SAVING THE UNIVERSITY IN FRANCE

Eli Thorkelson

Abstract

There is much discussion of universities in crisis, but we do not always investigate the further question: how do they get *out* of crisis? In this paper, I investigate a project to "save the university" in a French faculty activist group called (eponymously) *Sauvons l'Université!* or SLU. I show that SLU's notion of salvation was not intended to preserve the traditional public university system as it was, but rather was a means of parsing and reprocessing their mixed attachments to the contradictory public university system. In other words, saving the university amounted to trying to figure out "what in it was worth saving." I further show that SLU, rather than advocating a substantive policy program, primarily served a *meta-political* function of creating new forms of political consciousness and involvement. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of metapolitics and direct democracy and their challenge to the very notion of "policy."

SALVATION THROUGH CRITIQUE

The policy perspective on higher education generally presumes a political model that divides the institutional world in two.[1] On the one hand, there are policymakers; on the other hand, there is everyone else. But this simple distinction between the governors and the governed, between leaders and followers, readily breaks down when, as in protest situations, the non-policymakers themselves seek to become political actors who have a voice in university policy. In this paper, I seek to analyze alternative models of university politics that diverge radically from the usual model of top-down policymaking. I also aim to bring an international, comparative perspective to debates on higher education that too often are implicitly nationalist.

My point of departure is the sense of crisis that afflicts higher education in so many parts of the world. This raises a question. Can the university in any sense be saved from its crises? In France, there are those who think so, as I learned while doing ethnographic research on public university reforms there. In 2009 and 2010, I often spotted a red, white, and black banner being carried down the streets of Paris, in protests against the then-Sarkozy government's higher education policies. *Sauvons l'Université!*, read the banner—that is, Save the University! It was borne by a group of generally middle-aged, nondescript French academics, belonging to a small political collective with the same name as the banner. They usually called themselves SLU for short. SLU became surprisingly influential during the nation-wide French faculty protest movement of 2009, as it pursued a somewhat unusual political project. Intervening constantly in debates on French national university policy, the collective sought to push the boundaries of legitimate political discourse without becoming either hopelessly radical or excessively pragmatic. They were chiefly devoted, not to advancing their own policy agenda, but to the more critical project of analyzing French university reforms and showing their flaws.

As they presented themselves publicly in street marches, the members of SLU seldom sought to draw attention to themselves as individuals. They were generally unmarked (by French standards) in ethnic, national or cultural terms, and they epitomized neither Parisian bourgeois "elegance" nor working-class subalternity, implicitly manifesting their status as intermediate-rank civil servants. This vigorous social unmarkedness was not without some bearing on the group's claim to political legitimacy, which was based on their ability to speak as members of the academic profession within the context of national politics.

The ethnographic interest of this group emerges, in the first instance, from its exceptional status as a faculty activist project outside the usual frameworks of higher education politics. To

begin with, SLU was not a union, and their legitimacy was not based on the breadth of their membership or their desire to help administer labor relations. They were also not a scholarly society, claiming to represent any specific discipline; nor were they a think tank, drawing on specific research expertise in higher education; nor were they adherents of any single political philosophy or practice.[2] They saw themselves as political activists, in some general sense of the word, participants in what they called a "movement" or a "struggle," but their activism was primarily intellectual labor, centered on maintaining a website, distributing information and writing critical communiqués. Intellectual activism, this case shows us, need not be a contradiction in terms.

This paper focuses on a simple question about the relationship between the group's name and its work. In what sense could SLU's critiques of government policy be construed as "saving the university"? What, in this context, did it *mean* to save the university? In part this is a question about how political practice orients itself around guiding metaphors; we will see how "saving the university" came to be the accepted label for SLU's project of critical policy analysis. But there are also larger questions about what salvation can mean as a narrative of institutional attachment. What is the value (or at least, the function) of "salvation" as a political narrative in higher education? How can there be salvation through critique?

This paper seeks to answer these questions in four parts. First, I offer a brief history of SLU as a group, situating it in the context of French public higher education. Second, I investigate the meaning of the university salvation metaphor, as it emerged from a debate between members of the faculty protest movement. Third, I examine the relationship between SLU's general principles and its particular interventions in specific cases, looking mainly at its critiques of university governance. In a fourth section, I show how SLU's own members were ambivalent about the definition of their own project of "resistance." Finally, I conclude with some recommendations about fostering direct democracy and what the paper will eventually describe as university metapolitics.

UNIVERSITY REFORM AND FACULTY PROTEST

French public universities have seen a series of major reforms since the late 1990s, when the French government was central to the Bologna project of "harmonizing" university structures across Europe (Thorkelson, 2014, ch. 2, ch. 10).[3] In 2003, the French system of university diplomas and course credits was changed to match the new European standards ("LMD Reform"). In 2005, a new National Research Agency (ANR) began to administer a newly grant-based research funding system, and in 2006, a national evaluation agency (AERES) was introduced, following an international trend towards audit culture in higher education (Brenneis, 2009; Strathern, 2000). Many of these reforms were controversial within the academic community, and higher education

had acquired a reputation in the French political and media sphere as "resistant to reform." Nevertheless, in July 2007, the newly-elected, center-right Sarkozy administration introduced further major reforms, under the auspices of a new law on the "Liberties and Responsibilities of the Universities," usually abbreviated the *Loi LRU* (or LRU Law).

The LRU law sought to make French public universities more "autonomous," such that each institution would be self-managing, according to contracts and incentives set by the state. The spirit of this project was quite similar to the "self-ownership" status allotted to Danish universities in 2003, although the Danish reforms went farther than their French counterparts in granting universities legal independence from the state apparatus, and in linking state funding more directly to quantified, auditable targets (Wright & Ørberg, 2008). The category of "autonomy" provided a positive image for the French reform project, even though, beneath the surface, the notion of autonomy was deeply ambiguous. As Christian Galan observes, "'Autonomy' today in France is a 'magic' term: extensible, polysemic, flexible, which in the context of education no longer means much of anything" (2015, 270-271). In any event, the LRU reforms provoked large-scale conflict, protest and debate in the French university system, and the conflict, on Annie Vinokur's analysis, "essentially takes place between the *collegial* autonomy of *academics* [*des universitaires*] and the *managerial* autonomy of *universities* [*des universités*]" (2008, 73, emphasis in original).

It took time for the protest movement to gain steam, and the government attempted to negotiate with the major student union, UNEF, to avert student involvement. But in December of 2008, a group of faculty from the left-wing University of Paris-8 came together around a critical platform that was published in the newspaper *Le Monde*, entitled "University presidents don't speak in our name." This platform called on academics to make their own voices heard, and it rapidly attracted a large following, becoming a national petition called "For a collegial university." The organizers from Paris 8 originally wanted to host this petition on the website of an existing association, Sauvons la Recherche (Save Research! or SLR), which had been formed in 2003 by researchers concentrated in the hard sciences (Trautmann, 2011). But according to SLU's first president, Jean-Louis Fournel, SLR had declined to host the petition:

It's only because that turned out to be impossible that we decided to make a dedicated website, and brought to life what, to me, is today the feather in SLU's cap, its most effective instrument, the thing that enables the association to stay present even in periods of reflux, like today, thanks to a few folks who keep this site alive on a daily basis. And it's because we were creating a dedicated site for this petition that we needed to find a name, so we collectively invented the name of Sauvons l'Université, which could be taken at once as a real recognition of SLR, as a sign of proximity but also as a little wink [in their direction].... At

that time we were seized with the enthusiasm of creating something, but we weren't yet building to last, during the first weeks at least; we advanced step by step, and each project had to prove to us that it was worthwhile to keep going. (Fournel, 2011)

Like all successful social achievements, then, this collective was a contingent product nestled in a historical structure, emerging through processes of political mimesis and schismogenesis from sibling groups. The petition for a collegial university was eventually signed by some 6,000 academics, and the organizers went on to constitute themselves legally as a nonprofit association, which gave them new institutional durability. In principle, it was a membership organization governed by a board (a *conseil d'administration* or Administration Council in local terminology), which in turn elected a *bureau* (executive committee) comprising a president, a secretary, a treasurer, three to five spokespersons, and a press contact person. "95% [of what we do] is the board," someone said during a collective interview I arranged. In 2014, the board was composed of 13 men and nine women, of whom a majority were the equivalent of associate professors. Twelve came from Parisian universities, and the rest from across the French nation. Yet in spite of this internal heterogeneity, they felt that they came across as "an association of intellectuals, Parisian, 13th arrondissement."[4] Note again that, while this certainly situated them within French social geography, they were in no way marked as social or ethnolinguistic outsiders.

In practice, the work of the organization was done by a small number of active board members, and was primarily electronic. Some members managed the website, posting official documents, news articles, and activist communiques from across France, along with occasional international coverage. Academic unions and institutional activists from across the country seemed to be in the habit of sending in their documents to appear on the site, which at its peak became the premier activist space, news aggregator, and political archive in French higher education. In a typical week in November 2014 (Table 9.1), SLU's website covered everything from faculty salaries and globalization to calls to mobilization and international higher education.

"There's no real equivalent [to our site], that's partly why we had a large audience: there wasn't much competition!" I was told. The SLU president and spokespersons also made a habit of attending activist events in the university milieu, where they represented their collective's views. And traditionally, the main activity of SLU was writing activist analyses of current policy, using a collaborative editing process over their internal listserv. The group's activities slowed down, however, as French university activism subsided in the wake of the reforms. The group was at its height during a 4-month, faculty-led national strike in spring 2009 (Thorkelson, 2014), but by November 2011, they had to change their bylaws (*statuts*), from having a board "of 29 members" to one of "29 members at most." In June 2010, they told me, "We're temporary, but we're not about to

stop." But by that autumn, at their annual assembly, I heard more downcast remarks. "There aren't many of us. We aren't mobilizing anyone outside our group any more." As the years went on, their group entered a long slump. The 2012 election of the Socialist Party's François Hollande as President of the French Republic did not produce a major shift in university policy, and SLU did not manage to acquire much influence even on the ostensibly left-wing government, in spite of being asked to provide policy input in the administration's early months.[5] As of this writing, SLU's site is still maintained, but posts are less and less frequent, and many of the original organizers left in 2014. Their sister organization, SLR, ceased to function in 2013.[6] But let us leave to one side the impact of this long-term decline, in order to now look more closely at the group's guiding image of "saving" the university.

METAPHORS AND POLITICS

Most of the time, SLU's name was just a name, an arbitrary designator for their collective, invoked without particular reflection. Yet it turns out that the salvation image did, at times, attract attention from critics. It is perhaps worth recalling here that anthropologists of higher education have long begun with the claim that higher education is a *culture*, or more precisely a set of cultures and subcultures (Wisniewski, 2000; Clark, 1997; Geertz, 1976). A standard corollary to this culturalist stance would be that symbolic order is not incidental to academic culture, but is indeed intrinsic to it. It follows that we should not make any strong distinction between symbolic economies and political economies, between the circulation of metaphors and the flow of everyday life. To "save the university" was a metaphor for SLU's activism, but it was not a *free-floating* metaphor that served to simplify, rationalize, or distort a more complex "empirical reality." Instead, "saving the university" was a symbolic intervention *in* that reality, one premised on a long discursive labor. At the most basic level, the activist discourse of "saving the university" sought to disrupt the Sarkozy government's discourse of "reforming" and "modernizing" the university. The two political discourses thus competed with each other, each trying to naturalize its stance. Who could be opposed to modernizing something presumed obsolete? But then, who could be opposed to saving something presumed valuable? On their own terms, each image sought to appear unquestionable.

The Sarkozy government seldom deigned to criticize its opponents' metaphors, other than through generic denunciations of leftist rabble-rousers.[7] Instead, the most coherent critique of the salvation metaphor came from the faculty movement's far left. Emmanuel Barot, a Marxist philosopher who taught at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, argued that "saving" the university

amounted to consecrating its traditional, elitist hierarchies. Barot (2009) published his critique in *Contretemps* in August 2009:

> If on one hand this saving is impossible, it is all the more so undesirable for other reasons. The extremely hierarchical and bureaucratized structure has long made the university, along the lines of all state structures, a component of social administration, control and cohesion, one that moreover is absolutely harmonious with capitalism. This university is notoriously friendly to the mandarins[8], to ultra-hierarchy . . .
>
> It emerges generally that the question is not about 'saving the university' but about knowing what in it there is to save, what it is possible and desirable to save, what needs destroying and how. Clearly its elitism was historically less important than the massive democratization of knowledge that it made possible and which alone merits being "saved." The university of tomorrow is the university of yesterday, elitism and hierarchy without democracy, but newly subjected to the immediately productive logic of a trained workforce. The essence of what is worth saving in the former university is its potential — which was only ever relative — for democratization: the rest should definitively be destroyed… It is certain that 'saving the university' and 'no to the commodification of knowledge' are, in political terms, mere byproducts of calls to action; if they pretend to be other than that, to constitute real political projects, then the first is a social-democrat slogan that is burying itself with the university it hoped to defend, and the second, a pious wish, reactive, in short the "left radical" [*gauchisée*] form of the first.

  Barot in short construed "saving" the university as *preserving* the university, as an attachment to the status quo. His critique was aimed, perhaps, less at SLU per se than at the larger university movement and its slogans, but SLU qua organization was still clearly targeted here, by virtue of its very name. Yet if Barot was correct in noting that SLU and their compatriots seldom talked about what to "destroy" in the existing public university system, it remains the case that SLU was never a "preservationist" project; preserving the status quo was never their object. This rejoinder was quickly made by Thierry Labica (2009), a union activist and English literature professor from the University of Paris 10-Nanterre:

> [Barot] does not seem very well attuned to the meaning that, in this context, a slogan like "save the university" can assume — a slogan which, even if it only marked a straightforward intention to preserve the existing (which is not even the case), is resonating today with an unprecedented amplitude. Such a slogan tends to bring out that part of the historic compromise which today finds itself put in question, and consequently, as it becomes a key demand in this conjuncture, it becomes radical, inasmuch as it consists in taking seriously a

set of never-kept promises that constituted the social-reformist ideological mortar of the postwar period. These include free tuition, universal access, independence from private economic or political power, democratization of knowledge (or rather, knowledge as a field of democratic practices), employment stability, labor rights, and refusal of the market's coercive competitiveness — all this at a moment where the promised [university] reforms and break-up of the civil service were reinforcing the worst forms of servility [*larbinisme*] and of mandarinism known today.

Labica was quite right that the image of "salvation" helped to foreground a set of social-democratic ideals that were the "never-kept promises" of the post-1960s French university.[9] But we should add here that SLU's work went well beyond recalling a set of ideals. It was more a situational ethics or a critique-in-action than a generic declaration of principles. It would be more precise to say that broken social-democratic ideals served SLU as tools for *processing* the institutional realities they saw around them. Indeed, SLU themselves definitively rejected the "preservationist" reading of their project, in an anthemic text they wrote in Summer 2009, just in the aftermath of the movement:

> The bitterness, the self-questioning, the rage, and the hopes of these last months are not some kind of conservative reflex to save the old university, which has not existed for a long time. The movement has taken stock of what the university is today, and it has tried to open up paths for thinking about its future and the future of the university's social functions. University massification took place in the absence of adequate means for its desired goals; and this has profoundly transformed the university's material reality, as well as our practices and our analyses. Sometimes, unfortunately, due to the circumstances in which massification took place, even our perception of the merits of broad access to higher education has shifted. Unclear positions about selective student admissions and tuition raises (already begun and still coming) are indexes of this malaise, and the ambivalent reaction is a result of the fact that we have not collectively worked out the consequences of the rising number of students and of their changing characteristics. Still, the question that emerges from this spring's reflections is not about whether the university accepts too many young people, but rather about the necessary conditions for maintaining broad access while still being the University. The University should allow still greater access to those social groups new to higher education, and in so doing it should fulfill *its unfulfilled promises of democratization.* (SLU, 2009, my emphasis)

Here, we see SLU not only recalling an "unfulfilled promise" of the university (here, mass access to higher education), but also trying to think about the institutional circumstances (here, the

flood of underprepared undergraduates) *that were clouding and reshaping these very ideals.* We might conclude that, far from being a sort of ornamental or "superstructural" discourse, SLU's salvation metaphor was, in spite of its seemingly straightforward label, a way of trying to parse and reprocess a mixed attachment. The work of the salvation metaphor was thus less about rationalizing and effacing ambivalence than about giving it space to elaborate itself; to "save the university" was a way of trying to figure out what was worth saving, just as Barot had proposed. To be sure, in some distant sense, the salvation metaphor also provided SLU and their colleagues with a mythical narrative to identify with, since the image of salvation implies a heroic subject along with a virtuous object-in-distress. But in their day-to-day work, as we will see below, SLU very seldom talked about saving anything.

Our problem as ethnographic analysts, then, is not to decode a metaphor per se, but to investigate the *relationship* between a metaphor and a practice. "Saving the university" offered a metaphorical framework for SLU's everyday activity, but it did this less by providing a single dominant image than by potentiating a whole field of activist discourse.[10] The empty image of salvation worked as an anchor for something much more generative and concrete. Indeed, the salvation image in SLU's name—the "saving" in "Save the University"—provided some of the optimism, positivity, and narrative continuity that their everyday activity rather lacked.[11] It was as if maintaining an overall state of political ambivalence required an ongoing source of optimism, in this case one hidden in plain sight.

THE GENERAL AND THE PARTICULAR

If in practice, saving the university was a matter of processing a mixed attachment to the existing French public university system, then the ethnographic question becomes: What did this work of processing look like on a day-to-day basis? Here, rather than trying to examine the wide range of political topics that SLU treated, I will single out one particular topic that consistently preoccupied SLU: the question of representation in university governance. This was, in a sense, SLU's inaugural topic, since, as we saw above, the group itself emerged from a 2007 declaration called "University presidents don't speak in our name." That text denounced the "hyper-presidency" that SLU saw looming up from the LRU Law, and complained that campus presidents had dominated the ensuing policy debates:

> Given that the university community essentially includes three constituent parts (students, teachers and administrative staff), everything happens as if, to know the views of the two latter categories, it is enough to know the opinions of campus presidents. (Bayard et al., 2007)

The text went on to demand that university presidents speak up against the law, and concluded that the academic community needed to reclaim its own voice in public debate:

It would be good if the rare presidents who do not want this excess of [newly granted] prerogatives — and who see their dangers — said so clearly. And finally, the teachers and staff members must organize themselves to make their voices heard, and to say that university presidents' declarations, and the communiqués of the CPU [Conference of University Presidents], do not represent what many of us think of this law. In short, we must make it known that a minority [*certains*] does not speak and will not speak in our name.

The declaration was effective at mobilizing a segment of the academic community, rapidly producing SLU's birth as an association. And yet the problems of representation in university governance never went away. The Sarkozy government seldom showed much enthusiasm for meeting with protesters, and by the end of the 2009 protest movement, the ongoing lack of dialogue had provoked intense anger among SLU's leadership. On June 16, 2009, after the protest movement had wound down, the legislator Daniel Fasquelle organized a meeting at the National Assembly, aiming to foster dialogue about the university reforms. Fasquelle was a law professor, and belonged to the party of the Sarkozy government, the Union for a Popular Movement. He had invited Jean-Louis Fournel, then SLU's president, to speak at the event. But for Fournel, it was too little, too late.

Fournel's appearance made an impression on me that morning, given its dramatic difference in tone from the other speakers. He wore a neat brown jacket with the group's badge prominently pinned to his lapel. "I'm here to share with you the ANGER of the movement," he said when his turn came to speak. "It's very important that ALL the interlocutors are here, whatever one may think of their attitudes. I wish we had had dialogue from the start." His anger was palpable, his face strained, his voice tense. A more intellectually elaborated version of this anger comes through in the prepared version of his remarks (which I do not think were delivered verbatim, but which circulated afterwards):

How is it that a meeting organized by our parliamentary representatives and dealing with the university is happening without the presence of the movement's main institutional actors? The selective sorting of interlocutors is not a method. One must work with the people, even in the university, rather than hoping to find a different one. The strength of the spring 2009 movement should have incited our parliamentary representatives to draw some new conclusions, acting as good legislators and on behalf of the Nation. Alas. Instead of looking for new ways and means to communicate with the whole university community, you have preferred to sustain confusion. While a structured and systematic project of denigrating our

professions has been at the heart of government policy for months, I'm sorry to say that at no moment did the parliamentary majority deign to envision correcting the urgent and very serious imbalances in the academic system that it introduced with its vote on August 10, 2007. […] For all these reasons, SLU refuses the bit part that it's been offered today. We thank the few people who were happy to see us here and we apologize to them for having to leave. *Au revoir Mesdames et Messieurs!* (Fournel, 2009)

Afterwards, there was a brief debate with the organizer Fasquelle, and then Fournel stormed out of the room, just as promised.[12] The least one can say about this is that, for SLU's spokespersons, the questions of democracy and representation were not mere talking points, but had become imbued with affect and political investment. The longevity of this investment is apparent from the fact that five years later, under François Hollande's Socialist Party government, the same concerns recurred. From 2012 to 2015, French higher education was under the supervision of Geneviève Fioraso, a Socialist Party politician from Grenoble, with a background in tech startups and urban development.[13] Something of a French Arne Duncan (cf. Giroux and Saltman, 2009), Fioraso rapidly became a symbol of the neoliberal policy continuities between Sarkozy's center-right government and the subsequent Socialist center-left government. More than 11,000 academics had signed a petition demanding Fioraso's resignation in April 2014—a petition that SLU avidly supported.

SLU's opposition to Fioraso was still quite strong the next month, as apparent in a short SLU communiqué from May 2014, entitled (in English) "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." The communiqué was illustrated with a Groucho Marx photo and published on their website:

The LRU and the Fioraso laws have eroded the forms of staff representation in higher education and research across every level of academic governance. Outside appointees have increasingly acquired a dominant role in universities' Administrative Councils, especially in the elections of campus presidents.

The Board of Sauvons l'Université notes that the State Secretary for Higher Education and Research is stubbornly continuing to partake in this logic, by disdainfully refusing to meet in person with the natural representatives of the staff, that is, with their unions. At the same time, she finds space in her calendar to invite the representatives of "clubs" who inspire her policies in some cases, and contest it in others.

Whatever may be the pertinence of a dialogue with these clubs, this practice illustrates a desire to choose her interlocutors, and a propensity to react hastily on the basis of a

newspaper article, without looking beyond the froth of these debates [*sans aller au-delà de l'écume des débats*]. (SLU, 2014)

SLU carefully struck a balance between the general and the particular, between indignation at the general disenfranchisement of "the people" (as Fournel might have put it) and frustration with a specific detail of Fioraso's calendar. SLU had become expert in just this sort of mediating move, combining a very local critique of a local incident with a very general reminder about a problem that had preoccupied them for years. In this instance, SLU situated their complaint about Fioraso's schedule in the broader context of declining council democracy on campus, as new regulatory requirements (from the LRU Law) had increased the number of outside, non-academic members of campus administrative councils. The State Secretary's selective choice of interlocutors, in this light, was an affront to one of SLU's basic principles: that higher education should be self-governed, not governed from outside.

Just what was being "saved" here, then? On the mundane level, this was an argument about saving time on an official schedule, about requiring fair representation in official policy consultations. But on the moral-ideological level, it was an effort to save a whole system of academic democracy—and this not in the abstract, but as it manifested within a specific situation in French politics. Yet were SLU's members satisfied with their own discourse, with the links they drew out between the general and the particular, between saving and criticizing? In fact I found the opposite. Even as they produced large amounts of critical discourse in their house style, SLU's members remained troubled by the limits of their self-allocated critical role.

THE LIMITS OF SALVATION AS RESISTANCE

In June 2010, I interviewed many members of the SLU board in a group interview. Tellingly, the question of "saving" the university never came up. Instead, I saw complex disagreements about whether the group even had a political project, which they termed a "program."

> SLU Member 1: SLU's political identity, in fact, it's reactive, that is in terms of the LRU reform [which it opposed]. And the fact that there's no [political] line, at a given moment […]
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> SLU 2: To say that there's no line—for me there is one, which sets it apart from everything else I'm involved with at the university, and that's resistance. Because with everyone else, it's been a while since they stopped resisting anything, they bed down with whatever there is to bed down with, they get themselves elected to campus administrations.
>
> Ethnographer: So you have a reactive identity, in fact?

SLU 3: Hmm. Well not only, because we just took the government to court, and that was a way of—

SLU 4: It's one of those rare moments where we had the feeling we had a program.

SLU 5: Yeah, for example, in terms of the civil service exams [*concours*], no one among us had the same views.

SLU 4: We've never had time to reflect on it.

SLU 6: It's more complicated than that, because since we started saying we don't have time to reflect on it, we could have found the time.

SLU 5: I'm not sure that we could have found it, given everything else going on…

SLU 4: It would be a kind of work that maybe we're not used to doing, and maybe that's why [we don't do it]—because it's not the same thing as reacting [to an issue].

As we see here, SLU's members were frustrated by their own lack of a positive program, even though they found it hard to agree on how to assess this lack. Clearly, SLU perceived the difficulty of producing a positive program was as much material and logistical as ideological or theoretical. We see here a keen awareness that these faculty organizers were in no way compensated for their work, that their time was limited, and that in the end they were bound by the limits of their own habits and competences. As the interview continued, I learned more about the complexities of defining "resistance" as the SLU program:

SLU Member 2: Resistance, we're putting together tools for resistance in different areas. We just put together the legal team, we had the mobilization team, the street team, the union coalition team, and yeah, the petition team—

SLU 5: The agit-prop team.

SLU 2: Yes but, as in any place where one starts reflecting through resistance, I'm making some progress — on [the issue of] Europe, all the same, we did reach consensus on some propositions, as if resistance alone weren't the only thing we were after.

SLU 7: There's an agreement on resistance.

SLU 2: We have a shared foundation, but we don't reflect on how we could push it forward, in fact — there's a shared foundation, yes, we do end up seeing that, but we don't push it forward.

SLU 5: There are some questions that are cleverly dodged, because they're hard and there's no consensus, like for example, with the matter of the civil service exam [*concours*], should we at all costs defend the civil service exam, the *agrégation* [*an elite teaching certification*]? That's something where, here and there, we've vaguely had conversations that showed us that we

weren't on the same page, that there were even some frankly antagonistic positions, but we've never tried to get into it, in the end.

SLU 2: But then, this affair of the civil service exam, I'm not sure we face any problem of principle — that is, philosophically speaking, in an ideal society, should there be a civil service exam? Maybe instead, what moves us is (it's somewhere between reformism and radicalism), given the political positions we do have, and which we don't really quarrel over (since in the end that's not the point of the association), how do we end up making a less worthless [*pourave*] world? And in the end, we've put ourselves on the side of resistance. Which is an easy side to take, which saves us from having to sort out our positions on the long-term means of building something positive. In fact, I'm not entirely in agreement that we're more an embryo of a political party than of a union. I think we're more an embryo of a union than an embryo of a party, because we're not working on constructing a project.

Resistance was their line, they said, and they didn't advance beyond it into a positive project, as a political party might have. Does this mean, then, that to save the university was simply an act of resistance? I think one might reasonably conclude that SLU's positive project was more *meta-political* than substantively programmatic. That is, for SLU activists, saving the university meant redefining the very model of university politics. It meant figuring out how to be political in the university in a new way, beyond the predefined scopes of disciplinary, institutional, or even union (labor) politics. Saving the university meant renegotiating the boundaries between what was considered radical and what was considered practical, inhabiting the uncharted borderlands where they meet. Saving the university involved losing a lot of fights over policy, but, I would argue, it helped prevent neoliberal government policy from ever settling in as doxa, by deflating state ideology in France and questioning its seriousness. I am not necessarily convinced that the university in its social democratic form can be saved from its own internal contradictions, let alone from a hostile policy situation like the one in France. But the case reminds us that the metaphor of salvation can at the very least be quite politically productive. In the terms of this paper's initial questions, we might conclude that salvation through critique may be effective without being either necessary or sufficient.

FOSTERING METAPOLITICS

Practically speaking, what can we learn from this case? On the most basic level, the SLU case reminds us that university faculty are quite capable of becoming sophisticated critics of academic policy, and as such deserve to be consulted even when their views are strongly opposed to those of the ostensible policymakers. (Such faculty critique, interestingly, need not presuppose any

strong political consensus among its authors, since criticism does not require homogeneous political commitments.) On a second level, SLU shows the value of an academic *culture of direct democracy*, where members of campus communities freely self-organize outside of top-down organizational channels. Such a culture of direct democracy deserves more encouragement than it usually gets in Anglophone academic contexts, particularly in moments of institutional crisis when dissent is most difficult and traditional channels are most inadequate. Finally, SLU's example reminds us of the power of language and metaphor to motivate institutional action. It barely matters, in the end, that the university was never literally "saved" by the work of *Sauvons l'Université*. What matters is the field of critical policy analysis and the antidotes to *doxa* that their guiding metaphor helped bring into being. As such, one might conclude that we would be well advised to continue expanding our stock of metaphors, while discarding images like "crisis" as they become increasingly worn out. One might also wonder: is the very notion of "policy" a bad metaphor for politics in higher education?

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Table 9.1: SLU website posts in the first week of November 2014

Date	Article Title
2014-Nov-1	Chile: educational reform hits turbulence
2014-Nov-1	Women paid worse than men
2014-Nov-3	November 4 - Call for mobilization against the steamroller
2014-Nov-3	Towards a globalization of education?
2014-Nov-5	Let's get rid of Public-Private Partnerships, millstones around the neck of the State
2014-Nov-7	Taxes: The research tax credit under attack again
2014-Nov-7	60,000 education jobs, really?
2014-Nov-7	United Kingdom: protests against precarity in higher education
2014-Nov-7	Research: The accounts don't balance
2014-Nov-7	Saint-Denis: Abandoned Schools?
2014-Nov-7	A hundred students marching for higher education funding
2014-Nov-7	State of emergency in the French University
2014-Nov-7	Are salaries getting paid at the university?
2014-Nov-7	On the misery of higher education
2014-Nov-7	Meeting with Vincent Berger - minutes

Footnotes

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[1] This paper would not have been possible without the collaboration of many members of SLU, for whose generosity I am extremely grateful. I also want to thanks Charles Soulié for his comments on the topic. Naturally, I remain solely responsible for the claims of this paper and for any errors that it may contain, including errors of translation.

[2] They were in fact highly critical of any expert monopoly on discourse about university policy, writing at one point: "The mistrust of the "political"… tends to make reflections on the university into a private affair of administrative specialists, or even (worse!) to restrict it to the managers of university life, who are dominated by the discourse of expertise and cold, indisputable, seemingly technical neutrality, who accept neither collective reflection nor collective input. The apparent rigor of statistics comes to replace critical thought, "common sense" and good feelings substitute for critical analysis, the arrogance of solitary certitudes for collective deliberation — too slow for the government's taste" (2009).

[3] For general descriptions of French higher education in this period, see Abélard (2003), Felouzis (2001), Musselin (2008), Faure et al (2006), Le Gall and Soulié (2009), Beaud et al. (2010:ch. 3).

[4] The 13th arrondissement of Paris is a gentrifying district that houses the French National Library and several university campuses.

[5] See http://sauvonsluniversite.com/IMG/pdf/SLU_Newsletter_36.pdf

[6] See http://sauvonslarecherche.fr/spip.php?article4025

[7] The opposition, however, had already taken steps to denounce the government's modernization metaphor, as early as the 2007 declaration that set SLU in motion. "To understand the stakes of this affair," they asserted, "it is best to avoid positing a caricatured conflict that opposed the modern and dynamic partisans of the reform to its archaic opponents" (Bayard, et al. 2007).

[8] In French academic contexts, the notion of "mandarins," drawing loosely on a stereotype about bureaucrats in Imperial China, is commonly used to describe the ruling academic elites. The historian Fritz Ringer writes that, "For the European setting, I would define 'the mandarins' simply as a social and cultural elite which owes its status primarily to educational qualifications, rather than to hereditary rights or wealth" (1967, 5).

[9] Documents from the student movement in May 1968 seldom refer to salvation, and when they do, mainly negatively. Student protesters of the period largely seemed to concur with Bourdieu and Passeron's argument, in *The Inheritors* (1979), that the existing French university was dominated by bourgeois students and academic mandarins. In other words, decidedly not worth

saving, as one student pamphlet put it on May 17, 1968: "University students, high school students, out-of-work youngsters, professors and workers did not struggle together behind the barricades last Friday to save a University that solely serves the interests of the bourgeoisie. It's a whole generation of future staff [*cadres*] who are refusing to be the planners of bourgeois needs and the agents of workers' exploitation and repression" (Perrot et al, 1968, 142-3).

[10] Along similar lines, Bonnie Urciuoli (2003) shows how in the U.S. liberal arts context, general categories like "diversity" or "excellence" also work to enable whole worlds of institutional discourse and action even when the specific referent of these terms is empty or variable.

[11] The irony here is, according to Fournel's account of SLU's origin, the "saving" in the name was derivative and citational, derived from a last-minute imitation of another group (SLR, "Save Research") under the pressure of their activist timeline.

[12] It seemed to me that the event's organizers were in no way surprised by Fournel's departure, as if it struck them as a predictable piece of theatre.

[13] In 2014, after a cabinet reshuffling in the wake of the Socialists' electoral defeat in the 2014 municipal elections, Hollande's government downgraded university governance in its ministerial hierarchy. Fioraso was accordingly reassigned from "Minister of Higher Education and Research" to "State Secretary for Higher Education and Research."