

Training for reform? Public service schools in the face of calls for modernization

Olivier Quéré

The 12th issue of *APRP* explored the theme of training public servants, and it is the paper devoted to schools of public service that is translated here. Reviewing the context in which these schools for civil servants came into being and their role in transforming public action, the paper questions their very existence and the effects of the training they provide.

Mirroring this first paper, the issue includes an article devoted to the initial training of public servants in Great Britain, with a view to international comparison. In addition, a Cross-views section opened the discussion on the learning society in a dialogue between Virginie Madelin, Director of the *Institut de la Gestion publique et du Développement économique*, the training body for employees of the economic and financial ministries, and François Taddei, a world-renowned geneticist and Director of the *Centre de recherches interdisciplinaire* ("CRI", which became the Learning Planet Institute in 2021). This issue of the magazine then turned to an international comparison, with two papers focusing on the initial training of public servants in France and the UK respectively.

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The French Senior Civil Service School (ENA) – replaced by the French National Institute of Public Service (INSP) on 1 January 2022 – may well be the highest profile public administration school in France, but a multitude of public service schools offer higher and executive education courses designed to train public servants. What is the history of the emergence of these public service schools? What criticisms are made of these schools and what role do they play in transformative change for public action?

The French Senior Civil Service School (ENA), transformed into the new French National Institute of Public Service (INSP), has long been a subject of disquiet due to a combination of at least three types of criticism (Eymeri-Douzans, 2019). First, the school has been the focus of politico-media complex criticism: ever since its establishment in 1945, many political commentators, experts and professionals have called for a reform of the competitive entrance examination, course content and the graduate ranking system, if not purely and simply the closure of a school deemed overly “elitist” and “technocratic”. ENA has also been the subject of regular criticism from its own students within the school complaining about inconsistent curricula, inapt lecturers and a tense environment laden with competition and gossip. In addition to these two thrusts, there is the criticism driven by sociological analyses, first and foremost of which is *State Nobility* by Pierre Bourdieu published in French in 1989, which did much to popularise the image of a senior civil service closed shop with its homophilic recruitment profile and cliquishness.

However, alongside ENA are to be found a multitude of public service schools offering higher and executive education courses, generally under ministry oversight, to train civil service engineers (Ecole Polytechnique, Mines Paris – PSL, National School of Civil Engineering renamed the Ecole des Ponts ParisTech engineering institute, ENTPE Graduate School of Civil, Environmental and Urban Engineering, etc.), administrative middle managers (regional administration institutes), magistrates (National School for the Judiciary), inspectors and

controllers (customs, tax, labour, education, etc.), penitentiary staff (French National Correctional Administration Academy – ENAP), senior local administration managers (National Institute for Local Studies – INET), veterinary surgeons (National School of Veterinary Services), and so on. Often less in the media and political spotlight, these schools are nevertheless the subject of regular reforms which, although differing in scale, show the – sometimes strategic – importance that certain senior administrators place on their existence and work.

As an object of criticism and, at the same time, many cosmetic changes, the public service schools have prompted questions about their very existence: what purpose do they serve? Asking this candid question is tantamount to asking about the effects of the training. If it has no effect, then it serves no purpose. Yet if it is considered that the training does have effects, what purpose does it serve and, more importantly, who does it serve?

Obviously, public service training serves a direct purpose for the students who learn from these schools how to become public servants. Yet it also serves the interests of the administrative players, tempted to use these courses as leverage to reform the administration more broadly. It may therefore be considered that students need to be trained in reform precepts to subsequently embody them in their work and support them in the departments, agencies and administrations in which they work. Seen as both reform drivers and targets, the schools have hence been a central focus of the reconfigurations in the administration at large for

the last 30 years (Bezes, 2009). To what extent are public service schools open to changes in public action and intentions to modernise?

To further understand the reform uses made of public service schools, this article first looks back over the emergence of civil service training courses before drawing on available studies and an original study of the regional administration institutes (Quéré, 2020) to show the tension apparent in civil service training courses: the teaching of position, hierarchy and bureaucracy in general appears to come a cropper over the tendency to want to turn the schools into state reform laboratories.

Training to serve the state

Public service schools started to take shape as such in the Napoleonic period. As pointed out by Ezra Suleiman, Napoleon Bonaparte took the example of top universities such as the Ecole Polytechnique and the National School of Civil Engineering, established during the revolutionary period and under the Ancien Régime, to inform his plans for secondary education reform (Suleiman, 1979, p. 38). Napoleon's purpose was first and foremost political: the entire education system was designed not so much to educate the masses as to train future "servants of the state" able to supply the necessary skills to conduct affairs of state.

The instrumental aspect of the schools was hence not born of the recent administrative reforms: the alignment of all the curricula, standardisation of the competitive entrance examinations for the top universities and, more broadly, rationalisation of the administrative organisation under the Consulate and the Empire defined the shape of the state officials who would soon come to be called "civil servants" tasked mainly with supporting government action. The higher education institutions hence resembled a power tool that could be used to build an obedient, loyal elite. This explains the formation of a state monopoly on higher education courses training civil servants as early as the 19th century.

Whereas the first top universities enabled a rapid formation of high-ranking civil service technical and military corps, the matter of "general" senior civil servants hit a series of stumbling blocks. Given that they were not attached to a specific ministry, as was the civil engineering corps to the Ministry for Infrastructure and the engineering corps to the Ministry for Industry, the "administrators" became the focus of intra-government conflicts. Many endeavours throughout the 19th century to establish common training for all senior civil

servants met with resistance from the "line" ministries, protective of their prerogatives in matters of training and careers management for their own staff.

One example of this is the failure of the first "Senior Civil Service School" proposed by Hyppolyte Carnot in 1848 when he was Minister of Public Instruction under the French Provisional Government: the plan to create a single, general "interministerial" training course for senior civil servants met with hostility from many ministries (Wright, 1976). Among these, the National Education Ministry played a particular role in that it sought to protect the monopoly of the law faculties in training the nation's elite.

This opposition explains the difficult birth of the French Senior Civil Service School (ENA) in 1945 (Gatti-Montain, 1987) and that of the regional administration institutes set up in 1970 to train public service middle managers (Quéré, 2017). The late appearance of interministerial schools for general senior civil servants was consequently due primarily to the intra-government antagonism that played out among ministerial players, far more than it was due to a fundamental fear of "administrative power" undermining governmental political power and thereby popular sovereignty.

Various, and sometimes contradictory, political and administrative input went into the civil servant schools thus set up. They therefore emerged as one of the key elements gradually establishing the administration's independence from the political sphere and fuelling the process of bureaucratic construction (Dreyfus, 2000). What theoretical and practical grounding do these schools give civil service students and how are these principles internalised in practice?

Learning bureaucracy

Max Weber considered "vocational" training for public servants, in the same way as the competitive examination and the career, as one of the components of "bureaucratic administration" typical of rational-legal authority (Weber, 1995).

In Weber's ideal-type, the schools are one of the elements of the rationalisation of government activities. As such, they provide a "qualification" that appears to be geared to the administrative rules. Consequently, it is not surprising that the curriculum on these courses consists essentially of knowledge revolving around a "general" teaching standard (Biland and Gally, 2018) to give students what they need for the exercise of public service: whether legal knowledge or focused more on

engineering sciences, this knowledge is designed to provide them with a grounding in the work expected of them when they enter the civil service.

Such is historically the case with the civil service engineering schools, where courses focus primarily on public service in practice interfaced with disciplines such as engineering sciences, statistics and more or less “general” subjects that, in return, define the ranking of the schools on the top university scoreboard (Gervais, 2007, Delespierre, 2015).

Studies conducted at the French Senior Civil Service School (ENA) have found a prevalence of ritual conventions in the school to which the students were expected to conform (Eymeri-Douzans, 2001). In this self-styled “general” training school, knowledge generally matters less than style, form and skills since senior civil servants are essentially required to produce comparative summaries of different political positions in order to inform policy or “format” it for the administration.

At administrative middle management level, such as in the regional administration institutes, “general” skills are undercut by more technical skills, such as learning software, by and large equated with “dirty work” (Hughes, 1984 [1962]) delegated to subordinate staff by senior civil servants wanting to keep their monopoly on more prestigious tasks such as public policymaking and decision support (Quéré, 2020).

The hierarchy of schools therefore shapes a hierarchy of administrative tasks, revealing a great deal about the division of labour – both mechanical and symbolic – running top-down through the departments and administrations. At the top of the administrative hierarchy, the top universities, which train students in power even as they are structured by it, tend to reproduce ruling class positions. The top universities thereby produce a “State Nobility” by turning the civil service students into “holders of a legitimate monopoly on a social virtue or competence in the juridical sense of the term, that is to say a legally recognised capacity to wield a form of power that is effective because it is legitimate,” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 118). Through their contact with power, the administrations’ senior civil servants produce briefs, proposals and summaries used to both translate political decisions into administrative forms (Eymeri-Douzans, 2003) and endeavour to convince members of parliament (Laurens, 2013).

Civil service middle managers are therefore required in their training to internalise their position in the hierarchy of administrative tasks: neither too

low down the chain of command to ensure that ENA graduates can delegate their tasks efficiently, nor too high up the ladder of prestige to reserve the tasks of policymaking and decision-making for the nobility of their order. Law appears to be the typical instrument of this subjection: for middle managers, learning to respect the law consists of learning to respect the hierarchy (Quéré, 2015).

Consequently, the public service schools dispense an entire education in bureaucracy, that is to say a work space hierarchically segmented into “task silos” specific to each occupational group. The point is to secure a position in this hierarchy and be aware of that position. The official curriculum generally pursues this goal, but a more implicit, “hidden” skillset agenda firmly anchors bureaucratic practices to roles.

To what extent has this training in bureaucracy been redefined by the reform policies seen in the administration since the mid-1980s?

State reform laboratories

The public service schools have long been impervious to state reform policies. Calls for modernization are more the pursuit of senior civil servant converts (Bezes, 2012) who tend to bypass the schools to impose their precepts. Yet little by little, some public service schools have gradually changed, primarily under the “professionalisation” banner.

Seeking to distance themselves from the academic model championed by the law schools (and hence the National Education Ministry), the public service schools seized on vague labels in vogue in the administration in the 1980s such as the “applied school”. The “general” courses focused more on methodological and instrumental instruction, as shown by the teaching of law centred more on practical experience-based knowledge. This can be seen from the emergence of training in applied legal techniques such as court proceedings and the drafting of legislation which, in both ENA and the regional administration institutes, is defined as “the art of writing law” and is taught as a practical subject. The point is not just to know the law, but to know how to apply it.

The move to “professionalise” (Boussard et al., 2010) flanks a “managerialisation” movement in training: so-called “management” modules, although protean, represent a growing proportion of course studies. “Management” courses are an offshoot of the “professionalisation” of training in that learning management is associated with instrumental and methodological skills.

Students work increasingly on case studies (real or hypothetical) and simulation exercises and even attend simulation workshops, sometimes led by actors (see box).

Simulation workshops in the regional administration institutes

Simulation workshops are held in the regional administration institutes in classes called “Public Speaking”, “What is a Manager?” and “Teamwork”. All of these classes are grouped under the “management” heading.

The simulation workshops take place as follows: first, the facilitator details a scenario and explains everyone’s roles. The student placed in the situation in front of the class has to respond in situ to the constraints of the exercise in interaction with the actors.

For example, in the “What is a Manager?” class, a student is placed in the situation of an administrative officer in a prefecture. This student has to put together the work and holiday schedule for subordinates, medium-rank civil servants played by actors, who each have their own constraints: one agent has to finish every day at 4 p.m., another has to take their holiday in August, and so on. The administrative officer’s role is to balance these constraints, even if that means being an adjustment variable themselves. Their work is made very hard by the actors, who take an uncompromising stance with respect to their individual constraints.

This type of exercise is supposed to prepare the future manager for the main managerial techniques. It demonstrates both the level of “professionalisation” of the course – in terms of using instrumental know-how – and the importance of management and managerial instruction in the training of public service managers.

Although the “professionalisation” and “managerialisation” training processes may look similar, the fact of the matter is that the gradual introduction of management and managerial skills into the public service schools has considerably

changed the structure and content of the courses, and thereby the conception of the civil service. A close look at this type of know-how and how it is taught reveals the extent to which the budgetary constraint is naturalised and how students are expected to build their professional practices around the optimisation of resources (Québé, 2020). Classes given by “public management” experts, sometimes from consultancy firms, reinforce this tendency. The reformers consequently see civil service students as having to “lead the change” in the administration and the schools as the springboard for this change. Although there is no way of telling whether this enterprise will be successful, we are seeing an attempt here at the “internal” construction of a manager state through the public service schools.

However, “management” skills are not catching on in all the schools in the same way and not all of them are taking on board these changes in the same manner, giving rise to variations in training practices and uses. At ENA, for example, the emergence of “management” stemmed from a reconfiguration of the legal syllabus geared to the introduction of management and economic modules (Biland and Kolopp, 2013). In the regional administration institutes, the “management” training that started appearing in courses in the mid-1980s gained traction all the more easily in the 2000s since it effectively raised the profile of the public “manager” as an independent figure with decision-making capacity – the exact opposite of the figure of the ENA graduate as a “minion” associated with the work of administrative officers. Similarly, in the civil service engineering schools, the introduction of “management” could be seen as a resource for the civil service ranks, as is the case with the civil engineering corps which took advantage of the managerial training reform to boost its prestige and keep its place in the state system (Gervais, 2007).

To conclude, training is clearly a subject of reform ambitions, but variations in uptake approaches give rise to disconnects between intentions and practice. By “leveraging” these reforms, certain groups of civil servants play the positioning and bureaucratic ranking game.

The bureaucratic objective of training and skilling on which the public service schools were built was flanked by a purely political purpose from their creation through to the managerial changes of the early 19th century: today’s civil service students are the malleable, loyal public servants of tomorrow. The many and varied schools therefore serve as much the civil servants as the

many reform intentions. Yet bureaucracy is a slow-changing institution and the civil service schools, a cornerstone of the institution in France, evolve at the same pace.

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