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Introduction

“WHO WOULD want to read a book about us?” That is what Vanessa, a thirty-year-old service worker living in one of the depopulated towns in the Grand Est region of France wanted to know. She is used to people not being able to find her *département* on the map, to not claiming a regional identity, to not talking about or hearing about where she grew up, nor seeing people in the media or in positions of power who share her background, or her accent. This “book about us” takes a look at the young adults who live in what has come to be called “peripheral France,”¹ an expression that has become common and widespread since 2014. Despite universal criticism from academic researchers, this expression has established itself in public debates and across the political spectrum, from the Left to the Far Right, where it now finds its strongest resonance. The unprecedented use of this term by major media outlets has made it a catch-all for any place that, when seen from Paris or from large regional cities, is perceived as “the middle of nowhere.” This widespread use has, obviously and continuously, irritated researchers (mostly in geography and sociology) who study these spaces. They often repeat, proof in hand and to anyone who will listen, that there are striking differences from one town to the next, let alone from one *département* to another, and that the parts of France that are located far from large cities are diverse and impossible to characterize as a whole.

Certainly, emphasizing local particularities in the name of scientific rigor may, on the other hand, lead researchers to overlook the broader significance of their work. Indeed, rural areas of France today, far from being isolated or frozen in time, have much to teach us about the major economic and social upheavals of our era. When we look only at regional specificities, incorrect interpretations have the potential to reinforce a form of cultural essentialism that assigns each “community” its own way of thinking: “Bretons” are said to be like this, “Corsicans” are just like that. These are such appealing images that it is always tempting to reify them as supra-individual mindsets, yet they prevent any lucid or critical analysis—analysis, for example, of the common dynamics across the diverse rural areas where the Yellow Vest movement got its start and has maintained its greatest intensity.

The “countryside in decline” in the subtitle of this book is meant to draw a distinction, based on demographic and economic criteria, between two major types of social and geographic realities in the parts of France that are far from large cities. On one side, there are the “attractive” rural areas that draw in new residents and whose populations are growing. On the other are rural areas suffering from depopulation and growing poorer; these are the areas that shall be our focus. Not recognizing this basic difference would be a bit like grouping the chic Neuilly-sur-Seine and working-class Aubervilliers into the same category because they are both suburbs of Paris. Such a comparison rings false, and yet, when it comes to towns and villages we know little about, we allow ourselves to paint everyone with the same brush. Why is it so easy to lump these places together as “peripheral France”? Objectively speaking, the parts of the Grand Est region that are in demographic decline differ significantly from the rich countryside (near to coastal tourist areas or wine-growing regions) and from rural areas that may benefit in various ways from the influence of large cities. In attractive rural areas, the population is growing and houses are being built and renovated. The social diversity in these areas is roughly the same as in a midsize city, with a sizable

number of middle-class professionals, as well as managers and highly educated professionals, especially among the neorural population. Those who can, will buy second homes there, and those who live there often find value in being locals, harkening to the “authentic” image of a territory that has become part of their cultural heritage.² On the other hand, rural areas in decline do not lend themselves to tourism or contemplation. In part due to this fact, they are relatively unknown to the dominant classes that produce legitimate representations of society. They are former industrial regions that are still in the grips of the profound changes brought about by neoliberal capitalism. The number of jobs and residents is constantly decreasing, and young people with degrees are leaving to build their lives elsewhere at rates reminiscent of the last rural exodus of the postwar period.³ This kind of educational sorting along class lines means that those who remain are those who do not have the resources to move elsewhere. But they also share a determination to go on living as they see fit, despite the widespread sense that “their world” has become obsolete.

When I began my research in 2010, these regions were still rarely spoken about, whether in the media or in academia. Since then, as the Far Right has attracted more and more voters and with the more recent Yellow Vest movement, national media have turned their microphones and cameras on the village residents in my home region. Some journalists have opened their readers’ eyes to local realities that have long stayed in the shadows: the hollowing-out of town centers, heroin use among young adults caught up in the collapse of local industry, the dismantling of the healthcare system, the serious shortage of doctors and the arrival of Romanian healthcare professionals to replace them, the closure of schools, and so on. Such outside views of rural realities can, however, remain aloof or take on a touch of exoticism, if not disdain. One of the articles that got the biggest reaction from locals was published in a left-leaning newspaper. The headline made direct reference to daily disputes between residents of a village that had voted overwhelmingly for the Front national (FN, or National

Front, now the Rassemblement national [RN], or National Rally). In reading about themselves, they felt they had been portrayed as living in a state of trench warfare, where “surly rurals” spend their time either hating each other or hunched in front of the TV, learning to better grumble about foreigners.

It is as if one fantasy has replaced another, with the idealized vision of the village communities of “long ago” giving way to two opposing representations of the inhabitants of these rural spaces in decline: either pitiful portrayals of the lives of “racist hicks” that we tend to find on the Left, or odes to a “peripheral,” “forgotten France” that somehow embodies the “real French people” and needs defending, more often found on the Right.

How can we understand the success and the persistence of these caricatured representations of the working classes, who, we must remember, constitute the overwhelming majority in these rural areas in decline? We need to take two factors into account: first, that these rural working classes are particularly dominated (in the sociological sense); and second, that they are, in all senses of the term, very far removed from those who speak about them, sometimes even in their name. Also, because they have been so widely disseminated, such descriptions have performative effects on the populations they are meant to evoke. This is nothing new. In the 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu theorized the “object class,” that is, a dominated social class (Bourdieu used the small-scale farmers of Béarn as an empirical example) that is “spoken” by others and subjected to an externally produced image of itself.⁴

Of course, it is possible to find circumstances that support the producers of these dominant discourses. It is true that “for anyone not in the know,” as locals facing questions like to say in anticipation of outsiders’ astonishment, a simple trip through the most depopulated towns in rural and industrial France can give the impression of a world that has been destroyed, where nothing moves, with collapsing houses and deserted streets. If a journalist wishes to interview residents in person, they are likely to come across a teenager who will tell them, “It’s dead here!” Much as, after the

latest elections, reporters conducting street interviews in these villages had no problem finding passersby willing to say they are “for Le Pen” to journalists who came looking for that kind of “authenticity.” That is because today, publicly declaring support for the Front national is no longer stigmatized. For some of the people I spoke with, publicly associating themselves with FN discourse functions as proof of respectability. It is a way to quickly define yourself socially, especially with someone you do not know but who is perceived as important. It allows you to define yourself in the negative, as against “exploiters,” against “welfare cases,” against “immigrants,” and the like.

Against this unsettling backdrop, the idea of a “peripheral France” aligns with other expressions that have entered common parlance to designate these areas and the people that live in them. Among these, there is one in particular that, by invoking a racialized vision of the world, has increasingly gained traction in public debates—that of *les petits blancs*,⁵ referring to the so-called “average white folks” who have supposedly taken shelter far from large cities out of “cultural insecurity,” fleeing the banlieues and their inhabitants. It must be said that the people we will meet in the pages that follow would prefer not to be reduced to this sort of pitiful stereotype. First of all, this group is in no way characterized by a fearful attitude. They are proud and sure of their way of life. I was told twice, for example, that “Here, it’s like Corsica without the sea,” in reference to the island well known for its separatist movement.⁶ Furthermore, rather than the image of the isolated and individualist “petit blanc,” our study of local sociability will show that the inhabitants of these rural regions spend an enormous amount of time together, “over at each other’s houses,” as they say, in solid groups of friends, through which they define themselves and construct their visions of the world. Finally, we must recall that historically, these rural and industrial areas have always drawn foreign workers (Italians, Portuguese, North Africans, Turks, and others). They are therefore home to more than just so-called *petits blancs*. In actuality, the descendants of North African immigrants are among “those

who remain” in the postindustrial countryside. As the children of blue-collar workers, they share the same concerns and living conditions as the rest of their generation, whether they come from an immigrant background or not. In the course of this study, I met groups of friends that included both so-called *petits blancs* and descendants of North African immigrants. We will see that these young adults can find solidarity together because they have known each other since childhood, they work in the same companies, and they are part of the same “crew” of friends, who stick together under any circumstances. Of course, in critical social situations, which have become more frequent as everyone’s lives have become more precarious, this group solidarity can fracture and lead to increasing racism, even though the same conflicts also emerge between the “*petits blancs*” themselves. In short, entering into the daily life of those who live in the countryside in decline also means discovering the complexity of the social relations that take shape there over time. Capturing them and accounting for them in detail is, perhaps, the greatest contribution any ethnographic study can make. An essential part of this process is undoubtedly the constant practice of reflexivity regarding the contexts in which the study, which fully engages the sociologist, was conducted.

Research Through Immersion

To this end, the researcher must first introduce himself. As both a sociologist and as someone from this so-called middle of nowhere, I have tried to position myself as a translator between two worlds that I frequent in alternation, that of my informants and that of the social science–reading public. Because this study turns the spotlight on a social group that is poorly known and whose way of life may surprise—or even shock—those who consider themselves arbiters of good taste and bearers of a legitimate lifestyle, there is always a risk of unconsciously reproducing the exoticism one seeks to criticize. The important thing for me was to not expose those I describe, and more or less defend, to scorn or mockery.

With these issues in mind, I decided to take the weight of their words seriously and to allow my research to follow the doors that opened (or closed) to me and observe what I could. The material I gathered and the themes I explored were therefore closely tied to the compatibility, or shared *habitus*, that existed between them and myself. I would not have been able to do this work without the help of childhood friends and other rural inhabitants I met and befriended, to the point that, after several months of living in the area, I found myself a part of their daily lives.

While most researchers are concerned with familiarizing themselves with their area of study, for me, it was more a question of distancing myself in order to analyze it more objectively.⁷ For their part, the people I met were mostly confused to think of themselves as objects of study. “No one cares about us,” “What you’re doing won’t interest anyone,” “You’d do better talking about important people” were some of the reactions I heard again and again once I began my research in 2010. This is a population that sees itself as “without history,” that does not like to talk about itself introspectively, as field sociologists generally prefer—like “good clients,” as we say in the business, capable of eloquently recounting their entire life history.

Hence the importance of pseudonyms. When you meet Éric, Tiphanie, Lorenzo, Nicolas, Vanessa, and the other workers, employees, job seekers, tradespeople, and farmers in this study, their identities will not be revealed, but they have equivalents elsewhere with the same lifestyles, for whom cars and single homes are important, who experience similar power relations between men and women, between bosses and workers, and so forth. I also do not mention the specific places where my research took place, although even these are not reducible to one locality or another.

Where We Exist

Based on the principles of investigation put forth by the ethnographer Marcel Maquet, one of the most important qualities of an ethnographer is knowing how to “blend in” to a “social situation.”⁸

This means becoming a part of the daily life of the group or location being studied. The researcher is then able, as Erving Goffman said, to grasp “what’s going on here”⁹ and to direct their attention toward the social activities most relevant to their research questions. While it may seem like a fairly common approach, this inductive methodology offered a distinctive stance within the body of mostly top-down accounts of declining rural areas and of “peripheral France.” Allowing myself to be caught up in the activities and concerns of those who remain is what made it possible for me to move beyond the conventional narratives around rural decline and to ask questions that are absent from major surveys—such as the importance of having a “good reputation”—and shed light on the new kinds of collective and political consciousness that play out at the level of “friend groups” or “crews”¹⁰ in a context where most of the historical structures that once brought a sense of collective belonging (factories, unions, clubs, and the like) have disappeared. We will see that these small groups of friends play a central role in the overall economy of these rural areas, notably, in the trajectories of my young informants: they often found romantic partners or “caught wind” of job opportunities for which “a pal” could recommend them through their “friend group.” The composition of these groups of friends stands witness to the profound upheaval in the logics of belonging in rural spaces. Instead of having their social lives rooted in a specific locality, as was once the case when village life encompassed people’s entire social world, they now have a much broader relationship to the surrounding space. When they say “here,” they mean their circles of acquaintances, rather than a specific place. The space that is known and used is the space where one knows people. As a result, of the roughly two hundred people that make up the population of young adults I met, two-thirds know or regularly see each other, even though the geographic scope of the study extends over several towns and départements.

Alongside the centrality of groups of friends in my analysis, by observing through immersion I was able to access moments where

ways of being, thinking, and acting were more self-assured, exactly because they were expressed in relatively socially homogenous spaces, in a kind of *entre-soi* or “just among us” reserved for those who are part of the group. When they are together, the young rural adults I met behaved as they do *entre potes*, among close friends: proud of their way of living, of their tastes, and of their value judgments, in contrast to the relative discomfort they experience in socially heterogeneous settings. It was for this reason that the few people who worried that they would be caricatured as “hicks” or “bumpkins” in my book were those who had, at some point in their life, left their rural homes and lived in less homogenous social spaces where their ways of being and thinking were called into question, or even stigmatized.

Those who leave, while sometimes expressing resentment towards “those who remain,” who, in their eyes, “only stick to their own” but “are happy that way,” led me to formulate a central hypothesis—namely, that sociability in these rural areas in decline continues to be intense and vital. This is precisely because it allows for a working-class way of life grounded in mutual acquaintance, autonomy, camaraderie, and hedonism to persist despite global structural changes that threaten it.

Before the Yellow Vests

My study concluded a few months before the Yellow Vest movement began with mass mobilizations against a national 80 km/h speed limit, introducing political issues that continue to be a part of public debates today. It goes without saying that this movement was fairly embarrassing for theorists of an inward-looking and apathetic peripheral France. In only a few weeks, this mobilization largely changed the view that the working classes didn’t feel they had the power to speak up publicly or make their voices heard. Even I was shocked to see that the people from the depopulated towns of the Grand Est region, though usually not prone to protest, were among the most involved in France from

the very start. While this sudden uprising, which continued to gain momentum throughout the period of mobilization, surprised me in its scope and duration, the issues raised and the rhetoric employed were quite familiar. The research presented in this book, which began in 2010, shows that this movement did not appear out of nowhere. Rather, it is connected to deeper processes that are easier to understand under ordinary circumstances, outside periods of social unrest or political conflict, when the lower intensity of social activity allows for the patience that research requires.

To explain the connections between a long-term social context and a sudden political movement, I have chosen to devote the first chapter of this book to observations I was able to make as part of a small survey of Yellow Vests. The goal is not to analyze the movement in itself but rather to try to understand a specific local context at a moment when that was all anyone could talk about, not only among the movement's participants, but also among those disappointed by the movement and those who obstinately remained apart from it from the outset.

These moments of collective effervescence can indeed help reveal history and social relations that are normalized in everyday life and therefore rendered invisible.¹¹

It is also telling that this episode of revolt helps put into perspective the major historical processes reshaping rural societies. When he studied the great postwar peasant “crisis of reproduction,” Pierre Bourdieu could still begin his book *Le bal des célibataires* (2002) with a description of a village dance that took place after an agricultural show. Unlike today, this kind of seasonal event still brought the local population together, even if the young farmers studied by Bourdieu felt that they were gradually being left behind by a world that no longer had a place for them.

What, then, can we say about today's young rural working-class men and women between the ages of twenty and forty, who are manual and service-sector workers, struggling to find stability in

the job and marriage markets, all the while haunted by the specter of earning a “bad reputation”? Their ways of being and thinking are legitimate in their social milieu and they are well adapted to the everyday working-class social relations that have shaped them. Nevertheless, there is a risk of only being respectable “here,” in a social space in decline. A space where they find themselves in competition with their friends and family, with some securing a “good job” while others become trapped in long-term unemployment.

This book aims to explain how an entire generation was violently sorted out by focusing on the way people interact socially and how they form bonds of friendship or find romantic partners, all while also living with a feeling of permanent conflict and a desire to be recognized by their peers. While some people embraced the Yellow Vest movement, this was often because they were convinced that their living conditions had deteriorated and that the way of life they held so dear was under threat. From this perspective, the Yellow Vests are truly “those who remain” or, more precisely, those who wish to remain and make their lives in the countryside in decline, often with a nostalgia for less lugubrious times, which we will address in a later chapter. Those who donned hi-vis vests often spoke of a vague “how things used to be,” about how “old folks” used to “live better” or “knew how to live better” in the same rural spaces that used to be more dynamic. Of course, it is true that the price of gas didn’t use to be a problem and everything was just a bike ride away, including the factory, the grocery store, and public services that have since been dismantled.

Départements such as la Meuse, la Haute-Marne, l’Aube, les Ardennes, and les Vosges were historically dominated by an industrial paternalism that encouraged workers to buy small properties and anchored behaviors and political ideas to a deep conservatism.¹² In fact, the areas I studied are home to the electoral districts that are the least left-leaning and the most supportive of the Far Right in France. This inheritance weighs heavily on the present. These electoral trends coincide with a strong overrepresentation of blue-collar and lower-level white-collar workers, as well as an

underrepresentation of managerial and professional groups among the local population. This sets these areas apart both from dynamic or “attractive” rural areas and from large cities. Such ideological uniformity and class homogeneity allow locals to express their support for the Far Right more openly. And yet, during the Yellow Vest movement, the same people who a few months earlier had called themselves “very right wing” or “100% for Le Pen” began calling for a more equal distribution of wealth and a more or less radical disruption of the existing political order. How can we understand these seemingly contradictory positions?

Those Who Leave and Those Who Remain

One of the keys to explaining this phenomenon is the particular social makeup of these formerly industrial rural areas. Their homogeneity, which I would call a working-class *entre-soi*, is produced by a particular demographic dynamic that this study will illustrate from the point of view of its protagonists, by looking at the long-term division of a generation between those who leave and those who remain. Chapter by chapter, we will see how this working-class *entre-soi* emerged from the departure of middle- and upper-class young people, as well as of the working-class youth who pursue higher education. This educational sorting divides the population based on class, but also on gender. In the areas I studied, the job market offers mostly positions that are seen as men’s work, with fewer professional opportunities for women. Furthermore, in working-class contexts, women tend to perform better in school and are more likely to continue their education at higher levels. Pursuing higher education means leaving your hometown and region to live in big university cities like Reims, Strasbourg, Nancy, or Dijon, all of which are at least an hour by car from the areas I studied. We will follow the gradual dispersal of these young people, some of whom keep in touch with their old friends, despite an ever-widening social distance between them. We will also see how distinctions emerge even among those who

remain, between workers who are “well regarded,” such as those who join the armed forces while retaining local recognition, and those with precarious lives who feel “done for” within circles of mutual acquaintances.

My informants’ fear of gaining a “bad reputation” was omnipresent throughout my study, including the fear of what I might write about them here. From the point of view of the men and women who are presented anonymously in this book, the worst thing, in their own words, would be to “come across as lazy,” perhaps less so in the eyes of the whole of France than in those of “everyone here.” This is what Karim, an electrician, explained to me: he did not mind my telling his life story in Paris, but under no circumstances did he want it “getting out here,” among his local friends.

“Déjà nous” and “Friend Crews”

On a more positive note, Karim hoped that I would mention his popularity within his group of friends, which he considered a source of hedonism and solidarity in all circumstances. Friendship and the norms of conduct associated with it are indeed a central aspect of life in working-class rural areas. It is among friends, and sometimes only among them, that the young manual and service-sector workers I met say they feel independent and valued. It is often also through these networks that they are able to find work or a romantic partner. However, this type of solidarity is reserved for “real friends you can count on,” as they said, and not for just any local acquaintance. Their feeling that solidarity can only extend to a limited number of people could be mistaken with a kind of inward-turning isolationism. It is true that the fewer the jobs or resources available to a circle of acquaintances, the more competition grows among them. Since these young women and men have usually known each other for years and belong to the same groups of friends, conflicts are particularly difficult to live with, often incurring collateral damage. This was the case, for example, for two childhood friends who had both trained as plumbers, but who

came to oppose and avoid each other after they found themselves competing for the same job working for the local government. While these regions were formerly home to large factory-based collectives, they have since undergone a profound disintegration of everything that fostered group formation and reciprocity; and as resources become scarcer, this has led to simmering jealousy and open rivalries.

The approach presented in this book is perhaps less attractive or attention-grabbing than the “clash of civilizations” or “great replacement” narratives, but by studying the most common interpersonal conflicts, we can determine that it is indeed fundamental economic drivers, rather than cultural differences, that are generating divisions within the rural working class today. What has changed is that people no longer mix casually with whomever happens to be around. As competition has increased between individuals, friends are selected with care. At the same time, everyone is actively engaged in maintaining their “good reputation” to ensure that they can continue living where they grew up.

It is, in fact, because employment has become harder to find that people invest more in their friendships in the hopes of being recommended for a job. As public services, small businesses and certain amenities have disappeared from these rural regions, there is a need to surround yourself with the right people and to help each other out on a daily basis. I understood how much these structural effects had permeated people’s mindset when I started hearing young rural adults refer over and over to an “us” that they valued. This “us” was always qualified, sometimes becoming “*déjà nous*” or “just us.” The first time I noticed this expression was during a conversation between a few friends discussing the possibility of getting together to do home repair work for elderly people. One of them insisted that they shouldn’t “shout it from the rooftops” if they found a client and that they should only share “good leads” with each other. He summed up his logic, saying, “Let’s keep it to just us.” At other times and with other people, I began to pay

attention to phrases like “just us,” “us first,” and “only us,” seeing them as expressions of a persistent collective consciousness, putting “real friends” before anyone else and feeling solidarity with friends in the face of shared oppositions.

The persistence of this valued “us” is a reminder that despite the erosion of structures that served to build collective bonds, individuals continue to find ways to recreate solidarity and a sense of belonging. However, this collective consciousness is now selective and driven by the certainty that the world is based on conflict. “Déjà nous” also serves to counter the shared sentiment of “always coming last, behind other people,” of being, on a national level, left behind or ignored by political decision-makers. More generally, the idea is that you need to be suspicious of others because the world is full of conflict; it runs on conflict, both locally and globally. Refusing to endorse this view makes you seem like someone with no real life experience, a “softie” or “care bear,” as it was sometimes said, ironically. On one hand, we can see this conflict-driven view of the world as the persistence of a certain awareness of class antagonisms in rural working-class areas, especially when this sense of solidarity transcends apparent divisions within the working classes. It would, however, be difficult to ignore the potential for the idea of “déjà nous” to be coopted by Far Right political thought, with its “France First” ideology that affirms the feeling of living in a fractured world and calls for a limited alliance against others who are “not like us” and who are conveniently attributed responsibility for the countless problems facing French society today.

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