

# Dismantling the welfare state

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**What effects have economic rationalization had on public services? Nadège Vezinat presents a nuanced picture of how institutional dynamics weaken the welfare state's bureaucracy, agents, and the rights of beneficiaries.**

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Reviewed: Nadège Vezinat, *Le service public empêché* (Public services impeded), Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2024, 368 p., 24 €.

Does the retreat of the state, which has been underway since the 1980s, spell the end of public services? Nadège Vezinat offers a nuanced answer to this question. In her view, the public sector has been "impeded." In this dense book, Vezinat, a sociologist, offers a detailed diagnosis, informed by their own research on the French postal system and the now abundant literature on the challenges the public sector has faced in recent decades.

Vezinat's book documents in minute detail the "vicious circle" that could lead to the "twilight" of the public sector, which she has described [on this site](#). In the name of reducing government debt, public services are required to be profitable in ways that contribute to their deterioration, rendering them less efficient and less profitable. This, in turn, justifies their partial privatization and segments the public, which is increasingly called on to assume the costs of the services provided to it.

Vezinat has undertaken a difficult project. She must keep track of multiple processes that are often contradictory and rarely transparent. In the name of reducing public deficits, reforms have proliferated at various levels: the public sector's mission has been redefined, it has undergone institutional transformation, public-private

partnerships are used with increasing frequency, new forms of labor organization have been introduced, and so on. To explain these changes, Vezinat has chosen to focus on their effects--on the public sector itself, the individuals who implement these measures, and beneficiaries and consumers. In this way, she shows the widening gap that separates the principles in whose name the reforms are made and their impact on public services.

## **Economic rationalization's false pretenses**

Vezinat focuses on economic public services (the postal service, transportation, energy, and so on), which are subject to contradictory directives. On the one hand, the goal of reducing public deficits requires them to be profitable--in other words, to turn a profit--or at minimum balance spending and revenue. On the other hand, they are placed in situations that force them to run deficits. Some costs are necessary because they are public services, such as infrastructure maintenance or continuing services that run at a loss because they serve underpopulated areas or underprivileged populations. Most of the extra revenue they could reap goes to other entities, such as private companies that take advantage of the opening of public services to competition to poach from promising submarkets, or even the state itself, when it withholds their surpluses.

Vezinat sees comparable phenomena in social as opposed to economic services (social security, public education, and so on). The concern with rationalizing costs often leads to measures that increase public spending. In hospitals, for example, the reduction of the number of full-time medical practitioners results in an explosion of short-term subcontracted employees, while cuts to prevention policies result in extra costs tied to the need to address illnesses that could have been avoided. More generally, reforms tend to encourage short-term economies at the expense of investments needed for long-term budget stability.

Similarly, opening services of general economic interest to competition, whose proponents see it as virtuous, benefits the public sector less than the private sector and, within the private sector, some companies more than others. With great subtlety, Vezinat shows that liberalization amounts in fact to an oligopolization process, which allows a handful of private actors to enjoy competition in niche markets, without

having to invest in infrastructure or obey the requirements of universality and accessibility associated with the public sector.

Nor has the rise of the New Public Management been particularly beneficial. Forced to compete under the pretense of emulation and excellence, in their own work or in responding to bid solicitations, public servants must spend more time on administrative tasks than on addressing the needs of users. They must also pass on to the latter a larger share of the tasks and costs that were previously provided by the public sector or even sacrifice the interests of beneficiaries to their own professional advancement, which at times is clearly disconnected from the quality of services rendered.

The last chapter emphasizes how these changes have increased the work-related hardships of many civil servants, who were usually drawn to these careers because they wanted to be in public service and who find that they are "impeded" (by these new budgetary constraints and managerial norms). Whether they take more sick leave due to professional exhaustion or simply resign, the result is the same: far from making public services more efficient, the new managerial methods tend to make them dysfunctional. Perhaps it is worth adding that, from this perspective, the private sector is not faring much better?

When it comes to assessing the role of the European Union and the intentions behind these obviously counter-productive measures, Vezinat is cautious. But when one has read her analysis, it is hard not to wonder about motives: if the point really was to improve the management of public funds by reducing certain expenses while making them more efficient, why not acknowledge that, after years of experimentation, that the cure is worse than the disease? How is it possible, in democratic societies, that those responsible for such unsuccessful policies are not held accountable and are still in power?

As Vezinat notes on several occasions, a political choice has indeed been made: that of privatizing certain expenditures rather than mutualizing them. This choice has been made in the name of economic rationality. When one compares health care spending in the United States and France, there is reason to be skeptical. Americans are reluctant to mutualize costs, meaning that they spend more per capita even as life expectancy is declining. Must we follow their lead? The interest of Vezinat's book is that it takes the managerial argument seriously while showing its limits and contradictions.

## Rescuing public services

Vezinat, of course, is no fool. In a world in which the same old song of individual responsibility is played against the background of questioning the purpose of taxation and denigrating civil servants, it is clear that the goal is less good management than dismantling the welfare state at any cost. Without doing so explicitly, the book examines the foundation of public services: in the name of what principles do we demand collective responsibility for services that preserve social rights for all (access to a minimum income, healthcare, education, and culture)? The dignity of the human person? Social cohesion? Equality? All of the above?

The book shows that the political project that underwrites the existence of public services is losing its self-evidence, even among its most ardent champions. Vezinat seems to think that this confusion is primarily due to the rise of private operators, such as associations or companies, that are increasingly entrusted with the public good, though on private terms. Vezinat thus proposes--often implicitly--a defense of state-provided public services carried out by civil servants--understood in the Weberian sense, as agents recruited for life through competitive exams and whose promotion is determined by career ladders fixed in advance. Because they are removed from the pressures of the market and politics, these civil servants are better able to respond to the requirements of public service: impersonality, impartiality, and universality.

The "renewed solidarism" that Vezinat calls for would seem to depend on the state, which, in the name of interdependence, intervenes to equalize opportunity in situations in which some people's social positions have opened doors that the contingencies of birth have closed to others. Vezinat defends a "proportioned universalism," in which equal access to public services is accompanied by specific policies benefiting the most vulnerable populations so that they can make good on their social rights.

This claim, even if it stated hastily--after all, this is not the book's purpose, which is primarily to analyze the current state of French public services--is particularly stimulating from an intellectual and political perspective. References to solidarism and the invention of public services hark back to late nineteenth-century France, when state intervention was mostly regulatory and public services mostly existed at a local level, in the form of private non-profit organizations or regional or municipal public entities or even by municipalities themselves (through "municipal socialism"). In those times,

the goal was to subject any service rendered to the public--be it through private or public financing or via private or public agents--to norms of conduct and management that were under state supervision.

This perspective leads us to two questions we asked after finishing the book. The first concerns the incoherence of the principles guiding public services. Is it mainly due to the coexistence of private and public agents carrying out these goals? Should one not also and primarily attribute this incoherence to the weakening of legal and moral norms regulating actions aimed at the public interest, irrespective of their actors' status and financing? The second question is tied to the first. If public services have been in danger for over twenty years, is it not because intermediary bodies have been subject to unprecedented attacks? Would they not be more resistant to the neoliberal state's efforts to drain them if they were supported by their supporters among NGOs--which are genuinely mutualized, in managerial as well as financial terms?

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