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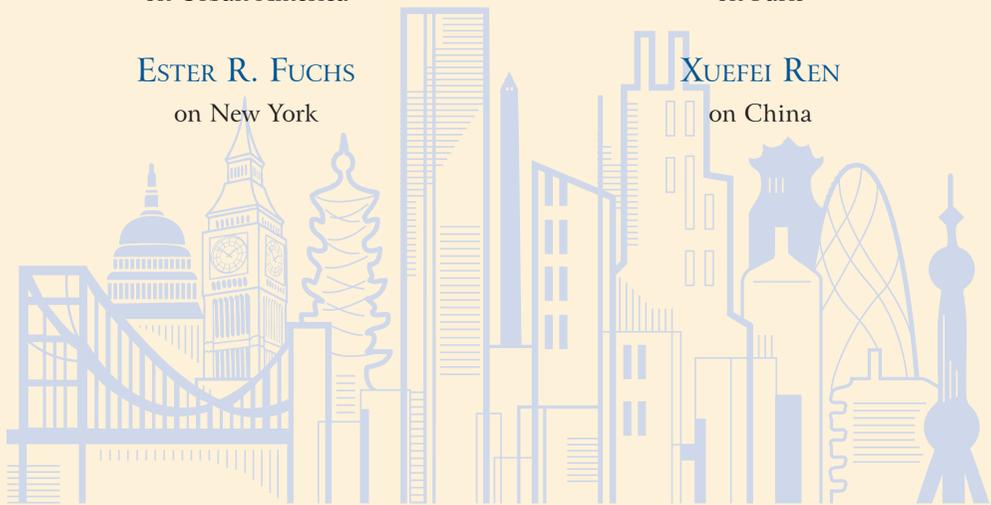
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THE PARIS *BANLIEUE*: PERIPHERIES OF INEQUITY

Marc Angélil and Cary Siress

Debates on contemporary urban conditions often center on the periphery of the city where an ever-increasing proportion of the urban population is forced to live. This article focuses on the banlieue—*the periphery of Paris—as a model for the breakdown of the spatial order in cities globally. We examine how France's urban planning, guided by political and economic influences, has created and sustained* banlieue *poverty and marginalization. With rising anxieties about civil disorder in Paris resulting from the spatial inequities and cultural stigma toward the* banlieue, *it is now generally agreed that the city's historical planning policies have failed. We argue that any attempt to allocate space within a city equitably cannot emanate from the city center alone, but must also come from the marginalized periphery, which is equally a part of the system.*

Is Paris burning? Whether on the movie screen or in political history, this infamous question has never lost its charge.[1] The city still burns as tensions mount among factions of the urban populace, particularly between those within the city core and those on the periphery, or *banlieue*. The word *banlieue* is the product of two French words: *ban* (to forbid) and *lieue* (league, or about four kilometers). The term refers to a belt of residential neighborhoods surrounding the city core. While "periphery" can refer to both rich and poor neighborhoods, *banlieue* has become a pejorative euphemism for neighborhoods with low-income housing projects, predominantly for immigrant families, that are characterized by widespread poverty, unemployment and violence.

Historically, the city limits of Paris were marked by tax-collection barriers that only extended to its immediate margins.[2] Therefore, policies and laws applied to those in the city core and the immediate periphery. Beyond this area lay the "zone," a barren stretch of land in which inhabitants were cut off from the

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Marc Angélil and Cary Siress

governing framework of the republic.[3] In the early 1870s, when Paris underwent grand modernization, the immediate periphery was annexed into the city core. Gentrification and suburban sprawl led to the creation of a new periphery in which poor communities became displaced and were relegated to the outskirts, the once-barren zone. The zone became known as a "place of the *ban*" since residents had been excluded both physically (because of distance from the city) and culturally (because of class-based prejudice) from society.[4] Thus, the expression *banlieue* infers a symptomatic breakdown of spatial politics and functions as the physical manifestation of a stigmatized social space.

> The relationship between [the city center and the *banlieue*] has been reduced to a standoff of good versus evil.

Urban planning in France has caused differences between the city center and the *banlieue* so great that the relationship between the two areas has been reduced to a standoff of good versus evil—a divide between the orderly center and its dangerous exterior.[5] Tensions between the *banlieue* and the city core are the result of social and spatial inequities that arise from class and ethnic territorial segregation. In a country where the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was born and where *liberté, égalité, fraternité* is writ large an emblem of tolerance, political practices that compromise these coveted human rights prevail, particularly for those in the *banlieue*. As such, complaints of injustice are growing louder in marginalized neighborhoods and have reached a fever pitch on the edges of the capital. Indeed, there is an expansive list of riots that have been widespread in France over the past few decades, including the social discord in the summer of 1981, as well as riots in the *banlieues* of Paris in September 1995, May 1996, December 1997 and 1998, May 1999, September 2000, July and December 2001, and January and October 2002.[6] Because of the proliferation of violence, it is generally agreed that France's postwar urban policies have been unsuccessful. The riots serve as reminders of how volatile urban spaces can become, whether in France or in the thousands of peripheries scattered across the globe.[7]

FRENCH URBAN PLANNING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, a widely known French prefect and civic planner, oversaw a grandiose modernization of the nation's capital throughout the nineteenth century. Supported by Emperor Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte III, Haussmann was charged with transforming the entire social and material makeup of Paris. He capitalized on the power of the straight line, creating sharp new thoroughfares through what had been a labyrinthine tangle of medieval streets; the resulting *grands boulevards* still dominate the inimitable images of the French

capital. Such boulevards became the cornerstone of a calculated spatial zoning that clearly separated well-off areas from disadvantaged neighborhoods.[8] These efforts to restructure the urban core accomplished, according to geographer David Harvey, "the expulsion of 'dangerous classes' and insalubrious housing and industry from the city center."[9] This process of evicting the poor to the outskirts is most famously captured in the photographs of Charles Marville. Such images bear witness to the political blindness at the heart of this grand project, which fueled the anger of the underprivileged and ultimately led to *la Semaine sanglante* (the Bloody Week) in 1871.

Harvey identifies this division as "a spatial framework" around which "processes—of industrial and commercial development, of housing investment and residential segregation, and so on—could cluster and play out their own trajectories and thus define the new historical geography of the city's evolution."[10] Consequently, some territories develop spectacularly at the expense of others, validating the notion of "uneven geographical development."[11] Within this organized spatial hierarchy, territory becomes a symbol of power; the city core, with its displays of grandeur, is reserved for elites, while the outlying belt is for the lower classes. It is in this sense that the *banlieue* is an emblematic manifestation of an urban pecking order, the product of political construction that asserts power through polarization of center and periphery.

Public Housing in France

During the postwar years from 1945 to 1975, also known as the "glorious thirty," France was filled with economic prosperity. Construction of government-subsidized mass housing (*habitations à loyer modéré*) was launched on a large scale, boosting the national economy.[12] Private investors managing the ventures were incentivized by low interest rates and tax benefits and began to lead the construction of thousands of housing units with maximum efficiency. New districts of expansive neighborhoods filled with high-rise blocks populated the peripheries of Paris and other French cities.[13] In each area, the result was bland architectural uniformity.[14]

Compromised from the outset by a prioritization of quantity over quality, the dilemma of the "new towns" was further exacerbated by spatial partitioning. Although such partitioning resulted from strict adherence to official land-use policies, the consequence was segregation along social lines. These projects were conceived basically as ghettos to accommodate workers recruited from North African states and former colonies to assist in postwar industrialization.[15] To keep the underprivileged at a distance is "very much in line with the history of Paris," a process in which "the combined action of town planners, property speculators and

police has never stopped pressing the poor, the 'dangerous classes', further from the centre of the city."[16] Though it is questionable whether or not early urban planners consciously sought to enact a discriminatory spatial design, the impact is clear. In the creation of the *banlieues,* France found itself replaying a former colonial refrain, only this time within its own national borders.[17]

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MODERNIZATION OF *BANLIEUE* HOUSING

In France, *banlieue* housing estates are worlds apart from the ideal and, despite the seemingly resigned political atmosphere, public authorities are well aware of the problem. Indeed, the 1983 high-profile visit of President François Mitterrand to Parisian *banlieues* symbolized refocused attention to the periphery. More than a casual sortie beyond city walls, this state visit heralded the launch of the ambitious *Banlieues 89* project, a grand plan for a more inclusive Paris comprised of an expanded and more just metropolitan realm.[18] This planning project stretched over a long period of time and was touted with the crowning motif "down with the *grands ensembles*," a message proclaimed by Mitterrand himself at the opening of a conference inspiring a new era of urban politics.[19] The project not only included the remodeling of existing buildings, but the demolition of several blocks of housing to rebuild modernized edifices. Through *Banlieues 89* new objectives were set that prioritized quality over quantity while seeking to integrate the city's marginalized parts.

Key to successful integration was first an understanding of the *banlieue* marginalization. To this end, sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, among others, were commissioned in 1989 to research the plight of the *banlieue*. The resulting report, titled *The Weight of the World* and published in 1993, includes a series of interviews that laid bare the living conditions in the tenements.[20] The premium placed on the diversity of perceptions altered public understanding of the city and thereby forged new trajectories in urban politics.

Through the interviews, it became clear that conflicts arise in both the social and architectural space.[21] The project thus sought to alleviate conflicts through a two-pronged approach, referred to as "subject help" (*aide à la personne*) and "object help" (*aide à la pierre*).[22] The *Banlieues 89* campaign inspired countless projects of urban revitalization.[23] Yet again, a bureaucratic machine was set in motion, but this time it was charged with the renovation and redevelopment of existing urban substance. Accordingly, the consciousness of human impact took precedence over the general purview of regional planning. There would be more variations of

housing with new models of proprietorship, including housing cooperatives and payment-installment plans that could lead to ownership and a greater sense of attachment to place. At the core of the scheme was the effort to integrate isolated districts, which required overcoming both visible and invisible borders.[24]

ECONOMIC ORIGINS OF *BANLIEUE* TENSIONS

Tension and despair over *banlieue* living conditions peaked in the 1980s in response to economic restructuring and have not declined since. In France, as in much of the Western world, employment became a rare commodity as companies moved to the Global South to pursue more profitable business interests. Modernization in Western cities therefore meant local deindustrialization in order to balance the rise of foreign-based manufacturing. Layoffs were thus widespread and unemployment skyrocketed, with ever-larger portions of the population pushed to the margins of society.[25] The decline in employment opportunities was coupled with a decrease in government provision of social services.

Not surprisingly, these structural readjustments directly affected vulnerable neighborhoods, which became doubly branded as stigmatized milieus of both the poor and unemployed, characterized by "advanced marginality" that Wacquant associates with the rise of a neoliberal economy.[26] In his comparative research on Chicago ghettos and the Parisian *banlieue*, he lists six key characteristics that constitute the state of advanced marginality in developed economies and suggests that greater levels of development lead to more evolved modes of exclusion. First is the reintroduction of short-term wage laborers in place of long-term salaried employees. This fragments the labor force in favor of the upper class residing in the city core while peripheral districts become "border zones of the employment sphere." A second facet is the disconnection of the lower class from macroeconomic trends. As the market fluctuates, elites reap the benefits of economic upturns and such gains do not trickle down to the poor; instead, the poor are cut out of the equation altogether. Third, the physical space of the periphery becomes increasingly isolated. Fourth, social alienation is exacerbated by the isolated space. Fifth, Wacquant refers to "the disappearance of a viable hinterland" as a haven for the urban poor. Finally, groups lose their terms of communal solidarity, resulting in a "de-proletarianization" process.[27]

In *The Economic Horror*, Viviane Forrester addresses conditions of social and spatial breakdown. She demonstrates the irony of permanent mass unemployment, describing how a civilized society that relies on labor soon abolishes opportunity for work and simultaneously degrades those who struggle each day in search of work that does not exist.[28] The perpetually unemployed are then labeled lazy and lacking initiative when, in effect, they are internally exiled—foreigners in their

own country living in a wholly different social and physical construct.[29]

The profile of social conditions in the Parisian *banlieue* is quite similar to that of the urban peripheral spaces in cities throughout the world. Whether in Baltimore, Montreal or Liverpool, unemployed teenagers from poor families are drawn into illicit street life in hopes of earning enough to meet their daily needs. They are likely to become high-school dropouts with a significantly reduced pool of job opportunities. These young people join a community of destitute people in the *banlieue* who often turn to drugs, violence and criminality in hopes of escaping their despair.[30]

Banlieue residents thus develop an increasing rage against authority that is often expressed through repeated bouts of active or indirect destruction. Buildings become dilapidated due to a chronic lack of maintenance, with paint peeling from the walls, elevators out of service and defective sanitation, all of which mark a permanent state of decay. Active aggression is demonstrated through vandalism and indifference toward authorities, including law enforcement, municipal officials and landlords alike. Such active aggression is matched by the aggression of police, fueling a vicious cycle of urban violence.

French Social Unrest

In the 1995 film *La Haine* (Hate), director Mathieu Kassovitz brought the riots of the periphery to the silver screen. The opening scene is filled with stark black-and-white images of demonstrators clutching placards and rampaging youth hurling rocks at police before running away. A story about the fall of society, the film highlights the infernal relationship, often sidelined in the national narrative, between marginalized territory and cultural politics in France.[31] Since the film's release, the state of people living in the *banlieue* has continued to receive national attention. *Banlieue* residents, as portrayed in the film, point to racial and class tensions as the source of their marginalization and develop animosity toward the state for enforcing policies that perpetuate such tensions. This tension often erupts in violence on both sides; police brutality is common in the streets of the *banlieue*, further fueling *banlieue* violence against the state.[32] And so the *banlieue* has burned and continues to burn with the fire of hatred.

Ten years after the film's release, nothing had changed. On the night of 27 October 2005, French young people led a series of riots that continued for several weeks in which thousands of cars were burned along with public buildings, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency. In addition to the numerous deaths and injuries, the monetary damage from the unrest was estimated at 200 million euros.

In light of this unrest, Kassovitz wrote an open letter to Nicolas Sarkozy, then

minister of the interior, in which he stated, "As much as I would like to distance myself from politics, it is difficult to remain distant in the face of the depravations of politicians."[33] Kassovitz attacked Sarkozy's use of the word "scum" to refer to young immigrants, calling him an egocentric demagogue whose lack of respect for impoverished communities was matched by rioters' lack of respect for property, be it public buildings or cars.

In truth, the sight of burning cars is common in France. Almost every morning in the outskirts of Paris and other French cities, streets are littered with the charred remains of automobiles set afire the night before. In the riots of 2006, nearly forty thousand cars were burned, averaging a hundred vehicles per night— slightly higher than the year before.[34] The melodic names of Clichy-sous-Bois, Aubervilliers, Épinay-sur-Seine, Le Bourget and La Courneuve hardly resonate with the chronic state of crisis besetting them. Their official designation as *zones urbaines sensibles* (sensitive urban zones) has proven a more suitable epithet for municipal authorities when citing just cause for inter-

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vention. Such formal designations are state attempts to control the waves of spontaneous rioting that sweep through the *banlieues*. These classifications shape the public perception of the problem as one isolated to a troubled periphery, helping the state to rally support for targeted crackdowns.

Though riots in Paris may signal an entrenched, nationwide problem, they are not the result of an organized revolt but are rather the culmination of several stand-alone actions by angry individuals giving representation to collective grievances. This is significant because, in France, policy responses to societal conflict are often applied in isolation, affecting a particular "problem space." If the unrest comprises a multiplicity of violent incidents in a designated space, they seem easier to contain than the larger root causes that defy spatiality.[35]

FAILURE OF FRENCH URBAN PLANNING

Had it gone according to plan, the reorganization of Paris would certainly have transformed the geography of the *banlieue,* answering Lefebvre's plea for a humane city. For just as there is a *Declaration of Human Rights,* there must also be, according to Lefebvre, a similar declaration specifying "*le droit à la ville,*" or the right to the city.[36] His pamphlet of the same name, published in two segments in 1968 and 1972, detailed an appeal for a qualitative urban space that serves the core of society—working-class people.[37] The demand was clear: instead of ruthless

political power and arbitrary economic machinations governing the city, it must be collectively managed as a common good. Furthermore, since the city encompasses more than just its center, its edges must also be addressed as integral parts of the system. Only then, when marginalized areas gain political representation, will the "right to the city" begin to take root. Indeed, these areas already constitute the vast majority of the metropolitan populace.[38] This implies that the right to the city cannot emanate solely from the center, but must also arise from the margins— from the thousands of peripheries that must now take center stage as the main protagonists in a new course of urban political economy.

What good are grand visions of urban space when social conditions are inequitable? The "right to the city" should mean the "right to equal treatment," inferring political, economic and social equality. The predicament of the periphery requires more than lip service and ad-hoc police repression; rather, it requires a thorough, careful strategy to address root problems.

Thinking beyond Spatial Politics

The Parisian *banlieue*, like so many other places, is still governed through a focus on policing. Because such a focus has been coupled with repressive economic forces throughout history, it has developed, as Jacques Rancière suggests, "a common space . . . [that] makes forms of domination appear as if they are founded on a sensible and obvious system."[39] The profile of a territory is thus constructed as "society is . . . divided into functions, into places where these functions are exercised, into groups which are, by virtue of their places, bound for exercising this or that function."[40] By the sheer fate of being on the periphery, one is condemned to poverty, and this poverty, so it follows, belongs to the periphery.

This is a vicious cycle causing entire segments of the population to be trapped in a physical and social space. While attempts to establish equity for the *banlieue* have been made, much more must be done. Escaping this trap calls for something transformational that revisits the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and that alters the political imagination. One might draw on Wacquant's radical proposition for guaranteeing equal levels of subsistence for all members of society. He proposes that society should "break out of the market-state paradigm and sever the link between work and subsistence via the institution of a citizen's wage."[41] This would secure enough earnings for basic survival independent of employment. With this citizen's wage or "basic income plan," as he calls it, social integration would no longer be linked to earnings, but would be built into the system.[42]

This alone is not sufficient to transform the *banlieue*. To be truly integrated, the republic would have to be refounded on a "declaration of the rights of man and of space." However longstanding, conceptions of space are themselves constructions

that can be undone and reformed. Just as citizens have the right to the means of survival, they should also have the right to dwell in and shape space as a vital resource.

These two tenets in tandem spell out a new socio-spatial agenda, one that will not happen of its own accord. The idea of overturning a political order is as unthinkable now as it was before the French Revolution. The storming of the Bastille in 1789, the erection of barricades for the Commune of 1871 and the taking of the streets during the events of 1968 came and went in a blaze of passion. Should society again fail to take action to revive the human condition, the peripheries—wherever they may be—could very well be the next site of revolution. We are reminded by the voice-over at the opening of *La Haine*, and as history might yet prove again, "It's not the fall that counts, it's the landing." The clock is still ticking. ♕

NOTES

1   The title of the 1966 film *Paris brûle-t-il?* [Is Paris Burning?] quotes Adolf Hitler's question to his chief of staff after having insisted that Paris be set ablaze rather than surrendered to Allied forces at the end of World War II.

2   Waqas Jawaid, "City of Lights, City of Fire: Architectural Apartheid in the Paris Banlieue" (bachelor's thesis, Princeton University, 2010).

3   Ibid.

4   David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88.

5   See Harvey's *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, which is an exposé on the history of the French capital. Harvey provides a detailed treatment of social uprisings in Paris that pit the center against the periphery during the rise of capitalism. See also Lukasz Stanek's essay, "Lessons from Nanterre," which makes references to Henri Lefebvre's observations on the events of 1968 and the difficult relationship between a privileged center and an underprivileged periphery. Ibid., 88, 96–97, 149, 150; Lukasz Stanek, "Lessons from Nanterre," *Log* 13/14 (2008): 59–67.

6   The list covering events from 1981 to 2006 is taken from Laurent Mucchielli and Véronique Le Goaziou, *Quand les banlieues brûlent... : Retour sur les émeutes de novembre 2005* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2006), 6–7.

7   See Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 147–59; Henri Lefebvre, *Espace et politique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Anthropos/Éditions Economica, 2000).

8   Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, 130.

9   Ibid., 112.

10   Ibid., 113.

11   David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism, Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006), 77.

12   For a detailed account of the history of the HLM, or rent-controlled housing, in France and their stigmatization as housing for the masses, see Jacques Lucan, *Architecture en France (1940–2000)* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 2001), 63–89.

13   Éric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris, A History in Footsteps*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), xiii.

[14] Lucan, *Architecture en France*, 75.

[15] Ibid., 63–89.

[16] Hazan, *The Invention of Paris*, xiii.

[17] Karima Laachir, "France's 'Ethnic' Minorities and the Question of Exclusion," *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 1 (2007): 99, 101.

[18] The number 89 commemorated the French Revolution's two-hundredth anniversary.

[19] Lucan, *Architecture en France*, 301.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *The Weight of the World, Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[21] The distinction between *aide à la pierre* and *aide à la personne* was clarified in a discussion with Philippe Cabane following his interview with M. Poidevin, a real-estate promoter with the company Nexity, 8 December 2006.

[22] Lefebvre, *Espace et politique*, 169.

[23] The urban-design projects were backed, for example, by the Ministry of Employment, the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Housing, the National Agency for Urban Renewal and the Architects and Planners of the State, commissioned with the "projet urbain auprès du directeur général de l'urbanisme, de l'habitat et de la construction" [urban project with the director general of urban planning, housing and construction], the latter being under the purview of the Ministry of Transportation, Equipment, Tourism and the Sea.

[24] See Ariella Masboungi et al., *Régénérer les grands ensembles* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2006).

[25] Wacquant cites the loss of ten thousand out of the eighteen thousand manual-labor jobs in the La Couneuve neighborhood alone between 1968 and 1984, and in the same period a decline of 280,000 jobs in the greater Paris region. Loïc Wacquant, "French Working-Class Banlieue and Black American Ghetto: From Conflation to Comparison," *Qui Parle* 16, no. 2 (2007): 12.

[26] Loïc Wacquant, "The Rise of Advanced Marginality: Notes on its Nature and Implications," *Acta Sociologica*, 39 (1996): 121–39.

[27] Ibid., 124–28.

[28] Vivianne Forrester, *The Economic Horror*, trans. Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 68.

[29] Ibid.

[30] See, for example, *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* [Tea in the Harem of Archimedes], directed by Mehdi Charef (1985; Paris: Costa-Gavras, 2000), DVD; "Tea in the Harem of Archimedes" [in German], Film Galerie, http://www.filmgalerie.de/2009/01/23.htm.

[31] Transcript of the opening scene from *La Haine*. The film was rereleased in a special tenth-anniversary edition with an new updated English translation, from which this transcript is taken. *La Haine*, directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, 10th anniv. edition (1995; Paris, StudioCanal 2004), DVD. See also Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma, "So Far So Good: La Haine and the Poetics of the Everyday," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 3 (2000): 103.

[32] For a list of violent events in Paris and other French cities in 2005, see "Timeline: French Riots," *BBC News*, 14 November 2005.

[33] Mathieu Kassovitz published an open letter on his website on 8 November 2005 attacking then–interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy; it was reprinted the next day in the *Guardian*. Mathieu Kassovitz, "It's hard not to cheer on the rioters," *Guardian*, 9 November 2005.

[34] Christian Müller, "Frankreichs Vorstädte—weiterhin explosive Problemzonen" [France's suburbs—still explosive problem areas], *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11–12 November 2006.

[35] Mustufa Dikeç, "Police, politics, and the right to the city," *GeoJournal* 58 (2002): 95; Mustufa Dikeç, *Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics, and Urban Policy* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 240.

[36] Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*, 145.

[37] Ibid., 143.

[38] Denis Moreau, "banlieuedenanterre, le droit à la ville et la périphérie" [Nanterre-suburb, the right to the city and the periphery], text to the exhibition entitled *banlieuedenanterre*, Galerie Villa des Tourelles, Nanterre, France, 2–11 March 2006.

[39] Jacques Rancière, "Xénophobie et politique, entretien avec Jacques Rancière" [Xenophobia and politics, talks with Jacques Rancière], in *La xénophobie en banlieue, effets et expressions*, ed. Florence Haegel, Henri Rey and Yves Sintomer (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 215.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Wacquant, "Rise of Advanced Marginality," 121.

[42] Ibid., 131.