

Reflecting on Poverty, Fostering Solidarity

by Julien Le Mauff

Active in the fight against poverty since the 1950s, the ATD Fourth World movement has successfully combined grassroots action, research and advocacy, exerting a lasting influence on social policies in France and internationally.

Reviewed: Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, *ATD Quart Monde, une histoire transnationale. La lutte contre la pauvreté, d'un bidonville à l'Onu*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2025, 594 pp., €25.

Since publishing her thesis on Secours Populaire nearly twenty years ago (2006)—not to mention a study on Emmaüs (2009), another on the Foyer Notre-Dame des Sans-Abri in Lyon (2020), and a wealth of work on the fight against poverty—Axelle Brodiez-Dolino continues to explore the many ways in which solidarity has developed since the two world wars.

The historical interconnection between the voluntary sector and the development of public policy at both local and national levels forms, in particular, the focus of research into the conflicts between different spheres of action—as well as within each of them—but also into the specific contribution of solidarity-based organizations, and the originality and inventiveness of their methods of action. This is particularly true of ATD Fourth World, a movement founded in 1957 in the Paris suburbs, which is the focus of this new book.

Solidarity, organizations and ATD's unique characteristics

As the author points out, a monograph such as this serves to remind us of the vital role played by voluntary organizations in the management of social solidarity in France, which forms the basis of a dual system – a “mixed economy of welfare,” to use the term coined by the American researcher Sheila Kamerman¹.

In France, as elsewhere, “associations and public authorities now work largely in concert [...] both on the ground and when developing public policies” (p. 16). Furthermore, ATD Fourth World has a distinctive feature that justifies this book: it has a particularly strong influence on how public authorities frame issues of extreme poverty, as Bernard Lahire has already observed regarding illiteracy, a concept largely constructed as a public issue under the influence of ATD². The role of ATD in this regard – highlighted several years ago by Frédéric Viguier – also rests on the movement's unique emphasis on observation and sociographic research that accompanies its activities. In retrospect, this also gives the historian the advantage of having a rich field of study to explore, thanks to “an exceptional archival culture” (p. 12).

Associative action and religious identity

In France, the association traces its origins to the involvement of Father Joseph Wresinski, chaplain to the homeless camp set up in Noisy-le-Grand by Emmaus in 1954. The regeneration of this shanty town, a symbol of the mass poverty characteristic of the Trente Glorieuses era, led to the creation of an association after several years of work. ‘Aide à toute détresse’ (“Help for any kind of distress”) was founded in 1961, and remains deeply influenced by its founder, a clergyman of Polish origin who had himself experienced poverty during his childhood, a story which is also recounted in the book (pp. 24–39).

¹ Sheila B. Kamerman, “The New Mixed Economy of Welfare: Public and Private”, *Social Work*, vol. 28, n° 1, 1983, pp. 5-10.

² Bernard Lahire, *L'Invention de « l'illettrisme ». Rhétorique publique, éthique et stigmates*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999.

Other prominent figures also played a role in shaping ATD's future, starting with Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, General de Gaulle's niece, who was part of the team that worked alongside Wresinski in Noisy-le-Grand from 1958 onwards and later served as ATD's president from 1964 to 1998. Alwine de Vos, for her part, was the first female Dutch diplomat. After meeting Wresinski out of curiosity in 1959 while working at the OECD in Paris, de Vos left the diplomatic corps for good to join the organization as a volunteer and champion its cause, particularly on the international stage—she served as president of the International Movement ATD Fourth World from 1974 to 2002.

Although it diminished over time, the profoundly Christian nature of the discourse on poverty that centered around Wresinski was also originally reflected in forms of near-total commitment from volunteers. They were required to practice a form of asceticism, a “communion with the poor” (p. 305) aimed at “forming a community” with them—the monastic reference was no coincidence—by placing themselves “at the disposal” of the poor to “foster their initiatives” so that they might have “the desire and the means to break out of the impasse,” according to Wresinski himself (p. 300). The religious aspect of the commitment to ATD was long driven by a “theology of the poor” (p. 323), which continued to be reflected in the movement's activities and the volunteers' experiences well into the 1980s.

From hardships to the “Fourth World”: informing action through research

This commitment, however, extended to another area of activity: the generation of knowledge. From the outset, participant observation was one of the tasks assigned to the volunteers in Noisy-le-Grand, who were required to submit a daily observation report to Joseph Wresinski, to be read, corrected, and archived in a “Sommier” —a name that, referencing Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, reflected the systematic purpose of the project (pp. 301–305). This original approach laid the groundwork for a genuine action-research methodology—participant observation—which led to the establishment, within ATD Fourth World, of a Social Research Office, created in 1960 and led by Alwine de Vos.

The association used both statistical methods and a growing number of qualitative studies, including family case studies often published in the journal *Igloos*

(edited by the movement), to establish its fields of action as a basis for reflection. This in turn enriched the conceptual language of solidarity, centering on notions such as the “sub-proletariat” or “exclusion,” whose expanded use in a socio-economic sense helped renew the vocabulary of “maladjustment” and “marginality”³ (pp. 191-196). Exclusion captured the sense of entrapment experienced by the poor in their situation—today we commonly speak of a “poverty trap”—and the many factors that cause it, since the situation of exclusion is “produced simultaneously by one’s surroundings, society, and the individual themselves,” through the internalization of rejection that drives the individual to distance themselves from their social environment (p. 195).

Thus, too, the term “Quart Monde” (“Fourth World”) was coined in 1969 (pp. 239–242). This concept was soon adopted by the ATD association under Wresinski’s leadership, in reference to the *Cahiers du quatrième ordre* written by the revolutionary Dufourny de Villiers during the Estates General of 1789. It was also the subject of in-depth research, in particular by the Catholic sociologist Jean Labbens, in his book *Le Quart-Monde* (1969), with a preface by Wresinski⁴.

ATD’s global expansion

This approach also made ATD a scientific laboratory, setting the movement apart and forming the core of its operations: for its founders, “policy solutions had to be based on sound knowledge” of poverty (p. 183). It also helped foster the development of community colleges open to everyone, build bridges to the academic world and various public programs, and establish ties with France’s national statistics agency (INSEE) as early as the 1970s (p. 247). This also led to projects funded by international organizations, including a number of research studies conducted in collaboration with UNICEF, UNESCO, and the OECD beginning in the 1990s, focusing in particular on the “hidden dimensions of poverty” (p. 278).

This collaboration between ATD Fourth World and international organizations and scholars (beginning in the 1970s in Israel and the United States, pp. 256–258) also

³ Emmanuel Didier, « *Émergences des mots de l’exclusion* », *Revue Quart Monde*, n° 165, 1998. On this subject, see Axelle Brodriez-Dolino’s interview with Serge Paugam in Julien Le Mauff and Réjane Sénac (coord.), *Politique de l’exclusion*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2024.

⁴ On how the term “Quart Monde” was coined, see Michèle Grenot and Thierry Viard, « *Naissance et sens du mot Quart Monde* », *Revue Quart Monde*, n° 199, 2006.

led to a real “spreading” of ATD Fourth World’s methods, inspiring many researchers who in turn adopted the participatory approach of action research (pp. 267–269). Moreover, the association’s advocacy efforts were extensive both internationally and within France, engaging with the United Nations system as well as the emerging European institutions.

Universal rights against poverty

The unique effectiveness of the advocacy work carried out by ATD Fourth World from the very beginning was the movement’s “main distinguishing feature” and “made it a model for others” (p. 287). As Brodiez-Dolino points out, the organization was instrumental in shaping entire sections of anti-poverty policy, particularly in France. Under Wresinski’s leadership, a framework emerged within ATD that challenged the traditional discourse prevalent in the 1950s—one that distinguished between “good” and “bad” poor people based on their attitude toward work—and rejected any expansion of welfare. As the founder of ATD observed, this mindset trapped vulnerable populations in precarious conditions and left them vulnerable to any unforeseeable events, driven by an “excessive emphasis on the value of labor.” The priest pioneered a new approach to combating poverty as a violation of human rights. From then on, the challenge was no longer just to assist those most in need, but to establish new fundamental rights to defend the dignity of people living in extreme poverty.

In the 1970s and 1980s, governments commissioned major reports prepared in collaboration with ATD Fourth World, which helped spread these ideas. These included the 1982 Wresinski report, *Enrayer la reproduction de la grande pauvreté* (Breaking the Cycle of Extreme Poverty), submitted to Michel Rocard, then Minister of Planning, followed in 1987 by a second report for France’s Economic and Social Council, titled *Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale* (Extreme Poverty and Economic and Social Insecurity), published a few months before Wresinski’s death.

This approach first inspired new housing policies, in line with the public initiative launched in Noisy-le-Grand to create “social housing communities” that integrated economic, social, and educational needs with community life (pp. 109–112). Above all, after many years of work and debate, the idea of a minimum income was formalized, first through the 1980 law on the “family minimum income” (p. 415), and

then, more decisively, through the implementation of the “minimum income for integration” (RMI) program, established in 1988 and made permanent in 1992 (p. 461).

Many policies emerged from the advocacy work of ATD Fourth World, such as the introduction of universal health coverage (CMU) in 1999, the state medical aid program (AME) that complements it, and the adoption of the two laws of 2016 and 2020 governing the pilot program known as “Zero Long-Term Unemployment Territories,” the result of a long-term initiative dating back to the 1990s and led within the association by Patrick Valentin, an actor in the social economy (pp. 506–511). On the international stage, ATD’s advocacy efforts have had mixed results, though they have played a significant role in the UN’s recognition of extreme poverty as a human rights violation (pp. 547–552) and in addressing the issue within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were developed gradually from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 before their final adoption in 2015. The challenges seem greater when it comes to the institutions in Brussels (pp. 557–567), where a social Europe has yet to be fully developed.

A spirit of resistance?

As Brodiez-Dolino notes, the continued commitment to and advocacy for more effective public policies to combat poverty and promote social integration now appears to be contradicted by a genuine “shift in the perception and treatment of poverty” (p. 502), the result of an undeniable hardening of attitudes, particularly among a large segment of the political establishment, toward those on welfare, and which also masks a desire—driven by neoliberal logic—to steer the labor market toward greater flexibility, lower wages, and the dismantling of worker protection regulations, which are “no longer viewed as a social asset but as an economic handicap” (p. 502).

By examining the social history of the second half of the twentieth century and shedding light on the darker aspects of the Trente Glorieuses through the history of a solidarity movement, Brodiez-Dolino’s book also helps to show how such interpretations of the social world, forged in the post-World War II context, are still relevant today and can be put to good use. In recent times of economic stagnation and

setbacks in social rights, ATD Fourth World continues to uphold the principle that extreme poverty *is* violence and constitutes an affront to human dignity⁵.

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⁵ "All Together for Dignity" but in french "Acting Together for Dignity".