

Changing Frames of Reference and Regulatory Structures: French Airport Policy in Transition

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the regulatory state, the privatization of network industries in Europe and in air transport have led to a redefinition of how airports are regulated. The French model of state ownership and regulation of airports became progressively out of step with a broader European market-oriented frame of reference. A new French sectoral frame of reference was developed and became public policy in 2005. A cognitive analysis identifies the key factors and actors responsible for this shift. This article explores the nature of the changes made to adapt the French model to a European framework and examines the influence of foreign models of regulation on the design of the French model. Finally, it suggests that features of the European frame of reference for regulatory structures have been adapted within France.

Key words: *airport, cognitive analysis, economic regulation, France*

Introduction

Aéroports de Paris (ADP) is a significant player in the European airport industry. It was created as a public corporation in 1945 and has since built, owned, managed and developed airport infrastructure around Paris such as Roissy-Charles de Gaulle (61 million passengers in 2008), Orly (26 million) and le Bourget (business travel) (UAF & Aéroport 2009: 14). In the past 50 years, Aéroports de Paris has gradually commercialized airport activities through attention to quality of service, business plans and customer service. In 2005 the French State moved in a new policy direction. ADP was partially privatized, new economic regulations were introduced, but the French government retained a majority share of the company. This represents a significant shift in airport policy, from a situation in which airport activities were planned and controlled by the state, to an era of commodification of airport activities driven in part by market mechanisms.

French airport policy is an interesting case since it allows us to deepen our knowledge of the French state with regards to a broader set of comparative literature on administrative and policy change. The comparative literature on administrative and policy change generally argues that France

has been more resistant to reform than other Western nations. For example, the administrative “*Grands Corps*” has remained at the heart of the state apparatus despite several administration reforms (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2003). There has also been a strong reluctance to reform the status of public enterprises in light of a more general European trend towards the liberalization of publicly-owned corporations (Verhoest et al. 2007). However, French airport policy changed dramatically and in line with global trends in airport reform. This change needs to be understood in order to understand its implications for debates on the distinctiveness of policy change in France.

While changes in airport policy in France follow a global trend of airport reform, the pace of reform was slower and had some distinctive characteristics. The British Airport Authority (BAA), which operates Heathrow airport and was fully privatized in the late 1980s, has been widely studied (Parker 1999; Francis and Humphreys 2001; Starkie 2001; Hendriks and Andrew 2004), both in terms of regulation and the remaining role of the state and in terms of the origins of privatization in the ideological commitment of the Thatcher government. The commercialization of Canadian airports in the late 1980s and 1990s has also been the subject of academic research, with special attention paid to the gradual process of commercialization and the pragmatism that motivated the reform (Lovink 2001; Valo 2001; Tretheway and Andriulaitis 2008). However, few scholars have studied the French airport sector, and there is a gap in the policy science literature regarding *Aéroports de Paris*. The history and enforcement of the company’s identity were examined from a sociological perspective (De Montricher 1993; De Montricher 2004). The evolution of the legal framework in which it operates and its consequences for French aviation have also been highlighted (Chapier-Granier 2006; Auby and Lombard 2007) as have the conflicts generated by the airports (Halpern 2007). Academics have nevertheless largely ignored the French airport sector and its relations with the state. In analysing the role of the state in air transportation in France this article makes it possible to compare policy change in France with that of other countries. More specifically, it allows us to see the relationships between the different actors involved in airport reform, the values and norms inherent in airport public policies, and how European and foreign ideas and institutions were adapted and applied in France.

Theoretical perspective: the cognitive analysis of public policy

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the process of defining and reformulating how airports work brought about policy change. Airport policy in France will serve as a single case study. Contemporary political science appears to be increasingly dominated by institutionalist approaches that stress policy stability. Despite their epistemological differences, the three

institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor 1996) appear to be limited in their ability to approach the rapid and dramatic change in French airport policy. A recurrent conclusion of sociological and rational choice institutionalisms is that reform and policy change are often impossible. Both share an impoverished vision of the roles and preferences of actors who operate within a range of institutional constraints (Smyrl 2005). The notion of path dependence developed by historical institutionalists (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000) permits one to go further and underline the weight of previous choices on current policy decisions. However, this concept still largely accounts for continuity in public policy and is weaker when it comes to analyzing dramatic change. While criticizing the conservative bias of approaches emphasizing institutional continuity, Streeck and Thelen (2005) show how incremental changes can slowly lead to important reforms. Yet even so the approach remains unable to explain substantial change in public policy.

Nevertheless, change does happen in public policy and it needs to be theoretically addressed. In the case of airport policy in France, the change was rapid, significant, and supported by a vast coalition of actors with different perceptions. Cognitive analysis of public policy appears to be the best approach to understand this change and to address the weaknesses of institutionalist approaches. Developed in order to explain change in public policy, the concept of the frame of reference is at the heart of cognitive analysis of public policy. A frame of reference is both a cognitive process that limits the complexity of reality and a normative process that permits one to act on this reality. It is a cognitive image created by actors through which they perceive problems as well as solutions. It articulates four analytical levels of perception: the values (the most general and fundamental aspects that structure public action), the norms (the principles of actions that are compatible with the dominant values), the algorithms, or causal relations ('if..., then...') and lastly the images (cognitive shortcuts that carry meanings and ideas, as well as values, norms and algorithms of a frame of reference) (Nahrath 1999: 43–44; Muller 2007: 62–63).

These four elements combine to produce policy shifts: they are both framed and mobilized by élites in order to legitimize a public policy change through their use in public debates. A symbolic dimension colours values, norms, algorithms and above all images, a dimension that can be easily decoded and interpreted in order to give coherence to, and legitimize, new policy approaches. Reframing these four elements and applying them in discourses, reports and articles leads naturally to a reframing of public action as actors come to perceive a policy change as both self-evident and inevitable.

Following on from this, two kinds of frames of reference can be identified. The *global* frame of reference is the general representation around which many sectoral representations are organized and structured. These *sectoral* representations and their values, norms, algorithms and images constitute the

second kind of frame of reference, which differentiates between different activities and professions within a society (e.g. airport, agriculture, finance). There is a need for consistency between the values, norms, algorithms and images of a sectoral frame of reference and the global frame of reference. If there is no consistency between the two, one would expect a reformulation of the four analytical levels of a sectoral frame of reference, which will subsequently permit the formulation of a new policy and give it coherence. This reformulation is expected to re-align the sectoral frame with the global. A specific public policy is thus understood as an instrument that links the sectoral to the global: it harmonizes the sectoral with the global frame of reference by stating and enforcing principles of action that ensure the coherence. In other words, considering that a sectoral frame of reference must change when it is out of alignment with the global frame of reference – when there is cognitive dissonance between the two – a change of public policy based on new principles of action will emerge. Thus a change in the frame of reference causes a change in public policy.

This process is likely to be élite-driven. Élités can here be conceptualized in terms of mediators that have “the power and the intellectual resources allowing them to do this work of articulation between the ‘sectoral’ and the ‘global’ level and, therefore, to elaborate the definition of the [sectoral frame of reference]” (Nahrath 1999: 45). They have both the symbolic resources and the positions of power to decode, interpret and reformulate the sectoral frame of reference in order to adjust it to the global. Similar to the concepts of ‘advocacy coalition’ (Sabatier 2007: 189), or ‘epistemic community’ (Haas 1992), mediators are those who transform a socioeconomic reality into a policy program (Jobert 1992; Faure et al. 1995; Muller 2000; Surel 2000). This dynamic process can be visually simplified (see Figure 1).

This paper develops the following argument: *Aéroports de Paris*’ economic regulation and legal status became out of step with a European airport frame of reference, causing the redefinition of the French airport frame of reference and a subsequent change in airport public policy. This occurred through a mediation process supported by the benchmarking of other European airports’ regulation standards. This article contends that the European airport frame of reference, considered to be the global frame of reference of airport industry in Europe, has changed since the end of the 1980s to become market-oriented, while the French airport sectoral frame of reference remained static, dominated by a state-owned, state-planned and state-controlled airport system. A mediation process, supported by the benchmarking of foreign models of economic regulation, has led to the production of a new French airport-sectoral frame of reference of economic regulation, based on a price-cap model and an equation “user fees and charges = financing of investments” in which airlines would set aside user fees and charges in order to make future investments. In other words, this

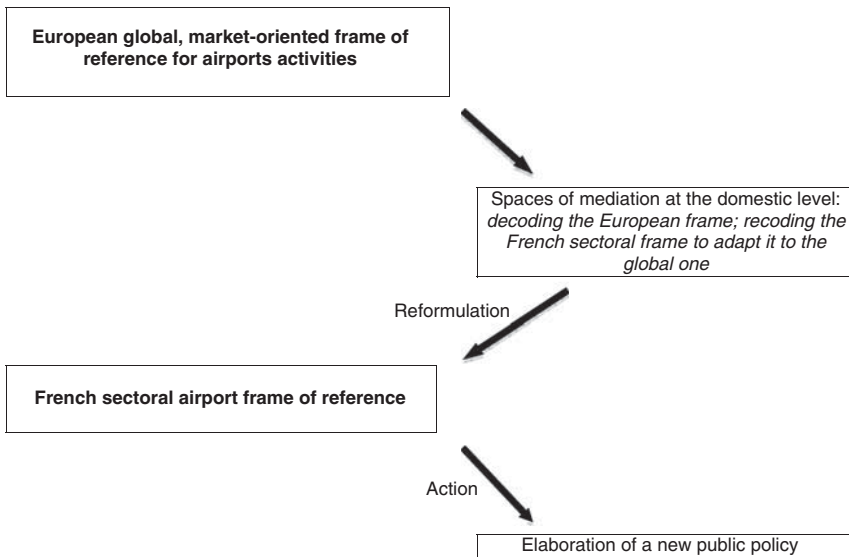


FIGURE 1 *The Dynamics of Policy Change*

means that airlines are paying for services that will be delivered at a future date. The process was clearly influenced by the British experience. The British Airport Authority was seen as a successful operator, having the ability to invest in its development, free from bureaucratic red tape and political intervention. It was also ranked first in terms of passenger volume in Europe.

The empirical data in this article was gathered in 2008 and 2009 primarily through interviews with top- and middle-managers in Aéroports de Paris and Air France; senior civil servants within the Ministries of Finance, of Economy and of Transport, and Ministers of Transport’s and of Finance’s aides; domestic and foreign airlines’ associations representatives and a few other important actors of the civil aviation sector. Other empirical material consists in published documents (annual reports, government and agencies publications, etc.) and confidential material gathered in interaction with the interviewees. Anonymity was guaranteed to all interviewees. Nevertheless, excerpts of interviews¹ will be presented throughout this article in order to present empirical evidence and to highlight the role of actors and the process of frame reformulation.

Emergence of a New European Frame of Reference

The regulatory state and enterprises in monopoly

Relationships between European states and public enterprises have changed dramatically since the 1970s, with a significant decrease in public

ownership as an instrument for public intervention (Clifton et al. 2003). Scholars have identified this change with a trend away from a “positive” to a “regulatory state”, the latter focused on the correction of market-failures through technical expertise and economic regulation (Majone 1997). This trend towards economic regulation has been fostered by European institutions (McGowan and Wallace 1996; Eberlein and Grande 2005), particularly in the case of utilities such as airports (Coen and Thatcher 2001). Divestiture and the creation of competition between many European public enterprises since the 1980s illustrates the emergence and the strengthening of the regulatory state.

One of the main functions of this regulatory state is to exert external market control over enterprises working under monopoly conditions (Eberlein 1999: 209). However, this shift has not meant a retreat but rather a redefinition and a reformulation of the role of the state. This reformulation formalizes state relationships with regulated enterprises through contracts that stipulate goals and objectives (Lodge 2008: 282–283). This shift towards a regulatory state appears difficult to reverse: partially privatized monopolies will not be subject to strong competition, thus regulatory states need to maintain economic regulations that will protect end users (Frison-Roche 2004: 56).

Some academic literature is nevertheless more or less sceptical about the implementation of a French regulatory state as a result of European integration, and more specifically there is a literature that addresses the issue of French resistance to a regulatory shift (Bartle 2002; Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002; Jones and Cole 2009). However, there has been substantial movement in France toward a regulatory state model. While the new shareholder function assumed by regulatory states allows them to play a new role in which they can realise their economic goals (Delion 2007: 538), in 2004 the French government created an agency, the French Government Shareholding Agency, and placed it under the supervision of the Ministry of Economy. The agency was specifically charged with dealing with the state’s financial interest in former monopoly enterprises (Bézar and Preiss 2007). This demonstrates a domestic adaptation to a global, European trend, and the airport policy case will further highlight dramatic shifts toward the regulatory state.

Liberalisation and regulation of network industries in Europe

Network industries illustrate perfectly the emergence and strengthening of the ‘regulatory state’. Network industries are those industries in which a fixed infrastructure is required to deliver goods or services to end users, such as telephone or electricity cables and wires, railroads, and airport runways (OECD 2000: 151). Initially conceived as natural monopolies owned and managed by the state in order to limit their market power, network industries are increasingly regarded as the locus of economic intermediation; a tool to allocate scarce resources, and thus able to function

like any other enterprise (Curien 1993: 13–14). A trend of liberalization and deregulation of these enterprises has been witnessed in Europe since the end of the 1970s (Zembri 2005: 21–23).

The divestiture of BAA (the British Airport Authority), for example, was made in order to promote a “market-function” of network industries with the concept of price-cap regulation (Currier 2008). According to a RPI-X formula, a price-cap regulation aims to “encompass a pricing structure that is subject to specified maximum fare increases, expressed in terms of percentages that cannot exceed the difference between the Retail Price Index and a given factor X” (Betancor and Rendeiro 1999: 29). The factor X is a productivity factor, which integrates the goals of both productivity and investment with the minimization of costs leading to higher profits. In other words, the operative logic of the price-cap is the following: it aims to limit the regulatory burden on network industries; their price limits are set by a regulator once every five years, according to the rate of inflation, with the possibility of earning profits within the established limits. It is thus a way to connect price-setting in a network industry to the real economy, transforming public services into service industries.

BAA experimented with this mechanism in the European airport sector, and it has allowed the state to retreat from direct involvement in airport management and ownership while maintaining the responsibility to determine the value of the factor X (devolved to an independent regulator in the British case). To some commentators France appears to have resisted to some degree the liberalization of its network industries, especially as regards transport and telecommunications (Leibfried and Starke 2008). This article shows on the basis of the airport policy case, that reforms have occurred later than in other European countries, but they have still occurred.

European airports and the market: A progressive integration

Since 1987 and the divestiture of the BAA, there has been a double movement of integration of European airports into the market. The first movement accompanied the liberalization of air transport by European institutions, which allowed air carriers to set their own customer rates and granted them free entry in European intra-routes (Reynolds-Feighan 1995), liberalized ground-handling services, and subjected airports to competition rules and directives (Chapier-Granier 2006: 222, 249). The liberalization of air transport has led major airlines in Europe to establish a specific airport platform as their hub (Mouhot 1990; Molin 1997; Varlet 1997; DGAC 1999). Instead of a point-to-point transit model, a hub is an airport that becomes the centre of a wheel where traffic moves along its spokes (Varlet 1997: 208–210). The consequence of this is to both facilitate and multiply the number of connections for passengers through synchronization of domestic

and international flights in take-off and landing. During the summer of 2008, the use of Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport platform permitted Air France to offer 21,000 weekly connections within two hours (Air France 2009). Five hubs currently dominate the European airport sector: London-Heathrow for British Airways, Paris-Charles de Gaulle for Air France, Frankfurt-am-Main for Lufthansa, Madrid-Bajajas for Iberia, and Amsterdam-Schiphol for KLM (Gillen and Niemeier 2007). However, the concentration of air traffic in specific platforms has led to a congestion of capacities, and huge investments are required to maintain and increase these capacities (Bel and Fageda 2006). In addition to this phenomenon, the European Commission liberalized some aspects of airport activities in the 1990s, such as time slots attribution and ground handling, also opening an element of competition traditional in airport activities (Chapier-Granier 2006).

The second movement is the spread of partial airport divestiture in Europe. After the full divestiture of the BAA, along with the implementation of a price-cap regulation based on a five-year regulation period in 1987, many European states implemented new divestiture policies for their own airports. This approach appears to have been successful as Heathrow remains the first European airport, but so far no country has followed the British path of full divestiture. For example, the first wave of privatization involved Vienna (with a share of 27 per cent) in 1992, Copenhagen (25 per cent) in 1994, Athens (45 per cent) in 1996, Dusseldorf (50 per cent), Rome (45.5 per cent) and Naples (65 per cent) in 1997, Skavsta Stockholm (90 per cent), Florence (39 per cent), Turin (41 per cent), Hamburg (36 per cent) and Zurich (50 per cent) in 2000 and finally Frankfurt (29 per cent) in 2001. The process then started again after the 9–11 crisis, with the partial privatisation of Brussels, Budapest, and Bratislava airports in 2006 (Gillen and Niemeier 2006).

A new market-oriented frame of reference

The 1990s and the 2000s have seen the emergence and strengthening of a new frame of reference in European airport activity. The integration of certain areas of airport activities in the market, the partial divestiture of most main European airports, the implementation of price-cap economic regulation and the new hub system indicate that there is a global market-oriented frame of reference in the European airport industry. According to the literature, France might be expected to have resisted pressures for change in this direction. However, this new European frame of reference constitutes the new cognitive representation of airport activities in Europe. It acts as a cognitive and normative matrix that shapes diagnoses of domestic (or sectoral) airport conditions and offers prescriptions of how to deal with them, thus leading to dramatic policy change in France.

*Cognitive Dissonance with The French Airport-Sectoral Frame of Reference**French airport policy and management: An exhausted frame of reference*

At the end of the 1990s, both the Aéroports de Paris and the French major regional airports faced strong constraints that threatened their development. As a state-owned company, two features limited the ADP. The first was its “speciality principle” which asserted that the ADP mission was to build, manage and develop airport infrastructure located near Paris, that is to say Paris-Charles de Gaulle, Paris-Orly, Paris-Le Bourget, the heliport of Issy-les-Moulineaux as well as nine small airdromes². However, ADP had positioned itself as a major international actor in the airport industry through the development of two member companies: Aéroports de Paris Ingénierie (ADPi), which designs and builds airport platforms and major infrastructure in foreign countries, and Aéroports de Paris Management (ADPM), which provides advice and assistance on airport management in developing countries. It had also diversified its activities through a move into the telecoms sector with the creation of Hub Télécom. These international activities, which are part of the competition between major airport’ operators (Chapier-Granier 2006: 480–503) were of dubious legitimacy since they overstepped the limits of the “speciality principles” and received an adverse judgement from the French Court of Audit in 2002 (Cour des Comptes 2002: 410).

The second characteristic of state-owned companies such as the ADP concerns its financing. ADP can use two resources: the state’s budget, and its debt. However, successive governments in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s seemed less and less willing, or able, to finance ADP’s development. Increasing infrastructure costs had limited the ‘generosity’ of the state regarding network industries in general, and airports in particular (Crozet 2003: 11). In addition, the European Commission also strictly restricted public financing for airports in order to limit potential distortions of competition between airlines on specific platforms (Marty 2006: 6). At the same time, the second instrument has also become more and more difficult to use: in 2003, ADP had a \$ 2.3 billion debt, with a debt-to-income ratio of 16 per cent, while a 28 to 30 per cent ratio usually indicates a good financial situation (Auby and Lombard 2007: 11). The financial structure of ADP as a public-owned company thus constituted a limit to its development in a context of increasing financial need to invest in its infrastructure capacities of the platforms. For the 2004–2007 periods, the need for investment was estimated to be roughly € 2.3 billion (Chapier-Granier 2006: 480–511).

Along with these legal and financial limitations that restricted the development of ADP, the enterprise also conducted structural experiments that resulted in clear internal problems. For example, ADP’s top-management and supervision have been largely hired from the *Ponts et Chaussées*, a powerful public service *Grand Corps*. This engineer-corporation dominated both the

development and strategic orientations of ADP, emphasizing airport aesthetics over efficiency (De Montricher 1993: 27). Emphasis was placed on the pursuit of architectural merit *per se* without taking into account the use of the infrastructure by ADP customers. Commercial development was not supported by the *Ponts et Chaussées* managers, and no other *Corps* was able to gain a sufficient foothold in the top management of the enterprise to make these commercial activities possible (De Montricher 2004: 506). However these extra-aeronautical activities were an important source of financing for the airport (Freathy 2004; Reiss 2007), and this situation limited the profitability of ADP (Cour des Comptes 2002: 407).

Finally, the legal status of the Aéroports de Paris had weakened its autonomy. State-owned companies in France had previously been seen as a macroeconomic tool to be used by state officials seeking to satisfy political objectives. These included recruiting workers during periods of high unemployment, the capture of airport revenues by government and the exertion of political pressure on ADP during periods of inflation (Bauby 1998: 26; Dumez and Jeunemaître 2004: 2). All of this happened in spite of the cost-based regulation framework of French public enterprises, in which prices are set and fluctuate according to the cost in addition to a ‘reasonable’ profitability rate (Crozet 2003).

Cognitive dissonance and the implementation of spaces of mediation

A major shift occurred in 1996, with the strategic decision of ADP’s main client, Air France, to establish its hub at the airport platform of Paris-Charles de Gaulle (Fayolle 2003: 80). This led to a need for increased investments in order to improve existing capacities and to build new infrastructure, but it also resulted in the emergence of “cognitive dissonance” (Muller 2007: 196) between the French airport-sectoral frame of reference and the European market-oriented model. While ADP was becoming increasingly integrated into the European airport industry market, requiring significant funding to support the expansion of its capacities, the French airport-sectoral frame of reference remained static. The actors involved interpreted and acted on the basis of the French frame of reference and its values, norms, algorithms and images centred on statism and state-planning, but this frame no longer gave an accurate account of reality. A couple of quotes from respondents interviewed helps illustrate this. According to a former ministerial aide, “in order to face air traffic growth and support a large budget, ADP had to plan consequent investments. With the capitalistic structure of ADP, they didn’t have the tools to prepare an ambitious investment plan”. A senior civil servant within the Ministry of Transport argued: “The air transport sector has been deeply modernized under the impulsion of the EU, which has led to

the privatization of Air France. Regarding aeronautic construction, the sector has also been modernized with Airbus's restructuring. However, the airport sector has remained untouched since World War II, leading to a de facto gap with the rest of the air transport system, despite reforms in other European countries".

Key actors within ADP and within the state were unable to make new plans for financing airport development within the existing model. The sectoral framework of a state-owned company has not evolved with the commodification of airport activities in Europe. This has strongly limited the ability of ADP to rely on state funding while not having the power to increase user fees to finance its development. The resulting cognitive dissonance between a European and a French frame of reference is also present among state officials. In the words of one ADP's representative: "We really needed an economic model which would be more in touch with current affairs: there is a real competition between actors, and ADP had to update its model, with a new economic model". Another argued "The very concept of public enterprise is unwelcome in Brussels. I remember that a guy from the Competition General Directorate shouted at me during a visit to the Transport General Directorate. He brought me to his office and told me: "I'm fed up with Aéroports de Paris, [...] I'm fed up with your legal status, I'm fed up with the French exception! [...] ADP, it is not the state!. We were in deep trouble because of the status."

By the beginning of the 2000s, the French sectoral frame of reference for airports was thus completely out of step with the international environment in which French airports operated. The cognitive and normative matrix that had legitimized French airport policy could no longer offer a guide for those making policy within the sector. The sectoral frame of reference thus became inappropriate (Muller 2000: 196). More precisely, the perceptions of élites and actors of the airport sector in terms of values, norms, algorithms and images of the sector made it impossible to identify a domestic, sectoral frame of reference that would be coherent with the European frame. Faced with this conflict, élites in the sector had to reformulate these conflicting values, norms, images and algorithms in order to adapt them to the European characteristics of airport regulation. This process, referred to as the mediation process, will subsequently lead to the formulation of a new policy program that will produced fundamental reform in the French airport sector and fully embedded it within a broad European frame of reference.

Benchmarking and the Reformulation of the French Frame

Two kinds of spaces of mediation were implemented by key actors, referred to as mediators. Two different categories of mediators attempted to decode features of the European frame of reference in order to recode the French

frame, an exercise that would ultimately result in a change in airport policy. Surprisingly, major regional airport operators created the first mediation space, while the second space was introduced by the top-management of ADP.

French regional airports and the airport company

Although ADP is the most important actor in the French airport industry, it is also important to look at other players. French regional airport operators have also been affected by the new European frame of reference. As a result, they have participated in decoding the European frame of reference and recoding the French one.

Local Chambers of Commerce had been operating major regional airports in a concessionary regime since the 1930s (Guitard 2002: 11). The European Commission heavily criticized this regime in 2000 and called for a shift in French airport policy (Giblin 2004: 101). The institutional features of French regional airports were disconnected from European regulatory standards, putting severe constraints on their operators. In addition, a report commissioned by the French government in 2000 proposed to devolve responsibility for regional air transport infrastructure to the regional level (Mauroy 2000: 73). Anticipating these threats and recognizing the need to update standards, the top management of regional airports created a *Comité d'action pour la mise en place des sociétés aéroportuaires* (Action committee for the implementation of airport companies) in 1999. This committee had the explicit mandate of studying the situation of French regional airports and formulating new approaches to policy that would conform to both European standards and those of their European competitors. The *Comité d'action* published a white book, in which regional airport operators advocated the creation of 'airport companies', a simplified legal environment and a reorientation of the role of the state towards a regulatory function and away from its previous shareholder role (Guitard 2002: 19).

The regional airport operators put forward a European approach according to which airports in France would finance themselves through flexible charging principles. This was based on a systematic benchmark of economic regulations affecting regional airports in Germany, the UK and Italy. Regional operators considered the French State, which should have assumed this financing responsibility, to be inefficient. The white book argued that the "competitors" of French regional airports in the EU had seen their status and economic regulation altered (Guitard 2002: 31). The main proposal they came up with involved the creation of "airport limited companies". These companies would have 'private' status and would no longer operate as concessions. Furthermore, they would be able to finance their investments through user fees as well as through equity markets. This was

justified by the need to modernize French airport policies, and above all by the benchmarking of other European regional airports standards.

The *Comité d'action* was thus a forum in which policy rules and norms were questioned (Jobert 1992). It highlighted a cognitive process of reformulation of the French airport sector through both a diagnosis of the system's failures and through prescribing a set of solutions adapted to the new features of the European frame of reference. The standards set by other European countries and the new policy orientations proposed in the white book indicated a shift in the conception of the French airport sector and its adaptation or synchronization to a European market-oriented frame of reference of airport activities. However, the complete and definitive reformulation of the French frame of reference could not occur without the involvement of *Aéroports de Paris*.

Élites and key actors in running French regional airports constructed a preliminary sketch of a frame of reference. They were trying to shift the parameters of public action in order to create greater consistency with the European frame of airport liberalization. This process was to be decisively completed by a second stage of mediation that reformulated the values, norms, algorithms and images of the French airport sector, thus leading to new policy prescriptions and policy change.

Aéroports de Paris: The new equation: User fees and charges = financing of investments

The year 2001 represents a shift for *Aéroports de Paris*, with new actors from outside the airport appointed to key positions in the company. A new General Manager, a former road sector manager was appointed. He subsequently appointed a senior civil servant from the Ministry of Finance as number three in the ADP hierarchy and requested a report on the evolution of airport financing. The supervision of the report was entrusted to the CEO of *Réseaux Ferrés de France*, which is in charge of French rail infrastructure. This new wave of actors had sufficient distance from the sector to examine the ADP in an 'objective' manner. In creating a new link between the economic regulation of airport and the broader field of infrastructure regulation, these new actors in power within the sector worked as mediators able to reformulate the basic features of economic regulation within the French airport sector. A new distribution of power within ADP allowed the French frame of reference to be brought into question according to the norms prevailing in other EU member states.

These mediators did not carry any pre-conception of the future evolution of the airport policy. They faced a cognitive crisis and introduced a space through which they could re-examine the policy and formulate new propositions. Finally, all the mediators came from administrative "*Grands Corps*"

(the *Ponts et Chaussées* or the *Finances*). This origin from within the state's administrative élite avoided the phenomenon of administrative resistance typically associated with France. It has been indeed highlighted that state-led reform formulation might constitute a distinctive French path for change (Saint-Martin 1998).

The Committee in charge of the report studied the British model of airport regulation, which was seen as being successful and as a potential model for the Aéroports de Paris. It interviewed members of the BAA and its regulator – no other foreign airport managers or regulators were invited to share their views. In sum, the report, published in 2002, recommended price-cap regulation, with the double-objective of adapting ADP to global trends in airport regulation and adjusting ADP's user fees and charges to its financing needs (Martinand 2002: 21). The aim was to adjust ADP's charging principles to an 'efficiency principle' which could ensure the optimal use of existing infrastructure, the development of new capacity as well as improvements to the quality of service (Martinand 2002: 27).

In other words, the space of mediation reformulated the economic regulation of Aéroports de Paris through benchmarking foreign economic regulation standards, particularly through the study of the British model of economic regulation. Actors proposed a shift towards price-cap regulation and the implementation of the equation: "user fees and charges = financing". The role of mediators was to open a forum – a space of mediation to examine why cognitive dissonance occurred and how it could be transcended. As the mediators were both in power and in a situation to analyze failures of the system, they set out a new way of looking at the features of the French airport system linked to a European frame of reference. More precisely, from their statements, interviews and reports one can clearly identify a reformulation of the four analytical levels of perception that define a sectoral frame of reference (Muller 2000: 61–64):

1. Values (the most general and fundamental aspect of the frame of reference): secure and foster financing for ADP capacities and quality of service, especially for the Paris-Charles de Gaulle platform.
2. Norms (principles of action): infrastructure financing through user charges and fees.
3. Algorithms (causal relations): 'there is no financing problems, but only charging principles problems' and the equation 'user fees and charges = investments'.
4. Images (simplified/concentrated representations of the situation): Heathrow airport, leadership image of dynamic airport, which has the capacities to invest for its development.

Each of these analytical levels is consistent with the European market-oriented airport frame of reference, and addresses the fact that the

previous French airport-sector frame of reference was out of synch with the European one.

Prescriptions for major policy changes in airport administration and regulation resulted from these different levels of perception. By simplifying the perceptions of the characteristics of the French airport system and the issues it faced and linking them to a broader European frame of airport policy, the mediators thus elaborated a program of action contained in the four distinct analytical levels which, when brought together, set out a prospectus for dramatic policy change. The success of the mediation process is a critical condition for translating these new perceptions into policy, made possible in this case by a double take-over: mediators both reformulated the perceptions of their sector and could impose the new values, norms, algorithms and images on the sector as they occupied leading positions within it.

The reformulation of the parameters of the French, sectoral frame of reference according to the European frame reflects nevertheless a domestic adaption to the French airport sector reality. The benchmarking of different European regulation standards, and the strong influence of the British model regarding the reformulation of the economic regulation, cannot simply be 'copied and pasted' on to the French context. Price-cap regulation has two main goals: to protect the interests of the users from the airport operator's spatial monopoly and to promote the economic efficiency of BAA (Francis and Humphreys 2001: 49). Conversely, the division of the new French airport-sector frame of reference into four analytical levels clearly indicates that the aim of a price-cap for Aéroports de Paris would be to protect the airport's financial interests more than the users' interests, and would also promote ADP's development and investments more than ADP economic efficiency. This indicates a domestic adjustment of the European frame of reference. The new formulation is coherent with the European characteristics of hub airports in particular, and network industry regulation in general, but it has been adapted in order to answer first and foremost to Aéroports de Paris's needs.

To conclude, a major shift occurred with the formulation of price-cap regulation adjusted to the ADP's financial needs instead of a cost-plus regulation adjusted to a public service model of cost-based charging principles. This redefinition of the sector's economic regulation clearly demands a change in public action (Faure et al. 1995: 174). The next necessary step was to translate the newly formulated French airport sector frame of reference into a legal framework.

The Translation of the New Frame of Reference

The right is back: A new policy program carried by new actors

Along with the formulation of a new French airport sector frame of reference, the year 2002 opened a new window of opportunity for translating

its principles into a legal framework. The election of a centre-right *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) majority in the National Assembly and the subsequent appointment of Jean-Pierre Raffarin as Prime Minister led to a convergence between new governmental priorities and ADP's need for policy change. On the one hand, a trend towards transport infrastructure divestiture began with the privatization of highways (Lorrain 2005). Following a slowdown in French economic growth after 2001 the state looked for new sources of revenue. Selling infrastructure to the private sector constituted an attractive option for the French state as part of a long-term disinvestment position towards its own transport infrastructure (Bézar and Preiss 2007: 612). On the other hand, Jean-Pierre Raffarin's government engaged in a second wave of decentralization that redefined the scope of regional government responsibilities (Le Lidec 2003). All airports except the Aéroports de Paris and the nine most important regional airports were devolved to local and regional governments in 2004 (Giblin 2004: 101), and this pointed towards further reform for the remaining public airports.

Finally, a new figure came into the story. The general director of the Civil Aviation Directorate between 1995 and 2002 was appointed as Chief of Staff of the Minister of Transport and Utilities. He had been at the heart of reformulating the French airport-sector frame of reference. He was kept informed as the regional airports operators were developing their proposals and he also authorized ADP top-management to create a Committee charged with redefining economic regulation in the sector. At the interface of the two spaces of mediation implemented by regional airport operators and by ADP's top-management, he also expressed his own preference for a "more reactive, more dynamic and more flexible economic management of airports", considering that "the current status of airports does not 'fit' anymore" (Bricq and Collin 2001: 7).

By December 2002, the Transport Minister declared that the government was considering a partial divestiture of the Aéroports de Paris (Coulin 2002). In 2003, the President of ADP was dismissed, and the Chief of Staff of the Minister of Transport was appointed President. Both the new President and the General Manager heading the Committee given the task of redefining airport regulation received an official letter putting them in charge of preparing the transformation of ADP into a limited company that would be partially divested (Lomazzi 2003). This is the final step in order to prepare the readjustment of the French airport sectoral frame of reference to the global one: new policy proposals had been developed and key actors were now in place to carry out a rapid and dramatic policy change.

This situation nevertheless highlights an unexpectedly complex mediation process exposed by a cognitive analysis theoretical framework. Aside from the existing two-level space of mediation, a third kind of mediation process was introduced in order to provide a link between the new proposals

for the airport sector and its institutionalization in a regulatory framework. Due to his position within the General Directorate for Civil Aviation and as Chief of Staff of the Minister of Transport, this third actor worked at the interface between the two reformulations proposed by the regional airport operators and by ADP. He then migrated toward a major locus of power in France by joining the minister's *cabinet* (Rouban 1998). If the literature highlights the central role of these *cabinets* in translating new sectoral frames of reference (Muller 2000: 201), a contribution of this article is to stress the possible movement of mediators from sectoral activity to the locus of decision-making.

Design of a new regulatory framework

Less than a year after the appointment of a new President, a draft of the bill that would change Aéroports de Paris' legal status was presented to ADP employees. The Senate adopted the bill in October 2004 and the National Assembly in April 2005. Aéroports de Paris was subsequently transformed into a limited company without any "specialty principles". The law stipulated that a majority of ADP's capital would remain public, but that the enterprise would be able to increase its capital through private markets. Last but not least, the law planned the establishment of an economic regulation contract to be signed by the ADP and the state, which would set a price cap for a five-year period (Gonnot 2005). The economic regulation contract was signed in February 2006, establishing an annual maximum increase of ADP charges at 3.25 per cent plus inflation. In June 2006, the government partially privatized the ADP through a € 600 million increase of capital: 32.5 per cent of ADP's shares went into the hands of the private sector (Auby and Lombard 2007: 13).

In contrast to the British model, the state remains the first shareholder of ADP. No independent regulatory agency in charge of determining the price cap was created. The government has also maintained the responsibility for approving the price cap in airport regulation. This indicates again that the translation of the airport sector frame of reference is not a copied and pasted version of the British model of economic regulation. The European market-oriented airport frame of reference was adapted to French circumstances. Its orientations conform to the global frame, but specific applications are determined above all at the domestic level (Muller 2007: 76). And if socialist and communist MPs questioned the partial privatization of ADP during the parliamentary debates, the shift towards price cap regulation was not questioned, indicating that the values, norms and algorithms of the new frame of reference had become dominant in thinking about the French airport sector. This cognitive shift was accepted and internalized by actors within the sector and within the decision-making apparatus of the state.

Conclusion

A new global frame of reference for airport activities at the European level emerged through a careful study of the rise of the regulatory state in Europe and the liberalization of network industries and the study of airport regulation and ownership transformations in the UK and other European countries. This new frame of reference, considered to be market-oriented, structured a fresh conceptualisation of the airport sector at the domestic level.

In France the domestic or sectoral frame of reference for airports had become increasingly out of step with the European frame. Characterized as a state-interventionist with cost-based regulation and public financing, the French frame of reference provided an inaccurate guide to running airports at the end of the 1990s. The major regional airport operators and *Aéroports de Paris* implemented two distinct 'spaces of mediation' through which the French airport system was redefined. A new way of looking at the airport company with price cap regulation was developed. Analytically, we can distinguish between the values, norms, algorithms and images of this new French sectoral frame of reference that is adjusted to the European market-oriented one. A new airport policy was then implemented in order to translate the features of this new frame into a legal and enforceable framework.

This article provides a case study of *Aéroports de Paris*, a major player of the European airport industry but an understudied case by comparison with the British Airport Authority (Francis and Humphreys 2001; Humphreys et al. 2007). It shows the French state in a process of mediated action with a third actor at the interface between the French airport industry and political power. The analytic grid helps explain the drastic shifts in sectoral public policy, where analyses in terms of incremental change or individual actors' rationality cannot account for policy change. Furthermore, the article draws attention to the specifics of the French airport policy change, which was motivated neither by an ideological commitment to neoliberalism (the British case) nor by a gradual elaboration of a new model of governance (Canadian case).

The study confirms that, despite global trends and pressures for policy change, public policy remains largely formulated at the domestic level (Ferrera 2005). Liberalization reforms, in accordance with institutionalist accounts, have to be appreciated in their diversity at the nation-state level (Campbell and Pederson 2001). However, even though France is often presented as reluctant and resistant to major policy and administrative change, change nevertheless occurs. The benefit of the cognitive analysis theoretical framework lies in its ability to deconstruct the complexity of the policy process by combining an analysis in terms of actors and structure, and therefore usefully supplementing institutionalist approaches. It offers a theoretical framework able to analyze ruptures and major changes that incrementalism and historical institutionalism cannot really explain. As regards the regulatory state, this article highlights a

real French adaptation to European and global trends through an evolution of the role of the state, redefined by actors within the state. These trends affect not only airports, but also other major network industries, and are reflected in railway and telecommunication policy changes over the last decade.

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NOTES

1. Interviews were conducted in French; English translations are by the author.
2. Article L. 251-2, French Civil Aviation Code.

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