Being a (Sub-)Prefect in Paris: The Self-Legitimization of the Prefectoral Corps’ Members Working Within French Core Ministries

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10.1 Preliminary Clarifications: Morphology of the Prefectoral Corps

As far as the territorial representatives of the central State are concerned, France bears many specificities. As already exposed in the introduction and analysed in previous chapters of the present volume (see Parts I and II), it is not only that modern prefects were created by First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte in 1800, and then exported and/or imported in other neighbour—or faraway—countries. In addition to the presence, since then and...
until nowadays, of one prefect in each and every French département (the French notion for province), and also of one sub-prefect in each and every territorial arrondissement (the French notion for district),¹ foreign readers have to bear in mind that the French public administration, and our vast civil service characterized by a typical career system, are regulated by the holy ‘principle of the distinction between grade (grade) and position (emploi)’ and organized on the basis of the co-existence of hundreds of administrative corps (corps administratifs). Let us give precisions on both aspects.

French administrative corps are collective bodies, which enjoy legal, historical (for the oldest and most prestigious ones) and sociological existence. They group together the civil servants regulated by the same ‘particular statute’ (in the form of a specific decree), who are entitled to the same (succession of) grades, and have a common right to a certain career (grade and salary progression) in the corps, based on a mix of recognized individual merit and seniority. A French administrative corps, an invention of the eighteenth century that has resisted to all revolutions and regimes’ falls, is typically what German sociologists Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber dubbed a ‘Stand’, and later on Weber’s translators in the USA, such as Talcott Parsons, a ‘status group’, as opposed to a ‘social class’ (see Weber 1978; Nisbet 1956: 260–274). Deeply rooted into the traditional ‘legitimacy of the eternal yesterday’, sticking to its traditions, animated and actuated by a genuine ‘esprit de corps’, a French administrative corps is a collective entity, bearing lots of features in common with a ‘profession’ or ‘professional group’ in the US sociology of the professions’ understanding (see Abbott 1988). The most prestigious of these professional groups, called the ‘grands corps’ (see Thoenig 1987; Suleiman 1978; Kessler 1986; Gervais 2019), among which one can find the prefectural corps, side to the Finance Inspectorate, the Council of State, the Court of Accounts and the diplomatic corps, have developed through generations collective strategies of self-protection, self-promotion and empowerment. These prestigious and influential grand corps are regularly criticized and accused of being the major custodians of an ossified ‘corporatist system’ of privileges and prerogatives that the long-lasting ‘Reform of the State’

¹These are not to be confused with the ‘arrondissements’ of Paris (well-known by any tourist who has once visited the City of Lights), Lyon and Marseilles, which are subdivisions of these three major municipalities, with their own mayors… but no sub-prefects.
policy (see Eymeri-Douzans 2013a) tried to vanquish by commanding the fusion of hundreds of corps, including some prestigious ones among State engineers (Gervais 2010). However, the most prestigious administrative grand corps remain very powerful collective actors in the governing and administration of nowadays France, even at the very top of the Executive—since President Macron, a former member of the Finance Inspectorate, succeeded in 2017 to President Hollande, who belonged to the Court of Accounts, and appointed as his first Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, who is a member of the Council of State, then in 2020 Jean Castex, who is a member of the Court of Accounts.

As for the principle of a ‘distinction between the grade and the position’ of French civil servants, it dates back to the Law on the status of army and navy officers adopted on 19 May 1834, which stated: ‘If the grade belongs to the officer, the position belongs to the King’. The current practical consequence of this principle is that each civil servant enjoying statutory tenure (being ‘titulaire’, so this does not apply to the quarter of contractual staff among all public employees) possess, like military officers, a given ‘grade’ into a given ‘corps’ to which s/he belongs and is appointed (sometimes for a limited mandate, sometimes not) to a given ‘position’ (‘emploi’) in a given ministry, public entity, public agency. The ‘grade’ confers to the owner a rank, bearing largely the same meaning as the nobility titles did under the Ancien Régime (Elias 2005; Cosandey 2016), whereas the ‘emploi’ is a pro tempore position in which a civil servant is appointed ‘in the Service’s Interest’ (says the Civil Service Statute) and from which, for the same motive, s/he can be removed and transferred to another position (with the notable exceptions of judiciary judges and full University professors who are, so to speak, ‘owners’ of their positions in application of a constitutional principle of independence). To use the classic notions of sociology, the ‘grade’ of French civil servants is a status they enjoy, whereas their ‘emploi’/position is the role they are asked to play.

In some cases, the name of the grade in the corps and the name of the position are different—e.g. French higher diplomats are either ‘conseillers des Affaires étrangères’ or ‘ministres plénipotentiaires’ (grades within the diplomatic corps) and they can be appointed as ‘ambassadeur de France’ to this or that country (position). However, in the case to be discussed here, denominations are identical: thus ‘prefect’ and ‘sub-prefect’ are both grades (e.g. Prefect Pascal Mailhos is one of the prominent members of the prefectoral corps in nowadays France) and positions (Prefect Pascal
Mailhos, at the time of writing and for probably three years or so, is the actual Prefect of the Region Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, and prefect of the département du Rhône, with his residence in the metropole of Lyon).

There are, in 2020, 18 regions in France (5 of them being Overseas), 101 départements (including the Overseas ones) thus 101 territorial prefectures, subdivided into 332 districts (arrondissements) with 233 sub-prefectures only—the difference being due to the fact that the main district of a département, where the prefecture is located, has logically no sub-prefecture. As a matter of fact, there are much more prefects than there are territorial prefectures, and much more sub-prefects than there are territorial sub-prefectures, as shown in Table 10.1.

If the territorial assignments of prefects outnumbers the 101 départements, this is because several specific positions, such as the very sensitive one of Paris ‘Prefect of Police’ (the custodian of the law, order and security in the capital), or the one of Secretary-General of Prefecture of the Region Île-de-France, are positions of/for prefects. The same is true for sub-prefects: in addition to the 233 sub-prefectures, of course headed by one sub-prefect each, many other positions are opened up to sub-prefects,

| Table 10.1 The 1131 members of the French prefectoral corps 30/09/2019 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Prefects | Sub-prefects and civil administrators of the Interior Ministry |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| With territorial assignment | 126 | 442 |
| With no territorial assignment, among whom: | 118 | 445 |
| Members of the CSATE\(^a\) | 12 | – |
| Councillors of the Government or ‘prefects on mission of public service’ | 14 | – |
| Directors-General of central administrations | 6 | 16 |
| Assigned to a position in the central administration of the Interior or in the ministers’ cabinet | 30 | 267 |
| On secondment to other ministries or on special leave | 56 | 162 |
| Total | 244 | 887 |

\(^a\)CSATE: Superior council of the territorial administration of the State

Source: Author’s calculations on the basis of Ministère de l’Intérieur, *Rapport 2019 sur la gestion du corps préfectoral et des hauts fonctionnaires du ministère de l’Intérieur*. MI/SG/DICOM-11/2019
such as secretary-general of a prefecture, SGAR (secretary-general for regional action, one per region) or director of cabinet of a prefect, mainly.

Far more relevant for the topic of the present chapter, Table 10.1. shows that half of the prefectoral corps’ members have no territorial assignment at all. As for prefects, this is the result of their double nature of ‘politischer beamte’—as Max Weber coined it, after the case of French prefects precisely (Weber 1978). As the bearer of the grade of prefect within the corps, a French prefect remains a prefect for life (even when going to pension, s/he retains the title of ‘honorary prefect’). But, since the positions as territorial prefects are listed by Article 13 of the 1958 French Constitution, with the ones of ambassadors and secretary-generals and directors-general of central administrations, as ‘emplois à la discrétion du Gouvernement’ (positions of political appointees), all territorial prefects can be ‘revoked ad nutum’, each Wednesday morning, by a presidential decree taken in the Council of Ministers. Therefore, when a new President and a new party come to power, without this being a US-like ‘spoils system’, successive ‘prefectoral movements’ (as they are called) provoke a musical chairs’ game: some are promoted prefects (among sub-prefects), others are transferred from one location to another, and others are removed from their prefecture if the Executive doubts on their loyalty. The latter are discreetly ‘assigned to the Ministry of Interior, Bureau of the Prefects, Place des Saussaies’ and asked to quietly wait at home for better days, while receiving their monthly salary (without bonuses). After a few months, they can be placed comfortably in a consultative body, the CSATE, the Superior council of the territorial administration of the State. Some of them may choose to go outside the ministry and work in public or private sector organizations, or for the president of some regional, départemental council or the mayor of a metropole with whom they have political connections (20 cases in 2019).

Yet, the major pars of prefects without a territorial assignment are well employed in the Core Executive, in various capacities. A few of them (19 in 2019) are given a ‘special mission of public service’ (préfets en mission spéciale de service public) or a position of ‘conseiller du Gouvernement’. These happy few are often missioned to pilot reform commissions producing reports, such as the well-known 1993 report Pour un Etat stratège, garant de l’Intérêt général (For a strategist State, protector of the General Interest), commonly known as Rapport Blanc after the name of Prefect Christian Blanc, who piloted the undertaking.
More frequently, prefects are appointed on the very top of the administrative apparatus of the Ministry for Interior: at the time of writing (June 2020), the Secretary-General of the Ministry is Prefect Christophe Mirmand, the director-general for interior security (DGSI) is Prefect Nicolas Lerner, the director-general of the national police (DGPN) is Prefect Frédéric Veaux... as well as numerous deputy-directors and under-directors working with them are also prefects. Thirdly, several prefects always take major (politically appointed) positions within the ministerial cabinet of the minister for Interior (the current ‘director of cabinet’/chief-of-staff is Prefect Stéphane Bouillon) and of his/her deputy ministers and secretaries of State. They can also be found in ministerial cabinets in other departments. A famous case in the latest decades is the one of Prefect Claude Guéant, who served Nicolas Sarkozy as his loyal chief-of-staff in the Interior, followed him to the Ministry for Economy and Finance in the same capacity, then came back with him to the Interior, prior to becoming Secretary-General of the Presidency when Nicolas Sarkozy became President. To say the truth, it is almost customary to find at least one prefect in the cabinet of the Prime Minister: Prefect Patrick Strzoda was the director of cabinet (chief-of-staff) of Prime Minister Cazeneuve, Prefect Eric Jalon is currently ‘chief of the pole for internal affairs’ in the cabinet of Prime Minister Philippe. Equally, there are always prefects in the entourage of the President: Prefect Pierre-René Lemas served as the first Secretary-General of the Presidency (chief-of-staff) under President François Hollande, and the same Prefect Patrick Strzoda is currently the ‘director of cabinet’ (a sort of deputy chief-of-staff) of President Emmanuel Macron. Fourth and finally, prefects may head various public bodies or agencies: for instance, of the fourteen directors of the famous National School of Administration (ENA) since 1945, three were prefects—the latest being Prefect Bernard Boucault between 2007 and 2012—and the deputy-director of ENA in charge of the coordination of internships and inspection of ENA interns is always a younger prefect geared towards a bright future (such as Prefect Eric Freysselinard in 2013–2017).

It must be added that the ‘prefectoral corps’, sociologically united by its culture and esprit de corps is, in legal terms, threefold: there is a corps of prefects, a corps of sub-prefects, and there are members of the inter-departmental corps of ‘civil administrators’ assigned, upon graduation from ENA, to the Ministry of Interior. Far from being an oddity—the French diplomatic corps is also composed of four categories,
deputy-secretaries of foreign affairs, secretaries of foreign affairs, counsellors of foreign affairs and plenipotentiary ministers—this situation results from the corporative cellular division over time, and also of more cynical reasons: the corps of prefects and the corps of sub-prefects are kept distinct in order to prevent any form of automaticity in promotion of sub-prefects as prefects during the career. This dichotomy existed well before the 1945 ordinance that created the ENA and the new corps of civil administrators, with better salaries and career development than the older corps of sub-prefects. Thus, the numerous sub-prefect positions offered for 70 years to each promotion of ENA graduates are proposed in the form of a ‘titularisation’ as civil administrator assigned to the Ministry for Interior and seconded as territorial sub-prefect, with no integration into the sub-prefects’ corps, which keeps its own recruitment channels (mid-career promotion of police commissioners and directors of prefectures, irregular specific concours, etc.). Thus, by a tortuous legal astuteness, the ‘aristocracy’ among sub-prefects, i.e. the ENA alumni who are likely to become prefects around 42–48 of age, possess the grade of civil administrator, serve as sub-prefects, and belong sociologically to the prefectoral corps. It is hard (and does not make lots of sense) to estimate the number of these actual sub-prefects who are legally civil administrators, and when they have no territorial assignment, are re-integrated into the corps of civil administrators: that is why, in Table 10.1, we have merged them with sub-prefects, ending up to a total of 887.

Half of these young-to-middle age officials whose ambition is to access the dignity of prefect work in Paris. Unsurprisingly, they can be found in any Directorate-General of the Ministry of Interior and related ministries, at all levels of the hierarchy: many desk officers, dozens of bureau’s chiefs, 28 under-directors, 9 heads of service, 10 ‘project’s directors’ and ‘high level experts’. Sub-prefects are also quite numerous among the special advisors serving within ministerial cabinets, in many various departments. Traditionally, they serve as chefs de cabinet (literally ‘chief of cabinet’), a discreet position not to be confounded with the abovementioned one of directeur de cabinet, the true chief-of-staff of a minister, whereas chefs de cabinet are in charge of recruiting and paying special advisors, coordinating the daily teamwork of the staff, handling the minister’s agenda, organizing his/her official visits in the provinces, and also taking care of touchy ‘reserved matters’ (including, in the good old times, declaring the minister’s revenues for the income tax, interacting with the male ministers’ mistresses to plan their dates with them, etc.). In the largest
ministerial cabinets, the position as special advisor for the minister’s relations with her/his constituency or her/his municipality is also often offered to a sub-prefect with experience on-the-ground. Last but not least, the Council of State and the Court of Accounts, supreme courts which commonly examine a plethora of litigations and budgetary documents coming from local authorities, are always happy to host several seconded sub-prefects and to benefit from their empirical competences. As a total, 102 sub-prefects and civil administrators work as such outside the Interior’s sphere.

We hope that these long but necessary preliminaries give to non-French readers the explanation for the otherwise mystery title of the present chapter: indeed, in the French administrative system, a (constantly renewed) few hundreds of prefects and sub-prefects work in Paris within the central State machinery without ceasing to belong to the prefectural corps and to behave as such—a possibility which would not make any sense in the context of The Netherlands or Nordic countries, where province or county governor/commissioner is only a position (according to the ‘position system’) occupied usually once and in one single location.

10.2 Research Question, Theories and Method

The French combination of the existence of strong administrative corps, within a lifelong career system, organized according to the distinction of grades and actual positions of their fellow members, allows for a research question elaborated at the juncture of a ‘new institutionalist’ approach to Public Administration studies, a more classic political scientist study of governmental elites, the sociology of the professions and cultural anthropology.

Going farther, here, into an avenue of research that the author has been following for two decades (Eymeri-Douzans 1999, 2006: 269–283; 2013b), the purpose of the present chapter is to better identify some major constitutive elements of what can be coined as ‘the prefectural culture’—an exemplary case of the wider phenomenon of institutional cultures (on that notion, see Lagroye and Offerlé 2010). ‘Culture’ is considered here—without any confusion with the use of the notion in the 1950–1970s culturalist approaches of authors such as Almond and Verba 1963—in a perspective initially inspired by Clifford Geertz’s anthropology (Geertz 1973, 1986) and which has enriched the neo-institutionalist approach to organizations (see, in particular, Powell and
DiMaggio 1991). The ‘culture’ of an institution and of the members who belong to it—in our case the French prefectural institution and the members of the prefectural corps—is not a corpus of ideas, principles and values carefully ordered and tightly assembled into a systematized ‘body of formal knowledge’ (as Eliot Freidson puts it regarding the medical profession, see Freidson 1986). It is more of a genuine ‘culture in action’ (in the sense defined in the major article by Swidler 1986), action in which the ‘ideal’ and ‘material’ dimensions of this culture are inextricably intertwined (as demonstrated by anthropologist Godelier 1984). In our view, an institutional or professional culture—since well-structured professions (not simple occupations or positions) are undoubtedly institutions—is to be approached in the same way as Emile Durkheim proposed to understand religion: ‘un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques’—a cohesive system of beliefs and practices (Durkheim 2003: 65). It logically implies that a culture is always ‘in action’, actuated, and that it is therefore misleading to try and distinguish its ideational or ideological dimensions from its practical dimensions: a culture-in-action is a simultaneous complexion of idea, logos and praxis. Following this conceptual vein, we already defined an ‘institutional culture’ as an ‘indecomposable compound of representations, beliefs, knowledge, know-how and practices of which all members of the institution participate’, of course in various forms and to variable extents (Eymeri-Douzans 2006: 272). The culture of a given institution is the institution embodied and actuated by its fellow members.

The purpose of the present chapter is not to give detailed account of the institutional culture of French prefects, nor to draw its Weberian ideal-type in a systematic way: this would be a very ambitious undertaking, requiring years of ethnographic observation of the daily work and life of prefects and sub-prefects working on-the-ground, and the writing of a long book providing a ‘thick description’ in Geert’s manner. In the very limited number of pages at our disposal here, what can be offered is quite different. On the basis of the vast, yet limited, empirical material at the disposal of the author thanks to his 20 years of successive surveys and investigations, combining various methods (documentary analysis, especially of grey literature, archives and HR files, semi-directive interviews, questionnaires, direct and even participative observation), within the French ‘Core Executive’ (in the sense of Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995), we can propose here an analysis of the situation of those prefects and sub-prefects who, at one time or another of their long careers, serve in the
central ministries and national agencies as well as in ministerial cabinets. When they are, for a few years, appointed in Paris, these officials take a ‘new job’, have a different occupation and fulfil different tasks than on-the-ground. However, it does not mean that they are asked or willing to abandon by the same token their specific institutional/professional culture, their prefectoral identity… for many good reasons including that their future success in the corps/profession means going back to a (higher) position in a prefecture. Thus, observing prefects and sub-prefects at work in the central machinery of the State can be used as a sort of ‘living laboratory experience’ which allows the researcher to better identify what are the few enduring and thus totemic features of the ‘prefectoral culture’, which resist to their transplantation in Paris, and are even asserted by these members of the prefectural corps who want to maintain their distance and ‘distinction’ (in the sense of Bourdieu 1987) vis-à-vis the classic bureaucratic culture of the senior officials who work at the centre for life (Eymeri-Douzans 2013b).

In order to shed light on this ‘distinctive’ game of cultural assertion and legitimization of the self and of the group (see Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), the most convenient way here is to investigate the ‘order of discourse’ proper to the considered group, bearing in mind that the set of beliefs, values, rituals and the ‘aesthetic of the self’ (Foucault 1984) that their discourse carries does influence, in various ways and degrees, the actual behaviour and practices of these prefects and sub-prefects temporarily working in the central apparatus of the State.

Let us now investigate these three totemic components of the ‘prefectoral culture’ that the prefects and sub-prefects working in Paris are repeatedly claiming to embody.

10.3 Findings: A Threefold Prefectoral Identity

‘Les gens de la Préfecture’/‘the people from the Préfecture’—a common and convenient all-embracing formula used constantly by our interlocutors to circumvent the abovementioned legal subtleties of the three different legal corpses—appointed in Paris claim vividly their prefectoral identity. This is true both for the civil servants who became sub-prefects at mid-career and for the ENA graduates (see Eymeri-Douzans 2001) who immediately opt for the Ministry for Interior: ‘According to a tradition instated in our Ministry, many youngsters come here so as to work on the ground’, says the deputy-director in charge of the HRM of
the prefectoral corps (M., 45, ENA, deputy-director\textsuperscript{2}). Let aside some rare cases of exclusively Parisian careers, the ENA alumni serving in the Ministry for Interior spend usually two-thirds of their 38-to-40 years of career outside Paris. Consequently, territorial prefectures are their main reference and horizon: ‘I am a member of the prefectoral corps’, said one (M., 41, ENA, deputy-director), ‘as a sub-prefect myself, I have…’, said the other (M, 45, ENA, under-director). This is a leitmotiv they all sing when asked to draw their succinct self-portrait.

Moreover, any observer interested in the daily routine of public bureaucracies easily notices that the central administration of the Ministry for Interior seems saturated with the echoes of the prefectures’ way-of-life. These are symbolic features such as peculiar titles (e.g. directors-general are entitled in this sole ministry to a ‘directeur de cabinet’ who doesn’t run any cabinet team, but is a replica of his/her homologue assisting each prefect in each prefecture); special objects (many offices in the Ministry are equipped with the famous ‘RIMBAUD’ phones which connect all prefects in the ground with the highest authorities of the State in view of prompt crisis management and secured ‘Secret-Défense’ oral communications); old-fashioned rituals (ceremonious ushers in tailcoat accompany/introduce visitors and still transmit handwritten messages on armored silver plates). The very setting of the ministry’s main building, Beauvau Square, where the ministers’ office and Secretariat-General are located, is quite illustrative for the culture of the institution: vast and long corridors in the Third Republic style, bordered by marble columns, walls decorated with gilded stucco and shining mosaic pavements, tens of massive double doors padded with blue velvet and garnished with bronze handles protecting the secretary-general and the directors-generals (almost all prefects, as already said). Last but not least, life in the Ministry for Interior presents certain advantages that are less common in other departments, as a fleet of official chauffeured cars carrying day and night the hierarchs from home to work and back (an exclusive privilege of directors-generals in other ministries), or a number of low rent splendid apartments allowing prefects temporarily working in Paris, and their families, to preserve their way-of-life, since they are accustomed to be housed for free in all-furnished palaces, or at least mansion houses, when they work in the provinces.

\textsuperscript{2} Inter brackets: gender, age, recruitment path, actual position of the quoted interviewees.
On the whole, prefects and sub-prefects we have met in the Core Executive seem to be somehow in transit in Paris—much alike diplomats when they are not serving abroad. They even confess their nostalgia:

‘When I’m on the ground, I’m happy. It suits my aspirations, my skills and my faults. I feel at ease, much more than in Paris’ (M., 45, ENA, under-director). ‘Although I’m currently working in Paris, I feel closer to a sub-prefect than to someone who choose to make his entire career at the centre, here in the Ministry’. (M., 28, ENA, bureau chief)

Indeed, the prefectures are the core of the institutional culture of the Interior: ‘Oh, this is crystal clear! Everything has to do with the prefectures in this Ministry! Prestige comes from there’ (M., 41, ENA, deputy-director). Prestige indeed, and more importantly the legitimacy and legitimization of the members of the prefectoral corps.

Regardless of seniority or assignments, our interviewees claim their enduring identity as ‘people of the Préfecturale’. They actually do it by means of a triple symbolic upgrade backed by a triple ‘equivalence’ (on that notion, Boltanski 1990) that they explicitly establish between themselves and other major players of the governing processes of contemporary France. Firstly, they all claim to be persons with a rich ‘ground-level experience’ and thus reject the label of ‘bureaucrats’ for themselves. Secondly, all respondents emphasize their quality of ‘representatives of the State’—a general legitimacy that cannot be downsized to be a specialized thus limited expertise in one specific policy area. Thirdly, they pretend to be the only civil servants who really understand the very ‘logic of politics’: they turn to their own advantage the constant criticism against prefects’ ‘politicianization’… and assume by the same token their vocation to participate, along with elected politicians, to the governing of the nation. Let us give a closer look to each of these three totemic aspects.

10.3.1 ‘Never Call Me a Bureaucrat! We, Prefects, Are People with Ground-Level Experience!’

How many times we have heard among (sub-)perfects: ‘You know, I’m a guy experienced on-the-ground!’ (in French, ‘un homme de terrain’)? This is true even for those whose C.V. shows a rather limited experience in the prefectures. For instance, a top official from the Interior, who spent only four years of his life in a prefecture (1987–1991), then joined
a ministerial cabinet in Paris, then became Director-General of Public Administration and the Civil Service, and eventually deputy-director-general of RATP (the Paris public transports), says:

I’m now capable to talk with metro drivers and engage in harsh negotiations with Union’s leaders only because I’ve started my career in a prefecture. It makes us people with ground-level experience! I can really feel the difference with those who never left their cocoon in Bercy [location of the Finance Ministry] and see the world from their ivory tower. (M., 54, ENA, on secondment)

‘We are guys experienced on-the-ground’ happens to be a recurrent *topos* of the prefectoral identity discourse of self-legitimization. ‘We are neither bureaucrats nor technocrats!’, intone the prefectoral chorus in a single voice. When asked to comment on the attacks that elected politicians reiteratively launch against the ‘Enarchs’/énarques (the top civil servants graduated from the ENA), one interviewee declares:

It doesn’t really concern me! This is probably the answer people from the Interior always give you. I don’t think politicians have the prefectoral corps in mind. Although we share the same faults with the other énarques, the fact that we work on-the-ground, that we manage real crises and that we are directly confronted with lobbies, local powers, all this forces us to leave the intellectual world of theory! (M., 45, ENA, deputy-dir.)

Another colleague comments:

What bothers me here, in Paris, is to be surrounded only by bureaucrats. Here, you feel cramped, drained. It is a whole different world on-the-ground! There, you can have a sense of your own responsibilities, you have an instant feedback and you cannot help to notice if you’re wrong. There, you learn that you don’t have the right to be wrong. Here, if you make a mistake, the responsibility gets always diluted. (M., 43, ENA, deputy-director)

This unanimous praise given to on-the-ground experience, cradle of all virtues, is also a way for them to downgrade the value of the desk-work of Parisian civil servants. Efficiency, expediency, immersion in the real society and business, accountability, openness and tolerance:
Unlike in Paris, where administrators work in isolation, when you are on-the-ground, you learn quickly that you have always to listen. So, I took my lessons of openness and tolerance in managing the everyday business there, like tracing the route of a road or renovating a church. Once you get that, you’ll never lose it! (M., 41, ENA, deputy-director)

Our unanimous interlocutors draw their self-portrait as officials with ground-level experience and craft, to whom the ‘terrain’, the ‘ground’ is the alpha and omega of their professional achievements, the source of all those virtues that make them ‘men (or women) of action’, realistic, efficient, moved by a democratic ethos... in perfect contrast with the narrow-minded ‘bureaucrats’ or the arrogant ‘technocrats’ to be found in central administrations. But let us not be misled. This rhetoric which celebrates administration at the grassroots and territorial governance has lots to do with the turf wars and inter-institutional conflicts animating the now permanent process of ‘State Reform’ in France (see Bezes 2009; Cole 2008; Eymeri-Douzans 2013a; Gervais 2019). One major battle of this inter-institutional war has revolved around the neo-managerialist shift of the administrative ethos and rationale, with ‘bureaucrats’ summoned to become ‘public managers’, moulded after the pattern of the top officials from ‘Bercy’—the dominant Economy and Finance Ministry, named after the Eastern quartier of Paris where it is located. The prefectoral corps has never accepted to be treated as mere object, or transmission of ongoing reform policies: prefects claim for a leading role in the State Reform, both in its conception and, obviously, in the piloting of its implementation. Thus, overplaying their prefectoral identity of ‘(wo)men of action with ground-level experience’ is a very astute way to both reject the ‘bureaucrats’/‘technocrats’ stigmata and to claim to meet the criteria of excellence attached to the ‘new public manager’ even better than the Bercy’s ‘financiers’, since prefects and sub-prefects have better practical skills and know-how of the more and more de-concentrated ‘territorial administration of the Republic’ and implementation of public policies and reforms in the context of the increasingly decentralized territorial governance of France (for all details and complete bibliographies, see Pasquier et al. 2011).

We can observe here that institutional/professional cultures, such as the one of the prefectoral corps, are not at all ‘folkloric’ identity reassertions, but valuable cognitive resources strategically activated as
weapons in the never-ending inter-institutional power struggles between rival ministries and corpses.

10.3.2 ‘Representing the State’... the Whole State, Nothing but the State

Prefects and sub-prefects have the mission to ‘represent the State’ in inland France at the ‘territorial’ level of regions, départements and arrondissements. Hence, several significant consequences: like diplomats abroad, ‘the people of the Préf’ are, among all civil servants, the best accustomed to *embody the State* in the routine of their daily work, that is to speak and to act *on behalf of the State*, which, thanks to the social magic of representation, acquires an actual existence. ‘We are the maintainers of the State’, perceptively noticed Prefect Genebrier (*Le Monde*, July 10, 1981, quoted by Chagnollaud 1991: 171). As already studied by Pierre Karila-Cohen in the present opus (Chapter 8), with prefects we are in the presence of a rare case of institutional objectification by and to the benefit of a status group whose members enjoy, each and all together, in a personalized manner, the very special identity of an impersonated and abstract *persona ficta*—the mega-institution called ‘the State’.

More importantly, members of the prefectoral corps, when working on the territory, do not embody a small part, a little piece of the complex governmental machinery, but ‘the State’ as a whole. Thus, it is an uncomfortable and awkward situation for them to come and work in Paris, where they are aliens within the highly differentiated, fragmented entrails of central government, animated by constant inter-departmental rivalries. One interviewee confesses lucidly this structural difficulty:

The big problem of the Interior—I reckon I’m a bit critical to my own home—is that we always identify ourselves with the authority of central government. ‘We are prefects, we are the State!’ So, we are like the Roman Curia confronted with the Barbarians [smile]. Hence, we have a lot of problems when in Paris. (M., 34, ENA, under-dir.)

Indeed, these people who have got accustomed, as a second nature, to personify the State when they work on-the-ground cannot accept to be downgraded to the level of ordinary civil servants, compelled to bustle about in the exiguous limits of an ordinary ministry, which they leave only to seat in RIM, the inter-departmental meetings held in Matignon Palace
to negotiate the drafting of legislations and regulations (see Dulong et al.
2019), where they are expected to advocate for the limited ‘sectorial’
views and defend the ‘sectorial’ thus vested interests of the Interior only,
whereas the representatives of the Prime Minister office and the ones of
Bercy (Economy and Finance) are the only ones around the vast tables
to be entitled to speak on behalf of ‘the General Interest’—this almost
synonym of ‘the State’ in French language. Therefore, it is easy to under-
stand why the institutional culture of the Interior Ministry is so focused
upon, or enshrined into the professional culture of the prefectoral corps:
in the specific case of this department, insisting upon a more classic
bureaucratic culture as a central administration would be, for the prefects
who control (more or less) the top hierarchy of the ministry, to accept
a silly capitis deminutio, a downgrading of their status to the one of an
ordinary ministerial department just like the others, a ‘sectorial’ adminis-
tration. On the contrary, constantly emphasizing the ‘territorial’ rationale
of their activity and perspective—despite the risk of a certain cognitive
dissonance—appears to be a sound strategy to successfully claim for them-
selves, and for the whole Interior Ministry, the authority and legitimacy
of those who embody and preserve the State.

All our prefectoral interlocutors, wherever we have interacted with
them—in the central services of the Interior, on secondment to the
Council of State, within ministers’ staffs—seem to participate of the State
grandeur, without using explicitly this notion inherited from the Classic
Ages and revived under the Gaullist era, yet approximating it by verbs
of action such as to federate, to gain height, to bring together, to inte-
grate, to arbitrate, with a constant view to reach beyond specific cases,
vested interests and particular circumstances, to the General Interest.
This common axiological ground—we may even speak of a specific ethic-aesthetic of the self (Foucault 1984)—seems to be one of the key
motivations for them to have opted, among other possibilities especially
when graduating from the ENA, for a prefectoral career:

‘I’m not here by accident. I wasn’t interested in working for a narrowly
specialized ministry because I didn’t want to be trapped into one policy
field only. I was interested in a generalist approach related to the regalian

3 A very French notion with no exact equivalent in English, the Dictionary of the
French Academy defines this adjective as follows: ‘Régalien, régaliennne: Se dit de ce qui
missions and attributes of the State, as it is the case here in the Préfecture and the Interior’ (M., 34, ENA, under-director). ‘The Public Service doctrine, the State with a capital S, ta-ra-ta-ta, these are not futile notions for me! […] Despite all contradictions, the civil service is the very place where we defend what I think to be the General Interest. And this is all the more true for the Interior because it fulfils a special mission, consubstantial with the State, I would say’. (M., 49, ENA, deputy-director)

The intimate connection of the prefectural administration and the Interior with the authority of the sovereign State and the ideology of the General Interest is the recurrent theme of the (sub-)prefects’ anthem. Of course, prefects do not play anymore the role they had ‘before the 1982 decentralization reform when [they] were all-powerful in their départements’ (M., 34, ENA, under-director)—a vision of a Golden Age which deserves to be nuanced as brilliantly demonstrated (by Grémion 1976). Nowadays France has become a highly decentralized State where ‘territorial governance’ is more and more a multi-actors, networked joint action (see Pasquier et al. 2007). Prefects have adapted:

The prefect is a sort of a universal work inspector, that is a person who has the technical competences, the disposition to listen and the arbitration authority acknowledged by all parts, who reviews the legality of local governments’ acts, who acts as a mediator and who stirs the implementation of national public policies and European programmes. (M., 43, ENA, under-director)

Meeting mayors, getting together businessmen, setting up projects, listening to civil society demands, making constant phone calls with everybody: the prefect is a convenor. He brings people together. (M., 42, ENA, under-director)

Other metaphors are available—such the one of a ‘catalyzer’ (M., 28, ENA, bureau chief)—all emphasizing the synthesizing role, in a logical as well as a chemical sense, of a prefectural corps whose members consider themselves as vectors of ‘unity’, ‘cohesion’ and ‘coordination’: unity of the ‘one and indivisible French Republic’, ‘territorial cohesion the territory’, coordination of public policies’ implementation by both territorialized State services, public agencies and elected local governments.

*est inhérent à l’exercice du pouvoir souverain*/‘Regalian: Refers to what is inherent to the exercise of sovereign power’.
Last but not least, especially in the time of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic crisis when these lines are written, French prefects and sub-prefects are extremely proud to be entrusted with the essential responsibility of piloting crisis management, regardless their causes, from urban riots to classic social conflicts, from industrial accidents to natural catastrophes, from terrorist attacks to pandemic crisis, and maintaining public order in all these vicissitudes that France has often gone through in the latest decade. Even if crises pop up on prefects’ agendas intermittently, such a mission relating to the ‘continuity of the State’, and its nature as our (democratic) Leviathan, is a strong source of legitimization for the whole corps, giving its members the prestige of those in charge of safeguarding the country and the Nation.

Q.: What is precisely the identity of the Interior?—It’s the fact that here, unlike other ministries, we manage the abnormal, the unforeseen, the extraordinary, almost on a daily basis. Thus, we are more familiar with an emergency management of things that one may be when dealing with industrial investments or public transports. Moreover, the Interior is a ministry of generalists: prefects, and policemen, are the general managers of all sort of crises. And prefects more than policemen, because we have to bring together various actors and institutions. […]. So, one could define the Interior’s culture by saying that it is the place of regalian missions and we all feel it very deeply. (M., 34, ENA, under-director)

‘General crises’ managers’: what better way to capture the values of supreme effectiveness and resilience that prefects claim to embody as actual and effective custodians of the State, and not only symbolic and honorific representatives of it in a few ceremonies where they wear their splendid uniforms.

10.3.3 ‘We Are the Only Civil Servants to Understand the Very Logic of Politics’

As already mentioned, the hybrid legal special legal status of prefects make them the typical ‘politischer beamte’ in Weber’s words (Weber 1978). Although prefects are not the only top officials in France to be politically appointed and dismissed freely by the Executive, they count among the very rare cases of public agents whose ‘political, philosophic and religious opinions’ may be recorded officially and without legal offence in their individual professional files—which is strictly forbidden by law for
almost all French public employees. History plays an important role in this respect: throughout the nineteenth century, especially during the Second Empire (1852–1870) when these ‘emperors with little feet’—as Napoleon pleasantly called his prefects—were supervising the system of ‘official candidates’ for legislative elections, and appointing all mayors, prefects acquired the reputation of being government’s electoral agents. If we add that prefects also keep the government informed about the political opinions and moods of the citizens on-the-ground (in connection with intelligence services), manage crises of all kind, command security forces, welcome any minister paying a visit to their territory, it is no surprise that prefects are considered to be very politicized by the media, the public opinion, and the common sense knowledge of politicians.

Overshadowing the bulk of purely administrative work done by prefects, this label is unflattering, and to a certain extent inaccurate (see Tanguy 2009). Nevertheless, examined through the cold lenses of both the Weberian ideal-type of the rational-legal bureaucracy or the ones of a French or British model of professional and apolitical civil service (for a comparison see Dreyfus 2000), or considered with the critical eyes of journalists and ordinary citizens, the verdict is identical: prefects are said to be ‘the most politicized civil servants’... and this is a true stigmatization in such a country as France where the so-called ‘political class’ has become very unpopular.

Since such a politicization sin jeopardizes the ‘social honour’ attached to their status group, the only solution for (sub-)prefects is to make a virtue out of a necessity by trying to turn the stigma to their own profit. Much like patricians of Ancient Rome, constrained by their status to play the evergetes—‘an institution is such a trap that whoever is caught in it has no choice but to be conscientious’ (Veyne 1971)—, modern prefects and sub-prefects willingly incorporate their double-face identity. Instead of suffering from the stigma of politicization and uselessly trying to refute it, they accept it proudly, with a bit of showing off:

We are considered to be politicised. So what?! For my part, I say it’s for the better! Fortunately enough, there are at the top of the State, because it is precisely where we stand, people who have an actual knowledge of the real world, whose loyalty to the State is unquestionable and who are capable to talk to politicians, something most civil servants are unable to do. (M., 34, ENA, under-director)
We, I mean the Préfecture, we understand what elected officials want, the president of a region, or a minister. We speak their language. We are deciphering their allusions. We are able to transmit their messages and make the reality on the ground intelligible for them. We are both interpreters and translators! We are bridging politics and administration! And we are doing it like a second nature! (M., 62, ENA, prefect, DG of a national agency)

Why do you think so many ministers choose a prefect as their chef de cabinet? Do you know what a chef de cabinet does? The minister’s agenda, his or her tax statement, his or her bank accounts, his or her dates, his or her visits in the country, always so political, and the secret funds… and I may go on! If we are appointed to such positions, it is because we are the only civil servants that politicians really trust! It’s as simple as that! (M., 41, ENA, ministerial cabinet)

Absolute loyalty is nothing but the reverse of the risk of being instantly recalled and making one’s career under the burden of political patronage. Moreover, constantly rubbing shoulders with elected officials of all ranks during their territorial assignments eventually creates a sort of congeniality between prefects and politicians.

Our former ENA classmates who become civil administrators in an ordinary ministry are locked up in their small offices, far away from real politics. As long as they don’t have the experience of working in a ministerial cabinet, they are unable to understand the other side of things, the real game. On the contrary, from our first assignment as director of cabinet in a prefecture, they threw us straight into politics, just like Obelix into the caldron of magical potion. You spend your first years in a prefecture and I can assure you that you’ve understood all you need to know about French politics: the feudal nature of our politicians; the inclination of the country for presidential politics; the void of assemblies’ sessions, be it a municipal council or the houses of Parliament; the panic fear to take any decisions when elections are in sight; and of course the painful slowness of policy implementation. After that, nothing can surprise you anymore! (M, 41, ENA, under-director)

Further accounts offer supplementary proof that prefects and sub-prefects do much more than reversing the politicization stigma by emphasizing their empathy with politicians. They go as far as claiming their ability to see, think and act like politicians do:
Q.: Can you tell me more about this specific culture of the Interior?—In sociological terms, the Ministry rests on two pillars: the police and the prefects. The Préfectorale, hum, how to describe it? We have the constant will to appease conflicts, to avoid violent outcomes. To a certain extent, we prefer to sink disagreements into a very positive, hypocritical view on things [embarrassed mimics]. Prefects’ attitude has something of a court game. We are not a world of technicians like the Ministry for Public Infrastructures, with their engineers who are more inclined to consider things objectively. Typically, an engineer will put it bluntly: ‘These are the facts, true to a technical and objective approach’. Here, there is always an apprehension, a cautious way to deal with constraints that are not always explicit because they are not always respectable. To be a prefect means always acting in order to appease conflicts, to smooth processes, to avoid problems. It is an art of compromise to produce social harmony! Simply put, it is politics! We are political animals, different from politicians, but still political. (M., 49, ENA, under-director)

What an explicit way to claim not only the know-how and technical skills proper to politicians, acquired thanks to a sustained work on-the-ground, but also the very ability to see and phrase reality from the political stance in order to act upon it!

So, unlike the other ENA alumni serving in the central bureaucracy, those ‘State guardians’ that we have studied extensively (Eymeri-Douzans 1999) and who cultivate an ethic-aesthetic of the self and a self-legitimization which are mainly of technocratic nature (Dubois and Dulong 1999), the members of the prefectoral corps assume to participate in the governmentality (Foucault 2004) processes of nowadays France by means of their political capacities. Hence, in the never-ending palace wars of contemporary ‘court politics’ (Rhodes 2014) in the summits of the State, where rival groups of top officials are in competition to attract the favours of the Prince, prefects use and abuse of their advantageous possibility to picture themselves as the mirrored image of politicians: ‘You and us, we are almost alike’ is the message prefects working in the Core Executive keep repeating to the political masters of the day in order to assess their vocation to co-govern by their side.

In that regard, it was remarkable, in the period 2007–2012, how President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister François Fillon, who—for once—did not have a professional background in the higher civil service, were not ENA alumni, and never camouflaged their hostility towards the ‘ruling class’ of ENA people, manifested a strong preference for the
‘quasi-political’ people of the prefectoral corps in the higher appointments they made. Moreover, since Nicolas Sarkozy truly established his political prominence while at the head of the Interior Ministry, he logically based his strategy for conquering the Presidency on a network of prefects—the abovementioned Prefect Claude Guéant being the best known among many others. President Hollande, a former president of a départemental council, also relied a lot on prefects, as well as Prime Minister Valls, a former minister of the Interior himself.

Yet, the situation has recently changed with President Macron and Prime Minister Philippe (see Cole 2019; Dolez et al. 2019), who both have personal networks much more rooted into business, finance, the digital economy and the legal professions (see Vauchez and France 2017). But ‘the future lasts long’, as General de Gaulle once wrote in his memoirs: the prefectoral corps has survived to all vicissitudes since 220 years ago, and this institution still looks very robust and vivid.

10.4 Conclusive Remarks

To briefly conclude without repetitions, let us return to some methodological thoughts. Our atypical and partial investigation of a significant but minority sub-group of a wider status group (almost a profession in the US meaning) sharing a strong common institutional culture, subgroup whose members find themselves working in Paris outside the usual positions and institutional roles that constitute the ‘core business’ of the corps, is a research protocol—certainly not free of limits and biases—which seems to make it possible to effectively grasp some of the most structuring cultural patterns of this prefectoral culture. In such a context of interviewing people at a good distance from the ground, these major cultural features seem to have more easily accessed to the ‘discursive consciousness’ of the actors (in the sense of Giddens 1984), whereas a prefect or sub-prefect observed by the researcher on-the-ground, immerged into the hic et nunc of the ‘practical economy of his/her practices’ (to borrow from Bourdieu 1990) would have been less capable to emerge from the flux and shared implicits of their ‘practical consciousness’—in Giddens’ words—or ‘logic of practice’—in Bourdieu’s words.
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