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Political representation as response to urban rioting

A comparative perspective

The French system of assimilation was effective so long as it was concerned with creating a homogenous population whose members would have lifetime job security. However, the assimilation model is no longer appropriate for the contemporary situation, hence the need for a comparative perspective. A "French multiculturalism" based on contemporary social and economic conditions could well be adapted to the French tradition; this would need to go along with a rethinking of the system of political representation.



The theoretical background on the French *quartiers sensibles*, *cités*, or *banlieues* can be organized around three themes: cultural diversity versus the myth of assimilation; the need for a comparative perspective in the social sciences; and the political representation of the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods. Cultural diversity is not limited to ethnicity or race: it deals with various aspects of diversity, be they related to social class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, history, family ideals, or eating habits. Using the term "cultural diversity" has major advantages: in a country that calls itself "laïque" (laity a word assumed to be stronger than "secular"), it prevents one from repeatedly mentioning "religion" as a way of differentiating between "us" and "them" and from making a sharp and artificial distinction between social and ethnic revolt. The violence in the French *banlieues* in November 2005 was indeed a mix of these variables: religious, social, and ethnic. Cultural diversity (or multiculturalism) in the political system does not prevent a society from sharing similar values or values that society considers "universal", as long as they are explicitly designated as such in the public sphere.

Assimilation and homogeneity

The French system was efficient throughout the industrial period and for as long as the main goal was a homogenous society. Today, however, given the structural change occurring to capitalist economies, the traditional theory of assimilation is no longer valid.

The French system in general can be defined as rigid or inflexible, whatever the sphere, discipline, or issue one is dealing with. Precise rules exist in schooling and higher education that every student is obliged to follow. For instance, hardly any time is allocated for discussion. The teacher does not expect a student to comment on what he or she has taught. In order to enrol as a civil servant in the education system, there are exams in which candidates are supposed to repeat precisely not only what has been taught, but also how it has been taught. In order to enter the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), a

prestigious school where most of the French elite (including politicians) are educated, there is an oral exam in which there is only "one" way (obviously the best) of introducing and presenting codified knowledge.

The rigidity of the system can be seen to have been effective as long as it was concerned with creating a homogenous population geared towards mass production, with providing all members of the population the security of a job for life, and with integrating all members of the population into the social fabric. The system can also be seen to have been effective so long as it served as a tool for (more or less) eliminating class differences. One must also recognize that French social theory, because it is largely embedded in the concept of "class struggle", presents real weakness when it comes to dealing with other kinds of difference. These may include ethnicity, religion, or race. The model of pure assimilation that operated in several countries — including the US, which during the industrial period used the metaphor of the "melting-pot" — is no longer valid. Hence there is a need for conceptual change.

In the current period, characterized by processes of globalization linked to communication and information technologies, cheap modes of transport of products and people, and the advent of a "new economy" based on knowledge, it has become extremely difficult to stick to the theory of assimilation as a viable model. However, few in France seriously consider this structural change in capitalist economic systems. Most researchers, journalists, and politicians tend to think that the assimilation model no longer works because immigrants have a different skin colour and a different religion to previous generations.

Homogeneity as a goal is limited first by the "knowledge economy", which no longer requires standard know-how but creativity, imagination, and innovation, and second by the ubiquity of communications technology. The French system therefore needs to start considering "cultural diversity" a real asset. French intellectuals and politicians agree with this ideal at the international level — France and other francophone countries have been powerful lobbies in favour of "cultural diversity" in UNESCO in 2005 — but fail to take it seriously at the national or local levels. On the domestic front, homogeneity is still considered an ideal to be pursued and "diversity" a risk to be avoided.

One of the best ways for initiating change in the French system would be for researchers to become increasingly involved in comparative analysis. The purpose of comparative analysis is not to take a foreign experience as a "model" or a "counter-model", but to encourage imaginative conceptual approaches in the political arena.

A comparative perspective is necessary

Rapid technological, economic, and social transformation calls for a comparative approach. In this respect, the US, because of its ability to incorporate change in the political system, can be taken as a convenient "field of analysis".

In the 1980s, I wrote what is called a "these d'Etat" at the Sorbonne entitled, "The urban regions of Los Angeles and Paris: a comparative study of the management of space". It was impossible to get the thesis published, since at that time no research was done with a comparative perspective (except in law and literature). Researchers involved in the social sciences still thought that if

one studied a foreign context one was implicitly taking it as an "example"; and in the French political imagination there was no room for other examples. There was also the assumption that things in France functioned more or less the way they did in other capitalist countries. While this point of view was correct so long as political regulation at the national level was successful — for instance, during "les 30 glorieuses", a period economists refer to as the era of the "Fordist compromise" — it is no longer appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Hence, there is an urgent need for a comparative perspective in order to learn how other nations have adjusted to the new historical context framed by globalization processes. The purpose is not to copy others, but to see how, by adopting "multiculturalist" principles in accordance with their history and institutions, they were ready to give all members of the population a sense of belonging to the same society. The United States and Canada adopted multiculturalism but also shaped it according to their political cultures. Multiculturalism is not a uniform system; if French society were to adopt it, racial and ethnic categories would not have to be added to the census. There is a variety of multiculturalisms; a "French multiculturalism" based on contemporary social and economic conditions could well be adapted to the French tradition. A comparative analysis in social sciences should be understood as a way to work on our own context while taking a step back from it.

As a researcher working on American cities and interviewing leaders in local administration and associations as well as residents, I have been constantly amazed at people's preoccupation with political representation and citizens' participation. American researchers are extremely concerned with the political representation of "people without a voice" and with public participation. In other words, it seems that researchers and residents are able to maintain a balance between representative democracy and participatory democracy as expressed by Tocqueville — who, while studying the American society at the first half of the nineteenth century, conceptualized the difference between the two terms as well as their complementary character.

In a city like Los Angeles, which has witnessed two riots (Watts in 1965 and South Central in 1992), there has been serious will to introduce change into the system. In 1972, residents of Los Angeles elected Thomas Bradley, an African-American city councilman (the percentage of the African-American population did not exceed 14 per cent); in 2005, they elected Antonio Villaraigosa, a Latino city councilman. Thomas Bradley was re-elected five times (for a total 20 years) because he was able to take into consideration the needs of his community while making Los Angeles a global city (in the early 1970s, Los Angeles was still seen as a regional capital within the American economy). Both mayors came from poor families and grew up in poor districts, but both had the chance to access higher education.

In the French system, there is a need for political representation of cultural diversity, which should not be seen as a "failure" of the theory of assimilation. This goal is feasible as long as our main values (or the values we consider to be universal) are explicitly integrated into the political discourse and not taken for granted, as is the case today.

There is no reason to conceal cultural diversity. In France, however, the way the elite system functions makes it difficult to escape the current situation. Most of our national politicians (and their advisors) not only come from the

same social class, they also come from the same schools (such as the ENA). Most had the same teachers, took the same courses, and shared the same leisure activities. There is therefore a serious gap between these politicians and the rest of society. This gap is even more important for the French nationals of foreign decent. Most people in this group feel that they bear a social capital and identity that are not fully recognized by the system, despite the fact that they have contributed greatly to the economic development of the country. French people referring to the era of "30 glorieuses" never mention the role of the migrant workers who took the "dirty" jobs those that the "old stock" of the French population did not want.

Since deprived neighbourhoods are not represented in the French political arena, their populations express their "exclusion" in one of two ways. The "old stock" or *Français de souche* tend to vote for the far-Right (Le Pen), while the young French nationals of foreign descent turn to public violence (violence or *incivilité*, not limited to November 2005).

One way to deal with the issue of under-representation of "deprived neighbourhoods" is to become involved with the technical aspects of representative democracy, to look at how the democracy is spatially and geographically organized, and to try to get closer to the ideal of "one person one vote". Despite different kinds of changes, constituencies' boundaries (*circonscriptions électorales*) have not been revised in France for 25 years. Hence, in electing representatives at the *Assemblée nationale*, constituencies do not have equal populations. Take the example of the Lozere constituency in rural France: it has a population of 34 374 and one parliamentary representative. A district in the dense suburban area around Paris, with a population of around 200 000, also has one representative. This shows how the French suburban population is under represented in the national political arena as compared to the rural population. What's more, within this suburban category, people living in deprived neighbourhoods are not represented at all. The technical side of French representative democracy therefore needs to be addressed.

Democracy of representation versus democracy of participation

French *banlieues*, which include two different types of population, must be thought of as "a territory without real political representation" at the national level. The population includes French of the "old stock" and French of foreign descent. Since these two groups and their territories are under-represented, it has been easy for a small group of people to transform these neighbourhoods into a kind of extra-territoriality (*zone de non-droit*). This small group, which deals in drugs and weapons, includes criminals who know how to manipulate young people and lure them into their business.

However, if the *banlieues* and their inhabitants are not represented in the political arena, it does not mean that central government is doing nothing. Large public investment has been directed to these neighbourhoods and several national agencies have been created over the last 20 years. However, these administrations have not conducted any serious evaluation of their many programmes and it is difficult to know what has been really achieved in terms of public services and schools. In France, there is still a reluctance (also among researchers) to validate knowledge acquired through experience. Given the rise of extremist populism and violence, it is not difficult to conclude that there is still much to be done, probably in a less technocratic way.

This argument for political representation of those who have no voice in the political arena does not mean that the issue of participatory democracy should not be addressed when dealing with "quartiers sensibles". However, when talking about participatory democracy as a way to bring cultural diversity into the political arena, one should not forget the value of representative democracy in achieving the same result. The spatial distribution of a country's demographic growth is one of the goals of the census and should serve to legitimate a democratic system.



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