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DO WE COMPARE SOCIETIES
WHEN WE COMPARE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS?

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Exchanges have been very numerous and dense between the tenants of the societal analysis on the one hand, and the tenants of the sociology of organized action on the other, each of them developing their own positions, putting forward their arguments, but always with openness to others' arguments, so that, from one text to another, a real dialog took place (cf. especially, Maurice et al. 1982; Maurice 1989; Friedberg 1993; Maurice 1994a and 1994b). In these writings, two themes are always coming back and force. The first one deals with the status of international comparison, to which M. Maurice and his colleagues attach a central place while E. Friedberg (1994: 143) considers it only as a variant of the principle of systematic comparison which is the heart of the approach he developed with M. Crozier: "Comparison does not need to be international. It is only late that the research lead by the *Centre de sociologie des organisations* included this dimension. But from the beginning on, they were comparative. From this point of view, international comparison makes no difference." The second theme deals with the question of generalization, a point which is constitutive of the societal analysis while local orders are the principal object of the sociology of organized action.

These two themes are generally discussed out of any reference to their implications for the field work, especially when each of these schools is leading comparative studies on two or more countries. Thus, I would like to come back to these points and present the case of the France-Germany

comparison I have been leading (with Erhard Friedberg) on higher education for more than twelve years, and which has been prolonged with a Ph'D on the public university system of the State University of New York (Brisset-Sillion 1994a, 1994b, 1996 and 1997). This will allow me to explain, more precisely than I ever did, how the comparative approach shaped our research program, then to discuss the effective contributions of international studies, and finally to explicit the level and degree of generalization we reached.

What I would like to show is that both approaches can reach the reconstruction of national models and that comparative studies are especially good at this. But I will also plea that the kind of generalization aimed at by the sociology of organized action is not of the same type as the societal analysis's one: for the former the links between micro and macro phenomenons and regulations remain loose and the national models are always in competition/interaction with (and not embedded in) local orders.

Compare, analyse and then construct other objects to be compared

Our research led us to describe different national models, the structure of which is revealed and understandable through the nature and the content of the interactions between: the state and especially the state agencies in charge of higher education (Friedberg and Musselin 1992 and 1993; Berrivin and Musselin 1996); disciplines¹ engaged in the allocation of scientific reward and in the management of carriers (Friedberg and Musselin 1989b; Musselin 1996); and finally universities, understood as institutions within which more or less

¹ With the term "disciplines" I will mean what is related to "disciplines' specialities" as well as to structures involved in the defense of interests, in the management of carriers, in the attribution of scientific reward.

coherent forms of collective action emerge (Musselin 1987; Friedberg and Musselin 1989a; Musselin 1997b).

Such interactions shape a general framework, which determines constraints as well as it generates resources, but that is no more than a framework: as a matter of facts it admits diversity from one university to another, from one discipline to another and from one state agency to another. Thus, we described national modes of regulation that never totally determine the behaviors of the actors within them but that are pregnant enough to exercise a certain influence beyond the differences among the disciplines and beyond the heterogeneity of the characteristics each institution owns. They are also stable enough, not to be automatically modified when persons, rules, status or policy orientations change.

In other words, each national configuration can be understood and qualified through the specific combination that occurs between institutional logics (the universities' ones), the academic logics (the disciplines' ones) and the public logics (the state agencies' ones). The articulation between these logics is proper to each studied system as the latter is the product of the interdependances that arise among these logics and that form what we called a "national university system". Through this notion, we have thus developed an approach that, on the one hand, does not allow to propose a universal model for higher education, but that, on the other hand, is convenient to point out divergences and convergences among different countries through the analysis of dimensions whose relevance has been experienced in the various empirical studies we led in France, Germany and the United States. Those dimensions have not been defined a priori, but emerged progressively and have been revealed out of the results of the first comparative work we led in France and in Germany. That is the reason why, I would like to come back to

the foundations of this international comparison, the questions it raised and the answers we tried to give.

Comparing specific organizations

Of course it is somewhat artificial to reconstruct the beginnings of a research strategy launched more than a decade ago. The principles and choices adopted at that time are certainly clearer and more evident to me now than when they have been settled, because it is also the practice that helps you discovering the benefits (and the dead ends) of the options you have defined or that you have been obliged to accept in order to start.

In this first part I will describe how we developed our research on the basis of a first comparative work on France and Germany. This study aimed at studying universities as organizations, and thus reflected a certain disruption with the great majority of the previous comparative research on higher education that most of the time can be related to what M. Maurice (1989) called the functionalist perspective. As a matter of facts, universities and academic work have frequently been understood as universal categories whose common denominator was their "exceptionalism": they are presented as irreducible to any other forms of human activities or of organizations. Thus the academic is a peculiar figure, whose specific character is first of all defined by his belonging to a discipline, by his relation to knowledge, by his mission in the society, etc. So, in many researches, the national, cultural or historical features are ignored or taken for insignificant, while, on the contrary, the social, cognitive, epistemological or normative traits that differentiate disciplines from one another are put forward, beyond the geographical or

institutional boundaries (see for instance: Kuhn 1962; Polanyi 1962 or Becher 1989).

The other way round, little attention is given to the institutions' way of functioning whereas scientific (and pedagogical) work occurs within them. This reflects three different postures towards those institutions. Either universities are ignored in favour of the intangible concept of University. Either, they are taken for quasi transparent and thus for having no effects on behaviors (this position is very frequent among the sociology or the anthropology of science²). Either it is assumed that they just are the reflect of the activities and of the actors involved within them: then the point is to stress their "a-normal" character, to show their difference. In this case, the particularity of academic activities is a good reason to treat universities as singular organizations that develop (and ought to develop) specific relations with the political sphere as well as with economic one and the society as a whole. So, because to be an academic is not considered as an activity like the others, universities are all supposed to possess the same characteristics that distinguish them clearly from other organizations and other productive places. That is the reason why, in such a perspective, it is admitted that there exists more convergences between two universities in two different countries than between a university and a firm in the same country. The fact of describing them as "organized anarchies" (Cohen et al. 1972), "professionnal bureaucracies" (Mintzberg 1979) or "loosely coupled systems" (Weick 1976), belongs to the same process: it puts universities into categories to stress their similarities and to distinguish them from other organizations.

² This seems to me particularly true in Latour et Callon's works (See for instance, Latour and Woolgard 1979 and Callon 1989): the *porte-parole* in the socio-technical networks can translate and enroll as if they were free of any institutional constraint and weight.

The idea of a university "nature" that transcends cultures and societies seems all the more evident that there seems to exist some "institutional isomorphism through mimetic process" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) among universities from one country to another: discipline based units (departments) grouped into intermediary structures (the UFR — *Unités de Formation and de Recherche* — in France, the *Fachbereiche* in Germany, the colleges in the United States), a president and some vice-presidents, some administrative staff parallel to this professional structure, and some deliberative instances. This formal similarity, the increasing relationships among academics from different countries, plurinational research programs, are as many features to demonstrate the internationalization of scientific exchanges and the rising convergences among structures that produce and deliver knowledge (see for instance Rhoades 1990 or Crawford et al. 1992).

Nevertheless, some research, most of them American, introduced a different perspective and contributed to the "desingularization" of universities as they tried to analyse them as they would have done for any other kind of organizations. So did P. Blau (1973) in a book, debatable in other respects, in which he described universities as bureaucracies; J. Baldrige (1971) took them as field studies to develop his political model of decision-making; Pfeffer and Salancik (Pfeffer and Salancik 1974; Salancik and Pfeffer 1974) found in universities an example for their resource-dependence theory. For these authors, the way of functioning to be found in universities can not be reduced to the ways by which they produce and transmit knowledge³. They show that it is pertinent as well to wonder how actors socialized in and by different disciplines, and poorly engaged in working together, will manage the minimum of cooperation imposed by their belonging to the same

³ Even if they also take into account such dimensions in their work, see for (Pfeffer and Moore 1980).

institution and make decision upon budget, seminars allocation, the building of new curricula, the management of space, the recruitment of new faculty members etc.

It is with such a perspective that we started a first research project in 1984, seeking to compare how different institutions manage this minimum of cooperation. Let us be honest: hazard and chance explained why we led this comparison in two different countries⁴. For the questioning we had at the time, the realization fieldwork in two countries was not a necessity. But for various reasons, the opportunity was given to us and, moreover it seemed relevant to take it. As a matter of fact French and German universities looked rather "similar", as, in both countries, higher education relies on convergent principles: it belongs to the public sector, faculty members are civil servants, the fees are very low, and every person who has the *baccalauréat* in France or the *Abitur* in Germany can enter the university. Moreover, the recent past of the universities in both countries also tended to make them closer: they overwent the same increase in students numbers in the sixties, the same student riots by the end of the sixties, some new framework laws (the *loi d'orientation* of 1968 in France and the *Hochschulrahmengesetz* of 1976 in Germany) that modified the universities' status in order to set more democratic decision-making processes by introducing representants of non-professoral staff (assistants, students, administrative staff...) in the deliberative instances. For that reason the formal structure as well as the missions of French and German universities looked very similar and comparable.

⁴ I could speak German and was interested in comparative work about these two countries, but the real opportunity arose during a conference on higher education, among academics who launched the idea of a research project on this subject.

Thus, we adopted an approach that compared objects that, at first, were not too different, so that the possible divergences that we would notice would be all the more questionable.

Analysing divergences and similarities

The comparison we led among the four monographs we wrote at that time⁵ stressed on the one hand some clear convergences in both countries: functional interdependancy among faculty members is weak; this feature is reinforced and encouraged by the institutional environments (ministries, research funds, etc.) that directly allocate material and symbolic scientific reward; the administrative staff is not strong enough to promote collective action; the academic leaders do not act as managers but as representants (or *primus inter pares*). The other way round, French and German universities could be opposed on two other points: first on the behaviors and the discourse of professors towards their institution and their deliberative bodies; second, on the way the latters do function, that is their course of action and the type of decisions they make.

Putting forward those divergences/convergences has been a first crucial step. Then started a second step that raised even more questions: the interpretation of these first results. As a matter of facts, the divergences' analysis quickly appeared to be more difficult but also more learningfull than the convergences' one. In fact, the latters are deeply related to the very nature of scientific and pedagogical activities for which strong cooperation and

⁵ These studies occured between February 1984 and June 1986. The main material consisted in semi-directive interviews from one and half to two hours. It has been completed by work on documents (reports on the universities, catalogs of courses, budgets, hearings of the deliberative bodies, etc.). 342 interviews have been led, 187 of them in Germany.

collaboration are not necessary among faculty members, even if nuances are to be observed that have more to do with the characteristics of each discipline than with national patterns. These convergences rely on the same strategies aiming at maintaining as much autonomy as possible. Thus, the weakness of the functional interdependence among faculty members is not only constitutive of this type of activity, it is also a social product: actors identify themselves with autonomy and adopt behaviors that seek to increase it as much as possible. So, the exceptionnalism of this kind of activities appears to be reinforced by the academics themselves!

Nevertheless, because of these similarities, the observed differences became even more surprising: we could state a great convergence in the way academics manage their teaching duties, create new curricula, develop research activities etc., but, the other way round, we found they had different relations to the collectivity and to the institution as a whole, from one country to the other. Because the distinction line is national, it questioned the relevance of any endogeneized explanation of the observed divergences, that is to say an explanation that would seek interpretative elements in the local adjustments and in the local orders of each German university on the one hand and of each French university on the other. In other words, the divergences we met implied to redesign the boundaries of our research object: it was necessary to leave the university's limit in order to explane the variations we observed in the relation to the collectivity between both countries.

But, for methodological reasons, we decided that, at least to begin with , we would introduce either cultural explanations, nor historical interpretations (stressing for instance that German universities belong to a 150 year old tradition - the humboldtian one - whereas French universities got their

institutional autonomy only in 1968). On the contrary, we focused on mechanisms that are exogenous to the universities and that define a different context for action in both countries.

That is the reason why we tackled the effects of the management of academics because it is very different from one country to another. In Germany, we observed two "curious"⁶ characteristics: the recruitments of professors (especially for full professors) induce negotiations on the resources he will get –*Berufungsverhandlung*– and the university is very active in this process; most of the assistants do not have the tenure and work on contracts that can be renewed only one time. These mechanisms happened to become a central phenomenon to understand⁷ how German academics can, on the one hand, behave with great autonomy and try to limit interdependances among them and, can, on the other hand, be more committed and loyal to their institution (whereas they generally experiment more mobility than their French counterparts), and also be able to introduce decision-making process in the deliberative bodies that allow them to make collective choice, especially *vis-à-vis* the ministry. For these reasons, we analyzed the *Berufungsverhandlung* not simply as personalized fundings dedicated to the improvement of some academics work conditions, but, more symbolically, as the product of compromises that are inherent to each recruitment situation and that combine the discipline based logic to the institution's one: allocating resources to improve work conditions does not only mean that scientific reward is translated into material values ("a price"), but also induces that the

⁶ Curiosity for a French observer. For the Germans, these negotiations are so "natural" that they never present it as a distinctive trait of their higher education system and that they generally forget to mention it or to analyze its specific effects on the budgets allocation (see for instance U. Schimank's paper (1994) which is exemplary of this !). This type of negotiation for civil servants (*Beamter auf dauer*) seems very unusual to the French.

⁷ For more details, see Musselin (1987) and Friedberg and Musselin (1989a and 1989b).

universities has to set and shows its priorities and to find supplementary resources⁸.

Defining new comparisons to be led

The influence of these recruitment and carrier mechanisms on the relation to the collectivity and on the behaviors in the deliberative bodies led us thus to depart ourselves from the micro-level (academics at work) as well as from the meso-level (university governments) and to pay more attention to the macro-level of analysis (more precisely the national one), as academic carriers, in France and in Germany, do occur on a national marketplace⁹ which is organized by national rules and procedures (and even a national committee in the case of France).

A second element spoke also in favor of exogenous explanations: the state agency role. The relationships between the minister of *Land* and the German academics were more dense, developed and frequent than the relationships between the French academics and their parisian state agencies. Moreover, while the ministries of *Land* take part to the recruitment decisions¹⁰, the French national ministry does not intervene on this matter, whereas it is very active in the definition and modification of the rules and procedures that structure the carrier paths. For all these reasons, it seemed pertinent to pay

⁸ Either by internal redistribution or by arguing for supplementary resources by the ministry.

⁹ Thus, if the publication of vacant positions occurs through different means in France and in Germany, it nevertheless always concerns the whole country.

¹⁰ They take part in two ways. First, through the control of the process conformity, but it very rarely contradicts the university choice. This control deals with the respect of the procedures but also with the "normality" of the choice, a candidate with a weak dossier should not be preferred to candidates with great reputation. Second, the ministry can intervene and have a more active role, if the university asks him for supplementary resources in order to recruit a very interesting candidate.

more attention to the state agencies and to his influence on the university government, either.

The research we then led was thus centered on the relationships between the ministry and the universities on the one hand, and between the ministry and the academics on the other. In other words, we wanted to understand how state agencies work and how they interact with the universities and with the academic profession. This led us to describe two different national models that can be opposed on these three dimensions (see Table 1)

Table 1 about here

So, the different types of articulations we found between the academic profession and the institutions had to be related to the different types of articulations (in nature and content) we observed between the ministry and the universities and between the ministry and the academic profession. These various mechanisms exercise reinforcing effects on governance and on collective action in the universities of both countries. In France the dominance of discipline based logics of action¹¹ weakens local university government and is in opposition to the emergence of institutional autonomy (Musselin 1995). In Germany, on the contrary, because the university is recognized as a pertinent intermediary structure for negotiation and steering, this institution benefits from more leeway to exercise its autonomy¹².

¹¹ There are weaker since the beginning of the nineties especially since the State agencies sign four year contracts with each university (Frémont 1991; Berrivin and Musselin 1996 and Musselin 1997b).

¹² Cécile Brisset-Sillion confirms the importance of these relationships in her study on an american public system of higher education (called the State University of New York).

From comparison to generalization

While reconstructing the research works we led on French and German higher education systems, I tried to describe the way we have been using international comparison and to show that it has been a process of results' production, formulation of questions and definition of new fieldworks. Relying on this particular example, I would like to show that different levels of comparison were central in the generalization process we engaged. Then I would also like to precise the status we attached to comparison and to the effects an international perspective induces.

Going from specificity to generalization through a comparative process

The research project I described above in fact did not involve only international comparison but different types of comparative processes to progressively go from singularity to general, from individual data to more global modes of regulation.

One reason for this is that the data collected during the fieldwork were of different kinds: in our case, we principally worked with interviews describing activities and interactions and including advices, opinions, explanations, little stories etc., but also documents and sometimes even observations. All those data are never completely comparable one with another. It means that we had to sort out the multiplicity and the diversity of facts and elements. In this purpose, we first confronted data about the actors by qualifying their relationships (nature, content, intensity). It was then possible to compare these relationships and to analyze the divergences and convergences that were to be seen. A third level of comparison dealt with the logics of action

that structure these relationships and with the coherence among these logics, in order to discover the more general modes of regulation which structure the relationships within the university. Confrontating the results of each monograph represented a fourth level of comparison. Thus, it was only at this moment that the comparison between France and Germany occurred and, as a consequence, on already rather aggregated data, for the actors concerned as well as for the compared phenomena (deliberative bodies, decision-making process...).

Finally, our interest for the universities/state/academic profession relationships leads us a step forward towards generalization, as we tried to compare and understand modes of regulations and logics of action among these corporate actors.

Comparison as an heuristic tool

As pointed above, hazard confronted me to international comparison and my problematic at the beginning has not been defined¹³ in terms specific to international work. My point was not to compare France and Germany in order to discover differences (or convergences) between each countries through their higher education systems, but, more "simply" to compare organizations that have the same vocation, and that happen to be located in two different countries. What may be regarded as "methodological incoherence" by specialists of international comparison, was (and still is from my point of view) legitimated by the place accorded to the comparative approach in our research – would it be led or not on different countries –

¹³ All the more as it was one of the first study led in different countries at the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations*.

and by our way of using comparison, that is as a tool for discovery serving an inductive research strategy. As a matter of fact, comparison has a double aim in the studies we led: pointing out convergences and divergences, but also finding the explanatory system that will give sense to the latter. In other words, comparison is settled in an inductive approach and in an heuristic process that do not forecast the convergence/divergence elements to be found, nor than they set *a priori* the kind of explanation systems (for instance universal hypothesis, culturel specificity, societal effects...) that would have to be mobilized to interpret the results obtained.

Thus, in a first step, we just try to discover differences or convergences we did not know before and, through this process, to deconstruct and reconstruct "natural" categories, notions, object, collective actors. The fact that comparison may be international has no impact on this step. In the same country, categories or object that seem identical may hide very different practices, representations, etc. On the contrary, an international comparison may not lead to the observation of divergences (Neuville 1996) and then the question to be raised is why the national context does not make any difference.

After the description of convergences or divergences, it is then time for interpretation. The latter has to be coherent with the obtained results and can not pre-exist to the study. In the fieldwork we led on French and German universities, we did not make hypothesis about the dividing lines we will find, nor about the explanatory models we would use, as they depend of the type of convergences/divergences we would meet: would each monograph be a particular case that can not be reduce to the three others (which would have favoured endogenous explanation)? Or, on the contrary, would we find so strong convergences that we would be able to propose a single university

model (universalist model of explanation)? Or would we have to distinguish France and Germany (national model or societal effect)?, etc.

One of the difficulty inherent to this approach is that, will it be international or not, comparison can be a heuristic tool only if it deals with *a priori* comparable objects. Because it should go over the apparent similarities, the latter have to be the starting point of the comparison, in order to be put into question afterwards. The way we used comparison thus admits contrasts (a new university and an old one, for instance) but does not allow much heterogeneity (for instance, comparing a university to a firm or even to a French *Grande Ecole* seems to me weakly pertinent), because differences as well as convergences then lose their signification and their explanatory strength: it is then much more difficult to distinguish what can be understood thanks to statutory or to structural differences and what is a matter of the games in which actors are engaged and that they contribute to produce and to maintain.

International comparison makes difference

Shall we nevertheless come to the conclusion that international comparison does not make any difference and that it is indifferent to stay at the infra-national level or to lead an international study? I do not think so. From my point of view, the comparison between France and Germany had at least three effects: a lightening one, a validating one and an crushing one.

Of course, it is not possible to know what I will have found, would the study be led only on French universities. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to me that international comparison modifies the glance at the French results. For

instance, the impact of the disciplines experts on the French central administration would have anyway been an important point in the study of the French state agencies, but I would have found it rather trivial. On the contrary, it becomes "extraordinary"¹⁴ in respect with the absence of such experts in German ministries. Thus, international comparison offers a different light and obliges us to reconsider what seems too quickly "natural", shakes evidences and reveals our ordinary knowledge.

International comparison also has a lightening effect because it allows a better identification of what is specific to the studied object and what is related to its integration in a larger frame. Thus, having comparative elements that are exterior to France and that point out differences between the two countries, helps us in distinguishing what refers to national variables and what does not (for instance the weak functional interdependency among academics). For that reason international comparison possesses a validating effect, as the general explanations found for one country can be validated (or not) for another country.

But international comparison also introduces bias, because it contrains to hierarchize differences and convergences. Let me take an example. In Germany, higher education is in charge of the *Länder*, and we compared the functions and the styles of intervention of three ministries of *Land*. For each of them, we were able to identify a specific higher education policy and a specific way of functioning¹⁵. Would our work be limited to Germany, we certainly have stressed these differences. But, compared to the French state

¹⁴ Whereas it is a part of the ordinary knowledge of each French academics who are used to submit research or pedagogical projects to their peers and never to the administrative staff.

¹⁵ We distinguished three models: a bureaucratic one, an hierarchical one and a political one (Friedberg and Musselin 1993).

agencies, there was then no ambiguity about the conclusion to raise: the French ministry is very different from the German ones and this distance became the principal fact. But of course, it obliged to crush the infra-national differences and to treat them as nuances in a more general pattern: it minimized infra-national differences and tends to neglect the impact of mechanisms that are either national nor societal. The positive aspect of this, is that it helps generalization. But what kind of a generalization? That will be my last point now.

Systemic coherences or societal effects?

How far can we generalize what we learn from our France/Germany comparison? I see two possible ways.

First, this research proposes an analytic framework that can be, transfered in other countries than France and Germany as it suggests that that the degree of autonomy universities should always be understood in interactions with the academic profession and the state agencies. The research led by Cécile Brisset-Sillion on the State University of New York (SUNY) gives an example of such a transfer.

Second, our work offers a possibility for generalization because, studying the modes of regulation and the logics of action among the universities, the state and the academic profession, we also tried to understand how the three of them are articulated, constructed and institutionalized. From this point of view, and using the vocabulary of the societal analysis, our work states consistencies between the discipline based intercourse, the public (or political) one and the organizational one. It also allows the reconstruction of collective

actors who have different identities in both countries: as a matter of fact the figure of the German professors does not bear the same representations, the same leeway for action, the same relation to the university collectivity and to the society, as the French one; the German university either does not have the same place, the same functions, etc. Thanks to a more longitudinal approach, we could show how those identities have been structured in relation to the process of institutionalization that the relationships between the universities, the state and the academic profession knew in each country (Musselin 1995).

As a matter of fact, and beyond the divergences I pointed out in this text, the sociology of organized action, applied to international comparative work, find many resonances with the societal analysis. Nevertheless, it remains a crucial difference that is related to the explanatory scope attributed to such national models.

In the sociology of organized action, as I practiced it, I went from specificity to generalization but it does not mean that the micro level is closely related to the macro one. Through the comparative process I described above, we progressively went from one level to another, from the interpersonal relationships, to more global and more generic modes of regulation. This led us to the identification of national models that describe (make visible and resume in a certain way) the frames that structure the collective action. These frames limit the actors' behaviors in orienting the allocation of resources and constraints. They are in the same time constructed through the interactions among the actors and are the product of the exchanges, adjustments, arrangements that have developed and have been institutionalized, but that can be renegotiated and modified. But, these general modes of regulation are not **inscribed in the actors**. They are just one of the elements of the actors' social construct. We have been able to qualify in a generic manner the content

and the nature of the relationships that arise between the ministry and the universities, the ministry and the academic profession, and between the universities and the academic profession. We have been able to explicit the stakes behind those relationships and thus to identify the modes of regulation that structure them. We have been able to show that these modes of regulation are not independent from one another. Nevertheless this tells us nothing about the each time different and original way by which, each individual actor (in our case an academic) will articulate his belonging to a discipline, his belonging to a single institution, and his belonging to a national system. So it tells nothing about the way he will construct his own identity. The more we generalize, the looser the links between general regulations and local interaction.

For these reasons, the explanatory scope of the national systems we described in France and in Germany has to be relativised. I show in the first part of this text the limits of the research on universities and disciplines that do not pay attention to the national variables. Conversely, it would be as excessive to say that national models can either account for, nor give sense to all that happens in universities and disciplines. As a consequence, the notion of societal effect seems to global to me. Societal analysts recognize that societal effects do not determine the actors but they nevertheless add that the latter are "caught and conceived through the social intercourses (educative, productive, organizational, of cooperation or negociation) that contribute to produce them (Maurice 1994 a: 654)."

Within such a perspective, and in the specific case of higher education, this would mean that the discipline-effect and the university-effect are subordinated to the national modes of regulation. But it is not so: these

different effects are in interdependence and in competition one with another, at the local level.

That is why the identification of national models should not be assimilated to the reconstruction of a societal order or the unfolding of a meta-structure, and why we only partially compare societies when we compare national university systems. This is precisely on this point that I see most of the divergences between me and the societal analysts who, it seems to me, use societal effects as if they were meta-structures. From this point of view, and even if such a statement would need longer explanations, they are very close to other streams with which they had less exchanges than with the sociology of organized action. For instance: the american neo-institutionalist sociologists¹⁶ for which actors share beliefs, norms, values or common representations that constitute what they call "institutions" or "institutional environments. These latter construct their cognitive perception of the situation in which they are engaged, and "determine" or, ad minima, circumscribe their actions (cf. for instance Berger and Luckman 1966; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1985). I also refer to some works in political science this time, and more precisely to B. Jobert and P. Muller (Jobert and Muller 1987; Faure et al. 1997) who use the notion of global referential to integrate all the different systems of action in a common representation of the world which is embedded in the individual/society relationship.

Societal analysts, neo-institutionnalists and tenants of the referential analysis all propose a well-ordered conception of the social world that hangs over and

¹⁶ Sociologists, political scientists and economists use the notion of "neo-institutionalism" but in relative different ways. For a synthetic but rich presentations of each of these theses and for a confrontation on their different contributions, see Hall and Taylor (1996).

embodies the individual actor, even if these three streams admits that in return this macro-structure is (at least partially) constructed by the actors. But, this subordination of the local orders to a more global one is debatable for me. Saying that, I do not mean that there exist no macro-mechanisms, no national model, no societal effects. I just state that they do not take the lead of the others. They are just one of the "frames" that circumscribe individual actions, one of the "institutions" that participate to the cognitive perception of situations, one of the effects that structure the actors' identity, one of the referential individuals can act and think their relation to the world. For that reason local orders can simultaneously be very different on one territory (or within a society): they always account for the contingent articulation the actors produced at the local level among various "frames of action". Of course, it may happen situations in which individual behaviors are strongly connected to some societal effects, to an institutional environment or to a specific referential¹⁷. But, such closure are not the rule: they are the exception.

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¹⁷ See for instance the doctoral dissertation of H. Bergeron (1998) on the healthcare system for toxicomaniacs in France.

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