

Why did the banlieues burn?

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The violence on French housing estates in November 2005, which saw thousands of cars burnt, attacks on public buildings, occasional Belfast-style confrontations between police and young rioters and police helicopters overflying residential suburbs, sent shock waves through French society. The scale of the violence and repression was unprecedented. One month after the return to 'normal', over 800 young people had been imprisoned, often after the mere pretence of a fair trial.

When the revolt began, the entire Establishment was caught by surprise. Yet the crisis did not come out of the blue. Police statistics revealed that since the beginning of the year, on average nearly a hundred cars had been burnt every week. What happened in November was a sudden increase in tension after the death of two boys in an electricity substation in Clichy-sous-Bois, a town in the northern suburbs of Paris dominated by bleak high-rise housing projects. They had been fleeing police after a reported robbery, which turned out never to have happened. When interior minister (and would-be president) Nicolas Sarkozy announced an inquiry into the boys' deaths, only to repeat in the next breath the inaccurate version given by the local police, he added fuel to the fire. A few days later, a tear-gas canister exploded near the entrance of a mosque during Friday prayers (significantly, the riot police claim they didn't know the mosque was there). No regrets were expressed until long after the damage had been done. The dignified response of the victims' families, community and religious associations and the local mayor contrasted sharply with Sarkozy's arrogant behaviour and President Chirac's curious silence.

The riots were a conscious, if largely unorganized, response not only to years of neglect, but to repeated provocations by Sarkozy and other right-wing demagogues. For months, he has been exhorting the police to step up action against 'troublemakers', setting targets for deporting undocumented immigrants and declaring that 'the scum' would be 'washed out of the housing estates'. Community policing has been abandoned in favour of strong-arm tactics, with Sarkozy cynically saying that it is not the role of the police to play football with young people. He has called for rioters to be deported if they are foreign nationals, although many have never lived in their country of origin (in one of the first cases the court refused to do so, saying that the boy in question was 'perfectly integrated').

In the aftermath of the troubles, polls showed a leap in support for the ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his arch-rival, the 'Euro-sceptic' Philippe de Villiers. Sarkozy himself may be a demagogue, but he is far from being a fool. In a deliberate break with conventional political discourse, he has spoken about the need for a measure of 'positive discrimination', rather than vague talk of 'equality of opportunity'. While upping the law-and-order rhetoric, he has been busy promoting conservative Muslim leaders.

Politics of the suburbs

While of little bearing on the violence itself, Islam is at the heart of debate on the *banlieues*, the deprived areas on the fringes of French cities. Representations of Muslims usually depict either a withdrawal into ‘communitarianism’ and religious conservatism, or a growth in extremism. Suburbs with a large immigrant/Muslim population have in this view become ‘extraterritorial’ zones outside the Republic. Hence the rhetoric of ‘reconquest’ often used by politicians and editorialists. The reality is far more complex.

Not only do people of all origins bear the brunt of unemployment and poverty, but Muslims do not form a homogeneous ‘community’. Sarkozy himself clearly believes in the emergence of a pro-business Muslim middle class, whether represented by the associations controlling the majority of mosques (often linked to the undemocratic, neoliberal regimes in the former French colonies of North Africa), or by the more dynamic, and ambiguous, umbrella organization the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF). This organization, which is said to be linked with groups in the Lebanon and Egypt such as the Muslim Brotherhood, issued a fatwa against Muslims taking part in the riots. This attitude was condemned by progressive Muslims close to the global justice movement, such as Tariq Ramadan and the Collectif des Musulmans de France, for playing into the hands of those who blamed Muslims for the troubles. They emphasized the social and political, rather than ethnic or religious, roots of the movement. Another group, Participation et Spiritualité Musulmanes, insists on the need to engage with the wider society, and work with non-Muslims in the interest of peace and social progress.¹

The French Left as a whole responded to the November crisis, correctly but inadequately, by attacking the government’s social and economic policy. Unemployment is running at up to 50 per cent among young people in deprived areas. Little wonder that for many of them the ‘informal’ economy has become a way of life. Spending on social services has been squeezed. Health charges, utility bills and local rates have all increased. Unemployment benefits are under attack. With 1960s’ public housing projects deteriorating rapidly, the outer suburbs need a massive injection of resources. While efforts have been made to smarten up sink estates by renovating or demolishing tower blocks, the real social problems faced by their residents have continued to get worse. At the same time, community groups have had their funding cut, school auxiliary workers have been sacked, public transport projects in suburban areas has been axed.

However, the November protests were no traditional labour revolt, and the influence of the (mainly ‘white’) Left in the housing estates is negligible. Other explanations are needed. Thanks to the riots, there is now a heightened consciousness that, in ‘the country of the Rights of Man’ (no less!), non-white citizens face widespread ‘exclusion’. In the ‘sensitive’ areas, genuine attempts were made by left-wing councillors and mayors to avoid playing off ‘respectable’ citizens against residents of the housing estates, or cités. They emphasized that the conflict was not racially motivated, and took initiatives to bring community and faith-based associations together. Residents’ groups were set up to protect schools, youth centres and sports facilities from firebombing, while avoiding the trap of forming vigilante groups. In the best cases, steps have been taken to build bridges to disaffected young people. Hundreds of local meetings have been held, many of them very political, to draw the lessons of what happened. However, it remains the case that for a broad section of public opinion the violence is associated with immigration, polygamy and Islam.

The most crushing verdict on the events was provided by the government’s intelligence-gathering service. The Renseignements Généraux concluded that, far from being the result of a religious or criminal conspiracy, the popular revolt had in fact been entirely spontaneous, and an indicator of the despair felt by young people ‘of all origins’ as a result of unemployment, poverty, racism and lack of hope for the future.

Republican consensus

The Left's response has a fundamental political weakness. When the government introduced emergency powers under a 1955 law passed to deal with the Algerian liberation movement, there were few objections from the 'official' Socialist opposition. Although most Left-controlled local authorities did not impose curfews, arguing that the car-burnings were by then diminishing, they did not challenge the central thrust of government policy – the need to 'restore the authority of the state'. Some Socialists laid the blame on 'irresponsible' parents. There was sympathy for withdrawing family allowances from parents of 'guilty' children, cracking down on fake marriages and lowering the age of apprenticeship to fourteen. Within the Socialist Party, there is support for immigration quotas tailored to labour shortages.

Sticking to traditional working-class demands such as better social services and an attack on unemployment (goals which social-democratic governments have singularly failed to meet in the past), while touting France's official ideology of a single and undivided republic in which 'all citizens are equal', leads to 'downplaying' minority groups' specific needs. So does simply calling for a united response to policies like privatization and pensions 'reform'. Worse still, when activists from minority groups raise awkward questions, they are often accused of creating divisions in the working class. The reality is one of massive alienation from trade-union and political organizations – and not only among ethnic minority groups. If only 'they' would get involved and join trade unions and left-wing parties, activists seem to say, we could all get on with the job of working towards a bright socialist future (or at least helping to elect a Socialist president in 2007). Such attitudes put the onus of integrating on immigrants and the children of immigrants, and fail to provide an adequate response to racism and discrimination. When integration is seen to fail, the victims themselves can be held responsible for not making sufficient efforts or clinging to outdated traditions.

Left-wing parties have left an enormous political vacuum by refusing to take up Muslims' legitimate feelings of exclusion and diabolization. Indeed, the Left often seems obsessed with a largely imaginary threat to 'secularism' or *laïcité*. Such knee-jerk reactions have their roots in republican anti-clericalism; coincidentally, 2005 saw the centenary of the separation of church and state. They also reflect a strong 'libertarian' (anarchist) trend for which religion as such is an enemy – sometimes the main enemy. Finally, feminists tend to treat Muslims as if they were a reactionary bloc. Confrontations took place earlier in the year, when attempts were made to exclude more open-minded feminists, joined by Muslim girls wearing the headscarf, from commemorations of International Women's Day and the 1975 law legalizing abortion. Two organizations representing the dominant republican, 'integrationist' (some would say 'assimilationist') trend are SOS Racisme, originally a broad-based anti-racist group but subsequently hijacked by a section of the Socialist Party, and Ni Putes Ni Soumises ('Neither Whores Nor Submissives'), which tends to place the blame for violence against young women on the housing estates exclusively on the subculture of young Arab and black men. Both benefit from an inordinate degree of support in the media.

'Republicanism' and 'secularism' fail to take into account the dynamic, multicultural nature of French society, as well as the global context of the neocons' 'war of civilizations'. The republican tradition arose at a time when the 'civilizing mission' of French imperialism was taken for granted. Such an attitude is mirrored by the idea that republican institutions and especially the education system are the key to 'integrating' minorities, which are naturally expected to give up the supposedly 'backward' aspects of their own culture. The orthodoxy on the French Left is that all public expressions of religious and/or ethnic identity are 'anti-republican'. However, in practice many militants reserve their bile for what they see as an 'offensive' by Muslim fundamentalists. The Enlightenment tradition – somewhat chauvinistically viewed as a unique

French contribution to civilization – is often invoked in an idealistic fashion against religious ‘obscurantism’. Voltaire, of course, was involved in a clash with powerful religious institutions that were fully integrated into the semi-feudal *Ancien Régime*. Any comparison with Islam in France (or, for that matter, the evangelical Christian movements which are flourishing among other non-white minority groups) is totally misplaced.

The Left fails to recognize the role played by alienation from the majority culture, and ultimately by the alienation experienced by all exploited (but especially oppressed) groups within capitalist society, in the success of religious beliefs. In relation to Islam, even ‘progressive’ thinkers are often influenced by the idea that Muslims are stuck in a time warp, incapable of understanding or responding to modern conditions. Islam, in this view, is a peculiarly ‘backward religion’. Hence the notion, frequently expressed by left-wingers and feminists, that Muslim women who wear the headscarf – including those who choose to do so – need to be liberated ‘despite themselves’.



There are, fortunately, alternative voices. A number of writers have provided a sensitive and well-informed analysis of the multiple strands of consciousness among French people of ‘Arabo-Muslim culture’, as well as a critique of the concept of *laïcité*.² Going beyond such elementary intellectual practice, it is important for those engaged in political action to address the real problems faced by discriminated groups. Defending the basic democratic right to religious, political and cultural expression is a necessary part of such a process.

Only a minority of radicals (some Greens, Communists and global justice activists, a small section of the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, some anti-racist and human rights campaigners, individuals with a history of anti-imperialist struggle, intellectuals involved with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, etc.) have made any practical effort to engage in dialogue and joint work with Muslim or black activists. Some progress has been made through recently created groups such as the Collectif une École Pour Tou(te)s (CEPT), which campaigns for the right of girls wearing the Muslim headscarf to receive a state education, or the Collectif des Féministes

Pour l’Égalité (CFPE). Unfortunately, they have been effectively ‘blackballed’ by the mainstream Left. This writer, for one, has discovered an unsuspected authoritarian streak on the Left, directed against members and supporters of a vulnerable section of the population. It is not a pretty sight.

In addition, opponents of multiculturalism and progressive ideas are on the offensive. The introduction in 2003 – with little parliamentary opposition – of the law banning religious symbols in schools reflected the ‘republican consensus’ that integration consists essentially of immigrants adapting to established French norms (see David Macey, ‘The Hijab and the Republic: Headscarves in France’, *RP* 125). It also revealed widespread ignorance and Islamophobia, extending from the Far Right to (depressingly) the majority of feminists (Christine Delphy was a notable exception) and sections of the Far Left. Notoriously, Claude Imbert, editor of the centre-right magazine *Le Point*,

admitted cheerfully in 2003 to being ‘a little Islamophobic’. His problem, he said, was with Islam as a religion, not just Islamic extremists. Most recently, the well-known philosopher and broadcaster Alain Finkielkraut gave an interview to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* which the anti-racist organization MRAP described as ‘a text of a rare racist violence, echoing the clichés of the Front National and placing this social insurrection by French people he calls blacks or Arabs on an ethnic and religious plane’. He said that ‘anti-racism will be to the twenty-first century what communism was to the twentieth’. He is also reported as stating that France’s footballers had been ‘black, white and Arab’ in 1998, but were now ‘black, black and black’ and had become a laughing-stock. His statements were applauded by adjutants of Le Pen – and condemned by the Jewish organization l’Union Juive Française pour la Paix. (It should be said that Finkielkraut subsequently claimed he had been ‘misquoted’. On the other hand, those who have read the original text in Hebrew claim that the English version printed in *Haaretz* was in fact watered down by embarrassed Israeli journalists.)

Post-colonial colonialism

Such outbursts have fortunately not gone unchallenged. Recent developments have stimulated debate about issues previously considered inappropriate in France, whose ‘republican’ tradition discourages any legitimation of cultural, linguistic or religious differences. Astonishingly, the question of French colonialism has not only become an issue among intellectuals and militants from minority groups, but has even impinged on the mass media. History has suddenly become political.

In February 2005, parliament decreed that schools should teach the ‘positive role’ of French colonialism. At the time, opposition was limited to a petition by academics and teachers’ associations, who declared they would ignore it. It took the urban violence – most of whose authors had presumably never heard of the law but knew about racism and ‘post-colonial’ attitudes from personal experience – to bring it to the attention of the mass media. As a result, the Socialists (some of whom in constituencies with many returned white settlers had supported it in the first place) attempted unsuccessfully to obtain the repeal of the law, mainly in the name of ‘academic freedom’. Chirac and de Villepin, who take their reputation in Arab and African countries seriously, have attempted to distance themselves from the law. But the president has lost touch with his own rank and file, who are out for blood.

Even the bicentenary of Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz in 1805 became a hot potato, as black militants protested about the non-recognition of the emperor’s restoration of slavery in 1802 as a ‘crime against humanity’. A popular late-night talk show broadcast a debate about allegations that Napoleon was a racist who gassed rebel slaves. Political and cultural associations in Guadeloupe and Martinique, supported by the veteran politician, poet and philosopher Aimé Césaire, planned to give Sarkozy an appropriate welcome to the region, causing the brash and self-confident hero of the Right abjectly to cancel his planned visit.

At the centre of discussion in the media, but also in informal arguments up and down the country (if my factory canteen is anything to go by), is the future of the ‘French model’ of integration. Journalists have drawn attention to discrimination in employment and housing, as well as to the almost total absence of individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds in parliament, the media and public life in general – outside entertainment and sport. Complacency about the ‘process of integration’ (thought to be a natural and inevitable result of the ‘republican model’) has been undermined. Unfavourable comparisons with the ‘Anglo-Saxon model’ have become more common. A television crew returned from a visit to a housing estate in Tottenham with glowing reports (*sic*). Before the riots, even raising the question of under-representation of minority groups was widely regarded as a concession to British- and US-style ‘communitarian politics’. (As I write, I

am aware that such terms as ‘minority groups’ or ‘ethnic discrimination’ are not part of French political vocabulary, and shock many educated readers. ‘Black French’ or ‘Arab French’ as a description of an individual or a group would be inconceivable, as would be the teaching of Black, Asian or Muslim Studies in schools. Collecting statistics on ethnic origin or identity is considered a breach of the ‘principle of republican equality’. Interestingly, the denomination ‘French of North Africa’ exists, but refers exclusively to returned white settlers – the *pieds noirs*.)

In these circumstances, some activists have concluded that the treatment of minorities in present-day France is part of a continuum running from the slave trade, the colonial period and the massacres in Madagascar and Algeria to the exploitation of immigrants in the postwar boom and present-day discrimination against their children and grandchildren. They refer to such treatment as ‘post-colonial colonialism’.

When, at the end of 2004, a group known as the ‘Indigènes de la République’ (the name refers to the subhuman status reserved for the indigenous population at the height of the colonial period) was set up, the reaction bordered on the hysterical. They were falsely attacked for promoting separatism and being soft on Muslim *intégrisme*, and banned from using trade-union premises for meetings. Although an analysis of the text shows that the key concept is ‘equality of rights’, they were accused by the national-republican Left as well as the ‘economist’ Far Left, of raising race or *ethnicité* as an issue in place of an orthodox class analysis. The statement published by the Indigènes nevertheless attracted thousands of signatures, and a successful march was held on 8 May, the anniversary of the 1945 massacre of pro-independence demonstrators in Algeria as well as of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany.

A great deal needs to be done to clarify ideas about feminism, secularism, the role of religion and the meaning of words such as ‘oppression’, ‘republicanism’, ‘community’ and ‘integration’ in France.³ Riots, it is often said, solve nothing. But when the fires burn, politicians, academics and militants have to respond with all sorts of new thinking.

Notes

1. An excellent source for Muslim opinion is the website Islam En Toute Liberté at Oumma.com.
2. See, for example, Alain Gresh, *L'Islam, la République et le monde*, Fayard, Paris, 2004; Xavier Ternisien, *La France des mosquées*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2002; Saïd Boumama, *L’Affaire du voile, ou La Production d’un racisme respectable*, Geais Bleu, Paris, 2004; Laurent Lévy, *Le Spectre du communautarisme*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2005. On religion, see the review *ContreTemps* 12 ‘A quels saints se vouer? Espaces publics et religions’, Textuel, February 2005, containing articles from different perspectives by Gilbert Achcar, Daniel Bensaïd, Chris Harman, Fouad Imarraine, Samy Johnsua, Sadri Khiari, Michael Löwy, Josette Trat.
3. See the website Les Mots Sont Importants at www.lmsi.net, coordinated by Pierre Tevanian, author of *Le voile médiatique. Un faux débat: ‘L’affaire du foulard islamique’*, Raisons d’Agir, Paris, 2005.



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