

Explaining the periurban right-wing vote: “social frustrations” of low-income households or the reshaping of the working classes?

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There is a growing interest in voting patterns in periurban areas, which tend to lean to the right or even far right. However, the interpretation of these patterns is often unsatisfactory: Violaine Girard shows that they reflect not a “downgrading” or “relegation”, but rather the profound transformations that have, for several decades, affected the stable fractions of the working classes.

Although periurban areas¹ have for a long time been almost absent from research and media coverage, they have, in recent years, become the subject of a growing interest, particularly in the context of national elections. Following the 2007 presidential elections, for example, the voting patterns in private suburban housing estates, many of which were considered safe territories for Nicolas Sarkozy, were contrasted with the voting patterns seen in the *banlieue* – the poorer suburbs that are home to social housing estates – which more often lean to the left (Cartier *et al.* 2008). For the 2012 elections, the press once again dedicated many column inches to suburban areas, which are closely linked to the “modest-income” households that choose to move there, attracted by the prospect of being able to buy a detached house.² In these residential areas, manual and office workers and employees are portrayed as largely right-leaning, and often converted to supporters of the FN (National Front, the main far-right party in France).³ And, to explain such observations, it is the theory of the “class relegation” of periurban households that is cited. According to geographer Christophe Guilluy, these households are the “forgotten population” of “periurban France”, who have “the impression of being subject to globalisation” and who, from their position on the edge of our cities, are going through “a profound identity and cultural crisis”.⁴ But this type of explanation, however evocative, would appear to be far too simplistic. By linking these votes to the “social

¹ Translator’s note: in this article, the term “periurban” is used to translate the French word *périurbain*, which refers to the outer suburbs and/or satellite towns on the urban fringes of large cities. Unlike the term *banlieue* – which tends to refer to poorer (and often less distant) suburbs containing large amounts of social housing – *périurbain* is typically used for localities characterised by estates (subdivisions) of privately owned detached houses.

² Some of the many examples of press coverage: “[Ouvriers, employés, ces oubliés qui vivent la rage au cœur](#)” (“Manual workers and office workers: the forgotten people who live with rage in their hearts”), by Rachida El-Azzouzi and Mathieu Magnaudeix (*Mediapart*, 28 February 2012) and “[Aux portes des pavillons où séduit ‘Marine’](#)” (“On the doorsteps of the houses where ‘Marine’ is winning over hearts and minds”), Thomas Wieder (*Le Monde*, 29 February 2012). It should be pointed out here that these reports concern only suburban towns in the Seine-et-Marne *département*, to the east of Paris, no doubt chosen for convenience by Paris-based journalists.

³ Opinion polls by Ifop confirming these conclusions – showing that Marine Le Pen obtains her best scores in areas located 30 to 50 km (20 to 30 miles) from cities of more than 200,000 inhabitants – were widely reported in the press. On 29 February 2012, *Le Monde* dedicated its front page and an additional article to an opinion poll (“[Dans la France péri-urbaine, le ‘survote’ pour le Front national exprime une colère sourde](#)” [“In periurban France, the ‘excessive vote’ for the National Front reflects unheard anger”], Thomas Wieder) and, on 25 April 2012, *Le Figaro* published similar reports, this time based on the results of the first round of the election (“[En grande périphérie, le FN emporte la mise](#)” [“In the outer suburbs, the National Front is the clear winner”], Albert Zennou).

⁴ “[Il faut parler des classes populaires](#)” (“We need to talk about the working classes”), interview with Christophe Guilluy, by Joseph Confavreux, Mathieu Magnaudeix and Hugo Vitrani, *Mediapart*, 21 January 2012.

frustrations” of low-income electors who, far from the city, are apparently socially relegated, it tends to homogenise situations that are, in reality, quite diverse. Above all, by insisting on the relegation theory, it masks the profound social transformations that have affected the working classes for the last thirty years or so, not just with regard to work and employment, but also in terms of social and residential trajectories. However, via an investigation in a working-class periurban space in a large French metropolitan area, it is possible to reconsider these interpretations.

An oversimplified vision of periurban spaces and the working classes

Although this interpretation of periurbanites’ right-wing votes now seems to be widespread, it contains a number of stumbling blocks that we shall now examine. First of all, the “urbanity gradient” approach, based on the addition of votes according to distance from the city centre, is the subject of a number of methodological criticisms: using “distance from the city” as the only criterion for vote variation amounts to aggregating disparate data without taking into account the diversity of the territories considered (Bussi *et al.* 2011). This criterion seems to oversimplify the situation significantly, when compared to the periurban electoral configurations highlighted by the statistical work of Jean Rivière (2011). Finally, the fact that this approach is based only upon percentages of votes cast means that it ignores the question of the actual number of voters, which would no doubt mitigate the size and significance of the National Front vote in rural and periurban areas, as pointed out by Guy Burgel.⁵ Such an approach would therefore very much seem to be speculative, especially bearing in mind that the prospect of a serious empirical study of National Front votes presents a number of difficulties, linked in particular to the highly volatile nature of these votes, making it impossible to talk about a stable “electorate” that are regular voters for this party (Lehingue 2003).

In this context, the theory whereby periurbanites’ “social relegation” and “social frustrations” are solely to blame for the rise of the National Front seems highly questionable. Indeed, this theory is based on crude sociological categories, despite the fact that it is known that contemporary manual workers and contemporary office workers belong to social worlds that are generally quite different (Vigna 2012, p. 303; Chenu 1990); it is for this reason that sociologists prefer to talk about working classes in the plural (Schwartz 1998). For although it would be absurd to deny that a certain proportion of manual workers and working-class categories today vote for the right or the far right, it is all too often forgotten that manual workers’ voting practices are characterised above all by highly dispersed results, in terms of both participation – absence from the electoral roll, occasional or systematic abstention – and voting tendencies – between the left, the right and the far right (Collovald 2004, p. 142). Employment situation (stable or temporary), professional qualifications, industrial sector (manufacturing, crafts and trades, service sector) and even the public-/private-sector split are all important explanatory factors for the variations in voter participation and divergences in political persuasions identified among groups of contemporary manual workers. Ultimately, it is the role of self-perceptions with regard to the working classes that seems to be the determining factor in identifying political leanings and the shift to the right among these groups (Lehingue 2011, p. 247–254).

And although periurban spaces are marked by an over-representation of the working classes – identified in averages based on the aggregation of two categories, manual workers and office workers⁶ – it is nonetheless true that little is known about the social characteristics of these working-class households, or of their working and living conditions. Any conclusions that portray

⁵ “[Le périurbain n’est ni de droite, ni de gauche](#)” (“Periurban areas are neither right-wing nor left-wing”), Guy Burgel, *Le Monde*, 9 March 2012.

⁶ As the 2010 employment survey by the French statistics office INSEE shows, half of all manual workers live in rural or periurban municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants or in urban areas with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

“modest-income” households as the principal vectors of the rise in the National Front vote in periurban areas therefore have every chance of being based on risky and crude generalisations.

The idea of increasing insecurity among periurban working-class households – with little concern for detailed sociological contextualisation – largely ignores the question of how types and places of employment have been reshaped on the outskirts of large urban areas. Indeed, the massive destabilisation of employment status observed in recent years should not mask the shift that has been under way since the 1980s in employment centres in suburban areas: periurban municipalities have seen significant increases in manufacturing activities, which grew by 5% between 1990 and 1999, while urban employment centres have seen manufacturing activities fall by 16% (Gaigné *et al.* 2005, p. 7). For all industrial sectors combined, this represents almost “four additional jobs in 10 [that are located] in periurban areas between 1999 and 2007”.⁷ (Beaucire and Chalonge 2011, p. 61).

Industrial areas and the reshaping of the working classes

The ethnographic investigation launched in 2002 that we are carrying out in La Riboire,⁸ a predominantly working-class industrial area, has made it possible to highlight the complex changes that take place within these periurban spaces. In the main *canton*⁹ studied, half of all men of working age in employment were manual workers, while, among women of working age, the proportion of office workers was almost 50% and the proportion of manual workers was 20% in 1999. These figures must, however, be qualified. Among the men, the high proportion of manual workers must be considered alongside significant changes: the consistently high proportion of manual workers masks a reduction in the number of unskilled workers (from 23 to 18% of all men of working age employed between 1982 and 1999), in favour of skilled employees, manual workers (30% in 1982 and 1999) and technicians and supervisors (from 9% in 1982 to 18% in 1999). These changes have resulted in an overall increase in the number of skilled posts in the manufacturing sector in France.¹⁰

This area, popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the “upper working classes” wishing to become homeowners, has also benefited from significant economic development. Since 1983, it has been the site of an industrial park typical of the new employment centres established in recent years in the hinterland of large cities: the one here is today home to more than a hundred businesses, ranging from factories belonging to large industrial groups to SMEs that undertake subcontracting work in various spheres of activity (automated production, chemicals, logistics, services, maintenance). In 2011, over 3,700 people were employed here in permanent posts, together with 1,000 to 2,000 temporary workers. This kind of growth results in very low unemployment rates.

Since the early 2000s, election scores for right-wing and far-right candidates in this *canton* have regularly been above the national average, combined with voter turnout that has been in line with or slightly above national levels. In one of the municipalities in this area, characterised by a significant over-representation of manual workers, technicians and office workers, Jean-Marie Le Pen obtained 30% of votes cast in both the first and second rounds of the 2002 presidential election. In the 2007 presidential ballot, 73% of votes cast in the second round were for Nicolas Sarkozy. And in the first round of the 2012 elections, Marine Le Pen and Nicolas Sarkozy obtained scores of 32% and 33%

⁷ Data concerning 37 metropolitan areas with more than 80,000 jobs in 1999 (excluding Paris) shows that these metropolitan areas are, together, home to 53% of all jobs in France.

⁸ Translator’s note: the name of the area has been changed for anonymisation purposes.

⁹ Translator’s note: in France, a *canton* is an electoral division of a *département*, often comprising several municipalities and represented by a single *conseiller général* (similar to a county councillor).

¹⁰ In parallel with the drop in the number of unskilled workers, from 2.5 million to 1.1 million between the early 1980s and the late 1990s (Vigna 2012, p. 299), the proportion of “non-manual” technician and supervisor posts has risen significantly: these posts represented 5.9% of working-age men in 2005, compared with 4.7% in 1982 (Bosc 2008, pp. 21–24).

respectively in the village, with a turnout rate of almost 88% for a total electorate of 604. How can these high scores for the right and far right be explained?

Reconfiguration of forms of employment and residential development

Office workers in this dynamic industrial area are not victims of globalisation, as Christophe Guilluy diagnosed (2010), but rather they are faced with massive reorganisations in terms of the forms of employment on offer: in the 1980s, the creation of the industrial park at La Riboire was a response to strategies seeking to “bypass the fortresses of the working classes” created by the major industrial groups (Noiriel 2002, p. 222). This new zone is thus characterised by a break with the way work was traditionally organised, linked to the increased use of outsourcing and a differentiation in terms of employment status. Certain workers were abruptly subjected to less secure working conditions and greater constraints at work, and their professional trajectories were very often marked by changes of employer, reflecting the difficulties now involved in spending one’s career with the same company. But others, particularly those born in the 1950s and 1960s and who had professional qualifications, managed to acquire relatively stable positions, and even supervisory roles by the end of their career. Nonetheless, these methods of organising work hampered the formation of work collectives built around solidarity and industrial action, such as those that existed in the old bastions of large-scale industry. These methods also resulted in a weakening of the forms of social identification in the workplace. For anyone wishing to analyse the transformations that affect contemporary working groups in periurban areas, the first port of call should therefore be an examination of the jobs and forms of employment on offer.

Then, by considering residential careers, certain social determinants that influence voting patterns among periurbanites can be identified. The households contacted in La Riboire belong to groups that can be described as being at “the lower end of the socio-economic scale but not poor” economically (Schwartz 1998, p. 41). Most of them, for example, wanted to “build a house” (i.e. buy a new-build house; in France, this typically involves selecting a model from a housebuilder’s catalogue, who then builds it to order), even though the purchase of a detached home required considerable financial efforts and, very often, a degree of self-building. Their move to the urban fringe is therefore not generally experienced as a “social relegation” – quite the opposite, in fact. Indeed, it often goes hand in hand with a decision to send their children to the local state school, whereas some households sought to avoid the local state schools in their previous (inner suburban) location by enrolling their children at private schools. Many households of (male) manual workers and (female) office workers also invest in the residential sphere and maintain sociability with neighbours, thus improving their social standing within the local neighbourhood. The fact that they are homeowners is thus a key element in the definition of social position for these households, who consider themselves to be “respectable”, and who have made an active decision to move away from the *banlieues* and their stigmatised residents. More generally, these households express aspirations for social advancement that are “compliant” with working-class lifestyles and which correspond to a form of gentrification, described by Gerard Mauger as related to access to home ownership and the attraction exerted by the possibility of “working for oneself” (2006, p. 32). Indeed, two respondents, a lorry driver and a former manual worker turned site foreman, had done just this and set up their own businesses, respectively a roadside restaurant and a vehicle services company. Conversely, these households seem distanced, in terms of their lifestyles, from the model embodied by the “middle classes with cultural capital” (Schwartz 1998, p. 160).

Votes with different motives

In this way, certain social determinants for working-class voting patterns in periurban areas can be highlighted: the devaluation of working-class identity, the breakdown of trade unions and the imposition of new work organisation methods, in parallel with the opening-up of social possibilities

for certain members of the “upper working classes” associated with the reconfiguration of industrial areas, as well as, politically, the legitimisation of rhetoric – on both the left and the right – discrediting vulnerable and excluded populations. Indeed, these periurbanites, who are generally employed in the private sector and own their own homes, appear to be committed to efforts to differentiate between populations, reflecting a “triangular social conscience” (Collovald and Schwartz 2006), i.e. a conscience that combines a sense of not belonging to the dominant classes with a willingness to distinguish themselves from more vulnerable groups. The aspirations of these households, who seem disposed to valuing forms of economic stabilisation rather than access to distinctive cultural or educational resources, also reflect a more general reconfiguration of the models for social success, with a weakening – for some of those in salaried jobs in the manufacturing sector – of the attraction exerted by the middle classes, often politicised to the left.

Like contemporary workers’ groups, which are marked by growing internal differentiation, the social profiles – and motives – of voters in this area are characterised by significant heterogeneity. For example, a number of residents contacted reject “the excessive welfare state”, as one of them put it, or wish to see the former positive image of manual trades restored for young people – both positions that are legitimised by current right-wing rhetoric. One of these inhabitants, a boilermaker in an industrial vehicles firm, emphasises the advantage of having a trade which may be “dirty”, but “where there’s work”, i.e. where there is little risk of becoming unemployed. And although some people concede that the labour market is difficult for “young people” today or feel that the wages on offer on the industrial park are relatively low, their right-leaning political views are also shaped by efforts to differentiate themselves from vulnerable or stigmatised fractions of the working classes. In a context of distrust with regard to the main national political leaders, the National Front thus attracts a proportion of right-wing voters who tend to be more radical.

Finally, it should be pointed out that manual workers, technicians and office workers are not the only people in the area to vote for the National Front; and, conversely, it would also be a mistake to think that everyone in the area supports right-wing or far-right parties. A case in point is a pensioner who worked in a large car factory, where he was a member of the [left-wing] CGT trade union, before becoming site foreman for industrial piping, who explained that he will always vote for left-wing parties, given his militant past.

Although it is today commonplace to associate (via generalisations) low-income households, periurban areas and the rise of the right-wing and far-right vote, the case of La Riboire dispels the idea of an unequivocal rightward shift of the working classes generated by social frustrations, by showing that these population groups are far from being trapped in trajectories of social relegation (Cartier *et al.* 2008). What becomes apparent from the case study of this periurban industrial area – typical of so many others like it – is the long-term effects of work reorganisation policies: the breakdown of traditional status within many companies, the destructuring of workers’ collectives (such as trade unions) and the weakening of forms of identification with the workplace, in favour of an investment in the residential sphere, where many households construct signs of their social respectability through access to home ownership, far from the working-class neighbourhoods of the poorer inner suburbs (*la banlieue*). These households, with the financial means to purchase a detached property, seem worlds apart from the captive manual workers living on social housing estates closer to the city (Masclat 2003, p. 92) or indeed workers living in the (formerly) heavily industrial regions who have been hit by rising unemployment and consequently tempted by National Front (Beaud and Pialoux 1999, p. 375). And yet there are many right-wing or far-right voters among these upper echelons of the working classes: indeed, these households, mostly employed in the private sector, stand out through their aspirations to the model of upward social mobility embodied by the cultivated middle classes. These various elements have the effect of distancing them from left-wing parties, which are either seen as not terribly different from traditional right-wing parties, or instead decried because they are too closely associated with social policies.

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