

# The French Riots and Canada

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## Paris is Burning

The fires lighting up the nights of the suburbs of France over the last month have stripped even more gloss off the already tarnished ideology of neoliberalism. Against the alleged 'harmonies of the market' producing benefits for all, the seething outrages of the excluded and the marginalized from market society now need to be even more firmly set. That the outrage is coming from the working classes victimized as well by racism and globalization should come as no surprise to anyone. These are North Africans long resident in France from the decolonization turmoil in France's former Maghreb colonies. And Africans from the sub-Sahara region pushed to find work wherever they can by the devastation wreaked by structural adjustment policies on alternatives that might lead to development in these societies. The 'empire strikes back' is the metaphor that immediately comes to mind. And it carries more than many truths that both the North American media and the neoliberals have left to the side.

Yet, it also needs noting that the rioting has occurred in the austere slums of the French suburbs. These suburbs have been cut-off from the city centres of France that have become the residences and entertainment zones of the ruling classes, the professional elites and the global tourist industry; and from the isolated and often gated communities lying further afield still for the upper middle classes seeking shelter in the 'urbanized countryside' from the polarities of the neoliberal city. These kinds of suburbs are zones of both physical and social isolation. It is the suburbs that have become, in France like North America, the holding tanks for the reserve army of labour of migrants and marginalized necessary to fuel the actual new economies of neoliberalism.

That the rioting in France would be greeted with a self-congratulatory response in multicultural Canada could never have been in doubt. We have been told, time and again in our school lessons, that Canada is the paragon of successful migration from all corners of the world (the plight of the Indigenous peoples of Canada being met with just awkward silence to this day). But there is much of the same dynamic at work in the labour markets of Canada; and of the conversion of the suburbs of Canada's major cities into zones for recent migrants and the poorest sections of the working class. It is what has made Canadian media commentary on France particularly unbearable.

In this *Bullet*, Govind Rao addresses the Canadian media coverage in the home of liberal complacency in Canada, 'The Toronto Star'. We also include here a post from the 'International Viewpoint' website, which captures much better the forces at work in France, than the media in Canada have conveyed.

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## **Why Canada Is More Like France Than Haroon Siddiqui Would Like You To Believe**

**by Govind Rao**

The French riots of late-October, have renewed discussions about integration and marginalisation in Europe. Much of the Canadian commentary has made the argument that Canadian multiculturalism and equity programmes have been much more successful integrating immigrants, and that similar social unrest is unlikely here. It would be nice if both those views were true.

A case in point are four columns that Haroon Siddiqui wrote in 'The Toronto Star' (November 6, 10, 13, 17, [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com) click "Star Columnists"). The theme that is evident is that North America has done a much better job of integrating immigrants than Europe, and Canada bests the US. There are two points that need to be followed up on from his columns. The first is the make-up of the Canadian immigrant stream, and the second has to do with more recent trends in the integration of immigrants. Both of these explain why Canadians should not be patting ourselves on the back anytime soon.

There is little doubt that the immigrants Canada admits each year are among the most-educated group admitted to any country. And ignoring for the moment the moral depravity of one of the world's richest countries creaming out the best and brightest from some of the world's poorest, we are still left with an educated immigrant stream that is the reason for any relative difference in integration that exists between Europe and Canada. The storied openness to immigrants that exists in Canada would quickly evaporate if it wasn't highly educated and skilled people arriving in the economic class (67% of total intake). It is this factor beyond any other that lays the foundation for the relative successes Canada has had with immigrant integration. It is a success that cannot be, as Siddiqui wrongly does, chalked up to multiculturalism policy.

The government's policy when it comes to aiding the integration of recent immigrants can be summed up as 'sink or swim'. That so many immigrants to Canada, although highly educated, end up under- or unemployed is blamed on immigrants themselves. In Europe, immigrants are similarly condemned to low-wage, dead-end jobs; in Canada the educational and class background of our intake allows immigrants to pass on to their children skills that allow for higher levels of success in the second generation. In effect, upper-middle class families take a step back for one generation on their arrival, but the children regain the socio-economic status of the parents thanks to the benefits of Canadian accreditation and relative social openness towards some minority groups.

This dynamic is very different from the one that Siddiqui sketches. In his view, the openness of Canadian society and ability for new immigrants to be accepted, opens up doors that would remain closed in Europe. This brings with it success for immigrant groups, and less alienation. From this perspective, helping immigrants feel like they are first-class citizens is very important (even if they are paid, and integrated into the labour market as second-class citizens). Thus, guest worker programmes for Siddiqui are out, as they don't allow for attachments of belonging to form. He writes: "Having the benefits of immigration without immigrants might suit the right-wing C.D. Howe Institute. But Canada should not be in the business of exploiting people." One might wonder what creaming out poor countries' doctors, and then using them as fast-food delivery people is if not

exploiting them?

The second point that comes to mind when thinking about integration of immigrants in Canada is whether earlier immigration trends in Canada are continuing under neoliberalism. Statscan surveys have shown that children of immigrants who arrived in the 1950-1970s period, earn better than the Canadian average. However, the jury is still out on more recent waves of immigrants, but there are some not very encouraging pieces of the puzzle already available. Immigrants who arrived during the 'permanent recession' of the 1980s and 1990s have fared much worse than pre-1982 immigrants in earnings and net-wealth. The group post-1982 also has much higher percentages of racialized immigrants. In the 1990's there was clear evidence of the racialization of poverty and housing: Canada's suburbs also becoming zones of 'economic apartheid'. Racialized Canadians earned 24% less in 1998 than non-racialized Canadians, and the former had much higher and chronic levels of unemployment. Of recently arrived immigrants, 35.8% (landed within 5 years) lived below the poverty line. In 1998, the family poverty rate for racialized groups was twice that of non-racialized Canadians. These trends are continuing as the drumbeats of neoliberalism for wage concessions, labour market flexibility and social cutbacks pound on. From one Canadian city to another, the suburbs are seething with the some of the same outrages as the French.

In sum, the evidence points to living conditions and opportunities for post-1982 immigrants becoming substantially worse, not better. Whether the second generation of Canadian-born children is able to recreate the success of the 1950s-1970s group remains to be seen. However, the facts so far don't look promising. That is why the smug self-complacency of the media elites that have come to embrace neoliberalism and think of Canada as so apart from the fires burning in France is quite intolerable. It could turn out that Canada is much more like France than Siddiqui would have you believe. •

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## **Faced With Widespread Revolt, Government Declares State of Emergency**

### **—International Viewpoint—**

The nightly riots in the poor neighbourhoods around France's towns and cities have now been going on for two weeks. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin announced the government's response. It was to resuscitate a 1955 law authorizing the proclamation of a state of emergency. This law not only authorizes prefects (non-elected, government-appointed administrators of France's departments - the equivalent of counties) to impose curfews in areas where they deem it necessary. It can also be used to ban meetings and demonstrations, control the press, place banning orders on people going to certain places, search houses at night and even put people under house arrest.

The utilisation of the 1955 law is highly symbolic. It was originally adopted during the Algerian War of Independence to combat the independence fighters and the population that supported them. Fifty years later it is being used against young people, many of whom are the grandchildren of those same Algerians. Because the areas where the riots have taken place are not just poor and neglected. They are also home to large concentrations of North and Black Africans. The vast majority of these young people were born in France and therefore have French citizenship. But they are very conscious of

not being French citizens like anyone else. Young people of Arab and African origin are second-class citizens. Even when they succeed in leaving school with qualifications, or even go to university, their chances of finding a job are much less than their white counterparts. And they are subjected to constant racist harassment - police controls, de facto colour bars at the entrance to night clubs, etc.

The use of the 1995 law amounts to a recognition that the only thing the government has to offer these young people is repression. Periodic attempts to 'rehabilitate' their neighbourhoods have had little effect. A generation of young people has grown up in grim, increasingly ghetto-like housing estates, with little hope of escape, and feeling rejected by a society whose loudly-proclaimed commitment equality does not seem to apply to them. The significance of the state of emergency has not been lost on those concerned. Recalling the aim of the original law fifty years ago, Djamel a 30-year old inhabitant of the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, put it succinctly to a journalist from the daily Le Monde: "In this country a bounoule (a racist term for North Africans) remains a bounoule. It's serious. You see, its proof that they don't consider us to be really French." His friend Omar added: "People are going to go crazy. We're already confined to our estates, now they're passing laws to lock us up in our own homes."

People - young people - have already "gone crazy." In many ways, what is surprising is not that the suburbs have exploded but that they did not explode before. The riots were sparked off by the deaths of two teenagers in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, who were accidentally electrocuted as they took refuge from police. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. But it was far from an isolated incident. Young people - mostly of Arab and African origin - regularly die from the brutal methods of the police. Usually the result is a local riot or protest march, and then things die down again - till the next time. This time the pent-up anger exploded and the revolt spread to other Parisian suburbs and then across France. The scale of the revolt is indicated by the more than 30 zones where the state of emergency has been invoked. They cover areas in and around France's main towns and cities, from the English Channel to the Mediterranean.

The term "riot" which has come to be applied to the revolt is in fact misleading. The revolt is the work of gangs of youth who know each other and who consciously turn their anger into acts of destruction of property - burning cars, schools, shops, buses - and attacks on the hated police. As one young man put it to the Madrid daily El Pais: "We don't have words to explain what we feel. We only know how to speak with fire." Beyond their immediate targets, their anger is directed against Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, the hard right hopeful for the 2007 presidential election, who has described them as "rabble" and "gangrene" and threatened to "hose down" their neighbourhoods. The only political demand that the rioters put forward is for Sarkozy's resignation.

Of course, there is a negative side to this revolt. It is easy enough to see that wreaking havoc in their own neighbourhoods causes damage to their neighbours and families. This can and is being exploited by the government to divide their communities between generations and between French and immigrants. But when the despair of those to whom society offers no future explodes in revolt, it rarely does so in a neat, tidy and "politically correct" way. What is happening in France today recalls the explosions in the ghettos of North America in the 1960s and the 1981 riots in England.

The riots have been the at the centre of French political life for two weeks. The right-wing government has alternated between Sarkozy's provocative statements and mealy-mouthed assurances of the government's concern and understanding. But the bottom line was to send in more and more police, thus acerbating the situation, and finally to resort to the 1955 law. Well over a thousand young people have already been arrested. In this climate the far Right has been having a field day. National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen has called on rioters to be stripped of their French citizenship. Philippe de Villiers, leader of the rival Movement for France has said that the government "has not taken the measure of the anti-French insurrection which is threatening the

unity of the republic." Both the far Right and the right wing of the ruling UMP party have called for the army to be sent in to the suburbs.

The main opposition party, the Socialist Party, has not rejected the use of the 1955 law, confining itself to saying that it was necessary to be "vigilant" in applying it but that "above all, it is imperative to re-establish order and security." Forces to the left of the SP have reacted differently, placing the blame for the riots on decades of neglect, institutionalised racism and police brutality. The LCR, French section of the Fourth International, has called from the beginning for the resignation of Sarkozy. This demand has also been taken up by the Communist Party leadership, which has however had to contend with pressure from within the party, mainly from the municipalities it controls in the suburbs, to put equal blame on the police and the rioters.

A joint statement opposing the state of emergency was issued on November 8<sup>th</sup>, signed by political parties (the LCR, the CP, the Greens and the Citizens' Alternative), trade unions and civil rights organisations. Discussions are taking place with a view to organising unitary initiatives, including demonstrations in defiance of the curfew in the areas where it has been imposed. A first rally took place on November 9<sup>th</sup> in Bobigny, administrative centre of the Seine Saint-Denis department, north-east of Paris, the area where the revolt began. It was supported by the LCR, the CP and the main trade unions of the department. But over and above such initiatives, when the dust has settled, the French Left will have to develop an ongoing presence in the neighbourhoods where the revolt exploded, and from which it has been all too absent in recent years. •

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**P.S.**

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