

Retracing the Steps of the Poor

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Sociologists Jean-François Laé and Numa Murard have returned to the field where they previously conducted research on the poor and money. In contrast, their new book sheds light on the impact of processes of individualization and fragmentation on contemporary working classes.

Reviewed: Jean-François Laé et Numa Murard, *Deux générations dans la débîne. Enquête dans la pauvreté ouvrière (Two Generations in the Dumps: An Inquiry into Working-Class Poverty)*, Paris, Bayard, 2012, 420 p., 21€.

In the early 1980s, two sociologists conducted research in a short-term housing estate located outside Rouen and Le Havre. The book they published in 1985, *L'Argent des pauvres (The Money of the Poor)*, presented an extremely rich portrait and singular viewpoint on the social life of mainly French, impoverished families with no steady employment and/or housing. Thirty years later, the two sociologists decided to return to the field. What has become of their privileged informants and the other inhabitants of the housing estate destroyed in 1987? How might their steps be retraced? And what can be said on the subject now that was not said earlier? The resulting 'ethnography of memory' traces the trajectories of two generations hailing from the poorest ranks of the working class. It provides the material for a long and beautiful text, which is much more than a preface or a long introduction to what the authors now call 'the Archive' (*L'Argent des pauvres*) – references to which infuse the more recent work with historical value.

The book's intention is thus twofold. It provides, notably in the introduction and conclusion, several keys for interpreting both what has stood the test of time and what has effectively changed. What remains to be said and known about these poor men and women – who

correspond rather well to the pejorative figure of ‘*cas soc*’ (social case) - is “what those who are presumably at the mercy of history actually do, say and experience, without being reduced to a class, a homogeneous history, or a single political stance” (p. 11).

The authors had already adopted this position in 1985 by giving due weight to what people experience and say, restituting the minutiae of everyday life, and privileging narration. In effect, they applied the same mode of inquiry in their recent study. Their purpose was to grasp, by means of in-depth field observations, a reality that regularly escapes grand theories but also the most detailed analyses of poverty. Therein lies the remarkable interest and quality of Jean-François Laé’s and Numa Murard’s work.

The Poor and Money

The original book’s title suggested a decentering of the gaze. *L’Argent des pauvres* began by describing the exchanges and solidarities, the relationship to money, work, social assistance, housing, petty crime and ‘the economy of resourcefulness’ observed in sometimes dramatic and often funny moments. It then presented the historical, theoretical and methodological background to the inquiry, the recent history of social housing, the shift in designation categories (from the ‘war on slums’ to the ‘war on the poor’), and the broad characteristics of the population under study. Built in 1975 to unclog the slums of the city center, the Blanchard housing estate was composed of 80 units that accommodated 250 residents, two thirds of which were children. During the period of research (1981-1984), it brought together families of the ‘impoverished class,’ including a minority of adults with a job and a majority living on social assistance. The authors’ purpose was to discuss the poor more than poverty in itself, to present the perception the poor have of poverty more than poverty’s objective measures and the ‘structures’ and ‘systems’ that produce and reproduce it. There was nothing provocative in using money and its equivalents – food, clothing, objects – as a guiding thread for the investigation (though the term provocative will be misconstrued today in light of ongoing attacks on benefit recipients and the theme of ‘easy money’). To do so meant contradicting numerous testimonies and discourses imbued with moralism and miserabilism that reduced ‘social cases’ and the ‘Fourth World’ to deprivation and to the problems they pose. In effect, notwithstanding the few occupied positions (unqualified workers, machine operators, painters, housemaids, cashiers), the resources drawn from

undeclared work and underground economic networks (waste recycling, scrap metal recovery, odds and ends repairs, petty thefts) allowed people to make ends meet. Similarly, the complex system of family benefits – compared to a ‘social bank’ – shed a crude light on the relationship of social workers to ‘their’ poor, but also highlighted the various ways in which social benefits are appropriated and misappropriated. The housing estate, in this sense, was no amorphous, disorganized or anomic space. The authors also sought to underscore the narrow imbrication of economic interests and social obligations in a fragile equilibrium.

The book begins with one example of the latter, the remarkable story of old man Brisard. This 56-year-old former office clerk, who lived in a basement and constantly visited other residents, was hit by a car on the highway while returning home from the hospital. Everyone in the housing estate was initially worried by his absence, and then later shared the family’s grief upon hearing the news of his death. This dramatic event was inscribed into the collective memory, which was then reinforced by an article published in the local press. The organizing of the funeral collection, the sum collected, the talent of the collectors and the homage rendered all attested to the reputation of the deceased, but also to the village ambiance of the housing estate – to use the classic motif of ‘the urban village.’ What plays itself out in the housing project is indeed a whole social organization, which expresses itself more broadly in funerals, weddings, births and other events as various indications of the ‘intensity of social life.’

Yet social life is also made of material necessities that call for any possible aid and, when assistance is unavailable, for new resources which contrast with prevailing discourses about ‘the culture of dependency’ and ‘families’ lack of foresight.’ An equally remarkable account provides a glimpse of this:

When fridges and cupboards are empty, fever takes hold of the Blanchard housing estate. In order to procure the evening meal, any opportunity, any scheme, any job will do, so long as it brings the lifesaving 10-franc note, the two coupons accepted by the grocer, or the food basket granted by the social educators. This is ad hoc economics: one gives the janitor a hand with the trash, visits social educators on the off chance they might help, picks up metal scraps in the city, tries to sell a trinket or a piece of furniture. Such a state of emergency authorizes stealing at the grocer’s store, demanding immediate reimbursement from a neighbor who shouldn’t have been rushed, breaking into the social educators’ office, thieving in the fields, or borrowing forcefully from someone weaker. Inequalities are conspicuous in these daily moments. Those who earn a decent income do not experience this type of panic because theirs is a less precarious situation. The others must cope and plan ahead with these potential hazards in mind, these abrupt disruptions that create chasms in already precarious finances (p. 312).

In other words, perceptions of poverty reveal distinctions that range from the tramp – with no money, home, parents or friends – to the affluent – earning a steady income. “Beyond this lie the realms of wealth and fortune, as so many mysterious and impenetrable zones” (p. 300-301).

Social Benefits and Solidarity

Jean-François Laé and Numa Murard excel at describing the economy of social bonds in the housing estate, and in doing so they reveal the double bind system that imposes itself on the residents of Blanchard. On the one hand, “the *Blanchardins*, who continually depend on late benefit allocations” (p. 319), also know the right techniques to get assistance when money is running short and fridges are empty, tilt the power balance with social workers in their favor, assert their status as rights holders, and prioritize their debts. On the other hand, “the obligation of solidarity” (p. 320) that binds residents together manifests itself in multiple practices: small favors, barter, or credit. It can be observed in reimbursement priorities as much as in the social values that ground these and are tied to the social reputation of the moneylender. “Hence economic resources cannot be analyzed apart from the way they are put into circulation, that is, apart from their social value” (p. 334). The critique of utilitarianism therein is unmistakable.

Yet conviviality is clearly not free of coercion. If short-term housing estates can be likened to “day hospitals in reverse” (p. 324), they also compare to “enclosed spaces” or “civilian prisons” (p. 385). Thus “mutual inspection is a full time occupation” (p. 340). Rumors, malicious gossip and backbiting together structure collective life: they are “the issues and backbone of alliances and conflicts” (p. 364). Here too, the *Blanchardins* are not completely helpless in the face of territorial constraints. They cheat and stage their own disappearance, in the statistical sense – for instance playing with their many identities – but also in the physical sense – leaving the housing estate only to return later. As such, they remind us of what numerous studies on housing estates and social housing areas may have slightly overlooked since then: a housing estate is not merely a fixed and bounded physical space, but a mobile and open territory, “a network that enfolds the entire city” progressively. In the end, *L'Argent des pauvres* subtly describes some fairly solidified social logics that we might (or might like to) find in the housing estates of today.

Back to the Present: Disappearance and Anonymity

Returning to the field thirty years later left a different impression on the two ethnographers, and this for several reasons. First, it is difficult in this context to follow parents and siblings who have either scattered – ‘gone without warning,’ as people say - or do not wish to talk about their past. A great deal of pragmatism is needed here, as is an acceptance of being lost and disoriented. Second, it is the sociologists who disappeared for so long without leaving a trace, for which several people reproach them. Hence for many former residents of Blanchard, there is no point in communicating again – though fortunately “it is easy to speak” (p. 45), between two doors, mumbling or swearing that there is nothing left to say while also saying many things... Finally, the impression that the ‘Fourth World’ is disappearing has an objective dimension. Have not the poor ‘gradually and smoothly’ left the mental landscape of journalists, politicians, researchers, and intellectuals? Having become even more invisible due to the vulnerability that now affects all categories of salaried workers, the poor have never known the stability that had been hitherto promised to them.

It is the story of this disappearance that now dominates the authors’ narrative. Indicators of economic decline and impoverishment (population decline, rise in the number of unemployed and welfare recipients, flight of residents occupying management and middle management positions, decrease in the number of secondary school classes, etc.) are compounded by equally significant data: the slow death of the market and the closure of downtown shops, aging low-rent housing, completely abandoned streets where no one wants to loiter. The destruction of the short-term housing estate, which had become ‘a ghost town at the end’ as one tenant mentioned, meant removing a symbol of failure. Thus the former residents’ feeling that they were expelled – a feeling that still won’t go away twenty-five years after the fact.

In this context, retracing the steps of the housing estate’s former tenants confronted the authors with another obstacle, which they refer to as the ‘name trick.’ It is at this point that the emblematic mailbox enters the scene.

For instance, Angélique is the daughter of Courteau and Laloie; she took the name Rembran after her first marriage and the name Malaquais after her second one. Depending on her interlocutor, she uses either one of the four names. When she stays at a friend’s house, [...] she is completely invisible on the mailbox. It is impossible to find her. [...]. Ultimately, for the poor, there

are two ways of resisting: either they find enough strength in numbers to delay their predicament, or they make themselves very small, invisible” (p. 33).

Playing with these multiple identities is therefore a trick, a tactic, a way of covering one’s tracks and finding some breathing space before the multiplication of administrative disputes. We are in effect reminded that logics of power come up against these microresistances. As the two ethnographers retrace the steps of their interlocutors, the housing estate’s former tenants cannily duplicate the spatial bearings of yesterday and today, like this man who “narrates places as though he could see the past and present superimposed in them” (p. 39). As Maurice Halbwachs showed, urban space is a stratified memory that informs the way present time is apprehended and confers verticality on sensible space.

What has effectively changed? On the one hand, relationships today are more elective. On the other hand, former residents seem to have lost the “strength that came with poor people’s aggregation in the city, in a space over which they could exercise some form of sovereignty” (p. 71). At bottom, “Elbeuf still has a hold on them” (p. 150). Yet escaping this ‘large family,’ or one’s own family in particular, is no easy feat. The family biography the authors reconstituted based on the letters of Angélique (who was a child in the 1980s) and her husband is significant in this respect. This biography deals with a painful situation in which breaking with a family that repeatedly and secretly engaged in criminal and deviant behavior could only occur through judicial recourse. Angélique’s denunciation of the rape she had suffered at the hands of her brother who turned out to be her half-brother ensured that he would be condemned to five years in prison. A story such as this could not stop here: it is the never-ending story of an “impossible separation” (p. 154).

In the past, residents of the housing estate shared a similar experience of precarity and labeling. Today, it is fragmentation that prevails among the working class. The construction of multiple social borders is an effect of deindustrialization, employment loss, dependency, and feelings of worthlessness. Such borders can be observed as well between men and women. For there is no gender mingling in this world.

It is not that men and women don’t like each other. [...]. But viewpoints necessarily and violently diverge when it comes to what must be done, to morality in dealing with children and grandchildren, to abuse and tolerance towards money and social conducts, and to the risk of invasion. [...]. Avoiding gender mingling is a way of distributing excesses, abuses, deviance and violence to

separate spheres [...]. Women, for instance, never encroach upon the territory of men's gardens. Reciprocally, men never interfere with women's handling of family issues (p. 108).

Is the separation of masculine and feminine worlds a social invariant? Has this gap amplified over time? It is difficult to say. One would need to draw a cartography of places occupied and places lost – though numerous researches conducted in the last twenty years suggest that relationships between (young and old) men and women have grown more tense, to say the least, in working class neighborhoods. Nevertheless, there is tension between continuity and change, as can be observed in several domains. Continuities can be noted for instance in legal proceedings, which confirm that the poor live in a litigious society. They can be seen moreover in the multiple consequences of men's age-old and severe problem of alcohol abuse, which includes violence against women, as well as in their fears and anxieties. In this respect, the authors' description of the hearings held at the Rouen tribunal is rich and interesting. They show, on the one side, men who have their driver's license revoked – their work tool in fact – for alcohol abuse, or who have failed to pay spousal support or traffic fines. On the other, they show women being sued for unpaid rent, credit card debts, or children's criminal offences. A shift occurs in the way criminal justice is staged and perceived. In the authors' words: "What is at issue here is not a gendered relation to the law in general, but rather the inscription in the judiciary of gendered modalities of action" (p. 188). Poor people's experience with justice may not be more significant than in the past, but it has redeployed itself over the years – as new scenes have emerged for the moral management of the poor (around unemployment and welfare in particular) and have given rise as such to new forms of protest and reclamation. This is at least what the authors reveal through their original and rigorous analysis of the correspondence of unemployed people who try to assert their rights before the administration: in doing so, they present a newly fruitful domain of research.

From one Inquiry to the Other

On the one hand, the authors show that life stories repeat themselves. Hence they often suggest a community of destiny and convey the impression of timelessness. On the other hand, they highlight certain differences: large families have become more rare, children's schooling now lasts longer, living apart is more common, and relations with social workers have become

more peaceful. In addition, living conditions have worsened while former pockets of poverty have become more diffuse and have been scattered throughout the city's different communes.

What surprised Laé and Murard is the interviewees' ability to express themselves: "the multiple instances of speaking out" (p. 19). Such instances make more room for the verbalization of feelings and suggest a greater distancing from the family group. It is important to note, however, that *L'Argent des pauvres* was essentially grounded in ethnographic observations, while 'the ethnography of memory' is largely based on conversations, interviews and letters. Does this have an impact on the authors' research findings? Other ethnographic studies have highlighted the same phenomenon, which is even more conspicuous when quotations abound. How is one to interpret these multiple instances of speaking out? Do they result from the overabundance of self-narrations on television – in TV movies, soap operas, and serials – and in cinema, as well as from the explosion of cellphone and Internet use? In other words, are they the sign of an erosion of working class culture – a process accelerated by the dissemination of media literacy in impoverished homes that have largely internalized the norms of a dominant 'pop psychology culture'? Given that more importance is assigned to persons than to classes and to class fractions, this focus on individual capacities may well be inevitable.

Some questions are left unanswered in the book. Has the working class imploded to such an extent that there remain only fragments of individualities disconnected from any collective inscription? Are categories and collectives reconfiguring themselves according to other lines of fracture, namely generational, territorial, and ethno-cultural ones? The sociology of housing estates has provided multiple examples of these phenomena. And yet *Retracing the Steps of the Poor* offers a counterpoint to these studies: its authors are interested in the other side of this familiar picture. The social vulnerability they expose is less (or not) known, invisible, greatly contrasted, and yet confirms that there is much left to say. And giving voice to that which is not spoken is precisely what the authors do so magnificently.

First published in www.laviedesidees.fr.

Translated from French by **Arianne Dorval** with the support of the **Institut français**, 4 June 2012.

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