"The icing on the cake": negotiating diversity and intersectional ascription to gain access to Sciences Po

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Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, several higher education institutions in France have used merit and diversity as complementary principles in implementing equal opportunity programs. Through an ethnographic approach and an intersectional framework, this article examines how Sciences Po's *Conventions éducation prioritaire* (CEP) program is received by candidates participating in preparatory workshops at high schools in Seine-Saint-Denis. The CEP candidate profile is shaped by a delicate balance of distinction from and resemblance to the imagined profile of an elite student. As a result, candidates experience both advantages and challenges depending on their intersecting identities and identifications throughout the admissions process. Their strategies for navigating the admissions process reveal the paradoxical expectations placed on students, who are required to negotiate diversity in a seemingly color-blind context where difference is simultaneously reified and denied. More broadly, this paper argues that while Sciences Po's territorially based policy allows students to showcase diverse aspects of their backgrounds, it simultaneously places an uneven burden on the candidates and forces them to negotiate intersectional ascription, stereotypes, and expectations throughout the admissions process.

On Sunday, April 26, 2020, Bichara (a pseudonym) takes part in an online mock interview with three members of Ambition Campus, a student association that mentors candidates applying to Sciences Po through its equal opportunity program. Throughout the interview, Bichara presents various aspects of her profile: her internship at the National Assembly, her goal of passing the entrance examination for the National School of Administration (ENA), and her commitment to feminist issues. The mentors ask a series of questions: How does Bichara define feminism? What

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about gender? Does she support assisted reproductive technology? Which feminist figures inspire her? In response to the last question, Bichara names her mother and describes how, despite being born in a small village in the Comoros, she defied societal expectations. When the time comes to deliberate, the mock jury is unanimous: The candidate failed to demonstrate a broad perspective and remained too anchored in personal experience, particularly in her response about an inspirational feminist figure. The issue is not that personal experience is irrelevant, but rather that it must be balanced, explains a member of the association who is in his mid-20 s: "For me, her choice to highlight her mother as a feminist icon rather than Simone Veil, like everyone else, is touching, and it gives substance to her commitment. But here, it is unfortunate because it came up in an interview that was too focused on emotions and not enough on knowledge. However, when personal experience is the 'icing on the cake,' I find it very positive." Ultimately, the candidate is advised to bring "less emotional investment and fewer personal elements" into her presentation. In short, she must acknowledge and highlight her minority identity. Yet, she must invoke symbols of the French nation and universalist feminism to prove her merit for admission to Sciences Po.

This article examines how potential beneficiaries of Sciences Po Paris's *Conventions éducation prioritaire* (CEP) program learn to navigate the admissions process in a system that promotes diversity within a formally color-blind framework. It explores how and why these students encounter different constraints and opportunities in performing the role of the "good diversity student," depending on the intersectional forms of ascription they experience.

In the comparative literature on race politics, France stands out as an exception due to its color-blind approach to social inclusion. The aversion to recognizing group characteristics, originally conceived by French revolutionaries as a safeguard for equality before the law, remains a central tenet of French republican universalism (Beaman and Petts 2020; Suaudeau and Niang 2022). Since the early 1980s, however, France has employed territorial strategies that enable reinscribing race through seemingly color-blind rhetoric while indirectly targeting people with an immigrant descent (Doytcheva 2007; Palomares and Roux 2021; Simon 2000). Alongside this territorial approach, a second form of public intervention emerged in the late 2000s and focuses on the labor market through the promotion of diversity. Diversity, as a policy paradigm, accounts for individual characteristics and differences that can be framed as skills contributing to the "collective benefit" of a firm or community (Bereni 2009; Scheepers 2019). In a French context where race and ethnicity are both legally and politically illegitimate as categories of public action, the diversity paradigm gains traction precisely because of its flexibility and ambiguity (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2009). However, scholars have criticized this approach for reframing discrimination in a positive light while masking the underlying power dynamics at play (Bereni and Jaunait 2009; Doytcheva 2020).

Since the mid-2000s, French *grandes écoles*, including Sciences Po Paris, have adopted diversity initiatives, placing new emphasis on "talents," "potentials," and "personalities." Sciences Po presented its goal of "democratization and diversification of social recruitment" as both a moral responsibility and a response to the

issue of social closure.[1] It has also embraced the diversity paradigm to align with the expectations of companies that view elite schools as recruitment pools (Pasquali 2021; Van Zanten 2010; Allouch 2022).

This paper applies an intersectional framework to examine how students in Seine-Saint-Denis—a territory implicitly associated with racialized and socioeconomic disadvantage— engage with Sciences Po Paris's *Conventions éducation prioritaire* (CEP) admissions process, which was introduced in 2001. Policy reception, in this context, refers to "the set of processes by which policies are appropriated and co-constructed by, and the effects they produce on, their beneficiaries," or, in this case, potential beneficiaries (Revillard 2018:478, my translation).

Using an intersectional lens to analyze policy reception underlines the influence of overlapping social, racial, gender, and religious categorizations on CEP candidates as they navigate the admissions process. Despite the policy's formal territorial basis and color-blind framing, successfully embodying the ideal CEP candidate requires students to deploy specific strategies in response to these intersecting categorizations. I argue that, while most candidates welcome the policy's shift toward evaluating students' "personality," this policy ultimately reshapes the intersectional dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. It places the onus on students to manage stereotypes and expectations that affect them unevenly, drawing our attention to the paradoxes of diversity-led policies in a putatively color-blind French republican context.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. I first provide a brief overview of Sciences Po's "positive discrimination" scheme before outlining the intersectional framework and discussing the study's data and methods. The second section provides context on the structure and evaluation of Sciences Po's entrance examination before turning to interview and field analysis to examine how professors and mentors approach their role in teaching diversity and personality criteria within a color-blind context.

The third section consists of three empirical analyses that further elucidate how the profile of a typical CEP candidate profile is co-constructed: first, through the performance of "markedness" (Urciuoli 2016), which aligns with abstract, color-blind universalism; second, through assumptions about race and class positions projected onto individuals living in the French *banlieue*; and third, through an expectation of assertiveness and detachment from familial, community, and Muslim religious ties. In conclusion, I reflect on the paradoxes of a program that celebrates diversity in a national context that formally rejects racial and categorical distinctions, and I

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[1] The February 21, 2001, press release entitled *Conventions ZEP l'excellence dans la diversité* (Excellence through Diversity), which introduced the program, alternated between rhetoric on diversity and equal opportunity (*égalité des chances*). An article published in *Le Monde* in 2001, co-signed by several members of the school's Management Board, further explained that "the diversity of [students'] social and cultural backgrounds would contribute most to the school's critical spirit and intellectual rigor" (see *Le Monde*, "Sciences-Po: égalité des chances, pluralité des chances," 2001. Accessed 10 June 2024). On this subject, Daniel Sabbagh has pointed out a "problematic convergence" between this approach and the productive, culturalist concept of diversity used in American universities since the *Bakke* ruling (Sabbagh 2006).

consider the impact on CEP candidates as they navigate the intersectional processes of ascription.

Sciences Po's 'positive discrimination' scheme and the tension between diversity and French color-blind republicanism

Unlike other French *grandes écoles* that have established outreach programs, Sciences Po Paris introduced a "positive discrimination" scheme through a parallel admissions pathway for students from high schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The program was implemented in a context where "positive discrimination" has been framed as a point of contrast between the American and French models, often couched in a rhetoric of national endangerment (Fassin 1997). Sciences Po administrators have therefore presented the CEP program as a counter-model to American affirmative action, which is explicitly race-based (Sabbagh 2011).

Higher education institutions often treat merit and diversity as complementary rather than competing principles of assessment (Lamont and Moraes Silva 2009). However, in the case of Sciences Po, the emphasis on merit also serves to downplay diversity. In *Sciences Po, de la Courneuve à Shanghai* (2007), Gérard Descoings, former director of Sciences Po and the architect of the CEP policy, stated: "One is not admitted to Sciences Po because they are Black, Kabyle, Turkish, Arab, or Chinese. One is admitted because they deserve it" (Descoings 2007:379, my translation).

Candidates admitted through the CEP program are formally pre-selected based on territorial criteria, which serve as a color-blind proxy for assessing educational inequality. When introduced as a policy category in 2001, territoriality indirectly targeted students from disadvantaged racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, following the rationale of *indirect* affirmative action (Fernández-Vavrik et al. 2018; Sabbagh 2011). Since 2010, Sciences Po has progressively expanded the program to high schools in rural areas and overseas territories for what it describes as "meritocratic purposes."[2] This expansion of CEP to non-*banlieue* areas parallels recent transformations in *politiques de la ville*—urban policies aimed at addressing social inequality in disadvantaged urban areas—which have increasingly incorporated more rural regions in response to criticism of "positive discrimination" (Epstein and Kirszbaum 2019). Nevertheless, the most recent scholarship on the CEP policy suggests that, despite its formal color-blindness, Sciences Po's admissions selection committee operates with implicit expectations about the social, racial, and cultural attributes presumably held by the typical CEP candidate: The "personality criteria" are strongly associated with perceptions of social and geographical "otherness" (Allouch 2022; Glinel and van Zanten 2021), and there is an indirect positive

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[2] Conventions éducation prioritaire: Sciences Po renforce son dispositif. 2002. https://www.sciencespo.fr/fr/actualites/sciences-po-renforce-son-dispositif-de-conventions-education-prioritaire-cep/. Accessed 18 February 2021.

correlation between dual or foreign nationality and the likelihood of CEP candidates being admitted (Oberti and Pavie 2020).

Many recent studies on equal opportunity policies in French higher education have examined how evolving principles of merit and diversity reshape policy objectives and outcomes (Allouch 2022; Cornand et al. 2021; Pasquali 2021; Soubiron 2012), as well as how selection committees interpret and apply selection criteria (Glinel and van Zanten 2021; Oberti and Pavie 2020). Some research has focused on the social mobility of policy beneficiaries through a longitudinal approach (Pasquali 2014) or on the barriers they encounter in the labor market and the strategies they develop to navigate these challenges (van Zanten 2023). Other studies have analyzed how potential beneficiaries and their parents perceive merit and inequality (Oberti et al. 2009) or how preparatory schools provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with new forms of socialization, which can either reinforce or disrupt pre-existing social dispositions shaped by family and neighborhood environments (Buisson-Fenet and Landrier 2008).

Yet, few studies have looked at how those targeted by these programs—namely, potential beneficiaries—experience the policy in practice. To the best of my knowledge, no study has specifically analyzed how students' social, racial, gender, and religious identities and identifications influence their negotiation of the admissions process. In this paper, I employ an intersectional framework to examine how candidates seeking admission to Sciences Po through the program contend with the intersecting social ascriptions that shape their application process while preserving "diverse" identities that are legible within a formally color-blind system. The intersectional and interactionist approach also underscores the tension students face: On the one hand, they are expected to embody the differences valued by diversity policies, while on the other hand, they must conform to the codes and norms of an elite French institution.

In the next section, I elaborate on how intersectionality is applied to this case study and explain why an intersectional analysis is crucial to understanding the reception of this territorially based diversity policy in France.

Analyzing the reception of the CEP program through intersectional lenses

Intersectionality is both an analytical tool for understanding the interconnections between entities such as race, gender, and class in a given social context and a framework for critically examining power structures (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hill Collins and Bilge 2020). In this paper, I apply the intersectional framework in four ways: empirically, analytically, theoretically, and politically.

Empirically, the intersectional approach stems from Sciences Po's use of a territorial policy category to pre-select beneficiaries of the CEP program. Unlike other social categories, territoriality functions as a transversal category that encompasses multiple class, gender, race, and religious groups (Druez 2022; Talpin et al. 2021). As a result, analyzing the reception of the CEP policy among this "multigroup"

category of beneficiaries requires examining students' experience across and within intersecting categories of gender, race, class, and religion (McCall 2005).

The intersectional framework also emerged inductively from the analysis, serving as a lens to understand how candidates negotiate their intersecting social positions to gain entry to Sciences Po. As a counterpoint to the idea of "intersectional illusion"—the idea that some groups appear "more intersectional" than others (Chauvin and Jaunait 2015)—scholars have underlined that identical social characteristics do not always produce the same effects (Mazouz 2015). Gender, race, and class categories do not exist in the abstract; rather, they are shaped through social processes that constitute them as "ongoing accomplishments" (Mazouz 2015; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Identities and categories are contingent on the dynamics at play (Cho et al. 2013), and the social processes surrounding race, gender, and class operate in distinct and context-specific ways (Nash 2008). As a result, individuals may experience their gender, race, and class identities as either enabling or constraining, depending on local and national contexts and specific social interactions (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013). This paper examines how candidates' intersecting identities and affiliations simultaneously create both opportunities and challenges as they move through the application process to an elite higher education institution in France.

Finally, the intersectional framework is also applied in theoretical and political terms to emphasize the power dynamics shaping candidates' experiences. Scholarship on intersectionality has shown that the significance ascribed to particular forms of difference is a matter of power rather than identity alone (Cho et al. 2013). As Kimberlé Crenshaw has emphasized, power operates through processes of categorization and by imbuing this categorization with social and material consequences (Crenshaw 1990). This paper highlights the power structures and representational systems embedded in France's color-blind republican framework and examines their impact on candidates from Seine-Saint-Denis applying to Sciences Po through the CEP program.

Data and methods

The analysis in this paper is based on a multi-sited ethnographic study carried out between 2020 and 2021 as part of doctoral research on the reception of affirmative action policies that explicitly employ the language of race (as in Brazil) or reinscribe it indirectly through territorial categories (as in France) (Giraut 2025). In France, the data for this study come from participant observation in weekly training workshops (*ateliers Sciences Po*) at two high schools in Seine-Saint-Denis that are affiliated with the CEP program, as well as interviews with high school students participating in the *ateliers*, Sciences Po students who benefitted from the CEP program, teachers, and mentors.

While a large number of students initially attended the *ateliers*, participation declined over the course of the school year due to the program's workload and demands, eventually stabilizing at ten regular participants in the final stages. All participants were interviewed. The majority were young women, had parents from

non-European immigrant backgrounds, and had grown up and/or completed their schooling in the suburban periphery of Paris. The teachers leading the *ateliers* were mostly white men in their forties.

Among the students who remained in the *ateliers* throughout the school year*,* most also sought mentorship from student associations such as Ambition Campus. I attended their mock interviews as part of these sessions. Most of the mentors at Ambition Campus were in their 20s, were non-white, and had themselves benefitted from equal opportunity programs to gain admission to Sciences Po or other elite institutions.

All participants were asked to reflect on their perception of the policies' selection criteria and expectations when preparing for the entrance exam, whether as current candidates (10), former candidates, and, in some cases, as mentors (31) or high school teachers (5). For the sake of anonymity, I have changed the names of all interviewees and do not specify the high schools where I conducted the ethnographic research.

Importantly, by focusing on how the policy is received by a group of CEP candidates from the French *banlieue*, this study excludes the experiences of candidates from rural areas and overseas departments and regions. These candidates represent a growing share of applicants due to the program's expansion to high schools in these areas.

To examine how candidates respond to Sciences Po's diversity expectations and personality criteria, I first provide an overview of the admissions process and its academic and non-academic requirements.

Understanding the selection process: Sciences Po's admissions criteria to 'identify all the best talents'

In 2020, Sciences Po standardized the admissions procedure for CEP and regular applicants, making the same materials mandatory for all candidates. The new assessment process is twofold and is presented by Sciences Po as more transparent, designed to evaluate candidates on an equal footing to "identify all the best talents": The first round of evaluation consists of three scores out of 20 based on (a) Baccalaureate exam results or a foreign equivalent, (b) an academic record reflecting grades over the 3 past years along with teacher feedback on the student's overall progress, and (c) a set of three personal essays. The personal essays include (a) a personal statement in which students describe their activities and areas of interest, (b) an essay outlining their motivations and reasons for applying to Sciences Po, and (c) an additional essay on an optional subject. The combined score from these three evaluations is intended to reflect "the full diversity of the candidate's academic and extracurricular skills" and determines whether the candidate advances to the

final stage—an interview, described as "a guided exercise to complete the evaluation process.".[3]

The focus on "potential" involves broadening the selection criteria and moving beyond a system based solely on academic merit. This approach recognizes the individuality of each student and considers how their educational, family, and social backgrounds might contribute to the Sciences Po environment (Allouch 2021). At the same time, academic criteria remain central to the evaluation process. Thus, the new methods redefine merit without fully departing from traditional "categories of professorial understanding" (Bourdieu and Saint Martin 1975; Darmon 2012). In fact, a recent report highlights that the institutional discourse surrounding the CEP program leads potential beneficiaries to underestimate the academic component of the evaluation, which has carried increasing weight since the 2021 reform (Oberti, Pavie, and Rossignol-Brunet 2024).

The "personal essays" and the interview serve as the two examination components through which students can showcase the uniqueness of their profiles and demonstrate their personality, proving their potential through non-academic activities. For candidates, this raises questions about the types of personality traits Sciences Po expects and how they might frame aspects of their identities as skills that align with the committee members' perception of the ideal CEP candidate. The process of interpreting and adapting to the policy's language requires students to understand the power dynamics that determine "which differences carry significance" (Tomlinson 2013). As I show in the following sections, candidates learn to navigate diversity and personality criteria through an evolving process of interaction with teachers and mentors.

Importantly, the goal of this study is not to criticize the teachers who lead the *ateliers*, as they are deeply committed to fulfilling their role as facilitators of social mobility (Pasquali 2014). Rather, focusing on how candidates learn to interpret Sciences Po's criteria allows us to see that, in a context where the relationship between academic and non-academic evaluation criteria remains deliberately vague, "diversity work" (Ahmed and Swan 2006) largely falls on the candidates and, to some extent, on teachers and mentors.

Teaching diversity and personality-based criteria in a color-blind context: the role of teachers and mentors

Teachers and mentors serve as intermediaries between the policy and the candidates. They help students strengthen their applications based on their own understanding of Sciences Po's criteria, and, in the case of mentors in students' associations, also based on their own experience with the policy. The mentoring role alters teachers' relationship with students, as they have to step beyond their traditional pedagogical

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[3] Admissions 2021: Nouvelles modalités. https://newsroom.sciencespo.fr/admissions-2021-nouvelles-modalites/#_ga=2.114095047.1378986843.1629300624-878336712.1614691377. Accessed 1 September 2021.

function to help candidates understand the difference between what can be openly expressed and what is implicitly discouraged in the application process.

In the two high schools where the survey was conducted, the teachers expressed unease about training students to emphasize aspects of their identity related to the personality criteria and Sciences Po's emphasis on diversity.

> These personality criteria stick out in my mind. That's all they (Sciences Po) talk about, and the Zoom interview we had recently confirmed it once again. How stupid we feel coaching them during mock interviews: "Ah, you have dual nationality, that's good, you can talk about it…"

As this informal e-mail exchange with a teacher leading a Sciences Po workshop at one of the high schools suggests, the emphasis on personality and diversity objectives conflict with teachers' role in democratizing access to higher education through a color-blind, universalist framework. Teachers see their role as grounded in "a principle of justice aimed at guaranteeing equality for all." This contrasts with what they view as a "neo-liberal" or "merit-academic" model of evaluation (Pavie et al. 2021). Teachers are also dissatisfied with changes to the selection process, particularly their reduced influence in the selection process following the abolition of the press review and the oral eligibility test at the school level.[4] They viewed these past examination procedures as less elitist, allowing for a more nuanced and discretionary assessment of knowledge, practical skills, and interpersonal abilities.

By contrast, many mentors in student associations, having gained admission to Sciences Po through the CEP program themselves, see personality-based criteria as an opportunity for candidates with weaker academic profiles.

> When applying to other universities via Parcoursup (the French University Admissions Portal), students know there is no guarantee that their CV or personal project will be reviewed. At least with this school, they can be sure that something beyond grades will be considered. It's an extra chance for them, I think. (Sciences Po student, member of Ambition Campus)

While teachers and mentors differ in their views on Sciences Po's emphasis on personality and social diversity, they agree on the strategies and approaches to self-presentation that CEP candidates should adopt or avoid in their applications. They recognize that a minority background may provide CEP students with the "authority of authenticity" (Naudet 2014), as opposed to the presumed theoretical and detached

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[4] Until 2020, the admissions criteria for CEP and non-CEP candidates were different. Throughout their participation in the *atelier*, CEP candidates had to produce a press review on a topical event of their choice. This exercise consisted of a two-page objective summary of a selection of 15–20 press articles, followed by a four-page personal reflection on a related issue. Candidates then attended a first interview *(oral d'admissibilité)* at their high school, where the head teacher and other internally selected members conducted the initial assessment. If approved, the candidate proceeded to a second interview at Sciences Po *(oral d'admission)*. In this process, *atelier* teachers were previously responsible for identifying and pre-selecting the "talents" for Sciences Po (Allouch 2022). However, since 2020, their role has been reduced to that of policy mediator. Despite the press review no longer being a formal evaluation criterion, teachers in both *ateliers* have chosen to retain it as an internal evaluation of students' motivation and analytical skills.

knowledge held by typical Sciences Po students. However, they also make it clear that gaining admission requires more than simply "playing the diversity card." Rather, as described by a mentor from the Ambition Campus association in the excerpt below, the most successful candidates are those who balance both difference and conformity to the image of an elite student:

> They must master both explicit and implicit codes. Some of them are aware that the Sciences Po profile expected from a CEP student is not the same as that of a traditional candidate. As a result, they skillfully craft a presentation of themselves that aligns with traditional candidates—their very Parisian interests—with the new cultures, while simultaneously maintaining a connection to their own life story, neighborhoods, and popular culture. That's why, as I was saying, the clever ones do best. It's those who recognize—and that's the key!—the need to embody both the image of a classic candidate while adding, I would say the 'CEP spice', in the right proportion. (Member of Ambition Campus and former Sciences Po candidate)

Although the CEP profile is shaped by representations of otherness, admission to Sciences Po also depends on demonstrating qualities such as ambition, merit, and perseverance—moral characteristics aligned with the archetype of a Sciences Po student (Allouch 2022). In the words of Naima, a candidate participating in one of the *ateliers*: "Basically, what they're looking for is people who come from priority neighborhoods to balance the scales at Sciences Po. But it's not enough to come from neighborhoods like that, no! You need ambition to get in!".

In the following sections, I examine how and why Sciences Po candidates face different dilemmas depending on their intersectional social position, and how they employ different strategies to meet expectations of a "diverse good student." Performing the role of the ideal CEP candidate requires negotiating Sciences Po's criteria while being attentive to broader categorization processes of gender, race, and class.

'Say you'd be a good diplomat because you do that at home too!': translating non-whiteness and territorial belonging into race-blind elite soft skills

Most students from the *ateliers* are non-white and from lower-income backgrounds, which means they often lack the cultural resources typically available to elite students. Yet, they come to understand that a social and racial minority standpoint can be leveraged if translated into the kind of productive resources that Sciences Po values.

For instance, a non-European immigrant background may be highlighted to emphasize a connection to their country of origin and construct a professional project oriented toward international mobility—an idea that resonates with the school's global outlook. Holding dual nationality and speaking a language such as Turkish or Arabic may also signal versatility and an ability to navigate between

cultures in the role of a "cultural broker" (Beaman 2017; Sharma 2010), suggesting, in turn, potential for a career in diplomacy:

> When I was preparing my application with Ambition Campus, I told my mentor I wanted to be a diplomat, and she said, 'Combine both! Emphasize your cultural background and say you'd be a good diplomat because you do that at home too!" Because at home, I was surrounded by people who weren't just French but came from other countries, who had migrant parents. But I didn't know that at Sciences Po there weren't many of them. (Student who entered Sciences Po through the CEP program)

Students are accustomed to the universalist interpretive framework characteristic of the French context, which resists the language of identity politics (Bereni 2023). As a result, they are often unaware that skills and interests stemming from a racial minority standpoint may be transferable or aligned with the expertise, resources, or ambitions valued by a French higher education institution. However, for non-white and lower-class students, learning to navigate Sciences Po's criteria and expectations involves discovering new possibilities for identity conversion while avoiding discourses that could harm their applications.

All students from the *atelier* came to understand that being perceived as having narrow interests or viewpoints contradicts the "spirit of openness" expected from a Sciences Po candidate. However, for those perceived as non-white and lower-class, avoiding limitation requires them to anticipate the "particularizing dimension of abstract universalism," that is, the process by which they may be reduced to a singular identity by committee members who presumably adopt a universal perspective (Mazouz 2021). An illuminating example occurred when a teacher monitoring the *atelier* at one of the high schools warned Mila, a Black candidate who expressed interest in working on the election in Côte d'Ivoire for her press review: "Do you have Ivorian origins? I don't need to know, but if that's the case, it's important to show you have broader interests as well. There's the election in the US at the same time, so you should demonstrate awareness of that too." A pattern of discouragement from working on subjects related to one's social or cultural background in the pre-selection competition was briefly mentioned by Marco Oberti and colleagues in their ethnographic study of four high schools partnered with the program (Oberti et al. 2009). However, in the case presented above, the risk of being associated with limited intellectual curiosity stemmed from the choice of a specific research topic coupled with an attribution of difference based on physical appearance. The latter explicitly functioned as a marker of difference, leading to assumptions about nationality by extension (Guillaumin 2002). In the end, Mila changed her research topic and focused on the implications of the COVID-19 lockdown from both a public health and a democratic perspective. Like Mila, most candidates perceived as non-white chose to focus their press reviews on topics not commonly associated with residents of French *banlieues*, such as environmental issues or diplomatic relations with Peru. This trend suggests that they distanced themselves from perceived limitations and sought to counteract the effects of ascription, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Another challenge for non-white and lower-class candidates is navigating the paradoxical expectation to signal "markedness" (Urciuoli 2016) without overstepping the limits of French color-blindness in their discourse and self-presentation. For example, during her mock interview in one *atelier*, Meriem emphasized her passion for rock climbing, which she described as giving her a "spirit of openness" and "enabl[ing] her to meet people from other ethnic groups." The teacher responded with irony, questioning the "types of ethnic groups she had met while climbing." She justified her phrasing by explaining that the people she encountered in this extracurricular activity did not have African origins but were "French people from France." She eventually emphasized her cultural distance from this group by adding that they had practices unfamiliar to her, such as drinking alcohol. The teacher concluded by stating, "It's better to talk about cultural differences then."

The student's mention of rock climbing may be understood here as a metaphorical practice that reflects her aspiration for social ascension and her ability to adapt to Sciences Po's upper-class milieu (Glinel and van Zanten 2021). Paradoxically, Meriem invokes ethnicity to reinforce her commitment to the principle of "indifference to difference" and to reject the social and racial segregation experienced by students in middle and high schools classified as disadvantaged (commonly referred to as REP) under French territorial policies (Mohammed, 2021). However, throughout this process, the student also reinforces a symbolic boundary between two social groups—those she identifies as "French people from France" and "people of sub-Saharan origin"—a boundary that should be denied or minimized. In addition, she presents the codes of the other group as "other" from her perspective as a member of the minority group, highlighting the relational and situational dimension of the ascription process. The teacher's comment serves as a reminder that, even though the principle of diversity is based on an opposition between sameness and difference (Junter and Sénac-Slawinski 2010), the racial dimension must remain implicit to comply with the framework of French color-blind republicanism.

As the examples in this section demonstrate, criteria emphasizing personality and diversity provide non-white and lower-class candidates with new opportunities to present themselves as "situated knowing subjects" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). However, complying with the expected image of a CEP candidate requires staying within the realm of productive difference, rather than framing race as a structural marker of discrimination. The two preceding examples further show that non-white and lower-class CEP candidates must mitigate the social distance created by being ascribed a racialized and *banlieue* profile. They do so by displaying shared interests and broad intellectual curiosity for unfamiliar topics. At the same time, navigating diversity also requires maintaining an abstract approach—that is, avoiding explicit references to race or difference that might challenge color-blindness or highlight the whiteness of the majority group. Their experience of the policy contrasts with that of my informants who share dominant class and racial characteristics with the imagined typical Sciences Po student. As I show next, students with this profile can more easily draw on cultural and symbolic resources that resonate with a French elite institution. However, since they do not fit dominant perceptions of the CEP *banlieue* student, they also learn that they should instead emphasize their extracurricular activities and practices commonly associated with the *banlieue* territory.

'I grew up there too!': whiteness and middle-classness versus territorial belonging

Luc, the only white candidate from the *ateliers* I attended, arrived at his mock interview wearing his grandfather's uniform from his time as an SNCF railway man. The French train company, SNCF, is widely regarded as a symbol of public service and one of the last strongholds resisting the privatization of transportation.

Wearing this SNCF uniform in 2021, after the company's massive strikes in 2018 and its leading role in protests against pension reform at the end of 2019, signaled Luc's strong left-wing activism. His outfit, combined with his physical demeanor and whiteness, reinforced his embodiment of racial and class characteristics that are not typically associated with the French *banlieue* in the collective imagination (Avanza 2010). This candidate, whose mother is a librarian and father a landscape designer, expressed himself very formally and spoke with natural ease during the mock interview. He described his interest in issues related to public services and left-wing political engagement, as well as his work as a receptionist at his city's theatre, which had given him "a taste for tragedy." These extracurricular activities and interests reflected his upbringing in a middle-class family with significant cultural capital and set him apart from his peers at the *atelier*, who primarily focused on humanitarian, social, or sports-related extracurricular activities.

During our interview, Luc told me how surprised he was when a teacher overseeing the *atelier* advised him not to emphasize public services too much in order to avoid being discredited: "I was told that over there in Sciences Po, you shouldn't go too deep into the subject. You shouldn't say, 'Oh I love the SNCF, it's great!' You have to take a more global perspective. And I was told that I'd be at a disadvantage if I took too strong a position, that the SNCF wasn't very well regarded, and that I might be told, 'You're just a dirty leftist.'".

The advice given to this student regarding self-presentation discouraged him from expressing strong political convictions. This guidance might equally apply to CEP and non-CEP candidates. However, political engagement is typically associated with middle- and upper-class Parisian students rather than those from lower-income backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1969). The figure of the "SNCF leftist" also echoes, to some extent, that of the "teacher's son," which policy administrators define as a non-typical CEP candidate, as such an individual might be too familiar with the institution's inner workings (Allouch 2022).

Sam, a white former CEP candidate who was not accepted after the admission interview but later became involved in the Ambition Campus association, recalled receiving similar advice when he participated in his high school's *atelier* in 2015–2016. Despite his educational and socio-territorial background in an economically disadvantaged commune in northwest Paris, Sam, whose mother works as a municipal employee and whose father is a sales executive, was told by his mentors—albeit with good intentions—that he "didn't have the CEP profile" and should adjust his application accordingly. As he explains in the interview excerpt below, this warning came as a shock and felt unfair to him, as he saw himself as very different from the typical Sciences Po candidate despite his race and class position:

I didn't come from a family experiencing severe social hardship; indeed, I had lived all my life in a REP, but I didn't come from... well, not from extreme social difficulty, I didn't come from an immigrant background, and my interests were very similar to those of the classic candidates, not the CEP candidates. In other words, I didn't have many voluntary commitments, and so, in fact, against my will, I found myself with a very classic profile, on a path that wasn't classic and that was meant to be different. (…) So I shaped my application, my cover letter, and my presentation somewhat by saying something that was also true: I grew up there too! I didn't feel privileged at all; I didn't have the network that the classic candidates might have, I hadn't done any internships at an embassy. I hadn't traveled abroad, and my political commitment stemmed from my experiences in very difficult neighborhoods.

In his experience navigating the CEP policy criteria, Sam encounters a rupture with the familiar color-blind intersectional framework, in which whiteness remains unarticulated and racially invisible as an intersectional subject position (Carbado 2013). Like Luc, Sam believes that the skills and aptitudes he developed partly stem from his socialization in poor neighborhoods, much like their peers in the *ateliers*. However, to meet the CEP policies' personality criteria, both Sam and Luc had to reckon with their racial and class privileges, as well as the fact that they did not fit the profile typically associated with the *banlieue* in which they grew up. Their experiences with the policy suggest that a dominant position in racial and class relations, alongside self-confidence and verbal fluency—traits often linked to masculinity (Baudelot and Establet 1992)—can mitigate individuals' territorial anchoring in the *banlieue*. It also underscores that the *banlieue*, as a territorial category, primarily serves to identify racialized individuals from lower-class backgrounds, thus contradicting the premise that territory functions as a policy category independent of individual characteristics.

An important paradox draws attention to the situational and contextual disadvantage of students with these generally privileged social positions: White and middle-class candidates may be perceived as non-typical within the *banlieue* category and may consequently face disadvantages during face-to-face interviews with the selection committee. However, owing to their class position, they are also more likely to conform to elite codes and meet academic expectations. In fact, quantitative studies have shown that students with greater cultural capital than their peers from the same high school have a higher chance of being admitted to Sciences Po, due to the significant weight placed on purely academic criteria (Oberti and Pavie 2020). Thus, the intersectional dynamics experienced by this specific group depend on the selection criteria in use. The fact that they can be simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged underscores the tension between academic merit and diversity as evaluation criteria at Sciences Po.

Girls perceived as Muslims also face distinct intersectional patterns of ascription and, as a result, encounter different challenges in navigating their admission to Sciences Po. As I show next, they must account for gender and cultural beliefs that serve as a "background framework" (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) and may influence the committee's decision.

⚹

'Feminist Muslim' or 'Muslim feminist'?: performing gender against culture

"Last year in the *atelier*, we had a girl who was extremely focused on school, very shy, and who wore the veil. I thought it would be difficult for her to pass the oral entrance exam," a teacher in charge of one of the *ateliers* told me as we waited for the metro after a session in the fall of 2020.

Students in the *atelier* must avoid being closely associated with the figure of the "purist," who adheres too rigidly to meritocratic ideals and academic outcomes (Van Zanten 2010). Previous research has shown that, since young women are less likely to show confidence and move beyond purely academic expectations, they have lower chances of being accepted into French *grandes écoles* than boys do (Oberti and Pavie 2020; Pasquali 2014). However, the compounding continuum highlighted by the teacher—"being shy," "school-oriented," and "wearing the veil"—illustrates how girls from the *banlieue* are more likely to be stereotyped as "good students," even when this perception does not align with their actual experiences (Brinbaum 2019; Guénif-Souilamas 2006). Indeed, in French public debates shaped by "sexularism" (Scott 2009), the figure of the veiled Muslim women is framed through the disciplinary processes of pathologization, criminalization, and infantilization (Bentouhami 2018). Muslim women are portrayed as potentially dangerous or suspect citizens in a broader context of surveillance of the Muslim population and counterterrorism policies (Beaman 2023). At the same time, they are also represented as vulnerable rather than as autonomous, agentic, and emancipated individuals (Lépinard 2020). Moreover, since being identified as Arab is often conflated with Muslim identity in France, these stereotypes also affect girls who are categorized as Muslim based on their phenotype and (perceived) ethnic backgrounds (Karimi 2023).

In this context, navigating Sciences Po's criteria requires girls with this profile to craft their self-presentation around specific extracurricular practices or interests that signal agency and emancipation. For example, Naima wrote in her essay that boxing enabled her to "assert herself and gain respect" and "face up to prejudices about women" as a girl born and raised in an infamous French *banlieue*. In this case, the personality criteria became an opportunity for stigma reversal: "I had the impression that even if we pointed out our flaws, it could actually be an advantage for us. Yeah, because it's like saying, 'Well, you've got a flaw, but you can turn it around. You see, for example, the difficult neighborhoods. What did that teach you?' And it teaches us lots of things!" Other girls from the *ateliers* with similar profiles negotiated what Chauvin and Jaunait (2015) term "intersectional authority" by identifying as feminists or highlighting their engagement with gender equality issues, often to justify their career aspirations.

While these self-presentation strategies could align girls perceived as Muslim with the "profile subjects" (Reckwitz 2020) sought by a French elite school, some candidates understood that additional strategies were needed to prevent reinforcing stereotypes of vulnerability and suspect citizenship. For instance, Zainab, a participant in one of the *ateliers* with Pakistani origins, expressed

concern that linking her personal experiences to her interest in gender and equality issues could reinforce stereotypes of submissiveness to "traditions" and familial constraints. To navigate this tension, she positioned herself as an observer rather than a victim of the gender inequalities that interested her from a theoretical standpoint, thereby distancing herself from the forms of oppression at play: "In Pakistan, women are associated with staying at home, being a housewife, doing housework and so on. And that's not what interests me. And I thought people were going to associate me with that, thinking 'Well, since she's Pakistani, she must experience this at home.' (…) But once I'd said I was an observer, I wasn't subjected to it, so there you go."

Meriem, the same student from the rock climbing anecdote, also highlighted her feminist interests and commitments but faced a dilemma regarding how to present herself. She realized that she could mention her Muslim identity after attending the mock interview of a male colleague, who had mentioned the skills he developed as president of his church's youth group (*président de la jeunesse de l'Église*), which surprised her. Yet, she hesitated over whether it would be wiser to present herself as a "feminist Muslim" or a "Muslim feminist." She was seemingly aware that, within the context of French republicanism, the second formulation could frame her feminism as secondary to her religious identity in the eyes of the evaluators, whereas the first would likely align her more closely with the ideal of republican femininity. The teacher confirmed her intuition, responding: "In the second case, you will have to expect some questions." His answer also suggested that choosing the second formulation might expose her to intrusive questioning functioning as "pedagogies of coloniality" (Kebaïli and Lépinard 2024).

Meriem's outgoing personality and emphasis on feminism asserted her agency; yet, she learned to prioritize gender over religious identity to dispel any suspicion of disloyalty to French republicanism in the eyes of the selection committee. The teacher's remark further illustrates how Muslimness in France is framed as a category of choice (Cohen and Mazouz 2021), which places the burden on the candidate to manage the potential backlash of a "wrong" self-presentation.

Research on diversity in France has shown that public displays of religious identity can result in being labeled as having a "problematic personality," one that is perceived as incompatible with French republican ideals (Doytcheva 2018). More than just a question of incompatibility, the two examples above highlight the challenges faced by girls categorized as Muslim in overcoming stereotypes of vulnerability when expressing genuine interest in specific issues to meet Sciences Po's personality criteria—or, alternatively, in having to manage both vulnerability and suspicion simultaneously. To construct intersectional legitimacy and position themselves closer to the ideal CEP candidate, these girls must demonstrate an awareness of the appropriate hierarchies between different aspects of their identities or distance themselves from those elements too strongly associated with victimhood. This process reveals that the "good diverse student" sought by Sciences Po is co-constructed through attitudes of assertiveness, as well as the ability to detach oneself from familial, communal, and religious ties.

Conclusion

The preceding sections have explored how potential beneficiaries of Sciences Po's equal opportunity program, the *Conventions éducation prioritaire* (CEP), navigate the policy's criteria based on their understanding of the selection committee's expectations and the guidance they receive from teachers and mentors. Using a policy reception approach combined with an intersectional analytical framework, this paper has demonstrated that candidates face different challenges depending on how race, class, and gender categorization might shape the selection committee's judgments.

Candidates' engagement with the CEP policy reveals the inherent tension between affirming difference and conforming to the expectations of a "good" French republican citizen. It also underscores how categories intersect and derive meaning from power dynamics (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020), in this case within the framework of France's color-blind republican universalism and a dominant secularist discourse that regulates the visibility of Muslim women (Bentouhami 2018; Kebaïli and Lépinard 2024). As the ideal CEP profile is constructed through a dialectic of both difference and similarity to the archetypal elite student, candidates' intersectional subject positions present them with both advantages and disadvantages in negotiating their admission.

A non-white, lower-class background can be reframed as a set of skills and dispositions that align with the institution's emphasis on diversity, but this also requires candidates to display broad intellectual curiosity beyond familiar issues and to remain in the realm of abstraction characteristic of French color-blind universalism when discussing race. Occupying a white and middle-class position may afford candidates forms of cultural capital that the institution readily recognizes. Yet, they may need to emphasize their identification with the territorial category of the *banlieue* to mitigate the perception of class and racial privilege, which is not typically associated with CEP applicants from these areas. Finally, being perceived as female and Muslim does not necessarily hinder one's ability to meet Sciences Po's expectations regarding personality, but it may require candidates to align with a dominant conception of gender and womanhood in order to counterbalance their religious and cultural categorization.

France's higher education equal opportunity and diversity policies represent a source of hope, aspiration, and a promise of both individual and collective success for many disadvantaged students. The emphasis on student potential, which shifts away from selection based solely on academic merit, has been widely welcomed by most candidates I encountered. By recognizing how a student's educational, family, and social background can enrich the Sciences Po community, these new criteria offer students the opportunity to highlight aspects of their trajectories and profiles that were previously regarded as shortcomings within the French school system.

However, the strategic and rhetorical capacity to approximate the ideal CEP candidate is not solely determined by objective factors such as academic curricula or participation in extracurricular activities. It also depends on candidates' ability

to address stereotypes arising from intersectional categorization, which affect them in unequal ways. Above all, the paradoxical effects of this diversity policy do not undermine its necessity or critical role in higher education. Rather, they highlight the urgent need to rethink societal structures and the ideology of French color-blind universalism. Only by addressing these broader issues can diversity-driven policies fully realize their transformative potential.

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