

Chicago and Paris: Two cities with School Segregation? 1/2

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French programs of “positive discrimination” are supposed to help open elite education to socially disadvantaged students. While challenging the idea that diversity is truly promoted in the United States, a comparative study of current trends in Paris and Chicago show the opacity of the selection criteria in Paris, and the existence of a clear geographical segregation.

How can we reconcile the education of the elite and greater diversity in the recruitment of this elite in cities that are characterized by segregation? At a time when programs of positive discrimination for the access to the most prestigious lycées¹ and selective institutions of higher education are being developed in France, looking at what is currently happening in the city of Chicago is particularly helpful, and all the more interesting since a new system of discrimination has been established there in the domain of education. Partly based on the socio-economic profile of the neighborhood of residence, it officially abandons “race” as a legitimate and decisive criterion of affirmative action, and thus tends to attenuate the differences that we commonly observe between, on the one hand, the French model, based on a geographical approach to the populations involved and an explicit indifference to ethnic origin and income, and, on the

¹ In France, secondary education is in two stages: *collèges* cater for the first four years of secondary education, from the ages of 11 to 14, and *lycées* provide a three-year course of further secondary education for children between the ages of 15 and 18. Students are prepared for the baccalauréat (baccalaureate, colloquially known as *le bac*.) (Translator’s Note)

other hand, the American model, based on the student's origin and whether he or she belongs to an "ethnic or racial minority group."²

A comparison of both contexts allows us to think about the limits of both the new action plan in Chicago and of the French system (or at least the system that has been implemented in and around Paris), much less elaborate and formalized in its attempt to diversify recruitment. Both cities, with their respective experience and contrasting results as far as the ability of their education system to "diversify" the elite, socially, ethnically and "racially", is concerned, are confronted with the same questions: Who should be advantaged? What are the implications of a more open recruitment of the elite in a highly competitive "meritocratic" system, when there are only a limited number of places? How can we influence the markets and regulate the principles of unequal distribution of resources that affect success in school? How can we combine, not only social and ethnic factors, but also "racial" criteria in the United States, or criteria that are linked with belonging to a group of "visible origin" in France? How can we politically legitimate such attempts and strike the right balance when it comes to principles of positive discrimination?

In both cases, the room for maneuver is highly constrained by politics and seems limited, insofar as educational systems remain characterized by strong organizational and institutional inertia. In the end, it seems very difficult to determine with certainty what the intended objectives are and which comes first. Are the current reforms in Chicago and Paris really trying to give a greater weight to the working class and minorities in the recruitment of the elite? Or isn't it rather, in the case of Chicago, a way to revive programs of desegregation without referring explicitly to "race"? Is this "small opening", in the French case, a way to make some adjustments and protect highly selective institutions that are the keystone of the French education system? Isn't the introduction of

² This text is based on the results of a study that can be found in its entirety in the following article: Oberti, Marco (2011), "Ségrégation, sélectivité et 'diversité' dans les lycées publics de Chicago et Paris", *Notes & Documents*, n° 02, Paris, OSC, Sciences Po/CNRS, 2011. For an electronic version of this working document and the other issues of *Notes & Documents* of the OSC, see the OSC website: http://osc.sciences-po.fr/publication/pub_n&d.htm

“diversity” as a euphemistic form of positive discrimination that takes into account the “origin” of a student a response to a political strategy of a different type?

Selectivity and Diversity in Chicago High Schools?

Among the different types of schools in Chicago, the *Selective Enrollment High schools (SEHS)* are the most interesting if we want to understand how the department in charge of public education tries to reconcile the selection of the best students with greater diversity in recruitment. There are only a small number of these selective public high schools – 9 for the whole city – and they provide schooling for roughly 12% of students. Unlike the situation in Paris, characterized by the great geographical concentration of its most attractive and selective schools, these high schools are dispersed throughout the city, from North to South. Given the nature and intensity of segregation in Chicago, this point is particularly important. Even if the social and racial morphology of the city is more complex than that, it is common to oppose the *North Side*, located in the North of the Loop and predominantly white and affluent, to the *South Side* on the one hand (South of Loop), predominantly African-American and less affluent, and to the *West Side* on the other hand, also underprivileged, with a strong presence of Hispanics and African-Americans. This geographical distribution does not completely erase other ways of differentiating between these schools, having to do with their location in more or less desirable neighborhoods. If, generally speaking, the ethno-racial profile of these selective high schools mirrors more or less faithfully the profile of the city, each school’s data reveal significant differences depending on its location. Despite their status as elite schools, those that are located in mostly black and less privileged neighborhoods are having difficulty in attracting white or Asian middle-class students, who choose to apply only to the selective high schools located in the most affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods.

Only the best middle schools students (those who are in the top 5% of their class) can take the admission test. Their grades during the school year count for 70% of their final grade, and their result at the admission test for the remaining 30%. Among admitted students, 30% are accepted on the basis of their school records and their results at the test

only: no other factor is taken into account. These are the students who have obtained the highest scores of all the candidates, but we must keep in mind that a significant part of white middle and upper middle class students are in private schools. The remaining 70% are divided into four equal parts (or tiers) that correspond to four socio-economic neighborhood profiles (with roughly 4,000 inhabitants each), from the least to the most affluent. These profiles are established on the base of a synthetic indicator that takes into account the following six criteria:

- Average household income
- Level of education (% of people without any diploma, with a high school diploma, of college graduates and post graduates)
- Percentage of single-parent families
- Percentage of homeowners
- Percentage of people speaking a language other than English
- Average performance of schools in the area on the test (Weighted Average ISAT Performance at Attendance Area Schools)

It is therefore no longer the characteristics of the family as such that are taken into account (income, “race”), but the average profile of the (micro) neighborhood in which the family lives. In a city like Chicago that is characterized by great social, and especially ethnic and “racial” segregation, this approach through micro-neighborhoods is a relatively efficient mode of assessing the socio-economic background of a student, his or her “race”, and/or his or her ethnic origin. It is also a way to give a push to a minority of middle-class (black) students who live in poor neighborhoods (or at least in neighborhoods that are less privileged than others) where Whites represent a small minority,³ and whose social standing is generally inferior to Blacks. The intense segregation and stigma attached to some schools, however, greatly limits the ability of

³ The underlying goal could be to encourage middle and upper middle class white families to live in more mixed neighborhoods, and to thereby act on social, ethnic, and racial segregation; but the principle put forward by CPS is clearly a principle of diversity in schools, and there is no reference to a goal of greater socio-residential mixing.

these measures to encourage white middle-class parents to adopt residential strategies in order to increase their children's chances of accessing these schools.⁴

Each tier therefore represents 17.5% of all admitted students⁵ and recruits the best students within each profile. The scores of the students who are admitted on the basis of their results at the entrance exam (rank), and the scores of those who are coming from the most affluent neighborhoods are superior to the scores of the other tiers, with, however, a very small gap between the minimum and the maximum. School selectivity is therefore lower for students who come from less privileged neighborhoods, regardless of their social origin and “ethno-racial” background. On the other hand, the discrepancy between the results of the nine Selective Enrollment High Schools are more marked depending on their location, their recruitment, and therefore their appeal. In other words, the label “elite school” does not completely erase the social and ethno-racial hierarchy that is deeply rooted in Chicago's urban space. The hierarchy of scores is generally more closely associated with the hierarchy of neighborhood profiles in the high schools that are located in the city's more affluent areas, which are also the most sought after by the white middle and upper middle class.

In total, if we add to the 30% of students who are admitted on the basis of their score at the exam only (among whom a majority comes from the most affluent neighborhoods) the 17.5% of best students who come from the poorer neighborhoods (Tier 4), it is the case that, by subtraction, *more than half of the admitted students come from medium or modest neighborhoods* (often with a large proportion of Blacks and Hispanics), neighborhoods in which the medium scores at elementary and middle school level are lower. If we compare this number with the 15% of students coming from middle schools located in Priority Education Zones (Zones d'éducation prioritaires or ZEP) who

⁴ This is also what Sabbagh (2010, p. 61) demonstrated when he looked at the evolution of positive discrimination in California. The increased probability of being one of the best students when attending a less selective high school with a greater presence of African-American and Hispanic students, and therefore having the opportunity to get into one of the two best public universities in the State, did not increase the appeal of those schools for the white middle class.

⁵ In reality, 5% of available spaces are left to the principal's discretion. In some cases, this quota is used to recruit top athletes who would never have been recruited otherwise.

are admitted each year to the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, we realize the lack of concerted effort in the Parisian system to guarantee social diversity and a mix of “visible origins” in elite high schools.

Is the Criterion of Residence Sufficient in Itself?

The intensity of social and ethno-racial segregation in Chicago justifies therefore the approach by neighborhood both when defining a student’s socio-urban environment,⁶ but also his or her dominant ethno-racial profile. And yet taking residence into account as the sole criterion is problematic. Admittedly, the majority of children who are in public schools attend an elementary or middle school in their district, but the opportunity to attend a private school allows some families to avoid the constraints of districting – keeping in mind the fact that the high tuition of some of the most prestigious schools⁷ result in a massive attendance of these schools by white upper middle class children, and a much smaller presence of Blacks and Hispanics in comparison with selective public high schools.⁸ In Chicago, 17% of students attend a private high school, with, however, a very uneven ethno-racial distribution, since it concerns 44% of 16-year-old white students, 8% of black students, and 17% of Hispanic students (Sander, 2006).⁹ The situation is very different in the suburbs, where the proportion of white students of the same age who attend private schools is four times less (11% only), whereas it varies little for the other two groups. In other words, one of the essential aspects of *white flight* lies in the possibility of moving to the suburbs to access public schools that are relatively

⁶ Chicago ranked second among the main US cities, immediately after New York City, with regard to the dissimilarity index (or Index of Dissimilarity – ID) between Blacks and Whites in 2010 (82.5) and was in eighth position for the ID between Hispanics and Whites (60.2). The index between Blacks and Hispanics was also high: 80.8. In other words, 82.5% of African-Americans would have to move to another neighborhood (or census tract) in order for the white and black groups to be equally distributed.
<http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/segregation2010/Default.aspx?msa=16980>

⁷ The *Latin School* and the *Parker School* in the Northern part of the city, and the *Lab School* (University of Chicago) in the Southern part, are among the city’s most reputable, and most expensive, schools. (Tuition at the middle school level is between \$20,000 and \$27,000 per year.)

⁸ These three schools set forth principles of social, racial, and religious diversity in their charter, and insist on diversity as an educational and cultural tool. The extent to which diversity is taken into account during recruitment is less clearly stated. Only the *Latin School* indicates on its website that “26 % of employees and 27 % of students are self-declared people of color”.

⁹ Beside the cost, one of the reasons for the lower percentage of Blacks in Chicago’s private schools is the fact that most of these schools are Catholic, while the majority of Blacks are Protestant.
http://www.chicagofed.org/digital_assets/publications/chicago_fed_letter/2006/cfloctober2006_231.pdf

segregated in terms of ethnicity or race and have important resources at their disposal, related to local taxes.

The funding of public schools represents indeed the major difference between the two systems, even if we tend to exaggerate the homogeneity of resources in French schools. In the United States, public schools receive very little funding from the federal government, a little more from the state government, and most of their funding at the local level.¹⁰ The amount of resources per pupil therefore varies considerably within a single state, with major differences between the school districts that are located in affluent suburbs and those, less privileged, that are in urban centers. The more centralized nature of the French education system does not produce the same level of inequality. However, financial resources vary from one department¹¹ to the next (at middle school level), but also from one region to the next (at high school level) and lead to political decisions and the attribution of subsidies that are often contested. These disparities are reflected not only in the academic institutions that are in charge of education, but also directly in the schools themselves (affecting the number of programs or initiatives, of Special Education Assistants, the type of equipment, etc.).¹² These inequalities are amplified by the indirect effect of the resources (financial or other) that parents inject into these schools. This is even more obvious in the United States, with the organization, within schools, of fund-raising events during which parents are solicited for financial contribution or gifts in nature. This process effectively privatizes “public” schools and creates considerable inequality in their endowment, depending on which neighborhood they are in.

Taking into account only the student’s residence can therefore favor students who are living in middle-of-the-road neighborhoods, students who belong to the white middle class and attend a very selective private school outside of their area. It would therefore

¹⁰ In Chicago, as elsewhere in the US, the three levels of government (Federal, State, Local) are knee deep in debt and budget constraints are particularly strict right now.

¹¹ French: *département* – one of the three levels of government below the national level, between the region and the commune. (Translator’s Note)

¹² This recently led to the mobilization of parents of students in Seine-Saint-Denis (a working-class neighborhood in the North-East of Paris).

seem more coherent and more efficient to also take into account the choice and location of the school (within the district or not), for instance, by giving extra points to students who attended a school within their district¹³ (or a school located in a district with a similar profile).

The second part of this article will be published tomorrow in [Books&Ideas](#).

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¹³ A similar problem can arise for the children of divorced or separated parents, who have the possibility of using the most advantageous fictitious address.

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First published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by **Pascale Torracinta** with the support of the **Institut français**.

Published in booksandideas.net 26 April 2012

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