

/Academic Discourse/

*Linguistic Misunderstanding and
Professorial Power*

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4

The Users of Lille University Library

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For practical reasons, our study of university students and their use of institutional libraries has been restricted to the users of Lille University Library, implying a more limited range of objectives than would have been possible with access to other survey methods and techniques.¹ How library reading varies in relation to other reading, for example, and how attitudes to the range of institutional libraries (university libraries, libraries of specialized institutes) differ by student background are questions which would have required a sample survey. Having decided to limit the study to measuring user attitudes to the University Library and its services, we also had to forego objective information on student behaviour which could have been gathered only through systematic observation.²

The University Library, thanks to its multi-purpose character, lends itself to a variety of uses, and this provides the opportunity to describe the diversity of relationships which students develop towards the facilities which the academic system puts at their disposal. If its specific role is to provide students with instruments of study not otherwise available to them – texts, reference works, catalogues, bibliographical support – the Library also offers itself as a place of study where scholarly activity, the reading of lecture notes or the preparation of assignments can be carried out without resorting to any of the library's specific resources. Obvious and easily recognized, these functions conceal others which are very frequently associated with them, such as using the library as a meeting-place.

There is no better definition of the real function of the University Library than the objective meaning implicated in the use which students make of it.

Asked about what they were doing in the Library on the day of our survey, 38 per cent said they were completing an assignment for which they had used none of the tools supplied by the Library (catalogues, reference works, textbooks); 24.5 per cent said they had consulted reference works; while only 25.5 per cent had used the Library in the way it was specifically designed – to borrow books to read there or at home.³

Students in their great majority do nothing at the Library which they cannot do as well or better at home because, by unanimous consent, the Library is an unfavourable site for scholarly reflection. This finding bears out the impression, if any confirmation were needed, that most users of the University Library only appear to be working rather than actually getting anything done. During our pilot survey, some 33 different kinds of activity were observed. Of these, 22 suggested distraction or relaxation, with some students endlessly checking their watches as if they were about to leave, others chatting continually with their neighbours or getting more involved in what their friends were doing than in their own work.⁴ University students thus seem to want something from the Library which they cannot find at home, whether this is the real or imaginary encouragement to study induced by the 'atmosphere' of the Library or the psychological gratifications of contact with their peers, known or unknown, or a vague expectation of making these contacts.

Nothing is thus further removed from the rational utilization of all the possibilities offered by the Library than the behaviour of the great majority of students. From the failure to understand the services which specialist library staff provide or the role of the card-index⁵ to the type of work carried on while fritting away time chatting or coming and going, everything confirms the fact that students misrecognize the particular function of the Library and more often treat it as a meeting-place or at best a study area. Further confirmation of this comes from the finding that when invited to share their expectations regarding the organization of library services, very few students (12 per cent) want technical improvements to the specific tools of intellectual work supplied by the university library (catalogues, loan service, etc.).

Student attitudes are defined more or less explicitly by reference to an image of work in a library as being seen to be at work, and it is because of this that the will to get some work done (as distinct from merely appearing to work) can lead to refusing to work in the Library just as well as working there from a rational and resolute sense of commitment.

It would be tempting to explain much of this behaviour by pointing to physical conditions, especially poor or inadequate facilities (shortage of study areas, for example). In fact, this would be to make the common assumption that objective conditions directly govern attitudes or actually

produce them, so that for a change in attitudes to occur, only a change in the material environment is needed. This illusion of a spontaneous sociology fails to take into account the fact that 'Material conditions can to a large extent aid or inhibit the development of corresponding lines of behaviour, but only if there is a pre-existing tendency, for the way in which conditions will be exploited depends on the nature of the people who are to exploit them.'⁶ Indeed, it is very doubtful whether, without some kind of external intervention, university students would be able to develop the skills necessary to benefit, fully and uniformly, from the provision of new facilities, and whether new attitudes can be created simply by abolishing penurious conditions. For material impediments, which weigh unequally on students from different social backgrounds, tend to mask underlying cultural obstacles, concealing them especially from the most vocal of critics. Thus, for example, students complain about the lack of books, but, on the other hand, they are poorly trained in bibliographical searches; their reading is too narrowly limited to recommended texts;⁷ and the fact that they are always after the same basic textbooks means that the branch library with multiple copies meets their requirements better than the university library equipped for researchers.

More profoundly, though, what is perhaps most strongly conveyed by student attitudes to the University Library is their whole attitude to intellectual work. What most students refuse, consciously or unconsciously, is the notion of library work as a methodical enterprise. For this requires a deliberate rationalization of time and the application of undivided hours to a continuous task; and this approach is diametrically opposed to the typical way of portraying intellectual work in which reading is ideally done in gulps. Nearly all students questioned during our pilot survey said that they preferred reading at home or in circumstances in which other, non-studious activities could be fitted in – the café, outdoors, a walk, on a bed, at a friend's place.

The romantic image of intellectual work, which reserves reading for 'propitious moments', turns work itself into a form of leisure, and dismisses any apprenticeship in intellectual activity based on exercises carried out in a place specifically set aside for them as boring. 'I don't like the atmosphere of libraries.' 'What puts me off about the Library is the institutional, tedious side. Owning a book makes me feel as if it was written for me. Borrowing a book, I feel that it's not addressed to me.' 'I always have 30 books out to read for the exams, and everyday I borrow another one. I say, "everyday", but it's more like every hour! I tell myself I have to read that, then I take the book, read three or four pages, then, at night, another book catches my eye and I take out yet another one.'

These cultural obstacles weigh so heavily on students because they are

poorly trained for the rational exploitation of the Library. Thus young people who have spent several years in higher education can still prove to be incapable of using the Library in the way it was specifically intended. 'I quite often go to the University Library to do translations, to use *Harraps*, or for various other things, but I have never borrowed a single book. I don't even know how the system works, the card-index, all that, I have never used it' (female student; father, a middle-level manager; six years at university). In fact, the techniques of bibliographical search are never explicitly taught, in however rudimentary a way.⁸

Significantly, students are able to distance themselves much more from the typical attitude when they are better equipped in terms of methods and techniques of academic work and more capable of integrating library work into a methodical enterprise. Thus 35 per cent of holders of secondary teaching scholarships came to consult the catalogue or to borrow books as against 27 per cent of general scholarship-holders and only 24 per cent of private students. Similarly, more holders of secondary teaching scholarships than private students see the Library exclusively as a place of work, and not as a meeting-place as well as a place of work.⁹ Thus, everything happens as if the absence of methodical instruction in the techniques of intellectual work facilitates the law of natural selection coming into play. Only those students who are better armed scholastically are capable of finding in themselves the resources which the institution should provide for all.

* * *

Thus the activities in which students engage most frequently tend to come together in defining the real meaning of work in a university library, and this establishes the framework within which the subjective and the objective significance of individual behaviour is in turn defined, even if the very ambiguity of their relationship with the library implies that students cannot categorically declare the real meaning of their own conduct.

In this context it is remarkable that indirect survey questions should have been able to bring out underlying relationships between student attitudes to seriousness of intellectual work, skills in using library services, or the meanings conferred by students, subjectively or objectively, on work in a library and background characteristics such as number of years at university, sex and occupational category.

For newcomers – preliminary-year students – work in the University Library is one of the surest and easiest ways of achieving the image of the student. Moreover, while in some respects it may restore the atmosphere of compulsory, supervised study in secondary school, the University Library is also the place to encounter what is most specifically and notoriously

'student'. So it is understandable that preliminary-year students should be the main users. The fact that undergraduates, preparing for their *licence*, use Institute libraries as an alternative, is not enough to explain why preliminary-year students, who represent only 30.6 per cent of all arts faculty numbers, should make up 45 per cent of all library-users.

Ambivalent attitudes towards the University Library are particularly marked among female students. Knowing that they are more likely than male students to report working regularly, and that, living more often with their families, they are more strongly attached to the idea of working at home, we might have expected them to be less well represented among users of the University Library. Should we then attribute to a superior academic zeal the fact that, on the contrary, they are more highly represented?¹⁰ In fact, they are more likely to admit that they go to the Library out of a desire to feel enclosed by the surroundings and so to feel 'stimulated in their work', while meeting fellow students at the same time. The Library is a 'place to work where you don't feel isolated'; it offers the satisfactions of studious activity and distracting social contact. 'I like the spectacle of people coming and going'; 'I don't like going there on my own because I get bored to death.' Male students tend to construct a more realistic and less ambivalent picture of the Library. From a menu of alternative images, they often choose the 'railway station', as representing a place of transit and of meetings. But young women reject this analogy, and describe the library as a 'beehive' – a place of intense collective activity in which scholarly zeal and the expectation of meeting friends are merged. They also couple two antithetical images more frequently – 'monastery' and 'railway station', 'beehive' and 'waiting-room' – and through this attempted reconciliation of contraries betray the ambivalent function which the University Library really performs for them.¹¹ They can thus enjoy working in a noisy atmosphere, and blame the noise for not getting much work done; the Library is for work, but at the same time for meeting friends. Again, by comparison with male students, their ideal image of the Library gravitates towards the beehive or the lecture theatre, while males prefer the monastery. A desire for integration is revealed by these attitudes, as well as by other indicators. Girls more often say that they like to sit close to their friends or try to find out what their neighbours are doing or that they frequently break off their work to talk.

Perhaps these contradictions in attitude should be understood as a response to the 'mixed pressures' experienced by young women caught between the traditional definition of women's role and the situation of female students at university. Young women who come from well-to-do families can view their entry to university in terms of social benefits, without being unaware that their current activity is preparing them in name only for

a future which will deny their training.¹² Indeed, female students can respond to contradictory expectations from family, male friends and, in fact, the whole university situation with behaviour which differs from male patterns in two divergent directions. Conformity to the most traditional models of feminine conduct offers them adaptation in the form of academic zeal and docility, evident, for example, in the greater likelihood that they, not their male colleagues, will read recommended texts. But there is still a kind of unconscious fidelity to the most traditional social expectations, which leads them more often than young men – who are better integrated in a badly integrated milieu – to look consciously or unconsciously for meetings and contacts.

Library work authorizes an apparent reconciliation of contraries through a kind of double-game played out with itself. It provides female students – especially those from the most privileged backgrounds – with a way of expressing their ambivalent relationship with their situation, and it is owing to this that their behaviour more completely betrays an attitude found to different degrees among most users of the Library. How can we explain the fact that working-class students – whom we know buy fewer books, have less comfortable accommodation, and are more assiduous at university – frequent the University Library somewhat less often than other students, if we do not admit that, being more conscious of the fictive character of a certain style of library use, they more often choose to work at home? Their attitude, characterized by much greater seriousness of purpose, is formed with reference to the objective definition of the Library as a place in which the impression of work is given – a definition which is more evident to them, and which they express more freely in interviews.¹³ It is because of this that they display a greater tendency than other students to absent themselves from the Library. One proof of this is the fact that, with the approach of exams, when the call to be serious is greater than usual, their presence among library-users is even more sparse than during the course of the year.¹⁴ Moreover, there are other signs that when in the Library they work with more seriousness. While, by contrast with upper-class students, they sit closer to their friends, they speak less frequently to them, doubtless because they are less worried about 'making friends'.¹⁵ In short, students are more likely to make the Library a place where the impression of work is given when they come from a more privileged social background.

* * *

'My work isn't unpleasant, it's not an imposition; I could just about say that all the work I do is leisure.' 'For me, there's no such thing as a time for

work, a time for leisure; there's just a time of inactivity, with things falling into place.' 'Throughout the year, for me at any rate, work is a kind of leisure, and leisure a kind of work; in short, they overlap.'

For the dilettante, all means will do to break down the boundaries between leisure and work. Just as he can convince himself that certain leisure activities belong to the business of cultural training, so by working in the Library or in the café he can claim the justifications of work done without giving up the satisfactions of leisure.

APPENDIX 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Father's occupation	Preliminary year ^a	Arts licence	Science	Law	Medicine Pharmacy	Grandes écoles
Farm-workers (n = 48)	10	17	13	5	—	3
Industrial workers (n = 87)	36	30	17	2	—	2
Domestic workers (n = 41)	10	21	6	2	1	1
Office-workers (n = 96)	30	40	19	3	2	2
Artisans, shopkeepers (n = 153)	53	58	30	6	1	5
Middle managers (n = 145)	59	52	26	5	2	1
Senior managers (n = 244)	75	104	44	9	11	1
Others (private income, retired) (n = 66)	13	27	21	3	1	1
Total (n = 880)	286	349	176	35	18	16

^aArts Faculty

APPENDIX 2 THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Centre de sociologie Européenne
10, rue Monsieur-le-Prince
Paris 6

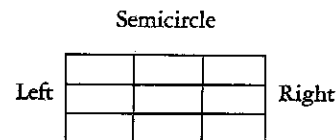
Date

Sociology of Education

- 1 Hour of arrival Hour of departure
- 2 Sex
- 3 Date of birth
- 4 Father's occupation
(Please be as precise as possible: don't say 'teacher', but 'primary school teacher' or 'secondary school teacher'; don't say 'worker', but 'semi-skilled worker' or 'skilled worker, grade 1').
- 5 Faculty (or School)
- 6 In what type of school did you do most of your studies? public — private
Were you: a boarder — a day-pupil?
- 7 Examinations taken this year:
.....
.....
.....
- 8 Number of years in higher education (including the present one)
- 9 Place of residence during academic term
- 10 Do you reside:
 - with your parents?
 - in a private room (alone, with two people, with several)?
 - in private boarding?
 - on university premises (residential college or union)?
 - in a hotel?
 - other (specify)
- 11 Are you:
 - a private student?
 - a scholarship-holder?
 - a studentship-holder?
 Are you presently employed:
 - in education? (Specify.)
 - outside education? (Specify.)

- 12 Approximately how many hours each week do you spend in the University Library?
- 13 What did you do today in the University Library? (Please be as precise as possible.)
.....
.....
.....
- 14 If you came to borrow a book or to consult one at the Library, was it:
- because a lecturer recommended it?
 - because it was listed in a bibliography?
 - because a friend spoke to you about it?
 - because someone else recommended it to you? (please specify who) . . .
 - for other reasons? (Please specify.)
- 15 As a rule, do you work in an uninterrupted fashion? Yes - No.
If not, do you stop from time to time to:
- daydream?
 - speak to your neighbours?
 - go for a cigarette, alone or in a group?
 - go to a café, alone or in a group?
 - for some other reason? (Please specify.)
- 16 Where do you most often work? (Number in order of importance.):
- at home?
 - in a café?
 - in the University Library?
 - in other libraries? (Please specify.)
 - other places? (Please specify.)
- 17 Do you prefer to sit with your friends? Yes - No.
- 18 Has the University Library enabled you to make friends with other people this year? Yes - No.
If yes, were these people:
- from the same course?
 - from the same faculty?
 - from other faculties? (Specify.)
- 19 Do you try to find out what your neighbours are doing? Yes - No.
If yes, do you try to find out:
- their level of studies?
 - their course?
 - other? (Please specify.)

- 20 Do you have a preferred spot in the Library? Yes - No.
If yes, mark the spot with a cross on the plan of the Library below:



- If possible, say why
- 21 Of the following different images, which is the one which most approaches what the University Library is, in fact, for you?
- church
 - waiting-room
 - beehive
 - railway station
 - lecture room
 - monastery
 - other images (please specify)
- Please say why:
- 22 Of the following different images, which one most closely describes the way the University Library *ought to be*?
- church
 - waiting-room
 - beehive
 - railway station
 - lecture room
 - monastery
 - other images (please specify)
- Please say why:
- 23 What does the Library mean to you, and what do you expect of it?
.....
.....
.....
.....

- 24 Please note below any free observations or wishes you might have with respect to the Library?
-
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NOTES

- 1 The sample comprised 880 students who entered the Library at least once between Monday, 16 March, and Saturday, 21 March, 1964. The questionnaires were distributed at the entrance to the Library by students from the sociology group in the Faculty of Arts at Lille, who encouraged their comrades to answer them (once only, when they first entered the library). In order to verify the results obtained by this survey and to examine the extent to which the use of the Library varies according to time of year and proximity of examinations, a second very brief questionnaire was administered on 21 May, and the 255 responses were analysed separately. We wish to thank Miss A. Brucher, Librarian of the Lille University Library, who permitted us to conduct this survey, and Messrs R. Beghinot and J.-F. Lacascade who carried out preparatory observations and organized the pilot study and main survey.
- 2 Preceding the survey, systematic observation of the behaviour of students in the University Library was able to provide only general indications; to link up various attitudes with the social characteristics of individuals required us to resort to the questionnaire.
- 3 Given the availability of the loan service, which permits students to come and borrow books without entering the Library, the actual proportion of students who come to borrow works in order to read them at home is surely greater than what the present survey reveals; students who came simply to borrow a book without having to search the catalogue did not complete the questionnaire, which was distributed at the entrance to the reading room.
- 4 Many behaviours express the same dilettantism, real or affected: references are noted on a matchbox or on the back of an envelope; monumental piles of books are returned without having been opened; and so on.
- 5 Students reject working through a librarian, rarely asking for assistance. 'It is very difficult', a librarian says; 'there is a door to go through, they don't know, they dare not.'
- 6 William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 2nd edn (New York, Dover, 1958), p. 13.
- 7 Among users of the loan service, 59% were obeying strictly academic orders, whether the work had been explicitly advised by a lecturer or had figured in a bibliography handed out by one; only 11% had been advised by a friend.
- 8 The sheet handed to students at enrolment time in October provides a good general guide to the operation of the Library, but it does not constitute an initiation into bibliographical techniques. Indeed, for students to know how to

- use the system, it is not enough to give them a description of it; it is also necessary to induct them into the techniques of using these instruments.
- 9 The few law students who frequent the University Library (which is located very close to the Faculty of Arts) have to leave the space of their habitual activity to do this, and it is not surprising to observe that most of them came to borrow books.
 - 10 Young women represent 70% of Library-users coming from the Faculty of Arts, while for the same academic year they represent only 60% of all students enrolled in this Faculty.
 - 11 Invited to give their observations on the subject of the Library, 24% of female students reported expecting to be able to work and at the same time to meet other students, as against only 12% of males. Among young women, 56% adopted as the ideal image the beehive or the lecture room, as against 37% of men, who, conversely, chose the image of the monastery relatively more often (33%, as against 18%). On the other hand, if 29% of male students compared to 13% of females saw in the railway station the image closest to the library in its present form, 10% of young women cited combinations of disparate images evoking at one and the same time a place of work and a meeting-place, something scarcely ever found among male students.
 - 12 Young women from the working classes are clearly distinguished from female students in general by more studious and unequivocal attitudes. In addition, they more often use the Library according to its specific function, locating the most undisturbed areas to work in, away from passages and meeting-places and close to reference books.
 - 13 'It is absolutely impossible to concentrate, to read in a library' (student from an office-worker's background). 'The University Library? No, I don't like it, you can't work there with any conviction. - For my part, when I work I don't like to be disturbed' (student from farmer's background). 'The University Library? No one works there; they just give the impression of working. - As for me, I prefer to work at home' (industrial worker's background).
 - 14 While working-class students represent 23% of students in the Arts Faculty at Lille, they represent only 15% of Arts students who frequent the University Library in the 'normal period' and less than 12% of those who frequent it at the time of exams.
 - 15 We have seen that female students from working-class backgrounds have a different attitude to other female students.