

FRANCE'S REVOLT

Can the Republic live up to its ideals?

John R. Bowen

On October 27, 2005, in Clichy-sous-Blois, one of the poor outer cities that ring Paris, boys leaving a pick-up soccer game flee when police enter their neighborhood. Three of the boys climb a fence around a power station; two are electrocuted, and the third is badly injured. Young men and boys begin torching cars. Two days later, tear gas fills one of the town's two mosques. (It is still the month of Ramadan.)

The "popular revolt," as the French secret police call it, expands beyond the local *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, eventually reaching cities throughout France. Groups of adolescents charge one mayor's car as he drives through his city. Journalists take refuge in police vans. Schools and hospitals are burned, but few people die. Many who did not join in the vandalism complain of police harassment and social exclusion. On November 9 the government proclaims a state of emergency, which allows prefects to declare curfews. On November 17, the police say that the situation has returned to normal throughout the country because only 98 cars were burned overnight.

From the first day of the riots European and North American commentators offered the conventional explanations. They told us, correctly, that men and women living in these outer cities faced high unemployment rates and discrimination in jobs and housing, and that in any case jobs were hard to find in France. Prescriptions were comparably predictable. According to *The Economist* in Britain, creating more jobs would require liberalizing the economy; for France's anti-globalization Left, it would demand fighting free-market liberalism. French politicians introduced (or reversed cutbacks in) job-creating measures.

But something more was happening. As the skeptical weekly *Marianne* noted, most unemployed people don't burn cars; they look for work.

In France, some politicians and intellectuals claimed to have the answer: cultural deficits in the outer cities. One minister, albeit a lowly one, said that polygamy among West Africans led parents to neglect their children, who could then indulge their desire to burn cars. On November 23, 153 deputies in the National Assembly petitioned the Ministry of Justice to prosecute rap groups for inciting "anti-White racism" and "hatred of France." The prominent intellectual Alain Finkielkraut decried the search for social causes of the riots and declared that the real problem was hatred of France by those who have a "Muslim identity." American reporters seized upon a French study from September that documented an increase in religiosity in the workplace and suggested that there might be a con-



COLIN K. HUGHES

nection to the riots. (The French secret police instantly dismissed the conjecture.) Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, whose harsh words for the "scum" in the housing projects helped to spark the riots, momentarily blamed "radical Muslims"—before cooler heads pointed out that the rioters had included non-Muslims, too, and that Muslim organizations had done their best to calm the situation.

But what was missing in these speculations was an adequate account of why so many of those who live in these neighborhoods but attacked no one were so bitterly angry at France. Few residents failed to mention Sarkozy's insults; his ill-chosen words—or, perhaps, well chosen for the far-right voters he hopes to attract in his presidential campaign—were, along with the deaths of the two boys, the sparks that ignited long-simmering resentments.

What fueled the underlying anger? Feelings of betrayal, for one: many whose parents or grandparents came from overseas territories see France as deeply hypocritical, and some see continuity from colonial to neo-colonial ways of governing immigrants. France's leaders preach republican theories of equal citizenship for all, regardless of origins. In practice, however, France has sharply stigmatized those who have the wrong origins. The anger at this hypocrisy resembles the attitudes toward the United States that the political scientists Peter Katzenstein

and Robert Keohane call "liberal anti-Americanism": a strong resentment of the United States for failing to live up to its own principles.

Something analogous is at work in France: "The state claims to be color-blind, [but] society still is not," *Newsweek* proclaimed, referring to France's unwillingness to take account of ethnicity when fighting discrimination. The policy of blindness to ethnic difference, made official in a 1978 law that forbade the state to collect data on ethnic or racial origins, does indeed hamper the state in creating substantive equality for all its citizens. But the problem goes beyond the state's incapacities in fighting discrimination to the state's role in *creating* the discrimination that violates republican principles.

To appreciate this role, we need to set aside two misguided ideas. First, the riots do not, as some have alleged, prove the bankruptcy of the "French model," whatever that might be. French leaders have no reason to apologize for the core ideas of French republicanism: that everyone ought to be fully accepted as a citizen of France and that the state is responsible for protecting the individual dignity of each citizen. France's state-centeredness cannot be switched out for a British *laissez-faire* approach—it developed over the long term from a centralized royalty and from equally centralized efforts to create a set of educational, cultural, and politi-

cal institutions that could give everyone equal entry into public life. French politicians are constantly tinkering with the system—recent steps to transfer powers from the state to local governments have overturned long-held ways of doing business. And certain features of French life that prevent positive social change—the rigidity of the school system, the lack of data about job discrimination—could be reformed without abandoning the core ideals of republicanism.

Second, the rioters were not all "Muslims," and few were "immigrants." The boys and young men who were arrested include what are called "French with roots" (*Français de souche*), blacks of West African ancestry, and northern Africans (*maghrébins*), with parents from Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia. (The difficulty of finding neutral terms for these categories is a symptom of the problem of confronting ethnic distinctions in a country that proclaims such distinctions to be inappropriate for policy discussions.) Some of these young men may consider themselves Muslims, and others assuredly do not, but in any case none of those interviewed mentioned God or the after-life as having anything to do with their actions. This was neither Hamas nor suicide bombing, though some politicians tried to play the radical-Islam card. Furthermore, the overwhelming number of the boys and young men arrested were citizens of France; they were no more immigrants than Nicolas Sarkozy, whose father came from Hungary.

And yet, Islam and immigration *are* part of the broader story—of dilapidated housing projects, of insulting treatment by the police, and of a sense of not being heard. Islam and immigration also figure into how the French state has treated the marginal populations and why it has taken French policymakers so long to arrive at the realization—and not all have yet arrived—that their memories of a successful French "melting pot" (*creuset*) of immigration do not provide useful guides to current realities of exclusion and integration.

French colonialism contradicted the egalitarian ideals of the republic. Colonial policies treated one portion of the citizenry as subordinate to the other, creating social institutions and attitudes that continue to shape French culture and everyday life. Current divisions, or "fractures," as they are called in France, reach back to the long history of French settlements overseas and the second-class citizenship held by Algerian Muslims, the brutal Algerian War and the state's cover-up of its atrocities, the spatial isolation of workers brought from Africa to live in

French slums, the longstanding police brutality and far-right hostility toward immigrants, and the state's continuing tendency, left over from colonial days, to treat Muslims in France as a matter for arrangements with and subsidies from foreign powers. Some recent invocations of the colonial era are explicit, as when Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin activated a law designed to control Algerians in 1955 to control French rioters in 2005.

France has never fully come to terms with this colonial past or its lingering effects. Part of the difficulty comes from another, very different aspect of the French treatment of outsiders: France's claim to a history of successful integration of immigrants rests on memories of how workers from nearby European countries came eventually to reside in France.

That history began in the mid-1800s, but it was hardly free of conflict. In the 1880s and 1890s, anti-Belgian riots in the northeast and anti-Italian riots in Lyon and the Midi were bloody and bitter. By the early 20th century, Italians, Poles, Portuguese, and Spaniards were arriving in France in large numbers—Portugal remains the largest single source of foreigners on French soil today. In the 1920s and 1930s French workers and growing far-right movements protested their presence—workers resented the competition and considered the Poles too Catholic. Many thought that the immigrants could never assimilate. The state housed the Poles separately from other workers, taught their children Polish so they could return home, and did indeed send many back to Poland.

It was the “30 glorious years” of rebuilding after World War II that encouraged some of the Poles, Italians, and Portuguese to stay in France and that made it possible for them to find jobs without displacing other workers and generating resentment. These new workers joined unions, fought for higher wages, and assimilated culturally. Their story is not entirely unlike that of the late-19th-century wave of immigration to the United States, in which Protestant anger against Catholics led to urban gangs and the anti-Catholic public schools movement; and in the 20th century the immigrants' children and grandchildren reached the suburbs and ran for national office. In France the children of the Poles and Italians grew up speaking perfect French, went to the same schools as French children, and eventually found jobs alongside those of longer French ancestry, those “with roots.” One Hungarian immigrant's son became interior minister.

The outer-cities immigration story, in contrast, is not about a melting pot but a bouillabaisse: the mussels and the fish were never supposed to contaminate each other with their tastes, much less blend together. By the 1870s, France had a plentiful supply of cheap, temporary labor in a second-class region of France—Algeria. Invaded in 1830, Algeria became part of France by the 1870s. French Algeria was bifurcated. The colonizers were fully French citizens, with French political and social institutions at their disposal. The Muslim colonized remained as a separate, “indigenous” population with a distinct personal status. They came to be governed by the *indigénat*, a distinct legal regime under which their family affairs were judged according to a version of Islamic law—unless they renounced that

Winter Field

What better witness than this evening snow,
its steady blind quiet, its eventual
completeness, a talc smoothing every surface

through the lumen tricks of ice.
No one who comes here hastens to leave,
though the mineral winter makes a dull

math of cold inside the bones, a numbness
thinning into each fingertip and eye.
Faint injury traveling toward earth

in shifting silence, a softness in the weather
passing through us, dark moods of snows—
a sense of peace so deep we extend out

into the blackness of our lives, dread and failure,
and feel no hint of terror, only the premonition
of drift-design, the stars behind the snow

burning in ancient immanence over the field.
What lights a world gone blank with despair?
You were here once; you will be here again.

—*Joanna Klink*

status and applied for citizenship, a step most considered to be a betrayal of their religion. (In contrast, France gave automatic citizenship to all Algerian Jews.)

From the late 19th century onward, then, three categories of residents coexisted in France: citizens, foreigners (who might be immigrants from other European countries), and *indigènes*, native peoples on French territory. These Africans or Asians had “ethnic characteristics that cannot be reduced to ours,” said a ministerial report from the time. This official system continued into the 1960s, such that in 1961 the Paris police were able to arrest “Algerian French Muslims” on the street—their identity cards, mandatory at all times, made it clear what they were. The legacy of this colonial system was the memory that, as the entrepreneur and advocate for “positive discrimination” Yazid Sabeg has put it, “France established in Algeria a social and interethnic organization based on communalism and discrimination, ignoring its own republican principles.”

Although all immigrants from Africa (northern or sub-Saharan) shared poor housing, police insults, and job discrimination, the early and psychosocially deep structure of immigration and separation in France was laid down in Algeria. In the 1920s, a new government office recruited men from Algeria (as well as from Italy and Poland) to work in metropolitan France and then return home. They remained outside the mainstream. It is not even, as economist Éric Maurin put it, that Paris's outer cities are the “far-off and last echo of the failure of the republic of the universal.” The French model for building up metropolitan industrial capacity while not bleeding Alge-

ria dry of its labor force depended on a “failure” of integration, in which workers from Algeria would remain apart so as not to integrate into French society. Individuals or families arriving in France generally found lodging either in shantytowns, the famous *bidonvilles* that sprang up in a ring around Paris and other large cities, or in low-cost “transit hotels,” where they shared rooms and even beds with others workers.

Ironically, the very length of the North African experience made integration more difficult. Many of the workers stayed in metropolitan France only a short time and therefore were less likely to develop the networks and habits that would have facilitated integration. They were segregated at work and in their housing by policies pursued by employers and by agents of the French state, who treated them as natives out of place and due to return home. In addition, most Algerians resisted assimilation. Because obtaining citizenship required Muslims to renounce their Muslim identity, few did so—only about 26 per cent between 1865 and 1934. Even by 1990 only about 13 percent of Algerian immigrants to France had acquired French nationality, compared with 60 to 70 percent for European immigrants. Furthermore, the nationalist movements in Algeria and the post-independence Algerian governments discouraged Algerians from considering permanent settlement in France and tried to exercise control over Algerians in France.

The rapid growth in settlement by Algerian families in metropolitan France coincided with, and was thus colored by, the bloody war for Algerian independence from 1954 to 1962. The war killed thou-

sands of people, featured the systematic use of torture by French soldiers against French citizens and assassinations in Algiers and Paris, and created bitter memories of betrayal on all sides. We might compare the Algerian War to the U.S. Civil War: both were battles for independence fought by a southern, poorer, agricultural region against an industrial, politically dominant North. Both tore apart the society.

The legacies of that long-term colonial experience are to be found in emotional memories and in social structures of separation and discrimination. At the moment of Algerian independence in 1962, about one million people were living in Algeria as settlers or civil servants, and these *pied noirs* returned to metropolitan France angry at the French state they felt had abandoned them. About five million French soldiers had fought against those siding with the Algerian Liberation Front. Hundreds of thousands of Algerian Muslims had been arriving in France each year, and they were bitterly divided. Some, the *harkis*, had fought on the French side, and their pro-colonial engagements became an embarrassment for a France seeking to forget the past. Most Algerians had supported the Liberation Front either actively or passively, but they found themselves now living in the country of the former enemy. Few sentiments were clear; fewer still were proud and positive.

The conflicts and the anger were imported to the mainland. The state sought to cover up the more delicate moments of the “operations to maintain order” in Algeria and the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris. It was only in 1999 and 2000 that the lid began to come off: in June 1999, for the first time, the French parliament acknowledged that there had indeed been a “war” in Algeria. The first use of the term “massacre” for the October 1961 killings came in March 1999, during the trial of the man who in 1961 was the Paris police chief: Maurice Papon, on trial for sending Jews to gas chambers during World War II, not for his massacre 19 years later. In 2000 and 2001 revelations of torture in Algeria emerged, as did the fact that high officials, including François Mitterrand, had known about it. In 2001, Paris's mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, placed a plaque on the spot where 40 years earlier police had thrown Algerians into the Seine, and a similar ceremony with the same mayor was held in 2005, but no representative of the state has yet to acknowledge the massacre, and, indeed, two archivists who leaked incriminating documents from 1961 received reprisals.

Under these conditions—a century of second-class legal status, a bloody civil war and bitter aftermath, continued isolation and discrimination—what sense of French citizenship and memory could be available to African immigrants and their children and grandchildren? Part of the question is what sort of memory does France wish to promote and enshrine? The authors of the recent book *The Colonial Fracture* argue that France is the only European country to have dissociated national history from colonial history. France's history of itself is internal, structured around battle sites or wines or monuments. The seven volumes of France's quasi-official “Sites of

Memory” do not include sites overseas. Colonial histories, on the other hand, are nostalgic, exotic, and increasingly rosy. The several museums of colonial history now being planned will celebrate what Jacques Toubon, the head of the museum commission, has called the “work” (*l'oeuvre*) of colonialism. On February 23, 2005, the National Assembly passed a law (with few deputies present) stipulating that schoolteachers teach “the positive role of the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa.” The resolution led to an outcry by many historians, but touched a chord among many who wish that the “civilizing mission” carried out by France not be forgotten, particularly the *harkis* who had fought on the French side in the Algerian War. In several cities in the southeast, these constituencies succeeded in erecting monuments to members of the paramilitary OAS, an organization engaged in assassinations in Algeria. In November, after the riots, the majority UMP party, anxious to preserve support by the *harkis*, defeated an effort to repeal the article in question.

Colonial-era memory may prove increasingly divisive in the years to come. Even as a loose alliance of anti-racism organizations declared the existence in France of “The Indigenous People of the Republic” in an effort to underscore the perduring effects of colonial rule, other

new immigrant schoolchildren arrive in the district each year who do not speak any French. They are of 70 different nationalities, but most come from the same countries that have provided the majority of immigrants. In Seine-Saint-Denis, for example, 28 percent of these immigrant children are Algerian, 12 percent Moroccan—and 11 percent Chinese. Thus the second generation sits, school desk by school desk, with a new first generation from the same countries.

This story is not of unbroken gloom, but it is full of unintended consequences. Physical conditions in the outer cities improved markedly during the 1960s and 1970s, when the state built huge complexes of apartments as low-rent housing, or HLM (*habitations à loyers modérés*), which each housed thousands of families. These new complexes were heartily welcomed at the time. They were clean, had toilets, and at first they housed together native French and immigrants from all parts. But better-off families (especially native French and Asians) were able to move out and buy small homes, and as the nearby factories closed their doors in the 1970s and 1980s, those who stayed found themselves increasingly without work. The projects became traps rather than springboards, and it is the children who grew up in them who burst onto the front pages this fall.

France's taboo on discussing ethnic and national origins has served to hide their impact on present inequalities and discrimination.

groups emphasized the legacy of slavery and of anti-Semitism. Shortly after the riots ended, 56 associations representing people of African and Antilles ancestry formed the French Federation of Blacks to give blacks more visibility in relation to North Africans and to demand that France face more openly its history of slavery.

This colonial history is crystallized not only in memories but in immediate, lived experiences. People in the poor outer cities seek to make sense of why their lives are as they are, even as they clamor for jobs and better housing and respect.

France's labor and housing policies left poorer populations living on the geographical and thus social margins of French cities—in marked contrast to the inner-city segregation of American blacks. Their neighborhoods are not museums to the past; they are populated by recent immigrants as well as the descendants of older ones because immigration continued, even after the 1974 halting of most labor migration. About three quarters of legal immigrants arrive in France today through claims of marriage or family ties.

For a sense of this mixing of old and new consider the Créteil *académie*, the governing unit of school districts, which includes three of the major catchment areas for immigrants near Paris, the prefectures of Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne, and Seine-et-Marne. Between 3,000 and 4,000

Perpetuation of inequality works in myriad and sometimes subtle ways, starting with interactions between housing and schooling. In France, as in the United States, residential concentrations of poor minorities make income disparities worse. The concentrations of immigrants in certain neighborhoods—about twice as high as in the United States generally—had their beginnings in state policies toward immigrant labor and have persistent effects on schooling and employment. Who sits in the school desk next to you has significant effects on how likely you are to complete school. These effects help explain why 20 years of special state investments in poorly performing school districts (the ZEP, *zones d'éducation prioritaires*) have had no measurable effect on school success. The concentration effects continue after school: immigrants earn much less than native-born French with the same level of education.

Ironically, the low-cost housing projects, though often blamed for social problems, serve to counteract ethnic self-segregation even as they reinforce economic segregation. It is very difficult to find a place in an HLM—people compete to get out of unsafe and filthy privately run apartments—so you end up wherever the housing office sees fit to put you. As a result, blacks, North Africans, and “native” French live side by side in the projects. But they observe boundaries. You date across those lines at your own risk; when

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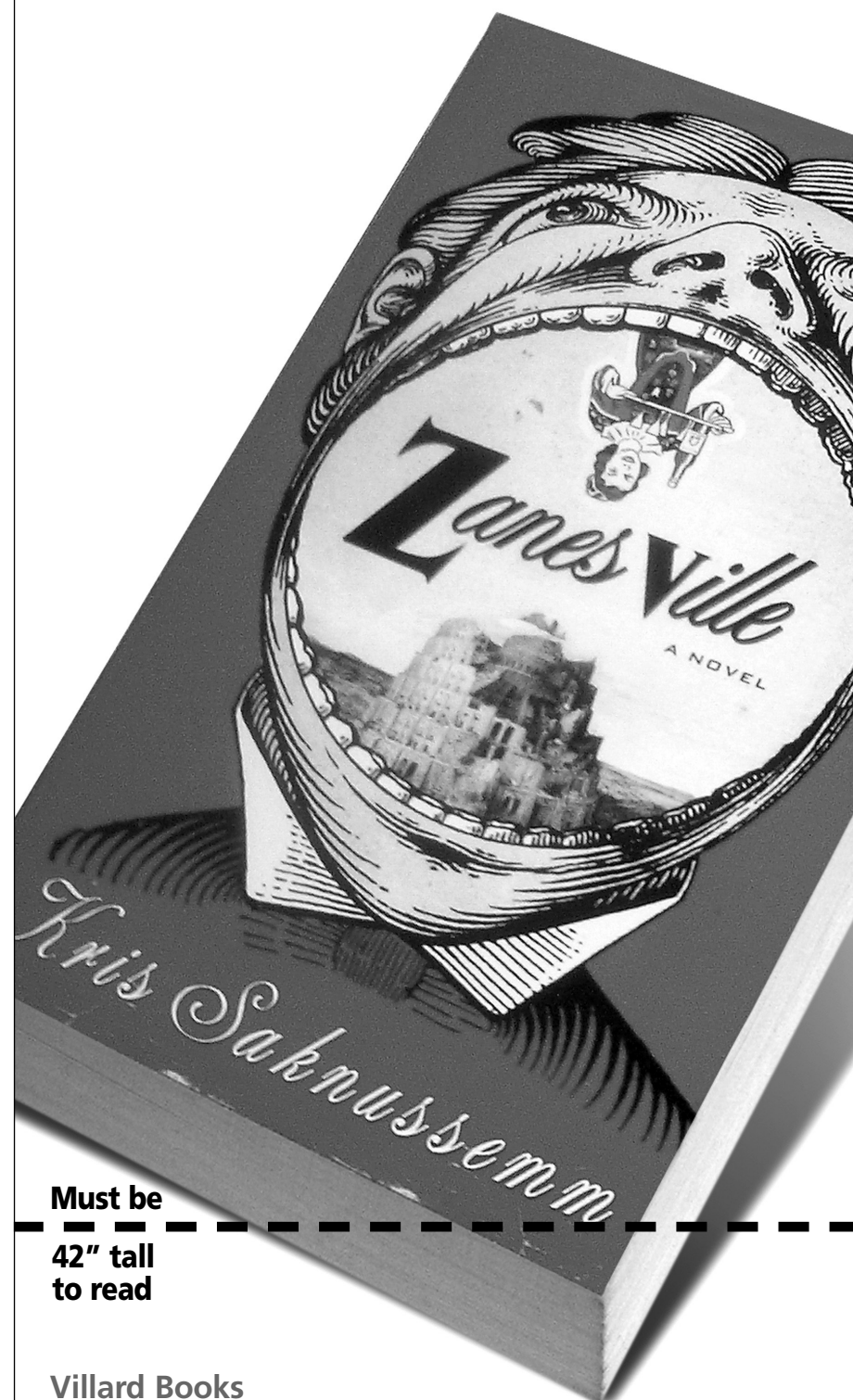
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one black-brown couple tried it last year a shoot-out followed and prompted Sarkozy to make the first of his incendiary remarks.

There are bright spots where institutions and associations thrive and gloomy spots where they do not. Within the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, where the riots were concentrated, the cities of Saint-Denis and Clichy-sous-Bois at first glance seem similar: high unemployment rates, subsidized housing, foreign residents, and poor schools. Saint-Denis, however, is a bustling market center with easy access by subway or train to the center of Paris, a campus of the University of Paris, private Islamic schools and associations, and the Basilica, a major tourist attraction.

Clichy-sous-Bois (where the riots began) has isolated housing projects, no cafes or bistros, no educational institutions beyond the mediocre public schools, and very difficult access by public transport.

Public schools are supposed to be the major French mechanism for integration. But, as in the United States, schools in principle take their pupils from the surrounding neighborhoods, thus reinforcing residential segregation. Parental strategies exacerbate these effects because many of the better-off parents manage to place their children in schools in a better district—40 percent of Paris-area parents are estimated to have done so through legal methods and an unknown number through illegal ones. These strategies for getting around the

rules make the concentration of immigrants in any one school two to two and a half times what it otherwise would be.

Within schools, teachers channel pupils very early on toward those professions that seem to best fit their social and cultural profile. High schools were created by Napoleon in 1802 in order to form an elite, and they have never lost their essential gate-keeping quality. Social-class differences show up massively in the schools children attend, which tracks they pursue (math, arts, technology), whether they take the baccalaureate or a less demanding exam, and what they do afterward. Ghislaine Hudson, the principal of a school south of Paris, points to the way in which pupils are evaluated: if they are weak in any subject, they fail and have to repeat a year, so weaker students experience failure after failure, year after year.

Pupils who fail together also live in the same neighborhoods, adding to their sense of class determinism. As two sociologists recently wrote, young people in the poor outer cities experience schools not as a way to advance but as “a site of selection that turns their social fate into so many personal humiliations.” Better-off parents have the option of private school, and 40 percent of all French parents place a child at one time or another in a private school.

People in the outer cities have higher unemployment rates, but the official numbers understate the realities youth face. A town may have 20 percent unemployment, twice the national average, but for younger residents the rate may be 30 percent, and for those who left school and populate the projects, the rate may be 50 or 60 percent. Discrimination makes already poor chances worse. A 2005 report on employment is one of the few to have examined the difference ethnicity makes in France. The authors conclude that having a North African background makes you two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than if you are (or more importantly, if you look and sound) “native French,” controlling for level of education, and that this difference has changed little in 15 years. Ominously, in a December 2005 poll, one third of all French residents said they considered themselves to be “*raciste*,” a sharp rise from the previous year.

Compounding these structural features is constant harassment by the police. Officers use the informal *tu*, received (and intended) as an insult—after the riots began Sarkozy ordered the police to stop this particular practice. Citizens with darker skin report being stopped frequently, some four or five times a day. At each stop, the police demand to see identity papers, sometimes tossing them to the ground. It was fear of being hauled down to the police station and held for hours (a fear based on their own experience) that probably led the boys in Clichy-sous-Bois to flee to their deaths in October. (The introduction of neighborhood police, who would get to know residents, was curtailed by the governing center-right party in 2002 as part of budget cuts.)

French official responses to the crisis have been halting and often contradictory—Sarkozy tells police to use the formal *vous* but repeats his use of “scum”; the government promises to restore some

neighborhood subsidies but has little new to offer regarding discrimination in jobs and housing; de Villepin avoids celebrating Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz because the Corsican reinstated slavery but he tightens up immigration and his party insists on colonialism’s positive impact.

France’s leaders must acknowledge the contradictions of the past and the continuing psychological and social reality of that past. France’s taboo on discussing ethnic and national origins has served to hide their impact on present inequalities and discrimination. This taboo can be lifted without abandoning the republican model. Some post-secondary schools and corporations give preferential access to young people in outer cities, and the use of anonymous resumes is growing. Patrick Weil has proposed that France can learn from U.S. policies to admit a certain percentage of high-school students to state universities. Gathering statistics on the origins of employees would help detect systematic discrimination. None of these steps violates the idea of individual equality; they seek to counteract the effects of past and present discrimination. And in this way they resemble American affirmative action programs, wrongly confused with quota systems by many in France.

French leaders must also acknowledge the positive role that Islamic associations can play in developing the sense of citizenship and membership in the outer cities. During the riots, the groups most actively trying to calm matters were Islamic associations. Some politicians evinced their distaste that any Islamic group would play a public role, and objected when the largest federation of such associations, the UOIF, told Muslims that destroying property was un-Islamic. France’s allergies toward public manifestations of Islam (see John R. Bowen, “Muslims and Citizens,” February/March 2004 *Boston Review*) are reinforced by the suspicion of neighborhood associations that have an ethnic or religious character. As Riva Kastoryano notes, the long-standing opposition to intermediary groups in France—opposition that traces to the anti-guild Le Chapelier Act of 1791—has meant that associations have had to represent themselves as facilitators of integration rather than representatives of communal interests. A deep suspicion of “communalism” (*communautarisme*) drives political leaders to condemn activities that stem from a specific ethnic or religious group.

Islam is now part of French public life; it will become ever more so, and France needs to recognize the critical role that local ethnic and religious associations play in creating social ties in neighborhoods where such ties are stretched dangerously thin by the pressures of poverty and exclusion. Despite politicians’ reference to angry residents of the outer cities as “immigrants,” those who showed or expressed their anger in the autumn of 2005 are by and large citizens of France, in need of recognition of their origins and respect for their beliefs. Facing the contradictions of the past and the diversity of the present must be part of a new French model of citizenship. Rooted in the egalitarianism of the republican tradition, it must give equal public recognition to all its citizens by acknowledging their human differences, not by denying them. ♦

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