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French Against French : The Uneasy Incorporation⁽¹⁾ of Beurs into French Society

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Who suffers the most from racism in France today?² According to a recent French survey, not the Blacks, nor the Asians but the Maghrebis and their sons and daughters : the [Beurs and Beurettes](#) . Usually born in France and educated in the French school system, the overwhelming majority of the Beurs speak French like native speakers, have the same way of life of other French people and have never set foot in their parents' countries of origin. France is their "patrie", their homeland even if the rejection of parental religion and values is often felt as a painful acculturation. Yet, in spite of and because of the Beurs' Frenchness, a large section of the French population resents their presence in France; they are seen as a kind of invasion from the south, responsible for much of the ills of contemporary France: economic, social and otherwise.

Unlike their parents who came to France from North-Africa after World War II as unskilled labourers on the assembly lines, the Beurs are certainly a minority with an attitude. They were the first youth group to copy the Afro-American look of baggy shorts and caps with peaks turned backwards, the first to adopt rap music. The best French rappers, such as Alliance Ethnik, are Beurs. With or without their distinctive fashion style Beurs are easily recognised because of their non-white, North-African appearance, their youth in an ageing French population and even by their body language. All this forms part of their assimilation problem as they can easily be singled out by people with anti-Arab feelings who feel threatened, not by the Beurs' North-African background, but by their very Frenchness. As Perrineau's studies on the National Front show³ , fear and racist outbursts are not directed primarily against people who are completely different, but rather against neighbours and fellow workers of similar socio-economic background. It is therefore not surprising that the million or so Beurs living in France are faced with mounting intolerance and as a consequence are adopting more and more rebellious attitudes. More educated than their parents and similar to the rest of French youth in terms of their ambitions, they are pushed by economic circumstances into adopting idiosyncratic sub-cultural manners and loyalties expressed through distinctive clothing and language (verlan, veul and other slangs).

Here is how Nadia, the young Beur girl who is at the centre of Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun's recent novel, encapsulates the Beurs' predicament:

Our need for consolation is impossible to fulfil, our craving for understanding infinite, our will to exist fierce, our madness never far, our patience unreasonable, our fury blazing, our thirst for recognition unquenchable ⁴. We are the children of the forgotten generation ... born with a small broken star on our foreheads.⁵

For the extreme right-wing political parties promoting racist attitudes, little difference is made between illegal immigrants, Beurs' search for identity and Maghrebi's cultural background, values and expectation: in their view, all are equally responsible for rising unemployment, the near-collapse of the French social security system, vandalism, crime, drug abuse, religious fanaticism etc. Although "only" 14% of voters favour right-wing politician Jean-Marie Le Pen, as many as 38% of French people agree with him when he points the finger at migrants to designate those responsible for France's current high level of unemployment and economic difficulties. As we well know in Australia, the anti-migrant phenomenon is not specific to France, but the depth of feeling is quite surprising as shown in some examples that made the front page of the French news for weeks on end.

"*L'affaire des foulards*", (the "scandal" of the Islamic headscarf) that arose in 1989 was a typical example of a rather trivial issue blown out of proportion. The trouble started when a number of Muslim parents insisted that their daughters wear the headscarf and started complaining to the schools about their daughters having to attend sex-education and history lessons that presented the world in a way they did not approve of. Yet serious trouble erupted only when the Ministry of Education advised school principals not to bow to any religious pressure and to eradicate any "ostentatious" religious signs, namely the headscarf. This hard line approach based on the premise that the republican principle of "laïcité" (secularism) that had been observed for a hundred years in the French public school system was now under threat inflamed racist intolerance across the spectrum of French society. Young girls who were requested to take off their headscarf faced expulsion if they did not do so. With no time to adjust and find their own way, they were caught between two equally unbending systems: that of the school principals and that of their parents.

A film made in 1995 for the TV screen, Romain Goupil's *Sa vie à elle* (Her very own life), shown on Arte TV station, illustrates the complex issues at work. It takes as its central character a Beur *lycéenne* who decides, without ever explaining the reasons why, to wear a headscarf despite strong disapproval from her own family, school friends, and teachers. She is abused at school and she is pushed around in the street. A most poignant scene shows some Beurs trying to pull her headscarf away in the street while screaming: "You and your type give us a bad name." She is expelled from her school but finally gives in and goes to another *lycée*. She is able to start a new life as a typical teenager - minus the headscarf and with a great sense of loss.

The Beur situation is also linked to recent political turmoil in Algeria. Although not officially recognised, a civil war is raging in Algeria between the Government and Islamic fundamentalist movements. The targeting of foreigners as well as Algerian intellectuals, university teachers, journalists, women who don't wear the Islamic headscarf and any vocal opponent to terrorism is making front page news almost daily. For example, last year the murder of the Bishop of Oran and eight French Trappist monks received considerable media coverage. These victims represent only a very small percentage of the 50,000 people - mostly Algerian civilians - who have lost their lives so far: fifty a month and on the increase, as exemplified by the bombing and killing of fifty people at the very time this article is being written.⁶ French people's attitude to the civil war took a new turn two years ago with the attempt of the FIS (*Front islamique du salut*) and the GIA (*Groupement islamique armé*) to export the war to mainland France, the former colonial power. Bombs were exploded in the heart of Paris (on the Champs-Élysées and in the Latin Quarter), one was defused just on time on the track of the Very Fast Train (TGV) and scores of others were found in pressure cookers in market places. (That explains why you will not find a bin left in the streets of Paris: all have been taken away for fear of being used as hiding places for bombs!)

In no time, suspicion turned to the large number of Algerian workers living in France. How could such acts of terrorism be carried out if there was no help from people living there? And who more so than the Beurs could be considered as obvious accomplices? Being young, mostly unemployed and rebellious, all this smacked of terrorist tendencies. Already accused of being dole bludgers, no-hopers,

hooligans and vandals, the Beurs attracted this new tag while it was obvious that the Beurs and their parents were being made responsible for the worst aspects of a war and religious fundamentalism far removed from them.

Not surprisingly, the outcome of such crude scapegoating led to tragedies. The death of young Beur, Hamed Khelkad, at the hands of the police is a case in point. His shooting was video-taped and broadcast by local TV stations. Large sections of the French public were outraged by this "police stuff-up" (*bavure*) which was blamed on the National Front's indoctrination regarding the Beurs and by the misplaced zeal of the French police, often accused of anti-Arabic feelings, to the point that many Beurs feel it is dangerous for them to go about the streets.

The irony is that most French people - including the police - would also consider that it is highly dangerous to live in the *banlieues*, that is the outer suburbs of the cities where most migrant families live, and which provide fertile ground for spiralling racism, gang activities and confrontation. The outer suburbs are usually made up of high rise apartments which were hastily built in the sixties and seventies. Generally, they lack the indispensable amenities such as shopping centres, entertainment complexes, public transport, administrative offices and have very little to offer in the way of jobs, sports facilities or recreation areas.

With the rate of unemployment at its highest level ever in France (12.5% and up to 40% in some *banlieues*) all the ingredients for an explosive situation are there. Five years ago, riots and pitched battles with police took place in the Banlieue of Lyon, Vaulx-en-Velin. Since then it has been publicly admitted that about 130 such *banlieues* (i.e., about 1 million residents) are considered "no-go" areas by the police: "Forbidden cities" (the headline of an article on this new phenomenon in *Nouvel Observateur*, November 1995) are places where the minute a 'cop' (*un flic*) is spotted, stones are thrown, ambushes set up, and cars rammed into police vans. Mathieu Kassovitz 1995 film, *La Haine*, documents such a spontaneous uprising suggesting that all young people, whether Beur or not, are pushed to the point of exploding with hatred.

Many voices are being heard saying that not only right wing nationalists, but also a large section of the media, have been guilty of simplification and sensationalism. Anecdotal evidence can never give a full picture of a society. In fact the Beurs' fight for survival has already contributed a great deal to French culture in terms of fashion, literature⁷, music and sport (the judo gold medallist at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics Games, Djamel Bouras, is a Beur).

Tolerance seems to be more and more in short supply but the new boundaries between individuals' samenesses and differences are constantly being redrawn. No doubt that given a chance to live, work and escape racist harassment, and being treated with respect, most Beurs would live quietly and happily with the rest of their fellow French residents.

Notes

Used publicly for the first time in 1981 on a pirate radio station, the word Beur gained currency because the term "arabe" from which it derives had become a term of racist abuse in some quarters of French society. Beur derives from the word arab in "verlan" slang (back to front words, with some euphonic changes, with Beurette as a feminine form). Although at first claimed by Beurs themselves as reflecting their distinctive identity, the word has now lost its "contestation" edge. It is now widely accepted even if it is sometimes used with a negative overtone such as in the diffident title of a novel by Soraya Nini, **Ils disent que je suis une beurette** (They say I am a Beurette] (Paris: Fixot, 1995). Presumably it is an acceptable alternative to the wordy "offspring of the North-African migrants to France" or "second-generation youth" which also tends to disregard the Beurs' actual French identity.

See Alec G. Hargreaves, "Writers of Maghrebian Immigrant Origin in France: French, Francophone, Maghrebian or Beur?", in **African Francophone Writing, A Critical Introduction** L. Ibnlfassi & N. Hichcott (eds), Oxford: Berg, 1993, pp. 33-43.

1. "Incorporation" appears more neutral than "integration" or "assimilation" both suggestive of "effacement of differentiation", Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration, 'race' and ethnicity in Contemporary France*, London, New-York, Routledge, 1995, 32-3.

2. In December 1996 the *Nouvel Observateur* published a survey conducted among migrants and their children investigating their perception of how the French treat them. Contrary to expectation, the Beurs expressed feelings of victimisation second only to their parents' (75% and 86% respectively).

3. Pascal Perrineau says : "*Prise dans une logique de l'enfermement, ne pouvant plus se différencier socialement de ses voisins de palier ou de quartier, cette population [souffrant de la désintégration sociale et politique des banlieues] développe une 'différence raciale', un racisme 'petit Blanc' qui nourrit le vote FN*". p. 272.

Pascal Perrineau. "Le Front National: 1972-1994", in **Histoire de l'extrême droite en France**. Michel Winock (ed) Paris: Seuil, 1994, pp.243-298.

4. Tahar Ben Jelloun. **Les Raisins de la galère**. Paris: Fayard, 1996, p.117. My translation

5. **Les Raisins...**, p.121.

6. Written on the 18th January 1997.

7. Alec G. Hargreaves. **La Littérature beur, un guide bio-bibliographique** New Orleans: Celfan Ed. Monographs, Tulane University, 1992.

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