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Olivier Masclet, Thomas Amossé, Lise Bernard, Marie Cartier, Marie-Hélène Lechien, Olivier Schwartz, and Yasmine Siblot, eds., *Subaltern Workers in Contemporary France: To Be Like Everyone Else.* New York: Routledge, 2023. xviii + 356 pp. Notes, appendices, and index. $136.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032360560; $41.59 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781032360577; $41.59 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003330073.

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Subaltern Workers in Contemporary France is a collective work, but it is not one of those eclectic collections of essays born out of a conference. Instead, it represents the outcome of a multi-year collaborative investigation conducted by a group of French researchers united by a common sociological project and methodology. This team brought together, over four years, more than twenty Bourdieusian sociologists of the working classes, belonging to several generations: the baby boom generation, now retired; Generation X; and millennials. The volume includes chapters written or co-authored by major figures of the generation of sociologists from the 1980s and 1990s who revitalized the study of the working classes by focusing not only on labor or politics but also on the entanglement of family life and work. The list of contributors also features many who completed their dissertations in the 1990s under the supervision of these senior scholars--now eminent professors of sociology such as Olivier Masclet, Marie-Hélène Lechien, Marie Cartier, or Yasmine Siblot--who initiated this ambitious collective project. Finally, the book includes younger millennials, who in turn explore the lifestyles of the French working classes and their transformations.

For these authors, long connected through journals, research centers, and dissertation committees, the sense emerged that the time had come for a new synthesis on the working classes. Three major books published in the early 1990s offered influential syntheses of working-class lifestyles and continue to be widely cited, but they have not been updated. With *Le Monde privé des ouvriers* (1990)--based on five years of ethnographic fieldwork among northern French workers in the late 1970s and early 1980s--Olivier Schwartz shifted the focus of working-class sociology by showing how family life had become a refuge for working-class existence.[1] In *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale* (1995), Robert Castel argued convincingly that the working classes of the 1990s had undergone a profound deproletarianization linked to their integration into what he called the “salaried society.”[2] The strong, primarily masculine, investment in industrial work gave way to mass consumption and domestic comfort. The expansion of schooling, especially for women, reshaped working-class households, as women increasingly worked in clerical and service occupations. This changed the lived experience of the working classes, bringing them closer to the middle classes. The old binary “us vs. them” opposition was replaced by a more triangular social consciousness, in which working-class groups

perceived themselves as both exploited and distinct from elites, but also eager to differentiate themselves from the assisted.[3] Their central aspiration became to "get by like everyone else" in a society of peers. Bourdieu and his large team, in *La Misère du monde* (1993), further demonstrated the diffusion of positional suffering across broad swaths of society, beyond the traditional "working class."[4]

Where do we stand today? Despite many fascinating monographs--including those by several of the contributors to this volume--no contemporary synthetic work has woven together the transformations of labor and private life. The authors of *Subaltern Workers in Contemporary France*, many of whom had already co-authored a collective synthesis on the lower middle classes, now set out to do the same for the working classes.[5] Their objective is to provide a comprehensive account of the lifestyles of contemporary French workers, avoiding both a reductionist focus on the margins (the unemployed, the excluded, and so forth) and the fragmentation of reality into narrowly specialized perspectives (education, labor, immigration, etc.). This portrait is all the more necessary, in the team's eyes, because the major transformations identified by Schwartz, Castel, Bourdieu, and others have continued to reshape the working classes since the deindustrialization of the 1980s, while their public visibility has steadily declined with the weakening of the parties and unions that once represented them. Working-class positions are even more subordinate today than in 1990, because professional qualifications and secure employment are harder to obtain. Cultural porosity with the middle classes has likewise deepened: educational attainment among workers has risen, home ownership has expanded, and norms of health and care more closely resemble those of the middle classes than they did thirty years ago.

To achieve their goal, the authors sought to capture the condition of the working classes by examining the effects of diverging trends on their middle segment, that is, the relatively stable fraction in terms of housing and income, though always under the threat of precariousness. The book combines two complementary approaches: statistics and ethnography (eighteen case studies). The strength of the statistical framework is to situate the portraits in relation to one another, transforming what might otherwise have been a mere accumulation of case studies into a coherent whole. Within this framework, small but significant social variations emerge--territory, age, household composition, professional trajectory, housing status. The scale of the collective (twenty-six authors) makes it possible to diversify fieldwork across the French territory while still producing rich, detailed portraits of households. Each case rests on a sustained interpersonal relationship between researcher and respondent, giving the book both breadth and depth.

After an introduction and a general framing chapter, each of the subsequent chapters focuses on households approached through ethnographic methods (primarily repeated interviews rather than continuous observation). They articulate work and family life, trajectories across workplaces and residences, political and cultural engagements, and representations of the social world. Each chapter underscores the strong interdependence of these domains. The case-study approach also highlights ruptures in social trajectories. While such ruptures may be no more frequent among the working classes than elsewhere, they often have graver consequences, revealing the fragility of stability for working-class households. The portraits are vividly written, and readers of *H-France* who teach courses on contemporary France may find them useful for classroom use. The book is organized into three parts: "Stories of stabilisation," "Gender relations and domestic space," and, finally, "Triangular social consciousness and the respondents' 'good will' toward institutions."

The first section offers a fascinating portrait of how eight households belonging to the middle fraction of the working classes manage to get by. As the authors clarify, "stabili[z]ation by no means signifies that it is a permanent acquisition: the positions of these households can still be somewhat fragile, and many have been destabili[z]ed at one time or another" (p. 65). For these households, stability requires the combination of three factors: secure jobs and incomes, facilitated by education and qualifications; two earners within the household and a shared commitment to escaping instability; and affordable housing. The descriptions of how these households manage their budgets convey vividly the narrowness of their incomes and the heavy weight of fixed expenses (housing, loans). They also show the peril these families face if one salary disappears and no broader network of solidarity exists. While five of the eight portraits feature heterosexual couples, three depict alternative arrangements that underscore the centrality of the household commitment to ensure stability. One particularly interesting case is that of two young male friends (thirty-two years old at the time of the study) who, having known each other since high school, chose to share a house in a small rural town. Their preference for the financial and personal comfort of cohabitation outweighed opportunities for more distant employment that would have forced them to give it up. Another case, that of a divorced mother living with her two children, shows how reliance on extended family enabled survival, and how her adolescent children participated in a form of economic solidarity--taking babysitting jobs whenever possible and being "very reasonable" in their consumption. Housing choices also emerge as decisive: one couple was gravely destabilized after purchasing a house that was too expensive and too far from their workplaces.

An important result of the second part ("Gender relations and domestic space") is the emergence of a kind of popular feminism. In most of the households studied, the division of domestic labor between women and men is explicitly negotiated, something once more characteristic of middle- and upper-class households than of the working classes. The women interviewed do not demand an equal division of tasks, and they remain responsible for most housework and childrearing. Yet, in a social group where the home is a major site of temporal investment (DIY renovations, maintenance, gardening), they refuse to sacrifice themselves entirely to family life. They express their viewpoints clearly, reject the "macho model," and are willing to confront conflict with their husband when necessary. In several cases, men contribute to grocery shopping, cooking, and childcare without feeling that their masculinity is diminished. Many women also insist on maintaining personal activities outside the home. Another key contribution of these chapters is to trace how the division of labor within couples evolves over the life course: it is not fixed, but continuously renegotiated depending on life changes--the arrival or departure of children, career vicissitudes, commuting time--especially since many of the cases involve suburban homeowners far from urban centers. Overall, these chapters depict working classes in which gender roles are far more diverse and fluid than thirty years ago.

The third section is at once the most ambitious, the richest in the diversity of realities it depicts, and the least fully developed in terms of connecting its portraits to the hypotheses it advances. Its introduction proposes a strong claim: the generalization to the entire median working class of a triangular social consciousness, in which the old "us vs. them" opposition has given way to a ternary vision. Working-class families pay less attention to "those above" than to "those below"--the unemployed, welfare recipients, and immigrants, who are perceived as failing to uphold the dignity of work and as tarnishing the reputation of the working classes as a whole. But while the section provides rich

descriptions of this triangular social consciousness, it also provides few answers as to how this worldview came to be formed.

The most compelling portrait in this section, in my view, is that of Myriam (written by Olivier Masclet and Gérard Mauger), a part-time cleaner married to a truck driver and mother of two. It captures with great sensitivity the ways in which Myriam strives to situate herself socially. She distances herself from her cleaning jobs, which provide meager pay and little social recognition, and actively participates in her children's school's parents' association, where she interacts with middle- and upper-middle-class families. She takes pride in this involvement, which expands her social surface area, though the association also exposes her to cultural domination of which she is keenly aware. She notices who among the parents is "stuck up" and who is "down to earth." Conversely, when distinguishing herself within the working class, Myriam's judgments can be harsh. Although she wishes she could work full-time rather than part-time, she condemns welfare recipients and the unemployed. And though she is the daughter of an Algerian immigrant and the wife of a Black man from Réunion, she resents what she perceives as excessive competition from immigrants. Myriam's portrait, like others in this section, vividly illustrates the ambivalences of this triangular consciousness: pride in the dignity of work, resentment toward those seen as undeserving, and only limited attention to structural inequalities imposed "from above."

At the same time, this case study leaves the reader wishing for a more systematic engagement with the sources and mechanisms of such dispositions. How did Myriam overcome her sense of cultural domination to join the parents' association? How did she form her views of the undeserving? How does she think about her own racial position? And why are her employers seemingly absent from her understanding of economic domination? These questions remain unresolved. If this chapter, and the third part of the book more generally, feels less conclusive than the first two, it nevertheless provides valuable insights into the shifting moral and symbolic boundaries of contemporary working-class life.

Overall, *Subaltern Workers in Contemporary France* represents a major contribution to the sociology of the French working classes. Its collective scale, methodological pluralism, and careful attention to lived experience allow it to echo the syntheses of Schwartz, Castel, and Bourdieu, while also updating them for today. If some of its most ambitious hypotheses could have been further explored, the book nonetheless succeeds in demonstrating the transformations of working-class lives and identities in recent decades and in reminding us of the enduring necessity of studying these "subaltern" groups who remain central to the French social landscape.

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NOTES

[1] Olivier Schwartz, *Le Monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

[2] Robert Castel, *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale. Une chronique du salariat* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

[3] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, dir., *La Misère du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

[5] *La France des « petits moyens ». Enquête sur la banlieue pavillonnaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

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