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The residential logic of Swiss urban elites (1890-2020): Transformations and differentiations between elite categories*

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Abstract

Scholars generally agree that elites do not only distinguish themselves from non-elites through social practices, but also physically segregate themselves through their residential choices. Yet, as of now, only few studies systematically analyze elites' place of residence as a form of differentiation and distinction. In this paper, we analyze the evolution of elites' favored place of residence in conjunction with the transformation of urban spaces in the 20th century. We use data from a major research project on local elites from 1890 to 2020, which identifies elites based on a positional approach in different Swiss cities. With this data, which includes information on elites' place of residence, we analyze the transformation of academic, economic, and political elites' residential choices from 1890 to 2000 in the two cities of Basel and Geneva. Our results show that elites continuously deconcentrate and spread from the center city to surrounding municipalities and to other places in Switzerland. In addition, however, we also identify certain elite neighborhoods in both cities which are home to a disproportional number of elites.

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Introduction

In a widely received book and in an effort to explain the surge of populism in Western countries, the journalist David Goodhart distinguishes “anywheres” from “somewheres” (Goodhart 2017). In his view, “somewheres” are people that are rooted and attached to particular places, whereas “anywheres” do not have strong place-based identities and group attachments. The first are typically less well-educated and belong to the poorer strata of society, whereas the latter are what we might call the elites that dominate politics and society. Goodhart’s characterization of elites as anywheres resonates with well-established sociological accounts prominent at the end of the 20th century that essentially depicted elites as placeless cosmopolitans – i.e. not in need of or interested in (particular) places for exercising power (Castells 1996, Merton 1957).

Against this view, recent scholarship has demonstrated that upper classes and elites are also locally rooted (Andreotti et al. 2015) and that they might be even more bound to place than members of lower classes (Young 2018). Indeed, place and location can have important functions for elites and upper classes. Pinçon-Charlot and Pinçon (2018) point to the significance of urban space and residence location as a resource of symbolic capital for the upper class. Residing or owning property in a particular neighborhood often is a starting point for gaining access to the upper classes’ inner circles and meeting places – such as clubs and society parties. Place can also serve an important function for elites’ economic activity. Young (2018) argues that elites relocate much less for tax reasons than one would expect, since their place of business activity also carries important social capital – networks with clients and partners – which would be lost after relocation. Finally, Andreotti et al. (2013) demonstrate that upper-middle class managers – a social stratum often considered to be highly mobile and cosmopolitan – are often strongly attached to particular cities or even neighborhoods – and are very similar to the general population in that respect (Antonsich and Holland 2014).

In this paper, we assess how elites’ relations to urban space have evolved over the long term. To do so, we focus on two Swiss cities – Basel and Geneva -- and compare the place of residence of three different types of elites, namely economic, political and academic elites. For six benchmark years between 1890 and 2000, we show how elites gradually suburbanized and dispersed over the course of 110 years. We first describe and compare the proportion of elites living in the two cities, in their surroundings, in Switzerland and abroad. We then draw maps of company directors, local politicians and university professors’ places of residence. In a final step, we focus in more details on two of the neighborhoods most favored by the local elite: St. Alban in Basel and the old city of Geneva.

Distinctive spatial distribution of three types of elites in the Swiss case

For this study we focus on three types of elites, namely economic, political and academic elites. In this section we present the main characteristics of the three types of elites in relation to their geographical distribution. These three sectors of activity are indeed the most important and influential in Switzerland. The power of these elites has been widely studied, including their formation and organization, particularly in terms of coordination and concentration (David et al. 2012, Mach et

al. 2016, Pilotti 2017, Bühlmann et al. 2018). This contribution completes and diversifies these observations by adding the analytical dimension of the spatial distribution of these elites.

Economic elites

The statement that power over physical space can also be a form of social power is a commonplace which is generally accepted by elite sociologists (Pinçon-Charlot and Pinçon 2018). This particularly holds for elites that dispose of a high amount of – or the command over – economic capital, including corporate elites and company directors. In addition to living in particular places, they also invest their capital into property in very particular places (Beverstock 2002, Fernandez et al. 2016). Yet scholars have only recently started to engage in the large-scale analysis of the geography of economic elites – particularly of wealth elites (Cousin and Chauvin 2021). To date, this research is rather UK, and particularly London-centred, and focuses on the comparison of municipalities and neighborhoods based on large-scale datasets (Burrows et al. 2017, Cunningham and Savage 2015, Webber and Burrows 2016). When it comes to differentiate economic (wealth) elites from other elites, Cunningham and Savage (2015) show that London's economic, cultural, and legal elites all cluster in particular areas. Similar conclusions are drawn by Bassens et al. (2019) in a study of Brussels' elites that invest in cultural institutions. The study highlights the existence of elite neighborhoods as areas that are densely populated with donors and investors from a variety of professional backgrounds. Finally, and in a more historical perspective, Accominotti et al. (2018) show that the seating pattern in the New York philharmonic orchestra at the turn of the 20th century closely mirrors residential patterns in Manhattan.

Political elites

While recent studies seem to converge in underlining the propensity of the economic elite to concentrate in certain districts of large cities, the spatial distribution of political elites seems to follow a different logic. As in the previous case, the analysis of the place of residence of political elites is very marginal in the sociology of political elites and has been little studied in the Swiss case (see Di Capua 2021 for the political elites of urban communal parliaments), even though the study of birthplace has long been considered a classic feature of the study of the social background of the political elite (Genieys 2011:174). The few uses of GIS (Geographical Information System) on political elites (see: de Borman et al. 2001; Van Hamme and Marissal 2008) have led to very heuristic results. Indeed, this rare research into the sociology of political elites has made it possible to highlight a deficit in the spatial representativeness of political representatives, with elected representatives tending to live more in bourgeois neighborhoods than 'working-class' ones. Unlike the other types of elites studied in this research, the residential location of political elites is characterized by a legal and institutional spatial constraint: the electoral district. To gain access to a political position of power through elections, an elected official must reside in his or her electoral district, commune or canton, according to the legal framework in force. The place of residence of the political elite is therefore indirectly a political issue through the question of electoral boundaries. Indeed, the latter has a decisive effect on the outcome of an election and the social and spatial representativeness of the political elite (for the Swiss case, see Di Capua 2021). More specifically, one can also think of the phenomenon of gerrymandering, which aims to (re)divide certain electoral districts to give an advantage to a party or a candidate (Gagnon: 44). Some studies have looked at the relationship between constituencies and the social composition of the resulting political bodies following elections. For example, in the United States, Engstrom and McDonald (1986) observe how black populations benefit from better representation in district-based elections. More recently, Trounstein and Valdini (2008) show that the presence of electoral districts can

increase the social and gender diversity of local representative bodies if under-represented groups are highly concentrated and constitute a significant proportion of the population. Therefore, unlike academic and economic elites who can move spatially as they wish, the spatial mobility of the political elite is constrained by institutional reasons and electoral political strategies. The analysis of their spatial location should therefore focus on intra-urban residential logics such as the choice of specific neighborhoods where they are likely to appeal to an electorate with whom they share a common social and political capital.

Academic elites

The decentralization of the Swiss political field is reflected in that of the academic field as well. Indeed, academic organizations have a great deal of autonomy in their decision-making, notably on the recruitment of academic staff and on the funding of scientific research, which produces a very favourable institutional context for competition among scholars (Braun 2001, Benninghoff and Braun, 2010). While the Swiss higher education system is characterized by the importance of local governance, recent studies have highlighted the growing internationalization of academic elites (Hartmann 2016; Goastellec and Pekari 2013). The literature agrees on the growing importance of the dynamics of (re)internationalization of academic careers and of international capital for obtaining stable positions (Gingras 2002, Rossier et al. 2015, Bühlmann 2020). The academic field is undergoing an important internationalization - of ideas, of people, of scientific collaborations - which has been increasing since the end of the 20th century (Gingras 2002). As a result, the sociological profile of professors, as well as their nomination procedures have considerably changed over time. Among the main selection criteria for the selection of elites, “cosmopolitan” resources are added to traditional resources to define scientific prestige (Bühlmann et al. 2013; Wagner 2010; Rossier et al. 2017). While the mechanisms of anchoring academic elites in the local social fabric has been the subject of a few case studies for the early 20th century (Simon 2010), less is known about today’s role of locally valued resources, especially to social capital acquired through the belonging to regional and local networks. Most universities are old institutions that are closely associated to their city (Gingras 2003; Ruegg 2004 and 2010). They contribute to education, culture and intellectual life, as well as urban economic development (Laferté 2004). To our knowledge, there is no study devoted to the articulation between local and international dimensions of the academic elites in Switzerland. However, there are many studies that deal more broadly with the existence of links between the academy and the private sector, particularly developed in the Swiss case (Stettler 1993, Tanner 1998, Gugerli et al. 2010, Wirz von Planta 2016). There are indeed specific places of sociability that, already at the beginning of the 20th century, brought together academics, local political and economic elites (Simon 2010).

Research Design

Case Selection: Two Major Swiss Cities

The focus of this study lies on two of the largest Swiss cities, Basel and Geneva. Cities and their ruling classes played an important role in the structures of power and domination within the territory of contemporary Switzerland since centuries. In addition to this historically grown importance, the cities of Basel and Geneva are similar in several respects. First, both of them are city-states. This means that the city territory coincides with the territory of the canton – the important intermediate government tier in the Swiss political system. Second, both of them are border cities – bordering Germany and France – and represent the center of a transnational region.

Third, both were dominated by local oligarchies and patriciates until the end of the 19th century – even if the rule of the ancien régime officially ended with the French revolution (Perroux 2006, Sarasin 1997, Strebel et al. 2021).

Data: Swiss Elite Observatory

The data for this study come from a database on local elites in the three largest cities of Switzerland, Basel, Geneva, and Zurich, from 1890 to 2020. The database is constructed based on a positional approach: for seven benchmark years – 1890, 1910, 1937, 1957, 1980, 2000, 2020 – we have collected information on those individuals that hold key positions in different social spheres (see Table 1).

Table 1. Positions Included in the Database

Sphere	Positions
Academic	Professors at the city’s university
Cultural*	Board members of local art societies
Economic	Board members and directors of major companies from the most important economic sectors (Basel: financial services and pharmaceutical industry; Geneva: financial services, watch-making, machine, and pharmaceutical industry; Zurich: financial services, machine industry); Board members of local chambers of commerce
Media*	Board members of two major newspapers in city
Political	Members of local and cantonal parliament/government

*Not included in the present contribution.

In total, the database comprises over 9,300 individuals. For the present article, we focus on the subset of local elites that hold positions in the cities of Basel and Geneva (n=5,199).¹ We have completed our data collection on their place of residence at the time of their mandate for n=4383 elites². This data allows us to identify the long-term evolution of elite residential patterns in the two cities and to assess whether we find clusters of certain types of elites (e.g. academic or economic) in certain neighborhoods.

Table 2. Study sample (n=4383 elites)

	1890	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	Total
Economic elites	204	238	211	227	247	288	1415
Political Elites	274	281	307	279	328	329	1798
Academic Elites	121	162	217	265	163	181	1109

Note: some individuals might hold positions in two or three spheres. In this case, they are counted double or triple. For reasons of missing data still too important, the year 2020 has not been included in the sample.

Two steps of the analysis

This contribution is the descriptive stage of an analysis that will evolve. It should therefore be considered as a work in progress. We conducted this initial overview in three steps:

¹ For the elites of Zurich, the data collection on addresses is still ongoing.

² All addresses were verified through the *Official directory of building addresses* and georeferenced with the help from the Federal Office of Topography “swisstopo” website:
<https://www.geo.admin.ch/fr/news/aktuell.detail.news.html/geo-internet/news2019/news20190307.html>.

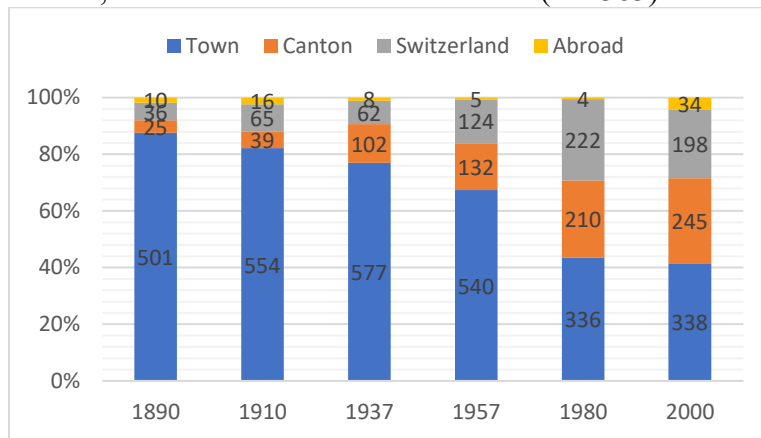
1. The first step compares the proportion of the three different types of elites who reside in the city, in the same canton, elsewhere in Switzerland and abroad. These rates are then compared across benchmark years.
2. The second step consists in projecting the individuals on maps to visualize (1) the spatial distribution of elites according to the type and the period and (2) to identify the municipalities and neighborhoods most favored by the elites, which allows us to highlight some prominent elite neighborhoods in both cities in more detail.

First descriptive observations

1) The residential evolution of economic, political and academic elites (1890-2000)

This first section presents the spatial distribution of elites' residential addresses aggregated by four areas: the city itself, the canton, everywhere else in Switzerland, and abroad. The overview of all elites shows a clear general trend away from cities and towards either other municipalities within the canton, or somewhere else in Switzerland (figure 1). Only very few elites' addresses are located in another country, with the highest percentage in 2000 (4.2%).

Figure 1. Residential area, all elites from Basel and Geneva (n=4383)



The proportion of elites living in the cities declined from 87.6% in 1890 to 41.5% in 2000. Elites which are active in a local organization that does not require residence in the city – companies and universities – seem to increasingly live in municipalities within the same canton as well as elsewhere in Switzerland. This relative homogeneity seems to fade when comparing the two cities (Basel elites are slightly more likely to live in the city), but really disappear when separated according to the spheres (figures 3, 4 and 5 below).

Figure 2. Economic elites (n=1415)

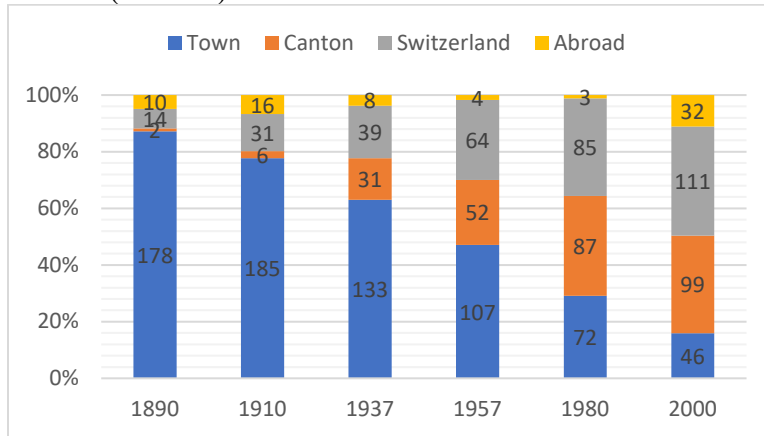


Figure 3. Political elites (n=1798)

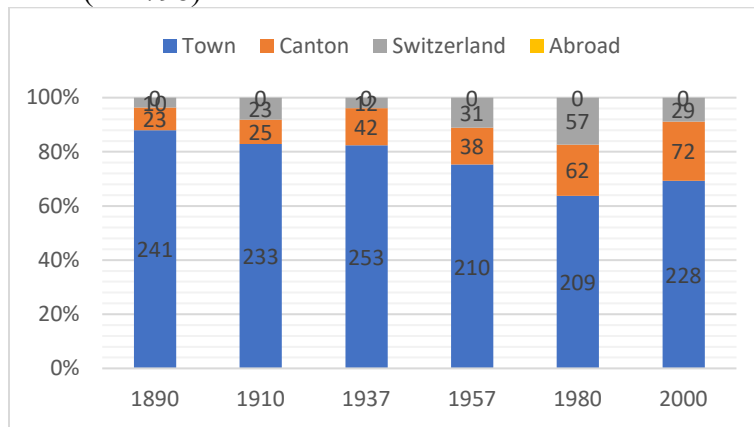
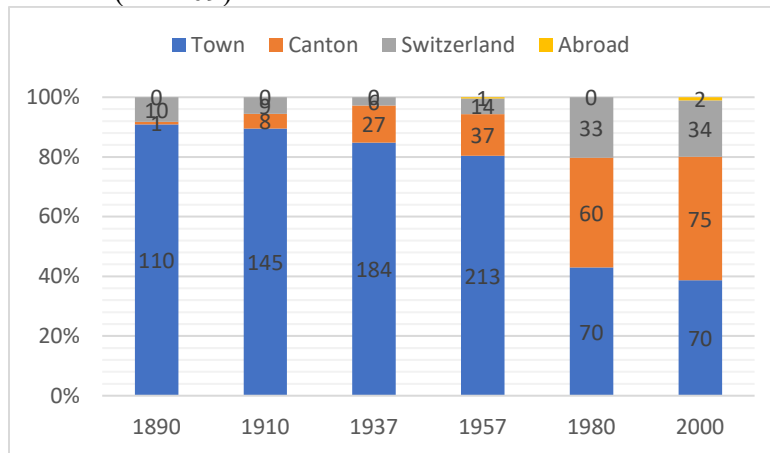


Figure 4. Academic elites (n=1109)



From a general point of view, we note that the economic elites are clearly the least urbanized nowadays and have become so gradually: from 87.3% in 1890 living in one of the two cities, we arrived at only 16% in 2000. The reason might be that member of a company board is not a full-time job and hence many of the corporate elites in our sample might exercise their main professional activity elsewhere – some of them even in other countries. Moreover, it seems that the

evolution of the spatial distribution of the economic elite anticipates a development we see among the general population in Switzerland from the 1970s until the end of the 20th century: suburbanization (Kübler 2007). When cities became more populated, it became more difficult to find spacious houses with surrounding garden areas, and it became easier to commute for longer distances due to the spread of cars, economic elites probably relocated to more suburban municipalities, where there was more space to build large houses “in the green”. For the political elites we find a stronger concentration in the cities and the cantons. Given that political elites need to reside in the city or in the canton in which they are elected, it is normal that we find a higher proportion of political elites that live in the city and in municipalities in the same canton. The academic elites experienced a break between 1957 and 1980: the rate of professors living in the city dropped from 80.4% to 42.9% in 1980. Thus, we see that the re-internationalization of the academic field in terms of nationalities and career mobility (Rossier et al. 2015) is accompanied by a decentralization of the places of residence towards suburban municipalities or elsewhere in Switzerland (although less frequently). Moreover, this might also reflect the general pattern of increasing suburbanization and increased daily mobility among the general population. Long commutes are particularly common among high-skilled professionals, such as university professors.

2) Mapping the city-regional dynamics of elite spatiality through the 20th century

The first part of our results aimed to quantify the spatial distribution of our elites without looking at their intra-regional mobility over time. Based on a cartographic visualization of the residence of our elites, we will now observe how economic, academic and political elites have moved spatially during the 20th century within our study regions: the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Geneva.

The cartographic visualization of the place of residence of our elites within the two regions studied allows us to observe a first process which extends over the whole of the 20th century and which mainly concerns the academic and economic elites: a process of centrifugal dispersion of the elites going from the central city of the canton to the surrounding municipalities. Indeed, if in 1890, both the academic and economic elites were concentrated in the cities of Geneva and Basel, they gradually began to disperse to other municipalities in their respective cantons, until they reached a significant spatial dispersion in 2000 (see figures 5 to 8).

But these elites are not scattered randomly throughout the canton; certain neighborhoods and municipalities are favoured by the economic and academic elite. Like in any city and city-region, the social structure of neighborhoods and municipalities is rather sticky: there are certain neighborhoods and municipalities which were home to the working-class and others that were home to the bourgeoisie through great parts of the 20th century (see Walter 1994, 213-214). The city of Basel is essentially cut into two by the river Rhine. The part on the south-western side is called “Gross-Basel” and is traditionally the home of the bourgeoisie. The part on the north-eastern side is called “Klein-Basel” and is traditionally a working-class area – even if gentrification processes fundamentally reshape this area since the new millennium. The large village in the north-east of the canton, Riehen, has been a residential area for a long time. Already in the 16th century, patrician families from Geneva built their countryside homes in Riehen. For the city of Geneva, the river Rhône plays a similar role in delineating working-class and bourgeois neighborhoods. On

the south-eastern side of the river, are neighborhoods such as the old town and Champel which are traditionally home to a more bourgeois clientele. On the north-western side are the more popular neighborhoods of the city of Geneva. When it comes to the surrounding municipalities, those located on the south-side of lake Geneva have traditionally been the home of wealthier families. Like in Basel, some wealthy Genevans had their countryside or summer residences in these municipalities.

From the figures we can clearly see that the economic and academic elites reside in the more bourgeois parts of the city. Certain neighborhoods seem to have been particularly prominent among both economic and academic elites until 1957: the old town district (Cité-Centre) as well as the Champel neighborhood in Geneva, as well as the St. Alban, Vorstädte, and Am Ring neighborhoods in Basel (Walter 1994, 213-214). For Geneva, we do not see a differentiation of the residential patterns between economic and academic elites. The old town neighborhood essentially comprises the medieval city and it can be assumed that members of old patrician families still own sizable family homes there. The Champel neighborhood is located just above but outside the old town and was characterized by old villas – some of which are still standing to this date, even if the neighborhood urbanized heavily in the 20th century. The original buildings of the city's university are located just between the old town and Champel – which might explain the intermingling of academic and economic elites.

In Basel, the situation is somewhat different. Here we can see that the economic elites are mostly concentrated in the neighborhoods of St. Alban and Vorstädte (south-east), whereas the academic elites are heavily concentrated in the Am Ring neighborhood (west of the Rhine). This might be due to the location of the city's university in this area. Since 1957, we clearly see a deconcentration of academic and economic elites in the canton. In Geneva, we can clearly see how they cluster on the southern side of the lake, while in Basel, there's a rather strong presence of both economic and academic elites in the Riehen municipality in the north-east.

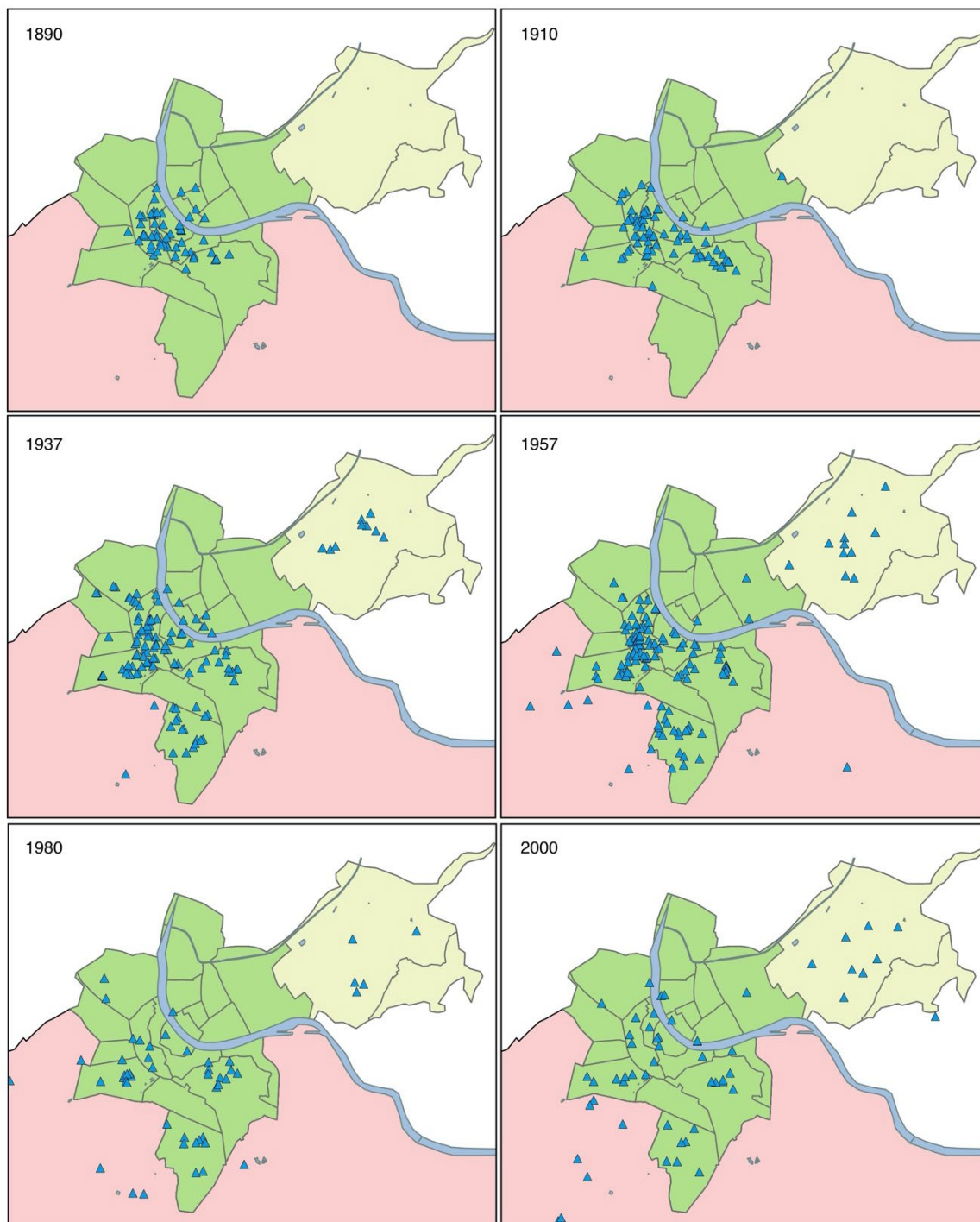
While political elites also experience a form of centrifugal spatial dispersion in both regions (see Figures 9 and 10), this is explained more by the urbanisation of the cantons, which enlarges the electoral constituencies, than by the selection of certain affluent municipalities for social reasons (class intermingling) and economic reasons (tax advantages) that the economic and academic elite may favor as a domicile. However, when we take a closer look at the distribution of representatives by political party, we can see that elected officials from center- and more radical right parties are also concentrated in the neighborhoods preferred by the economic and the academic elites. By contrast, center- and radical left representatives concentrate in the more working-class neighborhoods of both cities. At the same time, we also see that the differences between neighborhoods seem to become somewhat less sharp in the year 2000 – when the clientele of left parties has shifted away from traditional industry workers towards urban professionals.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to shed a light on the spatial distribution of different types of elites in Swiss cities and city-regions. Using the residential addresses of university professors, company directors, and local political representatives, we have shown a general deconcentration pattern of elites' place of residence over 110 years, from 1890 to 2020. Yet, this deconcentration pattern is not uniformly distributed across the different types of elites. Economic elites are clearly the least urbanized and the most deconcentrated, probably due to the part-time nature of their involvement with particular companies, followed by the academic elites. Political elites remain very concentrated in the two cities and the associated cantons, which is not surprising, given that they act as the representatives of these territories. The intra-regional residential dynamics also reveal that academic and economic elites – together with representatives of the political right – are concentrated in particular neighborhoods and municipalities in each city-region. These neighborhoods are generally well-known for their affluent residents and they have had this role already before the end of the ancient régime.

In a next step, we will focus in more detail on the characteristics of neighborhoods in the surrounding cities and municipalities. We will collect indicators such as the average income in a neighborhood to examine the relation between neighborhood characteristics and elite residences in more detail. In addition, we will also integrate more individual-level indicators of the elites in the analysis. This will allow to draw a more refined picture of the changing elite geographies in Swiss cities. What becomes clear from this preliminary analysis is that elites are not uniformly distributed across space. Rather, they concentrate in certain neighborhoods and municipalities. Physical differentiation thus seems to be an additional resource that elites can – and might want to – possess.

Figure 5. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of academic elites in the Canton of Basel-Stadt (1890-2000)

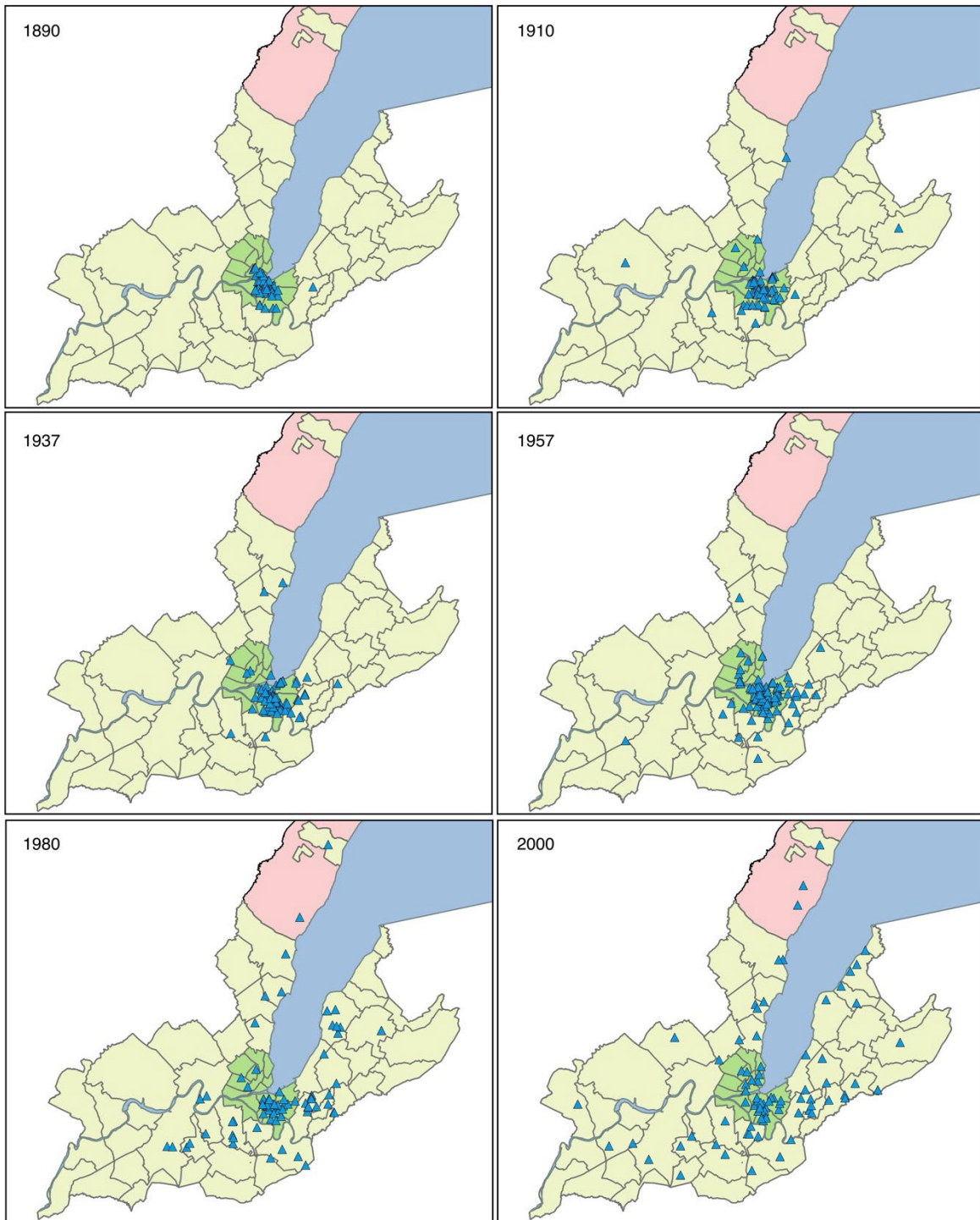


Légende

- ▲ 1 élite académique
- ▲ 2 élites académiques
- ▲ 3 élites académiques
- ▲ 4 élites académiques
- Quartiers de la ville
- Communes du canton
- Autres cantons



Figure 6. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of academic elites in the Canton of Geneva (1890-2000)

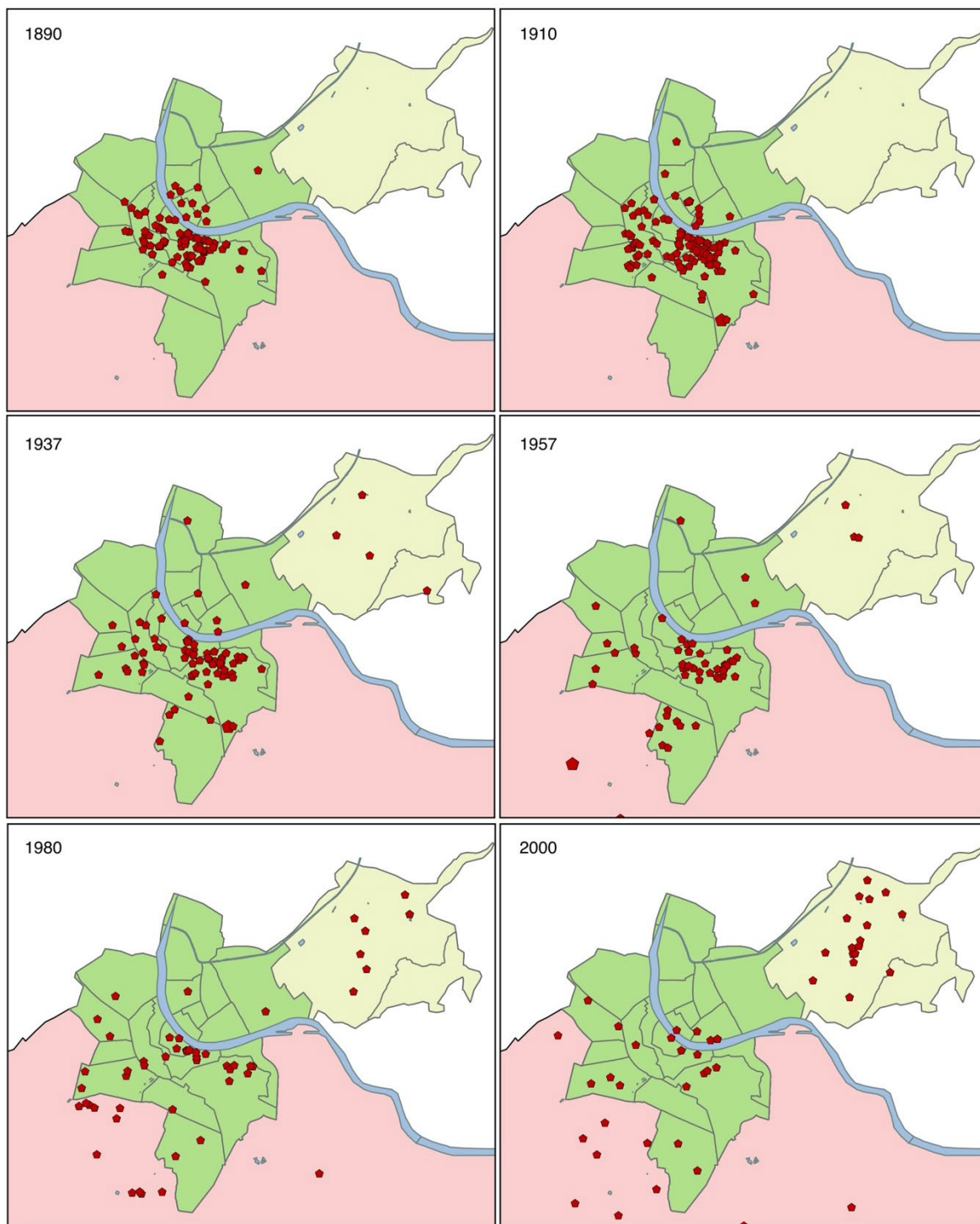


Légende

- ▲ 1 élite académique
- ▲▲ 2 élites académiques
- ▲▲▲ 3 élites académiques
- ▲▲▲▲ 4 élites académiques
- Quartiers de la ville
- Communes du canton
- Autres cantons

2.5 0 2.5 5 7.5 10 km

Figure 7. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of economic elites in the Canton of Basel-Stadt (1890-2000)

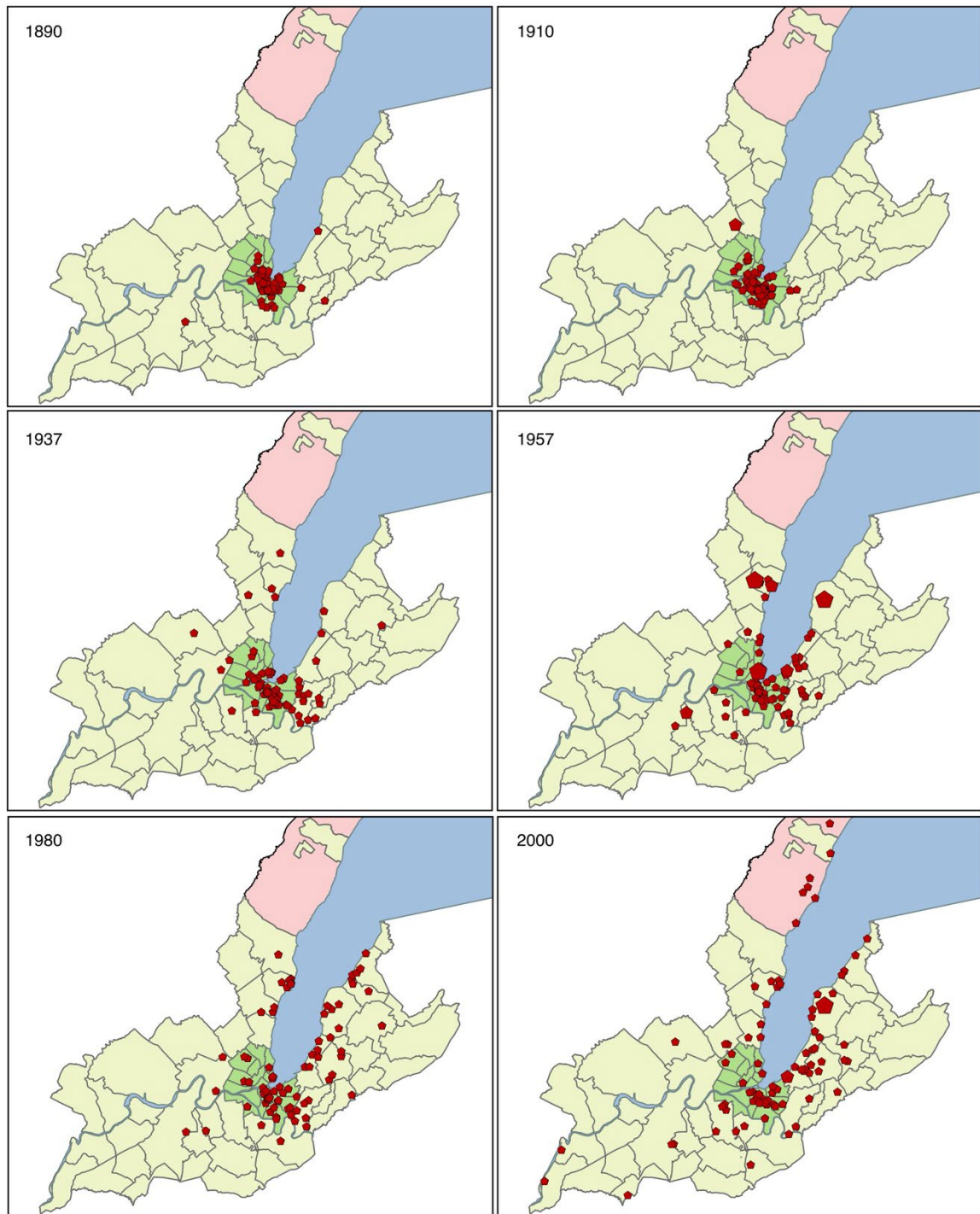


Légende

- 1 élite économique
- 2 élites économiques
- 3 élites économiques
- 4 élites économiques
- Quartiers de la ville
- Communes du canton
- Autres cantons



Figure 8. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of economic elites in the Canton of Geneva (1890-2000)

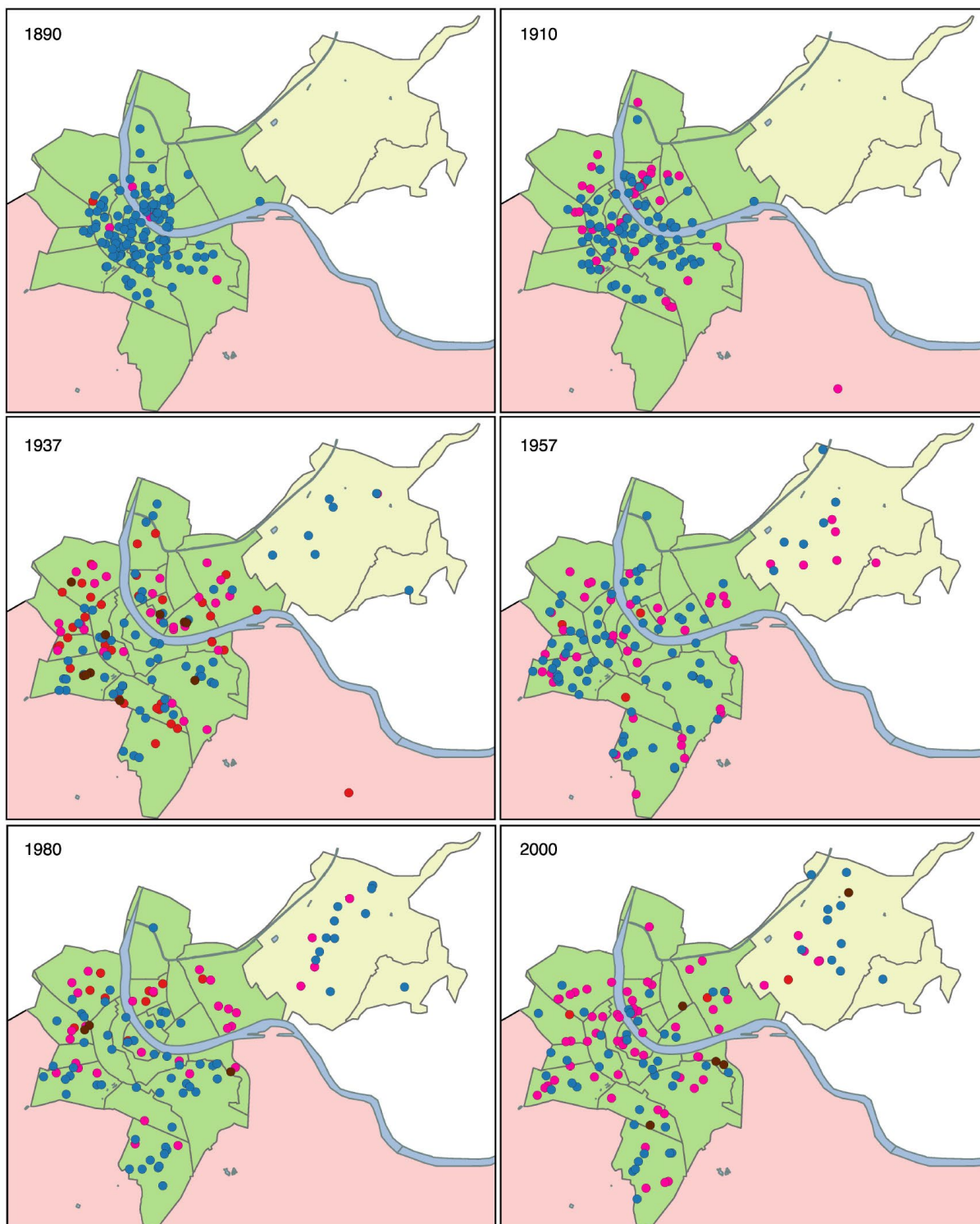


Légende

- 1 élite économique
- ◆ 2 élites économiques
- ◆ 3 élites économiques
- ◆ 4 élites économiques
- Quartiers de la ville
- Communes du canton
- Autres cantons

2.5 0 2.5 5 7.5 10 km

Figure 9. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of political elites in the Canton of Basel-Stadt (1890-2000)

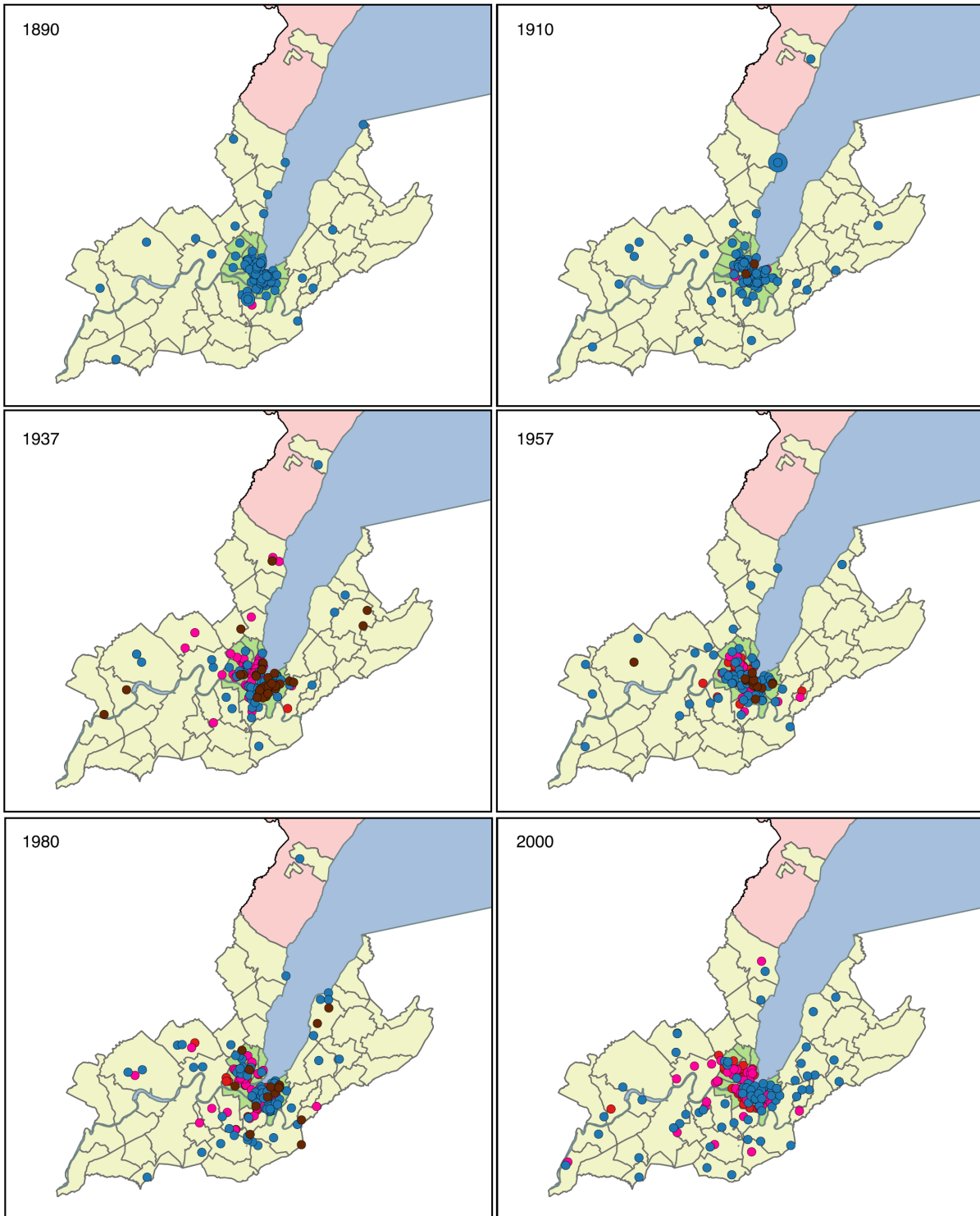


Légende

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| ● Elite pol. droite radicale | ○ 1 élite | ■ Quartiers de la ville |
| ● Elite pol. bloc bourgeois | ○ 2 élites | ■ Communes du canton |
| ● Elite pol. centre-gauche | ○ 3 élites | ■ Autres cantons |
| ● Elite pol. gauche radicale | ○ 4 élites | |



Figure 10. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of political elites in the Canton of Geneva (1890-2000)



Légende

- Elite pol. droite radicale
- Elite pol. bloc bourgeois
- Elite pol. centre-gauche
- Elite pol. gauche radicale
- 1 élite
- 2 élites
- 3 élites
- 4 élites
- Quartiers de la ville
- Communes du canton
- Autres cantons

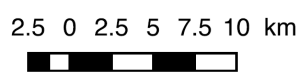
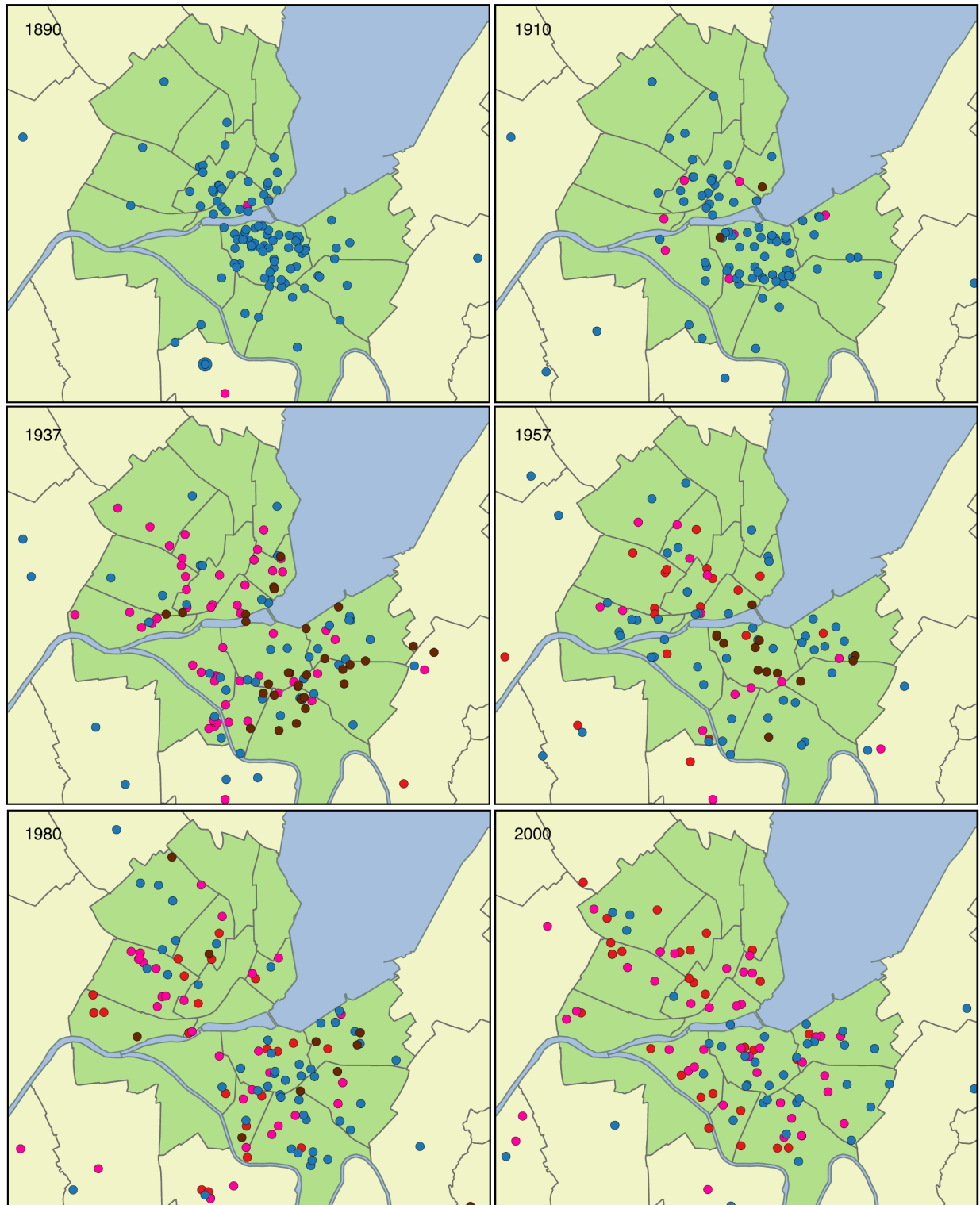


Figure 11. Spatial distribution of the place of residence of political elites in the City of Geneva (1890-2000)



Légende

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| ● Elite pol. droite radicale | ○ 1 élite | ■ Quartiers de la ville |
| ● Elite pol. bloc bourgeois | ○ 2 élites | ■ Communes du canton |
| ● Elite pol. centre-gauche | ○ 3 élites | ■ Autres cantons |
| ● Elite pol. gauche radicale | ○ 4 élites | |

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