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What's the matter with the *banlieues*? Exploring the importation of the American community organizing tradition by French social movements

Julien Talpin

With the eclipse of the once-powerful Communist and Socialist Parties in France, and these parties' traditional roots in the country's white working class, the residents of long-neglected blue-collar and immigrant suburbs (banlieues) have had little political voice. In recent years, some have turned to the American tradition of community organizing as a way to build power independently. In this first of two articles, Julien Talpin explains the different ways in which activists from the banlieues have imported this tradition, and foreshadows the risks of French activism with an American accent.

In recent years, French social movements have been increasingly influenced by the American community organizing tradition and especially by the work of Saul Alinsky. Some neighborhood organizations have even tried to replicate the Alinsky model in its pure form, before moving towards an organizing model inspired by ACORN,¹ the once-powerful organization of community-based activist groups. How can a country with such a different political culture from the US be directly influenced by its social-movement tradition? And why would France, the birthplace of May '68, of a century-long, union-organizing socialist tradition, and one of the most developed welfare-state systems in the world, need American community organizing?

The depoliticization of the French *banlieues*

Historically, the French Communist Party (PCF), embedded in factories and poor neighborhoods around Paris (*la banlieue rouge*, or “red suburbs”) and other major cities, played an important role in the politicization, organization, and representation of the working class. Its decline since the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the face of deindustrialization, its internal lack of democracy, and its failure to adjust to the demographic shifts and post-colonial face of the French working class (Mischi 2015; Masclet 2003), has left working-class neighborhoods politically fragmented. While the French *banlieues* are not political deserts (Hajjat 2008), the long-run rise of electoral abstention and the decline of union and party membership are unquestionable (Braconnier and Dormagen 2007).

These political and structural transformations were never clearer than in November 2005, during the three weeks of riots or “rebellion” that affected the *banlieues*. While most social scientists agree that the riots cannot be understood as a form of irrational violence by mobs as many pundits argued (Lapeyronnie 2006; Bacqué *et al.* 2015), they nevertheless revealed the inability of the French left to represent the sense of injustice experienced by poor neighborhood residents. Many progressive political parties actually condemned the riots as self-destructive and irresponsible behavior (Cortesero and Marlière 2015). The three weeks of civil unrest resulted primarily in increased spending directed at these neighborhoods, aimed at urban renewal and the dispersal of “at-risk

¹ ACORN: Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

populations” in the name of “social mix.” In terms of organizing, some initiatives arose where the riots had started—such as the association AC Le Feu in Clichy-sous-Bois—and some tried to launch a Social Forum of Working-Class Neighborhoods (Forum Social des Quartiers Populaires in French), but these efforts were short-lived. A few years later, in an acclaimed report on the state of participation in France’s poor neighborhoods, Mohamed Mechmache (of AC Le Feu) and the sociologist Marie-Hélène Bacqué pointed to the failures of the state in fostering civic engagement in the *banlieues* (Bacqué and Mechmache 2013). They criticize in particular the bricks-and-mortar approach that prevailed after the riots, whereby most resources went to rebuilding housing projects while local associations saw their funding cut. Bacqué and Mechmache called for a Copernican Revolution of public action in the *banlieues*, to foster the inclusion of residents’ voices in the improvement of their lives and neighborhoods. Under the banner of the American tradition of “empowerment” (translated as *pouvoir d’agir* in French), they argue for a bottom-up approach to public participation, contrasting with the top-down tradition that has limited residents’ engagement in public policies for the last 30 years (Carrel 2013). The focus on empowerment is influenced by Bacqué’s own scientific trajectory, as she has studied community-based organizations in Boston and Montreal (Bacqué 2005; Bacqué and Biewener 2013).

An answer in Alinsky?

This call for the empowerment of *banlieue* residents took place in a broader context of interest among neighborhood activists, social workers and academics in the American tradition of community organizing. At that time, the work of Saul Alinsky appeared to speak to the problem of disempowerment and apathy of poor neighborhood residents. As the Pouvoir d’Agir collective put it in its manifesto² (in French, translated here), “France has to explore a path it has never dared to explore, that of *empowerment* [in English]: offering residents of these neighborhoods access to political capacity so that they can become the definers of their own needs and the coproducers of the solutions to be provided.”

Although Alinsky had been translated into French in the 1970s, a new translation—with a more appealing title³—was published in 2011. An international conference also took place in 2012 in the Lyon *banlieues*, bringing together American specialists in community organizing, French academics studying civic engagement, and many social workers and activists⁴. The conference was attended by about 450 people, an unusually large crowd for an academic event. The notion of empowerment also gained traction in Socialist Party circles, with two reports, one edited by the think tank Terra Nova focusing on *pouvoir d’agir* (Donzelot, Djaziri and Wyvekens 2012), the other by the Jean Jaurès Foundation, emphasizing the first experiences in the *banlieues* directly inspired by the American organizing tradition (Arslan and Didi 2013). Academics have also played a role in the spread of community organizing in France. Aside from Marie-Hélène Bacqué, younger scholars have studied experiments in the UK, Canada and the US and disseminated them through nonacademic publications and conferences in activist circles (Balazard 2015; Balazard *et al.* 2016; Talpin 2016a, 2016b). This intellectual frenzy helped make a 70-year-old civic practice rooted in Chicago’s ghetto seem like an innovation. While Barack Obama’s election in 2008 also raised the profile of community organizing, its spread to France might not have happened without the construction of loose international networks of community organizers, and financial and technical support from American brokers—even the American embassy. This, in turn, has raised questions about the politics of organizing in the French context.

² Open letter titled *Valoriser la capacité citoyenne des quartiers populaires* (“Making use of citizen capabilities in working-class neighborhoods”), Pouvoir d’Agir collective, June 2010. Available in the original French at the following URL: <http://fonda.asso.fr/Lettre-ouverte-Valoriser-la.html>.

³ Alinsky, Saul. 2011. *Être radical. Manuel pragmatique pour radicaux réalistes*, Brussels: Aden.

⁴ Conference titled “Le *community organizing* : développer le pouvoir des citoyens”, March 14–16, 2012, ENTPE (École Nationale des Travaux Publics d’État – National School of State Public Works), Vaulx-en-Velin.

L'Alliance Citoyenne

The first line of diffusion of community organizing in France passes via a collective of activists from Grenoble, who founded ECHO⁵ (later renamed L'Alliance Citoyenne, or Citizen Alliance) in 2010. Inspired by Alinsky's writings and by a doctoral student working on London Citizens, the main European branch of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF, created by Alinsky in the 1950s), they first of all spent a week in London to train in the method. Although from different backgrounds, the five founding members of ECHO shared a common disillusionment with social work, state-led public participation, and anti-globalization movements, as well as a conviction that community organizing could bring a new dynamic to mobilization efforts in French neighborhoods. Following Alinsky's tradition to the letter, they initially spent months pounding the streets of Grenoble in order to meet local leaders and conduct hundreds of one-on-one interviews, before organizing their first assembly. ECHO closely followed the Alinsky model of broad-based organizing, uniting religious institutions, immigrant groups and student collectives. With the explicit aim of organizing "communities", ECHO embodied a departure from the French Republican political culture, in which the recognition of collective racial or religious identities is seen as problematic. They were also inspired by the strategic and pragmatic orientation of community organizing, following the steps of the campaign cycle as Alinsky prescribed them: research meetings, power analysis, expression of a claim, negotiation or conflict with the target, and evaluation. Their first campaigns combined direct action and humor, and ended up being very successful: the first managed to improve janitors' contracts while the second got immigrant students easier access to the local university.

Photo 1. Janitors celebrating their victory in a campaign to improve working conditions



© Alliance Citoyenne de l'Agglomération Grenobloise.

These victories, obtained through the mobilization of grassroots leaders, contributed to the reputation of the Grenoble experience. Today L'Alliance Citoyenne claims 400 dues-paying members and 5,000 contacts in total, a significant number after a few years of existence. In order to

⁵ ECHO: Espace des Communautés et des Habitants Organisés (Space for Organized Communities and Residents).

remain independent from public institutions, they initially rejected any form of public funding—the dominant support system for nonprofits in France—getting only modest grants from private foundations. The Grenoble experience has since resulted in the creation of similar organizations, in Aubervilliers (in the inner suburbs of Paris) and in the western city of Rennes.

Studio Praxis and Graines de France

A second path of community organizing is linked to the transatlantic networks of several activist groups from Paris *banlieues*. The role of the American embassy in France is crucial here.

In February 2010, a two-week field trip to Chicago was organized by the American embassy in France, directly focusing on community organizing. A dozen young leaders—mostly in their twenties and thirties, and mostly from ethnic minorities—were trained in community organizing methods by different groups and experts. The trip left a deep imprint on the participants. For instance, Nassurdine Haidari, a Socialist elected official from Marseille, says it has changed him: “For me there is a before and an after. Everything I saw as potential inside of me took shape when I went to the United States. I started to see how to build a struggle. The problem is that you may have political goals, but you don’t know what the best way to go is. In Chicago, I learned to structure an efficient organization.”⁶ Although he didn’t start a community organization as such afterwards, he has played an important role in organizing Marseille’s civil society and pushing for more direct state intervention to fight racial discrimination. Tara Dickman, the head of the French chapter of the nonprofit Humanity in Action, also went to Chicago. She offers this testimony: “We received such deep training! You have to live it to understand! Everything fell into place in my mind; I understood how we could make change happen in France. [...] The question is how to make a difference. What I got from community organizing over there, by doing door-to-door canvassing, by learning the methodology, etc., is that our generation, which is a minority, which does not have the same tools, the same history of the previous generations, can impose its issues on the political agenda” (Célinain 2012). On her return from the US, Dickman launched community organizing training sessions. In 2011, with Ladji Real, she created a public-relations consultancy, Studio Praxis, especially aimed at young leaders from the *banlieues*. Studio Praxis has been the main actor behind the Stop le Contrôle au Faciès campaign, which, since 2012, has fought against racial profiling by the police. This campaign combines public opinion work—through outreach towards minorities who share their racial-profiling stories—and a lawsuit against the French state. The focus on storytelling and the emphasis on indigenous leadership development are direct imports from the US, as is the distinction between organizers (who remain in the shadows of the campaign) and leaders (who are at center stage). Others who also took part in the Chicago trip, such as Réda Didi and Leyla Arslan, founded Graine de France, a nonprofit that trains and informs community organizers.

⁶ Interview with Nassurdine Haidari by Leia Santacroce, Marseille, August 7, 2013 (Santacroce 2013, p. 57). See also Steven Erlanger’s portrayal of him in the *New York Times*: “A Presidential Race Leaves French Muslims Feeling Like Outsiders”, April 4, 2012, URL: www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/world/europe/presidential-race-in-france-leaves-muslims-feeling-left-behind.html.

Photo 2. Teenagers displaying the number of times they have been racially profiled by the police



© Stop le Contrôle au Faciès/Studio Praxis.

Two trajectories

While affiliates of L'Alliance Citoyenne on the one hand and Studio Praxis and Graines de France on the other share a common interest in community organizing methods, they also differ in important aspects. First, while the Alliances Citoyennes aims to build long-term neighborhood-based organizations—in accordance with the Alinsky tradition—groups such as Studio Praxis and Graines de France focus on launching specific campaigns and on diffusing new tools and methods through training. Moreover, Alliances Citoyennes organizers are mostly from middle-class backgrounds; they have college degrees in social sciences and a long activist trajectory on the left. By contrast, the Studio Praxis-affiliated Stop le Contrôle au Faciès collective was founded by activists who, although upwardly mobile, come from the *banlieues* and hail from minority and working-class backgrounds. The question of racial discrimination is much more central for them than for the leaders of the Alliances Citoyennes. The two groups also have different relationships with electoral politics. The former is more directly influenced by Alinsky and therefore more cautious about bringing in any form of electoral support. By contrast, among Stop le Contrôle au Faciès activists, getting into local positions of power is considered an important tactic for activists looking for symbolic recognition. Accordingly, several leaders trained in community organizing methods were candidates in the 2014 municipal elections in the Paris *banlieues* and several of them were elected.

Neither trajectory of community organizing is politically uncontested, however. Both have raised objections on both the left and the right, and both are suspected of being either inappropriate imports from the United States or, more insidiously, manifestations of American imperialism. A companion article, to be published during the week of June 26, will explore this issue further.

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