

## CHAPTER 9

# The Failure of the Elite University in Early Modern France

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### Abstract

From the 16th to the 18th century, the French universities favoured widely their function of conservatory of traditional knowledge and assigned a limited place to Humanism. But, even in the traditional disciplines as law, and in spite of their monopoly in the formation of the judges and the lawyers, the bad quality of the training they offered was proverbial and they have failed to meet the needs of French monarchy. Above all, rival institutions got to their detriment the new scientific and social functions which emerged. Since the mid-16th century, independant humanities colleges took over the training to the *belles lettres*, and their boarding schools offered a global education in addition to the humanities. After the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the exploration function of new fields of science was fulfilled by numerous royal academies, while the formation of clerical, military or technician elites was entrusted to seminaries and to Grandes Ecoles. Thus, the failure of the emergence of an elite university in early modern France, and what distinguished it from the neighbouring countries, came from the number, the power and the strong separation of its rivals.

**Key words:** French universities ; XVIth-XVIIth-XVIIIth centuries ; humanities colleges ; academies ; Grandes écoles ; elite training ; traditional knowledge ; vocational training

The study of elite universities in early modern France is problematic. Indeed, the notion of elite university can seem anachronistic, especially if we define it teleologically, according to the Humboldtian model that developed after the period under consideration<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, an analysis that draws upon the 1809 Berlin example of what an elite university might be could allow us to reconsider academic realities from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The term “elite university” reflects certain key characteristics that can be summarized as follows : the leading role the institution plays in the advancement of the sciences, through the employment of distinguished scholars ; closely tied to this first characteristic, the excellence of the training the institution offers ; finally the quality of the students, whose background or achievements ensure their place in an academic and social elite<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, building on the previous criteria, the term presupposes a hierarchy of institutions, making it possible to distinguish between elite universities and other establishments. Formulated as such, this definition of an elite university offers us an analytical rubric for reexamining the history of early modern French universities. Within this general framework, the final criterion especially allows us to focus this study on the University of Paris, which unquestionably predominated over other French institutions<sup>3</sup>. If there was an elite university in France, it was this one. Finally, this approach necessitates also attending to the expectations of contemporaries, as it is impossible to speak of failure if there had not been attempts to construct an elite university.

The traditional historiography has painted a dark picture of early modern French universities. An idea of intellectual and institutional ossification, between the brilliant medieval period and the scientific revival of the nineteenth century, dominates the narrative<sup>4</sup>.

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1. About this retrospective quest, see Le Cam, 2013, p. 312-322.

2. For short and stimulating syntheses on the Humboldtian university, Gingras, 2003, p. 3-7 ; Schwinges, 2001 ; Paletschek, 2002.

3. As shown in the book directed by Verger, 1986.

4. Verger, 2012, p. 48 : “We gave for a long time not much attention to the universities of early modern period (XVIth-XVIIIth century) which do not seem to play any more the dynamic and creative cultural role which had been theirs in the Middle Ages” (and p. 65-67).



FIGURE 1: The college of the Sorbonne, 1550. Lithography of Fourquemin (XIXth c.). B.N.F., département des estampes.

This image has only partially been revised by the last thirty years of research on the knowledge produced, advocated or taught in these institutions and on the students and professors working in them<sup>5</sup>. But, more than a corrective, these works have brought greater nuance and a new focal point to the literature. The severe conclusions of earlier generations of historians have not been fundamentally questioned. While the revisionist stance is certainly the most provocative, it is rather difficult to maintain here.

As can be expected from a critical overview, we will begin by addressing the universities' adaptation (or lack of adaptation) to new knowledge and the new social functions ascribed to these institutions since the sixteenth century and the Humanism. However, a reflection exclusively focused on the reaction of universities to the intellectual changes would not allow to understand all the operat-

5. On the knowledge, Brockliss, 1987. On the actors, Julia and Revel, 1989 ; Ferté, 2002-2013 ; Roy, 2006 ; Farge, 2006 ; Noguès, 2006 ; Berlan, 2013.

ing phenomena. A good understanding of this history also requires us to take into account the expanding number of places, outside of universities, for the production and transmission of knowledge during the period. These new institutions would ultimately become a genuine system, constituted through competition and cooperation with universities<sup>6</sup>. The new institutions likewise revealed contemporary universities' deficiencies, while contributing in a parallel to the worsening of these deficiencies, because they deprive the university of a part of the new functions which it would have been able to assure. Consequently, here I will attempt to resituate the university in the broader educational and intellectual field in order to clarify its role in intellectual leadership and in the education of elites who increasingly had access to rival institutions.

## 1. Knowledge and Institutional Structures: A Reappraisal of Academic Ossification

### 1.1 *Humanism and the University: An Illusory Integration?*

We know that at the beginning of the sixteenth century, universities were confronted by a dynamic intellectual revival. They were not *a priori* outside of this development. If we examine the subject in terms of individuals, we see that in the fifteenth century figures well integrated in the universities introduced the study of humanism at the University of Paris<sup>7</sup>. Guillaume Fichet who lectured on Petrarch and gave a course on rhetoric from the 1450s to the 1470s was at the same time an important figure of the university (*socius* of the Sorbonne, *procureur* of the Nation of France, doctor of theology, rector)<sup>8</sup>. At the next generation, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples was professor of philosophy as well as philology and translator of the Bible<sup>9</sup>. As

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6. An example of local complementarity between the various forms of institutions in Belhoste, 2011.

7. Vulliez, 1986, p. 129-135 and bibliography p. 136-137 ; Verger, 2008, p. 8-9.

8. Philippe, 1892 ; Simone, 1938.

9. Pernot, 1995 ; Balley, 2002.

shown in a recent book<sup>10</sup>, the list of professors interested in the humanities and letters is long and stretches well into the eighteenth century, including those from the faculty of arts who entered into the Collège royal or the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres<sup>11</sup>. The university, in Paris and elsewhere, therefore never lacked men intellectually disposed to engaging with humanism.

Further, from the vantage point of pedagogical structures, humanities education was born in the heart of the Parisian university, under the direction of Jean Standonck at the Collège de Montaigu in the latter part of the fifteenth century. We know that his approach was innovative in comparison to medieval practices, organizing classes based on student rank, creating courses within the college, not only for the fellows living there but others as well. Over the course of the century, this *modus parisiensis* spread through the faculty of arts where the curriculum progressively evolved, placing a greater emphasis on grammar and rhetoric, which comprised six years of study by 1598. This development in humanities education came at the expense of traditional philosophical subjects, that were subsequently limited to two years at the end of the course of study<sup>12</sup>.

Through their intellectual engagement and the establishment of humanities instruction that created new generations of elites, the universities (at least the Parisian university) seemed to ensure the passage to modernity at the turn of the fifteenth century. This contradicts the simplistic “declinist” analysis of the modern university, offered by nineteenth-century historians<sup>13</sup>. Henri de Mesme (1532-1596), future high magistrate and king’s councillor, provides us with evidence that in the mid-sixteenth century, long before the rise of the “age of eloquence”, elites adhered to the educational model offered by these university colleges. In his memoirs, de Mesme, who entered the Collège de Bourgogne at the age of eleven in 1542, highlighted the many benefits of his tenure there, which blended Gre-

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10. Ferrand and Istasse, 2014.

11. On members of faculties in academies Noguès, 2006, p. 137.

12. Process described by Compère, 1985 and 1991. See also Grafton and Jardine, 1986 and Bushnell, 1996, p. 10-22.

13. For example Waddington, 1855. The best study from nineteenth century : Jourdain, 1862-1866.

co-Roman culture, self-discipline, and the formation of elite networks<sup>14</sup>.

Despite these successes, however, it is important to note that the integration of new knowledge was limited in the university. Particularly striking is how, over the course of their careers, major figures distanced themselves from the institution. Fichet left Paris after 1472 for an Italian career. Lefèvre and then Ramus came into conflict with the university<sup>15</sup>. The opposition between the university and the humanists, readily suspected of reformist sympathies, is evident in a number of individual biographies. In fact, the upper faculties and the traditional parts of the arts faculty (the theologically-oriented philosophers) long remained doubtful, even hostile, to this type of instruction. Numerous conflicts between the faculty of arts and its rivals during the seventeenth century reveal that professors of grammar and rhetoric struggled to gain recognition<sup>16</sup>. Despite the number of years of study dedicated to grammar, poetry and rhetoric, these subjects had no place on the tests given for the *maîtrise ès arts*. The exams that crowned the arts curriculum only dealt with the last two years of philosophy, namely with the traditional disciplines of logics, physics and metaphysics<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, aside from the introduction of humanism, revisions to the content of the curriculum were, on the whole, extremely slow and superficial, and the frame of the four faculties stayed unchanged.

### 1.2 *When the Non-University Collège Captured Elite Education*

If we expand our analysis beyond the matrix of the Parisian university, we see that this new humanistic instruction had rapidly grown outside the University of Paris's monopoly. The clearest example of this was the establishment of the Collège des lecteurs royaux in 1530,

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14. Memoirs quoted by Malte-Brun, 1809, t. 6, p. 269. See also Chartier, Compère and Julia, 1976, "Les pratiques éducatives des robins parisiens", p. 171-173.

15. Ramus et l'université, in Cahiers Saulnier, 2004 [see Ramus, 2004].

16. On the corporative sense of the conflict between faculties, Noguès in Amalou and Kouamé, forthcoming ; Jourdain, 1862-1866 ; Noguès, 2006, p. 64-67 and p. 95-106.

17. Noguès, 2009, p. 95-134.

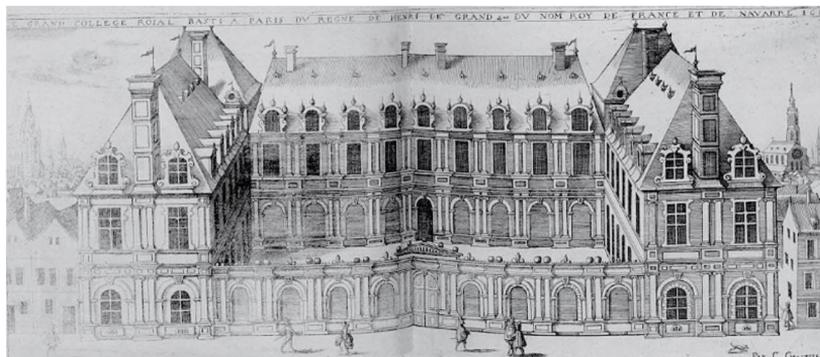


FIGURE 2: A competitor of the university of Paris : le Collège royal, engraving from Claude Chastillon, *Le grand college royal*, 1612.

independent of the university<sup>18</sup>. Its mission was indeed to offer subjects excluded from the traditional curriculum (Hebrew, Greek, mathematics for the first endowed chairs). The creation of a structure beyond the university points to the King's lack of confidence in the institution's ability to adapt – and his preference for an institution directly depending on him and that could contribute to his glory. Here the relative autonomy of the university was certainly a handicap. Before a chair in medicine in 1542, the establishment of a chair in Latin oratory, assigned to Latomus in 1534, signaled more direct competition with the instruction already offered by the faculty of arts<sup>19</sup>. The 1551 nomination of Ramus as royal reader in philosophy and oratory, when the university had condemned his book attacking Aristotle in 1543 and forbid him to teach philosophy, made the Collège royal a refuge for breakaway thinkers. Here, we also see the Royal College's ability to attract the best elements of the university. Furthermore, in addition to the promised salary, the prestige of a chair backed by royal patronage was certainly more appealing than the relative anonymity of university chairs. More widely, even if it is necessary to qualify the judgment, as seen above with Fichet and the others, from the 1530s, the Parisian intellectual world appeared more

18. See Lefranc, 1893.

19. Lefranc, 1893, p. 6.

and more to part on both sides, the new humanist galaxy and the “ignorante Sorbonne”, according to Clément Marot’s word<sup>20</sup>.

The success of the *modus parisiensis* also served to increase the number of competitors, in both Paris and the provinces. The model initially spread to other university towns in the provinces, like the collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, staffed by Parisian instructors including Jean de Tartas (1533), from the Parisian college of Lisieux, and André de Gouvea (1534-1547), former principal of Sainte-Barbe<sup>21</sup>. Most importantly, humanities instruction rapidly escaped the university’s orbit. Between the middle of the Sixteenth century and the first third of the seventeenth century, often due to the initiative of urban notables (who wanted to provide to their children an education in the immediate nearness), existing city schools were transformed into humanities colleges and other establishments were created *ex nihilo*<sup>22</sup>. The movement became all the more competitive with the construction of a network of Jesuit colleges, from 1556 in France<sup>23</sup>. François de Dainville estimated that 40000 pupils were enrolled in these Jesuit colleges in 1627 (about two-thirds of the French *collégiens*)<sup>24</sup>. From its opening in 1564, the Jesuit college of Clermont in Paris (later renamed Louis-le-Grand) enjoyed immense

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20. “[...] wishes ill to me the ignorant Sorbonne. Very ignorant it shows herself in being the enemy of the noble trilingual academy your Majesty has created [the Collège royal]. It is clearly manifest that within her precincts, against your Majesty’s will, is prohibited all teaching of Hebrew or Greek or Latin, she declaring it heretical. O poor creatures, all denuded of learning, you make true the familiar proverb, Knowledge has no such haters as the ignorant.” (“Me veut du mal l’ignorante Sorbonne/ Bien ignorante elle est d’estre ennemie/ De la trilingue & noble Académie/ Qu’as érigée. Il est tout manifeste/Que là dedans, contre ton veuil céleste/Est défendu, qu’on ne vienne alléguant/Hébreux, ni Grec ni Latin élégant/Disant que c’est langage d’hérétiques./O pauvres gens, de savoir tous étiques !/ Bien faites vrai ce proverbe courant/Science n’a haineux que l’ignorant”), Clément Marot, “Epître au roi de son exil de Ferrare”, 1535, in Auguis, 1824, p. 96.

21. Compère and Julia, 1984, p. 142-143.

22. On this phenomenon, Compère and Julia, t. 1 et 2, 1984-1988.

23. Fouqueray 1910-1925 ; Delattre, 1940-1957 ; Dainville, 1978, (especially p. 53-73) ; Chartier, Compère and Julia, 1976, p. 167 and 186-190 ; Compère and Julia, 1984-2002 ; Julia, 1986, p. 148-152.

24. Dainville, 1957.

success, attracting an academic clientele from the court and upper aristocracy<sup>25</sup>. In 1711, the Jesuit friar Croizet triumphantly described the institution: “Each day one can see the wealthy heirs of the kingdom’s most illustrious families, the sons of dukes and noble peers, even princes from abroad, coming here to learn<sup>26</sup> .” Never integrated into the university, Louis-le-Grand is the indisputable college of French elites.

The triumph of the Jesuit model over that of the university stems from several factors : religious (the guarantee of Catholic orthodoxy), political (the support of the King), and financial (they systematically had more funds than secular establishments, which allowed them to offer free instruction<sup>27</sup>). We can add to this list the quality of their grammar and rhetoric courses as well as the pedagogical know-how of a congregation that could depend on a great deal of stability and a large pool of skills and talents<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, the Jesuits developed boarding schools far from major cities that offered a wealthy clientele an education that extended beyond the humanities. The prototype was the collège de La Flèche which opened in 1604 ; its equivalent among the Oratorians was the collège de Juilly (1641)<sup>29</sup>. These establishments offered a global education in addition to the humanities, including courses on drawing, fencing, mathematics, geography, and foreign languages – subjects absent from the university, but sought after by men whose future was in the military or at court. In all cases cited, the study of the archived class rosters demonstrates that this type of establishment was at the center of elite education, placing instruction in the hands of the congregations and thereby bypassing the university. In the end, the intellectual and social success of the humanist model of education in the sixteenth century permitted, above all, the development of competition. The university lost its monopoly on learning and elite intellectual training.

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25. Bruter, 2002, p. 359-407.

26. Letter from the Père Croizet, 1711, quoted by Compère, 1985, p. 116-117.

27. Noguès, 2012, p. 45-60.

28. Noguès, 2013.

29. Rochemonteix, 1889 and Broglin, 1978. On the elite boarding schools, Frijhoff and Julia 1981.

### 1.3 *The University, Guardian of Traditional Knowledge in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

An additional aspect marked the intellectual history of French universities : their reputation for ideological conservatism. In essence, the university saw itself as a conservatory for fixed knowledge, which it had to protect from alteration<sup>30</sup>. This was equally true for the faculty of theology, guardian of Catholic orthodoxy, where censure occupied an essential place in the doctors' activities<sup>31</sup>. The same remark could be made about the other upper faculties, such as medicine. For a century (1566-1666), this discipline was embroiled in the antimony debate. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to offer a systematic analysis of the end of this conflict that, in 1651, opposed Jean Chartier, doctor-instructor at the faculty of medicine (as well as physician to the king and professor at the Royal College) and Guy Patin, dean of the faculty, the episode is rich in meaning and reveals the faculty's situation in the mid-seventeenth century<sup>32</sup>. The debate points to an attachment to Antiquity ; the faculty's claims to professing the truth and regulating the circulation of knowledge through the censure of Chartier ; conservative individuals' control of the institution (Patin was dean) ; the strength of corporatist norms (Chartier was excluded from the group in 1651) ; the transmission of new ideas, despite these factors, outside of the institution ; and, finally, the submission of the institution to a Parliamentary political decision in 1666, as Chartier did not lack for well-placed friends. The ironic gaze Molière fixed on this medical milieu in the *Malade imaginaire* illustrated, at least for the author and his knowing audience, the critical distance that then separated the public from the university sphere. Diafoirus' tirade about his son can be heard as a reference to Patin's conservative positions in the early 1670s<sup>33</sup> :

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30. Revel, 1987, p. 75.

31. Higman, 1979 ; Martin, 1984 ; Martin and Minois, 1995. See also Neveu, 1993.

32. Chartier, 1651 ; Labrousse and Soman, 1986.

33. Defended thesis on 18<sup>th</sup> december 1670, *An sanguis per omnes corporis venas et arterias iugiter circumfertur*, (quoted online by Capron).

“ I can say, without vanity, that from that time till now there has been no candidate who has made more noise than he in all the disputations of our school. There he has rendered himself formidable, and no debate passes but he goes and argues loudly and to the last extreme on the opposite side. He is firm in dispute, strong as a Turk in his principles, never changes his opinion, and pursues an argument to the last recesses of logic. But, above all things, what pleases me in him, and what I am glad to see him follow my example in, is that he is blindly attached to the opinions of the ancients, and that he would never understand nor listen to the reasons and the experiences of the pretended discoveries of our century concerning the circulation of the blood and other opinions of the same stamp<sup>34</sup>. ”

The judgment was just as severe in the 1750s, when the *Encyclopédie* denounced “the disputes of those cantankerous savants” and the methods and intellectual objectives of the contemporary university<sup>35</sup>.

Many other examples like these could be analyzed. A detailed examination of practices and intellectual postures would undoubtedly complicate the depiction of the period as stagnate<sup>36</sup>. The antimony affair demonstrates that, in the end, new ideas penetrated the university. The existence of debates and divisions within the faculties is reason enough to reconsider the apparent petrification of these institutions<sup>37</sup>. However, an argumentative register common to all camps demonstrates that the debates that shook up the universities were those of specialists who shared a common *episteme*, as shown by Isabelle Pantin et Gérard Péoux about the antimony affair<sup>38</sup>. Historians of science have only marginally revised the notion of a lag

34. Molière, 1673, act II, scene 6.

35. Yvon in Diderot, 1751, article « Aristotélisme ».

36. See Brockliss, 1986, p. 251, « Contenu de l'enseignement et diffusion des idées nouvelles ». But this autor focused on learning, not on production of knowledge.

37. An other example of internal debate at the seventeenth century, in theology, Gres-Gayer, 2007.

38. Pantin and Péoux, 2013, introduction : “The doctors of the Faculty of Medicine of Paris showed their common culture through the formal homogeneity of their publications, even though they made their disagreements a spectacle”.

between university learning and knowledge produced elsewhere that responded to societal demands. The condemnation of the modern university's conservatism by its contemporaries shows well that the changes scholars today and in the past have identified were imperceptible and insufficient for the men of the eighteenth century.

These conservative positions stemmed largely from the ideological homogeneity of the academic corps. The professoriate was in the strongest sense of the term a corporation, whose members shared not only a profession, but also a means of entering into it, exercising it, and a set of common values. This was still an *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, not yet the *universitas scientiarum*. The required university degrees served as an efficient ideological filter that sifted out non-conformist thinkers. In theology, the positions of the theses were beforehand censored, before being printed in the form of poster and posted in the city, so that each could inquire and denounce possible abnormalities<sup>39</sup>. Even in arts, medicine or law, all the statutes specified that the “doctrine” and the morality of the candidates must be verified<sup>40</sup>. For the most part, professors also belonged to the Church<sup>41</sup> and were consequently subject to increasingly strict ideological control between the Reformation and the Jansenist controversy. A final characteristic that marked this milieu in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a low level of professional mobility; these men generally practiced in the town where they had studied. If in the sixteenth century cities competed to attract the brightest professors (and in their wake numerous students), during the latter period this *mercato* disappeared, as did student mobility<sup>42</sup>.

Cause or consequence of this conservatism, beginning in the seventeenth century universities faced in their role as institutions of knowledge enormous competition from new royal foundations. We can cite the French Academy (established in 1635) and the Jardin du roi (1635 also, future Natural History Museum), the Royal Acade-

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39. Piales, 1757, p. 441 and 447 ; Durand de Maillane 1761, t. 1, p. 461.

40. For Paris, Jourdain 1862-1866, pièces justificatives, statuts de la faculté des arts, p. 6, art. LXII ; statuts de la faculté de droit canon, p. 12, art. XXIII.

41. Noguès, 2006, p. 96-100 on the Faculty of arts and Piales, 1757, p. 443 on the theology.

42. Noguès, 2013, p. 75.

mies of Painting and Sculpture (1648), of Inscriptions and Belles lettres (1663), of Sciences (1666)<sup>43</sup>. These institutions were distinguished by their royal protection and their specialization in new domains (history, mathematical and physical sciences). Their charters gave them a dual expert mission: to regulate knowledge within their field, and to foster research, through the activities of their members or, in the eighteenth century, through public competitions<sup>44</sup>. They were followed at the end of seventeenth century and at eighteenth century by a series of provincial academies foundations. Even if some academics entered the academies, these were institutionally completely separated from universities. In contrast to French universities, few of whose faculty members are remembered by posterity, these academies brought together the most illustrious savants and men of letters, from d'Alembert to Voltaire and Lavoisier, and energized scientific life through their networks of provincial and foreign correspondents. In this way, the regulation and advancement of the new sciences moved toward institutional structures foreign to the universities.

## 2. The Judge, the Priest, and the Officer: Three Figures of Failure

A similar phenomenon is noticeable in the university's role in the training of officers. We will look at the cases of judges, clergymen, and military officers whose vocational training illustrates the development of the new educational institutions.

### 2.1 *The Deficient Education of Jurists*

At the beginning of the early modern era, law faculties in France benefited from a favorable situation. As elsewhere in the West, the

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43. On academies in France, Michaux, 2007 (2008), p. 73-86 ; Roche 1978 and 1996, p. 643-658.

44. Tits-Dieuaide, 1998, p. 87. About the opposition between academy and university, see D'Alembert, 1751, article "Académie", and the workshop organized by Blocker and Ribard, 2014.

number of positions requiring administrative competency increased<sup>45</sup>. The abundance of opportunities was furthered by the dictates of the French monarchy, which progressively made holding a *licence* a requirement for joining the legal professions, between the Ordinance of Blois in 1498 and the seventeenth century<sup>46</sup>. Notably for our discussion about the failure of the elite university, during this period a singular importance came to be placed on the diploma as a guarantee of advanced skills. The concept of ability or skill was recurrently taken up in royal mandates intended to improve the quality of instruction and the rigor of exams<sup>47</sup>. Thus, the monarchy had the political will to align the issuing of university diplomas with the formation of quality candidates, particularly beginning with the reform of 1679 : “That those who will want to take degrees will have, after two years of studies, to undergo a particular examination, and if they are found sufficient and capable, they will support an act publicly, during two hours at least, to be graduate, and to obtain the letters of license, they will undergo a second examination at the end on the aforementioned three years of studies, after which they will support a public act<sup>48</sup> ”. This precision shows that there was a true will of the monarchy to set up inside universities a real selection of the candidates based on “capacities”.

The university’s dysfunctionality and the numerous frauds committed by students, however, led to the failure of this policy. This failure was condemned multiple times by contemporaries such as Jean-Jacques Piales, who wrote in 1757 : “There are universities which grant the degrees de *bachelier* or *licencié* of law sometimes to people who ignore the basics of the Latin language. [...Some leave Paris] without having studied in any university, return after fifteen days decorated with the titles of *bachelier* or *licencié* of law<sup>49</sup> .” Historians have analyzed this in detail, emphasizing false certificates of assiduity, diplomas obtained at complacent universities, like Reims,

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45. Stone, 1964 and 1974.

46. Isambert and Jourdan, 1829, t. XIV, 1559-1589, Paris, 1829, t. XI, 1483-1514, p. 347, t. XIX, 1672-1686, p. 229.

47. On the attempts at reforms, Julia and Revel, 1989.

48. Damiens de Gomicourt, 1778, t. 4, p. 76.

49. Piales, 1757, préface, p. VIII-IX.

Orléans or Orange (since a Bachelor's degree obtained anywhere in France is valid throughout the kingdom), and the fact that exams were not at all difficult, as universities engaged in a competition of leniency<sup>50</sup>. In addition, to confirming the universities' dysfunctionality by contemporary standards, historians have also examined the meaning of university degrees in *Ancien Régime* society. The *licence* was, then, simply a regulatory obligation, unconnected to the future magistrate's practice, since Roman law was largely taught, whereas in northern France customary law was practiced<sup>51</sup>. Future magistrates trained themselves through practice, outside of the faculty, usually by first working as lawyers. This discrepancy reduced the *licence* in law to a formality that granted access to a social and professional group. Thus, aside from its ritual function, the exam essentially served as a social and professional (but not intellectual) filter<sup>52</sup>. In the case of venal offices, only birth determined career paths. Not surprisingly, the social origin of the jurists is superior to that of the pupils of the other faculties, while this degree is exactly the least selective intellectually<sup>53</sup>.

There was, therefore, a link between the university and the legal world, but this link did not correspond in any way to that implied by the definition of elite universities mentioned above; the university served more as a means of assuring the social reproduction of elites than of forming competent jurists.

## 2.2 *The University and the Tridentine Clergy*

In theology, the *licence* and doctorate opened doors to successful ecclesiastical careers beginning with the Concordat of 1516<sup>54</sup>. Admission was based on the candidate's doctrinal conformity and social origins (in the middle of the eighteenth century, a *licence de théol-*

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50. Julia and Revel, 1989, p. 116-151.

51. On late development of French law, Edit d'avril 1679 de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, article 14, in Isambert and Jourdan, 1829, t. XIX, p. 199.

52. Arrow, 1973 ; Julia and Revel, 1989, p. 168 ; Rasche, 2007, p. 150-273.

53. Kagan, 1975. See also Chartier, Compère and Julia, 1976, p. 277.

54. Gérardin, 1971, p. 44.

ogie costed approximately 500 pounds in Paris<sup>55</sup>, two or three years of income for a labourer). Yet theology was traditionally more socially diverse than the other professions, particularly due to scholarships theoretically reserved for poor students. Unlike the law schools, theology degrees did not have the reputation of being just given away. In Paris, exams taken for the licence resulted in merit rankings, useful for career advancement<sup>56</sup>. In the eighteenth century, the pursuit of scholarly excellence led to a national competition to recruit young poor clerics for the small Robertin community (inside the Saint-Sulpice seminary, founded in Paris in 1642). According to abbé Baston, who passes the competition in 1758, they would have been fifteen admitted persons on sixty already hand-picked candidates, what testifies of the selectivity of the test<sup>57</sup>. These students roomed and boarded as fellows and benefited from strict intellectual training by young *maîtres de conférences* who taught them debate in an intense atmosphere of intellectual emulation, rounded out with courses at the Sorbonne. The selection of the scholars and quality of instruction unarguably made this an elite institution that in some ways prefigured the French *École normale* (supérieure) of the nineteenth century. It is important to note, however, that this unique institution was situated on the margins of the Parisian university. This exceptional example therefore sets into relief the limits of the theological training offered in the faculties.

These limits are even more convincingly illustrated by the development of an extensive network of over one hundred diocesan seminaries, founded between 1642 and 1700<sup>58</sup>. The Counter-Reformation created an avenue for the profound redefinition of the secular clergy, who were to be modeled on the figure of the “good priest” – well educated and equipped with particular moral qualities. To instruct this type of cleric, the seminars strove to offer useful theological training, shape the future friars’ spirituality, and develop a durable *habitus*. Of course, the seminaries did not necessarily offer

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55. Piales, 1757, p. 443 and p. 445.

56. Piales, 1757, p. 441-442 and Baston, 1897-1899, t.1, p. 100-106.

57. Baston, 1897-1899, p. 37-38.

58. Degert, 1912 and Julia, 1988, On the first seminaries, Vénard, 1983, p. 1-17.

enormous intellectual prestige and the contents of their teaching were soon considered as archaic<sup>59</sup>, but the success of the formula was indisputable, given the efficacious acculturation of the seminarians. This model illustrated the need for a new organization that could provide the Tridentine clergy with a global education, since faculties and colleges welcomed students with heterogeneous motivations, who lacked a vocational calling, and who, by and large, managed to avoid communal life, living independently in town. In this way, the seminary model points to the faculty of theology's limitations. It could only transmit purely intellectual knowledge that was, moreover, often judged to be outdated.

### 2.3 *The Invention of the French Grande École*

A final example will help us understand how the most cutting-edge training remained beyond the reach of the universities. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the refinement of the military sciences of artillery, engineering, and navigation. These fields required significant skills, especially in mathematics and drafting. The necessary disciplines, however, were all but absent from the faculty of art's official curriculum (and even more so from that of the upper faculties). At the end of the seventeenth century, only the Jesuit colleges had a good network of chairs in mathematics<sup>60</sup>. Even in Paris, it was not until 1688 that the Collège des Quatre nations specifically organized to create a permanent chair in mathematics<sup>61</sup>. The history of the study of physics in the faculty of arts illustrates an attachment to Aristotelian thought and a belated receptivity to Cartesianism and Newtonianism<sup>62</sup>. Elective course were often offered within or in conjunction with the colleges, like at college of La Marche at the end of the seventeenth century<sup>63</sup>; as mentioned above,

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59. Certeau, 1975 (used : folio 2002), "Les lois propres au groupe religieux : réduction au silence et administration culturelle", p. 224 et sq.

60. Dainville, 1963.

61. Charter and regulations of the college des Quatre Nations, Archives Nationales, H<sup>3</sup> 2562, dossier 1.

62. Brockliss, 1986, p. 216-218.

63. Rules of the college of La Marche, end of the seventeenth century, quoted by

these were among the advantages of the large aristocratic boarding schools in the provinces. However, electives associated with the humanities colleges were not systematically organized. They depended on the local availability of this or that instructor, and did not result in formal evaluations.

The need to institutionalize the training of the army's future technical officers through the creation of specialized establishments was felt early, with Richelieu instituting two academies in 1636 and 1641<sup>64</sup>. There, young nobles received French-language instruction in cartography, geometry, arithmetic, mechanics, optics, astronomy, economy, etc. These initiatives failed, however, by 1650, largely for financial reasons.

The first permanent schools designed exclusively to train naval officers, limited to the nobility, were thus created by Colbert in 1669<sup>65</sup>. Five artillery schools were founded in 1720. In the mid-eighteenth century the *École royale du Génie de Mézières* (1748) and the *École royale militaire de Paris* (1751) came into being, modeled on the cadet academies of Saint-Petersburg and Berlin, and, in the field of civil engineering, the *École des Ponts et chaussées* was founded in 1747<sup>66</sup>. The most successful of these institutions was the *École du Génie de Mézières*<sup>67</sup>. From the beginning it displayed novel characteristics that distinguished it from the university model and that would later mark the French *grandes écoles*. Entry into the school required passing a mathematics competitive examination given by members of the Academy of Science, a way to show the weight of the scientific competence in the procedure. The test's relative difficulty led to the creation of institutions that specialized in preparing students for the exam. In contrast to the university curriculum, the training in these establishments incorporated theory and practice. Though tempered by the preferential recruitment of nobles, two

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Lévy, 1921.

64. Chartier, Compère and Julia, 1976, p. 181-185 ; Gaborit, forthcoming.

65. Julia, 1989 [2].

66. Chartier, Compère and Julia, 1976, p. 217-222 ; Belhoste, 1989.

67. Chartier, 1973, p. 356. About the Pont et chaussées, Picon, 1994.

new principles emerged : the choice of mathematics as a key criterion of admission and the creation of competitive exams to select candidates for a limited number of places<sup>68</sup>.

## Conclusion

Leaving off with the military and engineering schools of the eighteenth century invites us to finish our discussion with the École polytechnique, founded in 1795. This establishment perfectly symbolizes the elite French institutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, separated from the university and practicing an early hyper-selectivity of students<sup>69</sup>. Thus in the division between universities and *grande écoles* that structures French higher education today, we can see the distant result of the singular failure (in comparison to the situation in other countries) of the faculties from the Renaissance to the Revolution.

Without covering every detail, the vast survey that we have undertaken permits us nonetheless to put this French singularity into perspective. We can schematically draw out the monarchy's and other actors' expectations of the universities, and these sixteenth-century institutions' inability to move beyond an intellectual project that originated in the medieval period, which had by then run its course. Only their role in regulating and reproducing elites permitted *a minima* the maintenance of a social and political consensus concerning the universities' existence<sup>70</sup>.

At least until the end of the seventeenth century, the picture painted here undoubtedly differed little in neighboring countries. English or German universities were not always exemplary at the seventeenth century<sup>71</sup>. Nevertheless, and though these are at the beginning isolated examples, we would be hard pressed to find a French equivalent to Isaac Newton or universities like Halle, founded in 1694, or Göttingen, established in 1737. The undeniable suc-

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68. On the development of competitive examinations, Julia, 1994.

69. On the importance of Polytechnique in France, Belhoste, 2003.

70. Noguès, 2013.

71. Many examples given by Clark, 2007 and in Rüegg and de Ridder-Symoens, 1996.

cess of Göttingen in the second half of the eighteenth century depended less on the creativity and originality of its professors, than on its unique institutional organization. There, the university, strictly speaking, was closely associated with an equestrian academy, a library, an academy, and a journal<sup>72</sup>. These diverse institutions were in the service of the university's dynamism, whereas in France they were identified as competitive establishments. It is thus during the first half of the eighteenth century that we can identify a real divergence between French practices and new approaches that were put into place elsewhere. If other countries like England, Italy, or the German states possessed colleges and academies and began to promote specialized schools in the eighteenth century, the competitive fabric of their universities was not as dense, as diversified, or as clearly segregated as that of the universities in France. Finally, we can add to this that the Collège royal, the major Jesuit colleges of the royal foundation (La Flèche, Louis-le-Grand), multiple royal academies, and military schools benefited from the priority support of an especially powerful and efficient state, to the detriment of the long-abandoned universities.

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72. Saada, 2009, especially p. 312-316.

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