

Poor peripheral whites against suburban migrants: A discussion of Christophe Guilluy's work

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In many countries of the so-called “North”, electoral geography is now a hot topic, as illustrated by the Trump phenomenon or the Brexit. The old city versus countryside division has taken a new form with the emergence of an opposition between large metropolitan areas, taking the most of globalization, and other territories, often defined in negative terms, underlining their dependency from more dynamic territories: aging areas where retired couple gather, deindustrialized areas, and so on. France is no exception to that change. One term has particularly caught public attention: “peripheral France”, a term coined by Christophe Guilluy in a book published in 2014, and titled “Peripheral France (*la France périphérique*): how we sacrificed popular classes”.

Integration and inclusion of recent migrants are at the heart of political debates related to this new geographical partition. Schematically, the peripheries are dominated by right-wing parties asking for more control of immigration. And Guilluy portrays his peripheral France as a hotbed of anger that finds an outlet in the French extreme-right political party, the *Front National* (whose leader, Marine Le Pen, has been compared by some US journalists to Donald Trump). Opposed to these peripheral territories, large cities, dominated by “bobos” according to Guilluy, are much more open to immigration, and give their vote mostly the Socialist Party (which is now only socialist by name, and which doctrine is comparable to the one of the Democratic Party in the US).

Within that framework Guilluy's stance is intriguing. He wants to give a voice from the left to those inhabiting peripheral France, without criticizing their anti-immigrant discourse. Guilluy positions himself as speaking out for the lower classes while also considering legitimate certain views that could be ascribed to the *Front National*. Indeed, according to Guilluy, one should listen to the identity-related malaise of lower classes, a feeling of no longer being at home in their own country due to a too large presence of migrants with different cultures. Christophe Guilluy also criticizes the focus of redistributive territorial policies on impoverished suburbs. To him, policies directed toward the suburbs, including the *Politique de la ville*, favor foreign born and migrant populations at the expense of other people, mostly white, living far from the suburbs, outside the metropolitan areas of influence, in areas where poverty is also significant.

This paper will start with a short presentation of this thesis and its reception in the media and political spheres. It will then underline the lack of empirical foundations of significant parts of Guilluy's thesis. Many of his arguments, especially those about immigration, contradict the empirical surveys available. Studies first converge to show that the territories making the so-called *France périphérique* are marked by very diverse political and social dynamics, about which it is difficult to make any sound generalization. Second, they also converge to show that, to explain the vote for the *Front National*, one should look to the profound transformation of work relations, to rising inequalities, and to the breakdown of workers' organizations (at work, in association

activities, and in municipal life). The question is therefore first and foremost economic and social. It is not primarily about a cultural malaise.

The paper will then try to explain how Guilluy's view became so popular, especially on the left-side of the political spectrum (since the success of the populist Rights is already subject to a large literature). It will be contended that this has, somewhat paradoxically, something to do with the republican ideal which is dominating the French political imaginaries. Within this ideal, one has to be blind to differences, be they physical or cultural. In the public spheres, ethnicity should not have any more importance than eyes color for example. Whatever one thinks of this ideal, it is in contradiction with how ethnicity is now lived, especially in large urban centers. Indeed, according to Christophe Guilluy, a key explanation to the cultural malaise among white lower classes is that migrants can too easily display their cultural attachments in the public spaces. For Guilluy, this threatens the French republican model under which workers from all origins could unite.

All that considered, Guilluy's call to pay more attention to "peripheral France" should be listened by researchers and not only dismissed as empirically unsound. This paper thus discusses the political accuracy of Guilluy's work. Why does space matter in the way he put it? Why should his opposition between the territories outside metropolitan areas of influence and the suburbs (*les banlieues*) be taken seriously? How pronounced is the ethno-racial dimension of this new division? And last but not least, what are the political ways out of these divisions? Guilluy's political perspectives are clearly regressive, anti-urban and anti-cosmopolitan (his book *Peripheral France* makes an apology of the "village" as a stable and reassuring cultural unit), but what are the alternatives? The paper concludes that it is time to focus on the right to the village, aside the right to the city.

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