Ethnicity, Islam, and les banlieues: Confusing the Issues

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The most astonishing thing about the recent riots was the surprise of the media, in France as elsewhere, at this outbreak of violence. For indeed, violence in the suburbs is nothing new. In the 1980s, the suburbs of Paris and Lyon were similarly set aflame. And in November of 2004, the violence of the suburbs broke out in the very heart of Paris when two rival gangs clashed on the Champs Elysées. Nor is the isolation of French youth a new phenomenon. Since the 1981 “rodeo riots” in the Lyon suburb Les Minguettes, social and economic conditions in the suburbs have only deteriorated, despite the often generous funding of urban development projects. It is not sufficient, however, to attribute these outbreaks of violence solely to factors of social and economic marginality. This marginality is exacerbated by a general context of urban degradation: a degradation, furthermore, which affects a very specific sector of the population. That is, the crisis of the banlieues primarily concerns first- and second-generation immigrants from the former colonies of the Maghreb. This population has frequently been treated as a separate case, not only in terms of the history and conditions of immigration, but also in terms of the politics of integration. This constant exclusion results in the fact that the issues of poverty, ethnicity, and Islam tend to be conflated, both in current political discourse and in political practice. The recent violence is but the direct consequence of the constant amalgamation of these three separate issues.

Economic and social exclusion in the urban context

Who today would dare to believe, with the old German saying, that “the air of the city sets you free”? What has happened, such that in the space of a few decades the city has instead become the paradigmatic site of decline and crisis?

In France throughout the 20th century, the concepts of city and modernity were for all effects and purposes synonymous. It was in the urban space above all that the status of the individual citizen, and the rights accruing to that status, were defined. At the same time, the growth of industrialization fostered the idea of potentially limitless social progress.
The construction of government-sponsored housing in the 1950s was a concrete example of the belief in limitless economic growth. These housing projects (HLM, *Habitation à Loyer Modéré*, literally “low-income housing”) did indeed constitute an undeniable change for the better in the social condition of working-class families who left their former homes in the city for apartments equipped with all the amenities of “modern comfort.” Residence in government-sponsored housing was effectively perceived as an intermediate step towards the purchase of the single-family house, a goal to which everyone aspired (and continues to aspire).

But the end of the “trente glorieuses” (the three decades of prosperity after the Second World War) and the tapering off of economic growth in the 1970s sufficed to shatter this vision. The economic crisis of the 1970s, marked by chronic high unemployment, corresponded to a profound transformation of the world of labor—and by extension, of social relations. Along with this crisis came the refutation of certain assumptions, naïvely expressed by the formula, “If I work hard, my children will have a better life than me, and my grandchildren an even better life, etc.” From the 1970s on, however, regression became just as likely as progression.

But this crisis was not merely economic in nature. It also extended to issues of society and, especially, of identity. Above all, it reflects the difficulties in making the transition from “a vertically integrated society, which we were in the habit of calling a class society, in which the chief division is that of upper and lower classes, to a horizontally integrated society, in which the important distinction is between those at the center and those at the periphery.”[^2] The poor suburbs are precisely this territory where the tension between the center and the periphery becomes evident, and where spatial differentiation supersedes social differentiation. The poor and the excluded are henceforth associated with particular sections of urban space, even if they are not systematically concentrated within them.

With the Minguettes riots and the emergence of urban unrest in the 1980s, the French were forced to confront both the material and the humanitarian degradation of what are termed the “great collectives” (*grands ensembles*). At the same time, French people became aware of the definitive establishment of immigrant populations in France. The conflation of the otherwise discrete issues of the suburbs, immigration, and exclusion would become commonplace.

The November 2005 riots did no more than demonstrate that such economic and social problems, far from having been resolved, have only worsened in the course of the past 20 years. At the end of the 1970s, French society had very little conception of the ghetto in the sense of an ethnically homogenous, insular, and self-governing enclave. In that era, the populations of housing project districts in France were still from a diverse assortment of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Little by little, however, government-sponsored housing became a formidable trap for immigrant populations and their children. After the destruction of the shanty towns and transit centers in the 1970s, these populations were segregated and organized according to decisions made by HLM administration. But gradually “les Français de souche” (native-born French people) began to abandon the housing projects. This flight was in part because the projects had always been perceived as a stepping-stone on the path of social mobility. In part, however, it was due to the fact that native-born French
people did not wish to live alongside immigrant families. Thus immigrant families gained access to government-sponsored housing at the very moment when it became no longer a symbol of progress, but instead a trap for working-class families who did not have the financial means to leave. And even if certain young people of immigrant origin have the possibility to move out of the projects, it is often the case that they cannot find another place of residence due to racial, ethnic, or cultural discrimination, not to mention the stigma of the suburbs themselves. The top-down decisions regarding the assignment of populations within the housing projects, as well as the stagnation of populations within the projects, eventually did lead to the establishment of ghettos, i.e., a concentration of populations increasingly homogenous in terms of ethnic identity, religion, and socio-economic status.

Academic failure, delinquency, drug use, and the highest rate of youth unemployment in all of Europe have now become the common lot of HLM populations. The problems entailed by marginalization are exacerbated by the particularities of urban planning in France. The term “relegation” is often used to refer to the physical distance of housing projects from cities proper. But physical distance is not the only aspect of relegation. The lack of shops, cultural spaces, cafés, etc., means that the HLM are places devoid of what constitutes communal city life. The HLM are dormitory towns.

Ethnicity, French-style

The problem of economic and social difference is complicated by differences of ethnicity and culture. It is indeed true that the marginalized populations of the HLM are primarily from the most recent waves of immigration to France, i.e., they are of North African origin. What is debatable, however, is the received political wisdom that ethnicity, culture, and religion are the causes of social and economic marginality. According to this view, immigrants from the Maghreb and other parts of Africa have held on to their culture of origin—Arab, Algerian, Moroccan, etc.—and it is this retaining of cultural difference that prevents them from properly integrating into French society. In France, however, there exists little of that kind of cultural reformulation that maintains or reconstructs nationality or ethnic identity to form a subculture separate from mainstream society. If there is a subculture to speak of in France, it would be the subculture of the banlieues themselves, which could adequately be described as French working-class culture infused with Algerian or African slang terms.

In the French context, ethnicity refers most often to a way of defining oneself, and of being defined by the other (as Arab, Maghrebian, Muslim, etc.), based on a single defining trait (e.g., facial features, religion) without this definition necessarily corresponding to any specific cultural practices. For this reason, it is important to make the distinction between ethnic culture and ethnic belonging. The former refers to the perpetuation and/or recreation of various cultural practices: language, sex and gender relations, cuisine, etc. The latter, on the other hand, refers to identification—often very loose or removed—with a particular ethnic origin, but without this identification necessarily entailing any particular customs or types of behavior. Many analyses fail to distinguish between these two ways of practicing ethnicity, and thereby assume that the disappearance or acculturation of certain customary practices announces the end of ethnic identity. Doubtless many members
of the younger generation, born or raised in France, find it difficult to maintain the same kind of communitarian allegiances held by the first generations of immigrants. These early allegiances were largely based on regional, village, or ethnic ties. For second-generation immigrants, however, they most often take the form of an emotional attachment to a particular origin—even if this origin is more mythic than actual—and often a corresponding reinforcement of the division between “them” and “us.” This is particularly the case in a context of exclusion and stigmatization.

For the younger generations, ethnicity primarily signifies an experience of difference and discrimination (racism, social exclusion) simultaneous with the loss of cultural identity. In other words: even though the lifestyle of second-generation immigrants in France may have little to do with an “Arab” or “Algerian” way of living, they are constantly made aware of their background in the form of the stigma they experience in their day-to-day interactions. In effect, these young people are victims of the “post-colonial syndrome,” in which an Arab or Muslim background becomes a symbol overdetermined with all the negative imagery built up over decades of colonialism. In this way, social marginalization is also consistently reinforced by cultural inequality.

This cultural inequality translates to institutionalized discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, educational opportunities, and political representation. Of course, it is difficult to establish precise figures for employment or housing when speaking of second-generation immigrants (who possess French citizenship, and are therefore not counted in censuses as a separate group). Nevertheless, a 2004 report by the High Council on Integration cites a number of studies on immigrant youth from underprivileged neighborhoods, all of which reveal definite trends of exclusion from the educational system (a 31% high school dropout rate), higher levels of unemployment, and a lack of residential mobility.

In this context, the Minguettes “rodeo riots” of 1981 or events such as the 1989 riots in Vaulx-en-Velin are violent, if sporadic, forms of protest. Such protests are seen throughout Europe, for example in the violence that broke out in 2003 in the English city of Bradford. The main difference between the current situation and similar events in the past is that previously the violence had been contained and limited in scope: nothing, for example, like the large-scale riots that occasionally exploded in the ghettos of American metropolises (such as the Los Angeles riots of 1992). The relative civic peace in France can be partially explained by the fact that the government exerted a great deal of social control in poorer neighborhoods: there was almost always a powerful official presence in the form of educators and social workers. By subsidizing various social activities and resources—sometimes even quite generously—local and regional authorities helped to maintain order. Similarly, financial support given to “beur” organizations in the wake of the youth marches of the 1980s helped to neutralize any outbreak of violence. This political support was decisive: not, perhaps, for the creation of such organizations, but indeed for their furtherance. Ethnicity thus became in part a strategic creation of the municipal authorities, who often assumed that the ethnic origin of this or that public figure from the suburbs would be a guarantee of civic order. Rapidly, however, there emerged a striking divide between the organizational beur elite (or “beurgeoisie”) created through these official channels, and the masses of suburban youth. The youth, by contrast, were fairly disorganized and easily spurred to action on a particular
Today, the “beur” generation is all but gone. The banlieues have reverted to the confusion and the organizational vacuum of the 1980s. Moreover, the symbolic ghettoization of these neighborhoods—particularly in regard to the younger generation—has only grown stronger in both political discourse and the media. On a regular basis, suburban youth are referred to as a threat: a dangerous social class made up of people who do little but steal and engage in all sorts of illegal activity. In the past five years, the teenagers of the suburbs have been portrayed as budding terrorists, as rapists (with the gang-rape controversies of the past ten years), and, after the debates over the headscarf, as their sisters’ oppressors. As Eric Macé put it in an article in a November 7, 2005 article in *Le Monde*:

> The contributing factors I refer to, and which are particularly the case in France, are: the highest rate of youth unemployment in all of Europe, racial discrimination, increasing ghettoization and isolation, and, since the early 1990s, the stigmatization of teenagers from working-class suburbs, which makes them appear as strangers to French society, which in turn describes them as an escalating threat. The steps of this escalation are as follows: first young people were equated with thieves; then, with the revelation of the gang-rapes, rapists; then, with the headscarf controversy, they were “veilers”; and now finally they are considered scum that has to be simply scrubbed out. This is beginning to become intolerable.

**The paradox of Islam in the suburbs**

It is ironic to note that the American media have had no qualms in using terms such as “intifada” or “jihad” to describe the recent riots, whereas both in France and throughout Europe, the emphasis has been placed primarily on social and economic conditions. Indeed, neither Islam nor religious concerns were motivating factors in the riots. The proof, as reported by Xavier Ternisien in the November 9, 2005 edition of *Le Monde*, is that attempts by the heads of the UOIF (the Union of French Islamic Associations) to communicate with the young rioters and bring them back to reason and calm met with little success.

This gulf between religious authorities and the rioters is a striking illustration of Islam’s actual standing in the French suburbs. Nevertheless, the question of Islam’s role in the suburbs is indeed part of the discourse of stigmatization described above. In France, the growing fear of fundamentalism does not date from September 2001: it begins with the December 1995 bombings in the Paris Métro and the case of Khaled Kelkal (a young man of Algerian origin born in a suburb of Lyon, who was suspected to have taken part in the Paris Métro bombings, subsequently killed by the French police). September 11th exacerbated this fear, and lent a feeling of urgency to the discussion on national security. The main targets of this discussion were the youth of the suburbs, who were envisioned as sympathizers with the radicals.

Without doubt, the vacuum left by the disappearance of beur associations, as well as other forms of social or cultural assistance, has opened up a space for religious figures to exert influence. Many of these religious figures—for example those among the Tabligh or Salafi sects—are indeed quite conservative. In the Islamic...
tradition, *Salaf* refers to the devout elders who served as companions to the Prophet Mohammed. In contemporary Islam, the term refers to groups or movements that go back to the Qu’ran as the sole source of doctrine. The Salafiyya was initially a modernist movement created in the 19th century by Islamic scholars such as Mohammed Abduh, Al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida. While they promoted a return to the Revealed Text and the Hadith, (the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed), they were not by any means anti-intellectual and, in their time, were even considered modernists. Today the term *salafi* has become closely associated with more conservative and anti-modernist interpretations of the Qu’ran and Hadith. The Tabligh—sometimes called the “Jehovah’s Witnesses of Islam”—is an orthodox and proselytising movement whose primary aim is to promote Islamic education. Even if the Tabligh is considered apolitical, its interpretation of Islam is an ahistorical and essentialised approach to texts that often recalls the religious rhetoric of jihadi groups.

These conservative groups, however, are not generally popular among the youth of the suburbs. The proof is given by the rioters themselves, whose actions were in no way motivated by the orders of religious authorities. Nevertheless, the question remains open regarding the characteristics of certain religious figures or groups who specifically target young people, and who may potentially serve to create an atmosphere of hate and frustration in the suburbs.

**Wahhabism as the global orthodoxy of Islam**

Even if Salafi doctrine bears no direct relation to terrorist activity, it does provide a similar religious framework as that used by radical groups such as Al Qaeda. Thus it may contribute to the sense of familiarity or proximity that potential terrorists experience in joining radical groups. Although Salafi Islam is not the only interpretation of Islam existing in European society, it has indeed taken a central role in how Muslims deal with their religious tradition in the West. For example, in the mosques of France and the rest of Europe, most of the materials for religious teaching and proselytising follow the Salafi interpretation of Islam.

In addition, the pitched atmosphere of competition between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan to achieve predominance in the Muslim world has resulted in Europe and the United States becoming crucial battlegrounds—evidenced by the sharp increase in petrodollars distributed there in the last two decades. The proliferation of brochures, free Qu’rans, and the building of new Islamic centers in Malaga, Madrid, Milan, Mantes-la-Jolie, Edinburgh, Brussels, Lisbon, and Zagreb, as well as the increase in the number of Internet sites, all serve to facilitate access to Wahhabi teachings and to promote Wahhabism as the sole legitimate guardian of Islamic thought.

It is extremely difficult to gauge the precise influence exerted by Wahhabism on Muslim religious practice. In the case of French Muslims, the influence cannot simply be measured by statistics. In a minority culture—which lacks both institutions for religious education and the means by which to produce new forms of knowledge—the easy access to theology that Salafism offers is one of the main reasons for its popularity. The widespread diffusion of Salafi teachings means that even non-Salafi Muslims evaluate their Islamic practice
by Wahhabi standards. In other words, even if most Muslims do not follow Wahhabi dress codes—white tunic, head covering, beard for men, nikāb7 for women—the orthodox Salafi nonetheless often becomes the standard image of what a good Muslim ought to be.

These movements indicate the emergence of fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. Global fundamentalism is defined, above all, by an exclusive and hierarchical vision of the world, as well as by a taxonomy of religions that places Islam in the topmost position. The expanded use of the term kafir (infidel, heretic), for example, is very common among Wahhabis. In classical Islamic tradition, this term is used only for polytheists, not for members of competing monotheistic faiths. Among globalised fundamentalist groups, however, it has been extended to include Jews, Christians, and sometimes even non-practicing Muslims.

Thus, for those influenced by Wahhabism, the world is divided into Muslims and infidels, and the image of the West—automatically associated with moral depravity—is always a negative one: nothing good can come from the West, neither politics nor morality nor culture. Their perception of the West is as essentialised as their perception of the Islamic tradition. Unsurprisingly, in these conditions they also discourage political participation, holding that the believer must maintain a separatist stance in relation to public institutions.

The growing sense of alienation among young people can facilitate an attraction toward such a religious interpretation, one compatible with their feelings of discrimination and rejection. Sometimes, as is the case in many cities throughout Europe, the proper response of young men to real or perceived ghettoization is to form associations based on an Islamic ethnic identity. In this way, the imagined community and ethno-familial culture that has crystallized around Islam is a response to the way in which religion has become racialized. The concentration of populations in urban areas, and the constant—real or mythical—contact with the culture of the country of origin, encourage this separatist use of Islam. Thus, in many cases, the imposed ghettoization is accepted and even desired.

In other words, self-identification as a Muslim is in many cases a consequence of an ethnic solidarity maintained or preserved by the socio-economic conditions of segregation. Avoiding the stigma attached to segregation requires dissociation from the dominant culture to the extent possible, reclaiming the stigmatized identity, and inverting this stigmatization into a positive attribute. Marginalized ethnic or religious groups take both the closeness imposed upon them by the dominant culture and the binary and essentialist categories with which the dominant culture characterizes them, and turns these disadvantages into positive elements of identity.

**Conclusion**

Today, the real issue at hand is not the loyalty or disloyalty of French Muslims. Rather, it is the dramatic upheavals in both the organization of society and the construction of identity currently taking place in France. These changes have caused the French to forcefully reaffirm many of their longstanding cultural values, including secularism (*laïcité*), the status of the citizen as an individual, and the rejection of minority cultural and ethnic communities. Given this situation, integration is something that refers not merely to people of
foreign origin, but to all those who live on the margins of the social and economic system and who have to ask themselves what minimum values they might nonetheless share with their fellow citizens. It is thus urgent to put an end to the discourse that bases itself on a conflation of race, ethnicity, religion, and poverty. In the long term, this conflation will result in serious political disturbances, precisely like the ones that have just taken place.

**Endnotes**

1. The French “banlieues,” technically towns on the outskirts of a city, should not be confused with the American suburbs. While to an American ear, “the suburbs” evokes visions of middle-class stability, “les banlieues” has a connotation similar to what is evoked by the phrase, “inner cities”: i.e., concentrations of poor, often minority, populations, violence, ghettoization, and despair. For the purposes of this text, however, “suburbs” and “banlieues” will be used interchangeably, though the latter should always be understood.


4. “Beur” is a French backslang word for Arab. The term was used throughout the 1980s to refer to the second generation of North African immigrants, who emerged as a political force in that decade, claiming their rights to live in France and to hold French citizenship.


6. Wahhabism is the official religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia. It has over the last decades been closely associated with salafism all over the Muslim world and beyond. The Saudi government has succeeded in transforming the term salafi into a conservative approach to the Islamic tradition. For more details, see Cesari, Jocelyne, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States*. New York: Palgrave, 2004. See also Cesari (co-ed.), *European Muslims and the Secular State*. London: Ashgate, 2005.

7. Cloth covering the face according to *Wahhabi* law.