

## UNIVERSITIES OF THE 21ST CENTURY AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie



*RJ* Dear Professor Le Roy Ladurie, do you think that the modern-day university is a moving force or an obstacle in the way of social innovation nowadays?

In countries like Singapore and China, universities seek to stimulate progress and social change. In France, the situation is somewhat different. I do not want to sound unpatriotic, but **our universities find it very hard to adapt to the modern situation.** The situation may be better in other European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, but in the countries of the Mediterranean, the situation also leaves much to be desired.

*RJ* How important do you think the role of universities in modern-day politics is? Are universities still a breeding ground for tomorrow's political leaders?

One of the ways that French universities influence political life is through the **actions of the rather revolutionary students, who are opposed to any change and are often represent an obstacle to achieving progress.** This is to say that their influence is certainly not always beneficial. Another, more direct, form of influence is the role played by the National School for Administration (ÉNA), which prepares future public servants and whose graduates form the basis of the political class in France. This influence is, in essence, a beneficial one.

*RJ* Has there been a big change in the political views and affinities of professors and students in recent years? Are they basically in consensus or do they disagree with the attitudes of society in general?

In the USA, professors of the humanities and the social sciences often adhere to more leftist political views, while their students may tend towards the extreme left. American universities are liberal in the American sense of this word – in other words, they have leftist views, although their opinions are not necessarily radical. At the same time, the majority of Americans (though not necessarily an overwhelming majority) adhere to views that are more conservative and right-leaning. At some point, Bush managed to win an election simply on the basis of accusations that his opponent was a liberal.

After the victory of Barack Obama, a certain shift took place in the global political balance. The world community began to lean a bit more to the left. However, it is not yet clear if this “swing to the left” is going to last.

In France the universities also tend to be leftist, unlike the majority of the population, which is predominantly right in their views. One of the specific differences with France is that we have established leftist political movements that have a long history and a sizeable influence on both national and global politics.

*RJ* Would you say that the increase in the level of education is an indicator of the development of a society?

Definitely, I would say so. The upper class in both French and German society prior to World War I was actually very well educated, they had received a brilliant education. As a result, Germany experienced rapid economic growth, while France enjoyed a remarkable cultural boom. Unfortunately, both countries lost most of their elite to the war.

**Nowadays, the level of education in France and, I think, other western countries has deteriorated.** This has to do with the tendency to abuse TV and Internet, which accounts for a significant portion of teenagers' time. I would also like to note that the educational system in the former communist states was

**Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie** (born in 1929) is a world-renowned French historian focusing on the medieval period, whose work is mainly centred upon the *ancien régime* of the modern era. Le Roy Ladurie is the founder of the *Nouvelle histoire* school of thought. Following his teacher Fernand Braudel, he was an active participant of the

*Annales School* movement. Today, he is an honorary professor at the Collège de France.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is most renowned for the research he conducted on the daily life of the peasantry in the Languedoc province of France. Together with Carlo Ginzburg, he is considered to be one of the fathers of the so-called ‘microhistory’

genre. Apart from microhistorical research, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is also known as one of the originators of climate history research and is also known for his work on the social and political history of France under royal rule in the late medieval and early modern period, right up until the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI.

rather good, despite the existence of many flaws in other areas of their society.

**RJ** *How will the ideology and status of the 21st century university differ from those of the 20th century? Will they become more politicised institutions than it is currently the case? What do you think are the factors that will affect the development of the university as an institution in the near future?*

Universities will definitely become an important force in the society in the 21st century. However, they will have to compete for influence with other forces that currently have a greater influence on society, namely the Internet and its most important segments (e.g. Google, Wikipedia). Nowadays, the students do not use crib sheets or cue cards to find the answers they need to answer their exam questions; instead, they search online for the information they need to answer these questions on. New technologies are taking on greater weight in the information balance. The importance of reading books is declining, while the use of other informational sources is increasing. Thus, **it appears that universities are not the only source of knowledge and that they are no longer the force that they used to be.**

The university's position as a social force is threatened by the mass media and by video games, which are an important part of the life of the young people. Today's youth tend to be good with computers and new technologies, and this is probably the most important driver of social change in recent years. ■

*Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie was speaking with Yulia Netesova*



## TITLE: TEACHING CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM RESEARCH



CHARLES MAYER is an American historian, a professor at Harvard University Center for European Studies. He was the Head of the Center in 1994-2001 and then again in 2006. He is an author of numerous works, including 'Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors' (2006)

Exclusively for RJ

There has never been widespread acceptance in the USA of the notion that research institutes should somehow be separated from teaching institutions. In America, there is nothing similar to the Max Planck Institute or France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Most of researchers in the US must also teach students and, in my opinion, that remains a strength of the American educational system (an exception must be made for the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study or the RAND Corporation — but I don't necessarily think that they perform their functions better than universities as such.)

The old socialist bloc countries, including the republics of the former Soviet Union, had separate research institutions that often resolved collaborative tasks. I do not believe that this is the best use of skilled academics. I also think that a professor tends to play a more useful role in society than an academician. **If I were at liberty to determine the education policy in one of those countries where similar academic institutions exist, I would seek to integrate them more closely with the process of teaching students.**

Admittedly, in the USA, the private sector activity carries out a great deal of

research. For the most part, this usually takes the form of financing university research programs, but some corporations also have their own laboratories. Among such companies are Bell Labs, IBM, Microsoft, Intel, and Google, for instance. Grants from the NSF go towards funding a huge amount of developments in the sphere of medicine and the natural sciences, in addition to some research in the social sciences.

Universities certainly will be different in the future. There will be much more decentralisation in the teaching process through internet offerings (through distance learning programmes). Major central libraries will become less important with the emergence of and access to a greater amount of digital information. I think that, as universities mature they will most likely become less active politically. However, in some countries, universities will retain the function of being an implicit oppositional element to the powers that be. In recent years, this has not been so much the case in the USA (with the exception of the 1960s), compared to universities in Latin America, France, Italy and perhaps some Asian societies. Perhaps universities will continue to play this role in the future. ■