

The idea of upward mobility within Black French citizenry

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Introduction

In his 2011 book, a Harvard law professor, Randall Kennedy, rightfully states:

In the hearts and minds of most Americans – indeed, the overwhelming mass of African Americans – Barack Obama is the most admired person in the canon of black celebrity and accomplishment, surpassing Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and even Martin Luther King, Jr. This is so not because of Obama's policies or anything in particular that he has said or written. It is primarily because Obama climbed to the top of American electoral politics, besting along the way scores of people who were seemingly better positioned than he to win the presidency. Blacks, too, are powerfully attracted to success. (2011, 29-30)

The United States is certainly not France, and the feat of Barack Obama is still not matched by that of any black citizen in postcolonial French history. Thus far, the black French figure whose political ascent has come closest to Obama's in the past thirty years is that of Christiane Taubira. The Guyanese-born Member of French Parliament has become the very first black nominee of an established French political party – the Parti Radical de Gauche – to run for the presidential elections. She unarguably failed in her bid with only 2.32% of the electorate who voted for her (Résultats de l'élection présidentielle 2002, n.p.). Taubira has also been the first black citizen appointed to the highly coveted position of Minister of Justice, one of the most powerful ministries in the fifth Republic.

However, beyond the stark differences between the United States and France, there is still, at least, one major reason to draw a parallel between the conditions of the people of African descent in the two countries. This reason, which the quote from Randall Kennedy's book brings home is a shared aspiration of contemporary blacks from the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean: upward mobility, as a manifestation of success. Upward mobility is certainly not the monopolistic aspiration of people of African-descent. But, as shown by my ongoing research within the current generation of blacks,² this attraction translates in such specific terms that it sets this group of citizens apart, at least by comparison to their white counterparts.

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² This ongoing research is about the formation of a black identity group in postcolonial France.

Conceptualizing upward mobility from a race relations perspective

Upward mobility is actually not conceived here as an intra-individual or intra-group dynamic, which accounts for the evolution of an individual from a given professional position (and its economic translation in terms of income) to a higher position within a given time frame. Sociological research including that of Claudine Attias-Donfut and François-Charles Wolff (2009) has sufficiently documented this approach of upward mobility as an intra-group dynamic by highlighting immigrant parents' anxiety to see their progeny attain a socially better valued professional position than their own. However, they fail to account for effects of generation, of "raising expectations"³ and of the sociopolitical transformation of a group itself on its conception of upward mobility.

In the contemporary demographic segment that I have studied, composed of Afro-descendant activists born and raised for most of them in France, or established in this country since their late teenage years, upward mobility has endorsed a novel meaning. It has become the thermometer of the purported color-blindness of postcolonial France, and therefore is defined from a race relations perspective. More precisely, the advancement of people of African-descent in the professional sector serves as the yardstick of blacks' ascension to "occupational prestige," to borrow from Coxon and Jones (1978). In these authors' view, "occupational prestige" consists in a heterogeneous set of positions and occupations that stand out because of the social power they contain and the high visibility they have gained in society. To a large extent, the series of occupations which Charles Wright Mills listed in his *The Power Elite* (1959) serve as signifiers of occupational prestige.

Notwithstanding the inspirational value of the Coxon and Jones' definition of "occupational prestige," a close examination of black French's discourses about their upward mobility shed light on the racial dimension of "occupational prestige," in racially diverse society. Indeed, while naming the list of occupations they strive to open up to French citizens of African descent, black activists infer quite clearly the equation of whiteness and "occupational prestige." The social standing of an occupation results from its monopoly by people of white ancestry – and *mutatis mutandis* the exclusion of blacks (and other racial minorities) from it. An occupation is deemed prestigious as long as phenotypical characteristics thwart the significance of talent and professional credentials and therefore

3 On the effects of "rising expectations" on upward mobility, see William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, p.108. This African American scholar argues that within approximately three generations blacks have developed a negative attitude towards menial jobs: "To some extent, this change in attitude is related to a revolution of rising expectations, not only for the black poor, but for all citizens of America – expectations generated by economic progress and by the democratic welfare state's official recognition of human suffering. Moreover, many of the black poor have internalized the values emanating from the civil rights and black protest movements, values which promote black pride, and explicitly reject the view that disadvantaged minorities should content with a system of unequal rewards."

turns white skin color as the *master criterion* of qualification.⁴ By this, I mean, along the lines of argument posed by Everett Cherrington Hughes who used the concept of “master status-determining trait” (1945, 357), that along many other objective criteria of evaluation of qualification, whiteness is singled as the most reliable index within a context of interracial competition.

Worthy professions are those monopolized by whites

The discourses of black activists in the past twenty years are rife with demands of which the most consensual among organizations of African-descendants are the appointment of black primetime TV anchors, black ambassadors, and black prefects – the prefect is the highest representative of the central administration in a region or a department – and the selection of black actors to play the roles of a physician or police chief detective in movies. The commonality of these characters is certainly not the level of power supposedly inherent to their functions. Whereas the prefect has power upon citizens, the journalist and the film actor could claim at best only some influence on the viewers. These characters’ common attribute is rather their embodiment of professions that are undoubtedly coveted with social prestige but more importantly mostly monopolized by whites. In the archival record of postcolonial France, until the inception of the black activism, these occupations were filled by whites, and consequently almost black-free. Their attractiveness and consideration as yardstick of upward mobility reside therefore in this racial exclusiveness.

For instance, this analytical intuition is all the more groundbreaking that one parallels black activists’ investment in the appointment of black newscasters and their disinterest in occupation of high social visibility and sometimes equal influence as that of a football player:

I have nothing against football players, said one of the most prominent black activists I interviewed. But we should resist the desire of our children to become football players. We want them to get the same good jobs as those white kids, to play great characters in good movies, to present the news on TV. That’s it.

As indicated by the composition of the 2018 French national football team characterized by a disproportionate presence of black players in the light of the estimate of the popula-

⁴ The subjective subordination of professional prestige to criteria totally independent from professional qualification extends beyond the realm of race. It is also observed in the realm of gender. In a controversial interview, Columbia University professor of literature, Antoine Compagnon, stated that the high inclusion of women in the teaching profession has ended up downgrading this profession [“La féminisation massive de ce métier [l’enseignement] a achevé de le déclasser.” One may argue with the wording of the statement, nevertheless quantities of theoretical studies and empirical facts seem to sustain its validity, among these studies the works by Margarita Torre (2018), Pierre Bourdieu (2010) and Ruth Milkman (1987). To this extent, the virulent reaction against the content of his article seems unfathomable. See Antoine Compagnon interviewed by Marie-Estelle Pech, “Professeur, un métier sans évolution,” in *Le Figaro*, 6 January 2014.

tion of black adults which amounts to approximately 5% of the French population⁵ (CRAN 2007, n.p.), one may infer from this excerpt that football player is not a coveted profession because it is already an integrated sector. Yet two analytical elements are worth taking into consideration in order to better assess this excerpt. On the one hand, given the high visibility of professional football players featured on television screens at least on average once a week; and the high income earned by these professionals, football player should still remain a well-coveted profession for the black citizenry by black activists. On the other hand, despite their undeniable monopolization of occupations such as CEO of large public and private firms, or newscasters, or movie actors, white French are still striving to keep these occupations open for their progeny or for themselves. What therefore could explain black activists' rejection of their progeny's aspiration to the occupation of football player – parallel to white French's endeavor to retain their presence in the aforementioned occupations – is not simply the social visibility and the prestige (measured in terms of economic gain or public influence) associated with these professions. Ultimately the synonymy of an occupation with whiteness determines the choice of blacks. The presence in whatever occupation whites covet is evidence of social success and mobility in the worldview of black activists.

Summary

For the black French citizenry, upward mobility is not reflected primarily in the increasing financial return or the social influence that a profession guarantees. It is measured by blacks' access to professions monopolized by whites. White exclusiveness, therefore, determines the value of a profession, and has generated consequently the conflation of professional prestige and whiteness in the worldview of black French.

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⁵ For more analysis of the survey results, see Abdoulaye Gueye, "Breaking the Silence: The Emergence of a Black Collective Voice in France," *DuBois Review* 7(1), 2010.

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