

The limits of local participation and deliberation in the French “*politique de la ville*”

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Abstract

For the past twenty years in France, the *politique de la ville* (a policy targeted on impoverished urban areas) has constituted one of the main sources of renewal of the discourse concerning social participation. This article looks at whether it has generated a real democratisation of public action. The following four questions are discussed. Have participatory procedures improved the efficiency of public policy? Have they favoured a strengthening of the social link? Has the setting up of new procedures improved deliberation between political and non-political actors? Finally, has this new policy generated a renewal of local elites and modified the decision-making process? The authors conclude that these different attempts have had only very partial effects.

Introduction

In France the concern with local governance grew out of urban social movements and the politics of self-management in the 1970s, resulting in several experiments of limited scope and duration. The latter influenced the move towards state decentralisation and were among the first steps towards the *politique de la ville*, a state-initiated urban policy focused on the neediest neighbourhoods. The *politique de la ville* was institutionalised in the 1980s by the first left-wing government, at a time when an important process of decentralisation allowed the devolution of various competences to local governments. As a result of a policy of territorial "affirmative action", priority was given to neighbourhoods deemed to be most in need in terms of various socio-economic criteria and following extensive political negotiations between the state and local authorities. This approach was intended to be global; it was grounded in a notion of "partnership" between various institutions and associations and had little to do with the private sector. It also represented an attempt to reform public management and state administration in neighbourhoods confronted by some of the most difficult social issues. After ten years of experiments, the target of the *politique de la ville* was formally expanded from the neighbourhood to the city as a whole, culminating in a major law on urban policy ("Loi d'orientation pour la ville", 13/07/1991). This new urban policy was pursued throughout the nineties and is currently implemented on a conurbation scale. Some reorientations have been introduced, due to the changing political majorities (most notably, a law creating tax-free zones in the poor suburbs was enacted by the right-wing government in 1996). Although the idea of a "Marshall plan" for the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods was regularly expressed from the outset, it was never implemented and financial and administrative commitments have remained limited (Delarue 1991; Sueur 1999; Cour des comptes 2002). The budget of this policy is difficult to calculate but can be estimated at about 4.5 billion euros per year, for contracts that are directed to three million inhabitants. Moreover, as the problems of these neighbourhoods have remained unsolved, the legitimacy of the new urban policy has been increasingly questioned.

Characterised in theory by contracts, public deliberation, global approaches to problems and citizens' participation, this new urban policy illustrates the transformations affecting public governance. Some of the main goals it has put on the agenda have been widespread. Participation, which since the beginning has been a key element in the discourse concerning the *politique de la ville*, has become a nearly consensual keyword in the global discussion about modernisation of political life and public administration. The idea of deliberative politics, although proposed in a rather ambiguous way that does not differentiate deliberation

from bargaining (Elster 1994,1998; Habermas, 1996), has also had extensive resonance. Slogans such as “contractual politics” or the “facilitator state” (Donzelot & Estèbe 1994) have captured ideas that the discourse on governance has recently incorporated. Some elements of the international discourse on New Public Management, such as promotion of a less hierarchical, more flexible, transversal, output-oriented and accountable public administration, were first introduced in France in the debate on urban regeneration.

These catchwords have not only been “cheap talk”; to a certain extent, they have led to real institutional innovations. In most of the cities’ poor suburbs, neighbourhood managers have been contracted and have become local facilitators for social work. The delegation to NGOs of some dimensions of public action, most notably in the social and the cultural sectors, has been particularly dynamic in large cities and medium-sized towns. Some novelties that were experimented within the urban policy were subsequently adopted far beyond its ambit: in 2002 a new law on decentralisation extended the role of participation and deliberation in public policies and made the creation of neighbourhood councils mandatory in all cities with more than 80,000 residents. Very often, officials and intellectuals have explicitly described the new urban policy as the avant-garde of innovative policy-making.

Nevertheless, this claim has also been sharply criticised. Is it not paradoxical to want to make the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods the main areas of modernisation of public action? Is it credible to ask their residents to participate and deliberate, and thus to become ideal citizens, when active citizenship is tending to decline everywhere, even in wealthier areas? Is it really possible to fight such an intense social and economic crisis with legal, administrative and financial means that remain so limited (Damamme & Jobert 1995; Le Galès 1995; Gaudin 1993, 2002)?

In this paper we evaluate the discourse and practical innovations of the *politique de la ville*, focusing mainly on the relationships between local administrations and residents. The idea is not to provide a social history of the emergence of these policies, but to discuss them as a whole. The first section briefly presents our methodological approach and the underlying theoretical assumptions, while the second section describes the urban policy discourse and its concrete tools. The following four sections examine the *politique de la ville* in relation to four main criteria: (i) Has this new policy-making been efficient, particularly in its participatory dimension? (ii) Has the new urban policy been socially inclusive: has it been open to outsiders or actors from the lower classes? (iii) Since hopes were placed on the ability of actors to collectively elaborate some common goals and shared beliefs, based on an argumentative debate, has the *politique de la ville* really been deliberative? (iv) Last but not least, has it been

democratic? What has been its legitimacy? Are decision-making processes reduced less and less to pre-existing forms of representation, and do they entail a wide participation?

To answer these questions it is necessary to articulate theoretical and empirical arguments and to pay special attention to the link between discourses and practices. Two objects which are supposed to represent the core of the new urban policy democratic dimension, the role of associations and the functioning of "neighbourhood councils" (micro-local institutions that rely upon citizen participation), will be closely examined. The function of associations as "watchdogs" of the democratic spirit has been strongly asserted by social theorists. What has their role been in French urban policy? Are they institutionalised and, if so, are they powerfully constrained by political and administrative actors? Or is institutionalisation a new resource for associative action, that changes the way in which policies are implemented? Although neighbourhood councils have been created in various cities, a majority of them were initially linked to the *politique de la ville* and are claimed to represent one of its key concrete innovations in a new democratic process. Has this innovative process really taken place? Do neighbourhood councils, together with other procedures, push towards a more accountable and more transparent administrative action?

Empirical foundations and theoretical assumptions

Our analysis is based upon a critical survey of the prolific academic and administrative literature on the *politique de la ville* and upon the extensive fieldwork that we have carried out during the past years. We systematically scrutinised the national reports on the new urban policy in order to reconstruct the official policy-making discourse, and compared the results to our interviews and observations¹. The study of discourses was only one dimension of the research, for we also carefully analysed concrete practices. Our approach was essentially qualitative, with two main focuses. The first concerned the implementation of the *politique de la ville* in two regions (Aquitaine and Languedoc) and more particularly in two cities (Bordeaux and Montpellier). Although not concentrated only on social participation, this research tackled the question of the effects of partnerships between associations and public

¹ The reports can be divided into three main periods. The first corresponds to the beginning of the *politique de la ville* with the first Mitterand left-wing government (Dubedout, 1983). The second, in the moving political context of the late eighties and early nineties, includes the first national evaluations of the new policy (Levy 1988; Delarue 1991; Picard 1991; Floch 1991; Belorgey 1993; Geindre 1993; Donzelot & Estèbe, 1994; during this period the journal *Esprit* was in charge of organising conferences and publishing books in order to enrich the normative content of this policy: see among others Affichard & De Foucauld 1992; Roman 1993a, 1993b). During the third period at the end of the nineties, the legitimacy of the *politique de la ville* was strongly questioned (Sueur 1998, 1999; Challas, Genestier & Gaudin 1998; *Esprit* 1999; Kirszbaum 2000; Conseil Economique et social 2000; Cours des Comptes 2002).

administrations in the implementation of this policy². The second focus was on relations between social exclusion and participatory procedures in the poor Parisian suburbs of Saint-Denis and Aubervilliers³. It was subsequently extended to a comparative analysis of the modernisation of local management and participatory democracy in several countries, including France, Brazil and other Latin-American countries, Germany and the United States⁴. Although the results of this comparative fieldwork are only very partially presented in the present paper, they have been crucial for our understanding of French urban policy.

Our theoretical approach aims to avoid two limits in the interpretations of discourses and, more precisely, of the normative discourses with which the legitimacy of a social order is defended or challenged. The first is the risk of dissolving the normative dimension of legitimacy into sheer power relationships, and of considering public discourses as functional artefacts that merely legitimise domination. The second is the risk of conceiving power and legitimacy as resulting from a normative consent of free and equal citizens. As it appears in the assessment of the *politique de la ville*, these perspectives are one-sided. Two contrasting types of judgement illustrating these limitations have been made. For some authors this policy has only been a new way of obtaining citizens' consent and of reducing resistance and normalising deviance, as the traditional institutions no longer suffice for that (*Techniques, territoires et sociétés* 1993). For others, the new urban policy implies a modification of the democratic link, since the citizen is no longer merely the recipient of governmental action, but a participant in the formation of public decisions, a development that surpasses the paternalism inherited in France from the 3rd Republic (Donzelot & Estèbe, 1994).

As an alternative, a new theoretical approach informed by empirical inquiry is proposed here. It is inspired by theories of deliberative, participatory and/or associative democracy (Bohman & Rehg 1999, Cohen & Rodgers 1995; Dryzek 2000, Elster 1994, 1998;

² This study was conducted as part of a PhD in political science. About 120 semi-structured interviews were held to assess the contractualisation process, the transformation of administrative action and the involvement of non-political actors in the elaboration and implementation of actions targeted on deprived neighbourhoods (references will be provided after anonymous evaluation).

³ More than one hundred semi-structured interviews conducted over the last eight years, together with a systematic observation of the participatory procedures and ethnographic inquiries in the neighbourhoods, allowed us to follow the evolution of urban policies and public deliberation throughout this period. Some repeated interviews with key actors have been of particular interest. Some complementary and more short-term research has been done in other areas (especially in Paris in the 19th and 20th *arrondissements* and in the city of Rouen). The results have been presented in several monographs and comparative papers (references will be provided after anonymous evaluation).

⁴ This ongoing study began in 2001, with funding from the French Ministry for Research. It is based primarily on qualitative methods (the observation of participatory assemblies, juries or councils, dozens of interviews in each city, and ethnographic inquiries in the neighbourhoods) but also includes some elements of quantitative research (especially concerning the sociological profile of the participants). It has led to several publications (references will be provided after anonymous evaluation).

Habermas, 1996; Hirst 2000; Pateman, 1970), and by critical trends in French contemporary sociology. It is based on five underlying assumptions: (i) Although contemporary societies are deeply unequal, rulers and more generally all actors are frequently criticised publicly and have to justify themselves. The legitimacy of the social order largely depends on the dynamics of that critique, its integration, its exhaustion, and its renewal. Even though ideal norms do not necessarily indicate what actions really are, discourses have a performative effect when actors appeal to some of them in order to criticise actions or social orders that contradict them (Boltanski & Thévenot 1991; Boltanski & Chiapello 1999, Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2001). (ii) "Justification trials" consist in mobilising these discursive resources in concrete practices. In some cases the trials are not effective and no real critique can take place. One of the aims of the social sciences is therefore to analyse when such trials take place and when they do not. When they do, they temper power relationships and, to a certain extent, allow a deliberative dynamics that gives a normative content to the legitimacy of the social order. When they do not, discourses remain merely ideological and their factual legitimacy is disconnected from any democratic normative content. (iii) In these "justification trials", all the actors affected are not necessarily present and do not necessarily have the same voice (Bourdieu 1987). The situation in which all persons concerned participate on an equal footing is only an ideal-type. (iv) When social scientists consider some practices as more efficient, deliberative, socially open or democratic than others, they produce a normative judgment; this activity is in its own way part of the broader social critique and may interact more or less closely with it. To assess whether a particular decision-making process is characterised (or not) by transparency, accountability or democracy, as in the case of recent research on network governance (see among others Fung & Wright 2003; Gaudin 2002; Heurgeon & Landrieu 2000; Jouve & Lefebvre 1999; Le Galès 1995; Papadopoulos 1995, 2003), is another way of saying that it is (or is not) subjected to fair "justification trials".⁵

Goals and tools of the new urban policy

Throughout these years the discourse of the *politique de la ville* has been full of notions such as dialogue, participation, citizenship, partnership, or contracts. A keyword seems to summarise the spirit of this new policy: "reciprocal interpellation", that is, a process of mutual dialogue and critique between various public and private actors such as the state, local governments, or NGOs. This rhetorical term, introduced by Dubedout (1983) and emphasised

⁵ For a systematic discussion on these assumptions, see Blondiaux & Sintomer 2002a, 2002b.

in Donzelot & Estèbe (1994), implies three kinds of stated objective – functional, social and political – developed in the discourse of local actors and in national reports on urban policy.

(i) The starting point of the “*functional*” objective is to increase the efficiency of administration through a contractual logic based on project implementation. Three elements are seen as justifying this evolution. First, modern societies are increasingly complex and no single actor – even the state – is able to solve problems on its own; secondly, the state has to deal with other actors who may legitimately take part in the creation of the common good; and thirdly, societies are more individualised than before and individuals can no longer rely upon fixed collective identities. This is why “reciprocal interpellation” is central: it contributes to the modernisation of public management, to its legitimacy and to the flexible relations that the state has to build with individuals. The aim is to shift from a logic of trusteeship to one of contracts. Contracts can be signed between the state and local governments (for example the *contrat de ville* in which a town is granted state funding for specific operations planned for several years), or between the state and an individual (for example the *contrat d’insertion* through which a person is entitled to a minimal income -RMI- in exchange for an active search for training or employment), or between the state, local governments, business corporations and associations (for example the contract *Partenaires pour la ville*, in which all these agents contribute some specific input to urban regeneration). A special kind of partnership concerns the relationships between local governments and citizens as residents or users of public services. To listen more to what they are saying and to incorporate their competences and knowledge seems to be a way of improving the outcome of administrative action. In order to administer better, one has to administer closer to concrete problems, and even let people co-decide. In this perspective of “incorporation” of the aspirations and energies of the people, neighbourhood councils and associations are seen as crucial mediators between local government and citizens⁶.

(ii) The second stated objective can be called “*social*”: building or developing social cohesion. Nearly all actors share this goal. The problem that this social approach wants to

⁶ The literature on New Public Management often distinguishes between three ways of modernising the state through better accountability to citizens (Naschold, Oppen & Wegener, 1997; Reichard 2001; Reichard & Röber 2001). Citizens may be concerned as *users or consumers* of services and goods, as *co-implementing* decisions (most notably by volunteering), or as *co-deciding* policies. The functional objective of French urban policy corresponds to the first (“user-consumer”) dimension. However, what is specific to France is a sharp ideological dichotomy between the “*usager*”, that is, the user of a public service, and the “*client*”, that is, the user or the consumer of a private service or commodity. This distinction, which also exists in other Latin languages, does not correspond to the customer/client dichotomy in English and disappears in the German “*Kunden*”, a word that subsumes both “*usagers*” and “*clients*”. In the huge majority of cases in France, the call for modernising the state through better accountability to citizens-*usagers* did not correspond to a neo-liberal orientation towards market forces and criteria (Warin 2002a).

address is the weakening of the “social link” (a notion widely used in French politics and inherited from the Third Republic and its sociologists Durkheim and Bourgeois) in the neighbourhoods confronted with a new urban poverty. Unemployment, economic crisis, and the weakening of political or associative activism are seen as reinforcing one another and threatening social peace. In urban policy discourses, it is expected that the “social link” can be fostered through repression (such as a tough struggle against crime or the control of residential mobility in order to avoid the arrival of immigrants and other outsiders), through economic regeneration (that may promote the development of market rules through tax-free zones, or financial investments by the state), through social policies (that require the extension of the welfare state in these places), or through participation and contractualisation. These are supposed to foster associative networks, facilitate a better communication and mutual understanding between all actors and contribute to the creation of a shared identity. A new sociability should arise as a result.

(iii) The third proclaimed objective can be called “*political*” in a narrower sense. The idea is that “reciprocal interpellation” will increase democracy and citizenship, that is, “the right for a person to intervene in the decisions affecting her or him” (Delarue 1991: 89). Through their participation in the discussion of public policies, citizens will expand their civic culture and sense of responsibility, and politicians and local government administrators will become less distant from the people. Usually, the kind of “democracy” which is advocated in this context seems to be “communicative”, in Habermas’s sense (Habermas 1996). The legitimacy of decisions crucially depends on how they are elaborated: the more numerous and frequent interactions between citizens and administrations or politicians are, the more legitimate the decisions will be. In this perspective, the role of associations is again important to foster a civic culture. Moreover, politicians try to increase their proximity to citizens through neighbourhood councils, decentralised meetings in apartment blocks, or the appointment of a political leader as responsible for dealing with the everyday problems of a neighbourhood. The notion of “*démocratie de proximité*” summarises this idea. It has a double meaning and cannot be directly translated, for it can signify “neighbourhood democracy” (in this case, the “proximity” is geographical) but also a political “proximity” between citizens and rulers that goes far beyond the neighbourhood level. Most often, however, this proximity does not mean co-decision-making and implies only mutual information and consultation.

Various innovations have been carried out to meet these objectives. (i) The first one concerns the state’s internal structure. It consists in a stronger coordination of various administrations, either through the internal coordination of several services in the same city

under the direction of a politician and/or a neighbourhood manager, or through a partnership involving different public authorities. (ii) Partnerships can be extended to non-governmental actors, such as businesses or associations, resulting in the creation of “hybrid forums” (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2001) that include different types of actors. Most often, these forums are not open to the wider public and are merely consultative, even though they may sometimes decide upon local issues. This kind of mechanism is adapted from neo-corporatist institutions set up for collective bargaining in the workplace. Cooperation with NGOs often leads local governments or the state to delegate some responsibilities to them, especially in the social and the cultural spheres. (iii) Neighbourhood councils represent another kind of “hybrid forum” because they build dialogue between politicians, local administrators, NGO leaders and voluntary citizens. Usually, they are open to the public. Together with partnership with NGOs, they represent the main tool for associating civil society with the new urban policy.

Traditionally, associations stood on the fringes of urban policy whose actors were mainly political officials, civil servants and professionals (especially urban planners) (Grémion 1976). The new devices launched at the beginning of the eighties sought to promote a new conception of public action that involves associations in the elaboration and implementation of urban policies. As a consequence, associations are now policy actors in two ways. First, they are consulted in urban decisions and participate on various committees. They are therefore officially playing a role in the definition of social problems and are contributing to the elaboration of projects. Secondly, they are backed by institutions, and some of their projects are financed by public authorities. A large part of social policy is now implemented through contracts between associations and institutions: cultural projects developed in neighbourhoods, actions concerning school aid, operations against youth unemployment, and projects in sport or in training are carried out more and more by associations financed by public institutions. A parliamentary report reveals that during the 11th Plan (1994-2000), nearly 15,000 associations took part in the implementation of the *contrats de ville* through which the new urban policy was implemented (Sandrier 2001). The same report indicates that 73% of state funding – apart from investments – for the *politique de la ville* was directed to projects conducted by associations (this amount includes many leading NGOs active in deprived areas but led by people from outside and especially by social workers). Not surprisingly, the associations’ budgets are mainly (up to 80%) an addition of subsidies from various institutions. In both Montpellier and Bordeaux, the local associations we studied are funded by a dozen different public agencies (ministry of culture, ministry of

youth, ministry of sport, ministry of employment and social affairs, inter-ministerial funding managed by prefectures, public agency in charge of migrants, various services attached to municipalities, the departmental council, the regional council, etc.). The result is a welfare mix where public authorities, associations and other actors from the non-profit sector are associated in the production of operations targeting disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Although this trend is not limited to urban policy, it has been particularly strong in this domain.

In the same way, although the history of neighbourhood councils cannot be reduced to the emergence of the new urban policy, these structures have been created in disadvantaged areas more than in other places and have been the main channel for involving ordinary citizens in the *politique de la ville*. Neighbourhood councils developed very differently from one town to the next. In some places it was a bottom-up dynamics and the creation of independent grassroots neighbourhood associations (*comités de quartier*) was institutionalised afterwards. In most places however, it was a top-down movement and the creation of neighbourhood councils was the result of a city council's decision. The first experiments began during the late seventies. The urban crisis that emerged in the eighties was a strong incentive to engage in this direction in more places, and the growing political crisis of the nineties, along with the 2002 law, led to the generalisation of neighbourhood councils in all cities with over 80,000 residents. As a result, the number of councils has proliferated as they spread beyond disadvantaged neighbourhoods: there were dozens in the eighties, hundreds in the year 2000, and probably thousands at the end of 2003, most of them in big cities. The law has not completely standardised the role and structures of the neighbourhood councils and applies only to cities with more than 80,000 residents. However, some general features can be identified (Bacqué & Sintomer, 1999a; Blondiaux, 1999; CRAPS & CURAPP 1999). (i) In all experiences of local participatory democracy, politicians and local government administrators regularly organise open neighbourhood meetings where they meet the citizens who want to take part. These meetings are organised from three to six times a year. Very often, they represent the main element of participatory democracy. (ii) In cities with more than 80,000 residents and in some other towns, there are also more formal neighbourhood councils. In this case, neighbourhood council meetings and assemblies open to the public regularly merge, and ordinary citizens may attend and take part in discussions with councillors. In some places the councils can nevertheless also meet without the public. (iii) In a few cases citizens elect the councillors (the level of participation in the election is generally very low and hardly attains 5%). Usually, the mayor, local politicians or associations coopt the councillors, with the final choice being the responsibility of the mayor. In some cases a number of councillors are

chosen by lot among neighbourhood voters. (iv) In most cases, the mayor or one of his or her delegates chairs the council, whose autonomy and capacity to decide upon its agenda is therefore limited. In other instances neighbourhood councils may elect their president and meet without the presence of local government delegates. Nearly everywhere, neighbourhood councils have only a consultative role and discuss only micro-local issues. (v) There are only a few towns in which neighbourhood councils may join in a common meeting, two by two or all together, in order to discuss a question relating to a larger scale than the neighbourhood. Most often, the councils remain isolated and are therefore confined to micro-local topics.

Efficient? The renewal of neighbourhood management

Have the stated objectives been achieved, or even really pursued? What have the results of the new procedures been? As far as the first objective, efficiency, is concerned, it is not easy to make a global assessment, for there are few evaluations that are systematic and concrete enough to allow a nation-wide analysis. The problem has been constant from the beginning of the new urban policy: the inclusion of a neighbourhood or a city in this programme has depended less on objective criteria than on closed-door bargaining; few statistical data have been produced; the weakness of an evaluation culture in France has reinforced this opacity; and there has been little debate about the criteria against which a possible gain of efficiency should be measured. After twenty years, nobody is able to really say how much has been spent, by whom, and to what extent administrative action has become more efficient owing to participation. Any attempt to evaluate this policy can rely only upon relatively general national reports and a comparison of monographic studies (Collectif 1997; Mozère, Peraldi & Rey 1999).

Theoretically, discussions on New Public Management tend to show that efficiency gains may be obtained in three main directions (Reichard 2001). The first consists in reforming the internal structure of the administration (i.e. the relationship between the various services or public authorities, the decision-making process, the management of employees, and so on). The second direction tends to rely on the market logic, either through the privatisation of some services or with the introduction into public administration of criteria imported from business. The third direction is the only one that really concerns participation, for it implies an increase in accountability to citizens. This has been developed to some extent in France but has been largely decoupled from internal administrative reforms. The impact of participation has therefore been limited, for the everyday functioning of local bureaucracy has hardly been affected. A clear sign of this gap has been the limited echo in the literature on New Public

Management among French actors and analysts of participation. In contrast, the closer link between participation and administrative reform has been the key of the dynamics of participatory budgeting in Latin-America (Gret & Sintomer, 2004).

Nevertheless, some results must be considered. The impact of the inclusion of NGOs in some steering committees is difficult to establish, but the delegation of certain responsibilities to associations has led to real gains in term of flexibility – even if the low level of the state's financial involvement in the struggle against new urban poverty and the bad economic context have limited its effects. We lack detailed evaluation showing that associations are more efficient than public organisations. However, on the basis of our fieldwork we draw the same conclusion as monographic studies which found that the integration of associations in the *politique de la ville* helped to increase the ability of public intervention to answer current social demands. NGOs have detected emerging social needs more acutely and have promoted actions that traditional actors (public social workers or street level bureaucrats) have been unable to carry out, very often because of a lack of autonomy in relation to their hierarchy. In Montpellier and Bordeaux this has, for example, been the case in the fields of after-school programmes and youth training. From the point of view of public organisations, the use of contracts with associations has another advantage: through this procedure, they use funding for specific actions, thus limiting the need to hire permanent staff. Such a phenomenon is particularly clear with the implementation of the 5-year youth employment programme (“new services, new jobs”) initiated in 1998 by the socialist government, in which some public organisations (housing estates, public transportation companies, etc.) decided not to hire new employees directly but rather to sign contracts with associations. By doing so, they managed to externalise the risks associated with the recruitment of new staff, and to avoid the implicit obligation to give permanent jobs to the young people involved when the programme came to an end. Thus, contractualisation with associations can be seen as an alternative to the massive recruitment of public agents and a flexible way of meeting social needs.

The most visible gain is perhaps to be seen in “micro-local management”. The creation of neighbourhood political coordinator and manager positions, linked to the institutionalisation of dialogue with residents through the neighbourhood councils, usually does effectively foster the incorporation of citizens' competences into the administration. The citizens who are involved really do contribute to local governance. In some cases, local administration does not really care about participatory structures, and this leads to frustrations. But in most places the administration learns to take advantage of what is said during the neighbourhood councils and meetings. Public discussion imposes a certain accountability that represents pressure towards

greater efficiency of micro-local public action. Regular encounters with the public help local politicians and administrators to understand citizens' everyday demands better, and to bring administrative action more into line with local problems. A participant in a neighbourhood council in Aubervilliers summarised a widespread feeling when she praised the way the local administration had fixed a square, a traffic light and various other urban facilities: "In small neighbourhood meetings, there are some people who speak, nowadays, and who say intelligent things. A technician, or a technocrat does not see the practical things in the field that an everyday user will see. I think it will give a new impulse to the relationship with local representatives. The town administration has answered [our demands] very quickly because it realised that everyone has judicious demands. Small things. We are not asking to build the *Stade de France*, but these small things are those making life impossible otherwise" (interview with a retired woman, Aubervilliers, Spring 1999).

This mediation used other modes in the past. Most notably, political parties and their satellite organisations used to represent channels of communication between the institutional system and the public. Their crisis opened a gap that the participatory structure tends to reduce. However, the context is increasingly difficult. Politicians and senior local administrators no longer live in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods, voting has often decreased by half⁷, and social and economic problems have grown. Organised civil society has been deeply undermined and associations that are partners of local administrations often come from outside. Consequently, participatory structures are very often indispensable for any efficient micro-local management. If the public administration is to be responsive towards the residents' everyday problems, the gap between residents and rulers has to be reduced. Owing to the flexibility and proximity that participation can bring, the legitimacy of public action can increase and deliberate deterioration of public infrastructures and facilities can decline. Public discussions between citizens, local administrators and politicians on the councils also lead to more transparency in the evaluation of policy efficiency. Nevertheless, this positive effect has mostly been confined to the micro-local level and complaints about the difficulty of engaging wider reforms are common among managers. On this scale, "justification trials" have been effective and the observation of councils shows that people regularly appeal to the participatory norms of the "facilitator state" in order to criticise or justify administrative action. The transparency of the outcomes is better because they concern

⁷ In Saint-Denis and Aubervilliers the rate of electoral mobilisation, i.e. of valid votes compared to the number of adult residents, has fallen to the level of the 1870s, that is, before the development of labour organisations: between 25% and 30% of adults vote. Reduced to French citizens, the turnout rate was around 33-39% in 1876, 53% in 1889, 60-65% at the end of the 1960s, and 35-40% at the end of the 1990s.

everyday life. Beyond this scale, “justification trials” have been much weaker: the discourse on efficiency has not really been translated into concrete practices, discussions have remained rather vague, and the criticism repeated in the national reports has not induced any real change.

Social? The paradoxes of participation

The diagnosis is much worse concerning the second stated goal of the new urban policy: the social goal. As noted above, the *politique de la ville* aims to foster social cohesion through repressive or socio-economic policies, as well as through participative procedures open to all, which are supposed to promote dialogue and the formation of a collective identity. What can be said about the social impact of participation in deprived areas? We will focus here on the issue of inclusiveness⁸: have these procedures induced an enlargement of the local public sphere?

The assumption that the cooption of associations in the decision-making process and in the implementation of urban policies would strengthen them, consequently improve the civic culture, has been widespread. Practices have been more ambivalent. First of all, most resources have been allocated to national or regional NGOs (such as the “Restaurants du Coeur”) or to NGOs consisting of professionals rather than residents of the neediest neighbourhoods. Their action has therefore been seen by the latter as coming from outside. In this respect, no movement similar to the north-American community development exists in France (Bacqué 2000). Local activists have only occasionally been able to obtain recognition and to share it with their fellow residents. Secondly, local associations from the *banlieues* (suburbs) have had difficulties in aggregating their demands and acting as pressure groups in order to influence political decisions and to change the institutional rules. Fragmentation, heterogeneity and scattering – rather than integration and unity – are common features of collective action in poor urban areas. Divided by a plurality of cleavages (territorial, social, cultural, sometimes religious), specialised in specific fields of activity, in competition for

⁸ A point must be made about the more general social and economic effects of the *politique de la ville*. Although other factors have also contributed, it is probable that this policy has mitigated the violence of the economic crisis in the neediest neighbourhoods and contributed to the fact that these areas have not been as affected as U.S. ghettos. Nevertheless, this achievement has remained limited due to the global economic context and to the inadequacy of the financial efforts. The *politique de la ville* has remained a palliative rather than a preventive policy. Census data provide clear evidence of poverty concentration and even of an increase of the gap between the *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (the areas targeted by the *politique de la ville*) and the rest of the metropolitan areas they belong to, between 1990 and 1999. For example, unemployment increased faster: the proportion of young people (15-24 years) looking for a job rose from 28.5 % to 38.6 % (i.e. + 35.4 %) between 1990 and 1999, although the general figure for young people in France as a whole shows a rise from 19.6 % to 25.6 % (+23.4 %) during the same period (Le Tocqueux & Moreau 2002).

public funds, local associations have not been able to represent a real reference for the residents. Thirdly, the participatory process has induced selective effects among applicants. The associative sphere is deeply unequal in terms of access to institutions, financing or symbolic recognition. Those whose leaders are able to cope with institutional rules, to set up projects and to favour brokering between various interests differ considerably from those unable to mobilise such resources. It must be said that the *politique de la ville* is a complex array of institutional actors, funding circuits and committees, nested and interlinked. With this multiplication of players, issues, types of subsidies and commissions, we enter a complex, muddled universe which makes the policy difficult to understand for public opinion -and for the protagonists themselves. In other words, the large number of subsidy procedures generates opacity, which in turn produces a hierarchy within the associative sphere. A number of associations are fragile and their growth is hampered by the complexity of the administrative world in which they must find a sympathetic ear. Administrative slowness induces a hierarchy between those associations that have funds and those that do not. The complexity of procedures can even generate exit tendencies: tired with "wasting" time in negotiating with public agencies, some association leaders end up withdrawing from partnerships. A leader of a cultural association commented: "We stopped working with the team in charge of the *politique de la ville* two years ago [...] We were fed up with administrative meetings and so on [...] You can't imagine the number of mails we sent to get one project financed" (interview with an associative leader, Bordeaux, 1998). As a result, a subtle filtering is at work: specific skills are required that are unevenly distributed between association leaders (de Maillard 2002).

The lack of social openness is even greater in neighbourhood councils, where participation is highly selective. Its level usually remains very low in France: less than 1% of the adult population in Saint-Denis, 0.3% in the relatively lower-class 20th *arrondissement* of Paris, and these two examples seem to be fairly common. Moreover, those who participate are not statistically representative. All observers have noticed the striking absence of some social groups. Young people, foreigners, second-generation immigrants and the lowest classes are almost entirely absent or at least considerably under-represented. Furthermore, when they do participate they tend to be marginalised in the debate. In poor neighbourhoods speech tends to be monopolised by a small number of people, most of all politicians and association leaders. It is striking that some people who express themselves very well in other contexts, such as rap singers, are practically mute when they participate in council meetings. They use a lot of slang and have difficulty understanding the institutional political language. Most often, local

politicians and administrators are indifferent, paternalistic or irritated when “outsiders” interfere with the planned debates. In any case, there is hardly any common deliberation and the “excluded” people are mere objects of, and not subjects in, the discussion – a trend that has been widely discussed by other scholars (Fraser 1997). In participatory councils, social barriers tend therefore to be the same as in representative democracy⁹. This is why a young North African street supervisor participant in a neighbourhood council in Aubervilliers bitterly summed up the situation: “Local democracy... Here, in this place, I am not very hopeful. You finally realise that those who participate in local democratic institutions are those who already participate in their everyday life. I mean, one gives a little more power in the neighbourhood to those who have it already. I mean, in neighbourhood councils, you will find former activists, association leaders, and so on. These structures increase the power of those who have it already” (interview with a street supervisor, Aubervilliers, Spring 1999). Participatory meetings certainly lead to a better mutual understanding between those who actively take part. But the individuals and groups that should be primarily concerned by the “restoration of social cohesion” are absent. The same street supervisor explains what happened at a council meeting when a group of young people came in: “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 talk to them [...] The subject of their discussion was young people, but they did not want the subject of their discussion to be in front of them!”. Such contradictions are not debated in councils; there is very little concern about the fact that the functioning of the neighbourhood councils can hardly reinforce the “social link”.

On the whole, the social outcomes of the new urban policy are difficult to assert. The attempt to restore the social link has not really been facilitated by the participatory procedures, due to their lack of social openness. It is striking that this problem has not been on the agenda. No effective “justification trial” has taken place; in the associations the social filtering goes on without any wide debate; in neighbourhood councils, outsiders remain absent or marginal and cannot challenge practices by appealing to the norms that are said to guide them. Outsiders do not even have spokespersons who could make their voices heard in their absence. The discourse on social cohesion therefore remains ideological and, unsurprisingly, outsiders do not trust it.

⁹ With one notable exception: women tend to participate a lot and this tendency is noticed in most participatory experiments in local democracy outside France as well.

Deliberative? A new grassroots public sphere

Before addressing the third objective of the new urban policy, we need to analyse a dimension which has remained ambiguous in the discourse on “reciprocal interpellation”: the extent to which the *politique de la ville* has or has not been deliberative. In that respect the assessment should be more balanced, as practices tend to be contrasted.

The contractual mechanisms created by the new urban policy seem to fit well with the ideal of a deliberative process: claims for “partnership” or “dialogue” express a desirable process of discussion without determining what the outcome should be. However, the procedural regulations do not produce direct effects and may even be circumvented. They often imply bargaining (strategic discussion aiming to balance particular interests) rather than arguing (communicative discussion on the common good based on the exchange of reasonable arguments), and local associations are not invited into institutional arenas where major decisions are taken. They are consulted but not associated in the decision-making process. In French policies against social exclusion, the existence of networks involving association leaders and officials playing a key role in law-making (Warin 2002b) has not been synonymous with an active role of those who are excluded and who are usually objects rather than subjects of these policies. Even when partnerships were directed towards local associations, they were more often driven by a top-down rather than a bottom-up rationale. Delegation of responsibilities to NGOs has been limited and has never reached real devolution. The participation of associations in the *politique de la ville* remains confined to the implementation of policy objectives that they have not defined (most members of steering committees or strategic meetings are institutional representatives). To use a classical metaphor, associations remain in the sphere of “rowing”, while public institutions seek to “steer” (Osborne & Gaebler 1992). Compared to Anglo-Saxon countries, French citizens have also been invited far less often to actively co-implement decisions. Volunteering and delegation of specific actions to associations are only atrophied versions of strategies for community development (Bacqué 2000; Donzelot, Mével & Vyvekens 2003). In that perspective, it is important to note that the criteria used by institutions to select projects remain often obscure to associative leaders thus showing a lack of mutual understanding. Leaders of associations consider that there is no real dialogue with institutions: “The *contrat de ville*? We don’t really know how it works [...], sometimes we get money, sometimes not [...] But we don’t know where it comes from, why we get this amount of money and not another” (interview with an association leader, Montpellier, 1998). A kind of opacity and secrecy would drive the institutional choices. Such a context makes deliberation very unlikely

and the dream of a procedural democracy is still far off: there is neither real discussion on the policy goals nor procedures helping to make institutional choices transparent.

In contrast, although it is socially selective and differs from the idealised descriptions of most political theories, real public deliberation takes place in the neighbourhood councils. This is striking when one considers the topics discussed. One of them, although not the most important, is what participants call “democracy”, that is, relationships between citizens and public authorities. When citizens criticise administrators or politicians, they complain about two things: the fact that they do not listen to the people enough, and the fact that they do not respect what had been said in previous meetings. 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 (responsiveness). Politicians have difficulties contesting this conception. When they rely on technocratic arguments in the meetings, criticisms become sharper. The discourse of the “facilitator state” that politicians officially share represents a real rhetorical constraint here, a norm that is difficult to challenge.

The second kind of topic concerns neighbourhood problems: public transport, public housing, construction or alteration of small local crossroads, buildings or squares, small shops in the neighbourhood, street cleaning, etc. These topics often tend to be seen from outside as “insignificant”. However, participants insist that these small things are very important to their everyday life. For people who are not used to speaking in public, it is also easier to focus on concrete issues. Moreover, one sees the results of action and deliberation better, and can check that officials really listen to what citizens say or that they respect the common decision. The real problem is that participants can hardly go beyond these micro-local topics, generalise the deliberation, and discuss themes related to the town or country as a whole. There are few possibilities for different councils to meet together in order to discuss a problem on another scale. The participatory dimension is strictly limited in scope and is not expected to interfere with representative democracy. Political representatives inform participants about the general orientations of the town policy, but are rarely willing to discuss it. Participatory structures function as if they were in charge of the particular local interest, while representative democracy is held responsible for the common good. The contrast with Porto Alegre and the participatory budgeting in Latin-America, where participatory procedures are organised up to the city level, is striking (Abers 2000; Gret & Sintomer 2004). This division of labour is a major problem in a context in which the neighbourhood is hardly a relevant scale for dealing with structural problems. A major side-effect of decentralisation and of empowerment

strategies on a micro-local scale is a tendency to give people responsibilities they are ill-equipped to deal with. The second risk inherent in such a role division is parochialism. As long as citizen participation is restricted to the neighbourhood level, the “Nimby” effect seems nearly unavoidable.

This risk is even higher with the third kind of topic, which concerns security and everyday “incivilities”. In France, the “security” problem is less a matter of serious crimes than small offences. Due to the absence of the incriminated groups, the scenario always tends to be the same: people of higher social status criticise the behaviour of people with a lower social status and describe it as aggressive and intolerable. Participants accuse officials of not being active enough regarding security.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that deliberations in neighbourhood councils and meetings have a logic that leads participants beyond their mere particular interest. This is clear when one considers a kind of subject that is completely illegitimate during the discussions: demands that do not concern the neighbourhood as such, but only the interests of some individual or pressure group. The dynamics of publicity, which was conceptualised by Kant and which is central to Habermas’ theory, certainly has some relevance 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 challenged, and after they have spoken nobody cares about what they said. In order to be listened to 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). In such a context, to speak in public represents a real constraint that can be interpreted in some cases as a cooperative search for the best common solution, and in others as the “civilising force of hypocrisy” (Habermas 1996; Elster 1994). 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, although deliberative, remains fragmented and one-sided. Very often, 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 neighbourhood, outsiders, and so on. In this process, a particular interest (of one social group or of one neighbourhood) is easily seen as if it were a general interest.

It is primarily because it remains restricted to proximity problems that the common good can only be defined as non-political in the participatory structures. Non-political here means that any argument that seems to be linked to the political system (such as speaking in the name of a party or an ideology, in favour of or against the government or well-known politicians) is

prohibited. This is a second kind of theme that is implicitly seen as illegitimate. 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 speaking as individuals. Only a few people, usually elected, have legitimacy to pass from one register to the other and to generalise grassroots problems into political issues: the mayor and, to a lesser extent, the deputy mayors. This exclusion of partisan politics also leads most participants to refrain from relying upon most kinds of general arguments, which strongly limits deliberative dynamics. This is not specific to French neighbourhood councils; it also takes place in German citizen juries. Nevertheless, it is not a general rule and debates in Latin American participatory budgeting are quite often politicised. Moreover, the quality of deliberation, although real, is limited if one compares neighbourhood councils to other participatory procedures that favour discussion in small groups, have more explicit procedural rules and give more time to deliberation, such as citizen juries or councils in participatory budgeting. Finally, a last feature is worth noting: although French neighbourhood councils are “hybrid forums” that constitute a local public sphere because they are open to the public (this is often not the case with citizen juries), they generate only a limited dynamics of publicity: their resonance on a public wider than the direct participants remains small and the mass media hardly notice them.

In conclusion, the deliberative nature of the new urban policy is partial. One can hardly find any kind of deliberative democracy in the partnership with associations. In the neighbourhood councils, actors barely question the lack of social openness and are mostly trapped in micro-local topics. They do, however, deliberate, although their discussions do not correspond to the norm of the ideal speech situation. In these “justification trials”, public action is criticised or justified in the name of the common good. That is why neighbourhood councils have, over the two last decades, been one of the most visible elements in the rise of a “deliberative imperative” in France. To organise some kind of public deliberation has been considered more and more as a necessary condition for the legitimacy and efficiency of public action. Although this norm has not yet fundamentally changed existing practices, it has been widely shared and people increasingly tend to appeal to it to criticise the traditional decision-making process (Blondiaux & Sintomer 2002).

Democratic? The limits of “proximity democracy”

The third stated objective of the new urban policy has been more strictly political: the deepening of democracy. The catchword proximity democracy is often used to sum up the

various innovations introduced in France: citizens are to become actors of their own lives, and a new political legitimacy is supposed to rise from better communication between politicians and local government administrators on the one hand, and more active and organised citizens on the other. Has the *politique de la ville* achieved this goal?

The consequences of the participation of local associations in the *politique de la ville* are more ambivalent than an optimistic view would conclude. One could hardly say that the *politique de la ville* has contributed to a true empowerment process. The absence for a French translation of the notion of “empowerment” is not only a linguistic problem: it reveals a strong reticence of public authorities towards what Fung and Wright call “counter-powers” (2003). Once subsidised by institutions, associations no longer determine their orientations independently from public authorities, which exert several sets of constraints (legal, intellectual, financial). Association leaders devote more and more time to contacts with bureaucrats and develop actions only if they are backed by institutions. As an association leader commented: “Earlier, we used to get together to defend some ideas, to realise a project. Now, associations have become structures that hire staff: educators, social workers, *emplois-jeunes*. Instead of remaining a potential opponent, of emphasising what doesn’t function, they avoid criticising political institutions at all costs because they fear their subsidies will be cut off. I am totally aware of the problem, being employed by an association” (an association leader, quoted in *Le Monde des débats*, 1999). Although not completely dependent, associations act as intermediaries rather than counter-powers in their relation with institutions. As a consequence, “the notion of self-organising civil society composed of freely associating individuals is less and less meaningful” (Hirst 2000: 20). It would, however, be misleading to conclude with an absorption of associations by public institutions. Paradoxically, the fact that a large range of institutions funds associations allows them to manage a certain leeway for action: receiving subsidies from several institutions, they are less dependent on one of them (and can sometimes use funds earned for one project to back another action).

The same tendencies can be observed with neighbourhood councils. As discussions about the 2002 law (that made them obligatory in big cities) showed, the vast majority of French members of parliament do recognise the importance of listening to citizens who express particular interests, but also want to maintain elected politicians’ monopoly on the definition of the general interest, and therefore on decisions. That is why neighbourhood councils have remained mostly consultative; they represent a “weak” public sphere (Fraser 1997) whose discussions have only an indirect impact on the decision-making process. Furthermore, due to the lack of procedural guarantees and because they are strongly dependant on the mayor in

nearly all phases of their activities, they cannot be described as true counter-powers¹⁰. At first sight, this “proximity democracy” could bring to mind Habermas when he argues that public opinion has to lay siege to the fortress that the political power represents without trying to take it by storm. Public opinion and grassroots associations should be self-limited and not cross the border beyond which they become institutionalised and bureaucratised (Habermas, 1996). However, as we have seen, this kind of public opinion is not socially open and can hardly transcend the micro-local level, while the classical clear-cut distinction between state and civil society that Habermas emphasises tends to vanish. The representative system always tends to become more and more independent of the “sovereign” people (Balibar, 1997; Bourdieu, 1979). When policy-makers regularly meet with the public, the gap certainly tends to shrink, but French participatory mechanisms only permit that to a limited extent and exclusively at the micro-local level, where “justification trials” really take place.

This is why the French “proximity democracy” that is advocated in the new urban policy is very different from a participatory democracy in which the division of labour between citizens and officials is effectively challenged, and in which the creation of new “strong” public spheres links deliberations more directly to decisions. Participatory structures often do not have the capacity to pronounce themselves on real alternatives and can only amend, accept or refuse what the administration and politicians have opted for. Neighbourhood councils and associations involved in partnerships tend to remain trapped in the micro-local level and to avoid questioning power structures (internal to the political system, but also in society at large). To a large extent, participation mainly concerns the citizen as “*usager*”, as a user of public services (Warin 1997). As far as co-implementation through the delegation of competences to NGOs is concerned, it endangers the autonomy of civil society, while co-decisions mostly remain out of reach. Without a real possibility of generalising deliberation to global topics, participation is reduced to policy and does not affect politics. This situation produces constant discussion among councillors and citizens, but the normative sphere of “proximity democracy” is very narrow and hardly represents a resource that can be used to criticise the various dead-ends of this situation. It seems inherently contradictory to ask people to participate and to confine participation within such a limited role.

Conclusion

¹⁰ Other experiments, in Latin-America or in the United States, have given more autonomy to civil society in participatory structures (Abers 2000; Gret & Sintomer 2004; Bacqué 2000).

The *politique de la ville*, which has been one of the most innovative policies in the last two decades in France, has only very partially attained its proclaimed objectives with respect to participation. The present paper has assessed its three main goals: improving efficiency (Have the various forms of participation enhanced efficiency?), fostering the social link (Has participation strengthened the social link in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by favoring inclusiveness in the policy process?) and reinforcing democracy (Has this new policy modified the decision-making process?). We have also analysed whether this policy has facilitated collective deliberation (Has the setting up of new procedures enabled better deliberation between political and non-political actors?).

This policy has led to some results concerning its first goal, efficiency. Although an assessment is difficult because of the lack of an evaluation culture in France, the new devices have probably induced much more flexibility in public action through the delegation of some public functions to associations. In addition, they have increased the efficiency of neighbourhood management. At this micro-local level, a pressure towards more transparency and accountability of public action has taken place. Nevertheless, as these transformations have not been linked to more global innovations in the administrative system and culture, the scope of the changes has remained limited: they have only led, in some particular areas, to a better adjustment of administrative outputs to the claims of users of public services.

The second goal, fostering cohesion, has not been achieved or, at least, the participatory structures have not really contributed to it. The cooption of associations in the decision-making process has not substantially favoured the reinforcement of a civic culture or the emergence of a new sociability. Fragmentation and heterogeneity remain key characteristics of collective action in disadvantaged urban areas. Moreover, the participatory devices have not been socially inclusive. Because of administrative slowness and procedural complexity, they have only strengthened the kind of associations that are able to conform to official criteria. As to neighbourhood councils, participation is highly selective: young people, foreigners, second-generation immigrants and lower class people are under-represented. This failure has not produced significant criticism because those most directly concerned – the most disadvantaged – have been all but absent.

Thirdly, a real – although not ideal – deliberative dynamics has taken place. It has not arisen in partnership structures, where public debate tends to be replaced by negotiations on specific projects. In that respect neighbourhood councils have been more innovative: politicians have come under sharp criticism by residents and have often been constrained to justify themselves. Moreover, a collective dynamics has forced participants to speak beyond their

own personal interest. The main limit to this deliberative process has been that the scope of issues addressed was restricted to the neighbourhood and that it has not been possible to discuss more general issues.

Attempts to promote the last goal, democracy, have been mostly successful at the neighbourhood level. They have implied a “proximity democracy” rather than an associative or a true participatory democracy in which elements of direct democracy would be articulated to representative structures. After over twenty years of this participatory experiment with limited success, the real challenge today is probably to identify what kinds of procedures would lead to more effective “justification trials” to facilitate a critical revision of the goals and tools of the new urban policy.

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