Student activism in France

TRENTO NOV 8 2018
Summary

- Part I: a brief history of student activism in France
- Part II: student participation nowadays
- Part III: what happened last year??
Student dialogue in 1968
DIALOGUE IN 2018?
Montpellier faculty of law
1ST PART / A SHORT HISTORY OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN FRANCE

- During the 19th century development of student associations at city level with a strong local patriotism dimension in an elitist context.

- 1907 creation of a national organisation: mirror of French university structure: a number of faculties managed from the central government.

- Only after 1st WW and the return to the benches of war veterans: Unef starts developing directly or lobbying for the development of services to students: medical services, restauration, and student housing.

- Is active in the creation of the CNOUS: national structure which today still manages student housing and restauration.
From WW 2 to MAY 68

- During the war the UNEF stays mostly silent
- Immediately after WW2 and in a context of political unrest under the influence of veteran resistance fighters that come back to the university the UNEF takes a very political stand
- 1946 the Grenoble Charter : art 1 the student is a young workingman
- 1948 : creation of student social security system( MNEF ) managed by student organisations
- From then on to Algeria war the student union is very close to the political powers
With the Algeria war starts a movement of division between a corporatist view of student activism and a political one that is enhanced by the fact that the corporatist wing is, at the time, quite close to the right and Algérie Française, the political side being extremely active against colonialism, torture etc…/the draft being a strong incentive.

The coming to power of General de Gaulle will see the explosion of the movement:

- On one side, corporatist organisations close to the government.
- On the other, the political organisation (UNEF) sees a number of its members create small leftist groups.
Mai 1968

- Much wider scope than students
- But initiated in universities: revolt against a stifled society and in the framework of the massification of higher education: students revolt against the power of « mandarins »

Follow up: loi Faure nov 1968

- Creates universities by regrouping faculties: faculties don’t exist anymore and are replaced by UFR: training and research units (UFR)
- For the first time universities are managed by elected councils representing academic and non academic staff and .. Students
- And « presidents » are elected: previously the « recteur » nominated by the government was the head of the faculties ..
First half of a period going from 1970 to the beginning of the 90 ies sees a split between those who are ready to participate in the councils created by the loi Faure which creates « real » universities and those who ( on the extreme left ) refuse to participate at all and are only on the grounds of political fight.

The beginning of the 90 ies sees the progressive rise of the FAGE : an organisation that regroups students associations and takes an apolitical stand.

From the 90 ies to today a pendulum motion between political stand ( UNEF ) regularly revived by big strikes ( 1995 ,2006, 2009 ) and associative movements regrouped in the Fage.
PART II: student participation in governance
French way ...
Or customers?
Student participation in university governance

- The loi Faure and the following reforms enhance student participation to university governance
  - With the loi Faure: students participate in the election of the president
  - 2001: a circular encourages the development of student initiatives
  - In 2007 the creation of a student vice president
    - Elected by the academic council
    - Its role is not really defined and will depend on each university
      - Usually will play a role in the interaction between academic life and the students more or less formal
      - In some rare cases will participate in the collective governance as organised in regular bureau meetings
    - Being elected by the academic council is not a member of the board
In the 70’s after the Loi Faure the rate of participation was between 50 and 70 percent

Today around 10 % vote

This low rate of participation can be the consequence of 2 positioning

- The university is a consumer product like any other
- Defiance towards any political participation in the institutional life considered as an implicit approval of the system

Both are probably true ..
If last year's election to the CNOUS (French organisation in charge of student housing and restauration) can be considered as an indication:

- With around 8% participation rate
- The FAGE (association that claims to host a number of local organisations aiming to develop services to students – center left) is clearly the winner.
- The UNEF (left) takes second place: a new phenomenon.
- The UNI (close to the conservative forces): a good third.

Up to now, the efforts of the extreme right to penetrate universities have failed even if we can observe the development of extreme right activism.
Contrary to some north european countries, student associations don’t play an important role in student’s campus life: housing and restauration are since the 30 ies ensured by a national public body (CNOUS with CROUS at regional level), student social security although initiated by student organisations is now in the hand of the national security system (MNEF scandal).

But student associative life is vigorous and encouraged by the government..

Eg: more than 90 associations in Toulouse Capitole
25 % of the students are active in associative life (about the same rate as the general population)
Organising student leisure is just one of them
Associative life

different subjects
  humanitarian
  cultural
  campus life
  environment
  social etc…
Recognition of student associative life is recent

- 2001 circular: recognises and encourages student associative activities, creates a fund whose use is co-managed with student associations..

- But only in 2017 recognition of student commitment through ECTS has been generalised by decree.

- Up to this date, a number of higher education institutions recognised student commitment but not all of them or when they did it was not always on a rationalised basis.

- The 2017 decree makes the definition of systems of recognition compulsory even if it is up to the institutions to define such a system.
Contrast

- A vigorous associative life
- A low rate of participation in university election
- And a very variable active participation in university governance

- A reflection of « real life » in France
Part III Another type of participation?
What happened last year
Last year’s events

- 2 taboos in french university policies: selection and fees
  - Selection: dual system in France:
    - Universities: if you have the Baccalaureat you could enter any curriculum
    - Grandes Ecoles: heavily selective system:
    - When you have selective curricula in a university (it happens) we can observe a high number of applications
  - Selection is the word you don’t say
  - Fees are equally taboo although the number of students in paying private schools has risen in the past few years
The government has chosen to tackle the selection taboo without saying it

- Our minister has spent a lot of time on radio and TV explaining that the loi « orientation et réussite des étudiants » is not a new selective entry system. When in fact it does introduce selection.

- Without going into details it is interesting to note that even the FAGE student organisation which approves the reform, has been very careful in not uttering the S word.

- And the UNEF has strongly opposed the new law. But after being run over on its left by a new and very radical leftist phenomenon.
Events during the 2017-2018 year

- A spectacular outbreak of violence but limited to humanities, psychology, sociology disciplines: means that humanities universities were mostly closed and couldn’t function during several weeks or several months (Jean Jaurès in Toulouse) the trauma of previous strikes in 1986 making police action very difficult.

- And some pluridisciplinary universities saw a « guerrilla » type activism mostly directed at the administration: Strasbourg, Grenoble, others saw the administrative buildings either occupied or blocked with a cat and mouse game..aimed at preventing the administration to function. In at least one case, wages couldn’t be paid..
But no spreading: ex in Toulouse only Jean Jaures was concerned. Neither the scientific nor the law and economics university saw any student movement.
A new phenomenon

- The very restricted number of students activist considered in relation to their capacity to disturb
- The emergence of some extreme right activists (Montpellier for eg: existed in the 70 ies but had declined)
- The lack of echo in the universities … if not in the general press
- The attacks against bureaucracy .. Relayed if not created by some academics .. Relates to a much wider phenomenon described by Graeber ..
Student activism a reflection of the socio-political environment?

- A general disenchantment with traditional political action
- Combined with a consumerist attitude to studies
- And with a violent activist minority
- And the emergence of extreme right movements

- Rings a bell??