

# Understanding 'La Contagion': Power, Exclusion and Urban Violence in France and the United States

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*Following the Autumn 2005 riots in France, many observers openly asked: 'Why all the fuss? What was so different about the 2005 violence within the French historical context and what made it special in terms of cross-national comparison?' This article argues that the contagiousness of the riots highlighted structural weaknesses in the French integration system that need to be addressed in order to prevent widespread ethnic violence in the future. Through a comparison of citizenship models in France and the United States (US), this article contends that, while the French Republic may formally facilitate ethnic integration, the structure of power within this system actually constructs informal barriers that exacerbate socio-ethnic exclusion and marginalisation.*

*Keywords: France; United States; Structures of Power; Ethnic Exclusion*

## Introduction

Immigration stirs public passions because it touches national core identities and affects fundamental collective notions of citizenship and community. Social and ethnic integration, which is inevitably linked to immigration, is highly complex because it affects all aspects of a receiving nation's human ecology, defined as the political, social and economic systems that dictate human interaction. History has shown that this mix of ideological debate and materialist concerns related to security and socio-economic well-being can create tension and anger amongst both native populations and immigrant groups. Often, specific events trigger sporadic ethnic violence that periodically calls attention to immigration issues on national political agendas.

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Given this general context, the ethnic violence that occurred in most major French cities in Autumn 2005 should not be considered an anomaly. In fact, urban violence is not a new phenomenon in France. Scholars of French ethnic and urban politics (Body-Gendrot 1998; Duprez and Hedli 1992; Wieviorka 1999) have examined violent forms of protest and crime since car-burnings began in the *quartiers sensibles* in the early 1980s. This practice is generally explained as an expression of social malaise related to socio-economic marginalisation in areas of elevated unemployment and geographic exclusion. Thus, the basic question to be addressed following the 2005 urban violence was: 'Why all the fuss?' Why was the violence of 2005 so different and so special in terms of cross-national comparison?

Many observers of the Autumn 2005 violence even took exception to the label 'riot'—often used in the international press to describe these events. The then French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy were quick to point out that nobody was killed as a direct result of the violence that lasted from 27 October to 17 November.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, as the violence ended, public debate on the positions of ethnic minorities and immigrants in French society quickly subsided. In fact, the repressive strategy utilised by national and local authorities to quell the violence was widely applauded by many French citizens. Following the enactment of a curfew in the affected areas, the popularity of de Villepin (+7 per cent) and Sarkozy (+11 per cent) rose significantly in public opinion polls. French immigration politics seemed to return to normal, as the so-called challenge to the Republic was 'effectively addressed'.

Despite such politically tinged interpretations, most scholars agree that the 2005 urban violence was meaningful first and foremost because it happened in France. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the French Republican model of citizenship was viewed idealistically by many observers. Whereas communitarian models, such as those employed in the United States or Great Britain, were often characterised by ethnic competition, racism and discrimination, and the procedural and informal racialisation of immigration, the colour-blind French notion of citizenship was often viewed as a positive alternative. Scholars of French immigration politics such as James Hollifield correctly note that France distinguished itself from other immigration states through its formal 'willingness to accept foreigners as settlers and citizens' (Hollifield 2004: 184). Even recently, with the breakdown of integration programmes in communitarian countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium, many politicians in these states have been calling for the creation of citizenship laws based on those found in France (see the contribution from Han Entzinger in this issue). The 2005 violence has obviously impacted on policy debates in these countries, which demonstrates its importance beyond France's national borders.

Domestically, the 2005 urban violence must also be considered significant. Even though such violence has occurred periodically in French cities since the early 1980s, it has never before occurred on a national scale. Limited ethnic violence is relatively easy to explain. Often it results from social injustices, both real and perceived

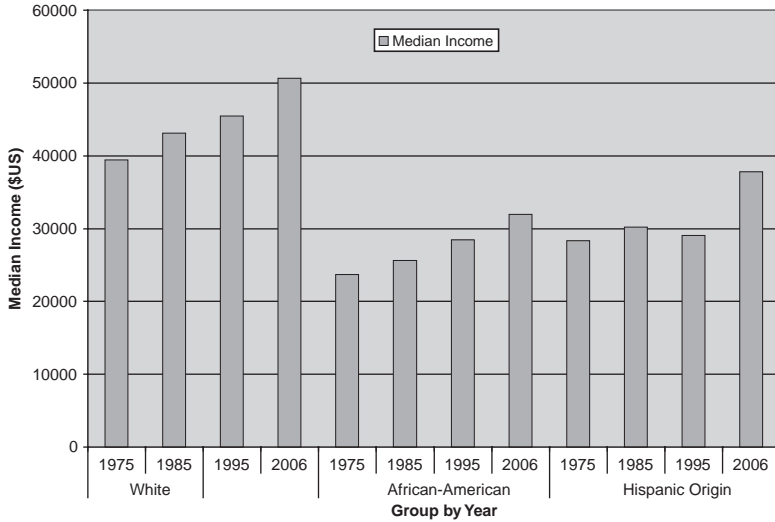
(Horowitz 1985). However, widespread violence, such as that which occurred in France, does not occur as frequently and its causes cannot be viewed simplistically. The phenomenon of '*la contagion*' or 'the contagiousness' of the 2005 urban violence is the most impressive aspect of the events of those days. This article argues that *la contagion* highlighted structural weaknesses in the French integration system that need to be addressed in order to prevent widespread ethnic violence in the future. Through a comparison of citizenship models in France and the United States, I contend that, although perhaps formally facilitating ethnic integration, the structure of power within the French Republic in reality constructs informal barriers that exacerbate socio-ethnic exclusion and marginalisation.

### **Ethnicity and Exclusion in France and the United States**

Many comparative studies of immigration have focused on France and the United States (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992), as numerous important social and historical variables can be kept constant through this comparison. First, both countries are historical receiving states in which widespread immigration began more than 200 years ago (Noiriel 1996; Viet 1998). The two countries also have numerous ethnic communities present in these states, marked by multiple generations. Second, both France and the US are characterised by similar models of the socio-economic and geographic exclusion of ethnic minorities. In both countries, ethnic/racial minorities are over-represented in poorer neighbourhoods characterised by high unemployment rates found in the centre (US) and peripheries (France) of metropolitan areas. Even though a direct quantitative comparison of the socio-economic standing of ethnic minorities is impossible due to differences in data collection that reflect the respective citizenship norms of the two states, indirect comparisons of socio-economic indicators for ethnic minorities in the US and France clearly demonstrate similarities. Figures 1–4 illustrate the racial stratification of US society in terms of median household income, poverty levels, group presence in state and federal prison populations, and violent crimes (homicides).

Similarly, Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate higher unemployment rates for minorities in France.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Figure 7 shows that education levels have less of an impact on employment rates in the so-called *quartiers sensibles*—where most of France's ethnic minorities are concentrated—than they do on the general population. Finally, Figure 8 presents the distribution of the French population by social category and nationality. It highlights the over-representation of minorities in low-skilled positions (various 'worker' positions on the right of the graph) and their under-representation in more specialised and professional categories (those found towards the left).

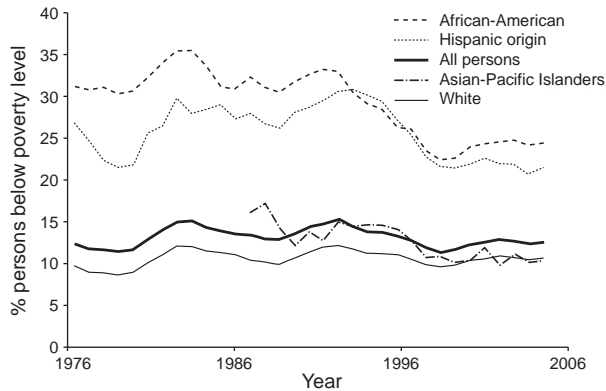
In addition to their immigration histories and socio-demographic trends concerning minorities, France and the United States also share important social characteristics that affect integration. Both states have, in fact, received historical immigration flows from countries located within widely recognised spheres of influence. In France, immigration has been dominated by migrants from former



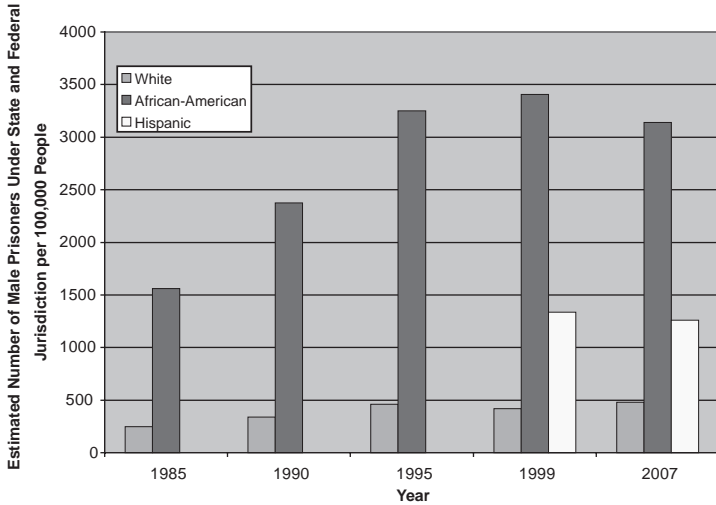
**Figure 1.** Median household income by race, 1975–2006  
 Source: Infoplease: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104552.html>

colonies especially those in North Africa (Hollifield 1992). Public opinion concerning immigration was strongly influenced by French views on the Algerian war of independence, which remained a taboo subject in political debates for decades (Bouamama *et al.* 1992; Favell 1998; Papademetriou and Hamilton 1995). This mix of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment led to the revival of the far-right in the 1980s and an acceleration of electoral support for the *Front National* in the last ten years (Betz 1994; Hainsworth 2000).

Similarly, immigration to the United States has been inextricably tied to its southern neighbour, Mexico. Even though the US has never formally colonised Latin America, it has considered this region part of its sphere of influence since the decree

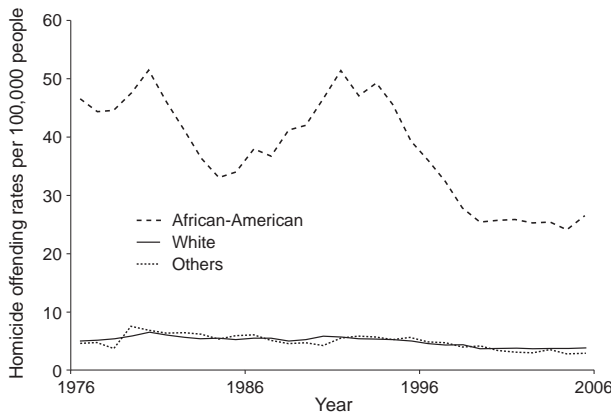


**Figure 2.** Persons below poverty level in US by race, 1975–2007  
 Source: Infoplease: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104525.html>

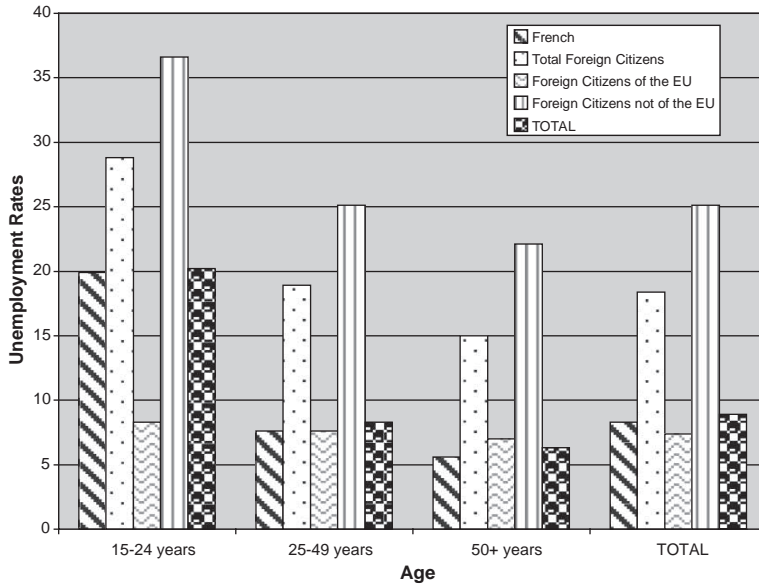


**Figure 3.** Estimated number of male sentenced prisoners under state or federal jurisdiction per 100,000, by race  
 Source: Figure created by author based on statistics in Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins, 1996, 1999, 2007.

of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. Animosity has often marked the relationship between Mexico and the US since the latter annexed one third of the former's territory after the war of 1848. Throughout the twentieth century Mexico has sought to assert its political independence from the US (i.e. through its support for Castro's regime in Cuba), despite its neighbour's enormous power in global affairs (see Chambers and Smith 2002). This has often created animosity in US immigration politics, which has been characterised by strong anti-Mexican sentiment. In border

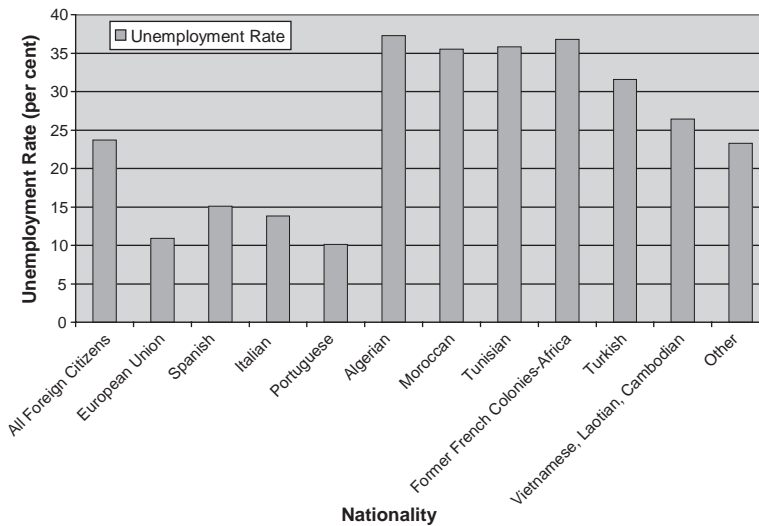


**Figure 4.** Homicide rates per 100,000 people by race  
 Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide)



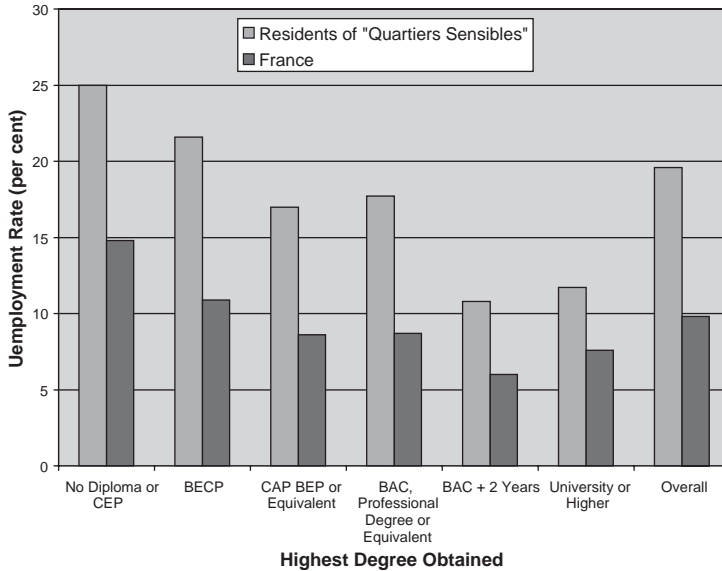
**Figure 5.** Unemployment rates by nationality and age

Source: Figure created by author based on data from ‘Le chômage dans les quartiers dits sensibles’. Observatoire des inégalités, 13 November 2005, [http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id\\_article = 312](http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id_article = 312)



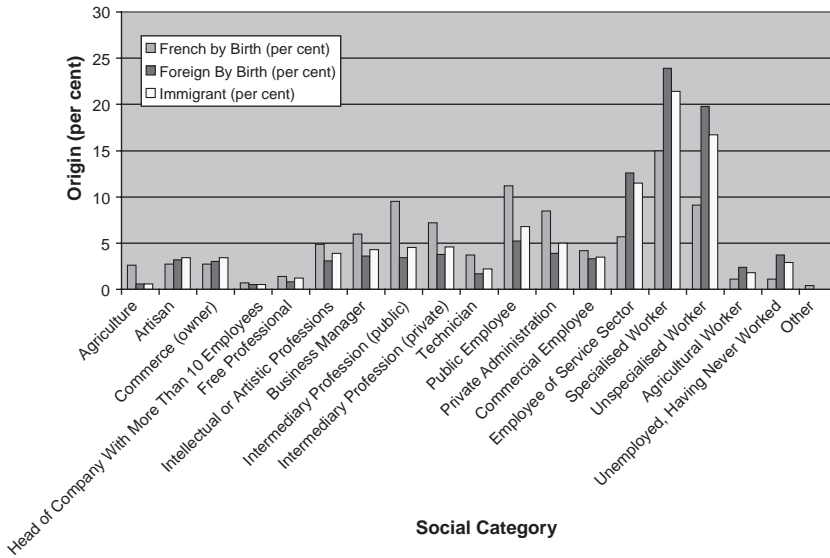
**Figure 6.** Unemployment and nationality statistics for population aged 30-39

Source: Figure created by author based on data from: ‘Les catégories sociales des étrangers’, Observatoire des inégalités, 7 November 2004, [http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id\\_article = 275](http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id_article = 275)



**Figure 7.** Unemployment rates in 2003 by highest degree obtained

Source: Figure created by author based on data from: 'Chômage: le diplôme protège moins dans les quartiers sensibles', Observatoire des inégalités, 16 March 2005, [http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=314](http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id_article=314)



**Figure 8.** Classification of working population by social category and origin

Source: Figure created by author based on data from: 'Les catégories sociales des étrangers', Observatoire des inégalités, 7 November 2004, [http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=275](http://www.inegalites.fr/article.php3?id_article=275)

regions such as California and Texas, anti-immigrant lobbies and pressure groups have pushed both the federal government to strengthen its controls along the south-west frontier with Mexico and state governments to restrict public assistance to clandestine migrants (i.e. proposition 187 in California). These efforts have gained popularity nationally and the US Congress recently debated a proposal to extend the current system of border walls to cover the entire US–Mexico divide. Thus, like many French immigrants from North Africa, Mexicans in the US have been confronted by hardened public attitudes and stereotypes linked to national relationships with their homeland (Massey *et al.* 1988). Even recent ‘academic’ work on migration to the US has reflected these opinions (e.g. Hanson 2003; Huntington 2004). These studies have, in fact, highlighted a presumed inability of Mexicans to integrate into US society and culture. For this reason, many in the US, including Mexicans, who share such viewpoints concerning ethnic minorities, became alarmed by the 2005 riots in France. Many public debates on the French riots, in fact, asked: ‘Is the US next?’ (Sanchez 2005).

### **The Debate Between Liberalism and Communitarianism**

While social variables can be considered constant in a comparison of the United States and France, political factors vary significantly. First, the French and the United States’ systems of government function very differently (Esping-Andersen 1991). The French statist model is characterised by bureaucratic centralisation and uniformity, whereas the federal system found in the US places greater responsibility in the hands of local authorities. Second, the US and France have very different constitutional traditions concerning social integration and welfare. Whereas the US tradition aims to protect individual liberties and social freedom, the French model is based on social cohesion and socio-economic justice. For this reason, for example, ‘hate speech’ is permitted in the US but outlawed in France, even though it is very difficult to prove. Finally, the US and France are characterised by different normative ideals concerning citizenship. As stated above, the United States legally recognises ethnic differences, while the French do not. This context of liberalism vs. communitarianism has dominated most discussions of citizenship, migration and integration in France and the US, especially since the 2005 riots.

In her 2005 article, Marcela Sanchez responds to a citizen who wrote a letter to the *Washington Post* blaming the French riots on uncontrolled immigration. She quotes the following passage from the public contribution: ‘There are riots all over France because they took in too many immigrants. Biz (businesses) wanted them for cheap labor when the French birth rate dropped, this same thing will happen in the USA when the Mexicans riot years from now’. Sanchez refutes this logic with the following argument: ‘France has long taken the ostrich-head-in-the-sand approach to immigration. Despite the sometimes deserved backlash to endless conversations about diversity/tolerance/multiculturalism—these movements are the very reasons the United States will not see such widespread violence’. In fact, the issue of



multiculturalism took centre-stage in the US press following the riots. Some authors, like Sanchez, utilised the Autumn events to criticise France's liberal model and to defend communitarian recognition of difference for the purposes of collecting statistics, combating discrimination and instilling pride in ethnic minorities. Conservative writers, such as Thomas Sowell, interpreted the 2005 riots as further proof of the failure of multiculturalism. In a November 2005 commentary he wrote:

While Dr. Dalrymple called this Moslem underclass 'barbarians',<sup>3</sup> a French minister who called the rioters 'scum' provoked instant outrage against himself, including criticism from at least one member of his own government. This squeamishness in word and deed, and the accompanying refusal to face blatant realities is also a major part of the background for the breakdown of law and order and the social degeneration that follows. None of this is peculiar to France. It is a symptom of a common retreat from reality, and from the hard decisions that reality requires, not only in Europe but also in European offshoot societies like Canada, Australia, New Zealand—and the United States of America.

In fact, the main topics of public discussion in the US following the riots, including socio-economic exclusion, cultural refusal and religious conflict (centred mainly on Islam), converged in a debate over whether US or French notions of citizenship were more effective in politically integrating minorities or creating social division and threats to public security.

These exchanges on the impact of French identity were not limited to the popular media. In fact, much of the academic analysis of the riots has focused on the issue of identity in France. In part, this has occurred because of the political events that took place before, during and after the riots. For example, in his 18 November speech to the nation, French President Jacques Chirac made reference to an 'identity crisis' and a 'lack of landmarks'. However, this crisis to which Chirac refers has been building for many years, and it has become embodied in the symbol of Muslim headscarves, that are cited in many books and articles (see, *inter alia*, Caldwell 2000; Debray 2004; Kaltenbach and Tribalat 2002; Wieviorka 2003). The riots seemed to rekindle most of the recent academic and political debates surrounding immigration and identity in France—from the utility of race in data collection (Suleiman 2006), to affirmative action policies (Hargreaves 2004), to ethnic mobilisation and interest representation (Neveu 1995; Wihtol de Wenden 1994) and the compatibility (or lack thereof) of Islam with French Republicanism (Ethnobarometer 2006).

One of the most interesting academic forums for debate on the impact of the riots is the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) website. This arena was constructed to facilitate informed discussion of numerous issues connected to the riots. The introduction states:

Even as the riots in French cities and *banlieues* subside, they continue to invoke important and troubling issues. There are questions about the riots themselves; the government's response to them; the relative roles of race, religion, and ethnicity; the social and economic exclusion of first-, second- and even third-generation immigrants; the alienation of youth; and the capacity of the French Republic to

deal with these and a range of other challenges to its integrationist model and formal commitment to '*liberté, égalité, fraternité*' (SSRC 2006).

The essays presented on the site come from numerous distinguished scholars—on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean—of French immigration, race and ethnic politics. The analyses presented offer valuable insights into the causes of the rage expressed through widespread violence. In general, the contributions collected by the SSRC focus on the intersection between spatial exclusion (Kastoryano 2005), ethnic solidarity (Wihtol de Wenden 2005), the recognition of identity (Dufoix 2005; Hargreaves 2005), and socio-economic exclusion (Cesari 2005). While the opinions expressed are certainly insightful, they cannot be considered innovative, as most of the essays repeat points of discussion that have been present in academic debates on ethnicity in France for many years. Moreover, most of the essays generated the same conclusion, in one way or another: French political elites are horribly out of touch with the situation in the *banlieues*. Ezra Suleiman (2005) eloquently writes:

The riots will increase all this. But perhaps they will be a wake-up call to those elites who run the country who may come to realise that the abstract principles by which they justify their actions and policies, and from which they have been the chief beneficiaries, need to be brought in line with reality. The fervent attachment to the status quo has now outlived any usefulness it might once have had.

Thus, much of the discussion focused on the present and future utility of French Republicanism for such an ethnically diverse state. Kastoryano (2005) summarises predominant feelings regarding the novelty of the 2005 riots with the following introduction to her essay: 'Nothing is new with the last riots in France, they just lasted longer'. This opinion seems accurate within the framework of the political and academic debates on French identity and socio-economic exclusion in the *quartiers sensibles*. However, the 2005 riots added a new dimension to these debates. In his SSRC essay, Michel Wieviorka (2005) correctly notes that local conflict has escalated to the national level. The interesting question remains: 'Why?'

### **Explaining Contagiousness**

In his essay on the 2005 French riots Didier Lapeyronnie (2006) calls their beginnings 'mundane'. In fact, the violence began like so many episodes in the past. Three youths, fearing capture by the police, hid in an area that transmitted high-voltage electricity and, tragically, two were fatally electrocuted. Due to the poor-standing relationships between police and youths in the area, the death of two of these young men triggered a violent reaction, like that seen so many times before in cities such as Lyon, Toulouse, Lille and Strasbourg. However, unlike the past, this violence spread—from one Paris suburb to another—until it affected the entire metropolitan area outside the city (and later there were even some episodes inside the Paris city limits). Following the provocation of Nicolas Sarkozy, who called the participants in the

violence '*racailles*' or 'scum', the violence continued to spread to other cities and even beyond the national borders to Belgium and Germany.

Was the violence truly 'contagious'? In many ways, the answer is negative. There was never a true national movement that organised widespread revolt. Unlike the 2006 student strikes that captivated the French political agenda (and pushed the 2005 revolts off it), there were no national leaders or organisations that directed the rebellion in France's *quartiers sensibles*. At best, gangs used websites and cell phones to publicise their actions to their peers and provoke a certain amount of competition from city to city. However, no cooperation between rioters in different cities was ever established. In fact, non-governmental organisations and grass-roots groups in the separate *quartiers sensibles* should be applauded for their efforts to mediate between local authorities and the rioters. In almost every major French city they were present throughout the violence, attempting to calm participants.

Despite the lack of national agents or social movement entrepreneurs, the riots were characterised by contagiousness due to their spontaneous spreading throughout France. Instead of national riots, one can best describe the 2005 events as a series of local revolts that occurred throughout the country. During the violence, participants focused their rage on Sarkozy for his indelicate comments, as we saw above. However, most of their general anger was directed at an anonymous police force which they considered to be the immediate enemy in their own neighbourhoods. These common tensions led, in fact, to what many observers called 'France's worst political crisis since 1968'.

That year, 1968, was obviously marked by student movements and strikes in France and throughout Europe. However, the year was very significant in the United States because of the nationwide rioting that occurred following the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King. In fact, throughout the twentieth century, many supporters of the French Republican model of citizenship pointed to the presence of dangerous race riots in the United States, whereas French ethnic politics did not suffer from such overt tensions. Even during the Algerian war of independence, terrorism on French soil was attributed to 'foreigners' (and especially to the *Front National de Libération*, the Algeria-based socialist political party) rather than to immigrants in France who had come from Algeria. As recently as 1995, when a terrorist group based in the northern city of Roubaix organised an attack on the Paris subway, authorities blamed the event on foreign groups that influenced impressionable French youths through the financing of 'educational' programmes at a local mosque (Duprez *et al.* 1996). Since the attack, local authorities have increased funding opportunities for the local mosques 'in order to improve contacts with these institutions, better understand the content of their programs, and reduce the influence of foreign financing'.<sup>4</sup>

The 2005 revolt has changed this predominant view of ethnic conflict in France. French politicians and the media can no longer search for external sources on which to lay the blame for domestic revolts. As stated above, national and international responses to the 2005 violence directly confronted French authorities, challenging them to take responsibility for the conditions that led to the violence. In this regard,

the events of 2005 in France closely resemble the racial conflict that occurred in the United States in the 1960s.

A brief comparison of the analyses of these two contexts further supports its appropriateness. Like the opinions on the 2005 French violence presented above, most of the debates surrounding the US race riots in the 1960s focus on three factors: geographic isolation (Wilson 1987), socio-economic marginalisation (Massey and Denton 1993; Sugrue 2005) and racial tensions tied to identity issues (Almaguer 1994; Glazer 1983). In fact, it has long been noted that US race riots in the modern era have largely occurred in non-Southern cities. Thus, the informal barriers to citizenship found in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago or Cincinnati, for example, created more violent responses than the formal barriers (legal segregation) erected in the South. This aspect of US race politics is significant for the contemporary French context.

Whereas observers of both the US race riots in the 1960s and the 2005 French revolts have asked: 'Why did the violence occur?', this article argues that a more useful query would be: 'Why doesn't it happen more often?' The socio-economic statistics presented earlier indicate a clear socio-economic stratification in both France and the US based on racial/ethnic lines. Moreover, the brief discussion of the two countries' immigration histories described the patterns of cultural exclusion that one finds in both states. Each context is marked by socio-economic marginalisation and cultural refusal: precisely the elements discussed in both popular and academic analyses of the 2005 violence in France. Yet, despite these conditions, the 2005 revolts were the first instance of national rebellion in France. In the United States race-rioting on a national scale occurred only once, following the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. The absence of 'contagiousness' in the two contexts suggests that exclusion and cultural refusal are not sufficient factors for national revolt because they are constants.

This interpretation would refute the analysis forwarded by Lapeyronnie (2006), amongst others, that the 2005 revolts in France's *quartiers sensibles* were a form of collective negotiation between marginalised groups and the state. Scholars of social movements have argued for years that collective action does not simply arise from discontent (Tilly 1978). Some authors, such as McCarthy and Zald (1973) or Olson (1965), have argued that political agency is necessary for collective action to occur. The description of the 2005 revolts presented above has already addressed this point. Neither the 2005 violence in France nor the US race riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 were planned events that were instigated by social movement entrepreneurs. In both cases, the fuses for the riots were provided by informal groups or, at best, gangs of youths.

Obviously, cultural frameworks matter in collective action. Excluded groups often appropriate provocative identity contexts that justify violent action. In both the French and the US contexts, the participants in ethnic violence expressed outrage at the actions of the police. They have often explained their anger, and justified destruction, as a response to discrimination and abuse on the part of the police.

This aspect of ethnic rioting is the part that has been the most ignored in the analyses of the 2005 violence in France. Most scholars (see, for example, Duprez and Mucchielli in this issue of *JEMS*) briefly address the role of the police in their discussions. However, this point is usually abandoned for deeper debates on socio-economic marginalisation and identity-based conflict. While the role of tensions between youth in the *quartiers sensibles* and the police should not be overemphasised, it can be considered a key to explaining the contagiousness of the 2005 violence in France. It is vital to understanding this phenomenon because it introduces a concept that is largely absent in most discussions of the 2005 violence: power.

Obviously, socio-economic and cultural elements contribute to an overarching 'sense of powerlessness' felt by most of those who participate in urban revolts (Wieviorka 1999). However, by attempting to understand the basis of this collective feeling, most analysis of ethnic and racial violence has incorrectly ignored the importance of the totality of these variables. Why have almost all of the major ethnic and race riots that have occurred in the United States and France in the last 50 years begun following an incident that somehow included the police? Exclusion does not ignite violence; injustice does. The police, more than any other representative institution of the state, embody the notions of power and justice.

Police forces are meant to be legitimate forms of coercion. They exist in order to protect citizens. When perceived or real police abuses are suffered or witnessed in specific neighbourhoods, then this force loses its legitimacy in that geographic area. This is especially true when ethnic minorities are concentrated in these neighbourhoods and the supposed abuses are racially or ethnically motivated. Minorities cease to be citizens of the state because citizenship entails the ability to control one's own life-course (Rawls 1971). Instead, when they suffer police abuse, ethnic minorities essentially become informal subjects whose life-courses are controlled by the institutions which were created to protect them.

Obviously, race riots cannot be simply explained by rogue police forces. However, injustices committed by the police exemplify an overall problem in contemporary French society: the structure of power in the political system is exclusive. In response to the question, 'Why did the 2005 revolts in France spread nationally?', most discussions mistakenly focus on the identity-based, liberal-communitarian debates cited above. Instead, they should examine the opportunity structures surrounding the revolts in terms of the forms and uses of both formal and informal power in contemporary France. The *quartiers sensibles* are, in fact, found in the peripheries of both French cities and French politics. French political elites are not just out of touch with the problems in these areas because of their personal and political interests, but the French political system demonstrates a civic arrogance *vis-à-vis* the citizens of these neighbourhoods.

The French welfare state has, indeed, addressed socio-economic issues that have plagued the *quartiers sensibles* for years. Nothing has improved because the programmes erected under state structures, such as the *Contrat de Ville* (City Contract) are paternalistic. They attempt to cure evident symptoms—such as

poverty, crime, low educational achievement—instead of addressing the underlying disease: powerlessness. In fact, much of the public information on the *quartiers sensibles* does not even mention that most of these neighbourhoods are vibrant areas with much associative participation (Collectif 1997). For example, more than 100 associations are active in Toulouse's Mirail district and similar activity exists in Lille-Sud (Koff 2005). Unfortunately, much of this collective energy is wasted because grass-roots initiatives are isolated within these neighbourhoods. In previous research I conducted in different French cities (Koff 2005), one of the biggest problems with the non-governmental sector in these metropolitan areas was that associations in the *quartiers sensibles* had no contacts with other organisations outside of their neighbourhoods or with political parties or unions. Thus, even positive initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life in the *banlieues* are not recognised by other sectors of French society.

This situation is not accurately described by terms such as 'exclusion' or 'marginalisation'. Instead, it is best understood in terms of 'domination'. In his seminal work *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer (1983) identifies domination as an overlapping of exclusion in different spheres of citizenship. The theoretical situation that he describes actually portrays quite accurately the situation of ethnic minorities in France. Borrowing from Marshall's (1992) work on citizenship, one can state that minorities in France are excluded economically, socially, culturally and politically. This is the working definition of domination.

Politically, most analysis, such as that presented by the SSRC (2005), condemns French leadership for its role in the 2005 violence. However, domination cannot be constructed by a single President, Prime Minister or Minister of the Interior. Instead, it is systemic. The French state is insulated from citizen participation through heavy bureaucratic structures. For example, the *Prefet*, who represents the national government locally in French cities, is responsible for public security in the *quartiers sensibles*. This position is appointed by the Ministry of the Interior and is not elected, so there is little recourse for citizens when they disagree with territorial management in these areas. Similarly, the police are a national force so there are few community-oriented programmes. Because most of the officers have been 'parachuted in' from other cities in order to advance their careers rather than serving in the communities in which they live, they have little familiarity with the neighbourhoods in which they work. Unfortunately, one of the most significant victims of the 2005 violence was the further reduction of the *ilotiers* programme that instituted community policing, with the objective of improving relations between police and the citizens of the *quartiers sensibles*.

The issue of domination and the centralisation of power in France is highlighted even more through comparison with race riots in the United States. Dangerous and destructive ethnic violence happens more frequently in the US than it does in France. Nonetheless, it does not spread as it did in France in 2005. Political responses following the 2005 violence focused on the US commitment to multiculturalism and

diversity. Even if these responses seem politically tinged and patriotic, they do identify two important aspects of US politics that have attenuated ethnic violence.

Multiculturalism can be viewed as both a unifying and a divisive force. Culturally, it has created an ethnically mixed identity that binds US citizens through a common tie. Its greatest contribution to the attenuation of ethnic riots, however, is structural. Unlike the 2005 French case, race riots in the US are usually uni-racial. Rarely have groups united in violent rage against the political and socio-economic isolation that is shared by those living in inner cities. Actually, it is the opposite that is true, as lasting images of US race riots generally include inter-racial violence. Moreover, the position of African Americans is quite distinct because of the legacy of slavery. Obviously, this group does not share a common experience with other immigrants who arrived in the US by choice. Moreover, even though discrimination is common to different ethnic minorities in the US, many scholars argue that African Americans suffer more. Toni Morrison (1993) is one of the most well-known exponents of this position. She writes:

This is race talk, the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy. Popular culture, shaped by film, theater, advertising, the press, television and literature, is heavily engaged in race talk. It participates freely in this most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture: negative appraisals of the native-born black population. Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete. Whatever the lived experience of immigrants with African Americans—pleasant, beneficial or bruising—the rhetorical experience renders blacks as noncitizens, already discredited outlaws.

The competition between African Americans and other ethnic groups has become a tangible part of contemporary US politics, especially in immigration politics. For example, in April 2006, a field poll in California found that African Americans—more than Whites and US-born Latinos—supported more progressive immigration reforms. The next day, the office of Maxine Waters, an African American member of Congress who supported such reforms, was invaded by a group of African American activists who opposed illegal immigration (Hutchinson 2006). Similarly, a recent story in *Newsweek* recounted the experience of Leticia Vasquez, Mayor of Lynwood, California, who has been ‘pilloried by fellow Mexican Americans for being—in her estimation at least—too sympathetic to black constituents’ (Cose 2006).

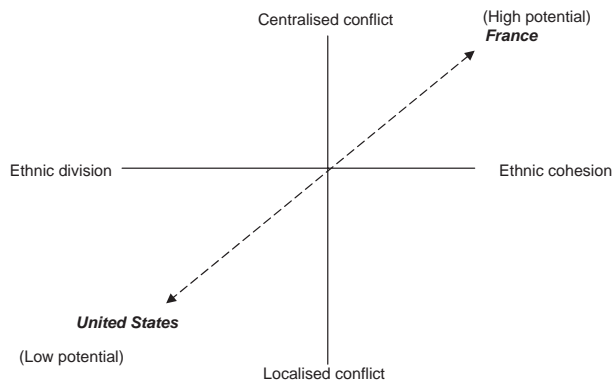
These situations derive from one of the most evident consequences of multiculturalism in the United States. Even though this tradition has created a common cultural bond, it has constructed political and socio-economic systems based on ethnic competition. While African Americans and Mexican Americans often share a bond due to common experiences with discrimination and exclusion, they also compete for political and economic goods. For example, many economic studies have shown that clandestine migrants often work in the low-skilled, precarious jobs that had previously been filled by African Americans living in inner cities (e.g. Lim 2001). Moreover, illegal immigration has been accused of negatively affecting wage levels in

these sectors of the US economy (Borjas 1990; Watts 2002). For these reasons, when race riots begin in the excluded neighbourhoods where marginalised groups live, very often the participants view other ethnic minorities as economic nemeses rather than political allies. Hence, the bonding of various ethnic groups in a unified national revolt, such as that which occurred in France in 2005, would be impossible in the US, given the circumstances created by multiculturalism.

Moreover, the structure of power in the US also decreases the potential for nationwide race riots. Since the 1960s, such revolts have continued to occur in individual cities (i.e. 1980 in Miami, 1992 in Los Angeles and 2001 in Cincinnati). However, the federal system of government that one finds in the US localises power and, more importantly, localises conflict. The assassination of Martin Luther King was such a significant event that it overcame these divisions and national riots ensued. Apart from this example, one cannot identify 'contagiousness' in the US such as that which occurred in France in 2005. Despite the fact that various ethnic minorities share similarly marginalised socio-economic and cultural situations in different US cities (Waldinger 2001), there is little solidarity across geographic limits. Thus, ethnic revolt is characterised by local concerns. Moreover, the fact that US police forces are local further restricts anger geographically when abuses occur. Therefore, it is not necessarily the unifying cultural bases of the US political system that have prevented widespread ethnic violence, but the formal and informal divisions of power and conflict which have prevented the contagiousness that marked the 2005 violence in France, by dividing ethnic domination in the United States. This is illustrated in Figure 9.

## Conclusion

The 2005 revolts in France were significant because of their contagiousness. For the first time, local conflict spread to the national arena. While many observers accurately identified cultural refusal and socio-economic exclusion as explanatory variables for



**Figure 9.** The potential for contagiousness of ethnic violence based on ethnic cohesion and the centralisation of conflict



the violence, neither factor is sufficient to explain the spreading of the violence to every major French city except Marseilles. In methodological terms, one could say that these explanations lack a mechanism that links the independent variables to the 2005 violence.

This mechanism is power. Within the discussions of the 2005 revolts, the question of power is treated without ever being directly addressed or even pronounced. As stated above, public and academic discussions have been framed in terms of citizenship debates involving cultural recognition. This context seems misguided, as the youths participating in the revolt were not challenging French citizenship norms, but were, instead, protesting their exclusion from the basic Republican ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—freedom, equality, fraternity (see Duprez, this issue). The nationwide revolts that marked French ethnic politics in October–November 2005 were a response to the political domination that characterises the French *quartiers sensibles*. This condition exists because of the socio-economic marginalisation and cultural refusal that is present in most contemporary discussions. However, it is important to give it a name and clearly identify it for what it is. Violent protest is a response to powerlessness which, in turn, cannot exist without domination.

In the United States, racism, discrimination and prejudice continue to exist and the country remains characterised by ethnic stratification. However, since the race riots in the 1960s, changes have occurred in the US political system which have undermined the domination that led to African American revolts in the past. While few of the adjustments are recognisable internationally because limited progress has been achieved at the national level, African Americans have moved into positions of power in numerous urban centres, not to mention, now, the presidency! This is significant because ethnic conflict in the US is essentially local in nature. These in-roads have provided African Americans with avenues for recourse when they are victims of racial or ethnic injustice. In this regard, ethnic minorities in the US have benefited tremendously from the political fallout from the race riots that occurred throughout the 1960s.

Interestingly enough when the 2005 revolts occurred in France, most alarmist responses in the US centred on the country's Mexican and Mexican American population, rather than African Americans. Mexicans, in fact, represent the 'most dominated' group in the US today. Their socio-economic positions are marginalised, they are often geographically segregated and there has been an increase in their involvement in criminal activities. Most significantly, the current anti-immigration positions that have shifted the US immigration agenda to the right have created a negative political atmosphere which has contributed to discrimination.

During April 2006, these fears that Mexicans and Mexican Americans would rebel nationally became a reality. For the first time since the 1960s, US leaders were confronted by national ethnic protest. However, this movement was peaceful, well-organised, and focused on defeating immigration reform proposals that would have constructed a wall between the US and Mexico and made it illegal to provide humanitarian assistance to clandestine migrants. Unlike the French revolts, Mexican

American collective action cannot be viewed as a rebellion against domination. Instead it is a positive expression of self-empowerment and participation.

The key to success for this movement was the network that Mexican and Mexican American groups created by unifying the efforts of numerous non-governmental organisations. These networks are the key to transforming violent, localised revolts into organised, constructive national protests. Unfortunately, the isolation of the *quartiers sensibles* in France has made the creation of these networks virtually impossible because the activities of grass-roots associations are intrinsically linked to the local neighbourhoods in which they operate.

Reform is needed in France if national revolts such as those that occurred in 2005 are to be avoided in the future. However, the issue of cultural recognition needs to be put aside for a moment and political bridges need to be constructed between the *banlieues* and local and national political systems. In fact, the absence of multiculturalism paradoxically offers France an opportunity to establish positive inter-ethnic social networks that can foster ethnic interaction.

The key to creating these networks is administrative reform more than changes in the country's citizenship laws. Power needs to be diversified through increased federalism and authorities need to open new avenues for recourse to ethnic minorities when they suffer discrimination and injustice. The key to social integration is not the abolition of conflict, but its incorporation into the formal political structures that govern the country. France can no longer afford to practice paternalistic democracy. Instead, French leaders need to open new opportunities for residents of *quartiers sensibles* to channel the energy that created the 2005 revolts into constructive forms of political participation. Such changes were effective in the US following the race riots in the 1960s. The 2005 revolts demonstrate that they are absolutely necessary in France today. The decision that French leaders need to make concerns both the structure and the use of power, especially in the *quartiers sensibles*. They can loosen their grasp and partially return this power to the people, or they can tighten their fists in defence of a democracy that is more dominant than it is democratic.

## Notes

- [1] One fatality was reported but the murder was not directly linked to violent engagements between local residents and police.
- [2] The term *étranger* or foreign citizen is, statistically speaking, generally reserved for nationals of foreign countries or even for those born abroad. Thus, the figures presented indirectly discuss ethnicity. They even more clearly demonstrate the problem of marginalisation, as many ethnic minorities who live in the marginalised *quartiers sensibles* have been included in the 'French' category, thus eliminating their visibility in the statistics.
- [3] Sowell is referring to an essay entitled 'The Barbarians at the Gates of Paris' by British social critic Theodore Dalrymple (reprinted in *Our Culture, What's Left of It.*).
- [4] Interviews conducted by author with local government officials and representatives of mosques in the Lille metropole.

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