

Fires Without Commentary

France, 2005

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“Unlike the French uprising of May-June 1968, the youth rebellion of November 2005 had no demands and no critique; just the fires.”

—*Le Monde Libertaine*

Early in November 2005, three young men were trying to escape from being questioned by police and took refuge inside an electric transformer in Clichy-sous-Bois, a poor working class suburb outside Paris. Two of them were electrocuted and the third was severely burned.

Although the police knew how dangerous this spot was, they offered no aid and spoke of the youth as well-known delinquents, which later was proved to be false. News of what happened prompted immediate demonstrations, followed by riots in the city. Riots quickly spread to other Parisian suburbs and then to all parts of France.

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For a month the riots continued, then quieted down just prior to the authorities declaring a state of emergency. The events recounted here occurred after a series of contemptuous and aggressive comments made by the French Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy who spoke of his intention to “clean up the neighborhoods until they’re spic and span”; and referred to the young men as “scum.” This aroused tensions again. The deaths of the two young men ignited the flames.

The Stage is Set for Rebellion

Urban areas where poor workers reside already have an extensive history of police violence and rebellion. French housing projects of a hideous vertical urbanism were built in the 1950s for a proletariat working in heavy industry and now show the deterioration that came with economic crisis, deindustrialization and growing unemployment.

Invariably, it is the poorest working class, largely immigrant, populations that are concentrated in these suburbs; many of the families have been in France for two or three generations (the grandfather of one of the young men killed while being chased by the police emigrated to France in 1938), but there are also more recently arrived families whose status is uncertain and who may be undocumented. Many of the young people have French citizenship even if their parents do not.

The majority of the workers are from Africa, north and south, and Turkey; others are of Portuguese, Asian, French and other ancestry. Young people make up nearly one-half of the population in these areas and they are the first to feel effects of unemployment. The average rate of unemployment is around 20 percent, but in places it can reach 40 percent, as in Clichy-sous-Bois where the deaths of the two youths ignited the rebellion.

There is an extreme crisis of public education. School facilities continue to deteriorate, budgets are cut. It is no surprise that a majority of the students find themselves “failing academically.” Public education in France is multi-faceted. It is no longer a unified system, but a wide range of public schools that correspond to the wealth or poverty of a district. Once the rebellion began, “reasonable” voices called for funds to be restored to these suburbs so professional educators can fulfill their task of supervising young people. Such a program is ridiculous. Even if it’s true that recent government administrations cut the funds in half, educators never had any real influence.

More relevant is that the academic support network for young people with problems has been constantly shrinking, so that even more quickly than before, these young people have found themselves ousted into a situation of mass unemployment, a “parallel economy,” and family disintegration. In recent years, repression has been directed toward the young, and its form has changed. Police harassment is now constant, it is more violent and aggressive; it aims to humiliate and crush the individual. This is true not only for the young men, as a woman reported: “Now when I go down to take out the trash, I have to make sure I have my ID with me.”

For capitalism to function a legal system is an essential ideological prop; one of Marx’s observations is relevant on this point: the forms of government and law tend to correspond to the forms of exploitation. A more brutal and violent exploitation comes with more severe laws and more authoritarian government.

Thus, we see that recent changes in the penal code authorize a significant increase in prosecutions and sentences. These changes in the law have clearly blurred certain aspects of legal jurisdiction: now any act may qualify as an offense depending on the location and the individual and, should there have been no offense, inventing one poses no problem.

The punishment that stems from the ban on “any gatherings in apartment stairwells” is a perfect example of this. With the new situation comes constant fear of surveillance and coercion by the police, given that the authorities consider that areas young people regard as their own don’t belong to them.

In a capitalist system with a division of labor, racism always exists but its specific forms depend on the society. In France, racism is molded by the country’s colonial history and conflicts of decolonization. The status of immigrants

in France's social division of labor has reinforced racism and also camouflaged the current social crisis; this is because the increased poverty of a part of the proletariat is seen in the context of immigration.

Viewed from the other side, racism always raises issues of colonialism. The recent directive requiring schools to teach the "benefits" of colonialism is seen as a clear provocation. Recent criminal or accidental fires in immigrant rooming houses (the result of decrepit structures into which people are herded), the repeated eviction of immigrant workers from housing they had occupied all reinforce the sentiment that "it's always the same people [us] who end up paying." Suburban youth feel that they are part of a population that has become superfluous, that counts for nothing, is scorned and treated as criminal. To them, their "destiny" seems bound up with their immigrant origin. This "social racism" is a mix of simple racism and the fundamental nature of the system.

Generalized Powerlessness

The November revolt grew out of a specific context and atmosphere. It disclosed feelings of being blocked and facing a dead-end—feelings prevalent throughout French society. When members of religious or secular associations urge young people to take part in municipal activities, the invariable response is: "What's the point?" A demonstration organized in Paris by various organizations calling for "an end to violence" and for giving young people a greater role in electoral politics was a resounding flop. Particularly after 1995, every socially oriented or union-organized campaign, including strikes, met a stone wall.

In proletarian quarters as everywhere else, the lack of success in struggles over education policies the revision of retirement benefits was clearly perceived as a setback. Still today, the sense of the November rebellion's powerlessness and absence of perspectives is shared by the wider social movement as well.

The capitalist economic crisis as well as the perspective which opposes using private profits and bourgeois wealth for social welfare caused the French state to limit spending. Without funding, proposals for reform came to nothing.

It was mainly in the domain of repression that the government initiated change. The threat of repression limited public reaction; certain gatherings were forbidden by designating them as a threat to public order. The Prime Minister dusted off a law passed by the Socialists during the Algerian War which allowed a curfew to be imposed in certain suburbs; the imposition of this law upset even the conservative press (Le Monde's headline called it "hasty;" a journalist reported a comment by a young man: "It's very clear. For them we will always be Arabs").

The inconsistent way that states of emergency were declared permitted "problem areas" to be isolated, to be occupied by the police and arbitrary searches to be carried out. In ideological terms, these measures identified even more closely a "dangerous population," with a suburban population and an "immigrant population." For more than twenty years now, social questions have been conveniently transformed into security concerns. Once social questions become matters of security, the exclusion of immigrant workers no longer has to be dealt with in social terms; repressive ones will suffice.

But conflicts within French society, the deep-seated rage of the exploited classes and a fragile political equilibrium caused the wielders of power to hesitate a bit. The political class and the capitalists do not seem ready to launch a unified campaign to criminalize poverty: such a campaign would lead to the physical isolation of the socially excluded. The "republican" jargon that proclaims formal equality in opportunity still carries some weight, even if everyone knows that it doesn't correspond to social reality. Acknowledging the failure of the ideology concerning immigration would mean an end to reformism and mass unemployment would be inevitable. Also, depending on repression alone raises some serious problems and contradictions. One of them is how to keep a modern society functioning when its cities are under military occupation.

Recent events in Perpignan exposed the drawbacks to this option.* Police occupation of the city quickly strangled the market economy and businessmen had to request that the police operation be called off. Later, a curfew imposed in some housing projects posed similar problems. In sections of the northern suburbs of Paris the police were obliged to cancel some of the restrictions because workers who lived there were responsible for keeping Roissy airport functioning and they had to travel to their jobs at night.

How Things Have Changed

The recent rebellions have no connection to gang wars, to the drug economy or to petty thievery. This is not to say that neighborhood gangs did not take part in the clashes: being a member of a youth gang can determine what action a young man will take. But in these clashes, “parallel economy” interests were largely absent. In any case, the concept of “a parallel economy” or “a drug economy” is not needed in order to understand the situation. In the first place, these terms are linked to law and order precepts and allow moralizing to enter the debate; secondly it is very difficult to measure their scope.

The “parallel economy” furnishes the principal means of survival in impoverished areas, but the “drug economy” is only one of its aspects; undocumented work is another. Anyway, the “drug economy” operates with a strict hierarchy and has a powerful and repressive force within a given neighborhood. As is well known—and not only in France—a “drug economy” develops close links with the police, links which hasten a neighborhood’s implosion. In the long run, the kingpins of this economy will always choose the side of law and order, since police occupation of their turf disrupts business. In other words, even if the parallel economy (and the drug economy too) furnish some part of the dismal survival offerings for temporary labor in the suburbs, it was not a determining factor in the explosion of rage in these urban areas.

There were no reports of reactionary or exasperated citizens responding violently to the young people. Except for some isolated “accidents” there was no settling of accounts in these suburbs. Despite insistent media reports of “urban violence,” the authorities were unable to benefit from the indignation of the “honest citizens.” It was the police who imposed a curfew on all the residents of a given area, but the resulting anger tended to be directed toward the rebels; this caused additional disunity in the neighborhoods. In the short term, politicians utilized this to arouse “public opinion.” In the long term, they expect this discord to benefit them in the next election.

In France, the community of impoverished youth has not imploded as it has in the U.S.; it is not compartmentalized by race or religion as it is in Great Britain. It continues to respond as a community—as an exploited and excluded community. The rebels were principally poor youth from working class areas, and not only youth of “immigrant origin.”

In regions where poverty affects a significant part of the established working class, as in the north of France, many of those arrested were non-immigrant “rioters not fitting the stereotype,” “young Whites.” Moreover the race of the participants seemed to be irrelevant. This is an important difference from earlier riots—and from those in Perpignan, as well.

Required Politicians to “Apologize”

The November riots were rather a revolt of a “social type,” a poor young man from the suburbs. In clashes with the police, the young men showed a sense of solidarity and demanded respect, refusing to accept the State’s contempt for them. Flung back at them was the scorn that affluent classes display toward the poor. The “young rebels” insist that they not be treated as “criminals.” They repeatedly required politicians to “apologize” for the expressions they used and to explain the deaths of the two youths.

Once the repression was launched, politicians felt they could not yield, make apologies for the deaths of the young men or retract their official and media lies. Such a reversal would have served to legitimize the rebellion.

It is hard to determine whether this movement is a traditional one, or rather one whose various actions, with solidarity and a shared point of view, consciously makes demands, outraged at its miserable living conditions and State repression; a movement that demands justice and refuses a situation which cannot continue.

The young people from poor suburban areas have recovered a collective sense of community in these riots. We are most definitely seeing a rebellion set in poor residential areas where unity is based on shared feelings: against the State’s forces of law and order and its politicians, against its institutions and symbols; against the capitalists as well, who profit from circumstances by establishing factories in impoverished zones in exchange for tax-abatements. Young People & School: Separated by Hostility

This was the first time since uprisings and riots first occurred in these suburbs some ten years ago that very young people took part on such a large scale. Of the 3000 individuals taken into custody by the police, almost 700 were found guilty; 118 of them were minors. In all, more than 500 minors faced trial. The absence of young women is revealing and shows aspects of their situation in these suburbs.

Young women are not generally very visible in street activities or in gangs, especially at night. Their relationship with school is quite different from that of young men. For women, school remains their only chance to escape the ghetto and, despite increasing difficulty, they manage to find work more easily than young men do. Also they are more “protected”—in the good and bad senses of the term—by “big brothers”; the “protection” borders on repression. We should point out that young women increasingly resist this control, and tragic consequences often follow.

A revision in social codes can bring in religious values, often Muslim, occasionally Christian (in communities of workers from Portugal, Martinique, Cape Verde or Guadeloupe). Separation of the sexes still persists and was even reinforced by the violent nature of the confrontations. This clearly disclosed the rebellion’s limits and its isolation. Nevertheless, the absence of young women does not mean that they are indifferent to the rebellion and its causes. In fact, women were prominent in the various demonstrations supporting the arrestees and in the courtroom.

There is a clear link between the young age of the rebels and the numerous attacks on the schools which were burned and vandalized. When one emphasizes the number of destroyed schools, there tends to be less attention given to the attacks on police stations, tax offices and businesses that refused to employ neighborhood youth. As for the damaged schools, even a teacher’s union bureaucrat was able to figure out that “these acts are symbolic. Schools furnished a lot of hope and were promoted as a path of upward mobility. When you burn a school down, you’re saying that it’s no good. We turn against it because it has let us down.”

Schools are burned down also because of their role in determining an individual’s first placement in the future division of labor. The system has carried out this task very well. As proof: just consider the young age at which housing project youth leave school to wander from one low-paying job to another. A recent parliamentary report on “preventing delinquency” has gone so far as to advocate the creation of a system for detecting delinquency that would start in nursery schools. Not only a travesty, this proposal should be recognized as an attempt to make public schools adapt to the current needs.

Religion was Sidelined

The assumption that religious manipulation played a significant role in the rebellion is totally discredited. In fact, social issues trumped religious observance. Even during Ramadan, and contrary to the expectations of the government itself, religious leaders found themselves overwhelmed: the rector of the Paris Mosque was roughed up in Clichy immediately following the deaths of the two adolescents, and the efforts of bearded men who tried to intervene between the police and the young men came to nothing.

The blatant police provocation of throwing a grenade in front of the Clichy mosque did not further the cause of the religious leaders. In fact, religious individuals and their associations turned out to be among the first to agree on the creation of a “protection militia,” in some places going so far as to organize “night patrols” in an effort to calm things down. One of the largest Islamic organizations in France (L’OUIF) had the ridiculous idea of issuing a fatwa condemning the violence. Ineffective, naturally.

An Islamic functionary complained to a journalist: “These young men are totally confused, their connection to religion minimal. When you greet them with ‘Salam aleykum,’ they reply ‘Good evening.’” Conversely, one can predict that to a “Good evening” from the journalist, they would have replied, “Salam aleykum!” In other words, for the young men, religious terms may serve as points of reference for the group, but only as an oppositional identity, not as bond between rebels.

By focusing on disaster and exclusion, religion finds fertile soil. The rebellion made it clear that it was seeking to end disaster and exclusion, not more fertile soil for religion. Of course religious advocates have not disappeared. The solution proposed by these champions of religion is for the individual to personally withdraw, to choose an identity which replaces a collectivity that focuses on social issues. Religious militants merely wait for a disturbance to end so they can recuperate those who were disillusioned or killed. They play an essential role for maintaining

social order, and we can foresee that the ideologues of power will raise the status and enlarge the role of religious institutions that maintain social control.

When Refusal Exposes a Society's Problems

The November rebellions have exposed the class-based poverty, inequality and injustice in France, thus revealing a generalized social disaster. To the extent that the media have quoted participants' comments, social questions have outnumbered problems of immigration or issues of "race" (prudently called "ethnic"). The questions raised go beyond issues in the suburbs; the very logic used to deal with social issues is being questioned.

Of the young people arrested, a significant number work at low-paying, temporary jobs. The portrayal of a "population" that is totally alien to the world of work is false. Like many of the areas' other residents, they take part in the world of work—employed one day, laid off the next. In fact, the situation of the rebellion's protagonists provides a sort of photographic negative of an earlier working class. On one hand, they would like to be part of it. On the other hand, they judge the working world of their parents to have been one of sacrifice on the altar of profit, a judgment which causes them to strongly reject the world of work and wage labor.

In this sense we can say that they reject their integration when it is perceived as an acceptance of the world as it is today. As Jean Baudrillard observed, "Western culture maintains its credibility only because the rest of the world longs to have access to it. At the first sign of rejection, at the slightest decline in its attraction, not only does western culture's superiority evaporate, but it loses all its attractiveness in its own eyes. Here it was precisely the 'best' of what Western culture had to offer—automobiles, schools, shopping malls—that were burned and looted. Even day care centers! Precisely everything that was set up to integrate them, to care for them from childhood onwards."

The movement of rebellions can be interpreted as a violent, though wordless, response to the bankruptcy of the old workers movement and its institutions, and to the defeated condition of the working class. These young proletarians are condemned for life, permanently excluded from traditional forms of wage labor. In areas where they live, unions and leftist parties no longer exist and to them are meaningless concepts.

Flashes of Lightning, Limits and Dead-ends

The rebellion of our era's excluded cannot follow the route of past collective struggles, the path of unions and parties, and even less the electoral path. The marginalized proletarians in today's societies do not see themselves in the old political blueprint that was drawn up during the years of reformist struggles. What limits these revolts—the powerlessness and absence of perspectives—also limits the broader social movement. The rebellion reveals this, first of all, by showing what is no longer tolerable. The expression of social rage nevertheless contains a dead-end. Its very nature keeps it from developing since it has no way to prevent this society from reproducing itself.

Many commentators have detected explosive forces in this rebellion. Any critical appraisal of a movement involving social conflict, even as limited a movement as this one, always seeks parallels with earlier ones and feels the need to appropriate various "golden ages" of past conflicts. In contrast to the rebellion of May '68, the absence of social utopia was noted here.

To this can be added the absence of any transmission to other social sectors which, in 1968, led to the wildcat general strike. In May 1968, the students' anger was transmitted to the workers and they had the ability to shut down society. Given class relationships in today's society and the salaried workers' low level of fighting spirit, such a transmission seems quite improbable and this makes the limits of the rebellions all the more obvious.

The rebellions and riots also expose the crisis in bourgeois politics, namely that the Left and the Right have identical visions. The Left seeks nuance as it focuses on methods. The Left wants to involve various associations and wants "educators" to double as neighborhood peacekeepers; it wants a return to "kinder" police methods and so-called "neighborhood police forces." Today, such a project seems impossible to put into practice.

As for considerations about a better future, for a reduction of unemployment, and for an end to precarious economic life, the Left has nothing to propose and remains confined within constraints set by capitalism. The Socialist

Party even supported a curfew as “necessary for the return to law and order;” and merely requested that it be applied “for a limited time,” while timidly voting against a three-month extension. As for the Communist Party, it sought to play its one last card as part of the governing system. A few Communist mayors still govern most of the poor suburbs and the Communist Party ended up providing the last of the political system’s ineffective interlocutors to face the young rebels.

The events in November 2005 reveal that the repression of surplus workers leads to real problems in societies having a specific historic culture. Despite being marginal and excluded, these young people are still marked by French social history as can be seen by their use of values like “equality” and “justice” in making their demands.

But to categorize the rebellion as “a very French movement” is an exaggeration. It is rather a movement of excluded individuals who turn to rebellion to demand values that are fundamental to French society. Anyone identifying the progressive social measures in the French past with the ideology of formal democracy can easily be carried away by aspirations of equality. These November events caused great concern within the ruling circles of other European countries. They came as a second shock following the French “No” to the European Constitution.

Questions Raised by the Rebellion

Are the values expressed by this rebellion essentially no more than a mirror image of the barbaric values of the current system? Or do they reflect the violence of exclusion that is often found in neighborhood groups and gangs? It is true that these young people said “No,” but they didn’t say “Yes” to anything specific. Even so, this movement harbors values which are not those of the system. Can we not see in the insistent demands for respect—an end to humiliation, abolition of fascist categories that are used to exploit and perpetuate social injustice, and for equality—the beginnings of a call, a desire, for a different society?

We also note that they reject the lies and the contempt that is inspired by class; they have political awareness of their own specific situation—in short, they exhibit solidarity. In the neighborhoods, the solidarity of the residents is visible, especially in their opposition to repression, humiliation, the lies and the contempt. It is a known fact that the appeal the police made to recruit informers brought no results. Of course, such attitudes are common to every community.

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that widespread support of the rioters was not visible either. In the end, the declaration of a state of emergency came to be accepted without much show of opposition. As if their understanding the situation didn’t necessarily translate into their approving the means employed.

Were the rioters aware that they were fighting the State?

Whether they were or not, they expressed their rage against and opposition to the State institutions they were familiar with: police, schools, social services. And it was the State’s repression that unified the rebellion in both time and in space.

The rebellion of the young “project” residents is important mainly because of the crisis it ignites, not because of what it was. The tragic essence of these young people lies here. There is nothing in their situation that can promise much for the future, a future in which their poverty is overcome. Isolated, they are condemned to asserting themselves only in negative terms as they confront the system. In other words, the real problem posed by their rebellion is their isolation from the rest of society, particularly from other exploited sectors. We were already aware that resignation and passivity are dominant characteristics of our era. Now the young rebels have refreshed our memories and pointed up how true this is.

Rebellion in itself is not emancipatory. Historically it has been known to feed into fascist political formations. But this is just one more flawed comparison. Because the fascism that’s possible today—still undefined, as are the various forms of reformism—has no need for these young, excluded proletarians. In this context, a telling comment made by a young man to a journalist resonates: “We don’t hate, we rebel!”

As long as there is rebellion, there is hope. Without rebellion, no subversion is possible. And, what is possible depends on historical circumstances and on the general situation.

*In the summer of 2005 in Perpignan, two poor communities, North African and Gypsy, clashed with each other after a young Moroccan man killed a young Gypsy. The clashes between the two communities lasted several days

against a background of political manipulation on the part of the mayor (the Gypsy population being a longtime captive electoral base for the mayor) and ended with the police occupying the city for several weeks.

This article was translated by a *Fifth Estate* comrade in Detroit, assisted by another in Montreal. It originally appeared in the Spring 2006 *Oiseau-tempete*, a Paris-based critical-analytic journal. Contact: Oiseau-tempete, 21 ter, rue Voltaire, 75011 Paris, France, or oiseau.tempete.internetdown.org.

Update: As we finish this issue, a report in the February 9 *New York Times*, stated that the two French police officers who chased the electrocuted youths, showed “surprising irresponsibility.” They were placed under formal investigation, a step short of prosecution.

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