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Abstract communication

Symbolic capital at EDF, History of a social reputation preserved.

How can the past still help organizations to project into the future?

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Abstract:

The result of the nationalization of the energy sector at the end of the Second World War, EDF has behind it seventy years of stories interspersed with periods of stability but also moments of crises, even sometimes brutal ruptures. From the beginning of its history, which has been closely linked to that of France since the post-war period, the French historic energy engineer successfully meets many challenges to meet the energy needs of a France undergoing reconstruction. During the Thirty Glorious Years, the company participated in the economic development of the country and pursued the national dream of energy independence driven by a fascination for technology, an unshakable faith in technical progress and a practice of rational calculation of decisions in the interest of France. With attachment to the public service and the status of personnel, we are probably touching on the roots of symbolic capital most deeply rooted in the memory of French public service agents and companies, of which EDF is in many ways an example.

After having crossed the Thirty Glorious Years by accomplishing with quiet force many technological exploits of which the agents pride themselves, the company is confronted, at the turn of the 90s, with the planned liberalization of the energy sector, the " requiring to transform its management model like other French public service companies, such as France Telecom, La Poste or La Ratp. The end of the monopoly in the energy sector and the gradual opening of the market to competition directly affect the institutional structure, but also the culture and identity of EDF which became, in 2004, a "Société Anonyme" to bring itself into conformity with European Union directives.

The purpose of this communication is to highlight that the past determines the present and can still help the French historic energy company and its agents to plan and invent their future. The problematic of our communication is thus posed: to what extent can EDF's past and the

symbolic capital of its agents allow it to preserve its reputation as a social enterprise, a fortiori vis-à-vis customers in situation fuel poverty? The central hypothesis of our reflection is that the diversity of forms of internal solidarity specific to large public service organizations is found in the way agents adapt to transformations and fulfill their missions vis-à-vis customers in difficulty. The symbolic capital that has aggregated over time among agents practically contributes to preserving the social reputation of the company, despite its deinstitutionalization combined with other organizational phenomena. Our work articulates a historical approach retracing the chronology of the history of the social at EDF and a pluralist approach but nevertheless mainly based on an actionist sociology. We therefore come across historical facts with data collected during management consultancy missions, training seminars for managers and supervisors, and during semi-structured interviews carried out in recent years as part of thesis.

First, we will examine what the history of “EDF and its culture” teaches us about the markers of solidarity: attachment to public service, faith in scientific and technical progress, the practice of calculation and rationalization of economic choices, as well as staff regulations. We can already notice the role attributed to history in official discourse: the first and the last of the four distinctive features of EDF very clearly refer to the past, while the other two are forward-looking, also involving history, that is to say a mastery of temporality. Next, we will focus on present markers from the past. The singular bond that the organization maintains with solidarity since its origins reappears concretely among its agents when they face a fringe of its customers in difficulty of payment. Finally, in our last part, we will demonstrate how its history and its present markers from the past, contribute to preserving EDF’s social reputation. We will see that even if this aspect of the story is of little interest to its current local managers, it re-establishes legitimacy based on the founding values of the company and thus preserves its social reputation with a part of the clientele. In other words, under the actions of certain agents carrying the historic values of the organization may be hiding the source of its future profitability.

The statement helps the program committee evaluating the relevance of the paper. Indicate, if you have a purely descriptive approach and for which reasons.

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Insert keywords such as Corporate Governance, Finance, Marketing, Retailing, Strategy, The Netherlands in the 20th Century, Innovation

innovation, sociology of organizations, France in 20th Century, welfare state, energy sector & business

E.g. Cultural History, Econometric, Eclectic, Narrative Analysis, Varieties of Capitalism ...

Cultural History & sociology of organizations

EDF, A HISTORY OF « PUBLIC SERVICE À LA FRANÇAISE »

The official history of EDF begins with the vote in the National Assembly on 8 April 1946, which nationalised the energy sector and institutionalised EDF in the form of an EPIC (Public Industrial and Commercial Establishment). This very rich and fascinating history, which has been linked to the history of France since the post-war period, continues to be the subject of numerous works which recount in great detail the vicissitudes and upheavals with which the company has been confronted in the course of the seventy years that separate us from its birth. The ambition of this first part of our article is more modest; it is only to outline the background to EDF's solidarity policy in order to better highlight the discourse and practices of the company and its employees in relation to poor customers.

EDF: an image of France's past, present and future

During the 1930s, the electricity market in France was divided between two hundred companies that provided production, a hundred or so transmission companies and more than a thousand distribution organisations; within this framework of free competition, electricity supply and tariffs differed greatly depending on the service provider and the territory.

The birth of the "French public service"

At the end of the Second World War, energy production was one of the main concerns of an exsanguinated France, whose needs were immense in terms of housing construction, infrastructure works, sanitation and water and electricity distribution. Under the impetus of the CNR (Conseil national de la Résistance), the provisional government of the French Republic embarked on a resolutely proactive reconstruction policy marked by structural specificities unknown in other countries: the influence of the State in management and its power, as well as a large part of the economy in the public sector. To meet the challenge of rebuilding the country, General De Gaulle ordered the creation of the CGP (Commissariat général du Plan) by decree on 3 January 1946, which was responsible for the first "Overall plan for the modernisation and economic equipment of metropolitan France and the overseas territories". The CGP had around thirty people in charge of missions, gathered around Jean Monnet, many of whom came from the senior administration, the Resistance and the Uriage management school. Louis Armand and Pierre Massé had no trouble aligning the objectives of EDF and SNCF with those of the first plan, which ended in 1953. In the wake of this, the National Assembly voted, on 8 April 1946, for the law that entrusted an EPIC with the monopoly of electricity production and supply, which was considered a "common good" and access to which had to be guaranteed for all. The numerous private companies active in the production, distribution and transport of electricity were nationalised and henceforth united within a new public service institution: Électricité de France.

The dream of energy independence

"In France, we don't have oil, but we have ideas," said Giscard d'Estaing, President of the Republic at the time of the oil crises of 1974 and 1979, to explain to the French people the need to move the clock

forward by one hour in winter and backward by one hour in summer in order to increase the country's independence through energy saving. And, as if he doubted his own words, he continued the civil nuclear programme and endorsed the construction of a number of power stations.

Although France is undoubtedly the cradle of many inventions, at the time of the post-war reconstruction, it did not have many energy resources apart from coal, which was very expensive to extract, whereas the energy needs to relaunch industrial production and improve the well-being of the French were immense. By 1953, coal mines were being depleted and their share of the various energy sources in French electricity production only decreased from 38.8% to 19.5% between 1953 and 1981. In the name of the economic imperative, EDF engineers transformed the power stations by substituting fuel oil for coal as a source of fuel in the thermal power stations. At the same time, EDF was developing most of the hydraulic dams at the same time. This was certainly delicate work that required a great deal of effort, but it was in no way exciting for highly qualified engineers who aspired to other adventures.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the CEA (Commissariat à l'énergie atomique) did not succeed in developing a 'French line' of heavy water power plants and civil nuclear power was stagnating while the first atomic bomb exploded in Reggane, in the Sahara, on 13 February 1960. However, EDF had other projects in store, including a tidal power plant that could be submerged in the tidal current to produce electricity. The concept of the "bubbler groups", conceived in the 1950s by the engineer Gilbert Gibrat, led to a grandiose project: to dam the Mont Saint-Michel, from Cancale to Granville, by 25 km of dykes to produce 10,000 MW, without fuel, without radioactive waste, without smoke, without disputes... perfect energy before its time! On 26 November 1966, General De Gaulle inaugurated the first 750 metres which barred the estuary but would remain unique, as the bulbs proved to be a source of much trouble...

The hope of Algerian oil revived the dream of energy independence. The subsoil of the Sahara would hold its promise, but with the proclamation of Algeria's independence in July 1962, the former colony, which had become a French department, disappeared from geography textbooks, and with it the windfall of cheap oil. The year 1973 sounded the death knell for cheap energy and saw the price of oil quadruple from 1973 to 1974, only to double again in 1979. The oil crisis gave rise to a vast 'anti-waste' campaign, organised under the aegis of the 'Energy Saving Agency' in favour of saving energy, a new resource whose weight is difficult to assess. In the meantime, the civil nuclear programme has made great progress, thanks in particular to President Georges Pompidou who decided, before his death, to build thirteen nuclear power plants in two years. With 38.6% in 1981, nuclear power became the leading source of energy in French electricity production. The energy deficit has not yet been made up, however, and a new constraint is already looming on the horizon for EDF: to reduce the share of nuclear power in electricity production to 50% by 2025, in accordance with Law No. 2015-992 of 17 August 2015 on the energy transition and green growth.

The myth of Reason

Another remarkable feature of the identity and culture that EDF has forged throughout its history is the myth of rationality, based on the primacy of mathematics on which the French education system is also based. Management is a mathematical exercise and one has little chance of becoming the head of a large French company, especially in the public sector, if one has not graduated from the École Polytechnique. In the background, we can detect the national culture inherited from the

Enlightenment and well highlighted in Geert Hofstede's famous typology. The French are very individualistic, abhor uncertainty, insist on distant power relations and have a strong taste for 'bureaucracy' as Michel Crozier has shown.

According to Claude Riveline: "This faith in reason has been vigorously denied in recent years. The collapse of the communist world is the most spectacular, but the liberal world is hardly better off with an endless economic crisis, unemployment, environmental issues and underdevelopment as cruel and widespread as ever. This leads to an examination of the hypothesis that the hopes of the Enlightenment have become frozen in an increasingly irrelevant mythical system." In particular, he shows the pernicious effects of certain management control "indicators" in the specific case of coal mining and illustrates the effects of "measurement" on the rational behaviour of operators: "Some may have an interest in having their crews extract bad resources first, instead of taking the coals from the good layers, in order to avoid blame and stabilise daily production." We shall see whether these limits of substantial rationality are confirmed in the case of EDF's solidarity policy.

Towards the enslavement of citizens to the Great Computer?

After the introduction of mechanography in the 1950s, soon followed by the arrival of the first computers, a new wave of technological changes has disrupted the lives of large organisations faced with digital transformations: computers, robotics, telematics, office automation, etc. The original work of developing a series of scenarios for the introduction of telematics in an imaginary company, carried out by a working group of EDF employees with the support of a team of three researchers from the CRG (Centre de recherche en gestion) at X, showed "the considerable difficulties of the members of the group in freeing themselves from representations linked to the current situation of the company, and that their ability to imagine or anticipate different situations was correspondingly limited.

Initially intended for EDF employees, the results of this exercise were disseminated in the form of an internal report and then a book, which met with great success, far beyond the initial target audience. The different scenarios on the factory, the office and the relationship with the customer of the future were the subject of comments in several newspapers which the authors of the "Chroniques" considered unfair or malicious. Under the title "Des technocrates survoltés", Le Canard Enchaîné commented on the different scenarios in the following way: "This is what awaits you: a completely electronic and rather gloomy world in which the citizens will be enslaved to the Great Computer".

Nevertheless, the authors themselves point out "the dilemma between standardisation and personalisation, which is of crucial importance in a company that is in close contact with the public, and a very heterogeneous public". Especially if that company is extremely concerned about its image with its different target audiences. It is obvious that the problem of "dialogue with machines" is most acute for the elderly, for the least socioculturally advantaged and, a fortiori, for the most disadvantaged among them. As we shall see, digital tools cannot completely replace more traditional means of intermediation without the risk of reinforcing the feeling of exclusion and damaging the social reputation of companies operating in the field of public services.

The identity and cultural challenges of liberalisation

From the beginning of the 1990s, EDF was confronted with a new rupture with the publication of the directives of the European Commission, which wanted to encourage the deregulation of the energy sector. From the beginning of the 2000s, new energy producers and suppliers came to compete with the historical electricity supplier in France, which was obliged at the same time to transform itself in order to comply with European directives. EDF separated from GDF and became a public limited company in 2004, when it began to face competition in the professional market in France. It was listed on the stock exchange the following year; its capital is still mainly held by the State (84%). The opening up of the market continued in 2007 with the arrival of new competitors, this time on the private market. This resulted in a commercial war between the historical electricity supplier and the new entrants to the market. For example, Butagaz, which offers a KW/hour identical to that of EDF but charged 10% less, is trying to attract new customers by opening ephemeral shops in high-traffic areas, such as Les Halles au Châtelet in Paris. For EDF, which has a historical mistrust of the commercial approach and which continues to carry out a public service mission, particularly with regard to customers in situations of energy insecurity, the transition to a competitive business logic profoundly challenges the company's identity and culture.

Solidarity in and for itself at EDF

Solidarity is the social bond of reciprocal commitment and dependence between people who care about the welfare of others as members of the same group bound by a common destiny or purpose. Long before the first policies designed by insurance companies to cover natural disasters, farmers in the past practised a form of corporatist solidarity by stockpiling seeds in anticipation of years of crop failure.

Solidarity and its politics

Solidarity is a relatively recent term (19th century) that can be linked to a set of related notions such as fraternity, in reference to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, or mutual aid or even charity from a Christian perspective. When studying solidarity, the work of the founding father of the sociological notion, Emile Durkheim, is valuable. As we shall see in the second part of our article, this author distinguishes between two forms of solidarity, which he describes as 'mechanical' and 'organic' respectively. The first is present in traditional communities which are based on spatial or family proximity and have a collective consciousness by sharing common values and quasi-mandatory norms of behaviour. The second form of solidarity, frequently found in modern societies, is a crucible of differentiation but also of interdependence. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that for more than a century this form of solidarity has been at the origin of a number of levers encouraging the division of labour to allow substantial productivity gains.

In a classical sense, the policy of solidarity can be defined as the general framework for the organisation and development of relations between people who are aware of a community of interest which entails a moral obligation for its members not to serve others and to assist them. This is undoubtedly one of the foundations of public service, reinforced by the law of 29 July 1992, which specifies in particular that "nobody should be deprived of access to energy". According to the economist Claude Henry, "This law has never been applied: it is the charities, Secours Populaire Français, Secours Catholique, Cimade,

etc., that pay tens of millions of francs in unpaid bills. Most of these cases, which correspond to real disabilities to pay for access to electricity, are not settled by EDF or the State, which nevertheless present themselves as guarantors of French-style public services.

Charity begins at home

In order to appreciate the policy of solidarity in force at EDF, since its creation and as it has evolved over time, it is essential to remember the importance of the attachment to public service and to the status of personnel governed by public law. This is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable features of the symbolic capital of French public service companies. With the end of the monopoly and the deinstitutionalisation of the company in 2004, this legacy of the past was called into question and new entrants are now hired under a private law contract.

The status of public law employee is a kind of "historical value" of EDF's culture. On joining the company, the employee signed up to a contract with multiple clauses and all the benefits attached to it. This extra 'social security' in return required a social and emotional relationship beyond the economic link that traditionally governs the relationship between an employee and his employer. It is based on an internal solidarity based on a set of stable elements such as joint management, the supply of electricity at preferential prices, training, career progression, holiday centres, social works, etc., right up to the preparation of staff for 'professional inactivity' during week-long residential seminars which took place between six and nine months before their retirement.

"Charity begins at home" seems to sum up perfectly the way in which EDF and its employees have conceived solidarity since the company's inception. In effect, it means that the way I look after myself is not without influence on the way I look after others. This proverb is sometimes criticised as encouraging selfishness. But loving yourself is a good thing. If I truly love myself, then this love must lead me to go beyond myself to others. For to say that charity begins at home does not mean that it stops at home. On the contrary, if it is well ordered, it must lead me beyond myself.

This way of ensuring internal solidarity is undoubtedly the result of a consensus between the different stakeholders who participated in the creation of EDF and in which the unions, in particular the CGT, played an important role in defending the interests of the agents. It can also be seen as a counterpart to the cost of the "golden compensation" for the holders of shares in the electricity companies nationalised in 1946, i.e. around 1.4 million individuals. Their shares were exchanged for bonds issued by the Caisse nationale d'équipement de l'électricité et du gaz, and their value was calculated with a view to not cheating anyone. These bonds also paid their holders very well, as they received an annual coupon of 3% plus a remuneration representing 1% of EDF's turnover!

EDF AND THE HISTORY OF ITS EXTERNAL SOLIDARITY

In this article, "external solidarity" covers all the provisions and measures that EDF and its stakeholders (actors actively or passively concerned by a decision or a project) use to prevent, eliminate or only attenuate situations of distress and social problems, or finally, to favour access to electrical energy for

the most fragile categories of users in society. EDF, like the State, works with local social actors to redistribute income and wealth.

An era of growth and the birth of the "customer"

Solidarity with part of the customer base is inherent in the emergence of the notion of customer and its categorisation as a substitute for the unified notion of user. At EDF, we find the creation of commercial files at the end of the 1950s and the implementation of a four-year commercial action plan in 1961. These methods were continued in the following decades. In EDF's commercial tools, external solidarity was, for the time being, absent because the network had to be built up, particularly thanks to the hydraulic dams. The term "customer" replaced "user" from 1960 onwards in the internal notes of EDF's management, just as the term "profitability" sometimes began to replace "public service".

In the 1970s, it became clear that the oil crisis had reinforced the importance of electrical energy in the country and soon in the French territories. The supremacy of this form of energy was no longer questioned in the domestic environment. At the same time, the current crisis is not affecting EDF's business for the moment. The growth in electricity consumption was still following the same trend as before: a doubling every ten years.

In 1979, EDF launched its first corporate campaign "Men serving men". For EDF, the aim was no longer to promote its "electricity" product or its services like a classic brand communication, but to enhance the company's image by targeting its customers and its national and local partners. The message is no longer focused on encouraging consumption but on "service" and "people". The social bond of reciprocal commitment and dependence between people, which is the very essence of solidarity, was already finding its first channel of expression. From this period onwards, EDF sought to reassure its customers that it would be there for them on a daily basis and in the future, wherever they were. This change in communication follows the economic crisis as the increase in energy consumption stalls. Even though usage continued to grow, for the first time it was a question of offering households services and solutions aimed at saving energy.

A wind of solidarity

From the 1980s, throughout the 1990s and until the mid-2000s, the economic crises did not go away. Unemployment and rising energy prices led a number of poorer households to make trade-offs in the payment of their bills. From the mid-1980s, so-called "organic" solidarity seemed to prevail at EDF and was characterised by the creation of the ESF. In 1992, the law n° 92-722 added a national aid and prevention system to cope with electricity expenses by specifying that "any person or family experiencing particular difficulties due to a situation of precariousness is entitled to aid from the community to access or maintain access to a water and energy supply". Two "Périssol" charters of November 1996 will complete the existing texts to provide for the conditions of maintaining electricity and the social treatment of unpaid bills. Rather than "organic solidarity" in the sense of Durkheim, Bauby prefers to speak of "targeted solidarity" which made a strong comeback in the 1980s. According to him, the need to help the most disadvantaged members of society "was then imposed by the majority and gained ground in all categories".

External solidarity as a policy against fuel poverty

The phenomena of fuel poverty seem to have emerged with the crises of the 1970s and 1980s and to be linked to mass unemployment. When we analyse the INSEE figures, we see that poverty declined from the 1970s to the mid-1990s. It then rather stabilised until the early 2000s. In reality, we see that it is society's perception that has changed; precariousness for society, as for EDF, became less acceptable between the 1980s and 1990s. Precarious living conditions were more widely recognised by organisations such as EDF or by institutions. Everyone then tried to find the most effective tools to reduce their effects. This balancing act between competitiveness and profit, on the one hand, and people and the general interest, on the other, led EDF to position itself in the 1990s as a 'socially responsible' company. Employment, and later the defence of the environment, led the energy company to acknowledge that it had to bear the social and environmental consequences of its activities.

In fact, for more than thirty years, the public authorities as a whole have been committed to a policy of solidarity towards poor customers. The EDF company has been proactive in this area (1st "Poverty, Precariousness" convention in 1985, partnerships with NGOs) or has followed the regulations (automation of the TPN, protection during the winter period). Above, the "construction of a policy of solidarity" frieze traces the different key stages that led to the contemporary discourse on fuel poverty.

From 2000 to 2007, the turn of liberalisation

Since the 1980s, Europe as an economic area has been gradually built up. It is a land of new conquests for EDF and helps it to pursue its development and growth ambitions. The EDF model, in its initial structure, was strongly challenged by the European Commission with the general deregulation of the energy market. After its change of status from EPIC to Société Anonyme in 2004, the company opened up part of its capital in 2005. This liberal scheme on a European scale led to a frontal attack on the monopolistic management of energy networks in France. The liberal is the one who demands that the State break a tradition, that of the EDF monopoly, and which forces it to give the consumer the freedom to choose his energy supplier. This dogma has also resulted, at EDF, in the separation of its structures between the marketer (EDF) and the distributors (RTE for high voltage and very high voltage and ERDF for medium and low voltage). This structural reconfiguration of the EDF entity during the 2000s caused other systemic effects. New elements of language have appeared or, externally, new organisations have been created.

In a liberal society, social protection is primarily based on personal and voluntary initiative. In recent years, however, it has to be said that European constraints have indirectly modified the internal structure of the management of precarious customers at EDF. Solidarity actions have been professionalised and structured around processes and departments with strategic visions. According to a number of actors who experienced the period before 2007, the opening of the energy markets has led to the departments in charge of precariousness becoming "poles" specialised in these issues, whereas before "everyone had an empathetic attitude towards poverty and unpaid bills, now this task

is devolved to professionals who are trained in these issues. We have moved from amateurism to professionalism. In an organised and divisionalized structure, only professionals are, if necessary, capable of taking on the responsibilities that require freedom from a liberal society. Thus, the precarious client, often invisible in society, regains visibility and a place in the public space thanks to a number of technical tools such as indicators and procedures. This amateurism, which preceded 2007, nevertheless retains a sympathetic and "cool" side for clients that is far from useless.

Professionalization of the managers of poor customers

From July 2007, private customers are free to choose their energy supplier. 2007 was also the year of the creation of the "solidarity poles", which still exist today. Their establishment is the most important historical event in the company's history of solidarity in recent years. This period marks the anchoring of EDF's reputation as a solidarity and social enterprise and the fact that the company deliberately wishes to mark the judgment of customers by this choice. While competitors seem to focus on solvent and profitable customers, EDF keeps the insolvent and geographically and socially isolated households. In order to respond to their multiple requests, the solidarity centres have about half a dozen advisors supervised by, at least, a solidarity correspondent, and even, in addition, a manager and a business support. According to a company study in 2012, "For 80% of EDF customers, a supplier that is close to them is one that offers them payment solutions in the event of difficulties in paying their bill". The "social" then becomes a commercial argument. It is therefore understandable that EDF is seeking to preserve its reputation as a "social enterprise" among customers and to maintain the active role that Intermediaries can play in their actions on their territory. For the first time in 2012, the company is fully communicating on the solidarity processes it can put in place and on its specially trained advisors to respond to them. Before, there was no need to communicate on EDF's solidarity axis; for more than twenty years, it was "obvious" and "self-evident". When it opened up to the markets and marked a turning point in its history, it felt the need to rebuild a relationship of trust with its customers and to reassure them: in situations of uncertainty and crisis, it would remain at their side thanks to its local professionals. The 'natural' solidarity of 'sympathetic amateurism', which EDF employees used to show in the past, is now institutionalised in procedures and communication. Solidarity is manifested under the aegis of "professionals" who often ironically refer to the "old-timers" and their way of doing things. At EDF, there is no formal internal communication with employees to ensure that they maintain their public service ethic; it is only the result of the actions of intermediary actors.

Is solidarity a business like any other?

As we can see, over the last few years, solidarity policy has followed the trend towards privatisation, moving a little closer to the methods of 'service marketing'. The hiring and training of new solidarity professionals is not a matter of chance; the aim is now to sell services to all types of clientele, and this can no longer be done "instinctively" with agents who have not made this their profession. Solidarity is a business like any other, managed by professionals whose aim is to make a profit for themselves, in the form of bonuses, or for their company. In this sense, they use their capacity as 'professionals' to ensure EDF's commitments to French society. During our observations in the shop or during telephone

conversations, we found what Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot denounce, the fact of offering or not offering the services intended for the poor. For them, the precarious client is, a priori, a client like any other because he can also pay. Moreover, when we look at the customer management procedures given to intermediaries, we see that precarious customers are now subject to a specific categorisation in the same way as other customers in the 'middle' and 'top' of the portfolio.

LEGITIMACY MARKERS OF EDF'S SOCIAL POSTURE

In the context of this article and in order to get as close as possible to the reality observed in the daily actions of the Intermediaries and the concept of reputation, it is appropriate to work on this notion through a second one, legitimacy. Between de-institutionalisation and the questioning of past achievements, EDF's symbolic capital, in other words its legitimacy, is weakened.

History and markers of the past, the pillars of legitimacy and social reputation

In order to safeguard its historical reputation as an energy company serving the general interest, EDF and its employees can rely on the markers of its history and on the various supports of its legitimacy, some of which seem to be unalterable and others rather alterable.

Legitimacy and reputation

Legitimacy is, in sociology, a tacit and subjective agreement based on ethical or meritocratic agreements in human actions. Most often, there is a form of power and authority that is recognised and accepted by members of society. The criteria commonly accepted as legitimising the actions of a ruler may be justice, morality or fairness, but they may be very different in the case of the legitimacy of a traditional and rather arbitrary power. When we talk about legitimacy, the imaginary, the symbolic and the value systems often have even more weight in the legitimisation of a power than the formal normative framework in which it is inscribed because, in many so-called traditional societies, power has a sacred character.

We have to turn to works in management sciences to find authors who make the link between legitimacy and reputation, even though the notion of legitimacy is used primarily in sociology. We find fairly recent works based on the theory of stakeholders. Firstly, there is the idea that, in order for a company's employees to naturally adhere to the principles of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), the company must make efforts to preserve and develop its reputation in order to increase its legitimacy throughout society. In other words, legitimacy is the result of long-term work on the means of influencing people's judgement of the company. The historical aspect of its construction and preservation would then only be linked to Weber's traditional domination and its unmodern aspect because it is not rational and customary. Thus, even if it is not the only possible path to legitimacy, reputation would be the equivalent of a sustainable communicational work that can be considered as

the first step of a long processual path towards legitimacy in the eyes of society. We will see here that a long-term work is produced by the actions of the intermediaries.

A loss of legitimacy?

Regulatory change in the EDF sector was initiated in 1996 and implemented in the 2000s. In 2014, almost ten years after this event for private individuals, the objective of full market liberalisation and increased competition was still far from being achieved; indeed, only 6% of customers in this sector had switched to competition. There was still a bond of trust. However, over the last three years, things have changed as alternative energy suppliers have continued to increase their market share significantly and now have almost 18%.

This raises the question of what happens when a company, which was dominant and in a monopoly position, gradually loses its legitimacy, at the same time as the market is opened up, and its symbolic capital and reputation already seem to be in the twilight of its intensity. A company is not like a state or an individual, it is often a 'moral' person, in the legal sense, which cannot use force (army, militia, etc.) or any physical power to show its legitimacy and inflict its domination. Reputational discredit, if it exists for EDF, gradually gives way to illegitimacy. This leads to complaints, fraud and loss of customers.

Because of its extensive but not always efficient organisational activities, this model of the company with public service missions is on the verge of a 'crisis of legitimacy' when it refers to states in a context of loss of loyalty from the public. Like the welfare state model, is the corporate welfare model and its management of solidarity gradually coming to an end? Or are the intermediaries maintaining some legitimacy through their actions?

Different sources of legitimacy

Legitimacy and reputation are both intangible notions and are commonly built on the fulfilment of commitments. These two phenomena consolidate and enrich each other. In the territories, the question of the loss of legitimacy or, at least, the risk of losing legitimacy is now being raised.

While reputation may be seen by actors, whether clients or intermediaries, as the fruit of domination through the legitimacy of EDF, it is even indispensable to procedural intermediaries for the exercise of their work and it is all the same useful to other cool innovative intermediaries. This legitimacy is, in a way, an adjustment variable in the particular relationship that EDF has with its customers. To this end, several mechanisms, or 'supports', allow the company and the Intermediaries to continue to appear legitimate to the precarious energy clientele thanks to the discourses disseminated and the actions undertaken by the energy company. For EDF, these supports for legitimacy can be either 'rather alterable' or 'rather unalterable'. The 'rather' that qualifies these qualifiers comes from an observation of reality that may include a degree of subjectivity.

Alterable supports of legitimacy

Some supports are "rather alterable" and can potentially lose their solidity over time and according to the interplay of actors. This is the case for state support. As the main shareholder and provider of markets, the State also proposes the bills voted by Parliament that concern energy and its standards. It is a very important legitimising support for the actions of EDF, whose CEO it appoints. As the State is the legitimate entity of all the citizens of a nation, it transmits a strong symbolic respectability to EDF. Secondly, local support is present in all territories through the action of the subsidiary ERDF. It should be added that EDF is a privileged partner of local authorities and elected representatives with whom it shares the same concern for social legitimacy and proximity to the inhabitants. This support of legitimacy is therefore due to its very strong local presence. The company, always synonymous with proximity and with the symbol of the "blue car" on the territories, weaves all sorts of links with local actors and other associations in France because its imposing organisational structure allows it. Behind it, the support of the agents of the former "integrated" company EDF is essential to give a human and concrete face to a "moral" legal entity.

The register of "competence" is a general designation of more or less explicit resources, including "cool", to characterise legitimacy in face-to-face actions for precarious customers. Whether face-to-face or on the phone, many agents committed to their organisation are often keen to show that EDF is not a company like others and that it remains imbued with the values of solidarity. As far as price is concerned, legitimacy comes mainly from the 'regulated' status of the price of electricity. The regulated tariff, if it is lower than the "market price", is a very important guarantee of legitimacy for the precarious public and for the Intermediaries. It ensures a saving stability for all, in particular with tariff equalisation, in the face of a perception that "market prices" fluctuate too much, or are even dangerous. The only regulated 'blue tariff' for individuals has changed little in recent years.

Unalterable support for legitimacy

Other supports are 'rather unalterable' because they normally retain their ownership regardless of the set of players. These legitimacy supports are less affected by the hazards that EDF may encounter with the precarious energy clientele because they are better recognised and less sensitive to internal and external contingencies. We will start with the support of institutional communication. EDF produces communication aimed at internal targets (shareholders, employees) and external targets (customers, public authorities). This global communication has several aims: to define the unique character of EDF's identity, to develop its image, to defend its reputation or to deploy its relational strategies with all its stakeholders. One example is the "8 EDF commitments" intended for all customers, but on which EDF communicated both internally and externally to its employees and stakeholders. Then there is the case of supporting history.

The company was born at the time of the Liberation and was the initiator of technological advances such as hydroelectricity in the 1950s and 1960s and nuclear power in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, EDF occupies a special place in the collective unconscious of the French and in the history of the nation. EDF is one of the symbols of the French reconstruction after the occupation by an enemy power. Then there is the financial support. The energy company is one of the main French companies in the CAC 40 and is the leading producer and supplier of electricity in the world. Its weight is considerable in the French industrial space. Moreover, the company has a significant economic strike force to carry out its international expansion or to help the most disadvantaged; many associations locally depend on it.

Finally, the support of the product and service is based on the supposed quality of the French public energy service. EDF's product, for private customers, is simple and clear: electricity in sufficient quantity and with no interruption in supply. Energy cuts due to climatic events are rare and are dealt with in conditions that appear to be quick and efficient. The EDF service is present everywhere and whatever the cost. The "blue car" that has been circulating for fifty years on the roads of the French countryside is a fine example of this, still maintained every day on Twitter. EDF's service remains strongly linked to that of the welfare state, shaping and legitimising "the image of a generous, benevolent state, solely concerned with the well-being of its subjects".

A past that still saves despite the de-institutionalisation of EDF

After its listing on the stock exchange and the fragmentation of its organisation, which had previously been integrated, into a multitude of entities in order to meet the requirements of the European Commission, the historical pillars of EDF's legitimacy have progressively cracked. In practice, this new situation gives the Intermediaries a crucial role in restoring the reputation and preserving the future of the symbolic capital forged throughout the company's history.

A crumbling of EDF's legitimacy

All these supports constitute the eight historical pillars of EDF's legitimacy. They serve as considerable attributes for carrying out its solidarity policy via a good reputation and they allow many intermediaries, and especially procedural ones, to be well perceived and even to excel in the best of cases in their work as local mediators. However, history is being made every day and certain supports of legitimacy that seemed unchanging now seem to be wavering. As an unintended consequence of the actions of procedural intermediaries, but also of external contingency, unalterable supports are beginning to crack. These transformations are taking place particularly under the combined effects of the disintegration of the public energy service and the emancipation of customers from the entity that makes them tend towards a 'state of freedom'. All of these elements are leading to an acceleration of the "big bang" phenomenon, also known as the "distension path" of reputation.

Altered supports

The "path of distension" finds original elements in the loss of legitimating elements. The "rather alterable" supports are affected first by the delegitimising elements. State support is becoming less and less and this is reflected in the shareholding of EDF. Thus, after the sale of many EDF shares in 2011, it was the turn of RTE in 2016, a network subsidiary wholly owned by the former integrated group EDF, to be the subject of a proposed 50% sale by the Minister for the Economy. State symbols of the welfare state fell and the group, which was not to be privatised, lost its EPIC status and then opened up its capital in 2005. However, the state has just renewed its strong attachment to the company by reinjecting billions of euros. The price support originated in the national regulation of energy tariffs. But the scale is now more transnational. European regulation imposed by Brussels,

through the state, is forcing France, and EDF, to liberalise the energy markets just as it has done with the telecoms market and Orange for over a decade. Last year, with the end of the yellow and green tariffs, EDF lost 30% of its business customers and has to agree to significant discounts to regain the lost ground. The "blue tariff" reserved for private individuals still exists but its constant increase, judged "too high" by customers, tends to diminish its appeal. Also, the effects of competition on prices, which were not noticeable until recently, are beginning to reduce the number of EDF's private customers. EDF's reputation as a generous and social company is also due to this "blue tariff". It gives the company legitimacy on the social register while at the same time distancing it statutorily from "pure and perfect competition" where profit alone could mainly count. The paradox between profitability and solidarity is, in spite of this, already present in the minds of customers and it is opposed to EDF's reputation of only charging customers the right price. The support of the agent who legitimises EDF in the territories rests in principle on each of the company's 70,000 agents. However, as the employees themselves admitted during our qualitative interviews, over the last ten years, the collective is no longer as strong as it once was. The split with GDF and then the segmentations of the integrated company into a multitude of entities which must be independent, according to the wishes of Brussels, no longer always allow the federation of individuals around the aggregation and defence of a reputation. The CGT, a historical and collectivist union, which led a minister to say in the 1980s that 'EDF is the USSR that succeeded', has seen its membership and representatives decrease in number over the last ten years, to the benefit of the managers' union, which has a more individualistic vision of the company. As for the last 'rather alterable' support, that of proximity, it too is losing strength. It is true that the intermediaries are present in the territories, but there are fewer of them to establish EDF's legitimacy. Also, many shops have closed their doors in France since the opening to competition. Similarly, the company's identity is no longer as clearly represented to customers as it was in the past. For example, the blue car of the integrated company was, until the middle of the 2000s, dressed with the EDF-GDF logo; this is no longer the case. After a period of 10 years during which the ERDF logo was displayed by the blue car, graphically quite close to EDF, with which it had a strong link, a new logo, very different graphically, appeared in 2015. The demarcation for private customers between the blue car and the marketer will increase since this subsidiary was obliged to change its name in 2016 under pressure from the Energy Regulation Commission. The new name is likely to blur a little more the image of proximity that the EDF company wanted to keep with the territories.

Unalterable supports are cracking

Despite their relative stability, the 'rather unalterable' supports of legitimacy for EDF are also tending to crack. There are many indications that certain forms of legitimacy, which seemed to be unchanging, are tending to disintegrate. Institutional communication support remains strong and present to reaffirm the company's values, but the messages it sends out are regularly blurred in the Internet media. In terms of solidarity, the discrepancies between the company's communication and the reality felt by stakeholders in terms of solidarity are regularly highlighted. In terms of legitimacy, the financial support seemed to be an asset that would be perpetuated. EDF also has an essential role in the territories, even if this seems to be increasingly fragile. With its share price at an all-time low and a debt of 37 billion euros, EDF's economic indicators are judged "in the red" by analysts. The State has even come to "bail out" its cash flow. When procedural intermediaries have to act to deal with cases of energy insecurity, historical support is a major factor in the legitimacy of EDF in the eyes of these people. The company has been present among the population since the end of the Second World War

and has had a special place among users for decades. However, this special position is changing in the minds of the French. For the new generations of French people, the commercial relationship includes an element of infidelity and an openness to competitive offers in order to always buy at the best price. Every day, EDF loses a little more of its special post-war status and slowly but surely becomes a brand like any other. The last "rather unalterable" support is that of the product and service. It remains the most solid pillar in the medium term due to the recognised intrinsic quality of EDF's electrical product. However, the product is dependent on the representation made by the intermediaries and the service they provide. Even if the cool Intermediaries do their best to preserve a quality of service and legitimise the quality of the product, this support of legitimacy is also dependent on the representation of service made by the procedural Intermediary. Selling rather than serving, the disembodied and detached representation rather than the valorising presentation of the electrical product, for example when selling services that are sometimes of little use to precarious customers, could, in the medium term, impact on this support. The interviews highlighted these losses of support and legitimacy.

As a result, all the pillars of EDF's legitimacy are weakening, and more and more customers no longer recognise it "naturally" and feel an emotional detachment from EDF. If nothing is done, energy insecure people and other customers may be determined to damage the company's reputation locally.

The intermediary, a social entrepreneur and a symbolic figure of its history

When EDF is no longer legitimate, the procedural intermediary finds it harder to do its work with poor people. It too loses its legitimising base. Since it cannot compensate with its capital, and in particular its 'cool capital', it cannot, conversely, legitimise the organisation with which it is in contact with individual clients. On the other hand, cool intermediaries have a crucial role to play when the pillars of legitimacy break down. Indeed, they partially restore certain pillars by their simple extraordinary skills combined with their rare and specific capital. In particular, they extol the merits of the electrical product and the quality of their services which they illustrate in their actions. The link they have with EDF's legitimacy is much weaker than for the proceduralists and they give, in a non-interdependent way, legitimacy to the public company. We can therefore speak of a 'partial restoration' of legitimacy.

The intermediaries' actions are numerous in order to re-legitimise EDF with its customers. Each in their own context, the cool Intermediaries, social entrepreneurs and symbolic figures from their history, are re-establishing a balance of power and restoring to EDF attributes that seemed to have been lost: 'proximity', 'agents' as professionals, 'institutional communication' and 'products and services'. They re-legitimise the company with a number of tools that are far from disembodied: empathy, apology, "service rendered", the "co' gesture", even the "rendering of service" and in a relationship without criticism or open judgement. The cool intermediary, the 'social connector of the social', rebuilds 'substitute pillars' to the legitimacy of EDF: one legitimacy linked to proximity and another linked to the knowledge of the informed 'professional' and his 'cool' posture. His proximity to the locality helps him to transmit the company's messages; he replaces, in fact, an institutional communication that becomes, at times, deficient. This legitimacy of proximity corresponds to the 'democratic legitimacy' which attributes to the person who has it the fact of being there whatever the geographical and economic situation.

Our intermediaries recognise all singularities and are ever more attentive to individuals and particular situations. Their legitimacy as professionals is based on a dimension that is more global than extraordinary practices and skills, it is also based on the rules of real equity in the treatment of poor and rich clients. For the intermediary, doing his or her job well as a professional is linked to the need to distance him or herself from partisan positions and special interests. This 'professional legitimacy', which can also be called a 'legitimacy of impartiality', is the result of a subtle and effective alliance with the 'cool'.

The intermediary does much to re-establish the legitimacy of the EDF organisation without directly seeking to capitalise its actions into economic benefits; it thus responds to the fundamental paradox between profitability and solidarity that has contributed to the cracking of the pillars of legitimacy for individual clients. Cool" individuals are needed for solidarity to be credible in the eyes of customers, otherwise "common sense" would dictate that they only perceive and retain actions leading to economic profits on behalf of their organisation. For the individuals connected with EDF, intuitive "common sense" would dictate that a company doing "business" should not have the ambition to seduce bad payers.

CONCLUSION

As the cornerstone of France's reconstruction after the Liberation and of its new growth from the Thirty Glorious Years onwards, the 'French public service' model embodied by EDF has gradually been confronted with upheavals in its environment. In 2005, the deregulation of the European energy sector and the deinstitutionalisation of the company were undoubtedly the high point. At the same time, the successive economic and social crises since the 1990s have led to a significant increase in the number of households in fuel poverty.

In order to meet the new challenges of a now highly competitive market, while continuing to fulfil its public service mission, the company has set up specific measures and professionalised the work of the intermediaries responsible for helping customers who are temporarily or permanently unable to pay their electricity bills. The attitude of certain intermediaries, described as cool, better meets the needs of a strong, balanced and authentic service relationship for customers in need, than the normative and procedural behaviour prescribed by the hierarchy.

In spite of everything, the image of the historic energy company is still strongly anchored in the collective memory of the French. This should allow the company to project itself into the future, provided that it encourages the experimentation of innovative practices. Their dissemination in the territories will allow enterprising agents to reveal themselves and thus contribute to partially restoring EDF's legitimacy by enhancing its symbolic capital as a company in solidarity with its customers.