

A Look Back at the Ethnic Riots in France

French author reflects on November 2005

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Just about everything and anything has been said about what's been called variously "ethnic riots," "suburban conflagrations," or "insurrectional anarchy," which inflamed France in the course of three weeks, from late October to mid-November, 2005.

The Facts

The riots started in Clichy-sous-Bois, in the Seine-St Denis *département*, on October 27. They erupted upon the death of two youths, Zyed Benna (age 17) and Bouna Traoré (age 15), electrocuted in a transformer as they ran from the police. The unrest reached its peak on November 7 when 1410 cars were incinerated and 400 people arrested. The next day a state of emergency was declared. A total of 2921 persons were arrested, a third of them minors; 591 were imprisoned, 126 police officers and *gendarmes* were wounded. There were three deaths – the two electrocuted youths and an adult bludgeoned to death in front of his family on October 27 while taking photographs.

The official figures are likely underestimates. They focus primarily on the dramatic: the vehicles set afire. By November 17, 9193 vehicles had been incinerated, half of them in the Paris region. In the Seine-St. Denis *département* alone, the total

exceeded 1500.

The riots were not limited to the Paris area. Over one hundred cities were affected, among them Lyon (614 cars burned), Nice and Strasbourg, but also numerous small towns no one had ever heard from.

A number of public buildings were also set ablaze or vandalized: schools, gymnasia, shops, social and cultural centers, police stations, bus depots, warehouses. At the end of 2005, insurers valued the losses throughout the country at 200 million euros, not counting the costs of lost work and additional security.

The Process

Back in 1998, we identified the process leading to unrest in *Immigration: the Legal Fracture* (*Immigration: La Fracture Légale*, published by *Le Pré aux Clercs*): an immediate response from youngsters fixated on the perception of suffering an "injustice." The explosion then spreads by contamination.

It starts with an accident caused by juvenile delinquents. They, or their friends, meet their death as a result of their own carelessness or of an error in judgement by the police. The information is immediately carried forth by cell phones, amplified and twisted by rumor; the protests start that evening in the victims' neighborhood and spread quickly to nearby cities. While the mediators, the victims' families, the authorities and the police try to reestablish order in the neighborhood where the trouble started, more distant cities are set ablaze, generating a domino effect, magnified by the media and blogs calling for action.

Then, after nights of televised confrontations with police arouse fear in the French mainstream

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community, tensions diminish gradually until the next incident.

The Protagonists

A large majority of the rioters are between twelve and twenty-five years old, the children of North and Sub-Saharan African immigrants. This is evident from the television coverage and from the geography of the riots. Publications of the radical (and morally indignant) left try to obscure this reality by arguing that these youngsters are French citizens like all others. This is technically true, but our understanding of the phenomenon is not helped when we ignore the role of immigration and its consequences: overpopulation, clandestinity, unemployment, and poverty. In the most affected *département*, Seine-St-Denis, the majority of young people are now descended from immigration.

However, we must be careful of generalizations. Only a very small minority of youths took part in the confrontations – fewer than 10,000, that's less than 0.1% percent of that age group, with few girls or young women among them. The correlation between known delinquents and rioters has also not been demonstrated. Many of those arrested were unknown to the police.

False Explanations

The explosion had been predictable. I myself had predicted it as early as 1998 and I mentioned it recently in an interview in *The Social Contract*. Nevertheless, using immigration as the only explanation overlooks many social and cultural factors.

The Minister of the Interior, Nicholas Sarkozy, has stated that the uproar had been orchestrated by big honchos working in the “informal economy,” by radical Islamic preachers and by left-wing militants calling for world-wide revolution. This explanation doesn't lead anywhere. Those in command of the traffic in drugs, weapons, animals, and spare auto parts have no wish to attract police attention. They attempt to keep things orderly in their territory. Pacing the young at the service of radical Islamists is largely a myth. While it's true that some preachers harbor a wish to punish France – a country they hate because of its colonial past, its freedoms and customs – their influence on Muslim youngsters is

limited. A large majority of them accept the precepts of Islam yet consider themselves French, and tend to distance themselves from religious practice.

The riots had repercussions beyond the borders of France. There were incidents in Germany (Berlin, Bremen, Cologne), in Belgium (Brussels, Charleroi, Liège), in Denmark (Aarhus), and in Spain (Barcelona, Seville). In Greece, a protest was organized in front of the French Embassy “in support of the French insurgents.” Such dissemination could lend credibility to the existence of an international ring of vandals, but it did not start until November 7 and remained sporadic. More likely, what we saw were spontaneous imitations of the French riots, rather than an organized international operation by the extreme left, which in fact had not seen it coming.

Finally, using polygamy as an explanation, as was done by a sector of the right and the extreme-right, is not a convincing argument. Today, in France, as a result of clandestine African immigration, there are between 10,000 and 20,000 polygamous families. Some of them, illiterate, living in hiding or promiscuity, are unable to care for their children; they abandon them to the streets, to all sorts of traffics and illicit relationships. But the arrested youngsters came largely from monogamous families.

The Ingredients in the Mix

We must look elsewhere. First, let us review history. Tensions have been running high in some two hundred cities since riots erupted in the Lyon area in 1979, and especially since those in 1981-1983. Some twenty to thirty thousand vehicles are burned every year, with a peak on New Year's eve. But never before had the disturbances been so intense nor had they lasted so long. This time, the stress awakened old wounds that had not healed. To start with, there is a desperation fed by a sense of victimization, itself fueled by polemics about colonialism. These young people, who are often failing in school, are under the impression that they are being sacrificed the way their elders had been. They believe that coming from crime-ridden neighborhoods, the doors of industry and commerce are closed to them and that access to secure civil

service jobs requires a steep climb that will exhaust them. Social climbing is not an option. Thus, they express their frustration against emblematic buildings: schools, sports facilities, cultural centers. Unable to enjoy the benefits of the consumer society, they heap their revenge at the symbols of that society: stores are pillaged or destroyed, cars are vandalized or burned.

Let's add to that mix a burning passion for festivities organized around the incineration of vehicles – symbolic ceremonies of expiation offered to the whole city. There is also the burden of “empty” evenings. When no broadcasts are scheduled of soccer matches, reality TV, or shows with favorite stars, when there is no work to be done and no outings planned, the youngsters congregate outdoors or in the hallways of buildings. There they harass and deride people coming home late and stage provocations to attract the attention of neighbors and the police.

Finally, let's not overlook the role of the media in framing the riots. According to those apprehended, appearing on TV and surpassing the outrages of some neighboring town are the only ways to be heard. Putting on a big show and spewing hatred are the only sounds coming from the hoodlums. They are not worried about the economic repercussions and human suffering occasioned by their behavior, or about the image of France abroad. At the same time, the small screen spawned a multitude of analysts who discoursed at length on the fundamental causes of and new excuses for the urban riots and thus contributed to keep them going.

Drastic Surgery vs. Mild Medication

To imagine that there are immediate remedies available to ameliorate a situation that has festered for twenty years is to be politically blind. There is a double fracture at work here: a social one between those who have and those who have-not, and a legal fracture between transgressors and those who are resigned to their condition. These fissures have created ethnic and multiethnic geographic ghettos that substantiate the lack of social integration. They demonstrate the limits of the French model, one based on a free economy, on government social services, and on a culture respectful of democratic

civic values. In some French people, there is a temptation to end the whole charade by getting rid of the outcasts and scrubbing the cities clean.

The proclamation of a state of emergency and the solemn address by President Jacques Chirac on November 14, heard by a record 20 million television listeners, helped to restore calm in the streets but not in people's minds. The politics of “zero tolerance” recommended by the Minister of the Interior is simply inapplicable in lawless neighborhoods where agents of the state and of civil society can not venture without a cease-fire granted by the gangs that control them. It's unworkable in an economy which derives 18% of revenues from the informal sector. Intervention can only be effectuated at the margins: creation of zones in which the informal economy is legalized, expulsion of inflammatory imams, tough punishment for notorious recidivists, state supervision of welfare payments to dysfunctional families or those implicated in their children's misconduct.

To reduce the delinquency that feeds on a sense of exclusion, measures must be taken that are politically sensitive, economically expensive and socially dangerous.

As a start, the 1945 laws on juvenile delinquency must be abolished or completely overhauled. They are ill-suited to social conditions in the 21st century and the excuse of youth should not apply to vandals who know perfectly well what they are doing. Seeing young people hauled for the fortieth time before a juvenile judge and getting away with a reprimand borders on the surreal. That doesn't mean prison is always the best solution – prison often teaches minor delinquents to perfect their skills.

A second reform would compel the perpetrators or their parents to pay for part of the pillage. Some may argue that this would penalize the poor twice, since social misery is itself a causal agent of incidents. But experience has demonstrated that apparent poverty often hides wealth and, above all, that parents who have no wish to pay for the stupidities of their children can strongly dissuade them.

The third change would involve a *bona fide* revolution in housing subsidies by allowing the most

disadvantaged to occupy lodging of a size suited to that of the family. Placing a family with eight children in a three room apartment encourages the kids to roam outside the home, form gangs, and develop conceits that take offense under any pretext. True enough, it may induce families to have more children in order to benefit from more welfare and larger quarters. But we must be realistic. The first necessity in a rich western society is for a young person to have a minimum of space to call his own. It is within the solitude and freedom such space affords that personhood takes form.

In the long term, urban policy is first of all about employment in the cities – work contracts for the future, assistance with employment, a first job, affirmative action in gaining access to prestigious universities. These are part of an ambitious program launched by the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin to reduce unemployment, but it will only bear fruit in the long run.

From now until then, there is ample time for minds and cities to re-ignite. ■