JPS
Journal of Policy Studies

Eymeri-Douzans, J.-M. (2024). France: Which Prospects of Hybridization for the Neo-Weberian State in the Homeland of the 'State-in Majesty'? *Journal of Policy Studies*, *39*(3). https://doi.org/10.52372/jps39302

Articles

France: Which Prospects of Hybridization for the Neo-Weberian State in the Homeland of the 'State-in Majesty'?

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Keywords: Neo-Weberian State, France, sociology of the State, Administrative reforms, public policies

https://doi.org/10.52372/jps39302

Vol. 39, Issue 3, 2024

In this article, after recalling the historicity of the French 'State-in-Majesty' and its current politico-administrative regime (section 2), we will assess the French case against Pollitt and Bouckaert's model and demonstrate how nowadays France corresponds to a hybridized Neo-Weberian State (section 3). Then, section 4 will demonstrate how the never-ending triple French State reform develops as a specific and multilevel interplay of the 'five Ms'. Turning to the upgraded definition of the NWS as an 'omega' for our turbulent times, section 5 will defend the thesis that the robust, resilient French Neo-Weberian State is well equipped to democratically govern poly-crises and master three current 'great transformations', provided it is not captured by illiberal populists (section 6).

1. Introduction

In the more fortunate liberal countries where the freedom of "speaking truth to power" and speaking about power is guaranteed, decision-makers, editorialists, scholars, and ordinary citizens agree in observing that our post-modern polities have entered an era of "poly-crises" (as coined by former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker) or "turbulence" (as analyzed, inter alia, by Ansell et al., 2017). This turbulence, caused by many successive and combined factors—from terrorist attacks to global financial crises, from migrations to viral pandemics, from armed conflicts (with escalated number of war crimes) to cyber-criminality, and from industrial accidents to more extreme natural disasters due to climate change—characterize a period of significant instability that strongly questions the governability of more globalized and interdependent societies/economies/polities: The institutional capacities of contemporary nation-states, which claim to exert a politico-administrative and exclusive legitimized authority over "their" populations' within the limits of 'their' territory, are being more and more frequently put to the test, while the efficient, effective and "problem-solving" nature of the public policies these states produce and implement is becoming increasingly uncertain, particularly when policymakers must address "wicked problems".

Since these current challenges to the capacities of our numerous contemporary "policy states" (in the sense of Orren & Skowronek, 2017) are often global, the observation of their varied organizational adaptations and policy responses to crises has revealed—as always in comparative research—a very complex reality, made of a dialectic combination of cross-border regularities with, however, remaining (even renewed) singularities characterizing each national case. To borrow a suggestive metaphor from the late Christopher Pollitt, it appears that we are sailing in the same storm, but in different boats. This wise observation sums up in one image the rich results of years of comparative research exhibited in Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2000) book, Public Management Reform, a masterpiece in which our colleagues first developed their model of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) to reflect the difference between the national reform trajectories developed by continental European states, especially France, and the more drastic New Public Management (NPM) reform strategies adopted by Anglophone countries.

A quarter of a century later, in the post-NPM era of turbulence, it is only logical that historicity and path dependency should continue to have an effect on the methods by which each nation-state attempts to adapt and reproduce itself. This is the new context in which Bouckaert (2023) proposes an upgraded definition of the NWS as a "model for reform", and it is the very purpose of the previous and present issues of JPS, co-edited with Tobin Im, to discuss and assess whether current effective evolutions in significant national cases give empirical substance to Bouckaert's new conceptual refinements.

The present article starts by assessing the French case against Pollitt and Bouckaert's first model: After succinctly recalling the historicity of the French "State-in-majesty" and its current politico-administrative regime (Section 2), we expose how contemporary France corresponds to a hybridized NWS (Section 3). Following this, Section 4 demonstrates how the never-ending triple French State reform develops as a specific and multi-level interplay of the "five Ms". Turning to the upgraded definition of the NWS as an "omega" for our turbulent times, Section 5 defends the thesis that the robust, resilient French NWS is well equipped to democratically govern poly-crises and master three current "great transformations", provided that State is not captured by illiberal populists (Section 6).

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2. Context does matter: historicity of the French politico-administrative regime

If each country has its own trajectory of State- and nation-building (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1991; Linz, 1993), the idea to entrust 'the power and the mandate to rule' the People to sacred kings (Bendix, 1978), equipped with 'two bodies' (Kantorowicz, 2016), a perishable individual one and the eternal one, the body politic, later transformed into 'the Crown', then into that *persona ficta* called 'the State', did not appear everywhere and at the same time. The invention of the modern State (Poggi, 1978) happened in Western Europe between the Middle Ages and the humanist Renaissance, in a sociogenetic 'process of civilization' (Elias, 1982) animated by the competition between very few realms – England, France and the small Hispanic realms. A team of historians studied that process under research project 'Genesis of Modern European State 1984-1993' (Genet, 2003; Genet & Balard, 2004).

2.1. The French trajectory of State-building in brief

Thus, France bears the privilege of being one of the modern State's homelands. As such, it is a comparatively rare case of a country where the State, as a project, an undertaking, and an apparatus of legitimized politico-administrative domination over a territory and its populations, preceded the existence of a nation. The French State, since its advent in the year 987 by the Capetians (Le Goff, 2000), truly shaped the nation: *'La France est fille de son Etat'* (France is the State's daughter, see Beaune, 1985). The French nation is, therefore, a more political nation than the two neighboring nations of Germany and Italy, which existed in the form of a common culture, language, and national sentiment far before the late creation of their respective states (end of 19th century). The French nation is the outcome of a deliberate, long-lasting State undertaking, continued in the Classic Age under the Bourbons, their great ministers, office-holders, and intendants. As Tocqueville (1856/2011, p. 1856) first pointed out, even though the 1789 Revolution terminated the Ancient Regime and opened a century of turbulences (until the 1971 Commune of Paris), later followed by frequent social movements that shook France's politics (1936 strikes, post-WWII insurrectional strikes, May 68, ..., recent Yellow Vests), such turbulences, sometimes spurring changes in regimes and constitutions (12 since 1791), are counterbalanced by very strong elements of institutional continuity. The reigns of the two Napoleons (1799-1815 and 1851-1870) were decisive in the achievement of modern State-building in France, while the Third Republic (1870-1940) was decisive in republicanizing, democratizing, and liberalizing that prominent State – which all French pupils are taught, at primary school, must be spelled with a capital letter (*Etat* in French).

Such a prominence owes much to the invention and refinements, by generations of great State office-holders and legists, of a consistent legitimizing theory, which combined much of the *imperium* inherited from Roman law, the concept of 'sovereignty' proposed by Jean Bodin in his *Six Books of the Republic* (1576), the notion of Common Good modernized, democratized and republicanized by Rousseau as 'the General Will' (Rousseau, 1997), transformed by jurists of the 1880s, in France (Esmein, Duguit, Hauriou, Carré de Malberg; see Sacriste, 2011) as in Germany, into an overarching 'General Interest' (Rangeon, 1986) or *Gemeinwohl* that entrusted the '*Etat de droit*' or *Rechtstaat* with the responsibility, authority, and legitimacy to rule-by-law the society and the economy by means of *Puissance publique* and/but to serve this society/economy by setting-up and providing qualitative *Services publics* complying with the 'three laws of Louis Rolland' (continuity, mutability, and equal-treatment). This was, and remains, the 'general theory of the State' (Schönberger, 2006). Such a European continental, 'romano-germanic' legal tradition, which coheres with the separation between 'private law' and autonomous public/administrative law and jurisdictions, is very distinctive from the Anglo-Saxon tradition represented by Great Britain, whose polity is characterized – from the *Magna Carta* to the *Habeas Corpus* and the *Bill of Rights*, all grounded in classic individualist and liberal philosophy – by a (progressively) limited monarchy, a parliamentary regime, and a legal system of common law in which the judge represents the People and can judge the Power and its administrations.

In the UK, it is not 'the state' but 'the Crown', embodied into the 'King-in-Parliament', that symbolizes the polity's continuity: the former notion, quite abstract in the English language, is used in scholarly writings but not in common parlance and public life, as recalled by Kenneth Dyson, who even qualifies Great-Britain and the USA as 'stateless societies' (Dyson, 2010). Instead, Anglophones commonly rely on the notion of 'Government', *lato sensu*, to grasp those in power, the public administration and other public apparatuses which obey them, and even the public policies they co-produce, including at territorial levels (local government). Right opposite, in France, '*gouvernement*' narrowly refers to the Prime minister and ministers currently in charge (somehow equivalent to the British 'Cabinet'), while the notion of State is routinely used and substantiated as an actor – 'The State has decided this', 'The State should (not) do that' are ordinary public utterances – while citizens and media ordinarily talk about '*l'action de l'Etat*' (literally the State's action) to refer to governing activities and public policies. Therefore, it is no surprise that two French academics have drawn the ideal-typical opposition between the British 'weak state' and the French 'strong State' (Badie & Birnbaum, 1979).

The French trajectory of State-building, analyzed by Michel Foucault as an enduring process of '*étatisation*' (literally 'statisation') of society (Skornicki, 2015), was not only ideational but also very practical and organizational. Since Weber taught us that 'in daily life, domination means primarily administration' (Weber, 1978, p. 125), it is unsurprising to witness how State-building has also consisted in the 'invention of bureaucracy' (Dreyfus, 2000) – a notion first coined, in 1745, with the initial spelling 'burocratie', by French physiocrat Vincent de Gournay to refer to the system installed in Prussia by the Great Frederic, borrowed

by Weber (Eymeri-Douzans, 2005a). It is remarkable how the building of a solid and qualitative bureaucracy took place concomitantly in rival Prussia and France, from its birth under Louis XIV and Colbert (Richet, 1976) and full deployment under Napoleon (Thuillier, 1980). In Paris, as in Berlin, the institutionalization of a strong bureaucratic central apparatus occurred alongside the development of a rich bureaucratic knowledge-for-action and repertoire of techniques known as 'cameral sciences' in Germany (Laborier et al., 2011) and 'sciences of government' in France (Ihl et al., 2003): these were the foundations of the monopoly of expertise and policy-advice enjoyed by the *stand*/status group of senior bureaucrats in classic Weberian public administration.

The unique combination of Absolutist, Revolutionary, Napoleonic, and Third Republic heritages, interacting with the growing concentration of political, economic, scientific, and intellectual power in Paris over the late 19th and 20th centuries (a phenomenon unknown in Germany, the UK or Italy) has given rise in France to a genuine 'State-in-Majesty' (Eymeri-Douzans, 1999).

2.2. The current French politico-administrative regime: a 'State-in-Majesty'

To express it with a degree of ideal-typical stylization, the French 'State-in-Majesty' combines all the prestige of a 'Jupiterian State' (Chevallier, 2008) with the long-lasting and probably exaggerated pretension to act as an 'immodest State' (Crozier, 1987) which exerts a tutelary benevolence *in* and *over* society – from '*L'Etat instituteur du social*' to the opulent post-WWII Welfare State (Rosanvallon, 1990) – together with a wide control *over* and strong interventionism *in* the real and financial economy – from old 'Colbertisme' to modern 'dirigisme' and massive nationalizations (see Kuisel, 1983) and more recent defense of industrial 'national champions'. The outcome is original enough to be recognized by Anglophone scholars as a type of 'State-centred capitalism' (Schmidt, 2002), quite distinct from the Anglo-American free market economy.

Logically, the politico-administrative elites of that State-in-Majesty (whether right-wing or social-democratic) have, generation after generation, built up a vast, complex, differentiated, and ramified State apparatus at the center in Paris as 'in the province'. To populate and activate them, they have recruited, since the second half of the 19th century (a period of massive rural exodus), an ever-increasing 'army' of tenured public servants enjoying a 'career system' with lifelong employment and generous pension: *la Fonction publique*. It is a sub-world and sub-culture (Rouban, 2009; Singly & Thélot, 1988) that has always represented – families and relatives included – an important part of France's total workforce and a decisive share of French voters, which is of importance in one of the first established European democracies (1848, definitive instauration of male universal suffrage). As a result, in modern France, the Civil Service *stricto sensu* amounts to no less than 5.6 million public servants (more than the population of nine Member States of the EU!), while the public sector *lato sensu* employs 25% of the country's workforce. Such a huge public sector needs lots of money, leading to taxes in France being some of the highest globally (46% of GDP in 2022 [OECD, 2024]).

Thus, it is not an exaggeration to observe, as Emmanuel Macron himself wrote after many scholars, 'Our History has made us children of the State. [...]. It is around the State that our common project brings us together: the Republic' (Macron, 2016, pp. 39–41). Indeed, the abovementioned historical legacy embedded into institutions now combines with the great stability of a political regime, the Fifth Republic, whose leader, bearing the official title of President of the Republic, is also known as the 'Head of the State' – a customary title which is highly significant for our present reflection. Founded by General de Gaulle in 1958, the Fifth Republic is a tactical compromise between Gaullists who wanted to restore State power and party politicians who wanted to save a parliamentary regime where governments are responsible to parliament. Moreover, it is a historic compromise between French citizens' attachment to the Republic, human rights, the rule of law, and democracy with their penchant for embodied authority. The synthesis is not, as wrongly repeated by law professors, a 'semi-presidential regime', but a true 'republican monarchy' (Duverger, 1974): a hyper-President, being the 'Elected One' anointed and sacred by universal suffrage, is entitled to reign *and* govern, seconded by a submissive yet essential Prime Minister and by loyal ministers, all supported by a usually comfortable and docile 'presidential majority' in the National Assembly (except a few electoral accidents like that in 2024), with strong counterpowers exerted by the Senate, the Constitutional Council, the Council of State, the complex territorial 'decentralization', and the EU institutional and legal supranational system.

The French hyper-President, who aims to – and is expected to – govern an often-turbulent nation by passing ambitious reforms, needs first to impose his political domination over prestigious and influential *hauts fonctionnaires,* a custom-defined elite of a few thousand top civil servants, from which the Academia, the Judiciary, the Military, and high-ranking regional and local officials are *de facto* excluded. By virtue of their elitist recruitment through the entrance concourse to a few '*grandes écoles*' (very select and prestigious initial training schools controlled by the State elite), the 27-year-old generalists passed by ENA, the National School of Administration founded in 1945 by General de Gaulle and Michel Debré to train the higher 'State's Guards' (Eymeri-Douzans, 2001), and the young State engineers graduated from Ecole Polytechnique are considered *hauts fonctionnaires* – a sort of State nobility (Bourdieu, 1989) whose members enjoy a lifelong passport for quick and (usually) successful careers. It is especially so for a super-elite who joins the three State administrative *grand corps* (Finance Inspectorate, Council of State, Court of Accounts) because the effective solidarity and esprit de corps of these old institutions has for long guaranteed a 'high-flyer' status to their members (Kessler, 1994). French political science qualifies these *hauts fonctionnaires* as true 'policists' (policymakers) who co-govern the country (Eymeri-Douzans, 2019; Offerlé, 2004) alongside the polit-

ical masters (President, Prime Minister, and ministers) and their powerful entourages of special advisors, ministerial cabinets (Eymeri-Douzans et al., 2015). At the same time, party politics are weaker in France (except on the extremes) than in neighboring parliamentary democracies, and party professionals are much less influential. Prominent foreign scholars often typify such a politico-administrative regime as typically 'technocratic' (Cole, 2008; Dyson, 2010; Suleiman, 1978; Wright, 1978; Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2023, p. 2011). Compared to the USA, for instance, what is remarkable is the quasi-absence of businessmen or academics accessing the French Core Executive, combined with a regular flux of top civil servants who, after serving in the grey zone of ministerial cabinets, enter politics and often become ministers.

Such 'technocratization' of French politics has existed since the 1960s: five (Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, Chirac, Hollande, and Macron) of the eight presidents served in ministerial cabinets before entering politics and reaching the Presidency. Many (Prime) ministers followed the same path, often promoted directly from presidential or ministerial adviser to minister without even running for Parliament. For decades, ENA alumni have thus populated not only the administrative elite – which is normal – but also the political elite. Compared, e.g., to the UK, where ministers serving in recent Conservative governments have had little-to-no connections with a Senior Civil Service they often dislike or disdain, the French osmosis between administrative and political elites also greatly contributes to the enduring prominence of a State-in-Majesty usually unchallenged by its political masters.

3. The French case from a theoretical perspective: A Neo-Weberian State indeed, intertwined with traditional PA remnants and the novelties of European integration

In a neo-liberal era (the late 1970s to 2000) where New Public Management (NPM) gurus and fans aimed at 'reinventing government' (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) by imposing their 'one-best-way' generic reform ideas and recipes to all countries (Hood, 1991), infusing into private, third sector, and public organizations a 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), the seminal comparative work by Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert wisely demonstrated that major countries, anchored in a great diversity of State-building (see above), 'administrative traditions' (Peters, 2021) and 'politico-administrative regimes', were actually developing quite different 'reform trajectories' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). The co-authors proposed the ideal type of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) to better comprehend reform trends adopted by continental Europe and the Nordic States against more radical NPM-driven approaches followed by the UK and other Westminster-model (and former British Dominion) countries. Since then, the NWS model has been discussed and refined by its creators (Bouckaert, 2023; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) and other scholars (Drechsler & Kattel, 2009; Eymeri-Douzans, 2010; Laegreid & Eymeri-Douzans, 2009; Lynn, 2008) – with fascinating discussions prolonging Weber's 'theory of science' (Weber, 2017) on whether an 'ideal-type' is strictly a 'stylized' model of reality or can be developed into an 'ideal' or 'omega' towards which reality tends to transform. The NWS is increasingly debated in our scholarly community and situated against other major 'competing and co-existing' models of public governance and reform, to quote the title from Torfing, Anderson, Greve, and Klausen (2020), who identify seven paradigms: classic bureaucracy, professional rule, NPM, NWS, Digital Era Governance (DEG), Public Value Management (PVM), and New Public Governance (NPG).

Considering France against this typology, it is obvious that the 'One and Indivisible French Republic' is a Neo-Weberian State indeed and/but retains many vivid characteristics of traditional public administration and has willingly developed since the Treaties of Rome (1957) into the true innovation of being a *Member* State of the European Union.

3.1. France: A True Neo-Weberian State

The governing and governance of contemporary France fits the NWS type very well. Let us recall that the 'core claim' of the NWS, against NPM and NPG, is 'to modernize the traditional state apparatus so that it becomes more professional, more efficient, and more responsive to citizens. Businesslike methods may have a subsidiary role in this, but the state remains a distinctive actor with its own rules, methods, and culture' and that the main policy coordination and decision-making remains, in the NWS, 'authority exercised through a disciplined hierarchy of impartial and professional officials' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 22). These passages appear to describe the French case, where the very professional technocratic politico-administrative elites, conceiving of themselves as great 'reformers', precisely devote their energy and competence to modernize the inherited big State apparatus and administrative culture and adapt them to contemporary requirements. Those in power are also very focused on satisfying the needs and demands of French citizens because they are the most heavily taxed taxpayers in Europe, and they elect or dismiss directly the country's republican monarch every five years.

Moreover, if we go deeper into the four 'Weberian' elements and four 'neo' elements of the NWS initial model (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 121–122), the French case perfectly matches, e.g., the 'reaffirmation of the role of the state as the main facilitator to the new problems of globalization, technological change, shifting demographics and environmental threat' (from the figure of '*Etat-stratège*' in 1993 to recent '*Etat plate-forme*', see below); or the 'reaffirmation of the role of representative democracy (central, regional, and local)' that has been obvious in the French decentralization movement since 1982; or the 'preservation of the idea of a public service with a distinctive status and culture' (e.g., President Hollande's term strongly emphasized 'public service values'); or a 'shift towards meeting citizens' needs and wishes not by market mechanisms but by the creation of a professional culture of quality and service'; or the transformation of legalistic bureaucrats into 'professional managers' (made visible, since the 2010s by the substitu-

tion of the old notion of *fonctionnaires* for the notions of *encadrement dirigeant, encadrement supérieur, encadrement intermédiaire* and *agents*).

As revealed in Section 4, with France being subject to constant institutional reforms, its nature as a NWS happens to be accordingly transformative: strong empirical evidence indicates that the 2020s French politico-administrative regime and national 'policy style' (Howlett & Tosun, 2021; Richardson, 2013) are currently evolving in accordance with the renewed version of the NWS model sophisticated by its inventor (Bouckaert, 2023) (see Section 5 below).

However, with France being a paradoxical country, it is no surprise to witness the actual hybridization of the NWS dynamic with substantial elements of administrative classicism.

3.2. Historicity embedded into institutions: traditional PA is still alive in Napoleon's 'Great Nation'

Due to the strong imprint of historic legacies embedded into French State institutions, major aspects of 'old', 'traditional' or 'classic' public administration – be it qualified as Napoleonic or Weberian – remain in place, as in comparable countries (Germany, Italy, etc.) examined in the previous and present thematic issues of *JPS*. It is quite logical because the NWS is not constructed on a *tabula rasa*: on the contrary, 'the NWS represents a particular instance of path dependency [...] where the image of a strong state that is well placed to help citizens can still be used to generate positive political results (legitimacy). [...]. NWS is part of a political strategy responding to globalization and party political dealignment, [...], a defensive strategy by previously corporatist regimes (Germany, France, The Netherlands, Sweden) to try and protect the "European social model" and the "European administrative space" from the depredations of globalized neo-liberalism' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 122). France ranks among the highest globally in terms of tax-to-GDP ratio and social expenditures (32% of the GDP in 2022, against 29% in Italy, 29% in Germany, and 27% in Denmark). Indeed, its long-serving former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin once declared, 'Yes to market economy, no to market society'! It is precisely the eminent mission of the classic State-in-Majesty to maintain such a delicate balance.

This is why, when considering the 'old public administration' or 'bureaucratic' model (as exposed by Torfing et al., 2020), one observes that nowadays French State is still characterized by a high power distance between (elected or appointed) State officials and their subordinates, submitted to their command-and-control through strong, uninterrupted yet ramified hierarchies, with horizontal division-of-labor and rule-based handling of issues and dossiers. All actors in this game are socialized to a strong public service ethos, where the principles of the general interest, rule of law, and obedience to elected executives are crucial. Even if many actors, in and out, are often consulted, the conception of State authority remains vertical: 'the Chief' (as French public servants commonly qualify their superior) is expected to have a strong focus on policy creation, to constantly launch and conduct new programs and projects, and to daily 'arbitrate' on difficulties or rivalries raised by centralized mechanisms of policy coordination.

Considering the French case through the lenses of historical institutionalism (Streeck & Thelen, 2005), let us illustrate the resilience of very ancient institutions and politico-administrative arrangements by one example only: the Council of State. Prolonging the Bourbons' King Council, re-founded by Napoleon in 1799, maintained by all regimes and mentioned in their successive constitutions, the Council of State is a fascinating hybrid. Placed on top of the administrative apparatus and populated by a few hundred *hauts fonctionnaires* – the super-elite from ENA – its first mission is to be the Government's jurisconsult, the legal advisor whose consultation on the legal correctness and political 'opportunity' of any law, ordinance, or decree proposal is compulsory. Simultaneously, it is the supreme court of the administrative jurisdictional order (independent from penal and civil justice in France): in this latter capacity, the Council of State can, within two months after its adoption, nullify for matters of illegality any decree signed by the President or Prime Minister. Its dual role as a superior advisor yet legal censor of the Government gives strong authority to the flow of recommendations and admonitions that the Council provides *larga manu*, and sometimes *ultra-petita*. In addition, this very old institution has, since the 1980s, adopted a strategy to self-modernize and attract visibility: its main instrument is the publication of thick annual reports full of facts and figures, analyses, and reform proposals. These annual reports are always widely commented on in the media and mobilized in political debates. To illustrate how policy-oriented and fashionable these reports are, the title of the latest one (2023) is *The end-user, from the first to the latest kilometre: an efficiency challenge and a democratic imperative*. It makes 12 realistic and ambitious recommendations 'to actually put the end-users on the ground at the core of public policies': no less! This shows how 'old PA' institutions in France not only survive but also reinvent themselves by focusing on 'new' topics related to the NWS and even to NPG.

It is not that surprising because 'the development and implementation of a new governance paradigm does not mean that the old governance paradigms are eliminated and replaced with new ones' (as argued by Torfing et al., 2020, p. 17): hybridization is the most likely trend to be observed.

Yet, a true novelty, subject to subsequent hybridization with older features, also results from the enthusiastic participation of France in European integration.

3.3. The radical novelty: France as a Member-State of the EU

France is anything but an isolate: as all 'open societies' involved in globalization, it is no more a standing-alone, sovereign State, but a 'member-state' of many international organizations. These are major IOs (UN, including its specialized fora, such as the essential COPs on climate change; IMF; World Bank; OECD, 2024; etc.), a vital military alliance (NATO), or softer 'international regimes' (ISO, G7, ...).

More specifically, since the Schuman Declaration (9 May 1950), France has also been a leading country of European integration: from the Paris Treaty (1951) to the Lisbon Treaty (2007), this complex process, combining deepening and enlargements, has built up a sui generis, supranational yet intergovernmental 'legal community' and *persona ficta*, the European Union. The EU 'unites in diversity' 27 member-states and their peoples, exerts major parts of their sovereignty in common, and produces a 'legal order' (made of legislations, called 'regulations' and 'directives', elaborated in 'trilogues' between the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament, complemented by the rulings from the EU Court of Justice) whose integration into Member-States' domestic legislations is direct. Moreover, the 27 heads of State or Government regularly meet at European Councils, where they can evoke all strategic or geopolitical issues and must handle evermore frequent cross-border crises. As a constant promoter of European 'spillover', the French State has now become the 'national level' in a 'multi-level governance' structure (Hooghe & Marks, 2001), where Brussels holds the European level (Smith, 2004) – a level skilfully invested by French political leaders and senior civil servants delegated at the Council to daily interact with other national delegations, with the Commission's 'Eurocrats' and the MEPs, to co-produce EU norms and policies. In addition, French governments are also subject to 'soft' or more binding injunctions from Brussels, especially in the frame of the 'European Semester', precise policy recommendations from the European Commission on how to cut exploding French public deficits. In many policy domains, the EU fora and arena in Brussels are also spaces where a constant flow of benchmarking exercises, macro-quantitative surveys, comparative studies, 'non-papers' to 'white papers', policy briefs, series of recommendations, 'action plans', 'roadmaps' and other 'strategies' are performed and distributed. Such expertise sharing has accelerated the cross-border circulation of new policy ideas, narratives, precepts, norms, values, and targets, with their related repertoires of policy instruments, that French civil servants bring back to Paris and mobilize daily in national policy formulation (Cole & Drake, 2000). Since the EU is, *de facto* if not *de jure*, the 'regulatory state' of an advanced continent-wide single market with unique currency (Majone, 1996), and since the EU (small) 'Eurocracy' was built as a mix of German and French classic bureaucracies, shaken by the Kinnock Reform with elements of NPM (Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013), there are strong arguments for considering the European Commission as a supranational Neo-Weberian entity (Drechsler, 2009; Ongaro, 2015).

In addition, there is strong empirical evidence that the NWS is the model of 'good governance' that the EU Commission (as well as the OECD, through their joint service, Support for Improvement in Government and Management, known as SIGMA) promotes within an emerging European administrative space (Bauer & Trondal, 2015). In the domain of PA, a matter of Member-States' reserved sovereignty and limited EU 'coordination competence', the Commission has become, since 2000, a genuine reform promoter (Ongaro 2024). Using with all Member-States the regular activities of the so-called EUPAN network that grasps the 27 ministries in charge, the Commission has developed towards Central and Eastern European Member-States and Candidate Countries, successive 'carrot-and-stick' programs of capacity-building (PHARE, Twinning, TSI). In hundreds of technical assistance projects developed in the frame of these programmes, the mobilized Western experts, especially French ones, unsurprisingly push their Eastern beneficiaries to adopt mostly NWS-driven reforms and recipes.

Having focused so far on institutions – even though in an already dynamic way – it is time to refocus on the reform processes that animate and transform them.

4. Short story of the never-ending 'reform of the State' in France: a specific and multi-level interplay of the 'five Ms'

As with other continental European countries with an NWS, France has been profoundly transformed since the end of the 1970s by the combined effects of the end of the Soviet bloc collapse, the Anglo-Saxon, neo-liberal globalization, financialization and deindustrialization of national economies and their interconnection within the European Single Market, many other post-modern transnational processes and threats (especially radical Muslims' terrorist attacks in the case of France), plus *intramuros* conflicting trends (decline of 'natives of natives', rising share of citizens of migrant origin) in a now multi-ethnic, multi-religious and aging society, in which urban and rural segregation, gender issues, and ecological transition have become political issues of the utmost salience. Thus, France is by no means an unchanging country!

If one focuses on the French State-in-Majesty, its vast public sector, and its numerous territorial layers of politico-administrative power, we have already argued elsewhere (Eymeri-Douzans & Bouckaert, 2013) that France, far from being a 'reform laggard' (as some NPM promoters wrongly pretended) has been fully following, since the 1980s, 'the world movement' of institutional reformism, but in its own way and at its own rhythm (Eymeri-Douzans, 2013). From a comparative perspective (Eymeri-Douzans & Pierre, 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), this ongoing French trajectory of reform combines a major national singularity with many trends that are common to continental European States.

The main singularity sounds like an oxymoron: State reform is permanent in France. In his masterpiece, *Réinventer l'Etat*, as in other writings, Philippe Bezes, a great specialist on the subject, explores the 'genealogy' of State reform as far as from Napoleon's seminal reforms, then insists on the 1930s – a period of rationalization of bureaucracy against red-tape, promoted by Henri Fayol – to effectively start his detailed survey in 1962, when De Gaulle and the Gaullists, assisted by State technocrats, considered themselves to be the 'great modernizers' of both State and society (Baruch & Bezes, 2006; Bezes, 2009, pp. 17–25). The actors of the process are aware of its true nature: 'The willingness to renovate public administrations is as old as the State itself. Short chronology of the major stages of an

endless reform' (title on the kakemonos of an exhibition at *Rencontres des Acteurs publics*, Paris, 3-5 July 2012); 'The reform of the State will obviously never be fully achieved. It is something permanent' (Eric Woerth, right-wing minister for State Reform, 2005); 'There was a reform of the State before RGPP, there will be one after it. It is our conviction that the State must evolve permanently' (Marylise Lebranchu, socialist minister of State Reform, 2012). Such an agreement among reform leaders on its endless nature raises many questions about its expected/effective impact on State and government legitimization (Eymeri-Douzans, 2012).

Compared to other countries, State reform in France is, thus, more of an endogenous, enduring, self-sustaining process that started far before the NPM era, even if it has undeniably been challenged, influenced, and boosted by the worldwide diffusion of the NPM doctrine, precepts, and recipes, notably by Paris-located OECD. To better comprehend and explain the French reform trajectory, it is heuristic to consider it as a specific combination of the five ideal-typical dynamics identified by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017, pp. 115–120): the 'five Ms' – maintaining, modernizing, marketizing, minimizing, and mediating (or mobilizing). Since the French State corresponds mostly with the NWS model, the logic of modernization is obviously the key driving force of its endless reforms. However, the four other Ms are also part of the 'mixture' and intertwine, in diverse ways, with the main modernizing 'red thread'. Broadly speaking, this evolving patchwork consists of the following:

- More Maintaining than elsewhere: As abovementioned, classic PA did not fade away in France as much as it did in other countries. The French have a real genius for maintaining old institutions, organs, and procedures, and even reinventing them for a renewed purpose. Public servants show great attachment to existing ways of doing things, often demonstrate sceptic 'resistance to change' (Crozier, 1963), and always try to 'digest', routinize, and ritualize innovations often imposed in a top-down logic. France is a country where the leitmotiv of Prince di Lampedusa's novel, *The Leopard*, is well known. Thus, the highest public servant in protocol order, the President of the Council of State, Jean-Marc Sauvé at the time, once told the author of these lines at a conference panel, 'Maybe everything must change so that nothing changes' (RAP, Paris, July 2015). This philosophical attitude relates to the second M.
- The Modernizing core logic: French State Reform, piloted for decades (before recent expertise externalization) by State technocratic elites themselves (with many inner rivalries), is precisely an ongoing undertaking of modernization. Its 'underlying assumption is that, if regularly modernized, the state apparatus can be trusted to deliver robust policies and high-quality services' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 115). This is exactly what hundreds of middle or senior public servants the author of this article has educated, recruited, trained, accompanied, and interviewed keep saying and doing: for them, loyally serving the State consists of reforming it to improve its institutional performance. France belongs to that 'group of continental European modernizers [that] continue to place greater emphasis on the state as *the* irreplaceable integrative force in society [...] continuing in modern form, their 19th and 20th-century traditions of strong statehood' (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 118). Remarkably, such a worldview is widely shared by moderate right-wing and social-democratic leaders who win elections and exert State power chief executives...as well as by far-right (National Rally) and extreme-left (LFI- *La France Insoumise*) populist parties that are anti-elite and anti-system but very strongly favor an even stronger State (a Carl Schmitt's one for the NR, a 'Bolivarian' one for the extreme leftists).
- 'Acclimatized' yet growing Marketizing: Marketizing is the core neoliberal logic of NPM, in combination with minimizing. France was first reticent to radical versions of NPM promoted by 'Reaganomics' and Thatcherite 'roll-back of the state'. Yet, progressively, a contextualized appropriation, a French 'acclimatization' of the neo-managerialist ideological and praxeological repertoire of reform ideas and related recipes, instruments, and techniques has occurred (Eymeri-Douzans, 2011). From PPPs to agencification, from management-by-objectives to performance-related pay, from analytical accounting to policy evaluation, many NPM features are now familiar to French rebaptized 'public managers'. Under two Presidents in particular, Sarkozy and Macron, marketization even concerned policy formulation and reforms' piloting, costly outsourced to private consultancies, in a French variant of 'consultocracy' (Saint-Martin, 2000).
- Underestimated Minimizing: France counts very few ultra-liberals dreaming of a 'minimal state' reduced to 'nightwatchman' functions. However, considering that major banks and energy, transport, and industrial companies (including Renault) were nationalized in 1945, and many others by the Socialists in 1981, the public-owned companies amounted to 3,500 and employed 2.3 million employees in 1986, when the Chirac Government initiated a privatization strategy continued by all successors, including Socialist Lionel Jospin (who sold Air France, Crédit Lyonnais, and disentangled the Post Office and France Telecom, with their 450,000 agents, from the State apparatus). Privatizations of gas and electricity providers, tech companies, motorways, and airports have occurred since 2000. As a result, State control over the economy is no longer what it used to be; still, the French public sector employs 25% of the country's workforce.
- Recent Mediating: without adopting a New Public Governance (NPG)-vectored reform strategy to which French national leaders and technocrats remain averse, it is undeniable that French governance, highly differentiated between policy sectors and controlled by various social and political power coalitions

at the various layers of territorial governance strengthened by decentralization reforms, has undeniably evolved towards 'overcrowded policymaking' (Richardson & Jordan, 1983). More vocal stakeholders, professions, lobbies, NGOs, militants, advocacy coalition representatives, and experts are interacting on a more horizontal basis with politico-administrative elites whose role is now to act as policy network 'enablers', 'shared objectives' designers', 'honest brokers', and compromise-makers. In recent decades, the French 'policy advisory system' (PAS) involved in policy formulation has widened and complexified (Eymeri-Douzans, 2025); public consultation and participative democracy mechanisms, including mini-publics and 'citizens' conventions', have been tested (especially in urban and environmental policies); hackathons and other 'living labs' attracting geeks from Generations Y and Z to brainstorm on policy innovations are flourishing; and civil servants, *volens nolens*, adapt to this latest NPG fashion and its fuzzy words: all they talk about now is 'co-creation'.

As a matter of fact, the dynamic interaction of these 'five Ms' can be witnessed and tracked all along the specific combination of three related yet distinct streams of 'constitutive' reform policies (in the sense of Lowi, 1972) which animate the various layers of power of the French politico-administrative *millefeuille*: reforms of the central State; reforms of 'administrative deconcentration' in favor of the 'territorial' State; reforms of 'political decentralization' that devolve competencies and empower regional, meso-local, and local elected authorities.

4.1. Successive avatars of the central State reform

At the centre, France is remarkably undergoing a never-ending *Réforme de l'Etat*, which survives all political shifts and crises. It has developed in successive avatars, from the 1970s 'modernisation' to the 'renewal of Public Service' (under the Rocard Government in 1988-91) to the 'State Reform' shift under Prime Minister Juppé (1995-97), followed by the LOLF (*Loi organique sur les lois de finances*) cross-party, unanimous reform of the public budgeting and accounting system under socialist Prime Minister Jospin (1997-2002), then by President Sarkozy's 'General Review of Public Policies' (RGPP) (2007-2012), itself replaced by President François Hollande's 'Modernization of Public Action' (2012-2017), itself 'disruptively' upgraded by President Macron to become 'Public Transformation' (2017-), handled by a Ministry and interministerial delegation (DiTP) bearing the same programmatic name. The scientific production on the State Reform is very rich (see, inter alia, Bezes, 2009; Bezes & Jeannot, 2016; Cole, 2008; Eymeri-Douzans, 2005b, 2008, 2013, 2020; Gervais, 2011, p. 2021, 2022).

As Bezes demonstrates, it is after 1974 that raising awareness of red-tape and 'maladministration' paved the way for installing a French variant of ombudsman and setting up transparency procedures for better citizen's access to administrative documents. Then, as from 1981, during the first term of the Socialists, they and State technocrats agreed, against radical Anglo-Saxon NPM, to adopt a cautious '*modernisation de l'administration*', an intra-administrative endeavor piloted by civil servants since President Mitterrand was not interested. An uploaded version was the 'Renewal of Public Service', launched in 1989 by Prime Minister Rocard, inspired by the philosophy of the 'General Interest' and participative in its method (with 'quality circles' involving employees).

A critical juncture was under the right-wing Balladur Government (1993-95), with several technocratic task forces commissioned to reflect and make radical proposals: their final reports, known by their authors' names (Report Blanc, Report Sirieyx, Report Prada, Report Picq, for details, see Bezes, 2009) paved the way for importing major NPM ideas and instruments, yet in a low profile manner, using vernacular notions to 'acclimatize' them to the French administrative culture, such as the myth of '*Etat-stratège*'. This shift led to the official birth of the ambitious policy baptized 'Reform of the State' by a famous 1995 Circular of Prime Minister Juppé and piloted by a 'Commissariat for the Reform of the State' (CRE) headed by Jean-Ludovic Silicani, a leading change manager at the time. State Reform was not interrupted by the Socialist Jospin Government (1997-2002), which conducted a historic refoundation of the French public budgeting and accounting system, known as LOLF (*loi organique sur les lois de finances*) – prepared in a cross-party manner, adopted by a unanimous Parliament in 2001, it was implemented step-by-step under the following right-wing governments (see Bezes & Siné, 2011; RFAP, 2010).

State Reform continued under Raffarin and Villepin Governments, with various inflections and innovations. Among these, one can mention two opposite processes: on the one hand, France was touched (with delay) by the 'agency fever', and dozens of semi-autonomous public agencies and more independent regulation authorities (in the US/UK style) were set up in all domains, noticeably public health, consumer protection, regulation of markets (financial, energy, etc.). On the other hand, major mergers were conducted in a top-down way: the merger of Foreign Affairs with the small Ministry for Cooperation and Development; the merger between the two big tax administrations (DGI and DGCP) to create DGFiP; the merger between the two webs of institutions in charge of the unemployed, ANPE and UNEDIC, into '*Pôle Emploi*'; the merger of ministries in charge of land-use planning, road and railways infrastructures, transport, energy, and environment into a super-ministry of ecology: MEEDEM, MEDDAT, now MTE (Cole & Eymeri-Douzans, 2010). Yet, that important institutional redesign was minor compared with the long-lasting impact of working 'in LOLF mode' on back-office reengineering and ordinary public servants' daily lives: program budgeting, constant use of performance indicators, diffusion of impact assessment and evaluation, contracting-out missions to private operators, etc.

Then, in 2007, came the 'Great Reformer' and first hyper-President: Nicolas Sarkozy. That President and his Premier, François Fillon, were exceptions in having no background

within the State elite and showing great positiveness towards private business. They rebaptized RGPP (*Révision Générale des Politques Publiques*) and gave a new impetus to State Reform. This general review of public policies was launched just upon their accession to power, because it had been prepared in advance for Sarkozy, during the electoral campaign, by Bearing Point, a consultancy taking inspiration from Canada's 'Program Review' (1994-1999). It was clearly a Minimizing strategy: budget cuts, necessary to allow promised cuts in taxes, plus a broadcasted 'one-for-two' new rule for the replacement of old public agents going on pension. The novelty of RGPP was also methodological: for the first time, State Reform ceased to be seen as a 'technical' dossier handled by the Prime Minister: President Sarkozy put RGPP on his own political agenda, created a dedicated inter-ministerial committee under his chairmanship to make the decisions, and entrusted the monitoring of RGPP to a small taskforce working directly for the Secretary-General of the Presidency. The RGPP operational pilots were Eric Woerth, the Minister for Budget and Civil Service (a former Arthur Andersen consultant), and the Directorate-General for State Modernisation (DGME), a Trojan Horse for consultants (who populated half of DGME's staff), headed by François-Daniel Migeon (a man with ten years of experience at McKinsey). The RGPP auditing and evaluation missions were performed by mixed taskforces: State inspectors-general and consultants. The 'accompanying measures' of the tax administrations' merger were also outsourced to consultants. Ultimately, the real impact of RGPP, as with other radical 'ruptures' President Sarkozy wanted to impose in all policy domains, was far more limited than expected, especially during the 2008 global crisis (Maillard & Surel, 2012).

Moreover, President Sarkozy was beaten after one term, and 25% of the laws he passed never received their enforcing decrees under Socialist President Hollande (2012-2017), who immediately abandoned RGPP. Unsurprisingly, since the President, Prime Minister, and many ministers were civil servants, and their advisors were recycled from Jospin Government staff under the new banner of 'MAP' (Modernization of Public Action), the policy discourse recycled the 1990s notion of '*Etat stratège*' and strongly emphasized 'Public Service values' and necessary 'respect' due to civil servants who 'serve' citizens: a very NWS discourse, indeed! In practice, DGME was replaced by SGMAP (Secretariat-General for the Modernization of Public Action), whose double roadmap was to develop the culture and practice of policy evaluation in all sectors and to foster the digital revolution within PA (favoring more IT companies, as Cap Gemini). In the shadow, considering the enduring effects of the 2008 global crisis on French public deficits and the crisis of the sovereign debt, President Hollande, even if a social-democrat, retained the underlying RGPP objectives of cutting public expenditures and increasing administrative productivity (Hassenteufel & Saurugger, 2021) but promoted using different policy instruments and taking a more respectful attitude towards public servants (usual left-wing voters).

In 2017, the unexpected victory of young Emmanuel Macron brought consultants back into the power game and 'effracted' the institutional agenda with a 'disruptive' policy discourse. As for consultants, Macron had prior connections with them: when he ran for presidency with no party support, he welcomed the *pro bono* expertise of ten McKinsey consultants to help drafting his electoral program. When elected, he placed their friends in command of former SGMAP, now rebaptized as DiTP (Interdepartmental Directorate for Public Transformation). After public procurement, DiTP awarded huge 'frame contracts' to a few major consultancies in 2018-2019 for 'accompanying' reforms. Delayed by the COVID-19 crisis, they were mobilized in bursts in 2021 to assist the Government with vaccination and deconfinement strategies. As a result, a 'McKinsey scandal' broke out in 2022, perturbating the President's re-election campaign. The Senate set up an investigation commission whose report, entitled *A tentacular phenomenon: the growing influence of consultancies over public policies*, showed that the State paid consultants one billion euros throughout 2021 alone! Judges have started prosecutions, which are still going on. Re-elected in 2022, President Macron ordered drastic cuts in consultancy contracts. A cross-party law proposal aimed at reducing and controlling the use of private consultancy by public administration was under discussion in 2024 but fell with the dissolution of the lower House. Thus, the *modus operandi* of Macron's 'Public Transformation' was fuelled by substantial Marketization. As for the logic and content of 'Public Transformation' – a grandiose notion substituted to all too familiar 'reform' – seven years of its enforcement, complicated by the Yellow Vests crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, have shown different phases. In the first years, following already existing projects of collaborative digitalization (Pezziardi & Verdier, 2017), the slogan of the 'Platform State' was taken up wholeheartedly by all those who were interested in selling their apps to deliver more public services online to the geekiest part of the population (for critical assessment, Jeannot, 2020). In parallel, hyper-President Macron, a former technocrat who has no words harsh enough to denounce public servants' 'rent-seeking' mentality, entrusted Minister Dussopt with the mission to pass a 'Law of Civil Service transformation' (August 2019) whose ambition is no less than abolishing corporatism in the French administration by, at the same time, professionalizing *and* individualizing recruitments, careers, and rewards. As a result of this truly NPM-inspired reform, all permanent positions in all administrations are now open to civil servants from all corps and careers, as well as to contractual agents coming from outside (three-year contracts, renewable once). Such a 'marketization' (in the sense of the labor market) of a rigid system of status and ranks is a true cultural revolution, especially because Loi Dussopt applies to the 1,000 positions of secretaries-general, directors-general, heads-of-services, deputy directors, and project directors who are the senior management of French ministries, now open to outsiders from the private sector. This is a clear message sent to '*énarques*': the State's higher bureaucracy is no longer your 'private hunting ground'. Even more, President

Macron went as far as aggressing them through presidential ordinances (without discussion in Parliament), which transformed the prestigious but arrogant ENA into a more modest INSP (*Institut National du Service Public*), abolished the diplomatic and the prefectorial corps, etc. His intention – or waking dream? – is to transform the 'State nobility' into docile 'can-do managers' (Eymeri-Douzans, 2024). Only time will tell whether this attempt will be successful.

4.2. The continuous bass of the 'territorial State': more administrative deconcentration and policy implementation coordination entrusted to prefects

Another reform trend relates to what French academics call 'the territorial State' – an analytical notion referring to the vast web of State services working on the ground, in the provinces and overseas, under coordination by the prefectures. The French 'State-in-Majesty' does not only consist of of a strong central head in Paris but also of a big body covering the whole territory: the 'deconcentrated services of the State'. Staffed with State servants, headed by regional and departmental directors appointed by and reporting to their parent ministries in Paris, their mission is to implement policies on the ground. Their institutional architecture was fixed by De Gaulle in 1964 (Grémion, 1976). At the golden age of their expansion (around 2000), there was in each region and *départements* (the French word for 'province') an isomorphic reproduction of the central State, with no less than 35 regional directorates and *departemental* directorates representing each of the main ministries, supervised by the prefecture. Far from being an immutable heritage, their structures and missions have evolved since the Defferre Laws (1982), which introduced political 'decentralization' and a parallel stream of administrative 'deconcentration': it consists of increased devolutions of competencies, budget, and staff from Paris to State deconcentrated services on the ground, with reinforced coordination by the prefects. The major legal framework was fixed by ATR Law (*loi sur l'administration territoriale de la République*, 1992) and 'deconcentration chart' decree (1992): these two texts introduced the principle of subsidiarity into French internal law, giving to *services déconcentrés* the ordinary competence for implementing policies and taking administrative decisions. Deconcentration has been pursued, regardless of left-right shits in government, until now. It was accelerated by President Sarkozy, whose RéATE (*Réforme de l'administration territoriale de l'Etat*) drastically reduced the number of State deconcentrated services, merged into a few inter-ministerial structures placed under stronger control by regional prefects (Bezes & Le Lidec, 2010).

As a result of decades of administrative deconcentration, in modern France, 95% of central State servants work at regional and meso-local levels of State administration, which account for 80% of all State expenditures. They work for *services déconcentrés* as well as in hundreds of *établissements publics* (e.g., universities) and public agencies whose parent ministries are struggling to control them from Paris, by means of technical *tutelle* and fiercely negotiated 'contracts of objectives, resources and performance' (COMPs) – a French governance by quasi-contracts (Gaudin, 1999) and 'at a distance' (Epstein, 2005).

In such a complex landscape, as in comparable countries, policy implementation on the ground is complicated and delayed, if not ruined, by an overload of institutional actors with heterogeneous logics or even non-cooperative games, diminishing the effectiveness and real impact of governmental programs. Made aware of this threat by feedback from countless auditing and policy evaluation exercises, Hollande's and Macron's governments, throughout the recent decade, took successive consistent reforms to address these issues (the latest text, passed in 2022, being 'Law 3DS', for differentiation, decentralization, deconcentration, and simplification), including the following:

- Giving increased policy coordination authority to regional prefects, for which new organs have been established. Each regional prefect now chairs a CAR (Committee for regional administration) composed of all prefects in the region and all directors of State deconcentrated services: it is the steering committee responsible for 'the effective implementation of public policies up to the last kilometre' (one of Macron's slogans). This is replicated at the meso-local level under each prefect.
- Allowing regional prefects to take stronger command and control than ever of State public agencies implanted within their jurisdiction.
- Permitting wider autonomy to local authorities to 'experiment' with adaptions to their local contexts of the national rules of the 'one and indivisible Republic', under scrutiny of the prefectures.
- Strengthening, in the 'back office', the interoperable data sharing and processing between siloed services so as to drastically simplify the relations between 'the State' and citizens, businesses, and NGOs in view of a 'tell-us-once' ideal.
- Opening one-stop-shop '*Maisons France services*' in (semi-)rural, remote areas to guarantee minimal equal access to public e-services for their aging, less IT-familiar populations, which rebelled in the Yellow Vests movement and vote ever more for far-right NR.

Less original than administrative deconcentration is the parallel reform trend towards more 'decentralization':

4.3. Waves of political decentralization: towards a multi-actor, multi-level 'territorial governance'

Remarkably, since WWII, most Western European States, at different moments and to their own rhythms, entered a structural reform trend consisting of a transfer of legal capacities, budgets, and policy competencies from the politico-administrative center to subnational, territorial authorities. Bearing different names in different countries, such as 'devolution' in the UK or 'autonomies' in Spain, it is called 'decentralization' in France, which is no exception in this respect. Even though regionalization started under De Gaulle, decentralization is a major legacy of Socialist Pres-

ident Mitterrand (1981-1995), who was aware that (before him) the Left only held power at the national level for a few years sporadically, while Left-wing mayors and majorities often held on for decades at the territorial level: with an objective of a Left-Right balance of powers, it made sense for him and his minister of the Interior, the life-long mayor of Marseilles Gaston Defferre, to introduce a new territorial balance of powers. 'Act one of decentralization' consisted of a series of 'Defferre laws' and decrees passed in 1982-1986. It was so well accepted by all parties, which all found it in their interest, that a 'second act of decentralization' followed under President Chirac (right) and Prime Ministers Jospin (left) and then Raffarin (right) between 1999 and 2002, and even sanctification by constitutional reform. Successive waves of 'territorial reform' have followed: the 'third act of decentralization' under President Hollande (2013-2015, especially with Law MAPTAM and Law NOTRe) and the 'fourth act' under President Macron (with Law 3DS in 2022).

French decentralization is an enduring, cross-party reform, noticeably favored by citizens even if they know little of its details and complexities, which has transformed the formerly centralized 'one and indivisible French Republic' into a very decentralized country where multi-level 'territorial millefeuille' and multi-actor 'territorial governance' flourish (Pasquier et al., 2007). This reform stream is characterized, in comparison with other European states that enforced more drastic reorganizations (devolved UK, federalized Belgium, regionalized Italy or Spain) by the following combination of Maintaining, Modernizing, Marketizing and Mediating:

- The maintaining of two traditional layers of territorial authorities inherited from the 1789 Revolution. On the one hand, there are 101 *départements* at the meso-local level, with their own deliberative assembly elected by universal suffrage (*conseils départementaux*) and executive (president of the *Conseil départemental*) whose competencies are specialized: 'social action' in favor of the youth, the elderly, the handicapped, the poor (distribution of the minimum revenue); part of secondary education and school transportation; fire and rescue services. On the other hand, a myriad of 34,935 municipalities called '*communes*' (most of them being small villages), with their own deliberative assembly elected by universal suffrage (municipal council) and strong executive (mayor), enjoy a 'general clause of competence' but are especially in charge of urban planning, social housing, primary education and kindergartens (construction, personnel, canteens), roads and sewerage, waste collection, parks and gardens, sports and cultural facilities, public transport, municipal police, registry offices, cemeteries, etc.
- The establishment of a professionalized, competent, unified *fonction publique territoriale*, a true territorial civil service distinct from the State's one, employing no less than 1.94 million employees (Biland, 2019). Their senior officials, called 'territorial administrators', highly selected by and trained at INET (*Institut National des Etudes Territoriales*), enjoy mobile careers from one place to another and thus diffuse common repertoires of (good) practices, standardized *modus operandi*, etc., in constant interaction with outside academics, NGOs experts, urbanists, and private consultants, all increasingly involved into 'territorial governance', policymaking and monitoring/evaluation of public programs and projects.
- The creation in 1982-1986 of 27 Regions, merged in 2016 to 18, with their own deliberative assembly elected by universal suffrage, the Regional Council, headed by a strong President. Regions' competencies are specialized around seven core domains: organization of transport, especially regional express trains, roads, ports, and airports; secondary education buildings; professional training of adults (apprenticeship, etc.); land use planning and green development (SRADDET); economic and industrial development, 'competitiveness poles' and innovation clusters (SRDE); managing authority for European structural funds. Regions have soon become key arenas of political trade-off and policy piloting (see Nay, 1997; Négrier & Simoulin, 2021; Pasquier, 2004).
- In addition, since the 1990s, farsighted leaders, like Minister Chevènement, understood that merging municipalities was out of the question but that wider entities were needed to exert properly local competencies: they invented '*intercommunalité*', i.e., an intermunicipal cooperation in which all municipalities were progressively forced to participate. As of 2023, there are 1254 of these '*EPCI à fiscalité propre*' covering all the territory, with four variants according to the density of population: 21 'metropoles', 14 'urban communities', 227 'agglomeration communities' and 992 'communities of communes' (the latter in rural areas). These 'intercos' (as people familiarly call them) have remarkably concentrated institutional and financial capacities and enforce policies/deliver public services at a proper and viable level: in a low-profile manner, a profound reshaping of French local governance has thus been achieved in 25 years. It is noteworthy that the assemblies and executives of 'intercos' are not elected by citizens but are composed of delegates from the municipal councils, the mayors of constituting municipalities often serving as vice-presidents and the mayor of the biggest one as president: the 'democratic deficit' of intermunicipal governance is thus pointed and should be addressed (Desage & Guéranger, 2011).

As a result of these reforms, combined with other trends, notably the rise of NPG ideas and practices at the territorial level, in the form of consultative democracy and even participatory modes of policy formulation or decision-making regarding big infrastructure projects, it is obvious that the 'territorial governance' of France has changed substantially in recent decades, consequently rebalancing the whole governing of France towards a territorial 'distribution of powers' that Montesquieu had not thought of, but which applies his precept that 'by the disposition of things, power

should stop power'. A single figure suffices for quantifying such rebalancing: in 2024 France, a country which used to be the one of central State 'dirigism', 58% of all public investments are done by territorial authorities, compared with 42% by the central State.

These three enduring, sustained, intertwined reform trends – central State reform, deconcentration, and decentralization – which profoundly transformed the governance of France, constitute a national trajectory of reform, deeply rooted in French historicity and 'statehood', yet whose peculiar combination of 5 Ms driving forces tends towards an 'omega' of increased NWS, in the renewed meaning of the concept recently developed by its creator.

5. The robust and resilient French NWS fit for turbulent times: how to democratically govern poly-crises and three concomitant 'great transformations' in a period of democratic backsliding?

According to the Anglo-American social sciences tradition, there are two main ways for humans to coordinate activities in any society-economy-polity: hierarchies and markets (as demonstrated, after Coase, by Williamson, 1975), recently completed by networks. One can easily agree with Olson that these three coordination logics that frame our activities are not exclusive but 'coexist in contemporary democracies' (Olson, 2006, p. 18). Logically, Bouckaert proposes to conceptualize the 'governance space' of our contemporary polities as a three-dimension space whose x, y and z axes are HMN: hierarchies, markets and networks (Bouckaert, 2023). Obviously, the positioning of countries in this space varies synchronically and diachronically.

Considering the French case in relation to HMN, the following conclusions can be drawn from Sections 1 to 4 above: the mainly neo-Weberian, still partly 'old' Napoleonic, and/but highly multi-level, decentralized French State is 'scoring' very high on the H-axis, thanks to combined Maintaining and Modernizing strategies; it is 'scoring' medium on the M-axis (privatizations being terminated, but fruitful PPSs and contracting-out still alive); and it progressively 'scores' higher on the N-axis (multi-level territorial governance, multi-actors and participative policymaking, increased digitalization of the 'platform State').

In sum, the French Fifth Republic, for long an NWS, is animated by current trends that reinforce its NWS nature and direct it towards becoming an NWS 'of the second type', as recently refined by Geert Bouckaert (2023) as:

- A democratic state as a frame for governance and decision-making.
- With the rule-of-law as the supreme principle, resulting in hierarchy as a dominant organizing driver, which in turn produces an open, accessible, participatory, affordable, transparent, sound and trustworthy 'bureaucracy' and public sector for all citizens.
- And a responsible, accountable, significant hierarchy that proactively directs markets and networks, following not just logics of consequences (performance orientation) but also logics of appropriateness (which explicitly includes equity and inclusion), and thus adopting a 'whole-of-government' point of view in the use of market and network mechanisms that supports private for-profit, civil society not-for-profit, and public sector actors from a 'whole-of-society' perspective.

These components should yield a functional combination of (i) guaranteed and inclusive routine service delivery, (ii) effective handling of chronic crises of governance, and (iii) constant organizational and policy innovations, which in turn should give the NWS more legitimacy and make it more trustworthy compared to alternative models (Bouckaert, 2023).

The way in which the French NWS has been coping with an uninterrupted series of crises since 2000 illustrates Bouckaert's farsighted reflections.

5.1. An adaptative, resilient, robust French NWS coping with constant poly-crisis since 2000

Since our post-modern polities have entered an era of 'poly-crises', it is obvious that 'turbulences' (Ansell et al., 2017) push to their limits the in-crisis adaptability, post-crisis resilience, and continuous robustness of politico-administrative institutions, their standard operating procedures, and their public servants' dedication, innovative 'bricolage', and loyalty (Carstensen et al., 2023). This is true for France as for comparable countries.

Space does not permit an analysis of how the French NWS elites, middle-managers, and so essential 'street-level' agents, showing a strong sense of their duty to the State and the Nation, have handled since 2000 – with professionalism and without many complaints – an amazing succession of crises, be them exogenous shocks or endogenous crises:

- In the fall of 2005, several weeks of violent rioting in disadvantaged, multi-ethnic, suburban neighborhoods (*banlieues*) compelled President Chirac to declare a 'state-of-emergency' in all Paris regions and other metropoles, allowing evening lockdowns and house searches by the police to confiscate war weapons (disseminated from the ex-Yugoslavian war): that temporary extreme level of H proved successful in restoring law-and-order.
- In 2008-2013, the US sub-prime mortgage collapse caused a financial market crisis whose worldwide dissemination provoked terrible consequences for the EU and France: the Greek crisis, a sovereign debt crisis for many Member States, the Euro crisis, and serious risks of bankruptcy for major European banks. President Sarkozy and the French State elite did their best, with Chancellor Merkel and German senior bureaucrats and ECB President 'super'-Mario Draghi, not only to 'manage' these interconnected crises but also to create new collective mechanisms, such as the European Fiscal Compact and the Banking Union, to prevent them in the future. Creating more solidar-

ity, more rules, more procedures, more State intervention, funded by more taxes – this was an obvious increase in H in reaction to the failures and absurdities of M.

- It was followed by the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, beginning in 2015-2016, a geopolitical challenge France reacted to with its EU partners by more rules and procedures, the deployment of Frontex, reinforced border controls, quotas, etc: once again, much more H against the perverted alliance of N and M.
- In 2015 also, France was specifically targeted by massive terrorist attacks organized by radical Muslim groups. President Hollande and his ministers reacted by giving wider discretion to anti-terrorist armed forces, activating intelligence services to tighten control on suspects and spy terrorist networks, and arresting criminals preventively. As such, dozens of other attacks were prevented. Again, this case shows increasing H against criminal Ns and their M (black money from trafficking).
- In 2018-2019, the Yellow Vests rebellion brought out up to 3 million French citizens (plus hundreds of ultraviolent black blocs). President Macron and his government reacted severely: 11 civilians were killed and 25,800 wounded (while 2,000 policemen were wounded), 12,000 protesters were arrested, and 3,100 were sentenced by courts. The scale of this repression is unusual in a democracy: H happened to reach an apex! And cold-blooded senior officials told the author of these lines, in private, that 'the security forces saved the regime'.
- Then, intercontinental transports of our globalized market-and-network economy brought us a China-born coronavirus: French authorities' reaction against the COVID-19 pandemic was, like in most EU countries, to lock down the population and shut down huge sectors of the economy, a strategy baptized '*quoi qu'il en coûte*' (at any cost) by President Macron. The President vertically concentrated powers in his hands at the national level, while his territorial delegates, the prefects, did the same on the ground. After vaccines became available, EU member States bought them collectively and dispatched them authoritatively between countries, and the French vaccination campaign was enforced militarily, mobilizing thousands of young volunteers to assist (for details, Alaux et al., 2020). Again, lots of vertical H from a 'strong State' combining a maximum of command-and-control over its population and a maximum of Welfare to save each life that could be saved, in a deliberate suspension of the Market law and marginalization of governance Networks.
- Then came Putin's aggression against Ukraine: for Europe in general, this led to an energy crisis and the obligation to invest in rearmament; for France in particular, a hidden, hybrid war is being waged by the Russian regime and its creatures, spies, and trolls by means of constant cyberattacks and destabilization against our country because it is the top military power in Western Europe, the only autonomous nuclear power and the top armament, rockets, and planes producer. To these aggressions, the French NWS reacts with more controls, more surveillance, and more counter-espionage – a logic of maximized H, eventually using Ms and Ns as tools and vectors of influence and countermeasures.

On each of these critical occasions, which resemble 'system-cakes' (Bouckaert and Gallego 2024) that challenge State capacities and authority, the French NWS has shown – so far, so good! – its aptitude to react efficiently and effectively at all layers of power, from the Core Executive to State services in the countryside, combining crisis governance, uninterrupted routine public service delivery, and clever innovations in emergency. On many (not all) of these 'system-cakes', Anglophone readers' attention should be drawn to the key coordination role – made of vertical coordination with Paris and horizontal coordination on the ground – assumed in the 101 *départements* by an institution unknown in the USA or the UK: the prefectorial institution. The prefect, territorial representative of the central State, head of State services on the ground, and legal controller of elected local authorities' activities, is of obvious Napoleonic heritage. The prefects' hybrid nature as protectors of the rule of law, highly responsible for maintaining law-and-order, dedicated crisis managers with concentrated powers when a 'crisis cell' is activated, and also a go-between for the regional and local politicians with whom they interact daily, gives them a remarkable 'nodality' (Hood, 1983), with all the resources attached. Thus, the prefect, a figure whose genesis dates to 18th century King's intendants, proves to be a highly functional institution for our post-modern era, with a demonstrated capacity to successfully navigate turbulences: a typically NWS institution, whose diffusion in countries who do not have it, outside Europe, could be considered (for Europe, see Tanguy & Eymeri-Douzans, 2021).

However, governing and administering turbulences is not enough. The NWS must also contribute to piloting three 'great transformations' of our post-modern times.

5.2. The French adaptative NWS is an essential 'part of the solution' to three 'great transformations' in a risky period of democratic backsliding

While the neoliberal era's motto was President Reagan's assertion – 'government is not the solution, government is the problem' – it becomes increasingly clear that 'governments are part of the solution' to the huge, transnational policy issues that actually challenge the capacity of each post-modern Nation-State to maintain its 'exclusive and legitimate politico-administrative authority' on its population and to produce-reproduce it as a People or Nation whose citizens continue to share a 'common subjective feeling of belongingness' (to paraphrase Max Weber). The French NWS is no exception to this common destiny.

Amongst many policy challenges requiring strong and effective State mobilization, three main streams of correlated changes appear to be so enormous that they merit being classified as 'great transformations', comparable in importance to the birth and deployment of the market economy studied by Polanyi (1957). These 'great transformations', mutually heteronomous yet concomitant in their impact, affect France as they do its neighboring countries. They are as follows:

- The digital revolution, powered by big data, blockchain, algorithms, and generative AI: whether contemporary governance is a 'digital era governance' (Dunleavy et al., 2006) or not, what is undeniable is that big data and generative AI are already transforming administrative work and politico-administrative decision-making. These 'aliens' which have penetrated the NWS must absolutely be domesticated and dominated by the State logic in principle, and by a renewed form of bureaucratic normalization in practice: in France as elsewhere, much remains to be done in that regard.
- The vital green transition necessary to limit climate change and its terrible consequences: this transition is one of survival which will never be piloted by blind ultra-capitalist Markets that have destroyed the environment. The green transition can only be defined and enforced, with its needed coercive dimension, by the coordinated action of NW States, fruitfully allied in a collaborative governance logic with relevant Networks of stakeholders, at the service of the Public Interest and Public Value for all (Ongaro 2024).
- A new demographic transition combining the ageing of native population and/but a constant flux of (legal or illegal) migrants (a flux which is not about to cease, given the world's overpopulation and armed conflicts, and the legal and technical impossibility to close French borders, including the Overseas territories): this double dynamic reshapes an increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-religious, heterogeneous French society, riddled with tensions. Business action and market solutions cannot adequately address these challenges, which require clever public policies of education, integration, and equal treatment developed by the NWS in close partnership with the relevant stakeholders in education, social work, urban planning and housing, and the nonprofit sector, whose joint action is indispensable to promote a 'Whole-of-Society' humanism for the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

The hybridized and constantly adapting French NWS must accomplish these three series of twelve post-modern Herculean labors: mastering the digital and AI revolution, realizing the green transition, and reinventing its own nation as an "imagined community" and solidarist society melting nicely ageing natives with young immigrants. Such a combined endeavor requires an ambitious strategic vision, which will need to be widely agreed on by consensus or compromise between the main political forces, as well as a continuity in enforcing that strategy from one government to another far beyond the short horizon of five year presidential and parliamentary mandates. Furthermore, all this must be achieved while crises are erupting unexpectedly and consuming too much of the State institutional capacities in short-term fire-alarm issues of governability. Unfortunately, the conditions for such an enduring quality of governance are missing in the France of 2024: Whereas the country and its NWS were able to magnificently welcome the world to the wonderful Paris Olympics, the second term in office of hyper-President Macron appears to be a disaster: The President is so unpopular and isolated that he cannot lead the country anymore; Prime Ministers and ministers seldom survive more than a year and a half—a situation that ruins any continuity in policy-making; and the 2024 irrational dissolution of the National Assembly has brought back, in a traditionally majoritarian system, an incredible chamber broken into 11 political groups which agree on almost nothing and have no culture of coalition-making (against many neighbor countries). The situation is thus gloomy, which —since France is one of the two leading countries of the EU, with Germany itself suffering a difficult period—also fragilizes the governance of Europe as a whole, in a very crucial moment of its history. Therefore, in Paris as well as at EU level, major qualitative improvements to the NWS, are needed, and their tangible positive outcomes for all citizens must be quickly demonstrated and properly showcased.

It is all the more necessary since a more structural, long-lasting phenomenon further complicates the current situation: French State politico-administrative elites are expected to accomplish short-term and long-term Herculean feats in a period when their legitimacy—that of elected politicians as the one of ENA-graduated technocrats—in the eyes of discontented, very critical citizens, is at its lowest since the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958: The public "bashing" of any institutional leader entrusted with some kind of public authority and the post-truth hyperbolic doubt placed on technocratic and expert knowledge are displayed daily on all social networks. Such a legitimacy crisis gives room to the propaganda of populist, anti-system movements—at the far-right as at the far-left—which are almost on the doorstep of power, and whose authoritarian leaders, would be happy to come to power and impose their illiberal, simplistic (non-)solutions to wicked problems, in contradiction with the three founding values of the French Republic—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—as well as the European Treaties, regulations, and case law. It does not require a soothsayer to predict that such a scenario of an illiberal, Europhobic, extremist leader winning the presidential contest and starting to impose his/her program would provoke an institutional crisis in the European Union even more considerable than that of Brexit, while several million French citizens, always so quick to take to the streets, would activate their 'right to resist oppression' and block the country.

To avoid such a catastrophic scenario, the moderate, pro-system political and technocratic elites who are still in

command of the French NWS, in Paris as at the levels of territorial governance, are now faced with abandoning their often-arrogant attitude and top-down approach to policy-making. What France needs is a true cultural shift: by accepting a situation in which power is shared with all the socio-political forces and stakeholders that remain positive towards liberal representative democracy and the rule of law, and truly including ordinary citizens in inclusive mini-public experiences of participative democracy and collaborative policy design that were recently experienced with success, the political masters and administrative servants of the robust French NWS could succeed in governing and administering the three abovementioned 'great transformations', while managing the upcoming crises at the same time. This task will not be easy at all and will require a great deal of goodwill from all partners. But, as Napoleon once declared, 'The word impossible is not French!'

Submitted: July 10, 2024 KST, Accepted: September 07, 2024 KST

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