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# Giving something back? Sentiments of privilege and social responsibility among elite graduates from Britain and France

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**Sally Power**

School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, UK

**Annabelle Allouch**

Observatoire Sociologique du Changement, Sciences-Po, France

**Phillip Brown**

School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, UK

**Gerbrand Tholen**

Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK

## Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between transnational elites and civil society through examining the contrasting orientations of two cohorts of 'elite graduates' from Paris and Oxford. Both cohorts believe their privileged status has been earned through hard work and ability. But they are also aware that they have benefited from advantages not available to all. Perhaps because of this, they express the need to 'give something back'. However, the means through which they seek to discharge their social responsibilities are very different. While the Oxford graduates seek to 'give something back' through volunteering and third sector engagement, the Paris graduates will 'give something back' through public service. The article discusses how the contrasting relationship between the state, civil society and the education system in these two countries may shape dispositions, and speculates on the extent to which these elite recruits' commitment to 'give something back' will make a difference.

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## Corresponding author:

Sally Power, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, 46 Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3BB, Wales, UK.

Email: [powers3@cf.ac.uk](mailto:powers3@cf.ac.uk)

## Keywords

Civil society, elites, graduates, social responsibility, volunteering

This article addresses current debates around the changing relationship between elites and civil society within the context of increasing globalization. Various social theorists have pointed to the ways in which processes of ‘deterritorialization’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972), ‘transnationalism’ (Schiller et al., 1992) and the ‘hollowing out of the state’ (Rhodes, 1994) are reconfiguring citizens and citizenship. Of course, as Falk (1993) notes, citizenship has always been an ‘uneven experience’ – varying across social groups and over time. The forms and prospects of transnational citizenship experienced by elites are likely to be very different from and less precarious than those experienced by the dispossessed migrants and refugees. But even among transnational elites, there are notable shifts in their relationship with the changing globalized landscape.

Falk (1993) argues that before the Second World War, elite citizens with international orientations were very much ‘global reformers’ who acted as advocates of global responsibility.<sup>1</sup> They were, he claims, ‘a worried and idealistic component of the elite’ (1993: 42). In more recent decades, Falk argues that the ‘global reformer’ has been gradually replaced by the ‘man or woman of transnational affairs’ – unified around common business and financial interests. Certainly, much has been written about the rise of a transnational elite comprised of talented young graduates pursuing ‘boundaryless careers’ in a global ‘war for talent’ (e.g. Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown et al., 2011; Doyle and Nathan, 2001; Favell, 2008; Sassen, 2001).

There are concerns, though, that as these ‘bright young things’ pursue their international careers, they will have limited national allegiances and little sense of social responsibility. Falk (1993: 44), for instance, claims that unlike the ‘global reformers’ of previous generations, these new men and women of ‘international affairs’ comprise ‘a denationalized global elite that is virtually without any sense of global civic responsibility’. Others fear that these new transnational elites will not only lack global obligations, but that they will have limited national allegiances and little sense of social responsibility for those left behind ‘at home’. Over 20 years ago, Robert Reich (1992: 302) spoke of the ‘darker side of cosmopolitanism’ in which transnational professionals:

... may never develop the habits and attitudes of social responsibility. They will be world citizens, but without accepting or even acknowledging any of the obligations that citizenship in a polity normally implies.

As Freeland (2011: 2) argues of what she calls the ‘new super-elite’:

Its members are hardworking, highly educated, jet-setting meritocrats who feel they are the deserving winners of a tough, worldwide economic competition – and many of them, as a result, have an ambivalent attitude toward those of us who didn’t succeed so spectacularly. Perhaps most noteworthy, they are becoming a transglobal community of peers who have more in common with one another than with their countrymen back home ... today’s super-rich are increasingly a nation unto themselves.

Despite the apparent consensus about the emergence of this transnational elite, there is relatively little empirical research on how their social responsibilities and citizen obligations are *actually* being reconfigured. And while there is little doubt that we are seeing forms of deterritorialization, this does not necessarily mean that the national differences have disappeared. Indeed, as Yeoh and Willis (2005: 72) point out, 'far from heralding the death of geographical location, global competition has only rendered relativities of place more, not less, important'.

Sassen (2003) argues the 'global' may be embedded into nation-states in different ways and that it is important to look at the specificities of changing forms of citizenship. We need to trace 'micro-transformations in the institution of citizenship on the inside of the national state (rather than the outside, as in post-national conceptions)' (Sassen, 2003: 246).

In this article we attempt to explore some of the elements of these 'micro-transformations' through comparing the orientation and dispositions of two 'matched' cohorts of French and British elite graduates – people who might be considered recruits to this new global elite. France and England provide fascinating contexts in which to undertake comparative research. Although geographically very close and having broadly similar demographic and economic profiles, the two countries are culturally and politically very different. As Gordon and Meunier (2004) outline, the UK has long been seen to embrace a *laissez-faire* approach to the economy in which, as Adam Smith famously put it, *The Wealth of Nations* should be left to the 'invisible hand' of the market and state involvement kept minimal. France, by contrast, has long been associated with a *dirigiste* approach, not only to the economy but to many aspects of social life. France, at least rhetorically, upholds the virtues of order and regulation; the UK favours deregulation of the market. For France, the collective is privileged; for the UK, the individual is paramount (Gordon and Meunier, 2004). Not surprisingly, these two countries have positioned themselves differently in relation to the rise of the global economy – while the UK has tended to embrace global markets, France has been far more ambivalent towards globalization – and in particular Americanization (Meunier, 2004) and sought to retain elements of *dirigiste* control (Clift, 2006).

We have explored elsewhere (Power et al., 2013) how contrasts between France and England appear to influence young graduates' international aspirations, but here we look at their sentiments of privilege and social responsibility. To what extent do these elite recruits consider themselves to be, as Freeland suggests, 'deserving winners'? Do they display ambivalence about their own success relative to those who are less successful? Have they developed any of the 'attitudes of social responsibility' or accepted some of the 'obligations' to which Reich alludes?

Examining the attitudes and aspirations of the transnational elite is sociologically important. As Sassen (2005) argues, these are the 'emergent social forces', whose dispositions and orientations will have far-reaching consequences. Their trajectories not only help us trace the flows of globalization, they also have significance for those who are 'left behind'. As Giddens (1998: 105) has argued: 'Exclusion at the top is not only just as threatening for public space, or common solidarity, as exclusion at the bottom end; it is causally linked to it.' He argues that the withdrawal of those at the 'top end' from various aspects of civil society will have negative consequences for inequality.

## The research

The data from which this article draws derive from a larger research project<sup>2</sup> on the ways 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 (in their own language) about their backgrounds, career plans, personal aspirations and perspectives on meritocracy and inequality. We outline below the reasons for the selection of the countries, the institutions and the courses; the attributes of our respondents and the mode of data collection and analysis.

In order to highlight the national contextual differences in orientations to citizenship, we have attempted to make our comparisons across two cohorts of students that have been 'matched' as closely as possible on the basis of the status of the institution and the career orientation of the degree courses.

### *Institutions and courses*

In England, we interviewed a cohort of 20 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 20 students taking the Master's in Political Administration at Sciences-Po, Paris. Both Sciences-Po and Oxford would count themselves as elite institutions. They reside at the top end of not only national but international league tables of prestige. In relation to the 2015 World University Rankings (QS, 2015) for political science, for example, Oxford takes third place (after Harvard and Princeton) and Sciences-Po, fifth place (just 'behind' the London School of Economics and Political Science). Both institutions would claim to be 'global universities' and, because of their reputations, both are highly academically selective.

Not only are both institutions of roughly equivalent status and selectivity, there are strong parallels between the degree 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 organizations. 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*. Indeed, it is the *alma mater* of 13 of the 21 prime ministers of the Fifth Republic. Only two of the seven presidents of the Fifth Republic are not Sciences-Po graduates.

Oxford, along with Cambridge (collectively referred to as Oxbridge), does not have quite the same explicit link to elite formation enjoyed by graduates of the French *grandes écoles* – but the association between having an Oxbridge degree and access to elite occupations is close. A recent report (Milburn, 2014) reveals that while Oxbridge graduates account for less than 1% of the population, they comprise 75% of British judges and 59% of government ministers in the last administration. Oxford's PPE in particular has a reputation for feeding graduates into high political office (e.g. Kelly, 2010). David Cameron, the current prime minister, holds a PPE degree, as do seven members of his Cabinet.

## *The respondents*

Our 40 interviewees responded to an invitation to participate in the research and while we cannot therefore guarantee that they are fully representative of the course members, their overall profile matches that of the institutions as a whole. Despite attempts in both countries to widen participation, both institutions recruit disproportionate numbers of privately educated students from socially privileged backgrounds. Our respondents can therefore be considered ‘elite’ not only by virtue of their entry to an elite institution, but in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds. All but one of our 20 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. At Sciences-Po, our 20 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. In terms of traditional occupational groupings, both cohorts are by and large the children of parents from ‘Class 1’ occupational groupings – whether it is the ‘higher grade professionals’ of Goldthorpe’s (1973) UK-based schema or the ‘*instituteurs et professions intellectuelles diverses*’ of the French schema (INSEE, 1977). In terms of more recent categorizations, our respondents would certainly fall within the ‘elite’ category of Savage et al.’s (2013) new typology of social classes. Both cohorts are overwhelmingly white.

## *Mode of data collection and analysis*

Each of the respondents was interviewed individually in a place of their choosing – sometimes within their institution, but also within local cafes and bars. The interview schedule was semi-structured – comprising a series of common questions on their background, aspirations and perceptions of the nature of the labour market they were about to enter. The Oxford-based interviews were undertaken in English and the Paris-based ones in French. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the analysis carried out in both French and English.

Clearly the semi-structured nature of the interview foreshadowed particular research directions, but we were alert to unanticipated themes emerging. Although we had anticipated there would be national differences between our French and Oxford cohorts, we did not foresee the differences being quite as pronounced as they turned out to be. For example, the main theme of this article emerged from reading the transcripts rather than being structured into the interview from the beginning.

In the following section, we examine how these likely recruits to the transnational elite attempt to reconcile their own social and educational privileges with those who, as Freeland (2011) puts it, ‘didn’t succeed so spectacularly’ within two national contexts that are characterized by high and increasing levels of social inequality.

## **Deserving winners?**

All of our Oxford and Parisian graduates were cognizant of their prestigious educational status and the high-flying careers it opened up for them. Many had already enjoyed

internationally based internships and accepted posts in multinational companies. In general, Freeland's observation that members of the transglobal elite feel themselves to be 'deserving winners' in the economic competition for elite jobs holds true for our respondents. They felt they were 'worthy' of their privileged educational career and elite aspirations (Brown et al., 2014). They emphasized the importance of their intellectual abilities – and particularly their hard work – in getting them this far. Typical comments include:

I think that probably I do like have some kind of natural intelligence or something but obviously in order to get this far. I have also had to work. (Natalie, 5/20 Oxford)

I am pretty good at my subject but I work really hard for it ... And if you are here you are definitely good enough, you just need to work hard enough in order to you know achieve your potential actually. (Colin, 18/20 Oxford)

I got selected in the exams through hard work. I am not bad basically. One should not hide oneself ... It is for others to say that someone is talented. I think I am good at science subjects and that I have worked on them. (Virginie, 17/20 Sciences-Po)

... the talent that helps you to succeed at something in every field is reinforced by hard work ... I find it difficult to believe that someone gets into ENA without working. (Giselle, 18/20 Sciences-Po)

In general, our respondents did not question the legitimacy of their own achievements – or of the various selection procedures that had successfully filtered out 'less deserving' candidates. Despite ongoing concerns about the recruitment policies of these elite institutions (e.g. Nanni, 2015; Parel and Ball, 2013), all our respondents thought that the selection processes which had brought them to Oxford or Sciences-Po were largely meritocratic. The French students in particular argued strongly that their '*concours*' was the fairest and most equitable means of selection – a position which is somewhat at odds with Erikson et al.'s (1979, 1982) comparative research on social mobility which indicates that historically France has a stronger pattern of self-recruitment in the 'top end' than England.

So, while our respondents generally believed that they deserved to be where they are, they simultaneously acknowledged that they had not competed on a completely 'level playing field'. Many talked about benefiting from parents who had encouraged them or who had the resources to supplement their education, e.g.

... you should be in a family that encourages education. Which would follow the children, from a very young age, to intellectually stimulate them and ensure that they succeed in the education system. That could be sending the bright children to learn German or Latin to stimulate them. In this regard, there is a social bias on the whole. (Giles, 16/20 Sciences-Po)

There is the question of parents financing more private lessons at an early stage, followed by private preparation. In the main, candidates who have undergone private preparation clear the Sciences-Po exam. (Alain, 3/20 Sciences-Po)

Many respondents, and particularly those at Oxford, spoke of the variable quality of schools and the advantages they had received from having attended a 'good' school.

I have had a really good education and here I am, there are very few people here who have come from you know poor state schools and succeeded. (Colin, 18/20 Oxford)

I like went to a really good school and I had really good teachers and so yes in a way it was just there for me to take. (Natalie, 15/20, Oxford)

Because I had access to quality education which is not comparable. (Nicolas, 19/20 Sciences-Po)

One of our French graduates mentioned geographical inequalities:

There is a phenomenon of social and geographical segregation. When you are in a big Parisian high school, even if your parents are not necessarily rich, you have more chances of joining a preparatory class if you are better than a good student from Lozère. (Aurélie, 13/20 Sciences-Po)

However, alongside these inequalities, the overwhelming majority also spoke of the importance of 'luck' in their educational careers, e.g.

I think one thing that strikes me in particularly being here and coming towards the end of my final year in Oxford is actually how lucky and random this process has been. (Tim, 17/20 Oxford)

I think you do definitely need to be talented, but I also think you need, you do also need to be lucky as well. (Stuart, 3/20 Oxford)

I would say that I have been extremely lucky. (Nicolas, 19/20, Sciences-Po)

We were just lucky at one point in time to get admission into a good school. (Monique, 15/20 Sciences-Po)

The use of 'luck' as an explanation for success is significant because it signals an acknowledgement of the uneven distribution of opportunities at the same as overlooking more structural explanations for that maldistribution. As Brown et al. (2014: 10) argue: the emphasis on luck can be seen as the "individualisation" of the systematic inequalities in education and life-chance'.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of reconciling their privileged status with what they saw as the relative arbitrariness of good fortune, many of our elite recruits spoke of the importance of using their talents in a 'socially responsible' way and the need to 'give something back'.

## **Giving something back?**

The form that this 'giving back' took is different for our Oxford and Parisian respondents. For our Oxford respondents, social responsibility is to be discharged through engaging in



civil society – and in particular the third sector and volunteering. For our Paris respondents, social responsibility is to be discharged through public service to the state.

### *Oxford students and volunteering*

In a practice which is now fairly widespread, many of our respondents had participated in volunteering during their ‘gap year’ – a time young people sometimes take between leaving school and going to university, e.g.

I took a gap year in which I worked with street children for a year in Bolivia ... and that was really good, really, really challenging, really hard but I really enjoyed it ... (Naomi, 16/20 Oxford)

There have been a number of critiques of this kind of practice. As Simpson (2004: 681) notes, this ‘volunteer tourism’ enables young people ‘to combine the hedonism of tourism with the altruism of development work’. It may also, as Heath (2007) claims, give those who are already advantaged and can afford to take a year out an even greater advantage in future selection and recruitment procedures. In addition, as Naomi goes on to say, Oxford gave her the opportunity to further extend her gap year experience of volunteering while at university:

Oxford has given me opportunities to do things that I wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise ... for example getting involved with charity work. I went travelling over the summer which was partly funded by my college which I wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise. (Naomi, 16/20 Oxford)

In common with most British universities, Oxford University actively encourages volunteering and, with the Students’ Union, supports a range of activities. For example, there is the ‘Oxford Hub’ where students volunteer to work with disadvantaged communities in the Oxford area. The following respondent talks about the importance of giving something back to local school children who have been less fortunate than her in their education:

So I have spent a lot of time organizing volunteering projects, so I have started a project where we teach maths to children at schools in Oxford at GCSE standard, so I know that has taught me a lot in terms of organizational skills and management and things like that. (Faith, 13/20 Oxford)

Several intended to build on these experiences and work for charities or other third sector organizations in the future, e.g.

I am very interested in entrepreneurship, I was involved in the social enterprise last year, which was very interesting so I like the challenge of being in that. (Jack, 2/20 Oxford)

I want an international job, preferably kind of some sort of you know doing good, sort of charity work or some sort of way helping out. (Gerry, 20/20 Oxford)

... I have been doing a bit of research as part of my work with a charitable organization 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)

I might also be interested further on in doing something within a charitable organization or I don't know, something with a slightly more global, humanitarian social aspect but I am not sure what that is going to be exactly. (Mike, 19/20 Oxford)

The language of 'social entrepreneurship', rather than simply 'charitable good works', is revealing and perhaps reflects the largely private sector leanings of our Oxford graduates who were just about to begin careers in a variety of multinational corporations. Although the concept of 'social entrepreneurship' is contested, it generally emphasizes an affinity between business practice and social benefit – rather than seeing them as fundamentally opposed (e.g. Leadbeater, 1997). An affinity between business and social benefit was also evident in some of our Oxford respondents' justifications for their career choices; so that even moving into a lucrative private sector occupation could be reconciled with the need to 'give something back' where the company engaged in forms of 'social entrepreneurship'.

As Juliette comments on her future career in a large corporation specializing in investment banking:

Although they are a bank they do take corporate social responsibility seriously and it is something that they really do kind of work at. Obviously it has got business interest to it and they make a profit from it, but the fact that you know you might as well do something good whilst making a profit rather than just exploiting people and so I do quite like that aspect of it. (Juliette, 12/20 Oxford)

### *Sciences-Po students and public service*

In general, references to charitable work and volunteering were far less prevalent in the narratives of our French graduates – either in terms of past experiences or future aspirations. Only two of our Parisian graduates appeared to have done any volunteering (as distinct from internships) and only one other talked about a future in the third sector. However, this does not mean that they had no sense of the need to reconcile their privileged status with social inequalities through 'giving something back'. There was strong sense of duty in some of the narratives:

The French system allowed me to be where I am today ... I have an obligation. As I do not consider myself talented, whatever I am today, I owe it to the surrounding my parents and grandparents are a part of. (Nicolas, 19/20 Sciences-Po)

My parents have also gone through some social ascent ... I have had role models in the field of education in the family. And also economic ease. It is a blessing and also a duty to give back what you have received. (Stephanie, 20/20 Sciences-Po)

Well, I know that I come from a milieu that has allowed me to find myself. But there's another reason for this: I studied in a public high school and prep class where the teachers put in an

enormous effort in educating us, and we received all this education without having to pay anything. ENS was a stage above. Here we were even paid to study. So I am completely aware of the opportunity that I've had, which was offered to me by the State and I feel indebted to it. These jobs not only motivate me, but also moreover, I want to give back to the State what I could receive. Civil service is my only interest. (Virginie, 17/20 Sciences-Po)

Unlike our Oxford respondents, our Sciences-Po respondents did not see any affinity between business practice and social benefit – indeed they saw the private sector as being injurious to the social good (Power et al., 2013). In general, our French respondents believed that social responsibility was to be discharged through working for the 'administration':

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. (René, 2/20 Sciences-Po)

I like the idea of public service. That is not completely hogwash. I like the idea of getting back home in the evening thinking today I did something that made a difference to someone, certainly I'll not change the world (I am not a humanitarian ...), but I did something that has helped someone somewhere. (Marie-Pierre, 5/20 Sciences-Po)

The interest is to work for the general interest for public service ... It is rather to be at the service of citizens, even if that is very naïve to say. But it is this aspect that interests me more ... the most important interest of civil service. (Arnaud, 6/20 Sciences-Po)

These contrasts in the narratives of our British and French graduates are supported by other research on engagement in volunteering. A number of comparative studies of volunteering (e.g. Anheier and Salamon, 2001; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001) have shown that rates of participation are much lower in France than they are in the UK. More recently, analysis of data from the European Social Survey (Round 6 2012/13) on the relative frequency of engagement in volunteering shows that while 57% of British respondents had never volunteered, this was the case for 68% of French respondents. The difference is even more marked for younger adults (those less than 26 years old). While over half (52%) of the British respondents had engaged in volunteering in the previous 12 months, this was the case for only just over one quarter (29%) of the French respondents.<sup>3</sup>

## **Accounting for national differences**

It is clear that while our French and British respondents share a sense of their own privileges, the ways in which they envisage using their privileges to discharge their social responsibilities and make the world a better place are very different. Our Oxford students have clearly been socialized into believing that social responsibility to those less fortunate should be discharged through various forms of social entrepreneurship, such as volunteering, while our Parisian students think that their responsibilities will be discharged through public service in the form of working for the state.

These contrasts are intriguing. First, they confirm other research by ourselves (Power et al., 2013) and others (e.g. Carroll and Fennema, 2002), that even among the ‘global elite’ national differences remain strong. Certainly, at this point in their careers, our two cohorts of elite recruits do not support Freeland’s (2011: 2) fear that they may become ‘a nation unto themselves’. But the strong divergence of attitudes towards social responsibility may also indicate a very different configuration between the state and civil society in France and England.

### *Education and the state*

The role of the education system is likely to be crucial here. As Green’s (1990) comparative study has shown, France and England have very different histories. In France, the education system was put in place much earlier than in England. France’s education system was highly centralized – a powerful state apparatus geared to achieving the collective goals of the nation-state. By contrast, throughout most of the 19th century it is difficult to speak of an English education system at all – either in terms of centrally organized provision or a national remit. For most of the century, England rejected a statist approach to education and settled for the more piecemeal development of voluntary sector and private provision. As Green (1990: 208) points out:

England was the last of the major nineteenth century powers to create a national system of education and the most reluctant to put it under public control.

England’s ambivalent attitude towards the role of the state in education is evident in recent policies which appear mark a return to the fragmented and diversified provision of the 19th century. The Conservative government is currently encouraging the growth of ‘free schools’ – schools which are set up by willing groups of parents and voluntary associations and which operate outside the regulatory framework of local government. Moreover, and unlike France, there was no state intervention in what schools taught until well into the 20th century when the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a National Curriculum for the first time. Even this intervention is now being reversed inasmuch as free schools do not need to apply the National Curriculum.

These very different histories brought about contrasting roles for schools in the development of citizens. Mitchell (2003: 395) points out how the English educational system has had a limited role to play in the development of ‘citizens’ compared to other countries:

... public education was not called upon to assist in state formation either through the constitution of properly disciplined national subjects oriented towards a newly unified national identity.

Starkey and Osler (2009: 344) also point to how these differences are also manifest in the more recent introduction of explicit courses in citizenship in schools:

In both England and France, new programs of education for citizenship aim to reinforce and strengthen democracy. The French program is based on republican values, particularly human

rights, and emphasizes the unacceptability of racism and discrimination. The program for England emphasizes social and moral responsibility and active engagement with society.

At the higher education level, these differences are also evident. In England, there is a very loose articulation between the state and universities. In France, elite educational institutions, and in particular the *grandes écoles*, have always had an intimate and idealized relationship with the state as the means by which elite positions would be allocated on the basis of merit rather than nepotism (Belhoste, 2002; van Zanten and Maxwell, 2015).

In terms of more recent developments, it is also likely that these differences are compounded by contrasting funding regimes. In the UK, and in particular, England, students now make significant contributions to the cost of their own higher education – through successive fee increases and maintenance. In France, not only is higher education free, but our Sciences-Po students are salaried. These different funding regimes are likely to create very different sets of indebtedness and obligation. As one of our French respondents points out:

I am paid for studying ... it is not a salary but a loan from the State who has gambled on us and we owe something in return. (Stephanie, 20/20 Sciences-Po)

Not one of the Oxford respondents articulated any such sense of indebtedness to the state.

### *Civil society and the state*

The contrasting dispositions of our French and English students may also relate to the different ways in which the third sector is situated in each context. Again the same contrasting traditions of liberalism and state control can be seen in the patterns of voluntary association activity and membership.

For example, two different analyses (Anheier and Salamon, 2001; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001) both explain the comparative rates of volunteering in terms of the different cultural repertoires of countries. In both studies, Britain's relatively high levels of volunteering are seen to be related to a liberal third sector which stimulates voluntary sector activity and participation. In both, France's more statist approach (characterized as 'corporatist' by Anheier and Salamon, 2001) leads to a voluntary sector that is less pronounced. Jenkins and Cosphey (1996: 112) argue that France reveals 'the dangers of a state-led process of nation-formation, which under different regimes has sought to impose the prevailing state ideology on to a recalcitrant "civil society" '.

The significance of volunteering for the British cultural repertoire is explored by Pupavac (2010). She sees the mainstreaming of charitable work and volunteering in the UK as a distinctly British phenomenon whose roots lie deep in a long tradition of humanitarianism. She argues that there has been an ongoing decline in shared national values and that humanitarianism 'has come to the fore in official policies to promote a sense of Britishness' (2010: 47). It is evident, she argues, in the wholesale incorporation of the virtues of charitable work into the school and the establishment – through the school curriculum, through BBC programmes such as Comic Relief and Blue Peter 'appeals', and

through political campaigns, such as David Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative. Of particular relevance to this analysis are the ethnographic studies of elite schools which reveal widespread engagement in charitable work – national and international – through which students are to develop 'imaginings of transnational mobility and cosmopolitan futures' (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2015: 9; see also Brooks and Waters, 2015). And, as we saw with our Oxford respondents, universities are keen to encourage their students to undertake a range of volunteering activities – within their local communities and internationally.

## **Making a difference?**

How one feels about the implications of these two contrasting orientations to social responsibility is likely to depend on one's perceptions of the relative potential of the third sector and the state to make a difference for those who have not achieved the elevated status of our respondents.

There are many criticisms of the increasing recourse to the third sector as a means to improve social welfare. These range from concerns about the diminution of professional safeguards, creeping privatization to the abandonment of more systematic and universal interventions. In thinking about the limits of the kind of 'giving back' being undertaken by our Oxford respondents, we have found Pupavac's (2010) critique of British humanitarianism very insightful. She argues that:

... its prominence in public life in various periods has coincided with the contraction of social concern and progressive politics, rather than their straightforward expansion. Its present conservative character, notwithstanding its radical self-perception, is influenced by the demise of progressive politics and disconnect from a popular social basis.

She goes on to argue that the contradictions in British humanitarianism, which she traces back to Wilberforce's campaign to abolish slavery, can actually be attributed to British reaction to the French Revolution. In this way, antislavery became a 'residual progressive cause among former progressive members of the middle classes now fearful of radical political change'. She argues that 'abolitionism answers the psychic needs of mill owners, giving them a sense of moral purpose although otherwise hardened to the immediate suffering around them'. She draws on Whitaker's (1983) history of Oxfam (an organization which perhaps not coincidentally developed in Oxford) to show how the 'predominantly middle class organisation lacking a solid basis in the working classes .... failed to win over non-academic Oxford'.

As Carey (1992) argues, British cultural elites have generally not concerned themselves with the plight of British urban populations. For our own advantaged respondents, there is a similar disconnect between their desire to 'give something back' and a willingness to address the inequalities through which they have benefited. Perhaps the limits of this kind of philanthropy are perhaps most effectively summed up by Clement Attlee's perception of nearly 100 years ago that 'Charity is a cold grey loveless thing. If a rich man wants to help the poor, he should pay his taxes gladly, not dole out money at a whim' (in Beckett, 2007: 63).

If one sees the third sector as a form of creeping privatization and no substitute for the more radical, progressive and universal welfare that only national administrations can achieve, one might be more sympathetic to our French graduates' orientation. Of course, there are limits here too and just as there are many criticisms of the third sector, so too there are many accounts of the 'dark side' of the state. Among our Sciences-Po graduates there will undoubtedly be a strong affinity between self-interest and public service. And despite their avowed allegiance to the state at this moment, past experience suggests that many will become 'pantoufleurs' and take lucrative 'pay-offs' as they move over to the private sector (Cole, 2005).

Additionally, despite their different allegiances, there is no indication that our respondents' desire to 'give something back' will involve a diminution of their own advantages. As we have seen, while there was a common recognition that inequalities in social opportunities and the educational system had contributed to these advantages, there was very little desire to alter the arrangements.

Given the likelihood that our elite graduates will earn very high salaries (e.g. Power et al., 2003), we were interested to see what they felt about earnings inequalities. In spite of Attlee's exhortation that the best way to help the poor is to pay one's taxes, there was little enthusiasm for any significant redistribution through increased taxation – even among our public sector-friendly French graduates. There was an almost universal rejection across both cohorts, for example, of any kind of earnings 'cap':

I don't think there is necessarily anything unfair about having a very select group at the top that are very rich compared to the bottom ... I don't think the market is that efficient, but it's probably the best of all possible systems ... it's probably the best of all the worst systems. (Jack, 2/20 Oxford)

I am comfortable with the idea that people, certain people earn more because the work they do commands greater remuneration, or it requires more rewards. (Stuart, 3/20 Oxford)

That's how economics works essentially, isn't it? ... if you are an able builder, you should be earning more than a novice builder. Talent should be rewarded. (Roger, 1/20 Oxford)

I think it's probably too high at the high end as well, but given the hours they put in, like an investment banker, if you did it in hourly wage, a lot of them would be earning minimum wage. (Emily, 8/20 Oxford)

Sadly, a ceiling at the national level would limit the competitiveness of France or of any European countries adopting this method. (Alain, 3/20 Sciences-Po)

Even when injustices were acknowledged, even worse ones were identified, e.g.

... what I really find unjust is that a footballer earns 250 times more. I am not defending them but I think you should not just blame people, especially traders, who earn a lot of money. (Giselle, 18/20 Sciences-Po)

So, while there may be an inclination to 'give something back', it is not envisaged that this reconciliation will involve any diminution of their earnings and consequently any significant redistribution of resources.

## Conclusion

In this article we have tried to explore the various ways in which two highly advantaged groups of elite graduates in Paris and Oxford reconcile their privileges with a social and educational system characterized by significant inequalities. As we have seen, our two cohorts display common characteristics. Both Oxford and Sciences-Po respondents have a fairly astute sense of their own privilege. While they do ascribe much of their current elevated status to their own efforts (hard work, ability), they all generally acknowledge that they have benefited from either the unequal distribution of resources (educated parents, an unequal education system) or simple 'luck'. The acknowledgement of the perhaps sometimes arbitrary circumstances that have led them to where they are now seems to have engendered a sense of obligation to 'give something back'. However, at this point, the similarities in their narratives end – for the ways in which our Oxford and Sciences-Po respondents seek to discharge the 'debt' of their privilege are very different. Our Oxford respondents seek to 'give something back' through engaging in various voluntary activities and social entrepreneurship. In France, our Paris graduates plan to discharge their debt through public service careers.

Accounting for these contrasts involves delving into the different histories of the relationship between the state, the education system and civil society in England and France – issues that can only be touched on in this article. Nevertheless, they indicate that there are different national cultural repertoires which mean that despite increasing internationalization, elite recruits bring with them different allegiances and different orientations to civil society. From an optimistic perspective, one might argue that these enduring national sentiments mean that Reich's (1992) and Freeland's (2011) fears about the demise of attitudes of social responsibility or the obligations of citizenship are unfounded. However, from a more pessimistic viewpoint, it is clear that what was being 'given back' in both contexts is quite limited. Although mindful of their own good fortune and cognizant of inequalities within their countries, neither our French nor our British respondents were willing to envisage any significant redistribution of income that would be needed to 'level out' the playing field of access to elite higher education and elite occupations.

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## Notes

1. Falk is writing from a US perspective. From a UK perspective, one would also need to add another kind of transnational elite, the 'colonial elite' of Commonwealth and Empire.



2. 'The Social Construction of Talent: A Comparative Study of Education, Recruitment and Occupational Elites'; a project funded through the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) based in Oxford and Cardiff Universities. [www.skope.ox.ac.uk](http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk).
3. I am grateful to my colleague Martijn Hogerbrugge for this analysis.

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### Author biographies

Sally Power is a Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University and Co-Director of WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Data and Methods). She has extensive experience of research on educational and occupational trajectories and is currently undertaking research on intergenerational transmission and civil society.

Annabelle Allouch is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Picardy – Jules Verne, France, and a Research Affiliate at Sciences-Po, France. Her current research interests include the sociology of education and the sociology of elites in Europe, as well as the criteria for admissions and selection in British and French higher education.

Phillip Brown is a Distinguished Research Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. He has written, co-authored and co-edited 17 books including *The Global Auction* (Oxford University Press), and is currently writing a new book on rethinking human capital theory (with Hugh Lauder and Sin Yi Cheung).

Gerbrand Tholen is a lecturer in sociology at the Department of Sociology at City University London. His research interests are centred around education, skills, jobs, occupations and the labour market. Between 2012 and 2015 he was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

### Résumé

Cet article étudie la relation complexe qu'entretiennent les élites transnationales avec la société civile, en examinant les orientations contrastées de deux cohortes d'« étudiants d'élite » de Paris et d'Oxford. Si les deux cohortes considèrent que leur statut privilégié est le fruit de leurs

efforts et de leurs compétences, elles sont conscientes d'avoir également bénéficié de certains avantages que tout le monde n'a pas. C'est peut-être pour cela qu'elles expriment le besoin de « donner quelque chose en retour ». Cependant, les moyens par lesquels l'une et l'autre cohorte cherchent à assumer leurs responsabilités sociales diffèrent fortement. Tandis que les étudiants de la cohorte d'Oxford cherchent à « donner quelque chose en retour » en faisant du bénévolat et en s'engageant dans le tiers secteur, les étudiants de la cohorte de Paris envisagent de « donner quelque chose en retour » en travaillant pour la fonction publique. L'article étudie comment la relation différente entre l'État, la société civile et le système éducatif dans chacun des deux pays est à même d'influer sur les dispositions des uns et des autres, et examine dans quelle mesure l'attachement de ces membres de l'élite à « donner quelque chose en retour » est susceptible de changer les choses.

### **Mots-clés**

Bénévolat, éducation, élite, étudiants, société civile

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo analiza, compara, y explica las redes de poder corporativo formadas por la interconexión de consejos de administración en cinco economías de América Latina con el fin de comprender por qué las élites corporativas están conectadas por redes cohesionadas en algunos países y no en otros. Los resultados muestran redes de élites cohesionadas en México, Chile y, en cierta medida, en Perú, pero no en Brasil ni Colombia. Después de testar y rechazar las hipótesis de las teorías existentes, se ha hallado una relación de complementariedad entre la cohesión de las redes de la élite corporativa y las relaciones estado-empresas a través de asociaciones empresariales poderosas así como el grado de apertura comercial. En las economías en las que las relaciones estado-empresas están mediadas por fuertes asociaciones empresariales y están abiertas al libre comercio con las economías desarrolladas, las élites corporativas forman redes cohesionadas, mientras que en las economías con asociaciones empresariales débiles y baja apertura comercial, las élites empresariales no forman redes cohesionadas. Estas nuevas explicaciones resultan adecuadas para descifrar redes de poder corporativo en las economías emergentes, y un punto de referencia para futuros estudios sobre elites corporativas.

### **Palabras clave**

América Latina, consejos de administración interconectados, economías emergentes, élites corporativas, redes de élites