Introduction: Administrative reforms and mergers in Europe – research questions and empirical challenges

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This special issue originated with two workshops held by the Comparative Public Administration Working Group (*Groupe Science politique comparée des administrations-SPCA*) of the French Political Science Association (*AFSP*) in April and September 2008. Our workshops focused on a rather under-researched dimension of comparative public administration: namely administrative mergers and bureaucratic reorganizations as a dimension of contemporary reforms. We started from the observation that, in recent years, there has been a rich literature on the role of agencies and other forms of organizational decentralization, but much less on organizational and professional mergers within public administrations. Participants were invited to address a set of linked questions designed to try and elucidate the nature and scope of administrative reorganizations in the European countries under observation. Among these questions were the following: under which conditions and to what extent do mergers and other forms of administrative reorganization have sustainable effects on the state apparatus? How does the multi-level structure of government, especially within federal states (Germany, Belgium), regionalized (Spain) or 'dual' states (United Kingdom) influence administrative reforms? What policy narratives are mobilized to justify and legitimize these reorganizations, and especially how important is the discourse of New Public Management (NPM) in that respect? Finally, what are the consequences of such reforms on civil servants' careers, professional identities and administrative cultures? The issue brings together a range of country-specific articles whose remit is, broadly, to address these questions and to contribute to enriching the comparative and empirically rooted reflection about the dimensions and forms of state reforms in the NPM era.

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Framing the research

A core distinction is often made between processes of specialization, in which bureaucratic apparatuses become more differentiated and fragmented, and processes of de-specialization, which imply a structural integration of formerly separated organizations. In contrast with the former process, administrative mergers and reorganizations have attracted relatively little academic attention. Playing with the 'structure of government' and reshaping bureaucracies is an activity as old as bureaucracy itself, with famous examples in History including Frederic the Great of Prussia, Napoleon and Peter the Great of Russia. That is maybe one explanation why they have been considered as an 'old' object for 'old institutionalism', whereas 'new institutionalist' scholars, very much influenced by the 'cognitive turn' in social sciences, have framed institutions in terms of discourses and beliefs (Schmidt, 2008), path dependencies (Peters et al., 2005) or forms of 'appropriate behaviour' (March and Olsen, 1989) and only incidentally as organizations. As a consequence, some students of public administration have, in the past two decades, preferred to discuss extensively the novelty of the ideas and prescriptions of New Public Management (NPM), rather than to invest in fine-grained empirical analyses of organizations. Therefore, concrete administrative reforms, such as mergers, have sometimes been dismissed as a by-product of the worldwide diffusion of NPM, rather than considered as research objects in their own right. Unlike such 'top-down' approaches, the articles in this issue, following a more 'bottom-up' perspective, intend to take administrative reorganizations seriously, and to explore critically the extent to which they are linked with NPM.

The rise and trans-national diffusion, first within OECD countries and then worldwide, of NPM has been remarkable since the early 1980s. There is an extensive academic literature showing that almost all national governments of developed countries, regardless of their right/left orientations, have adopted ambitious policies of 'administrative reform' or 'administrative modernization'. These more or less NPM-driven reforms have been explicitly oriented at both decreasing the costs of public services (public budgets, public debt, and taxes) and increasing the quality of public services, the expected result being a better quality of government: 'best value for (less) money'! At one level, NPM can be read as a means of applying the logics and methods of the private sector to improve the famous 'three Es', Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness of public services; its early association with neo-liberal governments, in the UK and New Zealand particularly, and also in the USA and Canada, lent it a marked ideological edge (Savoie, 1994). However, scholars of comparative public administration have demonstrated that NPM is not a fixed and consistent dogma but a 'paradigm' produced by syncretism (Hood, 1991, 1995), a mixture of ideas, beliefs, values, slogans and policy narratives supporting a practical repertoire of managerial recipes, techniques and instruments: one can even argue that NPM is more of a 'praxeo-logic' than an ideology (Dreyfus and Eymeri-Douzans, 2006; Eymeri-Douzans, 2010). The content of

this neo-managerialist repertoire includes well-known features such as agencification, benchmarking, performance indicators, accreditation procedures, citizens' charters, increased transparency, management by objectives, performance-related pay, programme budgeting, accountability procedures, mergers of administrations and one-stop-shops, eGovernment, public-private partnerships and delegation of public missions to private entities, 'total-quality management', certification, and *ex ante*, *in itinere* and *ex post* evaluation. These flagship recipes and techniques have repeatedly been broadcast as 'best practices' in international and European forums, as witnessed, for example, by the various programmes and networks on 'good governance' and the administrative reforms handled by the World Bank, the IMF, the OECD and the EU. Policy-makers from very different countries have selected elements or the whole of that NPM 'toolkit' and transplanted/transposed them into their own public administration (on policy transfers in general, see Dolowitz, 2000; De Jong et al., 2002). This 'praxeological' dimension of NPM is undoubtedly its major strength in terms of easy transferability: those in power in our different nation-states, both the elected governors and the top civil servants, have imported and implemented the neo-managerialist toolkit without having to declare explicitly their adhesion to the founding neo-liberal ideological corpus of NPM.

But such a praxeological character of NPM is also one of its major weaknesses, since this 'policy paradigm' (in the sense employed by Hall, 1993) is tactically used to justify contrasting organizational reforms such as agencification and/or administrative mergers. In practice, however, specialization and de-specialization might be interpreted as two sides of the same coin; both involve an attempt to confer a strategic sense on organizational reforms and to resolve the increasing problems of coordination in contemporary government. Administrations restructure themselves in various ways, ranging from the reclassification of ministerial departments, divisions and directorates-general, to the creation of agencies that splinter bureaucracy. Rather like agencies, administrative mergers are increasingly accompanied by a managerial rhetoric, which, in its various expressions and incantations, promotes the approach as adaptable common sense. 'Efficiency' is undoubtedly the key word in justifying mergers, as it is used to rationalize organizational split-offs and specialization, and moreover to justify any policy orientation in our era of managerialism. By addressing the issue of coordination and limiting the overlaps between allegedly redundant bureaucratic tiers, administrative mergers are believed to make government more efficient. With great emphasis placed on cuts to public spending, mergers – once again similarly to agencification – are often said to be an effective recipe in making bureaucracy leaner, while enabling important economies of scale as far as personnel, space or logistics are concerned. The articles collected in this special issue thus invite their readers to a critical questioning of that neo-managerialist rhetoric mobilized 'in all seasons' to justify opposing measures by the same set of arguments. Following the conclusions of the major survey by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004), the articles in this special issue collectively cast strong doubt

upon the convergence of organizational forms in a sense that would support the thesis of a homogenous 'neo-managerialization' irrespective of national, local and sectoral peculiarities. It is worth underlining that, even within the parameters of one single country, organizational styles have varied over time and between policy fields.

To sum up, in this special issue, a selection of European case studies is analysed in a comparative perspective, in order better to understand what concretely is at stake in these administrative reorganizations. The choice of cases offers a necessarily limited yet sufficient variety which allows for comparative conclusions to be drawn while remaining embedded among the established democratic states of Western Europe. All the states considered here are members of the European Union, hence they are all potentially affected by multi-level interactions. The states considered encompass unitary, federal and regionalized states; they also include states with Napoleonic administrative traditions, German *Rechtstaat* traditions as well as some with more liberal regimes. Their civil service elites encompass generalist administrators, policy specialists, members of prestigious technical '*grand corps*' and representatives of the legal profession. In sum, our cases cover a range of logical comparators in Western Europe. If the focus is on the 'core executive' (in the sense employed by Rhodes and Dunleavy, 1995), in the case of Spain the definition of this core executive is also widened to take account of the development of asymmetrical forms of territorial public administration: in that case particularly, the issues of administrative reorganizations get caught up with the broader problem of territorial reconfiguration of the State.

Fundamental similarities . . . and essential differences

Although each article considers a defined national case, collectively these articles invite a broader reflection about the influence of NPM and the form of state reforms in Europe, in the light of the reality of administrative mergers. On that basis, it seems possible to identify (at least) five key intervening variables that mediate the exogenous (international) and endogenous (localized) pressures for change and the empirical cases of administrative restructuring. These intervening variables are: institutional legacies, reform fashions, hybrid logics of institutional engineering, interaction between collective strategies of involved institutions and groups, and multi-level dynamics.

The importance of 'legacies' from the past (Pierson, 2004) is a well documented theme in the literature, whether conceptualized in terms of national trajectories of 'stateness' (Linz and Stepan, 1996), the influence of the structure of government or the enduring quality of 'policy styles' (Richardson and Jordan, 1982) and inherited public policies (see in particular the classic work by Rose and Davies, 1994). In the cases considered here, *institutional legacies* are the most apparent factor of resilience of national administrative structures and inter-institutional configurations

to cross-national neo-managerial pressures for change. Of the various case studies presented, the persistence of traditional national institutional arrangements is striking in Germany (where departmental responsibility remains paramount), to some extent in France (where the corps manoeuvre to safeguard their existence and retain their influence) and even in the UK (where agencification, contrary to what is often asserted, has not been the main challenge for the role of top civil servants). In Spain, the powerful challenge to central authority on behalf of ambitious autonomous-minded sub-state governments outweighed in significance administrative reorganizations at the level of central government.

Unsurprisingly, the long tradition of departmentalization remains an important feature of the public sector architecture all over Europe. From a historical institutionalist perspective, the process identified by Weber of a differentiation-specialization of the tasks of government has left its strong genetic imprint. In all Member States, we find the common inherited pattern of a core executive divided into ministerial departments or ministries, subdivided themselves into directorates-general (*directions d'administration centrale*, divisions, *Abteilung*). Administrative reforms implemented in recent decades, even though sometimes designed to provide alternative instruments or agencies that bypass what are perceived to be rigid hierarchies and boundaries of the sectorized Weberian state, have nowhere led to the disappearance of line ministries, which remain a robust feature of any state apparatus in contemporary Europe.

The case of the UK can be mentioned as a good illustration of how far reform attempts can go . . . and cannot go. The core organizing principle in British government – from the 1918 Haldane committee – is that of ministerial departments and the doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility which, in theory, creates clear lines of accountability. At various stages in recent British history, however, this model has come under attack, with reformers using the argument that departmentalization creates silos, wastes resources and encourages a 'bureau shaping' mentality that leads agencies to off-load problems onto other agencies or onto local government. Efforts to reform the core executive have been centred on the Prime Minister. For instance, Conservative Premier Heath attempted to merge a series of smaller departments into larger ones in 1970, with the argument that larger departments would allow for more focused decision-making by reducing the number of places around Cabinet. Heath also created the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) with the specific task of cutting across departmental boundaries (Flinders, 2002). More recently, the theme of 'joined-up government' has been promoted by New Labour governments, especially under Blair, as a solution to the 'wicked' problems of coordination (Lewis, 2009). New Labour set up some innovative structures (the Social Exclusion Unit, the Strategy Unit) in an attempt simultaneously to address generic problems involved in social exclusion, to create new budgetary instruments and dedicated units (Rough Sleepers Unit, Children and Young People's Unit) capable of imposing priorities on reluctant ministers, thus reinforcing the key steering capacity of the Prime Minister. One successful cross-departmental programme called 'Sure Start' pooled the resources of several ministries (Education,

Employment, Health) in relation to the 'client group' of young people, creating a pooled budget and a set of institutional rules to encourage cohesion. But such examples of successful cross-departmental synergy are relatively rare, dependent as they are upon investing scarce political capital (a diminishing resource with time) and pooling jealously guarded departmental resources.

Our survey uncovered evidence from each of our countries of strategies of organizational experimentation. But state reform programmes are not constructed on a *tabula rasa*, certainly not in the complex West European democracies under investigation here. Narratives of joined-up governance can blur clear lines of managerial and democratic accountability and threaten or empower core interests. They can also be interpreted as attempts by rival actors at the heart of the state to control the sphere of inter-ministerial coordination, which becomes an issue of increasing importance since policy-making is increasingly inter-departmental and multi-level in EU Member States. In the case of the UK, efforts to boost No. 10 run against the core coordinating role of the Treasury, and similar dynamics can be observed in France (with the Budget and Public Accounts Ministry competing with the Prime Minister's office), in Spain (where Prime Ministerial authority has been gradually enhanced) and in Germany (where the Chancellor's authority is circumscribed by powerful legal and departmental traditions). As a matter of fact, NPM appears to be the latest legitimizing repertoire to be mobilized by the competitors involved in these long-running contests for domain and authority within central executives.

Reform fashions are a second key variable here, which challenge any over-static portrayal of the longevity of institutional forms. Policy fashions, cross-border benchmarking and international policy transfers can produce common policy narratives and a common set of policy instruments that, at least, lend the appearance of converging reform trajectories. State reformers across Europe (and within the European Commission) tend to use similar legitimizing NPM-inspired discourses focusing on the 'three Es', 'Better Regulation' or 'the Quality of Government'. These narrative tools have often been associated with recourse to a common toolkit based on agencification, programme budgeting, contractualization of the conditions of employment and performance-related pay (Hood, 1998). The recent literature on comparative policy instruments provides some empirical evidence of the strength of converging organizational trends in various areas (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004). In the precise cases considered here, we observe that these reform fashions appear to be more meaningful in some contexts than others, and that they are reinterpreted in the light of understandings about state traditions and organizational forms when they are not merely convenient discourses (Dyson, 2010). On the other hand, the converging trends towards the setting-up of vast 'super-ministries', supposedly omniscient and all-powerful, also forms part of a broad trend that attempts to provide an institutional response to political claims of joined-up governance.

As an illustration, let us consider briefly the case of agencification to demonstrate both how it is a reform fashion, and how its substantive content varies

significantly in accordance with national politico-administrative cultures, contexts and configurations of forces. Although agencies have appeared almost everywhere, the forms these take, and especially the degree of autonomy of these entities towards central ministries is highly variable across European countries. In some countries, such a delegation of regulatory and service delivery responsibilities to autonomous public bodies dates back centuries, for instance in the remarkable *Ambetsverk* model in Sweden, and has no linkage with neo-liberal economic arguments. In the UK, after a period in the 1960s and 1970s during which there was a consensus between Tories and Labour in favour of large, broad-based ministries, the Thatcher government introduced the NPM fashion of slimming-down core ministries now focused on strategic missions and transferring massively public service delivery to Executive Agencies, but without giving them an equivalent autonomy to the one enjoyed by Swedish agencies (on the Swedish system and its limited evolutions, see Pierre, 2003). A few years later, as we observed above, the Blair government, without reconsidering the new agencified structure of public administration, denounced the excessive fragmentation and the coordination problems created by the multiplication of agencies, and the new fashion became 'joined-up government'. In other cases, the situation is different, for instance in France, where more or less self-standing '*établissements publics*' have existed since the 19th century: the agency fashion has been adopted in France much more recently than in the UK or the Netherlands, and in view of strengthening – and not weakening! – the role of the state in politically sensitive domains such as health and food safety. The situation is also very complex in the case of Germany, where the doctrine of *ressortprinzip* has embedded an ethic of political responsibility for administrative acts which is difficult to reconcile with arm's-length management, but where a real 'zoo' of heterogeneous public entities has been sedimented over time and never simplified.

Our survey also uncovered *hybrid logics of institutional engineering* at play. One of the strongest empirical findings to emerge from these and similar studies is that two different and apparently rather contradictory tendencies have been coexisting within the EU Member States as regards administrative reorganization: agencification on the one hand, and administrative mergers on the other. Rather than attribute *sui generis* qualities to these institutional models, however, or considering them only as belonging to specific state types or merely as representing overarching trans-national trends, our case studies give empirical evidence that they usually operate in new forms of institutional hybridization. Agencies and mergers are designed to respond to goals of specialization and of de-specialization which can coexist within widely different polities and administrative frameworks, including all of the cases considered here. In other words, there is a broader process of institutional hybridization afoot that can combine institutional innovations resulting from trans-national transfers with the persistence of endogenous structures and practices, and that mixes organizational forms, such as agencies and mergers, in accordance with the prevailing priorities. Both mergers and agencification are routinely justified in relation to an overarching narrative of state productivity; in

rather different ways, both also allow specific issue and policy areas (such as food safety, health or the environment) to rise up the political agenda.

Consistent with this hybridization thesis, we observe the coexistence of broad trends of specialization and de-specialization within the same country at the same time, as well as changing over time. The case of France is particularly illustrative in this respect. A first 'round' of creation of public agencies took place in the field of public health, drugs and food safety in the mid-1990s. After a noticeable slow-down, there was an acceleration in the rhythm of creation of new agencies under the 2002–07 government, and, above all, a shift in the nature of the agencies created (Cole, 2008). But, at the same time, another tendency, since 2007, has been for some agencies (but not all) to be brought back under control of the state administration. Indeed, formally independent, quasi-public bodies such as Public Corporations and Chambers of Commerce have been integrated into the central planning exercise by the General Policy Review, reflecting the influence of the Budget and Public Accounts Ministry. Alongside the specialization of agencies, the Sarkozy era has renewed with the creation of super-ministries, most notably the MEEDDAT (Ministry of the Environment, Energy, Sustainable Development and Planning – *Ministère de l'Ecologie, de l'Energie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire*). Though MEEDDAT merged four former ministries into one, the number of Directorates-General was reduced from 35 to just five. What links these apparently contradictory developments is the overarching narrative of state productivity and the strategic goal of state capacity-building. The Fillon government's General Policy Review (*Révision générale des politiques publiques* – RGPP) has provided an overall framework and justification for cost-cutting, from not replacing one out of two retiring public agents to the closure of rural hospitals, post offices, tax offices and the far-reaching restructuring of the French court system. The Policy Review has also provided the overarching framework for important bureaucratic mergers, particularly that within the Finance Ministry between the previously rival administrations (with their huge staff in the provinces) for tax calculation (*Direction générale des impots* – DGI) and for tax collection (*Direction générale de la comptabilité publique* – DGCP), a division that dated back to the Napoleonic period. If considerations of political economy are important for these mergers, even more important is the exercise in state capacity-building that they represent. Merging two administrations with powerfully embedded trade union interests, as in the above case, is intended to empower a political leadership that is deeply suspicious of bureaucratic capture by organized interests. Such examples of strategic mergers could be multiplied during the Sarkozy Presidency, for example, the creation of a new unified Employment Service (*Pôle Emploi*) from two previously autonomous providers (ANPE and ASSEDIC). These examples all have in common a strategic steer from the core executive and a claim to exercise a form of political leadership of the state reform process.

Fourth, *the interactive dynamics between collective strategies of involved institutions and groups* are obvious in each of our national cases. Case studies in the

apparently technical field of administrative reorganization can reveal richly varied institutional logics and strategies developing in each country, in each policy field. Merging ministerial departments, directorates-general and other administrative bodies (such as corps), or breaking up the core executive never flows from a neutral Pareto-efficient logic. It is obvious that administrative reforms are oriented not only to improve outcomes, but also to empower key interests at the expense of others or to raise the profile of sensitive issue-areas. For instance, reforms that fragment the public sector into multiple single-purpose agencies (like the Next Steps in the UK) might typically be designed to experiment with new forms of central steering, to weaken the elite of 'Whitehall mandarins' by providing alternative sources of expertise to the traditional bureaucracy, or to raise the political saliency of specific policy issues. Territorial decentralization or devolution reforms that empower regional and local governments can have a similar instrumental logic. On the other hand, core executive administrative elites sometimes propose and handle by themselves administrative mergers or reorganizations that are oriented to strengthening their policy influence – observations which are in line with the core assertions of the well-known 'budget maximizing' or 'bureau-shaping' models (Niskanen, 1971; Dunleavy, 1991). To sum up, our case studies thus provide empirical evidence that mergers or other forms of administrative re-engineering, as all public policies, take place in the context of 'bureaucratic politics' power games between multiple, inconsistent and competing institutional rationalities (as identified in the early 1970s by Allison and Halperrin, 1972), which end up with some involved institutions and groups being winners while others are losers or victims.

Finally, *multi-level dynamics* are at work in at least three of our cases. The Spanish case combines a remaining belief in a unitary state at the centre with an equally strong determination by Autonomous Communities to develop their own forms of politico-institutional capacity, an enterprise most successfully undertaken in Catalonia (Heywood and Molina, 2000; Parrado, 2010). Somewhat like Spain, the United Kingdom combines unitary and union principles of territorial organization, while retaining a limited but powerful central state and a theoretically unified home civil service. In the case of the UK, however, the core executive has been scarcely affected by the development of powerful devolved governments – or so it would seem. In the case of Germany, the model of cooperative federalism produces a high degree of multi-level exchanges, cross-influences, exchange of knowledge and negotiations. It is probably in France that multi-level dynamics used to be the weakest, since it is a country where processes of central state reform and decentralization have traditionally been kept apart. But the situation is changing: consistent with his approach towards administrative mergers, we observe how President Sarkozy, through the instrument of the General Policy Review, has openly used productivity arguments to intervene directly into the reorganization not only of the French territorial state (the merger of the 'deconcentrated' services of the state in the regions and *départements*) but more broadly to recast local and regional governments.

To conclude . . .

The concrete results and the social, political and economic impact of those administrative mergers and reorganizations so much in fashion at the moment within European and OECD countries, such as the ones presented and discussed in this Symposium, remain rather difficult to assess properly (as recently argued by Pollitt, 2009), and may be more modest than expected (as illustrated, among others, by a sobering report, *Reorganising Central Government*, UK National Audit Office, 2010).

Caution is also required in considering administrative mergers and reorganizations in these EU member states from the same overarching perspective of the diffusion of NPM as a trans-national form of ideational and 'praxeological' convergence, even when mediated by national and sectoral variations in understanding and implementation. Even though it is undeniable that both agencification and administrative mergers are more or less justified in relation to those same overarching policy narratives and repertoires, one has to recall that such mergers and reorganizations, which are a traditional feature of governing administrative apparatuses, were going on long before the NPM era (as shown by Pollitt, 1984, 2003).

Moreover, our observations do not offer much evidence of a pure and simple form of institutional mimetism (Mény, 1993). On the contrary, and consistent with the more sophisticated versions of policy transfer literature (for example Dolowitz, 2000), our case studies show clearly the extent to which some common features are embedded in peculiar ways in each and every state, each and every territorial layer of government, each and every policy field, within each localized context. Although there are common trans-national policy narratives and repertoires of instruments, the articles presented in this issue collectively cast doubt on whether common pressures for policy transfer produce really convergent organizational forms. It is not only in Asia that national reformers are 'choosing items from the menu' (Turner, 2002). A fine-grained empirical analysis of administrative reorganizations, conducted in a selection of EU countries, clearly challenges over-deterministic NPM accounts, such as the ones announcing a 'dismantling of democratic states' (Suleiman, 2003). To sum up, of course there are common trends as regards administrative reforms, but these trends are subject to highly differentiated forms of surprising 'acclimatizations', non-anticipated hybridizations and paradoxical real outcomes (as argued elsewhere by Eymeri-Douzans, 2008). The governing of democratic polities and of their public bureaucracies can only be an imperfect 'art of the state' (Hood, 1998) – an 'art' of governing consisting precisely in a constant adaptation to the 'local' context and configurations, which is a matter of survival for those in power. Adaptation to different national/regional/sectoral contexts implies differentiation in the real national/regional/sectoral trajectories of reform.

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