

Recovering the History of the French University

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ABSTRACT

The history of French universities is characterised by several ruptures since the French Revolution, the last of them dating from 1968 and resulting in the breakup of existing universities into multiple entities without their own past. Simultaneously, a culture of intense centralization served as a guiding principle in the design of the French academic system, leading to the disappearance of all, indeed minor, attempts to create a culture of autonomous institutions. Against this background, it becomes clear why the bulk of the historiography on French universities has focused on the academic disciplines and rarely mentions universities as institutions. Scholars identified themselves first and foremost with their scientific field, with their institutional affiliation playing only a secondary role. By discussing these specific characteristics of the French university system, this article aims to elucidate the problems French universities are confronted with when eager to commemorate their own past.

Keywords: historiography; university history; jubilees; France; scientific disciplines

Introduction

Efforts to commemorate French universities are, from the very start, grounded in a paradox. France prides itself on having the second oldest university in Europe – only the University of Bologna is considered older than the Sorbonne, which was founded in the 13th century – yet no other public institution suffers from such a lack of historical attention.¹ Due to an archival and historiographical lacuna, the scholarship on French universities remains thin, largely comprised of political projects meant to justify the continued existence of

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¹ For an historical overview, see: E. Picard, 'L'histoire de l'enseignement supérieur français: pour une approche globale', *Histoire de l'éducation* 122 (2009) 11–33.

small institutions through appeals to their longstanding history. A prime example is the University of Avignon, which published a self-aggrandizing history intended to further the fiction of a 700-year-old university. The text, mostly photographs and reproductions of documents, conveniently omitted the institution's disappearance between 1793 and 1980.

The form that the French university has taken since its re-establishment under Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century has served as a prototype for institutions of higher learning both in Europe and the former overseas colonies. In his history of European universities, Robert Anderson shows the co-existence of two dominant models during the nineteenth century: the French, a centralized, hierarchical, and total system of education that encompassed secondary schooling, and the German, that was founded on the idea of the research university that enjoyed far greater autonomy from public authority.²

Despite its importance as a model, we know little about the history of the French university. The historiography of higher education remains underdeveloped, with no research centre or specialized review dedicated to the subject. There are only a handful of doctoral dissertations on the theme, mostly written at foreign universities.³ Published in 1994, the most recent synthetic work on the University of Paris left a great number of questions unexplored.⁴ A few monographs have taken up the topic of provincial universities, but within narrow methodological and chronological scopes.⁵ Rare occasions commemorating universities have not led to genuine historical research. This may seem to be a harsh assessment, but it is understandable with a look to the general history of the French university system. Through a retrospective reflection, therefore, we can begin to account for the deficiency of scholarship and to consider its historiographical consequences.

However, first of all two major questions that colour any discussion about the French university must be raised. First: should we consider the history of the French university in the singular or in the plural? Since intense centralization served as a guiding principle in the design of the French academic system, which was conceived of as a coherent and systematic whole, we are forced to ask if it makes sense to consider each institution individually – the history of French ‘universities’ – or if it would be more fruitful to treat ‘the university’ as a single entity, each establishment making up no more than a small part of the larger system? It follows from this first question that it is impossible, in France, to dissociate the history of the university from its relationship with the state from which it emanates, and upon which it so closely depends. A second question, then: are there particular universities that, due to their essential coherence, lend themselves to individual institutional histories? There have been some attempts to write the histories of specific institutions, but these lack in contextualization and leave their readers with a sense of incompleteness.⁶

2 R. Anderson, *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914* (Oxford 2004).

3 For example, M.-J. Nye, *Science in the Provinces. Scientific Communities and Provincial Leadership in France, 1860–1930* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1986); J. E. Craig, *Scholarship and Nationbuilding. The University of Strasbourg and Alsatian Society, 1870–1939* (Chicago-London 1984); Jean-François Condette, *La faculté des lettres de Lille de 1887 à 1945. Une Faculté dans l'histoire* (Villeneuve d'Ascq 1999).

4 A. Thuillier, *Histoire de l'Université de Paris et de la Sorbonne* (Paris 1994).

5 For an on-line bibliography on French higher education institutions, see: www.inrp.fr/she/picard_biblio_établissements_enseignement_supérieur.htm

6 Very different is the situation for the *Grandes écoles*, which have been studied in detail, e.g. B. Belhoste, *La Formation d'une technocratie. L'École polytechnique et ses élèves de la Révolution au Second Empire* (Paris 2003) or J.-N. Luc e.a., *Des normaliens, histoire de l'école normale supérieure de Saint-Cloud* (Paris 1982).

In order to write a history of the French university, we must start with the institution as a whole and the circumstances of its re-establishment under Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With such an historical perspective in mind, we can explain the major trajectories of French historiography on higher education and elucidate contemporary choices concerning commemoration.

The university: a history of successive ruptures

Among the oldest on the continent, the twenty-two French universities that existed at the eve of the Revolution functioned much like their counterparts across Europe. Revolutionary leaders essentially viewed them as conservative, religious institutions and suppressed them in 1793. For the next decade no university existed on French soil. Their reappearance stemmed from Napoleon I's 1802 reorganization of the educational system. Napoleon started his reform with the foundation of a limited number of law and medical faculties; later, in 1808, he expanded the Imperial University to include arts and science faculties in the 35 academies.⁷

In this period, the term 'university' did not refer uniquely to higher education, but to public secondary and post-secondary education as an ensemble, constituting a kind of Ministry of Education *avant la lettre*. Universities in today's sense made up only a small part of the Imperial University, a total institution comprised of establishments of higher learning, upper and lower secondary schools. Limited to five faculties – law, medicine, theology, arts and science – each discipline remained independent of the others. The majority of cities boasted only the faculties of arts and science, while certain cities, like Paris or Strasbourg, enjoyed the full array. Political authorities tightly controlled the universities: directly appointing professors, dictating the curriculum, imposing a national system of academic degrees, and managing the professoriate. Opening and closing faculties was based on political, rather than scientific criteria. The notion of 'academic freedom' became thoroughly obsolete, though French university professors and their students often opposed political authority. When a number of faculties became the theatre of social unrest, the government reacted by closing them.⁸ By 1855, however, sixteen university towns appeared on the map of France, a number that would remain stable until the 1950s.

To better understand the peculiarities of the French university, one must take into account the stark duality that characterized them in the nineteenth century. Before the Revolution, university education had two stages. Faculties of arts awarded master degrees, being a pre-requisite for admission to a doctorate in law, medicine, or theology until 1789. A Master of Arts, therefore, constituted a form of preliminary, general education. In 1802, Napoleon modelled the system of secondary education and the baccalaureate degree on this tradition. In 1808, the baccalaureate replaced the Master of Arts (*Magister Artium*) as a condition of university admission. The faculty of arts survived, yet transformed into an upper secondary school.⁹ The development of the faculties of arts and science at universities outside France, however, made it difficult to limit the new French institutions to law, medicine, and theology. Consequently, Napoleon created arts and science faculties *ex nihilo*.

7 A. Prost, *L'enseignement en France, 1800–1967* (Paris 1968).

8 J.-C. Caron, *Générations romantiques. Les étudiants de Paris et le Quartier latin (1814–1851)* (Paris 1991).

9 W. Frijhoff e.a. (eds.), 'Secondary Education: Institutional, Cultural and Social History', *Paedagogica Historica* 40 (2004) no. 1–2, 9–14.

During the next several decades, despite these innovations, the situation remained similar to what had existed before the Revolution: arts and science faculties continued to confer baccalaureate degrees on students who had completed their studies in upper secondary schools and would go on to enrol at the faculty of law or medicine.

Initially, only the faculties of law and medicine offered genuine professional training and attracted students and instructors educated under the *ancien régime*. Although the faculties of arts and science legally were just as much allowed to grant baccalaureate, master and doctoral degrees, in practice they only granted the first kind of diplomas, in contrast to the two professional faculties. The bachelor and doctoral diplomas that they issued offered limited professional opportunities, graduates generally entering the professoriate at the secondary or university level in limited numbers. In cities where upper secondary schools were established these faculties did not serve any real purpose. Those in Paris constituted an exception, since a few dozen students made these faculties the starting point of their professorial careers.¹⁰

Thus, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, universities as we know them today did not exist. Instead, groups of independent faculties crisscrossed cities and filled different needs. The profession of academia was also nonexistent. In medicine and law, there was significant continuity with the *ancien régime*. According to the regulations, university professors had to hold a doctorate before they could be hired. Since, unlike the faculties of arts and science, the faculties of law and medicine had produced a large number of doctors before the Revolution, the new faculties easily found employable instructors. In arts and science, however, the situation was quite different. Under the *ancien régime*, faculties of arts did not offer a diploma beyond the master degree, literally making it impossible to recruit doctors. When they opened in 1808, upper secondary school professors served in these institutions, often teaching conjointly in both types of institutions.¹¹ The Grand Master of the University, a title equivalent to the Minister of Education, directly promoted them to the rank of doctor without prior examination.¹² As the first half of the nineteenth century wore on, the Parisian faculties produced doctors in arts and science, subsequently recruited to teach in the provinces. Despite their titles, these professors continued to bear more resemblance to upper secondary school instructors and had only few students. The bulk of their work consisted in giving numerous public lectures and eloquent generalist compositions intended for the local elite that made up their audience.¹³ Only Parisian professors benefited from a more specialized public, thanks to a dozen or so students from the prestigious *École normale supérieure*.

¹⁰ V. Karady, ‘Lettres et sciences. Effets de structure dans la sélection et la carrière des professeurs de faculté (1810–1914)’, in: R. Ferré e.a. (eds.), *Le personnel de l’enseignement supérieur en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris 1985) 112–127.

¹¹ P. Savoie, ‘Les Enseignants du secondaire, XIXe-début XXe siècle. L’évolution du métier’, in: M. Grandière e.a. (eds.), *L’Innovation dans l’enseignement français, XVIe-XXe siècle* (Nantes/Paris 2004) 129–144.

¹² This practice links up to a tradition that goes back until the seventeenth century and constitutes one of the origins of conferring honorary degrees: P. Dhondt, ‘Pomp and Circumstance at the University. The Origin of the Honorary Degree’, to be published in *European Review of History*.

¹³ B. Nogues, ‘Élèves ou auditeurs? Le public des facultés de lettres et de sciences au XIXe siècle (1808–1878)’, *Histoire de l’éducation* 120 (2008) 77–97.

This situation only began to change substantially in the 1880s, following the introduction of a significant reform that definitively separated secondary and higher education.¹⁴ The doctorate became a discriminating and difficult test.¹⁵ At the same time, enrolment from the bachelor to the doctoral level grew thanks to the establishment of a scholarship system. Professors started to work with assistants and from 1877 onwards, they became responsible for the in-depth study of the material that was presented in large lecture courses, through small group work. In 1896, universities were formed through the merging of each city's individual faculties. A statute allowed these new entities the right to accept gifts and donations and to use these funds to develop specialized programs.¹⁶ However, it would be misleading to conclude that the revived universities had any real autonomy. They remained tightly controlled by the state: almost all of their budget came from the Ministry of Education, every diploma which they conferred had to be nationally recognized and approved by the minister of education. Faculties continued, as before, to be inspected and audited and the ministry received copies of each report. The minister's responsibilities included, moreover, creating new positions for professors and assistants. As being civil servants the state paid their salary directly.

The number of students and faculty rose steadily, reaching about 76,000 students and 5,000 professors by the end of the Second World War. As in many Western European countries, the *Trente Glorieuses* marked a dramatic demographic explosion and the arrival of the baby boomer generation, first in secondary schools and soon in higher education. Between 1960 and 1970 the university student population ballooned from 200,000 to 600,000. The growth of the professoriate concurrently followed the same pattern, swelling from 8,000 to 30,000. In order to face the challenge that the influx of students presented, satellite campuses were established in many cities from 1960 onwards. The Sorbonne became partially decentralized through the creation of new campuses in Paris and the suburbs. Though real change did not come until after the crisis of 1968, the French government understood the need for reform as early as the mid-1960s.

Once in place, the Faure Act of November 1968 came to represent a significant rupture, altering the long-established map of French academia. It signified the creation of new universities in cities that had never had one and the expansion of pre-existing institutions. It also affected the universities' organization, eradicating the faculties. On the one hand, their elimination had the effect that disciplines had to be regrouped into smaller, more flexible structures, such as teaching and research units. On the other hand, it required new universities to be multidisciplinary, though not every discipline needed to be represented.¹⁷ Thus, in this framework, one could no longer have a law school and a school of medicine, but instead universities of arts and law, of science and medicine, of science and law or arts and medicine. Existing universities had to be restructured to conform to the new rules. The reform caused the breakup of larger universities into several different institutions along

¹⁴ J. Verger (ed.), *Histoire des universités en France* (Toulouse 1986).

¹⁵ C. Jolly, 'La thèse de lettres aux XIXe et XXe siècles: les principaux textes législatifs et réglementaires', in: 'Éléments pour une histoire de la thèse', *Mélanges de la Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne* 12 (1993) 113–176. For a specific discipline: G. Lingelbach, *Klio macht Karriere. Die Institutionalisierung der Geschichtswissenschaft in Frankreich und den USA in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 2003).

¹⁶ G. Weisz, *The Emergence of Modern Universities in France, 1863–1914* (Princeton 1983).

¹⁷ A. Prost, *Histoire générale de l'éducation et de l'enseignement en France. Tome 4: L'école et la famille dans une société en mutation (depuis 1930)* (Paris 2004).

various disciplinary lines, mostly decided on political and ideological grounds, rather than scientific ones. The Sorbonne fractured into thirteen separate universities and the university in Bordeaux was split up into four separate institutions. Only the smallest establishments retained their initial unity, Besançon and Reims, for example. The rapid modifications that swept across the academic landscape led to the often politically motivated creation of new entities that inherited parts of their former university's identity. The new name, the reduced number of faculty despite growing enrolment numbers, and often a new location posed critical problems to each university's sense of identity. The new establishments, moreover, did not enjoy more autonomy from the state than their predecessors.

This situation lasted for twenty years until the early 1990s, when a second demographic explosion triggered another transformation. The creation of vocational tracks in addition to the traditional secondary curriculum¹⁸, together with government targets that sought to insure that 80% of French upper secondary school seniors passed the gruelling baccalaureate exam led to the rapid growth of existing universities and the establishment of new ones. This time, changes also affected the relationship between the universities and the Ministry of Education. Each university would now negotiate a four-year contract for its budget, based on institutional projects and objectives. University presidents were granted greater powers.¹⁹ Real change, however, only came to the universities with the passing of the 'University Freedom and Responsibility Act' in 2007. The Act allowed universities full autonomy in terms of their budgets, including direct control over all the salaries. University presidents and their councils were endowed with enhanced powers and given the ability to develop institution-specific policies. This reform has not been in place long enough to assess it properly. Nonetheless, it is clear that the French university system is now in uncharted territory and that these changes will have a great impact on the institutional identities.

A history of the teaching body and of knowledge

The history of these structures has felt the weight of this painfully slow march towards institutional autonomy.²⁰ The effect has been to direct attention to the whole of the system, rather than to its parts. This whole includes the entire teaching body, a corps of civil servants guided by a set of bylaws that clearly delineated the contours of their profession. In order to put the focus on the parts of this whole, the academic disciplines provide a more pertinent analytical framework.

Although universities did not constitute autonomous institutions for the first two centuries following their re-establishment, the same cannot be said of the professoriate. Prior to a reform in the late nineteenth century, the distance dividing university professors and their upper secondary school counterparts in France, particularly in arts and science, remained rather small. However, by the turn of the twentieth century a gap was formed, marking the definitive split between these groups. While they both remained civil servants whose employment and career development continued to be codified by ministerial regulations, university professors managed to establish a system of peer review by the end of the

¹⁸ A new vocational baccalaureate degree was created in 1988.

¹⁹ C. Musselin, 'State/University Relations and How to Change Them: the Case of France and Germany', *European Journal of Education* 32 (1997) no. 2, 145–164.

²⁰ C. Musselin titled her book dedicated to the historical study of this process: *The Long March of French Universities* (New York 2001).

nineteenth century. The professors themselves were responsible for hiring and promoting practitioners through their ranks. They alone participated in their profession's advisory bodies, and they sat on the ministerial councils responsible for changes to their status.²¹ In other words, they enjoyed a much greater degree of autonomy as a profession, than the universities did as institutions.

In fact, professional identities had little to do with the universities where these professors worked. Due to the way in which these groups generally took shape within the academic corps, the institutions were of little interest to their staff. Belonging to a discipline counted above everything else. Being a historian, geologist, or jurist was of much greater importance than being professor at the University of Lyon. The organization of French academia helps to explain why professors tended to place little value on their institutional affiliation. Nothing motivated faculty members to highlight their place of employment. Subject to the same laws, issuing the same diplomas, providing the same training, universities lacked any decision-making authority. In contrast, the different scientific fields developed into individual entities with specific procedures and organizational principles that had a significant impact on scholarship. The resulting loyalty towards the own scientific field certainly restricted interdisciplinary undertakings and slowed the emergence of new disciplines.

The existence of national committees that held tight control over the hiring process elucidates this phenomenon to a large degree. From the 1820s to the 1970s, the minister of education chose candidates for vacant posts on the basis of the recommendation of a centralized organization, the *Conseil supérieur de l'Instruction publique*, and the faculty board at the institution with the vacancy. This dual system might suggest that, through the faculty boards, universities had a direct hand in hiring their professors. However, regulations prescribed that the national committee's view prevailed. The structure of this committee brought the disciplines to the fore: made up of four sections, one per faculty, each subsection was further divided by field. This resulted in each discipline having their national representatives who judged and managed the careers of their co-professionals. Regulations introduced during the interwar period reinforced the authority of these committees by requiring that anyone seeking a university position had to be placed on a national registry of qualified instructors. Candidates submitted their *curriculum vitae* to their field's subsection of the committee. If the panel assessed the applicant to be suitable, they added his/her name to the registry. The *Conseil supérieur de l'Instruction publique* was allowed to recommend names on the list only. Thus, to get a job, a candidate had to gain the approval of the disciplinary committee. Likewise, the committee handled faculty promotions.

In consequence, participating in the national committees that played a crucial role in controlling and regulating each discipline held huge importance for French academics. Nothing and no one escaped from them. Each section exercised absolute decision-making autonomy and over time developed a distinctive working style. This body still exists today, composed of seventy disciplinary sections now referred to as the *Conseil national des universités*. Doctors seeking lectureships and scholars with the necessary credentials to direct research projects as professor, still have to add their name to the registry, as described above.²²

²¹ C. Charle, *La République des universitaires, 1870–1940* (Paris 1994).

²² E. Picard, 'Éléments d'histoire des instances d'évaluation des enseignants chercheurs', in: M.-F. Fave-Bonnet (ed.), *L'évaluation dans l'enseignement supérieur en question* (Paris 2010) 99–114.

During the first decades of the twentieth century the number of candidates on the registry could not exceed the number of vacancies projected for the upcoming year. Limiting the list gave the central authority substantial control over the selection of applicants. Universities could only negotiate how new hires were distributed among them. This has changed a bit over the course of the last thirty years, partly because the number of names on the registry is no longer restricted, creating a glut. Since the 1980s, moreover, universities have gained a greater voice in hiring, as they now select candidates from the registry themselves. In essence, the current practice constitutes a two-round process: the first round, at the national level, creates an applicant pool; in the second round, universities themselves pick their hires from this pool. While the universities' autonomy has been bolstered up in some respect, they do not have an entirely free hand. Firstly, universities cannot directly recruit someone who is not on the national registry; foreign academics, for example, often struggle to meet the qualifications.²³ Secondly, they have to observe division in scientific fields. At least half of the selection committee for a new hire has to come from the vacancy's discipline. On the other hand, the new law allows universities to recruit staff for temporary positions without taking into regard their status as civil servants.²⁴

This organization per discipline has proved to be decisive. It has led to the affirmation of professional identities based first and foremost on the individual's field, with their institutional affiliation playing only a secondary role. On this level, the faculty is the only structure that has retained its significance to some extent. The institution that replaced the universities under Napoleon has become a central reference point: housing the disciplines, dictating the composition of the central committee's subsection, and playing a role in hiring staff. Until their disappearance in 1968, the faculty structured the academic labour market as well. A doctor, for example, could only become a full professor in the same type of faculty that had granted his or her doctorate. A doctor of mathematics who graduated from a faculty of sciences could not apply for a position in economics at a faculty of law.²⁵ As such, the faculty serves as a basic organizing principle, surviving not only the re-establishment of the university at the end of the nineteenth century, but also its own dissolution in 1968. The term is commonly used today, especially in reference to law and medicine. The faculty still remains a more coherent entity than the teaching and research units (UFR) created in 1968 that currently constitute the university. In the scientific disciplines, the faculty is implied in the continuous use of the term 'dean' to indicate, for instance, 'meetings of the directors and deans of the scientific UFR'. Without question, the faculty remains one of the most symbolic markers of the heritage handed down to contemporary universities. In recent years it has found a new life as institutions reconstitute themselves and restructure, as in 2012 when the three universities of Aix-Marseille fused together to create four large faculties: medicine, law, science and arts.

Against this background, it becomes clear why the bulk of the historiography on French universities has focused on the academic disciplines and rarely mentions universities as

²³ The main difficulty for foreign scholars to be qualified is correlated to the language barrier, e.g. when their dissertation is not in French. Moreover, in the faculties of arts, the aggregation is required.

²⁴ E. Picard, 'Les enseignants-chercheurs: une évaluation centralisée. Du comité consultatif de l'enseignement supérieur au CNU (1873–1992)', *Spirales* 49 (2012) 69–82.

²⁵ E. Picard, 'Les universitaires de Mai 68: tensions structurelles et radicalisation syndicale autour de la réforme du Comité consultatif des universités', in: B. Benoit e.a. (ed.), *À chacun son Mai? Le tour de France de mai-juin 1968* (Rennes 2011) 269–280.

institutions, perhaps with an exception for the Sorbonne. Given that Paris has long been the site of scientific production *par excellence* in France and, consequently, has been the place where most academics hope to find employment, it comes as little surprise that it is above all the history of the universities of this city universities that has been written, field by field. Seen as less pertinent than the professoriate to our understanding of changes in the French academic universe, the history of universities as autonomous entities remains neglected.²⁶

The problem of commemoration

This broad survey allows us to better understand the problems universities are confronted with when eager to commemorate their own past. The first difficulty concerns the very definition of each institution's past. In cities with only one university, like Nantes or Avignon, this is a less contentious question. Overall however, we are dealing with much newer universities, (re-)established during the 1960s. Even institutions like the University of Avignon, created long before the Revolution by the Pope in 1303, disappeared in 1793, like all the other universities in France. The University lay dormant until 1963 when it became a satellite of the University of Aix-en-Provence, only acquiring the status of a full university in 1984. The University of Avignon inherited no more than a memory of its pre-Revolutionary namesake. Nonetheless, efforts have been made to create a false sense of unity, transcending the century and a half long gap between the two institutions, as in a recent work titled 'The University of Avignon: Birth and Rebirth, 1303–2003'.²⁷ In result, the publication should be characterized as an illustrated book that superficially documents the history of one university of Avignon after the other, artificially bridging two very different realities, rather than as a proper historical treatment. One could arguably qualify this as a work of propaganda, with the aim to inflate the importance of a minor university on the French academic scene. Though it would be more difficult to characterize André Tulard's 1994 history of the University of Paris as a similar kind of propaganda, in his review of the book, Laurence Brockliss has underlined the specious nature of the text's embrace of the *longue durée*. By inscribing the institution in a linear process, Tulard's reading is teleological at best; at worst, it is totally contrived, relying entirely on a narrow institutional approach.²⁸

Certain universities have to contend not only with their disappearance and subsequent reappearance at the dawn of the nineteenth century, but also with having been integrated into a foreign educational system. Originally founded in 1621 on French territory, the Alsatian University of Strasbourg was closed in 1793 as well, only to be reopened as a group of faculties in 1808 under Napoleon. Following France's defeat in 1870, it passed into German hands. The institution became French again in the aftermath of the First World War. From 1940 to 1945 Germany retook the reigns of its administration. Finally, France reclaimed the university at the end of the Second World War. A significant amount of disorganization accompanied each hand off. After 1870, part of the teaching faculty moved from German-occupied Alsace to Nancy on French territory. In 1940, the university was evacuated to Clermont-Ferrand in the centre of France. In the context of vastly different political and

²⁶ For a discussion on this issue: E. Picard, 'L'histoire de l'enseignement supérieur français: pour une approche globale', *Histoire de l'éducation* 122 (2009) 11–33.

²⁷ B. Bénézet (ed.), *L'Université d'Avignon: naissance et renaissance, 1303–2003* (Arles 2003).

²⁸ L. Brockliss, 'Corporatisme, Église et État: l'Université de Paris, c. 1200–1968', *Histoire de l'éducation* 77 (1998) 35–45.

regulatory frameworks, France and Germany alternately invested significant resources in the development of the University of Strasbourg. This resulted in a fragmented institutional history, with episodes divided between two very different academic traditions with little continuity.²⁹ Additionally, in 1968 the university was split into three distinct institutions and was subsequently fused back into a single entity on the 1st of January 2009. This convoluted history has complicated attempts to write a *longue durée* history of the University of Strasbourg. Most works on the subject tend to take up just one part of the chronology outlined above.³⁰

The breakup of older universities in urban centres following the 1968 Faure Act, including the division of the University of Paris into thirteen separate institutions, created yet another set of problems. With little regard to organizational coherence or completeness, each of the thirteen new universities inherited a fraction of the original institution. To date, no study has scrutinized the logic that dictated how the Sorbonne's history department was divided between six of the new institutions. An examination of the career paths and intellectual occupations of the faculty suggests, however, that politics and scholarly concerns played a central role in this process. The University of Paris, Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris I), for instance, welcomed social historians, while Nanterre (Paris X) specialized in political history and Jussieu (Paris VII) became a centre for non-European history. Not only did the creation of new campuses further the field's fragmentation, it also provoked serious questions about the Sorbonne's heritage. It was relatively easy for the minority of departments that continued to work on the university's historic location (the history departments at Paris I and Paris IV, for instance) to lay claim to the Sorbonne's legacy. Even the label 'Sorbonne' creates an issue. Three Parisian campuses bear the name: Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne), Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle) and Paris IV (Paris-Sorbonne). Today debates over the name's use continue with three newer entities that include it in their designations. Being products of the creation of 'research hubs and institutes of higher learning' and the unification of multiple institutions under one administrative and scientific umbrella, these are: *Sorbonne Universités* (Paris II, IV and VI); *Hauts-Etudes-Sorbonne-Arts et Métiers* (HESAM) (mainly Paris I, the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS), and the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers* (CNA)) ; and *Sorbonne-Paris-Cité* (Paris III, V, VII, XIII).

The paucity of French university historiography extends beyond studies of the university's recent history. Nearly thirty years ago Marie-Madeleine Compère noted the scant number of works on the university under the *ancien régime*.³¹ The ruptures that have punctuated the history of French universities do not explain this dearth on their own (and, moreover, they are not unique to the French case). The very nature of the university system in France also needs to be taken into account. Despite the inherent corporatism of the university, it maintained close ties to the monarchy under the *ancien régime*, ties that were only reinforced after the Revolution in the university's total submission to the centralizing state. For the historian, these structural bonds have important consequences. Not only did they hinder

29 E. Crawford e.a. (eds.), *La science sous influence. L'université de Strasbourg, enjeu des conflits franco-allemands, 1872–1945* (Strasbourg 2005).

30 C. Baechler e.a., *Les Reichsuniversitäten de Strasbourg et Poznan et les résistances universitaires, 1941–1944* (Strasbourg 2005); S. Jonas e.a., *Strasbourg, capitale du Reichsland Alsace-Lorraine et sa nouvelle université (1871–1918)* (Strasbourg 1995).

31 M.-M. Compère, *Les Collèges français (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles), Répertoire*, t. 1, *France du Midi* (Paris 1984).

the emergence of autonomous identities among the university's institutions, but they also had a large impact on the preservation of its archives. Locked in a twin system of control by and financial dependence on the state, French universities corresponded at length with the government. This correspondence was meticulously conserved on two administrative levels: the Ministry of Education and the rectories, intermediary administrative units responsible for regional school districts that included universities. These papers were deposited in the National Archives³² and the departmental archive closest to the rectorate respectively.³³

A number of materials can be found among the files in both types of archives concerning the universities' history as autonomous entities. In addition to correspondence with the administration, the collections contain a great number of briefs addressed to the government. As an ensemble these documents constitute a massive resource, though these materials are frequently catalogued in an incoherent, inconsistent, and non-linear manner. Most universities have failed to develop clear policies concerning their archives, casually allowing the written evidence of their activities to pile up in drawers and basements, randomly turning papers over to their respective departmental archive. The persistent lack of systematic acquisition and conservation policies, despite calls for them from the *Archives de France*, has perpetuated this economy of shortage. Though many papers that were considered central to university operations, viz. the minutes of council meetings, have been well preserved over the years practically everywhere, other sources have simply disappeared. In a few cases, the entire archival stores of certain institutions have been thrown out. Huge trash bins overflowed with large quantities of paper, objects, and equipment when Toulouse's faculty of science moved to a new campus outside the city in the late 1960s, scrubbing its records clean. Redrawn several times over the course of the twentieth century, the Sorbonne's blueprints and architectural schematics – documents that would have well served architects renovating the interior – are nowhere to be found. The search for a particular university's archives begins to take on the allure of a police investigation.³⁴

Contending with these sorts of archives, the rare researcher who has undertaken the history of a particular university has generally limited his or her study to a particular faculty whose papers were long ago deposited in the departmental archives. In result there exist contemporary history accounts of a few law faculties – Toulouse, Strasbourg, and Bordeaux, for example – and of a few medical schools like Montpellier.³⁵ Science faculties benefitted from the development of science studies in the 1970s and the interest of young American researchers in French history. Works like Mary-Jo Nye's dissertation, *Science in the Provinces*, have brought attention to several provincial universities. The notion of an internal archival service for each university is rather recent, only progressing slowly and gradually over the course of the last decade, against universities' reluctance to create archival positions on their staff. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the small University of Mulhouse was the first to hire such an archivist. Today, major universities, including the descendants of the Sorbonne, still do not have professional archivists. Conversely, the well-developed institutional *esprit de corps* at the *Grandes écoles*, the other half of France's higher education system, has

³² Série F 17 in the *Archives nationales* in Paris.

³³ Archives des rectorats, located in the 'Archives départementales'.

³⁴ E. Picard, 'Les archives de l'enseignement supérieur français à l'époque contemporaine: un chantier d'avenir?', in: L. Rollet (ed.), *Mémoire et culture matérielle de l'Université* (Nancy 2008) 51–62.

³⁵ For example: M. Malherbe, *La faculté de droit de Bordeaux, 1870–1970* (Bordeaux 1996); H. Bonnet, *La faculté de médecine de Montpellier* (Montpellier 1992).

helped to ensure the thorough conservation of these institutions' archives and, by extension, the production of historical works of high quality.³⁶

From their organizational structure and history to their archives, a multitude of factors makes it difficult to write the history of French universities as individual institutions. Works tend, then, to be limited to isolated case studies that are difficult to synthesize into a cohesive survey of French academia. This does not stop French universities, however, from participating in commemorative practices, even when they entail the production of constructed or evasive narratives. As mentioned above, the most common practice among smaller, provincial universities consists in reviving a past that, if not prestigious, at least goes back a long time. Avignon, Poitiers, Perpignan are just a few examples of universities that assert a centuries-long history, while ignoring any gaps.³⁷ This sort of illusionary historical unity based on institutional concerns allows such establishments to celebrate their five or seven-hundredth anniversary. The commemoration of institutions created by the Faure Act of 1968, which dissolved large, urban universities into smaller ones, results in an even more precarious situation. Given that the initial division cut across the original faculties, none of these universities can escape their shared past. The Faure Act required universities to be multidisciplinary, leading in most cases to the division of faculties into a number of smaller entities. Each university retained a small fragment of its former faculty's memory. The often-contentious politics behind the partitioning meant that the institutional memories inherited by each university tended to be antagonistic, hampering any attempt to write a unanimously agreed-upon history.

Thus, in a certain sense, a silence takes hold. Universities bearing the name 'Sorbonne' (Paris IV-Sorbonne or Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne) have been reluctant to participate in commemorations underscoring that they are only a part of the glorious whole. Institutions exiled from the Sorbonne's historic campus, sometimes from Paris itself, had to develop a new identity. The forty years that have passed since their foundation have become the object of very different commemorative celebrations, beginning with the date of their establishment. On certain campuses, commemorations reference 1968, marking the political decision to subdivide the Sorbonne. Others have chosen to embrace the year that the administration recognized their status as separate institutions, usually 1970 or 1971. Some assert their early existence as annexes of the Sorbonne as part of their own history. Located in the southern suburbs of Paris, a rural area at the time of its foundation, this is the case for the University of Orsay. Created in 1957 to relieve overcrowding in the faculty of science's facilities, this campus remained an extension of the Sorbonne until 1970. Nevertheless, the institution asserted its identity as the legitimate heir of the Parisian faculty of sciences by celebrating its forty-year anniversary in 1997.³⁸

Anniversaries become controversial since they imply that a university constitutes an organic, institutional, and, to some extent, a historic entity worthy of being remembered. They give the institution life. Paradoxically and problematically, however, when French

36 P. Hummel e.a., *Pour une histoire de l'école normale: sources d'archives* (Paris 1995); N. Bayle e.a., 'Le nouveau classement thématique des archives de l'école polytechnique', *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 1 (1985) 73–82.

37 Bénézet, *L'Université d'Avignon* (n. 27); *Université de Poitiers. 550e anniversaire* (Poitiers 1983); P. Carmignani (ed.), *L'université de Perpignan, tradition humaniste et modernité scientifique, de 1350 à 2000* (Perpignan 2001).

38 P. Brouzeng e.a., *Orsay, un jardin pour la science* (Orsay 2005).

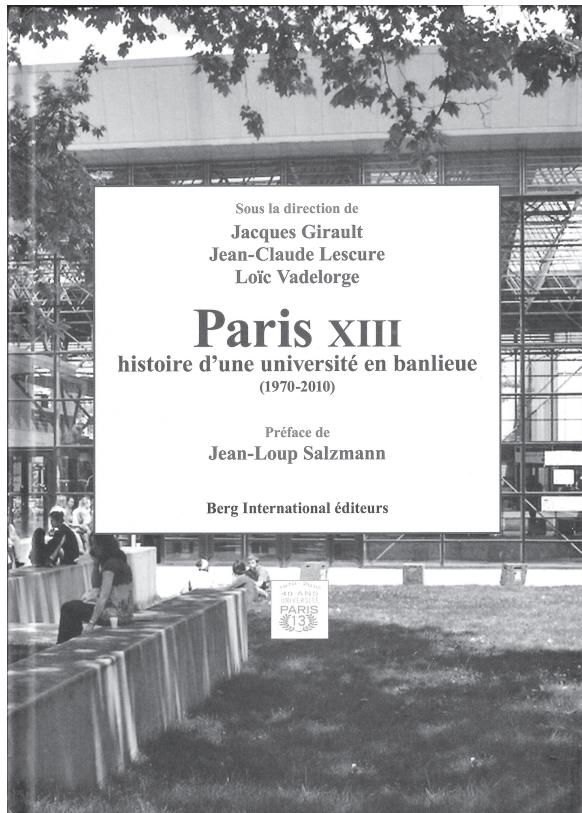


Fig. 1: Cover of J. Girault e.a. (eds.), *Paris XIII. Histoire d'une université en banlieue* (Paris 2012).

universities commemorate anniversaries and thereby legitimate their individual existence, they are forced to draw attention to the fact that they are only one part of a larger whole. At times it is more attractive to see an institution as part of an older, more prestigious whole rather than a freestanding, isolated institution, devoid of history. This is the conundrum that confronts the universities on the outskirts of Paris. Often in impoverished neighbourhoods (Nanterre was literally built in a slum), with poor public transport service, and a far less privileged student body than in Paris, suburban universities do not have the best image. When planning for a conference intended to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Paris XIII, located in the northern suburbs, the scientific committee debated over two titles: 'The University in the Suburbs' or 'A Suburban University'.³⁹ The former was chosen as it placed the emphasis on the term 'University,' while the latter seemed to imply that the university was second-rate. Beyond the semantic debate, the conference served as an occasion for the institution – often perceived as the least prestigious of the Parisian universities – to

³⁹ [Translator's note] Beyond its generic meaning: suburb, 'banlieue' has a further implication in French, evoking the emotionally charged image of dysfunctional public housing, poverty, crime, and social decay. That could be translated as 'ghetto' in English. In essence, what Anglophone readers might more readily identify with the 'inner city'.

underscore its uniqueness and above all its ‘excellence’.⁴⁰ Memorialisation served to legitimize and affirm the university.

In more ambiguous cases, the process has been tactical. Founded in 1964, the University of Nanterre has sought to commemorate its place as the first university, outside the Sorbonne, to specialize in the humanities and as an institution that fostered important developments in disciplines like sociology and political history. At the same time, the revolt of 1968 began at Nanterre and during the 1970s it became the emblem of ‘student unrest’. Since its foundation, the University of Nanterre has publicly celebrated a number of anniversaries: its tenth, twenty-fifth, thirtieth, and most recently its fortieth. Yet on the whole they have remained modest celebrations, generally consisting of photography exhibits and a few lectures, without delving into the university’s archives.

In the coming months the archival section of the Rectory of Paris (which is responsible for the Parisian universities) will host a series of celebrations culminating in a colloquium and a large exhibit in the Sorbonne’s entirely renovated chapel. A number of conferences have been scheduled during the run-up to the event. The first, on university archives, took place in June 2011. In hopes of exciting the interest of young scholars, the conference offered more of an agenda for research than an inventory of the rare works on the subject. This centralized initiative aims to combat the weak links between Parisian universities, bringing the region a coherence, which it has lacked the last forty years, and allowing for collective action. At the same time, the initiative seeks to foster collaborative scholarship through the development of networks of researchers, particularly of researchers interested in the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the post-1968 universities. Hopefully these projects will encourage interest in the history of universities and provide the subject with a heightened level of visibility.

Outside of Paris things are different. A vibrant initiative has developed around the scientific hub at Nancy and has produced a wealth of studies on that university.⁴¹ This approach continues work which began in the 1990s and that seeks to analyze the historical relationship between universities and their regions, a subject recently brought back into the limelight by a national program called *GéoScience*. A number of universities, moreover, have taken a stab at local history, generally through conferences that pull unusual, yet precise, contributions together in an effort to clarify local historical particularities: the professoriate under the Third Republic, the main stages of university re-establishment, organization of instruction within a specific discipline. At the moment, however, the only systematic work being carried out deals with law schools, coordinated by a team of legal historians.⁴²

A fundamental problem remains, plaguing all of these efforts. The poverty of the historiography concerning the French university as an institution prevents us from putting case studies into perspective. This literature, as previously mentioned, is fragmentary and scattered. The lack of a strong interest in the history of French higher education, particular the history of universities, has left this field largely uncultivated. Thus, we have come full circle. One can only hope that these commemorative events will inspire a group of researchers to tackle this crucial historical problem head on and to carve out a place for the history of French universities at international congresses on the history of higher education.

⁴⁰ Jacques Girault e.a. (eds.), *Paris XIII. Histoire d’une université en banlieue* (Paris 2012).

⁴¹ L. Rollet, ‘Peut-on faire l’histoire des pôles scientifiques?’, *Histoire de l’éducation* 122 (2009) 93–113.

⁴² For exemple, numerous issues of *Revue d’histoire des Facultés de droit et de la science juridique*.