Crisis and excellence: how the French higher education system is being polarized and commodified

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joint work with
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1. Commodification and differentiation

2. Social polarization
Quantification and commodification

D. Harvey, 2003, p. 141

capitalism can [...] make use of some pre-existing outside [...] some sector within capitalism - such as education - that has not been proletarianised.

Marx, *The capital* (I), chap 3.1

It is not money that renders commodities commensurable. Just the contrary. It is because all commodities, as values, are realised human labour, and therefore commensurable, that their values can be measured by one and the same special commodity, and the latter be converted into the common measure of their values, i.e., into money.
Quantification and commodification

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For education to be a tradable service, exchangeable on a market against money, academic labour must be « abstracted », i.e. be expressed as commensurable with any other labour.
Quantification (Desrosières, 1993)

To quantify = to agree on and then to measure

Quantification relies on (ideological, technical, legal) devices that provide an « objective » support to a new, quantitative, expression of some social activity, here academic labour.

Reputation → excellence (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2015; Espeland & Sauder, 2009)

- **Reputation**: a qualitative, subjective and situated characterisation of a university
- **Excellence**: an objective, quantitative, one-fit-all evaluation of a university
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Rankings, and in particular the ARWU (Shanghai) are such devices, together with h-index and other quantitative indicators used to manage the sector (REF in the UK, HCERES in France). Their are performative when enforced by the authorities.
The « Shanghai ranking »
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

Successive French HE ministers refer to the ARWU as biased but unavoidable: an external, objective, requirement for change.

Valérie Pécresse, (11 juillet 2007)

le classement de Shanghai [est] certes critiquable mais [...] les étudiants américains [...] regardent ce classement. C’est la mondialisation. On ne peut s’en abstraire et nous devons donc gagner des places, ce qui n’est pas contraire à l’exigence d’excellence de l’université française.

Geneviève Fioraso (15 août 2015)

les critères qui sont utilisés pour le classement de Shanghai sont des critères absolument partiels [...] malgré toutes ces réserves [...] la France ne s’en sort pas si mal [et] grignote des places.
Engagements de l’IDEX Paris-Saclay :

Projet 2011 : Construire « une université de recherche de classe mondiale qui apparaît en bonne place dans les principaux classements internationaux. »

Rapport d’évaluation IDEX 2016 :

Tous les jalons affichés ont été atteints et parfois dépassés :

... à l’exception de l’engagement de faire classer l’Université Paris-Saclay un an après sa création (prévue initialement le 1er janvier 2014)

Vers le classement de l’Université Paris-Saclay :

fusion obligatoire ?

Classement ARWU 2015 : estimation

1. Les établissements ESR de Paris-Saclay et leurs UMR, sans les UPR des organismes de recherche

   méthode ARWU pour identifier les affiliations PUB / HiCi (WoS)  

   26

   (PSL*: 25)

2. Tous les laboratoires de la ComUE, UMR et UPR

   méthode ARWU pour identifier les affiliations PUB / HiCi (WoS)  

   21

3. Tous les laboratoires de la ComUE, UMR et UPR

   repérage manuel approfondi des affiliations PUB / HiCi (WoS)

   HiCi : 12  ➔ 14
   PUB : 8 500 ➔ 9 786

   18
### Academic Ranking of World Universities 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Rank</th>
<th>Institution*</th>
<th>By location</th>
<th>National/Regional Rank</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
<th>Score on Alumni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Pierre and Marie Curie University - Paris 6</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>University of Paris-Sud (Paris 11)</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Ecole Normale Superieure - Paris</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>Aix Marseille University</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>University of Strasbourg</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>University Paris Diderot - Paris 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>Université Grenoble Alpes</td>
<td></td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>University of Bordeaux</td>
<td></td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>University of Paris Descartes (Paris 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
French universities, initially mid-table, have been merging and climbing up.
Some French universities, initially mid-table, have been merging and climbing up.
Quantification and differentiation

Why did ARWU took so much importance?

Permanent reforms during the period, with more responsibilities for universities presidents, without clear and stable goals. ARWU is a clear aim, impacted by local administrative changes. And a few huge competitive grants (a billion € each).

⇒ ARWU as evidence of excellence.
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Market segmentation

The ranking sets out a hierarchy, defines a single axis of quality and a population (here the « world universities »):

1200 HEI assessed world wide, 500 ranked; in France, 33 among 142.
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1200 HEI assessed world wide, 500 ranked; in France, 33 among 142.
⇒ production of a category, reification of excellence and sets a quantitative framework for unidimensional competition.
Quantification and differentiation

Differentiation as commodification

Universities’ adoption of enterprises’ features can be better understood as a differentiated process, since enterprises are themselves differentiated, in particular on the ability to lead the innovation process.

**Enhanced University** leading a innovation circuit. e.g. Harvard, ARWU archetype

**Technological University** subordinate participation to innovation circuits. Ranked by ARWU.

**Simple University** pushed out from innovation circuits. Not ranked by ARWU.

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1. Commodification and differentiation

2. Social polarization
   - Methodology
   - Social polarization of HEI
Whose universities?²

**Students enrolment database (2009-2017)**

- universities (and « grandes écoles »),
- high school majors (5), social grant level (9), PCS (10+2)

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Dimension reduction : principal component analysis
A single synthetic axis gathers 36\% of the information contained in the 26 variables on the economic, social and educational background of the student bodies.
A weaker second axis opposes STEM to humanities.

Universities are very differentiated along the horizontal axis (elitist on the left, popular on the right).
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Market segmentation: ARWU ranks universities that are already elitist.
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Rankings are a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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Since the publication of ARWU, polarization has been rising.
The French higher education is increasingly polarized

- ARWU helped to reform and reshaped higher education.
- Social polarization deepens and lead to segmentation.
- overlaid with a research insensitivity differentiation through concentrate public funding.

Simple universities have twice as much working class students, most of students from vocational schools and more women than Technological universities. They assume most of the bachelor massification burden ⇒ funding per student decreases rapidly.

French Technological universities are increasingly commodified

- They opt out of the massification dynamic of the bachelor.
- They develop international masters, with rising tuition fees.
- They are strongly involved in global value chains trough innovation circuits.
Thanks!