

HARDSHIP

The lasting success of Sempé and Goscinny's *Le petit Nicolas*, the diary of a schoolboy from the sixties owes much to France's nostalgia of its schools, when there were neither islamic veils nor aggressions of teachers in class. This spring the rioters who occupied the Sorbonne intended to mimic the feats of their elders of 1968, but they only succeeded at vandalism. Is French education a thing of the past? The Third Republic was called "la république des professeurs", but where are the professors today? French universities fare badly in international rankings. They have been compared to those of the Third World. No wonder: the Grandes Ecoles, attended only by 5% of the students, get 30% of the total budget of superior education. Do these fare better? No, because they do not have enough critical mass. Recently laudable but laughable attempts were done to bring children from the suburbs to the prestigious Great Schools. "Republican elitism" has been replaced by patrician privilege. Everyone agrees with the diagnosis, but nothing is done, and candidates in the next presidential election prudently avoid the issue. No one has any interest in changing the system, but there is a simpler explanation. The school mythology in France has always been a story of hardship. We French believe that the more our campuses look like slums, the less our academics have means, the more we flourish. And we do: our mathematicians, who need only computers and

paper, are among the best in the world. So if abstract reason wins, there is hope.