

# THE FRENCH AUTUMN RIOTS OF 2005 AND THE CRISIS OF REPUBLICAN INTEGRATION

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**rench police intelligence has classified the street riots that swept through the suburbs of French cities during October and November of 2005 as the most serious popular rebellion since 1968. Even though car burnings and clashes with police had been an often televised and ludic weekend tradition among marginalized youths since 1981—and, particularly, 1990—these events had never taken place simultaneously in as many cities or for such a prolonged amount of time. Neither had they swept into some neighboring countries or targeted public buildings, businesses, and schools. The sheer scale of the revolt highlighted the French integration model's growing inability to incorporate immigrants and the ethnic minorities comprised by their

children (both second and third generations) into the nation's social, economic, and political fabric. This problem stems from the predicament of the nation's main institutions—the welfare state, social urbanism, the school system, the justice system, the police, and the family unit—in a context of economic stagnation and unemployment.

A number of false and ideological reasons have been used to explain these riots. However, these were not racially motivated, as in the case of U.S. ghettos, nor are the French working-class suburbs comparable to the ghettos. In fact, there was no racial violence. The rioters were not street gang members fighting over drug territory, as suggested by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. And they were not Muslim fundamentalists, as the far-right would have it. In fact, the lack of a



political project or a social utopia was the most striking factor in this spontaneous, anarchic revolt against economic marginalization and social discrimination.

### THE RIOTS.

Suburban youths of African origin started rebelling on October 27, 2005. As in the case of many previous street riots in France and Los Angeles during 1992, the violence was spurred by an encounter involving the police. Three young theft suspects were being chased by policemen in Clichy-sous-Bois, a suburb of Seine Saint-Denis in northeast Paris, when they decided to take refuge in a power substation to escape abuse. Two of them were electrocuted and died. In response, car burnings and violent clashes between youths and police took place in the area. But it was the use of tear gas on a mosque and the comments made by Sarkozy—who claimed he was going to clean the “scum” off the streets—that ignited the Parisian suburbs. By early November, the revolt had spread to other French cities and even downtown Paris. *Banlieues* throughout the country, from Strasbourg to Rennes, Nice to Lille, burned at night. By November 8, riots were taking place in some Brussels, Berlin, and Bremen neighborhoods (like France, Belgium and Germany have a large number of Maghrebian or Turkish minorities). The Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (Union of Islamic Organizations of

France, or UOIF) declared a fatwa against the arsonists, although another Muslim religious representative opposed it. It was around this time that a sixty-five year old white man in Stains, Seine St. Denis, became the first and last casualty of the riots. Low-scale disturbances spread to Athens, Rotterdam, and Brussels. On November 12, in an attempt to control the movement, the government decreed a curfew and declared a state of emergency, banning nightly social meetings in public places and authorizing summary penal sanctions and brazen searches. This measure, abetted by a law passed in 1955 to fight Algerian revolutionaries, was a completely disproportionate response to disturbances carried out by marginalized youths. It was denounced by Arab and African minorities who resented its colonialist character and many mayors refused to implement it. The government also arrested thousands of rioters, deported some of them for being foreigners, and threatened to cancel subsidies for large families whose parents were incapable of controlling their children. The riots progressively subsided, but the government decided to prolong the curfew for three months in spite of protests by left-wing parties. They eventually relented and lifted it in January.

After three weeks of upheaval, more than 10,000 vehicles and tens of buildings had been burnt: schools, libraries, gyms, police stations,



tribunals, town halls, depots, businesses, workshops, and, in some cases, churches and synagogues. The rioters mostly targeted state offices and, to a lesser extent, businesses and shopping centers, generally avoiding religious buildings. However, many of the cars they burnt in their partially self-destructive rage belonged to immigrants and other people in their same condition, all of whom lived in the same neighborhoods. Their tactics were those of an urban guerilla, relying on cell phones to coordinate their various small contingents and escape the police after throwing Molotov cocktails.

The government's response was firm: 11,000 policemen were mobilized and almost 3,000 people were arrested. A third of them were underage, a few were foreigners, and very few had criminal records. Six hundred were held for trial. The race for the presidential nomination between Sarkozy and former Prime Minister Dominique De Villepin resulted in two kinds of political discourse: the former emphasized the need for tough measures while the second insisted on "understanding and dialogue." It was Sarkozy who prevailed (Morice A., 2005).

#### THE BANLIEUES

The French word for suburb is *banlieue*, a word derived from *bannir*, *mettre au ban*—that is, exclude or banish. The *banlieues* have been the place in the outskirts of the capital

where the kingdom sends its unwanted population. In the late 1950s, many Algerian families who were fleeing the war began settling in these areas, which were built to provide moderately priced social housing for the working class after World War II. They were later joined by other Maghrebian immigrants and, as of late, many families from Sub-Saharan Africa. The French white and Christian population concurrently diminished, and now most of the inhabitants of the *banlieues* are French citizens and second or third generation immigrants of non-European origin (Boils, 2006).

These neighborhoods consist of large tower complexes that are usually fifteen to twenty floors tall, all of which are identical. There are very few commercial outlets and scarcely any recreational, cultural or transportation facilities; there are no gathering centers or attractive plazas. The buildings, some of which are half a century old, are in very bad condition: there are elevator, plumbing, and garbage collection problems, as well as lack of maintenance in common areas. Municipal authorities pay little attention to the residences because many poor tenants owe rent and others destroy the property, which they perceive as alien (ibid). These bedroom-cities are far from the urban centers and house poor and marginalized foreign populations. They once comprised 1,530,000 homes, or what used to be 6 percent of French households: a total of 752



dilapidated, highly populated and dangerous urban areas. The government started demolishing or rehabilitating many of these buildings in the 1980s, but progress has been slow: in 2001, there were 250,000 new homes and 40,000 renovated ones (ibid). There is a deficit of 1,300,000 homes (320,000 in the Paris metropolitan area alone) and, in many poor neighborhoods, two families often share the same house while others have no house at all. These conditions are exacerbated by the fact that African immigrant families tend to be large (three to ten children) and the apartments are usually quite small (an average of 28 square meters or 301 square feet for five people). On top of all this, unemployment is rife and government aid is not enough. Young French citizens whose families have lived in France for two generations must rely on precarious and badly remunerated jobs. In Aubervilliers, 12.4 percent of households depend on the R.M.I.<sup>1</sup> and 18.3 percent receive C.M.U.;<sup>2</sup> aid packages for large families increased three-fold over the span of three years, and the average income of tax exempt households is 465 euros.

Many have compared these neighborhoods with the U.S. ghettos given the perpetual presence of drugs, street gangs, petty crime, and inter-neighborhood and class hostilities involving the French white middle

class. The *banlieues*, however, are not the product of an apartheid policy or a social practice of racial segregation: they include African and European immigrants, their children, and French whites (or “Gauls”). As has been pointed out, the government provides some kind of upkeep and public services (education, health, subsidized housing, etc.). Also, unlike what happens in U.S. ghettos, people tend to earn their living legally (salaries, social benefits) rather than illegally (drug trafficking, theft; Rey and Body-Gendrot, 1999). In fact, many of these areas have multiethnic fronts that fight problems such as addiction and lack of services, and promote cultural and sporting activities. There is, nevertheless, a tendency toward social, ethnic, and inter-generational antagonism (Bruneau, 2004), both within the neighborhoods themselves and between different *banlieues*. This has been exacerbated by the decreasing amount of “Gauls” and the growing ethnic diversity.

#### THE FAMILY STRUCTURE OF AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

Anthropological studies have examined the confrontation, transformation, and adjustment of traditional systems and values experienced by Maghrebian or Sub-Saharan families residing in

<sup>1</sup> *Revenu minimum d'insertion*, or Insertion Minimum Income, is a reduced economic subsidy provided by the French government to the unemployed.

<sup>2</sup> *Couverture Maladie Universelle*, or Universal Health Coverage.



France. The extended family networks, endogamy, and the inferior status of women in the patrilinear societies of Northern Africa, as well as polygamy, communal traditions, and high birth rates among Sub-Saharan African families, all clash with the social values and housing system found in France (Todd, 1994). France's diminutive apartments are not fit for large families, and submission and withdrawal from public spaces does not sit well with the almost egalitarian participation of women in French society. "Immigrants come from African societies that are vastly different from French culture. These contrasts are not easily overcome, neither by the poor who emigrate nor by the rich who receive them: they involve different worldviews, social behaviors that clash with those of the receiving society, and qualifications that have little to do with the skills required in the receiving country. Culturally speaking, the issue of women's social participation poses the major problem" (Castaingt, 2005).

Traditional family systems are, nevertheless, profoundly affected by the immigration process: as time goes by and the children become familiar with the language, the school system, and the culture of the receiving nation, patriarchal structures, women's social exclusion, and endogamy become unfeasible. The strong cultural pressure exercised by French society leads to clashes between individualist and egalitarian values and communitarian, patrilinear ones, which leads to the implosion of

the traditional Muslim family (Todd, *ibid.*). Teenagers of both sexes begin to question the authoritarian and patriarchal family structure, rebuff their parents' humble stance in regards to the dominant society and reject their occupational fate. Young girls refuse endogamous marriage and a life as homemakers, seeking to excel in their studies. The breach between illiterate parents and children with a secondary education additionally undermines parental authority, and families live under the constant threat of disintegration. The most serious dangers are the reversal of the parent-child relationship (e.g., cases of children who beat their mother) and young males' propensity toward crime. Monomaternal or polygamous Sub-Saharan families run by women are increasingly common, and the lack of a father figure is a constant problem (Quiminal, 1999). Recently immigrated Sub-Saharan families are also the most marginalized group in terms of housing (many live in shacks or unoccupied buildings) and employment (their educational levels are low, their knowledge of French is sometimes insufficient, and they have very few qualifications).

#### THE CRISIS OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Public, non-religious, and universal free education has been the fundamental assimilation tool through which immigrants are incorporated into French culture, following the ideals of citizenship,



liberty, and equality. In fact, until the 1990s, education provided some North African youths with the means to achieve social ascent: they became professionals, businessmen, technicians, etc., the so-called *Beurgeoisie*<sup>3</sup> (Castles and Miller, 2004). A study addressing the educational problems of second generation immigrants revealed that, despite having the highest failure rate of in primary school, this population became more proficient than the children of native French during secondary levels. This was due to the fact their families showed more interest in their educational achievements and made use of the government's special educational assistance programs, which are meant for students facing cultural difficulties (Lorcerie, 1999).

There were attempts to institute a bilingual and intercultural educational policy during the late 1970s and the 1980s; countries of origin financed language and culture courses taught by native teachers in an attempt to facilitate the integration of immigrant children and adopt the multicultural model favored in English-speaking countries. This policy, however, was not implemented on a massive level and was quickly abandoned when the children of immigrants became French. In the 1990s, this project gave way to policies that attempted to balance quality standards through the use of

educational aid and scholarships for marginalized areas, as well as the reinstatement of the notion of a common culture (Lorcerie, *ibid*). Said policies failed to curtail ethnic discrimination and professional segregation, and the children of African immigrants showed comparatively less schooling: 71 percent of Algerians older than 15 had no diploma, and only 3.1 per cent had finished high school or had some kind of technical certificate (Zehraoui, 1999). There was also a noticeable educational "ghettoization": the more immigrant children a given school had, the more neglected, low-quality, and violent it was, all of which accelerated the French Gaul exodus. This was compounded with the conflict over Muslim girls' use of the veil, which was banned in order to enforce the non-religious and mixed character of the French school system. This triumph on the part of conservative secularists only increased exasperation among the Muslim minority.

In fact, the school system is undergoing a profound crisis that includes serious authority problems and lack of discipline; the intrusion of anti-social and delinquent behavior; a growing inequality of resources and staff from one neighborhood and school to another; programs and teachers who have failed to adapt to global realities, and early hyper-specialization.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore not

<sup>3</sup> From "Beur" (the *verlan* or French inverted slang term for "arabe"), which is the name given to the French children of North African immigrants.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, admission to the *grandes écoles*, or elite French schools, is even less democratic today than it was twenty years ago.



surprising that many young *banlieue* inhabitants fail at school. Reeve (2006) quotes a unionized teacher: “You really believe in school because it is supposedly a tool for social ascent. Burning it down symbolically states its ineffectiveness. You turn against it because it has disappointed you.”

#### LABOR DISCRIMINATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The workplace provides the most insight into the latent racism prevalent in French society. Foreign immigrants have played a crucial economic role in the development of French industrialism since the early 20th century: they comprised a submissive, cheap, and flexible workforce that adapted to economic cycles and cost little since it was amenable to indirect salaries; many were single men of productive age who often returned to their country of origin when they grew old. They worked in the public services sector as well as the automotive, metallurgical, chemical, textile, and mining industries, among others. They also took on menial jobs. Unfortunately (or not), the post-industrial revolution led to a profound industrial restructuring and eliminated most low-qualification jobs, as well as many of the sectors and productive branches in which these migrants worked. Many found themselves unemployed while the programs for legal labor migration were cancelled in 1974. Legal

immigration continued through family reunification because, since migrants form their own families or bring them from abroad, temporary circular labor migration always gives way to permanent settling in the receiving country.

The children of these immigrants could not take the jobs previously held by their parents, nor were they interested in doing so. They had been educated in France, many were already French, and they wished to break away from the sub-proletariat. Few were able to do so because of general unemployment, their limited access to higher education, and pervasive, latent discrimination. The economic crises and the subsequent stagnation increased competition among lowly qualified French whites and the “new,” darker French with unpronounceable names and hybridized speech, who often lived in the same sordid neighborhoods. This competition based on the fear of “those who have come to take our jobs” has played a crucial role in the exacerbation of racism and the popularity of the Front National, or National Front (Castaingts, op. cit.).

High unemployment rates have been a structural feature of France since the 1970s. They are the result of several institutional factors such as stringent labor regulations; high employment taxes; the high costs of layoffs vis-à-vis the increasing popularity of temporary hiring; a segmented labor market; reduced labor mobility, and lack of adjustment in terms of workforce qualification,



among others (Pérez Pérez, 2006). Unemployment rates hovered above 10 per cent for a long time and, in 2005, they were still at 9.8 percent, the European Union's sixth worst rate (Pérez Pérez, *ibid*). The situation was quite different in the United States and United Kingdom, where unemployment rates were less than half and all immigrants, legal or not, were able to find employment. In France, unemployment mostly affects the youth, people older than 55, and lowly qualified workers.

The suburbs of large cities are the areas hardest hit by unemployment: 21 percent of their population is jobless (the overall national average is 10 per cent); in the northeastern Parisian *banlieues* where the riots began the rate is as high as 26 percent (Boils, 2006). Young Maghrebians are particularly affected: in 1992, unemployed youths of Algerian origin comprised 40 percent of the national average, while the jobless children of native French amounted to 11 percent. Not even educated *beurs* could find work: 26.5 percent of Algerian men and 36 percent of Algerian women were jobless in 1996 (Zehraoui, 1999), and discrimination played an evident role in this (Tribalat, 1999). It is common for employers to refuse applicants on the basis of skin color, surname, or place of residence. As the leader of the French employers association openly stated, "The culture of the *banlieues* is antithetical to that of firms," and

children of immigrants are thought to have difficulties adapting to workplace discipline. In Clichy-sous-Bois, the area where the catalytic events took place, unemployment had reached 40 percent (Reeve, *op. cit.*).

In such a context and with the welfare state in the midst of a financial crisis, subsidies and social education and health policies "are not enough to bring about social integration," especially "when prejudice and racial, ethnic, or religious stigmatization limit access to employment" (Rincón Gallardo, 2005).

#### THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION IN FRANCE.

In 1999, 4, 310,000 of France's residents (or 7.4 percent of the national population) had been born outside the country. More than 1.5 million immigrants had become naturalized in the previous decades, and half a million were colored citizens hailing from the so-called DOM-TOM.<sup>5</sup> The main sending countries were Algeria (576,000), Portugal (570,000), Morocco (521,000), Italy (380,800), Spain (316,500), Tunisia (201,700) and Turkey (176,000). France had Europe's largest Muslim population: 2.5 million in 1990, 5 million in 2007. Between 1980 and 2000, approximately 545,000 foreigners entered France legally each year, which amounted to just 0.01 percent of a total population of 62.7

<sup>5</sup> *Départements d'outre-mer*, or Overseas Departments, and *Territoires d'outre-mer*, or Overseas Territories.





million in 2007. By the late 1990s and the early 2000s immigrants were almost twice that number. Over two thirds of them were reuniting with their families, others were marrying French citizens or seeking asylum, and only 12 percent were in France for work-related reasons (Le Monde, 2006).

Even though immigrant flow into France is not massive, it now comprises 25 percent of the nation's demographic growth, which is characterized by low birth rates. Immigrants help counteract the accelerated ageing of the population and provide an economically active population for the proximate future, as they tend to have 35 percent more children than French families (Boils, *op. cit.*). Even though this does not pose an immediate threat to Gaul dominion, immigrants' high birth rates worry the right wing and exert a toll on social services.

The European Union has an estimated 3 million undocumented migrants, 500,000 of which currently reside in France. The country receives between 10 and 20,000 of them each year (0.03% of the population). Most are lowly qualified adult men who work in the informal economy (domestic services, manufacture, construction, agroindustry, and agriculture) under conditions of exploitation or near-enslavement, or formally unemployed people who survive by working on the streets and engaging in small-time trafficking. These undocumented migrants, better known as the *sans-papiers* (or "without

papers"), staged several protests during the 1990s, participating in church takeovers and hunger strikes. They managed to achieve some regularization policies under socialist governments but, since 2002, they have been systematically hunted down and deported. The French government has complained that Spain and Italy tolerate clandestine migration that subsequently ends up in France.

#### THE CRISIS OF INTEGRATION POLICIES

The youth riots in France's urban and social periphery are the consequence of a worn out institutional system that has exhausted its economic and cultural assimilation capacities, but they also owe much to increasingly tyrannical measures of political control and police repression. "The crisis is that of French Republicanism: the French Republic tells everyone that 'liberty, equality, fraternity' is a wonderful promise, but it is not there for everyone; and when you are young, educated, and you know that the school system is going to be segregated in actuality (and not just in theory), this is going to be very frustrating. This is the only crisis of such magnitude in Europe, a general institutional crisis: it applies to the justice system, the police, but particularly to the school system" (Wieviorka, 2006).

Indeed, social and political institutions are in crisis: the French social welfare system, one of the most



advanced in the world, already shows a big deficit in the pension and health coverage areas due to the ageing of the population and their anticipated retirement. The courts are backlogged with trials, disarmed in the face of delinquents who are too young to go to jail and whom the system does not know how to handle. The police lack sufficient resources to fight growing crime, and families disintegrate as parents divorce, the gap between parents and children increases, and monoparental households become increasingly common. National cultural integration is threatened by the growing U.S. influence and the communal seclusion of ethnic minorities, who feel discriminated against and seek to reaffirm their identity through religious conversion. This is the case of some Muslim communities whose religious approach sometimes takes an integrist or political stance as a form of protest.

On the other hand, racist attitudes and xenophobic political opinions boost the popularity of the Front National and other right-wing parties:

The French Republic was the integration machine; when it broke down, all of its pieces stopped working at once: the army, the family, and the school system, which were the elements that passed on patriotic culture. The same thing happened to the church, the political parties, and the unions. Rule of law cannot exist without common values, since citizens identify with their fellows through models that do not currently

exist. This is why unconscious, religious, or ethnically-based identities surpass the feeling of republican citizenship. ... Vertigo and anarchic revolts are an expression of frustration (Debray, 2005, quoted in Cruz Zamorano, 2006).

And yet, the children of North African immigrants did try to integrate into French culture: many married native French citizens and were institutionally incorporated. The French naturalization policies (which privilege *jus soli* over the blood rights still recognized in Germany) and the welcoming refugee programs were quite benevolent during the 1980s. Schools opened up to immigrants and tried to cater to their needs, but as the nation went into economic recession and unemployment grew, the children of immigrants were subjected to growing racism and became “second class citizens: France has not been able to integrate them, neither socially, politically, or economically” (Cruz Zamorano, *ibid*). These new French generations have been the victims of latent racism on all fronts: the educational system (the ban on veils in schools), the cultural space (discrimination in the private labor sector), housing (limited access to living quarters), and political racism (racist attacks and hate crimes; Bataille, 1999).

Lacking a cohesive family structure and human and parental monetary capital, most of them are unable to incorporate themselves into the normative structures of the



middle class and are “assimilated downwards” (Portes and De Wind, 2006). They are also unable to join the transnational ethnic networks that provide youths with family and communal support, maintain cultural values and behaviors belonging to the country of origin, and create ethnic labor markets through which they could attain a modicum of economic wealth (García Borrego, 2006). In fact, most of them have been acculturated. [According to *Le Monde*, in 1995] only 24 percent of children born to Algerian parents speak their parents language and only 14 per cent were practicing Muslims, while 50 percent of Algerian children born in France had had their first relationship with native French (*Le Monde*, 1995). Nevertheless, in the *banlieues*, this acculturation has not resulted in a complete adoption of French culture, which is considered “second class.” There, youths cultivate an “Americanized culture, that of hip hop’s gangsta rap: they wear the same clothes, use the same gestures, play the same videogames, listen to the same music, and organize in gangs that are similar to those in the United States” (Castaingts, *op. cit.*). In fact, they are pushed toward a culture of violence.

The great trap and paradox involving the children of African immigrants is that, even when an individual integrates and becomes acculturated, “French society will still consider him inferior because he is different, but he has already cut his ties to his group of origin. He is

doubly guilty of treason: he is part of his group of origin without really belonging to it, and he is part of the receiving society without really belong to it” (Lapeyronnie, 1999). These youths find discrimination more difficult to bear than their parents because they were born in France and no longer have ties to another place of origin; they cannot take refuge in their roots (*ibid*) and, in response, try to build an identity that exacerbates their difference. This, for example, is the case with radical Muslims whose identity is based on their problematic experiences in the receiving society and acts as a demand for recognition (*ibid*). Ultimately, these approaches lead to clashes with police, reverse racism, and street violence.

#### POLITICAL BACKGROUND AND CAUSES OF THE RIOTS

The Parisian suburbs used to be the capital’s “red belt,” the area where the Parti Communiste Français (the French Communist Party, or PCF) had social and political control. But, starting in the 1980s, the party grew so weak that it almost disappeared from the region, leaving a large organizational gap and a scarcity of social and housing policies. A large part of the PCF’s base moved to the Front National, inaugurating the division between the native and naturalized French proletariats.

During the 1980s, the frustration and belligerence latent among the



inheritors of migration was channeled toward civic and political venues. In 1983, under the socialist government and after the first suburban riots, a large anti-racist movement brought the French public and *beur* youths together on a 100,000 person march from Marseille to Paris. This movement insisted on equality at the same time that it demanded the right to cultural difference, mixing republican ideals with communal forms of organization and culture (Wihtol de Wenden, 1999). The undocumented immigrant protesters wanted to express their desire for a kind of political conversation that went beyond full and participative citizenship and addressed all levels, from the local to the national. They even nominated candidates for municipal elections. They were received by former president François Mitterrand, who provided some with resident status and ten-year work permits and naturalized many others. In exchange, the government and the socialist party attempted to take political control of the movement. They co-opted its leaders and cut them off from their popular base, thus neutralizing the movement's radical potential. The tradition of anti-capitalist struggle was lost after the defeat of the last immigrant worker strikes, which did not connect to the urban protests carried out by the immigrant's children or obtain the support of the unionized French workers (Dell'Umbria, 2006).

By the 1990s and faced with the lack of political will on the part of the

socialist government, which failed to integrate them into the political system, the *beur* activists had become disenchanted. The disappointment in both the political left and the anti-racist *beur* movement, which had only focused on one aspect of social exclusion and had not solved the economic problems facing its youth, led to their loss of legitimacy and gave way to Muslim associations, some of which followed communal traditions and rejected integration: "the associative movement had to relocate or disappear" (Wihtol de Wenden, 1999). The late 1990s saw the emergence of the *sans-papiers'* movement, which gained the support of French intellectuals, NGOs and the church, but did not achieve the kind of massive union between French youths of native and immigrant origin that had taken place in the 1980s.

The process of sociocultural integration maintained its course, although new hybrid models—such as a type of cultural integration that did not completely relinquish family identity—were adopted. Economic insertion, on the other hand, was negatively affected by the high unemployment rate and this created a fertile ground for differentialism and communitarism (Wihtol de Wenden, 1999), along with spontaneous manifestations of rage. Today "we no longer have a worker's (or citizen's) movement, or a political party that can politicize the frustration and rage experienced by these youths, and their revolts take on a self-destructive tenor" (Noiriel, 2002).



The right-wing governmental policies implemented by Jacques Chirac and Sarkozy starting in 2002 reduced the amount of social programs and increased repressive and security measures, amplifying the sense of moral wrong and injury. Locally subsidized youth employment programs, which hired second-generation *banlieue* youths as social mediators, were suppressed; the public health budget for impoverished areas was reduced; economic support for neighborhood social workers was cancelled, and local police forces, who had gained the trust of the residents because they lived in the same problematic areas, were disbanded. This urban policy was limited to an increase in policing activities and a stance against terrorism and delinquency: youths were banned from meeting around tower entrances to “stop the creation of gangs” (or, more to the point, to keep them from thinking and acting collectively), and renovation programs in highly deteriorated buildings were abandoned, leading to accidents and the death of 60 people. Race conflicts increased and, two months before the riots, a purportedly accidental fire in a migrants’ dwelling caused the death of 14 people, including two children. Similar fires had happened before, killing 24 Africans in the outskirts of Paris.

In addition to a restrictive immigration policy and very tough security measures, Sarkozy implemented a U.S.-style communitarian integration policy.

He supported the building of mosques and recognized all Muslim leaders—including some integrist associations without much representation—as political interlocutors in an attempt to control them. France’s former Minister of the Interior and, unfortunately, its current president, seems to derive more of his ideas from Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism (which has been questioned and even partially eschewed in the United States) than from the homogenizing, assimilationist, and lay republican model.

#### SOME CLUES INTO THE MEANING OF THE RIOTS

The riots were the marginalized French youth’s demand for acknowledgment, an affirmation of their dignity and social and political being. They were a protest against constant police abuse, arrests based on ethnic profiling, and “accidental” beatings and deaths that always go unpunished. These youths wanted to be French citizens as much as anyone else, and enjoy the employment, consumption, cultural, and gratification rights they cannot access because of their race or origin. In the words of J. Railte, Seine St. Denis’ communist senator, “The demand of second generation youths is to enjoy complete citizenship in their diversity, and not belong to this or that communitarian, ethnic or religious group” (2005). “What they cannot bear is the breach between theory and practice, between the motto of



republican equality and a destiny of unemployment. [...] All they dream about is having money so that they can consume like everyone else” (Bouzour, 2005).

The lack of criminal records among the riots’ detainees invalidates the notion that these revolts were the result of gang wars over drug territory. The religious factor does not explain them either, as the violence did not have any sort of Muslim component (Wieviorka, *op.cit.*); in fact, some Muslim associations tried to create protection militias, which were repudiated by the rioters. The same happened with left-wing organizations, which had nothing to do with the riots, did not foresee them, and did not understand them. This can partially explain the lack of a political agenda in a movement where the only demand ever (and only occasionally) voiced was the removal of Sarkozy. This would also explain the absence of any sort of social utopia or networks with other popular sectors. In any case, the targets of the rioters’ attacks leave little doubt about the fact that their demands and ire were directed at the state.

The sociodemographic and socioeconomic profile of these youths sheds light on the nature of their movement: 50 percent of detainees were underage, averaging between 14 and 22 years of age—some were merely 11. This explains, for example, the ludic character of the fires, which were set by unemployed teenagers with no access to recreational activities. It also shows that the

succession of riots partially resulted from acts of emulation, which were propitiated by mass media coverage throughout neighborhoods and cities: “let’s get on TV with more fires.” Thirty-two percent of detainees only had primary education and many were failing at school, which, in turn, explains their lack of educational expectations. Those who were not students and were held for trial had precarious and badly paid jobs: errand boys, carriers, movers, bakers, etc. (Jeremie, 2006). In short, they were part of the sub-proletariat.

According to a 2006 survey carried out by sociologist H. Lagrange, the neighborhoods that experienced the most violence during the riots shared the same main characteristics:

- A high unemployment rate among the young.
- A high underage population; children and teenagers could comprise more than 35 percent of the population.
- A very high rate of large families (over 6 people per family, especially among immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, who have many children and little money). This can lead to very serious family problems, and 83 percent of the rioters lived in small welfare apartments: “They live on top of each other; when they grow up they have problems with their siblings. Family income is quite reduced and there is no money left for entertainment (M. Lahtifi, educator, 2005). According to Lagrange, this explosive combination is the most significant variable.



- These are poor neighborhoods in rich cities, and the youths resent the social contrasts they face on a daily basis.
- The housing complexes are extremely deteriorated and waiting to be demolished.
- Black youths were overrepresented among the rioting population, a factor that could be linked to the problems caused by large families living in small spaces (Lagrange, *Le Monde*, 2006).

### CONCLUSIONS

The 2005 riots can be seen as an explosion of irrational rage involving psychological mechanisms of “stigma retrieval” (Morice, *op. cit.*), a process where the victims of discrimination adopt the characteristics of the ascribed stigma and use them as a form of vindication (*e.g.*, those classified as violent gang members become more violent, those disparaged as native or black proclaim their indigenous character or their blackness). This mechanism was analyzed by Frantz Fanon in his treatise on colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Another possible interpretation is that provided by Wieviorka, who refers to floating subjects that cannot quite become actors and insert themselves into a social, political, or intercultural relationship because they feel rejected and unrecognized as subjects. This can lead to angry and destructive or self-destructive behaviors when an individual or

another member of the group is subjected to abuse or injustice. This violence can act as a cathartic tool that tears the individual away from a daily state of passivity and alienation and can lead to a subjectivation process that, stemming from a spontaneous feeling of solidarity, could become the first step toward civic, cultural, sportive, or political participation on the one hand, and delinquency and antisocial behavior on the other (Wieviorka, 2005).

These riots, however, can also be seen a pre-political and anti-authoritarian (rather than anti-capitalist) revolt that seeks recognition, equal opportunities, and respect for difference in a society and state that exclude and humiliate their bastard children after having exploited and marginalized their parents. The violence enacted by these marginal subjects represents both protection and freedom, at least for a while. “The violence of the subject is located in the lacks, the gaps, the decomposition of societal complexes on all levels, from the local to the global” (Wieviorka, 2005).

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