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Françoise F. Laot. *Un film comme source pour l'histoire de la formation des adultes homes... et femmes, Retour à l'école?* (Nancy, 1966). Collection "Histoires des institutions scientifiques." Laurent Rollet and Marie-Jeanne Choffel-Mailfert, eds. vol. 9. Lorraine: Presses Universitaires de Nancy-Éditions Universitaires de Lorraine, 2014. 209 pp. Illustrations, tables, documents, and bibliography. 15.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8143-0183-2.

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Françoise F. Laot's *Un film comme source pour l'histoire de la formation des adultes homes... et femmes, Retour à l'école?* (Nancy, 1966) can best be described as a "think-piece" that necessitates a suspension of disbelief upon first reading. The primary reason for this necessity is the actual history of the film *Retour à l'école?* itself and the difficulties posed in writing a history based on what at first appears to be a rather obscure source.

Laot's point of departure in this history is the film, *Retour à l'école?* by Alain Bercovitz and Jacques Demeure. This forty-five minute black-and-white film was produced in 1966 at the Centre universitaire de coopération économique et social (Cuces), a center of adult education (*la formation des adultes*), located in Nancy, France. Laot sees *Retour à l'école?* as a unique historical source because it gives voice to male auditors of adult education classes. Therefore she sees the film as a window into the politics of social promotion (*la promotion sociale*) in France between 1959 and 1966. For Laot, the film allows us to analyze and get to know the "audience" (*public*) for adult education that is consistently talked about in the archival documents, but remains "abstract" and "indiscernible" in prior histories of adult education (p. 7). However, most importantly for Laot, the film shows male auditors and sometimes their wives, but includes not a single female auditor of adult education. For that reason, Laot sees *Retour à l'école?* as a lens by which one can examine the gendered nature of the politics surrounding adult education in 1960s France.

According to Laot, an examination of the film *Retour à l'école?* demands a re-visitation of the history of adult education in post-1945 France. Laot also sees *Un film comme source pour l'histoire* as a complement to the (already well-examined) history of young women and co-education in France and hopes that this work will initiate a wave of historical inquiry into the history of adult women in continuing education. Additionally, Laot sees herself as contributing to the larger project initiated in France in the 1990s, of unearthing the silences of history by writing the history of women and gender.

However, it is at this point in the history that one is forced to banish disbelief, for by page six, Laot tells us that *Retour à l'école?* had fallen into "complete obscurity as soon as it was completed" (p. 6). Laot admits that her determination to work on this source might seem a bit "excessive" to some (p. 8). This dedication seems even more extreme, when one realizes that the film disappeared from sight and memory as soon as it was made. Laot's "stubbornness" (p. 8) and magnetic attraction to the film is reflected in her methodological path.

Laot describes her research as utilizing mixed methodologies. After obtaining a copy of the film, Laot first recreated the script of the film in order to analyze word usage and to weigh the relative importance

of various topics in the film, based on the amount of time they were allotted in the overall project. At the same time, she conducted several interviews with individuals who were involved in the planning of the project, as well as others who could provide contextual information for the film, such as managers at the major institutions involved in its production. In the end, only five of the nearly two dozen individuals Laot interviewed had any memory of the film at all and of the five, most had only a “vague recollection” (p. 37). For Laot, the nearly-complete absence of this film in the memories of the individuals directly implicated in its production made her doubt that the film ever existed, at least as an official production of an institution such as Cuces. By the time she had gotten over her disappointment over this initial series of interviews, two more possible sources for interviews had passed away and the one auditor she had located had categorically refused to stir up old histories.

At this point, Laot turned to the archives. After discovering that the film had indeed existed and that the various stages of its formation, funding, and production could be proven with archival research, Laot began to ask new questions about this history, focusing instead on the absences and omissions surrounding the film. For instance, how could so many individuals directly (or tangentially) involved in the production of this film have forgotten it so completely? Laot asked herself whether there were social, economic, or political developments transpiring in the mid-1960s either nationally or locally that might have had an effect on the reception of this film. This was also the point where Laot began asking questions about gender, after confirming in the archives that women were absent from the film, not only at the level of the institution, but also in the national politics of adult education. It was this new series of questions that Laot succeeds in answering in this work. Although Laot was honest about her challenges as a researcher, this section cast such a doubt over the choice of this film as a source, that it took many more chapters for Laot’s insightful and intriguing arguments to win me back.

Un film comme source is divided into three parts. Part one, “Archéologie autour d’un film documentaire,” outlines Laot’s sources, methodology, and analytical and theoretical frameworks. Part two, “Les années 1960 au prisme de la formation des adultes,” discusses various aspects of the history of adult education in France in the 1960s, including the politics of social promotion and adult education on both the institutional and national level; the history of the “social promotion” of women—which remains a “taboo,” according to Laot—(p. 63); and the particular history of the formation of men—and women—in Nancy. Portions of part two have been published previously. Part three summarizes much of Laot’s archival work on the actual production of the film in the papers of the three institutions involved—Cuces, the research service of the Office of French Radio-Television (ORTF), and the General delegation for social promotion (DGPS)—an interministerial organization in charge of directing governmental politics on the subject of adult education. Laot’s work also contains an introduction, conclusion, and postface, which is actually a thought-provoking letter to Laot from Alain Bercovitz, author of the film, detailing his views of her work.

Laot’s foundational field in the history of adult education, led her to her first encounter with the film *Retour à l’école?* As such, Laot’s deep and enduring interest in this film serves as the basis for many of her theoretical and analytical choices as well. For example, due to of the limitations of the film as a source, Laot applied a micro-historical analysis to this work, inspired by work done in Italy in the 1970s. Laot states that because her original source was so “small, focused, limited, and specific,” she was forced to widen her field of research, investigating the topic at both the local and national levels, taking new paths as older ones were blocked, and bringing a whole new set of questions to the material she was analyzing. Laot states that in France, most of the examinations of adult education have been at the macro level, for instance analyzing the national politics and laws surrounding adult education. Although she has aspects of this model in her project, Laot has shifted her analytical framework to include the relatively-unexplored “very local level” of the individual (p. 18). Additionally, the film itself, with its rich, mysterious, and controversial history became a “character” that needed to be investigated (p. 180). Reading the film in this manner inspired Laot to pose new questions regarding a history that had been previously explored.

Laot also views her work as socio-historical based on the model of Gérard Noiriel. First, she focuses on the education of adults—a problem that rests at the crossroads of the sociological and historical perspectives. Additionally, she examines her subjects in their daily activities with a particular eye to relationships of power. Lastly, Laot qualifies her work as socio-historical because she believes that her historical analysis has an impact on the present.

Laot was also drawn to Michel Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge* as a theoretical base for her project. Like Foucault, she began to see the film not just as a stream of visual images with dialogue, but as an object imbued with meaning. In reality, *Retour à l'école?* was the product of three institutions, Cuces, who gave the movie its content; the Research Service of the (ORTF), which directed it; and the DGPS that financed it. However, borrowing from Foucault, Laot sees *Retour à l'école?* not simply as the product of these three institutions, but also as “an archive” filled with knowledge that could be used to re-create a history of adult education in the 1960s (p. 6).

Later, Laot proposes that *Retour à l'école?* might also be considered a “concentration of knowledge” because it conveys a particular view on adult education that stemmed from Cuces (p. 13). Cuces, according to Laot, was not just any center of continuing education, but was in fact a center of research and innovation in the education of adults. Cuces came together with the Association de Cuces (Acuces) and the National institute for the education of adults (INFA), to form the Nancy complex (1963-1972), which was directed by Bertrand Schwartz. The film was meant to train the educators of adults (who were often teachers or former teachers). The film was not meant for “entertainment” and was never aired nationally or played in theatres (p. 32). Laot uses *Retour à l'école?* to access the dominant discourse surrounding adult education, but only briefly explores the fact that the contents of the film seem to actually contest that discourse. This dissonance, in the end, was one of the reasons that the film was “erased from memory” as soon as it was produced (p. 177).

According to Laot, there are three omissions or absences in the film that led to its early demise. For Laot, these absences also force a re-examination of the topic of adult education.

First, because the film stressed the social promotion of the individual worker as opposed to the collective, it threatened the tenuous connection that the center had just begun with workers' syndicates promoting the collective continuing education of workers. Second, the film ignores women's “formation” entirely. Women are only included in the film as the wives of the auditors being trained. Ironically, at the same time the film was released (1966), several national committees began asking questions about, focusing on, and then making a priority of women's adult education or “formation.” Thus, argues Laot, the film was out-of-date even before it was released. Lastly, the film did not show any educators, only the auditors of the classes. Laot states that showing only the auditors as they lived their daily lives at the training center, at work, and in their homes was a significant decision, fundamental to a particular view of adult education that was being promoted at Cuces in the years before the film was made. However, this last “absence,” which Laot represents as a relatively uniform view of adult education, was in fact, debated strongly before, during, and after the film was produced.

In his postface, Alain Bercovitz stated that the film had been crafted as a psycho-sociological inquiry. Bercovitz had gathered the information through voluntary interviews, analyzed the content of the interviews, came to a synthesis of the ideas, and presented his findings. Bercovitz insisted that his training as a psycho-sociologist affected every decision he made, including the filming of the interviews, the final selection of scenes, and the editing. Bercovitz stressed however, that this approach was not supported by all of his colleagues. Some had stated that the final version of the film represented more his point of view rather than an objective view of reality. In the end, Bercovitz concluded, “I believe that this was one of the reasons that the film was so little utilized and then forgotten” (pp. 194-195). The director of Cuces, Bertrand Schwartz, also did not agree with Bercovitz's choices. In a 2006 interview

between Laot and Schwartz, Schwartz, “seemed extremely shocked” by the scenes that had been filmed at the auditors’ places of residence. Schwartz, in fact, claimed that he could not believe that he would have given his permission “for such an intrusion into people’s homes” (p. 152 and p. 152 fn). So although Laot states that she is trying to bring to light the “obscure ensemble of rules” that constituted the knowledge surrounding adult education in the mid-1960s, the players themselves were in intense disagreement over these rules. [1] As Laot begins to explore at the end of her work, the film’s erasure from memory was as much about the dissonant internal politics at Cuces as it was about the film coming too late.

Chapter three of part two, “Formation des femmes: un tabou à lever,” will have a particular significance to those with an interest in the history of working women in France. Laot begins the chapter with an overview of a few contemporary case studies on working women in the 1950s and 1960s in France, particularly those in industry. The findings of these early (female—as Laot points out) researchers suggested that there were “great resistances to change” in the employment and employability of women in France and that “French society and the job market remained cleaved into ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’” (p. 64). These studies also indicated that the idea that women’s work was both complementary and “accidental” was also deeply entrenched in French society (p. 64). Heads of industry justified women’s placement by insisting that they lacked the appropriate knowledge for highly-qualified positions; they were not interested in performing difficult and multifaceted tasks; they could not adapt to equipment that required mechanical skills; and that (above all) they were more likely than men to accept low-paying jobs. Laot covers other contemporary authors as well, who pointed to the impressive augmentation of women’s employment in areas such as teaching, but the much less impressive increase in women’s employment in the areas of upper management and engineering. Using the work of both contemporary and modern scholars, Laot also shows that, although women were well-represented in higher education in the 1960s, they were most often shunted off towards degrees and training in sectors of the economy that were either losing momentum or were over-populated, such as stenography. Additionally, very few women obtained diplomas in continuing education programs (for instance at the National conservatory of arts and crafts, or Cnam).

Laot then uses this review as a springboard for her own archival research on the “politics of social promotion” through the lens of gender. This review of the archives leads Laot to insist “unequivocally” that women were completely forgotten as beneficiaries of adult education (p. 67). Laot’s first step in the archives was to assess the gender breakdown of the groups in charge of creating this politics of adult education. Laot concludes that they were all composed of men, with one exception to this rule, the comité Grégoire. The comité Grégoire, which contained one female member out of twenty-one, was a national committee in charge of studying the pedagogical structures and problems of social promotion. In addition to the one female member, the president of the comité Grégoire was Roger Grégoire, member of the Council of State, and husband of M^{me} Grégoire, whose work on women and work was already well-established, although she had not yet begun her radio program on Radiotélévision Luxembourg, or RTL. Perhaps not surprisingly then, this was the one committee that raised the question of the social promotion of women. Nonetheless, Laot insists that the report generated by the comité Grégoire was “hardly progressive” in nature, as it treated women only tangentially as professionals and instead focused on training women for efficiency in their roles as home managers and consumers (p. 70). Although traditional in its outlook, however, “this first report on the advancement of women has the merit of introducing the problem of the place of women into a political field that had forgotten them” (p. 70). This report as well as other brief notes that indirectly or tangentially mentioned women, attracted little attention from historians prior to Laot.

Although women were “forgotten” in the politics of social promotion on a national and local level, Laot’s archival research underscores the intense focus on women that grew steadily in the 1960s, not as targets for adult education, but as supporting figures in their husbands’ education.

In 1966, the DGPS, in their *Livre blanc de la promotion sociale*, stated that there was a “family obstacle” in the way of the success of auditors who took night classes (as cited by Laot, p. 73). An auditor who attended classes had to deal with two different levels of “negative pressure” in light of his family (p. 74). First, by attending night classes, he (and as Laot indicated, it was clear from the context that the DGPS envisioned this auditor as exclusively male), was essentially “abandoning his family life” (as cited by Laot, p. 73). This abandonment could occur for a period of weeks or months (if attending day courses) or for evenings four nights a week (and preparation for classes on the weekends) for a period of six years. By attending classes, the auditor neglected the education of his own children, which jeopardized their chances for social promotion. The second familial pressure came from the wife. The spouse of the auditor often experienced a sense of isolation for a goal (social promotion) in which she only vaguely believed. Bertrand Schwartz stated that in fact only 10 percent of those who began the program of continuing higher education (Promotion supérieure du travail, or PST), made it to their final year of schooling, and the many studies of the period indicated that the primary reason for this failing was “family difficulties” (p. 74).

Although not contiguous, Laot’s transcription of the film’s interviews in part three, chapter two, “Un film débordé par son contenu,” highlights the essentiality of spousal support for success in a program of social promotion. In this fascinating section, Laot details the portions of the film dedicated to the “family entourage,” which constituted 40 percent of the final cut of the film. Because of the heavy weight of this topic in the overall project, Laot concludes that the creators of the film believed that the family environment was considered an essential topic for the education of adult educators. In the film, the interviewer (Alain Bercovitz, the film’s author) opens the topic by saying that the wives of the auditors are the ones worthy of praise, after which several auditors are seen supporting this position. For example, a few auditors stressed that when they wanted to give up, it was their wives that gave them the support they needed to carry on. This theme is covered even more in depth in the interviews of the auditors and their wives that were conducted at three of the auditors’ homes. It was clear that, although each of the three couples were very different in their social situation, outlooks on life, and relationships with each other, all three couples reinforced the idea that a wife’s support was critical for the successful social promotion of her husband. In the first childless couple, the husband clearly dominated his wife, but she supported her husband by allowing him to “teach” her when he returned from his night classes, “simplifying” the more difficult subjects (like science), so that she could understand them. She stated, “If I understand, it is because you [her husband] explained it to me well and that you understood it yourself” (p. 156).

In the interview of the second couple it was obvious that the woman took the lead role in their relationship. In this couple, the wife was not only supportive of her husband’s self-improvement, it was crucial to her that he be more than just “a simple worker” (p. 158). Laot surmises that the woman in this couple married beneath her station (her husband had dropped out of school at fourteen years of age), and that following a program of social promotion was a way for him to attain a similar status as his wife. The last couple appeared the most content with each other and with their role as parents to six children. The husband in this couple had had an earlier hiatus in his adult education when his wife had become overwhelmed with raising six kids alone and experienced what they called a “cracking” (p. 163). When the children were a bit older, she said that she was happy for him to have returned to school because he came home and shared what he had learned with her and the children. The children (who took part in the interview) also said that they were happy that their father shared with them over dinner, such adult topics as “capitalism” (p. 165). Laot argues that there were two important lessons to be learned from these interviews. First, formation affected not just the auditors, but their entire families. Second, the process of social promotion was particularly problematic for the wives, because they risked their position in the family power-dynamic if their husband moved ahead and they did not seek promotion themselves. However, it is evident that, whether or not they learned the same material that their husbands were learning, the wives’ position in their families was strong enough that if they decided that social promotion was a liability for the family, their husbands would not succeed.

This essential figure of “the wife” of the auditor finally became visible in the politics of the period regarding social promotion in the mid-1960s. In 1965, the *comité Grégoire* sent a report to the DGPS, suggesting that one could not advance the professional and cultural status of a husband without also targeting (in an unspecified fashion) his family, otherwise it might cause a dangerous “mismatch” (as cited by Laot, p. 76). According to this report, the wife (without some sort of intervention) would miss out on the opportunities for personal betterment in which her husband was engaging, and if working, would not be able advance her own career, because she would be so overloaded with household duties. Additionally, in 1965 a legislative act created the *Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin* (CTF), under the Minister of Social Affairs. The CTF was composed primarily of feminist figures who had made a name for themselves in feminist organizations or unions of the period. The CTF worked to create a level playing field for women in the job market by stressing the importance of women’s vocational training both in their initial education and their continuing education. For instance, in October 1966, it recommended that the principle of non-discrimination should be clarified in article one of the law of 1966. This principle was left out of the final draft of the law. Although in hindsight, some members of the CTF believed that their recommendations were never taken seriously, the very existence of the CTF showed that small steps were being made toward validating women as human beings and as workers who had the right to the same level of education that men received when it came to their chances for employment.

Although some progress for women had been made on institutional and political fronts in the mid-1960s, it would take the revolutions of May 1968 to truly open the door of adult education to French women. The May Days forced a re-examination of the entire educational system, including adult education and continuing higher education. After May 1968, institutions of continuing higher education began focusing on the “*non-publics*”—those who had been either on the margins or ignored completely as target audiences for continuing education and this population included women. As a result of changes implemented by institutions like Cuces, women’s participation in continuing education increased a modest amount. However, the true victory at the end of the 1960s was that women’s participation had become part of the discourse for changes in adult education. This inclusion in the discourse was a great step towards their ultimate participation as auditors in their own right.

In the end, however, after 1971, the politics of adult education again took a turn toward the masculine. Law n° 71-575 of 16 July 1971 subsumed the organization of continued professional education under the category of continuing education, or life-long learning (*l'éducation permanente*). Therefore, after their short visibility in the discourse between 1966 and 1970, “women rejoined the undifferentiated asexual masses of salaried employees, who were the new target of the politics of formation” (p. 179).

One of the most insightful portions of Laot’s work was her section, “Portraits d’épouses: trois couples pris dans le jeu de la formation,” from chapter two of part three. In *Un film comme source pour l'histoire*, Laot highlights the importance of the voices of the auditors in this film, both for the original purpose of *Retour à l'école?*—the education of adult educators—but also for the historian today. For Laot, seeing these individuals’ faces and hearing their voices in the film, “quite literally makes them exist” (p. 7). My own work privileges the voices of women in the past in order to re-create in my audience the same empathy that I feel towards the subjects I investigate. There has been recent research done in the field of neuroscience that shows that there is a brain-to-brain connection—a mind-meld of sorts—between individuals, when one listens to the stories of another.[2] Although this connection is strongest in person and declines in intensity with the emotional distance between the conversation’s participants, sharing the voices of these individuals in print, has, I believe, a whisper of the same effect, creating a sense of compassion in the reader. Laot has actually taken this technique one step further based on the fact that her source is a film with visual images, as well as dialogue. Laot chose to transcribe her subjects’ words in her work and included the movie stills of the interviews to establish a deeper level of intimacy between her subjects and her readers. I found myself flipping back and forth between the

movie stills of the couples and the transcriptions of their interviews to see if I too, agreed with Laot's analysis of the interior lives and exterior worlds of these individuals. Laot's intimate connection and deep interest in the auditors (and their wives) who were the focus of *Retour à l'école?* shine through in her work and remain the piece of her investigation that left the deepest impression on me.

Although strong in several categories, Laot's work does have some limitations. First, Laot writes this history as if France existed in a vacuum, with very little mention of global developments for women or of the global politics of social promotion. For instance, in her review of the problems of women and work, her assessment of French women's difficulties reads as if France is the only place where women struggled (and are still struggling) over bosses seeing them as "accidental," periodic workers, devalued because of their likelihood to procreate at some point in their lives. This tendency to view women as complementary workers, rather than as breadwinners in their own right has been around since the transition from cottage industry to industrial work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Additionally, placing women in low-skilled, less-prestigious positions and devaluing the work they perform (even if performing the same tasks as men) has been rampant in many European countries since the early twentieth century.^[3] When Laot does integrate a global perspective, this technique adds nuance to her argument, for instance, when she discusses the 1964 report on the social promotion of women by the inspector of public instruction, René Cercllet. Laot argues that it was likely that this report was sloppily compiled because it was not internally motivated, but was instead an attempt to create something quickly to satisfy the request of an international work commission tied to UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (pp. 77-78). The few times that she does include an international perspective also help to validate her argument for French singularity. It is possible that Laot's overwhelmingly French-focused approach stems from her dependence on sources written by French scholars and theorists, entirely in French.

However, Laot's most serious limitation with this work is the issue of accessibility. As it is written, this book in its entirety will appeal to only a very small audience. Its primary readership will be scholars interested in social promotion and adult education in post-1945 France. However, sections of this work would be illuminating to a wide variety of scholars. For instance, Laot's theoretical and analytical choices for this work (for example using Foucault to examine *Retour à l'école?* as an object imbued with meaning, or the choice to make *Retour à l'école?* the subject of a micro-history) are insightful examples of this type of scholarship that could serve as models for others. Laot's perseverance in the face of analytical adversity and her choice to ask new questions of subjects previously explored are tools that all historians hope to master in their craft. However, Laot fails to provide the necessary tools—for instance, a chronology, glossary, list of abbreviations, index, et cetera—that would make this work accessible to all of those who fall into the aforementioned categories. Laot's writing assumes a vast amount of prior knowledge that makes this work difficult to read for someone outside her specific sub-discipline. This lack of accessibility is truly unfortunate because Laot's work has so much to offer to so many.

Despite any challenges or lapses of her own, Laot's book remains a cogent and thought-provoking source. Laot's work will be of value to anyone investigating the modest, but essential steps toward change for women in pre-1968 France, as well as those interested in the history of adult education in postwar France, and more tangentially the history of the 1960s.

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 273, cited in Laot, p. 17.

[2] Uri Hasson, et al, "Brain-to-Brain coupling: A mechanism for creating and sharing a social world," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 16, no. 2 (February 2012): 114-121.

[3] Information on working women in Europe can be located in many secondary sources, for instance, Bonnie G. Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present* (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), pp. 143-144. There are also many monographs and anthologies that speak to women's work in the twentieth century, a small sampling of which include: Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago, Ill. and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Rosemary Crompton, Suzan Lewis, and Clare Lyonette, *Women, Men, Work, and Family in Europe* (Basingstoke, Eng. And New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Éva Fodor, *Working Difference: Women's Working lives in Hungary and Austria, 1945-1995* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

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