Elite education and the State in France: durable ties and new challenges

Agnès van Zanten and Claire Maxwell

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Introduction

This article examines the two-way relationship between state and elite education by drawing on Max Weber's ([1919] 1994) conceptions of the state, bureaucracy and social status groups, and those studies that have extended his work. Weber, influenced by the observations made about the dynamics of the Prussian but also of the French state, emphasised the strong relationship between the emergence of modern state institutions and the development of bureaucracy. Already underway during the Ancien Régime, the training and recruitment of specialised agents to manage matters of the state was strongly reinforced in France by the Revolutionaries and later by Bonaparte in order to do away with patrimonial forms of rule and to establish a new type of state (Chazel 1995). According to Weber, bureaucracy played a key role in this process of new state formation because it provided a strong basis for the two dimensions of government: authority,

the constitution and maintenance of a legitimate social order; and power, the capacity to act effectively to solve practical problems (Duran 2011).

According to Weber, bureaucracy developed thanks to an alliance between political authorities and administrative agents keen to extend their field of power, which in turn encouraged close interaction between these two groups, and led to the constitution of the state as an institution, understood as separate from the rest of society. However, another central purpose of the bureaucratic consolidation of the state, according to Weber, was the promotion of capitalism. Far from conceiving state and economic development as two independent processes, he emphasised the cooperation of the bourgeoisie in the creation and extension of modern state institutions. These institutions were critical to members of this group to establish and sustain those economic and cultural activities that were the basis of their power and that allowed them to occupy a dominant position in society after the Revolution (Chazel 2009).

Although Weber's analysis is anchored in a specific historical context and did not directly focus on the role of education, his work inspires two central questions that need to be considered when studying the relationship between the state and education. The first concerns the specific relationship that is created between the state and those educational institutions whose purpose is to train future state agents. Drawing on Weber's conception of bureaucracy, this question requires that we explore how educational institutions support and extend the authority and power of government through working to promote and persevere with the legitimacy of the state and the effectiveness of its political institutions. Similarly, it requires a close examination of how the state promotes the necessity and validity of the elite education institutions themselves.

The second central question that arises from a Weberian-inspired study of the relationship between the state and elite education institutions is the need to analyse whether and how the dominant social classes – that is, according to Bourdieu's (1984) model of the social space, those groups who have managed to secure high volumes of the valued capitals in a given society and at a given period – work to reproduce or improve their social positions within and outside the state through their control over elite education institutions. Here, it is useful to introduce a further concept of Weber's – social closure – to examine the processes through which social collectivities seek to restrict access to positions of power to a limited set of people, largely by closing off opportunities to 'outsiders'. As the modern state has an increased capacity to control the allocation of resources, it plays a crucial role in mediating the struggle between different collectivities for these positions of power.

These two research questions facilitate the examination of some of the broader questions with which the field of elite studies still needs to concern itself: a coherent definition of elites, understanding whether and how they engage in processes of social closure to limit the 'circle of eligibles' (Parkin

1974, 44), and the role of education in shaping and sustaining elites (Maxwell 2015). We focus on the case of France in this paper because it fits with our areas of expertise and because the state has had a much stronger involvement in the creation, support and control of elite education institutions, when compared with many other countries, such as England, the USA and others. Using France in the first instance also allows us to examine the utility of Weber's theorisations for extending our understandings of the mechanisms that shape and sustain elite education systems, and will, we hope, therefore inspire further work drawing on a similar framework in other national contexts.

In France, an examination of the relationship between the state and the elite education institutions and how they mutually reinforced each other's legitimacy became a focus for political scientists and policy and organisational sociologists during the 1970s. These academics focused on how particular educational tracks shaped the political and administrative systems, and who took up senior positions within these bureaucratic structures (Birnbaum 1977; Birnbaum et al. 1978; Suleiman 1978). The second key research question identified above – how processes of social closure are used by dominant social classes – was a key concern engaged with by Pierre Bourdieu in the last decades of the twentieth century. *The State Nobility* (Bourdieu 1996) was an ambitious study that examined both questions – focusing on the state's capacity to control the elite education sector objectively (through the development of specific organisations and institutional mechanisms) and subjectively (the inculcation of social structures in the mind; Ball 2010) (Bourdieu 1994). *The State Nobility* therefore begins to trace the complex interpenetration of political, social and institutional priorities that are advanced through the elite education system in France (Bourdieu 1996; van Zanten 2005).

In this paper we seek to present an analysis of the relationship between the state and elite education that explores the two central research questions which Weber's work encourages us to examine. Drawing on these classical French studies, especially the work of Bourdieu, but also integrating relevant international research literature, we examine both continuities and change in relations, and processes that embed these, between the state, the elite education system and the dominant social classes.

In the first section that follows, we take a historical perspective to examine the durable links between French political and elite educational institutions. We examine the content of the 'charters' (Kamens 1974; Meyer 1970) of these institutions – their licence and mandate about what and how to teach, and the kinds of individuals they aim to produce. We also consider the crucial role of links between these elite institutions and the state in preparing their graduates for power (Cookson and Persell 1985). We then explore how their curricula and institutional 'habituses' (Reay 1998) are shaped by changing distributions of power among different status groups in

the broader society and the kinds of educational strategies they pursue (Karabel 1984; Khan 2011).

In the second section that follows, we focus on new challenges to elite education. We first show why and how meritocracy, an institutional 'myth' (Meyer and Rowan 1977) promoted by elite educational institutions and by the state in their common effort to sustain their legitimacy and political order (Duran 2011), but also by the dominant groups seeking to defend their privileged status, is being challenged. In the following subsection, we assess the impact of processes of internationalisation within higher education on elite tracks. We examine to what extent these processes are 'dis-embedding' the French national elite system and replacing national principles and procedures with global norms, as has been the case in some other contexts (van Zanten 2015a). We also consider how this might be affecting the relationships between the state, elite institutions and social groups (Wagner 2007; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010).

Durable but complex ties

The creation of an elite system for and by the state

The state has exerted a profound influence on elite schooling in France. It fostered the creation of special elite higher education institutions and has strictly controlled the preparation for, and conditions imposed around, admissions into these elite schools; the kinds of curricula they teach; and the specific positions occupied by graduates from these elite higher education institutions in key public administration, political and other state-connected organisations.

This influence dates back to the last quarter of the eighteenth century when royalty initiated the creation of institutions that would train agents qualified to lead the army, civil engineering projects and agricultural development (Green 2013). This trend was reinforced rather than halted by the political upheavals of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the revolutionaries, Napoleon, the state representatives of the Third Republic (1870–1940) and even the provisional government established after the fall of the Vichy regime in 1944 – who created the last major public institution of this type, l'Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), in 1945 – all actively supported the need to train professionals that would both increase the state's capacity to control and rule and help re-affirm their authority. The creation of these 'special training schools', which came progressively to be referred to as the *grandes écoles* (Belhoste 2001), was also related to generalised political mistrust towards universities. The universities were considered by representatives of all types of political regimes in France as overly oriented towards scholarly pursuits and either too influenced by the Church or too autonomous to produce the kinds of competent military and civil servants that would be loyal to the state.

Elite educational institutions were therefore used from the outset as a means of sustaining the efficacy and legitimacy of the state. Central to this process was the introduction of selection by merit through competitive examinations – the *concours* – for a specific number of places, which were annually determined by the state. The *concours* had a clear practical function – providing the state with highly skilled professionals according to its technical needs – but also a strong normative component. It was instituted by the French revolutionaries to end the favouritism and nepotism linked to birth and social status associated with the *Ancien Regime* and to give priority to personal qualities assessed through what were perceived to be neutral procedures. First implemented by the most famous *grande école* – Polytechnique – the *concours* progressively became the symbol of a new 'Republican elitism' and was integrated into the recruitment processes of almost all *grandes écoles* (Belhoste 2002).

The establishment of the competitive *concours* had a significant effect on the relationship between the *grandes écoles* and the secondary schooling sector because of the need to prepare students to take it. From 1802, training was being given to take the written and oral examinations required to gain entry into the *grandes écoles*, located in secondary schools. Later on, these c*lasses préparatoires* became a provision that students took for two years after their *baccalauréat* (end of secondary school examinations) and became officially viewed as a form of higher education (Belhoste 2001), although largely still taught in secondary school buildings. This is still the case today.

The curriculum provided within these elite education tracks has been strongly influenced by both their relationship to the state and the division of work between the *grandes écoles* and the preparatory classes. The curricular 'charter' (Meyer 1970) of the public *grandes écoles* has thus been driven by their initial purpose, which is to train students to become civil servants within the administrative and technical *grand corps* of the state. Such 'channeling' has also demanded that students be socialised into particular kinds of understandings of the purpose and value of the state, supported by a strong and expert bureaucracy (Birnbaum 1977; Birnbaum et al. 1978). Such an inculcation of values is further embedded through the meritocratic nature of the recruitment processes into the *grandes écoles*, given the small size of these institutions, and the strong probability that graduates will secure a prestigious position among the political and administrative elite, all of which foster a sense of solidarity among its students (Suleiman 1978). As found by colleagues in the USA of students attending private elite boarding schools (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2011), students come to understand their education and future positions they will hold within and outside political institutions as merited.

Knowledge within the *grandes écoles* is also understood differently – not as necessarily valued in and of itself, as in universities, but seen as a

technical and power resource (Belhoste 2003). Furthermore, while the curriculum focuses on the kinds of knowledges needed for the particular field students are being prepared for, these institutions also emphasise the development of a range of generalist skills that, they believe, will help these future professionals take on a variety of roles within and beyond their sphere of technical expertise (Mendras and Suleiman 1995; Thoenig 1973). Such an emphasis on generalist skills becomes an elite marker for these graduates, as it does for bureaucractic elites in other countries (Mangset 2015).

A specific focus on the curricula of those *grandes écoles* preparing students for high-status administrative positions can be found in two relatively recent studies examining how students are trained at ENA, and are prepared for the *concours* to enter ENA at Sciences Po. Eymeri (2001) describes 'a second-hand culture', where knowledge is informed by textbooks rather than the analysis of original work, and classes are taught by state agents rather than university professors. The main form of pedagogy is delivery of knowledge through exercises that encourage students to focus on facts rather than on theoretical understandings of issues, and where they are required to adopt unambiguous positions rather than embrace the complexity of the social, financial and political nature of the problems they are discussing. Oger (2008), meanwhile, analysed the content of the written and oral examinations of the ENA *concours* and found that both conformity and originality were in fact rewarded. Yet Oger (2008) has also suggested that the kinds of intellectual and social qualities being examined for are associated with being members of the upper classes of French society, an argument also made by Bourdieu and Saint-Martin (1975) in their analyses of teachers' perceptions of students' performance within preparatory classes.

The curriculum of the *grandes écoles* must also be understood in relation to the division of labour that occurs between them and the preparatory classes. While ENA and Sciences Po perhaps present a different case, because in the past Sciences Po has played a preparatory role for entry into ENA and has prided itself on offering a kind of pedagogical counter-model of preparatory classes (Garrigou 2001), the preparatory classes leading to the other *grandes écoles* (those specialising in engineering, management, sciences and humanities) provide a highly demanding and ambitious programme of study. The teaching approach, provided by secondary school teachers, is still very close to that of secondary schools but, because of the strong focus on success at the *concours*, teachers behave more as coaches. Students are expected to work hard under conditions of urgency, even 'organized panic' (Bourdieu 1996), which is seen to aid them in ensuring they will succeed at the *concours*, but also as mirroring the working environment they will encounter when they take up their administrative and political elite positions. These teachers, who see themselves as 'at the service of elites' (Rauscher 2010), are nevertheless careful to create an environment in which

their students' talents are encouraged to emerge and to provide them each with personalised attention (Darmon 2013; van Zanten 2015a).

Elite tracks were therefore initially created by the state to fulfil its need for a highly skilled workforce of bureaucrats and public servants who would stabilise French society and support its growth in particular ways. The legitimacy of the creation of elite tracks has been strongly supported by the so-called meritocratic *concours*, which seeks to recruit 'the best of the best' (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009) and create a closed elite system based on exclusive interactions between the *classes préparatoires* and the *grandes écoles.* Studies have also highlighted the complementary curricular character of these two elite educational segments. In preparatory classes, students acquire a general disposition, learning to cope quickly and effectively with external demands; while in the *grandes écoles* they continue to acquire general skills alongside more specialised ones and prepare more directly for positions of power.

Private elite institutions and the public/private divide among class fractions

It is, however, important to underline that the state has never had a total monopoly on elite education, nor has it been able to completely regulate the struggles that have emerged between different social groups in relation to elite educational tracks. Private education is particularly important when considering gender and elite schooling. Access to the Napoleonic state *lycées* created in 1802 was solely for boys. Similar public institutions for girls were only created in 1880. The purpose of the introduction of state provision for girls was, however, largely driven by a desire to limit the ideological influence of Catholic institutions on future female citizens, rather than seeking to promote women's work (Offen 1983). Thus, these schools for girls had a different curriculum and were not preparing them for the *baccalauréat,* or entry into higher education (Mayeur 1977).

However, even after the introduction of publically-funded secondary girls' schools, the majority of families who made up the aristocracy and bourgeoisie continued to send their daughters to Catholic private schools, especially those families who were practising Catholics and whose power and prestige were linked to economic resources (industrialists, bankers, members of the highly-paid professions) as they sought out an environment where girls could be educated among students from similar social milieus and inculcated into a 'domestic' ideology (de Saint-Martin 1990).

The situation was not the same for boys, who might attend Catholic private institutions but were also likely to be sent to prestigious state *lycées* in order to prepare them for the elite professions. However, although Catholic schools were chosen by the upper classes mainly for ideological and social reasons, over the course of the first half of the twentieth century these

schools began to focus more on providing 'excellence' in their academic provision. This move was driven by a series of changes in the law: the 1905 law that enforced the separation between church and state and banned religious teachers from such schools; the introduction of coeducational, state-funded secondary schooling in 1924; and the 1959 Debré law that provided public funding to private schools (Peretz 1985). These processes contributed to the growth and take-up of preparatory classes in private Catholic *lycées*.

Work by van Zanten (2015a) nevertheless shows that some significant differences remain between prestigious public and private '*prépas*', as these classes are called in colloquial language. The selection process, as well as the formal curriculum of these preparatory classes (dictated by the content of the *concours*), are the same. However, private preparatory classes are allowed to ask for more personal details from applicants, as well as a 'letter of motivation'. Moreover, within private provision, the focus on socialisation is stronger, as these classes seek to develop the 'whole person' through providing a 'total curriculum', including compulsory cultural, social and physical extracurricular activities (Maxwell and Aggleton 2013). Significantly, there is also a greater emphasis placed on the development of group solidarity between students, and on identifying with the specific institution being attended instead of with the state, as is the case in public preparatory classes.

With regard to the *grandes écoles*, today at least one-third of them are private institutions. Private tertiary providers started emerging after 1870 as a result of economic developments in France. Special institutions were created that were linked to business sectors. Despite important initial differences between these and the state-funded *grandes écoles*, those wishing to become 'top institutions' developed a process of 'mimetic isomorphism' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) with their public counterparts, to gain prestige and increase their influence. One of the main strategies in this respect was the adoption of the *concours* as the main form of selection, thereby benefitting from the 'nobility' bestowed upon public institutions through this meritocratic contest (Bourdieu 1996). Additionally, recruitment was focused on students who had completed their two years of preparatory classes, thereby raising the academic qualifications of their entrants significantly (Languille 1997). A further, important development has been that the most prestigious of these private tertiary education providers have acquired a special status through securing funding from regional chambers of commerce.

However, the selection processes, curricula and types of socialisation provided through the *grandes écoles* do still vary in important ways (Allouch 2013). These dimensions are not only shaped by their public or private status, or the specialisation for different fields of work, but, significantly by the particular social groups (Karabel 1984) they are most likely to recruit. This has important implications for the different institutional

'charters' (Kamens 1974; Meyer 1970) and institutional *habituses* (Reay 1998) of these tertiary providers. As Bourdieu (1996) found, at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (ENS), for instance, which trains mostly scientists and higher education professors and whose students are most likely to come from the intellectual fractions of the upper class, scholarly knowledge and intellectual pursuits have always been prioritised. On the other hand, managerial schools that attract a significant number of students from the economic fractions of the upper class have, from the onset, promoted 'soft skills' and held an instrumental view of knowledge (Lazuech 1999). In these institutions, extracurricular activities – including election campaigns for student associations, sport events and various social and networking activities – are foregrounded (Abraham 2007). This process is deemed necessary so the 'purist' (Brown and Hesketh 2004) students recruited from the preparatory classes via the very selective *concours* learn the necessary skills to succeed as future leaders in the private sector. These differences can already be observed in the curricula of various preparatory classes. Thus, literary and scientific classes are much more intellectually demanding, while those preparing for management schools have a greater focus on other forms of socialisation (Darmon 2013).

Differences between graduates from different institutions and tracks, however, tend to fade once they enter the job market because of the varied career trajectories pursued by many. The *grandes écoles* and the *grands corps* have for a long time tolerated, for instance, that a proportion of civil servants will initially work in the private sector immediately following their studies, in the anticipation that they will eventually return to serve the state. An alternative trajectory is for graduates to enter public administration upon completion of their *grandes écoles* training, but later move into private industry. This movement between careers in the public and private sectors, with an increasing focus on pursuing careers outside public administration, grew during the second half of the twentieth century. Private firms appreciate having employees who have gained particular kinds of informational and social capital through their time in public administration, seeing these as useful during negotiations with state representatives in a state-dominated economy. Similarly, the state values civil servants who have insider knowledge of the private sector.

Studies have shown that a significant proportion of CEOs of the 40 largest French private firms are graduates from public *grandes écoles* (27% from Polytechnique and 23% from ENA in the 1990s; 22% from Polytechnique, 19% from Sciences Po, 16% from ENA in 2007) alongside graduates from the major private management school, l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (Bauer and Bertin-Mourot 1997; Dudouet and Joly 2010). Similarly, among the 200 most important French companies, 47% in the 1980s and 28% in 2007 had among their directors people who had had a previous career in the public sector (Bauer and Bertin-Mourot 1987;

Dudouet and Grémont 2007). Birnbaum et al.'s (1978) analyses of three editions of *Who is Who in France?* demonstrated that already in the 1970s a strong interpenetration between political and economic elites was occurring due to their common social background and academic trajectories through the *grandes écoles*, but also because they shared residential and leisure spaces, as well as membership of the same clubs and associations.

In this section we have highlighted how the various elite tracks have been sustained over time with a growing mixed economy of providers – the private and Church sectors. Although elite tracks variously serve different upper-class fractions and have been shown to engage in different socialisation processes, the effect nevertheless seems to be that the elite nature of the education provided is secured – through a focus on academic excellence (in a small group of state institutions, as well as some private, mostly Catholic, *lycées* and preparatory classes), selection based on merit via the *concours*, and an acceptance by the state and private industry that graduates from all the *grandes écoles* bring a set of skills, expertise and experience that will be a welcome resource in both sectors.

New challenges

The erosion of meritocratic legitimacy and new efforts to recreate it

In France, the existence of separate higher education tracks leading to elite jobs has been historically justified on the basis of the meritocratic nature of their admission procedures. Merit is defined as a combination of talent and effort understood as individual characteristics that are independent of birth and family resources (Dubet 2004). Yet existing data show that the proportion of working-class students who have been able to pursue the French elite tracks has always been quite small (Baudelot and Matonti 1994). The illusion of equal access across social classes has nevertheless been maintained for most of the twentieth century.

The hold of such a myth has been possible, first, because of the abstract definition of meritocracy as equality of opportunity, not as equality of results. Second, most *classes préparatoires* are located in public secondary schools, so they are seen as accessible to students from all social classes. In practice, this has meant that these tracks have been opened to those social groups with high cultural capital but relatively low economic resources, such as the children of secondary and primary school teachers. Research has found that during the greatest period of the democratisation of elite tracks (1930–1960), students from these social groups were almost as successful in securing places in preparatory classes and the *grandes écoles* as students with upper-class backgrounds (Albouy and Wanecq 2003; Euriat and Thelot 1995). Additionally, studies have identified that many of these middle-class students' grandparents had been farmers or manual workers, giving credence to the idea that the French elite education system made it

possible to move from the bottom to the top of the social ladder within two generations (Veltz 2007).

However, despite the relative democratisation that occurred during the 'Glorious Thirty' period (1945–1975) – a period of significant economic growth in France, which also introduced the comprehensivisation of the education system – the last decades of the twentieth century heralded a return to stronger processes of social closure around elite education tracks. First, concerns about the possible negative effects of the successive waves of expansion of French universities in the 1960s and 1980s led to a growing proportion of upper-class parents, who themselves had been university educated, opting for a more selective, elite track for their own children's education. Second, as the provision of preparatory classes was expanded and diversified during the 1990s, partly as a result of increasing demand from middle-class parents, upper-class families increasingly adopted strategies to secure their own child's success in gaining access to the '*prépas*' that were seen as both the most intellectually demanding and the most socially selective through activities such as intensely supervising their education at home, providing them with private tuition and extracurricular activities, and carefully choosing curricular options and schools (van Zanten 2009, 2015b).

Third, the expansion of the secondary school system coupled with its 'segregative democratisation' from 1960 to 1990 (Merle 2000) has meant that recruitment to *classes préparatoires* has been increasingly influenced by the subjective assessments made by selection panel members. Research has found that members of these panels are more likely to mistrust the academic value attached to students applying from socially and ethnically diverse *lycées* as they tend to consider that teachers working in these schools are 'overindulgent' in their assessments and cover curricular subjects in less depth. Conversely, students with similar grades but who come from *lycées* with good reputations, usually located in Paris or in other urban areas where upper-class and middle-class families reside, are advantaged in the selection process (van Zanten 2015a).

The meritocratic basis of elite education is also challenged when considering the under-representation of female students in some of the tracks, especially the scientific tracks and *grandes écoles* specialising in engineering. However, the reasons for this are different to the factors that affect accessibility for lower-class backgrounds. First, it is not that young women do less well than young men in terms of attainment (in fact, the opposite is true – although gender differences are more acute among lower-class than upper-class groups), but that they are less likely than their male counterparts to choose the scientific track at the *lycée* level and therefore cannot apply to the scientific preparatory classes that would channel them into the most prestigious engineering schools and to Polytechnique (where only 13% of students starting in 2013 were women).

Second, women are often aware of their reduced chances of occupying top positions within the civil service. The administrative and political fields in France have been strongly monopolised by men who hold a male-centred vision of political leadership and authority, and who have been found to be more likely to nominate other men to key positions (Milewski 2011; Sineau 2001). Such processes of nepotism have been reinforced by the 'incestuous links' between certain *grandes écoles* (that only became coeducational in the 1970s) and the *grands corps* (Suleiman 1978). These factors explain to a large extent why female students, despite the fact that they have outnumbered male students at Sciences Po and other political science institutes for several years, were much less likely until recently to take the ENA *concours* (and also less likely to pass) (Eymeri 2001). Finally, even if female students are over-represented in the *grandes écoles* specialising in management, their distribution between the different sub-fields of management is very unequal, revealing again processes of self-selection according to the prestige, gender image and male composition of the different professions they feed into (Buscatto and Marry 2009).

These facts, in particular those concerning inequalities in access to elite tracks for lower-class students, began to receive considerable attention after Sciences Po, in 2001, launched a new 'equality of opportunity' programme through a series of partnerships with *lycées* in disadvantaged areas (initially with seven in 2001, growing to 100 in 2014). This initiative gave way to heated debates not only within the institution itself, especially by the upper-class students who criticised its 'demagogic' character as students from the disadvantaged *lycées* were not required to take the competitive entrance examination as per this new initiative, but also within the media, political circles, and between the Director of Sciences Po and those of other *grandes écoles*.

Meanwhile, private-sector firms, especially those with international markets, created new 'diversity' programmes similar to those of their American or European competitors (Bereni 2009), and pushed elite educational institutions for more symbolic action around increasing diversity. President Sarkozy's right-wing government also sought to promote limited forms of affirmative action in politics and the administration as part of his effort to distinguish himself from the old Right and well as from the Left (Simon 2007). The *grandes écoles* responded with a number of widening participation programmes, led by the ESSEC – a prestigious management school. During the same period, Polytechnique and the most prestigious engineering schools developed other initiatives aimed at increasing the number of women entering their institutions, driven by similar market and political pressures (these included the law in 2000 encouraging parity in political bodies, as well as a more recent 2013 law enforcing quotas for women among new high-level civil servants).

The initiatives aimed at increasing the participation of lower-class students or women entering elite tracks have nevertheless been very modest in scope. Most *grandes écoles* have only offered additional tutoring for students from disadvantaged *lycées* when preparing for the *concours*. While Sciences Po made the *concours* non-mandatory for these students, other *grandes écoles* would not contemplate such a move or agree to change the content or form of the examination in ways that might advantage these lower-class students. Furthermore, selection panel members of the public preparatory classes were very reluctant to consider taking into account students' social background as they believed strongly in the neutrality and symbolic legitimating power of their existing procedures.

Nevertheless, despite these limited changes, elite educational institutions have managed to deflect potential criticism by emphasising that the problem of social and gender inequality lies with society more generally, including within the family and the rest of the school system. These institutions have claimed that by developing small interventions to tackle the issue (sometimes with funding received from private firms, who thereby also meet their corporate social responsibility), and through the official integration of these initiatives into a 'comprehensive' government policy around equal opportunity that is promoted by intensive media coverage, they are doing their bit. In this way they have succeeded in maintaining their legitimacy while also being publicly perceived as important policy actors committed to social justice. This arguably further embeds the material and symbolic resources of these elite institutions and demonstrates the ways elite institutions have worked in partnership with the state to at least discursively support the call for improved equality of opportunity, while also demonstrating their autonomy to do so in ways that suits them (van Zanten 2010).

Twists and turns in the march towards internationalisation

Pressures towards internationalisation constitute a second significant challenge to the relationship between the state and elite education institutions. The French government – who was from the onset directly involved in the framing of the Bologna declaration on higher education, designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications in European countries (Ravinet 2011) – has enforced its main components. These include: the establishment of three different cycles in higher education studies (three to four years for a bachelor's degree, one to two years for a master's degree and three to four years for a PhD); and the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. State-funded higher education institutions must implement these new norms, and private institutions have also been strongly encouraged to adopt them.

While elite institutions have engaged to some extent with these changes, they have also worked hard to preserve their institutional interests in the

process. For the Ministry of Higher Education, the most rational and effective way to adopt the Bologna Process would have been to create a unified higher education system in which elite tracks would have become part of a reformed university system. Raised and muted at other points in time, such a solution has been largely dismissed by fractions of the administrative and political elites and completely rejected by the elite institutions themselves, fearing that such a change would signal the end of their prestigious status and their autonomy.

Grandes écoles have instead re-organised their curricula in such a way that their students can now gain a master's upon graduating (either awarded by the *grande école* itself, or via partnerships with selected universities). Meanwhile, preparatory classes have obtained European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credits for their students, who after completing two years of these specialist classes can now, by enrolling on a few additional university courses, gain a bachelor's degree, or even go straight onto a master's programme if they have completed three years of preparatory classes.

Furthermore, both the state and elite education institutions are under considerable pressure to secure a top position in internationally-recognised ranking schemes. Yet for elite institutions, the highly specialised nature of their provision makes their integration in these international comparison exercises challenging. A central dimension in these rankings and in the definition of 'world-class excellence' (Hazelhorn 2011) is research output. However, for the *grandes écoles* – due to their links to the state, their professional orientation and their separation from universities – research has, until recently, not featured as a central aspect of their activity (Cytermann 2007). 'Excellence' has been and still is, to a large extent, understood as being about the academic (and social) qualities of their students, emphasised through the rigorous meritocratic selection processes insisted upon, and demonstrated in the prestigious nature of the careers of their graduates in public and private organisations. Second, the kinds of indicators of research output that are used in rankings (Nobel prizes and Field medals as well as publications in high-impact journals and number of citations) are highly dependent on institutional size. Given the small size of most *grandes écoles* (Polytechnique recruits 400 students each year, the ENS and the most prestigious engineering schools 100, and ENA only 80), this makes their ability to compete on a world stage around research output extremely difficult.

In the context of considerable fragmentation of the French higher education field with pressures to compete at an international level, in 2007 the government promoted the creation of new networks of higher education institutions called *Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES) with a view to increasing the concentration of research and teaching activities into one single entity in different regions and big cities (Aust and Crespy 2009). While several of the 26 PRES that were created included universities and *grandes écoles*, the interaction between the two types of

institutions has remained very limited. *Grandes écoles* applied for PRES status both because the price of abstention in terms of their relationship to the state would have been high, but also because higher education institutions integrated into PRES could benefit from additional financial resources that are channelled into these networks.

A more ambitious approach led by the state from 2013 has been higher education institutions forming 'communities of universities', aimed at forging stronger associations and promoting opportunities for mergers. The most important of these communities to date is the proposed Campus Paris-Saclay, which is due to start in 2015. It will bring together 11 *grandes écoles*, including Polytechnique, and two universities, as well as seven research centres in a cluster situated at the southwest of the Parisian region. Campus Paris-Saclay will produce joint research publications, as well as offering a PhD and master's programme for French and international students. Although it is too early to anticipate the outcomes of this new development, it is likely that such institutional frameworks will allow *grandes écoles* when they are in the majority, as in this case, to control most of the major decision-making processes. Meanwhile, from a macro perspective, it can be argued that the formation of these different types of networks have accentuated rather than reduced hierarchies within the French higher education system, with prestigious *grandes écoles* and universities collaborating and the less elite institutions left to associate with each one other or remain isolated.

Another major aspect of becoming a world-class institution in the global race for income and prestige is the ability to attract 'excellent' students from abroad, especially those coming from emerging countries that have not as yet established competitive national higher education systems of their own. French *grandes écoles* have two major challenges in such a race.

The first challenge is that the main language of instruction is French. The French state has not strongly encouraged a move towards the mainstreaming of English in higher education. This can be partly understood by the fact that, traditionally, foreign students have come from France's former colonies or from countries where one of the dominant languages was French, as well as from French-speaking families living abroad. Although these groups of students have, for the most part, not been understood as 'excellent' and most do not have an upper-class background, the government has welcomed them as part of its efforts to defend the global presence of the French language and its culture.

While most *grandes écoles* are conscious of the need to attract new generations of foreign academically-able students, recruitment practices have been very diverse across the sector. The desire to internationalise their student body and academic staff cohorts has depended on each institution's relationship to the state, on the type of disciplines taught and whether graduates are being prepared for a national or international job market, as well

as the kinds of resources the *grandes écoles* have available. In this respect there is a great divide between state and private *grandes écoles*, with private institutions having more funding and more impetus to internationalise (Darchy-Koechlin 2011).

Alongside the challenges posed by French medium instruction and a largely French-speaking academic teaching staff, the long-standing commitment to the *concours* for recruitment into the *grandes écoles* makes the recruitment of international students extremely difficult. In the most famous state *grandes écoles* – ENS, Polytechnique, ENA – the *concours* is open only to national students who are considered civil servants in training and receive a salary from government. Foreign students, meanwhile, are admitted following a different procedure. In other *grandes écoles*, foreign students could, in theory, take the competitive examination. Yet because most foreign students will not have completed the initial preparatory classes beforehand, they would be significantly disadvantaged during the admissions process. Therefore, most *grandes écoles* have created specific admission systems for them. The institution of alternative admissions procedures for foreign students has created tensions between the French and non-French students, especially in the smaller state *grandes écoles*. This links closely to the founding principle of the elite education system – a commitment to meritocracy – defined here as securing admission through the *concours*, the best method for measuring excellence (Darchy-Koechlin and Draelants 2010).

In fact, in a context of internationalisation, new tensions have emerged between the three members of the triad sustaining elite education in France. On the one hand, among state officials there is a desire to attract foreign students without compromising France's position as a former colonial power or the importance of French as a global cultural resource. On the other hand, elite institutions are keen to attract the most able students rather than pursue these political goals, but without radically transforming their recruitment procedures. Finally, domestic students – the majority of whom come from the dominant social classes – actively defend the meritocratic legitimacy of the *concours*. Wishing to secure the national advantages that stem from an elite education system for them, they tend to see foreign students as illegitimate competitors for elite status.

A third focus related to the internationalisation agenda is the promotion of international mobility of French students. This again is rendered difficult by the specific features of French elite education. Within the preparatory classes, the curriculum is dominated by conservative French pedagogical traditions, evident, for instance, in the practice of teachers awarding their students very low grades for their work in an attempt to prepare them for the way they will be evaluated against others at the *concours*. While the most prestigious of these classes have now taken some action, such as providing an explanation in English of their grading system, such a system is

still likely to complicate acceptance onto foreign university courses for the few but growing number of students opting for this option, many of whom are taking preparatory classes in literature and humanities for which there are very limited opportunities for further study in the *grandes écoles*.

Most of the *grandes écoles* are working to promote the possibility of studying abroad or provide internship opportunities through reciprocal partnerships with prestigious foreign universities. Yet the latter arrangements have been difficult to sustain as the state *grandes écoles* are free of charge, while many of the foreign elite institutions are not. Furthermore, although French upper-class students from elite institutions are open to these experiences, most of them intend to remain living and working in France and indeed display a strong allegiance to the French educational model and to the French nation-state (Power et al. 2013).

Attempts to internationalise the recruitment basis of the elite French higher education system have thus been limited in its success – especially for *grandes écoles* traditionally established to produce the *grands corps* of the state bureaucracy. Here the state, the institutions themselves and the social classes who dominate in such institutions are all hesitant to facilitate the recruitment of foreign students because this will imply significant changes in targeting, admission processes, curricula and the medium of instruction that threaten geopolitical strategies, institutional prestige and social domination and legitimacy. Similarly, efforts to increase the international mobility of students from elite institutions between France and other prestigious institutions have been stymied by the organisation of the French elite tertiary system, which is quite different to most other countries, the pedagogical and curriculum content of many French elite education programmes, and the main actors involved –the state, the institutions and the upper-class students and families – who display a general ambivalence for transnational mobility.

Conclusion

Inspired by Weber's theorisation of the importance of state bureaucracies in shaping modern nation-states, we have considered, in this paper, how elite education tracks were established and have been maintained by the state in France. The state saw these elite tracks as necessary to train high-status civil servants who could manage its affairs effectively and stabilise the political environment. The state therefore created and has actively sustained a segregated higher education system. Many young people planning to work for the private sector also follow these elite tracks. Thus, given that most dominant agents in the public and private sectors have been educated through the *grandes écoles* system, it is not surprising that the elite education sector has received considerable support to sustain its separation from the universities.

Elite education in France is seen as a public good and is negotiated between the state and the dominant social classes. Despite upper-class fractions competing for elite status in French society throughout history, there has remained strong support for elite education tracks among them as this is one of the key mechanisms for excluding other groups from vying for elite positions (Bourdieu 1996; van Zanten 2011). Furthermore, the elite institutions themselves are actors within the sector, actively defending their own interests, usually through forming strategic alliances with the other two sets of actors within the triad. It is important to understand this particular political and social context, which has shaped the development and legitimacy of elite education institutions in France, when seeking to make sense of how the elite education sector has responded to, and will most probably continue to respond to, challenges to its legitimacy – such as those recently experienced, including pressures to widen participation and internationalise higher education.

The French elite education system is strongly constricted in its ability to significantly innovate by its history and the strong three-way relationship that exists between the state, elite education tracks and dominant social classes. While efforts to widen participation and internationalise have made visible the existence of different perspectives between groups of senior civil servants and CEOs, elite institutions and the upper classes, as well as between fractions of dominant social groups, our analysis suggests that overall the triad dynamic tends to reproduce particular normative understandings and institutional procedures (North 1990; Pierson 2000), although the process of reproduction is not as seamless as it has been in the past. The actors in this triad have worked hard to maintain the 'meritocratic consensus' governing elite education tracks, which had acted as an effective closure mechanism for the state, elite institutions and the upper classes. However, the legitimacy conferred onto elite education institutions, dominant social groups and those who take up key positions across the private and public sectors through this consensus has become the object of regular and growing contestation and scrutiny in the last decades. Furthermore, an ongoing commitment to the *concours* as a way of recruiting students onto elite tracks and the kinds of curricula found in the *grandes écoles* can be understood as an obstacle to French influence on global dynamics.

The specific features of the French elite educational system, and their preservation in identical or renewed forms in current times, raise the question of the degree to which these observations about relations between the state, elite education tracks and dominant social classes can be applied elsewhere. This broader question will require scholars to consider two issues. First, we need to appreciate differences in the composition and purpose of the state in different countries. In France, the state has been argued to be 'strong' because it relies on a large bureaucracy. Furthermore, through maintaining a relatively strict separation between public and private

domains, the state seeks to actively create a set of universal 'French' norms and practices with which it expects all its citizens to comply, ignoring its increasingly diverse population (Birnbaum 2011). Analysts in other countries may want to consider the 'styles of statism' (Baldwin 2005) – different ways in which associations between the state and the society it governs are structured (King and Le Galès 2011) – before seeking to consider how the state shapes and legitimates elite education tracks. Second, scholars of elite education should begin to compare the interests of, values espoused by and strategies employed by elite educational institutions and dominant social classes in relation to elite education tracks across various national contexts.

We suggest that the theoretical model used here to interpret institutional developments and change in the French context may support such a cross-national analyses. This approach has firstly emphasised that the 'charters' of elite institutions are strongly shaped by the broader relations governing societies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer 1970). Second, we have demonstrated that even when there is considerable national and international pressure for change, elite institutions are able to, in different ways, defend their interests through the significant economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources they have accumulated over time and due to the strong support they receive from the state and the dominant classes (Karabel 1984).

While our work has taken the nation-state as the specific space being examined, increasingly education, and particularly elite education, must also be understood within a broader global context. Research by Jane Kenway and colleagues, for instance, understands the elite schools in their study as shaped by global forces such as mobility of upper-class and middle-class families, desires for transnational identities, the impact of colonial legacies, international ventures promoting cooperation between schools, and so forth (McCarthy and Kenway 2014), and examines how these shape elite education charters. Yet, alongside the necessary focus on the global, most elite education institutions are still bounded in different ways by their relationships to the national state. This requires scholars of elite education to understand the ways in which the state and dominant social groups influence the context in which elite institutions have the potential to change or remain the same when negotiating their positions within the maelstrom of ongoing national and global influences.

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