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Studying (in) a French *grande école*

Combining mobility, mobiles and mobilization

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Abstract : I am presenting a field study in a French *grande école*, using sociological qualitative methods and comparing it with other researches on the same topic. I will then show five kinds of mobilities of this institution : territorial, international, academic, institutional and social, throughout the twentieth century. Finally I will be discussing the question of mobility in regard to the concepts of Mobile and Mobilization. I will try to show how mobility is a factor of cohesiveness within the institution, since it implies common mobiles and its members mobilization.

Keywords : Mobility, *grande école*, Mobiles

Empirical data : a fieldwork study

After a Maitre program at École normale supérieure and Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, I enrolled, during the years 2001-2005, in a French *grande école* curriculum, while continuing with my PhD researches in sociology within the school (Marty, 2002). Being a student, I had access to everyday life raw material : students' teamwork projects I was involved in and that I described, teacher's material and collective evaluations I had to comply with, informal learning through associative life, students' social codes generating a collective identity,...

This field study about a *grande école* ethos and curriculum is the result of a qualitative enquiry using interactionist methods. It is complementary with the recent sociology PhD defended by Mariane Blanchard (2012), at Ens, about these kinds of French *grandes écoles*. Meanwhile she extensively described many schools with a socio-historical perspective, I focused on a single one and went through an intensive insider study.

In order to change the first part of this intervention's title : "studying in a French *grande école*" into "studying a French *grande école*", I will have to show how the reflexive analysis is made so that "in" can be put into brackets.

Method : on reflexivity

Max Weber (1989) defined the method of ideal-type and the possibility of having a full view of a social phenomena through the study of one of its specimen. This representative element combines all the characteristics typical of the population studied.

In order to generalize a case, it is however necessary to take some epistemological distance with it (Marty, 2013), comparing it with other cases and linking it to current research questions. Hence the reflexivity through the mirror of education sciences' question of mobility is another step in the process of generalizing my observations, going from sociology *within* a school to sociology *about* a school.

More broadly, this reflexive exercise is part of a current preparation to habilitation (Hdr) in education sciences. Thus I will discuss in the last part the question of combining mobiles and mobilities to build up a workgroup – using the case of this French *grande école*.

Results : a set of mobilities

Let's first start by presenting some results about different mobility dimensions in this *grande école*.

Territorial mobility

This school, created in Lille in 1906, has gradually grown into a major French *grande école*, using a territorial strategy to spread all over the nation. The first satellite campus was opened in Nice in the 1990's, soon followed by a campus in Paris in the early 2000's. This territorial mobility was a strategy set up in order to expand the school and transcend the North of France location.

International mobility

Meanwhile, the institution decided to expand internationally by opening up a campus in Singapour. In addition to the Parisian students going massively to Lille, the campus on the French Riviera appeared to attract international students and the cross-continental campus in Singapore was set up to turn the school into a world school.

This international mobility is not limited to a territorial action : many efforts are made in the direction of international rankings : attracting students is a challenge that requires more than classrooms : reputation is a major dimension in this school's strategy (Blanchard, 2012).

Academic mobility

This international strategy triggers consequences in the academic field : most of the lectures are taught in English (even for the French students) and many diploma denominations, even though controlled by French state, are similar to North-American system : the “Programme Grande Ecole” is a *master of science* and the school proposes a PhD in Finance, an MBA for professionals, a bachelor degree... All these denominations are American and the scholars working within the institution are requested to teach and publish within international review. It is therefore a case of academic mobility.

Institutional mobility

In her sociology doctorate, Mariane Blanchard showed how these kinds of French schools gained a legitimacy in the 1990's by imposing a two years preparation for French students before being authorized to take an exam to enter the institution. This French legitimacy is reinforced by a two years old agreement with an older engineering school from Lille but is nowadays contested by the diversification of programs I just described, most of them being accessible to professionals. The marketing of curricula set up by the direction shows a variety of targets that surpass the unique pool of French students but that is limited to private sector professionals.

Social Mobility

Indeed, after two years of intensive preparatory school, the French students are learning how to be less study-centered and individualist, becoming more management oriented (association life, collective evaluations,...) and adopting a professional ethos (through internships).

With the massification of higher education and the access of women to labor market, this relatively recent school, targeting the private sector, has recruited many female students (half of the students population). It is therefore a macro-social mobility representing a major shift in students population and workers in France.

Discussion : combining mobiles and mobilities through mobilization

I now want to discuss the question of institution mobility, in all the previously described dimensions, with the perspective of values (Marty, 2013) and mobiles. I want to show that shared mobiles orienting a collective mobility are factors of cohesiveness in a group (here the school taken as an institution).

Mobility oriented by common mobiles such as international schooling, territorial expansion and being a high ranked institution, is not only a question of changing from one place (Lille, French students, ranked in France) to another (world spread campuses, international students, teaching in English and ranked in international reviews), it is also a question of changing together, as a systemic whole.

During the century of existence, the school institution and all its members (direction, professors, former students and current students) have made a shift in their identity. The mobilization around shared goals has tied up links between all members involved in the school's life.

Shared mobiles have been a way of mutual recognition and have valued everyday life events, considered as a collective step in this mobility.

Each and everyone has looked up in the same direction with shared dreams and did a part of this common journey. Each and everyone has faced the same obstacles and may have helped other members sharing the same difficulties. What does it mean to open a new campus less recognized by French students ? How to teach in English in an old French institution ? Common solutions have been found such as the recruitment of foreign teachers. And, after the common journey, the whole group looks back to the past with the same views, shaped by difficulties and common solution encountered during the common trip.

Therefore mobility is not only a trajectory of an institution in regard to its environment. It is also an inner change of the system : shared values, interactions habits,... Mobility through shared mobiles is a factor of mobilization, of unity for a school institution.

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