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The Sorbonne versus the Centaurs

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Since the anti-CPE movement of Spring 2006, the university sites that mobilised against the government reforms impacting on the missions of public university and research were the object of close surveillance coming just as much from the state forces of security as from private security companies brought in specially for this purpose. The Sorbonne is an exemplary case of such a process, attesting to the establishment of a policy that targets the university population (students, administrative and technical staff, lecturers) in an unheard of way – in the name of the preservation of the 'goods and people' in the site. A veritable laboratory of a new modality of academic subjection (*assujettissement*), the Sorbonne is submitted to the development of a security grid (*une quadrillage*) that has the neutralisation and exhaustion of the movement of contestation unfolding for over two months now. Thus it is that, for various weeks, the university community enters the space of the Sorbonne under heavy surveillance: received on the outside by a disquieting barrier of normal patrolling officers and riot police (CRS), and by the *Rectorat*'s and the hired private security agents of Centaure Sécurité inside.

If the Sorbonne is the property of the local government of Paris since 1852, the responsibility for site and building management, on the other hand, is up to the Chancellery (*Rectorat*) of the University of Paris[1]. It is the latter that hires private security

enterprises to assist the guards (attached to the universities), the firemen, and their own in-house security personnel. At least since the events of May 1968, ministers for education, higher education and research have been reluctant to request the presence of police forces inside the establishments under the responsibility of their portfolio. For some years now, this rule of prudence (and, tacitly, of law[2]) has been replaced by a new securitarian whose objective is at once the control of the university community – and, in particular, that of a student population whose government is regarded as especially delicate – and the production of a new academic subjection, in the name of 'risk prevention'. The omnipresence of security agents – whether they are police, in-house personnel in charge of the prevention of hygiene and security risks (under the authority of the Paris *Rectorat*), waged private security employees – is the sign of a modification in the policy of management and eradication of social conflicts in the university environment. The intrusive, suspicious, up-close control apparatus bearing down on universities today is, as we know well, one of the pans in a profound refounding of the university. In the name of the modernisation of higher education, the reforms coming from a properly neo-liberal conception, repeatedly analysed, criticised and denounced[3], are grounded on the generalisation of a principle of competition (among universities, lecturers-researches, students, degrees). Now, the imposition and generalisation of this principle of competition depend, among other elements, of putting in place an apparatus of security with the atomisation of the members of the university community, the eradication of all collective mobilisation and the interiorisation of a politics of 'risk' by each and all as its functions. But what risks is one speaking of?

First level: invisibilising mobilisation, de-localising the threat – Deans and guards:

Higher education establishments, in the same way as all public buildings, even more if they are classified as being of 'historical interest', are subject to a reinforced plan of active prevention of fire risks (maintained by the laws regarding the smoking ban in public sites, even outdoors). Now, it is in the name of this prevention policy that one witnesses the establishment of an apparatus of what is, as a matter of fact, labelled 'degrading', 'uncivil', 'anti-social' acts, authorising the guards to remove (or to order the cleaning staff to remove) banners, flyers, unauthorised posters, announcements etc. relative to mobilisations, often right after they have appeared.

The Sorbonne is, in this regard, a problematic site: its meandering corridors, its mystifying staircases, its rows of rooms, secret passageways etc. are particularly difficult to make safe, that is, to 'keep clean'. Besides, a costume has become established since the movement against the CPE[4]: administrative lockout. Rather than risk a mobilisation, heads of schools and departments prefer pure and simple interdiction of access to all sites. The would-be 'occupied' or 'blocked' universities are thus, most of the time, effectively universities 'shut down' by security measured, resulting in the total suspension of all academic and administrative activities, and leading students to drop out – something to be blamed *a posteriori* on the striking students and workers. Total suspension of activities, or almost... We know that the new dispositions regarding the LRU[5], the Plan Licence[6], and the modification of the decree on the status of lecturers-researchers converge on several points, most notably on the valorisation of computer resources. If making course documents (bibliography, lecture plans,

reference texts etc.), even entire courses, available online participates in an improved pedagogical coordination, it also constitutes a criterion for the evaluation of lecturers. It is equally clear that this enables 'out of site' teaching, making it possible to wait for 'on site' disturbances to be placed under control, for those (non-striking lecturers, privileged students with adequate material and access) who feel 'taken hostage' by the strike movement. In a words, a sort of 'selective' minimum service, before it becomes institutionalised by the new policy of attribution of gratifications and promotion of teaching personnel.

Furthermore, one can easily understand why is it that those departments and UFR[7] with a greater tradition of mobilisation – in the case at hand, those in humanities, social and political sciences –, as well as the most creative in terms of militant communication, are the first to be de-localised to new campi, whose academic 'quality of life' is presented as their main selling point, obscuring the fact that they were specially designed to prevent any form of future mobilisation. Separated from its natural space of union, social and political awareness-raising and mobilisation, the university community has no other choice but to externalise its actions: 'outdoor teach-ins', symbolical actions (such as the brave *Ronde des obstinés*[8] at the Hôtel de Ville)... The imperative that we have accepted of popularising the movement in order to draw the attention of public opinion, media and the minister is also a form of deviation (*détournement*) of the right to strike there where, by definition, the conflict takes place: our workplace.

Second level: Guaranteeing the security of all, identifying and eradicating the 'external elements', dividing the community – *Rectorat* and in-house security personnel

It is at this level that the *Vigipirate*[9] plan comes in. At the smallest sign of the least suspicious leafleting, universities' entrances become controlled in the name of *Vigipirate*.[10] The 'terrorist pretext' authorises here a greater or lesser perturbation of academic activities, the systematic control of sites, activities and people[11], resulting in a privatisation of the access to knowledge. Higher education establishments thus become service-providers in the knowledge market: the control of student cards consisting also in allowing in only those who have earned the right to be enrolled in the establishment in question, forbidding free access not only to the teaching itself, but to seminars, colloquia, conferences etc., traditionally open to the 'public'. Now, this apparatus, nowadays restricted to 'crisis' periods, is in fact in its test phase, before it becomes totally generalised: magnetic student card (smart cards) providing access to campi, libraries, university services and activities... ensuring the up-close and personal control of the movement of individuals, their identification and localisation.

Considering current university mobilisation as a 'certified risk', according to the terms of the *Vigipirate* plan, the present control apparatus imposes a climate of 'ongoing hostilities' on the university community, activists in particular, but certainly prepares the moods for what is to come. The antagonism is cleverly orchestrated within the community so as to pit a minority of 'troublemakers' (often qualified as 'external elements' – 'fake students' – when it is the case of an occupation, for instance) against the 'silent majority' of users/customers of the university 'taken hostage', who is in distress for not being able to attend lectures, take exams, receive their degrees etc. One thus witnesses the redefinition, or rather, the production of a novel university community ('we' the actors/entrepreneurs, user and customers of

the university) which, playing on an endogenous purge ('we' and 'them'), renounces all critical sense.

But what goes on at the level of the security personnel itself? The first effect of the massive recruitment of private security agents (there is presently at least fifty in the site of the Sorbonne, at every entrance and every floor of the building) is evidently a division of labour between the 'in-house' security personnel and the outsorced ones[12]; the latter being deployed on site as a consequence of the opening up of a previously public market, which is occupied by private security companies specialising in the management of crisis situations. A first series of questions: what is the increase in expenditure in the budget of the *Rectorat* and/or the universities that this represents? Where does this money come from, and who decided to spend it in the creation of such jobs rather than others? Second series of questions: who do the 'in-house' personnel feel in solidarity with? Why not with the administrative staff and lecturers on strike, to the extent that their status and function is under the threat of privatisation pure and simple?

Third level – Maintaining order, instilling fear, privatising the university – the state and Centaure Security, 'specialist in the analysis of atypical behaviours'[13]

Created in 1995, Centaure Security is a private security enterprise whose worth is estimated between five and ten million euros.[14] It counts Paris X – Nanterre, Paris V - Descartes and Paris I - Panthéon-Sorbonne among its clients, but also Asterix Park, the Grévin Museum, Yves Saint Laurent, Lacoste ... Consulting the company's website, we learn that 'so as to optimise the efficaciousness of the security chain, Centaure proposes a global solution in both human resources and technical means. It is a

matter of proposing, after careful study, the most cutting edge and adequate technical solutions to the needs and context in the following domains: fire detection, CCTV surveillance, access control, management of hours…'. The mission of Centaure Security at the Sorbonne is one of 'reinforcing' in-house security agents, in a context where, according to the Security Committee of the *Rectorat*, the mobilisation of the university community threatens to become radicalised. Centaure Security must therefore ensure that no-one hinders the 'free access' to the entrances of the Sorbonne building; which concretely means that it works in the prevention of 'blocks', the new term for a classic practice from the repertoire of union actions: the picket. In other words, the 'strike' is thus made equivalent to an 'atypical behaviour' on the part of the worker, in this case the lecturer or the ordinary student.

It is thus at this level that private security companies intervene, conjointly with riot squads, on the grounds of questionable, or even downright illegal, prerogatives. On top of the systematic intrusions and police controls at the time of militant demonstrations (paper checks, arrests, persecutions…), the quotidian displays of force that transform the Sorbonne – but also various other establishments of higher education and research – into besieged spaces participate in a general process of criminalisation of political mobilisations and actions. Now, consulting the text regulating the rights and duties legally granted to private security agents, we can read[15]: 1) that they must clearly identifiable (and, most notably, be clearly distinguishable from the public forces of order); 2) that they can do no more than a visual inspection of handbags and rucksacks (without it being in fact clarified whether they should be open or not!…)[16], and that under no circumstance can they go through bags or carry out body

searches without consent; 3) and, first and foremost… article 4 states:

It is forbidden for people exercising an activity mentioned in article 1 as well as their agents to intervene, at any moment and in any form, *in the development of a labour conflict or events relating to one*. It is equally forbidden *to carry out surveillance relative to political, philosophical or religious opinions, or their belonging to trade unions*. (My emphasis.)

'The Sorbonne belongs to us, we fought to occupy it, we will fight to keep it…'[17]

The fact that private security agents prevent the formation of strike pickets, 'blocks', occupation or any other militant activity decided upon at a General Assembly of staff and students of our universities; that is, that they constitute a human and logistical reinforcement to the evacuation, *manu militari*, of buildings, the identification and filing of unionists and activists, constitutes a serious attack on civil liberties. Does this mean that we would rather these 'lowly tasks' fall exclusively (back) upon the shoulder of state agents? As a matter of fact, the next logical step would rather be the autonomisation of the function of surveillance and control (for instance, thanks to CCTV, magnetic cards and the installation of electronic controls at the entrance to different premises): the bouncers and watchmen that will have have crystallised our discontent so are effectively a psychological 'weapon' to lower our threshold of tolerance and, to that extent, are only a transitory solution.

The stake here concerns the convergence of struggles and the reaffirmation of academic freedom. For the time being, the

presence of Centaure Security's agents in the grounds of the Sorbonne as well as the annexing sites rented out by other universities, in the name of the security of all, is not only scandalous, but literally illegal. In fact, since February 9 2009, the majority of staff and students at said universities have decided at a General Assembly to go on strike for unlimited time, and, as a consequence, are right at the heart of what constitutes a 'labour conflict'. What can then possibly justify the fact that the *Rectorat* and the deans, who will have, in a way or another, directed public funds to and authorised the presence of this sort of company in the establishments they are in charge of, do not respect the penal procedure code?

If the amplitude of the movement that animates the university community and the world of research today is without precedent since 1968, it is also because we live in a unique situation. The programmed application on the world of knowledge of the 'politics of risk', and of its security aspect, by the government, is the indispensable condition of its full liberalisation; it is also the spearhead in the banishment of public university and research, which we wish not so much to 'defend' or 'preserve' as to contribute towards its construction, to pursue, and to expect.

This text was written in the context of the protest movement that mobilised almost all French universities last Autumn and Spring against the proposed government reforms.

[1] With the education reforms that followed the events of May 1968, the old University of Paris was broken down into thirteen different universities that remained nevertheless under a single Chancellery (the *Rectorat de Paris*), which retained some bureaucratic functions over and above the individual units. The Rectorat itself is housed at the historical Sorbonne building in the Quartier Latin. (Translator's note.)

[2] This interdiction is commonly traced back to the Middle Ages, where the Sorbonne was under the authority of the Catholic Church – being, therefore, outside the King's jurisdiction.

[3] Cf. in particular the documentary by Thomas Lacoste, *Université le Grand Soir*, 2007, L'Autre Association.

[4] The *contrat première embauche*, or 'first employment contract', was a new form of employment contract applying to individuals under 26 that the French government tried to create in 2006, as part of a new Equal Opportunity Acts. The proposal was greeted with massive social opposition, mostly on the grounds that it made it possible for employees within a two-year 'trial' period to be fired without reasons for dismissal, and eventually abandoned. (Translator's note.)

[5] The 'Liberties and Responsibilities of the Universities' law, also sometimes called 'law on the autonomy of universities', passed in August 2007. (Translator's note.)

[6] Law passed in 2007 that restructures French undergraduate degrees (*licences*). (Translator's note.)

[7] 'Formation and research units' – something akin to a school or faculty. (Translator's note.)

[8] Literally the 'Round of the Persistent', a protest started by Paris VIII lecturers in front of the seat of the local government, it consists in having at all times a group of people going round in circles at the site, while some people move sporadically into the middle of the circle to chant slogans. Inspiring copycat protests in places such as Bordeaux, Amiens, and Grenoble. (Translator's note.)

[9] French national security alert system. (Translator's note.)

[10] Cf. http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigipirate

[11] The *Vigipirate* plan is, since December 16 2008, at the red level of threat: 'Taking the necessary measures to prevent the certified risk of one or more serious attacks, comprising certain measures of protection of institutions, and putting in place the means for adequate aid and response, accepting the constraints imposed on social and economic activity'.

For instance, paper checks, bag searches... But also the setting up of CCTV cameras... At the Sorbonne, a CCTV camera is already posed at the rue de la Sorbonne, 17 entrance. This apparatus will in the coming months be systematized and reinforced: increase of CCTV surveillance inside the buildings and the maintenance of a record of incidents (which will oblige the *Rectorat* to warn users of the site, according to the dispositions of the National Commission on Informatics and Civil Liberties [CNIL]).

[12] Division of security labour that, more generally, attests to a racialised social dimension: one can see it in the colour line that separates a majoritarianly 'white' university population and the almost exclusively 'black' Centaure Security personnel present at the Sorbonne.

[13] Cf. www.centaure-securite.fr

[14] Cf. www.kompass.com/fr

[15] Law 83-629, July12 1983, modified by law 2003-239, March 18 2003, especially articles 1, 2,

3, 4. Cf. www.legifrance.gouv.fr

[16] Article 3.1: 'The individuals exercising the activity mentioned in article 1, paragraph 1, can carry out visual inspection of handbaggage and, with the consent of their proprietary, search them through. The individuals exercising the activity mentioned in article 1, paragraph 1, with special habilitation to that end granted by the local head constable or, in Paris, the head constable under the conditions established by decree of the Council of State can, with the explicit consent of the people concerned, carry out body searches. In this case, the body search must be carried out by a person of the same sex as the one who receives it. These particular circumstances are established by a byelaw issued by the head constable defining its duration and the places or categories of places where the searches can take place. This byelaw is communicated to the attorney general of the Republic'.

[17] Cf. http://sorbonneengreve.revolublog.com