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Christophe Guilluy, *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France*. Translated from the French by Malcolm DeBevoise. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 184 pp. Appendix, notes, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780300233766.

Review by Frédéric Viguier, New York University.

Although the English version of Christophe Guilluy's 2016 book has appeared with an academic press and is reviewed here for an academic forum, this short essay (149 pages of text) is not a scholarly book seeking to carefully assess available statistical data on class inequalities in France and engage with the literature of the field to make an argument about the primacy of spatial dimensions in accounting for class inequalities in contemporary France. Rather, Guilluy's *Twilight of the Elites* aims at building up a political case, which might be briefly summarized as follows. French society can be boiled down to two classes: one, the bourgeoisie (traditional and new) that mostly lives in expensive urban centers, has largely benefited from neoliberal globalization, and makes up approximately (in Guilluy's assessment) 40% of French society; and the other one, the working class, which has grown poorer with the advent of a globalized economy over the last four decades, inhabits the various peripheries of wealthy French metropolises (suburban, peri-urban and rural), and is excluded from any access to economic opportunity and true political participation. "Peripheral France," as Guilluy calls it, has but one enemy: globalization, by which Guilluy refers at once to international free-trade agreements that have led to the outsourcing of industrial production, European integration that has opened the French production system to finance capitalism and closed the economic field to state intervention, and immigration, which has brought home innumerable competitors willing to take low-paid jobs. But peripheral France is now fighting back against the elites by abandoning their traditional left-wing parties, not turning out to the polls, or voting for the sovereignist Rassemblement national (the Front national's new name). The French elites, writes Guilluy, might well be at their twilight, on the brink of a social and political disaster.

Trained as a geographer, Guilluy first became well-known among French sociologists and geographers with his 2004 *Atlas des nouvelles fractures sociales en France*, written with Christophe Noyé, an empirically grounded, nuanced discussion of the social consequences of the gentrification of city centers and the expansion of urban sprawl in France.^[1] His *Atlas* was widely taught to introduce students of French society to new patterns in social inequalities. Guilluy's following books have gained him prominence in the public sphere but taken him very far from academic circles. This is not a value judgement, but rather the acknowledgement that Guilluy's most recent books no longer seek to administer rigorous evidence for their claims nor to engage with relevant scholarship. Guilluy identifies as a left-wing sovereignist republican, and

often pays tribute to French politician Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the former socialist minister, who founded the *Mouvement des citoyens* (1992-2003) and ran in the 2002 presidential election, under the banner of the *Pôle républicain* (2001-2004), which intended to coalesce republicans of the left and the right. Like Chevènement, Guilly believes that only strong state intervention might protect the working classes from the evils of globalization and multiculturalism. He lambasts the “new bourgeoisie” that “professes to believe that social and cultural mixing is a necessity” but directly participates in the process of demoting and excluding the working class. Although Guilly identifies with the left-wing republican tradition, it is on the right and the extreme-right that his chastising of the “cultural elite” and his vitriol against multiculturalism have earned him a warm reception. His 2010 *Fractures françaises* was a source of inspiration for Nicolas Sarkozy’s 2012 presidential campaign to whom he provided the argument that a strong national state is first and foremost a protective fortress for the working class.[2]

With *Twilight of the Elites*, Guilly moves even further from academic social sciences by ignoring the most central references on inequalities (Piketty’s works are not mentioned) and doubling down on the vitriolic language against the new “hipster” upper-classes and their embrace of immigration and cultural diversity. Guilly repeatedly insinuates that social scientists refuting his theories are but ideologues of the status quo. H-France readers should not expect a tightly nor eloquently argued book; they will find anger instead of intellectual curiosity, assertion when demonstration is needed, rant in lieu of careful organization. This political pamphlet is interesting only insofar as it documents an active trend of political thought in contemporary France: the obsession of the republican left with the supposed evils of multiculturalism.

The book’s first chapter, “the new citadels,” sets out to demonstrate two main ideas: firstly, the social and territorial closedness of the urban bourgeoisie, and secondly, the alliance between the two segments of this urban bourgeoisie: the traditional owning class, and the privileged classes that support them. To make his first point, Guilly primarily uses available data on wage discrepancies and the spectacular rise of real estate costs in urban centers in the last three decades: purchasing (or simply renting) an apartment in a metropolitan center has become unaffordable to the working class, and most formerly working-class urban neighborhoods have gentrified.

The first chapter’s second point is more original, although not justified with careful evidence. Unlike many recent social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, Guilly does not see class conflict as opposition between a small minority (“the 1%”) and the very large majority of the French population (the “99%”), but rather between the 40% who benefit from globalization and the 60% who suffer from it. That the richest segment of the upper classes is embedded in a web of alliances that runs far beyond the highest percentile of income is certainly a more realistic sociological description of French society than the 1% theory, but according to what criteria should different strata of French society be clustered together into social classes? Guilly’s criteria are not simply economic (income and wealth) or spatial, but also cultural and political. He claims that the support offered by the “new bourgeoisie” to the traditional owning bourgeoisie (which one might call the 1%, or perhaps the 10%) is a quintessential element of today’s class conflicts because it adds a cultural dimension to the domination of the working classes: the ideology of openness to others, especially migrants and foreigners, which obscures the effects of socioeconomic inequalities, and delegitimizes opposition to globalization. In his view, the centrist politics of the Socialist Party, and its electoral stronghold on affluent metropolises like Paris or Lyon is evidence of his claim. And so, alluding to then presidential candidate François Hollande’s

famous speech on finance in 2012, Guillyu mocks Socialist Party supporters: “Finance is the enemy, but their finances are in fine shape, thank you, and their property values have never been higher” (pp. 13-14), and accuses them of being bobos: a little bohemian, perhaps in their tastes, but surely bourgeois in their economic and political preferences. This word, coined in 2000 by New York Times columnist and writer David Brooks,[3] became immediately successful in France, and took on extensive meaning, designating pretty much anyone urban and not too old: at once precarious artists and cosmopolitan elites, and those living in gentrified first belt communes as well as in old bourgeois *arrondissements*. Guillyu doesn’t provide a definition of “bobo,” and his usage of the word constantly shifts from statistical categories of the INSEE (the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) to analytical ones (“elites,” “bourgeoisie,” “dominant classes,” etc.), and mostly moral ones (“cool bourgeoisie,” *‘homo festivus’*). In the end, he does not offer a convincing case for why renters and owners, public government employees (teachers and professors) and private high-wage workers should all be conflated in the same class despite their stark differences.[4]

In the book’s second chapter, “an Americanized society,” Guillyu suggests that the last four decades of rising inequalities have led France to degenerate from the republican haven of yesteryear into something other than its true identity: “a multicultural society wracked by nativist anger and immigrant paranoia, by separatist impulses on both sides, geographic segregation, and increasingly frequent ethnic violence—in short, a perfectly ordinary American society” (pp. 67-68). Against this de-historicized dystopian vision of “an ordinary” American society, Guillyu, like many other republicans before him, conjures up an idealized fantasy of the French Third Republic, in which all citizens supposedly lived in cultural harmony and accepted to curb their religious expression in return for and acceptance of the protection of a generous if demanding state. Guillyu’s vision of the Third Republic ignores the violence of class, religious and political conflicts in metropolitan France, and the brutality of French colonialism. It is a strange fabrication for today’s self-proclaimed left-wing republicans, who find themselves defending Jules Ferry rather than Jean Jaurès, and Georges Clémenceau instead of Léon Blum.

But Guillyu does not seem to know anything about the actual Third Republic. He confuses episodes and misunderstands their historical significance. For example, he writes that the 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and State also provided free schooling (when that law passed in 1882) and a system of social protection (which, in fact, came to maturity in 1945). He seems to genuinely believe that *laïcité* meant the erasure of religious expression in the public space, when in fact the 1905 law guaranteed the religious neutrality of the state, the freedom of conscience and religious expression as well as the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of their religious beliefs. His historical mistakes reveal that the golden republican age he conjures up has nothing to do with French history but simply operates as a rhetorical device meant to tell today’s Muslims that they have no right to practice their faith in the public sphere and request fair adaptations to accommodate their needs. The truth is that although Guillyu pretends to put “nativist anger” and “immigrant paranoia” on the same level, his developments make clear that he primarily focuses on Muslim immigrants rather than nativists, and he accuses the former of pursuing with animosity their own “sectarian” interests rather than the common good. Eventually, Guillyu’s problem with “an American” society appears to be not so much its inequalities, but rather its legitimization of multiculturalism, and, in turn, the legitimacy and intellectual resources the United States offers to French ethno-racial minorities when they fight against discriminations.

Chapter 3, “the management of public opinion,” and chapter 4, “the defection of the working class,” assert that the rise of working-class support for the National Front is but a consequence of the social changes laid bare by Guilluy, a way to fight globalization. Distrusted elites, he contends, “reclaim the moral high ground by treating all criticism of the effects of globalization as proof of hateful motives” (p. 95), by delegitimizing working-class grievances and dismissing them as fascist propaganda. But in doing in so, they only further alienate working-class voters, who double down on their support for the Rassemblement National. Although it is not entirely clear what consequences left-wing parties should draw from this interpretation in Guilluy’s view, one is led to assume that he suggests that the left should stop demonizing the Rassemblement national, recognize that working class support for it is “only” a rejection of globalization and multiculturalism, and accept to truly combat class inequalities by restoring national sovereignty and renouncing multiculturalism.

Guilluy’s argument about the working classes’ preference for the Rassemblement national is both partly true and partly wrong. It is partly true because several studies have indeed shown the dealignment of the working class from the left and its realignment towards the extreme right due to generational replacement.[5] However, it is also partly wrong because while blue collar voters have become the core clientele of the extreme right, not all of the working classes have turned to the extreme right, the rejection of immigrants, and the repudiation of the E.U. Far from it. In fact, in spite of the increasing audience of the extreme right in France, scholars of the National Front show that there are strong barriers to the party’s further progression within the working classes: the persistence of the left-right cleavage, the rising level of education, the inability of the National Front to diversify its platform beyond the rejection of immigrants and the E.U., and finally, the strong attachment of the working classes of immigrant descent to anti-racist and anti-discriminatory politics.[6] If the National Front has successfully contributed to repolarizing the French national debate around the issues of immigration and law and order, instead of the economic ones that used to dominate the French political stage, it is not the case that the traditional French left has fully embraced immigration. On the contrary, the Socialist Party has gradually hardened its stance and policies with regard to immigration and multiculturalism. In doing so, the Socialist Party may well have lost many of its working-class constituents of immigrant descent[7] and steered them toward electoral abstention.[8] Ultimately, by constructing the extreme-right as a form of resistance to neoliberal globalization, Guilluy utterly fails to understand that the kind of nationalism advocated by extreme right parties is the opposite of left-wing politics and goes hand in hand with what Jean-François Bayart calls “national liberalism,” or free circulation for the rich and nationalism for the poor.[9] As the marriage of plutocracy and nationalism in Putin’s Russia, or the rise of the Dow Jones since the election of Donald Trump, or the support of Brazil’s economic elites for Jair Bolsonaro have made clear, extreme-right nationalism has not freed anyone from the stronghold of financial capitalism.[10]

NOTES

[1] Christophe Guilluy and Christophe Noyé, *Atlas des nouvelles fractures sociales en France : les classes moyennes précarisées et oubliées* (Paris: Autrement, 2004).

[2] Christophe Guilluy, *Fractures françaises* (Paris: François Bourin Editeur, 2010); Grégoire Biseau, “Le livre de gauche qui inspire la droite,” *Libération*, 30 mars 2012.

https://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/03/30/le-livre-de-gauche-qui-inspire-la-droite_806919.

[3] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: the new Upper Class and how they got there* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[4] Jean-Yves Authier, Anaïs Collet, Colin Giraud, Jean Rivière and Sylvie Tissot (eds.), *Les bobos n'existent pas* (Lyon : Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2018).

[5] Florent Gougou and Nonna Mayer, "The Class Basis of Extreme-Right Voting in France. Generational Replacement and the Rise of Cultural Issues," in Jens Rydgren, ed., *Class Politics and the Radical Right* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 156-172.

[6] Nonna Mayer, "The radical right in France," in Jens Rydgren, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 433-451.

[7] Olivier Masclet, *La gauche et les cités. Enquête sur un rendez-vous manqué* (Paris: La Dispute, 2003).

[8] Céline Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen, *La démocratie de l'abstention : aux origines de la démobilisation électorale en milieu populaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

[9] Jean-François Bayart, *L'impasse national-libérale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

[10] Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018).

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