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The Spread of Vouchers among French Local Government: When Private Companies Reshape the Meaning of a Tool

Arnaud Lacheret

Introduction

1 Vouchers are "instruments of public action" (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2004) with a paradoxical scientific reputation. Despite their widespread use in France, particularly within local governments, they have been more widely studied in the English-speaking world. The reinvention and the transformation of vouchers into a political science object can be dated precisely. Milton Friedman launched the use of vouchers and tried to implement them in the public services, especially in the field of education (Friedman, 1955, 1962). He imagined a deregulated system where parents would be free to choose their children's school using a "school-voucher". He assumed that, as a targeted subsidy provided directly to families, vouchers would enable them to choose the school for their children, whether public or private, provided they follow the minimal standard requirements approved by the state government.

2 In France, vouchers appeared in the 1990s in a politically liberal context inspired largely by the Anglo-American model and especially the spread of New Public Management (NPM) (Brookes, 2019). They then became ubiquitous tools of public policy in the sense of Lester Salamon (Salamon, 2001), trade-off dispositives between the stakeholders of public action and, later, sustainable instruments present in the majority of French local governments.

3 After an overview of vouchers through a literature review addressing their roots and origins, this article proceeds to a discursive analysis of the perceptions and feelings of a number of French actors that are positioned to provide insights into their rapid and

wide-spread use. Meanwhile, we will notice the relative persistence of NPM-based landmarks within the conceptions and definitions made by political entrepreneurs of the concerned publics. The third part shows that, in order to become a legitimate tool of public action, vouchers have invaded the field of permissible tools as they have become politically more neutral and acceptable because of the role of mediation and promotion played by the companies and organizations whose role it was to promote and implement them, concealing the initial ideological dimension.

4 We will therefore question the reason(s) behind the spread of vouchers among French local governments. Despite an apparent link with New Public Management, no particular political debate has occurred and our assumption is that this “neutralization” of vouchers in France is due to private actors that have been clearly part of the public policy transfer among local governments. This research question has two main assumptions. Without mentioning the liberal origins of vouchers in French local governments, actors are clearly introducing them by using arguments found in the literature of vouchers. Second, to avoid any political debate and smoothen the policy transfer, the real sense of vouchers has been neutralized by French voucher companies, thereby providing these tools to the local governments by using new kinds of arguments.

The Anglo-American origin: an example of school vouchers

5 Vouchers have their roots in far older references than Friedman. Regarding the school vouchers he proposed, we could go back to John Stuart Mill (1860), who mentioned, in an English context, the importance of parental choice for the education their children may receive. Hayek (Hayek, 1944), then Friedman, were the American promoters of "neoliberalism", a politico-economic order Michel Foucault referred to as a "technique of government" of self. Supporters of Neoliberalism aimed to spread the grip of the market mechanism to the individuals and finally to the entire society. Vouchers are also considered as tools of NPM (Hood, 1991). Applied to education institutions, they allow the concept of quasi-markets to expand to other fields (Glennester, Le Grand, 1995). With this mindset, the mechanisms of the trade model are transferred to public education through an in-depth reform of that sector in the USA. This approach proposes a sort of alternative market oriented and individualized regulation, which can partially replace the state financing of the public educative system, considered too costly. The distribution of vouchers can thus substitute, at least partially, education budgets, representing a trade-off model between public funding and a fully private system.

6 Vouchers emerged in this new deregulated context. Theoretically, from an NPM perspective, the state has to interfere only to allow the individual-entrepreneur to use his freedom of choice. Christopher Hood summarizes this by explaining that NPM generates a set of administrative reform doctrines built on contestability, user choice, transparency and incentive structures. Therefore, the state has to guarantee the smooth running of the market mechanism to allow the individual to choose the training supply of his choice. This was the vision of Friedman and the Chicago School when they proposed the school voucher for the US: the individual has to have the possibility to reach the market for education using an oriented subsidy he can use freely.

Vouchers, pragmatic tools stemming from liberal vision

7 Vouchers were used in a famous experiment in 1981 in Chile. Friedman became the advisor to the Chilean Government led by Augusto Pinochet and sought to implement the first school voucher. They would then be adapted in diverse forms in several American states (Milwaukee and a few other states such as Florida still use the "school voucher system") and also, perhaps surprisingly, in Sweden, the paragon of welfare state capitalism. Vouchers were first considered by American researchers as a tool of public action that was supposed to be "ideologically neutral" and seen as merely one tool among others in the policy toolbox (Steuerle, 2000). They were, however, subsequently criticized (One can refer to the major debate surrounding US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's proposal for using school vouchers). The massive rise of "tools" and "instruments" in the public policies in the 1990s has been described as a "revolution that no one noticed" (Salamon, 2000). Eugene Steuerle argues that vouchers are just tools among others, more or less efficient depending of the target and the considered public policy. According to these observers, vouchers are first a social object, aiming to provide an oriented social subsidy to well-identified public beneficiaries (Steuerle, 2001). This notion of being a pragmatic tool that is not apparently ideologically oriented is present in other papers written by researchers specializing in vouchers. For example, Gary Sturgess and Ivana Bodroza mention a technical dispositive, a tool that helps to level up the value of public services when the market and the public policies have the same orientation (Sturgess and Bodroza, 2011). In another book on vouchers, Steuerle defines them as a subsidy that gives limited spending power to individuals who can select from among a restricted choice of goods and services (Steuerle, 2000).

8 Thereafter, many critical studies challenged this idea of a "neutral" voucher and emphasized their "neo-liberal" sense while at the same time criticizing their efficiency. The evaluations of the voucher system in the USA after the first experimentations generated severe controversies among researchers on this sensitive political subject (Carnoy, 2008; Wolf, 2012; Chingos and Peterson, 2013; Lacheret, 2013; Feigenberg et al, 2017). This definition of vouchers as tools linked to the NPM best explains the success of their implementation and spread in France, which is the subject of our research. Considered neutral tools by American decisions makers, they have been applied to many other fields, starting with culture (Peacock, 1968), housing, food, and social aid (Colin, 2005). With this expansion, particularly in the USA, of the spread of vouchers to other fields (and following several researchers Steuerle (2000, 2001), Salamon (2001), Greene (1998, 2001, 2011), and Sturgess and Bodroza (2011), our research method consists of isolating the six main arguments justifying the desire by a government to implement a voucher system, namely: promotion of free choice for a targeted public, social equity (to legitimize to tax payers the provision of an oriented social subsidy to a targeted population), the organization of tenders between providers of goods and services redeemable by vouchers, the replacement of an existing subsidy program, the restriction and capping of choice of beneficiaries and the desire to save public money while funding social policy.

9 NPM (Hood, 1991) naturally appropriated this tool by using the following argument: a voucher policy has to be considered from both the point of view of the beneficiary but also of the taxpayers who finance it. In this case, notions such as "public value"

(Moore, 1995; Alford, 2017) or merit goods (Becker, 1974) can be used. Therefore, the voucher is identified in the research discourse as a tool based on a liberal conception of public policies and individuals, especially the recipients of social aid. This tool crystallizes (Halpern et al., 2014) political and moral opinion and defines the target "public" of this social aid: this aid should be a “waste of public money” and those that receive it should not adopt a "the state can do everything for me" attitude, but rather be guided in their choice and be able to use the services of competing private providers overseen by the regulatory state.

1. Dynamic of diffusion and appropriation of vouchers in France

10 In the French case, surprisingly, vouchers have not been the subject of much political debate or scientific controversy despite their intensive use since the 1990s, essentially by local governments, and despite the fact that the first elected officials were clearly not shy about identifying the Anglo-American parenthood of the school voucher system [1]. The generalization of the use of vouchers is a consequence of the global reform of the welfare state and the gradual trend towards a neoliberalized model of capitalism (Kersberger, Manow, 2008). The aim of this broad tendency is to individualize social subsidies (this trend appeared in the 1970s and strengthened throughout the 1990s and the 2000s) and to implement them on the local scale with tools adapted to the various specificities of the regions (Esping-Andersen, 2008). Vouchers also became relevant, consistent and rational because they can be used for a precise and specific good or service. Moreover, they are, in the main, dedicated to a specific person (in France the name of the recipient is often written on the voucher) and therefore avoid irregular payments that can prove rather difficult to recover.

11 Our main assumption is as follows: the smooth spreading of vouchers in France may be explained by the fact that their political and ideological dimensions have been lost or concealed and they have been depoliticized by the companies and the suppliers that sell them to local governments. Actually, the French context, and in some ways the weakness of French local government, lead the latter to pass through specialized companies to develop voucher systems that play the role of mediators among the local governments by reshaping the arguments defining vouchers. Thus, vouchers are instruments replete with paradoxes: although the first local elected officials to implement them were clearly liberal and saw the opportunity for a classic policy transfer of an innovation (in the sense of Everett Rogers, 1995), our assumption is that the ideological sense of vouchers has since then been neutralized. Once implemented in the first region in 1993, they spread among French local governments, following a certain form of isomorphism (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), through a public private dimension that has helped to reduce political debate on their use.

12 This paper stems from a PhD research on the adoption of vouchers and their reinterpretation and implementation within French local government. We assessed the rise of vouchers in the Rhône-Alpes Region, the pioneer locale in the trend, and their transplantation to other regions (Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur) and/or other local governments (Department of Saône et Loire and Drome) that have adopted this tool and its method of implementation. To determine how this instrument is perceived, the study is based on interviews with 45 individuals such as local representatives, civil

servants from the bottom to the top of local government, as well as employees of voucher companies. In addition, we were able to access documents of local government and of voucher companies, allowing us to undertake a qualitative survey which was supplemented by interviews with actors from other local governments. This enabled us to minimize any findings that may be attributable to locally specific circumstances.

13 In the Rhône-Alpes Region, where vouchers were first launched by a French institution, the aim of the vouchers was to create access to cultural goods and services for a targeted population. Their quick spread among other French local governments clearly demonstrates the phenomenon of horizontal dialog among peers (Ferlie and McGivern, 2013) and benchmarking between same-leveled institutions. The results of the study show that the actors, during each transfer and implementation of the method, also accepted the implicit liberal arguments of the vouchers. Eventually, the action of the voucher companies was crucial in introducing pragmatic logic that helped to depoliticize the adoption of this instrument, making them more easily accepted because of their apparent political neutrality. The first vouchers used in France on the national scale to provide a public subsidy were implemented in the 1990s, essentially with a social purpose. We can mention the "Universal job service voucher" [2] or the "social aid personalized voucher" [3 in this context. However, the voucher systems aiming to provide individual subsidies were created at the local government level. In 1993, the regional council of Rhône-Alpes created the "chèque culture". Dedicated to high school students, this checkbook contained four vouchers purchased at the price of 10 francs and redeemable in a library, a theater performance, an entry to a museum or at a cinema. This kind of subsidy spread widely: 21 French regions out of 22 had such a cultural voucher system in place by the year 2014 (since that date the merging of regions has seen vouchers invade all the French regions). This experience opened new fields of development for vouchers, and we can now find training vouchers (Poitou Charentes Region), moving vouchers (Nord Pas de Calais Region, Var and Puy de Dome Department), health Vouchers (La Réunion Department), baby vouchers (redeemable to purchase a baby seat) (Bouches du Rhône and Pyrénées Atlantiques Departments) and energy or sustainable development vouchers (to help for the supply of wood for boilers or solar boiler (more than half of the French regions).

14 To summarize, France has two different types of vouchers. Although these are used for the same purpose (as a subsidy to help a targeted public access a good or a service), their objectives differ:

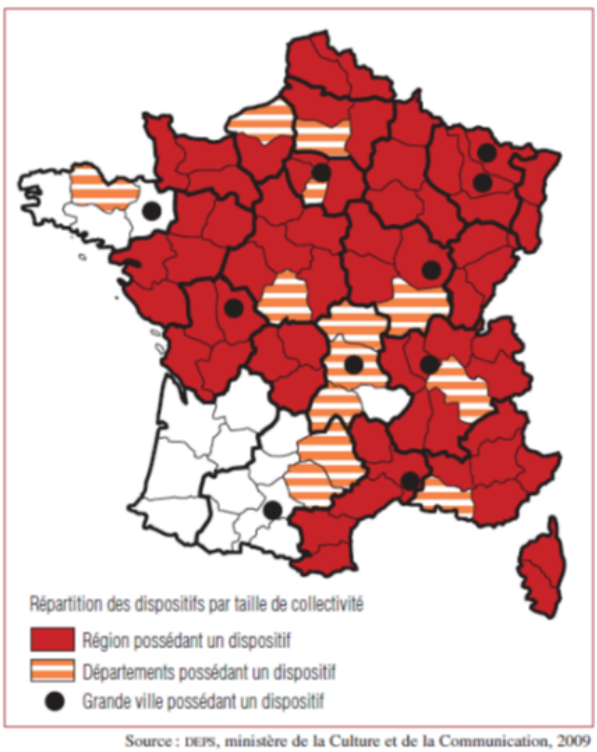
- Social vouchers target and rationalize the supply of a social aid
- The other type of voucher offers non-compulsory aid to a public that does not necessarily have social difficulties, and are also used to replace an existing cash subsidy to make the action of local government more concrete and visible to the public.

Cultural vouchers: pioneers in local government

15 Used as tools of cultural policy for the Rhône-Alpes Region, which presented them as the priority track of its policy of free access for youth to culture (Lacerenza, 2001)[4], cultural vouchers have been transformed since their launch in 1994 and became a chip card referred to as "carte MRA" in 2013. From a pure cultural instrument dedicated to the region's high school students, they have become a "card of autonomy", offering services that go far beyond culture (sports, health, among other things). Cultural vouchers can therefore be considered as tools presenting a supply of services and

providing freedom of choice. They are used in a way that is diametrically opposed to traditional cultural policy, which subsidies and supports the cultural actors. We find this idea in the arguments developed in the interview with E2[5], Vice-President in charge of Cultural Affairs in 1998, and with E3[6], President of the Cultural Commission of the Regional Council, when they discuss a political divide in the perception that politicians have of cultural vouchers. They share the same vision of the vouchers as a tool to ease freedom of choice while constraining indirectly the use of public funds by obliging the beneficiary to spend them for a pre-determined type of good or service. They both trace the origins of these vouchers to the Anglo-American system. and E3 even referred to Milton Friedman during the interview. However, surprisingly, the shift of political power from the right-wing to the left-wing within the regional council did not curb the use of vouchers in Rhône-Alpes or in the other regions. The regional elections in 1998 and then again in 2004 saw heavy defeats for the right and led the left to rule 21 from 22 French regions. Nevertheless, the spread of the vouchers increased: "art vouchers" in Ile de France Region in 2001, "book and cinema vouchers" in Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur in 2001, etc. The departments followed the same path with, among others, the "cultural vouchers" of the Var Department, the first one of a series of imitations of the Rhône-Alpes cultural vouchers. This unexpected spread across diverse French local governments induced the French Ministry of Culture to run a survey to list them. Thus, Francois Rouet has been appointed by the Ministry to map the existing cultural voucher systems in France (Rouet, 2009).

Figure : Local government use of cultural vouchers in 2009



Source: Rouet 2009

16 Meanwhile, other vouchers were locally developed, enlarging the range of policies: "sport vouchers" to pay the membership fees in sports clubs for the youth (Midi-

Pyrénées and Limousin Region), or a wide range of vouchers for high school children to participate in sport, leisure and cultural activities (Drome and Allier Departments). This example of cultural vouchers, because of their popularity and good reputation, explains the surprising absence of political division about them in France, especially compared with the polemic debates and controversies which surrounded their use in the USA. The liberal origin is not easy to discern in the French context of their implementation, and neither is it clearly claimed by the actors (except for the above-mentioned pioneers in Rhône-Alpes). This is why the spread of vouchers among French local governments has been comparatively a-political and consensual.

17 This sketch of the way vouchers were diffused in France poses a question: As vouchers have spread among French local government through a process that closely resembles isomorphism but lost their initial ideological roots, what are the main arguments actors have used to define their use?

2. Arguments developed by actors and the perception of the public

2.1 Some fragmented and diverse arguments

18 The various interviews conducted during this study enable us to compare the arguments used to explain the implementation of the various voucher systems by French local governments with those developed by Anglo-American researchers in the 1990s and 2000s and presented in our introduction. Our assumption here is that by concealing the mainly liberal political sense of vouchers and reshaping them, their promoters (who are mainly private actors) have found a way to efficiently spread their use. Nonetheless, in our interviews, the actors always referred to at least one argument advanced by the liberal doxa. Each actor used the dimension that best fitted his/her argument without showing support for the liberal source of the voucher concept. A discourse analysis and comparison of the arguments used by the American promoters of vouchers and the ones put forward by the interviewees in this study was considered the optimal way to link our research with the theoretical framework and highlight the link between French and Anglo-American vouchers. Some actors thus emphasized the free choice argument[7], and others drew on Steuerle's framework of "choice and equity" and used arguments describing it as a "merit good" with "public value"[8]. Yet others insisted on the fact that vouchers help to increase the competition within a market [9]. Several actors consider that vouchers can also be used to replace an existing public policy[10]. Some interviews suggest that vouchers may restrict the choice of their users, for example, in the interview with the former General Director of the Saône et Loire Department[11] when discussing the vouchers used to provide social aid for disabled people. Lastly, the financial argument in which the supply of a subsidy with vouchers should be a way to save public money was also a well-developed argument of the actors dealing with social welfare [12].

19 In addition to these classic arguments stemming from the American literature, two new arguments, far more pragmatic and less politically oriented, arose from the study: first, according to some of the interviewees, vouchers can be considered as tools of communication by making social subsidies easier to materialize and appear more concrete in the eyes of the beneficiaries; second, the vouchers can simplify the

administrative process and instructions on how to apply for and receive the subsidies because externalizing the instructions of the individual demands to the private sector (the voucher company) makes the provision of the public service more fluid. These two arguments are clearly part of the reshaping of the sense of vouchers conducted by the French voucher companies to which local governments have outsourced the provision of vouchers. Those two additional arguments, as well as the founding role of the French voucher companies, appear to be the main difference that may explain the lack of political debate when vouchers were launched in France. Indeed, the essential difference in the French model of vouchers lies, above all, in the way they were introduced and described by the actors.

2.2 The various "public" of the vouchers: a multiple target that differs according to sectors

20 The interviewees emphasized far less the political sense of vouchers than their usefulness regarding the allocation of subsidies. This definition of vouchers, fits with Harvey Rosen's broad definition (Rosen, 2001). Contemporary actors, even if they adopt parts of the discourse inspired by the NPM-oriented model, promote a depoliticized definition of vouchers linked to their apparent neutrality and their pragmatic aims. This makes possible their uncontroversial spread among various local governments, most of which were ruled leftist politicians during the survey. The vouchers do not have overt political connotations in the same way that politicized instruments do. They become an object of compromise, a common sense, "above the political fray" solution to an existing problem. Thus, new arguments developed to promote them are assumed to be more effective for their spread among local government. However, it is noticeable that during the interviews an important difference arose in the conception between two types of representation the actors had about the beneficiaries of facultative subsidies such as "cultural vouchers" and more social oriented vouchers. In the case of the provision of social welfare to the "public", the latter is imagined as an ensemble of persons whose rationality is bounded and, for that reason, is observed with a certain paternalist mistrust in the eyes of elected politicians, public managers and operational civil servants [14]. The "public" is perceived as somewhat immature - for example, a manager of a social department in a local government claimed that "those people are not able to understand everything" [15] - and are unable to use their subsidies properly. To restrict their choice by orienting their expense with a voucher is considered a way to frame and actively help the beneficiaries according to norms enshrined in public service. In contrast, the public targeted by non-social vouchers is described as less immature, more responsible. It has a certain sense of initiative and is "naturally" in need of more freedom of choice.

21 This difference in institutional attitude is not dependent on the nature of vouchers. Indeed, even if, technically speaking, the social vouchers permit a degree of choice by their beneficiaries, this dimension of autonomy of choice was never mentioned during the interviews. However, we did encounter the notion of freedom of choice to be high in the arguments used by the actors when discussing vouchers which aim to provide non-social welfare (cultural vouchers, sport vouchers etc.). Therefore, the public targeted by that non-compulsory welfare is put into a position of having more freedom of choice, to be realized by accessing the private market through use of the voucher. This conception of empowered beneficiaries being underpinned by this type of

instrument should have manifested itself in a strong right/left political divide within the local political institutions involved, as was the case with the launch of the cultural vouchers in Rhône-Alpes Region in 1993[12] . However, the political divide was far from obvious in the transcripts of the interviews. From the left to the right, elected officials described the vouchers as instruments which empower the skills of the targeted public, offering them a margin of action and freedom if used efficiently. This positive perception was shared by the local civil servants, who consider that the beneficiaries of non-social welfare are to a degree responsible and autonomous actors, able to take free decisions[13]. Thus, vouchers are not only a means of giving shape to a cash subsidy, they also carry a representation, not only of the subsidy given, but also of the targeted public. The same instrument, used for different goals, carries different images of the public it is supposed to help.

22 In the two cases studied, another type of "client" of vouchers emerges: "public opinion", the "taxpayers" (Alford, 2002). Many of the interviewees are persuaded that by showing that the destination of the subsidy is controlled with the allocation of vouchers, the external legitimacy of this form of social welfare is extended and their acceptance by public opinion is eased, especially in the eyes of non-beneficiaries [17]. This claim is particularly notable in the comments of the local politicians E2 [18], E1 and the socialist C5, the Vice-President of the Department of Saône et Loire, who insisted on the guarantee to give to the population (composed of tax-payers) proof that the allocation of social welfare is serious and that the public money is well spent. These interviews show the plural and polysemic character of the argumentation aiming to legitimate the use of vouchers in public policy. Obviously, the comments are inspired by the ideological baseline of vouchers, namely the NPM, but they cannot be placed in an easily recognizable and well-defined belief system. In fact, the way they justify the use of vouchers is to be found *outside* of their respective intellectual paradigms and political field but rather in the instrument itself. Their arguments borrow much from the words and guidelines of the companies that sell and market the vouchers and submit their commercial arguments to their customers and to the institutions to which they provide those vouchers and processes of provision.

3. Mediation by the companies: vectors and actors in the de-politicizing of a "cause without opponents"

23 The interviewees at all levels claimed that the management of a voucher system is complex, at the same time illustrating the poor capabilities of French local governments, which most of the time struggle to outsource even an apparently simple technical dispositive. Much of the time they find it easier to hire the technical knowledge from specialized companies, creating public private partnerships to outsource their needs. Although it is not easy to discern how many local voucher systems have been externalized to the private sector among the 43 identified in 2009 by a Ministry of Culture study, the authors are conscious that "when the provision is delegated, major companies can rely on their preexisting networks[14]". They deal with the technical launch of the vouchers, the monetary transfer costs and the communication issues, while at the same time concealing their political sense. The local governments can then externalize the technical and political costs of the vouchers.

3.1 From service delivery to politic lobbying?

24 Competition is rather strong among the four leading companies (Edenred (Ticket Restaurant), Groupe Up (Chèque Déjeuner), Sodexo CCR (Chèque Restaurant) and Natixis Intertitres (Chèque de Table)) during the call for tenders to supply luncheon vouchers for public employees in French local government. Considering the maturity of the market for luncheon vouchers, and in order to make a profit from the fiscal and legal existing opportunities, these voucher companies have created new types of products to enlarge their range of supply. They have a similar business model (gift vouchers, social service vouchers, etc.) but create new and unique opportunities for business development reasons.

25 In addition to this range of classic vouchers, several companies have created more specific vouchers, tailor-made for local governments that seek to implement additional services to targeted beneficiaries. Since 1999, Groupe Up (the new name of Groupe Chèque Déjeuner) has developed a tailor-made voucher department able to respond rapidly to the demands of local government (named "adequation"). Its competitor, Edenred, created at the same time a department named "ticket à la carte", much with the same objective in mind. This adapted answer to the needs of local governments corresponded, at the end of the 1990s, to the emergence of new cultural policies supporting demand by targeting specific groups that fit perfectly with the use of vouchers. "Tailor-made" products are indeed considered less as sources of new income for these companies but more as promotional and influence tools. These allow them to highlight their knowledge and their brands in the highly competitive market of luncheon vouchers, displaying their unique skills by tailoring specific vouchers[15]. It seems perfectly logical that the three biggest luncheon voucher companies have taken advantage of the opportunity represented by the provision of individual subsidies to a targeted population to launch the production of tailor-made vouchers. The cultural field has been the first to benefit from this new windfall. Later, in response to the spread and evolution of the demands of local governments, new markets arose in fields such as the environment, transport and social welfare. Companies had to reorganize their services and create additional departments dedicated to supplying local governments, able to reply to calls for tenders and manage the daily life of such devices. This evolution had serious consequences for the companies and the local administrations. Therefore, in 2006 "Groupe Chèque Déjeuner" (the former name of Groupe Up) created, in addition to its "adequation" department, a specialized marketing service aiming to promote its tailor-made expertise to local governments. This emergence of demand for cultural vouchers fit perfectly with the beginning of the spread of "cultural vouchers" among French local governments. The company was then going to take advantage of the poor technical resources of local Governments, as well as of the path dependency effect due to the use of luncheon and other kinds of vouchers in HR management, and encourage it further through an approach similar to a lobbying and influence strategy. This strategy shift was conducted rapidly and silently, in just a few months, by the board of Groupe Up. This adaptation to this new framework conveyed the will to increase the capacity of lobbying the local public sector by encouraging it to implement voucher systems for all kinds of individual welfare. At the same time, the two other companies - Edenred and Sodexo – implemented similar strategic shifts.

3.2 The marketing discourse on vouchers: a public/private coproduced argumentation

26 This marketing action was accompanied by efficient lobbying, which had the consequence of generalizing the promotion of an argumentative discourse emphasizing the ethical dimension of the voucher system as well as claiming its efficiency and its political neutrality. Vouchers and their promotion thus became a "cause without opponents" (Cloteau and Mourad, 2016; Juhem, 2001) but also indirectly a coproduced social piece of work. The marketing actions of the voucher companies targeting the local governments appeared as one of the factors that explain this dynamic of appropriation and the quick spread of vouchers among French local government. One of the sales leaflets of a leading voucher companies stated that implementing a voucher policy permits a "guarantee of good use of public subsidies by the beneficiaries", "a simplification of the management of the social aid dispositive" and "ensures anonymity which is a source of broader dignity, of freedom of choice and of ease of contact with actors in local life"[16]. In 2010, in two business emails to the managers of youth departments of the local governments and to the elected officials in charge of this policy, the arguments given were administrative simplification, control of the public expenses and clarity of the public policy[17]. The companies that purchase vouchers played a central role in mediation by privatizing and shifting the means of providing social subsidies by using vouchers. They implemented an efficient representation of individual subsidy but have also legitimated a public/private partnership model. Taking into account the cognitive dimension of these discourses of public and private action provides an explanation of the extent of “bricolage” that has occurred (Levy-Strauss, 1962) in the political arguments used by both the political and administrative actors during the implementation of the voucher system and by the companies aiming to explore new markets by creating a sense of confidence and partnership with local governments. The purpose of the use of vouchers can thus not be reduced merely to a “neo-liberal quest”, even though the liberal character of these tools and the pervasiveness of NPM can nevertheless easily be shown and proved.

Conclusion

27 This paper sought to question the reason(s) behind the spread of vouchers among French local governments. This spread has occurred in a transversal way, without any particular intervention of the state, as has been the case for other public policies, and without stirring much in the way of political controversy. By taking into consideration the liberal origins of the vouchers assumed by several elected officials who participated in their introduction in the 1990s, we might have imagined that the discourses built by the stakeholders would have been quite radical and would have generated a major political debate among the local authorities where vouchers were implemented. However, this was not the case at all because vouchers became a "cause without opponents", technical tools that are considered efficient and useful, and whose politically sensitive aspects did not stir the interviewees in this research. When vouchers aimed to provide a social aid, they were described as tools of control and of restriction of the beneficiaries' behavior, whereas when they were used to provide, for example, access to culture for a targeted public, the arguments were totally reversed -

freedom of choice came to the fore to describe the vouchers during the interviews. The adoption of this tool of government in France was in fact widely based on commercial arguments developed by luncheon voucher companies that had long existed and that occasionally already provided services to local governments (through their HR policy). The companies organized themselves to respond better to this new opportunity, spreading it among local government by presenting it mainly as a tool of communication and of administrative simplification. Local politicians and civil servants used the vouchers to answer local, concrete issues while adopting in their arguments the liberal rhetoric found in the multiple studies published by Anglo-American researchers. The spread of vouchers among French local government is clearly due to this "discourse assistance building" developed and provided by the companies. Vouchers carry a specific representation of social welfare and of its beneficiaries. Ultimately, they are vessels, vectors of a change in the conception of social subsidies and of their public, and they accompany the shift from a universalist logic to a logic of targeting provision of subsidies. Therefore, the emergence of vouchers in French local government in the early 1990s occurred concomitantly with the massive introduction of tools of NPM within public administration. The originality of this particular instrument lies mainly in its manner of spreading and the "argumentation support" built by the companies, in cooperation with the local government, to introduce a utilitarian logic accompanied by a differentiated representation of the beneficiaries of the vouchers. Obviously, vouchers, French or not, are tools of NPM, matching all the main characteristics highlighted in the literature, especially the work by Christopher Hood. In the French case, their specificities prevented them from being at the core of political debates that would have prevented or at least curbed their spread. The discourse of the actors quickly shows that the political sense of vouchers is not the same in France as it is in the Anglo-American world, although the tool is actually quite similar in intent and practice.

28 This reshaping of the meaning of vouchers, emphasizing its administrative simplification, communication and political marketing aspects, has been done mainly by a number of private companies that were directly economically interested in selling the voucher systems to French local governments. This private argumentation tended to make what is essentially a liberal tool more presentable and acceptable by partly depoliticizing it and taking out the potential “noise” that may have been expected to have accompanied their implementation, as has been the case with other tools of NPM. The promotion of these new tools of governance is the result of the times, the institutional history and the discursive research of coherence between public and private logics, not just their user-friendliness. By coming together to provide a united representation of vouchers, the actors involved avoided fruitless struggles and political controversies. The apparent neutrality of the use of instrumental rationality and its apolitical legitimacy implied the development of normative dynamics shared among actors, a perfect fit with the emergence of NPM. The pervasiveness of a state of mind, of values, of common representations that avoid conflict and debates and are focused on the coproduction of institutional innovations have done the rest.

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NOTES

1. Interview with E1 former President of Rhône-Alpes Regional Council, 1999, 2010.
2. Chèque emploi service universel
3. Chèque d'accompagnement spécialisé
4. LACERENZA Sabine, «L'impensé des études sur les effets des politiques de tarification - L'exemple du chèque culture en région Rhône-Alpes », in Olivier Donnat, Sylvie Octobre (ed.), *Les publics des équipements culturels – Méthodes et résultats d'enquêtes*, Ministère de la Culture et de la

Communication, Département des Études et de la Prospective, collection Les Travaux du DEP, 2001, p.170

5. Interview with E2, 15 April 2000

6. Interview with E3, 1st March 1999

7. Interview with E2, 10 February 2010

8. Interview with C1, Head of services of Drôme department, 11 July 2011

9. Interview with C2, Head of sport and youth department, Drôme, 11 July 2011

10. Interview with C3, Head of energy department, Rhône-Alpes, Lyon, 28 April 2013

11. Interview with C4, 31 January 2013

12. Interview with E1, 10 February 2010

13. Interviews with C6, 20 April 2013, C7, 8 October 2012, C8, 11 February 2010, C9, 23 June 2010

14. O*p.cit*

15. Interview with Stéphane Lefebvre, Epernay, 21 December 2012

16. Translated from the sales leaflet of the three biggest French voucher companies.

17. Translated from emails sent by "Groupe Up".

ABSTRACTS

Vouchers as tools of provision of social and individual subsidies are rather marked politically as they have been promoted by economists such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Despite their controversial political sense, vouchers have spread widely in the 2000 among the French local governments to provide individual subsidy. While in the USA the debate is strong between supporters and opponents of voucher systems, in France, the apparent neutrality of vouchers permitted them to spread at a local and regional scale without particular political tension. Our research, based on 45 qualitative interviews and on a wide source research within the local governments and private actors, showed that this silent spread is mainly due to the marketing and lobbying action of voucher companies that have done a lot to neutralize the vouchers and avoid all political debate on its their strong liberal roots.

INDEX

Keywords: vouchers, policy transfer, lobbying, social subsidy, new public management, innovation

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