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# Neo-liberal influences in a 'conservative' regime: the role of institutions, family strategies, and market devices in transition to higher education in France

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This article focuses on the interplay between institutional arrangements, family strategies, and market devices in the transition to higher education (HE) in France with a view to documenting both persistent features of the French 'conservative' educational regime and recent changes, in particular those related to neo-liberal influences. Using a theoretical model inspired by research on welfare regimes and integrating key elements of the sociology of networks, institutions, and markets, as well as data from a comprehensive qualitative study, the article focuses on three main topics: the impact of both institutional stratification and family choices on segregation and channelling into HE; the framing of students' choices generated by impersonal policy instruments and personal human guidance; the role of private providers and agencies, as well as the devices they use to influence students' transition to HE. The conclusion emphasises the impact of these different processes on the perpetuation of educational inequalities.

## Introduction

The existing literature in the sociology of education shows that transitions in educational systems are crucial periods during which various processes concur to perpetuate inequalities (Walther 2006; Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran 2007; Ingram and Tarabini 2018). Given the growing number of students who continue into higher education (HE) worldwide, the transition between secondary education and HE deserves special attention. And indeed, it has been the subject of a very large number of empirical studies since the 1990s.

Several institutional processes related to this transition have been carefully explored, notably the role of tracking (Convert 2010; Mazenod et al. 2019) and career guidance at secondary school (McDonough 1997), institutional channelling between secondary schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) (Attewell 2001; Espenshade, Hale, and Chung 2005; Hill 2008), and the selection criteria and processes implemented by the latter (Alon 2009; Boliver 2013). Conversely, very few studies have focused on

market influences and mostly with a view to documenting new forms of global competition between HEIs (Marginson 2004) and between HE graduates (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010) rather than to exploring how these dynamics influence students' choices.

The comprehensive analysis I put forward in this article uses an original framework based on neo-institutional theory (Owen-Smith and Powell 2000) and economic sociology (Podolny 2001; Beckert 2010), which I consider useful both for studying local and national configurations in detail and for comparative purposes. This framework focuses on how three major forms of social organisation – institutions, networks, and markets – influence the transition to HE. Using data from a study on access to HE in France<sup>1</sup>, my purpose is also to show the increasing influence of neo-liberal instruments, especially choice, and of market actors and devices in a 'conservative' welfare regime that has traditionally relied on institutions and families, with a view to illustrating both the importance of this process and the fact it takes different forms in different national contexts.

The article is divided into four sections. The first discusses some of the main contributions of the literature on welfare regimes and educational regimes. It then looks at how neo-liberal trends might affect national social and educational configurations, more specifically the French educational system, before presenting the data and fieldwork on which subsequent interpretations will be based. The second examines the impact of both institutional stratification and family choices on segregation and channelling into HE. The third goes on to focus on the interplay of impersonal policy instruments and personal human guidance in framing students' choices. Finally, the last section examines the role of private providers and agencies and the devices they use to influence students' transition to HE.

## **Studying neo-liberal trends in welfare and education regimes**

In this section I shall turn first to Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999)'s work and the related literature in order to discuss some distinctive features of the 'conservative' regime predominant in France. Some further specific features of the French educational system are also presented, using existing typologies of educational regimes and youth transition regimes. I then turn to the analysis of liberal trends and to studies focusing on how these trends have hybridised with certain dominant characteristics of French policy in general and in the educational sector in particular. I conclude this section by briefly presenting the evidence on which my analysis relies and how it was collected and analysed.

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<sup>1</sup> This project is supported by a public grant overseen by the French National Research Agency (ANR) as part of the "Investissements d'Avenir" program (reference: ANR-11-LABX-0091, ANR-11-IDEX-0005-02).

## Welfare and education regimes

Research on welfare regimes has been widely inspired by Esping-Andersen's (1990, 1999) seminal work, focusing on differences between regimes according to whether the management of social risks is taken up primarily by the state or devolved to families or the market, as well as on the links between these modes of management and social inequalities. Esping-Andersen's three actors correspond broadly to the forms of social organisation that are central in my own model of analysis, although some measure of qualification is necessary. First, I use the term 'institutions' rather than the term 'state' to refer to state policies and instruments, as well as state organisations (state agencies, secondary schools, and HEIs) and their dominant institutional arrangements (Scott 2001). Second, I refer to 'networks' rather than to 'families' because although this highly institutionalised network plays a key role in education – and will, in fact, be my main focus here – more informal networks, and especially peer groups, are also important. Third, I use the term 'market' to refer less to economic exchanges than to fundamental market mechanisms, especially choice and competition (François 2008), and typical market devices (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007).

Esping-Andersen distinguishes between three types of regimes. In the first, the 'social democratic' regime, the state plays a major role not only vis-à-vis the market but also vis-à-vis families thanks to substantial de-commodification of social services for the whole population. In the second, the 'conservative' welfare regime, the state is also a key actor but only intervenes when families cannot act on behalf of their members and it works towards preserving status differences. In the third, the 'liberal' regime, the state acts to encourage the market either passively by guaranteeing only minimal de-commodification or more actively by encouraging the intervention of market actors and the development of private services.

Some studies based on Esping Andersen's typology suggest the need for a subtype of 'Southern' or 'Mediterranean' countries, which are close to the 'conservative' type but include other specific features (Ferrera Citation1996), with some disagreement about whether France should be included in such a subtype or considered a conservative regime. Leaving aside this subtler distinction, for the purposes of this article I consider France as an essentially 'conservative' education and welfare regime due to the importance of status differences among the population resulting primarily from state support for educating high status groups and the strong influence exerted by families on educational matters, to the advantage of those with the most resources.

I nevertheless also underline the tension between this conservative structure and an egalitarian ideology. In order to understand how this tension translates into the concrete dynamics of the French educational system, in previous work on elite education (van Zanten 2018) I have found it useful to adapt Turner's (1960) distinction between two idealtypical norms and their associated mechanisms: 'contest mobility' and 'sponsored mobility'. In addition to pointing out how these two norms and mechanisms combine in the French system, I have also extended Turner's work by distinguishing between 'institutional sponsorship' by the state and educational institutions and 'social sponsorship' by families.

Several studies on educational and youth transition regimes emphasise the link, in 'conservative' regimes, between high degrees of institutional stratification in schools and the reproduction of a static and unequal social order (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010; West and Nikolai 2013). Although its secondary school

system is not as precociously and externally stratified as those of other continental countries, France is viewed as 'conservative' in the majority of these studies because of the importance of internal tracking in upper-secondary schools. Another relevant element in these studies concerns differences in education expenditure between educational regimes. Conservative regimes seem to combine a medium level of educational expenditure and low tuition fees with relatively low investment in HE as 'it is taken for granted that students from different social/educational backgrounds have different educational and career trajectories' (Pechar and Andres 2011, 24).

Contrary to other conservative regimes, however, France has not strongly developed vocational training as an alternative to HE for students from less advantaged educational and social backgrounds. In Germany, young people from these backgrounds enjoy greater economic security and more job prospects thanks to the joint action of the state and professional sectors, whereas in France they are expected to engage in unfair competition with the other students and risk facing high levels of unemployment (Verdier 2001; Chevalier 2018). Other studies still have underlined that the tight link in France between qualifications and jobs (Dubet, Duru-Bellat, and Véretout 2010), together with the fact that a person's first job is a stark marker of future status and that there is limited job mobility, forces all young people to invest heavily in their studies. As a result of this and of limited state funding for HE, young people also remain economically dependent on their parents for longer periods than in liberal or social democratic regimes (Van de Velde 2007).

## **Market trends in the French policy context and educational system**

In recent decades, welfare states have faced many external and internal financial challenges that have called into question both their capacity to control their economies and the efficiency of different policy sectors. This situation, in turn, has created a favourable context for the spread of a neo-liberal creed presenting markets as the most desirable regulating mechanism (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002). Although researchers disagree about the degree to which neo-liberalism has penetrated in different national contexts, there is broad consensus regarding the fact that states' responses to, and adoption of, market principles and instruments have not led to greater convergence between welfare regimes. The variations between these regimes are widely ascribed to 'path dependency' mechanisms and especially to each state's past commitments to different constituencies and predominant institutional arrangements (Bonioli and Palier 2000). However, some authors point out that these variations are also due to the fact that the meaning of neo-liberalism, which owes much of its resilience to its multi-faceted character, differs significantly across countries (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013; Deeming 2017).

Some authors contend that a market paradigm became dominant in French policy after the 1980s (Jobert 1994). Most empirical analyses nevertheless conclude that, in stark contrast with the UK, the diffusion of market mechanisms in France has not been 'ideological', that is to say radical and highly politicised, although, as Hay (2004) points out, this process has involved different phases in the UK. Instead, the French way has been 'pragmatic'.

This has meant, first, that market reforms have been depoliticised due to the fact that they were introduced by a left-wing government and pursued by right-wing and left-wing governments alike. They have consistently been justified as being the result of international pressures and the only viable solution with no alternatives (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002). Second, this 'pragmatism' also refers to the major emphasis placed on the 'bureaucratic face' of neo-liberalism, (Mudge 2008) with technocracy foregrounded in the conception and launch of reforms. Moreover, in actual practice, many managerial reforms fall instead under the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM) with limited active deregulation and privatisation and more focus on borrowing elements from the private sector and adapting them to the public sector (Bezes and Musselin 2015).

The education sector has followed similar overall trends but presents some specific features. First of all, more than in other countries, it is considered a 'sacred' sector that should be preserved from market principles and forces. This is due to the central role attributed to schooling in the construction of the French nation as well as in maintaining social cohesion (Green 2013). It is also linked to schools having been assigned the role of the great 'social equaliser' since the French revolution. A second distinctive feature is the existence of a large educational bureaucracy characterised by a high degree of segmentation and very 'loose coupling' (Weick 1976) between modes of administration and schools' daily activities. The resulting bureaucratic regulation creates a buffer for external pressures and an obstacle for radical reforms, while also emptying reforms that are implemented of their initial goals and re-bureaucratising new rules and instruments (van Zanten 2006). These features explain the special paths taken by policies of choice and delegation to the private sector.

HE is, however, different from basic education. It is much more open to market pressures both because of its proximity with the labour market and because it has become a key sector in the global competition for economic and human resources (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010). HEIs are also more complex organisations than schools meaning that NPM principles and tools can be more easily implemented there than in basic education (Bezes and Musselin 2015). Moreover, because of their more extensive autonomy and higher degree of differentiation, HEIs are more clearly part of fields structured by power relations but also by relations of cooperation and competition (van Zanten 2017). However, two elements at least limit the diffusion of market trends in policies related to access to HE in France. The first is HE's highly fragmented character. The wide array of tracks and institutions do not easily lend themselves to a common market discipline. The second is the fact that transition policies involve both secondary education and HE, which means that the factors mentioned in the previous paragraph play a significant role and that coordination is necessary between both levels of education. This is highly problematic because they have distinct goals and modes of organisation and there is a lack of inter-sector networks.

## **Studying market-oriented changes in transition to HE**

My discussion of some of the major features of the French educational regime and recent market-oriented changes, especially regarding the transition from upper-secondary school to HE, is based, first, on relevant studies and, second, on results from an on-going research study. The second section of this article draws primarily on the first type of sources, although I also refer to an empirical study of school choice

conducted previously. The interpretations presented in the third and fourth sections are more directly connected to empirical evidence from a seven-year (2013–2019) comprehensive qualitative study on access to HE, analysed using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Three types of data from that study are emphasised. The first type concerns a specific policy instrument: the web platform used to process students' HE applications and its changes over time. My analysis is based on examining a large number of reports and official texts, more particularly four reports and around 10 official texts dealing with the creation and transformation of this platform, as well as on approximately 40 interviews with policy-makers, notably with four high-level administrators and one university professor directly involved in conceiving and implementing it, and on an on-going analysis of the platform's content.<sup>2</sup> The second type of data concerns existing guidance practices for students applying to HE in upper-secondary schools. I conducted a three-year ethnographic study of four lycées located in the Ile-de-France region focusing on differences and inequalities in HE guidance.<sup>3</sup> This study comprised numerous interviews with head teachers, school careers' advisors, and students, as well as regular observations of school meetings.

A third type of data<sup>4</sup> concerns the intervention of market actors and the role of market devices in the transition to HE. In this regard, we analysed articles and reports as well as statistical data on the growth of private providers, observed meetings of directors of investment funds and conducted 8 interviews with private providers and investors. Detailed analysis was also carried out of the websites of the three major private agencies specialising in HE guidance, as well as the public one. We also studied 22 HE fairs, where we observed talks and activities at several stands, carried out short interviews with stand representatives and visitors, and distributed a questionnaire answered by 1000 students and 450 parents. This data is used in the fourth section of this article.

## **Segregation and channelling through stratification and choice**

Traditionally, the French educational system has worked to support a 'conservative' social order through institutional mechanisms oriented towards segregating and channelling students. The existence of such

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<sup>2</sup> This part of the study is being conducted with the participation of Leïla Frouillou (Université Paris Nanterre) and Clément Pin (Sciences Po).

<sup>3</sup> The other researchers that participated in this part of the study are: Alice Olivier (Sciences Po), Anne-Claudine Oller (Université Paris-Est Créteil-UPEC), and Sylvie Da Costa (Secrétariat Général de l'Enseignement catholique).

<sup>4</sup> These data were collected with the help of Amelia Legavre (Sciences Po), Anne Mazenod (Sciences Po), Alice Olivier (Sciences Po), Anne-Claudine Oller (UPEC), Jessica Pothet (Université de Lorraine), and a group of sociology Master's students at Sciences Po.

mechanisms in a society committed to equality of opportunity has been justified by the importance of institutional sponsorship of the best students, which is how 'meritocracy' has generally been understood. These institutional mechanisms have not only reflected state interests but also those of upper-class families. While they have remained very powerful, they have also had to change to adapt to constant pressure to open up the system by removing certain institutional barriers. This has driven upper-class parents to adapt their educational strategies in turn.

### **Institutional stratification and the bureaucratic sponsorship of high status groups**

The stability of the 'conservative' French educational regime and of the unequal social order that it helps reproduce has been maintained, as in other national contexts, through a dual process: on the one hand, opportunities are 'closed off' for lower-class groups at the higher levels of the educational system and, on the other, horizontal stratification also takes place at these levels (Raftery and Hout 1993; Lucas 2001). With 80% of students holding a *baccalauréat* in 2018, in just a few decades the French educational system has contrived to massively reduce educational inequalities in participation to secondary education. However, it has simultaneously developed new forms of stratification (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2008). The separate secondary educational institutions that educated different social groups until the post-WW2 reforms have now disappeared. In their place, there is a theoretically homogeneous lower-secondary school (*collège*) but the internal tracking in place within upper-secondary schools (*lycées*) now plays a major role in segregating and channelling students through the system.

Closely following the first wave of expansion of secondary education in the 1960s, a new 'technological' *baccalauréat* was created in 1968 alongside the initial 'academic' one (*baccalauréat général*), while the second wave of expansion in the 1980s went hand-in-hand with the invention of a new 'professional' *baccalauréat* in 1985. These three types of upper-secondary tracks are unevenly distributed across *lycées*. Students are, in turn, unequally distributed across these different types of tracks according to their academic results. This segregation of the student population is justified on the basis of meritocratic principles, as students' grades and educational trajectories are officially the only elements taken into account by lower-secondary school professionals when recommending one of these pathways to students. However, not only are their recommendations strongly influenced by the existing tracks in nearby *lycées* – with the bureaucratic goal of filling all existing places (Masson 1997) – but school professionals are also more likely to propose the 'academic' track to middle- and upper-class students with good or average grades than to lower-class students with similar academic profiles, both because they tend to mistrust the reliability of the latter's results and because they anticipate that they will receive less support from their families (Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1998).

Tracking in secondary school still plays a major role in access to HE: around 80% of students with a *baccalauréat général* and 70% of those with a *baccalauréat technologique* continue onto HE, whereas this is the case only for 40% of those with a *baccalauréat professionnel*. Secondary-school tracks also strongly 'channel' (Hill 2008) students into the various HE tracks. Since the *baccalauréat technologique* was created, there has been a clear segmentation in the HE tracks followed by its holders compared to their peers with a *baccalauréat général* (Convert 2010). The gap is still much greater between these two groups



and the more recent holders of professional baccalauréats as while this track has been upgraded and aligned with the others, it is nevertheless where schools continue to place the students who are weakest academically and those who come from low socio-economic groups and/or from an immigrant background (Chauvel 2015).

The unequal channelling of students into various HE tracks also results from the high degree to which the French HE system itself is stratified and fragmented. The first main division exists between long tracks (3–5 years) leading to a bachelor's or a master's degree, and short two-year tracks leading either to a degree in technology or a vocational degree. Within the long-track system, there is a long-standing division between the system of the *Classes préparatoires pour les grandes écoles* (CPGE- preparatory schools for the *Grandes écoles*, programmes that last 2–3 years after a *baccalauréat*), and universities.<sup>5</sup> The former are generally perceived as far more prestigious and they are far more selective than universities having, among other things, been authorised by the state to establish rules that only allow for a very limited number of places for students with a technological baccalauréat and almost none for those with a professional one. Universities, on the contrary, are forbidden by law from selecting their students, except in some disciplines such as medicine. Additionally, a growing number of post-baccalauréat schools exist, offering both short and long tracks, some of which are highly academically selective while others are not.

### **Choice and new forms of family sponsorship through 'Rigging' and 'Ranking'**

The persistent force of institutional mechanisms of stratification in the French system is due, as the previous paragraphs have already suggested, not only to the actions of the state but also to those of dominant upper-class groups. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) brilliantly analysed, while the development of educational institutions reduced these groups' capacity to directly control the reproduction of their status, they nevertheless managed to 'sponsor' their children's school careers through two main vectors: first, their capacity to influence curricular choices in such a way that the latter largely reflect their own culture and membership of high status groups; second, their capacity to keep other groups at bay by supporting segregative educational paths.

Until the post-WW2 reforms, this second strategy – which is my focus in this article – was implemented by supporting the preservation of distinct types of educational institutions. However, the formal unification of these institutions, at least until upper-secondary level, has forced upper-class families to renew their reproductive and exclusionary strategies by engaging more closely with school rules in two complementary ways, as analysed by Brown (2000) in the UK context. The first involves the permanent 'rigging' of these rules at a local level: in France, this particularly concerns the rules governing the transition from lower- to upper-secondary school and how students are allocated to the different upper-

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<sup>5</sup> The elite *Grandes écoles* and their CPGE were created after the French Revolution to recruit and prepare 'talented' young people to occupy high-level technical and administrative state positions. Now, however – and this is especially the case for the *Grandes écoles de commerce* (business schools) that developed later in the 19th and 20th centuries – they train students much more for managerial positions in the private sector (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015).

secondary tracks but also those governing how students are allocated to different secondary schools. This rigging has, in turn, created more possibilities for other families to enter the competition for the best places. It has therefore forced upper-class families to engage with these rules in ever more personal ways, by using their cultural, economic, and social capital to win in critical competition 'rankings' involving other groups.

These processes can be observed by examining the content of reforms giving parents more possibilities for choice. First, various decisions launched in the 1970s and 1980s by right-wing governments, but later pursued by left-wing ones and justified by the need for greater 'flexibility' in the system, took power away from educational professionals by formally giving more weight to parents' points of view when it comes to decisions concerning the transition to upper-secondary level and the allocation of students to different tracks. These reforms have generally benefited upper-class families. These families tend to maintain high levels of ambition even when their children are not high achievers academically (Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1998) and, in addition to having better knowledge of the complex and opaque stratified system in France, they can use their cultural and social resources to interact more effectively with institutional agents.

Second, although France has not implemented a clear policy of school choice within the state system, since the 1980s, it has encouraged parents to opt out of their local lower-secondary schools through requests for special dispensation. Initially, this decision was not justified by greater efficiency of market mechanisms but rather by the need to provide more state options for parents to avoid their 'flight' to private schools. While private school choice had always existed, contributing to setting apart the most conservative fractions of the upper and middle classes, it was previously driven by religious and ideological considerations. By the 1980s, however, it had become a highly strategic choice, made by larger fractions of these groups in order to avoid the most academically, socially, and ethnically segregated state schools.

The most recent school choice reform, launched by a right-wing government in 2007, encouraged it based on the need to provide options for lower-class parents 'trapped' in their local schools. In practice, however, upper-class parents have either not been concerned by these rules – because their economic resources allow them to live in segregated upper-class areas and send their children to similarly segregated schools or to resort to private schools – or have been able to use their cultural and social capital, especially their knowledge of school hierarchies, norms, and practices and their relationships with teachers, either to circumvent the new rules or to use them skilfully (van Zanten 2009).

## **The interplay of impersonal policy instruments and personal human guidance**

The expansion of the French secondary education and HE systems and the increasing importance of choice have in turn favoured the development of more sophisticated mechanisms for allocating students to schools and especially to HEIs. These mechanisms have in turn reinforced the importance attributed to

teachers' and university professors' involvement in guidance and selection, giving way to a complex interplay between impersonal policy instruments and personal professional judgement.

## **Governing and competing through algorithms**

School choice at the lycée level is now managed through an algorithm that combines three different criteria: proximity, academic results, and possession (or absence) of a means-tested scholarship. A more sophisticated system was introduced in HE where, since 2009, applications have been managed by a common online platform. While similar platforms exist in other countries, they have not generated the same debates as in France probably both because they are processing very different numbers of students (the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS] handles around 60,000 applicants against almost 890,000 for the French system in 2018) and because they operate within systems that are far less institutionally fragmented and stratified than the French one. More importantly, these platforms, whether they are managed by the third sector, as in the UK, or by the state, as in the case of University Admissions in Sweden, are conceived as technical tools rather than political instruments (Lascombes and Le Galès 2005). They are used to simplify the application process rather than to pursue various government goals and respond to pressure from different constituencies, as is the case in France.

One of the major debates sparked by the first HE platform, Admission Post-Bac (APB), was linked to the fact that it was directly inspired by previous systems created to allocate students to a group of grandes écoles and then to CPGE. One major consequence of this was that the platform's matching algorithm (with students ranking their choices and HE institutions also ranking them, in turn) only worked well for selective institutions and for students applying to them. Universities, which were not allowed to select their students, did not rank them if they had sufficient places for all applicants but resorted to new ad hoc institutional rules (priority given to local students, to students for whom the course was their first choice ...) but especially to drawing lots at random when they could not accept any further candidates. This last principle, in particular, was widely criticised and officially contested by a student association, leading the *Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés* (CNIL) – France's data protection agency – to recommend that the system be changed due to the unfairness of its impersonal processing of applications. A new system, Parcoursup, was then proposed.

The development of these platforms must be examined by focusing on the trade off between institutional and parental interests and between those of different social groups. One of the main political justifications for creating the initial platform was to increase possibilities for choice. This market mechanism was partly justified by appealing to neo-liberal principles, specifically by highlighting the need to empower users confronted with the strategies deployed by prestigious and oversubscribed tracks and institutions to attract and 'attach' the best students, especially their tendency to only consider applications from students who had ranked them first. In the first platform, this was achieved by forcing HE institutions to rank students without knowing how these applicants had ranked them. In the second, institutions are forced to decide whether or not to offer places without knowing how many other applications the students have made.

In reality, however, the effects of these online platforms, which still deserve much critical attention, seem to be twofold. The first effect concerns the generalisation of competition between HE tracks and between HEIs. While the traditional hierarchy mentioned in the previous section has not disappeared, the strong dividing line between the selective CPGE-*grandes écoles* tracks and universities is now blurred due to the fact that, by capitalising on users' dissatisfaction with the previous platform and with the 'impersonal' selection by algorithm, the present government has surreptitiously allowed the latter to single out students' applications based on personal academic judgments (those of their teachers in secondary schools and those of HE professors involved in the admission process). This is a profound change in the French context where all previous attempts to introduce selection at universities had met with huge student protest and ultimately failed.

This emerging competition between the CPGE and prestigious and oversubscribed universities and university tracks is likely to increase inequalities between students from high status and low status backgrounds. The former are the perfect target audience for universities trying to raise their institutional status and this increase in their potential range of choices will in turn give them greater leverage over prestigious HEIs. Conversely, lower-class students, and especially those holding a professional baccalauréat, run the risk of being rejected by the most prestigious universities and tracks and becoming even more segregated in low prestige institutions and tracks or of not obtaining a place anywhere.<sup>6</sup>

More generally, upper-class groups are also much more likely to rank higher in the interpersonal competition organised by these platforms thanks to their cultural resources. As with many algorithms, those governing these platforms are clearly based on the model of a 'rational' user. Those responsible for the platforms claim that they boost students' capacity to choose by allowing them to make many choices (36 in APB, 10 in Parcoursup) and providing them with increasingly sophisticated information (on local HE provision, on the number of places at HEIs and their admission and graduation statistics, etc.). They nevertheless strongly downplay the differences between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' concerning prior knowledge of HE and mastery of its stratified structure (Reay, David, and Ball 2005), as well as the socially-embedded cognitive inequalities between students concerning their capacity to understand different types of statistical and qualitative data, to compare tracks and institutions, and to grasp their explicit requirements and implicit expectations. Both algorithms also reward strategic dispositions (capacity to anticipate, to rank, to wait until the system works in their favour) that are much more common among upper-class students due to their previous family socialisation.

## **Inequalities in personal institutional guidance of students' choices**

In France, the relationship between secondary education and HE has been weaker than in other countries due to low political support for HE – and especially universities, which were not considered as loyal and useful to the state as the *grandes écoles* (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015) – which, as underlined earlier, is

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<sup>6</sup> This last, and not uncommon, situation has led the government to create commissions that, at the end of the process on the platform, arbitrarily allocate these students to any lower-status vocational track that has vacant places.

typical of conservative regimes. This relationship has also been essentially mediated by impersonal institutional devices (the *baccalauréat*, which is considered both a secondary and a HE degree, and institutional tracking, as discussed above). Guidance in educational choices was introduced in secondary schools after the post-WW2 reforms but mainly for low-status failing students. Careers' advisers were expected to discourage these students from applying for academic tracks and to obtain their consent to pursue their studies in areas presented as a priority in governmental economic plans. Although advisers did not accept this role without contest, they fought more to be able to provide psychologically informed guidance to these students than to extend their role to the whole student population (Lehner 2016).

One of the consequences of these decisions is that as educational policy-makers have come to think of their role as consisting in helping the majority of students make more 'enlightened choices' regarding HE, they have now turned to upper-secondary school teachers. These teachers, however, view their professional role as focused primarily on the transmission of knowledge and they therefore define guidance as providing information and advice to students mainly about their academic profiles and chances of success in HE. This position in turn advantages students applying for selective tracks where grades, class rank, and academic judgments are the main elements taken into account and all the more so when they attend schools where many students have similar plans. Conversely, students who are average academically and hesitating between different non-selective tracks and institutions are more likely to be left to their own devices and all the more so if they are concentrated in schools with similar students.

Moreover, in a similar vein to the conclusions of research in the US and the UK (McDonough 1997; Reay, David, and Ball 2005), my study revealed guidance models in secondary schools that differed strongly in four respects. The first difference concerns the direction and strength of channelling into HE. In the two lycées with a large proportion of upper-class and successful students, teachers took it for granted that students would continue onto HE but placed strong pressure on them to choose prestigious tracks that were as aligned as possible with their academic level, although the less elite of the two lycées, which was also a private establishment, took into account students' 'personalities' a little more. Conversely, in the two other lycées, one with a mixed intake and one with a large proportion of lower-class students, for students and parents alike, the educational horizon was the *baccalauréat*, the expectation being that, depending both on their work habits and professional plans, any students who succeeded at that exam would themselves choose either a university track or a professional track. Consequently, much less pressure was placed on students.

Schools' guidance practices also varied concerning the degree of anticipation and planning. In the first two schools, students started to hear messages about their HE futures from Year 10 onwards. This logic of anticipation extended to teachers' pedagogical practices, with many of them reminding students that their curriculum was intellectually demanding, their workload intense, and their assessments recurrent and harsh because they were being prepared for prestigious HE trajectories, especially within the CPGE-*grandes écoles* track. Conversely, HE guidance only started only in Year 12 in the two other schools and was characterised by a lack of preparation and a general sense of urgency to keep up with the pace set by the new online platform.

There was also strong variation concerning school staff's degree of commitment to guidance and the division of work between them. In the first two schools, teachers and headteachers were strongly involved in advising students about their academic level and potential and, additionally, in the private school, two teachers also gave them more professional advice on careers while other members of staff were involved in providing information about the dates and places of 'open days' and related events. In the last two schools, some teachers were highly involved in guidance but others were not, with some preferring to devote themselves to giving extra tutoring to failing students. The rest of the staff devoted most of their time to coping with student absenteeism, the risk of drop out, or social problems.

Finally, a crucial difference between the four schools concerns how advice was given to students. In the two more disadvantaged schools, this advice was mostly 'generic': teachers and other staff, including careers' advisers, tended to address students in groups rather than individually; students were given official information or advised to consult official documents, guides, and websites; they were reminded about important dates concerning the online platform and told how to fill in the online forms correctly but few exchanges concerned their actual choices. In the other two schools, especially in the elite state lycée, the advice was much more 'patterned' to each student's profile and plans, with a stronger focus on students' academic results and potential as well as on the academic expectations of the tracks and institutions to which they were applying (Olivier, Oller, and van Zanten 2018).

## **The growing influence of market providers, agents, and devices**

In addition to the increasing importance attached to parents' and students' choices in both secondary education and HE, the transition to HE in France is presently characterised by much stronger presence of private providers than in the past and by far greater penetration of market agencies and devices. Three main factors explain this situation. The most important is the significant increase in the number of students who continue to HE. These students, especially first-generation students with little knowledge of HE, are ideal targets for private providers and agencies. The development of the latter is also reinforced by the fact that state investment in HE has not kept pace with its expansion. A third factor concerns congestion at entry into the labour market which reinforces parents' and students' anxieties and encourages them to resort to private agencies to get advice on the best tracks to choose for the best jobs.

### **Private providers and private agencies**

For a long time, France was characterised by the weak presence of the private sector in HE. However, whereas the intake of private HEIs represented around 7% of the student population at the beginning of 2000, these institutions have now become the main engines of HE expansion, absorbing 80% of HE growth and training almost 20% of each generation. This spectacular leap is linked to the fact that a significant proportion of these institutions are now part of large national, and increasingly multinational, entities and benefit from the resources of investment funds. It is also linked to strong strategic efforts on their part to

offer courses in new sectors such as media studies and digital technology. They have also endeavoured to establish themselves in geographical locations not covered by public institutions. The general landscape of private HE is nevertheless highly heterogeneous both concerning institutional status – in addition to the newer for-profit schools, there are also older schools belonging to regional chambers of commerce or to associations – and quality: alongside some of the most prestigious management schools, the private sector includes many institutions catering for students with low grades who would not have been accepted by selective public institutions.

The same factors also explain the popularity of market agencies specialising in informing and advising students preparing access to HE and competing with the public agency responsible for this, the ONISEP. A systematic analysis of the websites of the three main generalist private agencies (L'Etudiant, Studyrama, and Digischool) and of the ONISEP shows three main differences between the latter and the other three.

The first difference concerns the proportion of 'cold' and 'warm' knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998; Slack et al. 2014) provided to visitors – that is to say, of official, often statistical, data on the one hand and of information based on experience, on the other – and the degree to which the dominant discourse is 'vertical' or 'horizontal' (Bernstein 1999). The public agency focuses on giving updated, exhaustive, and neutral official information and data on all areas of study and its relationship to its audience remains strongly 'vertical', although it has made some recent efforts to use 'warm' knowledge and to draw closer to its visitors by developing 'frequently asked questions' and quiz sections, and resorting to written interviews and videos in which students talk about their trajectories in different tracks. Although on the related website, 'My Online Career Guidance', students can ask official educational advisors questions, by telephone, e-mail, or chat, the main website does not offer any discussion forums or other possibilities for visitors to express their views.

Conversely, the three private websites rely mainly on 'horizontal' discourse and make extensive use of 'warm' knowledge. While the same official data is frequently used, most articles are written in a subjective mode relating to students' supposed experiences and queries – for example, 'the six most frequent mistakes in recruitment interviews' – and substantial space is devoted, especially in L'Etudiant and Studyrama, to students' practical concerns, e.g. scholarships, organising academic work and stress-management techniques, student housing, and part-time jobs. Various in-house rankings occupy a central place, as well as quizzes and tests. These websites also take into account different perspectives providing information and advice for those engaged in long-term planning and those looking for immediate, alternative solutions after not having been offered a place by the online matching platform or after having failed in a given track. They contain many individual portraits and personal narratives in both written and video form (including links to YouTube videos) recounting different students' experiences depending on their pathways but also on their initial grades and 'personalities' and are also more interactive than the ONISEP website, offering forums, the possibility for 'likes' and comments, and also robot or personal chats.

A second major difference concerns links with private institutions. On the ONISEP website, some private institutions are officially presented alongside public ones but there is no publicity for the former. Conversely, on the three private websites substantial space is devoted to pages that promote these institutions or are written by them and on Digischool's website some HEIs also sponsor pages on general

subjects. There is also a tendency, especially on the Studyrama website, to focus more on private institutions that have chosen not to be part of the Parcoursup online platform. Most of the services offered by these private websites are free of charge, except for coaching, but an implicit commercial relationship is established with visitors who must give personal information to access some services, which is then sold to private HEIs.

A third important difference concerns the general tone of the website and the implicit type of student that each agency – and the HEIs with which it has a privileged relationship – aims to attract. While all the websites have an optimistic tone focusing on possibilities rather than constraints, the public website and, to some extent, Studyrama, clearly target ‘serious’ students looking for reliable information and advice to take ‘rational’ decisions. The other two websites, especially L’Etudiant, focus much more on students as young people giving greater priority to a pleasurable student experience than to hard work and searching for information about studies but also about many other less ‘austere’ subjects.

### **Market HE fairs as quasi-state services**

All of the three private agencies organise HE fairs, unlike the public agency which only sponsors them or acts as a secondary partner. During the first part of our study on this market device, for the academic year 2013–2014, we counted 150 fairs organised around France – of which 41 in the Paris region – with 71 organised by L’Etudiant, 70 by Studyrama, and the rest by other agencies. The overall number of fairs has risen since then and the number of agencies involved in their organisation too, now also including the two main daily newspapers in France, Le Figaro and Le Monde. All these actors are private therefore, unlike with the websites, there is none of the duality and competition between public and market services that is common in countries such as France with hybridisation between neo-liberalism and a strong statist tradition (Thelen 2014). Here, the situation goes beyond that because although private actors have monopolised this device, rather than claiming the superiority of the market over state services, they tend to present themselves as ‘quasi-state’ services.

They do so by insisting on the fact that participation in the fairs is totally free of charge for visitors and, even more, on the ‘neutral’ advice given to students and parents, notably about the subtleties of the Parcoursup online platform. This is clearly a legitimisation strategy (Meyer and Roman 1977) developed with a view to penetrating an educational field characterised by strong distrust of market actors, and it is successful. While educational authorities and teachers in public secondary schools generally advise students to use the ONISEP website, they also tend to act as though the fairs organised by these private agencies were indeed a public service: information about them can be found on the regional educational authorities’ websites and many of them pay for students’ transport to the fairs. Secondary school teachers, especially in disadvantaged establishments, frequently offer visits to fairs to students considering them a major aspect of their guidance practices (Olivier, Oller, and van Zanten 2018). This in turn blurs the distinction between public and private for students and parents, especially those with fewer education and cultural resources.



However, close examination of what goes on at these fairs reveals how far they actually are from providing a public service (van Zanten and Legavre 2014). Three main distinctive features reveal their strong market orientation. The first, and the most important as it conditions the other two, is the predominance of private HEIs, which represent, in the Parisian fairs, between 80% and 100% of participating institutions. These institutions are vital to the fairs as their economic model is based on HEIs paying for space for their stands and in some cases sponsoring certain activities and, in turn, fairs are vital for private HEIs, especially for-profit ones whose main source of funding is students' tuition fees and even more so for those that cannot count on their reputation to attract students because they are either new or low prestige.

The second is the importance given to typical market devices to attract and 'attach' students (Cochoy 2002; Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007), including big and colourful stands, with music and sometimes activities offered for visitors, glossy brochures, promotional items, and, particularly, a clever division of work between the persons working at the stands: while HEIs representatives talk to parents and to 'serious' students about instrumental dimensions (cost, length of studies, job perspectives) using vertical and purportedly objective discourse, 'student ambassadors' from the institution talk 'horizontally' to the majority of young visitors about expressive and subjective dimensions such as the quality and beauty of the premises, student associations and events, and travel abroad.

The third factor concerns the fact that all participants, especially speakers giving talks who are generally HEI directors, focus, on the one hand, on the advantages of small private HEIs compared to large public universities and, on the other, on the possibilities rather than the constraints of successful transition to HE. In doing so, they combine references to the instrumental advantages of private HEIs, notably in terms of proximity to the world of work and the resulting job prospects, and to 'rational' ways of playing with rules of access to HE, with references to the quality of the student experience in private school settings and to students fulfilling their dreams by following their desires rather than the more secure but less original paths advised by their teachers and parents.

## Conclusion

My analysis has illustrated the persistent role of institutions in the durable reproduction of inequalities (Tilly 1999) in 'conservative' education and welfare regimes and specifically in the French system. This reproduction takes place at each educational level through processes of institutional stratification that, in turn, create 'status tracks' not only between high status institutions – which also exist elsewhere (Kingston and Lewis 1990), although in France they have been far more formalised through the CPGE-*grandes écoles* channel (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015) – but also between low status institutions as well. I have also shown, however, changes in this channelling process with increasing individualisation of secondary-HE pathways taking place through contrasting procedures: on the one hand, 'matching' through impersonal algorithms and, on the other, the more personal involvement of secondary school teachers in career advice and of university lecturers in the selection process.

These institutional changes go hand-in-hand with others concerning the influence of family networks. Upper-class families have always played a major role in the dynamics of the French 'conservative' educational regime, which, despite its strong meritocratic ideology, is supported by a dual process of 'institutional sponsorship' and 'family sponsorship' closing off opportunities for 'outsiders' and low-status groups. However, the aforementioned institutional changes have forced upper-class families to adapt their strategies. The 'rigging' of institutional rules now requires new knowledge about the logics underpinning both algorithmic matching and professional involvement in the transition processes. Families must also make more direct use of their economic, cultural, and social capital in order to win in new competitive 'rankings' (Brown 2000). This requires renewed efforts on their part to disguise and adapt their modes of intervention in order to preserve both the ideal of meritocracy, so that the new upper-class generations continue to believe that they deserve their place, and the ideal of youth autonomy (van Zanten 2015).

My purpose was also to show the increasing importance of market actors and devices. In addition to the growing success of private schools chosen for non-religious motives and the development of choice within the public sector, the most recent changes have taken two forms, both of which are typical of the ways in which neo-liberalism has hybridised with 'statism' in the French welfare regime (Schmidt and Woll 2013). The first is that of *laissez-faire* (the state lets private actors 'get on with things') as in the case of private HE providers. Given the potential negative public perception of this trend, the state disguises or downplays the existence and influence of these actors, as evidenced by the scarcity of data on this group of HEIs in official statistics and lack of reference to them in most official reports. The second form is that of *faire avec* (the state 'gets along' with private actors) as in the case of market agencies and HE fairs. Collaboration with these actors is facilitated by their strategy of presenting themselves as having 'quasi-state' status rather than boasting about the superiority of 'quasi-markets' (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993) and market devices.

All these processes are, to a large extent, the consequence of a very rapid and massive movement of widening participation in HE in France over recent decades. These processes have also aimed to democratise access to HE, albeit with little anticipation of the institutional adjustments necessary to adapt to the arrival of large numbers of first-generation students and limited financial efforts deployed to encourage these adjustments. Due to these policy orientations (van Zanten et al. 2018), as well as to the fact that there is still a high degree of institutional stratification and significant differences in resources between social groups, democratisation has not widely increased the number of new competitors truly challenging upper-class groups' privileged access to high status HE. It has, however, increased the fear that this might be the case in the near future, thereby prompting the complex interplay of institutional, family, and market strategies analysed here.

## Related Research Data

[Achievement Inequality and the Institutional Structure of Educational Systems: A Comparative Perspective](#)(Source: Annual Reviews)

[Choisir son école](#)(Source: Presses Universitaires de France)

[Competition and Markets in Higher Education: A 'Glonacal' Analysis](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[Du baccalauréat à l'enseignement supérieur en France : déplacement et recomposition des inégalités](#)(Source: CAIRN)

[Education and State Formation](#)(Source: Palgrave Macmillan)

[Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems](#)(Source: JSTOR)

[Effectively Maintained Inequality: Education Transitions, Track Mobility, and Social Background Effects](#)(Source: University of Chicago Press)

[Elite education and the State in France: durable ties and new challenges](#)(Source: Informa)

[Elèves, parents d'élèves et agents scolaires dans le processus d'orientation](#)(Source: JSTOR)

[Engineering Access to Higher Education Through Higher Education Fairs](#)(Source: SensePublishers)

[Espace de l'enseignement supérieur et stratégies étudiantes](#)(Source: CAIRN)

[Higher-Education Policies and Welfare Regimes: International Comparative Perspectives](#)(Source: Springer Nature)

[How Do Fields Change? The Interrelations of Institutions, Networks, and Cognition in the Dynamics of Markets](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[How do welfare states change? Institutions and their impact on the politics of welfare state reform in Western Europe](#)(Source: Cambridge University Press - CUP)

[How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?](#)(Source: Wiley-Blackwell)

[Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony](#)(Source: University of Chicago Press)

[La France a-t-elle changé de régime d'éducation et de formation ?](#)(Source: PERSEE Program)

[Le déroulement de la scolarité au collège: le contexte " fait des différences "...](#)(Source: JSTOR)

[Maximally Maintained Inequality: Expansion, Reform, and Opportunity in Irish Education, 1921-75](#)(Source: JSTOR)

[Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market](#)(Source: University of Chicago Press)

[Quasi-Markets and Social Policy](#)(Source: Palgrave Macmillan)

[Regimes of youth transitions](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[Resilient Liberalism in Europe's Political Economy](#)(Source: Cambridge University Press)

[School Strategies and the "College-Linking" Process: Reconsidering the Effects of High Schools on College Enrollment](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies](#)(Source: Oxford University Press)

[Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[Students' university aspirations and attainment grouping in secondary schools](#)(Source: Springer Nature)

[The 'Southern Model' of Welfare in Social Europe](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[The Evolution of Class Inequality in Higher Education](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[The Frog Pond Revisited: High School Academic Context, Class Rank, and Elite College Admission](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[The Global Auction](#)(Source: Oxford University Press)

[The Globalisation of Positional Competition?](#)(Source: SAGE Publications)

[The Lost and the New 'Liberal World' of Welfare Capitalism: A Critical Assessment of Gøsta Esping-Andersen's The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism a Quarter Century Later](#)(Source: Cambridge University Press - CUP)

[The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries](#)(Source: University of Chicago Press)

[The Winner-Take-All High School: Organizational Adaptations to Educational Stratification](#)(Source: JSTOR)

[The normalizing role of rationalist assumptions in the institutional embedding of neoliberalism](#)(Source: Informa)

[The state: The bête noire of neo-liberalism or its greatest conquest?](#)(Source: Cambridge University Press)

Varieties of Liberalization and the New Politics of Social Solidarity(Source: Cambridge University Press)

[Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An essay](#)(Source: Informa)

[Welfare Regimes and Education Regimes: Equality of Opportunity and Expenditure in the EU \(and US\)](#)(Source: Cambridge University Press - CUP)

[What is neo-liberalism?](#)(Source: Oxford University Press - OUP)

[Widening Participation in France and Its Effects on the Field of Elite Higher Education and on Educational Policy](#)(Source: Springer)

[World Yearbook of Education 2015](#)(Source: Routledge)

[‘Hot’, ‘cold’ and ‘warm’ information and higher education decision-making](#)(Source: Informa UK Limited)

[‘I Heard It on the Grapevine’: ‘hot’ knowledge and school choice](#)(Source: Informa UK Limited)

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