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French 378

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Topic: Housing in the French banlieues

### **1. Colonization of Algeria and the *pieds-noirs***

France first invaded Algeria in 1830 and within a few decades, Algeria was annexed into France, meaning that the country had no independent identity, but was subservient to the Parisian government in the same way as any other territory in France (Hussey). As of 1845, a portion of Algerian territory had been declared an integral part of France, and approximately half of the 110,000 Europeans in residence were French. During this time, the educational inequalities were apparent between the Europeans and Algerians which were further accentuated by the elimination of Muslim religious schools. This differential in education will linger throughout the period of colonization and continues onwards even after Algeria eventually gains its independence in 1962.

The European population rose in Algeria throughout the late 1800s, reaching 500,000 in 1901 and around 1 million by 1962. While Algeria became incorporated into the departmental structure of France, Morocco and Tunisia by contrast were only protectorates. Consequently, independence was achieved more easily in the cases of Morocco and Tunisia compared to Algeria. Morocco passed from autonomy to complete independence, which was attained in 1956, and Tunisia attained independence later that same year. Meanwhile, the Algerian War lasted from 1954 until 1962. Decolonization also brought departing *pieds-noirs*, the European colonists in North Africa, who fled Algeria in large numbers in 1962 at the moment of independence, as

well as the *harkis*, the Muslims who fought on the French side in the Algerian war (Alba and Silberman).

## **2. Post-World War II, the housing crisis of the 1950s, and the grands ensembles**

Public housing in France, particularly during the postwar period from 1945 to 1975, underwent significant development. This era, often referred to as the *trente glorieuses* or the "glorious thirties," was marked by economic prosperity and a boom in construction, including government-subsidized mass housing known as *habitations à loyer modéré* (HLM). During this time, there was a focus on quantity over quality, with private investors driven by low interest rates and tax benefits leading the construction of thousands of housing units. This resulted in the creation of expansive neighborhoods filled with high-rise blocks, particularly in the peripheries of Paris and other French cities. This rapid development led to bland architecture and uniformity in design. One of the main issues with this approach was the spatial partitioning and segregation that resulted. The urban planning in France led to differences between the city center and the banlieue so great, almost like a "divide between the orderly center and its dangerous exterior" (Angelil and Siress).

The need for immigrant labor greatly increased during World War I. Between 1914 and 1954, more than 2 million Algerians resided in metropolitan France, and while this was overwhelmingly a temporary immigration of men without their families, still a permanent Muslim population began to emerge in some French cities. The immigration beginning around the time of World War I and resulting from decolonization could be drawn upon for the need for low-wage, unskilled or manual labor, of which much of the jobs were filled by Muslim North Africans, the Maghrebins. The *pied-noir* population exhibited signs of rapid integration with the native French, while the Maghrebin population remained separate. There were sharp social

distinctions between the two groups, in terms of both race and social class, in the jobs that they took, as a consequence of the discrepancies in the education received. As seen in the film, *Le Gône du Chaâba*, Omar, a young Algerian youth living in a slum on the outskirts of Lyon, experiences a disconnect from his father who is illiterate and does not have a high aptitude towards education (Ruggia). The immigration only reached its high point until after decolonization, which occurred in the mid-1950s for Morocco and Tunisia, and in 1962 for Algeria. There was also a cultural conflict for Algerians residing in France who were forced to choose between Algeria and French citizenship (Alba and Silberman).

In 1959, Sonacotral (La société nationale de construction pour les travailleurs algériens) was the first housing policy implemented for Algerian immigrants, and established mono-ethnic homes, easily subject to specific surveillance (Blanc-Chaléard). The goal was to rehouse Algerian families in slums and relocate them to these *cités de transit*. One of the first of these HLM projects was in the western suburbs of Paris, Nanterre and its slums, which consists largely of former French settlers, the *pieds-noirs* from North Africa, as well as former colonial citizens who were born with French citizenship. Due to these factors, this area witnesses a high concentration of an Algerian population. During this time, they implemented a 15% threshold quota limit for housing allocated to Algerian families, which was then later extended to all foreigners. The post-war conditions meant a large rural exodus to the cities, particularly working-class Algerians in the search for jobs. In Lyon, there was a housing project open to Algerian families, but limited to a share of 30% to avoid the risk of becoming a ghetto, “pour éviter le risque de ghetto” (Angelil and Siress).

*Les grands ensembles*, large-scale high-rise housing projects, are widely regarded as the products of postwar French government policy in regional and urban planning. They were large-

scale reconstruction projects that appeared as an autonomous complex of apartment buildings constructed in a relatively short period of time. Some of the other terms that were proposed were “*gratte-ciel de banlieue*” (suburban skyscraper), “*ville satellite*” (satellite city), and “*milles fenêtres*” (a thousand windows). The history of the *grands ensembles* is linked to that of the *trente glorieuses*, the period of France’s march toward modernization after World War II. The early 1960s marked a decisive turning point in the discourse surrounding the *grands ensembles*. Previously cast as these “radiant cities” with clean-lined buildings, they came to represent the opposite, instead regarded as mass housing complexes characteristic of monogamy and uniformity and social problems caused by their lack of infrastructure. Some articles at the time even compared them to the structures of rabbit cages.

In 1973, there was a halt to the construction of the *grands ensembles* and marked the beginning of the implementation of the “politique de la ville,” a policy aimed at revitalizing troubled urban areas, the goal being to “humanize the concrete.” In the 1970s and 80s, the general consensus was that the *grands ensembles* had become a failure and were now perceived as the source of ills of the city, responsible for the social breakdown stemming from lack of infrastructure and geographic isolation, and as a portrayal of the “*mal-être*” (malaise) of the *banlieues*, in the decay of the urban complexes and the physical deterioration of their buildings. In the late 1980s, the demolition of some of these housing complexes began, such as the Debussy building in La Courneuve in 1986, a commune in Seine-Saint-Denis, the northeast of Paris. *Grands ensembles* remain linked to the architectural and city planners at the end of the war, which had been intended to be a social and political utopia (Bertho).

### **3. The banlieues and the habitations à loyer modéré:**

HLM stands for *habitation à loyer modéré* and is the common term for social housing or subsidized housing in France. The *banlieues* see the most of this concentrated social housing, which are often located at the edge of defined urban zones in France, where there is a crisis of social inequity, massive waves of immigration, and cultural tensions. Over four million HLMs house about one-fifth of the country's population, and are characterized by low standards of living, high crime rates, overpopulation, and segregation. The *banlieues* are geographically and symbolically separated from its suburbs. In 1990, approximately 45% of France's urban population lived in the *banlieue*, but they are now associated with deprived housing developments situated on the outskirts of French cities and are largely occupied by a disproportionately high immigrant population (Higbee).

The *cités de transit*, known as transit cities or housing projects are also called “*logement tiroir*” (drawer housing), “*habitat-prison*” (prison habitat), or “*habitat-dépotoir*” (dump housing). The *bidonvilles* (slums) were cleared in the mid-1970s, and many of the buildings degraded rapidly, with a noticeable spatial segregation. They were described as “ghettos” and bore witness to a variety of social issues, such as unemployment, drugs, and AIDS, which greatly affected young men. In the beginning of the 1970s, there were sets of housing allocated to families, designed to rehouse isolated men from the slums. These *cités de transit* intended to reduce the amount of people living in slums and unsanitary housing in general and spread throughout France during the 1970s. HLMs sought to resolve the issue of the *bidonvilles*, which were only absorbed in the mid-1980s. With the negative connotation of the slums, there was also a context of an increase in xenophobia against the Maghrebin immigrants. (Cohen and David).

Tension and despair over *banlieue* living conditions peaked in the 1980s in response to economic restructuring and have not declined since. Layoffs and unemployment directly affect

vulnerable neighborhoods, and they are viewed as poor and isolated, with a social and spatial breakdown. This means a sense of exile and being foreigners in their own country. Buildings are neglected due to a chronic lack of maintenance, the paint is peeling, the elevators are out of service, and there is poor sanitation. Vandalism and aggression fuel a vicious cycle of urban violence (Angelil and Siress). Especially among young French immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, there are strained relations with everyday institutions, such as school, employers, police, and the justice system. The built environment is a significant factor in shaping these communities in the first place (Horvath).

#### **4. 2005 and 2007 banlieue riots:**

In 2005, the deaths of two teenagers who were electrocuted as they fled from police in the Parisian *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois led to a series of protests. In the aftermath of these events, France witnessed three weeks of widespread rioting, where thousands of cars were burned along with public buildings, coming to a monetary damage of around 200 million euros (Horvath). Violence is prevalent in the *banlieues*, as historically there were outbreaks of suburban violence, such as during the riots in Lyon at the beginning of the 1980s. The 2005 riots were bigger than past events and impacted all areas of society and politics. Additionally, in 2007, the deaths of two youths ages 16 and 17 was limited to the northern Parisian suburb of Villiers-le-Bel, and this was the first time that firearms were used against police.

The suburbs are often linked to the threat of insecurity and urban violence. Terms such as *jeunes des cités* and *jeunes de banlieue* explicitly associate the activities of certain young people in the suburbs with the cause of the security problem facing French society, while expressions and terms such as “*fracture sociale*” (social divide), “*violence gratuite*” (senseless violence), “*zones de non-droit*” (no-go zone, *quartier sensible*), and “*la haine des banlieues*” (hatred of the

suburbs) have constructed a stereotype of the suburbs as a menace to mainstream society. With these *quartiers sensibles* and their lack of integration into mainstream society, there is also a question of identity. There are large proportions of immigrants, particularly from post-colonial countries such as Algeria, who inhabit these areas, and some have reached their third, and in some cases, fourth generation. Many of the youths in the suburbs are French nationals born and raised in France, with little or no connection to the past, but also feel isolated from their French identity, as they are outcasts and not accepted by society. This creates a sense of confusion and frustration. During these riots, the discourse by prominent figures in political and public areas was widely disseminated by the media, and they depicted the riots as the actions of *voyous* (thugs) and *racaille* (scum) and conveyed the idea that the rioters were experienced delinquents expressing a hate for French society and the Republic (Moran).

These events revealed an important divide between the middle-class youth described as the “jeunes bourgeois qui avaient la chance de poursuivre des études et qui ne manquaient rien” and the “marginalized postcolonial youth from the suburbs.” (Korvath). This exposes serious human rights violations by law enforcement officials in French *banlieues*, as there is tension on both sides, from reasons related to race and class (Angelil and Siress). The *banlieue* as depicted in the film *La Haine* is distanced not only in physical distance from Paris, but also from the way the police treat them, with a highly contemptuous attitude. Vinz and his friends also treat the police with an equally aggressive attitude, there is a mutual negative sentiment on both sides (Kassovitz). Also made evident from the riots was the lack of institutional accountability for the deaths and the treatment of the youths. Because of the perceptions of the geographically, socially, and economically marginalized working-class neighborhoods, the suburban youths of immigrant descent were subject to discrimination and discredited publicly as “scum” and

“troublemakers.” Hostility in the *banlieues* and *quartiers sensibles* arise from a variety of factors, such as racial and social prejudices and xenophobia (Korvath).

Since 2000, a law, the *Loi Solidarité et renouvellement urbain*, was passed, requiring selected municipalities to devote 25% of public housing, to curb the growing segregation. However, over twenty years later, over one thousand municipalities still do not comply with this quota. Some of these noncompliant municipalities were required to pay a fee that would help to finance the national rental social housing fund, as well as subject them to construction recovery plans (Maaoui). This is just another example of the neglect those living in these neighborhoods face.

### **5. Modern-day:**

In 2013, Sevran, a commune in Seine-Saint Denis was noted to be one of the poorest areas of the Paris metropolitan area. As of 2013, 36% of the residents are considered to be below the poverty line, three times the national average, and 18% are unemployed. About 75% of Sevran's residents live in subsidized housing. More than half of the residents of the city is of foreign origin, namely Algerian, Moroccan, and sub-Saharan African (The Economist). The contrast between living conditions in Paris and its suburbs is increasingly violent and segregated. This issue is pertinent due to the historical context as well as the issues seen throughout France's history in the riots of the *banlieues*, and because the segregation creates a cycle of poverty as well as economic and social difficulties, which only worsens the situation in low-income neighborhoods. As a result, there is separatism or ghettoization created in the country (Lefebvre).

The problematic nature of data sources in the case of France makes the study of different ethnic elements in the later generations of North African immigrants difficult. France has resisted the inclusion of direct measures of ethnic origin in the census and other major data sources with



the belief that ethnic distinctions among French citizens will undermine the ideals of the Republic. Sources of information about ethnic membership come from nationality data and questions on birthplace, but for the second-generation France has generally given citizenship to its members, thus most of it disappears into the native French population in census. It cannot separate the children of *pieds-noirs* from those with Arab parents. There are geographic differences between the two groups. Residing in certain parts of the Paris region, especially in the suburban departments of Hauts-de-Seine in the west, or Seine-Saint Denis in the north, house some of the largest immigrant *banlieues*, which are strongly indicative of Maghrebin origin. The most southern sections of France, in Languedoc, Provence, or Corsica are suggestive of *pied-noir* origins. So, there is a difference noted between living in Paris or its *banlieues* of high immigrant concentration compared to on the Mediterranean coast (Alba and Silberman).

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