

WHY THE “COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL DE PHILOSOPHIE” IS A NUISANCE

I have often expressed, in presence of my friends philosophers from abroad, a violent opposition to the CIP, especially when these friends had been tempted into participation in its activities. I have myself adopted the rule of *never* participating in any of these activities, including when philosophers whom I respect are invited by this institution. This short note has been written to state my reasons.

First some things have to be recalled about the French academic and institutional context, which is most of the time ignored by our colleagues from abroad. Philosophy in France is taught in four kinds of institutions: in the *lycées*, at the level of secondary education; in the *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles*, which also belong to the lycées, but form a sort of semi-independent system of teaching, two years after the *baccalauréat*; it is taught in the *grandes écoles*, which students from the *classes préparatoires* enter after very competitive concourse examinations; finally philosophy is taught in the universities. Research in philosophy is done in mainly two kinds of institutions: the universities, and the Center of National Scientific Research (CNRS), which is independent from the universities (although in fact many of its teams are located in universities), and whose researchers are not required to teach (indeed they can in principle never teach for their whole career). Most of the *grandes écoles* (at least in the humanities) are supposed to prepare the students to the concourse examinations for secondary education teaching (*agrégation*). They include more and more research, but it is necessarily limited, since there are no more than four or five of them, whereas there are more than thirty philosophy departments in the universities. A figure should always be kept in mind: that the *grandes écoles* contain only 4% of the students of the whole system of superior education, but receive 30% of the total budget of the superior education.

This brief description suffices to indicate that what is known, in most superior education systems outside France as “The universities”, although they have in France the largest number of students, not only receive, proportionally, a lesser financial share than the “elite” formations of *grandes écoles* and *classes préparatoires*, but also are only partly responsible for the effort of research. The dual division between *grandes écoles* and universities at the level of teaching, and between the CNRS and the universities, is a permanent feature of the French superior education system. These divisions are, according to me, responsible for many of the tensions and difficulties that this system encounters. They create strong differences in status, style of work, and indeed self-images of the participants, not to mention the by-products of envy, frustrations, etc. felt by the actors of the system.

Another permanent feature of the French system — and obviously connected to the previous one— has been the successive creation of new institutions when the former ones seemed not to work. Thus at the end of the XIXth century the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes was created, later (just after the second war) the CNRS, and later such more or less independent institutions as the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales were created, not to mention the Collège de France created by François The First in order to counterbalance the Sorbonne. The creation of the “experimental university” of Vincennes Paris VIII in 1968, and more recently of the Institut Universitaire de France seemed to obey the same scheme.

The creation of the Collège International de philosophie in 1981, by the socialist government, seemed to follow the same logic. Some reknown (but marginal institutionally speaking) philosophers, like Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, who were dissatisfied with the university, decided to create a new centre. It would not allow degrees, and in this respect would not function like a university. Its members would not be appointed by the ministry of education, but by their peers. It would give mainly research seminars, and some courses, not sanctioned by exams.

And it would be “international”, that is it would try to promote philosophy not only at the hexagonal level, but one a larger, international scale.

At that time, a circular letter was sent to most university teachers and teachers of philosophy in lycées, in order to promote the CIP, asking them to contribute. I wrote in reply to Derrida that I might participate if the CIP were *really* international, and expressed reservations and doubts about its not being a university institution. But I had no objections to something like the Open University in the UK, if that was their model.

My doubts have been confirmed. After more than 15 years of existence, the CIP has proved to be international, but only in the sense that it has served to promote outside France what I take to be the most hexagonal products of philosophy, known elsewhere as “deconstruction” or “post-modernism”, or the other varieties of philosophical journalism that are prevalent in the media in France. When philosophers belonging to other traditions, such as analytic philosophy, have been invited, they have been associated with “post-analytic” philosophy, which is actually opposed to analytic philosophy. Most of the productions of the CIP have borne the mark of the most fashionable, superficial, and anti-academic kind of philosophy. When serious people happen to have been invited, they came back with the impression that nobody there knew anything about their work, and that their names had been used as hostages for the sake of pseudo-research. Indeed the only reason for their acceptance seems to have been that their trips and accommodation in Paris were generously paid.

The board of the College has changed many times, after the resignation of its founders, and after what seem to have been successive palace revolutions. No real consensus seems to have been reached about the aims of the institution, apart from the fact that it was doing “something different” from what happens elsewhere in philosophy in France.

Nevertheless, the CIP has managed to survive these many crises; today it receives no less than X(?) millions FF [according to a recent figure, I heard 3 million francs] for its functioning, it has an official journal (“rue Descartes”) published by the PUF, and even a collection of books. Its seminars are announced in *Le Monde*. It seems to be blooming.

But these are just surface facts, seen from the point of view of an outside observer, who has never been involved in any of the Collège activities. My bad opinion about the value of what is done in the CIP is no argument against its existence, although I do not think that the usual countermove — by what criteria do you judge it bad? what proves that your criteria are better? — is any good, for I believe that in philosophy too there are standards of work which are objective and which allow us to distinguish what is good from what is bad.

My main objections are institutional, and rest upon what I take to be what I would call the ethics of academic research.

1) Although it is most of the time composed of academics coming from the universities, or the CNRS, or of the Education Nationale, and although public money is given to the College, there is no control from the Ministry of Education over its functioning. Whereas research teams of the CNRS and the Universities are evaluated by committees, there is no such control over the activities of the College. As a result its choice of seminars and invitations is left to the decisions of the board, which, as far as I know, is not subject to any external control, although it often uses the names of renown international scholars (but who know nothing of the internal French situation) to gain legitimacy.

2) Since there are no entrance exams, nor degrees, the public is free to come as they wish, on the model of the Collège de France (indeed the CIP is a sort of poor-man’s Collège de France). It seems to be composed of a population similar to that which goes to the philosophy *cafés*, or various encounters that the French are fond of. But the Collège de France is a state institution. Its professors are chosen from the best academics in France, according to usual academic rules. No such thing with the CIP. I have mentioned the Open University in the UK, which seems to function

along similar lines as the CIP, and which seems to be at the service of similar needs. But as far as I know, the OU has had strong connections with the British universities, it has launched real curricula, and has been controlled publicly.

3) Everything might be in order if the members of the CIP accepted their marginal status, and did not aim at more than cultural agitation. But their behaviour shows that what they expect from this institution is something similar to the marks of ordinary academic respect. Some candidates who apply to university jobs often refer, in their CVs, to their “directions de programmes” or to their “participation to seminars” of the CIP, as if it were a normal evidence of their academic seriousness. I do not know whether they do that candidly, or out of a desire to smuggle in pseudo-degrees, but the fact is that they take their work to be equivalent to work done by usual academic standards. The problem is made worse by the fact that a number of academics collaborate with the CIP when they cannot find funds from their universities. They contribute in the legitimisation of the imposture.

4) I find that it is a true scandal that public money is given, under such conditions of loose control, to an institution the official objective of which is to demarcate itself from what is done in the universities, when at the same time academics are refused funds for their research activities, and try to survive with so many difficulties. Given the dispersion of institutions that I have described in the superior education system in France and the almost untractable problems that it has produced, the existence of the CIP reinforces this scattering of energies.

We should not blind our faces in front of what is at stake: it is the survival of philosophy in the universities, and the very possibility of the existence of departments which could be real counterparts of what exists elsewhere. The philosophers who really try, with their meagre means, to promote in the universities an authentically international research, conform to the usual academic standards, and who do their best for the formation of serious students, should oppose strongly an institution which only mimicks the normal rules and practices of the university, in order to promote the seducing image of a “free-spirited” philosophy. Indeed the CIP reinforces our philosophy colleagues abroad in their belief that France is only able to produce the most superficial kind of philosophy associated with the “French thinkers”. At a time when Sokal-type of criticisms of this form of bad philosophy (rightly) ridicules “the French”, the existence of a whole institution devoted to promoting precisely that kind of philosophy is a sort of intellectual suicide.

The blindness and the cynicism of the various governments (left or right) who have granted funds to the CIP, and did not dare to contest its existence in fear of petitions from “intellectuals” in newspapers (“pas de vagues”), or just because they have only contempt for philosophy and its productions, and think that whatever they do, it will produce the same result, is not to be forgotten. The CIP would not have existed if the French government had had a real university politics.

The fact that the CIP has occasionally helped some young researchers to do their work with some subsidies and encouragement, and that it has occasionally launched interesting conferences with the help of official academics coming from the university of the CNRS, or with the help of internationally respected philosophers, is no excuse. It just proves that in the state of intellectual under-development of our university system people are discouraged of getting help from the usual means and are ready to prostitute themselves in order to survive. The fact that the “standard” academics in France are often not creative and not respectful of the seriousness that is expected from them in any other country, is no excuse either. It is obvious that the CIP would not have existed if the university system, in particular in philosophy, had not been in a deep crisis. But the remedy to this crisis is not the maintaining of an institution which accentuates it.

Pascal Engel
 Université de Caen and IUF
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