

## **Does France Still Have a Class Society?**

### **Three Observations about Contemporary French Society**

Olivier Schwartz

**Enlargement of the sphere of social disadvantage, conversion of some of the higher social categories to a culture of measuring performance, and opposition in some low-income categories to policies that are too focused on the poorest ones; in Olivier Schwartz's view, those are three of the main factors that make for difficulties in reconstructing a city of fellow creatures. In this picture, France is both less and more a class society than it was forty years ago.**

This paper is a revised version of the author's presentation to the forum on *Reinventing Democracy* that La République des Idées organized in Grenoble in May 2009. Olivier Schwartz was part of a roundtable on "Class, Generation, and Age", along with Louis Chavel and François Héran. A podcast of this roundtable is available on the [République des Idées website](#).

Today, the fundamental question about democracy is how much capacity we have to continue to shape, or to begin again to shape, a society that is – to adopt a phrase from Robert Castel – a "society of fellow creatures" – i.e., a society that is truly able to integrate all of its members, and acquires the means of containing inequalities to the fullest. As a contribution to the discussion of this issue, I just want to offer three factual observations, and one epistemological comment. My three observations will focus on some facts that are today sources of difficulties or obstacles in proceeding in precisely this direction of refounding a city of fellow creatures.

To avoid any ambiguity: I of course adhere fully and completely to this civil and political objective. My only concern is to take notice of some facts that can as I said constitute difficulties in this path, and that we must therefore reflect upon. I do not mean to say that these facts and observations are exhaustive. There will certainly be many other things to touch upon. On the other hand, I have deliberately chosen three facts that lead me to three different levels in the social hierarchy.

#### **Enlargement of the Sphere of Social Disadvantage**

The first factual observation, all too trite, is the size of what we can call the phenomenon of social disadvantage, the phenomenon of the existence of "disadvantaged groups". By this I mean groups of people whose situations are vulnerable – to unemployment,

to insecurity, to hard and badly paid jobs, to losing ground... When you look at what French society is like today (and here I deeply agree with the criticism made in recent years by Louis Chauvel regarding the theme of averaging<sup>1</sup>), one can't help being struck by the extent of the phenomenon and by the number of groups that it affects. There is a whole section of employees in the private sector who today more than ever are being hit by unemployment, marginalization, the fact they are working in declining businesses, and more widely by the whole process of deterioration in working conditions, to which sociology has drawn attention for some years now – service and tertiary employees doing so-called low-skill jobs. This whole section of private sector employees finds itself in the situation of being socially disadvantaged.

In addition, there are the young. First and foremost, of course, the young in lower-class families, especially from immigrant populations. But, as is well known, there are also a large number of young university graduates who are having great difficulty finding employment, and in the end manage to find only insecure situations involving a loss of status.

### **From the Policy of Excellence to Intracategorical Inequalities**

Moving around the social hierarchy, my second observation concerns the higher categories. Here it seems to me that there is now a rather wide-spread feature in the culture of many in these categories, at least if we look at those in managerial positions – namely, the importance given to the culture of excellence, performance, and competence. At the centre of this culture is an idea about the governance of businesses and organizations: the idea that we must move towards governance that, much more than before, values performance and excellence, and will tailor individuals' careers to their performance, competence, and results. It seems clear that this idea of governance is now a central part of the culture in the managerial categories. One characteristic of this culture is that it can be quite favourable, at least in principle, to steps taken to fight against inequalities and discrimination based on origin (e.g. ethnic origin); but at the same time, it can be very favourable to introducing into businesses and organizations more inequalities, based on “merit” and performance.

Since the early 1990s, this concept of governance can be seen in the changes that have affected personnel management in private-sector businesses, especially in the big ones: policies of individualized remuneration, the appearance in MEDEF (the largest employer union in France) of a philosophy of governance that replaced the logic of qualification with the logic of confidence, and so on. It should be emphasized that this philosophy can also be seen very clearly today in all sorts of policies in the public sector. Even without looking at recent actions in French universities, it seems clear here too that this concept of the governance of organizations is the philosophy behind a large part of the reforms carried out during the last two years in universities and in the world of research.

To be more precise: I am fully aware that all of these issues are complicated. And I know that there are plenty of arguments in favour of this kind of view on the functioning of businesses and organizations, and the idea that excellence must be valued and career paths must be individualized in line with performance evaluations. This concept can be perfectly well advocated and defended. Nevertheless it has to be observed that if the implementation of such a philosophy continues, expands and strengthens, in the private as well as in the public sector, there will be a significant deepening and widening of inequalities, not between

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor's note: This is a reference to Louis Chauvel's contribution, which had preceded Olivier Schwartz's in the above-mentioned roundtable on “Class, Generation, and Age”.]

different social categories but among members of the same category – the famous “intracategorical” inequalities that many economists and sociologists have been thinking about during the last fifteen years. Indeed, it appears that one of the characteristic changes in French society as in many other contemporary western societies is the appearance of these “intracategorical” inequalities among members of the same socio-professional category, on top of traditional social inequalities. These newer inequalities have been caused largely by the explosion and diversification of types of employment, but it is blindingly obvious that the policy of excellence and competence, the weight placed on performance, and especially the individualization of career paths, could in the future constitute an extremely important factor in the heightening of intracategorical inequalities, and thus also in challenges to group solidarity.

**“We’re the Ones Paying for Everyone”:  
The Tripartite Division of Social Conscience in Low-Income Groups**

For my third observation I move down to the intermediate levels of society. I’ll refer briefly to a survey that I’ve been conducting for a long time, in order to reflect on one of its findings. For several years I’ve been studying the public transport bus drivers in the Paris region (RATP), the “machinists”, who could be said to be at the borderline between the working-class categories and middle-class salaried employees. These bus drivers occupy a subordinate position in the social divisions of their work. They are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Even though they have a lot of independence when doing their work, they are agents of others; they implement instructions and tasks assigned to them by higher-ups. As a result, like lots of workers and employees, many of them spontaneously adhere to a binary image of society, based on opposition between those at the top – the leaders, the powerful ones, the ones with education, power, and money – and those who are at the bottom – the task performers, the workers, the employees, those with whom they think they are in a general way linked together. For a long time I thought I had rediscovered here a kind of social representation that Richard Hoggart<sup>2</sup> in some well-known works had shown to be important in the world of workers and the English lower classes in the 1950s: an opposition between “them” on high, and “us” down below, the task performers.

But I finally realized that for some of them, things were more complicated, even though this was true only for some of them. Their representation and awareness of the social world was not bipolar, but triangular: they felt they were subject not just to pressure from the top, but also to pressure from the bottom, coming from those lower down than them. This pressure from below (it’s me saying it this way, of course, but remarks made to me several times by the drivers clearly went in this direction) consists of for example the idea that there are too many unemployed people who not only don’t have a job but aren’t even looking for one, who live on unemployment benefits or welfare, and therefore don’t have to look for a job, because other people pay taxes for them – other people who do work, among whom are of course bus drivers. Or for another example, the idea that some immigrant families get by without working, thanks to benefits, i.e. thanks to welfare, which again is financed by those who work and pay taxes. In my interviewees I repeatedly came across this feeling of being injured both by decisions from the top and by behaviour coming from below, injured both by more powerful people and by poorer people. One day, one of them said to me: “We’re the ones paying for everyone”, and it’s clear that he had in mind both the top and the bottom.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1957.

This tripartite division of social awareness was also noticed by the authors of a book called *La France des petits moyens*<sup>3</sup> [The Lower-to-Middling Sorts in France], a survey of house owners in Paris suburbs. And I think this division is important, because it too is a potential source of problems in moving towards a more communal society, since policies designed to aid the poorest and most disadvantaged people can encounter reluctance or hostility in some modestly well-off groups, who feel that some of their problems come not only from above but also from those poorest people, and who tend to think that maybe those poorest people are getting a little too much aid. That is the mental image that you find in some of those whom these authors call (and who call themselves) the “lower-to-middling sorts”.

Enlargement of the sphere of social disadvantage, conversion of some of the higher social categories to a culture of measuring performance and excellence, and opposition in some low-income categories to policies that are too focused on the poorest ones: those are three factors (among many others) that make for difficulties in reconstructing a city of fellow creatures.

### **Does France Still Have a Class Society?**

Finally, I would like to make a complementary observation, about the term social class. I have avoided using this term in introducing the three preceding observations, quite simply because it seems to me that at the moment we do not have at our disposal a satisfactory analysis of the class structure of contemporary France, in other words an interpretation of contemporary France in terms of class that is adequate, that takes into account the changes and transformations that have affected this society since the end of the 1970s, and that can therefore be applied to this society as it is today. It seems to me that if the term “class” is needed, we sociologists will really have to get our act together and develop a vocabulary and a way of thinking that meets that need.

Having said that, I do not mean to imply that from my point of view this idea of class is now obsolete or irrelevant to talking about contemporary France. Quite the contrary. Like many others, I think French society is today still a class society. More precisely, I think we could say it is both less and more a class society than it was at the end of the 1970s. It is certainly less structured by class than it was thirty or forty years ago, for familiar reasons, especially because the feeling of belonging to a class has significantly declined in the poorest parts of the social hierarchy. It has significantly decreased in the world of workers and in the lower social categories. Today you no longer find here a majority who have a sense of belonging to a working class, which in the 1960s could be seen in a vast majority. And there are several other factors: schooling and the media affect all social settings; cultural boundaries have diminished; the French simply no longer inhabit a society characterized by very distinct class cultures. In this sense, in many ways the society in which they live is much less clearly class structured than it was forty years ago.

Yet at the same time, in other ways, we can say that the class character of this society has in some respects become more pronounced. Not only have the great social inequalities basically been maintained by moving, it is no exaggeration to say that some of them have hardened. For example, inequalities in pay, which lowered in the 1960s and 1970s, today are no longer decreasing. More broadly, some social boundaries have hardened. For example, some of the lower social categories have been sucked into vulnerable situations, while at the

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<sup>3</sup> Marie Cartier, Isabelle Coutant, Olivier Mascelet and Yasmine Siblot, *La France des petits-moyens*, Paris, La Découverte (in the series “Textes à l’appui / Enquêtes de terrain”) 2008.

other end of the social hierarchy urban sociologists (notably Edmond Préteceille<sup>4</sup>) show us that in housing, choice of neighbourhood, and choice of residence and school for the children, the behaviour of a substantial part of the higher categories, especially leading private-sector executives and the professions, have become more and more self-segregated, and consistently exhibit avoidance of social diversity. New social boundaries have appeared with the growing importance of formal qualifications. For example, worker mobility in businesses is today virtually blocked above a certain level; without the right paper qualification, it is increasingly difficult for skilled workers to get beyond their status as workers. It is in this sense that we can say that French society is today more as well as less a class society that it was forty years ago. For this reason I think this idea of class is still relevant, and I repeat that it is an urgent task for sociologists to construct a satisfactory class analysis of contemporary France. This task is both intellectually urgent and politically necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> See especially Edmond Préteceille, “La ségrégation contre la cohésion sociale: la métropole parisienne”, in Hugues Lagrange (ed.), *L'Épreuve des inégalités*, Paris, PUF (in the series “Le Lien social”), 2006, pp. 195-246.