



## The Challenge of a Working-Class City: Patrice Leclerc, Mayor of Gennevilliers

Robert Spizzichino

*At a time when French metropolitan governments have increasing influence on urban development, often in favor of more affluent incomers, many elected representatives of suburban cities perceive this as a rejection of working-class populations, who are pushed ever further out of the city. The inner Paris suburb of Gennevilliers and its mayor Patrice Leclerc are at the forefront of a movement to counter such development through policies and programs that benefit existing populations—and by negotiating various contradictions.*

### Patrice Leclerc, a humanist first and foremost

The current mayor of Gennevilliers, Patrice Leclerc, 55, is the son of a bakery worker and a housekeeper. He followed a typical trajectory within the French Communist Party (PCF): after studying history at university, he joined the Union of Communist Students (UEC – Union des Étudiants Communistes), became president of the National Union of French Students (UNEF – Union Nationale des Étudiants de France) in 1986, parliamentary attaché to the cabinet of Jacques Brunhes (member of parliament and mayor of Gennevilliers) in 1987, an assistant mayor of Gennevilliers in 1989, and secretary of the local party section in 1992. From that time, however, he began to have doubts about the way the party functioned and gradually made contact with other currents on the left. He distanced himself from the PCF in 2003 (abandoning all party responsibilities) before formally resigning in 2007. He developed a specialty in communications, participating in or leading such initiatives as the People’s University of the Hauts-de-Seine,<sup>1</sup> the Social Movement Photo Library, and a community-supported agriculture association (known in French as an AMAP, or *association pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne*, where subscribers receive a regular veg box of locally and sustainably sourced produce). He embraces every aspect of life, stating that “nothing human is foreign to him.” After a series of political episodes with trade unions and associations. Leclerc was elected mayor of Gennevilliers in 2014. He subsequently rejoined the PCF, because the party had trust in him and hopes for a revival of the left through the Left Front (Front de Gauche, a coalition of left-wing parties including the PCF). Rooted in working-class circles and immersed in an all-round curiosity, this trajectory shows a certain pragmatism, a rejection of party sectarianism, and a desire to combine the conceptual and the real.

As mayor, Patrice Leclerc today strives to take up a number of crucial issues and challenges: restoring the dignity of working-class populations that have become invisible in public and societal life, even though they remain living forces of experimentation and creativity in French society; finding ways for the working and middle classes to live together in today’s metropolitan contexts; and restoring social housing as a public good accessible to all. Leclerc is pro-tenant on all fronts, opposing the demolition or weakening of social housing, fighting slum landlords, and demanding that the most vulnerable populations of migrants and Roma be distributed fairly through the city’s neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> Hauts-de-Seine is a *département* (administrative area similar to a county) located immediately to the west of Paris. Its territory covers 40 inner suburban municipalities, including Gennevilliers.

## **Gennevilliers: a blue-collar, industrial city in Greater Paris experiencing renewed attractiveness**

Gennevilliers—43,376 inhabitants in 2015—is an inner suburb situated close to the northwestern boundary of Paris, in a meander of the River Seine.<sup>2</sup> It is home to the primary commercial port for the region, commissioned after the Second World War, and remains the largest river port in France and the second largest in Europe (after Duisburg in Germany). With a combined annual traffic of 20 million tons and a total area of 272 hectares (672 acres), it supplies 13% of the goods entering the Paris region (known as Île-de-France) and is therefore a major commercial hub within the metropolis. The port facility itself is part of the Autonomous Port of Paris, a state-owned company that manages 70 inland port sites in the Île-de-France region.

This development of the city's port consolidates an existing industrial tradition dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gennevilliers' industrial fabric was initially built around three major sectors: aeronautical construction, the automotive industry, and electricity generation, reaching a peak of prosperity in 1930 with 92 factories within the city limits. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, many of these firms closed, with the expected demographic consequences. Yet industry is still present in Gennevilliers, accounting for more than 20% of jobs, even if the makeup of this sector is profoundly different from a century ago.

Municipal intervention in economic matters is also part of the city's history. In recent decades, Gennevilliers has sought to diversify its economic base, to provide a receptive environment for new businesses and the expansion of old ones, and to use the port as a springboard for economic development and a revenue base for public services.

Obviously, these trends have reshaped the area's working-class population, though the city still contains a substantial share (22.4%) of industrial jobs within the area covered by the Greater Paris Metropolitan Authority. The city can be considered a *ville populaire* (non-elite or blue-collar city) insofar as household incomes are low (the annual median revenue is nearly 40% lower than that of the Île-de-France region as a whole) and have risen only slowly, with a population that for the most part is still low-skilled (a third of residents have no formal qualifications, almost twice the regional average) and affected by high levels of unemployment (19.4% of the active population in 2014), especially among young people (39.7%), despite the substantial job base. Finally, it should be noted that immigrants (i.e. all those born outside France, whether of French or foreign nationality) made up 32.5% of the city's population in 2014.

Currently, taking ongoing projects into account, Gennevilliers has once again become an attractive location for companies and residents. It enjoys good transit connections, land is available and controlled by public authorities, there are opportunities for real-estate development, many jobs are already located there, and existing public infrastructure helps provide a good quality of life. This has led many to ask whether these attractive qualities pose an opportunity or a danger for the current population of the city.

### **In search of a different kind of metropolis**

In 2014 and 2015, the French parliament passed laws that defined a new institutional architecture of local government, affirmed the importance of metropolitan areas, and sought to “modernize” public action on a regional level. This has stoked intense political debate about Greater Paris and metropolization. In this context, Patrice Leclerc has proposed a project for Gennevilliers designed

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<sup>2</sup> Gennevilliers is also one of the seven *communes* (municipalities) that make up the Boucle Nord de la Seine intermunicipal body, named for this meander. (The other six municipalities are Argenteuil, Asnières-sur-Seine, Bois-Colombes, Clichy, Colombes and Villeneuve-la-Garenne.) Boucle Nord de la Seine is one of 11 bodies defined—alongside the city of Paris, the 12<sup>th</sup> body—as components for the governance of the Métropole du Grand Paris (MGP; Greater Paris Metropolitan Authority). The MGP covers Paris and 130 inner-suburban municipalities, with a combined population of 7 million (out of about 12 million in the whole metropolitan area).

to consolidate a working-class lifestyle and fight against territorial exclusion. The children and grandchildren of the current population, he argued, must be able to live in Gennevilliers, if they wish, and not be driven out by the speculative mechanisms linked to the attractiveness of the city, while still remaining open to others in the region. But he also knows that local public action is limited in the context of major world cities.

He is particularly keen to safeguard the city's immigrant populations in terms of the primacy of social class, beyond debates about national origin and religion. At the same time, older retired white community activists who have lived in Gennevilliers for a long time have difficulty in undertaking a dialog with young immigrants. The associational fabric of the city no longer relays public actions to all its residents, especially the young. Moreover, a double generational and ethnic divide seems to have emerged between old and young and between native-born and immigrants, creating a lot of bitterness and misunderstanding. Notwithstanding the separation of church and state in place in France since 1905, many native-born residents express worries about religious pressure and religious proselytism from Muslims. This fracture between white Gennevilliers residents and populations of foreign origin has grown over several generations—indeed, the mayor is struggling to reach the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the first immigrants who arrived in Gennevilliers.

In reaction, the mayor's efforts to consolidate pride in a working-class city take place across many sites and seek to be multidimensional: simultaneously ideological and practical, educational and ambitious, traditional and innovative, and local and general in scope. A number of examples presented below illustrate these efforts.

### *1. Restructuring the center of Gennevilliers*

The mayor has proposed a new residential development including 3,000 social-housing units, of which half are to be offered through rent-to-buy schemes (*accession sociale à la propriété* in French), and half through subsidized-ownership schemes (*accession maîtrisée à la propriété* in French). This new housing must allow for diverse living arrangements and accommodate different kinds of households. To succeed in achieving these objectives, the project revitalizes an old tool—the social housing cooperative—and makes use of the anti-speculation tools available to the local public authorities. This new city center aims to become the heart of the city's new social contract. Using the 50-50 approach described above, the new neighborhoods of the Chandon–République eco-district, to be built on a vast former industrial site in central Gennevilliers, should be characterized by a mixture of inhabitants. Similarly, it is hoped that these new neighborhoods will be characterized by urban and social mix, high-quality buildings surrounded by well-designed public spaces, and measures to protect and preserve the environment.

**Figure 1. Public meeting concerning an urban restructuring project in Gennevilliers**



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## *2. Promoting urban farming: the inauguration of the Agrocité project*

The city is also proposing to encourage urban agriculture (shared gardens, market gardening, etc.) and practices of reuse (e.g. recycling workshops) that characterized by the social and solidarity economy through an ambitious project called the Agrocité developed in the heart of a social-housing estate (*cit * in French). The city government will encourage inhabitants to develop ecological practices through an experimental urban farm, which will provide cultivatable land, a market for locally grown vegetables and other food products, a bakery, a henhouse, beehives, a coffeehouse, and various cultural activities. The mayor hopes that this form of urban agriculture will help reforge social ties between different social classes, reorient life toward the growing seasons, and provide time away from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan life.

**Figure 2. The inauguration of the Agrocité urban farm, Les Agnettes housing project, Gennevilliers**



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### *3. Free extracurricular activities for children in kindergarten and primary school*

The mayor also proposes that the city's many sports, cultural, scientific and recreational teams and groups should provide extracurricular activities to enrich the lives of Gennevilliers' youngest residents and foster greater openness to the wider world. Such activities would be open to all and make an excellent investment for the future of the young.

Patrice Leclerc's approach to governing Gennevilliers can serve as a model for other cities: the current mode of metropolitan governance benefits certain types of people and organizations, particularly the most mobile and the most cultivated, but it also increases sociospatial inequalities and tends to displace the lower classes far from the most attractive inner suburbs. The progressive strategy developed in Gennevilliers is clear: restore cohesion and class pride to diverse populations (immigrants of several generations, workers and employees, the precariat, etc.) so that they are not left out of metropolitan restructuring. Patrice Leclerc's proposed citizen action schemes, universal education and recreational programs, municipal communication strategies based on notions of respect and dignity, strong affordable-housing policies, and economic development plans that promote growth for long-term Gennevilliers residents—including recognition of alternative (informal) economies—are all part of an equitable and progressive style of governance in the face of urban growth. However, this strategy faces several obstacles: an unfavorable political environment, a general climate of skepticism and mistrust of politics, and a form of social disintegration that affects the increasingly heterogeneous working classes and produces tensions that inhibit working-class solidarity.



**Figure 3. Edgar Varèse Conservatoire, Gennevilliers**



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Clearly, such ambitious goals cannot be solely pursued at the local level; however, state power seems liberal enough for a leftist left. I recommend two emerging policies that could assist the progressive movement in France:

- first, the creation of several networks of progressive cities (along the lines of Fearless Cities, Resilient Cities, Cities in Transition, etc.) to discuss possible resistance and build on the successes of others; and
- second, the creation of a form of metropolitan institution that respects the existing municipal tier of government (“a cooperative of municipalities”).

As Patrice Leclerc says, “We will win. It is necessary and indispensable for the survival of humanity. But when?”

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