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Cédric Hugrée, Yasmine Siblot

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Chapter 9

France: The dynamics of internal changes within a persistent class structure

Cédric Hugrée 0000-0001-6037-3704

Yasmine Siblot 0000-0003-4843-0352

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Abstract

This chapter follows three threads to present the new insights offered by the sociology of social class in France: its reassertion of the persistence of a class structure, notwithstanding the changes within it; the importance of taking into account territorial differences and scales of analysis, as well as movement flows and mobility; the need to articulate social class relations with gender and ethno-racial relations in order to grasp the internal divisions and the processes of reproduction. We emphasise, across these three threads, the centrality of public institutions and the State in enhancing or attenuating class and power relations.

Introduction

Surveys conducted in France since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have revealed the profoundly unequal effects of this social and health crisis, on three levels. Firstly, there are cumulative inequalities between social classes, whether in health, work and employment, living conditions, or school (Bajos et al., 2020). Secondly, the crisis highlights the impact of local disparities: The effects of the crisis are heightened in the working-class outer cities (Mariette & Pitti, 2020a, 2020b), and are manifested differently in urban, peri-urban, or rural zones, and in regions. Thirdly, these class inequalities are intrinsically linked to gender relations, in both the domestic sphere and the workplace, and ethno-racial relations, in terms of access to healthcare, exposure to surveillance procedures, and racism.

These three aspects are central to the sociology of social class in France, a field in which recent studies have done a great deal to shed light on the effects of the pandemic. Here we follow

these three threads to present the contributions and new insights offered by this field of research: its reassertion of the persistence of a class structure, notwithstanding the changes within it; the importance of taking into account territorial differences and scales of analysis, as well as movement flows and mobility; the need to articulate social class relations with other social relations in order to grasp the internal divisions and the processes of reproduction. We emphasise, across these three threads, the centrality of public institutions and the state in enhancing or attenuating class and power relations.

1. The persistence of class structures in 21st-century French society

In France, academic debate in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by the challenge to Marxism. As in many other countries, the theory of the “end of social class” became popular. A number of sociologists interpreted the changes in employment and living conditions as a process of “middleisation” of French society, arguing that this resulted in a blurring of the material and symbolic boundaries separating the working classes from the middle and dominant classes.

But following a series of studies that documented renewed inequality, the issue of social class “returned” in the early 2000s (Bouffartigue, 2004). Though it takes a number of diverse approaches, this sociology is strongly influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Coulangeon & Duval, 2014). His representation of the social space as a hierarchy determined by the amount and composition of capital remains pertinent. This approach became popular in particular thanks to sociologists’ increasing use of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE)’s Occupations and Socio-occupational Categories (*Professions et catégories socio-professionnelles*, PCS) classification, which enabled Bourdieu and his team to link social status to lifestyles. Forty years later, there are still many studies that draw on an updated version of this classification (Desrosières, 1990) to document the dynamics of class inequality. The widespread use of this tool has without doubt contributed to the relative consensus, well beyond the sociology that claims its inheritance from Bourdieu, around a representation of the social space as being divided into three broad areas. The dominant classes are usually identified with the label “*cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures*” (translated here as: managers and higher intellectual professions), the middle classes with that of “*professions intermédiaires*” (intermediate professions), and the working classes with “*ouvriers*” (manual workers) and “*employés*” (service workers). “*Artisans commerçants et chefs d’entreprise*” (shopkeepers, self-employed tradespeople, and business owners) as well as “*agriculteurs exploitants*” (farmers) may be allocated to one or other of these three main social classes depending on the size of their business.

1.1 *The dynamics of social class in France in the 21st century*

A comparison of the class structure of contemporary French society with that presented by Bourdieu in the 1970s shows substantial changes in the arena of social status (see Table 9.1). At the beginning of the 2010s, two predominantly male groups showed a marked decline: There were fewer farmers and agricultural workers, and half as many unskilled manual workers as forty years earlier. The number of skilled manual workers had also fallen, although not as steeply. But above all, thanks to the boom in the lowest-skilled service sector jobs, the group of service workers, the vast majority of whom are women, had expanded to overtake that of manual workers. There were thus very real changes within the social groups at the bottom of the social space, but these did not point to an erasure of the boundaries with other classes. The substantial growth in employment in intermediate professions and higher managerial

occupations helped to maintain and renew the social distance between classes. Because of a new dynamic of increasing wealth among the richest and more intense competition for access to the highest educational qualifications on the one hand, and the continuation of various forms of domination on the other, French society remains a class society. Rather than indicating the blurring of class boundaries, the statistical data reveal a dynamic of reproduction of inequalities. The economic repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 health crisis have accentuated forms of collective downgrading, prolonging the destabilisation of the Wage-Earning Society that began in the 1980s (Castel, 2002).

Table 9.1 Changes in various social groups in the working population (1982–2019)

	1982	2007	2019
Farmers	7.1	2.6	1.5
Self-employed tradespeople, shopkeepers, and business owners	8.3	6.4	6.7
Managers and higher intellectual professions	7.8	15.7	19.3
Intermediate professions	19.2	21.4	23.4
Service workers	25.3	29.4	26.8
Manual workers	30.3	23.2	19.6

Note: In 2019, 19.6% of persons employed were manual workers.

Scope: France including overseas territories except Mayotte, population of households, population in employment

Source: INSEE, Labour Force Surveys, long series on the labour market

In terms of economic capital, the apparent stasis in the inequality of salaries and living standards masks a dynamic whereby the richest are becoming wealthier, thanks to assets, and the income of the poorest is falling (INSEE, 2021). On the one hand, the richest 1% are the only group to have seen their income rise since 2013, thanks to an unprecedented rise in income from assets (particularly transferable securities) and a reduction in taxes. In 2018, the estimated average gross assets of unskilled manual workers' households were €15,000, compared to more than €500,000 for the households of those in the liberal professions. On the other hand, poverty is now concentrated among the unemployed and, for those who are employed, among the self-employed and manual and white-collar employees on precarious (short-term, part-time, and temporary) contracts. In 2018 more than one in three unemployed people (38%) and more than one in five self-employed people (18%) were living below the poverty line, set at €1,063 per month. France is still one of the least unequal countries in Europe, thanks to its economic redistribution policies, although inequality in pre-tax income is very high. However, the dynamic of inequality aligns with the international trend whereby only the highest incomes capture the benefits generated by the growth in fixed and movable assets (Piketty, 2013/2014).

In terms of cultural capital, particularly educational capital, the situation appears very different from that of the late 1970s. Since the mid-1980s, a proactive education policy has set the objective of 80% of each generation achieving the *baccalauréat*, certifying completion of

secondary education. Thirty-five years later this goal has been achieved, thanks in part to the creation of the “vocational *baccalauréat*.” The youngest manual workers and service workers are consequently significantly more qualified than the oldest (Poullaouec, 2021). Among manual workers and white-collar workers under 40, there are often as many who hold the *baccalauréat* or higher education qualifications as those who hold only certificates from short vocational training or no qualifications. However, behind these profound shifts in access to qualifications, the structure of educational inequality persists. The intermediate professions and managerial and higher intellectual professions include overwhelmingly more people with higher qualifications and all of these social groups have intensified their use of higher education. At the beginning of the 2010s, 75% of children of those in managerial and higher intellectual professions had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher qualification, compared to only 20% of the children of unskilled manual workers, 31% of the children of skilled manual workers, and 35% of the children of service workers (Lemaire, 2012).

Lastly, health inequalities, particularly in terms of mortality, also demonstrate the processes of reproduction of class inequality. While the life expectancy of all social groups has increased since the 1970s, this has not been a uniform development across the social space. Social inequality in relation to mortality primarily affects men and manual workers: Female managers are still the least affected (Blanpain, 2016). Between the period of 1976–1984 and the period of 2009–2013, the life expectancy at 35 for senior managers rose from 47.5 to 53 years for women, and from 41.7 to 49 years for men. Among manual workers, it rose from 44.4 to 49.8 years for women, and from 35.7 to 42.6 years for men. Furthermore, the disability-free life expectancy was ten years longer for male managers than for male manual workers, and eight years longer for female managers than for female manual workers.

1.2 France’s tripartite social space

Debates about the categorisation and boundaries of social groups have pervaded the sociology of class in France since the 1970s: “classe ouvrière” or “classes populaires,” “petite bourgeoisie” or “classes moyennes,” “classes dominantes” or “supérieures,” “bourgeoisie” or “élites.”¹ These debates were revived with the new turn in sociology in the 2000s. At the bottom of the social space, a number of studies analysed the restructuring and fragmentation of the dominated groups. At the top of the social space, the new distinctions went hand in hand with a persistence of the boundary between managerial (“cadres”) and non-managerial occupations, and the expanding role of international capital in the creation of dominant positions. Between these two poles of the social space, there was much discussion of the theory of the “loss of status” of the new “middle classes.” Ultimately, notwithstanding the great plurality of approaches, a consensus emerged with the recognition of three main social classes in France. Meanwhile they appear to be more internally diverse than they had been in the 1970s, because of various social evolutions, and because the attention to this internal diversity has grown among sociologists: Some consider this diversity in terms of differences between class fractions whereas others focus on micro-classes.

A number of studies have reopened the question of the boundary between the dominated and the middle classes. These studies documented the decline of the “working class” (in the singular) and the concomitant emergence of subaltern jobs outside of industry that are centred on interaction with the public. Olivier Schwarz (2011) proposes the term “working classes” (in the plural) as a way to acknowledge this restructuring and the diversity that it implies while also encompassing within the same term social groups that are in a similar position (service and manual workers), distinguished by their limited economic resources and their distance from established forms of legitimate culture. This reflection has influenced a number of studies

(Siblot, Cartier, Coutant, Masclet, & Renahy, 2015), which show that although there is a marked gender segregation among them in the labour market, manual and service workers have in common their strong conjugal and family ties. These studies emphasise how the extension of education affects ways of seeing the social world and modes of consumption, and demonstrate the obsolescence of a sharp cultural separation between dominated groups and the middle classes. They also show that forms of class domination persist at work, in education, in living conditions, and in politics. While social and symbolic boundaries between classes remain, they have also been analysed with regard to the specific resources that the different sectors of the working classes possess. Thanks to the creation of a “vocational *baccalauréat*” in 1985, increasing numbers of the new generations of manual workers hold a secondary education certificate. As a result, a new level of educational qualification is now expected of manual workers, whereas for the older generations having a high school education had been a strong symbolic marker that distinguished technicians from manual workers (Misset, 2015).

Initially seen as a set of positions with indistinct boundaries, in France the group “*cadres supérieurs*” (“higher managerial occupations”) was identified through a symbolic and political unification around the figure of the graduate working in a large company (Boltanski, 1987). In the early 2000s the specificity of this social group was once again called into question. Between the 1980s and the 2000s, internal changes were observed in this group, while a social distance from other employees persisted (Bouffartigue, Gadéa, & Pochic, 2011). Managerial staff today are younger, more highly qualified, include more women, and are still the best paid employees. The data on this group indicate a shift in its centre of gravity toward engineers and commercial managers, and a gradual convergence between the dominant fractions. Managers in private companies are increasingly similar to one another, while those in the arts now appear closer to the intermediate professions in information technology, arts, and theatre.

This division of the French social space into three parts is still subject to debate. Recent research has indeed revealed splits that run through the social space, and a blurring of class boundaries in some practices. For example, there is a quite sharp contrast between the social characteristics of the self-employed, whatever their level of education, and employees. Moreover, in France the fact of working in the private or the public sector still underpins a division across classes in terms of contrasting relationships to public institutions, voting patterns, and cultural practices (Hugrée, Penissat, & Spire 2015). Finally, in comparison with the 1970s the disparities in modes of consumption between working-class and middle-class households, and between these two and the dominant classes, are much less marked (Sinthon, 2019).

2. Social mobility, migrations, and changes of scale

Beyond the question of the porosity of class boundaries, analysis of the social structure in France has been profoundly reinvigorated by the recognition of the social and spatial dynamics that run through and reshape classes and relations between classes: The analysis of social and spatial mobility improves the understanding of class structure on the national but also on the international, especially European, scales.

2.1 Social mobility: Crossing the boundaries

The study of social mobility is still dominated in France by statistical analyses that quantify changes in the level of social fluidity in French society over the long term, following the work

of John Goldthorpe (Vallet, 2020). Recently a series of studies has connected the analysis of intergenerational trajectories to the institutions—not only educational but also sports or cultural institutions—that make them possible, and has included other approaches and methods (Pagis & Pasquali, 2016).

The revitalisation of the sociology of class began with a more fine-grained quantification of social trajectories, based on a more detailed version of the Occupational and Socio-occupational classification (PCS). This approach reveals the “small social shifts” (Lahire, 2004) that are still the most common intergenerational movements in France. For example, in France in the 2010s, most of the children of skilled manual workers became manual workers, but some also gained service positions. A significant number of these are jobs in the public sector: More children of skilled manual workers than of unskilled manual workers become service workers in the public sector (13%), such as cleaners in schools or police service staff, and more of them enter the female-dominated intermediate occupations in the public sector (8%, as primary school teachers and nurses) than the male-dominated groups of technicians or work supervisors. Using a micro-class approach, recent works underline the strength of professional reproduction, while documenting its variability and the forms of “micro-mobility” (Jayet, 2021).

This fine-grained quantification of the social shifts between generations, which takes seriously the influence of gender and the relative position in the class of origin on social trajectories, makes for a fertile dialogue with ethnographic studies. Field studies also help to shed light on the cultural and symbolic effects of small shifts and on the diversity of pathways via which individuals cross social boundaries. Observation of trajectories over the long term above all offers an opportunity to better grasp the amplitude of movements, on both material and symbolic levels, their reversibility, and the meaning individuals ascribe to them. From this point of view, analysis of the trajectories of “class exiles” (*transfuges de classe*) too often reduces upward movements by children of the working classes to an experience of uprooting, whereas repeated crossing of social boundaries generates daily accommodations between their original environment and the space they arrive in (Lagrave, 2021).

This return to biographical and longitudinal analyses has led to a broadening of analysis beyond the educational and work spheres: Many “discreet” shifts within the labour market appear to be less individual than familial or even collective when they are articulated with strategies around housing and assets, and with domestic practices, as localised studies show.

2.2 *Changing scale: Localising class boundaries*

The development of monographs focused on class relations within an urban district or a rural municipality, along with consideration of housing and sociability, have resulted in growing attention to scales of analysis and local variations in class structure. National-scale studies tend to erase these specificities, and the many studies conducted in large conurbations, particularly the greater Paris region, tend to generalise the results thus produced, whereas in fact there are substantial regional differences in class structure.

Studies of rural areas have developed a “localised approach to social relations” (Bruneau, Laferté, Mischi, & Renahy, 2018), in a critical extension of Bourdieu’s analysis of the “effects of place” that draws on research in history and geography and on the practice of ethnography. This approach reveals the geographical variability of the internal composition of social classes, and of the forms of relations between them. In the rural region of eastern France explored by Bruneau et al., the position of the dominant classes is based primarily on economic capital, but

also on local prestige (business owners, liberal professions, “gentrified” farmers). The involvement of the “technical and cultural lower middle class” (teachers, technicians) in local social and political life varies widely with generation: The youngest among them work there but live elsewhere, reinforcing the local social divides. In this local space, the families of manual workers who have social capital linked to their strong local roots (which the researchers call “capital of autochthony”) and limited economic assets (timber industry and railway workers) coexist with very poor households (stigmatised as “charity cases”). The power relations are starkly evident but may be tempered by inter-class practices such as hunting in local associations.

This localised approach to the rural space in its turn illuminates research on urban spaces. Thus, research on the greater Paris region reveals the diversity of configurations of social space but also the importance of the scale of analysis. At the level of municipalities or arrondissements, notwithstanding the continued rise in the proportion of people from the middle and dominant classes, and the fall in that of the working classes, especially manual workers, there is still a tendency for classes and fractions of classes to coexist. The strongest level of social segregation appears in the areas where the richest fractions of the dominant classes live (Préteceille, 2006). These processes of segregation and neighbour relations between classes are thus highly variable. Two studies describe contrasting forms of class power relations in the Île-de-France region. In the more recently constructed neighbourhoods of the West outer city, close to the Défense business district, the financial fractions of the dominant classes form a tight enclave, explicitly creating a material and symbolic separation between themselves and the working classes, particularly the poor and racialised communities living in social housing in neighbouring municipalities (Cousin, 2014). By contrast, in the municipalities of the East outer city that are currently being gentrified, the cultural fractions of the middle and dominant classes, who are locally the dominant class fractions, are reshaping the space so that it conforms to their tastes and aspirations, and increases in market value. At the same time, they seek to “facilitate cohabitation” with the working classes who have lived for a long time in these former industrial towns, by, for example, campaigning for better education conditions in state schools (Collet, 2015).

2.3 Migrations: Crossing spatial and social boundaries

Adopting a frame of analysis complementary to the localised approach, other studies have moved in the opposite direction in their scale of analysis. By broadening the focus beyond national borders, they have sought to understand the effects of international migrations on the power relations and boundaries between classes: Combining the sociology of social class and the sociology of migration, these studies bring new insights to the analysis of the national social space in France. This change of scale presents a serious conceptual and methodological challenge, given that the sociology of class is shaped by the national context owing to the classification it is based on and the role of the state in the reproduction (or mitigation) of inequality. The concepts of “international capital” (Wagner, 2020) and “migrating social capital” (Bréant, Chauvin, & Portilla, 2018) help to construe the “globalisation of social classes,” both “top-down” and “bottom-up.”

Studies of the dominant classes were the first to take this approach (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 2016; Wagner, 2020). The richest fractions of the French dominant classes (the upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy) have long had an international capital that is at once embodied (fluency in foreign languages, transnational sociability), material (homes abroad or in internationalised vacation resorts such as the Côte d’Azur, belonging to highly selective clubs such as the *Union Interallié*), and institutionalised (education at private or public international

schools such as the Lycée international in Saint-Germain-en-Laye). Alongside these established forms of social capital there are competing forms associated with corporate globalisation that are held by the senior executives of large companies: international qualifications in finance and management from French *Grandes Écoles* following training in English, and working as an expatriate in transnational business spaces such as Dubai, where national and racial hierarchies are such that the status of these French executives is higher than that of their peers from economically and symbolically dominated countries (Le Renard, 2019).

While the middle and working classes are less mobile than the internationalised fractions of the dominant classes, some of their members also cross-national borders by emigrating. But in the case of France the principal dynamic in these intermediate and dominated regions of the social space has been one of substantial immigration since the late 19th century. These flows have been subject to stringent restrictive policies since the 1970s. However, they continue to exist and produce complex social mobilities that accompany spatial mobility, where the position in the national and social space of origin is combined with that in the national and social space of settlement (Sayad, 2014). The proportion of immigrants is thus higher among the working classes (the majority of the men being manual workers and the women service workers); they are largely concentrated in low-skilled sectors (construction, personal care, cleaning) even though some of these migrants come from the middle class or upper fractions of the working classes in their country of origin.

The social space in France is still powerfully structured by the nation-state, but this research helps to situate classes and fractions of classes in relations that incorporate a transnational dimension, and to think, at least partly, in terms of “international class relations” (Bidet, in Bréant, Chauvin, & Portilla, 2018).

3. Articulating social relations: Internal boundaries within classes, reproduction, and accumulation

Alongside the return to research on social class, during the 2000s a number of French studies discovered or rediscovered the analysis of gender relations and racial divisions, contributing to the development of intersectional approaches. Broadening the understanding of modes of domination, these studies drew attention to the way that, in different practices and social scenes, class relations are articulated with other social relations. This enriches the relational analysis of the social space through a new scrutiny of the foundations of material and symbolic boundaries between fractions of classes, and sheds further light on processes of reproduction and accumulation.

3.1 Intra-class gender and race divisions: The role of work and domestic space

Since the 1970s, studies based in materialist feminism have demonstrated the significant role of gender inequality in the domestic sphere and the workplace. This inequality is still fundamental, but is nevertheless socially differentiated according to class, and its modalities have altered to some extent. For example, gender segregation at work is particularly marked among subaltern service workers (Table 9.2): It is among these groups that the majority of the most heavily female-dominated occupations are found (cleaners, care workers, secretaries) as well as the majority of the most male-dominated occupations (manual workers in construction and transport). The naturalisation of roles and skills that structures recruitment and staff

management practices is quite explicit here (Avril et al., 2019). But for both women and men, this gender segregation goes alongside poor chances of acceding to intermediate, and still less dominant, occupations, because their skills are not recognised and such occupations demand qualifications that involve lengthy studies. While there is more mixing in the middle and upper levels of the workforce, it remains limited (as evidenced by the categories of technicians and nurses), and gender hierarchies play out through specialisations (human resources versus finance; gynaecology versus surgery) and through the persistence of major inequalities in careers despite the spread of “market feminism” in private companies (Pochic, 2018).

Table 9.2 Main socio-occupational groups among women and men (2020) (%)

	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>All</i>
Farmers	0.7	2.0	1.4
Self-employed tradespeople, shopkeepers, and business owners	4.2	9.2	6.8
Managers and higher intellectual professions	17.9	22.7	20.4
Intermediate professions	29.0	23.3	26.0
Service workers	39.9	12.5	25.8
- Skilled service workers	20.8	6.7	13.5
- Unskilled service workers	19.1	5.8	12.3
Manual workers	7.9	29.9	19.2
- Skilled manual workers	3.4	21.4	12.7
- Unskilled manual workers	4.4	8.5	6.5
Not recorded	0.4	0.4	0.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Note: In 2020, 20.8% of women employed were skilled service workers.

Scope: France including overseas territories excluding Mayotte, persons living in standard housing, population in employment

Source: INSEE, Labour Force Surveys

This socio-occupational hierarchy structures women’s social space in such a way that it is much wider at the base and smaller at the top than that of men: women are mainly concentrated among service workers and intermediate professions offering few possibilities of ascension; men are often manual workers, but also technical intermediate professionals and managers, and have better careers. This imbalance is intensified by domestic practices and family socialisation that are differentiated by class and gender. The majority of the household tasks is undertaken by women in all social groups. These tasks weigh particularly heavily, however, on female manual and service workers, who are often forced to leave their jobs when they have young

children because they have less control over their work hours and are less well paid (Bentoudja & Razafindranovona, 2020), while middle- and dominant-class households delegate part of their domestic work to unskilled service workers. The gender inequalities internal to the different classes thus reinforce class inequalities between women: In 2010, female white-collar employees, female manual workers, and unskilled female white-collar employees did 2 hours 35 minutes more domestic work per day than the men in their category, but also 1 hour 5 minutes more than women in managerial positions in the private sector (Brousse, 2015).

Sociohistorical studies have provided long-term and varied documentation of the segregating and discriminatory effects of the heritage of colonialism and migration policies on immigrants and their descendants, both men and women. While they affect all social groups, these processes are particularly evident among the working classes, especially in certain sectors of the economy. Ethnic and racial management of the workforce was long a characteristic of industrial labour, for example in the mining (Perdoncin, 2021) and automotive sectors (Pitti, 2005). Immigrant workers, mainly of Algerian and Moroccan origin, in these sectors were assigned to the least skilled jobs, on the most precarious contracts, without any prospects of promotion. This mode of management indirectly contributes to the reproduction of the most stable fractions of the manual workforce and reinforces the internal divisions among subaltern employees. The hierarchy between stable and precarious employees can be intensified by racial ascriptions, as in the heavily male-dominated construction sector, where there are legal constraints weighing on (sometimes undocumented) foreigners, and where stereotypes linked to (real or supposed) origin structure the division of work between “French,” “Portuguese,” “Arabs,” and “Mamadous” (a common given name used generically as a pejorative term for West Africans) (Jounin, 2009). In the highly female-dominated sectors of personal care, such as home care assistant for dependent elderly people, these modes of management are less evident. But divisions involving social resources and racial ascriptions emerge between service workers. On the one hand, non-immigrant women from stable working-class backgrounds (former retail assistants and salespeople) who are rooted in the local space limit their involvement in care work with the most dependent elderly; on the other hand, some immigrant women who are better qualified but in precarious situations take on this work to enhance their position through closer proximity to the intermediate professionals who supervise their work (Avril, 2014).

Exploration of the way class relations are articulated with race and gender relations reveals situations where forms of power are aggregated, but also more ambivalent combinations: It is therefore essential to grasp these articulations in order to understand the dynamics that are reshaping the social space, as well as the processes of reproduction.

3.2 Social reproduction: New forms of selection in a restructured education system

Within an education system that is formally unified up to the end of secondary education, there are in fact numerous options and tracks that ensure the reproduction of educational inequalities at all levels of the education system.

To begin with, as soon as they show evidence of early difficulty in basic learning, children from the working classes, especially when they are migrants or have immigrant parents, are quickly directed toward vocational education. This educational sector remains separate from general education and recruits children almost exclusively from working-class backgrounds. For both boys and girls, the vocational track is strongly influenced by gender stereotypes (Palheta, 2012).

However, the children of immigrants by no means all have the same experience of educational inequality (Ichou, 2018). As for French-born people, the parents' qualifications and their social assets (prior to migration) are the key resources in their educational career. This is partly why the children of immigrants from West Africa and Turkey, whose parents are low-skilled, are more likely to experience early educational inequality than those of immigrants from South-East Asia and China, who more often come from families who had financial or cultural resources before migration. More broadly, minorities tend to be more segregated at school than in their residential environment in France, owing to practices of parents avoiding schools in working-class areas.

At the other end of the educational scale, the Preparatory Courses for *Grandes Écoles* (CPGE)² that give access to the elite higher education of the *grandes écoles* are the most elitist educational institutions. The recently declared proactive policy to “open” these places to students from schools in “deprived” neighbourhoods comes up against recurrent campaigns by the elites who studied there. When questions of the social openness and racial diversity of the French elites became a political issue, these elite schools created small local social accessibility programmes while at the same time raising their entrance requirements and manoeuvring to avoid introducing quotas for scholarships at each institution (Pasquali, 2021).

The various French higher education institutions thus contrast strongly with one another in their recruitment in terms of social, educational, and migration background. The professional tracks that recruit students from working-class backgrounds, such as post-secondary vocational courses, sit alongside elitist institutions like the CPGE. Until the 1990s, in French universities only healthcare-related courses (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy) had the right to strictly select their students. The introduction in 2018 of the *Parcoursup* program, which manages the applications and allocation of students leaving secondary school to begin higher education courses, has extended forms of selection for university entrance, and reinforced the disparities between tracks.

3.3 *Accumulation of assets: The strictly limited effect of public policies*

The changes in housing policy since the late 1970s, which facilitated access to property ownership and investment in property to the detriment of the construction of public housing, reshaped the social and symbolic gaps between classes and class fractions, but without eliminating inequalities in the accumulation of assets.

Although the number of households who own their homes is lower in France than in most EU countries, incentive policies introduced since the 1970s have democratised access to home ownership. While still lower than the proportion of middle- and dominant-class households that own their own home, the proportion of working-class households who own or are buying their home has continued to rise since that time, with the exception of immigrant households, where the proportion of home-owners has fallen steadily since the early 2000s (Domergue & Jourdan, 2017). But for the working classes, virtually the only the property they can afford to buy is concentrated in peri-urban zones, using loans that cover almost the entire value of the property. Members of these households therefore find themselves geographically distant from their jobs, and with the part of their budget that is spent on housing unavailable for other expenses. This access to property has thus led to forms of disillusionment (Lambert, 2015) that vary depending on social trajectory and previous housing experience. Here, class boundaries intersect to some extent with racial discourses. In her study, Anne Lambert found that the majority of the families between which tensions arose lived in the least well-appointed part of the housing development; they had come mainly from large social housing estates and

originated in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and South-East Asia. Although they might seem socially close to the upwardly mobile or stable fractions of the working classes, the members of the white lower middle class on the new estate adopted a racial register as a way of symbolically distinguishing themselves. This micro-segregation thus opens material and symbolic divides within the working classes, but also with other social classes.

The urban renewal policy of the early 2000s sought to transform the boundary between tenants on the large social housing estates and the owners of small houses on the outskirts of the city and in rural areas. This policy offered the opportunity to buy property in social housing estates. In the suburbs of Lyon, studied by Pierre Gilbert (2013), this offer did not attract the middle-class buyers expected by the social housing landlords. It was in fact members of the stable fractions of the working classes who applied for these state-sponsored sales. By becoming home-owners in a social housing estate, these households gained a little mobility in housing while preserving the social relations essential to their social lives. Their trajectory, and the work this new housing required of them, led them to invest intensively in their private sphere and to keep the neighbourhood and those residents deemed less respectable at a distance. Thus, while urban renewal modified the population of inner-city estates by slowing down the departure of stable or upwardly mobile groups, the fact that they lived alongside poorer groups did not lead to the two becoming socially closer.

Progressively excluded from property ownership in the centre of France's major cities, the working-classes households who own their own homes rarely see their property rise in value, unlike dominant-class households. The latter usually amass various forms of assets (property and movable assets, personal and business assets), and create entire family strategies for the accumulation of wealth. The transfer of these assets within the family usually works to the advantage of men and the detriment of women (Bessière & Gollac, 2023). Bessière and Gollac show how the institutions that govern the division and transfer of assets, and the legal professionals who organise it, authorise and foster legal and family arrangements that deepen gender inequality and maintain class inequalities. Men of the dominant classes systematically benefit more from the formal and informal rules governing the division of all forms of assets on the occasion of separation, succession, or transfer of a business. Thus, among those who possess financial capital, it is family organisation and the mechanisms of the law at the time of transfer that explain the recent growth in inequality of assets between women and men.

* * *

While it is still entirely appropriate to distinguish three main divisions of the social space in France, the outlines and internal composition of these have altered radically since the 1970s. Varying the scale of analysis by taking both national and local approaches, taking into account the effect of migration and social mobility, and integrating the way gender and race relations combine with class relations into a relational analysis make it possible to get a better understanding of the dynamics of power relations, but also of the internal divisions within classes.

One crucial contribution from recent studies on social class in France has also been to note that, in the first quarter of the 21st century, public institutions and the state still play a central role in processes of reproduction and accumulation: While public services or the existence of an employment sector may mitigate inequalities, education and economic policies, along with migration and family policies, are far from challenging the power relations that structure class society.

At the political level, the question of inequalities between social classes is certainly often present, as during the Yellow Vests movement in 2018 and 2019 or through the claims of the workers worn out by the pandemic since 2020. But the classist scheme seems to have lost its mobilisation strength as parties and trade unions no longer make it the central mode of defining their action and as various forms of social and symbolic domination become more obvious (Hugrée & Penissat, 2022).

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Notes

¹ Few of these terms have an exact equivalent in English. As discussed in what follows, in France there is a significant difference between “classe ouvrière” and “classes populaires,” which the terms “working class” and “working classes” attempt to render. Similarly, the English term “middle class” is not an equivalent to the French term “classes moyennes,” which is regularly the focus of disputes around definition both among academics and in the public sphere. Finally, the term “dominant class” used by Mills to define the “classes supérieures” or “classes dominantes” is sometimes preferred to “ruling class,” which is closer to “classe dirigeante.”

² *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles*: intensive two-year post-secondary course preparing for entrance to the elite higher education institutions. The *grandes écoles* (Polytechnique, Sciences-Po Paris, École des Hautes Études Commerciales, École Normale Supérieure...) play a central role in the selection, training, and reproduction of economic, political, administrative, and intellectual French elites.