



Silent Suppression: How Local Politicians Stifle Collective Action in Working-Class Neighborhoods

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Taking as its starting point a study of a neighborhood roundtable in the northern French city of Roubaix, this article examines the discreet but effective way in which public institutions, and local politicians in particular, have sought to thwart collective action organized by local residents regarding an urban-renewal project. Working-class neighborhoods are all too often described as political deserts, but the experience in Roubaix shows this couldn't be further from the truth, and that in fact everything possible has been done to prevent the emergence of local counterpowers.

The sociology of collective action has always been interested in forms of suppression that are the subject of social movements, especially where such suppression comes from law-enforcement agencies (Della Porta and Fillieule 2006; Combes and Fillieule 2011). While suppression can take dramatic turns—as in the case of the death of Rémi Fraisse at a protest against the proposed Sivens dam in southwest France in 2014, or the convictions of trade-union activists from the Goodyear factory in Amiens in northern France in 2016—less visible tactics are implemented every day by elected officials, public institutions and local authorities to prevent the formation of counterpowers, or indeed any form of protest. Between the very frequent practices of co-optation and clientelism on the one hand and violent suppression on the other, there are a multitude of more diffuse methods of frustrating mobilization that significantly restrict the activities of social movements and associations.

By taking as its starting point a neighborhood roundtable (“*table de quartier*” in French) in the industrial city of Roubaix (population 96,000), in the Lille conurbation (population 1.2 million) in the north of France, this article sheds light on the tactics implemented by elected officials to prevent the creation of a cohesive residents’ collective seeking to challenge an urban-renewal project that risks being imposed upon their neighborhood. Despite discourse reflecting a highly pro-participation stance, the city council has continually tried to counteract and halt the emergence of such a collective. In spite of this silent suppression, the neighborhood roundtable has managed, through intensive mobilization strategies and a constant power struggle, to achieve substantial progress.¹

¹ This research is based on a broader ethnographic survey on the relationship that working-class populations have with politics in Roubaix, initiated in 2011. Here, I adopted a participant-observation approach, accompanying the neighborhood roundtable in a capacity as a “consultant sociologist” and specialist in participatory democracy. In this way, I was able to follow events both in public and behind the scenes alongside activists and residents, participating in public and preparatory meetings, informal discussions and door-to-door sessions. By contrast, despite repeated inquiries, local elected officials did not respond to my requests for interviews.

“De-densifying the neighborhood” to promote social diversity?

The neighborhood of Le Pile, one of the poorest in Roubaix,² is characterized by housing stock consisting of small brick row houses and courtyards, traditional in the north of France.³ Half are occupied by tenants (in both private and social housing), the other half by homeowners in fragile financial situations. The area was very run-down at the time of my research: many houses were unsanitary, and some had been bricked up for several years. Added to this are neighborhood-wide issues related to cleanliness and general obsolescence, creating a sense of abandonment that is constantly decried by residents.

Figure 1. Bricked-up houses in the neighborhood of Le Pile in Roubaix



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The PMRQAD project (Programme Métropolitain de Requalification des Quartiers Anciens Dégradés – Metropolitan Program for the Rehabilitation of Deprived Inner-City Areas),⁴ which officially began in early 2012, only became visible to residents in late 2014, when work actually began. This program aims to “de-densify the neighborhood”, that is to say demolish a certain number of houses deemed unsanitary in order to create green spaces and new roads, in a neighborhood considered “isolated” from the rest of the city.⁵ The program involves the construction of 92 new housing units and the renovation of more than 220 homes. The reduction in

² The unemployment rate in the census block group (known as an IRIS area, where IRIS stands for (*îlots regroupés pour l’information statistique*, literally “grouped blocks for statistical information”)—covering Le Pile stands at 55%. The annual median income of households in the IRIS area is €15,153. Source: 2010 French census of the population and the inframunicipal/IRIS database, data produced by INSEE (the French statistics office) and disseminated by ADISP-CMH (the public-statistics data archives at the Centre Maurice Halbwachs research unit).

³ Translator’s note: in particular the northernmost *départements* (counties) of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, both of which are former mining areas, but also parts of neighboring *départements* further south (e.g. Somme, Aisne).

⁴ For more on the national program (PNRQAD) of which the PMRQAD is the local iteration in the Lille metropolitan area, see the article in *Métropolitiques* (in French) by Lina Raad (2015): www.metropolitiques.eu/Les-paradoxes-de-la-lutte-contre-l.html.

⁵ Source: www.lafabriquedesquartiers.fr/Nos-projets/07.-Pile-Fertile-quartier-Pile-a-Roubaix-PMRQAD.

the number of houses will inevitably result in the departure of some long-standing residents (111 households are to be rehoused). The explicit objective of the program is to promote “social diversity” by attracting middle-class populations to this poorly regarded working-class neighborhood.⁶

In early 2015, a growing number of people in Le Pile were expressing concern about the project and deplored the lack of information provided. They did not know whether their homes would be demolished and, if so, whether they would be rehoused in the neighborhood or would have to leave Le Pile. Homeowners also had questions about the purchase offers made to them by the public land agency (*établissement public foncier*, or EPF), which often seemed low, even derisory in view of how much they had invested in their homes. But how can property values be determined accurately in a run-down neighborhood, where the price per square meter has inevitably fallen through the floor in recent years? Aside from these material questions, though, the local population also feared that the bonds of sociability between residents and their attachment to the neighborhood would be lost. As one longtime resident said in a meeting: “In our street, we are like a little family, and you’re going to break all that up!”⁷

Channeling anger through the neighborhood roundtable

The neighborhood roundtable would become the conduit for these concerns. This roundtable is part of a national experiment, launched in 2014 by the Fédération Nationale des Centres Sociaux (French Federation of Social Centers) and Pas Sans Nous (“Not Without Us”), an association for the coordination of working-class neighborhoods, following the publication of the Bacqué–Mechmache report (2013) on the reform of urban policy in France. Inspired by a community-organizing experiment in Quebec, the idea is to bring together inhabitants and the various intermediate actors in a given area (associations, local businesses, social centers, etc.), with the aim of implementing campaigns to make a tangible difference to the lives of local residents.⁸ Neighborhood roundtables are mechanisms that are independent of public authorities, which do not participate in the meetings. They therefore embody the desire to move from a top-down approach to participation, imposed by institutions—the norm in France—to a more bottom-up approach, initiated by “civil society” (Carrel 2013). The resulting new national urban policy provided for citizens’ councils; however, it was felt that these did not really match up to the proposals contained in the report. It is for this reason that “Pas Sans Nous” (which involves many of the associations that Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Mohamed Mechmache met as part of their nationwide research for their report) decided in 2014 to launch an experiment whereby 12 neighborhood roundtables would be created in different parts of France (Paris, Tours, Marseille, Toulouse, Roubaix, Tourcoing, etc.). Half of them are run by social centers, the other half by associations. The Roubaix roundtable is run by a youth association called ANRJ (Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse, literally “Association [for a] New Vision of Youth”)—and initially involved around a dozen neighborhood associations in Le Pile.

⁶ This program forms part of a broader project to transform the city’s population. On this subject, see the article (in French) by Yoan Miot (2013).

⁷ Public meeting, Roubaix, October 15, 2015.

⁸ For more information (in French): <http://expetablesdequartier.centres-sociaux.fr/presentation-de-lexperimentation>.

Figure 2. Meeting of Le Pile citizens' café, Parc de la Teinturerie, Roubaix



© Université Populaire et Citoyenne de Roubaix/Anne Lescieux, April 2015.

The emergence of this experiment in Roubaix was not the result of a social demand on the part of the local population, nor of a real desire on the part of associations in the neighborhood. Rather, it was linked to certain activist and interpersonal networks, as the director of one of the roundtable's member associations was consulted as part of the Bacqué–Mechmache report; he was able to see the opportunity for Roubaix of being part of a dynamic of this kind. There was therefore a considerable risk that the specter of top-down participation would reappear, coming this time not from public institutions or local authorities, but from certain elites within local associations.

While the first steps taken by the Roubaix roundtable may have led some to fear the worst in this respect, the roundtable's dealings with the neighborhood renewal project—combined with the anger generated by this project among residents—has in fact given rise to a strong collective dynamic. One reason for this was that ANRJ was directly affected by the project, as it was forced to leave the premises it had occupied for 10 years, considered unsanitary and in need of refurbishment. The association was offered a space within the “Maison du Projet,” the institutional space dedicated to consultation between residents, architects and public authorities on the project. Located in the center of the neighborhood, the Maison du Projet would become the regular meeting place of the roundtable and a space appropriated by residents. In addition, the Université Populaire et Citoyenne (UPC; a “citizens' university for all”)—which provided technical assistance to the roundtable—has been running a “citizens' café” for over two years. This citizens' café is a space for debate and a place to meet up in the neighborhood, and became a sounding board for residents' concerns.

Initially, the city council and La Fabrique des Quartiers (the developer)⁹ provided for only minimal consultation on the project.¹⁰ In particular, they chose to focus on green spaces, with participation being seen as a condition for their appropriation. While the citizens' café was involved in the consultation on the creation of a future park for the neighborhood, its leaders realized that it was not a priority for inhabitants of Le Pile. When they carried out a door-to-door survey to canvass residents' opinions on the park, everyone questioned expressed concerns about the future of their home. In parallel, the ANRJ's premises were gradually becoming a "housing advice bureau," with worried residents coming to seek information and support from an association that was not specialized in this domain.

Once informed of these developments, the city council and La Fabrique des Quartiers finally decided to organize public meetings on housing in order to address residents' concerns. While this, technically, is a legal obligation for such projects in France anyway, the meetings were brought forward in response to local pressure, as an elected official acknowledged: "Why have we accelerated things? Because I felt frustrated when we did the consultation on the park; we heard about housing all the time."¹¹

Over 120 people, mobilized by the roundtable, participated in a first public meeting on May 21, 2015. The city council's discourse on this occasion was intended to be highly pro-participation, as exemplified by the words of the neighborhood mayor for Le Pile: "I will not commit to anything without first listening to residents and consulting them—without first listening to your ideas. After that, the time will come for arbitration and decision-making. It really is a process that is very much open to residents, and I wanted to thank you for attending in such high numbers this evening. This is a new process of project co-production. It's very important; it's the future of Le Pile that's at stake, and we need your feedback." Despite these good intentions, the anger and frustration of the inhabitants was clearly perceptible. A man in his sixties got up and cut off one of the architects mid-speech:

"We've been here for an hour and we still haven't been able to talk! We'd like to move on. This [the outline of the project in the PowerPoint presentation] all well and good; since 2011 I've been getting leaflets in my mailbox, every year I have leaflets, but nothing happens. The park, it has to be said, is secondary. We don't care about the project, we know what it's about, you've been bricking up houses for the last six months. People see the bricked-up houses and, as a result, no one wants to buy in the neighborhood anymore. [...] You say that you're conducting this project with the residents, but that's bullshit, it's not true! It's unacceptable, each new city council has invested in the center, not in the neighborhoods. The most important thing isn't the park, it's the fact that this gentleman has rats in his house and he can't raise his children. That is what's important. Who cares about the park!"¹²

He was applauded, proof he has expressed what was a widely shared feeling in the audience. The meeting itself, despite the speeches made by elected officials, was ultimately not very participatory, with a panel of officials from public institutions mostly talking to an audience of residents, the former providing more and more information without the latter really being able to intervene. The

⁹ La Fabrique des Quartiers is a local public development company (in French, SPLA or *société publique locale d'aménagement*), a mechanism typical of public-private partnerships that ensures the "governance" of cities. It is a private company whose shareholders are mainly local elected officials. In particular, it is responsible for the management and operational coordination of urban-renewal programs (including the PMRQAD) within the Lille metro area (an elected intermunicipal local-government body called the Métropole Européenne de Lille, which covers Lille, Roubaix and 88 other municipalities in the conurbation), which has delegated this responsibility to it. The president of La Fabrique des Quartiers is none other than the mayor of Roubaix.

¹⁰ Roubaix, historically a socialist (center-left) city, has been administered since 2014 by a center-right municipal council.

¹¹ Public meeting, Roubaix, June 5, 2015.

¹² Public meeting, Roubaix, May 21, 2015. See also the article reporting on this meeting in the local daily newspaper: "Ils étaient venus pour se faire entendre, on leur a demandé d'écouter" ("They had come to make their voices heard; they were asked to listen"), *Nord Éclair*, May 23, 2015.

meeting ended in confusion, with audience members taking the floor to talk about individual cases (“How much will I get for my house?”; “Will I be affected by the demolitions?”; “Will I be able to stay in the neighborhood?”), with the leaders of the roundtable unable to express a more collective position. It was only gradually, over the following weeks, that a collective voice was developed, by organizing participatory action in a variety of formats, with more meetings and more informal discussions in the street or at the Maison du Projet.

Two weeks later, at a meeting of the neighborhood roundtable, a contribution to be submitted as part of the consultation process was drafted collectively and signed by the 40 or so residents present. In this submission, they list a series of demands, including:

- a request for information on the nature of the project and the rights of residents;
- the extension of the official consultation period, which had been squeezed into just a few weeks, impeding a truly participatory approach;
- rehousing within the neighborhood (ideally in the renovated houses) as a priority for those residents whose homes are to be demolished.

At the following public meeting, on June 5, La Fabrique des Quartiers announced both the extension of the consultation period and the priority rehousing of residents who wished to stay in Le Pile. This was a victory for the roundtable, even though the public institutions tried to minimize the influence of this collective action on their shift in position. The roundtable, on the other hand, sought to promote these achievements, as in the leaflet below from late June 2015.

Figure 3. Extract from a leaflet produced by the Le Pile–Sainte-Élisabeth neighborhood roundtable, June 2015

Table de quartier Pile - Ste Elisabeth

GRANDE REUNION
Samedi 27 Juin
à 14H
49, rue de Condé

Depuis un an les associations et des habitants réunis à la Table de quartier organisent des réunions dont le but est de rassembler la population pour améliorer la vie dans le quartier.

Lors de l'assemblée constitutive du 16 mai dernier, les habitants ont décidé de se concentrer pour l'instant sur le projet de rénovation du Pile (PMRQAD) et les questions de logement.

Ces réunions ne sont pas une perte de temps!
La preuve, se mobiliser collectivement donne des résultats !

Le 13 juin la SPLA - en charge du projet de rénovation - a annoncé, conformément aux demandes des habitants :

- Le démarrage des réhabilitations de 18 logements vides avec relogement en priorité des ménages concernés par le rachat de leur maison, s'ils souhaitent rester dans le quartier et que le cout le permet
- La possibilité que les travaux de réhabilitation puissent en partie être réalisés sous forme de chantier d'insertion avec une priorité pour les jeunes et habitants du quartier
- L'allongement de la période officielle de concertation, initialement prévue jusque juin, allongée jusqu'à l'automne

Ces propositions étaient issues de la Table de quartier, preuve que cela vaut la peine de participer !

Il reste beaucoup de sujets sur la planche !

L'urgence : le percement des rues
Desaix, Jules Guesdes et Marie Buisine (Ilôts Lanières).

(The original version of this document can be found in the appendix of the online article, under the heading “*Titre documents joints*”.)

Since then, the power struggle with the city council has continued. At a public meeting in October 2015, residents denounced the “salami slicing” of the consultation process—now restricted to a single block in the neighborhood—and called for the creation of a permanent space for discussions with the city council, within which to work collectively on the project as a whole. The roundtable was joined by the Atelier Populaire d’Urbanisme de Fives (Fives People’s Urban-Planning Workshop; Fives is a neighborhood of Lille), an association specialized in defending the right to housing, which made its technical and legal expertise available to residents of Le Pile. In addition to the concrete progress achieved, this collective action has above all given hope to residents, allowing them to express their value and their dignity.

Municipal suppression strategies

The relative success of the neighborhood roundtable is linked to its ability to take on board the anger of local residents in a way that is independent of the public authorities. Autonomy creates trust among a population that is very distrustful of public institutions and politics in general. With this in mind, the city council proceeded to do everything in its power to weaken the roundtable. Multiple strategies were employed: first of all, it restricted the material conditions necessary for mobilization, by refusing access to a (public) facility located in the area, namely the Maison du Projet. On two occasions in the year leading up to February 2016, the neighborhood roundtable was denied access to the Maison du Projet, which ultimately led it to find another, perhaps less inclusive, gathering space: the neighborhood church. Given the important role that meeting spaces can play in the dynamics of mobilization (Cossart and Talpin 2015)—are they open, accessible, visible, welcoming to outsiders, and so forth?—such forms of suppression enacted against an actor seen as outspoken have very real and tangible consequences, leading those residents who were least engaged or most afraid of being associated with a “transgressive” body to distance themselves from the roundtable.

Once again with respect to material conditions, the city council also has a significant right of scrutiny over the subsidies allocated to associations. So, for example, while the Ministry for the City granted funding for the nationwide experimentation of neighborhood roundtables to allow the creation of coordinator roles (adult intermediaries), the city of Roubaix has still not received any such funds, whereas all the other roundtables (which are not in a context of protest to the same extent) have benefited from this support.¹³ The neighborhood roundtable in Le Pile therefore essentially relied on the dedication of volunteers and employees of member associations—who cannot, however, work for the roundtable on a full-time basis.

In France, after central government, municipalities remain, in France, the main financiers of small associations (by supporting certain activities, making premises available free of charge, or even granting subsidies to allow associations to create positions for salaried workers). Accordingly, the fear of losing subsidies can also influence the attitudes of associations. Certain member associations in Roubaix, anticipating the possibility of suppressive measures, have thus gradually pulled away from the neighborhood roundtable. When internalized in this way, institutional suppression against counterpowers influences the action of collectives in working-class neighborhoods, which are very often highly dependent on municipal choices. This can in turn contribute to the dislocation of inter-association dynamics.

In Roubaix, the city council has also quietly tried to play the roundtable’s member associations off against one another, by spreading rumors about the possible hegemonic ambitions of some of them. Suppression is also symbolic, by resorting to the disqualification of actors. These forms of delegitimization involve calling into question certain roundtable leaders, who are accused of “playing politics,” of opposing the project in order to better attack the mayor, as some of them “are Green party members.” By politicizing the conflict in this way, the city council has sought to encourage residents who are not affiliated with the roundtable—and who are very critical of party-political game-playing (Masclat 2003)—to move away from battles that are not openly identified as such. Symbolic disqualification also changes activist practices. For instance, one of the roundtable’s leaders, a long-standing activist in the neighborhood, has preferred on many occasions to stand back and not risk too much exposure, especially in public meetings, for fear that accusations made against him might delegitimize the collective dynamic. While they should be driving forces, the most experienced activists often perceive themselves as obstacles, likely to hinder future success in resolving their grievances. This is reflected in a certain weakness in the roundtable’s leadership, which is in fact based largely on technical assistance provided by activists from outside the neighborhood. These individuals can then easily be disqualified on the grounds of their lack of

¹³ It is not clear, to date, whether the origin of this “obstacle” lies with central government (and in particular the Ministry for the City), the city council, or both.

localness, as suggested by the neighborhood mayor at a city council meeting in January 2016: “I regret that some community leaders, who do not live in the area, take advantage of the distress of local residents.”¹⁴

Finally and, here too, very typically, public institutions have attempted to disrupt the collective by entering into individual contact with certain participants, and in particular the most resentful residents, promising them an improvement in their situation, an advantageous rehousing option, or in some cases even more personalized arrangements in order to defuse their anger. The most direct forms of suppression are, in some respects, a last resort for public authorities, in cases where more insidious tactics to control situations and produce consent have failed to prevent opposition arising. These tactics included intervening on individual rehousing issues; “educational” approaches implemented by social workers and urban planners to help residents better accept an outcome (leaving the neighborhood) that appears to be inevitable; splitting working-class populations into competing groups; and creating more “cooperative” residents’ collectives from scratch using a range of discreet rewards, with participatory mechanisms embodying the most established form of recompense.¹⁵ Together, these different strategies served to generate consent and avoid the emergence of protest action.

While, to date, such tactics have not managed to devitalize the neighborhood roundtable in Le Pile, they have greatly increased the material, human and symbolic cost of engagement, wearing down those activists who are involved the most. They have sometimes come close to despondency, after experiencing the kinds of difficulties that they have experienced so many times in the past.

The democratic value of counterpowers

Far from being isolated, the case presented here seems to be common in many working-class neighborhoods (Hajjat 2008; Deboulet 2014). To take just one example, one of the most active collectives in recent years in organizing the residents of working-class neighborhoods, Justice Pour Le Petit Bard, in the southern city of Montpellier, ceased its activities in late 2015, weary of the constant attacks from elected officials:

“Institutions tire you out. The urgency of everything kills you [...] the authorities play on that. Except they have time and we don’t. They have money and we don’t. [...] They’re trying to kill us by attrition. It’s a way of tiring us out.”¹⁶

We find almost identical words uttered by a Roubaix activist: “It’s wearing and tiring; at some point, we’re just going to go home; we’re worn out.” In addition to suffering these undermining and invalidating tactics, Justice Pour Le Petit-Bard—like Le Pile’s neighborhood roundtable—was also evicted from its premises. These forms of silent suppression represent a kind of microphysics of power, which is exercised less by brute force than by a thousand small, insidious cuts, steering practices either by direct means or by anticipating the next move. Just as James Scott (2008) identifies the subpolitical tactics of the dominated, which together form an armory of “arts of resistance,” so the (more or less) hidden strategies used by public authorities to stifle protest also deserve to be studied. Their consequences are ambiguous: on the one hand, suppression can help to unite and galvanize collectives and facilitate mobilization in the face of a clearly identified adversary; on the other, when deployed subtly, these stifling tactics typically appear to be effective (Gilbert 2014).

The Montpellier and Roubaix cases illustrate that not everything depends on the political color or personality of elected officials—one city has a left-wing council, the other a right-wing one—as the

¹⁴ Roubaix city council meeting, January 28, 2016.

¹⁵ On this subject, see Pierre Gilbert’s particularly astute analyses (Gilbert 2014).

¹⁶ For information (in French), see: <http://quartiersxxi.org/hamza-araab>.

changes in governing party following the 2014 municipal elections have not led to significant changes in the practices implemented.

While ideally it would be necessary to systematize this analysis and observe the role of a given political context in other places in greater detail, the elements presented here nonetheless reveal how politics works in France: it is an ultra-professionalized field where elected officials cannot bear to have their monopoly on democratic legitimacy challenged, despite the decreasing number of votes they receive election after election.¹⁷ This inability to get to grips with more conflictual forms of building general-interest objectives was aptly summed up—unintentionally—by a representative of the central state administration in addressing the members of the neighborhood roundtable, when he remarked: “You want to be independent, but now you’re asking for a dialog with the city; you have to make up your mind about what you want,” as if the two approaches were incompatible, with discussion only possible within the framework of mechanisms controlled by public institutions.¹⁸

Everything seems to have been done to prevent the emergence of a local counterpower, even when this counterpower has succeeded in getting residents involved where public institutions typically fail. These difficulties reveal the fear, in France as in many other countries, of autonomous forms of collective organization among the working classes. However, they appear to be more necessary than ever—otherwise these populations risk expressing themselves in a different, perhaps less constructive, manner.

A decade on from the revolts that shook France’s *banlieues*, in a context where anger still bubbles under the surface in disadvantaged areas without finding positive channels of expression, action of the kind seen in Le Pile stands out as an alternative that, today more than ever, seems necessary for the vitality of our democracies. Rather than suppressing them, the state should provide resources to ensure the sustainability of such autonomous collectives, which are capable of offering a voice and representation to working-class neighborhoods.

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¹⁷ For example, the mayor of Roubaix was elected in 2014 with 6,949 votes in the second round (34.9% of votes cast), or just 7.3% of the city’s total population.

¹⁸ This aversion to counterpowers and competing forms of expression of general-interest objectives perhaps embodies the other side of “consensus government,” studied by Fabien Desage and David Guéranger (2011), which contributes to the weakening of divisions and the depoliticization of public-action issues. On urban renewal, see also Epstein (2014).

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