

Tackling Urban Apartheid

Notes from the Social Forum of Popular Neighbourhoods in Paris

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In early October 2008, activists held the second Social Forum of Popular Neighbourhoods (*Forum social des quartiers populaires (FSQP)*) in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris. Organized by movement groups from Paris (*Mouvement de l'Immigration et des Banlieues (MIB)*), Toulouse (*Motivé-e-s*), and Lyon (*Diversité*), the Forum was sponsored by a wide variety of movement organizations active on issues of unemployment, poverty, housing, racism, police violence, women's equality, imperialism, education, arts and culture. Among them were also more recent organizations like Popular Ecological Zone (*Zone Écologie Populaire (ZEP)*), an environmental justice group that tries to re-define green politics by taking into account how residents in popular neighbourhoods carry a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation.

Just as the first Social Forum in St. Denis, another Paris suburb, in 2007, this year's version was multi-pronged response to

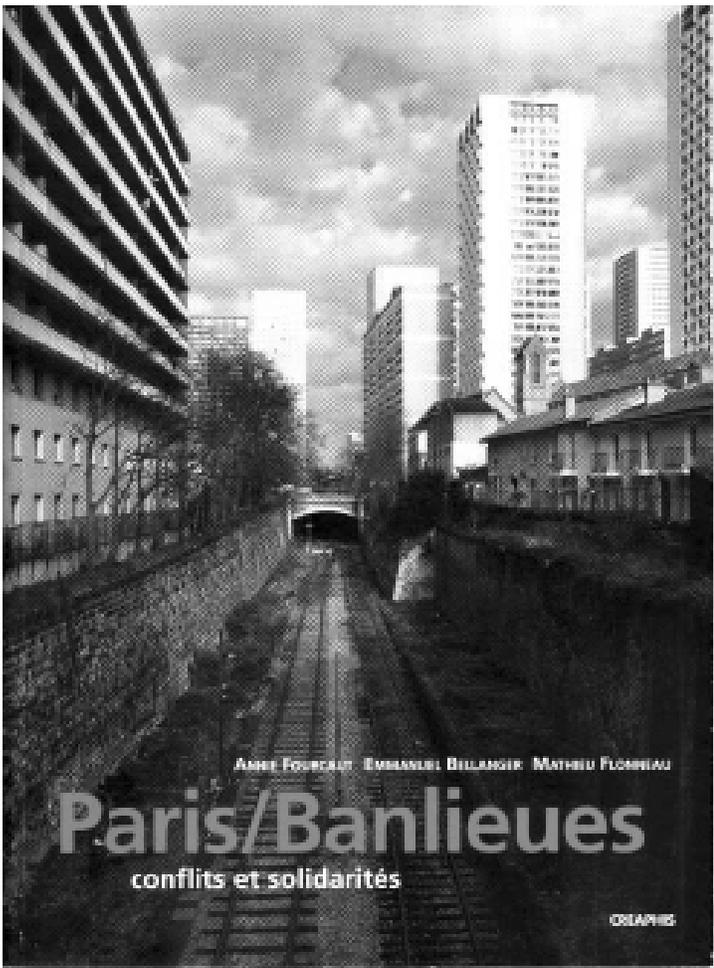
the uprising of youth of colour in the fall of 2005. Its intention was to counteract the isolation of activist-intellectuals working in individual segregated neighbourhoods by facilitating an exchange of experiences and views while facilitating strategic discussions at wider – metropolitan, national and international – scales. Given the weak and problematic links between the organized left and racialized residents in popular suburbs, the Forum's longer term aim is to build an autonomous, self-organized and nation-wide voice against racism and for social justice.

THE BANLIEUES

In comparison to the better-known world-wide and continental social fora, the bases for organizing the *FSQP* are more explicitly social and geographical in character. In the French context, the popular neighbourhoods where working class people of colour are concentrated – the so-called *banlieues* – tend to be located in suburbs built from the 1950s to the 1970s. Heavily stigmatized by the media and the political class and subject to a wide range of discriminatory practices, these neighbourhoods are socially demarcated from other suburban spaces such as bungalow districts and wealthy enclaves.

The place where the *FSQP* took place illustrates the situation of the popular suburbs today. The tents and stages of the Social Forum were nestled at the edge of a vast district of social housing (the *cité Pablo Picasso*). The track stadium which accommodated the Forum is built on a historical site of a temporary shantytown where, during the 1960s, the French state herded migrant workers until they won the fight to move into regular social housing. The struggles of immigrant workers against sub-standard housing and racism in the workplace in the 1960s and 1970s formed an important, if often overlooked part of the movements during and after 1968. (Nanterre's more well-known contribution to the famous uprising in May 1968 came from the students who occupied the newly built University of Nanterre, which is within walking distance from where the Social Forum took place).

Governed by a left coalition led by the French Communist Party (*PCF*), the municipality of Nanterre is still part of the shrinking 'red belt' of left-wing suburban municipalities that surround the wealthy central municipality of Paris from the east, the north and parts of the south and the west. Today, the eastern edge of Nanterre – where the Social Forum took place – is just a stone's throw away from the glitzy bank towers of *La Défense* (Paris's second downtown, a concentration of skyscrapers which house a big part of the global financial operations and corporate head-



quarters of France's transnational firms) and *Neuilly-sur-Seine* (the ultra-wealthy residential suburb which is the political base of France's neo-conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy).

FEMINISM, RACISM, SEXISM

Not surprisingly, the key themes of the Social Forum were all related in one way or another to the conditions of the popular suburbs. During the three days of the Forum, panel discussions, film screenings and workshops were grouped into the following topics: Urban Apartheid, Education, International Solidarity, Women's Questions, Police and Justice and the Media. Let me zero in on the particularly noteworthy events and debates I attended.

The sessions grouped under "Women's questions" dealt in various ways with the relationship between racism, sexism and feminism. Numerous contributions underlined how, in contrast to the mainstream image of women of colour as either docile immigrants or passive victims of sexism, women have a long history as active participants in political struggles. In a documentary film shown during the Forum – *Moujadhidate* (women liberation fighters) – women talked about how they contributed to Algeria's war of independence against the French colonizers (from 1954-1962) in various ways, as weapons smugglers, informants, combatants, nurses, and operators of safe houses. Far from docile managers of the traditional domestic sphere in North Africa, women played a strategic role in decolonization efforts.

If women have been active resisting colonial and neo-colonial conditions, what kinds of feminism have emerged out of these struggles? In the French context, from colonial times to now, mainstream feminism has often been mobilized to portray as "emancipatory" French colonial policies and those targeting non-European residents of France. For example, the law of 2004, which prohibits explicitly religious clothing in public schools, was depicted by many mainstream French feminists as a progressive measure against supposedly patriarchal immigrant cultures. Activists pointed out how this law, which led to the expulsion of girls wearing the Muslim headscarf, ended up penalizing the very girls it claimed to help. By focusing the fight against sexism only on immigrant communities and Islam, it also helped deflect attention away from the patriarchal aspects of French society at large.

The (neo-)colonial dimensions of certain feminisms have forced many to define a specifically anti-racist or anti-colonial form of feminism. This became clear during two events at the Forum: (1) the launch of a book based on interviews with young women who talked about their various reasons for wearing the headscarf in France (*Les filles voilées parlent*); (2) a play that enacted the experiences of a Muslim women's group in Rennes (*Femmes musulmanes de Rennes*), which was barred by organizers from setting up a stall during International Women's Day. In a plenary session on racism and sexism after these two events, most defended the need to counter the claims of mainstream, 'colonial' French feminism with anti-racist feminisms that acknowl-

edge a plurality of avenues toward emancipation or liberation. But not everyone agreed about the form these feminisms should take and the role religion should play in popular feminism. While the reality of Islamophobia in France was widely condemned, people differed about the relative weight that should be placed on the link between racism, sexism, and Islam.

A DIFFERENT FUTURE FOR PUBLIC HOUSING

An equally explosive issue (grouped under the rubric of "Urban Apartheid") focused on resistance against public housing demolition. In the mid-1980s, the French state began a selective strategy to demolish public housing projects. At that time, this strategy joined a broader array of urban policies (by both left and right-wing governments) to respond to riots against racism and police brutality in popular neighbourhoods. These policies (which have also included job training, funding for community organizations, additional transfer payments to tax-poor municipalities, and community policing) have targeted specific neighbourhoods. In a paternalist, and sometimes racist fashion, they assume that the problems facing residents there (poverty, un- and under-employment, stigmatization) are not the result of broader forces (systemic racism and the features of today's capitalism) but can be blamed on features of these neighbourhoods themselves: the physical design of large-scale housing blocks, a lack of a proper work ethic, 'cultural' factors, and so on.

Back to public housing. Since 2003, public housing demolition has accelerated rapidly after the right-wing government under the Chirac presidency set up a national agency to oversee demolition and reconstruction efforts. Under the auspices of the *Agence nationale de rénovation urbaine (ANRU)*, public housing providers, municipalities and departmental governments across the country have embarked on concerted campaigns to demolish public housing units. The goal of *ANRU* is to demolish a quarter of a million public housing units by 2013.

While in principle, all demolished units are supposed to be replaced, demolition often results in a net loss of public housing units, and this at a time when almost a million people across the country are on waiting lists for public housing units. The shrinkage of public housing is exacerbated by the fact that many replacement units are on average smaller, more expensive and often located at a significant distance from the original site. This is particularly the case in the Paris region, where public housing providers and municipalities have tried to cash in on the recent, now defunct real estate boom by building ownership and market housing on public housing lands. As a result of such speculative motives, public housing projects were destroyed even if their physical state of repair did not justify it. Activists have calculated that the cost of demolition alone is often higher than the sums of money needed to re-habilitate existing housing tracts.

Over the last few years, tenants in dozens of neighbourhoods have started resisting public housing demolition. They realized that even though demolition/reconstruction efforts are legitimized in seemingly progressive terms, as attempts to improve housing

conditions and increase the income mixity of neighbourhoods, they actually threaten the integrity of existing communities, particularly their networks of mutual support and their already impressive state of ethnic and social diversity. Residents also noticed that the physical design models used to rebuild neighbourhoods after demolition have the additional purpose of facilitating police access to what in the eyes of French authorities are “sensitive” areas. This is hardly surprising because since the 1990s, policing and surveillance have become the *main* concerns of French urban policy.

Facing eviction and, often, displacement to other neighbourhoods and municipalities, tenants mobilized and, in some cases, managed to delay or stop demolition efforts. Today, these efforts are assisted by an umbrella organization (the *Coordination anti-démolitions des logements HLM*), which links neighbourhood level resistance efforts with broader, nation-wide campaigns against France’s neoliberal housing policy. The goal is to stop demolitions and focus housing policy on rehabilitating and expanding public housing. From a North American perspective, these partly successful resistance efforts are a ray of hope. After all, the American state has been assisting cities across the country with their efforts to destroy public housing units, often with even more drastic effects than in France. In Canada, public housing redevelopment has begun more recently in cities like Toronto, where demolition/reconstruction efforts are also privatization and displacement schemes justified by a language of income mixing and social diversity.

THE BANLIEUES AND THE LEFT

The main plenary discussion at the Forum centred on the relationship between residents of segregated immigrant neighbourhoods and the French left. The panel included three anti-racist and immigrant militants, a public sector union activist and two representatives from the City of Nanterre (a city councilor, and the Communist mayor), which lent logistical support to the Social Forum.

The debate was premised on two assumptions. First, the organizing principle of the whole Social Forum was “autonomy”: the capacity of residents of non-European immigrants to define their issues and organize their struggles independently of the institutions of the French left, whether they are parties, unions or movement organizations. Second, the distinction was made between the left with a history in government (*la gauche gouvernementale*: the Socialist Party (*PS*) and the Communist Party (*PCF*)) and the more movement-like ‘social left’ (*la gauche sociale*: activist currents in unions and the *PCF*, anti-globalization movements, and initiatives such as the *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA)*, a new party proposed by the neo-Trotskyite *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR)* and Olivier Besancenot.

The implication of these assumptions was that autonomous anti-racist organizing could work with the social left but not with the electoral left. In this sense, the organizers of the Social Forum placed themselves in a political history reaching from the

workplace and housing struggles of immigrant workers in the 1960s and 1970s, to the large anti-racist marches during the early 1980s and resistance against racism, deportations and police brutality based on a new generation of activists in the *banlieues* since the 1990s. During this long history, anti-racist and immigrant activists repeatedly faced paternalism, if not hostility, from the institutional left.

Various panelists and contributors to the debate reminded each other of various disappointments with the governmental left: the decision of the Mitterrand government in the 1980s not to honour its promise to grant the right to vote to immigrants, the attempt by the same Socialist Party government to control the anti-racist agenda with state-sponsored organizations (*SOS-Racisme*), the support the *PS* and *PCF* have lent repeatedly to repressive measures against youth of colour and participants in suburban revolts, and the active role of Socialist and Communist mayors in strategies to gentrify popular suburbs and demolish public housing.

A shared skepticism about the organized left did not lead everyone to the same conclusions, however. Some remained in a state of hostility towards the left (governmental or social) even as others expressed their support for pragmatic, issue-specific cooperation. This became clear during a debate on the current campaign against the privatization of the French postal service. While various contributors pointed out that postal service is often minimal in poor neighbourhoods and thus does not have high levels of support there, labour movement activists insisted that a privatized postal service would make things worse, not better. The upshot of this debate for union activists was clear: don’t expect automatic support for anti-privatization campaigns in popular neighbourhoods unless you can link these campaigns to a strategy of changing the way in which public companies (and their workers) relate to the users of public services there.

AN INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

The Social Forum of Popular Neighbourhoods presented various lessons for North American observers. Particularly in the United States, and, more recently in parts of Canada, there has also been a shift towards a ‘place-based’ approach to state intervention, which focuses social and economic policy on particular territories such as impoverished neighbourhoods and public housing districts. While this shift could work hand in hand with egalitarian principles, place-based state intervention has generally aimed at managing precarious and acutely racialized populations which are considered potential political threats. Just as in France, place-based state intervention attempts to manage the deep contradictions of today’s neo-imperial capitalism. As a result, what remains of redistributive public policy is deconstructed further for the benefit of market-based interventions and ultimately repressive concerns with security and crime prevention.

The Social Forum of Popular Neighbourhoods demonstrated how activists and residents can avoid blaming themselves for the social segregation and geographical isolation that is reinforced

by place-based state intervention. The Forum's attempt to link separate neighbourhoods to each other and to nation-wide political discussions and strategies is of the highest relevance in this regard. The resistance against public housing demolition has shown that with mutual support networks linking individual public housing projects, tenants can successfully organize against the destruction of popular communities. In turn, organizing efforts of anti-racist feminists underlined the need for nuanced anti-racist feminist responses to the imagined 'clash of civilizations' (the 'West' vs. 'Islam') with which our own politicians and journalists help to further criminalize racialized communities.

The debate about the relationship between the left and the *banlieues* suggested that a strong self-organized presence of anti-racist and feminist voices in segregated neighbourhoods is an essential precondition for genuine alliances with the movement-oriented left currents within and outside the labour movement. Without truly mutual alliances based on the self-defined autonomy of its constituent parts, it is difficult to imagine a genuinely popular future for an anti-capitalist politics. This is of the highest importance in cities like Toronto, where for some politicians and academics, the rise of concentrated, racialized poverty in subur-

ban housing districts conjures up a "suburban problem" of French proportions, thus justifying a city-wide approach to micro-manage racialized neighbourhoods.

Finally, it is vital that strategies against inequality and segregation be placed in international contexts. During the Social Forum, the war on terrorism, American empire and the neo-colonial character of French foreign policy were constant reference points. Sessions linked contemporary American and French support for Israel with a discussion of the 60th year anniversary of the *Nakba*, the forceful expulsion of Palestinians from the territories occupied by the then newly established state of Israel. Other events looked in detail at the current state of the liberation efforts in Kanaka (New Caledonia), one of France's still existing colonies where in the 1980s, the French state responded to liberation movements with the same state of emergency legislation that was used to quell the youth uprising in French cities in late 2005. Clearly, the state of world politics is not unrelated to the situation of segregated popular neighbourhoods in our own cities. **R**

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