Neither Race nor the 93 Are What You Think They Are

*Yohann Le Moigne*¹, *Gregory Smithsimon*² and *Alex Schafran*³

**Abstract**

This article aims at offering an American perspective on the study of Seine-Saint-Denis, a territory that has been the subject of numerous negative representations and that has often been compared to American ghettos. Like many American scholars, we use the concept of « race » (understood as a social construct) as a key lens for understanding geography and geopolitics. But France famously denies the validity of this lens. Both race as a critical analytical tool and Seine-Saint-Denis are the subject of distorting representations which prevent us from understanding their complexity. Consequently and in a comparative perspective, we will focus on three facets of this racial lens (racial politics, racialized stigma and questions of representation) to show both the complexity and utility of race as a concept, and the diversity and complexity of Seine-Saint-Denis as a place. We will insist on the necessity to develop a French way of understanding race in order to deconstruct fantasies and stereotypes, to struggle against the essentialization of racialized territories such as Seine-Saint-Denis, and to better comprehend the processes of domination at work in French society.

**Introduction**

When we were asked by the editors of *Hérodote* to contribute an American perspective to this issue on Seine-Saint-Denis, it posed an obvious conundrum. Like many American scholars – and certain French scholars of America – we use race

---

as a key lens for understanding geography and geopolitics. But France famously denies the validity of this lens. So how to compare when the very language of comparison is a problem?

This essay turns this problem on its head, arguing that both race as a critical analytical tool and Seine-Saint-Denis are both complex “spaces” often misrepresented or misunderstood. Race is not simply a misused social construct or an inaccurate census category, nor is Seine-Saint-Denis simply a ghettoized collection of cités and unintegrated immigrant communities. Race as a lens has many facets, and in this essay we use three in order to show both the complexity and utility of race as a concept, and the diversity and complexity of Seine-Saint-Denis as a place. The first is the study of racial politics, an area where scholars from the French Institute of Geopolitics have made significant contributions to American scholarship over the years, in part because of its clear connection to geopolitics. Second and third are the linked issues of racialized stigma and questions of representation, an area deeply familiar to French social science even if they generally choose to avoid race as a framing mechanism. All three analyses show the subtleties of both race as a lens and Seine-Saint-Denis, and how the former is a useful tool for understanding the latter. Moreover, as we discuss in particular in the conclusion, race as a lens is gaining increasing purchase in France, and both racism as a powerful social and political force and race as a means of interpretation are empirical facts, not just something to be resisted. The challenge for French scholars and political actors is to further develop a French way of understanding racial politics, racial stigma, racial hierarchy, etc., ways which can further help understand the lives and spaces of millions of French citizens. In part because it is such a critical symbol of a contemporary racialized France, Seine-Saint-Denis is a good place to root this effort.

Racial Politics: From Baltimore to Bobigny

The city of Bobigny is an almost ideal-typical case where geopolitical changes can be better understood through the lens of racial politics. Part of the “red belt,”

4. Like Seine-Saint-Denis, not all the facets are good.
7. In 2008, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) estimated the number of first and second generation North African immigrants living in France at more than 3.5 million, and the number of first and second-generation immigrants from other African countries at more than 1.2 million (INSEE, fiches thématiques “immigrés et descendants d’immigrés en France,” 2012).
Bobigny had elected communist leadership for nearly a century (between 1920 and 2014). In 2014 this tradition was interrupted with the upset election of a UDI mayor, Stéphane De Paoli, who throughout the campaign received strong support from Jean-Christophe Lagarde (one of the founding members of the UDI), at that time an important ally of conservative (or “Républicain”) Nicolas Sarkozy. This surprise victory was largely the result of a divide with a strong racial dimension that the communists (and the left as a whole) did not recognize or did not want to take into consideration, but that others, on the right, exploited effectively.

In many suburban cities, particularly in Seine-Saint-Denis, electoral coalitions (or lists) that are outside of the major political parties have been developing in working-class districts since the end of the 2000s and show their opposition to the traditional parties, claiming in particular the defense of interests (support for the right of noncitizens to vote, or opposition to racial profiling) that the Left government never promoted beyond periodic announcements intended to attract minority votes. In 2010, these electoral lists coalesced as the group “Emergence” which collected 0.42% of the votes in the regional elections in Île-de-France. In Bobigny, the main artisans of the victorious campaign of the UDI in 2014 come from this movement. Arabs and Blacks for the most part, they share a deep resentment towards the traditional left and the “betrayals” of the 1980s. Paradoxically, they developed and promoted a campaign called “Rendez-nous Bobigny” (“Give Us Back Bobigny”), while neither the candidate De Paoli nor the party that supported him were representative of the inhabitants of the city and the expectations and demands of a large part of them.

In a feature article entitled “Bobigny 2014: When Arabs and Blacks Campaign for the White Right” published a day after the election on the site of the Parti des Indigènes de la République (the PIR), a group of non-white political activists, Aya Ramadan, a resident of Bobigny, unpacked the reasons for this alliance. She wrote:

In “Give Us Back Bobigny”, to whom exactly should Bobigny be given back? Who is this “us” in which most Balbynians recognize themselves? This “us” is above all Arab and Black, it is Muslim, it is also Indian and Asian, it is the veiled woman, it is the father of the family who works at the factory, it is the retired immigrant worker who escaped the police attack of October 17, 1961. We want our town hall to resemble its inhabitants. We want a mosque, a real one, to pray. Fed up with being piled like sheeps in the gyms on Eid! Fed up with squatting in the mosques already full to

8. The UDI (Union of Democrats and Independents) is a center-right party.
9. In particular the ideological hijacking and the deradicalization of the antiracist movement by the Socialist Party as well as the cooptation of several leaders of the autonomous movements that were developing at the time in working-class neighborhoods.
bursting in Bondy, Drancy or Blanc-Mesnil! Fed up that the city is decorated only for Christmas and not during the month of Ramadan that three quarters of the city observes! We want halal meat in the canteen. We want veiled women to have access to school and work without discrimination. We want a clean neighborhood and we want elementary and middle schools to have more resources, more professors, supervisors, and equipment to help our children succeed in school. We want a city that resembles us and respects us.¹⁰

This text has to be critically analyzed, especially since it emanates from a group (the PIR) whose ideas are still not representative of the people it wants to speak for (immigrants and their children, residents of working-class neighborhoods and people from the Overseas Departments and Territories). Beyond uncertain affirmations (it is, for instance, very unlikely that three quarters of the city observe Ramadan), it must be noticed that the “us” depicted by the author assumes a solidarity of the “oppressed” that rarely exists. However, the text has the merit of highlighting the fact that a significant proportion of the electorate of the working-class neighborhoods are fed-up with what they consider a lack of political representation.

Understanding the alliance by immigrants of color with the UMP, a right-wing party without apology, requires a look at the details of retail-level urban politics. While the Communist Party list had only 14 non-whites out of 43 candidates, the UDI’s list had 27, including two veiled women. Republicains and their allies could place headscarf-wearing members on their list in part because they did not have a local ruling coalition to upset. The Communists, in contrast, had a well-established group of voters, and because many were older, French-born, and steeped in values of republicanism and secularism (or laïcité), it was comparatively more difficult for the party with a winning coalition to add new members whose identity suggested “communautarisme,” an idea that in France carried strong negative connotations of ethnic identity at the expense of shared national identity. Existing Communist Party alliances obstructed the addition of new groups who a minority party could cultivate more readily.

The inclusion of two women on the UDI list who appeared on posters wearing headscarfs also generated intense tension between the two camps, tensions immortalized by a video widely disseminated on the internet by the UDI showing a man presented as a communist militant verbally attacking UDI militants. He castigates the party for including women in headscarfs on their poster, and insists that a veil alone qualifies a candidate as a “Muslim fundamentalist.”¹¹

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtNT8kDTA6g
In the end, for many participants in the campaign, it didn’t matter if the disappointment was great, or if many promises have not (and will not) be kept: they demonstrated (in Bobigny as in many other municipalities of Seine-Saint-Denis) that the voices of people of color, immigrant communities, and inhabitants of the working-class neighborhoods would no longer automatically fall into the traditional left wing. Several of them, including one elected official, went on to work on campaigns for the UDMF (Union of French Muslim Democrats) in the regional and district elections of 2015.

While the UDI’s promise to deliver municipal resources to their supporters (like free school lunch) sound to American researchers like a classic example of urban democracy at work, members of the Communist Party who we met with criticized the electoral strategy as “clientelism.” The duality of clientelism is well recognized by US political scientists: for 100 years it has succeeded in delivering resources to American immigrants voters and integrating them into the political process; on the other hand it prevents a broader, universalistic movement, like that of the communists, that would challenge the unequal distribution of resources that the urban poor face in the first place. In Bobigny, clientelism surely played a role in the electoral success of the UDI, as the voters who ultimately supported the conservatives did so despite the party’s stance on immigrants and Islam at the national level.

Yet the American method of examining electoral politics through the lens of race reveals equally varied outcomes in le 93. If the UDI’s victory led to a rise in the political representation of what the French call “visible minorities” (a euphemism for “non-white people”) in Bobigny, Seine-Saint-Denis remains a territory where the ethno-racial composition of elected officials and that of the population is largely unbalanced [Bacqué and D’Orazio, 2015]. While the “Trajectoires et origines” sociological study that was jointly led by the INSEE and the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) shows that visible minorities made up 57% of people aged 18 to 50 in Seine-Saint-Denis at the end of the 2000s, only 9 out of the 42 elected officials sitting at the Seine-Saint-Denis departmental council (21%) were non-white. This percentage is higher when we focus on municipal elected officials (31.5% since 2014 but only 23% in 2008), but it remains largely lower than the share of non-white people within the general population [Bacqué and D’Orazio, 2015]. Moreover, there are large disparities between the forty municipalities of Seine-Saint-Denis: non-white city council members make up less than 20% of all elected officials in twelve of them, and more than 40% in ten cities. The cities of Bondy (51% of non-white council members, 23 out of 45) and Coubron (0%, 0 out of 26) illustrate, for instance, the high demographic heterogeneity that characterizes Seine-Saint-Denis.

---

In the city of Saint-Denis, the department’s largest, only 34% of the council members are non-white (19 out of 55), while our field observations indicate that the city has a much higher percentage of black and Arab residents. The lack of official statistics regarding the race of residents and of representatives makes a racial study of electoral representation difficult, and it is likewise difficult for activists to challenge elected bodies on the basis of racial representation if such figures do not exist.

But representation does matter to people in the municipality: the Algerian-French director of a Saint-Denis community organization looked at the poster of Saint-Denis government officials, and indicated which, among Arabs, he thought highly of and which he did not. Ethnic representation mattered to him, even if ethnic origin was not the only determinant of political compatibility. Asking questions about racial representation can lead researchers to think about the way white elected officials have been able to retain power in territories with such a high proportion of non-European immigrants, and about the answers that could be provided to the specific issues that it generates. In the case of Bobigny, racial analysis of electoral politics indicated shifting party affiliations of new French citizens and unexpected conservative party coalitions that threatened a well-established communist stronghold.

By comparison, two examples of the pervasiveness of racial politics in the United States are worth considering. In Baltimore County, African Americans moving to middle-class suburbs of single-family homes sought political power commensurate with their numbers. Community activists pressed for more African American representation, and using racial data from the 1990 census, a series of state assembly districts were redrawn to yield African American representatives. Activists took similar action at the more local, county level. As Patricia Ferguson, president of the county chapter of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) explained, “NAACP was very instrumental when the Baltimore County council did the redistricting.”

The group worked explicitly to build a majority Black district:

“We did a plan. We redrew a district. We took it to the county council. We did a presentation. We sat down with a lot of community people and if NAACP had not done that, we probably wouldn’t have the one African-American council person that we have now.”

13. These observations have yet to be nuanced because there are no official ethnic-racial statistics and visibility depends on how public space is used, which varies from one social group to the other. However, these observations seem consistent with the INED and INSEE figures about the department of Seine-Saint-Denis that we previously mentioned.

14. Interview with one of the authors. September 2007.
For Ferguson, race was representation: “As NAACP we don’t care who it was, we just need… more people on the county council. African-American and minority students need to see people in leadership positions who look like them.” In this framing, changing political boundaries in race-conscious was necessary to genuine democracy.

Several elections in this 80 percent Black suburb have been hotly contested, but the boundaries virtually insure the winner will be African American, and no one has challenged the basis for those boundaries. In fact, not taking race into account in legislative boundaries is impossible. Given the history (and contemporary reality) of white politicians drawing boundaries to dilute African American votes among several districts, thereby preventing the election of Black politicians, the federal Voting Rights Act allows judicial review of boundaries to see if African American voters are being disenfranchised, and judges can (and do) reject redistricting proposals and require they be redrawn. In the American political context, being racially just does not mean colorblind: equal participation in democracy can only happen with a legal framework that prohibits exclusionary gerrymandering by race.

In practice, race-conscious representation does not mean unanimity of opinions. The three African American assembly members and one state senator initially worked and campaigned together, until one, a prominent minister, had a falling out with the others because of his opposition to gay rights, abortion, and college tuition assistance to immigrants. Racial homogeneity has not produced political unanimity.

It is also useful to ask how race shapes electoral districts because it delivers very different answers in different areas. The city of Compton, California offers another example of how race can play a fundamental role in US politics and the importance of racial criteria in analyzing power rivalries. This poor suburb of Los Angeles has become known in the last decade as being the site of tensions between African-Americans and Latinos, especially in the political field. A city that was exclusively white and segregated until the 1950s, Compton had become predominantly Black over the next two decades. This growth of the African American community was accompanied by a political shift, and Compton became a national symbol of Black political empowerment. The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw the explosion of Latin American immigration in Los Angeles and in particular in Compton, so that Latinos officially became a majority in 2000. The latest Census estimates show that Latinos accounted for 66 percent of the population in 2014 and that the proportions of African-Americans had dropped to 31 percent. Despite these profound demographic transformations, African American leaders have retained power, with the result that today there is a significant discrepancy between the numerical superiority

15. In 1980, African Americans made up 75% of the population of the city.
of Latinos and the political control of the Black community: of 15 elected representatives of the two main political institutions of the city (the city council and the school board), only two are Latino. Until 2013, with the surprise election of Isaac Galvan, no Latino had ever sat on the city council. Politically maneuvering shaped political control in a city where the municipality and the school district are the two main local employers, and where residents disparaged newcomers as illegitimate. Because of the city’s particular history and the struggle of African Americans for desegregation and achievement of municipal power, Compton was considered a Black enclave, a refuge city that was to remain in the hands of African Americans. The practices sometimes used to retain that power can be at odds with the demands of the civil rights movement that first sought more open political access in the 1950s and 1960s. Compton’s example thus illustrates the importance of the racial prism in the analysis of rivalries of power in a society deeply marked by racial stratification. It also highlights the limits of the use of a one-size-fits-all racial prism.

In the sphere of politics, comparing French banlieue and American suburbs demonstrates that while the situations in each place are different, asking American-style questions about race and ethnicity can be productive precisely because they reveal different political relationships in each case.

Stigma: Le 93 and the 718

In the popular imagination in the United States and France, American ghettos are seen as dangerous places. Crime, drugs, and gangs, real enough in low-income communities, are even more prominent in Hollywood representations. Violence is a key aspect of the ghetto, because it can limit residents’ movements in public, encourage those with more resources to leave, and contribute to a dangerous and hostile relationship between residents and the police. In terms of violence, there is little comparison between Seine-Saint-Denis and archetypical low-income areas like the Bronx. Both areas have roughly equivalent populations: the Bronx has 1.419 million people, the Department of Seine-Saint-Denis has 1.53 million. However, their crime rates are incomparable. In Seine-Saint-Denis, there were 26 murders in 2013 (and an average of 26.2 homicides per year over the previous five years). In 2015, New York State Senator Rubén Díaz feted the Bronx for two consecutive years.

16. 718 is a telephone area code that covers several boroughs of New York City, especially the Bronx and Queens.

with a murder rate under 100: 80 people were killed in 2013, 91 in 2014. New York
today is considerably safer than it was; murders in the Bronx had peaked in 1990 at
a staggering 653. While recognizing that “one murder is too many,” he wrote of the
reduction in violence, “Kudos for the Bronx!”

In 2013, the murder rate in Seine-Saint-Denis was 1.7 per 100,000 residents (com-
pared to 1.2 for France as a whole). The murder rate in the Bronx 5.6, more than three
times as high (and against 4.5 for the US as a whole). Crime is concentrated in a vi-
olent place like the Bronx; the murder rate drops as we move from borough, to city, to
state. But incredibly, even at the state level there are only three states (Hawaii, Iowa
and Vermont) whose murder rates were lower than Seine-Saint-Denis. In reality,
vioence varies block by block, but taking murder rates at the level of state averages,
there is virtually nowhere to live in the United States that is as safe as Seine-Saint-
Denis. These comparisons are not intended to diminish the challenges residents in
Seine-Saint-Denis face, but the difference in the homicide rate between Seine-Saint-
Denis and American ghettos is one important area in which comparing Seine-Saint-
Denis to an American ghetto misrepresents, rather than clarifies, those challenges.

Another issue in terms of safety is relations with police. In recent years there
has been a increased attention to police violence. The deaths of Michael Brown in
Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York, 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Freddie
Gray in Baltimore or Oscar Grant in Oakland prompted a nationwide movement.
The growing media coverage of these cases does not mean that violence is increas-
ing—they are, on the contrary, part of a long history of police brutality—but that
the growth of new technologies increases their visibility and complicates their
re-presentation as acts of self-defense (even if in criminal prosecution is still absent
the vast majority of cases). The Internet is full of videos exposing police abuses of
all kinds targeting disproportionately Blacks and Latinos. Despite the difficulty of
obtaining reliable statistics, between 400 and 1100 people are killed by the police

19. Death Penalty Information Center, « Nationwide murder rates by 2014 rank, highest to
lowest (other years shown for comparison), murder rates per 100,000 people », <www.death-
penaltyinfo.org>
20. Violence by law enforcement towards people of color has always been a key element of
systemic racism in American society. The major urban riots of the 20th century were triggered by
police violence, whether in the 1960s or in 1992 in Los Angeles after the acquittal of police officers
who had beaten Rodney King. For more details, see Charlotte Recoquillon, “Aux États-Unis, la
21. In order to overcome this lack of information and to determine the extent of the phenome-
non, The Guardian launched a project called “The Counted” in 2015, which draws up an inventory
of police homicides. In 2015 alone, their results exceeded the highest estimates with 1134 individ-
uals killed by the police.
each year in the United States. According to the Department of Justice, nearly 32% of the 4,813 people killed by the police between 2003 and 2009 were Black, while African-Americans make up only 12.2% of the country’s total population [Recoquillon, 2015]. As Charlotte Recoquillon notes, “if we focus on adolescents, a study by ProPublica has calculated that Black teenagers were 21 times more likely to be killed by the police than white men.” In addition, there is the practice of racial profiling, which contributes to a large extent to the deterioration of relations between police and ethno-racial minorities. A study of New York police practices revealed that 55% of the people checked in 2012 were Black (while Blacks constituted only 22.8% of the New York population), but 89% had done absolutely nothing wrong [Recoquillon, 2015]. Racial profiling is also very frequent during traffic controls, which explains the rise to prominence of the phrase “driving while Black” (a word play on the name of an actual crime – driving while intoxicated) in the United States over the last two decades.

In the United States, middle-class Black parents explicitly train their children how to act in the hopes they can avoid interactions with police. During an interview in Baltimore for instance, one 19-year old dutifully recited his mother’s list of rules to avoid interactions with the police while he drove the car: not too many friends, no loud music, not leaning the seats back in a way that looked “cool” and might attract police attention. When teenagers are out late at night, police are not reassuring but worrisome for parents of color, who say they fear their children will have a dangerous encounter with the police. In 2014, the New York-based association The Brotherhood/Sister Sol produced a very telling video on the subject, illustrating the differences in how the police interacted between white families and black families. The video shows, on the one hand, three black parents teaching their sons how to behave in case of a stop in order not to be killed by the police, and on the other hand a white father urging his son to call the police in case of problems because “they are there to help”. Young adults’ descriptions of interactions with the police documented a profound sense of powerlessness and risk.

In contrast, as we walked through the city of Saint-Denis, three police officers walked towards us, blocks from the site of the massive anti-terrorism police raid of November 18, 2015. One officer carrying a short machine gun bumped up against a dark-skinned Black man in his twenties. “Pardon!” the young man smiled and called out playfully after the police as they continued past him. For several seconds he

---


23. According to the Department of Justice, Black motorists are three times as likely to be searched during a traffic control as white motorists [Recoquillon, 2015].

24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KThOlWvYEDM
continued to tease them for bumping into him, as the police continued to slowly walk away. This kind of interaction, while rare in France, is inconceivable in the United States, where police in Black neighborhoods are told by colleagues to confront young Black men anytime there is the slightest sign of disrespect. Although some young Black French men said interactions with the police could be as bad as what they had heard of in the United States, in our research several asserted that they felt they could exercise control over interactions with police through their choice of words and actions. While it is the exception more than the rule, we have observed other instances of young Black and Arab men using humor to moderate the tenor of an interaction with police. Young people of color in the United States said they did not have any such sense of control.

The differences in police interactions are cited not to minimize difficulties that young residents of the Paris banlieue described to us, but to illustrate differences in the processes of racialization and their intensity depending on national contexts. Police profiling exists in France as well. A study conducted in 2009 for the Open Society Initiative by two CNRS (the French National Center for Scientific Research) researchers demonstrated the prevalence of these practices by asserting that “identity checks conducted by police officers are mainly based on appearance: not on what people are actually doing, but on what they are, or seem to be” [Goris, Jobard and Levy, 2009, p. 10]. The study found that, depending on the observation sites, Black people were between 3.3 and 11.5 times and Arabs between 1.8 and 14.8 times as likely as Whites to be controlled by the police. In June 2015, the French state was found guilty of “gross negligence” by the Court of Appeal of Paris in five cases of racial profiling but decided to lodge an ultimate appeal four month later. The defense then presented a brief that justified and legitimized racial profiling on the grounds that Blacks and Arabs are more likely than Whites to be in the country “illegally”.

According to this document, skin color would be sufficient to question the citizenship of controlled individuals and to make them potential delinquents. This, on the one hand, contravenes French legislation as well as several international laws, and it is, on the other hand, an affront to the “republican values” so promptly promoted in these troubled times by the members of the main French political parties. Against this background, Stop le contrôle au faciès (Stop racial profiling) - a group of organizations founded in 2011 which was one of the main protagonists of the lawsuit against the state – issued a report in March 2016 in order to alert to the depth of the problem and propose a series of recommendations. Besides racial profiling, several other

more or less structured collectives were born over the last few years to denounce police brutalities, which kill an average of one person every month in France, mostly Black and Arab men [Amnesty International, 2009].\textsuperscript{27} If this figure is a far cry from what can be observed in the United States, it seems like the community and political agitation engendered across the Atlantic by the recent succession of police killings has inspired other in France. Through a similar process to what has been observed in local politics, a growing number of activists and citizens from working-class neighborhoods (many of whom are non-white and some have been trained as community organizers in the United States) are freeing themselves from the codes of traditional French activism and organize by insisting on their autonomy and the defense of their own interests. Often linked to what could be called the “new antiracist movement” – a movement whose protagonists are mostly from an immigrant background and intend to oppose the traditional antiracist movement (made up of institutional organizations such as \textit{SOS Racisme} or the \textit{LICRA}) by developing their own claims within a political agenda that gives prominence to a color-conscious rather than color-blind perspective – they increasingly try to link both the struggles of American minorities and their own fights. As an example, a group called “\textit{Ferguson à Paris}” (Ferguson in Paris) was formed in 2014 with the aims of paying homage to Michael Brown\textsuperscript{28} and showing international support to the Black Lives Matter movement. Another example was the organization of the “March for dignity and against racism” in October 2015 in Paris (whose main objective was to promote the fight against police “racist crimes”) in the presence of a delegation of Black Lives Matter activists. In the crowd, a banner highlighted the transatlantic dimension of the struggle: “From Ferguson to Clichy-sous-Bois\textsuperscript{29}, stop state racism”.

The conjunction, in such a short period of time, of such significant events highlights a reality that generally does not receive much media coverage but that many field workers and residents of working-class neighborhoods have experienced for years, especially in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, whose representatives in parliament have recently come out in favor of a stricter supervision of police controls\textsuperscript{30}. It is incidentally not fortuitous if, among the fourteen organizations that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} L. Simbille, « Bavures policières mortelles : trente ans de quasi-impunité ? », \textit{Bastamag} [online], \langle www.bastamag.net \rangle, April 2, 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{28} A non-armed Black teenager killed by a white police officer in Ferguson (Missouri) in August 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Clichy-sous-Bois is a city in Seine-Saint-Denis. It made the headlines in 2005 after two teenagers (one was Black and the other Arab) died in an electricity substation after being chased by the police. This event triggered the so-called « French riots ».
\item \textsuperscript{30} C. Sterlé, “Encadrer les contrôles de police : les députés du 93 sont pour”, \textit{Le Parisien}, March 1, 2016.
\end{itemize}
make up the collective “Stop le contrôle au faciès”, four are community-based organizations located in Seine-Saint-Denis.

Another difference is that state investment in Seine-Saint-Denis is notably higher than in American low-income neighborhoods, because of the larger role of the French state in housing construction and infrastructure investment\textsuperscript{31}. The plan for Grand Paris, the extension of metro lines, the construction of Tramway lines, the remodeling of train stations, the renovation of sites, and the construction of new housing direct some investment into low-income banlieue. French investments are not perfect, and are sometimes criticized for fostering gentrification. In contrast, there has been far less mass transit expansion in the United States in thirty years. The federal government has not expanded public housing since a moratorium forty years ago, federal public housing funds are used to demolish, not expand, state-owned housing, with no equivalent investment focus on sensitive areas. At the local level, the city of New York has built only limited housing in the Bronx in the past 30 years.

Representation: “Le 93” as Secular and Nonracial Identity

In France, particularly since the 1990s and the huge popular success the rap group “NTM”\textsuperscript{32}, “le 93” has gained symbolic meaning for residents and nonresidents. While violence and investment in the 93 and American metropolitan areas are quite different, the symbolic meaning of place is becoming more similar in the United States and France. Many large African American neighborhoods are freighted with a great deal of cultural meaning: Harlem and Bed-Stuy, New York; The South Side of Chicago; Compton, California. For Latino communities, “el barrio” (the nickname given to Spanish Harlem) and East Los Angeles have comparable significance. American popular culture – be it literature, cinema or music - reflects and contributes to the meaning of place for such paradigmatic African American neighborhoods\textsuperscript{33}.

\textsuperscript{31} See Wacquant [2006] for a comparison between state intervention in the French cités and in American hyperghettos.

\textsuperscript{32} Their song “Seine-Saint-Denis style” has for instance become a kind of unofficial anthem of the “93” for a significant part of the French youth at the end of the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{33} They have often been considered ultraviolent ghettos, excrescences symbolizing all the social ills of urban America and the concentration of populations with dubious morals who would largely be responsible of their fate. But this stigmatization also favored the development of “counter-representations” from residents of these territories, which make them dynamic places characterized by great artistic and cultural diversity as well as by social and political agitation that place them at the forefront of the fight against social and racial inequalities.
It is worth noting that many very large Black and Latino communities have no such name-recognition: New York’s third largest Black neighborhood (Jamaica) is an unstoried neighborhood in Queens, much like the suburbs south of Chicago, or the vast sprawl of mixed Latino suburbs of Los Angeles.

In France, for many non-residents, the 93 represents urban ills and urban decay, an area of presumed violence, of periodic riots, and, today, as dens of Islamist terrorists. Among residents, the 93 is most meaningful among young people, as shown in a study conducted by sociologist Fabien Truong among students of four Seine-Saint-Denis high schools [Truong, 2012]. If most of them share a pretty strong sense of belonging to their department, they entirely refute the outside stigmatization of Seine-Saint-Denis and they reject, for instance, the use of the term “ghetto” to label their place of residence:

The students clearly refuse the descriptive model of the ghetto, which is mainly perceived as a fictitious and foreign interpretative framework. On the contrary, they depict their neighborhood as integrated to the national territory and wrongly segregated, because people live there like everywhere else. […] Actually, the rejection of the word “ghetto” shows how the students perceive the “banlieue” and Seine-Saint-Denis in particular as being considered an infamous place by outsiders only. These students feel defiled by the omnipresence of “territorial stigma” because it is difficult for them to picture their place of residence without thinking about what “the others” think about it [Truong, 2012, p.21].

The weight of representations and territorial stigma also push some teenagers from Seine-Saint-Denis to reappropriate stigmatizing labels and make it a source of pride. Being from the 93 can therefore become a valued identity especially because it is stigmatized by the dominant society. Depending on the contexts in which it is used, this identity can evoke strength or danger and can be utilized as a means of intimidation and self-defense. This process of formation of an “oppositional identity” [Ogbu, 1978] has been particularly used and popularized by hip-hop: “representing the 93” has often been done through rap lyrics (sometimes in a fantasmatic way) and the very numerous graffiti that can be found on the departments’ walls.

A particular value of the identity “le 93”, which is shared by many residents but experienced in many different ways, is that it cannot be reduced to a racial, religious, or national identity. While many of the social problems described can be framed racially, residents of Seine-Saint-Denis face discrimination on the basis not only of race but of citizenship, religion, and neighborhood. “Le 93” as an identity encompasses all those forms, unifying 1.5 million diverse residents and experiences. This highlights an important disequilibrium in the use of racial categories: in many ways, discrimination in the 93 is racial, but resistance to such discrimination
by residents is not racial. This contrasts with the American case, of course, of both racial discrimination and racially framed resistance movements like the African American civil rights movement or the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Seine-Saint-Denis therefore presents in interesting case of asymmetry between discrimination and resistance.

In the face of a process of racialization, it is significant that oppositional identities are not racial. Indeed, the formation of racial identities is more difficult in a country where, “unlike the United States, racial categorization has not historically consolidated as a legitimate form of public representation” [Préteceille, 2009, p. 493]. As a consequence, French society, at least in Metropolitan France, does not have a rich history of racial organization. The so-called “new antiracists” are still largely in the minority and have a relatively weak influence on youth in working-class neighborhoods, especially because of the complexity of their discourse and because many of them belong to the most-educated classes of French society. But this can also be explained by the fact that the weight of the universalist ideology has prevented a majority of racialized French to get involved in autonomous movements.

Another reason could be that there is a great deal of variety in how “nonwhite” people are shaped by race: some Blacks in France are descendants of slaves while others are not, some are French citizens while others are not, some feel more singled out for their religion than their race (even though islamophobia is a form of racism because it essentializes “the Muslims”, who are considered a homogeneous bloc that does not belong to the Nation). It would be difficult to construct a racial identity that united people in the face of highly diverse types of discrimination.

Moreover, the department of Seine-Saint-Denis (just like the whole Paris greater area) is more ethnoracially heterogeneous and less segregated than the American territories to which it is generally compared and in which racial identities have been able to form [Préteceille, 2009]. This bigger racial heterogeneity does not facilitate the construction of a strictly racial identity that could be shared by all. Therefore, being from the 93 is an identity that challenges racialized inequalities but is available to anyone in the department, regardless of one’s racial belonging.

However, as previously mentioned, it seems that a growing number of young non-white residents of Seine-Saint-Denis adopt a more and more color-conscious approach by referring to concepts and leading figures of the African American movements of racial resistance. For some, this pertains to an in-depth reflection conducted as part of a militant journey. For more of them however, it highlights the understanding of their alterity and of the often violent gap between the republican ideals and the reality of the discriminations that they endure and/or witness in their daily life. In a department 1) that has been severely hit by the different economic crises that the country has experienced since the 1970s; 2) where the percentage
of youth with an immigrant background has tripled between 1968 and 2005 (from 19% to 57%); 3) where many cities have extremely high levels of ethnoracial segregation (“about three fourths of young people in Clichy-sous-Bois, Aubervilliers and La Courneuve are of immigrant background, 70% in Saint-Denis and 67% in Saint-Ouen” [Aubry and Tribalat, 2011, p. 498]; 4) where, according to Aury and Tribalat [p. 503], young people of immigrant background have largely replaced young people of French origin in many cities; 5) whose residents are therefore specifically concerned by the liberation of racist discourses which goes hand in hand with the rise of Marine Le Pen’s National Front as well as by the persistence of systemic racism that most French political parties keep ignoring; any massive support from the youth for a colorblind vision of society seems extremely unlikely. As a consequence, the potential reinforcement of the racial factor in the common identity shared by many residents of the 93 cannot be ruled out.

One revealing difference between the American and French cases is what constitutes a social problem in the first place. On one field visit to Seine-Saint-Denis we observed an elementary school playground filled with immigrant children from all over the world. Such a scene is interpreted very differently by American and French social science. In France, neighborhoods with very high percentages of immigrants are measured in terms of segregation indices (as Black neighborhoods are in the United States) to quantify how isolated they are from native French society, despite huge difficulties to gather reliable statistics [Prêteceille, 2009; Aubry et Tribalat, 2011]. A predominantly immigrant neighborhood isolates immigrants, and is therefore a social problem.

In contrast, in the United States, neighborhoods that have high percentages of foreign born residents, if they are from all over the world, are celebrated for their diversity and framed as unambiguous success stories. One New York Times article on such a neighborhood called it an “idealist’s dreamscape” and bragged that New York “stands atop the world in its ethnic variety.”34 The neighborhood was 56.4 percent foreign born. Its residents were 20 percent African American, 20 percent Caribbean, 23 percent white, 17 percent Latino, 16 percent Asian, and also home to Russian Jews, third-and fourth generation Italians and Irish, and “significant smatterings of Bangladeshis, Mexicans, Pakistanis, Chinese, Tibetans and more.” The article said residents “use words like utopia” to describe their neighborhood, and officials at the Department of City Planning were “bullish,” hoping for more such neighborhoods. The tone of the newspaper, government officials, residents, and academics was positively celebratory. This was not a social problem, but a success story of vivre ensemble.


XVI
These differing definitions of a social problem point to one of the clearest issues in any representation of Seine-Saint-Denis in comparison. The most common trope one hears is that Seine-Saint-Denis is the Bronx- not just because of questions of violence or ghettoization, but for cultural forms like hip hop which have turned both spaces into international symbols. But while comparing the two is at times useful, Seine-Saint-Denis is as much Queens as it is the Bronx (and the Bronx is more Queens and the Queens more Bronx than people acknowledge). If Seine-Saint-Denis cannot be identical to either borough, why compare it to the borough that symbolizes social problems rather than the one that socializes immigrant success stories? The comparison with Queens resulted from an interview with a Saint-Denis resident who proudly noted how many languages were spoken in his city. The exact same claim is made about Queens, which proudly proclaims that over 138 languages are spoken in the borough and that the public library has books in 59 different languages.35 The city government of Saint-Denis has, to at least some extent, adopted a celebratory position like that of the borough of Queens, having sponsored multicultural music festivals and a “Journée de l’immigré” (immigrant day), the point of which, according to one organizer, is to underscore that “immigration is a source of wealth”.

This cross cultural comparison challenges American presumptions as well. Why, after all, is a majority-immigrant neighborhood in the United States considered a success story when it is, indeed, highly segregated? Completely unmentioned in the article celebrating immigrant diversity is the fact that 34.44 percent of children in the neighborhood live below the poverty line. Even if the American presumption is correct, and melting pot neighborhoods integrate immigrants so that their children can grow up to have mainstream American lives, French concern about segregated immigrant neighborhoods makes it hard to comprehend American complacency regarding high rates of immigrant and child poverty simply in expectation that conditions will improve decades later for the second generation. Perhaps the American narrative of immigrant assimilation and American attention to racial segregation has left it inattentive to the harm of immigrant segregation.

Conclusion

The 93 cannot be fully comparable to any place in the United States because of the inevitability of differences in racialization, government policy, and politics. Nor does it need to be compared to other places; the 93 needs to be understood on its own

terms. To gain such understanding, however, comparative studies are useful for teasing out differences between the operation of race and racism in France and the United States. Comparisons between the 93 and other urban immigrant spaces identify the reality of contemporary racialization and the variability in its manifestations.

“Race is not what we say it is, but it is the most tangible, real, brutal reality”, Colette Guillaumin wrote in 1992 [Guillaumin, 1992, p. 216]. If essentialist approaches that define race biologically have long been refuted, racism and its consequences are real and rest on processes of racialization that need to be studied and understood. This doesn’t mean that race has to be reified or regarded as the only cause of discrimination and inequalities. It simply has to be taken as it is: a social construct initially designed to establish hierarchies between groups of people - hierarchies which remain today in many realms of social life and are added to other types of inequalities and discriminations. Studying race and taking the racial dimension of some inequalities into account is, therefore, not denying the existence of other types of discrimination and domination. Moreover, rethinking social relations by opting for a color-conscious rather than a color-blind approach has been gaining momentum among French non-white populations for several years.

One of the main ideas formulated by whiteness studies, which were developed by anglo-saxon scholars in the 1980s, is that the main privilege of “White people” is not to be aware of their whiteness. As early as 1978, Colette Guillaumin wrote: “We say of blacks that they are black relative to whites, but whites are just white. Moreover, it is not even certain that whites have any colour” [Guillaumin, 1978, p. 16]. Many non-white French are totally aware of their alterity and have, consequently, a color-conscious view of social relations. Nevertheless, because French social sciences were in denial for a long time and because this way of “thinking race” has consequently not penetrated society as a whole, many non-white French – apart from intellectual and militant circles fed by the thought of anticolonialist authors such as Fanon and Césaire – reproduce thought patterns developed in the United States in a specific historical and political context, which arrived to France through the globalization of culture (cinema, television, the internet...). There is therefore a need to develop a French thinking on this issue, one that is adapted to French history and challenges (especially the postcolonial question and the relationship with Islam).

This is what a relatively small – but constantly growing – number of French social scientists are trying to do, inspired both by the Anglo-Saxon research conducted since the early twentieth century and by the pioneers of the French sociology of racism which developed in the 1970s. Among them, many take an increasing
interest in the articulation of the dimensions of race, class and gender in relations of
domination [Palomares, 2013]. As Horia Kebabza [2006, online] explains,

Putting the emphasis on skin color, origin, culture, ethnicity, or “race” doesn’t mean
for all that that it is the primary and unique source of all the forms of social exclusion.
Hence the necessity to reject both the competition between the systems of oppression
and a “sandwich approach”, in order to think about the crossings, the intertwinnings of
the categories of sex, class and race, as well as to grasp all the complexity of social
relations by highlighting their contradictions.

Rooting French urban studies in the field of intersectionality\(^\text{37}\) could therefore
contribute to break a French taboo and develop a reflection on the concept of “race”
as a social construct) in order to deconstruct some fantasies and stereotypes, to fight
again the essentialization of racialized banlieues and their residents, and to reach a
better understanding of the processes of domination at play within French society.
Given the symbolic power that it carries and the intertwining of different types of
discrimination and domination that can be observed in this territory, Seine-Saint-
Denis could then become both an ideal site for social science research and a particular
innovative “citizen laboratory” in the field of community organizing.

References

CRENSHAW K. (1989), “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist cri-
tique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics,” University
of Chicago Legal Forum, p. 139-167.
DE RUDDER V., POIET C. and VOUREC’H F. (2000), L’Inégalité raciste : l’universalité républi-
DOUZET F. (2001), “Pour une démarche nouvelle de géopolitique urbaine à partir du cas
d’Oakland (Californie),” Hérodote, n° 101, La Découverte, Paris, p. 57-75.
DOUZET F. (2007), La Couleur du pouvoir. Géopolitique de l’immigration et de la ségrégation
à Oakland, Californie, Belin, Paris.

---

\(^\text{37}\) Intersectionality is a concept developed by American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw
[1989]. It highlights the interaction between gender, race, class and other social categories to illus-
trate the multiplicity of the systems of oppression. In the last few years, it has gained momentum
in France among scholars and militants involved in the “convergence of social struggles”.

XIX


LE MOIGNE Y. (2014), “‘From a ghetto to a barrio’ : les enjeux de la successon ethnique à Compton (Californie),” *Urbanités* [online], <www.revue-urbanites.fr/chroniques-from-a-ghetto-to-a-barrio-les-enjeux-de-la-successionethnique-a-compton-californie/>.


XX