

On French Riots

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Wednesday, 21 December 2005. This is a rough draft of a future article by John, originally taken from a "group of discussion" (mailing-list).

'We burn cause it's the only way to make ourselves heard, because its solidarity with the rest of the non-citizens in this country, with this whole underclass. The guys whose cars get torched, they understand. Ok, sometimes they do. We have to do this. Our parents, they understand. They did nothing, they suffered in silence. We don't have a choice. We're sinking in shit, and France is standing on our heads. One way or another we're heading for prison. It might as well be for actually doing something'

- interview in the Guardian, Nov. 9th 2005

The Renault showroom in the 'City of Three Thousand' housing project, Aulnay-sous-Bois, was burnt to the ground the night of Wednesday November 2nd. The 40 or so brand new cars inside fed the ferocity of the conflagration, confounding the efforts of a couple of hundred firemen to put out the flames. A few days later, in the boxing gym down the road, perfunctory attempts to condemn the rioters as 'silly kids' gave way to invective when the subject of the Renault showroom came up: "You know, that place employed 55 people. Do you know how many of them came from round here? Not one."

French companies get tax breaks for investing in the banlieue, but it is common that they use the same criteria employing people here that they have elsewhere: an African or Arabic name, an address from a certain neighbourhood – even if it is the neighbourhood where the job is located – and you will be passed over in favour of a more 'respectable' CV. It is not true that everyone in the banlieue is unemployed or a drug dealer. The lucky few can find work in factories relocated to these areas in search of cheap labour as well as tax breaks, and others can get part-time work in the various 'associations' for education or against drugs and violence. These latter are publicly funded organisations designed to kill two birds with one stone – dampen the spiralling crime and revolt, as well as artificially lower the unemployment statistics by dolling out 'jobs' to all-comers. But these measures are obviously ineffective in the long-term (combating neither the causes of crime nor unemployment) and they have seen drastic budget cuts in the last 3 years. The cuts have perhaps been exaggerated as a cause of the recent riots (by militant association workers with a bigger voice in the media than anyone else in the banlieue) but combine it with the recent tightening of the welfare benefits on which a large percentage (sometimes 50%) of the local population survive, and it becomes clear that it is not only police harassment but also the 'social wage' of a growing precarious section of the working class which is under contestation in these riots. Faced with a capital which increasingly abandons its role in reproducing the proletariat, the class is forced to demand the universality of its own reproduction, the 'normalisation' of equal access to employment and benefits, from the perspective of an exceptional particularity which itself threatens to become the 'norm' for the proletariat as a whole. It is thus both a struggle against a particular proletarian condition which is becoming universal, and for a normal proletarian condition which is becoming impossible. The members of the boxing gym expressed a wish to be treated like 'French workers', which means permanent contracts and 'respectable jobs', not the shit line-work the men get offered in the factories, or the cleaning jobs the women do in the bourgeois suburbs; the trouble is they know that 'French workers' live in fear of being

treated like them, and are wont to support the provocative and repressive measures of the state for this reason.

‘The events’

Young proletarians in the French banlieue burn 90 cars per day *on average*. Burning cars is a tradition which dates back to the late seventies when proles in Strasbourg started to celebrate New Years Eve with a cheaper means of explosive than fireworks. Some sociologists have pointed out that the car is a symbol of the mobility denied to most ghetto dwellers, and incurs their rage partly for this reason, but a simpler explanation is the ease with which a car can be torched and afford a spectacle for the arsonists whilst also attracting police and journalists who will come and report these incidents if the conflagration is big enough. The fact that burning cars is one of the only ways of getting some kind of recognition by the rest of French society, as well as an established means of pissing off the cops, shows to some extent why teenage boys in Clichy-sous-Bois took to it immediately on the night when they heard that two of their companions had been killed whilst hiding from the cops in an electrical substation. This story spread quickly, as the deaths caused a temporary blackout which extended to the police station where some of their friends were being interrogated. Journalists reported it that night on TV, even the Prime Minister was questioned and repeated the official lie that the boys were involved in a robbery and that the police did not give chase (two lies made more blatant by the fact that they seem to contradict one another).

The first cars to go were postal vans; also bus shelters and trash cans were torched that night (all of which shows the extent to which state-property was at the receiving end of the rioters attention from the beginning). The next night, when it was clear that the official lies would be repeated and the cops would not apologise, more people came into the streets, this time older men as well as teenagers, but the police were ready with rubber bullets and tear gas. The rioting continues the next two nights, with some 80 cars burnt and 60 arrests, until on Sunday evening, in an area-wide heavy police clampdown, a dispute involving an illegally parked car outside a mosque leads to the cops firing a tear gas canister into the mosque itself (it is the night after Laylat Qadr, the holiest day of the Muslim year). Again there are more official lies denying this incident (‘it was a different kind of canister than those used by the cops’) and no prospect of an apology forthcoming; indeed on the scene there are reports of cops using racial and sexual insults against women as they run out of the mosque. It is only at this point, in reaction to the media coverage of this incident the next day (and the media for the first time questioning the state’s version of events in both cases), that the riot began to spread outside of Clichy-Sous-Bois, first to the rest of the Seine-St-Denis area, then on wednesday to the rest of France. By Saturday over a thousand vehicles had been burnt in total, but the conflagration was growing exponentially, and on Monday night alone 1,400 were torched. In the full period of two weeks almost 10,000 cars burnt in about 300 localities. On top of this, dozens of public buildings were set on fire, mostly state-owned buildings like schools, cop shops, dole offices, gymnasiums, but also many shops, warehouses and even one factory (French insurance companies estimate the total damage at 200 million euros).

These numbers might give an impression of a massive riot taking over large areas and overwhelming the cops, but few of any of those 10,000 burning cars were used as barricades. If the

cars were used as anything other than as ciphers for the media it was to tie up police and firemen or (in a few cases) to set up ambushes for them and pelt them with rocks. There were very few attempts to hold territory by the rioters. It was mainly small autonomous groups of friends (mostly teenage boys), avoiding real confrontation with the cops and burning what they could in order to get their ghetto on the nightly news: with its map of France on which the cloud and sun icons were replaced by little flames. Soon the media realised that there was an element of competition between different cities and different ghettos and stopped reporting the numbers of cars burnt by localities. Those who were burning buildings seem to have been somewhat distinct from those burning cars, tending to be older and acting with greater preparedness and selectivity. Going by the few interviews we made and others in the press it seems that the latter actions were also more divisive than the former, with more people willing to denounce the burning of a school than the burning of locally owned cars. However, this may be due to the relative controversy of the actions in French culture in general: the school in France represents the most important values of the republic (and they were obviously targeted for this reason) whilst car burning is not only a common event but fits into a somewhat institutionalised symbolic tradition of street protest. Even some of the owners of the burnt out cars were willing to defend the actions in interviews, acknowledging that all established political channels had been exhausted and pointing out that it is the only way of getting the attention of the media and the state. However there was a widespread *de facto* solidarity beyond any explicit discourse, for many of the actions were carried out in such a way as to depend on the complicity of the local populace and the number of people denounced to the cops was relatively low.

The specificity of the riots

The radicals and activists I met experienced 'the events' (as they came to be known in the French media) as if they were taking place in another country, and it seemed that at least in Paris no-one from the radical left had any contact with the rioters. Some people tried to support the riots through writing leaflets and going to demos against police brutality, but the demos were poorly attended, and as others pointed out it made little sense to 'support' a riot, you either participated or you didn't. Yet unlike previous riots which took place in specific places, with large groups of people and often during the day, these were seemingly randomly distributed night-time skirmishes and essentially impossible to join. The only way for 'radicals' to participate was to do their own things with their own groups of friends in their own neighbourhoods. Thus the few who did manage to participate remained as isolated from the rest of the rioters as the the groups of rioters were amongst themselves. However this difficulty of contact and communication posed even more of a problem for the leftist associations or religious groups that would have wanted to play the role of mediators, they were caught completely off guard by the events and could do nothing but impotently call for a return to calm, thus showing themselves to be the enemies of the rioters.

Now that the riots are over (having literally burnt themselves out in some areas) the work of analysis can begin. This will happen not only in the press and government circles, but above all in the French left whose *forté* is theory *post festum*. Did it show the bankruptcy of the French model of a state-led republicanism, or the first expression of the liberal 'Anglo-Saxon' one which threatens to replace it? Was race a factor in the riots, did they affirm a communitarian identity? Or

did they display a unified patchwork of colours and creeds, all demanding equality of citizenship as 'children of the republic'? The silence of the rioters means that all these questions will be posed rhetorically, along with one or other proposition of a 'solution' to the riots.

On this list R. and Yannis raise the question of 'collective bargaining by riot' and this is more interesting for it corresponds to a debate among communists about the '*revendicative*' status of the riots, or the extent to which they pose demands. At one end of the debate are those who deny that any demands have or could be made in this form of struggle, seeking to distinguish it from traditional forms of workers struggle. Depending on what you think about those traditional forms this is either a good thing or a bad thing: either the riots are denounced as counter-productive 'lumpen' actions with anti-social content, or they are romanticised as pure 'unrecuperable' forms of revolt with no illusions. For both these views the distinguishing feature of the riots is their nihilism. At the other end of the debate are those in TC who (rather provocatively) call the riots 'syndicalist', asserting that the demands are clear, that the struggle has a pragmatic defensive character, and that the perspective of the struggle is no more 'nihilistic' or 'suicidal' than any current struggle in the workplace. On this view the 'demands' are: for the end of the (often racist) harassment and provocation by the cops, for the defence of the social wage as it exists against the recent tightening of the welfare system, and, yes, for employment: to be treated as 'normal workers'; in a word, for 'respect'¹. The fact that most don't want the crap jobs on offer, that they are often so undisciplined as to be unemployable, and that everyone knows that the 'normal' 'respected' worker in France is an endangered species, does not negate these demands, it just makes them contradictory (and what demands aren't contradictory these days?). On this view then, if this is a form of collective bargaining it is one in which the price of the sought after 'respectability' will always remain impossibly high. Just as in England, the term 'respect' in France has come to signify a split within the proletariat, a split which is often racialised, but which opens up just as much between 1st and 2nd generation immigrants: it is the split between those who have gained some minimal recompense and recognition for their labour and those on their doorstep who represent the disrepute into which they could so easily slip – if they lose their job, if the housing market collapses, if their neighbourhood goes the same way as the ghetto down the road. It is the mutually opposed demand for 'respect' on both sides, from those who have nothing to lose but respect and those who have nothing else to gain, which shows how for the proletariat today, class adherence has been reduced to an external constraint imposed by capital. TC argue that in this situation there are no means for building a class unity based on the proletarian condition other than a struggle against that condition itself.

A comparison which R. made between these riots and those of the early eighties in the UK is one which has occurred to many of us. In both cases a prolonged crisis of unemployment and a variety of liberal restructuring measures created a state of tension in which the riots of the most dispossessed was just the most violent of a series of confrontations with the state². The

¹ it is true that these demands are somewhat problematically imputed onto a largely mute movement, but this objection would apply even if there were strong mediating organisations who expressed them, we have to overcome the temptation to make of the 'silent majority' of any movement the radical contrary of its representation. if the government is responding in the words (if not deeds) of 'anti-discrimination' and 'anti-poverty' it is not because it is stupid

² in France public sector strikes, the peasants movement, the lycéens movement, and the movement against the European constitution all saw themselves as against 'liberalism' and were all denounced for their 'backwardness' and 'irresponsibility' by modernists – in this sense the burning of cars in your own neighbourhood is just the most 'barbarous' end of a continuum of temporal sabotage

form of rioting was different but the large spread of the riots was the same. As was the separation between the riots and the struggles of the most militant sectors of the old workers' movement (in England manufacturing, in France the public sector). However this kind of comparison risks the mistake of seeing history as race, with France lagging 20 years behind the US and UK economies. Witness the hubris of the UK press in its response to the riots: wagging their fingers at France's failure to reflect its ethnic diversity in public life or create a truly flexible job market at the same time that the 'third way' is itself being questioned (post-July 7th).

The response of the state

The reaction of the state is perhaps the most immediately significant fact, and shows also the difference with the UK case. Thatcher had liberal judges to go in and reform the police service, forcing them to admit to 'institutional racism', as well as local community institutions who were given real power and public money. She was also willing to leave the welfare system untouched because she depended on it whilst taking apart the old manufacturing industries. Chirac simply cannot afford to buy off the banlieues, and that kind of multiculturalism would be more difficult in republican France, but he is also obliged to reform the welfare system here and now, making conditions worse in the short term. The only option for the state is therefore more repression, and the decision 4 days after the riots had finished, to prolong the state-of-emergency for 3 months shows the extent to which they realise that the war is only beginning. This law has been used to impose curfews but rarely in areas seriously touched by the riots and often they are just the result of right-wing prefects trying to gain votes by taking tough stance. Apart from the general climate of fear which aids the state in its unpopular reform program, the most significant measures which the state of emergency allows for (and which have already been put into effect) are the ability to carry out raids and expel immigrants without going through the normal judicial channels. The riots have in this sense served as a pretext for the testing of strategies of repression and 'states of exception' which are as much a portent of the future as the riots themselves.

4,770 people have been arrested of which 763 have been charged already. Most of them seem to have been arrested during the day on the basis of police or grasses claiming to have seen them the night before, or simply in raids of known troublemakers. They would all be tested for traces of gasoline on their clothing, even on the soles of their shoes, and any positive result would be enough for a conviction. The hearings were very informative, for they revealed things that the media never reported, such as the fact that many were done for robbery and small acts of looting (though no mass looting seems to have occurred) and a surprising number had part-time jobs or apprenticeships. The sentences varied greatly but in general they were extremely harsh, often three or four times the usual punishment (3 months in prison for throwing a rock). As far as I could see in Paris there was a little or no prisoner support from the radical left, even from those groups writing 'supportive' leaflets.

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