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Immigration, politics and violence in urban France: between fiction and facts

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Abstract

Reflecting on the question of advanced marginality as it is elaborated by Wacquant in Urban Outcasts, this article examines the ways in which problems of relegation, territorial stigmatisation and unemployment emerge from the narratives of French writers of Algerian origins in the last twenty years. It proposes a reading of November 2005 clashes in French cities reconstructing historical networks of social and cultural reasons that contributed to ignite them. Semi-fictional accounts of immigrants' life in the banlieues are a privileged source of information about the social distress that nurtured the explosion of urban violence. Reading between the lines of these representations helps grasping what happens underneath the surface of an overexposed situation of inequality that periodically morphs into violence.

Introduction

27 October 2005. Clichy-sous-Bois. 5.30 pm. Zyed Benna, 17 years old, and Bouna Traorè, 15, two adolescents from this banlieue in the northeast of Paris died. They were electrocuted, hiding in an electricity booth, while escaping an identity control by the police. This episode was the trigger of a massive reaction that quickly spread all over the outskirts of Paris and in the suburbs of main French cities, setting off three weeks of urban riots (28 October-17 November). Despite the recognised evidence of social unrest in the banlieues, the dimension, temporal span and violence of the clashes seemed to take both French government and public opinion by surprise. These events generated a vast international media clamour and this excess of noise prevented the possibility of a thorough understanding of the meaning of what had happened.

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This article is divided into four sections. The first one, "Urban Unrest", proposes an analysis of the media perception and interpretation of the riots and articulates a critical account of both the rhetoric of a "clash of civilizations" and the political responses to it. The second part "On Names and Presence" briefly reconstructs the main moments of the history of immigration in France with a particular focus on the Algerian community. It also highlights the deep connection that exists between urban development and management of ethnic and cultural difference in contemporary France. The sections titled "Concrete desires" and "Tenir les Murs" start from the spacialised metaphors used by the youth of the banlieues to describe their social activities and provide a reading of twenty-five years of Beur fictional and semi-fictional writings looking at the youths' perception of marginality and social exclusion.

Urban Unrest

Despite the surprise and bewilderment that both French people and government showed in the aftermaths of the riots, France has frequently witnessed violent manifestations of social discontent. The previous fifteen years have seen an almost yearly occurrence of disturbances, involving the major cities of the country.[1] The modalities of the uprisings have always been similar: looting, clashes between youth and the police and car burnings. Without exception, all the disorders followed the killings of banlieusard youths by the police. They were always described as sudden, communal and uncontrolled reactions to the constant harassment and prejudice of the police towards youngsters from the peripheral areas of the main urban centres in France. This situation went on relatively unquestioned until events reached their climax at the end of 2005. Just a few months before the big riots spread, in June 2005 a child died in La Corneuve, a banlieue in the northeast of Paris, after being hit by a stray bullet in a conflict between rival gangs. The then Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, visiting the area few days after the accident promised that he would firmly intervene, cleaning the neighbourhood "with a Kärcher" – a famous brand of pressure cleaning equipment.

These unfortunate words left a sign and were followed by an even more straightforward statement by the same Minister Sarkozy in October, two days before the accident in Clichy-sous-Bois. Sarkozy publicly defined the youth of the banlieues as racaille (scum). Even if the word is used among youngsters to address each other – an English equivalent might be nigger for black American street gang rappers – its enunciation from an official (white) position gave the term an inevitable racist and insulting twist. The death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traorè in Clichy-sous-Bois on 27th of October occurred in a tense moment and was the spark that detonated an enormous malaise. Clashes started that very night.

The chronicle of what happened is widely known: events had massive worldwide media coverage and images of burning cars and bronzé (the French way of defining those with a dark complexion) kids lighting them became the symbols of what seemed to be a breakding point in French society. Many commentators, emphasising the crude aspect of violence in parallel to the ethnic origin of the rioters, implicitly defined French banlieues as the physical stage of a clash of civilisations. An immediate connection was made between riots and radicalisation of Islam. Alarmed interpretations suggested the

[1] Riots occurred in 1990, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, and earlier in 2005. www.uparis2.fr/ifp/formation/dess/journalisme/documents/marlowe/Playing%20with%20Fire%20-%20sidebars.pdf, pp. 18-19.

complicity of Al-Qaeda in the ignition of violence through local branches of Islamist movements. Clashes seemed to confirm the extreme rightwing long-lasting protest against any real possibility for inter-racial social cohesion and were defined as the proof of the failure of national politics of integration.[2] While leaders of Islamic organisations immediately condemned the use of violence, claims of religiously driven riots appear ideological and misleading as no slogan or demand was even marginally connected to religious questions. The closing balance of three weeks of urban warfare had 10,000 cars set on fire (1,400 on the night of the 8th of November), about 30 vandalized schools, more than 3,000 people in police custody and the media, paranoid sensation of France being on the verge of a civil (multicultural) war.

Few days after the official declaration of the end of the riots – that is, when the number of cars set ablaze came back to the "normal" average – Loïc Wacquant gave a talk at the Center of Institutions and Governance at University of California, Berkeley, titled "Burn Baby Burn, French Style? Roots of the Riots in Urban France" proposing a reading of the riots radically against the grain of the rhetorical clamour of the media.[3] Contesting the very argument of the surprise and novelty of the riots, he looks at them in their eruptive/disruptive character. Without a single reference to the religious aspect so emphasised by the media, Wacquant argues that the clashes were powerful communicative devices, which brought to the fore the continuing malaise of the banlieues in relation to questions of both unemployment and intolerance towards the perpetration of structural discrimination from the State – of which police represented the embodiment of the enemy. The ethnic or racial component entered the picture as an aggravating element of conditions of marginality and deprivation, but was not the triggering element of unrest. What was defined by the media as aimless and counterproductive violence was instead to be understood in its proto-political nature. Riots were in fact the symptom of the unwillingness of the lower classes to accept a condition of marginalisation and disrespect. Warning against the risk of a romantic over-interpretation of the riots as an act of political resistance, Wacquant still underlines the importance of the events as they pointed at the widening gap and disaffection between (multiethnic) lower classes and the State. Rather than showing the failure of integration or an identity crisis, in fact, clashes highlight the fact that so-called second-generation immigrants were actually claiming the recognition to their full entitlement to French citizenship.

The reactions of French government to the events were slow and contradictory. The first declarations by President Jacques Chirac arrived only a few days after the uprising started and were articulated around a mild call for social fraternity, being all the citizens equally sons and daughters of the Republic, whatever their skin colour. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Minister of Interior Sarkozy adopted instead a firm and confrontational attitude, with a particularly repressive take – both testing the ground of consensus in relation to the 2007 Presidential elections. Politicians asked very few questions about the possible responsibility of the State for the causes of the unrest. The urgent concern was to find immediate solutions rather than uprooting the deepest problems that generated the clashes.

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[2] Astier,2006; Dikeç, 2006; Hargraves, 2007.

[3] http://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/wacquant/

On the 8th of November, when things seemed to calm down, the government declared the state of emergency (suspended only in June 2006), applying a 1955 Act that was passed at the beginning of Algerian war and never applied since! This meant a sort of curfew with early underground closures in the banlieues and a consequent clear cut between city centres and peripheral neighbourhoods. This determination was perceived as yet another provocation and ended up with the opposite of the result intended, unleashing a further burst of violence. Reactions to this measure were extremely critical also on the side of public opinion. This decision had a strong symbolic and psychological effect on French citizens of North African descent, bringing back to memory the harsh police repressions of the 1950s and 1960s against the supporters of the Algerian struggle for independence. They dramatically highlighted the necessity of French collective memory to deal with the return of repressed (post)colonial questions.

Wacquant criticises the over-ethinicisation of the riots as it shifts the attention from the crucial question of the deproletarianisation of French multiethnic working class. A reconstruction of the geography of riots, in fact, shows the coincidence between unemployment, social exclusion and distribution of violence. The shockingly young average age of rioters (sixteen years old) points at the lack of future personal and professional perspectives that youth living in deprived areas generally suffer.

This is a question Wacquant discusses in his book Urban Outcasts. A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality (2008). Constructing a comparative study between American hyperghetto and French banlieues, Wacquant contests the assumption of an Americanisation of European spaces of urban exclusion. While acknowledging the phenomenological similarities between these two socio-spatial formations, Wacquant underlines the constitutive difference between. They in fact respond to opposite logics of interconnection between race and class in the broader frame of state interventions and historical development of civil society. The media use of the term ghetto to define the harshening condition of European and French urban peripheries in connection with the racialisation of their population, thereby pushing attention away from the transformation of the working class facing global capitalism, while reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes. The concentration of ethnic minorities at the bottom of the social pyramid, and thus their significant presence in the banlieues as a result of social housing programmes, is often misinterpreted as the cause of growing social instability and insecurity. The racial component, according to Wacquant, operates as an aggravating rather than as a determining element of dispossession and exclusion. This is a general condition of advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2008: 2) that lies at very heart of Western society as its repressed other. The presence of spaces of relegation within the centres of Western metropolises gives life to a collective imaginary of misery and deprivation that contributes to worsen the already harsh living conditions in these enclaves of poverty. This construction adds up a layer of "symbolic dispossession" (Wacquant, 2008: 169) that generates a feeling of moral inferiority related to the stigma of territorial indignity that connotes these areas.

The denial of a sense of belonging strongly contributes to loosening social bonds and widening the social divide through what Wacquant (2008: 230) defines the "dualization of the city". Banlieues thus become a sort of memento of personal failures: the ones who stay are those who have no choice, living in precarious economic conditions and developing a deep sense of frustration and bitterness. The metaphor of immobility can represent both the social and the spatial situation of the banlieues. This condition, in combination with a growing unemployment and the consequent expansion of organized

criminality, seems to prevent any possibility of social solidarity "through sociofugal strategies of mutual avoidance" (Wacquant, 2008: 30).

Moreover French Republican values tend to be colour- and ethnic-blind in consideration of a notion of universal citizenship: this attitude has somehow contributed to deepen the sense of displacement and isolation of the different communities, as they are split between the necessity of a network of solidarity and the fear that any sort of communitarian aggregation would widen the gap between them and the rest of French society. This anxiety for a further stigmatisation ends up generating a deep sensation of isolation, a certain suspicion towards the neighbours and a feeling of shame and rejection to the place they live in.

On Names and Presence

Keeping in mind the deep entanglement between class and ethnic elements, it is crucial to tackle the issue of immigration for a full understanding of the situation of French banlieues. The Republican ideals around which France organised its sense of citizenship (Liberty, Equality and Fraternity) have promoted a unitary conception of the nation, endorsing a univocal and homogeneous national belonging. This was supported by a clear distinction between private and public spheres: religious and ethnic communities rights are granted, but they are located within the sphere of individual freedoms, and thus confined in the private realm. A civil society organised around universal values should be ruled by the strict adherence to the concept of laicité (secularism). This is one of the main features that contemporary France has chosen to represent itself - a principle inherited from the French Revolution. Laicité is the choice of a morally and religiously neutral State, which guarantees full expression of freedom of conscience at the individual level. The idea is to create a unique community that publicly gathers around shared civil and political principles, while granting freedom of personal moral choices to be expressed in private. If we go back to the specific features of cultural difference, in a somehow paradoxical way, this attitude might lead to the conclusion that a successful immigrant's presence in French society would result in a sort of invisibility. It is interesting that a frequently used formula to define French citizens of foreign origins is visible minorities, as if openly declaring the inherent failure to adhere to a set of requisite for what being French might mean.

The presence of immigration in France is obviously connected to its colonial past. A crucial moment in this history is the end of the Second World War, when foreign workers were called in to support the economic boom the country was then experiencing. The rapid industrial expansion needed cheap labour to keep it growing and workers from the colonies were asked to be part of the transformation. Campaigns of labour recruitment were held in Algeria in the 1940s and 1950s, promising workers from the countryside substantial economic support to those who would decide to move to France. In this context, immigrants were considered as a desirable, but temporary workforce and very few political questions were asked on how to accommodate cultural difference within a long-term process of nation-state construction.

On arrival in France, immigrants met a harsh situation and many found their first shelter in bidonvilles (shantytowns), which were informally growing in the wastelands surrounding the centres of the major French industrial cities. The 1960s saw the development of cités d'habitation à loyer modérè (HLM – social estates) as a response to the workers' infamous housing condition. These were massive projects of social housing

development, which promoted a counter-model of hygiene and control as a reaction to the conditions of the shantytowns.

This spatial organisation brought white and immigrant working class in close contact, pushing to the fore problems of cohabitation and communication. The situation grew tenser during the 1970s with a progressive economic decline and the consequent increase of unemployment. Those who principally suffered this conjuncture were the under-skilled and non-specialised workers, who for the most part were the immigrants themselves. These are the years when questions of racism and racial discrimination were first openly addressed. By now it had become clear that immigrants were not transitory presences, but were a part of the nation that had to be understood, integrated and assimilated.

In what follows, I will focus on the history and present conditions of immigrants of North-African origin, and specifically in the Algerian community, as they are deeply rooted in the urban context and have developed a mongrel, hybrid subculture that is deeply influential on the general panorama of French urban culture in terms of media, music, fashion, film and literature. They are also one of the most problematic presences in French imagery as they represent an unresolved element of the past, the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) which remains somewhat undigested. Algerian immigrants also represent the biggest portion of the Muslim community in France. After September 2001, there has been a growing suspicious attitude towards Islamic communities as well as a general association between the banlieues and the capillary diffusion of extremist Islamist organisations.

The 1980s were a fundamental turning point in the definition of the cultural and public presence of North-African communities in metropolitan France. After thirty years of right-wing government and a severe economic crisis in the 1970s, France experienced its first Socialist government with François Mitterrand (1981-1995). He was immediately pressured to fully recognise the presence and dignity of immigrant communities (as supported by the Left), while being asked not to lose the grip on major concerns of security and fight against criminality (as requested by the Right). These two drives greatly influenced the political debate of those years with a consequent major impact on the lives of North African immigrants. One of the first initiatives that Mitterrand's government took in matters of immigration was to legalise in 1981 the immigrant's right of association. Cultural initiatives quickly mushroomed everywhere in the country tackling a variety of different issues. A common feature of many of these expressions was the attempt to combine a much localised action – motivated by a sense of belonging to the banlieue they were based in – with a global scope, rooted in the inheritance of the experience of migration. Theatre companies, comic productions and radio stations were the main vehicles to communicate and shape a new dynamic and multi-faceted urban culture. This expansion was soon limited by the increasing recognition that the National Front gained in local elections between 1983 and 1986. Fear of racist escalation and preoccupations of a deep split within the nation forced the government to slowdown and turn its attention from questions of immigration to problems of security and fight against criminality. Political and economical support consequently grew smaller, thus reinforcing the localised tendencies of immigrant cultural associations.

Since the 1970s, Beur was the name used by North African youth to define themselves. It is a Verlan word, Verlan being the Parisian back-slang that is the "official" language of banlieusard young people. This lingo is constructed through the switching of the first

and last syllables of the word, preserving the same sounds of the syllables themselves, but writing them phonetically. Beur is thus the subversive appropriation and twisting around of the derogatory term Arab, which was used as a racist epithet for North Africans – independently from their actual origin or ethnicity. The term became a powerful tool of self-affirmation and came to be the connotative adjective to define the rich urban culture that North African youth were developing in the French banlieues. Beur was thus the term that defined cultural production by either North African or of North African descent youth living in underprivileged urban contexts. The strong evocative quality of the term gave it a huge popularity and was soon exploited by the mass media, depriving it of its subversive and confrontational take. For many critics, it became the definition of an ethno-glam urban underground culture, erasing the deeper layer of the history of exclusion and identity struggle it was originally meant to embody. Once again, the fear of being pigeonholed and stripped of the political possibility of self-definition, opened a debate on whether the term should be rejected or still used, protecting the "historical" value of self-awareness it originally held. No clear position was taken and the term, with its ambivalent story, is still used both at a popular and an academic level to define the whole of this particular cultural production. Keeping in mind the ambiguity of the term I will anyway use it in what follows to define the cultural products I will be examining.[4]

Concrete Desires

High-raising tower blocks and long, grey concrete bars, ennui: this can be the synthetic, almost banal, summary of the literary representations of the French banlieues. Being in Paris, Lyon or Marseille does not seem to make much difference: the homogeneity of the social housing suburban areas generates a landscape that reproduces itself over and over, independently from its actual location. This monotony represents a symbolic landmark that projects its shadow both on the construction of people's desires and on a sort of identification between physical environment and social expectations. A sense of exclusion and disillusionment, combined with a real lack of infrastructure, contributes to transforming a symbolic divide into a material border. The split between the city and the banlieue is socially, spatially and aesthetically clear and almost impossible to trespass. These polarities represent the sheer opposition between access to possibility and its negation. The physical belonging becomes a crucial element in the process of self-definition as it influences possibilities and access to resources. What can be defined postcode discrimination seems to operate on both the material and the psychological level: biases connected to heavily stigmatised neighbourhoods have in fact an impact on both sides of the divide. If, on the one hand, there is an actual discrimination on the side of employers and people living in the city centres; on the other hand, the same mechanism has produced a lack of self-esteem that might prevent youths even to try and change their situation.

Impression of inaccessibility of the other side of this irreconcilable partition strongly influences the narrative tone of Beur literature. A sense of paralysing immobility is one of the main triggers of Beur narrations, which become almost a response to this heavy weight in the negotiation of an acceptable social position. These are the main lines along which the actual presence of the banlieues takes shape in the literary production of Beur authors since the 1980s. Some twenty-five years of fictional and semi-fictional accounts

[4] Beur literature has in fact become a generally recognised definition.

of immigrant's life in social housing neighbourhoods of French metropolises give back a bleak picture with very few signs of transformation. Significantly, the main themes and places have not changed in time. Questions of discrimination, lack of recognition, physical seclusion along with street violence, poor housing and little hope for improvement of material conditions can be indicated as core elements of this kind of literature. What emerges from the texts of Beur writers is the deep, inherent connection between place and identity. The physical context plays a fundamental role in the construction of a self-understanding that tries to negotiate, on the one hand, with multiple heritages, poor material condition social and racial discrimination; and, on the other hand, with the desire for normality, full citizenship and the possibility of a better future.

Tenir les Murs

Le Gone du Chaâba (1986) by Azouz Begag is one of the earliest and most complex reconstructions of the immigrants' experiences and their deep interconnection to the specificity of the place they settled in.[5] The book is the autobiographical account of the early childhood of the author, recalling both the years spent in the Chaâba bidonville at the periphery of Lyon and the hope-filling passage from the shantytown to a flat in a social housing project. The narration is in the first person and gives a vivid and fresh account of a harsh world as it is perceived from the eyes of a young boy.

The physical description of the space of the bidonville is constant and particularly detailed as it has a significant impact on the trajectories of games and adventures of children's lives. Chaâba has gathered several families coming from the same village in Algeria, its spatial construction thus closely reflects the needs and habits of a structured community, with shared courtyards and spaces for social gatherings, an illegal slaughterhouse and common latrines. The place has neither electricity nor water, which is supplied by only one pump (or bumba as it is called in broken French) that is a constant object of clashes among women. Chaâba is constructed around a disorderly geometry, it is dirty and cramped and characterised by the smell of oil lamps that light the long winter nights in the bidonville.

Through the relation to his schoolmates, Azouz becomes aware of the fact that living in a shanty town means to be poor and he starts to grow a deep shame towards his lifestyle and origins. The confusion towards his own identity is reflected in the constant reference to the transitory state of untidiness of the bidonville. The lack of physical structure of Chaâba mirrors the accumulation of heritages and denials Azouz struggles to come to terms with. He is almost daily confronted at school with the width of the cultural gap between his family habits and what is understood to be appropriate within French society. Classes of "hygiene" and "moral education" are those where the distance is more apparent. In order to overcome this uneasiness, Azouz puts all his efforts and energies to become a good student so as to make his father proud and find his own place in society. Surprisingly, though, this becomes a further element of conflict. His Algerian

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[5] Azouz Begag is a writer, a sociologist and a politician. He has been Ministre délégué à la promotion de l'égalité des chances (Delegate Minister for Equal Opportunities) between June 2005 and April 2007 under Dominique de Villepin's Government.

friends accuse him to have betrayed them: "T'es pas un Arab, toi!" (Begag,1986: 94).[6] If he were a real Arab, in fact, he would have not been a good student. This loneliness is enlarged as more and more families leave the shantytown. Azouz' father – one of the elders of Chaâba – seems to resist the idea of moving out as he fears that living in a house-block would deprive him of the sense of community and social solidarity he grew up with and managed to reproduce in the bidonville. As living conditions become harsher, after a few years Azouz family eventually manages to move into a proper flat in a HLM in a banlieue of Lyon. When they enter their new flat there is a mixed sensation of enthusiasm and displacement for the newly acquired luxury: electricity, fresh water, a private toilet. Begag in Le gone du Chaâba reconstructs a unique picture of the passage from the provisional accommodation in a shack to the fulfilment of the dream of a proper house. It also denounces the long impasse of French government in dealing with questions of immigrants housing and welfare. For those who were first sheltered in the bidonvilles, banlieues became a dreamt destination and an achievement rather than a bottom-line solution. What was gained in physical comfort, though, was somehow lost in psychological terms as the community bonds grew looser in the context of concrete bars and tower blocks. In the decade between the 1970s and the 1980s when the shanty towns were completely demolished, banlieues lost that ideal connotation and increasingly became the embodiment of social exclusion and economic discomfort. They became the stage where the struggle for a sense of normality takes place, facing the difficulties of being able to make through the day.

Beur fictions and semi-fiction share the same compressed and repressed violence and despair, where the monotonous and deprived scenario of the banlieue plays the bodily counterpart of an encaged hope. Most of Beur novels have youths on the threshold of adulthood as the main characters. The hostile indifference of the landscape does not help them in a proactive construction of an assertive sense of self. A conspicuous dichotomy between inside and outside, us and them, banlieue and city centre, reinforces a process of identification that is forged by denial as much as by positive affirmation.

The banlieue is the scenario of these interactions and it is understood as the negative polarity of the city centre, which is imagined as a faraway realm of liberation and the dreamed destination for the eventual flight. Social and individual expectations collide on the margins of the metropolitan environment that seems instead to promise the possibility of freedom and emancipation. The banlieue, in this sense, represents the space where ancestral family rules and patterns of behaviour clash against the youth's attempt to create a canon that would allow them to come to terms with their metropolitan French belonging. This, though, is in turn frustrated by the lack of recognition of being fully part of French society as they are still considered a different "category" of citizens that is the children of immigration or else second generation immigrants.

Le thè au harem d'Archi Ahmed (1983) by Mehdi Charef is an interesting example of the struggle of a mixed-race group of young kids trying to make their way on the streets of the banlieue. Both the novel and the film that was later produced from the book, tell the story of Madjid, the oldest son of a family of Algerian origins who lives in the outskirts of Paris.[7] The plot is very simple and reconstructs the daily dynamics of a group of

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[6] You not an Arab!

[7] Mehdi Charef is also the director of the film titled *Le thè au harem d'Archimed* (2002) that was awarded of the Jean Vigo prize. The different titles of the book and the film stem from an

people living in a HLM in the days before Christmas. Madjid, his best mate Pat and their crew of friends are the main focus of the narration. Through their eyes, experiences and perceptions, the author reconstructs the way in which the struggle of daily survival is lived in the banlieue. In a combination of cynicism and naivety, the kids face and discuss questions of unemployment, rage, ennui, drug, racism and self-definition. Madjid's father came to France from Algeria as a non-specialised worker. After working many years in a factory, he lost his job and with it his mental health. This character is somehow the extreme representation of a condition that hunts many North African immigrants in their fifties. The economic stagnation put many of them out of employment. Most of them were without any specialisation and too old to learn another job, the number of immigrant workers who ended up unemployed and consequently alcoholic or mentally unstable is significantly high.[8]

In narrative terms, the presence of their fathers' failures is one of the elements that forces kids on the street. If, in fact, this is the result of leading an honest life, then it is definitely better to get involved in criminal traffics making easy money and enjoying a more comfortable life: the association between immigrants' honesty and French exploitation leads to a general sense of disillusionment and mistrust. Madjid's father embodies both the failure of a role model and the absence of an alternative one. Kids only know they don't want to end up that way. What seems to be missing is where do they want to go and how they intend to reach their aim. This sense of being no-where, this idea of being destined to live in a state of transition but with no destination is what shapes Madjid's and his friend's life: there is nothing to do but waiting, there is nothing else but ennui. In Le thè au harem d'Archi Ahmed the landscape of concrete towers of the banlieue, with its monotonous but reassuring character, is used as a narrative device to highlight the emotional dimension of the characters. The first scene of the film is a long shot of the neighbourhood at dawn with panoramic views of the tower blocks and few people walking on the streets heading to the bus to go to work. This sequence recurs throughout the film as both an image of hope and despair: it tells about the daily struggle to find, obtain and maintain a job to survive. The theme of unemployment and its relation to dignity and self-esteem is a red thread throughout the film.

In this precarious context of uncertainty, Madjid lets time pass without opposing any resistance. In this rootless form of waiting, Madjid's days go by between the local café, the staircases of one of the housing blocks where he zones with his gang and few incursions in the city centre where, with little tricks, he can get easy money – with his friend Pat, they sell a local junky as a prostitute to illegal workers living in shacks in the wasteland around the banlieue; they roam sport centres in posh areas to steal money from "rich people" to buy a nice meal and a lady for the night; they rob people on the tube to get some cash.[9]

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incidental joke during the course of the narration. In a flashback about their schooldays Madjid and his friends recall one of their fellow students misspelling on the blackboard the name of Archimedes theorem (Le theorem d'Archimede).

[8] This subject has been addressed by Abdelmalek Sayad in his book *La double absence*, 1999.

[9] The passage of the theft on the tube is one of the few in which racial prejudices take actually shape. The guy whose purse is stolen accuses Madjid of the theft – which is instead perpetrated by Pat (who is white) – and insults him using racist terms.

In this aimless wandering between the banlieue and the city both the book and the film end with a long night ride on a stolen car driving through the city lights and towards the sea that the kids have never seen before. They reach the shore at dawn and when the sun is about to rise, the police find them. All but Madjid run away; he is arrested and taken away: a strange beginning of a new day. The police car though suddenly stops to find Pat on the edge of the road who, when asked, replies that he is with his friend. In the end, when everything seems to fall apart, friendship, however rough and dysfunctional, seems to be the only reliable certainty kids decide to invest upon.

The attempt to navigate between the city and the banlieue is the engine that moves Hexagone (1992), a film by Malik Chibane set in Goussainville, a banlieue 20 km north of Paris.[10] The colours and framings of the film photography play a fundamental role in emphasising the division between the two shores. The colour that characterised Goussainville is grey in a variety of shades: thick clouds of the autumn sky, asphalt of the long empty streets, scrapped plaster of the concrete buildings. Paris is generally depicted at night, sparkling and running fast out of car windows: it is remote, ungraspable and full of possibilities.

Hexagone tells the story of a group of friends of Beur origin. They are in their early twenties with little professional qualifications, but big hopes for a better future. The film begins with a long panoramic view on a picturesque rural landscape of ripe cornfields; as the camera closes up, big grey concrete bars and towers appear against the horizon of the endless cityscape. The ideal natural landscape is abruptly interrupted by the monotony of the social housing modular structures, which are the stage for the whole action. Moving between the employment office and the organisation of parties at the local community centre, the protagonists of the film try to make the day through an intricate construction of lies and mystifications. Counterfeit documents with fake names, addresses and qualifications have to be produced in order to get a better chance to find a job. This is also the reason why Slimane decides to call himself Roland before asking a blonde, French girl out for a date. What Loïc Wacquant defined "territorial indignity" (Wacquant, 2008: 137) plays a central role in the construction of the filmic narration of the banlieues.

The film depicts a bleak scenario of French intercultural relations and equal access to opportunities as it transmits a sense of suspension and incompleteness. The difficulty of straightforward communication and the frustration for the impossibility of honest self-expression impose on the protagonists of the film the bitter awareness of the physicality of the gap that separates the city and the banlieues. Clothes, lifestyles, language are all extra symptoms that clearly mark the divide. Chimane's camera seems to indulge on the representation of the monotony and dullness of the banlieue's landscape as both a symbol and a cause of the identity struggles and negotiations of its young inhabitants.

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[10] The film is an auto-production realised without external funding. It is played by non-professional actors and it took Chibane almost ten years to have it released. This is one of the striking examples that clearly marks the different political approach to minority cultural production between France and United Kingdom. The colour-blind attitude of French policies has inevitably excluded from funding those cultural products that were understood to be to *community oriented* and thus not fully arketable on the national level. For an interesting discussion about the impact of public funding on *Beur* cinema see Tarr, 2005. Also for a critical reading of filmic representations of French *banlieues* see Bullock, 2003.

Things for youths are often made more difficult by the cultural and behavioural divide they experience between public and private spaces. Familial violence and lack of communication seem to be unspoken rules to reproduce the social roles that have been left behind in Algeria. In the general panorama of displacement and disorientation the parents' attempt to replicate traditional models is a way to create an impression of stability in a foreign world that is harder and harder to grasp.

In his book Désintégration (2006), Ahmed Djouder discusses the social and psychological condition of the children of immigration trying to look at them through the relation to their parents' lives and experiences. The book is constructed as a flow of thoughts without a proper narrative line: it is a view on the daily experiences of a young Beur trying to define himself both in relation to his family culture, desires and expectations and in connection to the interaction with French society at large. The picture is constructed through a succession of our parents do not… we are…our mothers believe… the Arabs love… you did not understand… The train of thoughts starts with a list of what immigrant parents do not do in comparison to what an "average" French parent is expected to be doing – like playing tennis or badminton, going to a classic music concert or out for dinner in a restaurant. This is followed by a long description of the general living conditions of immigrants. The interiors of crowded domestic spaces reflect the attempt of cohabitation within two cultures: reproductions of Renaissance paintings hang on the wall next to family portraits and photos of the Holy Shrine in Mecca. Family is the main moral and social value, the absolute priority that parents try passing on to their children.

The constant misunderstanding between generations and the different perceptions of their presence in France amplifies the sense of loneliness that Beur youths feel and express in their narrations. They are almost suspended in a vacuum where a whole new code of interpretation of the world has to be forged. Coming from families who still preserve their cultural and emotional roots in Algeria – that children have possibly never visited – Beur youths try to construct a language that could allow them to reduce the gap between home and the world. It is a kind of daily migration between two different worlds within the same world, which inevitably sits at the core of cultural production. The emptiness produced the dichotomy between an unknown fatherland and an unwelcoming country of birth (as it is France for Beur children) is filled by the banlieues, which embody an ultimate sense of belonging.

It is interesting to note that in the street jargon the metaphors used to talk about these sensations are strikingly spatialised. The streets of the neighbourhood are in fact the backdrop of long and empty days. As gangs meet in the alleyways of the tenements or in the corners of courtyards, the expression that they use to describe the necessity of killing time is tenir les murs (holding the walls) as if their actual, bored presence were physically inscribed in the local environment. Another interesting expression, along the same lines, is the verb zoner that indicates the getting together and strolling around. The space of the neighbourhood in a subtle, but pervasive ways overcomes the physical realm and insinuates the symbolical sphere. This overwhelming presence becomes a metaphorical tool of identification replacing traditional models of belonging. The solidity of the concrete structures of towers and bars provide an anchor in the floating process of self-definition: however dull, their monotony and sameness play a reinsuring role when everything else seems to be in transition.

Moving from the semi-fictional narration of autobiographical novels to the personal accounts of life in the banlieues, 1, 2, 3 … cités! (1999) by Akim Malouk with journalist Daniel Lederman follows a very similar narrative development. Malouk recounts the ups and downs of his young life, weaving a tight link between biographical events and the context he grew up in. Living in a HLM in the north-west outskirts of Paris, the city is the ideal and forbidden destination, almost another universe: "Un univers auquel je n'ai pas droit et que me rejette. C'est comme si j'etais transparent" (Malouk, 1999, p. 28).[11] Fashion and clothes become the tools to gain visibility, the embodiment of a dignity that might otherwise seem inaccessible. The logic of dress to impress pushes the kids to a constant need for quick money, accessible through local criminal networks. Illegal trafficking is the easiest access-point to a number of possibilities that regular society seem to deny: a sense of community and protection through the identification and complicity with a gang; commodities and material wellbeing that the general high level of unemployment seem to forbid; an opportunity to kill the ennui and do something in the desolately empty hours of life in the banlieues. The sense of uselessness and boredom is the fertile terrain to nurture blind rage and hate against society. The word haine has been identified as the general sentiment of the banlieusard youth; it painfully recurs in Beur writings and was constantly used during the 2005 riots as the invisible engine of all the clashes. It works as a scapegoat, an attribution of responsibility, a justification. This almost primordial hatred is often traced back to colonial times: contemporary youths are only picking up a poisonous fruit that has been planted by the French many decades ago. It pays back for the structural injustice that immigrants have suffered while contributing to the increasing welfare of the French nation. Hate is the response to the lack of recognition, both in terms of gratitude and acknowledgement of their bare existence.

Despite the bleak picture, the closing of the book is a naïf declaration of goodwill and positive intentions following the lines of: if I were the mayor of my city I would do many things to gave youngsters a better life. This is a common feature of semi-literary autobiographical accounts. The apologetic tone of many of these writings, combined with a claim for authenticity, puts them within the long lasting anthropological tradition of native informants. This approach brings to the fore only voices the broad public is willing to listen to – namely those somehow unproblematic writings, which picture a reassuring situation where all is well that it ends well. The redemptive conclusions of many of these narrations counterbalance the need for a straightforward and open narrative as there is always the necessity to preserve a sense of acceptability. Too dark a picture would risk reinforcing existing stereotypes on the side of potential readers. Positive values as generosity, friendship, dedication to family, faithfulness, solidarity, sacrifice and honour are highlighted as the innermost component of a culture that is ignored and underestimated by French society.

The pressure towards a normalisation of the cultural production of visible minorities dangerously disempowers the attempts of constructing an autonomous voice, capable of freely represent one's own experience and cultural heritage. This attitude is clearly reflected in the actual spatial organisation of French urban society as well as in the way in which certain areas have become symbolic of social conflicts.

[11] A universe that is not my right, that rejects me. As if I were transparent.

Conclusion

Moving between the historical reconstruction of the of 2005 riots in the suburbs of French cities and a symptomatic reading of Beur literature, the article proposed a transversal of the complex entanglement between fiction and fact in the understanding of stigma, marginality, fear and quest for social justice.

The analysis of twenty-five years of Beur literature does not instrumentally prove the origins and reasons of the conflict. Its relevance rests upon the fact that it offers lateral access to an unspoken dimension that has always been there, but somehow left on the margins. The spatial inscription of social discomfort is present as a constant feature in Beur fiction; it subtly, but inevitably emerges between the lines of the narration. Interestingly it never comes out as an openly addressed problem: it has been so deeply digested to be normalised as an entrenched element in the construction of both personal identity and social relations. If there is nothing new in highlighting the connection between locality and identity, what is particularly relevant in the case of French banlieues is that they project the question well beyond the biographical accounts of individual experiences, directly addressing social and urban policies. Looking at the imaginary representations of these places can work as a device for both analysis and future planning. In political terms they are, in fact, a reservoir of sensations and projections that can crucially contribute to the understanding of what and how people perceive the place they inhabit. In conclusion, when talking about a space of social and economic relegation, getting a grasp on this unspoken dimension can work in perspective both as a platform of participation and discussion and as the indicator of a malaise that has to be addressed rather than swept under the carpet until it eventually explodes.

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