

Sarkozy versus the *banlieues*: Deconstructing Urban Legend

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In 2005, the deaths of two young people in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-le-Bel sparked three weeks of rioting on an unprecedented scale. Politically, the response to the riots revolved around the interpretation of the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy branded the rioters ‘thugs’ and ‘delinquents’, dismissing the riots as a purely nihilistic expression of violence, a rejection of the Republic and of French society at large. Given Sarkozy’s political position and the sensationalist appeal of his discourse, this interpretation was rapidly imposed as the dominant interpretation of the violence in the media. Of course, Sarkozy’s interpretation of the violence was nothing new. Since his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Sarkozy has strongly advocated a hard-line response to crime and delinquency. More than this, he has consistently used the theme of security to evoke fear in the electorate, positioning himself as the solution to a deep-rooted problem in French society. In this way, Sarkozy has successfully used the theme of security to advance his political career. Throughout his rise to the peak of French politics, the *banlieues* have represented both the source and the target of Sarkozy’s politics of security. These underprivileged areas represent a concentration of all the challenges facing the Republic: immigration, social and economic exclusion and violence. This chapter will explore Sarkozy’s

relationship with the *banlieues* and problematise the security-oriented image that has emerged from this relationship

Introduction

In autumn 2005, the deaths of two young people in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois sparked rioting on an unprecedented scale. Over a period of three weeks, young *banlieusards* burned cars, damaged buildings and clashed with police. And the riots were not limited to the suburbs of Paris, but spread to *banlieues* across the nation as the events of Clichy-sous-Bois ignited a profound underlying malaise amongst the youth of the suburbs. The scale of the violence was such that it resulted in the decision by the French government to implement emergency laws dating from the Algerian war of independence. Both during and after these events social commentators offered a range of interpretations of the violence. One of the principal interpretations voiced after the riots was ethnic-oriented with advocates viewing the violence in terms of communitarianism and a fragmentation of the Republic along ethnocultural lines. Alain Finkielkraut, the former left-wing philosopher, was a strong advocate of this perspective. In an interview with *Haaretz* on 18 November 2005, for example, Finkielkraut evoked an ethnocultural fragmentation of the Republic. Finkielkraut made an analogy between the French Republic and Europe, both under attack from parts of the Muslim-Arab world, thereby explicitly linking the Muslim population of the suburbs to the menacing image of the inhabitants of the suburbs manifesting a religiously-motivated hate for the Republic. But the facts of the violence told a different story. Throughout the course of the 2005 events, a significant Muslim presence on the streets was recorded by journalists. However, journalists also recorded the fact that the majority of these inhabitants actively engaged in discouraging the violence, in some cases even attempting to form barriers between youths and police (*Le Monde*, 2 November 2005). Moreover, a confidential report by the Renseignements Généraux, published in *Le Parisien* explicitly stated that Muslim fundamentalists had

'aucun rôle dans le déclenchement des violences et dans leur expansion' (*Le Monde*, 7 December 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum, commentators placed emphasis not on the perceived cultural or ethnic element underlying the violence, but rather focused solely on the social issues at stake. This interpretation viewed the riots of 2005, and indeed views urban violence in more general terms, as a direct result of the social processes in operation in these areas. Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux laid the groundwork for this social-oriented interpretation in 2003 when they claimed that the "‘émeute urbaine’ selon l’expression consacrée, peut être comprise, dans un premier temps, comme le révélateur d’une lente dégradation des relations sociales dans la ZUP [Zones à urbaniser en priorité]" (10). In other words, the riots in French suburbs must be understood in the context of the long-term social mechanisms that have impacted upon the social situation of inhabitants of the *banlieues*. In 2005, sociologist Laurent Bonelli adopted a similar approach, claiming that 'cette crise des milieux populaires est [. . .] profondément sociale' (*Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2005). The sociologist emphasized the role played by the destructuring of the working classes in the post-industrial period in the emergence of urban violence, and specifically the events of 2005. However, if the ethnocultural interpretation fails to provide an adequate explanation for the riots, so too does the interpretation that views the violence as the reflection of a purely social crisis. Undoubtedly, the social interpretation touches on fundamental issues that are at the heart of the *malaise des banlieues*, unemployment and education being two of the most important. However, the problem with this approach is that the point of view is limited; the social interpretation fails to give adequate consideration to other elements having an equally important impact on the production of violence in the suburbs such as ethnicity, identity and belonging, for example.

In any case, these different interpretations took a backseat to the 'official' interpretation. In the political sphere, the riots were described as the actions of thugs, hardened delinquents expressing a hate for the Republic and French society at large. This perspective

stemmed, in large part, from the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. Moreover, Sarkozy's position of authority, combined with the sensationalist appeal of his discourse, gave legitimacy to this interpretation. Other competing interpretations were rendered inaudible by this 'official' view which was quickly imposed in the media as the dominant view of the riots. This chapter will offer an in-depth analysis of this 'official' view of the riots and assess its validity as a legitimate interpretation of the events of 2005. On a larger scale, the chapter will situate Sarkozy's security-oriented interpretation of the 2005 riots in terms of the relationship between Sarkozy and the *banlieues* in more general terms. For the now President's interpretation of the violence was nothing new. Since his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Sarkozy has strongly advocated a hard-line response to crime and delinquency. More than this, he has consistently used the theme of security to evoke fear in the electorate, positioning himself as the solution to a deep-rooted problem in French society. In this way, Sarkozy has successfully used the theme of security to advance his political career. Throughout his rise to the peak of French politics, the *banlieues* have represented both the source and the target of Sarkozy's politics of security. This chapter will thus explore Sarkozy's relationship with the *banlieues* and problematise the security-oriented image that has emerged from this relationship.

Autumn 2005: Genesis of a National Phenomenon

As mentioned in the introduction, the riots were sparked by the deaths of two young *banlieusards* in Clichy-sous-bois. On 27 October 2005, Traoré and Benna died by electrocution at the site of an EDF electrical transformer in the Parisian suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis. Another teenager, Muhittin Altun, sustained serious injuries. The youths were fleeing police, despite the fact that none of them had done anything wrong. The tragedy produced an emotional and angry response among the teenagers' peers and that evening saw a number of violent incidents in Clichy-sous-Bois. For the friends of the dead youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré were

the innocent victims of the police discrimination that forms part of life in the suburbs; 'Morts Pour Rien' was the slogan branded upon t-shirts as the families led protest marches in front of the media. However, for those living in similar suburban communities, while these deaths lacked a personal link, the tragedy constituted yet another example of the discrimination and humiliation that form primary factors in the social equation of these areas. The violence quickly spread to the neighbouring suburbs of Montfermeil and Aulnay-sous-Bois. Up to this point, the violence was limited to the suburb at the source of the tragedy and its immediate neighbours. Crucially however, the first statement made by government representatives regarding the tragedy claimed that the victims had been in the wrong and attempted to absolve the police of any blame in the matter (Kokoreff and Moran 35–51). This move would prove to be a significant factor in terms of the escalation of the violence. The day after the tragedy, before any comprehensive enquiry had been carried out, the then Minister of the Interior made the following statement to the media:

Lors d'une tentative de cambriolage, lorsque la police est arrivée, un certain nombre de jeunes sont partis en courant. Trois d'entre eux, qui n'étaient pas poursuivis physiquement par la police, sont allés se cacher en escaladant un mur d'enceinte de trois mètres de haut qui abritait un transformateur. Il s'en est suivi une nuit d'émeute, une de plus à Clichy-sous-Bois (AFP, 28 October 2005).

This statement, spread via the media, was rapidly imposed as the dominant interpretation of the causes of the tragedy. The statement held particular weight given Sarkozy's position of authority as a government representative. However, subsequent information proved this statement factually incorrect. A report published by the *Inspection générale des services (IGS)* after the riots revealed that the police had indeed pursued the youths, thus negating the official version voiced so hastily after the tragedy occurred (*Le Monde*, 7 December 2006). Moreover, no crime had been committed and, in any case, attempted break-in does not constitute an infraction under French law. In this context, a number

of questions are raised. With no clear knowledge of the situation and before a detailed enquiry had been made, why did Sarkozy, acting in his official capacity, point the finger of blame at the young *banlieusards*? Was Sarkozy being deliberately provocative, acting the *pompier-pyromane*? For despite the attempt to absolve the forces of order from blame, thus potentially defusing the violence, the riots continued to spread. Over the following days, violence and destruction was recorded in suburban areas across the country. And while previous events, such as the violence of Les Minguettes in 1981 or that of Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990, had developed under similar immediate conditions, that is, within a context where the police were perceived as having committed an injustice against local inhabitants, these instances of violence were largely contained within the city of origin (Silverstein and Tetreault). In the case of the 2005 violence however, this format was altered as the riots transcended all city and regional borders, developing as a national phenomenon that posed a serious and legitimate threat to what Nicolas Sarkozy termed 'Republican Order' (*The Times*, 8 November 2005).

Analysis of the beginnings of the 2005 riots reveals that, although the deaths of the two youths served as the primary catalyst for the violence that followed, there was in fact another factor that also played a decisive role in the outbreak and escalation of the violence. Chronologically, this incident took place a number of days before the start of the civil unrest, on 25 October, when the then Minister of the Interior visited the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil. During a speech to local residents, Sarkozy adopted his usual hard line stance on crime and delinquency, promising inhabitants that he would 'les débarrasser des voyous [...] de la racaille', and using the metaphor of a 'Kärcher' or high powered cleaning hose when speaking of his intentions to clean the suburbs of the 'scum' inhabiting these areas (*Libération*, 31 October 2005). These controversial comments were, at the time, immediately denounced by the Minister for the Promotion of Equality at the time, Azouz Begag, himself a former inhabitant of the *banlieues* (*Libération*, 31 October 2005). Sarkozy's description of certain inhabitants of the suburbs was received as a

direct insult by many residents, compounding the discrimination that forms part of daily life in the suburbs by publicly verbalising the stigma that has been attached to the suburbs by mainstream society. Although Sarkozy's statements did not directly result in rioting, his claims compounded the frustration of the inhabitants of these areas, effectively helping to move the situation in the suburbs towards a context where the potential for civil unrest was markedly increased. Throughout the riots Sarkozy's statements were frequently cited by those directly involved in the riots as being a primary reason for their personal involvement; comments such as 'Sarko has declared war so its war he's going to get', 'we won't stop until Sarkozy resigns', and 'the main person responsible for this situation is [. . .] Sarkozy', were recorded by journalists throughout the violence (*The Times*, 3 November 2005; *The Times*, 7 November 2005; *Le Monde*, 17 October 2006). Numerous internet blogs registered similar comments, however the internet based blogs were not initially subjected to any form of censorship and were created by the youths themselves, perhaps resulting in a more accurate reflection of the intensity of the emotions evoked by the words of the then Minister of the Interior: 'France should be ashamed of its incompetent government. Sarkozy is the one who should be cleaned with a Karcher', 'I say yes to the riots, yes to Sarkozy's resignation', 'We will f**k this bastard Sarkozy and his policemen' (*The Times*, 8 November 2005).

A Rejection of the Republic?

If Sarkozy's statements before and during the riots had succeeded in arousing the anger of those inhabiting the *banlieues*, thereby contributing to the potent mix of factors underlying the violence, it was his statements after the riots that held most effect in terms of interpreting the riots for a public struggling to understand the reasons for such widespread destruction and violence. Sarkozy's security-oriented interpretation of events viewed the riots as the actions of 'voyous' and 'racaille'; experienced delinquents expressing a hate for French society and the Republic. The picture painted by Sarkozy was that of a social space dominated by a

'peur des bandes, des caïds', areas ruled by mafia-like organisations where even the police are afraid to go (*Le Monde*, 11 November 2005). Moreover, the now President of the Republic downplayed the importance of a number of social issues, as he cited the activities of criminal gangs as the principal cause of the violence:

La première cause du chômage, de la désespérance, de la violence dans les banlieues, ce ne sont pas les discriminations, ce n'est pas l'échec de l'école. La première cause du désespoir dans les quartiers, c'est le trafic de drogue, la loi des bandes, la dictature de la peur et la démission de la République (*Le Monde*, 22 November 2005).

Sarkozy's interpretation of the violence found support among a number of politicians. On 5 November 2005 for example, Gérard Gaudron, Mayor of Aulnay-sous-Bois, led a protest march against the violence, telling media reporters that the march was 'neither a provocation nor a demonstration of force, but a republican response to acts of delinquency' (*The Guardian*, 6 November 2005). Claude Pernes, Mayor of Rosny-sous-Bois denounced a 'veritable guerrilla situation, urban insurrection' (*Al Jazeera*, 6 November 2005). Elsewhere, the then Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin voiced his opinion that those involved in the riots were 'delinquents' during an interview on the French television station, TF1 (*BBC News*, 3 November 2005). Statements issued by various police bodies and unions in the wake of the 2005 violence also supported this interpretation. Jean-Claude Delage, for example, General Secretary of *Alliance Police Nationale* (the right-wing majority union of police officers), presented the striking image of 'la canaille [des banlieues] en guerre contre l'état' at the union's fifth National Conference in November 2005 (*Alliance Police Nationale*, 17 November 2005). The warlike discourse of *Alliance Police Nationale* was compounded by Frédéric Lagache, national secretary of the union, who called for 'l'éradication de ceux qui pourrissent la vie des habitants des cités et instrumentalisent les jeunes contre les forces de l'ordre' (*Libération*, 21 October 2006). The minority right-wing union *Action Police CFTC* was another voice much quoted by the media during the 2005 violence due to its sensationalist interpretation of events.

Michel Thooris, general secretary of the union, claimed that France was seeing a civil war unfolding in her suburbs: 'there is a civil war under way in Clichy-sous-Bois at the moment' (*The Guardian*, 30 October 2005). On a larger scale, these declarations all took their place in an established trend evoking the menace of the *quartiers sensibles*, the threat of these areas to the prospect of a cohesive French society, and asserting the need for repressive police action against the 'army' of delinquents who threaten social order. In all of these cases, the comments published rejected any link between the violent events and the social, economic and cultural problems facing the *quartiers sensibles*. The riots were primarily viewed as an excuse for delinquents to engage in acts of large-scale destruction. Once again, this discourse implied the need for increased repressive action in order to deal with the threat posed by gangs of delinquents to social order and unity.

However, the supposition that is implicit in this discourse—that of a core of hardened delinquents, directing their destructive tendencies at French society and the Republic at large—was called into question as the facts surrounding these episodes of violence emerged. In relation to the 2005 violence, for example, as time elapsed, allowing the events to be studied with a greater degree of critical objectivity, it emerged that the facts behind the events did not support this rhetoric. In fact, the opposite was true. A study undertaken by two prominent French sociologists revealed that, contrary to Sarkozy's claim that '80% des jeunes déferés au parquet seraient bien connus des services de police', the immediate appearances of the 'rioters' before the court at Bobigny showed that the majority 'n'ont pas d'antécédents judiciaires et ne peuvent donc être étiquetés comme "délinquants"' (Beaud and Pialoux, "La 'racaille' et les 'vrais jeunes'" 19). Furthermore, in the case of those minors brought before the Bobigny children's court for their actions during the violence, Judge Jean-Pierre Rosenczveig revealed that out of 95 minors brought before the court 'seuls 17 d'entre eux étaient connus de la justice' (20). Moreover, extensive qualitative research conducted in the suburbs by the author further undermines the claim that those involved in the riots were hardened

and experienced delinquents intent on causing destruction (Moran 276). These revelations call into question the rhetoric of insecurity that dominates popular discourse regarding the suburbs. For Beaud and Pialoux, this reductive discourse regarding urban violence effectively imposes a simplistic, binary view of the situation in the *quartiers sensibles* that fails to acknowledge the underlying social issues at stake:

Ce discours sécuritaire [. . .] se nourrit d'une étiologie sommaire du phénomène de violence qui repose, au fond, sur une dichotomie rassurante: il y aurait, d'un côté, un noyau de "violents", d'"irréductibles", de "sauvages", dont on n'ose pas dire qu'ils sont irrécupérables et non rééducables [. . .] et de l'autre, les jeunes "non violents", qui se laisseraient entraîner et qu'il conviendrait de protéger contre la contamination des premiers' (Beaud and Pialoux, "La 'racaille' et les 'vrais jeunes'" 18).

The security-oriented interpretation thus challenged, an obvious question remains. Did Sarkozy's interpretation of the riots reflect the reality of the situation, the reality of the banlieues? Or, rather, did this viewpoint simply represent the reformulation of a well-established dialogue? To answer these questions it is necessary to briefly examine the development and evolution of the banlieues as 'problematic' areas of French society.

On the Margins of Society

Since the 1950s and 1960s, when the newly constructed *grands ensembles* were hailed as the zenith of urban living, the *banlieues* have been in long-term decline. Originally envisaged as a context where social difference could be surmounted—a 'classless' society—today's *banlieues* represent a concentration of society's poorest and most underprivileged members. In demographic terms, the population of the *banlieues* is generally characterised by high numbers of immigrants or those of immigrant origins, a situation stemming from the migratory movements that occurred during *les Trente glorieuses*. Since the 1980s and the emergence of the question of integration as a salient political issue, the *banlieues*, with their strong immigrant presence, have come to be

viewed as areas resting at the limits of the Republic, both literally and metaphorically. Alec Hargreaves has shown how powerful stereotypes were attached to the term 'immigration' throughout the 1970s and 1980s that saw this term being progressively, and then almost exclusively, associated with unskilled, European workers, or people of colour (Hargreaves 36). Maxim Silverman states that 'the reformulation of immigration [. . .] transformed the term "immigration" into a euphemism for non-Europeans (particularly North-Africans) and delegitimised it'. The non-European immigrant population came to be regarded as a threat to national unity and identity at a time when these themes were fast regaining popularity (72). More importantly, in the context of this chapter, the threat posed by immigration was inextricably linked to the *banlieues*, given the high representation of immigrant populations. François Dubet's work illustrates how perceptions relating to populations of immigrant origins became interwoven with the stigmatization of a particular geographical area: 'La stigmatisation d'une cité se nourrit de la présence immigrée, rendue responsable de la dégradation: logements surpeuplés, difficultés de voisinage, inquiétudes face aux jeunes qui occupent les espaces publics' (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 84). Consequently, the suburbs became places of exclusion, marginalised by mainstream society. Of course the state took measures to try and reverse the spiral of social and economic degeneration that enveloped the *banlieues*. At the beginning of the 1980s, prompted to some extent by the riots that took place in the Lyon suburb of Les Minguettes in 1981, the state engaged in a series of policy measures collectively known as the *politique de la ville*. This would serve as the blueprint for urban policy in France, a product of the efforts of the state to manage the problems and difficulties engendered by urban development. However, the *politique de la ville* ultimately failed to reverse the destructive trajectory of the *banlieues*.

Linked to the issues of immigration, exclusion and socioeconomic relegation, the question of the *banlieues* also found itself at the heart of a debate on security during the 1990s. Sophie Body-Gendrot states that 'au cour des années ponctuées par des désordres dans les

banlieues et par la montée en puissance des victimes, le sentiment d'insécurité épargne peu de catégories sociales' (Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden 60). Thus from 1991 onwards, attention was focused on the 'problem' of the suburbs. Heavily mediatised instances of urban violence throughout the 1990s contributed to a growth in the idea of 'insecurity', an idea that was progressively and almost exclusively associated with the *banlieues*. Statistical records of the strong growth in crime and delinquency supported the propagation of this theme in the popular imagination (Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden 61). Sylvie Tissot states that 'les émeutes, progressivement détachées de leurs événements déclencheurs, sont rapportées au problème général des "banlieues" ou des "quartiers sensibles," décrit comme un problème social nouveau' (Tissot 19).

The evolution of this generalised discourse linking immigration, insecurity and the *banlieues* was also influenced heavily by the emergence and growth of the Front National on the political stage. The emergence of the Front National as a player in the political stakes throughout the 1980s constituted an important political development; the party campaigned on a strong anti-immigrant platform and contributed significantly to the ethnicisation of the French political scene. This anti-immigrant position was linked, throughout the 1990s to the question of insecurity, as the Front National attempted to capitalise on the sporadic instances of large-scale urban violence occurring in the *banlieues*. The growth in the popularity of the FN brought about a crucial change in the French political landscape as mainstream parties were forced to engage with these questions of immigration and insecurity. On the left, for example, the Socialists embraced a more security-oriented direction, represented most notably by the Villepinte Conference of 1997. The Villepinte conference held particular significance in that the speeches by prominent political figures such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Lionel Jospin took their place in the more general rhetoric of insecurity that was developing as a central societal and political concern. In his closing speech, for example, Prime Minister Jospin succumbed to emotive evocations of the 'frontière de la délinquance', the 'petits groupes menaçants, mendiants

agressifs, dégradations diverses de l'espace public' (Jospin 8). The acquiescence of the left to the rhetoric of insecurity took its place in a circular process that saw the theme of insecurity gaining increasing momentum in the political sphere.

The success of the National Front in garnering support through this discourse linking immigration, insecurity and the threat to national unity was most evident during the 2002 presidential elections. Throughout 2001, in the run up to the 2002 elections, the National Front promoted a programme that posited immigration as 'a mortal threat to civil peace in France' (Shields 312). This situation was compounded by the priority given to security issues by the other candidates, namely the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, and the RPR candidate Jacques Chirac (Dikeç 118). Jospin, 'playing to middle-class fears, claimed he had been naïve about crime and now supported zero impunity policing' (Schneider 147). The year had seen a 10% increase in recorded crime and 'the government's record on law and order [was placed] under the spotlight' (Shields 282). However, Schneider affirms that 'by embracing zero tolerance, Jospin legitimated the discourse of the hard right. And it did not help him' (Schneider 147). In the first round of the elections, Le Pen caused widespread political shock in overtaking the Socialist candidate and progressing to the second round. Shields reveals that 'the shock [. . .] was all the greater since no polling agency had considered this a serious prospect' (Shields 281). This success represented the first time a candidate of the extreme right wing had progressed to the second round of the presidential elections, a fact that highlights not only the achievements of the National Front as a political party, but also the degree to which the linked themes of immigration and insecurity had progressed as salient issues in both the public and political spheres. In this respect, Shields adds that 'in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York [. . .] equations between *insécurité*, illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism found a louder resonance' (284). Ultimately, Chirac was elected as President amid strong anti-FN protests on the part of associations and activist groups, however

his 'new cabinet reflected the harsh punitive policing tone of the campaign' (Schneider 147). And it is in this general context that Nicolas Sarkozy emerged as a leading player on the French political scene, using the question of insecurity and the *banlieues* as a means of propelling himself up the French political hierarchy.

Political Success and the Rhetoric of Fear

From the moment of his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Nicolas Sarkozy's political agenda has been characterised by the theme of insecurity. A shrewd tactician, Sarkozy has played on the fears of the electorate, thus catapulting himself to the pinnacle of French political power. In his first term as Minister of the Interior (2002–2004), Sarkozy successfully manoeuvred the question of insecurity into the political spotlight. Through a series of policy decisions Sarkozy made law and order the focus of his political agenda. The Perben Laws serve as a good example of this focus. The first law of 2002 strengthened penal responses to acts of minor delinquency. This was accompanied by the 2004 law which 'increased police custody to four days, and extended the scope of the notion of "organized gang" (Dikeç 119). This development was followed by the 2003 'loi pour la sécurité intérieure', a law that

renforce les moyens juridiques de la police judiciaire par l'extension de la compétence territoriale des officiers de police judiciaire, incrimine un certain nombre de comportements qui troublent au quotidien la sécurité et la tranquillité des personnes (racolage, mendicité agressive, rassemblements dans les halls d'immeubles . . .)' (27).

Paradoxically, while these measures did indeed achieve their goal of providing the forces of order additional tools to aid their task, the increase in police powers has, to a certain extent, helped inflame the situation in the *banlieues* where police-public relations are characterized by hostility and tension. The abolishment of the community police in 2003 in favour of a more repressive style of policing, based on a culture of results and defined by a clear commitment to zero tolerance regarding delinquency, provides

another example of Sarkozy's security-oriented approach. Nassar Demiati claims that 'depuis qu'il est revenu au ministère de l'Intérieur, Nicolas Sarkozy a délibérément choisi de jouer le jeu de la provocation des jeunes des quartiers populaires et d'y faire monter la tension' (Demiati 61). Sarkozy has played a central role in the construction of a security-oriented image of the suburbs, an image that represents these areas as veritable 'zones de non-droit' at the limits of the Republic.

During the violence of 2005, Sarkozy's repressive approach cemented his image as the "premier flic de France," the man to restore order to lawless areas of society. In this respect, Robert Castel claims that the "essentiel de la problématique de l'insécurité" is inextricably linked to the population of the suburbs, "de sorte que l'éradication de la dangérosité qu'elles portent vaudrait à la limite pour une victoire sur l'insécurité en général" (Castel 66). Sarkozy's position of authority has, through the media, allowed his voice and, consequently, his representation of the suburbs to dominate in the public sphere. The problem here is that this representation has effectively contributed to the construction of an artificial 'reality' of the *banlieues*, a reality that is imposed on the inhabitants of these areas and dictates how they are perceived in the public sphere. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's work explores the concept of 'reality effects', that is to say, the specific cultural effect achieved by the processes governing media production in the public sphere:

The power to show is also a power to mobilize. It can give life to ideas or images, but also to groups. The news, the incidents and accidents of everyday life, can be loaded with political or ethnic significance liable to unleash strong, often negative feelings, such as racism, chauvinism, the fear-hatred of the foreigner or, xenophobia. The [. . .] very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups (Bourdieu 21).

The media thus "produce 'reality effects' by creating a 'media vision' of reality which, in turn, tends to create the reality which

the media claim to describe” (Marlière 221). This is not to suggest that the media fabricate events, however it does show that the vision presented by the media can distort the reality of a given event; the emphasis given by the media to certain aspects of an event or situation inevitably requires the omission of other aspects that might be considered equally, or indeed more, important, in another context.

Crucially, in terms of the social identities of social actors or groups, the reality effects produced by the media can result in a specific form of symbolic violence. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as ‘violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it’ (Bourdieu 17). In other words, the reality produced by journalists, by the media, under the visible and invisible structural influences acting upon and within the journalistic field, and absorbed by the public sphere which accepts it as such, unaware of those same influences, can result in the symbolic oppression of a particular social actor or group. This symbolic oppression can have negative implications for those concerned in terms of marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion if the reality effects of the media are left unchallenged. Philippe Marlière goes on to link this notion of symbolic violence explicitly to the suburbs:

The media tend to create an image of social problems for the public consumption which emphasizes the ‘extraordinary’, that is, violent actions, fights between youngsters and the police, acts of vandalism, juvenile delinquency, the overconcentration of immigrant populations, etc. Media portrayal of these suburban areas “stigmatizes” the people living there in all aspects of their everyday lives, thereby extending the bad reputation of a place to its inhabitants (Marlière 221).

Sarkozy’s representation of the *banlieues*, both magnified and compounded by the media, has become ingrained in the popular imagination; the suburbs are associated with crime, delinquency and, most importantly, fear. Moreover, the strength of this artificial representation is not easily challenged, the representation of the

banlieues in mainstream society is fixed within a circular process of reinforcement. The negative image of the suburbs nourishes the theme of insecurity reinforcing the image of the suburbs. In this context, Kokoreff argues that in 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy 'a su trouver un intérêt politique dans la propagation des violences en vue d'une relégitimation d'une politique d'ordre' (Kokoreff 132). In electoral terms, the riots of 2005 served to reinvigorate the politics of insecurity through the creation of a climate of tension permeating mainstream society. Sarkozy's security-oriented politics appeared reassuring to mainstream voters, while also appearing seductive to those voters tempted by the politics of the Front National. This strategy proved successful in 2007, when the question of insecurity was at the heart of Sarkozy's presidential campaign. Indeed, perhaps the most telling recognition of Sarkozy's success with the politics of security was the failed attempt by the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royale, to triangulate his politics and draw on the theme of insecurity for her own campaign. Now President, Sarkozy has undoubtedly reaped significant political benefits from his politics of security, but at what price?

Beyond the Looking Glass: Life in the banlieues

The 2005 riots were remarkable both for their scale and their intensity. And while the riots failed to produce a clearly articulated set of demands, there was undoubtedly a message in the violence. In contemporary society, French *banlieues* are populated, to a large extent, by French citizens of immigrant origins who regard themselves as French in terms of identity and belonging. However, French society has failed, or refused, to fully recognize and accept the progression from immigrant to citizen *of immigrant origins* and the distinction that this progression entails in terms of belonging to the national community. Physical and cultural differences marking these youths as having ancestral roots in other nations continue to form a cultural barrier in terms of how these young people are perceived by mainstream society. These developments have formed a background to the already present social and economic malaise that dominates many suburban areas, all combining to

produce a potent social mix that exploded into violence during the events of 2005 and 2007. Ultimately, what was at stake in these riots was the question of access. Inhabitants of these areas feel isolated, physically and metaphorically, from the state that is failing to address the problems of the suburbs; excluded from the Republic whose values and ideals do not appear to extend to these areas. To this end, Castel claims that ‘en plus de se trouver dans une situation sociale souvent désastreuse, les émeutiers voulaient aussi régler des comptes avec la société française accusée d’avoir failli à ses promesses [. . .] C’est ainsi qu’on peut trouver une signification politique à ces événements, même s’ils n’ont revêtu aucune des formes classiques du répertoire politique’ (Castel 53). Viewed from this perspective, the 2005 riots constituted a primitive political event charged with a symbolic meaning which, while not clearly articulated, was nonetheless emphatic. For his part, Kokoreff states that the riots ‘ont marqué une entrée en politique des jeunes non seulement animés par le désir de détruire mais par une volonté de confrontation’ (Kokoreff, “Sociologie de l’émeute” 528). The populations of the *banlieues* are marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. Socially and economically disadvantaged, the difficulties of these populations are compounded by a profound sense of injustice. Danièle Joly sums up this position in saying: ‘le désavantage de ces jeunes est découpé par l’échec scolaire, le chômage, la pauvreté, un avenir sans issue, ainsi que par le racisme et la discrimination avec leurs cortèges d’humiliations quotidiennes et les injustices qui en découlent’ (Joly 293). The situation here, perceived as beyond their control, induces a profound malaise among the inhabitants of the *banlieues*, particularly the young. This *malaise* is compounded by the quasi-impossibility of making their voices heard in the public and political spheres. In this context, violence appears to be the only means of making their voices heard, of becoming visible. Violence provides a means of focusing media attention on the suburbs which, in turn, brings the problems of the *banlieues* to the attention of public and politicians alike.

The politics of security has had an important negative impact on the *banlieues*. The important social and economic problems

facing the underprivileged populations of the suburbs are ignored, rendered inaudible by the force of Sarkozy's rhetoric of insecurity. At the same time, the stigma attached to the *banlieues* and their inhabitants in mainstream society is augmented, compounding the already-present social, economic and cultural problems facing these areas. Castel sums up the situation in saying that "la logique qui se met ainsi en place au nom de la défense de l'ordre républicain peut alors se retourner en logique de ghettoïsation, ces jeunes n'ayant plus d'autres ressources que de se refermer sur eux-mêmes dans un entre-soi communautaire et de retourner le stigmate en revendiquant la dignité de la race contre les promesses fallacieuses de la démocratie" (Castel 75). It is in this context that the events of 2005 must be understood. The riots of 2005 crossed a threshold in terms of their scale, affecting suburban areas across the nation. This spread of violence is representative of the widespread nature of the anger and frustration among the populations of the French *banlieues*. In the popular imagination, the *banlieues* and their inhabitants evoke powerful negative connotations. The image of the French suburbs is the stuff of urban legend and Sarkozy has contributed significantly to the narrative in recent years. French society sees the suburbs as the reflection of Sarkozy's security-oriented discourse. However, the narrative does not tally with reality; life in the *banlieues* is much more colourful than Sarkozy's monochromatic outlook would have the public believe. Yet paradoxically, the strength of the narrative is overwhelming the reality of the situation, the imagined is taking the place of the real. Didier Lapeyronnie sums up the situation: 'l'image rend homogène des expériences hétérogènes et diversifiées. Elle simplifie et unifie une réalité complexe et souvent contradictoire. Les habitants souffrent d'une sorte de survisibilité qui leur apparaît comme la contrepartie de leur sous-visibilité. Ils sont trop vus pour ce qu'ils ne sont pas, ce qui, pour eux, empêche de les voir pour ce qu'ils sont' (Lapeyronnie 144). An identity is being imposed on the inhabitants of the suburbs, an identity that reinforces the destructive forces that hold sway in the *banlieues*. Nicolas Sarkozy has inextricably linked his political evolution to the question of the *banlieues*. However, this link is based on a mirror

image, for as Sarkozy has progressed, armed with his politics of security, the situation in the suburbs has deteriorated. Ultimately, the price of Sarkozy's success has been to widen the gap separating the suburbs from mainstream society. In the case of the suburbs, urban legend has overtaken reality.

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