THE FRENCH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Controversy of Democratization

by

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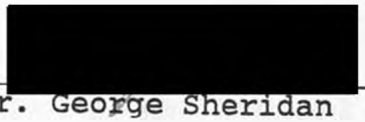
Approved: 

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This paper will examine the history of the democratization of higher education in France, an issue which has incited fervent debates for decades. The tension between egalitarian aspirations and the elitist tradition in education comes to the fore when this issue is raised. In France, since the age of Napoleon, the grandes écoles have always represented excellence in higher education. In the late nineteenth century the modern university was established to combat the elitism of the meritocratic system and to represent equality. From this point on, reformers have sought to democratize French higher education by instituting new reforms. The reformers have concentrated their efforts on the universities, while the traditionalists have sought to preserve elitism in the grandes écoles. The rivals have made use of these two institutions to represent their competing ideals. The result has been a continuation of the debate over equality and excellence in French higher education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a major role in shaping the culture of any society. It serves to cultivate a national identity by institutionalizing the goals of a people. In this way, education can be a unifying force; however, this has not been the case in France. Since the Revolution, France has been divided over meritocratic values and egalitarian ideals, which has led to a widespread debate over the purpose of education. The controversy over equality or excellence underlies this debate.

The history of French education has been marked by the intense rivalry between the elitist tradition and egalitarian aspirations. The two institutional representatives of these opposing ideologies have been the grandes écoles and the universities. Since the age of Napoleon, the grandes écoles have always represented excellence. In the late nineteenth century the modern university was established to counter the elitist system. Subsequently, the French university system has been the primary target of perpetual democratic reform and the paradigm of equality in higher education. The grandes

écoles, on the other hand, have maintained their traditional privileges which enabled them to preserve their prestige and high standards. Thus, the debate over higher education emanates from the two ideologies respectively embodied by the grandes écoles and the universities; although, in reality, the two institutes of higher education are less polarized than their images profess.

In order to understand better the controversy of democratization in French higher education, the fundamental structure of the grandes écoles and the universities will first be outlined. The university system is the largest sector in French higher education. University courses in law, economics, business studies, humanities and sciences are divided into three cycles, each lasting two years. The completion of the first cycle leads to the award of the DEUG (Diplome d'etudes universitaires generales). This diploma is very general and might be made up of courses from different disciplines. Students may choose to seek employment at this point, but employers do not consider the DEUG to have much value. Possession of the DEUG will allow the student to enter the second cycle which leads to a licence after completion of the first year and a maîtrise after the second. A master's degree is the requirement for entering into the third cycle. Medical studies follow a different pattern. Those wishing to become doctors are trained over a minimum of seven years.

The cycles of the grandes écoles also last three or four years, not including at least two years spent in preparatory classes. The courses offered are extremely varied, since most grandes écoles were created in response to the growing diversity of societal needs. Consequently, there is no official definition of what precisely constitutes a grande école. Yet most schools are associated with the area of administration or industry for which they train their students. The first and most famous category is that of the écoles d'ingénieur, of which there are 153 in France today. The French ingénieur is someone trained as an executive in a specialized field such as aeronautics, electronics, civil engineering, or computer science. The next largest group of grandes écoles are those specializing in commerce and business. The École des hautes etudes commerciales and the Écoles supérieures de commerce are two of the more prominent examples. Another group trains students in architecture. A fourth category of grandes écoles is that providing courses to train top executives mostly for civil service, such as the École d'administration. The famous écoles normales supérieures, which trains teachers, can also be listed in this category. The final group of schools can be labeled miscellaneous. This includes grandes écoles that train students for the Merchant Navy, as veterinary surgeons, or for careers in the arts or the newspaper world or as translators.[1] The most

salient features of the grandes écoles are the low enrollment rate and the rigorous selection process. In contrast, the universities are open to anyone who passed the baccalauréat.

Currently in France, politicians, professors, and educational reformers argue over the structure of the higher education and the roles of the grandes écoles and universities. Opponents of the grandes écoles believe these prestigious schools should be dismantled and merged with the universities in order to eliminate inequality in higher education and to give France one unified system. Proponents argue that excellence is the ultimate aim, not equality, and therefore the grandes écoles must be preserved.

An understanding of this current debate must begin with its history. This paper will trace the origins of this debate, beginning with the Napoleonic reforms. These reforms gave birth to the current debate. Then the period of university reform from the creation of the modern university will be reviewed to the present to explore the numerous attempts to democratize higher education and the constant resistance to democratization on the part of the elite tradition. This historical survey will show the frequent manifestations of this debate both explicitly and implicitly throughout the history of university reform. Recurring themes such as autonomy versus centralization, the inferiority of technical education versus the superiority of

classical education, and Parisian dominance over provincial schools, all turn on the debate between equality and excellence. By reflecting on the history of the reform movement, I will analyze the current controversy over French higher education to determine if and how this perennial debate could be resolved.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE GRANDES ÉCOLES AND FACULTIES

The Napoleonic Reforms

The French educational system today has been described more than once as essentially the work of Napoleon I. He fulfilled the dreams of the revolutionaries by bringing education under state control and by establishing a meritocracy through selection of students according to their ability rather than according to noble blood. However, Napoleon stopped here. The emperor rejected the Jacobin notion that the citizen had an inherent right to literacy, and he shunned the ideas of a democratic educational system. On this point, he adopted the traditional view that universal literacy would jeopardize the order and stability of the state and therefore would defeat the very purpose of education. He strongly believed that only an elite needed an advanced education. Thus Napoleon maintained the social hierarchy characteristic of the old regime. The Napoleonic educational system was thus an amalgam of revolutionary principles and old regime structures which resulted in the creation of a new elite based on merit.

The product of his educational theories took the form of various institutions which are still intact today. He

established the lycées ("high schools"), the prestigious grandes écoles, and the large, centralized administrative apparatus called the Université.[2] Scholars describe as the "Napoleonic myth" the notion that these institutions were an enduring legacy; for this notion implies that nothing in the French educational system changed since the nineteenth century. In reality profound reforms have taken place behind this institutional framework. Today, for instance, elementary and secondary education is nearly universal, and literacy is widespread.

In the area of higher education, however, Napoleon's elitist ideal continues to thrive through the grandes écoles. As Napoleon intended, the schools educate a select elite who in turn serve the state. Only a few of these prestigious schools were established by Napoleon and over 300 have proliferated since. The grandes écoles have ceased to occupy the heart and soul of higher education, as they did in the empire. But they remain the most prestigious institutions in the French system and continue to represent the pinnacle of higher education in France.

Although the grandes écoles have remained intact, this elitist system has not gone unchallenged. For centuries the faculties, or modern universities as they are now called, have tried to compete with, absorb, or even suppress the grandes écoles. Since Napoleon's time, the faculties have aimed to democratize education by putting an end to the

elitist system and making it more accessible to the masses.

History of the French University

Most French universities date back to the Renaissance. Sixteen public universities existed in the seventeenth century which consisted of the traditional faculties of law, medicine, humanities, and sciences. Under the Old Regime, these institutions dominated the French system of higher education and trained elites for professional careers. From the 15th century on, however, they rapidly began losing their prestige. In the years before the French Revolution, the universities had decayed to the point that much of France's intellectual progress was developing outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, the universities. For this reason, as well as for political considerations, the universities were suppressed during the Revolution.

In response to the growing need of better institutes of higher education, the first grandes écoles were established outside of the university system. In 1794 The École Polytechnique was created to train the best military and civil engineers. One year later the École Normale Supérieure was founded to train senior schoolmasters. As new needs developed, more grandes écoles were established to provide even more specialized education in engineering and applied sciences. As a result of this development, the grandes

écoles soon surpassed the universities in power and prestige and quickly became the major institutions of higher learning. Unlike the universities, which were open to all who passed the baccalauréat, these required entry by competitive examination. The École Normale and the Polytechnique in particular attracted the very best students in the country, and the success of their graduates in the public sphere enhanced their enormous prestige. Consequently, the majority of the ruling elites and the most influential people in France's economic and intellectual life were graduates of the grandes écoles.

Nevertheless, Napoleon restored some 60-odd faculties in 1808, and they continued to coexist with the grandes écoles. But the faculties consisted of too many unrelated institutions and competed for too little money to provide a quality education. The emperor kept them isolated from each other, and thus they could no longer treat human knowledge as a whole. In fact, this idea of a university was totally abandoned by the Revolution and the Empire. In addition, Napoleon placed the faculties under direct control of the national government, which restricted their pursuit of knowledge and independence.

During the nineteenth century, the faculties continued to lack the power and prestige of the grandes écoles. In theory, the superior faculties of theology, law, and medicine provided professional training, but their standards

and the quality of education had fallen abysmally low by the late eighteenth century. The faculty of sciences had no connection with the important discoveries of the outside world and thus taught nothing about them. In the faculty of law, it was reported that less than 2 percent of the students attended the lectures.[3] Most professors no longer bothered to lecture, and the examinations were so easy that a student did not even have to attend a faculty physically to pass the test and receive a degree. Moreover, research was never conducted within the walls of the universities, a fact which contributed to their lack of prestige. In reality, the function of the faculties was reduced to administering examinations and granting degrees.

Not until the 1860s did the dismal state of the faculties finally incite an ardent demand for reform. Critics of the system launched a fervent campaign demanding the fundamental transformation of higher education.

CHAPTER III

UNIVERSITY REFORM UNDER THE THIRD REPUBLIC

The Pressure to Reform

Throughout the complex history of university reform, the ideological struggle between reformers and traditionalists over the democratization of higher education has been a recurring theme. Reformers believed that facilitating access to higher education was a means of increasing equality and social mobility. Therefore they demanded the admission of a larger section of the population into the system of higher education. The traditionalists retorted that quality should not be sacrificed for quantity. Admission into faculties should therefore be restricted and the grandes écoles preserved.

In the 1860s the deteriorating faculty system along with a dramatic increase in population, increased the demand for reform and intensified this debate. As a result of the industrialization of society, enrollment in the faculty system rose from less than 10,000 in 1875 to 42,000 in 1914.[4] The expansion of student population provoked complaints about the negative effect of overcrowding on quality of university education. However, in the early years of the Third Republic complaints were not taken very

seriously. Quality required money, which was directly linked to large enrollments. Later, when the rapid expansion caused serious strains on the university system, the argument over admissions became more acute.

A second pressure for change stemmed from the intense competition within the entire system of higher education. All institutes fought for control over high status career openings in order to attract the best students and obtain resources. This caused the already divided system to fight bitterly rather than to cooperate. Although the most intense competition existed between the faculties and the grandes écoles, in 1875 the Catholic schools also entered the race. When the law allowing the Catholics to establish institutions passed, the government was forced to start investing more heavily in the faculty system in order to permit it to compete successfully against their new rivals.

Competition among the grandes écoles, the Catholic schools and the faculties, as well as among the faculties themselves, led to widespread disagreement over the level of standards that should be maintained. Having small fixed enrollments, the grandes écoles always maintained high standards and thus earned prestigious reputations and won the best students. Faculties also needed to raise their standards and prestige in order to compete successfully. But reformers pointed out that faculties needed to attract large numbers of students in order to increase funding and

to raise the number of students receiving a higher education. Other problems concerning the structure of the faculty system also generated pressure to reform. Since the earliest days of the Université, the centralized system of authority over dispersed faculties proved ineffective. Institutions were divided among various ministries, which resulted in many "zones d'incertitude". Some faculties even managed to escape the jurisdiction of a ministry altogether. Demands for decentralization and increased faculty autonomy were constantly voiced.

The internal structure of the faculties also provoked grievances. As the shortcomings of the system became more apparent, university professors became increasingly conscious of their low status. Although some professors, even after 1860, continued to pursue change only to improve their own status, a more broadly-based and far more radical academic reformism emerged which combined self-interest with a fundamental transformation of higher education. Professors demanded more academic freedom, institutional autonomy, increased resources, higher salaries, and, most important, the creation of universities to replace the dispersed professional faculties.

Reformers argued that a unified system would result in greater efficiency. They believed a few large centers could utilize resources and serve students more effectively than small faculties. Whether they would admit it or not,

reformers intended to create a modern university system above all to develop the faculty system at the expense of the grandes écoles. "If reform leaders like Liard and Lavisse cautiously argued for a close coordination between faculties and grandes écoles, faculty reports frequently demanded the suppression of the grandes écoles or, at the very least, an end to their monopoly over the administrative grands corps."[5] As this quotation indicates, leading ministers expressed concern for the grandes écoles and tried to modify the demands of the reformers.

Louis Liard and the Implementation of Reforms

Despite the intense pressure for reform between 1860 and 1880, concrete changes were not implemented until the late 1880s. Louis Liard was the first to respond to the demands of the reformers and to initiate change in the faculty system. In 1884 Liard was nominated Director of Higher Education in the Ministry of Public Instruction. He dominated higher education for the next quarter century. Liard shared the basic belief and prejudices of the reform movement. He was sympathetic to the many complaints launched by the professors and, as a result, he immediately improved their status and working conditions. Liard shared the dream of multi-functional universities which could adapt constantly to new social needs and break the monopoly of the

grandes écoles.

Despite his reformist rhetoric, however, Liard acted as a negotiator between the conflicting interest groups that comprised the reform movement. The minister was forced to consider the various demands of the entire teaching corps all of whom believed in the need for change but differed on the means of doing it. In addition, Liard had to accommodate the grievances of politicians who were always reluctant to invest state funds and, in doing so, to relinquish their control over the faculty system. Liard finally devised a plan to transform the faculties into a modern university system. This he erroneously thought would produce a consensus among all parties.

In December 1885, Liard published two decrees. The first decree, allowed faculties to handle their own finances and in doing so, extended their autonomy. Faculties could now receive and spend private funds without the mediation of the government. They were given more control over their programs and teaching methods. This new autonomy enabled them to propose and finance new courses and programs of study and to expand the scope of their curricula and research.. Professors immediately began training students for the "new professions" in industry and commerce in order to compete better with the grandes écoles. The second decree attempted to encourage cooperation and unity among the faculties by establishing a general council of faculties in

each town. These councils had disciplinary powers over students and teachers. Professors were still appointed by the Ministry of National Education, but on the recommendation of the council.

Liard's decrees of 1896-97 completed the transformation of the old faculties into the modern universities. The law of July 10, 1896, reconstituted the French universities by grouping together the faculties in a given geographical area and granting them the official title of "University". The single-purpose faculties, formerly devoted to training and certification for the liberal and teaching professions, were transformed into diversified multi-purpose establishments. This new structure allowed faculties to begin playing an important role in scientific research and technological training. Although less successful, the faculties also extended their programs into administrative, commercial, and colonial studies. In addition, numerous pedagogical improvements were implemented by introducing new programs and by making the existing ones more flexible.

The Result of Liard's Reforms

The creation of the modern university system was by far the most significant reform implemented during the Third Republic. However, Liard's decrees did not solve the inherent problems of the faculty system, and many reformers

were left bitterly disappointed. First of all, they were extremely discouraged that the grandes écoles retained their independence and remained a threat to the new modern universities. Resentment of the control of the grandes écoles over the elite administrative careers and the high positions in the private business sector persisted. In general, the reformers saw no significant results. The modern universities continued to provide mass higher education leading to less prestigious and less influential careers than those occupied by graduates of the grandes écoles. Overall, the status of the universities was barely improved after their transformation. Consequently, all of the major complaints resurfaced after 1896, and criticism of higher education continued unabated.

One scholar attributes this failure to equalize conditions in the higher education to the inherent reluctance of the French to change. He writes that although politicians and professors alike "were probably sincere in their desire to extend the social role of universities, any effective pursuit of this goal would have gone against too many administrative realities, traditional values and reformist ideals to be successful".[6] This was true of Liard for whom conservative pressure made it impossible to implement the radical reforms he had originally supported.

Even the apparent successes gained by the creation of the modern university caused new problems. The increased

student population drained resources and lowered the overall quality of education. The multiplicity of functions now performed by the university inevitably caused institutional incoherence. The biggest flaw in the modern university, however, was the lack of political and social uniformity. Officially, Liard's decrees united the entire faculty system, but ideologically it remained severely fragmented, since the university system was established only as the result of a compromise among interest groups. Moreover, all the ideological diversity of republicanism itself was reproduced in the modern university, making impossible a comprehensive educational experience culminating in a social and political consensus. For the next century, the French nation would become increasingly divided over the issue of higher education as it became a major political issue. As a result, the continuing reformation of the universities would reflect the interests of the political majority and incite opposition from the minority.

The Reforms at the Turn of the Century

From the turn of the century until the outbreak of the war, the rise of republicanism supported the democratization of higher education. The socialists, who became a rising force within the Chamber of Deputies in the 1890s, believed that higher education could help to achieve their egalitarian goals and to fulfill their promise of social mobility to the people. In addition, a belief spread that science could replace religion as the vehicle to inculcate the moral and political values necessary for social integration. Thus the demand for the reformation of the university system persisted.

In 1901 the barriers between secondary and higher education were constantly being attacked in the name of egalitarianism. The early twentieth century republican politicians and administrators were satisfying the demands for democratization by making higher education more accessible. "At a time when enrollments in secondary education were stagnating and the total number of baccalauréats rose only slightly, the number of baccalauréats giving access to all faculties rose significantly"[7]. This statement proves that recruitment policies were becoming increasingly lenient. In fact, in 1907, the minister of public instruction, Aristide Briand, proposed to abolish the baccalauréat completely.

Not surprisingly, this radical proposal was immediately rejected by Frenchmen who violently opposed the growing accessibility of higher education. In every faculty, especially in the faculties of medicine, certain professors joined with laymen in fighting against this egalitarian movement which they believed was lowering standards and crowding the elite circles in France with the half-educated. They particularly opposed the progressive changes in the baccalauréat, which were deliberate attempts to increase the number of candidates who might enter into higher education.

The most intense debate ensued when a new baccalauréat was offered that waived the classics requirement. Modernist argued that a classical education was creating a barrier between secondary and higher education. Therefore they made "modern studies" equal with the classics. Traditionalist argued that this would inundate the universities with students who were culturally illiterate. They felt especially threatened by this proposal because classical education was the traditional mark of a highly educated person and determined one's social status in France. The grandes écoles, acting as a shelter for elite values, maintained the preponderance of classical studies.

While the reformers succeeded in increasing the number of students who entered higher education, the quality of their education undoubtedly decreased. The faculties of law became severely overcrowded. Their libraries and lecture

halls could not accommodate even a fraction of the student population.[8] The licence degree granted by the faculty of letters was not recognized as a mark of higher education, but rather as equivalent to secondary education. The same was true for the science faculties, which also suffered from lack of laboratories, overcrowding, and chronic shortage of resources.

Dissatisfaction with the university did not disappear after the First World War. Because of the political chaos, however, the reform efforts of the early 1920s fizzled out. Political polarization and economic crisis made it impossible to rebuild the prewar alliance of progressive academics, administrators, and politicians. Not until the 1950s, in response to severe social changes and to another dramatic increase in the student population, did a new reform alliance emerge.[9]

In the meantime, change was slow and the traditional methods of reform dominated. By a decree of July 1920, the jurisdiction of the universities was extended over libraries, laboratories, institutes, and observatories. With the approval of the minister, jurisdiction also included schools of local governments or private associations. But there were some important exceptions, namely the exclusion of the scientific institutions in Paris and the grandes écoles. This decree gave greater flexibility to French higher education by authorizing the creation of institutes

alongside the traditional faculties. By 1961 there were over 150 of these institutes connected with the 16 universities.

This decree certainly helped the universities expand laterally, but still with little integration among the faculties. The amalgamation of faculties into universities was clearly superficial; since the essential unit in the university remained the faculty. Reform ministers of the time made no effort to change this. In fact, the most active reforming education minister of the century, Jean Zay (1936-9), did not pay any special attention to the problems of the university. He argued that democratization of higher education was impossible until the lycées were reformed. Therefore, he focused his attention on altering the elitist character of the secondary schools.

With the outbreak of World War II, the education system remained amazingly intact. One scholar attributes this to the strength of the Napoleonic system: "As in the past, such continuity as France was able to maintain in these troubled years was provided by the Napoleonic-designed administration which escaped nearly unscathed these political variations".[10] Needless to say, any further attempts to reform the university system were postponed until France was liberated and the Gaullist regime was firmly established.

Chapter IV

FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER WORLD WAR II

The polarity between mass versus elite education and meritocratic versus egalitarian attitudes pervaded the history of university reform throughout the Third Republic. During the Fourth and Fifth Republics, this contention grew to become a dominant political issue. Politicians used the grandes écoles and the universities to represent the two opposing views. Therefore, the polarization between the two institutions existed more in political theory than in reality. With the rise of the modern university, faith in the democratization of education revived as a way of finally curing social inequality. School had become the determinant of the occupational level to which one could aspire, rather than birth or wealth. New technological advancements required a more broadly recruited and specifically trained elite. Thus, by 1944 most Frenchmen eagerly sought schooling to reach the ranks of the upper class. The result was a growing popular demand for higher education.

France was unable to meet this demand at the time of the Liberation, for the problems confronting the university system were worse than ever. Both the physical and

psychological damage done to the system during the war was devastating. Over 6000 classrooms had been destroyed, and libraries everywhere had fallen into disrepair. While scientific studies were advancing in the rest of the world, outdated materials and dilapidated research facilities caused scientific research in France to lag. Since the teacher training programs were disorganized under the Vichy regime, the number of trained professors had severely plummeted.

An unprecedented growth in student population accompanied this loss in teaching staff. The explosion of student population increased by a factor of four between 1950 and 1967 put an immense strain on the resources of the faculties. Classes were transformed into massive lectures where up to 2000 students were crammed into a single auditorium.[11] Student unrest prevailed, and the serious problems of higher education could no longer be avoided.

The Fifth Republic and President de Gaulle's Reforms

Between 1946 and 1958, considerable research was conducted to decide how to improve the universities, and ambitious programs were conceived. But they did not generate any substantial changes under the Fourth Republic. Not one new university was built in spite of the dramatic increase of student population, nor were the faculties restructured

to accommodate the influx. In fact, up to the end of the 1950s, higher education was not yet a dominant political issue. Finally, in 1958, with the strengthened executive power of the Gaullist regime, accelerated change superseded incremental reforms. President de Gaulle had spent his years of retirement criticizing the paralysis caused by party divisions of the Fourth Republic and was eager to displace the antagonism that, he believed, had paralyzed educational reform.

In the beginning of the Gaullist regime, it was clear that the remaining inequities of French education had strongly resisted the efforts of reformists: "only 10 to 20 percent of the children of farmers and workers attended school after the age fourteen, while 80 to 90 percent of the children of higher civil servants, the liberal professionals, and business leaders did so".[12] To cure this De Gaulle set out to reform the entire educational system. One of the first acts of the President on 6 January, 1959, was the issuance of an ordinance which summed up past expectations and addressed future needs. However, action was delayed until January 1965 when a circular was finally promulgated specifying the means of carrying out some of these ideas.

The circular focused primarily on technical education. It began by declaring the science baccalauréat officially equal to the classical. More significantly, the Instituts

universitaire de technologie (IUTs) were implemented in January 1966. These two-year post-secondary institutes were designed to offer specialization in applied studies, such as electrical engineering, accounting and marketing, through accelerated programs and new pedagogical methods. Fifteen years later, only 35,000 students out of 900,000 were registered in these innovative but nonetheless low-prestige institutions.[13] Both of these developments maintained low access to high status careers for the masses as employers continued to favor the graduates of the grandes écoles over those of the universities.

De Gaulle also created new universities in order to meet the growth in demand for higher education. A science faculty was added to the University of Paris and a faculty of letters at Nanterre. More universities were established in the provinces at Amiens, Nantes, Nice, Orleans-Tours, Rheims and Rouen. Moreover, old universities extended their campuses, and the ministry increased university staffs. Despite these efforts, the universities remained soulless. Students compared them to factories, but with no guarantee of obtaining a qualification having much status on the job market.

The Fifth Republic endeavored to reduce social tensions and satisfy the demands of a generation of educational reformers, but this too proved impossible. One academic remarked, "De Gaulle was fond of illustrating the diversity

of French opinion by citing the 300 types of French cheese. He could have made the same point by citing the variegated responses to his plans to improve French education."[14] The diversity of opinions was expressed through the vast amount of literature published in response to De Gaulle's proposals and was a warning of the trouble to come.[15]

The majority of this literature echoed the traditional grievances of the past century which the President's decrees failed to solve. The debate over classical versus scientific curricula continued. The pedagogy of the faculties was criticized for preparing students only for the examinations. Thus universities were not considered true centers of learning and research. The excessive centralization that had prevailed since Napoleon I was blamed for causing inertia and lack of innovation in the university. The grandes écoles were again ferociously attacked for fostering the old school-tie mentality. Ultimately, "entrenched evils--centralization, bureaucratic rigidity, antiquated methods, Parisian dominance, the attraction of the grandes écoles, and the traditional social inferiority of technological studies--were yielding stubbornly to planned change."[16] Aware of the flagrant inequalities of French education, critics argued that governmental reforms had failed to change the elitist character of higher education. However, despite the constant complaints launched against the university system, neither bureaucrats nor reformers

predicted the reform movement that would explode in the spring of 1968. But these events had been long-preparing, and the final thrust came when expectations were heightened by the gradual implementation of the goals pronounced in 1959.

The Revolts of May 1968

In May 1968 the university students turned the reform movement into a revolt. In general, the students were responding to the new post-war era in which the traditional bonds of culture, family, and religion no longer played a major role. Students were objecting to any kind of authority, a prevalent trend which incited student revolts from Berkeley to Frankfort and Rome. They had listened to and now echoed revolutionary catch phrases, such as "capitalism inevitably leads to fascism, "a socialist university cannot develop in a capitalist society," and "intellectual workers must not be separated from the rest of society".[17]

The first disturbance broke out in Nanterre, a new American-style campus that drew its students from the rich side of Paris. Ironically, Nanterre had proportionately the smallest working class and provincial enrollment of any French university. Minor issues over student housing ignited the rebellion, which then gave way to a widespread criticism

of the university. The students protested primarily against bloated universities and classes, overemphasis on examinations, and the distance between students and teachers. The majority of reformers sympathized with the students' grievances and supported the protests. On 2 May the dean was forced to close the campus and bring in the police.

The revolt spread to the Sorbonne and then to nearly every French university. On the night of 10-11 May, barricades went up in Paris, and 20,000 students became engaged in battles with the police. The trade union leadership decided on 11 May to call a strike in support of the students. Faced with this sudden national crisis, De Gaulle announced on 30 May that he was dissolving Parliament and calling a general election. That night a half-million cheering supporters paraded along the Champs-Elysées, believing victory was theirs. In the elections that followed, however, the Gaullists took the majority of the seats, and the revolt came to an end.

The students' defeat can be attributed to several different factors. First, their alliance with the workers was a tenuous at best, and it quickly fizzled out when both groups realized they had very different interests. In the second place, the constant violence associated with the student revolts soon turned the public against them. The threat of the revolts also caused groups of the extreme

Right to harden their position. Finally, the entrenched Napoleonic system that had remained intact remarkably through two world wars proved invincible against this civil uprising.[18] However the magnitude of the student revolts did succeed in calling attention to more concrete grievances, and the period since 1968 has been a ceaseless endeavor to re-examine the foundations and methods of French education.

Edgar Faure and the Loi d'orientation

The elections of 1968 ushered Edgar Faure into the office of Education Minister. The new minister immediately set out to restructure the system to preclude any future uprisings. His main piece of legislation was the Loi d'orientation, which responded directly to the dissatisfactions of hundreds of thousands of students. In his introductory speech to the National Assembly, Faure described the students' situation sympathetically and conceded that the Université had lost touch with its environment and failed to acknowledge social needs. He proposed three basic principles of reform of the Université: local participation; autonomy, which would require modification of the Napoleonic concept of a centralized and authoritarian Université; and democratization through expanding material aid to education at the higher level as a

way of diversifying the composition of the student body of universities in terms of cultural background.

On 12 November 1968, the law on higher education was promulgated. Title I called for the improvement of pedagogy and the assistance of students in choosing a vocation. Title II sought to reconcile disciplinary pluralism in the universities by suggesting that each university maintain a specialized emphasis. Regional councils of higher education were to be established with representatives from the student body and members outside the University. These councils would participate in coordinating programs and giving advice on the budget. Title III called for extended autonomy and set up similar types of elected councils on the national level. Title IV increased pedagogical autonomy, allowing individual departments to control instruction. The minister, however, would still oversee all matters concerning national degrees. Title V granted some degree of financial autonomy by giving each university a general budget and allowing it some freedom by no longer having to obtain prior consent for expenditure.

The immediate result of this law was the most radical restructuring of the university in this century. The University of Paris with 230,000 students was divided into 13 more manageable autonomous universities, each ranging from 6000 to 30,000 students.[19] These divisions enabled each university to redefine its main goals, to reshape its

curricula, and to strengthen its own research programs. Many provincial universities followed this pattern. This restructuring of the universities struck at the core of the fossilized system and temporarily revived enthusiasm for innovation within the universities.

Despite these pragmatic alterations, theoretically the Loi d'orientation proved unsuccessful. "Whether or not the inclusiveness and novelty of these reforms doomed them to failure, observers of every persuasion have by and large decried a gap between promise and fulfillment."[20] Many of the provisions were simply ignored. The regional councils, for instance, which were central to the concept of a participatory system, were never established. The provision suggesting that each university choose a subject in which it would specialize was opposed by the established disciplines, and the excessive centralization of administration persisted. The promise of autonomy did not go beyond the limits of details in the curricula, pedagogy, and research activities. Furthermore the central government kept a tight financial and bureaucratic hold; after all, it was the exclusive supplier of university funds. In fact, centralization has often been seen as the principal obstacle to realizing the intent of the Faure legislation and other proposed reforms in the past century. Not surprisingly centralization would remain the greatest impediment to further reform.

The Savary Law

A decade passed before the Faure Law received any legislative response. When the socialists won the election in 1981, President Mitterand designated Alain Savary to be the new Minister of Education, and he immediately announced his project to reform in-depth the Edgar Faure law of 1968. Ultimately, the Savary reforms sought egalitarianism through democratization. To achieve this, Savary proposed that every university should have three main goals: first, to enhance the scientific and cultural development of the nation; second, to contribute to employment policy and regional development; and third, to help reduce social and cultural inequalities.[21]

Many of those in the university sector, who had hoped and expected that the entire higher education system would finally be democratized by the left-wing government were disappointed. Although Savary's proposals originally intended to encompass all institutions of higher education, the grandes écoles remained unaffected and were permitted to keep their traditional privileges. By Article 12 of the law, "the provisions relating to the placing of students in institutions and on courses preclude any selection," and yet "selection may be operated according to procedures fixed by the Ministry of Education for entry to...,' and then comes a

list which includes the preparatory classes for the grandes écoles, the grandes écoles themselves, and the IUT, among other privileged institutions.[22] Apparently, the cultivation of elites was considered too necessary to modify, even by high left-wing officials who also were benefitting from this system.

The Savary law went on to reiterate that any pupil with the baccalauréat or an equivalent qualification be allowed access to higher education. As Article 12 states, there would be no selection process, such as a competitive exam. This seemed like nothing new, since the modern university had long prided itself on its semi-open access policy. However, as many other instances regarding university procedure have proved, there was a large gap between theory and policy. The administration of the more popular universities and departments had implemented their own selection methods to control student enrollment. Although each university had the safeguard of closing classes when they were full, other methods of quality control were often instituted, such as insisting on a particular type of baccalauréat, on a mark of distinction obtained in the baccalauréat, or on an adequate secondary school record.

The philosophy behind the government's reaffirmation of the semi-open access policy was, first of all, to ensure democracy and justice. It was thought wrong that a student who had aspired to a certain educational level should be

prevented from at least trying to go farther. Secondly, it was believed that admitting a large portion of the country's population into higher education, would ensure France's economic strength. The latter reason reflected the concern for the recent drop in the percentage of 20 to 24 year olds in full-time education. In fact, almost half of those who entered a university dropped out during the first two-year cycle of studies. Savary assumed that premature specialization was causing a loss of interest. Therefore, he proposed that the first-cycle student be granted more leeway before having to specialize.

To Savary's surprise opposition broke out. Students, urged by faculty, protested against the postponement of specialization. They feared that their work load would be increased in order to cover the basic material learned usually in the first-cycle. The demonstrations first erupted in the medical and legal departments and were pursued in universities which consisted primarily of right-wing sympathizers. By the spring of 1983 opposition to the Savary law traveled to other departments, incited by the controversial issue of selection. Unlike access to first-cycle studies, the minister sought to limit the number of places available for second-cycle work leading to the licence or the maîtrise. Savary ordered that entry to second-cycle professional studies be determined not only by successful completion of the first cycle but by the

selection of the most suitable candidates through competitive examination. One reporter pointed out that although the word "selection" was not explicitly mentioned in the text, "this is obviously selection by another name."[23] Students protested against this article, which they thought would worsen their chances of continuing their studies.

The issue of selection had always been problematic in the process of democratization. It was one matter to facilitate the access into higher education and thereby increase the student population. But, it was another matter to ensure for the students quality education and employment opportunities after graduation. In reality, selection had to take place sometime, either in the universities or in the job market. The 1984 law tried to solve the problem of selection by trying to match the universities' output to society's needs. Ideally, the number of places in second-cycle courses would be determined by job prospects. However, the universities received little help from job forecasting systems. In times of severe unemployment, employers could not feel obliged to hire underqualified students. Given an enrollment rate of 35-40%, it is not realistic to hope that every university graduate will obtain a high or middle status job, since such jobs accounted for no more than 25% of the labour force.[24] Therefore, Savary's law merely postponed the selection process.

The Counter Attack

Unlike the 1968 Faure law which was voted in unanimously by the Assemble Nationale, the Savary Law was voted in unanimously by the left-wing majority and rejected entirely by the opposition. The extremely controversial nature of the Savary law was destined to provoke a counter-attack as soon as the political climate changed. This occurred after the 1986 elections, when Alain Devaquet became Minister and was asked to draft a new Higher Education Act. The result was a bill suggesting a more rigorous selection procedure for admissions and greater autonomy for individual establishments. The final text provoked such strong opposition in France, especially from the students, that it was ultimately withdrawn. Immediately following this incident, University higher education found itself in a strange predicament. While the fundamental problems of the universities were still being debated, no effort was made to reform them. Any attempt to set reforms down in a formal draft would result only in division and opposition as had been previously demonstrated. This clearly shows that education had become a politically biased issue without a chance for bipartisan agreement. Moreover, the politicization of higher education exaggerated the ideological differences between the universities and the grandes écoles, as politicians used these institutions to

represent their particular ideals.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Historical Analysis

Since the Revolution, educational reformers have endeavored to establish a system of higher education that would embody the democratic ideals of 1789. Napoleon realized one of the main revolutionary principles by creating a meritocratic education system. The emperor, however, refused to abolish the hierarchical system inherited from the Old Regime. The result was the proliferation of the grandes écoles and the creation of a new elite based on merit.

Under the Third Republic, in 1896, this elite system was challenged by the rise of the modern university, which became the symbol for democratic change. The new university system, however, was not founded upon any ideological uniformity. Universities reforms then became increasingly politicized reflecting only the ideals of the political majority. Moreover, those in political power, although willing to implement radical reforms in the university

system, refused to restructure the grandes écoles which had provided France with quality education and leadership. Indeed, most of the political leaders were products of these schools. Thus the tension between democratic reform and the elite tradition grew to become a dominant political issue, sometimes existing more in theory than in reality.

At the turn of the century, with the rise of republicanism, politicians tried to fulfill their egalitarian aspirations by reshaping the university, not the grandes écoles. They succeeded in democratizing the university system in the sense that a larger number of students were admitted into the faculties. The results, however, were not a levelling of social inequalities but overcrowded universities and a decrease in the quality of education. These conditions led to the student revolts in May 1968. In the face of stiff opposition, both Faure and Savary tried to satisfy the various interest groups by proposing detailed plans which promised to improve the universities while continuing to democratize them. Not surprisingly their theories, like those of many of their predecessors, failed in practice.

In the 1990s the intense political divisions have continued to thwart university reformation to the point where legislation on higher education has proven impossible. In addition, ideas to democratize the universities have been exhausted to no avail. As a result, the universities remain

cumbersome, slow to adapt to social needs, and overcrowded.

Meanwhile, throughout the century of university reform, the grandes écoles have continued to prosper and to win prestige. They remained fixed at the apex of the system. Neither Liard, De Gaulle, Faure, or Savary tried to dismantle this old elite system despite the constant demand. The few attempts to implement democratic reforms have proved ineffective. For instance, the École national d'administration (ENA), established in 1945, was designed to break the dominance of Paris and the upper middle class. It forbade tuition, established seven satellite campuses in the provinces, and added an alternative concours for those already in the civil service, instead of recruiting only from preparatory schools. Despite these democratic efforts, the difficulty of the course and the inadequate preparation of the candidates accepted through the second concours kept new candidates out. In 1945 the Institute des etudes politiques, the institute from which the majority of the ENA candidates have come, was reformed along similar lines, but it still continues to educate students from the most prosperous classes. As a result, the higher reaches of civil service remain preponderantly upper class, Parisian-educated, and often related by personal and family ties. Egalitarian social objectives have not been able to penetrate this elitist tradition and the rigidity of the examination system. Moreover, France has not succeeded in

reconciling the aspiration for equality with the demand for excellence.

The Left, however, has not given up in trying to reduce inequities in higher education. In fact, currently the debate in France over higher education once again centers around the contention between the universities and the grandes écoles. Although the grandes écoles had been criticized by democratic reformers all along, the attack eased somewhat with the rise of the modern university. As the above historical survey has shown, the reformers focused on new ways to reform the university system to combat elitism instead of constantly demanding the dismantling of the grandes écoles. Currently however, after generations of university reforms and social inequality in higher education still prevalent, reformers are once again viciously attacking the grandes écoles.

The Current Debate

The grandes écoles are blamed for thwarting the efforts to democratize French higher education. Members of the left-wing parties demand that the grandes écoles be dismantled and merged with the universities. They argue that the schools produce a group of elites and thus reinforce social inequality in France. Leftists point out that the sons (rarely daughters) of this elite gain a disproportionate

number of places in the grandes écoles. Traditionalists rebut that stiff entry qualifications are justified. In keeping with the Republic's fundamental belief in equality, they contend, all candidates are chosen according to their ability, not by their wealth or familial status, as in the Ancien Regime. In response to the charge that the sons of elites occupy the majority of places, they counter that it is a well known sociological phenomenon that sons of the upper social classes do better in the educational system than others. Leftists argue that this results in an elitist vicious circle, and they demand that a larger percentage of the working class be admitted. But the advocates of the grandes écoles believe that high standards will be jeopardized in opened to such large number of students. Furthermore, they fear that when standards fall the cultural life of the nation will suffer. Traditionalists are extremely reluctant to abandon a system that has produced the elite of France and many of the cultural leaders of Europe since Napoleonic times.

What underlies this current debate, and the entire controversy over the democratization of French higher education, are the conflicting desires to give each student an equal opportunity and to continue to produce an elite that will lead France in a competitive world. These opposing purposes of education have resulted in a tense politicization, with rival parties embittered at the failure

of their respective plans. The failure of reformers to realize their democratic plans, however, suggests that their ideas are implausible. Reformers have overlooked the utility of the grandes écoles and have exaggerated the rivalry between them and the universities. In reality the grandes écoles and universities complement each other by performing separate functions and by training students for different careers. Elimination of either institute would be damaging to the entire French system of higher education.

Resolution of the Debate

In face of persistent disunity, the idea of providing a common value system for Frenchmen is retreating before the reality of a pluralistic society. The dreams of establishing a unified system of higher education in a country as divided as France become correspondingly impossible to realize. The higher education system of a democratic country should reflect its diversity. Therefore there needs to be an exclusive institute where tradition is preserved, as well as an egalitarian system which offers a democratic alternative.

If the quintessential goal of higher education is to provide the greatest number of students with the best education possible so that all degrees of potential can be maximized, both the grandes écoles and the universities must continue to coexist. This is the only way to offer both equality and excellence, tradition and egalitarianism.

Without the grandes écoles the best and brightest will not have the high standards to which they should aspire nor the adequate training available to maximize their full potential. But if the grandes écoles alone were to survive, only a select few would enjoy the benefits of a higher education, while mediocre students would be forced to end their academic careers after the secondary level. Both of these situations would be harmful to the French state and to the individual. The only resolution to the debate over French higher education is a peaceful coexistence of the grandes écoles and the universities.

ENDNOTES

1. H.D. Lewis, The French Education System (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p.106.

2. The term "university" is used here to describe the highly centralized education system established by Napoleon which embraces primary, secondary, and higher education. Later the term is used in reference to the institutions which Louis Liard formed by grouping the existing faculties in 1896.

3. Theodore Zeldin, France 1848-1945: Intellect and Pride (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.317.

4. George Weiz, The Emergence of Modern Universities in France, 1863-1914 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). p.373.

5. Weiz, p.327.

6. Weiz, p.377.

7. Weiz, p.234.

8. Zeldin, p.327.

9. The number of university students rose from 79,000 in 1939 to 598,000 in 1968. (Weiz, p.376).

10. Joseph Moody, French Education Since Napoleon (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1978), p.147.

11. Alain Bienayme, "The New Reform in French Higher Education". European Journal of Education, vol.19 no.2 1984 p.154.

12. Moody, p.170.

13. Bienayme, p.153.

14. Moody, p.175.

15. H.D. Lewis cites the work L'Administration de l'education: essai de bibliographie by M. Declaux and J.Minot which lists over 70 works on the May events published between 1968 and 1973

alone. In addition, Joseph Moody treats the numerous educational philosophies that were in circulation after De Gaulle's proposals. I however only mention a few that I felt were directly relevant to this thesis.

16. Moody, p.178.

17. Ibid.

18. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Pour l'universitie--Avant pendant et apres mai 1968 (Paris: Payot, 1968). p.31-34.

19. Bienayme, p.154.

20. Moody, p.184.

21. Bienayme, p.159.

22. H.D. Lewis, The French Education System (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p.128.

23. Guy Neave, "Bill Redefines Role of Universities." The Times Higher Education Supplement (April 1983) p.13.

24. Bienayme, p.162.

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