

The media construction of the suburbs in France: looking back on the 2007 presidential campaign

Jean Rivière and Sylvie Tissot

In the run-up to the recent French presidential elections, the question of la banlieue – the (generally poor) suburbs that ring every major city in France – barely warranted a mention. In 2007, however, it was a central issue in the election campaign. An analysis of articles in four major national dailies reveals the extent to which the media have helped construct a specific image of the suburbs based on disorder and incivility.

In the aftermath of the recent French presidential elections, this article considers the way in which the image of *la banlieue* was forged in the media during the previous presidential election campaign in 2007. To this end, a corpus of articles from four national daily newspapers was compiled.¹ Close reading of these articles reveals that, in 62% of cases, the residential spaces mentioned were “*banlieues*” (suburbs), “*quartiers sensibles*” (“sensitive” neighbourhoods) and “*cités HLM*” (social housing estates), with these figures ranging from 50% in *Le Monde* and *Libération* to 80% in *L’Humanité*. “*Quartiers sensibles*”, a term which made its first appearance in the public debate around 20 years ago, are clearly still the areas of predilection for all those who seek to describe and understand – and deal with – social problems (Tissot 2007; Sedel 2009).

The longevity of this kind of analysis of the social world is worth considering in itself, especially when the list of pathologies associated with the *banlieue* continues to increase. In addition to the lack of “*citoyenneté*” (citizenship) and the deficit of “*liens sociaux*” (social ties) diagnosed in the 1980s, this list has also included, since the 1990s, repeated alerts regarding delinquency, “*violence urbaine*” (urban violence) and “*communautarisme*” (communitarianism), while issues such as anti-Semitism and Muslim fundamentalism, sexism and homophobia now seem only to affect “the suburbs” (Fassin 2010).

More generally, these suburbs always seem to be the framework for intellectual controversies and questions: are they becoming “ghettos”? Should one highlight – if necessary, by breaking taboos – the delinquency that prevails there, or, on the contrary, is it better to underline the dynamism of the young people that live there? Although other questions have also been raised in public debate, such as discrimination, social problems still seem to be extensively studied through the prism of a number of very narrowly circumscribed territories.

This focus on the suburbs is not in any way neutral, as the 2007 presidential campaign shows. During the run-up to this election, newspaper readers were offered very specific representations of the people who live in these areas. Because election campaigns are moments when social relations

¹ An examination of the general-interest pages of *L’Humanité* (historically communist), *Libération* (left-wing), *Le Monde* (centre-left) and *Le Figaro* (right-wing) was carried out by Jean Rivière over a four-month period between February and May 2007. On the basis of these articles, only those containing references to a residential space (e.g. “social housing estates”), a social group (e.g. “young people”) and a political stance (e.g. “Ségolène Royal”) were included in the corpus. This text develops certain elements discussed in a chapter of a published work (Rivière 2011) relating to large suburban social housing estates, central urban spaces and rural areas.

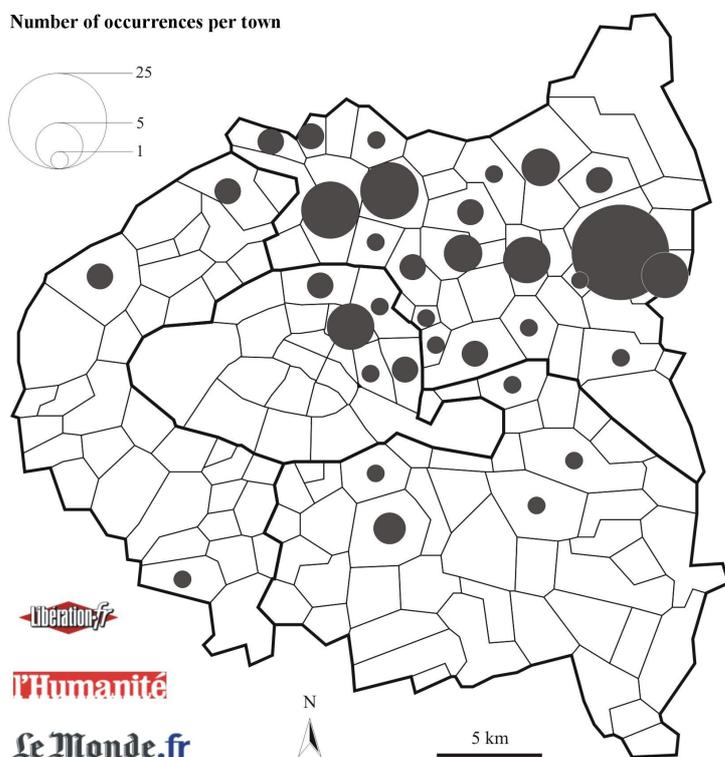
are crystallised, the interpretations of the social world that are mobilised at the time have an even greater impact on these collective representations.

Riot territories?

An examination of the places evoked in the articles makes it possible, first of all, to draw up quite a precise geography of the suburban spaces in question. In terms of administrative divisions, it is “Seine-Saint-Denis” that is cited in nearly 40% of cases. It is this *département*, immediately to the north-east of Paris – also known by its administrative number, 93 (rendered as “*le quatre-vingt-treize*” or even the local slang term “*le neuf-trois*”) – that is the embodiment of “*les cités*” (“the estates” or “the projects”). It is therefore interesting to take a closer look at this geographical area. The map below, which shows the city of Paris proper and the three *départements* that make up its inner ring of suburbs, confirms the dominant place of towns in Seine-Saint-Denis, with Clichy-sous-Bois in first place, followed by Argenteuil (in the neighbouring Val-d’Oise *département*), Saint-Denis, La Courneuve, Bondy and Montfermeil. The memory of the 2005 “*émeutes*” (riots), extensively covered in the media, explains the interest expressed by journalists across the board in Clichy-sous-Bois, where the riots began in October, as exemplified by the headline of the 7 May 2007 edition of *Le Figaro*: “*Clichy-sous-Bois, symbole des banlieues à risque*” (“Clichy-sous-Bois, the symbol of suburbs at risk”). Argenteuil, on the other hand, is associated with the remarks of the then-interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, who, while on a tour of the town, promised he would rid estates of “*racaille*” (“rabble” or “scum”) using a “Kärcher” (high-pressure cleaner); furthermore, it is precisely these comments that are deemed to have triggered the events of October 2005. Furthermore, it was the beginnings of a “riot” at the Gare du Nord railway station that led to the 10th *arrondissement* (city district) of Paris appearing in several articles, which would otherwise be quite surprising, given the sociological make-up of this central district, where gentrification has been under way since the 1990s.

Geography of "neighbourhoods" in the 2007 press corpus

Number of occurrences per town



libération.fr

Humanité

Le Monde.fr

LE FIGARO.fr

Sources: IGN; examination of press corpus, 2007

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Of course, these articles also contain – albeit much less often – references to Lyon and its suburbs (such as Vaulx-en-Velin, Villeurbanne and Vénissieux), to working-class towns and cities in the north of France (Lille, Roubaix, Dunkirk) and the large cities of the Mediterranean basin, where vulnerable populations are sometimes concentrated in central districts (in Perpignan, for example), as well as a fair number of medium-sized towns and cities that each have their share of poorer housing districts on their outskirts. However, the media focus on a few neighbourhoods in the Paris region clearly reflects what was unanimously one of the key issues at the start of the campaign: would Sarkozy, “eagerly awaited in Argenteuil” (*Libération*, 26 February 2007), be able to campaign in the *banlieue* without causing a new riot?

Typically, the images of these large estates go hand in hand with descriptions of landscapes that associate social behaviours with particular urban forms: decayed buildings where the dominant colours are dull (“greyish”, “yellowed”), spaces saturated with concrete, tower blocks and slab blocks “on an inhuman scale”, the pathogenic effect of which is underlined through the use of medical terms such as “scar”. The diagnosis that has accompanied urban regeneration operations since the beginning of the 2000s can be found here too: the “problems” of these neighbourhoods will only truly be resolved once certain parts of them are demolished.

Photographs of suburban landscapes all seem to be modelled on the same basic structure, frequently featuring tower blocks, complete with stereotypical youths hanging around, kicking their heels: large lips reflect African origins, while the dress code of hoodies with hands in pockets signals their supposedly permanent state of indolence. We have moved on from the disorganised spaces described in the literature of the 1970s on *sarcellite*² to the “new dangerous classes” (Beaud and Pialoux 2005), composed to a large extent of immigrants, and considered a key part of the “suburban problem” since the 1980s.

The question is, are stigmatising descriptions such as these omnipresent in the press articles examined? Although “*banlieue*” is the term that occurs most often (Table 1), it is in fact expressions derived from the word “*quartier*” (“neighbourhood” or “district”) that represent the largest share of the corpus (38% of the 306 expressions identified), including “working-class”, “sensitive” and “difficult” neighbourhoods, as well as rarer – but more pejorative – expressions such as “*quartier multicolore*” (“multicoloured neighbourhood”), “*le quartier où Darty n’ose plus aller*” (“the district where Darty [an electrical retailer] no longer dares to deliver”), “*quartier quadrillé par la BAC*” (“area under crime-squad surveillance”) or “*quartier qui cumule les handicaps*” (“neighbourhood with multiple handicaps”).

2 Translator’s note: “*la sarcellite*”, or “*sarcellitis*”, was a type of psychological depression similar to the new-town blues, named after the town of Sarcelles, in the northern Paris suburbs, where many large, system-built social housing estates were constructed after World War II.

Table 1: The 20 expressions most frequently used to describe residential spaces

Banlieue	<i>Suburb</i>	61
Quartier populaire	<i>Working-class neighbourhood</i>	41
Quartier	<i>Neighbourhood/district</i>	40
Cité	<i>Estate/project</i>	36
Cité populaire	<i>Working-class estate</i>	9
Quartier sensible	<i>Sensitive neighbourhood</i>	8
Quartier difficile	<i>Difficult neighbourhood</i>	6
Cité HLM	<i>Social housing estate</i>	4
HLM	<i>Social housing</i>	4
Ville populaire	<i>Working-class town</i>	4
Ville communiste	<i>Communist town</i>	3
ZUS	<i>Sensitive urban zone</i>	3
Banlieue populaire	<i>Working-class suburb</i>	2
Cité sensible	<i>Sensitive estate</i>	2
Ghetto de banlieue	<i>Suburban ghetto</i>	2
Grand ensemble	<i>Large housing estate</i>	2
Grand quartier populaire	<i>Large working-class neighbourhood</i>	2
Quartiers les plus défavorisés	<i>Most disadvantaged neighbourhoods</i>	2
Ville minière	<i>Mining town</i>	2
ZEP	<i>Educational priority zone</i>	2

The problems and disorders of “*la banlieue à risques*” (“suburbs at risk”), “*la banlieue poudrière*” (“powder-keg suburbs”), “*la banlieue qui flambe*” (“suburbs in flames”) and the “*territoires perdus de la République*” (“lost territories of the Republic”) are extensively discussed in this way. However, alongside generally neutral terms – such as “ZUS” (sensitive urban zone), “ZEP” (educational priority zone) and “ZUP” (priority urbanisation zone) – the social or political characteristics of the suburbs are also underlined through expressions such as “*quartiers populaires*” (working-class neighbourhoods), “*cités populaires*” (working-class estates), “*les quartiers les plus défavorisés*” (the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods) or even “*villes rouges*” (“red towns”, i.e. towns that tend to vote communist). Although one must be prudent when interpreting the constituent elements of the corpus, it seems clear that this register of language, which associates descriptions of large estates with their social or political profiles, is more present in those newspapers on the left of the political spectrum, with examples in 50% of articles in *L’Humanité*, 32% of those in *Libération*, 41% in *Le Monde* and 14% in *Le Figaro*. Conversely, expressions centred on disorder and incivility are more frequent in newspapers with a right-leaning editorial line on social issues: 8% in *L’Humanité*, 9% in *Libération*, 11% in *Le Monde* and 35% in *Le Figaro*, which, on 29 March 2007, for instance, sported the headline “*La banlieue, poudrière sous haute surveillance*” (“The suburbs: a powder keg under high surveillance”).

The tone of the articles varies not only according to the newspaper, but also according to the different campaign periods.³ Accordingly, even though the majority of terms used are “neutral” during each of the periods considered, the use of expressions focused on incivility and the environment of “the projects” increases notably just before the first round and between the first and second rounds (peaking at a little under 20% at the crucial moment), before dropping to less than 10% once polling is over. So, who exactly is responsible for this incivility in the eyes of print journalists?

3 The first period corresponds to the phase during which potential candidates must collect signatures from 500 elected representatives in order to be eligible as a candidate (22 February–16 March 2007). The second period extends from the deadline for signatures up to the first round of the election (16 March–22 April). The third period corresponds to the fortnight between the first and second rounds (22 April–6 May), while the fourth period begins with the second ballot and concludes with the end of Jacques Chirac’s presidential term (6–16 May).

Estate residents: from violence to political integration through democratic participation

These suburbs, portrayed so frequently in the press, seem to be populated above all by “*jeunes*” (“young people” or “youths”): this group is cited far more than any other when discussing the inhabitants of these urban spaces, even without counting those young people who seem to exist only through their place of residence, as “*jeunes des quartiers*”, “*jeunes des banlieues*” or “*jeunes des cités*” – all terms for young people from disadvantaged estates (Table 2). For example, an article by Luc Bronner, *Le Monde*’s “*banlieue specialist*”, opens with a declaration from “Tarek, 17, a resident of Les Mureaux,⁴ [who] brutally sums up the general mood of sensitive neighbourhoods in the Paris suburbs” (3 May 2007). Similarly, residents of these areas are described simply as “*habitants*” (inhabitants) – or even “*habitants des quartiers*” (estate inhabitants) – a term that is never used on its own, unqualified, to describe people who live in other types of residential spaces.

Table 2: The 20 expressions most frequently used to describe inhabitants’ social background

Jeune	<i>Young person/youth</i>	56
Habitant	<i>Inhabitant</i>	29
Ouvrier	<i>Manual worker</i>	26
Salarié	<i>Employee</i>	23
Racaille	<i>Rabble/scum</i>	22
Chômeur	<i>Unemployed</i>	15
Enfant	<i>Child</i>	15
Employé	<i>Employee</i>	14
Étudiant	<i>Student</i>	14
Immigré	<i>Immigrant</i>	14
Gens	<i>People</i>	13
Femme	<i>Woman</i>	11
Retraité	<i>Pensioner</i>	11
Étranger	<i>Foreigner</i>	10
Noir	<i>Black (adj.)/black person (n.)</i>	10
Arabe	<i>Arab</i>	9
Citoyen	<i>Citizen</i>	9
Français	<i>French (adj.)/French person (n.)</i>	9
Sans-papiers	<i>Undocumented migrant</i>	9
Mère de famille	<i>Mother</i>	8

Age, along with factors such as nationality and origin, tends to be the dominant criterion, as Table 2 shows. Expressions such as “*immigrés*” (immigrants) and “*étrangers*” (foreigners) can be found, as well as more specific terms to describe ethnic background: “*noirs*”, “*blacks*” and “*Africains*” to refer to black people; “*Arabes*” and “*Maghrébins*” to refer to North Africans; and some descriptions are more precise still, with terms such as “*Marocains*” (Moroccans), “*Turcs*” (Turks) and “*Algériens*” (Algerians) employed. For those originating from this last country, the sub-categories used can be even more specific, with distinctions made, for example, between “*Kabyles*” and “*pieds-noirs*”.⁵ It would be appropriate, moreover, to feminise many of these descriptions in French, as women seem to occupy a particularly important place in the suburbs. They are generally presented as “*mères de famille*” (mothers), as well as “*femmes voilées*” (“veiled women”).

⁴ Translator’s note: Les Mureaux is a town in the outer western suburbs of Paris.

⁵ Translator’s note: the term *pied-noir* designates French citizens of European origin who were born in Algeria prior to independence from France, and who considered Algeria their homeland. Huge numbers of *pieds-noirs* were “repatriated” to mainland France following Algerian independence.

Indeed, expressions relating to religion also occupy a not insignificant place in the articles studied – Islam being the religion in question, of course, with references to “*musulmans*” (Muslims) or, when the stigmatisation is less explicit, to “*barbus*” (“bearded men”), “*fondamentalistes*” (fundamentalists) or “*intégristes*” (extremists). It should be noted that no Catholics whatsoever appear to live on these estates, with references to Christians reserved for pieces concerning rural areas. In article after article, the collusion between the language of disorder and that of national identity – elevated to a key political issue by the right wing – leaves little doubt regarding the identity of troublemakers and “*délinquants*”.

Here, too, a clear divide can be found between the various newspapers. “*Racaille*”, “*bandes*” (gangs), “*casseurs*” (thugs) and “*délinquants*” (delinquents) are among the words most frequently used in *Le Figaro*. And although the presence of terms such as “*ouvriers*” (manual workers), “*salariés*” (employees) and “*chômeurs*” (unemployed) in Table 2 may be surprising – as they are generally invisible in the press and coverage of social issues (Beaud, Confavreux and Lindgaard 2008) – it should be pointed out the vast majority of occurrences are in articles from *L’Humanité* (18 of 26 occurrences for “*ouvriers*”, 11 out of 15 for “*chômeurs*” and 19 out of 23 for “*salariés*”) and *Le Monde*, where the social categories evoked depict a more diverse image of disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

If we take a look at all the articles selected, not just those concerning “the projects”, a shift in the way inhabitants are described can be observed around the time of the first ballot. More specifically, terms linked to ethnic origin or skin colour, words relating to religion, and descriptions describing the behaviour of inhabitants (often in terms of deviance, with reference to “*racaille*”) are present in 28% of articles immediately before the first round, and in only 13% of articles after 22 April. And yet we have shown that it was precisely to describe the *banlieue* – and not its inhabitants – that this interpretation of the social world, based on subjective criteria (religion, practices and social behaviours that are presumed to be common to given groups), was previously used. However, a close examination of the articles published once the first round of the election was over reveals a more frequent use of objectively measurable social properties (such as socio-economic categories). Although most journalists – influenced here by proponents of televisual electoral sociology – are usually not overly inclined to highlight the effect of social determinants on electoral practices, it is possible that these more frequent references to inhabitants’ social positions in articles appearing after the first round can be explained, in part, by the fact that the vote has taken place, and is thus likely to be analysed. Nevertheless, nothing prevented the authors of the articles in question from considering the political effects of the material conditions of estate residents before the poll – and yet this was (all too) rarely the case.

Indeed, the political behaviour attributed to inhabitants of social housing estates seem to be viewed from a particularly consensus-based perspective. From the very start of the election campaign, the articles of the corpus portrayed the forthcoming presidential election as an opportunity for political integration for “the projects” and their voters – just two years after the riots of 2005. Here, we see a dichotomous and legitimist view of political behaviours in the suburbs, with fear of riots and violence on the one hand, rejected as irrational, and hopes of “good-citizen” behaviour on the other, which several newspapers – anxious to counter the stigmatising visions they are sometimes accused of peddling – sought to underline. Among attitudes considered to be positive, we can cite first and foremost the action undertaken by associations, as testified by the number of articles dedicated to AC Le Feu (an association created in Clichy-sous-Bois following the events of 2005), which launched a tour of France in order to hear the grievances of residents of social housing estates. However, in many articles, the act of voting – and particularly voting for the left – is portrayed as the ideal means of achieving political integration.

Consequently, the names of the presidential candidates were very often present in articles (Table 3). Socialist candidate “Ségolène Royal” was by far the most frequent category, followed by communist candidate “Marie-George Buffet” (32 occurrences, exclusively in articles from

L'Humanité) and the word “*communiste*” itself (28 occurrences, of which 21 in *L'Humanité*).⁶ “Nicolas Sarkozy”, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement; conservative) candidate, is next on the list, but the articles in which he appears all tend to concern estate-dwellers’ immediate reactions to Mr Sarkozy following his now-infamous “*racaille*” comments. In contrast to the beginning of the election campaign, many articles published on the eve of the first ballot raised questions concerning the possible risk of an “explosion” in the event of Nicolas Sarkozy’s victory – indeed, so much so that, even after the election, this was still the angle adopted by *Le Monde* on 8 May in its report from the deprived suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois, where “the tense face-off between the forces of order and inhabitants of the ‘Cit  des 3000’ estate did not degenerate into confrontations”.

Table 3: The 20 expressions most frequently used to describe residents’ electoral behaviour

S�gol�ne Royal	-	52
Marie-George Buffet	-	32
Communiste	<i>Communist</i>	28
Nicolas Sarkozy	-	26
Gauche	<i>Left</i>	21
PCF	<i>French Communist Party</i>	21
Fran�ois Bayrou	-	17
Inscription sur les listes �lectorales	<i>Registering to vote</i>	16
Jean-Marie Le Pen	-	16
FN	<i>National Front</i>	15
Olivier Besancenot	-	13
Socialiste	<i>Socialist</i>	13
Jos� Bov�	-	10
UMP	<i>Union for a Popular Movement</i>	10
CGT	<i>General Confederation of Labour</i>	8
Gauche populaire et antilib�rale	<i>Popular and anti-liberal left</i>	7
PS	<i>Socialist Party</i>	7
UDF	<i>Union for French Democracy</i>	7
Altermondialiste	<i>Alter-globalist</i>	4
Frontiste	<i>National Front supporter</i>	4

With the risk of violence waiting in the wings, the election was portrayed by the media as the natural outlet for *banlieue* residents’ protests. Among the political behaviours cited in the articles examined, “*l’inscription sur les listes  lectorales*” (registering to vote) is frequently mentioned, with the campaign led by AC Le Feu to encourage “young people” to get their names on the electoral register and channel their anger by voting being particularly well covered in the press. This specific coverage raises a number of points. First, the 16 occurrences of “*l’inscription sur les listes  lectorales*” are all to be found in articles concerning ‘the projects’, which is somewhat caricatural – as if people living in other urban or rural areas had never thought to register to vote before 2007.

But it is interesting to note that, while the calls to register to vote were extensively covered by the press, the question of abstention – though always in the background when discussing this issue – is almost never explicitly mentioned, almost as though abstaining is simply not an option. And yet recent studies have underlined the high levels of abstention observed in working-class areas composed of large estates (Braconnier and Dormagen 2007) – by showing, moreover, that voter turnout and voter registration are closely linked. Similarly, while the growing levels of abstention among the working classes are closely related to the way the political world operates, no journalists have mentioned – except with regard to Nicolas Sarkozy personally – the hypothesis whereby the

⁶ Occurrences of the terms “PCF” (French Communist Party), “CGT” (General Confederation of Labour, a trade union with formerly strong links to the PCF) and “*gauche populaire et antilib rale*” (“popular and anti-liberal left”) were also almost exclusively found in articles from *L’Humanit *.

political class itself (e.g. the blurring of ideological borders between the left and right wings; the gap, particularly in socio-economic terms, that separates elected representatives from their electorates) could be behind the decision not to vote. Conversely, the tendency towards isolation, indifference, nihilism or even “violent” reactions seems inherent in “young people from the projects”.

Overall, the focus on voter registration and the fact that the issue of abstention is raised only implicitly mean that residents’ political behaviour is presented in a particular way. On the one hand, nothing is said about the possible existence of politically motivated abstention in these “neighbourhoods” (or elsewhere, for that matter), where, election after election, objective living conditions change very little, and where the distance between these populations and the left-wing parties continues to increase. And, on the other hand, any questions regarding the possible political (or “proto-political”) dimension of riot-related behaviour seem to be set aside (Mauger 2006).

Estates under the spotlight at the crucial moment

This media focus on the *banlieue* during the 2007 presidential elections was clearly not anodyne. Furthermore, it was at the moment in the campaign when these areas were most discussed that they were also described in the most stigmatising terms. Indeed, the percentage of terms relating to suburban neighbourhoods falls visibly as the weeks progress: 64% before the first round, 62% between the two rounds, but just 37% after the second ballot. At the same time, central urban spaces – generally presented as “calmer” – were suddenly evoked four times more often.

From a more critical standpoint, and in a context of strong links between the political world and the media, one might legitimately ask questions about the electoral uses of such a focus on the suburbs and their supposed problems. One might also wonder whether the return to obscurity of population groups that only seem to emerge in sensational reports of violent incidents is the corollary of the urban cores of cities once again taking centre stage during the post-electoral “analyses”, owing to the high proportion of national dailies’ readerships that happen to live in these central areas. In conclusion, it would seem to be a case of newspapers’ journalistic focus returning to what its customers consider to be a legitimate space.

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Jean Rivière is a lecturer at IGARUN (Institute of Geography and Regional Planning at the University of Nantes) and a member of the “Espaces et Sociétés” (ESO) research unit (UMR 6590 – CNRS). His work is in the field of social geography, and more specifically the study of the spatial dimension of inequalities and power relationships. His work brings together the social recompositions under way in (peri-)urban environments and electoral behaviours that are expressed in these settings. His recent publications include “La division sociale des espaces périurbains français et ses effets électoraux” (*Données Urbaines*, vol. 6, 2011) and “Catégorisations résidentielles et (dé)valorisation des habitants. La campagne présidentielle française de 2007 dans la presse écrite” (in *La dimension spatiale des inégalités. Regards croisés des sciences sociales*, 2011).

Sylvie Tissot is professor of political science at Université Paris-8. Her work concerns the reform of public spaces and their representations, from social-housing neighbourhoods to gentrified districts, in France and the United States. She is the author of *L'État et les quartiers. Genèse d'une catégorie de l'action publique* (Seuil, 2007) and *De bons voisins. Enquête dans un quartier de la bourgeoisie progressiste* (Raisons d'Agir, 2011).

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