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# President Sarkozy, *La Princesse de Clèves*, and the crisis in the French higher education system

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A BRIEF visit to Paris in early April seemed an attractive option, well worth the trouble of producing a seminar paper in French. I did however wonder whether I would actually be able to enter the Sorbonne, and was not surprised to find it ringed by policemen, while my hosts ruefully explained that even if we were to gain access no students would be present. So instead of discussing the problems of the Ancien Régime we concentrated on those of the French academic world under President Sarkozy. Although this crisis has merited occasional mentions in the British press, these have mostly concentrated—quite understandably—on the surface manifestations of trouble, the strikes and demonstrations. Articles in *Le Monde* have given a more complex view, without making the essence of the dispute remotely plain even to some of us familiar with the French scene. Indeed, almost nothing written on the subject in France itself is comprehensible without advanced knowledge of the educational acronyms which litter every other sentence. So what on earth is going on, and does it matter to anyone else?

Sarkozy and his embattled Education Minister, Valérie Pécresse, have announced a series of ‘reforms’ that would amount to a revolution in French higher education and in the whole structure of academic research. While there have been plenty of earlier reform plans, none has been so radical; this urgency stems in part from the (highly questionable) ‘Shanghai rankings’ of the world’s universities. When the original version of these showed only two French institutions among the top one hundred the reaction was a mixture of humiliation and outrage. Subsequently some French experts devised their own alternative ranking scheme, whose dominant measure was success in finding good jobs for one’s graduates, under which the *Grandes Ecoles* naturally performed brilliantly. Since what was being tested here was really recruitment practices among the French ruling élites this said remarkably little about the merits of teaching and research, and might be thought rather to have highlighted one of the major problems in French education, an issue which the ‘reform’ completely ignores. The *Grandes Ecoles* play a crucial role in French life and have contributed massively to the problems of the universities, which all parties to the current dispute recognize as being in the grip of a long-running crisis. Where they disagree profoundly is over how to resolve this.

A certain amount of background information is essential here. Even before the Revolution the monarchy had started to establish specialized forms of training outside the universities, notably for engineers of various types. This process was taken much further under the Napoleonic régime, and has extended considerably since then. There are now around 150 *Grandes Ecoles*, 110 of which are state-run, the remainder validated by the state. Al-

though they are distributed across France, the most prestigious establishments are naturally found in Paris. The vast majority are still based on engineering, but a small group of élite schools have other missions—the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, *Ecole Nationale d’Administration*, and *Sciences Politiques* being the most famous of these. These institutions are the crucible in which generation after generation of the French ruling class is formed; they only take 4% of the annual student intake, with a massive bias towards the children of the rich and powerful. Entry is competitive, but requires at least two years after passing the *baccalauréat* spent in the special *classes préparatoires*, which are renowned for their heavy demands on the students. Those who succeed in entering the *Grandes Ecoles* after this harsh initiation have become members of an exclusive fraternity, enjoy lasting prestige, and can rely on their connections throughout their careers. They dominate French industry, commerce, and government.

The *Ecole Normale Supérieure* is something of an exception, and recruits heavily from academic and intellectual families; its graduates are primarily intended to become university teachers or researchers. No-one is in any doubt that entry to a *Grande Ecole* is the objective for any able child, with the university a poor second. An increasing number of families have been choosing to put children through the *classes préparatoires*, even though they have little expectation of success in the exams, as a way of by-passing the first two years of the *licence* (equivalent to our BA), because they can still enter the university as third-year students. Where the *Grandes Ecoles* can restrict entry just as they choose, the universities are open to all those who pass the *bac*. This is not quite as bad as it sounds, because the examination is no pushover; even so, the numbers entering higher education (54% of the age group) are substantially higher than those in Britain. They are certainly much too high for an underfunded system, with inadequate (often crumbling) buildings and a very poor staff-student ratio. One consequence is a massive drop-out rate; the university does select, but only at the end of the first and second years. Since students are required to attend their local university and normally live at home there is almost nothing by way of pastoral care or social facilities, so self-reliance is at a premium.

There is surely no other European country where attitudes towards the state are quite as complex as those in France. The notion of the state as the guarantor of a whole range of ‘republican’ values is exceptionally deep-rooted, with the associated idea that central authority has a vital role in counterbalancing localism and clientalism. Another corollary is the value attached to any position as a *fonctionnaire*, a person directly employed by the state. This is crucial to the universities, because a

majority of students aspire to emerge from the system, after five years of study, as at least prospective *fonctionnaires*. In practice, if one excludes the special cases of medicine and law, which do not feature in the Grandes Ecoles at all, this normally means teaching in the university or the school system. A university degree in classics, philosophy or history has no other value on the French employment market, so the opportunities at the end are far from matching the numbers who enter, or even the much smaller number who graduate. All this helps to explain why French students are so often discontented and rebellious, and why there is an implicit acceptance that the system can afford a high wastage rate. There is a sense in which the educational system is simply reproducing itself in each generation, awareness of which must underlie the disdain expressed by Sarkozy and his kind, for whom these intellectuals just don't matter.

Whatever the faults of the system, anyone who knows a representative selection of *universitaires* is unlikely to underestimate its achievements and potential. Those who make it through the faculties and the formidable competitive examinations of the *agrégation* are smart and resourceful people, the vast majority of whom take their responsibilities very seriously. The system is in such a bad state that without this human capital it would be hard put to survive at all, and of course a major factor here is persistent underfunding. Poor scores in the Shanghai rankings reflect the obstacles to research that flow naturally from the situation in most faculties, including poor library facilities and the lack of research leave. The standard teaching load is 192 hours a year, made up of lectures and classes, and taking no account of numerous other duties. French academics are also rather poorly paid, which must impact further on their research when the university provides so little effective support on site. Again there is a problem with a parallel institution, the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, which funds some 11,500 *chercheurs*, compared with around 57,000 *enseignants-chercheurs* (as the government has now chosen to call them) in the universities. Many of the best graduates gravitate towards these research positions, for obvious reasons. To an outsider the CNRS seems to work much better in the 'hard' sciences, where laboratories really exist, than in humanities disciplines where they are merely virtual entities. It nevertheless enjoys very high esteem in France, and is not unreasonably seen as having preserved France's standing as a major player on the international research scene.

The government has taken an axe to several of these Gordian knots, amidst a storm of protest that has now turned into open revolt. In mid-April even the normally compliant university presidents came out strongly against most of the key 'reforms'. The ministers have responded with a series of minor concessions over the last few months, without any perceptible effect on the situation. They have in fact managed the remarkable feat of uniting the various professional unions, with those traditionally seen as right-wing often emerging as the most virulent critics of the *décret Péresse*. Meanwhile the students are also in revolt, largely because of the section of the 'reforms' dealing with the Masters degree programmes that make up the fourth and fifth years of the normal study pattern. There is a widespread perception that the real purpose behind many of the changes is a reduction in the number of properly qualified and fully employed teachers, in both schools and universities, and

a greatly expanded use of various forms of casual labour. Faculty and students can therefore unite in defence of common interests, against a government that is seen as deeply hostile to the ethos of the university, and indeed as fundamentally anti-intellectual.

So what has the government done or proposed? It has passed a law making French universities autonomous, giving them control over their budgets and the working conditions of their staff. This might seem uncontentious, but when it is coupled with a series of related changes opponents see a situation that would allow major inequalities and unfairness to develop. Excessive powers would be given to the Presidents of universities, at the expense of collegial decisions taken by the competent persons in specific areas. There is a particular fear that sweeping away the national system of appointments would greatly increase what is already seen as a major problem in French academia, the influence of local and personal favouritism. What really makes the issue explosive, however, is the linked proposal to bring in individual assessments of staff on a four-year cycle. Like so much else, this is only explained in the sketchiest form, so the ministry is quite rightly accused of making policy on the hoof without proper consultation or planning. There is a direct threat that those whose research output is insufficient will be given more teaching, under what is called *la modulation des services*, with a wholly arbitrary assumption that time is currently divided equally between teaching and research. The notion that good researchers might benefit from reduced teaching loads is thrown into question by a qualification that requires universities to cover their teaching needs from internal resources, while there are job cuts anyway under Sarkozy's bizarre election pledge to replace only half the *fonctionnaires* who retire.

Most people would agree that under current arrangements French universities function best in the fourth and fifth years, the post-*licence* period when numbers have become manageable and there is much more effective contact between teachers and students. It is in this context that the 'Masterisation' of teacher-training enters the picture. Although the 'reforms' are too complex for a proper analysis here, a key aspect is the suppression of the present second year of training for secondary school teachers, when the trainees have paid positions to spend half their time doing supervised teaching practice. The students will now be integrated with Masters degree programmes in the universities, and study teaching in theory much more than in the schools. Everyone outside the ministry is dismayed by this proposal, whose consequences in the classroom are seen as potentially disastrous, while they will also destabilize the existing Masters programmes through an ill-conceived mixing of academic and professional trainings. Students are up in arms because of the threat to all the forms of employment for which good performance at the university normally equips them.

If this were not enough, in his January speech Sarkozy stunned his audience by seeming to announce the imminent suppression of the CNRS, to be replaced by a funding system akin to that used in Britain, with specific grants disbursed for limited periods. Whatever the defects of the French research system, its employees are highly-qualified individuals who have invested heavily in the long educational process, often lasting ten years, that has preceded their success in demanding competitions to obtain their positions. Currently they remain

completely unclear what fate the government has in mind for them; although they have no obvious mode of direct resistance, their situation has further inflamed the crisis in the universities. What the critics see is a policy of seizing control of the whole arena of intellectual enterprise, in order to impose neo-liberal views that conflict with both the central traditions of French public and academic life, and with the freedom essential to any healthy structure of teaching and research. The government is patently inspired by what it imagines to be the North American model, but seems to notice only those parts of it that correspond to its own blinkered ideology. To date there is no sign that it is prepared to fund research on anything approaching the necessary scale, still less to allow the academics a proper say in decision-making at any level.

In effect the government is making the university teachers the scapegoat for poor French results in the Shanghai rankings, and proposes to institute a system of carrots and sticks *at the individual level*, without providing any real safeguards for those subjected to this new régime. This is to fly in the face of the obvious truth that the professors are far more the victims of the anomalous state of French higher education than its cause, and have never been allowed the freedom to alter the system under which they operate. The model now being advocated is the classic competitive one derived from the business world, and is spectacularly ill-suited to generate academic excellence. At the same time the ministers want to take charge of the research agenda, despite the lack of any sensible mechanism for making the necessary judgements, with the clear intention of giving priority to applied research supposed to have an economic payback. Budgetary constraints and the 'national interest' are being used to justify a general attack on serious learning and its modes of transmission, led by a President now notorious for his contemptuous anti-intellectualism. The critics anticipate that there will be a series of disastrous consequences; at the least, if the 'reforms' are somehow forced through, a disaffected and demoralized academic community will hardly deliver the world-class performances required to change their rankings. Another fear is that application of the utilitarian ideology will extend from research to teaching, so that professional training will become the only approved type, with serious academic disciplines only continuing to exist in the margins and on sufferance. Not only is this being done in an authoritarian, top-down fashion, it would establish permanent authoritarian structures within the universities themselves.

With some regret one must conclude that broader public opinion is probably more on the side of the government, not least because the media have failed to present an adequate picture of the issues at stake, with even *Le Monde* leaning towards the official line. Rebellious students too readily bring back memories of 1968, while too many people have their own unhappy memories of the universities, all of whose well-known shortcomings the government is craftily trying to blame on the professors, not on the central policies that have made it impossible for them to deliver a proper service. The French ruling élites, largely formed in the *Grandes Ecoles*, usually have little understanding of the universities and are markedly prone to their own subtler forms of hostility to 'pure' intellectual pursuits. As a group their chief interest is in the maintenance of the *Grandes Ecoles*, through which they hope to pass their own children and grandchildren, so

it is no surprise that the changes leave these institutions untouched.

The cards may therefore appear to be stacked against the rebels, whose fragile union the ministers will be trying to disrupt by any possible means, and whose cause is not obviously popular in the country as a whole. A crucial test is now imminent, because the current groups of students should be taking their examinations in May and June, yet there has been no teaching in many universities for virtually the whole semester. Unless some kind of truce allows at least a brief resumption of activity it is hard to see how any meaningful examinations can be held, leaving both students and their families to face major problems if they have to prolong their studies. If the strikes continue all the same, then the crisis will have entered a new and dangerous phase, while the rebels will have scored a major success simply by holding together. Ultimately it is not clear how the government can make its new scheme work without the co-operation of the majority of university teachers, and the longer the standoff continues the harder that will be to secure. It will also be highly unfortunate if the effect is to confirm resistance to all change. The republican ideal of equality, as currently applied, is incompatible with the pursuit of excellence; to maintain 83 universities at the same notional level must produce mediocrity, while the way students currently enter the system is totally dysfunctional. Needless to say, the government's 'reforms' offer nothing on these fronts.

As might have been expected, Sarkozy has made his own distinctive contribution to the situation, with a series of *boutades* in typically abrasive style. These began in 2006 when he denounced the use of the classic seventeenth-century novel *La Princesse de Clèves* as an examination text, declaring that he had found the book unreadable in his own youth, and that only an imbecile or a sadist could have chosen to set it. To admire the book has now become a symbol of opposition to a President whose idea of good taste is to flaunt expensive designer goods, and for a period it stood at number three in the bestseller lists, while public readings have been a feature of the student protests. In his January speech this year Sarkozy launched a committee charged with developing a national strategy for research and innovation, a significant coupling behind which there was all too plain a desire to prioritize applied research over more fundamental work. The numerous stupidities he uttered left it unclear whether he was unable to understand the nature of research, or was choosing to misrepresent it for his political ends. He described the existing arrangements as 'infantilising and paralysing', while the numerous achievements of French science were 'the tree that hides the forest' and 'the alibi of conservatives on both the right and the left.' Then he went on to anticipate the break-up of the CNRS; this speech amounted to a declaration of war and was the immediate precipitant for the nation-wide strikes. The opponents believe that they are fighting to prevent the destruction of the French universities, and of the ancient core values for which they still stand. I think that they are right about this; even though the system does need fundamental reform, the plans advanced by Pécresse and Sarkozy would be simply disastrous.

Anyone interested in following the conflict in detail (and over the coming weeks) will find extensive documentation on the websites *Sauvons l'Université* and *Sauvons la Recherche*.