

## Quotas of foreigners in social housing: a legacy of the Algerian War? Les Canibouts, Nanterre (1959–1968)

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*Was it better to concentrate or disperse Algerians during the Algerian War? In the course of the conflict, both strategies were defended in terms of police action and integration. For Algerians accommodated in standard social housing, dispersal was the preferred solution, justifying the implementation of a quota system limiting the number of foreign residents in each housing complex.*

Sonacotral, the National Construction Company for Algerian Workers, was created in August 1956<sup>1</sup> by Guy Mollet's government, at the same time as the vote on special powers in Algeria.<sup>2</sup> Sonacotral's aim was to build hostels for one particular category of immigrant workers: "FMAs" ("French Muslims from Algeria"), as they were referred to in official legal texts following the statute of 1947, which granted them French citizenship.<sup>3</sup>

Stage left, Sonacotral would provide workers in overcrowded slums with housing of hitherto undreamed-of comfort in the form of "hostel-hotels". To accomplish this, the former minister for post-war reconstruction, Eugène Claudius-Petit (1907–1989) – one of the more innovative politicians in terms of housing and urban planning – was appointed as the company's chairman. Stage right, Sonacotral was nothing other than the first element of a housing policy for "Algerian" immigrants that took shape during the war, with the dual aim of defusing nationalist influence and exercising greater control over migrants. In accordance with the wishes of the interior ministry, Sonacotral built monoethnic hostels that could be more easily subjected to specific monitoring.

With the emergence of the Fifth Republic in 1958, this social policy with regard to Algerians was extended in scope and entrusted to special representative Michel Massenet. He launched, among other measures, a *bidonville*<sup>4</sup> (slum) clearance plan in 1959, with special financing, the FAS (Social Action Fund). However, the *bidonvilles* were home to numerous families, whose numbers had increased significantly as the conflict in Algeria worsened. While accommodation for Algerians had, until then, been mainly required for single workers, the slum clearance raised a new issue for the authorities, namely how to house these Algerian families.

At this point, Sonacotral became one of the main instruments of this social policy, as it was made responsible for implementing the resettlement of *bidonville* inhabitants. It rehoused them first of all in *cités de transit*<sup>5</sup> (transition estates). These estates, very much emergency solutions, followed an approach of colonial assimilation, with an educational function: the families grouped (and monitored) in these estates were supposed to learn how to lead "civilised" urban lives. In addition to

<sup>1</sup> Société nationale de construction pour les travailleurs algériens, created by the decree of 4 August 1956.

<sup>2</sup> In March 1956, Guy Mollet's government obtained full powers to take action in Algeria without having to inform parliament.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the term "Algerians" will be used, even though, legally speaking, this term only came into use from 1962 onwards.

<sup>4</sup> See de Barros, F. 2012. "*Bidonvilles*: from colonial policy to the Algerian War", *Metropolitiques*, 21 March. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Bidonvilles-from-colonial-policy.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See Cohen, M. and David, C. 2012. "*Cités de transit*: the urban treatment of poverty during decolonisation", *Metropolitiques*, 28 March. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Cites-de-transit-the-urban.html>.

this transitional form of housing, Eugène Claudius-Petit, the “boss” of Sonacotral, and his “passionate team” of colleagues (Jacques Bador and Guy Pellennec), imbued, like him, with Christian humanism, provided subsidised public housing for Algerian families.

As the town of Nanterre (in the western suburbs of Paris) and its *bidonvilles* housed a very large Algerian population, it was both a major target of police operations and a test bed for slum clearance schemes. Naturally, therefore, it was here that Sonacotral built the first public housing project designed specifically to rehouse Algerian families. This estate was Les Canibouts, a pioneer in its field.

### A “pilot enterprise”

With this new aspect of its remit, Sonacotral entered the prestigious world of public housing and urban development. The company’s managing director presented the project at Les Canibouts at one of the first meetings on slum clearance in the Paris region, on 19 May 1959: “[Les Canibouts] is a pilot enterprise that shall serve as a model for other developments; it is also a project that is essential in order to accommodate the 400 families living in the *bidonville*.”<sup>6</sup>

The statutes of Sonacotral, a semi-public company, did not allow it to take advantage of loans for social housing. But, by taking over a failing social housing company, it was able to found its first public housing subsidiary, Logirep, in the Paris region. This was the starting point for the Sonacotral group, which subsequently developed several other “Logi-” subsidiaries in provincial cities: Logirem in Marseille, Logirel in Lyon, etc. With regard to Logirep, the French finance ministry acted promptly to grant permission for the takeover. The other institutions involved in the Nanterre site did the same, enabling measures to be implemented in a proactive way, with “regular meetings with the prefect Garnier to track the progress of the Canibouts project”.<sup>7</sup>

From this point, the “*grand ensemble*” (social housing complex) operation was under way. The overall layout was entrusted to the architect Charles-Roux. Of the 850 units planned in total, the first instalment was to include 634 public housing units, 40 Logéco-type<sup>8</sup> transition housing units and a central tower containing a hostel-hotel of 217 rooms of 11 m<sup>2</sup> each. The list of facilities provided was exemplary: parking spaces, schools and “social square metres” (neighbourhood centre, youth club, etc.). A certain degree of freedom in the floor plans and facades was permitted in order to avoid monotony. There was also variety inside, with the introduction of duplex apartments, which Jacques Bador hailed as “living architecture adapted to the needs of our time”.<sup>9</sup> The living environment itself was, however, less felicitous: located in the remote district of Petit Nanterre, the estate was still close to the *bidonvilles* (which would only slowly be cleared), sandwiched between factories on one side and the Maison Départementale – an institution built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a workhouse, prison and hospice all in one, eventually becoming a hospital – on the other.

### Sonacotral’s choice: social housing with quotas

If we are to believe those in charge,<sup>10</sup> the Canibouts project and the opportunity given to Sonacotral to build and manage social housing responded to two challenges. The first was to overcome the resistance of municipalities that refused to cede land to build workers’ hostels. These hostels were incorporated into social housing estates, which mayors did want. The second was to

<sup>6</sup> Centre des Archives Contemporaines (CAC) 760 133 art. 16. Affaires Sociales – Fonds Massenet. Organisation de l’immigration algérienne en France (translation: Organisation of Algerian immigration in France).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Guy Pellennec, 2 June 2005, Meudon (near Paris).

<sup>8</sup> *Logements économiques et familiaux* (economical family housing): housing intended for first-time home-ownership, implemented as part of the Courant Plan of 1953.

<sup>9</sup> Archives Nationales (AN) Papiers Jacques Bador 627AP/83, Texte manuscrit non daté de J. Bador, probablement pour une conférence (années 1970) (translation: Undated handwritten text by J. Bador, probably for a conference (1970s)).

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the Jacques Bador papers, we have referred to interviews with Guy Pellennec, now deceased. He joined the company in 1960 and was later appointed head of urban development for the Sonacotra group.

demonstrate to social housing landlords that Algerians were tenants like any others, who paid their rent and were “capable of enjoying the premises as good family men”, according to the expression laid down in the social housing decree of 1954.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the late 1950s, when the housing crisis was raging<sup>12</sup> and when public housing accommodated the middle classes and excluded the poorest, the project at Les Canibouts was indeed a challenge. Whether privately or municipally run, public housing bodies insisted on choosing their tenants, leaving the door open to housing shortages, and protested when the government sought to impose a maximum income level. For a long time, social housing bodies refused to rent dwellings to foreigners, and a note from the Conseil Supérieur des HLM (“Supreme Council for Social Housing”) had to be sent out in 1959 to remind them that nothing in their statutes actually excluded foreigners. The possibility of housing Algerian families was simply ignored. Up to the mid-1960s, the subject was mentioned neither in the proceedings of the congress of the Union des HLM (“Union of Social Housing Bodies”), nor in the public housing journal *HLM*, except for the following remark where “proletarians” and “North Africans” are considered together with regard to the fear of ghettoisation:

“Let us not create proletarian-only sectors. No one wants to hear about buildings reserved exclusively for large families, much less North African families. It has been said that ghettos of even the best race are worthless. [...] Closed groups are bad from a social perspective.” (Guy Houist, Dijon congress, June 1955)

The issue of ghettos, obviously central to the management of Algerians during the colonial era, was even more crucial for Sonacotral, whose remit was, by definition, to have a segregative effect. How was it possible to build public housing for Algerian families while at the same time avoiding creating ghettos?

In order to meet this contradictory requirement, Claudius-Petit’s team came up with a system of quotas and exchanges. A quota, set at 15% of all housing, would limit the proportion of housing allocated to Algerian families. The remaining 85% of dwellings would be traded with other public housing bodies in the area. However, no measures were devised to overcome the resistance that was more than likely to emanate from the other social landlords. It will not come as a surprise to learn that, in the case of Les Canibouts, the public housing offices in Paris and neighbouring towns did not manage to find room in their housing stock to accommodate “FMAs” during the trading process.

However, the principle of quotas was not new at the time, and it was not invented by Sonacotral. Previous experiments to house Algerian families had already been conducted on the basis of dispersal, using the same principle of quotas. In Paris, in 1959, the prefect Pelletier, who had managed to house families in conditions identical to families from mainland France, nonetheless stressed that housing bodies must not give the impression that “FMAs” were receiving preferential treatment compared to other poorly housed populations. In Lyon, a Logéco-type project with a view to home-ownership was opened up to Algerian families, but their share of the housing units was limited to 30% “to avoid the risk of a ghetto”.<sup>13</sup>

But with Sonacotral, the parameters of the quota system started to become fixed: the figure of 15% would be dogmatically applied and would long be used as a sort of alibi – because, although nothing actually obliged social housing companies to accommodate Algerian families, this very low limit of 15% was quickly reached by those who did agree to it. While the number of families to be accommodated was increasing, the idea of a threshold of 15% was starting to be imposed at all institutional levels (social landlords, prefecture, ministry). In addition, Sonacotral, whose creation had already saved employers the responsibility of housing their workforce, also helped to relieve social landlords of any action to assist immigrant families.

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<sup>11</sup> Decree no. 54-346 of 27 March 1954, which defined the conditions for the allocation of social housing.

<sup>12</sup> As evidenced, for example, by Abbé Pierre’s appeal of 1 February 1954.

<sup>13</sup> Lyons, A. 2006. “Des bidonvilles aux HLM. Le logement des familles algériennes en France avant l’indépendance de l’Algérie”, *Hommes et Migrations*, no. 1264, pp. 35–49.

## The effects of independence

Algeria's independence brought an end to the illusions of a "France-Africa"<sup>14</sup> that had supported the beginnings of the rehousing plan for "FMA" families. It made Algerians foreigners in France – and undesirable foreigners at that – for whom the Évian Accords maintained freedom of movement. Sonacotral, released from its exclusively Algerian remit, saw its scope of action extended to all foreigners, as well as French workers. Sonacotral became Sonacotra (National Construction Company for Workers) in July 1963. The presence of Algerians was managed in a state of contradiction. The refusal to see them settle permanently led to their marginalisation in the context of a social policy now extended to all migrants. Priorities had changed, as the completion of Les Canibouts in 1963 illustrated vividly: in addition to the scheduled 15% of Algerian families, the housing complex also became home to a majority of returnees, including some *harki*<sup>15</sup> families. Beyond the cruel twist of history that led to cohabitation with those who opposed the war, we can measure everything that separated the welcome received by repatriated populations from the treatment of Algerian families that were formerly French. The latter were only entitled to 15% of the dwellings *built for them*, while up to 30% of housing units were *reserved* for returnees in the estates completed in 1962.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of whether the discrimination was positive or negative, it is clear that "quotas" were popular at the time. It must be said that this new growth in public housing led to the proactive development of urban settlement, through the allocation of housing. By this logic, the 15% quota adopted empirically for Algerians stemmed from colonial interpretations of ghettoisation and not war-related circumstances.

Once the social policy devised for Algerians had been extended to all foreigners, the 15% quota was also to be applied to all immigrants. As a result, Portuguese migrants, of which there were many in the *bidonvilles*, for a long time had only marginal access to public housing. Italians and Spaniards received a warmer welcome, which, moreover, gave many municipalities and social housing bodies an excuse to turn away Algerians, as the 15% threshold for foreigners was easily reached. In the late 1960s, when the question of housing foreigners was gradually turning into a public policy issue, Algerians were the subjects of a particular kind of discrimination: applications for social housing from inhabitants of the Nanterre *bidonville* never received an answer and, following the slum clearance operations, many were clustered in nearby *cités de transit*. For the Portuguese, a stay in such transition estates was less systematic.

### After the experiment, the inquiry: tolerance thresholds between the lines (1968)

To justify their refusal of North African tenants, social landlords would evoke specific handicaps (families too large; wages too low), as well as problems relating to cohabitation with French families. For this reason, Sonacotra commissioned a sociological survey into life at Les Canibouts a few years after the estate was opened to tenants. It was carried out in 1968 by a sociological study centre created by Jacques Bador, known as CEAL (Centre d'Études Appliquées au Logement – Centre for Applied Studies in Housing). The end result was an eight-volume machine-typed work entitled *La cohabitation des familles françaises et étrangères* ("The cohabitation of French and foreign families").<sup>17</sup> The analysis, rich in statistics, as was the fashion at the time, is based on a comparison between Les Canibouts and another Logirep operation, La Cure in Fontenay-le-Fleury, further south-west. "The percentage of foreigners is roughly equivalent in La Cure and Les Canibouts", but at La Cure they were mainly Italian and Spanish, while at Les Canibouts "the higher proportion of Algerians is reinforced by the impression of 'continuous Arab movement on

<sup>14</sup> The expression *France-Afrique* (now spelled *Françafrique*) could often be found in the writings of Michel Massenet to designate a future organic union between France and Algeria.

<sup>15</sup> See Moumen, A. 2012. "Housing the *harkis*: long-term segregation", *Metropolitiques*, 4 April. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Housing-the-harkis-long-term.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the minister for construction, Pierre Sudreau, was not in favour of such high quotas as he feared this would lead to excessive concentrations of certain population groups. Cf. Scioldo-Zürcher, Y. 2010. *Devenir métropolitain. Politique d'intégration et parcours de rapatriés d'Algérie en métropole (1954–2005)*, Paris: EHESS, p. 211.

<sup>17</sup> AN, Papiers Jacques Bador 627AP/84, 88, 104, CEAL, *La cohabitation des familles françaises et étrangères*, 1968.

the estate” – suggesting that the size of the North African population was a decisive factor in terms of cohabitation problems. In addition to noise and vandalism – the subjects of many complaints to caretakers – the issue of schools was at the heart of friction on the estate. It was said that the proportion of foreign children at the school in Les Canibouts (Groupe Scolaire Jean de La Fontaine) was 70% in the nursery section and 60% in the primary school. The teacher said that the maximum acceptable proportion was 25%, which would correspond to around 10% of households. The survey explained that French families tried to send their children elsewhere (notably the nearby town of Colombes) and that the school recruited outside Les Canibouts in order to fill its classes.

Reading these volumes leaves a contradictory impression. On the one hand, they contain a lot of problems identified in other investigations of large groups. But the conclusion presents the “racist atmosphere” as the No. 1 problem. In what is an otherwise well-intentioned study with regard to Algerian residents, the difficulties on a public housing estate are measured in light of the more or less visible presence of this population group. On the basis of one local primary-school teacher’s recommendations, the 15% threshold was revised downwards: “it would seem necessary not to exceed 15% of foreign families, while seeking as much diversity in terms of origins within the estate as possible. If such diversity is impossible, then it is best not to exceed 10%.” This demonstrates all too well how residential quotas turned into quantitative alert thresholds. The issue is no longer to avoid ghettoisation, but rather to remain within an acceptable tolerance threshold for French society.

This survey is the only one at the time that considered the question of foreigners in public housing. Consequently, it is now something of a reference document. Although the expression “tolerance threshold” does not appear in the text, one only has to read between the lines to sense its presence<sup>18</sup> – and with good reason, as Sonacotra did indeed start to use this expression shortly after. For example, a survey of Logirel, Sonacotra’s “Logi-” company in Lyon, was entitled *État des seuils de tolérance de l’immigration étrangère dans la région Rhône-Alpes, Lyon et Saint-Étienne* (“State of the tolerance levels of foreign immigration in the Rhône-Alpes/Lyon/Saint-Étienne region”).<sup>19</sup> The issue of threshold limits for foreigners was very much on the agenda in the early 1970s, when the question of formally limiting their numbers was raised, as attempted by the Marcellin-Fontanet circulars (1972). Here and there, prefects looked into “foreigner saturation levels” (20% per municipality). In some social housing estates, the anxieties that were developing concerning the concentration of immigrant families were reflected in statistics. For, unlike the illusion that officials had anticipated whereby quotas would allow for the harmonious dispersal of Franco-Algerians within estates, the arrival of foreigners in public housing developments took place in a context of clusters and avoidance. This process is summed up all too well by the words of historian and political scientist Patrick Weil: “how to create ghettos with quotas”.<sup>20</sup> Today, Les Canibouts is regarded as a problem estate in Nanterre. It is the subject of a vast urban renewal programme, as well as an association-led project that seeks to document residents’ memories.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Marié, M. 1975. “Le seuil de tolérance aux étrangers”, *Sociologie du Sud-Est*, nos. 5–6.

<sup>19</sup> CAC 960134-3, “Logement des étrangers en France, Sonacotra, Expulsions”. This inquiry is not dated, but its location in the archives and its content suggest that it is from 1972 or 1973.

<sup>20</sup> Weil, P. 2005. *La France et ses étrangers*, Paris: Folio Gallimard, p. 375 (1<sup>st</sup> edition: Calmann-Lévy, 1991).

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