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November nights 2005: The geography of violence

A round table discussion

Nicolas Sarkozy, with his reference to suburban French youth as "scum", did more than anyone else to stoke the flames of the 2005 riots. Now, his presidential victory is likely to cause continuing resentment in France's suburbs. In a discussion published at the time, French urban geographers, sociologists, and political scientists discuss the causes and effects of the rioting and offer solutions to the conditions responsible for it. While the unrest had precedents in the 1980s and 1990s, they argue, this time it involved new actors, new areas, and new targets. Unemployment, ghettoization, unsympathetic policing: the causes are familiar enough. Only this time, young people were unable to find any more political means of expression than violent implosion. What can policy offer? Social mixing looks good on paper but depends on people having control of the process; redistributive taxation can be equally self–defeating. Now that place struggle has replaced class struggle, can the riots be understood as a new attempt to force solidarity from the middle classes?

Esprit: What is your analysis of the riots that took place in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities in November 2005? What was behind this spread of violence amongst young people in the suburbs?

Hugues Lagrange: First of all, you have to put these events into the context of the last twenty to twenty–five years, during which similar episodes occurred, even though they were not as extensive either in time or in space. To begin with, the episodes of the early 1980s took place prior to any break with the Left at a municipal level and could be seen as being directed at politicians, in particular when you look at what was happening in some areas of Lyon. At the beginning of the 1990s, the situation was different. The break with the urban Left and with the institutions was very much in evidence. But what these two episodes have in common is their geographical location, corresponding to a very large extent to areas of Algerian immigration in France. It coincides with the industrial areas in which a large proportion of the Algerian population settled. It was areas such as this that first produced associations such as SOS Racisme and where a certain disillusion set in once the lack of political engagement with the agitation in the suburbs became evident. There then followed two phases which are not characterized by such clear–cut developments as those mentioned. The first of these phases, in which it is quite clear that this confrontation between young people and the police developed, runs from 1993 to 1998. The second phase runs from 1998 to 2002, and that is when violence degenerated into delinquency: a period of frequent violent confrontations between gangs, of violence against young women, of an inability to find political expression for feelings of aggression, even in their most elementary form, namely in confrontations with the police.

What happened during these nights in November signals a return to an earlier phase: there was no violence between gangs; the police were always the target. This was not an outbreak of delinquency even if there was some degeneration into violence, and it must be said, an unacceptable level of violence towards individuals. But looting was very rare — in fact, it was practically non-existent. The targets were the police and public buildings rather than businesses. Admittedly, some of the young people may have set fire to gymnasiums or to the schools that their little brothers attended, but we are not talking about an outbreak of delinquency that got out of hand. It really was a confrontation with the police and intended as such.

The geography of the latest series of events was also very telling: the eastern areas of Lyon and the northern districts of Marseille, zones where, in recent years, there have been very serious confrontations (Essonne and Val-de-Marne) were not very heavily involved or else, like Grigny, for example, only involved towards the end. The departments of Yvelines, Trappes, and Mantes were also not very affected, except for the fairly spectacular burning of the bus depot in Trappes. What incidents there were remained isolated. So we are dealing with a different geographical picture from that of the 1980s or 1990s. And another feature of the new profile of these riots is that the involvement of young people of sub-Saharan immigrant origin was very considerable, whereas previously it was relatively minor.

Esprit: The police reported that a younger age range was involved; was this a particular feature of the situation?

HL: They were talking about sixteen as the average age, so that implies that many of those involved were minors. I feel that what we are facing are major generation clashes and serious isolation: the isolation of young people. For a start, the forms of action they took did not unite people; they might have been able to unite the 18- to 25-year-olds but probably not their parents. But, as I was able to see for myself at a meeting in Mantes, whilst there may have been an unspoken form of solidarity between the 20- to 25-year-olds and the much younger people, that does not mean that there was any kind of actual involvement. Another thing was that many of the mothers felt that there were some real grievances behind the violence; they blamed the fact that their children had qualifications but no jobs, saying things like: "What good is a BEP¹ in hairdressing if you can't get a job?" Other categories of people that I met, such as heads of families and representatives of local associations, tended rather to feel solidarity with the young rioters while nevertheless maintaining a distance from them.

Esprit: The police and the CRS² were often surprised by the way in which the acts of violence were carried out: the clashes were not with groups who were trying to gather into large crowds but just with small gangs. Why did this happen?

HL: It correlates pretty closely with age. These are the young people who are stopped and made to show their papers several times a day. They have a difficult relationship with the police, particularly since the increase in powers, at least in the Paris region, of the BAC³, and of police methods which have, to say the least, little to do with those of the neighbourhood police or the crime prevention squad. They have now had three or four years' experience of this sort of skirmishing. It is very clear from the increase in sentences for insulting behaviour and disorderly conduct that this face-to-face confrontation with the police is turning out badly. The kind of action carried out in small groups can

also be explained by what we have seen of the isolation of these very young people. There is no sort of mediation between, on the one hand, the BAC and special intervention squads or riot police such as the CRS, and these young people on the other. The scrapping of jobs for young people and the restrictions placed on CES contracts⁴, which were not compensated for by the overall effect of the youth employment contracts, not only brought about a reduction in jobs that might have helped young people who had not managed to integrate, but made matters worse by reducing posts in the mediating professions. Everything conspired to bring about a reduction in mediation over the last three years. The lack of mediation at the political level is just as blindingly obvious. The only people who have not been completely absent at a political level have been the mayors. The role they have played has been a positive one and has gone beyond mere party-political affiliations.

Local features

Esprit: What about solidarity within the family? We didn't hear very much more about those "elder brothers" who were supposedly going to act as mediators.

HL: The situation is ambiguous. The elder brothers did not restrain the younger people, but they did not make common cause with them either. To oversimplify a little, it is possible to distinguish between two types of elder brothers: there are those who work for the community, who do jobs involving youth work and mediation; then there are the gang bosses. The ones who could have wielded some authority, apart from the religious leaders, tended to be the gang bosses. But they did not get involved, nor did they hold back the demonstrations. The youth leaders did play a part, but nowadays they are not in a position where they are going to be listened to; they lack credibility, and that is another aspect of the crisis in the suburbs. As for the gang bosses, it does not appear possible, on the basis of the riots, to draw up a map of the drug-dealers' territories. For example, there was no rioting in Gennevilliers even though it is a major drug-dealing area. There was only limited rioting in Nanterre, too. So the idea of a kind of curfew being declared by the drug barons doesn't really stand up to scrutiny. In the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, the communes most affected were those where there is a very high unemployment rate amongst people aged 15 to 24. And then, if you look at communes where there are urban industrial development zones⁵ which have produced jobs, you can see that there was very little rioting, although Clichy-sous-Bois is an exception.

Jacques Donzelot: There has been a transformation from the rioting of hope of the 1980s, a time when young people on the estates were the focus of social inquiry, to the rioting of despair. The riots have undergone a process of degeneration, changing from an anti-racist perspective and an affirmation of the *quartier*, as Christian Bachmann showed in his remarkable study *Autopsy of a Riot*, to all sorts of destructive acts. For some years now, young people have not been in the forefront of social inquiry; centre stage has instead been given to public service employees or to wage earners affected by relocation. These riots expressed despair at the fact that young people in the suburbs feel left out and are treated as "scum".⁶ What such labelling expressed is quite simply this: that young people feel that no one is taking any notice of them, that they are being discredited and that their future is, to put it mildly, uncertain.

As regards geography, I would like to return to the question of Clichy-sous-Bois. When you actually go there you can understand why young people feel that they are marginalized. Once you enter the area you cannot see how to get out again. It is a town, or rather a non-town, caught between several communes, a long way from all the rapid transit services, a place where you have to catch a bus, except that you can't find any of the bus stops, and that is because there is no one waiting at them. The people you see are those who are not in work, young people from ethnic minorities, older white people and the very poor. In Marseille the situation is the exact opposite. The fact that there were no riots in Marseille is often explained by the quality of community life there. But actually this is often not nearly as good as it is claimed to be. But it is certainly a vote catcher as far as the town council and the offices of the district mayors are concerned. The important point is that young people in the northern districts can access the city centre via the public transport network. They have their own areas in the centre. They feel that they have a stake in the city, they see themselves as "Marseillais", and that is what they call themselves. Their revolt expresses, first and foremost, a refusal to be sidelined by society or by town planners.

Marie-Christine Jaillet: The local perspective also seems important to me if we are to understand why one area or another did or did not experience rioting this time. You might wonder why the Mirail area of Toulouse was one of those that hit the headlines. It is, indeed, one of those areas with a good metro connection to the city centre. So the residents and the young people can get into the centre. So, as well as the lure of copycat activity, you have to look for other explanations in the local situation. For example, you need to recall that Mirail had been earmarked by the police as an area to be "won back". For months, the police, using methods worlds away from those of the local force in Toulouse that had been discredited by Nicolas Sarkozy, had "gone in hard": entry to the area had been "monitored" in the evenings at the main roundabout, there was an increase in visual identity checks, and so on. This kind of approach hardened attitudes, and helped to increase a feeling of exasperation among young people. What is more, the community associations which held the area together and which acted as a third party in the disputes saw their credit slip away; they just quietly died and were no longer able to play their part. You also have to remember that Toulouse is a town that can boast economic success, notably with the Airbus A380. But the young people of the Mirail area continue to feel that they have no stake in this local success story. They are just spectators. It is probably more painful to feel this in a town that is supposedly rich and expanding and showing every sign of being so. And, a final point: there is probably a link between the riots and the changes affecting the suburbs as a result of urban renewal projects: in Mirail demolition is taking place. The framework of the residents' lives is being affected and, at the moment, they cannot see what is going to happen to their environment and do not feel that they are involved in the project; they have no stake in it. Once again, they are just on the receiving end.

HL: Indeed, you might well be inclined to wonder whether there is any connection between the activities of the government agency responsible for planning urban regeneration ⁷ and the current outbreaks of violence: some families, in the inner suburbs especially, knowing that they are going to be moved out, are supposed to have trashed the place. I'm afraid that many families just let their children do as they liked because they thought that they had no future in the area in any case. There has to be reinvestment in the suburbs but there has to be transparency too. If people are going to be made to move, they have to be told where they can go and what the conditions are

going to be.

Philippe Estèbe: The notion of degeneration does seem to be correct. I would like to go back to the point about urban industrial development zones, specifically with reference to Seine–Saint–Denis. The fact that there are jobs available nearby does not seem to be a passport to such jobs for those who live on the estates. In the development zones, businesses are supposed to reserve one quarter of *new* jobs for residents of the estates. We are not talking about a quarter of the overall workforce but only a quarter of the new jobs. Proportionately, they may reach the prescribed figure, or even exceed it, but the actual numbers employed can often be very low. I do not consider it very likely that these zones will be able to make residents feel that they are sharing in the development and prosperity of the town. I am not at all sure that living near to these zones makes people feel involved. Outside the actual development zones, what is certain is that the Plaine–Saint–Denis has become a focus for considerable economic growth, on a regional scale, including the Stade de France and the location of major commercial and industrial head offices. But, the more employment becomes available in Plaine–Saint–Denis, the more recruitment takes place at the national level and the share claimed by the local residents decreases. This is also the case for Mirail, which is close to the growth areas in Toulouse, but this does not mean that the people who live on the spot have any better right of access to the available jobs.

There is another point that I would like to stress. Today's rioters do not have the same origins as those of yesterday. Something has happened in the interim period. Because we have focused on areas rather than people, we lack information about what is happening between one riot and the next. Now, in some areas in Seine–Saint–Denis, there is an annual rate of house moves of between four and seven per cent. So there is some renewal of the population even if others do not move, whether voluntarily or otherwise. There is a proportion of the population which remains mobile because, for some, these suburbs are transit areas. The change in the nature of the riots may be the result of a new wave of immigration, not the third or the fourth generation of immigrants trapped in inherited unemployment. The suburbs have not only to be seen as places which "hold" social groups, but also as spaces through which populations flow.

M–CJ: It seems to me that there is a new dimension in the way that the residents in the suburbs regard the riots compared with previous occasions. Those aspects of the living conditions and lack of consideration that seem unbearable to young people are seen in the same way by the population as a whole. This does not mean that one should conclude that the area stood squarely behind its young people; nevertheless, a number of residents said that they could understand why the young people had got to that point. And some local responses to some extent confirmed the divide between the residents of the suburbs and the rest of local society and showed that the latter were afraid that the riots might spread to the centre of the city. For several days you could not get to the Mirail district after six o'clock in the evening because they closed down the metro. The symbolism was clear enough: the gates of the city had been closed to the residents of Mirail.

On the political level, you might be surprised by the silence not just from all the leftwing parties but also from the extreme Left. And yet there was not really anything unexpected about what was happening. It was as if the Left could not use their usual structures and vocabulary to respond to these events, as indeed was the case for the suburbs and their residents too. The Toulouse

example also shows that, although the generations follow each other in the suburbs, the political experience which their elders lived through has not enabled young people to find any more political means of expression than violent implosion. Recollection of political action has not been handed down. In 1998, after the death of a young man and serious unrest in the area, a small group of young people started a movement that was taken up by various local activists and resulted in a large march into the heart of the city centre. There was nothing like that this time. What is more, it is difficult not to recall how, in Toulouse, the Motivé-e-s movement⁸ became part of the experience that has stayed with a whole generation of young French people "with their origins in the immigrant community", but who lay claim to being French, to being sons and daughters of the Republic, and who have played the game of public and political expression within the framework of the Republic. Rather than really being given a place in the scheme of things, they and their demands concerning discrimination were confined within strict limits. Traditional political action turned out to be less effective in mobilizing French society and its elites on the question of discrimination than has the present outbreak of violence. At the local level, anyway, there has been no passing on of political experience from one generation to the next, and today's young rioters are effectively isolated, deprived of any political or community outlets.

JD: The attitude of the residents was probably made up of, on the one hand, a measure of understanding of the difficulties that everyone in the area has to face, of the feeling that there is no future for a lot of these young people, but also of disapproval of themselves, of the area, of the services and facilities that it has to offer. The proof of that is that after a certain period of time, residents got together during the night to occupy the services in the area. Who would ever have imagined that people from these suburbs would have undertaken to safeguard their area's facilities?

HL: Despite the violence of the events, there were very few signs of things getting out of control or of self-defence. We saw some mobilization of society: youth leaders, community structures, or officials of sports clubs or teachers protecting the schools, whose aim was not self-defence. On the whole, the geographical distribution was nothing new: the names of the districts affected have been well-known for a long time. But it is a younger generation that is now experiencing the deadlock, and this time the form it took was more desperate because it had no political voice.

Enforced immobility

Esprit: What you are describing is geographical movement in two directions: spreading out from an initial point, Clichy-sous-Bois, towards districts that fit into a familiar geographical category, but at the same time the violence being confined within a defined urban sector. Why did it not spill over into town centres?

HL: This was linked to the fact that the rioters were young: they did not have the means to travel very far and they only knew their own areas. They had a tactical advantage if they stayed within familiar territory. Similarly you might wonder why the premises affected were the infant schools and, to a lesser extent, primary schools rather than the secondary schools, despite it being in the latter that the split takes place between these young people and the education system. The answer has to do with their situation: of all the parts of the educational network, infant schools are the most thick on the ground and therefore, from a tactical point of view, the easiest to get to. Primary and

secondary schools are further away. When you see it in this way, it is clear that it was not the rioters' intention to burn the places where their little brothers went to school.

JD: The rioters were also very quick to understand that, for the media, the unit of currency was the burnt-out car and only secondarily the school. They had found a symbol. At the moment, for the US in Iraq, the unit of currency is the number of dead. For our suburbs it is the burnt-out car. That is an advantage, even if American journalists reported our riots as if they were a war, as if they were *their* war.

M-CJ: Not only did the young people demonstrate in places that they knew well and in this way stay in their own districts but, within the small scale of these districts, there were also places which took on the character of stage sets: that is where events happened and not elsewhere in the area. So the riots were very localized. For example, in the Reynerie area of Mirail, the Rue de Kiev, and only the Rue de Kiev, was the scene where the riots took place and there was no real spread to the rest of the area. It was at no. 9 in this street where the young man lived who was killed in 1998. That was where the 1998 riots had already taken place and the house at no. 9 was one of the first to be demolished. It may be new generations that are involved, but the area still has a history that gives these places a collective memory, even if the buildings themselves have been knocked down.

PE: Their choice of turf aims to minimize the risks and to maximize their visibility. What is interesting is that the aim was to minimize on both sides: for the young rebels it was a case of minimizing the risks and also minimizing the confrontation and the attendant danger of it getting out of control with the police. In Toulouse in 1998, a local riot lasted a week after the death of a young man. The district was the site of the confrontation, but the residents of the area concerned organized a silent procession of mourning for the young man and of protest against police brutality. The route it took led to the town hall in the Place du Capitole. You can see then that the residents of the estates, especially the young, use space in a carefully and intelligently variable fashion: the suburb is used as the battleground and the town centre as a kind of public forum.

Esprit: These riots occurred at the same time that a major urban regeneration policy was being launched. It is the most important project agreed for the suburbs for a long time; at any rate, one that is going to mean a major spending programme. Is this just a coincidence?

JD: Even though the aim of the Minister for Urban Affairs was to bring positive pressure to bear, there is plenty of negative pressure associated with this urban renewal process. Getting together large sums of money for these urban renewal operations was a very good idea. Let's start getting rid of the high rises and the low rises as well, good idea! But the problem is that people were in no way involved in what was going to happen. They were just manipulated, literally, there was no participation whatsoever. In the US, the lack of participation in urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s was one of the two main causes of the bloody riots which lasted for five years, from 1963 to 1968, the other being unemployment. It was only after that that the Americans began to think seriously about the question of degeneration and opted for two strategies that gave them effective control of the problem, although they did not solve it. But claiming to have solved it purely by means of a planning operation only made the problem worse. So modesty is no bad thing in this

context. The two strategies were — and still are — affirmative action (applying quotas on the basis of ethnicity for access to employment and entry to university) and community development, specifically a process of regeneration seen as serving the aims of social and moral reintegration for the residents of the ghettos.

Urban renewal, as conceived by the minister for employment, social cohesion, and housing, Jean-Louis Borloo, aimed to create mixed communities in the suburbs. But how can you create mixed communities without driving out some of the people who live there? The population density is already excessive. How do you attract people from outside? We just do not know how to bring about social mixing in places from which it has disappeared. There have been some tentative experiments in Holland in the form of "controlled gentrification" in town centres. It involves a programme of refurbishment, demolition, and construction of residential buildings. The people who were most readily accepted for this accommodation were people assumed to be capable of forming relationships easily with ethnic minorities: teachers, social workers, police officers. The results appear disappointing in spite of all these precautions. Improvement in employment and in school performance had been hoped for but nothing of the kind took place. The only improvement was in public order — which was by no means negligible — which seems rather to reflect a process of withdrawal than any kind of active social mixing. The problem is that when you deliberately mix groups together you juxtapose social codes that can be difficult to acquire, especially for those who are only capable of adapting to one code. All of that has been clearly demonstrated in sociology by the Chicago school. Speaking to others implies that you have mastered their social code as well as your own. If you impose mixing and thereby deny people their own identity then all you are doing is bringing about a withdrawal effect.

You can bring about a certain sort of mixing provided that you are able to perceive what the American sociologist Robert Putnam has called "strong bonds" and "weak bonds".⁹ Strong bonds are those represented by belonging to the family and to the community, bonds which depend on similarity. These bonds are very useful for short-term needs: getting someone to look after your child, for example. Weak bonds are those you occasionally make with people from other milieus. Such bonds are fragile because they are not based on identity. It is these that are most useful for access to employment. The idea that you have to do what you can to strengthen weak bonds to assist in the return to employment, rather than doing so by creating development zones, has been accepted as axiomatic for a good twenty years now in all Western countries with the exception of France. Everything is achieved by establishing bonds. A weak bond may be a one-off but it is precious. It forms a link with the other elements which go to make up a town, the strongest elements, but you have to be strong enough to know how to make the best use of such an opportunity. The strength of the weak bonds depends, in the final analysis, on the strength of the strong bonds, that is, on having the degree of confidence and self-esteem that your immediate entourage can give you when it takes on this role. In France the only bond we are familiar with is the "social bond", that is the expression of state authority. Because we refuse to make use of the relationship between strong and weak bonds, we deny ourselves the possibility of making use of the relationship between the community and society in a flexible way.

PE: Asking the question in terms of strong and weak bonds is indeed much more interesting than asking it in terms of social mixing. But laying the stress

on weak bonds does pose a problem. Weak bonds are the more productive from the point of view of integration and of social development. But in order to capitalize on the weak bonds, you first have to have the capacity, the social capital to enable you to undertake a variety of social experiences to enable the maximum possible number of social encounters. Now if you think about that problem, our urban policies have given out messages to the residents that have been, to say the least, contradictory. On the one hand, these policies have issued powerful directives in favour of social mixing, and on the other they have consigned residents to a form of social unit based on the community, and they do this in the name of "consolidation of social bonds". They provide finance for "elder brothers", for adults as intermediaries, as if the only viable social model was the family model. This is counter-productive in relation to the importance of establishing weak bonds.

People and places

JD: What has characterized urban policy in France up to now has indeed been the provision of posts which come under the management of urban policies: in particular, adult intermediaries and youth employment. But it has never trained community leaders in the way that the Americans did. You can help the population of an area to create contacts with the outside by helping people to emerge who can take responsibility, can get themselves known, can act as a link rather than allowing relations with the outside world to pass exclusively through state or municipal administrations.

M-CJ: It is true that there is a permanent fluctuation in urban policy between two contradictory imperatives. It frequently refers the individual to the notion of belonging to the area. Without wishing to deny that the area is something that offers resources to the individual, this imperative can tend to "lock in" men and women who no longer feel themselves to be migrants but above all to be French. On the other hand, urban policy calls for a return to social mixing in the suburbs. Whilst such a policy supposes that people from other social strata would come to live in the suburbs, it also supposes that people from the suburbs are able to live elsewhere in the town, given that it stresses the idea of reducing population density in the suburbs. There would be too many people in situations of poverty, living on the edge, people from the immigrant community, and such a "concentration" in one place would be harmful. The reasoning that is used to justify "dispersal" is that, if they were moved elsewhere, the residents of the suburbs could diversify their social encounters and find new opportunities. If that is to happen, it means that affordable social housing must be produced elsewhere. Since the declared aim is to get rid of the ghettos, the communes are going to have to be involved in absorbing the population of the suburbs and will have to make the effort to provide 20 per cent of social housing. And it will not just be enough for them to provide social housing if the aim is to guarantee that some will be used to house residents from the suburbs. Whereas mayors are now more ready to build social housing, it is actually because they need housing for rent to respond to local social needs, such as the younger generation moving out of the parental home. The mayors may have social housing at their disposal but they do their best to stay in control of allocating it. When a young person or some other resident of a suburb sees houses being demolished without being involved in what is going on and when, in addition, he hears that he is not wanted elsewhere (the mayor of a commune just outside Toulouse stated in the local press that he did not want any social housing schemes so that he wouldn't have to take in people from Mirail); when you add to that the daily problem of being unable to break through the "glass wall" of discrimination, even with the qualifications and

certificates that are required, such an accumulation of experiences is eventually bound to produce resentment, to say the least. At the point we have reached in French society, are there not priorities other than social mixing, other urgent matters? Because transforming the suburbs is going to take time. As far as I'm concerned, the priority seems to be to take the strains out of society so that it truly becomes willing to make room for people from the suburbs and, in order to do so, to get it to fight against discrimination of all kinds.

HL: But what should we do? We're faced with two obstacles: the policy of social mixing is obviously useful if you think about the "leavening effect". Every study proves conclusively that, when there is a star pupil in a school, the less bright pupils get carried along. And this is not a symmetrical effect: the fact that there are poor pupils in a class does not necessarily lower the standard. You notice when you observe the friendship networks of young people that those who have had good pupils in their circle for a long time make progress. Social mixing is not some sort of muddled appeal to a notion of solidarity, of openness towards the other. It is not just a humanist position, but it is first and foremost of value in terms of educational change. The problem is to know how to promote such change. And on the other hand, one can see how extremely effective those policies are which target individuals, individuals who have taken measures to escape their predicament. Indeed, the political answer to the recent riots was bursaries and boarding school places for deserving students: would we have had them without this kind of pressure?

But these policies that stake everything on the mobility of the individual also have a downside. Once there is an elite in the area, a young couple, for example, who marry and have a certain level of qualifications and who leave the area, that means one fewer community leader in the area, one star pupil fewer in the school. The fact of people leaving causes a concentration of problems, through a sort of upward evaporation. In order to build up weak bonds that are going to be useful in gaining access to employment, you first have to achieve a degree of self-reliance that the adolescents in the suburbs lack. The collectives that could set people free and could create a measure of self-reliance are missing. By this I mean the associations whose role today is often to stand for, to identify the community. Unless you have a combination of action that actually works on people's careers together with social mixing and the leavening effect, then you either cause people to move upwards and leave, thereby impoverishing the estates, or else you adopt territorial policies which get no support and which are diluted.

Esprit: We have moved on from thinking about investment in places, in the built environment, to thinking more about the people themselves. What is meant by "investing in people"?

JD: It means investing in people at the same time as you invest in places. It all depends on what it is that you are aiming to do. When we invest in places, is our intention to disperse people so that they do not constitute either a force for inertia or a force for aggression? Or are we investing in places in a way that will allow people who live there to use this as an opportunity to become a force, to learn to become individually *and* collectively strong? Such a way of proceeding may have been experienced by a certain number of project managers in France in the 1980s and 1990s, but the approach was forgotten before it was even recognized. It is a question of knowing how to go about it. And the know-how has not been grasped. We do not know how to get people to participate. We either struggle to no effect or else we undertake consultations that are pure fictions. We bring the leaders of community

associations together, get ourselves photographed with them and proclaim that the regeneration project has been drawn up with the residents. This is what happened in Montpellier, for example, where the residents mounted quite a rebellion against this fiction. And as for the social workers, they do not know how to handle relations with individuals. We have to show people that they can acquire power in their town and in their lives by democratic processes.

Social mixing takes on a new meaning for people as soon as they have some kind of control of the process and can welcome newcomers. But where the mixing is imposed from outside, you cannot welcome people in; people are being imposed on you.

M-CJ: Urban policy used to try to bring the two dimensions together: activity related to place and activity meant to benefit people. The urban regeneration projects break with this tradition to the extent that they focus solely on places, even though the Borloo Act¹⁰ was supposed to have acted on both aspects of the problem. You can indeed see in the suburbs a concentration of problems resulting from the "evaporation" of those who leave. It may well be that this environment, which has simply gone on getting poorer for decades, is partly responsible for dragging its residents downwards. However, you can also see that to get the residents moving, to allow them some measure of mobility, is not just a matter of removing the "elites" from the area, it is also making evident what kind of dynamic force there might be for the men and women who are stuck there. In particular, as long as the men and women who have made an effort to educate themselves and to obtain some qualifications remain in these suburbs, as long as their CVs do not get accepted, then it will be very difficult to make educational effort and its promise of escape credible. Getting people in the suburbs to change their lives is not just a matter of shifting them somewhere else.

Possible policies

Esprit: What can the authorities do? Is it not the case that the lack of social housing in many communes and the lack of any sense of solidarity between communes are also factors that go to explain the ongoing problems in these suburbs?

PE: The main strategy for restructuring the areas, about which, unfortunately, we can only draw retrospective conclusions over a period of three or four years, is the idea of intercommunality. What can we say about it? In the statement of aims of the Chevènement Act¹¹, intercommunality was indeed put forward as a means of combating what is called "social apartheid". But confusion arose between "rich communes" and "communes composed of rich people": the Chevènement Act targeted the struggle against "social apartheid" using as its principal weapon a sharing out of the *taxe professionnelle*¹², a tax which is considered unfair on a geographical basis. Now, whilst this tax is indeed unfair on a geographical basis, it is much less unfair from a social point of view. The communes made up of poor people are somewhat richer than those made up of rich people. This is because the former contain more business premises than the latter, which are purely residential. It has to be noted however that the growth in the *taxe professionnelle* is today greater in the residential communes because of the way that economic activity has evolved. But, for the most part, the *taxe professionnelle* is a tax that tends to be socially fair. In the provinces, the Chevènement Act has worked well to the extent that it has facilitated *rapprochements* between quite different kinds of communes, both on the social and on the fiscal level. However, the kind of fiscal solidarity

which is set up between these communes is regressive in the sense that the money does indeed move from the rich communes to the poor communes, but that means that it frequently moves from poor households to rich households. So you often see main towns having at their disposal *taxes professionnelles* that mount up in the social housing fund whilst poverty-stricken residents are financing personal services in the little residential communes where the middle classes live. The Île-de-France region is a typical case because the intercommunal share-out that applies is not self-defining in terms of a continuous urban patchwork. The councillors have been able to select profitable groupings, with the result that the Île-de-France is now covered with "clubs", if that's the right word for these gatherings of one-class commune groups. The make-up of these groupings of very similar communes has regressive effects in terms of regional fiscal redistribution. One of the only groups of communes to play a positive role in the Île-de-France, in my opinion, is La Plaine, a commune that is built around Saint-Denis. But, as far as the rest of the region is concerned, one cannot see, at least at the moment, any kind of move towards solidarity on the fiscal level. So questions need to be asked today about the kind of solidarity that intercommunality produces. Perhaps there will be more positive effects on construction or on the allocation of social housing.

M-CJ: But this unwillingness on the part of councillors to play the game when it comes to solidarity between communes or to accept social housing reflects the concerns of their electorate, in particular of the middle classes and their giving way to the preference for being among their own kind so as to protect themselves. Last year, the habitat and humanism organisation carried out a survey on social housing. They asked a two-part question. First of all they asked interviewees whether they favoured the construction of social housing. The overwhelming majority answered, "Yes". Then they asked them whether they favoured the construction of social housing in their area: the proportion of positive replies collapsed. In other words, the "citizen", in the universal sense, says, "Yes", but the resident says, "No". That is a very clear expression of the concerns of the middle classes who themselves feel weakened. What these riots and, on a larger scale, the suburbs themselves have shown is the divide between the middle classes and the residents of the suburbs. Some members of the government, those who played the firmness card above all, were certainly playing on this divide. It is hard to see how any strong political alliance can be forged anew between the working classes and the middle classes. And above all, on the basis of which political parties or movements could it be done? All the discourse about national security, on the other hand, can get on very nicely on the basis of a refusal to re-establish relationships, because a section of the middle classes has itself been destabilized by the changes in the economy and is itself unsure about its own future.

HL: But how did we manage to forge an alliance between the working classes and the middle classes just after World War II? In a way, the middle classes agreed to make a considerable effort in terms of redistributive taxation but also in terms of personal engagement. You might wonder whether the violence that we have seen might not be a new expression or a new attempt to force a relationship that would oblige the middle classes to recreate a form of solidarity. Because part of the population is excluded from the world of work, this enforced relationship cannot now be expressed at the factory, in the place of business, or through trade-union activity. The probability is that it has shifted to these suburbs and is happening there as something which is part, not of the class struggle, but of the struggle for a place.¹³ That is why the question

of the allocation of social housing is crucial. The fines to be imposed on communes failing to fulfil their obligation to provide 20 per cent of social housing are derisory. Why can we not design a system that would allow much more meaningful transfers of funding? For example, communes that have only five per cent of social housing and have not met their obligations could have to pay fees indexed against property prices in their commune. In the long term, that would be an incentive for them to obey the rules. Certain communes could still be allowed to pay, but to pay a lot, for keeping poor people away. This sort of regulation would seem useful to me.

PE: We do indeed need safeguards to give action relating to these areas the same force and the same visibility as trade-union action was able to provide for the world of work. According to the economists, the problem is to find the right scale for the areas between which the transfers of funding should be carried out. Your last proposal could only work at the regional level so that the area to be taxed would be large enough and so that the cost of failing to fulfil your obligations would be as high as possible.

JD: There is a new factor by contrast with the 1950s and 1960s when the middle classes had managed to forge an alliance: it is no longer the case that the division is between a working-class majority and an increasing middle-class minority. The division is between a middle class that feels threatened and has lost its upward aspirations, both on the collective and the individual level, and a "popular" class in which "visible minorities" dominate. Whereas the alliance in question might have seemed to be likely to succeed for both sides in an industrial society because the workers could bring to it the power of the collective and the middle classes the reward for individual effort, now, the present-day middle classes are giving off a collective signal, an expression of fear and of a defensive struggle which, at the individual level, translates into a refusal to live alongside anyone with less money, and above all anyone with a different skin colour from yourself. The upper middle classes are less afraid of the world, of globalization, less afraid of immigration that is no threat to themselves. All that was perfectly evident in the French referendum on the European constitution! As for any restrictions on communes in connection with social housing under the Solidarity and Urban Renewal Act¹⁴, it is more than doubtful whether they would lead to any reduction in the concentration of poverty. A mayor who builds social housing in a commune where there is very little of it will be very careful about how this housing is allocated. He is not going to go and pick up somebody else's poor families; he will find needy families in his own commune, be they local government employees, minor civil servants, and so on.

Conversation recorded on 16 November 2005. Asking the questions for Esprit were Nathalie Lempereur and Marc-Olivier Padis.

¹ Brevet d'Études Professionnelles, a certificate of professional training, usually awarded at the age of 17, after two years' study — trans.

² Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité: the riot police — trans.

³ The Brigade Anticriminalité: the crime squad — trans.

⁴ Contrats emplois solidarité — a French government scheme to reduce unemployment by subsidizing certain types of job, dating from August 2004. In August 2002, they also set up Contrats jeunes en entreprise, a scheme to subsidize jobs for young people aged 16 to 22 with minimal qualifications — trans.

⁵ The reference is to *zones franches* — areas where industrial or commercial enterprises are granted exemption from certain taxes in order to encourage development and investment — trans.

- ⁶ "Racaille" and "gangrene" were the highly insulting terms used by the Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, in a speech at Argenteuil on 25 October 2005.
- ⁷ Agence nationale pour la rénovation urbaine (ANRU) — trans.
- ⁸ A political pressure-group with its headquarters in Toulouse — trans.
- ⁹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster 2000.
- ¹⁰ The official title of this act, promulgated in January 2005, was "Law on Social Cohesion" — trans.
- ¹¹ 12 July 1999
- ¹² This is a tax on local businesses and on professions that earn fees rather than salaries. Its level is based on the value of the business premises and assets. It provides about half the locally raised income of the municipalities — trans.
- ¹³ See: Olivier Mongin, "[From class struggle to place struggle](#)".
- ¹⁴ Passed in December 2000 — trans.

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