

We must still work to become good citizens!

François Bernheim

A speech given at the Group for Remembrance and Vigilance (16 April 2015)

For nearly 40 years working in the field of advertising it has been my pleasure to communicate with millions of consumers. These days, I use all my strength to speak with smaller numbers of people, from one to 300.

How do I do it?

In 1996, I was part of a radio news programme and a live program called “Monday is a mess”, which was analysis and poetry, created especially for people who watched or listened in a room. It stopped in 1999, but then it restarted in 2009, with two important changes – it changed from Mondays to Tuesdays and an accompanying blog was started called “Tuesday is a mess”. Thanks to the efforts of all involved, the blog continued after the live shows stopped two years ago

The idea behind ‘it is a mess’ is:

1. As well as having fun we want to focus on society’s problems together with art, literature and human interest
2. Secondly, we focus on the ‘other’ or the foreigner, as being as interesting as we are. Indeed we are not alive without interaction with those who have different cultural traditions to us.

In fact, with the internet, and with the blog in particular, we have progressively engaged with two groups:

- Parisians involved in the life of their community
- The media, targeting an audience to whom we had no previous exposure

The internet has allowed us, and indeed others, to enhance the status of the journalist. Such legitimacy developed very slowly and it was only last October that ‘Tuesday’ was first seen in the mainstream media. Like many supporters of the Republic, the rise of the National Front is of concern to us. In February 2014, Haydée Sabéran, a journalist for *Libération*^{*}, published an enquiry on the rise of the National Front in Hénin Beaumont^{*}, where they won the council elections in March. A few months later she gave me contacts in the area and in October I spent three days there, conducting interviews, listening to people talking in cafes and eventually writing an article for the blog called ‘Do not weep Hénin Beaumont’. Once I had done that, I went on to visit other towns, to further examine the rise of popularism. This led to a second report from La Courneuve^{*}, starting in the beginning of January.

^{*} *Libération* is the name of a centre-left daily newspaper in France

^{*} Hénin Beaumont is a commune near Lille in North-West France.

^{*} La Courneuve is a commune about 8 kilometres north of Paris

Why would I undertake such a task without any resources, and put it all up on a blog? This is someone who was reluctant to be involved in existing channels for community participation, but who is interested in the difficulties of others in being able to participate in the life of the city... it is about facing transformation, not to say the collapse of social links. 20 years ago a social worker told us "they ask me to mend the fabric of society... but there is no longer any fabric of society..."

So what is the problem today?

Perhaps it is about finding the means to empower people (education), but we are aware enough to realise that **it is of the utmost importance to fight for equality for all our population, who will then be motivated to participate and improve our 'community life together'**. It is about understanding what is really happening, to discuss and maybe outline ideas that give us hope that it is still possible to participate in politics, in the true meaning of the term. We are told that in a democratic society we are all part of a community that can live together. But everything makes us think we are only powerless extras on the stage. So, things need to change.

2/ Hénin Beaumont: a story of pride and betrayal

Hénin Beaumont has a population of 27,000, 11,000 households, of which 44.5% have taxable incomes. The average household income is 18,456 Euros. There is 19% unemployment, 23% of households receive RSA*. It ranks fifth in French towns for mortality due to alcoholism, and 0.4% of properties are secondary residences. The numbers speak for themselves.

The grandsons and granddaughters of miners and labourers speak passionately about the place. Their grandparents came from Italy, Poland, Algeria or North Africa. They have had hard and sometimes tragic lives, but they were heroes of an industrial journey and a strong collective history. Their popular culture was built on dignity and respect.

The Left was profoundly entrenched in the region. Then, over many years, industry and mining collapsed. They had been the mainstay of the local economy. The Left is still there but they have no plans for the future. The elite, the local estate owners, look after their own. Gradually those who had been 'permanently elected' now only work for their own benefit and forget about the common good. Whilst the crisis worsens, the Left has abandoned the area and there is a succession of unemployment, misery and despair.

Who is going to replicate the approach of the Communist Party? Steve Briois, the National Front mayor-elect has been around since he was 15 years old. He knows everyone and takes the time to listen to them. In 2007, he organised Marine Le Pen to come and visit, and since then the world media follows Marine every time she comes to Hénin Beaumont. The town will be, with the help of experts, a laboratory for the National Front presenting itself as honest and democratic. The local Socialist Party had behaved like a branch of the Mafia. Some were even denounced by the Communist Party, which still aligned itself with them until the last minute. Misunderstandings, revolt, resistance, bitterness. It was the only party which denounced 'all that was rotten' so it has had its chance. The National Front won an absolute majority in the first round of municipal elections. Not only was the Left beaten at

the ballot box, but the National Front had cannibalised it and made their policies their own. It was like a symbolic rape.

3/ La Courneuve: This is a story of whitewashing or distorting the public image of poverty and abandonment, whilst in reality there were many who were wealthier with a brighter future than what was portrayed. The town has a population of 39,000, 14,000 households, of which 35% earn taxable incomes. The average household income is 14,500 Euros. There is 25% unemployment with 0.4% of properties being SECONDARY residences. The issue with this town is that its story has been entirely written by outsiders.

*RSA (*Revenue de solidarité active*) is welfare income for unemployed or underemployed workers. It aims to assist workers to find work or to supplement their income.

In 1967/70, the office of Public Housing for the City of Paris, had the power to force the most severely disadvantaged cases to come to the 'city of 4000'*. La Courneuve is an integral part of region 93, the most disadvantaged in France, and became a suburb for thugs, drugs and all kinds of trafficking.

In the national plan, La Courneuve, is also associated with the festival of Humanity ('Humanity' is a communist newspaper which holds an annual fund-raising event to keep itself going). But it is also a story of conflict and shady deals at the heart of the Left. So it's generally a disastrous image, that a great majority of media have embellished, amplified and entrenched to vilify it! A kind of partly self-generating catastrophe!

On the international level, we must consider the following data. Today's population of La Courneuve is made up of more than 100 nationalities. This is mainly the result of decolonisation (North Africa and then Sub-Saharan Africa) and from migration caused by internal conflict and poverty in the poorest countries in Africa. It is well-known that this complex picture is a combination of conflict, war and terrorism which has torn apart different forms of Islam.

However, the other story, not obvious from the outside, is a city that is making progress with its incredibly committed and vibrant community groups. It is a place where a left-leaning municipal council has, despite its falling financial resources, fought discrimination and tries to create local employment and a society for all. This in a community where under 20s represent a third of the population.

Without any targeted campaign, the National Front got more than 19% of the votes in the European elections and the same at a regional level. One can vote for the National Front, forgetting about the details of their policies and just retain their ideas of rejection. "The National Front is condemned by the so-called honourable parties, we are on the same side as the lepers" ... "They understand nothing" ... "They don't listen to us" ... "They don't believe in anything anymore" ... "The underclass of France suffers".

In this way, at the last elections, the falling influence of the Communist Party was confirmed, to the huge advantage of the Socialist Party, the extreme right, and as a sign of the times, a new generation of empowered French youth of North African origin. These young people

who are very active in community groups and on social media have a strong presence, and they are proving every day that they have the interests of the community at heart. They are a mixed group of High Tech, young people of religious backgrounds and of community involvement. What are their goals? That still remains to be further investigated, and they are at risk of exploitation by other parties.

4/ The main questions that this poses

These days there is no credible or comprehensible political discourse emanating from the state groups.

The reality is obscure. Insecurity is also a loss of values, a feeling of “what’s the point” ... to vote, to discuss politics or to hope for change? Does that mean society is stagnant, that history is finished? Or that this country is too old to consider the youth of the world, to have dreams and aspirations?

Should we not question the framework of the mainstream cultural and ethnic analysis? Can we forget that social struggles reveal conflicts, as much as solidarity? The class struggle is not necessarily outdated because those who advocate it have forgotten to be modern. What social change has been achieved without a fight? And we must remember the widening gap between socio-economic groups.

It is not just material wealth that is at issue. If cultural and symbolic wealth allow some people to feel legitimate and validated by others, then we must struggle to overcome cultural and symbolic poverty of the disadvantaged.

*City of 4000 is a very disadvantage suburb of La Courneuve. It was built in the sixties.

The discourse is not that of the 60s and 70s – we no longer talk of revolution and very little of socialist reform. In this context we should, at least in the interim, avoid talking ideology and instead implement local experience, something concrete and visible to create discussion. Isn't that the price we pay to become credible and to return to a local presence? Today there is also the pressure of international and national difficulties which are so strongly emphasised in the media.

5/ Several suggestions to initiate debate and take action

Being inspired by the generic states of 1789, it could be about implementing a common history which comes from the towns and villages, in order to shine light on an abridged but consistent story.

It is also to show that culture is not the sole preserve of the middle and upper classes, which is a manipulative aberration.

The great political battle seems to us to be that of equality, primarily equality of representation. In terms of socio-professional categories, only 30% of the population are represented by elected officials. So we must keep up the pressure for equality so workers are better represented on the boards of companies, and those without citizenship can still vote in local elections and fully participate in the life of their communities. On this point why not trial the vote for non-citizens for a limited time in sample municipalities before making it obligatory?

We should give credit for time given to voluntary community and political groups. This would be a good start to reshape the way politics works.

To create local 'SMILE' community initiatives: every day I will say hello to three people who I do not know. Shops and an internet site can spread information about the initiative and create smiley badges which are fun and imaginative. If that works, other initiatives can be taken forward from this starting point, for example, a system of exchange of services.

François Bernheim

François Bernheim is a creative consultant and business communications specialist for major corporations and regional authorities. He is also a media personality (a commentator with Canal Plus and France 2) as well as the author of articles on advertising and marketing. He is the creator of the blog www.cafaitdesordre.com. The blog will feature a series of reports based on François's extended time in several towns in France where he sought to better understand what facilitates or prevents the development of populism.

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