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Yearning to Labor

John P. Murphy

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YEARNING TO LABOR

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YEARNING TO LABOR

Youth, Unemployment, and
Social Destiny in Urban France

John P. Murphy

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For Jillian

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Abbreviations

BEP	<i>brevet d'études professionnelles</i> (vocational training certificate)
BTS	<i>brevet de technicien supérieur</i> (senior technician certificate)
CAP	<i>certificat d'aptitude professionnelle</i> (certificate of professional competence)
CDD	<i>contrat à durée déterminée</i> (fixed-term contract)
CDI	<i>contrat à durée indéterminée</i> (permanent contract)
CES	Contrat emploi-solidarité (Solidarity employment contract)
CGT	Confédération générale du travail (General confederation of labor)
CNE	Contrat nouvelles embauches (New jobs contract)
CPE	Contrat première embauche (First job contract)
CTT	<i>contrat de travail temporaire</i> (temporary work contract)
ENA	École nationale d'administration (National school for civil service)
FJT	<i>foyer de jeunes travailleurs</i> (home for young workers)
JOC	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (Young Christian workers)

PAIO	<i>permanence d'accueil, d'information et d'orientation</i> (reception, information, and guidance center)
RMI	Revenu minimum d'insertion (Minimum subsistence income)
RSA	Revenu de solidarité active (Active solidarity income)
TUC	Travaux d'utilité collective (Works of collective utility)
UNEF	Union nationale des étudiants de France (National union of students of France)
ZEP	Zone d'éducation prioritaire (Priority education area)
ZRU	Zone de redynamisation urbaine (Urban revitalization area)
ZUS	Zone urbaine sensible (Disadvantaged urban area)

Introduction

This book is about social inequality and how people make sense of it in everyday life. It is about the categories and distinctions they use to position themselves and others, the meanings and significance they give to these, the feelings of connectedness or difference involved, and the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that may arise along the way. This book is also about unemployment. Drawing on a case study I conducted in France amid widespread fears of rising job insecurity, I portray the daily struggle of a group of young people from the outer city of Limoges, one of France's poorer, multiethnic *banlieues*, as they confront more than triple the national unemployment rate. In the process, I aim to illuminate how changes in the global economy sometimes referred to as “neoliberalism” shape and are shaped by local frameworks of thinking and being.

To say that the timing of my research was fortuitous would be a tremendous understatement. During my fieldwork year, France found itself in the throes of what have come to be known as the fall 2005 riots, a conflict so unprecedented in scope—more than 270 cities, including Limoges, were simultaneously engulfed by violence for three full weeks—that it made front-page news across the globe. Just months later, also during my research period, trouble erupted again in France, this time in the form of massive opposition to a proposed government employment bill called the *Contrat première embauche* (CPE; First job contract). Both conflicts implicated young people, and both involved explicit claims about social

inequality—specifically, the disproportionate number of youth affected by unemployment.

Since the early 1980s, contingent employment among working people under age thirty has nearly tripled in France. Today on average one out of every three workers in this age bracket is employed on a temporary basis. Meanwhile, unemployment is about as great for the under-thirty crowd as it was three decades ago, hovering at a much-higher-than-national-average of around 17 percent.¹ Such grim prospects undoubtedly rouse frustration, and this frustration, some commentators insisted, fueled the violence witnessed in late 2005 in France’s troubled outer cities. Certainly, this was a view presented by France’s leaders at the time, who, in response to the riots, proposed the CPE with the explicit goal of addressing unemployment among the country’s youth.

More than a decade later, it remains the case that some young people in France do better than others in the precarious job market. In the disadvantaged outer cities, employment figures can be far worse than national averages: as many as two out of three young working people may hold only a temporary or part-time job, and unemployment levels can soar to a staggering 40, even 50 percent. A great deal of ink has already been spilled over this category of French youth. However voluminous, this literature tends to describe the question in terms of statistics or trends. Though often talked about, such young people, it would seem, are seldom listened to. A central question I attempt to answer in this book is how they *experience, understand, and manage* the unequal access to employment they face.

Put another way, this book is about young people’s individual and collective perceptions of sameness and difference. It asks how youth struggling in the French job market position themselves both in relation to their peers, who may or may not experience similar difficulty finding or keeping work, and to previous generations, whose members came of age under different circumstances. Its title pays homage to a groundbreaking analysis of the social reproduction of inequality, *Learning to Labor*, published by British sociologist Paul Willis in 1977. Having conducted ethnographic field research among a group of twelve “lads” in a small,

industrial English town in the early 1970s, Willis set out in that book to explain how distinctions of social position are sustained from one generation to the next at an individual level. He demonstrated that the youth at the center of his study actively participated in the reproduction of what he called “class identity” by consciously rejecting the “work hard, move forward” mentality of modern education, preferring instead to identify with their fathers, who worked on the shop floor.

A lot has changed since Willis wrote that book. Industrial restructuring and the implementation of neoliberal capitalist policies across much of the globe have had a profound effect on employment practices. Whereas long-term, stable employment had been the norm during the decades of economic boom following World War II, today unemployment is increasingly a chronic condition. The result, economist Guy Standing (2011) argues, is the emergence of a new “dangerous class” of people—a precarious proletariat, or “precariat.” In the context of such claims, the question we need to raise, and one that anthropology, with its intense focus on people’s everyday perspectives and practices, is particularly well positioned to explore, I argue, is not how today’s youth “learn to labor,” but rather what are their experiences *yearning to labor*? In other words, what are their desires and expectations about finding and keeping work, and what strategies of adaption, negotiation, or resistance do they develop in response to the bleak job prospects that await them once they leave school?

This question, in turn, raises another: In the absence of large-scale industrial manufacture, and stable employment more generally, does the label “working class,” or even “class”—the lens Willis found so compelling in his analysis and which Standing adopted in his formulation of the precariat—still hold meaning for most or even many people today in places like France, as they attempt to make sense of their social world and the inequality they encounter in it? Certainly, “social class” was one category used by commentators in France and elsewhere to decipher the fall 2005 riots and the spring 2006 protests, but so too were a multitude of other distinctions, including, notably, race and ethnicity.

What interests me, and what this book tries to illuminate, is not whether

one or another of these categories or distinctions better describes the riots, the protests, the difficult job market—or social life more generally and its unevenness in France or elsewhere, as if some fundamental truth were awaiting discovery. Rather, I seek to understand *how* such classifications get used. I ask who deploys them, when, in what context, and to what effect. It is my contention that such categories and distinctions are not in themselves meaningful or the root cause of social inequality in France or the world beyond. Far from the commonsense, immutable ideas they are often presented as encapsulating, they take on shifting meanings and significance over time and space. In this book I argue that social categories are used practically and strategically by people in the working out of everyday life (including during more exceptional moments, like the fall riots and the spring protests) to make specific claims and to achieve desired results. Depending on the intentions, understandings, and resources of those putting them into circulation, they can have vastly different consequences or outcomes.

To be sure, the transformations under way in the French labor market extend far beyond France's borders. Across much of the globe, greater flexibility in employment practices is widely viewed as vital for remaining competitive in increasingly interconnected, fast-paced, information-driven economies. Yet it is in the actions of individuals living in time and space that such extralocal forces are embodied, interpreted, managed, and negotiated. A primary objective of this study, then, is to explore how far-reaching social, political, and economic processes intersect with the everyday, situated practices of ordinary people. By tracing out the categories and distinctions people use to order their social world and the meanings they give to these, I aim to illuminate how large-scale change—specifically, shifts in the employment landscape sometimes described as “neoliberal”—may be shaped or molded in distinctly local ways.

For two reasons, France offers particularly fertile ground for exploring these issues. First is the glaring contradiction between the French Republican ideal of equality and the unevenness that pervades everyday life in France. By this I do not mean to suggest that inequality is any more of a problem in France than in other societies, or, even worse, that the

French are just a bunch of hypocrites—a view sometimes encountered in American popular discourse. Rather, because equality is, at least in theory, a foundational value of the French Republic (even if its definition has shifted in France over time), questions of equality, or more often inequality, frequently—and often passionately—enter into public debate. Inequality is very much a contemporary concern in France, a concern that the state is often formally called upon to address, much more so than in the United States. Second are the terms with which inequality gets understood and expressed in France, which, in my experience, can be similar to but also at times vastly different from those used in the American context. How might examining the ways people in France evaluate and classify themselves unsettle and illuminate some of our commonsense notions about the labels we use in social classification and stratification?

This question has particular resonance in the context of the shrill debates on race and ethnicity surrounding France's outer cities during the past several decades, debates that attracted widespread public attention in France and abroad at the time of the fall 2005 riots. The French Republic's universalist underpinnings, some critics contend, leave no room for difference, whether in skin color or in habits of mind and body, and this, these detractors insist, leads to frustration among oppressed racial or ethnic minorities. The violence witnessed in the outer cities, they argue, just offers more evidence in support of this claim. The question of how race and ethnicity are understood and used in France is very much central to this book. However, rather than taking these categories as my starting point and risk imposing ways of experiencing, thinking, and being that my interlocutors in Limoges might find erroneous, I take a step back to ask how they understand and express the inequalities they encounter in daily life. Race or ethnicity may—or may not—be important to some or all of them in this regard.

Instead of beginning with race or ethnicity (or class, for that matter), I adopt the less prescriptive—but locally more meaningful—concept of social destiny. People everywhere may have some sense of what their future holds. They will be doctors, plumbers, or teachers. They will live in their hometowns or move across the globe. They will marry or remain