

Twilight of the elites: prosperity, periphery and the future of France

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archeological tourism. In the epilogue, Effros reiterates the tragic view of colonial archeology as ‘a vicious and unforgiving system that turned ancient monuments into fuel that justified the colonialist experiment’ (259).

Incidental Archaeologists will likely remain the main reference on the impact of the Roman imperial legacy in French Algeria for quite some time. Through an admirable engagement with the archives and the existing literature, Effros has provided invaluable depth to the well-known influence of the Roman model on French colonial officers. Her work also raises two fascinating questions: to what extent did the Roman idea of the Mediterranean Sea as a *mare nostrum* also inflect French imperial thought after 1830, and did the officers’ encounter with the limits of the Roman roadmap in the Algerian desert ultimately transform their Rome-centered imperial vision? These questions remain outside the scope of *Incidental Archaeologists*, which largely focuses on the development of colonial archeology, but all future works that consider these important questions will undoubtedly rely on this groundbreaking book.

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Twilight of the elites: prosperity, periphery and the future of France, by

Christophe Guilluy, London, Yale University Press, 2019, 177 pp., \$25.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780300233766

The geographer Christophe Guilluy will be familiar to those who follow contemporary French politics. His trenchant essays on France’s ‘fractures’ and its ‘peripheral’ zones have given him a degree of notoriety, with many people praising his ability to cut through a general ambience of political correctness and speak candidly about inequality in French society. It is only right, then, that some of his writings should finally be accessible to an English-speaking audience in the form of *The Twilight of the Elites*, a translation of his 2016 essay *Le crépuscule de la France d'en-haut* (2016).

The book’s arguments are clearly stated at the outset. To summarise briefly, Guilluy believes that the ‘upper classes’ have—through a mix of real estate investment, managed public opinion, neo-liberalism, and faux Marxism—contrived to marginalise the ‘working-class’ spatially and politically. In his view, France has been remade into an unequal space, with wealthy and powerful ‘citadel’ cities sapping the lifeblood from ‘peripheral’ towns and villages that have been ignored and neglected. This corrosive state of affairs has gradually led the ‘working-class’—who inhabit France’s periphery—to revolt, either through populist parties like the Front National or in defiant acts of protest against the EU and domestic agents of the global elite.

On the surface, this is a seductive argument. The recent *gilets jaunes* demonstrations, which Guilluy triumphantly claimed in media interviews proved the validity of his thesis, seemed to confirm the idea that there is a spatial and social fracture at the heart of French society. Moreover, he is surely right to suggest that the concept and language of class in France has become invisible,

despite the obvious persistence of socio-economic divisions. In particular, the inability of the left to attract a working-class vote can legitimately be read as a stinging indictment of its detachment from the concerns of ordinary people.

Unfortunately, Guilluy obscures the more penetrating dimensions of his argument by succumbing to the hyperbole that is so typical of French intellectual pamphlets. A succession of approximations, generalisations and facile correlations blunt the impact of his text, a problem that is even more acute in English since many of his cultural reference-points and ideological jibes cannot be understood without an intimate knowledge of French politics.

One of the biggest problems with Guilluy's analysis is that his characterisation of class is wholly inadequate. The very least one might have expected in a denunciation of the elites is a careful dissection of its priorities and faultlines, but this is entirely absent. Instead, he lumps together wildly different socio-economic and socio-cultural groups under the term 'elite' or 'upper class'. The differences in age, occupation or geography that he is so keen to bring out for the working-class are absent from his quasi-conspiratorial portrait of an elite supposedly infected by global groupthink.

His discussion of politics is almost as unsatisfactory as his discussion of class. He caricatures a whole raft of political ideologies, from socialism and conservatism to French republicanism and neo-liberalism, stripping them of any meaningful content and using them as polemical tools to support his attack on 'globalisation'. More troublingly, his repeated invocation of 'Anglo-Saxon' capitalism and American 'ghettos' are not only analytically problematic, but also conform to the worst French stereotypes of the Anglo-American world.

Ditto with his presentation of multiculturalism, immigration and race in France. Many have accused Guilluy of being an apologist for anti-immigrant, far-right rhetoric against multiculturalism and immigration. There is clearly some truth to this accusation, but the more fundamental problem is that he is not interested in understanding the political behaviour of France's Muslim, Jewish and other non-white populations. He does not understand identity politics; he does not have any real sense of the complex dynamics of France's overseas territories; and he certainly does not have a clear grasp of the immigration politics of countries like the UK and the US, which he mentions in passing to support his argument.

Finally, there is the question of nostalgia. Throughout the book, Guilluy maintains that earlier structures of 'solidarity' have been torn apart by the neo-liberal consensus of the past thirty years. He is not alone in this belief. Similar arguments have been made by parts of the French far-right and the anti-capitalist left, as well as influential dissident intellectuals like Jean-Claude Michéa, whose influence on Guilluy is evident.

One need not be an apologist for the inequalities of twenty-first century neo-liberal capitalism to see that this argument rests on a longing for social relations that were never as pure or as straightforward as Guilluy implies. After all, when have the French business and political elite not set the political agenda? When was Paris not by far the most influential city in the country? When did the working-class not labour under poor conditions, inadequate pay, and perpetual insecurity? In his rush to indict the present, Guilluy ignores the long history of class formation, social stratification and elite control in France. The result is an analysis that amounts to little more than a frenzied condemnation of an imagined enemy in the name of a mythical 'people'.

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