

The Custodians of State Policies Dealing With the Financial Crisis: A Comparison Between France and the US¹

William Genieys

University of Montpellier, Montpellier, France

Jean Joana

University of Montpellier, Montpellier, France

Following the 2008 global economic crisis and rolling out of austerity measures, elites of the state seem to have become a “political species” of their own, now under threat of extinction. The study of the health and defense policy reforms in France and the US during the 1990s and 2000s shows that far from disappearing, the influence of state elites is being strategically reconfigured to defend some sector-specific policies. Similarly to those “custodians of policy” dear to P. Selznick, small groups of elites are gaining expertise within strategic sectors of public policy; they are also making the need to control the cost of public spending their royal battle, in order to safeguard what they see as the crucial role of the public good. In the American cases study, the image of the “revolving door”, which encapsulates the idea of professional mobility back and forth from the private to the public sector, implies a fragmented state, open to external pressures of social groups. We document career and professional trajectories marked by a strong commitment to a given policy area. Circulation, we note, is frequent between these positions in the public sector. While these findings do not in and of themselves allow us to fully assess the influence wielded by these elites, this study identifies the social and political resources and forms of specialization which predispose them to play important roles in shaping public policy. For the past 30 years, the question of varieties of liberalisation has been put forward as an explanatory factor for a wide range of public policies (Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013; Thelen, 2014). In this perspective, numerous authors have theorised the dismantling of democratic states and the weakening of public authority that would follow (Suleiman, 2003; Fukuyama, 2004; Bezès, 2009; Bonneli & Pelletier, 2010; Lodge, 2013). Research on public policy has focused on the success of neoliberal ideas among European and North American political elites (Pierson, 1994; Prasad, 2006; Fourcade, 2009) on the calling into question of the neo-Keynesian paradigm (Hall, 1986; Crouch, 2011) and on the development of budgetary constraints (Bezès & Siné, 2011; Streeck & Schäfer, 2013; Blyth, 2013). Other work emphasises the idea that the effects of economic globalization—reinforced by those of the financial crisis of 2008—have accelerated the weakening of state capacity in western democracies by accelerating the expansion of market relations within national political systems (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Jabko, 2012). At the same time, this period has seen renewed interest in national regulation (Lodge, 2011). Even so, if analysis is limited to the evolution of public policies as a simple functional response to the evolution of the international, financial, or ideological contexts in which they are found, research tends to underestimate the role played by competition among the elite groups involved with their elaboration and their capacity for resilient attachment to the power of public authority. For this reason, the hypothesis of the dismantling of the state, allegedly accelerated by the crisis of 2008, should be revisited.

Keywords: élites, defense policy, health policy, France, USA

Introduction¹

We should recall in the first place that work on *American Political Development* (APD) has pointed to the existence of strong policies at the sectoral level to call into question the argument of the weak state (Lieberman, 2002; Baldwin, 2005; King, 2005). Inspired by Mann's (1984; 1993) sociology of the state, this line of research has noted with respect to several sectors of public policy that the strong infrastructural power of civil society has led to a stronger role for public authority (King & Lieberman, 2009a; 2009b). Work analysing the process of recomposition in the states of Continental Europe faced with the combined effects of the increased power of the European Union (EU) and the territorial fragmentation of public action reaches similar conclusions (King & Le Galès, 2011; Ellinas & Suleiman, 2012). It nonetheless seem to us that, in minimizing the role of the elites who make policy and who have historically manifested an attachment to public authority, these streams of research neglect the keystone on which the distinction between strong and weak states was established (Badie & Birnbaum, 1983; Birnbaum, 1982; Skocpol, 1985). Birnbaum and Suleiman, in the case of France, and Skocpol, for New Deal America, have nonetheless shown that the significant capacity of French *hauts fonctionnaires* or US "high public officials" to structure public policies within certain sectors and departments (the US Department of Agriculture, for example) provides the means to identify empirically the opposition among different types of states through their modes of action (Birnbaum, 1982; 2001; 2002; Suleiman, 1974; 1978; Skocpol & Finegold, 1982; Skocpol & Ikenberry, 1983). From this starting point, it seems pertinent to reconsider the recomposition of public authority in the historic medium term by elaborating a correlation between the transformation of elite structures with respect to the state and the orientation of public policies.

A set of recent studies have suggested a more direct role for elites as programmatic actors at the origin of reforms of health payment policies caught between the neoliberal orthodoxy of austerity on the one hand and increasing costs on the other hand (Genieys & Smyrl 2008; Hassenteufel et al., 2010). The comparative analysis of the transformation of policies in two strategic sectors of the French state (health and national defence) has also allowed the identification of the transformed power of the high civil servants acting in defence of the strong state, as they have become in the process a new type of policy elite. Exchanging the generalist profile of the traditional technocrat for a growing sectoral specialisation, these elite actors sharing similar educational backgrounds and professional trajectories (in the French context, *Grandes Ecoles* and *Grand Corps*) have taken on a role that we designate as "custodians of state policies" (Genieys, 2010). As we will see below, the distinctive element of these new elites can be characterised at once by their professional trajectories, profoundly anchored in a single policy sector, and by their strong identification with policy programs leading to a reaffirmation of public authority and state capacity. A second line of research has focused on a similar object in the US context². Initial results attest to the existence of "long timers" at the top of

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William Genieys, Research Professor at the CNRS-CEPEL, University of Montpellier.

Jean Joana, Professor, Centre d'Études Politiques de l'Europe Latine (CEPEL), University of Montpellier.

² This article is based on empirical findings from the OPERA research programme (Operationalizing Programmatic Elites Research in America 1988-2010). This "White" programme led by W. Genieys was funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche française and conducted over a four-year period from 2008 to 2012 (OPERA: ANR-08-BLAN-0032). The empirical study focused on the transformation of certain sectors such as national defense and health insurance within the senior echelons of the American state structure. This involved compiling 299 biographical profiles and carrying out 200 interviews.

both legislative and executive branches of the US government (Darviche, Genieys, Hoeffler, & Joana, 2013) The study of the successful passage of the Affordable Care Act as well as of the failure of Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's "revolution in military affairs" opens the way to a new look at the role played by the custodians of state policies in the context of the US weak state.

In order to avoid overemphasising the effects of recent events (financial crises and the resulting renewed austerity) on our analysis of the recomposition of elite power in democratic states, we propose a longer-term approach centred on a renewed socio-historical review of the relations between elites and public policy since the end of the Second World War. This analytical choice allows us to replace in historical time the stakes but also the terms of the ongoing debate on government and policy making among different elite components of the power structure. From this starting point, we will defend the notion that political leaders in most pluralist democracies have secured the strong adhesion of state elites to the virtues of democratic pluralism by initially conceding to them a monopoly on the implementation of policies based on planning and/or Keynesian principles. Indeed, between 1945 and the 1970s the elites of the state, whether trained in leading universities as in the US or by the state itself as in France, imposed their technocratic authority over public policy. We will show that the power of these elites of the state was contested in the 1980s by the neo-liberal turn in public ideology but that, far from fading away, this power has been progressively reformulated in certain domains of public policy. The hypothesis of the affirmation of a new role, that of "custodians of state policies", in such strategic sectors as social welfare and national defence in both France and the United States so as to maintain the state's capacity for action is the central focus of our argument.

Conditions of a Strategic Rallying of Elites to the Democratic State After 1945

The comparative sociology of the state has underscored the reticence of state elites with respect to the entry of the masses into the political game. Daalder (1995) emphasised that in the majority of European states in the 19th century, high civil servants set themselves up as "custodians of the state" and, as such, opposed the setting up of representative democracy, which seemed to them to present a menace both to their authority and to the stability of public order. The precocious acceptance of democracy by British and Scandinavian elites, and to a lesser extent by French ones, constitute exceptional cases (Hermet, 1983; Higley & Burton, 2006).

In the United States, by contrast, the absence of a feudal heritage and the birth of the liberal tradition limited the development of the expression of public authority to Washington DC (Hartz, 1952; Young, 1966) despite the precocious autonomy of a few agencies such as the Department of Agriculture or the Post office (Carpenter, 2001). With the interventionist program of the New Deal, only the Department of Agriculture succeeded in imposing its policies, becoming "an island of state strength in an ocean of weakness" in the words of Skocpol and Finegold (1982, p. 271). In other sectors, attempts to establish public health insurance failed repeatedly in the face of opposition from the Congress and interest groups (Skocpol & Ikenberry, 1983; Skocpol & Weir, 1985). Similarly, after the end of the war effort, the new dealers did not succeed in generalising the idea of planning outside the perimeter of major defence contractors.

In Western Europe, by contrast, the post-war era marked the general reconciliation of state elites to democracy (Field & Higley, 1980; Higley & Burton, 2006). The advent of the Cold War and the pressure of US economic aid favoured the implementation of economic interventionism by democratic states in Europe in the form of direct planning or of Keynesian demand management (Shoenfield, 1965; Kuisel, 1981). In this new institutional configuration, the solid allegiance of state elites to Pluralist democracy corresponded to the

moment in which these elites held a monopoly on the skills and techniques of public policy (Thoenes, 1966). Paradoxically, the global conflicts of this era favoured the interlinked growth of both “welfare” and “warfare” sectors and policies (Titmuss, 1976; Skocpol & Amenta, 1995).

Political Loyalty in Exchange for a Monopoly of Welfare State Policies

In the majority of West European states, the Marshall Plan and the implementation of welfare state policies led to a profound transformation in the political behavior of bureaucratic elites. Their strategic rallying to democracy was expressed through common strategies culminating in a corporatist takeover of planning implementation and/or of Keynesian policies, depending on the national configuration of the welfare state regime (Keller, 1963; Hecló, 1974; Suleiman, 1974; Jobert & Muller, 1987; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The Dutch sociologist Piet Thoenes (1966), in his pathbreaking work *The Elite in the Welfare State*, defined the “welfare state regime” as a mode of government established on the basis of a new intra-elite configuration established after the end of WW Two, breaking at once with liberal, socialist, and authoritarian models of the previous era. This type of regime innovates through the monopoly position of state elites in the elaboration and implementation of public policies³. Taking on the role of architects of planning, placing their action at the interface of government, administration, and nationalized industries, these plan-fulfilling elites developed styles of politics that varied from one state to another (Thoenes, 1966, p. 198). Even if the capacity of administrative elites to shape the content of public policies differed as a function of the institutional configuration of the various states and of the social learning process involved, it was a reality in each case as pointed out in Hecló’s (1974) study of the modernization of social protection systems in the UK and Sweden. In the context of the French strong state, the Planning Commission and elites redefined relations between economy and social structure on the basis of an industrial policy based on planning and nationalisation in pursuit of full employment. The French system of social security was established in this same period (Shonfield, 1965; Nord, 2010). In the US, in light of the strong sectoral autonomy of state activity and the structural weakness of the high civil service, this phenomenon emerged later and for a shorter time, at the turn of the 1960s with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, notably the “War on Poverty”. In this context, it was limited to certain sectors such as urban policy, social policies, and national defence (Derthick, 1979; Baldwin, 1990; Skocpol, 1995).

Whether labelled Keynesianism or planning by economists, or social democracy by political scientists, there is a general consensus that these new policies, characterised by an increase in fiscal pressure and redistribution towards lower income socio-economic groups, were implemented by state elites who supported democratic capitalism (Dahrendorf, 1959; Miliband, 1969; Giddens, 1973). At the same time, by opening themselves to middle and upper middle classes, the structure of state elites changed in most western democracies (Kelsall, 1974; Darbel & Schnapper, 1969). The US, where certain social and ethnic minorities continued to be excluded, constituted an exception (Bendix, 1949; Stanley, Mann, & Doig, 1967). The general increase in the educational attainment of civil servants and the increase in legal education in particular played a

³ Thoenes attributes this change to “an elite of scientifically trained officials, in government departments, in semi-official departments, serving with big firms, with trade unions, and with professional organizations. Many clashes of interest kept them divided, but the task of scientific oversight of the national economy is a unifying one, and it gives them a common stamp” (1966, p. 129). He subsequently specifies the central role of state elites; “The functionaries’ elite is that official section of the community which claims, by virtue of its special skill to have the task of understanding, bringing about and safeguarding the requirements which shall determine the structure and function of the nation’s controlled society” (1966, p. 183).

central role in the acquisition of technocratic skills in these policy areas (Dogan, 1975; Aberbach, Putnam, & Rockman, 1981). To underscore the reinforcement of links between these elites and the state, notably in the French case, Dogan (1975; 2003) used the metaphor of the Chinese Mandarins. Like them, high civil servants are educated in public institutions hired through competitive examinations, and are destined to occupy the top administrative positions. On the strength of these positions of power and their capacity to influence the contents of policy, these elites favoured the shifting of the centre of power from parliaments to ministries, most notably in the French Fifth Republic by acting to reinforce public authority in general (Birnbaum, 1977).

Warfare: Beyond the Military Industrial Complex, the Rise of Civilian Defence Elites?

National defence was among the earliest sectors of public activity to be strongly influenced by the rise of planning. William McNeill (1982) has shown that, as early as the 1880s the armaments sector in certain European countries such as Great Britain, until then dominated by market logic, was turned increasingly into a command economy. It is well known that the First World War played an important role in accelerating this process, notably in France. In the USA, the conflict with Germany and Japan between 1941 and 1945 was the occasion to transfer into the military production sector the planning instruments first tried experimentally as part of the New Deal (Hooks, 1991). The post-war period was a time of unprecedented emphasis on planning for the defence sector, leading to fears of the emergence of a military industrial complex (Rose, 1967). This rise of defence-related planning was in fact part of a broader trend in capitalist democracies. John Kenneth Galbraith (1967) evoked the rise of a “technostructure” allowing defence industries to produce the material needed for the Cold War. In the same way, the introduction of the tools and mechanisms needed for planning brought about a change in the criteria applied to military promotions. This period saw the rise of “officer managers”, whose professional skills closely resembled those of top corporate or government managers (Janowitz, 1960).

This transformation of the structure of US military elites was contested by critical sociology which, following C Wright Mills (2000 [1956]), denounced the formation of a military industrial complex potentially antithetical to the proper functioning of Pluralist democracy. For this school of analysis, planning constituted an efficient instrument of public action, but one that served the interests of the arms industry and the power elite. In a similar vein, William Domhoff has rejected the notion of an increase in the autonomy of the American state, seeing instead a rise in the power of “big business” through the various planning activities of public policy (Domhoff, 1967; 1990). Marxist analysts Baran and Sweezy (1966) went farther in their criticism, suggesting that US foreign and defence policy more generally was a reflection of the interests of American capitalism. By contrast, other authors have called into question the homogeneity of the purported military industrial complex, pointing out the contradictory interest of the civilian and military actors allegedly found there (Slater & Nardin, 1973). For some of these, the Cold War of the 1960s seems to be the moment when civilian elites of the defence sector affirmed their autonomy with respect to other sectoral actors. In this way, the reforms initiated during the Kennedy administration by Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara are frequently attributed to the “whiz kids”, civilian experts and advisors on his staff. Breaking with the formalism that had hitherto characterised relations among industrialists, the military, and political decision makers in the arms sector, these new elites imposed a state-led system dubbed “Pentagon capitalism” (Melman, 1970).

Similar logics of action can be found among the elites of the state charged with defence planning in West European democracies. Beginning in 1945, the UK, a paradigmatic weak state, put in place a strongly

interventionist policy with respect to armaments. The combination of a market-oriented logic of politics and economics and the structural intervention of the state gave rise to what Edgerton (1991; 2005) has labelled “liberal militarism”. Planning and the nationalization of strategic firms in the defence sector reinforced the power of civilian elites with respect to military ones in the armaments sector (Dillon, 1988). Until the start of the 1970s, the role of the state was conceived as an expert state relying on technological excellence (Hoeffler, 2011, p. 128).

In France, concern with regaining the world power status held prior to World War Two favoured the rise of civilian elites whose mission was to plan the rapid reconstruction of the armed forces and the armaments industry (CHED, 1996). The creation of the *Délégation Ministérielle à l’Armement* in 1961, which was renamed *Délégation Générale pour l’Armement* (DGA) in 1977 was the sign of a willingness to modernise the French defence structure around the concept of a nuclear strike force, a notion put forward and supported by an elite coming from the *Grandes Ecoles* and *Grand Corps* of the French state (Vaïsse, 2002). The influence acquired by this corps of armament engineers, which was unified in 1968, is symbolised by the presence of its members not only in the structures in charge of research and development of military equipment, but also in principal decision making positions within the ministries of Defence and Industry (Kolodziej, 1987). Under the Fifth Republic, the power acquired by the DGA over armaments policies within the defence sector contributed to the defeat of military elites (Cohen, 1994; Genieys, 2004). In France as in our other cases, thus, these civilian elites of the defence sector gradually imposed their power over the definition of policies to the detriment of the uniformed military.

The Temptation of Technocratic Government in Representative Democracies: Myth or Reality?

The monopoly held by the elites of the state on the implementation of planning policies pointed to a threat of technocratic government in western democracies (Meynaud, 1964; Putnam, 1977). Meynaud (1964) first, taking the example of the French “strong state” observed that after having penetrated most sectors of the state’s action, technocrats imposed their political legitimacy vis-à-vis civil society to the detriment of that of elites drawn from political representation. In the US, the debate opposed those who held that planning situations led to “polyarchic” control (Dahl & Lindbloom, 1953) and those who denounced the rise to power of an entrepreneurial technocracy made up of the managers and technicians leading to the formation of a “new industrial state” (Galbraith, 1967). In a comparative analysis of western democracies, Mattei Dogan (1975) pointed to a set of structural factors such as administrative centralization, ministerial instability, and the increased influence of ministerial staffs as factors increasing the weight of technocratic power over daily life. From this starting point, the question of the growing autonomy of the elites of the state, or of their fusion with political elites, has continued to solicit controversy in western democracies (Suleiman, 1974; 1978; Putnam, 1976; Domhoff, 1990).

Pierre Birnbaum (1977; 1984) has pointed to the opposition between two cases. In the French strong state, on the one hand, notably following the advent of the Fifth Republic after 1958, high civil servants set off to conquer the highest positions of political power. In the context of the weak state as found in the United States, on the other hand, elites coming from civil society maintained the upper hand and monopolized positions of political and policy leadership. Even so, while it is clear that power relations among political and technocratic elites vary according to the configuration of state and society relations, they evolved in most cases to the advantage of those who held technical skills necessary for the governance of public policy. By studying the

beliefs and behavior of technocrats (conventional officials vs. technical officials) in Germany, Italy, and the UK, Robert Putnam (1977, p. 407) showed that the mastery of similar technical skills with respect to policy generated a “technical identity” on the basis of which grew a strong sense of group identity which allowed technical officials frequently to impose their points of view on subjects of public policy. This power, however, varies as a function of the institutional configuration of democratic regimes, of competition, and of arrangements made with interest groups and other elites (Aberbach et al., 1981; Page & Wright, 1999).

Specialists in the analysis of public policy have studied in detail the question of concrete arrangements among elites and interest groups, opposing corporatist and pluralist models to explain the different types of modernising planning and the Keynesian strategies pursued by European democracies in the post-war period (Schmitter & Lehbruch, 1979; Jobert & Muller, 1987; Hall, 1986; Lehbruch, 2003). In this vein, Hugh Heclo (1974) showed that in both Britain and Sweden, albeit in different ways, administrative elites shaped arguments around a global welfare state programs that were later co-opted by political elites. This capacity to elaborate governing agreements around policy programs frequently went beyond the sphere of social policy to extend to global budgetary issues, notably in the UK (Heclo & Wildavski, 1974). For his part, Peter Hall (1986) showed through analysis of the trajectory of economic policy in France and the UK that while planning was originally an administrative technique, it became a fully fledged strategy of government allowing the regulation of negotiations between the elites of the state and interest groups. In their study of the golden age of French planning, Jobert and Muller (1987) demonstrate that, by maintaining an effective monopoly on access to internal documentation within the administrative machine and developing their own technical language, high civil servants elaborated a “global-sectoral relation” (*rapport global-sectoriel*) that allowed them to integrate interest groups in each sector into the overall policy of modernisation. Strong technocratic power over policy was not limited to generalist administrators, rather it was affirmed also in technical sectors where the engineers of the *Grand Corps* participated in policy making for major infrastructure projects (Thoenig, 1987) as well as for Concorde, high-speed trains, Airbus, and the Minitel (Suleiman & Courty, 1997).

At the start of the 1980s, nevertheless, the relation between state and market was once more called into question, leading in both Europe and the US to a sudden and comprehensive opposition to planning and the elites that embodied it (Muller, 2015, p. 419). This critique took on different forms in strong and weak states. It is to this debate that we turn in the following section.

Death and Resurrection of the Power of the Elites of the State in the 1980s

At the end of the 1970s, the power of the elites of the state in western democracies was contested on several fronts. With respect to policy, their monopoly was increasingly challenged by the “politician-technician” (Putnam, 1976; Aberbach et al., 1981). In the United States, the political appointees who made up what Heclo (1977) famously termed a “government of strangers” challenged the power of high civil servants over sectoral policies. On the societal front, elites were criticized for developing strategies ensuring the creation of a closed and self-perpetuating caste at odds with the meritocratic virtues which they claimed to embody since the end of World War Two. The oil shocks of 1973 and 1980, along with the return of mass unemployment favored the re-emergence of anti-elite populist rhetoric targeting the inadequacy of technocrats and their policies. This critique was found in most advanced democracies, but it took on a different tone in the context of highly bureaucratized states such as France, where the threat of the “state nobility” was evoked. In countries

characterized by weak states, marked by the debate over the “power elite” the discredited technocrats were relegated to being no more than a figurehead for the interests of a capitalist ruling class.

Elements of the Reassessment of the Power of the Elites of the State

During the period under study here, the elites of the state developed strategies of professional reproduction that led gradually to closing off sources of knowledge to individuals from other social groups. Starting from this observation, structural Marxist sociology pointed out first of all this lack of social openness and used it to frame a broader opposition between the elites of the state and the cultural values of democracy. On this basis, their capacity to elaborate policies embodying the general interest was put into question.

In the USA, we must note that, to the extent that there was a state elite in this period, it remained in the shadow of the myth of the “power elite” dear to C. Wright Mills (Genieys, 2015). Even so, the proponents of a pluralist view have shown through studies of US foreign policy that the elite decision-makers in the US State Department defined foreign and defence policies in the national interest with a certain degree of autonomy with respect to interest groups (Krasner, 1978). William Domhoff (1990) contested this thesis and affirmed anew the existence of a “ruling elite” composed of an element of the “upper class”, of the “business community”, and of members of “policy-formation organisations” such as think tanks, chambers of commerce, etc. These, in the view of this scholar, prevented the autonomous constitution of a group of policy elites serving an autonomous state interest. Broadening the scope of this reasoning to European societies, but restricted nonetheless to the British weak state, Ralph Miliband (1969) denounced the transformation of the formerly open educational system into a system for the internal reproduction of a state elite in the interests of the ruling class. The Oxbridge system was accused of having become the origin of a homogenous elite within which the boundary between private and public interests was blurred (Glennerster & Pryke, 1973; Stanworth & Giddens, 1974; Kelsall, 1974).

In the context of the French strong state, on the other hand, where administrative elites were educated exclusively in the *Grandes Ecoles*, numerous observers pointed to the rise of a “state nobility” (Suleiman, 1974; 1978; Bourdieu, 1996). Suleiman (1974, p. 85) showed that intra-elite circulation within the French state linking education in a *Grande Ecole* and career in a *Grand Corps* had become quasi-automatic. Bourdieu (1996) broadened the attack by raising the spectre of the rise of a new caste, the “state nobility”. In his view, the links between selective secondary education (*classes préparatoires*) and the *Grandes Ecoles* favoured the formation of a group sharing the same social properties as those of castes or ethnic groups and—more to the point—of aristocratic lineages. The “magic of the state” was invoked to convince the population as a whole that the state itself produced an autonomous elite defending the general interest, while in actual practice this new noble order served its own interests and altered the working of democratic institutions to this end.

At the same time, in a paradoxical fashion, the vision of the central role of state elites in implementing the post-war welfare state faded from public opinion in western democracies. Neo-elitist scholars such as Field and Higley (1980, pp. 13-17) put forward the explanation that different governments implementing welfare systems gave the illusion that the compromises and negotiations that took place within the state were the product of the state itself, and not the result of a compromise among various interest groups who elaborated this policy program. Unable to take credit for the advantages of Keynesian reforms, the elites of the state found themselves branded in the US and UK by a portion of the political class converted to neo-liberal ideas as being responsible for the economic crisis and, more generally, for the bureaucratisation of western societies (Pierson, 1994; Wolf,

2014). In northern Europe, where the welfare state was anchored in a long history, conservative elected officials developed a populist discourse that consisted in labelling elites of the state as responsible for the loss of efficiency of the social democratic model (Blyth, 2001; Palier, 2010). In the French case, finally, the lengthy survival of the myth of the “golden age of the state” (Suleiman & Courty, 18997) and the adoption of a popularised version of neo-liberalism by the state itself (Jobert & Théret, 1994) resulted initially in diffusing critique.

On the whole, the convergence of two critical dialogues, that of the radical left attacking the elite’s capacity for self reproduction, and that of the conservative right denouncing the excessive cost of state policies, and ultimately the centrality of the state itself as embodied in Ronald Reagan’s oft-repeated statement that “government is the problem, not the solution”, led a part of the technocratic elite to renew the basis of their legitimacy by targeting particular domains of policy with a view of reaffirming the state’s capacity for action.

Refocusing on Policies Strategic to the Survival of State Influence

It is worth remembering that since the end of the 1970s, the Keynesian underpinnings of public policy have been attacked across the board in Western democracies (Prasad, 2006; Fourcade, 2009). Indeed, in the US and UK, the Reagan and Thatcher governments launched all be it, in different ways retrenchment policies aimed at dismantling the welfare state (Pierson, 1994). Similarly, conservative governments questioned the Swedish social democratic model initially set up by administrative elites (Blyth, 2001), whereas French technocrats in the 1970s slowly transformed their “state interventionism” into pragmatic neoliberalism (Prasad, 2006). Under François Mitterrand’s socialist presidency according to Jobert and Théret, a portion of the state elites occupying strategic posts within key French ministries metamorphosedæ into “state economists” by applying a strict budgetary policy and globalising the French economy (1994, p. 80). If for some, this paradigm shift in budget policies led to the neoliberal discourse eclipsing Keynesian rhetoric (Lehmbruch, 2003; Siné, 2006); for others, it allowed some Keynesian technocrats to rethink the policy-making context and incorporate leaner budgetary choices (Benamouzig, 2005; Genieys, 2010). This was the basis upon which budgetary policy choices would now be made and they would become key for state elites reasserting their influence in a climate where advocates of austerity (*austerians*) would challenge proponents of renewed regulation (Bezès & Siné, 2011; Blyth, 2013).

Yet, some strategic sectors for the enabling state such as Foreign Affairs illustrated how sector elites, who revealed themselves capable of defending both the general and the national interest, were able to resist pressures from various interest groups (Krasner, 1978). Nonetheless, the rise of powerful interest groups or organised lobbies and the professionalisation of partisan elites helped to bolster this trend towards challenging technocrats’ monopoly of policy-making expertise (Suleiman, 1984; Page & Wright, 1999). At the same time, conservative governments condemned state elites’ identities by bringing in new public management (NPM) policies, which challenged their professional expertise (Suleiman, 2003; Bezès, 2009) and showed just how politicised they were (Mayntz & Derlien, 1989). With their expertise increasingly questioned, senior civil servants and technocrats found themselves needing to carefully distinguish between decision-taking managed by professional politicians (Giddens, 1973) and policy decision-making (Page, 2003) that they could contribute ideas to and shape new instruments of governance for (Mayntz & Derlien, 1989; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004).

This phenomenon despite its various manifestations affected some new democracies on the American

sub-continent (Dezalay & Garth, 2002), where applying the “Washington consensus” formula led to actual “palace wars” within the entourage of those government chiefs, wars between those “traditional” state elites of gentlemen of law trained at law schools, with a legal education obtained at European universities, and those *Chicago boys*⁴ converted to the neoliberal *doxa*. In these countries, traditional bureaucratic elites’ power and influence, often rooted in authoritarian regimes, was soon obliterated by new elites, who basking in democratic ideals were to denounce the authoritarian and bureaucratic state as arbitrary and inefficient and so, impose ultra liberal policies (Dezalay & Garth, 2002, p. 65). This sociological principle is linked to sociological work on *structure power analysis* dear to Domhoff, who nowadays more than previously, asserts that the technocratic power of elites of the state has dissolved in the face of a new economic and financial elite’s powerful, globalised and transnational networks (Savage & Williams, 2008; Murray & Scott, 2012).

Yet research analysing liberal policies’ “victory” over various types of Keynesian states tends to relegate rather too hastily swathes of state elites to the cemetery of history. If state elites have first tended to abandon Keynesianism as a hegemonic discourse (Lehmbruch, 2003), this has been in order to reformulate it in a few strategic sectors of state activity, such as health payment and national defense (Genieys, 2010), especially by shaping new instruments for regulating public policy (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004; Bezès, 2009). From this perspective, reconfiguring the state in Europe and its capacity to act has occurred in an asynchronic way, which varies according to domestic or foreign policies (King & Le Galès, 2011). The economic crisis and public deficits crisis mean that the need to control budget spending and balance public accounts has turned into a power struggle (Bezès & Siné, 2011) where elites of the state can reassert their might⁵.

Shaping the “Custodians of State Policies” in Response to Neoliberal Policies (1980-2020)

The emergence of custodians of state policies is by no means an *ex nihilo* phenomenon. Rather, it corresponds to the changing sociological make-up of elites of the state linked to a broader questioning of Keynesian technocrats’ *modus operandi* prompted by conservative and/or neo-liberal revolutions. Partly, one could argue, these custodians have emerged in the wake of the democratic state’s crumbling bureaucratic foundations, which these revolutions set off (Suleiman, 2003; Fukuyama, 2004); partly, the rise of these custodians’ influence can be seen as a way of taming the new *super rich* and returning *oligarchs*’ grasp of state power (Page & Winter, 2009; Winter, 2011; Page, Bartels, & Seawright, 2013; Mizruchi, 2013). Moreover, following the 2008 global economic crisis and rolling out of austerity measures (Blyth, 2013), elites of the state seem to have become a “political species” of their own, now under threat of extinction (Dezalay & Garth, 2002).

Contrary to these pressing arguments, our work shows that far from disappearing, the influence of state elites is being strategically reconfigured to defend some sector-specific policies (Genieys, 2010; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015)⁶. Similarly to those “custodians of policy” dear to P. Selznick⁷, small groups of elites are

⁴ For them, the Chicago boys are trained in the United States and uphold economic arguments of the so-called Chicago School as opposed to the “gentlemen politicians of law”, lawyers trained in European law schools who are imbued with notions of the public good and public interest intrinsic to public continental law (Dezalay & Garth, 2002, p. 51).

⁵ Jean Leca reminds us that government elites “are no longer condemned to choose between ‘butter’ (Welfare) and ‘canons’ (military expenditure)” as they need to reduce spending in these two areas, in order to limit public spending deficits... without increasing the tax burden and all the while instituting social justice (2012, p. 71).

⁶ We observed this phenomenon in two strategic state sectors of public policy: health insurance and national defense (Genieys & Smyrl, 2008; Genieys, 2010; Hassenteufel et al., 2010; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015).

⁷ Philip Selznick drew attention to the rise of “custodians of policy” in public and private organisations, where attachment to an organisation’s institutional integrity depended on shared values elaborated via public policies (Selznick, 1957, p. 120).

gaining expertise within certain strategic sectors of public policy; they are also making the need to control the cost of public spending their royal battle, in order to safeguard what they see as the crucial role of the public good. And these groups, fighting against the dismantling of the enabling state's influence on policy, and bolstering it as a necessary regulator, these elites are establishing themselves as custodians of state policies.

A Sector-specific Conversion to the Role of Custodians of State Policies: A France-USA Comparison

Our various empirical studies both in Europe and the United States illustrate how health payment and national defense are sectors in which the state's capacity for social regulation by way of public policy has been the object of fierce struggle since the early 1990s (Genieys & Smyrl, 2008; Hassenteufel et al., 2010; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015; Joana, 2012). In France, these sectors appear as the crucible par excellence where custodians of state policies have succeeded in channelling their political authority. In the US, research on APD reveals the existence in certain sectors since the 1980s of "strong policies" (Liebermann, 2002; King, 2005; King & Lieberman, 2009a; 2009b) highlighting all the while, the rise of neoconservative values and the decrease of the power of the public sector (Pierson & Skocpol, 2007; Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Yet, by looking at what has happened since the 1990s in terms of "strategic" sector reform, such as national defense and health insurance, it is clear that groups such as custodians of state policies have emerged in France.

In France, it is mainly in terms of social policy that new pressures from a global economy and budgetary constraints have made themselves felt, as a result of EU member states adopting the Maastricht Treaty, thus leading them to limit their spending. Paradoxically, these new constraints marked an increase in the state's direct role regarding the health insurance system with the adoption in 1995 of the "Juppé Plan" which, while it granted parliament responsibility for drafting the annual law setting financial guidelines for "social security", in practice reinforced the prerogatives of ministries and civil servants at the expense of unions and employers (Palier, 2002; Hassenteufel & Palier, 2005). Giving particular attention to health insurance policy stems from the actions of a group of elites strongly anchored in the sector since the 1980s, who acting on behalf of the state have fashioned new tools for public action in order to better control over public spending in the area of social welfare (Genieys, 2010; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015). Comparative research on health policy reforms in Germany, the UK and Spain reveals the role played by small groups of local activists who wanted to reassert the power of the public sector and the state's regulatory capacity at the expense of a neoliberal convergence regarding these policies (Hassenteufel et al., 2010).

The other strategic sector of French state initiatives, where this process is apparent and custodians of state policies have succeeded in this new tussle among elites, is that of defense policy (Genieys, 2004; Joana, 2012). If the 1990s was the decade when the "golden age" of military planning initiated by the Fifth Republic came to an end, then the conditions in which the "Leclerc Tank" programme was set up and fizzled out, despite its strategic obsolescence and excessive financial cost, is a good example of this (Genieys & Michel, 2005). Yet, an analysis of strategic interactions between military land army elites does not allow us to fully understand how the programme persisted despite the demise of the Cold War and in the face of new, severe financial constraints. Rather, completing the programme seems to be linked to the role played by an internal elite in the sector's administration, highly committed to the project, who believing the best tank in the world was being built managed to oversee the decision-making. The politics of the professionalisation of the French armed forces date back to 1996 and occurred in a similar vein, when President J. Chirac determined how the forces were to be reorganised and managed, with support from Ministry of Defence non-military elites who took over from

“the clan of the diplomats” (Ironelle, 2011). Nevertheless, this reform owes much to the key role played by these Ministry of Defence non-military elites, who all the while excluding representatives from the Treasury and Foreign Affairs Ministry from the process of training those new professionalised army staff, managed to channel the military elites’ resistance for their own ends (Genieys, 2010).

In terms of American domestic policy, reforming the health insurance system from the “Clintonian” failure to the relative success of “Obamacare” is highly relevant. Several reasons explain the defeat of the Clinton Plan (Hacker, 1997): let us remind ourselves that many observers noted a growing conflict between some Presidential advisers endowed with weak sectorial legitimacy (i.e., I. Magaziner, D. Shalala) and the Health and Human Services administration (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Our empirical research on transformations of elite policy-making at the highest levels of the health insurance sector between 1988 and 2010, in fact reveals how this struggle occurred within a larger context, to do with the state’s capacity to reconfigure this sector (Darviche et al., 2013). Indeed, if the Clinton administration witnessed the emergence of a group of *policy elites* strongly anchored in this sector, these were quite divided, to such an extent that it was necessary to increase the state’s direct role in health insurance. The impossible alignment of different points of view, exacerbated by the frenzy concerning the immoderate cost of a “public option”, could be interpreted as a factor that made it impossible for the strategic alignment of the elites of the state around any one policy orientation (Hacker, 1997). Yet, our analysis of the “success” of the *Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act* reform (PP & ACA, 2010) illustrates how the small group of elites who pioneered the project initially fragmented before gradually uniting around a new reform project that incorporated market ideals. These elites, while continuing to specialise and circulate among think tanks, foundations or even non-profit organisations during the G. W. Bush Administration, worked together to elaborate a new reform, merging the public and private into a proposal for controlling costs, a reform likely to win both bipartisan approval in Congress and temper the veto of certain interest groups (Beaussier, 2012; Smyrl, 2014).

In terms of defense policy, the reform to transform the American armed forces instigated by Secretary of Defense D. Rumsfeld, following the election of G.W. Bush in 2000, is another example of the effects of shifting roles of elites at the highest levels of the US State. Research on this reform largely ignores this aspect, highlighting technical elements instead and importance accorded to developing new military equipment (Adamsky, 2010; Lacquement, 2003; Sapolsky, Friedman, & Rittenhouse Green, 2009). However, Rumsfeld’s reform is testimony to the influence achieved during the 1990s by a proportion of the civil elites within the defense sector, for whom the Pentagon and armed forces have become factors in the American State’s decreasing military capacity. The failure of the Revolution in Military Affairs desired by G.W. Bush’s Defense Secretary can thus be explained by the resistance of the military elites and, in particular, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who defended an alternative model of adaptation to budgetary constraints.

Thus, the new constraints which public action was subject to from the 1980s on, more tied to austerity budgets, did not necessarily entail a loss of influence over those policies by the elites defending the public sector. With respect to certain sectors critical to the survival of the state, it is crucial to assess how small elite groups, whose professional trajectories are strongly tied to the outcomes of sector policy-making, manage to capitalise on financial constraints in order to devise reforms.

Singular Trajectories and Professional Mobility of Custodians of State Policies

After the Second World War, the sociology of state elites’ professional career paths was dominated by a

tension in political science between a strong and a weak state (Birnbaum, 1982; 2012). Firstly, a strong state meant professional career paths were mainly understood as those of generalist high civil servants, who would implement coherent, identical Keynesian policies across each sector of state intervention, independent of any negotiations won by representatives of civil society or interest groups (Jobert & Muller, 1987; Hall, 1986). Secondly, what a weak state meant for professional elite career paths largely formed during short stints within civil society settings (i.e. those professionals known as “birds of passage”) was a form of government of strangers, whereby interest groups came to wield strong influence (Hecló, 1977; Domhoff, 1990). Yet, emerging new professional career paths tied to restructuring undergone by the public sector from the 1980s and 1990s on, on both sides of the Atlantic, lead us to challenge this definition (Genieys, 2010; Darviche et al., 2013; Hassenteufel et al., 2010; Genieys & Joana, 2015).

Commonalities among custodians of state policies include have been graduated from prestigious universities. If in the French case, they always emerge from the traditional “Science Po-ENA” route (Genieys, 2010), in the American case, they tend to have been educated within “Schools of Public Policy”⁸. Indeed, these institutions which provide interdisciplinary trainings enable their alumni to seize the stakes involved in evaluating public policy (Wildavsky, 2001; Allison, 2006); they equip them with vital prerequisites such as university diplomas (MPA, MPH, or even PhD) necessary for future sector specialisation by Congress “staffers or political appointees” of the executive branch (Darviche et al., 2013). Thus, since the 1980s we see in the US, a young generation of liberal elites (Wildavsky, 2001) socialised early on to be wary of the “cost-benefit” analysis approach of public policies linked to the development of Policy Planning Budgeting System (PPBS) which promotes the financial evaluation of public action and reinforcement of the role of the public sector (Allison, 2006, p. 65). Strong in the art of persuasion and argumentation, and mastering those policy analysis and micro-economics techniques (Mac Garity, 1991), these elites are endowed with practical know-how that enables them to conceive and draft policies, which constitute an alternative to those defended by the “new right”.

It is noteworthy that in the French case, where the mode of training administrative elites still remains tied to the myth of the “generalist technocrat” (Suleiman, 2008), the acquisition of sector-specific competencies occurs later on during their professional specialisation (Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015). So, the social background which characterises custodians of state policies no longer corresponds to the one where the administration’s particular culture, nor loyalty in its service, are the essential features. Instead, these elites benefit from a training that provides them once they graduate with a set of highly specialised skills and knowledge regarding public sector policies, and these competencies and know-how will subsequently favour their career progression as long-term professionals in a particular public sector field, while still allowing them scope for “toing and froing” between the private and public sectors.

The other sociological peculiarity of these custodians of state policies stems from their professional mobility rooted solely within a single sphere of the public sector. However, if according to the organisational nature of the state (Laumann & Knoke, 1987), the toing and froing into the public sector is more common in the

⁸ In the United States, this shift in how elites are trained which feeds into working for the state corresponds to the creation of “Schools of Public Policy” at the instigation of a Ford Foundation programme (1972). Inspired by an approach known as “Policy Science” dear to Harold Lasswell, centred on training and evaluating public policy, 12 Masters were set up (Allison, 2006). The most significant of these is the transformation of the Harvard School of Administration into the John F. Kennedy School of Government.

United States, these professional career paths seem firmly anchored within a particular public policy sector. Length and type of specialisation of these sector specific careers is what distinguishes professional pathways. Our empirical work on transformations at the highest levels of power in the health insurance and national defense sectors in France and the USA illustrates how the average length of careers is more than 20 years (Genieys, 2010; Darviche et al., 2013; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015). This “long-term” sector presence is often accompanied by high mobility among professionals working within one sector, owing to the revolving doors phenomenon between the political parties. In France, this circulation generally takes place within sector-specific agencies of the state itself, with transfers into the private sector tending to occur later on in employees’ careers. In the USA, however, it is more common to observe frequent toing and froing between public and private sectors. Nevertheless, movement within any one sector tends to favour emerging networks, which often reach beyond the state’s formal boundaries.

Thus within a strong state such as France, it is by remaining within the same sector and at the heart of this sector’s nucleus of power, and by alternating between posts that involve decision-making over policies (such as directing central administration or ministerial cabinet work), as well as by holding posts where policies can be assessed and evaluated (for example, the *Cours de Comptes* and various *Grands Corps* tasked with inspections), that custodians of state policies can shape their careers (Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015). It is precisely this sector-specific professional mobility which enables employees to retain their power and influence over redefining the enabling state’s sphere of intervention.

With regard to the US weak state, employees’ mobility as elites within a sector is highly structured by the revolving door system (Mackenzie, 1987) and characterised by numerous comings and goings in shadow of the state between public and private sectors (Wedel, 2009). Yet, this type of transfer into the private sector essentially—practically solely into *think tanks*, foundations including non-profit organizations, and rarely into business or interest groups—shows that policy expertise is found chiefly outside the traditional bounds of the state (Lepont, 2014). However, whether shaped within or outside the state’s institutional boundaries, their expertise and knowledge of policies tends to lean towards strengthening the public sector’s regulatory powers.

Rooted in this kind of social background and career trajectory, the custodians of state policies on both sides of the Atlantic have become aware of today’s budget constraints weighing heavily on public policies. Taking account of the costs of policies often involves operating via those “specialized” institutions of power which control public sector finances. In France, this means professionals moving into inspectorate and sector control organisation roles, including the *Cour de comptes* (Genieys, 2010). In the United States, this usually means obtaining an “appointment” at the heart of organisations controlling public policy expenditure, such as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) (Joyce, 2011)¹⁸. Analysing these trajectories shows how these elites, while mastering the high expenditure and budget costs of reforms, can maximise their influence over decision-making within both branches of democratic power.

Conclusion

The emergence of custodians of state policies clearly is testimony to their strong attachment to the public

¹⁸ We should mention here, that the OMB (reorganised under the Nixon Administration, 1970) or even the CBO (1974) are recently created institutions involved in developing controls and evaluations of public policies within both branches of power in the US, the executive and the legislative. Alice Rivlin and Peter Orzag, who headed these two institutions, played a vital role preparing Obamacare, which we observed while researching these reforms (Joyce, 2011).

sector and commitment to defending the enabling state in the face of attacks targeting its political and administrative institutions across the world. What really sets these custodians of state policies apart is their attachment to the role of the public sector more than that of the state itself, especially in countries where the state is seen as weak.

The economist Martin Wolf (2014) recently denounced the inability of financial, political and intellectual elites to formulate adequate policies to tackle our early 21st century's economic crisis. For Wolf and his economist colleagues, the concentration of decision-making power within Euro-zone countries reflects a plutocratic drifting off course among democracies, who crown Keynesian policies with the "austerians" victory crown (Blyth, 2013; Stuckler & Basu, 2013). Yet these various observations fail to reflect the diverse policies implemented in several western countries to combat the crisis (Bermeo & Pontusson, 2012; Thelen, 2014; Streeck & Schafer, 2013; Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013). Moreover, when considering, as given, the defeat of those elites, who have delivered "welfare statism" policies since the end of the Second World War (Thoenes, 1966), it seems to us that those authors understate the fact that crises also make bureaucracies and their elites prosper (Rueschmeyer, 2005). While it remains incontrovertible that during the 1980s, the Neo-Liberals began the dismantling of democratic states (Suleiman, 2003; Dezalay & Garth, 2002), we should beware underestimating the role that some groups of vocal elites have played by instigating reforms aimed at reshaping the public sector's regulatory powers (Genieys & Smyrl, 2008; Genieys & Hassenteufel, 2015). More generally, these emerging custodians of state policies also shed light on just how modern states are transforming themselves in a context of economic liberalism to which they have been subject over the past 30 years (Fourcade, 2009; King & Legalès, 2011). W. Streeck and K. Thelen (2005) see this liberalism, which they broadly define as "a secular expansion of market relations inside and across the borders of national political-economic systems" (p. 2), as the main factor of institutional change within developed economies during the 1980s. According to them, this liberalisation lies at the origin of incremental, yet real changes that several countries' economic and social policies were subject to. The role played by these custodians of state policies in domesticating the Neo-Liberals' *doxa*, thus opens up new perspectives for exploring how these transformations occurred (Prasad, 2006).

Of course, this liberalising role cannot be limited to a zero-sum game of either more or less state. How these guardians are managing to uphold the public sector's role in several spheres of state intervention, all the while conforming to pressures to reduce and ration public spending is one example of this. Their method also confirms results from other studies, which emphasise how far the state is from becoming a disappearing agent in this changing context, and that in some areas, its ability to intervene might even be on the increase (Jacobs & King, 2009; Faucher-King & Le Galès, 2010). The second lesson to be drawn is a comparative one. Recent criticisms of the sociology of the state point to its excessive focus on the state's administrative and institutional workings and structure. Furthermore, these criticisms call for far greater attention to be given to the state's ability to devise public policies in the guise of a "policy-state" (King & Le Galès, 2011, p. 467).

The emergence of custodians of state policies, in these varied political contexts in both the United States and European countries, partly confirms the need for our field of the sociology of the state to refocus. Defending the role of the public sector, which these new guardians are beholden to, transcends those divisions among states defined either as weak or strong; it also illustrates the need for an approach, that will highlight what the state has achieved as a result of these policies, rather than what it is held to be. These elites' professional career paths—how they flourish in the public sector—illustrate just how the structure of each state

contributes, nevertheless to shaping them. These processes also determine the type of post that these elites take up within various sectors, as well as their more state, like make-up in France at least, and in some senses, also in the United States.

Finally, the new role of custodians of state policies casts additional light on the rise of new modes of public regulation at the supranational level. In the context of research on the EU, some studies have already shown how the growth of the EU's competencies in several sectors did address some member state elites' eagerness to encourage strategies within the EU that promote, support, and uphold public sector organisation, up until then mainly manifest at the national level (Joana & Smith, 2002; Mérand, 2008; Ellinas & Suleiman, 2012; Kauppi & Rask Madsen, 2013). What the rise of these guardians of state policies reveals is a set of innovative arguments for defending and protecting the power of the public sector, thus allowing us to fully appreciate those national mechanisms which underpin their emergence.

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