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Listening like a state
An ethnographic contribution to the study of
the self-critical state

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I offer an ethnographic approach of the involvement of public services user in the shaping of public management reform. Drawing on a two years fieldwork in a French organization dedicated to the definition of administrative simplification reforms, I argue that this emerging set of technologies is a refinement of the neo-liberal “art of government” defined by Michel Foucault and can be inscribed in what I propose to call a “self-critical state”. The contribution of this account is twofold. From a conceptual point of view, I highlight how the user’s voice is listened to and appropriated by the administration. This operation leads to the definition of reforms aiming to eliminate the concrete manifestation of the state in everyday life without weakening the control activities. From a methodological point of view, I stress the specific issues raised by the using of “at-home ethnography” and tries to offer solutions to find the good distance from the field.

Keywords: ethnography, public management reform, Foucault, at-home ethnography, user, citizen

What is at issue is whether a market economy can in fact serve as the principle, form, and model for a state which, because of its defects, is mistrusted by everyone on both the right and the left, for one reason or another.

Michel Foucault

Bureaucratic knowledge is, of course, all about schematization. In practice, bureaucratic procedures invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real human existence and reducing everything to a simple pre-established mechanical or statistic formula.

David Graeber

The modern states may have neither eyes nor ears but one could hardly argue that they are blind and deaf. From the XVIIIe century at least, states developed their ability to scan the actions of their citizens, and to catch subversive words in flight (Farge 1995). In the streets, in the World Wide Web, a myriad of human and non-humane apparatuses permanently collect information about what is done and said before formalizing it into stylized and simplified representations such as maps, reports or databases. These representations constitute huge corpus of knowledge that are supposed to make the society more legible and, as a result, more governable. In other words, they are embedded in a governmental praxis.

A new stage has been reached in the last decades, with the rise of managerial reforms of the state within the OECD countries and beyond. Behind the improvement of administrative efficiency lies a political rationality (Bouckaert and Pollitt 2004). In the heart of the reformer's modernizing project an answer to the haunting question of the integration of the public in public affairs is being formulated (Ferlie 1996). I do not allude to a coherent and clearly conceptualized theory. I refer to the constitution of a refined elaboration of the internal government of the state, drawn on an apparently unquestionable common sense. This ongoing invisible revolution recaptures the recurrent watchword of an inhumane, careless and inefficient bureaucracy. The solution would be to bring the public in the other side of the desk, in the heart of administrative reform. By this focus on the public, the "reinventing government" discourse claims to break up with three supposed dysfunctions of the administrative government (Osborne and Gaebler

1994). First, the democratic deficit brought to light by a weakening participation to the election days and the impotence of politics to govern their administrations (Martin 2009). Second, the tropism of bureaucratic organizations to satisfy their own good before addressing the people's "real" needs (Ferlie 1996). Third, the crisis of the administrative elites' authority facing the citizens' empowerment. Public administrations could not turn a deaf ear anymore to the ritual critics of unsatisfied users. These critics had to be *listened to*, that is to say *collected and formalized as a tool to shape the reforms*. The emerging figure of the user would be the legitimate craftsman of the "modernization" of the state. Listening like a state would not be any more a way to "discipline and punish" (Foucault 1993). It is a means to shape the reform. The creation of dedicated organizations in many countries to constitute a formalized knowledge of public services users' needs and behaviors is, in this respect, highly significant.

In spite of the growing interest for the implication of the public in public management and organization theory literature has to be seen (Jung 2010), it can be said that the constitution of this knowledge remains a largely ignored and under-studied phenomenon. Basically, students of organizations have taken this rhetoric of the public in account in three ways. Some accept the necessity to shape a more user-compliant state and discuss the way it should be done and how far this collaboration should go (Claver, Llopis, Gascó, Molina, et al. 1999). Others adopt a more critical point of view and warn against the threat of a developing consumerist ideology within public services (Aberbach and Christensen 2005; R. B. Denhardt and J. V. Denhardt 2001; Olsen 2004). A last group prefers to pay no attention to the phenomena, seen as an ideological gloss to hide the ongoing rolling-back of the state (Bonelli and Pelletier 2010). Most of these accounts remains highly theoretical or rely on interviews or quantitative surveys rather than on empirical data. No attention is paid to the material means implemented to listen to the public, to the form used to transcribe and to share them or to the people involved. Once again, the studies on bureaucracy tend to forget the bureaucrats and the day-to-day life of administration.

In this paper, my goal is not to contest the pertinence of such approaches but to demonstrate how an ethnographic study of mundane practices can help to displace the debates raised by the public management reform. Drawing on the data collected during an ongoing two years fieldwork in the French General Directorate for state Modernization

(DGME), I propose to study the capture of public services users' voice by the central administration as a manifestation of a *self-critical state*. This perspective aims to contribute to the study of the neo-liberal governmentality initiated by Michel Foucault in his 1978-1979 lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault 2010). This work is a part of a broader project undertaken to write my PhD thesis. The method used to collect the data I analyze here is close to what Mats Alvesson (2009) names "at-home ethnography", that is to say the fact, for the researcher of studying his own organization.

The paper is structured as follows. In a first section, I will present the conceptual framework of this study. Then I will share the methodological specific issues raised by at-home ethnography. In a third section, I will provide a thick description of the French process to listen to public services users, from the collection of the user's needs to the shaping of the reform. Finally, I will discuss the empirical, theoretical and methodological contribution and limitations of my approach.

Studying the self-critical state: the public as a means to manage the rolling back of the state

Conducting an ethnographic investigation is a conceptual choice as well as a method to collect data. But one must remind that the conceptual framework is nothing that a tool to permit and support the pertinence of the description (Graeber 2009). After reviewing the current trends in academic research about the integration of the public in the shaping of the reform I will demonstrate that such a method can help to displace the ongoing managerial reforms of the state. Inspired by accounts from organizational ethnography and political anthropology, the focus on the mundane materiality of everyday-life constitutes a key to product meaning.

Current theoretical trends

A quick glance of the recent literature on the public's involvement in administration demonstrates a striking domination of theoretical accounts. To put it in a very simplistic way, three thematic sets can be identified.

The first one confronts the problem of the system's democratic deficit. Mainly grounded in political sciences, it draws on the social need to provide a renewed conceptual legitimization of public administration. For instance, in his contribution on the discussion on participative democracy, Pierre Rosanvallon acknowledges both the impossibility to rely on the elective legitimization alone and the legitimizing potential of public administration. By describing the emerging forms of legitimacy, he stresses the importance of "the agencies of indirect democracy" (2011, 221) and their interaction with the central administration. Others try to find a theoretical justification to the public manager's right to lead (Behn 1998). The public, mainly identified as a fictional citizen, becomes often a pretext to claim for more transparency and accountability.

The issue of publicness leads us to the passionate debate within public administration and organization theory about the supposed privatization of the public sphere through the introduction of marketization, or Public-Private-Partnerships. Derived from the conceptions of the "public choice", this movement tends to decompose the public in rational actors in search of a maximized utility. The state has to generate "public value" by using marketing tools or by contractualizing with private actors (Moore 1997). A glance at the terminology used to characterize the public is particularly expressive of the ongoing debate. Are public administrations dealing with citizens, service users or customer (Jung 2010)? In what extent should public services be seen as a type of consummation among others? More sophisticated and critical accounts nevertheless point out the inanity of these theorizations in civil servant minds and throw the light on the hybridization between these configurations to offer a theorization of the "citizen-consumer" (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, and Westmarland 2007).

The third set, closely embedded in the managerial reforms movement, focuses on efficiency and tries to see the public as a driver to change organizational culture. They attempt to establish a connection between efficiency and public satisfaction (Higgins 2005). This kind of literature pays a little more attention to the metric systems, especially to the performance management indicators.

The richness of the academic works is tangible, even in this quickly drawn picture. The existing literature provides a wide panorama of the current debates on the implication of the public in the reform. The theoretical revival of the problem is fed with empirical investigations on experimentations such as public forums or satisfaction

measurement. It also offers interesting exploratory perspectives to build a more legitimized public administration. Nevertheless, no attention is paid to the concrete conditions of this implication, its integration in the day-to-day work of bureaucracies.

We now have to turn to the few but important ethnographic studies on this matter to find more concrete works. Of course, Michael Herzfeld's challenging deconstruction of the Weberian ideal-type of Western bureaucracy through the study of its symbolic roots seems to be somewhat like a hapax (Herzfeld 1993). Yet Goffman's pioneering study of the asylum as a totalitarian institution (Goffman 1961) had found posterity in various interactionist investigations of the relations between street-level bureaucrats and service users (Dubois 1999; Weller 1999). These accounts highlight how some civil-servants, in daily relations with the public come to develop a privileged knowledge. As they were gaining experience, they developed the ability to interpret the words of their interlocutor in order to figure out what is to be done, to understand his concerns and needs. To put it in James C. Scott terms (Scott 1999), through the interactions with the public, these street-level agents constitute a *mètis*, a practical knowledge barely accessible to top-civil servants, far from the subtle materiality of things. This knowledge is multiform and changing. It is closely very tied to the subjectivities of those who master it. Such a form of knowledge is really difficult to standardize and formulate. It is cannot be grasped and made legible without being hollowed out of its subtleness.

The growing interest for the public in top-management recently produced a recentring of this knowledge and, as a consequence, of the object of study itself. This recentring is tangible in the institutionalization of organizations, dedicated to capture and translate the public's voice to shape the managerial reforms. The user is no more an embodied individual in direct relation with real civil-servants. He is a fictional artefact. The knowledge constituted is no more a practical ability to deal with a unique situation. It becomes a governmental representation, a simplification embedded in the *praxis* of the reforms. I do not mean that the new form of this knowledge will replace the older one. But the abstract and more legible emerging one surely challenges and reshapes the old and vanishing *mètis* through the imposition of top-down reforms.

Conceptualizing the self-critical state

This shift carries heavy conceptual and methodological consequences for the ethnographer willing to study the role of the public in public management reform. The more obvious is the necessity to relocate the field, from the grass-roots to central government. Indeed, the constitution of the knowledge about the public is no more to be sought in the relation with the service user but in the day-to-day work of bureaucrats. The concrete tools and practices must be investigated. In other words, the interactionist framework, focused on interpersonal relations is no longer adequate to this investigation.

For an ethnographer, such a statement leads to the necessity to construct his object of study in another way. I propose to take seriously the link drawn by public administration scholars between the public and the reform. The reform is the tool through which the ebb and flow of the vanishing boundaries of the state is made. As a result, it can be suspected that the capture of the public's voice by the state is nothing less than a means among others to engineer the ongoing rolling back of the state. In his 1978-1979 lectures, Michel Foucault depicts the liberal and neo-liberal "arts of government" as an internal limitation of the expansionist reason of state. This limitation is not a negation of this *raison d'Etat*. It is a refinement, a "point of inflection" of the liberal rationality (2010, 28) thanks to the integration of political economy as the knowledge of the state par excellence. In consequence, the market mechanisms become "the general index in one must place the rule for defining all governmental action" (2010, 212). The best government is shaped by the "reason of the least state." The instauration of a permanent vigilance defined by Foucault as a "state-phobia" (2010,76) would be the insurance to maintain a "frugal government". In this view, neo-liberalism attempt to minimize the haunting tension inherent to the traditional liberalism between the imperative of freedom and the need for control. In a neo-liberal perspective, the state is no longer the instance that produces the condition of the "laissez-faire". Its role is to preserve the conditions of economic growth by intervening in conformity with economic prescriptions.

This outline relies on a conception of the state as an ideological project, and not as an overhanging entity dominating the society. To cite Foucault's scathing judgment about Hobbes' theorization, "The state is not a cold monster" (2010,6). Political anthropology, drawing on this scattering of the Leviathan state, argues that the state must be sought in

its daily repetitive practices, as an “effect of mundane processes” (Mitchell 1999, 95) rather as in its substance. These “state effects” are the perceptible manifestations of the state in the banality of life. For Hansen and Stepputat, “exploring the state through ethnography thus raises the question of the limits of government: Where does the state begin and end?” (2001, 8). I propose an evolution of this statement by questioning the means used by the state itself to know, represent and manage its own loose and moving boundaries. Foucault was locating the limitation of the endogenous imperialism of the state within civil society. Ironically, it can be said that the reformers were even more Foucauldian than Foucault himself: they have located the state phobia within the governmental organizations. In this view, the conceptualization of the public as a service user and its involvement in public management reform can be seen as a construct by the state itself of the knowledge of its own effects, in order to reduce them. The correlative emerging activities constitute a refinement of a set of state’s technologies I propose to regroup under the generic concept of self-critical state. To carry out the study of this object, I will rely on the observation of administrative work practices, in order to figure out how this knowledge is built and the role it plays in the elaboration of the reform; to understand how to listen to like a state.

Relocating the field in the top-management’s work practices

The necessary consequence of this project is an in-depth immersion in the day-to-day work of central administration. The mist of politics and the reassuring banality of street-level bureaucrats often let the muffled and quiet corridors of ministries in a dull but impenetrable shade. Yet, work, in these intimidating places is not “petrified” (Barley and Kunda 2001). The ongoing reform has boosted the adoption of emerging practices, often borrowed from the private sectors or from other countries to be adapted. Accessing the field through interviews only would not be enough to grasp the meaning of the ongoing processes. State officials are, even more than private-sector managers, tied to their organization by loyalty if not by a kind of patriotism. In practical terms this difficulty entails the necessity to focus on the materiality of administrative activities. Attention must be paid to the apparatuses of bureaucracy, that is to say the heterogeneous set of documents, rules, institutions of everyday-life. Bureaucracy is a world of paper. Reports,

memoranda, presentations, reporting sheets provide rich and nuanced information. Texts, charts, and diagrams have to be scrutinized... The way the information is presented and made legible is as important as the information itself. What is simplified, represented or forgotten is what makes these representations significant for the ethnographer. To be useful, these documents have to be linked up to other sets of objects, such as electronic devices and replaced in the existing power relations. Bureaucracy is also a world of flying words, exchanged in meetings, in the silent of a corridor, behind the secret of closed doors. All these data have to be collected, linked up together and relocated in their material, normative and social context, to gain life and provide meaning. These reflections preliminary requirements can be deduced to guarantee the success of the field approach:

1/ A free access to the field to collect a great amount of diversified documentation and to attend meetings and to take part to informal conversations.

2/ A long-time access to the field. The bureaucracy speaks its own words and has its own norms and values. It is a construct that has to be unpacked, and not a given and unchanging object.

Methodology: “At-home ethnography”

From project management to ethnography

I was hired as a project manager in the DGME in September 2009, after five years in the management consulting business. Located in the Innovation service (see below), my job consists of identifying and negotiating the implementation of new reforms by other administrations, in order to meet public services users' needs. I must confess that, at the beginning, my intentions had nothing to do with the study of administrative reforms or ethnographic observation. My goal, more trivial, was to make money before beginning my PhD in organization studies. As I discovered the administrative world, many things seemed quite odd. The extreme formalism of the relations with other administrations, the complexity of decisional processes, the proliferation of cryptic acronyms were as many occasions for me to experiment with my ignorance of my new workplace's topography, norms and culture. Little by little, acting *like an ethnographer* appeared as a necessity. I do not mean that I immediately adopted the stance of a formal

researcher. As a matter of fact, I had, like other among the former consultants here, to strongly develop my ethnographic sensibility in order to have productive contacts with my administrative interlocutors. In this situation, my PhD supervisor's suggestion that I engage my fieldwork in public administration has triggered something out in my mind. In a way, I became an ethnographer by happenstance. In May 2010, I began to accumulate more systematic field notes in my journal and to conduct ethnographic interviews.

The huge advantage of my position is, of course, the free and complete access to the field. The difficulties traditionally encountered by ethnographers to access data and gain the confidence of the "natives" barely exist. Although my research is not kept secret, most of the actors consider me as a colleague rather as an ethnographer.¹ Within the two last years, I was given the opportunity to attend dozens of internal and external meetings, to multiply informal interactions with the actors and to carry on ethnographic interviews with officials. I could collect many documents covering the main aspects of the DGME's activity in a rather economical way. This paper nevertheless relies on a very limited part of this documentation. The chosen data present the specificity to be the most closely related to my day-to-day activity. Their analysis raises very intimate interrogations. It questions both my professional identity and my personal values; my relation to my job and to my organization and colleagues. The recourse to auto-ethnography could have been a solution to treat this type of data. The focus on emotion and on the constitution of a professional identity in a multicultural environment constitutes indeed a well-defined and active area in organizational ethnography. But it would have implied, in this case, to offer a confessional narrative while my goal was to provide an account on current emerging practices in central administrations. This choice is not a way to escape the essential self-exam of my relation with my field. But it leads me to confront it in another way.

Specific problems of reflexivity in at-home ethnography

I am here neither a "professional stranger" nor an objective and neutral observer. As a DGME agent, I am a part of the system, and am tied to the existing power relations. In such an "at-home ethnography", participation counts far more than observation. As a researcher *and* as a project manager, I take an active part in the production of meaning, in

¹ This privileged situation entails, of course, ethical issues I will not discuss here.

my everyday work and in interactions with colleagues and partners. The familiarity with the field comes first and overrides note taking and conventional techniques. It comes before the formulation of the research questions and before the elaboration of the conceptual framework. Reflexivity is even more critical here than in other ethnographic methods.

The difficulty of such an approach relies on the imperative to unpack the researcher's own relation with the object of study before reconstructing it to provide a more rich and pertinent meaning. In comparison, regular participant observation can be operated in a more direct way, from a more distanced, if not external position with the field and with informants. I do not forget the frequent alteration of the self that longitudinal participant observation can cause, especially when the study draws on very emotional and painful data, for an example in war contexts (Schatz 2009). But the process of meaning making is even facilitated by this confrontation. To put it simply, "at-home ethnography" does not raise problems of another nature than other approaches to the field. But two of these problems take here more intensity and complexity.

First, the closeness to the field can make more difficult to escape from the taken-for-granted ideas. The researcher is even more bound to the ideological representation engineered by his structure. The symbolic power of state organizations can lead to a tautological analysis of the state through the lenses of the state's categories (Bourdieu 1990). The cultural breakdown does not occur naturally and must be created. Second, the moral agreement between the researcher and the organization is complicated by the superposition with a job relation. The terms of this job relation are contractual and financial but also moral and emotional. The fieldwork can possibly influence the quality of the job I am paid for; it can be in contradiction with the duty of confidentiality. More, the unveiling effect of ethnography could reveal to myself meanings of my job I would not be comfortable with, and so affect my professional identity.

Creating the cultural breakdown in at-home ethnography: the right distance from the field

Traditionally, the ethnographer's problem is to get closer to his object to capture its secrets. In at-home ethnography it becomes to distance from the field to make the taken for granted problematic and the unsaid explicit. This detachment has to be operated

both in a theoretical and very practical way. From a conceptual point of view it can pass by an unpacking of the researcher relation to his object of study in order to reconstruct it through conceptualization (Trouillot 2002). I found this distance in the deconstruction of the state as an object. Michel Foucault's famous call to "cut off the king's head" was a first step. But the practical consequences of this disrupting claim were mainly taken seriously in political anthropology of postcolonial states (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). The imposition of statist forms of domination was seen here as a discontinuous process, breaking up with the essentialist discourse of the permanence of the state. Socio-historical accounts helped me to question the theological feeling of the perpetual development of an over-weighted state. By highlighting the elaboration of constituent state activities these works encouraged me to propose the conceptualization of a self-critical state, with its own administrative inscription, its own technologies and its own image of the state. These theoretical detours were, I think, productive to relocate the state in my daily work environment. To put it in David Graeber's words, I became aware that I was "dealing with the shadow of the state" (Graeber 2009, 510).

This conceptual effort has to be accompanied by practical measures to escape from the field. This statement can seem a bit shocking for ethnographers how are often recommended to stay as close as possible to the ground. It can also appear as counter-productive while many researchers stress the uneconomical rapport between the materials gathered in ethnography and the time spent on the field. Yet, the problem, in my project is not to access the field or to acquire a culture but to succeed to provide a productive conceptualization of the day-to-day administrative practices. Concretely, I addressed this need by requesting to work on a part time-basis. The spared time was used to lead interviews and to pace up and down the field freely. I could conduct investigations in other fields with a more conventional participant observation approach. My fieldwork in courts and prefectures, implementing lean management methods with consultants, allowed me to observe the concrete consequences of the managerial reforms and the power shift it cause. It was also spent farther from the field, in libraries, reading social science theory. Of course the risk is present to miss an important event or to fail to attend a critical meeting. Yet, in my short experience, reading Foucault facing a Norwegian fjord can be as productive, in this particular situation, than walking round and round in a silent field.

This call for conceptualization is not to be taken as an invitation to forget that the main goal of ethnography is description. It is after all not more than a way to come back to the field with a renewed point of view. In other words, it is a means to meet Bourdieu's demand to "objectify the objectification" (Bourdieu 1998).

In the following sections, I will provide a contextualized and thick description of the "listening to users" process in the French central government. The names are replaced by generic functions. All the organizational or contextual indications likely to permit identification of my interlocutors have been removed. In this administrative narrative, my characters will be charts, graphs, lists, surveys, artifacts as well as women and men. This description is a bit far from the pleasant exoticism of many ethnographic works. This icy journey is nevertheless essential to unpack the modernist project of managerial reform.

Contextualizing the field: public services user and the reform

The general context is everything but neutral and must be made explicit. The redefinition of the boundaries of the bureaucratic state through the reform is the confluence point of a political project and of a given administrative configuration (Bezes 2009).

Placing the user "in the heart of the reform"

Compared to other OECD countries such as Canada, Netherlands or United-Kingdom, the institutionalization of the knowledge about the public is quite recent in France. The Innovation service of the General Directorate for State Modernization (DGME) was only created in 2007 and counts now around 25 people. Described as the "marketing department" of the French central administration this organization is entirely designed to listen to public services users' voice. The administrative environment is decisive to understand the role of this structure. The DGME is a unique organization within the French administrative landscape. Two moments can be identified in its existence, since its creation in 2005 by the merger of four structures formerly in charge of

administrative simplification and e-government.² This creation marks both a step forward in the institutionalization of state modernization, formerly disseminated among various structures and the growing appropriation of the administrative reforms by the financial ministries. This appropriation has to be linked to the vote, in 2001 of a organic financial law (LOLF), inspired by the American Program-Planning-Budgeting System (PPBS), supposed to ensure a better allocation of public expenses. Linked to the Ministry of Budget, but conceived as a transverse structure, the first DGME was in charge of modernization audits known as “audits Coppé.” This first organizational experience remains rather classical, and crystallizes the legacy of 40 years of administrative reforms. The emergence of administrative “modernization” as a major political stake of the 2007 Presidential campaign marks a turning point. As soon as he was elected, President Sarkozy launched the General Revision of public policies (RGPP) to secure the realization of one of his main promises: one retiring civil servant out of two will not be replaced. Inspired by managerial reforms, such as the Canadian Program Review, the RGPP is presented as a cornerstone of the new administration’s disruptive style. Within a few months, 374 reforms focusing on administrative rationalization were decided and launched within central and regional state structures. Few of these measures can be considered as really new. But the method, based on a very tight agenda and a monitoring by the Presidency itself.³ At the same time, the heavily re-structured, DGME was commissioned to coordinate the RGPP reforms and to identify the next measures to be decided. From the beginning, this new DGME was the political weapon of a global administrative project. The renewed DGME aspires to be both the *catalyst of State transformation* and the *meting pot of a new administrative culture* by mixing public and private approaches.

In this context, the Innovation service has to capture the user’s voice; to ear his complaint and to replace him “in the heart of the reforms.” It is divided in three departments, each focusing on one user-type: citizens, businesses, local government and non-for profit organizations.

² Four structures are merged: the *Direction de la réforme budgétaire* (DRB), the *Agence pour le développement de l'administration électronique* (ADAE), the *Délégation aux Usagers et aux Simplifications administratives* (DUSA), and the *Délégation à la Modernisation de la gestion publique et des structures de l'État* (DMGPSE).

³ The RGPP is still rather under-studied, in spite of its originality in the French administrative history. A more precise presentation can nevertheless be found in the special issue of the *Revue française d'administration publique* (RFAP 2010) and especially Philippe Besez’s account “La morphologie de la RGPP”.

A DGME official reminds of the beginning of the new structure with nostalgia:

All was to be constructed. The top management asked us to open the DGME's windows and to let the service user in. Then we have introduced the system for listening to users.

“Listening to users” will quickly become the watchword of the service.

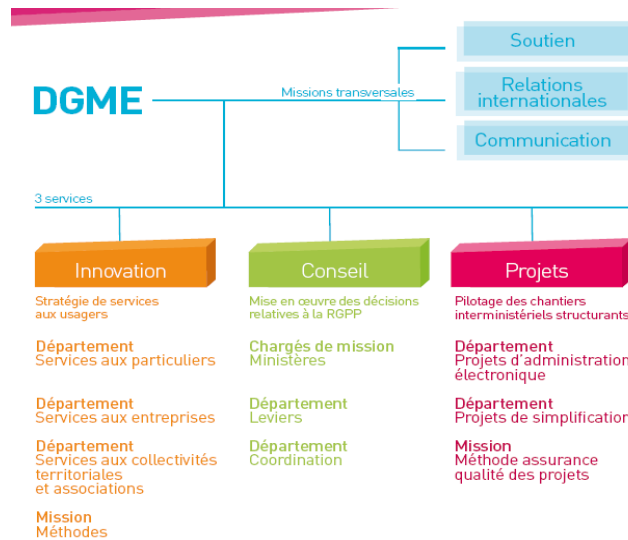


Figure 1
The DGME organizational chart (2008-...)
Source: DGME

But what is heard from users? A closer look shows that the focus is strongly oriented on administrative complexity, excluding other matters.

From the zero red tape plan to the notion of administrative complexity

This focus can appear as a very modest and narrow way to include the public in the reform. Yet, it has a genealogy in the short existence of the DGME and illustrates continuity in the means. Before the restructuration the DGME launched a “Zero red tape plan” in order to reduce the administrative burden of citizens and businesses, in application of a 2006 European decision. The method (figure 2), based on a comparative study lead in various European countries, consists in evaluating the totality of administrative obligations imposed to users in order to reduce it. The burden is established both in time and in euros, for the administration and for the user. In other words, the purpose for the state is to measure the concrete effect of its presence in the life and the related cost. This enterprise was quickly seen as a Herculean task. The shift in

top management was the occasion to change the method without confessing a failure. The first actions taken were maintained, but no more measures were decided. It was time to use more up-to-date and sophisticated tools.

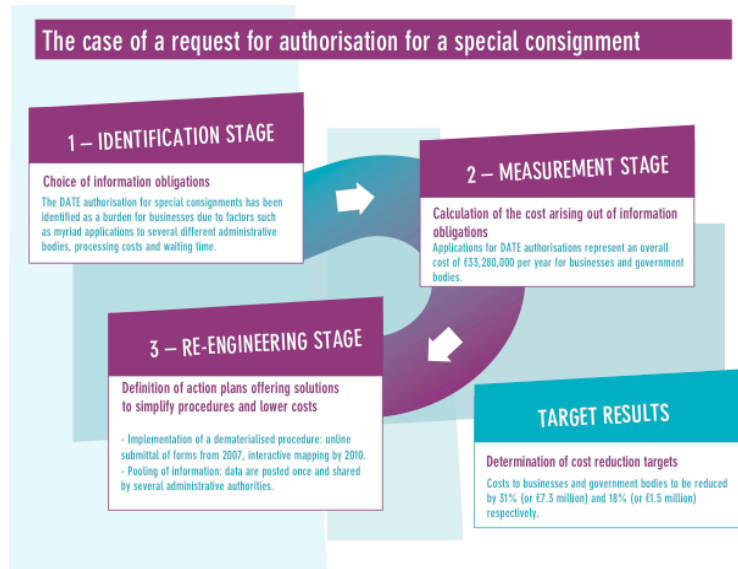


Figure 2
The Zero Red Tape plan: the method (communication leaflet)
Source: DGME, March 2008

As an Innovation manager explains to a partner from another administration in a meeting:

Before, we were trying to measure the administrative burden. Unfortunately, it was so long and so fastidious that in two years, only a very small part of the work was done. Then, we wondered: “but why not asking our users: ‘which are the obligations that hurt you most? Which are the most painful? What do you want us to do first’?”

Of course, this retrospective narrative reconstructs the factual reality to arouse a feeling of coherence in the partner’s mind. But the genealogy it draws is significant. The user is primary seen in an instrumental way. He is a managerial means to set the DGME’s priorities. The theoretical discussion on consumerism within the public services seems to be really far. Although the DGME officials sometimes use words such as “customer” or “market share”, it must be seen as an ideological marker or as a misuse of language rather as than reality. I do not mean that consumerism is absent from public services. Its growing presence in schools, or in the health services could hardly be denied. Yet, the focus on “choice” and “competition” is quasi-absent of the area of state modernization I describe. The explicit goal is “to do better with less money”.

Administrative simplification and public management reform

Within the first 18 months, the activity of Innovation was let apart of the rest of modernizing activity, in a sort of incubation. There were very few interactions between Innovation and the other services, especially Conseil, in charge of the RGPP. When I arrived, in 2009 this separation from the main part of the reform activity was still obvious. The general feeling was that we were the “good guys”, aiming to serve the public. We were making its voice eared by other administrations. Till today, many Innovation agents are persuaded to have nothing to do with cutbacks and job suppression. At the most, they think themselves as a pretext to hide the rationalization or as those who make it less painful fur users. The methodology was defined in this atmosphere and first measures were defined with the other administrations.

Yet, in October 2009 the Minister for the Budget, Eric Woerth, announced to the press a list of simplification measures made to ease the relations between the users and the administrations. A few months later, the simplification measures are integrated in the totalizing framework of the RGPP managerial reform. In a practical way, each measure receives a tracking number and is included in a global monitoring. Twice a year, the progress made by the various administrations on each reform is assessed and translated in a colored traffic light. A general progress report is then published and presented to the President himself by the Minister of the Budget.

Axe	Date de décision	Mesure	Avancement*
Restructurer les réseaux diplomatiques pour garantir leur capacité d'adaptation	Avril 2008	Transformation d'une trentaine d'ambassades en postes de présence diplomatique simple à format allégé et simplifié	●
	Avril 2008	Lissage des formats d'exception dans les ambassades où les moyens sont les plus importants	●
	Juin 2008	Le réseau de l'État à l'étranger est recalibré selon une double logique de modularité et d'interministérialité. Les ambassades seront réparties en trois formats selon leurs missions, dont une trentaine de postes de présence diplomatique à format simplifié. Les huit ambassades les plus importantes en termes d'effectifs verront une fraction de leurs emplois redéployés	●
	Avril 2008	Amélioration des processus interministériels au niveau central pour assurer la cohérence de l'action extérieure de la France	●
	Juin 2008	La stratégie consolidée de l'État à l'étranger sera définie par un plan d'action élaboré sur un mode interministériel. Un comité interministériel, le comité des réseaux internationaux de l'Etat à l'étranger (CORINTE), sera chargé de piloter cette réorganisation interministérielle de la présence de l'Etat à l'étranger	●

Figure 3
The monitoring of the RGPP reforms

This monitoring system aims to ensure both the continuity of the reform and to put the ministries and the project managers in charge under pressure. Each time, they have to explain where they are and what is still to be done. If needed, they are required to justify the delays and have to negotiate the color of their traffic light with the DGME's ministerial correspondents. Corrective actions can be eventually undertaken to face operational difficulties. From October 2009, each report is accompanied by a list of administrative simplifications engineered by the Innovation service. These measures were inscribed in a "100 simplifications" program requested by the President of the French Republic.

This integration of the simplifications in the RGPP is a consecration both for the user as a tool for reforming and for the method designed to listen to public users. I will now offer an overview of the method before highlighting the making process of a simplification method.

Mapping the life, mapping the mind: the dilution of lived experiences in the administrative world

In three years, the Innovation service has constructed a very complete toolkit, in the only goal to ear and represent the user's voice. This toolkit mainly relies on surveys conducted by leading marketing agencies such as BVA or IPSOS. It has been completed by techniques collected within other countries through benchmarks or best-practices sharing. My goal in this section is to follow, step-by-step, the reduction of people lived experience in a packaged form of administrative reformative knowledge.

Who is the DGME's public services user?

The very first task was to shape the public service user. The chosen solution was to consider as a user everyone that has used a service within the last two years. A representative panel was constituted and an important survey conducted in October 2008. Three thousands of users were interviewed by phone, and asked to provide a feedback on the quality and the complexity of their interactions with administrations.

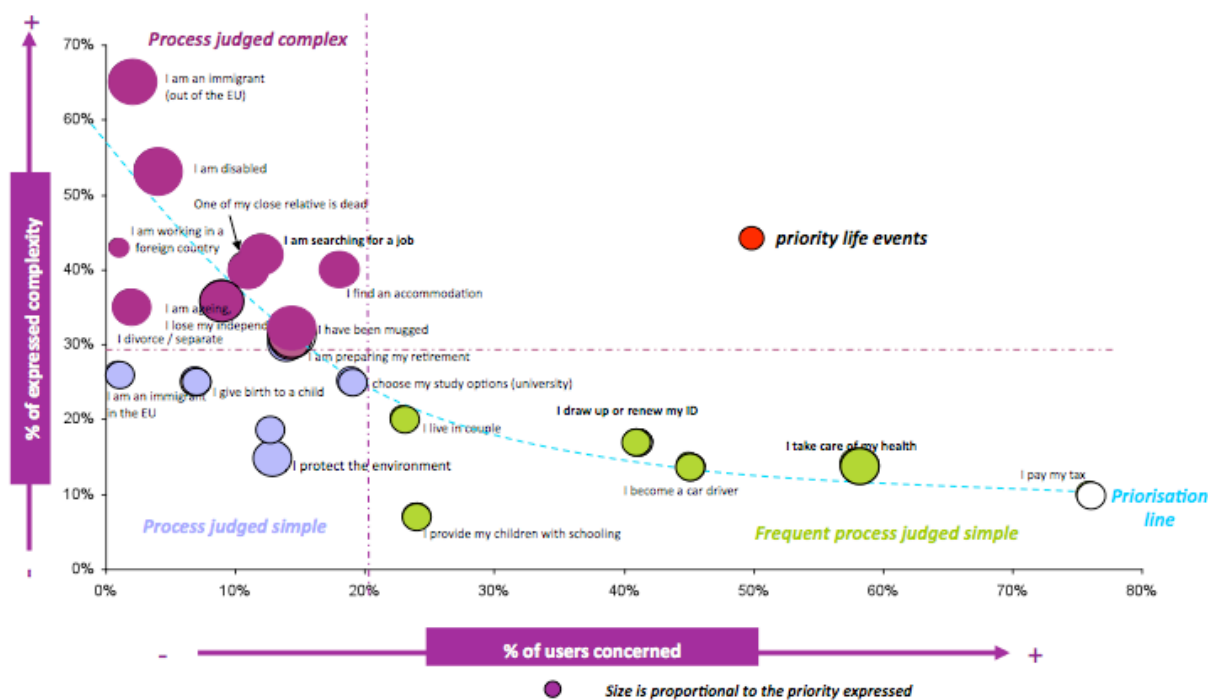


Figure 4
The complexity matrix of life events for citizens
Source: BVA / DGME, October 2008

This survey is the departure of all the simplifications identified until 2011. Crossing the number of persons concerned and the percentage of users who express a feeling of complexity permits to draw a “priorization line” and to set the work agenda (figure 4).

Similar work was made for business and non-for profit organizations.

The key entry for this analysis is the concept of life event. A life event can be defined as a contact with one or several administrations in a lifetime. “I am getting married,” “I give birth,” “I loose my job,” “I divorce,” “I loose a loved one...” The mapping is, in a way, an image of a normalized humane life seen through the administration’s eyes. This concept is inspired by a Dutch experiment and has been imported through international networks.

Recomposing the user’s complaint

Each of the high-priority life events is then studied separately through additional qualitative surveys conducted by marketing agencies. The goal is to reconstitute the “customer journey mapping” and to identify precisely the source of complexity.

As an Innovation manager explains to another administration:

when I go to the Ministry of Environment and try to tell them how complicated it is for users to obtain a building permit, they reply that they usually deliver it within a few weeks. But in this period, the delay caused by data exchanged with other administrations is not taken into account. For an example, more time may be necessary to obtain an expertise from an architect or a dispensation from the Ministry of culture.

The life event approach is a way for us to record the complete experience of the user.

The customer journey mapping is so a conceptual way to break through the traditional bureaucratic specialization by putting all the stages of the life even on a timeline. The tool attempts to materialize the pain endured by the user by highlighting the difficulties in red and by illustrating it with carefully chosen verbatim (figure 5). The tumult of the users' voices is summed up in a single linear representation. The focus is particularly put on repetitive tasks, the multiplicity of controls and on the most absurd situations. A reflection is currently carried on in the Innovation service to provide a more striking experience, by adding audio verbatim or satiric films. The purpose is not to provide an accurate image of reality but to provoke the empathy of the interlocutor. Indeed, these formalizations have to be thought in a strategic way. They are designed to present the reform as an unavoidable correction of an absurd and unfair bureaucratic reality.

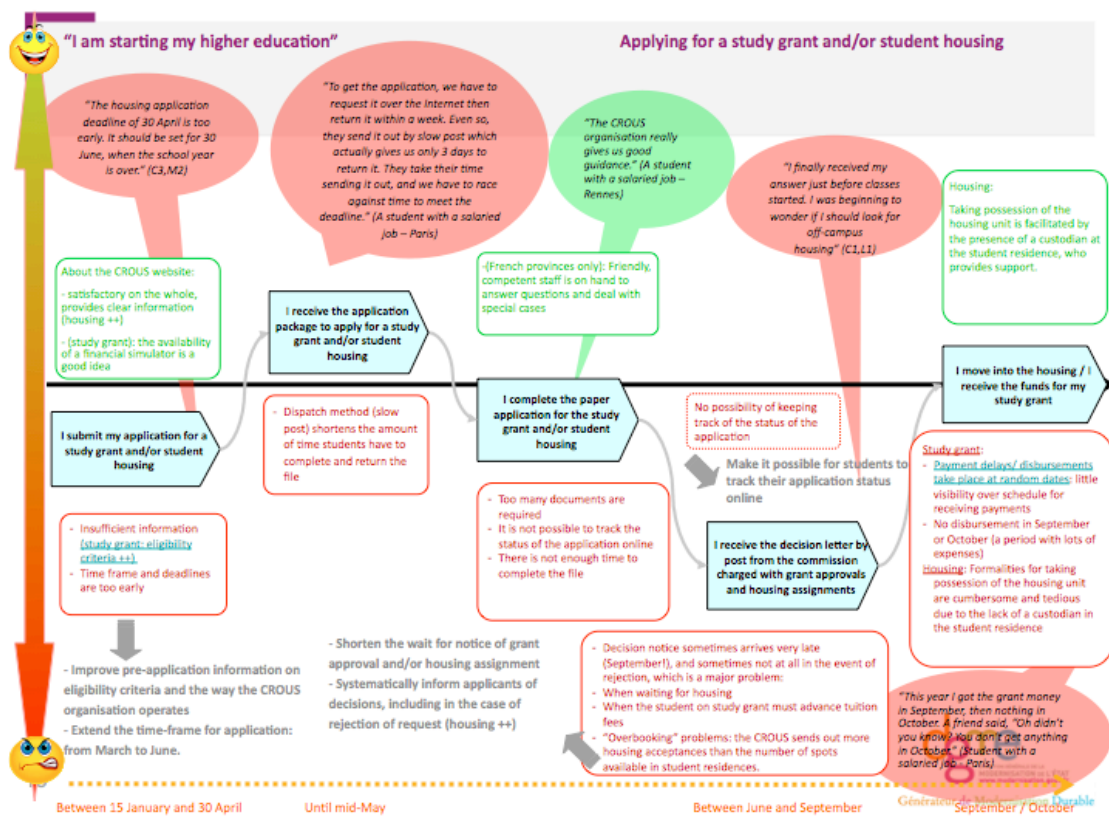


Figure 5
The "Customer journey mapping:" I am starting my higher education
Source: DGME

Like the medieval clerks, the compassionate listeners of the user's complaint write a martyrology.

The satisfaction drivers: the modeling of minds

Then, what is to be done? At this moment, a new step is reached in the abstraction. The administrative investigation passes from the user's voice to his mind. This kind of analysis aims to identify the user's "satisfaction drivers" to shape the simplification reform. Recent refinements, such as the Bayesian networks have been integrated in the toolkit.

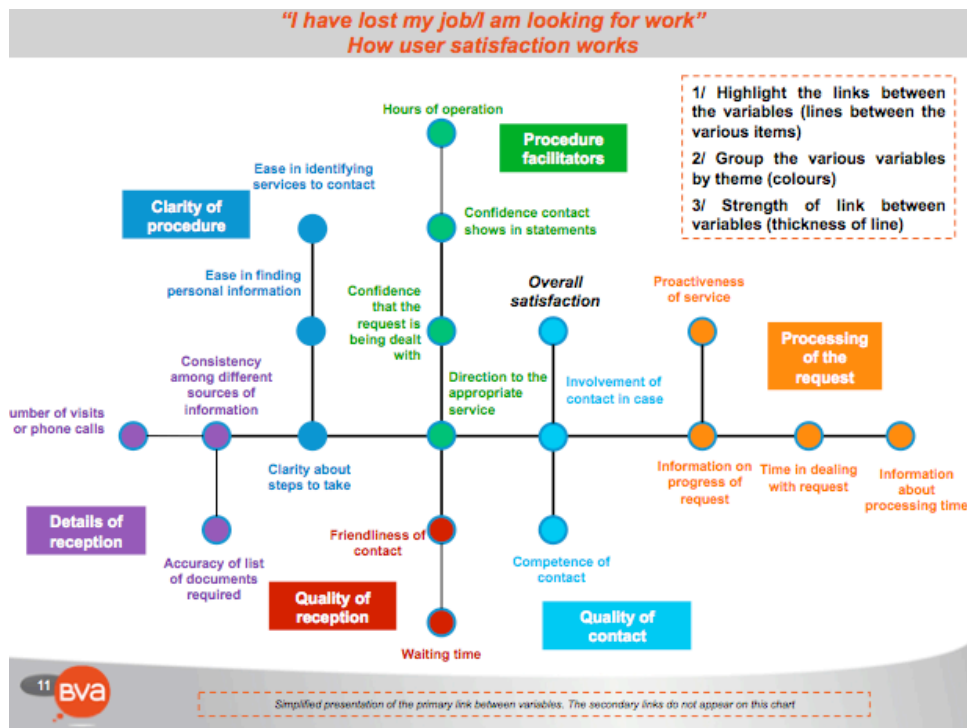


Figure 6

The Bayesian networks: a simplified representation of the links between variables on the life event “I have lost my job / I am looking for work”

Source: BVA / DGME

This approach allows escaping from causality analysis by establishing statistical links between all the variables. For an example, a user can complain, during the qualitative study because he had to go several times to the prefecture to obtain a piece of paper. A quick inquiry shows that he is not obliged to do so. If we dismiss the eventuality of an unlikely and perverse passion for administrative science, no objective reason can be established for these repetitive displacements. A Bayesian networks analysis could reveal that this is not a matter of obligation but a matter of mistrust. The user is convinced that his request has not been taken in account and wants to be reassured. This redistribution of causality is meant to allow a better understanding of the user’s relations with the administration as a clue to provide a solution. In the example presented in figure 6, the overall satisfaction of the user in search of a new job is closely linked to the involvement of his administrative interlocutor. The proximity of items and the thickness of the links in the graph show that involvement has three perceptive dimensions: competence, guidance and proactiveness.

The satisfaction drivers offer the framework to product simplification scenarios to be discussed with other administrations. The evolution in the form of the representation

is striking. The time line vanishes to become a kind of cognitive map of the user's mind. Thanks to this tool, the reformer gains the feeling he can directly influence the behavior and the feelings of his users. The Bayesian networks analysis even provides forecast of the improvement in satisfaction that can be expected if the reform is implemented.

The output of this long journey consists in two facing lists written in a slide: in the left column, the identified sources of complexities; in the right column, the proposed reforms. The list is now classified by priority and themes to be discussed with other administration and proposed to decision. A recapitulative sheet is then written, discussed and validated in an interministerial meeting (RIM).

Sharing and struggling: evangelizing the other administrations

Such a sophisticated toolkit linked to the user-based approach still is quite disruptive in the French central administration. It supports the DGME's communication toward other administrations as much as its analysis. As an Innovation manager acknowledges it, "we are seeking to provoke a 'Wow' effect." Impact is proclaimed as on the DGME's values. The constituted knowledge of the user has to be useful, that is to say, to make the reform happen.

The simplification reforms are not just decided from the top but are negotiated with the DGME's administrative partners. These negotiations are the last alteration of the reform by the administrative process before decision and mark the last stage of the appropriation of the user's voice. The contacts with the administrative partners are critical for the success of the reform but constitute the most difficult part of the work. Some very trivial reforms can be negotiated during years without finding an end. Meetings are the main settings for these discussions and find afterwards developments in emails exchanges. A short extract of an informal meeting can illustrate the atmosphere of this negotiation. The bone of contention is a legal obligation for the user to go to two different desks to register the same data. One is operated by a governmental administration (Directorate A) and the other by a semi-autonomous agency (Orga 1). According to the DGME surveys, the user was upset to have to come back to another administration after the first registration. He is supposed to leave twice the same document. The data are then entered by hand in the two information systems by each organization. The initial DGME's project

was to suppress the obligation to register the data to and to organize the electronic transmission of the data between the two organizations. The strong disagreement of one of the organizations lead the DGME to ask for a mediation. The meeting takes place in the office of a senior manager from the General secretariat of the ministry of Economy.

- Hortense (Senior manager – Directorate A): The data collected here are crucial for our controls. We don't know how much it would cost to have the same result. In Orga 1, they are not civil servants, they are businessmen...
- Octave (Project manager – DGME): Orga 1 is ok to supply the data for free!
- Hortense: Sure, but even in these conditions someone has to pay for the technological evolutions. I have no budget for that.
- Octave: But you pay 200 guys to enter the data in your system...
- Charles (Middle manager – Directorate A): And don't forget... The first ration of drug is always free!
- Octave: But from the user's point of view, all of this sounds a bit odd, you know... Why two registrations in two distinct places? I mean... he has to come to the desk twice for the same thing!
- Charles: Oh, you know, it is healthy to walk 30 minutes a day...It is an opportunity to go out for a walk.

Silence

- Sébastien (Senior manager – DGME): Ok, I understand that you don't trust Orga 1. But would you agree to receive electronically the full documents from them and to enter it yourself in your system?
- Hortense: Well... Listen. The situation is not perfect but it works, we have our data, it's cheap, and it's reliable. Our agents had to face many changes the last two years, with all these reforms.
- Alexandre (Senior manager – General secretariat): If the DGME has nothing to add, I must say that I am convinced by Directorate A's argumentation...

More than eighteen months later and after around a dozen of meetings and a couple of arbitrations, a rephrased version of this reform was approved by an interministerial meeting to be experimented. It can be easily seen that the user's voice is, in this case, not decisive. Directorate A officials have their own agenda and are not willing to modify it. Hortense's last intervention is an understatement to express the risk of social movement if the measure is implemented. Alexandre, as an experimented civil-servant has well understood her point and will not

support the DGME's position until he is given serious guarantees. Yet, this major argument remains unformulated. Hortense knows that it would not be heard if arbitration from the prime minister services is required by the DGME. The matter here is to obtain a delay. To reach an agreement, the DGME will have to provide more documented and factual arguments to weaken the opponent's position. The DGME and its partners will rephrase again and again the user's voice. No need to say that the result is often a poor translation of the initial demand.

The repertoire of administrative simplification

What is it all about? What are the concrete results of this impressive methodological attempt to place the user in the heart of the reforms? An analysis of the approved measures permits to picture quickly the repertoire of administrative simplification. Three leverages can be identified:

- E-government is the first one. Forms are dematerialized and can be filled and sent online. Existing websites are regrouped in large web-portals. The reorganization of online official information in guides, tax-simulators is a major way to
- Process re-engineering is another means. It permits to suppress obligations, official forms or to provide one-stop shops to users.
- Law simplification is the last one and maybe the most difficult to implement.

Analysis: the biopolitics of public management reform

What is left, at the end of this journey, from the public in public management reform? Not much, for sure. Yet, many teachings can be grasped from this complex set of apparatuses. As the object of the study seems to vanish, it is time to recapture it and to inscribe it in a broader picture.

The public services user as an incomplete artifact

One can remark first that the DGME's conception of the user is, as all definitional enterprise, both including and excluding. As it was not based on national criteria, it includes foreigners in contact with French administrations and exceeds the boundaries of citizenship. Yet, the focus on people who could benefit from the public services in the past is not an innocent choice. It implies to forget all of those who were not able to access them, in reason of their inability to face administrative habits and language. The noticeable absence of specific life events concerning the most vulnerable public is another limitation. Yet, the administrative burden to benefit of social help is not to be neglected. This point illustrates once more the difficulties to provide a bureaucratic rationalized knowledge able to represent the subtleties of real life. The risk would be here to substitute this knowledge to the traditional *métis* by implementing a heavily normalizing reform. By focusing on an incomplete artifact, the reform could be counter-productive: it could shape an even more inhumane and careless bureaucracy.

From the administrative martyrology to the crafting of a bureaucratic tool

The knowledge of the user is not a disinterested compilation but a tool to achieve reform. The crafting of this tool is operated through a three reductions sequence.

The first reduction occurs during the reconstitution of the customer journey mapping. This stage is actually a reinvention of reality by the collection of the various user's grievances collected within the surveys. To dramatize the situation, the most expressionist verbatim are selected. This rhetoric of grieve and pain contributes to the production of a narrative designed to move the administrative interlocutors of the DGME agents. The first presentation is always seen as really disruptive by the partners. Indeed, the multiplication of the "reality effects" (Barthes) through edifying anecdotes, audio-verbatim, films is a way to reach the user behind the civil servant. The goal is here to instill an insidious doubt that questions directly the interlocutor's professional identity. If your users are suffering in spite of your professional orthodoxy, maybe you should change something. The reform would be an opportunity to better serve the public by breaking through the existing rules. The interlocutor should be turned out in an evangelist

of the reform toward his own hierarchy. Of course, this strategy may fail. Many actors get furious and refuse to collaborate. But this reaction itself shows how far it can be emotionally efficient.

The second reduction occurs when the timeline of the customer journey mapping becomes the map of the user's mind. This new modeling breaks up with the narrative structure. In a way, in spite of its disruptive aspect it constitutes a far more conventional tool. Maps were the arms to manage the territory. They are now supposed to be a means to govern the minds. The evolution has to be noticed. To view the minds as the last territory to master is a mark of the evolution of neo-liberal governmentality towards biopolitics. Foucault had no time stabilize his view of this path, but the shortcut is quite tempting (Foucault 2010).

The final reduction is the canning of the user's voice in a double list. The last remains of the lived experiences are completely decontextualized. As Jack Goody argues, making list is increases the mastering of a reality (Goody 1977). The user's voice does not belong to him anymore. It has become a bureaucratic knowledge, ruminated by the comprehension of an agent, his discussion with his hierarchy and the negotiations with other administrations. Listening to users, for state apparatuses is to appropriate and confiscate their voices. From this moment, it can be used to justify and legitimize the reform in the materiality of day-to-day life.

Beyond the "state effect"

Such a movement can be seen as the finest refinement of the neo-liberal arts of government. The institutionalization of the "state-phobia" in the heart of the self-critical state is an unexpected acknowledgement of the ritual claim following a contact with an administration. It acknowledges Herzfeld's statement for which "bureaucracy is one of those phenomena people only notice when it appears to violate its own alleged ideals." In his view, "if one could not grumble about 'bureaucracy,' bureaucracy itself could not easily exist" (Herzfeld 1993, 3). Through the user's complaints, administrations locate the "state effects", now identified as complexities. The state is seeking its own boundaries in the user's mind.

In this view, the repertoire of the simplification reforms can be seen as a catalogue of leverages aiming to reduce the “state effect.” Little by little, by suppressing an official form, by filling them automatically, they erase the presence of the state in everyday life. Thanks to the growing use of e-government tools, the state loses its administrative locations to become an invisible and barely noticeable presence. I do not mean that administrative simplification is the hollowing out of the state. As it can be noticed by reading the little dialogue reproduced before, each administration continues to receive the proper data and to work in a normal way. I actually argue that administrative simplification is the insidious and progressive suppression of the “state effect”, defined as the perceptible presence of the state both in lives and minds. The biopolitical government tends to become an unnoticeable shadow but does not abandon its prerogative. What is at stake is the preservation, if not the extension, of the government through the vanishing of state effects. Is such a painless government more suitable? As a matter of fact, it is probably more efficient in controlling behaviors and thoughts.

Of course this is only an emerging trend, and its development is not certain. As this short account puts it, the corpus of knowledge are various within administration and none can be really hegemonic. Yet, the role of the user’s voice in the shaping of the reform is a reality and is likely to continue.

Discussion

The contribution of this paper is twofold. From a theoretical point of view, I tried to show how an ethnographic approach could renew traditional debate within public administration and organization theory. Beside the focuses on participation, consumerism and publicness, I tried to open a new discursive space to study the appropriation of the user’s voice as a tool to shape and legitimize the reform. By inscribing these practices in what I propose to call a “self-critical state”, my attempt is to inscribe them in the development of neo-liberal liberal arts of government. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s pioneering account, I wanted to confront this approach to the field, and to reconstruct it in a different way.

From a methodological point of view, I have highlighted the specific issues of “at-home ethnography”, and presented the way I tried to maintain the right distance to the

field. Thanks to theoretical and concrete detours, I could deconstruct and rebuild my relation to the object of study. I am nevertheless willing to insist on the danger of this kind of methods. Alvesson is right to precise this is not an approach everybody should use. I am not saying that it requires specific skills (2009). Yet one should be warned that doing this kind of fieldwork can deeply affect the meaning of everyday work. The ethnographic operation could reveal unsuspected results and provides new signification to familiar objects. The organization will never been the same again. And sometimes, no going back is possible.

Conclusion

As David Graeber puts it, ethnographic knowledge is, like bureaucratic knowledge, about simplification (2009). Can it be said that I tried to conduct ethnography of a quasi-ethnographer state? I will not. Actually this account provides only a view of a tiny area of public management reform. I nevertheless argue that the way the public is involved in the crafting of the state is not a trivial question. The silent ongoing revolution of public management reform is a huge question that should be publicly discussed in all its consequences. Many questions remain for ethnographic research within public administrations. The dynamics of cultural change are still understudied. New phenomena are emerging in various countries, such as the “big society project” in the United-Kingdom. In other words, with the ongoing managerial reform, the central administrations are, for ethnographer a renewed field for investigations.

Count: 9,373 words

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