

Extrait du School forging new paths

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# **North Montreal on a psychiatrist's couch**

- English - Prevention of violence -

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North Montreal on a psychiatrist's couch? Last spring, long before the riots, people from the neighborhood told themselves it would be a good idea. But only if they could choose a good couch and a good psychiatrist.

Consider it done. Yesterday afternoon, North Montreal unveiled its psychiatrist. It's not just anyone. They brought in Charles Rojzman, the French sociologist and psychotherapist who is an internationally renowned expert on urban crises.

Rojzman is a kind of emergency room doctor of urban crises, a man with a fascinating background who developed an intervention he calls "social therapy," in the explosive context of the French working class suburbs in the 1980s. Since then, he's been going from one conflict to another, whether in Chechnya, Rwanda or North Montreal.

At first, I was a bit skeptical. Can we really deal with North Montreal or the French working class suburbs in the same way as Chechnya? Is the source of unease really the same? - I asked Rojzman. He was quite categorical. "What's happening in France is roughly the same as what's happening in Chechnya. Quite simply, the difference is that in France the environment is less catastrophic - the economic environment, the human environment, the schools that are still there... But I think that, fundamentally, the problems of living together are the same."

Here as elsewhere, stresses Rojzman, anything that creates fear can create violence. Invited here by the Multicultural Youth Café to participate in a project of the Advisory Committee on Youth and Street Gangs in North Montreal, the therapist sends a warning to our local politicians, who have reduced the August riots to "an isolated event": "This is exactly what happened in France. They said, 'There are a few riots in the suburbs, but it is not serious.' And now what happened in November 2005 is happening every day in the French working-class suburbs, but nobody is talking about it, because we don't know how to handle the problem". However, silence does not resolve anything, quite the contrary.

Charles Rojzman, who is in town for only one week, does not claim to be an expert from North Montreal. "I don't know anything about your problems," says the gray-bearded therapist. "I have nothing but prejudices. I believe that this is not what my work is about."

What, then, is his job? It is to help the people of North Montreal understand what is happening to them and find their own solutions. For that to happen, Rojzman says, there is no other way but to go through conflict. "Violence happens when conflict is not possible," he repeats. This means that, in order to avoid violence, we should stop avoiding conflict. In practical terms and in terms of practice, this means creating encounters between people who no longer meet one another, who, as a result, come to have paranoid fantasies about "others".

The point is to "break the tribes." And to do that, you have to actually force people who do not want to, to sit together, giving them a "space for conflict" that will reduce their fears. If, for instance, you invite North Montreal policemen to meet with marginalized youth, you can't be

happy with a few volunteers around the table. You must go further, otherwise "it will be just the Police Athletic League types, those they call 'Jesus' at the police station, the ones everyone makes fun of." This does not detract from the good job of the "Jesus" types, but it does not get us very far.

The process, as one might imagine, is most often long and painful. In North Montreal, the project, led by local people that Charles Rojzman will train, will begin in January or February and will last three years. Because breaking down masks and avoiding meaningless exchanges, two or three short sessions "on the couch" are not enough. "It's the in-depth work that brings people to talk about things they never usually talk about," remarks the sociotherapist, who has an incredible wealth of experience on the ground. Only this in-depth work allows people to talk about the "real problems" and come out of powerlessness and victimization, in order to finally create solutions out of their "collective intelligence", solutions that, for example, will improve schools, institutions, and the police.

At the end of the process, the bottom line is that they should all be able to work on their own violence, on "all these monsters" and "all those shadows" that exist in themselves, whether they are about thirst for power, fear or hatred ...

Charles Rojzman says he is obsessed with these "monsters." Born during the Second World War in a family of Polish Jewish immigrants, he explains in his book, *How to Live Together* (La Découverte, 2001) that he sometimes feels he has spent his life trying to understand hatred, racism and fear. As a child, he heard stories of massacres. He had to go into hiding with his parents. He has repeatedly escaped the worst. His grandparents and most of his uncles and aunts were not so lucky.

His interest in "monsters" comes from this. "From this childhood, I was left certainly with this fear, stuck inside myself like a splinter, but also with a kind of curiosity, an interest in the monster, the Human Beast that is capable of the worst excesses," he writes. "I wanted to understand and I think I have understood something. Not everything, but something."

The monster is everywhere, it can wake up at any time. In our minds, among those who vote on the right as those who vote on the left, among the police as among marginalized youth. "You can't heal the monsters. They are there," Charles Rojzman said to the people of North Montreal. "But we can create positive environments that help the best in ourselves come out, rather than hatred and fear." Quite a contract. But do we really have any choice?

*Post-scriptum :*

*Source: "Montréal-Nord sur un divan de psy". By Rima Elkouri, La Presse (Montreal), November 25, 2008 (Translated by Novella Keith)*