

## “French Suburbs”: a New Problem or a New Approach to Social Exclusion?

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### Abstract:

At the end of 1980s, the question of « *quartiers sensibles* » (at-risk neighborhoods) started being very publicized in France. It was not only the subject of many front page articles, but also the target of a new public policy aimed at promoting urban and social development in about 500 neighborhoods (*Politique de la ville*). I argue that such focalization on « *quartiers sensibles* » does not only result from increasing problems such as unemployment, poverty or juvenile delinquency. It also represents a major change in public policy. Focusing on « *quartiers sensibles* » directly contributed to the restructuring of the French Welfare State by centering its action on specific urban spaces rather than national territory, and on social links rather than economic reality, contrary to what Welfare State claimed to do during the Fordist period. The outbreak of November 2005 riots is inextricably bound up to the way some problems (like lack of communication and weakening social links) have been associated to the question of « *quartiers sensibles* » whereas the French model of integration, based on equality between abstract citizens, let some others (like ethnic discrimination) unquestioned.

**Keywords:** exclusion, French suburbs, social problem.

### Résumé :

A la fin des années 1980, la question des « quartiers sensibles » a commencé à recevoir une grande publicité en France. Elle était non seulement le sujet de nombreuses unes, mais aussi la cible d'une nouvelle politique publique visant à promouvoir le développement social et urbain dans environ 500 quartiers (politique de la ville). Ici, je soutiens la thèse que cette focalisation sur les « quartiers sensibles » ne résulte pas seulement de problèmes de plus en plus préoccupants comme le chômage, la pauvreté ou la délinquance des jeunes. Elle représente également un changement radical de politique publique. L'accent porté sur les « quartiers sensibles » a directement contribué à la restructuration de l'Etat providence français en recentrant son action sur des espaces urbains particuliers plutôt que sur l'ensemble du territoire national, et sur le lien social plutôt que la réalité économique, contrairement aux objectifs du Welfare State pendant la période fordiste. Les émeutes de novembre 2005 sont ainsi à rattacher à la manière dont certains problèmes (comme le manque de communication et le désagrègement du lien social) ont été associées à la question des « quartiers sensibles », tandis que le modèle d'intégration français, fondé sur l'égalité entre citoyens abstraits, n'a pas donné de réponses à d'autres (comme les discriminations ethniques).

**Mots-clés :** exclusion, banlieues françaises, problème social.

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Crossing the Atlantic, speaking another language, entering a different academic environment and discovering new intellectual traditions have many benefits. One of these is that the process automatically calls into question the categories used to analyze society. It is particularly true as far as the words “suburbs” in English and “*banlieue*” in French are concerned. While some wealthy cities and desirable neighborhoods do exist in the outskirts of Paris and other big cities, in French “*banlieue*” automatically evokes the image of housing projects, with young people hanging around wearing baseball caps and sweatsuits, smoking a joint, perhaps standing beside a burning car. “*Banlieues*” has become the symbol of a bleak urban environment, deviant youth and segregated minorities, whereas “suburb” in the United States designates quiet, wealthy areas, with nice, large houses and white middle or upper class families. Paradoxically, such gaps might be useful to expose the distant perspective I developed in my book on “French suburbs” (Tissot 2007).

My book, which seeks to challenge the consensus narrative about urban crisis, increasing racial or religious tensions and failure of the Welfare State, is sometimes met with astonishment and even a reproach in France: shouldn’t sociologists seek to help “solve” the “problem of *banlieues*” rather than endlessly “discussing” it? This complaint responds to the fact that the locus of my exploration of the “problem of

*banlieues*” was not in the “*banlieues*” themselves. I analyzed what has been said on the suburbs since the mid-1980s, and studied the people who addressed this question: journalists, civil servants, politicians, experts, statisticians, sociologists, social workers. In other words, I did not do fieldwork in the *banlieues*; the people who appear in my book are not the people we watch on the nightly news, like those who participated in the November 2005 riots. Instead, I analyzed social environments that are not usually thought of as sites for sociological “fieldwork”, and people who are not generally considered subjects of sociological interrogation: the people who write articles, books and reports, pass laws, make statistics; who count, classify, write, analyze. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s perspective, I decided to shift my attention from people who usually are counted, classified, and analyzed, to, instead, the people who invent and use the tools, categories, words, concepts, languages to do these analyses. I was equally inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological perspective in the sense that public debates were not my only material. I investigated the people who, while discussing the “problem of the suburbs”, and sometimes disagreed on the interpretation of the problem, promulgated new ways of thinking and new political programs (Bourdieu 1992, and more specifically pp 209-210). What analysis of the “problem” ultimately prevailed and what social logics made it prevail? What

consequences for the material world did this analysis have? My book seeks to answer these questions.

### The “reality” of the *banlieues*

The world “*banlieues*” is not new; it has taken on many different meanings, depending upon contexts and periods of history. More recently, the expression “*quartiers sensibles*” (literally “vulnerable neighborhoods”) appeared as part of the current terminology in public debates on urban crisis beginning in the late 1980s; it was unknown before then. More importantly, since that time (the mid-1980s), both expressions, “*banlieues*” and “*quartiers sensibles*” (suburbs and underprivileged areas), as well as others like “*quartiers difficiles*” – (problem neighborhoods), or “*cités*” (projects), have come into ubiquitous use in discussing socio-economic topics. As a consequence, poverty, inequality or unemployment are no longer discussed, or rather, they are discussed only through territorial categories. Socio-economic language has given way to a language of space. And urban crisis seems to epitomize all problems faced by French society, from the failure of the Welfare State to concerns about the French model of integration.

I argue that the sudden and intense focus on urban crisis is not the consequence of growing segregation, rising unemployment, newly threatening youth delinquency or a collapse of the Welfare State. As the sociologist Herbert Blumer posited, “social problems” do not exist in themselves, but rather are the result of a social process whereby some material changes are designated serious and urgent (Blumer 1971). This constructivist perspective does not mean that neither “reality” nor “problems” exist, or that

problems were just fabricated, that these are sheer linguistic inventions, with no relation whatsoever to the material world. The history of the public housing areas is not a happy one, though it is neither as bleak as it is often presented. Most public housing in France was built between the mid-’50s and the mid-’70s. It was designed more or less on a standardized and highly recognizable architectural pattern: tall, large projects, which often house thousands of people. They were built very quickly, often with little respect for manufacturing standards in terms of quality and safety. Consequently, many of them are now considerably rundown.

But until the 1970s there was a fair degree of social diversity among the people living in public housing. After World War II France faced a significant shortage of housing and many families, even middle class ones, had a very hard time finding a place to live. For them, getting into one of the projects meant upward mobility. The then-new buildings provided space, light, and modern comforts like a bathroom and proper heating. In the 1950s and 1960s, the projects were a symbol of modernity and the great potential of the Welfare State to promote the public interest, both by guaranteeing social rights (including access to modern accommodations) and by subsidizing a large-scale construction industry, thus encouraging economic growth.

Since that auspicious beginning, three phenomena have dramatically changed the fortunes of the public housing developments. During this period (mid-1950s until mid-1970s), foreign nationals living in France had almost no access to public housing. Discrimination against immigrants, and especially against those from North Africa, and particularly from Algeria, was widespread. It was not until the mid-’70s that foreigners could get into the

projects, and until then, many of them lived in slums. But in the early '70s, the government launched a major "revitalization" project, aimed at destroying the slums, and public housing corporations were forced to let more immigrants, especially the recently displaced, into the projects.

Further, in the mid-'70s, the French government's approach to housing underwent a major shift. Instead of building projects, the government began to promote individual houses and access to private property. The government made low-interest loans available to many of the middle class families who lived in public housing, families that consequently left to buy their own homes. Given that many of these families viewed the concurrent arrival of large numbers of foreigners as a degradation of their environment, they were all the more anxious to leave.

Finally, at this time, many public housing residents, especially in communities around Paris, worked in large factories. They had been hired in large numbers in the '60s, when the factories needed unskilled labor. In the late '70s and into the '80s, these factories engaged in large-scale downsizing. Often, the first to be fired were foreigners. In combination with the other developments just discussed, this also meant that many residents of the "*banlieues*" found themselves unemployed.

Because of these three phenomena, the social composition of the projects changed rapidly between the early '70s and today, and the unemployment rate has continually soared in these neighborhoods since late 1970s. Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1980s that the question of "suburbs" began to be highly publicized. At this time, it became not only the subject of many front page articles, conferences, books, reports, and statistical analyses, but also the

target of a new public policy aimed at promoting urban and social development in about 500 neighborhoods (*Politique de la ville*). According to the consensus that formed around the idea, social issues in general could not be addressed in France without centering research and public policy on these urban spaces.

Does it mean that such focus on *banlieues* or *quartiers* simply resulted from increasing problems? In fact, there is a more complex relation between the material world and categories, problems and words. The category of *quartiers* is not a neutral one; rather, use of this word indicates a major change in the approach to social exclusion, which itself has given rise to a new paradigm in French society and a new urban reform. The new paradigm approaches social exclusion through a growing but disguised racialization of discussions of poverty, with territorial categories functioning as euphemized racial categories, as well as through the question of social ties rather than economic hardships.

But is it really worth studying the terms of these debates when problems in the *banlieues* seem to be so pressing? I argue such analysis is not only fruitful but necessary, because on the ground, discourse is not "just words". Far from being separate, words are a dimension of reality. As Christian Topalov explains, "The lexical systems and their transformations can thus be inscribed in the social processes where the "representations" are integral parts of the "reality." The representations are no longer regarded as, in effect, objective (scientific), biased (ideological), or arbitrary (cultural) reflections of a social world already in place, but as forms of experience of that world, as media for situating and displacing it, eventually for changing it" (Topalov 2002, p 375). Currently, "*banlieue*" or "*quartiers sensibles*" are words through which one sees



and analyzes urban environment and urban problems, and urban environment and urban problems do not exist independently of categories of perception. They make us see the world from a certain point of view. Moreover, these categories are not only conceptual categories but also categories of public action: as I demonstrate, analysis of the “problem of the *banlieues*” was promoted by social actors powerful enough not only to popularize and legitimize their views, but also to create new programs, with significant funding and personnel charged with transforming the “*banlieues*” to conform with their own diagnosis of the problem.

The first impact of these spatial categories was the emergence of race in debates over poverty. In public debates, swiftly and on a very unanimous basis, *banlieues* began to be used as a euphemism to designate populations defined by ethnic background. Yet because of this strategy, I argue, the emergence of ethnicity issues did not lead to acknowledgement and investigation of questions of racism and discrimination, but rather ended up obscuring the way race is a factor.

### The meaning of ethnicization

The generally accepted idea about France is that, contrary to the U.S., we talk about class but not about race. This emphasis on class rather than race means that, officially at least, the recognition by the state of universal citizens, abstracted from social and economic conditions (whether residential, religious or racial) is supposed to guarantee access to equality, and also the successful integration of immigrants into French society. Thus, the question of poverty is traditionally addressed through color-blind, state-run programs aimed at reducing

inequalities, without consideration for the role race plays in inequalities. However, as historians showed, racial categories were not absent from French public policies and legislation (Lewis 2007, Saada 2007). The emergence of the discourses on “*banlieues*” in late 1980s marks a turning point, as they brought ethnicity explicitly to the forefront of the debates and made ethnicity a legitimate way of speaking about social questions.

Several sources document this phenomenon, including articles in 10 different newspapers and news weekly published after two riots: the first one occurring during summer 1981 in the outskirts of Lyon, and the other, also in the outskirts of Lyon, in Vaulx-en-Velin in October 1990. In addition to press, I used parliamentary debates over the so-called “anti-ghetto law” passed in 1991. Strikingly, two very similar events (youth violence, burnt cars, looting) received substantially different reactions and analyses in these forums. In 1990 and 1991, unlike 1981, not only was media coverage huge (with entire front-pages devoted to the “riots”), but the words “*quartiers*” or “*banlieues*” were used systematically, by virtually everyone: journalists from all different newspapers-- Communist, Left-wing, Centrist and Right-wing--as well as Communist, Socialist, Centrist, and Right-wing deputies and senators. This total consensus was indicative of a new lexical regime that included “*quartiers*”, “*banlieues*”, “*cités*”, “*ghettos*”, but also “*exclusion*”, “*segregation*”, and many metaphors based on space (“urban crisis”, “urban question”). The consensus was utterly uniform, and also very new. In 1981, these words were unknown (only “*grands ensembles*” was used), and riots were seen as local events, rather than as symptoms of a major and new “social problem” faced by French society.

Not only the terminology but also the diagnosis of an intrinsic link between the question of “*banlieues*” and the question of immigration (or even illegal immigration) drew a widespread consensus. We might think this interpretation is only logical as immigrants have been increasingly numerous in public housing since late 1970s. However the association was not neutral: the problem of “*banlieues*” was defined as a problem posed by immigrants, and more precisely by their supposedly insurmountable cultural and religious differences. This assessment was based on a narrative in which former Catholic immigrants, Poles, Italians, Portuguese or Spanish people successfully integrate into French society, whereas Muslim and Arab newcomers, from Africa, were “too different” to integrate. In addition to unemployment (which noticeably attracted much less attention), the percentage of immigrants in some areas, the lack of what the French call “social diversity,” and the transformation of French neighborhoods into American-style ghettos were considered the main causes of the explosion of social turmoil.

In all the parliamentary debates, not a single word was said about what caused the outbreak of the 1990 riots: the death of a youth, from immigrant background, after his motorcycle crashed at a police roadblock. If the “*mal-vivre*” (psychological suffering) was lamented, not a single word was said about the antagonistic relationships between police and youth in these neighborhoods, or more broadly the discrimination faced by young people. Race openly entered public arenas, but racism stayed outside the terms of debate.

In addition to newspapers and parliamentary debates, I went through 45 years of a journal (from 1960 until 1995), uncovered more evidence of the emergence

of a new terminology, which at once highlights the question of race and evacuates the question of racism. This journal is called *Esprit*. Founded in the 1930s by a Catholic intellectual, *Esprit* gained a large audience after World War II, and became the site of intense debates between politicians, intellectuals, and civil servants over reforms of the Welfare State.

I systematically selected the issues and the articles addressing the question of segregation and singled out two major periods when this issue was intensely and frequently discussed. The period of the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a sharp increase in the number of articles dealing with the situation of migrants in slums and their exploitation (the word “exploitation” reveals the importance of Marxist thought or at least class rhetoric in French intellectual debates). In *Esprit* in the late 1960s through early 1970s, segregation also designated social life in projects designed by architects, urban planners, social workers, accused of being the agents of a state normalization (here again, word choice is telling: “normalization” is very indicative of Foucault’s influence on intellectual and activist circles).

“Exploitation” and “normalization”, however, disappear from the terms of debate over the course of the 1980s. Segregation, on the other hand, comes up again in the 1980s, although inscribed in a new epistemic regime. At this point segregation became a synonym for “exclusion”, a term which, unlike its role in the United States, is relatively new to France, and designates socio-economic phenomena but from a very specific angle. It has been conceptualized by sociologists such as Alain Touraine to describe a social question which, in Touraine’s view, no longer relates to economic exploitation but rather refers to the fact that people are relegated to specific

neighborhoods: “*quartiers*”, “*banlieues*”, “*ghettos*” (Touraine 1991). In that paradigm, “exclusion”, “immigration” and “urban crisis” seem to be inextricably intertwined, but with a critical change since late 1960s: since that moment, economic phenomenon are no longer central, as I will explain later, and immigrants are no longer seen by *Esprit*’s contributors as workers but as residents; they are associated with problem of cohabitation, a lack of social diversity and the crisis of model of integration: no longer are they linked to the economic problems they themselves face.

This shift from socio-economic approach to racial perspective can be seen beyond debates on “*banlieues*” as well. But I argue that the discussions of the “*banlieues*” facilitated this shift, with spatial categories like “*quartiers défavorisés*” and “*quartiers sensibles*” working as intermediary stages. On one hand, these last two still have a social connotation because they evoke poverty. In that sense, to speak about “*quartiers sensibles*” seems to imply a commitment to poor people and minorities. That is why initially at least, the focus on this category was considered a progressive approach. But on the other hand, and more and more as time went by, it increasingly evoked strangeness, danger, and threat. In fact, the word “*sensible*” (sensitive) has a double meaning: “*sensible*” is close to “*difficile*” (difficult) or “*défavorisés*” (impoverished), but it also refers to something “at risk” that can explode anytime, thus raising the spectre of riots. As a result, the working classes are no longer people who should be helped or who have rights to defend; rather they are seen as dangerous classes.

The role played by spatial categories is even more striking as they contributed to shape public policies. Ethnicization here becomes an important concept but one which

needs careful definition. Ethnicization first means a shift in focus from socio-economic hardships to racial conflicts. This shift was legitimized by the thesis described and refuted by Loïc Wacquant: French *banlieues* are becoming American ghettos (Wacquant 2007). This supposed parallel between the two contexts was poorly documented (and as I say, ultimately disproven), but nonetheless extensively used by journalists and played a crucial role in the ethnicization of social questions. However, I argue ethnicization is not only the erroneous importation of foreign categories, those of race. Of course, focusing on supposedly threatening origins and life styles obscures how immigrants (as well as native-born French) experience poverty and unemployment, which are key factors in urban marginality. But a crucial feature of ethnicization is also the refusal of addressing the obstacles race creates for the racialized people.

This comes into focus when we examine how programs targeting the 500 “*quartiers*” of the *Politique de la ville* were designed. Indeed the shift in *Esprit* is important because as I will explain later, *Esprit*’s pages were dominated by the network of social actors who participated in promoting the category of “*quartiers sensibles*” between 1985 and 1995—and were so successful that a new public policy, the *Politique de la ville*, emerged. These programs were implemented with this ambivalent perspective on ethnicity: by marking the predominantly immigrant “*quartiers*” as the problem area, ethnicity was implicitly invoked, but racism and discrimination continued to go unmentioned. Here we see how debates and analyses construct public policies: the depictions of immigrants had a direct impact on how the social problems were taken into account (or not taken into account) in public action.

The November 2005 riots illustrate the impact of this definition of social exclusion. These riots, like all the riots that have taken place since the 1990s, are undoubtedly linked to the way the question of “*banlieues*” has been conceived in the 1980s and 1990s. Notably, the 2005 riots followed an event similar to that of the earlier riots: the death of youth after a dispute or arrest by the police. In this case, two teenagers died in an electric plant, while being pursued by the police. Importantly, though, these teenagers were not fleeing because they had committed a crime (contrary to the Minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozy’s claim at that time, which was false). Rather, they fled for fear of being arrested by the police, fear of being arbitrarily sent to the police station and as a consequence, being unable to break the Ramadan fast that evening with their family (Le Goaziou and Mucchielli 2006).

Those fears may not have been founded in this instance, but they must also be seen as a consequence of the often violent and arbitrary attitude of the police towards youth, and the deep hostility of the youth toward the police force that they tend to consider as illegitimate and racist. If discrimination is a widespread phenomenon, confirmed by such documents as the reports of the *Commission nationale de Déontologie Sécurité* (the National Commission for Ethics in Security) as well as academic research (Fassin and Fassin 2006), why has it been so constantly overlooked? Within the conceptual and institutional categories of the “*banlieues*” and “*quartiers*”, immigrants became people who create problems rather than people who face problems; the consequences of discrimination became irrelevant, even invisible in this frame.

## The reduction to the question of social ties

As Hillary Silver explains, social exclusion has been defined in Europe as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and not only as an economic one (Silver 2003). I argue that in the French context, the programs designed to address exclusion in *banlieues* went in the opposite direction; instead of expanding to include more of the relevant factors in urban marginality, French policy on the *banlieues* significantly narrowed the definition of social exclusion by focusing on social ties to the detriment of attention to systemic economic problems. Thus, they provided the bases for a new model of urban policies, which challenged the foundations of the Welfare State.

From the 1980s, programs were implemented in the 500 “*quartiers sensibles*”. The first significant characteristic of these programs was that they targeted specific areas, and were locally run. A second major aspect of these programs aimed to address all aspects of exclusion. The *Politique de la ville* was founded initially by activists and organizers who denounced the centralized, state-run and, in their view, undemocratic housing policies implemented in the 1950s and 1960s. They forcefully argued that the technocratic production of public housing and the absence of dialogue with the local population or local authorities were the causes of the current situation of the “*banlieues*”. They called for a focus on quality rather than quantity, on social life rather than construction, and on localized action rather than state-run planning. These actors promoted the category of “*quartier sensible*,” which was thus constructed as a shorthand for their analysis: not only would the *quartier* be the locus of urgent social problems, but also, even more importantly, it



became the relevant level for addressing those problems, via a focus on “social ties”.

This diagnosis of the social ills of the *banlieues* provided the theoretical basis for programs designed to strengthen social ties, promote community groups, and enhance civic participation. This is what I call a new urban reform because it stands in sharp contrast to the urban reform founded in the beginning of 20th century and implemented after World War II, as analyzed by Susana Magri and Christian Topalov (Magri and Topalov, 1987). Since 1945, the Welfare State, considered the best agent to promote general interest, had been in charge of implementing standardized programs on a national scale. But with this new reform, public action no longer focused on the large-scale housing production coordinated by the national state. Urban policy would be administered by local agents, private actors, and associations, in order to promote civic participation and social diversity (rather than social justice and equality), now imagined to be the appropriate remedies for the “*banlieues*”.

But how could the rather marginalized political actors such as activists and organizers turn their diagnosis into a reform that would have such significant consequences, not only in terms of urban planning, but also in terms of the history of the Welfare State? Of course, they gained credibility as rioting and tensions in *banlieues* increased. But the more comprehensive explanation stretches back to the 1960s. First, the growing crisis for the post-World War II planning model opened the way for new approaches to urban politics: the projects built in the 1960s became increasingly rundown and in need of renovation, and the proponents of civic participation provided new tools and the idea. These tools and ideas were met with enthusiasm because they seemed to be able

not only to renovate the buildings, but also to impact social life (thus preventing future riots).

Political and economic contexts also helped make possible the *Politique de la ville* reforms. The policy was implemented in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when the European Union was calling for a reduction of inflation and limits on budget deficits; Keynesian spending policies were no longer viable for the Socialist Party. In that context, social policies that focused on specific urban territories and on social ties became politically legitimate. For the left-wing governments in office at that time, the *Politique de la ville* became a way of implementing social policies still supposedly faithful to their traditional political values, but without increasing the budget deficit. At the same time, this shift contributed to the decreasing concern for the question of unemployment as such.

Surprisingly, this diminishing interest in the question of unemployment occurred even as actual rates of unemployment rose throughout the 1980s. This was possible also because of the domestic political conditions under which the founders of *Politique de la ville* turned their political ideology into categories of public policies. In this period, these former members of Communist, Trotskyite, Maoist and Socialist associations and parties, which were very powerful and numerous after May 1968, were hit hard by the severe decline of protest in the late 1970s. Their ideological systems became radically suspect. More practically speaking, many of them also had to find new jobs. The *Politique de la ville* and the focus on “*quartiers sensibles*” offered these activists opportunities for both social engagement and professional stability. They also saw in this public policy the possibility of implementing their ideas rather than being confined to marginal positions and theoretical

controversies. To improve the situation in the “*quartiers sensibles*” gave them a new cause, even if it limited action to the local level, and obscured the structural and economic issues that were still at the core of their Marxist thought.

Another factor paving the way for the *Politique de la ville* was the huge discrediting of French politicians in the 1980s and 1990s. During the two presidential terms of François Mitterrand (1981-1995), several financial scandals hit the Socialist Party, which also was accused of failing to live up to campaign promises. As a consequence, a gap widened between citizens and politicians, as we see in decreasing voter turnout, especially among the working class. In an attempt to relegitimize their status, many politicians, especially mayors, sought to promote local democracy. The *Politique de la ville* was thus appealing not only because it defined the lack of social ties as the key problem, but also because it created more contact with residents of the most impoverished suburbs where voter turnout was the lowest.

The last factor which explains the focus on social ties to the exclusion of attention to economic hardships relates to the relationships between social science and public planning. The journal *Esprit*, in conjunction with non-profit organizations like ATD-Quart Monde, as well as sociologists and civil servants, theorized the “social exclusion” paradigm, that is, a lack of social integration as the source of economic woes (Fassin 1996). Specifically, the social exclusion paradigm as it emerged in France in the late 1980s was based on the sociological narrative of the shift from industrial to post-industrial society. For this reason, there were many conferences as well as informal contacts which gathered intellectuals and people in charge of *Politique de la ville*. All these experts agreed

that social problems could not be solved by focusing on the workplace and broad economic processes. New attention would instead be paid to other places like impoverished neighborhoods, and to other phenomena like civic engagement and social ties.

The consequences of this new urban reform can be seen on a very local level. In the course of research for my book, I conducted fieldwork in a small city in the Parisian “suburbs”, examining how specific programs were implemented in three particular neighborhoods of this city, designated as “*quartiers sensibles*.” Several articles, published in the city magazine in 1994, give an interesting description of these three neighborhoods. Despite the fact that the city has been run by members of the French Communist party since the 1930s (a party which in France is part of the mainstream political system), social-economic classifications were never used in these articles. Age and ethnic dimensions, by contrast, crop up frequently, as does an emphasis on conflicts between adults and “youth”, and between “immigrants” and “French”. Moreover, the journalist laments the degradation of projects but hardly mentions unemployment. The presentation of the “problem of the neighborhood” in these articles is based on exactly this perspective: it is useless to do anything until social ties are reconstructed (not, notably, until economic opportunity is improved). Ultimately intervention in this city resulted in the creation of neighborhood committees, more dialogue between public housing corporations and residents, and some funding for youth associations—but the distrust of youth, especially youth with an immigrant background, remained strong (Masclat 2003). And in any event, none of these programs proved enough to stem the tide of riots as economic disparity continued,

and immigrants continued to be portrayed more broadly as the causes of social and economic ills, rather than as the bearers of the brunt of those ills.

### Shall we get rid of spatialization to address the question of poverty?

Thus, in my view, it is not satisfactory to describe the situation of the “suburbs” as the result of “urban crisis”, and develop an analysis solely on this plane. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, *“the perfectly commendable wish to go see things in person, close up, sometimes leads people to search for the explanatory principles of observed realities where they are not to be found (not all of them, in any case), namely at the site of observation itself. The truth about what happens in the “problem suburbs” certainly does not lie in these usually forgotten sites that leap into the headlines from time to time”* (Bourdieu 1999, p 181). The situation of “suburbs”, with their very high levels of unemployment and ongoing tensions between youth and police, are also the consequences of how, when the problem of “suburbs” emerged, some problems were deemed more urgent and other constantly overlooked. In this we see that the relationship between concepts and the material world is deeply complex. Categories are not just words which have an impact on reality; rather they are reality. But at the same time, these categories do not spring arbitrarily from the minds of the clever, nor from an abstract sky of ideas; they are the product of social phenomena such as the history of activism and left-wing parties since May 1968, and the transformation of urban planning and the complex relationships between science and policy. As a consequence, the history of “banlieues” as a concept should be

considered part of the history of the “banlieues” on the ground, and of the history of the entire French society. It is through such an approach that we can understand the continuing protest in the “banlieues” despite the numerous programs implemented there.

My book aims at questioning the focus on local urban territories, as it implied a contraction of the understanding of social questions. However, my point is not to say that spatial categories are necessarily dangerous. In the case of social exclusion, the meaning given to words in public debates and public policies makes the difference. The label “*quartiers sensibles*” carries a negative connotation, and potentially increases stigmatization, but we need words to study changes that have occurred in these places. Must we use words other than “*quartiers sensibles*”? Perhaps try to make new ones? Or should we retain “*quartiers sensibles*” or “*banlieues*”, following William Julius Wilson’s logic; after acknowledging that some groups can be stigmatized by the label “underclass”, Wilson writes: *“it would far worse to obscure the profound changes in the class structure and social behavior of ghetto neighborhoods by avoiding the use of the term underclass”* (Wilson 1987, p 8).

It is nonetheless difficult to change the meaning of words, especially when they pervade thought and public action so deeply. In fact, the late 1990s and early 2000s have witnessed significant changes in the ways in which territorial categories are used. Still, the same bias continued to exist. Since the late 1990s, many questions have emerged while being systematically analyzed in the strict limits of the concept of the suburbs. Why is voter turnout lower and lower? Why is there a strong vote for Le Pen in France? Is Muslim fundamentalism rising? Have Arab youth become more sexist? Are women being forced to wear headscarves? Is there a

new anti-Semitism? These questions are well worth asking. But are they intrinsically linked to the problems of the “suburbs”, and only the suburbs? Spatial categories seem to allow us to think that once one is back in the wealthy, safe French major cities, all this disappears; equality, order and feminism prevail. Thus, we exempt a large portion of the population and institutions from critical questioning and responsibility for social problems, as if, because everything goes so terribly only in the *banlieues*, in the French Republic, as Voltaire - or Candide - would have said “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds ”. A very comforting but dangerous idea.



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