



# **THOSE PEOPLE**

THE SUBCULTURE  
OF A  
HOUSING PROJECT

**Colette Pétonnet**

*Translated by RITA SMIDT*

CONTRIBUTIONS  
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### **The Subculture of a Housing Project**

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**Colette Pétonnet**

Foreword by **William Foote Whyte**

Translated from the French

and edited by **Rita Smidt**

Physically La Halle is like the end of the world.

"The traveller getting off the bus at the town church sets off on foot on a very busy highway. . . . He must walk for ten minutes along a dirt path before reaching the traffic light at the bend, which marks the intersection with the access road of the Project. No habitation can be seen beyond this point; a gray, nondescript plain stretches out to a horizon barred by factory chimneys and gas storage tanks. To the left, some six-sided structures with pointed roofs stand with their backs to the road. This is the Project."

This is La Halle.

These lines might have been taken from the works of Hugo or Balzac. In fact, the inhabitants of the Project in this study are not unlike the "savages," the "lower depths," described by the French realists.

Lumped together as "*those* people" by a scornful society, the occupants of La Halle take root in the space allocated to them and soon develop a fairly homogeneous subculture based on mutual poverty and awareness of their rejection by society. Mainly Arab, Jewish, and underprivileged urban French, they maintain the cultural carryovers from the old milieu for a time. Then gradually, these customs are eroded until few of the old ways remain. The people become defined by their environment.

In this "culture of poverty" study set in a commune near a major city in France, Colette Pétonnet provides us with a unique opportunity to participate in the daily lives of "*those* people." Applying the methods of ethology, she uses sustained interview and participant-observer techniques to document the life in the Project where she lived for many seasons. Her observations draw us from our own world and make us participate too.

La Halle comes alive as we join in its gossip, dramatic and festive moments, secret rites, and adventures of the young in the surrounding outdoors. "The House" is not only the apartment—it is the whole environment, with each sub-group shaping its own domain and in turn being shaped by it.

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The municipality in which La Halle is located would like to be rid of the people who occupy the Project. A transitional arrangement, La Halle was created to help the ill-housed form new habits pending their relocation into a "better" project. Relocation is slow in coming. Their removal from the slums has given these people little chance of being more than "occupants" in a project sponsored by public charity. A few families are skimmed off for relocation by the government; a few manage to leave on their own. But no one can settle down securely in the present without a notion of what the future holds. It is difficult to build a future when all of one's energy is mobilized for survival.

Mme. Pétonnet studies the environmental framework of the Project, and the family life, specific social relations, conceptions of time and space, and systems of values of the inhabitants. In the manner of Gilberto Freyre and Oscar Lewis, she expands our knowledge of those who cannot speak for themselves.

**Colette Pétonnet** is a Researcher at the National Centre of Scientific Research, Paris, France. She has published several articles in scholarly journals.

**William Foote Whyte** is Professor in the New York State School of Labor and Industrial Relations of Cornell University. He is the author of *Street Corner Society*, *Money and Motivation*, and *Organizational Behavior*.

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