

Islamization of the French Riots

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On Thursday, 27 October 2005, a group of teenagers were playing football in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. When police officers arrived to check their ID's, they tried to run and hide. Three of them, thinking that they were being chased by the police, climbed over a wall to hide in a power substation. Bouna Traore, 15 year old and of Malian background, and Zyed Benna, 17 year old and of Tunisian origin were both electrocuted by a transformer in the electric substation. The third boy, Muhittin Altun, 17 (from Turkish Kurdish origin) was severely injured and brought to hospital. This event triggered the riots of October and November 2005 that were initially confined to the Paris area. The unrest subsequently spread to other areas and cities in France. Thousands of vehicles were burned, and, at least, one person was killed by the rioters. Close to 2900 rioters were arrested. In this interview French sociologist Laurent Chambon talks about his personal and professional engagement with these riots and the current social and political circumstances in the French banlieues and French society in general. Laurent Chambon was born in 1972 in Châtenay-Malabry in France. Living in his younger days in the ethnically mixed neighbourhood, he recalls his youth as a happy period. Regardless of their ethnic or religious background, he and his friends considered themselves as French.

Martijn: Being a French citizen regardless of your ethnic and religious background is an important prerequisite of the French model of integration. Do you still believe in that model?

Laurent: This might sound a little bit nationalistic or chauvinistic but I believe that the French Republican model is a generous and very effective model for emancipation of French civilians. What I worry about is that people like Alain Finkielkraut and the French Minister of Interior, Sarkozy, are constantly promoting this model, while at the same time not living up to the promises of this model such as equality and dignity with regard to how they treat the people in the French suburbs. In this way they are destroying the model for their own benefit and at the cost of the people in the French banlieues; people I grew up with, I know their older brothers and sisters. So, you could say I'm involved.

Martijn: Can you explain how Sarkozy and Finkielkraut did that and why did they do it? I have a hard time in believing that they would deliberately want to cause trouble for these people?

Laurent: One of the most important things is that they islamized the riots. During the riots, the French Minister of Interior and probable presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, stated to the press that the rioters were either a band of criminals violating Republican order or under the influence of radical Muslims. Everyone thought of Al Qaida, of course. Judges were asked to put these criminals in jail, and send the ungrateful foreigners back home. Unfortunately for the Minister, the French Intelligence Services issued a few weeks later a report stating that, firstly, most of the youngsters who had a police file were known to belong to problematic families or had been victims of violence themselves. Only a very small minority had been involved in criminal activities, and those mostly very mild ones, something not extremely abnormal in these areas. In other words, one cannot speak of a "criminal operation." Secondly, that it was absolutely not planned in any way. The media, through their coverage, did encourage youngsters to emulate their companions of misfortune, but one cannot speak of a structured movement. Thirdly, to the big despera-

In October and November 2005, France witnessed a series of riots and violent clashes between youths and its police. Laurent Chambon, a French sociologist, born in one of the Paris banlieues and now living in the Netherlands, emerged, at that time, as an engaged social scientist worried by the islamization of the riots-discourse and by the way the French state handles the problems of the areas he knows so well from his childhood. Instead of riots of "youth gangs inspired by radical Muslims," he argues in this interview that these riots should be seen as part of a movement against the "precariousness" of everyday life in the French banlieues.

tion of the Extreme-Right and the Muslim fundamentalists, that Islam did not play any role in these riots. Sarkozy islamized the riots also by first asking the imams to stop the riots and later asking for a fatwa that would condemn these riots. Unfortunately for him, the youngsters in question have shown little interest in traditional Islam, and even less for first generation preachers. Finally, the bands were made of French young men. Roughly, over one third was of North-African origin, slightly less than a third of African origin, and about one third of "natives." If racism and religious discrimination were definitely part of

the problem, the fact that these bands of young men were almost systematically ethnically mixed proves the theories of racial riots or Islamic conspiracy wrong. These three categories of rioters cannot be seen as distinct groups. In fact they see themselves as one group: French people from the banlieues. Although Islam played a very small role at the origins of the riots, Islam became a very debated issue, especially under the influence of culturalists or neo-reactionaries like the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut.

Martijn: What is this Islamized discourse on the riots all about?

Laurent: The main argument of influential politicians and public intellectuals, is that what happened is a living proof of the growing cultural gap between a civilized West and a barbarian East, the rioters being its latest avatar. With a legitimacy deeply rooted in the analysis of anti-Semitism, Alain Finkielkraut became the herald of the culturalists, called "nouveaux réactionnaires" by the French press, as he maintained, in an interview given to journalists of the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, that the riots were "anti-white, anti-republican pogroms" and constituted "a revolt with an ethno-religious character... directed against France as a former colonial power, against France as a European country. Against France, with its Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition."¹ While fiercely criticized in France, he had to apologize, his analysis became very popular mainly in the United States, Russia and the Netherlands, and not by coincidence: these three countries are very busy, in their own way, with neo-colonial, imperialist, islamophobic issues and Finkielkraut's theory did resonate well with their internal political obsessions. The goal of this intellectual strategy is to transform the traditional "Freedom versus Solidarity" issue, where political parties put their own cursor from right to left, into a "Civilized versus Barbarians" one, where nobody can really choose for Barbarians. Sarkozy supported Finkielkraut by stating that if there is so much criticism of him, it might be just because he says things that are correct.² I am convinced that the call from Minister Sarkozy to the imams to stop the riots, with a fatwa if necessary, is part of a broader strategy of islamization of social problems and criminalization of poverty.³ While, almost from day one, many reliable sources indicated that the riots were mostly socially motivated, Mr. Sarkozy chose to introduce the Muslim factor to reinforce his own conservative agenda on security, integration and immigration.

Martijn: Many analysts also point to the grave social circumstances in the banlieues as the cause for these riots. Feelings of humiliation, no prospects for having a job, bad housing, and the overt racist behaviour of the police, contributed or even caused these riots. You lived in these banlieues. Can you tell us something more about that?

Laurent: As stated in different reports, especially from Amnesty International⁴, the French police are characterized by strong shortcomings:

structural racism and xenophobia, culture of impunity, and abusive procedures against victims of misconducts. The culture of the French State, focused on exportation of the "French culture" for the good of humanity, has produced a very strong colonial culture, not necessarily racist, but strongly ethno-centrist, where the Other is seen as a "Barbarian" who needs to be tamed. The relation colonizer/colonized can well define the one between the youngsters from the banlieues and the police. Besides, especially under a right-wing government, the French police enjoy a large impunity when it comes to power abuse and misconduct. Even in the case of deadly misconducts, the chance of seeing a policeman in jail is close to zero. Finally, the French police is in a very poor state: high figures of alcoholism, divorce and suicide, a very poor diversity policy, women and migrants are not welcomed at all, very low salaries and a toleration for misuses of the law to make some extra earnings are endemic problems. The abusive use of the "insult to agent" procedure, meant to protect the police from harassment, its costs being covered by the prefecture and generating well-paying compensations, is an easy way to complete a small pay-check. It is also a way for the police to cover its misconducts: the judge will generally listen first to the policemen if such a procedure has been engaged, guaranteeing amnesty for them, even if they have gone far over the red line. What is also important, is the structural discrimination and racism of French society, but there is something more important going on. Although I might seem a little bit too Marxist in my analysis, what is happening nowadays in France is that when you are born in the wrong class your chances of having a prosperous future are very limited. You can have all the degrees you want, you can be an excellent student at an excellent institute, but when you are from the banlieues, you have a problem. France often proudly presents itself as a meritocracy: if you have the right qualifications, you can find a good and steady job and secure your future. But in fact, nowadays, France looks more like an aristocracy: with the French upper class securing its own positions. For example, I was doing well at university but when people found out that I was from the banlieues, they stopped talking to me. People from the French upper class, the aristocracy, the establishment, have no problems in finding well-paid, secure jobs. Others, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is, have far fewer chances. The question therefore is not if these riots are ethnic or Islamic, but "how" and "why" these riots became islamized. By islamizing these riots, politicians and public intellectuals are actually diverting their attention from this issue to another one that is far more popular. They are avoiding that their own position comes under close scrutiny and reforms of the system are implemented. As said, this problem affects everyone from the banlieues. When you are a white, middle class man like me, and probably more when you are an Arab or black, lower class Muslim. Another problem that relates to this aspect of aristocracy is the crisis of political representation, something which I have researched.⁵

People from the banlieues are hardly represented in the French political system because the way people are elected. Any desire for reform to include more women or ethnic minorities, is refused by the political elite. Look, for example, at the people in the Assemblée Nationale, only 10% are women.

Martijn: You characterize these riots as a clash between the lower class from the banlieues and the French establishment. Is there any proof that this has a broader impact that extends beyond the banlieues only?

Laurent: There is, when you look at the unrest in France of March 2006. Students are protesting against the new work laws. These are seen by students and many on the left as an attack on job security at a time when many in France are feeling deeply threatened by globalisation and any hint of change at home. What these students fight against is actually for a large part the same as for the people in the banlieues in 2005. The crisis of meritocracy is not only affecting the youths of the banlieues but also middle class youth who, with all their university qualifications, can only find insecure temporary jobs if any. Both the students now and the banlieusards back then, can be seen as part of a precarious movement.

Martijn: "Precarious" means unsure, uncertain, difficult, and delicate. Since the early 80s the term has been used more and more in relation to work. Precarious work refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible forms of labor such as illegal, seasonal, and temporary employment, subcontractors, freelancers, or so-called self employed persons. Is it only about work and is this a new kind of workers' movement?

Laurent: It is more than that. Precariousness refers to living and working conditions without any guarantees, to the uncertainty of all material and immaterial conditions of life. For example, it is difficult for these students who are revolting now, to find a good and steady job as it is. The new work laws will make it increasingly difficult because after a short period they can be fired without any conditions attached to it. For the people from the banlieues it is even more difficult. Not because they are not that qualified but because they are from the banlieues and lack the necessary networks for social mobility. For Arab and black people of the banlieues, racism and discrimination comes on top of that and the islamization of the riots makes that worse than it already is. The precariousness therefore relates to these so-called flexible jobs, but also to identity issues, geographical locations, and an uncertain future. And especially in France it also has to do with, and again this is what makes me so angry: the French state not living up to its own standards of "republican equality."

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Participants at a silent march, Clichy-sous-Bois, Paris, 29 October 2005

Notes

1. Ha'aretz, 18 November 2005.
2. See for example Ha'aretz, 6 December 2005.
3. See Loïc Wacquant, *Punir les pauvres, Le nouveau gouvernement de l'insécurité sociale* (Paris: Agone, 2004); and see also http://lmsi.net/article.php3?id_article=481.
4. See the report online: <http://web.amnesty.org/report2005/fra-summary-fra>.
5. See Laurent Chambon, *Le sel de la démocratie. L'accès des minorités au pouvoir politique en France et aux Pays-Bas* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2002), see also <http://users.skynet.be/suffrage-universel/fr/frmiel.htm>.