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29

The sociology of elite education

Agnès van Zanten

Research on elites (that is, on status groups that occupy dominant positions) is characterized by the lack of connection between studies that focus on elite recruitment and those that focus on the exercise of power by elites. As underlined by Giddens (1974), both types of approach are important and should complement each other in the analysis of mediations between the class structure, the organizational structure and the power structure in a given society. Giddens also insists on the need for recruitment studies to take account of two different dimensions: the types of channel that are privileged by elite groups to reproduce their social position, and the degree of social closure or openness of these channels to other groups (Parkin, 1974). This distinction is used to organize the present chapter, which focuses on a single channel that has come to play a crucial role in post-industrial societies, that is schools and, more precisely, upper-secondary and higher education institutions, and on their influence in three different national contexts: France, the United Kingdom and the United States. In the first section, the specific features of elite education are examined. The second section explores the extent and modes of institutional and social closure.

Socialization patterns in elite educational institutions

Elite schools as total institutions

Studies of elite education have underscored the common features of elite educational institutions that distinguish them from other institutions that look after young people from the same age cohorts. The interlocking character of these features allows elite institutions to be described as 'total institutions' that provide, through both formal and 'hidden' curricula, a strong secondary socialization model for students that will decisively influence their public and private adult life (Faguer, 1991). Two of the most visible ones are physical closure and small size, which contribute to distinctiveness as well as inclusiveness (Wakeford 1969). These two elements were important characteristics of boarding schools and of the most exclusive colleges in the UK and the US, until at least World War II. Because of the location of the French *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* in Paris and other big cities, physical closure was less marked, although most students,

AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN

especially those coming from distant towns and rural areas, were boarders. In the *grandes écoles* themselves, boarding was the rule.¹ By relocating outside Paris in recent decades, moreover, some of them, such as the *Ecole Polytechnique* or the *Ecole of Hautes Etudes Commerciales* (HEC), have recreated to a certain extent the ‘campus’ atmosphere of their English and American counterparts, though on a much smaller scale. Internal cohesion has also been fostered and maintained over time in elite institutions by sophisticated rites marking entrance and departure, as well as important moments of the educational experience, by procedures concerning the allocation of boarding rooms and of various material tasks and by learning and social activities meant to develop a strong ‘bonding’ relationship among members and especially between ‘established’ students and new entrants, as well as between institutions and their alumni. These organizational forms have been strongly influenced by army and religious traditions and are frequently referred to through idiosyncratic terms that serve as social markers of membership.

Studies have also focused on the distinctive and exclusive character of the social culture prevailing in these institutions, notably on the prominent place occupied by sports and various games, some of which are practised only in elite boarding schools, and on the crucial socialization role played by fraternities, sororities, clubs and associations (Abraham, 2007; Cookson and Persell, 1985a). Elite institutions were also long characterized by a specific academic curriculum (Bernstein, 1977). This curriculum was distinctive in point of its content (with a key role attributed to Latin and the humanities and, in France, to mathematics), its pedagogy, which privileged individual modes of instruction (taking the form of ‘tutorials’ in British elite colleges or ‘*colles*’ in French *classes préparatoires*, i.e. individual work sessions and evaluations by older students and professors), and its evaluation modes (the creation of specific college entrance examinations in England and the US and of *concours* for access to the *grandes écoles* in France). Academic distinctiveness has also been reinforced by the gender, educational and social profile of professors in these institutions – in particular, those of public school masters and Oxbridge ‘dons’ in England (Walford, 1984).

Educating the upper class

These dimensions of elite education are the outcome of explicit and implicit choices made by teachers and administrators and show the relative autonomy that these educational institutions enjoy by virtue of their symbolic, cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1996). However, the ability of elite institutions to form their students is constrained by the expectations of dominant groups (Kamens, 1974). They work according to a social ‘charter’, that is a licence and mandate to produce specific educational subjects (Meyer, 1970), differing from those of institutions that cater to non-elite groups. This charter is subject to variations depending on the interests, values and ideas of the upper-class fractions that occupy or aspire to elite positions at a given time in each national context.

Although the expressive and moral dimensions mentioned above have been central elements of elite educational institutions in the three countries considered here, emphasis on sports and social life has been much more important in England than in France, owing to the prevalence of an educational model reflecting the aristocratic values and gentlemanly lifestyles of the nineteenth-century ‘leisure class’. Elite schools were a key element in the dissemination of this model among other elite and middle-class groups during the first half of the twentieth century (Anderson, 2007). This model was also ‘borrowed’ by America’s old money families when they sought to consolidate themselves and to build, through education in private preparatory schools and elite colleges, a ‘class wall’ separating old privileges from upstarts (Soares, 1999). On the

other hand, the academic culture of elite educational institutions has been more distinctive in England and France than in the US, reflecting a historically constructed, 'high-brow', aristocratic and bourgeois culture (Cookson and Persell, 1985b), but it places a greater emphasis on the mastery of intellectual knowledge and skills in France than in England.

The charters of elite educational institutions in each country are nevertheless subject to changing external pressures resulting from status group struggles (Karabel, 1984). Historical analysis of the most prestigious American colleges (Yale, Princeton, Harvard) shows the transition from an emphasis on the non-academic side of campus life, which helped students master the subtleties of the dominant status culture and accumulate contacts crucial for success in large organizations and the political field in the early decades of the twentieth century, to a more academically oriented curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s. These changes reflect the difficulty of providing a common social model for a larger and increasingly heterogeneous upper class, with diverging interests, values and ideas, and show the growing influence of its most culturally endowed fractions. The influence of these fractions on the academic culture and social atmosphere of elite secondary schools and higher education institutions was also visible at the same period in England, although it was exerted indirectly, through the mediating action of the state. In France, the emphasis on academic culture was more precocious and more radical, as the French Revolution replaced the aristocratic ideal of the '*honnête homme*' with a bourgeois model emphasizing scholastic merit.

Preparing for political and economic power positions

It thus appears that, although upper-class groups have always tried to frame the charter of elite institutions, this charter is also subject to variations according to more general economic, social and political factors that might lead interest and political groups acting on behalf of elites, but also reflecting contradictions and struggles among established and new status groups, to encourage elite institutions to act as 'guardians' of national cultural models and stratification patterns, or as agents of innovation and diffusion of new cultural or social ideals. The role of the state as political mediator between conflicting status groups' interests is particularly visible in France, because it was the state that created or restructured the most prestigious *grandes écoles* after the French Revolution. Designed to serve state needs (those of the army and various technical corps and later on of public administrations), the *grandes écoles*' mandate has been to produce individuals endowed with strong scientific competence and capable of synthesizing large quantities of information, but also interested in practical matters and able to take decisions (Thoenig, 1973). In Alvin Gouldner's (1979) terms, these schools were expected to train the 'technical intelligentsia' more than the 'humanistic intellectuals'. Their culture was from the onset strongly distinct from the non-utilitarian university culture traditionally oriented towards teaching, scholarship and research, although some institutions, especially the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, were clearly oriented towards the intellectual fractions of the upper class, whereas others, such as *l'Ecole Polytechnique*, have been characterized throughout their history by tensions between the divergent perspectives of scientists and engineers (Bourdieu, 1996; Belhoste *et al.*, 1994).

Strong state dependency has also influenced the non-academic activities and rites of these institutions, which were designed to instill respect for state hierarchies and loyalty to state institutions, at the same time that it has encouraged the development of 'organic links' between the *grandes écoles* and the state corps through recruitment processes directly linking valued positions in the most prestigious corps to class rank at graduation. However, since the 1970s,

AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN

private firms and economic status groups have in various ways exerted a growing and more direct pressure on French elite institutions. The oldest is the practice known as *'pantouflage'* – that is, the departure of civil servants trained in the traditional state *grandes écoles* for work in the private sector (Suleiman, 1978). This movement coincided with the creation and growth in the 1970s of privately funded *grandes écoles* with a strong market orientation. In the 1990s, the state-funded *grandes écoles* began to follow suit, offering a larger number of courses and activities meant to prepare students for direct access to jobs in private sector management and finance (Lazuech, 1999). At the same time, in what can be seen as a kind of compensation for decreasing material and symbolic returns of state investments in these special schools, many of them have in the last ten years re-emphasized their social and political responsibility, especially by taking a prominent role on debates and policies concerning widening participation in higher education (van Zanten, 2008).

In England, public schools, as well as Oxford and, to a lesser extent, Cambridge, have traditionally maintained what have been called 'incestuous links of privilege and power' with the British establishment (Scott, 1990) and direct connections to the state and the professions. In the US, 'prep' schools and elite private universities were also directly linked to economic and political elite groups through their recruitment, funding and access to elite positions. The general expectations from these groups and the organizations that they control have led to a strong focus on leadership, 'character' and self-discipline (Cookson and Persell, 1985a). Nevertheless, after World War II, elite institutions in England became strongly dependent on the state for funding. Although the initial effect of state funds was to redirect education away from action and business and towards research, in the 1980s, the state began to put pressure on universities to become key elements in the global knowledge economy, orienting research towards industrial needs, especially high technology, and students' career choices towards high-paying jobs in the private sector (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This latter tendency is particularly evident in elite American universities, which are extremely dependent on private endowments for their growth, which in turn determines their capacity to occupy the top places in international rankings of leading research institutions and to play an important role in global economic networks.

Social and institutional closure

The conditions of admission

Elite institutions have always enjoyed a large autonomy in setting their own conditions for admission (Douglass, 2007). However, although the admission criteria that they have devised reflect, above all, internal compromises between administrators and teachers and responses to competitive external pressures from similar organizations, they are also conditioned by changes in the distribution of power among status groups in the broader society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Karabel, 2005; Karen, 1990). In France, the state's early creation of a system of highly competitive examinations, ranking students according to a one-dimensional scale of merit for access to elite 'special schools', gave professors a high degree of latitude in the choice of future members of the elite vis-à-vis families and social or economic constituencies, while simultaneously endowing elites with a strong belief in their individual and social legitimacy as members of a 'state nobility' (Bourdieu 1996; Young, 1994). At the same time, the present extremely 'balkanized' system of competitive examinations for entrance to the *grandes écoles* is

less the reflection of academic interests than a legacy of the powerful influence of the state corps that framed and have strongly controlled their functioning.

In the UK and in the US, the transition from 'ascriptive' criteria to an educational meritocracy was slower, and the notion of educational merit has been subjected to more diverse interpretations than in France. Entry at Oxford and Cambridge was, until World War II, based on a system of examinations in which merit was equated with the mastery of a traditional curriculum, though school and family connections also played an important role. The Oxbridge system of recruitment was formally realigned to that of other universities in the 1960s, following the increase in government funding and involvement. Nevertheless, recent investigation reveals the persistence of distinctive features. As in other universities, the results obtained by students in subject-specific, nationally standardized tests, that is GCSE grades (three A*, the highest grade, in the disciplines considered as the most relevant for the desired university subject are expected), and teachers' predictions of A level exam results (in 1983, 82.4 per cent of the Oxford entering class had top A level scores, the proportion has now reached almost 100 per cent) are the crucial elements in the first phase of admission. However, during the second phase, the various colleges take other elements into account. These are both meritocratic (results in specific language tests or qualities exhibited in the best two school essays and, more recently, as in the US, results on Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs)) and non-meritocratic, such as family and school background, which is assessed in closer examination of admission forms and interviews with tutors.²

Until the 1960s, students in the US mainly gained admission to four-year colleges by graduating with good grades from high school. However, elite private institutions, imitating Oxford and Cambridge, developed their own entry examinations in order to limit student numbers and increase their legitimacy. The SAT, introduced in the 1930s, progressively became an important component of the admission process, reinforcing the cognitive dimension of merit. However, when this system started to give a clear advantage to brilliant Jewish students, elite institutions and dominant groups once again reinforced the weight assigned to extra-academic criteria such as 'character' (determined on the basis of high school teacher recommendations), participation in extracurricular activities, autobiographical essays and interviews that could be used to legitimately exclude 'inassimilable' non-WASP students. Nevertheless, by the late 1950s, in an atmosphere of intense concern about 'talent loss', 'character' began to lose ground to the intellectually gifted applicant defined according to SAT scores, Grade Point Average (GPA) and class rank, as well as excellence in one or more extracurricular endeavours. A new turn was once again taken in the 1960s with the introduction of a new criterion: 'diversity'. Since its relationship to academic merit was not to be systematically defined, its adoption proved nevertheless highly controversial (Karabel, 2005; Soares, 2007).

Institutional routes

Institutional routes played an important role in the creation and consolidation of elite educational systems. The 'bonding' relationship between a small number of elite colleges and secondary schools was based on the 'chartering' process described above, that is on the monopolization of a mode of training and socialization required for admission to elite institutions of higher education, but also, especially in the US and the UK, on a 'bartering' process – that is, negotiations between school and college personnel concerning selection and admission (Persell and Cookson, 1985). However, this 'institutional sponsorship' was officially abandoned as the result of the expansion and of the increasing formal meritocratic dimension of educational systems (Turner, 1960). The most radical departure from this 'institutional sponsorship' has taken place

AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN

in the US, where elite colleges have developed admission policies that severely hamper the effectiveness of 'bridging strategies' from secondary school feeders, except for a limited number of prep schools that still hold a special status because of their historical relationships with Harvard, Princeton or Yale (Le Tendre *et al.*, 2006). The importance attached to academic merit – and, in particular, class rank – has simultaneously allowed elite colleges to recruit excellent undergraduate students nationwide and led 'star schools' (schools that are particularly successful in getting students admitted to elite universities) to maximize the chances of their best students at the expense of those who have excellent test scores and high GPA earned in rigorous courses, but are not at the top of their class (Attewell, 2001). Despite this relative disadvantage, students in these schools – many, but not all, private – still benefit not only from a stronger focus on academic achievement by teachers and parents than students in other schools, but also from specific Honours and Advanced Placement courses that act as a 'signal' for college admissions staff (Falsey and Heyns, 1984) and from their 'brokering' strategies, that is from strong financial investment in and commitment to activities favouring the college-linking process, such as college visits, assistance with college and financial aid applications, and contacts with college representatives on behalf of the students (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997).

Institutional routes and sponsorship have also been weakened in England, but not to the same extent: a strong link remains between private secondary schools and elite higher education institutions. Privately schooled students are twice as likely to go to elite universities than state-schooled students and, although outnumbered by the latter in admissions (44.5 per cent versus 46.8 per cent in 2007 at Oxford), they are significantly overrepresented in relation to their total number in secondary schools. This overrepresentation is even more striking when one considers their share of the applicant pool and percentage among successful applicants. Given the expansion of the state sector and the strong meritocratic character of the admission procedures in elite universities, this overrepresentation is due less to explicit 'chartering' and 'bartering' than in the past. It is nevertheless important to note that, as in the US, students from private schools benefit from higher levels of advice and support on careers in higher education by internal staff and outside agencies working with the schools (Reay *et al.*, 2005), and that those from the so-called Clarendon Public Schools, in particular, frequently receive 'special notification' during the second phase of admissions at Oxford. However, the competitive advantage of private schools rests now to a larger extent on higher levels of educational achievement. These are the consequence of severe academic selection procedures as well as of the implementation over the course of the 1980s and 1990s of an Assisted Places Scheme (abolished by New Labour in 1997), intended to help 'able children from modest backgrounds' to enter independent schools of high academic reputation, but also of more marked 'school effects' linked to the concentration of academically and socially advantaged students (Halsey, 1995; Power *et al.*, 2003).

In France, on the contrary, the role of the state in elite education has given a competitive advantage to state *lycées* in admissions, with the evidence showing no clear advantage for upper-class students from private sector schools in terms of educational careers (Tavan, 2004). There are no official routes, but huge differences between *lycées* concerning their capacity to get students admitted into these classes. This result is strongly linked to provision, as those '*prépas*' that are most successful in getting students admitted to the top *grandes écoles* are all located in a limited number of old and prestigious *lycées* in Paris and other big cities, giving an advantage to students schooled at those *lycées*. In addition to that 'location effect', there is also some evidence that widening participation in secondary education has encouraged professors and administrators in the more selective *classes préparatoires* to weigh the grades, class rank and professional evaluations

of candidates according to the supposed achievement level of their *lycée*.³ Being accepted in these selective *classes préparatoires* is a key step for students who want to follow up their studies in the top *grandes écoles*, as there is a strong ‘chartering’ effect, both formal (teaching content, methods and evaluation are strongly conditioned by the explicit requirements of the *concours* of these *grandes écoles*, while less selective *classes préparatoires* prepare for less-selective examinations) and informal (use of knowledge of implicit requirements based on information provided by alumni, examiners, professors and managers at the *grandes écoles*). Students attending prestigious *lycées* and *classes préparatoires* also benefit from personalized counselling and assistance with applications.

Social advantage and parental strategies

In the three countries considered here, upper-class families strongly supported the initial institutional pathways that excluded other groups from access to elite higher education institutions. Although they have been able to resist and adapt to the development of meritocratic policies by these institutions, thanks to the competitive advantages provided by private schooling and selective public schools, and although in the US affluent upper-class parents, especially former alumni, have been able, much more so than in England or France, to continue to buy entrance for their children – not only because they can pay for tuition but also because they provide ‘legacies’ that contribute to university budgets – as a group, they have had to renounce collective admission privileges and accept that only some of their children with excellent academic results might be among the ‘chosen’ (Karabel, 2005). Moreover, members of this group now compete with larger proportions of members of the middle class. However, the respective advantages of middle-class families with high levels of cultural capital and those families with high incomes still have to be assessed carefully with respect both to the strategies available for parents and to the selection and channelling process in each educational system (Kerchoff *et al.*, 1997). In France, the intellectual fractions of the middle class have traditionally been advantaged by the formal and strongly scholastic meritocratic procedures of access to the state *grandes écoles*. However, changes in the educational context have forced them to develop, through ‘colonization’ of local schools, new, informal institutional pathways to maintain their position (Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007). Their advantages are also challenged, however, because, as in the UK and the US, families with higher incomes are able successfully to transform economic capital into cultural capital through residential and school choice, private tuition and private preparations for tests and competitive examinations (Ball, 2003; Johnson, 2006; van Zanten, 2003).

Another, even more important question concerns the extent to which this renewed ‘class meritocracy’ has closed off opportunities for other social and ethnic groups. Although meritocracy was initially conceived as serving the interests of hard-working students from dominated groups who could benefit from scholarships to go to elite universities, there has been a growing recognition of the existence of important inequalities of access. In response to strong social pressures, in the 1960s, elite US institutions developed ambitious ‘affirmative action’ policies giving an edge to Black, Hispanic and Native American candidates. This involved accepting candidates from ‘tagged’ groups with SAT scores a bit lower than other candidates yet still within the thresholds established by each university, as well as taking into account their capacity to succeed under ‘adverse circumstances’. Such measures were needed because, for reasons linked to their family background and secondary school careers in poor and underperforming schools, candidates from these groups could not compete on an equal, ‘meritocratic’ basis. They

AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN

nevertheless generated strong discontent, especially from the best-performing groups (Asians, in particular), in a context of 'college squeeze': a rise in the number of college-age students and a slow down of higher education expansion. In response to moves on the part of some states to make affirmative action illegal, some elite public universities (the University of Texas, the University of California) have adopted 'percentage plans' to recruit students from the largest possible number of high schools using class rank as the main indicator. While this measure has increased ethnic and social diversity in these universities, its success depends on the existence and maintenance of strong levels of segregation in high schools (Alon and Tienda, 2007). Elite private schools, on the other hand, count more on 'comprehensive reviews' of each proposal for achieving diversity. These reviews are more effective in detecting meritorious students from disadvantaged backgrounds without 'side effects', but they are very costly to implement.

In France efforts to increase social and ethnic diversity in elite higher education institutions have been much more modest. In 2001, Sciences Po developed a specific selection procedure for students from disadvantaged schools based on a specific academic exercise – a press summary – and interviews with a jury including scholars, administrators, public civil servants and managers from private firms (Sabbagh, 2002). Other less well-known institutions, such as the INSA (*Institut National des Sciences Appliquées*), have developed a selection procedure based, for half of the entrants, not on absolute results but on class rank. It is important to note that these two institutions recruit their students after the *lycée*, which allows them much more autonomy to set up original admission criteria than the *écoles*, which select their students after the *classes préparatoires*. They remain, in fact, isolated cases, and most institutions have only developed as elite universities in the UK outreach programmes providing information, assistance with the preparation of college applications and financial support for disadvantaged students. Although these programmes can be effective in limiting processes of self-exclusion due to institutional, cultural and economic factors when they are integrated into procedures including changes in the modes of selection, their impact seems limited when they are applied in isolation. It is also important to note that not all working-class and minority students are willing to submit to the cultural and social requirements of elite institutions, and that the kind of social capital they possess (strong bonding ties with members of their family and local community) not only constitutes a handicap for access but also prevents them profiting, to the same degree as middle- and upper-class students, from the social capital that these institutions provide (Allouch and van Zanten, 2008; Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Conclusion

This brief overview of elite education in the US, the UK and France has shown that, although elite institutions supported by established elite groups generally exhibit a strong reluctance to change, important transformations have taken place and are still at work in all three systems. The most important transformation, especially in the UK and US, took place after World War I, with the transition from an almost direct translation of social position into educational advantages, to the selection of talented individuals by educational institutions. Although this movement increased the autonomy and power of educational agents, it allowed only limited mobility opportunities for members of socially and ethnically dominated groups, as a new 'class meritocracy' emerged based on exclusionary processes exhibiting some differences between the three countries according to the relative importance of money, morals, manners or academic culture in class divisions (Lamont, 1992; Power *et al.*, 2003).

Also, although this article has mostly focused on changes in modes of social and institutional closure that have had significant consequences for educational and social inequalities, it is important to relate these to other changes linked to global transformations in the knowledge economy. These influences are creating new dividing lines between institutions, depending on their relationship to different economic sectors and their place in international networks and rankings, as well as between social groups, according to their capacity to integrate these new opportunities in their strategies of exclusion or usurpation (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Wagner, 2007). These new divisions and their concomitant class strategies require specific attention from sociology of education research.

Notes

- 1 The largest part of the French elite is not trained, as elsewhere, in universities but at the *grandes écoles*, which are distinct institutions of higher education. To prepare for the competitive examinations allowing access to these écoles, most students follow two- or three-year courses at *classes préparatoires*. Although these are more or less equivalent to undergraduate university studies, they are located in the *lycées*.
- 2 A. Allouch's personal communication based on ongoing Ph.D. research on English and French elite higher education institutions' admission procedures and outreach programmes.
- 3 Evidence on these processes is being collected and analysed in an ongoing project on elite education in France. For more details see van Zanten (2008).

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AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF ELITE EDUCATION

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