The French higher education and the American pattern. 
Equality of educational opportunities policies in the grandes écoles.

In France, an increasing number of grandes écoles are implementing « equal opportunities » programs in order to fight against social homogeneity within their student population. In 2001, Sciences Po Paris was considered a pioneer while setting up a new admission track intended for underprivileged high school students. So as to justify its program, Sciences Po puts the concept of “diversity” forward, a term imported from the United States and fashionable in the Anglo-Saxon world. If some ideas relevant to higher education can be shared in an increasingly competitive transnational context, some others cannot converge because of various national contexts. Indeed, the idea of “affirmative action” is for instance very common across the Channel and is very difficult to be imported in France where the idea of republican meritocracy remains dominant – which has caused numerous tensions when this new program has been launched. The aim of this paper is to show – based on a sociological assessment common to several countries (the social homogeneity of the student elite) – how ideas regarding the higher education “democratization” can be spread and shared or on the contrary how they can raise national differences. The study is based on the implementation of Sciences Po's program, which instigators try in the same time (and not without tension) to get close and to be different from anglo-saxon policies, and which model tend to spread all over the national territory.

The program implemented by Sciences Po: A study carried out in 2001 by two PhD students of Sciences Po highlights that among the first-year students, 81.5 % of the successful candidates arise from superior classes including executives and intellectual occupations as well as business managers and liberal professions, whereas only 3 % are children of workers or employees. To remedy this situation, Sciences Po sets up a new admission track intended for students from some high schools located in “priority education areas” with which Sciences Po has formed a partnership. The schools located in “priority education areas” (ZEP = AREA TARGETED FOR SPECIAL HELP IN EDUCATION) were created in 1981 by the socialist government and are endowed with additional means to face the social and school difficulties of their pupils, because the rate of underprivileged students is upper to the national average. Today, 86 high schools are partner of Sciences Po. The candidates from these high schools have to prepare during their Final year of high school a press pack on the topical subject of their choice and present it in front of a jury of eligibility within their high school. If they pass the high school diploma from the first session, they can then appear in front of a jury of admission at Sciences Po.

The refusal of a concept from the United States: Sciences Po's managers vs affirmative action detractors

Affirmative action seen as a danger for the Republic values

When Richard Descoings, director of Sciences Po, announces the launch of the program in 2001 – which then concerned only 7 high-schools – this turned into a lively debate between Sciences Po's managers, teachers and students’ unions. The debate, widely reported in the media, was quickly spread outside the institution. Sciences Po is thus accused to have implemented an affirmative
action program. Affirmative action is seen as a concept imported from the United States and is rejected as it is compared to communitarianism. In order to restore equity, affirmative action would set up new iniquities and would maintain a preferential logic - although by reversing the sense and the side of the preference. This policy would target different individuals, to treat them differently, according to the saying: “giving more to those who have less”. These individuals form a group with common characteristics: the underprivileged. However, the sense of such a program, focused on the group, is seen in France as completely unfamiliar. Indeed, according to the Constitution, criteria such as the “origin” or the “race” can not allow to make a difference between individuals. Article 1 highlights “the equality between all citizens, without distinction of origin, race or religion”. Affirmative action programs would carry the danger of an Americanized society composed of juxtaposed social groups, and would therefore be incompatible with the values of the French Republic which declare that the French people are “one and indivisible”. Since the 90s, the “French model” of public action is based on the historical values gained since the 1789 Revolution, such as universalism, equality and secularism. By setting up a preferential treatment towards particular population groups, affirmative action programs would break these values and among them the fundamental right for an individual not to be associated to any affiliation group that would be imposed to him/her as an innate and immutable feature.

Besides, American practices are seen as policies setting up unwelcome innovations as regards to the interpretation of two democratic norms: the meritocratic selection and the public action neutrality. Indeed in France, since the French Revolution, social positions are not supposed to be transmitted hereditarily, but to be gained according to personal competencies through a social competition process. In order for this competition to fairly reward one's merit, individuals should theoretically be placed in an egalitarian start situation. However, affirmative action would question this equality by setting up a differential treatment, although this is done to compensate what is seen as a set of handicaps related to social origin. Compensation measures do not intervene upstream of the competition, but following on from it, in the awards attribution. This is what these policies' detractors denounce: the preferential treatment breaks the equality of the selection, either by “stealing” the success to the exam of a more meriting candidate but who would not be part of the affirmative action beneficiaries group, or by setting up an “easier” competition and thus unfair, and this is what Sciences Po is blamed for.

**Sciences Po's strategy to legitimate its program : an euphemized affirmative action program**

To legitimize their program, Sciences Po's managers develop a speech in which they reject all the charges which compare it to an affirmative action program. Thus, in a brochure on the program, they explain that the new admission track is no “affirmative action” since “there is no quota. The students are recruited on the only criteria of their merits and their talents. Affirmative action means to apply different criteria to identical situations. For example, to recruit a Black, a Latino or an Asian because he is Black, Latino or Asian, although he obtained different results in an identical selection test. It is on no account what Sciences Po has implemented”. According to them, the equality of the competition is not broken since the exam is not the same and because there is no quota. Also, the new admission track is not inequitable since easier because it is not “a selection at a discount”. Thus, Sciences Po's managers highlights that “the competition is at least as difficult


3 *Les Conventions Éducation Prioritaire, Cinq années d'une action pionnière*, mise à jour octobre 2005.
and rigorous as the traditional written examinations in 1st cycle. But it is different”. Therefore, it is neither a “gift” nor “charity” because “only the best pupils are selected”. To distance from the concept of affirmative action, Sciences Po's managers use another word: “diversity”. According to Richard Descoings, this term is compatible with the French republican values. He explains4 that the new admission track cannot be moved closer to the American model because the race is not taken into account as a criterion of recruitment: « Our society is diverse in the extreme, and we want this diversity to be reflected in higher education. On the other hand, we also held fast to a great French republican tradition, which is one of the cornerstones of our legal order: the requirement to never consider race as a criterion within any kind of decision-making process. Therefore, at Sciences Po race is not taken into account in admission decisions. There’s no way we are going to admit a black applicant because he or she is black, a second-generation North-African immigrant because his or her parents are from North Africa. In my view, this French republican tradition has been strengthened by recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions and other developments at the state level, whereby race or ethnicity, in and of themselves, may not trigger preferential treatment in university admissions. As far as I know, race or ethnicity can now only be taken into account as one factor among many others ».

On the other hand, the program is based on a policy already set up in France, namely the “priority education areas” policies which are based on the territory. So, the criteria taken into account are not the race or the religion, which are not allowed by the French Constitution, but the place of residence and the social origin, which do not raise legal problems. Now, these criteria recut, indirectly, those of the race and the religion because of the urban segregation. Besides, Richard Descoings highlights this fact: « Our country is increasingly segregated. The rich cluster together, and the poor are forced to cluster together because there’s no place for them in the rich areas. Given the fact that a large fraction of young people whose parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents immigrated to France, come from less well-off backgrounds, the social, economic, and cultural segregation I’ve been talking about also turns out to be an ethnic segregation to some degree. As a result, considering the location of a school allows us to draw upon a much more diverse pool of potential candidates. Schools in less well-off neighborhoods are made up of whoever happens to live in the area—whites, Arabs, and blacks, but also immigrants from Vietnam and Cambodia (we always tend to forget Asian immigrants in this country)—, and all of these students can equally take advantage of this new, competitive admission track. So we’ve taken our inspiration from the U.S. focus on diversity, while making sure not to use race as a criterion, because that would have been entirely at odds with the French legal tradition ».

However, even there, Richard Descoings tries to refute the charges according to which the new admission track would be easier and unfair because it would introduce a preferential treatment, either to the Blacks or the Arabs, but to the poor ones: « we don’t admit applicants simply because they have less money than others. We don’t admit students because they’re poor, but because they’re talented ».

By trying to distance itself from the American model and to set up a “French-style” affirmative action program, Sciences Po gets closer in fact to the American experience in its will of euphemizing the preferential treatment it has set up.

4 In an interview by Daniel Sabbagh, transcripted on the “Equal opportunities Program” of the French-American Foundation website.
Practices actually not much differentiated: an affirmative action « à la française »?

In both countries, alternative ways to affirmative action

American and French practices can be brought closer through the euphemisation they operate within affirmative action policies, by looking for functional equivalents enabling to approach the « race » without explicitly raising it. Thus, the use of the territory as a public action tool is convenient to get round the difficulties linked to the use of the affirmative action concept. The territory seems indeed to allow the means to the public authorities to address questions related to cultural diversity by getting round legal obstacles. Thus, the program implemented by Sciences Po is based on a policy already existing: the priority education areas. The affirmative action “à la française” is funded on the city policy, linked to territories, enabling to operate non-egalitarian detours in order to restore equality, preserving in the same time the republican model. Indeed, these spatialised policies don't make explicitly reference to particular identities but target working-class neighbourhoods which inhabitants' national and ethnic origins are diverse. This is a way to keep the republican axiology but which could easily be compared to indirect “ethnic” management policy. The territory is seen as a public action tool at an intermediary and ambiguous position between the Welfare-State social classes and the American affirmative action's ethno-racial divisions, that is to say socio-professional group, income, age, family situation, which are all socio-economic groups referring to the individual and not to groups, in opposition to categories such as “race” or gender defined by birth or likely to be naturalised, and leading to a collective dimension referring to “communities”. Indeed, spatial categories are similar to socioeconomic variables by their contingent and temporary feature: the place of residence thus results from a combination of classic social factors such as income, the socio-professional group, the age, and may evolve thanks to the social mobility processes. In principle, it does not define an "essential" feature of the individual. On the other hand, the territory can be compared to the ethnic and racial categories in the sense that it refers to the collective dimension of social processes and social facts and thus has a strong symbolic and political dimension. As a matter of fact, that is very likely affirmative action substitute strategies, and this is where the French and American practices meet at a point. Indeed, after having dismantled their affirmative action programs, the American universities have been pursuing their "diversified" recruitment by leaning on residential segregation, as for example in Texas where universities set up a system according to which 10% from the best high school students are allowed, wherever they come from, to get into one of the universities (percentage plans).

In conclusion, and beyond considerations on the convergence of French and American practices, equality of opportunities policies underline the Republican « participatory » dimension, which is based on the individuals' mobilisation, their responsibilities awareness and their own care. These programs, presented as if they could erase social iniquities, contribute to bring back the belief in the fact that personal merit would be the sole success or failure factor. But social determinisms are not completely erased by these euphemised affirmative action programs. By targeting local territories, they are based on a distorted view of the homogeneity of the targeted public's social and educational properties and paradoxically reinforce inequities: every high-schools are not partners with Sciences Po; the pupils of the same establishment are unequally endowed with resources allowing them or not to be recruited; and finally, these programs strengthen their perception of inequities and contribute to “particularize” and to stigmatize them even more. Moreover, the territorialisation of

the policies can, through a certain local activism, give the feeling of a general mobilization, but hides in reality the opposition to progress of the big national institutions, and first of all school⁶. Thus, far from "diversifying" the decision poles, these policies contribute more to produce diversion⁷.

⁶ Milena Doytcheva, ibid., p. 135-136.