

Sheltering French Families: Parisian Suburbia and the Politics of Housing, 1939-1975

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL JOSEPH MULVEY: *Sheltering French Families: Parisian Suburbia and the Politics of Housing, 1939-1975*

(Under the direction of Lloyd S. Kramer and Donald M. Reid)

Sheltering French Families reminds us that a society's response to the housing question—how to shelter families dependent on salaries—is never benign; it is always linked to visions of ideal economic and human relations. This history examines how the French repeatedly rethought the best kind of familial housing to bring about a better society. It also offers a critical reinterpretation of France's modernist suburbs dismissed by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic as misguided blunders. These communities evoke images of burned-out cars and youth riots, but the postwar Social-Catholics who advocated their construction saw them as a means to encourage solidarity, prevent suburban sprawl, and “liberate” women from employment. Feminist authors called the suburbs “baby-factories,” Marxist intellectuals decried them as “capitalist concentration camps,” and liberal economists said they imposed “socialist collectivism” on the middle classes. These critiques obscured or discredited the social-democratic and conservationist intentions behind modernist suburbia. In the end, a centrist-liberal government prohibited construction of modernist communities because they were psychologically incompatible with married couples' “natural desire” to live in homogeneous communities. The same government promoted “American-style” single-family subdivisions as official policy. This history contributes to suburban, gender, and welfare studies as it shows how the history of French housing shaped the France we know today. It

also reminds us how cultural attitudes affect housing possibilities, desires, and choices and thus raises new questions about contemporary economic shibboleths imposed as universal truths.

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Home and housing are not synonymous. The sentimental attachment we feel towards home is not so much a sentimental attachment to a building, but an attachment to sociability and conversations or the memories of meandering meals. When a home is left, sold, or demolished, we feel an inexplicable sense of loss, although we know our lives will continue, because we lose a place of familiar encounters. I have had the pleasure of calling Hamilton Hall at the University of North Carolina home. Here, I immensely benefited from conversations with, in order of our first acquaintance, Professors Jay Smith, Lloyd Kramer, Donald Reid, Konrad Jarausch, and Karen Hagemann. On either side of the Atlantic, I shared many an intellectually rewarding dinner with Thibaut Gasteau, Karen Moreau, Maximilian Owre, Ceara Curren Owre, Natasha Naujoks, Marcie Jones, Philipp Stelzel, Michael Smith, Julia Osman, Jessica Sponsler, Arjun Sanyal, Patrice Whitehead-Gay, Ronbardo Gay, William Hulme, Ioanna Konidaris, Jenny Christley, Sarah Vierra, Ben Vierra, Stephen Angelsmith, Sarah Summers, Min Kyung Lee, David Berggren, Joe Donovan, Mark Fisher, Bethany Keenan, Kathryn Goforth, and Brian Turner. To me, that sentimental attachment called home will always feel strongest wherever I find Mary Margaret Welch and our son Matthias. Hopefully, we will always live in houses that promote equality and ecological responsibility.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In 2007, the financial magazine *Revue Banque* asked French presidential candidates how they planned to encourage economic growth. Then candidate Nicolas Sarkozy broke with his nation's traditional pervasive antipathy towards debt accumulation when he lamented that "French households are today the least indebted of Europe."¹ Sarkozy feared that "an economy that does not indebt itself sufficiently is an economy that does not believe in the future." The refusal of French couples to assume debts so as to lead more affluent lifestyles betrayed their collective doubts about their future assets. French households, Sarkozy warned, told world markets by their actions that they were "afraid of tomorrow." His solution to France's economic pessimism intersected with housing policy. Sarkozy advocated French banks liberalize household access to mortgage credit *à l'américaine*. Moreover, he asked those same banks to accept the value of a couple's home as a loan guarantee rather than their current savings and potential for continued earnings. If French banks stopped worrying about an individual capacity to repay a loan and more on the value of the mortgage then France would assume its place among the Anglo-American and European homeownership democracies. Sarkozy promised that as president he would institute a new culture of credit to move France's homeownership rate from 58% (35% outright) to 80%.

Sarkozy, however, understood that to promote homeownership was to do more than just stimulate economic confidence; homeownership was also a social policy. He argued that

¹"Le discours des candidats," *Revue Banque* 690 (26 April 2007): 29.

to make France a country of real property owners was “the best protection against insecurity.”² The asset of real property—ideally, the single-family home—would more effectively compensate parents in times of insecurity than any social protection network. Moreover, Sarkozy maintained that homeownership would promote unprecedented social mobility.³ Part of this government campaign to raise homeownership rates came in the form of a first-time buyer, complementary 0% interest loan, the size of which depended on a household’s income, familial and regional profile.⁴ Prime Minister François Fillon defended President Sarkozy’s ambitious reforms to encourage “a France of homeowners” as the people’s will. By 2025, Fillon envisioned a France where the majority of families could purchase a single-family home. Fillon explained that this future responded best to the demands of contemporary young couples who “aspire to greater stability, greater security, who want to be able to plant solid roots and raise a family, to educate their children, to get involved in local life.”⁵ The right kind of housing promised French families a safer, healthier, and more meaningful future. At the same time, the owner-occupier would be a better citizen, constituent, neighbor, and parent.

Sarkozy and Fillon acknowledged that increased housing production contributed to economic expansion and that homeownership was one way to sell families the insecurity

²Jacques Marseille, “Tous propriétaires: une ambition juste mais non dénuée de risques,” *Investir Magazine* 26.1 (July 2007): 90.

³Economists Carole Brunet and Jean-Yves Lesueur have countered Sarkozy’s mobility claim arguing that homeownership serves as an impediment to families in times of financial insecurity caused by unemployment. They argued that public policies encouraging homeownership were incongruous with contemporary French labor market realities. Carole Brunet and Jean-Yves Lesueur, “Do Homeowners Stay Unemployed Longer: Evidence based on French Data,” in Casper van Ewijk and Michiel van Leuvensteijn, eds., *Homeownership in the Labour Market in Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137-158.

⁴In French, *le prêt à taux zéro pour l’achat d’un logement*.

⁵François Fillon, “Discours du Premier ministre François Fillon sur l’accession à la propriété et Prêt à Taux Zéro,” (Speech presented at Rosny-sous-Bois, Seine-Saint-Denis, 17 January 2011), 4.

caused by the dismantlement of social protection networks. They also promoted their housing policies as a way for salaried couples and their children to achieve greater personal freedom through choice.⁶ Their ambition was not to return the French to some nostalgic past wherein women stayed at home. They understood that French homeownership depended on the financial stability achieved through dual incomes or France's modified male breadwinner model.⁷ Sarkozy and Fillon invoked through their rhetoric a better, albeit perhaps mythical, suburban future wherein French families achieved personal aspirations through a housing market that promoted the human thirst for liberal individualism.

*
* *

"Modern" housing is a hybrid of social, cultural, and economic assumptions about how people should relate to homes and who should produce them.⁸ "Modern" housing is more than technological innovation; it is defined by its ability to materialize cultural norms or maintain segregationist practices while it legitimizes socioeconomic systems and secures constituent loyalties. A society's response to the housing question—how to shelter families dependent on salaried labor, or, that in-between class that neither possesses capital nor owns arable land—is never benign; it is always linked to visions of ideal economic and human relations. To study a nation's housing history is to learn about a people's changing attitudes towards citizenship, gender roles, procreations, sexuality, and social protection. Sarkozy

⁶See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1992).

⁷Jane Lewis, "'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes,'" *Journal of European Social Policy* 2.3 (1992): 159-174; Also see Janes Jenson, "Gender and Reproduction: Or, Babies and the State," *Studies in Political Economy* 20 (Summer 1986): 9-41.

⁸"Modern" housing requires large-scale financial and logistical organization of homes as a commodity or service for mass consumption. It stands in contrast to self-provided familial shelter and small-scale dwelling production that has origins stretching back to the formation of early-modern European land tenure institutions.

explained his vision of an owner-occupier society wherein low-to-middle income families had access to single-family homes as “natural” despite the fact its creation depended on government subsidies, policy interventions, and financial stimulation. Of course, there is nothing “natural” about Sarkozy’s particular vision of how the French should house themselves just as there was nothing “natural” about the visions that preceded his. Politics constructs the “modern” homes a society inhabits—not nature.

Housing is a basic material requirement for human liberation along with food, water, and clothing. At the same time, “modern” housing has bio-political implications, which give material expression to ideologies. This history studies how the French attempted to create a better society through “modern” housing. It is the story of why the French came to see one kind of housing as a “forced choice” because of the real or perceived risks of other kinds of housing. This study extends the historical approach to housing by contextualizing French debates about who should provide familial housing, what shape it should take, and how couples should procure it. It recaptures the social visions that inspired housing policies and offers a more nuanced account of the processes that led to their abandonment.

As our world’s population swells to 11 billion around 2050, the United Nations predicts 70% of humanity engaged in non-agricultural activity will require “modern” homes in cities and suburbs.⁹ The question of how twenty-first century societies will secure housing for their citizens remains one with serious environmental, health, and social justice implications for governments everywhere. This history engages a new, global generation of activists and academics who once again advocate for alternative housing systems that respect the environment, promote sustainability, facilitate active citizenship, and encourage empathy

⁹United Nations, “Percentage of Population Residing in Urban Areas by Major Area Region and Country, 1950-2050, POP/DB/WUP/Rev.2009/1/F2,” *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision* (New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2007).

between diverse peoples. These voices seek a way to correct capitalism's tendency to invest itself unevenly across geographies. They recognize that housing markets are unnatural and that the government plays an influential role in how a housing culture is structured. Housing production demands an impressive investment of capital to purchase land, construct, and exchange a product, a process that requires labor, materials, and expert knowledge. Home design, financing, consumption, distribution, attribution, and management, however, remain open to limitless combinations. The collective memory of "authoritarian modernism," the collapse of socialist housing alternatives since 1989, and housing market integration all strengthened the arguments of policymakers, lobbyists, and real-estate agents who warned that any models positing alternative housing scenarios threaten familial security and economic productivity. We live in an age of transnational mortgage crisis, the proliferation of underserved residential districts, and an unprecedented global growth of so-called "Privatopias." Our homes continue to waste natural resources and create pollution. To encourage alternative sustainable and environmentally friendly housing systems for the twenty-first century, however, we must first recognize the historical origins of housing assumptions that underpin contemporary attempts to secure economic, emotional, and physical security for men, women, and children through housing policies.¹⁰

France is a fertile ground to study how groups assigned familial housing broader biological, environmental, moral, social, and political functions. The French collectively recognized that a powerful dialectic existed between habitat and the good society; albeit, few agreed on what shape either one should take. Wartime defeat, pronatalist politics, industrial

¹⁰Sustainability and environmentally friendly are complicated concepts whose global implications must always take into account the particular. By these terms, I gesture towards a form of development more respectful of environmental resources and intergenerational responsibilities that does not disavow economic productivity.

production, and a modernization ethos interwove to give the question of how to house families dependent on salaried labor unprecedented urgency. In a country now dotted with nuclear reactors and high-speed rail, it is easy to forget that France's postwar socioeconomic portrait was bleak: high infant mortality, chronic disease, food rationing, a thriving black market, dysfunctional transportation, and cities littered with shantytowns. Fewer than one million houses had running water, an indoor bathroom, shower, electricity, and central heating.¹¹ From a contemporary perspective, France matched the profile of an underdeveloped, potentially failing state in which cholera, typhus, and famine were all looming possibilities.¹² Part of the French solution to this conundrum, France's postwar "spatial-fix," would be a kind of residential housing built on urban peripheries for salaried breadwinners, caregiver wives, and their children. Traditional settlement practices and aesthetics were to be replaced by the modernist apartment building community or *grand ensemble d'habitation* [hereafter, grand ensemble].¹³

The term *grands ensembles* itself first appeared in an oft-cited 1935 article that Maurice Rotival published in *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*.¹⁴ Rotival described such buildings as a sustainable, environmentally friendly, and affordable form of mass housing situated far away from centers of industrial pollution and poor sanitation networks.

¹¹Jean-Marc Stébé, *Le logement social en France* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 86-88; Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: Government and People, 1936-1996* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117; Louis Houdeville, *Pour une civilisation de l'Habitat* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1969), 95-98.

¹²James Angresano, *French Welfare State Reform: French Idealism versus Swedish, New Zealand, and Dutch Pragmatism* (New York: Anthem Press, 2007), 172.

¹³A few notable *grands ensembles* constructed between 1954 and 1973 include Sarcelles, Epinay-sur-Seine, Val d'Yerres, Sucy-Bonneuil, Créteil-Mont-Mesly, Vernouillet, Maison-Alfort, Reuil-Malmaison, Palaiseau, and Mureaux. David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

¹⁴Maurice Rotival, "Les grands ensembles: problème général et implantation des cités," *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* 6 (1935): 57-72.

Architects, engineers, and laypersons used the terms *les grands complexes d'habitation*, *les ensembles immobiliers de grandes dimensions*, *les unités de voisinage* (after Le Corbusier's *unité de habitation*), *les ensembles immobiliers*, *les ensembles d'habitation*, *grands blocs*, *cité neuves*, and *les nouveaux ensembles* interchangeably.¹⁵ Journalists and social scientists, however, adopted *grand ensemble* (and sometimes *ville nouvelle*) to designate any assemblage of public, quasi-public, or private modernist buildings with 500 to 50,000 occupants.¹⁶ The communist quotidian *L'Humanité* was alone among the Parisian press in its abstention from employing the term *grand ensemble*, preferring instead to refer to modernist communities by their municipal designation and/or by specific categories of housing financing. French Communists refused to reduce the more precise language of social and political life to an abstraction.

Grand ensemble only took on a juridical meaning when Olivier Guichard, then France's minister of infrastructure, housing, and tourism, signed a directive "preventing future realization of any urban forms known as 'grands ensembles'" or developments resembling "apartment blocks and towers [*les barres et les tours*]" throughout the Hexagon on 21 March 1973.¹⁷ A better definition of grand ensemble was a residential community constructed piecemeal between the 1950s and 1970s whose architecture was strongly

¹⁵Raymond Bault, "Sarcelles, Premier grand complexe d'habitation de la région parisienne," *Le Figaro* 27 September 1960.

¹⁶French urban planning made an *a posteriori* distinction between *ville nouvelle* and grand ensemble. The distinction was an artificial to distinguish between a series of towns constructed after 1965 and residential property development. In reality, the grands ensembles were thought of as *villes nouvelles*. Parisian new cities and the year of their groundbreaking include: Cergy-Pontoise (1969), Evry (1969), Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (1970), Marne-la-Vallée (1972), and Sénart (1973). Annie Fourcaut, "Les grands ensembles ont-ils été conçus comme des villes nouvelles?," *Histoire urbaine* 17 (March 2008): 7-25.

¹⁷ Olivier Guichard, Le ministre de l'aménagement du territoire, de l'équipement, du logement et du tourisme, Circulaire du 21 mars 1973 Relative aux formes d'urbanisation dites «grands ensembles» et à la lutte contre la ségrégation sociale par l'habitat, *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 5 April 1973, 3864.

influenced by the modernist movement: well-sunned apartments, buildings set back from streets, and vast green spaces. A grand ensemble was situated in a suburban or peri-urban community; that is to say, neither apartment towers in the thirteenth arrondissement nor modernist blocks incorporated into the fabric of existing cities made a grand ensemble. Most importantly, as a doctoral student concluded in his struggle to define the term in 1963, a grand ensemble evoked among its immediate observers “the feeling of a radical transformation of daily life.”¹⁸ It was the novelty of the place, its strangeness, which made it a grand ensemble.

Center-right political elites used the term grand ensemble almost exclusively as shorthand for social rental housing despite the existence of owner-occupied units inside many grands ensembles and the existence of private grand ensemble developers by the late-1960s.¹⁹ A grand ensemble was not simply a collection of *habitations à loyer modéré* as many politicians believed. As the geographer Hervé Vieillard-Baron has pointed out, Anglo-Americans and the French often confused grand ensemble (an urban design) with *habitations à loyer modéré* (a legislated form of affordable housing finance).²⁰ Isolated, poorly placed apartment buildings, “very social housing [*logement très social*],” as the French call it,

¹⁸René Kaës, *Vivre dans les grands ensembles* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrière, 1963), 39.

¹⁹The private developer Robert de Balkany’s Parly II, Chevry II, and Grigny match the juridical definition of a grand ensemble. Parly II with 7,500 units, entirely planned around individual automobile ownership and a mall, was at the time the largest private condominium complex in all of Western Europe. Brigitte Derieux, *Les Equipements commerciaux des villes nouvelles et l'exemple de Parly II*, DES Thesis, Sciences économiques, 1971.

²⁰*Habitations à loyer modéré*, HLM, were just as likely to take the shape of an owner-occupied single-family home or Parisian apartment as a suburban tower. As a legislated category of social housing financing, HLM were one of a dozen or more categories invented between 1948 and 1973 that included *Logement économique normalisés* (1952), *Logements populaires et Familiaux* (1954), *Immeubles à Loyer normal* (1961), and *Immeubles à Loyer modéré* (1968), none of which constituted public housing in the American sense of poor housing. Hervé Vieillard-Baron, *Les banlieues: des singularités françaises aux réalités mondiales*. (Hachette: Paris, 2001), 66.

apartments built on the cheap for immigrants or the poor, do not a grand ensemble make. Typically, buildings within what Guichard considered a grand ensemble fell under diverse and complicated social rental or co-property ownership schemes. The grands ensembles were not state or public housing in an American sense and did not necessarily contain any municipal or departmental housing either.

The grands ensembles were part of France's alternative modernization pathway that a small minority hoped might engender—not entirely unlike Israeli kibbutzim—a new collectivist culture of solidarity and democratic participation. At the same time, these communities sought to elevate the status of the male breadwinner and to “liberate” his wife from employment by the affordability of their shelter. They were a hybrid of social democratic, conservative, pronatalist, and environmental aims that promised to reconcile the place of production with the place of reproduction. To the French, the suburban Parisian grand ensemble at Sarcelles built by Western Europe's largest homebuilder, the private-public Société centrale immobilière de la caisse des dépôts et consignations [SCIC], represented this revolution.²¹ The SCIC and the grands ensembles, however, lost the battle to be France's leading purveyor of residential housing. Yet the problems of the grands ensembles should not be framed as a failure of a technological institution to offer quality housing or a system of housing finance, but as a failure to communicate how a type of housing might encourage a more egalitarian society across space and time. This history therefore is the story of how a society concluded it must abandon one dominant form of suburban habitation for another. At the same time, this story rehabilitates the image of the grands ensembles and Sarcelles specifically, which were not without their social and environmental merits.

²¹In English, The Central Property Corporation of the Official Depository and Consignment Bank.

Housing and Memory

This approach departs from almost all other discussions of the grands ensembles, which have emphasized complaints and condemnations. Hervé de Charette, France's minister of housing between 1993 and 1995, went to the extreme of calling the grands ensembles "France's shame" during his tenure.²² The French comedian Vincent



1. Children at play before an apartment building in the suburban Parisian grand ensemble of Sarcelles circa 1960.

Lagaf humorously presented a "week-end à Sarcelles" as the prize contestants luckily avoided picking on the game-show *Bigdil* in 2001.²³ Even Tony Judt in *Ill Fares the Land* (2010), his compelling defense of postwar social protection and social democracy, admitted that Sarcelles and other such European communities only testified to "the haughty indifference" of bureaucratic mandarins to families' daily lives.²⁴ The dominant collective memory of Sarcelles and the grands ensembles is that modernist suburbia represented a troubling aspect of postwar planning and the idea that authority knows best. The youth generation of the late-1960s that backlashed against the "Nanny State" collectively tossed modernist communities—typically, conflated with social housing in general—into the historical waste bin. They did so often without ever having stepped foot inside one. The seemingly indistinguishable monotonous similarity of towers and apartment blocks alone proved their inhumanity. In France and among Anglo-American academics, Sarcelles and the

²²Christine Mengin, "La solution des grands ensembles," *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire* 64 (October-December 1999): 111.

²³Lagaf later made a televised apology for the joke. "Sarcelles obtient des excuses de Lagaf," *Libération* 31 August 2001; Eric Bureau, "La gaffe de Lagaf scandalise Sarcelles," *Le Parisien* 29 August 2001.

²⁴Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 81-82.

grands ensembles emerged as powerful reminders of socially irresponsible modernization and the ills of uncontrolled power.

The grands ensembles are as emblematic of the *Trentes Glorieuses* as the Citroën DS automobile. Much as the DS was a French attempt to “humanize” familial transportation, the grands ensembles were an attempt to invent a “humanist” housing policy that would permit families to fully bloom in France’s lush countryside.²⁵ The Citroën DS still operates as a powerful object of popular nostalgia in French collective memory while the grands ensembles are more likely to conjure nightmarish images of dystopian *villes carcérales* normalizing outdated living patterns such as optimum procreation and the gendered division of labor. Intellectual historian Michel Winock judged France’s years of grands ensembles construction, what he pejoratively called “the concrete years [*les années de béton*],” a massive failure in urbanization, a poverty of foresight without an equivalent in Western Europe, and an error that drew previously unknown lines of sociospatial segregation across the Hexagon.²⁶ In *Enfin, l’architecture* (1984), the one-time Maoist Jean-Pierre Le Dantec suggested “the Dark Years of French architecture” as a more accurate descriptor for the years between 1945 and 1975 than the *Trentes Glorieuses*.²⁷ To Le Dantec, the unholy marriage of financiers, unimaginative civil servants, and insane modernist architects left the French with

²⁵Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), 141; Annie Fourcaut, “Les cas français à l’épreuve du comparatisme,” in Frédéric Dufaux & Anne Fourcaut, eds., *Le Monde des grands ensembles* (Paris: Éditions Créaphis, 2004), 16.

²⁶Michel Winock, *Chronique des années soixante* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 123.

²⁷Jean Fourastié first used the term ‘thirty glorious years’ in his book of the same name. The expression comes from the ‘trois glorieuses’ days of the 1830 revolution. Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, *Enfin, l’architecture* (Paris: Autrement, 1984), 33-42; Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses: ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

the bleakest landscapes among Western nations. In his opinion, the best thing the French could do was to break with this legacy of horror through its total eradication.²⁸

There is an almost universal condemnation of France's modernist suburbia by academic and policy elites on both sides of the Atlantic. In retrospect, the entire project seemed doomed from the get-go. The unlivable and unsightly housing estates plastered across France fostered unsolvable social problems due to poor architecture and planning that led to high rates of delinquency and psychological problems among residents.²⁹ Not surprisingly, the French currently hold



2 A couple photographing a child at Sarcelles

similar sentiments. In 2001, a survey revealed that 70% of the French considered a grand ensemble a bad place to live.³⁰ The entry for grand ensemble in a recent dictionary of housing terminology noted that the design remains associated more than any other with exclusion and *mal vivre* in French society.³¹ As one US scholar put it in 2002, the unsuspecting tourist plopped down in Sarcelles on a snowy night would suspect she had been transported to Moscow's outskirts.³² A French scholar writing on Moscow similarly lamented that outside that city's center one found nothing but "Sarcelles for a thousand square

²⁸Ibid., 42.

²⁹Brian W. Newsome, *French Urban Planning, 1940-1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 2.

³⁰When grands ensembles was used as shorthand for non-profit affordable rental or owner-occupied housing known as *habitations à loyer modéré*. Yan Maury, *L'Etat providence vu d'en bas* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 86

³¹Naji Lahmini, "Grand Ensemble," in Marion Segaud, Jacques Brun, and Jean-Claude Driant, eds., *Dictionnaire de l'habitat et du logement* (Paris, A. Colin, 2003), 209.

³²Tyler Edward Stovall, *France since the Second World War* (New York: Longman, 2002), 95.

kilometers.”³³ A Canadian scholar described Sarcelles as akin to all other Le Corbusier-style tower block housing estates where the government crammed away the poor and immigrants.³⁴ In 2007, when I told a group of French friends—mostly, graduate students in their twenties and thirties—over dinner that Sarcelles and the grands ensembles were once praised as the most tangible sign of France’s progress towards a better future they laughed uncontrollably. In truth, it was only a half-century prior when a journalist prophesized that in the grands ensembles questions of class, consumerism, culture, education, the environment, family, industrialization, politics, reproduction, and social protection would become part of a fruitful dialogue that promised each individual “access to the concerted richness of modern universalism.”³⁵ Of course, when pressed, each friend admitted that they had little firsthand knowledge of the grands ensembles.

Liberal policymakers abandoned the grands ensembles model and replaced it with one that they said French families truly desired. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s housing minister Robert Galley described this new model’s appeal at a 1976 private homebuilder conference:

The promotion of homeownership figures among our [the government’s] primary objectives. This mechanism has known a considerable success in recent years because it gives to numerous French people with modest or middling revenues the possibility to become owners of their home, preferably single-family, responding to aspirations weighing so heavily upon them.³⁶

President Giscard d’Estaing considered the promotion of the homeownership and the single-family home to be irreversible because they represented a new step against social inequality. To Giscard d’Estaing, this type of housing was a means for the individual inside the nuclear

³³Philippe Haeringer, “Moscow Chill and Shanghai Frenzy: Two False Exits from the Communist Urban Order,” Trans. Juliet Vale and Andrew Pochin, *Diogenes* 49.194 (June 2002): 70.

³⁴*France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization Since 1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181.

³⁵Gérard Dupont, “Le grand ensemble facteur de progrès social et de progrès humain,” *Revue Urbainsime* 62.63 (1959): 7.

³⁶Josée Doyère, “La Réforme du financement de la construction,” *Le Monde* 16-17 May 1976.

family to find his or her own freedom. It depended on a couple's new relationship to housing. In the 1970s, French single-family home production skyrocketed as an alternative to the perceived failure of the grands ensembles. Central to a couple's acquisition of their new dream home was a woman's move from the kitchen to office. A married woman combined her income with that of her husband's to save towards more costly shelter. To the American Robert Brueggemann, this transition was a "natural" progression. France's brief rejection of American-style suburbia (privately developed sub-divisions with mortgaged single-family homes) was an anomaly that emerged from France's decimated postwar economy and the hubris of authoritarian bureaucrats.³⁷ A more affluent generation of young French couples spurned the collectivist grands ensembles that fostered anomie and demanded individual familial dwellings.

Things are seldom as good or as bad as we remember them. This is certainly true of France's grands ensembles. The collective memory of the grands ensembles is predicated not so much on their actual history, but what happened to them after policies dictated by monetary concerns shifted to favor middle-class single-family property acquisition on the private market.³⁸ There were voices, including Pierre Bourdieu's, that retrospectively called attention to the unrealized promise of the grands ensembles and contextualized their abandonment as a liberal political elite "rescuing" middle-class couples" from "socialist collectivism" to create more coherent political constituencies.³⁹ Léon-Paul LeRoy, president of the SCIC, would have agreed with Bourdieu. He too viewed policies that guided better-off

³⁷Robert Brueggemann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 46.

³⁸Bruno Lefebvre, Michel Mouillart, and Sylvie Occhipinti, *Politique du logement: 50 ans pour un échec* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991).

³⁹Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: New Press, 1998), 6.

families away from the grands ensembles as motivated by a pervasive fear that dense residential housing led the middle-class to make common cause with other classes thereby transforming them into communists.⁴⁰ Of course, the abandonment of the grands ensembles never decreased social inequalities as it was promised to do. Instead, the changes left only couples with elevated incomes a relative liberty in their choice of where—in a geographical sense—they lived. The physical and social degradation of many grands ensembles was not preordained; it was the consequence of policies that that encouraged better-off and dual-income families to purchase homes elsewhere.⁴¹

France's postwar housing *sonderweg* was defined by the nation's almost total and extended commitment to collective housing for young married couples of all classes. French authorities were well aware that their "alternative" housing pathway differed radically from the other countries of Northern Europe, which had put far more efforts into facilitating the production of single-family homes after reconstruction.⁴² The grands ensembles failed as a significant housing alternative capable of winning the allegiance of the middling classes and lasted only a short time before French housing policies re-converged with the broader process of global Americanization in the 1970s. The miracle of reinforced concrete rapidly moved over eight million French families into spacious rental and co-owned apartments. It raised homeownership rates to unprecedented levels with limited household debt accrual. Yet the grands ensembles became trapped in paradoxical snares leading to their cultural denigration at the very moment of their apparent triumph. First, the trap of nostalgia

⁴⁰Archives de la Caisse des dépôts et consignations (hereafter ACDC), 201-1, Témoignage de Léon-Paul LeRoy, 4 February 1987, 19.

⁴¹Maurice Blanc, "'La politique de la ville': une 'exception française'," *Espaces et Sociétés* 128-129.1-2 (2007): 71-86.

⁴²Jean-Paul Lacaze, *Les Français et leur logement: éléments de socio-économie de l'habitat* (Paris: Presses de l'école nationale des ponts et chaussées, 1989), 18.

portrayed the grands ensembles as a dangerous future full of alienated families where homes became interchangeable products. Second, critics complained that the movement away from a culture of scarcity and austerity to a consumer economy demanded a housing model that put personal liberty and desires ahead of collective causes and social projects. Constructed with the specific intention of ensuring happy and healthy families, the grands ensembles came to be seen as pathologically unsuitable for human habitation: a grand ensemble apartment literally made you sick, mentally unstable, even potentially suicidal. Contemporary Americans and Europeans may fret about how suburbs and long automobile commutes contribute to obesity and stress related diseases, but in France the critics found that life in the “unnatural” suburbs of the grands ensembles made women neurotic and left men psychotic.

Sarcelles’ developer conceived the grands ensembles as holistic communities that would enrich familial life and strengthen solidarity. Yet the towers and apartment blocks lost their cultural appeal for lower-middle and middle class salaried couples who saw greater happiness in the nostalgic, standardized individual suburban home [*la maison individuelle*]. Gray, monotonous, suburban streets with pavilion homes and the occasional passing automobile remains the idealized mass urban habitation within the Hexagon. Since the French revolution, rural populations viewed property ownership as the best means of obtaining personal and familial economic independence. The persistence of rural French dreams about single-family homeownership on village outskirts—*le rêve pavillonnaire*—has arguably had more to do with nostalgia and commodity fetishism than with personal liberty. The persistent vitality of *le rêve pavillonnaire*, however, was inextricably linked to the

perceived failure of *le rêve des grands ensembles* or collective housing's apparent inability to offer lower middle and middle-class couples a high quality of life.

By the presidency of Georges Pompidou, French governments rejected the *grands ensembles* and argued that such housing discouraged social diversity in habitation. Governments began to celebrate bucolic rural memories in the mass-produced single-family home along with a continued valorization of the *ville forte* or traditional urban centers. The psychological motivation driving single-family housing policy also mirrored that which had formerly stimulated industrial modernization during the 1950s: an urgent desire to catch-up, now on the domestic front, with peers—the United States, the United Kingdom, and West Germany.⁴³ To be owner [*propriétaire*] of an individual home became the visible sign through which couples communicated their social status. A home materially signified *la promotion sociale* achieved even at the price of a couple's economic solvency.



3. Sarcelles as the modernist, family-friendly suburb.

By the late-1980s, the *grands ensembles* seemed oddities in suburban landscapes littered with pavilion homes; they were the megaliths of a discredited architectural movement and a brief historical moment when France's social protection regime had conceptualized affordable, comfortable, and well-equipped standardized housing for blue and white collar families as a provision equal in importance to education and health care. Less than a quarter

⁴³See Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

century after Portuguese, Spanish, and North African laborers poured the concrete for apartment blocks and towers destined for French families, a televised debate considered leveling all the grands ensembles and re-urbanizing their populations. The American contextual equivalent—should we bulldoze all our single-family subdivisions—remains unimaginable.⁴⁴

France abandoned the grands ensembles, however, at a time when they made more sense than ever before. When Guichard said the grands ensembles were history in 1973; it should have been the individual house that was history. The rise in fuel prices that brought the *Trentes Glorieuses* to a close should have awakened a greater commitment to energy efficient residential communities organized around collective transportation networks. The housing model could have played a role in the successful social integration of immigrant families to France. At the same time, the model offered the disabled and the elderly greater mobility in a nation whose *villes fortes*, while increasingly welcoming to bicycles, remain virtually inaccessible to persons in wheelchairs. To dual-income couples and single parents, the grands ensembles promised affordable housing and proximity in childcare, education, and shopping needs. The grands ensembles project required a more flexible modernity rather than abandonment.

Housing and History

Housing constitutes a recent object of historical analysis, but this history continues a rich legacy of North American historians' fascination with urban France, contributing to the

⁴⁴“Faut-il raser les grands ensembles?” *Droit de réponse*, Télévision Française 1, 23 January 1982; Société française des urbanistes, *Faut-il raser les grands ensembles?* (Vénissieux: Ville de Vénissieux, 1989); Also see Centre de recherches et d'études sur Paris et l'Ile-de-France, Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la Région d'Ile-de-France, and Congrès, *Quel avenir pour les grands ensembles ?* (Paris: Cahiers du Centre de Recherches et d'études sur Paris et l'Ile-De-France, 1985); *Pour en finir avec les grands ensembles: 12 grands ensembles en question* (Paris: Banlieues 89, 1990).

literature investigating France's innovative modernization, and offering much needed background to contemporary French *banlieues* and suburban studies.⁴⁵ In regards to French historiography, the *grands ensembles* first emerged as an active field of investigation at the turn of the last century. Precisely when the *grands ensembles* became a subject of historical inquiry was no accident. Historical interest arose at the very moment when many buildings inside *grands ensembles* became threatened with demolition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, *grands ensembles* landlords settled their loan debts and began demolishing buildings to make way for new housing that could be rented or sold to a better-off clientele. Professional historians felt a certain urgency to write a narrative; to explain and to revalorize the meaning of the *grands ensembles* while they still existed.⁴⁶ They considered it an urgent

⁴⁵John M. Merriman *The Red City: Limoges and the French Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Merriman, *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815-1851* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Tyler Edward Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Rosemary Wakeman, *Modernizing the Provincial City: Toulouse, 1945-1975* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Rosemary Wakeman, *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Larry Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2007); Andrew Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity After World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998); Michael Bess, *The Light-green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA. MIT Press, 1995); Charissa Nannette Terranova, *French state vernacular: les grands ensembles and non-conformist modernism, 1930-1973*, PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2004; Timothy B. Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France, 1880-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Timothy B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization Since 1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Alec G., Hargreaves, *Multi-ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*. (New York: Routledge, 2007); Mustafa Dikec, *Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics and Urban Policy* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007); Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Kevin Michael Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For a discussion of revisionist suburban history in the United States see Jennifer Howard, "Revising the Suburbs," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 24 March 2006; Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴⁶Michel Giraud, *Les grands ensembles, histoire de milieux, milieu d'histoires: la construction du sens de l'espace, la relation densité-nature en banlieue lyonnaise* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000); Jean-Patrick Fortin,

task since contemporary French anti-urbanist ideology, popular housing tastes, and housing policy owed their existence to the rejection of the grands ensembles. Their scholarly efforts described the financial, ministerial, political, and cultural aspects of the grands ensembles in the context of social housing production.⁴⁷ They sought new perspectives and presumptions about the maligned grands ensembles.

This history also draws attention to the cultural and intellectual sources of national housing strategies and their consequences. In American historiography, the new social history first considered how dissenting groups, the poor and downtrodden, “spoke truth” to power. The new cultural history that succeeded it showed how language constructed those political worlds. Cultural history came under fire for dumping concerns over capitalism, the free market, and economic transformations onto the methodological junkyard and for thus marginalizing professional historians’ public role. Historians cut themselves out of

Grands ensembles, l'espace et ses raisons. (La Défense: Plan Urbanisme, construction architecture, 2001); Pierre Peillon, *Utopie et désordre urbains: essai sur les grands ensembles d'habitation* (La Tour-d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2001); Frédéric Dufaux, Annie Fourcaut, and Rémi Skoutelsky, *Faire l'histoire des grands ensembles: bibliographie 1950-1980* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2003); Sabine Effosse, *L'invention du logement aidé en France: L'immobilier au temps des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2003); François Tomas, Jean-Noël Blanc, and Mario Bonilla, *Les grands ensembles: une histoire qui continue* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de St-Etienne, 2003); Frédéric Dufaux, Annie Fourcaut, and Paul Chemetov *Le monde des grands ensembles.* Paris: Editions Creaphis, 2004); Fred Morisse, *ZUP!: petites histoires des grands ensembles* (Montreuil: L'Insomniaque, 2005); Annie Fourcaut and Loïc Vadelorge, *Villes nouvelles et grands ensembles 1* (Paris: Société française d'histoire urbaine, 2006); Emmanuel Amougou, *Les grands ensembles: un patrimoine paradoxal* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2006); Thibault Tellier, *Le temps des HLM, 1945-1975: la saga urbaine des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Autrement, 2007); Dominique Hervier, *Villes nouvelles et grands ensembles: espace, urbanisme et architecture* (Paris: Société française d'histoire urbaine, 2007); Camille Canteux, *Villes rêvées, villes introuvables*, PhD Dissertation, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2008; Pierre Merlin, *Les grands ensembles des discours utopiques aux "quartiers sensibles,"* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2010). On Parisian suburbia more generally see Alain Faure, ed., *Les premiers banlieusards: aux origines des banlieues de Paris: 1860-1940* (Paris: Editions Créaphis, 1991); Jean Laloum, *Les juifs dans la banlieue parisienne des années 20 aux années 50* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1998); Isabelle Papineau, *La banlieue de Paris dans la bande dessinée* (Paris: Harmattan 2001); Henri Boyer & Guy Lochard, *Scènes de télévision en banlieues 1950-1994* (Paris: Harmattan, 1998).

⁴⁷French housing history is a field orientated towards social housing. The field traces its origins as a dynamic discipline back to Roger-Henri Guerrand and his disseration *Les Origines du logement social en France* (1966) which linked social housing production to elitist hygienic concerns. Roger-Henri Guerrand, *Les Origines in logement social en France*, PhD Dissertation, Université de Paris-Nanterre, 1966; Roger-Henri Guerrand, *Les Origines in logement social en France* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1966).

conversations about why solutions to big problems—care, food, education, employment, the environment, finances, health, and housing—emerged, prospered, or failed in different contexts. History helps us to understand that cultures confronted these challenge differently and with varied degrees of success.

Housing has remained an overlooked historical lens, but it offers new ways to explore how tension filled questions about citizenship, gender roles, health, security, and social protection intersected over the past half century. By the 1970s, one had difficulty identifying any nation embracing any economic ideology that had not made housing provision a public priority.⁴⁸ American culture has traditionally embraced the view that states are inefficient actors in the realm of housing. Connecting social aims to habitat still leaves progressive academics, minorities, and conservatives uncomfortable and even making accusations of racism, sexism, or totalitarianism. Housing appears as a brief, weak, faltering, and increasingly non-existent column under the pediments of the capitalist welfare state. If anything, where one was housed contributed to composite identity, but it was not in itself a historical question. In reality, the organization of national housing systems—financial guarantees and policy interventions to provide well-equipped dwellings for employed couples—was a core state activity stabilizing societies and undercutting risks in post-war societies. Most governments saw housing as equal in importance to the efficient organization of food and health distribution networks during the decades after the war. The twentieth-century phenomenon of mass housing was therefore global in reach, but nowhere was it the same. Sociologist John Doling developed a comparative framework for sociological studies of housing and arrived at the conclusion that national housing systems just inside Europe—

⁴⁸See Leland S. Burns and Leo Grebler, *The Housing of Nations: Analysis and Policy in a Comparative Framework* (New York: Halsted Press, 1977).

let alone former European colonies—seldom shared common historical narratives, presumptions, or goals.⁴⁹ Housing systems are legion and their historical evolutions contingent on culture, although historical actors within any system typically accept their operations as givens.

As historians examine the last half-century of national housing systems, they must carefully tease out the realities of a paradox: postwar housing rationalization offered millions of families previously unknown security and comfort (water, heat, indoor plumbing, living space, and, in many cases, privacy) while simultaneously limiting or dictating their potential lifestyle patterns. To return to the last half-century of housing does not mean that historians simply repeat the visceral aesthetic reactions of critics who contemplated American suburban sprawl, French grands ensembles, or Soviet *khrushchoby*. We should avoid conceits and instead identify where housing cultures fell short, explain the reasons for failure, and acknowledge successes without apology—our historical criticism must be constructive. The historian must recognize that housing is a precondition for human liberation and health while acknowledging that any attempt to put populations into “little boxes,” be they dependent on social or market capital, impose bio-regulation across territories. Housing helps humanity as it serves as a regulatory mechanism that encourages ideological-based patterns of social relations and/or savings related to the renting or purchase of accommodations with direct bearing on sexuality and procreation.

Urban history takes into account all aspects of city life—modernization, reform, ethnic, racial, sexual, political or religious conflict—because cities have a multitude of researchable social relations and, conveniently, archives. In contrast, housing history betrays

⁴⁹John Doling, *Comparative Housing Policy: Government and Housing in Advanced Industrialized Countries* (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 11-21; For an example see Roger H. Duclaud-Williams, *The Politics of Housing in Britain and France* (London: Heinemann, 1978).

a degree of pragmatism bordering on the parochial in its questions: how and why did the marginalized, the poor, the wealthy, and all others in-between end up calling the roof over their heads home? There are few self-professing housing historians and no American academic departments gather humanists to explore housing questions past, present, and future. Housing history exists, but only as an inchoate field. Historical approaches can help carry housing studies toward new interdisciplinary perspectives. Housing history may not offer positivist lessons for solving contemporary housing crises, which are now considered almost exclusively through acontextual, presentist financial paradigms. It can nevertheless remind us how cultural attitudes affect housing possibilities, desires, and choices and thus raise new questions about contemporary economic shibboleths imposed as universal truths. Better understanding housing pasts in the present can only help as we think about housing futures.

Housing historians should discern the links between housing, care, citizenship, class, education, employment, ethnicity, health, gender, transportation, and race while describing and explaining the temporal drifts in national and global housing patterns. Drawing on cultural, psychological, and sociological methodologies, housing history becomes less about bricks and mortar or quantifiable data and more about larger issues of inequality and political ideology. Housing is always connected to larger issues since it underpins preconceived conceptions of citizenship, domestic happiness, family relations, and lifestyle ideals as well as complex psychological needs for security. To be concise, housing can serve as a heuristic device guiding the historian into many of the key problems and debates in modern societies.

Studying the historical evolution of national housing systems means asking a wide range of socio-cultural questions with reference to specific historical contexts. Who did a

society seek to shelter? What was the first dwelling of a young couple like? What factors determined their housing? What choices did men and women have in their housing?⁵⁰ Which factors affected a desire to change a family's housing? What were a couple's housing ambitions? What percentage of household incomes did allied couples consider acceptable to spend on shelter? How did women's salaried work contribute to housing? How were housing choices dictated by childcare, education, and transportation opportunities? How were single parents housed? How did a society house the elderly, minorities, immigrants, and the poor? How has housing affected public health? How have governments relied on housing to shape the allegiances of the governed? How has it influenced sexual identity and behavior? Why has housing been seen as a positive right? How were financial mechanisms, mortgages, savings and loan plans marketed? How have housing policies compelled or discouraged women's integration into workforces? How have housing allocations encouraged or discouraged procreation? How did housing policy become linked to government allocations and tax benefits? These questions are not easily answered, but they suggest how housing history leads historians into all kinds of social, cultural, and political issues.

Chapter Organization

The first half of this history chronicles how collective housing became a social question for all classes and led to public interventions that helped to make the grands ensembles triumphant (1939-1965). These policies sought to promote the "happiness" of the loving couple inside the patriarchal nuclear family. The second half chronicles popular reactions to the grands ensembles, the perceived failure of women to adapt to a dangerous built environment, and the search for a freer habitat (1965-1975). The demarcation line—

⁵⁰Legally, Frenchmen alone had the right within a marriage to determine household residence until 1974.

1965—is artificial, but it does represent a turning point in two senses. First, there was a consensus among public and private financial elites that French housing policy was exceptional (and not in a good way) in comparison to its European neighbors and the United States. Second, there was a shared sense on the right and left that France’s housing system failed to respect and encourage liberty. There was a moment in the early 1960s when the grand ensemble of Sarcelles was imagined as a bold experiment that was providing an alternative pathway to residential housing development. In the end, however, that turning point never turned, and the development was arrested. Market imperatives eventually ended the conversation about housing strategies that might develop between socialism and liberalism, communism and capitalism. These two parts of the study therefore chart the dramatic mutations in the average conception of the domestic good life during the three decades after the Second World War.

In the first chapter, “When the Free Market Failed to House the French Family,” I examine how historical actors argued for a greater state role in the provision of housing. Since the eighteenth century, France has produced much in philosophical introspection on experimental housing while steadily defending liberal market conceptions of housing provision. After the 1939 Armistice, architects and reformers concluded that the free market proved incapable of providing couples with adequate housing for biological reproduction. The chapter teases out the biological and moral arguments for an interventionist housing state. Biological theories presented familial housing as an aspect of a positive eugenics policy that would encourage racial health; the moral argument linked familial housing to male citizenship and the breadwinner’s responsibility to his wife and children. The second chapter, “Building a Better Society on the Parisian Periphery,” examines a housing developer’s

aspirations for Sarcelles as a housing model that would facilitate social interactions between diverse classes and races. The next chapter, “The Problem that had a Name,” studies the emergence of a newly identified homemaker pathology that was attributed to modernist housing’s primary role in the alienation of women. Description of this pathology played an important role in the popular denigration of the Sarcelles model. The chapter traces suburban women’s primary frustrations not to the aesthetics of their housing, but to the lack of childcare and transportation infrastructure that severely complicated women’s participation in the labor market. “A Right to What City?” narrates the vilification of the grands ensembles in French culture which portrayed this housing as both capitalist concentration camps and authoritarian collectives full of alienated families. These critiques contributed to the re-orientation of salaried allied couples towards single-family homeownership advertised as a true *patrimoine* for children. The conclusion interrogates the memory of the grand ensemble in the wider society and the potential for revalorization in French culture. Herein, I summarize the theme that runs throughout every chapter: the grands ensembles (for all their problems) represented an intriguing social alternative to both barely regulated free market capitalism and overly managed, socialist state planning

CHAPTER II

When the Free Market Failed to House the French Family, 1939-1954

Why should a government bear responsibility for the provision of housing? How should such interventions be rationalized? Adam Smith hypothesized that “the increase of demand encourages production, and thereby increases the competition of the producers, who, in order to undersell one another, have recourse to new divisions of labor and new improvements or art which might never otherwise be thought of.”¹ This proved untrue in the case of French housing production. Private residential developers were nowhere to be seen shouting “*laissons-nous faire!*” France’s interwar housing crisis seemed instead to confirm Karl Marx’s theory that the housing problem was a by-product of capitalist exploitation: “the more rapidly capital accumulates in an industrial or commercial town the more rapidly flows the stream of exploitable human material and the more miserable are the improvised dwellings of the laborers.”² The shortage of well-equipped dwellings for lower-middle and middle-income couples, let alone low-income families, had a host of unwanted social effects in a professedly pronatal nation: overcrowding, intergenerational households, and cramped quarters all contributed to the postponement of marriages and conception.

Before and after Liberation, France suffered a housing crisis that demanded a solution, but to what end? Those who reflected on France’s housing question were a minority because few ever considered housing to be as important as reconfiguring the industrial

¹Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 706.

²Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Random House, 1906), 726.

engine, infrastructure reconstruction, military equipment, colonial escapades, and the distribution of food. Those who discussed housing, however, linked it to the discourse of regenerated man. They argued for interventionist housing policies as the key to the biological or moral regeneration of the Frenchman and his so-called “dependents”—his wife and children. The discourse of the regenerated man was a powerful ideologically driven utopian aspiration that communists and fascists began to articulate in the 1920s. To European communists, extrapolating from the humanist Karl Marx, regenerated man was a future, revolutionary man who occupied a new social world where his relationship to the means of production had been radically altered. European fascists, by contrast, drawing on Darwinism and futurist thought, imagined their idealized, regenerated man as a biologically pure man whose social life utterly broke with liberal individualism and preexisting hierarchies in his service to community and his leader.

Despite their differences, communist and fascist worldviews shared a faith in state housing intervention as a means to promote the material conditions that could realize their visions of regenerated man. In *The State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin looked beyond the abolition of private property to the organization of Bolshevik housing paradises centered on communal apartment buildings wherein workers punished idlers, gentlefolk, and swindlers—those still practicing capitalist traditions—as ideology became lived practices.³ In Germany, Adolph Hitler prophesized the culmination of national-socialist policies in the racially purified half-peasant/half-warrior virile hero. Hitler and Third Reich policymakers conceived housing policy or *Wohnungspolitik*—and not just fascist architecture or folkish aesthetics—as a central aspect of the *nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssysteme* wherein affordable

³V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 49-51; 84-85.

postwar *Volkswohnung* set the ideal domestic conditions for the regenerated man and his dependents.⁴

In Vichy France, sundry experts and reformers also demanded that the French recognize what the Soviet Union and Germany had realized long ago: housing was an eminently biological phenomenon, an aspect of racial health, a technology capable of regenerating the demoralized Frenchman.⁵ It was the state's duty to prepare a national housing policy to be implemented at the immediate end of hostilities. This pseudo-scientific discourse medicalized housing as a scientific realm of social protection for the racialized human body as portrayed in the study of human eugenics. Housing was a biological preventative that modified human environments like a vaccine or antitoxin. Habitation itself was a scientific field for the biological engineering of racial health, a necessary pre-condition for a racial renaissance.

The biological discourse in support of state housing interventionism, however, was distinguishable from a separate moral discourse that advocated for state housing intervention in a language of fairness and citizenship, which circulated in Resistance social thought. Catholic socialism served as the intellectual basis for this discourse in that it viewed housing as an aspect of social justice because it promoted familial happiness rather than a technology of racial health. Eugène Claudius-Petit (1907-1989), the first postwar minister of

⁴Franz Seldte, *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich: neue Beiträge*, Berlin, 1938; Tilman Harlander and Gerhard Fehl, *Hitlers Sozialer Wohnungsbau 1940-1945: Wohnungspolitik, Baugestaltung und Siedlungsplanung* (Hamburg: Christians, 1986); Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113-125; Tilman Harlander, *Zwischen Heimstätte und Wohnmaschine: Wohnungsbau und Wohnungspolitik in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1995); Ulrike Haerendel, *Kommunale Wohnungspolitik im Dritten Reich* (München: Oldenbourg, 1999).

⁵This had long been the claim of the International Congress of Modern Architecture who conceived of their profession as a health science rather than an art. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse: éléments d'une doctrine d'urbanisme pour l'équipement de la civilisation machiniste* (Bologne: Editions de L'architecture D'aujourd'hui, 1933), 29.

reconstruction concerned with housing, believed that shelter was central to the regeneration of the Frenchman, as husband and father. But his foremost concern was securing the happiness of the loving couple and the family unit. Through housing, he thought France could establish the material conditions to bring about a moral renaissance and family-friendly society. The social-Catholic did not seek to secure ideal conditions for racial reproduction (housing as a form of positive eugenics); on the contrary, his attitude towards housing reflected the application of Resistance social thought to public policy. Resistance social thought was an eclectic, non-dogmatic current of ideas that combined a thirst for social justice with an eagerness to build an authentically French society that might have greater moral appeal than either Soviet communism or American capitalism. It also showed a clear proclivity towards corporatism and communalism and a faith in state techniques of social protection to achieve these goals.⁶ Resistance social thought nevertheless shared with Vichy a desire to oppose the past, to move beyond the failed model of liberal capitalism, to elaborate new social structures liberating the masses from material dependence, and to encourage individual participation in communal efforts.

Those who swam in the intellectual currents of Resistance social thought had no desire to return France to some mythical-traditionalist-patriarchal land of villages, but they sought to secure conditions in harmony with what they believed the perennial structures of a new political economy: the nuclear family, full male employment, and women's return to maternal/caretaker roles. In the logic of Resistance social thought, housing policies were a moral imperative predicated on a belief that the state had a obligation to ensure that every male breadwinner had the financial ability to provide affordable, well-equipped shelter to his

⁶H. Stuart Hughes, *The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 153-161.

dependents. To Claudius-Petit, for example, the state was not an instrument facilitating the capitalist exploitation of the wage earner or a force pressuring couples to procreate, but a moral arbiter that could help secure the best conditions for familial happiness.⁷

Vichy and the Bucolic Rural Home

Vichy sought an anti-liberal and anti-Marxist vision of a regenerated man after France's demoralizing defeat: a new Frenchman who would repudiate everything that



4. The collapsing *habitat traditionnel* found on the outskirts of any village under the Third Republic with the same home regenerated by the National Revolution.

characterized the Third Republic. He would be an amalgamation of humanism and Catholicism, embracing communal responsibilities and personal vocations (much as a woman would embrace her private “maternal vocation” as an instrument of collective good). What shelter would this new Frenchman call

home? Where would he collaborate with his wife to raise France's future generations? Historian Robert Paxton wrote “Vichy preferred women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.”⁸ It may have been the regime's preference, but in reality Vichy did very little to assure a woman had a lodging, let alone a stand-alone modern kitchen, in which she could stand barefoot. Vichy leaders had neither the time nor the means to transform their domestic vision into a reality.

⁷Claudius-Petit believed in indicative planning or a system wherein the state articulated desirable goals and relied on a central core of quasi-public institutions and industries to achieve those goals.

⁸Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Norton, 1975), 168.

Maréchal Pétain may have lacked a coherent technocratic or pronatalist housing policy, but the National Revolution rhetorically recognized housing as the foremost problem confronting young couples. Good homes were essential for the physical regeneration of the race. The National Revolution propagated an ideal vision of a family-friendly France composed of scattered bucolic villages. Vichy propaganda visually contrasted the collapsing *habitat traditionnel* found on the outskirts of any village under the Third Republic with the same home regenerated by the National Revolution.⁹ This regenerated familial habitation set in small villages would reflect folkish architecture while encouraging a sense of security and permanence. The National Revolution proposed a reorganization of social life to combat the national decadence whose chief symptom was declining birthrates. In this reorganized social world, each member of the familial cell would return to his or her “natural” duties. According to Vichy policymakers, the true Frenchman was a husband who acquired his familial shelter through his artisanal, agricultural, or industrial labor and formed under his roof a “*petit patrie*” that included his wife, now returned to a destiny dictated by biology, and his multiple children. Although Vichy’s housing policies favored couples willing to resettle on abandoned country farms, the regime’s rhetoric pointed toward a future where even industrial production was ruralized in satellite country villages.

After the Armistice, Vichy dictated low-interest loans for home building materials that would be available for newly married young couples “desperate to establish a *foyer*,” but it was up to the couple to design the structure, procure land, and hire help in an economic climate that lacked private developers or laborers.¹⁰ The state’s interventions also took the

⁹Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, *La France des années noires: de la défaite à Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 165.

¹⁰Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), 2AG/498, Jeune, tu dois savoir, undated pamphlet.

form of funds for families to return to the earth or rural peasantry. Those who returned to the land starting in November 1940 benefited from legislation that offered financial subventions to male heads-of-household who re-entered agricultural employment for the reconstruction of rural homes.¹¹ An April 1941 agricultural housing law offered a 50 percent state subvention on rural home improvements, and a May law encouraged bank lending to rural owner-occupiers after it was realized those on the land lacked the capital to make even the initial contributory investment to qualify them for the subventions.¹²

At the end of May 1941, Vichy promulgated Financial Assistance for the Return to the Land [L'aide financière pour le retour à la terre]. This measure was designed to assist urbanized young couples of peasant origins with a minimum of one child to live in rural environments.¹³ To qualify, a *chef de famille* had to prove his pure racial status, be between the age of twenty-one and forty-five, have spent at least five years of his life in a rural environment or have an artisanal skill, be physically fit, and currently draw a salary from industrial or commercial employment. He and his wife signed a ten-year engagement to work in professional agriculture or rural artisanry. If the applicant passed a review by the minister of labor and family benefits office [Caisse d'allocations familial, the government agency redistributing funds to lower-middle and middle-class couples with dependents] and received a final approval from the minister of agriculture, the couple received a *pécule*, that is, a nest-egg. The family benefits office paid the nest-egg in three installments over one year,

¹¹These were direct grants of up to 25,000 francs covering 50 percent of an individual project improving a dwelling's hygiene, 33 percent for improving agricultural working conditions, and 25 percent for improving a dwelling's comfort. AN, 2AG/458, Subvention aux agriculteurs sur la construction ou la restauration des immeubles ruraux, Loi du 21 novembre 1940, Arrête ministériel, 14 December 1940.

¹²AN, 2AG/458, Prêts pour l'Amenagement des logements ruraux, Loi du 15 Mai 1941; AN, 2AG/458, Les Prêts à long terme aux propriétaires ruraux, *Le Mairie Rurale* 1 September 1941.

¹³AN, 2AG/458, Aide financière pour le retour à la terre, Loi du 30 Mai 1941.

amounting to the total sum the family would have received in family allocations if the father had remained in salaried employment until their youngest child reached the age of fifteen.

The institution of Young Household Establishment Loans [Prêts d'établissement aux jeunes ménages, PEJM] operated as an added financial mechanism that sought to keep families housed in the countryside. The PEJM provided newly married rural couples with loans repayable over ten years at 4.5 percent interest for home improvements. In order to benefit from the loan, a couple had to fall within a certain age category (between twenty-one and thirty-five years for men and eighteen and twenty-eight for women) and present a certificate of medical health. The principal debt on the loan decreased with each birth and was canceled with the birth of a fifth child.¹⁴ The PEJM extended funds to couples with the expectation that they would spend those funds on the preparation of their home for the arrival of children. Here, the state depended on a financial mechanism to improve the comfort of rural shelter while simultaneously making it economically rational for an allied couple to rapidly procreate.

Overall, Vichy rhetoric encouraged an ethos of self-help as the best means to rejuvenate France into a constellation of rural villages. Lucien Romier (1885-1944), amateur historian, *Le Figaro*'s editor, member of Pétain's national council, and minister of state (August 1941 to December 1943), summarized how young couples could repopulate the countryside in an article entitled "La Femme et la vie d'intérieur (1941)."¹⁵ Romier estimated that thousands of abandoned, dilapidated French rural homes simply needed a man's elbow grease and a woman's delicate touch to turn them into familial paradises. During the Interwar period,

¹⁴Paxton, *Vichy France*, 166.

¹⁵AN, 2AG/458, Lucien Romier, "La Femme et la vie d'intérieur," *La Terre Française* 2.53 (1 November 1941): 6

Romier had spilled a great deal of ink condemning housing conditions in urban agglomerations with a particular disdain for collective housing or apartment buildings:

In apartment-houses, in sections of floors, in *grandes casernes* so to speak; families jostle each other, experiencing common contacts and restraints, or, as in America, the tendency towards a kind of gregarious hotel or restaurant life spreads more and more, to be taken up perhaps, eventually, by the whole population in the end. And what is to be said of the collective lodgings established in over crowded Russian cities!¹⁶

Romier feared collective housing in industrial societies reduced familial intimacy, placed emotional strains on married couples' relationship, and discouraged intergenerational interactions. A cramped apartment inspired the housewife to be "ill at ease" and "to grow bored and look for distractions."¹⁷ In her apartment, a woman lost "the protection, the bonds of sentiment and the traditions that upheld her." Romier's concern was not foremost with tenure—to rent or to own—but with the form of housing. The stand-alone family home promised women the best of psychological health.

Romier considered familial housing to be a sector that should not be submitted to "the pitiless laws of competition," but only to "the laws of familial love." All those abandoned rural homes scattered throughout the countryside did not fall into ruin because their occupants were poor: "No! What lacked in these houses, what prevented them from staying young, it was not wealth, it was that they no longer served as shelter for newly married couples."¹⁸ Young married couples returning to "*hameaux, villages et bourgs*" rejuvenated, restored, and repainted those ancient homes whose walls would once again serve as the privileged settings for the majority of French "*histoire des amours familiales*." A young

¹⁶Lucien Romier, *Who will be Master: Europe or America?*, trans. Matthew Josephson (Macaulay: New York, 1928), 116.

¹⁷Romier suspected this trajectory almost always ended in divorce. He feared woman's abandonment of the rural private familial dwelling left her with "no frame in which things are fixed, no control, no lasting affections, no point of support, no moral example." *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸AN, 2AG/458, Romier, "La Femme et la vie d'intérieur," 6.

married woman enlivened the interior of “the dead home [*le logis meurt*]” just as her husband enlivened its outside by strengthening the exterior. In his history of France, Romier attributed the features of the French racial character to its territorial continuity; literally, French families had stayed in communion with the land for centuries, and this land had given them specific physical and psychological characteristics.¹⁹ By returning to a rural home, a young couple returned to what historically granted them their individual stability and intergenerational familial identity.

Housing as a Biological Imperative

After the armistice of 22 June 1940, architects and reformers bifurcated over the ideal mode of habitation, individual or collective, but all planted themselves firmly in favor of unprecedented state housing interventionism from construction to provision. They envisioned future interventionist housing policies that would move families beyond the threshold of a shelter and secure the collective good by promoting racial hygiene and ideal conditions for population regeneration. The Third Republic was a society in decomposition whose insalubrious urban apartments, poorly equipped individualistic suburban homes, and dilapidated rural shacks served as the biological conditions for French military defeat. France’s loss provided an opportunity for those passionate about housing to speak freely about their views of parliamentary legislators who had failed to encourage free market solutions. They called for a providential sheltering state.²⁰

¹⁹Lucien Romier, *A History of France*, trans. A. L. Rowse (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966), 5.

²⁰Pétain’s arrival convinced reformers of all horizons that the moment had arrived for their projects implementation. How much easier it would be to engender housing changes through governmental authority rather than the legislative process! Housing reformers shared an illusion that Pétain’s Vichy was a coherent government; when, in fact, it sheltered diverse political currents incapable of directing a territory-wide housing policy. Globally, housing advocates overestimated the possibility to engage in meaningful and lasting institutional reforms in an occupied country. See for example Jules Verger, “Un Programme de grands travaux immédiatement réalisables,” *La Reprise Économique* (August-September 1940): 6-7.

Vichy did not really lay the foundation for Fourth Republic housing policies that manifested in the architectural form of the *grands ensembles*, but it was filled with opportunistic voices calling for the recognition of housing as a technological aspect of reconstituting a biologically sound French society. Today, well-meaning twenty-first century architects and environmentalists demand that housing be adapted to our ecological realities; human dwellings should limit their carbon footprints and adverse impact on environments. In the years after the armistice, well-meaning voices demanded that housing serve biological ends—racial health and increased procreation. These diverse voices conceptualized housing as a state technology grounded in scientific objectivity that could establish a condition of homeostasis or equilibrium across a geographical territory and thus encourage particular behaviors. They assumed that housing was a population-biological mechanism that regulated sexuality and procreation practices. During the Vichy/Occupation period, the medicalization of housing, that is to say, the application of medical ideas to housing, reached its theoretical conclusions.

Ascribing a biological function to housing did not mean its larger social or economic role inside an industrial economy was forgotten. The pharmaceutical owner François Debat (1882-1956) was in tune with Romier and Vichy when he gave social and biological reasons for the complete dismantling, decentralization, and reconstitution of French industries throughout the rural in *Essai sur la question sociale de l'après guerre* (1940).²¹ Unlike Romier, who saw those returning to the land as returning to agricultural or artisanal labor, Debat saw those returning to the countryside as industrial laborers, general staff, office employees, and managers. Defeat offered France a chance to systematically demolish the

²¹François Debat, *Essai sur la question sociale de l'après-guerre* (Paris: impr. de Guillemot et de Lamothe, 1940).

“ugly and poverty filled” concentric circles engulfing Paris, “city of arts, sciences, and history.”²² Re-planted in the rural countryside, the de-urbanized industrial male employee would again become the primary breadwinner in his rural village thanks to the affordability of his owner-occupied shelter. In turn, his wife would return to the home since her paid labor was no longer required to keep a household afloat. Moreover, decentralized production and the placement of habitation in “natural” settings promised “a better quality product” because workers would be healthier.²³

Debat linked this form of rural industrial habitation with the married couple’s increased psychological proclivity to biologically reproduce. As Debat explained it, the average Parisian blue- or white-collar employee seldom had the financial means to acquire lodgings to support multiple children, so mothers were often compelled to work outside the home to supplement monthly expenses. Theoretically, the shifting of factory and home to the countryside would decrease the price of sheltering a family and also reduce food expenses. The head-of-household would then bring home a salary that allowed his wife to “swear herself entirely to her natural and active labor as housewife and mother.”²⁴ In Debat’s working-class residential villages, there would be no such thing as male unemployment since women were removed from labor market participation and the elderly were forced into pensioned retirement. From cradle to grave, the male employee occupied a secure and naturally healthy setting that would also encourage his children to reproduce an identical rural life cycle.

²²Ibid., 13-14.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

Although Debat himself had initiated a model village for workers at his pharmaceutical laboratory in Saint-Cloud, the doctor sensed only the state, and not industry alone, could accomplish this grand project for a better future. Only the dictatorial state could expropriate and demolish at will. Only a powerful state could acquire land and help finance either directly or in partnership with industrialists the new villages where heads-of-household would acquire a home and garden after a short repayment period.²⁵ Debat believed that his habitation proposal—addressed directly to Pétain and those embracing the new Vichy spirit—had three great merits: biologically, it encouraged human reproduction and natural health (air, sun, access to fresh foodstuffs); socially, it secured social peace by making the male breadwinner master of his own home; economically, it preserved industrial capitalism.

The pronatalist National Alliance Against Depopulation [*Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation*, ANCD] also championed a greater state role in housing provision and assistance as a means to raise birthrates and combat France's demographic decline. Formed shortly after the First World War, the group forcefully decried the failure of the free market to house families under the Third Republic. Fernand Boverat (1885-1962), president of the ANCD until 1939 and the organization's leading propagandist, embraced a "progressive" conservatism that viewed housing provision as essential to the needs of reproducing families.²⁶ In an ANCD pamphlet entitled *Fécondité ou Servitude* (1942), Boverat argued for housing policies that would make family composition more important than the size of an

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Boverat joined Adolphe Landry, Georges Pernod, and Alfred Sauvy on the Haut comité de la population where they re-wrote the French Family Code. The group also played a central role in the creation of housing allocations.

individual's wallet. In other words, the size of one's family rather than a family's finances should dictate their housing situation.²⁷

Boverat hated two groups above all others: abortionists and the happily unmarried with employment. In Boverat's opinion, the former caused France irreparable harm, but it was the latter's decadent lifestyle that discouraged too many couples from forming large families. People without dependents living on a salary had too much fun and lived too well, causing couples to pause before procreating. Boverat envisioned a French society wherein couples were not penalized or caused to suffer a decrease in their quality of life for having many children. He



5. "Every hard worker and every devoted mother must be able to know familial happiness." Boverat's pronatalist ideal: the male breadwinner and his suburban oasis.

believed two men expending an equal amount of labor should not automatically receive equal



6. To the left "The home of an engineer without children." To the right: "The home of his colleague father of a large family." The contrasting images evidenced Boverat's argument that housing should reflect familial needs rather than individual incomes regardless of class or profession.

remuneration. Rather their remuneration, salary plus social solidarity contributions, should reflect the needs of each man's dependents. Every family with a salaried head-of-household should boast a *niveau de vie* above that of his single, childless counterpart. A couple's housing, Boverat argued, should neither restrict

a couple's choice to have children nor relegate them to "an unhealthy home [*un logement malsain*]"²⁸ The propagandist considered it contrary to human nature that even a well-

²⁷AN, 2AG/497, Fernand Boverat, *Fécondité ou servitude: Comment relever la natalité française* (Paris: Éditions de l'Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation, 1942).

salaried, white-collar employee, Boverat used an engineer as an example, was condemned to occupy worse and worse housing as he had more and more children. To begin correcting the situation, Boverat called for the state to introduce housing allocations that would significantly compensate families with children who consecrated over 10 percent of their monthly income to shelter.

Architect Paul Grillo, Paul Bigot's favorite student at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris and winner of the 1937 Prix de Rome, elaborated on what he thought the National Revolution meant for French housing in a memo outlining an architectural doctrine for Vichy.²⁹ Betraying an anti-Semitism absent from his future employment at Rice University, Grillo framed French habitation problems as a conflict between two races: the sedentary and the nomadic, the constructors and the destructors, the French and the Jews.³⁰ The architect-as-anthropologist identified the French as a sedentary people who traditionally manifested their commitment to their ancestors in the material edifices of their dwelling. To Grillo, a French patriarch made a symbolic and real commitment to racial health in the edification of his familial home.

France, Grillo believed, had fallen prey to a nomadic civilization, one Third Republic parliamentarians failed to detect, that perverted sedentary French housing traditions. He believed that in an invading nomadic population's eyes "all construction constituted a loss of time when it was not realized for financial speculation."³¹ Grillo blamed "Israelites" (who he

²⁸Ibid., 22

²⁹AN, AG2/458, Paul Grillo, Pour un doctrine d'architecture nationale, 2 December 1940.

³⁰After the war, Grillo worked in Switzerland before moving to Rice University where he helped undergraduates imagine mega-cities existing in harmony with Texan landscapes. Paul Jacques Grillo, "Three Cities: Aquila, Poseidon, Aegea," Department of Architecture, Rice University, 1963.

³¹Grillo, Pour un doctrine d'architecture nationale, 4.

said occupied positions without hereditary fixation in commerce, industry, and finance) for limiting housing construction to speculative ventures and “*la mode*.” Blinded by the “invaders’ greed and decadence,” the French bourgeoisie ignored the question of familial shelter, thus causing French housing stock to decompose to the point where, in Grillo’s estimation, it was closer to that found in India than anywhere else in Europe.

Grillo’s thesis was that his homeland’s return to civilization depended on the reestablishment of a sedentary society organized around a patriarchal familial home secured by the state. Housing should cease being a question of financing and speculation to become a question of public health and national security so as to reconstitute a nearly lost sedentary habitation culture. The shape Grillo imagined for this domestic future was the traditional French dwelling found on the outskirts of rural villages and towns. Each home would reflect the availability of local resources and history would set the aesthetic parameters for repopulation. France’s new homes would be the antithesis of all that was seen under the Third Republic whose regime produced “the anarchic Parisian lot suburbs, the tasteless high-rise at Drancy, and the ‘snobbish’ purely speculative suburban bourgeois villa.”³² The architect advised Petain to incorporate housing as a division of national defense so as to institutionalize “a well-thought and health-orientated housing policy [*une politique d’habitation*] setting family stability as the preconditions for the repopulation of France.”³³ A future “*État-bâisseur*” would assure every family cell had the sedentary conditions requisite for healthy mental and physical maturation across multiple generations. The nationalization of housing production and provision was a prerequisite to the reconstitution of a clearly discernible and authentic French race.

³²Grillo, Pour un doctrine d’architecture nationale, no pagination.

³³Ibid., 17.

Among affordable housing advocates, there was a sense that the military defeat of 1940 would lead to a renaissance in home building. Delegates at a Nantes national affordable housing congress held shortly after the Armistice unanimously adopted a declaration rebuking the ineffectiveness of Third Republic housing policies.³⁴ Congress members chided Third Republic parliamentarians for rhetorically advocating housing improvements without significant legislative actions. They blamed parliamentarians and ministers for failing to connect low birthrates with the nation's poor housing stock. By maintaining an indifference towards housing as a privileged area of health protection, parliamentarians, regardless of political affiliation, "turned their backs on French families and their race."³⁵ Parliamentarians' interwar inability to build affordable homes, harbors of domestic peace, transformed the French into the European record holders in abortions, alcohol consumption, mortality, tuberculosis, and low birthrates, all of which contributed to a familial and, hence, national degeneration which had led to the recent military defeat.

Delegates maintained that France required immediate housing construction "if she wanted to survive," but that the necessary building could not be achieved through traditional free market "*logomachies*." To delegates, the "utopian dream" that "*le jeu libre des lois économiques*" could adequately house nations had ended.³⁶ Housing, they argued, had to enter the state's purview as an aspect of national defense and racial protection organized in a military fashion. The delegates reminded Pétain that the question was all the more pressing since in the next years young couples "will soon be ready to constitute a family and to

³⁴"Déclaration adoptée à l'unanimité," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 2.14 (May-October 1940): 11-14.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

³⁶*Ibid.*

procreate.” The question remained: “What measures...will be taken to permit them to create a *foyer*?”³⁷ Only when the state monopolized control over the provisioning of shelter, delegates maintained, could measures be taken to subsume financing and speculative interests to “the quality of children’s muscles and blood.” Housing was too important to racial health to be left to the whims of the free market.

The socialist reformer Henri Sellier (1883-1943), Léon Blum’s first minister of public health, and longtime mayor of the Parisian suburb of Suresnes, also hoped that out of defeat would emerge an ambitious interventionist state housing policy. A suburbanite profoundly attached to the Parisian periphery, Sellier devoted his career to publicizing the relationship between housing, hygiene, and demographic growth. In his writings, he argued that good dwellings encouraged procreation and, more importantly, healthy children.³⁸ As president of the Seine Departmental Affordable Housing Office [Office départemental des Habitations à bon marché de la Seine], Sellier presided over the construction of eleven Parisian garden cities built in harmony with local labor markets. His final development was France’s first grand ensemble, at the time called the nation’s first “American-styled” skyscrapers, in the Parisian suburb of Drancy.³⁹

In a published letter of 1940 to Louis-Ernest Lafont, a Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière [SFIO] deputy representing the Hautes-Alpes and former minister of

³⁷Ibid., 12.

³⁸Henri Sellier and A. Bruggmann, *Le problème du logement, son influence sur les conditions de l’habitation et l’aménagement des villes* (Paris, Les Presses universitaires de France, 1927).

³⁹This was Sellier’s last project as head of the Seine Departmental Affordable Housing Office. The project named La Muette located in the Parisian suburb of Drancy. The housing development constructed between 1932 and 1935 was composed of a U-shaped building and five towers constituted the first “American-styled” skyscrapers built in France. During the Occupation, French police emptied the apartments of residents in order to transform the *cité* into a concentration camp for Jews prior to deportation. After the war, the U-shaped building again became social housing while gendarmes moved into the towers until their demolition in 1976. Roger-Henri Guerrand and Christine Moissinac, *Henri Sellier: urbaniste et réformateur social* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 15, 102.

public health and physical education, Sellier contextualized France's defeat as a consequence of the Third Republic's failure to commit to mass housing provision:

At the conclusion of the last war, Germany, politically and economically devastated, had from the start understood the all importance of maintaining a favorable demographic situation and a normal state of sanitation—the one and the other conditioned by satisfactory mass housing. Meanwhile, Austria, [and] Italy, for the same reasons, implemented remarkable construction initiatives, while the Scandinavian countries and Holland, countries comprising the avant-garde of European civilization, mercilessly destroyed their slums. Shortly after, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics considered the construction of hundreds of thousands of homes as the essential condition required for the realization of their five-year plan. And here, the French government and parliament remained indifferent to the question of housing.⁴⁰

Sellier argued that the Third Republic showed “a total indifference” toward “questions concerning racial defense” and the housing problem.⁴¹ Sellier urged reformers, governmental offices, and Pétain “to rapidly put into action a positive reform program...dominated by regulations drawn from modern urban science and adapted to general economic conditions, introducing French families to the notion of comfortable housing.”⁴² French couples desperately needed comfortable lodging equal in quality to that experienced by their German, British, and Scandinavian counterparts if they were to be convinced to procreate.

By 1941, Sellier had elaborated an ambitious legislative reform project for housing.⁴³ The reform called for the nation to guarantee each family a standard home [*un logement normal*] defined as a family room, bedrooms limited to two children of the same sex, and a kitchen.⁴⁴ This new form of nationalized housing was to be open to all social classes, as opposed to just the working class. But first, Sellier realized, the French had to change what

⁴⁰“Lettre de M. Henri Sellier, secrétaire général à M. Louis Lafont, Directeur de la Famille et de la Sante,” *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 2.15 (November-December 1940): 2.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Henri Sellier, “Projet de reforme de la législation de l'Habitation,” *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 3.17 (May 1941): 20.

⁴⁴Ibid.

they understood to be the state's role in the housing market. Sellier urged the nation to stop seeing the state's role in housing as confined to the narrow field of dealing with impoverished families. Instead, the French should adopt the paradigm of its victorious European neighbor Germany whose citizens understood housing was "an infinitely larger field of intervention."⁴⁵ The national housing Sellier envisioned was not for the poor or poorly socialized, families whom he believed required "a highly controlled and surveyed dwelling situation," but "all those with normal sociability and a normal sense of propriety."⁴⁶ What Sellier was arguing was for the socialization of familial housing for all classes.

By the winter of 1941, however, Sellier doubted that the doctrine of the National Revolution translated into a real political commitment to housing or preparation for the moment when France could rebuild. He deplored the fact that "the new political regime had adopted the same total indifference of previous public powers vis-à-vis the essential problem of racial regeneration: *celui de l'habitation*."⁴⁷ The dictatorial state had failed to recognize that "the problem of housing conditions, even more than that of birthrates, [affected] the survival of the nation and the race."⁴⁸ He warned Pétain that "if we want the race to survive" it was not enough to advocate procreation measures without first addressing "the problem of housing which conditioned birthrates."⁴⁹ As Michel Foucault once observed, French socialism—as opposed to social democracy—had a racist component from its utopian

⁴⁵Henri Sellier, "Lettre à Monsieur le Secrétaire d'Etat à la Famille et à la Santé," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 3:17 (November-December 1941), 32

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁷Henri Sellier, "Introduction," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 3:17 (April 1941): 1.

⁴⁸Henri Sellier, "La santé et la survie de la race," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 3:17 (November-December 1941): 7.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

inception. Sellier, a hero of the French Left to this day, simply stretched the aims of social housing in a way not unlike Boverat or Grillo to their natural conclusions: biological defense and racial regeneration.⁵⁰ Pétain, however, had failed to realize what Sellier had observed—that the French race was still menaced by social ills that were symptoms of a pathogenic state: the poor housing conditions of families.

Like Sellier, the architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965) also believed that familial housing conditions throughout France and its empire would be radically changed during the dictatorial moment that had arrived with defeat. On 1 July 1940 Pétain and his government arrived in Vichy. Two days later, Le Corbusier showed up with what he explained twenty years later as a desire “to fight” and “to put the world of construction on the right track.”⁵¹ The architect made Vichy his home between occasional trips to Algeria and Paris for the next two years. Le Corbusier saw France’s defeat as a moment of unparalleled potential. He understood that the government confronted urgent political questions and that the lack of building materials prevented immediate construction. Yet his foremost ambition was to establish himself within the new government so as to be ready when the moment to build arrived. Le Corbusier saw Vichy as the dictatorial moment for which he had long waited to implement a total razing—a cleansing—of past traditional dwelling systems to the benefit of metropolitan and colonial public health.⁵²

⁵⁰Michel Foucault, *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and François Ewald, eds., trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 262.

⁵¹Jean Petit, *Le-Corbusier: lui-même* (Geneva: Editions Rousseau, 1970), 86.

⁵²Le Corbusier wanted Pétain to approve his ambitious plans for Alger or what Le Corbusier planned to make “the capital of North Africa”. The architect’s began planning for Alger in 1931 only to have his project definitively rejected in 1942 as too destructive to the city’s kasbah. Said Almi, *Urbanisme and Colonisation: Présence française en Algérie* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2002), 97-103.

Long before the Armistice in 1940, the architect had advocated for housing to be considered an extension of public services as opposed to a commodity.⁵³ In the interwar period, Le Corbusier attempted to demonstrate what he interpreted as the obvious connection between housing and birthrates in Strasbourg and Metz. The two cities had their housing stock reconstructed by the German government during their occupation. The two cities also had France's highest interwar birthrates. Le Corbusier ascribed the cities' fertility directly to modernized housing stock.⁵⁴ To the architect, housing was medicine in a figurative social and a real prophylactic sense. Just as the state constructed railroads, canals, and ports to facilitate capitalist merchandise distribution, Le Corbusier advocated the state construction of housing to facilitate population health and reproduction.⁵⁵

Le Corbusier long courted governments—Fascist Italy, the Popular Front, the Soviet Union—he thought capable of implementing a reorganization of human life by building an ordered, self-disciplining habitation system wherein male subjects circulated across linear patterns. By no coincidence, Le Corbusier dedicated *La Ville Radieuse* (1933) “to AUTHORITY” and asked “government, AUTHORITY, patriarch, father of family, tribal sage, you who know—you who must know—are you conscious of the significance of the home?”⁵⁶ The implementation of his vision depended on a political authority capable of putting his conception of public good before private financial interests and property rights. The *Maréchal* was the patriarchal authority Le Corbusier long dreamed would come to France.

⁵³Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, 7.

⁵⁴Ibid., 95.

⁵⁵Ibid., 73.

⁵⁶Ibid., 104.

Le Corbusier never concealed his penchant for authority, order, the family, and traditional moral values.⁵⁷ In 1939, he praised Hitler for recognizing the social value of mass housing construction and using it to recover “the robust health that can be discovered in any race whatever it should be.”⁵⁸ Without question, Le Corbusier’s worldview was reactionary. This held particularly true for his conception of women’s roles. Throughout his career, Le Corbusier’s ambition was to harmonize the abstract man’s life so *he* would be able to better enjoy the fruits of *his* labor. Le Corbusier’s regenerated man was not a stand-in for humanity, man and woman, but *a man*. He designed dwellings that would reconcile a man’s employment with his habitation, thus forging the happiness of man outside capitalist and communist ideologies.

The architect conceptualized man as an abstract individual with unbreakable family connections: “his child at school, his woman in the house, his elderly parents who no longer work, his dog, his cat, his canary.” But it was he alone “who struggled against nature to subsist” for his dependents.⁵⁹ The entrance of European women into salaried employment during the First World War was for Le Corbusier an error that he scientifically summarized

⁵⁷During the Interwar years, Le Corbusier’s arguments seduced Georges Valois, founder of Le Faisceau, France’s first fascist movement. In 1925, Le Corbusier lectured, as a paying member, at the opening of Le Faisceau’s Parisian headquarters and leaving a profound impact on Valois. The architect’s fascination with fascism went beyond his membership to Le Faisceau. Le Corbusier penned articles for Valois’ journal, *Le Nouveau Siècle*, often with the Doctor Pierre Winter, a champion at connecting racial hygiene with habitation, and served as an editor at the journal *Plans* during the early 1930. *Plans*’ tone was anti-Marxist and anti-capitalist. The journal’s contributors obsessed over European decadence, the failures of democracy and liberalism, and struggled to articulate a “new spirit” capable of promoting a regeneration man of action. Georges Valois, “La nouvelle étape du Fascisme,” *Le Nouveau Siècle* 23 May 1927; Philippe Lamour, “Notions claires,” *Plans* 1.1 (January 1931): 13-23; Francois de Pierrefeu, “Le Paradoxe,” *Plans* 1.1 (January): 33-38; Docteur Martiny, “L’homme rationnel,” *Plans* 1.2 (February 1931): 32-44; Le Corbusier, “Menace sur Paris,” *Plans* 1.2 (February 1931): 49-66; Allen Douglas, *From Fascism to Libertarian Communism: Georges Valois against the Third Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁵⁸Le Corbusier, *Sur les quatre routes* (Paris, Denoël Gonthier, 1970), 165-167.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 83.

in the equation “*libération = idéal = illusion*.”⁶⁰ Women’s salaried labor reduced men’s wages, increased unemployment, and disrupted the harmony of habitation systems: “The woman in her household [*foyer*], with her children, that represents fewer people in the labor market. That means fewer men are unemployed.”⁶¹ Modernist housing only worked best when man and woman occupied “natural” roles inside modern economies.

In Vichy, Le Corbusier sought to convince the Maréchal to invest him with housing rejuvenation missions in Algeria and France. The professionalization of French architecture, L’Ordre des Architectes, by Pétain’s decree on 26 January 1941, left Le Corbusier inspired; finally an “authority” had elevated his vocation and banned “that dust ball of lost children who until now were the only one’s to design French homes.”⁶² Le Corbusier met the Maréchal, who the architect called “the one who has the power to regulate all construction in France,” on 29 March 1941 and was amazed to discover his “eagerness to use our organizations and to regard it as his organ of inspiration.”⁶³ Pétain appointed Le Corbusier to lead a temporary committee examining habitation construction on 27 May 1941 and by the end of the year he was borrowing the official stationery of the ministry of industrial production.⁶⁴ Le Corbusier continued to speculate in early 1942 that the Maréchal would

⁶⁰Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse*, 112.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²The legislation made architecture a liberal profession whose remuneration was based on an official barometer. It codified the architect as a neutral party between entrepreneurial interests, property owners, and the public, forbidding registered architects from working as developers, construction material sellers, real estate agents, or to receive commissions from said parties. François de Pierrefeu and Le Corbusier, *La Maison des hommes* (Paris: Plon, 1942), 166.

⁶³Fondation Le Corbusier [hereafter FLC], R2-4-28 to 29, Letter to Marie Charlotte Amélie Jeanneret-Perret, 27 March 1941, Vichy.

⁶⁴Petit, *Le-Corbusier: lui-même*, 87.

appoint him to lead a national familial housing mission that would free him to design standardized housing for the Hexagon.

To Le Corbusier and his supporters, housing took on an evangelical urgency because racial regeneration was conceived as dependent on biologically harmonious dwellings. Over the summer of 1941, Le Corbusier collaborated with François de Pierrefeu and Pierre Winter to publish *La Maison des hommes* (1942), an illustrated housing catechism that moved through a series of childlike questions. The book joyfully proclaimed that “the hour to construct has finally tolled” with the Third Republic’s military defeat.⁶⁵ Soon, housing would escape the logics of speculation, credit, and consummation to enter into harmony with man’s biological functions. This transition could only be accomplished

By state policy, exclusively, or by its immediate delegates, the Provinces. There in effect, and there only, can one hope to see born and made perfect an authentic doctrine...only public control can work to avoid the pressure of mercantile interests.⁶⁶

The co-authors of *La Maison des hommes* betrayed a hardly-veiled anti-Semitism. As they explained, it was only when the state removed housing from “the liberal economy or the gold economy,” to take it out of the hands of “mercantilists,” as shorthand for Jews, could a national housing system financed by the state through corporate contributions be organized to protect the health of the French family.⁶⁷ In the name of the “*salut public*,” the authoritarian builder-state expropriated any private landed property required for construction.⁶⁸ The individual would cease seeing his shelter as a commodity and transition into conceiving of housing as a public service.

⁶⁵François de Pierrefeu and Le Corbusier, *La Maison des hommes*, 6.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 128.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 180.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 186.

At the behest of Pétain and the Parisian Municipal Council, Le Corbusier traveled to Paris where he joined a committee studying habitation at the end of March 1942. In Paris, Le Corbusier befriended the renowned medical researcher Alexis Carrel (1873-1944). The doctor returned to France from America in November 1941 to found the French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems [Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains] whose mission was "safeguarding, improving, and developing the French population in all its activities." Educated in France, Carrel pursued a prolific surgical career at the University of Chicago and the Rockefeller Institute for Medicine, but it was *Man, The Unknown* (1935), translated into all major languages, which brought Carrel international notoriety. At the time of their Parisian encounter, Le Corbusier was far less known than Carrel, a global intellectual, read seriously by homemakers and policymakers alike.

In *Man, The Unknown*, Carrel outlined the importance of eugenics in creating a regenerated man.⁶⁹ Influenced by the American eugenicists Henry Fairfield Osborn, Harry Laughlin, Charles Davenport, and Irving Fisher, Carrel felt man had arrived at a moment when with the help of biology he could "remake himself" as a sculptor.⁷⁰ To avoid depopulation, decadence, and descent into feeble-mindedness, Carrel advocated each nation should assist the strong and stop protecting the weak.⁷¹ In short, the state should abandon all its charitable missions. Rather than calling for mass genocide, sterilizing individuals or murdering populations, Carrel advocated a voluntary eugenics encouraged by positive state policies. He argued that the state had a responsibility to promote better human stock by

⁶⁹On Carrel's global celebrity and the vulgarization of his work in popular literature see: Alain Drouard, *Une Inconnue des sciences sociales: la Fondation Alexis Carrel, 1941-1945* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1992), 110-111.

⁷⁰Alexis Carrel, *Man, The Unknown* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 274.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 299.

convincing healthy men and women to have children. He counseled states to offer “strong” young couples all the conditions of security and stability necessary to encourage them to procreate (a task he confessed was easier to accomplish in a dictatorial government than in a democracy). He called for a system of welfare redistribution organized around genetic characteristics rather than social groups or financial need. Carrel linked his state-promoted voluntary genetics to a historical narrative culminating in the establishment of “a hereditary biological aristocracy” or the total replacement of social classes by biological classes.⁷²

Carrel’s eugenics was pronatalist; he favored setting “ideal” reproduction conditions rather than organizing violence or “negative eugenics.” Encouraging “good” reproduction in a society was a matter of surrounding a genetically pure man with the physical conditions encouraging the healthy function of his body and organic systems as well as those of his dependents, *i.e.* his genetically pure wife and children. Before meeting Le Corbusier, Carrel had already made housing a major research node in the department of population biology at his Foundation. Biological research, Carrel held, should extend its purview into housing so as to fully understand what a man, woman, and child need in terms of shelter to obtain optimal “natural health.”⁷³ Housing was in itself a form of preventive medicine, a basic foundation for the implementation of a voluntary eugenic protection regime.

Carrel was therefore deeply sympathetic to Le Corbusier’s theories on habitation. He gleaned his understanding of Le Corbusier from a reading of *Sur les 4 routes* (1939, 1941), wherein the architect encouraged the French to devote all the energies they once put into armament production into home production, especially around “the thirty kilometers of

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Carrel distinguished between “natural health” and what he called “artificial health” or medicalized procedural/pharmaceutical assisted health

disgraceful shoddy” that was Parisian suburbia and in crumbling towns and villages which contained “a plethora of hovels unfit for human habitation.”⁷⁴ In *Sur les 4 routes*, Le Corbusier portrayed the “ill-sheltered” Frenchman whose dwelling was “a veritable hell-upon-earth” at an impasse after the debacle: he would degenerate with his children and race in tristful abodes or benefit from an interventionist government capable of decreeing for all “a type of super-home which of itself both can and will regenerate the race.”⁷⁵

Le Corbusier himself owned a copiously annotated copy of the French translation of *Man, The Unknown*, and the architect was highly motivated after learning Carrel was to serve on a Parisian housing commission with him.⁷⁶ They looked forward to assisting each other in the clarification of rules for habitation and in improving the “natural health” of French couples.⁷⁷ Le Corbusier confidently predicted that their findings on the Parisian housing commission would “spread to other cities and the French countryside and to the empire.”⁷⁸ Housing would soon serve as an aspect of a social protection policy promoting voluntary eugenics by introducing genetically sound Frenchmen, their families, and, eventually, France’s colonial dependents to an organic domestic milieu upholding natural health and sexual behavior.

Le Corbusier, however, built nothing for Vichy or in Occupied Paris. He definitively abandoned the spa town and his commissions on 1 July 1942, exactly two years after the day of his first arrival. He returned to Paris and installed himself at the École des Beaux Arts. At

⁷⁴Le Corbusier, *The Four Routes*, trans. Dorothy Todd (Bristol: Western Printing Services, 1947), 13.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶FLC, R2-4-53, Letter to Marie Charlotte Amélie Jeanneret-Perret, 12 February 1942, Vichy.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸FLC, R2-4-55, letter to Marie Charlotte Amélie Jeanneret-Perret, 28 March 1942, Vichy.

the end of 1943, Carrel officially welcomed Le Corbusier into his foundation as a technical consultant in habitation.⁷⁹ The authority to construct his vision of modern homes far from the ding and clatter of factories and backwardness of traditional cities across France and its empire was, Le Corbusier realized, unlikely to happen. The voices clamoring for state intervention in a national housing system as a privileged mechanism to achieve biological population imperatives lost influence. The call for housing that would promote individual, familial, and racial health along with positive sexual reproduction conditions, ultimately fell on deaf ears in Vichy.

Housing in a Liberated France

France was slower than any other wartime nation to resolve its domestic housing crisis born of military destruction, a long dormant private market, and a postwar baby boom. Housing was an aspect of post-war reconstruction whose priority fell far behind the reconfiguration of the French industrial engine. Leaders with diverse political allegiances assured families that the radical 1944 program of the National Resistance Council [Conseil national de la Résistance, CNR] would allow France “to rediscover its moral and social balance” through rapid economic rationalization in order to implement a social protection regime guaranteeing all citizens—men and after 1944 women—access to education, employment, retirement, and health care. Housing was absent from the CNR’s program. Charles de Gaulle displayed insouciance towards housing questions when he made it a minor ministerial sub-portfolio despite his ardent desire for twelve million French babies to see the light of day.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Petit, *Le-Corbusier: lui-même*, 93.

⁸⁰In his choice to make housing a sub-portfolio, de Gaulle shared the consensus of political elites who understood shelter as a private or employer issue with non-profits and charities for everyone else.

The preamble of France's 1946 constitution was the only constitutional document that alluded to housing as a potential realm of state intervention when it guaranteed "all, particularly for children, mothers, and elderly workers, health care, shelter, rest and leisure."⁸¹ That same year, the economist Maurice Langlet took a small degree of comfort in the fact that by comparison to the Third Republic, when housing questions were spread out among five or six ministries and departments, at least now housing was under the direction of a single minister.⁸² Still, Langlet considered it absurd that a liberated France had no housing ministry, centralized national housing service, or real vision of what French habitation should look like.

The Plan Monnet (the French economic modernization plan supported by the Marshall fund, 1946-1952) amazingly did not mention housing or building industries.⁸³ On the political right, state housing intervention sounded suspiciously Soviet while on the left housing continued to be seen through the prism of scientific socialism: a tool of labor reproduction and a question that could only be resolved after the revolution. Despite a government commission that pleaded for greater political awareness of how housing influenced "population behavior, lifestyles, social level, morality, intellectual aspirations, and the constitution of the family unit [*la cellule familiale*]," no major post-Liberation political figure made mass housing his or her *cause célèbre*.⁸⁴ As late as 1949, the ministry of reconstruction considered funding fictional feature-length films as a form of passive propaganda to document how poor housing affected familial life and to encourage public

⁸¹*Préambule de la Constitution du 27 Octobre 1946*, § 10, §11.

⁸² Maurice Langlet, "Le Problème de l'habitation," *Revue Politique et Parlementaire* 10 April 1946, 46.

⁸³AN 538AP/81, Note: Plan Monnet, 1949.

⁸⁴Gaston Duon, *Documents sur le problème du logement à Paris* (Lenain: Impr. Nationale, 1946), 6.

outrage and thereby force the hand of political action.⁸⁵

The Gaullists Michel Debré, the father of France's future mortgage system and first prime minister of the Fifth Republic, and Emmanuel Monick, governor of the Banque de France after Liberation, were among the few liberals to reflect directly on the housing question. The two published a program for a New Republic under the names Jacquier and Bruère entitled *Refaire La France* (1945).⁸⁶ The authors argued that France's only chance to sit at the table with the great nations was through a liberal revolution that rejected radical socialism and solemnly recognized the right to private property.⁸⁷ At the same time, they acknowledged that previous governments "never took into consideration the necessity of assuring the salaried a clean and decent home."⁸⁸ The decadence and the corruption of the Third Republic, they observed, was visible in the poor habitation it produced. The solution to the housing question, however, was not to be found in nationalization and the seizure of private property. The "New Republic" should instead assure the salaried man decent housing in order to convince him that a socialist revolution offered no solution to his desire for a private familial dwelling. The societal goal of this project was to transform wage and salary earners into a class of small-time property owners. They aspired "to assure the largest amount of salaried people a house and a garden."⁸⁹ In the "New Republic," as Debré and Monick envisioned it, owner-occupied housing would serve as a form of social protection

⁸⁵AN 538AP/81, la question de la propagande du MRU, 1949.

⁸⁶Jacquier and Bruère, *Refaire La France: l'effort d'une génération* (Paris: Plon, 1945).

⁸⁷Ibid., 70.

⁸⁸Ibid., 67.

⁸⁹Ibid., 68.

from un-employment. At the same time, it operated as a bulwark against communism and socialism by giving each man a reason to maintain allegiance to the liberal republic.⁹⁰

Liberals of the conservative and progressive persuasions emphasized a return to the market, the continued operation of philanthropic building companies, and the encouragement of private initiative. They supported the self-help attitude of the *Castor* (Beaver) movement, a cooperative-libertarian form of housing provision that appeared on the outskirts of Lyon and Paris after Liberation. *Castors* were groups of similar minded men, who shared a common public or private sector employer. They would pool savings to organize as a nonprofit building cooperative.⁹¹ They then secured loans to purchase periurban farmland and materials for construction of familial homes with the contributors themselves providing most of the labor. Private cooperative initiatives appeared across France, but their principal adherents were limited to physically-fit young men with a comprehensive knowledge of construction techniques.

Prior to the war's conclusion, a Musée social study on popular familial housing in the United States reported that Americans' homes had on average a level of comfort French families could not even begin to imagine (central heating, bathroom, indoor toilets, sinks, electric and gas stoves, fridges with icemakers, radios, living rooms). The report therefore suggested that the French would need a radical shift in mentalities about industrialized housing and housing finance in order to introduce an American-styled system at the conclusion of hostilities.⁹² Paul Voisin penned a more extensive report on the American

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹See M. Imbert, "Logement, autoconstruction, solidarité: l'exemple des castors," in *Les formes de la solidarité* (Paris, DRAC ile-de-France/CNRS 1999), 61-83.

⁹²Henri Deroy and Charles Pranard, *Les Problèmes du logement familial: Contribution à l'étude du financement du logement populaire* (Paris: Musée social, 1945).

housing system's incompatibility with French mentalities following a postwar exploratory housing mission (sponsored by the European Recovery Program) that brought him to New York, Washington, Pittsburgh, and Tennessee between 30 September and 1 November 1951.

Voisin was struck by a singular fact during his visit: "the fluidity of property in the United States."⁹³ He observed that Americans built homes to resell them "as one fabricates all other objects of consumption: clothing, refrigerators or automobiles with attention to client satisfaction."⁹⁴ The client then thought nothing of reselling the home at equal price or a profit to buy a new home just as one bought a radio. He found that throughout the United States:

Homes are constructed, sold, and repurchased with extreme easiness. Mortgaged titles [*les titres de garanties hypothécaires*] are secured and transmitted without substantial fees. This fluidity has many consequences: the American does not hesitate to become the owner of his home. This home, in the majority of cases, is not seen as a chain but, to the contrary, serves as a means to assure liberty in the eyes of the owner and the state. He knows that if he sells his home, the sale price will be at minimum equal to the purchasing price on the condition that he maintained it well.⁹⁵

Voisin's American interlocutors did their best to convince him of the evils of state housing interventions. Personally, Voisin judged the American liberal housing system, as shown to him, to be the cornerstone of the nation's industrial capitalist system because it maintained the semblance of social peace by allowing for rapid labor mobility. He found American workers/employees accepted as natural the selling of his familial home in order to relocate great distances for employment. Voisin considered the US mentality towards housing completely incompatible, at least for the time being, with average French mentalities towards debt accumulation and the idea of homeownership as a commitment to rootedness.

⁹³Paul Voisin, "l'habitation aux Etats-Unis," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 13.16 (October-November-December 1951): 28-33.

⁹⁴Ibid., 28.

⁹⁵Ibid., 33.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, a handful considered nationalization the only fair solution to housing France. The Civil and Military Organization [Organisation civile et militaire, OCM] stood alone among major resistance groups in elaborating a detailed plan for a nationalized housing program in September 1943. The OCM's adherents, a combination of anti-German conservatives and socialists, concluded housing was too important to be dealt with on the free market. The OCM rejected "the solution of liberalism" as insufficient and emphasized state regulation of the existing private housing market. New housing would be entrusted to a future minister of social life who would guide a centralized national housing developer toward planning, constructing, managing, and repairing rental and owner-occupied apartment buildings destined for all French families.⁹⁶ The state would aid every family to become an owner-occupier of their lodging thereby "pushing the father to develop the social cell generator of moral perfection, culture, and social stability." Housing, however, would cease existing as a commodity, a material abstractly represented on mortgages and deeds held by notaries, to become an aspect of government administrated social protection. Families would transfer their owner-occupied dwellings on a social rather free marketplace.

The idea of a centralized state housing company was not farfetched in a postwar period that witnessed the nationalization of Renault, coal, electricity, gas, and banks. In 1945, SFIO socialists and communists (Parti communiste française, PCF) dominating the legislature had an opportunity to radically alter the French housing construction and management industry as well as housing provision. That year, a communist municipal councilor from Rodez published a pamphlet arguing for the immediate nationalization of

⁹⁶Louis Houdeville and Jean F. Dhuys, *Pour une civilisation de l'habitat* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1969), 99-101.

home construction under a national housing bureau with departmental branches.⁹⁷ In his proposed system, a head-of-household would submit a dossier that contained his employment information and number of dependents. He would then receive a home matching his social profile. The Catholic-communist Maurice Laudrain, whose pre-war paper *La Terre Nouvelle* bore the provocative image of a white hammer superimposed over a red crucifix, called for the immediate state expropriation of all underused, privately-owned apartments and homes for their redistribution according to need.⁹⁸ Property dispossession, however, remained anathema to small-time property-owners and left-leaning elements with ambitions towards ownership.

Léon Blum put his support behind a committee named in honor of Henri Sellier (who died in November 1943) that proposed a national housing service based on the rejection of profitability, the reorganization of property laws, and the incorporation of shelter into the social protection network.⁹⁹ The committee considered it scandalous that housing—the primary reason for France’s low birthrates and wartime defeat—had yet to become an imperative of state intervention. In fact, the committee found the housing conditions of French families were getting worse and worse since Liberation. For the “health of the Nation,” they urged the state to expand the mission of departmental and municipal public housing bureau [Office Public de l’habitat]. Rather than nationalize housing, the government would expand and unify the pre-existing public sector under the name L’Habitation de France [French Housing, just like the nationalized Gaz de France or Electricité de France] as

⁹⁷Rigal, conseiller municipal de Rodez, *Le Problème du logement par un ami de l’U.R.S.S* (Rodez, impr. de P. Carrère, 1945).

⁹⁸Maurice Laudrain, *Le Salut Public par l’organisation socialiste de la France* (Paris: Résurec, 1946), 83-85.

⁹⁹AN 538AP/78, Comité Henri Sellier, *L’Affaire du Logement* (Paris: Editions de la Liberté, 1947).

a residential development and property management corporation under the purview of the interior minister.¹⁰⁰

Housing nationalization was not on the minds of the two PCF heads of the ministry of reconstruction and urbanism after Liberation, François Billoux (1946) and Charles Tillon (1947), whose tenures passed without any innovative impact. In *Critique de Base* (1960), Jean Baby, a PCF militant, author, and Parisian *lycée* teacher, looked back on their tenures as a period of missed opportunities and lamented the timidity of his party in not articulating a more ambitious housing program so as to expand the party's political base:

If the Party had launched a passionate campaign on this vital problem, if it had multiplied concrete studies on the subject, fought for the requisition and even the nationalization of lands to build on, if it had combatted without interruption, in the parliament and throughout the country, on this issue, it could have won the confidence of the masses and it could have obtained concrete results.¹⁰¹

The PCF lacked the foresight to consider housing provision an aspect of a political platform that could cultivate a broader political base. The party never looked beyond the argument that housing was a question best dealt with after the revolution.

It was the dogmatism of PCF leaders, who believed that French workers would always suffer hardships in a capitalist society, which prevented the party from taking action in the field of housing. The secretary general Maurice Thorez and central committee of the PCF adopted Marx's theory of pauperization to explain French economic patterns, but this theory tied the party's hands on housing questions into the 1960s.¹⁰² Poor working-class familial housing conditions seemed to support the theory that the conditions of the French

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 9.

¹⁰¹Jean Baby, *Critique de base: Le Parti communiste français entre le passé et l'avenir* (Paris: F. Maspéro, 1960), 73.

¹⁰²“It is otherwise with the ‘housing of the poor.’ Even a prejudiced observer sees that the greater the centralization of the means of production, the greater is the corresponding heaping together of the laborers, within a given space; that therefore the swifter capitalistic accumulation, the more miserable are the dwellings of the working people.” See Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Random House, 1906), 725.

working class would decline under capitalism. Billoux, as the minister invested with the sub-portfolio on housing, said it plainly: “The wretchedness of housing [*La misère du logement*] is one of the illustrations of the relative and absolute pauperization of the proletariat.”¹⁰³ The PCF elite, Jean Baby found, grossly misunderstood postwar capitalism by continuing to see it through a nineteenth-century prism of smokestacks and a soot-filled skies. The ideology of pauperization barred the PCF from proposing measures to improve the working-class quality of life.¹⁰⁴

As the Liberation gave way, France continued to lag far behind its European neighbors in well-equipped housing for salaried blue- or white-collar employees. A 1950 study by Alfred Sauvy’s pronatalist Institut National d’Études des Démographiques reported that poor housing was the second leading motivation for Parisian area abortions, following only inadequate finances among all classes.¹⁰⁵ Social workers painted portraits of Parisian domestic life that could have been written by Emile Zola: families housed in hovels, slums, shacks, cellars, closets, one-room apartments where babies slept in wooden salad bowls on kitchen tables, mid-level civil-servants [*fonctionnaires*] who shared fold-out couches each night with their wives and four children, mothers loosing their eyesight due to excessive

¹⁰³Baby, *Critique de base.*, 72-73.

¹⁰⁴Baby sensed the PCF could have better served workers if they proposed reforms improving housing conditions of working-class families in preparation for the eventual transition from capitalism to socialism. The PCF should have told the French working classes that they had a right to the same level of prosperity enjoyed by their American counterpart: a decent home, an automobile, household appliances, a television. Moreover, the PCF should have framed their opposition to the Indochinese and Algeria conflicts as wasting monies that could have provided every French family with a modern owner-occupied apartment (he estimated that France spent as much on the two conflicts as West Germany and a few small European countries combined on home construction). Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁵Jean Sutter, “Résultats d’une enquête sur l’avortement dans la région parisienne,” *Population* 5.1 (1950): 77-102.

humidity, and couples expecting a child but finding only an attic apartment without water or gas.¹⁰⁶

The physical contours of the 1950s urban French “*chez nous*” varied from pavilion homes, to one or two room apartments, to basements and attics, with all families sharing the familiar smells and sounds of the postwar era: Sheppard’s pie, fish in margarine, *pommes frites*, frying onions in horse fat, leek soup, chicory, bleach, slamming doors, crying newborns, laughter, street traffic, and radio. Parents and children slept on awkward arrangements of couches, mattresses, and chairs. Washrooms were nonexistent with toilets on landings or in courtyards. Better-off families had sinks, but most still washed in hand-filled basins. Apartments were sparsely decorated: a post office calendar on the wall and an armoire inherited from grandparents in the corner. Jacques Tati celebrated this urban France in *Mon Oncle* (1958) as sociable clusters of intergenerational communities remaining fiercely resistant to the standardization of the suburban *grands ensembles*.¹⁰⁷ In reality, these neighborhoods were not the result of a conscientious collective aloofness from American-styled consumer impulses but the product of severe material poverty. These twentieth-century families lived in miserable urban conditions.¹⁰⁸ The year *Mon Oncle* debuted in French cinemas, the government estimated 210,000 new homes were needed each year to prevent the housing crisis from growing and 320,000 were needed each year if the country wanted to solve the problem in thirty years time.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Office public d’habitations du département de la seine, *Le cahier noir ou la descente aux enfers des mal-logés et des sans-logis* (Paris: Office public d’habitations du département de la Seine, 1951), 2,3.

¹⁰⁷*Mon Oncle*, Jacques Tati, (1958).

¹⁰⁸ See Michel Winock, *La France politique: XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 410-413.

¹⁰⁹Gilbert Mathieu, “Logement, notre honte,” *Le Monde* 11 March 1958. Mathieu called for the organization of a decentralized democratic national housing service regulating home financing and building. In

Nostalgia paints the Parisian 1950s as little Nicolas' unproblematic world of well-to-do doctors, lawyers, engineers, and happy housewives whose children occupied individual bedrooms in vast suburban villas surrounded by walled gardens.¹¹⁰ Neither this image nor those found in magazine advertisements of elegantly dressed women admiring linoleum in furnished apartments accurately portrayed the houses most families felt they inhabited. Austerity remained the dominant reality. A March 1954 survey in the women's magazine *Elle* showed that the number one dream of young married couples—ahead of a trip to Italy, a car, a library, or being one's own boss—was to have a home to themselves.¹¹¹ The dream to live as a couple, to establish an independent nuclear family in a space apart—a home of a couple's own—reflected the continued social reality that the majority of married couples still turned first to parents or relatives when searching for lodging. Journalist Henri-François Roy called attention to the disparities between everyday life and the proliferation of advertisements that depicted happy families enjoying consumer goods in their spacious apartments when he critiqued the 1955 Salon des arts ménagers, an international Parisian home goods show, for being the equivalent of “a colonial exhibition where we show how the aborigines of Oubangui-Chari live,” only in this case it was the wealthy who opened their doors to show off “their bathrooms and toilets.”¹¹²

To a seven-year-old Alain or Bridgette, the enormous pleasure found in Laughing Cow cheese and Carambar candies, all with tradable cartoon wrappers, outweighed the

a later work, Mathieu claimed at least 200,000 abortions were caused each year due to poor housing. Gilbert Mathieu, *Peut-on loger les Français* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965), 20.

¹¹⁰René Goscinny & Jean-Jacques Sempé, *Le Petit Nicolas* (Paris: Denoël, 1960)

¹¹¹Andre Roussin, “En 1954 les français font 5 rêves,” *Elle* 22 Mars 1954, 28

¹¹²Henri-François Roy, “Les arts ménagers ou le musée du pauvre,” *France-Observateur* 3 March 1955.

discomfort presented by their cramped, under-equipped housing. For parents, the psychological toll of France's postwar housing crises was far more acute. Men who were husbands and fathers with good incomes and diverse occupations—accountants, bank tellers, civil servants, foremen, journalists, teachers, university professors, policemen—despaired when they could find nothing more than a room in Clarmart, Vitry, or Paris for their growing families. Despite scouring real estate agencies and submitting departmental and municipal housing requests, salaried, skilled factory workers returned late each night to answer the wife's "any luck?" with a confident "still nothing, but we'll find something yet."¹¹³ The postwar housing crisis—the inability of Frenchmen, as breadwinners, to secure shelter for their dependents—would only be matched in comparative psychological intensity by the employment crisis of the 1930s—the inability of men to secure a household income for their dependents.

Housing as a Moral Question

The biological discourse advocating state intervention in housing can be distinguished from a separate moral justification for state housing intervention. Whereas the former linked familial housing to promoting racial health, the latter considered familial housing a right linked to public responsibility. These advocates, by and large, Catholic socialists and democrats, advocated for a more ambitious state role in securing financing for housing development as a means to encourage a sense of citizenship and greater democratic participation among breadwinners. These campaigners were a minority during the Occupation and after Liberation, but they consistently clamored for state housing finance policies that could anchor a fair, egalitarian, family-friendly society.

¹¹³*Le Cahier noir ou la descente aux enfers des mal-logés et des sans-logis* (Paris: Office public d'habitations du département de la Seine, 1951), 7.

The individual who emerged with a self-professed desire to solve France's housing crisis arrived at the ministry of reconstruction and urbanism on 11 September 1948. Eugène Claudius-Petit (1907-1989) became the longest serving minister of reconstruction since Liberation (six consecutive years until January 1954 amidst almost monthly changes in heads of government). The young minister cut a recognizable figure with his dark black moustache and hair, longer in the front than back, and penchant for brightly colored ties. Quick to tan, the *Basler Nationalzeitung*, otherwise impressed with the minister, reported he had a certain air of Asia Minor in his countenance.¹¹⁴ Claudius-Petit's vision for housing significantly influenced the next two decades of French habitation. If voices speaking to Vichy advocated state housing intervention as a means to influence a couple's most intimate sexual comportments, Claudius-Petit conceptualized state housing intervention in housing as the moral duty of a society whose chief goal should be to ensure that every couple had access to the conditions necessary for their emotional stability. Unabashedly, Claudius-Petit declared his intent to build homes where love could bloom.

In 1952, a campaigning Dwight Eisenhower qualified the French as "morally debilitated and half agnostic or atheistic." Americans portrayed France as a capital of female sexuality—think Brigitte Bardot—and sexual liberty where young unmarried men and women slept with whomever they chose after a night in the café.¹¹⁵ Polls reported that the majority of Americans assumed French couples lived in common-law unions and that those who were married most likely engaged in multiple extra-marital affairs in their lovers'

¹¹⁴AN 538AP/78, Faits du jour, 10 January 1950, French translation of *Basler Nationalzeitung* article.

¹¹⁵In the Anglo-American imagination, Paris was also a town where a man had greater liberty than anywhere else to sleep with whatever other man they elected. See Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Parisian flats.¹¹⁶ The Frenchman, regardless of his class, lunched with his mistress. In reality, the 1950s was a golden age of conjugal sentiment *amoureux* so apparent in the early discography of Jean Ferrat and Françoise Hardy. Young women and men living in urban environments with some level of employment conceptualized love as a concurrence of sexual, psychological, emotional, and intellectual attraction. Conjugal love was radically reconceived as a legitimization of sexuality and the mutuality of sexual pleasure, but France was not the bohemia Americans imagined.

Young French couples respected the social convention of marriage be it officiated in a civil or religious setting. The civil status of marriage also remained imperative for any allied couple's successful search for modern, fully equipped, and affordable shelter.¹¹⁷ Claudius-Petit considered himself attuned to a youth culture in which men and women alike desperately wanted to fall in love and seek their *Bonheur* as monogamous couples. He sought to reduce the typical French household's social organization to the nuclear family—a married couple and their children—not simply out of elite technocratic concerns, but because he

¹¹⁶Wesley Douglass Camp, *Marriage and the Family in France Since the Revolution; an Essay in the History of Population* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), 132.

¹¹⁷Even as the *Trentes Glorieuses* came to a conclusion, couples accepted marriage as a status facilitating their housing acquisition (much as contemporary US couples accept marriage as a status facilitating their acquisition of health care). Throughout the *Trente Glorieuses*, a young married couple's acquisition of a better *chez-soi* depended on their civil status and their knowledge of housing (where to find it, to whom to turn, what agencies to consult, their allocation rights). Regardless of where they ended up, they could look forward to confronting an almost exhausting series of applications and formalities. They would be interviewed by social or administrative housing services asking questions at the time still considered indiscreet. How much do you make? Do you have savings? Do you have stable employment? Are you of good moral character? Are you planning on having children? Are your children behaved? Where will you obtain money for the deposit? Marriage was one of two perquisites to accessing housing. A head-of-household also had to prove he had a contracted salary. As the saying went: "it is easier to immigrate to the United States that rent an apartment in France." In *Elle court, elle court la banlieue* (1973), loosely inspired by Bridgette Gros' *Quatre heures de transport par jour*, a young Parisian couple, he a salesman and she a secretary, decide to move a more spacious and greener house, quickly deciding to marry at their arrondissement town hall so as to expand their housing choices. *Elle court, elle court la banlieue*, Gérard Pirès (1973); Bridgette Gros, *Quatre heures de transport par jour* (Paris: Denoël, 1970). In almost all French housing transactions, it was, and remains to this day, obligatory that a couple disclose their *état civil*. A couple's marriage timeline was and remains central to French divorce law.

considered it a sentiment shared by youth culture. More rental housing construction would enable young loving couples to marry and achieve their dreams of independent familial happiness.¹¹⁸

Before the Second World War, Claudius-Petit already considered modern familial housing a material justification for male labor. A state incapable of reconciling its economic system so as to offer men the security to shelter their dependents did not merit the allegiance of its citizens. At a 1950 housing conference, he concluded a speech with an ominous pronouncement: “If our civilization proves incapable of giving each French family a comfortable home, there will be few regrets if events come to sweep it away [*balayer*] or remove it [*emporter*].”¹¹⁹ A passionate defender of architectural modernism as outlined in the *Charte d'Athènes*, Claudius-Petit had no nostalgic attachment to any of France’s traditional landscapes. He genuinely considered the towns and cities of France and Algeria filthy prisons drowning children’s joy in darkness. Sundrenched towers encircled by parks and fresh air were a better place for couples and children.¹²⁰ The images of poorly housed mothers and children that photographers sent from France’s cities to his ministry confirmed his faith in the

¹¹⁸Claudius-Petit was not opposed to homeownership, but he considered existing systems of home savings plans inefficient since they delayed the satisfaction of a familial need. Private or “people’s” home-savings accounts had existed since the 1920s. They served as the major source for Interwar suburban home acquisition. Couples saved a percentage of their monthly earnings for a decade or two as a means to obtain matching loans with which they purchased lotted land. In Claudius-Petit’s opinion, most young couples had difficulty saving for an imaginary home in a very distant future. He questioned how one could even convince a young father to renounce a percentage of his income for a decade when it could be spent on his families immediate needs in a period of deflation. Ideally, Claudius-Petit envisioned a home buying system whereby the delay between a couple’s decision to save to become owner-occupiers and the satisfaction of that desire exceeded no more than five years. He advocated a system where a couple neither conceived their march towards homeownership as a period of self-sacrifice nor a goal rendered almost unreal by the extended temporal delay between the choice and its fulfillment. Above all, the owner-occupied dwelling was to be affordable. ACDC, 400-3, Eugene Claudius-Petit, “Plan Quadriennal de construction de logements”

¹¹⁹AN 538AP/78, “M. Le ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme,” *CIL* (June-July 1950): 21.

¹²⁰Eugène Claudius-Petit, “Preface,” *L’architecture française* 117.118 (1951): 2.

modernist vision of habitation.

Eugène Petit, he took the name Claudius during the Occupation, was born in Angers where he attended a local elementary school. His father, a railway worker, passed away while he was an infant and his mother, the owner of a small grocery store, cared for him and his older brother alone. At a 1951 housing congress, Claudius-Petit traced his passion for housing back to his childhood experience of living “without water, without gas, without electricity” and watching his mother sneak out to a public fountain to wash his clothes at night (an act prohibited by local police).¹²¹ As a schoolchild, long before any political engagements, he became perplexed as to why France, a nation he was told was the capital of luxury manufacturing and was renowned for its mastery in architecture, had so little to offer its families in the form of shelter. After receiving his *certificat d'études* in 1919, he set off on a tour of France apprenticing in various trades. He fell in love with woodworking and found employment as a skilled cabinetmaker for a Parisian firm. Following his mandatory military service in an aviation mechanical crew (1927-1929), he attended Parisian technical drawing classes at night while continuing to work as a cabinetmaker during daylight hours. In 1934, he received his *certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré* [CAPES] and began teaching drafting and design at Lyon's *Lycée Ampère*.

Intellectually, Claudius-Petit was attracted to the progressive democratic Catholic thought of Marc Sangnier and his *Le Sillon* movement. In a 1971 response to a family organization's request for his political views, he praised Sangnier for “sparking his true

¹²¹AN 538AP/78, “Dans mon enfance, j’ai connu les taudis racontée M. Claudius-Petit,” *L’habitation* 8 (November 1952), 4.

vocation to defend democracy and confront social injustice.”¹²² Sangnier saw no incompatibility between Catholicism and republican democracy since he found both fostered a mentality subordinating individual interests to the greater good. In his classic *L’Esprit démocratique* (1905), Sangnier argued for a democracy where the social, as opposed to the political, took precedence, or, what he called social democracy.¹²³ Sangnier considered the moral legacies of Catholicism, the belief in a more fraternal and equitable future, justice, and charity to be the historical foundation for the average Frenchman’s inexplicable emotional repugnance to doctrinaire economic liberalism.¹²⁴ A state’s primary concern should be social interventions based on moral rather than economic considerations. Sangnier’s Catholic socialism was what Marxists deridingly classified as utopian since he believed that property capitalism could be totally transformed. In Sangnier’s words, “humanity will see one day a better social organization corresponding to the needs of a regenerated society,” through the organization of solidarity systems.¹²⁵

In 1939, the military appointed Claudius-Petit a reserve sergeant at a Rhône airfield. After the Armistice, he followed his friend Antoine Avinin, a Lyon clothing shopkeeper, into the Rhône and Loire Resistance movements where he fabricated papers and distributed pamphlets to university students.¹²⁶ In May 1942, Claudius-Petit replaced the arrested Avinin

¹²²Claudius-Petit advocated a Catholic inspired social policy free from Church hierarchy. Although a lifelong practicing Catholic, he valued political secularism and independence. He voted for the right to abortion as a matter of conscience in 1974. His policy goals were an extension of moral concerns emanating from what would be termed today cultural Catholicism. AN, 538AP/84, Letter to Monsieur Le Président, Madame la Secrétaire Générale de l’Association Populaire Familiale du canton de Firminy et environs, 8 March 1971; Benoît Pouvreau, *Un politique en architecture: Eugène Claudius-Petit, 1907-1989* (Paris: Moniteur, 2004).

¹²³Marc Sangnier, *L’esprit démocratique* (Paris: Perrin et cie, 1905).

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 119, 132, 135.

¹²⁵Marc Sangnier and Jules Guesde, *Christianisme et socialisme, conférence-controverse entre Jules Guesde et Marc Sangnier, faite à l’Hippodrome de Roubaix, le 9 mars 1905* (Paris: au Sillon, 1970), 21-23.

on the executive committee of the Lyon Franc-Tireur movement headed by Jean-Pierre Lévy and Jean Fauconnet. As executive member, he occupied himself with arms transports and attempted to contact other movements. In early 1943, he built a photo laboratory to develop images collected by members of the Mouvements unis de la Résistance destined for London. Claudius-Petit moved to Paris in May 1943 where he represented Franc-Tireur on the Conseil national de la Résistance. The night of 16 October 1943, he left France for London and the following month he traveled to Algeria to join the provisional parliament.

While in the Lyon Resistance, Claudius-Petit entered into discussions with Georges Cotton and his brother Marcel who had created the Resistance movement France d'Abord with Émile Schwarzfeld.¹²⁷ The Cotton brothers were passionate about housing questions. After his First World War service on the eastern Front and in the Balkans, Georges Cotton returned to Lyon where he organized a residential property development company [*Société nationale de propriété d'immeubles*] in partnership with the municipality to construct affordable rental apartments and the city's first buildings “*en copropriété*” with his brother Marcel Cotton serving as an architect.¹²⁸ They summarized their aspirations for a French housing renaissance in a pamphlet entitled *Vers une politique nouvelle de l'habitation* (1945) which inspired Claudius-Petit.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Bruno Permezel, *Résistants à Lyon, Villeurbanne et aux alentours: 2, 825 engagements* (Lyon: Editions BGA Permezel, 2003), 35.

¹²⁷ France d'Abord was a unique resistance group in its emphasis on providing foreign press reviews, propaganda, military and industrial information, technical details, and juridical assistance. Schwarzfeld was arrested and deported to Struthof-Natzweiler concentration camps where he died in 1944. The Cottons dedicated themselves to thinking the Liberation and the ensuing French renaissance.

¹²⁸ Permezel, *Résistants à Lyon*, 178-179.

¹²⁹ AN 538AP/78, Georges Cotton and Marcel Cotton, *Vers une politique nouvelle de l'habitation* (Lyon: France d'abord, 1945).

To the Cottons, adequate housing resided at the heart of a good civilization and dictated its composition. From good housing radiated all other aspects of human life: family, work, liberty, prosperity, joy, dignity, health, and the laughter of children. People's housing was of primordial importance to France's return to grandeur. Just as the palace at Versailles had been the envy of Europe, so too would be the homes of average French families. The Cottons wanted this mission to become the task of a new ministry of housing that would be responsible for "lodging the French population from cities and the countryside in the best conditions of hygiene and comfort."¹³⁰ France's long experiment in private property would end and an era of collective property would begin in suburban, sun-drenched buildings with access to public services, athletic facilities, *crèches*, and youth centers all aligned with public transportation.

On Radio-Alger and in the provisional assembly, Claudius-Petit began speaking openly about municipal housing and architectural modernism's potential contribution to creating just living environments for all families. In June 1944, he sat on an urbanism committee in Algiers that published a report offering guidance to those to be entrusted with the duty of building homes for a New France.¹³¹ The report viewed housing from the perspective of men exclusively. Modern housing was to ensure salaried men harmonious domestic conditions for their dependents. Inspired by the *Charte d'Athènes*, in some cases almost plagiarizing the text, the committee aspired to put man back into harmony with nature while offering his dependents the comforts of water, heat, and electricity. If each historical époque left a material trace of its preoccupations, liberated France's trace was to be

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹³¹ AN 538AP/78, Pierre Claudius, Francois Bienvenu, Pierre A Emery, Docteur Lartigue, Jean de Maisonneul, Marcel Roux Andre Sive, *Problèmes d'Urbanisme Contemporaine* (Alger: CNRS, 1944).

represented in the concrete and glass of collective familial palaces housing the average Frenchman.¹³² Housing was to be the indispensable place where the salaried man reposed, developed himself as an individual, and loved his family.

The form of Claudius-Petit's vision for domestic happiness was to be in accordance with the principles of architectural modernism. On 22 December 1945, Claudius-Petit boarded a cargo ship as a member of an exploratory housing committee that set off on a seventeen-day voyage to the United States. To his delight, he shared a cabin with Le Corbusier who reconfirmed Claudius-Petit's affection for well-lighted apartment buildings amidst green spaces.¹³³ He saw this form of housing as the antithesis of his own childhood in Angers. Claudius-Petit was not unaware of the architect's activities during the occupation or his rubbing shoulders with Vichy, but he, along with France's cultural elite, recognized that a liberated France required an internationally recognized intellectual elite. He also believed architecture had nothing to do with politics; it was an apolitical, objective field of material intervention no different than plumbing.

¹³²Ibid., 6.

¹³³As minister, Claudius-Petit became the parliamentary champion and public defender of Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation* in Marseilles. The *unité* was a state building in the sense that the government ordered and paid for it before establishing a plan for attributing its 321 apartments with 23 different floor plans. Bureaucrats were uncertain just how the state could dispose itself of ownership. The *unité* was no solution to a national housing crisis. It took five years to construct (October 1947 to October 1952) and on its completion was one of the most expensive apartment buildings in France. In 1952, apartments sold from 1,300,000 francs to 5,200,000 francs when the average male yearly salary was 12,849 francs. The monthly rent and fees on a two-bedroom apartment exceeded 12,000 francs. As a government accountant put it: "revolutionary in its principles, the *unité d'habitation* LE CORBUSIER is not in its financial results." Claudius-Petit considered the project above all a political statement: a physical manifestation of a French civilization reassuming its place among nations. It was a signal informing the world that the nation of aristocratic palaces would now turn its attention to collective habitation. As a reporter at the regional daily *Le Provençal* put it, yes, few local families had the finances to live in the *unité*, but look at the unending wave of Americans, Russians, and even the Japanese that flocked to gawk at France's latest creation. CAC, 1978022/Article 1, "Pour l'organisation de l'exploitation de l'immeuble Le Corbusier a Marseille," 12 October 1949, Paris; CAC, 1978022/Article 1, "Pour l'étude des modalités de cession et de gestion de l'Unité d'Habitation Le CORBUSIER," Direction de la Construction, Secrétariat, 11 April 1950; CAC, 1978022/Article 1, Memo from Inspecteur adjoint des finances La Genière, 15 October 1951, Paris; CAC, 1978022/Article 1, Raymond Gimel, "Gai! Gai! Marions-nous..." *Le Provençal* 11 July 1952. Pouvreau, *Un politique en architecture*, 67.

In a 1946 national assembly debate, Claudius-Petit framed state intervention in rationalized housing construction as a means to assure the personal liberty of the head-of-household.¹³⁴ Standing to speak against those who defended small-time, private housing construction as an expression of personal freedom, Claudius-Petit argued that only direct state intervention could justly reconcile men's salaried employment with their financial commitment to familial shelter. He maintained that only the state could guarantee men the economic liberty to cultivate familial happiness. He linked state assurance of comfortable, affordable housing directly to the rights of male citizenship. A Frenchman ceased finding meaning in his daily labor inside an office or factory if he was unable to spend a minimum percentage of his income on comfortable shelter for his dependents. Such men ceased believing in their government because they became convinced it was not striving to offer them the minimum conditions requisite for familial happiness. At a later 1951 housing conference, Claudius-Petit explained that he imagined a France in which every father felt secure knowing that if he labored a certain number of days each month he could afford to lodge his dependents "in comfort, light, and well being."¹³⁵ This knowledge offered every newly married man or recent father the possibility to feel at ease, happy, and dignified. In Claudius-Petit's opinion, it was this right to housing that represented "the face of liberty that we had fought for in the Resistance!"

In a 1952 article, Claudius-Petit again presented state housing intervention as a government's moral duty to its citizens, a group he identified as male heads-of-family [*chef*

¹³⁴AN 538AN/78, "Débats de l'assemblée nationale constituante, Chômage et organisation de la reconstruction, 15 March 1946."

¹³⁵"Extraits du discours de m. le ministre Claudius-Petit a la séance de clôture du congrès national des organismes d'HLM de 1952, Alger," *Publications périodiques de la Fédération Nationale des offices publics d'habitations à Bon Marché* 18.19 (March-April-May-June 1952): 9.

de famille]. He wrote: “housing is a state affair because housing must command all policies and the economics of the country; equality, quality of life, and national prosperity are mirrored in housing.”¹³⁶ State intervention was necessary if the French wanted “a true civilization, a civilization that cared for its masses.” The explicit goal of all his efforts at the MRU was to house young couples by providing them a “*petit chez-soi*” wherein they felt comfortable enough to raise a family in economic security. The minister based his policies on the presumption that when young French couples married, they wanted space, and that they had no ambition to live with their parents or parents-in-law. Young couples wanted a nest and the state had an obligation to help provide it.

Claudius-Petit predicted French marriage rates would rise and divorce rates would plummet as young couples realized they could sidestep living in an intergenerational household or cramped room to move directly to their “*petit chez-soi*.” He envisioned nuclear families free from generational prejudices forming unprecedented friendships within collective apartment buildings as they and their children interacted with neighbors of diverse regional and social backgrounds. In the near future, he foresaw foreigners associating France not with palaces and luxury villas, but with the decent roofs over each and every family’s head regardless of their fortune in communities that encouraged solidarity and prohibited social exclusion. Together, the French would build “the city of tomorrow” wherein “children would be happy and free in contact with nature” and “men’s lives would be reconciled.”¹³⁷

As minister, Claudius-Petit established a financial policy (expanded by his successors) that promoted construction of familial housing. Claudius-Petit neither

¹³⁶AN 538/78, Eugène Claudius-Petit, “L’habitat et la reconstruction,” Centre Européen Universitaire, Nancy, 1952, 23

¹³⁷Ibid.

nationalized housing production nor created a single state housing service. Instead, the state secured financing for non-profits that approached housing as an administrative endeavor rather than a commercial business. Claudius-Petit then embarked on the ambitious project of constructing 20,000 new homes every month, the only way for the government to justly serve young French couples. Why did Claudius-Petit refrain from the nationalization of housing construction or from organizing a single centralized housing service responsible for the attribution and management of lodgings? After all, he was the first and perhaps the last MRU minister who truly believed that “housing can and must become a public service [*l’habitation peut et doit devenir un service public*].”¹³⁸ Without question, any radical step would have forced his immediate dismissal. Contextually, France had returned to the procedures of a middle-class parliamentary democracy, the brief age of public service nationalization had passed, and the Cold and Korean Wars had begun. Nationalized construction under a single developer or a national property management company was unlikely at a moment when the Soviet occupation of Western Europe was on the horizon. Practically, Claudius-Petit perhaps feared a central housing administration would mean that the most powerful—the political or military victorious—would be best housed.

Claudius-Petit is often cited as the single most important impetus behind the proliferation of what would come to be known as the *grands ensembles*.¹³⁹ To Claudius-Petit, however, the form’s appeal was more than a matter of rapid construction on the cheap. Finances and technology could have easily been marshaled to build horizontal, semi-detached communities throughout France. The choice to build towers, in addition to low-rise

¹³⁸AN 538 AP, Débat parlementaire, 5 March 1945, 290-311

¹³⁹Archives de la Caisse des dépôts et consignations, 201-1, Témoignage de Léon-Paul LeRoy, 4 February 1987, 17.

apartment blocks, was symbolic of Claudius-Petit's desire to create a meaningful habitation tradition. To change the nation's aesthetics was to affirm materially a new French spirit. Ten-story towers dotting a grand ensemble served the same purpose as a church belfry or the steeple of a town hall. They made those arriving from a great distance by train or automobile aware that something was there, that a particular civilization was to be encountered just over the horizon. Claudius-Petit hoped these communities would be the cathedrals and palaces of a morally regenerated democracy committed to securing the basic conditions for familial happiness.

Conclusion: At the Crossroads of Biology and Morality

Critical Marxist sociologists would argue that all postwar housing efforts were made to assure sustained economic growth.¹⁴⁰ They concluded that postwar policymakers subsumed habitat to the interests of industrial capitalism. Claudius-Petit, however, had an earnest intellectual desire to reconcile housing with full, male employment so as to relieve the psychological malaise the head-of-household confronted as he sought shelter for his dependents. He assumed that a man's primary psychological tribulation was acquiring decent shelter, as opposed to selling his labor, that is to say, finding a job. While Claudius-Petit advocated for housing construction in moral terms, family policymakers sought to encourage procreation and the "liberation" of woman from labor outside the home through housing allocations. The moralist Claudius-Petit considered housing construction central to setting conditions for couples to achieve happiness in family life. The pronatalist Alfred Sauvy, by contrast, considered housing allocations central to encouraging procreation. Ideally, housing

¹⁴⁰Susanna Magri, *Politique du logement et besoins en main-d'œuvre: introduction à l'étude de l'intervention de l'État* (Paris: Centre de sociologie urbaine, 1972); Susanna Magri, *Logement et reproduction de l'exploitation: les politiques étatiques du logement en France, 1947-1972* (Paris: Centre de sociologie urbaine, 1977); Also see Sabine Effosse, *L'invention du logement aidé en France: l'immobilier au temps des Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2003).

allocations complemented the material home, making it easier for a young couple to bear the financial burden of children.¹⁴¹

Pronatalist housing allocations first emerged on the eve of the Second World War, expanded under Vichy, and were reconfirmed after Liberation as an aspect of French Family Code. During Vichy, Fernand Boverat, Adolphe Landry, Georges Pernod, and Alfred Sauvy conceptualized allocations as the privileged mechanism for reducing inequalities between salaried men with children and all those without. Considered as a form of redistributive justice, blue- and white-collar family organizations fiercely supported the expansion of allocations in the 1950s.¹⁴² Housing allocations sought to assure that single-salaried families remained financially soluble by freeing them to obey their “natural” desires to found a family without uncertainty. In bureaucratic parlance, the housing allocation was an aspect of general

¹⁴¹From their inception, housing allocations were not interpreted negatively as American welfare assistance. The French equivalent to US “poor” welfare assistance was the rent allocation [*allocation de loyer*], a form of social assistance for those with limited resources, primarily, the elderly who could not by their own means afford shelter. Housing allocations were a form of equitable redistribution from individuals to families, not aid to the poor.

¹⁴²Parliamentarians and ministers seldom grasped their nation’s family presentation system resulting in frequent requests for clarification by social services administrators. One such 1956 memo explained the basic components of family allocations. When a woman discovered she was pregnant, married or not, she had an automatic right to need-blind prenatal allocations [*allocations prénatales*] after proof of her first prenatal examination and a doctor’s declaration of pregnancy. After her child’s birth, she received a Birth of First Child Grant [*prime à la naissance du premier enfant*] based on average departmental salaries ranging between 2,000 francs and 3,000 francs. A married woman’s household received a Single Salary Allocation [*allocation de salaire unique*] if only her husband was engaged in full-time employment (“a husband employed as a laborer with a wife who works as a hairdresser do not receive benefits”). After August 1956, by formally renouncing employment outside the home, she also received a Homemaker Allocation [*allocation pour la mère au foyer*] amounting to 10 percent of the average female departmental salary until her child reached the age of fourteen. A salaried *chef de famille* benefited had the right to claim family allocations [*allocations familiales*] after the birth of his second child. A salaried head-of-household received family allocations regardless of his need or his employment status (a boss, a teacher, a foreman, a laborer, etc., had equal rights to the benefits). Allocation barometers—published in major newspapers—differed from department to department and year to year, a head-of-household with an unemployed caretaker wife making average salary could expect a family allocation equaling 10 percent of his salary for his second child, 30 percent for three children, 50 percent for four children, and 70 percent for five children until a child reached the age of sixteen. In theory, by the sixth child certain heads-of-households received allocations equaling a second salary. In the golden age of allowances, the 1940s through the 1950s, a head-of-household marking a monthly salary around 1,500 francs was awarded 450 francs in allocations if he had three children and an unemployed wife, 750 francs for four children, and 1,050 francs for five children. ANC, 19780081, Article 29, “Prestations Familiales, Note pour Monsieur le président du Conseil,” Direction Générale de la Sécurité Sociale, 22 August 1956.

familial presentation with the specialized goal of partially compensating the personal effort the male *chef de famille* made to house his wife and children (bureaucratically known as his dependents) in lodgings. The allocation privileged one family model over others: the young family with a male breadwinner, a homemaker wife, and three children. A salaried head-of-household had the right to claim a housing allocation from the moment his wife's doctor declared her pregnant. A family could not benefit from a housing allocation if the mother exercised a professional activity. The sum paid to the head-of-household equaled the percentage between the real monthly housing payment (the allocation could be used towards rental or owner-occupied housing) and the head-of-household's possible contribution after accounting for his family size and income.¹⁴³

Postwar French housing and family policy intersected not only to set conditions for economic growth, but also to encourage reproduction. Unapologetically, and without mention, policymakers established a housing system that discriminated against unmarried couples, couples uninterested in having children, single mothers, gay and lesbian couples, the single, the elderly, and the self-employed. Housing attribution depended on familial composition (the nuclear family), employer, number of children, and resources (salary plus social allocations). The mathematical formulas that guided the financing of each and every apartment took into consideration the role of housing allocations in the payment of monthly rents. In the Fourth and early Fifth French Republic, housing and family goals intersected as never before so as to encourage pronatalism and discourage the intergenerational family. Advocates of these policies envisioned a unified social security network—one whose responsibilities were distributed between the state and public/private businesses—that

¹⁴³ As with all familial allocations, they were fixed by a barometer based on departmental average salaries.

protected young married couples' interests. Social solidarity assured the young couple could constitute a family while maintaining a sense of individual personal fulfillment.

The intersection of housing construction and government family allocations dramatically changed French mentalities about family. To many blue- and white-collar couples, constituting a family ceased to be associated foremost with self-sacrificing themselves to a life of mediocrity and martyrdom. Instead, couples suddenly encountered a level of security that literally gave more room for happiness in daily familial interactions. Young married couples navigated these policies as social actors. Their actions may or may not have always been based on economic rationality, but we must assume that their behavior was intentional. We must also assume that the choices to move to a newly built modernist apartment, for a woman to stay at the home, for her to have one, two, ideally in the eyes of pronatalist policymakers, three children (the child ensuring population rejuvenation), reflected individual or dual attempts to fulfill personal aspirations

CHAPTER III

Building a Better Society on the Parisian Periphery, 1954-1965

Sarcelles: a complex assembly of different classes, cultures, and races. One can find anything here: from the high bourgeois to the proletarian, from the Catholic to the Protestant and Israelite, from the Black, to the Yellow, to the White. Without a mention of ideologies or political parties.

A resident's definition of the grand ensemble, 1964¹

When I arrived, in 1963, I discovered a working democracy that surpassed anything I could have imagined. There were no problems of social status. The Renault engineer and worker lived side-by-side. It left a profound impression on me.

Jacques Salomé, former director of Sarcelles' Maison des jeunes et de la Culture, 2006²

Technocrats at the Société centrale immobilière de la caisse des dépôts et consignations [SCIC], a subsidiary corporation of the Caisse des dépôts et Consignations [CDC], felt confident that as residential property developers they provided homes that dramatically improved the lives of young married couples with/or expecting children.³ Staff at France's largest "disinterested" developer considered their residential communities a service to blue- and white-collar men who wanted to shelter their dependents in material security. As France entered a sustained period of economic growth, the staff expanded their

¹Jean Laborde, "Des cobayes malgré eux...", *L'Aurore* 26 June 1964.

²Linda Bendali, *Sarcelles: une utopie réussie* (Nantes: Gulf Stream, 2006), 42.

³The SCIC was a semi-autonomous corporation of a state character with separate legal personality and finances from the CDC. French historians long thought the SCIC archives destroyed, lost, or jealously guarded by the CDC. In 2005, the SCIC archives were localized in a suburban Parisian warehouse rented by a CDC subsidiary corporation. In total, the archives constitute twenty-eight linear kilometers of unclassified documents. The CDC organized a commission to determine what to do with the archives that has yet to reach a conclusion. Currently, the CDC archives permit restricted consultation of oversight committee meeting minutes, annual reports, assorted pamphlets and literature along with thousands of photographs. See Annie Fourcaut and Danièle Voldman, "La Caisse des dépôts et le logement: une historiographie en chantier," *Histoire Urbaine* 23 (December 2008): 12-14.

efforts to serve the best interests of the nation by encouraging a spatial proximity between social classes in their developments by “sinking” owner-occupied buildings between social rental buildings. The SCIC attempted to elaborate an alternative pathway of housing development inside capitalism. In its flagship community of Sarcelles, the SCIC and its supporters gestured piecemeal towards the construction of a dense “cosmopolitan canopy” under which heterogeneous groups engaged one another in spirit of civility, comity, empathy, and goodwill.⁴ As a model for future residential development, Sarcelles provided opportunities for strangers to become acquainted with “others” they seldom observed up close. Ideally, Sarcelles, as a cosmopolitan canopy, exercised a humanizing influence on its population.

In short, the SCIC attempted to operate as a residential housing developer with a moral conscience. In France, just as in the United States, a property developer [*promoteur*] is neither an accredited liberal profession—one does not become a developer as one becomes an architect, doctor, or even real estate agent—nor does the term have a juridical definition. Typically, a housing developer primary obligation is to manage capital in its phase of transition into a housing good by coordinating the actions of different actors. A development company thus gathers the disparate professional abilities—and they are many—required to build individual stand-alone or collective apartment homes with the intention of making a profit from their construction and/or management. The SCIC, a “disinterested” housing developer, a phrase that certainly strikes Americans as odd and perhaps disingenuous, borrowed a substantial amount of capital below normal rates as opposed to capital lent at

⁴See Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

normal interest.⁵ Whereas a private developer produced a consumable good for profit, sellable on the market, the SCIC produced a non- or limited profit consumable good managed by administrators. In America, private interests that benefited from public policies dictated residential developers' choices.⁶ The SCIC, in contrast, worked ostensibly in the public's interest and listened attentively to government prerogatives.

Housing developers, however, are much more than simple transformers of liquid capital into a consumer good. Since the Second World War, housing developers (be they public, private, or economically mixed in nature) transformed space with consequences for governance, identity, and practices of living. Housing developers reshaped and continue to reshape individual, familial, and group relations to the public and private while engendering new socio-spatial constraints, opportunities for encounter, and chances for active citizenship. Despite the transnational role housing developers have played in the organization of human environments, scholars have seldom reflected publicly on any given company's underlying political-economic rationality, its commitment to democratic citizenship, or its social vision of the future. Professional developers seldom articulate their ideologies or speculate on the meaning their occupants attribute to their shelter.

The cynic may say that the SCIC operated in the interests of French industrial capitalism by building affordable homes thereby keeping wages and salaries low. The private-public developer helped maximize private profits by supplying a home, which was merely a place for the reproduction of labor (nightly and biologically). In the 1970s, French

⁵Capital borrowed below normal rates is known as devalorized capital whereas capital lent at normal rates is known as valorized capital.

⁶See Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), x; Dennis Judd, *The Politics of American Cities: Private Power and Public Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 412-413; Delores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

Marxists theorists argued that the SCIC simply extended the dictatorship of the employer from the factory floor to the spaces of daily life.⁷ The SCIC destroyed the worker's right to the city or the democratic potential of urban life. This critique of the SCIC as a feature of capitalist exploitation obscured how the developer attempted to reconcile the demands of capitalism with the happiness of the nuclear family, democratic participation, and solidarity. The company should be distinguished from the now globalized "American-style" residential developer—an organizational model, which systematically undermined any policy discourse advocating greater income diversity in housing complexes or communities.⁸

As a company, the SCIC was a self-professed developer with a social conscience. That is to say, the company presented itself as empathetic to the difficulties families faced and aware of societal problems, which it hoped to help solve. Its social-conscience was loosely based on a moral code that reflected concerns of Resistance social thought and Catholic social justice. It therefore inspired visions of a future participatory society organized through mutual solidarity grounded in the maxim "love thy neighbor as thyself." Universalist and inclusive assumptions defined the social conscience of the company as it developed its flagship community at Sarcelles, thus spurring outside observers to take seriously the SCIC's potential to literally build a new moral order. In the world of ideas, it was always a small, albeit influential, minority including such figures as Gilbert Mathieu, assistant-chief of *Le*

⁷Susanna Magri, *Politique du logement et besoins en main-d'œuvre: Introduction à l'étude de l'intervention de l'Etat* (Paris: Centre de Sociologie Urbaine, 1972); Christian Topalov, *Les Promoteurs immobiliers: contribution à l'analyse de la production capitaliste du logement en France* (Paris: Mouton, 1973); Christian Topalov, *Capital et propriété foncière: introduction à l'étude des politiques foncières urbaines* (Paris: Centre de Sociologie Urbaine, 1973); Also see Christian Topalov, *Formes de production et formes de propriété du logement en France: approche sociologique de l'histoire de rapports économiques*, PhD Thesis, Université de Paris 5, 1985; Edmond Preteceille *La Production des grands ensembles* (Paris: Mouton, 1973); Manuel Castells and Francis Godard, *Monopolville* (Paris: Mouton, 1974); Jean-François Dhuy, *Les promoteurs* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1975); Susanna Magri, *Logement et reproduction de l'exploitation: les politiques étatiques du logement en France, 1947-1972* (Paris: Centre de Sociologie Urbaine, 1976).

⁸See Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

Monde's economist desk and member of the Club Jean Moulin, who envisioned a greater role for the SCIC. They believed the SCIC, as France's official or nationalized homebuilder, could set the tone for all residential development in the Hexagon. The company could build a family-friendly society that represented a third path between socialism and liberalism. In the end, the SCIC was a *rendez-vous manqué* between middle-class households and a form of residential housing that encouraged diverse social interactions and local participatory management.

François Bloch-Lainé and the Creation of the SCIC

Among American financial institutions, there is no equivalent to the Caisse des dépôts et Consignations. The institution reflects French capitalism's tendency to concentrate power in quasi-public institutions that control lending to industry and guide investment in the direction the state wants it to be guided for better or worse. Historically, the creation of CDC was a direct result of the underdevelopment of French private commercial banking in contrast to its British counterpart over the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. A Napoleonic institution in spirit, though Napoleon had departed for St. Helena shortly before its founding in 1816, the CDC assumed responsibility for mobilizing loanable funds that may have remained inactive deposits. That is to say, it converted savings into medium- and long-term loans.⁹ In the bank's coffers accumulated deposited savings: pension funds, unspent government tax revenues, the financial surpluses of cooperatives, and capital undergoing litigation. Despite the turpitudes of war, the CDC remained the nation's preeminent financial

⁹The institution was baptized a *caisse* rather than bank because of the deep collective cultural aversion the French held towards the word *banque* after the collapse of John Law's *Banque Royale*. With the exception of the *Banque de France* founded in 1800, French public and private banking institutions are named *caisse*, *crédit*, *société*, or *comptoir*. Charles Poor Kindleberger, *A Financial History of Western Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

institution dominating bond markets on the French stock exchange during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ Throughout the *Trente Glorieuses*, the CDC remained France's largest banking institution.

François Bloch-Lainé (1912-2002) introduced a new activity to the CDC when he created a subsidiary corporation to construct social housing in 1954.¹¹ In the past, the CDC financed homebuilders and held a luxury investment property portfolio, but it had never dirtied its hands, so to speak, with direct involvement in housing. As director, Bloch-Lainé re-orientated the CDC's investments towards low-yield, long-term social investments between 1952 and 1967. In the popular *Dictionnaire du capitalisme* (1970), Gilbert Mathieu's entry on Bloch-Lainé praised the banker for offering a potential alternative model

¹⁰The bank supplanted the absence of a well-developed French private credit-banking sector by purchasing whatever remained of an industrial bond offering after a public offering.

¹¹In *Ce que je crois* (1995), Bloch-Lainé described himself as a bourgeois, Judeo-Christian, who leans to the left—a simplification of an identity to be sure. On his paternal side, Bloch-Lainé came from a Jewish family with a long tradition of administrative and military service to the state tracing back to the Old Regime. His paternal grandmother, however, converted to Catholicism, the religion of his maternal family. As a child he was educated in Catholic schools while actively participating in the Catholic scouting movement. As a member of France's elite bourgeoisie, Bloch-Lainé had a comfortable childhood. The Catholic-educated scout's leftist leanings first appeared publicly in *L'Emploi des loisirs ouvrières et l'éducation populaire* (1936), his dissertation for a doctor of law degree, which advocated for working-class continuing education. As a newly hired state finance inspector, Bloch-Lainé voted for the socialists in the 1936 election. During the Second World War, the married Bloch-Lainé served as a lieutenant in the colonial infantry until captured in the Lorraine. He passed two months in a prisoner of war camp before being returned to the treasury department. At the ministry of finance, Bloch-Lainé entered into what he called "non-suicidal" resistance activities as a bookkeeper and financier. As he later explained it, he was a new father more interested in protecting his wife and the first of his four sons than in risking his life. His financial machinations, nonetheless, gained Bloch-Lainé a notable mention in the first volume of Charles de Gaulle's memoirs. After Liberation, Bloch-Lainé represented French financial interests in China and then in Indochina before becoming Robert Schuman's chief of staff. The government nominated him director of the treasury where he remained for six years before being named director of the CDC in 1952. He remained at the CDC until 1967. That year, Michel Debré asked Bloch-Lainé to modernize the lagging Crédit Lyonnais, a nationalized bank, where Bloch-Lainé stayed until the 1974 election of Giscard d'Estaing. Among the new president's first actions was requesting Bloch-Lainé's immediate resignation. For more detailed analysis on Bloch-Lainé's wartime experience and professional life see Michel Margairaz, ed., *François Bloch-Lainé: fonctionnaire, financier, citoyen* (Paris: Ministère de l'Economie, des finances, et de l'industrie, 2005). François Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire: entretiens avec Françoise Carrière* (Paris: Seuil, 1976); Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois*, 226; François Bloch-Lainé, *L'Emploi des loisirs ouvriers et l'éducation populaire* (Paris: Librairie du Recueil Sirey, 1936); Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre: l'appel, 1940-1942* (Paris: Plon, 1954), 236; François Bloch-Lainé, *La Zone franc*, Paris, 1954, 49.

of capitalism wherein savings were marshaled in the service of social justice.¹² Praised by Mathieu, Bloch-Lainé nonetheless developed a deep reciprocated antipathy for liberals, especially, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. He also provoked the permanent ire of the French business world with *Pour une réforme de l'entreprise* (1963) wherein he articulated an alternative corporate management system in which boards would no longer be elected by shareholders; they would be chosen instead by three different syndicates: one of shareholders, one of salaried employees, and one of the state.¹³

Pour une réforme de l'entreprise expressed Bloch-Lainé's aspiration for a more mature future economy in which the desire for perpetual growth became secondary to the desire to give each citizen the power to participate directly in economic and political decisions. Bloch-Lainé was no anti-capitalist, but he insisted that the territorialized state along with its businesses and financial institutions had a moral obligation to protect collective interests.¹⁴ The SCIC operated under a similar logic: it built familial housing for an economy whose assumed objective was to maintain high levels of collective consumption. To Bloch-Lainé, housing was an administrative question and, in a mature future economy, citizens would one-day participate in those administrative development and managerial decisions. However, housing was too important a sector to be exposed to the unregulated machinations of the free market. Instead, the disinterested developer should act as a "neutral"

¹²Gilbert Mathieu, "François Bloch-Lainé," in Gilbert Mathieu, ed., *Dictionnaire du capitalisme* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1970), 130-132.

¹³Bloch-Lainé and d'Estaing mutually disliked each other from the 1950s. Bloch-Lainé considered d'Estaing "an apostle of the recuperation tentative of advanced liberalism." François Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois* (Paris: Grasset, 1995), 23; François Bloch-Lainé, *Pour une réforme de l'entreprise* (Paris, Éditions du Sueil, 1963).

¹⁴Although not an anti-capitalist himself, by the 1990s Bloch-Lainé came to see ardent anti-capitalists as vital to public struggles to check the concentration of power in the hands of private business that despite the appearance of philanthropic generosity cared nothing for the public welfare of territorialized populations. Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois* (Paris: Grasset, 1995),

technological apparatus operating under limited freedom and mediating the interests of the state, the construction industry, and business.

Bloch-Lainé shared with his friend Eugene Claudius-Petit a political philosophy inspired by Marc Sangnier in whose thought Bloch-Lainé first discovered his “principal moral family.”¹⁵ To Bloch-Lainé, Catholic social thought freed of any clericalism created his two core ideas: the refusal of the capitalist status quo and the rejection of extremist solutions. He embraced its critique of the laws of the liberal jungle and its affirmation of a society based on familial solidarity that did not deprive the citizen of liberty. The ownership of the means of production was never a question of concern for Bloch-Lainé. He never believed state ownership of industry was a prerequisite to a more just reorganization of society. Instead, he maintained that social relations could be changed through a combination of private, economically mixed, and public corporations acting inside an *économie concertée* (an economy where the state sets specific rules to the economic game).¹⁶

From Liberation into the mid-1960s, Bloch-Lainé saw three major questions confronting France: how could the nation simultaneously safeguard individual liberty, establish an equality of opportunity, and distribute responsibilities for what he considered life’s necessities—housing, health care, and education—between government, civil society, and corporations?¹⁷ His postwar political economy philosophy was profoundly affected by the economic, social, and military disasters he had witnessed firsthand, most of which he attributed to a lack of foresightedness. Bloch-Lainé became convinced that liberalism—as an

¹⁵Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 32.

¹⁶François Bloch-Lainé, *A la recherche d'une économie concertée* (Paris: Les Editions de l'épargne, 1957).

¹⁷François Bloch-Lainé, “The Utility of Utopias for Reformers,” in Frank E. Manuel, *Utopias and Utopian Thought: A Timely Appraisal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 210; First published as François Bloch-Lainé, “The Utility of Utopias for Reformers,” *Daedalus* 94.2 (Spring 1965): 419-436.

economic philosophy—could not solve the complex problems of collective life because it could not look beyond day-to-day interactions and self-interest.¹⁸ Liberal ideology lacked a future solution for collective economic and social problems, though it explained the continued free economic activity of the individual.

In terms of social policy, the banker was pro-family rather than a pronatalist. His conception of the ideal family was bourgeois and he traced his deep hostility towards both violent revolution and reactionary traditionalism to his desire for all couples to enjoy the peace of familial stability. Rhetorically, Bloch-Lainé championed the establishment of a “partnership” model to replace the patriarchal model at all levels of society from the home to the office. That said, his concept of equality between man and woman assumed that men should be husbands who took active professional roles as breadwinners while wives served as family caregivers and moral centers.¹⁹ Housing should therefore provide each couple with a spacious nest for their loving family to grow in an economy where full male employment was considered a given.

Bloch-Lainé was a self-professed utopian who saw utopian thinking as an exercise encouraging the non-positivistic imagination to discover unforeseen solutions to social problems.²⁰ According to Bloch-Lainé, utopian farsightedness was of intrinsic value if a society truly wished to free itself from the past and determine a voluntary future.²¹ Bloch-Lainé’s own forward utopian reflections were dedicated to synthesizing what he sensed to be the grand dialectic opposition of the age: technocracy and democracy. In this new age, rising

¹⁸Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois*, 59-60.

¹⁹Bloch-Lainé, “The Utility of Utopias for Reformers,” 211.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 203.

²¹*Ibid.*, 202, 204-205.

standards of living and growing household wealth depended on the all-important technocratic ability to furnish life's essentials (food, shelter, power, water). He predicted a future dominated by the technician (just as the peasant was subjected to the warrior-protector during the Middle Ages and the worker dominated by the bourgeois during industrialization); so the key political question was how to temper the technician's authority with local democratic participation.²²

After his appointment as CDC director in 1952, Bloch-Lainé sought to coordinate the bank's finances with public policy aims. Under Bloch-Lainé, the CDC's function as a long-term lender divided into two distinct portfolios: profitable and social investments, or, as the Caisse explained in a 1961 official policy statement:

Placements on financial markets which the Caisse effectuates with the exclusive preoccupation of distributing its risks and yielding profit from its capital; loans and holdings, not negotiable on the stock exchange, that constitute the most important part of its interventions, concerns where favoring economic development or the satisfaction of a social need prevail over the quest for profit.²³

Bloch-Lainé shifted the bank towards the financing of social priorities even though neither he nor his staff was under any legal compulsion to listen to political directives.²⁴ In the halls of government, it was assumed the director was attuned to those political messages out of courtesy.

When Bloch-Lainé first arrived at the CDC to replace Jean Watteau, the acting director since Liberation, he had little knowledge of the institution's activities. He was

²²François Bloch-Lainé, "The Utility of Utopias for Reformers," in Frank E. Manuel, *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, 212.

²³Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, *Dix années d'activité: 1950-1960* (Paris: P.Dupont, 1961), 19-20.

²⁴Legally, the CDC was an independent institution with deposits guaranteed by the state. The acting government appointed a bank director during vacancies. The director reported the institution's activities to parliament via a *Commission de surveillance* that alone had the authority to remove an acting director.

amazed to find that the CDC was an underutilized financial “*caisse à outils*.”²⁵ The bank was a “sleeping princess.”²⁶ Quickly, he realized that the CDC could be more than a bank, it could be “an institution of collective protection [*une institution de prévoyance collective*].”²⁷ In the CDC staff, however, Bloch-Lainé discovered conservatives, anti-Semites (the CDC had played a central role in the expropriation of Jewish property during the Occupation), and reactionaries rather than fellow utopians.²⁸ To avoid operating through existing channels, Bloch-Lainé established independent subsidiary satellite corporations presided over by hand-picked civil engineers and servants. On 11 June 1954, Bloch-Lainé created the SCIC, the financial institution’s first technical and engineering subsidiary, whose primary objectives were defined as acquiring, selling, exchanging, renting, constructing, repairing, improving, transforming, managing, litigating, financing, and administrating any moveable or real property on behalf of itself, secondary parties, the CDC, or the state. As historian Paul Landauer observed, the very idea that the CDC would one day become a residential housing developer would have been unimaginable before the war and at any other time before Bloch-Lainé’s arrival the CDC.²⁹

Bloch-Lainé selected Léon-Paul Leroy (1915-2001), at the time a civil engineer, to preside over the still unnamed housing development company in July 1953.³⁰ Why did

²⁵Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 126.

²⁶Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois*, 20.

²⁷Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 133.

²⁸Caisse des dépôts et consignations, *La spoliation antisémite sous l'Occupation: consignations et restitutions : rapport définitif* (Paris: Caisse des dépôts et consignations, 2001); Alya Aglan, Michel Margairaz, and Philippe Verheyde, *La Caisse des dépôts et consignations, la Seconde Guerre mondiale et le XXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, . 2003).

²⁹Paul Landauer, “La SCIC, premier promoteur française des grands ensembles (1953-1958),” *Histoire Urbaine* 23 (December 2008): 71-72.

Bloch-Lainé choose a civil engineer rather than a philanthropist, a financier, a public health expert, or an administrator familiar with housing to act as the company's first president? The choice may have reflected the role of civil engineers in the rationalization and construction of colonial housing.³¹ It may have also reflected Bloch-Lainé's desire to give power to an ideal technocrat—someone who put organizational and scientific knowledge in the service of the public good. Since 1947, Leroy had worked as the highly praised assistant-director of the National Navigation Office where he was responsible for the reconstruction of 3,000 barges. After his appointment to the SCIC, the engineer immediately went on a rapid tour of the ministry of reconstruction's experimental projects before leaving to study Swedish housing developers. Leroy was no ideologue of architectural modernism: he approached rationalized housing construction as an engineer whose chief concern was sheltering nuclear families as well as possible within the inevitable financial and budgetary restraints.

Leroy, however, placed the *grands ensembles* that he championed into the broader history of French architecture. In a 1962 interview, Leroy compared the *grands ensembles* to the Palace of Versailles. He wondered if the contemporaries of Louis XIV considered it scandalous that their king had decided to build a collection of buildings—a *grand ensemble*—in the middle of nowhere at Versailles.³² He predicted that the *grands ensembles*—familial palaces—would one day be analogous with the grandeur of France just as the Sun King's suburban home had become. The *grand ensemble* model, Leroy sensed, was the best way to group administrative, socio-cultural and education infrastructure while

³⁰ACDC, Procès verbal de la Commission de surveillance, 10 Juillet 1953.

³¹Jean-Charles Fredenucci, "L'entregent colonial des d'ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées intervenant dans l'urbanisme des années 1950-1970," *Vingtième Siècle* 79 (July-September 2003): 79-94.

³²Jacques Charpentreau and René Kaes, "Les préoccupations d'un constructeur: entretien avec M. L. Leroy," *Affrontement* 20 July 1962.

preserving the countryside and giving each family a maximum of comfort. He explained that the goal of his company was not to make every grand ensemble “in the image of the sixteenth arrondissement or Neuilly,” two of France’s wealthiest communities, but to democratize material progress in comparison with Parisian apartments, which, Leroy added, still uniformly lacked private toilets. To Leroy, there was little difference between the grands ensembles and traditional urban neighborhoods. He observed that the population concentration in the grands ensembles mirrored those found in France’s major cities. Moreover, the SCIC never built an apartment tower that even approached the tallest Parisian buildings. To Leroy,



7. The cover to a SCIC handbook for new renters circa the mid-1960s with a “typical” family moving into a *grand ensemble*.

the grands ensembles were not radical departures from French habitation traditions, but a greener, more comfortable improvement that in twenty years time would have both the look and feel of an authentic urbanity.

At his outset in the late-1950s, Leroy’s intentions for the SCIC were qualitative: build as many homes as possibly as quickly as possible. Leroy’s SCIC quickly distinguished itself from France’s other non-profit developers by moving from impressive quantitative records—building X thousand homes in Y months to house Z population—toward a more holistic approach to the social composition of its communities. By the early 1960s, the SCIC presented itself as a providential developer modernizing France for the good of society: the

utopian future of France was one of dense “*grands unités urbaines périphériques*” wherein each family achieved a “psycho-sociological balance.”³³

Developing Sarcelles

Almost immediately after its formation, the SCIC sought a tract of land to develop. Prior to the SCIC’s construction of the grand ensemble at Sarcelles, the town was a farming village of 6,000 whose settlement traced back to Merovingian period.³⁴ The company purchased farm fields and pavilion homes, which it immediately demolished, slightly outside of the village after selecting the location in 1954. Planners considered the area an ideal development site for three reasons. First, a northern commuter train line bordered one side of the area. Second, a major road connecting to Paris bordered another side. Third, the development area was surrounded by countryside and in close proximity to parks, forests, and a lake. At an environmental level, the SCIC argued that the fields it urbanized were always “greener” after the implantation of housing because of the company’s tree planting policy (on paper, a minimum of one tree for each apartment).³⁵ The SCIC’s executive council envisioned high-density developments as islands encircled by countryside hypothetically preserved from development.

Three distinct phases can be distinguished in the twenty-year period of constant construction at Sarcelles. The first phase (1954-1958) was a response to an immediate housing crisis with limited long-term planning. The SCIC secured financing through the 1%

³³ACDC, 200-1, Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des Dépôts, Relations publique de la SCIC, 11 June 1964.

³⁴Jules Bernex, *Sarcelles à travers les siècles* (Sarcelles: Editions Sarcelles, 1952), 77.

³⁵ACDC, 201-5, Réalisations de la Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des Dépôts, 1954-1959.

employer paid salary tax [*le 1 percent patronal*] destined to facilitate housing provision.³⁶ In 1953, it had become obligatory for any private non-agricultural businesses or public establishment with more than 10 salaried employees to contribute 1% of their total salary payments to housing construction. Around 170,000 public and private businesses with 12 million salaried workers (48% of the active population) participated from the program's inception.³⁷ The state considered employer participation "a financial investment obligation in construction" and not a tax.³⁸

In October 1954, sub-contractors broke ground on a grouping of five-story buildings without elevators to house 440 families. Known as *Les Sablons*, the local place name for the fields, the buildings were made of poured concrete finished with decorative blue, orange, and red stone exterior. Each apartment, socially classified as *Logements Populaires et Familiaux*, had central heating, a bathroom, hot water, trash disposal unit, electricity, and numerous windows. In May 1956, the SCIC opened a second construction site and began building 1,180 identical apartment units named *Les Lochères*. Families moved to *Les Sablons* in February 1957 followed by those moving into *Les Lochères* in August 1958. As these self-identifying "pioneer" families settled, the SCIC initiated the construction of more buildings in *Les Sablons* and *Les Lochères* followed by five new neighborhoods with 1,200 to 1,500

³⁶Albert-Auguste Prouvost, owner of a Roubaix wool-factory, and Victor Provo, mayor of Roubaix, first experimented with the concept in 1943. Together, they founded France's first *Comité interprofessionnel du logement* [Interprofessional Housing Committee, CIL]. Local employers contributed a percentage of their mass salary to the CIL who in turn assured salaried employees housing through building companies benefiting from complementary state financing (originally, HBM financing regulations). Housing obtained by an employee through a CIL financing scheme did not depend on continued employment. The employee signed a rental contract with the housing manager rather than with his or her employer. A CIL operated as a middleman preventing direct paternalism in housing provision. Albert-Auguste Prouvost, *Tourjours plus loin: mémoires écrits en 1992* (Lille: La Voix du Nord), 86.

³⁷CAC, 19771119, Article 5, Participation des employeurs à l'effort de construction, caractéristiques essentielles, 3 May 1957.

³⁸Ibid.

apartments in each (Quartier Saint-Paul, Quartier des Paillards-Hirondelles, Quartier des Plâtrières and Sarcelles Ouest).³⁹ Buildings ranged in height from ten to fifteen story towers with colored exteriors.

During this first phase, narratives about arrival were identical because of the SCIC's dependence on the 1% employer contribution. One day at the office or factory, a foreman, syndical chief, supervisor, or manager approached a young married salaried employee asking if it was true his wife was pregnant or if he and his wife still lived in his mother-in-law's apartment or a small rented room. If he replied "yes," the representative offered the employee a modern rental apartment in Sarcelles. In many cases, the employee would be handed a key before even signing a contract.⁴⁰ As a result of its dependence on the employer's 1 percent housing contribution, buildings quickly became associated with the breadwinner's employment: *le bâtiment des flics* housed Parisian policemen, *le bâtiment des Citroën* housed Citroën employees, and *le bâtiment des profs* housed teachers. Well-equipped housing in modern Sarcelles—the future of French habitation—was thus destined for the chosen few. Only in the second and third construction phases would families access housing unrelated to their place of employment. Sarcelles' first apartments, however, were exclusive in that their doors were closed to the majority of Parisians. These buildings thus reflected the ethos of the

³⁹ See Michael J. Mulvey, "Urban Space and Social Identities in Postwar France: Gendered Representation and Women's Experience in Sarcelles, 1954-1974," MA Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006.

⁴⁰ Henry Canacos, mayor of Sarcelles and a *grand ensemble* resident, described how his friends Raymond and Josette Bossot arrived in the community through Raymond's employer's "*un pour cent*" in his history of the *grand ensemble*. Raymond married Josette and they rented a small room in the twelfth arrondissement. Josette was pregnant and they had no success finding an apartment. Luckily, Raymond's employer contributed to the 1 percent housing scheme. Five months pregnant, Raymond and Josette took a bus to Sarcelles in June 1957. They walked to the apartment, building two, second floor, and turned the key (Raymond having been given it at work). Door opened, they stood in amazement of the "paradise" offered them and signed the rental contract. Henry Canacos, *Sarcelles ou le béton apprivoisé* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1979), 22-23.

time. They were an attempt to solve the riddle that vexed Bloch-Lainé among others: how could responsibility for a necessity of life—housing—be distributed between government and corporations without the loss of liberty.

In the second phase (1958-1965), the SCIC committed to a master plan for the area and invested in denser apartments. The SCIC constructed four more neighborhoods after 1961 (Quartier du Clos, Quartier Taillefer, Quartier des Mignottes, Quartier Chanteraine) while adding buildings to existing neighborhoods. In the final phase of development (1966-1974), the SCIC favored building co-owned apartments over rental housing. In 1974, when workmen put down their tools, the SCIC had constructed 12,331 apartments (8,588 rental units and 3,743 *copropriété* units) destined for families. Over the course of twenty years, the SCIC urbanized an area of 195 hectares or less than 1 square mile. The partitioning of the surface area was the antithesis of suburban sprawl. The land was carefully divided with 17 percent taken up by residential, commercial, and public buildings combined, 13 percent by road and rail networks, 9 percent by parking garages, 17 percent by pedestrian walkways, 39 percent by parks, and 6 percent by sport fields or equipment.⁴¹

As a landlord, the SCIC held three basic obligations towards their rental and rent-to-own tenants: to allow the families “to enjoy the peaceful use of their home [*jouir paisiblement de son logement*],” to repair and renovate apartments and common areas, and to repair or replace any broken machines or equipment.⁴² On the ground, the developer’s foot soldiers were caretakers [*personnel de gardiennage*], most of whom were older women, housed on the first-floor of buildings, and a full-time grounds and repair crew. The women caretakers were hardy characters who led peaceful lives except for their battles against a

⁴¹Canacos, *Sarcelles, Ou Le Béton Apprivoisé*, 166.

⁴²ACDC, 201-6, L’accueil et l’information de locataire, 3.

common enemy: the hundreds of children who brought muck inside, dirtied entrance ways, and left their traces on hundreds of stairwell steps. Over the course of 1964 alone, Sarcelles' 104 caretakers consumed 1,440 brooms, 5,500 light bulbs, and 10,080 gallons of bleach.⁴³ Every two days, caretakers emptied 6,550 trash bins that accumulated 10,224 tons of trash yearly.⁴⁴ The caretaker reported to a district manager who mediated situations involving property destruction or extensive lapses in payment.

Sarcelles and the SCIC's other *grands ensembles* quickly took on distinctive demographic characteristics in comparison with older suburban and urban communities because their occupants were limited to salaried married couples [96% of Sarcelles' residents were married in 1962] with/or expecting children [87% had one or more children].⁴⁵ Families in Sarcelles had more children than the national average: 4.2 per family in Sarcelles against 3 for the rest of France. The average age of the population was twenty-one with the average adult age being 37 for men and 32 for women respectively. By 1963, breadwinners' occupations were roughly split between low-level administrative/managerial civil servants [*petits fonctionnaires*, 48% of the male population] and skilled-workers [38% of the male population] with a minority employed in liberal professions or as engineers [2.5% and 10.5% respectively]. Sarcelles never served as a home for the Spanish, Portuguese, and later North African laborers constructing its towers. The laboring population housed itself to the south of

⁴³Jean Duquèsne, *Vivre à Sarcelles? Le grand ensemble et ses problèmes* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1965), 22.

⁴⁴Aside from cleaning common areas, the caretaker publicly posted and collected rents each month. She or he would also be the first person a family met when they entered their home since the caretaker was responsible for recording existing damage to the apartment. Equally, a resident contacted the caretaker if an apartment had a leaky faucet, a light was out in a hallway, or if anything should be known for "*la bonne marche du groupe*." ACDC, 201-6, L'accueil et l'information de locataire, 3.

⁴⁵Compagnie d'études industrielles et d'aménagement du territoire, *La vie des ménages de quatre nouveaux ensembles de la Région Parisienne: 1962-1963* (Paris: CINAM, 1963).

the grand ensemble in a shantytown surrounded by vegetation, which remains inhabited to this day.

The most important aspect of the SCIC and the evolution of Sarcelles as a community was the developer's eventual preoccupation with discouraging "social segregation" by residential housing. The SCIC attempted to avoid this problem by "sinking" co-owned buildings destined for more better-off, financially stable families between affordable rental and co-owned housing. The SCIC thus juxtaposed rental apartments and various types of owner-occupied condominiums to promote social goals rather than to increase investment returns. Ideally, the developer sought to construct a social reality wherein different families with disparate life situations interacted inside the same community.⁴⁶ To accomplish this goal, the social housing developer diversified the forms and costs of housing it offered inside its communities. At a minimum, the developer set a goal of 20% market housing inside Sarcelles that catered to better-off middle-class couples.⁴⁷ The SCIC's experiments at its flagship of Sarcelles inspired the developer's most ambitious attempt to reduce social segregation through spatial proximity as a means to encourage solidarity: the Parisian grand ensemble of Val d'Yerres, which included its most diverse range of architecture and housing categories.

⁴⁶ACDC, 201-1, Témoignage de Léon-Paul LeRoy, 4 February 1987, 8.

⁴⁷In retrospect, the SCIC's 20% rule appears an inverted precedent to the controversial Solidarity and Urban Renewal Law of 2000. Guided through parliament by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's communist housing minister Jean-Claude Gayssot, the law mandated that all municipalities over 50,000 residents contain a minimum of 20 percent social housing. Whereas the SCIC attempted to convince better-off families to live amongst affordable housing, the Solidarity and Urban Renewal Law mandated affordable housing construction inside existing communities falling under the minimum threshold. Both policies, however, represented attempts to encourage social diversity by ironing out unequal territorial development with the SCIC's inspired by Catholic socialism rather than historical materialism.

The Co-Owned Community

The SCIC oversight council ideally envisioned *la copropriété* as the goal for the majority of buildings inside the *grands ensembles* by 1961.⁴⁸ Whenever a third of any building's residents displayed a preference for ownership, the building would be transferred to its residents in *copropriété*.⁴⁹ The SCIC encouraged co-ownership as more than a simple juridical solution to collective housing management. It was a pathway towards co-management or even self-management, *auto-gestion*, of *grands ensembles*. As collective owners and administrators, residents formed a convention to defend their common interests regardless of their backgrounds. Husbands and fathers, heads-of-household, would deliberate in their association's general assemblies, on occasion become trustees, and form strong bonds of neighborliness in the process. *Copropriété* encouraged communal habitation practices that helped to establish a foundation for solidarity and civil society. *Copropriété* or condominium ownership may not sound revolutionary. The juridical concept of the division of a home among co-owners can actually be traced back to Roman antiquity, but in the context of the time it was linked to a utopian vision. In *Pour une civilisation de l'Habitat* (1969), Louis Houdeville, lamenting the poor levels of participation in many resident assemblies, reminded his readers that the management of *copropriété* was intended to be a form of local democratic participation: it was the most basic political unit where the citizen made decisions about his intimate life.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ACDC, 201-2, SCIC Conseil d'Administration, Procès-Verbal, 30 January 196, 3-4.

⁴⁹By 1964, the SCIC moved thousands of families yearly into first-time homeownership in *grands ensembles* at Sarcelles, Créteil, Chevilly-Larue, Verrières-le-Buisson, and Tourcoing. By 1965, the developer had sold 10,000 apartments (6,000 in the Parisian region and 4,000 in the provinces). The long-term goal of the SCIC was to balance its construction by 1967 according to the following percentages: 30% HLM; 30% social owner-occupied, 30% rental housing benefiting from social financing, and 10% experimental realizations. ACDC 201-2, "Assemblée générale ordinaire," 29 May 1964; "Assemblée générale ordinaire," 26 May 1966."

⁵⁰Louis Houdeville, *Pour une civilisation de l'habitat* (Paris: Editions Ouvrières, 1969), 394.

At the moment of Liberation, the geography of French *copropriété* remained limited and unequally distributed. This rapidly changed with the construction of grands ensembles with buildings in *copropriété*. The unprecedented proliferation of co-ownership in grand ensemble eventually spurred jurists to review and re-legislate *copropriété* in 1965.⁵¹ They considered reform essential for managing *copropriété* in the grands ensembles, which went beyond the scale of all previous forms of *copropriété*. On the legal front, there was a clear sense that a type of tenure had surpassed existing French private property laws. There was no plan for how *copropriété* should function in a building with multiple towers or how 5,000 to 8,000 co-owners would manage green spaces, parks, and shared amenities. At an organizational level, as a result of each building's high population, jurists foresaw partisan camps emerging within homeowners' associations, thereby impeding the management of property and contributing to its physical deterioration. At a financial level, jurists envisioned buildings paralyzed by unpaid monthly fees. Jurists also feared too many low-level employees and workers, as heads-of-household, would refuse to contribute building fees out of impecuniosity, negligence, or unwillingness.

The 1965 law defined the private property of all co-owners and their "quoted part" of common property as proportional to the value of their private property. It also clarified the operations of the *syndicat*, the general assembly of residents—legally, a judicial personality—and the agent of its will the *syndic*, the executive branch. The law emphasized the legal responsibility of each owner to pay fees towards upkeep, preservation, and administration of common property, and it mandated that decisions to engage in repairs required a majority vote. Each head-of-household's vote equaled the owner's percentage of

⁵¹Law 65-557 fixant le statut de la copropriété des immeubles bâtis, 10 juillet 1965.

common ownership. In article 27 of the law, jurists spoke directly to the *grands ensembles* emphasizing that *copropriété* could be established inside developments with multiple interconnected buildings and even between separated buildings when they shared common grounds. Further, the law stipulated that in interconnected buildings, those with multiple towers and large populations, residents had a right to form secondary *syndicats* responsible for their common property under a primary *syndicat* responsible for general property. Again, with the *grands ensembles* in mind, the text legalized mechanisms whereby the *syndicats* in a community could contract with a single property management firm as their *syndic*.

The legislation established a new form of residential governance that could take two directions. Either the general assembly of residents, the *syndicat*, voted to outsource management responsibilities by hiring a remunerated third party as *syndic*, a licensed professional or company, or, residents could vote to turn their building into a cooperative. In the first case, the *syndic*, a remunerated housing manager and the legal representative of residents, reported to an elected *conseil syndical* after the general assembly's original discussion to hire the external party. In the latter, residents elected a *conseil syndical* composed of five members. One member was elected the *syndic* or president of the council while others adopted the roles of vice-president and secretary with an external accountant elected by residents to inspect finances. Advocates of a cooperative *copropriété* considered it an alternative form of local democratic management as it encouraged a participatory spirit among neighbors. Participatory cooperative management of co-owned buildings, however, continued to function best in developments whose residents had both the time to assume duties on councils and a comprehensive understanding of legal and financial systems.

Moreover, while cooperative management was conceivable in buildings with thirty to forty households, it seemed impossible to establish in a building with hundreds of households.

Leftist intellectuals—including Henri Lefebvre—dismissed *copropriété* just another way to re-introduce familial shelter into the free market rather than an attempt to encourage a more egalitarian French society.⁵² *Copropriété* was simply a banal aspect of a socially stratified residential housing system wherein each individual/couple housed themselves according to their revenue and in turn each home represented the revenue of its occupants. The SCIC's introduction of *copropriété* into Sarcelles and its other grands ensembles, however, had less to do with concerns about capital rotation and more to do with an earnest desire to encourage a more egalitarian society. The motivations behind the juxtaposition of affordable rental and co-owned buildings had less to do with an urgent desire to commodify familial habitat and more to do with a desire to simulate the profile of an imagined pre-industrial town of diverse social interactions. The developer needed a group of co-owners capable of paying the fees that could fund general infrastructure construction. *Copropriété* was also adopted as a measure to prevent a place name from becoming synonymous with the supposed revenue of its occupants. It was part of an attempt to create a community, to engender a village, and to promote the possibility of self-management of housing.

The Self-Management Alternative

The grands ensembles were a form of residential housing, but activists of diverse political backgrounds envisioned them as communities that could create new kinds of solidarity. The early years of Sarcelles' grand ensemble were thus a time in which residents launched intense political organization and activity. The most active groups were the renters

⁵²Nicole Haumont, Henry Raymond, & Antoine Haumont, *La Copropriété* (Paris: Centre de recherche d'urbanisme, 1971).

and familial associations, which were followed by other associations representing co-owner interests. The membership consisted entirely of men. As fathers and husbands, men still believed it was their sole responsibility to represent their household dependents in the residential associations that acted as interlocutors with both the SCIC and various political authorities. Jean Duquèsne, a resident and author, maintained that Sarcelles' married couples were on the forefront of "the modern tendency to not consider certain chores as being exclusively a woman's duty," but only men appeared in Sarcelles' public meetings, perhaps because women were responsible for minding children?

A number of associations emerged in Sarcelles to lobby on behalf of their members' interests: the Association Sarcelloise des Habitants des bois de Lochères represented a unified left made up of heads-of-household voting Parti communiste [PC], Parti socialiste unifié [PSU], and Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière. There was also a leftist pro-family working-class organization called the Association Populaire des Familles which affiliated itself with the Association Sarcelloise. The Association des Familles, a local section of the Union Nationale des Associations Familiales, represented pronatalist conservatives. The Union des Association Amicales des Copropriétaires represented co-owners within the Association des Familles until 1965, when the group defected to the Association Sarcelloise. The Association des Familles was therefore the smaller of the two major associations, and its members were conservative middle-class family men whose primary concerns were education, the organization of group leisure activities, and the establishment of vacation colonies.⁵³ These groups emerged out of the specific conditions of housing in the new grand ensemble. Although located within a municipality, the disinterested developer actually

⁵³Jean Duquèsne, *Vivre à Sarcelles? Le grand ensemble et ses problèmes* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1965), 162.

owned the streetlights, sidewalks, sewers, and parks. Residents therefore resided within the political boundaries of a municipality, but outside the municipality's realm of usual responsibilities.

Originally, these leftist and conservative associations focused on apolitical daily grievances: runny faucets, heating failures, and plumbing problems. Each group also had its own organizational structure and sponsored weekend familial activities (parades, shows, banquets, competitions, and lectures). They gathered together like-minded men of divergent social classes. We know the most about the Association Sarcelloise since it had two prominent members: Henri Canacos (1928-), PC mayor of Sarcelles between 1965 and 1983, and Claude Neuschwander (1933-), a PSU bourgeois businessman who became president of Sarcelles' resident council. The Association Sarcelloise began to collectively communicate resident grievances to the SCIC around 1956. Its first leaders, originally appointed by the "unaffiliated" conservative village municipal council, were avowedly reactionary. The leadership refused to allow communist to act as an apartment building's porte-parole, ostensibly because the association was nonpartisan and the communists politicized the group's activities.⁵⁴

As the Association Sarcelloise developed, the local French Communist Party also grew. Henri Canacos had been elected *secrétaire* of the PCF section of Epinay-sur-Seine. He had first gained prominence as a labor organizer at the Éclair film studios, where he worked as a skilled technician. One weekend, Canacos left his apartment building to a young recent arrival to Sarcelles, Pierre Nicolas, yelling on the street corner, "Ask for, read, *L'Humanité-Dimanche!*" Canacos ran up to him and shouted "*Salut comrade...L'Huma...thanks...listen,*

⁵⁴Canacos, *Sarcelles, Ou Le Béton Apprivoisé*, 41-42.

tell me...is there a cell in the neighborhood?”⁵⁵ Nicolas was unsure. They investigated without success. A few days after, someone knocked late at night at the Canacos’ apartment door, startling his pregnant wife. On the other side of the door Canacos was a delegation from the national communist party who asked him to resign his secretarial post in Epinay, decrease his involvement in union activities, and focus all his energies on organizing the party within the grand ensemble. They urged Canacos to attract a diverse population, including new *cadres*, to the party. Three days after, Canacos began holding local cell meetings in his kitchen.

Canacos and others who participated in those first meetings conceptualized the grand ensemble as a political *tabula rasa*. Cancos sensed that the communist party had a chance to make great strides as families of various backgrounds entered a new community freed of any previous political organization, prejudices, or history. To whom should they address their problems? The party, Cancos maintained, had to defend the entire grand ensemble population as opposed to just one class. In 1958, the communist cell at Sarcelles (around 100 to 125 militants), began distributing tracts calling for diverse actions that ranged from the opening of more shops to the creation of new *crèches* and schools. That May, fearing a right-wing *Coup d’état* at any moment, Cancos and Nicolas went door-to-door in every building to establish contacts. The cell led an impressive campaign in the grand ensemble to vote “*non*” in the July 1958 constitutional referendum by hanging red balloons inscribed with the word “*non*” throughout the grand ensemble (44 percent of residents voted no).⁵⁶ Sarcelles’ communist militants were so organized that they mobilized the armed occupation of public

⁵⁵Ibid., 35.

⁵⁶Ibid., 47-48.

buildings and guarded a nearby highway in collaboration with Gaullists in response to the 21 April putsch and the threat of rightwing parachutists.⁵⁷

Canacos, for his part, successfully recruited activists within Sarcelles, but the majority of households of all political persuasions turned to the Association Sarcelloise as an organization whose interactions with the SCIC could improve their living conditions. Despite the anticommunist position of its appointed leadership, the organization had become the voice defending residents' interests. After extensive debates, Canacos decided that the local party would integrate itself into the Association Sarcelloise with the intention of eventually assuming control. Canacos and his comrades entered the Association Sarcelloise at a moment of crisis. In late 1958, the SCIC raised rents in the grand ensemble to underwrite the construction of infrastructure and the Association Sarcelloise called an assembly of residents. Although the leaders of the Association Sarcelloise justified the



8. The cover of the Associations des Familles' June-July newsletter from 1960.

rent increase, Canacos and his comrades called for tenants to continue paying their rent at the previous level. Rejecting the increase, the leftists urged tenants to place the amount of the monthly increase into a special escrow account. If the *grève de loyer* failed, the account would transfer to the SCIC as compensation. If the *grève de loyer* succeeded, the funds would be returned to households. Residents adopted the plan unanimously.

Over the next five months, Canacos and his associates organized a *grève de loyer* in the grand ensemble. By the fifth month, however, the Association Sarcelloise decided to end

⁵⁷Ibid., 74-78.

the *grève* because there was little the developer could actually do. Cancos came to realize that the state proffered insufficient funds for infrastructure development. Despite a constant flow of anti-SCIC rhetoric, the left in Sarcelles recognized that the SCIC was not a typical capitalist developer. Canacos understood that the developer never raised rents to benefit shareholders, but to reinvest in housing and infrastructure. The SCIC constructed some buildings that paid for themselves, but it also supported non-rentable projects: sidewalks, trees, grass, streetlights, administrative offices, and cultural centers. Canacos never wanted the SCIC, which he viewed as France's flagship "public" real estate organization, to collapse under the weight of its expenditures or because of actions he helped to organize. At a general assembly, a communist took the podium to explain to his fellow heads-of-household that they should end the *grève* since the real enemy was not the SCIC but the state. The problem was not the disinterested developer; it was the rules of the capitalist economy the developer had to operate inside. At the following Association Sarcelloise general assembly, residents elected seven communists to the thirteen-member administrative council because of their performance during the *grève*. The communists on the Association Sarcelloise promised to battle to "humanize the city" by making it truly a safe community and not a "dormitory town [*cit  d'ortoir*]."58

In December 1962, a five-year-old girl, Viviane Klock, was returning from school in the grand ensemble when she noticed steam escaping from a sidewalk vent. She went to play in the vapors when the heating pipe suddenly exploded and burned the child to death. The Association Sarcelloise took the lead in calling for a safer, more reliable heating system by organizing another *gr ve* in payments.⁵⁹ Within the Association Sarcelloise, Canacos also

⁵⁸Ibid., 64.

established a union of the left with the long-term objective of taking city hall under the banner of “humanizing the city of the future.” In the 1965 elections, the leftist union accomplished its goal and Canacos, now mayor, shifted his interest from resident associations to city hall.

Bloch-Lainé was also concerned with the question of local democracy—specifically, the interaction of residents with the developer and the participation of residents in the management of their housing. He sought a political structure wherein residents could speak directly with the developer on an equal footing. To create this structure, Bloch-Lainé formed an independent working-group at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques to examine the issue. In *Les sociétés locales d'économie mixte et leur contrôle* (1963), the working group reported that the French law linking the landlord and the tenant in an individual relationship was no longer a suitable framework for the administrative and human reality of the grands ensembles.⁶⁰ The report advised the formation of an elected residents' council [*Conseil de résidents*] in each grand ensemble to communicate renter and condominium owner interests and engage in limited direct management [*gestion*] of social and cultural amenities.⁶¹ The recommendations represented a potential juridical revolution by altering traditional relations between the property owner and tenant, who would now be represented by councils.

Bloch-Lainé discussed these issues with Claude Neuschwander who was a friend, fellow member of the Club de Jean Moulin, and Sarcelles resident. Neuschwander had first met Bloch-Lainé when he was a Sciences-po student and Bloch-Lainé had served as visiting

⁵⁹Ibid., 86

⁶⁰Alain Serieyx, Francis-J. Fabre, and Roland Morin *Les Sociétés locales d'économie mixte et leur contrôle* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1963).

⁶¹ACDC, 201-6, Michel Saillard, directeur general de la SCIC, “Conseils de Residents: deux ans,” *CDC* (April 1968): 4; Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 137.

professor. Like Bloch-Lainé, Neuschwander also considered a new form of co-management [*cogestion*] of the *grands ensembles* between the developer and residents essential for a more democratic, technocratic society.⁶² In business, *cogestion* had come to designate an active participatory system wherein salaried employees participated in management with their employer. Staff and directors assumed joint responsibility for making decisions based on a formal contract designating powers and procedure. From Neuschwander's perspective, residents would eventually play an analogous role with the developer. Extended to its logical conclusion, the system formed a level of administrative residential democracy prior to municipal political democracy.

The SCIC first tested resident reactions to the concept of joint decision-making in Sarcelles. The company held public meetings with the Association Sarcelloise, the Association des Familles, and the Union des Association Amicales des Corproiétaires, which led to the elaboration of a formal convention between the associations and the SCIC signed on 24 June 1965. The convention called for a residents' council elected by universal suffrage with one vote per household. The council would be responsible for communicating to renters the SCIC's logic for determining rents, participating in the elaboration of yearly budgets and fees, and managing collective spaces and socio-cultural infrastructure.⁶³ On 27 February

⁶²Bloch-Lainé personally encouraged Neuschwander to run for Sarcelles' residents' council. Claude Neuschwander and Bernard Guetta, *Patron, mais: entretiens avec Bernard Guetta* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 67; They were not alone in considering resident councils a form of local democratic participation. Louis Houdeville would later lament the failure of resident councils as a failure to bring into maturation what he considered the seed of a new local democracy encouraging unprecedented participation of citizens in the management of their domestic life. Houdeville, *Pour une civilisation de l'habitat*, 394.

⁶³The company formed a single administrative entity to manage Sarcelles' rental units as well as homeowner associations in November 1966: la Coopérative de Gestion Immobilière [CGI]. Prior to the CGI, the SCIC managed all *grands ensembles* from its centralized headquarters on the Parisian rue Euler. A management "cell," the CGI exercised a level of autonomy as a stand-alone juridical entity (a société civile coopérative de gestion immobilière), led by a SCIC appointed director. The CGI, as a cooperative, had to abstain from seeking a profit, strictly balance its income and expenditures, and allow independent audits of its activities. The CGI filled apartments, collected rents, paid fees, and, for renters and on behalf of condominium

1966, the SCIC simultaneously held elections in the Parisian grand ensemble of Bagneux-la-Fontaine, Bondy, Epinay-Orgemont, L'Hay-les-Roses, Maisons-Alfort, Poissy, Sarcelles, Sucy-en-Brie, Villiers-le-Bel, and Viry-Châtillon.⁶⁴

Each grand ensemble had an elected board of twelve members with the exception of Sarcelles, which had eighteen members, and Epinay-Orgemont, which had fifteen members. The electoral body was limited to *chefs de famille* residing in the community for at minimum of one month before the date of the election in a rental or co-owned apartment managed by the SCIC. A man's *cojoint*, his wife or his oldest son, had the right to speak as a representative of the *chef de famille* in the case he was prevented by work, illness, or injury from participating in the election. Resident associations presented their candidates, *chefs de famille*, sworn to defend the best interests of residents, to the electorate. In Sarcelles, PC members declined to stand for nomination by the Association Sarcelloise, preferring instead to focus on municipal government. Despite the PC abstention, the Association Sarcelloise won a majority of seats on the first residents' council. After organizing an office and establishing a budget, the council elected Neuschwander as their president. Neuschwander had gained notoriety by instigating the defection of the Union des Association Amicales des Copropriétaires from the conservative Association des Familles to the leftist Association Sarcelloise.

At first glance, Neuschwander seems to be a contradiction: a militant Catholic socialist and number two official at Publicis, France's preeminent postwar advertising firm headquartered on the Champs-Élysées. At the time he assumed the presidency of the council,

societies, maintained collective infrastructure (heating systems, elevators, green spaces, facades, etc.) by bidding for subcontractors.

⁶⁴ACDC, 201-6, Michel Saillard, directeur general de la SCIC, "Conseils de Residents: deux ans," *CDC* (April 1968): 4

the business world considered Neuschwander the dauphin to Publicis' founder and owner Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet. Neuschwander's family was, by his own estimation, "*très bourgeois*."⁶⁵ On his paternal protestant-Swiss side, his grandfather was a "*homme de bourse*" while his father had pursued a life devoted to cultural and intellectual interests. His mother was Catholic, and he grew up in a Catholic milieu. Neuschwander practiced the religion his entire life.⁶⁶ Both sides of his family were politically rightwing—leaning to the extreme reactionary right. Neuschwander explained his leftist sympathies as the result of his Catholicism, which gave him a sense of social rather than individual morality.⁶⁷ At the age of fourteen, he entered the Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne [JEC] where he became convinced that the progressive social message of Catholicism required militant political engagement. Neuschwander was no evangelical—he had no desire to convert others to his faith—but he aspired to change the society and systems under which all lived.⁶⁸

Neuschwander moved to Sarcelles with his family shortly after the completion of the first co-owner apartment buildings in 1962.⁶⁹ He considered living in a *copropriété*

⁶⁵Neuschwander and Guetta, *Patron, mais*, 46.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸While still a *mathématiques supérieures* student, a post-baccalaureate course of studies in preparation for *grandes écoles* entrance exams, Neuschwander participated in the formation of the socialist and progressive Christian Association générale des étudiants des classes préparatoires aux grands écoles scientifiques [AGECP]. The AGECP cultivated leftist support and led a successful battle to control the conservative Union Nationale des Étudiants de France [UNEF] in 1956. When Neuschwander's father discovered his son, now a student at the École Centrale, had been elected vice-president of UNEF he shouted at Neuschwander in a fit of rage "I would rather have a slut for a daughter than a leftist son!"⁶⁸ Supportive of Algerian autonomy and then independence, he spent his military service at a radar station on the Algerian-Tunisian border in 1960. Upon his return, Neuschwander briefly studied at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and became a director of the Club de Jean Moulin. In 1962, Publicis' owner Bleustein-Blanchet hired Neuschwander on the recommendation of a fellow Centralien.

⁶⁹He had a connection to Sarcelles before his arrival in the grand ensemble. His wife's family lived in the countryside beyond the village of Sarcelles. Her father was a medical doctor who knew Neuschwander's

apartment with his family as an aspect of his militant Catholic socialism because where he housed his family represented an innovative attempt to organize collective life differently.⁷⁰ His purchase of a co-owned apartment within a grand ensemble affirmed his faith in an alternative form of habitation. Neuschwander conceptualized Sarcelles as an experimental pilot project pointing the public toward the future of French habitation, social relations, and local democracy. Years later, Neuschwander contrasted his choice to live in the grand ensemble with the choices of his sister who married, had four children, and embraced her bourgeois identity by renting a luxury apartment in Neuilly and owning a country house. He could have followed her pathway. Instead, Neuschwander elected to participate in an experiment that could lead to an alternative, more egalitarian society.

Neuschwander took his role as president of the residents' council seriously because he believed that innovations in the quality of life or democratic participation in Sarcelles would echo throughout all other grands ensembles.⁷¹ The Sarcelles council confronted resistance from local administrators, however, when it requested a full review of financial records. Neuschwander finally obtained the documents and handed them over to two young members of the council who worked as public accountants. The civil servants' review spurred the council to demand that the SCIC change how it contracted with outside parties for maintenance services. The council then organized a series of investigative studies and questionnaires. From these studies, the council determined its chief goal should be to extend the duration of rental contracts beyond one year. Couples reported feeling a sense of

maternal grandfather, a pharmacist. The couple befriended as children and Neuschwander was certain they had run through the fields where the grand ensemble was built. Neuschwander's choice (and, we can only assume, his wife's too) to purchase a *copropriété* apartment in the grand ensemble where they resided with their four children was a form of political engagement.

⁷⁰Neuschwander and Guetta, *Patron, mais*, 11.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 10-11.

insecurity due to the one-year leases. What was to prevent the SCIC from not renewing a lease? At the end of each rental contract, couples feared there was a slight possibility they would have to move. The council successfully negotiated long-term lease contracts [*bail à long terme*] tied to a maximum rental increase index favorable to residents. The council also put architectural plans before resident consultation, primarily mothers, to assure future developments were safe for their children.⁷²

The SCIC and the Canacos-led municipality, however, rapidly marginalized the residents' council after the departure of Bloch-Lainé from the CDC in 1967. Canacos and Sarcelles' elected politicians, in Neuschwander's opinion, had no desire to share power with the residents' council and, perhaps, distrusted him as a "bourgeois" in close associations with Bloch-Lainé.⁷³ Canacos certainly did not disavow the presence of bourgeois classes inside the grand ensemble, though he emphasized that their buildings should in no way be spatially separated from buildings housing other classes, but the mayor's priority was not introducing more middle-class families to the grand ensemble. Instead, he advocated the construction of even more affordable worker and employee housing (his political base) by relying on severely devalorized capital (1 or 2 percent loans repayable over sixty years or more). Canacos perhaps saw the residents' council as a political trap the developer could use to bypass the legitimate political representative body of the townspeople. In any case, the mayor along with leftist municipal officials proved unwilling to consider the subtle difference between an elected council representing residents as housing consumers and a municipality operating within state institutions.

⁷²Neuschwander noted that no women were elected to the Residents' Council, but he recalled that mothers actively participated in events sponsored by the council. Neuschwander and Guetta, *Patron, mais*, 184.

⁷³Bloch-Lainé expressed a great deal of admiration for Canacos as an administrator and political organizer. Bloch-Lainé and Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 70-71, 139.

More conservative financiers replaced a retiring Bloch-Lainé at the CDC, and they were less receptive to utopian experiments: residents' councils appeared a dangerous first step on the frightening road to the *autogestion* of housing.⁷⁴ At the time, neither Neuschwander nor the residents' council publicly mentioned *autogestion* as a way of reorganizing housing construction, provision, and management so as to combat alienation and push the social contract to its egalitarian and participatory ends. They articulated their chief concern as establishing a working system of *cogestion*. Neuschwander, however, understood that the residents' council was a conscientious step towards *autogestion* through *cogestion*.⁷⁵ The new SCIC management redirected the organization toward town halls, thereby circumnavigating the residents' councils. Rather than consult with the councils, the disinterested developer established planning contracts with municipalities.⁷⁶ Councils, and by extensions all residents, were effectively marginalized from directly contributing their opinions on future development.

Contextually, CDC executives were right to see the specter of *autogestion* of SCIC housing within the realm of possibility. The nature of SCIC housing developments—

⁷⁴ *Autogestion*, more fully theorized after 1968, was in no way synonymous with *cogestion* or nationalization. Theorists of *autogestion* made no distinction between nationalization and capitalism since a nationalized industry still had to operate in accordance with the capitalist organization of production and power hierarchies. Nationalization represented progress because it signified a society with evolving mentalities towards public good, but *autogestion* promised complete socialization of enterprises, the dismantling of bourgeois property practices, the total rupture with market capitalism, and the passage to a new decentralized society wherein human relations were more intense, personalized, and richer than under capitalist organization. To Roger Garaudy, *autogestion* promised to generate “*l'idée d'un homme nouveau*” whose attitudes and behavior would be fundamentally different from those witnessed during the age of market capitalism. Critiques of *autogestion* dismissed it as Marxist practices put into the service of a Catholic idealism. Annie Fourcaut, “L'animation dans le béton: autogérer les grands ensembles?,” in Christian Chevandier and Frank Georgi, eds., *Autogestion: la dernière utopie?* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 2003); Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'âge de l'autogestion* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1976); Roger Garaudy, *le projet Esperance* (Paris: Laffont, 1976); Neuschwander and Guetta, *Patron, mais*, 67.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁷⁶ This shift manifested in the next resident council election: 78% of voters abstained. 2,544 of 9,169 families voted in the election. Archives municipale de Sarcelles, “Plus de 75% d'abstentions au Conseil des residents,” *Gazette Val d'Oise* 15 October 1968,

thousands of residents as direct tenants or dependent on the company for property management—placed the SCIC in the precarious positions of becoming a target for the reorganization of housing outside traditional capitalistic property relations. To Neuschwander, *autogestion* represented an irreversible current that could fulfill men's deepest desires. He saw it as the future of France and Western Europe: a true third way in opposition to American consumerism and Soviet bureaucratization.⁷⁷ *Autogestion* was “the only system that could avoid the generalization of social disorder, the growth of contestation and the spontaneous uprisings that followed with it.”⁷⁸ It was “the means to permit man to pass from forced irresponsibility to voluntary responsibility.”⁷⁹ In retrospect, Neuschwander considered the council an important experiment that had sought to increase citizen participation and improve quality of life outside the place of employment where leftist unions and political parties usually gave most of their attention. To Neuschwander, the *autogestion* of housing would have meant removing habitations from the realm of egotistical material consummation, the abolition of privilege, and the establishment of harmonious collectives.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Neuschwander and Guetta, *Patron, mais*, 168

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 172.

⁸⁰Of all residential situations, the *grands ensembles* were ideal for experiments in the *autogestion* of housing. Theoretically, an *autogestionnaire* grand ensemble was an enterprise that residents held in common with all heads-of-households: collectively establishing managerial organization, electing directorial boards responsible for sub-contracting, democratically approving development plans; and communally deliberating on the repartition and reinvestment of rents (residential and commercial), sales, and fees. The community harmonized the use and exchange value of apartments within the grand ensemble relying on *autofinancement* (existing capital, savings) to pay for improvements. Male heads-of-household would be the shared masters of their housing by destroying traditional concepts of private property, rejecting any form of exploitation, and removing bureaucratization from their domestic life. For example, the community could decide whether they should auto-finance improvements in communal transportation, façade painting, or build parking lots for private cars. In this utopian domestic world, a head-of-household moved from heteronomy to autonomy in relation to his shelter as his *autogestionnaire* community, encouraging a new altruistic social order based on conviviality and reciprocity as opposed to the individualism and egoism of capitalist residential society. *Ibid.*, 169.

The Universalist Alternative

Sometime in the mid-1970s, Leroy drove a visiting American around Parisian suburbia to see a recent American-styled single-family sub-division and then the grand ensemble of Sarcelles.⁸¹ On their return to the city, Leroy asked the American what he thought. To his surprise, the visitor said he found Sarcelles far more interesting than the single-family homes. Puzzled, Leroy informed the American that the general opinion of the French at that moment was the opposite, so he asked what the American took away from Sarcelles. The American told Leroy that housing developers in his own country had been building single-family homes in nice suburbs for specific income brackets for decades; in fact, they were experts at it, but Sarcelles represented something American developers had never accomplished because, he explained, “we do not know how to make races coexist.”⁸² Leroy considered the American’s comment a confirmation that his company had realized its intention to have diverse peoples successfully cohabitate inside Sarcelles.

Since French statistical data does not address the categories of race or ethnicity, it is difficult to say precisely what racial or ethnic groups lived in the *grand ensemble* from their construction. What can be said with certainty is that the majority of the population of the *grand ensemble* consisted of white people from Paris or the provinces at least into the late-1960s. This is not to say the community lacked in diversity. A 1961 study conducted of 19,000 residents found 40% were of Parisian origins, 31% from Parisian suburbs, 18 percent from the provinces, 5% over-seas departmental and 1 percent foreign.⁸³ The *oultre-mer* and foreign percentages included Antillean functionaries, a small Vietnamese population, a few

⁸¹ACDC, 201-1, Témoignage de Léon-Paul LeRoy, 4 February 1987, 15

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Duquèsne, *Vivre à Sarcelles?*, 73

Eastern Europeans, and an Australian couple.⁸⁴ The grand ensemble also housed a dozen Indian families who moved to France after the dissolution of the L'établissements français de l'Inde in 1954.

The most notable demographic change began when a *pieds-noirs* population of 2,000 to 3,000 families arrived in the 1960s. For its part, the government encouraged the SCIC to borrow and to build to house the repatriated. The SCIC council accepted the building project as an aspect of its moral mission, but it expressed serious concerns about the financial solvency of the population. With the arrival of *pieds-noirs* also came a small North African Jewish population that expanded as Algerian, Egyptian, Moroccan, and Tunisian Jews purchased co-owned apartments in Sarcelles. By 1963, one of Sarcelles' commercial centers boasted a kosher butcher whose proprietor had previously owned a Cairo hotel that Nasser had nationalized. Rather than being crammed into Corbusier-style tower block housing estates by the French government, the Jewish families chose to purchase apartments in co-property inside Sarcelles. Their arrival reflected the social structures and fluidity of human migration. Indeed, the emergence of Sarcelles as one of France's most cosmopolitan cities had little to do with official state minority population strategies and a great deal to do with the informal global networks of international migration.

The arrival of minority populations, *pieds-noirs*, and North African Jews was not seen as a negative development. Bloch-Lainé, for example, said their presence transformed suburban Sarcelles into a robust hybrid of New York City and Alger.⁸⁵ SCIC management, however, opposed the concentration of any social, racial, or ethnic population in rental housing; even Bloch-Lainé and Leroy, who were vocally anti-racist and philosemitic, were

⁸⁴Ibid., 75.

⁸⁵Bloch-Lainé and Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire*, 174-175.

not advocates of multiculturalism. Despite arrival from former French colonies or elsewhere, SCIC administrators continued to envision Sarcelles and the grands ensembles as predominantly Franco-French communities. SCIC management was not openly hostile to minorities, but it preferred a culturally homogeneous community. In other words, the SCIC wanted the breadwinner and his dependents to reconcile their public interests with the wider social community regardless of their private behavioral practices.

Catholics quickly saw the SCIC as a developer that was building a universalizing city. Jean Marty, a Catholic priest who served as pastor for Sarcelles' grand ensemble observed:

On the social and racial front there is no voluntary segregation. In the same stairwells everybody brushes shoulders: manual workers, administrative executives, industrial executives, small-time employees, engineers, professors, technicians, people of all races and all skin colors.⁸⁶

To Marty, all this made Sarcelles an ideal place for families to return to the Church and for Catholic conversion.⁸⁷ The optimistic Marty admitted the developer's practice of non-segregation at a social and racial level scared some residents who isolated themselves from neighbors. Marty, however, confidently foresaw these young men and women overcoming their fears to knock on the door of their Black or Arab neighbor.⁸⁸ Even if they dared not knock, Marty had no doubt that their children would fight against their parents' racial atomization.

Rather than longing to return to their native countries, the organization of residential housing encouraged "foreign families" to "learn to become Occidental."⁸⁹ Marty's assumed

⁸⁶Jean Marty, "Une chance offerte à l'église: le cas de Sarcelles," *Vers une nouvelle civilisation urbaine* (Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1962),

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 122.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 116.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 118.

that the spatial concentration of minority populations in one area would prevent that population from adopting the culture of the majority population. By rupturing past familial and geographical ties, the grand ensemble also forced French families to question their mentalities and previously held beliefs. Marty gave the example of a Franco-French man who spewed racist comments on a Sarcelles adult football team only to find his fellow team members confronting him with questions about his disconcerting statements. The man gradually changed his opinions. Moreover, the presence of Blacks, Arabs, Vietnamese, and Indian couples challenged young French couples' assumptions about those peoples. "The Other" suddenly was everywhere, and couples had to interact with their neighbor unlike in "suburban single-family homes where 'the Other' is always over the garden wall."⁹⁰ The grand ensemble was thus "a provocation to the universal" that transformed what were once abstract representations of skilled metalworkers in the press—the Vietnamese in newsreels, or black Africans in photographs—into a familiar social reality.⁹¹

Marty encouraged the developer to avoid the formation of any "ghetto-community" by practicing what one may term today affirmative action or positive discrimination based on class and racial classifications. By assigning families of varied social classes and races to each floor within a building, Marty believed the SCIC sought to push humanity towards eschatological ends. Marty's own view of the grands ensembles suggested that they might contribute to the actualization of Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁹² Housing practices permitted "Blacks, Yellows, and Whites, Christians, workers, and

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

executives,” each with what Marty called their own independent psychologies, to arrive at an awareness of one another. Living in close proximity, they could contribute to one another’s welfare, live as a community and, in Marty’s opinion, promote conditions that would be ideal for the advancement of the Catholic faith.

The presence of assimilated minority ethnic, religious, and racial groups proved to the SCIC administrators that their innovative suburban developments were blazing a pathway to a better future. The award-winning novelist Anna Langfus, who lived on the tenth floor of a building in Sarcelles, saw the future of French race relations in Sarcelles. As she explained to a reporter: “Everyday, I see a little boy who is entirely black take the hand of a little boy who is entirely white on the way to school.”⁹³ Sarcelles, in Langfus’ opinion, contributed to a solution of “the racial problem” by exposing young French children to peoples of different color or religion and acculturating children from diverse backgrounds to France. Another resident confidently informed the same reporter that Sarcelles solved “the racial problem.”⁹⁴

This is not to say that all was *rosé*. Jean Laborde, the journalist who interviewed Langfus, met a young blonde *française* who asked him to accompany her to her stairwell where he smelled “a strong sickly-sweet odor of filth everywhere” which reportedly emanated from repatriated families. Although Laborde, it was not a question of “racism” or “North Africans,” but of “foreign groups whose lifestyle differs from ours.” The filth and noise produced by “Egyptians, Eurasians, Vietnamese, Africans, North Africans, Muslims, and Indians” reflected “their norms which are totally opposed to those we [the French] practice.” While Laborde expressed his opposition to the intolerable American practice of

⁹²Ibid., 128.

⁹³Jean Laborde, “Des cobayes malgré eux...,” *L’Aurore* 26 June 1964.

⁹⁴Ibid.

segregating housing by “white,” “brown,” and “yellow,” he considered interracial friendships in Sarcelles an impossibility. The unidentified blonde French woman he accompanied to the stairwell testified that already “there have been many departures motivated by the presence of other races.”

Paul Marie, an engineer for Jeumont-Schneider and president of the grand ensemble’s conservative Association des Familles attributed all of Sarcelles’ problems to the arrival of “an international population that had not yet had time to adapt.”⁹⁵ Children coming from “everywhere,” he argued, could not interact in the classroom because they had different levels of intellectual maturity. Similarly, adults could not make lasting friendships with foreign parents as they could with French parents because there was “too much diversity between the families.” In 1965, when Marie was interviewed, “foreign” families were still a minority in the grand ensemble. Was the presence of minority families so intolerable to Franco-French residents that they abandoned their apartments for elsewhere? Internally, the SCIC may have embraced a utopia vision of races sharing a single culture and cohabiting in a single community, but its publications contained nothing but white smiling faces.

On 26 June 1964 the SCIC celebrated its tenth anniversary by handing over the keys to its 100,000th apartment to a young newly married couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Chichery, in Sarcelles. Parliamentarians, political figures, and high-level bureaucrats arrived by car and train to participate in the event and stand beside gendarmes who appeared in full dress uniform. A SCIC photo captured the young couple on their apartment balcony accompanied by the rotund Paul Deange, prefect of the Seine-et-Oise department.⁹⁶ To their left on the

⁹⁵Jean Marie & René Miquel, “Votre Grand Paris: Les Habitants de Sarcelles,” *L’Aurore* 9 February 1965.

⁹⁶ACDC, 3.B.036, Sarcelles, Jean Biaugeaud, “10e anniversaire de la SCIC à Sarcelles remise des clés du 100,000e appartement a un jeun coupe m. et mme Chichery.”

balcony, Paul Delouvrier, previously charged with a “pacification” mission in Algeria and now Délégué général au District de la Région de Paris, chatted with an unidentified



9. From left to right, Madame Chichery, Deange, Monsieur Chichery, Delouvrier, unknown.

individual who seemed oblivious to the couple’s presence. The balcony was situated at the mid-level of an apartment tower. Deange, a wartime deportee, called Madame Chichery’s attention to something in the distance. The couple was young and attractive, Madame Chichery appeared to be a woman in her early twenties, and she

wore a modern knee-length dress with her hair tied back. She was pregnant. As she looked over her balcony, her face betrayed a sense of excitement and anticipation. Monsieur Chichery had well-defined features and struck a distinguished pose as he gazed into the distance. We know nothing about the couple other than that they were married and expecting a child. Why were they selected to receive the SCIC’s 100,000th apartment? What we can be sure of is that the image represented how the SCIC saw itself: sheltering white, young French couples and thereby granting them the security to raise a family. The disinterested developer served the public good by protecting the interests of married couples like the Chichery. As the SCIC attempted to show in page after page of glossy brochures, the developer offered such families paradises where they could raise healthy children in sunlight and fresh air.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ACDC, 201-5, *SCIC 1966* (Paris, Ed.CDC-SIRP/SCIC, 1966).

Conclusion: A Pseudo-Christian Socialist Utopia?

The utopian aspirations that diverse parties held for Sarcelles went beyond simply reconciling men's lives as breadwinners with their dependents' needs. Although residential buildings betrayed a degree of homogeneity in their clientele, the heterogeneous dense clumping of diverse classes encouraged a degree of social spatial proximity within a single community. In theory, spatial proximity granted a head-of-household the opportunity to learn to love his neighbor (a Christian commandment that was dear to Resistance social thought) thereby undergoing a psychological mutation. In short, cross-cultural encounters helped people shed prejudices and therefore transformed society. Male neighborliness was itself a form of social engineering within the *unité d'habitation*, and it helped efface a population's specificity and independent class identities.

In the grand ensemble, the *cadre*—highly skilled white-collar employees, for example, managers, executives, and engineers—civilized the worker and employee, who in turn taught his middle-class counterparts about solidarity and equality. The lowly and lofty converged on the center. All classes theoretically developed human qualities through neighborly interactions that helped to universalize French household aspirations. Two opinions emerged of the grands ensembles' ability to alter social interactions between heads-of-household and their dependents in the grands ensembles. The first opinion admitted that while the theory sounded idealistic and lacked concrete evidence; it was nonetheless a realizable condition. The second opinion viewed utopian housing developments as impossibly misguided and misinformed population experiments.

Psycho-sociology, a burgeoning research field within French urban sociology during the *Trente Glorieuses*, set out to uncover the utopian potential behind this new form of

habitation. People wanted to know how could a grand ensemble foster a classless society. These psycho-sociologists defended the possibilities of the grands ensembles when properly equipped with social and cultural amenities. Collected around the urban and housing sociologist Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe's Centre d'ethnologie sociale, psycho-sociologists challenged myths about the grands ensembles so as to change public opinions.⁹⁸ They wanted to generate a greater political and financial commitment to the projects; and they wanted the French to see such projects as a common enterprise. This kind of work, as Chombart de Lauwe saw it, contributed to human liberation.⁹⁹

Chombart de Lauwe never suggested that housing was in itself a universal panacea, but he did believe that a nation's preferred habitation reflected its morality and structured human relations.¹⁰⁰ By the early 1950s, he was calling for the use of economic and technological knowledge in the service of changing cultural attitudes so as to build cities of "free men, without distinctions of class, race, and doctrine."¹⁰¹ Above all, Chombart de Lauwe opposed any form of class or ethnic segregation in modern habitat such as the Parisian suburban red belt, Puerto Rican populated East Harlem, or the demarcation between *colons* and Muslims in Alger.¹⁰² Good intentions, he recognized, were not enough to make

⁹⁸In many ways, Chombart de Lauwe embodied Resistance social thought. In 1940, he had escaped France to join the Armée française de la Libération, which he served with distinction as a pilot and soldier. His future wife, Marie-José, at the time a medical student training to become a pediatrician, was deported to Ravensbrück for resistance activities where she was assigned the emotionally devastating task of working in the *Kinderzimmer*, a block for the camp's newborns, before being forced to assist as a nurse in the sterilization of Sinti-Roma. Chombart de Lauwe's military experience, his wife's trauma of deportation, and his Catholicism led him to favor a social model that would balance individual autonomy with collectivist solidarity. See Marie-José Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance* (Paris: Pop'com, 2002).

⁹⁹Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, *Des hommes et des villes* (Paris: Payot, 1965), 2.

¹⁰⁰Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, "Sciences humaines, planification et urbanisme," *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 16.4 (July-August 1961): 689-690.

¹⁰¹Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, "Scandale du logement et espoirs de l'urbanisme," *Esprit*, 10.11 (November 1953): 571-579.

earthly paradises, but he endorsed any attempt to think a better tomorrow as praiseworthy.

Chombart de Lauwe wrote:

In the United States one wants to have blacks and whites cohabitate while in Paris one wants to have workers and company executives live together. It all starts with the idea that the distances separating us must be reduced. There is in all this talk a manifest good will and a degree of idealism. Objective studies should not take it as their role to discourage such efforts but to pose true problems outside emotional ambiguity.¹⁰³

Social space prevented abstract man from entering into communion with his fellow abstract man. Rationalized habitation had the potential to offer men liberation—what Chombart de Lauwe defined as one’s freedom from material want—so as to allow the development of true, direct, and profound relations with other individuals. A radical altering of one’s social space did not automatically correspond with an increased potential to engage in communication outside one’s class or race. Indeed, Chombart de Lauwe found that cohabitation in buildings where heads-of-household worked in different professional categories did not immediately translate into unprecedented social interactions. Nonetheless, the *grands ensembles* represented a new civilization attempting to express itself whose potential remained unknown.

René Kaës, a doctoral student in psycho-sociology at the Centre d’ethnologie sociale (he later became a professor of psychoanalysis), published *Vivre dans les grands ensembles* (1963) in which he identified equipment problems inside the *grands ensembles* and argued that the model was full of possibilities.¹⁰⁴ According to Kaës, the *grands ensembles* had the potential to develop cultural, educational, and social infrastructures that would enable

¹⁰²Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, “La Libération des hommes par l’habitation,” in Paul Chombart de Lauwe, ed., *Famille et habitation: Sciences humaines et conceptions de l’habitation* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1959), 1-17.

¹⁰³Paul Chombart de Lauwe, “Evolution de l’habitation et le changement social un essai d’observation expérimentale,” in Paul Chombart de Lauwe, ed., *Famille et habitation: Un essai d’observation expérimentale* (Paris: C.N.R.S, 1967), 11-33.

¹⁰⁴René Kaës, *Vivre dans les grands ensembles* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrière, 1963), 14.

couples of all classes to obtain a new sense of security and harmony leading toward a more general social liberation.¹⁰⁵ Kaës defended the intentions behind the grands ensembles and gestured towards their future possibilities. He embraced a vision of mass housing that provided a benevolent public service as opposed to another form of consumption. The SCIC had the potential to extract housing from the “economic Malthusianism” of the free market and “murderous liberalism,” a task that Kaës understood would require a collective change in French mentalities about the meaning of home. Kaës therefore called for the French to stop conceptualizing their shelter in the same language they conceptualized an automobile: that of social status and the public manifestation of “success.”¹⁰⁶ The grands ensembles were a potential way to escape this logic. In comparison to the grands ensembles, Kaës theorized that psychological tensions were more elevated in homogeneous communities because a man was more likely to envy his neighbor’s goods if that neighbor’s social status made personal competition seem possible. In contrast, a man was less likely to be jealous of another’s goods if that person’s life was radically different from his own.

Sociologists Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madeleine Lemaire, however, later rejected the very idea that spatial proximity could somehow increase social relations between heads-of-household from diverse class and cultural backgrounds.¹⁰⁷ Relying on data collected by sociologist Paul Clerc in *Grands ensembles, banlieues nouvelles* (1967), the co-authors dismissed the perception that by bringing together managers, professionals, skilled workers, and employees—along with their “dependents”—in a dense community, their values and

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 34, 36.

¹⁰⁷Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madeline Lemaire, “Proximité spatiale et distance social: les grands ensembles et leur peuplement,” *Revue française de sociologie* 9 (1970): 3-33.

lifestyles would all converge in “a pseudo-Christian socialist utopian.”¹⁰⁸ Chamboredon and Lemaire thus argued that utopian-minded theorists such as Chombart de Lauwe and Kaës had proposed unrealistic ideas about how habitation could destroy class differences or universalize petty-bourgeois aspirations.¹⁰⁹ Chombart de Lauwe and Kaës overestimated spatial proximity’s potential to engender miracles.¹¹⁰ Social reality in the grands ensembles, the co-authors argued, prevented any real reconciliation between people from different backgrounds. The middle-class group increasingly saw its co-existence with “popular classes” in an unfavorable light. The co-authors contended that a couple’s opinion about the grand ensemble depended on their familial narrative or their housing trajectory. If the couple’s presence in the grand ensemble was transitory, they spoke of their community positively. If they lacked financial means to ever move to another situation, they spoke of their community negatively. A couple’s attitude towards a grand ensemble thus had come to depend on their ability to escape to elsewhere.¹¹¹

From Chamboredon’s and Lemaire’s perspective, the problem with the grands ensembles was the *copropriété* experiment, which they saw in data that showed 62% of middle-class *cadres* and 80% of *cadres supérieurs*/ liberal professions wanted to sell their grand ensemble apartments and acquire of a home, preferably single family, in a different

¹⁰⁸Clerc’s 1967 study revealed that the metropolitan Parisian grands ensembles were not working class, but were composed of heads-of-households with similar professions to those found in metropolitan communities of similar size; skilled workers—clerks, low-level employees, office workers—with two substantial differences. First, residents were younger and had more children and; second, mid-level employees, technicians, and professions were over-represented. Paul Clerc, *Grands ensembles, banlieues nouvelles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).

¹⁰⁹Chamboredon and Lemaire, “Proximité spatiale et distance social: les grands ensembles et leur peuplement,” 15.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 11.

community.¹¹² Better-off heads-of-household desired more flexible home production *within* homogeneous communities. The problem of the grands ensembles had little to do with apartment interiors or modernist urban aesthetics, but with the intolerable coexistence of social classes that did not naturally co-habitate.¹¹³ The middling classes in the grands ensembles, particularly those in *copropriété*, developed a sense of repulsion towards the fertility, credit practices, and poor taste of the popular classes living around them.¹¹⁴

To the French-educated Spaniard Manuel Castells, there was in fact only one thing in retrospect that unified all neighbors in Sarcelles regardless of their social class: their hatred of the SCIC.¹¹⁵ Castells went so far to hypothesize that the neighborliness marshaled to combat the SCIC—as a state agent operating in the interests of capitalism—in Sarcelles and other grands ensembles led to the prohibition of the housing model in 1973. The organization of residents from diverse social classes to claim a better quality of life in the grands ensembles ultimately led to the model’s abandonment. Castells saw in the Association Sarcelloise and Residents’ Council the first step towards an “urban trade-unionism of

¹¹²Ibid., 12; Clerc, *Grands ensembles, banlieues nouvelles*, 362.

¹¹³Chamboredon and Lemaire, “Proximité spatiale et distance social: les grands ensembles et leur peuplement,” 20.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 33.

¹¹⁵Mentored by Alain Touraine and exiled for sympathizing with his rebellious Nanterre students in 1968, Castells started his career by applying Marx to urban sociology with emphasis on urban protest movements as the place where classes conflicted with state capitalism. Through Castells’ ideological prism, all urban crises had roots in the means of production and class struggle against capitalism. Simultaneously, all urban interventions in the built environment—roads, housing, schools, hospitals—sought to regulate human life in the service of capitalism. Residential housing for the masses could only dominate the people who lived in such buildings because it served only the interest of the dominant classes. Housing integrated nuclear families into the capitalist system while regulating or suppressing contradictions within that system. The idea that participatory or democratic planning that involved citizens in urban transformations could change the social system anything was naïve. In fact, Castells argued, such processes merely incorporated dissenting voices into the capitalist system. The only way to oppose the spatial tyranny of capitalism was through the direct conflict of social movements. When people mobilized to change their communities, they were actually mobilizing to change the wider social order. See Manuel Castells, *Luttes urbaines et pouvoir politique* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975).

housing.” The SCIC had no ability to alter social practices, but people in the community confronted conditions that encouraged socialization. The goal of creating a fully functioning community served as a basis for neighborly interactions between heads-of-household. Those interactions were not the result of any specific spatial configuration or class configuration of the grands ensembles. In Sarcelles, residents gravitated towards one another out of hatred for the developer as a landlord and manager of every building. The one issue capable of bridging divides was their common enemy: a single landlord and manager, as opposed to the diverse constellation of Parisian landlords and caretakers. What frightened Gaullists, in Castells’ estimation, was the danger that collective mobilization on housing issues was changing the political attitudes of middle and lower-middle class households and the political allegiances of middle-class voters.¹¹⁶

Heterogeneous populations coming from different professional backgrounds were, in Castell’s estimation, on the cusp of forming a new collective residential consumer-orientated syndicalism. Such syndicalism was akin to labor unions formed in the work place, but capitalist leaders saw those groups as far more subversive because they drew executives, professionals, employees, and workers into collective actions that shifted political allegiances to the left. Sarcelles’ associations and residents’ councils acted as protean housing unions that made the grand ensemble model unprofitable by forcing the management to deliver a quality of housing and a level of services that could not be provided throughout the nation without major economic redistributions. Political representatives, Castell conceded, had unfortunately usurped the potentially radical work of these organizations before they had a chance to expand their purview from questions of rent and building maintenance to more

¹¹⁶Ibid., 84.

global questions of urbanism and quality of life, but the damage was already done because the authorities could already see the danger.

The SCIC was France's largest private-social sector developer during the *Trente Glorieuses*. A decade after its creation, the SCIC became the largest homebuilder, comparatively, in all of Western Europe. By the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*, the company was the largest single private property owner *in* the Hexagon. Social building companies and for-profit developers accused the developer of covertly attempting to monopolize the nation's housing market and, in the process, conflating social housing with market housing provision. In 1961, Gilbert Mathieu advocated the nationalization of the SCIC, which would have transformed the company into France's global residential housing purveyor.¹¹⁷ The daily *Démocratie 61* summarized best the case for nationalizing housing construction under the tutelage of the SCIC.¹¹⁸ As a nationalized corporation, the SCIC would combine features of the nationalized Renault and Électricité de France. Whereas Renault set comfort and affordability standards for the French automobile market, a nationalized SCIC would establish standards for the housing market. French Electric designed its nuclear plants, but relied on private sector contractors to realize them. In the same way, a nationalized SCIC would design communities while relying on private contractors to execute the plans.

In 1965, Mathieu condemned an emerging class of political elites who embraced a liberal dogma that said collective social and mixed housing developments along with private-public developers should be ended in favor of mortgages, home-savings plans, and private

¹¹⁷Gilbert Mathieu, "La Caisse des Dépôts pourrait devenir le secteur public témoin de la construction en copropriété," *Le Monde* 12 April 1961; Even *Le Figaro* considered the SCIC had the potential to dramatically encourage homeownership as a nationalized builder. "La Caisse des dépôts va mettre en route quelques programmes d'accession à la propriété," *Le Figaro* 13 April 1961.

¹¹⁸"La Caisse des Dépôts propose la nationalization de la construction," *Démocratie 61*, 13 April 1961.

companies.¹¹⁹ Mathieu asked why politicians found cash for highway construction and dumped billions of francs into the Indochinese and Algerian war and the *la force de frappe*, but refused to invest in a housing model that could improve an entire nation's quality of life.¹²⁰ He feared that France's elite looked too enviously at American middle-class lifestyles—a world organized around a liberal ideology about private housing and the family that heralded a dangerous future as homes became status symbols, classes became geographically isolated, and couples assumed onerous debts. He urged the French to municipalize land ownership and create a nationalized homebuilder from the SCIC as the prerequisites to chart a legitimate alternative housing system in comparison to the United States and the United Kingdom

Into the mid-1960s, the developer's supporters attributed a civilizing mission to the company, that is to say, they considered the developer an actor capable of binding communities together in a libidinal or creative-emotional way. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud dismissed as naive the maximum “love thy neighbor as thy neighbor loves thee,” as part of a civilizing process.¹²¹ Rationally, a neighbor was unworthy of love and even had a claim to hostility: human kind was neither gentle nor did it want to be loved. One's neighbor was a physical and psychological threat capable of causing humiliation or death. The only time aim-inhibited love worked was when a group had a convenient Other on which to manifest its aggressiveness. It was only in the presence of an Other than individuals integrated into a group. From a Freudian perspective, the SCIC's

¹¹⁹Gilbert Mathieu, *Peut-on loger les français?* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965), 55.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 31, 55.

¹²¹Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 64-74.

residential civilizing mission ran contrary to human nature because it stressed cooperation over competition.

Over the past forty years, the basic assumption of for-profit residential property developers suggested that capitalism's internal contradictions collided in unavoidable ways to form unevenly developed landscapes. Structurally, the dialectic inside capitalism between exclusion and expansion cannot be reconciled.¹²² In the neoliberal city and suburb, housing developers defended their interventions as beneficial to consumers (as opposed to citizens). The developer risks capital to offer targeted populations autonomy, freedom, and security, or so goes the marketing rhetoric.¹²³ Private developers promote themselves as more than purveyors of residential homes, but as authentic community builders. The private developer thus establishes community geographies of inclusion and exclusion without relying on any true political process.¹²⁴

The SCIC gestured towards a vision of a family-friendly society between socialism and liberalism. The developer engineered residential environments where solidarity was to trump individualism in an attempt to reconcile the dialectic inside capitalism between exclusion and expansion that produced uneven territorial development. The company's founder, Bloch-Lainé, embraced two seemingly contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, he had faith in a strong, interventionist technocratic apparatus engaged in modernization and

¹²²David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Neil Smith and David Harvey, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹²³See Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

¹²⁴Community as thought by for-profit developers operates as an economic consumer-orientated concept as opposed to a social or political concept: the right to a neighborhood is bought. In for-profit development, there is no economic incentive to compose socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods, in fact, such experiments are discouraged against since it is assumed they go against "natural" consumer desires to live in homogeneous communities.

rationalization while on the other hand he advocated for local democratic participation. His ideal community assumed every average man, as an employee, resident, and head-of-household, had the energy and cared enough to act as a corrective to bosses, property owners, politicians, experts, and the state.

CHAPTER IV

The Problem that Had a Name: The Misdiagnosis of a Homemaker Pathology in a Parisian Modernist Residential Community, 1960-1975

In the French 1950s, the modern homemaker stood neither in the kitchen of a ranch house nor on the balcony of a downtown apartment, but stared out her tenth-story window in Sarcelles, a suburban Parisian *grand ensemble* or modernist residential community. France's



10. Women and children at Sarcelles in the early 1960s.

Sarcelles was not unlike America's Levittowns: a lighthouse that guided the way to a better familial future. Young married couples of all classes and their children left overcrowded or dilapidated rental housing, furnished hotels, or intergenerational homes for

Sarcelles' affordable rental and owner-occupied two to five room apartments with all modern conveniences. By 1958, the women's magazine *Elle* proclaimed with confidence that Sarcelles "was where today's young couples want to live."¹ Journalists reported on married couples who "couldn't believe their luck" as they opened the door to their new home in Sarcelles at building x, stairway y, and apartment number z.² Some families stood flabbergasted, "*bouche bée*," as they inspected their spacious and well-lit homes. As one

¹Stanislas Fontaine, "Une Ville est née," *Elle* 25 August 1958, 36

²Joseph Pasteur, "Monde des mille et une fenêtres," *Paris-Soir* 2 February 1966.

homemaker put it, Sarcelles' apartments were "dreamlands" full of "utterly white, utterly clean" rooms with trash disposal units and collective heating.³ Young couples with children where enamored with Sarcelles' apartment buildings surrounded by green parks, playgrounds, and in near vicinity of a forest and a lake.

Social-Catholics, the strongest supports of residential developments like Sarcelles, hoped the housing model would encourage a child-friendly society, prevent urban sprawl, and liberate women from employment by the affordability of familial shelter. The *grands ensembles* therefore represented a radical rejection of interwar free market housing traditions that many argued had promoted an excessive individualism that contributed to France's wartime defeat. Administrators at the Société centrale immobilière de la caisse des dépôts et consignations [The Central Property Corporation of the Official Depository and Consignment Bank, SCIC], the largest residential property developer in France, and, comparatively, all Western Europe into the 1970s, presented Sarcelles as an alternative and more humane modernization pathway that placed habitat someplace between American consumerism and Soviet bureaucratization.

Social Catholics considered innovation in rationalized construction and domestic design as means to arrive at a future society that would encourage healthy lifestyles, but it was the SCIC's juxtaposition of different categories of social and market housing in radical proximity that would encourage social, religious, and racial peace. In 1962, Jean Marty, Sarcelles' first Catholic parish priest, expressed this aspiration best when he wrote that the *grands ensembles* had the potential to actualize Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one

³Joseph Pasteur, "Monde des mille et une fenêtres," *Paris-Soir* 2 February 1966.

in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Marty felt confident that the housing model could create a France wherein “manual workers, administrative executives, industrial executives, small-time employees, engineers, professors, technicians, people of all races and all skin colors” lived in close proximity and thereby they would cease to see one another as “the Other.”⁵ To Marty, Sarcelles heralded a more catholic—in the sense of universal—society.

Yet at the very time Marty heralded Sarcelles as a New Jerusalem many French critics saw it as a hell for homemakers who reportedly felt dehumanized inside its confines. Many analysts hypothesized that the violent break with traditional or “natural” habitation patterns rendered women powerless to control their actions and unable to live happy domestic lives in their apartments. By the mid-1960s, French society linked Sarcelles to a homemakers’ neuroses that evidenced women’s inability to successfully integrate themselves into the modern conditions of collective suburban life. In itself this particular suburban discourse was not unique. At the same time in North America and Great Britain, suburbia was widely purported to cause mental illness, particularly in homemakers.⁶ The French discourse differed, however, in creating the psychopathological neologism *sarcellite* that contributed to the suburban housing models prohibition in 1973. This homemaker neuroticism could be compared to Betty Friedan’s “problem without a name,” which was the brainwashing of educated women to accept the role of happy housewife, but *sarcellite*

⁴Jean Marty, “Une chance offerte à l’église: le cas de Sarcelles,” *Vers une nouvelle civilisation urbaine* (Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1962), 128.

⁵*Ibid.*, 122.

⁶F. Martin, J. Brotherston, and S. Chave, “Incidence of Neurosis in a New Housing Estate,” *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine* 11 (October 1957): 196-202; Richard E. Gordon and Katherine N. Gordon, “Psychiatric Problems of a Rapidly Growing Suburb,” *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 79 (May 1958): 543-548; Henry Wechsler, “Community Growth, Depressive Disorders and Suicide,” *American Journal of Sociology* 67 (July 1961): 9-16; Lord Taylor and Sidney Chave, *Mental Health and Environment* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964); Wyndham Thomas, “New Town Blues,” in *Planning 1964* (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1964), 184-189.

reportedly grew specifically from women's "natural" hostility to the spaces of modern collective living.⁷ Authoritarian architects, technocrats, and policymakers, the so-called "alienated who alienate," were therefore condemned for building communities whose core composites—concrete, uniform perspectives, standardized apartments—disrupted women's psychological balance.

The correlation between a form of housing and a homemaker illness distinguished the popular discourse on *sarcellite* from Betty Friedan's "the problem that had no name." Friedan described suburbia as the land of the philistine where middle-class ranch houses became domestic prisons for American women, but the built environment was not in itself the cause of chronic dissatisfaction. It was the lack of opportunity to use their education rather than the ranch house that drove women mad. Friedan solved the problem by urging women to find professional jobs so as to lead full lives in law, medicine, or another vocation.⁸ Friedan's solution therefore lacked a spatial fix. In France, Friedan's message spoke most strongly to the first generation of urban Frenchwomen who graduated from universities only to abandon their careers for marriage and maternity. The French translator of *The Feminine Mystique*, Yvette Roudy, saw the women Friedan spoke about in her Parisian neighbor who had left her law studies to raise children. Roudy never considered the petty-bourgeois *grand ensemble* homemaker a victim of an unidentifiable malaise.⁹ To Friedan and Roudy, as well as Simon de Beauvoir, education, professionalization, and labor force participation were the privileged means to escape alienation and obtain realization. In contrast, the popular discourse on *sarcellite* blamed the specific contours of a built

⁷Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); The French translation appeared in 1964. Betty Friedan, *La femme mystifiée* trans. Yvette Roudy (Genève: Gonthier, 1964).

⁸Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 344; 360.

⁹Yvette Roudy, *A cause d'elle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983), 76.

environment for the homemakers' neuroses. This spatial diagnosis suggested that the transition to a traditional urban setting or a single-family home could correct a woman's dissatisfaction. Sarcelles' actual female residents—almost all married with children—articulated practical spatial and time concerns related to day care and transportation, but only on one notable occasion did a woman publicly condemn the design of the modernist community itself.

The term *sarcellite* emerged as a psychological discourse used by the right and left to denigrate collective, social, and mixed market housing. The discourse never sought to spatially reconcile women's labor market participation with maternity. *Sarcellite* largely suppressed female resident's repeated claims that their frustrations emanated from specific social, infrastructure, and labor problems such as childcare, transportation, and employment hours instead of their housing. The entire discourse of *sarcellite* was indubitably one of misdiagnose. While important amenities, including the telephone and heating system failed early on and once resulted in a fatality, Sarcelles' female residents also considered their housing favorably in comparison to traditional urban and suburban environments.¹⁰ Gendered spatial and labor inequalities as well as the reconciliation of motherhood with salaried employment were the true problems for women in Sarcelles and the *grands ensembles*.

France's New Gendered Spatial Segregation

Sarcelles' homemakers who left salaried employment for maternity or because of transportation problems faced a degree of gendered segregation in suburban high-rise communities that did not exist in traditional urban environments. Each weekday morning, Sarcelles' male population departed *en masse* for daily employment. During working hours,

¹⁰“Allô! Sarcelles?,” *Paris-Soir* 9 January 1964 ; Jean Laborde, “A Sarcelles, cité pilote...,” *L'Aurore* 26 June 1964; “Angoisse et colère à Sarcelles,” *Le Parisien Libéré* 29 April 1965.

Sarcelles became a suburban island populated by women and children. France's postwar emphasis on housing young married couples and their children in suburban developments resulted in communities that lacked potential caregivers: the retired and the elderly. Frenchwomen did not move to Sarcelles or other modernist suburbs out of a deep psychological desire to live the media image of a happy homemaker. Sarcelles "emancipated" women from part-time or salaried labor because of its distance from employment centers, the absence of childcare support, and the inability/unwillingness of couples to purchase a second automobile. At the same time, many women embraced the affordability of their rental or owned homes and the idea of raising children in the countryside. The daily spatial segregation that occurred during working days when women became isolated with their children in the grands ensembles did not by itself elicit negative reaction. Mothers displayed contentment with their well-equipped apartments and the chance to raise children in isolated park-like communities. As a Sarcelles resident who arrived as a child in 1959 recalled:

It was an amazing place for children. You could play, stay outside, go to school without ever seeing a car. They had all kinds of games for the children: slides, a merry-go-round, monkey bars, stuff like that. It was wonderful. Mother wasn't working, so she spent all her time with us. Taking turns, one mother would baby-sit all the children on a floor while the others went to Paris to shop, went for a walk, or to visit her family. Back then, at that time, few mothers worked. They were always at home. It was, you see, life in the countryside right near the city.¹¹

The modernist dream of little children running in the shadow of towers surrounded by countryside became a reality for many children who developed under the watchful eyes of thousands of mothers.

Yet the spatial organization of this new suburbia often increased a woman's economic dependence on a male breadwinner as it produced a sense of alienation among homemakers

¹¹ Archives Départementales du Val d'Oise, unpublished interview, "Collecte de mémoire," *Atelier de Restitution du Patrimoine et de l'Ethnologie du Val d'Oise*, 1999.

who felt mentally unfulfilled by domestic labor and motherhood. The conjunction of housing and family policy placed women in the role of domestic economists who depended on single-salaries at the very moment when women needed larger household budgets. Women thus tried to combine care with knowledge based duties as they stretched household finances to purchase discretionary items for their sparsely furnished apartments in a new burgeoning consumer culture. Frenchwoman who attempted to balance work with familial care duties, women's "double burden," confronted spatial and temporal difficulties such as rigid work hours, lengthy commutes, and inflexible childcare arrangements. In contrast, men continued to participate in the labor market when they moved to modernist suburbia with their wives and/or children. As fathers, they were freed from home, childcare, and domestic work, but they could help with secondary childcare activities (play), engage in personal leisure activities, and participate in associations. Frenchmen rarely faced the same problems as they commuted between work and home.

The development of the *grands ensembles* was a male-dominated activity. SCIC architects were almost all men. Indeed, one finds but a single female architect—Béatrice Levard—among the over four hundred people who designed residential buildings for France's preeminent housing developer between 1954 and 1968.¹² Architects and technocrats never expressed a conscious desire to return young married women to homemaking or to implement a traditionalist-patriarchal domestic ideology that would limit women's roles to motherhood. Yet these men designed a separation of sexual spheres because they unselfconsciously assumed that a "better" future would enable men to commute to work while their wives tended to domestic duties and childcare in the countryside. Architects who

¹²*Visages de la SCIC: soleil, espace, verdure* (Paris: Le Service Information et Relations publiques du groupe CDC et Filiales, 1968?), 31-3.

designed the suburban communities viewed the gendered division of labor and universal male employment as a permanent feature of modern French society, even though some political leaders such as Pierre Mendès-France argued that housing policies should encourage women to enter a French workforce that desperately needed more skilled labor.¹³ The housing developer nevertheless created places that directly impeded women's active labor market participation.

Architect Jacques Henri-Labourdette, project-chief of Sarcelles between 1955 and 1970, exemplified the designers' assumptions about the permanence of a gendered division of labor in French society. Born to a wealthy Parisian bourgeois family (his father owned a luxury car plant and the composer Francis Poulenc played piano at family dinners), Henri-Labourdette studied at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts under Charles Lemaresquier. It was Eugène Beaudouin's interwar *cit  de la Muette* in Drancy, the project that had introduced fourteen story suburban tower blocks to France, which first sparked Henri-Labourdette's architectural imagination. The writings of Le Corbusier would further "seduce" the young Henri-Labourdette toward the dream of an architectural future in which "twenty-story high-rise glass towers reflected clouds at the base of which played little children on the grass."¹⁴

As chief-architect at Sarcelles, Henri-Labourdette designed residential buildings and supporting infrastructures that would enable men to leave the community for weekly employment via public or private transit while women remained at home to care for children. He publicly touted Sarcelles as the triumph of the most modern techniques in housing

¹³Robert Blanchard, "La bataille du salaire unique continue," *Pour la Vie: repopulation, hygi ne et morale sociales* June 1955.

¹⁴Jacques Henri-Labourdette, *Une vie, une oeuvre* (Nice:  ditions Gilletta, 2002), 95-96.

construction and rational planning.¹⁵ Yet the architect drew on Le Corbusier's four missions for architecture in human life—*habiter, travailler, se recréer, and circuler*—within a limited perspective that focused on the everyday life of employed men (as Le Corbusier intended). Henri-Labourdette was above all else concerned with the rationalization of men's daily life trajectories, a theme that he examined in conference paper that reflected on life in the next century. In "How will we live in the year 2000?" (1966), he said

In thirty-five years, liberated from energy transportation in cables and tubes, man will choose the most harmonious sites to set up a home. His means of transport from air cushion propelled car to the private helicopter, will permit him to free himself also from existing circulation routes...It is not impossible to imagine that man will live for four days in an apartment owned by his employer, and, during three days, returns to his family and home.¹⁶

Men should move between departmentalized realms (work and home), whereas women and children should remain sedentary within the lodging and the immediate "green" community. Henri-Labourdette was more interested in separating men's place of employment from their domestic lives than in lifting homemakers into modernity by equipping their domestic spaces with time-saving technology. Sarcelles served as a suburban island that could offer men refuge after a long day's work and thereby encourage, in Henri-Labourdette's own words, "a lifestyle evolution in men."¹⁷

The novelist Christiane Rochefort was the first to present a feminist interpretation of this male-designed housing system to the French public. To Rochefort, Sarcelles was the ultimate expression of a pronatalist desire to isolate women in towers so as to imprison them as reproducers. As she portrayed the pattern in her best-selling novel *Les Petits enfants du*

¹⁵"La ville nouvelles de Sarcelles," *Cahier du centre scientifique et technique du bâtiment* 47 (1960): 377-384.

¹⁶Jacques Henri-Labourdette, "Comment vivrons nous en l'an 2000?," *Les conférences des Cénacle*, 18 January 1966.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

siècle (1961), every apartment was to serve as a baby factory.¹⁸ Modernist suburban housing, with Sarcelles as her example, perpetuated patriarchy by compelling women to live in an artificial realm of consumerism that was to give meaning to the lives of homemakers. The very design of the communities, windowed building facade facing windowed facade, encouraged women to police themselves because each homemaker wanted to simulate the *bonheurs* of her neighbor. Lacking distractions or contact with the outside world, homemakers sat in a trance before televisions that flooded their minds with images of happy consumption.

To obtain those much desired consumer goods, homemakers had more and more children to profit from need-blind family welfare allocations. The intersection of housing and family policy thus served the interests of the consumer industry and the military by insuring a large youth population that could consume more goods before it went off to die in future European wars. Rochefort's *Les petits enfants du siècle* gave fictional expression to a kind of Marxist social reproduction theory, similar to certain concepts Henri Lefebvre later articulated, but her feminism carried the critique from class relations to domestic life. For Rochefort, the *grands ensembles* tricked women into complicity with a system of oppression by spatially inscribing their inequality into a housing system. She condemned a "social protection" system that left women without choices and never really protected them. French housing policy therefore reinforced gender roles by essentially telling young women that their financial security depended on birthing as many children as possible in a well-equipped tower apartment. Rather than leading to women's emancipation, the rationalizing policies of the modern state concealed structural violence against the individual. Rochefort wanted women to be autonomous persons who could pursue their own individual projects and free

¹⁸Christiane Rochefort, *Les petits enfants du siècle* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

movement through space. The modern housing system and material rewards for fertility, however, imprisoned women in places such as the *grands ensembles*.¹⁹

Les petits enfants du siècle opens with a young girl named Josyane experiencing the solitude and misery of a large working-class Parisian family. Joysane quickly learns to rely on her adolescent sexuality to obtain material goods, an emotion-free activity that leads her to see her first grand ensemble, Sarcelles. After having sex with a boy, she convinces him to lend her his moped. She soon has sex with four other boys in one night and discovers that she can borrow any boy's moped for the entire day. Setting out one day on a borrowed scooter, she goes to search for an Italian construction worker who unlike her other sexual partners had performed *cunnilingus* on her. Joysane heads for Sarcelles after hearing that Italians worked on the site, and she recounts her first impressions as she scoots into the grand ensemble:

One arrives at Sarcelles by a bridge, and then, all of a sudden, just there, one sees everything. Oh là!...That was the city, the true city of the future! For kilometers and kilometers and kilometers, buildings buildings buildings. Identical. Aligned. White. Still more buildings. Buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings. Buildings. Buildings. And sky; immensity. Sun. Sun fills the buildings, passing through the middle, escaping on the other side. Enormous green spaces, clean, *superbes*, rugs, on which is written Keep Off and Respect the Grass and the Trees...the people here are without question in evolution like the architecture.²⁰

Josyane is amazed. She concludes that the inhabitants are probably with sin because one policed the other. Like the surveillance of a panopticon, everything was fully visible and transparent. The architecture allowed the people in every individual apartment to observe the people around them. Husbands traveled to work, women cleaned homes, and they dined in the evening before the television in immaculate apartments.

¹⁹Rocheport's critique anticipated a powerful generational critique of state bureaucracies that would fully manifest itself during the student revolt of May 1968.

²⁰Ibid., 280.

Joysane stays until after dusk to stare at the buildings. At night, she looks over the grand ensemble in awe:

the windows are alight and behind them there is nothing but happy families, happy families, happy families, happy families. Looking in, one can see the light bulbs, behind the windows, happiness marches by, all the same like twins, or a nightmare. The happy souls on the west side can see the happy souls on the east side, as if they were looking into a mirror...at dusk, instead of howling coyotes, speakers [on the television] tell us how to have white teeth and shiny hair, how to all be beautiful, clean, and more importantly, happy.²¹

Rocheport's critique of the architectural structure was also critique of materialism and the capitalist state's policing power over everyday life. Sexuality, like maternity, played a paradoxical role in the grands ensembles, offering women modern shelter, but at the price of pregnancy. Joysane's tale ends tragically after a promising twenty-two year old television repairman impregnates her. Emotionally overwhelmed by his positive reception to the news, she agrees to marry him. Luckily, he is ready to submit his dossier for social housing, and when he asks about her preferences she recommends Sarcelles (Rocheport was unaware that Sarcelles contained no public-social housing). As Rocheport portrays it, Joysane's choice is tragic because she enters into a form of housing that limits her to biological and consumerist roles while preserving a gendered spatial division of labor. Her sexual license, so often associated with liberation, leads to her imprisonment as a homemaker in a tower. In Sarcelles, as Rocheport's described it, the chimera of happiness concealed a pronatalist and patriarchal agenda that separated women from the real world and stored them in consumerist simulacrum.

Making the Homemaker Happy

In popular culture, *sarcellite* became the chief symptom of the *grands ensembles*' incompatibility with women's "traditional" desires for rootedness and community. An unidentified Sarcelles homemaker first disseminated the word *sarcellite* when she reported to

²¹Ibid., 253.

Europe 1 radio that she had suffered from boredom-induced nervous depression ever since her arrival in the grand ensemble. While the medical profession quickly dismissed her term as “a witticism,” they did not deny it was a creative description for “nervous troubles akin to *neurasthénie* that struck a number of women recently installed in their new life and who have yet to succeed in adapting themselves to collective living.”²² The media discourse eventually led Louis Le Guillant, an influential academic psychiatrist, to ask if perhaps the grands ensembles were indeed pathological. His preliminary research found the answer was “*non*” and he abandoned the topic.²³ The question of women’s adaptation to the grands ensembles nonetheless became a subject of intense medical, social scientific, and popular debate partly in response to much anecdotal evidence of boredom, chronic fatigue, and nervous depression among homemakers. Why were homemakers unable to adapt to their habitation? Why did they descend into psychosis? Two possible solutions emerged as people responded to these questions and tried to solve the “depression crisis” that Sarcelles, as representative of all grands ensembles, apparently produced. One proposal held that women simply had to be assisted as they adapted to new housing conditions, whereas the other proposal grew from the assumption that women’s neuroses in the grands ensembles reflected the unresolvable pathological nature of modern residential living.

Alain de Sedouy, writing as an editorialist at the populist newspaper *Paris Presse-l’Intransigeant*, offered an example of the first paradigm. Sedouy traced *sarcellite* to excessive leisure time, which he sensed was the unintended consequence of well-equipped

²²“La ‘sarcellite’,” *L’Echo Régional* 22 March 1962.

²³Louis Le Guillant, “La caractère pathogène des grands ensembles,” *Les Cahiers de l’institut de la vie* 3 (January 1965): 53

housing and timesaving devices.²⁴ He interviewed a Sarcelles' resident who reported that when homemakers had finished cleaning and had sent their children to school "they turned around and around in their super clean [*ultra-propre*] apartment waiting for the eight o'clock train that brings their husbands return." Freed from stoking fires and collecting water, homemakers had enough free time to drive themselves insane. Sedouy felt a cure could be found, however, if managerial, municipal, and religious authorities organized daily collective distractions for housewives.

In a 1965 article for *L'Aurore*, René Miquel also agreed that the key to solving the homemaker malaise was distraction. Miquel firmly held that the problem was not an "imaginary sickness," but a reality—"a depressive state" unique to housewives with excessive leisure time in the grands ensembles. He welcomed a proposed plan to construct a "Champs-Elysées de Sarcelles." As he explained:

In the afternoons when the children are in school, the windows spotless, and they have nothing else to do, they [housewives] get bored. Radio, television, newspapers or romance novels don't suffice to alleviate the heavy weight on their soul. At this moment, their spirits look to fly to the *grands magasins* on the boulevard Haussmann or the rue de Rivoli, towards the boutiques of the Champs-Elysées.²⁵

"Shopping" and "window-watching" for 200,000 people (the population was approximately 50,000 at the time, but many journalists assumed that Sarcelles would continue to bloom) could flourish if a new Printemps department store could open in Sarcelles. Indeed, as Miquel explained it, a large department store should finally bring to Sarcelles "the end of *sarcellite*."

²⁴Alain de Sedouy, "Il faut arracher à l'ennui les femmes des cités dortoirs," *Paris Presse-l'intransigeant* 16 February 1963.

²⁵René Miquel, "Contre la Sarcellite, Sarcelles construit les Champs-Elysées," *L'Aurore* 28 April 1965.

Sarcelles' developer also took the mediatized question of *sarcellite* seriously. Administrators believed that social work professionals present within every *grand ensemble* would contribute to the happiness of homemakers. After all, *sarcellite* was bad publicity. Administrators feared that talk of *sarcellite* might discourage better-off families from purchasing apartments in the grands ensembles. The SCIC's president, the engineer Léon-Paul Leroy, lamented at a 1978 administrative council meeting that it was the myth of *sarcellite* that gave the grands ensembles "a poor image" among so many French who had never stepped foot inside one.²⁶ In retrospect, Leroy contextualized *sarcellite* as part of a broader campaign to discredit a housing model that had the potential to create more egalitarian cities. Instead of engaging the *sarcellite* as a myth in the media during the 1960s, the developer hired an army of social assistants, specialized educators, and socio-cultural coordinators to enhance homemakers' morale so as to eradicate any public discussion of depression.

The SCIC therefore organized a private social service apparatus inside all its residential communities, thereby expressing strong faith in the social workers' ability to adapt women to their grand ensemble. In the United States, social workers were more likely to serve marginalized and at-risk groups or the poor. The social workers inside the French grands ensembles, by contrast, resembled contemporary residential life counselors on American college campuses who create special programs, encourage group interaction, and assist the student's transition to college life. The social workers in the grands ensembles managed administrative information offices, adult education centers, domestic science centers, and cultural centers. Their task was to better educate women on the home front and

²⁶Archives de la Caisse des dépôts et consignations (hereafter ACDC), 201-3, "Conseil d'Administration du 27 avril 1977, Procès-Verbal", 83.

to help organize and enlighten daily lives. They taught practical cooking courses as well as lessons in judo and dance, ostensibly to strengthen solidarity among women. The SCIC, in other words, sought to insure that homemakers discovered forms of self-realization that they could not find in motherhood, domestic care, or cleaning an apartment so as to ward off *sarcellite*.

The second paradigm for addressing women's psychological distress held that the news of women's neuroses reflected modern tendencies to pervert "natural" living situations. Dr. Richard-Henri Hazemann, a medical doctor and hygienist, was among the first to argue that the living conditions in the grands ensembles could cause psychosomatic difficulties among their female residents.²⁷ Hazemann predicted that the health problems women had confronted in poorly equipped rented rooms would be supplanted by the mental health problems they confronted in well-equipped suburban apartments. Architects knew how to address the physiological threats to good health, but they lacked a scientific understanding of female biology and psychology. His critique of the grands ensembles thus became a doctor's crusade against architects who produced pathological domestic spaces for women.²⁸ In a speech entitled "The Health of the Spirit and the Heart: Psycho-sociological aspects of Habitation and Urbanism" (1961), Hazemann addressed housing's physical, psycho-sensorial, and psychosocial impact on women.²⁹ A man, Hazemann observed, passed only a third of his day in his home, whereas his wife and infants spent their entire day in and around

²⁷"Témoignage du Dr. R. H. Hazemann (Paris) Professeur a l'institut d'Urbanisme de l'université de paris, inspecteur général de la sante et de la population, L'humanisation des grands ensembles facteur de santé," *L'habitation* 71 (February 1959): 19.

²⁸R. H. Hazemann, "un medecin contres les architects," *Santé du monde* December 1962, 2-9; R. H. Hazemann, "Les maladies des grands ensembles," *L'habitation* 72 (April 1959).

²⁹R. H. Hazemann, "La santé de l'esprit et du Coeur: aspects psycho-sociologiques de l'habitation et de l'urbanisme," *Cités & Techniques* 4 (January-February 1962): 10-29.

the apartment. A woman's ability to feel comfortable within her environment was therefore essential for her mental health. According to Hazemann, the population density and aesthetics of the grand ensemble aggravated the psychological tensions that produced neurotic diseases in homemakers.³⁰

Marc Bernard, a socialist journalist, penned his description of *sarcellite* in *Sarcellopolis* (1964), a series of essays composed while he lived in one of Sarcelles' model apartments. In Bernard's description of *sarcellite*, space conditioned mental health:

Little-by-little these women fall into a kind of stupor which has been described to me in this fashion: the subject travels through the streets of Sarcelles. Unable to find peace in walking, her anxiety rises. She begins to feel she is living in a dead city, placed in a space without any real location, almost the same as purgatory. The people she meets are nothing but shadows, ghosts. She walks from one street to the other, believing she is always in the same place, that to her left and right buildings are always the same. She starts to run, impatient to return to her apartment, however, she mistakes her building, incapable of distinguishing her tower from the others...Once at home her sickness grows; she looks out windows and sees nothing...She feels cut off from the entire world, as if somebody placed her in an incubator like a newborn who came into being before term. Everything seems too clean, too disinfected, too silent, too empty; she needs sound, the crowd moving around her...Her solitude suffocates her...Her housing is an utter horror to her...³¹

Bernard's infamous description of *sarcellite*, which he never observed firsthand, attested to the direct correlation between an architectural aesthetics and a homemaker's psychological breakdown.³² The media frequently referenced his narrative of *sarcellite*, but few mentioned that Bernard denied housing itself caused depression in *Sarcellopolis*. Instead, he argued that Sarcelles' homemakers confronted problems common to all women that could be remedied by the legalization of abortion and contraception.

An article in *La Semaine thérapeutique* offered a more detailed description of *sarcellite*'s symptoms in a clinical language of psychiatric authority. Although the author theorized that the grands ensembles could pose an epidemiological danger because large

³⁰Ibid., 26

³¹Ibid., 48-49.

³²Ibid., 159-164.

population concentrations facilitated the spread of infectious diseases, the main problem his profession confronted was pathological female responses to modern sedentary lifestyles.³³

The homemaker pathology, *sarcellite*, manifested itself in the following symptoms:

...menstrual irregularities, gastrointestinal hypermotility, false cardiac-arrest, tachycardia, extrasystoles, anxiety, in rare occasions moderate arterial hypertension. The clinician always discovers psychological instability at the heart of these problems; sometimes, it is the psychological aspect that dominates the clinical picture, neurotonic irritability that makes, from their own admission, these illnesses “impossible.”³⁴

The author reported that in psychotherapy sessions, psychotic women in the *grands ensembles* reported an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia aggravated by the presence of construction workers, the placement of supermarkets, schools, cinemas, and hairdressers at the foot of buildings, and the constant sounds of television, radio, and crying children. Paradoxically, women felt isolated within the collective community. The author thus feared that the resolution to “the pathology of the *grands ensembles*” was largely outside the purview of psychiatric medicine. Doctors could only help the psychotic women in the *grands ensembles* by prescribing them tranquilizers.

Even a major labor syndicate whose adherents benefited from affordable *grand ensemble* apartments promoted the assumption that *sarcellite* was a symptom of women’s incompatibility with the *grands ensembles*. In 1964, the trade-union newsletter *Force ouvrière* investigated three Parisian *grands ensembles* to offer a cure to *sarcellite*.³⁵ *Force ouvrière* did not find the high-rise communities lacked “rationality, stores, sidewalks, distractions, streets, homes,” but its reporter suggested that designers had left women no

³³F. Chamard, “La Pathologie des grands ensembles,” *La Semaine thérapeutique* 40.4 (1964): 271.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵“Conquête ou esclavage? Les Grands Ensembles,” *Force Ouvrière Informations* 139 (May 1964): 335-346.

place “for dreaming and fantasy...everything is a little too cold, a little too rigid.”³⁶ Like other observers, the *Force ouvrière* writer attributed the boredom to modern conveniences: women who once spent entire days washing now had a disorientating amount of leisure time. The only way to combat “the high-rise sickness, *sarcellite*,” however, was for women to leave the communities. Homemakers would only be happy until their innate desire for a single-family home was satisfied.³⁷

The Reality of Adaptation

Women whose husbands worked as mid-level salaried employees benefited disproportionately from tax breaks and generous social benefits [*allocation de la mère au foyer*, *allocation logement*, and *allocation enfant*] that facilitated an easy move into a grands ensembles, including the acquisition of furniture and household devices on credit. There were, however, three groups of women who confronted psychological problems as they adapted to life in the grands ensembles: first, women forced out of employment due to transportation or childcare restraints, second, women who rapidly transitioned from traditional familial support systems to the isolated nuclear family; and, last, women whose families had limited financial means and no previous exposure to credit institutions.

In the first case, a woman’s arrival in a grand ensemble inaugurated a period of increased financial dependence on her husband, a devaluation of her now unremunerated daily activity and a more limited say in financial decisions. In *Sarcelles ou le béton apprivoisé* (1979), Henry Canacos, the communist mayor of a united left municipal government from 1965 to 1983, gave numerous anecdotal examples of married women eager to return to employment after childbirth to supplement household income. They were,

³⁶Ibid., 337.

³⁷Ibid., 339.

however, largely unable to do so because of space/time complications and a non-existent childcare system inside the grand ensemble.³⁸ In 1957, a woman who had just had a daughter and whose husband was employed as a salaried, skilled worker contacted a social assistance officer to find out where Sarcelles' *crèche*—a staple of French childrearing—was located. She wanted to return to part-time employment, but she was informed that the *crèche* would be eventually open in seven years. Needless-to-say, by that time her daughter would be in school.³⁹ Huguette Debaisieux, a journalist and romance novelist, interviewed women in Sarcelles for a 1961 *Le Figaro* article entitled “How are Parisian women living in the grands ensembles?”⁴⁰ While most women reported a sense of euphoria when they first arrived in their apartments, Debaisieux heard a single reoccurring complaint: the lack of *crèches*. Not only did the women demand *crèches* to engage in part-time employment, they also wanted the government to subsidize evening babysitters so they could go the cinema with their husbands. The *grand ensemble* opened its first *crèche* on 27 April 1976. The state's repeated refusal to contribute to its construction due to budgetary restraints and perhaps political opposition delayed the construction project for three decades.⁴¹ A town with on average three thousand children under the age of three and eight hundred yearly births had no *crèche*—no affordable childcare—for over two decades because the state was unwilling to contribute financially to its construction.

Long before it had a municipal *crèche*, Sarcelles' grand ensemble did have a fully-funded and well-equipped Maternal and Newborn Care Center, also a staple of French

³⁸Henry Canacos, *Sarcelles, Ou Le Béton Apprivoisé* (Paris: Ed. Sociales, 1979).

³⁹*Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁴⁰Huguette Debaisieux, “Comment vivent les femmes dans les grands ensembles de la région parisienne,” *Le Figaro* 12 May 1961.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 177

childrearing. The center was the only state-subsidized infrastructure inside the *grand ensemble* aside from primary, secondary, and trade schools. Opened in October 1964, the center replaced a provisional office that had been situated in an apartment since the first residents arrived in the grand ensemble.⁴² The center had a lactation consultant on duty for two hours Tuesday to Friday and medical staff available during business hours every week for infant and toddler related questions. Twice a week, a pediatrician provided free consultations for children and a doctor was also on site once a week for free vaccinations. In the grand ensemble, funds may not have been available for childcare, but there was support for prenatal and children's health care. If state priorities are best expressed in what is paid for and what is not, the French state showed the greatest concern for helping mothers to have healthy children and for preventing those same women from leaving their children's side.

The second group of women who confronted specific difficulties in the *grands ensembles* consisted of those who were unfamiliar with the social structure of the isolated nuclear family. For some, the move to a grand ensemble broke down the familial care network that existed in intergenerational households or neighborhoods. The conservative Gérard Marin, a *Le Figaro* journalist, reported that the stunning shock of suburban life in a "housing machine" [*machine à loger*, i.e. the grand ensemble] destabilized women who had spent their entire lives in "traditional living environments in cities and villages."⁴³ Lacking reciprocal familial and solidarity networks, the grands ensembles gave these women a sense of anonymity and isolation. This group of Frenchwomen were not dissimilar to the Algerian

⁴²Archives municipal de Sarcelles, "Centre de protection maternelle et infantile du grand ensemble," *Bulletin Officiel municipal de Sarcelles* October 1964, 8.

⁴³Gérard Marin, "Vivre dans les cités nouvelles," *Le Figaro* 11 February 1963.

women who Pierre Bourdieu documented as they transitioned from traditional familial homes to residential communities organized around the nuclear family during the early-1960s.⁴⁴

The third group of unhappy women, which overlapped in many cases with the preceding two, seemed to feel the highest level of anxiety. Mothers who depended on the limited income of husbands employed as unskilled workers or low-level office employees developed a new awareness of their severe budgetary constraints when they moved to a *grand ensemble*.⁴⁵ Unlike urban or older suburban rentals which came furnished and even contained cooking materials, families in the grands ensembles were responsible for equipping their apartments with all goods. Sarcelles' modern apartments awakened consumer aspirations that financial constraints soon locked; in short, a homemaker felt often incapable of taking full possession of her home. Women in this situation had to learn the new rules of a consumer credit economy through trial and error. It fell upon the homemaker to educate herself to purchase the appliances synonymous with modern convenience and leisure. At the same time, she had to adapt to the supermarket and its fixed prices for food, which differed from the public markets where price negotiations continued to reign.⁴⁶

It would be wrong, however, to attribute specific gender problems to the difficult transition from a more traditional economic culture to a system based on credit and standardization. Both men and women confronted difficulties as they learned how to navigate a consumer culture. In almost all cases, a couple's arrival in Sarcelles taxed household

⁴⁴Pierre Bourdieu, *Algérie 60 structures économiques et structures temporelles* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977).

⁴⁵Sarcelles' apartments differed from *habitation à loyer modéré* in that they were not subject to rent control.

⁴⁶"Enquête effectuée par L'association sarcelloise des habitants du bois de Lochères (association de locataires du Grand Ensemble)," December 1961 in Jean Duquèsne, *Vivre à Sarcelles? Le grand ensemble et ses problèmes* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1965), 271-283.

budgets because rent and food prices were higher than in traditional urban settings. For the average family living on the salary of a skilled worker or office employee, the household's financial stability remained tenuous at best. In the long term, the household salary of the single breadwinner proved insufficient for couples to buy the consumer goods they needed for their new apartments; venetian blinds, furniture, a television, a refrigerator, an automobile, a washing machine, children's clothing and toys. They had to rely on installment credit, which quickly stretched the monthly salary beyond its limits. If the devil was wandering around Sarcelles, he apparently disguised himself as a door-to-door salesman.

Demystifying the Myth

Michèle Huguet, a sociologist working out of Chombart de Lauwe's Centre d'ethnologie sociale, rejecting the view that modernist housing caused a homemaker neurosis. Huguet argued that society had to distinguish between two social modern phenomena: the changing roles of women and habitation. Although these two issues overlapped, Huguet claimed that critical debate had been replaced by polemical arguments that wrongly linked a kind of habitation to the mythical presence of suicidal homemakers. She concluded that the discourse of *sarcellite* was simply a medicalized discourse to criticize the grands ensembles rather than an accurate account of reflection of women's social realities. Huguet condemned the French press for simplifying the difficulties confronting Frenchwomen in the grands ensembles.⁴⁷ The press, Huguet claimed, distorted facts so as to attribute women's nervous depressions and suicides to their presence in a grand ensemble.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Michèle Huguet, "Les femmes dans les grands ensembles: Approche psychologique de cas d'agrément et d'intolérance" *Revue française de sociologie* 6 (1965): 215-227.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 215.

The social reality of the grands ensembles had been made subservient to distorted images or myths.⁴⁹

Huguet returned to the grands ensembles to examine social centers in order to determine whether the more systematic organization of so-called “feminine activities” offered a solution to women’s boredom.⁵⁰ Recall that the SCIC had created these centers as a self-conscious effort to prevent the homemakers’ descent into psychosis. Huguet again rejected the argument that the grands ensembles somehow radically transformed women’s lives or required the engineering of new lifestyles for their female residents. The grands ensembles existed within a society whose assumptions about women’s roles shaped the ways these social centers defined “feminine” activities as housework and family life.⁵¹ She concluded that social workers viewed femininity somewhat anachronistically, but the anachronisms did not come from the grands ensembles.⁵²

She contrasted these attempts to alleviate women’s boredom with Betty Friedan’s attempts to solve the “*indéfinissable malaise*” plaguing American suburban homemakers.⁵³ Rather than helping women to enter the workforce, French suburban social interventions were predicated on the belief that women’s boredom resulted from their incomplete preparation to become “*maîtresse de maison*,” to assume their “*vocation maternelle*” or to

⁴⁹Ibid., 216.

⁵⁰Michele Huguet, “La vie culturelle des femmes dans les nouvelles extensions urbaines,” in Paul-Henry Combart de Lauwe, Marie-Jose Chomart de Lauwe, Suzanne Mollo, Michel Huguet, Rene Kaes, Janine Larrue, Christine Thomas, *Images de la culture* (Paris: Editions Ouvrières, 1966), 65-80.

⁵¹Ibid., 78.

⁵²Ibid., 79-80.

⁵³Ibid., 66.

organize distractions outside housework.⁵⁴ The classes offered at socio-cultural centers tended to be identical to the actual work of a “*mère de famille*” on a daily basis: cooking and sewing.⁵⁵ Such free courses were notoriously under-attended, despite the best efforts of social workers. Huguet argued that these activities failed to attract women because they did not respond to the real aspirations of modern homemakers. What the homemaker truly wanted, after all, was to leave her apartment in order to engage in an activity that would differ from the work she did in her home. Huguet’s study found that homemakers actually wanted activities that “permitted them to surpass their condition of housewife [*femme à la maison*].”⁵⁶

Huguet’s research culminated in *Les Femmes dans les Grands Ensembles* (1971) wherein she demonstrated that women living within the grands ensembles shared the psychological profile of women living in all other urban environments. Her data revealed that women in the grands ensembles actually suffered from lower levels of acute and severe depression when compared to the general population. Her project teased out social reality from distorted representations—a task she considered especially important because the negative caricature of the grands ensemble had caused many women to believe that they could never have a meaningful life inside such an alienating and problematic environment.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Ibid., 67.

⁵⁵Ibid., 72.

⁵⁶A woman’s housing, Huguet determined, in no way changed a homemaker’s cultural activity patterns. A homemaker’s cultural activities continued to reflect those of her class subculture. A homemaker’s arrival in a grand ensemble modified her cultural activities (she may not be able to go to the cinema as frequently or the family may purchase a television), but her basic attitudes towards cultural consumption (what films she viewed, what television shows she watched, what radio programs she listened to, what magazines she read) do not undergo a metamorphosis because of her new housing. Ibid., 77.

⁵⁷Michèle Huguet, *Les femmes dans les grands ensembles: de la représentation à la mise en scène* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971), 11; A summary of Huguet’s findings

Huguet found women adopting much more negative interpretations of the grands ensembles despite the real-world diversity of the grands ensembles and the life stories of the people within them. Her study found that various forms of housing did not significantly affect the patterns of any specific female mental troubles.⁵⁸ Single-family homes had a slightly higher level of acute psychosis while all collective housing had a slightly higher level of acute neurosis.⁵⁹ When age was taken into account, however, the psychiatric profiles of young women in the grands ensembles mirrored that of young women of the same age living in different types of housing. Huguet concluded that the phenomenon of women's mental illness in the grands ensembles was better conceptualized as an example of mental illness in residential suburbia: if the grands ensembles were pathological, so too was the single-family home.⁶⁰

Huguet was not alone in her attempts to demystify *sarcellite* in public opinion. It was also a cause that novelist René Sussan decided to champion, albeit, in a pulp-detective book as opposed to Huguet's academic-scientific scholarship.⁶¹ In his Hardy Boys-esque detective novel *La ville sans fantômes* (1968), Sussan systematically debunked the idea that one's habitation could produce pathologies or provoke neurasthenia.⁶² The story follows a precocious eighteen-year-old Parisian named Hughes as he tries to uncover why an attractive forty-year-old homemaker, Florianne Jarrau, defenestrated herself from her fifth-floor

appeared in Michèle Huguet, "Sollicitation psychologique et grands ensembles," *Les Cahiers de médecine* 12.2 (15 February 1971): 155-160.

⁵⁸Huguet, *Les femmes dans les grands ensembles*, 63.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 67.

⁶¹He also wrote under the pseudonyms René Réouven and Albert Davidson.

⁶²René Sussan, *La ville sans fantômes* (Paris: Denoël, 1968).

apartment window in the grand ensemble of Cavannes (a thinly-veiled Sarcelles). The population in Cavannes reportedly suffers from “*la cavannose* [*sarcellite*],” a psychosis culminating in suicide that is caused by the specific spatial features of the community. Hughes takes it upon himself to determine if Cavannes is a spatial perversion with blood on its hands. If this is the situation, he plans to have the housing model prosecuted just as society prosecutes a murderer.

Like any good detective, Hughes starts his investigation at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Armed with paper and pen, Hughes decides to launch a statistical investigation by comparing mental illness in Cavannes with Paris: the result shocks him. Hughes research reveals that:

There are suicides in Cavannes, there are accidents, there are fights, there is prostitution. Fine. Only, there isn't any more of it there than elsewhere. In fact, there is less. To turn to suicides, my first preoccupation, the percentage is inferior to the statistics for most Parisian neighbors [and] for many suburbs also...⁶³

Hughes thus rejects the theory that *cavannose* killed Florianne and moves into Cavannes to determine what exactly happened.

The would-be Sherlock Homes soon uncovers a series of characters who give anthropomorphic meanings to the grand ensemble. A retired teacher, for example, believes a parapsychological force, a poltergeist, has occupied the town either because tombs and sepulchers were overturned to lay its foundations (perhaps, the teacher speculated, bones were mixed to form concrete) or because the dense concentration of 50,000 minds has caused an unprecedented localization of “immaterial energy.”⁶⁴ What the media interpreted as psychological illness was in fact, according to the teacher, the possession of living souls by floating spirits. Among those who claim the city itself was responsible for Florianne's

⁶³Ibid., 77.

⁶⁴Ibid., 175.

suicide, Hughes meets Florianne's husband, a skilled worker promoted to management who is also a functioning alcoholic. Hughes befriends the husband who, he learns, never liked living in Cavannes and much preferred the dilapidated suburban shack where he had lived with his wife in close proximity to his favorite bistros and drinking pals.

The young detective learns from others, however, that Florianne embraced Cavannes and, in her own way, improved her adopted community. After a series of clues, including the important fact that Florianne suffered from severe vertigo her entire life, Hughes realizes that the homemaker did not commit suicide at all: she had actually suffered an attack of vertigo while cleaning her apartment's windows and accidentally fell to her death. Her husband, who hated the grand ensemble, had tossed away the bottle of Glassex (Windex) that he had found on the apartment floor after her fall, so he could tell the police that Cavannes drove his wife to suicide instead of admitting that she had suffered a horrible accident.

Sussen generally portrayed the physical features of the grand ensemble positively, the plot of his novel seems to deny that a specific urban space induced psychological illness independently. His strongest critique of life within the grand ensemble was reserved for the well-meaning, affable activities coordinators or social engineers who organized conferences and cultural events for women. These coordinators attempt to spread a form of culture that he portrayed as elitist. In a paternalistic fashion, those with culture struggle to show residents what they should enjoy as they organize X discussion group, invite Y author, or display Z's photographs. Sussen viewed this approach to cultural education as misguided since it is unreasonable to believe that most people in France could actually care about such issues. This administrative culture was not participatory or even enjoyable, in Sussen's opinion, but it pressured women to improve their existence through over structured events. Sussen's

critique conveyed certain stereotypes as Hughes draws a sharp contrast between this sterilizing official culture of activity leaders with the vibrant female culture where women truly came alive: the public marketplace.

Emasculating Suburbia?

As in suburbia in America, where the center of family authority is shifting to the *mater familias*, a shift in authority from the father to the mother will become evident. It will become increasingly difficult to maintain traditional family roles among the inhabitants of the *grands ensembles*.

Rudolph A. Helling, 1964⁶⁵

The bearish French actor Jean Gabin—the embodiment of a certain virile, hard-yet-honest, trial-tempered, working-class Frenchman—visited the Sarcelles’ *grands ensemble* twice for two separate films. The first visit was for Denys de La Patellière’s *Rue des prairies* (1959). The film portrays Henri, played by Gabin, as a widower who deals with the trials of his three ungrateful children in a quiet, village-like working-class Parisian neighborhood in the twentieth arrondissement.⁶⁶ A laborer by trade, Henri works at the Sarcelles’ construction site. In the Sarcelles towers Henri sees headstones that seem to prophesy the end of a simple, traditional, working-class world that was filled with tribulations, but also a great deal of freedom, sociability, and kindness.

Gabin returned to Sarcelles for director Henri Verneü’s *Mélodie en sous-sol* (1963). As with *Rue des prairies*, Sarcelles’ second cinematic appearance had little to do with the film’s plot, which turned on the robbery of a casino on the Côte d’Azur by small-time gangsters. The two films shared a screenwriter, Michel Audiard, master of a popular poetic language, who placed Sarcelles in the film’s opening sequence in order to lament once again the kind of man who lived in Sarcelles’ towers and apartment blocks. At the film’s opening,

⁶⁵Rudolph A. Helling, “Review of Vivre dans les grands ensembles by René Kaës,” *American Journal of Sociology* 70.2 (September 1964): 261-262.

⁶⁶*Rue des prairies*, Denys de la Patellière (1959); also see Annie Fourcaut, *Banlieue rouge* (Paris: Autrement, 1992).

we find Charles (a rough looking Gabin) just released from prison and sharing a train car with men returning home to Sarcelles. Before his imprisonment for a failed robbery, Charles had sunk his stolen money into a two-story traditional stone home where his wife continued to live in what was at the time of his imprisonment a small agricultural village far from Paris. The men who share the train car with him are neither rural farmers nor archetypal Parisian workers, but well-dressed, salaried employees wearing ties, carrying briefcases, and discussing their impending familial vacations to Greece.

Charles discerned something emasculating about these men of Sarcelles. He had built his hearth with his hands and he robbed to build his own stand-alone home. These men on the train, by contrast, had purchased everything from others and often on credit: apartments, washing machines, Grecian family holidays. As Charles travels with these men he reflects on how they could not understand what it meant to accomplish something lasting through individual toil. Despite the height of their towers and their apartments' many amenities, they could boast no manly narrative. They had never labored to build their familial Parthenons, they simply turned the key to open the door. Through Charles, Audiard lamented the disappearance in his own time of a historical type, a certain masculine proletariat culture—a way of being—that had long existed across outer Parisian arrondissements and pavilion suburbs: Sarcelles could produce no such virile men.

Le Figaro littéraire journalist Bernard Champigneulle had first predicted that grands ensembles would result in the death of the French citizen and patriarch in “Les risques des cités poussées trop vite”(1959). Champigneulle questioned government employees who denied his requests for information on “a grands ensembles sickness” that infected men.⁶⁷

⁶⁷Bernard Champigneulle, “Les risques des cités poussées trop vite,” *Le Figaro littéraire* 28 November 1959.

For Champigneulle, the grands ensembles raised essential issues of life or death because they represented the “new perils menacing” Frenchmen. Champigneulle considered it obvious that the housing model “does not permit the achievement of the domestic ideal for the majority of French families who want a place to themselves with a little home and a little garden.” The grand ensemble went against nature. In turn, the Frenchman, as husband and patriarch, found the grand ensemble intolerable.

Champigneulle admitted that “the Frenchman accepts rather well the constraints that one puts on him,” but when confronted with the grand ensemble, he will not “tolerate an intrusion into his family life.” Regardless of his apartment’s benefits, the husband “wants to be master of himself.” For this reason, the French patriarch would rather construct a shelter [*un gîte*] by his own sweat than accept “cells prefabricated for calculated happiness.” If the father must remain in the grand ensemble, he should return to nature frequently with his children. “The family tent,” explained Champigneulle, “is in reality the hut of primitive man, that is to say, the opposite of contemporary cellular organisms.” Escape into nature, camping, tempered the masculine frustrations with his modern habitation. Just as women needed shopping, men needed tents. While women could gather for their “daily *rendez-vous*” at the commercial center, “citizens [*les citoyens*]” (apparently only men could be citizens) who have always “loved to frequent the forum or public places” had no recourse. Thus, the grands ensemble carried the most dangerous implications for male civic life and citizenship.

In 1962 *Le Figaro* published a series of letters to the editor in response to an editorial by Thierry Maulnier, a right-wing journalist and essayist, on Sarcelles.⁶⁸ Maulnier, like Champigneulle, contended that Sarcelles upset natural French ways of life. When the

⁶⁸Thierry Maulnier, “On n’est pas chez soi...,” *Le Figaro* 30 January 1962; “Lectures et lectrices ont la parole...toujours les grands ensembles,” *Le Figaro* 27 February 1962.

husband returned from work to the grand ensemble, he crossed a threshold into a realm of solitude and loneliness (Maulnier never mentioned the possibility that his wife had to stay in the same environment during the entire day). The male inhabitant of the grand ensemble could never share the peasant's joy of returning from the fields to his porch or the urban employee's satisfaction of passing through ancient streets past his local *bureau de tabac* or bistro on his journey home. Instinctively, Maulnier explained how the *bête sauvage*, or prehistoric man, searched out shelter so his "woman" could raise the little ones. But prehistoric man's property was not limited to his cave. Instead there were a series of concentric rings, which became extensions of his homestead. A modern grand ensemble like Sarcelles effaced these rings, creating in men a nervous sickness or a sense of chronic distress that resulted from the "destruction of fundamental biological accord of the individual," which had thrived since prehistoric times in the French countryside and cities.

In response to Malunier's article, one Madame F. from Marly-le-Roi, a charming village and former royal domain fifteen kilometers to the west of Paris, developed a less anthropological critique. According to Madame F., Sarcelles left males no recourse but to go to the café and drink excessively after leaving work. After all, who wants to "close themselves in between four walls among crying children?"⁶⁹ Whereas Maulnier thought the grands ensembles lacked places of male sociability, Madame F. believed they put men into too close proximity with places of intoxication. Another letter came from a Doctor Stéphane Tara in Colombes, above Neuilly-sur-Seine, who provided even more information about the dangers of the grands ensembles for modern men. Tara wrote:

One of the major aspects of the discussion on the grands ensembles should be alcoholism. I can say that I have already detoxified with success three notorious alcoholics and this permits me to speak to the problem's cause. Here is how it generally goes, when the husband returns to his apartment, his wife

⁶⁹"Lecteurs et lectrices ont la parole... toujours les grands ensembles," *Le Figaro* 27 February 1962.

is already working: cleaning, cooking. The husband remains inactive in the apartment and he soon hears his wife say: “Go do something, don’t bug me while I’m working.” After a few of these rebuffs, the husband, who has no space to amuse himself [*bricoler*], leaves his home and goes to the café. This becomes normal and soon he doesn’t even bother to go back to the apartment to kiss his wife when he returns from work, instead he goes right to the café. In my suburb, where I have lived for thirty years, we have single-family homes with little gardens and see very, very little alcoholism.

Tara, applying his medical authority to housing matters, returned to the old cliché that idle hands make the devil’s work. If men had a garden in which to *bricoler* they would not be tempted by drink and their family life would thrive. The doctor’s argument that the grands ensembles drove men to the bottle and destabilized families thus reaffirmed the popular claim that the single-family home could serve as a panacea for multiple social ills.

Robert Poirier addressed other mental dangers of Sarcelles for men in his 1965 article in *Lectures pour Tous*.⁷⁰ Poirier interviewed a medical doctor who lived in Sarcelles. The doctor recounted how one night a small French boy [*un petit Français*] urgently asked for him to come to his mother’s aid. When he went to the apartment the doctor found the child’s mother “with a swollen nose and black eye.” The mother explained how her husband returned to the apartment drunk and gave her “a thrashing” [*une raclée*]. She asked him to provide documentation of her wounds so she could file a request for divorce. What amazed the doctor was that the husband sat before the television, “captivated by the sequence of events on the little screen,” during the entire episode without “once looking at me.” The husband did not react until the doctor was about to leave at which point the husband jumped from the screen with his fist flying towards the doctor’s face. The doctor admitted that not all professional visits were so dramatic, but he could cite similar cases. Although the woman was a victim of domestic abuse that could take place almost anywhere, the doctor’s anecdotal

⁷⁰Robert Poirier, “Faut-il condamner les cités termitières?,” *Lectures pour Tous: Je sais tout* May 1965.

evidence again connected male alcoholism specifically with Sarcelles. The implication was clear: the breakdown of a family that should be focused on raising their *petit Français*.⁷¹

Another doctor whom Bridgette Gros interviewed for *Les Paradisiennes* (1973), a chronicle of her efforts to have a grand ensemble constructed in Meulen and its impact on residents, believed that women's depression in the grand ensemble broke down marriages by making it difficult for couples to remain monogamous.⁷² The doctor argued that a "sexual disequilibrium" developed in couple's sex life when husbands commuted daily to work. Husbands returned to their apartments to find a neurotic wife who naturally demanded more affection than he had the energy to give. As a result, instead of having normal sexual relations, two to three times a week, a man only had the energy to make love once ever three months or, in the worst cases, once every six months.⁷³

To compensate for this "sexual disequilibrium," numerous women in suburban grands ensembles began taking lovers. Such women, the doctor reported, left their children with a babysitter to meet their lovers during lunchtime in cheap Parisian hotels. Women who encountered foreign laborers working in their residential community were more likely to attract these exotic, often single men, while other women turned to prostitution to "satisfy both their sexual desire and desire to achieve a certain level of financial independence."⁷⁴

⁷¹The doctor indirectly contrasts this family setting with that of Sicilian women living in the shantytown and those who moved into Sarcelles. In contrast to this French family, Sicilian men and women devoted themselves as a community to reproduction and child rearing.

⁷²Bridgette Gros entered the Resistance at the age of eighteen. In 1944, the Germans arrested her. She was awarded the Croix de Guerre for her military engagements. After the war, she entered a career in journalism, had four children, and became mayor of Meulan, located forty kilometers northwest of Paris, in 1966. Her most famous publication was a study of suburban Parisian women entitled *Quatre heures de transport par jour* (1970). Bridgette Gros, *Quatre heures de transport par jour* (Paris: Denoël, 1970); Brigitte Gros, *Les Paradisiennes* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1973).

⁷³Gros, *Les Paradisiennes*., 128.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Tired of their wives' complaints' and erratic behavior, husbands satisfied their own sexual needs by finding mistresses in road stops and cafes on their commuter route. The doctor's message may have included speculations as well as real-life stories, but the theme was clear: a grand ensemble apartment was no place for a "healthy" or "normal" sex life.

Patriarchal Playgrounds

Gros also interviewed Henri, husband of Jeanne, who was described as "a skinny blonde" and homemaker. She reported that Henri was an attractive, sporty commercial director for a major pharmaceutical company who praised his *grand ensemble* wholeheartedly as he explained why his modern community was appropriately named Paradise:

I find that this community is truly a paradise. It merits well its name. Every time that I return in the evening from my office, around 7:30pm, it is an utter joy to return to my marvelous apartment, with the beautiful, unobstructed view, these large open green spaces, this calm. In fact, I've already convinced my colleagues to come live here...they are ready to leave their apartments in Nanterre, Puteaux, Clamart, to move to Paradise....especially because here, we are truly a city in the countryside.⁷⁵

Paradise, Henri confessed was "a less pleasant place for a woman than for a man." As Gros observed, the men quickly formed an all-male two-hundred member boules league and a tennis club. Paradise was located 30 kilometers from Paris, but Gros concluded that as long as their mode of daily transportation was convenient men embraced the *grand ensemble* model regardless of distance between work and home. After all, everything was provided for them in Paradise.

Technocrats also discerned that men embraced the aesthetics of modernity in their high-rises. Pierre Sudreau sensed the *grands ensembles* offered each Frenchman "the antidote to industrial civilization," a place where he could relax in "an oasis of peace and

⁷⁵Ibid., 111.

tranquility.”⁷⁶ In 1963, civil servants and politicians visited the *grand ensemble* at Epinay-Sur-Seine, which was designed by the architect Daniel Michelin.⁷⁷ The visitors found that the women lacked activities to occupy them, but their husbands warmly embraced their new apartments and the open green spaces. Moreover, the architect Michelin reported, the men eagerly demanded apartments in the highest towers. The architect assumed these towers appealed to men because the grand scale inspired a sense of adventure in young fathers. The sheer height of a man’s habitation, the commanding views it boasted, and the technological advancement it embodied all contributed to a father’s excitement about his home.

Marc Bernard took a different view of men’s willingness to embrace life in the *grands ensembles*, arguing that it had less to do with a husband’s cavalier attitude towards heights than with the total reorganization of French society around male interests. Developing his themes in *Sarcellopolis* (1964), Bernard claimed that modernist architects wanted to create a society in which men’s employment and their responsibility to dependents were equally rationalized.⁷⁸ The combination of a modern residential design and male-centered social policies freed men from their insecurities and allowed them to better enjoy their leisure time and their children. Bernard described Sarcelles above all as a central component of a new kind of masculinized urban civilization. The administrative machine gave the head-of-household extensive responsibilities and made his wife’s caregiving role

⁷⁶“Discours de M. Le Ministre Pierre Sudreau au conference de presse du 22 décembre 1958,” cited in Christine Mangin, “La solution des grands ensembles,” *Vingtième siècle* 64 (October-December 1999): 111; CAC, 19790021, Article 4, “Compte Rendu de la réunion interministérielle tenue rue de Grenelle le vendredi 9 Octobre 1959 a 10 heures sous la Présidence de M. Bacon,” Direction générale de la sécurité sociale, 8.

⁷⁷Started in 1957, the suburban Parisian *grand ensemble* held 3,500 apartments with a density of around 87 homes per hectare (.0039 square miles). Statistically, the SCIC reported head-of-household occupations split evenly between workers at the nearby Vélomoteur factory, *cadres*, and *fonctionnaires* with 88 percent having one or more children. CAC, 19771142, Article 19, Visite du groupe de la SCIC à Epinay-sur-Seine les 28 aout et 5 septembre 1963, 8.

⁷⁸Marc Bernard, *Sarcellopolis* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964).

almost superfluous as schools took charge of children and modern appliances gradually took over the tasks of homemaking. Sarcelles was for Bernard nothing more than a patriarchal playground that elevated the male breadwinner, protected his interests, and robbed women of responsibilities. The emerging masculinized urban civilization of suburban collective communities was halting the development of matriarchal power in domestic life—a power that reached an apex in interwar single-family pavilion suburbs. France had come to a postwar crossroads, however, where its elites had to choose between two civilizations: the single-family home in which women ruled or the collective apartment building in which men were masters.

Bernard identified those who called for France to construct American-style single-family suburbs as an out-of-date group who still sought to give priority to the family unit and individualism. They wanted “to give to each man a kingdom with its own borders where each citizen will have the intoxicating feeling [*le sentiment grisant*] to be master after God.”⁷⁹ Their vision of single-family homes with lawns set in a bucolic locations imagined such houses would be a rampart against the modern atomization of society. Although his home might be hundreds of kilometers from a man’s place of employment, he would commute on a motorbike and return from work to the privacy of weekends in his garden.

Meanwhile, those who defended collective housing in the *grand ensemble*, as Bernard learned from conversations, feared the single-family home because it empowered women within the family unit. Purchasing a single-family home, the husband assumed an onerous debt that condemned him to lifelong labor for a shelter in which he spent little time. The breadwinner’s pension would be wasted on the continued maintenance of the house.

⁷⁹Ibid., 204.

Moreover, the great distances between his suburban home and his place of employment forced him to purchase a car on credit and another car (on credit) for his wife to take his children to school and shop for provisions. The man's reputed castle quickly fell under the power of the matriarch. According to Bernard's undocumented interlocutors, the pavilion home "developed virile qualities in wives" and "feminized [*féminiser*] husbands."⁸⁰ This group argued that during the interwar period, suburban husbands had become enslaved to wives who constantly cajoled them to work at home painting, chopping wood, collecting coal, disposing trash, tending the garden—in short working at all the tasks that the modern *grands ensembles* rendered unnecessary.⁸¹ Husbands could not relax in their own homes after work because their labor continued; indeed, they lived more like pensioners than lords, whereas in the grand ensemble the property manager assumed responsibility for the maintenance of their shelter. In Bernard's opinion, a striking gendered image of single-family suburbia haunted the men who built and defended the *grands ensembles*: "that of your wife, relaxing in a rocking chair, smoking a Camel cigarette while you wash the dishes."⁸² To

⁸⁰From Céline and Le Corbusier to Queneau and Simenon, the poorly serviced and constructed interwar pavilion homes in Drancy, Bobigny, Villejuif, Saint-Denis, Montreuil, Goussainville, Tremblay-les-Gonnesse or Vitry were identified with mediocrity and all that was wrong with petty-bourgeois, Third Republic aspirations. Virile suburban housewives, however, appear a construct not addressed within the Interwar representational catalogue of women. Interwar traditionalists presented Frenchmen's masculine malaise as a product of women's emancipation—the dropping of the mystery of sex, and the disappearance of feminine modesty—not as an urban rather than a suburban or peri-urban problem. To traditionalists, the urban salaried man returned from his employment to discover his modern wife had gone out for the evening to engage in frenzied hedonism depriving him of comfort. The suburban homemaker lacked an Interwar mediatization. That being said, Interwar pavilion suburbs were characterized as a French equivalent to the American wild west so it was possible their female residents were attributed certain virile qualities. Annie Fourcaut, *La banlieue en morceaux: la crise des lotissements défectueux en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Editions Creaphis, 2000), 14; *Ibid.*, 210.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 208-210.

⁸²Bernard sensed the *grands ensembles* were an attempt to cloister women, an attempt to turn their lives inwards towards the television and washing machine so that she could better comfort her male counterpart and his children. *Ibid.*, 210.

Bernard, the siren song of the grand ensemble was irresistible to virile men who rejected the feminized, interwar households of suburbia.

In Sarcelles, men actively organized leisure groups and reportedly shared a certain sense of fraternity. They adapted with relative ease to the grands ensembles, forming numerous fraternal civic associations, playing *pétanque*, and working together on automobiles in the parking lots.⁸³ In *Vivre à Sarcelles?* (1965), Jean Duquèsne denied that Sarcelles fostered patriarchal aggression against women, but he did observe that men enjoyed their modern city far more than women. Duquèsne noted how men socialized during the warm months outside, gathered in cafes at the foot of buildings or traveled to other cafes in nearby Pierrefitte which stayed open after 8:00 pm.⁸⁴ Journalists frequently commented on the evening television that men watched for relaxation; and they noted the masculine pleasures of the train commute between Sarcelles and their place of employment. *L'Humanité* journalist Jean Rocchi expressed ideological reservations about dense apartment blocks and towers, but in “Comment naissent les querelles d’amoureux,” (1965), he praised them for preventing “lovers’ quarrels.”⁸⁵ A modern apartment enabled a husband to move out of his parent’s or his in-law’s home, freeing him from the “maternal gaze” or from the need to espouse the same ideas about “Giscard d’Estaing, the presidential elections, and the president” as his father-in-law. The *beau-papa* would never again remind him that “You are young my boy...I’ve seen two wars and I know what I am talking about.” To the young, employed husband, Sarcelles represented freedom.

⁸³Ibid., 120-122.

⁸⁴Duquèsne, *Vivre à Sarcelles*, 66.

⁸⁵Jean Rocchi, “Comment naissent les querelles d’amoureux,” *L'Humanité* 26 October 1965.

Women's Needs in a Parisian Grand Ensemble

Homemakers in Sarcelles expressed hostility towards those who portrayed them as neurotic, complicit in their own alienation, or victims of a patriarchal order that limited their roles to maternity. They considered motherhood to be a special status that was celebrated with honor in the grand ensemble. Yet female residents repeatedly emphasized two complaints: the need for increased municipal childcare facilities and more local employment opportunities. These requests became increasingly urgent in late 1964, when managing authorities raised rents on apartment models and offered residents rent-to-own schemes. To avoid eviction or to aspire to homeownership, whether in the housing estate or outside, often meant women needed to subsidize their spouse's income through employment. An early target of their frustration was the novelist Christiane Rochefort, who visited Sarcelles for a discussion of *Les petits enfants du siècle* at the request of the grand ensemble's book club in 1964. This book club served as a pretext for women to gather and, through literature and in conversation with authors, discuss questions that affected their lives.⁸⁶

Rochefort was surprised when she received a hostile, potentially violent, reception from the female crowd. The women of Sarcelles informed her that they neither identified with the novel's pregnant protagonist (who married a lowly television repairman to move to Sarcelles) nor considered maternity a tragic choice. The author recalled residents' response as: "What, so you've come here to pitch to us that we aren't happy? Good thing we have intellectuals! Listen smart-ass, aside from a few plumbing problems we are very content here!"⁸⁷ Rochefort viewed the night as a cultural failure and refused to engage with the rowdy book club members. Reflecting years later on that evening, she realized that she

⁸⁶ACDC 201-8, "Les clubs féminins: une étude de l'ALFA," *CDC*, 1978, 15-18.

⁸⁷Christiane Rochefort, *Journal de printemps: récit d'un livre* (Montréal: L'Étincelle, 1970), 26.

should have known better than to meet with the women because “people usually don’t recognize their own alienation...yadda, yadda, yadda.”⁸⁸ More importantly, the encounter demonstrated that women embraced both maternity and the *grands ensembles*. To be sure, most wanted to reconcile their domestic care duties (childcare, meal preparation) with new paid employment, but they strongly rejected claims that they suffered from a psychological illness or were victims of a patriarchal state. Many of these women wanted to work, but they never framed active employment in a language of liberation or romanticized labor market participation.

Sarcelles’ female residents later articulated these themes in a conference that was organized in response to the public discussions of *sarcellite* and suicidal homemakers. The conference, which was entitled “Women’s Quality of Life in Suburbia” (1965), brought together eight women who were suburban civic and municipal leaders who lived in either pavilion homes or *grands ensembles*.⁸⁹ Almost all were members of the Union féminine civique et sociale, and they gathered to confront the myth of *sarcellite* and present a competing social reality.⁹⁰ Each participant denied the existence of *sarcellite* or “a psychological sickness resulting from women’s inability to adapt to life in the *grands ensembles*.” Boredom did not come from any single architectural model; in fact, the women contended that a bored homemaker was more likely to be found in an isolated pavilion home

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Archives Départementales du Val d’Oise, “Table ronde à Sarcelles: Conditions de vie des femmes en grande banlieue,” *Bulletin d’information de la prefecture du Val-d’Oise* May 1965, 36-41; The UFCS monthly newspaper reproduced the conference transcript in entirety for a special issue. CAC, 19771142, Article 23, “la vie des femmes en grande banlieue,” *La Femme dans la vie sociale* 39.348 (1966), 7.

⁹⁰Archives Nationales, Centre des Archives Contemporaines, Fontainebleau, [hereafter CAC], 19771142, Article 23, “L’Union féminine civique et sociale et le Vème Plan,” September 1964; “Notes concernant le problème du logement et les améliorations à promouvoir,” September 1964; “Reformes concernant le Régime Foncier,” September 1964.

than in a high-rise apartment. No single psychopathology unique to modernist communities existed. Indeed, conference attendees believed suburban women shared “common problems” related to access to childcare, public transportation, and employment regardless of their homes design or tenure.

Residents of both grands ensembles and single-family homes observed that women’s ability to return to work outside the home after giving birth to children was the single most important issue confronting suburban women. The participants also noted that “the majority of women desired to work after maternity,” but living in suburbia presented multiple obstacles to entering the workforce, especially for women who still suffered a “double shift” at the workplace and home.⁹¹ The sharing of domestic tasks between spouses, the improvement of transportation networks, the movement of businesses to living places, and “a society which organized child care” would all improve the condition of suburban women including those residing in the grands ensembles. The UFCS independently rejected the existence of *sarcellite* or “a deadly boredom” caused by collective residential communities. In a 1967 explanatory housing guide for women, the UFCS emphasized that in the grands ensembles:

Residents protest against the allegations of those who do not live there. The grands ensembles are neither the hell described by “others,” nor the paradise painted by their developers.⁹²

The authors rejected the idea that because Sarcelles lacked a past it was somehow pathological. Were not all towns and cities at some time new and without history? Collective

⁹¹“Table ronde à Sarcelles”., 38.

⁹²CAC, 19771142, Article 23 “L’urbanisme et les femmes : connaissance des besoins, essai de solution, le logement,” *Fiches documentaires d’action sociale et civique: union feminine civique et sociale* 29: (January-February 1967).

living was therefore not itself a problem; the problems lay outside housing in the realm of equipping communities with infrastructure and childcare investments.

The Keys to the Future

In January 1967, the residents of Sarcelles had the opportunity to communicate their life experiences to the nation when *Les Clés du futur* [The Keys to the Future] television program broadcast live from the grand ensemble.⁹³ Hosted by Roger Louis (1925-1982), the face of French televised scientific reporting, the program explored Sarcelles and interviewed its residents in an effort to reveal to home audiences the future of French habitation. Louis and Jean-Noël Roy, the two program producers, clearly arrived in Sarcelles with the preconceived idea that life inside its confines was insufferable. Otherwise evenhanded in their scientific reporting on plastics or semi-conductors, their original intention seemed to be to present Sarcelles as a dystopia. At one point, a reporter inside Sarcelles betrayed his lack of journalistic objectivity when he admitted to a resident on live television that “before I entered here, I said I could never live here.”

The complicated opening sequence to the broadcast, transmitted in real time, was reminiscent of Jean-Luc Godard’s science-fiction film *Alphaville* (1965) wherein a central computer obsessed with logic, rationality, and planning deprives humans of their identity in a nightmarish grand ensemble-cum-modernist metropolis.⁹⁴ After title credits, a chain-smoking Louis addressed the camera to inform audiences that in twenty years 80 percent of the French would live in a city. The question, “the key to the future,” was therefore what kind of city would develop and would France find a different way to house its population? Quickly, the

⁹³“L’urbanisme,” *Les Clés du futur* Jean-Noël Roy and Roger Louis, dirs., ORTF Paris 11 January 1967.

⁹⁴*Alphaville*, Jean-Luc Godard (1965).

scene cut from Louis to a car with an attached camera that was traveling around the streets of Sarcelles, accompanied by menacing music, air raid sirens, and drumbeats. The car continued to drive through the streets as the audience heard now an eerie soundtrack and a series of rhetorical questions about whether man could be happy inside geometric shapes. The next scene showed a more distant wide-angle of the grand ensemble with lights on in almost all apartments. Louis then asked the residents watching the program at home to turn their lights off and on: almost all lights in the grand ensemble immediately flickered off and on.

Returning to Louis, the camera panned a hall that contained a scale model of Sarcelles surrounded by residents. Louis informed the crowd that he had heard how they suffered from boredom, nervous depression and delinquency, and how many women had turned to prostitution. He wanted to discuss these issues with them before the whole nation, and he would be joined with another journalist and camera crew who rang random doorbells inside apartment buildings. The audience that stood around Louis was composed of young couples in their twenties to late-thirties; they were all white and smartly-dressed, in some cases with their adolescent children.

Louis' first question was "is it possible to live in Sarcelles" to which he received an unexpected reaction. The response, largely from women, was that the community's problems had been much exaggerated. A woman wearing a pearl necklace and a mini-skirt addressed the camera directly because she wanted home audiences to know that "*sarcellite* was a fabrication." Louis then turned to others in the audience and asked if this was true. Everyone agreed. Clearly surprised, Louis noted "but this city is not like others." A reporter in the audience presented the microphone to a woman who responded that "people make the city" while another woman believed the so-called bored homemakers would be content if "they

could go out,” but first they needed childcare. A woman whose door received a random knock reported that she was very happy in Sarcelles and her apartment was very comfortable; moreover, she loved having the open green spaces for her children. When some male and female adolescents were asked if they actually wanted to live in Sarcelles and if the “futuristic city” made them uneasy, they happily informed the journalist that it was not too difficult to adapt and that they all felt they were taking part in history. One declared “we will tell our children about this.”

Conclusion: The End of Sarcellite

In 1969, a government-funded study asked 5,000 young urban couples their attitudes towards housing. The study revealed “*in abstracto*” that young couples desired a single-family home with a garden purchased on long-term credit.⁹⁵ When given a choice between a pavilion home with a garden and a grand ensemble apartment 68% preferred the former.⁹⁶ Yet 77% favored an apartment purchased on credit inside a grand ensemble if described as fully equipped with *crèches*, childcare centers, sports, good schools, cultural venues, and public transportation.⁹⁷ Almost all the couples surveyed planned to engage in dual employment after having one or more children. The author concluded therefore that the *grands ensembles* actually corresponded better with women’s psychological needs in theory since collective habitation meant mothers lived in walking proximity to *crèches*, daycare

⁹⁵CAC, 1971141 Article 17, F. Netzler, “Opinions et attitudes des jeunes ménages sur le logement: jeunes ménages habitants des agglomérations urbaines,” Institut Français d’Opinion Publique, December 1968-January 1969.

⁹⁶Ibid., 2.

⁹⁷CAC 19771142, Article 1, Quelques données sur le problème du logement des jeunes ménages, Direction de la construction service de l’habitation groupé de recherches et d’études sur la construction et l’habitation, Ministère de l’équipement et du logement, November 1969, 11.

centers, and transportation.⁹⁸ Moreover, the author then theorized that the comparable affordability of owner-occupied and even rental apartments meant that a couple with two salaries could reconcile financial affluence and the realization of an ideal family size. The author speculated that the appeal of the single-family home to educated twenty-year-olds was misguided. In his opinion, it reflected the fact few couples had ever experienced well-equipped collective housing and thus had only an inexplicable hostility to “the grand ensemble like Sarcelles.”⁹⁹

The government’s of presidents Georges Pompidou (1969-1974) and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974-1981) agreed with twenty-somethings that France’s domestic future was in single-family subdivisions. In 1973, the Gaullist minister of housing Olivier Guichard implemented a vigorous combative policy against the *grands ensembles*.¹⁰⁰ Guichard’s policy culminated in the prohibition on future construction of *grands ensembles*, which he defended as the only means to save families from a residential model that psychologically crushed individuals. According to Guichard, the psychological problems created by the model could only be solved through a combination of single-family sub-divisions and re-urbanization. Guichard professed goal was to return France to the spatial organization of the Middle Ages—the village and the city—while retaining all modern conveniences. In terms of technology and affluence, Guichard sensed the French had arrived at a historical moment when the (sub)urban ills of industrial capitalism could be eradicated. Guichard presented his directive prohibiting future *grands ensembles* that circulated on 21 March 1973 as a

⁹⁸F. Netzler, “Opinions et attitudes des jeunes ménages sur le logement: jeunes ménages habitants des agglomérations urbaines,” 4.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁰CAC, 1977130, Article 9, Note à l’attention de monsieur le ministre, Objet: *grands ensembles*, ministre de l’aménagement du Territoire de l’équipement, du logement, et du tourisme, Le Conseiller technique, Paris, 16 March 1973, 1.

combative measure against an unnatural space that distributed populations inappropriately. Guichard's prohibition would be interpreted by leftist academics as an attempt to rescue the middle-class from collectivism, to create coherent single-party voting continuances, and to dismantle social housing. French liberals celebrated the ban for giving all (middle-class) couples choice in where they wanted to live and for protecting the environment (the environment conceived as aesthetics, the *grands ensembles* were eyesores in the otherwise pristine countryside).

Almost a year after the prohibition, the housing ministry drew on undocumented fieldwork to produce a study that again defended the prohibition on the *grands ensembles*. The report found that residents, especially those with two employed adults, still demanded more public transportation access and childcare services.¹⁰¹ These opinions did not deter the reporters from concluding that the *grands ensembles* were unsalvageable: no matter what material or social interventions the state conducted they would remain unfit for human habitation. The report argued that the majority of French couples could not psychologically manage their daily lives inside the *grands ensembles*, and they desperately wanted to return to a normal life outside collectivization. It was the “constant intrusions of collective life” that left couples with the sense that they were “incapable of mastering the space in which they lived.”¹⁰² That same year, a research team composed of a hygienist and two clinical psychiatrists conducted a statistical epidemiological study in Mulhouse's *grands ensembles* to determine if particular forms of habitat negatively affected mental health.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰¹CAC, 1977130, Article 9, Grands Ensembles en Région Parisienne, Enquête sur la vie dans les grands ensembles de la région parisienne, 14 January 1974.

¹⁰²Ibid., 3.

inspiration for their study was Olivier Guichard's 23 March 1973 prohibition on grands ensembles construction throughout France—a prohibition that the researches believed was justified by the popular assumption that the form of habitat presented a risk to its residents' mental health. They produced a mapped morbidity that revealed Mulhouse's grands ensembles showed no elevated levels of psychological morbidity. The authors concluded that there was no correlation between psychiatric morbidity and habitat, but they found their evidence demonstrated a direct correlation between socio-economic status and mental health.¹⁰⁴ Poor mental health, they concluded, had more to do with poverty than habitat.

On 15 February 1976, Henry Canacos, Sarcelles' mayor, declared *sarcellite* “dead” on Europe 1 radio.¹⁰⁵ He defined *sarcellite* not as a sickness of neurotic homemakers, but as “a shared sense of dissatisfaction among citizens who lacked a harmonious urbanism.” He then explained how his municipal administration had rectified this problem by constructing seventeen *école maternelles*, twenty-two primary schools, six *collèges*, a *lycée* general, a *lycée* technique, a trade school, four stadiums, a swimming pool, nine gymnasiums, seven tennis courts, a library, a *discothèque*, a cinema, a music school, a *crèche* with two-hundred beds, a youth center, an elderly center, meeting places, a public market, efficient transportation, and a shopping mall. Sarcelles had achieved a level of urbanity that gave its citizens access to a full life. The grand ensemble was more than a cluster of habitats; it had inside it the infrastructure that supposedly permitted traditional urbanites to experience an authentic social life—to *habiter*. Despite this extensive infrastructural investment, the

¹⁰³M. Tindel, J. Lavillaureix, and L. Singer, “Hygiène mentale et habitat: Le problème des grands ensembles a travers une étude épidémiologique réalisée à Mulhouse,” *Annales médico-psychologiques* 133.1 (1974): 21-63.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁵“La sarcellite est morte a déclaré Henry Canacos au micro d'Europe 1” *La Renaissance* 16 February 1976.

popular view of Sarcelles as incompatible with a meaningful domestic life brought *L'unité*, a weekly publication of the Socialist Party, to Sarcelles the next year. The new journalistic visitors explained that they came to Sarcelles to see how the municipal government was still trying to “vanquish ‘*sarcellite*,’ a sickness of solitude and concrete born twenty-one years ago in Sarcelles.”¹⁰⁶

Sarcellite disappeared in popular culture as women left for work, couples acquired a second car or a pavilion home, and immigrant families reunited with men working in France [*le regroupement familial*]. A new generation, including many immigrant and North African Jewish families, purchased apartments in Sarcelles’ grand ensemble. The question of suburbia and the grands ensembles gradually acquired new meanings in French culture. The spatial coding of societal problems that were considered unique to the grands ensembles, however, continued as the social nomenclature evolved from *sarcellite* to the *malaise des banlieues*, the suburban sickness. The *malaise des banlieues* has become a catch-all for a host of social issues from immigration to multiculturalism and poverty. The debates over homemakers in the grands ensembles, however, had established a conceptual paradigm that made the grands ensembles more than an accidental repository for the socially excluded. French intellectuals and policymakers quickly came to see these same buildings as a primary cause of ethnic minorities’ frustrations and apparent inability to adapt to life within the Hexagon.

At a 1979 Parisian conference on “Women and Habitat” Jacqueline Wolfrom, regional delegate on women for the Ile-de-France, called on researchers to determine how women lived differently in relation to various kinds of housing models. She wanted to understand why women in the grands ensembles suffered disproportionately from neurosis in

¹⁰⁶Emmanuele Plas, “Le seul vaccine contre la ‘sarcellite’,” *L'unité* 22-28 April 1977, 20-22.

contrast to women occupying “*habitats anciens*” in Parisian arrondissements and why they disproportionately attempted to commit suicide.¹⁰⁷ By 1979, however, questions of women’s mental imbalance in the grands ensembles had long since intersected with other questions about their physical security in the grands ensembles. Sociologists Henri Coing and Christine Meunier observed in *Insécurité urbaine* (1980) that the grands ensembles, traditionally blamed for causing “*sarcellite*” or “a feminine psychological insecurity,” had now become associated with physical insecurity, more specifically, with sexual violence.¹⁰⁸ The sociologists argued that a racist culture had recuperated the myth of grands ensembles as dangerous for women’s mental health and readapted it to make the grands ensembles dangerous spaces of sexual aggression by Arab “foreigners” who lurked in the shadows of underground parking garages. Fear of sexual aggression, a product of racism rather than a social reality, led Frenchwomen to re-conceptualize the grand ensemble as a new kind of social imprisonment. The fear of sexual aggression inside their own residential landscape kept women confined within their apartments. In turn, the authors hypothesized, those alienated frightened women had witnessed a dramatic decrease in libido, which induced a hysterical state and a compulsive need to talk about their repressed sexuality—a new disease had thus emerged in the grands ensembles.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Wolfrom, “Ouverture,” *Les femmes et l’habitat: Actes du colloque du 24 avril 1979 à Paris* (Paris: Plan construction, 1979), 38.

¹⁰⁸ Henri Coing & Christine Meunier, *Insecurite urbaine? Une arme pour le pouvoir* (Paris: Editions anthropos, Paris, 1980).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

CHAPTER V

The Right to What City?, 1968-1973

How should a society shelter itself? What should a society look like? How does a society make that imaginary a reality? The rebellious *groupuscules* of the Latin Quarter and centrist-liberals in the ministry of finance concerned themselves with these common questions. The implementation of those desires depended a great deal on mentalities about the providential state and its ability to marshal knowledge to liberate citizens and reconcile capitalism's contradictions through rationalized security systems. On the radical left and liberal right, students and bankers re-asserted the individual's autonomy before a state whose institutional mechanisms were found to be far from benign, but were, as Michel Foucault explained in his literary corpus, often a form of soft violence. The individual could not rely on the state to fulfill his or her personal desires, and young couples could never rely on the state to accomplish their domestic goals. The state and its private-public agents like the SCIC were rarely benevolent in their housing interventions. Indeed, housing interventions did not protect populations; they controlled them.

As the rhetorical engine of individualism revived over the second half of what would come to be known as France's thirty optimistic years of economic growth, the French projected two alternative visions of a desired way to live in modern societies. Parisian students gave little attention to a coherent housing policy beyond vague calls for an experiential revolution, but, to judge from their activities in occupied dormitories and

buildings, they were willing to develop new individualized residential patterns while they rhetorically embraced communal living arrangements. Influenced by urban theorists, students embraced the idea that the individual could achieve personal liberation through a process of experimenting with different domestic lifestyles, social relations, and an authentic urban space. Each citizen therefore had a right to habitat that would facilitate a fuller participation in a richer experience of life. French economic liberals, far more attentive to financial operations, feared the alienation of the population in mass consumption and the drowning of the middle-class families in an industrial society of forced choices. The married couple could best achieve personal liberation by making their own individual housing market biographies. Liberals' ambition was to set couples free from the social forms of industrial society thereby removing themselves from any imposed political commitments. Individuals and couples should have the right to build a family in the privacy of a home that they desired.

The individualization of housing, as liberals and radicals described it, should give people the freedom to plan their life courses independently. The individualization of housing became a fluid cultural concept that both the right and left used in direct reaction to the social imaginary of collective housing. In the end, it was not the students' libertarian communal individualism—the self-creation of alternative urban landscapes inhabited by male and female individuals—which won out. It was the center-right's economic individualism that gained influence during the 1970s. Center-right reforms gave salaried employees new financial responsibilities and choices in their habitation, which was considered a key place of individual emancipation. They promised that housing as a practical personalized financial operation would help to liberate the individual from society.

We Refuse to be Sarcellized

On the walls of the student occupied Odéon theatre, an *enragé* or *enragée* painted in bold and broad strokes: “We refuse to be SARCELLIZED [*Nous refusons d’être SARCELLISÉS*].”¹ What did it mean in the spring of 1968 when rebellious students declared their resistance to sarcellization?² Above all, Sarcelles represented domination; from the heart of Paris or at Nanterre, students perceived the city as a concentration camp for nuclear families. Twenty-somethings saw in Sarcelles their darkest standardized Fordist futures: marriage, work, transport, childcare, consumption, and death all in building X, floor Y, apartment Z. For many radical students, Sarcelles was synonymous with a state technocratic repression apparatus that blocked participatory democracy. Sarcelles disproved the capitalist system’s claim to offer freedom over socialism since the town manifested a mindless capitalist devotion to endless growth, development, and production at any psychological, environmental, and social costs. The personal malaise that young homemakers felt in the inhumane grands ensembles was symptomatic of a morally bankrupt society. The radicals would have therefore rejected the validity of a poll conducted in October 1968, which found that 80% of Sarcelles’ residents said they were happy to live in a grand ensemble.³ The students would have lamented, as did Christine Rochefort, that sometimes the alienated cannot recognize their alienation.

At minimum, Sarcelles demonstrated an unpardonable lack of *savoir-vivre* on the part of the rationalizing modernizers: administrators, architects, developers, engineers, and planners. Students in the humanities and social sciences were not alone in these anti-Sarcelles

¹Julian Besançon, *Journal Mural Mai 68* (Paris: Claude Tchou, 1968), 17.

²Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992, 330.

³“80% des habitants de Sarcelles se dissent heureux d’y vivre,” *Le Monde* 2 October 1968.

sentiments; Beaux Arts architectural students equally disdained the “Sarcelles big and little” that their supposed professional mentors had designed in the service of industrial capitalism rather than as a service to the people’s interests.⁴ Leftists could see nothing socialist in social housing: on the contrary, capitalists had built the grands ensembles and managed them according to feudal customs.

The pamphlet *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (1966) reminded students that sexuality was also a form of social upheaval. Students lived in spaces that sexually repressed society.⁵ It was only through a total transformation of society—a kind of revolutionary *fête*—that society could re-emerge from a ludic world with two simple rules “live without dead time and climax [*jouir*: enjoy/climax] without chains.”⁶ It was, after all, the French university practices of single-sex dormitory housing—sexual segregation—that politicized so many (male) students. Protests against the prohibition of male/female mingling in French dormitory rooms emerged as a core activity during the period of student radicalization in the 1960s. The logical starting point for the movement that culminated in the Nanterre *enragés* was the Antony students’ protests against same-sex dormitory restriction starting as early as 1962.⁷ At Antony, male students destroyed a lodge that housed a guard who was responsible for restricting entrance to women’s dormitories. This action set off a struggle—eventually

⁴“Document 351,” in Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Journal de la Commune étudiante: textes et documents novembre 1967-juin 1968* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), 802; Also see Jean-Louis Violeau, *Les architectes et Mai 68* (Paris: Editions Recherches, 2005).

⁵Union Nationale des Etudiants de France and the Association Fédérative Générale des Etudiants de Strasbourg, “De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier,” *Etudiants de France* 21-27 special supplement (1966): 8.

⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

⁷Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 37.

nationalized—for the right of men to visit women’s rooms without constraint. Male students called for the end of dormitory concierges who controlled access to women’s dormitories in the name of security and/or morality. The battle for access to the space inhabited by the other sex was considered a battle for sexual freedom against a spacialized oppression.

To Parisian baby-boomer students, the similarities between university dormitories and Sarcelles went beyond their functionalist architecture because both represented forms of sexual oppression. A male student was isolated to his suburban dorm room and segregated from the other sex. As a *cadre*, the same man was isolated in his suburban apartment and segregated from all other life in his nuclear family. In a more perfect world, spaces of encounter and pleasure—the street—supplanted spaces of economic rationalization and isolation—the dorm room and familial apartment.⁸

In this climate, two intellectuals, Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre, provided students with a sustained critique of the French housing system. Each waged a systematic attack against Le Corbusier-inspired habitat, represented above all between 1957 and 1972 by Sarcelles. At the core of their critique of modernist residential housing was the ambition to promote freer human spaces and to transform those spaces by establishing a radical poetics or theatre of liberated urban play. Ideally, they sought to promote a broad consciousness that capitalism had replaced the human need for shelter with commands concealed in advertising clichés. To live in Sarcelles was no different from obeying the command “Drink Coca-Cola!” The Parisian Debord and Lefebvre, however, conflated all forms of modernist social housing.

⁸These themes first manifested in Debord’s artistic contributions to the IS review in the 1950s; most notably, in his psychogeographies of Paris (loosely inspired by Chombart de Lauwe’s maps tracing individual Parisian trajectories) or *Discours sur les passions de l’amour* (1958), a map of the capital charting an individual’s nomadic movements with red vectors representing passionate attractions. See Chombart de Lauwe, *Paris et l’agglomération parisienne* (Paris: PUF, 1952).

They seemed equally ignorant of developer's attempts to juxtapose market and social apartment buildings so as to create a more egalitarian society. Instead, all suburban modernist communities were working-class prisons that concealed a political program: the definitive isolation of the definitive isolation of society in little self-policed nuclear cells, the end of insurrection and chance encounters, and the total resignation to consumer capitalism.

Saving Playful Space from Capitalism: Debord and Lefebvre

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) served Debord and Lefebvre as an intellectual touchstone for thinking about different spatial relations. To Huizinga, human play was more than a physiological, psychological, or biological activity; it was something that transcended the immediate needs of life and sustained a kind of primordial fun-element. Play consisted of everything that was neither work nor seriousness (for example, activities and questions with ethical outcomes). Spatially, all play took place within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, much as religious rituals had consecrated sacred places.⁹ Play's second component was the play-community, what Huizinga defined as "the feeling of being 'apart together'," which left the individual with a sense of sharing something important with those who mutually withdrew from the rest of the world by at least temporarily rejecting the norms that applied elsewhere in society.¹⁰

Huizinga had pointed historically to the middle ages and the seventeenth century as western civilization's two great ages of play, times when men and women were still able to set aside pedestrian economic interests and expand the traditional social boundaries in

⁹Play-grounds included the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, all in form and function play-grounds, that is, "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules pertain...temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart." Ibid., 10.

¹⁰Ibid., 12.

ceremonies, speeches, insignia, banquets, jesting, buffoonery, and carousing. The industrial revolution and technological innovations, however, severely marginalized play during the nineteenth century. As Huizinga explained: “Work and production became the ideal, and then the idol, of the age. All Europe donned the boiler-suit.”¹¹ Between the nineteenth and twentieth century, Europeans and Americans started to pursue all activities with a portentous seriousness by simultaneously systematizing, regimenting, and even monetizing activities that were once spontaneous and unorganized in nature.

Play reached its apex in love-play between the sexes. Love-play—not the act of sex itself—was an essential feature of human interaction. It could include everything that occurred between the sexes on the road to copulation: flirting and wooing. Huizinga wrote:

It is not the act as such that the spirit of the language tends to conceive as play; rather the road thereto, the preparation for and introduction to ‘love,’ which is often made enticing by all sorts of play. This is particularly true when one of the sexes has to rouse or win the other over to copulating.¹²

Love-play, in its more benign form, appeared in courtship games, riddle-solving, and contests before physical intimacy. Huizinga, however, believed love-play revealed itself most fully in “erotic relationships falling outside the social norm.”¹³ The delay of sexual gratification in erotic love-play was an affirmation of human creativity and imagination. It was the erotic dance, driven by desire, that was itself the most playful game.

Huizinga addressed the question of dwellings in his history. Huizinga observed that the production of housing could never be a form of play; indeed, any form of architecture

¹¹Ibid., 192.

¹²Ibid., 43.

¹³Ibid.

necessarily restricted play.¹⁴ A home—the laying of foundation stones and a structure fit for safe human use—was a serious and responsible task requiring skill, proficiency, and careful organization. Huizinga emphasized that a home was no laughing matter because each dwelling marshaled technological and industrial knowledge that obstructed the natural play-factor within human culture. In the context of the urbanizing 1960s, there was great appeal in Huizinga’s argument that banal technocratic construction ultimately served only to maintain high levels of industrial productivity by shattering spaces of human play in the name of economic imperatives.

Debord, Lefebvre, and also Herbert Marcuse saw a relationship between Huizinga’s theory of play, erotic life, and habitat. Industrial society had proved successful at removing playgrounds of political contestation, but it had also removed the the playgrounds of erotic experiences from modern life.¹⁵ Erotic spaces had been “de-eroticized” to reduce sexual experience, restrict physical satisfactions, and limit reproduction to little functionalist boxes. Suburban apartments and homes completely de-eroticized the inhabited environment by integrating sex into the realm of commodity production and exchange.¹⁶ Housing contributed to the technological administration of the libido, the rejection of the pleasure principal, and the individual’s submission to the economic needs of advanced industrial civilization. Functionalism, in workplaces, automobiles, or apartments killed the game.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., 167.

¹⁵Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

¹⁶Ibid., 75.

¹⁷“Problèmes préliminaires à la construction d’une situation,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 12.

Debord also took from Huizinga his insistence that at any moment in any culture the play instinct might reassert itself, “drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game.”¹⁸ He defined play, free of any material gain, as “the struggle for a life commensurate with desire, the concrete representation of such a life” that “provoked conditions favorable to living directly.”¹⁹ It was only through the organic reconstitution of the city as a labyrinth-like playground that the individual could become free to lose his or herself in the game. The demolition of the “Cartesian city,” the grands ensembles, and the satisfaction of vital need such as shelter, clothing, and food, in free urban spaces would liberate the individual to pursue erotic games culminating in sex or sexual sublimation.

Debord gestured towards radical sexual liberation in alternative baroque cities that might generate new forms of sociability. He predicated his urban futures on the eradication of the nuclear family, which he considered anachronistic. . As he explained in *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), capitalism remade all modern space as its own décor, it marshaled urbanism to atomize the social classes so as to prevent contestation and thereby secure its absolute domination.²⁰ The intersection of the nuclear family and mass habitat contributed to the destruction of city by collapsing it, dissolving it, and liquidating it into a tourist attraction. Mass suburban housing in the “pseudo-countryside” isolated the worker while it maintained the worker classes’ dependence on within the system of production and consumption. Devolved by his habitat into a “pseudo-peasant,” the worker forgot the revolutionary, historical time the working class once knew in the city to embrace the cyclical time of work,

¹⁸Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 43.

¹⁹“Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 10.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 164.

transport, and consumerism. Only when liberated from the nuclear family and comfortable apartments could workers could return to the heart of revolutionary play: the ludic street.

In direct opposition to housing that segregated individuals into family units and thereby decreased human interaction, Debord envisioned an alternative city that encouraged wide ranging, liberated social exchanges.²¹ He pointed towards future housing wherein moveable partitions might create a labyrinth within its walls.²² In the chaotic urban jungles of winding roads, narrow alleyways, impasses, passages, and arcades, *homo ludens* (playful men), as opposed to *homo sapiens* (knowing men), navigated chiaroscuro landscapes where love became a game and sex did not mean that one's partner had to be integrated in any future life plans. Debord foresaw a society that stopped building for the nuclear family and began to build towards the "*style de vie à venir*," which would entail a reorientation towards a radical freer present to determine the ultimate shape of future urban space. Debord never mentioned sexual encounters, but the potential city he described was one that encouraged subversive sexual cruising—the act of walking around a locality in search of an anonymous, casual sexual partners.

It was the Dutch architect Constant who attempted to make this future tangible. Constant's designs were filled with "play zones," but not a single habitation zone. The closest thing to housing one found in the *Secteur jaune*, a neighborhood of steel and plexiglas suspended in the air by massive columns, was "two labyrinth houses, constituted of numerous rooms of irregular shapes, spiral staircases, lost corners, unconstructed areas, and

²¹This objective, to create experimental spaces outside the domination of capitalist wherein human happiness, and in turn, human sex lives, was negotiated through processes of serious play, had emerged as a reoccurring theme in French thought from the theorist Jean Baudrillard to the novelist Michel Houellebecq.

²²Guy Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958), 23.

cul-de-sacs.”²³ In Constant’s hedonistic urban vision, individuals, as nomads, traveled through space in accordance with their sentiments. Housing, as he theorized it, would become less and less important as humans enlarged their circle of action. He wrote:

Man only became sedentary by industrial labor...and with the disappearance of this form of labor will also disappear his necessity to always reside in one precise place. The need for temporary housing—hotels or, in a pinch, tents or caravans—will grow at the same rhythm. The relationship between the livable space and the social space must change to the benefit of the social space in order to respond to the needs of an emerging new nomadic life.²⁴

As he explained in *Opstand van de Homo ludens* (1969), New Babylon set the social, economic and cultural conditions permitting *Homo ludens* to supplant alienated *Homo faber*.²⁵ The world transformed would be one of temporary, mobile shelters, and constantly remodeled habitation that would allow individuals to become nomadic.

Reintroducing the individual to the play of the urban was foremost on the mind of the sociologist Henri Lefebvre. In his influential *Le droit à la ville* (1968), Lefebvre presented a teleological narrative that centered on around what could best be termed global suburbanization or the total reduction of *habiter* (to live, dwell, inhabit) to *habitat* (housing).²⁶ The logics of capitalism in direct conjunction with self-conscious upper class strategies emptied *habiter* of its social realities; in other words, the act of living, dwelling, and inhabiting in a community, a village, a town, a city. To live was more than to be housed, and it was the urban space that shaped a social world beyond one’s door.²⁷ He too saw his age as one where states isolated families in suburban single-family homes or apartments,

²³Constant, “Une autre ville pour une autre vie,” 37.

²⁴Constant, “Nouvel Urbanisme,” *Provo* 9 (1966).

²⁵Constant, *Opstand van de homo ludens. Een bundel voordrachten en artikelen* (Bussum: Paul Brand, 1969).

²⁶Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

²⁷*Ibid.*, 32, 68.

what he called “residential ghettos,” thereby chaining the employee to the consumer economy and his employer.²⁸ It was the burden of rent or mortgage payments, more than anything else, that made it impossible for the worker to challenge or leave his capitalist patron.

For Lefebvre, the only way forward was through the working class—white collar and blue collar—who still had the potential to speak of *habiter*. Workers and employees experienced first hand the poverty of daily life as they went from their apartment to the train station to their office or factory and then back to the train and their apartments to recuperate their strength and repeat the trajectory again. Only the working class could fully understand the connections among man’s three needs: security, the certitude of work, and the certitude of play. It was the working class who realized in urban social life that man needed a place to dispense his energies in play. In a transformed, future urban social life, man could again engage in creative acts if workers could liberate play from the deadening processes of production and consumption.²⁹ In addition to man’s basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing people desired the game of sexuality, physical activities, and sport. The transformation of daily life could therefore again make urban space a territory of work and productivity and the ludic *fête*. *Habiter* would again assert its predominance over *habitat* as social space became “schizophrenic.”³⁰

Given the lack of specific examples among radical social theory on these issues, one has to wonder what exactly ludic space looks like. One film that self-consciously interpreted the reduction of *habiter* to housing and women’s potential ludic liberation was *La ville-bidon*

²⁸Ibid., 137.

²⁹Ibid., 116.

³⁰Ibid., 152.

(Shantytown City, 1971). The film was directed by Jacques Baratier with a screenplay written by Christiane Rochefort with assistance from the actor Daniel Duval, who appeared in the film, and the plot was loosely adapted from Rochefort's *Petit enfants du siècle* (1961). An earlier version was created for television as *La Décharge* (The Dump), but the conservative Pompidou administration found the film too controversial and prohibited its transmission over French airwaves. Six years later, the film was re-baptized *La ville-bidon* and released in French cinemas to mixed reviews.

The telefilm began in a meeting with representatives of a municipality. A developer, an architect, and other officials discuss the construction of a *grand ensemble* on property currently occupied by a dump, a shantytown, and a transit apartment building for immigrant families. The actors portrayed these professionals as arrogant villains who thought of themselves as gods molding human life. After a series of exchanges, the one woman at the meeting, a stenographer, suspicious of all the talk about creating new men, modulating aesthetics, and planning for silences asks if anyone had thought about the needs of the people who will live in the apartments. The men reaffirm that through space and infrastructure they will institute "a classless society" and "a city of happiness."

Unbeknownst to the officials, a group of unmarried young men, women, and children live in a caravan on the dump where they self-manage a scrap-metal operation in complete individual and sexual liberty. It is a commune without any substantial or permanent habitat. They are knights of the blowtorch and car destroyers who disassemble the rusted debris of consumerism piece-by-piece. Fiona (Bernadette Lafont) serves as the erotic priestess of the rag-tag community, officiating at nightly bacchanalian and borderline sadomasochistic rituals. Masculinity and femininity have not disappeared among the scrappers, but relations

between the sexes are more egalitarian, and women are in a command of the erotic sexuality. The line between work and play is entirely blurred in the dump as the scrapers engage in the ludic, childlike game of dismantling cars.³¹ When informed that they need to leave their caravan and metal business, the scrappers immediately rebel, preferring their nomadic-inspired existence to living in what they call “dicks made of cement.” In the end, the male protagonist dies in a car crash as he attempts to block the police from pushing the scrapers off the dump.

La Ville bidon’s most compelling scenes were those that showed immigrant families living in Parisian shantytowns and transit housing. Unfortunately, these truly emotional documentary images are tied to a narrative that asks audiences to sympathize with a group of young Franco-French adults who choose to lead a romantic anarchic-libertarian lifestyle. *La Ville bidon* offered an emancipatory critique of a housing model, but it offered a frightful rather than compelling vision of an alternative society. Life on a dump did not really offer an attractive alternative for modern French families. Yet the life the rebels led in their cherished dump could easily be imagined occurring on some post-apocalyptic horizon; and the sexual power Fiona held over men offered no real security for women if those men became violent. Both the right-wing and the left-wing press embraced the film’s spirit of critique, but there was a shared sense that Bartatier and Rochefort had spent too much time in the cafes of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. This was perhaps the only place where the idea of living in an anarchic commune in a caravan somehow seemed better than living in an actual grand ensemble apartment. *L’Humanité* lamented that the film simplified important housing questions while *Le Monde* wondered if the director really believed a dirty field was better

³¹A 1976 *Pariscope* review considered these lyrical, circus-like scenes where junk was turned into objects of play constituted the only redeeming parts of the film. Georges Walter, “La Ville bidon,” *Pariscope* 11 February 1976.

than a “villainous” grand ensemble apartment.³² The grands ensembles may be inhumane, but the counter-culture of play that *La Ville bidon* portrayed—a settlement freely created rather than imposed in the name of liberty—was no more appealing.

Housing a New Generation

French couples turned to banking after the mid-1960s in unprecedented ways as they took advantage of the proliferation of branches and the marketing of financial products like home-saving plans. Government encouragement of the banking sector was part of a long-term employment strategy. It was assumed that youth generation coming of working age had no desire to dirty their hands in factories that in any case required fewer and fewer employees thanks to automation. Without banks, France tertiary sector offered few possibilities to resolve the problem of youth employment. As a result, the French could now find a bank at any major intersection as the number of branches increased between 1967 and 1975 from 4,484 to 9,433.³³ In 1966, only 18% of French households had a bank account. By 1972, 62% had at minimum a savings or checking account.³⁴ The home-savings account quickly became France’s most popular mass financial product of the postwar era (and remained so until 2003). These reforms coincided with married women’s right to open accounts without their husband’s consent and women’s massive entry into the labor force. By the late-1960s, the French female labor participation was only slightly below the ratio in Sweden, with the peak age of women’s participation falling between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. The salaried activity of women modified domestic economies as double-income couples became

³²Albert Cervoni, “La Ville bidon,” *L’Humanité* 28 January 1976; Jean de Baroncelli, “La Ville bidon,” *Le Monde* 28 January 1976.

³³ Henri Fournier, “L’évolution des banques françaises,” *Banques* 354 (September 1976): 823-838.

³⁴Perhaps far more revolutionary than the student revolts of May 1968 was the introduction of the *carte bleu* that same year by the Crédit Lyonnais, Société Générale, BNP, CCF, and CIC. Jean-Luc Bailly, Gilles Caires, Arcangelo Figliuzzi, and Valérie Lelièvre, *Economie monétaire et financière* (Rosny: Bréal, 2006), 19.

the majority.³⁵ As early as 1967, the government recognized that dual salaried couples had changed the housing game. As policymakers saw it, young married couples could now focus on savings accumulation between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five that could lead to the purchase a two to four room home comparably early in their lives.³⁶

Months before students occupied Parisian streets in May 1968, the ministry of housing had begun to think about how to put this young generation into boxes two by heterosexual two. A ministerial note in an October 1967 predicted that the baby boom generation would likely increase the annual number of marriages from 350,000 in 1967 to 400,000 by 1975.³⁷ The problem of housing those couples, as framed by the ministry, would only be solved by reconciling each couple's work, savings, and reproduction goals with its evolving housing desires. It was estimated that on average a newly married couple would need ten years to transition from rental to owner-occupied housing. This decade factored the time when a woman left salaried work to care for children or for a man to pursue a new profession—two situations that reduced a couple's savings potential.

Under the Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing's presidencies, the government justified its official endorsement of single-family subdivisions as an effort to realize the true desires of married couples. Government officials cited a 1967 INSEE survey that reported 77% of French households viewed the single-family home as the ideal type of familial habitation. This oft-cited statistic was somewhat misleading; in fact, a separate government funded housing study of 5,000 young (ages twenty-four to thirty) urbanized couples' attitudes

³⁵Marie-Agnes Barrere-Maurisson and Lovier Marcharnd, "Sociologies familiale et statistiques," *Population et Sociétés* 269 (June 1992): 1-3.

³⁶CAC, 19771142 article 1, "Documentation pouvant servir à l'étude de problème du Logement des jeunes ménages," Ministère de l'équipement et du Logement, direction de la construction, service de l'habitation bureau des études, sociologiques de l'habitat, August 1967.

³⁷CAC, 19771142 article 2, "Note sur le problème du Logement jeunes ménages, 10 October 1967.

towards housing revealed complex, diverse opinions about collective and individual housing.³⁸ Conducted in 1969, the study showed that young couples “in abstracto” expressed a preference for a single-family home with a garden purchased on long-term credit. When asked to choose between a *pavilion avec jardin* and a *grand ensemble* 68 percent preferred the single-family home.³⁹ However, 77% also favored moving into an apartment purchased on credit inside a collective habitation if the development had *crèches*, childcare centers, sports, good schools, and cultural venues.⁴⁰

Almost all of the surveyed couples engaged in dual employment and planned to have one or more children, therefore, the report concluded, collective housing actually corresponded better with women’s needs in theory since:

Collective habitation projects including *crèches* and daycare centers situated in the residential grouping leave mothers the ability to work, permitting young couples to reconcile the financial affluence that comes with two salaries with the realization of a family of the size wished.⁴¹

The report further speculated that the appeal of the single-family home among young couples probably reflected the fact they had never experienced a well-equipped collective housing development and thus had only inexplicable negative perception of “the grand ensemble like Sarcelles.”⁴² The report observed a contradiction in the couples’ professed dream of a single-family home and their simultaneous aspiration to be in close proximity to work, shops,

³⁸CAC 1971141 article 17, F. Netzler, “Opinions et attitudes des jeunes ménages sur le logement: jeunes ménages habitants des agglomérations urbaines,” Institut Français d’Opinion Publique, December 1968-January 1969.

³⁹Ibid., 2.

⁴⁰Ibid; This statistic was reported elsewhere. See CAC 19771142, Article 1, Quelques données sur le problème du logement des jeunes ménages, Direction de la construction service de l’habitation groupé de recherches et d’études sur la construction et l’habitation, Ministère de l’équipement et du logement, November 1969, 11.

⁴¹F. Netzler, “Opinions et attitudes des jeunes ménages sur le logement: jeunes ménages habitants des agglomérations urbaines,” 4.

⁴²Ibid., 3.

childcare, friends, services, and an authentic urban life. It was an inexplicable fear of modernist collective housing, the report speculated, that drove young couples to “traditional and reassuring modes of housing.”⁴³ The public images of a nightmarish life in the grands ensembles led young couples to gravitate towards a habitation style reminiscent of the rural countryside.

Those promoting the single-family home were aware that it was no solution for all social groups including the elderly (it was assumed the lifestyle was too isolating), the unmarried, or immigrant families. In fact, the single-family policy held much in common with the grands ensembles policy in that both were publicly defended as the best way to shelter salaried couples and their children. The difference was that the grands ensembles had from the beginning sought to shelter young couples quickly so as to encourage procreation, whereas the single-family policy, because it assumed a larger household financial contribution, delayed a couple’s acquisition of shelter and, potentially, reproduction narratives.

In 1971, the ministry of housing reflected on young couples’ desire to become single-family homeowners in the first ten years of their marriage, despite the fact that their family composition and place of employment could change dramatically over their first decade together. The ministry had three explanations for “youths” desire to become single-family property owners, and each explanation reflected changing cultural attitudes:

-First, due to the feeling that paying rent to a property owner is a loss of revenue while paying off loans is an investment

-Next, because renting offers no security

⁴³ The study reconfirmed that a women’s second salary represented the supplementary income permitting young couples to access a form of housing they desired by increasing the amount a couple saved towards a down payment. Ibid., 3, 69.

-Last, by the rejection of collective housing due to certain grands ensembles realized in France over the past twenty-five years that offered no attractive image⁴⁴

The single-family home was to be the ideal destination in a couple's life narrative, an objective to work and save towards, because it offered an escape from insecurity or the fear a grand ensemble. It was also destination that governments now portrayed as better suited to raising healthy children because it was greener, calmer, and more tranquil than collective housing. Given this government-supported image of the good life, it was perhaps predictable that a 1971 study of young married couples' housing preferences confirmed that France's baby-boomer generation expressed "conservatism" in their almost uniform preference for single-family homeownership.⁴⁵

Buy Yourself a Piece of Liberty

The liberalization of lending laws and the encouragement of private sector construction resulted in a massive wave of single-family home construction between 1968 and 1975.⁴⁶ At the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*, one out of every two households was no longer living in the same home where they had lived in 1968.⁴⁷ Between 1971 and 1975, builders completed construction on 500,000 homes ever year or more than were completed during the entire interwar period.⁴⁸ By 1973, 8.5 million French households called a single-family home their primary residence, but of only 47% lived in traditional homes predating

⁴⁴CAC, 19771142, Article 2, Le Logement des jeunes ménages en France, 10 October 1971, 7.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶CAC, 1977130 article 9, "Personnel letter from Christian Bonnet to Monsieur Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, ministre de l'économie et des finances, 13 September 1973,"

⁴⁷"Les migrations intérieures entre 1968 et 1975," *Economie et Statistique* 107 (January 1979), 3.

⁴⁸Serge Bernstein & Jean-Pierre Roux, *The Pompidou Years, 1969-1974*, Trans. Christopher Woodall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124.

1949.⁴⁹ French individual home construction surpassed collective housing construction in 1976 with private developers such as Bouygues and Phénix taking the lead.⁵⁰

This topographic imaginary of single-family France was not a mirror image of American styled suburban sprawl; it was instead idealized as a return to a more authentic France of scattered familial homes centered on a village. As historian Fernand Braudel reminded his readers, towns and cities rather than the single-family home were the anomalies of French history. Cities formed, thrived, suffered misfortunes, declined, and, were sometimes abandoned to the winds.⁵¹ He suggested that collective housing itself was an aberration that had emerged from specific socioeconomic *conjunctures*. True French civilization was found beyond the threshold of the familial home on the outskirts of rural bourgs, villages, and hamlets that sheltered an organic human and material culture; in other words, family homes expressed a way of life (belief systems, technology, culinary tastes), maintaining France's temporal coherence and territorial permanence.⁵² Braudel's student Pierre Chaunu argued that the single-family home embodied a psychological commitment to familial solidarity and permanence.⁵³ These homes were simultaneously a material edifice and a symbol of family life for those who dwelled within them; indeed, patronymic surnames became inseparable from the physical places where families, whether peasant or aristocratic,

⁴⁹Nicole Haument, "Les pavillonnaires et la pratique de l'habitat," *Urbanisme* 151 (1975): 68.

⁵⁰Prior to 1948, single-family homes represented 65 percent of the French housing stock. Grands ensembles construction pushed that percentage down to 41 percent between 1954 and 1974. Between 1975 and 1981, the single-family home regained lost ground to occupy 60 percent of the French housing market. Chester C. McGuire, *International Housing Policies* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1981), 171.

⁵¹Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen* (Paris: A. Colin, 1976), 321

⁵² Fernand Braudel, *Les écrits de Fernand Braudel* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1996), 292.

⁵³See Pierre Chaunu, "Le Bâtiment dans l'économie traditionnelle," in Jean-Pierre Bardet, Pierre Chaunu, Gabriel Désert, Pierre Gouhier, and Hugues Neveux, *Maisons rurales et urbaines dans la France* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 18-32.

lived. A French home was thus a physical place that also symbolized the perpetuation of familial traditions and stability.⁵⁴ Viewed in this way, French housing became a key component of the nation's collective identity. But the single-family home evoked a national past even more than a national future.

France, undeniably, had a long historical tradition of almost organic stand-alone rural habitation, and the nation had witnessed the anarchic growth of pavilion homes during the interwar period. What was particular about the growth of single-family home construction at the close of the Thirty Glorious Years, however, was the appearance of private developers purchasing agricultural fields, dividing them into lots, building homes, and selling the completed product—lotted land and house—to a second party. This was France's first experience with the mass production of single-family homes for consumers. Private developers could only begin building on this model after the mortgage market reforms and the introduction of household home-savings accounts. Despite all the discussion of individual initiative, it was the state that became the true champion of the single-family home as it encouraged experimentation in a series of widely-publicized competitions that the ministry of housing sponsored in 1967 and 1969.

In the early-1960s, the individual home in suburban communities was widely viewed as synonymous with ugliness, incoherence, and excessive individualism.⁵⁵ There was also a strong sense that it cost far too much to equip single-family communities with the requisite infrastructure. Advocates of single-family home construction were few, but they included

⁵⁴ Braudel held that French dwelling traditions remained constant aside from the occasional incorporation of technological advances until after 1945. Chaunu judged that French habitation patterns actually remained unchanged until the late-1950s. Braudel, *The Identity of France, vol. 1, trans.* Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 674; Chaunu, "Le Bâtiment dans l'économie traditionnelle," 23

⁵⁵ Susanna Magri, "Le pavillon stigmatisé," *L'Année sociologique* 58.1 (2008): 171-202.

influential figures such as the liberal economist Jacques Rueff.⁵⁶ Rueff was a life-long opponent of Keynesianism; specifically, what Rueff called the religion of full-employment, and a member of Friedrich von Hayek's Mont Pelerin Society. As a councilor to Antoine Pinay on the matter of establishing a strong franc, Rueff advocated a complete suspension of state supported financing of social housing construction through low-interest loans. In 1963, Rueff released a housing report approved by thirty-one out of thirty-six members of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques, which criticized the grands ensembles and encouraged the state to support American-style single-family home construction.⁵⁷

The report advised the government that it could better satisfy the true "tastes" of the population if it "stopped being an obstacle to free choice" and helped families acquire single-family homes as a consumer good. Rueff's report rejected the argument that single-family home construction was too expensive in France because land prices were so elevated around municipalities. Instead of investing in building grands ensembles, Rueff's report advocated government investments in expansive highway and road construction (as had the United States). New roads into the distant countryside would provide access to cheaper agricultural

⁵⁶Another important French theorist of single-family home development was the builder Jacques Riboud. Riboud envisioned peri-urban communities composed of 75 percent single-family homes and 25 percent apartment buildings. Residents, he explained, would depend on automobiles for transportation and television for entertainment. He asked his compatriots to have a little more faith in television and a little less faith for the automobile. Riboud believed social relations could be formed better over the telephone than in some modernist agora. Although his ideas were dismissed at the time, his vision was prescient. Jacques Riboud, *Expérience d'urbanisme provincial* (Paris: Editions Mazarine, 1961); Jacques Riboud, *Développement urbain, recherche d'un principe, complexe urbain en grappe* (Paris: Éditions Mazarine, 1965); Jacques Riboud, *La maison individuelle et son jardin dans la ville nouvelle: un récit sur la création de La Haie Bergerie à Villepreux, Yvelines* (Paris: Eds. Mazarine, 1966); Jacques Riboud, *Les erreurs de Le Corbusier et leurs conséquences; suivies de, Polémique autour de Le Corbusier* (Paris: Éditions Mazarine, 1968).

⁵⁷Rueff blamed the grands ensembles for creating a previously unknown "*vide social*" impacting the young who "resented the solitude of the collectivity" found in the grands ensembles. These disaffected youths in turn became "oppositional, aggressive, turbulent, all the comportments that lead him to delinquency." Jacques Rueff, *Commission pour l'études des problèmes du Logement* (Paris: Académie des sciences morales et politiques, Institut de France, 1963), 6.

land where developers could construct cheap single-family sub-divisions. In contrast to the “collectivist” grand ensemble, these groupings of individual homes would offer families “intimacy and independence, the solid basis for encouraging the development of family virtues.”⁵⁸ Rueff refuted the argument that single-family homeownership was an obstacle to labor market mobility. The French simply needed to learn a thing or two from the United States, where “real-estate property is bought and sold with extreme ease.”⁵⁹ For “the future of the nation,” political elites had to reorganize the financial instruments—be they imported from the United States or organized domestically—to give individual Frenchmen the tools to house his family as he chose.⁶⁰

By the late-1960s, opinions about mass single-family home construction were rapidly changing, thanks to a new faith that technological rationalization could create “traditional” homes with all the trappings of modernity; and that such homes could be built in proximity to municipal services, albeit at the price of dependence on private transportation (the automobile). There was growing confidence that the private sector would be able to apply the industrialized methods that were used to construct the grands ensembles for the development of “traditional” single-family sub-divisions. By practicing interventionist liberalism, the state intended to create conditions for the mass construction of single-family homes as consumer goods.

The first highly publicized governmental attempt to spur a private single-family construction market was a 1966 building competition called “villages-expos”—a highly-

⁵⁸Ibid., 12.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰Rueff wrote Olivier Guichard shortly after his directive prohibiting the *grands ensembles* to congratulate him for realizing an argument he made in 1963. ANC 1977130 article 9, “Letter from Jacques Rueff, Institut de France, to Oliver Guichard, 26 June 1973.”

organized even whose stated goal was to sensitize the public to the design of single-family homes clumped in American-style sub-division groupings. Throughout the late-1960s and early-1970s, ministerial officials were deeply concerned with the question of how to sensitize the populace to the idea of “*l’habitat individuelle groupé*” or the single-family subdivision. Built in the village of Saint-Michel-Sur-Orge, villages-expos received over 230,000 visitors before the homes were sold to private parties.⁶¹

At the villages-expos’ inauguration (25 September 1966), Roland Nungesser, interior secretary for housing, proclaimed that single-family homeownership was a universal French aspiration regardless of profession or region.⁶² The exposition was thus the physical manifestation of a desire to “break with the monotonous grands ensembles” and “reconstitute life around bourgs and villages.”⁶³ Nungesser predicted that the mass single-family home would inspire young couples to save so as to acquire a space they could truly individualize. Above all else, it was time for the French to return to what had long been the housing norm in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the United States, and West Germany.⁶⁴ He hoped the exposition would convince the French that single-family homeownership did not have to be an anchor holding families down or an albatross of upkeep; indeed, as Nungesser noted, property transactions could be simplified so as to make mobility even easier for an owner-occupier than for a renter. The generalization of single-family homeownership was “an

⁶¹This practice of grouping model homes offered by different builders continues to this day. There are currently four “Dom-expo” parks located to the north, south, west, and east of Paris respectively where couples—at least that is how they portray visitors in publicity—can visit homes offered by a half-dozen developers and receive financial counseling.

⁶²CAC, 19771142, Article 19, Inauguration de villagexpo, A Saint-Michel-sur-Orge par M. Roland Nungesser, secrétaire d’état au logement, 25 September 1966.

⁶³Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴Ibid., 7.

essential element of social progress towards which we direct all our efforts, which is improving the quality of domestic family life.”⁶⁵

The housing ministry followed up the housing expo with a “sociological” study two years later. The “study” was in reality a series of quotations from anonymous residents, all of which showed owners of the single-family homes at Saint-Michel-Sur-Orge as content with their lifestyle.⁶⁶ The study was part of a coordinated publicity response to a vocal group of residents and the “*conseil de village*” who complained about flawed construction, unfinished homes, sewage problems, poor infrastructure, and an absence of amenities for children.⁶⁷ The study revealed, however, that residents shared a general belief in the inevitable triumph of the single-family home across France. Residents pointed to the single-family homes as a tangible aspect of France’s economic and social modernization. As one resident remarked, The French were finally catching-up with the Americans:

All you have to do is look at the United States, there they do it more and more...it is a style of life that lots of people will want to adopt in the coming ten years and will have the means to do so. All you have to do is look at the United States.⁶⁸

Another homeowner thought that the entire “American system” might eventually be transplanted to France: “no initial contribution, people go home and repay their loan over the course of their lives, *c’est très bien ça!*”

Those interviewed connected single-family homeownership to personal freedom. One resident said: “a home, that represents success, you know! In any case...one has a feeling of

⁶⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶⁶CAC, 19771142, Article 19, Villagexpo: étude sociologique d’un groupe d’habitants, ministère de l’équipement, service de l’habitation, May 1968.

⁶⁷CAC, 19771142 Article 19, G. Gautier de Lahaut, Président du Conseil de village, lettre ouvert à monsieur le ministre de la construction, Villagexpo deux ans après ou de l’allusion au désenchantement, 16 April 1969.

⁶⁸Anne Meistersheim, *Villagexpo étude sociologique* (Paris: Dunod, 1971), 23.

liberation.”⁶⁹ Another held that mass single-family property ownership was “the only way it seems to satisfy the need for independence and liberty that seem absolutely legitimate.”⁷⁰ The single-family home “responded to the spirit of independence, the spirit of being the owner of something in totality rather than being in *copropriété* in a building.”⁷¹ Above all else, “pavilion life was so different from the grands ensembles from which we have so often fled...it is about conserving the advantages of the collective and improving them, if possible, for a better selection of the population.”⁷² Pavilion life, as presented, offered families the freedom to self-isolate.

Albin Chalandon, Pompidou’s minister charged with housing between 1968 and 1972, was keen to develop single-family housing, but he feared too many households would be priced out of the market, discouraged from saving towards ownership, and forced to enter collective housing if sale prices could not be lowered. The minister was somewhat exasperated by the stalled growth of the private market (only 36 percent of new homes built in 1968). He was also eager to encourage large for-profit residential sub-divisions. In 1968, 80 percent of new single-family homes were still built on an isolated basis. Chalandon wanted 80 percent of single-family construction to be part of larger concentrated sub-divisions. Instead of a small-time builder constructing one home here and there, Chalandon wanted a major private developer to marshal the capital to build one hundred homes here and two hundred homes there at the same time.

⁶⁹Ibid., 22.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 34.

Chalandon sensed that the key to lowering home prices was changing French mentalities about the home itself. In Chalandon's estimation, the single-family home of the present should not be confused with a traditional home built to last the centuries. The French had to conceptualize a modern single-family home as a new kind of consumer good with a lifespan of twenty to twenty-five years.⁷³ The mission for the government was to encourage the construction of affordable, single-family homes ranging between 55,000 and 98,000 francs in the Parisian region. In reality, it would remain almost impossible to purchase a single-family home under 130,000 Francs.

Chalandon labored in every way possible to raise the number of single-family homes constructed throughout the Hexagon. Ideally, the minister explained in promotional material for his 1969 Concours International de la Maison Individuelle, single-family homes should be "a consumer good just like a car" permitting "a different life style than that found in collective housing by facilitating contact with nature."⁷⁴ Chalandon advocated for a "liberating urbanism" organized around private construction and the single-family home that would allow French couples to finally "adopt the lifestyle of their choice."⁷⁵ He defended his project again and again as the will of the people. In the end, Chalandon maintained, it was the majority of his "compatriots," not himself, who desired to live in a single-family home. The government was only doing its part to actualize a dream for French couples.

⁷³CAC 197706, Article 1, Note pour monsieur le directeur de la construction, monsieur le directeur de l'aménagement foncier et de l'urbanisme, Monsieur le directeur du bâtiment et des Travaux publics de ministre de l'équipement et du logement, Albin Chalandon, 22 November 1968, 1.

⁷⁴CAC, 197706, Article 1, Concours International de la Maison Individuelle organisé par le ministère de l'équipement et du logement, 1968.

⁷⁵CAC, 197706, Article 6, Consultation pour la promotion de maisons individuelles, lettre du ministre de l'équipement et du logement aux préfets, 17 March 1969.

By 1973, civil servants officially acknowledged an anti-grands ensembles policy as an intricate aspect of promoting the single-family home. Chalandon's successor at the housing ministry, the Gaullist (Baron) Olivier Guichard, demanded "a vigorous combative policy against the grands ensembles and the social segregation they produce."⁷⁶ Guichard and subordinates adopted this language of equality to justify their opposition to collective housing construction. The minister argued that an immediate cessation of grand ensemble construction would dramatically decrease social segregation within ten years after the prohibition.⁷⁷ As he drafted a prohibition on their future construction, Guichard contended that he was coming to the rescue of the current grands ensembles' residents who felt as if they had been stuffed away inside boxes, where they became "crushed and resigned" to their fate. According to Guichard, collective housing encouraged class ghettoization, a socio-territorial problem, that could only be solved through a combination of single-family subdivisions and re-urbanization. Guichard therefore wanted nothing less than the entire French population to universally and permanently "*remise en cause*" the grands ensembles.

The final directive prohibiting future grands ensembles circulated on 21 March 1973. Signed by Guichard and his secretary Christian Bonnet, the ban was explained with three official justifications.⁷⁸ First, the grands ensembles "conformed little with the aspirations of their inhabitants and had no serious economic justification." Second, the grands ensembles encouraged the spatial segregation of social classes. Third, the grands ensembles were monotonous and aesthetically displeasing. Henceforth, no housing development could legally

⁷⁶Guichard served as minister between 1972 and 1974. CAC, 1977130 Article 9, Note à l'attention de monsieur le ministre, Objet: grands ensembles, ministre de l'aménagement du Territoire de l'équipement, du logement, et du tourisme, Le Conseiller technique, Paris, 16 March 1973, 1.

⁷⁷Ibid., 2.

⁷⁸CAC, 1977130, Article 9, Directive Ministérielle visant à prévenir la réalisation des formes d'urbanisation dites "grands ensembles" et à lutter contre la ségrégation sociale par l'habitat, signed Guichard and Bonnet, 21 March 1973

exceed 1000 units in a commune of 50,000 inhabitants and 2,000 units in major urban agglomerations. Moreover, no housing subdivision could remain under development for more than six years between groundbreaking and its completion (of course, Sarcelles and other major grands ensembles were housing subdivision-*cum-city*, taking ten to twenty years of construction to achieve an intended form). Seeking to ensure diversity in aesthetics, the directive also prohibited any one architect from designing more than 500 units in a single development.

The directive, however, went beyond the mere banning of a predominant form of French housing; its authors redefined the very mission of social housing. In addition to restricting a particular housing form, the directive discouraged rental property construction in favor of social owner-occupied construction. Rental housing constructed with over 300 units, traditionally viewed as affordable family housing, was henceforth to have at least 20 percent of its apartments reserved for “the aged, isolated, and physically handicapped.” Increasing elderly and handicapped access to affordable shelter was laudable, but this aspect of the directive redefined the groups that were best served by social housing. Falling in line with arguments made by figures such as Mesmin, the new approach who encouraged a shift from housing salaried families in social housing to sheltering needy and older populations.

The minister described the grands ensembles as buildings that had belonged to a past period of austerity when the French were poor. In the contemporary context of economic progress, French families could now draw on unprecedented financial means to live as they had always had wanted to live. In a September 1973 speech at Pontoise, Christian Bonnet reminded his audience that the March 1973 prohibition of the grands ensembles promised France a renaissance of single-family home construction in both the social and free

markets.⁷⁹ Bonnet explained that the minister's intent was to move families with the financial means from collective housing into single-family homes wherever possible. Bonnet declared that "everyone knows that, in the majority, the French population displays a preference for single-family housing... a truly "*populaire*" aspiration." The contemporary French couple desired above all "quality," "a human habitat," "less cohabitation," "larger surfaces," and "an elevated level of comfort" that only the single-family home was able to offer them.

In retrospect, Bonnet observed, it was strange for a people that did not "lack in space" to have "made so many collective buildings," but the time had finally arrived to move beyond "the repetitive grands ensembles, where the mediocrity of the architecture and the environment engendered anonymity and depersonalization in the inhabitations." Thanks to the "radical change of scale" now promoted by public power, French families would discover anew a satisfactory "*cadre de vie*" as they had once found in "traditional towns and villages" where "personal aspirations" and "social exigencies" had a more natural balance. Their new celebration of rural life did not return to Vichy-era dreams of the early 1940s, but Bonnet concluded that "the government profoundly believed in the influence of a certain type of urbanism on individual and familial happiness" and that "we create our milieu and that milieu creates us in a perpetual exchange." The French had the ability to choose the form of their habitation, but that habitation in turn influenced their attitudes and behaviors. The dialectic between a housing model and human social life continued.

In a November 1973 memo, Bonnet reminded departmental prefects and planning staff that the government's encouragement of single-family home construction "cannot operate in disorderly conditions that lead towards an anarchic urbanism, presenting just as

⁷⁹CAC, 1977130, Article 9, Allocution de Monsieur Christian Bonnet, secrétaire d'Etat auprès du ministre de l'aménagement, du territoire, de l'équipement, du logement et du tourisme, jeu de construction, Pontoise, 20 September 1973.

many inconveniences as the *grands ensembles d'immeubles collectifs*.”⁸⁰ Single-family subdivisions had to be structured so as to “harmonize” familial life. The habitation revolution sweeping the nation had to be carefully planned to create “a quality *cadre de vie*” and “*lutte contre la pollution de l'espace*.” The “development policy of the single-family home,” a policy coordinated in conjunction with “the aspirations of the French,” had to occur rationally to insure a return to “a more natural territorial equilibrium.”

Andrée Mazzolini at *Le Figaro* wondered if the grand ensemble prohibition was not in fact an electoral strategy.⁸¹ Mazzolini saw in Guichard’s efforts to demystify the *grands ensembles* a policy bent on atomizing social classes. The journalist could not understand how building six scattered sub-divisions of 500 units rather than one of 3,000 decreased socioeconomic ghettoization. In the communist stronghold of Seine-Saint-Denis, departmental officials immediately denounced Guichard’s circular letter as a strategy to eliminate social housing construction and thereby prevent the concentration of leftist electorates.⁸² *L’Humanité* also considered the prohibition to be an asinine reduction of a complex issue: the “war declared against the grands ensembles” was nothing more than “a diversion tactic” destined to whitewash the hands of those responsible for the so-called failure of the grands ensembles.⁸³

⁸⁰ANC, 1977130 article 9, Le Secrétaire d’Etat auprès du Ministre de l’Aménagement du territoire, de l’Équipement, du Logement et du Tourisme à Messieurs les préfets de région, messieurs les chefs des services régionaux de l’équipement, messieurs les préfets, messieurs les directeurs départementaux de l’équipement, 11 November 1973.

⁸¹Andrée Mazzolini, “M. Olivier Guichard décide d’interdire la construction des grands ensembles,” *Le Figaro* 22 March 1973.

⁸²CAC, 1977130, Article 9, “Le conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis et la politique des grands ensembles”.

⁸³R.P., “Moins d’HLM dans les communes ouvrières et ‘guerre aux grands ensembles’,” *L’Humanité* 23 March 1973.

Etienne Mallet, writing at *Le Monde*, found Guichard's directive surprisingly expansive in its daring vision (a full reprint of the directive accompanied Mallet's article).⁸⁴ Mallet contextualized the directive as foremost a Gaullist political strategy to reduce left-leaning political concentrations and even convince dissatisfied grands ensembles residents to shift their allegiances. What caught Mallet's attention was Guichard's argument that the prohibition eliminated social segregation by housing. The journalist feared the directive would likely result in far more isolated social housing units that would be even more underequipped than the existing grands ensembles. At *Libération*, Guichard's directive was viewed as part of a larger attack on social housing, which 80 percent of adults under the age of thirty-five said they actually wanted more social housing construction.⁸⁵ *Libération* noted that whatever else might be said about the aesthetics of the grands ensembles and social housing within them, the rents there remained significantly lower than anywhere else.

Louis Beriot at the populist *France Soir* was more sympathetic to the directive; and he argued that the French had to do something before Sarcelles was normalized as a French style of habitation.⁸⁶ Jean-Claude Buanic at *La Nation*, the organ of Guichard's party, predictably praised the prohibition as an unprecedented "radical" measure "improving quality of life."⁸⁷ It put an end to the "*ensembles inhumains*" that produced social segregation without justification. As Buanic observed: "quality of life is obviously the quality of the style of life and of habitat." The prohibition of the grand ensembles was thus "a way to oblige a

⁸⁴Etienne Mallet, "M. Guichard cherche à freiner la 'ségrégation par l'habitat'," *Le Monde* 23 March 1973.

⁸⁵"Le Logement populaire en 1973: 'Des appartements encore plus chers et toujours plus petits,'" *Libération* 30 Octobre 1973.

⁸⁶Louis Beriot, "Olivier Guichard déclare la guerre aux grands ensembles," *France Soir* 23 March 1973.

⁸⁷Buanic assumed throughout the article that *grand ensemble* and HLM rental housing were interchangeable. Jean-Claude Buanic, "Interdiction des grands ensembles," *La Nation* 22 March 1973.

more complex social composition of cities.” The decision could not have come at a better time because the grands ensembles were on the verge of becoming a normative aspect of France’s “*paysage urbain*.”

The leftist *Politique Hebdo*, by contrast, wondered “when and how had the baron Guichard been struck with *sarcellite*?”⁸⁸ The authors imagined Guichard as a modern day Candide who went out to discover the world, happened upon the monstrosity of Sarcelles and wondered how the hell can anybody live there? Why was it, the authors queried that an old hand in the Fifth Republic such as Guichard had suddenly become aware that nation’s housing policy produced “nervous depression, suicides, and a pathology baptized *sarcellite*”? Why had Guichard banned a form of

habitation that he deemed to cause “social segregation” and why was he promoting the single-family home? And why, finally, could this new form of urbanism actually promote class cohabitation or “a universal harmonious neighborliness” where “executives [PDG] and semi-skilled workers [OS] mowed the lawns of their pavilion home side-by-side”? To answer these questions and understand the prohibition of the grands ensembles, the authors argued, one had to first situate the urban form into a larger history of class contestation that made the Baron Guichard the inheritor of the Baron Haussmann’s struggles. The grands ensembles were an extension of Haussmann’s nineteenth-century plan to empty urban centers of the



11 “Baron Haussmann Baron Guichard Same Struggle”: Guichard as Haussmann’s inheritor.

⁸⁸E. L. G. and Collectif Urbanisme, “Comment et pourquoi le baron Guichard fut frappe de sarcellite et ce qu’il en advint,” *Politique Hebdo* (March 1973): 27-28

working class thereby preserving them for the wealthy. The political consequence of this policy was the spatial isolation of workers in areas where they could not revolt or engage in contestatory activities. Behind the grands ensembles was a capitalist policy of spatial isolation.

Guichard's prohibition was not inspired by a desire to improve human lives, *Politique Hebdo* explained, but it grew from the recognition that a housing system had failed to achieve its intended political goals. Rather than inducing an anesthetizing passivity in their populations, the grands ensembles motivated residents to organize and fight for better infrastructure and the right to an urban life within their community. It was the moment when this movement developed into an electoral reality in the previously center-right municipalities of Sarcelles, Amiens, and La Rochelle that "the government started posing questions." They found the grands ensembles played a role that differed from what planners had expected. The housing model increased political contestation among all classes. Guichard's prohibition thus was an attempt to stop the creation of any more pockets of contestation. Although Guichard portrayed his cause as morally righteous, rhetorically proclaiming that it ended social segregation in modern housing, his intentions were to homogenize electorates, integrate salaried couples into the world of consumer culture, and stimulate a large-scale, profitable single-family building industry.

Fifty deputies gave speeches on Guichard's circular in the National Assembly on 17 May.⁸⁹ Guichard opened the debate with an acknowledgment that neither he nor the deputies knew much about the techniques of construction, but their ideological vision of how a society should look put those construction techniques in motion. Housing, he went on to explain,

⁸⁹Débats parlementaires, assemblée nationale, compte rendu intégral des séances, *Journal Officiel de la République Française* 17 May 1973, 1327-1363.

required a new ideology and a new moral vision that would give France the chance to progress. Drawing critical exclamations from communists, socialists, and the radical left and applause from centrist and the right, Guichard announced that it was time to bury a housing policy grounded in “utopian socialism” and influenced by “romanticism” and “*naturisme gauchiste*.” It was this “coherent utopian socialist ideology,” Guichard continued, that had persuaded the French that the city was synonymous with pollution, oppression, and dehumanization. Rejecting their own city, the French went about building housing blocks “*sans beauté*” in “dead zones” outside older urban boundaries. At the core of his new policy, Guichard proposed that all citizens would find “a right to the city”:

Droit à la ville because the city is a value, because the city, the work of civilization, is the civilizer in return. *Droit à la ville* rather than to the four walls of housing: that is to say right to a certain type of social life where exchanges are richer.⁹⁰

The grands ensembles had proved incapable of fulfilling a citizen’s positive right to the city because they had escaped the design that fostered a vital urban culture.

To escape the dangers of suburban sprawl and return France to “a territorial equilibrium,” Guichard argued that all collective housing should be placed in urban centers and all older housing stock should be renovated. At the same time, Guichard apparently saw no contradiction in simultaneously calling for a housing policy whose foremost objective was encouraging the single-family home (and new forms of suburban sprawl). The minister concluded by recognizing that his new vision of French cities intentionally evoked the middle-ages, a time when dense socially diverse walled cities and homes were scattered

⁹⁰Ibid., 1329.

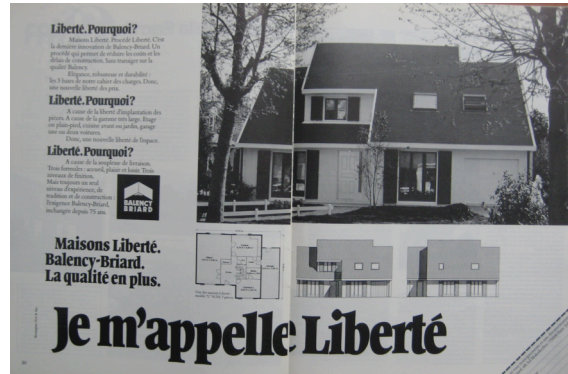
throughout the countryside: it was in the distant pre-industrial past that France would find “the condition necessary for a renaissance.”⁹¹

Conclusion: An Individualized Habitat for Individuals

In the end, baby-boomer radicals never successfully re-integrated housing into the practice of *habiter*. They nevertheless created a dramatic need for alternative housing arrangements as they pursued more individualized life narratives within a liberalized and tolerant society. Divorce, cohabitation, the decline of the two-parent household, childless couples, salaried women and men delaying marriage and/or children to live independently all created an urgent need for alternative housing situations. It would be facile to argue the center-right introduced housing finance reforms and encouraged single-family owner-occupied home construction to depoliticize the population and to discourage cross-class collations in collectivist communities by separating wealthier people from the rest of the population. Elite civil servants were certainly aware of these potential consequences, but housing policymakers could legitimately say that they were simply bending to the will of the people. Since 1945, French public opinion had consistently revealed a statistical preference for single-family homeownership among all social classes. Why was the preference for single-family homeownership so strong? Was it seen as a bridge between a rural past and an urban present? Was the suburban home actually viewed a form of continuity with the past in the modern world where instead of cows and crops one had a dog and a garden? Did couples see it as a potential harbor of peace and an anchor of heritage in a transitory world?

⁹¹Behind this vision was perhaps a real longing for a return to an early modern world of urbanization and habitation with the benefits of technology. Henri Lefebvre also portrayed that early modern urban world as a better place, a place of authentic laughter, play, and interaction before capitalism. See Henri Lefebvre, *Rabelais* (Paris: Éditions français réunis, 1955).

Sociologist Anne Meistersheim sought to answer these questions in a study of the Saint-Michel-Sur-Orge subdivision, which she published in 1971.⁹² Meistersheim concluded that if the majority of the French desired a single-family home, it was not because they were petty-bourgeois or had a psychological need to return to their rural roots; the desire came instead from the real or perceived poor quality of collective housing, which had sent French couples back to “a mode of housing



12. Balcency-Briard’s top selling model home named Liberty.

where they can on the one hand constitute a *chez eux*, have non-imposed social relations, appropriate their space, and have room for family members to engage in individual or group activities.”⁹³ Psychologically, homeownership was a form of liberation even if it came with two decades of indebtedness. It was by no accident that the private single-family homebuilder Briancy-Briad named its top-selling 1975 model home *Liberté*.

The genuine center-right political desire to personalize credit (and thereby democratize housing choice and homeownership) has been criticized for encouraging exclusionary practices. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, described these transitions as the victory of private interest over public good. According to Bourdieu, a group of “insiders,” elite civil-servants, top-ranking bureaucrats, treasury and ministerial officials, directors of public and private banks, and all graduates of the same *grands écoles*, dismantled affordable

⁹²Anne Meistersheim, *Villagexpo étude sociologique* (Paris: Dunod, 1971).

⁹³Ibid, 71.

housing and tricked couples into buying homes.⁹⁴ There was no political vision of the public good, just the profit motive.

Although Bourdieu rightly portrayed those responsible for reforms as an overwhelmingly elite group, it would be unfair to say that they had no social vision of the reality they sought to create for couples through housing reforms. Under the presidencies of Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing, housing policy encouraged individualism and private investment, departing self-consciously from a state-centered protectionist logic. The new political leaders promoted a market-based freedom of choice rather than state-imposed freedom from want. Whereas post-war leaders viewed the state's ability to shelter as a fundamental component of citizenship, Giscard d'Estaing viewed citizenship as a right to own property. That said, the French center-right, unlike neo-liberal Anglo-Americans, never advocated familial homeownership as a singular bulwark against all other risks (unemployment, illness, injury) or a solution for all socioeconomic groups.

In *Démocratie française* (1976), Giscard d'Estaing, summarized the vision of French society he sought to engender through housing reforms:

In private life, it concerns access to an individual habitat that should not resemble a cell of honeycombed cement and should resemble a house and that, whenever possible, should be owned by the family...the collectivist organization of our daily life has constituted a regression for our society....the role of society is not to regiment the individual to shape his *esprit*, but to the contrary to liberate him to facilitate his fulfillment [*épanouissement*].⁹⁵

The housing construction stretching from the 1950s to the 1970s had been in Giscard d'Estaing's view, driven by a "collectivist inspiration" which created monotone communities "exuding violence and solitude."⁹⁶ For the good of the couple and their children, the time had

⁹⁴See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*, Trans. Chris Turner (Malden: Polity Press, 2005).

⁹⁵Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, *Démocratie Française* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), 80-81.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 84.

now come to encourage homeownership and the single-family home—a material structure that gave men and women a sense of worth and encouraged more authentic neighborly relations.⁹⁷ Giscard d’Estaing’s conception of the family was not itself reactionary. He did not seek to institute a nostalgic patriarchal order (if anything, he was progressive in acknowledging women’s equality and recognizing equal roles within modern marriages). He saw a future where men secured a space through personal initiative—his work and savings in conjunction with his wife if employed—that would constitute a private shelter from the vicissitudes of collective life where the couple could more fully enjoy the play of familial life.⁹⁸ The legacy of late-1960s politics of the individual embraced by the left and right thus materialized itself across Parisian suburbia.

⁹⁷Ibid., 85.

⁹⁸Ibid., 80-81.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

An early draft of Olivier Guichard's editorial for *Le Monde* that explained the prohibition of the grands ensembles opened with a paragraph outlining what had been gained by France's twenty-five year experiment with the housing model.¹ Guichard attributed to the grands ensembles an undeniably vital role in the rapid modernization of French industrial construction; such large-scale projects spurred technological innovations and rationalized systems. The early draft even admitted that among all the grands ensembles "some certainly did not lack in quality." The draft went on to explain that the grands ensembles also provided the private housing industry with the basic methods to produce standardized single-family housing. Without the grands ensembles, private developers and the builders they relied on would have had no clue how to create large single-family sub-divisions. The time, however, had arrived to take all that was learned from the grand ensemble experiment and apply it to habitation "more adapted" to affluent life styles.

In French literature, life inside Sarcelles descended from Christian Rochefort's tragicomedy to Jean Vautrin's pure dystopianism. Vautrin's Sarcelles was awash with human blood as civilization collapsed inside it. The filmmaker and author set his trilogy of best-selling graphic crime novels in Sarcelles.² In his first book, Vautrin (1933-) portrayed a gang

¹ Archives Nationales, Centre des Archives Contemporaines, Fontainebleau, [hereafter CAC], 1977130 article 9, "Esquisse d'article du Ministre dans 'Le Monde' sur la directive 'grands ensembles'.

² Topographically, Vautrin's fictional Sarcelles bore little resemblance to the actual grand ensemble.

of over-sexed, sadomasochistic adolescents who kidnap a parliamentary deputy visiting Sarcelles. In his second venture, Vautrin's antagonist is a transvestite shooter, Billy-ze-Kick, who murders attractive married women in a Sarcelles that is otherwise populated with schizophrenics, erotic-maniacs, homemaker prostitutes, elderly suicides, maladjusted children, racists, pedophiles, and necrophiliacs. The detective who covered the Billy-ze-Kick case describes the grand ensemble as:

A city of the likes we will never construct again. Indeed, the government has announced it. Because it was a failure, the alchemists. Those messieurs recognized too late their error. Life was too gray. It appears that it is everyman for himself here, that the people do not communicate enough. A ghetto of rabbit cages, jalopies bought on credit, and rented televisions.³

In the end, a resident who places explosive booby-traps blows the detective to pieces along with the transvestite shooter.

Bloody Mary, Vautrin's third installment, was by far the most disturbing. The tale revolves around a replacement detective and his wife who descends into an irreversible psychosis. The detective, Sam Schneider, an unwilling transfer from Strasbourg to Sarcelles, is a racist with fascist sympathies. His wife, France Schneider, an attractive redhead, concludes that the city itself is trying to kill her after a miscarriage, and she refuses to leave their twenty-eighth floor apartment (the actual Sarcelles had buildings of no such height). In comparison to Colmar or Strasbourg, Sam considers Sarcelles an "anticivilization" where everything he hated was reunited in one place: "delinquency, prostitution, a lack of privacy, the mixing of races, broken families."⁴ Suffering from a personality disorder and calling

³One can compare Vautrin's critique of Sarcelles with the East German Brigitte Reimann's simultaneous critique of modernist habitat in her fictional *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974). Reimann's novel follows a female architect who suffered spousal rape and moves to the underserved, modernist socialist city of Hoyerswerda after her divorce. In Hoyerswerda, the protagonist finds the town a social disaster doomed to failure. Brigitte Reimann, *Franziska Linkerhand: Roman* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1998). Jean Vautrin, *Billy-ze-Kick* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 37.

⁴Jean Vautrin, *Bloody Mary* (Paris: Mazarine, 1979), 36.

herself “Maggy-Slut,” France covers her pubic area in ketchup and lied to Sam, saying an African window-washer named Baba N’Doula raped her. She adds, “the city was the cause of it.”⁵

At the time Sam is too busy to exact his revenge since he is chasing a military deserter who killed his superior officer after finding a picture of Hitler on his desk. The deserter returns to his native Sarcelles—where his father spent his days trying to catch a two-headed fish in the sewers—to plot the assassination of authority figures with stolen grenades. Sam eventually shoots N’Doula and attempts to pin the murder on the deserter before a grenade blows them both up. In Vautrin’s Sarcelles, there are no heroes. The detectives are always killed in the end with the criminals. Even the African N’Doula, unfairly murdered, is not a particularly likable fellow. Vautrin’s grand ensemble is a sterile container holding a rotten society. Vautrin was not being campy in his portrayal of Sarcelles; he apparently had no doubt that it was a kind of modern urbanism that corrupted the human spirit—a place the elite princes of public policy should have blown up long ago. This was the city as dangerous pathogen.

Speaking after the ban on future grands ensembles, Bloch-Lainé emphasized in his own apologia for the SCIC that all its technicians were men of “good conscience” who were unique among housing developers because “profit was not their motive.”⁶ Bloch-Lainé explained that the SCIC had entered uncharted waters from its creation. In the 1950s, as Bloch-Lainé admitted, Sarcelles lacked infrastructure, but behind its creation was the “good will” of architects, administrators, and technicians who wanted to provide families with

⁵Ibid., 166.

⁶François Bloch-Lainé and Françoise Carrière, *Profession, fonctionnaire: entretiens avec Françoise Carrière* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 136.

spacious modern homes as rapidly as possible. The flagship at Sarcelles, Bloch-Lainé reflected, had defaults, but it was the “pseudo-scientific” critique by journalists and *salonnards* that discredited the grands ensembles before they ever had a chance to prove their merits.⁷ The pervasive critique of modernist architecture left little room for the housing developer to articulate a full social vision. Until his passing, Bloch-Lainé thus defended Sarcelles as a socially diverse community with a “soul.” It was, he believed, a residential housing model that was environmentally and socially superior to sprawling single-family developments constructed away from urban centers, places of employment, and collective transportation.

In retrospect, Bloch-Lainé considered the first half of the 1960s to be a turning point that never turned.⁸ It was a moment when the French could have guided themselves down a pathway to a third way. He wrote:

If we had, at that precise moment, taken a more decisive step towards the third way, to better regulate the economy as well as perfect social relations, we could have without doubt evaded the ensuing stupidities, like the archaeological socialisms of 1981 and the thundering liberalism of 1986.⁹

Bloch-Lainé lamented the lack of audacity. Liberal orthodoxy, by contrast, never viewed the SCIC as a viable alternative developer; it was for liberals merely a temporary support for the economic system that housed families until a private construction industry could stand on its own two legs. Faith in the idea that a property developer could construct residential communities wherein heterogeneous groups engaged one another in spirit of civility, comity, empathy, and goodwill or that habitation could have a humanizing influence had evaporated.

⁷Ibid., 137.

⁸Bloch-Lainé, *Ce que je crois*, 76-82.

⁹Ibid., 78-79.

The leftist Geneviève Vailland, a younger sister of the communist, essayist, and screenwriter Roger Vailland, had visited Sarcelles in 1960. She decided that the grands ensembles exemplified a future way of life, though more time was needed to bring them into harmony with existing infrastructures. Vailland criticized Parisian journalists who descended from their trains in a grand ensemble simply to find “neither customary homes or streets.” The new housing system led journalists to assume that its residents suffered from *dépaysement* and dehumanization.¹⁰ Describing their hostile first impressions, the visiting critics rapidly made negative judgments because the grands ensembles differed from their traditional neighborhood and “their *vie parisienne*.” Vailland had wanted both the SCIC and the residents to take a more active role in informing the public that “*enracinement*” in such “new climates” was indeed possible. Indeed, she wondered why the SCIC had not formed a public relations department to portray the disinterested developer and residents as pioneers whose joint mission was creating “a new mode of habitation.”¹¹ By positively engaging public opinion, French society and residents could share “a sense of pride” in their grands ensembles.¹²

The SCIC, I hope to have demonstrated, had tried to materialize a vision of familial habitation that was inspired by Resistance social thought. Many civil servants politicians, and private interests, however, seemed to fear that the SCIC was creating a private-social housing sector in which various barriers between social status and housing forms had become too fluid. The grand ensemble allowed for more diversity in the ways that income was linked to

¹⁰Geneviève Vailland, “Vie quotidienne dans les grands ensembles” *Revue de l’Action populaire* 138 (May 1960): 607-619.

¹¹Ibid., 129.

¹²Ibid., 130.

housing. In the end, SCIC administrators were caught off guard when officials redefined housing policies that claimed to represent a “public opinion,” which favored the *maison individuelles* and expressed hostility for “sinking” practices. At a 1977 meeting of the SCIC administrative council, Léon-Paul Leroy concluded with sadness that “the golden age of our organization has passed.”¹³ The reorientation of housing policy had a “breaking [*freinage*]” impact on the SCIC.¹⁴ An organization that was best suited to build collective communities would have to reinvent itself in order to compete in single-family subdivision construction. The SCIC stood by helplessly as liberals subsumed social housing within the realm of the market and redefined the boundaries of social intervention. It was unprepared for a new generation of policymakers who placed the social sphere within the economic sphere and defined social issues as problems to be solved through free market economic programs.

In French culture, the *grands ensembles* became increasingly synonymous with *habitations à loyer modérée*, a mode of public financing for housing that had in fact transitioned to encourage affordable single-family home construction just as its original philanthropic advocates had intended. By the *fin-de-siècle*, only those who had lived as adults during a specific postwar era could communicate the reasoning behind the existence of the *grands ensembles*. My own well-educated French acquaintances, now in their twenties and thirties, grew up in either urban centers or suburban ‘*villages*,’ where the *grands ensembles* are now universally deemed to have been colossal errors. French society rejected and mostly despised the *grands ensembles* as pariahs whose total eradication—*tabula rasa*—was perhaps the only way to return France to a lost, albeit imaginary, territorial equilibrium.

¹³ACDC, 201-3, “Conseil d’Administration du 10 novembre 1977, process-verbal”, 5.

¹⁴Ibid.

By 1987, LeRoy himself had come to the personal conclusion that France was definitively set on the pathway to “American-style” housing provision and the consumer, lifestyle, transportation, and household debt problems that came with it.¹⁵ Unlike Margaret Thatcher’s Britain or Ronald Reagan’s America, however, France never engaged in widespread demolition of its modernist communities. The grands ensembles, for the moment, are still there. Yet the French have long since ceased seeing rental housing and condominium ownership as the ideal engine for lower middle-class mobility or family social status (cultural capital). Although the single-family home was not entirely triumphant, the stand-alone owner-occupied home remained the French dream. That dream, however, remained somewhat impeded because the French household’s access to credit never equaled the rapid fluidity of the American mortgage system, and France’s outstanding mortgage debt, as a result, always fell far below the European Union and American average.¹⁶ In France’s credit culture, the borrower has always had to accumulate more savings in order to prove that he/she/they can project financial security into the distant future. This was the situation then candidate Nicolas Sarkozy promised to change as president so as to make it possible for more French couples to achieve their dreams.

The real legacy of the grands ensembles, however, was a pervasive social theory that emphasized the influence of a built environment on the quality of life and the socioeconomic composition of neighborhoods. From Guichard’s circular (1973) to Habitat et Vie Sociale (a national plan to renovate the grands ensembles after an extended period of neglect, 1977), French housing policy was based on the theory that social segregation can be diminished

¹⁵ACDC, 201-1, Témoignage de Léon-Paul LeRoy, 4 February 1987, 17.

¹⁶Veronica Cacadac Warnock & Francis E. Warnock, “Markets and Housing Finance,” *Journal of Housing Economics* 17.3 (2008): 244.

through different forms of urbanity. In other words, a certain *urbanité*, a traditional urban landscape, a right to the city, can give social housing a positive image, thereby attracting mid- and high-range earning couples. The creation of new urban spaces would require the elimination of the grand ensembles, whose spaces had become largely unacceptable to salaried couples. Among public financiers, management agencies, and private contractors, there has been a longstanding desire to transform modernist buildings into more traditional residential spaces. The methods for this project include cutting up green spaces, placing buildings on plotted blocks, and eradicating the aesthetics of the grand ensemble style through demolition and renovation. The professed goal has been to destroy any traces of the modernist movement in residential habitation.

Although a professed goal, France never matched the zeal of the British in the demolition of modernist housing or matched their German neighbors for the imaginative renovation of estates. In the late-1970s and 1980s, French architects championed renovation over demolition, but respectful reorganization presented financial and legal challenges authorities seemed less than interested in reconciling. Demolition was seldom an option because few social landlords had completed repaying long-term construction



13. Sablons/Sarcelles 1 is scheduled for demolition

loans secured in the 1960s. Then, there was the legal fact that many apartments inside the grand ensemble were private property in *copropriété*, which limited the state's ability to intervene in the renovations. In many communities, the most dilapidated buildings became those in *copropriété* where the *conseil syndical* had disbanded.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, social landlords settled their debts and the buildings were demolished to make way for new social and market housing that could attract a better-off clientele. As a French scholar observed, the destruction of the grands ensembles, promoted as a form of urban renewal, offered incredible financial opportunities to private developers.¹⁷ Urban renovation, however, has typically been a site of tension and conflict in most modern societies. From New York City to Paris, activists saw urban renovations as an aggressive component of contemporary capitalism. There was thus a structural logic to the hatred of the bulldozer, and to battle the bulldozer was to put community before profit. Residents rallied to oppose demolitions and thereby protect their neighborhood—as a shared urban space and as a community of interconnected individuals. As Manuel Castells saw it, the impulse to protect a neighborhood from demolition was an act of resistance and solidarity.¹⁸ One thinks of Marco Ferreri’s humorous film *Touche pas la femme blanche* (1974), which was inspired by protests against the construction of a mall where the Parisian Halles once stood.¹⁹ In the film, General George Custer and the 7th Calvary suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of the Sioux Nation inside the gapping hole of the demolished Halles. Custer’s government, presided over by Nixon, wants the land and starts displacing the tribe, young Parisians, onto grand ensemble reservations on the periphery. The only way for the Sioux to withstand Custer and to preserve their ancestral

¹⁷Bénédicte Gérard, “Les grands ensembles d’habitation: une forme urbaine “non durable?” in Philippe Hamman, ed., *Penser le développement durable urbain: regards croisés* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008), 260.

¹⁸Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot recently argued that France’s elite bourgeoisie defend their spaces with militancy and, comparatively, greater success. Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, *Les Ghettos du Gotha: Comment la bourgeoisie défend ses espaces* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007).

¹⁹The film’s English title is *Don’t Touch the White Woman*. *Non toccare la donna bianca/Touche pas la femme blanche*. Dir. Marco Ferreri. France/Italy, 1974.

land was to band together and defend their old hunting grounds.²⁰ The Parisians therefore had chosen to defend their urban space.

In Sarcelles and other grands ensembles, however, demolition has provoked only limited public outrage. Buildings are emptied of their residents over an extended period of time. In many cases, long-time residents or elderly owner-occupiers are gradually relocated to new buildings nearby. A pervading sense of “good riddance” reigns in the demolition of older housing blocks or towers. Sarcelles’ first residential project has already been emptied and is currently slated for demolition. Bouygues, a French private developer, has now completed one building on the site. The new building is stylistically reminiscent of a traditional urban block (*i.e.*, built out to the street with a courtyard) and caters to a more affluent clientele.

From Pariah to Patrimony

The wrecking ball need not be the last chapter in the history of these modernist communities. As the bulldozer threatened the grands ensembles, cultural institutions turned to them as a subject of historical inquiry. Those who have tried to revise the meaning of the grands ensembles recognized that places such as Sarcelles would need a cultural “renovation” in the collective memory as well as a material renovation on the land. The people of Sarcelles have confronted these questions in their own way through an oral history project entitled *Mémoires Croisées de Sarcelles* which interviewed some 200 residents. A second intervention was the creation of an elementary school history textbook on the grands ensembles. More recently, the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles in the Ile-de-France [DRAC Ile-de-France] nominated a number of Sarcelles’ residential buildings for designation

²⁰See Michael James Miller, *The Representation of Place: Urban Planning and Protest in France and Great Britain, 1950-1980* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2003), 1-4.

as patrimonial historical monuments of the twentieth century. Each of these cultural interventions sought to change the meaning of a denigrated built environment by reevaluating its past, but each intervention offered different interpretations of what should be remembered and why Sarcelles should be commemorated in the first place.

In his 2006 oral history project, *Mémoires Croisées de Sarcelles*, Frédéric Praud traced residents' migrations, no matter whether they were teenagers or septuagenarians, up to



14. One in a series of posters displayed on buildings to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of lives in the grand ensemble of Sarcelles. The dominant theme of the series was peaceful cohabitation in diversity.

(and after) their arrival in the grand ensemble. In Praud's oral histories, Sarcelles emerges as a harbor of peace rather than as a dead-end, it becomes part of diverse personal struggles to obtain physical and emotional security over the past half century. In the late-1990s, Praud started recording oral histories or practicing what he calls "*l'activité d'écrivain publique biographe*" with the ambition of creating social bonds within communities and between

generations. Annick Morin, an *adjointe au Maire*, invited Praud to Sarcelles as part of the celebration of 50 years in the grand ensemble in 2006. She envisioned testimony from residents as a means to plant "memory trees" in the community and to thus "root" the grand ensemble in history. The municipality's explicit goal was "to permit residents of all ages to work at the valorization and the modification of Sarcelles' image so unjustly denigrated." Rather than a miracle solution, organizers hoped the series of public interviews would be one among many steps to help foster a positive communal history. On weekends, Praud interviewed volunteers at a neighborhood center with a selection of snacks and coffee

available to the audience. The interviewee reviewed questions prior to the event and there were no audience contributions. Praud transcribed all interviews online as uninterrupted prose and suggested pedagogical usages for local classrooms. The municipality transferred the filmed interviews, recordings, and transcripts to the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Cité de l'Immigration.

What do Praud's interviews tell us? Do they share any common themes as they trace the sundry paths that brought individuals and their families to Sarcelles from other parts of France and abroad? Although the migratory stories leading up to Sarcelles were unique, people arrived in the grand ensemble for similar reasons: they needed affordable rental or purchasable housing, sought a bigger or better living space, wanted to accommodate a growing family, shared pre-existing ties to people in the community, wanted proximity to places of employment, or successfully applied for a housing unit. The men who were fathers associated their arrival at Sarcelles with the psychological relief of finding shelter for their families. The women who were mothers expressed relief in finding a safe home, though they referred to the difficulties of organizing childcare and schooling while they balanced part or full-time employment.

What interviewees all shared, regardless of age or geographical origin, was a frustration with the common public representation of Sarcelles. To quote a 28 year-old interviewee whose parents, a Sudanese-Tunisian father and a Turkish-Liberian mother, moved to Sarcelles in 1975:

Outside, Sarcelles still has a reputation for being a tough city, to such an extent that sometimes I don't want to say I live there..."Where are you from?" "Sarcelles." "Oh gosh! How do you do it?" They have an image that this city is robbers, rappers, when in reality it is exactly the opposite.

Another interviewee, a 76 year-old woman named Michele Monet, had moved from Paris to Sarcelles with her husband and daughter in 1961, but she remembered how the negative images were already common in the 1960s:

A gang of journalists came to Sarcelles, but they never listened to what I had to tell them. They really denigrated Sarcelles without ever taking into account the things I told them...this example shows well that thirty years ago, journalists were already busy denigrating Sarcelles...they went about it the same way journalists do today...

Almost all interviewees criticized the media for propagating negative images of their community whether it be the myth of *sarcellite* or the stereotype of Sarcelles as the French equivalent of an African-American urban ghetto. No interviewee self-identified himself or herself as part of a marginalized population or as a victim of spatial segregation. They also refused to portray their community as obsolete; on the contrary, everyone saw Sarcelles as an urban experiment of continuing importance. Critics may dismiss the project as a prosthesis-memory for a transient community, but such critiques would be wrong. Although the project failed to formulate a shared consensus about Sarcelles' past, the interviewees seemed to tell their individual stories as a kind of sacred duty; they wanted to improve and protect the grand ensemble for future generations.

L'histoire des grands ensembles de Garges-lès-Gonesse, Sarcelles, et Villiers-le-Bel racontée aux enfants, a textbook distributed in 2008, provided elementary school students with a coherent historical narrative of the grands ensembles. Public historians working for La Mission Mémoire et Identités en Val de France initiated the project out of a sense that children in these communities needed a historical understanding of why the buildings they lived in existed.²¹ The comparative “unnaturalness” of their habitation required an

²¹The historical committee also published an invaluable archival guide on the communities. Mission Mémoires et identités en Val de France and Dominique Lefrançois *Guide des sources pour l'étude des grands ensembles: Garges-lès-Gonesse, Sarcelles, Villiers-le-Bel, 1950-1980* (Villiers-le-Bel: Communauté d'agglomération Val de France, 2005).

explanation, and the authors assumed that elementary students and their parents had little memory of the communities in which they lived. The construction of this memory thus required a new narrative about both the buildings and the people who lived in them. Funded by the DRAC, the department, and a social housing landlord, the project brought together major urban historians, educators, students, and a cartoonist who collaborated to publish a concise and humorous history.

The book opens with a discussion of the postwar housing crisis and a wonderfully illustrated explanation of the ideals behind the modernist movement. Cartoon children debate why this futuristic vision was attractive and how it embodied hopes for “a new society that would be more modern and more egalitarian.” The history then tackles the question of who lived in the grands ensembles and why they moved there. The stories begin with Parisians and French provincials



15. Cover to *L'histoire des grands ensembles de Garges-lès-Gonesse, Sarcelles, et Villiers-le-Bel racontée aux enfants*: A CM1 and CM2 textbook

before moving on to the arrival of repatriated families, then immigrants and refugees. Sarcelles, the textbook emphasized, became a landscape where different cultures mixed in spatial proximity. It was a landscape where “*le métissage* took place daily,” which was why residents displayed a strong historical commitment to combating discrimination and racism.

This optimistic multicultural message confronts a bleaker reality with the turn of a page, however, as the textbook explores the end of the golden age in the grands ensembles. After the 1980s, students discover, “modest families become more and more numerous” as immigrants and unemployed people became concentrated in the grands ensembles. Why did the dream die? What has been seen as a failure was not really a failure in the basic purpose of

the developments, we discover, because the *grands ensembles* continued to house families. There was nevertheless a failure to achieve a broader social vision made unrealizable by sustained economic crisis. The French commitment to the model's success waned. According to the authors, residents of the *grands ensembles* affirmed an important social value simply by living in their communities. Solidarity, our history tells us, remained alive and well in the grand ensemble where "individualism has gained some ground, but less so than in the big cities" just as the communities' developer and advocates intended.

The textbook's penultimate chapter brings forward the specter of the bulldozer: images of demolished buildings and moving vans. The narrator comforts the reader, telling him or her not to be afraid of demolition, to take comfort in the fact the *grands ensembles* will always be part of France's patrimony. The building in which you and your family lived will be destroyed, but you should not worry because we will conserve the memory of this special place. A well-intentioned attempt to comfort readers, however, comes across as somewhat disingenuous. Associations and public officials, the narrator reports, are busy collecting documents, photographs, and interviews from residents, so their memories will be conserved for the future. But they are not really safeguarding lived memory; they are simply constituting archives so the demolished neighborhoods will exist only as objects reconstituted by future historians. On that note, the last chapter asks students to help reconstitute their own community's past by responding to a series of document-based questions.

The textbook thus helped to prepare Sarcelles' students for the demolition of their homes, but the actions of the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles d'Ile-de-France [the DRAC] were also a first step towards blocking the bulldozers. In 2009, the DRAC nominated

two neighborhoods designed by architect Jacques Henri-Labourdette for Patrimoine du XXeme siècle status. The minister of culture and communication created the status in 1999 to preserve twentieth-century architecture and avoid “irreplaceable loses from this instant of European memory.” The status has no juridical meaning and no financial benefits; all in all, it is but a tentative step towards historic preservation status. After approval, the DRAC could affixe a sign on a building to inform the curious passerby that it is *Patrimoine du XXeme siècle*.

The DRAC favored attributing the patrimonial status to buildings in the grands ensembles as a means to change public opinions about the oft-derided structures. Cultural administrators hoped that the status would improve the reputation of a depreciated architectural style that coincidentally served as housing. The DRAC’s literature on the status makes clear that each building was nominated



16. Les Flandres: Patrimoine du XXème Siècle?

after a professional scientific evaluation without considerations of personal taste or the social, political, and economic evolutions of the site. Buildings existed in the realm of architectural history and therefore stood as monuments to an architectural movement and nothing else. In other words, the status memorialized buildings without recognition of their role as places of human life.

The DRAC easily identified particular apartment buildings as significant for the history of architecture, but it had difficulty suggesting why they carried symbolic importance. This paradox appeared in each of the “memory” interventions discussed: what is the relation



17. Lochères: Patrimoine du XXème Siècle?

between apartment buildings and their residents? Do we remember the houses, the homes, or the neighborhoods? Imagine if you will: a future tourist humming along in an electric car on the *autoroute du Nord*. As she moves along the GPS tells the driver something of historical importance is in the vicinity: Versailles, for example, and other famous chateaux. Will our imaginary driver also be informed to exit now to see the modernist community of Sarcelles? Will she take time to visit a still inhabited modernist community on the outskirts of Paris? And, more importantly, why? Would such a visit have historical meaning? What memory of France will be written into the concrete edifices of tower blocks erected during the *Trentes Glorieuses*? When our imaginary suburban tourist pulls off to photograph twentieth-century collective housing what historical story will await her?

Sarcelles celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on 16 and 17 March 2006. Large banners were placed on the sides of buildings to celebrate. Photographs of men, women, and children of different colors, ages, and ethnicities occupied each banner with the tagline “50 years of lives in the Grand Ensemble.” The banners seemed to recognize that each and every resident had a unique story, but that the grand ensemble had brought them together despite their differences. That year, the Parti Socialiste (PS) mayor of Sarcelles, François Pupponi, a lifelong resident of the grand ensemble groomed as the successor to the former parachuted mayor of Sarcelles Dominique Strauss-Kahn, conducted an interview on the roof of one of the *grand ensemble*’s tallest buildings. He reflected with pride on Sarcelles’ story and its

place in French history.²² He maintained that the problems of Sarcelles were mainly economic. They had nothing to do with architecture or a form of habitat, and there was never such a thing as *sarcellite*. In his preface to Linda Bendali's *Sarcelles: une utopie réussie* (2006), Pupponi reflected on how he would not have wanted to pass a childhood anywhere else but the *grand ensemble* since it promoted the concept of “*vivre ensemble*,” which manifested itself in the residents' tolerance, anti-racism, and philosemitism.²³ In his opinion, Sarcelles had become what its developers had always intended:

a “‘little Jerusalem,’ somewhat oriental, somewhat African, always *francilienne* [suburban Parisian]...a crossroads welcoming all who live there and of all religions of the Book...the habit of being in close contact with otherness [*l'altérité*] is anchored in its reality. Sarcelles, more than others, integrates those who install themselves there.”²⁴

To the journalist Bendali, the *grand ensemble* had not become a social utopia, but it had become a place where the question of how humans can better live together continued to be asked, just as, she believed its supporters had intended.

It is easy enough to cast the disparate parties involved in the design, financing, and management of the *grands ensembles* as misguided paternalists and authoritarians, we forget that they also believed housing should be organized in accordance with what they held to be new perennial social patterns. We now know many of these patterns—the nuclear family, full, male salaried employment, and women's devotion to domestic/maternal labor—were in fact anomalies of late-industrial capitalism. The *grands ensembles* anchored a postwar maternal and corporatist politics that familyists and pronatalists had articulated earlier in the twentieth century. Acting on such ideas, the developers placed millions of families in two to

²²Thierry Portes, “A 50 ans, Sarcelles rêve d'une nouvelle jeunesse,” *Le Figaro* 18 March 2006.

²³François Pupponi, “Préface,” in Linda Bendali, *Sarcelles: une utopie réussie* (Nantes: Gulf Stream, 2006), 6.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

five room apartments equipped with all modern conveniences. The new buildings thus combined utopian thinking (the harmonious family in a city in the countryside) with materialistic science (the establishment of a technocratic social peace). The goal of this postwar project was to protect lower-middle and middle-class salaried families, rather than to provide shelter for the poorest social classes.

Sarcelles and other suburban grands ensembles emerged from ongoing efforts to provide men, women, and children with all the material benefits of a modern industrial society. The broader social goal was to help people connect with the natural world in a space that reconfigured human relations and reconstituted “traditional” gender roles. The grands ensembles promised a more efficacious implementation of education, social, sport, and cultural infrastructure that in reality often arrived only after extended delays. The political ambition to make the grands ensembles part of a wider reorganization of French economic and social life, however, never developed outside of the writings of a few idealists.

Yet the grands ensembles encouraged the French to reaffirm a powerful dialectic between urban space and the healthy society—a dialectic that continues to permeate French culture and influence public policy in ways that have no direct American equivalent. The postwar grand ensemble contributed to the political claims for the French citizen’s right to housing and right to the city.²⁵ These two positive rights are nebulously defined concepts in

²⁵The Parti Socialiste, as a gesture to its base, legalized this theory through a series of *fin-de-siècle* positive housing rights legislation recognizing that an urbanized home was an aspect of every citizen’s full inclusion in society. In 1991, the PS legalized a citizen’s “right to the city [*la droite à la ville*].” The PS made the unwritten goal of *la politique de la ville* [urban policy]; to return France to a lost, albeit imaginary, territorialized socioeconomic equilibrium, the law of the land. They turned to a vague postwar constitutional promise to shelter for precedent to establish the citizen’s positive right to housing. Defending housing as a social rather than economic question, the PS passed the Besson Law acknowledging “the right to housing [*le droit au logement*] constituted a collective duty for the entire nation. Every individual and family confronting difficulties, notably due to their lack of resources or their state in life have the right to assistance from the community, have the right to access decent, independent, and maintained housing.” The Besson Law was one among a package of housing rights legislation including the 1991 Loi d’orientation pour la ville [Guidelines or

French law; indeed, one would be hard pressed to describe what a right to housing and the city actually means for a retiree, a single mother, an immigrant, a family of four, or an unemployed breadwinner. But the discussion of these rights remains an important rhetorical acknowledgment that egalitarian access to “modern” housing (the private and individual space) and to urbanity (the public and collective space) must be included in the project to build a more egalitarian society.

The postwar male breadwinner model of housing arrangements proved short lived as married women massively entered private and especially public sector labor markets. France moved back toward what Jane Lewis termed a modified male breadwinner model wherein the state assumed that women would not always be dependent on a salaried male.²⁶ When Frenchwomen reentered the labor market they actually returned to their traditional roles as both economic producers and family reproducers. Despite the efforts of social policymakers, the downward pressure of the male “family” wage meant that young couples perceived dual incomes as the best means to achieve a desired standard of living and their personal housing

Advice for Urban Policy Law] which legalized the nebulous concept of a citizen’s “right to the city” and the 1998 Loi relative à la lutte contre les exclusions [Anti-Exclusion Law] spurred by suburban unrest and activist groups that assured “access of all to rights in the fields of employment, housing, health, justice, education, training, culture, the protection of family and of childhood.” This legislative drive culminated in the 2000 Loi relative à la solidarité et au renouvellement urbains [SRU, Solidarity and Urban Renewal Law] that mandated that at minimum 20 percent of every municipality’s housing stock be social housing. Overall, these laws proved problematic in that they were not tied to any institutional mechanisms ensuring their enforcement and they met fierce opposition in practice from *notaires* and real estate professionals. The United States offers no equivalent positive housing rights and refused to sign a United Nation’s initiative asking member states to assure their citizens a right to housing under the pretext that such a right was best secured through the protection of free market housing provision. Barry Goodchild, “Implementing the Right to Housing in France: Strengthening or Fragmenting the Welfare State?,” *Housing, Theory, and Society* 20 (2003): 86-97; Élisabeth Maurel & René Ballain, *Le logement très social: extension ou fragilisation du droit au logement* (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, 2002); Élisabeth Maurel, “Les publics du logement très social,” *Informations sociales* 77 (1999): 56-67; Patrick Doutreligne, “Vers un droit au logement,” *Informations sociales* 81 (2001): 62-71.

²⁶Jane Lewis, “Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 2.3 (1992): 159-174; Also see Janes Jenson, “Gender and Reproduction: Or, Babies and the State,” *Studies in Political Economy* 20 (Summer 1986): 9-41.

aspirations.²⁷ This history ends with the introduction of more *laissez faire* housing policies in the 1970s, but if our survey continued we would discover that liberal reformers did little to reduce state interventions in the realm of housing allocations, subsidies, or benefits. The French stopped supporting devalorized building projects but they intervened in other ways to assist worthy households as they engaged the free market.²⁸ The state has nevertheless consistently set conditions that favored the sheltering of salaried couples. The model homeowner has always been a male breadwinner and later a modified-breadwinner family, and the goal was to make homeownership attractive to financially worthy couples.

Urban historian Kenneth Jackson argued in his classic *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985) that historical research is of fundamental relevance to housing policy; and, in my opinion, such research could spur renewed interest in civic minded, semi-decommodified, sustainable, and environmentally-friendly neighborhoods—habitats that could encourage socioeconomic diversity on postindustrial and rapidly modernizing frontiers. The grands ensembles—France’s concrete frontier—were an attempt to equalize the burdens of raising children for nuclear families eventually deemed incompatible with a high quality of life. Has the quality of life in owner-occupied single-family homes proved any better for working parents? Has it decreased their daily commutes? Has it liberated individuals from domestic ideologies? Has it made their lives seem less precarious when faced with unemployment? These questions and this history suggest that density and modernist housing deserve more historical and

²⁷Of course, Frenchwomen returned to employed for more than financial reasons. They also sought social interaction and the rewards of professional development. Also, as divorce became more and more frequent, women had to prepare for future financial security. See Jacques Commaille, *Les stratégies des femmes: travail, famille et politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

²⁸See Maurice Blanc, “The Changing role of the State in French Housing Policies: A Roll-Out without Roll-Back?,” *European Journal of Housing Policy* 4.3 (December 2004): 283-302.

public analysis.²⁹ In our age of environmental crisis and chronic anomie, the grand ensemble model—for its successes and failures—may have new relevance. Intellectuals decried the grands ensembles for swallowing a true France, scarring its pastoral landscapes, rendering ancient fields unrecognizable, and bending family narratives to the interests of capitalism and consumerism. French suburbanism after the ban on grands ensembles construction and triumph of the the *maison individuelle*, however, looks no better: car ownership rose as it became the primary means of transportation, household debts increased, daily commutes lengthened, and new highways were lined with consumer big-box stores and *hypermarchés* such as Carrefour.

Neither social nor free market housing have satisfactorily provided sustainable, economically mixed suburbs and cities, where young people, allied couples, individuals with or without children, and the elderly all want to live. The pressing question of the twenty-first century, when international capital has become amazingly mobile, is how to remove the stigma attached to certain forms of housing and how to create situations in which people can move more freely into living situations that reflect their changing life needs, especially as populations live longer lives. Who will assure the delivery of flexible dwellings? Will they reflect one's age, civil status, number of dependents, earnings? The answers to these questions will require a reassessment of the past half-century in order to rethink our housing cultures and to revise prevailing paradigms to correct the injustices and imbalances of self-interest. If “another world” is still possible, contextualizing and synthesizing past housing

²⁹Research has shown that Sarcelles-style developments are preferable to the current vogue for ultra-high tower condominiums (more than twenty stories) across the globe. Data has led planners to argue that a mix of mid-rise apartment buildings and moderate high-rises with different forms of tenure achieve high-density goals and a more efficient use of land. See Arza Churchman, “Disentangling the Concept of Density,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 13.4 (1999): 389-411.

strategies, as well as their impact on men, women, and children of different backgrounds is an important analytical enterprise; and it may well spur future social democratic or green movements to articulate innovative ways to resist homogenizing cultural and socioeconomic processes.

Historical research can assist the reconceptualization of dwelling paradigms. Historians can narrate how housing development and desires contributed to what is now a global fetishistic dependence on private automobiles and energy consumption. Housing history can also help societies rethink housing finance, design, and tenure to support allied couples, individuals, and extended families in increasingly precarious labor markets and rapidly expanding megacities. We must rethink how the industrializing and post-industrial world can build homes that do not treat humanity and nature as instruments of destructive economic productivity—before it is too late.

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