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Olivier Marty

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The History of a Young university: Paris, 1968 - 2022

What kind of knowledge for a recent university?

Olivier Marty

1. Before our case: a pattern of higher education revolutions

The French political revolution of 1789 deeply changed the national landscape of higher education. Philosophers such as Nicolas de Condorcet contributed to define new institutions that would help to set up the Republican state.¹ These new institutions would provide skilled experts able to build bridges and roads (*Ecole Polytechnique*), to train university teachers (*Ecole Normale Supérieure*), to introduce diplomats to foreign languages (*Ecole Spéciale des Langues Orientales*), etc. No less than eleven new higher education institutions were created then, most of them in 1794. Condorcet established the pedagogical idea of such institutions (the goals they were to achieve) but also designed curricula to reach this pedagogical idea and helped to find location for them in prestigious buildings. By doing so, he was more than a mere philosopher, he was also a man of action, a politician who took part in the foundation of new republican *grandes écoles*, as they are called in France. These institutions were to last long and have ever since been the main difference with the rest of the world's system of higher education: for about 250 years, French education has been divided into universities and *grandes écoles*.² How does this historical fact lead us to think about the creation of Paris 8, in 1968? We want to highlight the fact that the Republican *grandes écoles* served the construction of the State by providing new knowledge (in science and letters) to the bourgeoisie. It is well known, since Marx, that the French revolution profited mainly to the bourgeoisie social class and helped it to find an honorable place in society, between the peasants and the aristocrats. These new schools have long been criticized as a way for the bourgeoisie to establish its dominance over the rest of the society – through education.

¹ Olivier Marty/Ray J. Amirault: Nicolas de Condorcet. The revolution of French higher education, Cham 2020.

² Cf. Pierre Bourdieu: The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power. Stanford, CA 1996; Pierre Bourdieu: Homo academicus, Cambridge 1988; Christophe Charles/Laurent Jeanpierre (Hg.): La vie intellectuelle en France, Volume 2: De 1914 à nos jours, Paris 2016.

However, it is important to notice that this political revolution was also a way to take advantage of the newly available knowledge at that time: science and letters were established within these schools as a new way to power. Whereas medieval universities would rely on law and medicine (and to some point on theology) as knowledge to rule the world, the French *grandes écoles* were exclusively grounded on science and letters that had been slowly developed throughout the preceding centuries.³

Therefore, our main thesis will be that a young education institution always relies on new knowledge available in society and helps a targeted population to serve specific needs.

If we take up again our historical pattern of the French revolution of higher education and take, for example, *L'École Polytechnique*, we see that Monge's system of descriptive geometry was taught within the school as soon as it was introduced. Young people of the bourgeoisie coming from all over France would learn this mathematical tool in Paris to enable them to build bridges all over the new nation. They took advantage of recent development in mathematics to participate in the construction of the urbanized Republican State.

However, some students would use the newborn institution to achieve a different personal goal, like carrying on studying at university after their *grande école*, for example. But these instrumentations of the curricula are not part of the designer's point of view and, in this article, we will focus on the pedagogical idea or institutional goal.

Similarly, we will now present the case of a young university, the *University of Paris 8 Vincennes à Saint-Denis*, which is famous for digital humanities and new knowledge such as arts, theater, urbanism, film making, educational sciences, etc. This university is dedicated to the massification of higher education, accessible to lower class, available to workers through vocational education and training. We will defend that the same pattern (the use of recent knowledge) applies and that this is not specific to France but rather universal for the foundation of any young educational institution.

2. 1968: socio-demographics data around the birth of Paris 8

In 1968, France was facing a demographic crisis: the baby boom generation was trying to enter higher education but there was no room for everybody.⁴ The student crisis was soon doubled by a worker rebellion for which the government had to resort to force. In a state of emergency Faure-law divided up the University of Paris in about ten sub-institutions to absorb the

³ Cf. Alain Renaut: *Les Révolutions de l'université. Essai sur la modernisation de la culture*, Paris 2015; Jacques Verger/Christophe Charle: *Histoire des universités XII e XXI e siècle*, Paris 2012.

⁴ Cf. Georges Gusdorf: *L'université en question*, Paris 1964.

upcoming massification of higher education. It was the beginning of an inflation of university degrees (is it still higher education if everybody has access to it? Is the comparative now based on the length of studies or the nature of knowledge?) and the shift to an economy of services, soon to become an economy of knowledge.

In 1968, apart from this division of the University of Paris, the government created two small experimental university centers, influenced by the American way of learning. Both of them would use a credit system and have a president elected in governing boards, they would be close to workers and provide them with a relevant knowledge. The first one was located in the wealthy western part of Paris and dedicated to management (it became the *University of Dauphine – Paris 9*) and the second one was placed in the forest of Vincennes, east of the city, and anybody could have access to it, even without the ‘baccalaureate’ (a French national academic qualification that students can obtain at the completion of their secondary education; it is the first grade to qualify for higher education) or as a low class worker looking for further education.

This second experimental center of *Vincennes*, initially counting a few thousand students, was soon turned into the university of Vincennes, which was later (1980) relocated in the north of Paris and became the *Paris 8 University of Vincennes-Saint Denis*. The person in charge on the side of the Government was Raymond Las Vergnas, the dean of *La Sorbonne*, who delegated the mission to a group of young professors and intellectuals. The initial ambition was to replace amphitheatres by small classes to provide a better pedagogy. But its success led to a crowd of students with about the same overpopulation as in traditional universities.

In a nutshell, the political period was determined by the 1968 demography crisis and two laws: Faure (1968) reshaping the universities and Delors (1971) implementing vocational education and training (*Education Permanente*). With a wider perspective, this period is an important milestone for the shift from 1 per cent of a generation held the *baccalauréat* in 1920 (first grade to enter university) to 1 per cent of a generation holds the *doctorate* in 2020 (last grade at university): France is on its way to the massification of tertiary education and university is somehow losing its prestige and has to redefine its social position and goals⁵.

3. A young university and its new knowledge

⁵ Cf. Clyde W. Barrow: *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928*. Madison, WI 1990; Bayard Dodge, 2011 (1961), Al Azhar, a Millennium of Muslim learning, Washington 2011 (1961); Wesley Shumar: *College for Sale: A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. Washington 1997.

Paris 8 was first settled in the *Bois de Vincennes* and was known as the University of Vincennes.⁶ In 1980 the government forced a relocation in the poor northern area of Saint Denis and the University was henceforth renamed. Dedicated to lower classes, with a strong identity with antagonistic attitudes to the political powers, the institution is highly conscious of its own history. The video archives present informal classes during the 1970s e.g. taught by Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault, and the struggles with the government regarding the relocation of the university, law contestation and the omnipresence of unions due to the attendance of workers.

The institution hosted university professors such as the young Michel Foucault (we remember his contestation of carceral institutions and *biopolitics*) or the philosopher Gilles Deleuze with his reflection over violence in arts and film making. We are far from the establishment of medieval universities at the center of Paris, teaching the order of society in the faculties of law. The outskirts of the city host a university within a modern campus and at the periphery of knowledge: a knowledge that has been recently created and helps poor people from the suburbs to reach new occupations such as social workers, unionists, educator, art mediator, etc.

Nowadays, since 2016, the university fosters this specificity: the bachelor and master degrees are under the same central supervision as vocational education (the *direction des formations*). There is no difference between continuing education and initial education for the institution's administration. But above all, the university has a strong policy of research (doctoral programs are not included within initial or continuing education) digital humanities, arts, educational sciences, theater, urbanism, film making, anthropology. The university has its own publisher, with the emblematic collection *Libre cours* underlying the freedom of expression for the researcher, which is the core of the *esprit vincennois*. The institution promotes its own higher education ranking: *L'échelle de Vincennes*, in which universities are all the more recognized as they help social mobility, while Paris 8 is at the top of this scale.

The northern area leads to a differentiation of students: the first degrees recruit locally, in a pool of poor immigrants mostly of the second generation, the master degrees count students from France and the inner Paris, and the doctorate education attracts students from all over the world. Therefore, the bulk of the students (first degrees) is facing a contradiction with Parisian white teachers professing postcolonialism and inviting them to write the history of their own minority while at the same time—the students are dominated by the institution. As a result, there are

⁶ Virginie Linhart: Vincennes, l'université perdue, Film DVD, Paris 2016; Pierre Merlin: L'Université assassinée, Vincennes 1968-1980, Paris 1980; Danielle Tartakowsky: Construire l'université au xxie siècle, récits d'une présidence, Paris 8 2012-2016, Paris 2017.

contesting groups promoting *Paroles non blanches* and prohibiting white people to attend their own meetings. The universal modern knowledge of postcolonial history is reinterpreted, reshaped and adapted to local realities — with some similarities with America’s pluri-ethnic context.

Apart from these specificities, Paris 8 follows the national movement of digitalization of its curricula.⁷ It provides all the students with C2I/PIX, that is to say basic numeracy. The relatively old institute of distance education that it hosts has its own Moodle learning management system and the university was one of the first in France to offer a MOOC (Massive open online course) on the national platform, which is about electronic poetry and hypermedia. Therefore, it finds its identity in the national landscape as a recent university providing new knowledge (arts, digital humanities, educational sciences, etc.) for new professions. But it is stigmatized as a suburban modern institution that is specialized in less recognized knowledge for lower professions (since they came last). Paris 8 trains more social workers than lawyers, the knowledge of these professions is now recognized in higher education but less legitimate because they are more recent.

4. What’s next? Paris Lumières University and the French ComUEs

Paris 8 is a young university. But it is already part of a national shift in France, redesigning again higher education. Due to the rise of American universities and new economic powers such as China, France’s institutions are less well-known. Therefore, the government has decided to bridge the gap between *grandes écoles* and universities and to concentrate all the institutions in *Communautés d’Universités et d’Établissements* (ComUEs) supposedly more visible on an international scale. Since 2013, France has been reshaping its 80 universities and about 200 *grandes écoles* into 25 ComUES.

The university of Paris 8 is therefore part of the new ComUE *Université Paris Lumières*, with the university of Paris 10 and institutions such as the national library (*BNF*), the national museum of ethnography (*Quai Branly*) and various schools such as the French state film school (*La Fémis*). This new ComUE promotes the kind of knowledge in modern humanities we have characterized Paris 8 with.

But what is the status of this knowledge? If the French government wants to concentrate institutions so as to make them gain more visibility in international rankings (such as the

⁷ Cf. Olivier Marty: *Enseignements à distance. Anthropologie d’une organisation éducative*. Bruxelles 2020; Pierre Moeglin: *Que sais-je? Les industries éducatives*, Paris 2012; Christine Musselin/Barbara M. Kehm: *The development of higher education research in Europe. 25 years of CHER*, Rotterdam 2013.

Shanghai ranking) it appears that there are diverse positions for ComUEs. Some of them remain local (regional ComUE such as *Nouvelle Aquitaine*, *Université Fédérale de Toulouse*, etc.) whereas others look for excellence like *Paris Sciences et Lettres*, *Université de Paris Cité*, etc. Out of 25 ComUEs, nine are in Paris; moreover, within the Parisian human geography there are distinctions between dominated suburbs and central excellence.

The young university of Paris 8, as a part of the ComUE *Paris Lumières*, seems to maintain its somehow lower status. When a ComUE such as *Paris Sciences et Lettres* counts on a doctoral program called *Sacre*, highlighting design-based research, *Paris Lumières* is establishing a master degree diploma to train journalists (*Nouveau collège d'études politiques*). The very project of the newborn institution targets a lower rank within the European Qualification Network: the master is lower than the doctorate in the realm of professional qualifications. *Mutatis mutandis*, this may replace the hierarchy of knowledge based on its novelty.

As far as 'higher' education is concerned, is it better to have a lower qualification in an old and prestigious knowledge or a higher qualification in a recent and somehow downgraded knowledge? What is the importance of the institution delivering it? Is the hierarchy of knowledge an objective reality that is linked to anteriority or a situated construction of the actors like policy makers but also professors, students and families?

5. Notes on method: a 'halfy'

We have named the institution Paris 8 but our analysis is anonymous concerning any people we met there. We were involved as an employee of the university throughout 2016, serving as the first *Directeur des formations* in the governing boards who was liable for initial and continuing education. Therefore, we consider ourselves as a "halfy" both subject to the institution (we've been part of it, obeying its rules and its social pressure) and as an academic taking it as a subject of research (we somehow look back at it with an overview, embedded within the academic literature in education anthropology we specialized in).

Therefore we are not the voice of Paris 8 (two presidents of this university have respectively written their own story of the institution) but a well informed and fieldwork analyst. We do no longer use the term *ethnographer*⁸ due to the postcolonial context and its peculiar importance within the very institution.

⁸ Olivier Marty/Richard Wittorski: Ethnographie d'un conseil d'administration universitaire: un cas de professionnalisation conjointe. In: *Savoirs*, 51 (2019), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.3917/savo.051.0097>. Zugriff: 16.03.2023.