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The normative effects of higher education policy in France☆

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ABSTRACT

This student survey was a response to the French youth unrest in 2005 and 2006. It considers the degree to which French higher and secondary education institutions create social cohesion. Focusing on three distinct higher-education institutions: *L'institut d'études politiques de Paris* (Sciences Po), *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Paris 8, and a *lycée* in the outskirts of Paris, it asks students their opinions on pressing national issues. It reflects on how the French education system was developed to create French citizens and the post-war use of quotas created for Algerians in the employment and education sectors. It draws comparisons with the controversial 2001 separate-admissions policy at Sciences Po and the more recent agenda to institute 30% set-asides for higher-education scholarship students.

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1. Introduction

This national identity student survey was instigated by the youth unrest that took place in the outskirts of Paris in the fall of 2005 and the student uprising in the spring of 2006. Gathering data to consider the effects of French educational policies on students' sense of French identity began in January 2006 and continued through June 2007. Both during and after the unrest, there was discussion about the role of France's republican values in shaping the nation's youth and how French secondary and higher education systems could act as agents of socialization (Schnapper, Pascale, & Emmanuel, 2003). Politicians, educators, and others questioned the extent to which French educational institutions were capable of socializing immigrant and non-immigrant students in addition to how the nation-state could create equal access to education for Muslim[1] and other minority students. The 1st article of the 1958 French Constitution has been interpreted to mean that the Republic assures equality before the law of all citizens without distinction of origin or race; it is not only forbidden to discriminate, but also to make distinctions that give advantage to certain categories. The republican ideal is that all citizens are French and nothing else. In short, the privileges bestowed by French citizenship override identification with ethnicity or religious groups and explicate that difference does not exist in the public sphere – thus French citizens should be afforded the same opportunities and rights. The Jules Ferry education laws of 1881–1884 guaranteed free, compulsory, and secular primary education for all French citizens, transforming the republican ideal into an institution. In 1889, the French citizenship law was passed mainly to exert control over immigrants already living in France (Schain, 2008). The late 19th century secularization of schools resulted in the 20th century teachings of the French nation-state becoming supreme whereby "nos ancestres, les Gaulois" was a unifying construct along with other icons such as the *tricolor*

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[1] France's Muslim population is approximately 10% and is the largest in Europe.

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and the *Marseillaise*. These artifacts and narratives embody the French Republican, i.e., Jacobin, ideal. The notion of secularism or *laïcité*, was further promoted in 1905 by a law stating that ''The Republic neither recognizes, nor salaries, nor subsidizes any religion'' (Suleiman, 2005). This made France a secular state, and, as stated above, the 1958 Constitution made it illegal for the census to compile data concerning race, ethnicity, or religion. French public institutions have insisted ''that immigrants will conform to French cultural and legal norms, and that there is an acceptance of a common public space that is separate from religious faith and expression.''[2] After World War II, the French social model of solidarity and fraternity was enhanced by the creation of the French welfare state – a construct supported by French employees, labor unions, and education systems and now under attack by the French legislature (Schain, 2008). With increased rates of immigration, in the late 20th and early 21st century, tensions arose regarding the French nation-state's imperative to create social cohesion via assimilation policies in the educational sphere and the insistence of minorities that the state recognize difference. In relation to France's highly selective *grandes écoles*, the question is whether or not they are more adaptable to France's changing demographics and needs (Vaughan in Howorth & Cerny, 1981). The student survey was a means of considering these questions.

2. A brief history of French set-aside policies

Between 1956 and 1962, when France was entrenched in the Algerian War, French officials created policies that benefited Algerian Muslims in both the French *métropole* and Algeria. Specifically, public sector jobs in Algeria utilized a quota system (starting at 10% and increasing to 70%) which ensured that Algerian Muslims acquire positions. In 1958, President Charles de Gaulle appropriated the initiative for Algerian Muslims living within the hexagon and issued decrees whereby Algerians would be hired in such sectors as the legislature and civil service. There was also the creation of a quota system for 130 Algerian students at the highly selective National School of Administration[3] (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration* or ''ENA'') between 1959 and 1961. These initiatives were undertaken to quell insurrection (Shepard, 2006). The 1960 French Parliament expanded the set-aside policies which de Gaulle had created while invoking ''exceptional powers'' – a further means of curtailing the Algerian Revolution – to all levels of the military.[4] At present, France provides language classes in standardized French for immigrants and minority populations.[5]

Over the past twenty-five years, the French nation-state has created inclusive education policies at both the secondary and higher education levels. Subsequent to the tumultuous 1968 student riots, the centralized Parisian university system was broken into 14 separate institutions while the *grandes écoles* were left intact (Fomerand, 1975). Broadly speaking, *grandes écoles* afford access to careers at the pinnacle of French government, politics, and industry. Although Napoleon is often credited with their creation, some institutions existed before the Revolution and were known as *écoles spéciales* (Vaughan in Howorth & Cerny, 1981). Fundamentally, *grandes écoles* were designed to supply the French government with trained specialists selected according to demanding criteria. The most prestigious *grandes écoles* were concentrated on the areas of teaching, science, and the military. Napoleon expanded upon the construct and sought to create institutions that would create an administrative corps that was both efficient and useful. ''To instruct is secondary, the main thing is to train and to do so according to the pattern which suits the State.''[6] The 1808 Convention decreed the creation of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* or ''Sup'' (part of the student sample) as a teacher-training institution. Napoleon seized control of the school in 1813 and mandated that it would henceforth be impossible to become a teacher without attending one of the *écoles normales*. The rigorous *normalien* training in humanities and science spawned elites that in addition to forming the teaching corps, formalized French educational policy and produced some of the most illustrious French intellectuals, administrators, and politicians. A partial list of ''Sup'' graduates includes: Raymond Aron, Léon Blum, Pierre Bourdieu, Emile Durkheim, and Jean-Paul Sartre. ''One is a normalien,'' wrote the *normalien* Georges Pompidou, ''as one is a prince by blood.''[7] The central role of ENS – to train elites for leadership positions – was somewhat supplanted by the 1945 creation of ''ENA'' or *Ecole nationale d'administration*. *Grandes écoles* enjoy considerable autonomy within the French university system; there are approximately 210 *grandes écoles* in France, all of which are highly specialized (Neave, 1982). Historically, there has been little communication between *grandes écoles* and the university system, although within the last decade, there has been more contact to make French research endeavors more competitive.

[2] Schnapper et al., 2003, (p. 23).

[3] The *École Nationale d'Administration*, a *grande école* generally known as ''ENA,'' is where many of France's senior officials are trained and is the most direct route to becoming a member of the prestigious cadre of the French administrative branch. ENA produces fewer than 100 graduates each year, known as *énarques*.

[4] For examples of such laws, ordinances, and decrees see: J.O. Tables L. 56–258, ''*Mise en oeuvre d'un programme d'expansion*'' (16 March), 2591; D. 56–273, 17 March 1956, 2664; ''*Acces des citoyens musulmans: Avis concernant le recruitment des Français musulmans dans les emplois publics*,'' 6654, 1956; see also 1957, 820, in Shepard, (p. 50), 2006. Prior to this legislation, in 1945, the French Civil Code (Article s21–24) specified that no one can be naturalized without demonstrating his or her ''assimilation to the French community'' through knowledge of the French language. The Sarkozy law of 2003 requires demonstration of knowledge of rights and duties of French citizens, a requirement made stronger by 2006 legislation.

[5] See Kastoryano (2002) and Altermatt (2004).

[6] Liard, L., *L'Enseignement superieur en France, 1979–1889*, Paris, 1888, Vol. 2, (p. 69), in Howorth and Cerny (1981), *Elites in France: Origins, Reproduction and Power*, St. Martin's Press, New York, (p. 95).

[7] Suleiman (1978), *Elites in French Society*. Princeton University Press (p. 37).

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