

The Policy of the City and Cultural Action

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Abstract: Within the context of the Policy of the City and of Urban Social Development of the government of France, the paper discusses public cultural action (government involvement in cultural development), “emerging” cultures in housing projects and neighbourhoods that are supposedly “in trouble” (or, in other words, “sensitive” or “underprivileged”), and conflicts between community-based cultures and republican alternatives. In describing cultural conflict in urban situations, the paper refers to the situation in France. The article closes with a brief overview of certain developments in Europe.

Résumé: Dans le contexte de la Politique de la ville et du développement social urbain du gouvernement français, cette étude examine l'action culturelle publique (l'implication gouvernementale dans le développement culturel), les cultures « émergentes » dans les cités et les quartiers dits « en difficulté » (ou d'une manière autre, « sensibles » ou « défavorisés »), et les conflits entre cultures communautaires et impératifs républicains. Pour décrire des conditions urbaines conflictuelles, cette étude se reporte à la situation en France. L'étude se termine par un bref survol de quelques situations en Europe.

It is not easy to speak of culture. From a historical perspective, we see that culture does not spontaneously lead to social cohesion. In fact, we can cite many examples where it has led to war, not peace. Moreover, art, which normally emerges from cultural life, often conflicts with the dominant culture. There have been many battles over artistic works and practices including, for example, *El Cid*, *Hernani*, *The Flowers of Evil*, *Madame Bovary*, cubism, twelve-tone music, the French New Wave, and techno music.¹ On the other hand, from a philosophical point of view, culture is clearly oriented toward the common good (i.e., tolerance, liberty, discernment, heritage, curiosity about others, about new artistic practices, but also questions about the status quo). There is, however, a tension between this ideal and history.

An objective of cultural policies is to direct history, with its frequent violence, toward an ideal of tolerance and freedom; the goal is to encourage social cohesion. But policymakers can only accomplish this goal through actions that are specific, pragmatic, and inevitably limited in scope. Nevertheless, it is in this way

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that they can reinforce key concepts like *interaction, creativity, social coherence and cohesion, citizenship, citizen*—all words that cultural policymakers value (or should value). The French example of the “Policy of the City” as applied to underprivileged neighbourhoods illustrates this difficult tension between history and philosophical ideals.

The Policy of the City and of Urban Social Development: Stakes and problems

Housing projects and New Cities

To begin, it is useful to explain the meanings given to certain expressions in this essay. In this regard, “Policy of the City” does not apply to all cities or to a single city considered in its entirety. Rather, it applies primarily to underprivileged neighbourhoods. Bearing its full current name, *Politique de la ville et du développement social urbain* (Policy of the City and of Urban Social Development), it was born in the mid-1970s through the program *Habitat et vie sociale* (Housing and Social Life), whose objective was to improve living conditions in hastily built social housing.

Briefly, these vast housing developments or “estates” (*cités*) were built as part of the first large-scale urban planning project in the 1950s. Public authorities decided to build new dwellings on large rural spaces next to cities. These spaces were called *Zones à urbaniser en priorité* or *ZUPs* (Priority Urbanization Zones). The estates, created in 1958, bore certain architectural features, such as steel bars and towers. They were built on the outskirts of every small, medium-sized, and large city in France. A major characteristic of these estates involved distinguishing between three key functions, each of which was given a separate area: dwellings, roadways, and shops. Work areas were not forgotten; they were located in large companies in the vicinity. The first tenants came from the countryside. Later, new immigrants moved in. The notorious lack of comfort of these housing projects—referred to from the start as “rabbit warrens”—made collective life difficult. The contrasting origins of residents made matters worse, as did the varying cultural traditions that had to coexist in this uncomfortable shared space.

It did not take long for these buildings to suffer from depredations and degradations. These housing projects were a major urban-planning failure, and understood as such by public authorities around 1975. As public authorities grew worried over a situation that had quickly become alarming, they decided to halt the construction of large projects while making improvements to existing ones, through major repairs involving the soundproofing of apartments, beautifying facades, cleaning premises, and so forth.

The “New Cities” (*Villes nouvelles*), whose construction began in 1970, were to provide an alternative. Conceived in 1965, these New Cities were based on a different idea. Instead of separating, they united; instead of crowding together, they dispersed. They combined and mixed functions, as in the traditional town model, which was their basic point of reference. Thus they created more spaces for pedestrians, diversified architectural styles and roads, returned to individual

homes, and mixed social categories. They accommodated medical and dental offices, drugstores, restaurants, newsstands, garages, banks, cafes—all the services typical of “classic” towns (as historian Jean Labasse wrote, “Nothing could be less new than the New City”). The New Cities even had important administrative functions.

However, news stories revealed that New Cities were subject to the same problems as other housing projects: violence, drugs, delinquency, and gangs. Their urban character resembled that of housing projects and brought on the same problems. The first reason for this turn of events was that they failed to integrate the unemployed; the second was that schooling remained a challenge; and the third was that youth gangs were taking over territories (originally intended as public spaces), which they forbade other young people to enter. As a result, extremely violent conflicts sometimes arose.²

Nevertheless, the New City, because of its architectural diversity and its attempt to integrate different social categories, offered a greater promise of social cohesion than the housing projects, which were too uniform. In other words, although both of these urban developments created social problems, the New Cities offered more opportunities for their inhabitants, while those living in the housing projects had no other options (economic or social) than to remain imprisoned within them.

Problems with the Policy of the City

The expression “Policy of the City” (*Politique de la ville*) began to acquire its current meaning in 1981 with the creation of the *Commission nationale de développement social des quartiers*, commonly called the DSQ (National Commission for the Social Development of Neighbourhoods), and other commissions on safety, prevention, or economic development. The consecration of the expression came in October 1988 with the creation of a *Délégation interministérielle à la ville* or D.I.V (Inter-Ministry Delegation to the City). The crowning of the term occurred in early 1991 with the creation of the *Ministère de la ville* (Ministry of the City), which became the master implementor of the Policy of the City. To give an idea of the extent of this policy, the 215 City Contracts in 1996-97 involved 1,300 neighbourhoods in 750 communes, and a total of four million inhabitants (7% of the population of France). The major problem with the Policy of the City has been its complexity. It has become an impossible tangle of laws and decisions that have accumulated instead of superseding each other.³

The essence of these difficulties lies in the contradiction between a logic of closure and one of openness. The idea of ensuring the “social and cultural development of a troubled neighbourhood” exists to help specific neighbourhoods. It is a long-held perspective that affects how public powers deal with urban crises. However, it can seal off and isolate a neighbourhood. It highlights certain problems as particular to that neighbourhood, devaluing it in the eyes of its inhabitants while making adjacent neighbourhoods envious (“Why do they get help and not us?”). As for the City Contract, it has a broader scope, seeking solutions that encompass several neighbourhoods. The problem with such a dual system is that

different administrative procedures end up overlapping each other. Some procedures focus on the neighbourhood itself, running the risk of enclosing the neighbourhood within its specificity, within its “zone.” Other procedures focus on a neighbourhood’s environment, that is, the urban community that surrounds it. As a consequence, one runs the risk of contradictory decisions because of the divergent interests of the urban partners.

In brief, we can distinguish between three stages in the Policy of the City. The first is centred on the renovation of buildings, the second on action in a neighbourhood, the third on action in a city considered as an agglomeration of neighbourhoods. We can note, moreover, that the Policy of the City encourages the sharing of social and cultural resources among cities. In this regard, we can speak of an “inter-communal” arrangement or of “inter-communality.” Some have even spoken more recently of a contract or agreement between agglomerations that expresses the political will to bring certain neighbourhoods and communes out of their isolation.

These complications have long made the Policy of the City difficult to understand, and surveys of the populace on this matter have been very negative. A report that Jean-Pierre Sueur, then Mayor of Orléans, handed in to Minister Martine Aubry in 1998 described 50 propositions, of which the most prominent recommended that public authorities allot 5.4 billion euros (35 billion francs) per year for ten years to avoid “a thousand ghettos” in ten years’ time in France (see Sueur, 1998).

Following this report, the *Conseil des villes* (Council of Cities) reiterated the importance of the Policy of the City and its four objectives:

1. Guarantee the republican pact;
2. Ensure social cohesion;
3. Organize around a common project; and
4. Build a new democratic space for residents.

The last objective is the central one: nothing can be accomplished without the involvement of residents, and that is particularly clear in the cultural sphere.

Public cultural actions

From the beginning, the Ministry of Culture has been involved in the Policy of the City under the impetus of the *Direction du développement culturel* (Cultural Development Authority) and the organizations that followed it. This involvement (or cultural action) is arranged around six main axes.

The first axis is *artistic involvement*. Dominique Wallon, Director of Cultural Development, reiterated the point in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* as early as July 1983: the budgets for cultural institutions in communities would increase if “their creations originated in, or led to, work on cultural action.” Wallon rejected esoteric or frivolous culture and emphasized the social role of artistic action led by or with artists. Excellence was of key importance, even in the most populist cultural actions, because artistic excellence, ensured by the presence of the artist,

would allow the cultural expressions of inhabitants to develop more effectively. That stance is still valued, particularly with regard to artists in residence, such as choreographers or artists in housing estates, writers or musicians in colleges, actors in associations, and so forth.

The second axis is *the inclusion of "emerging" cultures*, that is, cultural productions that arise from the people. Most notable were the musical and choreographic practices that appeared in housing projects, especially among young people: rock, rap, urban dance, graffiti art, techno, photography, writing, reading, the cultural expressions of immigrants. A concrete manifestation of this axis was the *Quartiers Lumières* (Neighbourhoods of Lights) that, in 1991-92 and 1992-93, involved celebrations in 400 neighbourhoods. Those who were there will always remember the innumerable concerts, dance performances, literary productions, and so forth produced in the neighbourhoods and other areas with the help of the *Directions régionales des affaires culturelles* (Regional Cultural-Affairs Authorities).

The third axis is *artistic education*, whose objective is to open up socially underprivileged neighbourhoods to urban cultural life (including museums, monuments, industrial heritage, and trips to artistic sites like theatres and concert halls). At the local level, this work has been accomplished in partnership with the *Éducation nationale* and has involved trips to museums and monuments, complemented by pedagogical documents produced by cultural government services.

The fourth axis involves *amateur art*, and focuses on direct training in artistic practices. This axis received support in 1994, when Jacques Toubon, Minister of Culture at the time, requested information on amateur practices. The results, published in 1996 as *Les Amateurs* (Donnat, 1996), showed that half of the young people had practised at least one art as amateurs. Such activities contribute to the social and cultural integration of youth and are encouraged.

The fifth axis involves *the mobilization of artists*, including architects and urban planners. These artists co-operate with inhabitants to envision how neighbourhoods should grow in tandem with other neighbourhoods and the city. To mend the social fabric, it may be necessary to re-link parts of the city separated by roads and highways. This approach involves thinking about the overall environment within the framework of an "urban ecology" that has not yet developed to its full potential. By building bridges (literally and metaphorically), integration becomes more of a possibility. Cultural institutions, schools of art and architecture, and artists/designers are the first to be solicited in this context.

As for the sixth axis, we cannot forget the inter-ministry program *Culture, ville et dynamique sociale* (Culture, City, and Social Dynamics) that offers grants for *anthropological research into cultural life* on the outskirts of urban centres. A goal of such research is to learn about cultural resources there. This research has led to a variety of publications (see Métral, 1997, 2000).

Emerging cultures

Emerging cultures: this term describes cultural practices that arise on their own without outside help. Simplifying, we could say that so-called sensitive or fringe

neighbourhoods sustain more modern culture than do older neighbourhoods in city centres. By this I mean that fringe neighbourhoods consume modern culture, *and they also produce it*. The situation is paradoxical: those neighbourhoods with the richest cultural heritage are less likely to create modern culture, while the poorest are more likely to do so. The difference is especially pronounced in the case of music and dance. Almost everything that matters in contemporary music over the past 30 years has come from underprivileged neighbourhoods. It is hard to ascertain the exact reasons for this situation. The high proportion of young people in these neighbourhoods are an important factor, as well as the neighbourhoods' multicultural nature and sense of community (they are melting pots of musical styles, rhythms, and choreographic and artistic resources). A few examples are in order.

Festivals

It is always hard to draw on one's own experiences, because one has to choose and exclude, but I must cite the *Festival des musiques urbaines* (Urban-Music Festival) held since 1996 at the Grande Halle in La Villette, near certain underprivileged neighbourhoods in Paris. Also, the important work being accomplished in the suburbs of Lyons comes to mind (music and dance, but also creative writing, poetry, and dishes from around the world—Lyons delivers!); La Laiterie in Strasbourg, which has presented many works by foreign artists (art, theatre, music, etc.); and the city of Marseille, with its famous northern neighbourhoods where community life is quite intense. This city has also benefited from the recent development of industrial lands into cultural centres, such as *La Belle de mai* near the big port. These events could only have occurred with clear, willing, and durable political support (Rizzardo, 1999).

Quartiers Lumières

The first goal of the aforementioned *Quartiers Lumières* was to organize festivals in neighbourhoods on the basis of the cultural and artistic resources of the local residents. Four hundred "sensitive" neighbourhoods were thus mobilized for two consecutive periods (1991-92 and 1992-93), in all the regions of France including overseas departments and territories (see *Quartiers Lumières . . .*, 1991, 1992). These gatherings were held in the presence of recognized artists, and explored all areas of cultural creation: plastic art, cinema, dance, writing, education and training, music, photography, poetry, video, and so on. The second goal of the *Quartiers Lumières* was to identify individuals or groups with the potential to turn professional and offer them complementary training. In late 1993, however, the conservative government of Édouard Balladur (May 1993-May 1995) decided not to continue these festivals.

Hip-hop culture

Hip-hop culture in France has had mass appeal for more than ten years, and its first fans enjoyed it as far back as 1984, thanks to specialized radio and television programs. Hip-hop is an all-encompassing culture that includes three key components: rap music, dance, and graffiti art. We currently refer to this "emerging"

culture as “urban” (see Bazin, 1995; Boucher, 1998; Mayol, 1997). In a similar manner we refer to “urban dances,” recognized since 1996 through an annual colloquium and performances at the Grande Halle at La Villette in Paris. Hip-hop is a culture without an exact precedent in popular culture. On the one hand, it is a rather masculine teenage culture while, on the other hand, it is also a culture with claims to ethnicity. Right now, it is truly the culture of housing projects, with its original side but also its conformist side. The latter is quite visible in modes of dress, accent, and speech, including the use of *verlan*, a form of slang in which some words are pronounced backwards, such as *renoi* for *noir* (black), *caillera* for *racaille* (riffraff), and *meuf* for *femme* (woman) (Goudaillier, 1997).

The case of rock

We estimate that there are between 35,000 and 40,000 rock groups in France. There are probably 3,000 or 4,000 networks enabling contacts and the exchange of information among them. There are probably 150,000 musicians, 95% of whom are amateur. Beyond the musicians, there are close friends and acquaintances, admirers and roadies. Moreover, there are 200,000 or so fans dedicated to the groups. Such figures amount to 350,000 young people directly involved in rock. It is almost equal to the 450,000 students taking music in public schools, and a little more than the 300,000 in private schools. Rock is mostly an urban phenomenon and rockers are present in all of the urban centres of France.

The money that bands have invested in their equipment is something in the order of two billion francs (300 million euros). This amount is significant. It is the equivalent of 15% of the annual budget of the Ministry of Culture, and it is more than the budget of the *Direction de la musique et de la danse* (Music and Dance Authority), for example. In addition, the annual cost of rehearsal sessions is estimated at about 600 million francs (90 million euros). In total, counting incidental expenses, the amount reaches three billion francs (450 million euros) spent each year on rock by its young amateur performers (see Mayol, 1997, chap. 9).

Cultural conflicts

This leads us to cultural conflicts currently encountered in France. There are two opposing sides: *republicans* and *communitarians*. The republicans, likely to be political figures, favour a national solidarity pact overriding ethnic and cultural differences. They argue that integration can only occur through overcoming particularities of custom or religion that have no place in the French Republic, and of a wholehearted support for the principles of equality, liberty, and secularism. Communitarians, more likely to be sociologists, take into account the actual diversity of the people of France—and this diversity is particularly significant in cultural life and artistic expression.

Thus, we can distinguish between two currents, one toward integration and the other toward “secession.” Rai music, for instance, is a good illustration of “republican integration.” It is a style from French-speaking North Africa whose audience in France originally consisted of people of Mediterranean origin (Boucher, 1998). Rai however has spread beyond this audience to encompass

young (and not so young!) people of all regional and European backgrounds. Rap music, on the other hand, would seem, at least in some cases (in certain clearly underprivileged neighbourhoods), to favour ethnic withdrawal, “communitarianism,” and “secession.” (Sociologists who were close to the field chose to apply the word *sécession* in this context.) In the end, the sociological side overtakes the political; republicanism is overcome by the very freedom that it authorizes, the freedom of expression that is so important to French cultural life (Sueur, 1999).

We see that the future will consist of finding solutions somewhere between the two extremes exemplified by the diehard republicans at one end and communitarians at the other. After some difficult years, the new planning contracts between the state and the regions have been attempting to simplify the Policy of the City, and to further advance the position of culture in cities. The culture that we see appearing in the cities is in fact identity-based or “communitarian.” There is, however, no reason for that cultural identity to prevent republican integration. In fact, one cannot ignore the other and each needs the other: identity is necessary so that people can situate themselves in a historical community that in any case has already been hybridized for a long time; the Republic is also necessary, to give even more chances to cultural democracy. This type of consciousness is truly European. (It exists elsewhere, in Canada, in the United Kingdom, etc., but on different constitutional foundations.)

In closing, I would like to mention three related initiatives. First, the association *Banlieues d'Europe* (Suburbs of Europe), which has organized five international gatherings for the purpose of comparing cultural projects in suburbs and working-class neighbourhoods in different European cities (Barcelona, Belfast, Berlin, Frankfurt, Glasgow, Lisbon, Liverpool, Milan, etc.). In many of these neighbourhoods, cultural action is so strong that we could speak of “super-urbs” instead of “sub-urbs” (or *bon lieux* [“good places”] instead of *banlieues* [“sub-urbs”]). Second, the *Culture Europe* quarterly newsletter, founded in 1994 by professionals working in the cultural sphere in Europe. As stated on its Web site (URL: <http://www.culture-europe.fr.fm>), *Culture Europe* provides “a complete and reliable survey of European cultural news and policies.” And, finally, *Circular*, the CIRCLE newsletter produced by the Département des études et de la prospective (Department of Studies and Future Trends), whose priority is to present the state of research on cultural policies. These are but three examples in a Europe where cultural and artistic networks are innumerable, but they show that connections between cultural life and social cohesion are fundamental for the future of the “Old Continent,” which likes to renew itself by borrowing from the New World on occasion.

One final point: Public authorities certainly contribute to these cultural works, experiences, and creations, but they would be nowhere without the involvement of motivated, dedicated, and competent individuals who are part of civil society. Since 1901 in France, laws guaranteeing freedom of association have ensured that citizens can play an active role in the cultural growth of their communities (Moulinier, 2001). It is important to protect such laws, in France and else-

where. Indeed, the connection between cultural policies and civil society is an important one. It is hoped that cultural policymakers and planners will always recognize the importance of this connection when they formulate their policies. It is also hoped that researchers will continue to give this connection the attention that it deserves.

Notes

1. In the case of techno, I am referring to parliamentary debates in France over the legitimacy of raves.
2. In late 1999, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the French Minister of the Interior, used the term *sauvageons* ("little savages") in reference to young people involved in a quarrel that led to the death of a young man.
3. Specialists themselves find the profusion of acronyms—incomprehensible to the uninitiated—quite amusing: DSQ, DSU, GPU, HVS, LOV, MOUS, ZAC, ZAD, ZEP, ZFU, ZRU, ZUS, ZUP. . . . It is not necessary to spell out all of these acronyms, which are meaningful mostly to urban administrators in France (see Chaline, 1997, and Damon, 1997).

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