

# RFAS

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Pluridisciplinary call for papers on:

**Research, expertise and international comparisons  
in social and health policies**

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The call for papers addresses researchers in political science, law, sociology, philosophy and history, as well as actors involved in social protection and health.

**The papers are to be submitted no later than Monday 6 April 2020**

The field of social policy covers a range of intervention areas, including health, ageing, education, child care, employment, disabilities and the fight against poverty. These fields are constructed socially on the basis of disciplinary knowledge of “populations”, their “needs” and their “territories”. They as well should relate to financially sustainable practices and, among other aspects (exhaustivity here being impossible), likely scenarios of future changes such as those concerning occupations and technologies.

Pioneering work posited the idea that the harnessing of knowledge by political authorities was initially part of a strengthened competition between European states at the beginning of the modern period (for a summary, see Laborier, 2011). Today, relations between states, and notably those in Europe, combine economic competition and political cooperation. The process of European construction has failed to resolve this dilemma. The social models of EU Member States are confronted with competition, combined with cooperation within the Union. Furthermore, the increasingly strong links between social policies and the market (beginning in healthcare several years ago) generate an additional dimension as regards the way in which policy-making relates to knowledge, and thus, both to academic research and, more broadly, to expertise.

In the field of social and health policies, this issue ties in with dynamics in connected areas such as the environment. Researchers and experts, and their disciplinary knowledge, contribute to the construction of public problems in these fields and play a key role in the orientation of policy debates (Dumoulin et al., 2013). Research and expertise thus participate in democratic issues in policy-making in that they correspond

not just to collective choices (which options are available in housing or the fight against poverty? and with which predictable consequences?) but also to the methods for implementing these collective choices (how to meet collective objectives in the fight against drug abuse or in the employment of seniors?).

The French Pension Steering Committee (COR) is a relevant example in this respect, owing to its positioning (part research and part administration, as reflected in the composition of its bodies) and production (opinions, reports). The “pension reform” process launched in France several months ago illustrates the importance of expertise in public debate, competition among research disciplines, the internationalisation of debate and the reform “models” under discussion, as well as the relationship with the institutionalisation of research and expertise. And from a particularly topical standpoint, research and expertise are also being called on as part of policies to fight violence against women.

More pointedly, the definition of possible alternatives to mainstream policy-making has become a political issue in today’s political context, as illustrated by the famous “There is no alternative” or “TINA” (Lebaron, 2010). However, the upstream coordination of political choices often gives rise today to a rejection not only of a certain type of liberal policy but as well, to a way of legitimising political choices on the basis of specific and closed expertise.

Exploring the role played by expertise in the democratic dimension of policy-making calls for an analysis of the key trends involved.

## **1- The impacts of focusing public action on certain scientific disciplines**

First of all, certain scientific disciplines, including micro-economics, statistics (Desrosières, 2008), epidemiology, neuroscience and the management sciences (Gay, 2017), are holding increasing sway across a number of policy fields . In the realm of social policies, this trend directly concerns health, as well as, increasingly, housing, employment and education. What consequences do these changes have on policy orientation ? Are they giving rise to research and the development of alternatives so as to safeguard a critical function? Can the interdisciplinarity of research and expertise increase pluralism? Lastly, do disciplinary oppositions call into question the function of mediation between the various political demands and alternatives played by expertise in different configurations?

## **2. The role of international networks**

Secondly, the focus of expertise on certain disciplines has been seen as the expression of the internationalisation of networks and of the growing influence on national policies of international organisations such as the OECD (Normand, 2017). Is this the sole explanation, and what does this trend reveal? Has an “evidence-based turn” occurred in the French-speaking world and elsewhere in Europe? What kind of feedback is needed on experimentation methods? How do they transform the role of expertise in policy (Bureau et al., 2013)? Under which (scientific and political) conditions are they valid?

Discussions may also address the circulation of debate on social indicators and risk-assessment methods. Does the sharing of common analysis grids and values circulating at international level via communities of experts revolving around international and European institutions, or interest networks (extreme poverty, homelessness, privatisation of social protection, etc.), the sign of a standardisation and

harmonisation of national policies? More broadly, is the internationalisation of expertise impacting political issues in methodical quantification, notably through the managerial technology of benchmarking?

### **3- Changing relations between research, policy-making and the use of expertise**

Thirdly, are we witnessing a transformation of the structural relations between policy-making, research and expertise? In France for example, the institutionalised dialogue between scientific research, and policy-makers have been transformed. The importance of public research on policy-making has been systematically weakened. The elimination of the *Commissariat Général au Plan* economic planning institution and the *Centre d'Étude des Revenus et des Coûts* were publicized. The continued weakening of the study and research services of the central ministries (for example, the Ministry of Labour's *Centre d'Études de l'Emploi* employment research entity) and public agencies (including the public services of employment) are also part of this trend. The state is ridding itself of its semi-autonomous research structures, and successive governments have left little room for independent expression on economic, social, territorial, digital, income, health, housing and education inequalities. The INSEE survey on homelessness, *Sans Domicile*, and the recent absorption of the *Observatoire National de la Pauvreté et de l'Exclusion Sociale* (a poverty and social exclusion watchdog) by the *Conseil National de Lutte contre l'Exclusion* (national council of the fight against exclusion) may be seen as further illustrations of this trend.

Meanwhile, private experts, such as consultancy firms and experts from organisations, are increasingly being called on for policy matters, in particular for social policies. Does this transformation stand for a pluralisation of expertise or for the eviction, or at the very least, the marginalisation, of university experts and professional experts from trade unions or other professional or sector-based interest groups? What kind of data are available for asserting this point and explaining it? Should we see the trend as reflecting the greater restraint in France (compared with other countries) of university research relative to the assessment of social policies? Is it the result of a change in scientific standards that is shifting research further away from the needs of political actors? What can be said of the trend in publicly commissioned research at the social ministries and, more generally, the financing of public research via France's national research agency, ANR, accompanied by the growing importance of the rating of scientific publications?

At the same time, and in a contrasting trend, alliances are being formed, for example through the territorialisation of relations between public research, expertise and policy-making. In this respect, can a connection be seen with the emergence of new issues that justify the need for reform? This latter trend has certainly accompanied decentralisation but it also underscores the growing importance of the repertoire of social innovation, as well as confusion between the actors in charge of the design of policies and policy providers. In both respects, the key is to ascertain whether, and to what degree, these changes are blurring the boundaries between research, expertise and project engineering, as well as, increasingly, consultancy and public management.

The work of John Campbell and Ove Pedersen (2014) highlighted “knowledge regimes”. Elaborated at national level, these types of relations between policy-making and expertise combine the integration of the nature of expertise – pluralist to a varying

degree or focused on integrated public actors – with the structure of socio-economic institutions as inspired by the varieties of capitalism approach. The four types of knowledge regime established are then distributed according to the selected dimensions. The “Market-Oriented” model combines a pluralistic form of relation to the state and a liberal market economy; the “Politically Tempered” form combines centralised state expertise with a relatively uncoordinated market economy; the “Consensus-Oriented” approach stems from a non-centralised relation to the state and a coordinated market economy; and the “Statist-Technocratic” model combines a centralisation of expertise in the hands of the state with a specific type of coordinated market economy. These contrasted models illustrated the diversity and polarities of the various national cases in Europe. Are those models now disappearing to the benefit of regulation informed by another structural logic? If so, are we seeing a renewal of the general interest, with private experts responding to a “crisis of confidence” as public expertise cedes to the particularism of advocacy?

#### **4- Is academic research losing its autonomy and influence?**

Comparative research in the human and social sciences has since its foundation produced a corpus of empirically validated research work that seeks to reveal the key mechanisms in social dynamics (for example, Martin, 1997; Clasen, 2004). Does the autonomy claimed by academic scientific research in Europe suffer today from transformations in the methods of financing public research and its connection (as mentioned earlier) to policy-making? Is the capacity of academic research to assert the credibility of its analyses, as well as their relative success in debate and policy-making, facing a dead end? And what of the rigour of the scientific method, the ability of research to transmit its results for the purpose of action, and the ability to promote ideas (as think tanks do) that serve to consolidate an economic vision of social aspects (Beland, 2009; Argibay 2016)?

Our proposed issue on **a comparison of research and expertise in social policies** aims to stimulate comparative thinking on the various domains of social policies and health, as well as a cross-cutting approach to specific phenomena. Particularly welcome are international comparisons and comparisons between different policy scales, seen as spaces of social interaction. A further priority of this issue is an openness to different disciplines, from ethnography to political science and from socio-economics and sociology to history.

## **Select bibliography**

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**no later than Monday 6 April 2020**