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Converting ordinary resistance into collective action: visibility struggles, discreet antiracist mobilizations and intermediation work in the French banlieues

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Working-class neighborhoods are often seen as political deserts, but can one identify discreet mobilizations that might prefigure broader movements? During fieldwork in poor urban areas in France, we observed different ways of opposing the everyday injustices of discrimination. These practices differ from the infrapolitics analyzed by James Scott: the actors manifest forms of publicization closer to what Asef Bayat calls “the art of presence”. The article starts out from analysis of these non-organized practices and then examines the processes that enable feelings of injustice to be converted into more structured collective actions. Based on ethnographic studies in three working-class neighborhoods in France over three years, the investigation highlights the conditions of emergence and publicization of collective action by focusing on the role of intermediaries and re-placing discreet mobilizations in their institutional context of emergence.

Keywords: politicization; feeling of injustice; collective action; ethno-racial and religious discrimination; working-class neighborhoods; France.

1. Introduction

Among the enigmas that the social sciences face is “the affinity between a structurally dominated position and recourse to less institutionalized, less official ways of speaking out” (Neveu, 2002, p. 20). James Scott showed that in the rural communities of South-East Asia, peasants are not able to conduct overt, organized political activity against landowners (Scott, 1985, 1990). For Scott, the opposition of subordinate groups is often expressed through “infrapolitics”. This refers to forms of “quiet” resistance: if critiques are expressed, they are not necessarily shared in public. They are indeed hardly visible, even to researchers, unless they practice ethnographic research and even participant observation, which can give access to these discreet activities and viewpoints on the social and political world (Carrel, 2022). Scott’s work has shed a new light on the discreet and ordinary forms of resistance: far from being anecdotal, they allow one to grasp the social conditions of collective mobilization of subordinate groups.

In a long period of fieldwork in three working-class neighborhoods in France, we observed recurrent forms of opposition to the discrimination suffered by the inhabitants. These practices differ from the “quiet resistance” described by Scott: they are closer to an “art of presence” (Bayat, 1997, 2009). Reflecting on a model of change in the Middle East, the sociologist Asef Bayat identifies – alongside *loyalty* to the system in place and the wish to *exit* – latent forms of *voice* “marked by quiet, atomized, and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action” (1997, p. 7). In the neighborhoods he studies, the public space “serves as the only locus of collective expression” (p. 15). It is also a space where the identities of marginalized groups are forged. For Bayat, this art of presence is not so much a “defensive” resistance as a set of “offensive” practices aimed at improving the lives of the poorest. In the case of widely shared practices, these forms of quiet and non-coordinated activism may nonetheless induce change in power and the dominant norms: “their sheer cumulative numbers transform them into a potential social force” (p. 8). Being non-organized, they can reduce the costs of engagement in social movements in unfavorable or repressive political and social contexts. Is what goes for relatively authoritarian contexts also valid in a liberal-democratic context like France?

These ordinary forms of resistance are not necessarily opposed to more organized modes of action such as campaigning through associations or parties. Some political scientists argue for a broader conception of contentious action: this would mean examining the articulations between these ordinary practices and social movements “to understand how and why, in the world of possibilities, the shift from one to the other takes place” (Fillieule & Bennani-Chraïbi, 2003, p. 74). While working-class neighborhoods – confronted in France with massive abstention and the decline of political parties – are often presented as political deserts, can one identify discreet mobilizations that might prefigure larger movements?

This article examines two forms of discreet mobilization – the first more spontaneous and individual, the second more coordinated – and the connections between them. By following the trajectories of engagement of people navigating from one to the other, we shall see that discretion does not necessarily lie where one thinks. While individual opposition to the authorities may be visible, even disruptive, the mobilization of minority groups is more discreet when it is collective. Our analysis thus aims to question the conditions of emergence and publicization of social movements involving minorities that are both disqualified and remote from politics. Our hypothesis is that the French national context, which “does not recognize racial or ethnic groups (...) as legitimate social or political categories” (Lieberman, 2001), and local contexts that are more or less hostile to these demands, play an important role in the possibility of publicizing the problem of systemic discrimination and therefore in the development of these mobilizations involving minorities. In particular, the “hostile environment” (Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, Talpin, 2022) toward minority

demands and identities – where class and religion often intermingle due to the racialization of French Muslims (Galonnier, 2015) – translates into the disqualification of open and visible forms of antiracist engagement. While Scott emphasized how coercion and physical forms of repression were central in the emergence of infrapolitical rather than head-on forms of mobilization, in the French case, the postcolonial legacy makes the symbolic disqualification of minority claims a central factor of the variation of the publicity of these forms of resistance (Haapajärvi, 2022).

This article is based on fieldwork in three working-class neighborhoods in France characterized by spatial concentration of ethno-racial minorities:¹ the Le Pile neighborhood in Roubaix, in the Lille conurbation; the Pasteur neighborhood in Villepinte, near Paris; and the Grand-Ile neighborhood in Vaulx-en-Velin, in the Lyon conurbation. To grasp the effect of the institutional contexts, we chose to diversify the case studies, in terms of both political complexion and investment in anti-discrimination actions. In Vaulx-en-Velin, the socialist council seems very committed to anti-discrimination issues. Roubaix also showed a strong political will on these questions when the council was run by a socialist and ecologist majority but this declined after the town swung to the right in 2014. Villepinte, also run by the right, has never formulated a policy on a subject judged too “risky” by the council.

For each neighborhood, we conducted a survey at two levels. The first consisted of life history interviews with a diversified sample of inhabitants of French nationality belonging to different minority groups (mostly from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey and French overseas territories). They were recruited by snowball sampling – a total of 100 interviews for these three neighborhoods, anonymized and analyzed with the aid of Atlas.ti software. The second level is that of ethnographic observation of public policies and local mobilizations aimed at fighting racism and discrimination, especially against young people, so as to grasp the conditions of conversion of feelings of injustice into involvement in associations. In the town of Vaulx-en-Velin, the survey was also based on participatory research on some forty young people connected to a community center, some of whom had taken part in the riots that take place on July 14 every year.² This survey with peers made it possible to grasp the diversity of registers (micro-aggressions, verbal jousting, provocations, etc.) that are used to manifest the exaggerated attention of the police to young people from minorities. While young people’s resistance to these everyday micro-conflicts (Essed, 1991) sometimes takes very visible forms, the feelings of injustice from which they spring cannot readily be expressed in the public space. These results converge with surveys conducted in a more traditionally ethnographic way. The specificity of participatory research mediated by peers and carried out over a long period of time is precisely that it provides conditions favorable to the publicization of situations and feelings of injustice (Payet, 2011).

The article first examines the spontaneous forms of infrapolitical resistance to stigmatization and discrimination that may be expressed by the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods, through wearing a tracksuit, artistic practice, or riotous violence. It then seeks to understand how and under what conditions the shift occurs to more organized forms of struggle against racism and discrimination. While the intermediaries who try to convert these feelings of injustice into coordinated collective action play an important role, we show, finally, that the publicization of these mobilizations encounters a structure of opportunities that is not favorable to critical utterances about institutional discrimination.³

1. Asserting one’s presence in the public space

The public space is often analyzed as a site of sociability and civility, open to diversity and otherness (Lofland, 1998). It can also be a privileged space for grassroots activism that can “involve the urban poor in a collective, open, and highly audible campaign” (Bayat, 1997, p. 6). These practices

of daily life are distinguished from social movements by their spontaneous, non-organized character and the absence of a leader or an explicit ideology (Sainsaulieu, 2020). In the urban contexts that we studied, the public space thus becomes the arena of spontaneous forms of opposition to public authorities perceived as hostile to minority groups and identities.

1.1. *Clothing and cultural practices as a reversal of the stigma*

A common response to discrimination is to try to invisibilize the stigma to make life easier (Talpin et al., 2021). This is what Erving Goffman (1963) calls “disidentifiers”. Skin color, for example, can be perceived differently depending on how people dress, style their hair, use skin lightening creams, or choose to wear glasses to look more respectable. Others, by contrast, choose not to submit to the dominant norms. Such reversal of stigma appears as a strategy of identity affirmation which here takes place in public spaces.

This is the case, for example, for Saïd, aged 18, unemployed, French of Algerian origin, who lives in Vaulx-en-Velin, and wants to manifest his membership of the “street culture” by wearing a tracksuit. He has a large number of them and is particularly fond of the “vintage” models worn by the young rioters from the neighborhood in the 1990s. Even though it has now been democratized among all adolescents, the tracksuit (combined with the use of caps and hoodies) is indeed an emblem of the “street culture” and, beyond that, a marker of minority identity. While some of our respondents “cope” with discrimination by adopting a more conventional look to distance themselves from such racialized identity, others like Saïd refuse to submit to this norm of invisibility of minority identities in the public space. The wearing of tracksuits can thus be compared to that of the zoot suit popularized in the United States by Afro-American jazz musicians in the 1930s. “While the suit itself was not created and worn as a direct political statement, the language and culture of zoot suiters emphasized ethnic identity and rejected subservience” (Kelley, 1993, p. 87-88). The fact that he is commonly stigmatized as a “youth from the *banlieue*” (especially because of his choice of clothing) and has been confronted with discrimination outside his neighborhood, led him to develop reflexivity and brandish the stigma as a form of affirmation of his group membership. He is nonetheless convinced that this attribute exposes him to discrimination by the police.

Sociologist: Why do the police stop and check you?

Saïd: The tracksuit does it. Then there’s my face, but it’s more the tracksuit that does it. A white guy in a tracksuit gets stopped, not an Arab in a shirt.⁴

This form of “quiet activism”, or ordinary form of opposition to the norm, is also manifested by Aya, age 27, of Ivorian origin, living in Villepinte. She has a Master’s in Law and worked in highly qualified posts in several banks and insurance companies before deciding to retrain in the medical sector. As a student in nursing college, she hesitated for a long time to wear an Islamic veil. She first opted for a simple headband before daring to wear a more concealing veil. She sees this choice of clothing as a form of resistance to the dominant norms.⁵ It seems to her all the more feasible since the colored scarf and loose clothes that she wears can be assimilated to a fashion “look”. The knowledge that employers in her sector cannot easily find enough candidates, and her good grades, have also confirmed her in this choice:

When I’ve got my diploma, I shall wear a veil to my interviews. Because I know they’ll be desperate: they need staff and they can’t afford to reject me just for a veil when I’ve got good grades in my course. The way I wear it, it doesn’t seem as if I were Muslim, in fact! When the veil comes across as a “look”, it’s more accepted.

These respondents mention no desire to set an example: for Aya, for instance, it is a matter of affirming to the rest of the world that one can be at the same time pious and perfectly integrated in French society (Göle, 2013). In doing so, these forms of self-affirmation help to produce what the authorities denounce and try to invisibilize: minority identities (especially religious ones). The effect

of injunctions to invisibility is thus largely counterproductive: these identities are made even more salient when people choose to resist by appropriating the stigma.

Whether reflexive or more spontaneous, these strategies are commonplace in a context where visibility, notably that of Islam, is increasingly defined as a problem and combated by the French authorities (Hajjat, Mohammed, 2021). Thus, in Roubaix, many urban renovation projects initiated by the right-wing council have aimed at changing the image of some neighborhoods by moving or closing ethnic shops described as a “threat” to the city in the urban planning documents. The same process is observed in left-wing-run towns like Vaulx-en-Velin. Although their economic success is based on a fine adaptation to the expectations of their clientele, the socialist council decided to close half of these shops, seen as a symptom of “withdrawal into communitarianism” (Zouari, 2018). It can be noted incidentally that the political complexion of the town council makes little difference, the negative perception of ethnic shops and Islam being largely shared in French society and in particular among the political elites.

Artistic expression is another form of discreet but visible protest that is expressed through “diverted” uses or forms of appropriation of urban public spaces (Kelley, 1993). Some practices – especially around hip-hop, rap or graffiti – can constitute a way to make visible minority identities, or even symbolic weapons to respond to discrimination (Aidi, 2014; Marche, 2012; Dabène, 2020); as Antoine, a 40-year-old graffiti artist who lives in Vaulx-en-Velin, put it:

I think that the energy of the people always breaks through in the artistic world. The greatest artistic movements of the last century are linked to the liberation of black people in the United States. Music is already a struggle, it’s the emotion of struggle (interview by Aubras, 2019).

This is also the case for Rudy, a 40-year-old college graduate who describes himself as a hip-hop activist. He contributed to the creation of an association called Fedevo to offer activities around urban cultures.⁶ Rudy, the head of the Fedevo association, justifies his rejection of conventional forms of political action and his interest in artistic practices as a means to fight against discrimination, which led him to create Fedevo:

I was asked to be a socialist, I was asked to be a communist, and I refused. Because I am a hip-hop culture activist, and hip-hop culture activists are not politicians! [...] Hip-hop culture is a culture of transmission. It is transmitted from generation to generation, from older to younger. The aim is to allow young people to emancipate themselves. So we have always participated in programs to fight against discrimination in music, dance or graphic arts, like the graff-ik’Art project.

Other, less “quiet” practices of self-assertion are also widespread among young people embedded in a street culture and are aimed at expressing their mistrust of certain institutions such as the police.

1.2. *Occupying the street*

Although they are characterized by more ethnic diversity, a lower level of violence, and a greater presence of public services, the working-class neighborhoods studied in France present several features in common with the inner cities studied by Elijah Anderson in his work on street culture in Philadelphia (Anderson, 1999). Our survey confirms in particular the scale of institutional discrimination: almost two thirds of the people we interviewed reported at least one discriminatory treatment by institutions over their lifetime, a third of them reporting unequal treatment by the police (Talpin et al., 2021)⁷. Faced with the pressure of this institutional control, intensive occupation of public spaces can then constitute a form of resistance to police practices aimed at clearing them out.

Thus, among the young people interviewed in the participatory research project in Vaulx-en-Velin, almost half choose to react to the excessive attention of police officers and the micro-aggressions that pervade interactions with them, through actions contesting control of the public space with the police. These range from graffiti targeting certain police officers to insults and stone-

throwing, to taking part in riots. This form of street politics makes public spaces the theater of their opposition to the police and an arena of resistance to discriminatory identity checks and racial profiling, as underscored by Méhdi, an 18-year-old high-school student:

We often see police in the neighborhood. When we see them, we provoke them a bit. Because they often stop people just because of the way they look. And if people riot, it's for a good reason.

As Bastille Day, July 14, draws nearer, tensions mount on both sides and taking part in riots, in which trashcans and cars are set on fire, fireworks are thrown, and there are confrontations with the police, has become a ritual for some teenagers in Vaulx-en-Velin. Kamal, for example, aged 20, seeking training, describes very hostile relations with the police, while stressing the ludic dimension of the riots:

The riots are like a game: when you're little, aged 12 or so, you go where the riots are and wait for the police to chase you.

Beyond the ludic expression of violence, most researchers nonetheless emphasize the political significance of the riots, expressing spontaneous forms of demands for recognition and justice of working-class youth (Jobard, 2014). In the words of the high-school student quoted above, "If people riot, it's for a good reason." For sociologist Robert Castel (2006), it is the discrepancy between a paper citizenship and the reality of their everyday experience – a denial of citizenship, notably through persistent identity checks which are potentially dangerous to the point of ending in death – that helps to explain the behavior of the thousands of young rioters who, in fall 2005, expressed their anger after the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré in Clichy-sous-Bois in the banlieue of Paris.⁸

For young people cut off from politics and deprived of access to the public space, these protest actions are a way of expressing their resentment in the face of institutions that treat them as second-class citizens (Kokoreff, 2009). Several interviewees thus described taking part in the urban revolts as a way of "settling scores" with the police. That was the case with this man in his forties, now a caretaker, who took part in the riots of 1990 in Vaulx-en-Velin, which broke out after the death in Le Mas du Taureau neighborhood of Thomas Claudio, a young man killed by a police vehicle:

The riots of 1990 were for a good cause, for Thomas Claudio. I was 15. There was anger, it was just too much, there was no work, it was the poorest town in France. That's why it broke out, it all hung together, young people's anger.

Street politics goes beyond these more violent forms of confrontation such as the riots or urban revolts. For instance, in the major French conurbations,⁹ celebrating the victories of the Algerian national football team in the African Cup of Nations or the World Cup is another form of this street politics. For young people from the minorities, the scenes of jubilation observed in Roubaix for example are an opportunity to defy the police and occupy a public space – and in particular the town center – where they are often seen as *persona non grata*. In the course of these festive celebrations, "the screeches of car tires and the front wheels of scooters are constantly heard just next to the police ranks. (...) It is hard not to think that this explosion of exuberance is also a thumbing of the nose to the endless identity checks inflicted on young people in working-class neighborhoods" (Cos, Talpin, 2014, p. 52). While some observers – notably the local press – see this as the expression of anarchic or "communitarian" logics, these gatherings can also be seen as forms of identity affirmation. At the time, when the French Senate had just voted to ban the display of foreign flags at civil weddings in town halls, waving the flag of a former French colony in public, even sixty years after independence, has a political significance when the loyalty to France and membership of the French nation of these descendants of postcolonial immigration are frequently questioned.

Other forms of appropriation of the public space have been observed, like the improvised swimming pools that enliven the public spaces of working-class neighborhoods during the summer. These may also be indirect responses to the experience of discrimination. That is what is explained

by Saïd (already mentioned above) who, with his friends, bought a second-hand inflatable pool. This decision followed an experience of discrimination at the entrance to a public pool in Lyon.

One day – that really shocked me – I was 13 and my mother let me go to a swimming pool downtown with my mates. They wouldn't let us in. The security man said, "Where are you from?" "We're from Vaulx-en-Velin, there's no pool there." He replies "Of course not. You burn down your swimming pools!" There isn't even a swimming pool in Vaulx, what are we supposed to burn down? I think this must be the only town in France with no swimming pool, honestly, there's nothing! (interview by Aubras, 2019).

Compared with riots or celebrations of sports events, which are less directly linked to political demands, the political significance here seems explicit: these practices of occupation of public space are a way of denouncing the lack of public amenities in some working-class neighborhoods and the discrimination experienced by their inhabitants in accessing some services. Moreover, while the riots are characterized by spontaneity and the absence of clearly defined leaders, these informal practices are based on a rigorous collective organization: hygiene and safety rules, opening hours, etc. They are also structured around a handful of senior leaders well known in the neighborhood, wanting to enjoy urban amenities in their neighborhood while enabling the youngest to avoid the humiliating or discriminatory behaviors they may have experienced in downtown Lyon. This conclusion is in line with the findings of urban sociology, which has shown how working-class neighborhoods could be seen as "safe spaces" for their residents.¹⁰

Our research shows that, whether based on artistic creation or on more destructive behaviors, these "arts of presence" deployed in urban public spaces constitute a way of manifesting anger at racism and discrimination, echoing the confrontational strategies identified by Michèle Lamont and her team (Lamont et al., 2016). These actions can be undertaken jointly by several people, but they are rarely based on a structured organization. They are often regarded as "apolitical", but they sometimes take on a political meaning for the actors themselves, expressing a feeling of injustice. It is therefore the politicization of these ordinary practices that remains discreet, or even invisible. American historian Robin D. G. Kelley has emphasized the importance of this "culture of opposition" and the infrapolitical practices of the African-American communities to combat racism in the Jim Crow South. Following J. C. Scott, he argues that "the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts (...) often inform organized political movements. (...) The political history of oppressed people cannot be understood without reference to infrapolitics. (...) Those actions all reflect, to varying degrees, larger political struggles" (1993, p. 77-78). Hisham Aidi, another prominent scholar on these issues, is also interested in how musical practices like hip-hop are used all over the world by Muslim youth "to protest, proclaim identity, build community, and interpret the world" (2014, p. xxvi). These works, however, leave in the shadows the question of how this oppositional culture which gives visibility to minority identities (whether racial or religious) concretely fuels political struggles against discrimination. Beyond the consolidation of a collective consciousness, how and under what conditions can the transition from infrapolitics to more organized practices take place?

2. Structuring and publicizing protest: the role of the intermediaries

How can subaltern groups who assert their presence in urban public spaces rise to a more "public" form of expression i.e., one that is legitimate and capable of being discussed in the public space in Habermas's sense? The articulation between the urban public space and the public political sphere is not automatic, nor is the shift to organized collective action. It is true that "public spaces can act as sites of emergence and exposure of social problems (...). They make perceptible the phenomena that can feed a public debate" (Tonnelat, 2016). But the shift into action and the publicization of feelings of injustice cannot occur solely through the development of street politics. It may require collective

organization, which takes shape through processes of “inquiry”, formulation of demands, claims aimed at feeding public discussion and the search for solutions to resolve the social problem (Dewey, 2006 [1927]). We will see that certain intermediaries – in particular professional youth workers or organizers in associations – play a crucial role in converting street politics into arguments and claims. Their role of intermediation is facilitated when they are strongly rooted in the neighborhoods where they intervene, and when they themselves originate from the working classes and minorities subject to discrimination and therefore have the “street credibility” required for mobilization. These sociological characteristics attenuate the residents’ distrust of associations and generate belief in the capacity of collective action to produce change (Gamson, 1992). Their action can then favor the learning of political competences and the transformation of practices seen as “sources of disorder, fixation or deviance” into “civilities, in other words practices that are mastered, distinguished and distanced in the sense that Elias gives them” (Vulbeau, 2002, p. 145 and 49). These actors thus fulfill an ambivalent role, between politicization of anger and channeling of social conflictuality.

2.1. Who are the intermediaries?

While the historic French antiracist associations have often functioned on the model of a “conscience constituency”, and were mostly led by middle-class white people, a new generation has emerged in the last twenty years, embodying a new spirit of antiracist organizing in France. Thus, more recently created collectives mainly bring together “potential beneficiaries” directly concerned by the injustices to be combated (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Beyond the most renowned figures such as Assa Traoré, antiracist collectives have been created in many urban neighborhoods by minorities who had a hard time finding a place in traditional associations.

The collectives we studied have the common feature of being led by and mobilizing mainly actors belonging to the ethno-racial minorities, who have often gone through experiences of discrimination that have triggered their desire to become activists. In this case the commitment is personalized. One example is Laëtitia Nonone in Villepinte, of Martinican and Moroccan origin. The imprisonment of her younger brother was the event that triggered a commitment to which she was otherwise little disposed. Her personal history is marked by traumas, one linked to her father, a policeman, and the other to her imprisoned younger brother. When she was 14, her father was imprisoned after dramatic events. Laëtitia says she was then “in revolt” and began a career of delinquency until she met a judge who persuaded her to change her life. A second drama occurred ten years later, when her brother was sent to prison. Her desire to stop the escalation of tensions between young people and the police led her to create the Association Zonzon 93.

In Vaulx-en-Velin, the trajectory of Pierre-Didier Tchétché-Apéa, the son of a primary teacher of Ivorian origin, illustrates the investment of highly qualified young people – he has a law degree – in associations in working-class neighborhoods. He was an activist from a very young age and became one of the spokespersons of the Comité Thomas Claudio, named after a young man who died in Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990. His cultural capital and upward trajectory combine with his familial political socialization to nurture his personal commitment:

I’ve been marked by events in Africa, especially in Côte d’Ivoire. In my family there are great-uncles, aunts, great-aunts who were in movements resisting French neo-colonialism. And that has always remained in my memory. Our parents told us all about it.

This familial socialization encouraged him – after the shock of the death of a young man at the hands of the police – to create, with other young people in the town, the Agora association, and later to go into politics. This long-term commitment, structured around the question of racism and working-class neighborhoods, also underlies the choice of his professional career in the French urban policy targeting disadvantaged neighborhoods – called “Politique de la ville”, seen as the political answer to riots and urban revolts since the 1980s –, while maintaining extensive networks of activists

and friends in the neighborhood where he grew up. A similar professional trajectory led Laëtitia Nonone to become a project manager in charge of crime prevention in Stains, a town in Seine-Saint-Denis, while preserving her networks of friends and activists in Villepinte. This membership of ethno-racial minorities and these deep roots in the neighborhood characterize the leaders of the PoliCité collective in Vaulx-en-Velin and the *Collectif de lutte contre les discriminations* and the *Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse* (ANRJ) in Roubaix, associations strongly implanted in the working-class neighborhoods of these two towns.

2.2. Identification and street credibility

The sociology of social movements has highlighted the role of leaders in the dynamics of mobilization and shown how their profiles and resources predispose them to this task. Less attention has been paid to their function as role models, however. In non-profits or collectives fighting against discrimination, ethno-racial or religious identification plays an important role: it is not the same thing to become involved in a collective run by someone directly affected by the problem or someone who is not.

Whereas the historic French antiracist associations offer little place for personal narratives and storytelling, the experience of racism and discrimination undergone by the leaders of these collectives are often not only a basis for commitment but also a major ingredient in their discourse on injustice, which touches other people who recognize themselves in these accounts. Public commitment is then based on a “personalized political culture” (Lichterman, 1996). For Laëtitia Nonone, every public speech she makes is an occasion to appeal to mobilization against injustices based on her personal history. The following example illustrates these processes of identification in commitment trajectories. Cyntia, aged 19, of West Indian and Ivorian origin, who lives in Villepinte, describes how important this encounter was in leading her to participate.

At the start it was Laëtitia’s own story that touched me! I had never met anyone like me who had had the determination to go as far as creating an association. She was my first model, a black woman, like me, one of the people who have most succeeded.

These processes of identification are also true for Nora, a youth coordinator at the Georges-Lévy community center in Vaulx-en-Velin, who started the PoliCité project: her trajectory, her origins and her mobilizing work favor the involvement of young people. Now in her fifties, raised in an activist family, holding several degrees, Nora was socialized into politics by “a father passionate about current events and touched by all the movements and great revolutions that have shaken the planet”. Her interest in politics is expressed in an “activist” conception of her job, oriented toward youth empowerment. A number of young people identify strongly with her, and many of them have known her from childhood. One of them is Marwan, a student of Algerian origin, who hints at the importance of processes of ethno-racial identification and the “bond of proximity” to explain his commitment:

There’s the trust that comes from the long time she has been at the association. She knows how to talk to young people and convince them. And if she feels the same as we do about discrimination, there’s an identification effect that brings us together.

If the collectives we studied manage to mobilize inhabitants whom political organizations can barely reach, this is also because these intermediaries with whom people identify have strong social connections in the neighborhoods where they intervene. The mobilization is driven by people one knows, which removes the suspicion that weighs on associations and organizers coming from outside the neighborhood.¹¹ These dynamics are here catalyzed by the presence of intermediaries themselves belonging to the minorities and capable of channeling the feelings of injustice expressed through riots and the “arts of presence”.

2.3. From denial of citizenship to empowerment as a citizen

These intermediaries play an essential role in the shift to more organized forms of collective action. The discussions that they encourage may accompany the move from “I” to “we” and the construction of a “they” seen as responsible for these injustices. In other words, the encounter with these intermediaries can encourage forms of politicization, when individuals become aware that the problem they face is a collective, structural phenomenon that can be denounced through collective action (Eliasoph, 1998). Engagement can then lead individuals to claim their citizenship and feel authorized to speak out, moving “from experience of racism to its recognition as discrimination” (Eberhard, 2010).

This is illustrated by the trajectory of Saïd, who, through wearing a tracksuit and practicing the “arts of presence”, protested the way young people from working-class neighborhoods are treated by the institutions (see above). With no school qualifications, he is from an activist family and was himself politicized through regular participation at the community center. In contrast to the associations studied by Nina Eliasoph (1998), this community center is a real hub of politicization, through action research as PoliCité (a project to understand tensions between police and young people), collective discussions and youth empowerment workshops run by Nora. Saïd’s involvement in the participatory research project PoliCité, for which he conducted sociological interviews, made him aware of the scale of institutional discrimination in French society. He then questioned himself, with his friends, about ways of producing social change. His spontaneous reaction was to present the riots as a way of protesting police behavior: “Burn everything down!” In inviting the young people to reflect on the “means available to citizens in a democracy to assert their rights,” Nora helped them to identify other options, including recourse to law and organized collective action. Convinced that engagement can provide the levers of social change, but that the people who engage in a cause must also derive some symbolic rewards from it, Nora then conceived the status of “leader” to divert young people from violent modes of action. The aim is to channel their feelings of injustice and incite them to “act without violence”:

I thought up this status [of leader] as something to recognize their work and raise their self-esteem, as a distinction. They mustn’t take part in riots and must spread the message that riots are counterproductive and just turn against the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods. They have to agree to spread the idea that we must act without violence. In the past the only way they thought they could act to change things was through violence.

Nora’s advice would clearly have been received differently – potentially as paternalistic – if she had not been seen positively by the teenagers, who have a built a relationship of trust with her based on mutual identification. This work of “civilizing” the forms of protest action is then reproduced by the members of PoliCité with their peers. Enabling the young people of their neighborhood to discover other ways of getting their voices heard becomes the guiding principle of the work of consciousness-raising performed in schools and in their work as leaders in the community center.

The Association Zonzon 93 similarly performs a valorization of the notions of “citizen” and “citizenship”. The name Kiwitas, for example, which explicitly refers to citizenship, was deliberately chosen to name their annual festival. Brandishing the category of citizen as a young person from a working-class class neighborhood can be seen as a struggle for recognition, a demand to be treated equally, while the residents we interviewed frequently expressed the feeling they had of being treated as “second-class citizens” in French society (see Beaman, 2016). They therefore claim the possibility of their full participation in society; as Khadija, a young member, says: “We aren’t just the banlieue, we are also France!”

This empowerment process can produce long-term effects of politicization and favor a shift to organized collective action – as is shown by the trajectories of the Agora activists. Initially inexperienced, they started by taking part in the riots in Le Mas du Taureau in the early 1990s, but through the creation of the Agora association they developed a set of political competences, as in the case of Pierre-Didier Tchétché-Apéa. The shock of several successive deaths linked to police interventions led him to take part in the riots of 1990, and in the informal assemblies held in the neighborhood at the time. This first experience persuaded him to try out other forms of action that were more audible for the local authorities. Through encounters with seasoned activists, he was able to overcome his initial mistrust of associations. The intergenerational transmission of activist experience is crucial in supporting trajectories of involvement and equipping new mobilizations:

When we revolted, we didn't know what an association was. So, when the need to organize emerged, what were we to do? The old people came along, they started to give us lots of advice. We discovered things, we learned to speak in public, to write leaflets. We learned it by doing it.

These examples illustrate how, in Vaulx-en-Velin or Villepinte, the shift to organized collective action can take place. This dynamic is, however, relatively rare among the residents we interviewed and is not observed in all the areas we studied. Nothing better illustrates the central role of these intermediate actors than the difficulties encountered in trying to generate organized collective actions in their absence. In Roubaix, for example, there is no real collective seeking to channel the feelings of injustice expressed by the supporters of the Algerian football team. The defense of these citizens' multi-membership generally remains discreet and euphemized as it cannot be uttered in the French public space, or only at high cost.

3. A political opportunity structure unfavorable to antiracist mobilizations

The French context is characterized both by a denial of systemic racism and by the difficulty of recognizing the legitimacy of minority mobilizations. At the national level, antiracist groups such as the Comité Adama or the Parti des Indigènes de la République have had to face symbolic attacks from the State. Embodying a radical, autonomous and critical form of antiracism, these groups generally face harsh opposition from the public authorities: stigmatization as “separatist” and “anti-French”, criminalization through judicial trials, etc. While this form of institutional and political backlash against antiracism has been observed elsewhere – critical race theory or the Black Lives Matter movement being under attack, sometimes labeled as terrorism (Oliver, 2020) – the French tradition of denying racial discrimination fuels a political opportunity structure that is closed on these issues (Beaman, Fredette, 2022). Led by minorities, the local non-profits we studied are not necessarily connected to these national radical movements, but endeavor nonetheless to highlight the systemic nature of discrimination. The development of such a discourse, however euphemized it may be, is often seen as a threat by the authorities. The transition from forms of identity affirmation made visible by the “arts of presence” to the publicization of discrimination in the public political sphere is not mechanical: it comes up against an institutional context that is not very favorable to minority movements and to critical statements on institutional discrimination, including in cities that are developing programs to combat racism and discrimination.

3.1. *Disqualification of minority struggles*

While a recent report by the Defender of Rights¹² concluded that it is “urgent to act and defend the right of citizens of all origins to full participation in French society,”¹³ the emergence of minority organizing continues to provoke many debates in France on the dangers of their supposed “communitarianism” (Haapajarvi, 2022). Recent years have even seen a growing discredit of minority identities, especially those associated with the practice of Islam, in the name of the struggle against terrorism or radicalization. Alongside the category “communitarianism” (Mohammed & Talpin,

2018), another stigmatizing category has arisen in recent years – that of “proselytism”. It emerged in the context of the progression of an extensive and extra-judicial *laïcité* (secularism) since 2015, following terrorist attacks on French territory.

Although the collectives that we observed do not expend much energy on the promotion or defense of specific “identities”, or in the definition of collective identity (Lamont et al., 2016), they are often perceived as doing so, in particular by the public authorities and the media, and disqualified accordingly. This is illustrated by the case of the *Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse* (ANRJ) in Roubaix. Founded by Ali Rahni in 2005 around a group of young people in the Le Pile neighborhood, this association offers training for entry into the job market and youth organizing workshops. It belongs to a long history of youth movements in Roubaix. In fall 2017, the local press published an article¹⁴ accusing its founder of religious proselytism and indoctrination in the precepts of the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan. The article, entitled “A youth association mixes politics and religion”, complained that the ANRJ had organized a buffet on the occasion of a lecture by the Islamologist in the region; the buffet was intended to finance a journey to Spain by teenage girls from Le Pile.¹⁵ It was also alleged that, at the time of Ramadan, the association had collected food for poor people and convicts from the neighborhood. The journalist questioned the public subsidy for an association insidiously pursuing, according to him, religious objectives. Behind this controversy the journalist was taking aim at the founder of the ANRJ, Ali Rhani, close to Tariq Ramadan – historically very active in the *Collectif des musulmans de France* and *Présence musulmane*, and also an environmental activist. The association’s scheduled meeting with the local representative of the State – *the Préfet à l’égalité des chances* – was canceled after the publication of the article and it suffered financial cuts which led to the loss of its last employee. A few weeks later, the local radio station Pastel FM – on which Ali Rahni presented a program devoted to the struggle against discrimination and another with a religious vocation – also lost its subsidy from the regional government, after an attack by the far-right Rassemblement National accusing it of conducting “religious proselytism” by regularly inviting imams onto the airwaves.¹⁶

These symbolic attacks have had important repercussions for the associations, which are not only financial. They belong to a discursive context where forms of minority organization are seen as illegitimate in the French public space. Far from being limited to Roubaix, this phenomenon can be observed more generally throughout the national territory. Confronted with contradictory injunctions – which on the one hand push Muslims toward finding representatives for themselves, without, on the other hand, their being allowed to exist collectively in the public space – they may choose more disruptive forms of protest in the face of the stigmatization they undergo.

3.2. Denial of systemic discrimination

The reality of (especially ethno-racial) discrimination in France has now been established by numerous studies (Beauchemin et al., 2018). Over the last fifteen years a growing body of work has confirmed the extent of the discrimination embedded in the ordinary functioning of public institutions and policies. Yet this discrimination continues to be seen in public debate as the product of individual dispositions and of isolated acts. This depoliticizing framing can also be observed at local level. For example, in Vaulx-en-Velin, the anti-discrimination plan of the municipal government involved sensitizing actions against prejudices, for schools, associations and municipal employees, but no strategy to dismantle more systemic inequalities. While local governments run by left-wing politicians appear a little more sensitive to the issue of racial discrimination than their conservative counterparts (Bereni Epstein & Torres, 2020), progressive coalitions remain, most of the time, extremely cautious when it comes to systemic discrimination.

While they are far from constituting a unified movement, the associations and collectives that we studied at local level try to put forward an alternative framing to this depoliticizing vision. The

aim is to raise young people's awareness of the structural and systemic logics at work behind the violence, racism, or inequalities experienced by minorities. Their action nonetheless often remains discreet and non-confrontational, in the face of unfavorable political opportunities. For example, in the 2015 edition of the *Kiwitas* festival organized by Zonzon 93 on the theme of the struggle against discrimination, one could hear analyses of discrimination as a systemic phenomenon, in the context of a round table discussion bringing together associations arguing for a postcolonial reading. But one could also hear discourses from more consensual figures valorizing "individual success". Likewise, in Vaulx-en-Velin the terms "racial discrimination" or "police violence" were quickly dropped by the PoliCité collective in favor of a more euphemized terminology. As Nora explains:

So long as we talked about discrimination or racial profiling, we were blacklisted. We sidestepped it by talking about police/youth relations and that works better. You have to be discreet to advance the cause.

These forms of discreet collective action seem to be dominant in the neighborhoods that we studied in France and might appear conventional in comparison with the more offensive mobilizations that we studied in North America in particular. Despite a euphemizing framing and/or repertoires of action privileging the avoidance of confrontation with the authorities, they remain subject to great suspicion, even in local contexts where the struggle against discrimination is declared a priority.

This is illustrated by the forms of misrecognition and repression encountered by the PoliCité collective in Vaulx-en-Velin. In contrast to other mobilizations based on a conflictual repertoire of action, the members of the collective opted for deliberative practices to bring out the voices of young people in the public space (organization of debates, consensus conference, etc.). Several times, however, the representatives of the State (the Prefecture and the national police) expressed concern at the transformation of the power of young people into a countervailing force and made clear their hostility to any discourse publicly raising the question of "racial profiling".¹⁷ Having been latent for a long time, the conflict broke out openly in late 2020 with the joint organization of a day of meetings and exchanges between police officers and young people from the city. The PoliCité collective aspired to be recognized as partner by choosing the moderator of the evening debate. As the choice of this moderator – who came from a supposedly "too radical" fringe of community organizing – made the authorities fear a politicization of the exchanges, the PoliCité collective was finally informed of the definitive termination of the partnership with the State. The schools of the town were informed by the Prefecture that they were not to host any events run by the collective. Likewise, a theater company was told that its public subsidy would be cut off unless it broke off all connections with PoliCité. These reputational attacks were taken further at national level: an "alert" was issued by the Ministry of the Interior to ministries considering working with this collective on the theme of police-population relations.

These conflicts show how severely collective action is inhibited, even prevented, in the French context, when it comes to fighting institutional discrimination, even when claims are clearly euphemized and try to remain discreet. They testify to the importance of a "symbolic order" produced by society through the media and public authorities (Gusfield, 1981), which find it hard to recognize the *de facto* multiculturalism of French society today. The discretion of the mobilizations here derives from a framing strategy aimed at making acceptable questions that often appear too "sensitive". The comparison of our cases shows, however, that discretion might not be sufficient to escape these efforts at destabilization.

4. Conclusion: from politicization of feelings of injustice to their publicization

The experience of racism and discrimination arouses feelings of injustice and processes of politicization among people generally described as remote from politics. Confronted with police discrimination or stigmatization of minority identities, individuals do not remain passive: on the

contrary, they manifest their disagreement, by making urban public spaces “sites of emergence and exposure of social problems” (Tonnelat, 2016). These “arts of presence” can sometimes help to nourish public debate in deliberative and expressive forms, as is the case with the works of street artists. This informal politicization, which takes spontaneous and sometimes violent forms, can also be “translated” by intermediaries from the neighborhoods, favoring a “domestication” or a structuring of protest actions. In Roubaix, Villepinte, or Vaulx-en-Velin, as in other French towns, mobilization entrepreneurs thus provide an important labor of mobilization and politicization of young people from racial minorities. This demonstrates that local contexts matter and induce variation (Chuang & Merle, 2021). Politicization understood in this way enables individuals to “shift from ‘silence’ (self-exclusion from public debate or violent forms of expression) to the expression of a critical voice, which is a product of their position within an argued conflict” (Carrel, 2015: 194).

The publicization of social problems, initiated through an “art of presence” in urban public spaces, worked-on and strengthened through collective mobilizations, also relates to the structure of the “public arena” (Cefaï, 2016). In other words, the way in which these critical discourses and utterances may or may not be heard in the public political sphere influences the career of their publicization. In France, these critiques encounter a symbolic order that restricts the acclimatization of the French elites to the notion of ethno-racial discrimination and its transformation into a public problem. In this regard, differences of local context count for less than we hypothesized: all the collectives we studied were confronted with this barrier. The difficulties of converting feelings of injustice into durable mobilizations and the prevalence of sometimes violent forms of resistance in working-class neighborhoods can be understood in the light of this strong mistrust of the collective organization of minorities. It is therefore the repressive attitude of the local and national authorities, more than a lack of leadership (Kokoreff, 2009), that stands in the way of these mobilizations. The avoidance of politics, or the discretion of working-class mobilizations, do not spring naturally from a reified political culture, but are partly the product of power relationships and the role of the State and the public authorities in shaping the material and symbolic conditions of collective action. Most of the non-profits studied have thus faced attempts at destabilization or disqualification on the part of officials or politicians. These conflicts have inflected and often weakened their mobilizations. These collectives have nonetheless succeeded in mobilizing publics little predisposed to engagement and whose apathy, depoliticization, and individualism are endlessly deplored. There is no reason not to think that in a period of major crises, the formation of stronger and legitimate collective identities in the public space (“catness”) combined with the intense sociability of working-class neighborhoods (“netness”) might, as Charles Tilly (1976) hypothesized, provide the social conditions for less discreet forms of mobilization against social and racial inequalities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

¹Without reaching the ethnic homogeneity of the American ghettos, the French “banlieues” concentrate the most precarious populations and families of immigrant origin. More than half of the population (70% in Ile-de-France) is immigrant or of immigrant origin (Wacquant, 2008; Silverstein, 2018). Ethnic statistics being banned in France, we do not have precise data concerning the ethnic make-up of the neighborhoods we studied, apart from the overrepresentation and concentration of immigrants and descendants of immigrants from former French African colonies. The survey we conducted in these neighborhoods is part of a larger study carried out in 2014-2017 in six towns in France and three in other countries, focusing on the way the experience of discrimination shapes people’s relation to politics (Talpin et al., 2021).

²In this study called PoliCité, the sample was also constituted by snowballing, aiming to diversify the profiles of the people encountered, especially in terms of age, gender, and social status. 13 women and 32 men aged 15 to 35 with an immigration background (mostly North-African) and from areas of social housing were interviewed. The study eventually gave rise to a collective called PoliCité.

³ For a more detailed analysis on the French context, see for instance the special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* entitled “Fighting Discrimination in a Color-Blind Context: The Case of France” (2022).

⁴ Studies have shown that this unconventional look *de facto* increases, in combination with race, the likelihood of attracting the attention of the police, the look often constituting a sort of proxy for race (Jounin et al., 2015). The survey by Fabien Jobard and René Lévy on police identity checks in Paris nonetheless shows the importance of skin color in the likelihood of being stopped by the police, while also stressing the importance of a “young” style of clothing (Jobard et al., 2012).

⁵ In France, wearing a veil is legal at university or in the workplace. However, despite the law, it remains highly stigmatized in the French public space, with some people seeing it not only as a sign of oppression of women, but also as a political claim, or even as a first step in a trajectory of jihadist radicalization.

⁶ The workshops organized by the association aim to support teenagers in putting their daily experiences into words and denouncing through rap and slam the injustices they experience.

⁷ In particular, it is young people from minority backgrounds who are the object of over-attention by the police (Jobard et al. 2012).

⁸ These two adolescents from Clichy-sous-Bois had taken refuge in an electrical substation to escape a police check. Their death by electrocution provoked a wave of riots of unprecedented length all over France.

⁹ Since Algerian independence, these conurbations have been home to many immigrants from that country and their descendants.

¹⁰ On the vigilance that visiting mixed or “white” spaces entails for Black Americans, see for example Anderson, 2015.

¹¹ The attractiveness of these collectives also lies in their modes of action. Often, valorization of urban cultures, ludic activities, and collective discussion are mingled and favor the involvement of young people who define themselves as distant from politics (Balazard et al., 2022).

¹² The *Défenseur des droits* is an independent authority in charge, amongst other things, of access to rights, anti-discrimination and security ethics. It is a form of Ombudsman.

¹³ Défenseur des droits (2020). *Discriminations et origines: l'urgence d'agir*, p. 6.

¹⁴ The article in question predates the indictment of Tariq Ramadan on charges of rape, in February 2018.

¹⁵ “Le mélange des genres politico-religieux d’une association de jeunesse”, *Nord Éclair*, October 17, 2017.

¹⁶ “La région cesse de soutenir Pastel FM, accusée de prosélytisme”, *La Voix du Nord*, December 18, 2017.

¹⁷ This was the case in 2018 for the organizing of a public event aiming to reflect on ways to “move from confrontation to trust” in police-population relations. The representative of the Prefecture explicitly requested that the issue of racial profiling should not be raised. It also happened in 2019 over the strip cartoon produced by the collective, over which the representatives of the State demanded a right of veto. In both cases, the members of the collective managed to free themselves from these requests without thereby conflictualizing relations with the State.

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