Missed opportunities in France's deprived neighbourhoods

What's the point in going over what should be done in France's so-called lower-class neighbourhoods, *les 'banlieues'*, the socially and economically troubled areas where many second-generation immigrants have been relegated? So many specialists have analysed the situation, have given their two cents worth, have put forward potential solutions. Is there a need to add yet another one to the pile, to make recommendations that will only fall into the black hole of government policies that are struggling to evolve.

My wife and I have been involved in providing support for immigrants since 1965. We began organising literacy classes when we were living in Nanterre at the turn of the sixties, in a housing estate owned by Logirep, a branch of Sonacotra, which managed social housing for immigrant workers. In the 1970s I worked for the French Ministry of Public Building and Works in the region of Valenciennes, and was then involved in overseeing France's land policy in the early 1980s, just when France's future 'urban policy' (*politique de la ville*) was taking shape. In the same decade I was, within the same ministry, in charge of France's relations with North Africa. In the late eighties I was responsible for facilitating an international reflection on how disadvantaged areas and the informal city were changing. I was then asked in the 1990s to contribute to evaluating the Paris region's urban policy, and was later involved in assessing France's social housing (HLM - *Habitation à loyer modéré*) renovation policy. Over this period, I also wrote the book *Mission Possible*, exploring the new face of social exclusion, as well as the issue of North African and Sahelian immigration, issues that were central to my private, professional and activist life. What is happening in France today is in essence deeply rooted in a past that dates back several decades. Hence my interest in knowing if we could have anticipated how things would evolve, and taken action then, and if indeed we could have, why we didn't.

We knew but we refused to see, we were unwilling to act

After each social, political and financial disaster, the conclusion is always the same: we knew but we refused to see – or we were unwilling to act. We were too passive or lazy or irresponsible, or it would have required challenging the system to such an extent that we judged the solution would be too costly, financially or politically, to justify that which would have been gained.

I would like to return to these various forewarnings issued over time.Was I prophetic? Hardly! What I am about to discuss was visible to the naked eye, in the strict sense of the term; it was blindingly obvious. What is surprising is not so much that it was obvious, but that the institutions and the leaders active during that period, who were mostly good people (if only incompetence were the reason for our failures, we could imagine it was something we could easily fix), didn't see it, didn't want to see it, didn't want to do something about it.

In the late sixties, my wife and I worked with a small team on integrating foreign workers in France. At the time, everything published on the subject was based on marxism, which dominated the intellectual world at the time. From what we were witnessing in our everyday interactions, we were more interested in how immigrants were being welcomed and integrated into French society. It was the end of the post-war boom and of a time of full employment, but we didn't know that yet. The aftermath of World War II brought with it the need for the Planning

Commission (*Commissariat au Plan*) to find an answer to the crucial question of the era: where to get the labour for a booming industry? Their answer was to encourage residents of French rural areas to migrate to the city, integrate women into the workforce on a massive scale, and encourage immigration from other countries. The 1960s was a tipping point in regards to immigration: intra-european immigration was slowly drying up. It had previously filled the gap created by the low birth rate and the war, and had ushered Belgians, Poles, Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese into France. What followed was an increasing number of immigrants coming from the south of the Mediterranean, North Africa, and then sub-Saharan Africa. And what did we discover, to our great astonishment? That French immigration policy, particularly the family reunification policy, remained unchanged despite the fact that the issue was now different. And it was different in two ways: a virtually bottomless well had been opened up (which had not previously been the case) and, once open, it was not going to be easy to close the lid on migratory flows. And the issue of integration was taking a completely new form, with the arrival of people who shared neither our cultural codes, nor our religion, nor our way of living. It's true that at the time the Portuguese slums in Champigny and the North African slums in Nanterre seemed exactly the same, because they were both responses to the Paris housing crisis. Intentions at the time were focussed on tackling the public housing crisis and eradicating slums. At most, there was a vague attempt at education within the council estates intended for temporary accommodation (*cités de transit*) – these abstract waiting rooms halfway between a slum and a housing estate – and the image of muslims 'slaughtering sheep in their bathtubs' remained a figure of speech and an emblem of racism, rather than signifying any serious consideration of the meaning of moving from one universe to another. Without idealising slums and their insecure living conditions, what was perhaps more harmful was that many rehousing options were located in remote suburbs – 'potato fields' were often not that far from the truth - which meant breaking ties of solidarity with the village/region, often so important in navigating a foreign world. There already existed the illusion that integration began with severing the past. The fertility gap between communities was obvious and the impact this was having in schools was already being felt, but again no conclusions were drawn. There were still relatively few teenagers but it would only be a matter of time before the children grew up. They would be French, period. We wrote this at the time. But why listen to young idealists trying to provide a supportive environment for immigrants? They knew what needed to be done.

1972. A happy time when the French Ministry of Public Building and Works, responsible for urban planning, and the Ministry of Education worked together (backed by the Planning Commission) to analyse the phenomenon of children falling behind in schools in Valenciennes. I was fortunate enough to oversee these studies. We thus studied the educational pathway of 40,000 children of primary school age and 6,000 year ten students (14-15 year olds) living in the area. It was a fantastic opportunity to carry out a multifactorial analysis of the factors that played a role in children falling behind at school. Two things jumped out at us. Firstly, all else being equal, children from big families fared much worse at school than those from smaller families – *all else being equal*. The two popular theories at the time (the right-wing vision that it came down to individual skills and abilities and the left-wing vision that it was primarily about determining social factors) both went out the window: we were not about to make new friends. The other factor was that children of immigrants – we didn't bother (and I shudder to utter these words) about their nationality and just identified them by their names – were not equals in how they related to the school system. Immigrants from Europe generally had better results than French people from the same socio-economic group. Children who came from outside Europe, mainly North Africans residing in France's industrial north, were less successful at school. What was noteworthy was that immigrant girls had better results than immigrant boys. There was clearly a specific problem in how North African boys related to the school system and consequently how this shaped their professional trajectory. Again, I'd like to stress that this was all blindingly obvious; it was spelled out in black and white. And what have we learned? Nothing, it seems. I was surprised to recently read in the papers that these two phenomena have only just been 'discovered'. As if our alleged

ignorance was the explanation for the failure of the school system to adequately respond to new migratory groups. The fact that anything related to ethnic origin was swept under the carpet whenever there were any issues with young people in France also meant that for several decades it was impossible measure the extent of the phenomenon, despite the fact that everyone was well aware of it. And everyone knows it is impossible to tackle something that is not measured.

A brick wall up built up against any kind of social innovation

As Director of the French Ministry of Public Building and Works in the same area of Valenciennes, I was involved in one of the first social housing renovation projects in the 1970s. The housing estates were renovated, the rents were raised and there was increased support for poor families. There were a lot of them in the region, many of whom had been hit hard by the industrial crisis and the closing of mines. I was immediately struck by the absurdity of the system. Young unemployed people lying around while their parents' apartments were being renovated. Wasn't there something else that could be done? Wasn't this an opportunity for families to be involved in renovating their own homes while at the same time getting some professional training? I was told there was no way this could work. How could they get professionals to work with inexperienced people? And who would be responsible if there was a workplace accident? Etc, etc... It was easy to see how a brick wall up had been built up against any kind of social innovation. The welfare state was on auto pilot – until it couldn't bear the cost anymore.

Let's skip a few years. In the early eighties, I was in charge of dealing with the large number of French companies active in Algeria, following sectoral agreements signed between the two countries. In exchange for reevaluating the price of Algerian gas – the 'fair price' to be paid for commodities (I've never understood how exactly this is determined) – one of François Mitterrand's 101 proposals – the two countries took a rather innovative approach and decided to seek more balanced economic trade. French companies undertook massive housing construction projects in Algeria. An idea immediately came to mind: this was a perfect opportunity to train Algerian construction workers in France. The wheel had turned and France had engaged in a policy of incentivising migrant workers to return to their countries. I was set on my goal! But I also knew that for families living in France, ties with their home countries were strained and that going back there represented a risk. My suggestion was that returning could be on a provisional basis. I was told that this was out of the question – use it or lose it: whoever goes back to their home country loses their residence. Again, this represented yet another missed opportunity.

The Caracas Principles

In 1991, I became the director of an international foundation, the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind (FPH). One of the questions that came up time and time again was how to bring about change in poor neighbourhoods, whether they be remote suburban areas in France or informal settlements in their various forms in the Global South: Indonesian *kampungs*, Cameroonian slums, Brazilian *favelas*, Venezuelan *barrios*. What would it take for public authorities to respond positively to the need for change rather than just attempting to demolish them, to symbolically remove the poor from the urban space (and the latter were perfectly aware of this attempt to make them 'disappear')? This question was the subject of an international conference, in collaboration with the Venezuelan government, which brought together those engaged in these issues from various countries around the world. One day of discussion was enough for answers to emerge. The ways in which to ensure public policies are successful are the same everywhere, and can be summarised in 6 principles (the 'Caracas Principles'):

1. Learn to recognise, foster and stimulate local dynamics, which are often informal, sometimes unorthodox, but which are always anchored in home-grown ideas, dynamics which have little to do with enumerating the countless registered associations and organisations that they are often reduced to;

2. Acknowledge that residents have a 'right to reside', which includes a possibility for the second generation to live nearby, in order not to disturb the still-fragile roots;
3. Ensure residents' voices are heard and encourage different kinds of relationships between public authorities and citizens, acknowledging the profound diversity present in areas often lumped together as one group;
4. Reform public policies and anchor them in the local, so that residents of these areas have people that can talk with them about all their problems;
5. Synchronise administrative and political processes with social processes, from which they are, by and large, disconnected;
6. Ensure funding that would allow communities and public authorities to join forces and resources.

This is all evident my dear Watson! As evident as they may be, these principles are hard to implement without the commitment and long-term determination of public authorities to change their ways. One has only to consider the implications of principle 5. People living in these deprived areas – and young people in particular – have two outlooks: the very short term – urgency, enthusiasm and informality – and the the very long term – integration into society. Administrative and political time-frames occur between these two extremes: the annual budget (as when locals are told to 'submit a request for funding that will be considered at the next budget') and terms of office. If social time-frames are supposed to adapt to administrative and political time-frames, we will be waiting a long time to see any sign of change. In the early nineties, when the French 'urban policy' – designed to tackle problems that occur in deprived neighbourhoods – was in full swing and where many councils were hiring 'neighbourhood project managers', the Caracas principles had their hour of fame, and I was often asked to talk about them. But although it didn't take long for the people with whom I met to be convinced of the relevance of these principles, these people generally had little influence on local institutions, employed under temporary contracts which could easily disappear from under them, and were not in a position to have any real influence on the political machinery. They could only observe how ill-adapted the institutions and financial structures were to implementing these principles. Once again, they wanted to tackle a profoundly new situation without doing anything to change the over-ruling administrative processes. This became obvious not long afterwards when I was taking part in evaluating the so-called 'urban policy' in the Paris region: the psychological and social profile of young project managers was not that different from that of young aid workers (*coopérants*) working in Africa. This was not exactly surprising: in only a few years, certain areas of our cities had become more foreign than villages lost in the sticks.

Rights isolate, responsibilities integrate

In 1993, I published *Mission possible*. It included a chapter with a provocative title – 'Do the rich still need the poor?' What I meant by this was that new forms of poverty or exclusion were not explained by the logic of exploitation. Because, I believe, exploitation still represents a relationship, whereas mutual ignorance does not. And I protested against social integration by the sole path of rights, without providing any means to ensure this approach actually resulted in integration. I had a saying: rights isolate, responsibilities integrate. This was obviously not very politically correct. But I guessed that young people would turn toward those that would integrate them in something that required strict allegiance such as gangs and religion. Unfortunately, it turned out I was right.

In 1994, the Minister of Housing gave me the new, exciting adventure of evaluating France's social housing renovation policy. I set up ten working groups in ten cities, bringing together all stakeholders. Once again, it didn't take long for everyone to agree on what was required: most of the renovation work, which was extremely costly, involved insulating and improving the buildings – obviously a respectable undertaking but with little relevance to the locals' priorities – which were often youth and employment. The dissonance was so great that when those in charge of social housing described the sincere efforts they had made to confer with the residents, there were times when the latter were sincerely baffled as to what these 'efforts' had been. And, as was the case ten

years earlier, there was still no attempt to get residents and public authorities to work together, although it had been done in some cases through local service centres (*régies de quartier*). The objective behind social housing renovation was to reduce heating costs and to create jobs in construction, not to ensure the actions of public authorities were socially relevant. We illustrated that a project's success relied more on the participative processes around a project's conception rather than the project's content. So I suggested to the Ministry officials that the selection process for the projects to be funded should be based on that criteria. The response I got was that priority would be given to projects whose paperwork was already in order, which would allow the funds to be quickly distributed and the government's quantitative goals to be met. That was the end of the evaluation. I threw in the towel.

In the 2000s, an increasing number of studies were being carried out. The question of the role played by school again became the predominant focus. It made me think of some interesting research carried out by a young sociologist illustrating the identity vacuum of young immigrants from France's former colonies. Neither school nor family told them their own story, nor gave them a political explanation for their social exclusion. It was left to the propagators of Saudi Wahhabism to tell them about Islam. We know what happened next. Maybe it's not too late to finally put the Caracas principles into action. We can't rewrite history, but understanding it might help us find new answers.

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Further reading:

Paulette and Pierre Calame, *Les travailleurs étrangers en France*, Éditions ouvrières, 1969
Pierre Calame, *Mission Possible*, 1993, reprinted by ECLM, 2003
A number of books by the same author can be downloaded from the Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer website: http://apps.eclm.fr/Scrutari?q=calame
La réhabilitation des quartiers dégradés. Déclaration de Caracas, Coll., ECLM, 1992
Malika MANSOURI, *Révoltes intimes et collectives : Les adolescents français, descendants d'ex-colonisés algériens, dans les "émeutes" de 2005*, Université Paris 13