

WHAT THEORETICAL TOOLS ARE NEEDED TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE DIGITALIZATION OF PUBLIC ACTION?

Outline for a sociology of the plurality of sociotechnical logics of
action

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ABSTRACT

Our article outlines a model for analysing both the sphere of State production of digital governmentalities, and the plurality of sociotechnical logics of public action. The intersection of these two lines of inquiry enables us both to carry out a global analysis of the regimes of rationalizing public action through digital technology, and to grasp the concrete forms of digital instrumentation, as well as their different modes of appropriation. The aim of this theoretical outline is to construct a socio-technical understanding of the production of digital governmentalities and the shifts generated by these new institutional regimes, both for public agents and for their constituents.

Keywords: public action, field, context, disposition, dispositif, instrument, digital.

Following on directly from my introduction to this issue, I wish to make a more personal contribution here, with the aim of outlining a model that can be used to analyse both the sphere of State production of digital governmentalities (Arsène and Mabi, 2021), and the plurality of socio-technical logics of public action. At the intersection of these two lines of inquiry, an overall analysis of the regimes of rationalization of public action through digital technology can be carried out, and the concrete forms of digital instrumentation can be understood, along with their different modes of appropriation (Chiapello and Gilbert, 2013; Courmont and Le Galès, 2019). The aim of this theoretical outline is therefore to construct a socio-technical understanding of the production of digital governmentalities and the shifts produced by these new institutional regimes, both for public agents and for their constituents.

This presents a specific challenge, that of reintroducing the role of instruments and *dispositifs* (Halpern et al., 2019; 2014; Baudot, 2014; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004) into a sociology of fields and dispositions. More broadly, I am outlining what I am tempted to call, as a first approximation, a *sociology of the plurality of sociotechnical logics of action*. My proposal is structured in three parts. First, I examine the place given to things' and objects in the Bourdieusian and Lahirian sociologies on which I draw. The second part then puts forward several resolutions concerning the need to understand *dispositional affordances* and *conventional affordances* jointly in order to consider public action in the age of its digital instrumentation. Finally, I put forward an example of the application of my theoretical model to the public employment service.

FIELDS, CONTEXTS, DISPOSITIONS, THINGS

Pierre Bourdieu and his continuators – who inspired my present proposal – argued that there are two forms of social that meet each other: what they call '*history made thing*' and '*history made body*'. On the one hand, processes of institutionalization form social spaces (fields and *hors-champs*); on the other, processes of incorporation produce schemas of thought, action, evaluation, and so on.

These Siamese twins, the sociology of fields-habitus and the sociology of contexts-dispositions, conceive of social practices as a combination of embodied inclinations resulting from socializing frameworks prior to action (individuals' social conditions of production), and singular practical contexts (the institutional conditions allowing the activation of dispositions). To varying degrees, they call for, allow, suspend or proscribe the enactment of the various dispositions of the social subjects involved in the action.

From the [in]adequate habitus to the object

The 'field-habitus' dialectic clearly makes little or no specific room for objects, which are most often subsumed under the category of 'things', a term that in Bourdieu's work can denote a field, an institution, a mechanism, or possibly even an object. Therefore, technical artefacts do not feature very prominently in the accounts of social dynamics, yet are not completely absent either, particularly when they are part of the field of production of symbolic goods: 'The physical object that is the book becomes a social object only when it meets its other half, the embodied half of the reader or, more precisely, of the social subject or social agent endowed with the dispositions that lead them to read it and make them capable of deciphering it (these are the two dimensions of habitus: the "inclination" and the "capability")' (Bourdieu, 2015: 232, our translation). In this passage, the cultural object 'book' acquires its social nature insofar as it becomes the object of a use and therefore of users, social agents whose dispositions enable them to take it up ('to have the [in]appropriate habitus for the object'¹: *ibid.*: 240, our translation). This is an essential element, but it says nothing about the fact that the object in question is, one might say, already *technically* a social object, even before it is mobilized in action. It is firstly social in that it has been shaped by an author who has embedded symbolic content within it; it is secondly social as the object of a relationship to symbolic goods (distinction, cultural goodwill, a taste for necessity, etc.); and it is also social because it is based on a materiality that encodes the scripts *co-defining* its use. It is these socially constructed technical and symbolic inscriptions that call for 'a reactivation that is the work of the appropriate habitus', for 'it is when a socialized body encounters objects structured according to the very structures by which it is itself structured that this sort of immediate adjustment takes place that gives behaviour the appearance of having purpose' (*ibid.*: 252 and 299, our translation). But here too, the 'habitus-objects' alignment (i.e. the 'dispositions-functionalities' coincidence) is only a particular case of the individuals-instruments relationship. Non-use, misuse, abuse, breaking and various other forms of contestation are common practical regimes, revealing a discrepancy that cannot simply be read as a lack of skills or a deficient relationship to instrumental practice. Bearing in mind that objects are materialized social structures, discrepancies in use reveal discrepancies in relation to the institution that has made them its instruments.

In other passages, objects are de facto more clearly understood as belonging to processes of institutionalization of the social 'embedded' in materialities, and in this respect they are shaped in accordance with the rules of the game of a field they support. By placing objects in the category of 'things', a term that also denotes field logics, Pierre Bourdieu is implying that technical artefacts do indeed convey social mechanisms. This conformation makes them 'archaeological' elements of the social (he speaks of 'dead social' or 'mutilated objects', insofar as they await their 'dispositional half'), but they are also structuring insofar as they frame relationships and, in turn, participate in the elaboration of the social (socialization) and in the

¹ '[...] The body appropriated by history appropriates in an absolute and immediate way the things inhabited by the same history' (Bourdieu, 2021: 538, our translation).

learning mechanisms through which the logics of the field are made available in individuals' bodies. Dispositions are thus embedded in objects (which are acted upon), but these objects also seize upon the dispositions (they are actants). In other words, the conditions of felicity in the use of an object depend on an alignment between the scripts embedded in the object and the dispositions of the individuals who use it. The specification of objects is inextricably linked to the specification of the social subjects with whom they come into contact. Attention to things, insofar as they are coupled to bodies, ultimately leads us to consider that the 'objective chance' produced by the 'field-habitus' dialectic is a matter of attention to 'everything that makes up the apparatus' (*ibid.*: 294, our translation), including objects, because they are socially constituted just as people are.

Contexts and artefacts

Inspired by the Bourdieusian theoretical framework, Bernard Lahire's contextualist-dispositionist sociology, for its part, grants a place to 'things' and objects insofar as they convey a 'material continuity', but are variously appropriated from social and symbolic frameworks that differ in time and space. They are seen as having no disposition:

socially constituted to act, feel, sense, believe, all of which would be the product of their experiences. In this sense, objects have no particular attitude towards other objects or humans. These differences mean that objects, whilst they are omnipresent in social life and part of the constraints which humans must continuously come to terms with and therefore an issue for researchers in social science, are anything but actors (Lahire, [2015] 2019).

This assertion, as reasonable as it may appear – objects do not have dispositions in the same way as people do – is nonetheless debatable. Fundamentally, objects carry action programmes which, while they are not strictly speaking *dispositions* materially embodied in a mind and body, are nevertheless elements materially 'embedded' in objects of a technical nature (another form of social in a folded state) and through which they interface with the *dispositional affordances* of social subjects and the *conventional affordances* of institutions (Akrich, 1987). Technical objects are certainly not actors in the same way as a 'social individual' (person or collective) is, but it is nonetheless true that they participate as both actants and 'acted upon'. Moreover, while they are usually tools intentionally designed for practical use, they do become – caught up in the action – constituent parts of it. The internalization of patterns of action (i.e. the process in which they become dispositions) is based on 'social relations of interdependence with other actors, or by maintaining, through the mediation of other actors, relationships with multiple objects whose mode or modes of use and appreciation they learn' (Lahire, [1998] 2011: 176).

Clearly, artefacts are not omnipotent and have social importance only insofar as they are themselves the object of creative or appropriative attention, ensnared in social dynamics. But this importance stems as much from 'innovators' projected uses (via prescriptive scenarios: Akrich, 1987) as from the uses developed by 'operators'. For example, the social importance of a hunting rifle is fully revealed when it is used, in situations where its actualized practical potential proves to be essential (shooting wild animals). Nevertheless, 'at rest', the shotgun, as the bearer of practical virtualities, is also strictly speaking a social object, considering the symbolic charge that can be attributed to it outside of the uses for which it was produced. It is furthermore social insofar as its programme of firearm action is itself a social production describing potentialities likely to be involved in other situations (waging war, reassuring oneself, threatening a neighbour, taking pleasure in collecting weapons, taking part in the

convivial banquets of battues, etc.). Usage depends almost entirely on the scripts that translate in material terms the social functions in objects. Of course, objects can be misused, tinkered with or rejected, but our relationships with them necessarily take into account the inscriptions characterizing them (even if we are mistaken about their nature), which are (an *agencing* of) *technemes*, that is, *history made technologies* associated with people, places, beliefs, values, institutions, etc. (i.e. different forms of collective).

The variability of uses depends on the dispositions of the users-operators and the status of the object used, that is, the ways in which it makes sense in a given arena in relation to its trajectory based on status and use). It is nevertheless important not to forget that status and use are indexed more or less firmly to the material properties that determine the social utility of objects (enrolled in projections of use): ‘Thus, objects made by individuals in a given society [...] are thoroughly social, just as each individual is thoroughly social in the sense that he or she is the product of socialising processes associated with the groups or institutions frequented over the course of a lifetime’ (Lahire, [2018] 2020: 95). It is the programmatic characteristics of objects that also enable them to occupy particular places and play particular roles within specific social spaces: ‘By appropriating an object [...], the actor gives life to what went unheeded but, conversely, it is because they find themselves in the presence of the object [...] that this arouses what would otherwise have remained temporarily or more permanently in a latent state’ (Lahire, [1998] 2011: 67). Bernard Lahire therefore recommends studying objects from two angles that provide complementary insights. On the one hand, as ‘singular objects’ that need to be ‘biographed’, they are likely to reveal *ways of using* that resonate with practical reasons, dispositions and socialization contexts. On the other hand, as ‘representatives of a specific class of objects’ (Lahire, [2015] 2019) producing comparable uses – when their relatively similar functionalities are at work in settings with similar social structures – they can shed light on more global social phenomena, homologous in their institutional roles as instruments equipping socializing relationships.

STATE POWER AND *MISES EN DISPOSITIFS*

Having clarified thus, I argue that it is important, at a time when digital tools are increasingly responsible for guiding social behaviour, to take into account the technological nature of these social dynamics. This implies giving ourselves the means to think of the latter as a complex dialectical interplay between *dispositional affordances* and *conventional affordances*, giving rise to socio-technical couplings (forming ‘hybrid collectives’: Barbier and Trépos, 2007). When these two types of support are ‘brought into contact’, they ‘begin to act’, together giving rise to situated practical achievements.

Fields and State action

The sociology of fields is one way – there are obviously others – of thinking about ‘State actions’, ‘State power’ and public policy (Bourdieu, 2012; Bourdieu and Christin, 1990; Dubois, 2014a and 2014b). The State describes a bureaucratic field (Georgakakis, 2020) which is presented primarily as the arena of the production of public policies. These are to be put into perspective with positions and stances taken by public agents in dialogue with other contributors (competitors and/or allies) from other fields (media, legal, civil society, etc.). As Vincent Dubois (2014a) points out, there are two main options for explaining the construction of State policies: the first is to consider that they are the result of a power play between orientations competing to a greater or lesser degree, and arising from the positions and interests

of those who defend these orientations; the second is to establish a correspondence between a policy and the relational structure – the system of interdependence – of the fields of agents involved in its production. The ‘mix’ of these two options as an application of the concept of field to State action makes it possible to analyse the functioning of arenas of public policy production as a field of both *strength* (of positions) and *struggle* (for positions) aimed at *regulating* a particular institutional domain (i.e. in the dual sense of a construction that corresponds to the rules of the field – the means – and a regulatory aim of the public good – the end). The latter is necessarily based on a relationship of power (the power of the State, the public authorities) which ultimately compels, but which can also be challenged in the ways in which it does so.

This theoretical foundation (the heuristics of which would warrant further elaboration but is beyond the scope of this article: Dubois, 2024; 2022) seems to pay far too little attention to the fact that public policy is implemented via *socio-technical dispositifs* (Dodier and Barbot, 2016; Silva-Castaneda, 2012) designed to confer robustness to the orientations adopted by the State. The implementation of a public policy depends on the invention of agencing, rules, standards, procedures and people (public agents), as well as on technical instruments that translate the public will into *scripts* and become powerful levers of public regulation. State auxiliaries and citizen-users alike are never directly confronted with a public policy, but with the socio-technical *dispositifs* that are its practical interfaces. This way of thinking of public action in terms of the instruments with which it is equipped therefore suggests that the way it functions depends on the capacity of the *dispositifs* to align the practices of public officials and user-citizens with the State’s decision. The strength of the *dispositifs* lies in the fact that their use makes the political choices underpinning them invisible, whereas the instruments they combine convey ‘values, informed by an interpretation of the social and precise conceptions of the mode of regulation envisaged’ (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004: 13, our translation). By matching up public policies, the *dispositifs* make this choice more difficult to contest or, at the very least, tend to obviate constant negotiation and supervision of the institutional order. State power is made acceptable through all of the following: ad hoc ideological production; legitimization of the public policy production process (e.g. demonstrating dialogue with recognized experts, recourse to social dialogue, etc.); and the symbolic effectiveness of official regulations (Bourdieu and Christin, 1990: 65). It also involves instrumentation (Lascoumes and Simard, 2011; Salamon, 2002), including various digital tools (platforms, APIs, algorithms, etc.). By playing on ‘technological evidence’, these make it possible to bring together administrative staff and administered users around State *prescriptions*, for which technology becomes a sort of zealous agent (Hatchuel, 1995).

***Dispositifs* and dispositions**

In practice, the State governs through the mobilization of *dispositifs*– agencing of discourse, people and instruments – which operationalize intentions and drive regulatory systems. A *public policy dispositif* is ‘a *dispositif* which is both technical and social, which organizes specific social relations between the State, [its agents] and its citizens according to the representations and meanings it conveys’, while instrumentation brings together ‘all the problems posed by the choice and use of tools (techniques, means of operating, *dispositifs*) that make it possible to materialize and operationalize government action’ (Halpern et al., 2014, our translation). With the sociotechnical approach, the material and technical aspects of public policy can be restored to their rightful place, and considered as actors in their own right rather than simply as more or less effective tools of techno-solutionism. Digital *dispositifs* are never neutral; they are the bearers of institutional programmes of action involving different types of

actor (civil servants, users, trade unionists, etc.) in specific public policy regimes. The process of digitalizing and dematerializing public policies and services cannot therefore be summed up as a mere change of tools. It is indeed leading to a renewal of the practical (internal and external) relationship with State services, but is also bringing about other changes affecting the aims, content, players and relationships with public policies.

The instrument-centred analysis of State action, as practised by a certain sociology of public action (Lascoumes, 2018; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004), has the shortcoming, however, of paying little attention to the social characteristics of individuals (public agents and citizens), even though they constitute one of the two major components of socio-technical *dispositifs*. It is as if the rehabilitation of instruments that have long been forgotten in analyses (the ‘concern for objects’: Dodier, 1995) has led to a loss of interest in the social depth of those who administer and are administered. Thinking about ‘the *variety of intermediaries and modes* through which each of these objects guides activity’ (Dodier and Barbot, 2016: 294) cannot, however, be reduced to describing the manipulation of content, tools and interfaces without having to relate them to dispositions, because uses depend not simply on the scripts embodied in the instruments, but also on the patterns of perception, action, and so on embodied in people. They are the product of a socially constituted dispositional relationship to (instrumental) practice, the result of an adjustment framed by values, beliefs, representations, ethos, and so on (Granjon, 2022).

Therefore, while it is important to pay attention to the conditions that make it possible to develop digital *dispositifs* and instruments for public action, it is equally important to take into consideration the social logics determining the actualization of their uses. To account for the encounter between these two forms of the social – *mise en dispositions* and *mise en dispositifs* – in public policy regimes, we inevitably have to be attentive to the ‘singular folds of the social’, the plurality of dispositions, and the contextual conditionality of their enactment (Lahire, 2013; [1998] 2011). This involves considering the contexts in which public policies are implemented as a combination of instruments arranged in more or less solid *dispositifs* (Akrich, 1987), bearing prescriptions-proscriptions for action that become effective, in one way or another, only in the presence of dispositions. Paying attention to dispositions requires one to be attentive to individual singularity and to the way in which each individual’s dispositional originality frames their appropriation of instruments by selecting their properties (Bourdieu, [1997] 2000), attributing purposes to them (Dodier and Barbot, 2016) and transforming them into (non- or mis)uses. While the dispositions seize the *dispositifs* through the affordances constituted by the action programmes of their instruments, this practical relation to the practice of ‘things’ also plays out in the opposite direction. We might consider that it is the various inter-related scripts (instrumentation) that attract certain dispositions and encourage people to use them and, at the same time, to ratify a model of public action.

This dialectical interplay between dispositions and *dispositifs* presents as a broadening of the correspondence between *habitus* and (positions in) the *field*, which Pierre Bourdieu made the basis of his theory of practice, but it is also a reshaping of the relation between dispositions and contexts in the sociology developed by Bernard Lahire. It could be argued that the shift from contexts to *dispositifs* is almost the same as the shift from *habitus* to dispositions. It allows us to grasp situations that are both more varied than the particular case of the ontological concordance between *habitus* and *field*, and also closer to practical reality than envisaged by the play of ‘dispositions-contexts’. Above all, it opens up the possibility of fully taking into account the ‘generative capacity’ (Barbier and Trépos, 2007) of instruments that tend to produce forms of control (*emprises*) (i.e. taking power), but without determining them

definitively due to their coupling with individuals' dispositional affordances – a coupling of which the outcome does not always meet State innovators' expectations.

The power of *dispositifs*

From a dispositionist perspective attentive not only to the 'singular folds of the social' but also to the diversity of the singular folds of the instrumental that equip the *dispositifs*, the functional articulation of instruments with dispositions is achieved only through sustained work of alignment that is never perfect: 'The exercise of power is not a naked fact, an institutional right, nor is it a structure which holds out or is smashed: it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation' (Foucault, 1982: 792). The purpose of the *dispositif* is to penetrate and conform reality, to produce, maintain or shift practices, and thereby to generate spaces of socialization that produce dispositions conforming to – or at least compatible with – the rationalities governing implementation (e.g. by disciplining/controlling adjustments, in Foucault's work). But the affordances that *dispositifs* offer, whereby they lend themselves to being grasped (their programmes of action, their *raison d'être*), can themselves be subject to conjunctures and lose legitimacy and effectiveness. Above all, they can be grasped by ways of acting, thinking, evaluating, and so on, which do not necessarily correspond to their objectives of control and standardization.

In Michel Foucault's work, the idea of *dispositif* outlines a space for problematization, which posits, in particular, the principle of power that is rooted in 'the system of social networks' (Foucault, 1982: 793) and its distribution over heterogeneous entities, both human and non-human. We find this idea in pragmatic sociology, where non-human actants are not always able to impose their direction. They come up against the actors' ability to carry out *critical operations* and *move to generality* and, as a result, to shift prescriptions through *compromises* and the introduction of additional *dispositifs*. From this point of view, it is the critical skills of the players and their ability to coordinate and to reassemble *dispositifs* that open up the possibility of transforming practical conditions. For dispositionist sociology – which recognizes the importance of socialization structures in the behavioural economies of social subjects – the displacement of social practice is due to a misalignment of the embodied social properties of social subjects (from a practical sense or a sense *disposed to reflexivity and struggle*) with the objectified social properties of contexts.

I believe that it is the trade-off between dispositions (summaries of past experiences) and the variety of instruments of the *dispositifs* (i.e. with the diversity of conventional affordances of the social arenas that 'hold together', form totalities and constitute 'focal points of experience': Foucault, [2008] 2010) that lies at the heart of change. It is therefore necessary not only to recognize the existence of social orders, but also to consider their conditions of possibility as arising from the nature of the co-presence and assembly of heterogeneous elements (*dispositions-dispositifs*). To understand these State orders, it is necessary to identify the dominant strategic functions and the aims underlying their emergence (logics of conception). We also need to grasp the ways in which this heterogeneity coexists and is organized into a form of consistency (logics of assemblage), as well as the ways in which it is appropriated (logics of use) and described at different stages (discursive logics) by those who are both subjected to its socializing forces and engaged in a struggle with it – thus triggering dispositions that are more or less adapted (Frega, 2016).

AN EXAMPLE OF APPLICATION: THINKING THE DIGITAL INSTRUMENTATION OF THE SPE²

This theoretical framework, which is attentive to the dispositions of actors and the socio-technical *dispositifs* of public action, could, for example, be put to the test of facts in any sector of public policy. It would thus be possible to grasp, on the side of the ‘innovators’, the functioning of the arena of State production of digital governmentalities and, on the side of the ‘operators’ (State agents and citizens), the plurality of logics of appropriation of this instrumentation. By way of illustration, take the case of the French public employment service (SPE), which is the subject of one of the articles in this issue. Several strategic plans have been devoted to it in recent years, starting with the creation of Pôle Emploi in 2008, modelled on the British job centres. Successive reforms of the SPE have used digital technology as a lever to improve the efficiency of the services provided to jobseekers: first, by facilitating the tasks of public agents (automation of ‘low added-value’ tasks, mailing, profiling, document processing, the ‘once and for all’ approach, etc.) and freeing up their time for providing personalized advice; and secondly, by improving access to the national job market and matching profiles to vacancies (job boards, profile sourcing, digital raids to ‘identify and mobilise the invisible public’, etc.).

Digital organizational reconfiguration

With the recent ‘France Travail’³ reform –, the first trials of which, regarding the RSA⁴, started at the beginning of 2023 in 18 *départements* –, the entire public employment service (alongside the governance of Unédic⁵) is now being reconfigured around a one-stop shop⁶. While digital tools are primarily used as an interface with beneficiaries (front-office), as well as for the organizational redeployment of services (back-office), they are also used here to coordinate the various players involved in the SPE. France Travail aims to build a broad network including, primarily the State, Pôle emploi, Cap emploi, local missions, local authorities, chambers of commerce and industry, and social partners. The plan is for these various players eventually to be connected to the same interoperable ‘platform/hub of shared digital data and services’, making it easier, in particular, to cross-reference files and databases between administrations and with the information systems of private players in the field. The introduction of new digital *dispositifs* within the SPE is resulting in a major reconfiguration of the system and is bringing about changes in the structures of the actors’ relationships and the distribution of their strengths. Digital instrumentation is being adapted to regulate the behaviour of users and public agents; and in this respect, Pôle emploi is becoming an ‘employment/training/integration ecosystem coordinator’ connecting various territorial levels of intervention (local, departmental, regional, national).

² *Service public de l’emploi*

³ On 1 January 2024, Pôle emploi became France Travail. The plan is to roll it out gradually, with full implementation by the end of 2027.

⁴ *Revenu de solidarité active*: minimum income support.

⁵ The organization responsible for steering and managing state unemployment insurance.

⁶ Initial work on the platform-State at international level has shown that the main issue has been the creation of single digital service points. The few studies that have been carried out on France have highlighted the tensions between attempts to connect government departments using lightweight solutions (such as the ‘Particulier’ API, which enables any government department employee to make queries in other departments’ databases) and proposals aimed at more ambitious harmonization of systems (Jeannot, 2020).

Here, the concept of *field* is not insignificant, because it both fits perfectly with the concept of dispositions, and makes it possible to relate a ‘policy style’ (Richardson et al., 1982) ‘to the structure of positions and relationships between agents competing to define it, insofar as this structure socially establishes the space of options envisaged and determines their relative chances of success’ (Dubois, 2022: 12, our translation). The principle of the instrumentation of State action, coupled with a sociology of the fields of public action, therefore calls for an interest in the state of the structural balance of power between the different actors in the field of public employment policy making, as well as in the strategies of change and innovation (i.e. the choice of instruments by characterizing the motives and processes that have led the State to select certain instruments rather than others: Halpern et al, 2019: 322) upstream of their implementation within institutions.

The purpose of producing digital governmentalities in general, and within the SPE in particular, is to choose the industrial operators and technical solutions enabling the state to implement its public policies most effectively. It is therefore necessary to identify the SPE’s new partners-innovators – its efficient agents (Bourdieu and Christin, 1990) and its private competitors, who are increasingly entrusted with supporting jobseekers –, their objectives, interests, active properties, positions, dispositional affinities and system of relationships. The aim is thus to characterize the new social sphere of production of public employment policies, its structure, its divisions, and the power relations that run through it and ultimately lead to trade-offs concerning socio-technical *dispositifs*. It is then necessary to describe the action programmes of the instruments chosen by the public authorities and the way in which they have been arranged in the wider *dispositifs* serving as the socio-technical structure of France Travail. Finally, attention needs to be focused on analysing the new private services aimed at citizen-users, and their impact on equivalent public services. Ideally, therefore, we should survey the staff of France Travail’s information and digital departments, as well as local authorities, the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Integration, private application issuers, state startups, players in the ‘Ensemble innovons pour l’emploi’⁷ programme, the BetaGouv⁸ programme and the Nov’Us⁹ community, as well as general-interest entrepreneurs approved by the inter-ministerial Department of Digital Technology¹⁰. A closer look at the working documents and the accompanying discourse that lend technologies the capacity to embody change in the best possible way in the general interest¹¹ would bring to light the imaginaries and representations (particularly of users) that are mobilized, as well as the rationales for action stemming from them and inscribed in the material configuration of digital instruments.

A redefinition of the employment professions

In addition to this focus on the arena in which public employment policies are made, along with its actors and their positions in the field, it would also be necessary to investigate the ‘operators’ (i.e. State agencies and citizens), in order to consider the ‘reception’ of the socio-

⁷ <https://pole-emploi.io> (accessed on 16/01/2025).

⁸ <https://beta.gouv.fr> (accessed on 16/01/2025).

⁹ <https://pole-emploi.io/services/detecter-startup> (accessed on 16/01/2025).

¹⁰ <https://eig.etalab.gouv.fr> (accessed on 16/01/2025).

¹¹ The ‘France Travail 2023’ report, for example, states that ‘digital technology is a lever for putting people back at the heart of support’.

technical *dispositifs* of public policies by those who are commissioned to implement them¹², and those who are the users/citizens. These two aspects are closely linked, as we know that the predominant place taken by economic actors within the bureaucratic field is leading, for example, to an increased managerialization of public services (Gervais, 2012) and to a revision of the relation to the State as employer and to the State as redistributor. With regard to the various agents in the field of public employment services, we need to identify the shifts that the new digital governmentalities are bringing about in terms of professionalities, statutory positions, job identities and the actual carrying out of missions. The tasks of advisers and professionals of ‘rights management’ are being significantly redefined (increased reporting, multiplication of software packages, teleworking, deskilling, etc.) and the foundations of professions are being shaken, as for the staff of France Travail, Cap emploi (France Travail handicap) and the local missions (France Travail jeunes) it is a question of ‘rethinking the core business based on a platform approach’. The logic of dematerialization has already led to strikes and demonstrations when it seems to augur redeployment, staff cuts, job insecurity and outsourcing to the private sector. It is therefore likely that such reactions will continue to increase. Overall, the aim is thus to understand the organizational and practical readjustments of the SPE and their effects on relations with citizens.

Logically, we should also inquire into the practical consequences of digital instrumentation and changes in the ways that beneficiaries use and appropriate it. For example, the unemployed who have the most difficulty finding work (under-qualified, long-term unemployed, etc.) are those who are the least equipped and competent in the digital domain, which has repercussions in terms of access to services and rights (Deville, 2023) and the need to have recourse to digital helpers or France Services digital advisers (Mazet, 2023). As for those who have no particular difficulties using digital tools, the fact remains that digital and algorithmic monitoring of registration procedures, job search follow-up (‘My Personal Assistant’) and situation control (assignment to a ‘risk score’) is not without issues of discernment, categorization of ‘non-standard’ cases and discrimination (exclusion by design: Noble, 2018; Allhutter et al., 2020). It also poses problems in terms of distance from the most competent staff and the transfer of the administrative workload to citizen-users. The consequences for the return to work of the most precarious recipients (deregistration, end of benefits, difficult access to training, etc.) can be serious and create situations of great precariousness and social exclusion.

Dispositions, *dispositifs* and administrative relationship

A sociology of the plurality of socio-technical action logics needs to be able to lower the level of analysis to the interactions that constitute, so to speak, the basic units of the administrative relationship. The literature on this subject has focused primarily on the interaction that takes place at the counter, where public officials and citizens meet (Chauvin, 2023; Spire, 2007; Dubois, 1999). While it is obviously important to document this area of contact, there are others, on either side of the government-citizen divide, that it also seems essential to examine. In addition to the places where frontline SPE staff work, it is useful to consider the contexts of interaction between the various categories of staff, the ways in which contacts are instrumented, the ways in which these contexts ‘seek out’ and work on the interactants’ dispositions, and so on. From the point of view of citizens, it is also clear that attention needs to be paid to the rich web of relations within which job-seeking inevitably becomes embedded, and to the way in which the relationship with the SPE depends – in this case – on a more or less vast repertoire

¹² It would be interesting to monitor the training of agents and in particular the role that the France Travail physical and digital Academy is supposed to play.

of instrumented sociabilities that take on singular forms, linked in particular to the dispositions of those constituting them.

The administrative relationship characteristic of the SPE describes a vast collection of contact situations, ranging along a *continuum* from the hierarchical relationship regulating professional relations within France Travail, to the friendly relationship facilitating a placement, via the mobilization of weak links on social media, contact with employers and, of course, the jobseeker-advisor dialogue revolving around the triptych of ‘support-activation-control’ (Boeglin-Henky, in this issue). The variety of these relationships is matched by the diversity of the socio-technical *dispositifs* that equip them and that of the dispositions that frame their use. This ‘wide-angle’ interest in the variety of contexts and their objectifiable properties makes it possible to identify the complexity of the socio-technical links at play. It makes it possible to identify the structuring lines of digital instrumentation in the areas of activity of SPE professionals (e.g. the use of email in hierarchical relations), within the spaces that organize the meeting between jobseekers and agents (e.g. the ‘Emploi Store’ application shop) and for the ‘ordinary’ sociability zones of citizens.

It is also important to understand how these contexts depend on the dispositions that individuals bring into play in their relationship with the SPE, understood in a broad sense. From my perspective, courses of action cannot be interpreted without positing an ‘invisible structure that determines the form of apparent interactions’ (Bourdieu, 2021: 28, our translation). Practices can be fully explicit only under the conditions of the dispositional and conventional affordances of the *dispositif*. Unless we fall into a form of determinism, it is therefore useful not to consider engagement in the field of the SPE as responding to imperative causalities, whether these are dispositional, contextual or praxis-related¹³. And while it is relevant ‘to establish, on the one hand, the degree of constraint exercised by context on the actions of individuals and, on the other, the degree of strength or of power of their incorporated dispositions’ (Lahire, [2018] 2020: 524), it is also important to consider how and under what conditions this encounter is organized, unfolds in practice, and reforms or fixes the dispositional and conventional affordances underpinning it (Eymard-Duvernay, Marchal, 1994).

CONCLUSION

As regards dispositions, the social is characterized by a wide variety of ways of being in the world that refer to different social structures; and as regards *dispositifs*, instrumentality assumes heterogeneous forms (norms, rules, elements of language, individuals, socio-technical artefacts, etc.) that combine in situated, singular and more or less institutionalized *agencements*. Hence, the difficulty of defining, as in the case of a field, ‘that which is part of it and that which is not’¹⁴ (Bourdieu, 2015: 484, our translation). Paying attention to the

¹³ Practice-based studies, for example, make action an eminently local, indexical production, which is the raw material of the social. Everything that is ‘socially necessary’ is condensed in what happens in the space and time of action. As Philippe Chaniel points out in relation to ethnomethodology, theories of activity pay attention only to the existence of ‘a concrete order that provides for its own intelligibility’ (Chaniel, 2001: 298, our translation). The sociologies of action, focusing on the sequences of the here and now, have therefore investigated material affordances, but from a perspective that ‘disaggregates’ collective actors in indexicality (Dodier, 1993). My perspective is obviously quite different.

¹⁴ It is indeed difficult to define clear boundaries of *dispositifs*: on the one hand, because of the heterogeneity of the elements composing them and, on the other, because each of these elements can also be mobilized by and

dispositifs is an encouragement to be vigilant as to the diversity of practical situations in which social subjects with dispositions are brought into contact with the various affordances provided by social structures and institutions, which may be manipulable tools (e.g. software), frameworks for action (e.g. a procedure) and, more often than not, a hybrid instrumental configuration in which people are involved (and thus form a *dispositif*). In other words, embodied structures (dispositions), contextual structures (*dispositifs*) and action structures (interactions and practices) need to be considered in equal measure, in terms of their historicity and their relations.

Hence, the network of interactions and the repertoire of practices are not the *dispositif*; they are the practical signs of it, the symptomatic expression whereby they are made visible, but they are not the *dispositif*. In concrete terms, however, social scientists can understand the *dispositif* only by observing the interactions and practices taking place within it. For them, these are the actual affordances through which they can identify, step by step, the objects and structures framing the practice and defining a particular social space of objective relations that cannot be reduced to the interactions and practices taking place there, since they are merely their phenomenal expression. The physical proximity between people and things organizes practice, but insofar as this framed proximity always mixes dispositional affordances and conventional affordances¹⁵, it has to be identified by means of praxical traces and by studying the action, which are the manifestations of their encounter (interactions, manipulations, discourses, etc.). As in the case of the field, the *dispositive* also enjoins us to ‘look for something invisible, which we can find only by taking visible things, that is to say people’ (Bourdieu, 2015: 554, our translation); and we should add: ‘and instruments’. Observing the action should make it possible to postulate or attest to the assemblage of dispositional and conventional affordances embedded in one or more *dispositif*, which could be fields. The ‘dispositions-*dispositifs*’ dialectic calls for the production of survey apparatus based on records of observable practices, but set against records of dispositions, which are not observable. This would mean bringing together two systems of analysis, one of which gives pride of place to ante-predicative determination, structures and patterns of action, and the other to predicative contingency, agency and interaction. These are the conditions on which we can give ourselves the practical means for thinking about the ways in which relations to the world and to people also involve relations to things, and thus explain and understand the plurality of socio-technical logics of action.

participate in another *dispositif*, thus blurring even more the defining lines of affordances/instruments, which may turn out to be multi-positional. Nevertheless, in view of the integrated nature of any *dispositif*, examining one element of its assemblage opens up the possibility of encountering the other elements that appear, insofar as they are linked in some way to the mediation through which we enter the said *dispositif*: ‘The concept of *dispositif* thus implies a twofold methodological requirement: on the one hand, analysis must patiently break down the different elements mobilized by *dispositifs*; on the other, it must pay continuous attention to the texture of the global arrangement through which constraint is exercised’ (Dodier and Barbot, [2016] 2016: 294). The discourses of social subjects, particularly in problematic situations, are also elements likely to reveal the relevant ingredients of a *dispositif* (*ibid.*).

¹⁵ ‘It is indeed difficult to attribute the power to direct action to the individual or to the local material environment, since the two form an indissociable whole’ (Barbier and Trépos, 2007: 47, our translation).

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