



by Sylvain Abrial

# Is there life in social work after the riots in France?

*Attempt to give a real answer to a fake question*

## French youth and social worker confronted with the need for social innovation

### ► Facts and figures

October 2005, France is in the spotlight of the global media, exposing the hard and true reality of its suburbs to the world, confronting European citizens with their representations of a presumed French model of integration, which would suddenly finish its reign: the violent riots, which started in Clichy-sous-Bois (Paris region) quickly extended to other big urban areas all over France. Some facts as a quick reminder: on the night of 27th-28th October 2005, two young boys died whilst trying to escape a police control, by hiding in a power substation. As soon as this piece of news was confirmed, groups of young people started to gather and protest in the streets. The protests turned quickly into urban riots, violence, car-burning, looting and so on.

### ► “Paris is burning!”

Headlines and world press cover pages indicated the stupefaction and incomprehension from other countries, when looking at the event. Reporters from all over the world were sent to the “burning suburbs” of Paris, following the same process like war reporters.

### ► What to understand beyond the riots?

Of course, these events were tragic and of course the way they have been reported reflects the way they have been (mis-) understood. Let’s not doubt also that these riots indicate something is going wrong in the land of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”. Since then, some other riots took place in France (November 2007), but also in Greece (December 2008). So, yes this has to be questioned and explored further!

In line with the issue of this Coyote, you, as reader of this magazine, being a representative of the European civil society, most probably an actor (activist?) of social cohesion, believer in inclusion, knight of the holy non- formal education field, you were very probably touched in one way or another by these riots just like you were by the riots in Greece. You probably tried to understand more about it, to read between the lines of the mass media in order to allow yourself an analytic view of this extinguishing model of integration, that France is known for. These riots might have been a unique occasion to understand the symptoms but also the foundations of French society. And because you are in the field, you would like to know how the social field, the youth sector, the NGO’s, the world of non- formal education in France – how all of them were affected by such an explosion of violence. How did they react, to which extent did it change their approach to the problems? Which new means were they given? A bunch of questions, and all very legitimate, that I would also ask myself if I would see the situation from another country.

### ► What do I want to understand from the “post-riots era”?

From my place and point of view, answering directly to the questions “What came after the riots, how did the social field react? Which initiatives did they implement” would mean falling into the same trap of the mass-medias and of most politicians:

*A sudden breakdown / some sensational events / a lot of noise around it / a sudden process of awareness-raising by the whole society / the urgent search for change / the announcement of exceptional measures / and life goes on!*

Therefore I propose to use these events as a way to explore and understand a little part of the history of the non-formal education field in France (also known as “popular education”) and its

evolution. Please, be aware that the following analysis is a very personal point of view. My position is indeed the one of a French former professional youth worker, who went through 15 years of experience in European non-formal education and who became a trainer in the field. This European perspective surely influenced my introspection and analysis of my former working field.

### ► A French history of non-formal education in line with a French model of integration

In order to understand what is now the state of social cohesion in France, we have to step away from this phenomenon of riots or at least to keep them as only one indicator among others of what hasn't been working anymore now for decades in French society: the French "one law for all" republican model of integration. From that perspective, we can then analyze how professionals of the non-formal education field have been working so far at local level, how they have dealt with this heavy responsibility of transmitting the values of such a



model of society and how their work has changed (or not) recently.

Unlike the American and British multicultural models of societies (which one could describe as "Lets' co-exist a reasonable distance apart and ignore individual initiatives and regulate the collective wellbeing"), France has constantly been trying to integrate its different populations into a formatted and historic model of society, which is proudly inherited from centuries of successful democracy. Integration into French society is linked to a model of assimilation, supposed to bind all citizens to each other and to the symbols of the French Republic.

This article is neither about a French history of integration, nor about the ethnic aspect of urban riots. What is to be understood is how all representatives of the non-formal education field in France (youth workers, community workers, social workers) have been also impregnated by this model of integration in their education, in the way they approach their profession and their involvement in the field. As I've been one of them, I can of course refer to my own experience but because I'm nowadays training some of them in diversity qualifications, I've been observing quite a lot of common approaches.

For those of you, who don't know yet, non-formal education in France is named "popular education"[1] and refers to a long history in line with the separation of church and state[2]. Popular education, as complementary to the free and republican public school, is put into practice with what we call "animation socioculturelle" (socio-cultural animation), which gained most of its positive image after the establishment of "congés payés" (paid leave) by law in 1936 and was considered to be a social innovation. Young people had then to be "occupied" in an educational way during their free time. Over the years, "popular education" has extended its influence, has become professional (different levels of qualifications for professional youth workers), has got institutionalized (different kinds of organizations, some of them under contract with municipalities, some organized in national federations and lobbies). Nowadays, all districts, suburbs and villages have their "centre social" or "maison de quartier", "MJC", "amicale laïque" (community centre, youth and culture clubs...). These structures have the reputation of playing an important role in keeping the social links in the community, at a local level.

As mentioned before, most of the people working in these organizations are professional youth and social workers, trained and qualified according to harmonized national formats. They all went through the history of popular education, they all learnt about the French concept of "laïcité" (secularity), they all heard about "projet éducatif", "projet pédagogique"[3], "autonomy of the child", "education to citizenship", "integration"... In brief, and that's fair enough, they all were taught their job according to their historic republican model of society. In that way, they can be considered as guardians of social cohesion, through the transmission of society values.



## ► Youth and social worker: from capacity of observation to limits of action

Therefore, and to come back to the subject of riots, such structures are on the one hand the essential link between people and a barely sustainable model of society. On the other hand, they can easily be considered as the instruments of social and youth policies.

Regardless of the way they are considered, professionals in such structures are working on a long-term basis, by being present in the districts. From this position they could observe the development of inequalities and the constantly growing anger of young people and they were never surprised by the explosion of riots.

For a long time now, and in an accelerated way recently, these professionals have been fed with a lot of new directives, integration programmes and means of action by the different governments. According to the different policies in place, they have been swinging between more or less repressive policies, and with more or less funds injected into social action.

Their challenge has always been the same: Trying to keep their independence while carrying on with a focused action plan on the ground. One of their difficulties in this is to deal with a bunch of different social measures and funding programmes. New ones emerge; old ones are cut suddenly. Trying to move around in this jungle of programmes and funding for social cohesion can easily restrain any freedom of initiative.

The main issue is indeed: How can you innovate when your major concern is about how to fill in strict application forms, with just this amount space for question A and just these kinds of answers expected to question B, in order to make sure you will get sufficient funding for your structure to survive and go on working?

I hereby affirm it: In order not to become only experts in "technocracies", most French youth and social workers urgently need a new breath of innovation and new space of action. The answers might be European...

## ► Europe as a space for social innovation?

According to the European Commission, "*social innovation means the design and implementation of creative ways of meeting social needs*"[4]. It has to be admitted that Europe has a long tradition of social innovation. Following the "European year of innovation and creativity" and entering the "European year of fight against poverty and social exclusion", we can now easily link the issue of our French youth and social workers with the necessity of a broader perspective, which might help them to open up and get out of a constrained French-French framework.

Why not use then the operative arm of social innovation in Europe, the so-called "social experimentation" approach?

"*Experimentation is described as the carrying out of controlled experiments with a view to testing hypotheses(...) it is non-spontaneous and subject to evaluation*"[5]. In the social

field, experimentation is produced by NGO's and might become a way to test and renew practices and responses to new social needs at grass root level, with a bottom-up perspective, which hopefully contributes to renewed and effective social policies[6].

Isn't it what the European field of non-formal education has been claiming since it began? Isn't it even what defines the best in our field of work: Proposing educational situations, non-spontaneous but non-formalized, learner-centred, with no preconceived idea of what it might create but with a real plan for measuring and valuing their (learning) impact? And on the top of it, the most valuable educational tool: Transnational cooperation as the playground, in which diversity, creativity and mutual confrontation question constantly our practices and therefore permit the renewal of youth and social policies!

## ► Some conclusions

As a conclusion, this article has tried to demonstrate how the French youth or social worker can easily feel constrained into a valuable but over-strict historic model. It has also referred to the riots as a symptom of something not functioning anymore in the society without pretending that it would necessarily provoke a big change in practices of social work. The article has been through the idea of social experimentation as a response to new social needs and as a track towards innovation.

Basically, my conclusion might sound very simplistic and familiar to you: Transnational cooperation and non-formal education at European level is the way to bring back creativity and innovation in the practice of social and youth work at a local level! It has to be experimented with and transposed into local practice.

This sounds familiar and not innovative to you but does it sound familiar to local youth and social workers, who never worked at European level? What is indeed a routine here might be an innovation there and vice-versa! The challenge is to keep our mind in the sky but our two feet on the ground; otherwise we might lose creativity on the one side or the link to social reality on the other. ■



### Notes:



- [1] To explore more in English: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular\\_education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_education)
- [2] Law of 1905 setting up the framework for the French concept of «laïcité», often translated as “secularism”  
To understand more about this law in English: [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/1905\\_French\\_law\\_on\\_the\\_separation\\_of\\_Church\\_and\\_State#encyclopedia](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/1905_French_law_on_the_separation_of_Church_and_State#encyclopedia)  
In French: <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/laicite/index.shtml>
- [3] « Projet éducatif » in French refers usually to the educational and social plan pursued by an organization. It is usually seen as a global roadmap of the organization, made of values, global objectives...  
“Projet pédagogique” is more specific and refers to the educational approach, the methodology used and to some operative objectives, which can be measured. It is more operational and focused on 1 or 2 concrete actions/projects
- [4] Meeting of President Barroso with social innovation experts and stakeholders in Brussels, following a workshop organized by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) on social innovation, January 2009.  
<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/81&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&uiLanguage=fr>
- [5] Extract from “Social experimentation in Europe, towards a more complete and effective range of the EU actions for social innovation”, study by Marjorie Jouen, edited by the independent think tank *Notre Europe*, at the request of the French High Commissioner for active inclusion against poverty for the forum on social experimentation in Europe 21-22 November 2008 in Grenoble
- [6] Let’s mention here that the French High Commissioner for active inclusion against poverty and for youth has launched in June and November 2009 a call for projects of social experimentation in the field of youth (specifically for those with less opportunities) on different themes (international mobility being one of them). This call for long-term projects is targeted to NGO’s, educational institutions and public bodies, active in the field of youth. It is clearly and fully in-line with social experimentation approach (given an important place to evaluation and conditions of generalization). To understand more in French: <http://www.lagenerationactive.fr/>

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