

## Sociologist Laurent Mucchielli

### The French Riots of 2005: Lessons and Policy Responses

In the Fall of 2005, France experienced the most significant urban riots of its contemporary history, with unrest beginning in Clichy-sous-Bois, a poor district on the outskirts of Paris, and spreading to some 300 neighborhoods across the country. Sociologist Laurent Mucchielli, who specializes in delinquency, violence, and security policy, spoke to the French-American Foundation on October 4, 2007, in an attempt to go beyond the headlines and place the riots in larger historical and socio-economic context.

Laurent Mucchielli is the Director of the CESDIP (Sociological Research Center in Law and Criminal Justice), a joint research center of CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) at the University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin and the French Ministry of Justice. His publications include numerous articles on interpersonal violence in contemporary France and several books, including *Histoire de la criminologie française* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 1994), *Crime et sécurité: l'état des savoirs* (La Découverte, Paris, 2002, with Philippe Roberti, and most recently *Quand les banlieues brûlent. Retour sur les émeutes de novembre 2005* (La Découverte, Paris, 2007, with Véronique Le Goaziou).

#### The Motivations behind the Headlines

According to Professor Mucchielli, riots involving groups of youths—mostly jobless and of immigrant descent—have been a permanent fixture in France's poor suburban neighborhoods for the past 15 years. The pattern is often the same, he said: riots are triggered by the targeting of local youths that is in some way connected with police activity. The unrest continues for two or three nights, then order returns. The events of Fall 2005 had similar beginnings, but spread throughout the country, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency.

To understand the rioters' motivation, Mucchielli and his research team went straight to the source to interview youths living in these troubled suburbs. These districts, known as *zones urbaines sensibles* or urban renewal zones, are characterized by large working-class families, high unemployment, and an extensive youth population of immigrant background. The interviewees mentioned a number of motivations for rioting, including anger at the initial tragedy that touched off the events—the death of two youths during a police pursuit, as well as a later incident involving a police tear gas grenade thrown in the direction of a local mosque.

Mucchielli pointed out that beyond showing anger at these specific incidents, the riots were above all a revolt against humiliations and alienation that are a part of the everyday life of these youths, especially in their interactions with the police. Interviews also revealed resentment toward another public institution: schools, which were a prime target for rioters. "For these youths," said Mucchielli, "school symbolizes an institution that 'ruined their future,' i.e., one that has cut off the possibility of being integrated in society."

The three weeks of rioting in the fall of 2005 highlight a dual crisis of integration. First, youth unemployment in these neighborhoods can reach 30 to 40 percent. As employment mediates the

entire process of integration in social life, access to social status is thus made particularly difficult for hundreds of thousands of young people who face discrimination in an already tight job market. The second crisis, said Mucchielli, is symbolic and political. Rioters mentioned their feeling of being second-class citizens, almost "pariahs." These youths are no longer solicited or represented by traditional political forces and lack the political training to take independent, sustained, non-violent collective action.

## Policy Responses: What has been done?

Recalling the Kerner Commission following riots in the U.S. in the 1960s, or the Scarman Commission in the UK in the 1980s, Laurent Mucchielli noted the lack of official national debate on the crisis in France. No commission of experts and legislators (*commission d'enquête parlementaire*) was convened to analyze the riots. Mucchielli did, however, identify five key policy areas related to the urban unrest:

**Urban Policy:** The Urban Redevelopment Act of August 2003 directed a larger portion of public funding to demolition and reconstruction of public housing and less to local associations involved in mediation, educational support, and employment counseling. The government, said Mucchielli, has since reversed course and increased support for local associations, as well as expanded legislation that uses financial incentives to encourage businesses to establish themselves in poor neighborhoods.

**Employment Policy:** Unemployment being a major contributing factor to the riots, the government attempted to partially alleviate the problem through the "first-job contract," (*Contrat Première Embauche*) a measure to make it easier for firms to hire young people by reducing employment protection for those under the age of 22. Student and labor unions fiercely contested the law through nationwide protest that saw 2 million people in the streets, and the law was eventually withdrawn. A plan to lower the working age from 16 to 14 was also abandoned.

**Anti-discrimination Policy:** According to Laurent Mucchielli, this is the point where the government has made the most progress. Discrimination is a reality in hiring, housing, and everyday life. For three years, anti-racism associations and social researchers have been developing testing methodology, and the April 2006 law on Equality of Opportunity recognized those methods as legal proof of discrimination. However, discrimination lawsuits remain rare.

**Education Policy:** Fighting absenteeism and truancy in these neighborhoods while at the same time promoting stronger performing pupils appear insufficient to address failure in schools. The problem of failure in school among students of working-class and immigrant backgrounds begins in elementary school with the learning of fundamentals. No policy yet addresses this crucial problem, according to Mucchielli.

**Security Policy:** The need for police reform was identified as early as 1977 in the Peyrefitte report, which called for improving relations between the police and local populations, based on the principles of proximity, integration, contact, surveillance and protection. In the spirit of these principles, the Socialist government created the *police de proximité* (community police) in 1999. The program was discontinued in 2002 when then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy argued, as explained by Mucchielli, that security should be the responsibility solely of the national police. After the riots, local police units were reinforced with CRS —*compagnie républicaine de sécurité*—detachments. Mucchielli pointed out that these special security units are charged specifically with maintaining public order and have little contact with the local population.

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