

Badlands of the Republic?

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Guest editorial

Badlands of the Republic? Revolts, the French state, and the question of *banlieues*

Why did they happen? This question was remarkably absent in the aftermath of the recent series of revolts in the French *banlieues* (suburbs). For many activists, social workers, and researchers, the relevant question was why such revolts have not occurred more often given the state of many social housing neighbourhoods in *banlieues*. Having done practically nothing to alleviate inequalities, prevent discriminatory practices and police violence—disproportionately felt by *banlieue* inhabitants, youth in particular—the repressive government set up by Chirac was more surprised by the magnitude and persistence of revolts than by the fact that they happened at all.

Like previous revolts, the revolts of autumn 2005 were triggered by the deaths of young inhabitants, in which the police, once again, were implicated. Like previous revolts, they were spontaneous—not organised—uprisings. Like previous revolts, they took place mainly in the disadvantaged social housing neighbourhoods of *banlieues*. Unlike previous revolts, however, they were suppressed by exceptionally repressive measures by the French state. They not only revealed once again the geographical dimension of inequalities, discrimination, and police violence, but also the contemporary transformations of the French state along increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary lines.

Geographies of revolts

On 27 October 2005 three young men in Clichy-sous-Bois, a *banlieue* to the northeast of Paris, took refuge in an electricity substation in order to escape identity checks by the police—a form of daily harassment not uncommon in the *banlieues* towards youths, especially if they have a dark complexion. Two of them were electrocuted and one was seriously wounded. That the police actually chased them was officially denied, although the surviving young man stated the contrary. This was the triggering incident for the revolts, which first started on 28 October in Clichy-sous-Bois, and quickly spread to other social housing neighbourhoods of nearly 300 towns, lasting for about two weeks. More than 10 000 vehicles were set alight, and more than 3000 people were placed under police custody, of which one third were indicted.

Similar incidents had occurred in the *banlieues*, as early as the 1970s. However, two major series of revolts were most influential in shaping political debate around *banlieues*. The first took place in the so-called ‘hot summer’ of 1981, a few months after the arrival of the Left in power. By the end of the summer, some 250 cars had been stolen and set alight in the peripheral social housing neighbourhoods of Lyons, Marseilles, Roubaix, Nancy, and Paris. The second occurred a decade later, taking the Socialist government once again by surprise. On 6 October 1990 the social housing neighbourhoods of Vaulx-en-Velin—a *banlieue* of Lyons seen as exemplary under urban policy’s rehabilitation programme—were the sites of revolts, following the killing of a young inhabitant in an accident in which the police was implicated. Incidents occurred in other *banlieues* as well in the following months and years, and the decade saw forty-eight—compared with five in the 1980s—large-scale revolts in French *banlieues*, in addition to some 250 of a smaller scale.

The revolts of the 1990s shared two common features, which are also true for the 2005 revolts. First, virtually all of them took place in social housing neighbourhoods in *banlieues*. Second, such neighbourhoods had followed a similar pattern of

restructuring since the crisis of the early 1970s: they were severely hit by declining industrial and manufacturing activities. In 1975 unemployment rates in such areas did not differ greatly from the national unemployment rate. Since then, however, unemployment rates have rocketed up in these (former) working-class areas; in 1999 one fourth of the active population (twice the national average) and 40% of the young people (compared with the national average of 25%) were unemployed. These commonalities demonstrate that geographies of concentrated unemployment and geographies of revolts largely overlap—and have extended since the 1980s. These geographies also coincide with ‘targeted’ police repression (*Le Monde* 2002), “racist police attitudes” (Amnesty International, 2005), and police killings that often go unpunished (Rajsfus, 2002).

Overlapping geographies of inequalities, discrimination, repression, and revolts suggest that mere behavioural explanations—such as copycat effects or desire to be seen on the television—are not entirely satisfactory in accounting for the recurrence of revolts and the increase in their magnitude. The geographical pattern and expansion of revolts imply that there are structural dynamics aggravating inequalities, which particularly hit the social housing neighbourhoods in banlieues. Revolts, therefore, are not just looting and burning; even though they are marked by elements of violence, they connect and speak to larger dynamics and severe material conditions.

“The Algerian war is not over in France”

How, then, did the French government interpret the revolts? For President Jacques Chirac (who remained silent on the issue for about three weeks) they represented “a crisis of meaning, a crisis of bearings, it’s an identity crisis” (*Le Monde* 2005). For his security-obsessed Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, they were “perfectly organised”—a claim contradicted by a report by the French Intelligence Service. For Chirac’s minister for employment, Gérard Larcher, they were caused by “polygamy”. What is so disconcerting about such interpretations is not so much that there is little evidence to support them, but that they deny the slightest responsibility on the part of the government. Furthermore, they reduce the significance of revolts by interpreting them simply as resulting from the involved individuals’ cultural (or religious) ‘differences’ (that is, not white and Christian) or violent inclinations.

The government’s response to the revolts was marked by a concern with rapid and increased repression rather than a concern with devising redistributive measures that would, in the long term, help alleviate some of the problems of banlieues. In terms of urban policy, concerned mainly with social housing neighbourhoods in banlieues, the government continued cutting funding. Since 2002 the two right-wing governments under Chirac have constantly reduced subsidies and largely contributed to the dramatic decline of the associative sector in banlieues, which saw its finances disappear. The budget for urban policy’s renovation programmes decreased by 25% in 2005, 22% for 2006, and the recently voted budget implied a 52% cut in budgetary engagements for the years after 2007 (see *Le Canard enchaîné* 2005a; 2006). Existing redistributive measures did not go unaffected: about three months after the revolts, the SRU law,⁽¹⁾ aimed at the construction of more and evenly distributed social housing, was modified. The SRU law was passed in 2000, and it obliged communes of more than 3500 inhabitants (1500 in the Paris region) to reach a rate of 20% social housing in their total housing stock in twenty years. About three months after the revolts, the National Assembly, with support from Chirac and Villepin, modified this law by enlarging the definition of what constitutes ‘social housing’, which significantly diminished the required amount of new social housing construction.

⁽¹⁾ *Loi relative à la solidarité et au renouvellement urbains* (Solidarity and Urban Renewal Law).

In terms of repression, the government did not deviate from its previous policies, which, since 2002, have involved numerous security and penal laws that were aimed mainly at harsher penalties, making identity checks easier, prohibiting gatherings at building entrances (aimed mainly at the youth in the banlieues), and deporting foreigners involved in criminal acts *after* they have served their sentence (known as “*la double peine*”).⁽²⁾ Just when calm was returning to the banlieues, the government declared a state of emergency on 8 November 2005, allowing curfews to be imposed. This was an unprecedented response to revolts in the banlieues, and the fact that the state of emergency was based on a 1955 law dating from the Algerian war added insult to injury.⁽³⁾ It certainly brought to mind what was once so bluntly expressed by an activist in Vaulx-en-Velin: “the Algerian war is not over in France” (Abdel, interview with the author, 23 May 2002, Vaulx-en-Velin).

The government’s response to the revolts was remarkably different from the responses of previous governments. When faced with the 1981 revolts in banlieues, the Socialist government took the incidents seriously and initiated an urban policy programme with such strong ideals as the right to the city, democratisation of the management of the city, and social development of neighbourhoods. Following the 1990 revolts, a City Ministry was created as a sign of the commitment of the state to the ‘urban question’. However, the 1990s also gave the first signs of the coming of the penal state. The City Ministry started to collaborate with the Ministry of Justice to reinforce the presence of the penal state in ‘sensitive neighbourhoods’ through a rapid, on-the-spot treatment of delinquency. The Renseignements Généraux (French Intelligence Service) also got involved in 1991 with the creation of a special section called ‘Villes et banlieues’. With these developments, the banlieues were put under surveillance, and new ways of talking about them were generated with the appearance of new notions such as ‘urban violence’, ‘sensitive neighbourhoods’, and ‘urban guerrillas’. As many commentators noted, the neighbourhoods with a ‘bad reputation’ in the 1980s became a ‘menace’ in the 1990s, shifting from being ‘neighbourhoods in danger’ to ‘dangerous neighbourhoods’ (see, among others, Bonelli, 2001). The culmination of this growing preoccupation was perhaps best exemplified by the 2002 presidential elections, in which the issue of security seemed decisive. Since then, the French republican penal state has consolidated itself mainly in and through the social housing neighbourhoods in banlieues.⁽⁴⁾ The legitimising discourse of this consolidation has been centred around ‘the Republic’, allegedly under threat from the formation of communities at its gates, incompatible with its values and principles.

The republican imaginary and the paradox of actually existing republicanism

The term *banlieue* has always had negative connotations (although there are many affluent banlieues). However, starting particularly with the 1990s, there has been a strong stigmatisation of banlieues with reference to the formation of ghettos, ethnic separatism, and Islamic fundamentalism. When the ‘threat’ of banlieues was articulated in the 1970s, it did not involve ‘ethnic’ and religious connotations. Starting in the 1980s, however, the banlieues were associated with the ‘problem of immigration’, the problem being the ‘integration’ of non-European immigrants and their descendants into French

⁽²⁾ “[W]hat strikes me is that political life [in France] is organised around Le Pen”, boasted the extreme right leader in December 2005. And not without reason: since 2002, sixteen of thirty propositions of the extreme right’s “Justice and police” programme have been realised or are in the course of being realised (*Le Canard enchaîné* 2005b).

⁽³⁾ This law had been invoked only twice before, for the war in Algeria and for the incidents in France’s overseas territory New Caledonia in 1985.

⁽⁴⁾ I have elsewhere (Dikeç, 2006) tried to elaborate this argument.

society, and, starting in the 1990s, Islam became a dominant theme. This change was not a straightforward reflection of the changing demographic composition of the social housing neighbourhoods in banlieues. The context in which the revolts in banlieues were articulated contributed greatly to the consolidation of the current negative image of banlieues. In the early 1980s the Socialists were in power for the first time in the Fifth Republic with a politically contentious agenda, which included, among other things, the suspension of the expulsion of immigrants, and voting rights for immigrants in local elections. The revolts of the ‘hot summer’ of 1981 took on a specific importance in this context, where the opposition right had focused its critique on the ‘soft’ attitude of the new government towards immigration. The revolts of 1990 occurred in a context of heated debates around immigration and Islam, marked by incidents such as the Islamic headscarf affair of 1989 in France, the Intifada (already in place for three years), the Rushdie affair, and the Gulf War (to start in January 1991). Similarly, the revolts of 2005 occurred in a particularly tense context, marked by September 11 and its aftermath of increasing preoccupations over terrorism, security, and Islam. Other incidents—such as war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bali bombings, debates about the entry of Turkey to the European Union, and the London tube bombings—contributed to the development of hostile arguments against non-European immigrants and Muslims in many Western states, including France where the banlieues became the spatially reified forms of such ‘threats’.

It is important, therefore, to see the current negative image of banlieues as articulated in and with reference to these particular contexts rather than as an unproblematic reflection of reality. This articulation highlights less the difficult material conditions in banlieues than the ‘threat’ posed by banlieues, shifting focus from growing inequalities and discriminations to menaces to ‘the values of the Republic’, French identity, and the authority of the state. Furthermore, this articulation constitutes the banlieues in the form of a *menacing exteriority*, which not only makes the application of ever-more repressive measures possible, but also largely debilitates the significance of recurrent revolts.

The 2005 revolts, in this sense, were no exception, and they quickly gave rise to debates about ‘integrating’ the children of (non-European) immigrants, ethnic separatism, and Islamic fundamentalism. In terms of their magnitude, they were compared to the uprisings of May 1968. Broadcast images of the revolting youth mainly showed ‘darker’ people, which led to the interpretation of revolts as ‘ethnic’ and ‘religious’—an interpretation much exploited by the media in the United States (Fox News, for example, reported the revolts as ‘Muslim riots’). Let us follow the May 1968 analogy: stating that the revolts were ‘ethnic’ (dark skin) or religious (Islam) is almost as absurd as stating that the May 1968 uprisings were ‘ethnic’ (white) or religious (Christian). There was nothing to suggest that the revolts were ‘ethnic’ or religious. No such claim was made. Banlieues (the ‘bad’ ones) are not particularly attractive places to live. Many of them are marked by deteriorating housing, lack of facilities, education problems, insufficient transportation, and a strong territorial stigmatisation, the negative effects of which are strongly felt on a daily basis by their inhabitants, youth in particular (for example, in relations with the police and job applications). If the majority of revolting youth have a darker complexion, this should raise questions about the dynamics of the housing market and the practices of social housing construction, distribution, and allocation, rather than lead to a hasty conclusion that it is the Arabs, blacks, and Muslims who are rioting.

Therefore, suggesting that the revolts were ‘ethnic’ or religious is misleading in terms of the dynamics behind the revolts and their political implications. Confining the banlieue youth (most of whom were born and/or raised in France) in already given

'ethnic' or religious identities is already to place them on the outside, hopefully to be 'integrated' by the so-called 'republican model of integration'. As a result, when the youth in banlieues revolt, they always 'revolt as' (as blacks, as Arabs, as the children of immigrants, as Muslims). This is not to deny the racialised basis of inequalities and discriminations, but to point to the perils of confining political subjectivities into already given categories of identity. Rather than confining their spontaneously constituted political identities to preconceived categories that are deemed incompatible with the principle of "one and indivisible Republic", the challenge, it seems to me, is to hear their voices as equals manifesting their discontent and desire to be treated as equals.

The problem is not that republicanism is inherently incompatible with diversity. The problem is that the republican imaginary is so white and so Christian that any manifestation of discontent—either on the streets or in the spaces of institutional politics—by the republic's darker and non-Christian (or thought to be so) citizens quickly evokes concerns about the values and principles of the Republic. This is the paradox of actually existing republicanism in France. When those who do not quite fit into the republican imaginary mobilise, the principle of equality—otherwise strongly defended—gets displaced by a preoccupation with 'ethnic' origins and religious affiliations—otherwise strongly criticised. Rather than a defence of the equality of all its members regardless of ethnicity or religion, republicanism becomes a denial of diversity, and prevents the constitution of political spaces where the voices of the youth in banlieues can be heard *as equals* manifesting their discontent, making a claim on the republic as part of the republic—not as barbarians at its gate.

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