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The Old New Clothes of the French Republic: In Defense of the Supposedly 'insignificant' Rioters 1

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By Yann Moulier-Boutang

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Major events are not necessarily beautiful, nor joyous. They take you by surprise. They do not necessarily produce integration. The reason why they happen never says anything about the moment of their actual occurrence. They are overdetermined in the same way as the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back: there is a long build-up, and then, one day, submission no longer holds, and you tear down the house.

A riot is rarely a cause for enthusiasm. Its actors are usually unknown, confused, and seldom heroes. There is more than a whiff of undirected, aimless violence in a riot. Unlike wars or revolutions, the dead it leaves, or who lie in its dazed wake, will never be decorated. "Melancholia" [1], despair, "nihilism", "loss of self-confidence", are the conventional vignettes the not-too-stupid Right promptly used to label the rioters.

They handle the issue with a bargepole, as one would expect. But it is the embarrassment of the Left that is truly flabbergasting. The Left would be well advised to remember the Versailles "moral restoration" (the period after the Paris Commune-tr.) or, rather closer to us, the emergency decrees of the Algerian War that this government has now recycled - thereby proving that the act of parliament designed to defend in school textbooks the "positive effects" of colonization was in no sense a freak occurrence.

A few isolated voices are now rising up against this obscene propaganda overkill [2]. These voices salvage the dented honor of what is left of the French intelligentsia after twenty years of nauseating reaction. Do I remember the outcry against the "madmen" of Nanterre in 1968, and against the "hooligans" of Saint-Lazare ten years later — In both instances, these outbursts were the premonitory signs of an enormous upheaval (May 68, the shift of power to Mitterand in the 80's). So perhaps the cautious should be a bit more cautious! As Françoise Blum boldly wrote in an 11 November *Le Monde* op-ed piece : it is quite possible that the 'a-political' banlieue youths have done more to set things in motion than thirty years of cheap media posturing and vainglorious political statements. They might well have started to rid us of that embarrassing and insufferable Monsieur Sarkozy, something our "politically mature" Left has shown itself utterly unable to bring about, fumbling as it is in the kitchen of its botched-up presidential aspirations. Society must be defended against order.

Hence, we must defend the rioters against stupidity. Their own, for which they have been blamed ad nauseam, is surely not the biggest around at this juncture. Over these past fourteen days, our government, and a few of our prospective holders of power, have displayed an amount of arrogance, of social blindness, of crass stubbornness, and of persistence in error which is truly breathtaking : especially when viewed (from the State University of New York in Binghamton, (where text was written — tr.) in a country that knows quite a bit, and for quite some time, about urban riots — just think of Watts and Los Angeles.

Together, we constitute a human society, and not a mere anthill, if, and only if, we are able to become angry (which is always a folly) and to riot. Yes, to riot. Just look into any history book. In so far as we are able, first, to bring them about through a long and dogged process of self-deception, and thus to recognize them as our own children (and not some scapegoat figures of the "excluded", the "others"

the "aliens" to be air-deported to somewhere else). And then, in so far as we are able to respect the grief of any being which shares that same little patch of planet as ourselves, and are able to get mad at the viciously absurd sequence of mechanisms that institute the closest thing to the death penalty in Europe whilst appearing to banish it as a legal instrument of state power. In so far as we are able, also, to control our panic and fear in the wake of the chilling future that is already our present and whose cruel image is waved in front of us as if in a mirror by the rioters. And finally, in so far as we are able to react with intelligence to this new, harsh reality, to ponder what is being said, to consider what is truly at stake, and most of all, to realize that immense thing that is left unsaid and unseen, and yet is there, like the Purloined Letter.

The threshold of what it takes to be heard has become very high in our information societies. The selection of what is relevant news comes at a high price — just check out how much the people in power spend on PR. The humbled and the stricken do not command such resources. In order for modern media society to start listening to the suppressed message sent out by the rioters, it was apparently necessary that a few rubbish bins went up in flames first, followed by charred busses and trams, cars set ablaze by the thousands (that is to say many more, and especially, in many more places in France, simultaneously, than that which had become a daily routine), in addition to the vandalizing of a few schools and the trashing of a mall. But also three people had to die, which is unfathomable, and, hardly less calamitous, hundreds of youth had to be arrested, and a few dozens expelled (to return to Ceuta and Melilla and scale the barbed wires of Fortress Europe in order to come home, which is to say, to France). And to crown it all, the extremely disturbing, precedent-shaping recourse to emergency legislation and curfew orders dating from the Algerian War in 1955. (It should be noted that a state of emergency was not proclaimed during the events of May 1968 — when there were 9 million workers on strike, scores of occupied factories, and students on the barricades all over Paris.)

All this so that a message be heard. A simple message. Refusal to talk is a message in itself — any teacher will tell you so. One has to deserve to be spoken to. To be spoken to presupposes trust, love, and respect, not defiant challenge. The French interior minister's fighting talk, begun by the either moronic or fascistic pronouncement that he would "clean up the banlieues with a Karcher" (industrial high pressure cleaner — tr.) got him the response he deserved. The ministerial delegate for integration, Azouz Begag actually said so quite a few times during the crisis. And the events could have turned much worse. Taking the daily occurrence of police misbehavior into account, and of racism, of discrimination in the matters of employment [4] and housing, never mind the countless other forms of cultural discrimination, which are just as dreadful, France may as well count her blessings. Were the rioters not listening? Was their muteness a token of imbecility? This does not appear very believable when one sees that every provocation by the government (to wit, Sarkozy on October 30 talking about "scum" and promising "zero tolerance", and the measures announced by Prime Minister de Villepin on November 1st) were promptly followed by a broadening of the movement.

Now it is true that the redundant and empty noise of the official discourse about order, restoration of authority, universalism of the law, and other bedlam was mainly intended to saturate the rather limited receptive and analytical capabilities of the Fourth Estate. It substantially succeeded in achieving this, but for the few feats of street-level reporting, these were unnervingly eloquent.

Thanks to this long riot, one can no longer deny that France has remained blind to the gendered and racialized dimension of the 'social question' that has become crucial within the unfolding of globalization [5]. France is perversely color blind. Television dishes up a daily fare of integration problems in the banlieues by showing young blacks, who are often French nationals, or come from our former colonies (eg. The Ivory Coast where our troops are stationed), at the same time as news analysts (eg. A. Adler in the November 10 issue of *Le Figaro*) maintain that it is all about North Africans, about Islam and Islamism, while the state unflinchingly denies the existence of communities

within the French territory, decrying any allowance for an ethnic community attachment as a mistaken, 'anglo-saxon' (but actually protestant) concept. But it is something that one cannot discard if one wants to start afresh from what really exists and not from some elusive 'People' decreed into existence by the government.

The 'French Republic of the Great Nation' has, not without difficulty, achieved its external de-colonization (well, sort-of), but it has made hardly any progress in ridding itself of the internal colonization of its universalism. A hint of post-colonial studies added to the curriculum of its prestigious training institutes for high civil servants and that of the state schools might go some way towards a democratic oversight of its police force. Indeed, what is shocking is not the behavior of the frightened and inexperienced policeman on the street -furthermore, the banlieue youths damn well know the difference between a fair cop and a truly racist one (Sartre would have called such officers "les salauds" — the bastards). What matters are the 'little phrases' of those who hold the highest offices, which function as so many assurances of impunity automatically resulting in the increase in the number of police brutalities.

The Republic is also naked because the French assimilationist republican ideology has never been able to understand much about the transcommunitarian integration of the Multitude in the epoch of globalization. This has been argued over and again by a rather small number of social scientists — I am proud to count myself among them — and they were mostly talking in a vacuum. The ideology of republican assimilation remains mired in both the concept of "the People", an injection-molded "national identity", and in colonial servility. So yet a little more budget allocation (far less than needed in any case) towards the umpteenth "banlieue regeneration" scheme will not change one iota of the "cascade of contempt" Voltaire cruelly referred to when speaking of pre-Revolution French society.

This is precisely what our rioters have risen against. Loic Wacquant together with the majority of academic researchers have been telling us for the past twenty years that the French banlieues are not the same as the black ghettos in the USA, that what looked like ghettos in our parts were not such things, and that the Republic had saved us from having American-style minorities in our midst. Dominique Schnapper, in a book on the nation, a book that I criticized in its time, had also expounded the idea that the French universalist model stood at the opposite of the German concept of "Volk", based on a community of language and the bond of blood.

But the true antinomy lies between a racist European labor migration model that denies foreign populations the right to settle here, and that of countries relying on immigration and settlers. The European system is a much more closed one: that of a 'Fortress Europe' surrounded by barbed wire. It is a model that is inherently wrong in so far that it has, in the past fifty years, created actual minorities. These minorities are not like those made up of the children of recent immigrants to the United States, but resemble those of the descendents of victims of the slave trade. The youths in the European migrant neighborhoods are becoming our own US-style blacks. Watts and Los Angeles are our future. And the Republic, which was supposed to protect us against such an outcome, is actually going to lead us there rather faster than the British model. This is our current predicament, and nothing more.

Society must be defended, and the order of the Republic is not taking us anywhere near this goal. The issue at stake is the unfinished condition of democracy, and that issue obtains the world over: there is no such thing as the 'French exception'. In Andersen's famous tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes," there is a parade where an apprehensive monarch struts around, surrounded by an obsequious royal court, and all that is needed to make visible the obvious is the clear voice of a child. She strikes right through the mess that is order and calls its bluff: "but he's wearing no clothes at all ! The emperor shivered as it seemed to him that the people were right, but he thought to himself: "Now I need to stick it out till the end". And so the procession went on and the chamberlains continued carrying a train that

was not there".

In 2005 France the 'state carriage', complete with its flamboyant gargoyle, its monarch holder of the true knowledge and his grand vizier — who mostly keeps himself in the dark yet is very talkative on the box — seldom passes through the banlieues that it itself has created. It much more prefers to step out in the chic Champs Élysées or to engage in those well-organized campaign trips, either into a reassuringly rural France or to spruced-up, gentrified town centers. And whenever It goes for the gamut in the fawning limelight of the media "taking the pulse of the banlieues", you can be sure that the "scum" has been duly removed beforehand lest it would blight the picture. But now the "scum" has invited itself to the parade. And nobody can pretend to have heard nothing, save of course a state that is walled up in the sort of blindness that has always begotten revolutions. Sure, it was not the voice of innocence, but the far less reassuring voice of the truth about our national and 'republican' society. With total abandon, and a recklessness reminiscent of (Victor Hugo's cheeky character in *Les Misérables* — transl.) Gavroche, the "scum" has furiously shouted "the Republic is naked!" and "racism is everywhere!".

They ask "Why do we command so little respect as to be described as being "juiced" (électrocuté) ? — to quote the shameful word used by the minister of the interior. ('électrocuté' refers to the tragedy that triggered the urban riots the death of two youths who hid in an electrical transformer station to avoid a police check. The word Nicolas Sarkozy must clearly have had in mind was of course 'roadkill' — transl.). We are not living in Andersen's country, but in one that is seldom reformist, that is prone to revolution every now and then, but that is deeply reactionary most of the time. So you can bet that the "scum" is going to pay dearly for its cheekiness. 1200 people rounded up, 120 arrests and counting, countless convictions to come. What will probably be enough to piss off the magistrates is that they are being requested to uphold the law after the police, thanks to their behavior, have made its maintenance totally unmanageable on the ground. And all this with the active support of a hyped-up presidential hopeful who thinks he is going to carry the day in 2007 by appealing to frightened pensioners, sovereignist Gerard de Villiers supporters, racist Front National enthusiasts, and a scattering of Laurent Fabius and Jean-Pierre Chevenement devotees. And a supposedly insignificant, yet elusive Multitude, that is both mute and insufferable in its message, is therefore going to be made to pay. Offending immigrants will be expelled, even if they hold valid residence permits — betraying his lack of culture and contempt for the law, that is what was announced, in his characteristic offhand manner, by this very same minister of the interior. Yet it is the same minister who voiced his opposition to double penalty — and restores it all the same under emergency legislation. When behind Sarkozy-the-'Orleanist' a power-frenzied 'Bonapartist' Right appears, at the side of the equally Bonapartist 'Neo-Gaullists', the flavor-of-the-day is the 19th century 'paternalism of the bosses'. After order is restored, 'travail' (work) will obtain, followed no doubt by the 'famille' (family), with the 'patrie' (fatherland) thrown in after some time for good measure. ("Travail - Famille - Patrie' was the motto of the infamous Vichy regime in Nazi-occupied World War II France - transl.) And so the prime minister has launched the ultimate weapon against the circumstances that hatched the "scum". Yes, we are going to occupy these youths, we are going to get them jobs as apprentices at age 14 - a regression in thinking about education that beggars belief, and lags deplorably behind the Lisbon program. They will all be sent within the next six months to the ANPE (the French national employment agency - transl.) in order, one presumes, to be offered these fabulous labor contracts worth half or even a fourth of the legal minimum wage (something between 300 and 500 Euros). "The Law shall have the last word" is what the servants of the Republic, robed in the awesome albeit bogus drapery of "French-style integration" never tire to repeat, as if to convince themselves of a sales pitch they no longer believe.

By screaming that the Republic is naked, the rioters took up the defense of society. And we state, calmly but firmly, so as to let them know that they are not alone : "Society must be defended". Paris, 11 November 2005

Notes

[1] A. G. Slama, in *Le Figaro*' (Paris daily), November 7, 2005.

[2] Appeal by E. Balibar, B. Ogilvie, M. Chemillier Gendreau, and E. Terray on November 9, 2005 ; and the op-ed of Esther Benhassa in the daily *Libération* of November 9, 2005, also in an article by Pierre Marcelle, same day, same paper.

[3] "Ils sont entrés en politique" (They have entered politics) in the daily *Le Monde*, November 9, 2005

[4] See the results of a comparative study by sociologists Richard Alba (SUNY, Albany and Roxane Silberman (CNRS-Lasmas, Paris) about second-generation migrants on the both sides of the Atlantic. The performance of France is generally dismal, with youth unemployment rates among the highest in Europe.

[5] This obvious phenomenon obtains in both North and South America, and also in Australia. It is now occurring in Europe, and has been extent in France for a long time, since it is part and parcel of the colonial order. But it is also a generic feature of world systems, as both Immanuel Wallerstein and Terry Hopkins' research has shown. More generally, the work of researchers at the Fernand Braudel Center have indicated as such for years now.

[6] Cf the excellent op-ed by Esther Benhassa in '*Liberation* of November 10, 2005. But see also Michel Wieviorka's analysis of the misconceptions about the communitary phenomenon in French ideology.