What we learn from helping each other [1]

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Résumé : The text below is a testimony. It tells the story of the creation of INFLEchir at the Université Paris-Sorbonne (now named Sorbonne University) and attempts to analyze the sources that enabled this experience to happen. How is a solidary experience formed ? What are the obstacles ? How can it last and what do we learn from it ? In the wake of the mobilization that followed the occupation of Lycée Jean Quarré in 2015, the story of InFLEchir does not give definitive answers to these questions and does not pretend to do so. Perhaps, though, it will make a modest contribution to shedding more light on research devoted to militant experiences.

Mots-clés : mutual aid, solidarity, association, infléchir, migration, exil, refugees

What I am going to tell you here is just one example of a mutual aid experience, as there are certainly many others. This testimony is not intended to be exhaustive and remains purely personal. I do not claim to know how to write or speak for everyone. Each field experience has its own story. If telling the story of the adventure that we were able to launch over almost two years can be important, it is because it can help us to rethink what happens to those who help, because it can lead us to think about what comes out of helping each other. In the midst of the dark offensives of conservatism and the dreams of "grands soirs" [2], there are attempts of of concrete solidarity. They are nothing more but attempts. Concrete experiments are necessarily insufficient and yet, for those who form them, represent immeasurable experiences. The question is therefore to know what emerges from our actions, what can we deduce from them ? What do we know about helping each other ?

1. Traduction from Pauline Brouard (thank you).

2. The "Grand Soir" is an expression that can be roughly translated as the "big night ». It expresses the hope of a sudden and potentially violent event that would overturn the social and economic order. It is often synonymous with revolution and very often used in european militant jargon (from the leftist or anarchist slang) since the 19th century.

1 Doubts about the first gestures

When Alice and Solène came to me through a mutual friend, we were just coming out of an unprecedented summer in Paris. Multiple migrant camps had emerged in Paris, along with an incredible surge of solidarity that culminated in the occupation of the Jean Quarré high school. Student assemblies arouse and wondered how to extend the places of struggle to the universities. The occupation of a site transforms its meaning. The walls are silent. They only speak the language of those who touch them from one corridor to another. We will open our schools as they close their borders, we will make them the shelters they try to destroy.

I must admit, however, that I was full of doubts toward the success of such a project in Sorbonne University. If the incantations about hospitality were convincing, they did not constitute a method, nor did they elaborate strategies. In fact, they collided with the rigid functioning of administrations already undermined by the ongoing privatization of higher education and deliberately autistic toward the surrounding problems. It is not an evidence to state that the social mission of the university should be restored, for those who consider that the entangled management of this big machine already requires full attention, without anyone invading it with all the misery in the world. If we had to think about the homeless, people without diploma, people who cannot in one way or another access higher education, sexism, racism and all the rest, how much time do we have left to fill the gaps already here within the university ? One might think that the planned destruction of public services serves an economic goal as much as a specific political one : the goal of restricting the possibilities of action of an organized community, driven by an in-depth social reflection, as much as by some powerful and highly politicized struggling organizations. For the time being, our solution lied precisely in the fact that the path taken by the successive governments to progressively reduce the fields of action of the universities had not yet eradicated the fertile soil of the mobilization groups. A whole series of committed actors remained, who we would have to rely on.

We saw each other for the first time at the Reflet. Around September 2015. Solène and Alice had the idea of launching FLE [3] courses for exiled people at the university. They started from the two-fold observation that the people mobilized at Jean Quarré had all made : firstly French courses were saturated while the demand was enormous ; secondly the exiles were sometimes former students who wanted to pursue their life here and their projects. We thought that the duty of a university might well be to provide rooms, courses, teachers, resources for these people. At the École Normal Supérieur (ENS), the experiment was just at its beginning. Skeptical about the possibilities of replicating this initiative in Sorbonne University, I welcomed the idea with moderate enthusiasm. At the same time, I was involved in a certain number of projects going on at my students' union, which on November 13th would be aborted after all. We had just come out of a long debate during the previous year on the implementation of a University Diploma "Secularity" and the islamophobic overtones that had surrounded the idea led to a reaction, especially as the ambivalence of the

3. FLE stands for "Français Langue Étrangère", which can be translated by "French as a Foreign Language". This type of course aims to teach French to non-native speakers.

public discourse on secularism always ended up, at that time, by dragging in some part of our own camp. At that moment, at the Working Group (WG) on Secularism, within the League for Human Rights, I came to hear the intense internal quarrels that plagued the WG throughout the 2003/2004 discussions on the ban on the veil. These divisions were still reverberating at this time and I spent some of my time trying to defend the idea that the breach opened by the law of 15 March 2004 will enlarge the gaping mouth of fascism and ordinary racism, erode the public discourse and the most "open" minds to sap all the organization of neo-colonial and paternalistic struggles. Being mobilized on the issue for a long time, it was an old fight that stands out, but which, perhaps stupidly, occupied my days of October 2015 more than setting up a FLE course for migrants. I was carefully approaching the President in Council with the idea, without getting any reaction, hostility, or great interest at the time, from what I had to say. At the occasion of a council, the president told me that he was rather concerned about my idea of a debate on secularism because we should avoid the "black blocs"[4]. I shook my head in disbelief. November 13th will throw a fatal blow to this project of debate, as well as a momentary stop to our timid steps for the emergence of a FLE course.

Security was being strengthened. The Sorbonne University understandably accompanies the State of Emergency measures at this time. The idea was spreading that we would still like to get migrants into the university. If we wanted to started courses, we needed rooms. If we needed rooms, the only possibility was Clignancourt campus. The sudden closure of all the university centers was somewhat discouraging. At the end of November, the administrator of the Clignancourt center personally take over the situation to bring to our attention his concerns about our project. Indeed, the security of the center should prevail. There are "potential security risks related to the reception of refugees on the university premises". So we looked for other solutions in parallel. Similarly, we faced volunteer recruitment problems directly related to the lack of clarity about the feasibility of our project. Many people came to our meetings, the union hall was packed, but we didn't know yet what to give them to do. We were also trying to start approaching migrants who want to take courses, but without solving the room problem first (I'm not sure about the chronological time-line). It was too early. We were wasting their time. The beginning of Infléchir is a story made up of trial and error.

As it is often the case, when the situation is unblocked by collective intelligence, here the support of third parties enabled us to restart the machine. Through Sara, we got an appointment with the : Interuniversity Service for Langage Learning (SIAL) [5] during which we got the opportunity to specify the project. In parallel, the Franco-

4. The black bloc is both a strategy that advocates direct action and a group of people who come together occasionally and spontaneously, most often during demonstrations. Formed within East Germany during the 1980s, the Schwarzer Block, as it was called at the time, designated anarchist groups which engaged in collective and spontaneous moments of direct action to defend the anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist or anti-authoritarian initiatives in general, against the repression of institutions. In France, the expression indicates the groups which are formed in front of the demonstrations (also called Le Cortège de Tête), made up of people entirely dressed in black and which implement strategies of Direct Action, most often, by attacking banks and other symbols of capitalism on the passage of demonstrations. They also regularly confront the police.

5. SIAL is the Interuniversity Service for Language Learning. It is a university service dedicated to the organization of language courses for students.

phonie University Association, thanks to Annick's colossal work, released a call for projects to finance initiatives in favor of exiled people for universities. These specific circumstances allowed us to fund our action. It also made it realistic for the university institution and concrete for us. Lobbying was intensifying and the pressure was increasing

On the administrative side, we were being asked for a proper association, a bank account and an insurance. We did all of this with a certain amount of zeal. The association was officially formed in January 2016. Alice became the first president of the association, Solène was treasurer, while I formed a duo of secretary with Louise who had joined us in the meantime. Our organization was ready.

The director of the Clignancourt center also supported the initiative, certainly to the great displeasure of the center's administrator, who was always concerned about the sacrosanct issue of security. Then the president of the university decided to force the hand of everyone by supporting the project. The news was announced by the director of the Clignancourt center in an e-mail from 26 January : "Sir, your project is interesting, necessary and generous and we are going to encourage it. The President has given a favorable opinion and I take into account the recommendation of my colleague Claire Stolz who works with me at Student Life Department. ". To which the center's administrator replied :

> "Hello, please be careful, as already mentioned to Mr. Rebero (sic), it is appropriate that Mr. President and the university head are fully legally assured of this project in view of the current possible security risks related to the reception of refugees on university premises : indeed, which organization is mandated to choose them ? Will the Prefecture and the police station of the 18th district be informed ? etc."

The attacks in Brussels on March 22nd would increase his fears and a few days later, on March 24th, he would modify at great length the Convention that we were supposed to establish between Infléchir and the University in order to have access to the classrooms in Clignancourt. In blue and bold, right from the first page, his additions were quite clear :

> "The INFLECHIR association, given the current state of emergency activated throughout the French national territory, the Vigipirate Attentats plan now in force at the highest level following the attacks in Paris and Brussels, assures the University Paris-Sorbonne : in addition ; of the identity of all the people they will introduce into its university premises, of the fact that these refugees-migrants are all perfectly listed and traced by the various services and competent state administrative authorities, i.e. prefectural, police and immigration authorities, without which this convention is of course null and void.
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> The responsibility of the INFLECHIR association as well as its various officials and members could therefore be immediately engaged civilly, criminally and financially in case the various controls of the documents and

> official documents allowing the identification and tracing of these migrant persons would not have been perfectly carried out by them because otherwise it would directly engage the security of the staff, the users and the goods of the university".

In the middle of the "Commission of the University Life" (CFVU) [6], fulfilling my role as an elected student, I discovered this new convention which seemed to shock the director of SIAL and the director of the Clignancourt centre as well. They assured me of their support in restoring the Convention, and we indeed benefited from their help (certainly also from the President of the University), to finally sign an agreement acceptable for both parties.

2 From mutual aid comes solidarity

However, the relatively difficult beginnings of the association, if they are helpful to set the context, are not really the most interesting thing. We are going to come back to what we should remember from these relationships to the institution. But it is more directly thanks to the implementation on the field work that we learned the most.

We launched the first French courses for our first 18 students on May the 4th of 2016. Even before we realized the great achievement of bringing 18 people into a university institution, a deep feeling of exhaustion was already beginning to overcome some of our founders. We lost Solène, after having already lost Alice, only to find ourselves again just the two of us, Louise and I. We must pay tribute here to Louise's exceptional organizational skills. The first thing we learn in carrying out a long-lasting action is that it is impossible to do anything alone. Much more efficient than I ever was, Louise ran the internal organization of the courses going, while I tried to negotiate a proper convention from the administration. If it is easy to celebrate those who show up at negotiations, it is because we, far too often, eclipse the courage of those who offer their complete devotion, above all, to a concrete projects. Sacrificing her free time, her studies, her sleep and even her mental health, Louise gave everything she had to keep alive a project that, without her, might have been born through tenacity, but would never have lasted. And I have the impression that most of the projects of the same kind come along with forgotten heroines ; that all militant projects are supported by a woman who organizes everything, make an inventory of everything, carries the mental burden of the delicate administration of all the operations, subordinated in the organization chart to a president who is constantly in representation. In every organization I've ever been a part of, I've met billions of Louise. What we learn from many struggles is a gendered division of labor. Although we were surrounded by a particular context, it appears to me that the association hasn't been a great exception. Perhaps I haven't done enough myself to break this cycle.

In any case, Louise jointly formed the association from the beginning till the end. We thought together about how the two of us could organize the association : from the poles to the techniques for attracting new volunteers. What we take away from

6. The CFVU is, like the Conseil Académique (Academic Council) cited above, one of the decision-making bodies within the University in France. As for the Academic Council, students elected can have a say in it.

this two-way struggle is the mutual help and unshakeable trust between us as we went through the hard times. Louise has certainly been an example for me. But it seems equally certain to me that the success of our initiative, despite the considerable obstacles we encountered, owes much to the solidarity we were able to develop between us, the friendship we never broke, the moral support we never failed to offer mutually, and the trust we had in each other.

While it may seem trivial, this point actually highlights the importance of healthy relationships in activist projects. By an absolute miracle, our balance was not shaken by any struggles of power (because our organization was discussed among ourselves), no arguments were too strong (although tensions did exist), no emotional overflowing such as tenuous interpersonal relationships sometimes lead to arise.

All in all, the success of Infléchir may be based on the simple chance of meeting other people. Infléchir was born from that ordinary cup of coffee at Le Reflet taken with Alice and Solène. Infléchir lived with the inflexible devotion of Louise and all the people who joined us later (Haifa, Juliette, Agathe...). Infléchir was made possible thanks to the respect and the complicity that we have cultivated and have been able to maintain. What we know about the establishment of solidarity is that it is paradoxically born of solidarity itself. This tiny solidarity that creates and holds small groups together. That made us stand together with Louise, Alice, Solène and the others. Who can be born and grow when there are at least two people, then dozens of them, gathered with a common vision. It is likely that Infléchir owes everything, or almost everything, to the interpersonal bonds that are its very same roots. The networks of respect, caring and friendship that have flourished within us before we even want to extend the benefits to others.

To say that everything went perfectly well would be a lie. Earlier I expressed my doubts about our ability to overcome a certain gendered divisions of labor, despite our efforts. It is also clear that there have been arguments, sometimes, even losses of contact between some members over the time. To my opinion, the sadness of these occasional incidents does not cast doubts on the fundamental lesson of Infléchir's existence : that is to say, the solidarity initiative was based on strong groups, strong friendships, small networks of interpersonal solidarity that allowed each member to hold on, to come, to leave sometimes without leading to the association collapsing, to come back other times, to always help each other in the best way that we could. Finally, the implementation of solidarity is built on basic solidarity, fundamental mutual aid and daily benevolence.

3 The test of the world

If this mutual aid may have been occasionally undermined in the course of this human adventure, it proved to be fundamental each time one of us broke down. Infléchir has had its impressive share of burn-outs caused by the burden of the responsibility of 60 exiled people per year, the organization of 4 French courses, the organization of the whole life of the association which could gather about twenty volunteers more or less autonomous, more or less confident and who needed our presence just as much as the others, and then the daily confrontation with the drama or horror that each exile

carries within himself. The distress encountered may have exposed us to an emotional charge that we had not necessarily thought of ahead of time. The stories, as much as the monitoring of each person's administrative hells, confront us every day with the violence of the world. Misery becomes palpable and swells in a slight lump in the stomach as we struggle alone, unprepared and unprepared, to do what we can. The clash with the misery luggage that the exiled carry may have caused some members of the association to explode in flight. A strange mixture of guilt and deep empathy leads to the complete gift of oneself, to the sacrifice of the slightest lightness of spirit, to the constant transport of the presence of those who rely on you into the slightest corner of a brain bubbling with mental charge. One is faced with a few abandonments or one must try to manage the spiral, that is to say the progressive disappearance of a person in the quicksand of total self-sacrifice. No one talks about militant burn-out. Of those who suddenly collapse from having given their all, in the literal sense of the word.

I am often asked how I managed to get through two and a half years without falling like a fly. I'm not sure myself, but I think I owe it to a duller sensibility that allowed me to preserve myself. More precisely, it seems to me that Infléchir or RESOME are like the obligatory stages of a kind of personal journey. In retrospect, I am aware now that I was not so much helping the exiled or immigrants as I was helping my father and mother. My parents who spoke to me about their own exile every day, with their eyes in the void, between resignation and deep regret for my mother, nostalgia and gratitude for my father. Most of his sentences always began with "Antigamente…", "At the time…", and invariably extended to the raw reality of a father's life.

"At that time, we had no water, we had no electricity, I slept next to the cattle we were lucky enough to have with all my brothers and sisters, and all the people around us were dying of hunger or disease. "At that time, we left school at the age of 10 because no one had any money and we had to work in the fields or wherever we were wanted. I lulled in stories of hunger, perpetual misery, perfectly described traumatic experiences, recounted with precision as if it were a duty to pass on or an unconscious need to always tell how death passed close to one's heart in the country at the time. The homecoming sounded like a form of communion of traumas where uncles, aunts, grandparents, parents, successive generations, throw themselves into the history of that cursed past that preceded the revolution, that "time" when such and such died of starvation near such and such a house, when such and such a cousin died of infection because there was no doctor to properly treat his wound. It is here that the poverty of others fills up with the banality of everyday life, that the past of one's family becomes a tenacious and persistent reminder. My father immigrated because he was hungry. When he was 18 years old here, he was exploited on farms where he was locked up with dozens of others like him in small sheds from which they came out to work, and only to work. "We bent down on the ground all day to work the land, we picked potatoes by hand, if we raised our heads the foremen would come and beat us with sticks. If you say anything, they threaten to turn you over to the police, to send you home. Later he will make his hole in the masonry, my mother in the households, because that's what was expected of them. And we'll find accommodation in a housing project bar where immigrants can look each other in the eye and tell each other similar stories.

In short... The whole time I was Infléchir, I couldn't see an exile in front of me without seeing my father. All the details of the stories piled up in a kind of common brain box where the chronicles of misfortune were stored. If I say that I certainly had a blunted sensitivity, it is because paradoxically this automatic reflex made me adopt a kind of clinical distancing. I would record doctement and rationality would take over. It allowed me to say no to certain solicitations, it stopped me whenever I felt overwhelmed. I realize it now, this cold reflex was a gesture of self-defense that certainly preserved me. I will never know exactly. Still, this daily confrontation with the violence of the world seems to show a certain limit to the gift of self. The violence of the system is such that it creates a consequent number of abandoned, stoned people... We would like to save them all, the raw reality is that we are just as abandoned because the slightest setting up of a solidarity structure is a test. An administrative, political test first requiring a will and a crazy energy to go beyond imaginary barriers or the restricted frameworks of habit, and a human test then that shoots combative spirits in mid-air. The real problem with this system is that it is not designed for mutual aid. Concrete empathy becomes a kind of risk-taking mission.

What remains is the recognition of those who have been offered a modest helping hand. We were a drop in the bucket and they brought us a mountain of gold. Human bonds are made up of difficult trials that we forget as we are grateful. The paradox is that it is those we try to help who help us the most. With them, I have at least learned what it means to help each other.