An Overview of French Riots, 1981-2004

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In contemporary France, 'riots'[i] refer to urban disorders mainly, if not exclusively, located in urban areas called *banlieues**. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of such events in the two decades or more leading up to the most recent French riots of 2005-7. It will soon become evident that there is no recent French academic tradition devoted to theoretically explaining these preceding riots to rank alongside the British literature alluded to in the previous chapter. Here, our contribution will trace the historical evolution of the riots and their consequences in two areas: the policies that were implemented as a response to those urban disorders, and the influence of the riots on the political representations in France.

Riots in Contemporary France

Riots involving sections of France's immigrant population and/or the inhabitants of deprived urban areas were not, strictly speaking, a new phenomenon at the beginning of the 1980s, specifically in Paris and its immediate outskirts where many low-scale insurgencies of Algerian workers and activists against the police had occurred during the Algerian War of Independence 1954-62 (Blanchard 2007). But the events that took place in several of Lyon's *cités** in 1981 did not involve Algerian activists; rather, they were engaged in by French citizens of Arabic descent. Moreover, they did not occur amidst stereotypically wretched shantytowns, but in recently erected housing estates. As we shall see, the disorders of 1981 were much smaller in scale than those of the following decade.

However, their impact was sufficiently profound to ignite decades of concern and fear about what the French habitually refer to as the *problème des banlieues* or the *violence urbaine*.

(a) L'Eté Chaud*, Minguettes Estates, 1981.*

The 'Minguettes Hot Summer' of 1981 is the term used to designate a series of urban disorders occurring during the extended French summer school vacation in the 'Minguettes' housing estates, located in the *banlieue*-town of Vénissieux in the Eastern outskirts of Lyon. The disorders consisted of joyriding activities by local adolescents, who were apt to steal expensive, high-performance cars in the centre of Lyon, bring them up to the Minguettes *cité* and engage in chases (either between themselves or with police traffic patrols), before setting the vehicles on fire. From this point on, vandalism, nihilism and life-risking activities were the undisputed hallmarks of the *banlieues*-crisis in France. By the end of the '*été chaud*' ('hot summer'), around 250 cars had been destroyed. These events were comparable in nature to the wave of 'ram-raiding' thefts and 'hotting' cars events that took place on white, English working-class estates at the beginning of the 1990s. The main difference between them resided in the fact that the Minguettes were housing estates built-up in the mid 1960s in order to locate the huge strain of immigrant workers recruited from former French colonies in northern-Saharan Africa. The Minguettes are an urban area made up of almost 40 towers encompassing 10,000 apartments, or 35,000 inhabitants, with 55% of the re-located population from 1975 to 1982 being foreigners or of foreign descent (Jazouli 1993: 20). In the wake of the Lyon area riots, there were numerous attempts by factions of immigrant youth to mobilize in

pursuit of beneficial changes in policy on the part of the Mitterrand government that came to power in 1981. But these movements (most notably the 'Marche des Beurs' – see Hamidi, this volume) experienced blatant failure, due to the political inexperience of the young *banlieues* leaders, who found themselves detached from older and more experienced first-generation movements, and marginalized by the hegemonic *Parti Socialiste*, whose short-sighted tactics stymied the development of an institutionalized immigrant elite on the Left of French politics (Garbaye, 2005). As Garbaye puts it, 'The failure of the Beurs movement alone is responsible for the lingering crisis of confidence among many second-generation Maghrebis in French institutions, and, to a large extent, for 20 years of political exclusion' (2005: 216). This period of missed political opportunities was brought to a close by a particularly intense riot in 1990 in another *cité,* Mas du Taureau, on the outskirts of Lyon, which opened the floodgates on several years of urban disorder.

(b) The 'Riots Decade' of the 1990s

The disorders that hit the Mas du Taureau estates involved three nights of confrontations between the police and local youths, in which looting and the torching of cars were equally prevalent activities. These events were of significance to both past and the future developments. Concerning the former, the riots took place in a freshly renewed urban area, governed by a Communist mayor actively involved in many actions undertaken under the auspices of what was known as the *politique de la ville** policy (to be explained in more detail below). Thus, this particular riot (which consisted of torching cars, confronting the police for a two-day period and looting the local department store) was

deciphered as a blatant failure of the policies targeted towards the *banlieue* during the first Mitterrand presidency.

With regard to the *future*, the riot sequence observed at *Mas du Taureau* was soon established as a prototype for subsequent disorders of the 1990s, especially those occurring in the first half of the decade at the rate of 10 to 15 conflicts, both large and small, each year (Lagrange 2006a: 44). Mantes-la-Jolie, 1991, Sartrouville 1992, Melun 1993, Paris 1993, Dammarie-lès-Lys 1997, Toulouse 1998, Lille 2001, Clichy-sous-Bois 2004, Villiers-le-Bel 2007 are among the locations where deadly encounters with the police[ii] led to (in)famous unrests.

From the Mas du Taureau events onwards, the labels '*violence urbaine*' or '*crise des banlieues*' became synonymous with social concern and fears of crime stoked up by intense press coverage (Body-Gendrot 2000: 93-86, Bonelli 2007; Tissot 2008). By looking more closely into the details of these events, as Hugues Lagrange recently did (2006a: 44-45), one can distinguish two kinds of riot-like events. In a first period (1992 to 1996), unrests consisted for the main part in confrontations between the youths and the police (32%) or between the youths and civil servants like bus drivers or fire officers (40% of the cases)[iii]. Fights between youth groups or gangs represented only a fifth of all these incidents reported in the national press (28%). But in a second period, from 1997 to 2004 (no major incident having occurred in 1995 and 1996), such inter-group confrontations rose to more than one half of these events. This shift in forms of collective violence in the *banlieues* is explained by Lagrange as a sign of worsening employment and living conditions, which produced such consequences as the radicalization of inter-neighbourhoods confrontations, a rise of neighbourhood-related identities and pride

and/or inter-racial fights, and a rise of routine violent or sexual crimes committed by the *banlieue* youths.

One of the most remarkable features of the 2005 French riots is that excluded from the litany of disorderly locations were many of the sites of the first unrests in the 1980s and 1990s, specifically in Lyon's *banlieues*. These seem to remain untouched by the latest waves of disorders. What is indisputible, however, is that France's turbulent *banlieues* are now back to the same social and violence-prone state as at the beginning of the 1990s. Does this mean that nothing has changed since the first uprisings in 1981? In order to answer such a question, we now need to shift our attention onto the policies implemented in different attempts to deal with the *crise des banlieues* in France.

Politics and Policies in the French *Banlieues*. The Growth of Authoritarian Powerlessness

It would be disingenuous to pretend that that nothing has been done to cope with the riots and their underlying causes. Such a clichéd proposition (while quite prominent in the current English-speaking literature**)** overlooks the fact that the Minguettes uprisings of 1981 led to the instigation of real reformative measures on the part of the French state. The problem was that, not only were such measures incompletely implemented, but the urban and social trends they were designed to tackle head on were too profoundly irresistible to be successfully reigned in. This state of affairs led to a kind of conservative backlash from the mid-1990s onwards, aimed at bringing the central State back in - not only in relation to the police and criminal justice system, but also in respect of other urban policies.

(a) The Minguettes Disorders and the Birth of the Politique de la Ville

The Minguettes outbreak, in conjunction with the election of President François Mitterrand in May 1981 and his strong 'decentralization' policy (involving the allocation of more power to local authorities), opened a large policy window concerning the so-called 'urban issue' (Body-Gendrot 2000: 71-79; Le Galès 2008: 163-169; Le Galès and Mawson 1995).

The first policy measure undertaken after the *Minguettes* events was the bluntly-named *operation anti-été chauds* ('anti hot summers operation'), which was aimed at cooling down the potential for social disorder by using such devices as out-of-town vacations or on-the-spot 'recreation' or 'entertainment' schemes (*anti-été chauds* programs - see Juhem 1999: 65) whose primary goal was to engage up to 100,000 youths in activities that might deter them from otherwise rioting.[iv] The very low cost and apparent effectiveness of these programs ('evidenced' by the fact that there was no duplication of a large-scale collective disorder during any further summer of the 1980s) made them one of the pillars of public policies in France during the 1980s and after.

Besides these reactive programs, a much more ambitious policy framework, known as *politique de la ville*, was also implemented. *Politique de la ville* is based on numerous programs aimed at the re-vitalisation of deprived urban areas and at substantial investment in the poor *banlieues*. It must be seen as a 'national umbrella policy' (see Epstein, this volume), which represented a break with the usual French centralized and top-down policy-making approach. It is a policy frame that encompassed measures passed at the beginning of the 1980s in different policy sectors, namely:

- **education** with the creation of *Zones d'Education Prioritaire* (ZEP* - 'education priority areas') in some *banlieues*, encompassing more than 10% of all pupils in today's France (Benabou, Kramarz and Prost, 2005);
- **housing, urban planning and development** with the creation of a *Développement Social des Quartiers* program (DSQ - 'Neighbourhood Social Development'), implemented in more than 400 localities in 1988, which consists of special resource allocation programs from the central state with regard to 'bottom-up' projects; and
- **employment policy** with the creation of new job centres in numerous urban areas.

From a public policy perspective, the consequences of urban disorders, as exemplified by the *Minguettes* episode, are of two kinds, the first one breaking with French policy traditions, the second one a continuation of them.

First, the *politique de la ville* broke with the lasting centralization of French policy-making (Damamme and Jobert 1995; Linhart 1992). For the first time ever in French administrative history, the central state gave more power to local authorities. This policy shift was facilitated by the fact that the new Mitterrand government could rely on a very active network of Leftist mayors*. Many of them were defeated in the municipal elections of 1983, but the conservative municipal teams that succeeded them continued to fit their local agenda under the policy umbrella set up by the *politique de la ville*.

Second, the *Politique de la ville* appears to be a set of policies based on territorial units (i.e. towns or neighbourhoods), thus avoiding policies based on populations defined by racial or migration-related characteristics (Weil 2001). Policies do not target specific

racial groups, but territorial units (in which such groups are overrepresented), not only to conform to the republican-egalitarian French tradition, but also to avoid any resentment possibly linked to any kind of affirmative action. In this one can see a strong continuity from the Left at the beginning of the 1980s to the conservative governments in the 1990s. Accordingly, as Damamme and Jobert point out, the word *ville* rapidly became

> 'the place for political and policy-related overinvestment…, a way to point to the weight of the world and, in the same time, to put a veil on it. DSQ, DSU[v], Ville, these are new words and new and easy ways to address the *banlieues* and deprivation (and immigration, school drop, joblessness… issue without even mentioning them, or to mention it without daring to name it' (1995: 10).

It is indisputable that initiatives undertaken as part of the *politique de la ville* framework have generally failed in their objectives, especially since no policy was able to reverse the slow but inevitable effects of de-industrialization or bridge the growing gap between the fresh needs of a more demanding labour market and the unsuitability of the growing number of unskilled *banlieue* working-class young males. But is the efficiency issue of any relevance here? Very ironically, the riot that symbolically opened the 1990s riot decade in France occurred in a neighbourhood which could not have been more advantaged by all kinds of *politique de la ville* related operations (see above). This led to (sincere or opportunistic) calls for an abrogation of these policies, which, since they corresponded to social and political changes in French society, resonated profoundly among politicians and policy makers.

(b) Politics in the 1980s: Radicalization of the Banlieue *Issue*

Since the end of the 1970s, French society seems to have become more and more polarized by the '*banlieue* issue'. The growing economic deprivation after 1974 and the rapid de-industrialization hit primarily the unskilled workers gathered in the *cités** and, more so, the immigrant families in their midst (Bonelli 2007; Zauberman and Lévy 2003). *Banlieue* areas came to host a generation of sons of unskilled and increasingly unemployed immigrant blue-collar families who were not able to overcome their disadvantaged legacy through education. At the same time, the needs for the organization of the rising heroin market, the dramatic under-deployment of police forces in the *banlieue* towns[vi], and the massive proliferation of available goods due to the growth of the consumer's society encouraged a growing part of the *banlieue* youths to become involved in crime and delinquency. As a matter of fact, crime rose dramatically from the 1970s onwards, particularly acquisitive criminality (Robert 1991).

This situation led the conservative Président, Giscard d'Estaing, to pass a 'Security and Liberty' law in February 1981, a few months prior to the election of Mitterrand. This law had been preceded by a three-year long conference on crime and security issues, which placed 'law and order' the top of the public agenda. Consequently, the 1980s were characterized by a long-term alignment shift in French political culture (Robert and Pottier 2006). In response to the rise of crime against property, beside which we can point to a rise of violent crime at the outset of the 1980s (Robert 2008), press coverage, political parties and opinion makers focused ever increasingly on law and order issues.

Within this political climate, the electoral success story of the extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen is quite typical: it started in one of the three most deprived precincts of

Inner Paris in 1983, and ended with Nicolas Sarkozy's election as President in 2007 (Evans and Mayer 2005; Mayer and Tiberj 2002)[vii]. Le Pen's successes embody the rise of a conservative and fear-driven political culture in France, which focused on the *banlieues* and started to generate clear policy responses at the beginning of the 1990s. The blatant failure of conservative Jacques Chirac against François Mitterrand in 1988 (an election marked by a 14% score for Le Pen) served only to stall the repressive policies that would be implemented later on. Finally, one could state with Romain Garbaye that, from 1983 onwards, 'the strength of the FN effectively brought the issue of immigration to the forefront of the electoral debate and kept it there …. Because (the other) parties on the whole clung to the consensual policy, they effectively cleared the way for the FN' (2005: 81), the consensual policy being characterized by the 'republican integration model (used) as an apparatus for legitimating the defensive status quo' concerning the implications of immigration for French political life.

(c) Policies in the 1990s and 2000s. Political Authoritarianism and Policy Path Dependence

With their return to power in 1993, the Conservatives, led by Chirac, implemented a resolute law-and-order policy, which mainly consisted of getting tougher on juvenile delinquency and violent crime (Mucchielli 2004). This led to a permanent deterioration in the quality of encounters between young males from the *cités* and the police, the police being used as metonymical symbol for a hostile society in the eyes of the youths, who felt more and more justified to consider the police as being their sole enemy (see Bonelli 2007; Mouhanna, this volume). In this regard, the various provisions introduced by Home

Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2002 and after, only perpetuated the 1990s' legacy, to which he added a permanent state of verbal warfare against the *racaille* ('riff-raff'), designed to lure Front National voters back into the electoral mainstream. Contrary to what can be read in the literature on law and order policies in France, there has been neither a real shift nor a real radicalization of those policies under Sarkozy's tenure as Home Minister or President (Monjardet 2008). This holds true despite the symbolic ending, pronounced in 2003 by Sarkozy, of any form of neighbourhood policing, which increased the militarization process that we have already evoked, the latter being reinforced again on the occasion and in the aftermath of the 2005 riots, and the deep hate that Sarkozy inspired among the youths in the *cités*. All these development can be seen as *a continuation of the general tightening of law and order* against any form of disorder in the *banlieues*.

Does this mean that the *politique de la ville* policies have been replaced in France by a 'penalisation of poverty' process, as deplored by some sociologists? Before answering this question, it must be noted that one of the effects of the riots and, more generally, of the concern about the deterioration of police-youths relationships in the 1990s, has been a change introduced in police powers comparable to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) in the United Kingdom. Two days after its defeat in the parliamentary election of 1986, Mitterrand's government enacted an order creating a *Police Nationale** Code of Ethics; and a few months before a further parliamentary election defeat, Mitterrand passed a law in 1993 that offered a person detained in a police cell the opportunity to be visited by a lawyer and a doctor. This was directly linked to the Spring 1991 riots occurring in Mantes-la-Jolie, following the death of a young male diabetic

while in police custody. Finally, in 2000, Lionel Jospin* passed a law which saw the inception of a civilian complaint authority (Body-Gendrot 2010) This development was a consequence of criticisms of the police appearing in reports adopted by the European Council's Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and of allegations of police 'torture' brought before the European Court for Human Rights (Jobard 2003).

The deterioration of relations between the police and urban male youth in the context of a harsher 'law and order' climate was accompanied by a growing legal and media scrutiny of possible police abuses of force. It should be pointed out, however, that such concern has never reached the height of the public controversy surrounding the corresponding treatment by British police of ethnic minority populations.[viii]

In addition to these ambivalent developments, policies launched in the 1980s continued to be implemented, following two major policy shifts. The first one is the attempt to substitute the direct transfer of resources by the central State with a policy of fiscal support for enterprises and administrations to settle in specific *banlieue* territories. This has involved the creation, in 1996, of 751 *Zones urbaines sensibles* (ZUS* - Sensitive Urban Areas) in different *banlieue* towns, in which 80 *Zones franches urbaines* (ZFU* - Entreprise Zones) were also established on the basis of tax exemptions for local enterprises(see chapters by Lagrange and Epstein, this volume). This zoning of the *banlieues* is not a simple shift towards free market policies because ZUS territories also benefit from different tax re-allocation resources thanks to an 'urban solidarity' law passed by the *Parti Socialiste** in 2000 (under Lionel Jospin's government).

The second and most important shift may be characterised as an authoritarian-style return of the central State in the policy game. *Politique de la Ville* policies were a set of

countless local agreements between the *préfets** and the local authorities, which encompassed aspects of social policy, urban renewal and urban development. From 1997 onwards, these policies could take a new breath with the help of a national policy geared towards economic growth and state-sustained jobs ('*emplois jeunes*'), implemented by Jospin's government, which was able to supply these programs with a tax free workforce mainly constituted of *banlieue* youths. The conservative government that succeeded Jospin after his defeat in 2002 abruptly ended these employment programs**, a**nd reorganized the allocation of the state subsidies to voluntary associations in the *banlieues*[ix]. Moreover, the government passed the 2003 law 'for the town and urban renewal' that lead to the creation of the National Agency for Urban renewal (ANRU*), which allowed the central state to centralize all *politique de la ville*-related financial resources in order to focus them all on one sole objective: urban renewal - in concrete terms, the destruction of 250,000 dwellings and the construction of 400,000 new ones (see Epstein, this volume).

In the final analysis, a kind of authoritarian powerlessness can be observed today, incorporating an insistence on militarized forms of policing (at the expense of neighbourhood policing and other forms of citizen-oriented policing), a re-centralization of decisions and resources in the hands of the central state, and a policy path dependence that maintains the *politique de la ville* as a political slogan, even though it has been reduced from 2002 onwards to a mere urban destruction/reconstruction program.

Conclusion

By the eve of the 2005 nationwide upsurges '*banlieue*' had long been synonymous with urban disorders, fear of crime, racial issues and deindustrialization. The summer 1981 disorders on the 'Les Minguettes' estates, and the sudden media interest generated towards hate crime and allegations of police abuse, initially led to a national political organization formed by second-generation immigrants, mostly of North-African descent, and to remarkable shifts in central State policy. However, the onset of economic crisis, growing delinquency and fear of crime, combined with changing electoral trends occurring at the start of the 1990s, produced a two-step transformation in the way that 'urban crisis' was handled by public authorities, the main thrust of which has been consistently applied, bar for a partial suspension during the period spent in office by Lionel Jospin's government of 1997 to 2002.

First, there was the development of a law-and-order approach introduced by new legal provisions from 1993 onwards to deterring juvenile crime. This reinforced the rise in urban disorders observed from 1990 onwards - producing, in turn, the proliferation of paramilitary police units in the *cités* and a radicalization of the nature of confrontations between the youths and the law enforcement forces. The beginning of the 2000s was then marked by the transformation of public policies towards an emphasis on urban renewal. This gave rise to a troubled era in which poor urban residents found themselves uprooted and disconcerted by change - and this at a time when sudden cutbacks in state-subsidised employment schemes which had operated from 1997 to 2002 also served to heighten tensions in the *cités*.

Any suggestion that successive French governments may have neglected or abandoned the *banlieues* is not based on reality. In contrast to, say, the American situation of the

1960s, the French State has striven to implement policies devoted to the deterrence of rioting in its urban areas. It is also fair to say, however, that the impact of such policies has been marginal at best and, in some important respects, extremely counterproductive. While much closer in comparison to other European countries than the USA according to such indicators as police use of deadly force and ratios of juvenile imprisonment, French society is undoubtedly exceptional in terms of the negativity of contemporary relations between its police and urban youth. Indeed, having considered the state of tension that had existed for several months in the build up to the eventual riots, it is reasonable to ask why such a large-scale conflictual reaction had not been sooner in its arrival.

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[i] I will use the term 'riot' in this contribution, since it is the term in use in France ('*émeute*'), despite all the problems raised by the polemic content of the word and, above all, its disputed sociological accuracy (Marx 1970: 24, Tilly 2003: 18).

[ii] With a private security agent in Sartrouville.

[iii] These numbers come from a systematic collection of violent events that occurred in Paris and its banlieue cities, covered by the national press from 1990 to 2004 (n=160). A comparison with other kinds of sources like police sources would give similar results (Lagrange 2006a: 44).

[iv] Some summer camps were then created, which were called 'Trigano-Defferre' camps, named after Gilbert Trigano (the founding leader of Club Med) and Gaston Defferre (the then Minister of Interior).

[v] Another kind of urban policy.

[vi] *Police nationale** and *gendarmerie** forces have never been displayed on the French territory accordingly to the new demography and the booming of French *banlieues*, this mainly due to NIMBY related refusals by local elected authorities to let the government remove the police forces from their declining territories off to the *banlieues*.

[vii] The highest score reached by Le Pen has been during the 2002 presidential election when he received 17% in the first round and could get access to the second round (there being defeated by Jacques Chirac with 82%). In 2007 presidential election, Le Pen only reached 10% of the votes and could not be qualified for the second ballot: his electoral support had been 'siphoned off' (Mayer 2007: 429) by Sarkozy's candidacy.

[viii] For further discussions of French and British police conduct in relation to ethnic minorities see Bleich (2007) for a comparison on stop and search in France and in the UK and Pager (2008) or Jobard and Névanen (2009) for statistical studies on race and sentencing in France.

[ix] We shall see how, according to Lagrange (this volume), *banlieues* towns where these subsidies were still allocated or where municipalities* could take charge of them were less hit by riots in 2005 – this could be the main explanatory factor for a low riot level in the deprived east and south-east Paris *banlieues*. But other authors (Epstein, 2008) show that the conservative government elected after 2002 did not so much cut the subsidies than reorganized the allocation system of them.