

‘STUDYING IN A *PRÉPA* AS SURVIVING IN HELL’:
UNTOLD EPISODES FROM A MYTHICAL MEDIA TALE

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‘Studying in a *prépa* is surviving in hell’. The depiction of the French *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles*—technically named by the CPGE acronym in the French educational system, usually called ‘*prépas*’—as a highly selective and destructive system is a perennial subject in the French press, appearing almost every year, generally in mid winter[†], coinciding with the crucial time when *Lycée*’s students have to decide where they would like to go after they will have passed their A-level (*baccalauréat*).

This negative depiction acts as common knowledge among parents and students from all kind. *Classes prépas* are perceived as a demanding and stressful system, which is the price one needs to pay in the French educational system to have a chance to run for the most selective and desirable schools, the *Grandes Ecoles*. In spite of its evergreen tendency to be in the headlines once in a year in the national media, this common rant against the *prépas* is probably hiding what is really at stake if one wants to seriously tackle this issue.

1. *Prépas, not prépa*

1.1. *From “grandes” to “petites” prépas*

First, “*la*” *prépa* does not exist at all. It is a general system that has been developed throughout the country and one should be particularly careful about the local context in which each *prépa* is set. There are

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[†]This article is actually an extended translation of a column published in *Le Monde.fr* on the 17th of February 2012 (http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/02/17/ce-que-l-enfer-des-prepas-nedit-pas_1644557_3232.html) in response to a previous paper describing *pr pas* as ‘hell’, published on the 3rd of February 2012 (http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/02/03/prepas-l-excellence-au-prix-fort_1637985_3224.html).

the ‘*grandes*’ Parisian *prépas*—mostly located in the small area of the Quartier Latin and of which ‘*Utter elitism: French mathematics and the system of classes prépas*’[‡] gives a particularly precise account in this *The De Morgan Journal* special issue[§]. These *prépas* tend to get most of the media and public attention, due to both the proximity of the Parisian based national press and their highest position in the symbolic scale of prestige in the French educational system’s ladder. Those *prépas* are *preparing* the students to enter into the most prestigious *Grandes Ecoles* and passing (*intégration*) is definitely the norm.

Then, there are less prestigious *prépas* in *Province* (which stands for every location in France apart from Paris and its immediate surroundings, which is called the *banlieue*). They have a high prestige locally and attract the best students within the area who do not want to move to Paris to join the *prépas parisiennes*. Regular individual cases of *intégration* is then the norm.

Then, ‘*petites*’ *prépas* from *Province* or *banlieue* can be seen as forming a sub-group in which *intégration* to the *Grandes Ecoles* is extremely rare, not to say nonexistent. Finally, one can also find *prépas* in the *Zones d’Education Prioritaires* (ZEP). ZEP stands for areas where one can find poor education results combined with low social background and are hence benefiting from affirmative action policies. In those *prépas*, *Grandes Ecoles* entry is clearly not the aim.

1.2. *Science, Business and Humanities*

Also, one will find significant discrepancies between the three main fields covered by *prépas*: science, business and humanities. Basically, *prépas scientifiques* do prepare students to *Grandes Ecoles* in Science (*Normale* and *Polytechnique* being the top two) and *Ecole d’Ingénieurs* (engineering schools). The vast majority of students will end up in an ‘*Ecole*’—opposed to University—as there is a huge variety of engineering schools corresponding to different pools of selection and requirements.

Prépas commerciales follow a similar pattern: alongside the most prestigious *Ecoles de commerce* (*HEC* and *ESSEC* being the top two),

[‡]M. Lemme, *Utter elitism: French mathematics and the system of classes prépas*, *The De Morgan Journal* 2 no. 2 (2012), 5–22. <http://education.lms.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Louis-le-Grand1.pdf>.

[§]<http://education.lms.ac.uk/2012/03/specialist-mathematics-free-schools/>.

there are plenty of business schools. A student can then always end up in a ‘*petite*’ business or engineering school if he/she is studying in a scientific or business *prépa*. The only difference being that most engineering schools are public schools charging minimal admission fees—the amount being very close to university fees—whereas all business schools are run privately and have expensive admission fees.

On the opposite, in *prépas littéraires*, choice is much more sparse. There is not a huge choice of *Ecoles* apart from the most prestigious one (*Normale*) and the majority of students will end their curriculum without going to an *Ecole*, not even to mention *Normale*[†]. Choice of *Ecoles* consists of journalists or communication schools, *Instituts d’Etudes Politiques*—*IEP*, which are teaching humanities and political science—the top one being *Sciences Po*—and a range of business schools which have opened a gateway for students in humanities. Remaining students will join universities where they will generally become the best students.

One should indicate as well that some private schools are running some *prépas intégrées*—*prépas* with admission fees which are training students to pass internal exams to enter their very own schools.

Sciences Po and *IEP* also follow a specific pattern as the most common way to get a place is by a selection process set straight after the A-level.

Over all, *Grandes Ecoles* have been historically built around ambivalent philosophies according to the fact that they are privately run or not. Public *Grandes Ecoles* are free of charge and the most desirable one even do pay their students monthly as employees (*Normale* and *Polytechnic*), fulfilling a meritocratic ideal of social promotion which has vanished for a long time as the vast majority of students do not come from poor economical background. On the opposite, private or semi private *Grandes Ecoles* (*HEC*, *Sciences Po*) rely on expensive admission fees and are more openly business and profit orientated.

Due to this diversity, ‘studying in the *prépa* is surviving in hell’ is a confused and convenient view that tells us nothing.

[†]*Normale* is the current name for ‘*Normale Sup*’ which stands for *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (*ENS*). There are three *ENS* in France: Ulm (Paris), Lyon and Cachan.

2. ‘Surviving in hell’?

2.1. *Common practises and philosophy*

What then is the common ground of all *prépas* if contents and expectations are so diverse? First, they all organise students work around a very intensive pedagogic set curriculum. All courses are designed to value rigorous work, regular and repetitive effort and emphasise a genuine mix of individual supervision and collective dynamics. In practice, these structuring principles can potentially produce the best and the worst experiences for students. From one *prépa* to another, from one classroom to another, from one teacher to another, students can experience intellectual emancipation or a deep feeling of cultural illegitimacy, continual progress or permanent stress, individual recognition or personal stigmatisation, common emulation (and long-term friendship) or unhealthy and humiliating competition.

Nowhere else in the French educational system does the state spend as much money on students or supply such an intense degree of supervision. A single student in *prépas* costs 15,240 euros, whereas a student in university costs 10,180 euros[†].

2.2. *Stress and anxiety*

Individual suffering and stress in *prépas* is of course to be found among some students and not to be denied. But it cannot be entirely explained by the *prépas* system in itself as the ‘studying in *prépa* as surviving hell’ myth is a simplistic argument.

Suffering at school should more be seen as the produce of both growing schooling strategies and expectations from middle class parents towards their progeny—whether those strategies and expectation are conscious or not, they do not change the harsh psychological consequences that young students may go through—in a general context of school *massification*, massive and long-term unemployment, inflation of diplomas and growing uncertainties towards the future. Also, the particular anxiety that French students develop have been pointed out

[†]Source: *Etat de l’Ecole*, 2011, p. 21. One should consider that it is an average cost. “Grandes” *prépas*, for instance, tend to paradoxically cost less money than “petites” *prépas* as they attract more students.

by international comparison like the PISA program[‡] in studies that have been conducted on students aged ... 15 year old, that is to say few years before the *prépas*.

‘Hell’, if there is any, has surely its roots to be found *before* the *prépas*—being buried in the hard ground of the French educational system in a latent kind of form. The *prépa* should be seen as a zoom and a revealing mirror rather than a single and simplistic overdetermined cause of stress.

Eventually, there is no tangible evidence to say that students in *prépas* have more suicidal tendencies and are more depressed than universities’ students.

2.3. *Lessons from our personal experiences*

We both have experienced ‘*petites*’ *prépas* in humanities (social sciences section to be accurate[†]) and have both passed the *Grande Ecole* exams by integrating *Normale*[‡]. This academic success had never been taken for granted and was rather unexpected: both coming from a middle class social background, one of us (Fabien) attended a *prépa* in *Province* without even knowing what *Normale* was before joining, whereas the other one (Gérôme) had been told in *Lycée* that according to his current marks, *intégration* of *Normale* was an unreasonable dream ... Naivety is probably a good word to describe our initial approach of the *prépa* as students.

Actually, the experience of many students entering *prépa* could be qualified as *discovering naivety*. One should remember that students go into *prépas* without a clear plan: they just study in a *prépa* because academically they can be accepted. If one is undecided about their future and wants to keep as many options open as possible, *prépa* is

[‡]www.pisa.oecd.org (about maths and anxiety in France, see the 2003 survey).

[†]This social sciences *prépas* are called *prépas B/L*. They have been designed in the 1980s when *Normale* decided to create a specific entry exam in social sciences and economics. These *prépas* could be seen as the missing link between scientific, business and humanities *prépas* as their curriculum includes literature, foreign language, philosophy, history, economics, sociology and mathematics. The initial intention of these *prépas* is to form social scientists and economists. Also, it is to be underlined that a reasonable amount of students do enter in a business school. The importance of mathematics in the curriculum (6 hours a week) is a radical turn, which makes this *prépas* rather different from the traditional *prépas* in humanities. This is the reason why most of the students in *prépas B/L* have passed a scientific A-level, rather than social science A-level or literature A-level.

[‡]*Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan*.

the best solution as it is a way not to decide yet, because it still follows a general curriculum and one can also generally find a *prépa* locally.

What happened then? We actually both discovered the liberating effect of impressive courses lead by highly committed and dedicated teachers. And some books we were reading showed us for the very first time that the world was probably bigger than what we had previously thought. For instance, it had been said to G er ome in *Terminale* (A-level class) that it was not worth reading complicated books as handbooks had been specially designed to save students from any kind of further demanding reading! Interesting enough, the ‘complicated’ book mentioned was one written by Pierre Bourdieu[†].

3. *Social reproduction and the mythical tale*

3.1. *Social reproduction in the pr epas*

One should seriously raise this question. How many young students have been precociously put on the side by being told that Pierre Bourdieu or going to a *pr epa* was ‘not for them’? Figures of students from lower class origins are still so outrageously low in *pr epas*: in 2010–11, 6.3% of *pr epas* students come from working class origin whereas 50.8% of them are coming from upper class origin (*Professions Intellectuelles Sup erieures*)[‡].

Nevertheless, experience is showing that students from working class origin often succeed better than other students in *pr epas* and it is known for a fact that students who have benefited from a *pr epa*—even the ones who quit after a year and do not take the chance to pass the final exams (*concours*)—will transform their *pr epa*’s experience into a positive asset for their further studies at universities. They will have learnt work methods, efficiency and self-organisation, which will make them ready to face a system in which autonomy is implicitly required.

Fabien has taught for few years in *Lyc ees* in ZEP where more than 50% of students were officially coming from a ‘social disadvantaged’

[†]Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) is a French sociologist. He was professor at Coll ege de France from 1981 to 2001. His work on the academic and schooling French system as the cultural institution reinforcing social reproduction and symbolic legitimisation of inequalities in a society which values meritocracy has been internationally discussed. From a rural background and lower class origin, he has been himself a scholarship student in a ‘grande’ Parisian *pr epa* and entered into *Ecole Normale Sup erieure*.

[‡]Source: Minist ere de l’Education Nationale.

background and can remember, for instance, the long persuasive discussions needed to try to convince two students with average marks for just daring subscribing for a *prépa*, and it was, of course, a *prépa* in a ZEP area in the Parisian suburbs with special entrance procedures, as it was the only kind of *prépa* that these two students could even think of being possibly accepted. Two years later, they successfully entered into private business schools, not HEC or ESSEC, but desirable *écoles* still.

3.2. *Social reproduction in Universities*

Also, by describing *prépas* as hellish, there is the reverse temptation to qualify university as a counter paradise. Can we argue that the French university is a much better system with overcrowded courses in big amphitheatres as a rule bearing few exceptions, quasi structural lack of individual supervision, schedules looking more often than not like the famous *gruyère*—for non familiar cheese connoisseurs, *gruyère* is famous for having lots of holes, like university schedules often do—early specialisation, and real difficulty of getting hold of teachers?

Being both lecturers at university—and also being both lecturer at *Sciences Po* and examiners for *Normale*, we can certainly argue for the huge difference of supervision, organisation and of global coherence between universities and the ‘elite’ system.

The other argument which stands for more meritocracy and equal opportunities in universities do not resist any kind of further statistical examination: in 2010–11, 12.3% of students from working class background in undergraduate studies, 7.7% in master level and 4.7% in PhD level[†]. That is an over-selective and rampant selective process, which is rarely depicted by the media as it is silent and progressive. Not spectacular, but not less dramatic.

3.3. *The mythical tale’s social virtue*

‘*Prépas* are hellish’ is a mythical tale. It is a mythical tale, which allows social reproduction. It is a mythical tale, which deeply contributes to kill any kind of hopes for students having a social background which would not ‘naturally’ make them able to swim in the elitist water of *prépas*, even though they would have the abilities to succeed. And if

[†]Source: Ministère de l’Education Nationale.

prépas are really hellish, this will also never discourage upper class parents to choose and value them and make sure their children have a place in them, so they can fully benefit from the most selective system to reach the most desirable professional, social and symbolic positions.

Above all, ‘*Prépas* are hellish’ is working like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students who pass the *Grandes Ecoles* after having ‘survived’ this ‘hell’ do genuinely think that they do not owe anything to their social background but that their success can only be explained by their very own personal merit and individual skills. It is because they have managed to dig deep into their inner resources that they finally managed to ‘kill the dragon’. A good tale always needs its Prince.

And is ‘surviving’ two or three intensive years of academic studies the worst punishment when one is 18 years old? As if it is then worse than working part-time in a factory or being in competition in a national footballers apprentice centre, which is as selective and ‘hellish’. What is actually a big concern behind this ‘hell tale’ is the fact that there is no other possibility in our society to succeed without selective exams or competitions, that is to say without having been sent into a elitist program of selection, whether it is intellectual or sports related.

Conclusion

Criticising ‘*prépas* as hellish’ without any form of accurate judgment may be risky. One should not eliminate decisive elements in this system which could actually contribute in building a real policy for accessible high level of knowledge and emancipating education—for both students from lower and upper social background: general formation rather than early specialisation, individual supervision, full explanation of working methods, regular individual exercises, structured and coherent schedules, systematic praise to always try your best, absolute refusal to reach a common level by lowering expectations.

Bringing back a bit of our initial naivety, we could easily imagine an ideal system, which would mix the best of the university system (higher social mix in undergraduate levels, links with the world of research, student’s autonomy etc.) with the best of the *prépas* system. It could be designed as new ‘University College’ accessible for all and everyone at undergraduate level, which would imply a general and systemic policy within the public educational sector, and not only single initiatives lead by few private schools.

It would cost more public money, but it would not be a blind investment and it would be much more rational than the current unfair two way French system. It is clearly not the direction followed by the French state for now, in a tricky period of necessary reforms.

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