Call for proposals – The many hands of the State: Spaces, Actors and Instrument of the Recomposing of Public Action

2021 CEE’s doctoral study day

The PhD students of the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics will organize at the end of November 2021 (exact date to be determined)* their third doctoral study day, on the theme “The many hands of the State: Spaces, Actors and Instrument of the Recomposing of Public Action”. The study day will be composed of a series of four round tables of 1h30, each based on a specific theme and several communications discussed by a senior researcher and a PhD student of the Centre. The goal is to show how PhD students in social sciences can enrich an academic debate, while being approachable by a larger audience.

Only PhD students can propose a communication for one or more round tables. Communication proposals should be no longer than 1000 words and have to be sent by September 30, along with a paragraph presenting the candidate, his/her research themes and his/her research unit. The study day’s communications will be selected before October 15.

The candidates are encouraged, as far as possible, to present comparative works on European cases, however there is no restriction of discipline, geographical area or theoretical approach given the communication’s proposals fit the issues of the round tables.

The communication’s proposals must be sent to doctorants.ceesp@gmail.com

Theme of the day: The Many Hands of the State: Spaces, Actors and Instruments of the Recomposing of Public Action

This doctoral study day is enshrined in the axis “The State as Producer of Public Policies” of the Centre for European Studies, which analyses the contemporary transformations of the States and of public action. The conclusion has been reproduced many times: taken between global transformations – regional integration, capitalism’s mutations, technological change – and national ones – privatizations, decentralization reforms, public bureaucracies’ mutations – the power and legitimacy of the States is recomposing itself. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this study day calls for proposals over four key domains where these reconfigurations are at play.

Taken together, these round tables aim at proposing refreshing approaches, methods and discussions around public action and the transformations of State power. What are the different spaces of public action? How is the State authority negotiated and redistributed in its multiple interdependencies with actors located at different scales? What is the role of para-public or non-State actors in the production of public action and domination? What are the new legitimation strategies of public policies in front of active publics? Facing these transformations, can the States still be considered as “strong”? What do new digital tools change in the power and abilities of the States and of their administrations?
Round table n°1: “Playing with Scales: How the Inter, Supra and Infranational Bodies Transform the State and its Practices”

The State has never disappeared, but it is not (and far from it) the only one deciding in public affairs. Constrained by the norms of international institutions, the control of supranational bodies or by the growing weight of local and urban governance, the State is becoming the regulator of those multiple bodies. How is the State transformed by these not so new actors? Does State work with or try to resist to these external influences? How does the belonging to the European Union transform the European States? Which is the role or international and supranational organizations in other regions? Which is the power of local and urban administrations in a globalized world?

Discussion by Patrick Le Galès, CNRS research director at the CEE and Dean of the Urban School of Sciences Po, and Pablo Cussac, PhD candidate at the CEE

Round table n°2: “Beyond the Weberian State: Privatization, Informalization and Neoliberalization of the State”

For many years, social sciences have tried to overcome the opposition between ideal-typical States as described by Max Weber and the “failed” States literature, in order to describe the transformations of the States and their domination, which can be exerted through private and para-State actors, which questions the goals of public policies, the organization of the State and ultimately the boundary between State and non-State domains. Do we observe the same processes in all the States? Are we witnessing a generalized weakening of State power? What are the effects of these transformations on States’ strength and (in)ability to produce domination? How are these privatization and informalization processes justified?

Discussion by Béatrice Hibou, CNRS research director at the CERI and vice-President of the Fonds d’Analyse des Sociétés Politiques (FASOPO), and Ségolène Mennesson, PhD candidate at the CEE and the ULB’s GERME research center.


More and more scrutinized, either by the public opinion or by the organizations monitoring “good governance”, local or national producers of public policies face a series of requirements for quantitative and qualitative results. In return, the decision-makers pay an increasing attention to the ways in which their action is perceived and appropriated by the publics, that is to say the reception of their public policies. The issue is for them to maintain their legitimacy and popularity among the public opinion, while controlling the consequences of public action and anticipating the future demands of the governed people. Which instruments are introduced to measure the reception of public policies? How do the publics mobilize to change public policies? Can the latter reconcile an imperative of rationalization of the State with an ambition of quality public service?

Discussion by Blandine Mesnel, PhD in Political Science, teaching fellow at the Paris II Panthéon-Sorbonne University and associate researcher at the CEE, and Soazig Dollet, PhD candidate at the CEE and at the Alexandre Glasberg COS Foundation.

Round table n°4: “Seeing like a Digital State: Uses and Effects of Data and Algorithms on Public Policies and Governance”


Digital tools and the Internet have turned social practices upside down in many domains, and public policies are no exception. Tools for rationalizing processes, saving resources or producing statistics, they generate as many hopes as fears regarding their use by public authorities. How have administrations mobilized these digital tools? Which knowledges and forms of objectivity and neutrality are being developed regarding algorithms? Do digital tools encourage the concentration or the distribution of public decision? Are all social groups equally affected by digital and algorithmic governance? Which forms of implicit bias are embedded and reproduced in these tools? Is the road towards digital unstoppable?

Discussion by Dominique Boullier, Full Professor in Sociology and researcher at the CEE, and Jean-Baptiste Chambon, PhD student at the CEE

* If the health situation allows it, the study day will take place at Sciences Po Paris, otherwise on Zoom or with a hybrid configuration.