

## **Intifada on the housing estates or a young underclass in revolt?**

**Olivier Roy**

The American press, and some European observers, have described the riots that sent shock waves through housing estates on the outskirts of some French cities as if they represented an uprising by Muslim immigrants. This uprising was represented as the signal that the French model of integration had failed.

But we need to take a closer look at what happened. Far from being a rebellion on the part of the Muslim community, it was first and foremost a spontaneous movement by young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, many of them, but not all, the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Generational and social factors were more important than religion, more important even than ethnicity.

This was primarily a movement of young people, and especially teenage boys. Half of those arrested were under eighteen. Adults took no part. The riots mobilised gangs of youths, varying in numbers from thirty to two hundred, depending on the location; in no case was it local residents who were out on the streets.

Next, the young people attacked cars in the neighbourhood, in other words, cars belonging to their neighbours. They destroyed the schools to which local people, often, like them, from immigrant backgrounds, send their children. In short, the main victims were local families.

Next, and most important, the riots were restricted to what have been called 'difficult neighbourhoods', that is, those in which there is a heavy concentration of immigrants and their descendants, with high rates of unemployment and failure at school. We're therefore not talking about the working-class suburbs of Paris as a whole, still less about the city of Paris itself, but about a hundred or so neighbourhoods throughout the whole of France. And these second-generation youths are for the most part French citizens; among those arrested following the riots, only six or seven per cent were foreigners. Similarly, they were from a wider range of ethnic origins than reports might suggest: there were non-Muslim Africans, and youths with French, Italian and Portuguese names. It was a rebellion of the socially excluded, not of Arabs or Muslims, even though the latter are over-represented among the excluded.

Not a single person from a Muslim background came out on the streets anywhere outside these neighbourhoods. And there are many Muslims living outside them. But they tend to be middle class. Interestingly enough, nothing happened in the universities, where there are tens of thousands of students from Muslim families, many of them highly politicised. They did nothing.

Moreover, the movement on the estates is not highly politicised. Apart from a few slogans calling for Nicolas Sarkozy's resignation, there were no political demands – the reason, by the way, why the movement was doomed to run out of steam – nor was there any co-ordination, organisation or spokesperson. No liaison committee was set up, in contrast to what happened recently in the case of spontaneous movements of French farmers and secondary school students.

Lastly, there is nothing Arab or Islamic about the uprising. Strangely enough, for example, there was no sign of Palestinian or Algerian flags, whereas in the 1980s, the Arafat-style 'keffieh' was a symbol of revolt often worn by young demonstrators. And we may also recall that at the notorious France-Algeria football match on October 6 2001, when the French national anthem was booed by French youths of Arab descent, there was no shortage of Algerian flags. In the 2005 riots there was no reference to conflicts in the Middle East or to Arab nationalism. There were no slogans and no attacks on 'the Jews', whereas the press regularly denounces anything that might look like anti-Semitism among the youth of the estates. Equally, there were no religious slogans. The demonstrators' style of dress was in no way Islamic; they wore the kind of 'street' clothes that are the uniform of a Western urban sub-culture: that of young African-Americans, with their trademark grey 'hoodies'. They listen to rap and hip-hop, eat in fast-food outlets, dream of consumer goods, want smart cars and occasionally do drugs. They're unquestionably 'Western' (or 'global').

Their demands, when they express them, have nothing to do with the right to wear the hijab at school, or with the mosques, or halal meat. On the other hand, they all protest about racism and discrimination based on physical appearance (your 'features'). They feel very keenly real or imagined racism on the part of the police, but also complain of discrimination when trying to get into clubs, which has nothing to do with Islam.

They are youths who very often come from Muslim homes, but they do not wish to be identified as Muslims. They do not proclaim an ethnic identity, or a religious one, but identify with their local neighbourhood. They talk about 'the youth of the 4,000' (from the name of an estate in Courneuve) or of the Val-Fourré (in Mantes-la-Jolie). They form local gangs who are hostile not only to the police, but especially to other gangs from nearby neighbourhoods. These gangs appear to have been the chief participants in the riots, although data obtained from the courts show that many of those arrested did not actually have criminal records. They are people who are frequently involved in petty crime and forms of trafficking, usually in drugs. Drug-dealers are the real local 'big shots'. Many of these young people have dropped out of school and are unemployed, living on a combination of benefits and the proceeds of petty trafficking. They see themselves as excluded from society, and are very loyal to their own neighbourhood; the gangs defend their territory against intruders – police, journalists, or rival gangs – but also against the fire-brigade. There is no ethnic or religious solidarity at the national level, only in the neighbourhood.

The rioters' primary characteristic is that they belong to an underclass, in other words, they are people who are no longer part of the system of production. Their parents were manual workers; they were poor, but they had a social and economic role. These young people no longer have a way of entering society via work, and they see their worker-fathers as 'losers', because they worked themselves to death for starvation wages; today, some of their children support them with the money their dealing activities bring in.

When we look at the phenomenon of urban riots in the West, from Los Angeles to Bradford or Seine-Saint-Denis, we see that they have certain features in common: exclusion, indicated by both economic status and an ethnic factor that is indeed linked with skin-colour, whether we're talking about Blacks, Latinos or Arabs. It is the

combination of these two factors that makes for real exclusion, because middle-class people of Arab descent do not suffer from these problems in Europe. Social and ethnic factors cannot be dissociated.

*The model is the United States of young African-Americans, not Cairo or Mecca*

The press also brought up the role of the Islamists. Islamic organisations were not involved in the riots. In the first place, radicals of the Al-Qaida variety are not interested in jihad on the housing estates. Why waste time setting cars on fire in a neighbourhood in which nobody is interested, when you can go and make jihad in Falluja, or plant bombs in the metro in the middle of Paris? On the other hand, the radicals may hope to make recruits among young people disappointed by the movement's lack of political perspective, or radicalised by the way it was put down: we know that prisons are a place where many youths from an immigrant background are radicalised, in a religious or political sense. Moderate organisations, like the UOIF (Union des Organisations Islamiques de France), have strongly condemned the use of violence, and present themselves as mediators and peace-makers. These bodies are trying to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities and of French public opinion by presenting themselves as mediators who are reasonable, and champion the concept of 'Muslims and citizens'. However, other Muslim voices (such as Tariq Ramadan) object to this intervention by the religious authorities in the current crisis, because they reject the idea of any link between Islam and the housing estates. But the organisations aside, many moderate Muslims, who do not necessarily live in these neighbourhoods, were shocked by the fact that the government offered no apology when a teargas canister hit a mosque. The crisis confirmed the fact that Islam is not treated like other religions in France. And that is surely where the key to the problem lies: while the problems of the 'difficult' neighbourhoods are first and foremost social ones, Muslims and people living on the estates have been conflated into a single entity.

The debate in France around Islam is very heated, and we know that it led to the law passed in 2004 that banned the wearing of the hijab in schools. All the politicians' speeches and newspaper articles have 'Islamised' the problems of the estates, in other words, have made Islam the prism through which every incident is viewed. The movement 'Ni pute ni Soumise' ['Neither a whore nor submissive'] denounces the youths' 'macho' behaviour, but gives the impression that if gangs of boys threaten girls who go out alone, with their heads uncovered, it's because of Islam. But this is to forget that ghettos are all similar, regardless of the religion of those who live in them: in the United States, in African-American and Latino ghettos, we find exactly the same phenomenon of gangs who control the street, live from dealing, and are extremely 'macho'. Male chauvinism is a value wherever violence predominates, and that has nothing to do with religion.

In reality, these neighbourhoods are not an expression of a Muslim culture seeking recognition. Arabic has disappeared in favour of French, the traditional family has fallen apart and the authority of the father has collapsed. Nowadays one sees many single-parent families with a North African background. It is frequently the young generation who bring in money, often earned from forms of 'dealing' that are more or less legal. Physical strength and money, not age or wisdom, are what count. In these neighbourhoods there are no community leaders. The imams have scarcely any authority beyond their small mosques. Multiculturalism is therefore not an issue, simply because these neighbourhoods do not express an Arab-Muslim culture, but a

Western urban sub-culture, called 'youth culture' or 'street culture'. The model is the United States of young African-Americans, not Cairo or Mecca. It is interesting to note that when Hollywood films are dubbed into French, African-Americans are given the accent of the youths from these suburbs.

What's more, the young rebels are not demanding to be recognised as a minority with rights and its own specific characteristics. They believed in the French model of integration through citizenship. They wanted to be truly French, but feel they have been deceived, because today they are French only on paper. In reality, they are protesting against the failure of integration on the French model, but there are no others available. That's why they burn down the institutions that have failed to help them improve their situation: schools and social centres. Their rage is turned on themselves, and that is certainly not an intifada.

The estates are one thing, the question of Islam in France is another. But positive models of integration belong to the middle classes. And whatever their problems, there is definitely a middle class of Muslims who are French citizens and part of the economic and social fabric. In many cases they have left the neighbourhoods where they were born; they buy their own houses, open businesses in city centres, create IT companies, or work as hospital doctors. They are largely ignored, not only by the media, but above all by politicians; French political parties have not found a way of addressing them. And yet it is this middle class that is pushing things forward.

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