
For urban hospitality.

Against securitarian closure, let's open our cities

Sarah Mekdjian, Cécile Gintrac, Armelle Choplin, Frédéric Dufaux, Anne-Valérie Dulac, Mélina Germes, Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, Thierry Labica, Julien Rebotier, Max Rousseau, Nicolas Vieillescazes, authors and editor of *Villes contestées**

Translation: Claire Hancock

(*Gintrac Cécile, Giroud Matthieu (dir.), *Villes contestées*, 2014, Paris : Les Prairies Ordinaires.)



On a black Friday, November 13th, 2015, at the Bataclan, we lost a colleague and friend, Matthieu Giroud, a geographer and urban scholar at Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée. Our sadness is as deep as our anger. There is also fear, fear of the world being born after these attacks.

As a tribute to Matthieu, and a continuation of the work we had started with him, we would like to say a few words about cities and the spaces to be built there. The Bataclan, and the many terraces that were hit on that fateful evening, are places for city-dwellers, whether Parisian or not, to meet and party. The other aim of the attacks, the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, is another popular venue where classes meet and mingle, however briefly, around sporting events.

Of course, we can't ignore the fact that these places to meet and enjoy conviviality are also part and parcel of the privatization and commodification of cities, and the marginalization of the working class.

The attacks and their aftermath have tended to reinforce the existing separations and securitarian tendencies operating in our cities. They further challenge the fragile equilibrium of our society.

Matthieu Giroud's work aimed precisely to criticize cities as they closed, rejected the working class and excluded minorities. As a tribute to him, we want to carry on thinking more welcoming cities, an ever more urgent obligation, to effectively open up cities to fight separatism.

Hidden from view in cities, on the edge of official maps, in the angles not caught on surveillance cameras, and far from glittering window displays, there are welcoming places, built so that everyone can feel comfortable, places from which classism, sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of exclusion are banned. They are welcoming places, charging no entry fee, where people can come to eat, share information, meet, have fun and sometimes live. They extend invitations to share possible worlds, small and large utopias in the making.

In Grenoble, where Matthieu Giroud took his first degree in geography and studied the Berriat area's processes of gentrification, some of these welcoming places still exist, some are under threat, others have disappeared.

For instance, the Centre Hauquelin, a health centre for people with addictions and dependency issues, free and open to all, is under threat of having its operation reduced to medical care, and losing its social workers. Staff is fighting with the support of hundreds of citizens to preserve the quality of care and promotion of social integration. Family Planning centres are also struggling to survive despite regular cuts in subsidies, and continue to welcome people and ensure their reproductive rights are preserved. Many of these places that Matthieu Giroud documented as part of his work in Grenoble have disappeared. Among them, there were many autonomously-managed institutions where citizens were striving for other forms of sharing.

Let's not succumb to nostalgia. Being temporary is also a trademark of these marginal places, it is creative, as long as places evolve, move, and are recreated. But what we are witnessing today points more to suppression and gradual normalizing of urban margins, rather than reinvention.

We should beware of dreaming up, for the sake of security, fortress cities, commodified, sterile, uniform cities, which may give us reassurance, but suppress spaces from which a fairer and freer world can be constructed. Matthieu Giroud explored the possibilities of the urban, visited the margins in order to develop knowledge, document the everyday and people's lives. His death is pointless, but his work can help us continue

to live. They remind us of the life and generous thought of our lost friend; and they enjoin us to create welcoming urban spaces, places to express our individual and collective creativities and experiment with new forms of citizenship.

Books and papers by Matthieu Giroud:

<http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/actualites/veille/en-hommage-a-matthieu-giroud>

<http://acp.u-pem.fr/equipe/matthieu-giroud/>