

THE Republic AND THE Riots

Exploring Urban Violence in French Suburbs, 2005–2007

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Introduction

Quartiers sensibles or *banlieues* – since the beginning of the 1980s, and the urban violence that took place in the Lyon suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin, these terms have rapidly become synonymous with certain French suburban landscapes. Characterized by severe social and economic problems, as well as a high proportion of inhabitants of immigrant origins, these areas exist at the limits of French society.

In the *quartiers sensibles* the social climate is dominated by high levels of unemployment, crime and delinquency.¹ Discrimination and marginalization form part of the daily life of inhabitants, whether it is through the tense relations with the police or the difficulties experienced by residents in securing employment due to their association with areas that are stigmatized due to their social and economic problems as well as intense media coverage of past instances of violence. The scene of sporadic and highly mediatized outbreaks of large-scale urban violence for over three decades, these suburban areas have been targeted by French urban policy – the *politique de la ville* – during that time in an attempt to integrate the *banlieues* into mainstream French society. However, despite numerous efforts, the suburbs have remained excluded, with further episodes of violence merely serving to reinforce the negative perception of these areas in a circular process that further distances them from mainstream society.

In 2005, the *quartiers sensibles* were propelled to the centre of attention in French, and indeed world, media as violence once again enveloped these areas. The death of two teenagers, electrocuted as they hid from the

1 While the term ‘quartiers sensibles’ is originally a policy term used in the context of French urban policy, this term is used interchangeably with the term ‘banlieues’ throughout the thesis. The usage here is at once descriptive and intended to highlight the overarching stigma that has become attached to both of these terms in the popular imagination.

police, in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois proved to be the spark that ignited the suburbs. For a period of three weeks cars were set alight, buildings were attacked, and *banlieusards* clashed with the forces of order. Moreover, the events of 2005 signalled a new stage in French urban violence. While past events had typically been limited to the immediate spatial surroundings of the *banlieue* in question, the events of 2005 went much further in terms of their scale and amplitude. During the second week, the violence spread to suburban areas further afield, eventually affecting *banlieues* right across the country. The gravity of the situation provoked the government to declare a state of emergency, invoking emergency laws dating from colonial times.²

The events that unfolded at this time affected all areas of French 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 sixteen and seventeen years, 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. Essentially, it can be argued that the riots of 2007 constituted the aftershock of 2005, with both events, while temporally separated, taking place in the same context and under almost identical circumstances. In an insightful editorial published in *Libération* in 2007, two days after the deaths occurred, Laurent Joffrin stated that ‘chacun peut [...] constater que la matrice sociale et psychologique des émeutes de 2005 est toujours à l’oeuvre.’³ In terms of context, the memory of 2005 and the deaths of the two young resi-

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 ‘La loi permet “d’interdire la circulation des personnes ou des véhicules dans les lieux et aux heures fixées par arrêté”’, *Le Monde* (8 November 2005).

3 ‘Matrice’, *Libération* (27 November 2007).

dents of Clichy-sous-Bois were still fresh in the minds of the young people of Villiers-le-Bel, and indeed, youths of all other *quartiers sensibles* were touched in some way by the events of that time. The temporal distance separating the events of Clichy-sous-Bois from those of Villiers-le-Bel was not sufficient to efface the thoughts, feelings and emotions aroused in 2005. This is best illustrated by the choice made by young people in Villiers-le-Bel in the days following the tragedy to adopt the same slogan that was first seen on t-shirts and banners among the friends and family of the two dead *clichois* – ‘Morts pour rien’. In the case of Villiers-le-Bel, *Le Monde* reported how ‘l’après-midi, on a photocopié à la hâte les portraits de deux adolescents “morts pour rien”: le même cri de ralliement qu’après le drame de Clichy-sous-Bois.’⁴

Beyond the more general context of the violent events which occurred two years apart, it was the circumstances surrounding the immediate cause of the 2007 violence that provided the strongest link to the riots of 2005, and the similarities here are striking. The events that took place in Villiers-le-Bel echoed those that occurred in Clichy-sous-bois two years previously: two young residents of the locality (of a similar age to the youths who died in 2005) died in an incident involving police officers. 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: the police immediately denied any wrongdoing, while local youths held the forces of law and order responsible for the tragedy. Thus it is clear that the events of 2007 are inextricably linked to those of 2005. During the 2007 riots, Francois Pupponi, Mayor of the neighbouring suburb of Sarcelles stated that ‘c’est Clichy bis’, thus acknowledging the link between the two instances of violence.⁵

4 ‘A Villiers-le-Bel, un meneur: “C’est pas du cinéma, c’est de la guerre”’, *Le Monde* (28 November 2007).

5 ‘Un premier rapport de l’IGPN écarte la responsabilité des policiers’, *Le Monde* (27 November 2008).

Both during and after the events of 2005 and 2007, various social and political commentators aired a range of interpretations regarding the causes of the riots: simple acts of destruction by delinquents; a fragmentation of society along ethnocultural lines; a manifestation of social crisis. However, these interpretations, formed for the most part without the benefit of critical distance, are reductive and do not adequately address the key issues at stake in the suburbs. While the suburbs have been perceived as a point of social rupture in French society since the first riots in the Lyon suburb of Les Minguettes at the beginning of the 1980s, the events of 2005 were unprecedented. The scale of the violence represented a turning-point in French urban violence as the violence and destruction progressively spread to all corners of the hexagon. The events of 2007 were also unique. While not provoking the same widespread violence engendered by the incident at Clichy-sous-Bois, Villiers-le-Bel crossed a new threshold in terms of intensity. The violence of 2007 represented the first time that firearms were widely used in clashes between the police and young *banlieusards*.

The new levels reached in 2005 and 2007 respectively, one in terms of scale, the other in terms of intensity, are indicative of a growing malaise in French *banlieues*. More generally, the violence of 2005, as well as the aftershock of 2007, revealed the extent of the social divide that is growing within the Republic. Media accounts have revealed that many young people living in these areas seemed to be angered by the failure of the Republic to treat them as the equals of people from more affluent areas. Could it be that these young people were attempting to address the blind spot of French republicanism? That is to say, the situation that is produced when the reality of the racial and social discrimination suffered in the suburbs on a daily basis is obscured by the abstract proclamation of 'universal equality' for all citizens as set out in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Did the riots constitute a rejection of French society and values at large, or, conversely, could the violence be seen as a call for social inclusion?

In light of these issues, this book will explore the causes and significance of the violent events of 2005 and 2007. To do this, I will use these instances of large-scale urban violence as a starting point to examine the social, cultural, and economic situation in the French suburbs. On a larger scale, my analysis situates the question of the *banlieues* within the broader

context of the republican model and its supporting ideology. The book will examine the origins and nature of French republicanism before focusing on the validity and application of this model in contemporary French society. In working towards these goals, the question of policing in the *banlieues* will also be considered, given the frequent causal link between the forces of order and instances of large-scale violence in the suburbs, as well as the vital role of police in society as the immediate representatives of justice, guardians of the republican regime. The role of police is undoubtedly an issue of paramount importance in the question of integrating the *banlieues* into mainstream French society. Finally (although undoubtedly most importantly), the book will be supported by empirical evidence gleaned from a nine-month case study of Villiers-le-Bel, the scene of violence and destruction in both 2005 and 2007 and a suburb that is representative of all the social and economic problems that characterize the *quartiers sensibles*. The case of Villiers-le-Bel is particularly interesting. In 2005, while a significant number of cars were burned and clashes with police were recorded, this commune did not experience the levels of violence that occurred elsewhere despite its spatial proximity to Clichy-sous-Bois, the source of the riots.⁶ However, in 2007, the considerable use of firearms on the part of the young rioters in Villiers-le-Bel went beyond anything recorded in 2005.

Thus, important questions are raised: why was the violence somewhat limited in 2005 in comparison to other areas further afield? And why in 2007 did the violence reach unprecedented levels of intensity, with a number of police suffering wounds inflicted by firearms? In this regard, the results of extensive fieldwork permit an in-depth assessment of the true nature and causes of both the 2005 riots and the aftershock of 2007. The fieldwork provides access to the voices of those inhabiting the *quartiers sensibles*, voices which are often rendered inaudible by the clamour of interpretations voiced by social commentators. Analysis of these seldom-heard perspectives will allow the research to go beyond the media-constructed 'reality' of life in the suburbs and reveal the social and cultural processes

6 Communes are the smallest administrative subdivision in France.

operating in these areas. In more general terms, the fieldwork will afford a unique insight into the questions of belonging and citizenship in the *banlieues*. The identity of the *banlieusards* that exists in the public sphere is often one that has been constructed and superimposed by social commentators and the media, perhaps with a particular political or financial agenda in mind. 'Émeutier', 'immigré', and 'délinquant' are some of the names given to the inhabitants of these areas. However, this attributed identity often bears little resemblance to the self-perception of identity held by the inhabitants themselves. Consequently, the qualitative research carried out in Villiers-le-Bel will explore the question of identity among local residents and, on a larger scale, how the inhabitants of the area perceive their relationship with French society and the Republic at large. The case-study of Villiers-le-Bel, while undoubtedly reflecting the local social dynamic, will provide a general frame of reference to which other similar areas may be compared. The conclusions drawn from research in the microcosm of Villiers-le-Bel will provide new information that will shed new light on the macrocosm of the *quartiers sensibles* in more general terms.

Ultimately, this book will provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of one of the most pressing issues facing contemporary French society. Bringing together questions of immigration, citizenship, belonging and identity, the analysis will centre on issues which have dominated public and political life in France for three decades. The central focus of the book, the *banlieues*, sits on the point of convergence of all of these issues. The *banlieues* are widely perceived to represent a concentration of all the challenges facing the French Republic at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this context, the suburbs can be regarded as a testing-ground for the Republic, a means of assessing the direction in which French society is heading. My analysis of the nature and causes of the riots will thus offer an insight into a broader triad of interconnections: the interplay between republican ideals and the reality of daily life in the *banlieues*; between national projections of unity and localized realities of disunity, and between figures of authority (political and policial) and citizens.