



Fruits of Multiculturalism

Amir Taheri

Colaboraciones n° 663

November 24, 2005

With the imposition of curfew and an impressive show of raw force, the French authorities may well have managed to bring the latest urban riots under control. And a few nights of heavy rain may also help dampen the ardor of “les jeunes”, the youthful insurgents who have wreaked havoc in more than 300 localities throughout France over the past two weeks.

One thing, however is certain: Bringing the situation under control is one thing but finding a long-term solution to the problem is quite another.

The failure of the French leadership to understand what is happening, let alone develop a strategy to cope with it has opened the way for all sorts of maverick initiatives.

A group calling itself the Union of Muslim Organizations in France has

issued a “fatwa” (Islamic edict) calling on the Muslim youths to cease their rebellion. The message is clear: Rather than obeying the laws of the French Republic, Muslims in France should follow “fatwas” concocted by the Muslim Brotherhood. A variety of fixers, middlemen, and arbiters, most of them members of various militant Islamist groups, have also appeared at the local level in many places and are presenting themselves as an alternative to state authority.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a number of proto-fascist groups have mushroomed in the suburbs, especially close to Paris, and are calling for the formation of armed militias to fight the rioters. Claiming that France is already drawn into a civil war they are calling for the army to be brought and martial law to be imposed in the affected areas.

The one question that everyone is anxious to avoid concerns the nature of what polite society in Paris likes to call “urban violence”.

According to the left, notably the unreformed Socialist Party, the trouble stems from cutbacks in government subsidies that have curtailed social services in the affected areas. The Socialists are especially sore about Sarkozy’s decision to scarp the so-called “proximity police” that the previous Socialist administration had created. The “proximity police” had been a fig leaf to hide the fact that the real police, along with doctors, firemen, school inspectors, and other representatives of the republic had been excluded from dozens of suburbs for years. The “proximity police” had no authority to detect crime, arrest criminals or even report on criminal activities. But it could play football with teen-agers, organize seaside holidays for them, and supervise “artistic tagging” competitions.

There is no shortage of state subsidies in areas struck by the riots.

Government spokesman Jean-Francois Coppel says that the affected areas have benefited from “massive injections of cash” over the past three years. Nearly half of the population lives on various state handouts. The affected areas have become the hunting ground of professional do-gooders, associations, charities, pressure groups, social theorists, and, of course, so-called “Islamic reformers.” For years, some municipalities have devoted almost a third of their budget to such out-

fits in the hope of avoiding precisely the kind of crisis they now face.

No, the crisis cannot be explained in pseudo-Marxist terms. People do not go around torching public buildings and firing on the police simply because they are poor.

The truth is that the affected suburbs represent a dangerous cocktail in which poverty, cultural alienation and racial tensions are some of the ingredients. But even those ingredients alone would not have been sufficient for causing an explosion. After all the Paris region is also home to substantial numbers of Asian, mainly Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants who are as poor, as culturally alienated and as subject to racial pressure as are the inhabitants of the “exploding suburbs”.

The indigenous French do not consider the Asian community as a threat to the very idea of Frenchness if only because it has no universal pretensions.

The Muslim immigrant minority, however, is perceived as a threat because Islam regards itself as a universal faith and an alternative to Western civilization. Most indigenous Frenchmen are persuaded that their own culture and civilization is the best that mankind has ever produced and that Islam’s pretensions are misplaced, to say the least.

It is hard to establish which came first but there is no doubt that militant Islamism and equally militant Islamophobia have formed a deadly

couple that is leading France into uncharted waters.

The crisis concerns the very idea of Frenchness. And yet, many French leaders delude themselves into believing that French identity, often referred to as "l'exception française" is so manifestly superior as to be beyond debate.

The trouble is that there are millions of Muslims, especially those born in France of Arab and African immigrant parents, who do not feel French the way most other Frenchmen do. Some do not feel French in any sense whatsoever, apart from their official identity papers.

The question, therefore, is whether or not France can seduce this group of its children back into a new form of Frenchness.

The task is more difficult than the similar challenges that the United States and Britain have faced. In the US all that is required is loyalty to the American Constitution within which all sorts of hyphenated identities are not only accepted but actively promoted. You don't even have to speak English to be an American. Britain, for its part, has managed with a policy of benign neglect toward ethnic and religious minorities, allowing them to live as they wish with the understanding that, even though they may learn to play cricket, they will never become Englishmen.

France, however, has always wanted to assimilate its minorities, transforming them into "proper Frenchmen". On the eve of the French Revolution in 1787 only 12 percent of Louis XVI's subjects had French as their mother tongue.

Two hundred years later that had risen to almost 90 percent of French citizens. To reach that goal successive regimes in Paris had pursued a determined, and often ruthless, policy of destroying dozens of languages and cultures in a quest for a unique form of Frenchness.

That policy worked because the languages and cultures that were assimilated belonged to communities that had been both Christian and European since time immemorial.

Assimilation is far more difficult now because the Arab and African Muslim communities are neither European nor Christian.

They may be prepared to become a bit more European but would demand that, in exchange, other Frenchmen also become a bit more like them. In other words what they demand is a new French identity, a synthesis of the traditional concept of Frenchness with new Arab, African and Islamic ones. You cannot play multiculturalism without admitting the possibility that your own culture may, at some point, be affected by other cultures, including ones that were once regarded as alien or even threatening.