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Citation: Power, S., Brown, P., Allouch, A. & Tholen, G. (2013). Self, Career and Nationhood: The contrasting aspirations of British and French elite graduates. The British Journal of Sociology, 64(4), pp. 578-596. doi: 10.1111/1468-4446.12048

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/17001/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12048

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Self, Career and Nationhood: The contrasting aspirations of British and French elite graduates

Number of words: 8800

Date of resubmission: 14th September 2012

Self, Career and Nationhood: The contrasting aspirations of British and French elite graduates

There is increasing interest in the emergence of a 'global middle class' in which high achieving young graduates increasingly look to develop careers that transcend national boundaries. This paper explores this issue through comparing and contrasting the aspirations and orientations of two 'elite' cohorts of graduates. Interviews with students at the University of Oxford, England, and Sciences-Po, France, reveal very different ambitions and allegiances. Our Oxford respondents portray their futures as projects of self-fulfilment as they build portfolio careers by moving from job to job and from country to country with limited social allegiances – epitomising the nomadic worker of the transnational elite. Our Parisian respondents, on the other hand, display strong allegiances to the nation, state and civic duty. Their projects of the self involve reconciling their personal aspirations with strong allegiances to France. The paper concludes by discussing the significance of these differences. It argues that the enduring role of education in the formation of national identities should not be overlooked and that more detailed research is needed on the contextual specifity of transnationalism and the (re)production of elites.

Word count: 8800

Keywords: global middle class; elite education; career; project of the self; transnationalism.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the current sociological debates around the emergence and nature of a global middle class (Ball 2010). Butler and Robson (2003) have identified a 'transnational service class', Doyle and Nathan (2001) a 'cross-border transnational managerial elite'. Sassen (2001) talks of the significance of 'new international professionals', typified by what Favell (2008) refers to as 'Eurostars' who migrate across 'Eurocities'. Beaverstock (2005: 246) argues that the fluid nature of this international labour market has meant that 'the traditional expatriate is now disappearing, to be replaced by the 'nomadic worker' whose ultimate international mobility meets the challenges of international business in globalisation'.

Whatever terminology is used there appears to be consensus that young graduates are no longer constrained by national borders. Their mobility, it is argued, is fuelled by the emergence of a global 'war for talent' in which 'the calibre of a company's talent increasingly determines success in the marketplace' (Michaels *et al.* 2001: 1). Even if

these claims are somewhat overstated (see for example Brown and Hesketh 2004, Brown *et al.* 2011 for a critique of this discourse), there is little doubt that multinational companies are internationalising their recruitment strategies as they seek out 'top graduates' for 'top jobs'.

At the same time, we are seeing the internationalisation of higher education. Since 1965, the number of students studying 'abroad' has increased nine-fold (Varghese 2008). Although the USA is top of the 'receiving' countries with 21 per cent of international students, the UK and France are next on the list - attracting 13 per cent and 9 per cent of foreign enrolments respectively (UIS 2009). Some commentators argue that this internationalisation has led to cultural convergence between universities. Kennedy (2004: 162), for example, suggests that 'the idiosyncratic nature of some "national" skills has become increasingly difficult to identify as "belonging" to any single nation' and that professional training is being universalised.

The emergence of a 'global middle class' is of sociological significance because it raises a number of important theoretical questions about how we understand social class, nationhood and core national functions such as the welfare state. In particular, the emergence of a global middle class illuminates the limits of methodological nationalism. It is not only that transnationalism reminds us of the permeability of national borders, but that it has significant implications for what goes on inside those borders. As Sassen (2010: 3) argues:

> … the nation-state as 'container' is … undermined by the multiple structurations of the global inside the national … a process that denationalizes what was historically constructed as national.

Internal denationalisation would bring radical changes to the mission and outcomes of higher education. The building of national education systems has been intimately associated with the building of the nation state itself and the development of citizens (Green 1990; 1997). Universities in particular have played an important role in providing the state with the skilled professional elite on which it depends (Wittrock 1993). The erosion of this process through transnationalism is likely to reconfigure the relationship between universities, their graduates, the nation state and the labour market. It will also have implications for the construction (or destabilisation) of national identities and their replacement with what Ball (2010) calls 'cosmopolitan identities'. These cross-border movements will in turn, it is argued, lead to complex forms of transnational communities, transnational activism and transnational elites (Djelic and Quack 2010).

It is against the background of these debates that we set out to investigate the endurance and erosion of national differences in the sensibilities of elite graduates of 'global universities' (Wildavsky 2010) – the kind of young people whom one could consider destined to be part of that transnational class.

THE RESEARCH

The data from which this paper draws derive from a larger funded research project[1] on the way in which graduate employability and talent are conceived by elite graduates and employers in Britain and France. This project has involved interviewing 40 elite graduates and their potential employers during 2010 and 2011 about the structure of competition and perceptions of the labour market.

France and the UK (in this case, England) provide interesting 'test cases' because they have traditionally been seen as ideal typical of different systems of higher education. While France is considered to be state bureaucratic, Britain is characterised by strong academic freedom and institutional autonomy (King, 2009) thus making universities in each country more or less 'socially-buffered' and differently positioned in response to internal denationalisation (Sassen 2010). An additional reason for looking at France and Britain is to broaden the empirical basis for 'middling transnationalism' (Conradson and Latham 2005) which has thus far largely focused on Anglophone countries - for example, the British in New York (Beaverstock 2005), New Zealanders in the UK (Conradson and Latham 2005) or British workers in Australia (Clarke 2005).

Within the distinctive higher education systems of Britain and France, we have attempted to make comparisons across two cohorts of students which have been 'matched' as closely as possible on the basis of the status of the institution and the career orientation of the degree courses. In England, we interviewed a cohort of twenty final year students taking Bachelor's degrees in History and Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) at the University of Oxford. In France, we interviewed a cohort of twenty students taking the Master's in Political Administration at Sciences-Po, Paris. Both Sciences Po and Oxford would count themselves as elite institutions. They rest at the top end of not only national but international league tables of prestige. Both would claim to be 'global universities'. Because of their reputations, they are highly academically selective. Despite attempts in both countries to widen participation, both institutions recruit disproportionate numbers of privately-educated students from socially privileged backgrounds. Not only are both institutions of roughly equivalent status and selectivity, there are strong parallels between the courses our respondents are taking. The Master's in Political Administration at Sciences-Po prepares students for careers in public administration. Its curriculum includes courses in public law, economics and public finance with extended internships in key national and international organisations. Most importantly, it is the principal pathway to the École Nationale d'Administration (ÉNA) (Eymeri 2001) – the foundation for what is satirically referred to as France's 'énarchy'. In short, Sciences-Po provides entry to Bourdieu's (1998) *State Nobility.*

Although the courses our respondents are taking at Oxford are less specialised than their counterparts at Sciences-Po, PPE in particular has a reputation for feeding

[1] *Removed for anonymity*

graduates into elite public sector employment and politics. A recent BBC article, headlined '*Why does PPE rule Britain?*' claims that

> In the corridors of power, at the very highest reaches of government, a form of educational freemasonry holds sway … the surest ticket to the top … is surely a degree in politics, philosophy and economics (PPE) at the University of Oxford. (Kelly 2010)

Our cohorts are also of equivalence in terms of their social background. The background of both sets of respondents reflects the socially privileged intake of their institutions. All but one of our twenty Oxford respondents (13 male, 7 female) come from solidly middle class families where at least one parent is in a high level professional or managerial occupation. As one might expect given the orientation of the degree, the majority of parents work in the public sector, and include five doctors and eight academics. At Sciences Po, our twenty respondents (12 male, 8 female) also come predominantly from advantaged public sector backgrounds, with a significant number of parents in senior positions in public administration, education and health.

As part of the wider research project, both cohorts were interviewed in their own language about their backgrounds, career plans, personal aspirations and perspectives on meritocracy and inequality. Our original intention was to analyse these data to tease out the extent to which contrasting structures of competition in France and England led to different strategies of elite employability. However, it soon became apparent that there were remarkable differences in the way in which these two groups of students conceived of their futures - not only in terms of how to manage their employability, but in terms of their orientations to personal fulfilment and nationhood. We therefore re-coded the data to enable us to draw out and compare differences in the language and discourse of career aspirations. It is these differences which we explore here.

However, before we get to the analysis, it is import to draw attention to some of the limits of the comparison. Although we have tried to match our institutions and cohorts as closely as possible, there are significant differences to which readers need to be alerted. These largely derive from the different ways in which higher education is organised in the two countries and the relative importance of Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Thus, in the UK, it is the university of the first degree which is most significant in opening up elite career opportunities. For most British graduates, the critical interface between higher education and the labour market occurs in their early twenties. Accordingly, most of our Oxford respondents are between 20-22 years old. In France, it is the Master's level qualification which carries most weight and is the crucial entry point to elite occupations. Our Sciences-Po respondents are therefore somewhat older - being mostly in their mid-twenties. To some extent, these different branching-off points are part of the different structures of competition within the two countries. They should, therefore, be seen not just as 'interference' in the analysis but as revelatory of the different processes through which particular 'mindsets' and dispositions are shaped.

It also needs to be remembered that our data relate to respondents' *imagined* futures rather than their actual destinations. We hope to be able to follow up their subsequent careers at some point in the future, but for now we only have their aspirations. Nevertheless, even if they are 'only' aspirations, they reveal very different ways in which they envision their careers as 'projects of the self' (Grey 1994).

CAREERS AND THE PROJECT OF THE SELF

Rose (1999) argues that the way we think about work has changed radically in recent years. Work is no longer something which we 'do' in order to achieve security and fulfilment in our 'non-work' lives. It is, instead, the means through which we develop a sense of self:

> … the individual is not to be emancipated *from* work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled *in* work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover and experience our selves. (Rose 1999: 104)

For Grey (1994: 481), and of particular relevance for this paper, is the concept of the career as a project of self-management: 'Career links present, past and future through a series of stages, steps or progressions. Career offers a vehicle for the self to "become".' Both Rose and Grey argue that the production of the self through work articulates with the forms of self-regulation and governmentality associated with neoliberalism. However, neoliberalism takes different forms in different contexts. So that, while both our Oxford and Parisian graduates construct their careers as projects of self-realisation, the selves they are seeking to realise appear very different. These differences are explored in the following sections where we look first to our Oxford respondents and then to our Parisian graduates.[2]

Oxford trajectories: self-fulfilment and portfolio careers

Our twenty Oxford graduates spoke enthusiastically of their futures and the opportunities that their elite education had made available to them. However, rather than looking to exchange their valuable qualifications for job security or a stable income, our respondents are, by and large, planning to embark on what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:3) call the 'do-it-yourself' biography. Their narratives strongly confirm the trend towards the individualisation of middle class careers in which young graduates seek to pursue 'life projects' which maximise the scope for self-development (Savage 2000: 140, Power *et al*. 2003). These life projects share a number of characteristics.

[2] All the Sciences-Po interviews were undertaken in French and then translated. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

They are driven by a search for self-fulfilment, which entails flexible approaches to employment in order to develop a portfolio of skills and experiences, including working abroad. The projects are highly individualised inasmuch as our respondents display a lack of allegiance to any particular organisation or institution. However, the concentration on self-fulfilment does not mean these young people are necessarily self-*ish.* Our respondents spoke often of the various ways in which they could 'give something back', but these activities were largely decoupled from and peripheral to their occupational ambitions.

The search for fulfilment

Many of our Oxford respondents already had jobs lined up. However, when they spoke about what they would be doing, their comments were less about the nature of the work and rather more about what it meant to them. These early moves into work were not so much the beginnings of a linear career but the start of a voyage of self-discovery. The following are typical extracts from their reflections on what they planned to do next:

> … in terms of my career development it is very me-centred I suppose. I think I would do whatever and choose to go and work wherever I thought I would get the most benefit in terms of personal development. [*Stuart 3/20 Oxford*]

> So whatever it is, I would look at what I would be doing and how stimulating it would be. That is a bit vague. I would look at the specific tasks that I would have and decide how close they correlate to what I would like to spend my time doing. [*Andrew 14/20 Oxford*]

In the search for self-fulfilment, anything 'dull' is to be avoided:

> I wouldn't want to end up being a drone … and become some sort of boring desk jockey that has absolutely nothing to say for himself except for a huge salary. [*Tom 7/20 Oxford*]

> The characteristics in a career that I want? … That would be the main thing - interesting. So I don't get bored. [*Gareth 5/20 Oxford*]

Certainly, money is not presented as an important issue:

> And obviously I think having a fulfilling career and having something interesting to do with your life, is far far more important to me than money. In fact money isn't even important to me at all. What's important to me is doing something that I consider is worthwhile and finance doesn't really come into it at all [*Tom 7/20 Oxford*]

'Challenge' appears to be the one of the main criteria for self-fulfilment and is mentioned frequently in accounts of what our respondents enjoyed in their internships and what they are looking for in their future work:

> I really enjoyed working with them … they throw you in at the deep end, it's *challenging*. You have to deal with lots of new things quickly. [*Lucy 9/20 Oxford*]

> It is not only the money. It is probably some of the jobs out there are quite *challenging*, like high pressure jobs and I said about how people are really ambitious and like want a lot for themselves, like drive themselves hard … It is probably quite a *challenging* job and I think that people who come here wouldn't want to do something boring or easy. [*Marilyn 15/20 Oxford*]

> It is kind of the *challenging* nature of the work and the size of those companies and their prestige and how they go about things is why I want to work for them. [*Colin 18/20 Oxford*]

The search for 'challenge' and the need to avoid boredom inevitably leads our respondents to take a flexible approach to employment opportunities. Their plans for the future are generally fluid as they envisage moving from one job to another as they build a portfolio of skills and experiences.

Building a 'portfolio' career

Savage (2000:30) argues that the concept of the professional or managerial career invokes the idea of 'individual development linked to structured mobility through a hierarchical sequence of jobs (both inside organisations and between them)'. For our respondents, the focus on individual development is clearly evident, but the sense of hierarchy and sequence is much weaker. Just as 'boring' jobs are to be avoided, so too are those with pre-specified promotion paths, eg:

> I think I would be quite wary of getting rocked into a sort of long term kind of career path with hierarchal progression in one institution. [*Stuart 3/20 Oxford*]

Their desire to build 'do-it-yourself' biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:3) requires changes of employers and occupations, eg:

> I definitely see myself as being very flexible ... I have always envisaged this involving changing careers if not often then more than once. [*Stuart 3/20 Oxford*]]

> I think if you are prepared to, actually prepared to go for something, you should be prepared for the flexibility to actually follow your passion. Where the opportunities arise, to sort of follow them where they take you. It's [important] to be open and flexible for a few years at least. If it doesn't work out in 3 years then obviously then re-think. [*Tom 7/20 Oxford*]

> Certainly, certainly I would see myself over the next fifteen years being quite flexible, whether or not it's from company to company or in and out of academia, I'm not sure yet …. I'm still unclear about to do, about what I want to do and so my plan is just to keep moving forward, keep doing things that are interesting, that I can learn from and will be helpful. [*Lucy 9/20 Oxford*]

Company loyalty counts for little. As Savage (2000: 143) argues 'organisations are valued insofar as they provide the right opportunities for their staff to pursue "careers of the self"' and experiment with different futures.

> This [applying for big consultancy firms] is in some ways a platform for something else and I don't know what that something else is yet … [*Tim 17/20 Oxford*]

> I can see myself moving round different jobs for the first I don't know 10 years maybe, 5 years or something like that after university and not settling down until I can build up the kind of work and experience that would enable me to settle into a job. [*Naomi 16/20 Oxford*]

> I am open to the idea of switching. I mean I don't really know at the moment, I have tried a lot of firms and different types of working environment but obviously if the opportunity came up to do something that I thought might be fairly interesting or different, I would definitely consider it. [*Emily 8/20 Oxford*]

This rather rootless and nomadic search for experiences and skills requires not only mobility from employer to employer, from job to job, but also from country to country. In their study of the 'middling transnationalism' of New Zealanders working in the UK, Conradson and Latham (2005: 287), highlight the importance of international mobility for 'the formulation of the self as a creative project'. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of our Oxford respondents expressed a strong desire to work abroad. Many were going to work for multinational companies and the opportunity of overseas postings was part of the appeal:

> I want to work for quite a big one that is like global and so I can work abroad. [*Natalie 15/20 Oxford*]

> I'd like to work in the United States, for example, that would be just fantastic. … I don't see myself as having particular loyalty to the British firms. [*Stuart 3/20 Oxford*]

> I … want to travel with work and see different countries and experience different cultures and I like learning languages, so maybe pick up a couple more. So a big organisation that has hundreds of offices appeals to me. [*Tim 17/20 Oxford*]

> I absolutely love travelling and meeting people from all over the world is definitely really attractive… If I could only go to the company which was say only in England … I would turn that down to reapply and try and get jobs in multinational companies. [*Colin 18/20 Oxford*]

In strong contrast to their French counterparts, to whom we shall look next, there was very little sense of wanting to work 'for the country' or even for a British firm. A few students expressed a preference for 'staying in Britain' but this was usually because they were already in a relationship or, for example, liked living in London.

Self and Social responsibility

Perhaps as part of a more general process of individualisation (Beck 2007), the projects of the self of our Oxford respondents evidence a lack of allegiance to organisations and a marked absence of reference to either country or state in their imagined futures. In general, working for the government was negatively contrasted with working for the private or third sector organisations. Certainly, public administration was not seen as an arena in which talent and creativity would be fostered. Given that PPE in particular is seen as a 'training ground' for future national leaders, it is notable that only a minority – five of the 20 – were planning careers in what might be loosely termed the public sector. One was planning to join the navy and two the Foreign Office. One was planning to work in a university and one wanted to move into politics. Of the remaining 15 respondents, two were undecided, one wanted to join the voluntary sector and the remaining twelve were planning to go into the private sector in a variety of occupations such as management, marketing and investment banking.

In talking about their futures, there was little sense of social allegiance or social obligation. Indeed, the following respondent is making decisions so as to *avoid* any obligation:

> I don't think that I like the idea of having responsibility for anything and I like the thought of academia where you are kind of just working towards something yourself and it is important that you have to work hard but you are not really necessarily responsible towards anyone else. [*Samuel 10/20 Oxford*]

It might be tempting to assume that this focus on self-fulfilment at the expense of social obligation or allegiance indicates increasing *selfishness* on the part of our Oxford graduates. However, we would argue that such a conclusion is too simple. Many of our respondents displayed a strong interest in social issues. Many spoke of their experiences of volunteering and of wanting to do something 'worthwhile' or 'good'. What is notable, though, is that these kinds of aspirations were generally to be fulfilled in activities that were *peripheral* to their occupation. 'Doing good' was more often to be undertaken *alongside* employment either as voluntary activities or as a secondment before embarking on a 'proper' career. A lot of students spoke very positively of experiences they had of voluntary work either during 'gap years' or while at Oxford:

> I took a gap year in which I worked with street children for a year in Bolivia, so I was out there from August to August and that was really good, really, really challenging, really hard, but I really enjoyed it. [*Naomi 16/20 Oxford*]

Of course, a cynical interpretation might suggest that these experiences give graduates an 'edge' in terms of recruitment into elite positions – which further contributes to social reproduction as only the more advantaged students are able to accumulate such experiences (Heath 2006). Certainly, as Brown and Hesketh (2004: 130) observed, the kinds of 'soft skills' acquired in activities such as these can give one a competitive advantage in elite recruitment. They identify the mixed motives which candidates ascribed to voluntary work which could make a social contribution but also 'add value to one's CV'. For example, one of our Oxford respondents talks about the extra career benefits of his voluntary work:

> Those experiences have definitely given me a lot more skills especially the community volunteering project … having founded it has given me a lot more skills than I think that other people might sort of have a chance to develop … so those stand me in good stead. [*Colin 18/20 Oxford*]

Not only did volunteering give them skills that would help them in future jobs, but it also provided a kind of testing ground in which our young graduates were able to trial future careers:

> At the moment I think that I am thinking of going into marketing, yes probably market research **…** I have done marketing in sort of various forms with charitable organisations while I have been at university. [*Sarah 11/20 Oxford*]

Two of our Oxford respondents were planning to participate in *Teach First*[3] before moving into a different profession and the benefits of this for their future careers are clearly signalled:

> It is something that I am really passionate about. And I suppose everyone has a social justice issue that they are quite excited about, and educational justice is my one. So for me it is a great way to indulge that when I am 21. I don't have any responsibilities. But it is also a two year period in which I am going to be skilled up ... And it's a scheme from which, as I say, lots of the traditional high profile careers recruit from and support. [*Mike 19/20 Oxford*]

[3] *Teach First* is a charitable scheme which aims to reduce educational inequality through encouraging 'exceptional' graduates from elite universities to teach for two or more years in state schools in disadvantaged areas.

> So this is my primary impulse, to go into teaching in the first instance. I thinks it's a really good way of developing … skills and about leadership and that kind of thing, I think it is quite an interesting forum in which to do that, so I think that might be one of the reasons why I am not inclined to say join the civil service and work my way up or to join a sort of traditional, big firm or what have you and work my way up through a graduate scheme. [*Stuart 3/20 Oxford*]

While taking 'time out' to engage in *Teach First* does not seem likely to disadvantage these graduates, it also gives them a channel for 'giving something back'. We want to suggest that the preference for these kinds of activities indicates a potential *decoupling* of social responsibility and occupation. A small minority of respondents did try to align their career plans with 'doing good', but interestingly they did not select more conventional public sector careers. The concept of public duty and the civil service is replaced by the language and appeal of 'social entrepeneurship':

> I could see myself maybe setting up a social enterprise or a charity. But just a plain old business? That is not what I am interested in. I am interested in how to produce social change, so I could see myself being an entrepreneur in that sense, but at the same time in terms of the charity sector. [*Naomi 16/20 Oxford*]

> I have been doing a bit of research as part of my work with a charitable organisation into social enterprise and I think that I would love to set up a social enterprise that is actually useful and successful. That really would be a good thing to do I think. [*Sarah 11/20 Oxford*]

In summary, then, our Oxford respondents' aspirations epitomise high individualistic projects of the self that highlight ambitions fuelled by a desire for self-fulfilment. This is to be achieved by moving from job to job, gaining international experience and building up a portfolio of skills and experiences. However, although their careers are highly individualised, it should not be assumed that these respondents are devoid of a sense of social responsibility. It is rather that they do not see it as being discharged through conventional public sector careers.

Parisian trajectories: the self and the nation

The narratives of our French graduates stand in stark contrast to those of our British students. They too seek personal fulfilment through work and as such are also engaged in projects of self-development. However, their projects of the self are framed very differently. While our Oxford respondents' futures are characterised by fluidity, our French respondents seek progression. The Oxford narratives are very thin on sentiments of social allegiance or public service. Our Parisian narratives emphasise obligations to state and nation. Far from being decoupled, work and social obligation go hand in hand.

Self-development is inextricably linked to a future in the public sector and the advancement of the nation.

Serving the public interest

Because Sciences-Po is a more specialised institution, it is not surprising that most of our graduates taking the Master's in Public Administration intended to pursue careers in public administration. Of the 20 Sciences-Po respondents, 16 intended to work in public administration. Only three planned to work for private companies and one was undecided. Public administration was not only seen as a secure career path, it was spoken of with a passion that was not evident in the Oxford interviews:

> I'd be the happiest person in the world if I ever become a prefect at 50. *[Jean-Yves 1/20 Sciences-Po]*

> The administration has a lot of importance for me. I have a high regard for it. So I am inspired to go there. It is really something that has a value. *[René 2/20 Sciences-Po]*

> I feel it is in my soul to work for the public service. *[Philippe 4/20 Sciences-Po]*

> I think it is my calling. *[Nicolas 19/20 Sciences-Po]*

With the exception of two respondents who spoke negatively about the civil service, public administration was seen to have strong appeal. Several respondents pointed to the diverse opportunities it provided, eg:

> When I see such huge central administration, I think that there is a possibility to do diverse things. *[Giselle 18/20 Sciences-Po]*

> It can be about interesting careers. The fact of representing the country attracts me less than ensuring that all these domains function effectively … it is a rather interesting aspect. *[Daniel 10/20 Sciences-Po]*

The most frequently expressed reason for working in public administration, though, was less about interest but the desire to work for the state and the community:

> It is rather to be of service to people – even if it seems rather naïve to say that. This is the aspect which interests me the most. [*Lucienne 7/20 Sciences-Po*]

> This appeal is the willingness to work for the community. It is contradictory to what entrepreneurship is, although it doesn't sound incompatible to me. You work for the community and not for oneself or for money ... That's what I call the appeal for civil service … It is one of my dreams, kind of! [*Jean-Yves 1/20 Sciences-Po*]

> I find that working for the state or for the community interests me - even if it is frowned upon in the private sector. [*Philippe 4/20 Sciences-Po*]
>
> It seems a little abstract this way, but my calling is to work for general interest or something that is beyond short-term individual interest … It motivates me more than money or short-term achievements. I would not like to defend a company. It would have less meaning for me. To excel at work it is important to believe in what you do. I have more faith in something vast like the general interest than the private sector. [*René 2/20 Sciences-Po*]

Here, and unlike the Oxford narratives, fulfilment is to be realised through working for the 'general interest'. And while the Oxford respondents upheld the virtues of the private sector, the Sciences-Po graduates were dismissive of business values. They certainly did not see the general interest being served through working for companies and, because of this, rejected private sector employment as *un*fulfilling, eg:

> I do not believe in reasoning which puts the company interest first … For me the administration is more rewarding. [*Nicolas 19/20 Sciences-Po*]
>
> I like the idea of public service - that is not completely bogus. I like the idea that when I get home at night, of course I have not changed the world … but I have done something for someone more than other jobs might have done. …. I saw more sense in this than in working at L'Oréal. [*Marie-Pierre 7/20 Sciences-Po*]
>
> Public interest always makes me smile. It seems like a strong word. Well, we can always argue that anti-wrinkle cream improves everyday life. It can be justified too. But I wanted to be on something a bit more…to be useful. [*Giselle 18/20 Sciences-Po*]
>
> I never saw myself doing finance or marketing … the job is intellectually limited. Be it finance or marketing, it is really selling shampoos. [*Francoise 8/20 Sciences-Po*]
>
> Their primary function is profit and whether French or foreign it changes nothing. [*Virginie 17/20 Sciences-Po*]

Even those few respondents who intended to go into the private sector distanced themselves from it. For example, the following respondent wants to open a publishing house, but still aligns herself to the public sector:[4]

[4] This 'distancing' is made easier by the fact that in France the publishing sector is heavily subsidised by the State, making it possible for her to distinguish between the "real" private sector as opposed to publishing where the funding and professional ethos are closer to the civil service.

> I would like that it is not lucrative but that it works in the public sector, for the public… I do not wish to be in the real private sector. The private sector works for money, I completely understand that. But I am not after money. It's not my thing. [*Francoise 8/20 Sciences-Po*]

In general, there was a sense in which several interviewees felt that they just did not have the right dispositions and skills for the private sector, eg:

> Both my parents are civil servants, so I am socialised into the issues of general interest … I think my qualities are less adapted to the private sector. I did an internship in the private sector and it is really long hours and you have to be like a shark, a bit aggressive. [*Bruno 11/20 Sciences-Po*]

There was also criticism of fellow students who *did* choose the private sector:

> From my point of view, doing ÉNA only for the intellectual and social prestige and then making a career in the private sector, it doesn't interest me. And I do not think it is right either. [*Daniel 10/20 Sciences-Po*]

These sentiments are embodied within the French satirical figure of 'the pantouflard'[5] – the 'top' civil servant who, after attending ÉNA, leaves the public sector to work in the private sector for greater financial reward (see, for example, CB and AJ 2007).

While our Oxford narratives are characterised by a desire for flexibility and fluidity, our Sciences-Po graduates imagined futures of structured progression within the civil service. The respondent cited earlier who would be the 'happiest person in the world' were they to make prefect by the time they were 50 was not alone. There was mention of the importance of moving posts, but these anticipated moves were less frequent than those of their English counterparts:

> In the longer term, I do not see myself doing the same for 42/43 years. [*Alain 3/20 Sciences-Po*]

There was a more general sense of forward planning:

> In two years, administrative judge in a courtroom. In five years also. In 10-15, I could perhaps be seconded elsewhere. This is what happened to my law professor at Sciences Po who is now ambassador to local authorities at the Home Office.[6] That's what interests me too. It would be shame to be too fixed in your ideas at 24 years. [*Philippe 4/20 Sciences-Po*]

[5] Literal translation means 'slipper wearer'.
[6] Ministère de l'Intérieur

There was also concern that changing too often would have a negative effect on your employment profile:

> It is possible to change three or four times in 10 years. On a CV, you cannot allow yourself to change employers every 10 months or a year. One should learn to change three or four times in ten years. [*Giles 16/20 Sciences-Po*]

The following respondent speaks negatively of his experience of American job mobility while he was on an internship:

> I would always work for the State. How many times would I change job positions? When I was in the USA, the father of my host family changed jobs every two or two and a half, three years. It is a little soon. By the time you arrive, you become aware of things, you launch yourself and you have your own vision of things, it is already time to leave …. you cannot change job positions simply because it is professionally interesting. There are other factors at play. [*Nicolas 19/20 Sciences-Po*]

Serving France?

Whereas sentiments of serving one's country are entirely absent from our Oxford narratives, they feature strongly in the Parisian accounts. It is true that several of our respondents wanted to make a distinction between their enthusiasm for public administration and patriotism:

> I am slightly indifferent to the patriotic aspect. [*Daniel 10/20 Sciences-Po*]

> When I say the administration is in the public interest and for all the people who live in France, I don't mean to be nationalistic. [*Virginie 17/20 Sciences-Po*]

> My interest is to work for the public interest, for the public service more than the position of France abroad. That is not something very important in my eyes. [*Lucienne 7/20 Sciences-Po*]

> I would like to work for my country even if the question for me could be summed up to working in the public sector more than working for my country or not. [*Giselle 18/20 Sciences-Po*]

However, others were quite clear that a strong identification with their country was an important factor in their career decisions:

> Without being protectionist or nationalistic, defending the interests of France is what interests me [*Alain 3/20 Sciences-Po*]

> It is somewhat related to the fact that I studied Political History … because it's the same idea: to serve France. [*René 2/20 Sciences-Po*]

> What I was looking for, above all, was to get the chance to know the national defence better … it was about serving France … it means a lot to me … A little Gaullist here. [*Gabriel 12/20 Sciences-Po*]

As Daniel summarises:

> Public service is royal, national. It remains the most French and national path. [*Daniel 10/20 Sciences-Po*]

This allegiance to France and/or its civil service did not mean that our graduates were uninterested in working abroad. Like Oxford, Sciences-Po prides itself on its global profile (Descoings 2007). Many of our graduates had already had overseas internships and planned to take up postings abroad. What is noticeably different from the Oxford students, though, is that when our Sciences-Po graduates talk of working abroad, they are still working 'for France', either in embassies or for French companies:

> The more I grow up, the more I feel the connection with France. It intersects with my idea of not working abroad anymore. Well, I could work abroad for a French firm. [*Francoise 8/20 Sciences-Po*]

> When you work in an administration, it is important to work for the state. When you are in diplomacy, it is important to work for France. Could I work for another country? It would be difficult. … I grew up in France, my affection and sentimental ties lie within this country. Also the French system allowed me to be where I am today …. I feel I am connected. I have an obligation. [*Nicolas 19/20 Sciences-Po*]

There is a sense in which these moves abroad are temporary postings to spread French interests:

> We cannot have everything right away. In five years I hope to be abroad. And in ten years I hope to be back in France. We must do things one by one. In ten years, if I am flourishing in what I do and my path is right for me - EDF[7] moves a lot. [*Marie-Pierre 5/20 Sciences-Po*]

Overseas experience, therefore, is also used to align self-fulfilment with national interest - perhaps reflecting the stronger French tradition of 'economic patriotism' (Clift

[7] EDF (Electricité de France) is one of the largest utility companies in the world. Until recently it was wholly owned by the French Government, which still retains 85% ownership after partial privatisation.

and Woll 2012) Here, one graduate describes how he hopes to expand the national reach of *La Poste* abroad:

> It will be interesting because it is modernising itself according to the French plan. It will be interesting to see how such an historic and traditional organisation can also conquer the European market. [*Alain 3/20 Sciences-Po*]

In the following account, the 'footloose' expatriate is an object of scorn – driven by a desire for money alone:

> The expatriates are often people who do not have high enough pay in France. When they are abroad, their pay is multiplied by three: so suddenly they find a superior way of life than they were used to in France. Since there is no gradual progression in their revenue, they have a *nouveau riche* way of doing things. They show off, they are flamboyant and this is not my style at all … I do not want my life to be like this. [*Francoise 8/20 Sciences-Po*]

The contrasts between our Parisian and our Oxford narratives are strong. Our Sciences-Po graduates are, in general, firmly committed to public administration, albeit in its elite ranks. They see this not only as a career, but as a means of fulfilment. They express their decisions in terms of the satisfaction of working for the general interest, for the community. To this extent, their career and their sense of civic duty can be presented as in perfect alignment. They also express strong allegiances to the state and to France. If the Oxford accounts are somewhat thin on loyalty, the Sciences-Po interviews provide an image of committed citizens whose trajectories are closely connected to the future of the state.

DISCUSSION

There are clear differences in the ways in which our French and British graduates articulate and justify their aspirations for the future. It might be argued that these differences are discursive alone. Perhaps the different 'silences' reflect the social acceptability of particular discourses in the two different countries rather than deeply held personal dispositions. Our French respondents are happy to talk about their patriotism and loyalty to their country in ways which it would be difficult to imagine our British respondents doing. It may be that, in the UK, overt expressions of patriotism are associated negatively with bigotry or xenophobia rather than positively with sentiments of pride and loyalty. It is worth remembering, for example, that one of our Oxford interviewees is about to join the Royal Navy. In discussing his future, however, he does not speak about 'serving' his country, even though this must surely be an element in his thinking. However, while we need to bear in mind that the differences reflect what can be said and not just what can be thought – even the differences in what counts as socially acceptable discourse are likely to have some deeper significance. In relation to

patriotism, for example, it would appear that there has been a measureable decline in national pride in England (Tilley and Heath 2007).

The contrasting aspirations are important because they may indicate differences in the extent to which national education systems have been subjected to 'internal denationalisation' (Sassen 2010). And this has implications for the nature and characteristic of a 'global middle class'. There is clearly increasing transnationalism among elite graduates. However, our data indicate that this transnationalism may take different forms in different contexts. Our British and our French respondents both have international aspirations, but these are differently inflected with notions of nationhood. Our British graduates resemble more closely the 'nomadic workers' with individualised trajectories and weaker social allegiances. Their cosmopolitan identities appear genuinely transnational. Our French graduates have a stronger sense of national belonging. Their cosmopolitan identities are very 'French'.

The contrasts are also likely to reflect the different structures of opportunity for elite employment within the two countries. In the UK, successive neoliberal reforms have led to a 'hollowing out' of the state (Rhodes 1994). Adonis and Pollard (1997: 67) claim, for example, that, 'in the course of a single generation … the status of the public sector has collapsed in favour of a narrow range of private sector professions'. Rather than going into the 'old' elites such as the armed forces and Civil Service, the ascendant new elites are in private sector occupations such as law, accountancy and corporate banking. The civil service may be suffering the same fate as the Church, which saw a decline in the number of elite graduates entering the profession during the second half of the 20th century as its level of power and influence lessened (Boyd 1973). In France, the public administration remains strong - not just in terms of numbers but in influence. Elite careers can still be found within the civil service. And while the winds of neoliberalism blow over France too, they have not penetrated as deeply into the functions of the state so that the ideals of Rousseau's (1762) social contract can still be found in the discourse of our young French graduates.

In discussing these differences, and the extent to which they might continue to be shaped by national education systems and national structures of opportunity, we do not seek to suggest that one system is superior to another. Those on the social democratic left and neo-conservative right might look favourably on our French graduates and despair of the highly individualised and self-centred orientations of our Oxford graduates. The French graduates seem to embody all that the Oxford students lack - commitment to the public interest, self-fulfilment through civic duty and loyalty to the state. Again, such an interpretation would be highly problematic. The alignment of occupation with civic duty does not rule out strong self-interest and we have enough sociological critiques of the state to know that public administration is not necessarily commensurate with the public interest (Bourdieu, 1998). We also need to remember that these narratives are only *aspirations*. Our Oxford graduates may well end up in public administration and the evidence suggests that, despite the expressed distaste for

corporate values, at least half of our Sciences-Po graduates will end up in the private sector (Harvey and Maclean 2008). And while we may be sceptical about the extent to which volunteering is really about altruism rather than CV-boosting, research by Maclean *et al.* (2006) reveals that elite British directors were more than four times more likely to be engaged in charitable work than their French counterparts.

The significance of national systems of education for civic responsibilities and for transnationalism lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, the data presented here do provide empirical evidence of marked national differences in the orientations and aspirations of the 'global middle class' of the future. These differences raise important questions for our understanding of the relationship between national education systems, nationalism and transnationalism at the 'top end'. They indicate a need for more detailed studies of how national and global change in education and the labour market impact on the ways in which those at the 'top' differentially view the future of the nation state and civil society and the associated implications for elite (re)production.

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