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# The Highway to success? Dynamics of Access to the Upper Fractions of the French Social Space (1918-1972)

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## Abstract

The sociology of social mobility and the sociology of the elite often focus on how one’s social background shapes access to prestigious curricula that open pathways to the top of the social hierarchy. This is especially true in France, where a significant portion of the political, economic, scientific, and cultural elite consists of graduates from the prestigious *Grandes Écoles*. This narrow focus tends to underestimate the reproduction of inequalities within these institutions and beyond, especially in French sociological works. To shed light on these little-known mechanisms, we focus on the professional paths of graduates from these elite institutions born between 1918 and 1972, based on an original dataset that compiles data from the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) Labor Force Surveys. Our analyses nuance the common idea of the *Grandes écoles* as the gateway for access to elite status within the French social space. If public service appears to be a safe path for alumni from working-class backgrounds, the shift towards the private sector appears to be more characteristic of former students who are better socially endowed. These findings underscore the relevance of combining two sociological fields of inquiry that remain largely segmented: the sociology of social mobility and the sociology of elites. It also reveals how the neoliberal turn in France has been mainly driven by the most socially privileged fraction of the French social space

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## Introduction

In a context of rising social inequalities, the development of work related to the formation of elites are necessary, as access to such training are crucial social resources for gaining positions of power (Khan 2012). And, indeed, unequal access to elite education often fuels controversies, especially in France. A quick look at the press confirms this: proponents of the “golden” legends and the “dark” legends about the system of *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (CPGE) and *grandes écoles* are regularly pitted against each other (Darmon 2013). However, there is a relative consensus in framing the issue of selection and training of French elites, both from a political and scientific perspective. Whether to denounce the narrow and uniform recruitment for these prestigious institutions or, conversely, to praise their benefits, the question of “social openness” and conditions of access to GE are at the core of the debates (Oberti, Sanselme, and Voisin 2009; Zanten 2010; Nozarian 2015). As if accessing a GE was synonymous with reaching a positions of power.

Changes in education policies since the early 2000s (Zanten 2010) have significantly reduced debates on selective educational paths only to their “democratization” and the quotas for access to prestigious programs granted to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Beaud and Convert 2010), without considering what perspectives these programs truly offer to such students. These debates have been ongoing for a much longer period. The “social openness” of GE has gradually become, since the 1950s, the only perspective for

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public authorities to address the role of GE in recruiting national elites (Pasquali 2021). Simultaneously, scientific research on GE and their students has largely focused on access inequalities to these elite programs. Research has revealed a “narrowing of the social base of CPGE and GE recruitment in the 1980s, after the relative democratization that occurred for generations born between the 1930s and 1960s, along with growing disparities with first-cycle university degrees, which, during the same period, expanded significantly” (Zanten 2010, 71).

This concentration of public and scientific debate on the issue of access inequalities is largely explained by the specificity of the French system for selecting and training future national elites – which are said to “produce” a homogeneous elite like an industrial “factory” (Cuhe 1988; Eymeri 2001). However, it failed to highlight the trajectories of alumni of these institutions. It contributes to maintaining the idea that the “reproduction” of the inequalities that structure secondary education paths is “miraculously suspended” once one has “crossed the threshold” of integration into one of these prestigious selective programs (Beaud and Convert 2010, 7).

For the past fifteen years, research on the life course of educational elites has shown that reaching such prestigious curricula does not necessarily have the same effect for all students. Significant inequalities can be observed in terms of gender and social background during these programs, both in how they are approached and invested in (Abraham 2007; Lambert 2010; Pasquali 2014; Pierrel 2015; Blanchard 2013). The paths taken beyond by former students also reveal significant inequalities based on their social background and gender (Bataille 2013; Denord, Lagneau-Ymonet, and Thine 2011; Marry 2004; Favier 2021; Demoli and Willemez 2019). This is to such national and international (Brint et al. 2020; Reeves et al. 2017; Torche 2018) research trend that our research would contribute. Furthermore, these analyses of the life course of *grandes écoles* alumni take place in a context where the weight of qualified and highly qualified jobs is increasing, and where, with the economic and private sector expanding, the access to the upper fractions of the social space is today more than ever linked to possessing substantial economic capital (Savage 2021). Our research aims to analyze the differentiated social trajectories of “former” GE students in this historical context.

Using data from various waves of the French Labor Force Survey, this work seeks to provide insights into the differentiation patterns of the professional pathways of French school elites in terms of social background and gender. It aims to question, from a sociological perspective, the widely held belief in the French context that GE are the “highway” to access the upper strata of the social space. We would offers an analysis of the various sectors and levels of the national social space actually influenced by this specific “path” to access. By emphasizing flows while keeping the specificity of access to the upper strata of the social space (or elite spaces) at the core of the analysis, our analyze would like to link two sociological literatures that are too rarely bridge: the one focusing on issues related to social mobility and the other focusing on the sociology of elites. Our analytical frame places the integration of an elite training institution as one step (among others) in the path of the alumni — not as a finish line or an endpoint. Its encourages a sequential view of the paths of elite institutions alumni, distinguishing the condition of access to these institutions from the conditions of access to the upper fractions of the social space. When questioning the power of GE to help their students to reach the summits of society, it raises the question of the existence of specific integration mechanisms into the dominant fractions of the social space. Such mechanisms are overlooked by many studies that claim to analyze social mobility and its tend to obscure the specificity of the boundaries crossed by individuals “in mobility” and what its imply in terms of capital conversion and reconversion strategies (Pasquali 2014; Sinthon 2018). Furthermore, analyzing how elite spaces are rules in light of the evolution of the flows that permeate the entire social structure provides a dynamic and historical view of these social spaces, which tend to be reified (Bataille, Louey, and Violier 2020; Dudouet 2018).

If there are few studies that combine the sociology of elites and the sociology of social mobility, it is also partly because the necessary data for conducting such studies are difficult to get. Therefore, we primarily present our empirical approach. It is not coincidental that the most precise studies on access dynamics to the summits of the social space have been conducted by researchers working in countries known for the high quality quantitative data available for research purposes, such as the Scandinavian countries (Toft 2018; Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2020). Having access to data that provide accurate information on social background, educational pathway, and socio-professional position held by individuals in large, homogenous samples over the medium and long term is a challenge. In the French context, with certain limitations, the Labor Force Survey leads by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) can be used

to build such representative sample of third-cycle graduates in France over a relatively long period. We will first present the strategy we use to build this database and its limitations, with the aim of promoting the “appropriation of quantitative data on social mobility,” which is often overlooked in the French context (Hugrée 2016). Following this, the second and third parts present the results obtained from this unique database about the professional destiny of French school elites in the second half of the 20th century. Finally, we will attempt to demonstrate what can be deduced from these results regarding the relationships between social mobility, the transformations of the social structure, and the specific role played by the state.

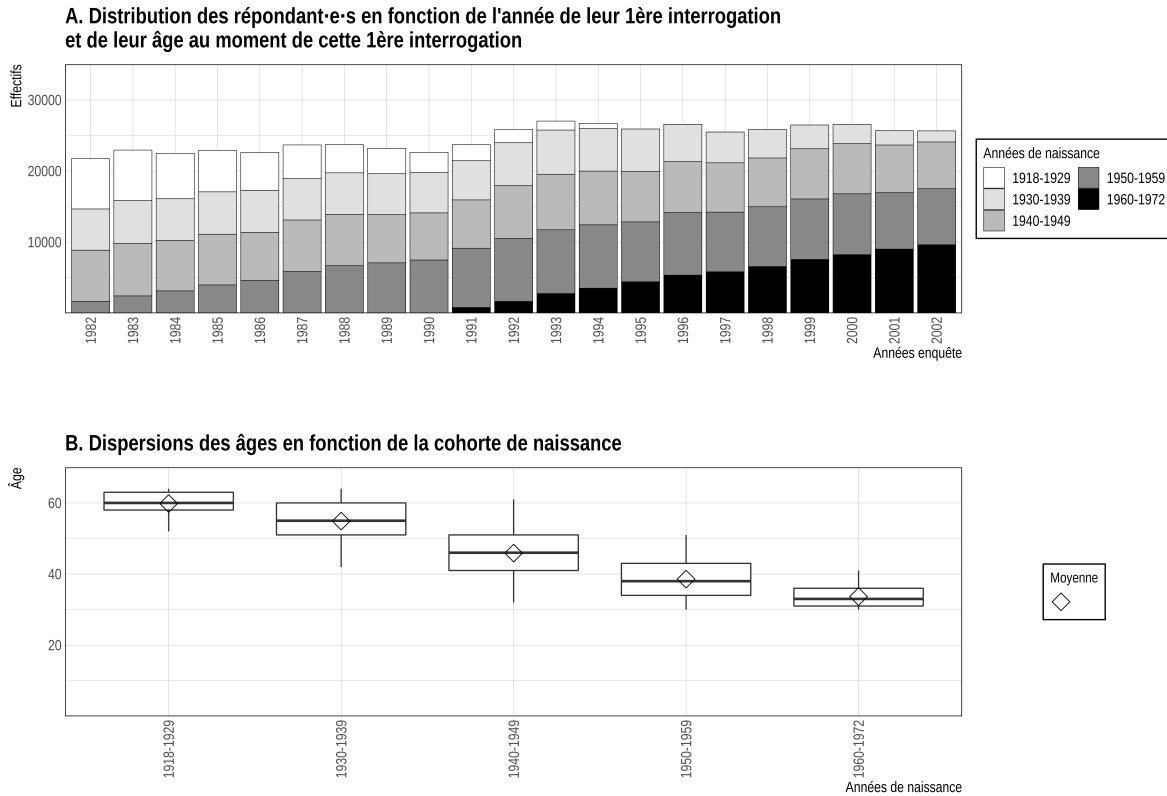
## **From Surveys Waves to Cohorts**

### **Building Cohorts from the Labor Force Survey**

Unlike many national and international official surveys, the Labor Force Survey include relatively detailed information about social background (father’s occupational category - and mother’s occupational category since 2003), the current occupational position, and the educational level of the surveyed individuals since the 1980s. It is as a valuable tool for analyzing intergenerational social dynamics and the transformation of social structures over the mid and long term. To use the data from this survey for this purpose, we carried out a reorganization of the original database - as presented in Figure 1 - by reconstituting cohorts based on the birth years provided in the Labor Force Survey. The Labor Force Survey is not a longitudinal cohort survey. In its most common use, it provides semi-annual snapshots of the French labor market. The sample of respondents is refreshed by one-sixth every quarter since 2003 (previously, the survey was refreshed by one-third every year (Goux 2003)). By selecting the first appearance of each surveyed individual in the database for a given period, we can reconstruct intergenerational individual pathways for a representative sample of the population from the generations born in the 1920s-1930s to those entering the labor market in the 2000s.

Transforming these surveys into quasi-cohorts is not straightforward and requires several methodological choices, which inevitably have an incidence on the analyses that can be drawn from them. The first of these choices concerns the age at which participants are selected for the survey. The analyses produced here aim to account for social mobility and reproduction from a historical perspective (Breen and Müller 2020). In this type of analysis, especially in France, the historical evolution of individuals’ social destinies is generally observed at a specific age (or age range). This allows the different cohorts to be observed at an equivalent point in their careers, avoiding the mixing of inter/intragenerational mobility effects (Vallet 2020). This is why mobility studies in France typically focus on the working population over 45 years (Bouchet-Valat and Jayet 2019). The issue is even more important here, since it is known that the prospects for alumni of the most prestigious GE may extend beyond the age of 40, whereas they tend to level off more quickly for graduates of less prestigious institutions (Bourdieu 1989).

**Figure 1: From Surveys to Cohorts**



Lecture : Among the individuals surveyed in 1982, there were 7,079 people born between 1918 and 1929. This group belongs to the cohort of individuals born between 1960 and 1972 (depicted in white on Figure 1.A). Among the individuals surveyed between 1982 and 2002 who were actively employed and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of their participation in the survey, the average age of those born between 1918 and 1929 was 60 years (Figure 1.B, represented by a diamond shape). In this same group of individuals, the median age was also 60 years (Figure 1.B, the central line within the box). 25% of them were 58 years or younger (lower edge of the box), and 25% were 63 years or older (Figure 1.B, the upper edge of the box).

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals actively employed and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey (first survey only).

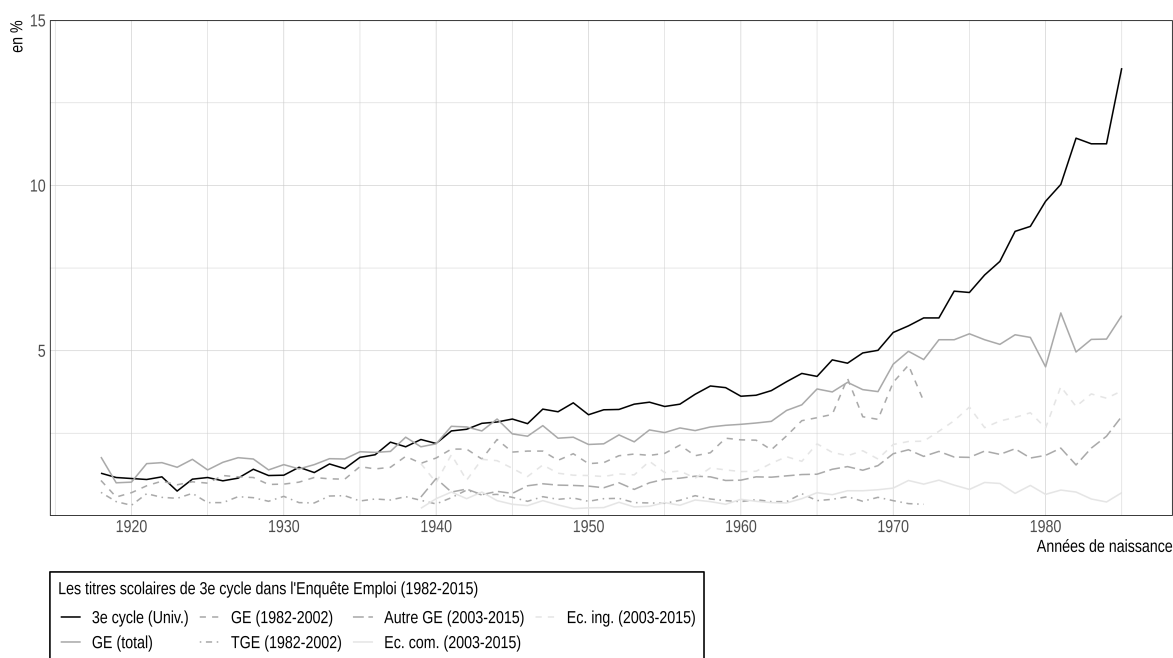
However, in this study, we chose to focus on the intergenerational trajectories of all surveyed individuals aged 30 to 64, due to sample size limitations related to our subject: former students of prestigious schools, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, constitute a rare population (Bataille, Perrenoud, and Brandle 2018). This means that we underestimate intragenerational mobility pathways for the youngest respondents (*e.g.* individual entering an intermediate position and later becoming a manager in their career). The average age at the time of the survey was 60 years for the oldest cohorts (1918-1929) and 34 years for the cohorts born between 1960 and 1972 (Figure 1.B). Therefore, we likely underestimate the upward intragenerational social mobility of the more recent cohorts compared to the older ones. Additionally, the age at the time of the survey has effects on the reporting of the respondent's father's profession (it is easier to report the exact profession of one's father when you are 30 years old than when you are 64) and on the reporting of the degree attained. Our choice to work with individuals aged 30-64 influences the interpretations of the obtained results and warrants caution. However, this method still provides an overview of the social trajectories of a substantial number of individuals over a long period, as already noted by C. Peugny (2007).

## Degrees and Ranking Struggles

As we noted earlier, conducting an analysis with data not originally designed for cohort analysis over such an extended period necessitates methodological choices that are inevitably subject to debate. While the significant hierarchies in French society have not weakened much during the studied period (Peugny 2013), the socio-political context has undergone significant changes. And each period can affect the analyzed cohorts (and the father's generation) differently. These changes inevitably have an incidence on the meaning of many of our categories of interest, like the type of degree obtained, the final occupational position, and social background.

The Labor Force Survey provides very detailed information about the last degree obtained. It allows for the identification of individuals who hold a postgraduate degree (3e cycle or >Bac+4<sup>1</sup>) and possess a degree or title from a GE. However, the classification categories "GE" vary in the nomenclature over the years, revealing the underlying ranking struggles that guide the re-coding of initial responses (in plain text) into statistical categories (Bodin and Orange 2016). Figure 2 shows the relative weight of different categories of individuals with postgraduate degrees based on the birth years of individuals surveyed in the Labor Force Surveys between 1982 and 2015. Regardless of their type of degree (university or GE), those with degrees exceeding Bac+4 are more numerous in the more recent generations.

**Figure 2:** Higher Education Diploma in the **Enquêtes Emploi** (1982-2015)



Lecture: Among individuals aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey, born in 1950, and surveyed in the context of the Employment Survey between 1982 and 2015, there were 3.1% who held a postgraduate degree from a university.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2015.

Scope: Individuals actively employed and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey (first survey only).

Figure 2 reflects the change that occurred in 2003 regarding the GE related categories. Before 2003, it was possible to distinguish between the most prestigious *grandes écoles* (*Très grandes écoles* or TGE) from the others (GE), as shown in Table 1. This division, although imperfect, had the advantage of distinguishing

<sup>1</sup>The *Baccalauréat* or *Bac* is the French diploma obtained at the end of the secondary training.

most of the “top institutions” (*Grande porte*) - such as the National School of Administration (ENA), Polytechnique, the *Écoles normales supérieures* (ENS), and others - from the rest (those represented the *Petite porte*) (Bourdieu 1989). However, from 2003 onwards, an entirely different classification was used, separating “Business Schools” (Ec. comm.), “Engineering Schools” (Ec. ing.), and “Other Grande Écoles” (Autre GE), abandoning any criteria related to the prestige and becoming less relevant from our perspective. People responsible for coding this variable, whom we were able to contact, attribute this change to a generational shift among their hierarchical superiors, among whom those educated in the TGE are several. It seems that, for those in charge of re-designing the survey for its transition to “continuous collection” in the early 2000s, the distinction between TGE/GE made less sense than that between business and engineering schools. The abandonment of the TGE/GE distinction can be seen as an indicator of the relative decline in the influence of certain intellectual influence among those responsible for designing statistical categories, particularly the Bourdieuan sociology, which may have had some influence in the early 1980s in the French public statistics institutions (Amossé 2013).

**Table 1:** The diploma partition in the Labor Force Survey (1982-2003)

Troisième cycle	Grande école (autres)	Très grande école
DESS DEA Doctorat général médecine chirurgien-dentiste CAPES CAPET Agréation	Diplôme d’une grande école (hors TGE) Etudes comptables supérieures (DECS) Avocat (CAPA) Expert-comptable 2e cycle de notariat	Centrale École des Mines École de l’Air Navale École de la Magistrature, ENS ESSEC, Polytechnique ENA, ENPC (« Les Ponts ») ENGREF, ESM (« Saint-Cyr »), IEP (« Sciences-Po ») Génie maritime, ENSAE (« Sup’Aéro ») HEC, Télécom Paris INA (« Agro »)

The available data, however show that, among the individuals surveyed between 1982 and 2002, the proportion of former students from TGE remained stable, while the proportion of students from other GE and postgraduate students steadily increased across cohorts. When comparing the evolution of the total proportion of graduates from all GE (GE Total) over the entire period, no major breaks in the series are observed. In the sample, the share of former students from all GE increases at the same rate as the share of postgraduates across generations, stabilizing at around 5% for the generations born between 1970 and 1985. Meanwhile, the proportion of postgraduates continues to increase relative to the massification of the French University during the 1990s.

Since the TGE category is of particular interest to us, the subsequent analyses focus on the period 1982-2002. In order to work with homogeneous data regarding degree categorization, we will only focus on individuals aged at least 30 years at the time of their first survey participation and surveyed between 1982 and 2002 (N = 517,546) – hence born between 1918 and 1972 (Figure 1.A). However, research projects involving less unstable statistical categories (certain well-institutionalized professional groups, such as doctors, for example) could use Labor Force Survey data beyond the 2002 cutoff and create larger sample sizes than the one used here.

## From PCS to Indicators of Destination and Origin Social Positions

The second significant recoding task relates to socio-professional categories, both for understanding the social outcomes of graduates and their origins. The history of statistical categories has demonstrated how these measurement tools bear the mark of sociological conceptions of social stratification that guided their creation. Categories originating from the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero schema (Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979), focused on employment relationships and disregarding individuals’ integration into a national social structure characterized by the unequal distribution of relatively incommensurable forms of capital (particularly cultural and economic capital), still serve as the gold standard in many analyses of

social mobility in international publications and have been extensively examined and critiqued (Penissat and Rowell 2012). Our aim here is not to revive these debates but to outline the path we found relevant based on our study population of highly educated individuals in France. In our case, the common categorizations aimed at representing the entire social space seemed ill-suited to the specific issues that structure the upper strata of the social space.

We aimed to construct a typology that accounts for the segments of the dominant classes toward which the graduates analyzed gravitate, along with specific characteristics of these dominant class segments in light of research on the upper classes in France. Following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it can be said that the upper part of the French social space primarily polarizes around an axis opposing “everything that is public or related to the ‘public sector,’ the State, public schools [...] and everything that is private, private property, as little dependent (at least publicly) on the credit of the State in economic [...] as well as symbolic (official decorations, participation in commissions, etc.) terms, private education, etc” (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin (de) 1978, 9). On this axis, which contrasts individuals in terms of the structure of their capital, liberal professions occupy a median position, accumulating large volumes of both economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979).

To do this, we started with the categorization proposed by F. Matonti and C. Baudelot (1994) in their work on the social backgrounds of students at the *École normale supérieure* (ENS). We therefore retained four broad “professional blocks” that reflect the polarity of the power field in France (and especially the distance/proximity to the State and the civil service) as it emerges in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, which we aligned with socio-professional categories (PCS). It’s important to note that only individuals for whom we can provide information about their social position in terms of their professional role are included in our sample. Inactive individuals are therefore excluded from our analyses. For older respondents, we exclude retirees, which introduces a selection bias in favor of those who, for example, remain active between the ages of sixty and sixty-four. We also exclude respondents who have temporarily or permanently stopped their activity to focus on domestic work, particularly affecting the female population.



**Table 2:** From PCS to the upper fractions of the social space

Pôles champ du pouvoir	Regroupement PCS (code PCS 1982)	Effectifs (non-pondérés)			
		Total	TGE	GE	3 <sup>e</sup> cycle
<i>Professions supérieures liées à l'État</i>	Professeurs et enseignants du supérieur et chercheurs (342a, 342b, 342c, 342d, 342f, 342e, 342g, 342h) ; Professeurs et enseignants du secondaire (341a, 341b, 422a, 422b, 422c, 422d) ; Cadres de la fonction publique (331a, 332a, 332b, 333b, 333c, 333d, 333e, 333f, 334a, 335a).	28226	496	928	3648
<i>Professions de tradition libérales</i>	Professions supérieures du droit (312a, 312b, 312g, 333a, 372e) ; Professions supérieures médicales (344a, 344c, 344b, 311a, 311b, 344c, 344d, 311f, 311c, 311d, 311e, 343a) ; Professions de l'information, des arts et des spectacles (352a, 352b, 353a, 351a, 353c, 353b, 354a, 354b, 354c, 354e, 354f, 354d, 354g).	17808	136	576	5296
<i>Professions supérieures liées aux entreprises</i>	Chefs d'entreprise de 10 salariés ou plus (23) ; Cadres administratifs et commerciaux d'entreprises (371a, 372a, 372c, 372d, 372b, 373a, 373b, 373c, 373d, 372f, 374a, 374b, 374c, 374d, 375a, 375b, 376a, 376b, 376c, 376d, 376e, 376f, 376g, 377a, 312c, 312d, 312e, 313a) ; Ingénieurs et cadres techniques d'entreprises (380a, 381a, 381b, 381c, 383a, 384a, 382a, 382c, 382d, 382b, 312f, 385a, 387d, 386c, 388c, 384b, 384c, 385b, 386a, 386b, 386e, 383b, 383c, 386d, 387a, 387b, 385c, 388d, 389a, 389b, 389c, 387c, 387e, 387f, 388a, 388b, 388e)	55389	1145	4961	1891
<i>Autre</i>	Les autres PCS (hors inactifs)	584659	309	1411	1989

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals actively employed and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey (first survey only).

Regarding the upper professions related to the State, certain choices inevitably raise questions, notably the categorization of secondary school teachers as “upper professions” for all cohorts. While it is undisputed that secondary school teachers in the 1940s and 1950s, who were still relatively few in number (a few tens of thousands) and often holders of the prestigious Agrégation exam (for nearly 25% of them (Bataille 2014, 160–61)), could objectively and subjectively be classified among the country’s cultural elites, this is less true for those of the 1980s and 1990s. The “averaging” of the profession and the accompanying sense of relative decline are well-documented today (Chapoulie 1987; Farges 2017). Nevertheless, in order to maintain a consistent categorization across all generations, it seemed more pertinent to retain secondary school teachers in the category of upper professions.

The heterogeneity of profiles grouped under the label “intellectual professions of liberal tradition” may also be surprising. However, although they now straddle the public and private spheres of the labor market, the “weight of liberal traditions” and the “main or secondary spheres of activity of their members” are factors that clearly differentiate these activities from other upper professions in the public sector (Baudelot and

Matonti 1994).

Furthermore, this approach does not allow for the distinction of “political elites” (Genieys 2006) – who hold a central place in structuring and operating the field of power – from other members of the upper fractions of the social space. Due to their broader perspective compared to studies more focused on political personnel, the analyses proposed here seem capable of “grasping the phenomena of power reproduction and self-legitimation in the overall structure of domination” (Genieys 2006, 137).

To capture the social origin of graduates (measured in Labor Force Surveys through the profession of the father when the respondent completed their initial studies), we opted for a more classical categorization with three modalities: “Upper Classes,” “Middle Classes,” and “Working Classes” (see Table 3). It’s worth noting that this choice of the father’s profession is also constrained by the data structure, as the mother’s profession is only recorded from 2003. Unfortunately, this means missing out on matrilineal inheritances, which are known to be crucial for understanding the educational and professional directions toward the male dominated upper scientific professions (Ferrand, Imbert, and Marry 1999).

**Table 3:** From PCS to social background

<b>Classification retenue</b>	<b>Intitulé PCS (code PCS 1982)</b>
Classes supérieures	Chefs d’entreprise de 10 salariés ou plus (23) ; Professions libérales (31) ; Cadres de la fonction publique (33) ; Professeurs, professions scientifiques (34) ; Professions de l’information, des arts et des spectacles (35) ; Cadres administratifs et commerciaux d’entreprise (37) ; Ingénieurs et cadres techniques d’entreprise (38)
Classes moyennes	Artisan (21) ; Commerçant et assimilés (22) ; Instituteurs et assimilés (42) ; Professions intermédiaires de la santé et du travail social (43) ; Professions intermédiaires administratives de la fonction publique (45) ; Professions intermédiaires administratives et commerciales des entreprises (46) ; Techniciens (47) ; Employés civils et agents de service de la fonction publique (52) ; Policiers et militaires (53) ; Employés administratifs d’entreprise (54) ; Employés de commerce (55)
Classes populaires	Agriculteurs (12, 13,14) ; Personnels des services directs aux particuliers (56) ; Ouvriers qualifiés de type industriel (62) ; Ouvriers qualifiés de type artisanal(63) ; Chauffeurs(64) ; Ouvriers qualifiés de la manutention, du magasinage et du transport (65) ; Ouvriers non qualifiés de type industriel (67) ; Ouvriers non qualifiés de type artisanal (68) ; Ouvriers agricoles (69)

The relevance of our choices evolves over the studied period. For example, the working class have known a rise of service-sector workers and a decrease in small farmers. Categorizing all farmers under “Working Classes” does not represent the significant dispersion and internal segmentation of this category (Bessière, Bruneau, and Laferté 2014). The prestige of teaching professions has varied significantly between the 1950s and 1980s, as we just mentioned. Even more problematic is the classification of employees as “Middle Classes”: these categories of workers tend to move closer to the working class (in terms of income and working conditions (Spire, Penissat, and Huguée 2017)) for the most recent generations, although this phenomenon is more limited for male professions (as we are interested in the father’s profession). Ultimately, this simplified classification is needed due to the constraints of sample size, especially when we want to develop a three dimensional analysis (social origin, degree, profession). Furthermore, this classification has the advantage of using the

classic “trptych” commonly used in everyday language and scientific analyses of social stratification, dividing society into three major groups. It goes without saying that the realities reflected behind these categorizations have evolved over the studied period, but they are the ones that seemed most relevant over the long term to understand the social position of the generation of the respondents’ fathers born between 1918 and 1972.

## **Socially Rooted Routes to the Top**

The first analyses presented here concerns the evolution of socio-sexual recruitment to top of the the French academic system: 3rd cycle programs at universities, GE, and TGE. Since many studies have addressed this issue of recruitment, we will only mention the most salient points that emerge here. To provide an idea of the evolution of the social selectivity of these three cursus, we can first analyze the social origin of their graduates based on birth cohorts and gender (Table 4).

**Table 4: Social Background and Access to Higher Levels of Education**

		Hommes					Femmes				
		1918-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-72	1918-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-72
<b>TGE</b>	Or. soc.										
	<b>cl. pop.</b>	13,8	16,8	12,6	11,1	10,2	18,5	16,9	10,6	13,2	13,2
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	37,7	36,3	40	41,8	34,4	28,2	39,6	43,3	28,6	38
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	48,5	47	47,4	47,1	55,4	53,2	43,5	46,1	58,2	48,8
<b>Total (N*)</b>		238	437	656	492	197	21	34	110	128	89
<b>GE</b>	<b>cl. pop.</b>	19,4	19,9	22,1	18,7	16,1	11,1	18,7	13,3	17,3	13,5
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	45,7	44,7	42,5	42,1	39	38,2	37,3	40,6	37,5	43,9
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	34,9	35,4	35,5	39,3	44,9	50,7	44	46,1	45,2	42,6
	<b>Total (N*)</b>	480	1277	2341	2085	1151	42	127	297	530	510
<b>3e cycle</b>	<b>cl. pop.</b>	14,5	17,4	17,4	16,4	16,7	11,1	11,4	14,3	15,9	16,1
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	46,6	45,9	44,3	43,1	46,3	46,8	44,2	43,8	41,6	38,9
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	38,9	36,7	38,4	40,6	37,1	42,1	44,5	41,9	42,4	45
	<b>Total (N*)</b>	397	1159	2712	2513	1131	199	739	1806	2050	1179

\*effectifs non-pondérés

		Total					
		1918-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-72	
<b>TGE</b>	Or. soc.						
	<b>cl. pop.</b>	14,1	16,8	12,3	11,5	11,1	
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	37,0	36,5	40,5	39,2	35,5	
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	48,9	46,7	47,2	49,4	53,4	
<b>Total (N*)</b>		259	471	766	620	286	
<b>GE</b>	<b>cl. pop.</b>	18,7	19,8	21,1	18,4	15,3	
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	45,1	44,0	42,3	41,1	40,5	
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	36,2	36,2	36,7	40,5	44,2	
	<b>Total (N*)</b>	522	1404	2638	2615	1661	
<b>3e cycle</b>	<b>cl. pop.</b>	13,4	15,1	16,2	16,2	16,4	
	<b>cl. moy.</b>	46,7	45,2	44,1	42,4	42,6	
	<b>cl. sup.</b>	40,0	39,7	39,8	41,4	41,0	
	<b>Total (N*)</b>	596	1898	4518	4563	2310	

\*effectifs non-pondérés

Lecture: Among all male graduates of *Très grandes écoles* (TGE) born in 1960-72 (men and women), the proportion of individuals from working-class backgrounds was 10.2%.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals in employment aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of the survey (first interview only) and holding a degree greater than a Bachelor's degree.

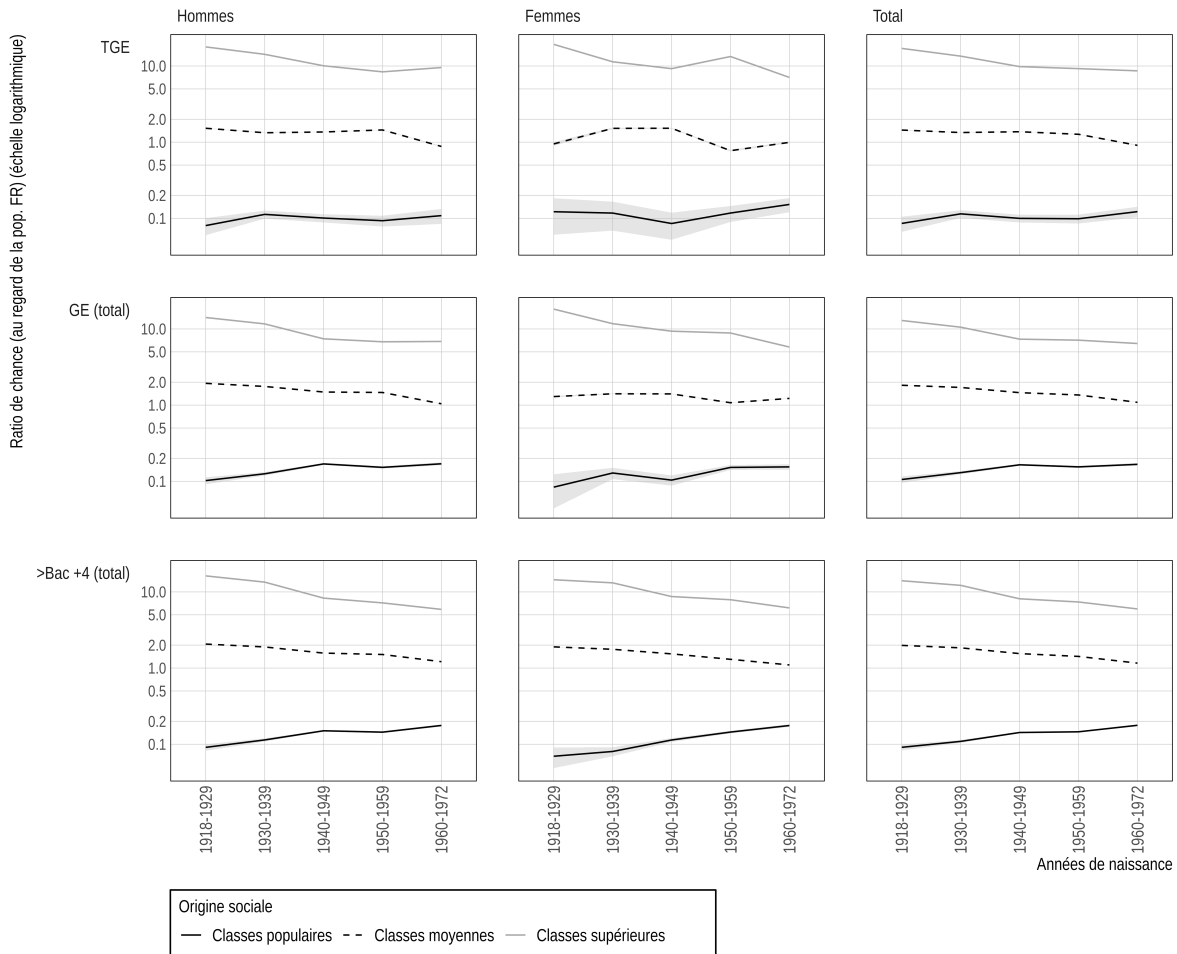
Here we can appreciate more precisely the size of the available samples for analyzing the paths of graduates

from prestigious schools and third-cycle university programs in the Labor Force Survey. Grouping cohorts that span about a decade of birth years provides a sufficient sample size for statistical analysis, especially for men. For female graduates of prestigious schools from the oldest generations, the sample sizes are very small (21 cases born between 1918-1929, 34 born between 1930-39) – which is, in itself, a result: women from these cohorts had a very limited access to the most prestigious academic pathways. These small sample sizes make the analyses more challenging and weaken the interpretations we can make regarding the paths of these graduates.

From an analytical perspective, Table 4 shows that a significant decline in the proportion of graduates from working-class backgrounds in prestigious institutions between the oldest and most recent cohorts: 14.1% for the generations born in 1918-29, 16.8% for those born in 1930-39, compared to 11.1% for the generations born in the 1960-72. This decline is particularly pronounced among working-class men. At the same time, the representation of people from upper-class backgrounds increased by 6.9 points among male graduates of the TGE. The same trend is observed among male GE alumni, with a slight increase in female graduates from working-class (+2.4 points) and middle-class backgrounds (+5.7 points). Among graduates with a tertiary university diploma, both male and female, the proportion of individuals from working-class backgrounds increases between the oldest and most recent cohorts (an increase of +2.2 points and +5 points, respectively). This increase is more prominent among men, where as early as the cohorts born in 1930-39, 17.4% come from working-class backgrounds. Among women, similar proportions are observed for cohorts from the 1950s and 1960s.

While useful, these initial observations have limitations, because they are sensitive to structural effects. For example, as shown in Table 4, the proportion of respondents with a working-class backgrounds decreases significantly between the oldest and most recent generations (-15 points). This is why we calculated, for each generation, the odds ratio regarding the access to our elite curricula, which we have arranged as a series of concentric circles (Figure 3): TGE (line 1), all GE (including TGE and GE - line 2), and finally all third-cycle universities diploma (i.e., all graduates with a degree beyond Bac +4, both from universities and other elite programs - line 3). These odds represent the access chances of men and women from working-class, middle-class, and upper-class backgrounds relative to all other people of the same gender from different social classes. The curves represent the trend of the odds ratios (presented on a logarithmic scale for better readability, especially when odds ratios are  $>1$ ). Despite the limitations of this tool (Combessie 2011), the use of odds ratios provide an overview of the relative changes in access opportunities for people from each social group to various programs, regardless of structural effects. The shaded areas represent to the margin of error (at a 90% confidence level). The position and slope of the curves thus obtained provide a intuitive idea of the evolution of the access opportunities of the different segments of the French population to the higher education system for the generations entering higher education in the second half of the 20th century. The closer the odds ratio value is to 1, the more similar the access opportunities are for the subpopulation analyzed compared to the rest of the population.

**Figure 3:** Evolution of the Chances of Access to Higher Levels of the French Education System for Individuals Born between 1920 and 1970



Lecture: A person born in 1960-70 from an upper-class background is 8 times more likely, compared to a person from a different background, to eventually access a Très Grande Ecole (TGE) rather than another form of education.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals actively employed and aged between 30 and 64 at the time of the survey (first survey only).

In general, it appears that, across all the generations analyzed here, children from higher social classes consistently have a greater probability of accessing the most prestigious levels of the French education system, regardless of the group of disciplines considered. This tendency is slightly more pronounced for TGE. For people with a working-class backgrounds, the relative chances of accessing degrees beyond Bac+4 increase from generation to generation, but they remain significantly lower than 1. For graduates of GE and TGE, the process is not as linear. In the cases of TGE and all GE, we can observe a two-phase dynamic: a period of gradually decreasing relative advantage for men from higher social classes (for generations born between 1918 and the 1950s) is followed by a period of stagnation, or even a resurgence of this advantage. The latter trend aligns with the findings of V. Albouy and T. Waneq regarding the social closure movement of these institutions during late 1970s (Albouy and Waneq 2003). Based on recent research on the “social opening” of all “grandes écoles,” it can be assumed that this trend has not changed for subsequent generations, given the low proportions of students from working-class backgrounds in the ranks of the 2000-2010 cohorts (Bonneau

et al. 2021).

Middle-class women, on the other hand, maintain a slight relative advantage, especially in accessing disciplines in all “grandes écoles.” In fact, when looking at gender, it is mainly among men that we observe a movement of social closure for individuals born in the 1960-72 period. Among women, the democratization of TGE and GE seems to continue beyond the 1970s, although the small number of women from working-class backgrounds in the data urges caution in interpreting this trend.

By contrast, the relative advantage of men from middle-class families has steadily decreased over the entire period in the three groups of disciplines analyzed here, especially within the “grandes écoles,” confirming certain trends already identified in other works (Euriat and Thélot 1992). Their situation is relatively under-studied, as the focus is primarily on the most spectacular cases of social ascent (in the form of media subjects known as “transfuges” or “transclasses” (Naudet 2018)) or the most obvious cases of intergenerational reproduction. Their situation appears unique compared to the trajectories of the other two social groups, both in terms of the descending slope of their odds ratio curve and the value (close to 1, indicating no relative advantages) at the end of the period.

## The Social Anchoring of the Sense of the State

### The Rise of the Private Sector

Now, let’s examine the paths predominantly taken by alumni from prestigious academic pathways according to generations. To analyze their professional trajectories, we employed a four-category variable which provides information about the types of segments within the upper classes (see Table 2). Table 5 presents the evolution of the relative positions of the three major groups of upper-class professions based on the generations of all respondents aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of their first survey.

**Table 5:** Evolution of the Composition of the Upper Strata of the French Social Space

	Hommes					Femmes				
	1918-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-72	1918-29	1930-39	1940-49	1950-59	1960-72
Prof. sup. de trad. libérale	2,6	2,1	3,3	3,2	2,4	1,6	1,6	2,5	2,9	2,8
Prof. sup. liées à l'Etat	3,1	3,6	5,5	4,1	3,9	1,6	2,5	5,1	4,3	4,6
Prof. sup. liées au privé	9,3	9,8	12,5	11,6	13,5	2,3	2,6	3,8	4,1	6,3
Autres	85,1	84,5	78,7	81,1	80,2	94,5	93,3	88,6	88,7	86,3
<i>Total (N*)</i>	<i>11541</i>	<i>35441</i>	<i>78886</i>	<i>113544</i>	<i>94527</i>	<i>8382</i>	<i>26483</i>	<i>63481</i>	<i>101554</i>	<i>88372</i>

*\*effectifs non-pondérés*

Lecture: Among all men in activity at the time of their first participation in the Employment Survey born in 1960-72, the proportion of upper-level professions related to the private sector is 13.5%.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals in activity aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of the survey (first interrogation only).

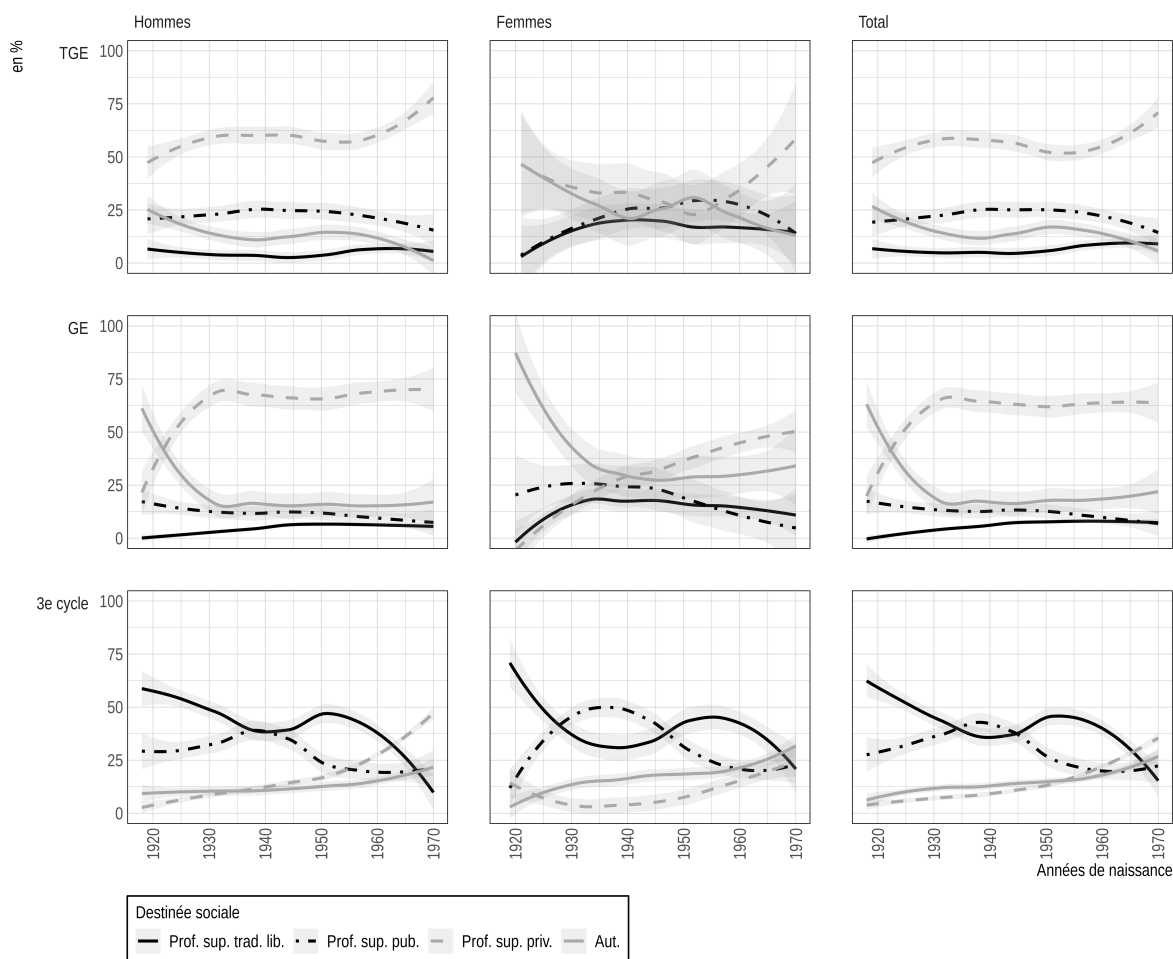
Overall, it appears that the proportion of individuals in these upper-class professions within the entire working population tended to increase (by +4 points among men and +8.2 points among women). The more pronounced increase is among women, reflecting the conquest of upper-class professions that occurred in the second half of the 20th century (Le Feuvre 2005).

For men, this increase primarily seems to be due to the growth of upper-class professions linked with private sector (+4.2 points). The other two groups of professions remained relatively stable among men. However,

there is a slight peak in the group of upper-class State related professions among the generations born between the 1940s and 1949. For generations entering the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s, which coincided with the peak of the development of the welfare state before its gradual “erosion” through the 1980s (Gaïti 2014), it appears that higher positions within the State may have been attractive. The fact that the same process is observed among women supports this hypothesis.

The larger sample size here (individuals are not distinguished by their social origin) allows us to track the professional trajectories of individuals holding a degree higher than Bac+4 according to their year of birth (Figure 4). For ease of reading, we have smoothed the curve representing these trends by using local regression (known as “loess”), which generates smoothed curves from a scatterplot of data points. In these graphs, the shaded area represents the confidence interval around this regression curve at a 90% level.

**Figure 4:** Evolution of Social Destinies by Gender



Lecture: For the generations born between 1960-1969, 67% of male graduates from *Très grandes écoles* (TGE) have entered a high-level profession in the private sector.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals in employment aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of the survey (first interview only) and holding a degree higher than Bac+4.

Among all the respondents, postgraduate degree owners primarily medicine or law students, constitute the



largest group, as evidenced by the relatively high percentage (between 50 and 45%) of upper-class liberal professions among this group of degree holders. The second most common destination for postgraduate degree holders from universities is upper-class professions in the public sector. There is a peak for those born in the late 1930s, followed by a decline in subsequent generations. A more detailed breakdown reveals that secondary education, particularly teaching, is the most common career path for the university postgraduate generations of the 1930s entering higher positions in the public sector. When examining gender differences, it becomes evident that this peak is particularly pronounced among female university postgraduate degree holders, as nearly half of them entered upper-class professions in the public sector among those born in the 1930s. Highly educated women entering the job market in the 1950s likely turned to public sector professions, particularly teaching, because they represented the most open careers in terms of symbolism and status, in contrast to professions such as law, medicine, and engineering, which were still male-dominated bastions at that time (Lapeyre 2006).

Secondly, it appears that both GE and TGE primarily “produce” private sector executives. This type of professional destination applies to nearly 60% of degree holders from all the major institutions in our sample. The TGE, in particular, also produce a significant number of high-level public sector executives due to the organic links that some of these *Grande porte* institutions maintain with specific segments of the civil service (such as the National School of Administration (ENA), government ministries, the prefectural or diplomatic corps, higher education, research which are well-known examples). Nearly a quarter of TGE alumni enter high-level positions in the public sector during the entire period.

However, the propensity of elite schools to “produce” private sector executives rather than State related professionals significantly increased for the generations born in the 1960s. This increase is particularly pronounced for the TGE. For the most recent years, only 17% of TGE alumni ultimately choose high-level public sector positions. At the same time, the rate of former TGE alumni joining the ranks of private sector executives increased from 50% for those born in the 1950s to nearly 70% on average for those born in the 1960s.

Two interpretations of this trend seem possible. First, it can be seen as a consequence of the significant reduction of the State during the 1970s and especially in the 1980s (Bezes 2012). The dynamics described in Table 4 account for this decrease in public sector employment, following a period of growth in the two decades after World War II. However, our data underestimate the changes in the State’s scope due to nationalizations and privatizations of large companies. Many former TGE alumni pursued careers in publicly-owned enterprises (e.g. France Télécom, Suez, Paribas), which later shifted to the private sector. Our data do not capture these movements, as these executives are systematically categorized among private company executives and engineers. Second, it may suggest an increased attraction of the private sector for TGE alumni. In other words, this trend could represent an intensification of the “revolving door” phenomenon among TGE linked to the senior civil service (Charle 1987). This trend would confirm Pierre Bourdieu’s observations that students from elite schools increasingly turned to the private sector starting in the 1970s, contributing to the growing symbolic and economic importance of the private sector compared to the post-World War II decades (Bourdieu 1989). The downsizing of the State and the growth of qualified and highly qualified jobs in the private sector likely reinforced the tendency for TGE alumni to look beyond high-level public sector careers. The combination of these trends reflects a shift in the balance within the upper strata of the French social space and a decline in the State prominence in favor of businesses in the last quarter of the 20th century. This move towards the private sector is not exclusive to graduates of the GE and TGE but is also observed among graduates with a postgraduate university degree. These changes reflect shifts in the labor market and the increasing professionalization of the French universities (Albouy and Wanecq 2003).

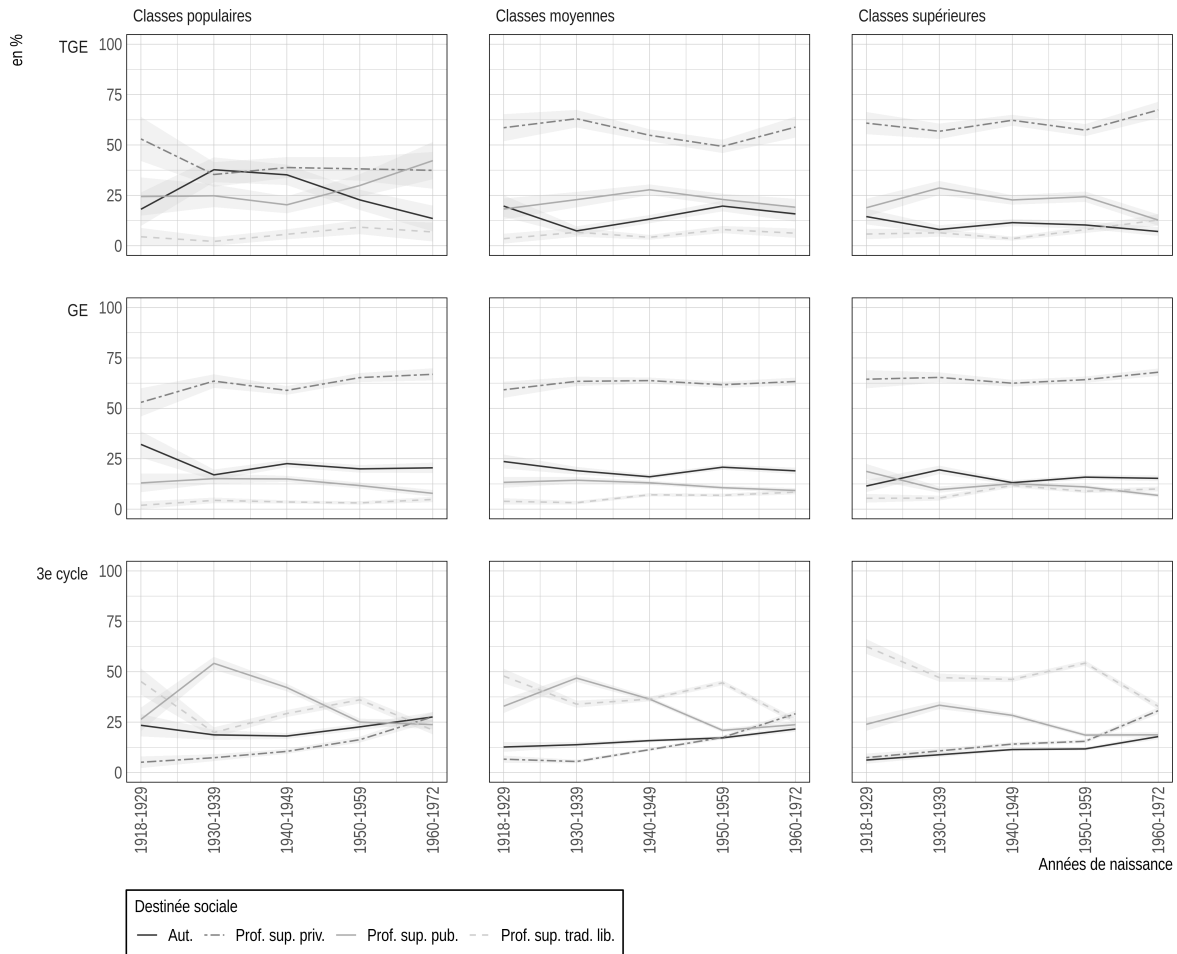
Gender inequalities in the professional paths of GE and TGE alumni also appear to be significant. The data gathered here do not allow for definitive interpretations regarding women who attended TGEs, as indicated by the wide confidence intervals around the regression curves. However, for almost all birth years, the proportion of female TGE alumni who do not reach any upper-class professions is almost the same as those who reach executive positions in the public or private sectors. Those with a postgraduate university degree seem to have made better use of their academic qualifications, with the proportion of those who did not enter upper-class professions (outside the upper class) mostly remaining below 25%.

Lastly, the central graph, with its ascending gray dashed curve, serves as an illustration of the “respectful revolution” effect experienced by engineering and business schools and the feminization of business schools – linked with the feminization of management roles in France during the second half of the 20th century (Marry 2004; Blanchard 2015). While almost no women born before 1930 and graduated from GE achieved management positions in private enterprises, nearly 50% of female GE alumni from *petite porte* institutions born in the 1960s have been in managerial or engineering roles in the private sector.

## **Socially Differentiated Returns**

Lets now analyze how the flows of graduates from the highest levels of the education system are directed in relation to their social origins (Figure 5). This allows us to test the idea that GE and TGE represent one and the same “highway to success” for people who enter these prestigious institutions. The small size of the groups does not allow us to analyze the evolution by year of birth. Instead, we have opted for an evolution by cohort, with each cohort spanning about a ten-year period. The particularly low numbers for the oldest cohort of graduates from working-class backgrounds (1918-1920) mean that trends for this specific generation should be viewed with caution.

**Figure 5:** Evolution of social outcomes for graduates based on their social background



Lecture: For the generations born between 1930-1939, 43% of graduates from “*Très grandes écoles*” coming from working-class backgrounds have not durably integrated into any of the dominant fractions of the national social space.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

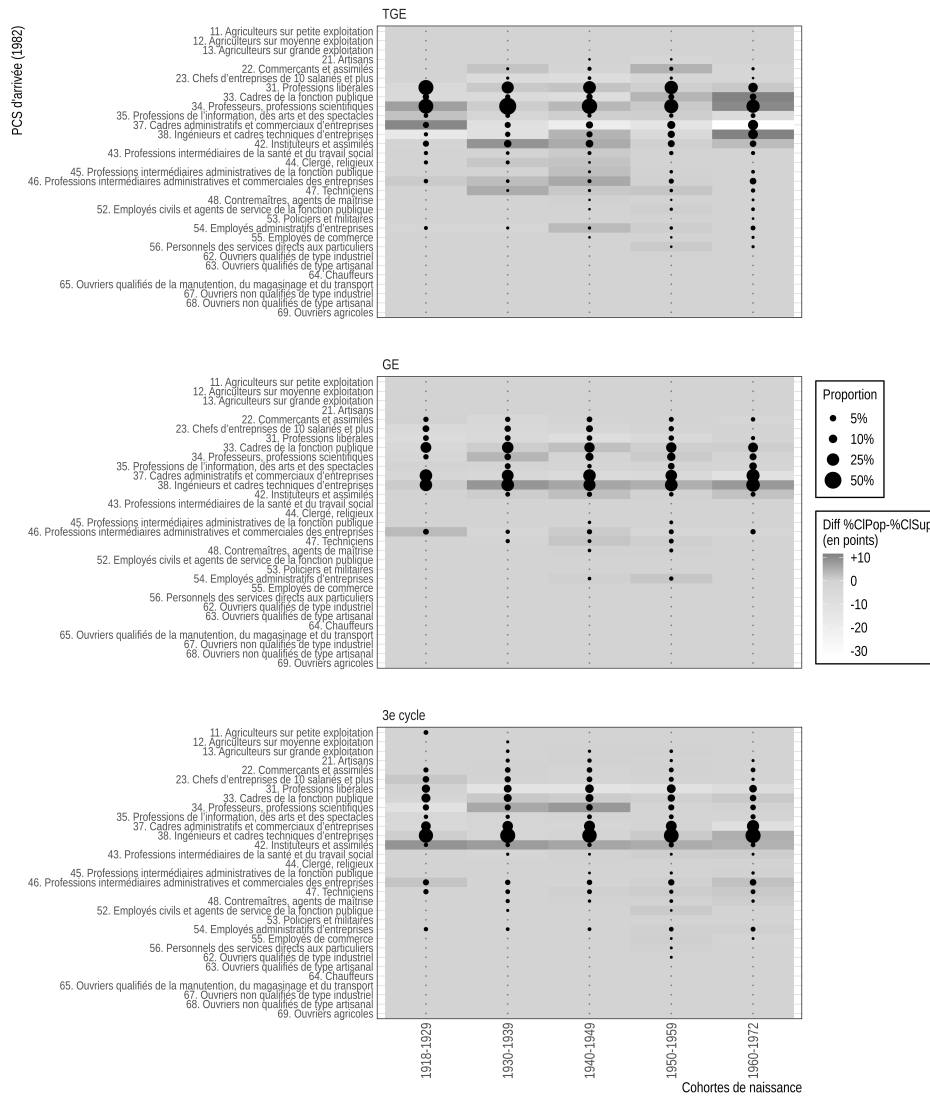
Scope: Individuals in employment aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of the survey (first interview only) and holding a degree higher than Bac+4.

Regarding graduates of universities (third row), much like women, individuals from working-class and middle-class backgrounds belonging to the oldest generations (i.e born in the 1930s and 1940s) largely entered the public sector - and less often the paths leading to liberal professions - before turning away from them. It's also noticeable that the gap in career outcomes for university graduates in relation to their social background decreases in the more recent generations.

Secondly, in the case of TGE, the data collected shows that graduates from working-class backgrounds born between the 1930s and the 1950s were nearly 43% not ending up in high-status professions. It's only for the generation born in the 1960s that the trend significantly reverses. What becomes of these graduates from working-class origins? A comparison of the professional destinies of individuals from working-class and upper-class backgrounds with a finer granularity of social outcomes can be helpful here. In Figure 6, the differences in proportions (in points) between these two categories of graduates based on their social background are represented on a graduated scale in two colors: the darker the square, the more the graduates

from working-class backgrounds are overrepresented in the corresponding ISCO category compared to those from upper-class backgrounds. The size of the dots is proportional to the distribution of all graduates, regardless of social background, in the various ISCO categories. Here we can see that the career paths outside of high-status professions for TGE graduates from working-class backgrounds lead to positions as primary school teachers, intermediate public sector roles, and positions in private firms.

**Figure 6:** Over- and under-representation of graduates from working-class backgrounds by Occupational Categories (PCS)



Lecture: Among the respondents of the Employment Survey born between 1930 and 1939, the rate of graduates from *Très grandes écoles* originating from working-class families who became teachers is 10 points higher than the rates of graduates from higher social classes in the same situation.

Sources: Labor Force Surveys 1982-2002.

Scope: Individuals in employment aged between 30 and 64 years at the time of the survey (first interview only) and holding a degree higher than Bac+4.

This significant proportion of ‘off-track’ outcomes towards intermediate levels of the social space can be partly explained by the evolution of the “field of grandes écoles” (Bourdieu 1989). A significant number of institutions classified as TGE from the 1980s onwards (such as ENS Saint-Cloud/Fontenay, ENSET, certain business schools) had long been considered second line grandes écoles. They opened doors to professions not categorized here as superior (teaching in normal schools, intermediate positions in businesses, etc.). Former students often found themselves significantly limited in their progression within these professional spaces (Barbé and Luc 1982).

The substantial decrease in the proportion of these ‘off-track’ outcomes among working-class graduates of *Grandes écoles* starting from the cohorts born in the 1950s also appears to be a result of a field effect. Starting from the 1970s, following the initial massification of universities, some of the less prestigious schools are more and more similar with TGE, in terms of recruitment and opportunities. It is partly this transformation that we observe here (Bourdieu 1989, 3e part. - chap. 2).

Nevertheless, the ‘dispersion’ of career outcomes among members of the same cohort has always existed, contributing to a potential gap between the “probable future” of former students and the “promised future by the institution” (@ Bourdieu 1989, 159). Contrary to many common discourses about Grandes écoles, it is evident here that they did not necessarily reward the ‘merit’ of upwardly mobile alumni more effectively before the first educational expansion in the 1960s. In fact, before the 1960s, the proportion of students from working-class backgrounds who failed to turn their prestigious diploma into dominant professional positions was particularly significant. Access to less prestigious schools and third-cycle university cursus appears, over the long term, to be a more consistent guarantee of upward social mobility for working-class individual.

Thirdly, an increased investment in the professions related to the State by working-class GE alumni is evident in the most recent generations. This goes against the overall trend of a predominant orientation towards the private sector. This reminds some of the findings conducted by S. Gollac and C. Huguée (2005) regarding the transformations that have affected the civil service as a whole since the 1980s. Despite the undeniable “contraction” of jobs in this sector since 1982, it has become increasingly favorable to “women and children of the working class” in terms of employment compared to the private sector, where these population categories are “more frequently discriminated against.”

Simultaneously, the increasing orientation of GE and GE alumni towards the private sector and traditional liberal professions is primarily the result of students from middle and upper-class backgrounds. These findings extend certain observations made about specific alumni populations, such as graduates of ENS (Bataille 2013), which showed the influence of social origin on post-integration career choices. It is a trend for students from families with larger amount of cultural and economic capital to veer away from the senior civil service to better exploit their educational capital. In this context, differentiation occurs between students from working-class backgrounds and students from middle and upper-class backgrounds. Supported by more qualitative research on the career paths of working-class students from *Grandes écoles* (Bataille 2017), one might wonder if the attachment of certain upwardly mobile alumni to the civil service, as identified here, can be explained by the fact that it represented their primary path to upward social mobility.

## Conclusion

Inequalities do not stop at the doors of prestigious academic institutions. Once this first step is completed, a second one is established – less recognized but equally effective – when come the time of converting educational capital into eminent social positions. Some conversions appear to be easier than others. This highlights one of the “underappreciated values” of the public service (Gervais, Lemercier, and Pelletier 2021) in our results: the vital importance of State-related services in social mobility and in providing access for working-class graduates and women to the higher levels of the social space. Over the long term, third-cycle university programs have played a central role in significant upward mobility, leading from working-class backgrounds to higher intellectual professions. The public sector also seem more open to the arrival of graduates from working-class backgrounds than those closer to the private sector.

Further research is needed on more specific subgroups whose modes of production and reproduction vary significantly, and our analyses deserve to be deepened in various aspects. The data at our disposal limit us in

this regard. Although the Labor Force Survey is incredibly rich, the data from it make it impossible to perform such detailed analyses for more recent periods (cohorts born after 1970), due to changes in the classification of degrees after 2003. Furthermore, even if this classification were still effective, we would probably face similar limitations in terms of sample sizes (although the size of the Employment Survey sample has increased over the years). Analyses utilizing more detailed categories on social origin, degree, and profession would be useful in capturing the dynamics of social inequality reproduction. For instance, within certain *Grandes écoles* and universities, some programs are more ‘lucrative’ (both in terms of money and symbolism) than others. More generally, for research on other, less exclusive populations (such as teachers, medical professionals, etc.), the use of the Labor Force Survey data that we have proposed here offers extremely promising research perspectives in a “micro-classes” perspective (O. Jonsson et al. 2009; Jayet 2021).

Despite the limitations we have pointed out, the approach blending sociology of social mobility and sociology of elites that we have attempted to establish here seems to shed new light on debates within the communities of sociologists belonging to one or the other of these two ones. For example, in works focused on French administrative elites, two major trends oppose each other in analyzing the propensity of French civil servants to pursue careers in the private sector, for example. Some argue that this trend is on the rise (Rouban 2012), while others emphasize the relatively limited nature of this type of career choice in relation to all the people who enter ENA (Birnbaum 2018). Our analyses show that without taking into account the interplay between social origin and the opportunity structure available to *Grandes écoles* alumni linked to the civil service, we cannot account for the logic of the choices made, which cannot be summarized as a more or less equal loyalty to the state.

Regarding works more closely related to debates on social mobility, the results we have presented demonstrate the specificity of the access mechanisms to certain upper segments of the social space and highlight the limitations of treating the hierarchy of diploma as a continuous variable (Hout 1988). The paths followed by individuals who only experienced university education and those who attended GE or TGE are not equivalent. Our results shed light on the specific logics that structure the trajectories leading to various summits in the hierarchy of social status. They advocate for a sociology of elites as a sociology of “inequalities from the top” (Khan 2012), i.e a sociology that pays attention to the effects of the specific impact of elite spaces on the production and reproduction of inequalities. As seen in this paper, access to the State related pole of the dominant classes is not equivalent to access to the private sector pole. The “class ceiling” (Friedman and Laurison 2019) that alumni on a strong upward social mobility trajectory encounter, particularly at the threshold of eminent social positions, invites a more precise examination of the social conditions of access to these specific social spaces and the specific modes of transformation “from one type of capital to another” (Bourdieu 1979, 146) that their integration requires.

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