

# Bringing in the Banlieues

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**T**oday, if you are African-American, Asian, Hispanic or multiracial, your odds of success in the most respected occupations are better in the United States than in France. While they were indisputably the group in American history most victimized by official discrimination (first slavery, then segregation), African-Americans are nonetheless present at the highest levels of politics and big business (including, until recently, CEOs of Merrill Lynch, AOL Time Warner and American Express). Such a thing has not happened yet in France, despite the long-standing presence of blacks and other non-Europeans in the population and despite a formal political and social ethos that has been, if anything, more egalitarian-minded and colorblind than that of the United States.

On the other hand, if you are an ethnic minority from the middle or the lower classes, you will be better off in France than in the United States. France's ability to culturally include and provide for the welfare of its citizens means that a person in the last tier of income earners will fare better in Paris or Marseilles than in New York or in Los Angeles, regardless of color.

In part, this contrast is not historically surprising. In the 1920s, for example, France held the advantage in advancing talented blacks, and many American blacks knew that the France of that era was fairer and more respectful of their rights. In 1919, on the occasion of the first Pan-

African Congress in Paris, W.E.B. Dubois declared to his compatriots, "Look at the French, they have deputies of color in their National Assembly; and we can hold a black Congress in Paris. What are you waiting for [in the United States] to do the same?"<sup>1</sup>

The First World War had just ended, and for the most part African American soldiers felt that "the French treated them with far more decency and respect than they had ever received from whites before. The memories of such pleasant encounters endured long after the war, motivating many of the blacks who chose to settle in Paris during the 1920s."<sup>2</sup> This was also a period when white American tourists provoked numerous scandals in France when they insisted that blacks be removed from public places where whites encountered them. In October 1923, for example, a group of American tourists saw a black French surgeon getting on their bus. They immediately complained to the bus driver, saying that they would not travel in the presence of a "negro." When the driver refused their demand, they grabbed the doctor and threw him out onto the sidewalk. At the renowned Paris restaurant La Coupole in 1924 the Haitian ambassador and an Egyptian prince were refused a table because "the Americans wouldn't approve." This led Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré, addressing the Chamber of

<sup>1</sup>Michel Fabre, *La rive noire: les écrivains américains noirs à Paris 1830–1995*, (André Dimanche, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996), p. 16.

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Deputies, to ask Americans to please leave their discriminatory practices at home. He was not being hypocritical either. Former French slaves and their descendants, having become full French citizens, then elected their own deputies and senators. Gaston Monnerville, a native of French Guyana, was elected as a representative of the mainland French department of Lot-et-Garonne and served as President of the Senate from 1946 to 1968. In this role he was second in line in the French republican hierarchy.

Secure in their established record of racial inclusion, most French believed that the definitive abolition of slavery in 1848, plus the absence of legal segregation, would be sufficient to guarantee in practice the key principles of the French Republic: equality, liberty, brotherhood.<sup>3</sup> This optimism, however, did not take into account the fact that these principles (for example, regarding parliamentary elections) were put into practice in physically separate territories—mainland France on one hand, and the overseas territories, on the other. This understanding also neglected to consider the colonial territories themselves, where legal discrimination remained in effect until independence.

The arrival and settlement in mainland France of black French citizens from the overseas territories and immigrants from former African and Asian colonies in the late 1950s gradually modified the situation without anyone clearly noticing at that time.

The first generation of migrants found employment in the public sector, for example in hospitals and post offices. For a long time, most government officials thought that the subsequent group of migrants from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa had only come for temporary employment and would eventually return to their land of origin. Why focus on the rights of these migrants when the first group had jobs, and the second group was expected not to remain in France?<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, during roughly the same time in the United States, the effects first of the civil rights movement and later of affirmative action policies helped blacks and other minorities find a more secure place in American society. Above and beyond prominent politicians and CEOs, in 2000 African-Americans represented

5.1 percent of all lawyers (versus 1.6 percent in 1960), 12.9 percent of firemen (versus 2.5 percent in 1960), and 6 percent of the 33,578 Ph.D.s (versus one percent in 1970).

The situation, however, is more complex than that. For example, among those American blacks who are the most successful, affirmative action has helped to reinforce stereotypes and tends to devalue the perception of their competence.<sup>5</sup> No matter how they excel, they are nonetheless widely perceived as having been the beneficiaries of racial preference. The politics of racial preference erodes the minorities' reputation while artificially boosting that of whites. Two American psychologists selected twenty questions from the Graduate Record Exam test and posed them to black students. When black students were first asked to state to which racial category they belonged, they answered half as many questions correctly as when they were not asked the racial question: They seem somehow to have been affected by the negative stereotypes that associate African-American with mediocre academic performance.<sup>6</sup>

While about two-thirds of African-Americans live better than before by objective economic measures, the remaining third are doing worse.<sup>7</sup> Because of the greater visibility of the multiracial or multicultural elite, the dropouts become less visible and in their own eyes more isolated within the wider society.<sup>8</sup> Affirmative action increasingly benefits richer black families and has not succeeded in resolving the problem of urban segregation. Indeed, residential segregation in the United States has *grown* over the past two decades. And it has perpetuated a “racialization” process at all levels of society. In *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (2003), political scientist Andrew Hacker speaks of an America composed of two nations—one white and one black—separate, hostile and unequal. This is an exaggeration, but an understandable one in light of contradictory trends.

In France, feeling that one can belong to one citizenry and still fit well in a diverse society is more prevalent. A 2006 Pew Research Center study showed that France had the highest rates of cultural integration and religious tolerance among 15 nations surveyed. Eighty-one percent of British Muslims feel that they are

Muslim first and British second; only 7 percent feel otherwise. In France, 42 percent of French Muslims feel French first, and 46 percent feel Muslim first—this in a country where half of all Muslim residents are not French nationals.

It appears that the acceptance is mutual, too: According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, seventy-four percent of non-Muslim French see no conflict between being a devoted Muslim and living in a modern society. By contrast, 70 percent of Germans, 58 percent of Spaniards, 54 percent of the British, and 40 percent of Americans feel that there is such a conflict. It is in France that Christians and Muslims have the highest mutual approval rates, and France is the only country where a majority of Muslims (and a large majority of 74 percent at that) have a positive opinion of Jews, which is certainly not the case in the United Kingdom, Spain or Germany. These results are confirmed by an August 2007 *Financial Times* poll conducted by Louis Harris in the United States and the five largest European countries: France is the only country with a majority (69 percent) who say they have one or several Muslim friends (versus 38 percent of the British and 28 percent of Americans). Forty-six percent of the British feel that Muslims have too much power in their country, whereas only 19 percent of the French say the same.

Populations of ethnic minorities, whether migrants from overseas territories or of foreign origin, tend to share the same values as other French people. Somewhat paradoxically, however, this makes quotidian discrimination even more insufferable in their eyes, since it contradicts the promise of equality at the heart of French tradition. While it could be said that France is good at cultural integration (better than the United States), it is bad at eradicating discrimination (worse than the United States), especially in high-level jobs. Interestingly, in the United Kingdom the situation appears to be precisely the opposite—Britain is more like America in its political disposition, even though the migratory history that has brought non-whites to Britain is more like that of France than that of the United States.

French discrimination against non-whites goes well beyond the problem of access to positions of authority. Between 1975 and 1990, the

state of affairs for young men (16–29 year old) of North African origin has declined. Whereas 9–15 percent of young North Africans were unemployed in 1975, that figure increased to 19–38 percent in 1982 and 34–45 percent in 1990. In 1990, the unemployment rate of people aged 24–29 of Algerian origin was approximately 35 percent; it was 12 percent for those of Portuguese origin in the same age group. Those aged 15–24 who are not originally citizens of the European Union are the demographic category most affected by unemployment: Throughout the mid-1980s and 1990s, between 37 and 50 percent were unemployed.” North African immigrant youth are more likely than any other group to leave the school system without a degree. Only 54 percent of those in this demographic group who undertake university studies receive a diploma in the end. They then also experience difficulties in finding a job. In 2004, Jean-François Amadieu, of the “Discrimination Observatory” at the University of Paris 1, studied the reaction of several corporations to résumés sent in response to 258 job advertisements. The results were striking: A white male applicant with a Paris address was invited to 75 interviews, whereas a white man with an address in public housing at Val Fourré, Mantes-la-Jolie (an infamous project at the outskirts of Paris) was only invited to 45. A man with that address and a recognizably North African first and last name was only invited to 14, and a handicapped man to just five.

**I**s it possible to fight discrimination without weakening cultural cohesion or the sense of common belonging? More specifically, is it possible to fight discrimination without somehow assigning individuals to an ethnic or religious group against their will, and without thereby legalizing or making racial, ethnic or sectarian divisions “official”? Is it possible, in other words, to deal with the natural and inevitable social impact of ethnic diversity without driving group identities further apart?

Émile Durkheim famously distinguished between two kinds of pluralism. One kind is the result of an attachment to a culture of origin, one in which “some individuals find that they share common ideas, interests, feelings, and activities that the rest of the population

does not share with them.” The other is the result of discrimination, which Durkheim calls a “constrained division of labor” that prevents individuals from “rising to the social level that corresponds to their level of qualification.” Voluntarily formed communities within a wider national framework are fine; forcibly formed communities are not. This concern, in addition to the historical reality of racial classifications under slavery, colonization and the anti-Semitic Vichy regime, justifies the strong reluctance of most French toward collecting racial and ethnic data in the census or in any public surveys, let alone using such data to shape public policy. In a recent decision (n° 2007-557 DC of November 15, 2007), the French Constitutional Council declared unconstitutional the gathering of any data that would include racial or ethnic categorization. More recently, on December 18, 2008, a presidential commission set up by Nicolas Sarkozy and presided over by former Minister Simone Veil decided against changing the French Constitution to legalize affirmative action and the collection of ethno-racial data by public institutions.

Transculturalism might be a way out of this puzzle. Building from Durkheim’s first form of pluralism, in a fair and liberal society, individuals could circulate among their multiple “identifications” depending on the context in which they find themselves. Such a society is not multicultural (the composite of many different and separate groups), but, as Claude Grunitzky called it, “transcultural” in his book *Transculturalism: How the World Is Coming Together* (2004). At given moments in their day or in their life, “transcultural” individuals identify as young or old, male or female, or identify on the basis of their job, sexual orientation, or musical or culinary tastes. They employ freely multiple cultural senses of belonging. “Transcultural” individuals may, for example, take part in observing important religious holidays out of respect for their families or a feeling of cultural belonging, even if they are non-practicing or atheist. At key times, they may recall the fate of their ancestors—slaves, veterans of the world wars, victims or escapees of the Nazi camps—and choose to belong to that group for a moment’s time.

But when these same individuals are assigned

to a group against their will by an outsider (Durkheim’s second form of pluralism) and are made to suffer discrimination as a black, Arab, Asian, Muslim or Jew, the state could recognize the existence of such groups temporarily so as to prove the discrimination in order to punish it or, even better, to prevent it. This is not the same as establishing permanent distinctions in public policies as is the case in the United States.

It is important not to stabilize racial groupings formally or legally, not least because not all discriminations are based on race. In the French higher education system, for example, discrimination is above all social and regional. Access to a public university is free and open to everyone who passes the baccalaureate exam. But the parallel, more selective system of *grandes écoles* (which train the business and political elite of the country) functions such that students from lower- and middle-class backgrounds of *all* races are increasingly left out. Since the majority of immigrant families and those in the French overseas territories are of modest means, their children suffer the full effect of this social discrimination. But it is important to distinguish social, class and geographic discrimination from the racial discrimination that clearly occurs in the labor and housing markets.

In regard to job access, we have to deal with direct racism: the decision not to hire a job candidate just because of the color of his skin or his ethnic-sounding name. But we also have to deal with the indirect racism produced by the constant reliance on the same networks of schools and families for the recruitment of interns and employees. This indirect discrimination is particularly acute in upper level management in private companies. Only 11 percent of those aged 25–33 of Algerian background, and with a university diploma, worked in management in 1990, as opposed to 46 percent of native-born French citizens. In contrast, among those self-employed as shop-keepers, artisans or small business owners, young people of Algerian origin have success rates comparable to those of native-born French people. As for public sector employment, a recent study has shown that the success rate of the children of immigrants is entirely comparable to that of the children of native-born parents.

These findings illuminate some paths to follow in France in pursuit of improved equality. A key priority for higher education reform should be the democratization of the elite selective school system. The efforts of Sciences-Po Paris and ESSEC to broaden access to their schools for young people from troubled suburbs, are encouraging, but they only involve 2–3 percent of the high schools in the country. Reforms should impact every high school in France and its overseas territories. Following the practice already in use in Texas or in California, the top 5–10 percent of students from every high school could be eligible to enroll in the preparatory classes for the *grandes écoles*. The weight accorded to some tests, such as in foreign languages, should be re-assessed and probably reduced. For students from the provinces or the overseas territories, the costs of travel to Paris to take the entry exams should be subsidized. More scholarships should be made available to students attending preparatory classes. The university system must invest massively to improve the quality of university instruction, for this is the level of higher education that includes most young people from underprivileged neighborhoods.

Regarding access to the job market, fighting direct racial discrimination is the key objective. Making anonymous *résumés* mandatory, which is already required by law of mid-sized and large businesses, must be put into wider practice. This will help eliminate certain conscious or subconscious stereotypes held by employers who increasingly find themselves confronted by a diverse candidate pool. The recruitment of interns must also be diversified, and paid internships must be made available to those young people who cannot afford to accept unpaid work. Statistical means must be made available to prove whether or not businesses suspected of discrimination are actually at fault, so that such crimes can be punished. Large businesses should be obligated to analyze the statistical makeup of their personnel, using data such as the birthplace or the nationality of the parents of the employees. More so than racial classifications (which would permit businesses to recruit from the elites of Africa or Asia to meet any diversity requirements), the analysis of data such as those suggested above, when compared with data available from the census,

would allow the government to target companies that practice discrimination toward young people of color born and raised in France.

Social and racial discrimination is seriously undermining French cultural integration. It is possible to fight it with some of the tools suggested here, many of which originated in the United States through its affirmative action efforts, but modified to fit the French historical and legal context.

This should be an urgent priority for French politicians and for the French business elite. Many in the French elite are to some degree still in denial of the colonial dimension of French history and deeply wish to retain a definition of their identity that predates the migratory history of the recent past. But given the depth of their commitment to the principles of liberty, equality and brotherhood, the French should be able to successfully reinterpret their identity toward inclusivity. If, given the bitter history of the American migratory experience, the American people can elect Barack Obama their President, this is at least possible. 🌍

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<sup>3</sup>Frédéric Régent, *La France et ses esclaves, de la colonisation à l'émancipation (1620–1848)* (Grasset, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Patrick Weil, *How to Be French? The Making of a Nationality since 1789* (Duke University Press, 2008), chapter 6.

<sup>5</sup>Glenn C. Loury, “How to Mend Affirmative Action”, *Public Interest* (Spring 1997).

<sup>6</sup>As reported in Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (Little, Brown, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>7</sup>Sources for this and all other statistical data in this essay are available from the editors upon request.

<sup>8</sup>William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (University of California Press, 1999).