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European Civil Service as a Group : Sociological Notes about the « Eurocrats' » Common Culture

Who are the "eurocrats"? Do they have a common "culture" and to what extent? The answers are not obvious considering the myths of eurocracy (Ferral 2000, Georgakakis 1999) and the relative lack of sociological data. We have indeed little information about this group and even less about the socio-political factors that contribute to its creation as a collectivity. For a long time, scholars in European studies tended to describe status and collective identity in a more or less enchanted way, thereby reflecting how the European civil servants describe themselves. This research was thus based on limited empirical data and imposed the image of European civil servants as prime mover of the cognitive integration of elites (Wallace & O'Neil 1996). In the last decades, these studies were conducted by scholars in anthropology and policy studies. The anthropological research has shown that European civil servants shared strong values and a series of cultural dispositions such as their belief in the beneficial effects of the Community method and European agreements, multiculturalism or a view of the world focused on long term future (Abélès & alii 1993, Shore 2000). On a other hand, public policy studies have shown that the invocation of the Community interest was a resource frequently mobilized by European civil servants. From this point of view, only European civil servants are capable of embodying the general European interest in the context of negotiations and debates opposing diverse national interests.

If those studies represent real progress, the available scientific literature pays little attention to the conditions of production and interiorization of this "common culture" and even less to the links between this culture and the ability of the European officials to embody effectively the Community interest. What could, by the way, explain the more or less success of this process? These questions are significant in a context in which European civil servants are facing with a lot of changes (enlargement and integration of newcomers, administrative reform, institutional debates, etc..). But it also could be interesting in the collective work of this seminar, especially to put in perspective the definition of European administrative culture adopted here¹.

If this definition is useful for its general frame, it presents, to my point of view, two kinds of problems. First, it tends to break the link between culture and social structures on which it depends, and in this case with the sociology of the group (euro-civil servants) which is concerned with. Secondly, this definition considers culture as a static object. If we understand that the administrative culture could be an obstacle to changes, how can we think about the possibility of changes and also of its own change? Is it really possible independently of the social agents

¹ « Differently to the (legal and organizational) structures, administrative culture indicates the values, norms, orientations, and attitude of an organization. Administrative culture is composed of patterns which have developed during a long time and often are discovered only by attentive observers. Administrative culture characterizes attitude towards changes like administrative reforms »

concerned with it? In other words, we can fear that such a definition leads to an “objectivist” definition of culture as data without process, or as *opus operatum* without *modus operandi*.

Of course, this paper won't claim to find a solution or present a finished model of European administrative culture. But in complement with the other contributions of this book, it could indicate another path. Indeed, instead of searching for the “European administrative culture”, his aim is to wonder what could be the social process of the formation of a European administrators culture. In other words, I would like in a Bourdieu inspired theory, to abandon the focus on “common culture” to point some assumptions of what could be the socio-genesis of an Euro civil servant habitus². In order to do it, I will develop some elements of a book in preparation in two parts. First, I present the framework of the analysis. Second will come the fieldwork perspectives resulting from such an approach.

1 Enigmas and tools : a framework of analysis inspired by sociology of social group construction

Most of us have strong links with eurocivil servants, and more generally members of staff working in the European Institutions (some contributors here are eurocivil servants). That's to say that most of us probably consider the existence of European civil service as taken for granted. Rather it is useful to take a fresh look or even to become naïve again. Before giving some elements on euro officials, I would like therefore to point out some enigmas posed by this group and present the conceptual tools used to resolve them.

1.1 European civil servants as a socio-political enigma

First of all, we should find the “euro civil service” surprising. As we know, European construction is a very recent process. Contrary to national civil servants, European civil servants do not benefit from a credit based on the history and tradition of a State. They even have to face the particularly changing context which results from the successive enlargements of the European Union. How should we understand that European officials have, at least in part, this « charisma of office » (as said Weber) which enables them to invoke the Community interest in a more legitimate way than others? On what is based the belief that a Finnish or Swedish European official represents the Community interest whereas these countries entered in the UE a little bit more than ten years ago? And now even more so for Polish or Lithuanian?

These questions are not obvious and they stumble over a common point. They point out the more general mystery of the collective existence of European civil servants. The existence of a corps of European officials is not self-evident. The European civil servants represent in reality a more than improbable collective unit. The existence of such an integrated corps is first of all a nearly unique case in the sociology of international civil servants. Before being European, European civil servants come from very different cultures as it was often shown. It is the case with regard to their “national habitus”, as Norbert Elias said, and their “administrative cultures”. Even

². For this concept, see further.

though the bureaucratic organisation contributes to this collective work, it does not mean that these officials share the same causes and values. In other words, considering themselves as European civil servants rather than ordinary or national civil servants is not something natural.

This reality can be undoubtedly explained by historical elements. From this point of view, we can say that the European officials are fulfilling the prophecy of Jean Monnet by considering the institutions as a laboratory for new men. If we do not want to have a naïve view of the relationships between the prophet and his community, we have to analyse the relative success of this prophecy. We have indeed to break with the tautological uses of history and their legal corollary explaining their durability through their legal status. The existence of this corps is not only due to its creation or to the creation of its status. On both points, it is important to remember that the constitution of a corps (ein stande in german) of actors does not necessarily mean that it will gather around it a sufficient number of agents to form a group sufficiently strong to outlast the particular conditions presiding over its creation.

Even if this problem is already known in the sociology of social groups, it is particularly acute in the case of the European civil servants. And this is another enigma. The morphological growth of this group, 500 agents in the 1960s to approximately 30,000 today, consistently challenged the group homogeneity. Every enlargement, despite being supported by officials, brings its share of questions and doubts about the continuity of the group and its values. The repeated critical situations of European construction often brought the conflicts of national interests to the surface and constituted a threat for the “European” character of the group. It is particularly the case when the Intergovernmental Conferences about the institutional future of Europe or the budget negotiations fail. Its also often the case in enlargement circumstances.

Then, how should we understand the existence of this group? How can we explain its continuous collective strength in spite of the constant radical transformations? The processes of the socio-political construction of the group, which are permanently renewed, can explain this continuity. Our hypothesis is that these processes have contributed to give to its members a common mission and to construct a group identity adapted to their individual path and to their original and objective position, between States and interest groups or even as civil servants at the service of an emerging but unacknowledged political order. These processes also contribute to renew the group by perpetuating it but also by adapting it to the new situations it has to face. Moreover, when these processes are blocked, they cause what the observers call the “sluggish climate” or even what many observers call the “crisis” within the European institutions.

1.2 The processes of the socio-political production of the group as research object

So how to characterize this process ? Focusing our research on the socio-political processes of the group construction seems to be a good method to try to lift the veil from the mystery of the collective power of European civil servants. However, this analysis needs some clarifications. First of all, we have to define the term of group. Considering the European officials as a group does not mean necessarily that we take for granted its homogeneity. The sociology of social groups encourages us to take some distance from the common use of this term and to maintain the

“right” distance, that is to say neither too near in order to see only the divisions nor too far in order to consider it in as an already existing or reified collective unit (Boltanski, 1987).

It is the same case for European civil servants. The analysis of these officials shows that there are many internal divisions. These divisions are linked to national membership, to its consequence on working habits (Abéles and alii 1993) and to its influence in some sectors. They can also be due to the rank, career or functions held. What does a Director-General of the Commission who worked before in cabinets of national ministers or members of the Commission (Georgakakis and de Lassalle 2006) and a young graduate who have just passed the A8 competition or a trilingual secretary have in common? The competition between sectors (Cini, Christiansen) and the symbolical hierarchies of prestige among the DG which divide the Commission can also explain these divisions. It is not the same thing to be a member of the Directorate-General for Competition, independent DG which is on a roll, than of the Directorate-General for Social Affairs (Georgakakis and de Lassalle 2007). And this is not to mention the political divisions linked to the views of Europe or of economic policies (Hooghe).

However, we can not imagine representing European civil servants as individuals dissociated from a powerful collective unit. The group exists under an institutional form with a status guaranteed and renewed by the practice of disciplinary commissions and of the First Court of Instance of the Court of Justice of the European Communities, which settles the disagreements between the institutions and their staff. This group has pay scales which contribute to its prestige, external enmities and its own pride. It is represented by socio-professional organisations whose competitions are based on trade-union and non-national cleavages. The group is mobilized during the days of action or demonstrations when the status or pay scales are threatened. These different types of actions are opportunities to revive the common values and views shared by its members such as “skill, independence and continuity” to repeat the watchword (“mot-d’ordre” in French, that’s to say “words which put in order”) of the trade unions of the European Civil Service.

Once the good distance has been kept, we have to analyse the encounter between the group and its members. In this context, it is necessary to give another precision. What do we mean by “process of socio-political production” of the group? This question is part of the recent scholarly debates on European construction.

We have perfectly understood that these questions can not be resolved through an intergovernmental or rationalist reading which pays little attention to European officials. Even if from this view point, the perspective adopted here is closer to what is called the “constructivist” school (JEPP, 1999), the objective is to break with its typical inclination at the international and European levels. In order to incorporate a sociological approach to the neo-functional research, the objective of neo-institutionalist and today constructivist perspectives is to analyse the processes of production of European values, of European socialization and the production of the collective resources of European officials. These perspectives enable us to determine our research subject on the content of its values and to refocus the debates on the construction of Europe in the framework of the common controversies of social sciences.

Despite its major contributions, the new constructivist school does raise questions. It particularly results in constructions which pay little attention to the objective structures that enable the “constructions” studied to take root and to last. By focusing on the symbolic outlines of the European civil servants’ identity, it ignores the empirical analysis of the processes of production and of interiorisation of its values. What are, first of all, the mechanisms and structures of production of these values? And what about their legitimacy and probability to exert their effects, and specially on the durability of what is constructed? What do we know moreover about the routinization of its values and the more or less important congruence which link these structures at different moments? Without such types of questions, the analysis of the construction of values unfortunately suggests a nearly-substantialized or idealist view of identity (on those kind of problem, Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Without asking these questions, it is also difficult to understand the changing and plural character of identities and the causes of the superposition of identity forms (collective, sectorial, institutional) very well mentioned by the same authors (Christiansen 1997).

Secondly, what could be the conditions of interiorisation of this identity? What are the factors that predispose officials to develop a sense of a’ European vocation’? How is this vocation distributed within the group and how does it vary with time? What are the consequences of this vocation on the ability to play a role and to represent the Community interest? Who is the more likely to embody this interest within the group and in favour of what kind of process? All these questions deal with the processes of construction and in particular of the construction of the Europeanity of the group’ members. But these questions can only be resolved once we have evaluated the role and the status of the mental and objective structures that are characteristics of the European civil servants,.

These criticisms not only aim at reminding us of the weight of the structures in the processes of social construction. They are at the heart of the analysis suggested here considering the fact that the study of the construction of this group leads to the central question of the production of a structure. And that point is connected with our debate on culturalist approach of European civil service. The different questions enumerated before enable us to understand that the ability to invoke the Community interest represents thus much more than a simple resource. It is an incorporated practice which consists less in a capacity of representing the Community interest than in defining it from a common “point of view”, as Panofsky describes it in his study on Gothic architecture of the XII century. Even if the European civil servants manage to keep the partners of European policies at a distance, to conciliate the different opinions or to use simultaneously reason and faith in Europe, the processes of the group production have created more than a collective identity in the common meaning of the word. It is indeed a common, long-lasting, structured, cognitive and practical framework which is at the same time adaptable to collectively maintain the actors of interest groups and the representatives of the States at distance. It also enables the Euro-civil servant in return, to construct the “architectures” which contribute to the objectivation of the Community interest.

This is the enigma of the group’s strength, beyond the effects of legitimization caused by the processes of production of the group. This enigma raises the question of the production of a real

“habitus” (as would have said sociologists such as Norbert Elias or Pierre Bourdieu) of the European Civil Service³. We will answer this question by analysing the encounter between the group’s objectivation and the conditions of interiorization of its collective history.

2 Objectivization of the group and incorporated history : some elements of a fieldwork in progress

In order to approach this process, the fieldwork is focused on two elements. Our first point is to analyse the objectivization of the group and its transformation into a tangible corps. This will be done considering three processes which seem crucial and little studied by the available literature: the construction of a series of representations leading to the representation of a common social image (first research area), the structuring of a series of mobilization practices of the group considered as a collective unit (second research area), and the institutionalization of a personnel policy which contributes to objectivize the group as regards the legal plan, wages and internal relationships (third research area).

2.1 Objectivization processes

First of all, this survey analyses the processes, both collective and competitive, of construction of the Eurocrat’s social image, of his symbolical outlines and his representations in the structures of production of identity and of the stylization of life (first research area). The identity of the officials is neither the result of an intrinsic process nor a mechanical effect of their geographical or socio-political situation. It is the consequence of dynamic processes in the context of tension between Member States and European institutions.

From this point of view, the stigmatized identity of the Eurocrat must be re-thought .. This representation is not ephemeral and can not be reduced to specific circumstances. It is part of more important processes of European construction. First, it not surprisingly come from the uses of Europe by the national political staff. But in this first case, the analysis allows us to show that the genesis of this representation (or of this story) is not only due to opponents’ speeches, necessarily circumstantial or expressed during electoral campaigns. These representations are also an important part of the speeches by political supporters of Europe. Authors such as Claude Radaelli have shown how national governments used Europe to make their citizen accept measures which would be unpalatable. There are many examples, in particular on the “social field”. The remarks which I have made on the Eurocrat’s figure in France show that, beyond the governmental uses, the use of the Eurocrat’s figure is linked to a structural mechanism heavy with redefinition or re-qualification of the political job as intermediary of Europe. This speech can often be heard as regards the transformations of the presidential figure and is made by the Ministers for European Affairs. It is important not to limit this dimension to the idea that Europe is only a justifying argument for politicians. However, this is linked to practices which tend to

³ For Bourdieu, habitus is a mental structure, structured by education or social experiences, which tends to structure practices and capacity of orientation in the social world. Following Niilo Kauppi, we can note, that Bourdieu draws a parallel between habitus and culture, describing culture as « a system of choice that no one makes ». for a good presentation of this concept and the debate it generated, Niilo Kauppi, 2000.

transform them into broker or interest representatives. The function is thus redefined in this more general process still without observing, in big countries for example (but an analysis is necessary for the new ones), the socio-morphological transformations of the political staff (Georgakakis. 1999a). Secondly, we can note the same phenomenon with regard to processes used by the group to define itself. These are not isolated images. Even if the processes of production are far from being perfectly coordinated, they are nevertheless converging and can be found in recurrent forms in memoirs written by former members of the Commission (that contribute to invert the stigma like Goffman would have said), the portraits made by the internal communication such as the Commission en direct (Georgakakis. 1999b) or other internal magazines such as those published by the trade unions (Georgakakis 2007).

These stylization processes are so important because they are associated with representation processes of the group as reflected in the creation of the European Civil Service's trade-unions (second research area). The trade-unions have been until now little studied but their presence is not neutral. They act as a structure which gives some images of the group but their role is much more important: the socialization of the group, the acculturation of the new members, the distribution of goods and services which enable them to have a significant position within the European institutions. Moreover, this activity is far from being static and is a condition for the maintenance of the group and of its values promoted by the dynamic of conflict characteristic of the field of trade-union representation and of the competition between trade-unions to represent the group. Once again, we have to take into account the social dynamics of these interactions. They can be seen through the regular work of electoral mobilization of the trade-unions during the elections of the staff committee. They can also be seen through the collective mobilizations also initiated by the trade-unions in the situations of reform as for instance the wage reform which lead to the elaboration of methods of adjustment of wages or the administrative reforms of the institutions. In this context, the weight of history is also very important because these processes have always been the same (but not necessarily in the same form) since the 1970s. The recognition of the trade-unions in the context of the Kinnock reform and the construction of places to elaborate the future of the European Civil Service (such as the creation of the GRASPE⁴ in 2001) clearly show the vitality of such processes without taking into account the services done by the trade-unions in the scope of their work of mobilization (Georgakakis 2002)

The trade-union mobilizations also contribute to associate the values of the group with tangible realities such as the wages and status of its members, obviously related to staff policies within the European institutions. The third research area on the objectivation of the group will deal with the evolution of these policies. As regards this point, we will study the socio-historical dynamics which emerged from staff policies and its by-products: the negotiation on the status in the sixties, the negotiations on the method to adjust wages or the internal communication policies such as in the

⁴The G.R.A.S.P.E mean 'Groupe De Réflexion Sur l'Avenir du Service Public Européen'. As it presents its self, it is a 'reflection group initiated by European civil servants with the aim of developing a common understanding of the broader context of the reform of the European civil service and, through it, actively contribute to the reform process'

newspaper called the Commission en direct since the mid-1990s. Many resources show the sociological importance of these processes⁵. We do not want to say that the group is a tangible reality because of its status and codification. However, the group is based on the fact that this codification is a constant process. It is the case during the negotiations on the status and quantity (and quality) of the staff. The tables which sum up the positions of the different institutions and partners of reflection and their evolution, which is described in the archives of the Commission, are a convincing example of these contributions. We could find many other examples of the vitality of these processes, in particular the case law of the European Civil Service which was the principal reason of the creation of the Court of First Instance in the 1980s and more recently of the administrative Court (Georgakakis, 2007).

2.2 The conditions to acclimatize to the group

At the end of this first part, we can note that in spite of the differences or divisions existing within the Commission (as in any other bureaucracy and they are maybe stronger there than elsewhere), there is a whole long-standing process which contributes to the construction and structure of the group. However, we can not limit our study to this analysis. Indeed, one could think, and it would be another form of tautology (sociological, this time), that the group now exists in an intangible form because it was the subject of a process of social construction. Our survey will then be focused on the condition of its perpetuation following three complementary points (which are here briefly summarised).

The first point will deal with the predispositions of the agents who join the European Civil Service and the conditions of expression and adaptation of their “vocation” (Suaud). These agents share common values which are relatively long-lasting. However, it is not the same thing for their habitus which converges in spite of their national membership and in particular as regards their weak dependence to the State or nation. In this fourth research area, we will not only analyse their vocation but also the steps of the ‘concours’ considered as a structure which selects and updates the social and political dispositions already compatible, that is to say (at least in part) denationalised. The analysis here encompasses a series of qualitative and quantitative data about the candidates for European Union and in-depth interviews of some members of the jury of the EU open competition. It also use direct observation surveys carried out by institutions preparing candidates for European Union (Work in progress).

From those first observations, it appears that things are close to what Bourdieu observes about the “noblesse d’Etat”, even if the multicultural context tends to make observations more complicated. European vocation (and correlatively its positive sanction in the open competition) seems to be linked with what I would call internationalized “bourgeoisie de robe” : sons and daughters of lawyers, cultural diplomats, teachers or ingeneers, for instance and specially when they have an

⁵ A first look at these documents enables us to find approximately 200 boxes on these issues. We can also add the references available in the archives of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg considering the structuring debates which took place about the status of the European Civil Service at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s between the COe and the different communities.

international background (like bi-national parents, long studies in an other country, etc.). By contrast, high “bourgeoisie” and specially “bougéoisie d’affaires” (from business world) seems not really predisposed to have European civil service vocation. In the same way some academic trajectories seems to be more efficient for entry into the European institutions, like college d’Europe, of course, but also European values such as sciences-po (not only Paris), LSE or some law faculties known in European circles.

This point on social background is nevertheless not sufficient. We have to add two supplementary elements to these questions about the way the social and political dispositions of the civil servants firmly root the values and collective capital of the group. The first one (fifth research area) deals with the internal competitions within the group and the mechanisms of appropriation of these values (that is to say its collective “value”) which are differentially efficient depending on the different functions held by the members. If this corps exists and distances from national references, it is for different reasons. The competitions within the group really enclose it and in particular with regard to the competition for the definition of the collective capital. This competition reflects the conflict among Commission official over the different definitions of Europe and the legitimate competences to govern it. We have to draw particular attention to this process because this competition permits to revive, update and certainly to give a definition of the group’s values and to adapt it to the morphological transformations.

The case of Directors-General of the Commission demonstrates here several interesting things. First it shows that accessing to very high position as officers often depends on an accumulation process of a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu) specific to the European institutions (Georgakakis, Delassalle, 2004, 2006). The owners of this capital have a trajectory defined by long in-house experience and experiences in several sectors. They have served as member of the commission cabinet membership and often European affirmative identity. They are often opposed with other DG who have a more sectorial and national background. Those oppositions are interesting because it determines the DG an officer can hold, at least in the same proportion as what we used to call the “flag” determination. For instance, Competition, Regional Policy, Trade, external relation or Administration, are held by such agents in contrast with others such as agriculture. These different positions held contribute to shape the sense of identity of the group its values, the definition of his mission or what could be its “good practices” and the perception of being a member of the core of the group, also change with those position.

The second element (sixth research area) will be focused on the effect of different juncture on the institution of the group. We will first analyse the long-lasting situations which raise the question of the generations which follow one another and of the resultant tensions. As it is often said, the role of the European Commission has changed, from “administration de mission” to “administration de gestion”. We would like to show to what extent this change also corresponds to morphological transformations of the corps and the ways to embody, believe and ultimately interiorize its collective values. Objectivized tensions still continue between the generations who entered the European Union in the sixties and the current generation. It is also the case as regards the ways to be a member of the group and the vocation of the European civil servants. However these junctures are also critical. They can provoke a crisis and show one of the brakes

upon this process: the return to national habitus, as a more ancient and deeper disposition, which puts a limit to the definitive construction of the European habitus.

2.3 Conclusion : back to administrative culture

In term of this sociological perspective on group and habitus formation process, it is possible to better understand what this approach could bring to the collective debate about European administrative culture. Only a few points will be underline as a conclusion. The first one consists in pointing out that the european culture should not be taken for granted, because of common reasons (multiculturalism, multinational administrative habits, multilevel networks of administration), but also because of its singular sociological background. As I have shown in this paper, this culture depends on a group which is not obvious and has never been so. That's to say that the formation of this culture is not the product of a relatively sociological stable structure. Secondly, the ability of this culture to be shared depends on a lot of patterns such as position in institution, generation, condition of entrance in the institution, proximity to the socializing agencies, and so on. Finally, the capacity of this culture to be durable and to produce collective effects (on loyalty, shared values, norms of practices) depends not only on history, institutions or a fortiori administrative reform policies but on the capacities of such political and social processes to be reproduced⁶.

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⁶ Many thanks to Carolyn Ban for her reading of the first version of this text.

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