Gustave Chéneaux, “nothing but good things to be said of him”

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On April 29, 1920, in front of an assembly of students and professors of the Bordeaux Faculty of Law, Dean Léon Duguit delivered a speech in which he paid tribute and mourned the disappearance of one of his colleagues, professor of Civil Law Gustave Chéneaux. Published later, this speech arouses contrasting sentiments in the reader, as the will to justify the butchery that was this war transpires in the word of the eminent jurist. However, Duguit’s words were marked by real fondness and palpable sadness as they dwelt on the personality of this teacher, “killed by the enemy” on April 29, 1915 near Verdun.

The dean first praised all the simplicity of the disappeared man, his obstinacy and his work ethic. Mentioning these traits, which can be found in both soldiers and lawyers, was part of Duguit’s desire to set the memory of Chéneaux as an example for students to follow. That is why he insisted that others had already followed him, as evidenced by the names of the 79 legal apprentices from Bordeaux who had died during this war. Although the emotion did shine through and the words did not lack for elegance, should we consider it to be totally sincere? Did the braided praises in memory of Chéneaux have root causes, or did they simply reflect the common corporatism that academics were accustomed to? To answer this question, one must take an interest in the path of the disappeared professor, which makes it possible to understand, at least to suppose, the reasons which were his and which pushed him to enlist as a simple soldier when nothing forced him to do so.

Joseph Gustave Chéneaux was born on March 17, 1868 in the town of Macouba in Martinique. Little is known of his childhood, except that he was born into a large and poor family. This last indication is crucial and constitutes an important key to his personality. He arrived in metropolitan France as a teenager to take his baccalaureate in humanities, which granted him a scholarship issued by the General Council of Martinique. Therefore, the successive stages of his journey as a student and then his academic career are identifiable, and we only need to remember the major dates. In 1888, he obtained his bachelor’s degree in law in Bordeaux. This allowed him to start a doctorate, which he completed in 1895 with the two theses required to obtain the degree of doctor. The same year, he came in third in the aggregation exam and gave his first courses at Poitiers university. In 1899, he returned to Bordeaux, only to leave it permanently one day in September 1914. Two important points emerge from this basic picture. First of all, nothing in his original environment predisposed him to such a course. In addition, it was through hard work, but also through the intervention of the institutions of the Third Republic that Gustave Chéneaux could continue the path he traced for himself. These elements were indeed the driving forces of his rise, as evidenced by his career record. However, before considering a career, Chéneaux had to complete his doctorate, which was not obvious at the beginning of 1895. Very financially challenged, the young doctoral student benefited from the support of certain personalities of the University of Bordeaux who undertook various actions of varying effectiveness intended to improve his life.

The first of his actions was the granting of a clerk's job with the secretariat of the faculty of law in December 1889. If Chéneaux had to be content with it, it was because his teachers had not succeeded in obtaining him a more rewarding situation. On October 26, 1889, Dean Baudry-Lacantinerie wrote to the Minister of Public Instruction, Fine Arts and Worship to submit the candidacy of Gustave Chéneaux for the position of assistant secretary within the faculty. If Baudry-Lacantinerie did this, it is because he had noticed this brilliant student who had recently begun his doctorate. The use of the most laudatory terms about him reflects the esteem and hope that the teacher then put in his student. After recalling the practice according to which this job was reserved for doctoral students in order to facilitate their preparation for aggregation, the Dean pointed out that the candidate has always received brilliant grades and that he had "des meilleurs renseignements sur M. Chéneaux du point de vue de la moralité [the best information on M. Chéneaux as regards morality]". Moreover, his motivation was evident, as he had already completed an internship to familiarize himself with this position. But the most important information in Baudry-Lacantinerie's panegyric concerns the material situation of the doctoral student: "Sa situation de fortune est si modeste qu'il lui sera impossible de continuer le cours de ses études s'il n'obtient pas le poste qu'il sollicite [His financial situation is so modest that it will be impossible for him to continue the course of his studies if he does not obtain the position he seeks]."

Despite such a plea, the attempt ended in failure. Reduced to the functions of clerk, the doctoral student was nevertheless aware of the projects developed by his peers. Indeed, although the professorial approach does not succeed, the Bordeaux faculty nevertheless obtained that the position of clerk should escape the suppression provided for by the ministry, and this, as long as Chéneaux was the holder.

However, it was during these few years that this brilliant but naive doctoral student committed what turned out to be the only hitch in his curriculum and career. In 1892, a reprimand, demanded by the Minister of Public Instruction, Fine Arts and Worship, was inflicted on him by the dean of the faculty. The reason was very superficial, and here it is summarized. A solicitor of Aubusson, with a baccalaureate in science, applied to the university for an exemption from the baccalaureate in letters, the latter being mandatory in order to obtain a law degree. Following several refusals, the solicitor made a new request, supported by a letter written by the hand of Chéneaux. The clerk at the faculty secretariat assured him that such an exemption "has been granted several times" and

that “the efforts” undertaken by the applicant “are as many recommendations” reflecting his motivation. Yesterday as today, there were all kinds of practices at the university that, while they persist, could not be named. Whether rightly or wrongly, the attitude of the petty official was considered as frivolous as it was inadmissible by the minister as by the rector of Bordeaux, and a “severe blame” was indeed inflicted upon him.

This episode, if it illustrates the candor of the young man, had no serious consequences and his behavior remained worthy of praise. Very quickly, the qualities of the doctoral student attracted the attention of the dean and the rector, who did not fail to note them in the annual confidential information sheets. From 1889 to 1895, his “very gentle” and “affable” character was considered “excellent”. With a “very varied” and “extensive” culture, his time was entirely devoted to work. Very early on, he seemed to have “great skills for teaching law” after having participated in his first rehearsals. A hard worker, his relations with his superiors and with the public of the faculty were constantly considered “excellent”.

His future then seemed to write itself. In 1895, the last year of his doctorate, the confidential information sheet intended for him was much more detailed than usual:

“Très bien doué. M. Chéneaux a fait preuve d’une sagesse et d’une maturité précoces. Il a beaucoup de sérieux dans son caractère et n’entretient que d’assez rares relations sociales, son temps étant tout entier absorbé par le travail. J’ai toujours été satisfait de mes rapports avec lui et les étudiants s’applaudissent d’avoir au secrétariat un de leurs camarades auprès duquel ils sont toujours prêts à trouver bon accueil [Quite gifted. M. Chéneaux showed precocious wisdom and maturity. He is very serious in his character and maintains only fairly rare social relations, his time being entirely devoted to work. I have always been satisfied with my relationship with him and the students are glad to have in the secretariat one of their comrades, with whom they know they can always find a warm welcome].”

But that same year, as he completed his Ph.D. and prepared to take the aggregation examination, the eternal spectrum of study funding presented itself again to him. Without sufficient resources, it was impossible to carry out this last undertaking.

That is why his professors again intervened with their minister on February 1, 1895. It was no longer a question of obtaining any position, but of paying an exceptional allowance to the deserving doctoral student. In order to support this request, the Rector

of Bordeaux relied on a report by Dean Baudry-Lacantinerie. From the latter, it appears that Chéneaux could not meet the cost of the aggregation examination and that in addition to his activities as a clerk, he was carrying out “un travail supplémentaire pour remettre de l’ordre dans les archives [additional work to restore order in the archives]”. The doctoral student’s investment proved fruitful and on March 19 of the same year, the Minister granted him “une indemnité extraordinaire de 400 francs […] pour les motifs particuliers invoqués à l’appui de la proposition [an extraordinary allowance of 400 francs […] for the particular reasons invoked in support of the proposal]”. Once again, it was thanks to the intervention of his peers that Chéneaux could continue and finally finish his university course.

Thus, through hard work, but also by being aware of the fact that the faculty had been supporting him throughout his career, Gustave Chéneaux, an accomplished jurist, became a member of the teaching staff specialized in civil law. After his stay at the Poitiers Faculty of Law, he returned to Bordeaux in 1899. Therefore, the qualities that were his in the past were again put forward by his colleagues.

Indeed the famous and just quotation that “power corrupts”, if it applies to others, did not seem to concern this young teacher. His personality did not switch from humble doctoral student to professor, and his character remained unchanged. Over the years, Professor Chéneaux was as “generous” as he was “selfless”. Naturally secret, he was entirely devoted to his work and to his students, in whom he aroused unanimous enthusiasm as “son enseignement est l’un des plus appréciés de notre école [his teaching is one of the most appreciated of our school]”, the dean pointed out. Such a portrait was never challenged during the fifteen years during which Professor Chéneaux gave his courses at the University of Bordeaux, first to doctoral students, and then to a wider public. “Affable”, “dedicated”, endowed with a “righteous mind”, this “brilliant teacher” pursued an exemplary career, marked by work and publications noted in civil law.

As for the more intimate aspects of his life, very little can be reported. Married in 1893 when he was only a doctoral student, he seems to have been entirely “devoted to his family” and maintained only a very small number of social relationships. Having had no children, he remained very attached to his Martinican origins. Thus, Professor Chéneaux was “deeply tested” following the disaster experienced on Martinique Island at the beginning of the 20th century . In May 1902, Mount Pelée awakened and lead to

the eradication of the city of Saint-Pierre, as well as the death of 30,000 people. This attachment was all the keener as since his departure from the island at the age of 15, Chéneaux has never had the opportunity to return. His poverty and the fact that his time was entirely devoted to his work did not allow him to see his father again until his death in 1899. Only his mother remained alive, and their reunion took place in a context as singular as it was tragic.

In his April 1920 speech, Dean Duguit recounted this episode, which he had witnessed himself. Having finally gathered the necessary funds, Professor Chéneaux and a small group of people, including Duguit, embarked on an ocean liner bound for Martinique on July 20, 1914. The long crossing was punctuated by telegraph messages announcing an imminent war between France and Germany, and it was at the landing that the rumor was confirmed. Here, one must leave the floor to Dean Duguit who, in the simplest way, explained the reaction of his colleague to the announcement of the news:

“Chéneaux prend alors à peine le temps d’embrasser sa mère ; il s’embarque sur le même paquebot qui rentre en France, arrive à Bordeaux à la fin d’août et lui, que son âge dispense de tout service actif, qui n’a jamais été soldat, court au bureau de recrutement, s’engage au 144e, demandant pour unique faveur que l’on ne retarde pas l’effet de son engagement par l’exigence de pièces trop longues à fournir [Chéneaux hardly took the time to kiss his mother; he embarked on the same liner returning to France, arrived in Bordeaux at the end of August and even though his age exempted from any active service, even though he had never been a soldier, ran to the recruitment office, enlisted in the 144th, asking for the sole favor that we his enlistment was not delayed by the requirement of documents too long to provide]”.

Gustave Chéneaux was 46 years old. Because he was from a colony, he was exempted from any military service. His martial knowledge was therefore all theoretical, and he was not known to profess any germanophobia. So how to explain that this gentle and discreet teacher would show such great stubbornness in wanting to enlist in the active army in the early days of the war?

His personal itinerary made Gustave Chéneaux a pure product of what is known as the meritocracy of the Third Republic. Starting from nothing, coming from one of the most modest backgrounds, it was both through hard work, but also thanks to various representatives of republican institutions that he was able to rise up in society.

Chéneaux was too old to have known the democratization of the school undertaken by Jules Ferry. He did not have to read *Le tour de France par deux enfants* (Eng. *Two Children Around France*), an excessively pedagogical and patriotic work encouraging young children to take up arms to recover the provinces occupied by Germany. In the same way, he did not attend, in primary school, the first classes of “military preparation”, direct ancestors of our physical education classes, intended to teach the discipline of barracks and the handling of weapons to the little darlings. However, Chéneaux considered that he was in the Republic and its institutions’ debt, as, from the General Council of Martinique to the professors of the Bordeaux Faculty of Law, they had allowed him to access the place that was his at the time when the war broke out. Where law professors would henceforth distinguish themselves by an unbridled germanophobia, Chéneaux enlisted in the army, unlike many of his colleagues, in order to defend the regime to which he owed everything.

Thus Professor Gustave Chéneaux became Private Chéneaux and began a new life, significantly shorter than the previous one, from September 1, 1914 to April 29, 1915. During these few months, most of his time was devoted to learning the profession of soldier in the area of Bordeaux. Chéneaux was incorporated into the 144th Infantry Regiment based in Bordeaux. His training continues at the Souge camp, near the capital of Gironde. Thus, he soon obtained the rank of corporal, then that of officer cadet. This rank, intermediate between that of under-officer and officer, testifies to his desire to climb the ranks within the army, a way for him to mark the depth of his commitment.

An undated photograph testifies to this period extending from his incorporation into a combat unit. Not being precisely dated, however, several elements allow for a valid deduction. Chéneaux was photographed slightly skewed, arms crossed on the chest. If the haircut is rigorously military, his face sports a soft look and a thick Gallic mustache. The law professor is dressed in the latest military fashion, since he is wearing the famous skyline blue outfit with *a priori* no distinctive sign.

However, the jacket is that of an officer, and on his right sleeve we can see the discreet insignia of the officer cadets, while on his collar legs appears the number of the 144th infantry regiment. This photograph was therefore taken in the last days of his presence in Bordeaux, between February and March 1915, when the new uniform began to be distributed to soldiers. Shortly thereafter, Chéneaux was transferred to the 34th Infantry

Regiment, where he did not remain long, and was transferred to a combat unit within the 91st at his own request.

Fighting since the early days of the war, this regiment was regularly provided with reinforcements to compensate for the significant losses it continued to suffer. They were no longer fighting to cover a retreat or stop the German advance. Hundreds of men buried themselves in the trenches where they were slaughtered on the daily for the conquest or conservation of either a rocky outcrop or a pile of ruins that was once a village. It was in this context that on April 14, 1915, Chéneaux and 25 other cadets arrived in the vicinity Verdun. He was assigned to the 8th Company of the 2nd Battalion, under the orders of Captain Dupuy. Fresh troops were brought in while the regiment was at rest following heavy fighting. On 25 April, the 91st was mobilized urgently and moved to the Éparges and the Calonne Trench sectors in order to repel the German attacks that put them at risk. For three days, especially on April 26 and 27, the road junction to the defense of which Chéneaux's company was assigned turned into a mouth of Hell. The shooting was permanent and the regiment's marching journal noted that the new bomb throwers had been used successfully. In three days, the regiment counted 75 killed, 151 wounded and 59 missing. According to information provided by his superior, the attitude of Officer Cadet Chéneaux on this occasion was similar to that he had always had in the past. Brave and determined, he did not consider himself above anyone because of his superior training, but behaved like the simplest of soldiers, to whom the calm he displayed gave confidence. His captain indicates that he took an important part in keeping the trench in the hands of the French army, thus proving that he actively participated in the fighting. The day after his first engagement, Chéneaux was hit by a bullet in the head while rescuing an injured under-officer. He was one of two recorded deaths on April 29, 1915.

In 1916 in Bordeaux, a subscription was opened for the creation of a commemorative plaque for the deceased professor. It was during the inauguration that Dean Duguit delivered the speech in which he mourned his fallen colleague. While it is now obvious that the praise of which he was the object was only a reflection of his personal journey and reflected the attachment that actually existed between the two men, it is necessary to remove some passages in order to reveal the core of the message. Constant references to the notions of heroism, courage and other supreme sacrifice, while not groundless, pursued an underlying purpose. Here as elsewhere, they had no purpose

other than to try to legitimize and justify what had been a nightmarish waste, causing the death of millions of people, including Gustave Chéneaux, a professor as brilliant as they come.

That is why, to Duguit's somewhat stilted formula that Chéneaux "fut aussi un exemplaire accompli des vertus civiles [was also a consummate example of the civil virtues,]" we prefer the blunter, more personal excerpt out of his confidential information sheets that there was "rien que du bien à dire de lui [nothing but good things to be said of him]".

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