

The Urban Citadels of the New Rich

*by Christopher Caldwell
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The French geographer Christophe Guilluy has spent decades studying the creeping gentrification of Paris. His observations, says Christopher Caldwell, can help us understand the backlash against globalisation---and how it led to both Trump and Brexit

The property market in any sophisticated city reflects deep aspirations and fears. Christophe Guilluy calls himself a geographer. But he has spent decades as a housing consultant in rapidly changing Paris neighbourhoods studying gentrification, among other things. And he has crafted a convincing narrative tying together France's various social problems---immigration tensions, deindustrialisation, economic decline, ethnic conflict, and the rise of populist parties.

Guilluy has published three books since 2010, with the newest, *Le Crépuscule de la France d'en haut* (roughly: 'Twilight of the French Elite'), arriving in bookshops last autumn. They give the best ground-level look available at the consequences of globalisation in France, and an explanation for the rise of the National Front (FN) that goes beyond the usual imputation of stupidity or bigotry to its voters. Guilluy's work thus tells us something important about British voters' decision to withdraw from the EU, and the astonishing rise of Donald Trump---two phenomena that have drawn on similar grievances

At the heart of Guilluy's inquiry is globalisation. Internationalising the division of labour has brought significant economic efficiencies. But it has also brought inequalities unseen for a century, demographic upheaval and cultural disruption. A process that Guilluy calls metropolisation has cut French society in two. In 16 dynamic urban areas (Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, Toulouse, Lille, Bordeaux, Nice, Nantes, Strasbourg, Grenoble, Rennes, Rouen, Toulon, Douai-Lens and Montpellier), the world's resources have proved a profitable complement to those found in France. These urban areas are home to all the country's leading educational and financial institutions, as well as almost all its corporations and the many well-paying jobs that go with them. There, too, are the individuals---the entrepreneurs, the fashion designers and models, the film directors and chefs and other "symbolic analysts", as Robert Reich once called them---who shape the country's tastes, form its opinions and renew its prestige.

Cheap labour, tariff-free consumer goods and new markets of billions of people have made globalisation a windfall for such prosperous places. But globalisation has had no such galvanising effect on the rest of France. Cities that were lively for hundreds of years---Tarbes, Agen, Albi, Beziers---are now, to use Guilluy's word, "desertified", haunted by the empty shopfronts and blighted downtowns that rust-belt Americans know well. Guilluy doubts that any place exists in France's new economy for working people as we've

previously understood them. Paris offers the most striking case. As it has prospered, the City of Light has stratified, resembling, in this regard, London, or New York. It's a place for millionaires, immigrants, tourists and the young, with no room for the median Frenchman.

The urban property market is a pitiless sorting machine. Rich people and up-and-comers buy the private housing stock in desirable cities and thereby bid up its cost. The laid-off, the less educated, the mistrained---all must rebuild their lives in what Guilluy calls (in the title of his previous book) *la France peripherique*. This is the key term in Guilluy's sociological vocabulary, and is worth clarifying: it is neither a synonym for the boondocks nor a measure of distance from the city centre. (Most of France's small cities, in fact, are in *la France peripherique*.) Rather, the term measures distance from the functioning parts of the global economy. France's best-performing urban nodes have arguably never been richer or better stocked with cultural and retail amenities. But too few such places exist to carry a national economy. When France's was a national economy, its median workers were well compensated and well protected from illness, age and other vicissitudes. In a knowledge economy, these workers have largely been exiled from the places where the economy still functions. They have been replaced by immigrants.

After the mid-20th century, the French state built a vast stock---about five million units---of public housing, which now accounts for a sixth of the country's households. Much of it is hideous-looking, but it's all more or less affordable. Its purpose has changed, however. It is now used primarily for billeting not native French workers, as once was the case, but immigrants and their descendants, millions of whom arrived from North Africa, starting in the 1960s, with another wave of newcomers from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East arriving today. In the rough northern suburb of Aubervilliers, for instance, three-quarters of young people are of immigrant background.

While rich Parisians may not miss the presence of the middle class, they do need people to serve tables, trim shrubbery, watch babies and change bedpans. Immigrants---not native French workers---do most of these jobs. Why this should be so is an economic controversy. Perhaps migrants will do certain tasks that French people will not---at least, not for the prevailing wage. Perhaps employers don't relish paying €10 an hour to a native Frenchman who ten years earlier was making €20 an hour, and has resentments to match. Perhaps the current situation is an example of the economic law named after the 19th century French economist Jean-Baptiste Say: a huge supply of menial labour from the developing world has created its own demand.

This is not Guilluy's subject, though. He aims only to show that, even if French people were willing to do the work that gets offered in these prosperous urban centres, there would be no way for them to do it, because there is no longer any place for them to live. As a new bourgeoisie has taken over the private housing stock, poor foreigners have taken over the public---which thus serves the metropolitan rich as a kind of taxpayer-subsidised servants' quarters. Public-housing inhabitants are almost never ethnically French; the prevailing culture there nowadays is often heavily Muslim.

Guilluy has written much about how little contact the abstract doctrines of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" make with this morally complex world. In these neighbourhoods,

well-meaning people of all backgrounds "need to manage, day in, day out, a thousand and one ethnocultural questions while trying not to get caught up in hatred and violence". Last winter, he told the magazine Causeur: "Unlike our parents in the 1960s, we live in a multicultural society, a society in which 'the other' doesn't become 'somebody like yourself'. And when 'the other' doesn't become 'somebody like yourself', you constantly need to ask yourself how many of the other there are---whether in your neighbourhood or your apartment building. Because nobody wants to be a minority." Thus, when 70% of French people tell pollsters, as they have for years now, that "too many foreigners" live in France, they are not necessarily being racist; but they're not necessarily not being racist, either. It's a complicated sentiment, and identifying "good" and "bad" strands of it---the better to draw them apart---is getting harder to do.

Guilluy came to the attention of many French readers at the turn of the millennium, through the pages of the leftist Paris daily Liberation, where he promoted the American journalist David Brooks's book *Bobos in Paradise*. Guilluy was fascinated by the figure of the "bobo", an acronym combining "bourgeois" and "bohemian", which described the new sort of upper-middle-class person who had emerged in the late-1990s tech-bubble economy. For Brooks, "bobo" was a term of endearment. These hipster nouveaux riches differed from those of yesteryear in being more sensitive and cultured, the kind of folk who shopped at Restoration Hardware for the vintage 1950s Christmas lights that reminded them of their childhoods. For Guilluy, as for most French intellectuals, "bobo" is a slur---meaning a bourgeoisie more predatory and less troubled by conscience than their predecessors. They chased the working-class population from neighbourhoods it had spent years building up---and then expected the country to thank them.

In France, as in America, the bobos were both cause and effect of a huge cultural shift. In most parts of Paris, working-class Frenchmen are just gone, priced out of even the football stadiums that were once a bastion of French prole-dom. The metropolitan bourgeoisie no longer live cheek-by-jowl with native French people of lesser means and different values. The previously working-class housing stock has been occupied by a second layer of bourgeoisie. For every old-economy banker in an inherited high-ceilinged Second Empire apartment off the Champs-Elysees, there is a new-economy television anchor or high-tech patent attorney living in some exorbitantly remodelled mews house in the Marais. They have arrived through different routes, and they might once have held different political opinions, but they don't now. As Paris has become not just the richest city in France but the richest city in the history of France, its residents have come to describe their politics as "on the left"---a judgement that tomorrow's historians might dispute. Guilluy calls this the politics of *la gauche* hashtag, preoccupied with redistribution among, not from, elites: "We may have done nothing for the poor, but we did appoint the first disabled lesbian parking commissioner."

Never have conditions been more favourable for deluding a class of fortunate people into thinking that they owe their privilege to being nicer, or smarter, or more honest, than everyone else. Why would they think otherwise? They never meet anyone who disagrees with them. The immigrants with whom the creatives share the city are dazzlingly different, exotic, even frightening, but on the central question of our time---whether the global

economic system is working or failing---they see eye to eye. Those outside the city gates are invisible, their wishes incomprehensible. It's as if they don't exist. But they do.

For those cut off from France's new-economy citadels, the misfortunes are serious. They're stuck economically. Three years after finishing their studies, three-quarters of French university graduates are living on their own; by contrast, three-quarters of their contemporaries without university degrees still live with their parents. And they're dying early: in 2015, life expectancy fell for both sexes in France for the first time since the Second World War. Their political alienation is striking. Less than 2% of legislators in France's National Assembly today come from the working class, as opposed to 20% just after the Second World War. The excluded have lost faith in efforts to distribute society's goods more equitably. The welfare state is now distrusted by those whom it is meant to help. France's expenditure on the heavily immigrant banlieues is already vast, in this view; to provide yet more public housing would be to widen the invitation to unwanted immigrants. In a society as divided as Guilluy describes, traditional politics can find no purchase.

With its opposition to free trade, open immigration and the EU, the National Front has established itself as the main voice of the anti-globalisers. Traditional parties now collude to keep out the FN as often as they compete. French elites have convinced themselves that their social supremacy rests not on their economic might, but on their common decency. Doing so allows them to "present the losers of globalisation as embittered people who have problems with diversity", says Guilluy. One need not say anything racist to be denounced as a member of "white, xenophobic France", or even as a "fascist". To express discontent with the political system is dangerous enough. It is to faire le jeu de ("to play the game of") the National Front.

Guilluy sees deep historical and economic processes at work behind the evolution of France's residential spaces. "There has been no plan to 'expel the poor', no conspiracy," he writes, "just a strict application of market principles." But he is moving towards a more politically engaged view: that the rhetoric of an "open society" is "a smokescreen meant to hide the emergence of a closed society, walled off for the benefit of the upper classes".