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Illusions of political neutrality: Science-based technocracy in interwar Western Europe and North America

THE FIRST WORLD WAR paved the way to a formalization of the various commitments that scientists had initiated with political milieus. Obviously, the challenge was to translate in a peaceful climate the mechanisms that had been functioning during wartime under military conditions. Attracted by the discourses praising the “scientification” of civil society, some scientists were soon engaged in a nexus of political transformation affecting the (re)organization of Nation-States. One of these domains dealt with the development of a science-inspired public administration; its objective laid in the emergence of a rational social order. Its peculiarity, to some extent, was to claim the political neutrality of its agenda: the mechanisms of economic benefits and social control operating in the factory could be displayed in the society as a whole (most notably by the use of planning methods, standardized budgets, social controls, etc.). Through this, they reactivated Saint-Simon’s old dream by shifting from “the government of people to the administration of things”. Put briefly, the features mentioned above are the common traits of the various technocratic movements that flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in Western Europe and the United States — movements that were traditionally depicted as modernists.

The questions this paper seeks to address are, on the one hand, the political origins of science-inspired technocracy in spite of its constant pushback and, on the other, the implications of these activities on the reordering of national public management cultures but also on the transformations of social sciences and their recognition as fully-fledged academy-legitimated scientific disciplines. This paper is part of a work in progress, which aims to seek the origins of rational public systems in Europe and North America through the identification of “technocratic” movements.

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