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# **Riots or Revolts? The Legacy of the 2005 Uprising in French**

## **Banlieue Narratives**

The 2005 banlieue uprisings have been the most important acts of contestation in France since May 1968, yet unlike the earlier student protests, they were largely interpreted as aimless violence rather than political dissent. While the authors of the upheavals remained silent, unable or unwilling to explain their motivations, social scientists and other commentators advanced the most divergent interpretations and made various claims on their behalf. This paper proposes to confront these readings with the analysis of three novels published in the wake of the 2005 riots by Mabrouck Rachedi (2006), Wilfried N'Sondé (2012) and Rachid Santaki (2013).<sup>1</sup> Comparing these banlieue narratives with a range of scholarly readings proposed by sociologists will help us construct an alternative interpretative framework in which riots appear to be collective demands for justice, equality and social mobility. The conclusion will assess whether the riots are likely to leave a legacy comparable to May 1968.

Keywords: banlieue, riot, police, social mobility, novel

Bien que les émeutes de 2005 fussent les actes de contestation les plus importants en France depuis mai 1968, contrairement à la révolte estudiantine, elles ont généralement été interprétées comme de la violence gratuite plutôt que des protestations politiques. Alors que les auteurs des agitations sont restés silencieux, soit par refus, soit par incapacité d'expliquer leurs motivations, des chercheurs en sciences sociales et d'autres commentateurs ont forgé diverses interprétations et articulé des demandes à leur place. Cet article propose de confronter ces lectures avec l'analyse de trois romans publiés à la suite des émeutes de 2005 par Mabrouck

Rachedi (2006), Wilfried N'Sondé (2012) et Rachid Santaki (2013). Comparer ces récits de banlieue à des grilles de lecture sociologiques nous permettra de construire un cadre interprétatif alternatif dans lequel les émeutes apparaissent comme des demandes collectives de justice, d'égalité et de mobilité sociale continuellement ignorées par l'élite politique. La conclusion cherchera à évaluer si les émeutes de 2005 réussiront à laisser un héritage comparable à celui de mai 1968.

Mots clés: banlieue, émeute, police, mobilité sociale, roman

## **Riots or Revolts? The Legacy of the 2005 Uprising in French**

### **Banlieue Narratives**

‘This morning I woke up in a curfew  
O God, I was a prisoner, too - yeah!  
Could not recognize the faces standing over me  
They were all dressed in uniforms of brutality!’

Marley, Bob. 1973. ‘Burnin’ and Lootin’ in *Burnin*. Island/ Tuff Gong<sup>2</sup>.

### **Introduction**

The events of May 1968 and the 2005 banlieue upheavals are perfect illustrations of the divergent interpretations and evolving meanings that acts of contestation can take up in France, a country where ‘throwing up barricades, tossing pavement bricks or Molotov cocktails’ can potentially carry legitimising references to the revolutionary past (Murphy, 2011: 984). Murphy, who compares dominant interpretations of the 2005 banlieue revolts and the 2006 CPE protests, distinguishes various factors that favour the legitimation of disorder as a political protest. Announced intentions, established spokespersons, well-disciplined membership, clear management and supervision of the protest, claims about the general interest and the participants’ relatively high social standing are just a few of the principal features that constitute the French model of public contestation laid out by the Revolution, the Commune and May 1968.

The events of November 2005 did not follow this model and were almost unanimously dismissed as acts of aimless violence. They revealed an important divide between the predominantly middle-class participants of the 1968 protest, described by Teulon as ‘enfants gâtés et insouciants, [...] une generation de jeunes bourgeois qui avaient la chance de poursuivre des études et qui ne manquent rien’ (2006: 4) and the marginalised postcolonial youth from the suburbs, quickly designated in public discourses as an ‘internal enemy’. Both police and media resorted to diametrically opposed methods while dealing with these different social groups. Whereas in 1968 the student protestors were treated with relative restraint and hesitation by the police and enjoyed a predominantly favourable media coverage, banlieue youths were met with general hostility. They experienced the heavy-handed security measures put in place after May 1968 which, according to Rigouste, have evolved into a system of state control inspired by the repression of indigenous populations during the colonial era (2009: 286). A report by Amnesty International published in 2009 exposed serious human rights violations by law enforcement officials in French banlieues not only during the 2005 riots but also in their aftermath, including ‘racist abuse, unlawful killings, excessive use of force, torture, and other ill-treatment’. (Amnesty International, 2009: 5) The unexplained death of Adama Traoré in police custody in July 2016 and the rape with an expandable baton of another young black banlieue resident, Théo, in February 2017, are recent examples that demonstrate police brutality, the undoubtedly biased treatment of black and minority ethnic populations and the lack of institutional accountability within the French culture of governance (Body-Gendrot, 2009: 658).

In November 2005, following the deaths of two teenagers caused by police neglect,<sup>3</sup> insurrection flared up right across the country and the duration and the intensity

of violence prompted the government to declare a state of emergency, invoking colonial laws dating from the Algerian war of independence (Moran 2012: 2). In the wake of the unrest, the confrontations between the police and the rioters became the focus of a significant number of sociological studies seeking to make sense of these apparently leaderless and spontaneous events. There were also a series of novels published, some addressing directly the unrest, some tackling the tensions between the police and banlieue youths. Such narratives, which depict banlieues from within, constitute valuable resources for an exploration of how tensions and clashes between residents and state institutions, are perceived in geographically, socially and economically marginalised working-class neighbourhoods. This paper will focus on three of these texts, *Le Poids d'une âme* [The Weight of a Soul] by Mabrouck Rachedi (2006), *Fleur de béton* [Concrete Flower] by Wilfried N'Sondé (2012) and *Flic ou caillera* [Cop or Scum] by Rachid Santaki (2013), selected for their emphasis on anti-police sentiment in vulnerable suburbs. By superposing literary representations of clashes between banlieue youth and the police to scholarly interpretations of the 2005 disorders, it will investigate the alternative interpretative frameworks proposed by contemporary novelists from the suburbs. Do they depict the unrest as acts of contestation or violence? How do they explain the residents' motives for breaking the law and how does their analysis relate to media, political and scholarly discourses? To what extent are they preoccupied with the rioters' criminal activities, such as vandalism or delinquency, and how do they perceive the quasi-colonial law enforcement methods used in vulnerable suburbs as well as the state's attempted cover-up? To answer these questions, the paper will first look at various academic interpretations of the 2005 uprisings. Then insight from the novels will be used to explore how the confrontation between residents and the police are interpreted in the

narratives before drawing conclusions about the legacy of November 2005, in comparison with that of May 1968.

### **Scholarly interpretations of the 2005 unrests**

Although since the eruption of the first bouts of unrest in the Lyon banlieue of Vénissieux in 1981 violent incidents have occurred on a regular basis, most social commentators agree that the uproar of 2005 was more than just one of the usual incidences of social unrest. The conflict lasted twenty days, spread to 280 cities nationwide and resulted in 10.000 torched cars, 201 wounded police officers as well as 200 million euros worth of damage. It provoked a massive response from social scientists who published over 20 monographs and collected volumes dedicated to the subject within the first 15 months after its outbreak. Analyses by Ocqueteau (2007) and Body-Gendrot (2016) highlight the gap between silent rioters and researchers formulating demands on their behalf. They reveal the risks of an immediate scholarly response to an event which, even today, remains difficult to interpret, given the contradicting accounts, lacking data, the commentators' vested interests or moral and political commitment and the distorting effects of the media on all actors involved. Body-Gendrot divides the proposed approaches into two main categories, 'one broadly structuralist (emphasizing social inequality for example, as Lapeyronnie, 2006, or Beaud and Pialoux, 2003, did), the other looking at the dynamics of protest, as Mohammed and Mucchielli (2006) and Jobard (2014) did' (2016: 557). Body-Gendrot's own framework integrates all these dimensions, as well as a series of contextual forces including the media, the local space, the pre-electoral context and even cultural and religious dimensions. She shows that, if the media unified the disorder at a distance, at the same time 'local differentiation needs to be accounted for: hundreds of different forms of disorder took place during those three weeks. Urban space allowed all kinds of actions to overlap and connect' (2016: 569).



Most importantly, Body-Gendrot's work emphasises the inability of French elites to enable the social mobility of suburban youths of immigrant descent and recognise the issues of discrimination they face. Thus, 'challenging public order in specific urban spaces' (*Ibid.*) remains the rioters' sole channel for expression when all other representations are blocked.

Despite their shortcomings, the first scholarly readings had the incontestable merit of challenging the security-oriented interpretations professed by prominent political figures including Nicolas Sarkozy, who viewed the upheaval as the work of criminal gangs spreading the fear in disadvantaged urban areas and threatening the values of the Republic. In the context of the approaching presidential elections, such discourses sought to discredit the rioters as 'scum' and 'troublemakers', while stigmatising the banlieues as no-go areas. By contrast, sociological studies revealed that the primary motivation for rioting was not Islam, dysfunctional families or polygamy but a deep-seated feeling of rejection and injustice which constituted a common experience, especially among young French immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa. According to Kokoreff, such populations often experience 'strained relations with everyday institutions, such as school, welfare and housing agencies, employers, police and justice officials' (2009: 149). For Mohammed, the political elite's attempts to de-politicise the riots while challenging the banlieue residents' dignity and self-respect certainly contributed to the stirring up of latent anti-state and anti-police feelings which endure even today as a result of humiliating and violent 'encounters with legal authorities, such as the police, courts and prison personnel' (Mohammed 2009: 161).

Many interpretations highlighted the role played by French national police force not only in combating but also in triggering the 2005 banlieue riots. Mouhanna (2009: 174) affirmed that even outside periods of extreme crisis, relations between the police and the youths who live in neighbourhoods of relegation are tense. The former try to keep these areas under their control by increasing the number and visibility of patrol officers, extensive controls, and humiliating stop-and-search operations. This police sovereignty is regularly challenged by residents who tend to insult policemen or throw various projectiles at them from tall buildings. The siege-like presence of the police in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, their lack of empathy towards the locals and their prevalent racial and social prejudices are often accountable for a great part of the hostility towards them in some banlieues. Body-Gendrot (2010) notes that institutional racism buried in police work as well as the lack of training and institutional accountability are fundamental problems in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The maintenance of public order and the tight control of protesters are major priorities for the French police. Police forces are under the central authority of the Interior Minister, are used politically and may be sent to any part of the French territory where they use space saturation techniques and intimidation rather than mediation, negotiation or prevention. These features are key to understanding the latent and long-lasting conflict between police and banlieue residents. Thus, according to Mouhanna, police officers are viewed in the banlieues with more contempt than any other authoritative institution and police conduct is undoubtedly the main catalyst of riots which are usually triggered by the killing or wounding of a youth or adolescent during a police intervention in a vulnerable neighbourhood. Mouhanna's study also shows that police forces are generally sent far from the places where they are recruited; modern technology allows them to avoid

personal contact with the locals and they do not try to network or forge lasting links with the population. They regard themselves as outsiders and are often fearful of the residents to whom they tend to talk without respect (addressing them with 'tu' instead of the more formal 'vous'). Their general attitude is further reinforced by their contempt of ethnic minority youths who in their view do not qualify for full rights of citizenship because of their foreign origins (Mouhanna 2009: 179).

From these various interpretations we can conclude that, according to many researchers, for example Mauger (2006), Lapeyronnie (2006), Kokoreff (2008) or Moran (2011), the 2005 riots had a political, or at least proto-political, meaning. Muchielli (2006) goes even further by affirming that the banlieue upheavals, of unprecedented scope and duration, were the most important protests to happen in modern France since May 1968 (Muchielli 2006: 9). For Muchielli, November 2005 was in keeping with the French political tradition of popular uprisings and expressed the despair of masses of marginalised youths who suffer from long term unemployment as a result of failing at school and racial and social discrimination. While the tensions between multi-ethnic banlieue youths and the police emerge as a key factor in understanding the riots, postcolonial urban space, geographically concentrated poverty, unemployment and social exclusion made virtually invisible by persistent republican values (Soja 2010) were additional triggers. The 2005 unrest cannot be explained by any single motive, but the lack of empathy in banlieue policing remains a strong contributing factor. In addition to stigmatising urban policies (Dikeç 2007), increasing stigmatisation in political and media discourses, socio-economical and racial discrimination, the move away from proximity policing, the mutual mistrust between predominantly white middle-class police officers from the French provinces and multiethnic banlieue youth, the use of humiliating methods

by police officers and their *de facto* impunity were undoubtedly major factors contributing to the 2005 riots.

### **Rioting, police cynicism and media in *Le Poids d'une âme***

In the second part of this paper, a close reading of the primary texts will be superposed on the interpretative framework produced by social scientists. Banlieue novels are narratives representing social issues in the French suburbs from within, adopting the residents' point of view. One of the most striking features of these narratives is their relative disinterest in rioting, which is particularly surprising given the high number of novels published in the wake of the 2005 wave of urban violence (Horvath, 2014, 2015). Published in 2006, only one year after the 2005 events, *Le Poids d'une âme* is one of the rare exceptions and also the first banlieue novel to evoke the unrests directly. Although the novel focuses on a fictive riot and not the 2005 events, its plot follows closely the common model of urban disorder in France, generally triggered by a banal confrontation between male minority ethnic banlieue youth and the police (Waddington, King, Jobard, 2009: 3). The plot is set in a social housing estate located in Evry, in Greater Paris. The protagonist, Lounès Amri, a 17-year old secondary school student, is arrested during a random visit to an acquaintance and wrongly accused of drug trafficking and international terrorism. The peaceful protest march organised by the school and the victim's family degenerates into violent clashes between the residents and special police forces and a series of acts of vandalism.

Rachedi uses an omniscient narrator to grant the reader access to the thought processes of a great number of secondary characters. These include Lounès' French teacher who sends him to the headmaster for tardiness, the headmaster who suspends him

from school, the police inspector who hopes to rise to the top of the hierarchy with the aid of the extensive and very biased media coverage of the Amri case and the journalist who plays a key role in exposing the absurdity of the accusations. This technique allows the author to voice the conflicting views of residents and a great number of representatives of state authority such as teachers, policemen, bus drivers, judges and prison staff. In contrast to the teachers who develop relatively close links with their pupil and are prompt to mobilise networks of solidarity to support him, the arrogant headmaster, the career-focused police officer and the indifferent judges embody an impersonal, abstract concept of the state which uses harsh measures and tends to rely on authority rather than on empathy.

The state's viewpoint is represented in the novel through a number of characters and institutions. Lounès is arrested by a unit of special police forces (known as CRS or the Republican Security Company) who bash the dealer's door in and force everyone present to raise their hands and turn against the wall. During the interrogation that follows, police officer Georges Hirout assumes that Lounès, whose brother is sentenced to prison for drug trafficking, is himself part of a criminal gang. He is nevertheless shocked when his superior, inspector Letranchant (whose name literally means cutting edge) claims that the student has connections with the international terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda on the basis of Lounès' Maghrebi origin and his Islamic faith. Letranchant, who was promoted to the position of inspector five years earlier after he uncovered a narcotrafficking network which involved Lounès' brother, is depicted here as a morally dubious character, glibly manipulative and exploitative of the ambient fear from insecurity, terrorism and the media's sensationalist approach to the banlieue, to advance his career. He impresses the audience with his charisma, wit and photogenic features when he appears on television, first on a regional program on channel France 3, and later on TF1's national

news. His successful networking with TV presenter Jean-Pierre Pernault, who requests his expertise for the coverage of similar cases in future, is a hint at the biased treatment of banlieue youth by the media which tend to rely on the police as their primary source of information, as demonstrated by Sedel (2009) and Berthaut (2013).<sup>4</sup>

Within the police hierarchy, the inspector is depicted as a ruthless superior, a ‘big shot’, who expects unconditional obedience and threatens members of his team with dismissal. Hirout nevertheless challenges his authority by reaching out to journalist Michel Millinaire who denounces the police error in an article published in *L’Express*. To get Lounès out of the way, before the scandal is let loose, police superintendent Vergnes attempts to expel him from the country on the grounds of being an illegal immigrant when the Algerian-born man without a valid residency card turns 18 in custody. The head of the anti-terrorist squad defends cynical views of the functioning of justice system (‘Je sais comment la justice fonctionne, je peux mettre Soeur Emmanuelle sous les verrous demain si je le veux’, (LPA: 134)). He calls on judge Paul Masson, a notorious alcoholic, who agrees to cooperate when threatened with a disciplinary audit. The numerous examples of corrupt or cynical police officers and civil servants reinforce the reader’s impression that the state-imposed concept of justice remains inefficient for the most part and is applied arbitrarily, in the authorities’ best interest rather than in that of the citizens.

The innocent high school student, who experiences inhuman treatment while in custody, including a rape attempt by a cellmate, severe depression, hospitalisation, and a failed suicide attempt, embodies the powerlessness of banlieue residents whose concept of retributive justice is represented in the novel by the riots provoked by the reinforced police presence in the neighbourhood. When the special police take over the control of the neighbourhood, about a hundred young men and adolescents armed with stones and

Molotov cocktails challenge the squad. The insurrection is spontaneously coordinated while the participants' motives vary: some want to outdo their rival neighbourhood whose riot appeared on television the previous day, while others seek revenge for being subjected to humiliating police searches in the past:

Des garçons de douze ans insultent les policiers, jettent des pierres, les grands frères essaient de les raisonner sans résultat. Une occasion de se défouler ne se refuse pas. Derrière leurs boucliers, les flics restent impassibles, leurs matraques rangés dans les fourreaux. [...] les jets de pierres redoublent, les moins belliqueux participant à l'hallali. Lounès se prête au jeu comme les autres. Pour une fois, l'Humiliation est dans l'autre camp. Tiens, prends ça en souvenir de mon dernier contrôle d'identité. [...] La vengeance anime Lounès, contre la police, contre l'autorité. (LPA: 49)

Rachedi's description of the outburst of violence validates Michel Kokoreff's analysis, which suggests that a latent anti-police and anti-institutional culture in the banlieues allows for easy mobilisation after a police *bavure* (2008, 185). The novel also highlights a deeply rooted mistrust of the police described by Didier Fassin (2011, 19), which draws attention to the unrecognised forms of racial discrimination practiced by the police against minority ethnic youth. These double standards are also present in the novel where, just like Zyed and Bouna in 2005, Lounès' brother Tarik saves the life of a wounded bus driver and immediately flees the scene in order to escape police interrogations; he knows all too well that 'qu'on soit coupable ou innocent, les interrogatoires de police vous rendront toujours noir à Évry' (LPA: 53). After the police retreat, the rioters celebrate their victory by torching cars, spray painting slogans on buildings, breaking windows, vandalizing and setting a bus alight.

The next day, when rumours about the cold search in the Amri family's apartment spread across the neighbourhood, youths start gathering again, preparing projectiles to throw. The police retaliate, provoke the rioters, arresting those who have no identification cards and the fracas ends with cars and garbage bins set on fire which the journalists arrive just in time to catch on film. Another confrontation happens in front of the secondary school where the teachers organise a peaceful sit-in protest. The participants are verbally provoked by the police and the subsequent physical confrontation leaves one teacher injured. This war-like situation in which each party seeks to provoke the other and then retaliate, reveals the fantasised representations that both the youth and the police hold of each other and validate the hypothesis formulated by Fassin (2011: 70-71) and Kokoreff (2008: 183-191) about the deeply rooted narratives of 'us against them' that rely on martial metaphors, aggressive language and tend to cause collateral damage by stigmatising not just criminals but also territories and populations already discriminated against by a cumulation of disadvantages (Fassin: 71).

The riot represented in *Le Poids d'une âme* is exceptional insofar as it turns the spontaneous indignation in the neighbourhood into an organised political protest in central Paris, led by the teachers, an activist journalist and the victim's siblings. The fact that the protest is structured by outsiders suggests, however, that the residents themselves are unable to voice their grievances. This impression is further reinforced by the many occasions on which Lounès is silenced, first by his French teacher, then by the headmaster, the police officers and the prison staff, until he finally claims the right to speak up at the end of his trial.

The political significance of the protest is further weakened by some rioters' dubious motivations including opportunist looting, entertainment or rivalry with other



neighbourhoods. Although the novel purposely avoids one-sided depictions of the main actors by representing examples of committed journalists, upright policemen and heroic youths whose efforts ensure the final victory of justice, its conclusion remains nevertheless unpromising. It reveals that the intimidating presence of special police forces fails to suppress rioting and shows how the verbal and physical violence employed against civilians fuels further confrontations. It also demonstrates the racist practices of the police, the prejudice and lack of respect towards the inhabitants and the opportunism in the upper ranks of police hierarchy. Media are depicted as the instigators of the riots, with their biased treatment aggravating the stigmatisation of the suburbs. The fact that the happy outcome is only ensured by the intervention of an independent journalist reinforces the reader's overall impression of the failure of the police and justice system to protect citizens in the banlieues. It also contributes to the dismissal of the residents as agents capable of voicing their concerns and stage a successful protest movement without external support.

### **The limits of proximity policing in *Fleur de béton***

While *Le Poids d'une âme* identifies media coverage, provocation and police *bavures* as the main triggers of banlieue riots, *Fleur de béton* focuses its attention on the dissatisfaction of banlieue youths who, regularly rejected from central Paris nightclubs and often unable to afford any form of entertainment, find an outlet for their frustration in an improvised dance-off in the cellar of an abandoned building. Located in the heart of the Cité des 6000, a fictive housing estate on the outskirts of Paris reminiscent of La Courneuve's 4000, the Black Move hosts dance parties on Saturday afternoons to allow local teenagers to flirt, dance and cast off the week's tensions to the mixes of a well-known Paris DJ. The founder of the club, Antonio, who died recently of a drug overdose

under unclear circumstances that were never fully investigated by the police, was a rebel who incited the inhabitants to take initiatives and create their own opportunities in life. Considered his legacy, the club is a success according to the residents. Local authorities do not share this view and decide to close it down, however, under the pretext of its lack of health and safety regulations and soundproofing. Two plain-clothed officers stop the clubbers from accessing the premises: Captain Moussa Traoré and Lieutenant Laurence da Silva. Their arguments – that the noise of the party disturbs the residents, the air of the cellar is toxic, the closure is only temporary, and the city council will liaise with local associations to arrange activities more suitable for the local youth – fail to convince the crowd which uses increasingly aggressive language to claim access to the premises.

In contrast to the previous novel, the police officers here are of immigrant – Malian and Portuguese – origins themselves. They use respectful language and exemplary methods of proximity policing which nevertheless fail to convince the crowd of upset youth to accept the city council's discriminatory decision. The tension rises quickly but the confrontation does not occur between the police and the youths as one would expect but between the youths and an elderly neighbour, a former corporal in the French colonial army, who sees in the clubbers of immigrant descent as the reincarnation of the 'savages' he attempted to 'civilise' during his service in Africa. After an exchange of insults and projectiles, the old man reaches for his rifle and shoots into the crowd to 'settle the score with rag heads and Negros' (FB: 98).<sup>5</sup> The subsequent riot results in tossing stones and bottles, setting garbage bins on fire, ransacking the supermarket, and vandalising the local school and nursery. It is justified by the narrator with the rightful indignation of the residents who are excluded both from consumer society and full French citizenship:

La rage gronde et se transforme en haine. [...] La goutte de trop est tombée, la rancœur des laissés-pour-compte, des éternels perdants, se déverse sur le goudron. [...] l'injustice trop grande dans les dédales du quartier, contrôles de police au faciès, les vacances devant la télévision, la nourriture bon marché [...] L'aigreur [...] déboule sur les avenues et crie justice pour tous!' (FB: 108-110)

The absurdity of the official justice symbolised by the closure of the club and the authorities' efforts to seek absolute control over the marginalised residents' entertainment, is challenged by the youths' conception of democracy according to which residents have the right to have fun for free in their own territory under the condition that they do not harm or disturb anyone.

Using a similar technique to Rachedi's, N'Sondé alternates the characters' viewpoints, adopting the perspective of various characters such as the police officers, the colonial corporal, the adolescents' defeated parents who lost their jobs when the factories closed down and the youths who, like Jason and Mouloud, actively participate in the riots. Jason, an excellent dancer originally from the French West Indies, bemoans the closure of the club which he views as the only place to express himself and impress others with his exceptional skills. Mouloud, a mentally disabled youth of Maghrebi descent, who suffered lasting damage during his military service in Algeria, sees the violence as his only chance to earn some respect.

While the televised media coverage interprets the riots as the sign of the immigrants' failed integration, condemns the looting and burning and praises the courage of the special police forces, the rioters have a different view. They feel like they have

been treated 'like dogs' (FB: 129) by the Republican Security Company who make their presence felt by deploying a high number of troops, patrolling in armour and filming the rioters from inside their cars so as to later identify and arrest them. The disrespect for the residents is exemplified by Mouloud's arrest by a special police squad who interrupt his prayer by spraying gas in his face. The final verdict of the novel is formulated by Captain Moussa Traoré who, for the first time, expresses his doubts concerning the methods used by the police: the disrespect towards the accused youths, the unnecessary military tone, and the deployment of excessive, disproportionate measures. Although the focus on da Silva's and Traoré's fears, moral doubts and dilemmas effectively humanise the servants of law and order, the ending of the novel makes evident both Traoré's own dominated position in the police hierarchy and the police failure to dispense justice in the segregated suburbs, as exemplified by Antonio's un-investigated death. The local authorities' attempt to exercise absolute control over the culturally and socio-economically dominated population mainly composed of postcolonial immigrants and their children is depicted as deeply problematic. Although inefficient in the long run and detrimental for the community that loses parts of its already deficient infrastructure, the riot is viewed in the novel as the only way to protest against discriminatory attitudes experienced by the inhabitants daily in their dealing with institutions including schools, employers, police and justice officials.

### **Police corruption in *Flic ou caillera***

Dedicated to Zyed and Bouna, victims of the police accident which triggered the 2005 riots, Rachid Santaki's *Flic ou caillera* has a different take on police and justice. The main character, Mehdi, a banlieue youth from Saint-Denis, becomes involved in female police inspector Najet Iker's attempt to bring down the powerful Bensama

brothers, the leaders of an important drug cartel in the Seine-Saint-Denis region. Forced to hide a bag filled with banknotes belonging to the dealers and solicited by Iker to steal an important document from the medical research company where he works, Mehdi finally manages to escape with the money and starts a new life in Tahiti. All the police officers in the novel are depicted as corrupt, apart from Iker who is fully committed to the police Code of Ethics and is motivated by her father, a well-known inspector with a strong legacy. Some of the unprincipled policemen, like Quincy, work for the drug cartel, informing the Bensama about police actions planned against them, while others like Stéphane Kabiri and Michael Jermin, sell drugs confiscated from criminals for their own profit.

Policing methods are described in the novel not only as illegal and unethical but also as particularly humiliating. Witnesses are arrested and released so that inspectors can stay one-up on them. Informers are blackmailed and pressed to sell drugs for the police officers' benefit and civilians are manipulated and forced to break the law against their will. The arrest of a criminal, Le Borgne, demonstrates how police officers assume the manners of gang members by talking to residents with disrespect and using unnecessary violence while dealing with them. The intrusion of six policemen in the family's apartment interrupts the father's prayer. The mother is violently pushed against the wall, neighbours are shouted instructions to return to their homes, the accused is forced out of his bed and his cash is stolen by Kabiri while his accomplice, Jermin, smiles on. These methods prompt Iker to voice her disapproval of her colleague's attitude: 'T'as pas besoin de te comporter comme un chef de gang'. (FC: 62)

The police are also represented in the novel as the perpetrators of police accidents, the memory of which is kept alive by certain residents like the militant journalist Bruno or Mehdi, a talented graphic artist. Contracted by Bruno, Mehdi produces a graffiti series as a tribute to the victims of police killings over two decades: Malik Oussekine de Paris, Aïssa Ihich, Youssef Khaïf, Makomé, Sydney Manoka Nzeza, Abdelkader Bouziane and finally et Zyed et Bouna. These youths of immigrant origin who died in violent confrontations with the police between 1986 and 2005 in Paris and the suburbs of Mantes-la-Jolie, Tourcoing, Dammarie-les-Lys and Clichy-sous-Bois become an important symbol of the exclusion and violence to which banlieue residents are regularly subjected.

While official justice is rendered obsolete and inefficient by the corruption of the police and the complicity of the political elite, little room is left for the residents' communal protests. It is worth noting that, contrary to the other narratives, no riots occur in Santaki's novel published seven years after the 2005 uprisings. This may be due to the fact that this hybrid, which borrows elements from both the crime fiction and the banlieue novel, follows different genre conventions than the other two narratives. Yet it is also possible that the time elapsed since the revolts resulted in a rise of individualism and hopelessness and a transformation of the banlieue in which the police and the criminal gangs work hand in hand, using similar methods to subdue the residents. Although Mehdi's individual escape with the gang money to Tahiti technically involves a breach of the law, it is depicted as the only way to break away from hopeless repression both by the state and by the mafia.

**Conclusion: a legacy beyond postcolonial repression and broken social mobility**

In their representations of protests, urban violence and conflicts between banlieue residents and the police, banlieue novels seem to confirm scholarly analysis at various levels. They show riots as leaderless and spontaneous disorder, mostly triggered by biased treatment of local youths by state institutions including the school, the local council and above all the police. Like sociological studies, these narratives also reject explanations that rely on single motives, and they clearly indicate that disrespect, institutional racism, prejudice and heavy-handed policing in the handling of impoverished postcolonial populations are all important triggers. The narratives explain suburban residents' motivations to riot both by their desire for media attention and their incapacity to find more apposite and politicised forms of protest. Novelists seem to agree with social scientists about both the prevailing anti-police sentiment, resentment of other state institutions represented in their territory and the limited agency of banlieue residents shown as unable to identify their adversaries or elect representatives who would voice their demands. To organise protests and marches, residents mostly rely on help from middle-class activists, teachers or journalists who generally do not live in the community. They only show a limited capacity for self-organisation and their collective actions, such as setting up a local dance hall in *Fleur de béton*, remain isolated and fragile because they depend heavily individual leaders like Antonio in the same novel, whose premature death puts the local initiative on hold. It is significant that all the novels end with individual solutions. In *Le Poids de l'Âme* Lounès survives his suicide attempt and is released from prison thanks to media mobilisation on his behalf. In the other two novels the main characters leave the suburb to start a new life with unlawfully obtained money. The upheavals, which mostly involve secondary characters, remain limited in their scope, length, local support and legacy. They do not lead to any lasting transformation for the community and the local residents' dominated situation continues largely unchanged.

The novels tend to challenge the public discourses that discredit rioters as troublemakers. They seem to argue that the riots' young male participants of predominantly postcolonial origin need to vent their anger caused by the state's failure to dispense justice effectively in segregated areas. In line with the tradition of postcolonial fiction which started in France in the 1980s with the *beur* novel (fiction by and about second generation Maghrebi immigrants who often live in suburban environments<sup>6</sup>), banlieue narratives illustrate the suburbs' postcolonial geography described by Soja and insist on the persistence of colonial methods of repression highlighted by Rigouste which symbolically extend the domination over populations of immigrant origins. The negative experience of the novels' main characters who are predominantly of Maghrebi, sub-Saharan African or Afro-Caribbean origin, serve to further reinforce the feeling that ethnic minority groups are discriminated against by public authorities in various, official and unofficial ways, notably in the spheres of housing, education and employment.<sup>7</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, the representation of the riots in banlieue narratives remains relatively marginal. Even the few novels in which upheavals and acts of vandalism feature seek to break common clichés about youth delinquency by clearly indicating that rioters are not synonymous with banlieue youths. They do this by embracing various viewpoints and emphasising individual differences, thereby illustrating Body-Gendrot's call for local differentiation to be taken into account. Thus the disorder that occurs in *Le Poids d'une Ame* and *Fleur de béton* is triggered by various motivations and takes different forms, none of which involves the entire community: there are always bystanders, youths who refuse to take part in the violence and everyday heroes who pull the driver out of the burning bus.



Just like social commentators, banlieue narratives remain uncertain about how the meaning of the 2005 unrests will evolve and how they will be remembered by future generations. A comparison with May 1968 seems to indicate, beyond the obvious differences, that revolts tend to be constructed differently by various political forces. Gilcher-Holtey highlights, for example, the disjuncture between the political left on the one hand which sees the legacy of the 1968 student protests as an idealist promotion of a better, fairer society, and right-wing politicians like Nicolas Sarkozy on the other, for whom 1968 represents ‘a loss of norms and rules, values and hierarchies, and morals and politeness’ (2008: 201-202). Teulon goes even further in his criticism and finds the legacy of May 1968 responsible for today’s blocked social mobility and thus the main trigger of the 2005 riots. He claims that ‘trente-cinq ans plus tard, la société entière est dominée par les héritiers (les soixante-huitards et leurs enfants)’ (2006: 6) who, unlike the anonymous participants of November 2005, were able to translate their revolutionary leadership into dominant social and economic positions. As opposed to the bourgeois-led student revolts, the disturbances did not emanate from ‘from labour relations in face-to-face conflict or from students’ revolts’ (Body-Gendrot, 2016: 568) but were largely attributed to the banlieues’ postcolonial ‘lumpenproletariat’. According to Bertho, although the November 2005 revolt did not generate any great narrative or leave any lasting legacy, there was something unique in its eruption, unusual duration, and abrupt ending: ‘un noyau résistant aux paradigmes habituels d’analyse politique ou savante. Sans banderole, sans slogan, sans programme, sans porte-parole car sans discours public, ce soulèvement furtif demeure sans suite’ (2014: 75). However, for Body-Gendrot, the events of November 2005 were more than just a furtive moment of disorder as they remain ‘a landmark in people’s imagination and a reference point each time tensions reoccur in the *banlieues*’

(2016: 568). To conclude, thirteen years after its eruption, this historically unique contestation still remains open to interpretation. Different actors including politicians, media, social scientists, artists and civil society will have to share the task of constructing their meaning and legacy over the following decades.

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[<sup>1</sup>] References to the novels use the following abbreviations: LPA for Rachedi's *Le Poids d'une âme*, FB for N'Sondé's *Fleur de Béton* and FC, for Santaki's *Flick ou Caillera*.

[<sup>2</sup>] The world became aware of police repression in the French *banlieues* from Mathieu Kassovitz' internationally recognised film *La Haine* which certainly remains the most influential example of French banlieue cinema until today. The escalating violence is underscored by the song 'Burnin' and Lootin', by Bob Marley, playing in the film's memorable first scene which captures the confrontation between police forces equipped with guns, shields and helmets and civilians solely armed with stones.

[<sup>3</sup>] The French word *bavure* is a euphemism generally used to downplay the police's responsibility for the accidental deaths of banlieue residents that occur either in custody or fleeing from law enforcement. It is generally translated into English as 'blunder', 'slipup' or 'accident' but none of these terms corresponds exactly to the French meaning because their playfulness is ill-suited to the gravity of the phenomenon they describe.

[<sup>4</sup>] The exclusive use of police information in certain biased media representations of the French banlieue has been demonstrated by Berthaut (2013) while Sedel (2009) has shown the rise of commercial rather than political logic of written media accounts from the

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banlieues, resulting in their transfer from the ‘society’ section of newspapers to crime and popular entertainment.

[<sup>5</sup>] ‘Régler leur compte aux bougnoules et aux négros.’ (FB: 98)

[<sup>6</sup>] The term was first coined by Michel Laronde (1993) and Alec Hargreaves (1997), but this articulation relies on Carrie Tarr’s (2005) definition, borrowed from film studies which does well to highlight the coherence between ethnic/racial and territorial identities in artistic expressions of the French suburbs.

[<sup>7</sup>] Both official and unofficial discrimination against immigrants has been demonstrated by Hargreaves (2007).

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