Some Observations on the Impact of Neoliberalism on Research Policy in France

Marc Abélès

Abstract: This article addresses the issue of the influence of neoliberalism on French research institutions, especially the future of the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research), a public organisation devoted exclusively to doing research. CNRS’s detractors argue that there is no reason to keep a specific research organisation in France. The hiring of fewer and fewer researchers, as soon as the baby-boomers retire, means the disappearance of what is considered, at the European level, a French exception. In this paper I try to analyse the impact of the change occurring in research policy, and to characterise the specific features of the global ideological context.

This article addresses the issue of the impact of global processes such as neoliberalism on our academic working environment and, in particular, the influence of neoliberalism on French research institutions. I will first briefly outline the French situation; then I will focus on the change that is occurring in research policy; to conclude, I will make some observations on the intellectual environment.

In France, education has traditionally been considered a public service, and we have a public university system which is wholly supported by central government. Until now, all the projects to privatise higher education have failed. The most prestigious institutes, such as Ecole Normale Supérieure, Institut d’Etudes Politiques and Ecole Nationale d’Administration, are public, conforming with the tradition of republican elitism. As Bourdieu has shown, there is a gap between the republican egalitarian model and the reality of inequalities but until recent years there has been a consensus on keeping education as part of the public service.

In 2002, the Left lost the elections, and the new government thought it was time to reform society. The official discourse is ambivalent. President Chirac often refers to what he calls the social divide (fracture sociale) in order to appeal for more solidarity between rich and poor, between generations, and between the autochtonous and immigrants. At the same time, the government is promoting neoliberal public policies and is downsizing the state in many domains, especially those dealing with unemployment and social matters. There was strong resistance when the government decided to change the rules of retirement, obliging people to work for a minimum of forty years in order to claim their full pension. In 2004 a second illustration of this neoliberal turn was new legislation on social security and the introduction of a system to favour the development of private insurance.

Now, what is the impact of the neoliberal turn on university and research? First of all, if there is not an explicit attempt to privatise the university system, the idea of...
introducing competition between universities is more and more widespread. For
instance, the director of the Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris has decided to
increase the fees, arguing that it is important to be able to transform this institute in
order to be competitive with the main European and American departments of
Political Science. More money will allow universities to give professors better
salaries and to offer students the best possible intellectual and material environ-
ment. There is strong resistance to this reform from those who do not accept the
ideology of competition and what they interpret as a first step towards privatising
this institution.

Another consequence of the neoliberal turn relates to the future of the CNRS
(National Centre for Scientific Research). This institution was created just after the
Second World War. It is a public organisation devoted exclusively to research: twen-
ty-five thousand people are employed by this organisation, among whom we find
twelve thousand full-time researchers. Once appointed they hold the same kinds
of positions as their colleagues teaching in universities (a fellow of the CNRS is the
equivalent of an associate professor and a research director the equivalent of a full
professor). Just like their colleagues they are civil servants, but they are not obliged
to teach: nevertheless, a majority of them also give classes or seminars. The CNRS
researchers are working in centres (1,200) which are called laboratoires, of which
LAIOS (Laboratoire d’Anthropologie des Institutions et des Organisations Sociales)
is one example. Most of these centres are located in the universities. The CNRS
has always been a kind of leader in most of the scientific innovations in France. One of its
specific features is its capacity to develop domains that are marginal in the global
organisation of universities. For instance, in the case of anthropology, it is interesting
to compare the number of researchers in universities with that in the CNRS: out of
390 anthropologists, 117 are teaching in universities, and the majority, 273, are
working in the CNRS. This situation can be explained because Durkheimian sociol-
yogy at the end of the nineteenth century monopolised all the Chairs in the universi-
ty faculties. Later, when anthropology developed, its scope was limited by sociol-
yogy’s earlier expansion in the universities. The CNRS therefore offered an alternative
home for the development of the subject.

The CNRS is now facing a lot of criticism from neoliberal politicians. The
main argument focuses on the specificity of this institution in the European con-
text. Its detractors argue that there is no reason to keep a specific research organi-
sation in France. Following the European model, it would be much better to reinte-
grate the researchers with the universities. They would like to transform the
CNRS into an agency in charge of different programmes carried out by professors
paid by the universities.

In 2003 a new set of measures was adopted at governmental level. The 137
researchers who retired in the following year would not be replaced. Among the
researchers who would be hired by the CNRS in 2004, one-third would not be
tenured and their contracts would only be for five years. Only 304 permanent
researchers would be hired in 2004; there were 558 in 2001. The new orientation is
clear: there will be fewer and fewer full researchers and the profession will be
casualised. The headline of the newspaper Libération (14/11/2003) was meaningful:
‘France is losing its resources’.

In this context part of social science will be decreasing: inside the CNRS physics,
biology and earth sciences are fighting hard to keep their dominant position.
They are thought to produce results, and in the new positivistic ideology it appears
very difficult to show the necessity of expanding anthropology. As an example, the CNRS director decided to suppress an interdisciplinary centre that included psychoanalysts and anthropologists. There were very few reactions from social scientists. The kind of social science that is now in favour is cognitive psychology, which is considered a more scientific way of doing human science. At the same time, psychoanalysis, philosophy and social and cultural anthropology are the targets of the critics emanating from the new positivistic ideology. These disciplines cannot easily be grasped by the policy of accountability.

Maybe the most interesting characteristic of what is now occurring in France is that Luc Ferry, the main protagonist of the neoliberal turn in the educational field is himself a well-known philosopher. Ferry was, until recently, the minister of education. Before becoming minister he wrote books on the political philosophy of Kant and Fichte. But he became well known when he published a book entitled The ’68 Way of Thinking (La pensée 68), whose subtitle is Essay on Contemporary Antihumanism. This book explains that the result of the 1968 revolt has been the introduction of a new permissive ethic which affirms individualism and the cult of spontaneity at the expense of any kind of normativity which is treated as synonymous with repression. For Luc Ferry the ’68 way of thinking has been inspired by the French philosophers and social scientists Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Deleuze and Bourdieu. Ferry criticises Foucault’s statement concerning the ‘death of man’; for him, Foucault’s antihumanism sounds very ambiguous: on the one hand, it means a radical critique of the classical conception of subjectivity and the Kantian concept of autonomy; on the other hand, this critique gives birth to a new kind of individualism which negates any form of normativity.

Behind Ferry’s denunciation of what he calls French Nietzscheism (Foucault), French Heideggerianism (Derrida) and French Marxism (Bourdieu), lies a reaffirmation of the necessity to return to a normative conception of subjectivity. As the minister of education, Ferry in his discourse always insisted on reinforcing authority and shaping subjects with traditional values. More concretely this kind of approach means that there is increasingly less place in the universities for deconstructionism in philosophy and for a critical perspective in social science. One argument against critical ways of thinking is that they have been reappropriated by US scholars! More seriously, one observes in official spheres a reorientation in order to promote an ethical philosophy which could support a normative integration of the individual into society. In this context poststructuralism appears as a factor of disorder and an institution like the CNRS is looked at with suspicion. In the neoliberal orientation there is no more place for this kind of ‘espace critiques’. On the contrary, even the critique must be recuperated in an integrative perspective. One French intellectual symbolises today this neoliberal manipulation of the radical critique: he is François Ewald, who was Foucault’s assistant at the Collège de France and is now in charge of the thinktank of the Chiracian party. Ewald finds in Foucault a tough critique of Marxist theory and a confirmation that class opposition is no longer the main issue in postmodern societies. What he proposes is a sort of instrumentalisation of Foucault’s analyses on bio-politics to create new regimes of economy and efficiency and to give impulse to better management of the conflictual relations between employers and workers.

I refer to Ferry and Ewald to give some insight into the French intellectual landscape and the new intellectual and institu-
tional orientations which seem to fit with the neoliberal turn. I do not know what will be the future of the CNRS; but what is clearly programmed is the progressive extinction of this organisation. The hiring of fewer and fewer researchers, as soon as the baby-boomers retire, means the disappearance of what is considered, at the European level, a French exception. In the case of anthropology it would mean a true disaster, because the sociologists will never agree to share the power they have conquered after years and years of struggle in the university.

To conclude, I agree with Brenneis, Shore and Wright (this issue) when they say that there are changes in the management and organisation of the tertiary sector. I would add that the Europeanisation process creates an homogenisation of university systems and introduces a new kind of normativity. In this context, an institution like the CNRS, which has always been dedicated to basic research, is now viewed through the values of enterprise culture. In this sense, it cannot have any future in a neoliberal perspective. What is worth noting is that the main protagonists of this neoliberal reform are eminent philosophers, both anti- and pro-Foucaultian, who have something in common: they hate any form of postmarxist way of thinking, and they share also a common suspicion of critical perspectives in social science.

Marc Abélès is Directeur de Recherche at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and director of the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie des Institutions et des Organisations Sociales (LAIOS). His email is abeles@club-internet.fr.