

## Neighborhoods and Cultural Differences

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**The sociologist Michel Kokoreff takes a fresh look at the controversy aroused by Hugues Lagrange's book *Le déni des cultures*. He urges us not to neglect the substance of the debate and analyzes the book's theses in detail before subjecting them to criticism.**

Reviewed: Hugues Lagrange, *Le déni des cultures*, Paris, Seuil, 2010, 350 p., 20 €.

From the moment it was published, the most recent book by sociologist Hugues Lagrange stirred a lively polemic. Although the controversy cannot be ignored, the book is a solid piece of work supported by robust data. The initial criticism had little to do with Lagrange's research findings and general presentation of the issues. What is the book actually about? The author seeks to examine the social problems of poor neighborhoods in the French suburbs by focusing on cultural difference between immigrant groups in an increasingly fragmented society. According to Lagrange, the explanatory and interpretive models that sociologists have proposed have avoided the question of cultural differences, as have the various policies implemented to combat social exclusion. The situation is totally different today, as the tenor of public and political debate attests. It is no longer enough to focus on social and economic conditions. The disruption of the family and breakdown of old forms of solidarity are also important. So is the withdrawal of immigrant families and their children from social commitment. These differences are reductive and contradictory, however. They do not take into account all of the relevant cultural dimensions, including not only differences of values, life style, and socialization but also of migratory flows, family dynamics, and concepts of generational and gender difference. At the same time, complementary structural factors must also be taken into account.

Basically, what the author shows is the way in which a whole range of social phenomena in the French suburbs became geographically and ethnically differentiated in the 1980s. He bases this conclusion on quantitative studies of three locations conducted between 1999 and 2006. The three locations were the Aval-Seine zone between Mantes-en-Yvelines and Mantes-la-Jolie, the 18<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement of Paris, and Saint-Herblain, a suburb of Nantes. The survey looked at five cohorts of students in public middle schools, who were followed from the sixth to the ninth grade (a total of 4,339 students in all). Unlike other monographic studies, whose shortcomings are well-known, this multi-site survey was supplemented by observation in 150 micro-neighborhoods (groups of 2,000 inhabitants defined by INSEE as *Îlots Regroupés pour l'Information Statistique*, or IRIS) in Ile-de-France, which allowed for temporal comparison and made it possible to put together a portrait of adolescent misbehavior in a number of cities with major urban developments.

Make no mistake, however: this is not a local study, because the author tries to show how globalization affects our societies by redefining social relations and collective identities. Economic and social inequalities between poor countries and rich countries increase, changing the logic of immigration. Tensions between the native working class in the countries of the North and immigrants from the South increase, and spatial concentration of the latter comes to symbolize the social degradation of the former. Immigrants become scapegoats. This results in pressure to close the borders, exemplified by the rise of the extreme right, xenophobia, and racism as well as by urban riots and electoral abstention. This “political backlash” is central to the first two chapters of the book, which deal with the moral involution that began in the 1990s, after a period of aspiration to liberty in the 1960s. The interest of the book—the author’s wager, if you like—lies in the way in which it uses the French suburbs as a lens through which to view the globalization of our post-national, multicultural societies. Society sends a double message to immigrants and their children, a message of both integration and hostility, and thus helps to produce the divisions that it simultaneously denounces.

Let us begin by summarizing the argument of the book. Immigrant families from the Sahel must contend with a withering of the family roles and norms they bring with them from Africa. The host country imposes new norms of its own, and from this two tensions arise: a first

tension in the immigrants themselves, which Lagrange calls “neotraditionalism,” and a second in the native population, which blames the immigrants for all its social ills. Lagrange’s approach, inspired by the neglected work of François Bon, might be characterized as *globalized statistical anthropology*. Well aware of the dangers of essentialization, Lagrange is wary of the radical constructivist arguments of Fredrik Barth and Benedict Anderson, inspired by work in immigration history, anthropological studies of family dynamics, and urban sociology. What is original about his work is the way in which he combines constructivism with hard data and comparative study of European and North American societies.

### **Unemployment and Segregation**

It is a fact that the social situation of immigrant families living in the French suburbs has deteriorated. Unemployment figures for Sensitive Urban Zones (ZUS) for 1990, 1999, and 2006 show this clearly. Unemployment in the 15-30 age group rose from 22.2% in 1990 to 34.6% in 1999, then fell to 32.1% in 2006. The unemployment rate for foreigners followed a similar pattern: 17.4, 29.4, and 30.1%. According to recent figures from the *Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles*, 43% of young males and 37% of young females were unemployed at the end of 2009.

This “selective amplification of unemployment” is linked to a twofold process of segregation. Social segregation generally came before ethnocultural segregation. In the late 1970s, middle managers and white-collar personnel abandoned suburban housing developments to European-born workers, who were subsequently displaced by immigrants from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Turkey. This progression is particularly clear in the Yvelines department. By the 1980s the absence of middle managers in the ZUS was already noticeable, and their numbers continued to decrease through 2006. In areas such as Val Fourré, the largest ZUS in France, one finds “a society without a local elite” (p. 116). Ethnic segregation is increasing, although the available data are not always sufficient to prove this. In 1990, there were eight cities with more than 30% non-European immigrants; in 1999 there were 24 (out of a total sample of 420 *communes* and Paris *quartiers*). Public housing became “Africanized.” In 1985, 85% of families had French surnames, but by 2006, this figure had fallen to 25%. In 1982, 6% of families were African and 9% non-French European; in 2000, the comparable figures were 26% and 11%. Studying the ethnic composition of each IRIS in Mantes-La-Jolie, Lagrange shows the

decrease in the number of native French families in the ZUS and their concentration outside the ZUS. Thus, two cities coexist: one without immigrants alongside a second “African city” at the other end of the commune.

Just as unemployment is “selective,” departures from the ZUS are “socially selective,” and their effect is to increase ethnic segregation. Observation of the 50 IRIS in the Val de Seine shows that population outflows are largest where the proportion of “immigrants” in the population is largest. A similar phenomenon is observed in the suburb of Nantes, where departures begin at a threshold of about 10% families of African origin, whereas in the ring of suburbs around Paris the threshold is about 20%. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement of Paris, Lagrange finds that “the new social geography of African-born workers followed the decline of the native working-class population” (p. 123). In those IRIS where ethnocultural cohabitation is high, as in neighborhoods within Paris proper or in the inner ring of suburbs, social distance is established by sending children to private middle schools. School segregation is high, especially in modest neighborhoods such as La Goutte d’Or.

### **School Failure, Delinquency, and Family Background**

Lagrange proposes to relate the social geography of school failure and what he calls “misbehavior” to the concentration of “African” families. Although he is well aware that demonstrating such a link might be taken as an “accusation,” he nevertheless thinks that it is an important fact to establish in order to help develop better policies of inclusion. Unlike other work that has pointed to discriminatory practices and behavioral differences between natives and “visible minorities,”<sup>1</sup> he demonstrates behavioral differences between young Sahelians and other “black” adolescents and between young Turks and “North Africans.” He establishes a link between ethnic segregation and desocialization as measured by early school failure, absenteeism, and misbehavior. The success rate on sixth-grade and school certificate exams is inversely proportional to the delinquency rate as well as to the proportion of families of African origin. These findings hold for all the areas studied, including the suburb of Nantes and the Seine valley.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fabien Jobard et René Lévy, *Police et minorités visibles : les contrôles d’identité à Paris*, Open Society Institute, New York Justice, 2009.

Misbehavior and difficulty in school are related to three factors. One is family configuration. Studies in the United States and Western Europe show that polygamous and single-parent families exhibit a “noticeable difference in risk” (p. 135). But the effect of monoparentality on success in school has been less well documented on this side of the Atlantic. According to Lagrange, single-parent families are less common in the most segregated cultural groups in the ZUS (North Africans, Blacks from the Sahel, and Turks): 15.7% in the ZUS compared with 22.5% outside. Delinquency rates are higher for single-parent North African families (nearly 27%) than for Sahelian families (21%). By contrast, there is a more significant correlation for non-single-parent Sahelian families (16%) than for North African families (9%). Misbehavior by children depends strongly on the parents’ occupation. The longer a father has been unemployed, the more likely the adolescent student is to misbehave and to fail the school certificate exam. The failure rate is 30 points higher than for the children of middle managers. Finally, the success rate on sixth-grade and school certificate exams is higher for families that have been in France for several generations and is higher for North Africans than for Turks and Sahelians. Conversely, the percentage of adolescents admonished for some infraction is four times higher for Sahelian families than for French families. Thus, the effects of social origin and cultural background reinforce one another.

### **Family Dynamics**

To explain these various phenomena, Lagrange relies on the sociology of immigration and above all the anthropology of family types. European immigrants generally have family types similarly to the dominant French type, but this is not true of immigrant families from North Africa, which are patrilineal. Studies have shown, however, that family types can change dramatically in just three decades (the influence of rural origins decreases, the number of unmarried couples increases, preferential marriages decrease, fertility rates decrease, intermarriage increases). Furthermore, although immigrants who arrived after World War II were not well educated, those who have arrived since 1975 have had more schooling. Children born in France to Algerian immigrants cease to speak their parents’ tongue. More and more Moroccan immigrants tend to come from urban rather than rural settings. Divorce rates among immigrants are rising. All of these things tend to show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the “integration machine” is still working, as wave after wave of immigrant experiences “de-traditionalization.” By contrast, immigrants from Black Africa have followed a different pattern.

Heterogeneity is the rule. There has been a historic shift of immigration from the countries of the Gulf of Guinea (Togo, Benin, etc.) to immigration from the Sahel. Immigrants from the former group came from a matrilineal or bilineal tradition, were relatively well educated, and were Christians or animists, whereas the latter, who represent about 40% of Black Africans in France today, come from a patrilineal tradition, have relatively large families (six to ten children compared to four to six), are mainly Muslims, and tend to be illiterate.

Patrilineal Sahelian families distribute family roles differently from smaller bilineal families with relatively egalitarian gender relations. Lagrange argues that patrilineal systems place strong controls on women, although there are differences between Peule and Soninke families on the one hand and Wolof and Manjak families on the other, the latter being less strict and more flexible. This social and symbolic domination of women goes along with a greater age difference between husband and wife (more than twelve years in the Val de Seine survey) and a percentage of polygamous families from the Senegal River region that is comparable to the proportion observed in Africa. Despite an overall convergence of fertility rates, fertility remains high throughout the Sahel zone, with no change since 1975. Thus it seems that exile reinforces elements of the tradition, especially asymmetry between the sexes. The high fertility rate and number of siblings may increase tensions between children and institutions, starting with the school and later the police and the courts.

This interpretation is different from what Oscar Lewis called “the culture of poverty.” To be sure, welfare recipients in poor neighborhoods are a highly dependent population, and their dependence apparently increased in the 1990s. Lagrange detects a high correlation between urban zones in which at least 50% of family income consists of social transfer payments and districts with a large “African” population. But this picture is modified somewhat by the unexpected results of a study of the files of parents in difficulty receiving assistance from the child welfare office in the Val de Seine. It is no surprise to discover that the rate of assistance is four to five times higher in poor neighborhoods than in city centers or small towns without a ZUS. But which families are assisted? The rate of assistance to African families averages 16‰ even though their proportion of the population is high and their children are more frequently in difficulty at school and on the streets. By contrast, the rate of assistance is 73‰ for “Franco-

French” families, which suffer from problems linked to alcohol, psychiatric problems, and domestic violence. “The problems of socialization that these large Sahelian families face, along with most North African families, are not for the most part problems that lead the child welfare office to become involved.” (p. 183) The children’s problems stem from factors other than emotional deficits at home or parental separation. For Lagrange, the problem is rather an “excess of authoritarianism,” which involves a distinction between authority of competence and statutory authority.

Statutory authority is reflected in the priority granted to men and their prerogatives in regard to early separation of the sexes, whereas women have no power over boys. This leads to tensions, which delegitimize the statutory authority of elders. “The radicalization of female inferiority divides the parents and places the sons above the mothers.” (p. 190) Among immigrant families in this situation, relations between the sexes and generations weaken owing to lack of support from peers and parents. Fathers are deprived of the circle of men who support educational success. Mothers, deprived of brothers and fathers, have no authority over their sons and are disrespected by their daughters. The ability of older children to regulate the behavior of younger is increasingly limited. “Thus the crisis is as much a result of changes in the traditional normative system as it is of the gap between that system and western norms.” (p. 192) In the North African population, by contrast, Lagrange observes a wider range of family dynamics. Mothers tend to be overprotective, and sons and daughters are raised differently in ways that encourage delinquency among boys. Yet the propensity to delinquency among children of North African extraction seems to be diminishing. There are several reasons for this: a weakening of the patriarchal model, greater success in school, greater familiarity with French social codes, and greater likelihood of living in socially mixed neighborhoods. As a result, this group is moving closer in behavior to the European middle class, and a new social elite is emerging.

### **Sociability, Excess or Deficit of Autonomy?**

Is there a clear difference in youth behavior depending on cultural origin? The answer is not clear. The question of gender segregation can yield some insight. Gender segregation is common among Blacks, North Africans, and Turks, according to the interview with Illayda with which chapter 7 begins. Gendered norms apply when it comes to access to public space. Lagrange reconstructs the social networks of a sample of young middle school students in the

Mantes region. The size of these networks does not depend on whether the individual lives in a housing project or not. By contrast, gender mixing is less likely in the networks of boys from a ZUS or ZEP (priority education zone) (see table, p. 205). It is twice as likely for youths of North African or Turkish origin outside a ZUS or ZEP. The gap is markedly smaller for youths from Black Africa. It remains significant for youths of European origin. Girls' social networks are less mixed in ZUS than outside them, but the differences are smaller than for boys, except perhaps for black African girls. This may be because for them social relations are more likely to stem from the school than from housing. If freedom in public space is restricted, this is compensated to some extent by large sibling groups and horizontal family ties. There is great freedom for girls in these spaces, where they are safe from the gaze of boys and men.

Other signs attest to the less elective, less individualized character of social relations of adolescents residing in ZUS. Lagrange finds that older children are often involved in crimes intended to protect a sibling or relative. One sees this in the share of crimes committed by adolescents 16 or older in Sahelian families in relation to the number of siblings and residential location. Older sons are more likely to be involved in these crimes, but where there are two or fewer siblings, involvement is less likely (7%) than in families with three to seven siblings (12%) and even more likely with seven or more siblings (28%). On this point, the reader may find it unfortunate that there is no equivalent tabulation for other cultural groups, such as North Africans and Turks. This weakens the overall case.

This is the heart of the author's anthropological interpretation of delinquency. "Here again, we see that poor African families act in highly 'collective' rather than 'independent' or 'individualist' ways. The problem is not a weakening of norms but rather their excessive power in the migratory context" (p. 214). It is wrong, however, to describe the sociability of public housing projects as a form of communitarianism. Hostility to outsiders does exist, but these help to create "mutual tensions between the descendants of immigrants and large segments of the host society" (p. 215). Hostility from the host society leads to a defensive construction of identity, which may draw upon Islam in ways that help youths to distinguish themselves from their parents, but these are not homogeneous. Lagrange sees not a "unified youth culture" but rather a "plurality of identities." In this respect he points to tensions between minority groups (Sahelian



and Turkish youths) and majority groups (North Africans). He also sees a “plurality of black identities.”

What individuals in poor immigrant neighborhoods suffer from, then, is not so much an absence of social ties as a surfeit of them. The institutional crisis is not the result of disinvestment by autonomous individuals but rather overinvestment in neighborhood social networks, peer groups, families, and communities. Indeed, the autonomy of the individual is reduced: in the neighborhood it is complicated to be a full-fledged individual. We see this in Lagrange’s treatment of the development of two new forms of delinquency since the 1950s: the “delinquency of prosperity” and the “delinquency of immobility” (pp. 249-255). The latter is characterized by violence in poor areas and predatory behavior in rich ones. It goes along with the transformation of big, anonymous public housing projects into spaces of mutual recognition and informal control, leading to an increase in delinquent and other forms of uncivil behavior. The other side of this deeply rooted form of sociability is the vendetta, in which violence promotes solidarity and insults must be paid back. Lagrange also challenges the idea that job loss leads to domestic violence, which turns out not to be true in Sahelian families. For all these reasons, he is critical of Robert Castel’s idea of “disaffiliation”<sup>2</sup> and of the way in which it was used by governments of the left. He is also critical of the views of Marcel Gauchet and Alain Finkielkraut, who argue that the institutional crisis is a consequence of excessive individual autonomy.

### **Policies of Inclusion**

What makes the book interesting is the fact that Lagrange does not stop with diagnosis but goes on to consider possible public intervention. For instance, his analysis of the geography of school failure, delinquency, and the concentration of sub-Saharan families might make it possible to develop “inclusive responses” (p. 126). Paying more attention to local aspects of delinquency and to the characteristics of delinquents might allow for better targeting of preventive measures (p. 132). Recognizing the early influence of cultural origins might make it possible “to even the playing field and neutralize cultural effects” by the sixth grade in order to even out results on school certificate exams (p. 150) in the context of a broader equal opportunity policy (p. 157).

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Castel, *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale*, Paris, Fayard, 1995. Note that the author has since abandoned this idea, which was presented as a critique of the category of exclusion.

How can scholastic and social success be encouraged for adolescents in troubled neighborhood, including those who face the greatest difficulties, namely, the children of African immigrants? “The authorities approach this question obliquely at best, because in their eyes cultural groups do not exist” (p. 275). Drawing on American work showing that there is a “neighborhood effect” on student success, Lagrange shows clearly that school test results vary considerably depending on the proportion of middle managers (*cadres*) living in the reference micro-neighborhood (IRIS). The same is true for delinquency, which rises when the proportion of middle class residents falls. So the question becomes one of how to make these neighborhoods more attractive.

Among various possible scenarios, the author proposes *social mixing without cultural diversity*. There is a new rising class of second-generation immigrants, who leave the projects to live in somewhat better neighborhoods with reputedly better schools. This “social elite” must somehow be captured or promoted internally. There are two possible levers for accomplishing this: jobs and institutional supply. Subsidized jobs for relatively poorly educated women have beneficial effects on scholastic outcomes. Support for women’s work is already strong among Sahelian women but has regressed somewhat among North African women. Employment is generally down, moreover, in the affected neighborhoods. What we see is a desire for work outside the home, not a “neo-feminist assertion of female autonomy” (p. 302). To encourage this, Lagrange recommends empowering women to expand their skills. Material support must be provided in a way that does not disrupt the family dynamic.

Such measures cannot be judged solely in terms of their objectives. We must also look at how they are implemented and what effect they really have. Policies aimed at promoting social and cultural integration since the 1990s have yielded only limited results. To speak of “inclusion” is to suggest that integration can be achieved without denying cultural differences and that economic participation can be achieved without disavowing community loyalties, through hybridization. The key word here is “recognition.” We need to change our modes of representation in order to welcome visible minorities with different cultures into our system. Challenging indirect discrimination is not enough. The example of the U. K. shows that it is

possible to go too far in recognizing differences between communities. Ethnic separatism is to be avoided. “There are alternatives to, on the one hand, denying cultural minorities altogether, as the standard discourse of *laïcité* does, and, on the other hand, establishing Islamic courts that apply *sharia* law” (p. 327).

### **The Neighborhood Environment, Riots, and Juvenile Delinquency**

Lagrange’s robust data (statistics, tables, graphs) are often convincing, but certain points are more open to challenge. It is perhaps regrettable that little use was made (apart from chapters 3 and 8) of qualitative information gathered in the course of the investigation. In particular, a careful description of the atmosphere of Val Fourré would have been welcome. This might have helped make it clear that the divisions in question were ethnic and racial rather than merely social and urban. This large housing project is 60 km from Paris and typical of the urban development of the 1960s. Since then, it has undergone a discreet “Africanization.” There are few whites in public places, while non-whites are highly visible, as is also the case elsewhere. Interviews would have helped us understand from within how these immigrants, and especially the women among them, experience their social situation, make sense of their lives, and make use of resources such as social, neighborhood, and community centers.

One important finding is that cultural origin influenced the participation of youths in the riots of 2005. Although this point is repeated often, it is not really demonstrated in the book. It is based on the observation that the probability of rioting was higher in neighborhoods in which more than 10% of the households consisted of six or more individuals. Since such households are more likely to be “sub-Saharan” than “North African,” this might imply a different propensity to participate in the riots. But more evidence would be needed to clinch this argument. What is more, no study of individuals arrested in the riots, no monograph concerning Saint-Denis, Aulnay-sous-Bois, or Villiers-sur-Marne, and no press account supports it, to my knowledge. Why would these sources not confirm a relatively heavy participation of blacks if that were the case?

Of course, there were also riots in Villiers-le-Bel. That episode crossed a line in that firearms were used against the police. Five young adults were accused of being ringleaders and of firing on police. They were tried in Pontoise in June 2010 and sentenced to long terms in

prison. All were of Malian origin, and their families turned out in force for the trial.<sup>3</sup> Villiers-le-Bel is a city that has been highly ghettoized. This is particularly true of the ZAC near which the events of 2007 took place. During a field investigation undertaken a year later, I was struck by the effects of the resulting “demographic shift.” I have done ethnographic research in the Hauts-de-Seine department since the 1990s, and most of the young people I encountered in the streets and other public places were of North African descent. Sub-Saharan families, being more recent arrivals, had young children who have become more visible as they have grown up, but who are not markedly different in their behavior from their North African counterparts. In Villiers-le-Bel, the proportion of adolescents and young adults of sub-Saharan origin is high. For example, at one meeting to prepare for the first commemoration of the “events” in November 2008, nearly all the participants were young blacks, and the leader was none other than Ali Soumaré, who would run in the 2009 regional elections as head of the Socialist list.<sup>4</sup> It is nevertheless significant, I think, that neighborhood officials and local government department heads were all of North African origin and in their thirties and forties. The city council was essentially white. In other words, there is ethnocultural segregation, which results in geographic immobility for some and increased social mobility for others, and both phenomena are related to levels of scholastic success. Although it would be risky to assert that these observations hold true for all three ZUS in Villiers-le-Bel, it would be just as dubious to say that the rioters were more black than North African. In other riots, youths of various backgrounds stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the “same mess” and sharing the “same fantasies,” to use the language of the suburbs. I am thinking not only of the riots in the east, at Vitry-le-François, Woopi near Metz, and Saint-Dizier but also in Saint-Etienne and in the Paris region, at Bagnolet, as well as in Grenoble. Furthermore the post-2005 revival of neighborhood associations and activists and the formation of multicultural lists in the last municipal and regional elections represent similar forms of collective mobilization. To be sure, one can always doubt their ability to transform local politics and overcome the lack of cultural diversity in political representation, but this is still a long way from the “depoliticization” decried by so many observers of the suburbs, whom Lagrange seems to echo in his remarks on “political alienation” (pp. 314-317).

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<sup>3</sup> See my article, “Villiers-le-Bel: ethnographie d’un process politique,” *Esprit*, August-September 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See Ali Somaré, *Casier politique*, Paris, Max Milo, 2010.

It's one thing to measure the variation of adolescent misbehavior in relation to cultural origin and to find that there are significant differences within families, between husbands and wives and boys and girls regarding the relation to the body and sexuality. It is another thing to measure the effects of common socialization with a strong geographical component. The formula "we grew up together" is often heard. In many neighborhoods, cultural mixing is the rule: young people are socialized in housing projects and middle schools. Boys are exposed early in life to identity checks by police, which can often be quite rough. With their sisters, they frequent the local social centers and youth clubs. Many have served time in prison and have a record of several convictions. "Zero tolerance" is part of their daily experience, as is racism, which gives them a common albeit negative identity. Their vision of the social world acquires a definite "ethnic coloration," which did not exist to the same degree among the "mall youths" studied by François Dubet or the "black jacket" gangs studied by Jean Monod. Their vision of society is based on the categories of *rebeus* (Arabs), *renois* (blacks), and *cefs* (French). These distinctions are not entirely dictated by an "us vs. them" logic. Youths from all groups consider themselves to be "brothers" and "cousins," define themselves as Muslim as much as French, talk and dress in similar ways, share the same musical tastes, etc. The question is then whether cultural differences have a greater effect than the two processes of racialization (from above) and ethnicization (from below) in a given geographical area.

Another debatable point concerns delinquency. Lagrange prefers the term "misbehavior" to "incivility" (although he helped to develop the latter a decade and a half ago). Does the category of misbehavior stress scholastic offenses (such as absenteeism and failure) more than delinquency (theft and violence)? Without knowing exactly what the figures indicate, it is difficult to answer the question. Few details are given in either the body of the text or the appendices. The statistics tell us only about the number of summonses issued, which covers an area somewhat between neighborhood law enforcement and actual criminal prosecution. This might be an institutional construct, but the correlation with scholastic data suggests either that the latter are also an institutional construct or that there is some solidity to the findings. But a further problem arises from the fact that police statistics are rare at the communal and infra-communal level. School data are available, but researchers are barred from accessing data about delinquency. The police jealously guard this information, which is no doubt biased but which

might still contain useful numbers if we could access it. As it is, there is little detailed information available about one of the most controversial social issues in France today. It might nevertheless be possible to devise protocols that would give us a clearer picture of the geographical distribution of delinquency.

Finally, it may be useful to point out that Lagrange's study deals with youths in grades 6 through 9, or ages 11 to 16. This is in no sense a representative sample of the delinquent population, because most juvenile delinquents are in the 16 to 18 age group. Still, a closer look is in order, because social workers tell us that many children do become involved in delinquency in the middle-school years. This may, however, be a relatively recent development, whereas the work of Hugues Lagrange and Suzanne Cagliéro focuses on the early 2000s. Hence new research may be needed to flesh out the picture.

### **Looking Back on a Polemic**

With these critical remarks out of the way, we turn now to the polemic that Lagrange's book aroused at the time of its publication. The political context of course played a role. Xenophobia was once again evident in the highest levels of government, following the creation of a Ministry of National Identity, a government-sponsored debate on national identity, and a campaign against the Roma in the summer of 2010, to say nothing of the law against the burka and the declaration of a "national war against drug traffickers in the projects." In the background of all this were sordid electoral calculations: the majority hoped to solidify its ranks and win back voters who had gone over to the Front National. In this context, a sociological study that interpreted various forms of "misbehavior" in terms of cultural origins was inevitably taken as a provocation.

Apart from these burning topical considerations, it is of course well-known that any attempt to question our famous republican model of integration arouses strong passions. The French model, based on abstract universalism, insists on rendering invisible any discrimination due to actual institutional practices. In the urban arena, we have seen the adoption of policies such as the ZEP, which stands somewhere between republican equality and special treatment not for a distinct subgroup of the population but rather for a geographical area. Similarly, the "big brother" strategy whereby political parties sought to attract North African elites created a group

of community intermediaries while at the same time denying the existence of ethnic identities. Nevertheless, these ambivalences seem to have been set aside, partly as a result of the hysterical debate over the veil and Islam. Indeed, a form of neo-republicanism, or republican fundamentalism, has emerged, which is entirely compatible with the process of moral involution described in the book. Paradoxically, moreover, this has happened despite the fact that studies by INSEE and INED have demonstrated the reality of discrimination. Residents of poor neighborhoods therefore suffer from a strong sense of injustice, and we saw another dramatic expression of this in the riots of 2005 and their aftermath.

On all of these issues there has been an abundance of academic literature in France since at least the end of the 1990s. Besides the sociology of racism (M. Wieviorka, P. Taguieff), a good deal of work has focused on discrimination in the workplace (Ph. Bataille, V. de Rudder), social housing (P. Simon, T. Kirzbaum), the schools (G. Fitoussi, M. Oberti), public health (D. Fassin, A. Lovell), the police and the courts (D. Duprez, F. Jobard), gender relations (N. Guénif-Souilemas, E. Macé), working-class neighborhood activism (A. Boubker and A. Hajjat), diversity (P. Weil), and urban ghettos (D. Lapeyronnie, M. Boucher). A multiauthor work edited by Didier Fassin and Eric Fassin<sup>5</sup> proposed a broad-based approach to ethnicization and racialization. Meanwhile, the historian Pap N'Diaye proposed a vast overview of the status of blacks: *La condition noire* (Paris, Folio, 2008). Oddly, Hugues Lagrange cites virtually none of this work. He might well object that racism and discrimination are not his subjects. But can the way in which a population is socially conceived and constructed be separated from its sociological definition?

This is a genuine theoretical problem. Lagrange refers to the notions of culture, cultural group, and cultural origin. He rejects theories of ethnicity, to which he prefers the logic of the ghetto, that is, of spatial segregation, of the relegation of certain ethnic groups to certain neighborhoods. Instead of using a “culturalist” argument to explain how individuals behave in

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<sup>5</sup> Didier Fassin et Eric Fassin, eds., *De la question sociale à la question raciale ? Représenter la société*. Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

certain places,<sup>6</sup> he revives and reinterprets the notion of “subculture”: “subcultures,” he writes, “depend on both the dominant culture and the culture of origin, on systems of value, aspiration, and achievement that stem from *both* the country of origin *and* the host country. [...] What we see in segregated immigrants groups are transitional adaptive forms that stem from a confrontation between inherited resources and the opportunity structure of the host society” (pp. 237-239). In this respect, a subculture is a kind of “social relation.” This definition is in some respects not very different from the Fredrik Barth’s dynamic conception of ethnic identity and of the social construction and transformation of the “us/them” distinction.<sup>7</sup> But it is also different in that it focuses not on the processes by which identities are attributed but rather on certain “cultural traits” that undergo change in the context of immigration.

This is precisely the point singled out in some of the controversy that this book aroused. To reduce social misery to cultural origin would be to surrender to “culturalism.”<sup>8</sup> To emphasize cultural difference would be to blame victims for their problems. To denounce the denial of cultures would be to contribute to the denial of discrimination. Lagrange is careful to avoid these mistakes. He stands the causal argument on its head by showing that the problems of socialization faced by Sahelian families are at least as much the result of tensions in the host society as of the behavior of immigrants. Immigrant behavior is not determined by the culture of origin. It is not essentialized but can be changed if the right formulas are found. Of course this is not easy. The book is not without ambivalence when it comes to the question of whether Sahelian immigrants and their children are the product of their cultural heritage and of a dual process of social and ethnic segregation, or, on the other hand, of power relations produced and reproduced by institutions and racism. Nevertheless, it encourages us to recognize social realities from which today’s French elites seem totally disconnected. In short, it is a contribution to the study of society as it is and not as we would like it to be.

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<sup>6</sup> The reference to the recent work of the American sociologist William Julius Wilson (*More than Just Race. Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, W.W Norton and Compagny, 2009) deserves a lengthy debate, notably on the relation between structure and culture.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Philippe Poutignat, Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart, *Théories de l’ethnicité*, Paris, PUF, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the op-ed piece by Didier Fassin and Eric Fassin, “Misère du culturalisme. Cessons d’imputer les problèmes aux étrangers,” *Le Monde*, Sept. 30, 2010.



The problem for Lagrange is the cultural cleavage that divides a partially endogamous group from other immigrant groups and their descendants, as well as from the rest of society. How can these culturally significant gaps be reduced? It is not enough to fight indirect discrimination, much less to institutionalize “communities.” At stake is a deliberate policy of reducing social inequality and fostering ethnocultural inclusion by way of fiscal incentives to municipalities and firms and indirect allocations to women and young people especially. Such a policy is necessary to get beyond the hardened positions of the right and the procrastination of the left. It may be “politically incorrect,” but it is nevertheless essential for the future of our neighborhoods and our society. This will be a central issue in the upcoming presidential elections.

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