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Giving racism an easy ride

The French media's response to Sarkozy's "law and order" clampdown

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It has been five years since the spectacle of violent confrontation in the French banlieues. But despite promises made at the time, little seems to have changed either in government attitudes to migration or the media's coverage of migrant issues. This time round, writes Mogniss H. Abdallah, it is the Roma who are in the firing line.

“‘It’s you, you the media who are creating this situation in which people are being stigmatized!’” raged Nicolas Sarkozy in a lengthy televised interview, watched by more than 12 million viewers, on Tuesday 16 November 2010. Leading journalists David Pujadas (France 2), Claire Chazal (TF1) and Michel Denisot (Canal Plus), who had tried to question him about his law and order moves against Roma and offenders of foreign origin, were aghast. With an aplomb that was totally disconcerting, the French president was using the same “it’s all the fault of the media” line that had been so effective in explaining the shock felt on 21 April 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen made it through to the second round of the presidential election. He went on to harangue Claire Chazal, demanding: “Yes or no, did the [European] Commission say that what France did was legal, yes or no?” “Well, yes, I suppose so,” she stammered, after an embarrassed silence that spoke volumes about the confusion surrounding the crisis caused by the statements made by Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, threatening France with prosecution for ethnic discrimination against the Roma.
Since that sensational drama starring the “lady in red”, Paris has, in fact, discreetly undertaken to incorporate into its internal legislation a Commission directive dating from 2004 that is supposed to guarantee a right of residence to European citizens and, therefore, includes Roma in that right. But, as Sarkozy is fond of repeating: “Communication is to action as the air force is to the infantry: it allows you to clear the ground”, and it is on the ground that the show of force is continuing. Hundreds of so-called illegal camps have been dismantled and more than 8000 Roma – of an estimated total of 15,000 in France – have been deported to Romania or Bulgaria. And, while Sarkozy was putting the brakes on the so-called policy of “opening-up” that was supposed to bring the French people together regardless of party-political affiliations, a recently-formed group on the popular Right, made up of 40 or so UMP (Mouvement Populaire) parliamentarians, increased its law and order attacks.

At the same time, in the aftermath of the Swiss referendum on deportation of foreign criminals, they proposed a return to a form of double jeopardy involving an additional sentence of exclusion from the country for foreign offenders – in 2003, Sarkozy had taken the view that that there was “no need for double sanctions in order to combat threats to our security”. Another example not immediately noticed was an amendment, towards the end of 2010, to the LOPPSI 2 Bill (Directives and Performance Scheduling in Internal Security). This provides for increased repressive action against illegal accommodation, whether mobile or fixed, and also against squats, all of which would be subject to sentences of up to one years’ imprisonment and a fine of 15,000. The Roma, and also “travellers” and those living in poor housing – occupants without rights or title – felt that they were being directly targeted.

The offender-immigrant equation is a feature of the new Sarkozy law and order offensive, but this type of equation is, in fact, a recurrent one. Already, back in February 2005, a television news magazine C dans l’air, presented by Yves Calvi on France 5, had scheduled a special feature entitled “Offending: The Romany Way”. Travellers, Gypsies and Roma were all bundled together and classed as “chicken thieves”. The star attraction of the programme had been the contribution of one of those involved in the debate, Yves-Marie Laulan, an essayist of a nationalist persuasion. “The crime rate is significantly higher among Roma,” he stated, continuing: “The Roma are a serious threat to France, at least in financial terms, and we ought to remove their children from the parents and, in any event, there is
no possibility of any kind of credible integration for them.”

In June 2010, a court found Laulan guilty of incitement to racial hatred on the grounds that he had been promoting, without qualification and without offering any evidence, “the idea that, because a person belongs to this ethnic group, that person becomes, ipso facto, individually incapable of being assimilated”. This law had been brought into the case by La Voix des Romans (Voice of the Roma) and other anti-racist groups. But, under a variety of forms, the idea in question has remained deeply rooted. Even so, reports in the summer by journalists embedded in the camps tended rather to speak of a certain unease shown by public opinion when faced with “Roma bashing”. Thus, for example, on 5 August 2010, Le Parisien ran the headline “Neighbours torn between hatred and understanding”. Admittedly, 79 per cent of French people, according to a survey by IFOP published in Le Figaro (6 August 2010), say that they are in favour of illegal camps being dismantled. A month afterwards, 48 per cent still say they favour the deportation of the Roma (La Croix, 27 August 2010). But editorials in the press, mobilization of support groups and the Church, not to mention the poignant contributions by the French cinema director Tony Gatlif, who has spoken out against French policies aimed at “destroying the Roma” and is best known for Gadjí Dilo (1997) and Liberté (2010) – his mother is a Gypsy and his father an Algerian – are beginning to raise doubts in people’s minds. Cultural milieux are also supporting the threatened Cirque Romanès, [1]. So, at a time when France and the European Commission were at loggerheads, “56 per cent of French people think that Europe has got it right”, read an exclusive survey in Le Parisien that made front-page headlines on 18 September 2010.

In order to make people more aware of the story of the Roma who live in these improvised shanty towns, France ô – which has been promoted as television’s “diversity channel” ever since the 2005 riots – put out in October “Le Bateau en carton” (The Cardboard Boat), a new documentary by José Vieira, who experienced the clearance of the Portuguese shanty towns in the 1960s.

“The Roma way of life is the key to the problem”

However that may be, equating Roma, travellers and criminals has remained in vogue. Sarkozy himself re-opened Pandora’s box when he denounced “the behaviour of certain Roma and travellers” after the violent confrontation
between travellers and gendarmes in mid-July 2010 in the village of Saint-Aignan (Loir et Cher), following the death of Luigi Duquenet, killed by gendarmes who claimed they were acting in self-defence. The matadors on the popular Right seized the opportunity to go further: “The Roma way of life is the key to the problem,” was how Assembly Member Jacques Myard put it, as reported in Le Figaro, 28 July 2010. “Integration can only be achieved by changing that way of life,” he continued. “An urbanised Europe cannot cope with the permanent movement of hundreds of thousands of people, or indeed of several million. Reason requires that we go back to an interventionist policy for integration and settlement.” Such was his clarion call, which once again equated Roma and travellers, the better to define his target, namely the Louis Besson reforms (not to be confused with Eric Besson, former immigration and national identity minister) of 1990 and 2000 setting up approved caravan sites. In essence, he was demonstrating his hostility towards these laws that were adopted at a time when the Socialists and the other parties of the Left were in power; moreover, he has never concealed his opposition to their requirement that each commune should have at least 20 per cent of social housing. Subsequently, this same UMP deputy delivered a sudden attack on the “appropriateness of the present pro-European system”. “You can shout about ‘European citizenship’ as much as you like, you can accuse one group or another of xenophobia, but all of that takes no account of the clash of cultures, which is a tangible reality.” He went on to recommend his way of dealing with it. He was a supporter of the “No” vote at the time of the referendum on the European constitution in 2005 and makes no secret of his regret that the right to vote was granted to European residents for municipal elections: in his view, this was nothing more than a hare-brained, federalist fad. Of course, this kind of talk represents neither France’s official position nor a majority view. But this battering-ram approach does allow the reactions of French civil society and the firmness of EU institutions to be tested whilst simultaneously showing up the current growing support for euro-scepticism.

The French government has been prompt in adopting repressive EU measures such as the “return directive”, which extends the possibilities for detention, deportation and exclusion across the entire territory of the EU. It has also chosen to read some European laws in a restrictive way. This applies to the 2004 directive relating to residence, which states (Article 27) that reasons of public order, security or public health cannot be invoked to restrict the freedom of movement and residence of Europeans. This did not stop the umpteenth bill on immigration being discussed in parliament in the
autumn of 2010, envisaging pushing someone back across the frontier for “abuse of the right to a brief stay” (less than three months), for “excessive numbers of return journeys with the intention of remaining within the territory”, or even for “being an unreasonable burden on our social services system”. These are all measures that are implicitly, once more, aimed at Europeans in poverty, including Roma. And they clearly demonstrate the influence of the nationalist Right.

One might well wonder, therefore, just how far the logic of disengagement from Europe will be allowed to take us. Seen in this light, the questions surrounding the future of the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality (known in France as HALDE) are symptomatic. It is, after all, a result of EU initiatives that discrimination, and racial discrimination in particular, has been given special institutional attention since the end of the 1990s. HALDE was set up in 2005 as an independent institution along the lines of the former Commission for Racial Equality in the UK, and succeeded, little by little, in imposing its authority on the political and media landscape as a player with a genuine measure of expertise in the field of discrimination, whether individual or systemic. It also had a certain degree of power to assess and to make recommendations. Too much power, perhaps, to the point of becoming a nuisance to the government and to employers? HALDE targeted governmental plans such as DNA checks on migrants pleading family reunion, or religious discrimination in the name of preserving the secular state. “By the end of 2007 HALDE had quite simply rewritten the Hortefeux Law that was meant to control immigration,” blustered Le Figaro, which is known to be close to the Elysée. The government, having had its fingers burned, decided to dilute HALDE by replacing it with a new “all-purpose” authority, the Défenseur des droits (Defender of Rights), which, in 2011, would bring together the Parliamentary Commissioner, the Ombudsperson for Children and the National Committee on Professional Ethics and Security, which looks into complaints against police behaviour in France. The result of this would be reduced visibility for the fight against discrimination.

In the meantime, in March 2010, Sarkozy appointed a new chair to head HALDE, Jeannette Bougrab. The change was immediate and trumpeted in the media, accompanied by smug pictures of this pretty young daughter of a harki (Algerian soldier loyal to the French government in the Algerian war of Independence) who had experienced discrimination “for herself, personally” but who refused any kind of “identity reclassification”. “A shake-up at
HALDE: Jeannette is off to war” was the full page headline in Figaro for 10 September 2010. It was quite a strategy she had in mind! No more soul-searching about discrimination against Roma or recommendations to the government to put a stop to it: “I’ve spoken to the Fillon (the French Prime Minister) cabinet and they don’t want us to talk about Roma and travellers,” announced the new chair in May 2010. [2] Like a good little soldier, she gave the institution a new direction in order to make up the quarrel with private enterprise, even if that meant covering up racial discrimination at work, promoting gender equality and supporting the “secular state” argument favoured by those wedded to France’s national doctrine of laïcité. During the rallies against the reform of retirement pensions, she leaped to the battlements to denounce discrimination against women in salaries and pensions, a radical posture that is entirely typical of the deceptive “state feminism” of the French government. Indeed, the government had scheduled some concessions on women’s retirement pensions by way of testimony to its willingness to pay heed to the demands made on the streets, the better to quench the fires of social unrest that had broken out in the autumn. Within HALDE, this attempt at taking back control, combined with some very autocratic behaviour, was not acceptable. But Jeannette Bougrab took no notice: she knew that the future of the institution was compromised and already had her eye on another portfolio. When the ministerial reshuffle happened in November 2010 she was offered the post of Secretary of State for Youth and Communities. She had only been in her HALDE post for seven months.

However, before she left, she had to co-manage one of Sarkozy’s frequent about-turns when, in the course of the autumn, he wanted to resume relations with travellers. The mobilization of travellers stirred up public opinion and often touched a sensitive “national” spot that was different from the “human rights” kind of support for Roma and foreigners in general. “We’ve got nowhere to go; even though we’re French [...] they’re treating us worse than immigrants! Instead of building mosques, they’d do better to build caravan sites,” was the kind of thing travellers were saying according to France Soir 16 August 2010 and Le Monde 21 August 2010. With that kind of talk being repeated over and over again, the government found a new means of dividing opposition to its law and order policies. At that point it even considered carrying out some kind of adjustment to the administrative status of travellers, which was characterised by discriminatory provisions dating, in some cases, from 1912. These included a specific travel log that would have to be stamped by the police every three months, and inclusion
on electoral registers only after three years of residence, rather than the six months that applied to other citizens. It should be pointed out that there are about 400,000 travellers in France and they are not necessarily known for being fond of the Left in politics... In short, travellers – at least those who do not live in illegal camps and who don’t look too much like “cop-killing thugs” – could even be good Frenchmen; could even – why not? – be mobilized in the “nation’s war” against foreign criminals and other “bad” French nationals.

“Patriotism alone is not enough”

“France, love it or leave it!” The 2007 presidential campaign slogan has left its mark on French political life ever since. The Front National, which had been using it since the 1980s, complained about plagiarism. The truth is that they actually pinched it from the US: “America, love it or leave it” was used to target opponents of the Vietnam War in the 1960s as “the enemy within”. In its French reincarnation, the slogan has dramatically revived the idea that there are two categories of citizen: those of French origin and the “new French” who still have to prove themselves by showing allegiance and loyalty. The line of demarcation between “them” and “us” that divided foreigners and nationals has now shifted to create a virtual division between French citizens. “Being French is something you have to deserve.” You have to show that you are proud of being French and declare your love of France. Faced with condescending requirements such as these, some renowned artists have duly obliged. On the front page of the *Nouvel Observateur*, against the background of a tricolour flag, actor-comedian Jamel Debbouze proclaimed “Why I love France”. Abdel Malik sang the *Marseillaise* on a stage full of television personalities.

But such public professions of allegiance will not be enough on their own: the powers that be are still wielding the baton. If you boo the *Marseillaise*, if you are found guilty of “insulting the national anthem”, you are now liable to six months in jail and a fine of 7500. In his now famous Grenoble speech of 30 July 2010, Sarkozy threatened that “any person of foreign origin who deliberately tries to take the life of a policeman, gendarme, or other figure in whom public authority is vested” could be stripped of their French citizenship. He also alluded to the idea that citizenship might not remain automatic for delinquent minors when they reached the age of majority. This reaction was provoked by the violent confrontation that occurred during the night of 15-16 July 2010 on the La Villeneuve housing estate in Grenoble,
following the death of a thief who was killed just outside his home by the Brigade Anti-Criminalité (Anti-Crime Squad). In the days that followed, the police who, it is claimed, were threatened with weapons, carried out spectacular “peace-keeping” operations on the estate...

The next thing was the Lies Hebbadj affair, named after the husband of a woman from Nantes who challenged a charge of wearing a niqab while driving, an offence punishable by a fine. It was through the media that the interior minister, Brice Hortefeux, mounted an attack on this man, a professing Muslim, suspected of polygamy, welfare fraud, working illegally and violent rape. He was the perfect “presumed guilty” party, who was to serve as the springboard for suggesting extending the loss of citizenship, not only to situations of this kind, but also “to cases of female circumcision, people trafficking or serious offences” (Le Parisien, 1 August 2010). From the beginning of the parliamentary session onwards, this profusion of proposals found expression in amendments to legislation ratifying new measures for removal of citizenship, in particular for “cop-killers” who had carried out their crime within 10 years of being granted citizenship. Simultaneously, the government refused naturalization to any man suspected of forcing his French wife to wear a “burqa” – they were really referring to a niqab, but “Afghanizing” this ostentatiously total form of cover-up reinforces the idea that we absolutely have to fight against yet another badge of the “Taliban enemy”. And, according to trade union sources, as part of the decentralization of citizenship applications that has been carried out since 1 July 2010, prefects are less ready to grant naturalization: the level of refusals is said to be around 30 per cent, and that does not include cases where a decision has been “postponed”. [3]

The message is clear enough: for one thing, that it is not true that it is too easy to become French; for another, that we are “not going to let ourselves be swallowed up”. It is a way of taking back the initiative following the fiasco of the “great debate” on national identity that was launched in November 2009 and which, as everyone admits, gave free rein to racist discourse. First prize among the kind of ranting that we heard must go to the UMP mayor of a small village in la France profonde, heard on France 2: “It’s high time we did something about it because otherwise we’re going to let ourselves be swallowed up”. “By whom?” “There are already 10 million of them, 10 million that we’re paying to do sod all.” In the end it makes little difference whether he was talking about immigrants, their descendants or anyone on state support in general: the racialization of the poor is, in any case, a longstanding French tradition. [4]
In the nineteenth century, the proletariat and the young workers, the “enemy within” of that era, were identified with the barbarian natives of the colonies, with their objection to working, their perpetual tendency to be violent, their morals and sexuality that were regarded as perverse. Nowadays the “native” takes the form of the Muslim, Arab or Black. And, one by one, the illusions about social advancement in a “post-racial” society that had been entertained since the autumn 2005 riots in 300 working-class areas around the country are vanishing. Fadela Amara, the former leader of the “Ni Putes Ni Soumise” organization and secretary of state for urban policy, vainly attempted last-ditch law and order witticisms that stuck closely to Sarkozy’s bravura speeches about “zero tolerance for messing around” and his call to “use a power hose to clean up the violence that is killing our children on the housing estates”. Yet neither this nor her tirades proclaiming that “the veil and the ‘burqa’ are the same thing” could save her job as a junior minister. Soon after the law on the “burqa” was enacted on 11 October 2010 she was relieved of her post. The other “diversity” icons in the government, Rachida Dati and Rama Yade, were given the push as well. Amara’s successor, Maurice Leroy, was to lose no time in proclaiming, almost as soon as he was appointed, that he “had never believed in it”. It makes you reflect upon all the mirages that go to make up what was, admittedly, a spectacular life in the media and the vacuousness of their actual life in politics.

The raï singer, Faudel, from the housing development of Le Val Fourré in the Paris suburb of Mantes-la-Jolie, admits that “when Sarkozy came along, I believed in Santa Claus” and confesses to having been a tnah arse-licker by singing for the president on the very evening that he was elected (in Algerian Arabic tnah means “an idiot, an ignorant fool who is an expert in the art of chitta, that is “flattering the powerful”). “All this talk about diversity fooled me. We were right in the middle of a debate about discrimination at work, anonymous CVs and so on. There were non-whites in the government, such as Rachida Dati and Rama Yade. But then afterwards you compare what was said with what was done. And when I did that, it seemed to me that they’d used me as a ‘satisfied customer’, a symbol of success who had originated from an immigrant family and from a working-class district. I was the token Arab; they’d taken me for a ride.” (Le Parisien, 23 January 2010.) Even in those parts of the media that are keen to maintain a reputation for diversity, journalists still report difficulties. In a long article that attracted some attention, Mustapha Kessous, an editor on a prestigious daily paper,
spoke about the problems he had experienced and about his distress and confusion. “I used to think that my ‘position’ as a journalist on Le Monde would finally rescue me from my main ‘defects’: being an Arab, having skin that was too dark, being a Muslim. I thought that my press card would protect me. I have had to cut off part of my identity; I have had to stop mentioning my Arab forename.” ("Moi, Mustapha Kessous, journaliste au Monde” et victime du racisme” [I, Mustapha Kessous, journalist on Le Monde and victim of racism] 23 September 2009). In the press, the general impression is of a falling apart or even of a decision to abandon such experiments; and then, of course, there is the reticence of the owners to be reckoned with. On Radio France Internationale (RFI), the “dedicated” programme Miroscopie d’Edouard Zambeaux was suddenly pulled on the pretext that “the French suburbs do not merit 47 minutes on RFI” (see the leader protesting about this in Le Monde for 17 November 2010).

The feeling that an orchestrated withdrawal is happening is further reinforced by such events as the hostile reception given to the film Hors-la-loi by Rachid Bouchareb. His film Indigènes was unanimously hailed as a triumph by the critics and acclaimed by the public after the Cannes Festival four years earlier; now, 1500 of those who felt nostalgic about colonial Algeria mounted a protest on the Croisette in Cannes, led by the UMP deputy, Lionel Luca, against an “anti-French film” that had been “financed with French money”.

Worse still, the proliferation of shock reporting in the written press and on most radio and TV channels has stirred up resentment. There have been innumerable scare stories on the front pages of newspapers or on prime time broadcasts about “ultra-violence” and weapons of war on housing estates, where you can buy a Kalashnikov for less than 200. Are our minds being prepared for war in the suburbs, as Hacène Belmessous fears in his heavily documented book Opération banlieue (“Operation Suburbs”, La Découverte, 2010)? At all events, the watchword now seems to be “let’s get the savages”, and one reportage after another pillories them from beginning to end. One example has been the stomach-churning programme entitled “La Cité du mâle” ("The Estate where the Male is King") that went out in late September 2010 on the Franco-German channel Arte, and is still making waves even now. It was initially presented as a documentary on how relations have evolved between boys and girls on the Balzac estate in Vitry sur Seine, the very same place where, in 2002, Sohane Benziane, a young woman of 17, was burned alive by a boy. But the report turned out to be
“exploitative and faked”. In the film, 15 or so young people, together with a single mother, come out with the foulest possible macho filth against a background of cultural stereotyping of Africans. The voice over drives home the message with the help of all sorts of untruths. For example, two of the young men are reported to be living off “little deals, a bit of trafficking; they never get up before midday and spend their time loitering on street corners”. The truth is that one of them has been working at Orly airport since 2005 and the other is a temp. The rest of the programme is along the same lines.

Another thing causing a scandal is that Nabila Laïb, a young journalist who worked on preparing the report and therefore had a right to approve the editing, which she violently disapproves of, was reduced to the status of a mere “fixer”. This is a term that sums up the supporting role played by informers or facilitators – a role that “professionals” try to assign to young people from housing developments who aspire to work in journalism. Let us not forget that the very notion of a “fixer” relates to situations arising in distant wars. In such a context it is not surprising that journalists should increasingly regarded with mistrust or that the fixers should be seen as “grasses”.

Despite the existence of all such avatars, many of the young people from working-class districts, whatever their origin, are prepared to persevere and to seize the initiative once more. In the case of La Cité du mâle, Ladj Real, from the Kourtrajmé Collective, initiated a “Counter Enquiry” among the protagonists appearing in the report. Elsewhere, some “fixers” are striking back. Abdel Otmani, who has been used by journalists for five years as a “native guide” in Clichy sous-Bois, the epicentre of the riots – or rather, in Abdel’s view, of the “social uprising” of 2005 – made a phone-call to a journalist, passing himself off as the wife of a polygamist. The reporter published this fake interview, claiming to have had a conversation on the spot at Montfermeil, with “Bintou”, a “woman whose pretty face was slightly scarified on each side of her eyes” (“Immigration, Roms, allocations, mensonges... Ce qu’on n’ose pas dire”, [Immigration, Roma, Allowances, Lies...] newsmagazine Le Point, 1985–30 September 2010). Then Abdel Otmani revealed the trick that he had played, which caused a sensation on the Internet. [5]

Poking fun at the media in order to show up its stereotypes and lies is one thing. But there are many people who really are addicted to these same
media, who still identify with the dominant way of looking at things and do so with a fascination that is morbid, always over-reacting to the image put forward. Let us remember in this connection that it was the words kärcher (power hose) and “racaille” (riffraff), uttered by Sarkozy in front of the television cameras, which, combined with the deaths of Zyed and Bouna fleeing from the police one Ramadan evening, lit the fuse for the events of 2005. Some, dazzled by the effect of “Obamania”, would like to see themselves breaking through the glass ceiling, gaining access to the major media outlets and making them dance to quite another tune. Bridges leading in this direction have been built. The Bondy Blog, created by some Swiss journalists in the Paris suburbs shortly after the riots, is often mentioned. The sociologist Julie Sedel, who is the author of a study on “the media and the suburbs” (INA-BDL, 2009), notes that “the younger generations appear to give more importance to ‘slices of life’ and to a ‘neutral’ discourse rather than to any kind of political discourse. It is as if a politicized inhabitant [of the suburbs] did not fit the picture.” It remains to be seen to what extent TF1, the privately-owned channel that is so often disparaged for its law and order coverage and for the way it turns the public into morons, will lurk around this breeding-ground in the hope of recruiting young talent; we ought to be asking a few questions! (“Le Bondy Blog dans la cour des grands” [Bondy Blog at the court of the great], Le Monde magazine, 30 October 2010).

As a result, home-grown media are flourishing and in many cases, such as Méd’in Marseille, these are territorially based. Still others produce one-off successes, such as Omar Dawson from Grignywood in the department of Essonne, who managed to have living conditions in the Fleury Mérogis prison filmed by the prisoners themselves and then have the images shown on Le Monde’s website. They have been watched by almost 1 million people. In this way, new technologies are making possible a hitherto unparalleled proliferation of information and viewpoints from such people. In order to give more weight to their views and to share their facilities and expertise, they are now trying to form federations, as the 3rd Suburbs Media Forum held in Paris on 10 December 2010 made clear. Their aim will be – why not? – to launch common campaigns against racial or sexual discrimination and in favour of equal rights.
Footnotes

1. www.petitions24.net/cirqueromanes

2. See: www.bakchich.info/Roms-la-HALDE-muselee-par-le,11911.html

3. See Marc Bonnefis, "Des naturalisations à 'la gueule du préfet'“, (Naturalizations according to the prefect's wishes), Libération, 17 July 2010.
