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Community development, empowerment and youth participation in social-housing neighbourhoods in France

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1 Part III

2 Acts of citizenship?

1 6

2 Community development, empowerment and youth participation
3 in social-housing neighbourhoods in France

4 *Galvin Erdi*

5 Chapter abstract

6 This chapter is based on empirical research conducted during 2017-19 in a social-
7 housing and multiethnic neighbourhood, Sanitas, located in Tours, France. It focuses
8 on a mobilisation against a renewal project in the neighbourhood and the relationships
9 between different local structures including the Social Centre, Citizen Council and
10 Sanitas Collective. The chapter argues that the top-down creation of participatory
11 tools does not enable real empowerment of inhabitants leading to a local radical
12 democracy but rather reflects the nature of neoliberal urban governance based on the
13 efficiency of urban policies and the deconflictualisation of urban projects. It also
14 discusses the tensions between different groups like young and racialised people and
15 activists in associations and the role the Social Centre plays in managing these
16 tensions. Finally, the author highlights the importance of involving youth in the
17 everyday life of the neighbourhood within the context of urban renewal.

18 Chapter keywords

19 collective mobilisation

1 empowerment

2 France

3 governance

4 participation

5 radical democracy

6 social housing

7 urban renewal

8 youth

9 █ A young man from the neighbourhood, no matter how he is a leader, if you put him
10 in the street all alone, he is nothing. Alone, he no longer has any power. His power
11 comes from the neighbourhood. █ (A young boy from the neighbourhood)

12 This chapter investigates the gap between this young man's sense of how his power
13 derives from the neighbourhood of Sanitas and the practices of █ empowerment █
14 associated with established community development projects in that same
15 neighbourhood. In France, the language of empowerment, associated elsewhere with
16 community development, is more usually associated with █ animation █ and █ popular
17 education █. As for community development workers elsewhere, the theoretical
18 foundations laid in the work of Paulo Freire are evident in the histories of Community
19 Associations in the neighbourhood of Sanitas, but this does not appear to create an
20 openness to the young people of the district: a long-standing issue for community
21 development practice in both France and elsewhere. Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony*

1 *and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2009) claim that
2 deliberative democracy with the will to build consensus oppresses different
3 viewpoints especially with regard to race, class, gender and, we can add, generational
4 perspectives. According to Laclau and Mouffe, it is only with radical democratic
5 methods that oppressive power relations can be made visible, renegotiated and
6 altered.

7 Starting from this idea, when we talk about radical democracy, we are talking
8 about a praxis coming from the roots of democracy itself; in other words, a praxis far
9 from a set of procedures but rather an infinite process of
10 deconstruction/reconstruction of the substance, forms and limits of collective
11 existence: a dynamic irreducible to any institutional state and coming clearly from
12 grassroots initiatives. [Laclau and Mouffe \(2009: 269\)](#) suggest that if we want to return
13 the original signification to the term 'democracy' in the current neoliberal age, we
14 should accept it 'as a new matrix of the social imagination and as a fundamental nodal
15 point in the construction of politics'. In addition, this should be done in plural ways
16 including all individuals with all their rights as well as all struggles with their claims.

17 This plurality is particularly important: with its democratic logic of the
18 generalisation of equivalence it includes all social and cultural categories in the
19 realisation of a collective participation including youth and children. It is therefore
20 interesting to observe existing practices of democracy from the perspective of youth.

1 This enables the analysis of how their place is conceived – if it is conceived – in
2 existing democratic practices.

3 Community development offers a perspective towards social equality in
4 participatory processes. Practising radical democracy in urban space also requires
5 thought about how and with which tools and methods such radical democracy
6 becomes possible. The claim to **space** is the main base of expression for all these
7 practices. Henri Lefebvre (1974) argued that the production of space not only
8 manifests various forms of injustice but also produces and reproduces them, thereby
9 maintaining established relations of domination and oppression. Therefore,
10 governmental practices in urban policy are not exempt. To resolve and mitigate the
11 effects of this process is to realise the right to the city for everyone according to
12 Lefebvre and this is also a radical approach of democracy in the city, going beyond
13 the classical understanding of participatory democracy. Lefebvre proposes the right to
14 the city as a right of all people living in the city to participate in decisions concerning
15 their everyday life and to exist, with their own lifestyles, identity and cultural habits,
16 in the city. The right to the city is then considered as a resistance to the
17 standardisation of city life, including resistance to standard forms of participation.
18 This necessarily goes beyond the institutions and become a perpetual invention of
19 different forms of democratic participation and expression. In other words, I argue
20 that space and its political construction matters for the realisation of a radical
21 democracy.

1 This chapter sets out to enquire whether, in a marginalised, low-income
2 neighbourhood with a significant young population, it is possible to see radical
3 democratic practices from the perspective of democratic right to the city despite the
4 weak social capital of residents. Are existing democratic tools, structures and
5 participatory devices efficient and inclusive? Are there spaces, possibilities and a will
6 for including youth in processes of community development? The question here is
7 whether and how different participatory processes, including those conceived by
8 governments in France, are able to build a democratic capacity for citizens or whether
9 in reality they neutralise different forms of resistance, mobilisation and/or protest built
10 by those same citizens. Do implicit spatial assumptions of governments concerning
11 so-called [sensitive neighbourhoods] not inflect the politics of participation and
12 community development in those neighbourhoods?

13 Methods of qualitative sociology were used for this empirical research
14 undertaken between 2017 and 2019 for a locally funded research project entitled

15 *L'engagement et la participation au prisme du pouvoir d'agir. Enquête dans*
16 *des centres sociaux et conseils citoyens en Région Centre-Val de Loire (ENGAGIR)*
17 in a social-housing and multiethnic neighbourhood, Sanitas, located in Tours, France.
18 The objective of this project was to study the role of Community Centres (Centres
19 Sociaux) in the empowerment of people living in the neighbourhood. The research
20 focuses on a mobilisation against a regeneration project and on the relationship
21 between different local groups like the Community Centre, the Citizen Council and

1 the Sanitas Collective. I argue that the top-down creation of participatory tools does
2 not facilitate a real empowerment of residents in order to lead to a local radical
3 democracy; in particular, it especially excludes the young. The main focus of the
4 chapter is to analyse the tensions between different groups, especially between young
5 and racialised peoples and activists in associations, and between those young people
6 and the Community Centre's employees. It will also analyse the involvement of a
7 young population in the everyday life of the neighbourhood in the context of urban
8 regeneration.

9 [Attempts at mobilisation against urban regeneration in Sanitas](#) 10 [and the difficult participation of young people](#)

11 Sanitas is the poorest district of Tours Metropolitan Area, classified as a priority
12 neighbourhood by the framework of *Policy for the City* designed in 2014. *Policy for*
13 *the City (Politique de la Ville)* is a set of policies for urban cohesion and solidarity
14 within the most disadvantaged districts. It aims to restore republican equality and to
15 improve the living conditions of residents by mobilizing all public policies (French
16 Ministry of Territorial Cohesion and Relations with Local Authorities, 2014). The
17 origins of this policy scheme was in a specific context marked by the arrival of the left
18 to power in 1981. After several incidents of unrest took place in the social housing
19 neighbourhoods of the French *banlieues* during 1981, a National Commission for the
20 Social Development of Neighbourhoods (Commission Nationale pour le

1 Développement Social des Quartiers, CNDSQ) was created and attached directly to
2 the office of the Prime Minister. Hubert Dubedout, the mayor of Grenoble, was
3 appointed as the president of the Commission who finally prepared the report
4 *Ensemble, refaire la ville (Together, Remaking the City)* (Dike, 2006).

5 In 2015, Sanitas had 8,227 residents with a median income of 7,500 euros per
6 year. It is a 93 per cent social-housing district. The population is quite young (48 per
7 cent are under 30 years old) and the working class is overrepresented, as are residents
8 of immigrant origin (27 per cent). Single-parent families are also significant. Among
9 2,200 families, there are 700 single-mother families. The unemployment rate (22 per
10 cent) is more than twice that of the region (9 per cent).¹ More than half of households
11 live below the poverty line.² As such, it is a neighbourhood which might classically be
12 the focus of a community development approach. However, a closer observation of
13 the neighbourhood shows clearly that there are numerous social and cultural
14 initiatives and associations for families, children, cultural and sports activities. As one
15 of the members of an association, ATD Quart Monde, told me, “even if the
16 neighbourhood seems globally poor, it is very rich in terms of cultural and ethnic
17 diversity and this is the treasure of Sanitas” (Beatrice, interview).

18 The district is located in the city centre of Tours, behind the train station. It
19 has already benefited from regeneration actions in the 1990s and then between 2001
20 and 2014. Today, it is one of the 200 districts of national interest listed by the state

1 as part of the New National Renewal Program (NPNRU), when a new phase of urban
2 renewal was launched in 2017.

3 According to this programme, the demolition of 430 social-housing units is
4 planned by 2024, corresponding to 10 per cent of the entire social-housing stock with
5 the objective of introducing further social diversity in the district. The main
6 associations in the neighbourhood struggling for tenant rights, such as the National
7 Confederation for Housing (CNL) and the Association for the Defence of Worker
8 Consumers, are opposed to the demolitions. The representatives of these associations
9 came together in order to create a collective of activists and to organise a mobilisation
10 in the neighbourhood. In 2017, they founded Sanitas Collective in order to stand up
11 for the existing social character of the neighbourhood and against the potential
12 gentrification at the hands of local administration itself.

13 In Sanitas, besides multiple associations working on concrete themes (help for
14 schoolwork, support for families in poverty and for refugees, food and meal
15 distribution, leisure and sport activities), there are three places of participation where
16 social, cultural and political issues related to the neighbourhood's life are debated and
17 discussed: Sanitas Collective, the Community Centre called Pluriel(le)s and the
18 Citizen Council.

19 The Collective has about ten permanent members with some other people
20 participating sporadically in meetings and activities. Of the permanent members, half
21 are women and apart from two people, all are over 55 years old. All the permanent

1 members are of French origin and only one occasional participant is of immigrant
2 origin. There are no young people in the collective.

3 The Pluriel(le)s was created in July 2013 with three main objectives: creating
4 social cohesion, supporting youth and promoting multiculturalism. Supported by the
5 National Family Allowance Fund (CAF) and the City of Tours, it hosts more than 64
6 associations offering diverse activities. There are 18 people on the Board of
7 Administration, around ten permanent volunteers throughout the year (with a
8 significant turnover) and 13 employees, as well as around 350 members and 2,000
9 users. While the most of the employees of the centre are relatively young (age 22-40),
10 the majority of its users regularly frequenting the premises are, in the main, either
11 people aged over 40 or children doing schoolwork.

12 Finally, the Citizen Council is composed of eight residents and eight people
13 from associations active in the neighbourhood. It is hosted by Pluriel(le)s and
14 meetings are facilitated by its director. The Citizen Councils were created in France in
15 2014 by a governmental decree. The initiative comes therefore from the top rather
16 than grassroots movements. The composition of the council has stayed the same since
17 its creation. For the most part, individuals who are already activists in different
18 associations and Sanitas Collective are also members of the Citizen Council. Most of
19 the individuals involved in these three structures are long-standing activists; some of
20 them do not live in Sanitas and all of them are White without migrant origin. They

1 invested in Sanitas because there was poverty and migrants who arrived and who
2 needed help” (Nathalie, interview).

3 However, they are not well known by the local residents who do not really
4 recognise themselves in these militants from the middle classes and who are perceived
5 as “White French”. The members are aware of this: “Young Africans at the corner
6 who make barbecues have said of the Collective: “they are White bourgeois who deal
7 with the urban renewal’. That’s why we must go and discuss with them, otherwise it
8 constitutes a brake on mobilisation and for the Collective” (Martine, interview). This
9 difficulty in creating links between the Collective and the residents of the area clearly
10 represents an obstacle to mobilisation. It prevents the constitution of an “us” which
11 could make it possible to channel the feeling of injustice, by explicitly designating the
12 Municipality of Tours as an adversary and to take action around the common
13 objective of preventing demolitions and ensuring that the renewal project is carried
14 out for the benefit of the residents. During a meeting of the Collective on 4 December
15 2017, one of its members said: “We should try to think of ways [by which] people can
16 do things together. The question of trust is important.”

17 The members of the Collective were aware of the fact that the mobilisation
18 was not strong enough, but they believed that this was for structural reasons in the
19 neighbourhood. One member argued that “people are mostly of immigrant origin [and
20 live] in a country [which is] strange to them, they stay silent as they want to stay here
21 permanently, and therefore don’t challenge the French authorities” (Jean, interview).

1 What is interesting in the discourse of the activists of the Collective is the focus on
2 ethnic origin as a barrier to engagement and mobilisation. Despite the presence of a
3 significant young population, whenever someone from the existing community
4 associations wonders why young adults are not engaged in different campaigns and
5 mobilisations in the neighbourhood, the response is limited to an observation of ethnic
6 and racialised barriers. Furthermore, youth is often seen as a separate category of
7 population and not considered as a potential support for engagement and participation
8 but rather as a potential problem: they are seen as the people mostly responsible for
9 the stigmatisation and the marginalisation of the neighbourhood. In this context,
10 elderly residents feel intimidated when they meet young adults in the street:

11

12 I am fed up with the noise in the neighbourhood. The police should install speed
13 bumps in our street because every weekend there are young people coming with their
14 motorcycle and they make urban rodeos. It is unbearable and you cannot tell them to
15 stop unless you want to be targeted and they will be hostile with you. (Elderly
16 Resident 1, interview)

17 There are always young people with their motorcycles and I'm always scared that
18 one day they will accidentally kill a kid. (Elderly Resident 2, interview)

19

1 Another problem related to the young people and mentioned by all people I met in the
2 neighbourhood is drug dealing. One of the activists of the Housing Association, CNL,
3 says:

4

5 [Before the urban renewal, there were well-defined corners in the neighbourhood for
6 the drug traffic. Everybody knew that. It was especially around the petrol station and
7 behind the church. Now the petrol station and building near it are demolished and
8 dealers don't know where to go. There are regular police patrols and therefore they
9 are now hiding their dealing inside the buildings and intimidating the residents if they
10 protest against that.] (Pierre, interview)

11

12 In fact, among the structures of citizen participation in the neighbourhood, the
13 Community Centre is the only place where young adults can organise and participate
14 in a range of different activities. It is also the sole place where different forms of
15 engagement and participation for youth are encouraged. However, it is also the case
16 that in the Community Centre, their participation is considered separately with an
17 objective of social empowerment in order to turn them away from delinquency or
18 religious radicalism. The director of the Pluriel(le)s explains:

19

1 We must first encourage young people to take initiatives, to set up a project on
2 something they like. They must already be motivated to push open the doors of the
3 Community Centre and to know and participate in the activities offered to them.
4 Most of them don't even know that we have a specific youth programme, that we
5 have a music and recording studio. Since we widely publicised about Ti Studio,
6 some young teenagers and adults come to make hip-hop and rap and it allows them to
7 focus on something. Participation in city affairs and democratic bodies is a second
8 step. The latter can't come if they don't first learn to take collective initiatives around
9 small projects. (Interview, Community Centre director)

10

11 There is a tendency to see youth as a monolithic group having the same objectives and
12 characteristics. It is true that in Sanitas, the young population have some similar
13 characteristics including a low level of education (71 per cent of the population has no
14 high school diploma according to the French National Institute of Statistics [INSEE])
15 and a high level of unemployment. It is nonetheless true that not all the young people
16 of this district can be contained and confined in a single category with the same kind
17 of professional and life objectives. On the whole, the reason for not seeing them in
18 participatory processes and in mobilisations as citizens can be explained by different
19 reasons, which are neither their lack of interest in democratic participation nor their
20 delinquency or segregation within specific ethnic communities. In Sanitas, around
21 18 per cent of youth between 15 and 24 years are unemployed (INSEE, Main census,

1 2013). Globally, the unemployment rate among youth in priority neighbourhoods of
2 the *Policy for the City* scheme in 2013 was 24.6 per cent while the national average
3 rate was around 13 per cent ([Hbila, 2014](#)). It means that, as in other priority
4 neighbourhoods, in Sanitas, young adults have difficulties in managing everyday life
5 and social and professional stability and combining that with having a perspective on
6 the future. Their demands and needs are relatively immediate, like finding a job and
7 an income.

8 In addition, there is also the fact that talking about youth in French priority³
9 neighbourhoods, as elsewhere, has a gendered dimension. We should remember that
10 before the law of *Politique de la Ville* (2014), these neighbourhoods requalified as
11 priority were called *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (Sensitive Urban Areas). In other
12 words, the category of youth in these areas is actually synonym for young men who
13 are seen as trouble. Whether for institutional representatives or members of
14 associations, youth (*jeunes du quartier*) has exclusively a masculine character.
15 Whenever community association members spoke about problems in the
16 neighbourhood and the people they tried to encourage to come to the Community
17 Centre, they presumed that it would be young men and not young women. Young
18 women are often placed in the category of women and women's activities as in
19 Atelier des Femmes Plurielles: cooking, doing yoga or stretching, learning French or
20 sewing. More could be done to encourage more social initiatives coming especially
21 from young women. Public institutions and their inclusivity programmes have a

1 tendency to characterise young women in neighbourhoods such as Sanitas as
2 submissive and dominated by their father, brother or husband ([Arouche et al, 2020](#))
3 and therefore propose very few programmes of real empowerment, more often staying
4 with clichés, especially in relation to Islamic headscarfed young women.

5 Therefore, in addition to the collective problems with youth in general, as
6 discussed, young women also live with the problems of invisibility, with little voice
7 and limited presence in public space. Their presence in public space depends on their
8 status. If they are a student or find a job or traineeship, they have relative liberty, but
9 this liberty may still be controlled either by members of their family or by the norms
10 of neighbourhood life. It seems hard, however, for the older generation to recognise
11 how they exercise agency. For example, Inaya, a young woman of 21 years old,
12 working for an association in the neighbourhood, explained that, although her family
13 allowed her to work, her movements and hours were controlled; she could not wear
14 the clothes she wished and she could not have a boyfriend. However, she had found
15 different ways and means in order to enlarge the borders of her liberty by organising
16 valuable activities for her Senegalese community in order to gain respect (Inaya,
17 interview). Nevertheless, the complexity of negotiations such as Inaya's are not
18 neglected and often supported in community development programmes as distinct
19 from the neglect by public institutions. For example, after she organised activities to
20 promote the cultural heritage of the African community, an association working in the
21 neighbourhood hired her to develop work with the Senegalese community.

1 The time of community development through the lens of young
2 people's engagement

3 All young individuals regardless of their gender share the immediacy of job problems
4 and the need for better conditions of life. This has effects concerning their
5 participation and interpretation of democratic participation tools offered by
6 institutions. According to an employee of the Community Centre, it is only possible to
7 pay attention and to be interested in developing community and helping others in the
8 everyday life of one's neighbourhood, and therefore to contribute to the construction
9 of a real citizen participation and a radical democracy, if you are comfortable and
10 supported in your own life: "You can't expect people to be interested in Citizen
11 Council, participation or other things which demand time and energy when their
12 stomach is empty, when they are expected to live on the minimum social wage"
13 (Abdou, interview). Another employee drew attention to another aspect of living with
14 urgent and immediate pressure:

15

16 In fact, young people, they have just one problem they find it difficult to imagine
17 future plans. They want to bring the neighbourhood to life. There are many things
18 they want to create but, now planning projects, that seems complicated to them.
19 What they lack is above all organisation. It is basically methodology. For them, it's

1 "right now", that's all if it is not, they will not be interested. (Observation notes
2 of Citizen Council meeting)

3

4 This clearly raises the question of the articulation of institutional and political time
5 and that of time in the lifeworld of young people, which follow distinct logics. For
6 example, when young people formulate familiar requests for places of sociability like
7 a self-managed meeting room or premises for their leisure; by the time these demands
8 have been managed politically and found an institutional outcome, the young people
9 have already left the field of negotiations because it is too slow for them ([Habila,](#)
10 [2014](#)). Thus, when young people's involvement in a participatory scene brings them
11 little or no benefit in return, they are disappointed and transmit their disillusion to
12 their juniors. A young man encountered in the street says the following:

13

14 "What is the point of participation? We have participated a thousand times in their
15 meetings, and, in their day, our grown-up brothers already participated a thousand
16 times in their meetings, what was the point? We have met this professional or that
17 elected representative several times. They know our problems. So what? It's no use."
18 (Abbas, interview)

19

1 This statement shows clearly the spatio-temporal gap between young people and
2 institutions. The former live in the moment and have difficulty in adapting to the
3 longer temporalities, especially those of institutional arrangements. This gap
4 sometimes creates conflict between the expectations of young people and the response
5 of existing structures in the neighbourhood. As for the Community Centre, it is not
6 always easy to act directly since the public institutions do not always allow it to take
7 initiatives even though it knows the neighbourhood better. The institutions are
8 motivated above all by respect for the republican and secular principles of France. As
9 a result, therefore, social and political participation schemes stay at a distance from
10 the grassroots and do not leave very much liberty to employees as the budget of
11 community centres come directly from national and local government in France.

12 **Institutions–youth nexus through participation and empowerment**

13 In France, since the 1990s, different programmes aiming to reintegrate young people
14 into the public sphere have multiplied. From Youth Councils to Parliaments and
15 Citizen Forums, a whole set of tools have the aim of encouraging their participation
16 but find relatively little interest among those first concerned ([Arouche et al, 2020](#)).
17 Several people interviewed in the district indeed perceive these devices as tools aimed
18 at favouring a certain type of commitment. Through unequally accessible modes of
19 participation, there is a perception of carrying out a selection process in order to
20 promote a style of commitment responding to local political issues, at the expense of

1 others that do not fit into traditional channels of participation. Generally, there are two
2 major problems for ensuring the participation of young people in the existing
3 institutions and structures. The first problem is the nature and the way of functioning
4 of these places of participation that have in the main a top-down and paternalist
5 character. The second problem is the educative posture of agents/representatives of
6 local structures – even when the latter are grassroots organisations vis-a-vis young
7 people.

8 If we start with the first problem, it is partly due to the forms and tools of
9 democratic participation in France and to the Jacobin character of French state
10 institutions consisting in the support of a centralised republican state and strong
11 central government powers seen as the sole legitimate actor to transform society
12 ([Fassin and Fassin, 2009](#)).⁴ This perception means that even in introducing citizen
13 participation, it is left to the state bodies to manage the issue and to provide places for
14 it ([Bertho, 2005](#)). This functioning has three perverse effects. First, it prevents citizens
15 from easily appropriating the places of participation as they were not involved in their
16 creation and therefore do not even sometimes know they exist. For example, the
17 Citizen Councils have been created by a law and only in certain neighbourhoods
18 qualified by their social and economic problems. This gives the impression that the
19 state conceived these councils in order to prevent potential conflicts but not to drive a
20 real participative initiative from citizens. Second, they are bureaucratic and complex
21 structures requiring time and practical competence to understand their rules, duties

1 and competences vis-à-vis public administration as well as their usefulness. This
2 means that the access to these structures stays limited for the part of the population
3 with a weak social capital and disadvantaged ethnic belonging, that is especially those
4 of Arab or Muslim origin including young people ([Slaouti and Le Cour Grandmaison,](#)
5 [2020](#)).

6 Finally, these devices paradoxically reinforce inequalities in participation.
7 There is clearly an under-representation of people belonging to dominated groups
8 (precarious youth, especially young, population of immigrant origin) in participatory
9 experiences in France ([Bacqué and Sintomer, 2011: 15-16](#)) as it takes time and
10 knowledge to achieve the necessary skills (correct language use, ability to manage a
11 meeting, to talk in public, to prepare official documents) in order to become part of
12 these processes. In other words, instead of creating an empowerment for the excluded,
13 they become the places where the self-esteem of long-lasting activists is enhanced. A
14 member of the Sanitas Citizen Council explains his commitment: 'because this district
15 needs recognition, because I am linked to this district, I am part of it. I can bring my
16 skills and contribute, through citizen action, to move the population towards more
17 dignity, solidarity, consciousness' (Sebastien, interview). French *Policy for the City*
18 has therefore lost its initial affirmative character underlined in 1983's *Together*
19 *Remaking the City*, which insisted that it is necessary to take into consideration
20 diverse forms of participation, and not merely formal associational forms. There is not
21 only one but several levels of intervention by residents in democracy at the level of

1 the neighbourhood [...]. The quest was for the democratization of the management of
2 the city' (Dike, 2006: 29). Participatory structures are thus under the constant
3 supervision of public institutions, ensuring that their members cannot emancipate
4 themselves from the competences and borders defined by those institutions. This
5 constitutes a real obstacle to imagination and initiative-taking and is highly frustrating
6 for young people who want to bring different projects to being and make them real in
7 a relatively short time. Thus, during a meeting of the Citizen Council where the
8 representatives of the municipality were present, I observed clearly that public
9 decision-makers do not consider the council as a real tool for citizen participation and
10 empowerment. The local social development officer in charge of Sanitas underlined
11 that: 'the Citizen Council is not intended to provide institutional formulas. It is not
12 your role, you have to leave that to the institutions. However, we can provide you
13 with information. Be careful not to be the messenger of any demand.' The urban
14 renewal manager at Tours Métropole continues in this direction: "We must not be
15 fooled about participation, because there are subjects which we can discuss, but, for
16 example the demolitions that have been decided in the neighbourhood are non-
17 negotiable. It is not for the residents to decide."

18 Members of the Citizen Council often feel this top-down gaze. The Sanitas
19 Collective had, for example, carried out a door-to-door survey among residents in the
20 Marie-Curie sector of the district. This initiative was very badly received by the
21 Municipality. A member of the Housing Association, CNL, and the director of the

1 Community Centre were called upon by a councillor who asked them: What does
2 this survey mean? We have done the official consultation in the neighbourhood. They
3 are trying to do their own! These words validate the observation that local elected
4 officials and state representatives do not seem ready to recognise the value of
5 proposals produced outside of their initiative and control (Bachir, 2018). One of the
6 members of the Citizen Council wondered if:

7

The Citizen Council wasn't it created in order to give the illusion of establishing
more democracy? For the authorities, isn't it created for clearing their conscience? Is
there a real desire for constructive discussion and consultation with citizens? The
council must be a real place of exchange, reciprocity, consultation for the good of the
residents of the district. As for the neighbourhood renewal proposed to us, the
Council has no say, is not consulted, cannot make proposals. (Interview, a member
of the council)

15

16 This paternalist approach is not compatible with what young people perceive as
17 democratic participation either.

18 A young volunteer at the Community Centre explains:

19

1 It is clear that in appearance we have some places to talk, a fake democracy that we
2 put in place to say: they, have a look, there is a chance to discuss, but what do we
3 do with the discussion afterwards? That's the problem. Listening is good, but are we
4 taking the discussion into account? For example, a protest that comes from some
5 young people, such as: Yeah, that's not normal, we want that, well they are
6 heard. They are going to be listened during a meeting but after that, what happens?
7 Over time, when this kind of meetings happens once, twice, three times, four times,
8 nothing moves or the result is not what is expected, then young people may not
9 believe in the system, no longer trust and say: well we are going to do otherwise, we
10 will not ask for anything, it is useless. They express their anger by burning cars or by
11 organizing in groups in order to have some power in the neighbourhood but don't
12 work with us or no longer come to events organised for them. (Interview)

13

14 In short, the whole question that arises for a community and its traditional partners is
15 to know to what extent they are ready to hear the youth. Do a city and those involved
16 with youth policy actors value the voice of young people only when it meets their
17 expectations? Are they ready to accept that young people move the lines, question
18 the rules in force and, ultimately, produce new social standards? (Hbila, 2014: 13).
19 This is one of the main issues for the promotion of young people's participation in
20 local democratic structures and returns us to the meeting of radical democracy and the
21 right to the city, meaning the real transformation everyday practices of participation

1 for all. Drawing on Lefebvre, the right to the city signifies in the most positive of
2 terms the right of citizens and city dwellers, and of groups they (on the basis of social
3 relations) constitute, to appear on all networks and circuits of communication,
4 information and exchange (Lefebvre, 1996). In other words, the core elements of the
5 right to the city are defined as the promotion of equal access for all to the potential
6 benefits of the city, the democratic participation of all residents in decision-making
7 processes, and the realisation of residents' fundamental rights and liberties, including
8 those of the youth. The French urban policy, which seemed to promote this approach
9 in the 1980s, has abandoned progressively this inclusive way of bringing solutions to
10 priority neighbourhoods' various problems. Rather, as Dikec argues, 'these
11 neighbourhoods were conceptualised as self-contained and dangerous areas with rigid
12 boundaries for which the answer became often repressive and punitive state
13 interventions addressed in spatial terms' (Dikec, 2006: 287).

14 Another problem is the normative and pedagogic orientation of
15 agents/representative of local structures. In France, Community Centres are created
16 with the principle of 'education populaire', which means to create collective dynamics
17 that allow the dominated people to jointly develop a critical understanding of society
18 and the origins of social inequalities. It is about giving yourself the means to
19 understand the world in order to be able to transform it. This orientation is, in reality,
20 not so far from what a radical democracy should be. Moreover, the director of
21 Pluriel(le)s underlines it clearly. Defining himself as an activist of 'education

1 populaire, he says that he wants to “use the skills acquired over the years to enable
2 people to take charge of their lives and to act together”. In his mind, the relationship
3 between the community development worker and the local resident is evolving
4 towards an alliance in which the latter is a committed actor developing their own
5 resources. As for the community development worker, s/he becomes a resource
6 mobiliser and a partner who facilitates the empowerment process (Deverchère,
7 2017). As the director underlined during a meeting, they are not there to take the
8 place or to speak in place of local residents but to listen and support. Everyone must
9 speak up and have the necessary time for this. It is therefore necessary to know how
10 to be patient and to live at the pace of the other person and not at his own personal
11 pace (Deverchère, 2017).

12 However, in practice, these principles are not entirely followed and are
13 sometimes transformed first in the style of assistance and teaching by the workers
14 towards the residents and especially towards young people. Concerning the latter,
15 according to Cortisero (2014), what is observed in public structures like Community
16 Centres is that work for youth aims to help young people achieve a social figure of the
17 accomplished adult, defined by a set of psychosocial development standards. In
18 France, policies for young people from low-income, social-housing neighbourhoods
19 follow largely a logic of containment of dangerous classes aimed at ensuring social
20 peace through educational actions intended to make young people reasonable
21 (Dike, 2007; Cortisero, 2010). Animation, the professionalisation of which, in

1 France, is largely linked to policies for the infrastructure and management of social
2 housing *banlieues* (Bataille, 2004) is part of a larger plan to 'civilize the banlieue'
3 ([Cortisro, 2014](#): 53). Young people who depart from these standards then embody a
4 deficit figure, and the work in their direction must be corrective and compensatory:
5 they must be helped to reach the 'dominant standard' ([Cortisro, 2014](#)). This kind of
6 education whose objective is actually to teach the formal exercise of citizenship to the
7 youth is often experienced as an institutional violence and a denial of recognition.

8 For example, in 2018, the French government set up the programme of
9 'Quartiers de Reconquête Républicain' (Neighbourhoods of Republican Re-conquest)
10 in order to ensure the public security by increasing the number of police officers in
11 some 'sensitive' neighbourhoods. Sanitas has been included in this programme that
12 was harshly criticised by civil society organisations who accused the government of
13 not being interested in long-term social solutions but of instead privileging physical
14 repression. For the director of Pluriel(le)s, this programme makes no sense because
15 the police will never be able to eradicate drug dealing. Instead, it increases social
16 tensions in the neighbourhood and young people are very hostile to the police officers.
17 According to him: 'dealers are smart guys, they know their interest very well. In
18 general, they don't use drugs but only sell them. Some of them study and you can
19 really discuss with them. When you want to discuss with an equal base, they listen'
20 (interview). In any case, it is rare to simply ask young people what they want and how
21 they would like to do it.

1 Conclusion

2 The study of actors in local democracy such as the Community Centre and the Citizen
3 Council at Sanitas shows that ensuring a broad participation of residents within
4 working-class districts is always a difficult task. Observation of the people involved
5 in various initiatives within the neighbourhood indicates that they are very
6 unrepresentative of the entire population of the neighbourhood. We see very few
7 young people or people of migrant origin in the activities of participation and design
8 of the Community Centre's project and activities. They are very often the same people
9 involved in different associations and projects, wearing several militant hats.

10 Observation of the participation and advocacy initiatives of residents of
11 Sanitas also shows the importance of the role of the Community Centre, which can be
12 both initiator and unifier, as well as passive and demobilising. Its position seems to be
13 largely dependent on the employees of the Centre and their involvement in structures
14 and spaces of participation as community development practitioners. Some
15 programmes and participatory studios initiated by the director of Pluriel(le)s seem to
16 attract young people to attend the Community Centre and this could have the effect of
17 giving back some confidence, to participate in the collective events and meetings, to
18 respect others' opinions and therefore to tolerate the contradictions. In that case, it
19 would be more valuable to integrate youth into existing participation platforms and
20 spaces rather than creating separate 'youth' platforms through which institutions

1 expect their engagement in policy. For that, instead of a paternal approach, some
2 researchers propose the term **user expertise** as young people could be experts of
3 their own territory and neighbourhood ([Talpin, 2010](#); [Cortés-Ro, 2014](#)). According to
4 Coussé et al, the education-centred approach is actively refused by young people, as it
5 tends to erase class conflict and relations of domination (Cano-Hila, 2017). In sum,
6 the lack of participation of youth seems highly correlated to social exclusion and
7 precariousness, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. All public and
8 community-based programmes targeting their inclusion in various platforms of
9 democratic expression should be imagined in the big picture that includes solutions to
10 enhance their social conditions. In addition, they should abandon the perception of
11 these neighbourhoods as problematic areas and consider them as resourceful areas by
12 focusing on how they can value the neighbourhood, both the young men and young
13 women within it, and what can they do together with young people and not for them.

14 Notes

15 <<TS: take in notes here>>

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¹ All rates are taken from the French National Institute of Statistics (INSEE) including the number of single-parent families.

² In France, the poverty line is fixed at 60 per cent of a median revenue **[[AQ: income?]]**, or €1,026 per person. According to INSEE, there are 8.8 million poor people in France today, or in other words, 14 per cent of France's population.

³ We should remember that before the law of *Politique de la Ville* (2014), these neighbourhoods requalified as **priority** were called *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (Sensitive Urban Areas).

⁴ **French republican** tradition considers each person as a member of the national community; consequently, integration means assimilation into the national culture. In the 1990s, this tradition took the form of a **republican nationalism**; immigrants became the scapegoats for socioeconomic difficulties and the *banlieues* were perceived as a **threat** to national unity. Despite the ethnic

diversity of these neighbourhoods, they have commonly been described as ghettos. See Dikec (2007) and the review of his book (Gilbert, 2010) where the quotation has been taken from.