

“Make our French heritage great again!” Entrepreneurialism, public sector pride and the shaping of critical judgement in French public organizations

Laure Célérier Université d’Ottawa, Canada), Mehdi Arfaoui (Mehdi Arfaoui EHESS, France)

This paper explores public managers’ contributions to maintaining an entrepreneurial ideology in the public sector, in spite of their own disappointments with unfulfilled entrepreneurial promises and criticisms of the entrepreneurial discourse. This research ambitions to overcome a polarization in public administration and management literature, between an orthodox stream praising the virtues of entrepreneurialism for public managers on the one side, and a critical research denouncing the nefarious effects of an entrepreneurial ideology for public managers, on the other.

A pragmatic framework, drawing from multiple authors, structures our demonstration (especially Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Chiapello 2003; Thévenot 2005). We conceive of entrepreneurialism as an ideology, the emergence of which has been fueled by 3 critiques of administration: a *romantic critique* – “administration is boring” –; a *market critique* – “administration is costly” –; and a *rational critique* – “administration is inefficient”. We investigate managers’ attachment to these critiques, as well as their engagement with entrepreneurialism, *i.e.* the meanings they invest in it and their appropriations of it in their practices.

This investigation relies on a case study of the French public sector. In 2007, a reform created an agency, named APIE, delivering free consulting services for the valuation of intangible assets in French public organizations. In 2017, we conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with public managers from the whole administration, for whom this agency had worked since its creation. These managers had come to endorse an entrepreneurial discourse and adopt entrepreneurial practices, with a focus on the valuation of their organization’s *heritage* (Boltanski & Esquerre 2017).

We find that entrepreneurialism is mostly invested with a symbolic meaning by public managers. The dissemination of entrepreneurial practices is of course supported by APIE discourses, encouraged by a number of incentive schemes and organizational changes, as well as fostered by the hope to raise new resources in a context of scarcity. However, the possibilities to enrich public organizations through the implementation of entrepreneurial strategies are deemed very limited. In fact, most managers express important disillusion in this regard. But, in a context of deep discontent with the French bureaucracy, managers invest the entrepreneurial ideology with the project of restoring the reputation of their organization and the self-image of their agents. This endorsement eventually comes with an altered critical judgement: managers adopt a passive position towards resource providers, and a defensive one when it comes to affirming their identity.

To existing literature, this research brings supplementary explanations for the durability of the entrepreneurial ideology in the public sector. We show first that the success of this ideology relies not only on dominant actors’ discourses, structural constraints and managerial innovations, but also on its appropriation and reinvention by local actors. These actors, beyond their disillusion, find in entrepreneurialism a way of asserting their pride. Then, we show that entrepreneurialism shapes representations in public organizations as it contributes to an entrenchment of ancient critiques of public organizations and models the articulation of critiques by public managers.

References

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