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Participatory Democracy and Governance: Local Politics in France.

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“In small neighborhood meetings, there are some people who speak, now, and who say intelligent things, after all. A technician, or a technocrat does not see the practical things on the field that an everyday user will see. I think it shall give a new impulse to the relationship with local representatives. The town administration has answered very quickly [to our demands], because it has realized that all the people have judicious demands. Small things. We do not ask to build the Stade de France. But these small things are the ones that make life impossible otherwise.”

(A retired communist woman who is a participant in a neighborhood council in Aubervilliers, a poor town in the northern suburbs of Paris)

“Local democracy... Here, in this place, I am not very confident. You realize at the end that those who participate in local democracy institutions are those who already participate in their everyday life. I mean, one gives a little more power in the neighborhood to those who have it already. I mean, in neighborhood councils, you will find former activists, association leaders, and so on. These structures increase the power of those who have it already.”

(A young North African supervisor, who is a participant in a neighborhood council in Aubervilliers)

INTRODUCTION

In France, during the last municipal elections of March 2001, participatory politics and participatory democracy have been important themes. Some lists have even taken it as their raison d’être, like the one conducted by Zebda, a popular pop music band of Toulouse
composed largely of second-generation immigrants. It is also a flag of the Green party, the political organization that has mostly increased its vote in these elections. The experience of the participatory budget of Porto Alegre (Brazil) has become a theme of discussions after the “World Social Forum” (organized against the Davos meeting), which took place in this city in January 2001. This is somehow puzzling. From the late seventies to some years ago, participatory politics was mainly a local concern in particular areas, where neighborhood councils still existed or where the gap between the political class and citizens was seen as particularly wide. At the beginning of 2001, the experiences of participatory politics remain limited. Due to the new political context, it is however very probable that they will increase in the next years. Most notably, neighborhood councils should be created in all Paris by the new left-wing administration.

Why has this question become more and more important? The increasing appeal of participatory politics can be analyzed from various perspectives. The first one understands it in functional terms. Most often, the functional approach tends to explain the development of new forms of government through the increasing complexity that a society or a political system has to face. Yannis Papadopoulos distinguishes three levels of complexity. The first one is social: a growing number of agents, with different logics, interests and priorities, are involved. The second one relates to the growing complexity of problems. It implies that a mono-causal reasoning is no longer possible. The third one is institutional: it derives from a complex decision-making structure in which several partially autonomous institutions have some power to decide (Papadopoulos, 1995, p. 55-59). As far as local public policies are concerned, the level at which complexity has notably increased in France is the institutional one, due to the decentralization in the eighties and the fact that a growing number of public institutions are involved in any decision. Where urban policies are at stake, one could say that the concentration of different problems in the same places (those where the new urban poverty has developed) is a new challenge. However, it is not clear whether this increasing functional complexity is, as such, sufficient to explain the rise of the participatory ideal, the emergence of some participatory structures and the kind of discourses that justify them. One could even argue that, in some cases, complexity has at least partially decreased: associations and political parties are less influential than before in poor suburbs, so that fewer agents are involved; local governments have a capacity to decide and act more powerfully than before...

In addition, a real balance of the experiences of the neighborhood councils, which represent the main institutional embodiment of participatory democracy at the local level, has not been really discussed in the public sphere at a national level. A careful analysis of the electoral
results shows that the existence of participatory structures has not been a major parameter in the electoral success or failures of previous mayors. It seems that it is less a functional balance of concrete previous experiences than a new *Zeitgeist* that has made the idea of participatory politics more and more popular.

This is why I will analyze participatory politics from another perspective than the functional one, and will focus on the legitimacy dimension. The notion of legitimacy has been widely discussed in philosophy and social sciences. Two main interpretations are usually developed. The first is the so-called “realist” one. It conceives legitimacy as something strictly empirical. It defines it as the factual support of a particular political system or a mode of governing, and explains this support as the result of instrumental strategies of elites that are in competition for the popular vote. The support can be analyzed as an ideological success (ideology being defined as a normative justification that hides privileges and a domination structure). The second one starts from a normative perspective and interprets legitimacy as the enlightened consent of citizens, following the classical schemes of the social contract or their contemporary reformulations. It is only afterwards that an empirical heuristic value is given to this normatively defined concept, and that a bridge is built between the normative and the empirical dimensions. These two interpretations have symmetric limits. The first one tends to dissolve the normative dimension into power relationships; the second one conceives power as a result of a normative consent. However, politics cannot be analyzed as a one-sided activity, oriented either towards cooperation or power struggles. That is why a new approach is needed. It could refer to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski/Chiapello, 1999. See also Boltanski/Thévenot, 1991) and test their theoretical perspective in another context. The authors argue that capitalist system is a domination structure, but they add that a crucial part of its dynamic is due to its critiques. The agents who are active in the functioning of this system always have to try to defuse the critiques, integrating some of them and passing round the others. The legitimacy of capitalism depends therefore on the dynamic of the critique, its integration, its exhaustion, and its renewal. The empirical order is always in between force relationships and a work of justification that does not abolish domination but imposes dominants to justify themselves. In this perspective, Boltanski and Chiapello argue that a new type of legitimation, that they call the “city of projects” (*cité par projets*), has increasingly justified the new “network capitalism”\(^1\).

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\(^1\) For Boltanski and Chiapello, capitalism was criticized after 68 for being both unjust and oppressive. In the late seventies and in the eighties, it was able to integrate the energy of its critiques that were focused on its lack of authenticity and its hostility towards a certain kind of individual freedom (such as sexual freedom). Capitalism
In this paper, I will not pretend that the legitimacy dimension is the only factor that explains the emergence of the participation theme. My hypothesis will be more limited: legitimacy is an important level for the analysis, and it cannot be reduced to functional requirements. I will try to answer three sets of questions. (a) Does the emergence of a new “spirit” of government explain the popularity of political participatory ideals and structures? What exactly could this new spirit be? To what extent is it related to the integration of former critiques by the political system? (b) To what extent do politicians, civil servants and citizens from various political tendencies share this new spirit? To what extent do discourses really guide practices of government? Can the participatory mechanisms be understood as the result of voluntary political orientations, even though the implementation of political strategies in the real world always have unplanned side effects? (c) What are the consequences of social inequality and power relationships upon participatory political deliberations and critiques? To what extent can we distinguish the new legitimacy of political institutions from the legitimation of domination (be it a social domination or the domination of a political elite over “ordinary” citizens)?

In order to answer these questions, I will focus on two of the main discourses about political participation of the nineties: the one that goes with the urban policy (politique de la ville) and the one that justifies the existence of neighborhood councils. The notions of participation and participatory democracy have been central for the politique de la ville, and this new orientation of public policies in the cities have been contemporary with the development of neighborhood participatory mechanisms in one hundred or more French towns. Is it possible to construct a coherent ideal type of this discursive world? Has it led to the development of a new “spirit” of public administration and democracy?2

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2 This paper is based on a discourse analysis and on a field research that has been developed during several years in poor neighborhoods in the Paris area and in Rouen (see Bacqué/Sintomer, 1999, 2001a, 2001b).
I. THE DISCOURSE OF PARTICIPATION IN FRENCH LOCAL POLITICS.

1. Participatory democracy in the discourse of the “politique de la ville”

A comprehensive understanding of the discourse of French urban policy would require a detailed analysis of its main texts (reports, laws and decrees...). Two logics (at least) were involved, which partially overlapped: a logic of modernization of administrative action, and a political logic, defended most notably by Dubedout, which was primarily based on local neighborhood experimentations. Interrogations on the State’s new role were linked to the decentralization, which deeply altered a two centuries tradition of Jacobinism. A social history of French urban policy will be the subject of a future research. For the sake of the argument, my hypothesis in this paper is that the ideal type of the politique de la ville can be analyzed focusing on the series that the journal Esprit published in the early nineties, and particularly on a book from Jacques Donzelot and Philippe Estèbe, L’Etat animateur (the supervisor State) (Donzelot/Estèbe, 1994. See also Donzelot, 1991, Esprit, 1991 and 1993).

Esprit was funded by the “Ministère de la ville” in order to organize conferences and seminars and to publish books whose aim was to elaborate a deeper justification and a general evaluation of the new policy. L’Etat animateur (whose main author was Donzelot) can be analyzed as the main manifesto of this enterprise and a good summary of the new spirit, as it tries to articulate the logic of modernization of the State and more political concerns. Donzelot is probably not a great philosopher, and his book was more an essay than a highly coherent theory. Still, the interest of L’Etat animateur and of the Esprit series is that they represented both a theoretical reinterpretation of practices that existed already, and a pragmatic program. Their aim was to guide the action of public servants, politicians and associations and to give them some kind of philosophical and conceptual analysis and justification.3

At the beginning of the nineties, Donzelot, who has once been a collaborator of Foucault, is intellectually and politically very close to the “second left” activists who where leading the politique de la ville. The explicit aim of his book is less to define the urban policy as it is, than urban policy as it should be: the ideal of the new type of actions the State has to

3 Nearly at the time that Donzelot published his first report, another report, written by Belorgey, was published on the politique de la ville. It was less ideological and tried to evaluate the concrete impacts of this policy in the neighborhood, instead of focusing upon the State apparatus (Belorgey, xxxx). The analysis of Belorgey’s text, and of other reports such as Delarue’s one (Delarue, 1991), should be important in a concrete assessment of the realizations of the French urban policy at the end of the eighties and at the beginning at the nineties.
promote in poor suburbs and, beyond them, in the society overall. To put it more precisely, Donzelot intends to describe a kind of regulatory ideal, the dynamic of a learning process that has involved higher public servants, state administrations, local governments and urban associations since the beginning of the eighties. In this perspective, the author draws a sharp contrast between the new conception of the State and both the liberal and the classical republican visions. The "supervisor State" (Etat animateur) cannot be identified with the minimal State, although it recognizes its limits and its actual impossibility to impose from above its norms over society. It is not mainly guided by an imperative of profitability or by the necessity of reducing the costs of public spending. It has to be active in society, to promote the economic regeneration of the poor suburbs and to reaffirm its two traditional functions: to insure the social protections of all individuals and their social integration.

Contrary to the neo-liberal credo, it has a strong responsibility on these two points; it cannot rely on the market mechanisms and cannot just blame individuals who are excluded for their behavior or their incapacity to find jobs and a stable insertion in society. The Etat animateur is even a possibility to restore the public administrations “patriotism” around a policy focused on the poor suburbs of big cities, which are the main symptom of the economic and social crises. However, the way in which the State has to be active is quite different from the definitions of French republicanism. The increasing social problems and urban violence that affect these neighborhoods are a symptom of the inefficiency and the illegitimacy of the classical policy-making. The State seems to be powerless against the exclusion of large parts of the population and is no longer credible when it vindicates its monopole over the definition and the implementation of the general interest. This is a crucial move in respect to the past: the State has to recognize that it has to deal with other legitimate agents to construct the general interest and to act according to it (Donzelot/Estèbe, 1994).

The “supervisor State” is not only a new conception of the State in a new context: it implies also a new theory of society, power, public policies, the relationship between individuals and the State, and of collective action... Donzelot argues that contemporary societies have to be seen as far more individualized than in the past and that the social groups and status that has shaped French society are no longer relevant for the self-definition of people and for the objective social mobility of individuals.4 The theory of society has also to incorporate the notion of complexity.5 This implies that there is no simple way of defining

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4 This thesis has been developed by Anthony Giddens in the late nineties (Giddens, 1994, 1998, 2000).
5 In the French intellectual scene at the beginning of the nineties, this notion refers less to Niklas Luhmann, who was nearly unknown in this country, than to the far more trivial thinking of Edgard Morin.
problems or solutions, that several agents are always involved, and that their cooperation is a major problem. Complexity increases the chances of unplanned side effects. This is why public administrations cannot work any longer in a fragmentary mode, each one focused on its specific attributions (health, occupation, economy, urbanism...) if they want to be efficient. A global approach is needed, together with public servants or semi-public organizations enjoying transversal responsibilities, in order to improve the coordination of the various sectors of the State. In a more individualistic society, what can be asked of the individuals differs also from the past: the aim is no longer that of “integration” (namely, the submission of the individual to collectivity), but “insertion” (which conversely considers collectivity as a frame that has to promote individual projects). The nature of power has also to be conceived in a new way: no longer as a zero-sum game, but as a collective capacity of acting together. The strength of this communicative power relies on cooperation rather than on competition, especially when the relationship between civil society and the State is at stake.

Finally, a new theory of collective action is required. Society is no longer structured by organized social forces but is characterized by an absence of social and organized forces (this is clear in the poor suburbs but also, to a lesser extent, in all the country). This is why the appeal for “participation”, which has been present in France since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, has acquired a completely different meaning in the nineties. Under De Gaulle, it used to signify a neo-corporatist strategy whose aim was to avoid social confrontations through the co-optation of various lobbies and the transformation of extra-systemic agents such as the worker movement in officially recognized lobbies. In the context of the *politique de la ville*, participation concerns the direct intervention of individuals, informal groups or associations in a positive democratic process. The litmus test for participation is therefore less the truly representative nature of the leaders than the rationality and the pertinence of the projects (Donzelot/Estèbe, 1994).

Participation was a synonym of “consultation” in the sixties, and implied discipline. In the nineties, it is a synonym of “involvement” and relies upon projects. The “axiomatic of the project” is the core of the new urban policy. When the State is no longer legitimate enough to impose efficiently its rule to the individuals, it remains an alternative to the neo-liberal *laisser-faire*: the State can enact rules whose aim is to sustain the individual projects as far as they build or foster the *lien social*, that is social integration and reciprocal solidarity among the people. The State continues to have another specific mission: to promote an active

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6 Individual does not mean here only persons, but also specific collectives such as local governments, associations, and so on.
solidarity, through distributive and incentive mechanisms, in order to balance the unequal capacity of the individuals to make projects. The State no longer has a monopoly over general interest; however, its nature is still “republican” (even though it is a “mild” republicanism) (a) as far as its main functions continue to be fostering the general interest (although through other ways); and (b) as long as, due to the democratic procedures, its legitimacy rests upon a defense of the general interest and does not rely upon mere corporate or private ones. This enables the State to play an active role in the dialectic relationship it has with civil society and local governments.

This is also why the idea of the contract, which has gained so much influence in the eighties and the nineties, has to be qualified. The “contracts” that involve the State are very peculiar. Several kinds can be differentiated: contracts between the State and local governments (for example the Contrat de ville in which a town get State funding for specific operations planned for some years), or between the State and an individual (for example the “contrat d’insertion” through which a person is entitled to get the minimal income -RMI- in exchange for an active search for formation or occupation), or between the State, local governments, business corporations and associations (for example the contract Partenaires pour la ville, in which all the agents bring some specific input in the panel of urban regeneration). In each case, their logic is neither the horizontal bargaining in the market nor the adhesion of members to a society or a group (like in the social contract). To a certain extent, with them, one passes from a logic of trusteeship to a logic of contract, but the agents who make contracts have quite different power and status, and the State still has some priority over the others. This is why it can be called “supervisor”: in the new game of reciprocal heckling, demands and critiques, it keeps the leadership. The “supervisor” State represents a third way beyond technocracy or centralist political decisionism on the one hand, radical self-management or extreme decentralization on the other hand. Its specific financial and juridical resources enable it to force the other agents to take into account the imperative of deliberation. Once the old hierarchical habits are left away, deliberation is the State’s new privileged tool when fostering solidarity and social integration (Donzelot/Estèbe, 1994).

The conclusion of this reasoning is that the changes in public policies that are taking place (where the poor suburbs are concerned, but also much beyond) represent a new age in the extension of democracy. What democracy is exactly remains unclear, or at least only implicit. The main features of this new age of democracy seem to be the following. First of all, a more horizontal relationship between the different organs of the State and between the State and society, in a game of mutual demands and critiques which requires the involvement
("participation") of individual persons and forces, and an active role of the State. Secondly, a fluidity in the configuration of social agents that goes much beyond both traditional societies and neo-corporatist arrangements; in a radicalized version of the "society of the individuals"\(^7\), the question of representation tends to lose some of its importance. Thirdly, a more pacified society in which the central problem is no longer a contradiction or opposition inherent to social structures (because of oppression or domination, for example between capital and labor). It is the gap that emerges between those who are "included" in society and those who are "excluded" (as Touraine puts it in a formula whose success will be enormous in the public sphere)\(^8\). Fourthly, a more rational society, due to the importance of deliberation, to the focus placed upon the pertinence of the projects, and to the improved capacity to face the problems of a complex society.

As we will see later, external critics have been raised against this conception of democracy. But even in an internal lecture, two things at least are puzzling. First of all, democracy is mainly conceived through the light of public policies. The semantic ambiguity that is implied in the French word *politique* (which can mean both "policy" and "politics") is systematic as far as the *politique de la ville* (the "urban policy/politics") is at stake. That is why one can doubt whether there is much real politics in this manifesto. Second, the notion of participatory democracy is not explicitly present in the argumentation and remain only a potential that can be deduced from the strong emphasis put on both democracy and participation. In fact, there is no description, analysis or proposal concerning the political institutions or dynamics that could embody or sustain such a participatory politics.

With less sophistication, the "supervisor State" had some elements in common with the "reflexive State" or the "supervisor State" conceptualized by Willke and others (Le Galès, 1995; Papadopoulos, 1995, Morand, 1991, Warin, 1997; Willke, 1991, 1992). Two types of questions can be raised concerning Donzelot’s specific version. External critiques could focus on the social relationships or dynamics that such an approach cannot grasp. For example, many observers have tried to demonstrate that the notion of exclusion is not appropriate to understand the increasing precariousness of all wage earners—and not only of those who, at the end of the process, are labeled as "excluded"(Castel, 1995). Others have argued that a

\(^7\) Norbert Elias created the notion, but the idea has been reformulated in quite a different perspective by Touraine, 1992, or Rosanvallon, 1995.

\(^8\) Alain TOURAINE, « Inégalités de la société industrielle, exclusion du marché », in Affichard/Foucault, 1992. See also Dubet/Lapeyronnie, 1992 (add some explanations). At the end of the decade, Donzelot will restate this inclusion/exclusion topic into a new dichotomy and stress the risk of “secession” that is supposed to get more strength, both among part of the middle class (syndrome of the gated communities) and among the "underclass" (through the development of illegal economy and violent social relationships) (see Donzelot, 1999).
“fluid” society composed of individuals without strong feelings of affiliation to social groups could hardly be a fair description of actual society and could hardly be characterized as democratic (Bacqué/Sintomer, 2001b). Some have emphasized the limits and the peculiar injustices of a society based on “projects” (See Boltanski/Chiapello, 1999). At this stage of the argument, I will not develop the paper following such lines. I will instead focus on a second kind of question: was this program really enacted? Or, to put it in another way, was this program a mere symbolic manifesto without any real impact upon practices, or did the practices tend to follow it, with its forces and its limits? I will center my discussion on the problem of participatory democracy and, in order to answer this question, I will first study the justifications of the neighborhood councils that have been given in the second half of the nineties.

2. Three dimensions of participatory democracy in neighborhood councils.

Nowadays, the main channel for participatory democracy at the local level in France is the neighborhood council 9. The history of neighborhood councils in France can be summarized in three moments. (a) In the seventies, urban struggles (Castells, 1972) have led to the emergence of the theme of participatory democracy. The first experiences of neighborhood councils were made after the Left had won in a lot of places in the 1977 town elections. Most often, these experiences took place where the activists who had been leading former urban struggles had been elected in the town councils. (b) The context of the eighties was no longer urban struggles, but urban crisis, together with State decentralization. The growth of unemployment, racism, and violence in the cities was characteristic of this period. A lot of former urban activists were at this time adherents or sympathizers of the Socialist Party. Acting for the Mitterand’s government, they thought that a specific public policy directed towards cities and poor suburbs was necessary. Urban regeneration for them had to include a participatory dimension and to rest upon the energies liberated by decentralization. The creation of neighborhood councils was suggested to local governments, even though it was not legally binding. Some numbers of councils were created in the dynamic of the politique de la ville. Others, that already existed but were only informal, were institutionalized. (c) The crisis of institutional politics was the main new dimension of the nineties, with the growth of electoral abstention and the Front national, the reduction of the

9 There have been other forms of participatory democracy, such as consultative referendums, “enquêtes d’utilité publique”...
number of people that were active in political parties, the bribe scandals and a growing distrust towards the political elite. Since the 1995 general strike of the public service, new social movements have developed, for which the idea of participatory democracy has been important. A Green party could at last stabilize itself in France. In the second half of the nineties, particularly after the 1995 town elections, other experiences of neighborhood councils began.

Throughout these decades, the classical French republican tradition, based upon a strong, hierarchical and centralized national Welfare State, has been weakening, even though some intellectuals have defended it very strongly in the public sphere. On the other hand, after 1995, the neo-liberal ideology, which has been so strong in other countries, was largely discredited. The search for new ways of justifying the role of the State increased. One has also to notice that the history of neighborhood councils is very different from one town to the other. In some places, it has been a down-top dynamic, and the creation of independent grassroots neighborhood associations (comités de quartier) was legalized and institutionalized afterwards (sometimes ten or fifteen years later). In other places, it has been a top-down dynamic and the creation of the neighborhood councils have been the result of a town council’s decision without any grassroots political mobilization (G. Gontcharoff, “Le renouveau des comités de quartier”, and F. Rangeon, “Les comités de quartier, instruments de démocratie locale?”, in CRAS/CURAPP, 1999). Globally, they represent a response to the critiques addressed to the political system (the positive critiques of the seventies that demanded more citizens’ participation, and the negative critiques of the eighties and the nineties, which deplored State inability to face the social consequences of the economical crises and the growing gap between the elite and the people). In addition, one has to notice that councils are, in most cases, directly or indirectly linked to an active urban policy. The new middle class mostly leaded the urban struggles of the seventies. At the end of the nineties, most neighborhood councils are situated in working-class areas.

As a result of these diverse and heterogeneous dynamics, the legal status, the attributions and the structure of the neighborhood councils are not defined at the national level and vary from one locality to another. Still, some general features may be described. (a) In all experiences of local participatory democracy, one has to notice the regular meeting of open neighborhood meetings in which politicians and civil servants from local administrations meet the citizens who want to take part. These meetings are organized from four to six times a year. Very often, they represent the main element of participatory democracy. (b) Relatively often, there are also more formal neighborhood councils. In this case, council meetings and
assemblies are regularly merged and the public may assist and take part in the discussion with the councilors. In some places, the councils can nevertheless also meet without the public. (c) In a few cases, citizens elect the councilors (usually, the level of participation in the election is very low and hardly reaches 5 to 10%). Usually, the mayor, local politicians or associations designate the councilors through cooptation. An interesting experience has been made in a Paris’ neighborhood (the twentieth arrondissement), where lot among neighborhood electors designates part of the councilors. (d) In most cases, the mayor or one of his delegates is the chairman of the council and of the assembly, whose autonomy and capacity to decide upon their agenda is therefore limited. Still, in some cases, neighborhood councils may elect their president and meet without the presence of local government delegates. (e) A last feature is important: there are only a few towns in which neighborhood councils may join in a common meeting, two by two or all together, in order to discuss a question relative to a larger scale than the neighborhood. Most often, the councils remain isolated and are therefore confined to micro-local themes.

Beyond the heterogeneity of the legal status and of the organization of neighborhood councils, it is striking that most of them share common features. One is that the objectives officially proclaimed are very similar from one place to another. They are all subsumed under the generic notion of “local democracy” (démocratie locale, or démocratie de proximité). Under this common umbrella, it is possible to distinguish analytically three different kinds of objectives that are more or less developed in nearly all the places (although social agents do not very often subjectively draw the same lines to present their different aims).

(1) The first kind of justification for the development of local democracy is a functional one. Its starting point is increasing the efficiency of administration. To listen more to what the habitants or users are saying and to incorporate their competencies and their knowledge seems to be a way of improving the outcomes of administrative action. The idea is that one has to administrate with less distance from the concrete problems and even

10 (Blondiaux/Lèvèque, 1999; Loïc Blondiaux, “Représenter, délibérer ou gouverner? Les assises politiques fragiles de la démocratie participative de quartier », in CRAPS/CURAPP, 1999. Before this experience, the lot, one of the main tools of direct democracy with the assembly, has only survived in France in the designation of popular jury. It has been recently reactivated in various spheres in several European countries. The principle of the lot is that every citizen has an equal right of becoming councilor and that the election introduces a aristocratic distortion because the richer, the more cultivated, the men, and so on, have statistically more chance than other to become elected (Manin, 1997).

with the people in order to administrate better\textsuperscript{12}. In this perspective of “incorporation” of the aspirations and energies of the people, neighborhood councils are seen together with associations as a crucial mediation between local government and citizens. Three levels have to be differentiated in this attempt to incorporate the people to administrative action. A minimalist version emphasizes the \textit{consultation} of the people. Public servants have to inform the inhabitants and consult their opinions and desires before or during the process of decision-making, but the decision remains the monopoly of official institutions that have to translate the particular and multiple wills and representations in a binding legal orientation. Furthermore, in this version, it is always possible for the administration to ignore a decision or a wish of a neighborhood council if it is seen as unrealistic or incompatible with the common good. A more participatory version stresses the importance of what the habitants or the users can bring to the administration and insists on their expert capacity (something that is not traditional in France, a country in which the expertise has long remained a monopole of State administration and big corporations). The role of the neighborhood councils is therefore taken more seriously and, very often, it is more formalized. One may speak of \textit{participation} in a proper meaning. A third and more radical version of the incorporation approach consists in \textit{delegating} some decisional power to the councils, for example through the allocation of a certain amount of money that it can spend freely\textsuperscript{13}. Still, if it is increasingly common in France to delegate some tasks that used to be done by administrations to various associations, it is uncommon to do so with neighborhood councils that could become a counter-power. The usual practice is the first version. Its success depends a lot upon the fact that somebody is able to inform the different services and take care that the civil servants of the local government will seriously study the decisions made during the assemblies or the neighborhood councils. This is why, in most of these experiences, a politician and one of the higher

\textsuperscript{12} In most places, this idea is part of a more general argument about “déconcentration” of State action (the State hierarchical pyramid remain unchanged but services are no more localized in a central place). In the two left-wing arrondissements of Paris in which neighborhood councils have been created, the idea was also to contest the right-wing town mayor and vindicate for a major decentralization.
local administrators are in charge of the questions and problems that are discussed in the neighborhood. They have a competency transversal to the different administrations.

(2) A second approach can be called “social”. It is part of a more general attempt to build or develop social cohesion on a given territory, be it a block, a neighborhood, a town or a State. One has to remember that most of the neighborhood councils were created in towns in which part of the territory was confronted with a new urban poverty, and that the politique de la ville had put a strong emphasis on the development of structures of participation. The problem that the social approach wants to address is the weakening of the “social link” and of all social relationships within the neighborhood. This situation is a threat to the welfare and security of the residents. Ultimately, it endangers the social peace. The reasons for this situation are allegedly unemployment, economic crisis, and the weakening of political or associative activism, each factor reinforcing the others. The role of the neighborhood councils is therefore to help to reconstruct the social link, to become a substitute for the old political affiliations that used to structure the poor neighborhoods, and to favor the rebirth of a local sociability. These councils are seen as being public spheres in which one can listen to the others in a dialogue that reinforces a better mutual understanding.

(3) A third perspective can be called “political” in a stricter meaning. The public sphere that is structured around the neighborhood council is seen as being important for the development of participatory democracy (which is sometimes called “direct democracy”). As such, the idea of participatory democracy is opposed to elitist political theory such as those of Benjamin Constant, Emmanuel Sieyes, Alexander Hamilton or Joseph Schumpeter. Still, it does not necessary represent the comprehensive theory defended by some radical philosophers (Pateman, 1970). In the discourse of local politicians, participatory democracy is seen as being complementary to the classical mechanisms of representative democracy, most notably to the town council. It is never seen as a counter-power and, in most cases, the

13 Other analytical distinctions have been proposed by Arnstein, 1969, and Georges Gontcharoff, “Le renouveau des comités de quartier”, in CRAPS/CURAPP, 1999.
neighborhood council has only a mere consultative role. It differs therefore from more radical experiences, like the participatory budget in Porto Alegre (Brazil), where participatory democracy has seriously altered the common features of representative politics (Abers, 2000). Usually, the kind of “democracy” which is advocated in this context seems to be “communicative”, in Habermas’ meaning\textsuperscript{14}. In this conception, the potential gap between politicians and the public tends to be underestimated. The general interest is allegedly created through public debate. In this process, the democratic opinion and the will of the people emerge. The public discussion, through its own dynamic, changes what participants used to think, their values and the definition of their own interests. At the same time, the rationality of the solutions increases, due to the selection of the best arguments in the discussion. The legitimacy of decisions depends for a crucial part on how they are elaborated: the greater and the more frequent the interactions between citizens and administrations or politicians are, the more legitimate the final decision is. In this perspective, politicians try to increase their proximity with citizens through the animation of the neighborhood council but also through decentralized meetings in blocks, or through the designation of one political leader as responsible to deal with the everyday problems of a neighborhood. This kind of discourse has been increasingly frequent among local politicians in the last years. It is also popular each time counselors want to justify their existence, be it in front of the politicians (when they want to contest a decision), in discussion with other citizens or during interviews with the social scientists. Previously, it was more important in the urban social movements and, more generally, in the new social movements.

The distinction between these three perspectives has only an analytical value, and agents most often tend to articulate the three dimensions in a more or less confused mode. This is clear when one considers the example in which a neighborhood council asks for a building where associations could meet, young people could go in for sports and housewives could meet and learn new skills. Such a polyvalent building can be the object of a functional

\textsuperscript{14} Politicians or association activists sometime explicitly quote the German philosopher.
investment in the frame of a good local administration. It can also be conceived as something that will foster local sociability and mutual understanding among social groups. Last but not least, the way it is managed and the repercussions of the associative activities that may take place can become a political issue.

3. The supervisor State.

What is the relationship between the discourse of the *politique de la ville* and the discourse on participatory democracy? It seems clear that the first one has always included a political dimension, and more precisely the idea of participatory politics, even though the word is not a clear notion in Donzelot and Estève’s book. Beyond these authors, French urban policy has always been prolific with the word “citizenship”\(^{15}\). Reciprocally, the contemporary discourse on participatory democracy is very focused on the renewal of administrative action and local public policy. In both cases, the mediation between urban policy and participatory politics is the reconstruction of the “social link”. Taken together, the two discourses draw a common ground (and I will argue that this common ground is also clear when one analyses practices, and not only discourses). The main preoccupations that were expressed by Donzelot and Estève are present in the discourses that justify the neighborhood councils, and reciprocally. It seems that there is continuity between the appeal for participation in urban policy and participatory politics in neighborhood councils. This common ground is possible on the basis of a particular vision of society, public policy and democratic politics. The idea is that a virtuous circle can be developed between reconstruction of the social link, more efficient administration and participatory politics, on the basis of a communicative rationality that will grow together with deliberation. Both discourses rest on a “positive” conception of a power that is seen as being increased by cooperation, and it is therefore not surprising that participation is spontaneously conceived as a complement to representation rather than an alternative to it. In this perspective, one could say that the neighborhood councils represent the political dimension that the supervisor State requires, and a logical complement to its logic of participation.

This discursive universe is relatively consistent, even though it does not have the depth and the variety of older traditions such as liberalism, classical republicanism or socialism. *I propose to keep the term supervisor State to describe it.* One can certainly distinguish several

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\(^{15}\) In some neighborhoods, “citizenship houses” were created, open to associations and to public administrations; The State proposed research programs that allegedly linked urban policy and citizenship...
variations and different emphasis inside this universe. But its general norms represent a comprehensive doctrine to which the agents refer when they criticize each other. A local politician can for example be criticized because he/she does not behave democratically enough (that is because he/she does not listen enough to what citizens say during a neighborhood council). A local association can criticize an administration because the partnership that has been made has not been respected (for example if the funding of a specific action is not renewed after some time). Conversely, an administrator or a politician can criticize an association involved in a partnership for making non realistic critiques (it has to internalize the necessity of governability); they can also emphasize the role of representatives, who have to supervise the definition of the common good and set the rules so that no particular local interest can impose itself on the others.

This idea of the supervisor State can be analyzed as a version of the discourse on governance and the new spirit of democratic administration and politics. Although increasingly popular, it has been criticized from other perspectives. The force of the discourse on the supervisor State has relied predominantly upon the first objective of the neighborhood councils: it has always been more difficult to contest the idea that the administration has to be nearer to citizens, in order to increase its achievements and in order to be accepted more. At this level, the consensus between Left and Right was relatively high. The second objective (the reconstruction of the social link through participation) has been less accepted. Most of all, various objections have been raised against the third objective, participatory politics. Populist versions, for example in some towns controlled by the Front National, have tried to respond quickly to citizens’ demands, but they have also strongly acted against any kind of pluralism in the local public sphere. Technocratic versions have emphasized the decentralization of administrations, but they have refused to extend the governance partnership to citizens; they have argued that, for the sake of efficiency, decisions have to be made by experts (both governmental and corporate ones). Neo-liberal versions have proposed quite different perspectives and focused on the pressures that clients can make on the market; they have therefore proposed to privatize as many municipal services as possible in order to increase their efficiency and to lower their costs. All these perspectives have defended a “proximity” policy (politique de proximité), but have sharply rejected participatory democracy.

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16 It expresses itself around terms such as “proximity policies”, “transversal administrative action”, “contract”, or “citizenship”.
and its local institutionalization in neighborhood councils. A lot of mayors have refused to introduce neighborhood councils. They have various arguments, namely a sharp defense of the representatives’ monopoly in the decision-making process, a rejection of the localism and of the “nimby” (“not in my backyard”) effect that are allegedly be inherent to neighborhood councils... More generally, classical republicans have criticized the reduction of the role of the State to a mere “supervisor”, arguing that the general interest was pursued more through centralization than through decentralization.

II. THE LIMITED DYNAMIC OF NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS

The overall balance of the supervisor State discourse is that it has been more influential in policy than in politics. Coming back to neighborhood councils, it is not clear whether the official discourse will actually materialize into acts or if it is “all just talk”. Do they at least represent the normative frame according to which the practices are evaluated? It is true that permanent discussions take place in the neighborhood councils about the gap between intentions and realizations. Does local government really take what we have been asking into account? Have sociability relationships among neighbors really improved? Is the council a really democratic institution? These questions are frequent during the council discussions, and during the informal meetings with citizens. To answer these questions requires analyzing the situation as an observer, and not only with the eyes of the participants.

1. Participants, themes and discursive logics

(a) This is first of all necessary because participation in local meetings and in neighborhood councils is highly selective. The level of participation seems to be relatively important for the legitimacy of participatory institutions. However, this level remains usually very low in France. Two examples can illustrate the point. Saint-Denis, a town north of Paris and a former “capital of the red belt”, has around 86,000 inhabitants. Among them, around 63,000 people have the French citizenship, from which 46,000 are more than eighteen and may vote. 32,000 are registered on the electoral lists, 15,000 have taken part in the last town elections (2001), and 7,500 have voted in favor of the mayor who has been reelected. The

Reciprocally, some radical democrats (like Zebda in Toulouse) have criticized the politiques de proximité and have vindicated for a real participatory politics.
town council is composed of 53 councilors. Between 450 and 600 people take part in one of the series of neighborhood participatory meetings that takes place more or less at the same time in Saint-Denis. This is less than 1% of the population, and around 1% of the adult population. One has to add that, in the late seventies, the Communist Party had several thousands activists in this town. Paris’ XX° arrondissement is a neighborhood that is often analyzed as one of the most interesting examples of the supervisor State in France. It has around 180,000 inhabitants. This arrondissement is divided into eight neighborhoods, each of them with a participatory council of thirty local councilors. Around 650 people take part in a series of neighborhood participatory meetings, that is 0.3% of the population. In both cases, all observers have noticed that the level of participation, far from increasing, has tended to lower after the first meetings. As far as participatory politics is concerned, these two examples seem to be representative of France, although the participation level can be two or three times higher in some particular cases, and much lower in others. This means that one cannot say that “citizens” are participating. A huge majority has never taken part in any neighborhood participatory meeting, and a large majority probably has not even heard about them. In itself, this factor would be sufficient to make the hypothesis that the gap between citizens and the political system is only reduced through participatory politics, and not filled up.

This limit is more increased if one considers the fact that those who participate are not statistically representative of the population. All observers have noticed the striking absence of some social groups. In some places, the will to foster the political inclusion of the groups that are largely excluded from it, is explicit among the official objectives of the participatory councils. However, this preoccupation is not very present in the concrete functioning of the councils. As a result, young people, foreigners or the second generation of immigrants, and the lowest class people are nearly absent or at least very under-represented. Furthermore, when they participate, they tend to be marginalized in the debates. Speech tends to be

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18 Participation varies between 20 to 100 people following the neighborhood. In one year, this means that between 30% and 50% more people have taken part in at least one meeting, because some always participate and others do not.

19 Legally, each arrondissement has a specific council, with some tens of arrondissement councilors.


21 In a year, the number of people who have participated at least once is higher, but does not exceed 1,500 (that is, less than 1% of the population).

22 The level of electoral participation in Saint-Denis is however specific: it is much lower than France’s average, and it is representative only of the poor suburbs in big cities.
monopolized by a small number of people, most of all politicians and association leaders, in front of which ordinary citizens feel inferior as long as rhetoric and sometimes social status is concerned. In wealthier neighborhoods, people with higher education or a strong cultural capital feel more comfortable to intervene, and the repartition of those who speak is more equal. In all cases, individuals from the three mentioned groups are completely marginal. It is striking that some people who express themselves very well in other contexts, such as rap singers, are practically mute in the councils. They use a lot of slang and have difficulty integrating the institutional political language. Most often, local politicians and administrators are indifferent, paternalist or irritated when “outsiders” interfere with the planned debates. Sometimes, they even speak about them but not with them in their presence. Other times, especially when young people with “deviant” behavior want for once to participate, they are not at all welcome and quickly understand that councils are not a place for them; they do not fit with this kind of discussion. Next time, they decide not go back again. In any case, there is hardly a common deliberation and the “excluded” people are mere objects of, and not subjects in the discussion. The factor that seems to most influence the presence of these three dominated groups is the size of the districts. The smaller they are, the easier the participation is. This is true for the average citizen, but even truer for the groups that are less present. This does not seem to be completely clear for the participants themselves, and only a few people, like the Green party in Paris, have vindicated for the creation of small “block councils”, in order to increase participation. It is also more difficult for local government to “follow” thirty local districts than ten: it requires more time and energy, and perhaps one would not be so confident regarding who will lead the council. This is why, in the trade-off between official’s energy and people’s participation, the latter is nearly always sacrificed. The old tendency that was discussed by Federalists and anti-Federalists at the beginning of the American Republic (bigger districts tend to favor dominant groups) is still present in the French supervisor State, but it is discussed less clearly than at the end of the eighteenth century (see Manin, 1997).

In the participatory councils, social selection and barriers tend therefore to be the same as in representative democracy (with one notable exception: women24). Why is it not seen as a problem? In the discourse of the supervisor State, society is no more structured by organized social forces but is represented as a fluid society, where individuals are no longer determined

23 In the texts, the groups that are mentioned are young people, foreigners or the second generation of immigrants, and women – but not working class people or the poorest people.

24 Until the last local elections (in which a parity law has imposed a nearly equal representation between men and women), they were under-represented in the town councils, but all observers have noticed a parity of participation at the level of neighborhood councils and meetings.
by their social role and where agency is mostly individual. This can be analyzed as an epistemological obstacle to conceptualize the absence or the marginality of some groups: the notions that are structuring the supervisor State discourse do not include the possibility of grouping people along “classical” sociological divisions. However, the idea of “exclusion” is important in this discourse: the main contemporary division is seen as being between those who are included in society and those who are excluded. Why does their absence not really matter? One has to remember that the excluded people are defined only in negative terms: they are not a social group with common characteristics, they are only excluded, and this status is the only thing they have in common. This is why they are not seen as being able to be active as a group—at least in positive terms: they may be defined negatively as an anomic group, as a source of problems and deviant behaviors. On the other hand, precisely because they are excluded, it is difficult to ask them to be able to make and do projects like those who are well integrated in society. This is why the discourse about them is ambivalent. They are very often stigmatized for being unable—or for refusing—to be responsible, that is, to make realistic projects (be it for work, for school or for everyday life). But they are also very often seen as people who must be individually helped in order to reintegrate society. In both cases, they are treated paternalistically, and are not supposed to take part in political collective action. This is why their absence in neighborhood councils and meetings is not an important topic. As long as they are excluded, they cannot act in a positive mode in these places. As soon as they will be reintegrated, they will be like the others...

(b) What are the themes that are discussed in neighborhood councils and meetings?

The first one is democracy, or what participants call democracy, that is relationships between citizens and the State. It concerns all State levels and, very often, participants do not make a real distinction between the central government, regions, the town council, and national or local public services (public transportation companies, public housing organizations...). This theme, although it is not the most important, comes back frequently. When citizens criticize administrators or politicians, they reproach them about two things: not listening enough to the people, and not respecting what had been said in previous meetings. As we have seen previously, this conception of democracy tends spontaneously to be “communicational” and does not focus on social struggles; it concedes the monopoly over decisions to the politicians, but requires them to take other agents into account and to act according to public opinion— to public opinion overall, but also, more specifically, to the public opinion that can express itself in the participatory structures. Politicians have difficulties contesting this conception, even
though they sometimes rely on technocratic arguments when they are outside the reach of the public. When they do so in the meetings, the critiques become sharper. The discourse of the supervisor State, that politicians officially share, represents a real rhetorical constraint, a norm that it is difficult to challenge. This is why policy-makers learn quickly and adopt another strategy. They frequently play with another dimension of the supervisor State, namely the various levels of decision-making. They exonerate themselves from any responsibility and accuse the national government, Brussels, or other administrations to be have the real responsibility.

The second kind of themes concerns proximity problems: public transportation (where a bus line has to pass through, how often...), public housing, construction or modification of small local crossroads, buildings or squares, small shops in the neighborhood, street cleaning... These themes tend often to be seen from outside as “peanuts”, especially by people who are opposed to the existence of neighborhood councils. However, participants insist on saying that these small things are very important to everyday life. For people who are not used to speaking in public about general political topics, it is also easier to focus on concrete ones. In addition, one sees the results of action and deliberation better, and can verify that officials really listen to what citizens say and behave respecting the common decision. The real problem is not that these micro-local topics are widely discussed. It is that participants can hardly go beyond them, generalize the deliberation, and discuss themes related to the town overall or national questions. The form the discussion is structured is hostile to such a generalization. The official role of the neighborhood councils and meetings is to deal with proximity problems. There are few possibilities for different councils to meet together in order to discuss a problem on another scale. At the town level, the town council is officially and institutionally the only one that is legitimate. The participatory dimension is strictly limited in scope and does not have to interfere with representative democracy. It is therefore a privilege of political representatives and administrators to represent the global common interest, and they use this privilege quite often in the discussion. They inform participants about the general orientations of the town policy, but are not really ready to discuss it. And they respond very often to the critiques concerning a proximity problem that they understand it quite well but... there is no money, problems are worse in other places, nobody can do everything at the same time. Participatory structures function as if they are responsible for the particular local interest, facing the representative democracy responsible for the common

25 The French slogan is: « voir le bout de ses actes ».
good. The contrast with the more radical experience of Porto Alegre is striking. In this Brazilian city, the discussion of the town budget imposes on neighborhood participants to go beyond their particular local needs and demands. They also have to deal with other neighborhood problems and with the general equilibrium and dynamic of the town. In Porto Alegre, the top of the participatory structure is directly in competition with the representative structure – and this is precisely what the politicians who promote “local democracy” in France do not want.

This division of labor is a major problem in a context in which the neighborhood is hardly a pertinent scale for dealing with structural problems. A major side-effect of decentralization and of all the attempts of empowerment based on a micro-local scale is a tendency to put people before responsibilities they cannot really face, because they cannot act on factors that go much beyond the local level. The second risk inherent to such a role division is parochialism. In wealthy neighborhoods, it leads to a “nimby” effect. This contradicts a central claim of the supervisor State: “the State sets rules that constrain the individuals to behave according to solidarity principles”. As long as citizen participation is restricted to the micro-local, there is a strong tendency that they will not behave this way.

This risk is even stronger with the third kind of themes, which concerns security and everyday “incivilities”. Taken together, the second and third kinds of themes usually represent 80% to 90% of the discussions. In France, the “security” problem is less serious crimes than small offenses: small robberies, illegal traffic of cannabis, insults, conflicts for the occupation of a square or a well, noise late at night... In wealthy downtown neighborhoods, the mere presence of outsiders (colored people, young people, people from lower social classes) can also be seen as being an aggression. Due to the absence of the incriminated groups, the scenario of the neighborhood council debates tends to be always the same: people of higher social status (white collars and upper classes in wealthy neighborhoods, blue collars with stable jobs in poor neighborhoods or in the projects) criticize the behavior of people with a lower social status and describe it as aggressive and intolerable. Participants reproach the officials for not being active enough regarding security. In some cases, they threaten to act by themselves –something they rarely do, because there is not such a tradition in France. Officials respond that they do their best, but that the problem is difficult, and so on. It happens from time to time that some citizens or officials argue differently. They try to explain that the situation is more complex, that one has to understand the problems of those who are criticized, that repression is not the only way of dealing with insecurity... In the absence of the
incriminated people, their arguments, however, seem however less convincing than the others, and dialectic deliberations are not very frequent.

Still, one cannot deny that deliberations in neighborhood councils and meetings have a logic that leads participants beyond their mere private or particular interest. This is clear when one considers a first kind of themes that is completely illegitimate during the discussions: the demands that do not concern the neighborhood as such, but only the particular interest of some individual or pressure group inside the neighborhood. The dynamic of publicity, which was conceptualized by Kant and which is central to Habermas’ theory, has certainly some strength here. The public spontaneously censures those who only speak for themselves, or appear to do so. They cannot speak very long without being interrupted and contested, and after they have spoken, nobody cares about what they have said. In order to be listened and to influence the discussion, people have to demonstrate that they defend the common good, or at least that their demands are compatible with it (Sintomer, 1998, 1999). This is why the active presence of various groups, or the common meetings of different councils, could be so important. Without them, the process of construction of the common good remains fragmented and one-sided. Very often, the consensus in the council is easier when it is reached in contrast with the values or interests of an absent third party: a higher State level (for example the national government), people of another neighborhood, outsiders... In this process, a particular interest (of one social group or of one neighborhood) is easily seen as if it was a general interest 26.

It is perhaps because it remains restricted to proximity problems that the common good can only be defined as non-political in the participatory structures 27. Non-political here, means that every argument that seems to be linked to the political system (such as speaking in the name of a party or an ideology, in favor of or against the government or famous politicians) is prohibited. This is the second kind of themes that is spontaneously censured. Those who are not cautious in this respect are quickly discredited. Even people who are known to be activists in a political party have to behave as if they were only speaking as individuals –as if power and party politics had to be kept outside the sphere of participatory politics. It is notable that the situation is the same in the town councils of small villages (of

26 As such, this fact does not imply that larger districts could be a good solution for the neighborhood councils. As we have seen, the larger the district, the lower the participation level. It is only an active presence of the outsiders that can produce another dynamic, and it is difficult for those who are culturally or economically dominated to speak in this public sphere when they face dominant classes. The best way to really include the outsiders is probably a progressive scheme that would, first, allow meetings among relatively homogeneous groups, and would in a second step organize a confrontation between them.

27 The important distrust towards the political system also plays a role in this respect.
less than one thousand inhabitants). The spontaneous censorship is stronger for the political spectrum extremes, most notably the extreme right, but it concerns nearly every tendency. Still, ecology is considered to be a non-political (or less political) topic and could be discussed easily in the neighborhood. Some particular individuals are however legitimate when they pass from one register to the other, and generalize proximity problems into political questions: the mayor, and then the vice-mayors to a lesser extent. They are part of the participatory debate, but are also elected and therefore legitimate in the representative system. This is why they can cross over the border.

2. *Administration or politics?*

The three official justifications of the neighborhood councils (the functional, the social and the political) are not equally pertinent when one observes what is really going on. The first one, namely the incorporation of citizens’ competencies to administration, has usually the most important consequences. Not all citizens are concerned, but those who are really contribute to local governance. In some cases, local administration does not really care about the participatory structures, and this leads to frustrations. But in most cases, administration learns to take advantage of what is said during the neighborhood councils and meetings. Public discussion represents a pressure towards a greater transparency of criteria and efficiency of public action. Regular encounters with the public, help local politicians and civil servants to understand citizens’ everyday life demands better, and to adapt more efficiently administrative action to proximity problems. This used to be done through other modes in the past. Most notably, political parties and their satellite organizations used to represent channels of communication between the political system and the public. Their crises had opened a gap that the participatory structure tends to reduce. Other forms of complicity supplant the common political membership. Symbolically enough, people very often address each other with the “*tu*” instead of the “*vous*” in the council. When the town administration has sufficient flexibility and financial resources to respond to the councils’ demands, its legitimacy can notably increase. In some projects, in which voluntary degradations of public building are very frequent, it is striking that some installations collectively decided, are respected by all residents. The supervisor State really becomes a shared norm, according to which, one can judge the success or the failure of a public policy. As a whole, it represents an effective dynamic.
This is completely different with the second official justification of the participatory structure. The meetings certainly lead to a better mutual understanding between those who actively take part. But the individuals and the groups that should be firstly dealt with, by the “restoration of the social link” are absent. A street supervisor explains what came up at a council meeting in Aubervilliers, a poor town in the northern suburbs of Paris: “It was the first time I brought a group of young people. As soon as they came in, the struggle began. Adults did not want them to take part in the assembly and did not even want to discuss with them... Adults declared that the young people were responsible for the neighborhood problems, but they did not want them to be present. The subject of their discussion was young people, but they did not want the subject of their discussion to be in front of them!” This contradiction is not debated in the council, and this is a noticeable contrast with what happens with the functional objective of the councils: when administrative action remains non-flexible, when public policy is not able to respond better to proximity problems, official are sharply criticized. But nobody really cares about the fact that the functioning of the neighborhood councils can hardly reinforce the “social link”. Could it be otherwise? With the irenic conception of society on which the supervisor State is based, things could hardly be different. The idea of a fluid society of individuals, in which those who are excluded have to be individually reintegrated through paternalist (benevolent or repressive) means, is hostile to a real attempt to mediate between antagonistic social groups. The fact that young people, most notably, are only objects of the discussions, represents a central obstacle in this respect. The desire “to give everybody the possibility to speak” is often sincere, but it is not followed by any concrete consequences. At this level, the supervisor State is a mere ideology, a veil posed upon the unequal access to the public sphere and upon social conflicts.

Things are slightly different with the third objective. Even if participatory democracy is conceived to be only complementary to representative democracy, one may doubt that it is qualitatively strengthened by the neighborhood councils. As we have seen, the discussions that take place in these structures are not political, if “political” means that they deal with the political system (mostly, in this meaning, they may be “political” when they increase the political legitimacy of certain mayors). But “political” certainly has a larger and more interesting meaning: beyond the institutional system, some kind of actions in civil society may be analyzed as having a political dimension. When exactly? Politics, as distinct from public policy, implies at least three things. Firstly, debates have to face real alternatives in non-neutral terms, beyond any technical discussion: in order to be political, a discussion has to concern not only the means, but also the ends of action. Secondly, local problems must be
linked to others in order to generalize the choices that have to be made; the presuppositions and implications of the different alternatives have to be explored, together with the interests and values that are at stake. Thirdly, the power dimension has to be taken into account: the actual repartition of power, the process of decision-making has to be questioned. Even the interpretations of politics that emphasize legitimate consensus as a central aim have to acknowledge the agonistic dimension of politics and the importance of social struggles. The neighborhood councils do not pass these three tests. They usually discuss proposals only once the town administration has chosen one of the options that it debated initially. The participatory structure does not therefore have the capacity to pronounce itself on various alternatives. It can only amend, accept or refuse what local administration has adopted – even if other alternatives may reappear when the proposal of the policy-makers is too sharply contested. Furthermore, as we have seen, it is nearly impossible to generalize the disputes: the micro-local scale and the refusal of “ideological” conflicts represent a very strong barrier. Last but not least, due to its peculiar logic, the participatory public sphere has a limited impact on power. It tends to be hostile to any questioning of social conflicts and power structures (internal to the political system, but also in society overall), even when some people may reflect and speak about them in other spheres. It is also ambivalent towards the power relationship between politicians and the people. The representative system always tends to become more and more independent from the “sovereign” people (Balibar, 1997; Bourdieu, 1979). When policy-makers regularly meet with the public, the gap certainly tends to reduce. Still, as long as the neighborhood councils are not a truly counter-power, they can be instrumentalized by the local political power to increase the consent to its public policy.

Habermas has argued that public opinion has to lay siege to the fortress that the political power represents, but without trying to take it by assault. Public opinion and grassroots associations have to be self-limited and not cross the border after which they would become institutionalized and bureaucratized (Habermas, 1996). Neighborhood councils, with their mere deliberative function, could be seen as good examples of such a strategy. Still, even if this strategy was convincing, it would require certain preconditions: politicians must have some incentives to respond to the public’s demands. A first requisite is a strong and politicized public opinion. We have seen that this is rarely the case in participatory structures. Another requirement is that other parties can challenge the mayor’s party, and this is not always the case in localities in which one party is very often completely hegemonic. A third condition is that real alternatives exist inside the political system, and not only an alternation...
between very similar positions. This is far from being the case in French local politics. As a whole, the necessary requisites for an efficient “siege” to political power can hardly be met. This situation produces permanent discussions among councilors and citizens, but the universe of the supervisor State is too narrow-minded to allow a positive issue, and this leads to growing frustrations. It seems inherently contradictive to ask people to participate and to confine participation within such a limited role. This is why the supervisor State has only a few concrete political impacts and can barely represent a norm according to which the limits of political participation could be analyzed and criticized. As far as politics is concerned, the supervisor State is almost an ideology.

**CONCLUSION**

The supervisor State has emerged in urban politics and has developed (among others) in the neighborhood councils. It represents a new universe of discourses and procedures that differs from the classical republican or liberal State. It is composed of a set of principles and institutions that enable civil servants, politicians and citizens to orient their action, to analyze the interactions, and to criticize each other. It can therefore constitute a “city”, in the meaning that Boltanski, Thévenot and Chiapello have given to this notion (Boltanski/Thévenot, 1991; Boltanski/Chiapello, 1999) – but it is only this way as far as public policy is concerned. The reorganization of administrative action is the core of the supervisor State. It is the dimension in which the functional requirements and the legitimacy claims tend to overlap. This strength is also a weakness: this new universe is so focused on public policy that the participation that is advocated differs, to a large extent, to any real political participation. The discourse on the social function of the supervisor State is more an ideology than anything else, at least when it materializes in the neighborhood councils. It is a legitimation of an unequal social structure and of particular interests. The discourse on participatory democracy tends also to be an ideology, and this is a paradox if one considers that the neighborhood councils are allegedly the most political dimension of French urban policy (*politique de la ville*).

One has to be cautious and not over-generalize the analysis. Still, urban policy is probably the first and most important example of governance in France. This analysis leads

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28 This situation is one of the causes for the present crisis of the politics.
29 Moreover, the supervisor State is not adequate to question inequality of resources that enable individuals to participate equally in public debates.
therefore to questions that have to be addressed to the thematic of governance in other domains and in other countries. If one leaves aside the economical sphere, where it probably has a (at least partially) different meaning, the notion of “governance” has been mostly used to justify, evaluate and analyze the reorganization of public policies. At this level, it seems to have produced interesting norms and cognitive effects. Social agents or academic observers often extend this notion to a more comprehensive approach. The title of this panel seems to go in this direction when it puts together governance and democratic legitimacy. In this attempt, are implicitly functionalist presuppositions introduced? How far can the notion of governance go beyond a reasoning focused on the “management of politics” from above, or beyond a judgment polarized upon governability problems? Is this notion open to an understanding of social inequalities and their impact on public action? Is it adequate to analyze and evaluate the democratic or undemocratic nature of public policies, and of politics overall?

One shall develop another argumentation to demonstrate this affirmation for the politique de la ville overall.
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