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Becoming respectable

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How do working-class and lower middle-class women experience their youth in rural environments? Based on a study of several rural and exurban spaces, Yaelle Amsellem-Mainguy revisits the question of women's social trajectories.

Reviewed: Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy, *Les filles du coin. Vivre et grandir en milieu rural* (Local Girls: Living and Growing Up in Rural Environments), Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2021. 293 p., 23 €.

Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy, a sociologist who specializes in youth sexuality, considers, in her new book, an understudied subset of young people: young women living in rural areas. Over fifteen years after the publication of Nicolas Renahy's *Gars du coin* (Local Guys, 2010), Amsellem-Mainguy, who is affiliated with the Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Education Populaire (National Institute of Youth and Popular Education), listens, in *Les Filles du coin,* to the voices of women excluded from norms and imaginings of most young people due to their place of residence and the position they occupy in gender and class relations. How do working and lower middle-class women experience their youth in rural environments? To answer this question, Amsellem-Mainguy presents a tableau of their lives at the onset of adulthood: when they leave their parents' home, have their first "live-in" relationship, see their friendships reconfigured, and attempt to join the professional world. Beginning with geography as her starting point, she shows how place of residence determines these women's life conditions as well as the scope of their life prospects.

The book is based on materials collected through an extensive ethnographic study consisting of observations and interviews (two thirds of which were done in groups, one third one-on-one) with nearly two hundred women, met through professionals working with young people (teachers, educators, bus drivers, and so on). These women, aged 14 to 28, belong to the working class and lower middle classes. They all live in territories considered "rural," in towns with fewer than 8,000 inhabitants in Ardennes, the Crozon peninsula, Deux-Sèvres, and Chartreuse. These regions--some attractive, some not, some touristy, others post-industrial--do not yield the same experiences of mobility, employment, and leisure for their young people. This territorial diversity reminds us that the term "rural" encompasses diverse realities that shape these women's different positions, perceptions, and projections.

Growing up in a rural setting; or, how to be a respectable woman

The book is divided into six thematic chapters. In the first, Amsellem-Mainguy shows that what the respondents consider "local" varies in relation to their life circumstances, social position, family situation, and worldview. Distinguishing themselves from the "scum" of the cities and the "hicks" of remote villages, they sometimes, for instance, establish classifications that rank territories and their inhabitants. Their residential trajectories and investment in local institutions of sociability determine, to a considerable degree, their sense of belonging to a local community and their "autochthony capital" (Retière 2003). In the second chapter, Amsellem-Mainguy shows that it is through networks of friends that (de)classification occurs and reputations are (re)constructed. Chapter three examines the ways in which educational trajectories are marked by a gradual expansion of the territories deemed "nearby" and wider networks of friends: the little communities that characterize school life in primary school get bigger when the young women go to middle school, then high school. In chapter four, Amsellem-Mainguy shows how, in a context in which jobs are few, employability is determined by their ability to demonstrate that one will do anything for a job, "making do" with poor and even abusive work conditions and jobs poorly suited to their qualifications and aspirations. Chapter five shows that due to an inadequate supply of leisure facilities and spaces of sociability and consumption, young women spend much of their free time indoors and in female company. In the final part, the process whereby these women become sexual and get married is marked

by admonitions to be neither a "slut" nor a "goody two-shoes," nor a woman who "can't hold a man." Living together as a couple, to which most of the respondents aspired, tends to enclose them in the home, as well as exposing them to their partners' social circles and potentially violent behavior.

In *Les filles du coin*, Amsellem-Mainguy shows that, for working-class women, living one's life in a rural environment means, to a considerable degree, "becoming respectable" (Skeggs, 2015). Finding themselves in demeaned conditions, the respondents learn to understand, appropriate, and avoid norms that result in diminished status. They realize that they can only benefit from certain resources if they do what is expected of them as young working-class women. They must also learn to "make do" with the constraints and even the violence inherent in these overlapping ascriptions. The book's interest lies in showing that, when faced with such ambivalence, not everyone is equal: variables can include the region in which one lives, parents' resources, age, local notoriety, and so on. These characteristic tensions of their youth are addressed through three notable features.

Necessary but constrained mobility

In living situations in which residences are dispersed, public services have vanished, training and work opportunities are increasingly concentrated in major urban centers, and shops and spaces of sociability are ill suited for young women, mobility is one of the respondents' major concerns. On the one hand, they *seek* living situations and leisure activities better suited to their desires, of the kinds found in cities: shopping at big chain stores, playing laser games, chatting while enjoying "cute drinks," spending time away from the gaze of neighbors, and so on. On the other hand, they are *expected* to be mobile--to get professional training, find work, and take care of one another.

Yet being mobile is no easy task when public transportation is lacking or limited, trains are expensive, and girls get two-wheelers, drivers licenses, and cars less often and later than boys. Despite the constraints in which the effects of territory, gender, and class are intertwined, the respondents, contrary to widespread assumptions, are by no means immobile. They develop strategies and accommodations to wrestle with these difficulties, relying on flexibility and collective organization. They use cheap bus lines; carpool with coworkers, friends, and partners;

ask family members to be "taxis" and let others to use them; and so on. Yet the most isolated young women, in the most precarious conditions, for whom no one in their circle has cars, and who are not integrated into local networks of friends and neighbors find themselves deprived of these collective resources.

Mutual knowledge with ambivalent effects

Integration to sociability groups is, in fact, a key element in these young women's lives. In a context of considerable mutual knowledge, it functions both as a resource and a constraint. It is because of their parents' involvement in local activities that these young women become involved in local festivals, soccer clubs, fire stations, and homes for young people. Their participation, often in tasks reserved for women (cooking, greeting, cleaning, baby-sitting, and so on), affords them a degree of local respectability and hence resources of various kinds, notably relating to work, housing, and mobility. Sociability among mothers can also favor the formation of friendship groups: the "good friends" of several respondents were daughters of their mothers' friends. Friendship networks, particularly those that have been around a while, promote autonomy and offer these women significant protection. Yet not everyone is equally positioned to benefit from such resources: those who have moved a lot, who don't live in very isolated villages, who are ashamed of where they live, or who were pulled away from the "neighborhood" due to their schooling can find it more difficult to participate in beneficial local sociability.

At the same time, joining these networks of shared knowledge has a restrictive dimension, when the loyalty expected of young women leads them, for example, to accept difficult work conditions, to be always available to "give a hand," and never mention the violence to which they are exposed. Inter and intra-mutual knowledge entails permanent surveillance, which, on a day-to-day basis, can have effects that are quite restrictive: since "everyone knows everything here," they must be careful not to harm one another's reputations, but also, by extension, those of their families and circle of friends. To limit these risks, which are particularly great in the case of romantic and sexual relationships, some prioritize their domestic interiors, spaces that are key to female sociability, where they are better able to shield themselves from outside observers. Mutual knowledge and sociability thus have ambivalent effects, as is often the case in female communities, which are spaces of great mutual assistance, but also ways of calling women back to gendered order (Clair 2013).

Renewed aspirations and projects

In their youth, young women formulate projects and ambitions adapted to the contexts in which they live. Like their parents in their day, they aspire to remain or come back "home" and to benefit from the autonomy that accompanies decohabitation. But intergenerational closeness--to one's parents' generation and sometimes to one's grandparents' generation--can also lead them to conclude that "things used to be better." Compared to their parents, their lives are marked by increasingly minimal public services and the closing of spaces of youth sociability. Employment opportunities have deteriorated to such an extent that they find it difficult to make plans based on finding work that is stable, decently paid, socially anchoring, and, if not enjoyable, at least "in their branch."

The deterioration of youth living conditions in rural areas, which was recently explored by Benoit Coquard's ethnographic study *Ceux qui restent* (Those Who Stay) is not, however, passively accepted. Amsellem-Mainguy shows that by noticing the extent to which women's trajectories face interference, respondents revealed themselves to be primarily attached to finding a regular job, before finding independent housing as part of a couple. This order of priorities and the importance they give to connecting their professional and married and family lives, which challenges conceptions of young working-class women as having no goals other than motherhood. By conceiving marital separations as a means for maintaining their security and independence, they are also breaking with their grandmothers', and, to a lesser extent, mothers' generation. In this instance, too, the inequalities between the young women in this study stand out: for example, those who have the toughest time finding a job tend to throw themselves almost exclusively into domestic and parental work, which can strongly limit their independence.

Les filles du coin is a precise and nuanced tableau of what it means for women in rural areas to "live their youth." The work epitomizes a sociology of young people that is resolutely empirical and painstaking in its analysis of the interconnection between territory, gender, and class, along the lines of Isabelle Clair's work (2011) on the ways that young people in working-class and rural milieus begin their romantic lives--a book that the author mentions several times. In her study, Amsellem-Mainguy gives the floor to largely invisible groups, carefully recovering but also taking seriously what these young women say about their lives, their difficulties, and their hopes. Though the argument is clearly focused on the life conditions of those who are most precarious

and isolated, the inequalities that distinguish the respondents (class fractions, age, racialization, sexuality as well as local, friendship, and family networks) are never erased. In short, Amsellem-Mainguy has managed to paint a portrait, in all their diversity, of young women who are both working-class and rural.

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