

IDEA Doctoriale 2017 24 November

John S. Bak

In lieu of IDEA's traditional "Rencontres des doctorants" for this semester, a half-day Doctoriale was organized in which several of IDEA's doctoral students presented their research in progress, and three visiting doctoral students discussed their PhD theses within the context of three different countries: Portugal, Brazil and Algeria.

What's New with the Doctoral Program in France?

John S. Bak opened the Doctoriale by explaining the recent changes to the PhD program in France (effective 1 Sept. 2016). Some of the changes made were significant enough to inform students and directors alike. Since several Master's students attended (and a couple of *Licence* students as well), it was good for them to see what awaited them if they choose to pursue a doctorate.

One of the most significant changes made was the Minister's demand that PhD theses in France be completed in three years. Gone are the days of seven-year PhDs, which has several implications for students and director's alike. The first implication is that the PhD thesis is now generally shorter, with the average thesis running around 300 to 350 pages. The second implication is that hiring committees for MCFs need to recognize these changes so as not to sanction potential candidates because their theses are not 500 pages.

Another significant change, which IDEA implemented last year, was the addition of a *comité de suivi* for each PhD student entering their third year of study. Without this committee's advice, the student cannot enroll. These committees, it has been clearly stated, are not "scientific" in nature. They have been put in place to catch any problems the doctoral student might be having which could impede the completion of the thesis. These committees must meet each subsequent year beyond the third enrollment and submit a short report to the Ecole Doctorale.

There are numerous other changes, some significant enough worth mentioning briefly: a director can sit on a student's jury but no longer has a vote in the final assessment); a student has the right to declare their studies full or part-time (part-time PhDs can last for five years); a student can take a one-year leave of absence during their studies, but only one year; the jury needs to have gender parity; any doctoral student can request to teach classes within his or her department; etc.

John Bak encouraged students and directors and future directors alike to read the Minister's report before taking on a new PhD student.

Roundtable 1: Research Presentations by IDEA's Doctoral Students

The first roundtable included four of IDEA's current PhD students: Steven Paschall (5th year), Gaëlle Lafarge (3rd year), Laura Davidel (4th year), and Florine Berthe (1st year). Steven, who is nearing his defense, spoke about his latest work on American poet Susan Howe. Gaëlle explained her narratological reading of two 19th-century travelogues along the Mississippi River. Laura discussed her application of Judith Butler's performative queer theory to Anne Rice's vampire chronicles. And Florine presented her PhD project on the *thématisation en anglais oral spontané*.

Roundtable 2: Research Presentations by IDEA's Invited Doctoral Students

The second roundtable included research presentations by three visiting PhD students, who are working with IDEA professors. Lilian Juliana Martins, from the Journalism Department of the Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho (Brazil), presented her thesis on a Brazil literary journalist, Antônio Callado. Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho, also from the Journalism Department of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal), discussed the process of completing a PhD in Portugal and explained how his thesis is attempting to problematize the history of literary journalism in his country. And Aziza Tahar-Djebbar, from the Centre Universitaire de Relizane (Algeria), explained her work on the American welfare system.

Comparative PhD programs (France, Algeria, Portugal, Brazil, U.S., U.K.)

After a brief coffee break, the three visiting PhDs gathered again, but this time to discuss the process of undertaking a PhD in their country. Aziza explained the procedure from inscription to defense in Algeria; Lilian did the same for Brazil, adding that students must take several seminars and pass a mid-term defense of their thesis in order to proceed to the final stages of the PhD; and Manuel added a few more details about the PhD in Portugal. John Bak discussed the process of a taking a PhD degree in the United States, which includes two years of advanced seminars, qualifying exams, and the dissertation, usually written in the last two years of the four-year program. Antonella Braida completed the discussion by detailing the PhD degree in the United Kingdom. The discussion elicited several questions from all the students in attendance.

Group work: What are the Roles of the PhD Director?

The final session (inspired from a similar session conducted by Alberto Lázaro, Director de la Escuela de Doctorado at the Universidad de Alcalá) was dedicated to the perceived roles of a PhD director viz. his or her PhD candidate. The goal was not to be prescriptive but to open up dialogue between the degree candidates (at all levels) and the directors about what each perceives to be the most important "traits" in a director. John Bak served as moderator/ animator of what was an exciting and enlightening debate

First, he distributed a sheet of paper containing 25 items pertaining to the various tasks asked of a PhD director. Each of these tasks was vital, from being a seasoned researcher him- or herself, to motivating the student when thesis was not progressing well; from helping the student to publish or find fellowships, to informing them of possible job opportunities outside of academia, etc. He then informed everyone that the goal of the exercise was to discuss and

debate each item and choose only 5 among the 25 items listed, and then rank them in order from first to fifth in terms of importance.

Next, he divided everyone into several small groups. There was a group of PhD directors, another of IDEA's PhD student, a third group of the visiting PhD students, and a final group of Master's and Licence students (although they have not yet worked with a PhD director, each has worked with a research director and thus had formulated ideals and goals along the way).

The groups debated amongst themselves for the better part of half an hour. The task was not easy, since the group had to agree on the five, ranked items, which was not easy, since 5th- and 1st-year PhD students obviously do not have the same perspective; nor do foreign students, whose own programs are vastly different, or undergraduate and Master's students, for that matter.

Once the groups completed their lists, John Bak then began asking each group to list their first choice. Not surprisingly, none of the groups had the same item listed as their first choice (only a few items in total were on each of the groups' lists).

The directors, for instance, had listed "be a good research" as their first choice for a director, whereas the visiting PhD students had chosen "consider the student's point of view" as their first item. The under/graduate students, who did an excellent job, argued that the director should first and foremost inform the student when their work is good and when it is bad. The senior PhDs obviously had different concerns: they wanted their directors to push them to publish, advice them of available financial resources, and present them with job opportunities after the PhD defense.

If "tags" could be given to each group according to their list of choices, the directors were "editors" (give care to the thesis as much as to the student); the senior PhD students needed "encouragements"; the visiting PhDs wanted directors who were "caring"; and the under/grad students said "push us".

A lot of laughs were shared during the final session, which was really both fun and enlightening for all who participated. The visiting students all agreed that they wish they had had events such as this at their home universities.

The evening ended, as the "Rencontres" always do, with an amiable reception, where students and directors alike shared conversation over a glass of wine. §