



Can French University Reform Succeed?



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Last March, French students in all the university faculties held elections to choose their representatives on the committees of cooperative management and organization created by the "Edgar Faure law."¹ Student participation in the voting was, in general, about 50 percent. And it was conservatives, very largely, who won out. The revolutionaries, much divided among themselves, either counseled abstention or received (except at Nanterre) a very low percentage of the votes. This is significant, for it shows that the French university has not emerged from its crisis, and may not even be on the way to solving it.

After the disorders of May and June 1968, far-reaching projects for the reform of the French university were effected. To do away with the excessive governmental centralization of higher education, to grant the universities a degree of autonomy (the power of making decisions on major questions—pedagogical, financial, administrative, etc.), to let students take part in running the university through councils in which they would have as much say as the professors and/or administrators, to open the university up to the outside world (by getting representatives of management and the unions to participate in its administration), to regionalize studies (abolishing the teaching programs that were uniform throughout the country and identical in all the faculties of the same discipline)—such were the main objectives.

This presupposed the breaking-up of the traditional

French "faculty-university" system² by abolishing the faculties: what was sought was the establishment of a "multi-disciplinary" system by means of which, within a single university and forming a real "corps," very different disciplines could be taught together (for example, sociology, architecture, history, law, economic science, etc.), so that students could choose various courses "à la carte" to constitute their own individual programs . . . "in the American way," we said in France. At the same time, teaching was to be integrated with scientific research. Finally, autonomy presupposed that within each teaching and research unit (*unité d'enseignement et de recherche*, or UER) the forms of examinations, pedagogical relations and programs were to be decided. The government would no longer have the power of decision in all matters, and the unity of the teaching system, examinations and academic degrees would be shattered.

It is hard to appraise the situation correctly, since we are going through a period of searching and groping. At the moment, however, it does not appear that the evolution of the reforms can be considered satisfactory. The people who served on the provisional committees of cooperative management set up in June 1968 soon came to realize that the "autonomy" granted or to be granted was altogether superficial. To begin with, the financial serv-

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² In each region there is a university composed of four big faculties: letters, sciences, law and medicine. Each faculty is directed by the corps of professors and an elected dean, and a system of rigid examinations decides everything, but it depends totally, in fact, on the Ministry of National Education. The university has no reality and no power. One of the aims of the reform was to give the university real powers by abolishing those of the faculties and reducing those of the government.

ices of the state made it known that they could not grant financial autonomy to the universities. Now, all appropriations come from the government; the universities will therefore not really be able to organize themselves as they wish, to recruit personnel and to determine the main items of expenditure, since, in the last analysis, the Minister of Finance always decides everything in this area.

But there was another limitation to autonomy. It was intended that the degrees awarded by the university should continue to have a "national" value; that is, that they should remain identical in content and rank. This made it necessary to maintain a common national program for the degree of Doctor of Medicine or Doctor of Economic Science, and so on. Thus, every university's power to make decisions was considerably reduced, and ended up by only affecting details.

This, in turn, led to joint management (between students and professors) losing its meaning, since, to make it worthwhile to set up joint management, there has to be something to be managed jointly. The limitations to autonomy robbed joint management of significance. And the reforms proposed from below got nowhere.

Sweeping Reforms—on Paper

In appearance, some reforms have been effected, but they are founded on words rather than reality. Thus, UERs have been created, but in fact nothing has changed. One example: formerly, a law faculty was made up of four "sections"—private law, public law, the history and sociology of institutions, and economic science. Now, most law faculties have asked for four UERs (private law, public law, etc.) and taken the title of university. The only change, then, is that the word "school" becomes "university" and the word "section" becomes "UER"!

What causes this stagnation? There are a certain number of obstacles originating, in reality, with all the participants in the matter—first and foremost, the administration. In France, the bureaucracy is more rigid than anywhere else. It is currently blocking almost all of the reform projects that were, at the outset, audacious. I have already noted, above, the financial administration's refusal to adapt. But the administration of the Ministry of National Education was also to a very great extent opposed to reform—and to the then Minister, Edgar Faure. This is why, in all probability, Faure surrendered his ministry. The administration wants to continue to retain the power to appoint professors and to control research institutes, etc. At the level of the schools, the administrations have the same conservative attitude.

Thus the "multi-disciplinary" project comes up against the objection that the examinations are very different, and lead to quite distinct degrees, in letters and science on the one hand and in law on the other, and the administration refuses to seek a compromise in order to create new examinations allowing the student to choose some subjects taught until now under letters and others under law, in such a way as to make up a new educational "package." To the administration's unwillingness in the matter of organization is joined the personal competition of the administrators among themselves (for example, if there is a merger of several schools, who will wind up in charge of the new secretariat, the result of the merger of two or three former secretariats?).

The second obstacle originates with the teaching corps.

The professors in the various schools had a privileged status, each being "the owner of his chair"—that is, once he was appointed to a chair, no one, not even the government, could thereafter do anything to him. Originally, this was a guarantee to assure the freedom of teaching; but it also had the awkward effects of keeping incapable professors in place, of limiting the number of teachers (since the number of chairs was strictly limited), and of creating a "mandarinate."

The Edgar Faure reform abolished the chairs, to achieve greater flexibility. While this is all very well in a regime in which the universities enjoy real autonomy, it becomes dangerous if the university system remains completely dominated by the government. The professors will be at the mercy of political changes. They are consequently, on the whole, very hostile to this measure.

The deans, moreover, seeing the organization of the faculties attacked, are striving to preserve it. Every dean is doing what he can to preserve "his" school intact. When it is too gravely threatened, he offers to resign.

Finally, the professors themselves want to hold onto their habitual methods of teaching; they alter the "pedagogical relationship" with difficulty, do not know how to adapt, and often react with a heightened authoritarianism. A narrow conservatism alone should not be blamed for this: many professors, men of good will, are also upset by the students! After June 1968, a great many professors suffered crises of nervous depression or anxiety and had to undergo treatment.

In June 1968, many professors were nevertheless ready and willing to undertake reforms, but there has been a considerable retreat since then toward holding onto what exists rather than attempting a transformation that seems incoherent and hazardous.¹ This retreat has been all the more extensive since the attitude of the students has most certainly changed. There remains a tiny nucleus of *enragés*, who are all the more violent and excessive for being less numerous (in the establishments with which I am familiar it can be said that there are about five of these *enragés* in every thousand students). They carry out armed raids and outrages and fling insults about . . . but they are not followed. Even so, they manage to keep the life of the schools in constant turmoil. They no longer have any program, and seek disorder for disorder's sake: it is necessary to "fight the university," that's all.

The great mass of the students—let's say 95 percent—is currently in rebellion against all change. I tried to put the new pedagogical relations and the new forms of examination they asked for last year into effect: in almost total unanimity, my students refused. They called for a return, pure and simple, to the old ways. I had to use my authority to *force* the students to take part in the preparation of courses and to exact personal works of research from them! I was obliged to leave them a choice between two types of examination; only one student in 25 chose the new form! And my students are all completing their studies for the doctorate!

There remains a small minority of students who would like to support the transformation of the university but

¹ The best example of these redoubtable transformations is the experimental University of Vincennes, which the government set up to give total freedom to the professors and the students: this experiment succeeded on the political level, for all the "revolutionaries" rushed to Vincennes. The government lured them into a veritable ghetto. Now, the experiments which took their departure therefrom are a total failure from a pedagogical and scientific point of view.

who find themselves immobilized by the *enragés*. on the one hand (who force the professors to think that any concession to the students is a sign of weakness in the face of violence) and by the conservative mass on the other. This small minority does not know how to make itself felt, and still lives in the shadow of last June's trauma. One good student said to me, "We still have no idea what we did that June! How could we have acted as we did? It seems to us as if the sky has fallen on our heads." These students, who are both demanding and of good will, are threatened on all sides, and receive little support from the professors, who accuse them of playing the *enragés'* game.

Crisis of Confidence

This leads me to make a statement about the general climate: the French university is sick with fear. The professors live in permanent fear of the students. Every time he enters a classroom, every French professor currently wonders "what's going to happen?" (And it is a fact that serious incidents sometimes occur: not many months ago a hand grenade was thrown into a classroom of the Faculty of Letters of Bordeaux.) When he tries to make contact with the students, the professor encounters indifference or else hostility: some accuse him of demagoguery and others (including conservatives!) declare that there can be no open, "man-to-man" relationship with a professor, whose status of authority "prohibits" students from being free with him.

Thus, the professor lives in a general climate of hostility; and the students, in turn, are afraid of everything. On the one hand, they feel that French public opinion is now very unfavorable toward them, particularly working class opinion. (On March 12, 1969, in the general strike mounted by the unions, there were serious fights between workers and students of the Left and extreme Left.) On the other hand, they have the impression that the professional corps has closed ranks against them and is growing tougher, they are afraid the examinations will be more rigorous, and finally, they feel very ill at ease in the disorder they have brought about.

Now, the fear of one group reacts on the fear of the other, and continuously worsens the climate. It is true that the moment a routine disciplinary measure is taken against a student, a measure that would normally be considered perfectly justified (for example, a reprimand for a student who had insulted a professor), *all* the students—including the conservatives—immediately cry out against "repression" and "provocation"! On the other hand, it is also true that the slightest student demonstration—the traditional rag or romp, for example—is immediately taken by the professors as a revolutionary attempt which must be suppressed. There has thus been a very great loss of freedom of expression and relations, on both sides, in the last fifteen months.

In this atmosphere of reciprocal lack of confidence, it is, most assuredly, very difficult to set up organisms of cooperative management, and in this atmosphere of fear, university reform cannot develop normally. It is to be feared that this mixture of fears is an explosive one, that the present calm (except for occasional incidents, everything is going on "normally"—courses, examinations, seminars) is only apparent, and that beneath a satisfactory surface new explosions are undoubtedly gathering

force. But these explosions will, I believe, originate with the extreme Right, among fascist-leaning students.

Finally, to evaluate the situation of university reform we must realize that the "Edgar Faure law" only retained one of the big student demands, that of better adapting the university to modern society, so as to bestow effective degrees which would enable their holders to find well-paid work in that society. Completely neglected—and even firmly blocked—was the *other* big demand: that the university must not be simply a place where knowledges and skills are learned; it must also form critical minds, educate an intelligence of opposition, and allow the individual to stand apart from the "consumer society." This was what has been called the trend toward the "critical university." This philosophical current, which seemed to me the more important—at once revolutionary and profoundly humanistic—was made up of several affluents, one being Marxist criticism and another liberal criticism.

At present, the tendency of the government is, rather, to reinforce the technical and practical character of the university. Not only is nothing whatever being opened up in the sense of a criticism of society, of the political or economic regime, or of the university itself and of the forms of modern culture; the tendency is, indeed, to reduce the position of those disciplines that can have a critical application—history, philosophy, sociology, political science. Thus we find in the law faculties a marked reduction in the teaching of the history and sociology of institutions. These subjects are considered "unprofitable" and, on the contrary, "dangerous."

It is true that students of sociology, political science and philosophy were often at the head of the insurgents, in May-June 1968, and that the government's attitude is conceivably dictated by its suspicion of them. But this turning of the university in a utilitarian direction and this negative attitude toward all critical formation are laying the groundwork for a renewal of discontent among the students, without making it possible to foresee just how this discontent will manifest itself.

Thus the government finds itself obliged, by constraint, to intervene in order to struggle against the local immobility of the schools and to overcome obstacles,¹ but on the other hand the proposed reform, which contains many good things, threatens to reduce the French university to the level of technical teaching (mathematical education alone remaining a fundamental discipline)—a situation which is desired by a majority of the professors (in teaching techniques, a man is "at peace") and a majority of the students (who are preoccupied with their prospects for finding jobs). But a minority of the teaching corps and the students (shall we say the best, the most profound, the most intelligent?) cannot be satisfied with this conformist trend.

Secretly, discreetly, the positions of the opposed forces are firming up, and neither the lawful way nor the way of violence would appear capable, at present, of resolving the French university problem. Still, this does not mean that we are in for another round of significant disorders; rather than that, I fear a resignation under an appearance of order, and an appearance of reforms continuing to paper over the "established disorder."

¹ Sometimes the government "fabricates" new universities in an authoritarian manner, grouping therein disciplines with no connection whatever to one another to break down specializations; naturally, this never works!