

No Justice, No Peace

Alec G. Hargreaves

THE DAY AFTER THE *Charlie Hebdo* KILLINGS, I spoke on the phone with a friend in Paris who said that during a bus ride that morning he had been disturbed to see on the faces of young men of Arab appearance expressions that seemed to signal aloofness or even defiance in contrast with the shock and sorrow visible on the faces of majority ethnic passengers. I saw a similar contrast at firsthand a few days later during a *Je suis Charlie* rally held in the main square in the town of Narbonne, to which I had driven from the nearby village in which I live in southern France. Except for representatives of a local mosque, practically all of those who joined the demonstration were whites, grim-faced and sad. Toward the end of the gathering, I noticed a tall black teenager with a smile on his face standing a few yards away from the demonstrators, toward whom he was looking from the edge of the square. Close by were several men of Arab appearance, probably in their midthirties, standing shoulder to shoulder, exchanging smiles and seemingly lighthearted remarks as they too looked upon the rally from a short distance.

The previous day there had been media reports that students in scores of high schools in disadvantaged multiethnic *banlieues* (outlying urban areas) had refused to observe a nationwide minute of silence in memory of those killed in the attacks. What did that refusal mean? Support for the killers? Resentment over perceived double standards concerning victims of anti-Arab racism for whom no comparable displays of national mourning had been organized in the past? Indifference to calls for displays of national unity in the face of entrenched patterns of discrimination that have excluded large numbers of minority ethnic men and women in the *banlieues*

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from participation in the life of the nation? It is as impossible to answer this question with precision as it is to interpret with certainty the meaning of those expressions on Arab and black faces seen in Paris and Narbonne. What is certain, however, is the immense distance that many in the *banlieues* now feel between themselves and mainstream French society.

More than thirty years ago, in December 1983, a hundred thousand demonstrators arrived in Paris on the final leg of the nationwide Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme (March for Equality and against Racism). The march was modeled by its organizers—young men and women of North African origin, together with majority ethnic sympathizers—on nonviolent US civil rights demonstrations that had climaxed in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when Martin Luther King had electrified the American nation by speaking of his dream. “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream,” said Dr. King. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’” The dream of the marchers who arrived in Paris in 1983 was rooted in the same values—nationally proclaimed and universal in nature—shared by the American and French Republics. “In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check,” Dr. King remarked. “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹ With the substitution of “French” for “American,” the spirit of these words voices the aspirations of the marchers who arrived in Paris in 1983, pressing for the gates of equal opportunity to be opened to them in French society.

In his 1963 speech Dr. King warned: “There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.” These words resonate as clearly and compellingly in the France of 2015 as they did in the United States in 1963. The chanting of “No Justice, No Peace” by demonstrators in Ferguson, Missouri, and other American cities protesting recent police killings of unarmed black men has highlighted the distance that is still to be traveled in the United States, and the *Charlie Hebdo* killings speak with chilling clarity of the gravity of the situation in France. Despite formal equality of citizenship, a chasm has been dug within French society by decades of discrimination against Arab, black, and Muslim minorities that successive governments have done too little to combat. That chasm, wider now than at any time in the past, was as plain to see in the horrific attacks carried out in Paris by the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly as it was in the gap separating young black and Arab onlookers from the *Je suis Charlie* rally in Narbonne.

In the weeks that followed the January 2015 killings, public debate in France was dominated by security concerns and the supposed need to educate minorities about the virtues of *laïcité* (the separation of the French Republic from organized religions) as a model of tolerance and mutual respect. Little was said about the injustices suffered by victims of discrimination, fueling cynicism among them in the face of unkept promises of equal treatment and favoring the rise of extremist elements. In April I was invited by the BBC World Service to participate in an hour-long radio debate in Paris focusing on the question “Is France’s model of integration broken?” A

¹ The full text of Dr. King’s speech may be consulted at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3170387.stm> (accessed July 27, 2015).

center-right Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP) *député* was invited to speak first. After singing the praises of French “integration” policy, which he said was exemplified by the principle of *laïcité*, he refused to listen to the concerns of minority ethnic panelists, interrupting them angrily, and shook his head dismissively when I cited research data documenting the widespread nature of racial and ethnic discrimination. With only about twenty minutes of the debate gone, he stormed out of the room after some of those present insisted, against his protestations, on their right to call themselves black. The debate continued in his absence. The completed recording was advertised on the BBC’s website for broadcast on the World Service two days later. A few hours before the appointed time, all references to the program disappeared from the advertised schedule and the debate was replaced by alternative programming. I learned later that the broadcast had been canceled after the speaker from the UMP complained to the BBC that the program lacked balance. To the extent that there was any basis to that claim, it arose not from any failure on the part of the BBC to seek to include a broad range of opinions but from the refusal of politicians across a large part of the political spectrum to properly engage with the issues at stake. Representatives of all the main parties who had been invited to participate in the program had declined to do so, with the sole exception of the UMP *député* who walked out when confronted with the concerns of minority ethnic speakers and evidence of racial and ethnic discrimination. Continuing a long-established tradition among French politicians concerning these issues, he preferred to break the thermometer rather than read the temperature. This will not stop the fever, nor will it bind up the wounds that cry out to be healed.

The long-standing failure of governments of both Left and Right to ensure equality of opportunity for all French citizens, irrespective of racial or ethnic differences, has fed numerous forms of disruptive behavior toward figures regarded as representatives of an unjust and discriminatory social system. With the passage of time and the deepening of resentment and despair, behavior of this kind has become increasingly violent and extremist. Since the late 1970s there have been countless confrontations in the *banlieues* between youngsters of immigrant origin and the police, at whose hands dozens of unarmed young men have died, in some cases during arrest or while held in police custody and in other instances shot while driving stolen cars. In a recurrent pattern, exemplified in Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 movie *La Haine* (Hate), police killings of this nature have sparked renewed rioting in the *banlieues*, where police stations and other official buildings have been attacked with stones and in some cases Molotov cocktails. Disturbances of this kind reached their paroxysm in 2005, when the electrocution of two teenagers while attempting to avoid a police identity check sparked the most serious civil disturbances seen in France in almost half a century. The sense of injustice at the heart of those events was compounded when, in May 2015, two police officers charged in connection with the 2005 riots were acquitted. Their acquittal by the criminal justice system of the charge brought against them—nonassistance to persons in danger—may be read as a cruelly ironic synecdoche for the systemic injustices suffered for decades by the minority ethnic groups concentrated in the *banlieues*.

By the time this verdict was delivered, grim new elements had entered the picture. Throughout the 1990s most acts and threats of racism recorded by the police had targeted Arabs and blacks. The beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000 was followed by a sharp rise in recorded cases of anti-Semitism, which for most of the subsequent decade outnumbered

offences against other ethnic or racial groups.² The upsurge in anti-Semitism was attributed by the Interior Ministry to disaffected youths in the *banlieues* who saw in the Palestinians fellow victims of social injustice, whose struggle against Israeli occupation now appeared to be prompting the scapegoating of Jews in France, perceived as part of a privileged ruling class.³ In a further twist, after the Arab Spring, which began in 2011, gave way to bloodbaths of religious and sectarian strife in the Middle East, initially small but growing numbers of young men in France, mainly from the *banlieues*, have joined jihadist networks that have engaged in murderous attacks on French army and police officers, Jews, and (in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*) journalists regarded as blasphemers against Islam.

In fixing media attention and political debate on Islamist fanaticism linked with Middle East-based groups, atrocities of this kind have drawn attention away from the inequalities and injustices within French society that have led young men from minority ethnic backgrounds to turn in extremist directions. In failing to address those injustices, politicians have allowed disaffection in the *banlieues* to become so endemic that the days now seem long gone when, in the 1980s, young men and women of North African origin could work with majority ethnic partners to mobilize a hundred thousand people in the hope of pressing open the gates of equal opportunity. Time and again, politicians have preferred to claim that the blockages to social incorporation have lain in inadequate cultural integration on the part of minorities. When those minorities asked for no less and no more than enforcement of the same rights and opportunities that their majority ethnic peers enjoyed, they were commonly accused—quite falsely—of undermining the unity of the nation by pursuing an agenda of ethnic separatism, demonized under the label of *communautarisme*.

Ironically, the exclusionary attitudes and practices that have long prevented these groups from participating on an equal footing in the life of the nation have tended increasingly to lead them toward alternative forms of socialization that resemble the *communautarisme* long warned against by self-appointed guardians of France's so-called republican model of integration. This was a central finding arising from fieldwork conducted in 2010–11 by a team of researchers under the direction of Gilles Kepel in Clichy-sous-Bois, epicenter of the 2005 riots, where low voter registration and turnout rates reflected the skepticism and in many cases cynicism of local inhabitants toward the political system. Kepel's team found that instead of seeking to improve their lot within the wider framework of French society, there was a growing tendency among inhabitants of Clichy-sous-Bois to turn in on themselves, cultivating alternative forms of social solidarity by taking increased pride in Islam, displayed in matters such as insistence on halal food, the observance of Ramadan, and the wearing of head scarves by women.⁴

Almost twenty years earlier, a turn of this kind had been described in an interview given to another researcher by a young man named Khaled Kelkal who had been raised by Algerian immigrant parents in Vaulx-en-Velin, one of the most disadvantaged of the *banlieues* that line the eastern edge of the city of Lyon. After suffering racism at high school, Kelkal had drifted into acts

² See the French Interior Ministry data for 1993–2010 in Commission consultative nationale des droits de l'homme, *La lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie: Année 2010* (Paris: La documentation française, 2011), 98.

³ Commission consultative nationale des droits de l'homme, *La lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie: Année 2002* (Paris: La documentation française, 2003), 84.

⁴ Gilles Kepel, *Banlieue de la République: Société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

of petty criminality, for which he was sentenced to prison, where he became radicalized under the influence of a Muslim cellmate. Treated as an outsider in French society, he found in Islam a sense of community and inner peace, calming violent impulses against a social system from which he felt excluded.⁵ Three years later, after being recruited by Islamist militants engaged in a civil war in Algeria, Kelkal became the first jihadist of immigrant descent to commit terrorist attacks in France, whose government was supporting Algeria's military-backed regime.

Seventeen years were to elapse before, in 2012, another young Frenchman of Algerian descent, self-proclaimed jihadist Mohamed Merah, shot dead three Jewish schoolchildren, one of their teachers, and three soldiers of North African immigrant origin whom Merah regarded as traitors to Islam (while two were Muslims, one was in fact a Catholic) because they had enlisted in the French army. Three years later, the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly slayed more than twice that number before dying, like Kelkal and Merah before them, in shootouts with the police. Their murderous and at the same time quasi-suicidal final acts—none of them can have expected to survive against the superior firepower of the French security forces—speak in an almost literal sense of the dead ends to which their lives had led.

In the interview given three years before his death, Kelkal explained riots that had recently scarred Vaulx-en-Velin in the following terms:

These were all guys who couldn't get jobs saying: "Stop! Think about us! You're leading an easy life downtown, but come and take a look at life out here in the *banlieues*..." You've got kids now who are only fourteen or fifteen years old stealing big cars to cause trouble for the rest of society, especially the police. They can't take any more.... These kids want jobs. Why can't they get jobs? It's only after there are riots that people try to understand.⁶

Although the most widespread of such riots, in 2005, prompted promises of improved social justice through an Equal Opportunities Law, this has brought few improvements on the ground. The torching of stolen cars, a long-standing feature in expressions of anger in the *banlieues*, has continued apace and now passes almost without attention. In the space of just two nights preceding and following the French National Day celebrations on July 14 this year, more than 700 cars were set alight in the *banlieues*. Although this was an increase of 23 percent on the same dates the previous year, destructiveness of this nature was considered so banal as to merit only half a dozen lines in the online version of *Le Monde*,⁷ France's foremost newspaper of reference, and no coverage at all in the hard-copy edition. In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the media spotlight is now held by jihadist killers who have ratcheted the stakes up to a fearsome new level. But there are few signs of this focusing attention on the underlying issues that cry out to be addressed. A

⁵ "Moi, Khaled Kelkal," interview conducted by Dietmar Loch in 1992, published in *Le Monde*, October 7, 1995.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Nuit des 13 et 14 juillet: Hausse des voitures brûlées et des gardes à vue," *Le Monde.fr*, July 15, 2015, http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/07/15/nuit-des-13-et-14-juillet-hausse-des-voitures-brulees-et-des-gardes-a-vue_4684638_3224.html (accessed July 27, 2015).