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The history of a young university: Paris, 1968-2022. What kind of knowledge for a recent university?

Olivier Marty

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Junge Hochschulen

Institutionen im Spannungsfeld von Tradition,
Reformanspruch und Pragmatismus

Herausgegeben von Peter E. Fäßler,
Daniel Kramps und Rainer Pöppinghege

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The History of a Young University:

Paris 8, 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 construc-

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.



tion 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.

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.

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.



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 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 amphitheaters 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.

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

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



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