

“An Attempt to Characterise Neoliberal Regulation: A Case-Study of France”

The words “neoliberal” and “neoliberalism”, propagated by heterodox economists to account for the evolution of contemporary capitalisms, have met some success. Their widespread use, however, raises questions about their characterisation and the underlying methodology. The words are synonymous with the systematic use of “laissez-faire” and the subjugation of the State to market forces. Yet, evoking these basic expressions entails underestimating the essential role of the institutional mechanisms and mediations that have governed the implementation of public liberalisation and *dérégulation* policies observed on a large scale.¹ Deciphering modern Western societies through the prism of neoliberalism reduced to its hard-core risks, in fact, simply applying economic logic to all the social forces involved in these processes. In order to overcome any reductive economism and to identify the practical conditions and modalities in which so-called neoliberal public policies have been formulated, it is necessary to add the socio-political dimensions that constitute these policies fully, and to explain the diversity of situations observed empirically.

To this end, institutionalist approaches such as variety of capitalisms (VOC) theory (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Hall and Thelen, 2009) and regulation theory (RT) provide useful perspectives. The VOC approach has shown that this diversity can be explained by differences in the roles and positions of the state in the economy. By contrast, research in RT is more encompassing and has highlighted the complex interdependencies between economic regimes and sociological, as well as symbolic conditions (Billaudot, 1996; Sum and Jessop, 2013; Théret, 1999) and political orders (Théret, 1992, 1999). The different accumulation regimes and modes of regulation are related to social relations and socio-political arrangements. As a result, the analysis of political contexts has thus given rise to work seeking to take into account the different facets and dimensions of political forms and phenomena, according to different schemes (Lahille, 2014, 2020).

The institutional forms (IFs) of capitalisms have been undergoing profound changes, leading to hidden and protean political crises. It is therefore essential to update and combine regulationist models – considered as non-exhaustive – to contributions from other disciplines and schools of institutionalist thought from constructivist and pluralistic perspective advocated by RT. This includes especially integrating meso-institutional and meso-social levels, as well as symbolic considerations (which have been little-explored) into regulationist work, centred on major socio-political and macro-electoral arrangements and the constitution of hegemonic blocs (Amable, 2005; Amable and Palombarini, 2005, 2012, 2017, 2021; Boyer, 2004, 2015, 2020).

To understand fully the multidimensional and multilevel character of all social regulation and to connect action and structure in a non-deterministic way, this paper borrows Commons’s broad definition of institutions and the central notion of “going concerns” (1934), which he associated with “political work” forged in sociology and political science (Smith, 2011, 2019).

¹ Translators note: “regulation” in this text is used, as usual, as the short-hand translation of *régulation*.

Social regulation thus draws on a cross-fertilization of approaches and disciplines that include political philosophy. It confirms the observation of a plurality of capitalisms, based on the multitude of intellectual constructions that feed into competing conceptions of neoliberalism (Audier, 2012). In this context, differences in doctrines, operating upstream of traditional political structures, give rise to games of symbolic power between schools and currents of thought. They constitute a wide range of ideological crucibles that subsequently take shape in the implementation of public policies that vary across space and time (Audier, 2012). To explain how the mental representations of these intellectual groups translate into public policies, it is necessary to identify the complex institutional mediations through which they act. Here, I will show that they draw on the “political work of going concerns” (Lahille, 2020).

The aim is to re-embed neoliberal policies socially by characterising the institutional forms and dynamics of this mode of social regulation. This is true, whether one approaches the issue through symbolism and ideas, from an economic or political perspective, by the State, structures and institutions, or from a meso-institutional or macrosocial level approach. This paper thus re-examines the status and mode of social insertion of politics in the light of a conceptual framework integrating complex interrelations with economics from a multidisciplinary social science approach, centred on the regulationist method (Boyer, 2015, Chanteau, 2017). The challenge is to think about the different forms of neoliberal social regulation in order to examine it pragmatically, with the emblematic and particular case of neoliberal regulation *made in France*.

1. Regulation as an ontological position and a common heuristic framework

Although regulationist studies of politics have taken heuristic perspectives, their parallel evolutions challenge their complementarity and their mode of interconnection with regulation theory in general. Models of politics involving a plurality of stylised facts, analyses from different angles and levels, result in a certain heterogeneity of conceptions and definitions. To grasp their unity, it thus seems logical to refer to the heuristic of the founding and central concept of RT, by returning to the origins of this approach.

By reasoning at a high level of abstraction and upstream of the various investigations, it is possible to connect several federating factors across various regulationist works. Among these, RT was conceived, from the outset, as an overall method for analysing economic and social facts as an alternative to neoclassical theory (Aglietta, 1976). On a methodological level, RT was positioned as a social science approach whose ambition was to provide grids for interpreting the dynamics of capitalisms by fully integrating political considerations and refuting the simplifications of standard approaches (Billaudot, 1996). Regulation theory was therefore thought of as both as a concept and as a method of analysis, encompassing economic and political issues (Aglietta, 1976; Théret, 1992).

The different authors thus shared a common conception of the pre-eminent and ubiquitous role of political considerations in the regulation of capitalism. For RT, the aim is to explain how the social structures and institutional mediations organising the different capitalist systems are regulated. But the very nature of this regulation always appears as fundamentally political.²

For example, for Aglietta noted (1976): “To speak of the regulation of a mode of production means seeking to express the way in which the decisive structure of a society is reproduced within its general laws [...] A theory of social regulation is an overall alternative to the theory of general equilibrium [...] The study of the regulation of capitalism cannot be the search for abstract economic laws. It is the study of the transformation of social relations

From the outset, politics was central for Aglietta ((1976 [1982])), because of the conflictual nature of social relations, and he viewed politics as a space for mediating the conflicts at the origin of institutional changes of varying magnitude. Subsequent work has progressively sought to clarify the ins and outs of these political mediations according to various more-or-less complementary schemes.³

These differences do not prevent identifying another common denominator that relates to the political function of regulation. Indeed, whatever the developments of RT, the authors consider the political function of regulation as always being paradoxical and problematic (Boyer, 2015, p.48; Chanteau, 2017, p.80), because it is viewed from the angle of an “immanent hetero-regulation” (Chanteau, 2017). These features constitute the foundations of an original ontological position that is expressed in most regulationist research. The intellectual journey of B. Théret provides an emblematic illustration of this. His work is centred on a topology of the social sphere having a “variable geometry” (Théret, 2019), and being based on a combination of fundamentally antinomic “structural-institutional” processes. This approach is then broken down into political and monetary phenomena, etc.

From this perspective, the concept of regulation can thus be seen as a “fractal concept” (Jessop, 2015; Jessop and Sum, 2016), representing a structuring way of thinking about social phenomena. By fixing the contours of a method of interpretation that gives it epistemological coherence, the “regulationist convention” is therefore defined as a specific ontological position and as a “constructivist-procedural” method.⁴ By drawing on categories of methodological institutionalism of Ostrom (2011), and at the highest level of generality, the concept of regulation can therefore be considered as a “universal element” providing the structure of a “heuristic framework”. The latter is then applied, according to a descending logic of abstraction, to theories and models which provide a better understanding of reality (Chanteau and Labrousse, 2013). The regulationist methodological unity therefore lies in the central role played by institutions in ontologically paradoxical regulatory processes. The political dimension is no exception to the rule. It must therefore be apprehended in the light of this methodological matrix which will later provide us with a common guideline.

However, this approach to regulation is not only a method that is invariably applied to any type of object. Although there are similarities between fields and dimensions, functional and logical differences must be taken into account, as these condition a plurality of contours, interconnections and institutional architectures that are specific to each field. In order to avoid misunderstandings by applying such an approach in a mechanistic and undifferentiated way, the study of the socio-political foundations of capitalisms therefore involves taking into account the functional peculiarities of politics for social regulation.

2. The specific function of politics in social regulation

The works of philosophy, sociology and political science, which question their respective doxas, have for long provided valuable elements to shed light on these issues. A broad consensus thus exists that the essential function of politics is to integrate conflicting social

creating new forms that are both economic and non-economic, forms which are organised into structures” in Boyer and Saillard (2002, p. 569).

³ For developments on this see Lahille (2014 and 2020).

⁴ This is not to be confused with the mainstream “positivist-injunctive” approach, based on the instrumentalisation of state action (Chanteau, 2017).

interests. By crossing these approaches with regulationist perspectives, it may be deduced that the specific role of politics is to exercise a function of social regulation (Giraud and Warin, 2008). However, the nature of the regulation of collective choices raises questions and fuels controversy between authors and disciplines. It is useful to recall that analyses using regulationist approaches share the view that conflicts and social power relations play a primary role in processes creating institutions.⁵ Politics is thus perceived as a space for mediating social conflicts, that are consubstantial to any society.

Such conceptions are historically and intellectually situated, because they were originally based on Marxian, Bourdieusian and structuralist conceptions of social relations, emphasising the relations of power and domination that structure any social field (Aglietta, 1982, p. X-XI, Lordon, 2014). Yet, in addition to social anthropology, studies in sociology, philosophy and political economy allow us to qualify this point of view.⁶ In contemporary capitalisms, the specificity of public action cannot consist *only* in ratifying the balance of power, by aligning social coalitions with economic interests, as is sometimes suggested by dominant regulationist works on politics (see Amable and Palombarini, 2005, 2012, 2020; Boyer, 2004, 2015; Lordon, 2014). In a democratic political system, the specificity of capitalisms would also consist in finding socially acceptable arrangements, by mobilising categories relating to social values (Bessy and Favereau, 2003), and forms of justification (Thévenon, 2006) which go beyond coercion alone.

At this stage, it is no doubt useful to recall that the democratic project of the founding fathers of political liberalism introduced a radical innovation in relation to the exercise of power under the *Ancien Régime* and the "governmentality" of social systems based on the monarchy, oligarchy and any despotic or authoritarian system. By establishing citizenship, equal rights and the "rule of law" as founding and unifying principles of social regulation, democratic political regulation broke with other political orders that were (and are) based mainly on domination.

Moreover, social anthropology shows that the function of politics is also to organise the dissensus inherent in any social formation, by producing equivalence between universes and heterogeneous social spaces (Graeber, 2016; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Although traditional societies were distinguished by the diversity of their political organisations, these could be differentiated according to whether they were more or less authoritarian and hierarchical as regimes (according to different principles) or decentralised, collective and "democratic". As with the works cited above, these contributions have inestimable heuristic value when they are linked to the regulationist approach. First, they validate the functional specificity of the political domain and confirm the absence of equivalence between domains. Secondly, they make it possible to broaden the regulationist conceptual framework to politics, by recalling that the function of politics is not limited to the sole exercise of domination. A

⁵ Aglietta (1976, [1982], p. X-XI) stressed that: "...a growth regime does not express harmony, a community of interests that can only be threatened from the outside. Conflict is irreducible because it is inherent in separations that make the constitution of any social group problematic. From a theoretical point of view, crises come first. (...) Then, as the origin of structural forms, these forms do not come from any transcendent law, they do not obey any universal principle of coordination: they are the products of social rivalry. The functioning of social institutions expresses the mediation but not suppression of conflicts. The existing structural forms are always under threat of being destroyed by the processes that generated them, by the social separations of which they bear transitory witness. (...)".

⁶ Ramaux (2012) recalls that this paradox is stated in Pierre Bourdieu's posthumous publication (2012), *Sur l'Etat : Cours au Collège de France, (1989-92)*, Paris, Edition du Seuil: "The domination of those who have power over the State is exercised in the name of the universal".

hegemonic bloc may be able to serve its interests in the long term by sacrificing the aspirations of the minority fraction of a social formation. However, history teaches us that such domination, becomes odious or unbearable for a fraction of society, leading to reactions via polymorphic disputes, that may be mediated by electoral processes – or not. Any political power must therefore take into account, even if only in a fallacious way, the equality of human rights and the imperative of the common interest, which is at the foundation of any community.

These protest movements are more or less violent and endogenous to the various hegemonic blocs, and manifest themselves whatever the political system. But following classical political philosophy, it must be remembered that the democratic project is intrinsically different to the sole exercise of domination of one social group over another, since it is based on the emancipatory principle of citizenship which broke with the political forms of the *Ancien Régime*. However, even dictatorships, oligarchic, monarchical and theocratic systems are based on narrow social bases and forms of legitimacy, whereas only the exercise of power based on terror may be considered to be pure domination.

These findings confirm a dual vision of politics which is in phase with the heuristic regulationist framework based on the generic form of “immanent hetero-regulation” and the essential role of intermediation played by evolving institutional structures and forms to stabilise the ontological tensions in any social formation (see Section 1 above). The result is an analytical framework which incorporates the ontologically problematical character of any political regulation and a less unequivocal conception of the function of politics.

This function is therefore ambivalent, because it is based on two contradictory imperatives, namely: a logic of the search for power on the one hand, and the production of the universal and the common on the other hand. This functional antinomy is clarified at the level of fundamental social structures (i.e. at a level of generality and high abstraction). But it must also be applied at the institutional level which today constitutes the central level of regulationist work (Billaudot, 2006; Chanteau, 2017; Theret, 2003, 2019). Formal and informal institutions (rules, norms and conventions) play a key role in mediating the general and abstract levels of the structures with the more empirical role of actors’ strategies (those of individuals and collectives). This justifies centring the study of politics at this level.⁷ But, despite notable advances, the various heterodox economic studies concerning stylised facts tend to separate, de facto, economic-political interactions or make them vertical, implicitly or explicitly. Yet, in neoliberal regulation, economics and politics overlap profoundly (Hay and Smith, 2018) and this needs to be integrated more formally into the regulationist framework.

3. For a constructivist institutionalism of political regulation

The study of the institutional ins and outs of political regulation implies including the tensions linking the two contradictory opposites of the political function (see below Section 5). Yet it obliges us, beforehand, to rethink the mode of insertion from a constructivist and historicised perspective, advocated by regulationist authors (Labrousse, Vercueil et al. , 2017). As RT has

⁷ For significant developments on these themes, see Chanteau (2017, p.90) and the notion of critical structurism, and Théret (2003) who shows that there is a complementarity between historical institutionalism (Commons) and methodical or genetic structuralism (Piaget), specific to the regulationist method. In addition, Théret (2019) also emphasises that the institutions constitute the nodal point around which the different approaches gravitate. This common reference is all the more solid, given that, despite their diversity, these approaches tend towards a unitary conception of the institution, based on a principle of collective action, from the perspective of the Commonsian definition, which makes it possible to articulate, implicitly or explicitly, structure and action.

claimed, taking into account changes in the political forms regulating contemporary capitalisms must logically lead to updating the theoretical apparatuses in view of stylised facts, on the basis of a combining and interdisciplinary method based on critical institutionalism (Lahille, 2020).

Whether we refer to historical institutionalism, as in the regulationist tradition, or to other forms of critical institutionalist construction, these approaches turn out to be logically compatible since they are based on common epistemological foundations and the same conception of institutions (Théret, 2003, 2019).⁸ As there is no unambiguous approach to try to re-embed the current political forms socially and historically, it is desirable to develop a construction drawing on the intersection connecting heterogeneous critical approaches, which are nevertheless logically reconcilable within this methodological matrix.⁹

On these bases, we can "recover" particular hypotheses within a logic of abduction. From an approach based on the unifying concept of regulation (see sub-Sections 2.1 and 2.2 above), we borrow conceptual tools from an epistemic nebula in a subjective and necessarily imperfect way, in the spirit of the "constructivist institutionalist" line advocated by Hay and Smith (2018). To specify the way in which political regulation works, the option chosen here therefore consists of associating the regulationist logics of immanent hetero-regulation (Chanteau, 2017) with a series of heuristic elements derived mainly from critical works in economics and political science, but also from contributions of political philosophy and sociology, as well as social anthropology, in a "federative" perspective (Labrousse, 2018).

By extending conceptions based on independence within economic-political-symbolic interdependence (Théret, 1992, 1999), and by creating parity between economics and politics (Hay and Smith, 2018), it is therefore possible to draw on regulation to update the function of politics which relies on the specificities of neoliberal social regulation. This approach is validated empirically, at the meso-economic and meso-institutional level by the work of Jullien and Smith (2008, 2012, 2014) and Lazéga (2016, 2020). They show that institutional mutations combine political logics that are also partly endogenous to the economic sphere, because "political work" is as much the prerogative of private actors as of public actors.

The more vertical inter-relationships between politics and economics described in the analysis of Fordism must therefore be adapted to this new, more "horizontalized" form of social regulation. The neoliberal regulation that gradually imposed itself from the 1980s onwards was therefore marked by the rise of a new regime of financialised accumulation, and by a change in the reference frameworks of public policies (Muller, 2018), which resulted from the rise in power of economic and financial actors within political regulatory bodies. The social hold exercised by the financial community (Orléan, 1998) has increased the risk of the social dis-embedding of the economy which has been specific to modern societies (Billaudot, 1996). The function of social regulation thus partially escapes political actors, strictly speaking, in favour of private actors who are increasingly autonomous and organically linked to the political sphere (Cagé, 2018, 2021; Djelic, 2012; Favereau, 2014; France and Vauchez, 2017; Jullien and Smith, 2014; Hay and Smith, 2018).

⁸Ibidem.

⁹For developments and details see Lahille (2020).

4. Social regulation viewed through the prism of “going concerns”...

This overlapping is specific to contemporary neoliberal regulation and must therefore be studied by linking the institutional structures of a political order with the economic and symbolic institutional forms (see Sections 5 and 6 below). But, beforehand, it is necessary to reconnect the “institutional structures” to the action of social groups, by replying to the criticisms (more or less well-founded) of the RT about its structuralist heritage. This is done by giving full place to the games of social actors from the Ostrom's perspective (2005, 2011). For this, it seems appropriate to use the notion of “going concerns” following Commons (1934), which refer to active groups of all sorts (in business and in this case in politics), as well as organised communities. As an intermediate concept, it allows different types of actors to be included without distinction – whatever their size and their social affiliation.¹⁰ Apart from the fact that this proposal gives full meaning to a horizontal and meso-social approach to politics, it may also be observed empirically that going concerns seek to make their ideas and/or their interests prevail and are able to exert pressure on (all or part) of the politico-institutional structures organising social regulation.

Depending on their position within social structures, small groups may thus succeed in modifying the institutional hierarchies structuring different domains and levels of any type of political regulation. The success of their undertakings therefore depends on their ability to develop and deploy the appropriate strategies.

For example, the central role played by the group of “Vulcans” may be recalled, which was organised in a clannish and reticular manner based on a radical ideological vision of neo-conservatism. This group was positioned within the political decision-making bodies of the Bush administration. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, it managed to stimulate a geostrategic reorientation of US policy, based on the unilateralism and messianic imperialism of the United States, which destabilised the US mode of political regulation and prepared major political, economic and geostrategic crises (David, 2005; Lahille, 2014; Mann, 2004). From a more meso-economic and meso-social perspective, the work of Lazéga (2016, 2017) highlights the role of a small group of lobbyists organised into a network that managed to put in place a new intellectual property law in Europe by replacing the work of European public authorities.

The rise of information technology and platform capitalism also illustrate the growing influence of major players in the digital economy beyond their traditional sphere (Durand, 2021, Snircek, 2018). Obviously, they intend to play an increasing role in social and political regulation. In parallel with building up techno-industrial and financial empires, the personalities and figureheads of these internet and digital trusts are setting up information and communication strategies made possible by their control of the main tools, circuits, content carriers and information content, as well as the symbolic power associated with these. Their ability to process big data is thus gradually being put to use in new fields that go beyond economics. Drawing on libertarian and/or transhumanist conceptions of society, these individuals and going concerns are deploying strategies of influence through the information sphere, which impact several pillars of social regulation.

¹⁰ The use of “going concern” here makes it easier to articulate the macro, meso and micro levels of a social formation.

It is no coincidence that in most Western countries, the mass media and the traditional press are subject to attempts at control by more or less traditional economic individuals and groups (Cagé, 2018, 2021). It should be noted that these relationships remain fluid and two-way. As they intertwine affiliations between social fields, coalitions emerge that are more or less bizarre. It is therefore possible to observe attempts by going concerns and individuals operating in the media sphere to seize political power (in Italy, the United States, France, etc.). This short overview confirms the analysis that very diverse going concerns can influence political and social regulation. In all cases, we observe that this quest systematically takes place via a control of information in its broadest sense – that is to say the symbolic field.

Furthermore, one of the characteristics common to Western capitalist countries with democratic regimes is the rise of the influence of economic and/or symbolic actors within social structures and political authorities. This is challenging the very principle of democracy. In capitalisms with authoritarian or totalitarian political regimes, almost complete control of the channels for circulating information (old and new media) is exercised more or less directly by the active political groups that hold political power (in China, Russia and Iran, etc.).

It can be noted that the symbolic field and the domain of ideas and information are essential spaces for understanding the processes of institutional change. As works of political philosophy (Audier, 2012, Chamayou, 2018) have pointed out, this phenomenon is however very broad, since it concerns both the intellectual field of the production of ideas and the more communicational field of their circulation (Salmon, 2008, 2020). Actions in legitimization, communication, and influence are exercised by small clans, networks, communities, groups, individuals, etc. These are affiliated with the different spaces and social fields (symbolic, economic, political) in the political bodies of regulation. Their actions thus appear as an essential condition for the transformation of institutional structures, at the different levels of social regulation.

5. ...And the contradictory nature of “political work”

It is relevant to mobilise the encompassing heuristic concept of “political work” (Smith, 2011, 2019), in order to describe the entire strategic palette used by a multitude of “going concerns” located at different levels of social fields. The notion of political work is multiform and multidimensional. Therefore, its use beyond the classical definition of relational and communicational strategies (Smith, 2011, 2019), shows that political regulation is conditioned by the nature of the political work of the dominant going concerns. Political work therefore concerns both the modalities of elaboration of intellectual constructions that serve as grammars of justification for a societal project (Salmon, 2020, 2021), but also strategies of conquest and the exercise of power, including the use of legitimate violence.

It therefore does not draw on peaceful and fair forums of deliberation or debate about ideas and the reasoned confrontation of arguments. Political work incorporates various forms of domination and the manipulation of information, as well as more or less perverted techniques of mass communication. Indeed, today, the widespread use of disinformation seems to occupy a preeminent place with regard to the task of informing public opinion, as illustrated by the institutionalised recourse to “parallel realities”. Active personalities and groups (in politics, economics and the media) work on social imaginaries by relying on think tanks, foundations, official and non-official organisations, pharmaceutical companies, etc. whose job is to fabricate

spurious and/or delusional narratives widely relayed through traditional media and unregulated social networks.

Thus, the informational sphere today occupies a special place in political work. This includes classical actions of influence through lobbying, collusion, clientelism, corruption, entryism, the creation of formal and informal networks based on shared interests and/or values in order to influence political regulation. But it also includes also the search for normative alignment, the blocking of information, the dissemination of authorised or confusing discourses, more or less sophisticated forms of propaganda and censorship, etc. This political work is polymorphic as it deals with communication strategies of influence and control in different institutional arenas.

Yet while political work is therefore symbolic today, it is not limited to the mere manipulation, capture and control of consciences, since it also involves actions of resistance based on a quest for truth, justice or defence of categorical interests. In each field, dominated going concerns also try to organise themselves on the basis of elective affinities, common values, ideas and interests, etc. challenging the established social order. Political work thus also focuses on the production of counter-narratives, on the dissemination by citizens of knowledge and information of public interest, on the structuring/coordination of actions of a political nature or various forms of activism related to the defence of human rights, biodiversity, environment, health, etc.

Political work is therefore multifaceted, taking place at many levels. It is deployed in several registers and social fields at different levels. It concerns the classical strategies described in political science and sociology and in regulationist works on alliances between political and social groups. However, electoral strategies for seeking and preserving political power between socio-economic groups should not overshadow other facets of political work. These involve the construction of coalitions, electoral agreements and socio-political arrangements, as well as legislative work, etc. which are in the foreground, but which also take place behind the scenes, upstream of macro-political strategies.

To fully characterise political work, we must therefore also bear in mind that it goes beyond the traditional political field. It operates simultaneously in the symbolic and economic fields, as well as in the political fields strictly speaking. Given that these spaces are interdependent, the form taken by political work therefore also depends on the place and role played by the dominant going concerns.

We can therefore see that political work concerns all types of organised communities and opportunistic individuals since it is the business of everybody... going concerns and individuals. As such, it constitutes the missing link between the major macro-institutional arrangements and the constitution of the hegemonic bloc, with the meso-social strategies of a multitude of actors seeking to assert their values and interests. Political work is therefore an additional piece to add to the regulationist puzzle on politics.

However, while the nature of the political work of going concerns is therefore at the heart of any social regulation (Lahille, 2020), only the political work of the most opportunistic and/or best-positioned going concerns within social structures (political, economic and symbolic) influences political and institutional structures.

6. An attempt to map political and social regulation

As an initial approximation, neoliberal political regulation is characterised by the growing influence of market logics and the dominance of the imperatives of financialisation over the political principles of representative democracy. It therefore acts through the symbolic actions of the financial community and *Big Business* to colonise minds. But this neoliberal political regulation also operates through targeted actions on the political organs of regulation.

The work of Jobert (1998) sets out the first groundwork to characterise the institutional forms organising a mode of political regulation. The latter may therefore be analysed via the embedding of three interdependent institutional subsystems organised into regimes: the regime of public policies, the regime of citizenship, and the political regime itself (Jobert, 1998). In view of the evolution of political forms, this founding work is complemented by the addition of a fourth pillar integrating the regimes of sovereignty. In the era of globalisation, these make it possible to understand the relationship any social entity has towards the world (Lahille, 2014, 2020, Sapir, 2016, Théret, 2008).

In order to model social regulation more completely, we repeat the distinction between institutional structures (*politics*) and strategies of actors (*policies*) set out by Hay and Smith (2018) – but by reversing it. In accordance with the regulationist methodological matrix (see Sections 2 and 3 above), *politics* and *policies* thus interlock at several levels of contradictions that manifest themselves on stages and in arenas belonging to several institutional dimensions and as part of a game of interdependencies between actors.

Politics thus flows from these four pillars whose mode of interlocking is conceived from the perspective of an evolutionary regime complex. There is in fact a multitude of forms of political regulation in space and time depending on the causal and interdependent relationships between institutional structures. In this case, the function of integrating interests, ideas and contrary values is constitutive of any type of social regulation. The institutional architecture organising a mode of regulation is based on this. It should be recalled that the diversity of institutional configurations also results from different dimensions and strategies of relatively autonomous actors. This diversity is connected to the ambivalence of *policies*. This ambivalence is explained especially by the difference in nature of political work conducted by private groups and that of political personnel. Private actors seek to make their conventions and interests prevail, within the democratic project stemming from classical (political) liberalism. By contrast, the purpose of the political work of governments is to manage to prioritise between different representations of the world by channelling social conflicts in such a way as to ensure social reproduction.

These contradictions are inherent the political work of actors, and are updated in the production of public policies. As the work of Jobert and Muller (1987), Jobert (1995), Muller (2018) has emphasised, they are a place for the expression of domination and a space of contention among the centrifugal tendencies threatening the unity of any social system. The “frames of reference”, which underlie public policies, are thus traversed by this functional dichotomy specific to *policies* (i.e. actors’ strategies) so that public policies express “a pragmatics of democracy” (Warin and Giraud, 2008, p.8). Public policies may therefore be analysed in terms of their convergence/divergence with the interests and ideas of the dominant going concerns.

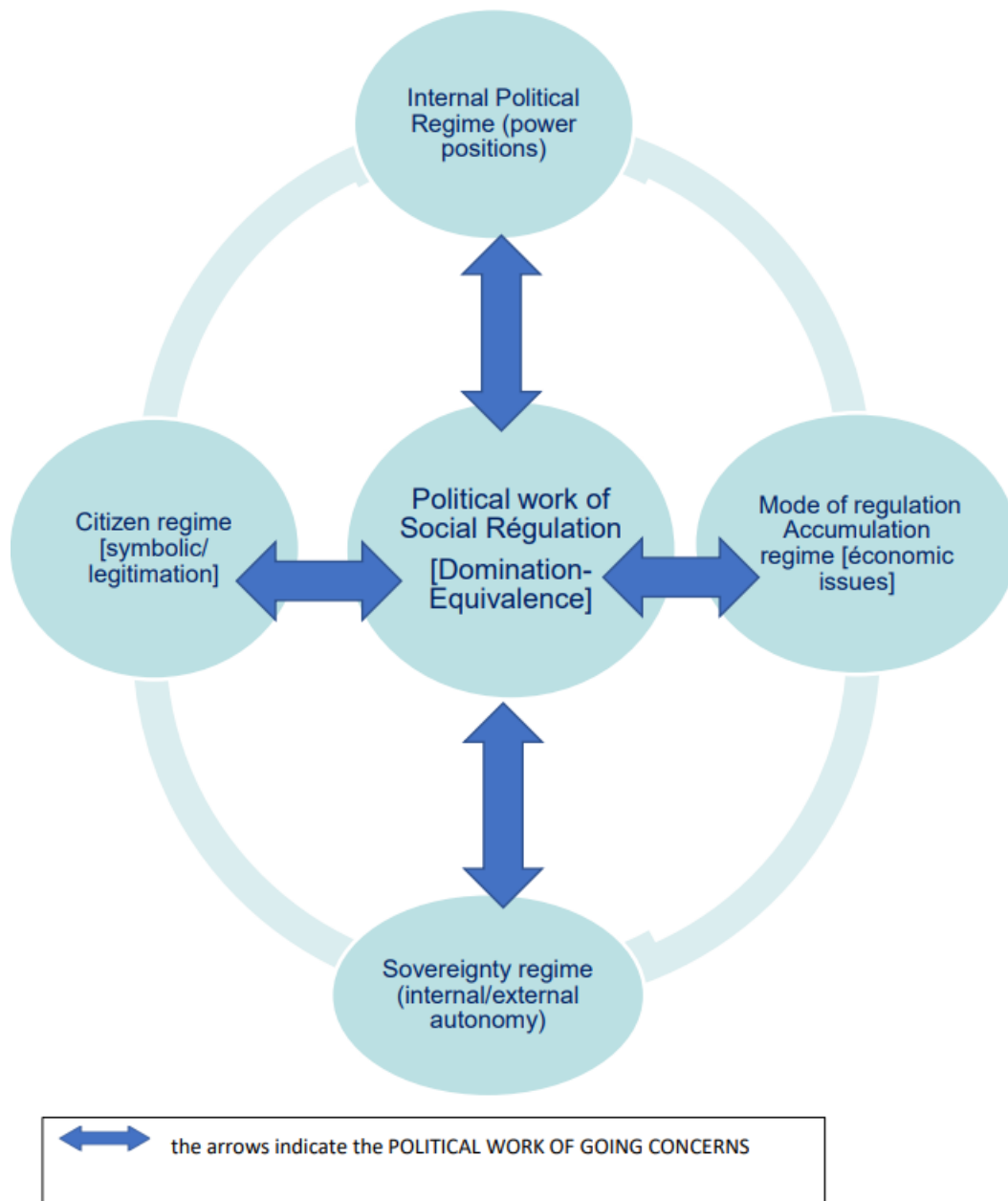
As these reflections on public policy regimes overlap in part with the broader concept of economic regulation in RT, it is argued here that economic issues may be understood through

economic regimes, viewed from the perspective of an accumulation regime, and a mode of regulation composed of the five institutional forms defined by (Boyer, 2004, 2015). We may then logically connect economic regulation, as defined by Boyer (2005), with the social regulation (Théret, 1992, 1999) grounded in the concept of political regulation put forward by Jobert (1998). The centrality of contradictory regulatory processes that underlie any political regulation then draws the contours of an analytical framework combining dialectically *politics* and *policies* from a multidimensional and multilevel analysis method.

Examples of socio-political systems of party-state as in China (Chavance, 2017)) or vertical organisation of power as in Russia (Vercueil, 2019), show up the existence of a diversity of modes of political regulation resulting from a particular configuration between a type of political work of the dominant going concerns on the one hand, and an institutional framework made up of economic, political and symbolic interdependencies on the other hand.

A typology of institutional structures can thus be briefly outlined. For example, there are four possible standard ideals of sovereignty regimes (Mairet 1997, 2012; Théret, 2008) referring to national sovereignty, individual sovereignty, state sovereignty, “citizen” sovereignty ... with hybrid variations. For their part, citizenship regimes vary according to competing conceptions of citizenship (market, individual, instrumental, relative/absolute, etc.), the legitimacy of governments, the mode of exercising of power, and the nature of dominant symbolic work. As RT shows, there is also a diversity of economic regimes according to the modes of regulation (neoliberal, ordo-liberal, social-democratic, libertarian, state, Mediterranean, corporatist, gazpromian, etc.) and accumulation regimes... A wide variety of political regimes may also be observed (oligarchy(ies), dictatorship(s), party-states, democracy(ies)) with different systems of power and voting (parliamentarians, presidents, etc.) based on electoral systems (majority with two rounds of voting, (full or relative) proportional representation, different modes of exercising power (verticalised, discretionary, gaseous, authoritarian, horizontalised, etc. in the context of a weak or strong democratic regime.

Each social formation corresponds to a multitude of institutional configurations, which explain the diversity of modes of political regulation. As interrelations between regimes are conceived as a “regime complex” and political work is discordant, social regulation appears to be everywhere/fundamentally ubiquitous. As it is largely characterised by universality and balance of power, the coherence of political regulation is therefore only relative and stability transitional. Moreover, it remains contingent on the forms taken by the political work of going concerns and the nature of intersections between regimes (cf. Figure 1).



7 France as an example of *contested* neoliberal-statist regulation.

To characterise better the main forms of political regulation in France, it is necessary to identify the dominant going concerns and describe their political work. In fact, their sociological composition corresponds to a combination of people from business, the financial community, the senior civil service, political personnel, etc. They share a common convention derived from the neoliberal vulgate of the “market society” and from an instrumental Hayekian vision of democracy (Chamayou, 2018) that cements an active epistemic community. If the elective affinities between financial circles and “political going concerns” seem to culminate with

France's current government,¹¹ let us recall that they possess structural attributes (France and Vauchez, 2017; Lefèvre, 1977).

However, the pro-market and pro-accumulation institutional changes observed over the decades have been facilitated by a low-intensity democratic political regime, led by the administrative and bureaucratic elite of a part of the state apparatus and whose organic links with economic and financial circles are socially encapsulated (Bezes, 2018; Sallais, 2014).¹² This “nobility of the State” (Bourdieu, 1989) is present at the heart of the political-administrative machinery, and is thus a vector of a political regulation of a particular neoliberal bent. Indeed, this political regulation is co-led by state bodies in symbiosis with private going concerns, and may be described as “neoliberal-statist”.

A spiral approach to French political regulation can be sketched summarily starting from successive changes in the international regime forcing the French state (*l'Etat*) to adapt the “national-state” sovereignty regime inherited from World War II. From the 1980s onwards, the political work of the dominant going concerns thus consisted of leading the country into Europeanisation, as well as financial and commercial globalisation, in parallel with the “global political work” (Smith, 2011) of transnational communities or networks (Djelic, 2012, Lazéga, 2016)) and “extra-national” actors (Salais, 2014, p.140-141). The result is a baroque “statist-individual” sovereignty regime in tune with the new world order, but which is also in a state of tension with national socio-political logics and national democratic imperatives (Rodrick, 2008, Sapir, 2002).

The neoliberal conception of sovereignty (individual and merchant), backed by a verticalised statist conception of power, has led to a change in the mode of economic regulation. In order to perpetuate itself, the latter needs to advance ever-onwards in the mode of exercising power. The continuous structural reforms of the IFs (institutional forms) under the aegis of the State, in fact, affect a hybrid mode of regulation which mixes inseparably the State and market in order to comply with the regime of financialised and globalised accumulation that ... paradoxically weakens the economic role of the State and increases inequalities.

The sovereignty regime and the economic regime therefore occupy a special place in political regulation, because they lead to a drift in the political work of the groups in charge of social regulation, whose role switches to an action leading society to conform to market forces by relegating the imperative of social equivalence internal in French society to the background. Thus, the continuation of neoliberal public policies imposes changes in the political sphere. France's political regime tends towards discretionary monarchical presidential power, while the nature of the mode of exercising power is changing, oscillating between a communicational vernier (Salmon 2008, 2020a, 2020b) and more repressive measures against refractory groups.

¹¹ Over the past 15 years, there has been an increase in conflicts of interest between key political actors and the business community, corresponding to a sociological standardisation. (See D. Huet and M. Magnaudeix, « A l'Assemblée nationale, le renouvellement et ses limites », *Médiapart*, 19 June 2017). These include the Kholer, Pannier-Runacher cases, the links between the container shipping giant CGA-CGM and the Elysée Palace, the emblematic “Comité Action publique 2022”, dominated by private interests, yet embedded within public decision-making bodies, etc.

¹² France's *Inspection des finances* (an elite corps of top-flight senior civil servants) acts as a reservoir for the French banking and financial system, via a revolving-door between public and private organisations which has institutionalised movement in both directions. See for example, Laurent Mauduit, « Jeu de chaises musicales à Bercy », *Médiapart* 20 janvier 2020.

The citizenship regime is thus deteriorating proportionally, leading to a latent crisis of citizenship, a loss of legitimacy of institutional structures and actors' strategies, which in turn lead to multifaceted rejections of the system. Authoritarianism and the disproportionate use of "legitimate violence" are consubstantial to the excesses in the way power is exercised. But they are increasingly contested, because dominated groups are taking note of the growing gap between substantial problems in health care, ecology, the climate, economics, symbolics, democratic and social justice issues, and illusory as well as destructive "solutions" put forward by neoliberalism.

Conclusion

Today, the "neoliberal-statist" mode of political regulation is openly telescoping the imperatives of the universality of social regulation, and so causing an unprecedented social crisis (Godin, 2019, Rosanvallon, 2020). The great turning-away from public affairs and the rise of social and political tensions that are insurrectional – such as France's "yellow vests" – are the symptoms of a deepening deviation of neoliberal-statist regulation with respect to democratic principles. Yet the failure to take into consideration the imperatives of universalisation and equivalence leads inexorably to major latent, multidimensional and multiform political crises of governmentality (following Foucault) and to social anomie (following Durkheim). This risks challenging the very foundations of democracy.

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