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The worrying decline in social mobility

In **Cairn's Dossiers** (2019), page 1

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The land of equality and fraternity is also the country whose school system most exacerbates social inequality. This is the conclusion not only of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), but also of French sociologists.

Teaching remains led by an elitist ideal. The disadvantaged classes are directed *en masse* toward vocational training. Elementary school, where, in the words of François Dubet, inequalities “take shape,” is neglected when it comes to funding. The myth that focusing on average or weak pupils will necessarily lower the standard of the top pupils persists. The preparatory classes for the prestigious *Grandes Écoles* remain the primary route of access to elite education, but are chiefly the preserve of children from well-off, educated families.

Many social mobility studies conducted since the 1950s show that, as Yves Besançon concludes, “progress has stalled over the last two decades.” The statistics do however obscure many positive changes that may be revealed by ethnographic investigations, such as Stéphane Beaud’s study of the eight children of a French Algerian family. Cédric Hugrée calls for the implementation of “mixed methodologies able to combine ethnographic and statistical data,” and we speak to Hugues Draelants from the University of Louvain, who focuses on the concept of cultural capital.

Our selection:

François Dubet, Yves Besançon and Stéphane Beaud.

And also: Agnès van Zanten, Cédric Hugrée.

Carte blanche given to Hugues Draelants.

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The French paradox

France is one of the world’s least unequal countries. School is free to attend, and curricula are set nationally. So why is it one of the countries whose school system most contributes to the reproduction of social inequality? In his article for the journal *Après-Demain*, sociologist **François Dubet** provides a broad response to this question. After describing the main stages in the development of the “social elevator” in France, he sets out OECD data on the impact of social origin on educational success, which is “sky high in France: 22.5%, compared to 16.9% in Germany, 10.6% in Sweden, and 12.5% in the United Kingdom.”

The hackneyed old idea of “equality of opportunity” is therefore a myth. François Dubet provides six main reasons for this state of affairs:

- Teaching remains led by an “elitist ideal” that disadvantages the disadvantaged. One of the results of this is that “the overwhelming majority of pupils in vocational training are from the most disadvantaged classes”;
- Funding for elementary school, where “inequalities emerge and take shape,” is 20% below the OECD average;
- Families with the means to do so direct their children to the most selective options;
- The “burdensome nature” of a ministry that is “overly bureaucratic and centralized”;
- Corporatism and the status quo are protected;
- Persistent misconceptions abound, the two main ones being: “the belief in meritocratic equality of opportunity,” and the idea that “focusing on average or weak pupils will necessarily lower standards.”

The sociologist ends with a call for greater emphasis on “equality of results.”

François Dubet is a sociologist, professor emeritus at the University of Bordeaux, and director of studies at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), Paris. His publications include *Les sociétés et leur école. Emprise du diplôme et cohésion sociale* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

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Carte blanche given to Hugues Draelants

“Cultural capital must be earned”

“France is the country of the reproduction of social and educational inequalities,” writes François Dubet. What are your thoughts on this statement?

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Unfortunately for other countries, France does not have a monopoly on the reproduction of inequalities. That said, it is true that because of its history, France more than any other nation defines itself and thinks of itself as the country of equal rights and opportunity. Equality is one of the founding values of the Republic, and remains strong in the collective imagination. The gap between the principles engraved on the pediments of many school buildings and the reality of how they are run is doubtless felt more keenly in France than elsewhere. Beyond this subjective aspect, it is also true that the French school system is objectively one of the most unequal in Europe. While social inequality at school is a universal issue, we must recognize that the level of inequality varies substantially from one educational system to another, as demonstrated by the well-known PISA studies. And within the same system, the level of inequality varies depending on the context and period. International, intranational, and historical comparisons thus show that nothing is set in stone and that, by taking affirmative action on school and social structures, inequalities can be reduced. We must therefore reject fatalism, but also admit that the school system alone cannot make society equal. Short of public institutions looking after children from birth, the situation of social reproduction is difficult to overcome due to the social inequalities that exist between families. It is therefore necessary to continue working toward equality not only in schools, but also in society. We will not solve the issue of education without also solving the issue of poverty.

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How should we approach the concept of cultural capital today?

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Cultural capital, often measured in quantitative studies as parents’ level of qualification or education, remains one of the principles that explain social

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inequality. It has been the subject of numerous studies in educational sociology, which have given us an increasingly keen insight into how and through what processes it contributes to creating inequalities. We know for example that cultural capital does not so much have an impact through familiarity with “highbrow” culture, but rather through educational practices that stimulate children’s cognitive development and communicate a certain relationship to language, along with attitudes and skills that are directly useful in school education. This is the case for example with parental practices that seek to communicate the love of reading. Embodied cultural capital—i.e. habitus or relationship to culture—generally plays a particularly important role during the early school years. Studies of the difficulties encountered at school by working-class children whose family culture is very different from the school culture reveal that the school system does not make sense to them, and this is reflected in their inability to understand the implicit messages behind their teachers’ demands. They simply understand that they must obey and work, which does not allow them to engage positively with their learning. Middle- and upper-class children acquire—though not naturally, and not without effort—the pleasure of learning and the skills to decode teachers’ signals. Intensive and daily effort by parents, properly school-like in nature, is required, and this underappreciated and largely invisible work generally falls to mothers. In the later school years, in secondary education and beyond, cultural capital continues to play an important role in the form of informational cultural capital. It is the ability to gather information and make one’s way through a complex and hierarchical school system—selecting the best institutions, specialism, options, etc.—that becomes a determining characteristic and favors those I will call the initiated. I see this as a shift from a mode of reproduction based on proximity to school culture to a mode of reproduction that is also determined by the quality of the school environment and by knowledge of those educational pathways with the highest social value. The internationalization of educational pathways, recourse to private tuition, and shadow education are also among the new strategies sometimes grouped under the term cultural capital. In my view, they demonstrate the growing hybridization of cultural capital with economic and social capital. I see this as symptomatic of a move from a meritocracy to a “parentocracy” (Brown 1990) and internal school competition between different sections of the middle and upper classes that favors those with the most economic capital.

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Is meritocracy becoming a new aristocracy?

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Pierre Bourdieu described France’s *Grandes Écoles* as producing a “state nobility,” and the educated upper classes are often criticized for their arrogance. The French academic elite does tend to be seen or to see itself as a very different breed. This stems from the quasi-exclusive role of academic rank and titles in representations of worth. The identity-based logics that result from these representations are entirely characteristic of the way elites are educated in France. That said, I don’t think we should lump meritocracy together with aristocracy. Modern societies are no longer societies of order, in which status is inherited; even if cultural inheritance continues to play a role in social hierarchy, status is no longer allocated at birth but acquired, and we should not forget this. Criticism of meritocracy must not fall into an easy radicalism. To paraphrase Churchill, we might say that meritocracy is the

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worst system, except for all the others. In a society in which positions are unequal, depriving schools of their role in meritocratic educational selection would equate to depriving them of all power in allocating social position. The democratic benefit of cultural capital is that, unlike economic capital, it must be passed on directly. It must be earned, and takes time and effort. And it is not passed on only through the family. While they may not always succeed in doing so, schools have the ability to pass on cultural capital to all their pupils. As such, meritocratic selection contributes to altering the original social hierarchy: certainly not enough, but it is an improvement on the past. To alleviate the struggle for places and the negative identity-based logics produced by meritocracy, we also need to drastically reduce the gaps in recognition and salaries associated with different social positions.



Hugues Draelants is a sociologist and professor at the University of Louvain. He recently published an article in *Le Débat* entitled “**Le mérite n’existe pas’, critique d’une vulgate sociologique**” (issue 202, no. 5, 2018).

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Stalling mobility

The development of social mobility in France has been considered by many different studies since national statistical monitoring began in 1953. Economist **Yves Besançon** provides an overview of this area in his article for the magazine *Alternatives Économiques*. In his view, it is clear that social mobility has broken down over the last twenty years. The most striking indicator of this situation is the stabilization in social immobility. While it nearly halved between 1953 and 1993, since then it has remained almost exactly the same, if not slightly increased. For example, “in 2012, 36% of sons had a similar socioprofessional status to their father,” almost the same as the figure in 1993, which was 35%. Another indicator measures “social fluidity,” which is the “ratio of the odds of sons of managers and the odds of sons of manual workers becoming managers rather than manual workers.”

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This ratio strongly declined from 1985, but since 2003 has tended to stabilize, with a manager’s son thirty times more likely than a manual worker’s son to become a manager.

In passing, Yves Besançon refers to the majority of authors of studies on social mobility in France to flesh out his analysis: Louis-André Vallet, Marie Duru-Bellat, Éric Maurin, Camille Peugny, Pierre Merle, Dominique Goux, and Louis Chauvel. He notes an ongoing debate about changes within the middle classes: for Dominique Goux and Éric Maurin, this group is unaffected by the broken social elevator, while for Louis Chauvel, the middle classes are the victims of a “negative spiral,” with the young adult generation afflicted by “multiple forms of demotion (in relation to wages, education, housing, etc.).”

Yves Besançon is an economist and former officer at the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) (French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies).

[Read the article](#)



Hidden mobility

Statistical data by no means show the complete picture. In his article for the journal *Idées économiques et sociales*, sociologist **Stéphane Beaud** demonstrates this by closely tracing the paths taken by the eight children of two Algerian immigrants to France.

Born in 1942 in a very poor family in western Algeria and his only education being a short stint at elementary school, the father went to work in France after his first child was born in 1970. His wife, born in 1952, continued on to *collège* (middle school), but was made by her father to give up her studies and get married. While her husband went back and forth between France and Algeria, she gave birth to two more children then persuaded him to move them all to France after threatening him with divorce. They secured accommodation in a HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*, or rent-controlled

housing), and five more children followed. Stéphane Beaud describes in detail the very different paths taken by these children (he subsequently published a book on the study).

The eight children have all experienced upward social mobility, but this was much more marked for the girls, with the boys struggling at school from an early age. The first of the three children born in Algeria is a nurse, the second a social worker, and the third a sales representative. The first boy born in France is a bus driver with the RATP (the *Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens*, the state-owned public transport operator in Paris), while the second a sales representative. The third daughter is a nurse, the fourth a social worker, and the fifth an advisor at the National Employment Agency. All have benefited from the intelligence, character, and dedication of their eldest sister, who helped them find their way or, in the case of the boys, prevented them from taking a wrong turn (although one, a victim of the “quartier,” or neighborhood, did go to prison).

The sociologist is struck by the fact that for these boys, “the absence of qualifications (or having only a minor qualification) does not necessarily mean prolonged unemployment.” On the negative side, Stéphane Beaud does however show that while the eldest children had access to bridges to the “bourgeois” world, designed in particular for the most “deserving” pupils, these bridges had almost entirely disappeared by the time the youngest reached adolescence, as segregation between immigrant and other neighborhoods really set in. This reflects a shift from the “Beur” (Arab) generation to the “cité” (project) generation.

Stéphane Beaud is a professor of sociology at the École normale supérieure (ENS) Paris. His publications include, with Florence Weber, *Guide de l'enquête de terrain* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010). His study of the Algerian family is the subject of a book, *La France des Belhoumi. Portraits de famille (1977–2017)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018).

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Further reading on Cairn.info

The barrier of preparatory classes for the Grandes Écoles

The typically French system of preparatory classes for the *Grandes Écoles* is a “social barrier” that “facilitates the access of the children of the upper social classes to elite positions while limiting the upward mobility of other social groups.” In *L’Année sociologique* (in French on [cairn.info](https://www.cairn.info)), **Agnès van Zanten**, from the Sociological Observatory of Change (Observatoire sociologique du changement, Sciences Po/CNRS), presents the results of a study she carried out in a leading elite *lycée* (high school) in Paris among parents, teachers, and the principal. She shows that strictly contest-related selection criteria co-exist with others, which she calls “sponsorship-related,” echoing a distinction made by American sociologist Ralph Turner in 1960. These two norms are “closely interlinked” and contribute in a complementary manner “to constructing social barriers to accessing elite positions.” Two sets of actors combine their efforts to ensure the optimal functioning of sponsorship: parents, and educational professionals. We can therefore speak of a “social sponsorship” and an “institutional sponsorship,” an expression that also covers decisions about where to live. The pressure from high-status parents that can be seen around the world has led to coinage of the term “parentocracy” in the United States, and this is equally relevant to France. Agnès van Zanten shows that “the logic of the closed contest is present from elementary school” and persists throughout all stages up to the preparatory classes, which siphon off 7% of those who pass the baccalaureate. One specific feature of the French system compared to the United States is that the judgment of the selectors “is not based on standardized test results but on marks derived from the particularistic judgments of teachers.” In summary, “the French education system succeeds in producing an elite, but it is one from a very limited social and educational pool.” The sociologist concludes: “It comes as no surprise to see the distance and growing suspicion that characterize relations between a minority that owes its position to having come through these narrow paths of reproduction and upward mobility, and the majority who were excluded from playing the game, often at an early stage, and either way permanently.”

Statistics and ethnography

No matter their level of detail, statistics cannot provide a complete picture of the subtle aspects of changing social mobility. Meanwhile, as in-depth as they are, ethnographic studies are necessarily limited by their small sample sizes. In his article in the journal *Politix* (in French on [Cairn.info](https://www.cairn.info)), **Cédric Hugrée**, from the Paris Center for Sociological and Political Research (Centre de recherches sociologiques et politiques de Paris), laments “the hegemony of statistics” but also “the scarcity of debates about different methodological approaches.” He highlights the opportunity to “invent mixed methodologies able to combine ethnographic and statistical data,” and the potential value of doing so. By way of example, he presents two “statistical case studies.” The first enables him to follow others in revising the idea presented by Louis Chauvel and then by the majority of observers of a “normalization of intergenerational demotion” for children born from 1970 onward. The 2014 data from INSEE’s continuous employment survey thus indicate that only a third of the sons of manual workers born in 1975 would themselves be manual workers at the age of forty. “The outcomes for working-class children are better than those estimated fifteen years ago,” Hugrée concludes.

The second “statistical case study” leads him to draw up “detailed mobility tables” for two categories “at opposite ends of the social spectrum”: the children of liberal professionals and the children of skilled manual workers.

These examples allow him to show that “sensibly critical uses of quantitative data” are entirely capable of “refreshing our understanding.”



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