

Student Protests Block University Changes

Government-supported plans to allow French universities to charge varied fees and admit students on a selective basis have been shelved because of strong opposition

LAST month's student demonstrations here left many foreign observers perplexed. How, it was frequently asked, could relatively moderate proposals to let universities vary their enrollment fees between \$60 to \$120 a year, exercise greater discretion over which students they accept, and add their names to the degrees they award, have led to violent demonstrations? One student died during the demonstrations and several were seriously injured. The uproar became a major political crisis for Prime Minister Jacques Chirac which forced him to withdraw the government's proposals, and led to the resignation of the minister for higher education and research, Alain Devaquet.

The paradox is partially explained by the fact that each of the points being disputed by the students is symptomatic of a deeper disagreement over the social implications of the structural changes in the university system.

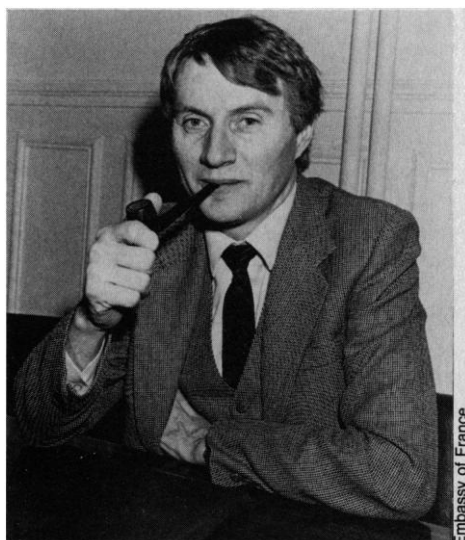
The slogan "non au Reaganisme à la Française" seen on one student's banner illustrated a common theme in the protests: a rejection of the idea that some institutions are educationally better than others and that students should be selected on the basis of competition. Currently, French high school graduates have a right to enroll in any university they wish. French students see competitive admissions as a form of discrimination, for instance. They vehemently oppose changes that would make French policies more like American ones.

University science departments have been directly implicated in this conflict. The changes against which the students were protesting reflect a shift in the focus of government concern from the social forms of higher education to its intellectual content, a shift which has been largely determined by pressures to improve the performance of university science and technology departments.

Some of the proposed changes to which the students protested so vociferously are already the unofficially accepted practice in

many science departments throughout the country. For example, although selection is not supposed to be practiced, certain science universities only accept students who have taken particular courses in high school; others (equally unofficially, and counter to government policy) already demand higher enrollment fees from science students than liberal arts students.

Many university scientists in France de-



Alain Devaquet had mixed feelings about the reforms he proposed.

fend such practices. But they argue that by attempting to introduce them explicitly through legislation in an area as sensitive to the French as education, the government was courting trouble. "If you want to achieve real change in this country, you have to do it quietly," says one prominent member of the previous administration. "We have to have selection, for example, but it must be unofficial."

This dual reality applies to two separate—although closely allied—aspects of science in French universities—namely how to achieve greater geographical distribution and provide universities with more autonomy.

The first is the dominant position of universities and laboratories in the area around Paris over those in the rest of France. Statistics alone support the argument that, particularly as a result of the rapid postwar expansion of government support for research, a larger amount of science takes place around Paris compared to the regional centers.

Although the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), for example, has in recent years been making a deliberate effort to decentralize its activities, the proportion of its 24,000 scientists and technicians employed in the Paris region remained 54.3% in 1984 (compared to 57.8% in 1978). In some individual fields, such as mathematics, the concentration near Paris is even greater.

Many provincial universities, however, have recently been able to draw on strong regional pressures to challenge the dominance of Paris in a growing number of research fields. These pressures have been both political and industrial, because strong university research departments are seen as a stimulus to the growth of science-based industries which many regions have adopted as the main hope for future growth.

As a result, the growing reputation of universities such as Strasbourg in chemistry, Grenoble in physics and mathematics, or Toulouse in advanced computers and artificial intelligence, means they have become as attractive to both students and research workers as the Paris universities, resurrecting the scientific reputations which many of the regions enjoyed in the nineteenth century but had subsequently lost.

"Twenty years ago, it was considered an anomaly that needed explanation why a bright chemist should choose to remain here rather than go to Paris," says Guy Ourisson, professor of chemistry and a former president of the University of Strasbourg. "Now it is accepted," he says. In a significant reversal of traditional roles, it is now some of the Paris chemistry departments that are said to be complaining about the lack of research funding.

Politicians on both right and left, as well as a growing number of scientists themselves, agree that the movement of scientific activities away from Paris to the provinces is likely to accelerate. There are frequent complaints from university scientists about the importance of the role played by the state in determining how universities are run, and the resulting administrative—rather than scientific—centralism.

Both left and right are split on this issue, some suggesting that universities should be given substantially more freedom to maneuver, others arguing that the state's presence is necessary to ensure that both the teaching

and research efforts of universities remain closely linked to national objectives.

Education minister Devaquet himself fell victim to just such a split within the ranks of the conservative coalition. As a member of the Gaullist party, the *Rassemblement pour la République*, as well as a successful scientist who rose from humble social origins through a series of state-supported institutions (including the CNRS), he had made it clear that he saw little need to significantly disengage the state either from universities or from research.

Indeed Devaquet has virtually admitted that he did not feel that a new university reform law was needed, and that he had been pushed into it by the more militant right-wing opponents of university legislation that was introduced 2 years ago by the former socialist government. The bill which he submitted to Parliament attempted to find a middle way between the socialist's legislation and its critics.

As a result, however, Devaquet was required to spend much energy defending a relatively moderate set of proposals against people on the right demanding more radical action, and he paid insufficient attention to potential criticism from the left, leaving the government vulnerable to a tidal wave of student protest that no one had anticipated.

Devaquet's lack of enthusiasm for the bill which he had formally authored was widely shared in university circles. One of the reasons for its defeat was the support given to the students by the Committee of University Presidents, most of whom have only just finished putting into operation the new rules introduced by the socialist government, and had no stomach for another major upheaval, even though they approved a substantial amount of its content.

Their ambivalence undermines the proposition that French universities are more strongly centralized than those in other countries. Centralization is undoubtedly a powerful force, reflected in the fact that all capital and equipment costs and professors' salaries are paid directly by the Ministry of Education in Paris. Yet on average over one half of each university's operating expenses come from other sources—including research contracts negotiated directly between individual research workers and the CNRS—already giving them a certain degree of autonomy.

As an illustration of this independence, sociologists of science complain that universities are reluctant to provide Paris administrators with a full overview of their activities, and that, paradoxically, obtaining data on the national university research effort is more difficult than in more decentralized countries such as the United States. "The



Student protesters by the thousands marched in Paris.

data exist, but they are very difficult to get hold of," says Bruno Latour of the *Ecole des Mines* in Paris.

It is a similar situation within the CNRS, which is directly responsible for a large proportion of the research carried out in universities. Although broad research directions are laid down by the central administration in Paris, detailed decisions on the allocation of grants are made by the 42 disciplinary committees of the CNRS's National Committee, each of which jealously guards its independence.

To the previous socialist government, the main problem that this caused was a fragmentation of effort, both at a national and a local level. Fragmentation is of less concern to the present Chirac government. Indeed one of its proposals for university reform was to give independent status to individual teaching and research units within a university. Supporters of this move argue that it would increase flexibility; critics claim it would result in a return to the pre-1968 faculty system which would, says former CNRS director Pierre Papon, be "a disaster."

The issue posed by each solution is how the results of both teaching and research should be assessed. The emphasis on evaluation is relatively new. The present conservative government's approach to this has been to apply a marketplace approach, giving universities greater incentives to compete with one another for both students and research funds by raising the cost of failure.

In practice, this approach is already gaining ground. At the Technological University of Compiègne, an experimental institution

set up in the early 1970s, only one applicant in eleven is accepted for the range of science and engineering courses offered, and all research proposals—organized by project rather than by discipline—are carefully scrutinized by a scientific council.

The idea of evaluation and selection, however, runs directly counter to a long tradition of respect for equal rights in France's political culture. It is seen as discrimination. It was no coincidence, for example, that many of the leaders of the recent student protests have also been closely involved in a nationwide antiracist movement, *SOS Racisme*.

Faced with strongly held but conflicting principles, the general reaction in France is to take a pragmatic approach. Guy Denilou, the president of Compiègne, says that his university thrives, despite its unconventional practices, "because people accept what we do"; André Staropoli of the National Committee on Evaluation argues that "all those who believe you can reform the French system merely by laws and reasoning are making a serious mistake."

Ironically, therefore, the government's decision to withdraw its bill may make it easier for universities to achieve precisely the goals that Devaquet was seeking, particularly if—as is being rumored in Paris—a decision is made not to rigorously apply the provisions of the previous socialist legislation. "A legal vacuum may for some universities prove an important step towards achieving real autonomy," says Ourisson at Strasbourg. The logic may be odd; but in France, that will not stop it from happening. ■

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