

CHALLENGING THE REPUBLIC: INTERPRETING THE 2005 URBAN VIOLENCE IN FRENCH SUBURBS

By *Matthew Moran*

In autumn 2005, the French ‘quartiers sensibles’ exploded into violence.¹ The deaths of Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna, two young inhabitants of the Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis, proved to be the spark that ignited the profound underlying ‘malaise’ of these problem suburbs. For three weeks the attention of French, and indeed world media, was focused on the infamous ‘banlieues’ as cars burned (up to 1400 cars were set alight in a single night at the height of the violence), buildings were attacked, and inhabitants of the suburbs clashed with the forces of order.² In the wake of the riots, various social commentators interpreted these events in different ways, with some reducing the riots to simple acts of vandalism and destruction by delinquents and thugs, while others evoked the threat of “communitarianism”, a fragmentation of French society along ethnocultural lines. However, the social issues at stake in the suburbs are undoubtedly more complex than these more superficial readings would suggest. The suburbs have, for many years, been labelled as a point of social rupture in French society, a theory that has been reinforced by similar past events such as the violence at Les Minguettes in 1981, or Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990, for example. However, the events of 2005 were of an unprecedented scale and magnitude, affecting areas right across the country and resulting in the resurrection of an emergency law dating from colonial times.³ Beyond the material destruction of

the riots, the 2005 violence revealed the extent of the social divide that is growing within the Republic, a divide that separates these underprivileged areas from mainstream society, thus challenging social cohesion. In the ‘quartiers sensibles’ – a term that has become synonymous with these marginalized areas – unemployment is rife (reaching as high as 58% in certain suburbs); the educational career rarely surpasses secondary level; and levels of crime and delinquency are notoriously high.⁴ The literal and metaphorical position of these suburbs, at the limits of French society, has created pockets of exclusion where social relegation is compounded by the discriminations suffered by inhabitants on a daily basis. The deteriorating sociocultural situation in the ‘quartiers sensibles’ threatens to permanently rewrite the social geography of contemporary French society, as it challenges the validity of the Republican model and its ideological foundations of liberty, equality and fraternity. In light of these issues, this paper will use the 2005 riots as a means of exploring the sociocultural situation in the ‘quartiers sensibles’; and, on a larger scale, the challenge posed by these areas to the ideological concept of French republicanism and the historically-rooted notion of the ‘one and indivisible French Republic’.⁵

Deconstructing the Violence in Popular Discourse: Two Reductive Interpretations

In contemporary French society, insecurity and urban violence are two themes that have occupied a primary position in popular discourse in recent years. Mucchielli confirms that the preoccupation with urban violence dates from the beginning of the 1990s, when the topic became a permanent fixture of the discourse of journalists, politicians, security professionals and numerous intellectuals, following the first series of ‘urban riots’ which began with those of Vaulx-en-Velin in October 1990, and continuing with riots in Parisian suburbs between March and July 1991.⁶ He goes on to state that, in recent years, the expression ‘urban violence’ has become trivialized to the point of becoming almost a daily element of the various media. Moreover, a

¹ ‘Quartiers sensibles’ is a term used to denote socially excluded and underprivileged suburban areas of major French cities.

² ‘Violence subsides across France’, *BBC News* (10 November 2005) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4424096.stm>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

³ 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 in 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 fixés par arrêté »’, *Le Monde* (8 November 2005)

<http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=922431> [accessed 23 April 2008].

Author’s note: It must be noted that articles cited from the

online archives of *le Monde* are frequently subscription-only content and are not freely accessible.

⁴ Jean-Marc Stébé, *La crise des banlieues* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), p.53.

⁵ The French republican model is a complex historical and ideological concept rooted in the revolutionary period of 1789. While it is not possible to examine the concept in this paper, it is useful to identify the key principles on which the model is historically based: universal assimilation, equality, liberty, and the secular state. Moreover, national unity has developed alongside these principles as a key element of republicanism in France, a means of ensuring the continuation of the republican model.

⁶ Laurent Mucchielli, *Violences et insécurité. Fantômes et réalités dans le débat français* (Paris : La Découverte, 2001), p.7.

review of coverage by the written press in relation to the suburbs over the last twenty years shows that the themes 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 ‘youth of the suburbs’, ‘thugs’ and ‘scum’ explicitly associate the activities of certain inhabitants (particularly the young) of the suburbs with the cause of the security problem facing French society; while expressions and terms such as ‘social fracture’, ‘gratuitous violence’, ‘lawless areas’, and ‘the hate of the suburbs’ have constructed a stereotype of the suburbs as a menace to mainstream society.⁷ Finally, and most importantly, Mucchielli states that the use of this vocabulary is inseparable from a general representation, according to which French society is faced with an ‘inexorable rise’ in delinquency and violence, a ‘surging of waves of adolescents’ that are getting more and more violent at a younger age.⁸

The discourse articulated in the wake of the 2005 violence constituted a continuation of this trend that depicts a society threatened from within, with the values and ideals of the Republic being placed in stark contrast with the menace of the ‘quartiers sensibles’. Closer examination of reactions to the 2005 violence, coupled with the benefit of critical distance from the events, allows us to distinguish two distinct interpretations of the events that unfolded. The first interpretation is that articulated by police and a certain element of the political sphere, as represented by the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. Proponents of this stance viewed the riots as the actions of thugs; experienced delinquents expressing a veritable hate for French society and the Republic. During the course of the violence, Sarkozy (who was elsewhere accused by many of fuelling the riots with his derogatory description of the inhabitants of the suburbs) explicitly asserted that the violence and destruction was the work of ‘thugs’ and ‘scum’, evoking the image of ‘gangs’ of delinquents wreaking havoc in the suburbs.⁹ The picture painted by Sarkozy was that of a social space dominated by a ‘fear of the gangs, the big-shots’, areas where even the police are afraid to go.¹⁰ Statements issued by the various police unions in the wake of the 2005

violence 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 ‘the scum [of the suburbs] at war with the state’ at the union’s 5th National Conference in November 2005.¹¹ The warlike discourse of *Alliance Police Nationale* was compounded by Frédéric Lagache, national secretary of the union, who called for ‘the eradication of those who rot the lives of the inhabitants of the suburbs and direct the youth there against the forces of order’.¹² These declarations 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. However, the supposition that is implicit in this discourse - that of a core of hardened delinquents, directing their destructive tendencies at French society and the Republic at large - was called into question in the wake of the 2005 riots. As time elapsed, allowing the events to be studied with a greater degree of critical objectivity, it emerged that the facts relating to the violence of 2005 did not support this rhetoric. In fact, the opposite was true. A study undertaken by sociologists Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux revealed that, contrary to Sarkozy’s claim that ‘80% of the youths brought before the prosecution were well-known to police’, the immediate appearances of the ‘rioters’ before the court at Bobigny showed that the majority ‘had no criminal history and thus could not be classed as “delinquents”’.¹³ Furthermore, in the case of those minors brought before the Bobigny children’s court for their actions during the violence, Judge Jean-Pierre Rosenczweig revealed that out of 95 minors brought before the court ‘only 17 were known to the justice system’, with some of these known for their educational assistance to the justice system rather than for acts of delinquency.¹⁴ These revelations call into question the rhetoric of insecurity that dominates popular discourse regarding the suburbs,

⁷ The review of newspaper articles mentioned here is comprised of a study of more than 300 articles from three major French newspapers – *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération* - spanning the period 1987-2007.

⁸ Mucchielli, *Violences et insécurité*, p. 7.

⁹ Cited in ‘Nicolas Sarkozy continue de vilipender “racailles et voyous”’, *Le Monde* (11 November 2005)

<http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=922507> [accessed 23 April 2008].

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Jean-Claude Delage, ‘Discours de clôture du Secrétaire Général’, 5^{ème} Congrès *Alliance Police Nationale* (17 November 2005)

<http://www.alliancepn.fr/presentation_syndicat_police/presentation_alliance_syndicat_majoritaire/congres_alliance_police_nationale/17_11_2005_discours_jcdelage.pdf> [accessed 23 April 2008].

¹² Jacky Durand, “‘Il faut reconquérir les quartiers par le dialogue’”, *Libération* (21 October 2006) <<http://www.liberation.fr/dossiers/banlieues/actualite/212173.FR.php>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

¹³ Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, ‘La “racaille” et les “vrais jeunes”: critique d’une vision binaire du monde des cités’, in *Banlieue, lendemains de révolte*, ed. Chakri Belaid (Paris : La Dispute, 2006), p.19.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.20.

a rhetoric that reduces the sporadic violence that erupts in these areas to the destructive tendencies of delinquents. For Beaud and Pialoux, this reductive discourse regarding urban violence effectively imposes a simplistic, binary view of the situation in the ‘quartiers sensibles’ that fails to acknowledge the underlying social issues at stake:

This discourse [...] feeds off a summary etiology of the phenomenon of violence that is based on a reassuring dichotomy: there is, on one side, a group of “violent youths”, “beyond reason”, “savages”, whom we are afraid to label as beyond redemption (which, nonetheless, is the belief of many figures of authority), and, on the other side, the “non-violent” youths, that allow themselves to be led and, consequently, that must be protected against contamination from the first category.¹⁵

As more information emerged following the end of the large-scale violence in mid-November and the return to ‘normal’ in the ‘quartiers sensibles’, the rhetoric of insecurity was again challenged by further evidence uncovered in a confidential report authored by the *Renseignements Généraux* (the RG are the intelligence service of the French police force) dating from the 23rd of November 2005. This report, uncovered by the French daily newspaper *Le Parisien*, and published on the 7th December 2005, explicitly stated that the violence ‘was not organized or manipulated by any groups, either criminal or Islamist’.¹⁶ This statement undermined and contradicted the claims of ‘numerous politicians’ that the riots were the result of the destructive trajectory of criminal gangs.¹⁷ This evidence was particularly damaging in relation to the public statements made by the former Interior Minister, denouncing the gangs who hold sway in these suburbs, given the role of the RG to provide the Interior Ministry with information and statistics relating to the development of urban violence in cities.¹⁸

The second interpretation is also to be found within the general critique that views the ‘quartiers sensibles’ as a menace to mainstream French society. However, the focus of this interpretation is ethnic-oriented, with advocates viewing the 2005 violence in terms of communitarianism and a fragmentation of the Republic along ethnocultural lines. Since the 1960s and the development of the enormous HLM apartment blocks that dominate the skyline in many

of the ‘quartiers sensibles’, the suburbs have always been home to a large population of immigrant origins, many of whom have roots in the Maghreb countries of northern Africa and subscribe to the Muslim faith.¹⁹ According to a report compiled by the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies in France following the 1999 French census, almost a quarter of the population of the “sensitive urban areas” in the Ile-de France area, for example, comprises of immigrants, with over a third of all immigrants in this area originating in countries where the predominant religion is Islam.²⁰ However, this statistic is reductive as it excludes those inhabitants of immigrant origins who have acquired French citizenship. More generally, research has shown that the French Muslim population is the largest in Europe.²¹ Following the events of 2005, Alain Finkelkraut proved to be one of the main proponents of the communitarian-oriented interpretation, publicising his opinions during a controversial interview with *Haaretz*, the Israeli newspaper, on the 18th November 2005. In the course of this interview, Finkelkraut clearly evoked an ethnocultural fragmentation of the Republic:

In France, they would like very much to reduce these riots to their social dimension, to see them as a revolt of youths from the suburbs against their situation. The problem is that most of these youths are blacks or Arabs, with a Muslim identity [...] it is clear that this is a revolt with an ethno-religious character.²²

The philosopher spoke of the ‘anti-Republican pogrom’ that has developed in the ‘quartiers sensibles’ and the ‘hate’ that has grown against the Republic, a ‘hate’ that stems from cultural and religious issues: ‘[the riots] are directed against France as a former colonial power, against France as

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁶ ‘Selon les RG, les émeutes en banlieue n’étaient pas le fait de bandes organisées’, *Le Monde* (7 December 2005) <[http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30\]&objet_id=925976](http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30]&objet_id=925976)> [accessed 23 April 2008].

¹⁷ *ibid.*
¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ The HLMs, *Habitation à loyer modéré*, were built as an answer to the urban housing crisis in French cities that was brought about, to a large extent, by the huge influx of immigrants in the post-war period. The HLMs were designed to provide affordable accommodation and to facilitate the mixing of social classes and backgrounds. However, these housing projects developed as a concentration of some of the poorest members of society.

²⁰ See ‘Atlas des populations immigrées en Ile-de-France’, INSEE - *Service Etudes et Diffusion* (December 2004) <http://www.insee.fr/fr/region/rfc/ficdoc_frame.asp?ref_id=9459&doc_id=9212> [accessed 23 April 2008], and Virginie Andrieux, and Julie Herviant, ‘Les zones urbaines sensibles en Ile-de-France en 1999’, INSEE - *Service Etudes et Diffusion* (2001) <http://www.insee.fr/fr/region/rfc/ficdoc_frame.asp?ref_id=4887&doc_id=4788> [accessed 23 April 2008].

²¹ ‘Muslims in Europe: country guide’, *BBC News* (23 December 2005) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4385768.stm>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

²² Dror Mishani and Aurelie Smotriez, ‘What sort of Frenchmen are they?’, *Haaretz* (18 November 2005) <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=646938>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

a European country, against France, with its Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition'.²³ Finkielkraut made an analogy between the French Republic and Europe, both under attack from parts of the Muslim-Arab world, thereby explicitly conflating the Muslim population of the suburbs with the menacing image of the inhabitants of these areas physically manifesting a religiously-motivated hate for the Republic.²⁴ Finkielkraut's analysis of the situation clearly evoked the Islamic culture and religion as a threat to the continuation of the Republican model. However, once again, the facts of the 2005 violence told a different story. Throughout the course of events, a significant Muslim presence on the streets was recorded by journalists. However, journalists also recorded the fact that the majority of these inhabitants actively engaged in discouraging the violence, in some cases even attempting to form barriers between youths and police.²⁵ Furthermore, the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (UOIF) specifically issued a *fatwa* forbidding Muslims from taking part in the violence while other local Muslim organisations organised night patrols in an attempt to calm those involved in the violence.²⁶ Further evidence to contradict this cultural or ethno-religious interpretation of the riots was also revealed with the publication of the aforementioned confidential report by the RG, published in *Le Parisien*. The report stated that Muslim fundamentalists had 'no role in the outbreak of the violence or its subsequent expansion'.²⁷ Indeed, the RG confirmed that this group 'had every interest in a rapid return to calm in order to avoid damaging comparisons'.²⁸

These reductive interpretations of the events of 2005, and, on a larger scale, the sociocultural situation in the suburbs, have important consequences for the social integration of these areas into mainstream French society. In propagating a selective discourse that depicts the inhabitants of the suburbs, especially those of immigrant origins, as a menace to society, as a force actively attempting to undermine and attack the Republic, the authors of

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Luc Bronner and Catherine Simon, 'Clichy-sous-Bois cristallise les tensions politiques et sociales', *Le Monde* (2 November 2005) <http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=921070> [accessed 23 April 2008].

²⁶ 'An underclass rebellion', *Economist* (10 November 2005) <http://www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_VTPVSJV> [accessed 23 April 2008].

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²⁷ 'Selon les RG, les émeutes en banlieue n'étaient pas le fait de bandes organisées', *Le Monde* (7 December 2005).

²⁸ *ibid.*

this rhetoric situate the population of these areas in direct opposition with mainstream society. The subtleties of the situation in the 'quartiers sensibles' are lost through the imposition of an almost Manichean opposition. A specific identity is imposed upon the inhabitants of the suburbs - the identity of a population apart that constitutes a willing obstacle to the positive development of French society as a whole. This in turn reinforces social prejudices regarding the suburbs and its inhabitants, feeding into the divide that ensures the perpetuation of the suburbs as zones of exclusion and relegation. However, this limited critique of the situation in the suburbs does not tally with the reality of the 'quartiers sensibles'. Alain Finkielkraut claims that the violence of 2005 must not be reduced to its social dimension, and yet to detract from the importance of the social dimension would be to neglect an intrinsic element of the debate surrounding the situation in the suburbs. Analysis of the events of 2005 shows that the violence contained a message that is more complex than the notion of an attack on the Republic orchestrated by a hate-filled population, a message that is inextricably linked to the social situation in the suburbs and that calls into question the very nature of French Republicanism.

Reason Amid the Chaos: The Underlying Message of the Violence

In an astute 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 that the term 'integration', which, since the 1980s, has replaced that of 'assimilation' in popular discourse, is misleading:

It is seductive [...] in theory it appears to exude a respect for culture, traditions, language and religion [...]. However in practice it proves to be booby-trapped. As soon as integration fails, the finger is pointed at the youth of the suburbs and they are told: "Why are you not making an effort to integrate" instead of pointing it at a society incapable of assuring equality of rights and opportunities to all young people, whatever their origins, whatever the color of their skin, whatever the sound of their name.²⁹

In this statement, Vidal succeeds in articulating one of the fundamental concerns in the debate on the 'quartiers sensibles'. Essentially, the

²⁹ Dominique Vidal, 'Casser l'apartheid à la française', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (December 2005) <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2005/12/VIDAL/13002>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

violence of 2005 constituted a rupture in the fragile social equilibrium that holds sway in the problem suburbs, balancing the discrimination and marginalization suffered by the inhabitants of these areas on a daily basis with the growing anger and frustration of the inhabitants at the injustices imposed upon them. The riots thus expressed the profound dissatisfaction that prevails among inhabitants, especially young ones, in the suburbs in relation to their current sociocultural situation. The population of the suburbs is ordered to integrate into a society that does not treat them as equals, a society that does not afford them the same opportunities as others. In the suburbs, the lack of educational support, the lack of social services, the lack of facilities and the widespread discrimination in terms of employment are all issues that have resulted in a spiral of despair - for the young people of the suburbs, despair and hopelessness overshadow many dreams of upward social mobility. This despair is compounded by a loss of faith in the justice system as a result of continued police discrimination and repression. In the 'quartiers sensibles', the deterioration of relations between the police and the public over a prolonged period has resulted in a relationship characterized by conflict and tension with the representatives of justice viewed as an enemy, symbolizing a justice system that appears corrupt to the inhabitants of these areas, rather than a positive social element. Since 2002, the situation in these areas has further deteriorated, with reductions in government funding for development projects in the suburbs. Beaud and Pialoux highlight the example of the *emplois-jeunes*, the government initiative aimed at creating jobs for unemployed youths. These jobs played an important part in the positive development of the 'quartiers sensibles', offering many youths a valuable opportunity, allowing them to 'regain confidence in themselves, giving them status, an income, and the chance to establish themselves and dream of a better future'.³⁰ Inhabitants of these areas feel isolated, physically and metaphorically from the state that is failing to address the problems of the suburbs, from the Republic whose values and ideals do not appear to extend to these areas. These arguments are supported by a number of facts that emerged as the riots continued.

First, throughout the violence, an extremely low level of civilian casualties at the hands of the rioters was sharply contrasted by the large number of attacks on cars and buildings and this fact alone gives a significant insight into the motivations behind the riots. The widespread destruction of cars represented what Hargreaves terms as an attack on

the symbols of a 'social mobility and modes of consumption from which the rioters know they are excluded through structural inequalities and discriminatory practices'.³¹ In a more practical context, the large-scale burning of cars effectively ensured intense media coverage of the events, thus giving a national and international platform to issues that may have otherwise remained localized. Furthermore, attacks carried out on buildings targeted, for the most part, state-owned buildings, which constitute an accessible, physical manifestation of the abstract state. Schools and police stations took the brunt of the anger, symbols of an education system that is selective and a justice system that is discriminatory. Second, as the riots progressed, attacks on material goods were overshadowed by the continued confrontations between the rioters and the forces of order, the severity of the clashes clearly indicating the extreme tension that exists between these two groups who have 'no capacity for negotiation, regulation or mediation'.³² Finally, the sheer magnitude of the events proved that the violence was linked to a profound and wide-ranging discontent, much greater than the destructive intentions of any one community, whatever their motivation. Following the initial outbreak of the unrest in Paris, similar instances of violence erupted in suburban areas across the entire nation.

A Plea for Integration?

In 1997, Michel Wieviorka evoked the urgency of the problems facing the French Republic in relation to the growing issues of multiculturalism and social integration.³³ Part of a collection of essays debating multiculturalism and social fragmentation in France, Wieviorka's assertions emphasised the new challenges facing the Republic as it moved towards the dawn of a new millennium, challenges brought by multiculturalism and the problems of reconciling an abstract republicanism with a rapidly evolving social and cultural reality. Now, over a decade later, France is still faced with the same questions. However, the situation has degenerated, the social gap separating the suburbs from mainstream society is wider than ever, while repression seems to be the basis for action on the part of the government – increasing police presence in the suburbs and calling

³¹Alec Hargreaves, 'La révolte des banlieues à travers les livres', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (November 2006) <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2006/11/HARGREAVES/14140>> [accessed 23 April 2008].

³² Laurent Mucchielli, 'Il faut changer la façon de "faire la police" dans les "quartiers sensibles"', in *Banlieue, lendemains de révolte* (see Beaud and Pialoux, above), p.93.

³³ Michel Wieviorka (ed.), *Une société fragmentée: le multiculturalisme en débat* (Paris : La Découverte, 1997).

³⁰ Beaud and Pialoux, 'La "racaille" et les "vrais jeunes"', p.23.

for tougher sentences to be handed out to young offenders. The growth of the theme of insecurity in the political sphere, and consequently in the media, has fostered a widespread fear among the general public, for whom the media often provide the only means of gaining an insight into the world of the 'quartiers sensibles'. Moreover, a definitive link has been forged in the popular imagination between the theme of insecurity that permeates discourse relating to the 'quartiers sensibles' and the subject of immigration, a link that leads to discrimination based on what Dubois terms 'real or supposed origins'.³⁴ However, for Beaud and Pialoux, what is perhaps most worrying about the situation in the suburbs is the apparent incapacity on the part of those in power to comprehend the social fragility of the inhabitants of the suburbs.³⁵ The continued failure to fully face the worsening situation in the suburbs has resulted in a vicious circle where certain inhabitants see violence as possibly the only way to draw attention to the urgent social issues that dominate these areas.

Following the riots there was widespread criticism of the Republican model and its failure in relation to the integration of the 'quartiers sensibles'. However, closer examination of the situation in the suburbs reveals that it is not necessarily the nature of the Republican model but rather the application of this model that poses a challenge to the integration of the suburbs. At present, French society is witnessing a selective application of the values and ideals upon which the Republic is built. The suburbs exemplify this, representing the 'blind-spot' of the Republic, a social space concentrating all the challenges that face contemporary French society – immigration, discrimination, unemployment, education and justice, to name but a few. The RG report published in *Le Parisien* on the 7 December 2005 revealed that in the suburbs 'youths feel penalised by their poverty, the colour of their skin and their names'.³⁶ The report went on to claim that the young people of these areas 'are handicapped by the absence of perspectives in French society', evoking a 'total loss of confidence in the Republic'.³⁷ Essentially, the youth of the suburbs are asked to integrate into a society that refuses them access, to adhere to ideals and values that do not appear to apply to them. Azouz Begag emphasised this point during the riots, claiming 'the young people are destroying a public space to which they do not feel

like they belong'.³⁸ In this context, the events of 2005 could be viewed as a plea on the part of the population of the suburbs, a plea for access to the same values and ideals that are available to other parts of society. Both during and after the violence, the aforementioned interpretations helped to foster the belief that the inhabitants of the suburbs were rejecting the Republic and all of its values. However, perhaps the opposite is true. While the events of 2005 did not constitute a social movement (due to the lack of leadership and coherent manifestos or demands among other things), the violence that enveloped the nation did indeed represent a revolt by the youth of the 'quartiers sensibles' against their sociocultural situation. Angry and frustrated at their treatment by a Republic of which they are a part, could the spreading of the violence have symbolised a widespread and spontaneous denunciation by suburban communities across the nation of this selective social climate that has cultivated a divided French society? Throughout the violence there were no formal calls for the end of the Republic, for this is not the desire of those involved in the riots. It would appear that the youth of the suburbs were simply asking to be recognised for what they are: citizens of France, and to be incorporated into mainstream French society.

Traditionally, the motto 'one and indivisible' has formed a cornerstone of the French Republic.³⁹ However, at the beginning of the 21st century, the social geography of France reveals a significant divide that poses a serious threat to this proclamation. French society has reached a crossroads in its social development; if the Republic is to progress as a whole, the suburbs must be embraced by mainstream society. The government must recognise the potential of these areas to positively contribute to French social and economic progression, and invest in the development of the suburbs. The trend of exclusion must be reversed or the French Republic will move divided into the future. In light of these issues, the 'quartiers sensibles' would appear to be the testing ground for the Republic of the future.

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³⁴ Jean-Pierre Dubois, 'Violences et politiques', in *Banlieue, lendemains de révolte* (see Beaud and Pialoux, above), p.73.

³⁵ Beaud and Pialoux, 'La "racaille" et les "vrais jeunes"', p.27.

³⁶ 'Selon les RG, les émeutes en banlieue n'étaient pas le fait de bandes organisées', *Le Monde* (7 December 2005).

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Philippe Bernard, 'Les déchirements du ministre Azouz Begag', *Le Monde* (8 November 2005)

<[http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30\]&objet_id=923239](http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30]&objet_id=923239)> [accessed 23 April 2008].

³⁹ Cited in Denis Sieffert, *Comment peut-on être (vraiment) républicain?* (Paris : La Découverte, 2006), p.24.

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