

ATD Fourth World: An Exceptional Undertaking

Axelle Brodiez-Dolino

Axelle Brodiez-Dolino is research director at the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research) and a specialist in the history of solidarity initiatives and of the work to overcome poverty and lack of basic security from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries.

After the recent release of her book [*ATD Quart Monde, une histoire transnationale. La lutte contre la pauvreté, d'un bidonville à l'Onu*](#) (ATD Fourth World, a Transnational History. The fight against poverty from a shanty town to the United Nations), published by Éditions PUF in January 2025, the author agreed to give an [in-depth interview to the *Revue Quart Monde*](#) (Fourth World Review). The meeting was organised by a committee of ATD Fourth World members comprising Thibault Dauchet, Martine Hosselet-Herbignat, Hernan Mamani, Thomas Pizard, Julie Robelet, and Bruno Tardieu.

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Revue Quart Monde: In your opinion, why is ATD Fourth World "an exceptional historical, political, and social undertaking"?

Axelle Brodiez-Dolino: It is true that for anyone working on the history of the work to overcome poverty, ATD Fourth World is an exceptional undertaking.

ATD Fourth World is one of those sources that both allow us to deepen and renew our understanding of the history of contemporary poverty (in France, Europe, and the world) and to better understand what democracy and the power of grassroots organisations represent.¹

It is exceptional, first of all, because of the quantity and quality of the archives it has produced and preserved. I know of no other association that has amassed such a wealth of material in

¹ Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, *ATD Quart Monde, une histoire transnationale. La lutte contre la pauvreté, d'un bidonville à l'Onu*, Éd. PUF, 2025, p. 10.

terms of both quantity and quality. This reflects a relationship with history and memory, and a desire to preserve heritage that I had never encountered before — and which has since been recognised by UNESCO in the "Memory of the World documentary heritage" category.

Among these archives, a number are exceptional in nature. One obvious example is the writings of the volunteer corps members, which are a pivotal piece of evidence. I haven't read them, as they are not accessible to researchers, but as you at ATD Fourth World use them to conduct surveys, write articles, plan actions, advocate,² etc., you filter them, distil them, so to speak, and that still gives us some access to their content. This material cannot be found anywhere else, especially since it has existed since the beginning of this movement. It provides exceptional insight into the field; it allows us to better understand the people it reaches — the activists, and also the actions of volunteer corps members and allies; and it reflects day-to-day life and events.

The second exceptional feature is that ATD Fourth World has conducted a great deal of research and investigation since the beginning. We can therefore approach it at a second level, through what is known as the "history of knowledge": What issues does the association deal with? How does it deal with them? Who deals with them? What impact do they have within and outside the association? And so on. This is all the more rich because these reflections encompass a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives: a desire for historical, sociological, anthropological, statistical, and even theological knowledge. The most fascinating thing for historians is to discover, through these surveys, both the objectification of what is happening in the field and the evolution of the objectified problems; and the "family monographs" that volunteer corps members, activists, and allies are working on, sometimes going back several centuries. In terms of methods, ATD has also invented the "merging of knowledge" approach, which is a real Copernican revolution in poverty research methods. It is therefore extremely rich.

But in ATD Fourth World you don't practise knowledge for knowledge's sake. It is knowledge that is always at the service of action in the field or in political advocacy — "Climbing the steps of the Vatican, the Élysée [official residence of the president of France], and the United Nations," as Wresinski said. And he succeeded, thanks to his accumulated knowledge and patient advocacy, at a time when anti-poverty organisations did very little or nothing at all in this area — and even less so at the international level. In the 1960s, Alwine de Vos van Steenwijk³ began attending meetings at the Commissariat au Plan (the French planning

² Advocacy by non-profit associations is "the development of the capacity and legitimacy to represent, speak on behalf of, develop and deliver a centralised and coherent political discourse on problems and their solutions — in short, to establish oneself as the legitimate champion and spokesperson for a social group [...] [in this case] the Fourth World." Ibid., p. 388.

³ A Dutch diplomat who arrived in Noisy-le-Grand in 1960, she became a volunteer corps member in the early 1960s.

commission) by sneaking in through the back door, then sending memoranda to the President of the French Republic, General de Gaulle, Geneviève de Gaulle's⁴ uncle.

From the 1970s onwards, Wresinski lobbied the subsequent presidents of the French Republic, Pompidou and then Giscard d'Estaing, initially without success, to secure a seat on the Economic and Social Council, so that the poorest members of society would be represented in this "third chamber". The organisation also began to make its presence felt in European corridors. The Wresinski Report, submitted to the French Economic and Social Council in 1987, was decisive in the adoption of the minimum income allowance the following year. Without ATD Fourth World, there would have been no International Day for the Eradication of Poverty declared by the United Nations in 1992, no law to combat exclusion in 1998, and probably no enforceable right to housing in 2007. I know of no other organisations, large or small, that have had such an impact at the national and international level. This is a perfect example of how not-for-profits can have real power to change laws and democratic representation.

Finally, ATD Fourth World has given a great deal of thought to terminology. Very early on, in the early 1960s, Wresinski and Alwine de Vos said: "Be careful; the terms we use to talk about people are not the right ones, they are even extremely harmful"; and they tried; they were concerned with finding more accurate terms. "But what should we say? Underprivileged? Disadvantaged? Excluded? What?" There was much deliberation before trying "sub-proletariat" and then "Fourth World", but without abandoning the term "exclusion", which reappears frequently in the Wresinski Report. It is essential to use the right terms when talking about people and describing what they were facing, because correctly identifying an issue is already a step towards finding a solution.

So yes, I think these are exceptionally valuable, rich archives for understanding extreme poverty, its diversity, and its evolution; the knowledge gained from members of the volunteer corps, and also from allies and activists; and advocacy efforts and their results at all levels, from the Élysée Palace to the United Nations.

⁴ A survivor of German deportation camps and later president of ATD Fourth World France

RQM: Did the idea of a project for a new society specific to ATD Fourth World emerge very early on?

A. B.-D.: Yes, we find it in Wresinski's work from the very beginning, from the late 1950s onwards. This is what particularly impressed Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz and made her stay. I have never come across this idea of a "project for a new society" anywhere else. It is a very powerful term, an enormous ambition.

But in a sense, this ambition has been fulfilled, since ATD Fourth World has, throughout its history, forged a systemic, original, and coherent view of the world, starting from the place it wants for people living in extreme poverty. It has set itself values, practices, and objectives; and has worked to transform both public policies and social attitudes.

There is also a theological dimension to this "project for a new society". Wresinski was always interested in going further, reaching out to the most isolated people, the poorest, the most excluded. His reference point is really the parable of the lost sheep. Most Christian-based anti-poverty associations refer instead to the parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink," etc. This means that anyone who is "hungry, thirsty, in prison, sick," etc., is the image of Christ on earth and must therefore be helped. At ATD Fourth World, at least initially, the idea was not to help all people living in poverty, but to start at the bottom, with the most disadvantaged and destitute. Over the decades, this evolved into "reaching the poorest people", "those who are still missing", "leaving no one behind", and so on.

This explains the emergence of a concept that quickly became central: the effort to counteract "skimming". I don't know if this term is still widely used today — I think it is less so — but it was very important in ATD Fourth World for a long time. The idea is that if we start by lifting the strongest people out of poverty (or poor housing, or dilapidated neighbourhoods, etc.), we will leave the group even more impoverished; that if we start at the top, we will never actually reach the bottom. Hence the historical opposition, which is still very strong today, to all public policies that propose to reduce poverty by a specific per cent, because in practice they will always start with the strongest people rather than measure the success of public policies by the people who are in the greatest poverty. Hence also the importance, from the outset, of the term not "poverty" but "extreme poverty".

So it is also a democratic project: democracy will be achieved only when everyone is included. Hence the importance of the idea of participation and empowerment; ensuring that the poorest members of society can develop and express their own voices, influence public policy, etc.

It is also inextricably linked to social cohesion, which requires the commitment of volunteer corps members and allies on the one hand, and a change in attitudes and the fight against preconceived ideas on the other. This change in social attitudes must enable the integration and respect of all, so that the people in greatest poverty are no longer prisoners of "shame" (another very important term in the history of ATD: "Extreme poverty begins where shame prevails," said Wresinski), which causes suffering and withdrawal and is a form of social violence. Instead, they should receive consideration, respect, and empathy.

The final element of this "project for a new society" is therefore the fundamental recognition of the dignity of every individual and the recognition of poverty as a violation of all human rights in their indivisibility and interdependence. For Wresinski, rights are a "floor"; and if there is no floor, he said, we "fall into the void". We therefore need basic rights in terms of income and housing, and also in terms of access to healthcare, training, education, culture, etc. All of these

rights were acknowledged in the 1998 law against exclusion introduced by Geneviève de Gaulle.

RQM: What role did Joseph Wresinski play in the process of understanding the most marginalised people, and how influential was he?

A. B.-D.: His role was important and at the same time should be placed in context. He was indeed the one who launched it, drawing on the knowledge he acquired at the JOC,⁵ with the principle of rigorous observation and daily writing that he passed on and instilled in the volunteer corps members. He himself was a voracious reader, someone who sought knowledge, who observed everything, who wrote, who always had his little notebook and pencil in his pocket.

He also encouraged the first volunteer corps members to pursue their studies, both internally and outside ATD (Eugène Notermans and Charles Sleeth went to university in Lille, Mary Rabagliati to the London School of Economics, etc.). When Alwine de Vos asked in 1960 how she could help, he asked her to set up a "social research bureau". Wresinski was undeniably a driving force, a proactive thinker.

He was also a cultural mediator, a translator between the world of poverty and everyone else. He lived in poverty as a child, rose above it, and agreed to return to it. Everyone recognises his keen insight and observation skills. He knew how to see and understand the smallest signs, and taught volunteer corps members to be attentive to them and to decode them. He was therefore not a class defector who crossed over to the other side; he truly had a foot in each world and he was the one who enabled people not living in poverty to understand the world of those living in poverty.

But he also had harsh words for research for research's sake, knowledge for knowledge's sake, which he considered to be intellectual rhetoric. It was something he could not stand. In this sense, he was much closer to the grassroots work. And it wasn't easy every day for the volunteer corps members who worked at the Social Research Bureau, who tried to read, learn, and investigate, and who had to walk a tightrope.

So yes, we must acknowledge his role, but we must not exaggerate it either. That would not do justice to all those other people who strove for knowledge — particularly in the formative years of the 1960s and 1970s, including Alwine de Vos, Daniel Fayard, Louis Join-Lambert, and other volunteer corps members — who were absolutely right, because the Social Research Bureau, which later became the Research and Training Institute, was very avant-garde and

⁵ JOC: Young Christian Workers. Founded in Belgium in 1925 by a priest, Joseph Cardijn, the JOC was established in France in Clichy in 1927 under the leadership of Father Guérin. An apostolic movement for popular education, it is aimed at young people aged 13 to 30 from working-class backgrounds (but other young people from various backgrounds who identify with its project can also join). These young workers, whether in precarious situations or not, are searching for beliefs and want to meet with other young people to reflect, share, and take action.

productive. Subsequently, research and knowledge became established, but also adapted and renewed in line with the context and the evolution of issues. And it has continued, to this day, to be highly innovative. This long history of the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of research is truly a very important and, until now, little-recognised feature of ATD.

RQM: How important is an organisation with a volunteer corps whose role is not to raise awareness among people living in poverty but to help empower them to become true activists?

A. B.-D.: There is indeed a kind of Copernican revolution in Wresinski's approach, which I think stems fundamentally from the fact that, unlike most founders of anti-poverty associations, he himself experienced poverty throughout his childhood and adolescence. I have sometimes wondered whether what he did for the most marginalised people was not what he would have wanted people to do for his mother, and for him and his brothers and sisters, when he was young. From the time he first went to the Noisy-le-Grand camp, for example, he called for an end to charity assistance so the families in the shanty town would cease to be dependent on stop-gap measures (soup kitchens, clothing banks, etc.) — which Wresinski hated above all else — and take control of their own lives.

But at the same time, this concept, which led to the emergence of Fourth World activists, did not suddenly occur to Wresinski at the outset. It was slow to germinate and was created collectively. This can clearly be seen in the slow development of the Fourth World People's University, which was initially very different from what it has become today, or in the creation — later on and not by Wresinski himself, but well after his death — by volunteer corps members Claude and Françoise Ferrand of the "merging of knowledge" approach. And Fourth World activists as we understand them today only began to emerge in the late 1970s, when Wresinski launched an original training programme, notably including Martine Le Corre.⁶

But even if this concept is only gradually taking root, ATD remains quite avant-garde among not-for-profit associations in its belief that people receiving assistance must become fully autonomous individuals, capable of thinking, speaking, acting, and coping both independently and collectively; people who participate in building and defending their own cause and become fully active players in it. "The subjugated classes do not speak, they are spoken for," said Pierre Bourdieu.⁷ This is exactly what ATD strives to combat, in its own way, by inventing new

⁶ Fourth World activist from Caen, involved with ATD Fourth World for fifty years. See her book, *Les miens sont ma force* (My People Are My Strength), published by Quart Monde/Le bord de l'eau, 2023.

⁷ French sociologist.

methods. Volunteer corps members are there to support them in this task, said Francine de la Gorce,⁸ and certainly not to do it for them.

RQM: What can you say about the concepts of poverty, assistance, and commitment that differentiate ATD Fourth World, Emmaüs, and Secours Catholique [Catholic Charity]?

A. B.-D.: Well, there is, of course, the relationship to religion. Secours Catholique continues to claim a Catholic religious foundation; Emmaüs, on the other hand, has long claimed to have broken with it completely. ATD Fourth World is somewhere in between: it aims to be open and multi-faith, and embraces forms of spirituality, which is another expression of religion.

There is also everything we have already discussed about Fourth World activists and the project for a new society.

And then there is the very important issue of advocacy, where ATD Fourth World is actually two decades ahead of others. This has led to successes at times when there were windows of opportunity, openings on the issue of rights, and greater empathy than today towards people living in poverty. These windows have largely closed since then. Secours Catholique took a very long time to really invest in advocacy. Emmaüs practised it around the winter of 1954, then abandoned it until the 1980s and 1990s, being further hampered by the figure of Abbé Pierre, who monopolised attention. This allowed ATD to be the leader in the field in the 1980s and 1990s. This is very clear. And then there is the idea of engaging with the United Nations: until the 2020s, I had never seen Secours Catholique, Emmaüs, or any other such organisation at the United Nations. They hadn't thought of it; it wasn't in their plans.

It also seems to me that ATD is unique in its circular approach to volunteer corps members moving between North and South. Generally speaking, countries in the North send volunteers to the South to bring knowledge, money, technology, etc. — to help. At ATD Fourth World, it's more circular: a volunteer corps member from the South can go to the North, and vice versa. Everyone is constantly circulating. There is therefore a form of horizontality, but no hierarchy — at least, there shouldn't be — unlike common practices in humanitarian work. This contributes greatly to cultural openness and mixing, and is parallel, in terms of the volunteer corps, to the idea of the "people of the Fourth World" and the universality of poverty.

RQM: Your thoughts on the relationship with Marxism are also interesting. In reference to "Workers of the world, unite," there is also this: "Poor people of the world, unite." Is this a blend of Marxism and Christianity?

⁸ One of the founding members of ATD Fourth World's volunteer corps.

A. B.-D.: "Poor people of the world, unite" is something I say tongue-in-cheek in reference to the famous "Workers of the world, unite" of Marx and Engels, because I think it sums up quite well part of Wresinski's thinking, as he was a great reader of Marx. Wresinski was deeply convinced that the Communist Party had stopped at the "proletariat" and did not want to embrace in its political cause all the people who remained below it — and whom Wresinski wanted to call not "lumpen-proletariat", as Marx and Engels did, describing them in very pejorative and contemptuous terms, but rather the "sub-proletariat". Behind this lies the sense that communism has in fact bypassed any idea of improving on democracy.

But within this union of all countries, there is also deeply rooted the idea, very important to Wresinski, of a universal Fourth World people; that there are aspects of poverty that are the same everywhere, and that people living in poverty around the world should not oppose one another, but rather show solidarity and unite. The term "people" is both very biblical (Alwine de Vos even compares Wresinski to a prophet who, like Moses, would lead his "people" to "liberation") and very republican. The Greek word for people, *demos*, is the foundation of democracy.

So yes, I think there is a real syncretism in Wresinski, that is to say, a fusion of ideologies to produce something new. In fact, when we mix ideas, when we blend them together, we enrich them.

RQM: One of our movement's distinctive features has been to define itself very early on as a defender of human rights, affirming the inalienable rights of the most excluded people. In an international political context where the human rights approach is increasingly under attack and being called into question, how do you view the possibility of continuing to base our advocacy at the international level on this foundation?

A. B.-D.: First, in the mid-1960s and the early volunteer corps conferences, the idea of "inalienable dignity" emerged. The human rights approach came shortly afterwards, combining (once again) this idea of inalienable dignity, which is the foundation of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the American inspiration of the civil rights movement. From the late 1960s onwards, ATD increasingly reflected on and analysed in terms of human rights — in a context where they were also being worked on extensively at the international level, but in a very divided way between civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other. One of the major contributions of ATD Fourth World's thinking that emerged at that time was to consider poverty as a violation of these rights in their indivisibility and interdependence. This would form the basis of advocacy at the United Nations in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, since the 1990s, there has been growing criticism, sometimes quite violent, of human rights approaches, pejoratively referred to as "human righters"; with the argument that this approach focuses on individuals rather than social classes and therefore abandons the fight against inequality. This approach was particularly prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s. Sociologist Colette Bec,⁹ for example, criticises the fact that we have moved "from the welfare

⁹ Colette Bec, *De l'État social à l'État des droits de l'homme* (From the Welfare State to the Human Rights State), Éd. PUF, 2007.

state to the human rights state" — where ATD Fourth World comes in for some harsh criticism. Here, human rights are not enough, compared with the fight against inequality.

But there is also, among critics of human rights, a completely different line of argument, whereby human rights are considered excessive. Since the 2000s, we have witnessed a decline in compassion and the rise of a discourse that considers people receiving assistance to have too many rights and not enough responsibilities; a discourse that tends to make them guilty, rather than victims, of their situation — even though we know very well that unemployment is due to a lack of jobs and numerous obstacles in terms of childcare, transport, health, etc.; and that the growth in the number of people receiving benefits is due both to mass unemployment and to the reduction in unemployment insurance in France, which pushes people towards social assistance. But this leads to demands for counteraction, a demand for "quid pro quo", a reversal of the meaning of society's debt (which is increasingly perceived not as a debt owed by society to its disadvantaged members, but as a debt owed by those receiving assistance to the society that helps them), which is quite unfair and difficult to bear for the people who are targeted.

However, I believe that we must not abandon human rights as our guiding principle. They have been the foundation of our societies since 1945 (1948 to be precise). Nor do I believe, quite the contrary, that advocating for human rights hinders the work to end poverty or the fight against inequality or collective thinking; they have, for example, served the people of Africa to justify decolonisation. They do not hinder anything, and on the contrary, they enable a great deal.

RQM: Can you explain your collaboration with members of our movement in your research work, and what do you think of the method adopted?

A. B.-D.: We developed a way of working together as we went along, without any preconceived methods or ideas. It came about through discussions and observations. The core principle was to have my chapters, once written, proofread in small batches by a small group, made up of both permanent members of the group and people who were called on for their knowledge of a particular chapter.

It was very productive, because historians read archives, but they may not have read everything, or may not have understood everything properly. Discussing it with other people was very reassuring. It sometimes led me to open boxes that I hadn't had access to, or that we hadn't thought of at first — because, of course, there are 2.7 linear kilometres of archives at Baillet,¹⁰ and I haven't read all of those 2.7 kilometres; a whole lifetime wouldn't be enough. I

¹⁰ Located in Baillet-en-France (Val d'Oise), the Joseph Wresinski Archives and Research Centre has worked since 2005 to collect, classify, preserve, and communicate a heritage of writings, photographs, sound recordings, films, and artistic creations. These archives, which continue to grow, are a source of information on the history of the work to overcome extreme poverty and the struggles to eliminate it. From the outset, Joseph Wresinski wanted everything to be recorded and documented in order to keep track of the commitments and struggles of activists, volunteer corps members, and allies working to eradicate extreme poverty. Website <https://www.joseph-wresinski.org/en/>

believe we struck a balance between what would have been unacceptable — namely control and censorship — and total freedom, which could result in misinterpretation or significant gaps. I was also able to conduct numerous interviews with activists and, above all, volunteer corps members, which was also very valuable.

RQM: Why did you choose to work on the history of the work to overcome poverty?

A. B.-D.: For several reasons. First, the subject you choose for your research always corresponds, in one way or another, to a personal inclination — it interests you, moves you, outrages you.

I also quickly realised that anti-poverty associations were a fascinating subject for history, because they are an observatory, a diffracting prism. They allow us to trace the evolution both of forms of poverty and of public commitments and policies. And then, today, there is a lack of historians specialising in poverty and lack of basic security in the twentieth century; there have been few, and that generation is disappearing. Yet there is a need, a social and media demand, and a wealth of archives that remain to be explored.

Finally, I hope that this work will be of social and civic benefit for anyone interested in the subject, and also, in the case of not-for-profits, for the organisations themselves. A better understanding of where we come from allows us to better understand where we are going.
