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SYMPOSIUM | 50 years of disability policy in France (1975-2025): history, current issues and perspectives

Call for papers

The Directorate General for Social Cohesion (DGCS) is organizing a symposium on June 5 and 6, 2025 on of disability policy in France (1975-2025), in partnership with the Laboratory for interdisciplinary evaluation of public policies (LIEPP) of SciencesPo, the Institut de recherche interdisciplinaire en sciences sociales (IRISSO) of the Paris Dauphine-PSL University and the Comité d'histoire de la Sécurité sociale. On June 30, 1975, France passed two laws on the same day, one « law of orientation in favor of disabled people », and the other “concerning medico-social institutions”. In the early 2000s, France modified this legal framework in two stages. In 2002, it revised the law on institutions and, on February 11, 2005, adopted the law "for the equal rights and opportunities, the participation and citizenship of disabled people". In 2025, the anniversary of these three laws (50 years for the first two, 20 years for the third) provides an opportunity to understand the evolution of disability policies in France, and to take stock of the consequences of their application. The aim of this call for papers is to propose a series of non-exhaustive lines of inquiry into these policies, with a view to understanding their history, proposing an evaluation, describing the transformation processes at work, and outlining prospects for the future.

1. Representations

The first line of inquiry focuses on political representations of relevant population groups and the social problems that public policies aim to address. Here, we are interested in the stakeholders who are involved in the creation of laws, how these laws frame their target population and the representations of disability they convey.

a. Producing the law

In the early 1970s, associations and political and administrative stakeholders played a key role in the drafting of these two laws. The role played by civil society in the incremental implementation of public policies since the beginning of the 20th century, but especially since the Second World War, has solidified their role as representatives of the issue on the political stage. In the debates that preceded them, and even more so after their adoption, these two laws were hotly contested by a number of disabled people's groups, political parties and trade unions, revealing the narrow space of cooperation in regulatory production between administrative and political elites on the one hand, and civil society organizations running institutions on the other. In 2005, the process of drafting the law involved intense exchanges between members of civil society, parliament and government, right up to the last minute. These drafting processes offer opportunities to observe the structuring of this policy domain: how were the participants in these deliberations selected? What terms were discussed? How can we describe the nature of

exchanges between political and administrative actors and those involved in the disability "sector"? How has this structuring affected the very content of public policies for disabled people?

These laws also set up more or less formal bodies to coordinate relations between political and administrative bodies and actors in the "sector". Created in 1975, the role of the Conseil National Consultatif des Personnes Handicapées (National Advisory Council for Disabled People) has evolved over the past 50 years. How can we describe its activities and how it relates to other forums for exchange with politicians? The organization of the national disability conferences (CNH) provided for in the 2005 law also contributes to these exchanges. At the same time, coordination structures have been set up within civil society (the Group of 21, the Comité d'entente, the Collectif handicap). What are the relationships, forms of competition and cooperation between these different bodies?

b. Laws and their target populations

While the field has gradually unified, the status of disabled people has evolved since 1975. Whereas the 1975 "orientation" law did not provide any definition of disability, referring this task to commissions, the 2005 law provided the first legal definition of disability. The former sets out a national obligation, while the latter claims, through its title, to achieve equal rights. While the 1975 law sought to act "in favor of", the 2005 law insists on the obligation to involve those directly concerned in the policymaking process. Since 2005, references to "co-production", "consultation" and "self-representation" have become common in the decision-making process and in the implementation of the law. How have these developments transformed representations of disability as a social challenge on the political stage? For example, what effect has the 2005 law had on the use of sign language in French society? Under what conditions have emerging players been able to act as spokespeople for disabled people? Has this "co-production" produced tangible effects? What relationships exist today within this public space between civil society organizations running institutions, activist groups, families, spokespersons and self-representatives?

The law does not only concern disabled people, but also other players involved in implementing these policies, notably local authorities and medico-social professionals. Legislation thus organizes in different ways the participation of local authorities in the production of public policy. How do they both reflect and relay the logic of decentralization in France? These laws have also largely contributed to the structuring of the medico-social sector. The 1975 law on disability was adopted on the same day as the law on medical-social institutions. The 2005 law follows on from the "2002-2" law on social action. Today, reforms such as the Serafin-PH project and the "accompanied response for all" are profoundly transforming funding methods, forms of cooperation between organizations and the professional logic of the medico-social sector. How are these professions affected by these transformations? What kind of reconfiguration of professions are we witnessing, particularly in the field of education?

These laws have also served to extend the protective wing of the State. The recent reform of the Allocation Adulte Handicapé (Disabled adult allowance) extends the logic of assistance to populations previously excluded from a welfare state built around salaried employment. These laws have also been the occasion for experimentation and innovation in solutions that had not yet been tested: the choice of public interest group status for the Maisons départementales des personnes handicapées, the creation of multi-disciplinary teams, the introduction of a "life project", and so on. How has disability policy transformed social and public policies?

c. Disability law and research

The 2005 law incorporates a number of developments pertaining to the social model of disability, notably through the issue of accessibility. At a time when international definitions were evolving considerably, notably through the adoption of the International Classification of Functioning in 2001, how did France integrate these rapid transformations? How do debates on the various models (rehabilitation model, "human rights" model, "disability production process" model or "interactive" model) play out in the French public arena and in the conduct of day-to-day public policy? Who are the translators and proponents of these theoretical models? More broadly, how are activists, civil society and academia involved in political decision-making?

These laws have also led to growing investment in disability research. At the same time as disability studies and deaf studies are gradually developing in France, public research on disability is expanding beyond strictly medical approaches. Today, around a series of structuring programs, learned societies, international journals and public institutions, research on disability is growing. Who are the researchers working on these themes? How do they relate their research on disability to the issues specific to their disciplines? How do they link their work to activist demands? How do we explain the particularities of French disability studies and the fact that there are few specialized training courses on disability in France? What links are there between the different generations of disability researchers in France? How important is the circulation of research at the international level, particularly research carried out in the USA? In addition, public statistics surveys in France have been slow to incorporate tools that provide a better assessment of disabled people and their daily lives. How did this happen? What will they tell us about people with disabilities? Finally, new participatory research formats are now being actively promoted: how do these formats affect the production of academic knowledge? Has this funding changed the way disability research is structured in universities and research organizations?

2. Borders

The second theme of this symposium concerns the perimeter of this policy domain, looking at changes in its boundaries, its links with other fields of public policy, and the international influences that shape it.

a. Changing boundaries in the field of disability

Whereas the 1975 law left it up to the administration to define the limits of this field, the February 11, 2005 law establishes an a priori definition of disability. The approach adopted, which is more sensitive to situations of disability, without making the environment the cause of disability, has provoked much debate on the potential dilution of the notion. The elimination of age barriers (under 18 and over 60 for the PCH - which has still not been achieved in 2024) is provided for in the law, even though the question of the ageing of disabled people is still a largely unanswered problem. The agency in charge of regulating this sector is also set to become the management fund to cover a new Social Security risk, the "autonomy" risk, which aims to include both disability and age-related dependency. Discussions on the "5e risk" came to a partial conclusion in the early 2020s, with the reconfiguration of the Caisse nationale de solidarité pour l'autonomie. But the articulation between these two policies remains unfinished business. Moreover, within the disability sector itself, certain situations are subject to partially differentiated treatment. In France, controversies around autism have led to a dedicated national scheme and political and administrative treatment. Other issues (such as diabetes and electrosensitivity) are unevenly recognized across the country, depending on local circumstances. The field of disability is itself the subject of a struggle to define its boundaries. How can we trace and understand these definitional struggles? How have the boundaries of this space shifted? Which players have lost or gained the ability to define them?

b. What links are there with other policy sectors

The question of how disability policies relate to other policy sectors has been a major issue since 1975. These policies emerged from a differentiation - notably in the case of "disabled children" - with the policies placed under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice for "delinquent children". These links still exist, however, particularly with regard to protected adults placed under "legal protection". In 1975, psychiatry was not included in the field of disability, but this was finally done in 2005, when the law recognized the existence of psychiatric disability. This differentiation is based on a set of specific institutions. The marginalization and segregation brought about by institutionalization policies are strongly criticized, particularly by international organizations, under the convention that France has ratified (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). Rights policies are forcing France to bring the "protected" sector closer to ordinary law, and to anchor practices in a non-discrimination perspective. On the other hand, the ambitions for accessibility affirmed in the law and the development of the notion of inclusion are leading to a desire to mainstream disability. These policies are no longer confined to traditional social welfare, with the aim of making them interministerial. Accessibility policies, the development of which has been largely thwarted in France, involve working across sectors, with transport and housing regulators. What are the results of these attempts? What instruments have been used to achieve this cross-sectoral approach? How have players in the various sectors reacted to this objective? Is it now being called into question? What place does the objective of making the country accessible occupy on the political agenda, at the various levels of public policy? How important are economic and financial factors in France's delay in this area? Can comparisons with other countries help us to understand why France is making so little headway in this area?

This articulation between sectors of public policy can give rise to contradictory rationales. In the case of employment and disability policies, demands for emancipation through work and financial autonomy in the marketplace runs counter to workfare policies, which force disabled people to accept work in order to limit social welfare. This conflict between sectoral rationales can also be seen in the field of accessibility to buildings and schools. What lies at the root of these conflicts? What instruments have been invented to overcome these sectoral oppositions?

c. What impact do international policies have on French policies?

The European and international dimensions of the 1975 and 2005 laws are rarely highlighted, and the narrative of a nation taking care of its most vulnerable is preferred. This logic is at odds with the rights-based perspective of international bodies. The Rights Committee of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Special Rapporteurs on their visits to France, point to the shortcomings of French policies. The World Federation of the Deaf does not consider sign language to be recognized in France, and there is no specific legislation governing it. France therefore appears to be out of step with international objectives. What role have references to international norms played in the evolution of the French legal framework? What role does the Europeanization of these policies play today in the concrete production of these public policies? Which actors are mobilizing these references today? How do these policies circulate internationally? Have French actors or organizations played a role in the production of these international standards? Which national models inspire or serve as a point of comparison for French policies today?

3. Changes

The third line of questioning concerns changes: those brought about by the law, and those that affect the legislative framework today.

a. Rights and experience

Have laws changed the lives of disabled people? Have school inclusion policies had an impact on the trajectories of disabled children? How can we assess the effects of promoting a logic of "rights" on the way disabled people define themselves and on their power to act? How can we ensure that the people directly concerned can fully enjoy these rights? How can these rights be put into practice in the caregiving relationship with homecare professionals, and in the ability to rely on peer networks? Within families, has the emergence of these rights and the prospect of self-diagnosis changed relations between parents and disabled children? How is expertise currently distributed between caregivers (family or otherwise), disabled individuals and administrative disability institutions? What experiments and transformations are underway to make these rights a reality? Can we measure the evolution of stereotypes associated with disability, in artistic or media representations? Can we assess changes in people's self-definition as the associated rights are recognized or denied?

b. Revolution or mutation?

While the laws of 1975 and 2005 are milestones in the evolution of disability policies, the idea that the law itself can bring about a real decline in social marginalization is open to debate. Numerous low-key developments have marked the evolution of disability policies in recent years. They are less integrated with other sectors of public policy. Is it conceivable that a new law could be a new driver of change in public policy? Are struggles for emancipation now taking place on other stages (activist, partisan, judicial, media, local), in the technical stakes of parameterizing management tools and relations between implementing institutions? Are we witnessing collective remobilization as a result of shortcomings in implementation?

c. And tomorrow?

Based on the trends observed in the evaluation of laws, is it possible to draw up a blueprint for the evolution of the French legislative framework? What experiments or innovations carried out in France or abroad could help overcome the obstacles, delays and delays observed in France's conversion to the logic of rights? What types of mobilization could help overcome these obstacles? What alliances should players in this sector forge to bring about a new paradigm?

In addition, this last axis also allows us to consider angles where research has made little progress to date: the question of the articulation of relations of domination (intersectionality), notably between gender and disability, but also between race and disability, is still in its infancy in France. This has had the effect of ignoring important issues, such as violence against disabled women, which is still poorly documented in France. The intersection of age and disability is also poorly understood, despite the fact that disabled children are over-represented in the child welfare system, and that many older workers with acquired disabilities leave the job market without access to disability schemes. How do we explain this difficulty in crossing perspectives on these intersectional issues? What other areas are still in the shadows, due to the way in which knowledge and public policies on disability are shaped?

HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL

Proposals must be sent to DGCS-COLLOQUE-HANDICAP-2025@social.gouv.fr by 1st September 2024.

Proposals should be no more than 3,000 characters long and include a bibliography of no more than 3 references. A short biographical note on the authors is expected (not counted in the 3000 characters).

The symposium's scientific advisory board will be keen to consider papers proposing forms of cross-fertilization of knowledge between academia and experiential knowledge.

Answers will be given no later than September 30, 2024.

Written papers (40,000 characters) are due no later than April 30, 2025.

The symposium will be held in person, in the Salle Laroque at the Ministry of Solidarity, 14 avenue Duquesne, 75007 Paris on June 5 and 6, 2025.

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