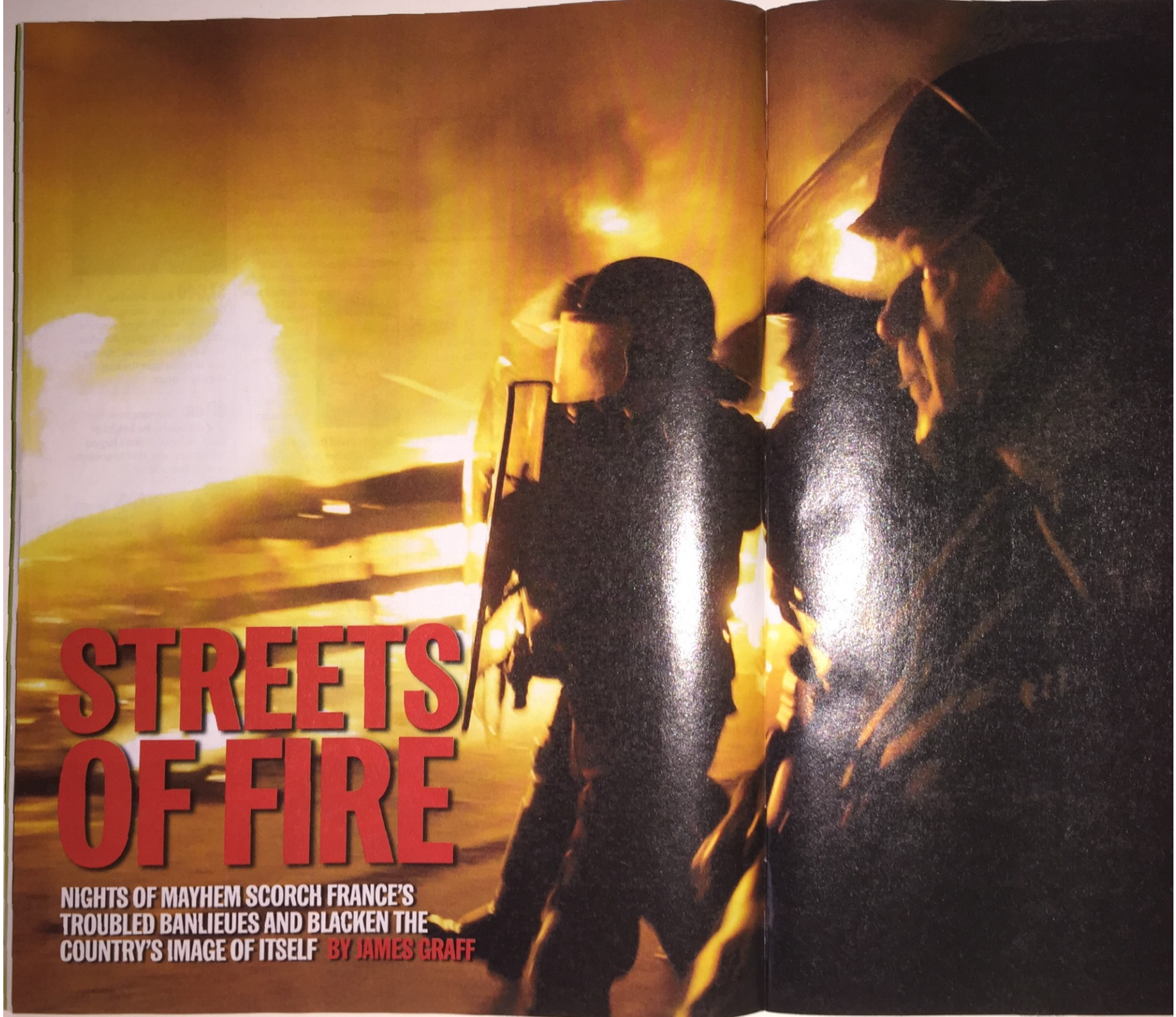


STREETS OF FIRE

NIGHTS OF MAYHEM SCORCH FRANCE'S TROUBLED BANLIEUES AND BLACKEN THE COUNTRY'S IMAGE OF ITSELF BY JAMES GRAFF

from the city's glittering heart. In Trappes, vandals burned 27 public buses; in Sevran, rioters ambushed a bus, sprinkled gasoline on the passengers, then set it alight, severely burning a disabled woman. Roving gangs targeted schools, shopping centers and businesses as one desolate neighborhood after another joined the mayhem. Thousands of police and firemen struggled to extinguish the rebellion but found themselves inflaming it. More than 480 arrests were made. In one suburb, shots were even fired at the cops. And on Saturday night, a symbolic border was breached when a Molotov cocktail damaged three cars near Place de la République in Paris itself.

The rioters were mostly Arab or black, but they were also mostly French, born and bred in the neighborhoods they were setting ablaze. French leaders tried to strike a balance between condemning the violence and seeking to understand it, but they were powerless to impose order on the streets. For decades, France had preferred to turn away from the deprivation and despair of the banlieues. But last week, they couldn't help but look. Each new outbreak of violence seared the government and left the country's model of social equality blackened. "It's like a forest that's dried out," says Malek Boutih, the Socialist Party National Secretary on Social Issues and former president of SOS Racisme. "Things heat up, a wind starts blowing, and all it takes is a spark for the whole thing to go up." With riots flaring in cities such as Dijon, Marseilles and Rouen, all of France could still get burned.

Banlieues like Bobigny, Aulnay-sous-Bois and the original flash point of Clichy-sous-Bois make up a tinderbox that few tourists see and no one in France wants to talk about. The working-class suburbs of Paris are dominated by sterile high-rise public housing where Arab immigrants from North Africa were shunted when they started arriving in France in the 1950s. Now, their children and grandchildren subsist in squalor alongside more recent black and South Asian immigrants and their French-born kids. Families struggle to hang on to their dignity while drug dealers and petty criminals exploit some of the only business opportunities to be found in these run-down towns. Unemployment rates are at least double the national average of 9.8%; in some neighborhoods, they surpass 40%. It is the French version of the social malaise that besets European cities from Amsterdam to London to Madrid.

The core problem is what the French politely refer to as "social exclusion." Residents of the banlieues feel cut off from jobs, from education, from decent housing, and ultimately from political life. There are some 5 million Muslims in France, but there is no Muslim member of the National Assembly. Poverty remains the fate of far too many alienated youth, who say they're turned away from jobs because of their ethnicity or faith. Discrimination, whether on racial or religious grounds, has never fitted into France's idea of itself, subsumed as it is by so many fuzzy platitudes about republicanism. But for the people seething on the streets last week, it's real. "These are all kids who feel they're not considered really French," says Sidaty Siby, a Malian who heads the Franco-African Association in Clichy-sous-Bois. "When they look for work, they don't find it; when they ask for housing, they don't get it. We want everyone to stop burning cars, but people have to realize that there was a reason for all of this."

The spark for last week's chaos was the senseless deaths of two teenagers on Oct. 27 in Clichy-sous-Bois, a jumble of largely dilapidated high-rises inhabited almost entirely by immigrants and their descendants. Bouna Traore, 15, of Malian origin, and Zyed Benna, 17, whose parents are Tunisian, took refuge with a third teenager in the relay station of a high-voltage transformer. They may have thought they were being chased by police, and when they entered the station the first two were electrocuted and the third badly burned. The rumor spread in the projects of Chêne-Pointu in lower Clichy that the police were at fault, though an official inquiry found that there was no pursuit.

That evening, an angry group gathered in front of a nearby fire station to protest the deaths and soon started burning cars and breaking windows. At a nearby postal sorting station alone, nine cars were incinerated. The battle flared when police arrived. A peaceful march the following Saturday in honor of the two dead—led by youth wearing T shirts that read MORT POUR RIEN (Dead for no reason)—did nothing to lower the tension. The pattern was set for a growing contagion of altercations between young men and French riot police across northern Paris.

Nearly as stunning as the outburst of violence was the French government's failure to control it. It was forced to suspend some train services from Paris to Charles de Gaulle Airport after two trains were targeted by riotous youths. Politicians seemed flummoxed—and most French didn't seem to expect much else. Last month, a survey by polling agency CSA found that 76% of respondents had little or no confidence in their political leaders, regardless of ideological stripe. The riots have done nothing to improve those leaders' standing.

At the center of controversy, where he most likes to be, is Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, president of the governing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the main rival of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin for the UMP presidential candidacy in 2007. Sarkozy's law-and-order campaign to crack the crime and drugs rings in immigrant areas has raised hackles. So has his penchant for tough talk. In June, he said criminal elements should be cleaned out "with an industrial power hose." Just days before the mayhem started, when he ventured into the troubled banlieue of Argenteuil to outline a tough new plan to fight crime, some in the crowd threw stones at him. Sarkozy slammed the troublemakers as "scum," and some protesters took it personally. "These neighborhoods have been on the edge for a long time," says Babali Doulou, 27, a Senegalese immigrant who lives in the gritty Seine-Saint-Denis district and cleans airplanes at Charles de Gaulle Airport for a

PARIS BURNING Firefighters fought to douse blazing buildings, like this warehouse in Aubervilliers

PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN—GETTY IMAGES

CULTURE CLASH Many immigrants and their descendants feel France has long ignored their plight

COURTNEY TOOLEN—MAGNUM PHOTOS

NO MORE Residents of suburban Aulnay-sous-Bois march in silent protest against the violence

JACQUES BRINON—AP

living. "This is because of Sarkozy."

Sarkozy has staunchly defended his language since the riots began, but as the crisis deepened it drew criticism even from within the government. Azouz Begag, a Junior Minister for Equal Opportunity, accused Sarkozy, whose father immigrated to France from Hungary, of using "warlike semantics." In the banlieues themselves, Sarkozy's remarks were used as an excuse for further violence. The rioting "is going to go on until they pull Sarkozy out of office," said K-Soc, 19, in Bobigny. "He heats things up and then leaves us here to deal with the police."

In contrast, De Villepin said nothing for days. But on Tuesday, as the riots continued to spread, he took the lead, fielding questions in Parliament while Sarkozy was rendered silent. De Villepin's choice of words was more dignified, if less colorful. "The republican state will not yield," he told the Senate on Thursday. "Order and justice will have the last word in our country." He met with a group of young people from the boiling neighborhoods on Friday and vowed to unveil a plan by the end of the month for improving living conditions in poor neighborhoods. It wasn't until the riots had raged for almost a week that President Jacques Chirac issued an appeal for calm. The continual convening of crisis sessions was meant to show the government in action, but only highlighted its inefficacy.

That response is evidence of what many banlieue residents say is one of the root causes of the violence: France's governing class is woefully out of touch with its populace. Disgruntled immigrant youths have been trying to get government attention—occasionally by mounting violent disturbances like last week's—for years. But France has clung to its belief that once newcomers arrive, they are officially French and do not need special treatment to guarantee equality. "The French just don't think the political class can attack these problems," says Stéphane Rozès, a political analyst and pollster. "They see gestures, not problem solving. The distance between the government and the people just keeps growing."

Practical solutions are being explored. Claude Bébéar, chairman of the supervisory board of the French insurance giant AXA, has been outspoken in trying to address the discrimination he sees at the heart of the malaise in the banlieues. He's urging other French companies to take up AXA's practice of stripping job applications of any ethnic or social identifiers, so that a Muslim name or a school diploma from an underprivileged neighborhood won't prevent consideration for a job. "France woke up late to this problem," Bébéar says. "It's one of the central challenges of our future to work double-time to resolve it." But, he warns, if the police can't handle the security challenge in the banlieues, companies won't go there to create jobs.

Those security challenges are daunting, even when there's not a general insurrection under way. The so-called "parallel economy"—drug dealing and automobile theft—has given criminals great sway over large swaths of the banlieue. While gun use is rare, the war of nerves between criminal gangs and police is constant and wearying. And for a small but potentially explosive minority, Islamic radicalism offers an alternative way to make a difference.

Stuck in the middle between the hard line of Sarkozy and the rioting youth are the vast majority of banlieue residents who want both respect and peace. Thousands of people from the banlieues signalled a growing backlash against the rioting by marching silently on Saturday morning through one of the worst-affected areas. "All this burning, it's only going to make it harder for people here to get jobs," says Aisha Bekhti, 48, a Moroccan-born woman who has lived in Montfermeil, next to Clichy-sous-Bois, for eight years. "It's got to calm down or things will get worse for all of us."

Claude Dilain, the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois, has managed to soothe his community through a dialogue with religious and ethnic leaders—and with the angry young men themselves. "The last thing we need is yet another Marshall Plan for the banlieue," says Dilain, a Socialist who has been mayor for 10 years. "That would just legitimize the violence. It's stupid to think we can spend our way out of this mess. We need to mobilize what we've got better." He thinks the conservative government made a major error, for instance, in shifting funds from beat cops to riot cops. Two years ago, Clichy-sous-Bois had 35 local policemen on duty; now it's only got 15. "We need both, obviously, but police aren't effective unless they're trusted," says Dilain. "The local guys got respect for understanding and solving problems. Now people view these armored police with mistrust and even defiance."

Dilain is doing what he can. Early next year, as part of a housing renewal effort the government is launching, his town and neighboring Montfermeil will see the start of the first demolitions of the apartment blocks that have become home to delinquency, drugs and despair. Part of the plan includes a new mosque; in the meantime, worshippers pray in a local gym. Well before the riots France's Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Jean-Louis Borloo, launched a program to alleviate the lack of decent, affordable housing in poorer neighborhoods by building half a million new units by 2009. The scheme also directs job-creation and training programs back to the banlieues where they are needed most.

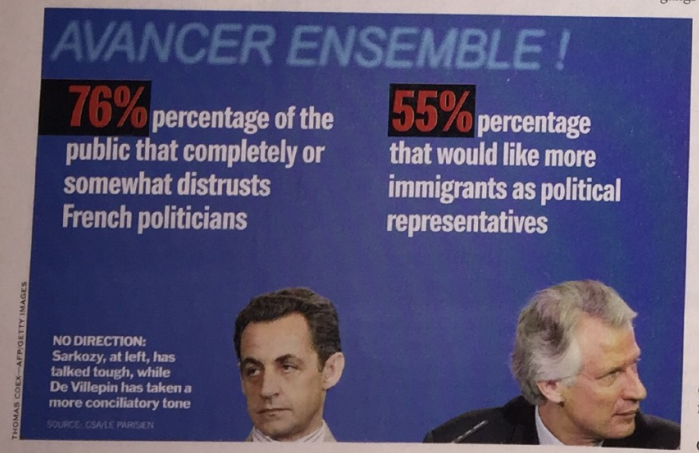
Despite these efforts, *liberté, egalité* and *fraternité* were little in evidence last week. Many banlieue residents feel France has promised more than it's delivering. Changing that will require the French to confront the widening disparities between those in the banlieues and those in the rest of the country. Until then, the rage and resentment that traumatized France last week will continue smoldering. ***—With reporting by Bruce Crumley, Grant Rosenberg and Vivienne Walt/Paris***

PATRICK ROBERT FOR TIME

CHARRED. The burned-out remains of buses torched by rioters in Trappes

29,000 and 17,500; respective numbers of cars and garbage cans set ablaze since January

SOURCE: DCRG



THOMAS COEX—AFP/GETTY IMAGES

NO DIRECTION: Sarkozy, at left, has talked tough, while De Villepin has taken a more conciliatory tone

SOURCE: CSA/LE PARISIEN

AVANCER ENSEMBLE !

76% percentage of the public that completely or somewhat distrusts French politicians

55% percentage that would like more immigrants as political representatives

Médine

How Much More French Can I Be?

People like me—the descendants of immigrants, whether Arab, black or Asian—are turning to our roots and embracing our heritage, just the opposite of what our parents did when they arrived. My grandparents, for example, who came to France from Algeria to live, work and build a better life, accepted the role of guest. They did all they could not just to fit in, but to become invisible. Calling attention to themselves usually meant trouble—endless ID and visa checks from police, racist remarks and insults—so they avoided that. They tried as much as possible to integrate, and in doing so shut away their customs, language and heritage.

I certainly don't belittle their choice. But people of my generation are not shy about embracing their heritage, and far from seeking invisibility we're standing up to denounce the prejudice and injustice we face. In my case, Islam is an enormous part of who I am, just as being French is. The two aren't in opposition, or even mutually exclusive. Yet when you hear the debate in France today, you'd swear they must be.

The people who live in projects like those where last week's riots raged are treated as second-class citizens. We have less access to the rights and services of the republic—schools are run down; job opportunities are remote. What we do have is a supermarket, a mall for low-cost shops, a few fast-food joints and maybe a movie complex. That's it. The idea is to create just enough diversion so we stay where we are. The message is: Don't come in to mix with the people in the city centers. That's what the police tell you when they stop you on a bus coming into town: "You have no business in the center? Then you have no reason to be there. Go back where you belong."

Before Sept. 11, I would have said this was a kind of residual racism. The problems people had with us were due to our ethnicity, our skin color. Today, with many young people returning to religion as they start searching for their own identities, faith is becoming the difference that's most often pointed out. I'm not just a black guy or an Arab anymore; I'm a Muslim. And that's a code word for alien, someone who's determined not to fit in.

But I was born and raised in France. I've been a citizen since birth. How much more "French" can I be? And there are many more people like me, not just Muslims but blacks, Asians and South Asians. It's time for the French to reject these outdated labels. And it's time for minorities to reject the cult of victimization, too. Things aren't perfect. There are a lot of problems. Those problems exploded last week, unleashing the long-held resentment of people who feel unwanted, scorned and swept into the margins like so much trash. To change that, the gap between the banlieue and the rest of France must be bridged. We need to make peace with the things that make us different. I'm French, I'm Muslim, and there are millions like me. We live here, and we're not going anywhere. So let's start getting used to it.

Médine, 22, is a Muslim rapper from Le Havre. His latest record is Jihad: The Greatest Struggle Is Within Yourself

PATRICK ROBERT FOR TIME

GRIM VIEW Young men in the suburbs face prospects as bleak as their surroundings

20% unemployment rate among 19- to 29-year-olds with French-born parents

30% rate for same age group with parents born outside France

40% rate for same age group with Moroccan or Algerian parents

SOURCE: INSEE