

The Working Classes in Contemporary France

by Pierre Gilbert

A coauthored volume offers a panoramic overview of working classes in contemporary France. These sociologists offer a theoretical clarification of the concept and show its relevance for describing this social group and its historical transformations.

Reviewed: Yasmine Siblot, Marie Cartier, Isabelle Coutant, Olivier Masclet, and Nicolas Renahy, *Sociologie des classes populaires contemporaines* (Sociology of Contemporary Working Classes), Paris, Armand Colin, 2015.

Is contemporary French society structured into social classes? And how should one describe that strata of society—which makes up a statistical majority—comprised of industrial laborers, white-collar workers,¹ and small-time self-employed workers (shopkeepers, tradesmen, and farmers)? Is it still appropriate, in this day and age, to speak of “working classes” (“*classes populaires*”, in French²)? These are the basic sociological questions informing a large number of empirical studies. These vast questions, however, usually result in a hodge-podge: studies focused on a single aspect of the problem and offering only partial and inadequate answers. The impressive work proposed by the five authors of *Sociologie des classes populaires contemporaines* is, consequently, very welcome. Coming in the wake of other recent

¹ Translator’s note: We have used “white-collar worker” to translate the French term “*employés*,” which includes both office workers and service-sector workers. Once again, the translation is imperfect, but the simplest way to convey this term in English.

² Translator’s note: The French term is “*classes populaires*”—literally, the “popular” (in the sense of “people’s”) classes. While the translation is imperfect, the only option for translating this term into English that would not lend itself to further confusion is “working classes.” “*Classes populaires*” differs from “*classe ouvrière*”, used in the past (and also translated as working-class), pointing at blue-collars (while “*classes populaires*” includes also office workers and sector service workers, as well as small-time self-employed workers).

synthetic efforts, albeit in much more succinct formats,³ it offers a decisive contribution to contemporary debates on working classes and the social structure of contemporary France.

At its most basic level, the book presents itself in as a textbook,⁴ displaying all the qualities expected of one. With its impressive bibliography, it offers thematic descriptions of a large number of work and provides detailed expositions of statistical data and case studies, as well as charts and long excerpts from interviews. These examples give the book's analyses a concrete dimension, but they also serve to dose out empirical evidence in a way that serves the theoretical concerns informing it. For this volume is also much more than a textbook: it is also a research book, which addresses the question of the existence of the working classes in contemporary society by considering new empirical material, comprised of the compilation of a large number of enquiries, offering, in this way, an innovative perspective on contemporary social structures. Summarizing its three hundred very dense pages, which themselves summarize many academic surveys, is obviously no easy task. We will focus here on its most important contributions: a theoretical clarification of the concept of "working classes" and the perspective it provides on how this social group is viewed by social science, as well as its three-part analysis of the changing boundaries between social classes; the question of whether the working classes are unified or disparate; and their relationship with other classes.

Defining social classes “on their own two legs”

Because this concept lends itself to multiple and often floating uses, the book's most obvious appeal lies in the theoretical and conceptual clarification it provides of the concept of "working classes." Drawing on the now classic theses of Olivier Schwartz,⁵ the authors define working classes in terms of two related properties: properties relating to social position and "culturological" properties. Working classes constitute, on the one hand, a group that occupies a dominated position within the social space, economically as well as symbolically, and whose "life chances," in Max Weber's sense of the term, are similar and limited. On the other hand, they are characterized by a common culture, lifestyle, and representations (the model of cultural universes that are separated or segregated, as described by Richard Hoggart,⁶ serves here as an important reference point). Beginning with a

³ See, in particular, Gérard Mauger, "Les transformations des classes populaires en France depuis trente ans." in Cours-Salies, Lojkine, and Vakaloulis, eds., *Nouvelles luttes de classe*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2006, pp. 29–42, and Philippe Alonzo and Cédric Hugrée, *Sociologie des classes populaires*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010.

⁴ Published in Armand Colin's "U" series.

⁵ Olivier Schwartz, *La notion de 'classes populaires'*, habilitation thesis, 1998; partially republished as "Peut-on parler des classes populaires?", *La Vie des idées*, September 13, 2011: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Peut-on-parler-des-classes.html>.

⁶ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Transaction Publishers, 1957. Translated into French as *La culture du pauvre. Étude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1970.

definition of social classes that “walk on their own two legs,”⁷ the book examines the relevance of the concept of working classes in contemporary French society.

Changing social structures, new social science perspectives

At the heart of the analysis lies the question of the historical change of this social group, compared to the working class that the social sciences brought to light in the mid-twentieth century – the *classe ouvrière*. The class-based analytical framework forged in the postwar decades, focused on the industrial workers’ world, was, by the 1980s, widely challenged by other paradigms: first by the idea of a vast middle class encompassing most of society (“middleization”), then by a process of society’s dualization, as it became structured around the distinction between the “included” and the “excluded,” or (alternatively) the “stable” and the “precarious” (associated with the growing importance of the themes of exclusion and vulnerability). The success of these paradigms was tied to deep transformations in the structure of society since the 1950, but also to the exhaustion and limitations of the theoretical model they challenged: that of homogeneous, integrated, and mobilized working class, which had dominated sociology from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The analysis of the transformations this social group underwent is inseparable, in fact, from a change in the way social sciences viewed it. In the wake of two pioneering works—Richard Hoggart’s *The Culture of Literacy* (translated into French in 1970 as *La Culture du Pauvre*) and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, which introduced the notion of *classes populaires* in the 1970s—many studies broke with postwar sociology. Where the latter, based on investigations of work and social movements, concentrated on white male workers in major industries (notably a few emblematic figures, such as miners, steel workers, and so on), these new studies became interested in the group’s other members (women, immigrants, office workers, sector service workers, and so on) in order to emphasize the heterogeneity of the working classes (thus explaining the use of the plural), as well as other aspects of their lives, notably what they did outside work and in private. By retracing the gradual constitution of this sociology of the working classes, the book shows, contrary to a widespread view that associates the 1980s and 1990s with a decline of class-based analyses and the 2000s with their “return”⁸, that the 1980s and 90s were a period in which the analytical frameworks for understanding the working classes flourished and were revitalized, providing the structure of

⁷ Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, “Classes en tous genres,” in Maruani, ed., *Femmes, genre et sociétés: l’état des savoirs*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005, pp. 38-47.

⁸ On this point, one might usefully consult the illuminating perspective offered by Frédéric Lebaron in “L’éternel retour du ‘retour des classes sociales’,” *Revue Française de socio-économie*, vol. 10, n° 2, 2012, pp. 281-287. The newfound attention is, moreover, primarily seen in an interest for the working classes: see Jean-Luc Deshayes, “Le retour des classes est ‘populaire’ à l’Association française de sociologie,” *Savoir/Agir*, n° 34, 2015, pp. 45-54.

the numerous studies undertaken in the past fifteen years.⁹ This new perspective, which put a dent into the past idealized image of a unified and mobilized working class, resulted in a more nuanced view of the historical evolution of class boundaries.

Erasure or displacement of class boundaries?

The first debate addresses the question of the persistence of the boundary between the working classes and middle and upper classes. On the one hand, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of changing social structures and the ensuing blurring of class boundaries. Various trends have gradually broken down the working classes' relative social isolation. The existence of homogeneous and inward-looking working-class areas has been undermined as work and home grow further apart, as well as by the gradual decline of urban segregation, which has begun to affect large swathes of blue and white-collar workers.¹⁰ Mass education has deeply altered the circumstances in which working-class youth is socialized and has led families to mobilize around school-related issues. Work, too, has undergone profound transformations: the steep rise in income during the postwar decades contributed to the "deproletarianization" of subaltern salaries, with access to mass consumption and very striking improvements in housing conditions. Finally, while the size of the working classes in the overall population has changed little since the 1960s, the decline in the share of laborers at the expense of white-collar workers has resulted in the growth of "relational" jobs, characterized by contact with members of other social classes, which constitute favorable contexts for working-class acculturation. From this perspective, a rapprochement, in social positions as well as in lifestyle, has occurred between working classes and middle and upper classes.

On the other hand, if the concept of working classes remains highly relevant, it is because these very real developments do not mean that it has simply dissolved into other classes. First, changes in working-class lifestyles do not mean that its distance from other social groups has been abolished: these other groups lifestyles are not static, and have undergone changes themselves, driven notably by strategies of distinction in relation to groups occupying inferior positions within the social hierarchy. This dynamic, which is found in many aspects of group lifestyles, is well illustrated by trends in the social experience of time.

⁹ Among the work that makes this break (the entirety of which cannot be referenced here), Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron's *Le Savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil, 1989) occupies a central place. At the risk of overlooking key titles, we will nonetheless mention: Olivier Schwartz, *Le Monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1990; Florence Weber, *Le Travail à-côté. Étude d'ethnographie ouvrière*, Paris, Inra EHESS, 1989; Danièle Kergoat, *Les Ouvrières*, Paris, Le Sycomore, 1982 ; Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français. Histoire de l'immigration XIXe-XXe siècle*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1988; and Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière: enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard*, Paris, Fayard, 1999.

¹⁰ Edmond Préteceille, "La France n'est pas une société d'apartheid," interview with Anaïs Collet and Clément Rivière, *Métropolitiques*, September 16, 2015: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/La-France-n-est-pas-une-societe-d.html>.

Since the 1980s, the amount of time working classes spend at work has declined and the way they use their leisure time has been transformed, with the rise of practices of domestic sociability, to which they had previously been averse and which had been characteristic of the upper classes. At the same time, the worktime of executives has increased; now, when they socialize over a meal, it tends to be outside the home. Thus the difference in the social experience of time has changed, but has not disappeared.

Furthermore, if increasing opportunities for contact with middle and upper classes has been a factor in changing working-class tastes and practices, this acculturation does not necessarily imply an assimilation or fusion with the lifestyles of these social groups. Working-class acquisition of the objects, practices, and symbols of superior groups are frequently “heterodox appropriations,”¹¹ consisting in reinterpretations, using the codes of working-class culture, of the norms of dominant social groups. This is the case, for example, of educational norms of the middle and upper classes, which value communication and negotiation with children. Its diffusion among working-class fathers naturally results in greater attention being given to explanation and dialogue, but also in the continued assertion of paternal authority and the rejection of an “egalitarian and negotiation-based model, the social hypocrisy of which they condemn, for it is not adapted to the hierarchy of social relationships that they experience, notably in the realm of work” (p. 144).

What we are witnessing is thus less the erasure of class boundaries than their displacement. Moreover, the tendency of the working classes to “break out” of their cultural confines overlaps with a reverse process, whereby the specificity of their position is reinforced and their relative cultural autonomy is preserved. Drawing on studies in the sociology of labor, the authors note, in the first place, the growing proximity between white-collar workers and laborers, who share a common status at work: that of subaltern salaried employees. Unlike other categories of workers, the latter is characterized by physically and psychologically demanding tasks and lack of control over the organization of time (due to pressures from hierarchies, as well as those of customers), which affects vacations and weekends, in addition to income, as discrepancies with upper classes have increased significantly since the 1980s. The lack of any prospect of professional promotion and the dwindling opportunities for entering low-level civil service careers or certain self-employed careers give “this experience of subordination at work the consistency of a shared condition” (p. 300).

This shared position affects working-class lifestyles in various ways. It results in inequalities in matters of health (lower life expectancies, poor health conditions at advanced ages, widespread obesity, and so on), consumption, leisure time, and vacation-taking. Similarly, changes in the school system have not abolished the distance between the educational and familial socialization logics that result in lower success rates for children of working-class origin, as the lengthening of school years entails a segmentation of trajectories:

¹¹ Daniel Thin, “Milieux populaires et logiques socialisatrices dominantes: une analyse de la confrontation,” habilitation thesis, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2010.

vocational tracks now specialize in recruiting working-class children, who are themselves destined to become laborers or service sector workers. If working-class culture is no longer characterized by the same identity and isolation as in the 1950s, the preservation of its relative cultural autonomy is still nonetheless apparent in a number of realms: in various forms of working-class family practices (practical rather than financial mutual aid, specific child-bearing and marriage practices), localism, and leisure activities—practices that are informal, internal to the working class, and removed from legitimate cultural practices.

A diluted, but not dissolved working class

Beyond the issues of boundaries with other classes lies the question of the group's unity and homogeneity. The authors emphasize, in this respect, the many internal cleavages within this class, relating to work (blue vs. white collars, skilled vs. unskilled, stable vs. precarious), gender, origin (immigrant vs. non-immigrant), or place of residence (renters vs. owners; housing developments vs. peri-urban spaces vs. rural spaces). These tendencies toward fragmentation are driven by acculturation processes, which primarily affect the working classes' better-off members, whose practices and outlook tend to diverge from those of most precarious groups. The social life of working classes is structured around strategies of distinction, notably in the realm of work: the most precarious groups are kept at a distance, as are foreigners and the poor, who are said to "take advantage" of the social assistance programs that workers help pay for. Similarly, public housing projects ("HLM") are avoided or condemned. This internal differentiation is not, however, entirely organized around the opposition between "upper" and "lower" working classes. Other cleavages shape it, such as between men and women, which also take a specific form within this group due notably to the sexual segmentation of subaltern jobs, and between "culturally oriented" strata and those that attach greater value to material goods and economic capital.

These fragmentation dynamics should not, however, lead one to conclude that the working class has dissolved. First, the authors emphasize that these various cleavages are not superimposed upon one another; they overlap in ways that make it impossible to identify distinct groups within the working-class community. The synthetic perspective which, bringing together numerous studies, informs the book, provides a decisive argument against the dissolution thesis: whereas its proponents often draw on partial empirical evidence and hastily conclude that only separate groups exist based on the analysis of a single criteria (race and ethnicity, territory, profession, and so on), the cumulative effect of the book is to emphasize the working classes' diversity and the fact that these divisive dynamics are non-superimposable. Second, differentiation processes—which, historically-speaking, are hardly

new¹²—coexist with unifying dynamics of the kind discussed previously. A striking example of this fact is the importance of homogamous marriage alliances within the working classes. Yet while the evidence of dilution without dissolution is persuasive, one might regret that the book does not address more directly the thesis, which has recently been imported from the United States, concerning the “underclass” and a “culture of poverty,” which holds that a precarious substratum, with its own status and subculture, has increasingly detached itself from the rest of the working class—an argument that, applied to cities, allegedly accounts for the phenomenon of “ghettoization.”¹³.

Class relations and politicization

This portrait of contemporary working classes continues with the consideration of a third dimension, which defines social classes in terms of their relations with other social groups. The study of the relationship between working classes and institutions and politics also leads to nuanced conclusions. While state action tends to strengthen working-class unity, due to the subjective distance it creates within the working classes vis-à-vis a political universe that seems distant, it is simultaneously true that the reconfiguration of the social welfare state around the principle of insurance sows internal division, as the condemnation of “entitlement” (or “assistés,” i.e., people who expect and receive state support) has been increasingly internalized by this group’s more stable strata. These class relations can also be gauged in relations with political representatives. From this point of view, the main change since the mid-twentieth century consists less in the disappearance of “class voting” benefiting the left (which was only ever true of a faction of this class) than in a growing distance from political parties and political power, which manifests itself in mass abstention during elections. This important development simultaneously strengthens group unity and the boundaries with other classes. The experience of domination and dim future prospects do not, however, necessarily coalesce into a collective consciousness. While similar lifestyles, a shared position and status in the social structure, as well as a common experience vis-à-vis the state and politics makes it possible to describe contemporary working classes as a “class on paper,” our

¹² This is in fact a fundamental trait of working classes as depicted by Hoggart, as well as Norbert Elias and John Scotson, in *Logiques de l’exclusion. Enquête sociologique au cœur des problèmes d’une communauté*, Paris Fayard, 1997.

¹³ On this point, see, for example, Louis Chauvel, “Le renouveau d’une société de classe,” in Paul Bouffartigue, ed., *Le retour des classes sociales. Inégalités, dominations, conflits*, Paris, La Dispute, 2004, pp. 55-71 and Nicolas Duvoux, “Repenser la culture de la pauvreté,” *La Vie des idées*, July 19, 2011: www.laviedesidees.fr/La-culture-de-la-pauvrete.html. And for a territorial approach, see Didier Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain. Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd’hui*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2008. And for a critical perspective, see Pierre Gilbert, “‘Ghetto,’ ‘banishment,’ ‘neighborhood effects.’ A critique of the ‘ghetto’ image of French housing projects,” *Metropolitics*, March 23, 2011: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Ghetto-banishment-neighborhood.html>.

present historical situation does not make of it—unlike other classes or class strata—a “mobilized class.”¹⁴

Published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 16 November 2016. Translated from the French by Michael Behrent with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 5 October 2017.

¹⁴ Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, *Sociologie de la bourgeoisie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2007; Pierre Bourdieu, “Espace social et genèse des ‘classes’”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1984, vol. 52-53, pp. 3-14.