

# The Enduring Mammoth

*by Jean Le Bihan*

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**Cutting the number of civil servants is a topic that is raised at each election in France. Why this anti-civil service attitude, despite public services themselves being constantly praised? Why this hostility, even though as soon as electoral campaigns are over, it is usually left without any practical consequences?**

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Reviewed: [Émilien RUIZ, \*Trop de fonctionnaires ? Histoire d'une obsession française \(XIX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle\)\* \("Too Many Civil Servants? A History of a French Obsession \(19th – 21st Century\)"\), Paris, Fayard, 2021, 265 p., €22.](#)

This book is the – at least provisional – result of the many years of research that Émilien Ruiz has devoted to the question of the number of civil servants in France. The text is mainly based on Ruiz's doctoral thesis<sup>1</sup>, which he defended in 2013, and which provides him here with most of his material – but the author has not limited himself to providing a mere summary of this thesis here. Rather, Ruiz has reconfigured its contents as well as its scope, now applying his analysis to more recent years. This book is thus not directly inspired by current events, but nevertheless strongly resonates with them. In fact, as Émilien Ruiz explains, he had the idea of writing it following the campaign for the 2017 presidential election, during which political leaders and economic stakeholders and experts had called – as so many others had done before them and with the same sense that they were calling for something self-evident – for a reduction in the number of civil servants. Ruiz's objective followed naturally from

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<sup>1</sup> RUIZ Émilien, *Trop de fonctionnaires ? Contribution à une histoire de l'État par ses effectifs (France, 1850-1950)*, history PhD thesis, EHESS, 2013.

this: to produce historical research, of course, but also to shed light on a public debate that is too often obscured by all sorts of simplifications.

## How Many Civil Servants?

It is admittedly no easy task to reconstitute the development of the number of civil servants in France since the 19th century, both due to the state of the relevant documentation and to the uncertainties which, from the start, have weighed on the very definition of what constitutes a French civil servant. After all, the number of individuals this term refers to currently ranges according to a ratio of 1 to 3, depending on whether we limit the definition to civil servants working directly for the state at the national level, or extend it to include military personnel and to people employed on permanent contracts by local public services and public hospitals; and even then, this latter approach neglects staff on fixed-term contracts, the number of which, as we shall see, is constantly increasing. It thus follows that the author cannot represent the development of the number of civil servants using a simple mathematical curve; he must carry out partial analyses, which should not however cast doubt on their indicative value. Thus, the graph on p. 60 eloquently illustrates how the number of agents of the state developed between 1896 and 2018: a moderate increase up until the Second World War; a faster increase through to the 1980s; and after this, a levelling-out. From this point onwards, the figure hovered around 2.4 million agents, i.e. six times more than during the *Belle Époque*. This more than justifies the author's assertion that "something happened in the 20th century" (p. 55). The long, gradual increase in the number of agents of the state was the result of the expansion of state intervention, due largely to the two World Wars, which, during the *Trente Glorieuses* – the 30-year French post-war boom – had a particularly big impact on social and cultural affairs, but also on emerging sectors such as the environment. As for the rupture that took place in the 1980s, this can, conversely, be explained by the fact that the perimeter of state intervention stopped expanding at this point, and that decentralisation laws transferred part of the powers of central government to local and regional authorities.

This long-term increase in civil service staff numbers constantly inspired hostile discourse. This might be broadly qualified as "anti-functionarism", a word coined from "functionarism" ("*fonctionnarisme*"), which is defined by Pierre Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel* ("*Great Universal Dictionary*"), in its 1872 edition, as "a system founded on the existence of a large number of civil servants". In a way, we might say

that anti-functionarism has existed for as long as the civil service itself. While the intensity of this sentiment may have varied over the decades, at no point did it ever completely disappear, something which prompts the author to view it as the expression of a genuine collective “obsession”. In addition, anti-functionarism is polymorphous. It is powerfully strongly influenced by the atavistic anti-statist instincts of free marketeers, who are quick to view any increase in the number of civil servants as the sign of the rising, or even sprawling, influence that the government has over society. However, as the author shows, the denunciation of functionarism is very often no more than a way of denigrating whatever regime happens to be in place. This is manifestly how it was used by, amongst others, the opponents of the parliamentary republic at the end of the 19th century. Under Vichy and at the Liberation, it even provided a pretext for administrative purges to be carried out. But, here again, the 1980s would constitute a moment of rupture. Indeed, from this point on, those in favour of reducing the number of civil servants stopped using political or ideological arguments; they now resorted only to the argument of budgetary constraints, which became, as it were, self-sufficient. Anti-functionarism appeared to become depoliticised.

## **The Hidden Aporia of “Slimming Down” Programmes**

However, as the author points out, it is clear that there has always been a wide gap between the objurgations voiced by the opponents of the bureaucratic Leviathan, and the depth of the budgetary cuts which they themselves, or others, then actually inflict on the civil service. Staff reduction plans appeared after the First World War, accompanied by the argument – which had a bright future ahead of it – that the savings thus realised would serve to increase the standard of living of remaining civil servants. This open voluntarism characterised a large part of the interwar period; it resurfaced at the Liberation and gave rise to the notorious “axe” and “guillotine” commissions. But these did not bring about the expected results. According to Émilien Ruiz’s estimates, of the 200,000 job cuts that were planned between 1945 and 1948, a little over 50,000 were ultimately carried out. We observe such a rift again at the beginning of the 21st century. The desire to “slim down the mammoth”, to use an expression that has become common parlance in France, then became stronger than ever. In 2005, a proposal was put forward to not replace one civil servant out of two for a period of ten years – and was then picked up again by Nicolas Sarkozy during his 2007

presidential campaign. It would be wrong to say that this did not have any effect: over 100,000 jobs were cut between 2007 and 2012; nevertheless, this result was much lower than had initially been projected. We might, in a way, apply this argumentation to the five-year term that is currently coming to an end, even if, in this case, the government's powerlessness has several very specific causes: first of all, the *Gilets jaunes* movement, and then the Covid crisis. At any rate, Émilien Ruiz's analysis leads him to the conclusion that French political leaders have always been unable to durably and significantly reduce the number of civil servants. According to him, this powerlessness is the result of their refusal, as soon as they are in power, to stand by the consequences that such a programme, if it were to actually be intransigently implemented, would inevitably have on the scope and quality of public services. Therein lies, ultimately, the "main 'taboo'" (p. 191).

## The Rise of Contract Work and Female Work

The aforementioned demonstration provides the overall framework for the book, but it is completed by two further arguments. In Chapter 3, the author retraces the history of the status of civil servants, which has been particularly called into question since the end of the 20th century. He also investigates the related issue of the development of contract work within the civil service. This is an ancient phenomenon, which was strongly influenced first by the First World War, and then by the Second. From the 1970s, the granting of civil servant status to contract workers became a recurrent demand in leftwing circles – one which obtained satisfaction, to a certain extent, following the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. The 2000s then brought about a major change in that, as has already been shown by Aurélie Peyrin<sup>2</sup>, contract work was very much normalised within the civil service. The author views this as one of the expressions of a general movement towards an increasing externalisation of public services, and this leads him to the interesting idea that the increased use of contract workers allows the government to get around the aporia we identified above in the sense that it then becomes possible to ensure that the number of agents of the state holding permanent contracts does not increase, and may even decrease, without this visibly affecting the scope and quality of public services.

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<sup>2</sup> PEYRIN Aurélie, *Des contractuel.le.s au cœur de l'État. Une sociologie de l'emploi public par ses marges*, unpublished habilitation thesis in sociology, Université Paris-Descartes, 2017.

Finally, Chapter 4 examines the development of women's access to the civil service. This is probably the chapter that is least closely connected to the book's main line of argument; but it does not interrupt our reading. Like others before him, Émilien Ruiz reminds us here that the feminisation of the public administration has been slow, and "fraught with difficulties" (p. 119) of both a regulatory and cultural order. Things have come a considerable way in the space of a century, though this does not of course mean that equality between men and women has been achieved, especially as far as concerns the jobs that are highest up in the administrative hierarchy. Let us add that, in line with the work carried out by Virginie de Luca Barrusse<sup>3</sup>, the author develops in this chapter a stimulating reflection on the way in which anti-functionarism and the fear of depopulation converged for a while under the Third Republic, due to malthusian civil servants supposedly not just factually contributing to a reduction in the birth rate, but also setting the wrong example for the rest of French society.

## **History: an Antidote to Demagogy**

We are undoubtedly here in the presence of a book that is well-documented, vigorously and rigorously written, and *in fine* convincing. Doubtless, we still have a few questions left once we have finished reading. We might wonder, for example, how the phenomena that the author has revealed and dissected at the level of the French public administration as a whole might take different forms within the various sectors that make up said administration. But this should not be taken as a criticism, since the format of the book prohibited the author from the start from examining the question of the number of civil servants in all its aspects. At any rate, the author has achieved what he set out to achieve. Over the course of these 200 pages or so, Émilien Ruiz provides solid material to anyone who wants to form their own personal view on this important question. Beyond this, he invites us to engage in a collective, democratic reflection on the place of the civil service in contemporary France, that is to say on its scope, its nature, its benefits, as viewed by the French people, and its cost, also as they are viewed by the French people; and this reflection is made all the more urgent by the fact that, in fact, the civil service has fast been transformed since the start of the new century. Will this appeal be heard? We would have good reason to bet that, among the

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<sup>3</sup> DE LUCA BARRUSSE Virginie, *Les familles nombreuses. Une question démographique, un enjeu politique. France (1880-1940)*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008.

supporters of “slimming down”, many will continue to argue that reducing the number of functionaries can be achieved simply by increasing efficiency; and to doubt that the surveys carried out in the field, by the administration itself, which point to the damaging effects that certain cuts would surely have – such as the report carried out in 2012 by the General Inspectorates of the Administration, Finances and Social Affairs, which is quoted in the book – will be enough to make them change their minds. They will, however, still have to explain why it still remains, despite all opposition, so difficult to cut, *ceteris paribus*, the number of civil servants. Perhaps they will answer that the political leaders of yesteryear lacked the political courage that will not fail those who they hope will preside tomorrow over the country’s fate. And the story will start over again... At any rate, we can only recommend reading this book, which is particularly useful in the current period of electoral campaigning, during which, in this field as in others, serious analysis is too often sacrificed to slogans and shortcuts.

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