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Is 'diversity' a liability or an asset in elite labour markets? The case of graduates who have benefited from a French positive discrimination scheme

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Abstract

This article analyses the obstacles faced by graduates who benefited from a positive discrimination scheme at an elite French higher education institution. It adopts a Bourdieusian perspective enriched by research on the barriers encountered by socially mobile individuals from disadvantaged and stigmatised categories and studies the experiences of graduates who lack the economic, cultural, and social capital necessary to compete with traditional holders of elite positions and who, due to their ascribed characteristics and/or the positive discrimination label itself, are prone to self-eliminate from elite positions or be subjected to discriminatory practices. Using data collected through interviews with 42 beneficiaries of this scheme still in the early stages of their professional careers, the article shows that the graduates' disadvantages and ways of coping with them, as well their chances of being stigmatised and reactions to this process, vary considerably. This variation can be explained by different family backgrounds and ethnoracial characteristics but also by axiological positions towards employability and social mobility, with 'purists' more likely to invest in increasing their technical cultural capital to make up for 'handicaps' and 'players' more likely to put forward 'soft skills' including, in some cases, those associated with their 'diversity'.

Keywords

Employability, non-traditional graduates, diversity, positive discrimination, categorical inequality

Since the significant expansion of higher education (HE) has not gone hand-in-hand with a proportionate increase in jobs recruiting high-skill candidates, graduates in many countries are now competing fiercely for top positions with high earnings and prestige (Brown et al. 2011). France is no exception. Although, in 2020, the majority of holders of a master's degree (91%) had found employment within 30 months of graduation – the highest percentage since 2009 – there are significant differences between them, depending not only on their field of study but also on the higher education institution (HEI) they attended. Within the very hierarchical French HE system, graduates from the prestigious *grandes écoles* are likely to get a permanent job sooner and to earn more than their university counterparts.¹ *Grandes écoles* graduates are advantaged on labour markets for various reasons. According to the establishments themselves, they obtain higher quality degrees thanks to smaller groups, better teaching conditions, and more internationalisation, but also because they benefit from more professionally oriented education, better internship opportunities, and special relationships with top firms.² The latter are much more likely to hire graduates from these HEIs because of the added prestige that 'leaks' between them and the *grandes écoles* through this process (Podolny 2005) but also because of higher levels of trust in these graduates' capacity to 'fit' into their organisations.

¹ Conférence des Grandes écoles, *L'Insertion des diplômés des Grandes écoles*, June 2021. Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche, *Note Flash du SIES* n°29, December 2021.

² *Grandes écoles* were initially designed by the state as 'special schools' training military and civil engineers to increase the state's capacity to rule and intervene in different aspects of social life. Management schools later

The way in which ‘trust’ and ‘fit’ are defined is particularly important when considering, as I shall in this article, whether non-traditional graduates from an elite HEI enjoy similar advantages in the job market as their traditional counterparts. If ‘trust’ and ‘fit’ refer mainly to the graduates’ technical skills, this is more likely to be the case. If, however, the kind of trust that predominates is fiduciary, that is emphasising shared values rather than just competence (Barber 1983), and if ‘fit’ is viewed by employers from a ‘homosocial’ perspective focused on recruiting individuals who are similar to those already there and with whom they will feel more comfortable socially, then there is substantial room for inequalities between graduates depending on their family backgrounds. Research in this area has mostly focused on the effects of social background (Rivera 2012). However, many studies have also shown the existence of ‘ethnic homophily’ and racial discrimination in hiring practices (Quillian et al. 2019) and a smaller number have demonstrated the intersectional effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on professional careers (Acker 2006; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Godechot et al., 2021), including in elite labour markets.

This last perspective appears particularly relevant given the dominant discourse in prestigious firms and HEIs concerning the value of ‘diversity’ (Blackmore and Rahimi 2019; Warikoo 2016). While this term is frequently used rhetorically, meaning that there is a considerable gap between what employers (and HE managers and academics) say and what they do (Pager and Quillian, 2005), its diffusion raises questions about the trajectories of

copied this model conceived as the polar opposite to that of universities, which are routinely criticised for being overly oriented towards scholarly pursuits despite increasing efforts to improve students’ preparation for the job market, for instance through professional bachelor’s degrees (Author and other 2015; Agulhon 2011).

disadvantaged individuals who have benefited from positive discrimination schemes or more informal practices intended to increase diversity in HE and/or the workplace. A recent sociological study has highlighted French firms' failure both to reach the specific groups they seek to target and to monitor the progress of their diversity management programmes (Safi 2017). This can be explained by the French state's weak stance on discrimination and by firms' limited commitment to these programmes in the absence of strong incentives or sanctions (Bereni 2009), but also by the fact that many workers do not identify with the struggle against origin-based discrimination and make a concerted effort to conceal their ethnoracial attributes. In this article, I focus rather on the experiences of graduates who have benefited from a positive discrimination scheme introduced by a prestigious French HEI, with a view to documenting the obstacles they face not only within HE (Allouch 2022; Pasquali 2014) but also beyond it. The scheme in question officially aimed to increase the institution's social and territorial 'diversity', but indirectly it also targeted disadvantaged ethnoracial groups (Sabbagh 2011).

Theoretical framework

One of the premises of this article is that recruiters for elite positions attach great importance to both 'fiduciary trust' and 'social and cultural fit' because future employees will enjoy a great degree of autonomy. This autonomy is granted on the grounds that the employees possess a high degree of technical expertise allowing them to take difficult decisions but is also based on the expectation that they will adhere to the organisation's aims and values (Bouffartigue 2001). The status of the HEI which applicants attended signals to employers not only their technical capacities but also their social skills and values (Collins 1971). However, considering the recent sociological literature on these topics it seems reasonable to assume that the 'social and cultural fit' of graduates from elite HEIs is implicitly dependent on two further expectations: first, that they come from similar socio-cultural backgrounds; second, that their experience in elite HEIs is also similar, in terms of the knowledge and skills they have learnt in

class but also of various kinds of ‘soft skills’, including networking, they have acquired, typically through participation in extracurricular activities (Rivera 2011; Holmqvist 2022).

Despite having graduated from an elite HEI, the young people discussed in this article – who come from disadvantaged, ‘diverse’ backgrounds and who were admitted through a positive discrimination scheme – generally do not fulfil these expectations although, as we shall see, their profiles and their experiences in HE differ considerably. They therefore constitute an interesting group through which to explore how the ‘class ceiling’ operates in elite jobs. This concept, used by Friedman and Laurison (2019) to encapsulate the different barriers faced by upwardly mobile individuals in elite occupations, is useful both because it focuses on processes of social closure at the top of the social hierarchy and because it combines elements from the literature on social mobility and on gender inequality. The term itself, however, is misleading given that the authors in fact adopt a multidimensional approach to social mobility, taking into consideration not only social class but also ethnicity, race, and gender. As this is also my approach here, I refer instead to the ‘intercategorical ceiling’ facing those who belong simultaneously to different categories subjected to inequality and discrimination (McCall 2005).

I take a Bourdieusian perspective by viewing social classes as groups of individuals sharing similar conditions of existence and corresponding sets of dispositions, that is values, worldviews, and practices acquired through socialisation. Following Bourdieu, I also consider that belonging to a class depends both on objective criteria and on being perceived by others as a member of that class (Swartz 1997). Finally, I adopt Bourdieu’s conception of inequalities between classes as broadly dependent on the volume and structure of three main types of capital: economic (wealth and income), cultural (credentials, knowledge, and skills but also embodied manners, tastes, and lifestyles) and social (valuable social relations). (Bourdieu 1984). I consider that non-traditional graduates are particularly disadvantaged in elite settings, which in

Bourdieu's terms constitute a specific 'field' – that is, a social arena structured by power relations (Bourdieu 2021) – and which require high volumes of all three capitals that they do not possess. These graduates are particularly lacking in wealth and valuable connections (Friedman and Laurison 2019) and they are also frequently suspected of not having truly internalized the cultural skills and dispositions expected of elite members and of simply simulating their possession.

The absence of some or all of these capitals is an objective source of inequality but, in elite fields, can also be a source of unjust or prejudicial treatment from those who possess them. However, discrimination is more likely to be faced by those belonging to categories deemed inferior because of their ascribed attributes (such as those considered in this study, i.e. gender, ethnicity, and race). These attributes cut across class boundaries and also generate within-class divisions. The existing literature leads me to hypothesise that, in the case of women and ethnoracial minorities, these attributes act as barriers constituting a more impenetrable 'intercategorical ceiling' (McCall 2005; Friedman and Laurison 2019). I focus here on perceived discrimination, that is how graduates interpret situations in which they consider that they were treated unfairly because of their lack of capitals or ascribed attributes (Lehman, 2014). Additionally, I also consider the role of the positive discrimination scheme itself and its potential negative 'labelling effect' (Becker 1963).

Finally, I consider how these graduates understand employability. I apply and extend the 'purist' and 'player' idealtypes identified by Brown and Hesketh (2004) by exploring the extent to which non-traditional graduates adopt these two perspectives, with the first focusing on merit, acquiring technical skills, and intrinsic motivation and rewards, and the second on adaptability to the market, soft skills, and extrinsic drivers, especially money and prestige. Several studies have pointed out that working-class students are less likely to adopt 'player-type' attitudes and behaviour because of a deeply ingrained belief in meritocracy and insecurity

about their own merit (Abrahams 2017) and also because a lack of capitals makes it more difficult for them to ‘play the (employability) game’ by accumulating extracurricular activities and internships (Bathmaker et al. 2013). In this article, I take into account three further elements which allow a different picture to emerge: first, the impact not only of class, but also of race, ethnicity, and gender; second, participation in a positive discrimination scheme that, especially in its early days, recruited students on the basis not only of their academic merit but also of their ‘potential’ and ‘diversity’ (Glinel and van Zanten 2022); third, enrolment in an elite HEI with a strong focus on employability and on developing a ‘player’ perspective.

Institutional context

This article is based on a case study conducted at the prestigious HEI Sciences Po, which occupies a very distinctive place in the French HE landscape because, among other reasons, its educational offering blends together the two models of graduate training in France: universities and *grandes écoles* (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015). On the one hand, like universities, it admits students after the *baccalauréat* (whereas *grandes écoles* admission takes place after two years of preparatory classes) and offers an undergraduate curriculum taught mainly by university lecturers. However, this curricular provision – which includes courses in five major social sciences (history, political science, law, economics, and sociology) – makes it closer to American liberal arts colleges than to French universities, in which students choose a specific field of study from the outset. On the other hand, the majority of Sciences Po’s 29 different master’s degrees in its seven graduate schools (the School of Public Affairs, the Paris School of International Affairs, the School of Management and Innovation, the Law School, the Urban School, the School of Journalism, and the School of Research) bear more resemblance to those offered by the *grandes écoles*, especially management schools. The courses focus on applied

knowledge, are taught by lecturers including a large number of practitioners, and prepare students for top managerial and professional positions outside academia.³

This article focuses on graduates who benefited from an ambitious positive discrimination scheme called *conventions éducation prioritaire* (hereafter referred to by its acronym, CEP) which was launched by Sciences Po in 2001 and which had involved 2,262 young people by 2020. The scheme (which operated from 2001-2020)⁴ represented a radical departure from the main admissions procedure at the time, which was based on a competitive written exam including several essays on traditional academic subjects. The new procedure involved a two-step selection process. First, students from disadvantaged *lycées* [upper secondary schools] selected as Sciences Po ‘partner schools’ (7 in 2001, 106 in 2020) were trained, in special workshops, to prepare and defend before a school selection panel a comprehensive written press report on a topical issue in the media. Those students deemed ‘admissible’ by the local panels went on to attend an interview with a Sciences Po admissions panel composed of one member of the administration, one member of the academic staff, and one manager or professional working in the public or private sector.

This procedure was intended to increase the proportion of disadvantaged and ‘diverse’ students admitted. However, its initial choices and progressive changes instead produced a quite heterogeneous group of CEP students in terms of social class, ethnicity, race, and place of

³ Until 2018 Sciences Po did not deliver undergraduate degrees, only Masters. Its curriculum comprises a common 3-year undergraduate programme (with the third year spent abroad) followed by a specialised 2-year graduate programme.

⁴ The CEP procedure underwent significant change when it was integrated into a revised general admissions system in 2021. Although CEP students are now evaluated according to the four criteria used for all students (1- *baccalauréat* marks; 2- marks in school reports and school career; 3- three pieces of written work: a personal statement, a presentation of extracurricular activities, and a short essay; 4- an interview), their applications are still examined and ranked separately.

origin. First, the scheme targeted *lycées généraux et technologiques* offering academic and technological *baccalauréat* tracks located in disadvantaged areas but that in fact enrolled a significant proportion of white middle-class and upper-class students both because lower-class groups and ethnoracial minorities tend to be segregated in neighbourhoods that juxtapose wealthier and more mixed areas (Oberti and Preteceille 2016) and because students from the latter groups tend to be diverted toward vocational *lycées* (Brinbaum 2019). Secondly, most *lycées* chose a policy of open enrolment in the CEP workshops, which encouraged self-elimination among students, while a minority only encouraged those with very good academic records to apply or only declared these students admissible. The latter tendency became widespread around 2012 when the Sciences Po' scheme underwent an 'academic turn' and admissions panels began giving greater weight to CEP candidates' school records and academic abilities, rather than to more contextual and wider definitions of merit and potential. This significantly reduced the proportion of lower-class and minority students within each incoming class (Glinel and van Zanten 2022; Oberti and Pavie 2020).

Precise data on CEP students are very scarce and come from institutional sources which are not completely reliable, not least because they aim to provide a positive image of their educational and professional careers. An internal study published in 2011⁵ highlighted that the percentage who repeated a year (generally the first) or had to re-take a course stabilised at around 11%-12% after the scheme's initial years and that a relatively small proportion dropped out each year (between 6% and 12%), despite difficulties in adapting to a massively white, upper-class student body (81% of upper-class students in 2011). This same study, as well as data published on Sciences Po's website in 2021 concerning all CEP graduates since 2006, also underlines that the latter are not penalised on the job market in comparison with traditional Sciences Po graduates, and even fare better, in terms of both how long they wait to get a job

⁵ V. Tiberj. 2011. *Sciences Po. Dix Ans Après les Conventions d'Education Prioritaire*.

and their field of work. Indeed, more CEP graduates are found in areas offering higher earnings (audit, consulting, banking, and finance) and fewer in fields offering lower ones such as NGOs and the voluntary sector. Other differences seem to be more qualitative: a higher proportion work in business and distribution, industry and transport, and technology, data, and informatics, with a much lower proportion in communication and international organisations. This positive picture is, however, partly misleading because it fails to take into consideration, on the one hand, the specific professional positions they occupy and the types of firms they work in, as well as their salaries and careers, and, on the other hand, the barriers they face and the coping strategies they develop.

Data and methods

The results and interpretations presented in this article are based on interviews with 42 young people who entered Sciences Po through the CEP procedure and have since graduated.⁶ Like other researchers who have conducted qualitative studies in similar settings (Binder et al. 2016), I decided not to mask the name of the institution due to its highly distinctive profile. Because of this choice but also because only a relatively small number of students have been recruited through the CEP scheme since its inception and some hold very specific professional positions, in the following analysis I provide my interviewees with pseudonyms reflecting their gender and ethnic origins and leave out some of their personal characteristics and certain features of their academic trajectories and professional careers.

Sciences Po does not maintain a CEP alumni database, so initial contact with most respondents was made via an e-mail sent on my behalf by the CEP office staff to students still in touch with them. This procedure introduced three types of bias. First, the vast majority of students who were reached this way and responded positively were recent graduates. This did not pose a problem, however, as I had decided to focus on young graduates' access to, and

⁶ The mean number of years after graduation among individuals in the sample was four and a half years.

experiences in, their first jobs. The second, more problematic, bias was that a large proportion of these graduates responded to this invitation because they felt grateful to the institution. Finally, many of them knew each other, partly because several of them had participated in, or were still active members of, an association called 'Ambition Campus' offering mentoring activities in CEP *lycées*. These last two forms of bias did not, however, prevent them from providing critical accounts of their educational and professional experiences.

The final sample comprised 22 women and 20 men. In addition to gender, I also paid attention to students' race and ethnicity by considering their first names and surnames as well as their parents' nationality. The final group was quite diverse with 18 graduates whose parents were both born in metropolitan France and 24 for whom one or both parents were born in another country (17 in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, and Lebanon; 4 in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa i.e. Senegal, Cameroun, and Mali; and 3 in Asian countries, i.e. China and Vietnam). Among these students, 4 were Black, 2 had Asian features, and 12 had more or less marked Arab features. Although I could not target respondents by social class, my interviewees were also very diverse in this respect: based on both their parents' occupations, 18 came from a lower-class background, 12 from a lower-middle-class one, and 12 could be considered

middle-class.⁷ Finally, there was also variation in terms of the types of graduate studies these young people had completed.⁸

I personally conducted interviews with 33 graduates, most of them at my office, but also in workplaces (3) or cafés (2). The remaining 9 were interviewed via videoconference by a master's student working under my supervision. All interviews lasted 1.5-2 hours and were recorded and transcribed. They were conducted using an interview guide focusing on: 1- educational trajectory and experiences prior to participation in the CEP workshops; 2- experience of these workshops; 3- views and feelings about the two-step admissions process; 4- academic and social experiences during the three stages of Sciences Po education (i.e. the two undergraduate years in France; the year abroad; the two master's years); 5- work experiences prior to graduation, whether associated with internships or not; 6- access to a first job and, if relevant, job mobility; 7- work experiences; 8- views on the CEP scheme and on positive discrimination policies. The interviews were first analysed by another master's student working under my supervision, in order to identify general trends. I then conducted a more detailed qualitative content analysis following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and

⁷ 'Lower-class' graduates come from families where both parents are manual workers or employees or where one parent belongs to these categories and the other is unemployed or doing unpaid work at home; 'lower-middle-class' graduates have parents who are self-employed or have intermediate professions or come from families where one parent is in this situation and the other is either unemployed or doing unpaid work, or belongs to the lower class; middle-class graduates have either both parents in managerial or professional occupations or one parent who is in this situation and the other unemployed, doing unpaid work or in a lower-middle-class or, much more exceptionally, lower-class occupation. Following the Ministry of Education classification, I also consider 'middle-class' those students who have one or two parents working as a teacher.

⁸ The most popular choices of master's specialties were Finance and Strategy (8 graduates), Urban and Territorial Strategies (5), Economic Law (3), Economics and Public Policy (3), Communication (3), and Public Affairs (3).

Strauss 1967) to identify key concepts and categories emerging from the data and to construct relevant interpretations through dialogue with relevant research concepts and categories.

Degrees of disadvantage and compensatory strategies

A significant proportion of the CEP graduates clearly suffered, both during HE and in access to employment, from lower levels of economic, cultural, and social capital than non-CEP graduates, albeit to varying degrees. This generated specific attitudes and prompted particular actions. One of the most widespread feelings was a sense of urgency in finding a job, which was even stronger among those who did not have a scholarship and had to take out student loans to pay for tuition and living expenses. A lack of economic capital also prompted many of them to work during their undergraduate years and to accumulate internships, both to have a small salary and to acquire work experience, including during their compulsory third year abroad. While this is now recommended to all students in certain master's degrees, it is also worth noting that 23 out of the 42 took a gap year, generally between the first and second year of graduate study, to do two six-month internships in addition to the compulsory one required by most professional master's programmes during the final semester.

This focus on accumulating work experience pays off insofar as CEP graduates find jobs sooner than other Sciences Po graduates: the afore-mentioned 2011 study showed that a higher proportion of them were employed six months after graduation (63% vs. 56% of Sciences Po graduates of the class of 2009) and a concomitant smaller number were job seeking (4% vs. 8%), while similar proportions were still studying (27%) and a lower proportion were doing an internship (6% vs. 9%). However, the effectiveness of these choices in getting not only a job but also one that corresponds to their expectations is limited by cultural factors. Due to a lack of information and guidance when facing Sciences Po's wide offering of master's programmes several of them, like Fatma, from a lower-class immigrant background, mentioned having made a choice almost randomly: 'there are lots of choices which are very different and being isolated

and lots of other things meant that I told myself that I had to make a pragmatic choice, and so I chose to do Economic law. It was a huge mistake, a huge mistake because I wasn't interested in it at all.' Driven by their need for money and job security, many also accepted job offers received during their internships or obtained by applying to the firms where they had done these, which raises the question of how CEP graduates find their internships. Most relied on offers on the Sciences Po careers service website or the Internet more generally. Their dependency on these 'cold' (Ball and Vincent 1998) sources of information and their lack of cultural knowledge about the hierarchy of firms and what jobs entail led some of them to apply to small firms paying less and offering fewer promotion possibilities and/or to companies and jobs not directly related to their field of expertise.

Moreover, doing the 'right' internships was not enough when social capital was lacking. Ahmed, for instance, from a lower-class immigrant background, did an internship in a big firm and another in a small consulting agency during his gap year. After graduation, he nevertheless found himself, together with other CEP classmates, at a loss regarding how to get a job: 'We were all having a hard time. So, in September, when there was the Business Fair at Sciences Po, there were lots of CEP there. We were all there, well pretty much all there, all the CEP from Finance and Strat, because we didn't know what to do. And really, then, during that period, well, it wasn't unemployment, but... I didn't have a salary. I said to myself: "I've really got to find something quickly". And I didn't really have many ideas, err, about what to do, I didn't really know which direction to take.' Ahmed is typical of those CEP students who lack the appropriate social networks not only owing to his lower-class background but also because, while at Sciences Po, he focused on his studies and favoured strong links with CEP classmates due to interactive processes of exclusion and self-exclusion. These processes were reinforced among those who, as undergraduates, lived together in a university hall of residence and who, furthermore, met regularly with other CEP students at the same table at the Sciences Po

cafeteria, known as ‘the black table’, due to the significant presence of students from ethnicised and racialised groups.

The CEP graduates’ limited contact with other Sciences Po students after class was also the result of not having enough money to go to the same cafés or parties, or to join them on weekends away and holidays. This dynamic was reinforced by the tendency among many CEP graduates to avoid involvement in student union extracurricular activities except those closely related to their ethno-racial background or involving mentorship in CEP *lycées*. This self-segregation, together with strong inter-CEP solidarity, helped many graduates cope with what appeared to them as very demanding academic requirements, due to gaps in their ‘technical’ culture and to poor organisational skills, exacerbated by difficulties in adapting to a new, and for some threatening, environment (Reay et al. 2009). It did, however, also prevent them from acquiring some of their Sciences Po classmates’ embodied cultural capital, both in terms of familiarity with legitimate cultural activities, and expected upper-class manners in private and public settings (Bourdieu 1986), and in terms of the ‘soft skills’ associated with organising different types of activities, or finding external funding for them (Stuber 2009).

CEP graduates tried to compensate for their shortcomings in different ways according to the capitals they already possessed but also to their axiological orientations. Some had strong ‘purist’ leanings instilled either by lower or lower-middle-class parents who had strongly emphasised schoolwork as the only route for social mobility and integration, or by parents belonging to the cultural fractions of the middle class, especially teachers (Lozach 2018). Among them, those who maintained this stance despite the general atmosphere at Sciences Po rewarding ‘players’ both inside and outside the classroom (especially in graduate courses) were highly invested in improving their technical skills. For instance, they not only used the third year abroad, like most CEP graduates, to try to improve their English but also attempted to acquire other skills. Moreover, a significant proportion of them (8 out of the 42 interviewees)

felt the need to complete their Sciences Po education with another master's degree from a different HEI. This is partly the result of Sciences Po graduates in general being perceived in several professional fields as lacking the 'hard' science skills of graduates from the most prestigious scientific *grandes écoles* or the business skills of graduates from the management *grandes écoles*. The desire to increase their technical capital was, however, more pronounced among 'purists' who felt insecure about applying what they saw as 'abstract' knowledge to different fields: 'I had the impression that I'd done a master's that was very theoretical and I didn't have... actually, I didn't see what I could offer on the job market' (Nesrine, lower-class immigrant background).

A significant proportion of CEP graduates who initially had 'purist' profiles, however, learnt to become 'players' at Sciences Po. Others already held some 'player' attitudes beforehand due to socialisation in families that took an instrumental view of knowledge and degrees or because they were encouraged to develop these attitudes in CEP workshops at *lycées* where teachers were aware of the value attached to 'personality' by external members of Sciences Po admission panels (Fernández-Vavrik et al. 2018; Glinel and van Zanten 2022). Leïla, for instance, who comes from a lower-class immigrant background and holds a Master's in Urban and Territorial Strategies, was offered a permanent position as a 'relationship manager' in a well-known audit and consulting firm during her internship abroad. This was certainly due to her Sciences Po degree, which she refers to as 'a crown on [her] head', but also because she was able to market her very varied prior work experience as showing her familiarity with diverse social environments, rather than because of her mastery of the required technical capital – an area in which, in her own words in English, 'she faked it until she made it'. Another interesting case was that of Robin, from a French lower-middle-class family that nevertheless encouraged him during his childhood to engage in many extracurricular activities. At Sciences Po, Robin spent a lot of time participating in Paris' myriad cultural activities proposed at very

low prices by the Bureau des Arts, a student association of which he was an active member and where it was easy for him to mix with non-CEP students with similar cultural interests. The embodied cultural capital and social capital he acquired through these activities proved very valuable in obtaining employment at one of the top consulting firms where he was working as a junior consultant at the time of the interview.

Self-elimination, reactions to stigmatisation, and positive discrimination

CEP graduates also suffer from different forms of ‘soft’ discrimination that have an impact on their professional careers. One form concerns their own self-elimination from master’s programmes and careers because they feel they lack the required qualities and/or because they see them as threatening environments. Several interviewees mentioned that they had initially planned to do master’s and post-master’s courses which, provided they were successful in the *concours* [competitive entrance examination], would have taken them to France’s École Nationale d’Administration and thus to careers in the highest echelons of government and public administration, but stated that they had then given up on this idea: partly because the post-master’s preparatory courses were costly and implied deferring their access to employment, but also because these channels seem reserved for students who combine strong technical skills with embodied cultural capital, as stated by Alia, from a lower-middle-class immigrant family: ‘for the *concours*, you tell yourself that you’re going to find yourself up against people who are really brilliant’. She and other graduates, especially lower-class, ethnicised, and racialised CEP graduates and women, remarked that these ‘brilliant’ students also happened to be upper-class white males. This offers a further explanation for CEP graduates’ relative avoidance of careers as civil servants.

It also clearly appeared from the interviews that several CEP graduates, especially women, were earning less than their traditional Sciences Po classmates. Even though attending an elite HEI and holding a Sciences Po degree tends to boost all CEP graduates’ ambition and

assertiveness (Binder et al. 2016), CEP women graduates often feel threatened by the ‘white male upper-class’ environments in many high-skill occupations and so opt for smaller firms and lower-paid jobs in a bid to avoid them. Zhang, a ‘purist’ from a lower-class immigrant family, who graduated with a Master’s in Urban and Territorial Strategies and currently works as a consultant in a small firm, seemed resigned to this situation: ‘*And in terms of salary, are you happy with it, is it what you hoped for?* Yes, yes, I’m happy with it, yes. I mean, I have friends who are in other master’s or who did the same master’s as me but at a different institution who tell me that I’m less well paid than the average [...]. I’m often told that you come to this company not for the salary but, actually, to learn [laughs]. So that’s what I tell myself. And I am learning lots of stuff, so that’s the main thing’. Other female CEP graduates appeared less contented with their salaries and opportunities for promotion but stated that, in their future, not-so ambitious job plans, they were considering their desire to have children in the short term.

The most common risk encountered by all CEP graduates, but which was far more pronounced for those who were ethnicised or racialised, was that of being stigmatised because of their CEP identity. Many of them described an initial ‘degradation ceremony’ (Garfinkel 1956),⁹ at Sciences Po involving one or several fellow students forcing them to disclose their supposedly lower status associated with their admission via the CEP procedure. Several also mentioned lecturers who publicly forced them to state their CEP status. However, white graduates were clearly more able to play with the uncertainty surrounding their identity during their studies. Ludivine, for instance, from a white lower-class background, underlined that at Sciences Po: ‘For some, it was obvious that they were CEP, like, there was no question. You’re

⁹ Garfinkel (1956) defined ‘degradation ceremonies’ as ‘any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types’ (420).

black, you're Arab, you're CEP [...]. I, on the other hand, played on it, it amused me a lot'. Others, such as Youssra, from a lower-middle-class immigrant background, tried to hide their CEP identity as much as possible despite their Arabic-sounding first names and surnames: 'I always made it a point of honour to make sure no one could imagine I'd got into Sciences Po via the *conventions*, because I was worried, precisely, about people's negative bias'. At work, most of them aimed at passing as non-CEP Sciences Po graduates which, again, was easier for white graduates although they too had to be careful about ways of talking and dressing or references to their background that might disclose their identity, such as in the following incident narrated again by Ludivine: 'Once, in that first agency [...], one anecdote put my back up a bit. One of the managers [...], I'd come out with a sentence that was a bit, with *banlieue* phrasing, like, and he looked at me and he said "did you do Sciences Po CEP or what?" So then I looked at him and said: "Yeah, and so what?" [laughs] And then he didn't know where to put himself'.

Few graduates mentioned that they had encountered direct forms of stigmatisation during their studies and at work but those who did were all black, underlining the fact that they constitute a specific minority in France today (Ndiaye 2008). Fatou, for instance, from an immigrant lower-middle-class background, mentioned both receiving an anonymous phone call telling her 'we don't want blacks at Sciences Po' and an incident in class: '[the teacher] was explaining the organic law of public finance and he said: "Yes, there are certain African countries that wanted to copy this, but I mean... basically there's no point wanting to copy our models exactly because it's specific to each context..." And then he stopped and basically said to me "don't be offended". And then I looked at him and I said to myself "he's got to be kidding, right?" and I didn't know what to say.' The interviewee who was most critical of his experiences was Sylvain, a graduate in Economics and Public Policy from a lower-class immigrant family, who sat a competitive *concours* and now works in a Ministry. Being a 'purist', he feels

extremely disappointed as he obtained very good marks in the *concours* and had deliberately decided to sit this competitive exam after a negative experience in the private sector, believing that he would then be protected by the anonymity of meritocratic selection: ‘I said to myself: “But actually, the only way for me to succeed, actually, is by doing the *concours*.” That’s to say, being anonymous and demonstrating anonymously that I can do just as well as the others, because otherwise I was going to be essentialised [...] for being CEP. Because, for example, in the internship I was talking about, the person who’d given me a chance with that internship there, err, had said to me that I’d been recruited “to give you your chance”, not [...] for my skills. So that says it all [...]. So seeing as that’s how it is [...], I told myself that the only way for me to succeed, to have any real legitimacy, was the *concours*. But even though I passed the *concours*, my legitimacy’s still in question, actually, always called into question by society, always called into question by my colleagues, always called into question by my fellow students.’

A more widespread experience is that of ‘tokenism’. Some male CEP graduates holding ‘purist’ values, such as Tom, a white student from a lower-class background, stated that their CEP status had a positive effect on their being perceived as motivated and determined, while others, such as Idris, who comes from an immigrant lower-class family, highlighted that it helped him be viewed as an ‘embodiment of Republican meritocracy’. Other male graduates who acted more as ‘players’ tended to use their CEP status strategically in contexts where it could be beneficial to them. Cédric, for instance, a white student from a lower-middle-class background, told me during the interview that he mentioned his CEP status in the form he had to fill out before taking the competitive *concours* for becoming a judge because he knew that ‘the magistrature school is taking the approach of diversified profiles and equal opportunities, and it also has its own admissions pathway, it has an equal opportunities preparatory course, so I knew that in an oral exam, this would be a topic that we could take up.’ In general, however,

tokenism more frequently concerned female ethnicised and racialised CEP graduates, as private firms and public administrations viewed recruiting them as a way of simultaneously increasing the gender and ethnoracial ‘diversity’ of their employees. ‘Purist’ CEP graduates acknowledged that this could be beneficial for accessing certain positions in the short term but were afraid that, in the long term, it might undermine faith in their technical capacities:

Q: Do you think that it was the Sciences Po diploma that played a big role in you being hired?

A: Well, actually, yes, I think so, because the two partners at the time were Science Po alumni. Another collaborator had also been to Sciences Po [laughs]. So actually it’s, I do think it played a role. And then I think that what also played a role, because I understood it a bit later, is actually the fact I’m a woman, from a minority [smiles].

Q: Because it’s a very male-dominated team?

A: Err, there was one girl at the time, so there were two of us, and then there were four men, four or five men. But it’s true, also, that, err, all the profiles in public law, in particular, are relatively... similar [laughs]. You’ve got lots of white men, you know, sometimes the son of someone famous. And, actually, I get the impression that it’s partly that that they liked, aside from, well I hope, the fact that I did have good legal knowledge [smiles]. (Nehla, lower-class immigrant background)

Ethnicised and racialised women, especially when they are young and attractive (Amadiou 2005), are viewed as bringing ‘exoticism’ to different fields without appearing threatening. The latter aspect is related to the fact that they tend to accept lower positions and salaries, but also that they appear more capable of ‘adapting’ to different milieus. This perception was also that of some female CEP graduates who took a ‘player’ perspective. Leïla,

who, as mentioned before, was able effectively to ‘market’ her social background and work experiences, also spontaneously mentioned in the interview her capacity to adopt elite manners: ‘But I do have a strong capacity to adapt. So I’m very good at knowing how to act. So I know, I have the right manners, I’m very good at knowing how to express myself, how to behave... So I’ve never had a problem, no [...]. In my neighbourhood, and at my *lycée*, people had already noted that I had a rich vocabulary, and was good at speaking in public. So I was really good, from that perspective. I was elegant. Apart from my skin colour which could set me apart.’ Samia, from a lower-middle-class immigrant background, who works in a law firm has turned this chameleon approach (Abrahams and Ingram 2013) into a life philosophy for upwardly mobile graduates: ‘It’s perhaps harsh to say this, but it’s up to you to be a chameleon [...] You could say it’s a shame, right, but today, it’s a real quality, being able to adapt. To adapt to your audience, to adapt to the context in which you find yourself, to adapt your language, to adapt your gestures, your clothing. And that’s a perspective that can perhaps be given to those pupils [CEP candidates]. Even if afterwards, you can still tell them to keep their identities’.

Conclusion

The interpretations proposed here should not be taken to mean that the CEP procedure has been a failure, hindering rather than helping its beneficiaries. Similarly to the policy of open enrolment at the City University of New York (Attewell and Lavin 2007), Sciences Po’s new admission scheme has brought important benefits to the majority of CEP graduates who otherwise would have pursued less ambitious HE studies, taken much more time to get a degree, or even dropped out (Truong 2017), and ultimately obtained less well-paid and prestigious jobs. Moreover, as pointed out previously, the vast majority of those interviewed considered it a great opportunity to have been selected through the scheme and were satisfied with their present employment and future job prospects. It is, however, also important to underline the barriers faced by these graduates because they lack the capitals implicitly required for moving into the

field of elite jobs, especially economic capital, embodied cultural capital, and social capital, but also because of discrimination processes, including ‘tokenism’ which is the most common ‘diversity management’ strategy in the French context (Doytcheva 2010).

Despite the small sample of non-traditional graduates studied in this article, there was nevertheless significant variation in their job situations due to differences in their ascribed attributes but also to contrasting values and choices. CEP graduates who adopted a ‘purist’ perspective were acutely aware of being academically weaker than traditional students during their undergraduate years, which led them to invest in acquiring additional skills through further study and work experience. Valuing personal development, many of them, especially the women, were more likely to avoid work environments in which risk-taking, competitive spirit, and adherence to corporate values are rewarded with high salaries. The purists’ investments and values were much more likely to pay off in professional subfields such as law, industry, or technology that reward specialist knowledge and skills (Tholen 2020), which explains why CEP graduates are more likely to choose these areas than traditional graduates. Even in these subfields, however, they run the risk of being perceived by employers as not trustworthy and unfit to do certain jobs, and, even more, to progress to senior positions because of a lack of embodied cultural capital and more limited social networks. These perceived shortcomings are a result of their social background but also of their moderate investment in extra-curricular activities and their reduced contacts with fellow non-CEP classmates and with graduates from other elite HEIs who hold key positions in firms and administrations. Due to their reluctance to promote themselves, purists, especially women and ethnoracial minority graduates, were also more likely to self-eliminate from promotion opportunities or resign themselves to receiving lower pay.

CEP graduates who adopted a ‘player’ disposition, on the other hand, were more likely to seize the various opportunities offered by Sciences Po to develop some of the embodied

cultural capital of elite students and build networks with them, and then to use these new capitals, sometimes explicitly combined with their ‘diversity’ attributes, to access well-paid, prestigious jobs especially in fields such as consulting and communication. While some of them seemed quite self-assured, others, especially minority and women graduates, presented a form of ‘impostor syndrome’ fearing that, despite their prestigious degree, employers would see through them and declare them either unfit for the job due to their limited mastery of key hard skills or mistrust their ‘soft skills’ by associating them with categorical stereotypes, for instance the alleged tendency of immigrants from the Maghreb or African countries to be ‘sweet talkers’. They also felt devalued by tokenism, particularly the women, even though they had sometimes played the ‘diversity card’ when applying for jobs. Moreover, even though CEP players were more at ease than purists in putting themselves forward in the workplace, many referred to future difficulties in competing for senior positions with colleagues from very affluent and highly educated Parisian families. They also anticipated struggling to be fully accepted by the latter should they be promoted, which raises the question of the extent to which they will be able to progress in these professions in the longer run.

The results presented here are exploratory and must be confirmed by further research allowing a better grasp of both the positive and negative effects of positive discrimination on non-traditional graduates’ job prospects, taking into account employers’ points of view and strategies and adopting a longitudinal perspective on careers. Despite these limitations, the results do make it clear that providing ‘compensatory sponsorship’ (Grotsky 2007) in HE through positive discrimination schemes does not suffice for non-traditional graduates to enjoy equivalent professional careers to traditional graduates. Despite the very significant advantage of possessing a degree from an elite HEI, non-traditional graduates continue to lack the capitals necessary for them to obtain certain jobs and especially to be promoted to the most desirable positions, with this gap reinforced by upper-class families’ unfaltering sponsorship of their

children's educational, but also professional careers (Friedman and Laurison 2021; van Zanten 2015). Additionally, non-traditional graduates, especially those who are not only lower-class but also belong to other categories subjected to inequality and discrimination (McCall 2005), face a variety of organisational social closure mechanisms (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019) which reduce their objective chances of entering and progressing in elite labour markets and diminish their subjective feelings of self-worth and personal fulfilment.

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