

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

The three weeks of riots that began in Clichy-sous-Bois, one of the ghettos of the Parisian *banlieue* (Seine-St.Denis [93]), and spread to over three hundred French cities, including direct confrontations with police in the Place de Bellecour in downtown Lyons, were not a surprise. With unemployment running three to five times the national average of 10%, inadequate and dilapidated housing projects built in the 1960s and 1970s, high crime, harassment by the police, a rigid educational system, and isolation from the rest of French society, the "*minorités visibles*," especially those whose parents or grandparents came from the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa, were ready to explode. The death of two young men, Bouna Traore (age 15) from Mauritania and Zyed Benna (age 17) from Tunisia, who were running to escape police interrogation (a routine happening in the *banlieues*), and were electrocuted while hiding in an electrical sub-station, was the final straw. At one of the first demonstrations to protest these deaths the mixed ethnic marchers, ranging in age from 13 to 25 and beyond (most of them were French citizens), wore white tee-shirts with the words "*Morts pour rien*."

It is important to understand that, contrary to the suggestions of some in the American media, the riots were not "Muslim Riots" (Fox News), or the work of Jihadists. Nor is it true that there is increasing support for Islamic terrorism (ABC). In fact, leaders of the Muslim community called for calm and an end to the burning of cars (some 10,000 burned), public buildings such as schools (247 were torched or otherwise damaged), private buildings (74), post offices, busses, churches (including three mosques and two synagogues). Hundreds were injured, including 217 police and military personnel, and two other people died in riot-related incidents. 4,770 people were taken in for questioning, half after the end of the riots. Of these 4,202 were placed in preventive detention and 763 were given prison sentences, including about 100 minors.

After twelve days President Chirac made his first public comments on the riots, emphasizing the need to restore order. Ultimately, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin called for a "state of emergency" of twelve days. It was subsequently extended to three months by the French National Assembly, with the possibility of lifting it earlier. The invocation of this 1955 law, passed during the Algerian War and only used in France once during the 1958 demonstrations by Algerians living in France and opposed to the war, was seen as an extreme and insulting reaction by the left and those living in the *banlieues*, but was supported by a majority of the French. The law provides for a curfew and the right to search without a warrant the homes of anyone suspected of owning firearms. House arrest is also sanctioned. On 6 December, 74 university professors and the *Verts* presented a request for immediate suspension of the state of emergency claiming that the riots or "*troubles*," as de Villepin called them, had ended. The *Conseil d'Etat* turned it down on 9 December. The Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, said that those foreigners who had committed crimes were subject to deportation, including those holding valid "*titres de séjour*," thus reviving the debate over the "*double peine*" and whether or not it is legal to deport foreigners holding valid papers who have been convicted of a crime. One member of the UMP suggested that naturalized citizens should have their French nationality revoked if they had participated in the riots.

At the time of this writing (11 December 2005), 7 people have been targeted for deportation, but the courts, which only have an advisory capacity to the Minister of the Interior, have exonerated two of them. Prime Minister de Villepin also announced stiff new restrictions on immigration. These include making foreigners residing in France and married to someone abroad wait two years before bringing their spouse. Currently one must wait one year (the Constitution guarantees the right to bring spouses under the France's *regroupement familial* policy.) Foreigners would have to speak French in order to bring their spouses. Laws against polygamy will also be enforced more stringently. It will be more difficult for foreign students to study in France (currently 50,000 a year do so), and the academic requirements will be raised. Sarkozy wants to increase the number of refusals of political asylum from 20,000 to 25,000 a year. He also suggested that the *allocations familiales* of families whose children participated in the riots be suspended. Before the riots he had said that "*la discrimination positive*" (affirmative action) should be adopted in order to reduce inequalities in French society, that foreigners should be allowed to vote in municipal elections, and that the state should help finance the construction of mosques. This carrot and stick approach has prompted a number of politicians of the left to refer to Sarkozy as a *pompier/pyromane*.

It is important to note that Nicolas Sarkozy has announced his intention to run for the presidency in 2007. It is no secret that President Chirac does not like him and does not want him to win. The politics of the riots were further complicated by the fact that Prime Minister de Villepin will also be a candidate and announced during the heat of the riots that he was opposed to "*la discrimination positive*." Instead he favors an approach that would bring about "*la promotion de l'égalité des chances*" (equal opportunity) without quotas, at least not ethnic or religious quotas, but perhaps geographical ones based on one's personal condition. In June 2005 he had named Azouz Begag, the well known writer (*Le Gone du Chaâba*) and sociologist, as the *Ministre délégué à la promotion de l'égalité des chances*. It was Begag who proposed equal opportunity measures such as more "*minorités visibles*" in police and fire departments in his 2004 report entitled *La République arc-en-ciel*. Shortly after the outbreak of the riots inhabitants of the *banlieues* in Seine-St. Denis he accused Sarkozy of inflaming the situation by his use of the terms *racaille* (scum) and an expression he had used to describe what should be done in La Courneuve in June of 2005 after the death of Sidi-Ahmed (age 11). The term was *nettoyer au Kärcher* (a high pressure water hose used to clean cars). Minister Begag entered into the debate (with the blessing of de Villepin) by criticizing Sarkozy's choice of these terms to brand an entire population, saying that it could only make things worse. But Sarkozy was unrepentant, undoubtedly because security continues to be a major concern of the French, much as it was in the 2002 presidential election when Jean-Marie Le Pen, head of the Front National, made it to the second round of the elections. Though handily beaten by Chirac, Le Pen had made his mark with French voters. Sarkozy believes (so does de Villepin) that he must siphon off votes from the Le Pen in order to win in 2007. He counterattacked against Begag, who backed off and, according to Sarkozy, offered his apologies for voicing the disagreements among ministers about how to handle the riots. Both the French and foreign press criticized the intrusion of presidential politics in the midst of what was clearly a national crisis.

Slowly a series of recommendations to improve the situation in the *banlieues* and more generally the condition of "*minorités visibles*" were presented by Chirac, de Villepin, Begag, and Sarkozy. Among these are returning "*police de proximité*" to the *banlieues* to help defuse tensions but also to provide a more preventive presence. President Chirac has proposed that the media hire more minorities of color to appear on television to serve as positive role models and to approximate their presence in French society (at present there is only one black full-time television reporter). Begag said that the French should begin to keep statistics on race, ethnic origin, and religion, something banned by French law since 1945 (the so-called "French model" whereby all citizens are theoretically equal and hence do not need to be identified by race, color, or religion). There are also few (only 10) members of Maghrebian heritage out of the seven hundred personnel in the 32 cabinets of the Villepin government. Nor are there mayors, *députés*, or much representation in French labor unions.

Many of the *minorités visibles* feel that it is only through elective office that they can hope to change French society. Azouz Begag hopes to see twenty or more people of black, Maghrebian, and Antillean heritage elected to the National Assembly in 2007. Other recommendations by Chirac and Villepin include experimentation with anonymous CV's so that color or name recognition does not lead to exclusion (studies have shown that a Parisian with a French-sounding name is five times more likely to get a job than someone with an Arab-sounding name from the *banlieue*). The government plans to restore budget cuts to artistic ventures and a variety of support groups in the impoverished areas, and President Chirac supports a kind of youth civil service which would provide specialized education and training for 30,000 minority youth in 2006 and 50,000 in 2007, following up on Begag's ideas to train them for work in the defense, police, environmental, health, cultural, and associative areas of the French civil service. Villepin would make this voluntary. This idea ties in with the proposal to lower the school-leaving age from 16 to 14 to get minority youth who perform poorly in school into job-training programs. Teachers' unions oppose this. Businesses have also been encouraged to hire more minorities. All in all another five billion euros will be poured into the ghettos to renovate dilapidated buildings and increase the number of "school success teams" of teachers involved in training ghetto youth from 175 to 750. In 2006 there will even be an experimental class of 30 from the ZEP (*Zones d'éducation prioritaires*) housed in the lycée Henri IV to prepare these students for the *grandes écoles*. Some question whether voluntary measures can succeed since there would be no laws to give them teeth and because this has been tried before without success.

While all of these measures will take time to implement, a full commitment to change and adaptation of the so-called French model might result in both material improvements for visible minorities and a better national climate in which blacks, browns, whites, and any other colors could actually profit from each others' talents and contributions to French society. Of course, none of this can happen unless respect is granted to the youth of the French suburbs who are first and foremost French and who declared this violently for all the world to see. Until they are actually acknowledged as French and not *Maghrébins*, *Arabes*, *Musulmans*, immigrants, blacks, Africans, and the myriad of other terms used to avoid calling them French (the vast majority were born and raised in France!) no progress is truly possible. Laws against discrimination will have to be enforced as well, and where there are no laws new ones will have to be passed.

We must try to remain positive for the long run, but recently I showed Yamina Ben-guigui's *Mémoires d'immigrés* to a class of mine and was struck by the sense of déjà vu when a newsreel showed President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing visiting a bidonville in 1975 and promising to improve the situation. After thirty years it is high time for action, not rhetoric, presidential or otherwise. The French have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

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