

# Violence in France: A Borderline Case

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For three weeks from the end of October 2005, France experienced a bout of urban violence which in its own way featured all the essential elements that I have described in this chapter. Sparked off by the announcement of the death of two adolescents who believed they were being chased by the police and hid in an electricity station, where they were electrocuted, and exacerbated by the unsubtle remarks of a Minister of the Interior who spoke of “rabble” and of “cleaning out the area with a high-pressure hosepipe” with regard to delinquency in working-class housing estates, the riotous conduct was the work of young men who set fire every evening not only to private cars, but also to public buses, as well as schools and nursery schools, firstly in the working-class suburbs of Paris, and then throughout the country. This violence shocked the whole world. In some cases, there was an element of jubilation in news commentaries, for example in the United States, where CNN, among other channels, reported the events with smugness, as if France was showing, through its misfortunes, that it was no better off than other major countries, and that it had had no right to think that it could preach to others, as it had done in recent years with more than a touch of arrogance. But more profoundly, the interest that these riots aroused abroad hit upon a decisive question, as overseas observers had understood only too well: the unrest clearly showed the major crisis af-

fecting the French model of integration.

**The Social and Institutional Dimensions of the Crisis**

The urban violence of autumn 2005 in fact combined an immense array of difficulties which constitute a veritable phenomenon, a multi-dimensional crisis of confidence in what is sometimes called the “French model” affecting its social, institutional, cultural, political and intellectual aspects.

The most obvious refers to the social register. Since the middle of the 70s, France has gone through a lasting period of social difficulties, associated with the consequences of the massive transformations brought about by an immigration which was for many years the product of a search for work, and later became a phenomenon of permanent settlement. Racism and discrimination, in fact, add further to the existing problems of unemployment, exclusion and lack of job security for many young people, most of them the children of recent immigrants, living in areas sometimes similar to ghettos. The so-called urban policies, implemented since the beginning of the 80s, and very often with considerable intelligence and generosity, have, however, obviously not helped them at all, and from this point of view, the violence is the voice of their rage, their despair, and also their inability to establish themselves as individuals in their own right, and to project themselves into the future.

The crisis is equally institutional, and more precisely affects the institutions of the Republic. It is not the republican ideal itself which is at fault, but the

growing difficulty to give it a concrete, tangible form. Institutions such as the police, the justice system, public services and furthermore the public education system, appear less and less capable of keeping their promises of “Liberté-Egalité-Fraternité”, (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity): as the proud motto of the Republic proclaims, and which politicians and “republican” intellectuals have repeated like a mantra since the mid 80s.

**A Crisis which is also Cultural**

The crisis is just as much cultural, in the sense that ever more numerous demands are being shouted out to the Nation – which in principle has the monopoly on cultural identity in the public domain – by groups defined by a particular identity, national origin, religious persuasion, ethnic or racial difference. According to the traditional model, in France you can be whatever you want in private, but in the public sphere there is only a place for individuals who are free and equal by right, not for minorities. It is thus that extremely fierce debates have been developing since the mid 80s, with regard to Islam on one hand, and the supposed ethnicity of young people on the other. The riots, contrary to what might be thought, were not in any way organised or structured from an ideological or religious viewpoint, neither did they express any claim, protest or affirmation, cultural, racial, ethnic or otherwise. But their irruption does belong in a general context where the question is posed.

The fact that those responsables are often the children of immigrants, including sub-Saharan Africans, provided an op-

portunity for some politicians and intellectuals to speak of actions purporting an ethnic character, despite the facts, for at no time did the youths in question draw attention to any such ethnic origin. This interpretation, fallacious, reactionary and even racist as it was, showed that the events appeared in a climate of general cultural fragmentation and of demands for recognition, made especially by the offspring of immigrants from the Maghreb and Africa on the one hand (with regard to the question of colonisation), or from the Caribbean on the other hand, who wanted the slave trade and slavery to be discussed.

### **In short, a Political and Intellectual Crisis**

This violence should be analysed equally in a context larger than that of a political crisis; it places us directly at the heart of the subject of political failure, not because it is in itself political, but because it encompasses a large body of social, institutional and cultural issues, which until now, politics has not known how to control.

More precisely, this failure must be interpreted on two levels. Primarily on the national level, since prior to the event, neither the party in power on the right, nor its predecessors on the left, had tried to tackle these questions realistically and directly, although they had been apparent to all for the last thirty years. A more particular responsibility is held, nevertheless by the current government, and more precisely by the two Raffarin governments (named after the prime minister from 2002 to 2005). Since 2002 and the presidential elections and subsequent legislative elections which brought it to power, this government has above all dismantled what little help that did exist in the districts concerned, and which had been holding their heads above water: they withdrew local police officers "on the beat" and opportunities for youth employment, and made massive reductions

in subsidies to social work organisations operating in the housing estates. But on the second level, the political failure is also local. In the past, the districts concerned were often under the political control of the Communist party, and were known as "the red suburbs". Furthermore, a rich network of associations existed in these areas, which assured that popular demands and expectations were transmitted from the lower to the higher levels of the system, organised social or cultural campaigns and mobilised the most dynamic elements of the population. Today, the Communist party has considerably declined and lost its impact in working-class districts. As for the associations which are found there, and which remain numerous, they are very different from those of the past, because essentially, they bring in help and assistance of a social nature from the outside, and are funded by public money. The only visible force, in certain cases at least, is Islam; when an imam is capable of suggesting diverse activities and educational support to young people, while at the same time taking them in hand from a religious standpoint. The paradox is that in Autumn 2005, these imams very often went out and asked the young people to return to their homes and not to surrender themselves to violence, in other words, they flew to the aid of republican law and order, and did not stir up the anger of the young people, contrary to what was said by uninformed ideologists.

Finally, the crisis is also an intellectual one. The traditional figure of the "great French intellectual" is in fact becoming rarer, even if some good examples still exist, like Alain Touraine or Edgar Morin. The intellectuals "of the left" have remained very silent with regard to the riots, embarrassed in certain cases by the decline of the workers' movement as a defining player in reference to all collective action. They no longer have a figure of reference to put forward, and no better utopia to suggest, unlike in the "good old days" of Communism. As a result, some of them retreat into hyp-

ocritical postures, carried along by the logic of suspicion and denunciation which allowed them to criticize the authorities, but not to properly understand the young people's revolt. On the right, however, the best known intellectuals sink into either a sort of wild "Republicanism", a purely ideological defence stemming from an extreme conception of the republican ideal, or into a more or less disguised form of racism – which explains the campaign of a great weekly newspaper to denounce the "neo-reacs".

The French experience of urban violence has thus testified to a general breakdown in the French model of integration. Is this breakdown peculiar to France, as a manifestation of the French "exception"? In fact, a sole but central element, allows "exception" to be spoken of in this context. Everywhere in Europe in fact, unemployment, lack of job security, social difficulties and the phenomena of racism and discrimination can be seen. Everywhere in Europe particular identities are demanding recognition in the public domain. Everywhere, also, national political systems give the impression of being overwhelmed, from on high by the demands of globalisation and European construction, and from below by the pressure of ethnic identities that they do not know how to properly cope with. But what is unique to France, is the force of the republican ideal, this promise made to every individual, every citizen that they will attain equality, that they will benefit from liberty, and that they will see solidarity and fraternity at work. The specificity of France comes from the representatives of the State and the intellectuals, who make and ceaselessly repeat this promise, whereas it is not held for all. In other countries, less is expected from the state and its institutions, simply because they have not made such promises. The French exception is there, in the frustrations exacerbated by a republican ideal which is translated neither into reality nor into prospects for the future any longer.