

# Controlling the Urban Fabric: The Complex Game of Distance and Proximity in European Upper-Middle-Class Residential Strategies

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## Abstract

*This article presents an open discussion of the processes of urban secession and gentrification in contemporary European cities, arguing that intergroup social dynamics in urban spaces are generally more complex than either extreme mutual avoidance or the colonization of neighbourhoods by the wealthiest groups. We analyse the residential strategies of urban upper-middle class managers in various European metropolitan areas through in-depth semi-structured interviews to argue that these groups develop complex strategies of proximity and distance in relation to other social groups. The development of these 'partial exit' strategies takes place through specific combinations of practices that allow groups to select the dimensions they are willing to share with other social groups, and those in which they prefer a more segregated social environment for themselves and their families. The responses of our interviewees were consistently more nuanced and complex than suggested by a simplistic theory about their drive to withdraw from society, forcing us to develop more sophisticated conceptual frameworks to account for the growing prevalence of multi-layered identities and spheres of reference and solidarity, specific combinations of elective segregation and local involvement, and more active patterns of mobility combined with local embeddedness.*

## Introduction

This article deals with what has become a central question in urban research: what are upper-middle-class residential choices, and what consequences do these choices have for cities and the urban fabric? Are they withdrawing into isolated gated communities, or are they colonizing what used to be working-class neighbourhoods in city centres? These questions are central to understanding the dynamics of inequalities and segregation, as well as grasping the ways in which upper-middle-class households use their resources to shape cities and exclude other social groups.

Research on European cities has long emphasized the creation of bourgeois neighbourhoods and the long-term influence of the upper social strata and their

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investment on city centres (Burtenshaw *et al.*, 1991; Benevolo, 1993; Berengo, 1999; Pinol, 2002), although the most industrialized cities are excepted from this. This development is linked partly to the fact that European cities have not traditionally been dominated by the working class, and that the residential areas of subordinate social groups were usually located on the periphery. Although European cities, like their US counterparts, have also been transformed by the long-term dynamics of suburbanization (Phelps *et al.*, 2006), the pattern of change in European cities has generally not been understood in terms of declining urban centres and massive suburbanization. Thus, the form of urban transformation processes in North-American cities, which have been thoroughly analysed (see Ley, 1996), may differ in Europe (see Borja and Castells, 2004; Le Galès and Zagrodzki, 2007).

In this article we emphasise the importance of focusing on the upper social strata when studying social segregation dynamics in contemporary European societies. Following Lemaire and Chamboredon's pioneering work (1970), and based on empirical research in three European cities (Paris, Milan and Madrid), we argue that the upper-middle classes tend to develop a plural and complex game of distance and proximity in relation to other social groups in order to select, control and choose the nature and intensity of these interactions.

## Secession, gentrification and 'partial exit'

Academic debates about the residential strategies of the European urban upper-middle classes, influenced by analyses of the experiences of segregation and secession of the wealthiest groups in the US (middle-class flight, urban sprawl, strong segmentation along ethnicity and/or wealth lines, emergence of 'gated communities', and so on), point towards the territorial concentration of these groups in certain areas, which are segregated from the rest of society. From Madrid to Stockholm, evidence of upper-middle-class Europeans leaving city centres to settle in new suburban developments consisting of individual detached (or semi-detached) houses has been collected. These groups are said to have created a lower-density, more socially and aesthetically homogeneous urban fabric at the outskirts of their cities, where they are insulated from other social groups and feel that they are 'among equals'.

In parallel, a different literature, with few interconnections to the previous debate, simultaneously emphasized a trend of territorial concentration of some of the wealthiest groups through the emergence and consolidation of gentrification. Briefly described, this process could be triggered by different state (urban renewal policies) and/or market interventions (private initiatives aimed at cashing in on the centrality and/or historical value of degraded urban areas), and it often led to the expulsion of less affluent groups from such areas. The most recent use of this concept (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Butler, 2005; Lees *et al.*, 2008), defines gentrification as a field of research aimed at linking the dynamic interactions between transnational and globalized flows on the one hand, and more locally bounded social dynamics on the other.

One aspect on which both approaches agree is on the role of the middle and upper classes as social 'segregators'. The search for potential benefits (for themselves, but mostly for their children) of cultural and relational capital accumulation that could result from living among 'peers' of similar (or preferably superior) socioeconomic status, is said to form the basis of the residential strategies of middle- and upper-middle-class families who increase their distance (both physically and symbolically) from less privileged groups.

Historically, the upper and middle classes in Europe have indeed demonstrated a strong capacity to choose where they live (Le Galès, 2002). More than a century ago, for example, English middle classes left the urban industrial centres to live in residential suburbs. Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot's work on France (1989; 2000) identified the

‘spatial stamp’ of the bourgeoisie as a way of building and organizing ‘good districts’ in cities, especially the largest ones. Mutual reinforcement in spatial terms enables this particular social class to deploy effective inheritance and reproduction strategies. As the authors point out: ‘Spatial segregation, pushed to the extreme, is in fact an aggregation, the choice of a social group, of a class, through which it is expressing its awareness of the group’s deep community of interests’ (2000: 54). This point is also emphasized in the literature on the British middle classes (Butler and Savage, 1995; Savage *et al.*, 2005), as well as in recent studies on schooling and educational choices for children (see Zunz *et al.*, 2002; Bagnasco, 2008; Oberti, 2008).

Because of the special role the city centre plays in European cities, the most privileged social strata (that is, the cultural, political and economic elites) continued to live in the city centres in most countries, with the clear exception of the UK, which historically displayed the most pronounced suburbanization processes. These privileged groups maintained and reproduced their presence while accumulating economic, social, cultural and political capital using this spatial centrality. European elites and middle classes have thus not systematically deserted the centres of old European cities (as they historically did in the US), and their urban presence has once again become more pronounced since the 1980s, as the literature on gentrification adequately points out.

However, these developments have taken on different forms: the level of segregation of the upper classes shows diverse characteristic patterns, and the complex interplay between different social and political factors (from family networks to social housing policies) contributes to mediating and changing the nature of those processes (Maloutas, 2004; Butler, 2005; Cortés, 2009; Maloutas and Alexandri, 2010; Musterd *et al.*, 2010).

New groups of managers and professionals (that is, members of the upper-middle classes) have generally followed the same logic, but have settled less systematically in the centre, also moving to residential suburbs. In most European cities it is easy to distinguish local suburban communities that have concentrations of well-off households, including the richest.

This development has benefited from the two movements of urban growth and urban sprawl, but has not generally led to a decline of city centres. In the European context we observe various parallel developments taking place: continuous ‘embourgeoisement’, that is, renewed investment by the upper and upper-middle classes in historically bourgeois neighbourhoods situated close to the city centres, as well as the structural decline of the working class, as shown for Paris by Préteceille (2007); ‘gentrification’, as the middle classes push the working class out of central neighbourhoods (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2000); ‘suburbanization’, the making of more or less segregated upper and middle-class communities, including ‘gated communities’ of the kind that are now common in the US, as well as the politically motivated construction of new neighbourhoods for upcoming upper-middle classes close to business districts (Docklands in London, Levallois in Paris, Milano Due in Milan), which Bruno Cousin (2008) calls ‘refounded neighbourhoods’.

We argue that intergroup social dynamics in the urban space are generally more complex than the images of extreme mutual avoidance (only constrained by real estate prices, urban policies or the physical layout of the city) or of colonization of neighbourhoods formerly inhabited by the working classes, which could emanate from some debates on suburbanization and gentrification. We try to show that most upper-middle class households do not aim to live in isolation, complete segregation or absolute secession, and that they are concerned mostly with skilfully combining proximity and distance in relation to other social groups. Just like the middle classes in Chamboredon and Lemaire’s (1970) study of socially mixed neighbourhoods — who compensated geographical proximity and neighbouring working-class people through complex strategies of distancing — today’s urban upper-middle-class managers develop their own combinations of practices that allow them to select the dimensions that they are willing to share with other social groups, and those in which they search for a more segregated social environment for themselves and their families.

Our hypothesis, which complements the processes of secession and gentrification, suggests that the upper-middle classes are distancing themselves from lower social strata, but not necessarily through complete physical segregation. They seek to distance themselves in certain domains (but less so in others) by developing 'partial exit' strategies that allow them to select the dimensions of the public sphere that they are willing to share with the lower classes. These strategies of distance and proximity in relation to other social groups imply that the upper-middle classes remain strongly embedded in the local territory of their neighbourhoods and cities through their interaction with their own social networks, their selective use of public services, or their presence in specific public spaces. In this context, their residential trajectories, in combination with the density and structure of their social networks, and their 'partial exit' strategies, allow them to inhabit socially mixed urban areas without having to renounce their own values and social practices.

## Renegotiating distance and proximity as a 'partial exit' strategy

In the tradition of urban sociology, we aim to bring an urban and spatial dimension to mainstream sociology's understanding of social class. On reflection, this ought to be essential, considering how territorialized European societies in fact are. In various works by the English sociologist Mike Savage, following earlier work by urban sociologists Ray Pahl and Herbert Gans, he identified what he calls the 'missing spatial dimension' of class analysis in the UK, in particular in the social-stratification literature described by Favell and Recchi (2009).

Within urban sociology, numerous studies on gentrification and suburbanization (in the UK, USA and Australia in particular) identified the sociospatial dynamics of social mobility, exclusion and inequalities in these terms (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005). In France, the dynamics of middle and lower-middle-class people working in the public sector were shown to be deeply rooted within particular types of regions and cities (OCS, 1987). Local analysis of class is also relatively strongly rooted in the Italian (Bagnasco and Negri, 1994; Bagnasco, 2008) and the Spanish (González Ordovás, 2000; Leal and Alabart, 2007) urban sociological traditions.

In somewhat different research projects Savage, Butler and their colleagues have emphasized this spatial dimension of social class, in particular for the middle classes. Butler (2005), returning to Savage's work, argues that as societies become more complex and mobile, individuals become more privatized, but still need to satisfy their need for belonging, which is then channelled through their residential strategies. We argue that the status of the upper-middle classes often stems from both their occupation (through their employment or their membership of a professional community) and their residential choices or trajectories.

We follow Savage in the hypothesis that the differentiation of spaces for interaction opens a wide range of possibilities for individuals in terms of belonging and of negotiating their involvement in a given space. Individuals are to some extent able to choose or negotiate their connection with a political or social space, as well as their degree of investment and interaction. Mobility and individualization therefore pave the way for the logics of choice. If we reframe this within our own argument, it means that a higher degree of freedom in choosing where to live, to shop, or to send children to school, and greater freedom to live their life at different scale levels, make 'exit' or 'partial exit' strategies easier to sustain.

We first developed the idea of 'partial exit' strategies in relation to the transnationalization practices of the upper-middle classes. One way in which individuals can choose to 'exit' from their nation state is to migrate physically, but this remains a relatively rare and extreme option involving high costs (even in Europe, where barriers to free movement have been considerably reduced), as Favell shows in his study on the

'Eurostars' (2008). Alternatively they can choose to 'partially exit' in a variety of ways: in terms of consumption, friendships, job strategies, housing, children's socialization and education, or financial investments. Thus, individuals belonging to these social groups may, for instance, choose to send their children to an international school or university (an 'exit' option), or to avoid certain public services (such as primary healthcare services), but to continue using other public services (for example, hospitals), or to participate in national political associations. Clearly, the aggregation of these personal choices has very important effects at the collective level, affecting the way public services function. The opportunity for 'partial exit' allows these individuals to (re)-negotiate their own position within the national social structure, for example to concurrently protest against or escape high levels of taxation, locate property or income outside the nation state, and actively campaign for reform of the educational or health systems.

Individuals can, therefore, choose to 'exit' from one dimension and not from another, creating a complex mix of choices that needs to be analysed at different *scales*: local/urban, national, European and transnational or global. Individuals may, for example, 'exit' from their country's national public health system, while still engaging in the local *place*, be it the city or the neighbourhood (voice). As previously mentioned, urban elites partly define who they are by the *place* (street, neighbourhood, district, city and/or urban region) they choose to live in. One way to 'exit' from the local level is thus to choose to live in a segregated space (such as a gated community).

Conceptualized in this way, certain social groups (the upper-middle classes in particular) have a capacity for 'exit' that they can exercise against their local environment, their city, or even the national society of which they are an integral part. By contrast, other groups have neither the resources nor the potential to escape their city or their district. Thus education, mobility, travel, occupational networks and various social bonds give the former the possibility of 'partial' (or temporary) 'exit' from the social constraints associated with life in a specific city and/or neighbourhood.

In previous phases of capitalist development, bourgeois groups led the process of reshaping the city, adapting it to their own expectations and interests. This article analyses how the upper-middle classes are responding to changes experienced in contemporary advanced capitalist societies by adapting their residential strategies and the way in which they interact with the urban environments in which they live. The classical issues of gentrification or urban secession are apparent in certain social groups, but in our analysis we aim to go beyond this dualism to focus more comprehensively on interaction practices and representations at the neighbourhood level and the level of the metropolitan region. In contrast to authors who emphasize the emergence of segregated groups in isolated suburbs (Donzelot and Jaillet, 2001), or groups of 'new barbarians' (Angell, 2000), who use their qualifications to free-ride on some public services while relying on the market to obtain other services (such as education or healthcare) in order to minimize their interaction with other social groups, we argue that many upper-middle-class managers develop strategies of selective anchoring in their local and urban environments. From these debates we nevertheless retain the notion of the importance of distinguishing among the different dimensions in which we can disaggregate the social behaviour of the members of these groups, including their utilization of public services, their frequentation of local (public and private) spaces, and their residential strategies.

### **Methodological notes on our research on European urban upper-middle classes**

This study adopts a micro-level perspective that considers the individual experiences, strategies, motivations, values and narratives of upper-middle-class social strata living in European cities. The approach is predominantly qualitative and the sample is not

intended to be representative. However, clear and revealing behavioural patterns can be identified.<sup>1</sup>

In order to explore the dynamics of self-segregation of these groups in European cities, dynamic metropolitan urban regions were considered as the most appropriate locations for research. The cities of Paris, Lyon, Milan and Madrid were selected. Within each city, research was carried out in four different neighbourhoods. Thirty interviews were conducted in each neighbourhood — thus 120 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out in each city, resulting in a total of 480 interviews. The article is based on empirical evidence of about two-thirds of the total database and does not include results for Lyon.

Interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire that included both closed and open questions, allowing interviewees to express their ideas on specific issues. Even closed questions gave interviewees an opportunity to explain the meaning of their answers, or the reasons for their choice. The interview grid was structured in terms of work and residential trajectories (with special attention to choice of city and residential neighbourhood, as well as to respondents' perception and appreciation of the neighbourhood), formal and informal social relations (family, friends and acquaintances, as well as active participation in political parties and in local, metropolitan or national associations), daily practices (cultural consumption, leisure, and so forth), utilization of public services and frequentation of public spaces (use of city and neighbourhood services, schools, healthcare, and so on), as well as social representations (attitudes and values).

Different methods and sources were used to identify respondents according to local contexts: we drew upon alumni associations and lists of former students from universities and *grandes écoles*, local and national associations of managers; we visited schools where respondents might send their children, while also using basic door-to-door sampling techniques.

The accounts of interviewees allow us to understand to what extent they combine practices of mobility and rootedness, and to what extent these two dimensions structure their life (and family) strategies.

Based on our definition and operationalization of the upper-middle class we wanted to study we had to make some compromises and simplifications in order to identify comparable populations across the different countries and cities, although our aim was not to achieve a statistically representative sample. These compromises could partly be attributed to the fact that the comparative nature of our research implied working with very different definitions and statistical treatment of groups in the different countries of our research. We followed two basic steps in the design of our research: (1) identifying a social and statistical category that referred approximately to the same position within the labour-market structure in the three countries chosen for the study (France, Italy and Spain); and (2) within these national categories, identifying some further, more strictly defined criteria.

We thus used the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) to identify a specific manager category, restricting our attention to individuals working as employees — a specific segment of the upper-middle-class social stratum that disregards professionals and entrepreneurs. Three further criteria were employed to make our interviewees comparable: (1) level of education (individuals with at least a university degree, most often at master's level); (2) autonomy at work (meaning the capacity to manage time and contents of their work); and (3) responsibility at work (for example, coordinating a team or deciding on the careers and salaries of other workers within their firm). All 480 interviews carried out in the course of this research fulfilled these criteria.

1 For further details on the research design, see <http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-villes/2010/08/25/alberta-andreotti-patrick-le-gales-francisco-javier-moreno-fuentes-2010-globalising-european-urban-bourgeoisies/>.

**Table 1** Selection of neighbourhoods

City	Social Structure	Central	Suburb
Paris	Homogeneous	Part of the 15th arrondissement Front de Seine Beaugrenelle	Le Vésinet
	Mixed	Part of the 17th arrondissement North-east of Les Batignolles Part of the 10th arrondissement West of Gare du Nord, Gare de l'Est	Fontenay Sous Bois
Milan	Homogeneous	City centre	Arese
	Mixed	Lorenteggio Inganni	Vimercate
Madrid	Homogeneous	Almagro	Nueva España
	Mixed	Ibiza	Mirasierra

Our hypothesis points to the notion that the upper-middle classes maintain a distance from lower social strata, but do not do so necessarily in terms of physical secession. They seek to distance themselves in certain spheres (for example, education), but less so in other areas (for example, use of public space). Our exploratory research aims at understanding how the upper-middle classes implement these strategies of distance and proximity in relation to other social groups, and how they justify their residential choices, as well as their involvement in the social affairs of the neighbourhoods and cities in which they reside. In this sense, although based on a different research strategy, this article explores some of the dimensions of ‘networked urbanism’ put forward by Blokland and Savage (2008).

With this purpose in mind, we explored the interaction between the perceptions of neighbourhood and city, the social practices, the professional and residential trajectories, and the social capital of a group of upper-middle class managers through a large number of in-depth interviews in three European metropolitan regions — Paris, Milan and Madrid.

In our research we worked with managers living in four different types of neighbourhoods, based on a combination of two basic selection criteria: location and social structure (see Table 1). The classic centre–suburbs dichotomy raises the question whether we can identify what David Lockwood used to call ‘the urban seeking’ versus the ‘urban fleeing’ middle classes (1995). Thus, we selected two neighbourhoods within the boundaries of what is considered the city centre, and two in more peripheral residential areas outside of those boundaries. The other variable that influenced the selection of neighbourhoods was the social composition of the population. Based on these criteria, we selected two neighbourhoods with the highest concentration of upper-middle-class social strata, and two with a more socially mixed composition in each city.

## Highly selective networks

An examination of the respondents’ networks of family, friends and acquaintances, and more specifically the physical location of these networks and places of interaction, appears to be a reliable indicator of the dynamics of the urban fabric and of social segregation processes (Andreotti, 2006; Andreotti and Le Galès, 2008). We asked interviewees to name the people with whom they interact on a relatively regular basis, inquiring about the basic socioeconomic characteristics of these persons (sex, age, place

of birth and residence, education, duration of the relationship, place where they met), as well as about the nature and intensity of their interaction with them.<sup>2</sup>

### Family continues to influence attachment to territory

The data we generated on the social networks of our respondents show that family plays a central role in the selection of area of residence in all three cities. Unsurprisingly, in Milan (with an overwhelming majority) and very clearly in the case of Madrid and Paris, the choice of neighbourhood is explicitly related to family ties. This influence takes on different forms: inheriting a family home in the case of more classic bourgeois families, choosing to live close to parents (or brothers and sisters), or living in a suburb close to where one of the spouses spent his or her childhood. One way or another, proximity to part of the family emerges as a very strong reason for choosing a residential neighbourhood.

A large number of interviewees stated that they had strong family connections with relatives living in the same city (or a neighbouring commune). Interviewees interacted with their relatives on a very regular basis and often turned to them when they needed to solve problems, or to facilitate daily-life activities. There was some variation between the different cities, partly as a result of varying degrees of the geographical mobility of the groups in the different urban contexts.

The degree of embeddedness in family networks appears to be significantly high in the case of Milanese upper-middle-class managers, with intense interaction and very active solidarity networks contributing to solving the daily puzzle of efforts that make combining family life and career possible for both partners (although this generally happened at the expense of the women's professional trajectory and/or leisure time, particularly after having children).<sup>3</sup>

The status of Paris and Madrid as state capitals (with political, administrative and bureaucratic power) and important centres within the economic system of their countries make these cities 'escalator urban regions' (to quote the metaphor Savage and colleagues use for describing South East London) (Savage *et al.*, 2005). In addition, in Paris, the elitist universities (*grandes écoles*) play an important part in the processes of upward mobility. In Madrid certain universities that offer specific degrees which cannot be studied anywhere else in Spain (certain engineering degrees in particular) play a similar though less important role.

Madrid seems to be similar to Milan in that proximity to family networks is a key element in the process of selecting area of residence. The intensity of interaction with and reliance on family for support appears to be very important too, as does the very low fertility rate patterns of the respondents as a group (reflecting the general trend within Spanish society). Nevertheless, the relatively high level of geographical mobility that can be observed among managers in Madrid implies that some of them have lost the geographical proximity to family-support and solidarity networks. In these cases, the level of interaction with relatives remains quite high, but telephone conversations and regular visits are the main mechanisms of contact.

Among the Parisian respondents, interaction with family is also very regular. The fact that about half of the interviewees are from various French provinces outside of Paris implies that respondents' family ties have been strongly affected by geographical mobility. The stronger development of social protection policies in France has

2 The collected information does not allow us to present a clear profile of the respondents' social networks. Nevertheless, the information obtained about three friends, plus the information collected with the position and resource generator methods, provides a more precise image of respondents' sociability patterns.

3 Low fertility rates in Italy and Spain over the last two decades, which are reflected by our respondents, point to the difficulties of coping with the burdens of reproductive responsibilities.



**Table 2** Percentage of respondents born in the metropolitan area by city and type of neighbourhood

Neighbourhood Type	City	% Born in the Metropolitan Area		
		Yes	No	No answer
Mixed	Paris	50	48	2
	Milan	59	41	-
	Madrid	65	30	5
Homogeneous	Paris	42	58	-
	Milan	56	44	-
	Madrid	48	48	4

contributed to making reliance on relatives less necessary. In spite of this, the level of interaction of respondents with their families remains relatively high.

If price constitutes a central element in the definition of the residential strategy of managers, particularly for those who live in mixed neighbourhoods, a very significant portion of respondents (about a third in the case of Paris, about half in Madrid, and a large majority in Milan) declare to have chosen their area of residence based on family history and physical proximity to close relatives. This aspect emerges as absolutely central in the case of Milan, where density of family ties strongly determines the organization of social life and residential choices. However, the important role of traditional family networks was evident in all three cities in our comparison.

The differences between newcomers and long-term residents in a specific neighbourhood seem rather interesting.<sup>4</sup> As Table 2 shows, newcomers tend to live in the more exclusive neighbourhoods. By contrast, managers who were born in the city are significantly more likely to live in mixed neighbourhoods. Newcomers to a city do not have the resources to control their interaction with other social groups accurately, so they tend to play it safe by choosing a neighbourhood housing a high proportion of managers. By contrast, those who know the city and the neighbourhoods well do not need to live further away to play the game of distance and proximity: they have the knowledge and networks to select their encounters with other social groups with more precision (in shops, bars, sports and cultural institutions, and especially in schools).

Table 3 provides some interesting complementary information about the differences between the three cities in relation to the role of mixed and homogeneous neighbourhoods in the residential strategies of managers. The spectrum for these three cities has Paris at one extreme (with the lowest percentage of managers who had resided in a mixed area for more than 10 years, and the highest portion who had lived in a mixed area for less than 5 years) and Madrid at the other (with the highest percentage of managers who had resided in a mixed area for more than 10 years, and also the highest portion who had lived in a homogeneous area for less than 5 years), with Milan occupying a middle position.

The main conclusion here is that respondents maintain important links with their families, and that these connections remain strongly anchored in the local territory. Despite the self-segregation drives of the chosen group, family ties often function as an anchoring element within the more complex strategies of distance and proximity towards the different social groups that live in the areas where respondents' family networks are most dense.

4 This point has specifically been made by François Bonnet.

**Table 3** Percentage of respondents by time of residency in the neighbourhood

Neighbourhood Type	City	Time of residency		
		Less than 5 years	Between 5 and 10 years	More than 10 years
Mixed	Paris	57	17	26
	Milan	24	25	51
	Madrid	30	9	61
Homogeneous	Paris	47	16	37
	Milan	31	16	47
	Madrid	52	16	32

### Good old classmates

Our data show that respondents have extensive networks of friends living close to their homes with whom they interact quite intensely and whom they meet on a regular basis. This friendship dimension has been analysed in terms of ‘homophily’ (similarity between the respondents and their friends in terms of age, level of education, profession, and so on), duration of their relationships, closure, frequency of contact, and the ‘spatial’ dimension in particular, which entails the different social circles in which relationships are formed and maintained.

Despite the complexity of the social fabric in the urban contexts in which they reside, our interviewees unsurprisingly confirm the existence of a high level of ‘homophily’, which matches our hypothesis of urban distance and proximity with different social groups. Thus a large majority of respondents mentioned people with very similar socio-demographic characteristics to their own as friends with whom they interact regularly. In Milan, the level of ‘homophily’ is very high as far as education is concerned, while more diversity seems to exist in terms of the professions of their friends. About four in five of the friends Milanese interviewees mentioned had a university degree (mostly of the same kind as the respondent). The spectrum of professions is more articulated, as many friends are professionals working on their own, or have their own company. The ratio of educational ‘homophily’ is even higher in Madrid than Milan — here nine out of ten friends have university degrees (a large majority of them in the same field of study as the interviewee) but work in a wide range of professions. Paris appears to be very similar; here most friends seem to have met through educational institutions. Four of five friends Parisian interviewees mentioned had a comparable social position and educational background to their own. The service sector appears to be the main source of employment for friends of upper-middle-class respondents in all three cities.

The educational trajectories of respondents seem to have been key in the development of social friendship networks in all three cities as well. Few respondents mentioned colleagues as friends, or declared having met their friends in the workplace. In Milan, in all cases the most common way of friendship formation was during childhood, mostly at school (at high-school and also at primary-school level). By contrast, involvement in cultural or political associations and neighbourhoods were never mentioned as a way to meet friends. In fact, most of the Milanese respondents’ friendships had lasted more than 20 years. This information portrays Milan as a place of longstanding social networks that are based on deeply rooted middle-class friendships, which are characterized by intense and regular contact.

Respondents in Madrid gave similar answers regarding the origin and duration of their friendships. More than one third of the friendships they mentioned dated back to their school days (mostly to primary school, and even to kindergarten), and nearly a quarter to their time at university. Friendships originating in the work environment account for less than one tenth of the total. The remaining friendship connections were formed through

leisure activities and, in contrast to Milan, through socio-political associations and organizations. About two out of ten friends mentioned by respondents in Madrid reflected the fact that they originally came from outside the city. This indicates that the Madrid metropolitan area draws people who are in search of educational and professional opportunities from all over the country. Madrilenian informants reported having a very intense social life, meeting quite regularly with their friends (mostly to go out to bars and restaurants) and staying in close contact through phone and/or email.

Paris managers' responses differed slightly from those in Milan and Madrid, but there were many common elements as well. While most respondents met their friends during their education, two other spheres seem to provide fertile ground for friendships: the workplace (particularly with people they met during training at a company, when they first entered the labour market) and children's schools (where they met people with a similar social and educational background). Most Parisian interviewees reported meeting their friends on a regular basis, particularly for dinners. As stated before, most Parisian respondents' friends were not childhood friends, as many came from other regions in their early twenties. This is also true for Madrid, for an even higher percentage of our informants (about half of the interviewees).

These results contrast with the findings of Savage *et al.* (2005) for the city of Manchester, who reported that their respondents did not stay in contact with their best friends, and did not share regular activities with them, as they were likely to live in other cities. In contrast, the majority of our interviewees mentioned having very regular contact with their friends (young respondents were in touch with their friends almost once a week, and older respondents about once a month). More than half of the friends of Milanese respondents lived in the city of Milan, often in the same neighbourhood where they and their friends grew up, which made interaction much easier than elsewhere. This was true for Madrid too, and to a lesser extent for Paris.

Among the managers we interviewed, couples appeared to come from very similar social backgrounds, with spouses having a relatively similar level of education, even if there was some disparity in their job situations (women may have been outside the labour market to take care of the household and children). However, opportunities exist for highly educated women in all three cities, and many couples (about half the interviewees) have a double income, which helps them to afford living in their selected neighbourhoods.

The trend towards homogeneity in social networks is confirmed by the position generator analysis: high-status tasks and functions representative of professionals and highly qualified positions are relatively accessible to the respondents, while this is not always the case for those with less prestigious or manual jobs belonging to the lower ranks of society. As might be expected, a very low number of Milanese interviewees declared knowing a non-skilled blue-collar worker. Those who had contact with people in such jobs said that these connections were established mostly through their professional environment, generally with people working in the same company. The situation is similar in the other two cities. However, those who declared knowing blue-collar workers typically originated from a more modest or provincial background.

Savage *et al.* (2005: 242) states that 'maintaining friends require[s] the persistence and the ability to be abstracted from time and space so it can endure over these two dimensions'. The dimension of persistence and investment is clearly evident in our case studies (as are time and space), although in a different way from that in Manchester. The relationships reported by Milanese and Madrilenian respondents seem to be deeply rooted in the local physical and social spaces, compared to Manchester, where friends appeared to live mostly in other cities. Paris seems to be somewhere between Manchester and the southern European cities in our study, since our Parisian respondents seemed to be well rooted in terms of their social life.

Milanese informants reported having friends who grew up and attended university with them. Friends had selected each other and had confirmed their selection over the years. In the words of Savage *et al.* (*ibid.*), they developed a sense of belonging that is both inherited, and up to a point ascribed, but clearly reinforced by choice. About a

quarter of Parisian respondents had a strongly local and static background. However, in the French capital the '*grandes écoles*' (elitist higher-education institutions) seem to play a decisive role in socializing processes and in the forging of deep friendships. These educational institutions attract bright young people from all over the country (including a large proportion from the Paris region) who overwhelmingly come from the same social background. In terms of rootedness, respondents in Madrid were somewhere between the deeply rooted Milanese upper-middle classes and the rather more dynamic Parisian respondents who reported the amalgamation of equals during higher education and upon first entering the labour market.

The analysis of network closure (studied through examining the extent to which friends mentioned they knew each other) further contributes to an understanding of the sociability of respondents, as well as that of their social environment. In Milan, nine out of ten interviewees reported that the three friends they mentioned knew each other. To a lesser degree this was also the case in Madrid (eight out of ten respondents stated that at least two of their three friends knew each other). Information from the Paris respondents seemed to indicate that their degree of closure is considerably smaller, as the three friends they mentioned knew each other more seldom. This information can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand it indicates the embeddedness of the respondents in their local social context, as they do not mention dyadic and isolated relations; on the other hand, it points to the existence of a close and largely homogeneous self-reproducing network.

## **No exit: managers' selective inclusion in the urban fabric**

In our analysis of the residential strategies of the upper-middle classes and their embeddedness in the urban fabric, we compared the characteristics and choices of interviewees living in central neighbourhoods to those living in the suburbs.

The choice of living in the suburbs seems to be strongly linked to the presence of children (who are said to be a central factor in the choice of residence) in the family (see Table 4). We also observed a small difference in the professional profile of managers choosing to live in the suburbs (they were mainly engineers working in the private sector) compared to those opting for the city centres (a higher percentage worked in the public sector here).

In the central areas, the neighbourhood's residential character is complemented by other activities of an economic (commerce, offices, and so on) and social nature (leisure, public spaces) that often involve the whole city and/or metropolitan area. This introduces a different set of conditions for the distance-proximity strategies deployed by upper-middle-class residents. Managers who lived in the city centres lived in flats, reflecting the structure of European cities, which is based on apartment blocks. They also tended to use their private cars less often to go to work. Respondents in Madrid and Milan were more likely to have a secondary residence (by the sea or in the country) for holidays and weekends. With the exception of Paris, respondents' use of a private car to get to work was around 30% higher for those residing in peripheral areas than for those living in the city centres. This can be attributed to the longer distances they need to travel to work, and to the impact of the construction typology of their residential areas on their mobility strategies (lower-density areas often do not have well-developed public transportation systems).

An analysis of the ideological self-placement scale of our respondents showed, quite unsurprisingly, that respondents do not support any radical parties: one third places itself on the left or the centre left, one third in the centre, and the last third on the right. Managers living in the suburbs were more conservative (the gap with those living in city centres is about 13 points), and those living in the city centres seem more inclined to express a more inclusive attitude towards diverse ethnic and social groups (see Table 5). Surprisingly, these differences in socio-political attitudes did not seem to have any great impact on respondents' day-to-day urban practices, their use of the city, or their interactions with other social and ethnic groups.

**Table 4** Respondents' characteristics: city centre versus suburban (%)

Characteristic	City	Central	Suburbs
Living in flats	Average	98	62
	Paris	96	31
	Milan	100	70
	Madrid	98	85
Detached house	Average	1	38
	Paris	0	69
	Milan	0	30
	Madrid	2	15
Home ownership	Average	70	88
	Paris	60	100
	Milan	79	93
	Madrid	70	72
Secondary residence	Average	50	42
	Paris	27	31
	Milan	50	36
	Madrid	72	58
Use of car to go to work	Average	41	62
	Paris	27	31
	Milan	52	82
	Madrid	45	73
No children	Average	31	16
	Paris	29	8
	Milan	40	21
	Madrid	23	20

**Table 5** Politics of respondents in the centre and the suburbs (%)

Political Scale		Central	Suburbs
1	Extreme left	1	-
2		4	5
3	Left	33	14
4		26	30
5	Right	28	41
6		3	3
7	Extreme right	-	-
-	Does not know/answer	5	7

## Low on socio-political participation

The rootedness of upper-middle class managers in their urban social environment can be studied through an analysis of their participation in local associations, organizations and/or initiatives, as well as their involvement in local politics. The literature on civic culture as well as on social capital highlights that middle-aged, well-educated, employed men are most likely to join associations. We therefore expected respondents to be involved in associative activities in their cities and neighbourhoods. Contrary to our expectations, respondents were not strongly involved in civil-society organizations, neither at city nor at neighbourhood level. As can be seen in Table 6, respondents' level of participation in associations was considerably lower than that of the general population of their countries.

Milanese respondents added an extra dose of demobilization to generally low levels of participation in Italy, which is particularly apparent in the political domain, unexpected in the religious sphere, and surprising in the area of sports. In Madrid, aggregated low levels of participation in Spain are reflected in low levels of respondents' involvement. In addition, interviewees' participation in religious and cultural organizations is well below average. However, they display an average level of participation in sports organizations and seem to be more committed to supporting charitable associations than the average citizen (although this participation is at city level, mainly through financial support of specific NGO initiatives). The upper-middle-class Parisian respondents in our study offer a striking contrast, though — their actions do not seem to reflect the relatively higher levels of participation in associations within the French population. This seems to be true for all types of associations. However, the level of involvement of French upper-middle-class managers is practically identical to that of the Milanese and Madrilenian respondents.

While respondents are not withdrawing from the political sphere, they mostly display a rhetorical interest in it. The majority of Milanese respondents declared to be rather interested in politics, to have voted in the last elections and to have discussed politics in the month prior to the interview. In Madrid, most managers also expressed a relatively high interest in politics and had participated in the last regional elections, although their interest seldom went beyond discussing politics with friends or colleagues. French respondents declared to be very aware of political issues and to have participated in discussions about it. Nevertheless, their level of active involvement was quite low, with only a very small number declaring affiliation with a political party or active involvement in politics.

The respondents did feel part of urban political life and, even if they participated less in the social sphere than the lower-middle classes, they followed important issues and might mobilize if their direct interests were at stake. These findings may be interpreted as pointing towards a logic of 'civic disengagement' and be considered an indicator of the deployment of 'partial exit' strategies by the group. This interpretation would be reinforced by indications of the upper-middle-class respondents' withdrawal from the public sphere. However, in the next section we show that this is not the case, since respondents continue to be very much present in the social sphere and to use public services, thus displaying no obvious and unambiguous sign of social retreat.

## Selective presence in the public sphere

The upper-middle-class managers in our research do not radically disappear from the social and public sphere, in keeping with their self-segregation drive. While their modest degree of socio-political participation could indicate a relative retreat from the public arena, their utilization of public services, presence in the social sphere and participation in the city's socio-cultural life indicate otherwise.

The hypothesis of the systematic 'exit' from collective services in general and from local public services in particular does not hold true for the upper-middle-class managers in our study. All the indicators we used point towards a relatively intense, though

**Table 6** Participation in associations (%)

	Sports		Charitable		Cultural		Religious		Political	
	City	Neigh.	City	Neigh.	City	Neigh.	City	Neigh.	City	Neigh.
Paris	32	-	15	-	28	-	11	-	3	-
Central	9	4	0	13	6	4	0	2	4	2
Peripheral	8	15	8	15	15	8	15	8	15	15
Milan	19	-	15	-	15	-	11	-	6	-
Central	8	2	0	0	8	2	4	0	0	0
Peripheral	9	2	0	0	13	4	2	0	2	2
Madrid	19	-	11	-	17	-	11	-	5	-
Central	17	5	28	2	7	3	2	2	5	2
Peripheral	12	10	32	2	8	5	2	2	5	0

**Source:** Average national data from the European Social Survey 2002 (Newton and Montero, 2007)

**Table 7** Respondents' utilization of public amenities and services (%)

Amenities	City	Central	Suburbs
Kindergarden	Average	24	23
	Paris	17	17
	Milan	31	30
	Madrid	-	-
Local doctor	Average	82	85
	Paris	71	75
	Milan	94	95
	Madrid	-	-
Public parks	Average	76	78
	Paris	75	75
	Milan	59	73
	Madrid	95	86
Public transport	Average	92	76
	Paris	95	92
	Milan	84	41
	Madrid	98	85
Library	Average	25	38
	Paris	49	58
	Milan	6	43
	Madrid	19	13
Public sports infrastructure	Average	70	70
	Paris	67	67
	Milan	63	59
	Madrid	80	84

selective, use of the services of the welfare state, as well as of public facilities and infrastructure. As shown in Table 7, respondents regularly utilize sports facilities, public transportation, healthcare systems, parks and libraries, particularly if these are located in their vicinity. Many have clear opinions about public services, wanting the quality to be improved (in particular to address their specific needs), and tend to have strong views about the politics of public amenities. On average, there is little evidence of structural and systematic 'privatism' or retreat from the public sphere.

In contrast to the middle classes in Manchester and London, the managers in our sample conduct a rather territorialized social life, go out regularly in their neighbourhood and city and do not live in a privatized manner. They can afford to take advantage of places in the city and make use of available opportunities on a regular basis, even if they live in peripheral areas. Table 8 shows data about how often respondents went out and made use of private services located in their city and neighbourhoods (an important element of the urban social sphere) in the month prior to their interview.

Roughly speaking, nine out of ten respondents had gone out to a restaurant for dinner in their city in the month before their interview. This was true for virtually all areas of residence, regardless of degree of centrality or homogeneity. The practice of going to a restaurant in their own neighbourhood was not so widespread in Milan, particularly in the more peripheral areas where choice is quite limited. Nevertheless, two out of three



**Table 8** Going out and using private services in the city in the last month (%)

Service	City	Central	Suburbs
Restaurant	Average	93	93
	Paris	85	90
	Milan	96	91
	Madrid	97	97
Bar	Average	68	66
	Paris	49	50
	Milan	74	82
	Madrid	81	67
Museum	Average	58	41
	Paris	60	50
	Milan	47	27
	Madrid	67	47
Cinema	Average	61	59
	Paris	53	70
	Milan	57	52
	Madrid	72	55
Theatre	Average	34	32
	Paris	34	40
	Milan	31	16
	Madrid	38	39
Concert	Average	32	22
	Paris	19	20
	Milan	27	16
	Madrid	51	29
Dance spectacle	Average	6	8
	Paris	8	20
	Milan	10	2
	Madrid	0	3
Sports event	Average	15	20
	Paris	8	30
	Milan	14	23
	Madrid	23	17
Hairdresser	Average	88	80
	Paris	92	67
	Milan	84	86
	Madrid	87	86

respondents who lived in the central neighbourhoods of Madrid and Paris, and roughly half of the respondents in Milan had visited local restaurants. Generally, managers who were living in more homogeneous neighbourhoods had gone to local restaurants more often than those residing in mixed areas. This indicates a search for relative privacy on

the part of respondents, although they remained active in their local environments. It also reminds us that co-presence in the same neighbourhood does not necessarily equate to interaction with other social groups, since the respondents could have been going to exclusive places with higher prices and a more selective clientele. The fact that managers went to local restaurants obviously does not mean that they mixed with the other inhabitants in the neighbourhood, regardless of their social status. Nevertheless, business in the neighbourhood implies economic and social activity, which creates greater dynamism in the territory and ultimately makes the area livelier and safer.

On average, two thirds of the respondents had also gone to a bar in their city during the month before their interview, and around 40% of these had done so in their own neighbourhoods. Milanese and Madrilenian managers pushed these averages up, and no clear pattern of differences appeared between those living in the city centre and those living on the periphery.

Over half of the respondents had gone to the cinema in their city, and they also went to the movies within their own neighbourhoods if the facilities existed. A similar share had visited a museum and about a third had gone to a concert and to the theatre. About one in five had also attended a sports event. These activities took place mostly at the city level, since events of sufficient quality would rarely have occurred at the neighbourhood level.

The indicator of visiting a hairdresser points towards a relatively high degree of embeddedness within the local environment at neighbourhood level: while more than eight out of ten respondents had visited a hairdresser in their city in the previous month, a considerable percentage of them had done so in their own area of residence.

Managers' participation in the public space, more precisely through leisure and consumption activities, is certainly characterized by segmentation of tastes and practices associated with their position in the social structure and their social status (Bourdieu, 1984). Nevertheless — regardless of whether they lived in a mixed or more homogeneous neighbourhood, and presuming that such activities take place in their local residential environment — upper-middle-class respondents had an impact on the economy of their area of residence through their presence (and their business), helping to maintain its mixed residential-commercial character. Although the social and leisure practices of our managers appear to be clearly segmented, the territorial dimension of these practices was not characterized by extreme segregation, clearly reflecting respondents' strategies of distance and proximity.

When asked how safe they felt in their neighbourhoods at night, respondents gave interesting and somewhat paradoxical answers. There seemed to be a general perception of relative security (less than two in ten mentioned feeling insecure in the area in which they resided). Managers living in more mixed neighbourhoods were generally slightly more anxious about safety than those who lived in more homogeneous upper-middle-class areas. However, when asked whether they avoided certain areas of their neighbourhood because of safety concerns, half the Parisian managers in the more wealthy areas responded in the affirmative, while only two out of ten living in a similar area in the other cities did so. The response of those living in more mixed neighbourhoods in Madrid stands out, though, with three out of ten respondents admitting that they avoid certain areas for security reasons (compared to two out of ten in Paris and Milan). These responses provide some clues about the managers' feelings of isolation in homogeneous neighbourhoods (with a less busy street life) and the relative uneasiness of those sharing the neighbourhood with groups of lower social extraction in more mixed areas.

Our empirical findings suggest that respondents are quite strongly territorialized within their neighbourhoods, but manage their interactions with the other social groups who live in the same area through a complex and shifting balance of distance and proximity that allows them to pursue their strategies of self-segregation without completely withdrawing from the social and urban spaces they inhabit.

In summary, we claim that those who live in a residential suburb or an exclusive city-centre neighbourhood are more relaxed about encountering people from other social

and ethnic groups at the supermarket, the railways station, the swimming pool, the school or the park. By contrast, those who live in a mixed neighbourhood try harder to avoid encounters with other social groups or to control the conditions under which that 'mixture' takes place. Schooling or sports activities in Paris provide an excellent example of this: in a more exclusive neighbourhood, parents will trust the school in the public sector and, because managers are dominant in the area, they feel at ease with a certain level of 'mixture' in the school. By contrast, in the more mixed areas, parents are far more concerned and thus often exit from the local school. These classic results match some of the research by Butler and Robson in London (2003), Maloutas in Athens (2007a; 2007b) and Oberti (2008) and van Zanten (2009) in Paris.

For us, 'relative mixture' under strict control is the name of their game. The upper-middle-class respondents in our study enjoy the city, feel part of it and deploy their resources to use distance and proximity according to their personal norms, expectations and interests. Thus, in terms of the Hirschman framework (1970), they do not 'exit' from the city — they use their voice when they need to, and use 'partial exit' strategies to protect their interests. Their capacity to 'partially exit' (from public services, for example) allows them to renegotiate and get more out of such services. In other words, they do not openly 'exit' their local environments, but certainly use their resources to maximize their interests, regardless of what this may mean for the other social groups.

## Conclusion

In this article we present and review the hypothesis of the 'partial exit' strategy of upper-middle-class managers in relation to urban space. We identified the sociability sphere (friends and family relations) as a suitable proxy for understanding how, and to what extent, these individuals play the game of distance and proximity with other social groups in their neighbourhoods and cities.

The analysis of the empirical evidence we gathered during our research does not support the arguments that foresee a future characterized by the predominance of anomic behaviours among the wealthiest sectors of society. Quite the contrary: our findings suggest that managers remain strongly attached to their areas of residence, where many family members and friends live too. Managers did not have contact with their close neighbours, but did indeed have an active social life in the city. Our results on this point differed substantially from those by Savage *et al.* (2005) for the city of Manchester, who found that relations with friends remained abstract rather than real.

The responses of our interviewees were consistently more nuanced and complex than any simplistic theory about a drive to free-ride or withdraw from society, forcing us to develop more sophisticated conceptual frameworks to account for the growing prevalence of multi-layered identities and spheres of reference and solidarity; specific combinations of elective segregation and local involvement; and more active patterns of mobility combined with local embeddedness.

The upper-middle-class groups we studied remain profoundly rooted in their city, and often in the neighbourhoods in which they reside. They develop strategies to mix with other social groups in certain spheres, while exiting from some other domains or increasing their social distance in these. Most interviewees see their cities as resource-rich environments, mentioning that services and networks of friends and families allowed them to successfully follow professional careers while raising a family and enjoying a dynamic social life. With these processes in mind, the hypothesis of a 'partial exit' strategy (selection and practices at the neighbourhood level, and incomplete retreat at the local level) that accounts for the behaviour of these groups makes considerable sense.

Our respondents are certainly no heroes of the cause of the urban social mix. They acknowledge their desire to reside in communities that house a very high percentage of managers like themselves, thus admitting to the existence of a powerful drive towards self-segregation which is, however, far from being accomplished. Those who live in more

mixed areas tend to like their neighbourhoods less, express more clearly their intention to move out, feel less secure, are less involved in local politics, and, above all, declare more often to have chosen their area of residence for its affordability and sometimes because of family ties. Their choice of living in a more mixed area usually does not seem to be the result of free personal choice, but rather a stage in their residential strategy. Thus, the desire to live in contact with more diverse populations does not seem to be a common attitude among our respondents.

Nevertheless, through their daily practices, the managers in our study participate in different types of activities, frequent public spaces and utilize a combination of public facilities and private services in the areas in which they reside. They feel fully integrated into the city and they even lauded their participation (and that of their children) in the local dynamics and activities through (controlled) exposure and interaction with other social groups in the public sphere. Our findings show that upper-middle-class managers are quite skilful at playing the complex game of distance and proximity with other social groups, as clearly exemplified by the educational strategies for their children: the more socially mixed their residential environments, the more readily respondents developed exit strategies from the public schools of the area (as Oberti, 2008, and van Zanten, 2009, have already shown). Conversely, those who live in homogeneous environments with a high concentration of upper-middle-class residents like themselves, show a lower level of anxiety about social mixing and are more likely to send their children to a public school.

The managers in our study do not seem withdrawn from the urban space, but rather try to utilize available resources in the city and neighbourhood to their own advantage while maintaining a distance from other social groups. Beyond the logics of self-segregation or gentrification, these groups make residential choices that contribute to the formation of individual and collective identities while prioritizing their social networks of friends and family. As researchers, we should try to avoid the excessive simplification associated with a depiction of 'ghettoes of the rich', or with the hypothetical secession of the urban upper-middle classes. Instead, we should identify and locate those processes (if they exist) within a more complex continuum of situations ranging from total immersion within the local urban context to the complete isolation and secession of the upper-middle classes from the society to which they belong.

In a context defined by the 'partial exit' strategies these groups adopt (as reflected in various dimensions, such as residential choices, leisure, work, sociability and education), the density of the social networks reflected in our empirical evidence may provide the stability that Favell's respondents so greatly miss in their lives as 'Eurostars' (to the point of making them question the meaning of their life project abroad).

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