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La France: Love it or leave it

Since the 2005 rejection of the EU constitution, the riots in the *banlieue*, and the anti-CPE demonstrations, France has been seeing a populist backlash often tolerated, if not supported, by the media. Although there has been self-criticism by some journalists, the language of security remains too deep-seated to allow a thorough enquiry; close links between media and politics also compromise full media independence. Recently, however, there have been signs of growing awareness of the scale of racial discrimination in France and the media's role in encouraging diversity.

Seen against the background of the identity crisis resulting from globalisation, the 55 per cent French majority "No" vote in the European Constitution referendum on 29 May 2005 demonstrated yet again the size of the gulf separating the ruling elite and France's "lower orders". The mass media, which had campaigned for a "Yes" vote, like all bad losers went on to accuse the French of having voted in error. In particular, the Left's "No" was denounced as amounting to cynical collusion with the racist, xenophobic "No" vote led by the anti-establishment supremacist Right.

In his editorial for 30 May 2005, *Libération's* Serge July was outraged by what he called "a populist epidemic": "You would expect it from Le Pen; it is his home ground, but to think that leaders on the Left should campaign in such an area [...] we used to think that kind of xenophobia was unthinkable." What the boss of this leftwing, liberal daily failed to point out was that the media themselves have been guilty of ploughing that particular furrow. It was they who created the imaginary "Polish plumber" bogeyman, symbol of the Bolkestein Directive on creating a single market for services within the EU and responsible for introducing unfair competition between workers from Eastern Europe and the French labour force. They also presented the huge imports of Chinese textiles into the European market as nothing less than an "invasion", allowing them, once again, to trot out all the old clichés about the "yellow peril". Nor must we forget Turkey's proposed membership of the EU, a question that straddled the divide between Left and Right. In the same week (11 December 2004), the *Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Figaro Magazine* used an almost identical front cover: "Should we be afraid of the Turks?" asked the one; "Should we be afraid of Turkey?" demanded the other. In both cases, the Red Crescent banner was depicted as besmirching the serene blue field of the EU's flag. This time the threat was a Muslim invasion.

Thus Philippe de Villiers, the leader of the *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF), could see how the media were building on his own obsession: rampant Islamisation. Ever since what he considers "his" victorious "No" vote, he has continued to harp on the same theme: Islamist infiltration is everywhere,

including at Roissy–Charles de Gaulle airport. Riding high on the wave of paranoia about Muslim terrorists prowling around aircraft — the images from 11 September 2001 are in everyone's mind — he is constantly to be heard on television or radio denouncing "Islamists and delinquents from the housing estates working together to have the airport placed under sharia law". At this point, *Paris–Match* and other parts of the media rush to mount inquiries into his allegations. Their revelations on the probable existence at Roissy of an illegal immigration ring or a recruitment system that favours staff of North African origin, simply reinforce the notion of links between immigration, Islam, and insecurity.

Despite some unfortunate precedents, the media continue to adopt a tolerant stance toward politicians on the extreme right, allowing them a platform that would be condemned in any other context. Why? Is this the media's duty to inform? Respect for freedom of speech? Or are they in thrall to any demagogue in tune with popular opinion? After the political upheaval of 21 April 2002 when the leader of the *Front National* (FN) got through to the second round of the presidential election, anti–Le Pen demonstrators waved banners that read, "The media are to blame": to blame for having acted as a mouthpiece for demagogues, for having blown up stories that later turned out to be dubious set–ups. Four years later, a survey conducted by the BVA Institute found very little change in the way people thought about it: of those polled, 73 per cent thought that "This feeling of insecurity is mainly being created by the media" (*Figaro*, 8 June 2006).

It is true that the media have asked themselves questions about their responsibility in all this. One might have thought this would trigger a salutary process of self–criticism, but that would be to reckon without the way the language of security has become part of the mindset of some journalists. For example, the TV director Tewfik Farès claims in an article under the dramatic title "The banlieue — territory we must reclaim for television" that "there are petty gang bosses whose housing developments have become their territory and who refuse to be filmed." (*La Croix*, 26 June 2002)

It underestimates, too, the complexity of the network of links between the media and the political class. In his traditional 14 July speech in 2001, Jacques Chirac had already broached the subject of insecurity; the media, both public and privately–owned, hastened to follow in his footsteps. Generally speaking, the media regard declarations by the government as the "authorised version" of events that it is their public duty to convey. Consequently, the powers–that–be use the media as a channel for official pronouncements, including and especially in times of crisis. At the time of the riots in the *banlieue* in November 2005, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, chose to declare the state of emergency on TF1 in front of 13 million viewers. Not only that, but political circles and the media regularly consult each other on a more or less formal basis. The resulting tacit accords often come to the fore in a surprising fashion in the press or on television. On 9 November 2005, at the height of the riots, Jean–Marie Colombani, director of *Le Monde*, went so far as to write: "The notion of firmness with justice, as put forward by Nicolas Sarkozy [...] is the sort of thing that could unite the country." This was a quite astonishing lack of neutrality given the controversial position of the interior minister at the time.

But Nicolas Sarkozy is never out of the media and knows how to turn it to his advantage. "Communication is to action what an air force is to the infantry: it allows you to clear the ground," he said to his troops on one occasion. His

resounding declarations, promising the residents that he would "clean up the housing developments with a power hose" to get rid of the "scum", and of the "mafia-style gang bosses" and "bearded fundamentalists", were delivered in front of embedded TV cameras. The young people he singled out for public opprobrium were enraged by his language. His choice of words also shocked some sectors of public opinion because of what he was stirring up in the French public's collective unconscious: recollections of colonial times, of the "cleansing operations" during the Algerian War and the idea of France as a "rubbish bin". His use of the word *racaille* — scum — echoed the language of the extreme right in the 1930s to denote foreigners and Jews. The rightwing newspaper *Figaro* recalled that historically it was used in France to mean "a contemptible rabble".

Sarkozy, claiming that he was simply speaking "like all Frenchmen who think exactly the same thing", took no notice: he was quite happy to persist in saying the opposite of what was actually the case. And yet, his own internal security services provided him with a detailed report that gave a more objective analysis of the situation. According to this report there was no fundamentalist or mafia-style manipulation of what for them was part of a "popular uprising in the housing developments, with no leader and no programme of concerted action". Some reporters, too, were forced to accept the evidence. They may have begun by conveying hackneyed stereotypes of "urban guerrilla warfare" against a background of images of unprecedented violence — cars torched in their thousands, schools and buses set on fire, police and firemen pelted with stones etc — but they were unable to report the presence of any "fundamentalist rabble-rousers", no "career delinquents", just young people and residents who were angry.

At this point, editors tried to gain a better understanding of what was motivating these people. On 5 November 2005, *Libération's* front page read: "The ghetto speaks: young people from the housing developments explain why they are angry; unemployment, sink estates, police stop and search — and their hatred of Sarkozy." In *Le Parisien* one young person explained: "A cry for help that is expressed through violence is bound to be clumsy. But these people aren't delinquents. They are just without hope." On television, the evidence given by young people about the deaths of Zyed and Bouna in Clichy-sous-Bois [two young men electrocuted while fleeing from a police identity check on 27 October Ed] conflicted with police statements. It was at this point that most of the media threw their weight behind a major campaign, launched by the comic actor Jamel Debbouze and the rap artist Joey Starr among others, to get young people onto the electoral register.

Reacting to the new climate of empathy with the banlieue, several "media intellectuals" protested loud and long. Writing in *Figaro* on 28 November, Robert Redeker, editor of *Les Temps Modernes*, complained: "All the justifications came from the media commentators; they tried to make these events say things they never intended to say." In his view, "it is not poverty, not a social situation, that has brought about this senseless, anarchic violence but rather nihilism, a cultural concept". The philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, who caused uproar by denouncing "an ethnic-religious uprising" in the columns of the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, also attacked "the authorised version that reduces present events to nothing more than questions of inequality and discrimination", and went on to deplore the fact that in a France split between understanding and indignation, "it is the voice of understanding that speaks loudest. Some have even gone so far as to congratulate the rebel multitude" (*Le Monde* 27/28 November 2005).

Sarkozy is relying on "French indignation" and "the silent majority" to win him the French presidency in 2007. He has no hesitation in trespassing into areas belonging to the nationalist *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF) and the FN. "If there's anybody who has a problem with being in France, we have no objection to their leaving the country if they don't like it," he says bluntly to a meeting of new UMP militants in Paris on 22 April 2006. The media furore that this arouses doesn't upset him, quite the contrary. Encouraged by the response of his militant powerbase, he deliberately takes over the slogan: "France — love it or leave it!" which the MPF had itself borrowed from the *Front National*. He also promises to go out looking for extreme right electors "one by one". At a meeting in Nîmes (an area of the south where the *Front National* is deeply rooted), Sarkozy exhorts militants in his rightist grouping, the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), to celebrate "that ideal which bears a name that will live forever: France" and to reawaken "their pride in being French".

It was at this meeting, held the day before the first official French commemoration of the African slave trade and the abolition of slavery, celebrated on 10 May 2006, that he lambasted "a society that can't manage to teach its children about Charles Martel, Napoleon, colonisation, or the Holocaust because it is ashamed, because it is afraid". Admittedly, he said, "France did take part in the African slave trade" but he was not willing to see "the slave trade as the only image of France". By attacking the argument in favour of "repentance" he is setting himself apart from the President's "climb-down" over Article 4 of the law of 23 February 2005. This requires schools to teach "the positive role played by the French presence overseas". In the face of strong opposition to this form of re-legitimisation of colonialism, Article 4 was withdrawn.

In the face of an impressive mobilisation of opposition from young students and workers, the government also gave in over Villepin's proposed CPE, the first employment contract launched in April this year. On that occasion Sarkozy demonstrated his pragmatism and was in favour of negotiation. His aim was to isolate his main rival, Villepin, leaving him to entangle himself in the crisis on his own. To demonstrate that he was not about to "let the streets rule", Villepin conducted a highly visible campaign of police repression against the most insistent rebels and the "*casseurs*" (wreckers). Over 3700 people were arrested and, as had been the case in the November riots, hundreds were sentenced by special courts.

The "wreckers" were denounced as banlieue troublemakers and fugitives from school who were mounting attacks on students out of "anti-white racism". This was a new kind of racism accompanied by gratuitous violence that rap groups were accused of encouraging in their compositions, along the same lines as anti-Semitism or "anti-police racism". *Figaro* asked: "Is this art or is it an insulting attack on whites?" while *Le Parisien* wondered: "Should we be afraid of rap?" The press pretended to examine its conscience while rightwing deputies and even the interior minister took several rap groups to court, accusing them of "treating France with contempt" or "defamatory behaviour towards the police force". Until now, courts have generally decided in favour of a discharge on the grounds of freedom of expression. But under orders from the executive, the public prosecutors are appealing and the pressure is kept up throughout the lengthy proceedings. New laws prescribe ever harsher penalties for "insulting" or "defaming" the French Republic. Nowadays you can be breaking the law if you whistle the *Marseillaise*. And as a result of Sarkozy's law on selective immigration, foreigners can have their residence permit withdrawn for "insulting the national anthem or the flag".

Increasingly, the media has focused on confrontations with the "wreckers" on the fringes of the anti-CPE marches: this constituted 59 per cent of the total coverage of the demonstrations by TF1, France's largest TV channel. On the other hand, the same media covered up the development of the movement in the secondary schools in the *banlieue* whose young people, having been saddled with the image of "wreckers" and undesirables, were more or less prevented from joining in demonstrations. In suburban stations and the Paris Metro, the police operated a form of triage among the demonstrators, arresting young blacks or Arabs. And yet these are the very people who are the first to be affected by the equal opportunities legislation of which the CPE was only one among many measures: apprenticeships from age 14, night working only permitted from age 15, removal of their family allowance from parents of absentee schoolchildren, national service in the army or the *gendarmerie* for excessively unruly pupils, and so on. This law, now in force, is the government's answer to the November 2005 riots.

In the midst of the anti-CPE protests, over 700 associations, groups, and political parties set themselves up as a collective to protest against another bill on "disposable" immigration: one of the aspects of the authoritarian, neo-liberal, and repressive society Sarkozy aims to create. On 13 May 2006, tens of thousands of people demonstrated across the country and a large number of teachers and parents of all ethnic origins are now siding with the families of schoolchildren who are under threat of deportation at the end of the school year. Journalists of all persuasions are showing genuine sympathy for the plight of these children and even for citizens who are prepared to undertake acts of civil disobedience to help illegal immigrants. Articles on the subject appear regularly.

There is also a growing awareness across the media of the scale of racial discrimination in this country, particularly against young people from immigrant families who, at the time of the riots, showed themselves to be a lot more French than would be suggested by the stigma of "*communautarisme*" or "the enemy within". The surprising feature was the discovery of highly diverse social profiles within the *banlieue*, in particular, the number of young people with qualifications who, because of their ethnic or geographic origins, had no access to the labour market. Such a picture does not match the narrow stereotype of young people from the *banlieue* as idle and self-destructive in their behaviour. It is much closer to the profile of the ordinary citizen concerned about social insecurity and instability.

Parts of the press and broadcast media are currently engaged in a process of self-criticism of their prejudices in relation to the cultural, religious, and ethnic differences that have become such frequent topics of discussion in the context of such things as the controversy surrounding the attempt to outlaw the "Islamic" scarf in public places. It is focusing more widely on social questions and resolving to promote greater social and ethnic diversity on the air and in editorial offices. New faces are appearing as presenters of TV news programmes and the editorial policy of several major popular newspapers is showing signs of affirmative action. For example, *Le Parisien* has originated a new daily column highlighting positive experiences in the *banlieue*. Residents from immigrant families are asked for their views on social questions that affect everyone, and several front pages have hinted at change and hope. "French proud of their diversity" runs the headline on 1 February; and on 16 May: "Integration and equal opportunities: that's what the *banlieue* believe in".

But these changes are still at the fragile stage and it would be all too easy for the ethnic and religious divide to be reinstated. The intolerance aroused by the affair of the Danish cartoons — reproduced by French newspapers including *France Soir* and *Charlie hebdo* — was matched by other instances of intolerance. Following the ban on the "Islamic" scarf and visible religious symbols at school, some people want to prevent Tariq Ramadan from taking part in anti-globalisation discussions or ban public showings of films that are accused of fundamentalist sympathies; Jérôme Horst's *Un racisme a peine voilé*, for instance. The anti-racist movement and human rights organisations are torn between denouncing "Islamic leftism" and the struggle against "Islamophobia". This schism is of particular concern at a time of political upheaval when the left itself is divided, torn between renewed resistance to globalisation, social-liberalism, and "zero tolerance".

The Socialist Party's rising star Ségolène Royal, who advocates "military supervision" for minors the moment they commit any act of delinquency plus parenting classes for their families, is putting the whole question of repressive control at the centre of the political debate. In the longer term, this risks making the authoritarian state the norm and means that special measures, always ready and waiting in the wings, will automatically be used to crush any future social uprising. Already the state of emergency decreed in November 2005 — based on a law passed on 3 April 1955 during the Algerian War — authorises a curfew, the closure of meeting places and control of the press and media. It has probably not been said often enough: stirring up the threat of the "enemy within" also threatens civil liberties.

Published 2006-09-25

Original in French

Translation by Mike Routledge

Contribution by Index on Censorship

First published in *Index on Censorship* 3/2006

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