

## INTRODUCTION

# FROM PETIT-BOURGEOIS TO LITTLE-MIDDLE

### *Studying Small Social Mobility*



Interest in social class and inequality has experienced a resurgence in French social sciences since the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists and economists have highlighted persistent inequalities in income, net worth, and cultural attainments, suggesting that they may even be on the rise.<sup>2</sup> Alongside these broad, statistically based approaches, other sociologists analyze contemporary French class structure by exploring changing social conditions through ethnographic study of social and occupational categories. Their work has pointed to the disintegration of industrial labor as a social group: today's industrial laborers no longer identify as members of a laboring class as they did in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> In addition, young people from immigrant backgrounds living in public housing seem to be caught in a particular situation, with a conflictual relationship to institutions manifest in difficulties in school, job insecurity, discrimination, and urban relegation.<sup>4</sup>

Our longitudinal study of changes in a housing development adjacent to public housing in Paris's northern periphery was intended to contribute to this analysis of contemporary French class structure. In this neighborhood, we found neither the working classes nor the middle classes as they are typically described in the literature. It is instead populated by households of diverse geographical backgrounds experiencing small upward social mobility associating both inter- and intra-generational residential and professional ascension. We chose to call them the *little-middles* (*petits-moyens*), picking up on an expression an interviewee used to describe her social position. This designation conveys the fact that a considerable number of the neighbor-

hood's single-family homeowners cannot readily be classified as working class or middle class without oversimplifying the distinctive aspects of their lifestyle, which is typified both by efforts to get ahead and succeed, and fear of backsliding.

By comparing residents' social characteristics and lifestyles at two very different periods in the neighborhood's history (the 1960s–70s and the 1990s–2000s), the book illustrates various kinds of collective social ascension and their consequences on social relations. Whereas the collective social ascension process typical of the 1960s–1970s seemed to break down class boundaries and forge what to all appearances was a comfortable relationship to the social world, the individual social ascension of today, with increasing employment instability, creates uncertainty about the future that feeds conflict and misunderstanding with other social groups. The social structure's intermediate categories are subject to considerable political and media commentary in contemporary France that often only defines them in vague terms, while identification with the middle class has generally expanded to higher and lower categories of the social hierarchy.

But is there not a vast range of inequality within these intermediate categories? The localized ethnographic approach makes it easier to break with homogenizing representations and discourses about the middle class to analyze phenomena of stratification from the perspective of specific local configurations, in this case a neighborhood in a residential city in the northern Parisian suburbs whose population has been significantly renewed since the 1980s by the arrival of immigrants from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and the children of North African immigrants from adjacent neighborhoods. Crossing urban ethnography with the sociology of social stratification enriches both approaches, especially concerning the spatial aspects of social issues.<sup>5</sup> By combining temporalities (past and present), by encompassing diverse spheres of neighborhood residents' social lives, and by considering residents in terms of their backgrounds and geographical movement as well as their socioeconomic positions and trajectories, this book explores the full complexity of the concrete living conditions of a particular strata of society that hovers between the working and middle classes, and the variety of ways in which its members live together, have a sense of group belonging, and participate in community life. Entering the field through the domestic rather than the occupational scene helps observers to conceive of these mid-range categories of the social structure through their internal relationships as well as their relationships with other social groups living nearby, and to assess whether they have broken away from or maintained their early social circles or lifestyles. It also permits taking couples and households as the unit of analysis, rather than individuals (as statistical studies usually do), which seems all the more necessary given the rise in women's employment. Finally,

it offers the possibility of studying forms of public participation and relationships to politics in a finite localized setting over the long term, instead of taking a decontextualized snapshot as is too often the case in postelection studies evoking “the housing development vote” or “Front National voters” that, in so doing, create artificial groups.

## STUDYING NEIGHBORHOODS OF SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES

In the United States, there is a long tradition of research in inner-city neighborhoods inhabited by the poor and the underclass, with particular attention to African-American families.<sup>6</sup> This research tradition emerged in the 1960s and has continued ever since, highlighting the persistence of racial segregation and social exclusion alongside the rising weight of the service sector in urban economies and challenges to national-level social policies.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, American suburban residents’ lifestyles have more often been condemned and depicted critically than they have benefited from dispassionate scientific study,<sup>8</sup> although Nicholas Townsend reminds, as did Herbert Gans in the 1960s, that suburban homeowners also deserve attentive, empathetic study, free of prejudice.<sup>9</sup> Mary Pattillo-McCoy further observes that researchers have given little attention to the residential experience of the black middle classes compared with African-Americans living in urban ghettos.<sup>10</sup>

Although the urban structure and spatial distribution of social classes are different in France and the United States, we note the same bias in French social science work on urban peripheries. It also has a penchant for the poorest neighborhoods, the 1960s housing projects of towers and fences found in the urban periphery (known as the *banlieue*), and not cities themselves.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1970s, French sociologists have continuously analyzed population flows, forms of sociability, and lifestyles in these neighborhoods on the urban edge that have gradually concentrated immigrants and the poorest members of society.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, they were joined by anthropologists wanting to develop an “ethnology of the present” who also took a particular interest in marginal spaces and housing projects.<sup>13</sup> These social scientists were reacting to the stereotypes and stigma haunting these spaces that became fixtures in the media as violence has increased in these settings since the late 1970s. Predictably, the riots in the autumn of 2005 prompted innumerable commentaries in the media and academia alike<sup>14</sup> that immediately led to new studies and publications questioning the limits of the French republican model for integration and addressing the discrimination suffered by young people from immigrant backgrounds in France.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, such neighborhoods (or *cités*, a term designating high-rise public housing developments where the young, insecure, and immigrant are overrepresented,

which we translate as “housing projects”) are at the heart of academic and everyday representations of the French *banlieue*. This is just as true for the work of American anthropologists of urban France, whose interest in immigration and immigrant integration in France led them to choose public housing neighborhoods as field sites as well.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, the social sciences have been less attentive to studying neighborhoods of first-time homeownership, despite the fact that they have been proliferating since the 1960s, first on the outskirts of cities and more recently on the edges of rural villages. Nicole Haumont’s study of homeowners in the mid 1960s was marginal and quickly forgotten.<sup>17</sup> From the 1950s through the 1970s, French sociologists were suspicious and disdainful of homeowners from working-class backgrounds. In the language of the Marxist-influenced political and intellectual climate of the time, they were seen as embourgeoisied workers whose interests as homeowners were thought to distract them from engagement in the labor movement’s collective struggle. Socially and politically stigmatized, they were criticized for being “individualists” and “closed in on themselves.” The new single-family home seemed like a fairy tale to sociologists who were devoted to denouncing the illusion of social mobility. It also seemed to run counter to residential modernity at a time when high-ranking authorities and urbanists were vaunting communal housing, as Susanna Magri has shown.<sup>18</sup> And yet historians have demonstrated that property ownership does not automatically engender a conservative disposition or individualism at odds with the values of equality and social justice, as Annie Fourcaut proves by connecting the emergence of communist suburbs (“*banlieue rouge*”) and laborers’ and basic employees’ access to homeownership in Bobigny, on the northeast edge of Paris.<sup>19</sup> Along with other historians, she reconstructed the intense social life in neighborhoods of new single-family homes built in the interwar period, where individualism was far from being the way of life.<sup>20</sup> Little inclined to look at these neighborhoods’ lifestyles and sociabilities with an open mind, French sociologists contented themselves with studying them from afar by exposing the Statist and economic rationales behind policies for the development of individual housing.<sup>21</sup>

Starting in the 1990s, the expansion of subdivisions in the outer suburbs renewed attention to housing developments, which geographers henceforth saw as symbols of the phenomenon of “peri-urbanization,” or suburbanization.<sup>22</sup> There were a few studies devoted to domestic and semi-domestic practices of various social strata of people living in these environments,<sup>23</sup> relations between family, housing, and residential practices,<sup>24</sup> and the social and symbolic consequences of new homeownership in families of working-class or more diverse backgrounds,<sup>25</sup> but they were rarely conducted at the neighborhood level, in contrast to this study’s localized ethnographic approach. The world of housing developments, another facet of the French

urban periphery, has been understudied, despite the fact that it is a fruitful starting point for renewed study of class difference in light of the transformations that French society has undergone since the 1960s.

## STUDYING SMALL SOCIAL MOBILITY

The single-family homeowners we met in the northern outskirts of Paris have similar social trajectories. Whether they are from immigrant families or not, whether they hold a given occupational position or not, they are quite frequently dual-income couples from working-class backgrounds experiencing upward social mobility. The difficulty in putting a name to this population is in part related to the state of research on social mobility in France. Although there is no lack of research, it favors two main models: the most frequently occurring (social reproduction) and the most rare (the great leaps across the social spectrum of class transfuges). They are not especially interested in mobility of small magnitude, which Bernard Lahire calls “small social mobilities.”<sup>26</sup> There have also been recent developments on social down-classing.<sup>27</sup> While this is in no way contesting the fact that the wage-earning middle classes are being destabilized, it is important to draw attention to the ordinary trajectories of social ascension that exist in contemporary French society, despite mass unemployment and deindustrialization.

Furthermore, research on social mobility is dominated by statistical studies. Although they do reveal structural and cyclical factors influencing movement across the social space and are the only way to measure society’s overall “flexibility,” they are not useful to analysis of modest social displacements, because the statistical categories are often too broad for them to be perceptible. The statistical approach usually overlooks the actors’ own interpretations of these shifts in social position and the altered practices and lifestyles that simultaneously precondition the social shift and signal its arrival.

We consequently chose an ethnographic approach to analyze trajectories associating modest inter- and intra-generational mobilities between the working and middle classes, from the informants’ perspective.<sup>28</sup> The residential neighborhood selected as a field site was a location for observing such small social mobilities. Many informants expressed their satisfaction with “living like everyone else” and their conviction they were “average,” “like the others—no better, no worse.” We took these formulations from the field quite seriously so we could better understand how to classify these small homeowners, in sociological terms. What social conditions make slight social ascension possible, in an era of mass unemployment and prolonged education? What does it mean to become a homeowner in a suburban city with a striking presence of high-rise housing projects? Would the inhabited space

not be even more important to little-middles because their social and occupational resources, though on the rise, are still fragile? What consequences do these small social ascensions have on lifestyles, social relations, and forms of socializing, or on civic participation and what they think of politics?

## FROM PETIT-BOURGEOIS TO LITTLE-MIDDLE

Are these upwardly mobile new homeowners part of the “respectable” working classes,<sup>29</sup> or should they be classified with the lower middle classes? Can their practices and worldview be included in the category of “petit-bourgeois”?<sup>30</sup> Classifying these households is even more challenging because a fair number of them are heterogamous. More often than not, sociologists and anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic use the categories working class, middle class, or petite bourgeoisie automatically without really specifying how groups or individuals were categorized. Our work breaks with this habit to challenge these classifications by opting for an indigenous category, little-middle, that an informant used to socially situate herself. By adopting and defining the term little-middles, we are rejecting the idea that social classes are disappearing in the purported “middling” of French society.

In this regard, our thinking is in continuity with Pierre Bourdieu’s work, especially his well-known book *Distinction*. It made considerable strides in renewing approaches to social class in France (and elsewhere) by offering a conception of a multipolar social space that distinguishes between classes based on their relationship to domination and further identifies fractions within each class, each with different practices and dispositions depending on the nature of peoples’ resources and trajectories. From this perspective, social position is derived from the volume and structure of an individual’s economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals, and it is defined relationally. Insofar as this approach suggests observing social classes in a variety of social scenes (including workplaces and people’s positions relative to production, but also on the residential scene and everyday family and public life), it calls for ethnographic methods and a local monograph, a recipe we followed for this study as others have done for other recent studies in Europe.<sup>31</sup> But despite *Distinction*’s in-depth study of the French upper and middle classes (including the petite bourgeoisie) of the 1970s, it gives superficial treatment to the working classes (which at the time included the census categories “laborers” and “farmers” but not “basic employees”), neglecting differences in position, taste, and lifestyle within them and thus leading to a homogenizing and often grim image of the working classes as primarily defined by privation and “the choice of the necessary.”<sup>32</sup> Although our work is clearly in line with this Bourdieusian approach to social classes (which is experiencing some-

thing of a revival in Europe), we also make a considerable effort to study the lifestyles of modest social categories in all their complexity and detail, and represent how they think and act without resorting to clichés.

While identifying with a so-called Bourdieusian approach, we believe that there is a point in studying social change empirically and that the transformations of the working and middle classes, their cultural borders, and their relations merit documentation. The work of sociologist Olivier Schwartz inspires our work in this regard.<sup>33</sup> Affirming his conviction that the notion of class is relevant, he calls for an update of social class analysis and its terminology: “For the time being, we have no analysis of the class structure of contemporary France, no satisfying interpretation of contemporary France in terms of class that takes account of the developments and transformations that have affected this society since the late 1970s and that could consequently be applied to what this society is today.”<sup>34</sup>

Because socially in-between situations force questioning of the homogeneity of each broad class category and its fractions, studying them is a useful strategy for thinking about the issue of social mobility and the boundaries between social groups. So in speaking of little-middles, we hope to counter the tendency to reduce all middle classes to “cultural goodwill”<sup>35</sup> and to break the habit of forever and always coming back to the same working-class culture passed on since its heyday in the 1930s through 1950s. The goal is to try to think about lifestyles that have emerged since the 1960s that have thus far only been described in passing in social science research on the working or middle classes. The working classes’ move toward the middle classes has often been described as involving a violent and often painful break, whether through the political or moral judgment of “class treason” underlying Marxist use of the notion of *petit-bourgeois*<sup>36</sup> or through the “split habitus” analysis developed by Bourdieu. What subjective experiences and feelings are associated with these modest social ascensions, which just happen to be the most common kind? This book approaches the question through the empirical study of the hybrid lifestyles emerging from these small ascensions, the fruit of complex adjustments and arrangements, guided by the following questions: How are little-middles similar to *petits-bourgeois*? How are they different? How do they imagine society and their position in it? How have the conditions for small social mobilities changed from the 1960s to the 1990s?

### A NEIGHBORHOOD BRIDGING INSECURITY AND SUBURBAN COMFORT

This study is based in a neighborhood of the city of Gonesse, whose population of 25,000 has been governed by Socialist politicians since 1995, after over

thirty years of a right-leaning city hall. At first sight, Gonesse looks like so many other disadvantaged cities in Paris's northern suburbs: it has more poor households with low educational levels than the regional average and distinctly fewer people in the highest categories. The significant presence of immigrants, primarily from Turkey, North Africa (the Maghreb), and sub-Saharan Africa, also encourages observers to associate it with the French administrative department of Seine-Saint-Denis, often referred to by its nickname, "the 93" (the department's code) or variations on it (the "9-3" or "9.3"), which for many French symbolizes ghettos, delinquency, and poverty.

But on closer examination, Gonesse has two distinctive qualities making it a transitional space in greater Paris. Located at the limits of the metropolitan area, just where the dense part of the city ends, it marks the beginning of the periurban countryside that attracts the middle and upper classes. It is also on the edge of the poor sector of northeastern Ile-de-France (the administrative region consisting of Paris and its immediate periphery).

But two statistical studies on the socioeconomic transformations of the Ile-de-France dramatically highlight what makes Gonesse so distinctive. The city is still identified as a working class space, where laborers and basic employees are overrepresented and *cadres*<sup>37</sup> distinctly underrepresented in relation to the regional average.<sup>38</sup> But today it has a rising presence of midlevel occupations with a high concentration of public employees. Its transitional situation is confirmed by a study based on household income distribution rather than socioeconomic categories,<sup>39</sup> in which Gonesse appears to have a low presence of wealthy households (although they are numerous in metropolitan Paris overall) and a concentration of households in the middle-income and poor deciles. The types of housing found there reflect this socioeconomic composition: there are vast public housing projects, but also housing developments of single-family homes that help keep home-owning households in the area.

According to both of these studies, the regional trend is toward the disappearance of gradual transition zones between spaces of poverty and those of greater privilege. The gap between these spaces is becoming more dramatic, as seen in Gonesse: several neighboring cities have become poorer since the 1990s (for example, Garges-lès-Gonesse, Aulnay-sous-Bois, and Bondy; see Map 0.1), while other nearby cities concentrate increasingly well-off households (such as Ecoeu and Deuil-La Barre, in Map 0.1).

In this part of Ile-de-France, where contrasts are particularly high, Gonesse is a site of transition from poor to better-off towns. Analysis of census data makes this evident: Between the 1990 and 1999 censuses, only six out of ten Gonesse households stayed put, while the other four moved elsewhere. The amplitude of this migration seems to be the key to defining the city's social function since the 1960s. As a space for taking in new populations,





**MAP 0.1.** Map of greater Paris; Gonesse is found in the upper left. The dark lines indicate the outlines of administrative departments. (Source: Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme d'Ile de France)

Gonesse primarily attracts young couples with children and some retirees. New arrivals are predominantly from the working classes: basic employees and laborers represent over half of the newcomers. Inversely, the social categories leaving Gonesse were mainly tradesmen, shop-owners, business-owners, mid-level employees, *cadres*, and high-level intellectual occupations. The higher their position on the social scale, the greater their likelihood of leaving. Census data also reveals that Gonesse is a place for becoming a first-time homeowner or upgrading property ownership for households already settled in greater Paris.

In Gonesse, the study focused on a neighborhood, “the Poplars,” that embodies all these processes. Mobility is higher there than in the rest of the city, and the percentage of homeowners is the highest of all Gonesse’s neighborhoods (70 percent). The Poplars, at the epicenter of the opposing sociospatial dynamics typical of the Ile-de-France, is indeed marked by increasing internal differentiation. Since 1990, the census divides it into two zones: the Poplars, designating the oldest part of the neighborhood, and the New Poplars, which corresponds to the more recently built areas.

In the New Poplars, there was a decline in the number of laborers and basic employees, a strong increase in mid-level occupations, and a slight

rise in the proportion of *cadres* (12 percent) between 1990 and 1999. But basic employees are still the main group present (42 percent), with a very significant presence of public-sector employees. A third of residents in this part of the neighborhood have degrees at the *baccalauréat* level or higher,<sup>40</sup> and the unemployment rate (10 percent) was below the overall city level (15 percent) in 1999. The New Poplars brings together households of relatively comfortable means: the annual median income per consumption unit was 17,544 euros, as compared with 13,882 euros for all of Gonesse.

We find the reverse in the older Poplars zone—a decline in the percentage of mid-level occupations and employees, a strong rise in the percentage of laborers (24.5 percent, and of unskilled laborers among them), while public-sector employees are less present. The percentage of residents without educational qualifications has risen, as has the unemployment rate (17 percent). The median annual income in the Poplars (11,910 euros) is below the city median, which reflects the impoverishment of part of its population. But the economic situation of its households remains overall better than that of residents of Gonesse's public housing neighborhoods, and the proportion of *cadres* (9 percent) is still above the city average. These trends thus indicate that this part of the Poplars is far from being indistinguishable from public housing projects, but that it clearly diverges from the better-off part of the neighborhood.

Census data reaches its limits, however, when it comes to understanding the processes that led to such differences. Each zone (Poplars and New Poplars) has a relatively homogeneous population, and the differentiation is actually found between microneighborhoods on a smaller scale. To comprehend the dynamics in play, then, we must revisit how the neighborhood was urbanized, in a patchwork of construction projects from a wide range of real estate development activities. Local urbanization policy as well as real estate market actors, developers, and builders thus all had their hand in influencing the composition of the neighborhood's population today.

## A PATCHWORK OF SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES

The neighborhood is located near Gonesse's downtown and is well served by the metropolitan Paris public transportation system; its residents' social characteristics are wide-ranging, as are the architectural styles and property values of their homes. The Poplars has 1,400 single-family houses, in a broad array of architectural styles resulting from a succession of real estate development initiatives.

Urbanization began in the 1920s with the creation of two garden-city-style developments near a train station, followed by the gradual construction of about 300 houses in a farming zone through the 1950s. The neighborhood

only really took off in the 1960s with a boom in the city's population, which quadrupled between 1954 and 1960 largely due to the construction of high-rise housing projects.<sup>41</sup>

From 1958 to 1966, a large-scale development project led to the construction of 644 row houses (also known as grouped houses or townhouses)—three-story attached homes with adjoining side walls (see Illustration 0.1). This project was similar to initiatives in other neighborhoods of Gonesse, greater Paris, and across France. The sales brochure of the time suggests that the appeal of these homes lay in their technical attributes that made them so modern (reinforced concrete, bathrooms with tubs and showers, water closets, central heating, ceramic tiles, parquet floors), and by a certain symbolic prestige conferred by reference to the homes as a “residence” as well as names for various house styles evoking luxurious places in and around Paris such as “Vendôme,” “Monceau,” and “Chantilly.” The rows of houses are of variable lengths, along a street or in a horseshoe around small squares. Their footage is from 85 to 95 square meters, with four to five rooms and a garage, and they have yards of about 150 square meters (see Illustration 0.2). Homeowners' associations manage upkeep of the small squares' shared infrastructure. This makes it a rather specific kind of housing: single-family, but with points in common with collective housing. Businesses and new schools ap-



ILLUSTRATION 0.1. Row houses. (Photo taken by author)



ILLUSTRATION 0.2. Adjoining yards. (Photo taken by author)

peared in the neighborhood in the 1970s. The microneighborhood of row houses is populated by families with young children, fostering an intense social life, and it goes on to become the heart of the Poplars.

The third phase of building, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, was organized in subdivisions. Its 250 two-story houses had footage ranging from 90 to 110 square meters. These houses were either in duplex or free-standing, most of them arranged in a so-called village-style: private cul-de-sacs circled by about twenty so-called grouped (duplex) houses, built by the developer, based on a choice of more or less spacious models in the same style and construction methods, interconnected by footpaths. These houses are slightly larger than the row houses and have rather large backyards (350–600 square meters) that initially bordered farmland (see Illustration 0.3).

But a few years later, these fields became the fourth and final housing zone, following the construction of a golf course there in 1991. Several developer-builders offered the 200 or so properties, locally referred to as the “golf-course” houses, and some houses from this phase of construction (such as those built by the developers Kaufman and Broad, abutting the golf course) are distinctly larger and of higher standing than other houses in the neighborhood (see Illustration 0.4). These developments were aimed at a more affluent clientele than the preceding initiatives.



**ILLUSTRATION 0.3.** Mid-range single-family homes. (Photo taken by author)

Because of its gradual urbanization, this assemblage of single-family homes thus brings together houses of very different sizes: the surface area can double from one to the next, and plot surface area varies to a factor of five. The row houses (by far the most numerous) are the smallest homes, with the narrowest yards. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the most recent houses are the biggest, with sprawling properties by French standards. The oldest houses and those from the 1970s to 1980s are medium-sized with rather large yards.

The real estate and social values of this housing have changed with time, each wave of construction influencing the standing of the others. This is captured to a certain extent by using selling price as an indicator of houses' relative values. Using a database of property sales tracked by the Gonesse planning office from 1988 to 2005 (DIA—see box “Building and Using the DIA Database”) allowed us to quantify the cost differences between sections of the neighborhood (old houses from the 1920s to 1950s; row houses; 1980s subdivisions; recent houses). Thus, in 2005, the most recent houses were worth 50 percent more than the row houses, and the oldest houses and those from the 1980s were worth 30 percent more. This hierarchy seems to have become even more marked over the last decade. Indeed recent developments linked to changes in the national and regional real estate market (a



ILLUSTRATION 0.4. More recent “golf course” houses. (Photo taken by author)

brutal drop in values between 1991 and 1997, then a rapid rise) have uneven consequences on different parts of the neighborhood. The houses from the 1920s to 1950s and the 1970s to 1980s thus experienced a strong upswing in value, while the row houses’ value was less affected.



#### BUILDING AND USING THE DIA DATABASE

This database was built and treated by Jean-Pierre Hassoun and Baya Sekraoui, based on the “Declarations of the Intent to Alienate” (DIA) filed with the city of Gonesse.

The DIA is a statement that notaries handling property contracts must send city hall prior to the closing of a sale. This became mandatory in 1987. The following information appears on each declaration: the property’s address, name and address of seller, name of buyer (since 1990), buyer’s address at the time of the transaction, the plot’s surface area, inhabitable surface area (since 1996), price, and date of signing of the sales agreement.

The database contains this information for 634 transactions between April 1998 and May 2005.



Houses' sales prices make it possible to pin down an internal ranking within the neighborhood that is inseparable from the houses' material characteristics and the social value attributed to them. The main division opposes the row houses at the heart of the neighborhood with all other house types, which then break out into the most highly valued new and recent "golf course" houses, followed by the oldest houses accruing considerable value, and last the 1970s and 1980s subdivision houses whose value also nearly doubled.

This quick tour of the history of the neighborhood's urban development demonstrates that these microneighborhoods are the most relevant scale for studying the Poplars's internal dynamics. But the processes influencing their relative values are naturally also related to changes in the populations living in them. Neighborhood residents hold a range of social positions, from laborers to *cadres*, but beyond that, the group of households we have called little-middles appears to remain central, renewing itself over the generations.

### THE ROW HOUSES: FROM "PIONEERS" TO "FOREIGNERS"

It is necessary to study the neighborhood's settlement and its population's social construction process to understand how this stratified patchwork of housing has served as a neighborhood of social ascension as well as (inevitable) downclassing.<sup>42</sup> Of all the levels of housing present, the row-house zone is the core that gives structure to the whole.

Depending on the era, we can characterize the flow of arrivals in the neighborhood and how it developed by combining a variety of complementary archival sources and interviews with some long-time residents still living in the Poplars or elsewhere in Gonesse.




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#### ARCHIVAL DATA ON THE PEOPLING OF THE ROW HOUSES

For the 1973–86 period, the archives of the Plateau, a microneighborhood of 136 single-family homes built in 1965–66, contain the notifications of transfer (or sale) that notaries submitted to its homeowners' association. They indicate the transaction date and sometimes the occupations of those leaving and arriving, as well as their age, place of birth, and address prior to the Poplars.

For the early period, we could supplement these archives with analysis of a sample of nominative data from the 1968 and 1975 censuses.

For the more recent period (1988–2005), we have the DIA database compiled from the municipal archives, described earlier in this introduction. These archives are exhaustive, but they are less rich than the previous ones for studying social characteristics.



The archives allow us to reconstruct a different version of the neighborhood's history that nuances the version most often heard in interviews, that of the "deterioration" of the neighborhood with the influx of "foreigners" (the "Turks") in the 1990s.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to this image of the harsh transformation of a once-stable neighborhood, the archives suggest that the neighborhood served as a stepping-stone for some residents from the outset, and renewal is actually a permanent trait of the row houses.

Most of the initial buyers of the new row houses (between 1958 and 1964) were employed by large public and private enterprises in jobs ranging from skilled laborers to mid-level *cadres*. These "pioneers," as they refer to themselves, were a generation whose lifestyle left a lasting effect on the neighborhood. These households had left other parts of France to come to the Paris area, making them the first generation in their families to own a single-family home in metropolitan Paris, another fact reflected in the pioneer label. When asked how they came to settle in Gonesse and the Poplars in particular, all the interviewed residents of this generation mentioned the dearth of new housing at the time, their financial limitations, and the need to grasp available opportunities: high-rise housing projects and this kind of row house were the only options they could afford. But the appeal of a single-family house was also in play to a certain extent, and nostalgic references to the neighborhood's former status went so far as calling it "chic":

Mme Pageot: The Poplars used to be a chic neighborhood before. People were owners, all the little houses . . . And then there were some people who lived in Paris and came on weekends. It was a sort of residential neighborhood. And I knew some people down there [*Gonesse center*]*—it was more farmers, it wasn't as good. For young people down there, girls from the Poplars weren't for them. You said it like that at the time—the Poplars was already sort of a cut above.*

Such references make the neighborhood seem like it was "sort of a cut above" the old downtown and the apartment complexes. Moreover, long-time residents today frequently describe the social position of pioneers and the neighborhood's early image as "lower *cadres*" (M and Mme Samson, M. Lenormand) or "middle classes" (M. and Mme Heurtin).

But is it possible that these residents, quick to embellish the past, tend to represent the neighborhood's early population as socially higher than it actually was? Using the resources at our disposal, we can get a relatively clear overview of the pioneers' occupations when they moved into the Poplars in the 1960s. The first generation was not a majority of *cadres*, not even mid-level ones. The occupation of office worker was most prevalent, for both men and women, and laborers and *cadres*/midlevel occupations formed the two main minorities above and below. If the image of a neighborhood of lower *cadres* does not entirely represent reality in the 1960s, this is because



it designates the positions they aspired to more than their actual positions, reflecting their aspirations for advancement. These households dreamed of improving their living conditions, and the men and women we met never expressed the reticence or regret at having crossed over to white-collar work so often heard in laboring milieus. In fact, all of the women began their working lives in offices. Households that maintained a connection with manual labor—at least early in their careers—were often heterogamous: the husband was a skilled laborer and the wife an office worker. Often, the latter had pursued schooling longer, through the exam marking completion of middle school (BEPC; Brevet d'étude premier cycle) or even as far as the *baccalauréat*, while the husband's formal studies ended after receiving his primary school graduation certificate (*certificat d'études primaire*) or a short technical program degree. Such heterogamous alliances seem to be a fundamental impetus for these upward trajectories.

And last, all the pioneers we met had been young couples with two, three, or even four preschool-aged children when they moved into the neighborhood. This crops up again and again in interviews, along with the feeling of equality and similarity that we will return to later, as if the fact of being parents of small children, a characteristic immediately visible on the residential scene, eclipsed differences in socioeconomic status. Young parents with at least two children: this demographic characteristic is so obvious that one runs the risk of overlooking it, although it is crucial, as we shall see, for understanding how people live and socialize locally. Another similarity contributing to pioneers' feeling of homogeneity and equality is a widespread working-class background: the first residents all came from families of farmers, laborers, or small tradesmen. They all, men and women alike, experienced a socially upward trajectory relative to their parents. Some pioneers come from families with immigrant backgrounds (Portuguese or Italian), but all were born in France. Only a minority of couples is composed of a husband and a wife born in the same administrative department, adding up to only a quarter of all households (nine of thirty-eight). The fact that they are rarely from the same geographical area is thus an important characteristic: the migration experience and geographical distance from their parental families contributes to their seeing Gonesse as a space devoted to a life unlike the one they knew as children.

So it is clear that the microneighborhood of row houses favored the formation of a group of upwardly mobile households, brought together by common values and intense social interaction, and fostered their local rootedness—but this should not overshadow the steady replacement and renewal of the population living in the row houses. By the mid 1980s, nearly half the pioneers of the Plateau sector had sold their homes and moved out, a fact that contrasts with the oft-heard story of the long-stable neighborhood

supposedly turned upside-down overnight by the arrival of families from Turkey in the 1990s. In fact, the row houses had quickly come to serve as transitional housing for a number of families who began to move on after a stabilization period of about five years. Several pioneer couples had rapidly resold their homes, explaining they left because they were looking for a “real house,” meaning a free-standing house with a bigger yard. Such departures meant that from the very outset, this microneighborhood was a stepping-stone for some, and a place for others to lay down roots. Moving there in the 1960s made social ascension happen, but in the 1970s and 1980s, ascension happened through leaving the neighborhood. When neighbors thought to be equals move away to buy a better home elsewhere, does the neighborhood continue to function as a space of promotion?

Neighborhood demographics do not seem to have been deeply disturbed in this first phase of renewal. Interviews and archives show the new arrivals included laborers (skilled and unskilled), mid-level occupations, and a few *cadres*. Similarity reigned. New residents’ demographic characteristics were more diverse: the row houses still attracted young couples with children, but also households of laborers nearing retirement who became homeowners late in their working lives. Another common trait was moving there from large public housing projects in and around Paris: either they grew up there in laboring families, or they had begun their adult residential paths there. This experience of living in the projects when their conditions went into decline is significant, both in terms of how they would relate to their new homes and neighborhood and how they would be seen by the well-settled pioneers, their new neighbors.

The row-house population continued to be renewed in the 1990s, and the aforementioned database on 1988–2005 sales allows some aspects to be substantiated.<sup>44</sup> First of all, there are more sales of row houses than any other kind of housing in the Poplars. In addition, we could identify newcomers’ national origins based on their family names,<sup>45</sup> and whether they were coming from public housing based on their address. New arrivals came from nearby residential areas. Only 30 of 383 buyers were from departments outside the Ile-de-France region, and even they were from nearby departments such as the Oise. The rest were overwhelmingly from departments in the northern periphery of Paris, especially from towns neighboring Gonesse with a strong public housing presence and rising poverty. Buyers coming from Paris mainly came from the most working-class *arrondissements* (eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth). In the 1990s, the row-house neighborhood became a space for first-time homeownership for families from working-class towns and cities near Gonesse, some of whom had been living in HLMs (*habitation à loyer modéré*, low-income subsidized housing, which is frequently built in large projects in urban peripheries). Buyers from elsewhere in Gonesse had

either been living in an HLM neighborhood or were already living in the row houses, either as renters who went on to buy their homes or as children who grew up there and bought near their parents. These residential backgrounds are distinctly different from those of the pioneers, who mostly came from other parts of France. Families from the HLMs of working-class cities around Paris began to move in the late 1970s, but their arrival accelerated and became particularly visible in the 1990s.

The same seems to be true for the national and migratory backgrounds of the new arrivals. Analysis of the 431 buyers' family names shows first of all that although Turkish family names are numerous among newcomers between 1990 and 2005, their arrival was spread out: we are far from the brutal onslaught of an ethnic community bloc. The diversity of family names also reminds us that immigration from Turkey is hardly new, and far from homogeneous: Armenians, Kurds, and Chaldeans all have very different stories and paths. Some Armenian families had been living in the neighborhood or nearby for a long time, and the presence of Kurds is also product of a diffuse migration across metropolitan Paris. The Chaldean families came to France later, when a wave of repression in Turkey forced this neo-Aramaic-speaking Christian minority of the Chaldean Catholic Church to emigrate in the early 1980s. This situation made them eligible for political refugee status, and they were settled in metropolitan Paris or elsewhere in France. The Chaldean families' search for affordable housing suitable for very large families (they are traditionalist Catholics) brought them to the Poplars's row houses, but their housing progression is also in line with the gradual trajectory of leaving HLMs experienced by the preceding generation of arrivals, at a pace varying from family to family.

The arrival of Chaldean, Kurdish, and Armenian families is part of a larger neighborhood shift toward immigrant families or families with non-French backgrounds. These "Turkish families" (as they are referred to in the neighborhood) represent about a third of newcomers, but half of recent arrivals have family names from other foreign countries: the Maghreb predominates, but names also come from sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Pakistan, southern and eastern Europe, and elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> These families (immigrant or from immigrant backgrounds, coming from elsewhere in the Ile-de-France region and many from HLMs) are the bulk of new row-house residents. They are clearly different from the pioneer families and are much more diverse in terms of age and social trajectory.

An overview with some profiles of these immigrant families would convey the variety of situations. Most of the Chaldean families already lived in metropolitan Paris (or elsewhere in France), most in a very run-down private housing complex in Clichy-sous-Bois in the department Seine-Saint-Denis, before buying a house in the Poplars. Initially the fathers were the

only employed members of these households (most often as semi-skilled laborers), so home ownership became possible with the help of extended family, unlike the pioneers, who were supported by their employers.

The Güneses were weavers in a mountain village in Turkey who came to France in 1985 and were granted political refugee status. They first lived with family in a very deteriorated neighborhood of a city in the outskirts of Paris, then for two years in an HLM in another part of France, where they received support as political refugees. Since the father couldn't find work, the family decided to go back to the Paris area so he could work in the garment industry. One of the father's sisters looked for housing for them before they came, a difficult task as there were eleven people to house (they had nine children). She found the row house, which they bought in 1991. Their neighbors, also Chaldean, helped them when they moved. The eldest son Paul, who at the time of our study had a DEUG degree (diplôme d'études universitaires générales, a two years of post-*baccalauréat* university study) in law and worked at a real estate agency, plans someday to buy a house nearby, but in a more prestigious town.

Most non-Chaldean families moved directly from HLMs in neighboring towns, often drawn to the Poplars by the relatively low cost without really knowing the neighborhood.

The Bonfos migrated from Togo in the early 1980s, and bought a row house in 2001. He is a stock controller in a food business, and she is a nurse's aid in a retirement home. He had been living in Paris, and she in an HLM housing project in another town in the department; they began living together in her housing project in 1988. After the birth of their two children, they wanted to leave the deteriorating housing project and looked to buy in the area. Going through a real estate agency, they decided to move to the Poplars because they preferred a single-family home, and this one was within their means.

As these examples attest, many families from HLMs buy a row house because it is one of the only kinds of housing they can afford. Like the first generation of inhabitants, this purchase sometimes serves as a step in a residential progression bringing them from HLM to a single-family house.

M. and Mme Piazza bought a row house in 1989. M. Piazza, whose grandfather was Italian, grew up in Sarcelles. He and his wife met there, while she was staying with her aunt who lived in the same apartment tower. He was a laborer for a tradesman in Paris, then a municipal worker for a town in the Val-d'Oise. She was an administrative employee in the city hall of another town, where she got regular promotions. They first lived in a low-income apartment building reserved for civil servants in Gonesse, then bought an apartment, which was followed by a row house. They sold it in 2005 to buy a "real house" with a bigger yard in the neighboring city of Arnouville.

As we can see, among these new residents, the fact of coming from an HLM, being an immigrant, or having foreign roots can span a wide range of situations. These situations all correspond, however, to trajectories of

social ascension that progress thanks to the possibility of homeownership offered by the row houses. Some of these new households, like the Piazzas, can unquestionably be identified as little-middles: from working-class backgrounds, they have risen both professionally and residentially, distancing themselves from the working classes and placing them closer to the middle. But this is not the case for all newcomers: the Chaldean families, and some others as well, remain firmly in the categories of laborer, unskilled laborer, or small business owner, so becoming a homeowner does not necessarily mean everyone leaves the condition of laborer behind. It can consequently be said that the row houses were partly renewed from below in the 1990s.

At the same time, though, the Poplars as a whole was also being renewed from above, because of the construction of new subdivisions that would assume the role of new zones of social advancement with greater appeal to some families.

### THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ZONES OF ASCENSION

Roughly 260 houses were built in the mid 1970s and mid 1980s, laid out in subdivisions meant to evoke villages. These houses were not very big, but their yards were rather large, and they have been inhabited by families with small children whose parents come mainly from working-class backgrounds and hold a variety of occupational positions—mid-level occupations and even some *cadres* along with laborers, basic employees, and small shopkeepers. The first residents of the 1970s subdivisions have trajectories rather similar to those of the first generation of row-house owners, a decade their senior. Interviews with several former residents of a small square named “Hamlet” dating from 1976 to 1980 revealed trajectories that neatly correspond to the position of the row house little-middles. The couples in late-1970s houses are characterized by upward social trajectories and low-level or no educational qualifications, whose mobility was due to careers in a single enterprise (especially for men) and accumulating real estate equity. Several lifestyle traits keep these socially rising families connected with the working classes. A significant number of them left upon retirement, many moving to other parts of France while others went on to have houses built on the Poplar’s newer squares in the early 1980s, in all cases ceding their place to younger families. These new families were different from their immediate predecessors: many of them had lived in HLMs, were more likely to be from immigrant backgrounds (from French overseas departments or territories as well as the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, or Asia), and had experienced a social ascension closely related to higher studies and employment as a civil servant.

In “Partridge Terrace,” a subdivision we studied in depth, laborers, basic employees, mid-level occupations, and *cadres* all live together. The percentage of public employees is significant (at least half the couples contained at least one, according to the data). Two couples from the Terrace illustrate these characteristics well.

M Bensoussan is a (nonengineer) computing technician for a bank, and Mme Bensoussan is a schoolteacher in a neighboring working-class city. Both come from Algerian Jewish families that had respectively moved into the Cité du Nord housing project in Gonesse and to the nearby city of Sarcelles in 1962. M. Bensoussan’s father worked as pharmaceutical preparer, and his mother was a homemaker. His parents also had a house built on Partridge Terrace, and left the Cité du Nord in 1986.

M and Mme Loiseau are both from farming families in the French overseas department of Martinique, where it is rare for young people to pursue schooling. Both of them completed middle school. He is a police brigadier, having first joined as a patrolman, and she was a civil servant (an administrative employee in the Ministry of Justice) after having held temporary positions in a variety of agencies. They lived in an HLM (like their siblings who also migrated to mainland France) before having a house built.

These couples achieved a significant ascent that unequivocally places them in the middle classes, and a minority of them (working as *cadres* and engineers) even approaches the upper classes. Within the neighborhood’s internal stratification, village-style subdivision residents are thus an intermediate stratum, being situated (as one of the square’s residents put it) “between the Turks and the golf,” which is to say, between the row houses where the families from Turkey now live and the more upscale houses built near the golf course.

The so-called golf-course houses are the most recent addition to the neighborhood. They are larger than other houses in the neighborhood, so some teenaged residents have dubbed it Beverly Hills, and people living there are sometimes described as “rich” or “bourgeois.” City hall and many residents alike have created a clear distinction between this zone and what many refer to as the “old Poplars.”

As a result, one comes across well-off business-owners as well as high-level *cadres* with advanced degrees, and sometimes even couples of high-level *cadres*. Some of them are invested in local life and the schools, and their presence draws all “golf course” homeowners socially upward.

M and Mme Fayard are respectively a computing engineer and a doctor (general practitioner). She was in a private practice until 2004, when she became a school doctor. Her father was a skilled laborer, and his an engineer. They are about forty and have three sons who are doing well in Gonesse’s public middle school and *lycée*.<sup>47</sup> Mme

Fayard is very active in the FCPE (Fédération des Conseils de Parents d'Elèves) a school parents' association that is considered left-leaning, and has been a Socialist municipal official since 2001. Originally from mining zones in eastern France, they both went to school in Nancy then left to work in greater Paris. After renting houses in the area, they had a large house with six rooms built on a 600-square-meter property they purchased in 1995.

Although this microneighborhood's population has a higher proportion of *cadres* than elsewhere in the Poplars, it is once again the diversity that matters. The upscale real-estate offerings appearing in the early 1990s did not reach the wealthy clientele they originally targeted. Some plans for deluxe subdivisions were converted into simpler versions, and some plots were sold as building lots for individual construction. It is likely that their proximity to an HLM housing project and the old row houses handicapped these elite projects. The everyday noise from the air traffic at nearby Charles de Gaulle airport may also have deterred affluent families from buying houses that were still rather expensive. As a result, many people in mid-level occupations and even some basic employees were able to move to this part of the neighborhood despite having thought they could never "aim that high," as Mme Germain put it. She grew up in Gonesse and has family ties there, and managed to buy a house in the "golf course" microneighborhood thanks to a significant upward professional ascension.

Mme Germain is forty-three and has always lived in Gonesse. Her parents were able to buy a small house thanks to her father's initiative, which got him internally promoted from his start as a basic employee. Her mother worked in a bank, stopped working, then resumed working (as a phone operator) upon the early death of her husband. Mme Germain left school at the end of *lycée* and worked as a bank employee like her two sisters. M. Germain is a customer service representative in a bank. He has a secondary-level vocational degree (a BEP, *brevet d'études professionnelles*) and was promoted internally. His father was a deliveryman (formerly an agricultural laborer), and his mother a child-care provider. He grew up in the Cité du Nord housing project, also in Gonesse. The Germaines initially bought an apartment in a neighboring town, but after having three children they took out a loan to buy their house in 1996. The surface area of the house is 100 square meters, on a 300-square-meter property. Mme Germain is a member of the local FCPE (school parents' association).

Another share of the new homeowners comes directly from HLMs in metropolitan Paris. They are composed of couples, many of which are immigrants or children of immigrants and/or work as lower-level civil servants, who bought a house or had one built here to escape "the projects."

In 2003, Karima Dhif and her husband bought a house under market price because its first owners were divorcing and needed to sell quickly. The house had only eighty

square meters of surface area, but the yard was rather big and Karima's sister Nadia and one of her coworkers also lived in the neighborhood. Karima and Nadia's parents are Algerian, and their father used to be a laborer. Karima left school upon completion of *lycée* and is an administrative employee in a university. Her husband, who is from Morocco, has a secondary-level vocational degree (BEP) and is a machinist for the metropolitan Paris train network, the RATP (Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens). She grew up in an HLM in Bondy until her parents bought a house. When Karima and her husband married they moved into an HLM. With their parents' help and thanks to their status as public employees, they were able to get a mortgage to buy a house.

The arrival of these couples from HLMs, who often come from laboring and immigrant backgrounds, further diversifies this newly built microneighborhood that outsiders frequently describe as being full of *cadres*. Although these *cadres* are socially visible and valued within the neighborhood, the neighborhood is nonetheless still a zone of ascension, as much for families with roots in other less prestigious neighborhoods of Gonesse as for those coming from HLMs, so the people renewing the neighborhood's population are indeed little-middles. But as we shall see, their trajectories are very different from those of the row-house pioneers.

This sampling shows that, to the contrary of what many long-term residents say, the row-house neighborhood's history is not only one of an abrupt change in the 1990s when families from Turkey arrived. It is also the story of a slow diversification that began in the 1970s with the departure of some of the Poplars's earliest arrivals. These pioneers are indeed gradually replaced by families from housing projects in metropolitan Paris, who are often foreign—including the Chaldeans from Turkey—or from immigrant families and thought to downgrade the neighborhood. But at the same time, from the 1980s to the 2000s, the more costly houses in the newly built subdivisions would attract better-off families that elevate that microneighborhood's social status. These population changes, related to population renewal and new construction, spark some significant social moves within and out of the neighborhood, and are behind the constant social downclassing and reclassing that this book aims to comprehend. How does this mix of small homeowners born in France of French parents, from recent waves of immigration, and descended from older migrations living in housing projects coexist and live together in this residential neighborhood whose population has been in constant renewal since the 1970s? How do these residents of diverse origins perceive each other, and how do they relate to each other in everyday life? How important is ethnic belonging, along with demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, in these perceptions and relations? What activities and groups of people prompt neighbors to lend each other a hand or, to the contrary, express hostility or rejection?



## A COLLECTIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SMALL HOMEOWNERS

Study of the city of Gonesse began in 2003–4, as part of a program to train students in urban ethnography. A member of the teaching team had grown up there and knew the city well, prompting us to choose it as a field site. In its second year, 2004–5, the study focused on the social trajectories of people living in the Poplars neighborhood as well as their residential practices and neighborly relations. The researcher-student team tightened in 2005–6, then was reduced to the authors of this book in 2006–7.<sup>48</sup> Research in the neighborhood itself thus took place over the course of nearly four years and involved several stays during which we were housed in the neighborhood and additional periodic visits to conduct interviews or observe local events.

It was not easy to contact residents of the Poplars, or to convince them to talk with researchers. The youngest households—dual-income couples—are not home very much because of their long work days and/or commuting times, and when they are, they prefer family activities: one woman we telephoned several times ended up replying that she is only available weekends, and weekends are “for family life.” The oldest residents—retirees who are home most of the time—are (as we will see) unhappy with how the neighborhood has developed and seem suspicious or disillusioned when asked to talk about their house and neighborhood today. And more generally speaking, these homeowners trying to be “like everyone else” have trouble seeing how their stories or lifestyles could interest researchers and students from Paris. Although they are prepared to decry the neighborhood’s “problems,” they are less eager to speak of themselves as individuals.

We were ultimately able to make contact with the network of longest-term residents by using the contacts of the teaching team member who had grown up in the Poplars and whose family still lived there, consisting of old neighbors and friends that went to the same recreational association. Being able to introduce ourselves as having connections with a family that had been in the neighborhood since the beginning was an open-sesame: the friendships and relationships of mutual aid tying these longtime residents together made them more willing to grant us interviews.

This connection with the group of long-term residents explains why the research addressed them more than the newcomers. Of course, we still worked to make contacts among more recent arrivals, especially with the families from Turkey, but research with them proved to be much more difficult—because of the language barrier, obviously, but for other reasons as well. In interview situations, they assumed the role of community representatives from the outset, and tried incessantly to counter the stigmatizing stereotypes that tarnished their community’s reputation; they avoided our

questions about domestic practices and personal histories to give an abstract collective image of a united, respectable, and well-integrated community.

To reach the youngest couples living in the most recent part of the neighborhood (the New Poplars), we began with the school parents' associations: the interest these parents show in schools and their children's education made them more likely to agree to invite Parisian researchers and/or students in their homes, because we were seen as representing the world of education they valued. A fortuitous chance encounter with a former student who had grown up in a Poplars subdivision and was still living there finally put us in touch with several "suburban youth" through his friendship and neighborly networks.

Once we had started pursuing these initial networks, our initial interviewees put us in touch with other homeowners, allowing us to gradually expand our contacts in a common ethnographic sampling technique.

The mayor of Gonesse was favorable to our study from the very beginning, if only because the Poplars "was a problem" for him: tensions between neighbors arising from how the population was developing, the increase in petty crime, the rising vote for the extreme-right political party Front National, and some households' socioeconomic insecurity led the city to designate this neighborhood as a "city contract" area (generally reserved for public housing neighborhoods) so it could benefit from state-sponsored "city policy,"<sup>49</sup> thus allowing it to intervene. The mayor put us in contact with a variety of administrative services, but he and his agents made only the slightest effort to influence our choice of residents to interview. In interviews, however, we did often have the feeling that the residents associated us with Gonesse city hall (in addition to Paris and the university) because the complaints and demands scattered throughout interviews often seemed to be aimed past us, at local authorities.

Interviewees often think of residential practices as too mundane and uninteresting to discuss them readily and at length in recorded interview situations. The choice to interview in pairs allowed us to minimize this problem by converting the interview into a tour of the house with one of us taking photographs: drawing our attention to particular objects and remarking on various interior and exterior arrangements led the people we interviewed to speak more explicitly and in greater detail of their residential history and neighborhood life today. The long interviews were then supplemented by observations of their houses as well as the surrounding streets and businesses. When we returned to the field without students at various times between 2005 and 2007, we were put up by neighborhood residents, which gave us further opportunities for observation and also allowed us to see some residents regularly, making them allies in our study (Isabelle Fayart, physician; Paul Günes, university student from a Chaldean family; Paulette Sanchez,

a row-house resident; Thomas Loiseau, university student living in one of the more recent subdivisions). We also attended local political and social events: neighborhood picnics, monthly neighborhood board meetings from October 2005 to June 2006, neighborhood council meetings,<sup>50</sup> the presidential election of April 2007, a public meeting city hall held for residents of the Poplars and the Cité du Nord after incidents between young people from the two neighborhoods. Following the 2008 French municipal elections, which were marked by a declared desire to open politics to “visible minorities,” we conducted another study in 2008–9 on Poplars residents who ran in this election.

Although the ethnographic rule of thumb holds that place names and the names of people should be changed when research findings are made public, in this case we chose to keep the actual city name, Gonesse. The need to contextualize our interviews and observations by relating the urban, economic, and social characteristics of the city made any effort to keep it anonymous useless, as anyone with the slightest knowledge of the Parisian metropolitan area could easily identify it. Retaining the real name moreover facilitates potentially fruitful comparisons and dialogue with geographers and urban sociologists, who do not generally hide place names. Nevertheless, the personal nature of the data acquired through interviews meant that we had to make it untraceable: the names of the neighborhood, streets, and schools have been changed, as well as the names of the people we spoke with, of course.

To conclude this introduction to the study and our argument for ethnographic methods in studying the class structure of contemporary France, we wish to stress how scientifically and politically important it is to use this research method to study the relationship that little-middles, these homeowners in modest social ascension, have with politics today. Every election cycle, local or national, prompts a mass of commentary on “modest suburban homeowners” as a group. The 2002 presidential election gave nationwide visibility to the suburban vote for the Front National, which is simplistically described as a vote by relegated “poor whites” living outside large cities, despite the fact that many residential neighborhood homeowners are now immigrants and people from immigrant backgrounds,<sup>51</sup> their residential trajectories are hardly in mass decline, and their voting preferences actually vary widely. The monograph format will allow us to connect political behavior to the neighborhood’s social history as well as the personal histories of the families living there. After characterizing how neighbors relate to each other and the form of social mobility that unites them, and demonstrating that the conditions that make these little social ascensions possible get harder for each successive generation, in the conclusion we will endeavor to describe and understand how these little-middles vote, and how they relate to local politics.

## NOTES

1. On the occasion of the English-language edition of our book (originally published in French in 2008), we have rewritten the introduction, integrating a subsequently published analysis: M Cartier, I Coutant, O Masclat, and Y Siblot, "From the Petite Bourgeoisie to the Little-Middles: An Invitation to Put Small Social Mobility into Question," in *The Routledge Companion to Bourdieu's "Distinction"*, ed. P Coulangeon and J Duval (Oxford, 2014), 63–77.
2. L Chauvel, *Le destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1998); L Chauvel, "Le retour des classes sociales," *Revue de l'OFCE* 79 (2001): 315–59; P Coulangeon, *Les métamorphoses de la distinction. Inégalités culturelles dans la France d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 2011); T Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 2014).
3. S Beaud and M Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière* (Paris, 1999).
4. S Beaud and M Pialoux, *Violences urbaines, violence sociale* (Paris, 2003).
5. I Backouche, F Ripoll, S Tissot, and V Veschambre, *La dimension spatiale des inégalités. Regards croisés des sciences sociales* (Rennes, 2011).
6. W Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987); W Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, 1997).
7. To cite but one prominent example from anthropology: P Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (New York, 1995).
8. However, an array of studies have shown the importance of homeownership to self-esteem and respectability, as much in the American working classes (D Halle, *America's Working Man: Work, Home and Politics among Blue Collar Property-Owners* (Chicago, 1984) as in the middle classes (K Newman, *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence* (New York, 1988). Gated communities have also been subject of recent studies, such as S Low's *Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York, 2003).
9. N Townsend, *The Package Deal* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002), 142; H Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York, 1982).
10. M Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago, 1999).
11. We chose to retain the French term *banlieue* in this text to avoid confusion with the connotations associated with the English-language word "suburb," though both technically refer to areas in the urban periphery. While in the United States, a suburb evokes the image of tidy lines of houses and neatly trimmed lawns (because of the American relationship to urbanization), in France *banlieue* raises the image of high-rise low-income housing projects (often referred to as *cités*) and the tensions Americans associate with the term *inner city* or *housing projects*. We have accordingly limited using *suburb* to cases with a more middle-class, single-family housing association, preferring the more neutral words *periphery* or *periurban* (where the urban edge mingles with farmland) for the geographical space surrounding the city itself.
12. The following is a nonexhaustive sampler of the many references on the subject: J Chamboredon and M Lemaire, "Proximité spatiale et distance sociale," *Revue française de sociologie* XI, no.1 (1970): 3–33; J Laé and N Murard, *L'argent des pauvres* (Paris, 1985); F Dubet, *La galère. Jeunes en survie* (Paris, 1987); O Masclat, *La*

- gauche et les cités. Enquête sur un rendez-vous manqué* (Paris, 2006); D Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain. Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui* (Paris, 2008).
13. C Pétonnet studies transitional housing projects; C Pétonnet, *On est tous dans le brouillard. Ethnologie des banlieues* (Paris, 1979); G Althabe studies neighborly relations in a housing project in the city of Nantes; G Althabe, "La résidence comme enjeu," in *Urbanisation et enjeux quotidiens. Terrains ethnologiques dans la France actuelle*, ed. G Althabe, C Marcadet, M de la Pradelle, and M Sélim (Paris, 1993), 11–69.
  14. The riots were set off by the electrocution of two young *banlieue* residents who hid from police pursuit in an electrical station. The ensuing uprising in *banlieue* across the country made international news and shook French society in their exposure of the tense and harsh living conditions in French public housing projects; for discussion, see D Fassin, "Riots in France and Silent Anthropologists," *Anthropology Today* 22, no. 1 (2006): 1–3; S Terrio, "Who Are the Rioters in France," *Anthropology News* 27, no. 1 (2006): 4–5.
  15. For example, H Lagrange and M Oberti, eds, *Émeutes urbaines et protestations. Une singularité française* (Paris, 2006).
  16. Two recent publications are good illustrations of this focus: B Epstein, *Collective Terms: Race, Culture, and Community in a State-Planned City in France* (New York, 2011); J Selby, *Questioning French Secularism: Gender Politics and Islam in a Parisian Suburb* (New York, 2012).
  17. N Haumont, *Les pavillonnaires: étude psychosociologique d'un mode d'habitat* (Paris, 2001). See also H Raymond, N Haumont, MG Dezès, and A Haumont, *L'habitat pavillonnaire* (Paris, 2001).
  18. S Magri, "Le pavillon stigmatisé. Grands ensembles et maisons individuelles dans la sociologie des années 1950 à 1970," *L'Année sociologique* 58, no. 1 (2008): 171–202.
  19. A Fourcaut, *Bobigny, banlieue rouge* (Paris, 1986). See also A Fourcaut, *La banlieue en morceaux. La crise des lotissements défectueux en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 2000).
  20. A Faure, ed., *Les premiers banlieusards* (Paris, 1991). In the United States in the 1960s, the Levittowners, who were quite focused on their houses as a unique space of freedom, nonetheless proved to be more "in the world" than their parents and grandparents had been: they trusted their neighbors and joined them in civic and social activities (Gans, *The Levittowners*).
  21. M Jaillot, *Les pavillonneurs* (Paris, 1984); P Bourdieu, *Les structures sociales de l'économie* (Paris, 2000).
  22. M Berger, *Les Périurbains de Paris: De la ville dense à la métropole éclatée* (Paris, 2004).
  23. D Pinson and S Thomann, *La maison en ses territoires. De la villa à la ville diffuse* (Paris, 2001); E Charmes, "Entre ouverture et fermeture: les rapports à autrui dans les tissus périurbains," in *La société des voisins*, ed. B Haumont and A Morel (Paris, 2005).
  24. C Bonvalet and A Gotman, eds, *Le logement une affaire de famille* (Paris, 1993); Y Grafmeyer and F Dansereau, *Trajectoires familiales et espaces de vie en milieu urbain* (Paris, 1998).
  25. M Verret, *L'espace ouvrier* (Paris, 1979); B Légé, "Les castors de la Monnaie," *Terrain* 9 (1987): 34–39; D Maison, "Pionniers de l'accession," *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 65 (1993): 46–53.

26. See “Petits et grands déplacements sociaux,” chapter 12 in B Lahire, *La Culture des individus* (Paris, 2004), 411–70.
27. C Peugny, *Le déclassement* (Paris, 2009).
28. Our work is very similar to that of anthropologist K Newman, who works to show the experience of downclassing among middle-class men and women, and how they interpret and react to the experience (Newman, *Falling from Grace*).
29. R Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London, 1957).
30. P Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984).
31. On greater Manchester, England, see “Local Habitus and Working-Class Culture,” chapter 5 in M Savage, G Bagnall, and B Longhurst, eds, *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identities and Lifestyle* (New York, 2008), 95–121; on Porto, Portugal, see V Borges Pereira, *Classes e Culturas de Classe das Famílias Portuenses. Classes sociais e “modalidades de estilização da vida” na cidade do Porto* (Porto, 2005).
32. Two former colleagues of Pierre Bourdieu formulated this criticism a couple years after the publication of *Distinction*, in a seminar on the sociology of the working classes at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in 1982 (see C Grignon and J Passeron, *Le Savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris, 1989). Anthropologists of working-class cultures have voiced similar critiques of the Bourdieusian approach to dominated groups. For example, see F Weber’s research on the positive taste for activity among rural laborers; F Weber, *Le Travail à côté* (Paris, 1989), and D Reed-Danahay’s analysis of her study on how farming and laboring families related to the school system in a rural village in the Auvergne region in the early 1980s (D Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996).
33. After studying forms of family life and gender roles among laborers in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France in a long-term ethnographic study (O Schwartz, *Le monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord* (Paris, 1990), Schwartz conducted an ethnographic study of bus drivers in metropolitan Paris in which he paid particular attention to how the cultural boundaries between the working and middle classes are reformed. He showed, for example, how the fact of holding a service job may partly change how men with low job skills conceive of virility, by favoring their apprenticeship in psychologically orthodox ways of behaving and speaking; Schwartz, “La pénétration de la ‘culture psychologique de masse’ dans un groupe populaire: paroles de conducteurs de bus,” *Sociologie 2*, no. 4 (2011): 345–61.
34. O Schwartz, “Does France Still Have a Class Society? Three Observations about Contemporary French Society,” *La Vie des idées* (2014), <http://www.booksandideas.net/Does-France-Still-Have-a-Class.html>.
35. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 318.
36. For a summary of sociopolitical debates on the petite bourgeoisie and the middle strata in the 1970s, see S Bosc, *Sociologie des classes moyennes* (Paris, 2008).
37. Employment categories reflect the categories of INSEE (the French census), which do not always have a simple equivalent in other census systems. Most relevant here are “basic employee” and “cadre.” According to the French census, an *employé* (translated as basic employee) is a vaguely defined category of low- to nonskilled workers, excluding laborers, that includes sales clerks, secretaries, domestic workers, hospital aids, firemen, police, and military. We retain the French term *cadre* according to the usage in the English translation of L Boltanski’s sociological treat-

- ment of this occupational category, akin to—but not the same as—a “white collar worker” in American English. *Cadres* are recognized both in the French census and in common usage as being persons occupying a range of jobs from low technician positions to upper executive, with associated job security, benefits, and social status. See L Boltanski, *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society*, trans. A Goldhammer (Cambridge, U.K., 1987).
38. E Préteceille, *La division sociale de l'espace francilien. Typologie socio-professionnelle 1999 et transformation de l'espace résidentiel 1990–1999* (Paris, 2003).
  39. T Saint-Julien, J-C François, H Mathieu, and A Ribardière, *Les disparités des revenus des ménages franciliens en 1999. Approches intercommunales et infracommunales et évolution des différenciations intercommunales (1990–1999)*, unpublished report for the DRIEF (Paris, 2003).
  40. The *baccalauréat* (commonly known as the *bac*) is a diploma marking successful completion of secondary schooling, granted upon passage of a rigorous annual nationwide examination. It is a prerequisite for academic-track university studies, but not necessarily for further vocational training. There are currently four specializations: science (the most prestigious), economics and social sciences, literature, and technology (the least valued).
  41. Gonesse's urbanization occurred at the same pace as that of Wissous, the village studied in the late 1950s by anthropologists R and B Anderson. While they were more concerned with gathering older residents' recollections of fading rural conditions, we are interested in the perspective of the new arrivals who began the urbanization of these old Ile-de-France villages; RT Anderson and BG Anderson, *Bus Stop for Paris: The Transformation of a French Village* (Garden City, NY, 1965).
  42. J Chamboredon, “Construction sociale des populations,” in *Histoire de la France urbaine*, ed. M Roncayolo (Paris, 1985), 467–501.
  43. The term “the Turks” is commonly used in the Poplars to refer to a diverse population including a variety of groups from Turkey as well as people from other backgrounds, which prompts us to use the term with quotes when evoking local usage and perception of “foreign” (as opposed to “French”) neighbors. We likewise sometimes use “foreign” with caution, because its usage corresponds more with perception of difference than actual nationality or even place of birth, further accentuated by the more fluid meaning of its equivalent in French (*étranger*), which can also designate “outsider.” The locally used term “the French” is also problematic, since some of the pioneering longtime residents have non-French origins (Italian, Portuguese) but identify and are fully accepted as French by other pioneers, while some of the newcomer “foreigners” are actually native-born French citizens. We thus use these three terms in quotation marks to describe these group dynamics in local terms without subscribing to their inaccurate and polarizing representations.
  44. There is no information on buyers for 1988 and 1989, so the analysis concerns 449 sales that took place between 1990 and 2005. As some information is lacking, we only know 383 prior addresses and 431 buyers' family names.
  45. It is sometimes difficult to identify the geographical origins of family names, and obviously they say nothing of the buyers' nationalities, birthplaces, or migratory paths. Here we identified French family names and foreign ones, sorted into four broad categories: European (Portugal, Italy, Yugoslavia . . .), Turkish (including Kurdish, Armenian, and Chaldean), Arab (for the most part from the Maghreb), and other (sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, etc.).

46. This great diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds is typical of many neighborhoods in France, especially in greater Paris's public housing and housing development neighborhoods. For example, B Epstein encountered a similar ethnic and cultural mix in the public housing neighborhood she studied in Cergy Pontoise (Epstein, *Collective Terms*).
47. We chose to retain the French word *lycée* to highlight the great difference between "high school" in the United States and the French system. *Lycée généraux* (which, following common usage, we will refer to simply as *lycée*) are fairly rigorous academic-track schools where most students aim to take an academic *baccalauréat* in order to attend university, whereas students pursuing vocational tracks attend lower-status *lycée professionnel* ("vocational *lycée*"), which prepares them for a manual trade, and in some cases a vocational *baccalauréat*. The vast majority of French youth attend one kind of *lycée* or another, but it is not required and they may opt for lower-level vocational training instead.
48. Appendix 1 contains the list of interviews cited in the book, as well as the names of the researchers that conducted them. Appendix 2 details additional data sources that do not fit into the bibliographical format.
49. The city policy developed in France since the 1990s consists of a collection of state actions aiming to renew certain so-called "sensitive" urban neighborhoods.
50. Neighborhood councils and boards are bodies aiming to get ordinary citizens to participate in the discussion of city decision-making that concerns the public. Of varying forms and names, these bodies for local citizen participation appeared in France in the late 1990s.
51. A Lambert, "*Tous propriétaires!*" *L'envers du décor pavillonnaire* (Paris, 2015).