

Strikes Sweep French Universities

Sunday, March 15, 2009, was a fine sunny day in Paris, and the Jardin Luxembourg was full of people. On the park's bandstand was an unusual sight: Before an audience of about seventy-five people, Gérard Besson of the Université de Grenoble was delivering a Bourbaki lecture ("Le théorème de la sphère différentiable [d'après S. Brendle, R. Schoen]"). In a gesture of solidarity with the strikes that were sweeping French universities, the organizers of the Bourbaki seminar had asked Besson to give his lecture outside the usual venue, the Amphithéâtre Hermite at the Institut Henri Poincaré, which is located in the Université Pierre et Marie Curie. They brought along a two-sided whiteboard, and by the time Besson had filled both sides, the police had arrived. The officers explained that, because the park is owned by the senate, it is not a public place, and public lectures are thus forbidden. They suggested moving the lecture to the forecourt of the nearby Panthéon, but the mathematicians ruled out that option, knowing they would likely encounter there more policemen jumpy about the many demonstrations recently carried out in the area. In the end the mathematicians repaired to the amphitheater. A 4-minute video showing Besson's encounter with the police was posted on YouTube. "I am not sure that the outcome of this revolutionary act is important," Besson said, "but my kids were happy to see me on the video."

This somewhat lighthearted story points to a more serious reality: the extraordinary outpouring of discontent among French university faculty and students that since early 2009 has led to widespread strikes and demonstrations across the country. Lectures have been canceled, faculty have refused to perform administrative duties, chairs have been removed from lecture halls so that classes cannot be held. One of the most widely used tactics has been mass public readings, especially from the seventeenth-century classic *La Princesse de Clèves*. The book has become a symbol of protest against the French president, Nicholas Sarkozy, who has made several public statements deriding the book and whose administration has pushed the government policies that sparked the strikes.

Causes of the Unrest

Although different people and groups are striking for different reasons, most of the dissatisfactions have centered on a law—"Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités", or LRU—that the government intended as a way to give French universities more autonomy. Although the law was passed in August 2007, its implementation began in earnest only in 2009; all universities must implement the reforms by 2012. Another bone of contention has been the government's proposals for revamping training of secondary school teachers, proposals that many believe

will be disastrous for an already ailing French school system. Another issue at the back of the minds of many of the protestors, though perhaps playing a less direct role, is the changes in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) that the government has been carrying out over the past couple of years.

The French mathematical community has responded in various ways. Many French university mathematics departments have posted notices on their Web pages saying they are on strike and describing their reasons and demands, and there has been a huge amount of discussion and exchanging of information among them. The concrete steps taken have varied—some departments canceled courses entirely, some temporarily; some taught part of their courses and advised students about how to catch up on the missed material; some held lectures outside of the university buildings. Through such actions, "people can say they are striking, but they are not doing something irreversible to the students," remarked Stephan Jaffard of the Université de Paris 12, who is the current president of the Société Mathématique de France (SMF). "The situation [for mathematics students] is under control, and there should not be too many bad consequences." In other academic areas, by early summer 2009 coursework interruptions had been so extensive that the upcoming examinations posed a serious problem, and it was not clear whether students would be able to progress towards their degrees.

The over eighty public universities in France are all centrally controlled by the French government. As many of them struggle with overcrowding, crumbling infrastructure, and a lack of funds, there is little disagreement that some kind of reform is needed. In fact, reforms of the type outlined in the LRU have been discussed for years in France and predate the Sarkozy administration. What has aroused the recent ire of French academics is the exact nature of the implementation of the LRU reforms. Writing in the *Oxford Magazine* after an April 2009 trip to France [1], Robin Briggs, Senior Research Fellow and Special Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Oxford, summed up the situation this way: "The model now being advocated is the classic competitive one derived from the business world, and is spectacularly ill-suited to generate academic excellence."

Deep Dismay Over Reforms

In this climate, faculty in the humanities feel more threatened than those in mathematics and science. But French mathematicians too have expressed deep dismay over at least two aspects of the implementation of the LRU. The first is a change in the way French mathematics departments are funded. Previously, department heads dealt directly with the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, which would provide the money, and the CNRS, which evaluated mathematics departments. In consultation with these two government bodies, a mathematics department head would make decisions about how to

distribute the funds within the department. While perhaps not universally loved, this system was seen as impartial and fair. Now, under the LRU, funding for departments will flow through the hands of university presidents, who will have a great deal of control over how the money is spread around. Many French mathematicians fear that decisions might be made on the basis of favoritism and local politics—already a problem in French universities—and that university departments will have to compete against each other for funds.

The second concern centers on changes in the definition of the duties of university faculty. Previously, government regulations stipulated, for example, how much time a mathematics professor was supposed to spend on teaching and how much on research. The LRU reforms aim to give more control over such matters to the universities themselves, so that university presidents would have discretion to, say, shift around teaching loads, rewarding those who are productive in research by assigning them fewer teaching hours and upping the teaching loads of those doing less research. The buzzwords are “autonomy” and “local control”, which sound reasonable and perhaps even desirable. But French academics are more comfortable basing such decisions on government regulations, which are seen as impartial and even-handed. They also believe the new organizational scheme does not provide enough discussion by and input from the rank and file faculty. In most universities in the United States, provision is made for discussion and input by an administrative layer—usually consisting of deans, who are themselves academics—that sits between departments and the upper university administration. In the reforms outlined in France, it is not clear there would be such an intermediate body.

One of the most volatile issues fueling the strikes is the government’s efforts to change the structure of degree programs that prepare secondary school teachers. These changes have unified a powerful and vocal bloc of faculty and students in both universities and secondary schools. Previously, students who advanced through the teacher preparation programs obtained paid positions to do two years of practice teaching under the supervision of experienced teachers. This component of teacher training will now be replaced by study of teaching theory rather than actual practice. “There are fears that secondary school teachers will have less technical knowledge of their subjects and less practice interacting with students,” Jaffard explained. In his article Briggs pointed to another disturbing possibility: “There is 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 labor.”

Another component of the dispute, and one that can be difficult for outsiders to understand, is the role of the *grands écoles*. Briggs wrote, “These institutions are the crucible in which generation after generation of the French ruling class is formed; they only take 4 percent of the annual student intake, with a massive bias towards the children of the rich and powerful.” Entrance into a *grande école* requires special preparatory classes after secondary school and ensures the graduate will enjoy privileges and

connections throughout his or her career. Entrance into a French university offers none of these advantages and is seen as a poor second choice. “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,” Briggs wrote. “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.”

Similar views, expressed in more blunt language, were voiced in a widely read editorial by Gérard Courtois that appeared in *Le Monde* in May 2009 [2]. Courtois wrote that, beyond all of the noisy unrest, the “true winners” of the conflict are the *grandes écoles*. The selective mechanisms that promote *grandes écoles* graduates intensify social hierarchies “to an absurd degree”, he wrote. “This is what the university is suffering from, first of all. This is what the ‘reform’ under way is concealing.”

For Mathematicians, Positive Signs, But Worries Too

Another development that has unsettled French mathematicians is the establishment of the Agence National de la Recherche, which gives research grants in a way similar to the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF). This development has further complicated the climate in mathematics departments. “Now individual groups can ask for money for specific programs—and they can ask for quite large amounts,” noted Frank Pacard of the Université de Paris 12, who also works part-time as an expert consultant on mathematics for the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. The division into “haves” and “have-nots” created by NSF grants have long been a fact of life in mathematics departments in the United States. “But people in France are not used to it,” Pacard said. “The change has a good effect because it puts money into mathematics, but it could be a drawback because the system is not as even-handed as it used to be. So there are mixed feelings.”

Over the past couple of years, the French government also mandated reforms of the CNRS that are intended to make the agency less centralized and to give each subject funded under the CNRS more autonomy. The reforms were greeted with some wariness by French mathematicians, for in mathematics, the CNRS has played a crucial role, by providing young mathematicians with research positions that ensure a good deal of job security (though not especially good pay) before they found permanent academic positions. It is true that the CNRS positions have not always been used as they were intended: A few mathematicians have remained for their entire careers in CNRS positions and have done little research. But these are exceptions, and it is clear that the CNRS has made an enormous contribution to the strength of French mathematics today. Indeed, six of the eight French Fields Medalists held CNRS positions at some point in their careers.

The changes to the CNRS that the government mandated have benefited mathematics in some ways. For one thing, the government has promised to provide more funding for mathematics through the CNRS. In addition, mathematics

is now overseen by a single mathematical institute within the CNRS; before, the field was somewhat uncomfortably lumped into a section with physics. French mathematicians are generally happy with this change, Jaffard said. Nevertheless, he noted, “there is a fear that, if the CNRS is split into several independent blocks, then if the government wants to eliminate the CNRS, it will be easier to eliminate the blocks one by one.”

Speech Galvanizes Opposition

Concerns about the government’s policies had been simmering for months before a January 22, 2009, speech by President Sarkozy [3] sent shock waves through the academic community and galvanized many groups to strike. The speech was intended to lay out a new vision for a more modern and dynamic policy to support science and technology. Instead, it ended up alienating many of the people who work in these areas. Sarkozy painted a picture of “weak” universities led by “nitpicking” central administrations and an “infantilizing” system of research that “paralyzes” creativity and innovation. He pointed to mathematics, physics, and engineering sciences as some of the very few areas of excellence in France and suggested that they serve primarily to cover up the generally deteriorating condition of French science. Academics objected as much to what they saw as misconceptions and errors of fact as they did to the demeaning, chiding tone of the speech. For example, after criticizing the publication output of French researchers in some areas, Sarkozy took a preemptive strike against possible disagreement: “Pardon me, I don’t want to be disagreeable.... This is a reality, and if the reality is disagreeable it is not because I say it, it is disagreeable because it is the reality.”

Reactions to the speech within the scientific community were nearly uniformly negative. At one point in the speech, Sarkozy suggested that Albert Fert, a French physicist and recipient of the 2007 Nobel Prize, supported the ideas set forth in the speech; soon afterward Fert publicly came out opposed. Although they were among the few groups singled out for praise in the speech, mathematicians nevertheless found it infuriating. One of the most prominent voices raised was that of Fields Medalist Wendelin Werner of the Université de Paris-Sud, Orsay, who wrote an open letter to Sarkozy that appeared in *Le Monde* in February 2009 [4]. “Your speech contained flagrant untruths, abusive generalities, extreme simplifications, dubious rhetorical effects, which left all of science perplexed,” Werner wrote. “I believe we are numerous, those of us who could not believe our ears.” He also wrote that some very good colleagues and students were so revolted by the speech that they expressed a newfound desire to leave the country. Asked about the response to his letter, Werner wrote in an email message, “Basically everybody (including members of the government) understood that the 22 January speech did damage the situation and made it difficult to move forward,” he wrote. “Since then, things have not really gone better.”

The SMF, together with its counterpart organizations in physics and chemistry, also registered its opposition to the speech in a February 9, 2009, letter to the French minister for higher education and research, Valérie Précresse. Jaffard, together with the presidents of the other two societies, met with Précresse in April 2009 in an attempt

to build a constructive dialogue. During that meeting, it became clear that Précresse was unaware that Sarkozy had planned to give such a speech. Indeed, the speech seemed to catch many in the government by surprise, leading to speculation that it was the work of a small handful of advisors to Sarkozy.

Together with the physics and chemistry societies, the SMF has written several letters to the government and articles that have appeared in *Le Monde*. “We have tried not to say that everything is good or everything is bad, but to make recommendations,” Jaffard said. They have had constructive discussions about science policy with Précresse and others within the government. However, when the three societies joined a large group of other organizations across the academic spectrum to write a letter to the education minister Xavier Darcos opposing the changes in the preparation of secondary school teachers, the reaction was dead silence. “[Darcos] wants to do it his own way,” Jaffard said. “He is not listening to others.” But that letter had an indirect effect: Soon afterward, the association of French university presidents, which was initially strongly in favor of the changes, reversed its position and registered its opposition.

“The situation is fluid,” Jaffard said in early summer 2009. It is clear that some of the developments that have generated the most controversy, such as the reforms made in response to the LRU, are here to stay. In other cases, the government has backed off from some proposed policies that met with opposition. The sheer number of changes the government has made, the rapid pace at which they are to be carried out, and the lack of provision for input from those whose lives will be affected have caused almost as much dissatisfaction as the specifics of the reforms themselves. But, as Jaffard pointed out, a clear consensus about alternatives has not emerged from the academic community. He said, “It is easier to be dissatisfied than to be united in what to do.”

References

- [1] ROBIN BRIGGS, “President Sarkozy, *La Princesse de Clèves*, and the crisis in the French higher education system”, *Oxford Magazine*, Second Week, Trinity Term, 2009.
- [2] GÉRARD COURTOIS, “République aristocratique [Aristocratic republic]”, *Le Monde*, May 18, 2009.
- [3] “Discours à l’occasion du lancement de la réflexion pour une Stratégie Nationale de Recherche et d’Innovation [Speech on the occasion of the launching of the discussion about a National Strategy for Research and Innovation]”, delivered by Nicholas Sarkozy, January 22, 2009.
- [4] WENDELIN WERNER, “Lettre ouverte au Président de la République [Open letter to the President of the Republic]”, *Le Monde*, February 18, 2009.
- [5] The websites *Sauvons l’Université* and *Sauvons la Recherche* provide a great deal of information and commentary about the crisis.

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