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Muslims and the Identity Crisis in France

By Alison Rice

France has made headline news around the world for different reasons in recent months. The outbreak of riots in October and November 2005 attracted footage and commentary, as did the widespread demonstrations that began in March and continued in April 2006. These two diverse incidents have hastily been attributed to a population of “Muslim immigrants” in a number of media reports.

Although it is true that France presently faces serious challenges, chalking them up to “Muslim immigrants” is a big mistake. The real impetus for the riots of autumn 2005 was racism, and the instigation for the demonstrations of spring 2006 was economic instability; both events featured young people infuriated by their current situation in France and desperate to express themselves in the dwindling hope of changing their future.

Alain Badiou, a renowned French philosopher, contributed an article to the newspaper *Le Monde* on November 15, 2005, in which he described a particular incident in a long string of unfortunate occurrences in the life of his sixteen-year-old adopted

black son, Gérard.

The latter was spending the afternoon with a friend, born in France to Turkish parents, who had just purchased a bike for around thirty dollars from some teenagers in front of a Parisian high school. The transaction had gone well and the presumed owners had gone on their way when a group of young kids suddenly emerged, claiming that the bike actually belonged to one of them. Gérard convinced his friend that the correct thing to do was to return the item to its rightful owner, and the friend begrudgingly handed it over, regretting his loss.

At this point, a police car arrived on the scene and two of its occupants jumped out and grabbed Gérard and his friend,



knocking them to the ground and handcuffing them, all the while shouting the worst insults known to the French tongue. The kids protested, insisting that the two teenagers had done nothing inappropriate, that they had returned the bike, but “the Black” and “the Turk,” as Badiou refers to them, were whisked away to the police station.

Hours later, Badiou had no news of his son’s fate and was waiting for him at home when the phone finally rang. The voice on the other end of the line announced that the boy had been arrested for “probable” participation in “group violence” two weeks earlier. This call came after ten, and Badiou was allowed to pick up his son shortly thereafter, at which time he was met with apologies, since his son—the victim of physical and verbal abuse at the police station—was innocent of any wrongdoing.

The title of Badiou’s piece, “Ordinary Humiliation” (*L’humiliation ordinaire*), gives evidence to the very banal nature of this episode: between April 2004 and November 2005, Gérard was stopped innumerable times in the street for “identity checks” and was actually arrested on six occasions!

As Badiou surmises, his son is relatively privileged, if we examine his experiences alongside those of young people from the *banlieues*, the French suburbs that were the location of the riots last fall. Living in Paris, the son of an intellectual, Gérard is arrested less frequently than his suburban counterparts and is likely to hear apologies at the end of the ordeal; those from the outskirts of cities are rarely the recipients of kind words.

Badiou concludes his heartrending article with a harsh condemnation of the current state of affairs in his country. He insists that France deserves its riots, for a nation that concentrates on protecting private wealth and “lets loose its dogs” on working-class children and those of foreign origin is “purely and simply contemptible.”

Badiou is not the only writer to lament racism in France today; a number of contemporary novelists, musicians, and filmmakers call attention in their work to the prevalence of prejudice and the constant struggle of those who are not “*Français de souche*” (of French stock), or—to put it more plainly—those who are not white.

What is particularly painful is that many who suffer from racial discrimination in France today are French citizens. A large majority of the rioters who set fire to cars and schools in November were born and raised in France.

When interviewed about the impetus for their violent actions, they explained in eloquent French—and often, for foreign media, in English, a language they have mastered much more convincingly than their political leaders—that they spoke only French, that they had attended French schools their entire lives, that they belonged to French sports clubs, but that they could not find work in France.

The desperation in the voices of those interviewed last fall was clear. They had taken to flamboyant measures because this was the only way they saw to attract attention to their cause. Despite their efforts to obtain various diplomas in the French university system, many of them earning master’s and even doctoral degrees, they were unable to gain employment.

As soon as they submitted their résumés with the obligatory photograph, name, and place of residence, they were denied interviews. They reminded us that *banlieue*, the word for the suburbs to which they have been relegated, is etymologically related to the word *banishment*, and they have found themselves literally and metaphorically distanced from French society.

We must remember that the incident that set off their display of frustration was the electrocution of two adolescent boys in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois: the teenagers were fleeing police. These boys were not the adopted sons of prominent French intellectuals—unlike Gérard—and their fear of the authority figures on their tail was so great that they were willing to risk death to escape them.

What angered youths from the French suburbs was not only the senseless deaths of two fellow suburb dwellers, but also the appalling discourse of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who used untranslatable words to refer to the population of the housing projects and made reference to a strong cleaning product that sandblasts buildings, peeling off their outer layer. Sarkozy’s unfortunate choice of metaphor for “cleaning” the high-rise apartments obviously carried the connotation of ethnic cleansing.

Following the first of the riots, the French police mistakenly supposed that the threat to civil order came from followers of Islam and set off a tear gas bomb at a local mosque during a worship service. This error was quickly corrected when representatives from the Muslim community made it clear that they did not encourage violence in any way.

Although the suburbs do constitute a breeding ground for deep-seated frustration and discontentment,

attributing the recent riots to Muslims is wrong. Trudy Rubin, in an article for the April 2, 2006, issue of the *Miami Herald* titled "Two Ways of Coping with Globalization," is right to point out that "the French have not figured out how to absorb the tide of Muslim immigrants from North Africa; isolated in slums and alienated from the system, some will seek solace in Islamic extremism."

Robert J. Samuelson echoes Rubin's opinion in his contribution to the April 3, 2006, issue of *Newsweek*: "Look at France. Its needs are plain: to assimilate a large and restless Muslim population of immigrants and their children..."

It is true that the French have not "figured out" how to "assimilate" immigrants in effective ways, but religion is not a significant factor in current problems. For the most part, offspring of Muslim immigrants from the former French colonies of West and North Africa are perfectly assimilated into French culture, and that is precisely the problem.

Their parents and grandparents, who came to Europe in order to fight for France in the First and Second World Wars or to work in the factories that were suffering from manpower shortages, did not complain about their situation. They were often illiterate and unaware of their rights, which made them perfect candidates for hard labor.

Their children, who grew up with French ideals and took to heart the national slogan, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, are disillusioned by the reality that surrounds them. Most of them feel alienated from their parents' faith; if Islam plays any role in their lives, it is likely to be cultural rather than spiritual.

It is important to note that just three days after the riots began in the Parisian suburbs on October 27, 2005, a silent demonstration took place within the walls of the French capital. In this *manifestation*, young people wearing white masks protested their precarious status in a society where they were hired as interns at low wages with little or no hope for steady, long-term employment.



Fires from outside the city eclipsed this demonstration, but these young professionals and their grievances were to resurge with a vengeance in March 2006, in response to a law that essentially legitimated an already widespread practice of firing young workers for no reason at all.

According to Samuelson in his piece for *Newsweek*, this new law "stemmed from last fall's rioting among young Muslims and complaints about their high jobless rate." But he and others who create such links are confused on several levels. The "first hire" law—which has now been withdrawn—had nothing to do with the riots or the unemployment situation of "young Muslims." But it has much to do with a country that is struggling with severe identity crises.

Neither youths from the outside nor youths from the inside have any hope left, and France must cope with a large population of retirees, a low birth rate, and a costly social security system in a climate that is quickly becoming more and more racist, closed off to the innovation, creativity, and energy that its multicultural youths could provide.

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