

CHAPTER TWO

The Republic and Its Beast: On the Riots in the French *Banlieues*

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*The two short chapters to follow by Achille Mbembe are translations of previously published articles that were written in the heat of the moment following the urban uprisings of October–November 2005. As one of the best-known intellectual figures associated with francophone post-colonial criticism in the United States and beyond, Mbembe has been able to articulate the aspirations of the dispossessed while also bringing to bear a theoretical and intellectual appreciation for the principles of justice, humanitarianism, and universalism associated with French republicanism. We have translated two crucial essays as “The Republic and Its Beast: On the Riots in the French Banlieues” (first published in the Douala-based Cameroonian journal *Le Messenger*, issue no. 2002, November 8, 2005: 7. Most recently it has been available in French on the Toulon section of *Les Droits de l’Homme* website: <http://www.ldh-toulon.net/spip.php?article971> [accessed on August 3, 2008]), and “Figures of Multiplicity: Can France Reinvent Its Identity?” (first published in *Le Messenger*, issue no. 2006, November 15, 2005: 6–7. It appeared under the title, “Les figures du multiple: La France peut-elle réinventer son identité?” It is also available in French on the Toulon section of *Les Droits de l’Homme* website: <http://www.ldh-toulon.net/spip.php?article2221> [accessed on August 3, 2008]). Paradoxically, these two texts emphasize*

the significance of the humanitarian impulse associated with French thought and culture on the one hand, but also probe the dark side of contemporary France, on the other. They also examine the difficulty the French republic has had in dealing calmly with the race question, constituting what Mbembe describes as the shameful face of French democracy. Finally, we have chosen to include these essays because they are documents of political intervention, evoking the nature of France's colonial past and calling on France, as a multi-faceted republican identity, to finally come to terms with decolonization and reinvent itself in the name of values most critical to French identity that include democracy, tolerance, and fraternity. —Eds.

France is an old country, proud of its traditions and of its history. Without its contribution to philosophy, culture, art, and aesthetics, our world would undoubtedly be poorer in spirit and in humanity. That is the limp, almost crystalline side of its identity.

The Beast and Its Nocturnal Face

Unfortunately, old age in itself does not necessarily make peoples or states more reasonable. Every old culture conceals, behind the mask of reason and civility, a nocturnal face, a vast store of obscure drives that, given the opportunity, can turn lethal.

In the West, that nocturnal face and those drives have always been fixated on race, the Beast whose existence the French republic, in its sometimes blind concern for universality, has always refused (not always wrongly) to admit. The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, speaking precisely of race, was right to proclaim that it represented the final frontier beyond which the political in the strict sense no longer had any meaning. Had she not seen how Germany built concentration camps in the 1930s and 1940s, in order to be done once and for all with “the Jewish question”? Fortunately, France has not come to that.

That said, the evasive strategy it has continually used with the Beast since the early 1980s may soon blow up in its face. Perhaps more than other European countries, France is now experiencing two crises—of immigration (represented by the figure of the “alien”) and of citizenship—which are now fueling each other. As a result of these crises, the nocturnal aspect of the republic, stirred up in great part by “Le Penism”

and relayed by “Sarkozysm,” is gradually revealing itself. We see it in the way state racism, which has always constituted the shameful, and for that reason carefully veiled, side of French democracy, has now become commonplace. The Beast, which demagoguery deployed by preference against foreigners, is now turning against the political body itself, threatening to divide it between the “French of pure stock” and those French who are “not quite like the others.”

As always in times of emergency, people bow to the imperatives of “presentism” and tend to forget the deep causes. The relationship between France and the black and Arab nations of Africa has long served as an outlet for that state racism: paternalist and accommodating in its postcolonial version, monstrous when necessary, as during the Algerian War. Lurking in the shadows was always the Beast. For a time, it could be seen clearly only by the light of France’s African policy, conducted with perfect continuity by successive administrations since 1960.

One may wonder what the riots in the *banlieues* (outlying regions) of Paris have to do with Africa. It must not be forgotten that the policy France conducted on that continent for several years is in great part responsible for the twin crises of the “alien” and of the citizen, which has found expression in the current flare-up of violence in the urban neighborhoods. After all, the phenomenon of so many French citizens of African descent packed into the ghettos is a direct result of the colonization of parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb in the nineteenth century. Before colonization, there was the slave trade: hence the existence in these neighborhoods of West Indians, Guadeloupans, and many others. The acceleration in migratory movements toward France is also the direct product of that long history. More decisively, the flow of illegal immigrants from the countries of the former French colonies is one of the consequences of the multifarious support the government of France has continued to offer predatory indigenous elites who run countries they have not ceased to pillage and impoverish since the achievement of independence.

In large measure, France is reaping at home what it believed it could sow elsewhere, irresponsibly. That has created a moment when the Republic is being asked to take seriously the question of the plurality of memory. Relatively belated efforts have been made to symbolically assume responsibility for slavery and its abolition. As for the “colonial fracture,” it is still gaping wide. Since no one wants to hear about affirmative action policies, the restoration of public order in the

banlieues will necessarily be achieved by white police officers pursuing young people of color in the streets. In the meantime, a legislative bill celebrating the “civilizing” and colonial enterprise has been passed by Parliament.

It is a good thing to confront the United States when it tramples underfoot an international law, which, in any case, very few nations were respecting. In addition, however, we must set an example in our own relationship with the weakest, the most vulnerable, the most dependent members of society. From that standpoint, France’s conduct toward its minorities is comparable to its conduct in Africa since the end of direct colonization: anything but ethical. Since 1960, France’s African policy has radically contradicted everything the country claims to represent and the idea it has formed of itself, its history, and its fate in the world.

No mutual attraction exists any longer between France and Africa. Execration and rejection now seem to characterize that old relationship, judged on both sides to be more abusive than ever.

The Geography of Infamy

In francophone Africa especially, the hostility, even seething hatred, of the younger generations toward France and what it represents is only getting worse. In all the major cities, tempers flare at every incident, however insignificant. The paradox is that anti-France sentiment is thriving at a time when there are increasing signs, if not of a real disengagement, then at least of widespread indifference on the part of the former colonial power toward its former protectorate.

Of the many roots of that tension, two in particular risk leading in short order to a huge morass. The first has to do with immigration policy and the treatment inflicted on refugees and other Africans living in France illegally. The second, a corollary of the first, concerns the “pacification” policy in the *banlieues*, inhabited for the most part by French persons of African descent or descendants of African slaves who, by force of circumstance, have also become French citizens.

We are all well aware of the hard line now being taken. It has recently been expressed in the proliferation of sweeps taking place on urban sidewalks, in the high schools, and at metro stops. There has been news of evictions. Families, students, and single people are offered only a few nights in a hotel, then thrown out onto the street. Every day through-

out France, thousands of people of color are systematically stopped by police for no apparent reason. In some cases, the structure of power relations and the constant harassment have resulted in deaths. We are also aware of the spread of camps designed to isolate aliens whose status is irregular, then to force them back to their countries of origin, often by military means. Then too, there is the outsourcing—exportation outside the boundaries of the European Union—and subcontracting to developing countries of the management and protection of refugees, in exchange for an increase in “development aid.”

Border camps are located near airports, seaports, and international train stations—whether they are called “waiting zones,” local “detention” centers, or “warehouses” for aliens, the nomenclature hardly matters. Judges have remarked that the prefectures send them aliens every day, asking that their detention be extended, even when there is no longer any room at the centers. Metropolitan France as a whole is now covered by a geographical web of infamy, from Bordeaux to Calais-Coquille; from Strasbourg to Hendaye; from Lille, Lyons, Marseilles, and Nantes, to Nice, Bobigny, and Le Mesnil-Amelot; from Roissy, Nanterre, Versailles, and Vincennes to Rivesaltes, Rouen, Sète, and Toulouse; from Dunkerque, Lyon-Saint Exupéry, and Saint-Nazaire to La Rochelle and Toulon; and on and on.

Across the Atlantic, everyone is aware of the humiliations many Africans face on a daily basis as they seek to obtain visas for France in the African consulates (with the exception of the South African bureaus). The arbitrary methods used in the consulates are directly related to those that colonization employed, at a time when every “little king of the bush” was in the habit of doing as he pleased.

The threefold system of identity checks, screening, and expulsion, then, with its procession of brutal acts, of physical violence and psychological warfare, is being inflicted once again, as under slavery, on the black body, the difference being that instead of the slave ship, the privileged instrument is now the charter flight.

Palestinization

This treatment and these forms of humiliation, which were once tolerated only in the colonies, are now resurfacing in the metropolis itself, where, during sweeps and raids in the *banlieues*, they are applied

not only to aliens—illegal immigrants and refugees—but increasingly to French citizens of African descent or the descendants of former African slaves.

In other words, a conflation is occurring between colonial modes of control, treatment, and segregation, the treatment in metropolitan France of men and women judged undesirable, and the treatment of citizens considered to be second-class simply because they are not “French of pure stock” or “of the white race.”

It is not by accident that we have come to this conjuncture. Over the last ten years, not only have representations of the “alien,” the migrant, and the refugee been fabricated to make them appear a threat to national security, but laws have been enacted that, in their obvious violation of common law, are in many respects inspired by the Code de l’Indigénat (Native Code) of colonial times. Through the byway of the fight against the right to asylum, illegal immigration, and terrorism, the sphere of rights has been invaded by legal conceptions relating to war. These conceptions have in turn provoked a clear resurgence of state racism, which as we know was one of the cornerstones of the colonial order.

The law is now being used not as a tool for rendering justice and guaranteeing freedom but as the stratagem that, if it does not authorize extreme violence, at least exposes the most vulnerable and deprived populations to extraordinary methods of repression. The great advantage of these methods is that they can be used rapidly, arbitrarily, almost irresponsibly. To control immigration, a segmenting of the administration of justice has come about.

As during the colonial period, the law itself is now fragmented. In France we find laws that apply only to certain “human species.” These laws prescribe offenses specific to the “human species” they target even as they grant the authorities charged with their application extraordinary powers deviating from common law. The crimes detailed in these laws can be invoked only against these particular “human species.” The system of sanctions applied is also exceptional because it has been placed outside the realm of common law.

The Code de l’Indigénat was elaborated to govern the colonies. By its very nature, this was a government of extraordinary powers based on state racism. Here the function of the law was precisely to multiply, spread, then universalize situations of illegality and to extend them to all spheres of daily life for people of races judged inferior. The legal philosophy underlying the Code de l’Indigénat—and of its corollary,

state racism—is now being brought back to metropolitan France. That philosophy is being deployed in the struggle against categories of persons in France judged undesirable (illegal immigrants, undocumented aliens, refugees).

It is well known that for several years the French population has been led to believe that the *banlieues* constitute a direct threat to their lifestyle and to their most cherished values. Both the Left and the Right wish to believe that the social bond cannot be reestablished in these neighborhoods unless problems of immigration and integration are transformed into problems of national security, and secularism is enlisted to police both religion and what is disdainfully called “communitarianism.”

But as soon as the *banlieue* is defined as a place inhabited not by full-fledged moral subjects but by an undifferentiated mass that can be summarily discredited (as little savages, scum, hooligans, delinquents, gangstas running the parallel economy)—as soon as it is constructed as the domestic front of a new planetary war (cultural, religious, and military all at once), where the very identity of the Republic is being played out—there is a great temptation to want to apply colonial methods drawn from the lessons of the race wars to the most vulnerable categories of French society.

All things considered, the images of hundreds of armed white police officers pursuing or arresting young “people of color” in urban neighborhoods of the twenty-first century cannot fail to recall what happened in the ghettos of the northern United States, and especially in the American South, more than forty years ago. The same images remind us of events that occurred more recently, in the townships of South Africa in the 1970s. But more than the American South and the northern ghettos, more than the townships of South Africa, stone-throwing and acts of arson in the *banlieues* of Paris subliminally echo the flames and smoke rising from the Palestinian refugee camps.

Moreover, the vocabulary used by some members of Parliament and by very high government officials, who talk of “hosing down” the *banlieues* or going on “hooligan hunts,” only encourages such comparisons. If we are not careful, the structure of power relations, pushed to the limit, may easily lead to a “Palestinization” of the *banlieue*, directly related to the colonial ideology of race wars. In substance, that is the grave danger threatening French society and its democracy—and beyond it, twenty-first century Europe, once more in the grip of its Beast. It is the problem of race, to which the problem of religion has been added. From

the standpoint of the law, “Palestinization,” as we have seen elsewhere, generally tends to make the exception into the norm, even while claiming to establish or impose order and justice by means of terror. In so doing, that system ultimately makes law the instrument of a semblance of “order” and of a pseudo-justice characteristic of the “state vested with extraordinary powers,” that is, making the most vulnerable synonymous with a state of illegality and fostering a state of disorder and general insecurity for all.

Is that truly the direction this old country wants to take, a country that has contributed so much to the world in the fields of philosophy, culture, the arts, and aesthetics and that, in so doing, has so enriched its spirit?