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► **To cite this version:**

Sébastien Michon. Pathways to Eurocracy: a study of international orientations among French students who pursue EU careers. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, inPress, pp.1-11. 10.1080/14767724.2022.2115341 . halshs-03769868v2

HAL Id: halshs-03769868

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03769868v2>

Submitted on 7 Sep 2022

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Pathways to Eurocracy: A Study of International Orientations among French Students Who Pursue EU Careers

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Abstract

The market for degrees preparing for careers in European politics has developed over the last 20 years. Starting from the French case, this paper proposes to understand how students move towards these orientations. Based on mixed-methods sociological study, the article shows that students in European politics masters programs are not so much from the international upper bourgeoisie as from the rising middle and upper social classes, for whom international capital is a distinctive resource. Then, it shows that pursuing a European career allows them to reconcile two seemingly contradictory rationales: on the one hand the incentive to specialize urgently to enter the job market and on the other hand the eagerness to prolong their Erasmus experience. The driving force behind these careers is accordingly as in the possibility of starting more an international career than a European one.

Key words

Students; EU jobs; Internationalisation; Socialisations; Professional orientations; Master's programmes

Introduction

This article focuses on students who aspire to a career in European Union-related jobs (EU jobs). EU jobs and training programmes for jobs in European politics are particularly appealing. Many people want to work in Brussels or in EU member countries as "support staff" (Becker 1982) of the European institutions and of organizations that revolve around them. These jobs form a specific labour market. Prized positions include those of official or contract staff in the institutions (administrator, programme manager, internal auditor at the Commission, parliamentary assistant at the European Parliament, political group staff in the European Parliament), interest representative, European affairs consultant, EU project manager, European funding or European affairs officer, EU policy analyst, communication officer, or staff in a permanent representation, a national administration, a university, a local authority or an office or information centre on Europe. These EU specialists or second-order Eurocrats, whose ranks have been growing steadily for over forty years, number in the thousands. They are involved in shaping public problems, elaborating decisions, making or maintaining connections between or with the institutions. They are in charge of administrative tasks, communication, monitoring, community regulations and policies, disseminating information and arguments, seeking compromises within an organization or group of organizations, formulating advice or recommendations, seeking funding, building and implementing projects (e.g. Georgakakis 2002; Büttner and Leopold 2015; Sanchez Salgado 2017; Laurens 2018). The creation of EU jobs since the 1980s has gone hand in hand with the development of the Union, the increase in the number of entrants and the growing competition in this labour market. Competitive examinations for entry into the European civil service have for several years been very popular and extremely selective. Access to slightly less prestigious and partly transitional positions, such as parliamentary assistant at the European Parliament (Michon 2014), project manager in

interest groups and local authorities and even trainee (Ballatore and Bertrand 2019), are also very selective: each job or traineeship offer elicits dozens or hundreds of applications.

In relation to this job market, training courses and programmes for jobs in European politics have also developed; they are often very selective. The prestigious College of Europe was a pioneer, founded in Belgium in 1949. Each year, in Bruges and since 1992 in Natolin, Poland too, several hundred students (477 in 2020) from more 50 countries (55 in 2020) enrol. For over 20 years, master's programmes with an EU specialization have been booming. These masters' programmes who make Europe a reality are named European Politics, European Affairs, European Studies, or EU Jobs. They are attached to law, history, economics or political science departments in some universities (such as the Free University of Brussels, the Central European University at Budapest or Maastricht University).

Considering the EU's permanent crisis (Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome 2021), the success of European careers is somewhat enigmatic. Indeed, many of the "Euro Bubble" commentators, to use the title of an Internet series on "European affairs", claim that the Eurocracy - the European institutions and the activity around them - has lost its appeal. Fewer and fewer people, if any, even within the European institutions, reportedly still "believe" in Europe, they say. This paradox calls for not solely focusing on adherence to the European project. This article instead considers the opportunity effect of the field of Eurocracy for young international graduates. Starting from the French case, this paper proposes to understand how young people move towards careers in EU jobs based on the study of the pathways of students in masters specialising in European politics and of the construction of their orientation. Which profiles are valued by these masters' programmes? Who takes up such careers? How do these orientations take shape?

Questions

Several works in European studies, political science and sociology have contributed to furthering knowledge on EU professionals (e.g. Page 1997; Shore 2000; Georgakakis 2002; Michel 2006; Georgakakis and Rowell 2013; Büttner, Leopold, Mau and Posvic 2015). They highlight the decisive character of European socialisation and its underlying social processes. Two things are most relevant here: the specialisation of the profiles of EU professionals – they are increasingly EU specialists, trained in European studies, European law, European politics – , and internationalisation. Nevertheless, these studies have tended to overlook three key factors in the making of EU careers. First, most studies focus on the professionals at the upper levels of Eurocracy including European civil servants and posted national civil servants (e.g. Ellinas and Suleiman 2012; Ban 2013; Georgakakis 2017).¹ Second, they focus on the activity of EU workers and provide less information on their backgrounds and paths, in particular where the construction of the EU orientation is concerned. Third, they deal with socialisation within the field of Eurocracy, "professional socializations" (Hrabanski 2006), "objects of socialisation" (Michel and Robert 2010), and study its effects with an emphasis on specific practices, knowledge and know-how (Büttner et al. 2015). However, we know less about their pre-socialisations, the social contexts they have experienced, and the conditions of possibility of European socialisation. Invoking chance is unconvincing, as such an interpretation neglects the social processes at work and the role of social trajectories (Bourdieu 1984) that make a given practice more or less likely. We may go some way towards an explanation by examining the

¹ Exceptions include the work of Büttner et al. (2015) on "professionalization in European affairs" and studies that focus on specific groups of specialists of European politics, who make a career in Brussels or at home: European Commission trainees (Ballatore and Bertrand 2019), parliamentary assistants at the European Parliament (Michon 2014), agents in charge of "European" files within local executives (de Lassalle 2010), representatives of interest groups in the European institutions (Courty and Michel 2013), as well as employers' groups (Morival 2019), the Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations (Hrabanski 2006), the European Trade Union Confederation (Wagner 2013) and NGOs (Lindelée and Scaramuzzino 2020).

making of this career choice, and in doing so shedding light on international mobility processes and the construction of the European orientation. There is a lack of research on these aspects.

This paper will provide data on the profiles valued by EU master's programmes and on dispositions that are conducive to accessing to the field of Eurocracy. In this sense, we propose to focus on trajectories and the meanings students give to their actions in light of their social and international backgrounds, and more largely their socialisations.

A first question relates to social and international background. We posit that applicants for EU-related positions have a significant amount of "international capital" (Wagner and Réau 2015). Wagner and Réau distinguish three states of international capital: an institutionalised form attested by titles, diplomas, as well as experiences; an embodied form (a system of dispositions that implies original forms of know-how and interpersonal skills); and, lastly, an objectified form, which makes it possible to feel "at home" in several countries. Starting from this definition, we posit that for most of the students in EU master's programmes, incorporation is recent and linked to a good will towards international exchanges. They are among those who owe their capital to an acquisition effort that is closely linked to the school system (Bourdieu 1984), and their international capital is above all institutionalised by their diplomas and their school experiences, such as the student years spent abroad. More than from the elites or the international upper bourgeoisie, they predominantly come from the ascending middle and upper social classes that have embraced the elitist principle of socialisation through travel for their children (Karady 2002) as an educational strategy. International capital is a distinctive resource for building a career.

A second question relates to the construction of the EU orientations. EU jobs are often considered as "vocational" orientations, referring to Max Weber, allowing those who pursue them to "live from and for Europe". In several studies, some senior civil servants mention this: *"working for the Commission is like working for a cause", "for a common purpose, that of*

constructing a new Europe” (Ellinas and Suleiman 2012, 132); some agents in charge of "European" dossiers within local executives too (*“Europe is in my blood”, “I’m addicted to Europe”*) (de Lassalle 2010). Nevertheless, over the recent period, Georgakakis (2017) has observed a weakening of the European vocation among European officials. Many among those with careers in the European institutions have a distanced and instrumental relationship to European construction; they might as well have worked in another sector. Ban (2013) shows that the enlargements have represented an opportunity for upward social trajectories for a set of relatively internationalised people. Based on these observations, I propose that for students too, careers in EU jobs can represent an opportunity for holders of international capital. Many applicants to courses preparing for EU jobs choose this path at a somewhat if not very late stage. While EU careers are genuinely pursued by choice, most of the applicants first share a broader interest in working internationally, leading them to spend time abroad.

The case study presented here concerns master’s students more specifically. In France, masters’ programmes specialised in European careers have opened in several universities (Aix-en-Provence, Nancy, Paris-Sorbonne, etc.) and Institutes of Political Studies (Sciences Po Paris but also Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Rennes and Strasbourg). These programmes are more accessible and have lower tuition fees than the College of Europe. A significant proportion of those working in the field of Europe in Brussels and at the local and national levels are now graduates of such programmes, and since the 2000s, there has been considerable demand for them. However, we know little about these students and about the future EU specialists. Despite the glut of press articles on the EU crisis, the numbers of candidates for European jobs are still very high: to take just one example, in 2015, the European Policies and Public Affairs master’s programme offered by Sciences Po Strasbourg received 199 applications for only 30 places. These masters’ programmes, which are now standard in Sciences Po curricula and in several law and history universities, have not been studied in depth.

The study

A mixed-methods research, focused on students and alumni, yields multiple findings on the profiles valued in these programmes and on the construction of these orientations. On the one hand, I have developed an anonymous online questionnaire, with around 60 questions on international experiences, educational backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics. It was submitted between 2010 and 2014 to students from eleven master's programmes in France, specialising in European affairs, studies or policies and offered by Sciences Po (Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Paris, Strasbourg) and faculties of history (Aix-en-Provence), law (Nancy) and political science (Lille, Paris, Rennes). First, I selected the main master's programmes. Then, the information available in various studies (Georgakakis 2002; Michel 2006; Michon 2019) and several constraints related to the feasibility of data collection - knowledge of informants among teachers and/or former students, responses to my requests - guided the construction of the sample towards a focus on students in courses specialising primarily in political science, and to a lesser degree in law and history. This sample was built to study relationships: representativeness was therefore not essential. The questionnaire link was forwarded by teaching staff and in some cases student organisations; in total, 403 usable responses were gathered. While the online diffusion did not elicit many responses, numbers improved by sending the link to students in two prominent master's programmes (Sciences Po Paris and Sciences Po Strasbourg) over several years.

Table 1: Sample structure of the survey of master's students

On the other hand, some thirty interviews with former students in masters' programmes in Lyon and Strasbourg were collected. Interviews covered their background, course, studies

and relationship to the EU. A first wave of interviews was conducted at the same time as the questionnaire on international experiences, educational backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics. Compared to the questionnaire, the interviews made it possible to gather more precise information on the students' trajectories and on some of their experiences and hesitations. Former students were contacted from alumni associations, lists, and then using the snowball effect. A second wave of interviews was conducted after an initial questionnaire response analysis. This allowed us to target profiles that the first interviews did not cover or did not cover very well, and to examine more specific aspects of students' trajectories.

This research is presented here in two steps. First, I draw on questionnaire responses to shed light on the students' social and international backgrounds. Second, I draw on the interviews to analyse the construction of their orientation.

Applicants with internationalised backgrounds

Regarding social background, about 60% of students have at least one parent in an executive position, in an advanced intellectual profession or working a business manager (see table 2). This finding is consistent with those of research on international practices: access to the cosmopolitan dimension of cultural capital is highly differentiated socially (Weenink 2008). Here, the distribution of these indicators is not particularly surprising, as it is comparable in France to that of relatively similar higher education courses such as journalism schools (Lafarge and Marchetti 2011) or masters' programmes in cultural administration (Dubois 2015). Still, the fact that these future Eurocrats come from a very distinctive pool of young people reinforces a form of self-selection among Eurocrats.

Table 2: Parents' occupations (in per cent)

Beyond pointing to a socially selective inner circle, the analysis of parents' occupations shows that students in European politics curricula in France do not come from the highest strata of the bourgeoisie. Although there are a few exceptions, the parents of the most bourgeois students are not so much specialist doctors, heads of large companies, international managers or top-ranking civil servants as heads of micro, small or medium-sized companies, general practitioners, or even senior civil servants (IT specialists, archivists, territorial civil service executives). It is worth noting the fairly high proportion of those who belong to the "new petty bourgeoisie" (sales representatives, sales executives, communication officers, etc.) and to the "new bourgeoisie" (senior business executives and engineers), to use Bourdieu's (1984) categories. This suggests that the pursuit of European careers fits within aspirations to remain in the upper social categories or to achieve upward social mobility from the middle to the upper classes.

Trajectories in education are linked to these two types of trajectories. Students favour social sciences in a broad sense (table 3), in particular law faculties and the prestigious Sciences Po school.² Whereas for most French students, trajectories follow disciplinary lines, those of the students considered here are characterised by multidisciplinary. This is the case for graduates of Sciences Po, which are multidisciplinary schools *par excellence*, but not only: a third of the students accumulate academic experience in at least two disciplines (e.g. history and European studies, law and political science).

Table 3: Disciplinary affiliations (more than one answer possible) (in per cent)

² Sciences Po Paris (or Institut d'études politiques de Paris) is a selective French school in France in the fields of the humanities and social sciences. In addition to the prestigious *Grande Ecole* in Paris, there are regional Sciences Po schools in multiple cities (Aix-en-Provence, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Rennes, Strasbourg, Toulouse), based on the same model but less prestigious.

EU master's students stand out in particular regarding spatial mobility during their graduate studies. As a whole, French students are not very spatially mobile, both nationally and internationally: few of them leave their region of origin or study abroad. The situation is quite different for these students: 95% of them have experienced domestic and/or international mobility. The experience of spatial mobility clearly sets them apart, and international mobility is a particularly distinguishing factor.

EU master's students are very internationalised compared to the rest of the student population in France, as evidenced by their language skills: while, according to a 2010 survey, 30.3% of all French students consider themselves fluent in English or bilingual (Coulangeon 2011), all the master's students in the group under study do. Some students are particularly internationalised: one indicator of this is the proportion of students born to binational parents (6%). However, for most aspirants to EU jobs, this internationalisation is quite recent, due to their diplomas, experiences such as Erasmus exchange years, language internships or odd jobs (as an au pair or tour guide, for instance): 84% have spent several months abroad, mainly as part of an Erasmus exchange. This proportion is very high when compared to the French student population at large: fewer than 5% of students benefit from the Erasmus programme (Erlich 2012).

To summarise, students of EU masters' programmes have fairly homogeneous profiles. They come from a specific segment of society: they are not so much from the elites or the international upper bourgeoisie as from the ascending middle and upper social classes, who tend to use internationalisation to achieve their aspirations at social mobility.

More precisely, successive socialisations and a variety of adjustments over the course of student trajectories inform the construction of international careers. It has been established that the likelihood of making plans to study abroad depends on the parents' social position and

internationalisation (Weenink 2008) and that the family plays a key role in the early development of international and linguistic dispositions and bilingual or bicultural school trajectories (Wagner 1998). Some students have experienced international socialisation since adolescence or childhood, if not early education for those born to binational couples. International socialisation in childhood translates into early foreign language acquisition, curiosity about other cultures, and dispositions to learn other languages and to operate in multicultural settings: “My mother is Dutch, my sisters are English, my father is French, and my stepmother who practically raised me my whole life is Polish. So I still have that multicultural thing at home. [...] My entire life has been multicultural, you know. I’ve wanted to go abroad for a long time.” (Elsa). However, only a minority benefited from such decisive experiences in the making of an international vocation. Differences in international socialisation between students are evident.

Without necessarily coming from a multicultural family, most display goodwill towards the idea of working internationally that also comes from the families. They mention that their parents were aware of the growing need to learn foreign languages, because they travelled extensively and/or worked in occupations or professions requiring the command of at least one foreign language (translator, interpreter, language teacher, commodity broker, tourism or humanitarian aid professional). Most parents also developed strategies to enrol them in international schools, and spent money on private lessons, language stays or study visits abroad. The family thus acts as a mould for international socialisation. In the making of international paths, the educational mould complements the familial one. A minority of students had international socialisation experiences in childhood and adolescence. A few studied abroad, for instance in an international school (18% out of all students). On the other hand, some achieving students and some in rising educational trajectories also attended an international high school in France, as part of strategies to access prestigious educational institutions, or took part in

international youth construction camps, language stays and school exchanges as teenagers. Many interviewees emphasise the role played by their parents in the conception and implementation of such projects: “I hated German, like everyone does, I think. In high school, it was awful, it was crap, and the teachers were crap. Until I went on a trip to Germany. You know, actually, every year my parents would send me to Germany for two weeks here and there.” (Marion).

A specific international socialisation appears as genuinely decisive for the vast majority of applicants at the higher education level. Experience is gained domestically by writing a dissertation and acquiring a specialisation with an international or European dimension (European studies, languages, international relations, international or EU law), which sometimes includes classes in another language, or entails learning another language. This socialisation also and most importantly occurs abroad: through internships (in firms, embassies, NGOs, local authorities, international institutions) (30% of students), international corporate or administration work programmes (2%), summer jobs (as au pair), and most frequently semesters or years of study abroad (a very large majority). The latter are all the more significant in students’ trajectories as they were their first “life-changing” experience abroad.

Students often discuss these experiences as revelations, as for Marion: “In my second year of high school, I went to Berlin for three weeks, and it was like a revelation. You get to Berlin, you are in high school, in the summer, it’s really, really cool. And I did think, this is great, I’m going to stay. Also, I fell in love with a German guy. And I understood then that German was actually a language that was spoken, it wasn’t just writing and dusty teachers. I thought, I’m going to do this German thing seriously.” Memories pertain to sociability, extraordinary collective practices, encounters with new friends and lovers. These multicultural experiences, often the first, fostered positive perceptions of travel and of the value of foreign languages, as said Jette “The international construction camp put a lot of things in motion. It

was one of the key experiences, actually. After that, I wanted to do something like that, with different cultures, people from abroad... [...] We showed one another our recipes and national dishes. We had a lot of parties, meals. It was really cool. [...] It was great. There were people from Turkey, Poland. I'm still in touch with a few people from that camp.”

The family thus acts as a mould for international socialisation. Nonetheless, it rarely doubles as a mould for EU socialisation, which goes a long way towards explaining the small proportion of applicants with an initial interest in Europe. Family incentives towards Europeanisation, defined as an interest in EU-related activities and in the European political space, are reported only by very few students. European or EU socialisation or hyper-socialisation is much rarer within the population under consideration than among the students in Brussels's European schools or of the College of Europe. Most parents do not have a direct connection to the European institutions (only 2.5% of students have one parent working in one). In the making of international vocations, the educational mould complements the familial one.

Agents of socialisation are not mutually exclusive. Students have developed international capital partly outside of school, but the latter favours its acquisition and upkeep, through language classes and especially institutionalised exchange programmes – the latter have become mandatory in Sciences Po Paris and others. Experiences of studying abroad bring fluency in both oral and written language and knowledge of another country. They also have a multiplier effect on the acquisition of international capital. They encourage further international experiences, as students report being keen to go back abroad. This multiplier effect also operates because “linguistic capital supposes and also acts as the condition of the management of an international social capital” (Wagner and Réau 2015). They encourage further international experiences, as students report being keen to go back abroad. The interviewees all forged friendships and attachments over the course of their stays abroad, upon which they built a sustained international sociability. Those who found partners during their stay abroad (the

“Erasmus couples” mentioned by several interviewees) especially tend to cultivate and deepen these bonds. Romantic relationships with someone who speaks another language are conducive to the learning of languages, codes, know-how and soft skills from other countries: “I think being in a mixed-nationality relationship is really interesting. I’ve learned a lot. It’s a good way to learn the language. It’s a good way to learn things about a country, about cultures...” (Guillaume). When they are long-distance, these relationships involve travel; otherwise, they are even more conducive to language learning. The social ties forged during years spent abroad and the experience of a relationship with someone from a different nationality reinforce dispositions to operate in a multicultural setting and to turn towards internationally oriented academic programmes.

Most students thus report an initial interest in languages, travel, diversity, multiculturalism – not particularly in the EU and in European jobs. Let us now examine how this international interest is shaped and then converted into EU orientations.

How European orientations take shape

Enrolling in master’s programmes that train students for jobs in European politics constitutes a genuine choice. Firstly, a large majority of students (88%) stated that the master’s programme in which they enrolled was their first choice. Secondly, EU-related master’s programmes are not synonyms of relegation or fallback options: they are selective. Thirdly, their students formulate the intention to graduate and find a job that relates to their European training. A very large majority of students report wanting to pursue an EU-related profession after graduation, particularly in the heart of the field of Eurocracy. While they are genuine choices, career plans in EU jobs develop rather late in the academic trajectory.

For most students, a career in EU jobs becomes a possibility between the end of the bachelor's programme and of the first master's year. For other students, this happens even later, during the first or second year of a master's programme on a different theme that intersects with the EU (political science, international relations). Typically, Anne-Sophie began thinking of graduating in "something international, international relations" as she was finishing up her bachelor's. During her first year of master's in history as an Erasmus exchange student in Berlin, she "got rid of all [her] history classes" and picked classes on "international relations, European integration, Eastern Europe". She then wrote a dissertation on the integration of Eastern European countries. This was when she began turning to European studies and formulating the plan of pursuing a master's degree in that field.

The choice of EU careers is often made late, at a time when students put pressure on themselves and are pressured by their parents to enter the job market urgently, which is often the case in France (Millet and Thin 2005; Orange 2013). Anne-Sophie's mother, for instance regularly asked her, "so when are you actually going to be working?". This is probably related to the strained state of the job market, but also to some parents' utilitarian relationships to education. For a number of students, opting for a master's programme on the EU is a way to meet their parents' expectations, because European Affairs master's degrees are rather prestigious master's programmes, which allow them to get a job quickly.

Opting for an EU-related master's is also a way to prolong the Erasmus experience. Experiences of studying abroad are highly decisive in subsequent orientations. Many students turn to EU careers during or after a year abroad, when they have increased awareness of international work and multiculturalism. The students emphasise the role of these experiences, which are all the more crucial as they represent "moments of redefinition" or "turning points" leading to a period characterised by a new regime (Abbott 2001) in student trajectories.

Several students discovered European studies in classes taken abroad. Likewise, many specialised in the EU after a year abroad. During that period, they acquired a practical sense of Europe, which they relate to very specific living conditions, a communal life with people from many different nationalities: “Since my Erasmus trip, I’d wanted to study the EU. I liked it a lot. [...] During my stay in Malta, the university put us up in a building reserved for Erasmus students. [...] It was fantastic, since we were all going through the same shit, sort of, in the same situation. We were all lost. We were lost in a country we didn’t know. We had nothing to do with the people next door and so we built relationships so intensely and so quickly, it was fantastic. That’s what made me want to pursue European studies. I realised the extent to which the Erasmus exchange programme could bring together different people, who didn’t speak the same language, who didn’t necessarily speak good English to begin with, and still it opened doors in a huge way. So getting in touch with that kind of culture became my goal. [...] I desperately wanted to do Erasmus [...] *Why did you desperately want to do Erasmus?* Because I saw a movie [by French director Cédric Klapisch] called *L’Auberge espagnole* [or *Pot Luck* in the UK]. *So what did you like about the movie?* Everything, I guess. I always liked openness, right, being open to people, to others, to difference.” (Romain)

The students emphasise the intensity of the social bonds they forged and of the challenges they faced and overcame, making these Erasmus years particularly decisive and salient: “It’s often said that there’s a post-Erasmus depression. I think I went through one when I came back from Greece. I don’t know, you no longer feel at home in France. I was used to being with people from different nationalities. I’d come back home to a terribly mundane everyday life. I was bored to death. So I went to Belgium straight away after that, staying at an Erasmus friend’s place. And then I went back to Greece for a month. And then I thought, I’m not going to stay in Paris anymore and I applied for a master’s in European studies.” (Marine)

Admittedly, the interviewees' discourses suggest that years of study abroad are likely to trigger "biographical shocks" that impact the course of student and, later, professional trajectories. However, it bears reminding that students in programmes preparing for EU careers are from the upper social classes and have dispositions for spatial and social mobility. Experiences abroad activate, strengthen and expand these dispositions, as in the case of Maxime, who became aware of European studies during his Erasmus year in Greece. This path appealed to him because he did not have a specific career plan and because it made sense to him, as a binational individual with good linguistic skills: "I think the theme of Europe came to me naturally during my Erasmus stay, as that was the first time I dealt with that much interculturality. I thought it was really nice, and I absolutely didn't know about those courses, since, well, I come from a provincial area, we don't hear much about that over there, and there were no European courses at my university. So Greek friends I met in Greece told me about it, and I became interested and did a little research, and I spotted this European studies programme in Paris." (Maxime)

For many students, picking a European course and pursuing European careers is a way to extend the Erasmus experience: "I'm doing European Politics, so we're together with... there's Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, people from the East, it's still sort of Erasmus-like, it's nice" (Louis). Aspiring EU professionals enjoy reconnecting with an atmosphere that resembles what they experienced abroad, and sometimes seek to reproduce the same lifestyle by sharing a place with students from different nationalities, like the Erasmus students in *L'Auberge espagnole*.

Spending years abroad, which is more likely for some students than others, is decisive in a number of respects for the career choice of applicants to EU-centric programmes. It allows them to gain international experience that is indispensable for these careers. It provides them with EU socialisation, both through mobility grants and through knowledge passed on in class.

The Erasmus exchange programme is also conducive to encounters between students, through which information is shared about EU-related courses and careers.

Conclusions

This study offers a contribution to the sociology of second-order Eurocrats. It does so by specifying their backgrounds. EU masters' programmes are frequented by young internationalised people, generally from the ascending middle and upper social classes. The future Eurocrats come from very specific segments of society, contributing to the *entre-soi* of the European “bubble” in and around institutions at Brussels. They consider prestigious EU jobs as good career opportunities. The study also shows how these students turn towards these jobs. While European careers are genuinely pursued by choice, most of the applicants first share an interest for international careers more broadly. Family incentives to internationalise and school and student socialisation, starting with stays abroad, explain this. Generally, interest in an international career takes the form of interest in European careers when biographical factors lead students to opt for masters' programmes with an EU specialisation. In this sense, the years of study abroad, before master, play a decisive role, as does the requirement for specialisation at master's level when students return. In fact, enrolling in a master's programme on the EU with the view to pursuing a career in EU jobs allow them to reconcile two seemingly contradictory rationales: on the one hand, the incentive to specialise urgently to enter the job market, and on the other, an eagerness to prolong the experience of living abroad. Ultimately, careers in EU jobs are fairly prestigious international options that make sense for young people with dispositions for international mobility. The data accordingly shows a relative homogeneity of profiles. The driving force behind these careers is not so much a strong and long-standing commitment to European construction as the possibility of having a career with a strong international dimension.

This case study particularly highlights the role of international capital in student pathways. International capital is also a determining factor in the professional careers of the alumni of these programmes (Michon 2019). Indeed, not all alumni go on to make careers in Europe (only six out of ten), or in Brussels: they divide their time between European jobs in Brussels and local jobs. Those with the most international capital are the ones who take up positions in Brussels in the institutions or interest groups, and who tend to stay there permanently.

The contribution is the first study on EU master's students in France. However, a study on the College of Bruges (Behar 2021) and explorations on master's programmes in Belgium, Hungary and Switzerland are in line with the observations presented here. Further research in other countries and on the development of these careers in the medium and long term, on their duration and their effects on the field of Eurocracy will make it possible to further specify the processes at work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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