A Campus Fractured: Neoliberalization and the Clash of Academic Democracies in France

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Through an ethnographic case study of campus politics at a Parisian university, this paper shows that neoliberal university reforms in France failed to create neoliberal subjectivities. Instead, the reforms provoked conflicts between direct and representative democracy, traditions which had organized post-1960s French university culture. These conflicts suggest that we can decenter neoliberalism and instead examine the confluence of multiple modes of academic production, along with the antagonistic emergence of non-neoliberal subjectivities. [higher education, historical experience, neoliberalization, democracy, France]

Introduction

In France on March 15, 2011, as an indirect result of neoliberalizing university reforms by the then-Sarkozy administration, the elected university president of Rouge University of Paris, Paul Morel, was chased across his campus by an angry crowd.[1] A large group of activist students, staff, and faculty had been waiting outside Morel's office for two hours, clamoring for a meeting to discuss their grievances. But he had narrowly eluded them, crossing campus under security escort to confer an honorary doctorate, and the crowd, halted by security guards in a courtyard, turned its wrath on a passing member of the university's elected Administration Council (CA). One staff member, angry almost beyond words with the campus leadership, presented her grievances:

> *Shouting*: I'm on the staff of this university and for more than two years work has made me sick. The CA is completely cut off from reality in this university. I've known this university since I was born. Unfortunately for some, and fortunately for others. I was in the daycare at Vincennes. I came when they moved here. I was a student, I've taught courses, and now I'm on the staff. I've never seen so many people talking about the university like this. Never seen so many people wanting to leave the university. And the Administration Council is like, "Everything is fine my dear, everything is marvelous." NOTHING IS WORKING [*rien ne va*]. I've never seen a CA so disconnected from reality on the ground. Having a president who is actually SCARED of the people who he represents—scared to set foot in the PARKING LOT with people who've had enough, refusing to give a MEETING—

Meanwhile the unfortunate CA member listened patiently, insisting at one point that he was not a stand-in for the campus president. But what was this debate really about? This confrontation was but one of a long series of internal conflicts about how this public university should respond to the Sarkozy government's reform agenda. Yet all the major players in this university's politics were superficially in agreement. They all opposed the reforms; they all opposed "neoliberalism."

This paper asks: What does it mean when the opponents to neoliberalism find themselves so viscerally opposed to each other? What happens when neoliberal policy is not *the* key structure of a historical conjuncture but merely is an event that makes a pre-existing structure reverberate? How do local actors themselves experience the event of

neoliberalization as it enters into a scene of pre-existing conflicts? This paper examines how non-neoliberal political subjectivities can emerge from practices of aggressive reality testing in scenes of political confrontation and standoff, drawing on a Raymond Williams-inspired account of overlapping historical trajectories.

The paper is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork at Rouge University (2009–11), including in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, and *in situ* observation of campus politics. In a sense this project was conventional foreign fieldwork, undertaken as part of my doctoral studies; I was a linguistic and national outsider to my French research sites. But my research also had a more reflexive and critical component, informed by an earlier era's "reflexive turn" and by a growing subfield of anthropology of higher education (which I detail below). Thus, I was also a partial or potential insider in the French academic field, perfectly recognizable to most French interlocutors as a American doctoral student. While the paper focuses strictly on a French case, it also has a comparative, critical significance. For me, and I suspect for many in my generation of twenty-first-century U.S.-trained academics, the practices called "neoliberal" have rarely seemed like a discernible event. Hypercompetition, auditing, self-marketing, precarity, and corporatized management were already standard parts of the atmosphere when I began my undergraduate education in August 2000. But in the French case, where neoliberal policy constituted a more recently discernible event, we can start to decenter not just our analytic categories but also, perhaps, a larger North American collective experience of academic life. In what follows, I write in a deliberately dense and narrative style in hopes of immersing Anglophone readers in an unfamiliar political culture. It is not necessary that readers should sympathize personally with these post-1968 French left politics. They need only agree that their very unruliness is ethnographically significant, out of sync with the "spirit of the times" and so deserving analysis.

History, Subjectivity, and Neoliberalization

Today it is a scholarly commonplace that neoliberal governance is not a homogenous global paradigm and that it does not get imposed as a straightforward, linear process. But if we do not believe that neoliberalization is a form of linear modernization, the conceptual question remains: What *is* our theory of the structure of academic history? Broadly speaking, critical scholarship on "neoliberalism" in higher education has developed a double research agenda. On one hand, it has documented the transnational—often global—breadth of neoliberal policies and practices, including the spread of entrepreneurial "academic capitalism," audit cultures, rising student debt, deregulation, quasi-privatization, and precaritization of labor (e.g. Ivancheva 2015, Shore and Wright 2015). On the other hand, it has revealed the immense variability of what Aihwa Ong rightly terms a "migratory technology of governing" (2007, 5), whose effects are a product of their encounter with historical, national, and political contexts (e.g. Greenwood 2009, Mitchell 2006, Shore 2010). Neither the global reach of neoliberal governance nor its local polymorphism in context are in doubt; but just how do we theorize the relationship between the two? Or the relationship between neoliberalism and other social formations?

One promising structural approach descends conceptually from Raymond Williams' account of changing modes of production (1977). As Williams observes, such modes always overlap, and each has its own historical trajectory, such that at any given moment, a particular mode may be "emergent," "dominant," or "residual." Many scholars of neoliberal academia thus hold generally that neoliberal governance constitutes our "emergent" or perhaps newly "dominant" institutional mode, which has integrated uneasily with

more "residual" academic modes such as the traditional faculty guild model. Katharyne Mitchell, for instance, has observed that European higher education is caught between an increasingly dominant neoliberal mode of governance and a subordinate but lingering "social democratic impulse" (2006, 392). In the New Zealand case, Cris Shore notes that successive phases of neoliberalization "have been 'added on' to each other in a cumulative, sedimentary fashion' (2010, 8). Alan Scott proposes a further typology of institutional reactions to neoliberal governance, ranging from "replacement" and "transformation" of prior systems in the British case to more ambiguous "stratification," "placation," and "reverse effects" (backfires) in the Austrian (2010, 513).[2] "All national university systems reveal the historical sediments that compose them," Scott and his colleagues noted in an earlier paper on the uneven Austrian transition from a post-1960s "democratized self-administration" toward a more neoliberalized "service-oriented proxy market" (Burtscher et al. 2006, 242).

A danger of this typological or "modal" analysis, though, is that we might come to regard the immediate precursor to neoliberal academic production as having been a singular, homogeneous "sedimentary layer." Yet just as neoliberal governance is polymorphic, multiple, and even contradictory, so too, for instance, were its broadly social-democratic predecessors in Europe. It is not just, as Scott or Shore have noted, that the traces of many previous institutional modes linger like archaeological layers. Rather, what looks in hindsight like a post-1960s "social democratic" moment was itself, at least in French public universities, fundamentally bifurcated, as an extended study of Rouge University will reveal. To make sense of President Morel getting chased across campus, we need a theory of how neoliberalization becomes an *event* that intervenes in an existing historical structure (Sahlins 1985). And thus: an event that reshapes pre-existing systems of political conflict. In the case I will examine here, political dynamics were poorly modeled by either a direct and linear or a more complex (gradual, overlapping, polymorphic, embedded, assemblage-based, contradictory, etc.) account of neoliberalization. Instead, as this paper will show, neoliberalization was only the spark that exacerbated and reshaped a prior conflict between conflicting models of campus democracy.

This revised historical framework in turn enables us to question a common assumption of the neoliberalization literature: that neoliberal structures generally create neoliberal subjectivities. Lawrence Berg, Edward Huijbens, and Henrik Larsen propose that "neoliberalism in the academy is part of a wider system of anxiety production," where intolerable levels of stress keep the workforce in line (2016, 11). Bonnie Urciuoli documents neoliberal skills discourses that "[reform] worker subjectivity through inculcation of those technologies of self that support profit interests" (2008, 224). Cris Shore and Susan Wright have argued that audit cultures "encourage people to think of themselves as calculating, responsible, self-managing subjects" (2015, 421). Previously, Shore has noted that "in the contemporary neoliberalized multiversity… conflicting institutional visions and managerial agendas are producing increasingly schizophrenic academic subjects" who are caught between incoherent ideals, such as commercialization vs. Humboldtian idealism (2010, 28). Of course I agree with these scholars that neoliberal policies *can* produce anxious, calculating, radically incoherent subjects. But do they always? As Wright notes at one point, "People do not always accept the redefinition of their institutions… Nor do they always adopt the subject positions which policies offer them" (Wright 2005, 7).

Thus in the scene that opened this paper, the protesting campus worker was not anxious, calculating, disciplined, or particularly schizophrenic. Rather, she was angry, outspoken, unruly, and openly critical of the status quo. Tellingly, she insisted again and again that her antagonists were "completely cut off from reality." At Rouge University, I

found that neoliberal reforms very rarely culminated in a calculating, disciplined pragmatism. Instead, neoliberal policy created internal conflicts which soon got out of hand, producing subjects in epistemic crisis. In political confrontations at Rouge University, I saw repeated accusations of "surrealism," as subjects felt that their sense of institutional reality was threatened, which led them to reorient themselves around a practice that I will call *reality testing*. In the conclusion of this paper, I will reconsider reality testing as a scene of historical experience and subject formation during the event of neoliberalization. But first I want to document the conflict between direct and representative democracies at Rouge University, and the story of how this conflict erupted into overt confrontations.

The Post-1960s Clash of Campus Democracies at Rouge University

The history of my field site demonstrates that in France the post-1960s "social democratic" system never conformed to a single political model. Rather, it was fundamentally a place where opposing political cultures came into conflict. Rouge University is a public university of about 22,000 students in the Paris region. It was constructed in 1968 as an "experimental university center" in response to the famous protests of that May–June (Soulié 2012). At its inception, the university housed then-unorthodox disciplines like Computer Science, Film, and Linguistics; it welcomed nontraditional students such as those without high school diplomas; and it was a hotbed of left-wing political radicalism, constantly in hot water with the national Education Ministry. Initially situated east of Paris in the Bois de Vincennes, it was subsequently relocated to the working-class northern *banlieue* (urban outskirts) of Paris. Like so many other urban public universities, its facilities were cramped and ill-maintained, and its staff overworked and underresourced, though its hallways and cafeterias often bustled with conviviality. Its undergraduate student population had become increasingly racially marked and working class, mirroring the large North and Sub-Saharan African originating populations in its environs. Its graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences tended to attract a more far-flung student population, ranging from bohemian artists to postcolonial intellectuals seeking French credentials. During my fieldwork, it still remained a markedly left-wing space, the campus entrance often flanked by student banners.

Although there was a great diversity of political groups on campus, including everything from Palestine solidarity and Trotskyist groups to feminist and immigrant organizers, I found that the university's internal politics were organized around a durable clash between *direct democracy* and *representative democracy*. Each of these political traditions was deeply institutionalized within post-1960s French university culture; each had its own key actors, its own histories, sources of energy and momentum, rituals, and organizational forms. Direct democracy thrived on moments of institutional conflict and protest (Geay 2009), employed tactics of obstruction like strikes and barricades, made decisions in a French mass meeting format called "General Assembly" (*assemblée générale*), and selected leaders through mass acclaim on the basis of their eloquence and skill at mobilizing crowds. The majority of its participants were students, particularly student activists (*militants*), but it often included politically engaged faculty and staff as well, who implicitly suspended their status and met students on an egalitarian political footing.

The university's mode of representative democracy, on the other hand, was based on a system of council governance that had initially been established by the November 1968 Faure law and acquired its general modern form with the 1984 Savary law, which established three governing councils: a Scientific Council, which dealt with research and curriculum; a Student and University Life Council that addressed student affairs; and

an Administration Council (CA), which had the last say and handled budgetary, legal, and organizational issues. Under the Savary system, the CA had thirty to sixty members (40-45 percent faculty, 20-25 percent students, 20-25 percent outside members, and 10-15 percent campus staff); an assembly of all three councils elected a university president (who had to be of French nationality and a permanent faculty member) for a five-year term. The ensuing mode of campus governance was thus decidedly faculty dominated. It lacked the corporate- and donor-oriented boards of trustees and dominant executive powers that have long characterized U.S. research universities. The university presidency was a symbolically important but comparatively weak office, because most major policy choices required ratification by one council or another (cf. Mignot-Gérard 2003). Election to these councils was thus at the heart of campus politics, as faculty, students, and staff affiliated with various "electoral lists" on the ballot, which were organized around common policy platforms or on behalf of student or staff unions (which functioned at times like political parties).

This system was thrown into crisis in 2007, when the newly elected Sarkozy government passed a major university reform law, called "Liberties and Responsibilities of the Universities" or "LRU." The law sought to make universities, whose back-office administrative functions had largely been managed centrally by the Ministry of Higher Education, more autonomous in terms of budgets and human resources, and it increased the discretionary powers of the elected campus presidents vis-a-vis the elected councils. Broadly, these reforms paralleled the Danish "self-owning universities," whose rise has lately been chronicled by Susan Wright and Jakob Williams Ørberg (2008). Crucially, by forcing French universities to compete against each other for status and public resources, the Sarkozy reforms reshaped the structures of political conflict in the university system. Under the previous system of council governance, the public university system had been a relatively uniform national institution. Policy questions had often been settled by collective bargaining at the national level, where staff and student unions were recognized as official interlocutors, and faculty and students could identify as members of national "corporate bodies" (Descombes 2009). Under the Sarkozy reforms, however, the option of acting as a corporate body became structurally less available. As autonomization played out differently on different campuses, universities were set against each other, forced to merge with each other, or thrown into acute budget crisis.

The law was widely protested, though it largely withstood the protests (Thorkelson 2014). Critics observed that far from freeing public universities from the state apparatus, LRU-style university autonomy had amplified state power over the university system. As the political economist Annie Vinokur described this new mode of neoliberal management:

> The new State-*strategist* must no longer *make* [*faire*], i.e. produce public services itself, but rather *make them get made* [*les faire-faire*] by 'operating' agents, for whom it fixes objectives, establishes a system of rewards and punishments, sets up external procedures of control (2008, 78).

Universities thus increasingly became "operating agents" of the state, rewarded when they met contractualized performance targets (Musselin 2004). According to a professor of Italian at Rouge University who was also president of a national faculty activist group:

> The problem is that the LRU law is organizing the incongruous marriage of the worst of centralizing authoritarianism... and the worst of corporate and market logics applied ineffectively and displaced onto the public service of research and higher education.

We can begin to analyze the resulting institutional situations by drawing on Scott's modes of institutional change. After 2007, Rouge University increasingly blended its traditional system of council governance (what Scott would term "democratized self-administration") with a newly corporate administrative apparatus, whose ballooning responsibilities included real estate, fundraising, human resources, and information technology. In Scott's terms, this was indeed a scene of "stratification" and "placation," as the university tried to mediate between old and new political systems.

However, if we look historically, "democratized self-administration" itself had always been a space of conflict and division. Jean-Phillippe Legois and Charles Soulié have shown that even at this university's inception, in the 1968–71 period at its original Vincennes campus, there were already conflicts between "student power" and the reality of faculty administrative predominance, between what the far left called *cogestion* (co-management) and *autogestion* (self-management). This often boiled down to clashes between the more authoritarian PCF (French Communist Party) and other left groups, frequently Maoist and Trotskyist.

> At the start of Vincennes, the "right" was represented by the Communists, or the "revisos" as the "leftists" called them. These "revisos" served as a foil to the majority of the Center, and by their very existence offered the advantage… of furnishing a unifying principle that was convenient for a diverse population—of students and teachers alike—whose interests were recognizably divergent. But a number of teachers held views that were more moderate, liberal in the academic sense, corporatist, or quite simply right-wing (as in law for example), but really could not make them known publicly, in a context marked by a strong political intolerance and by practices inspired in part by the Chinese cultural revolution. This gave rise to a number of early and silent departures.
> [Soulié 2012, 199n44]

Legois further argues that "From its summer creation, the Experimental University Center of Vincennes was essentially an affair of teachers. It was teachers who imagined the Vincennes project" (2012, 265). Indeed, I found in the field that as the early Vincennes faculty and staff had aged and become an "old guard," they had constructed a sort of myth around the university's first decade at the Vincennes campus, a radical heritage that remained consequential in campus politics forty years later. In 2005, one English Literature professor wrote in a faculty survey that the university's greatest weakness was "the ambient mythomania (people still believe it's the age of Vincennes)." For their part, student radicals around 2009–11 denounced the "depoliticizing" myth of Vincennes, which was sometimes used to delegitimize more current "struggles." Was Vincennes a utopia to memorialize or a past to transcend through new revolts? This utopian heritage problem constituted a cultural context for the irresolvable struggles between the faculty-dominated council democracy and the more militant, student-dominated General Assemblies. To comprehend these struggles, we turn to examine the Morel era on campus.

The seeds of Conflict under a Modernizing President

On October 30, 2006, Pascal Morel had been elected president of Rouge University by a vote of the three governing councils. A law professor, at 36 years old, he was the youngest president of any French university and was supported by a diverse coalition of faculty called Rouge University Otherwise. Morel's coalition ranged from left-wing activist faculty to more senior "establishment" figures, some close to the French Communist Party. The coalition advocated principles such as collegiality, collectivity, transparency,

public debate, and democratization, and by 2008, they would pride themselves on having greatly improved the campus climate, contrasting themselves with Morel's predecessor, Matthieu Vendange, whose projects, they said, "were only memorable for their insolvency and irrealism." According to one activist professor, life under Vendange had been irregular in the extreme:

> *Professor:* The whole thing was baked into an affective, lovey-dovey behavior where everybody would kiss everybody else or sleep with everybody else. Yeah, there was a fair amount of incestuous, symbolically incestuous sexual activity and links, very close friendships, but on the other hand, nothing was managed through process or institutional means. It was all personal relationships, charismatic authority—I mean, a union should have been a place where people said, "Look, this is not the way to operate. You have umpteen thousand students, umpteen hundred employees; you don't just function by kissing each other on the cheek and going to bars and getting drunk together and making decisions that way." That's not workable, and some people are getting the shaft because of that. […] By the 2000s, corruption had been spreading at Rouge University. […] Lots of the activity at Rouge University in terms of accounting was embezzling, pure and simple.

> *Eli*: The money couldn't have amounted to very much.

> *Professor:* No, but they pillaged it. It was "take the money and run."

Vendange and his crowd were both ineffective and corrupt, and would protect their own interests. So by the mid-2000s, the place had degenerated into the metaphorical equivalent of dons without the guns. These were mafia chiefs controlling their small kingdom and living the life. […] So this was the revolt which pushed Morel into power. There was a legend—which may not be a legend—that Vendange said, at the first Administration Council where Vendange ceded power to Morel, that the elections were not supposed to go that way. Meaning that they had stuffed the ballot boxes, which was widely assumed. But they made the mistake of having the election over two days, so they could only stuff them on the evening of the first day. Everybody came to vote on the second day—

> *Eli*: And they voted for Morel.
> *Professor*: And they voted for Morel. As a result, Morel won, which was highly unexpected.

Morel thus took office as a modernizing reformer. His administration turned away from the previous era's "affective politics" toward a more technocratic, rationalized administrative style, which turned the Vincennes political heritage into a set of highly aestheticized publicity images. Morel rapidly constructed a campus publicity apparatus, with a new website, a shiny campus magazine, and a 2010 exhibition memorializing the university's radical history. Yet this modernizing project became increasingly controversial as Morel found himself thrust into debates over the Sarkozy university reforms. "No one expected the law in 2007," Morel said.

Initially, the LRU law had offered the university a common enemy. Staff and students participated heavily in the first round of protests against the 2007 Sarkozy university reforms, and Morel was a frequent participant in street marches during the 4-month university strike of spring 2009 (Thorkelson 2014). But afterward this unity fell apart in the face of a series of weighty choices that the reforms imposed on the campus. Early in his term, Morel had successfully led the renewal of the campus's 2009–12 contract with the Ministry, elaborating an internationalist vision for Paris as a "University-World." But the

pressure of the coming contract renewal in 2013, the advent of a new system of institutional regrouping and quasi-mergers, the incitement to compete for new forms of financing and stratified recognition, and above all, the passage to increased administrative autonomy—officially named the "shift to Enlarged Responsibilities and Competences" (*passage aux Responsabilités et Compétences Elargies* or *passage aux RCE)*—would lead to increasing political rifts on campus, overwhelming any previous shadow of political unity. What had been a national protest movement collapsed into local infighting. In short, the ongoing event of neoliberalization transformed the longstanding structural divide in Rouge University's politics into a series of live confrontations.

Direct Democracy without Mass Backing

If we look in detail at the practices of "direct democracy" at Rouge University, we find that the event of neoliberalization often produced a political experience of *stuckness* (Berlant 2011), yielding moments of collective paralysis where nothing was getting figured out. As the academic year began in autumn 2009, the path towards confrontation at Rouge University was set in motion. Hoping to continue the protest momentum generated during the spring 2009 university movement, general assemblies—which were the ritual form at the heart of local direct democracy—were held on campus on October 13, October 26, November 17, and November 24. They attempted to sort through the political issues facing the university, to reach consensus on their priorities, and to remobilize their political coalition. But in fact, activists were uncertain about how to proceed. At one October assembly, there was talk of the "need for outside visibility" and of the need to "remobilize and recover the convergence between professors and students." "We absolutely must keep fighting against this reform," declared one militant professor. "A continued resistance will demand a minimum of organization among us. It's a shame to lose our unity." Yet as I observed the assembly, I jotted in my notebook that "nothing was really decided... The student majority in the room is overwhelmingly silent, sitting in clusters of friends, staring ahead and down at the professors at the front of the room, as if waiting for political agency to be offered to them."

After an unsuccessful attempt to revive public protest in central Paris that winter (Thorkelson 2016), general assemblies were held again on March 3, March 11, and March 17, drawing on a student-led list of demands. This list combined 23 political propositions, ranging from administrative requests for study space and visa support to sweeping demands for "higher salaries," "lower rent," and the "opening of a self-managed social student space." When the March 3 AG did meet, it again had many proposals but few decisions. While there was a shared sense that new forms of struggle were needed, there was little consensus on what they would amount to. "We're trying to continue," said someone from the far-left student union SUD Etudiant, "but we have to find new forms of action, not necessarily outright blockades, but common meals, working with foreign students, mobilizing against precarity—we have to make sure all these efforts go in the same direction."

Increasingly, there were calls for political simplification. "We have to transform the list of demands into a platform and then into action." "We have too many General Assemblies, we can't tell what issue is the most important." "It's always like this after major mobilizations," complained an anticapitalist activist, "we always have AGs with this sort of overly abstract, intellectual discussion, and all the differences come out between our different unions and organizations." After the meeting, students were asked to sign up for a new "mobilizing committee," but the room rapidly cleared out.

In this neoliberalizing moment, campus direct democracy displayed two major features. First, it suffered from a decline in political agency, struggling to find unity among different activist groups, to mobilize the noncommittal student masses, or to set the campus political agenda. Second, it systematically produced experiences of stuckness and impasse, as activists enacted participatory processes (like General Assemblies) without achieving clear results. Rather than developing "neoliberal subjectivities," frustrated activists experienced the event of neoliberal policies as a temporal hiatus in their preexisting forms of agency. The end of the spring 2009 university movement made direct democracy harder to practice, because it was premised ideologically on mass support and temporally on an experience of power through growth and "mobilization." I watched as student activists grew conflicted about their own specialized policy knowledge: they were well aware that their fellow students were uninformed about internal campus debates, but they found it hard to advance a critical agenda without mass backing. Yet it did not seem to me that this frustration made my activist interlocutors into "contradictory" or "schizophrenic" subjects, in Shore's sense of people facing incompatible imperatives (2010). Rather, they represented themselves as relatively stable political subjects who happened to be facing a confusing temporal blockage after the end of the mass "movement." Ironically, their opponents in the campus leadership faced quite similar problems.

Representative Democracy without Collective Backing

An ambivalence about institutional expertise and mass backing also set in among the faculty coalition that had elected Morel, as they discovered that running a university was a large endeavor. By June 2011, one correspondent reported that the Morel administration felt overwhelmed with the requirements of managing a newly autonomous university, particularly in the aftermath of increasingly angry claims from administrative staff:

> I recently had an interesting conversation with Louise Dupont [who would soon succeed Morel as president] about the internal political situation at Rouge University. Where in substance, she explained to me that, as far as the demands of the administrative staff go, they don't really know what to do. And that in fact, no one had taught them the craft involved in running a campus, budgets, "human resources," etc. In short, they have the sense of being amateurs at management.

This seems unsurprising, because French academics (like their counterparts elsewhere) generally have no direct training in university administration. The Sarkozy-era devolution of managerial tasks from the Ministry to individual campus administrations forced faculty leadership to develop managerial competences that they had never previously needed. Journalists reported a wave of contracts with private consulting firms during this period, in part to help the universities secure future government funding.

As Morel's term as president came to an end in late 2011, his supporters were increasingly lucid about the uncertainties they faced. Consider one faculty leader's statement from an internal coalition meeting:

> We're committed to democratic principles... but we shouldn't delude ourselves about the fact that, if we're elected [to succeed Morel], we'll be in an extremely difficult situation, on account of the multiple contradictory constraints. To develop democracy, it's not enough to communicate and to inform; it's when we work together to set up projects and undertakings together that things happen—which doesn't stop us from trying to have better coordination between the [administrative] councils.

> We haven't known how to work with the administrative staff [*BIATOSS*]: the nature of the jobs themselves are changing, both ours and theirs. We were at the forefront of fighting against the LRU: we lost, but we were at the forefront… We have to find new ways of federating those universities that are currently hoping for a certain form of resistance… There are elected representatives and a collective: we've been in street protests together… but the links between the representatives and the collective need rebuilding, because there's no longer any collective that's backing us. We'll have to talk together about a clear and common objective. It's true that our colleagues need to be informed of what we're doing in the councils, but the people in the councils also need to be informed of what people are going through.

Thus the campus leadership privately acknowledged the difficulty of its situation, the tensions with administrative staff that we saw at the start of this paper, and the breakdown of political unity on campus. Yet this private recognition did little to alleviate conflict or its sources. Like the General Assembly crowd, the campus leadership developed an ambivalent relationship to its own political posture. Lacking technical skills in management, here they also evinced nostalgia for the "collective backing" that they formerly had during the 2009 protest movement. Yet this desire for collective backing was also potentially contradictory, as they nevertheless hoped to have their own views and analyses win out. An activist professor diagnosed the ambivalent relationship to direct democracy that characterized the faculty leadership at this point:

> They're victimized because they are doing the right thing by the people and the people do not recognize them. It's a constant with these people, that they come to people with these perfectly reasonable solutions, and they're the only options anyway, and people *boo* them. And that feeds into their scorn of democracy.

Unfortunately for the leadership, the "problem" of democracy only grew during this period, as campus conflicts became increasingly public and publicized. The leadership group, which largely controlled the university administration through the elected council system, was not at an impasse in the same way as the direct democracy crowd. It was generally still able to control the campus agenda, if not always to dictate solutions; it was able to impose policy choices, if not always to make them popular. For instance, the transition to a new student information database, named Apogée, elicited prolonged protest from the administrative staff. Yet like so many political actors, the leadership sought to control not just institutional power but also institutional consciousness, and to create a sense of political momentum. It did face contradictory imperatives in Shore's sense, but it nevertheless presented itself as a subject seeking coherence and integrity. That is why it was threatened by moments of temporal impasse and outright confrontation, which put its legitimacy in question. Let us consider a moment where the leadership was indeed publicly booed, where institutional reality started to seem "surreal."

Institutional Impasse and Surreal Experience

In April 2010, campus politics focused on the problem of "enlarged competences" that the Ministry of Higher Education was imposing. Earlier that spring, some in campus leadership had already proposed that the university should shift to enlarged competences in 2011, that is a year before the 2012 deadline set by the ministry, on the grounds that technical compliance would afford greater freedom of institutional maneuver. That April 6 saw the release of two dueling political leaflets: the opposition's "Rouge

University takes a great step forward towards the abyss that is calling it," and the faculty leadership's more measured "About the *passage aux RCE*, and the questions it raises." The oppositional text, penned by an activist anthropologist, complained that the university suffered "from a schizoid anti-utopian pragmatism... [and] from a tendency to historical self-satisfaction with an ultra-conformist thrust." Meanwhile, the leadership text, written by a faculty union leader, suggested that a 2011 transition to enlarged competences might be expedient; it quipped that the "longest" resistance was not necessarily the "best." In short, the marginal critics resorted to strident ideology critiques, while the leadership advocated pragmatism.

These dueling leaflets resolved nothing, and President Morel convened a public meeting on April 14 to debate the issue. While the lecture hall was far from full and few students attended, the meeting did bring the university leadership face to face with its critics, who began the debate with hostile questioning about the leadership's strategy for "keeping power." "We are absolutely not attached to power," Morel declared. But the waves of accusation continued:

> *Anthropology professor #1*: My impression, as I'm listening, with your worry about keeping the possible damage to a minimum, is that you are on track to do a maximum of damage...
> *Film professor*: The question, are we going to the *RCE* next year or not, is a false question. And the argument telling us that it's a good question is surreal [*surréaliste*]...
> Psychology professor: In French higher education law in France, it's not only universities [i.e. there are other legal forms of educational institution]… What other alternatives would be thinkable, since the knife isn't at our throat yet, we still have two years?
> *Anthropology professor #2*: I don't understand why we're celebrating 40 years of Vincennes at the same time as we're being told that it's vital and necessary to kill ourselves off… and we don't even remember that it's possible to construct an experimental center. That would cost us dearly, but much less dearly in terms of our principles.
> *Computer Science professor*: The fears that we won't be a university anymore in 2012 [*if we don't transition to enlarged competences*], they're off base. First of all, we'll no longer be a university once we've switched to the RCE. Even if we keep the label... we will be a new structure, I'd insist on that… What will we be? That's a question that ought to be asked. Is it worth surviving in such a form?
> *Philosophy professor*: For me the real question that's raised here... is about the debate we're having here: is it a worthwhile debate or not? The debate on 2011/2012, I maintain that it's a debate that's really clouding the question and that is dividing us for nothing... Mr. President, this anticipation quite simply sets us at odds with each other over nothing.[3]

This interpersonal impasse was a space of active critique, and three distinct critical positions emerged. The first, purely tactical, was that the leadership's well-meaning plan to help the university was in fact practically unsound and would end up making things worse, thus alleging that the leadership had a bad institutional analysis. Second, there was a more utopian proposal to give up the status of a standard public university, based on refusing the *passage aux RCE* altogether, in hopes of returning to a 1970s-esque exceptional status outside the usual system of university regulations. (This sort of utopianism went along with sentimental appeals to whether the institution would still *deserve* the label "university" and to whether it was still "worth surviving.") Finally, a more metapragmatic critique asserted that the debate itself was mis-framed and—as the Philosophy professor put it—itself divisive.

This last criticism elicited a more direct official response.

Pascal Morel: "I'll just clarify… that's a real... truly, the 2011/2012 debate has no interest. Are we ready [*for the RCE*]? Me, I have no idea. All I know is that right now—"

Philosophy professor (interrupting):: "You're the one who launched into this debate. Mr. President, it's your intuition that got this debate started over 2011/2012, it wasn't us, there's no point in being here. It came from you, and then from a small circle, and then afterwards it spread more and more… 2011/2012, it didn't fall from the sky!"

Pascal Morel: "Well actually it's our responsibility and it's entirely to our credit to raise questions. The question has simply been raised!"

Brouhaha in the room.

Faculty union leader, sitting beside Morel: "No one ever said we were ready. No one has said that."

A great burst of laughter rang out, since this speaker had written the pamphlet that proposed an early transition to enlarged competences.

Union leader (unhappily): "Oh, this is surreal!" [*Ah c'est surréaliste!*]

Here we arrive at a moment of political breakdown that sums up the impasses of Rouge University's political configuration in this period. Faced with faculty contestation of their framing of the political situation, the campus leadership became defensive, trying to withdraw and evacuate their own prior metapragmatic labor (Silverstein 1993), which had previously worked to constitute the debate as it was. But Morel's union associate was a lightning rod for the opposition, and when he sought defensively to reframe the leadership's position ("No one ever said we were ready..."), he only unleashed mass ridicule. Thus, having set out to be as pragmatic as possible, the leadership ended up feeling that the situation was "surreal."

The *surreal*, in this context, seemed to designate what was (almost literally) *more than realistic*: "Below (psychologically) and beyond (geographically) any ordinary reality there existed another reality" (Clifford 1981, 542). "Surreal" got used here to describe a "pragmatic" scene of political calculation going off the rails but not in a happy direction. Here, finding the debate out of control, the Rouge University leadership reacted with indignation, as if offended that its very framing of the political situation had been refused—that they had essentially been booed with laughter. This incredulous sense of surrealism was elsewhere reciprocated by their interlocutors.

I interpret these allegations of "surrealism" as discursive indexes of local actors' temporal and epistemological experience in this moment of political impasse. Note, first, that these "opponents of neoliberalism" were at an impasse here *because they wanted to refuse the temporal sequence of the government reforms* but could not agree how to do so. Their lack of agreement led to a face-to-face confrontation where, in essence, their political frustrations got redirected into interpersonal conflict. (Like most universities, Rouge University had its histories of interpersonal conflict.) Second, this interpersonal conflict put institutional reality in question by threatening the appearance of institutional stability, practical momentum, and minimal decorum that normally characterized public university events. Ultimately, the confrontation with an intolerable but seemingly irresistible reform project left these actors feeling, not dominated by neoliberal policies or temporalities per se, but just at a loss. This aggressive reaction to being at a loss is what I now want to call *reality testing*.

Reality testing and non-neoliberal subjectivities

What kind of subjectivity was taking shape when someone exclaimed that "NOTHING'S WORKING"? Or when someone exclaimed that "this is surreal"? Both of these claims seemed unproductive from the point of view of instrumental action. President Dupont, who succeeded Morel, described such confrontations as "tiresome episodes." Yet we can also picture these angry exclamations as revealing a non-neoliberal form of political subjectivity that emerges from a circuitous, embodied, realtime practice of reality testing.

I borrow the notion of reality testing from psychoanalysis, where it designates an ongoing practice of keeping subjectivity grounded in social reality: "The ego calls upon its perceptual ability continuously to probe the environment… and to collate this information with its stored memories as a means of preparation for dealing with the environment" (Novey in Hurvich 1970, 301). Because the link between subjects and worlds is never guaranteed, "reality testing" is a means of checking this link for loose connections. We can disregard the term's clinical function of picking out psychotic subjects who (ostensibly) stop testing their perceptions against reality. Instead, I would redeploy "reality testing" to describe a more historically specific process: where political subjects in an impasse react by aggressively "probing" the contours of their circumstances, and thereby test, verify, and reconfigure their social worlds. Berger and Luckmann famously argued that "reality maintenance" is ongoing, even in moments of crisis, where it may become more ritualized (1967, 175). But when subjects do not have an available genre or ritual for reality maintenance, they must still test reality with whatever subjective resources they do have (Berlant 2011). The "surreal" confrontations at Rouge University suddenly make sense if we see them as scenes where consensus reality had broken down and actors had begun to prod their environment to see how it would respond.

Thus "nothing's working!" and "this is surreal!" were not just unpragmatic exclamations. They served to reframe reality as a problem when previously it had been more stable. Consider a few more lines from our initial dialogue:

CA member (quietly): I don't know who you're talking about, as a matter of fact.

Theatre professor (shouting): But it's you I'm talking about. I'll take the liberty of addressing myself to you, because all the same you're a member! Elected! Of a council! Who is supposed to represent the community I'm part of—that WE have been part of for years. With a history. The history. The pretended idea of Rouge University. The originality of Rouge University. The singularity of Rouge University. Who made this history? The managers? Who haven't even been here ten years. *Non!* I don't recognize their right. To speak in the name of a history that they not only haven't lived through, but what's more, have the gall to claim an identity only to betray it a year later?

CA member: Once again I'm listening, but I still don't know who you're addressing.

Theatre professor: You've been elected.

CA member: Yes.

Theatre professor: To the Administration Council.

CA member: I never miss a meeting. It's a lot of work.

Theatre professor: I'm convinced you are diligent. I'm convinced you are diligent. Perfectly.

CA member: And what is it that people are expecting from me? What's the bad decision I voted for? You have to look at actual things. Otherwise, where are we? We're in the interpretation of an image.

Theatre professor: We are not in the interpretation of images!

Staff representative (shouting): I'm on the staff of this university and for more than two years work has made me sick. The CA is completely cut off from reality in this university…

Again, I call this a scene of *reality testing*—not an emic term, but I hope an analytically fruitful one—because it centered on aggressive allegations about being "in the interpretation of images" or "cut off from reality." These moments of reality testing, I emphasize, constituted a narrowly focused intervention, not a totalizing cosmology: local actors were not critical of social realism *at large*, as in French theories of society as a mass spectacle or a hyperreal simulation (Debord 2004; Baudrillard 1981). Instead, like the generic social subjects described by Berger and Luckmann, actors at Rouge University generally presumed that social reality was a potentially stable entity, not an irredeemably problematic construct. This general expectation of a stable social reality meant, in turn, that reality testing could serve as a political tactic. If political realism was normative, local actors could criticize those who failed to live up to it. Thus questioning someone's grasp on reality was a standard political move in France; this particular scene thus presupposed broader collective norms of political realism and genres of debate (Thorkelson 2014).

But in this context, reality testing also enabled actors to experiment with being non-neoliberal subjects. Their very conflicts embodied a refusal to be the "excellent," entrepreneurial subjects that the Sarkozy government hoped to produce. The dialogue above suggests three key features of an emerging non-neoliberal subjectivity: aggression, collectivity, and passionately non-alienated labor. Thus in the above encounter, actors freely invoked a long collective history and a sense that their labor was an intrinsically valuable collective investment. "They haven't even been here ten years" was countered with "I never miss a meeting." Such utterances implied that longevity and hard work were at the heart of this community.

Yet this was not a placid community founded on surface consensus. Rather, its cultural continuity was premised on the public enactment of turmoil; visible anger, even aggression, was a traditional component of this activist culture. As these actors tested their unstable local realities, they were also testing *each other,* showing indecorous attachments and aggressions that were no doubt highly unprofessional by neoliberal standards. Still, even as they tested each other, they did not present themselves as autonomous neoliberal individuals but rather as collective delegates. The staff member spoke as a member of the staff, the CA member spoke as a member of his council, and the Theater professor spoke on behalf of "the community I'm part of." So while these actors were in conflict, their conflict was in no way a marketized, individualized competition. Instead, their mutual denunciations ("you're cut off from reality!") helped stabilize *non*-neoliberal subjectivities that were anchored in a local collectivity. Of course, not all these actors were enacting the same subjective form. The council member performed moderation, quite unlike his interlocutors' theatrical lividity. But both of these subjective stances were far removed from neoliberal policy discourses, premised on "a narrative that condemns the present and justifies an alternative future" (Wright 2005, 4).

French academics elsewhere were rethinking utopianism in this period (Thorkelson 2016), but reality testing was not a utopian politics. It was merely an inchoate strategy of aggressive persistence in the face of ambiguity, a scene of subjectivity formation which began when contrary historical projects collided. Yet I still hesitate to call this a paper about "resistance to neoliberalization" (and thus reproduce the cliché of "hegemony from above, resistance from below"), because again, these were always clashes between two political coalitions that each opposed neoliberalism. Perhaps any effective "resistance to neoliberalism" is apt to reopen old political wounds.

To return to our opening questions, we might conclude that it is possible, perhaps necessary, but not sufficient to read this case in terms of neoliberalization theory. The Rouge University case verifies Scott's finding that the "historical sediments" of earlier

academic modes do persist in the neoliberal present. It further shows that in the French case, the post-1960s "social democratic epoch" was organized not by a single dominant mode of practice but by a durable *clash* between opposed modes of political organization. The event of neoliberalization, in turn, does not necessarily *displace* these pre-existing modes of practice, even if it may cause new conflicts between them, which can culminate in face-to-face confrontations and political impasses.

Within the frame of neoliberalization theory, this case may seem a standard instance of New Public Management, according to which the French state apparatus should not *need* to intervene directly in local culture or activity. Rather, the state exercised power over Rouge University indirectly, by forcing actors constantly to negotiate new situations and dilemmas. Rouge University's trajectory exemplifies Annie Vinokur's analysis of the state as "strategist" and Isabelle Bruno's analysis of this mode of neoliberal indirection. In Bruno's analysis of European "knowledge economy" policies, she cites Foucault to the effect that neoliberal policy "acts not on the game's players, but on the game's rules." She then concludes that "the exercise of such a diffuse power does not offer its opponents the option of turning against a dominating government center. The flip side is that it lets resistance take hold at a multitude of points" (2010, 555).

Rouge University was one place in which the resistance did take hold. The "neoliberal order" never entirely set in at Rouge University during the period in question; the Sarkozy-era university reforms always had mixed results. A polished, rationalized administrative apparatus was successfully set in motion during the period in question, and the leadership did *try* to play the government's new games, maneuvering wildly to try to survive the new incentives and constraints of a neoliberalized regulatory environment. This in no way meant, however, that all internal structures of contestation were eradicated or that a monolithic corporatism set in. Rouge University's administration maintained its nominal commitments to the "Vincennois heritage," and even if left critics accused the administration of excessive compromise or mistaken calculations, the leadership nevertheless kept searching for niches in the evolving university landscape within which Rouge University might continue some version of its historical project. For their part, faculty and student radicals continued to organize against the local administration, and even if they were seldom particularly successful in their policy proposals, they maintained a degree of internal dissidence.

The more militant campus organizers tended to consider the post-2009 era a period of major political defeat. *RIEN NE VA*, NOTHING'S WORKING, was a description that could have applied to the internal contestation as well. "There aren't enough of us," one organizer remarked. After 2009, it proved essentially impossible to craft any sort of unifying ideological project on campus, and political struggle collapsed into administrative bargaining and bricolage, into what was often perceived as a perpetual scramble for survival. Nevertheless, all the political *forms* of direct democracy—the tracts, the General Assemblies, the threat of student occupations, the general repertoires of politicization—remained culturally and structurally available on campus in the years that followed, even if these politics were only practiced by a small minority.

Thus I would insist that even if the French state's neoliberal reforms created conflicts, crises, and major organizational adjustments, they did not immediately succeed in changing the available forms of political *culture*. This in turn suggests one reason to displace "neoliberalization" from the center of our ethnographic stories to their periphery—not to deny its existence but to question its centrality. If we momentarily relegate neoliberalization to the wings, we can then focus on *other* modes of political culture and conflict that organize contemporary academic institutions. In the case at hand, such a shift lets

us see that Rouge University's clashing democratic cultures are not mere "historical sediments." They remain culturally alive in the present.

But what, one might finally ask, is the broader political significance of this case, so far removed from the audit cultures or liberal politics that characterize much Anglo-American higher education? I surely do not view this left-wing French case as a prescriptive model for anyone. Its extreme conflictuality may well give pause to academics elsewhere who idealize democratic campus governance, or at least remind them that even a well-developed academic democracy is not a cure-all for a hostile economic and regulatory environment. But to those who view academic democracy as completely hollow and the neoliberal system as doxa, I insist that we cannot not *deny our coevalness* with this French case. In France, post-1968 academic democracy is not a fossil; it has persisted well into the twenty-first century. In fact this case shows that it is not just one living tradition but several. I would submit that council governance and direct democracy remain more viable as forms than they tend to appear. It is just that, as forms, they are never given once and for all. On the contrary, this case emphasizes that political forms get thrown into ambiguity by adverse political events, obliging their political subjects to test unfolding social realities and thereby reinvent themselves as subjects. But uncertain realities are a problem for neoliberal managers as well as for activists, and even the dominant neoliberal mode will become a residual social formation in due course. The interesting question is: What will come after? Perhaps new forms of academic democracy will emerge from these precursors.

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Notes

1. I have used pseudonyms for the site and the individuals concerned.
2. Scott rightly prefers the more specific term "New Public Management" to the more vague and polemical "neoliberalism," but I have opted to retain the latter term here to avoid a long exegesis of the differences between them.
3. Publicly circulated minutes of debate, April 14, 2010.

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