

Chicago and Paris: Two cities with School Segregation? 2/2

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French programs of “positive discrimination” are supposed to help open elite education to socially disadvantaged students. While challenging the idea that diversity is truly promoted in the United States, a comparative study of current trends in Paris and Chicago show the opacity of the selection criteria in Paris, and the existence of a clear geographical segregation.

This is the second part of the article. To read the first part of the article, [click here](#).

Elite High Schools in Metropolitan Paris

The label “selective lycée” does not exist as such within the Paris school district (*académie*), and yet there is indeed a hierarchy of high schools that has to do with several interdependent factors: their location, their results at the *baccalauréat*, their social profile, the diversity and the appeal of what they offer (electives, foreign languages, European sections, etc.), the prizes and honors obtained (at the *Concours Général*, for instance), the presence of classes preparing students for the *Grandes Ecoles*¹, and their results. Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education to assess, and therefore to rank the performance of these schools by taking into account their social profile and their capacity to retain students, other criteria, largely based on a classic definition of academic excellence and therefore on social and academic selectivity, continue to establish a clear distinction between the few elite high schools and all the others. If the media and Internet websites

¹ Higher education establishments (such as Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Polytechnique, Sciences Po, etc.) that are outside the main framework of the French university system and select students for admission based on national ranking in competitive written and oral exams. Usually candidates have completed two years of dedicated preparatory classes (CPGE). (Translator’s Note)

give coverage to these various indicators of a school's performance, they also often produce their own rankings that precisely include other elements of academic success.²

Several criteria can be used to establish a list of elite Parisian high schools. A simple way to proceed consists in choosing only the schools that have a raw rate of success at the general *baccalauréat* superior to 90% and offer preparatory classes for the *Grandes Ecoles*.³ There are only a few, and they are all located in the most affluent neighborhoods of the capital, or in well-to-do (and often historical) suburbs (like Versailles, Neuilly-sur-Seine, or Sceaux).⁴ The more modest neighborhoods full of immigrants in the North and the North-East of Paris do not host any of the elite public high schools; neither do the working-class suburbs located on the outskirts of these neighborhoods (like Seine-Saint-Denis).

The social profile of the students who attend these schools diverges considerably from the average profile of students in their district, with a noticeable over-representation of very affluent groups (69% in the elite Parisian high schools versus 46% in the district) and an under-representation of low-income groups (respectively 7% and 17%). The gap is even more striking in the elite schools that are located in the Western suburbs (74% of very affluent in this category of schools versus 37% on average in the high schools of the Versailles academic district; respectively 4.2% and 23% for the low-income categories). In these schools, the proportion of students who come from very privileged backgrounds therefore is double in this last case, in comparison with the average number in the Versailles district, while the proportion of students who come from low-income families is five times less.

² This is the case, for instance, for the website [letudiant.fr](http://www.letudiant.fr), which offers a ranking of the “lycées d’élite” (top high schools) and takes into account the type of recruitment (by sector or not), the rate of success at the baccalauréat, the percentage of diplomas with distinction, the number of prizes received at the *Concours Général*: <http://www.letudiant.fr/etudes/lycee/lycees-dexcellence--les-mille-et-une-manieres-dy-e/le-palmares-des-lycees-dexcellence-realise-par-letudiant-14931.html>

³ See full text version for a detailed account of the criteria used, and the list and profile of the selected schools.

⁴ Neuilly-sur-Seine and Versailles have the distinctive feature of also having prestigious private high schools that compete with some of the public high schools with regard to the raw results at the baccalauréat and the admission rate of the CPGE (preparatory classes) to the *Grandes Ecoles*.

Unlike the Chicago approach, which consists in erasing all district boundaries for elite high schools and giving weight to the neighborhood of residence for 70% of the recruitment, the bonus of districting is not only maintained in Paris, but bears a weight similar to academic performance, and is twice as important as social factors (whether a student receives financial aid or not). Given the social division of space in the city and its outskirts, this way of selecting students produces a strong social selectivity and homogeneity.⁵ The principle at work in Paris is therefore the opposite of the principle at work in Chicago, since living in a very affluent neighborhood gives one a clear advantage in relation to a student who comes from a less privileged district.

But it is mostly the opacity of the procedure that is in sharp contrast with the situation in Chicago, whether it concerns the measures of positive discrimination or, more generally, how the recruitment of these selective high schools works. Only Henri IV and Louis-Le-Grand are de-sectorized high schools that can recruit anywhere in the region, but both schools organize most of their recruitment outside of the district on the base of academic excellence. If attempts at “social outreach” exist, they remain marginal, and they do not follow an explicit protocol of selection integrated into the general recruitment procedure. Therefore, with such a system, the possibility (or the will) to diversify recruitment remains very weak, and only applies to a few dozen students coming from ZEP colleges (17% at Henri IV through the program “Les Cordées de la réussite”, but only 8% of students receiving financial aid; and a handful of students at Louis-le-Grand (14 in 2010) through a partnership with ten middle schools, at best, in the Eastern part of Paris). The fact that this assessment procedure is strictly based on a student’s files only helps to reinforce a feeling of uncertainty in face of the school’s verdict. This feeling is all the more pronounced in that parents, as well as students, know full well that their grades and the teachers’ assessments are weighed differently depending on the middle school they come from. Likewise, for the recruitment in ZEP schools, it remains unclear what makes a difference between two similar applications, with questions again arising

⁵ This is in fact clearly indicated on the website of the Paris school district. Here is, for instance, what we can read in the section “This school’s characteristics, its qualities, its dynamics” of the Lycée Duruis, located in the 7th arrondissement in Paris: “A ‘privileged’ school in terms of the social and cultural background of its students, and in terms of its geographical situation...”

about how much a student's origin factors matter, and, sometimes, a feeling of being discriminated against among groups of people who are stigmatized or left behind in French society. Likewise, it can make parents who do not belong to such "visible minorities" wonder if it puts their children at a disadvantage.

Could This System be Applied in Paris?

Would a system inspired by the *Selective enrollment high schools* be more efficient than the positive discrimination based only on attendance at a school located in a ZEP area? At the moment, not only the proportion of students admitted through this type of affirmative action remains small, it also does not allow a more diverse recruitment from the entire social spectrum, and it excludes in particular students from working-class or lower middle-class (mixed) neighborhoods, whose schools are not necessarily classified as ZEP, but in which the proportion of students coming from modest or immigrant background is far from negligible. At the moment, the will to "diversify" comes down to a highly polarized view of positive discrimination, which consists in recruiting mostly from the upper middle-class living in the most affluent neighborhoods and integrating a few of the best students from the least privileged schools. As a result, a whole swathe of working class or lower middle-class students who do not attend schools that have the ZEP label, and whose access to selective high schools would greatly increase their diversity – on a scale that would better reflect the profile of the population as a whole⁶ – are prevented from accessing these schools. Rather than truly attenuate the placement monopoly of a few dozen prestigious schools, the programs that are essentially focusing on struggling middle or high schools, weaken, in an insidious way, the position of ordinary schools, in terms of access to the most selective academic paths.

⁶ The convention ZEP-Sciences Po, focused on those few schools only, still manages to recruit from a large spectrum of social strata. In 2010, among the students who got into Sciences Po through CEP, roughly 20% came from intermediate social categories, and as many came from upper social categories (Tiberj 2011). The children of parents with intermediate occupations, for instance, represented 14% of the students admitted through this process. We can see as well that, thanks to these measures, their percentage among all the students at Sciences Po, which had tended to drop slightly between 1987 and 1997 (from 8% to 7%) increased again during the last ten years to reach 10% in 2011. By comparison, the children of working class parents increased from 1 % to 4.5 % during the same period and the children of employees from 2 % to 7.5 %.

Why then not officially identify those selective high schools that are no longer bound by district, whose recruitment could be split equitably between half of the admissions based on school records and results at the entrance examination, and the other half, still based on school records and results at the exam, but with an extra weight given to the type of neighborhood of residence?

This system would have several benefits. It would:

- limit the privilege associated with residence in the most selective neighborhoods of the capital (and its surrounding suburbs) to access the most prestigious schools
- make the methods of admission more transparent by clarifying specifically the criteria used in assessing applications, the notion of “diversity”, and the principles governing positive discrimination.
- implement a system of weights that would take into account a variety of socio-urban configurations, not limited to the poorer areas only, and introduce tiers in the recruitment that would correspond to the more “mixed” socio-residential profiles that are largely ignored by the current measures aiming at increasing diversity in the elite.
- attenuate the implicit drop in status of some schools because of their location⁷.

These four points find an echo in Chicago as well as in Paris in the thesis concerning the decline in status (or perceived decline in status) among the lower middle-class and its political effects (Chauvel 2006; Peugny 2009; Maurin 2009). The stagnation of income in the lower middle class in the United States has given rise to dissatisfaction with the political system and resentment towards both the poor and the wealthy. In France, a phenomenon of a similar type explains in part the rise of the far right. This issue is

⁷ As is the case in the US, even if the modes of assessment of the “quality of education” and the “dangerousness” of a given school can vary, we may have doubts about the capacity of such measures to compensate for the stigma and negative image of certain neighborhoods and their inhabitants. The prospect of more easily joining a selective academic track would probably not be sufficient in itself to transform the dynamics of school choice, which brings into play other elements of assessment of a school context (Oberti 2007; van Zanten 2009).

particularly acute in the domain of education, which continues to appear as the best protection against the risk of stagnation or decline in social status. It puts into question the extent of the social spectrum targeted by the French measures, which are mostly focused on the least privileged school contexts. The social profile of the eleven elite Parisian high schools and, even more so, of the few suburban elite high schools, shows how under-represented the most disadvantaged sections of the population are, but also the sections of the population that are poorly qualified⁸ (low-ranking employees) and those with intermediate occupations, especially if we put teachers aside, whose cultural capital is greater.

Residential Environment and Environment of the School

The tendency to not send one's child to the local middle school is strongly associated with social origin, independent of the neighborhood of residence. The relaxing of school districting since 2007 has not fundamentally modified this principle (Oberti, Préteceille and Rivière, 2011). It is therefore necessary to relate the profile of the neighborhood to the profile of the school that the student really attends. Rather than integrating the average results of the schools in the district of residence to calculate the generalized indicator that determines the type of neighborhood, this information could be individualized by considering the type of school the child attended. This would allow us to distinguish between students who live in a poorer neighborhood and attended a middle school in their district, from those who avoided it and went to a more privileged public or private school.

Is a system that takes into account both the profile of the neighborhood and the profile of the middle school preferable to one that only takes into account the profile of the school the student attended?⁹ The combination of both of these dimensions implies a

⁸ They represent on average 22.4% of middle school students within the the Paris school district, but 14% of the students of elite high schools, and respectively 23% and 13% in the Versailles district.

⁹ Patrick Weil, for example, suggests that we draw inspiration from the Top Ten Percent Plan applied by the State of Texas to promote diversity in access to higher education. The only criterion is determined by the high school attended by the student: no matter what school he (or she) attends, if he (or she) graduates in the top 10% of his class, he (or she) is guaranteed access to the Texas state universities.

more complex procedure, and we can ask what its benefits would be in terms of a more precise definition of the socio-economic environment in which the student develops, and about its ability to increase “diversity” in recruitment. The incorporation of both environments – residence and school – only makes sense if this political and educational concern with the diversification of the elite is accompanied by an urban concern with fighting segregation and its effects.

In both cases, however – discrimination on the sole basis of the school the student attended on the one hand, and the combination of this criterion with the profile of the neighborhood of residence on the other hand – the effects in terms of diversification in the recruitment to the most selective high schools would be quite significant. In the first case, not only would it increase the proportion of students coming from poorer/modest backgrounds, and with a foreign origin, but we would considerably widen the social spectrum by recruiting in a more “discriminating” manner, and not only from ZEP schools. In the second case, by adding the profile of the neighborhood of residence to the profile of the school attended by the student, we would integrate an urban dimension whose importance for the socialization of young people is well established. This could have an indirect effect on urban segregation in two ways: first, by limiting the effects of stigma, in particular on school trajectories that are associated with the place of residence; and also by loosening – much more than the “relaxing of the school mapping” has done – the link between school and residential appeal/selectivity.

A Few Major Problems Remain

The first problem has to do with the valorization of proximity in the education of one’s children, especially among more modest sections of the population. It would therefore require a more equitable geographical distribution of selective schools between affluent and less affluent *arrondissements* and *communes*. A second difficulty would be to make sure that the families who come from less privileged neighborhoods in which

there is a strong immigrant presence would agree to take part in this selection,¹⁰ perhaps by providing them with support and by a stronger outreach on the part of the schools in those neighborhoods. The third problem has to do with private schools and the possibility of maintaining a very selective parallel system, both academically and economically, that would circumvent such measures. This point is particularly important since we find a majority of private schools among those that obtain the best results at the baccalauréat.¹¹ A first lever would consist in setting subsidies for the schools that are part of this convention as a function of their implementation of such measures of positive discrimination. This could be accompanied by scholarships (private and public) that would cover most of the school tuition.¹² One of the pernicious effects of a more constraining injunction on public high schools to diversify recruitment could indeed be to reinforce the appeal and social homogeneity of private schools. Finally, a last concern has to do with selective high schools “vacuuming” the best students to the detriment of ordinary schools, with a significant impact on their recruitment and results.

The tension is therefore high between increasing diversity in a few elite schools and the maintenance of a relative social and academic mix in a large number of schools. This point raises the question of the appropriate stage at which measures of positive discrimination should be implemented. The current tendency is to promote access to selective pathways in higher education (with some intervention at the high school level), specifically with respect to access to the *Grandes Ecoles*. (The ZEP contract at Sciences Po is emblematic of this orientation, but also the measures taken by ESSEC, ESCP, and the Cercle Passeport Telecoms.)¹³ We could therefore choose to develop these measures

¹⁰ This would mean, among other things, reconsidering the role and the training of guidance counselors and, more generally, the way that information on higher education circulates.

¹¹ Among the twenty “best” high schools (taking into account the expected rate of success at the baccalauréat and added value), only two have a public status in the Academy of Paris. If we take into account only the raw results, private high schools are over-represented among the first hundred.

¹² A program inspired by this principle (*School voucher*) has been implemented in Florida. It consists in delivering checks to lower income families, who can use them either to have access to a better neighborhood or apply them towards tuition at a private school (Figlio, in press). Furthermore, prestigious private schools in Chicago use funds to allocate financial aid based on social criteria.

¹³ ESSEC: École Supérieure des Sciences Économiques et Commerciales; ESCP: Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Paris; The Cercle Passeport Telecoms (Telecom Passport Circle Association) offers business style mentoring to students coming from a modest background – in particular from depressed areas and

and extend them to a larger number of high schools, and thus limit the hegemonic position of a small number of feeder schools for the “greater” preparatory classes and the *Grandes Ecoles*. However, the identification of a restricted number of “selective schools” comes with the risk of reinforcing this specialization in the preparation of the elite. At the same time, we observe that the implementation of programs similar to the program at Sciences Po in a greater number of high schools has not fundamentally challenged the monopoly of a handful of prestigious schools. So we could perfectly imagine doing both at the same time – in other words, maintain the current programs aiming at diversifying recruitment to the *Grandes Ecoles* and reform the recruitment process of selective high schools.

Conclusion

The place and the measures devoted to programs promoting diversity in selective high schools in Chicago is in sharp contrast with their marginal character in France, and the opacity of the criteria and measures that are applied in Paris. A little more than half of the students who are admitted to the Chicago high schools are admitted through a system of quota that takes into account the socio-economic profile of the neighborhood in which they live. Given the intensity of ethno-racial segregation in Chicago, this sole criterion of residence makes sense, even though it would be possible to take more account of the profile of the school that the student actually attends. This way of doing things integrates in effect an ethno-racial dimension into an approach based on residence. The lesser segregation of immigrants in metropolitan Paris weakens further that criterion, if the idea of diversification of the elite (therefore taking place before high school) integrates these dimensions of visible minorities, without the possibility of making it explicitly a principle of positive discrimination. It seems especially critical to take into account the environment of the school the student attends, to connect it to his or her residential environment, and thereby better establish the social, urban, and academic background of the student. Such a process could be integrated into a wider effort to fight urban

minorities – to encourage them to enter the *Grandes Écoles* specializing in engineering and business. (Translator’s Note)

segregation, which raises the more general question of the relationship between city politics and those of the Education Ministry.

One observation emerges from this comparison and should make us never lose sight of the hierarchy of social dynamics in urban areas. Both cities, with their respective urban, political, and migratory history, and very different normative and legislative framework, try, in their schools, to limit, or regulate, the effects of social and ethnic segregation. These different histories and contexts have produced urban configurations that are marked by segregation: very strong and very much linked with ethnic or “racial” background in Chicago; less pronounced and less based on these factors in Paris. Of course, socioeconomic dimensions are also very much present in Chicago and dimensions linked with immigrant origins are also present in Paris, but it is a question of respective weight and intensity.

In both cases however, schools are asked to reach a level of diversity (social, ethnic, and “racial” in Chicago; social and taking into account the descendants of immigrants belonging to visible minorities in France) that we do not necessarily find at the scale of the micro-neighborhood. It calls for sophisticated measures that take into account a large number of parameters, but in which social and residential constraints remain strong, such as the valorization of proximity. In other words, it is a matter of correcting the principles of segregation that already exist in the city. This shows the importance of programs to reduce urban segregation in general – undoubtedly heavier, more costly, and more uncertain as well, but likely to be more coherent and more efficient at increasing diversity in schools in the medium or long term. However, there is no agreement between politicians and researchers in the social sciences about this goal of socio-residential mixing, far from it. The law *Solidarité et renouvellement urbain* (solidarity and urban renewal), for instance, which aims at a better distribution of housing projects over the various communities in large urban areas, is struggling to reach its goal, and the successive amendments of the law, as well as local practices, show the resistance of the wealthiest communities to admitting lower income (and immigrant) populations. Many sociologists, for their part, insist on the widespread tendency of keeping to oneself

and the perverse effects of measures favoring a greater “mix” in housing, which effectively leads, in some cases, to the exclusion from these projects of the very people who need it the most, or to weaken important resources for this low-income and immigrant population when it is geographically dispersed. The sociologists of education wonder as well about the variable effects of this social mix on the educational trajectory of children from modest and working class backgrounds. And yet, compared to many other cities, Paris is still characterized by many mixed spaces in which households from different social backgrounds and origins cohabit. Such spaces are still understudied and rarely mobilized by politicians to think about the everyday experience of the people who live in them. Yet “diversity” is really there, and does not necessarily create disorder and tension, which probably explains in part why they evoke less interest. This is true of the programs of “diversification” in education as well, that are still profoundly marked by a dual vision of the city and of its inequalities, which explains why they focus on the poorest and most stigmatized neighborhoods or schools, to the detriment of more ordinary places, neither rich nor poor, where in fact the majority of people live. Such are the limits of programs that are mainly aimed at the goal, admittedly crucial, of diversifying the elite, but that are not necessarily accompanied by the more ambitious goal of an equality of school contexts for all children, regardless of where they live and what their social background is.

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