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The Dark Side of the Classroom in New Caledonia: Ethnic and Class Segregation in Nouméa's Primary School System

LOÏC J. D. WACQUANT

It is in the particular way in which it fulfils its technical function of communication that a definite school system fulfils in addition its social function of conservation and its ideological function of legitimation.¹

Investigating the nature and bases of inequality in education in contemporary New Caledonia, I have shown that academic career patterns vary systematically with ethnicity and class; that the achievement gap between European and Melanesian children remains dramatic, indeed, has not narrowed over the past twenty years; and that position in the colonial structure (as indicated by the rank in the ethnic stratification, the place in the socioeconomic order, and the type and degree of involvement in the urban capitalist sector) is the prime determinant of scholastic success.² In a nutshell, the school functions primarily as an *instrument of reproduction* of the colonial society of New Caledonia.³

In this article, I wish to explore yet another dimension of educational inequality, one that has been consistently overlooked by students of this

This research was conducted while I was a member of the sociology laboratory of Nouméa's ORSTOM Center (formerly Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer, now Institut Français de Recherche pour le Développement en Coopération) in 1983–85. I should like to thank its director at that time, Jean de Boissezon, for his support of a project that was not devoid of political hazards, as well as Claude Poiwi, Adrien Hnangange, and Unè Unè and his family for their help and guidance in the field. I wish also to acknowledge the efficacious assistance of Elizabeth Bonamour du Tartre, without whom this work would not have been possible at all; the critical advice from afar of Pierre Bourdieu; and the encouragement of James S. Coleman in the design and completion of this article.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction: Eléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970).

² Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *L'école inégale: Eléments pour une sociologie de l'école en Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Nouméa and Paris: Institut Culturel Mélanésien, "Sillons d'ignames" with Editions de l'ORSTOM, 1985), pp. 137–58, and "La Question scolaire en Nouvelle-Calédonie: Idéologies et sociologie," *Les temps modernes* 464 (March 1985): 1654–85 (with the technical assistance of Jean-Marie Kohler).

³ On the general problematic and mechanisms of reproduction, see Bourdieu and Passeron; Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, "Changes in Social Structure and Changes in the Demand for Education," in *Contemporary Europe: Social Structures and Cultural Patterns*, ed. S. Giner and M. Scotford Archer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); on its New Caledonian specifics, see Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Communautés canaques et société coloniale: Notes complémentaires sur la 'question canaque,'" *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 61 (March 1986): 56–64, and "Différence ethnique et différences sociales dans les écoles de Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 70 (November 1987): 47–63.

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French Pacific territory: the ethnic and social segregation in the New Caledonian school system.⁴ I focus on the public elementary schools of the urban region of Nouméa, the capital. I examine not the individual traits of students but the socioethnic characteristics of the schools themselves. The hypothesis here is that these schools are linked to one another and to their environment by a set of recurring and (socio)logical relationships—of ecological and geographical proximity, of prestige, of endowment in material and cultural capital, of congestion, and so forth—and that they form a system *sui generis* whose emergent properties cannot but affect the careers of those who attend them. It is well established in the sociological literature that the social and cultural composition of a school bears a significant relation to the academic achievement of its pupils as well as to its teachers' pedagogic practices and evaluations.⁵ Now there is good ground to expect that the collective properties of the educational system as well as the *positional properties* of each school in this space may, in the New Caledonian case, have particularly strong effects on pupils' outcomes over and beyond the effect of individual pupil characteristics. First, the colony's educational institutions constitute what Martin has called a "transplanted system"—they replicate, in their structure and functioning, the state-controlled school system of metropolitan France.⁶ A school organization fit for Paris and Marseilles, however, may not be quite appropriate in Hienghène, Wé or Nouméa, and may produce in this setting a number of unintended consequences. Second, the New Caledonian school system makes no provision of any kind for the linguistic and cultural diversity of its users: French is taught and used under the assumption that it is the mother tongue of all pupils, while in reality it is a foreign language

⁴ Marie-Joëlle Dardelin, *L'avenir et le destin* (Paris: Editions de l'Orstom, 1984), does not see it because she focuses exclusively on rural Melanesian communities as separate from the rest of the colonial society. (A thorough critique of her thesis can be found in Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "L'école, le sociologue et l'indigène," [ORSTOM, Nouméa, mimeographed], 31 pages). Jean-Marie Kohler and Patrick Pillon's superficial and naively evolutionist study relies on flawed statistics on parochial education only and never begins to address the real dimensions of school inequality, be it ethnic or class (cf. their *Adapter l'école ou réorienter le projet social* [Nouméa: Institut Culturel Mélanésien, 1982]). Jean Guibert (*La terre est le sang des morts* [Paris: Anthropos, 1983]) does not grasp how the school can be a conservative force even where the Melanesians apparently control it.

⁵ For example, Nathalie Rogoff, "Local Social Structure and Educational Selection," in *Education, Economy and Society*, ed. A. H. Halsey, J. Floud, and C. A. Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1961); James Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966); Marie-Joëlle Dannepond, "Pratique pédagogique et classes sociales: Etude comparée de trois écoles maternelles," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 30 (November 1979): 31–45; Howard S. Becker, "Social-Class Variation in the Teacher-Student Relationship," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 25 (April 1952): 451–65; Donald Winckler, "Educational Achievement and School Peer Group Composition," *Journal of Human Resources* 10 (1975): 189–204; Clarence H. Thornton and Bruce K. Eckland, "High School Contextual Effects for Black and White Students," *Sociology of Education* 53 (October 1980): 247–52.

⁶ Jean-Yves Martin, "Sociologie de l'enseignement en Afrique Noire," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 53 (1972): 337–63.

to some 70 percent of the schoolchildren.⁷ The distribution of native French speakers (i.e., of Europeans) across schools would seem likely to have a significant impact on educational processes and performances. Ascertaining the reality and magnitude of the segregation of Nouméa's elementary schools constitutes a prerequisite for a full understanding of the social determination of educational selection in New Caledonia.

The purpose of this article, then, is to map out the basic structure of the urban *school space*, to measure the extent of the segregation it involves, and to determine the mechanisms of its formation. First, I present the data and specify the scope and implications of the inquiry. I then outline the social and ethnic contours of Nouméa's elementary school system before turning to an assessment of their relations to residential segregation patterns and of the role that pupil migrations play in buttressing them.⁸

Data and Scope of the Study

The data for this analysis comes from a comprehensive survey—the first of its kind in New Caledonia—of pupils in the *Cours Moyen deuxième année* (CM2, the last grade in French primary education) in the public schools of the Greater Nouméa, carried out in November 1983. The survey was conducted by means of a written questionnaire designed so that sixth graders, who are 11 or older, on average, could answer it without difficulty. Assistance as well as extensive checks to eliminate errors or omissions were provided by teachers in class, and consistent coding procedures were used for ensuring reliability of the data.

The inquiry covered all 40 public elementary schools and six Catholic schools with CM2 classes located in the city of Nouméa and the adjoining municipalities of Mont Dore, Dumbéa, and Paita; the results from the parochial schools, which contain only 18 percent of all urban sixth graders, are omitted from this report. A total of 1,572 children, or 87.4 percent of official enrollment, were surveyed. Ethnicity was identified by the respondents' declaration concerning the ethnic affiliation of his or her father, and double-checked by the patronymic, permanent residence, and region of origin of the parents. Seven ethnic categories are distinguished: European, of both settler and Metropolitan birth; native Melanesian (or Kanak); Wallisian and Tahitian (immigrants from the French territories of Wallis and Futuna, and of French Polynesia); Indonesian and Vietnamese; and

⁷ This is not to imply that each ethnic group should be taught in its own language, which would lead to an intractable situation (the 62,000 Melanesians alone comprise 27 different linguistic groups) but that French should at least be taught as a second language to nonnative speakers. The complex linguistic situation of New Caledonia and its educational implications are discussed in Jean-Claude Rivierre, "La colonisation et les langues en Nouvelle-Calédonie," *Les temps modernes* 464 (March 1985): 1688–1717, and in Wacquant, *L'école inégale*, pp. 22–24, 117–23.

⁸ This article is based on a larger sociography of Nouméa's elementary school system, the full results of which have been published as part 2 of my book *L'école inégale*.

a residual category of "others." Socioeconomic background was determined from information provided by the pupil relating to his or her father's and mother's current occupation. Classification is in terms of nine occupational categories (unemployed being the tenth), collapsed into three classes (lower, middle, upper).

The Greater Nouméa, as its sole urban region, is certainly not representative of the whole of New Caledonia. It is a white stronghold, exerting monopolistic control over most of the economic, cultural, and political resources of the colony and stands in stark contrast with the underdeveloped mainland and Loyalty islands.⁹ Yet it is precisely this specificity that makes it a most worthwhile case to study. First, it is only in the capital that the question of school segregation arises. Elsewhere, the population is so distributed spatially that the Melanesians and the other ethnic communities can hardly be expected to send their children to the same schools.¹⁰ Second, the city and its surroundings are the only area where the occupational structure is homogeneous and diversified enough to allow for variation in class position for all ethnic groups.¹¹ Last, the elementary schools of greater Nouméa alone contain 38 percent of the territory's CM2 pupils (58 percent for public schools) and, as a consequence, sufficient numbers of students from each ethnic and social category for meaningful comparisons to be made across schools. The urban school system thus constitutes a natural *experimentum crucis* on segregation in public education: if it is segregated, the entire school system of New Caledonia can be said to be segregated, for only in Nouméa are the conditions of possibility of equality in the social and scholastic context of education truly offered.¹²

The Structure of the School Space

The Greater Nouméa is a conurbation of 80,000 people, composed of three concentric zones: the city proper, sprawled over the 6-mile stretch of the peninsula; the near suburbs that have developed about its northern edge; and the satellite municipalities of Mont Dore, Dumbéa, and Paita, situated within a 15-mile radius to the southeast and the west. The zone

⁹ Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Extrême concentration des pouvoirs: Nouméa, une place forte et son désert," *Le monde diplomatique* 379 (October 1985): 2.

¹⁰ J.-P. Doumenge and Jean-François Dupon, "La population de la Nouvelle-Calédonie," in *Atlas de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et dépendances*, ed. G. Sautter (Paris: ORSTOM, 1982); Roland Bruel and Jean-Pierre Doumenge, "Enseignement," in *Atlas*, ed. Sautter.

¹¹ Benoît Antheaume, "Emplois et activités en 1976," in *Atlas*, ed. Sautter; Direction Territoriale de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (DTSEE), *Schémas de l'économie calédonienne 1985*, 3 vols. (Nouméa: DTSEE, 1985).

¹² Readers are referred to the survey report (Loïc J. D. Wacquant, with Elizabeth Bonamour du Tartre, "Position sociale et performance scolaire: Sociographie du système d'enseignement primaire urbain en Nouvelle-Calédonie" [ORSTOM, Nouméa, mimeographed], pp. 12–23) for a fuller discussion of the methodological difficulties and the sociological implications of the study.

of the city contains 27 elementary schools with CM2s, which can be re-grouped in seven school wards. A ward is defined here as a set of schools located in an ecologically homogeneous cluster of neighborhoods that are generally adjacent to one another and have similar sociodemographic types, and correspond roughly to official school catchments.¹³ For purposes of this analysis, these seven wards may in turn be assembled in three school strata aggregating those that are most alike, with the wards Résidentiel and Centre forming the “upper stratum” (with 351 pupils), the wards of Vallée des Colons and Magenta the “middle stratum” (357 students), and the three working-class wards of Vallée du Tir-Ducos, Rivière Salée and Montravail-Tindu making up the “lower Nouméa” school stratum (453 sixth graders).

The zone of the suburbs contains a total of eight schools for an enrollment of 252. The zone of the periphery of the conurbation has five schools and 181 students. The suburbs and the periphery, together with the three strata of the city, are referred to as regions of the school space. In the first section of this article, special attention is given to the zone of Nouméa, as it forms a coherent, functionally integrated urban complex and contains most of the public schools surveyed.¹⁴

The ethnic composition of the CM2 students in greater Nouméa is characterized by a marked preponderance of Europeans and very high proportions of children from other nonautochthonous origins. Almost half the pupils surveyed are whites and only 16 percent are Kanaks, compared to 30 percent and 49 percent, respectively, for the territory as a whole. This reflects the concentration of settler and immigrant groups in and around Nouméa—80 percent of all Europeans and 90 percent of the Polynesians and Asians of New Caledonia reside in the capital, where they make up, respectively, 50 percent and 30 percent of the population; in contrast, fewer than 30 percent of the Melanesians are urbanites. Another factor is that the six Catholic schools of the Greater Nouméa attract a disproportionately large number of children of low ethnic status (twice as many Kanaks and three times as many Wallisians as public schools in percentage). Also relevant here are ethnic differentials in survival rates that begin to take their toll as early as in the lower primary grades.

But, as table 1 shows, the three zones of the Greater Nouméa do not present the same ethnic mix. Only the city itself has a predominantly white enrollment. Almost all the Europeans (80 percent) and the Vietnamese (90 percent) go to school there, whereas over a third of the Melanesians and half the Wallisians attend suburban or peripheral schools. Thus, in

¹³ The comparison of urban districts was done with data from the 1976 census that were further processed by the Service des Méthodes et Applications Informatiques (SMAI) in Nouméa.

¹⁴ The anatomy of the suburban and peripheral schools is given in Wacquant, *L'école inégale*, pp. 68–69, 77–78.

TABLE 1
ETHNIC ORIGINS OF PUPILS BY ZONE AND WARD (in %)

	Europeans	Melanesians	Wallisians and Futunians	Tahitians and Other French Polynesians	Indonesians	Vietnamese	Others	N
Zone:								
City	51.4	14.9	8.3	8.4	6.5	3.4	7.1	1,139
Suburbs	35.3	21.4	23.4	8.3	4.8	1.6	5.2	252
Periphery	29.8	18.8	15.5	16.0	12.7	...	7.2	181
Greater Nouméa	46.3	16.4	11.6	9.3	6.9	2.7	6.8	1,572
Ward:								
1. Résidentiel	76.6	4.4	1.0	4.8	5.4	4.8	2.9	206
2. Centre	77.2	6.2	1.4	4.1	4.8	2.8	3.5	145
3. Magenta	67.1	3.8	4.2	6.1	8.5	5.6	4.7	213
4. Vallée des Colons	52.1	12.0	2.1	3.5	8.5	5.6	16.2	142
5. Vallée du Tir-Ducos	28.8	17.6	8.8	16.8	10.4	3.2	14.4	125
6. Rivière Salée	25.9	30.7	19.3	13.6	5.7	...	4.8	228
7. Montravel-Tindu	3.7	43.8	30.0	12.5	...	...	10.0	80

the city, European children constitute 51.4 percent of the students as against 31.6 percent for the Kanaks, Wallisians, and Tahitians together; in the suburbs and periphery, these shares are 33.2 percent and 51.8 percent, respectively.

Variations in ethnic composition, however, are much less pronounced across zones than they are across school wards within the city. Far from being homogeneous, the wards of Nouméa have drastically divergent ethnic makeups. Of the seven wards, only Vallée des Colons presents a composition close to that of the city as a whole; the others have polarized and opposing ethnic structures. Upper-stratum schools located in the Résidentiel and Centre neighborhoods are over 75 percent white and contain a mere 5 percent Kanaks and 1 percent Wallisians on average. Lower-stratum wards, conversely, have a student body with fewer than 1 European in 4, and massive overrepresentation of Melanesian (29.3 percent on average) and Wallisian children (18 percent). Note the high degree of segregation implied by these distributions: 71 percent of all European pupils attend schools where they make up over two-thirds of the student body, while 75 percent of Kanak youth and 83 percent of Wallisians find themselves in a school environment in which white children are but a small minority (from 4 percent to 29 percent).

What is remarkable here is that the proportion of both Europeans and Melanesians (and Wallisians) have very large ranges and standard deviations. Far from clustering about the zone's average, the schools of the city clearly exhibit a negative correlation between rates of whites and of Kanak pupils and a considerable spread along each dimension. For example, four of the establishments located in Nouméa's working-class districts have a student body with zero percent to 15 percent whites and about half Melanesians, while the four schools of the residential section of the capital include over 80 percent whites and anywhere from zero percent to a mere 8 percent Kanaks. Almost all schools fall under two opposed types: overconcentration of whites and underrepresentation of Pacific islanders (12 schools for 53.2 percent of city enrollment), massive underrepresentation of Europeans with disproportionate numbers of Melanesians and other Pacific ethnics (10 schools for 33.8 percent of Nouméa's sixth graders).

This summary ethnic topography of Nouméa's elementary school system demonstrates that children from different ethnic origins do not take their CM2 in the same learning context, for there is a large between-school variation in the ethnic mix of pupils. This variation is not random, nor is it associated merely with an unequal distribution of children from the dominant ethnic community, the other pupils being allotted evenly through the school space. Rather, there is a clear pattern of *ethnic segregation of white pupils from black ones*: the bulk of European students attend "white

schools,” while the great majority of Melanesians and Polynesian islanders go to “Pacific schools.”

A second dimension of the school space has to do with between-school variations in class recruitment. The social background of urban sixth graders as a whole is as follows: half come from the working class, a third from the middle class, and 16% belong to the upper class. This composition is relatively high compared to that of rural schoolchildren—the majority of those being from families who live off subsistence horticulture—and of urban parochial schools, where two-thirds of the pupils come from the lower class and only 6 percent from upper-class households. But, again, there are considerable variations inside the urban public education system. In point of fact, social composition drops steadily as one moves from the city to the suburbs and to the periphery, and, within the city, from the residential district to lower-stratum wards (cf. table 2).

The social composition of Nouméa’s seven wards displays a wide range of deviation from the city’s average and a clear pattern of class segregation. The percentage of pupils from the lower class rises steeply (from 18.7 percent to 76.8 percent) as one descends the hierarchy of the school space (from left to right on table 2), while the proportion of upper-class children declines at a comparable rate (from 42.4 percent to 3 percent). There proves to be little in common between the schools of the residential district of the capital and those of its low-income communities. On the one hand, we find a student body which is not only overwhelmingly white (77 percent) but almost exclusively middle to upper class (81.3 percent). On the other hand, three-fourths of the pupils of Montravel-Tindu and Rivière Salée are from the working class, and virtually none are from families of high socioeconomic status. If the wards of Centre, Magenta, and Vallée des Colons fall somewhere in between, they stand notably closer to the dominant pole: their social structure is characterized by a preponderance of middle-class pupils (41–46 percent) and a large minority of upper-class students (21–28 percent).¹⁵

Another way to evaluate the social segregation of Nouméa’s elementary schools is to measure the concentration of children of high and low socioeconomic level. The schools of the lower stratum alone contain 60.6 percent of all lower-class pupils and barely 3 percent of their upper-class schoolmates, whereas upper-stratum schools concentrate 60 percent of all upper-class students and 15.7 percent of lower-class ones (these proportions are 42 percent and 8 percent for the residential ward alone, which contributes 18 percent of citywide enrollment).

¹⁵ A more detailed comparison further shows that, within each class level, the upper wards of Nouméa have a higher socioeconomic recruitment (e.g., compare the occupational distribution of upper-class students in Résidentiel and Vallée des Colons).

TABLE 2
CLASS ORIGINS OF PUPILS, BY ZONE AND WARD (in %)

	Zones			
	Greater Nouméa	City	Suburbs	Periphery
Unemployed	7.4	5.4	12.4	13.4
Service workers	1.6	1.7	2.2	· · ·
Laborers, operatives	41.2	37.6	41.4	62.8
Total, working class	50.2	44.7	56.0	76.2
Artisans, shopkeepers	7.0	8.1	3.0	5.5
Police, military	5.6	6.0	7.5	1.2
Clerical and sales employees	14.8	15.1	18.1	8.5
Technical, health	6.4	6.7	6.6	4.3
Total, middle class	33.8	35.9	35.2	19.5
Business owners	2.2	2.3	3.1	· · ·
Teachers, cultural professions	3.7	4.0	3.5	1.8
Professions, managers	10.1	13.1	2.2	2.5
Total, upper class	16.0	19.4	8.8	4.3
Total no. of active parents	1,417	1,026	227	164

NOTE.—Total active parents in all categories = 100%.

This steady degradation of the social composition of schools, as one travels from the dominant to the dominated pole of the capital, has two distinct sources. It is linked, first, to the unequal distribution of Europeans in the school space. As members of the ruling ethnic group, white respondents enjoy a privileged socioeconomic position: 31 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively, have a bourgeois or petty bourgeois background (for comparison, 65.6 percent and 89.6 percent of Kanak and Wallisian children are from the lower class, and a mere 3.7 percent and 0.6 percent from the upper class). In fact, 92.5 percent of all upper-class pupils are whites, as against one working-class sixth grader in four. Given that Europeans monopolize high occupational positions, a greater proportion of children from this community automatically translates into a higher social composition in the school. This correlation is dramatically reinforced, however, by the unequal distribution across regions of European students of different class origins. Not only do the suburban and peripheral zones and lower-stratum schools harbor far fewer whites than the wards of middle and upper Nouméa, they also enroll whites of notably lower social condition. Table 3 shows that, indeed, the higher the percentage of Europeans in a region of the school space, the higher their class composition.

Take the case of the wards Résidentiel and Rivière Salée. In the former, 52 percent of the 154 white pupils are from upper-class families and only 9.1 percent from the working class. But of the 54 whites who attend the

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Wards						
Résidentiel	Centre	Magenta	Vallée des Colons	Vallée du Tir-Ducos	Rivière Salée	Montravel-Tindu
3.1	2.2	1.5	9.2	6.4	6.2	17.4
1.5	1.5	1.1	1.7	1.8	2.4	2.9
14.1	22.6	30.7	27.5	55.4	66.2	56.5
18.7	26.3	33.3	38.4	63.6	74.8	76.8
8.0	12.0	10.6	10.9	9.1	2.9	2.9
8.1	9.0	11.1	5.0	3.7	1.0	...
13.7	20.3	13.3	17.4	14.6	13.0	17.4
9.1	4.6	9.5	7.5	4.5	5.3	2.9
38.9	45.9	44.5	40.8	31.9	22.2	23.2
4.5	1.5	2.1	4.2	2.7	0.5	...
7.1	6.0	4.8	5.0	0.9	1.5	...
30.8	20.3	15.3	11.6	0.9	1.0	...
42.4	27.8	22.2	20.8	4.5	3.0	...
198	133	189	120	110	207	69

schools of Rivière Salée, 8.9 percent come from the upper class and 55.4 percent from the lower class. There is thus a *pattern of social segregation that is partially independent from and superimposed on the ethnic segregation pattern*. If the wards that are privileged in their ethnic composition are even more privileged in terms of their social mix, it is because they recruit both more whites *and* more upper- and middle-class whites. The result is that the children of Nouméa's economic and cultural bourgeoisie are massively concentrated in the "white" schools, while pupils of humble birth—Europeans included—tend to gravitate into the predominantly

TABLE 3
CLASS ORIGINS OF EUROPEAN PUPILS BY REGION OF THE SCHOOL SPACE (in %)

	Lower Class	Middle Class	Upper Class	% Europeans	N
Zone:					
City	21.2	44.5	34.3	51.4	542
Suburbs	38.8	41.2	20.0	35.3	85
Periphery	50.0	38.5	11.5	29.8	52
Strata in the city:					
Upper stratum	12.6	42.9	44.5	76.9	261
Middle stratum	20.3	48.4	31.3	61.1	192
Lower stratum	48.3	40.5	11.2	22.6	89

“Pacific” schools. Overall, 7 of 10 white sixth graders attend schools that are over two-thirds white and less than a third working class; 48.5 percent of upper-class respondents are educated in no more than five (of the most selective) schools, and 81.5 percent of them in the three highest wards (Résidentiel, Centre, Magenta), where Pacific islanders and sons of laborers are far and few (respectively, 12.1 percent and 24 percent on average). At the same time, the Melanesians and Wallisians are massed in the schools that are both the least white and the most working-class: half of them attend the 10 schools with the lowest class and ethnic mix in the city (21 percent white and 75 percent working class, on average).

If it is admitted that school composition helps shape academic trajectories through a variety of contextual effects, then it appears that the children of the dominated groups of the New Caledonian colonial society suffer *ab initio* all possible ecological handicaps.¹⁶ For Nouméa’s primary school system is a highly segregated one on the basis of both class and ethnicity. The school space is, in effect, split into two regions of opposite ethnic and socioeconomic mix. One contains mostly (and most) Europeans, especially those of the middle and upper class; the other, the bulk of Pacific islanders as well as of working-class children, who are relegated to a school environment which gives them the least opportunity to acquire the dominant linguistic and cultural *habitus* whose possession is the necessary condition of academic success.

This sociography suffices to demonstrate that the pupils of greater Nouméa are not educated in the same primary schools. The structure of the school space, with its hierarchical pattern across zones and its chiasmatic one inside the city, reveals a twofold *de facto* segregation of CM2 students on the basis of ethnicity *and* class. Because they burden the scholastic chances of Pacific islanders and of working-class children, these disparities in the social and ethnic composition of urban schools constitute one of the most misappreciated—and, perhaps for this very reason, one of the most powerful—mechanisms of educational inequality in New Caledonia.

The System of Pupil Migrations and Its Effects

What accounts for this definite configuration of the school space? For the most part, these disparities in the recruitment of public elementary schools reflect the social and ethnic ecology of greater Nouméa. That the New Caledonian capital stands as “the only pluriethnic mosaic of the Territory” does not mean that it is a “melting pot” of integrated com-

¹⁶ The schools that have the lowest ethnic and social composition are also those where CM2 classes are the largest and where teachers are the least qualified, the least experienced, and the most mobile.

munities.¹⁷ On the contrary, urban life there is marked by a sharp differentiation of neighborhoods along class and ethnic lines.¹⁸

There are indeed “several Nouméas”: that of the southern tip of the peninsula is affluent, residential, and European; that of the northwest side is predominantly black, industrial and poor; in between lies a “buffer” of mixed neighborhoods where whites of middle- and lower-class status reside alongside other ethnic groups, particularly those of Asiatic descent. This is no place for an in-depth examination of the ecological stratification of Nouméa; a rough comparison of these three sections of the city, based on data from the 1976 census, will suffice to give a flavor of the contrasts it involves.¹⁹

The population of the districts of Anse Vata, Orphelinat, Val Plaisance, and Ouémo (subsumed here under Résidentiel) is overwhelmingly white, and enjoys a very high socioeconomic condition. Over 87 percent are Europeans, and 38 percent of all household heads are professionals, managers, and owners of businesses. Fewer than 480 Melanesians (5.6 percent) and Wallisians (3.2 percent) dwell among the more than 5,000 residents of this part of the city. These proportions are almost reversed when one travels northwest to the *cit e noire* clustered about the Soci et e Le Nickel (SLN) nickel-processing plant and the adjoining industrial area. In Vall e du Tir and Montravel, the Kanaks make up over one-half (53 percent) and the Polynesians one-fourth of the residents; a mere 600 Europeans live in this community of over 4,500. Blue-collar workers make up 70 percent of the active labor force, and employment runs high in the large public housing project of Pierre Lenquette. Interposed—in both the geographical and the sociological meaning of the term—between these two poles, the downtown area and the adjacent Vall e des Colons have a composition that is closer to that of the city as a whole: a large minority of Kanaks, Wallisians, and Tahitians (15 percent, 6 percent, and 5 percent, respectively), a strong presence of Vietnamese and Indonesians (around 17 percent), and a marked predominance of tertiary employment (75 percent).

¹⁷ Jean-Louis Rallu, “La population de la Nouvelle-Cal edonie,” *Population et soci et es* 188 (February 1985): 3–4.

¹⁸ This is immediately evident to even the most casual visitor of the capital. Roux’s (“Noum ea: Faits de population,” in *Atlas*, ed. Sautter) assertion that, “as concerns residence, one notes a quasi-absence of ethnic segregation,” is in blatant contradiction with the data he himself provides (note the euphemism “quasi-absence”). His characterization of Noum ea as a “cosmopolitan city” is made possible only by artificially dividing it into “new,” “stable,” and “depopulated” wards and by ignoring totally the ethnic and social segregation his very own maps evidence.

¹⁹ I use these older data because the 1983 census is not reliable for the Noum ea region. Unfortunately, neither census provides data sufficiently disaggregated to allow for construction of synthetic segregation indices, such as those used by Reynolds Farley and Alma F. Taeuber (“Racial Segregation in the Public Schools,” *American Journal of Sociology* 79 [January 1974]: 888–905) to link residential and school segregation levels.

The social and ethnic makeup of the neighborhoods of Nouméa is thus highly variable. Inasmuch as each public school receives the children of its surrounding community, the population of pupils is bound to mirror these variations. A white upper-class ward will yield classrooms of white upper-class students, while sections of the city populated primarily by Pacific islanders of low-class status will have a student body composed primarily of black children of lower-class background. Inequalities linked to urban stratification and the attendant ecological segregation are reproduced within the educational system. The structure of Nouméa's school space, however, is not a simple reflection of the structure of the urban space. It results also from the movement of pupils who migrate from one elementary school district to another.

In the public education system of New Caledonia, as in metropolitan France, families do not have the option of choosing the primary school of their sons and daughters. Children are under the obligation to attend the nearest school located in the academic catchment area of their residence. Bureaucratic regulations strictly stipulate the boundaries of these catchments (as elements of the *carte scolaire*) and thus determine the assignment of children to their respective schools. According to administrative rules, then, pupil migrations (i.e., selective transfer out of one's school catchment area) should be negligible, if not nonexistent.²⁰ In reality, however, student migrations are not so out of the ordinary as the official school doctrine would have it: not only are they frequent but they also form a systematic pattern that can be shown to obey social determinations.

Pupil migrations can be tallied at several different levels; here, movements will be identified between the three strata of the city and the suburban and peripheral zones only. Note that this degree of aggregation, by excluding the migrations that occur within any of the five regions (transfers from ward to ward inside the same stratum or zone, which are, in fact, the most frequent), involves a notable underevaluation of the actual importance of migrations and of their potential impact.

1. *Despite their being administratively forbidden, pupil migrations are quite common.*—One pupil in six is an “academic migrant”: 258 of 1,572, or 16.2 percent of the children surveyed, attend a school located in a stratum or a zone that does not comprise their place of residence. In the city itself, a fifth of the student body is made up of such migrants (221 in 1,139). If one leaves out of this calculation the schools of the lower stratum, which are least implicated in these movements, squarely 27.3 percent of Nouméa's CM2 pupils are “outsiders” to their school. And these aggregate figures underestimate considerably the real volume of student transfers.

²⁰ Whenever I inquired about the phenomenon in my in-depth interviews with them, school principals systematically denied its reality, insisting that the assignment to one's school catchment was enforced and that transfers could concern only a tiny minority of pupils.

In the schools of the Centre, for instance, there are as many children who do not live in the corresponding catchments as there are who live there: of 145 pupils, 71 come from outlying wards, including 25 from the suburbs and the outer boroughs of the capital.

2. *The higher the position of a region in the school space, the more students it draws from the outside.*—Close analysis of migration flows shows that the bulk of the children move into the schools of the upper and middle strata of the city, where they represent over a fourth of the student body. Few move to the suburbs: only 13.9 percent of the pupils of this zone are migrants, of whom one half come from the periphery; fewer still travel to the schools of the black neighborhoods of Nouméa (6.7 percent), and practically none to the periphery (1.1 percent). Thus, pupils migrate primarily in order to join schools with a higher social and ethnic composition than that of the schools they leave.

3. *The propensity to migrate is a direct function of each social or ethnic group's rank in the urban colonial order.*—The higher the position of the ethnic community, the more likely its children are to be educated in an elementary school of their own choosing. It is the Europeans who provide the mass of the migrant population: 64 percent of all school transfers concern white children, whereas these form less than half of the total population. Of all the other ethnic groups, only the Vietnamese, who rank second in the urban social order, get a share of the migrations more than proportionate to their demographic weight. The Melanesians and the Wallisians, who stand at the bottom of the ethnic ladder, transfer the least—they are, respectively, twice and four times less likely to attend an outside school than European children.

Likewise, the higher the social origin of the pupil, the higher his chances of escaping the school of his neighborhood. Children from the upper class make up only 16 percent of the population surveyed but contribute 30.6 percent of all transfers. Their propensity to migrate is twice that of pupils of intermediate socioeconomic status and three times higher than that of their lower-class schoolmates. All in all, fully 22.7 percent of white pupils and 31.3 percent of upper-class children attend sixth grade outside the region of their residence. The tolerance of the school administration with regard to school migration clearly benefits the children of the dominant social group who, in effect, find themselves in a position to make an academic choice that is not equally given to all.

4. *The higher the position of a school in the school space, the higher the social and ethnic coordinates of the migrant pupils it attracts.*—Those schools located in the white and affluent sections of the city welcome not only more pupils from outside but also pupils of significantly higher social and ethnic background (see table 4). In Nouméa's upper stratum, for example, one student in four (25.9 percent) is an outsider; a full 81 percent of them are white,

TABLE 4
ETHNIC AND CLASS ORIGINS OF MIGRANT PUPILS, BY REGION OF THE SCHOOL SPACE (in %)

	Ethnic Origin			
	Europeans	Melanesians	Wallisians and Futunians	Tahitians and Other French Polynesians
City:				
Upper stratum	81.3	5.5	...	6.6
Middle stratum	66.3	5.9	2.0	8.9
Lower stratum	37.9	3.5	10.4	27.6
Suburbs	34.3	45.7	11.4	2.9
Periphery	50.0	...	...	...
Greater Nouméa	64.0	10.5	3.5	9.3

and 45 percent come from an upper-class family. Conversely, in the lower stratum, that is, in a doubly dominated region of the urban and school spaces, the socioethnic recruitment of outside schoolchildren is strikingly low by comparison. The small number (6.7 percent) of pupils who reside in other neighborhoods are drawn mainly from the working class (55.7 percent) and from low-ranking ethnic communities (62.1 percent).

Pupil migrations, then, are by no means a haphazard phenomenon: not everybody “breaks the rule” and transfers to an elementary school outside of his or her catchment area; neither do “academic migrants” move randomly through the school space. The probability of each family sending its child to a school that is superior in its (ethnic and social) composition to that of its neighborhood is a direct function of its position in the urban colonial structure. The child migrates from the regions where students are predominantly Pacific ethnics, especially Kanak, Wallisian, and working class, to those where they are overwhelmingly white and middle to upper class. But only those who belong to the dominant group of the colonial society get a chance to cheat their academic fate in this regard: of the 192 sixth graders who transferred to schools situated in the central and southern parts of the city, 141 are of European descent, and the same proportion (73.4 percent) belong to the middle and upper classes. The possibility of choosing the school of one’s children is a privilege afforded only those who are already privileged in both cultural and socioeconomic terms.

If, indeed, the flow of pupils from region to region corresponds to social strategies of academic investment whereby families seek to improve or maximize the (socioethnic) environment of their children during their primary education, they are bound to exert visible effects on the structure of the school space. The flight of students from the dominant group from the schools of the black, poor neighborhoods of the capital should translate

PRIMARY SCHOOL IN NEW CALEDONIA

Ethnic Origin			Social Origin			N
Indonesians	Vietnamese	Other	Lower	Middle	Upper	
3.3	1.1	2.2	22.3	33.0	44.7	91
5.9	5.0	6.9	30.7	44.0	25.3	101
10.3	3.4	6.9	57.7	26.9	15.4	29
...	2.9	2.8	42.9	35.7	21.4	35
50.0	...	...	50.0	50.0	...	2
5.0	3.1	4.6	32.3	37.1	30.6	258

into an aggravation of the segregation of the educational system. This can, in effect, be verified by drawing a double balance, ethnic and social, of the migratory movements that crosscut the school space of the Greater Nouméa. The evidence presented in table 5 suggests the following observations:

1. *The dominant regions of the school space draw pupils away from other regions.*—The upper and middle strata of Nouméa have a largely positive migratory balance that allows them to increase the size of their student body by one fifth. The other regions of the school space all incur a deficit of pupils that grows with their distance, spatial as well as social, from the dominant pole of the space: the lower stratum loses 7 percent of its potential enrollment, the suburbs 14 percent and the schools of the periphery 25 percent.

2. *Migrations result in an increased concentration of white pupils.*—The ethnic balance of pupil migrations, as measured by the number of Europeans lost or gained in the exchanges with the other regions, indicates that the Europeans who reside there tend to flee the schools of the periphery and lower-class neighborhoods to take refuge in the schools of the middle and

TABLE 5
ETHNIC AND CLASS BALANCE OF PUPIL MIGRATIONS FOR EACH REGION OF THE SCHOOL SPACE

	Inflow		Balance (Inflow – Outflow)		
	Total	Enrollment (%)	Total	Europeans	Upper Class
Upper stratum	91	25.9	+52	+47	+27
Middle stratum	101	28.6	+49	+31	+8
Lower stratum	29	6.7	-27	-28	-7
Suburbs	35	13.5	-30	-34	-17
Periphery	2	1.1	-44	-26	-11

upper strata of Nouméa, that is, in those which, by virtue of their location, already harbor large majorities of pupils from the ruling ethnic group. The situations of the periphery and of the lower stratum are revealing in this respect. The schools seated in the working-class section of the city welcome 26 children from outside; in return, they “give away” 56 sixth-graders (44 of whom travel to attend class in the middle and upper strata), thus showing a net loss of 27. But they let go many more European children than they receive, so that they end up losing 28 white students in the exchange. Similarly, suburban schools lose 30 children overall, but 34 pupils of European origin.

3. *Likewise, migrations increase the concentration of children from upper-class families in the school space.*—Students of bourgeois background shun the primary schools of the outskirts and of the black sections of the capital, and tend to move to those wards where they can safely expect to find a more fitting student body. Thus, the upper stratum enrolls an extra 27 upper-class children (+29 percent) thanks to these migrations; the middle stratum records an increase of 8 such students (+14 percent), while the lower stratum loses 7 (−37 percent), the suburbs 17 (−46 percent), and the periphery 11 (−69 percent).

Admittedly, some of these figures are modest, even allowing for the limited size of the population surveyed. Yet the flows they measure appear quite significant when they are considered against the backdrop of the already sharply segregated ecology of the Greater Nouméa, of the administrative rule of home-school assignment, and of the aggregate level at which they are tallied. More to the point here is the fact that pupil migrations contribute, in a moderate but definite way, to increasing inequality in the sociocultural context of learning. Their aggravating effects can be displayed *tota simul* by constructing the hypothetical school space that would result from a total absence of student transfers (cf. table 6).

Because they concern mainly children from the dominant ethnic and social group who flee those regions where they do not predominate, pupil migrations in greater Nouméa determine *an increased polarization of the school space*. The hypothetical school space corresponding to null migrations is the product of the mapping, onto the elementary school system, of the differentiated urban structure of Nouméa and its vicinity, and thus reproduces its residential inequalities. The observed school space, taking migrations into account, is noticeably more unequal. If school transfers do not appear to affect the makeup of the *cours moyens deuxième année* of the city’s middle stratum, they do increase the elitist character of upper-stratum schools and substantially lower the recruitment of the other regions, particularly of suburban and peripheral schools. Grasping the totality of the regions of the school space *relationally*, as linked by a set of systemic relationships that define their position in a hierarchical structure having

TABLE 6
EFFECTS OF PUPIL MIGRATIONS ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL SPACE

School Space	% European		% Upper Class	
	Before Migration	After Migration	Before Migration	After Migration
Upper stratum	74.6	76.9	33.7	36.6
Middle stratum	60.9	61.1	22.6	21.7
Lower stratum	25.2	22.6	4.4	2.9
Suburbs	43.6	35.3	14.2	8.8
Periphery	35.0	29.8	8.7	4.3

its own logic, rather than in isolation one from the other, permits one to see that transfers of pupils result in greater inequality in the socioethnic conditions of schooling.

Conclusion: A Hidden Privilege

The aim of this article has been to determine the reality and extent of segregation in New Caledonia's urban primary schools. Examination of the composition of sixth graders in the Greater Nouméa leads to the conclusion that there exists a pronounced pattern of segregation both by ethnic origin and by social class. Wide variations are found in the makeup of the 40 schools surveyed: the percentage of Europeans among pupils ranges from zero percent to 92.5 percent (from 3.7 percent to 76.7 percent in terms of ward averages), while the percentage of upper-class varies from zero percent to 58.8 percent (3 percent–42.4 percent across wards). Moreover, ethnic and class segregation are strongly correlated and reinforce one another.

School segregation patterns are closely associated with residential segregation patterns and magnified by selective pupil migrations from "low" school wards and regions to "high" ones. The homology that obtains between the structure of the school space and the structure of urban socioethnic relations, which is never visible at the level of individual schools but only at the level of the system they form, lies behind the transmutation of differences of social position into differences of academic performances and aspirations, through the correspondence it establishes between the local social structure of the school and the sociocultural characteristics of the students who attend it. Children occupy, in the space of urban schools, the position that corresponds to that of their family in the colonial order. The higher the latter, the stronger their chances of residing in (or transferring to) a ward, and thus of going to a school, where the conditions most propitious to the transmission and inculcation of the dominant culture

are gathered. In this Pacific island, no less than in the Metropole, primary school divides, as Baudelot and Establet put it.²¹

That the urban education system fulfills its “technical function of communication” differentially according to the position of its users in the colonial order calls attention to the effects of the collective features of schools and of the space they constitute. The school system of New Caledonia presents a mirror image of the colonial society, with its segmented, hierarchical pattern of crosscutting relations of ethnic and class domination.²² Inequality in New Caledonian education appears to be rooted in the very structure of the school space. An implication of this study for the sociology of schooling in New Caledonia, which barely emerges in its infancy, is that it should not overlook the structural properties of the school space, for these may prove to be *overdetermining* factors of a number of crucial educational processes.

²¹ Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *L'école primaire divisé* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975).

²² On the New Caledonian forms of “apartheid,” see Claude Gabriel and Vincent Kermel, *Nouvelle-Calédonie: La révolte kanake* (Paris: La Brèche, 1985), chap. 2; and Wacquant, “Communautés canaques” (n. 3 above), esp. pp. 57–61.