



Political Conservatism and the Working Classes in France

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Reviewed: Violaine Girard, *Le Vote FN au village : trajectoires de ménages populaires du périurbain*, Vulaines-sur-Seine, Éditions du Croquant, 2017, 314 pp.

In her latest book, Le Vote FN au village (“The National Front Vote in the Village”), sociologist Violaine Girard presents a rigorous study of working-class trajectories “in search of respectability.” Resisting any temptation to offer an overarching, oversimplistic vision of the far-right vote, this work instead skillfully makes use of a municipal monograph to examine a village’s political ecosystem in detail.

Since the late 2000s, studies of electoral behavior in France have sought to innovate by incorporating the effects of residential context into their approaches (Mayer 2017, pp. 34–39). A number of these studies have focused on periurban areas (Bacqué *et al.* 2016; Lambert 2015; Charmes *et al.* 2013; Rivière 2008; Cartier *et al.* 2008). It is within this specific field of research, which shuns overarching and oversimplifying visions of these spaces and their populations, that Violaine Girard’s latest work is situated. As a sociologist whose approach often reaches out to the field of geography, Violaine Girard is now one of the foremost specialists in periurban issues in France.

This study, initiated in 2003 as part of a PhD research project, was conducted in a periurban municipality close to Lyon, in southeastern France. Later on, in the early 2010s, it gave rise to new investigations more directly oriented towards the political and electoral dimensions. The study is based on rich empirical work conducted on several different scales. In addition to mobilizing the usual socioeconomic data provided by censuses and documents from municipal archives, it makes use of various ethnographic observations of local public life (such as election days – always Sundays in France – and municipal council meetings), some 50 interviews with different types of inhabitants, and around 20 others with political and administrative officials. As a result, over 60 interview excerpts are incorporated into the book’s overall scientific demonstration.

The municipality is located in a former farming area that underwent rapid industrialization in the 1970s. Since then, the maintenance of industrial activity has ensured this municipality’s relative economic prosperity. From this point of view, this periurban territory, while composed primarily of households of manual and clerical workers, does not fit the image of a relegated peripheral area. Nevertheless, for the past 20 years, the proportion of votes cast for the far-right Front National (FN) party¹ in presidential elections has been four to six percentage points higher than the national average. This observation is at the origin of the conundrum that the author seeks to elucidate in this work. The aim of this research is to identify the different social drivers of this type of vote in order

¹ On June 1, 2018, the Front National was officially renamed the Rassemblement National (“National Rally”), or RN.

to explain its permeation within working-class milieus that are experiencing relative upward social mobility. This study thus follows in the footsteps of recent research that has highlighted the limitations of explanations focused solely on social relegation in relation to the FN vote in working-class contexts.

Households in search of respectability

The majority of households of manual and clerical workers that live in this municipality are engaged in the process of accessing homeownership. The fourth chapter of the book presents these “established families in search of respectability” as being driven by a desire for material security. In this respect, the individuals that make up these families have a “triangular social conscience”:² they seek to distinguish themselves from the most precarious working-class fringes, while knowing perfectly well that access to homeownership alone is not enough to elevate them to the middle classes, let alone the upper classes. Nevertheless, obtaining homeowner status is a clear way to boost self-esteem. Driven by this objective, these households exhibit a “mobilized relationship with their social status” (pp. 17 & 123). The author’s demonstration here calls upon the processes of social distinction highlighted by the canonical works of Norbert Elias and John Scotson (1965)—processes so common that they seem to have an almost universal dimension (Easterlin 1974).

At this point, the author seeks to situate this phenomenon within specific social and family trajectories. For example, she rightly emphasizes the importance of marital status with respect to the likelihood of these individuals taking out a mortgage and being able to bear this financial burden in the long term. More generally, she shows how each key stage of people’s lives expands or, on the contrary, reduces the field of possibilities in terms of representations of their own social destiny; looking at this from the standpoint of homeownership is a good indicator of how these possibilities will vary.

More than a simple social group, these small-scale property-owners form a reference group insofar as they play a role, through their residential rootedness and their involvement in associations and political life, in defining a local way of life. In addition, the primacy of economic capital over cultural capital leads to closer links between these working-class households and the professions of the self-employed. A number of manual workers, particularly the most qualified among them, have professional experience as business owners.

The genesis of a sociopolitical ecosystem

One of the major contributions of this book is that it demonstrates that this ecosystem, in the sense of a system of interactions between individuals and their environment, does not appear *ex nihilo*. Three main explanatory factors are identified. First, by linking policy and politics, the author places the economic development of the territory studied within the history of national and local public policies. At the national level, during the 1950s and 1960s, the public authorities defended the creation of industrial employment areas and the implementation of tax and land-use planning policies that favored access to homeownership for many lower-middle-class households (Effosse 2003); however, during the 1970s in the perimeter studied, these national directives were relayed by an influential parliamentarian from the free-market right, who was keen to offer manufacturing companies a workforce with little awareness of the principle of class struggle.

The second point concerns the actual ways in which industrial work is organized, which are unfavorable to the formation of a working class that is mobilized against employers. The widespread use of subcontracting by companies leads to a fragmentation of small companies, and those that reach a certain size make extensive use of atypical forms of employment (such as fixed-

² The author borrows this phrase from Olivier Schwartz (Collovald and Schwartz 2006).

term contracts and temporary workers), while spreading their production activity over several sites. Finally, the presence of trade unions is also very limited. The author cites this socioprofessional condition as a key explanatory factor with regard to the mindsets of these working-class households, in the process discarding a little peremptorily those analyses that prefer to focus on the forms of “cultural insecurity” that affect these populations (Bouvet 2015).

The third type of factor is the role played by elected officials in the sustainability of this ecosystem. In the last chapter, the author provides a detailed portrait of the mayor and his first deputy. In this type of predominantly rural area, where the professionalization of political life remains very limited, these elected representatives with a sociological profile close to that of their constituents benefit from a form of mandate of trust from a majority of voters, who unequivocally vote for the same leadership teams at each election. In this context, municipal housing policies are guided by a desire to control local demographics in such a way as to preserve the current population make-up, by refusing, for example, to build any social housing.

Value system and voting

A system of shared values therefore inclines a majority of voters to vote in favor of candidates from the free-market right, regardless of the type of election (local, regional, national, European, etc.). Using excerpts from interviews conducted in the course of her research, the author highlights some of these values, which are representative of the typical way of thinking of these households; they are based on the defense of private property, the promotion of social promotion based on individual effort, the disqualification of vulnerable social groups, concern for the economic health of local manufacturing firms, and a certain distance, or even distrust, towards public services and their principal representatives. For example, the survey tends to confirm the current acuity of the private–public split in terms of respondents’ relationship to politics (Boy and Mayer 1997). In addition, there is a regular use of ethnic categorizations—particularly when it comes to issues relating to residence—which are especially structuring in terms of symbolic borders as they are located in networks of daily sociability where ethnic diversity is largely absent.

In terms of electoral behavior, the author recalls a certain number of sociological regularities, which all too many journalistic comments tend to ignore: choosing to vote (or abstain) and choosing to vote for a particular candidate often remain acts with little ideological involvement (Lehingue 2011). In line with national trends in France, the vast majority of voters in the electoral district in which the village is located demonstrate increasingly intermittent turnout at elections. Over the 2012–2015 electoral cycle, the level of voter turnout was even more volatile than it was nationally, dropping from 84% in the first round of the 2012 presidential election to just 41% in the 2014 European elections. This capricious relationship to voting also concerns those electors who may vote for the Front National: here, as elsewhere, this group of voters forms a diverse conglomerate. This downward trend can first be observed quantitatively, insofar as the FN’s results were highest at the presidential election but declined when traditional right-wing candidates are able to assert their local legitimacy in other elections. For example, in elections for the *conseil départemental* (French equivalent of a county council), the outgoing councilman from the center-right UMP³ party—son of the local member of parliament—usually wins the seat in the first round of voting. Variability is also found in the social origin of voters, which is not limited to the working class. Moreover, over the past 20 years, the relative progress of the Front National is primarily due to the contribution of habitual (center-)right-wing voters (Gougou 2015).

Nevertheless, two sentiments seem to characterize voters who are quick to vote for the FN. First and foremost, their vote appears to be based on a feeling that there has been blurring of the ideological and programmatic divisions between the left and the right. It also seems to be based on a

³ The UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, literally “Union for a People’s Movement”) party is now known as Les Républicains (LR; literally “The Republicans”).

feeling of disconnection from the political elites—a feeling also present among local elected officials, who claim to have no party position.

According to the author, the actions and narratives of key local councilors who have voted in favor of the FN in recent years have contributed to a “liberation of racist speech” (pp. 302–303). For our part, we would like to express certain doubts concerning this assertion, which has often been repeated by a number of commentators as well as by some social-sciences researchers. Indeed, in France—and there is every reason to believe that the space studied in this book is no exception—many elements, whether longitudinal indicators (e.g. opinion polls, comparisons of political speeches) or observations of forms of control and social self-control, seem to prove the opposite with ease, that is to say a decline in the expression xenophobic opinions.⁴ From this point of view, this misinterpretation can be explained by a greater sensitivity to racist speech—a sensitivity that could produce a perception bias in the scientific view itself. This reservation in no way affects the overall qualities of this book, as the phenomena it highlights demonstrate—if such a demonstration were still necessary—the scientific interest of monographic approaches when it comes to taking account of the intricacies of social and political issues.

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⁴ Nonna Mayer, “Le retour inattendu de la tolérance”, *The Conversation*, May 2016; it can be read online at the following URL: <http://theconversation.com/le-retour-inattendu-de-la-tolerance-59196>.

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