



## Migrants' Occupation of Lycée Jean Quarré: The Refugee Cause and the Cause of a Neighborhood

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*Translated from the French by Oliver Waine*

*The flows of migrants seeking refuge in Europe since the summer of 2015 have led to temporary settlements—legal or otherwise—in various urban locations. What is the impact of their presence on individual neighborhoods and relations with local communities? A study by Isabelle Coutant on the occupation of a disused high school in northeastern Paris sheds light on these impacts and the associated expressions of solidarity, engagement and tension that emerge.*

In the summer of 2015, the multicultural working-class Place des Fêtes neighborhood, in northeastern Paris, was one of the emblematic sites of the “migration crisis.”<sup>1</sup> For three months, “migrants and refugees,”<sup>2</sup> accompanied by volunteer “support personnel,”<sup>3</sup> occupied a former high school in the neighborhood—Lycée Jean Quarré—that was standing empty. Responsibility for this occupation was claimed by a Parisian collective called “La Chapelle en Lutte” (“La Chapelle in Combat”), which emerged in June 2015 following the evacuation of makeshift camps located in the vicinity of La Chapelle metro station in northern Paris. There were about 150 migrants upon arrival at the school, and 1,404 on the day the building was evacuated, according to the prefecture—mainly men, many of them from the Horn of Africa and Afghanistan. On the scale of the neighborhood, this operation was a major event, and one which would at times give people in the area the brutal impression of being at the heart of a world in disarray. It was first of all in my capacity as a local resident and the parent of a child attending the middle school next to the occupied building that I came face-to-face with the situation. I then decided to initiate research in order to understand the effects of this situation on the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

In September 2015, I attended various meetings organized locally, in order to identify the different positions held by those present. I also interviewed elected officials and people involved in local action. Following the building’s evacuation, I conducted interviews with—mostly female—residents who lived nearby and had engaged with the refugees. Who were they? What had been the driving force behind their involvement? In parallel with collecting these narratives, I also tried to

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Akoka questions this term, which implies an exponential growth in migrant flows that threatens our socioeconomic systems. This contradicts the findings of scientific studies, which put the situation into perspective while underlining the very real crisis that exists in terms of asylum policy. For more information, (in French), see: “Crise des réfugiés, ou des politiques d’asile ?”, *La Vie des Idées*, May 31, 2016, URL: [www.laviedesidees.fr/Crise-des-refugies-ou-des-politiques-d-asile.html](http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Crise-des-refugies-ou-des-politiques-d-asile.html).

<sup>2</sup> The expression used here, “migrants and refugees,” refers to a heterogeneous group of exiles with different statuses, who do not yet have—and in many cases will not obtain—refugee status.

<sup>3</sup> This is the term they use to describe themselves (*soutiens* in French).

<sup>4</sup> This research was the subject of a dissertation titled *Au cœur du monde. Les migrants en bas de chez soi* (“At the heart of the world. Migrants on one’s doorstep”), completed as part of the French HDR (*habilitation à diriger des recherches*) qualification necessary for academics who wish to supervise PhD research, defended on June 20, 2017, at Paris-Nanterre University. This dissertation was published by Seuil (as *Les Migrants en bas de chez soi*) in 2018.

gain access to other types of discourse—more difficult to capture—expressed by those who had proven to be hostile or particularly concerned during the occupation. What made these people different from the previous group? And what had each individual taken away from this experience?

### **Local challenges: a long-sidelined working-class neighborhood**

The Place des Fêtes neighborhood underwent major redevelopment in the 1970s: small apartment buildings and houses were demolished and replaced by high-rise towers, mainly composed of social housing (of two types: low-rent “*HLM*” dwellings and “*ILM*” dwellings<sup>5</sup>). No amenities other than schools were provided for residents. From that moment on, the demand for community facilities has been an issue for all those involved in local action. For a long time, this demand went unanswered, aside from the allocation of a small space for a *maison des associations* (a community center for use by local clubs and associations) and, a few years ago, the construction of a *centre d’animation* that organizes activities for local residents. In 2014, the city of Paris agreed to transform the former Lycée Jean Quarré into a media library before the end of the mayor’s term of office in 2020. At the time, the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*<sup>6</sup> was the only city district without a media library; this therefore represented a major victory for the local residents and elected officials involved in this project.

When Paris city hall announced in early August 2015, a few days after the occupation began, that the former Lycée Jean Quarré was to be transformed into an emergency shelter for a period of several years, the residents most involved in urban redevelopment projects felt betrayed. By a letter dated 21 August, while affirming its solidarity with the refugees, the Association des Amis de la Place des Fêtes (“Association of Friends of the Place des Fêtes”)<sup>7</sup> expressed its attachment to the media library project and its wish that less socially disadvantaged *arrondissements* be called upon to fulfil “solidarity functions” for the poorest and most vulnerable populations. The association had questions regarding the consequences of the occupation for the neighboring middle school, which was already stigmatized, and also highlighted the neighborhood’s existing difficulties.

Despite the gentrification processes that have occurred in surrounding neighborhoods (in particular around Jourdain metro station—the historic center of the vast Belleville district—and in La Mouzaïa, a compact neighborhood of small houses accessed by picturesque pedestrian alleyways), the area around Place des Fêtes has remained a working-class community, in no small part because of its high proportion of social housing. More than half of households in the area<sup>8</sup> live in social housing, compared with less than 20% of all inhabitants of the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, and 30% of the Parisian population as a whole. The neighborhood has been impoverished since the 1990s and the unemployment rate<sup>9</sup> in the area reached 16% in 2012 (compared to 10% for Paris as a whole and 9.3% on average for mainland France and Corsica). Place des Fêtes is also a cosmopolitan area and has been a welcoming place for every new wave of migration since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to 2012 census data from by the French statistics office

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<sup>5</sup> Translator’s note: *HLM* stands for *habitations à loyer modéré*, or low-rent housing units; *ILM* stands for *immeubles à loyer moyen*, or medium-rent apartment buildings.

<sup>6</sup> Translator’s note: the city of Paris is divided into 20 administrative districts called *arrondissements*. The 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*—one of the most populous (190,000) and most working-class in the city—lies on the northeastern edge of the city, and includes areas such as La Villette, Les Buttes Chaumont and the northern half of Belleville (of which the Place des Fêtes neighborhood is historically part). It borders the inner-suburban *département* (county) of Seine-Saint-Denis.

<sup>7</sup> The Association des Amis de la Place des Fêtes was created in late 2012 by young environmentalists resident in the neighborhood. They were quickly joined by individuals—members of the middle classes now close to retirement—who had been involved in local action for decades. It was this association that championed the media library project.

<sup>8</sup> What is referred to here as the Place des Fêtes neighborhood corresponds to the following contiguous census blocks (known in France as *IRIS* areas—*îlots regroupés pour l’information statistique*, or grouped blocks for statistical information) as defined by INSEE, the French statistics office: 7511904, 7511905, 7511909, 7511909, 7511910 and 7511911, representing a total population of about 11,000.

<sup>9</sup> Declarative unemployment rate recorded in the course of INSEE’s census operations.

(INSEE), the percentages of foreigners (15%) and immigrants (25%) in the neighborhood are significantly higher than in mainland France and Corsica as a whole (6.1% foreigners and 8.8% immigrants), and these proportions have increased since the 1990s, contrary to the trend observed in the city Paris as a whole. Today, populations from former French colonies in Africa are overrepresented in the neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, several hundred Chinese families have also settled in the area following the sale and subdivision of former rental buildings.

The census block<sup>11</sup> that includes the occupied high school, middle school, kindergarten, daycare center, and the nearby housing blocks is one of the most working-class in the neighborhood. Some 90% of inhabitants live in social housing. The unemployment rate is also higher than in the rest of the neighborhood (at 21%). The social-housing blocks in the immediate vicinity of the former high school have recently been deemed to warrant a *contrat de ville* (an “urban contract” granting special aid over a seven-year period).<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1. View of the former Lycée Jean Quarré in its urban context**



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### **The occupation as a source of tension in the neighborhood**

Elected officials from the center-left Socialist (PS, Parti Socialiste) and Green (EELV, Europe Écologie – Les Verts) parties for the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*—who backed the media library project—did not have a say regarding the occupation of the former high school, and were presented with a *fait accompli* when city hall approved the operation in early August 2015. Consequently, these left-wing elected representatives for the *arrondissement* are faced with a dilemma: how can they express support for the migrants while respecting the commitments made to voters?

<sup>10</sup> See: Antoine Brès and Thierry Sanjuan. 2011. *Atlas de Paris*, Paris: Éditions Autrement.

<sup>11</sup> This block is IRIS area 7511904, also known as “Amérique 4”, i.e. block 4 in the administrative neighborhood of Amérique (each *arrondissement* of Paris is divided into four administrative neighborhoods).

<sup>12</sup> An area qualifies for *contrat de ville* status when certain statistical indicators point to an impoverishment of the resident population. Within the framework of this contract, the neighborhood in question becomes eligible for material assistance and targeted action (via associations and public bodies) for a period of seven years.

They asked the city council to ensure there was a “balance between territories” (i.e. between different areas of Paris). They also tried to alert the mayor’s cabinet to the specificities of the local context and the configuration of the site in question. One elected official confided, “We cannot pit different populations against each other, otherwise we play into the hands of the [far-right] National Front. There would be nothing worse than not building the media library and saying it couldn’t be built because of migrants.” He takes as proof the fact that the National Front<sup>13</sup> distributed a special “Jean Quarré” leaflet via residents’ mailboxes at the beginning of September 2015—just as the new school year was beginning—using this very argument. The leaflet was titled “Lycée Quarré: Mafia and Prostitution a Stone’s Throw from Your Children!” and included the following sentence: “It should have been a media library; [instead,] it’s a den of dirt, disease and crime.”

Elected officials’ concerns grew in early September. The number of migrants was rising constantly, as were numbers of donations—especially following the media coverage of the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach—without any effective organization in place to receive and distribute donated items.<sup>14</sup> Donations attract marginalized populations and generate trafficking. At night, the “supporters” present during the day were for the most part no longer there, and fights would break out. Relations between the town hall of the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* and La Chapelle en Lutte became increasingly tense. This tension was particularly noticeable during a public meeting organized by the town hall initially for local residents: the meeting became an aggressive face-off between town-hall representatives and activists. The activists said they had lost confidence in institutions throughout previous combats, while elected officials blamed them for a form of irresponsibility and systematic hostility. This situation deepened tension lines in the neighborhood, with conflicts breaking out in local cafés and in the alleys between housing blocks. One young Green-party councilwoman told me: “I don’t know how the area’s going to emerge from this affair, but for the moment I sense a lot of pain. The neighborhood’s kind of holding its breath; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Tensions were particularly high in the housing block immediately adjacent to the occupied high school, leading to a split among its tenants’ association, the Amicale des Locataires. From their windows, residents had a view over the schoolyard, with some directly overlooked by the former school building itself. The housing block in question is a large 14-story building containing medium-rent social housing. Its population is a mix of aging pioneers (mostly retired white-collar workers and managers who obtained their apartments in the early 1970s via the “employer’s 1%” scheme,<sup>15</sup> many Jewish families (some of them very orthodox), and managers and artists in their forties from various backgrounds with young families.

### **From concern to commitment: the emergence of “Solidarité Migrants Place des Fêtes”**

It was in this particularly exposed apartment block that a group of residents first came together, initially on an informal basis. This group would later become Solidarité Migrants Place des Fêtes, positioned as an alternative to La Chapelle en Lutte in dealing with refugees and public authorities. Women who had taken action individually over the summer of 2015—and who, on some nights, would go down into the alley to break up fights—were beginning to share their experiences: those with children in middle school were worried about students starting the new school year in such

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<sup>13</sup> Translator’s note: when the original article was written, in November 2017, the party was still called the Front National (National Front in English); however, in June 2018, its name was officially changed to Rassemblement National (National Rally in English).

<sup>14</sup> These donated items essentially consisted of clothing, furniture and food. Donations of money were managed by La Chapelle en Lutte, but the way this was done was perceived as relatively opaque by migrants, and appears to have been the source of certain conflicts.

<sup>15</sup> Translator’s note: the “employer’s 1%” or “1% housing” scheme—more properly known as the *Participation des Employeurs à l’Effort de Construction* (“Employer’s Contribution to the Homebuilding Effort”), or *PEEC*, and now officially called *Action Logement*—is a scheme whereby companies with at least 20 employees contribute approximately 1% of their total payroll to fund housing construction and housing-related aid measures.

conditions. They were also concerned about the hostile reactions towards migrants that were being expressed by some residents in their apartment building. As a result of these concerns, they sought to develop a more formal structure so they would be in a better position to put pressure on the authorities. Many of these women work from home (as scriptwriters, directors, graphic designers, film editors, etc.), which meant they were more aware of and/or affected by events locally, and more available to react to them.<sup>16</sup>

While it is true that the events and their extraordinary nature to a large extent precipitated the commitment of individuals in “solidarity” with the migrants, this solidarity is nevertheless in line with other local action in which the group’s forty-somethings have taken part as parents. For years, they have been trying to combat the issue of “school avoidance.”<sup>17</sup> This attachment to a “real” social mix (“living in harmony [as a mixed community] is not a theory, it’s something you practice”) is undoubtedly the feature that best characterizes this group. These parents had already taken action within a network called RESF (Réseau Éducation Sans Frontières, or “Education Without Borders Network”) in the mid-2000s,<sup>18</sup> and later campaigned for the middle school to remain part of a priority education network (in French, a *réseau d’éducation prioritaire*, or *REP*, which enables underprivileged schools to benefit from extra funding and reduced class sizes). When the refugees arrived at the disused high school, this campaign was still very recent: the flag created for the occasion was still visible alongside the pyramid that stands in the center of Place des Fêtes. At first, when the prospect of migrants occupying the former Lycée Jean Quarré became apparent, the idea of potentially having to mount a new campaign triggered anger. Some parents expressed concern that all the efforts made in previous years to improve the image of the local middle school might have been in vain. There was also a certain weariness. Through this group, however, the anxiety and anger felt by many would turn into a willingness to take action. Furthermore, the skills acquired and the bonds of friendship forged—and the indigenous capital<sup>19</sup> acquired—during previous struggles by the members of this group would allow this new campaign to take form very quickly, in terms both of providing day-to-day support for the migrants and of putting pressure on public authorities.

Emails were circulated on a group list (rising gradually to about 30 a day) and letters were written to the occupied high school and the public authorities. These residents warned in a concerted way about the site’s health and security situations. They asked the mayor of the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, the mayor of Paris, and the prefecture to intervene to improve living conditions within the building. The occupants of the school were asked to take the surrounding neighborhood into consideration and be discreet. Indeed, for this kind of settlement to be tolerated by those living nearby, a certain number of conditions must be respected, and certain self-presentation strategies must be implemented in order to demonstrate an acceptance of standards of neighborliness;<sup>20</sup> however, this was not the case

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<sup>16</sup> Day-to-day involvement and engagement (in parent–teacher associations or the RESF network—see later) is generally a female form of engagement. More generally, all professions relating to “human things,” involving caring for others, tend more often to be occupied by women; from this point of view, the activist milieu is merely an extension of deeper social logics. On this point, see in particular: John Wilson and Marc Musick. 1997. “Who Cares? Toward an Integrated Theory of Volunteer Work”, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62, pp. 694–713.

<sup>17</sup> Translator’s note: “school avoidance” (*évitement scolaire* in French) is the practice whereby parents request special permission for their children to attend a state school other than the one designated for their local area (France has quite a rigid *carte scolaire*, or catchment-area system, for state schools), typically citing rare subjects or specialties that are not on offer at their neighborhood school.

<sup>18</sup> On the determining factors that lead to such action, see: Lilian Mathieu. 2010. “Les ressorts sociaux de l’indignation militante. L’engagement au sein d’un collectif départemental du Réseau éducation sans frontières”, *Sociologie*, vol. 1, no. 3, URL: <http://sociologie.revues.org/587>.

<sup>19</sup> “Indigenous capital” (in French, *capital d’autochtonie*) is a form of social capital anchored in a geographical space (e.g. a village, a neighborhood) and can be defined as the ability to have control over one’s residential space as a result of being closely involved in local sociabilities. The concept was suggested by Michel Bozon and Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and later clarified and extended by Jean-Noël Retière (see: “Autochtonie. Réflexions sur la notion de capital social populaire”, *Politix*, no. 63, 2003, pp. 121–143). While it is typically employed in relation to working-class populations, it can also be used in reference to the middle- and upper-class populations studied here.

here—on the contrary, the aim as far as the activists of La Chapelle en Lutte was concerned was to make their cause especially visible to outsiders, as visibility is vital for media coverage.

In the meantime, the city council had filed a case with the Paris administrative court; on September 25, 2015, in view of the poor health and safety standards observed on the premises, this court gave the occupants one month to leave the disused school. The city council announced that there would be no eviction, however, until alternative accommodation was found. In the interim, nothing was planned to improve living conditions for the disused school's occupants. The building was finally evacuated on October 23, 2015, following a number of fights in the middle of the day, one of which forced the middle school to take action to protect its students from projectiles. The authorities kept their promise—at least temporarily—to relocate all occupants without distinction of status (including “dublined”<sup>21</sup> and undocumented individuals). The evacuation lasted four hours and required some 30 buses to move nearly 1,400 people. Around 100 migrants, who had arrived too late from other places before reaching the disused school, remained there, before being taken to Place de la République by activists from La Chapelle en Lutte. This marked the beginning of a succession of new camps between Place de la République and the neighborhood of La Chapelle that would continue until the opening of an accommodation center by the city council at Porte de la Chapelle in late 2016 (which would, however, prove to be too small to absorb the new flows of migrants).

### **An intolerable situation and “hostile” residents**

Those residents who were hostile to the occupation of the school did not express themselves publicly as a collective; hostility remained relatively confined to apartments, corridors and alleys. Nevertheless, the events left their mark, continuing to fuel fears in its wake. While those who had taken action had been able to exorcise their fears through the group and its engagement, those who were against the migrants' presence, who remained silent at a distance, still bore resentment.<sup>22</sup> In France's regional elections of December 2015, the National Front obtained 15.58% of the votes cast in the first round in the polling station adjacent to Lycée Jean Quarré (polling district 36), which was five percentage points more than for the 19<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* as a whole (10.38%). This may seem insignificant in relation to results nationally (almost 28% of votes nationwide were cast for the National Front in the first round), but it reflects a notable increase compared to the 2014 municipal elections (9.79% for polling district 36), which was already higher than the rates recorded in neighboring polling districts, whose voters—who were further away from the school—were less exposed to the events. This was the first time since the 2012 presidential election that this polling district had recorded the highest scores for the National Front in the neighborhood. The Socialist party was punished in particular: it only obtained 30.2% of votes in this polling district, significantly less than in the neighborhood's other polling districts, where results were closer to 40%, when in other elections scores for the Socialist party had been similar across the

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<sup>20</sup> At least, this is what I observed in *Politiques du squat. Scènes de la vie d'un quartier populaire* (Paris, La Dispute, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> “Dublined” individuals are migrants whose fingerprints were taken in another European country before their arrival in France. Under the Dublin Regulation, they must in principle return to that country to make their asylum application, but when this country is in Southern or Eastern Europe, migrants prefer to stay illegally in France as long as it takes to submit an asylum application in France (usually a few months).

<sup>22</sup> During interviews conducted two to three months after the evacuation, residents shocked by the occupation were still expressing their emotions (see chapter 4 of *Les Migrants en bas de chez soi*, cited in footnote 4). A superintendent from the neighboring building whom I was interviewing on this subject threatened to physically throw me out of his apartment, having become outraged to learn that I had taken part in action in the former high school—“You're with them, the *bobos*! But you don't have to live here!” (Translator's note: the term *bobos*, or bourgeois bohemian, is widely used in popular discourse in France. Though the term has no clear definition, it typically refers to populations that are broadly middle-class, better educated than average, left-leaning, and with higher cultural capital than average, especially when these populations are perceived to be gentrifiers.)

neighborhood. This punishment vote was reflected not only in increased support for the National Front, but also in higher scores for the Green and the Communist parties.

**Figure 2. The exterior staircase of the former Lycée Jean Quarré**



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Interviews with residents shocked by the occupation of Lycée Jean Quarré revealed a degree of understanding for those in the neighborhood who expressed sympathy for the National Front.<sup>23</sup> Residents who were particularly worried during the occupation of the school included Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish families and some elderly residents, who have felt dispossessed for several years by developments in the neighborhood. They also included immigrants whose social trajectory has shown an almost miraculous rise and who felt threatened by a loss of this social status as a result of this forced cohabitation with migrants. A woman from a very poor family in Mauritius, who became

<sup>23</sup> On this subject, see *Les Migrants en bas de chez soi*, cited in footnote 4 (chapters 1 and 4).

a manager and has been a naturalized French citizen for several years, told me after the event: “The tragedy is that the arrival of these migrants led to questions about our own presence; we no longer felt legitimate... [...] You stay where you feel you have roots. And perhaps, when the migrants arrived, some people felt uprooted.” She was also concerned about how these newcomers would be accommodated and taken care of in an area that is already home to many immigrant families: “In the neighborhood, it is through the school and the health center that we integrate. And that’s a very big job. And look where we are now—there has been all this work that has rooted us here. So imagine the situation with all these people coming in!”

The occupation of the disused high school by migrants in the summer of 2015, in the midst of a “migration crisis,” was initially a polarizing issue for the surrounding neighborhood. Some described the area as “split in two.” Those residents who had publicly shown solidarity with migrants generally belonged to intellectual and artistic social categories. Residents from other social categories also showed solidarity, but often in more *ad hoc* and/or individual ways, without forming a pressure group. In both cases, though, it was mainly women who intervened on a daily basis. Unlike La Chapelle en Lutte and the many young “support personnel” present, Solidarité Migrants Place des Fêtes also promoted another cause, namely that of the neighborhood—a working-class, multiethnic, multireligious neighborhood—which had to be preserved, along with, as a corollary, the middle school in which their children were enrolled. Among those residents who were deeply shocked by the occupation of the former high school, there were all kinds of social, generational and cultural affiliations, but what they all had in common was a certain vulnerability in the face of these events, perhaps because they were elderly, or isolated, or distressed by the prospect of losing social status that was obtained with no small difficulty. What they found most intolerable was the failure to comply with unspoken rules of neighborliness, in terms of noise and cleanliness, which was interpreted as a lack of consideration for the environment and a lack of desire to “integrate.”

However, there are also factors of cohesion that have arisen from these events that contrast sharply with these lines of tension. By becoming more aware of local vulnerabilities, people who have taken action to help migrants now wish to become more involved in the neighborhood in order to forge new links and break down inward-looking attitudes that isolate and exclude. This has resulted in the creation of a traveling community café that operates in public spaces. This initiative has fostered connections between intellectuals and artists, African mothers involved in local action, and an association of young people from the neighborhood—essentially from working-class families, many of whom have a migrant background. In view of these new connections between different groups in the area, it is not unreasonable to think that the neighborhood has benefited from the dynamics triggered by the shock of the occupation. Its social capital has, in a way, become more concentrated, and relations between different local actors have grown in number.

For the residents involved in the media library project, however, the whole affair has left a rather bitter taste, as city hall ultimately decided to make the temporary accommodation center in the former high school a permanent arrangement. The Place des Fêtes neighborhood will, in principle, get its media library, but housed in different premises, with a floor area only half that of the initial project. This is viewed as indicative of the readiness with which political elites, including those on the left, are willing to sideline working-class neighborhoods—even though it is these communities that are on the front line when it comes to welcoming new populations.

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(La Dispute, 2000), *Délit de jeunesse* (La Découverte, 2005), *Troubles en psychiatrie* (La Dispute, 2012), and *Les Migrants en bas de chez soi* (Seuil, 2018), and the co-author of *La France des « petits-moyens »*. *Enquête sur la banlieue pavillonnaire* (with Marie Cartier, Olivier Masclet and Yasmine Siblot; La Découverte, 2008) and the collective work *Juger, réprimer, accompagner* (Seuil, 2013).

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