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## How Grande is your *École*

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

PARIS, France

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From kindergarten to the highest reaches of university, everything about French schools is beautifully untranslatable. As a rule, education always answers the needs of society. In the case of France, whose extremely centralized State resembles nothing we know (*see* JBN-15 to 17), education has taken unfamiliar shapes and developed rites of passage that serve its own purpose. The most bizarre product of the entire system certainly is a kind of university-level training school called *les grandes écoles*.

*École* means school, but the key word in the concept is *grande*, because all these schools have the explicit function of creating an élite. There are 350 such *grandes écoles* for engineers, chemists, professors, business administration, judges, historians — you name it. In the eyes of the French, and of them only, no university degree can match the luster of a diploma from *Poly* (*École Polytechnique* - for engineers), *les HEC* (*Hautes Études Commerciales* - business administration) or *Normale Sup* (*École Normale Supérieure* - for professors). A diploma from these schools brings not only honor to graduates and their families, but guarantees an influential management job in the private or public sector. Such prestige is somewhat odd: after all, *grandes écoles* are but training schools. However, to get admitted into a *grande école*, candidates must pass a *concours* (competitive examination) that requires from one to three years of special preparation, whereas anyone with a pulse and a high-school diploma is admitted to university for free.

You might think that a diploma from *Poly*, or *Normale Sup* is a sufficient ticket to glory, but the real stars pile up *grandes écoles* diplomas. The supreme prize: a diploma from *École Nationale d'Administration* (National School for Public Administration), the famed *ÉNA*.

*ÉNA* is a training school for senior civil servants. Since its creation in 1945, 5,5000 people have attended its classes, and 80 percent of them occupy top functions in the French administration. Each year, the Prime Minister decrees how many top-brass positions in each ministry will be reserved for the next batch of 110 graduates, who are assured beginning their careers where most of the best civil servants can only reasonably hope to end theirs.

*ÉNA's* influence is unmatched. Half of the ministers in the present cabinet, six of the last eight Prime Ministers and two of the last three Presidents studied at *ÉNA*. The influence of that school is often decried by local and foreign critics for creating a mandarinat of technocrats — dubbed *énarques* (a pun with monarch) — that run the country with little contact with reality.

Depending on how you look at it, this criticism is founded or unfounded. Decrying *ÉNA* as élitist is beside the point since the school was founded for the very purpose of creating a élite. The chief motivation for the hundreds of candidates that undertake the viciously severe selection process is to earn themselves a place in that élite. Each year, accepted candidates

are told that they are *les élus*, the chosen ones.

Critics who attack the school for creating a clique mentality and encouraging intellectual inbreeding are more to the point. But it should be borne in mind that the *ÉNA* clique isn't unique: the whole country is rife with cliques. As to intellectual inbreeding, it's not exclusive to France: all élites anywhere in the world reproduce within their narrow circles and show a marked dislike for any mutt of indefinite pedigree. A discussion on *ÉNA* in a vacuum is therefore pointless because understanding the

is in fact a hybrid of both *grandes école* and *université*. For example, French universities are not allowed to select candidates. The reason is *le Baccalauréat*. This high-school diploma not only rewards the first 12 years of elementary and secondary schooling, but also constitutes, effectively, the very first university-level diploma. To obtain *le Baccalauréat*, all students go through a week-long, brutal set of exams the third week of June. Questions and results are commented on in the press. Obtaining this is hard work, but students need nothing more to enter university. The consequence is that anyone with a *Bac* can begin studying medicine in France, but 90 percent won't make it through the second-year exam. It costs little effort and money to enter university, and the outcome is uncertain.<sup>1</sup>



President-to-be Jacques Chirac (center) as a graduate of *ÉNA* in 1959. He came out 10<sup>th</sup> in his class and was given a posting as auditor at the revenue court. He didn't know yet he would become President, but he knew he was off to a pretty good start.

workings of this institution calls for constant comparison with the other *grandes écoles* and the university system as a whole.

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In the French middle class, disregard for universities is one of the surprising features of higher learning – at least for undergraduate-level studies. In fact, the goal of any sane French parents is to do all they can to make sure their child *won't* go to university but to a *grande école*, even a rotten one. The only university that finds some mercy is La Sorbonne, and even then, it's regarded as second best.

What North Americans understand as a “university”

dozens of locations. In France's academic system, a researcher is paid to do nothing but research in a research center, and a professor is expected to profess. “You don't find in a French university the quality of fecundation and hybridization that you get in American campuses quite simply because the *université* does something else,” says Pierre Deyon, a historian and the rector of the Académie (school board) of Strasbourg in the 1980s.

This doesn't mean that French universities produce morons. By the time they reach the master's and doctorate level, French university graduates who've survived this *parcours du combattant* (obstacle course) are very good, but what's in the middle is meant to separate the good from the bad. Oddly, this system guarantees a high de-

<sup>1</sup> The Baccalauréat was in fact a creation of Napoleon in 1808. It was meant as a standard examination at the end of secondary studies. The purpose was to ensure that people entering university and *grandes écoles* would meet a uniform standard. It was also a condition for being an officer in the French army and civil administration. He didn't predict that schooling would spread the way it did. In 1889, 5,000 students earned their *Bac*. In 1936, 15,000. It doubled by 1948, and again by 1963. They were 150,000 per year in 1973, and they are now half a million.

gree of excellence for the reason that it's such a rat race.

The revolts of May 1968 have gone down in history as the expression of student unrest against old ways and de Gaulle's semi-authoritarian government. This may be so, but it really started an uprising of students against the organization of their university. In fact, French universities were reformed by November 1968. They were granted administrative and pedagogical autonomy, meaning that they could do what they wanted with their budget and create the programs they wanted. This was an absolute novelty!

So novel, in fact, that it took years before it actually entered into the national mentality. Universities created their own engineering faculties in the 1980s. In the summer of 2000, they announced the introduction of 172 new programs — construction-site management, and the like.

Nevertheless, autonomy remains relative. Prime Ministers appoint heads of French universities, and the absence of provisions in the law for any kind of philanthropic foundations makes the institution exclusively reliant on subsidies and grants. There is no such concept as an alma mater. And the only associations of alumni giving funds can be found in some *grandes écoles*.

The truth is that French universities have not been a factor of progress in French society for the last five centuries. *Grandes écoles* were created as a reaction to their conservatism. It all began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Universities produced armies of theologians and jurists, but many of them had bought their diplomas — much in the same way that rich people could buy a permanent government job for themselves and their heirs. The French knew very well that this was a recipe for disaster. At the time, France was the most important country of Europe and the budding industrial revolution called for better *encadrement* (framing, meaning managerial staff) and *cadres* (frames, meaning managers). In 1747 the King created a school of civil engineering called *Ponts et Chaussées* (Bridges and Roads). In 1783, it was the turn of the Mining school.

During the 1789 Revolution, the university was regarded as a hotbed of feudalism, clericalism and intellectual conservatism, and that general perception didn't evolve much until 1968. In 1793, the French created the Institute of Current World Affairs

school of Public Works, and the *École Polytechnique* — with the purpose of training military officers with gray matter rather than just blue blood. This *école* system diversified itself throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century as chambers of commerce created their own commerce schools. But *grandes écoles* and universities never mixed.

By American standards, all 350 or so *grandes écoles*, private or public, are rather *petites*. HEC takes only 400 business students a year, and this is regarded as a lot. The average is more like 100. Some of these are very private and costly, by French standards, up to 10,000 dollars per year, especially in business. But others are public and even pay their candidates to study — up to 2,000 dollars a month for some students at ÉNA. In all, 130,000 stu-



*Students of École Polytechnique (engineering) in uniform and in step on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July parade. This institution, created in the aftermath of the French Revolution, was established when the French saw that gray matter was a good substitute for blue blood as a criterion for becoming an officer.*

dents attend these 350 schools, or about seven percent of all university-level students.

The majority of all 150 engineering schools are under the administrative supervision of the Ministry of Education, but the ministries of Industry, Agriculture and Defense, to name a few, also have their own schools — Polytechnicians, for instance, are part of the ministry of Defense. Business schools belong to chambers of commerce, but most have a diploma recognized by the Ministry of Education. Tellingly, ÉNA is under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's office.

This function, and place, of ÉNA explains its great influence and prestige, in spite of its relatively young age. It was founded in 1945 by a decree from General de Gaulle

— him again, always. Since 1830 or so, French ministries had progressively adopted the habit of training new recruits after a selection by examination. “People asked, ‘if we give training to high-ranking colonial civil servants, why not train senior civil servants in Paris in the same way?’” explains Jean-François Kesler, author of *L’ÉNA, la Société, l’État* and himself a graduate of ÉNA in the same class as Jacques Chirac.

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One thing all *écoles* have in common is the *concours* (a competitive examination for a limited number of places). These *concours* are extremely selective: only one in 10 candidates gets admitted to the best schools. To succeed, students must attend *classes préparatoires* and assimilate high doses of math, philosophy, history or whatever the requirements. In history, it can mean eight hours of class per week for 25 weeks. And students take three or four such courses at once. Preparing for this calls for a considerable investment in money and time.

This preparation system produces candidates with high virtuosity, according to Jean-Luc Castro, a professor at Audencia, a business school in the Atlantic city of Nantes. “It’s do or die. The amount of work is staggering, and you have to learn to work efficiently, and to reason well. All *grandes écoles* students have gone through this. It means they are untrained in the scientific model of experimentation and proof. They’re trained to be quick and get it quick.”

*La Prépa* represents a risk, also. There is absolutely no diploma attached to this study, which means that the two or three years they spend doing drill can be wasted if candidates don’t get admitted to a *grande école*. Fortunately, many not-so-*grandes écoles* will accommodate not-so-great candidates. The typical ÉNA candidate also prepares for the *concours* at Foreign Affairs, or at the *école* for hospital directors. With reason: ÉNA’s *concours d’entrée* has the reputation of being one of the hardest in France.

ÉNA also has the singular distinction of requiring that its candidates have at least two university degrees, or one *grande école* degree, and go through a year of special preparation called *Prep-ÉNA*. The *concours* is in two parts: written and oral.

Written exams weed out six of seven ÉNA candidates. They consist of five written tests of five hours each on public law, economy, evolution of political ideas and thought, second-language proficiency and the European Union (or Social Affairs). Candidates must discuss intelligently the recent reforms of the qualified majority in the European Commission. They must debate the place of the contract in administrative law. They must read 60 pages of documents and produce a good ministerial memorandum with questions. Those who succeed are deemed “eligible.”

Half of the remaining candidates will be cut out at

the oral-examination stage. The easy part consists of three half-hour oral exams to test the candidates’ capacity to speak a second-language, and to discover whether they actually know anything about public finance, foreign affairs, social affairs and Europe.

The fourth oral examination, dubbed *le Grand O* (Grand Oral examination), counts for as many points as the first three. The five-person jury can question candidates on *anything*. The purpose is to unsettle them. Questions are notoriously unfair. One former ÉNA student I met was asked about the cost of a floor-cleaning machine. Examiners seek panache. In one famous exchange, one candidate, being asked out of nowhere the depth of the Danube, replied: “Under what bridge, sir?”

*Le Grand O* is public. Other candidates, friends, and even Canadian journalists with fellowships from American foundations can sit and listen. At the one I attended, we numbered about 12.

When we were all seated in the examination room, an usher announced the candidate’s name — one *Monsieur* Antoine Le Bout de Château-Thierry. Enter a young man of 33, black-haired, and impeccably dressed, whom I had spotted in the corridor as the candidate because he didn’t utter a word.

Like all candidates, Antoine Le Bout de Château-Thierry had 45 minutes to impress the jury. I counted and noted 65 questions during that period. Some were easy, like why he waited so long to get to ÉNA, or in what services would he like to work, or what was the last film he saw. Others aimed at destabilizing him: Should the minimum wage be indexed to economic growth? How many people are there on welfare? What do you think of piggyback transport for trucks on railways? What are the elements of your personality that would help in a foreign posting and those that could be detrimental to you? This struck me as exactly the kind and variety of issues that the head of minister’s cabinet is bombarded with daily.

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ÉNA’s schooling lasts 27 months and begins with two six-month *stages* (field training) in a Prefecture, an embassy or with a French multinational corporation. The validity of ÉNA’s teaching is a matter of constant debate it among students and former students — and debate it they do. But field training has not received a single criticism over 55 years of its history. The reason is simple: it is remarkable. The *Préfets*, ambassadors and CEOs who take a ÉNA trainee under their wing must get them involved in all executive meetings and make them perform a variety of executive tasks, like speech writing, working as liaison or carrying out studies. Students love it so much because of its practicality, whereas the standard of French education is very theoretical even in most *grandes écoles*. *Normale Sup*, for instance, is supposed to produce élite

professors. During their four years at *Normale Sup*, none of the students ever get to have real teaching experience with a class, not even a course in pedagogy. The only practical experience *Normale Sup* students get is by giving private lessons — a traditional sideline, and a lucrative one in a *concours*-obsessed society.

The idea of *ÉNA* field training was a product of circumstances. In 1945, when the government created the school, a building to house it didn't exist. Since the administration had a great need for new blood at the end of the war, it was only sensible to start with field training. Soon, however, directors realized that this was a good idea because candidates who had spent many years *à bachoter* (cramming for exams) needed contact with reality. As a former student put it, "the Constitution or the Civil Code cannot tell you how to react to a miners' strike or a flash flood."

After *les stages* come the classes. They pertain to administration of a prefecture, control of community affairs and public management. Through formal courses and role-playing, students practice economic analysis and decision, learn how to handle administrative issues, evaluate a budget and evaluate diplomacy. In teams of 12, they also have to produce ominous group reports on heavy topics like energy policy — they must agree on the topic, on who interviews whom and on whose ideas will prevail. "A horrible experience!" says Anne-Gaëlle Baudouin, 25, a student in 1995-97 now deputy prefect in the northern city of Lille. "Throughout our education, there's no such thing as teamwork. And we're not only individualists but first-class students unaccustomed to compromise." All in all, not such a bad preparation since they will deal with uncompromising brilliant individualists all their lives.

*ÉNA* students get marked on everything they do. For each class they attend, they must undergo a five-hour exam, during which they must read 80 pages of material on the topic of study and produce a four-page ministerial memorandum that explains the problem, suggests solutions and makes a recommendation.

"*ÉNA* is not a school of substance," says Isabelle Roy, in charge of *la Francophonie* at the Canadian embassy in Paris, who attended *ÉNA* in 1995-97 with 39 other foreigners. "I tell other Canadians who get there, 'don't make the mistake of studying.' It's all about buzzwords and languages. If you can master this and use the proper buzzwords, you do just fine."

Every foreign student doesn't agree with this. Her German peer, Hartmut Kramer, now at Andersen Consulting, appreciated the practical aspect of examination by memorandum: "In Germany, university education is

very scientific, very theoretical. *ÉNA*'s memorandum system is fundamental: people are shown a problem, they have to find solutions, and make recommendations."

In all, 1,500 foreigners have studied at *ÉNA* since the Franco-German rapprochement between de Gaulle and Adenauer in 1960 — a remarkable effort. Each year, 40 students from 30 countries are admitted and follow the same courses as the French students — full integration occurred the year Isabelle Roy and Hartmut Kramer were admitted. Canada and Germany, with four students each, supply the biggest contingents. On the whole, foreigners represent 25 percent of each *ÉNA* class, which is exceptional — the average at other *grandes écoles* is well below five percent.

*ÉNA* wanted foreigners for two reasons. It allows bet-



Patrick Noël is not your typical graduate of *Normale Sup*. Instead of working in a lab as a physicist, he and old-time friend Gérard Larguier opened a private school of *cours préparatoires*, IPESUP (Institut privé de préparation aux études supérieures). Each year, 4,000 students pay up to 5,000 dollars to get no diploma but excellent drill in all matters required for the ominous *concours*, the competitive examinations that screen *Écoles candidates*.

ter networking in a changing world, and also brings in fresh air. Early on, the French government became conscious of the danger of French-only intellectual inbreeding. Most students had come from the same milieu and schools, most of them Parisian.

In my opinion, *ÉNA* doesn't make the most of this essential feature. Foreigners do bring in new ideas and perspectives, but there are few incentives that force French students to pay attention to what foreigners have to say. "Foreigners ask too many questions and we make the French lose time," says Isabelle Roy. One reason is that foreigners are chosen by their own country, according to national criteria — Isabelle Roy, for instance, was chosen by Canada's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as its re-

cruit in the precinct that year. *ÉNA* screens out foreign imbeciles, but its acceptance standards aren't the same as for French applicants. As a result, foreigners are regarded as second-rank, even though they are integrated with the others. More importantly, foreigners are re-

ceeds exactly in the same way. In medicine, all medical students chose a specialty according to their rank in the final examination. Same at the school of Hospital Directors, except they pick the hospital.



*Isabelle Roy, the attaché for Francophonie of the Canadian embassy in Paris, was a student of ÉNA. Although foreigners had been admitted at ÉNA for special courses, Isabelle belonged to the first class of foreigners to be fully integrated with French students.*

moved from the competition and won't be offered a posting in the French administration at the end of their studies. It is as though great American universities said to foreign students that they had no hope of ever becoming a professor. So the French want fresh air, but not too much of it.

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All countries have schools for the purpose of creating an elite. Harvard, MIT, Cambridge, Oxford seek to do just that. What's so special about *ÉNA* is that ranking is paramount. As we will see, it's the only way they've found to make sure the chosen ones won't sit on their laurels.

All *ÉNA* students are given a rank at graduation. This rank has nothing to do with more familiar broad categories like Ph.D., Ph.D. with honors, or praise of the jury or with recommendation for publication. No: it's an exact numerical rank between the 110 of them. It comes from the total of their marks for 27 months of *ÉNA*.

This pecking order translates into a picking order — more precisely, picking jobs in the pool of postings offered. The *major* (the number one) has first pick. Number 110 has the last. It's that simple.

This system of choice by ranking is not exclusive to *ÉNA*. *Polytechnique*, the grand school of engineers, pro-

This system, so offensive to North Americans, is the only practical way the French have found to break up the thickly woven network of contacts, friendship, political sympathy, family ties, personal affinity and vocation that governed the appointment of high civil servants from the Middle Ages to about 1945. The numerical ranking system is deemed Republican and good. The goal is absolute equality of chances. Job givers have no choice: the Prime Minister's decree says how many former students they must take each year, and it's the students who choose. Only the mark comes into play.

"Before *ÉNA*, the administration was monopolized by families, corps, ministers and the rules of promotion were opaque," says Hartmut Kramer. "This system is in fact a formidable declaration of independence of the administration over the political. The government must act with a corps of *Préfets* and a *Conseil d'État* that wasn't installed by doing buddy-buddy. It ensures neutrality and independence." Conversely, each ministry has absolutely no say about whom they hire, either. The mark is paramount.

"The truth is that there are two categories of *énarques*. The top 15, who get all the best jobs, and the rest," says Anne-Gaëlle Baudouin. Customarily, the first 15, known as *la botte* (The Cream of the Crop), take the 15 best jobs in the top three corps — those of magistrate at the *Conseil d'État*, the Accounting office and the Finance Ministry, which will assure them of high-profile duties and maximum visibility from the political class. The ones who follow pick the next jobs with the most prestige, at Foreign Affairs. All the way down to National Education and War Vets. It's extremely rare that people make choices otherwise. "I was 27<sup>th</sup>, so I started high, but I'm not on the very fast track either. So I'm going to have a career very different from those in *la botte*."

Unfortunately, that's life. The problem is the manner in which choices are made. This ceremony of choosing, called the *Grand Amphi* (after the amphitheater where it takes place) is one of the most secretive rites of *ÉNA* — and certainly the most brutal. Before it takes place on the last day, it can be rehearsed up to eight times. The reason is simple: every time a candidate changes his or her choice of job, the entire selection of available jobs changes for those farther down the pecking order. So they rehearse until everyone is certain nothing will move. Called in order of ranking, students sit by the director, declare their choice, and sign their employment contract in front of their peers. If the *major* chooses *Conseil d'État*, the number two rarely chooses the same because what matters to

him or her is to be the first of their class in the particular corps of choice. Other students, who attend and wait, clap or boo.<sup>2</sup>

In my opinion, this ceremony is the perfect way to increase peer pressure and ensure conformism. It takes nerve or a strong vocation to answer one's calling and not take what the others recognize as the "best career option." Those with that kind of nerve are booed ruthlessly. Last-minute changes, though allowed, create such a stir in the ritual that school executives present at the ceremony discourage such behavior. A student with last-minute hesitations, which are perfectly legitimate, is yelled at mercilessly by the 45, 58 or 72 hungry ones waiting behind. Students are expected to make a choice with profound personal consequences *sans états d'âmes* (without uncertainties). Therein lies the true spirit of the French administration.

As a result, a *major* who would be inclined to take the Ministry of Health probably won't, because his peers would laugh at him as an underachiever and crucify him, and he would have to live with this repute through the rest of his career. Meanwhile the Ministry of Health will probably get a student who didn't want to go there. In 1997, only three students resigned from *ÉNA* rather than take a job they didn't want. "This is the fundamental flaw of *ÉNA*. Vocations are decided on the basis of prestige and on a matter of a quarter of a point," says Jean-François Kesler. And peer pressure at the moment of choice increases this flaw.

Another consequence of this mode of selection is inexperience. Over the years, the ranking-by-mark system has favored the most junior students who get propelled to the highest functions.<sup>3</sup> All *ÉNA* statistics show this: mature students over 28 with experience as civil servants rarely make it to *la botte*. This distortion comes from the fact that the young, who come straight out of school and hardly have a personal life, still master the art of performing at tests. Mature students with experience, but who have a family, a love-life or a house to care for, don't perform as well on formal tests. What weighs against mature candidates is a simple fact: whereas field training takes 40 percent of their schooling time, it counts only for 20 percent of the mark.

With such a system, it is frequent to see a smart aleck of 23 get a top job at the Conseil d'État. Is that good or bad? Maybe a mature student of 36 or 40 would be better suited to sit as a magistrate to rule over cases of corruption or bad contracts between the public and private sectors. But then Napoléon, who was only 30 when he became First Consul, durably reformed education (*le Baccalauréat* and *lycées*, a type of college), law (Civil Code) and the administration (he structured it like the army).

The promotion of inexperienced *énarques* is one of

the most controversial aspects of *ÉNA*, and probably the least studied of all. In Paris, I met a Canadian consultant for an American firm, who had been a civil servant in the past and who dealt frequently with smart alecks from *ÉNA*. He swore that the French system was actually the best because it brought in fresh minds and gave them fantastic opportunities at a young age — and enough rope to hang themselves. If they were bad, they were out. If they were good, they'd be around for a long time. As he put it: "Old farts make mistakes too."

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Because *ÉNA* is the post WWII version of the Jesuit College, it would be silly to decry the institution as elitist. Elitism is its very purpose. So the real question is why the French need an élite.

This desire to create an élite is extremely alien to North American mentality. This doesn't mean that we don't have élites in North America, not by any means. The difference is that the French need to affirm it. Says Hartmut Kramer: "We have elites in Germany, but we don't know who they are and how they got there. It's not clear, and it's not better."

In North America, the notion of élite carries the idea of caste: it's an aristocracy that sucks the very blood of the people. In France, and in most of Europe, the term carries a meaning of privilege, but also of duty. Being a élite civil servant in France means doing one's public service. It is very significant that in the particular jargon of *ÉNA*, a former student who quits the public service to go to the private sector is said to have turned *pantouflard* (stay-at-home).

The French seek élites. They love them, respect them and desire them. If the élite fails, they change the élite. Your basic Frenchman is quick to decry *ÉNA* for anything that goes wrong in the country, but this should be taken with a grain of salt. The *énarques* may get the best jobs, but the French always blame the élites for their failures. The fact that they lost the war in 1870 and in 1945 was the élite's fault — a very convenient explanation.

One purpose for the creation of *ÉNA* was to break the clique mentality that presided over the selection of top civil servants. But it succeeded only in replacing one clique with another, and effectively creating a caste of graduates with the very strong legitimacy that comes from a mode of selection strictly based on merit. The only proof of their incompetence is total collapse, which has not happened since 1945.

The clique mentality is very real. *ÉNA* has an active alumni association and the alumni co-opt one another

<sup>2</sup> I viewed this scene in the excellent documentary, *l'ÉNA, Miroir the l'État* (*ÉNA, Mirror of the State*).

<sup>3</sup> Of all 110 students admitted at *ÉNA* each year, 55 are students below the age of 28, 45 are civil servants of less than 46 years of age, and 10 are former politicians or people with professional experience below the age of 40.

without afterthoughts. Naturally, this means that people rise for reasons other than competence. The clique mentality explains some spectacular failures, like that of *Crédit Lyonnais*, a publicly owned bank that lost tens of billions of dollars in bad business ventures during the 1980s. The president was from *ÉNA*, and so was the Prime Minister, and so were the auditors from the Ministry of Finance.<sup>4</sup>

In all fairness, a clique can work well too, and the French post-WWII *élite* of civil servants and politicians has yet to produce a collapse of the nature of that of Japan in the 1990s. Jean-Marie Messier, the president of Vivendi who recently bought Universal Studios, is a graduate of *ÉNA*. And so is Thierry Desmarest, the president of Elf, the fourth biggest petrol company in the world. I don't think that the French managerial *élite* is more subject to inbreeding than any other *élite* in the world. In fact, you need only to read the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist* or *The New York Times* to realize that self-intoxication and intellectual inbreeding are not a monopoly of French *énarques*.

North Americans find it offensive that people get promoted on the basis of diploma or mark alone. But remember: *ÉNA* was created to offset opaque rules of promotion. And if you happen to like opaque rules of promotion, rest assured — many top civil servants are still recruited outside of *ÉNA*. At the level of *Préfet*, for instance, only a third are from *ÉNA*. Which leaves only two-thirds who aren't from there. So it's very easy to blame *ÉNA*, but it's like naming only the tip of an iceberg.

It is true that a great proportion of *énarques* find themselves in power as Ministers and Prime Ministers and even President. The clique mentality plays a role in this, but not as much as a particular rule in the administration that allows French civil servants to put themselves on leave and retain their status of civil servant even when they hold a political function, or are elected. This means that it doesn't cost them much to try. And try they do. Forty-one percent of all *députés* are civil servants on leave. Since the *énarques* are all civil servants, it's only normal that the top dogs get the top jobs. This just goes to show you that *énarques* don't operate in a vacuum.

As a matter of fact, *ÉNA* is just a branch of an even older and bigger clique: that of *Sciences Po* — the famed *Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris*. It was founded in 1871, after defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, for the purpose of renewing the *élite*. Because most of *Sciences Po's* courses pertain to public administration, social affairs, economics, political sciences and theory, *Sciences Po* students are particularly well prepared for any *concours* for any managerial position in the administration. It is this school,

much more than *ÉNA*, that has dominated public life in France ever since and has defined the profile of the best and brightest in public administration. Most of the candidates below the age of 28 at *ÉNA* come from *Sciences Po*, and it is *Sciences Po* that got the monopoly for *ÉNA's classes préparatoires*.

*Sciences Po* is no less a clique than *ÉNA*. My friend Thierry Leterre is a professor at *Sciences Po*. Born to a working-class family, he managed to get himself admitted at the *Normale Sup* at the tender age of 19 in order to become the best and brightest among professors. "I was even paid to study." He has taught in Ireland and the States, but then got the job at *Sciences Po*: "The director hired me because he wanted to bring in some fresh air. I am the first and only *Sciences Po* professor who isn't a graduate of *Sciences Po*."

The clique mentality is not exclusive to *Sciences Po* and its *ÉNA* branch — quite the contrary. Graduates of French business and engineering schools behave in the same way. "It has become fashionable to criticize the influence of *énarques*, but business schools, *Poly*, *HEC* all work the same," says Hartmut Kramer. "Graduates make strong tribes: *HEC* graduates vote in favor of proposals from *HEC* graduates and against those of graduates from *ESSEC* [another school], and vice-versa. If you think that only *énarques* behave that way, it's wrong. Parochialism



Thierry Leterre is the only *Sciences-Po* professor who didn't study there. He's from *Normale Sup*. "I was admitted at 19 and I became a civil servant, paid to study."

<sup>4</sup> The place of the *énarques* in French society became visible to foreigners in the middle of the 1970s first when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected. He was a *énarque*, but also a graduate of *Polytechnique*. In the 1980s, as many private companies were nationalized, many CEOs were replaced with *énarques*. They became very visible. The wave of privatization starting in 1986 and continuing to the present has put their management into the spotlight again.



being the norm, *ÉNA* has the merit of transparency.”<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

The biggest French clique is that of Parisians, who have developed through centuries a series of measures, official or just behavioral, that help one another and exclude strangers from remote places like Marseille, Bordeaux or Lyon. Some of these measures are quite insidious. I found one when I went to *ÉNA* to observe the posting of the list of received candidates — I wanted to know if my Antoine Le Bout de Château-Thierry had made the cut. (He had.) Each year, the results are posted on the second Thursday of December at five P.M. But here’s the catch: received candidates must show up for the welcoming speech on the next morning at nine with their best tie — and hangover. So the poor sucker from Marseille has to rent a room in Paris just to come and get the result in case he would have to show up on the next morning. What this shows is that outsiders are not too well considered, and that they are few anyway.

But just *who* wouldn’t be in Paris, since the best *écoles*

and the best universities are there anyway? *Sciences Po* is a case in point. There are in France six *Institut d’Études Politiques*, and they all give about the same education in public administration. They follow the same teachings as the one in Paris, but the students that make it to *ÉNA* are the ones who studied at the true-blue *Sciences Po* of Paris. You find the same ranking with *Normale Sup*: there are four in France, but the one in Paris gets the Nobel-Prize professors. In Engineering and in business, it’s exactly the same. Even in the public-school system it’s the same. *Lycées* like Louis-le-Grand and Henri-IV in the 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement are the place to be, and students from all over France wrestle to get admitted to these *lycées’ classes préparatoires*.

Why Paris? Because the best teachers and lecturers want to be where it matters. In a very centralized country, where the capital is seat of government and the economic center, the choice is easy. Add to this the particular sense of superiority of Parisians over people living in the “desert” — as they used to call the rest of France — and you’ll understand why you have to be in Paris if you want to be somebody. If France were a federation of 50

States and Paris a capital built on a swamp in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there would be no Paris clique. A French proverb has it that Paris is not France. But to all intents and purposes, it is.

A few eccentrics try nonetheless to break out of the clique mentality and stay away from Parisianism. Predictably, they’re found outside Paris. “La Sorbonne was not created in a day!” says Aïssa Dermouche, director of Audencia, a business school in Nantes. Audencia ranks in the top ten business schools. Depending on the criteria, but Dermouche has the goal of lifting his school into the top five. For this, Dermouche has restructured programs and brought in mandatory immersion, by which students must study abroad one year out of three. He also gives his professors two days out of five to do research.

Algerian-born Dermouche didn’t study in a *grande école*,



*Aziz, a friend from the hiking club, is a graduate of Normale Sup and math professor in classes préparatoires. “All school systems are selective, but what’s sad about the French system is the hypocrisy. The concours system is supposed to give equality of chances. In order to get to a concours, you must go through a prep school, but there’s no concours to be admitted in a prep school. Where you studied, with whom and your marks matter, because the prep school’s reputation depends on the number of students it places in Écoles. Kids of poor origins or with a bad record are less equal than others.”*

<sup>5</sup> *Écoles* are known to monopolize the entire management of companies. The petrol company Elf was said to be *ÉNA*-controlled whereas it’s French competitor, Total, was *Poly*-controlled. When Elf made a take over bid for Total, it was war and the entire network of both schools was put to work — Elf won. And equal underpinning came into play when a bank called BNP made a bid for a double takeover of competitors Paribas and *Société Générale*.

but at university. He believes in recruiting professors from abroad and from other schools, to the point that not one of his 45 professors is a graduate of Audencia. A rarity. "I'm not going to be the best by constantly comparing our school to other French business schools. Sure, *Parisianisme* exists. But what's a Parisian in the world?"

\* \* \*

The *grandes écoles* system has one major flaw: it's geared essentially to national consumption. Under the effect of Europe and globalization, it will not disappear, but it will certainly be transformed. "Seen from Düsseldorf, a diploma from La Sorbonne has more weight and value than one from *ESSEC* (a respected business *école*). Who knows what's *ESSEC*?" says Jacques Vauthier, a professor of mathematics at La Sorbonne and in charge of knowledge industries at *Édufrance*.

This agency, created by the Ministry of Education and Foreign Affairs in 1998, promotes French higher education abroad. Before *Édufrance*, the French relied only on their reputation and colonial past. Where the British had the British Council to promote national universities to foreigners, the French relied exclusively on their extensive network of French schools abroad and on an association, *L'Alliance Française*, for teaching the French language.

The big incentive for the creation of *Édufrance* in 1998 was a sharp drop in foreign enrollment in French universities. It went from 130,000 per year to 121,000 over a decade. In Great Britain, it went from 120,000 to 190,000, and in Germany, from 100,000 to 140,000. As to the US, it went up a third, to 560,000. Even small Australia is pursuing an aggressive policy and has raised the number of foreign students to 70,000. "Mexicans used to come to France. Now they go to the States. One famous cardiologist says that all the directors of cardiology in Latin America are French trained. But not one of their students is here," says Vauthier.

In reality, this drop in foreign attendance is a false problem hiding within a real one. In real numbers, the drop from 130,000 to 121,000 foreign students is small. It took

only a year of effort to offset this. Much fuss has been made about the fact that students from former colonies like Senegal or Morocco tend to choose North American universities, but more Chinese and Europeans are coming.<sup>6</sup>

"We have trouble attracting more foreigners, in part because our diplomas mean nothing to non-Frenchmen," says Vauthier. "It's a problem of label." There exists no official international standard about what constitutes the ideal diploma format. After two years, French students get the DEUG — *Diplôme d'Études Universitaires Générales*. After the third, they get their first graduate degree, *la licence*. They do the *thèse* (thesis) on the next year. After which, they enter the cycle of *Diplôme d'Études Approfondies* (In-depth studies diploma). The system is no less logical than the British and the American system,



Aïssa Dermouche, head of Audencia, a business school in Nantes (Atlantic). It is one of the rare *écoles* jointly run by the chamber of commerce and the town. He modernized programs, won't hire graduates from his school on principle and refuses to compare his school to any in Paris or elsewhere in France. "What's a Parisian in the world?"

but it simply never prevailed. It doesn't mean that French are no good: there are 10,000 of them in Silicon Valley. But what the hell is a DEUG? For a country that has long had pretenses of universality, being left alone in the corner is something of a problem.

Internationally, the problem of recognition is more acute for *grandes écoles*. Graduates of *ÉNA* and *Polytechnique* don't actually have any diploma — only the status of "former student," which means absolutely nothing outside of France. On their own initiative, they

<sup>6</sup> In proportion, it looks more serious: the proportion of foreigners in French universities went down from 12% to 7%, but this is mostly because the number of French university students doubled from one to two million over the last 15 years. This is because the French decided, in 1985, that 80 percent of kids should get the high school diploma and be eligible for higher education.

began to create the label of *Mastère*. This new word for diploma is meant to sound like the English "Master's," but it sounds mostly ridiculous and Banana-Republic-like. Aside from the most famous of the lot, most *grandes écoles* have a hard time attracting foreign students and professors because they are small, have no alumni, no endowment, no decent bursary system, and their diplomas mean nothing outside of France. In reaction, some business and engineering *écoles* are forming partnerships with universities in order to improve their international profiles. Others are merging to gain more leverage and funds to attract high-profile professors.

But this is not the only change. In the last few years, the number of applicants at *ÉNA* has dropped sharply, from a high of about 1,500 to less than a thousand. More significantly, the number of applicants from *Sciences Po* has dropped by half. Is it that people are lured by the better prospects of business? Does it mean that the central government has less influence in the face of Europe, and Regions? Or that people from outside of the Paris area are tired of *Parisianisme*? Or that the State has less power than it used to? Probably all of the above.

The reduction in the number of applicants is one of

the surest signs that something is changing in France, although nobody knows what, exactly. *ÉNA* has modified the purpose of oral examination: the jury now pays special attention to motivation and personality. Regarding the ranking of students, more weight has been given to field training in the overall mark. The problem is not exclusive to public *grandes écoles*: many business schools have had to enroll students in the second year of university rather than through the traditional *Prépa* channel. And engineering schools are starting to feel the heat from engineering faculties that universities created 20 years ago and whose students are beginning to hold managerial positions.

Jacques Vauthier thinks that all of this indicates a re-definition of French élites rather than their disappearance. "As a mathematician, I have been a corrector of exams at Poly for twelve years and I can tell that an admission examination composed of written tests in chemistry, physics, math and literature, plus the oral examinations, gives a good picture of a candidate's intellectual dexterity. But the human values are completely removed from this. Some *Poly* graduates are dry fruit, unable to animate a team of workers. And that's not what is being sought today." □

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**FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES**

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**Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

**Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

**Martha Farnelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecker McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

**Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

**Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing M.I.T. in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican/American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

**Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

**Leena Khan** (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer who formerly dealt with immigration and international-business law in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "Islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

**Whitney Mason** (January 1999-2001) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

**Jean Benoît Nadeau** (December 1998-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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