

backward countryside, troubled city: French teachers' images of rural and working-class families

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Dichotomies such as dominant versus local ideology or official versus unofficial discourse are popular themes in current ethnographic writing, reflecting an increasing concern with “capturing cultural diversity” (Marcus and Fischer 1986:20) in plural societies. Because ethnographic studies focus so much on local or unofficial versions of culture, however, they have a tendency to take versions considered “dominant” for granted. More emphasis must be placed on the uses and meanings of dominant ideologies in everyday life, however, if we are to better understand processes of domination and stratification. In this article, we examine French teachers’ discourse about their pupils’ families in both urban and rural contexts as a way of unraveling the concept of a dominant ideology. We seek not to deny the existence of hegemonic processes in schools but, rather, to problematize their assumed coherence and point to their inherent ambiguity. This constitutes an effort to describe what might be considered “everyday forms of domination.”

Schools in complex societies provide a convenient window from which to view the attempts of dominant groups to impose normative values and meanings on diverse classes and ethnic groups in order to create stratified but homogeneous populations. At the same time, they also reveal acts of resistance to such attempts and constitute sites of ideological struggle (Apple 1979; Giroux 1983; Willis 1981[1977]). Our analysis foregrounds the ideological underpinnings of the teachers’ discourse on families rather than the responses of families to the teachers and to school, in order to broaden our understanding of dominant versions of culture.

Well-known for its centralization and hierarchy, the French educational system is very explicitly an arm of the state and, thus, clearly associated with official ideology. French primary schools are directly linked, through a complex bureaucracy, to the National Ministry of Education in Paris, and teachers are national employees. Moreover, the French state has deliberately used the primary school system as a tool for nation-building. Tension between local families and public schools is, consequently, a common theme in French history.

In the influential work of Althusser (1971), the school is a prime example of an “ideological state apparatus,” through which the state and its attendant “ruling class” legitimate their power

French primary school teachers criticize both urban working-class and rural families, but often for different reasons. Their discourse about families reflects conflicting themes in French culture—the romanticization of rural life and the idealization of the bourgeois family model. Our analysis shows that the dominant ideology of the family in France is not coherent, and that teachers make use of ambiguous symbols and images of the family in order to privilege the “rationality” of the middle classes over the “irrationality” of the lower classes. We argue that more attention must be placed on such “everyday uses of domination” so that the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in dominant ideologies may be better understood. [education, ideology, France, social class]

and reproduce “capitalist relations of exploitation.” Using the model of the French school, Althusser writes:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most “vulnerable,” squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of “know-how” wrapped in ruling ideology (French, arithmetic . . .) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected “into production”: *these are the workers or small peasants.* [1971:155; emphasis added]

Althusser’s highly abstract and mechanistic analysis of social reproduction assumes the existence of a coherent ruling ideology that is transmitted to the relatively passive “masses” through a process of symbolic domination. It has been criticized on many fronts (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980; Aronowitz and Giroux 1985; Grillo 1985; Scott 1985; Thompson 1978; Willis 1981). However, even in educational research that offers a challenge to an Althusserian model and recognizes processes of resistance, or counterhegemony (Gramsci 1971), the dominant ideology is itself reified (as in Giroux 1983; Willis 1981 [1977]; see the critique of Willis in Marcus 1986). We suggest that there must be further recognition of the subtleties and complexities of dominant ideologies and discourse.

Our comparison of teachers in urban and rural schools shows that their talk about families is often contradictory and ambiguous, belying any theory of a *coherent* “ruling” ideology. At the same time, a closer look at the content and uses of this discourse reveals two related themes in French culture—the romanticization of rural life and the notion of the “rational” bourgeois family—both of which are tied to the concept of social class. Our aim here is to address the relationship of this (often contradictory) discourse to a “dominant” or “official” ideology of the family and to wider processes of social stratification in France and other complex societies. We are interested in the ways in which teachers contribute to social stratification processes through their ambiguous and self-contradictory discourse about the family.

In our respective ethnographic studies of schools attended by the children of *paysans*, or small-scale farmers,² and workers, we were both struck by the negative tone of teachers’ comments about their pupils’ families. An obvious explanation of these critical comments is that, in portraying working-class and rural families as deviant, they merely reflect the dominant (or “ruling”) ideology of the family in French culture. As such, they illustrate the tension between schools and families, often “worlds apart” (Lightfoot 1978) in state societies, and the tendency of teachers to blame educational problems on families, especially among the subordinate classes. This blaming more immediately reflects the current preoccupation with the alleged breakdown of the family in France, as in other western nations, and the study of French educators’ images of the family is therefore timely. These perspectives do not, however, take the analysis far enough.

The teachers in our studies not only criticized their pupils’ families but also directed different types of criticisms toward urban working-class families on the one hand and rural farm families on the other. This difference illustrates contradictions in French national culture, which has historically promoted both a normative bourgeois (or middle-class) family model and, at times, a romanticized view of the traditional peasant family. The notion of the “ideal” family expressed in the teachers’ critiques of their students’ families contains many inconsistencies and contradictions. Therefore, this discourse about the family cannot be said to embody a coherent “ruling class” ideology of the family. The teachers’ criticisms of rural and working-class families *do*, however, embrace and communicate a middle-class bias that serves to reinforce stratification and dominance in French society.

To explore these themes, we will compare our two studies of teachers and communities, studies that we carried on at approximately the same time in two very different settings in France. We will first place them in sociocultural and historical perspective in order to reveal the connections between the teachers’ images of families and broader cultural representations. Then, after introducing the two communities, we will examine various themes in the teachers’

discourse. In our discussion and conclusion, we will offer some new perspectives on the uses and meanings of ideology in processes of social stratification.

social class and parent-teacher relations

Teachers' images of families must be understood in the context of the social relationships between home and school. Decades ago, Waller referred to teachers and parents, whatever the latter's social class, as "natural enemies" (Waller 1965[1932]). School reformers and critical theorists (Apple 1986; Giroux 1983, 1988; Levin 1987) would that it were otherwise. They believe that parents, particularly mothers, share certain gender- and class-based interests with teachers, and they see them, in an ideal world, working in partnership for their children's education "against the male dominated bureaucracies that structure their lives" (Levin 1987:275). However, as Levin acknowledges, that partnership rarely materializes.

Role conflict is one reason for tension between teachers and parents. Parents fight for their own child's interest while teachers feel pressed to adopt a more impersonal approach (Feiman-Nemser and Floden 1986; Lightfoot 1978; Lortie 1975; Waller 1965[1932]). Moreover, as Lightfoot (1978) suggests, the gender system sets up a subtle rivalry between teachers and mothers, both of whom define their success in terms of their influence over particular children. This conflict is also based, in part, on the historical development and integration of nation-states, through which a conflict between private and public domains has been built into schools, pitting the authority of the family against the authority of the state (Shamgar-Handelman and Handelman 1986).

Home and school relations are, not surprisingly, strained in France. When teachers identify academic or behavioral problems in a child and blame them on the child's situation at home, they intensify parent-teacher conflict. Almost half of the 80 teachers interviewed in one study showed a "real hostility toward families" (Champion 1979:60), while only 19 percent judged families favorably. Champion shows that a striking 42 to 58 percent of teachers interviewed in this study cited milieu as the main reason for school failure (see also Grillo 1985; Henriot-Van Zanten 1990). Teacher-parent conflict is also found in the United States (Lightfoot 1978; Ogbu 1974), Canada (Levin 1987), Germany (Warren 1967, 1987), and Australia (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler, and Dowsett 1982). American teachers regularly cite home, milieu, or family as a factor in school failure or success, although they cite students' psychological traits more frequently (as illustrated in Beckman 1976; Cooper and Burger 1980).

Social class is crucial to parent-teacher relations. We have chosen to focus on working-class and rural families in this article precisely because their children are most likely to sift to the bottom of the heap in French schools (Boudon 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The majority of working-class children in France have experienced academic problems, an index of which is retention in one or more grades (see Baudelot and Establet 1971; Levasseur and Seibel 1984:483). Only 30 percent of working-class children make it to *première*, the equivalent of 11th grade in the academic track, and that figure is an improvement over 22 percent in the early 1970s (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 1989:155). In contrast, 84 percent of the children of professionals and executives make it to *première*.

While children of farmers and farm workers do not experience failure rates as high as those of working-class children, they still perform less well than do middle-class children, and they face more limited prospects for advanced secondary and university education than their urban peers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Jegouzo and Brangeon 1976; Reed-Danahay 1990). About 47 percent of the children of farmers now make it to *première* (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 1989:155), and this figure is lower in some regions.

The gap between teachers and both working-class and rural parents is intensified by social class differences, because in France, as elsewhere, teachers identify with the middle class and

represent its values. In fact, by the 1970s, many of them came from an upper-middle-class background. In 1973–74, when women made up almost 84 percent of the teaching corps, only 13 percent of female teachers were workers' daughters, while 25 percent were the daughters of upper-middle-class and professional fathers (Berger 1979:22–25). While it is true that in 19th-century France many elementary school teachers "rose" from the peasant and working classes (Ozouf 1967; Weber 1976; Zeldin 1977), even then they promoted middle-class values. During the early days of mandatory public schooling in the late 19th century, elementary school teachers served as self-proclaimed secular missionaries and agents of the "bourgeois" state (Weber 1976; Zeldin 1977). To this day, public school teachers are employed directly by the French government as civil servants. Thus, even when rural-born themselves, French teachers have often felt isolated from the inhabitants of the rural villages in which they teach, largely by virtue of the distance between the villagers' attitudes and lifestyles and their own (see Zeldin 1977:158–171). By the same token, both rural and working-class families feel estranged from teachers and the school, today as in the past (Grillo 1985; Henriot-Van Zanten 1990; Pétonnet 1973; Reed-Danahay 1987a, 1990; Tedesco 1979).

cultural images of the family

Teachers' images of families must also be understood in the context of cultural images of the family—which are, in fact, closely related to the social class gap between educators and the people to be educated. Since the 18th century (Chisick 1981), the French educational system has promoted and reinforced the cultural image of an idealized "bourgeois" or middle-class family. As reflected in 19th-century textbooks (Struminger 1983), the ideal bourgeois family consisted of the honest, sober father who responsibly supported his household, the rationally nurturant mother who kept a well-ordered home as a nest for her husband and children, and their children, who would learn from them to be hard-working and upright citizens. They enjoyed the simple pleasures of life at home, engaging in neither the conspicuous consumption of aristocrats nor the supposed degradation of an undisciplined and hard-drinking working class (see also Pitts 1963 and Segalen 1986 on French bourgeois families).

Along with other 19th-century reforms, the institution of free and universal primary schooling was aimed at civilizing what were considered the "dangerous classes" of France, including the urban proletariat and the landless peasantry, in order to produce good urban workers (Donzelot 1979; Lynch 1988; Zeldin 1977). In the cities, "the instability of proletarian families was a source of concern to the dominant classes" (Segalen 1986:2), and both educators and doctors set out to "civilize" urban workers, the "new barbarians" (Boltanski 1969). In the countryside, rural schoolteachers were urged to "penetrate into those narrow and dark homes to remove disorder" (Struminger 1983:29). In short, both working-class and peasant households were viewed as the antithesis of the orderly, genteel bourgeois household.

There are, however, contradictions and complexities in cultural images of the family in France, hinging in particular on images of the rural family. A romanticized image of the rural extended family has coexisted with a more urban, nuclear, bourgeois family ideal, reflecting a tension between the perceived virtues of rural life and those of urban life (see Rogers 1987). Williams (1973), although sharing a certain amount of rural nostalgia himself, has described a similar process of rural romanticization in England, through which the countryside has been "part-imagined, part-observed." The French rural family has been criticized for not being like the bourgeois family (that is, neither clean nor orderly) at the same time that it has been held up as a model of stability for the urban working class (Prost 1981; Struminger 1983). Despite fears of peasant backwardness and irrationality, the bourgeoisie has appealed to its own historical connection to an image of the stable, patriarchal peasant family (as a sort of mythic ancestor) to justify its dominant position.

One finds contradictions not only in images of the ideal family but also between idealized images of the family (or families) and *actual* family forms—between what Theriot (1983) has termed the family-as-ideology and the family-as-experience. The widespread assumption (both scholarly and popular) that there is a “crisis” in the contemporary European and American family has recently been shown to rely on a misguided, overly romantic view of what the family was in former times (Kertzer 1987; Rapp 1982; Segalen 1986; Stannard 1979; Theriot 1983). As our case studies will show, contemporary teachers’ attitudes toward their pupils’ families are informed by both the bourgeois and the rural ideal. The teachers’ attitudes are also shaped by the tension between the family-as-ideology and their own encounters with the family-as-experience.

Lavialle and Villefleurie

Our rural example comes from the township of Lavialle,³ located in the historically isolated mountains of the Massif Central, in the department of Puy-de-Dôme. Reed-Danahay conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the local primary school and among families there from fall 1980 to December 1981 (with a shorter visit in 1984). She also interviewed former teachers, did archival research on schooling in earlier periods, and visited other local schools. This research focused on the educational strategies of rural families and, in particular, on modes of resistance to the school (Reed-Danahay 1987a, 1990).

Lavialle is a dairy-farming community whose residents are all French and almost all native to either the township or its nearby region. The total population of Lavialle was around 450 in the early 1980s. Over 80 percent of the adults were full-time farmers, and the others worked in artisanal trades such as plumbing and plastering. Farms were small, family owned, and family run, and usually worked by a father-son team along with their wives and the son’s older children. Many households had at least three generations in coresidence.

The primary school of Lavialle was the only school located within the township. Over two-thirds of the 30 students who attended it lived on farms; the nonfarm children had fathers (and sometimes mothers) who worked locally in artisanal trades. All of the nonfarm families retained close ties with relatives living on nearby farms. The school had two classes, one at the primary level (ages 6 to 11) and one at the kindergarten/nursery level (ages 3 to 5). Lavialle’s school was typical of French rural schools in the early 1980s, when about one-quarter of the public primary schools were still one-room schools, and the average rural school had two to four classes (Ministère de L’Éducation Nationale 1989:47).

The teachers were a young couple in their second year at this school. They were both from the suburbs of Clermont-Ferrand, about 45 minutes from Lavialle, and had deliberately sought a rural post because they considered the countryside an ideal place to raise a young family. Both were from solidly middle-class backgrounds, with fathers who worked as *fonctionnaires* (white-collar government employees). Henri Juillard taught the older children, Liliane Juillard the younger ones. Lavialle’s teachers lived in an apartment located over the classrooms in the school building, which also housed the mayor’s office and township archives—a common arrangement in rural France. These teachers, and their discourse about families, were representative of rural French teachers. Henriot-Van Zanten’s recent comparative study of 29 teachers in a rural Breton canton and 35 teachers in an urban setting, a study that we cite at several points in this article, confirms this. Most of the teachers in the Breton setting, like those in Lavialle, had middle-class backgrounds, and half of them were married to another teacher (Henriot-Van Zanten 1990:138).

Our urban working-class examples come from 18 months of fieldwork by Anderson-Levitt (in 1976, 1978–79, 1981, and 1988) in Villefleurie, a metropolitan area of 200,000 people in central France. The objective of her research was to understand the culture of teaching and in

particular teachers' explanations of school failure (Anderson-Levitt 1984, 1987, 1989). Anderson-Levitt observed classrooms in 31 elementary and nursery schools located in 26 different neighborhoods and suburbs of Villefleurie. This article focuses on those 17 schools that could be classified as predominantly working class, although we also note comments teachers made about working-class children in predominantly middle-class schools.

Our criteria for the label "working class" are necessarily flexible. Sometimes, teachers identified for the ethnographer the professions of every student's parents, in which case we consider "working class" any school in which most of the parents were low-skilled workers or unemployed. In other cases, the ethnographer relied on characterization of the neighborhoods by teachers and on interviews with lifelong residents, who readily labeled the city's neighborhoods in terms of social class criteria.⁴

There was considerable variation, of course, among the schools described here as predominantly working class. Émile Zola School, for example, was a new school in a new neighborhood of private homes owned by plumbers, bus drivers, and railway employees. Maupassant School, in contrast, was entirely surrounded by five-story blocks of low-income apartment buildings, and teachers in other schools considered its neighborhood dangerous. Several of the working-class schools were located in industrial suburbs of Villefleurie, where many of the children or their parents were immigrants from Portugal, Algeria, and Morocco. Finally, two of the schools described here were technically in rural villages, although only a few of the school-children's parents farmed. Since most of the parents in these villages worked at small local factories and a few commuted to office jobs in the city, we consider these "rural" villages predominantly working-class, far-flung suburbs of the city, in contrast to the profoundly agrarian setting of Lavalie.

In the 31 schools visited, 48 elementary and nursery school teachers welcomed Anderson-Levitt into their classrooms for periods ranging from half a day to six months. This article relies primarily on the 29 of those teachers who worked in the predominantly working-class schools, and particularly the 11 who were interviewed at length about their students. These teacher-informants were a varied group, although not as varied as the neighborhoods in which they taught. Only five of them were men; most were married women, and most had children of their own. Some came from working-class homes themselves, others from middle-class families.

teachers' images of families

In the section that follows we will present those criticisms most prevalent in the Villefleurie and Lavalie teachers' discourse about their pupils' families. We will first trace comments made about urban and rural families alike, before moving on to those made specifically about either urban or rural families. This section will conclude with the explicit comparisons that teachers made between urban and rural children or their families.

families as irresponsible In Villefleurie, teachers criticized working-class parents for shirking their duties to their children. At predominantly working-class Jules Ferry School, for example, Anne Laplace lamented that the parents of one boy allowed him to watch the late show on television even though "a child of that age should get about ten hours of sleep." In the same school, when children failed to show up for class on Saturday morning (part of the regular school week), Jeannette Durand pointedly reminded them or their parents that "there *is* school on Saturday." Across town, Marie Berger complained that the (working-class) parents of her Portuguese pupils kept the children home on any minor excuse. Parents were also criticized for not attending to a child's vision problem or ear infection.

Teachers in Villefleurie felt that some children whose mothers worked were mildly neglected. At Émile Zola School, located in an upwardly mobile working-class neighborhood,

one teacher pointed out that many working parents dropped their children off in the morning before the school gates were unlocked. At Jules Ferry School, Jeannette Durand shook her head over a first grader, the daughter of an unmarried working mother, who had come to school with gum stuck in her hair: "Mama didn't see you this morning?" she asked. While it is true that working parents in "bourgeois" neighborhoods were also criticized, comments about neglectful working parents came up more frequently and tended to be more vivid (of the gum-in-the-hair sort) in working-class schools.

Meanwhile, the teacher couple in rural Lavalie frequently suggested that parents were slack in their discipline at home, especially concerning such things as table manners and bedtimes. One day when several children were having trouble with a lesson, for example, Henri Juillard complained that parents allowed the children to stay up too late watching the evening movie on television on school nights.⁵

families as too conservative In several working-class schools in Villefleurie, as well as in one of the "rural" schools near the city, teachers who had adopted "progressive" teaching methods said that they had met with resistance from parents. The parents, they said, preferred the older, more familiar emphasis on lots of homework and very traditional reading methods. At Émile Zola School, teachers reported that very vocal parents had put an end to a dance- and drama-oriented curriculum in the primary school, while in another working-class school a teacher had given up the progressive Freinet method of reading instruction because of parental pressure. In one of the "rural" schools near Villefleurie, teachers resisted the school inspector's pressure to introduce a more global, less phonetic approach to reading because, they said, parents had mounted successful opposition to such innovations in the past.

The teachers' criticisms of families in Lavalie, similarly, focused on the traditional, conservative attitudes of parents, as well as on their resistance to many of the teachers' efforts (for similar comments in rural Brittany, see Henriot-Van Zanten 1990:149). The teachers felt that they would have more success in their teaching and that their students would improve if the parents were more cooperative. For example, in the primary school classroom, Henri Juillard used some of the techniques advocated by the Freinet movement, such as allowing students to work independently and at their own pace by using self-directed cards with math problems. When discussing this method with Reed-Danahay, he complained that he would like to introduce more of this type of work but that it would not go over well with the parents, who expected a more traditional form of teaching.

families as repressive In some working-class schools, Anderson-Levitt heard complaints about authoritarian parents. In Émile Zola School, the first-grade teacher worried that certain parents beat their children and, more generally, that the atmosphere in some homes was authoritarian and stifling. Such an atmosphere was seen to conflict with the teachers' attempts to foster self-expression and creativity. A like-minded teacher in another working-class school criticized a family where everyone was on a "leash"—the little boy in a metaphorical sense and the cat quite literally.

Urban teachers mentioned repression of women as well as of children, but only when referring to the special category of "Arab" working-class families. In working-class schools attended by Muslim North African students, teachers worried about such issues as how to get girls to participate in gym class without offending their parents. A few teachers also commented on the seclusion and supposed oppression of mothers in conservative Muslim families.

In rural Lavalie the teachers also viewed families as authoritarian—not toward children, but toward women. As argued elsewhere by Reed-Danahay (1987b), the teachers felt that Lavalie women were repressed and that local farm couples were backward and traditional in their sex role behaviors. Liliane Juillard remarked, in order to justify her claims about backwardness, "These people, once they are married, never go out." The teachers considered women to be

constrained in their movements and social life, submissive and subservient to men. They commented on the fact that during parent-teacher meetings, mothers and fathers sat in sex-segregated groups rather than in couples.

Criticisms of irresponsibility, conservatism, and repression were common to the teachers' discourse about both working-class urban and rural families. However, the teachers in the urban setting of Villefleurie made some comments about families there that Reed-Danahay did not hear from Laviaille's current or former teachers.

working-class families as foreign One frequent theme in the discourse of Villefleurie teachers concerned the "foreign" aura of the poorer working-class neighborhoods. About ten percent of primary school students in France are the children of immigrants, principally from North Africa and Portugal (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 1989:118–119). The teachers usually referred to North African families as "Arab," although technically many of these families spoke Berber or other non-Arabic tongues. Since immigrants tend to be "at the bottom of the social ladder" in France (Boulot and Boyzon-Fradet 1988:28), Villefleurie teachers were not incorrect in associating the poorest neighborhoods with "foreign" families, although they exaggerated the association.

Whereas in many schools in the Paris and Lyon areas more than 50 percent of the students are immigrants' children (Grillo 1985, 1989:138; see also Costa-Lascoux 1989), there was only one such ghetto school in Villefleurie. Villefleurie teachers, however, perceived the percentage of "foreign" students as high even in those schools where only a quarter to a half of the students were ethnic minorities. Anderson-Levitt heard relatively few complaints about parenting practices in "foreign" families, suggesting either that the teachers thought these parents shared the school's perspective more than other working-class parents did or that the teachers were extremely sensitive to the danger of appearing racist.⁶ Teachers did express a great deal of concern that language differences seriously hampered learning and that cultural differences in the treatment of girls, as noted above, hindered the development of girls' self-expression.

Since there were no immigrant families in Laviaille, "foreignness" was not an issue for the rural teachers. However, it is interesting to consider the possibility that immigrants in rural areas may be less visible to teachers because they do not fit the rural image.⁷

working-class families as uneducated One common complaint about the "French" inhabitants of poor and working-class neighborhoods was that even though they spoke French, they didn't "really" speak it. Teachers contrasted them with professional parents who spoke well and who, they believed, frequently read to or with their children. Teachers also said that in some working-class homes no one ever did any reading.

In contrast, although parents in Laviaille had a minimal level of education, although many still spoke patois, and although the teachers corrected the students when they used colloquial forms of speech, the teachers never made overt comments that implied, even indirectly, that parents were uneducated. This attitude is echoed in Henriot-Van Zanten's study, where rural teachers were more concerned with parents' "backward" attitudes toward childrearing than with "poverty of language," with what the teachers perceived to be a lack of education, or with the use of local dialect (1990:148–149).

working-class families with problems In Villefleurie, when teachers talked about parents they more often than not made reference to "family problems," the rubric for divorce and other perceived anomalies in life at home. As Jeannette Durand said of the low-income housing blocks adjoining her school, Jules Ferry: "This milieu is not the best for encouraging schoolwork. The kids have seen so much already at their age—lots of divorce, fathers leaving."

The gravest social deviance was reported for the poorest families. The teachers' most serious complaint about a family was that it had received visits from a social worker, whether because

of alcoholism, chronic unemployment, or child neglect, or because these were foster parents taking in a child from a deviant family. Of the poorest neighborhoods, more than one teacher told Anderson-Levitt that “half the French” (that is, the nonimmigrants) were “cases.” Teachers also expressed concern about the psychological atmosphere in certain families. As a teacher in a ghetto school that served an extremely poor housing project said of her pupils, “They don’t get affection or attention at home, so they really look for it here.” This criticism was not limited to the poorest schools, however; a few remarks about the lack of affection were heard even in affluent schools.

Likewise, remarks about “broken families” reached beyond working-class neighborhoods in Villeflaurie. In every urban and suburban school, from public schools serving children from low-income housing blocks to an elite private school serving the children of doctors and aristocrats, teachers pointed to one or two or three pupils who, they said, were suffering from the effects of divorce, abandonment by a parent, or life with a never-married mother. Still, as Jeanette Durand’s generalization about “this [working-class] milieu” indicates, “broken families” were associated most strongly with working-class neighborhoods. In middle-class schools teachers felt that “family problems,” once rare in their neighborhoods, were growing “worse and worse.” Apparently what was once seen as a working-class phenomenon was coming to be seen as an urban (and suburban) phenomenon that threatened to transcend social class.

In contrast, Lavalie’s teachers made little if any mention of “family problems” to explain the poor school performance of some children. The township was not, however, devoid of such “problems.” One student’s father, an artisan, was widely known to have a mistress in a neighboring town but continued to live (after a fashion) with the boy’s mother; the boy was reared by his mother and his paternal grandparents, on whose farm he and his mother lived. In another family, also artisanal, the father was known to be slack in his work and irresponsible, while the mother, it was gossiped in the township, often beat the children. The local inhabitants also circulated rumors of irresponsibility and drinking in certain farm families. Despite all this, however, the teachers did not cite internal family “problems” when criticizing families or explaining school failure. Along the same lines, Henriot-Van Zanten’s teacher-informants in rural Brittany felt that there were “fewer families in difficulty, fewer disturbed” there than in the city, despite their acknowledgment of the fact of rural alcoholism (1990:144).

Just as the teachers in Villeflaurie pointed to particular flaws in working-class families, the teachers in Lavalie voiced specific complaints about rural families. The Lavalie teachers focused on what they perceived as parochialism and superstition.

rural families as parochial In Lavalie, Henri Juillard tried to introduce activities outside the classroom that he felt would broaden his students’ horizons. One of these was summer camp: students could get scholarships to attend, and he urged local families to consider sending their children. There was little interest, however. The teacher said to Reed-Danahay, “Parents are fearful. They stay here, see the same people, watch T.V.—never leave the environment.” (Parents, on the other hand, told the anthropologist that their children lived in the countryside and therefore had no need of “fresh air.”) Another leisure activity introduced by the Juillards was a movie series (*ciné-club*) to be held in the community center on occasional weekend evenings. Attendance, however, was very poor, and Henri Juillard finally discontinued the showings, remarking to Reed-Danahay that the families really “got to him” and that they were just too narrow-minded and apathetic. (Again, the parents explained to Reed-Danahay that the movies interfered with evening milking time and that the projector was very bad.) Teachers interviewed by Henriot-Van Zanten in Brittany made comments very similar to these, noting the lack of cultural activities in their rural canton and describing the milieu as “closed in on itself” (1990:143).

In the city, teachers did not refer to parents as parochial in the same way. Although once or twice teachers pointed out that low-income housing projects were almost a city within a city,

where children could attend school, go shopping, and visit friends without leaving the block, they did not attribute this phenomenon to a parochial mentality on the part of the parents.

rural families as superstitious The teachers in Lavalie regarded the parents of children attending the school, as they did all inhabitants of the township, as superstitious. Liliane Juillard mentioned in conversation with Reed-Danahay that some inhabitants of Lavalie believed in faith healing and that some believed that certain people in the locality could use psychic power to put out fires. While the teacher's observations were not completely inaccurate, her tone was clearly meant to convey her own perception that Lavalie's culture was traditional and superstitious. Her attitude was ambiguous, seeming to reveal both her disapproval of such "old-fashioned" beliefs and her desire to view the inhabitants in terms of a romantic image of "traditional" culture (which she and her husband were, after all, seeking in choosing this teaching post).

explicit comparisons between rural and urban families

So far, we have documented our informants' ideas about families by listing comments that were aimed at both urban working-class and rural families or that were specific to one or the other group. We also found that teachers in both Lavalie and Villefleurie explicitly compared the country with the city, always claiming that life was more difficult for children in the latter. Several Villefleurie teachers commented that children in the country were "calmer" and children in the city more "agitated." A teacher from one of the "rural" schools near Villefleurie agreed that her pupils tended to be less agitated, because, she said, fewer of them had working mothers and, therefore, they were less rushed in the morning. A couple who had once taught in Lavalie and then moved to an urban post voiced similar views when citing the contrast between Lavalie children and their urban pupils.⁸ Former and current teachers from Lavalie all felt that the children there led a relatively carefree and easy life, in contrast to those in urban environments. Here we see a middle-class critique of urban life that overlies negative images of rural families.

discussion

the "deviant" lower classes Our data suggest that the French schoolteachers in our studies viewed working-class and rural parents alike as irresponsible, excessively conservative, and repressive (toward either children or women). In their complaints, the teachers portrayed working-class and rural parents as basically similar in their failure to meet the ideal of the middle-class family.

These 20th-century teachers' images of the normative middle-class family did not conform perfectly to our 19th-century portrait of the ideal bourgeois family. Our teacher-informants' criticism of authoritarian families suggested that any element of the 19th-century ideal that might have favored explicit patriarchy had faded. Similarly, since most of our informants were working mothers and wives themselves, their image of the rationally nurturant mother now allowed that the mother might leave the nest to earn a living, provided she was home when the children returned from school. Nonetheless, the image of the well-ordered home organized by the mother for the father and children remained largely intact in our informants' discourse. Criticism of parents' "irresponsibility" obviously placed the parents in opposition to this ideal. Parents who were irresponsible about getting their children to bed "on time" or about sending their children to school every day were seen as "still" ignorant of or resistant to middle-class notions about children's health and about the importance of school.

The criticism of “conservative” parents who insisted on traditional teaching methods is more difficult to analyze, for here we see parents standing up—sometimes quite fiercely—in support of their vision of schooling, whereas earlier generations of working-class and rural parents had often resisted schooling altogether. What happened here? It is as if working-class and rural families, after initial resistance to schooling itself, ultimately came to terms with the institution—in its traditional form as manifested until the early 1960s. But meanwhile teachers, under the leadership of their peers, certain education professors, and occasionally the national Ministry of Education, had begun to change those traditional forms: encouraging discussion, reducing homework, and making secondary school attendance routine (Prost 1981; Vincent 1980: ch. 9). Whereas the school of the 1950s had been a familiar phenomenon to parents who had grown up before World War II (and this familiarity may have been a factor in the relative harmony between teachers and parents reported by Wylie in *Village in the Vaucluse* [1975]), the school of the 1970s and 1980s was quite alien to parents who had grown up in the 1950s and early 1960s (also see Zonabend 1980).

Middle-class parents had “kept up” with the educational innovations, but working-class and rural parents, just when they thought they had caught up, had “fallen behind” again. Their situation resembled that of the working-class university students described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) who, just when they had learned to appreciate classical music and art, discovered that their upper-middle-class peers had moved on to jazz and avant-garde art. The “conservative” lower-class families criticized by teachers lacked what Bourdieu calls the “cultural capital” of the middle class (1977, 1984).⁹

The criticism of families as “repressive” was somewhat similar to the complaint about “conservative” families. While urban teachers focused on repressiveness toward children and rural teachers on repressiveness toward women, both were pointing to deviance from the middle-class values of “self-expression” and individual fulfillment, values that had recently come into vogue in French pedagogy. Moreover, the teachers’ implicit perception of the conservative, resistant parents as enemies defined both rural and working-class families as the deviant lower classes in opposition to the idealized middle-class world that the teachers represented. The teachers implied that these lower classes, both working-class and rural, had fallen “behind the times.”

In articulating this type of critical discourse on families, the teachers were participating in what appears to be a widespread phenomenon. As Scott observes from research on peasants in southeast Asia, “subordinate classes are often seen as backward looking, inasmuch as they are defending their own interpretation of an earlier dominant ideology against new and painful arrangements imposed by elites and/or the state” (Scott 1985:318). Fabian (1983) points out, moreover, that the labeling of subordinate groups as “the other” through distance in time (that is, calling them “backward looking” or “behind the times”) is a common device by means of which dominant groups attempt to secure their own power.

backward “peasants” versus urban modernism in excess Despite the similarities noted so far, the teachers aimed different types of critiques at rural families on the one hand and working-class families on the other. The differences reflect cultural notions about rural as opposed to urban life—a sort of *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* opposition. Teachers felt that working-class families (and indeed all urban families) were likely to suffer from family problems such as divorce and abandonment, and they viewed a large component of the working class as “foreign.” On the other hand, they described rural families—and only rural families—as parochial and superstitious.

There is a tendency to exaggerate the differences between rural and urban life in the teachers’ (and, to some degree, our own) implicit distinctions between rural and urban families. The most rural departments of France do have the lowest divorce rates (Boigeol, Commaille, and Munoz-Perez 1984), and the percentage of single adults raising children is indeed higher for working-

class households (7.7 percent) than for farm households (1.9 percent) (Villac 1984). However, lower divorce rates in the countryside do not mean an absence of family problems and thus do not explain why the Lavalie teachers cast a blind eye to the kind of family problems that fascinated teachers in the city. In general, there is much more overlap between working-class and rural life than the teachers' images of families would suggest.

It is this overlap, perhaps, that created the disjuncture for Lavalie's teachers between rural family-as-ideology and rural family-as-experience. The young teaching couple had arrived in Lavalie with an idealized, romantic view of life in the country yet found themselves faced with real people who, they felt, were backward, crude, and narrow-minded. Their experience and their contradictory images were combined in their response to the families. They recognized the reality of parents' opposition to the school and saw it as a source of certain children's school problems. Yet they appealed to a stereotypical view of rural families as traditional, conservative, and parochial when trying to account for resistance and academic problems, rather than blaming the hierarchical nature of the educational system.

Moreover, the teachers were ambivalent about the rural family-as-ideology. They attributed the rural families' failure to live up to an orderly, progressive, middle-class model of family life to "backward" and conservative attitudes; yet the teachers' failure to acknowledge disruptions of family life in Lavalie showed that they also subscribed to the positive stereotype of the rural family. In short, the teachers viewed rural families as "intact" but "backward" and traditional. For the teachers, rural families represented both the good and the bad aspects of the imagined past, the good being that couples used to marry for life, the bad being that people used to live in a narrow, patriarchal world, their minds clouded by superstition.

The teachers' comments reveal the view that if rural families stand for the best and worst of the past, urban families represent a uniformly bleak future. The middle class fears that in this future they will not be spared from the snowballing "crisis of the family." The crisis strikes everyone who lives in a modern urban environment. Thus, it is not just that our teachers saw what they interpreted as the devastating effect of family break-ups on their pupils. It is also that divorce and single parenthood threatened the teachers themselves. Although none of our informants was divorced, many of the married women teachers were aware of the stresses placed on a "modern" urban wife and mother obliged to work outside the home.¹⁰

Interestingly, the pattern of complaints about urban "Arab" families resembled the pattern of complaints about rural families. In Villefleurie, if not in the larger city of Lyon (Grillo 1985), teachers attributed family problems less often to "Arab" families than to urban "French" families, and they saw "Arab" families as repressive of women rather than of children.¹¹ "Arab" families, culturally different though they are, represent an imagined, albeit very distant, peasant past; they are, in effect, subject to the same type of romanticizing as are the rural French families. As Fabian (1983) suggests, we tend to equate people distant in space—here, people from across the Mediterranean—with those distant in time. And, as was mentioned above, the characterizing of groups as distant in either space or time is directly involved with the hierarchical positioning of subordinate groups as "the other."¹² Although the teachers would most likely have balked at any suggestion that these "Arab" families, in their extreme foreignness, shared any characteristics with truly French farm families, they did perceive both groups to be less tainted by the ills of urban life than were the French working classes.

conclusion

The teachers in our studies labeled both urban working-class and rural families as deviant, but for different reasons. Lying behind their critiques of both types of family, however, was a theme whose roots we noted in 19th-century French discourse and which we think exists in teachers' talk throughout France and elsewhere. This is the theme of the rationality of the mid-

dle classes as opposed to the irrationality of the lower classes. Teachers' talk about families is, we suggest, fundamentally talk about social class.

Ideology is a repertoire of varied ideas and images rather than a coherent system. The "dominant ideology" of the family that the teachers used in their discourse is not a static, monolithic entity. It encompasses complex and ambiguous images. The romanticization of rural life implicit in some of the teachers' comments, for example, appeared to contradict negative attitudes toward rural families expressed in other comments. In their talk about families, the teachers in Villefleurie and Laviaille made use of a wide range of negative and positive images of the family in order to cast the particular families with which they dealt as "deviant." What might be seen as a range of *contradictory* images of the family can, alternatively, be viewed as an *ambiguity* that allowed the teachers to manipulate conflicting images.

Our comparison and analysis raise several issues. Why has "the family" continued to hold a central place in educational concerns for over two centuries? What is accomplished by criticizing families for failing to meet middle-class norms? And to what degree are teachers agents of the "dominant culture"? By examining these questions, we are better able to understand the ways in which ideology operates in everyday situations and its relationship to processes of domination and resistance.

The preoccupation with families has roots in the historical role of the state in French education, yet there is a more mundane expediency in the teachers' critiques of families. In this teacher talk collected late in the 20th century, we see vestiges of the 19th-century school-teacher as middle-class missionary wishing to reform lower-class families. The teachers' perceptions of their pupils' families as irresponsible, superstitious, and conservative "would not be out of place in a mid-Victorian social workers' nightmare" (Ashendon, Connell, Dowsett, and Kessler 1987). It makes as much sense for teachers today as it did 100 years ago to want to reform families they consider defective in these ways. It is reasonable for teachers to wish that all families would resemble the bourgeois ideal, at least in certain of its facets. A family in which the "rationally nurturant" mother always sends her children to school on time, closely supervises her children's schoolwork at home, and helps her children learn to read would certainly make the teacher's job easier.

The explicit *intent* of teacher criticisms of their pupils' parents is, thus, to change the behaviors of those parents. In this, the teachers are attempting to exercise social control, to perform what Donzelot (1979) calls the "policing of families." Although the teachers do not always express their complaints directly to parents, they communicate their dissatisfaction in many obvious ways. For example, during an impromptu conference with a parent, the teacher may frown while the mother tries to explain why she delayed so long in taking her child to the doctor to see about an ear infection. A teacher may tell pupils of his displeasure that they will not attend summer camp, and he may be impatient and irritable in his encounters with parents.

The actual *effect* of the teachers' complaints is another matter. Do families actually change as a result of this "policing"? There is little evidence of such change, in part because lower-class families resist many aspects of schooling (Reed-Danahay 1987a, 1990; Willis 1981[1977]). When parents refuse to change, it may be expected that the teachers do, at least, make inroads into the children's consciousness, planting doubts in their minds about their own homes so that the school can then inculcate the "right" moral values in them. Yet after more than a century of "civilizing" the subordinate classes, French educators still talk as if their efforts have failed.

The criticisms of families voiced by teachers do not, therefore, produce "good" middle-class citizens out of "deviant" lower-class families but, rather, encourage resistance to school processes. Indeed, much of the "irresponsible" behavior bemoaned by the teachers is most likely a form of resistance to schooling. Parents do not like the meddling of teachers in family affairs, and they have their own reasons for adopting particular childrearing practices. For example, farm families keep their children up late because this is part of the rhythm of farm life, in which

families spend time together after the 7 p.m. milking of the cows. Working-class parents may not believe that children should have different bedtimes than adults, and the teachers' criticisms of late nights may in fact lead to increased family control over this matter.

Rather than actually changing family behaviors, the teachers' negative comments and attitudes about families make public, in the official context of the school, the ideology that only the children of normative families succeed. When they criticize lower-class families and hold up the normative ideal, teachers help to legitimize the dominant position of the middle and upper classes. Their complaints about particular neighborhoods and particular families rationalize the stratified nature of the educational system and, ultimately, of French society. Rather than generating change, their criticisms justify the lack of change in the status of urban working-class and rural children in the educational system.

Ambiguity in the concept of the "normative" family, particularly the inconsistent attitudes toward the rural French family, do not undermine the rationalizing work of the ideology. On the contrary, the inconsistency and ambiguity permit the dominant classes to manipulate the concept of the "ideal" family so that both rural and working-class families can be cast as deviating from the norm. The positive image of the rural family is used to criticize "broken" urban families, yet rural families are themselves subject to criticism for failing to meet the "modern" bourgeois model. In this way all lower-class families are positioned as "the other" in relation to the rational bourgeoisie.

We do not mean to imply that schoolteachers conspire to reproduce social stratification. Nor do we mean to imply the opposite, that teachers function as unwitting pawns of the ruling class. Teachers are reasonable and often very thoughtful actors operating within fairly narrow constraints. Their institutions define children's behavior very precisely in terms of "success" or "failure," and individual teachers are often held accountable for the "failures." (For example, a second-grade teacher may grumble when the first-grade teacher passes along pupils with patchy reading skills, and irate parents will often blame the teacher for their own child's school "failure.") To protect themselves (see Ashendon et al. 1987), teachers have frequently attributed "failure" to psychological traits of the children in question—low intelligence, poor self-esteem, behavioral problems, and dyslexia, for example. Often, it is in attempting to move away from these mid-20th-century psychological explanations which blame the victim that reflective teachers have shifted blame for school "failures" to their pupils' families.

Whether they blame the child or the child's family, teachers do not operate alone. Educational psychologists sanction the notion of individual psychological deficits, while educational sociologists (and anthropologists) in France, as in the United States, wittingly or unwittingly sanction the teachers' claim that lower-class families fail to prepare their children for the demands of schooling (see Mollo-Bouvier 1986:290ff.). For example, social scientists document a correlation between school performance and social class, and then explain this correlation in terms of the differing teaching styles, narrative styles, and uses of literacy that characterize lower-class families on the one hand and classrooms on the other. Newspapers, teachers' magazines, and television talk shows publicize these arguments. Teachers whose experience and present position steer them away from criticizing the school's styles of teaching, narrative, and literacy find it easy to translate the research literature into a rationale for their criticisms of families (McDermott 1987; Trueba 1988). Whereas 19th-century criticisms of lower-class families may have relied on an implicit concept of genetic inferiority, it is "cultural" difference that is used to justify such criticisms in contemporary educational debates.

This study raises questions about the effects of other attempts to "police" or control the lower classes. Nineteenth-century policies that aimed at encouraging the working class to take wedding vows (Lynch 1988) or to accept the nutritional advice promoted by doctors and educators (Boltanski 1969) were not highly successful. Like the teachers' criticisms we have studied, such policies and programs cast lower-class families as deviant in relation to the normative middle-class family. As we have indicated above, when lower-class families do accept middle-class

norms, the norms shift. Such family policies do not, therefore, lead to changes in stratification but, rather, serve to reinforce the ideology that lower-class families are of low status because they have failed to comply with middle-class norms.¹³

The example of family ideology analyzed in this study serves as a reminder of the need to rethink the concept of “dominant ideology.” The schools that we studied are not, as Althusser claimed, purely and simply “ideological state apparatuses”; they are sites of a struggle for control over the role and meaning of the family vis-à-vis the state. Various actors are involved in this struggle, including teachers, families, children, educational administrators, the media, and educational researchers. The teachers in our studies appealed to two broad themes in French culture in order to criticize their pupils’ families for resisting middle-class standards: the romanticization of rural life and the idealization of bourgeois “rationality.” The manipulation of such cultural themes or symbols is undoubtedly a common device through which, in the attempt to impose cultural hegemony, the dominant groups of complex societies label lower-class (or “ethnic” or “foreign”) peoples as deviant. The use of such symbols is, as we have shown here, much more complicated than the notion of “dominant ideology” implies.

notes

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¹Scott uses the phrase “everyday forms of repression” in his discussion of “everyday forms of peasant resistance” (1985:241), but he places more emphasis on the latter forms. Althusser, similarly, writes of “everyday domination” (1971:139), but we believe that he has reified this process, rather than shown its operation in concrete situations.

²We reserve the word “peasant,” with its connotations of subsistence agriculture, for food producers of the early 20th century and before. We use the word “farmer” to refer to contemporary rural food producers because they are engaged in commercial food production. The term “*paysan*” is commonly used in contemporary France to refer to farmers, but it has a different meaning from that of the English word “peasant.”

³Lavialle and Villefleurie are pseudonyms, as are all the names of teachers and schools cited in this article.

⁴Our informants used terms such as *populaire* (of the common people), *ouvrier* (working class), *très pauvre* (very poor), *petites classes moyennes* (lower middle class), and *bourgeois* (middle class).

⁵Henriot-Van Zanten notes that teachers in rural Brittany criticized parents’ “*laxisme*” and complained that the parents, who showed little interest in supervising their children’s homework, would just as soon let the children watch television (1990:149).

⁶Teacher attitudes toward North African immigrant families in Lyon, according to Grillo (1985), are more extreme than those Anderson-Levitt found in the smaller city of Villefleurie. Grillo’s teacher-informants pointed to the family environments of North African and Portuguese immigrant children more often than to those of lower-class French children as a cause of school problems. As one primary school teacher in Lyon said of North African families: “The children are in the streets always. When they leave school, they don’t talk French in the home. The mother has no culture, the father is unemployed or off sick” (Grillo 1985:174–175). One of Grillo’s teacher-informants blamed the influence of North African families for the deterioration of French families in certain high-rise neighborhoods. We suspect that the milder teacher attitudes in Villefleurie reflected the relatively small size of the so-called Arab population there, but this is a topic requiring further exploration.

⁷One thinks of the casual way in which Wylie (1975), no doubt expressing local perspectives (as well as his own biases), mentioned Algerian ochre miners in *Village in the Vaucluse* without incorporating them into his study of life cycle and social structure.

⁸Spiegel found similar attitudes among former rural teachers in Touraine (1978:93).

⁹That French public elementary schools are geared exclusively to the middle class is illustrated by Sirota (1988), who demonstrates that it is the children of the French middle classes rather than the children of

professionals who are the most comfortable in elementary classrooms. Lareau (1989) uses Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" in an ethnographic study of schools in middle- and working-class American suburbs.

¹⁰We recognize, of course, that women have worked outside the home ever since work moved outside the home (Tilly and Scott 1987), but we refer here to the *perception* that women's participation in the labor force is a modern phenomenon.

¹¹Henriot-Van Zanten (1990:170) notes that teachers in her study perceived the same distinction between pathological "French" families and the stable "foreign" families in working-class suburbs of Dijon.

¹²In his discussion of the relationship of Greece to anthropological thought, Herzfeld adopts the concept of a Mediterranean "other" in order to highlight what he calls "Eurocentric preoccupations with otherness" (1987:4).

¹³This leads us to wonder to what extent "parent education" programs currently in development in the United States and Europe, on the premise that school problems are caused by family problems, will actually change childrearing practices.

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