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Opposing Exclusion: The Political Significance of the Riots in French Suburbs (2005–2007)

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In 2005, following the deaths of two teenagers in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, France witnessed three weeks of widespread rioting. These events were mirrored, albeit on a smaller scale, in the nearby suburb of Villiers-le-Bel in 2007 when two local youths died in a collision involving police officers. Both during and after these respective events, many social and political commentators denounced the riots as a purely nihilistic expression of violence, a rejection of the Republic and of French society at large. However, this interpretation fails to fully consider the complexity of the situation. This essay will attempt to deconstruct the security-oriented interpretation of the violence and instead offer an analysis that views the riots of both 2005 and 2007 as a plea for access to French society on the part of those involved. Drawing on empirical fieldwork carried out in Villiers-le-Bel, the article will examine the case of Villiers-le-Bel in relation to the arguments put forward by a number of French sociologists, most notably Lapeyronnie and Kokoreff, which attributed political significance to the riots. The argument will explore the idea of the riots as a protopolitical event, that is, a primitive attempt by a socially excluded population to gain visibility in the public and political spheres.

En 2005, suite à la mort de deux adolescents dans la banlieue parisienne de Clichy-sous-Bois, la France a vécu trois semaines d'émeutes d'une ampleur sans précédant. Ces événements se sont reproduits dans une certaine mesure en 2007 dans la banlieue voisine de Villiers-le-Bel quand deux jeunes ont trouvé la mort en percutant un véhicule de police. Pendant et après ces événements respectifs plusieurs commentateurs sociaux et politiques ont dénoncé les émeutes comme l'expression d'une violence nihiliste, un rejet de la République et de la société française. Cependant, cette interprétation ne prend pas en compte la complexité de la situation. Cet article cherche à dénouer l'interprétation sécuritaire et proposera une analyse qui considère les émeutes de 2005 et 2007 comme une demande d'accès à la société française de la part de ceux qui ont pris parti. En exploitant

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les résultats d'une étude empirique réalisée à Villiers-le-Bel, l'article examine le cas de cette banlieue par rapport aux analyses proposées par certains sociologues français, notamment Lapeyronnie et Kokoreff, qui attribuent une signification politique aux émeutes. L'analyse envisage les émeutes comme des événements protopolitiques, c'est-à-dire une tentative primitive de la part d'une population socialement exclue de devenir plus visible dans les domaines publics et politiques.

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Introduction

'France is Burning', 'Explosion in the Suburbs'. These were some of the headlines which appeared in the international media when, for a period of three weeks in 2005, France witnessed unprecedented scenes of violence and destruction. Sparked by the deaths of two teenagers who were electrocuted as they fled from police in the Parisian *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois, the riots saw a quasi-simultaneous production of violence in suburban areas across the nation. The scale of the violence was enormous: buildings were attacked, cars were burned (1400 in a single night at the height of the violence) and young people clashed with the forces of order. Violence in the *banlieues* is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, there have been regular outbreaks of suburban violence since the riots in Lyon at the beginning of the 1980s.[1] However, the events of 2005 signalled a new stage in French urban violence. Typically limited to the immediate spatial surroundings of the *banlieue* in question, the events of 2005 went beyond past events in terms of their scale and amplitude. The riots culminated in the declaration of emergency laws dating from colonial times.[2]

The events that unfolded at this time impacted upon all areas of society and politics. However, the chain of events that was initiated in 2005 did not end with the three weeks of violence. In 2007, the death of two youths aged 16 and 17 years respectively, provoked three nights of rioting, the violence of which, while limited to the Parisian suburb of Villiers-le-Bel, proved to be beyond that of 2005 with regard to intensity. The riots in Villiers-le-Bel saw 82 police officers injured (four seriously), numerous cars and a public library burned. Most significant was the fact that the events in Villiers-le-Bel represented the first time that firearms were widely used against police. My contention is that the riots of 2007 constituted the aftershock of 2005, for both events, while temporally separated, took place in the same context and under almost identical circumstances. The enormous social and cultural impact of the 2005 riots constituted an important moment in the collective imagination of the youth of the *quartiers sensibles*. In terms of context, the memory of 2005 and the deaths of the two young residents of Clichy-sous-Bois were still fresh in the minds of the youth of Villiers-le-Bel:

> On a pensé à 2005 au moment des événements [de 2007]. Ce qui s'est passé ici, c'était la même chose à Clichy en 2005, tu vois? Deux jeunes qui sont morts à cause de la police… Ils changent pas, la police, ils font ce qu'ils veulent. C'est pour ça qu'ils se sont fait tirer par-dessus, tu vois, ils ont un sentiment de toute puissance. Ils font ce qu'ils veulent. (Nassim, 20 years old)

> On s'est dit ça recommence encore 'deux jeunes à Clichy, deux jeunes à Villiers-le-Bel… la police là-bas, la police ici'… de ce côté-là on a pensé à 2005. (Wilfred, 22 years old)

As Paul Connerton (1989, p. 2) has argued, 'our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in the context which is casually connected with the past events and objects.' Thus, the deaths of Larami and Moushin, linked as they were to the tragedy of 2005 in contextual terms, reignited and amplified the anger provoked by the deaths at Clichy-sous-Bois. As was the case in 2005, the exact circumstances surrounding the incident were unclear and left room for speculation. And as in 2005, the narrative took two separate paths with police immediately denying any wrongdoing while local youths held the forces of law and order responsible for the tragedy.

But what was the significance of the violence? Did these riots represent, as many commentators claimed, a rejection of French society and the Republic at large? Was the destruction the work of *voyous* and delinquants?[3] This essay seeks to deconstruct the security-oriented interpretation of the violence, proposing an alternative analysis which views the riots as a plea for inclusion. In doing so, it examines the riots in Villiers-le-Bel in the context of the interpretation put forward by a number of French sociologists following the 2005 riots, most notably Didier Lapeyronnie, who argues that the violence represented a protopolitical event, a means of gaining visibility, ephemeral though it was, in the public and political spheres. The article presents the first qualitative case study of Villiers-le-Bel. The study is also the first to draw an explicit link between the riots of 2005 and 2007, using this as a contextual framework within which a deeper understanding of the factors motivating the violence can be gained. The dynamic here reveals much about the underlying processes governing life in the *banlieues* in more general terms. In 2005, Villiers-le-Bel was a peripheral actor as the violence spread outwards from Clichy-sous-Bois. However, this role was reversed in 2007 when the deaths of two local teenagers placed Villiers-le-Bel in the centre of the storm as intense riots broke out. Consequently, these separate yet inextricably linked episodes of violence give an insight into the generalised malaise that permeates the *banlieues*, while also revealing much about the immediate issues at stake in the production of large-scale urban violence.

In terms of methodology, the essay draws on qualitative fieldwork carried out over a nine-month period in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-le-Bel. Numerous studies have been published in relation to riots in the *banlieues*, particularly those of 2005; however few of these have been supported by empirical evidence (see Jobard 2009). The fieldwork here consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the riots, either directly or indirectly (young people, social workers, elected officials, and police). Over 40 young people were interviewed, half of which confirmed that they had been physically involved in the violence of either 2005 or 2007, or both. The level of involvement of the remaining interviewees could not be ascertained.[4] The setting of these interviews varied; one quarter of the interviews took

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place in local youth centres while the remaining interviews took place in various locations chosen by the young people such as apartments and car parks. The distinction here is important in the sense that the interviews conducted outside the institutionalised environment of the youth centre usually produced more detailed information as well as often heated and emotionally charged dialogue. The perspectives of the young people interviewed, aged between 18 and 27, offer an unrivalled insight into the motivating factors underlying the riots.[5] The viewpoints gleaned from those directly involved in the violence permit the researcher to glimpse into the heart of the riots, but no less important are the views of those young people who did not participate. The riots constituted an intense expression of anger, an emotional event that represented a crystallisation of the tensions simmering beneath the surface in the *banlieues*. However, it is important to recognise that this ephemeral and spontaneous nature of the riots can only result from a generalised build-up of tension that is deeply rooted in the social, cultural, political and economic processes that govern daily life in these areas.

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Thug Life: When *Voyous* Reject the Republic

In recent years, the theme of insecurity has come to occupy a central position in French society. Since the rise of the Front National in the early 1980s and the shift of mainstream parties towards more security-oriented rhetoric and policies, this theme has grown in importance (see Mucchielli 2001). Moreover, researchers such as Mathieu Rigouste (2004) and Patrick Champagne (1993) have shown how questions of 'insecurity' and 'urban violence' have engendered a particular vocabulary that explicitly links the suburbs to the threat of insecurity and urban violence. Terms such as 'jeunes des cités' and 'jeunes de banlieue' explicitly associate the activities of certain young people in the suburbs with the cause of the security problem facing French society; while expressions and terms such as 'fracture sociale'; 'violence gratuite'; 'zones de non-droit'; and 'la haine des banlieues' have constructed a stereotype of the suburbs as a menace to mainstream society.[6]

The dominant interpretation that emerged from the events of 2005 and 2007 represented a continuation of this trend that depicts a society threatened from within. This discourse found voice, for the most part, among police and certain political sources, as represented by the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. The status of these commentators as prominent figures in the political and public arenas gave an additional weight to their commentary and ensured that it was widely disseminated by the media.[7] Essentially, the security-oriented interpretation viewed the riots as the actions of 'voyous' and 'racaille'; experienced delinquents expressing a hate for French society and the Republic. The picture painted by Sarkozy was that of a social space dominated by a 'peur des bandes, des caïds', areas ruled by mafia-like organisations where even the police are afraid to go (*Le Monde*, 11 November 2005). Moreover, the minister who went on to become President of the Republic downplayed the

importance of a number of social issues, as he cited the activities of criminal gangs as the principal cause of the violence:

> La première cause du chômage, de la désespérance, de la violence dans les banlieues, ce ne sont pas les discriminations, ce n'est pas l'échec de l'école. La première cause du désespoir dans les quartiers, c'est le trafic de drogue, la loi des bandes, la dictature de la peur et la démission de la République. (*Le Monde*, 22 November 2005)

Sarkozy's interpretation of the violence found support among a number of politicians. On 5 November 2005 for example, Gérard Gaudron, Mayor of Aulnay-sous-Bois, led a protest march against the violence, telling media reporters that the march was 'neither a provocation nor a demonstration of force, but a republican response to acts of delinquency' (*The Guardian*, 6 November 2005). Claude Pernes, Mayor of Rosny-sous-Bois, denounced a 'veritable guerrilla situation, urban insurrection' (*Al Jazeera*, 6 November 2005). Statements issued by various police bodies and unions in the wake of the 2005 violence also supported this interpretation. Jean-Claude Delage, for example, General Secretary of Alliance Police Nationale (the right-wing majority union of police officers), presented the striking image of 'la canaille [des banlieues] en guerre contre l'état' at the union's fifth National Conference in November 2005.[8] The minority right-wing union Action Police CFTC was another voice much quoted by the media during the 2005 violence due to its sensationalist interpretation of events. Michel Thooris, General Secretary of the union, claimed that France was seeing a civil war unfolding in her suburbs: 'there is a civil war under way in Clichy-sous-Bois at the moment' (*The Guardian*, 30 October 2005).[9] These declarations all form part of an established trend evoking the menace of the *quartiers sensibles*, the threat of these areas to the prospect of a cohesive French society, and asserting the need for repressive police action against the 'army' of delinquents who threaten social order.

The events of Villiers-le-Bel provoked a renewal of this interpretation of the suburban violence as nothing more than the work of delinquents. Once again, this emanated from the top of the French political hierarchy. Sarkozy adopted a hard-line approach that was extremely critical of interpretations evoking the social problems at stake in the suburbs. He was clear in his statement that 'ce qui se passe à Villiers-le-Bel n'a rien à voir avec une crise sociale, ça a tout à voir avec la voyoucratie' (*Libération*, 28 November 2007). Furthermore, the now President went on to claim: 'Je réfute toute forme d'angélisme qui vise à trouver en chaque délinquant une victime de la société, en chaque émeute un problème social.' He dismissed what he termed the 'donneurs de leçons' who 'ignorent eux ce que c'est d'être en uniforme et face à une bande d'enragés'. Similarly, Fadela Amara, the State Secretary responsible for the Politique de la Ville, said in an interview with *Le Parisien*:

> Ce qui s'est passé, ce n'est pas une crise sociale. On est dans la violence urbaine, anarchique, portée par une minorité qui jette l'opprobre sur la majorité. Cette minorité, ce petit noyau dur, utilise le moindre prétexte pour casser, brûler, tout péter dans le quartier. (*Le Parisien*, 29 November 2007)

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Thus the political sphere was dominated by a security-oriented interpretation that failed to look beyond the immediate acts of violence and destruction effected by local youths. The riots were primarily viewed as an excuse for delinquents to engage in acts of large-scale destruction.

However, as the facts regarding the riots emerged, it became clear that this security-oriented interpretation was fundamentally flawed. A study of prosecutions following the 2005 riots undertaken by sociologists Beaud and Pialoux (2006, p. 19) revealed that—contrary to Sarkozy's claim that 80% of those involved were 'already known to police'—the majority had had no previous dealings with police. It is worth noting that this situation was repeated in Villiers-le-Bel where it was revealed that of the first youths to be brought before the courts in Pontoise, only one already had a criminal record and this was due to a conviction for driving without insurance. Moreover, at the community level, relations between the young people of different *quartiers* in the suburb of Villiers-le-Bel provided further information to challenge the security-oriented interpretation. Recent years have seen a rise in violence between the three *quartiers sensibles* that form part of the commune of Villiers-le-Bel. Interviews with elected officials and social workers from the locality revealed that strong efforts have been made to resolve this violence with social workers in particular describing their attempts to facilitate group meetings aimed at establishing dialogue between rival groups of young people:

> Comme [les jeunes] arrivent pas à trouver de perspective, comme ils arrivent pas à trouver de perspective, concrètement ils se rabattent sur les choses sur lesquelles ils peuvent tenir un peu les choses, concrètement, c'est le territoire. Et donc on les retrouve beaucoup, beaucoup, dans les questions d'affrontement … D'affrontement d'un quartier à l'autre, d'une ville à l'autre […] Aujourd'hui [la violence] est très, très prégnant, c'est très, très important entre ce quartier-là [les Carreaux] et le quartier qu'on appelle Puits-la-Marlière, PLM […] Ca veut dire … et puis le collège, le théâtre, enfin … devant le collège c'est le théâtre des rifts, et ça peut aller très loin. Ca va de jeunes entre 11–12 ans, et le relais est pris par des 15–25 ans, quoi. (Alain, social worker)

However, despite the existence of these rivalries between different groups within the community, the riots of 2007 saw young people from all three *quartiers sensibles* united in their opposition to the police:

> J'avais beaucoup d'amis pendant les émeutes. Il y avait des jeunes de tous les quartiers et même des jeunes que je connais pas. C'était tout le monde ensemble contre la police. (Driss, 21 years old)

Local oppositions, normally intense, were left aside as the riots engendered a community-wide revolt against exclusion and marginalisation, perceived to be represented tangibly by the forces of order.

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The Internal Outsider: An Alternative View of the Riots

Numerous sociological studies have been carried out on the *banlieues* in recent years (Kokoreff 2008; Lapeyronnie 2008; Le Goaziou & Mucchielli 2006). These studies have all highlighted the position of the suburbs as areas concentrating underprivileged populations of immigrant origins. Of course, it would be reductive to consider all *banlieues* in the same light; each suburb represents a unique convergence of the social, the cultural and the political. However, since the beginning of the 1980s the term *banlieues* has become synonymous with certain French suburban landscapes. These areas, which are characterised by severe social and economic problems and where a high proportion of inhabitants are of immigrant origins, exist at the limits of French society. Villiers-le-Bel shares many of the features that characterise these areas such as a high percentage of young people, high levels of unemployment and low levels of educational achievement. The statistics are revealing in this respect—Villiers-le-Bel has a population of just over 27,000, with one third of the population under the age of 20; 56% of the overall population reside in areas designated as 'Zones Urbaines Sensibles'; 30% of young people residing in the commune are unemployed.[10]

Moreover, research has shown that populations in the *banlieues* are discriminated against due to their real or supposed origins and their identity as *banlieusards*. In an analysis of the 2005 violence, published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Dominique Vidal draws attention to the fundamental paradox that surrounds the question of the *quartiers sensibles* and their integration into mainstream society. Vidal claims the term 'integration', which, since the 1980s, has replaced that of 'assimilation' in popular discourse, is misleading:

> Il séduit [. . .] il semble admettre le respect de la culture, des traditions, de la langue et de la religion [. . .] Mais, à l'usage, il s'avère piégé. Dès lors que l'intégration ne fonctionne pas, c'est en effet vers les jeunes des banlieues que se pointe un doigt accusateur, comme pour leur demander: '*Pourquoi ne faites-vous pas l'effort de vous intégrer?*' Au lieu de se tourner vers une société incapable d'assurer l'égalité des droits et des chances à tous ses enfants, quelles que soient leur origine, la couleur de leur peau, la consonance de leurs prénom et nom. (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2005)

In this statement, Vidal articulates one of the fundamental concerns in the debate on the *quartiers sensibles*: the question of identity. Since the 1980s, powerful stereotypes have been attached to the term 'immigration' in the popular imagination through a process that saw this term being progressively, and then almost exclusively, associated with unskilled, non-European workers, or people of colour (Hargreaves 2007, p. 26). Maxim Silverman states that 'the reformulation of immigration [from the 1980s onwards] transformed the term "immigration" into a euphemism for non-Europeans (particularly North-Africans) and delegitimised it' (Silverman 1992, p. 73). The non-European immigrant population thus came to be regarded as a threat to national unity and identity at a time when these themes were fast regaining popularity. These stereotypes regarding immigration were particularly linked to the *banlieues* due to the

large proportion of immigrants inhabiting these areas. However, while the stereotyping of immigrants has remained more or less unchanged in the suburbs, the identity of the inhabitants has undergone profound changes. The immigrant population of the suburbs has reached its third, and in some cases fourth, generation. Issues of national identity and cultural belonging have evolved with the birth of new generations, and questions of identity are no longer the same ones faced by the immigrant population of a decade ago. The majority of youths in the suburbs are French nationals, born and raised in France, with little or no connection to the past of their ancestors. They are French, especially in their own eyes, even if they are labelled otherwise by certain social commentators:

> Nos parents, nos grands-parents sont des immigrés. Nous, on est né ici, on est français. On a la carte, on est français. Nos parents sont des immigrés mais nous, nous sommes des français. On est né ici . . . voilà! (Wilfred, 22 years old)

> Mais 'immigré', c'est un terme pour qualifier les gens qui sont pas de couleur blanche quoi, pour moi c'est ça. Ils s'en foutent de savoir si t'as les papiers ou pas. Si t'es noir, t'es un immigré pour eux. C'est ça. (Niaye, 18 years old)

These young people regard themselves as members of French society. In this context, the question of integration inevitably evokes a profound confusion and, ultimately, frustration for these youths:

> Moi, je comprends pas ce qu'ils veulent dire par intégration.[11] Ça je comprends pas. C'est quoi l'intégration? C'est d'être né en France, d'avoir grandi en France? C'est ça l'intégration? . . . parce que là je suis intégré alors. Je suis né en France, j'ai grandi en France . . . je suis intégré! C'est quoi alors? C'est travailler pour la France? C'est payer ses impôts et tout? (Mohammed, 20 years old)

The above quote illustrates this frustration perfectly. Mohammed regards himself as a member of French society and thus for him, the call for integration seems to be out of sync with reality. This perspective is interesting in that it reflects the deeper ideological tensions that have come to surround the term 'integration' in terms of its application to young people of immigrant origins. The term has come to represent a two-speed society of sorts. While processes of acculturation have occurred in the suburbs as successive generations of immigrant origins have become ever more deeply embedded in French society and culture, official discourse has failed to take account of this. For certain inhabitants in the *banlieues*, continued calls for integration represent an unattainable illusion: continuously voiced in the public and political spheres and always demanding more of those in its sights, the notion of integration poses problems for the young people of Villiers-le-Bel in the sense that complete social access to the Republic appears to remain beyond reach. In other words, the term signifies a process without end which, ultimately, provokes and reinforces a realisation on the part of the young person that their position in the eyes of society is that of an outsider. This perspective was evident in the discourse of a number of interviewees:

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> Ils parlent beaucoup d'intégration dans les médias. Mais pour qu'on s'intègre il faut qu'ils veuillent qu'on s'intègre. Nous, on veut s'intégrer dans la société. Le problème c'est eux, ils nous laissent pas s'intégrer, tu vois? Dans les médias ils parlent de l'intégration et tout mais en réalité ils nous rejettent. C'est comme ça. (Hassein, 21 years old)

> On dirait que nous on doit s'adapter à eux alors que peut-être qu'eux … peut-être c'est eux qui doivent changer, qui doivent nous accepter. Peut-être c'est pas qu'à nous de faire des choses … (Niaye, 18 years old)

The situation here challenges the conventional dynamic of integration, whereby the host society calls for those of immigrant origins to adopt the dominant cultural and social norms. In the situation that faces the youth of the suburbs, it is the perceived outsider (perceived as such by mainstream society) who desires access to the Republic while mainstream society effectively refuses this access.

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Inside the Riot: Legitimising Urban Violence

To understand the internal logic of the riot, it is necessary to consider the context within which these events occur. Certainly, the social environment of the suburbs is one marked by social exclusion and discrimination. However, it is through the relationship between police and public that the problems facing the suburbs take concrete form (see Lapeyronnie 2008, p. 282). Broadly speaking, fieldwork in Villiers-le-Bel has shown that young people residing in the area regard the police as a corrupt source of power rather than as a force supporting justice and upholding the law. As one interviewee sums up:

> La police, pour nous, c'est pas la justice. Ils viennent casser les couilles dans le quartier, même quand on fait rien … quand on est là, tranquille. Si tu les regardes, ils font un contrôle. Ils provoquent les jeunes, ils jettent des insultes. Non, pour moi, c'est pas la justice. (Daladié, 22 years old)

In the *quartiers sensibles*, the relationship between police and inhabitants is one built on mutual distrust, suspicion, and, above all, conflict. For many young people, the police represent a physical manifestation of the symbolic violence that dominates life in the suburbs. Repeated identity checks, insults, provocation and constant suspicion have become part of the daily routine for the many young people in these areas. Claims of police provocation and harassment frequently punctuate interviews and conversations. The *contrôle d'identité* represents one of the most common contexts for the expression of this provocation or abuse of power and, as such, plays an important role in the dynamic underlying police–public relations in Villiers-le-Bel:

> Si on est là dans le quartier, ils viennent, s'ils veulent nous faire un contrôle d'identité … s'ils veulent nous contrôler il y a pas de problème, nous on se laisse contrôler … mais après dans le groupe de policiers il y en a toujours un ou deux qui va … qui va faire que les choses vont mal se passer. C'est ça que nous les jeunes on accepte pas ça. […] Des fois ça se passe mal … 'met toi par terre', 'met toi à

> genoux' . . . Non, non [tuts and shakes his head] on se met pas à genoux dans un contrôle d'identité, on est pas des chiens. Tu veux nous contrôler vas-y, j'ai rien sur moi. Si j'ai fait quelque chose, vas-y, ok . . . tu mets les menottes, fais ce que tu veux, il y a pas de souci . . . mais si je suis pas en tort . . . on se laisse pas faire, on se laisse jamais faire. (Wilfred, 22 years old)

In theory the *contrôle d'identité* offers police a legal means of rapidly identifying an individual and confirming their status in terms of nationality. However, the above quotation reveals a profound sense of injustice at the treatment suffered by local youths at the hands of the police. For the interviewee, the *contrôle d'identité* is seen as a frequently used means of reinforcing the balance of power in a relationship based on domination and discrimination. Thus the *contrôle d'identité* represents one of the key elements contributing to the construction of an 'us versus them' paradigm within suburban communities. In broader terms, Lapeyronnie affirms that:

> le racisme, le harcèlement et la pression des policiers finissent par créer une sorte de 'nous' collectif sur la base d'une expérience commune et d'une opposition au 'eux' policier [. . .] Si les 'jeunes de banlieue' ne constituent pas une catégorie sociale ou culturelle, ils partagent largement le sentiment de subir un 'traitement' commun, de vivre une expérience commune face à l'institution policière. (Lapeyronnie 2006, p. 437)

It is important to note that this 'us versus them' binary is not limited to the young people directly involved in confrontational situations with the police. In fact, the interpretative framework incorporates a significant proportion of the population, whether through their familial links to those youths who have suffered from police misconduct, or through a shared ethnic background or territory. In general terms, the police are viewed as an opposing force that targets and discriminates against the local population rather than as the representatives of justice.

The construction of this 'us versus them' mentality is crucial in understanding the production of large-scale urban violence. Essentially, the construction of this Manichean opposition between the forces of order and the population of the suburbs results in the creation of an interpretative framework, a '"grille interpretative" des événements et de la situation, chaque incident, chaque difficulté venant le renforcer' (Lapeyronnie 2006, p. 438). Two issues are of central importance here. First, the role of memory in this context cannot be overstated. The link between the actions of police and previous tragedies that have occurred in suburban areas since the beginning of the 1980s brings significant weight to bear on the perceptions of the young *banlieusards*. Each event has contributed to a collective and subjective memory which, ultimately, places the blame for all such incidents firmly on the shoulders of the forces of order. In this context, each of these events has constituted yet another building block serving to reinforce this interpretative framework through which subsequent events are viewed:

> Pour moi, il y avait pas besoin d'une enquête [à Clichy-sous-Bois en 2005]. On sait bien comment ça se passe, la poursuite et tout ça. C'est la même chose ici, tu vois? La police ils aiment casser les couilles, faire des contrôles . . . même quand on a rien fait. (Hassein, 21 years old)

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The above quotation illustrates the effects of this interpretative framework. The weight of similar past events can effectively preclude any alternative interpretation on the part of the young people. The interpretative framework through which events are viewed constructs, in this sense, a context where the results of any enquiry must compete with deeply entrenched perceptions forged over the course of a number of years and based on what is perceived as the repeat of an established pattern of police misconduct. Second, as this framework has progressively been reinforced, so too has the sentiment of injustice that is prevalent among the young people of the suburbs. They progressively see themselves as victims in a context where the misconduct of police officers appears to go unpunished. Ultimately, this interpretative framework serves to undermine the statements of authorities who rush to deny culpability on the part of their officers in contexts such as that of the tragedy in Clichy-sous-Bois. Politicians have fallen into the same interpretative framework through premature statements that support police actions. The example of Sarkozy's reaction to both the events of 2005 and those of 2007 is particularly relevant here. This situation has been worsened by the fact that the hasty statements released by police management and politicians have often proved to be flawed, thus giving an added legitimacy to the interpretation of the young people:

> On avait même pas besoin de réfléchir. On savait tout de suite que c'était la faute de la police . . . mais le problème c'est que eux ils ont tout nié, tu vois? Ils auraient dû accepter la responsabilité. (Nassim, 20 years old)

Events viewed in the context of this 'us versus them' paradigm have a profound effect on the reception of potential police misconduct on the part of the young people. As Lapeyronnie summarises:

> la loi se change en oppression. Un 'cadre d'injustice' se substitue ainsi au 'cadre dominant' et ouvre l'espace de l'action. Le 'nous', victime d'injustice, a soudain la capacité de surmonter l'autorité légitime des institutions qui sont à la source de l'outrage moral qu'il subit. Il offre aussi les critères de condamnation de cet ordre. (Lapeyronnie 2006, p. 438)

On the part of the young people concerned, any delinquent behaviour is no longer considered as such, having gained legitimacy as a means of responding to the injustice imposed by the police institution.

The Political Significance of the Riots

Jobard (2009, p. 238) has observed that 'at first glance, the French riots appear to be a form of activity devoid of the recognisable frameworks of political protest: there were no obvious leaders or collectively articulated demands; nor was there any insistence on meeting politicians amid those highly ritualised acts [of destruction]'. However, this is not to say that the riots were devoid of political significance. In general terms, it can be said that the riots of 2005 and 2007 constituted political acts in the sense that the violence caused by these events propelled the question of the suburbs onto the political

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centre-stage, forming the focus of debate right up to the highest echelons of political power. Yet this immediate and rather superficial observation does not do justice to the complexity of the question of the riot as a political act. Robert Castel (2007, p. 53) offers a more probing analysis, saying that: 'En plus de se trouver dans une situation sociale souvent désastreuse, les émeutiers voulaient aussi régler des comptes avec la société française accusée d'avoir failli à ses promesses.' Castel goes on to argue that: 'C'est ainsi qu'on peut trouver une signification politique à ces événements, même s'ils n'ont revêtu aucune des formes classiques du répertoire politique.' Rather than focusing on the politicians who reacted to events, Castel places emphasis on the perspective of the rioters. In this context, the riots can be viewed as political events charged with a symbolic meaning. Lapeyronnie (2006, p. 433) goes further still, arguing that the riots belong to the 'répertoire "normal" d'action politique'. In other words, the riots present a unique paradox, being at once unconventional and conventional. Unconventional in the sense that they do not follow prescribed forms of political action, but conventional in the sense that they are ultimately rooted in the fundamental social and political mechanisms that underlie the emergence of collective social movements. Thus, for Lapeyronnie, the violent and destructive behaviour and actions produced during the riot must be viewed from the *perspective of the riot* and analysed in this context.

In this respect, the words of two youths who were directly involved in the riots in Villiers le Bel are revealing:

> C'est pas qu'on avait rien à dire, c'est qu'on s'est exprimé d'une autre manière tu vois? C'est pas par hasard qu'on a brûlé le commissariat! C'est comme ça ici . . . si on va à la mairie ou . . . je sais pas où, ils veulent pas nous entendre, mais quand ils voient des voitures brûlées et tout c'est une autre histoire. (Anonymous, 22 years old)

> J'en ai marre moi! Les politiques, ils parlent . . . ils parlent, tu vois? Mais rien ne change sauf quand on brûle des voitures. Après, les médias viennent et tout le monde voit qu'on accepte pas ce qui se passe ici. (Nassim, 20 years old)

These young people make clear that their violence was not random but directed at specific institutions and seen as a way of making themselves heard by the politicians who claim to represent them. It is worth noting that over half of those young people interviewed (both formally and informally) in the course of the case study confessed that they did not vote regularly. For these people, participation in the electoral process was seen as a waste of time: 'Nous, on vote pas [reference to the immediate peer group of about 10 youths]. Ça ne vaut pas la peine . . . rien ne change, tu vois?'[12] Violence thus becomes a form of speech which is more effective than words in the case of the *banlieues* where conventional forms of political action have lost legitimacy due to their perceived inability to effect positive change. Violence here is viewed as a necessary course of action, a means of articulating the opposition of inhabitants, of proclaiming their sense of injustice. More than this, the violence acts as a vehicle through which the anger of the *banlieues* can be heard in the public and political spheres.

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Lapeyronnie, drawing on the work of Hobsbawm, labels the 2005 rioters 'primitifs de la révolte' (Lapeyronnie 2006, p. 433). In his view, the rioters formed part of a primitive political movement, devoid of structure and a clear ideological standpoint, since those involved exist outside the political institutions and often lack the means and the cultural capital (in the Bourdieusian sense of the term) to access these institutions. The movement is considered as political since those involved ultimately desire recognition in this social order that excludes them. However, while Lapeyronnie effectively draws attention to the political significance of the riots, his description does not do justice to the complexity of the journey undertaken by the rioters. The use of the term *primitive* in the context of the riots implies a normative political trajectory that would consist in a move from immaturity towards a more sophisticated political perspective and role. This interpretation could be viewed as overly deterministic, sharing some of the assumptions underlying the politico-media security-oriented discourse. In fact, my interviews revealed an acute awareness of current political developments on the part of many interviewees. Their actions could nonetheless be characterised as proto-political in that they are an attempt to forge a new path that lies both outside and inside conventional political channels: outside in the sense that the riots take an unconventional form that seems alien to conventional forms of political engagement, yet inside in the sense that those involved seek to force their way into the political sphere using alternative means. Paradoxically, the rioters attempt to move away from conventional means of political engagement in an attempt to gain access to a political arena which is structured, to a large extent, by these same channels. Crucially however, the violence and destruction of the riots should not be confused with a lack of understanding of the issues at stake, or indeed, a lack of coherence in terms of the aims of the violence.

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Conclusion

Far from representing nihilistic expressions of violence and destruction, the riots of 2005 and 2007 did indeed hold a message. Socially and economically disadvantaged, the difficulties of populations of the *banlieues* are compounded by a profound sense of injustice. The deadly pattern of violence and death or injury that has, since the 1980s, placed the inhabitants of these areas in staunch opposition with the forces of law and order, has resulted in the construction of an 'us versus them' paradigm. This binary opposition, expressed primarily through the relationship with the police, also serves as an interpretative prism through which everyday events are viewed. The situation here, perceived as beyond their control, induces a profound malaise and sense of disenfranchisement among the inhabitants of the *banlieues*, particularly the young. In this context, violence appears to be the only means of making their voices heard, of becoming visible in the public sphere. Violence provides a means of focusing media attention on the suburbs, which, in turn, brings the problems of the *banlieues* to the attention of public and politicians alike. The political significance of the riots is well summed up by 21-year-old Driss who had participated in the 2005 disturbances:

> Nous, ce qu'on, ce qu'on . . . ce qu'on a essayé de faire, c'était plus les bâtiments municipaux, tu vois, les trucs . . . de police ou des trucs comme ça. Après ben [. . .] La révolution, c'est pas . . . brûler la voiture de ta tante ou de . . . pour moi c'est une famille. Toute la ville c'est une . . . Avant c'était le quartier. Parce que le quartier, les autres quartiers, c'était pas la famille. Là maintenant, c'est toute la ville, la famille. C'est la famille.

The use of the term 'revolution' here leaves little doubt as to the political nature of the violence. Subsequent informal discussions with Driss revealed that he saw the riots of 2005 as evoking the spirit of the large-scale revolutionary movements of French history. References to the 1789 Revolution and the events of May 1968 were used by Driss to illustrate the point that violence is often the only means to oppose oppression, the only means to enter the political arena. For this young man, the goal of the 2005 violence was to make a public statement, a means of expressing the voice of the *banlieues* that is not normally heard beyond the territorial limits of these underprivileged areas. The desire to attack state-owned property reveals an attempt to target the state that the young man regards as exclusive and exclusionary, while the recognition of community solidarity symbolises an acknowledgement of the shared suffering experienced by the community as a whole.

Of course, the argument that violence is a form of proto-political action raises questions about the possibility of alternative channels for these expressions of anger. With regard to the 2005 riots, Jobard (2009, p. 239) notes that forms of expression such as blogs, Internet sites, and rap or hip-hop songs have contributed to the community memory of the events. A similar situation followed the 2007 violence in Villiers-le-Bel where Internet sites, for example, still display videos of rap songs dedicated to the memory of the teenagers who died. Jobard goes on to point out that there were a number of 'more formal political responses' such as a grievance book recording the complaints of residents in underprivileged *banlieues* and the setting up of social forums in other neighbourhoods. In Villiers-le-Bel, Ali Soumaré, a young man who acted as a spokesperson for the families of the dead teenagers in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and also organised a peaceful protest, subsequently entered electoral politics, appearing on the Socialist list for the legislative elections of 2009. However, Kokoreff (2008, pp. 260–270) argues that these isolated acts, while hinting at potential paths that residents could follow, do not offer any sort of 'alternative vision' for the future. In Jobard's analysis (cited in Waddington & King 2009, p. 246), the indication is that 'there has been no long-term gain or positive impact on policy, but rather an external negative reinforcement of political polarisation'. The continued failure to fully face the worsening situation in the suburbs has resulted in a vicious circle where certain inhabitants have come to see violence as the only way to draw attention to the urgent social issues that dominate these areas. Ultimately, the malaise of the suburbs is growing and the current trajectory cannot be maintained; unless the social and cultural trends that govern life in the suburbs are altered for the better, French society may see a repeat, perhaps intensified, of the violence and destruction witnessed in 2005 and 2007.

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Notes

[1] Other examples include Les Minguettes in 1981, Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990, Nanterre in 1995, and Les Yvelines in 2002.

[2] A decree was approved at a special cabinet meeting on 8 November 2005, declaring a state of emergency in certain defined areas. Emergency powers were invoked under a 1955 law dating from the Algerian war of independence. The law bestowed wide-ranging emergency powers on the authorities including: the right to impose curfews in designated areas, the right to prohibit public gatherings, and the right to assume control of the media. This was the first time the law had been applied on mainland France and was seen by many as a drastic measure on the part of the government. See *Le Monde*, 8 November 2005.

[3] Of course, there were other interpretations. In 2005, for example, Alain Finkielkraut was one of the main supporters of an interpretation that viewed the riots in the *banlieues* as a 'revolt with an ethno-religious character' (*Haaretz*, 18 Nov. 2005). However, with different and often conflicting interpretations fighting for credibility and to be heard, these viewpoints were overshadowed by the state-sponsored interpretation.

[4] The young people interviewed were understandably suspicious of any attempts to obtain information and, inevitably, this proved to be a significant obstacle in terms of establishing trust between the researcher and the interviewees. Participant observation and access facilitated by local contacts allowed the researcher to overcome this obstacle in most cases. However, certain interviewees were unwilling to speak of their personal role in the riots.

[5] It should be noted that the majority of the interviewees were male. In any case, none of the females interviewed claimed to have participated in the riots. These young women simply offered their own unique insight into daily life in the suburbs and their experience of the relationship between the police and members of the public. Of course, this is not to say that women played no part in the riots. Indeed the role of women in the riots, whether symbolic or physical, is a subject which has been neglected in the literature relating to the riots of 2005 and 2007. For one of the few articles to broach this question see Guénif-Souilamas (2006). Also, while the age range chosen for the sample of young people reflected, to a large extent, the demographic of the peer groups to which the researcher had access, it should be noted that a number of interviewees (young people and social workers) made reference to the wide age range of those involved in the riots—from early teens to late thirties.

[6] The review of newspaper articles mentioned here comprised of a study of more than 300 articles from three major French newspapers—*Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération*—spanning the period 1987–2007.

[7] On the subject of the security-oriented interpretation of the riots and its dominance, it is worth drawing on the concept of framing, a concept stemming from Erving Goffman's seminal work, *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974). Framing has been defined as 'interpretative, signifying work that renders events and occurrences subjectively meaningful' (Snow *et al.* 2007, p. 387). In other words, the process of framing attributes meaning to an event, giving subjective priority to what is significant and relevant in a particular context. In this way, framing processes 'function as articulation mechanisms by linking together the highlighted elements of the event or setting such that one set of meanings rather than another is conveyed' (p. 387). With regard to the 2005 riots in France, Snow *et al*. highlight the importance of this question of the relative power of institutional actors within the discursive field.

[8] 'Violences: Sarkozy annonce une prime pour les forces de l'ordre', Alliance Police Nationale (17 Nov. 2005). Available at: http://www.alliance-police-nationale.fr (accessed 12 June 2006).

[9] Action Police are no longer affiliated with the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens. On 24 February 2007, *Libération* reported the decision made by the CFTC to withdraw their mandate from Action Police. The decision was made on the grounds that the behaviour of Action Police 'was not acceptable in terms of union independence'. The decision

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was believed to reflect disapproval at the links between Action Police and the political party of Philippe de Villiers, Mouvement pour la France. See *Libération*, 24 February 2007.

[10] Délégation Interministérielle à la Ville, Système d'Information Géographique, 'Commune Villiers-le-Bel' (2009), http://sig.ville.gouv.fr/Synthese/95680 (accessed 12 Jan. 2009); Mairie de Villiers-le-Bel, 'Ville de Villiers-le-Bel' (internal memo 2007), p. 5.

[11] Methodological note: The term 'integration' was introduced to the discussion by the interviewee on a number of occasions. Having thus established that the term forms part of the repertoire of vocabulary used by the interviewees, the author then referred directly to the term in subsequent interviews.

[12] Interview with Nassim, 20-year-old French citizen of North African origins, unemployed (23 June 2009).

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