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DOSSIER

The sociology of family-school relationships: social reconfigurations and new analytical and methodological perspectives

International Capital and Student Body Composition at an International Private School

Capital Internacional e composição do corpo discente de uma escola particular internacional

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the composition and distribution of cultural capital amongst students at an international private school, drawing on data from 270 students' LinkedIn profiles and 27 semi-structured interviews. International education literature suggests that national middle classes are reinventing themselves by acquiring international properties. Studying at a school like the College of Europe provides the opportunity to not only study social groups from one nation but from many. Findings show that while the College of Europe tends to recruit a socially homogenous student body with strong international dispositions, there is a variation within the student body, which impacts how they perceive and value the school. Three groups of students were identified based on social class and international capital. For the "international inheritors", the school represented a social paradise and was a continuation of investment into the international, a strategy of social reproduction. For the "international social climbers", the school represented an opportunity for upward social mobility. Most students, however, belonged to the group of "international aspirants". For them, the school represented a strategy for social distinction by further accumulating international capital and reconverting their national scholarly capital into certified international capital. These findings suggest that, in the case of the College of Europe, international education is used by European national middle classes to reinvent themselves rather than social reproduction or upward mobility.

Keywords: International Capital. College of Europe. International Education. Students. Social Class.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a composição e a distribuição do capital cultural entre os alunos de uma escola particular internacional, com base em dados de 270 perfis de alunos no Linkedin e 27 entrevistas semiestruturas. A literatura de educação internacional sugere que as classes médias nacionais estão se reinventando por meio da aquisição de propriedades internacionais. Estudar em uma escola como College of Europe oferece a oportunidade de estudar não apenas grupos sociais de uma só nação, mas de várias. As descobertas mostram que, embora o College of Europe tenda a recrutar um corpo discente socialmente homogêneo e com fortes disposições internacionais, há uma variação dentro do corpo discente, o que não afetou apenas a forma como eles percebiam e valorizavam a escola. Foram identificados três grupos de alunos, com base na classe

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social e no capital internacional. Par os "herdeiros internacionais", a escola representava um paraíso social e era a continuação de um investimento no internacional, uma estratégia de reprodução social. Para os "alpinistas sociais internacionais", a escola representava uma oportunidade de mobilidade social ascendente. A maioria dos alunos, entretanto, pertencia ao grupo de "aspirantes internacionais". Para eles, o College representava uma estratégia de distinção social ao acumular ainda mais capital internacional e reverter seu capital acadêmico internacional em capital internacional certificado. Essas descobertas sugerem que, no caso do College of Europe, a educação internacional é usada pelas classes médias nacionais europeias para se reinventar, e não para reprodução social ou mobilidade ascendente.

Palavras-chave: Capital Internacional. College of Europe. Educação Internacional. Estudantes. Classe Social.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, international private schools were created to offer alternative education to the children of expats, diplomats, and professionals within international organisations (Delval, 2022). The literature on international private schools differentiates between traditional international schools catering to international professionals' children and new international streams aiming at local students primarily where the objective is to teach in English with the goal and hope of getting into a prestigious Anglo-Saxon University (Brummitt; Keeling, 2013; Delval, 2022). The College of Europe, located in Bruges, Belgium, was neither created to cater to international professionals' children, such as the IB schools or the European Schools, nor to the international economic elites' children, such as the Swiss international boarding schools (Dugonjic-Rodwin, 2014; Bertron, 2016; Drewski; Gerhards; Hans, 2018). Recent studies mentioning the College of Europe differ significantly in their portrayal of the school, ranging from depicting it as a school aspiring to form a European administrative elite to a European intellectual hub (St. John, 2021; Delval, 2022). Regardless, this College shares with other international schools the opportunity for students to acquire a predominantly international culture that, according to Anne-Catherine Wagner, differs from cosmopolitanism. While the latter presupposes a cohesion of a small aristocratic elite, the international culture of professionals is defined by the valorisation of the diversity of national cultures (Wagner, 1998).

Research tends to focus on the impact of international education on social stratification or international students' identity. Social stratification through international education can happen in two ways: 1) as a new means for elite groups to socially reproduce themselves; 2) as an opportunity for the middle classes to move socially upwards (Resnik, 2012). If national middle classes are reinventing themselves through the acquisition of international properties, thus, it is relevant to study at school like the College of Europe as it provides the opportunity to not only study social groups from one nation but from many. Every year, around 350 students arrive in Bruges, representing approximately 50 nationalities. For ten months, they live, eat, and study together. The school is bilingual in French and English, and the tuition fee during the fieldwork (2017-2018) was 24,000 euros. However, approximately 70% of students were on full or half scholarships.

This article sets out to examine the student composition of the student body during the academic year 2017-2018. This is done in three steps. First, through students' LinkedIn profiles,

I analysed previous trajectories of admitted students to understand what sort of cultural capital, specifically international capital, students have accumulated prior to enrolment. Second, I compared the experience of two admitted students to showcase that, albeit formally accepted, social origins impact perceptions of what is at stake during admissions to an international education. Third, supported by semi-structured interviews with 27 students, three groups of students are distinguished based on their international capital and social class.

The cultivation of international capital through international education

The specificity of the College of Europe is that it is an international private boarding school, differing from national schools due to the international capital cultivated through different practices. International capital has been theoretically conceptualised as a form of cultural capital, acquired by living in a foreign country (that is, a capital related to but distinct from one's national capital). Recent scholars perceive it as a multiplier to other forms of assets and resources already possessed (Wagner, 2020; 2007a). Apart from general forms of capital (economic, cultural, social), capital can also be field-specific. Cultural capital may take an embodied (long-lasting dispositions in body and mind, knowledge, taste, how we dress, walk, talk etc.), objectified (art collection, books), and institutionalised (academic degree) form (Bourdieu, 1986 [1983]). Similarly, one can think of international capital in three forms. In its institutionalised form, international capital would be a diploma from an international school (Wagner, 2020). Its objectified form could be owning real estate abroad. Finally, its embodied form would be practices, knowledge, and tastes related to international settings.

Research on highly mobile families has shown that families invest in international resources that easily travel across borders (English language, learning a musical instrument, international education) (Yemini *et al.*, 2020). However, at the same time, families continuously strive to maintain a strong link to their national elements by teaching their children their native language and celebrating national cultural and religious events (Yemini *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, discussing the acquisition and convertibility of international and national resources is a dual, mutual and complex process that also varies across space and place.

International capital, largely inherited and further reinforced by international schooling and professional experiences in foreign countries, can be viewed as symbolic capital (Wagner, 2011). Symbolic capital exists through esteem, recognition, belief, credit, and confidence from others. It can only be perpetuated if it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]). In some countries, such as the Nordic countries, which are small and open economies, international capital has symbolic power and international experiences are valued by employers (Wagner, 1998). In other countries, such as France, international education is often viewed as a refuge for students from dominant classes who struggle academically within the national system. Thus, international educational options are seen as a way to circumvent the national educational system within which they are failing (Vallot, 2020; Bertron, 2016; Delespierre, 2016). In other words, the national level continuously structures international capital's symbolic power and convertibility, which can vary across space, sector and discipline (for instance, economics is more international than law).

Exposing children to "the international" is hardly new when it comes to elites. Cosmopolitanism has traditionally been linked to the upper strata of the European bourgeoisie, such as the *grand tours* (Wagner, 2007b; Pinçon; Pinçon-Charlot, 2011). What is new is that "the international" has become accessible to other social groups, very much like education itself has (Engel; Maxwell; Yemini, 2020). Socioeconomic status plays a role in who partakes in exchange programmes, the students' choices of destination and subjects, and the availability choices themselves. Not all social groups benefit to the same extent by internationalisation. Whether studies abroad and international experiences will add a positive value to an individual's life trajectory largely depends on the other types of resources accumulated (Wagner, 2020). This is symptomatic of international education's tendency to benefit the middle and upper middle class by granting them opportunities and competitive advantages (Engel; Gibson, 2020; Nogueira; Aguiar, 2008; Maxwell; Aggleton, 2016).

Data and material

To gather data on the student profiles of the observed year, I consulted students' LinkedIn profiles. Out of 345 students admitted during the academic year of 2017-2018, I found and analysed LinkedIn profiles of 270 students. The data I was primarily interested in was education (BA or MA, academic institution, discipline), work experience (specifically EU traineeships), and international experiences (Erasmus, free mover, internship). I retrieved the students' names, programme affiliation, and nationality from the College's Yearbook. LinkedIn is a social and professional network platform that can be seen as a digital CV. It is possible (and highly probable) that people lie or at least make their skills look better than they are. Nevertheless, the College of Europe checked most of the variables I was interested in (educational diplomas, Erasmus exchanges, certificates of language knowledge) before enrolment as part of the selection process. Therefore, the data is overall reliable. One shortcoming of this data is that it does not give any information regarding students' social origin as a cohort, usually measured by parental (and sometimes grandparents') education level and professions. However, two recent studies surveyed the College students, considering social class as a variable (Behar, 2021; Michon, 2017). Therefore, I relied on these secondary data regarding the College students as a cohort, coupled with my own primary data from interviews, which nuances quotes made by students.

I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with students. I mainly interviewed students from Scandinavia and Central and Eastern European Countries. I also interviewed students from Southern Europe, Anglo-Saxon countries, and non-EU members to allow other perspectives, based on regional belonging, to emerge.

Table 1: Sample of students' national and regional belonging

Country of origin	Number of respondents
Northern Europe	
Sweden	5
Denmark	7
United Kingdom	1
Ireland	1
Southern Europe	
Italy	1
Portugal	1
Central Eastern Europe	
Poland	6
Slovakia	2
Non-EU members	
Norway	1
Ukraine	2
Total	**27**

Source: Prepared by the author.

The interviews with students were semi-structured and built around two parts. The first part entailed a shorter set of survey-type questions focused on information on the student's socioeconomic origin and previous academic and professional trajectories. This allowed potentially sensitive questions, such as parents' and grandparents' educational levels and occupations (Laurens, 2007). The second part of the interview centred around three topics: students' reasons for applying to the College and expectations, how they perceived and valued the year at the College, and their future career aspirations. Though this was the standard interview structure and point of departure, each interview took a different shape depending on what the interviewee shared. The average interview took approximately 1 hour 30 min, with the shortest being around 45 minutes, and the longest 2 hours 15 minutes.

The student body: nationally heterogenous but socially homogenous

During the observed academic year, there were 345 students admitted to Bruges from around 50 nationalities. Regarding students' nationality, the top three biggest countries were France (53 students), Spain (45 students), and Italy (43 students). These countries alone accounted for over 40 per cent of the total student population, indicating that while students are highly diversified in terms of nationality, some are numerically dominant. Close to 80 per cent of the students during the observed academic year came from EU member states. If the students are nationally heterogenous, they are socially homogenous. The College students distinguish themselves by their affluent social origins and being international. Internationally mobile students tend to come from an elevated social origin (Gerhards; Hans; Carlson, 2017).

Data from 5000 student applications between 1950 and 1995 collected by Virginie Schnabel showed that less than 3 per cent of the College students had blue-collar parents (Schnabel, 1998). In other words, the students who apply for the College of Europe do not tend to come from a working-class origin. Similar data has not been collected between 1995 and 2018. Therefore, it is impossible to attest whether a structural change or persistence in socioeconomic composition amongst students has occurred. However, two recent studies collected data on the social origins of College of Europe students. A study by French sociologist Sebastian Michon in 2017 showed that 21% of the students had one parent, and 40% had both parents belonging to the upper echelons of the social strata. When looking at fathers' occupations, 20% worked in managerial positions in the private sector, 18% worked in liberal professions, and 14% in managerial positions in the public sector. Regarding parents' educational level, 86% of the fathers and 83% of the mothers had a higher education (Michon, 2017). As part of his doctoral thesis, Maxime Behar surveyed students in the 2016-2017 academic year. It corroborated both Schnabel's and Michon's results, i.e., students come from upper – and middle – class families, are highly internationalised and have parents, even grandparents, with large amounts of educational capital (Behar, 2021).

During the observed academic year, few of the students interviewed, formally or informally, had parents who could be labelled as blue-collar parents. Most students belonged to the middle and upper-middle classes, had parents with a university degree and a liberal profession. In other words, interview findings align with previous studies concerning students' social origin. In sum, College students tend to come from families endowed with high educational capital, are socially homogenous and, based on parents' professions, are closer to the economic pole than the cultural one in a Bourdieusian sense.

Highly internationalised

International capital can be measured through how many languages one speaks, international experiences (studies and internships abroad), how many countries one has lived in, and if the person has double nationality or binational parents (Wagner, 1998). According to students' LinkedIn data, students spoke several languages, had already accumulated cultural capital, were geographically mobile, and had lived in several countries well before arriving in Bruges. They invested in "the international" but primarily in an "international" that had symbolic value for them. Thus, when studying abroad, they tended to choose France, the UK, and the US, also known as "zones of prestige", with numerous highly ranked universities (Munk, 2009).

While only 3% of students spoke two languages (the official minimum as the school is bilingual), one-third spoke four languages. Linguistic capital can be acquired through language courses at home but learning or deepening one's knowledge in a specific language is enhanced if one lives in a country where that language is spoken and can be seen as a transnational investment (Gerhards; Hans, 2013). Nine out of ten students had lived in another country than their own prior to enrollment. One-quarter of the students, excluding French nationals, had lived in France for at least three months, that such a large proportion of College students had lived there was most likely linked to French being one of the school's official languages. Furthermore, 13% of students had lived in the

United Kingdom and 11% in the United States. Almost one-third of the students had lived in Belgium. Close to one-fifth of the students had done an EU traineeship before enrolling at the College. Studies were the main reason students went to France, while internships in or around EU institutions were why students moved to Belgium. Summing up, a characteristic of the College students is that they have had international experiences prior to enrolment and possess knowledge of foreign languages, both correlated to social class. In fact, the fact that students are socially homogenous and tend to come from middle and upper-middle classes is masked by their national heterogeneity.

Student experiences during admission interviews

Generally, the students did not find the interviews very pleasant. They felt that the purpose of the interview was to make it an unpleasant experience. Many affirmed that it was a stressful moment and that they were sure they would not get in afterwards. A few cried after the interview. Pushing students during interviews was perceived by students as a tactic from the administration to see how they operate under pressure and how well they can maintain their composure and respond clearly. Most students I interviewed prepared themselves before the admission interviews by asking alumni, friends, or friends of friends for tips and tricks, what to expect, and how to prepare themselves in the best way possible. In other words, the students invoked their social capital to prepare themselves to the best of their ability (Bourdieu, 1986 [1983]).

However, social class also affected how students experienced the interview. Two excerpts from male Polish students exemplify this. Both were admitted to the IRD programme with full scholarships for the observed academic year but had very different experiences in the recruitment process. Below is an extract from an interview with Adam, a son of diplomats:

> **Adam**: *I know a lot of people prepared heavily for the interview, but I didn't. Because, first of all, I didn't really think I would get it because my knowledge of the EU institutions was very low.*
> **SL**: *Even after a whole undergraduate (diploma) in European studies?*
> **Adam**: *Yes, because it wasn't really EU focused. It was kind of general political science. Before the interview, for a week, I kind of read the basics of the EU institutions and that's all I knew. So, I didn't have high hopes. And during the interview, they only asked one question about the EU institutions specifically. They asked me "what is the most important EU institution" or something along those lines, so that was nice. And other questions were on current events, pretty much. And also, on my ambitions. So that's why I did better than I would if they (would've) asked me much about the EU institutions, probably.*
> **SL**: *Why do you think they ask about current events?*
> **Adam**: *I guess they want to check if I am interested in politics and what is going on (at) the moment… but, yeah, it wasn't really stressful because I really wasn't sure what I would do after my studies. It wasn't like I had all my eggs in the College of Europe basket. I probably would've found something else during the summer. Yeah, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to study for another year, anyway. But then when I got the scholarship to go here, I thought it would be kind of stupid not to.*

Second, an extract from an interview with another student, Daniel, a son of farmland-traders:

> **SL**: *Can you speak about the selection process? How you got recruited?*
> **Daniel**: *So, first of all, when I compare my profile with other people, I've got a feeling that my profile is worse.*
> **SL**: *Why?*
> **Daniel**: *Because I haven't lived abroad for a longer time, it was just an Erasmus.*
> **SL**: *(For) one year!*
> **Daniel**: *You have people who lived ten years (abroad) here, people who (did) internships in embassies, (EU) institutions, some of them (did) (the) Blue Book already, I don't have this. I got (a) regular student average profile with some additions. And how was it really? I spent a lot of time to prepare the best application I possibly could. Then, when I learnt I had been invited to the interview, it was a very stressful thing. Because I was sitting in the middle of the classroom with, I would say, twelve to fifteen people around me. With some distance (of) three meters looking at me, from my left to my right, like 180 degrees. And some of them were visibly bored because I was one of the many that they interviewed, so I totally understand, but some of them were not. Fortunately, below my belly there was a desk […] so I could crush my fingers below the level of the desk and nobody saw how stressed I was and how I was destroying my hands while trying to answer clearly and as good as possible […] the experience was, as I said, dreadful.*

Daniel's perceived agony during the interview and his meticulous application preparation and Adam's seemingly breezy and detached experience prior and during the interview can better be understood by looking at their previous trajectories. Adam grew up and went to school in different countries, following his parents' diplomatic careers. He went to international schools, had mainly international friends and spoke five to six languages fluently. Adam studied as a free mover in the UK, did an Erasmus in Switzerland and had internships in embassies, which he obtained through his parents' connections. If he not have accepted to the College, he was confident that he would have found something else during the summer prior to enrolment. In the end, he decided to go because he got fully funded, and, hence, it would have been "stupid not to".

On the other hand, Daniel started to prepare his application years before enrolling. His parents did not go to university, and they did not travel a lot. He heard of the College during his university studies in law at a national university. He realised that to get in, he would have to start building his profile and make it increasingly international. He went abroad twice, once to do a traineeship at a Baltic university for a couple of months and a second time to do an Erasmus for two semesters in Austria. He started to learn French. He perfected his English. Still, after all the prior hard work and effort, he regarded his profile as worse than the other students.

Although Daniel did apply to some PhD positions elsewhere, he had been pretty much set on the College for years. In other words, he had put most of his eggs in the College of Europe basket. Daniel needed the College experience to validate and reconvert all the investments in international experiences and language training into a tangible institutionalised cultural capital: a degree from a bilingual international school (Bourdieu, 1986 [1983]). Adam did not; he had already inherited and accumulated plenty of international symbolic, cultural, and social capital throughout his family connections, international schooling, and valued traineeships in the admission process to the College of Europe.

The example of Adam and Daniel shows how international dispositions are not something merely accumulated through exposure to the international in the form of stays abroad but incorporated as an embodied disposition over time, related to inherited social, economic, and cultural assets. For children of dominant classes, travelling and abroad stays have a formative function, preparing them for positions of power, through exposing them to international socialisation (Wagner, 2007b). Students like Adam, endowed with high volumes of these resources, could reap the multiplier effect of their international assets to their fullest. Students like Daniel, who had accumulated but not inherited their international capital and had low volumes of other resources, were not able to display and embody the sense of ease that only came naturally to those with a long duration of international socialisation. The different profiles of Daniel and Adam, both admitted to the College, point to a variation of selected students to the school where students like Adam felt "at home" while students like Daniel felt "out of place" (Bourdieu; Passeron (1979, [1964], p. 13).

Three profiles of selected students

Three types of student profiles were distinguished based on the 27 students interviewed[1]. First, a minority but symbolically dominant, was a group of students endowed with inherited international capital. These students had grown up in bilingual and/or international environments, in upper-middle-class families (they were children of lawyers, university professors, surgeons, EU civil servants, and diplomats). International travelling had been an integral part of these students' lives due to their parents' work or international family relations. Second, the "international aspirants" were the largest group of students and came from middle-class families with large amounts of cultural capital but not necessarily international capital. They were closer to the first group than the third group, but differed from the first group because their trajectories were marked by national schools rather than international schools. These students had acquired symbolic international capital on their own through Erasmus programme exchanges or internships at ministries of foreign affairs, embassies or EU institutions. They often had a pragmatic approach to why they wanted to study at the College. Among these students, knowledge acquisition, language acquisition, and practical skills were often invoked.

Third, the "international social climbers" were a minority of students of a working-class origin who, just like the second group, had invested in international capital through studies but had attended less prestigious universities. Often, they were the first person in their family to attend university. For them, the College represented, in the form of an international education, an opportunity for upward social mobility.

[1] These can be contrasted to the three groups identified by Sebastian Michon (Michon, 2017) in his study on French master students, College of Europe students, and Université de Bruxelles students. Michon identifies two opposing axes between international capital and educational capital within his student population. The College students and those enrolled at Sciences Po, ULB or IEP Strasbourg were in the group endowed with the most international capital. He concludes that international capital dominates over educational capital within the transnational space. My typology of interviewed College students can be seen as a further breaking down of Michon's group and demonstrates a variation in inherited and accumulated international capital concerning social origin and national educational trajectories.

Within the first group, the "international inheritors", parents had actively opened international avenues for their children. These students had often attended international schools such as IB schools or the European school in Brussels, a school for children of EU civil servants. Their families had frequently vacationed abroad, and students belonging to this group had a very relaxed relationship with travelling. For them, crossing European borders was no more intimidating than crossing the street.

Oscar grew up in a posh suburban area close to a Scandinavian capital. He went to a private school before his family moved to Brussels, where his father, a surgeon, got a job in an international organisation. After graduating from the European school, his family encouraged him to stay and study in Leuven and even offered to buy him a car to easily commute between Brussels and Leuven. He eventually enrolled to study law faculty at a renowned public university in his home country. During his studies, he went on an Erasmus to Leuven and did an exchange at a university in the south of France. For him, studying at the College had been a "childhood dream". He first heard of the College from his mother, who herself studied in France. She was "often the one pitching ideas", encouraging him to "look outside" his home country. When trying to explain why he always wanted to study at the College, he framed it as the next logical step considering his trajectory:

> *I mean, you start from the European school, you build on with law and then you do more law in Belgium and the EU and suddenly you have many more reasons why it would be a good fit to come to (the College) and then French from studying there (in France) and family and friends… so I guess that all just coincided.*

For Oscar, his exposure to a European environment in the European school, his choice to study law and do an Erasmus in Belgium with a focus on EU law, his choice of studying French in France and his social network of family and friends all "coincided" for him to consider the College a "good fit". And vice versa, he could be considered a good fit for the College of Europe. This perceived natural continuation between an international schooling environment and the College of Europe was a constructed narrative where one thing led to another, and, suddenly, it "made sense" to go to the school that also valued and legitimised the already possessed assets. Inherited cultural privilege, here in the form of having been exposed to the international since early years, is transmitted discretely between generations and manifests itself in a detached attitude towards the school system, by being at ease and feeling "at home" (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1964).

Both Victoria's parents are citizens of a Nordic country and work as EU officials for EU institutions. Victoria was born in Switzerland, as her father worked for the UN then. At the age of three, the family moved to Brussels. After attending European school, she enrolled in higher education as a free-mover, studying towards a joint degree in law from the University of Paris-Assas and King's College. During an internship at the EU Court of Justice, she was reminded of how much she had missed being in an international environment. For her, the College of Europe offered the environment that she felt she needed and was comfortable in:

> *I grew up in a very European environment […] and a very international environment too…I almost need (that) to feel I am using my full capacity […] So, it is partly that, the sort of environment it is (here). I think it is very fulfilling, because there are people from everywhere who had all sorts of experiences, who speak different languages… I think it renders an additional*

> *layer, it is always a new dimension to everything one does and I think that is fascinating.*

International inheritors such as Victoria grew up in mobile families. Often, they had English and French as teaching languages in school, if not from home. Before arriving, many students thought their fellow students would be elitist and worried about their social integration. The "international inheritors" students did not invoke any such qualms. Jacob, who grew up in Brussels in a bilingual family, with his father working for the EU, had been schooled in the European school and had expected the College to be similar:

> **SL**: *How did you imagine the other students? Or did you not think of them but more on the studies?*
> **Jacob**: *I thought it would be kind of similar to the European school, like, or that there would be people from all over. That it would be back to, yeah well not back to the European school but […] the international feeling.*

Among the second group of students, international capital was acquired through academic or professional experiences. Compared to the "international inheritors", the environment of the College was not familiar to the "international aspirants" nor a natural habitat that they were already used to. This environment, however, served as a push factor to apply for admissions, as it was viewed as prestigious and as offering an opportunity to build expertise and language skills. For instance, Charlotte for whom the EU always represented a strategic career option while her heart was beating for literature, or Sebastian for whom the College was a steppingstone towards enrolling in the national diplomat programme, or even László, who already had a PhD in law and worked for a think tank, enrolled at the College to understand EU law better and thereby develop professionally. This is in line with Maxime Behar's findings in his thesis on the College of Europe students, where he argues that for the majority, the year in Bruges constitutes a strategy of social distinction through international education by European middle and upper middle classes, who have largely accumulated their international assets through their schooling rather than inherited them (Behar, 2021).

These students invested in the "European" and the "international" with a very pragmatic and goal-oriented mindset. While their parents perhaps did not map out their children's futures, they were nevertheless supportive of their children's ambitions and goals. Charlotte's parents, for instance, went on a family trip from Sweden to accompany her to an open day at Oxford University when she was considering applying there. Yet, students in this group did not speak of their parent's role to the same extent as did the international inheritors, whose parents assumed an active role in suggesting where their children should study.

Finally, the parents of "international social climbers" had played a marginal role in their decision to attend the College of Europe. They were a minority at the school. Precisely because of this, these students deserve attention as their trajectories contrast those of students in the other two groups. For this group of students, being European implied having a lot of cultural capital and a cosmopolitan outlook, similarly to the parents of the first student group. A French female student I met during the first day of the academic year, who had previously studied at a provincial Institut d'Etudes Politiques (IEP) and subsequently at Sorbonne, told me that her parents were always

interested in Europe but that they "aren't Europeans at all, they are farmers". It was interesting that she made the connection between being European and having much cultural capital. This idea was echoed in an interview with Alessia, an Italian student who referred to her family as a "very sedimentary family, low-class family" from the countryside, which for her meant "not the kind of people who usually move places or study", "don't speak any foreign languages" nor "know about European issues".

> *As I said, I come from a working-class family. And especially, even more than working class, I would identify them as more from the countryside. And you know the popular image of peasants hiding their money under the mattress? That's how they are, you know […] what I knew that she (her mom) wouldn't say no to, was education. Education has always been the thing that, you know, no matter what, they were going to spend money on it. My mother worked extra hours for months in order for me to do these study trips. Because, for her, it was very important that I would have this chance, learning languages properly and everything.*

Alessia's family would not spend money on anything considered frivolous, but if they were to spend money on something, it would be education. Due to this, Alessia went on several language trips organised by her high school: twice to the US and once to Scotland. During one of these study trips, she fell in love and ended up being involved in a long-distance relationship between Italy, the country of her residence at the time, and Spain. This experience would change her perception of travelling and mobility:

> *For the first time in my life, I realised that taking a plane was not such a big deal as I thought it was […] It was the first time I would do the whole process on my own, buy the ticket and go to the airport […] my family doesn't travel by plane, they are all scared of it. The only time I had done it before was during the study trips but it was the teacher who took care of everything. There, for the first time, I had to actually go to the website, buy the ticket and go to the airport and do the whole thing. And I realised that actually the distances are much shorter than in my mind […] and this thing made me realise that I could actually go somewhere else (to study).*

Alessia's father saved up money to buy her a car, but she told him that she wanted to use the money to study abroad instead and that, after her studies, she would save up to buy a car for herself. This contrasts with Oscar's experience, whose parents offered a car to try to convince him to stay abroad and study when the family was moving back to their home country.

After participating in a simulation game of the European Parliament during high school, Alessia started researching the professional profiles of those working in EU institutions. She noticed that being multilingual was a common denominator among EU professionals. Therefore, she decided to study abroad, much like Daniel who also started building his international profile years before enrolling at the College. As she had studied English and French in high school, she wanted to study in the UK or France to improve one of these languages. She soon dismissed the UK as too expensive. She initially wanted to apply to Sciences Po in Paris but was unable to do so due to administrative reasons. Instead, she enrolled at a French provincial university where she graduated with a double bachelor's degree in law and political science. Afterwards, she stayed on and completed her master's degree at the IEP in the same city.

During her studies in France, Alessia became involved in the Young European Federalists group, the youth section of the European Movement[2]. There, she first heard of the College of Europe. Initially, however, she dismissed the idea of attending, as she was told that it was "very hard to get in". During this time, she met a former professor engaged in the European Movement and the Maison d'Europe[3], who became her mentor. He told her that she had a good profile for the College of Europe and should apply. Again, she dismissed the idea, as it was "expensive, too tough a selection". The year after, she completed a summer internship with a Member of European Parliament (MEP). At the end of this experience, her mentor asked what her plans were after graduation. When she said that she was unsure, he once again encouraged her to apply to the College and offered to help with her application and to write a reference letter. That was the third time she considered applying to the College, after having self-excluded herself on two previous occasions.

Through Alessia's story, it becomes painstakingly obvious how differently students perceive the question of international mobility. For most students, travelling within the EU was described as "absolutely normal". For Alessia, however, a flight between Italy and Spain profoundly impacted her to reflect on how spatial distances can be mental constructions.

Concluding discussion

This article investigated the distribution of cultural capital, especially international capital, of students enrolled at an international private school. Findings show that students were nationally heterogeneous yet socially homogenous, endowed with large volumes of international capital.

The national heterogeneity, although not as heterogeneous as it may seem on closer inspection, masks the social homogeneity within the student body. Very few students at the College of Europe come from a working-class origin, while most come from middle and upper middle class. Considering that the College of Europe is a postgraduate private international school this is not surprising as university degrees, private education and international experiences are all highly correlated with an elevated socioeconomic origin.

Three groups of students were identified based on social class and international capital. The first group, a minority amongst the students, were the "international inheritors". These students did not have a strong anchoring to a national schooling system but had gone through international schooling, such as the European school in Brussels. Their parents worked as EU civil servants or diplomats, and they had high volumes of inherited international capital. For the "international inheritors", the College represented a social paradise and was a continuation of an investment into the international, a strategy of social reproduction.

[2] European Movement was founded in 1947 and is the largest pan-European network of pro-European organisations, see Europeanmovement.eu (2021).

[3] Maison d'Europe is an association created in the late 1940s to facilitate cooperation between France and Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, but today aims to be a bridge between European citizens and the European institutions, see Les Maisons De L'europe (2021).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, also a minority amongst the students, were the working-class students, the "international social climbers". Often the first generation to attend university studies, they had invested years into building their "College profile". These students were increasingly inclined to self-exclusion and self-depreciation while linking being European with being cosmopolitan and well-educated, further enhancing an elitist notion of the school. For them, the College represented an opportunity for upward social mobility.

The largest group of students, the "international aspirants", were neither "international inheritors" nor "international social climbers" but middle and upper-middle-class students with inherited economic and cultural capital. These students' scholarly capital had predominantly been accumulated through the national schooling system, while international capital had been accumulated through Erasmus or internship abroad but generally not inherited. For these students, the College represented a strategy for social distinction by further accumulating international capital and reconverting their national scholarly capital into certified international capital. These findings suggest that in the case of the College of Europe, international education is used by European national middle classes to reinvent themselves rather than social reproduction or upward mobility. If they do so to compete with other factions of middle and upper-middle classes in their home countries by acquiring other types of dispositions or if they strive to compete with the "international inheritors" on the transnational scene largely depends on whether they will embark on an international career or return to their home countries upon graduation.

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