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Keywords
France, collective action, riots, protest, youth

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Introduction: A Tale of Two Conflicts

On October 27, 2005, a group of adolescents from Clichy-sous-Bois, a poorer town neighboring Paris, were walking home after spending the afternoon playing soccer at a nearby sports complex when a local resident, who claimed to see them loitering at a construction site, called the police. At the sight of an approaching squad car, the teenagers fled.

Most were quickly apprehended, but three evaded the police by ducking into a nearby electrical substation. This game of cat and mouse soon turned deadly when these three youths were electrocuted. Two died instantly; the third was badly burned but managed to make it back home, where word of the electrocutions spread quickly. Outraged, neighborhood youth descended on Clichy-sous-Bois's streets that evening, torching cars, smashing store windows, and vandalizing bus stop shelters. Despite police reinforcement, the disturbance escalated during the following days, spreading first to the outer fringes of Paris proper and then to urban peripheries across France before finally subsiding three full weeks later.

In response to the unprecedented scale of this destruction,[1] then-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin proposed in January 2006 a reform measure aimed at combating higher-than-average unemployment rates among youth in France's "outer cities,"[2] a leading cause, Villepin maintained, of the unrest witnessed the previous fall. The CPE (*Contrat Première Embauche*),[3] as the bill was called, proved widely unpopular among young people and others across France, who occupied schools, blockaded streets, and employed other tactics to voice their discontent. Faced by this massive opposition, Villepin was forced to retract the CPE the following April.

Although fundamentally both acts of contestation, the fall and spring events received very different treatment in French popular opinion: whereas the fall episode was widely condemned, the spring one was not only tolerated but also often celebrated. Labels used in the media reflect these divergent interpretations. At first, the most common term for the fall disturbance was "violent acts" (*violences*). Then, as the unrest spread, use of the word "riots" (*émeutes*) also became popular. By contrast, in the spring individual gatherings were called "demonstrations" (*manifestations*), and together these were said to make up a "social movement" (*le mouvement anti-CPE*, or the "anti-CPE movement").

These labels suggest that one reason the French condemned the fall conflict (but not the events of the spring) has to do with perceptions of violence.[4] The fall disturbance was, in fact, spectacularly violent: upwards of 10,000 cars were torched and over 200 public buildings—mostly schools, libraries, and gymnasiums—as well as a substantial number of private businesses were either severely damaged or destroyed. But this explanation is not entirely satisfying. The destruction caused by the

fall disturbance was contained geographically, occurring primarily in the perpetrators' own neighborhoods and it mainly only involved attacks on property. Few people suffered injuries severe enough to require hospitalization and there were no direct casualties. The following spring, opposition to the CPE sometimes entailed considerable violence as well, like the unruly confrontation between students and police that left the Sorbonne ransacked in mid-March or the gathering less than two weeks later in central Paris, during which cars were torched, stores were pillaged, police and firefighters were assaulted, and onlookers and participants were mugged.

What else then might account for the widely divergent value judgments the French assigned to these two conflicts? Their labels for the events—particularly, the initial hesitation over what to call the fall disturbance ("violent acts")—compared to the decisiveness with which the CPE opposition was classified ("demonstrations," "social movement") point to another, perhaps, less obvious but analytically more rewarding explanation: in the French repertoire of forms of legitimate contestation, the spring event could be made to fit a recognizable model, but the fall one could not. In other words, in contrast to the spring CPE "protests" the fall "riots" were considered transgressive because they somehow overstepped the boundaries of what the French deem acceptable acts of contestation.

The word "transgression" conventionally implies a violation, the breach of some collectively understood limit or boundary. Mary Douglas's (2007) classic work on purity and danger lays out the analytic usefulness of this idea. Building upon her notion of "matter out of place," my aim here is to decipher, through a comparison of the fall 2005 "riots" and the spring 2006 CPE "protests," the ways the French distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable collective displays of disruptive behavior.

The fall 2005 disturbance has received a great deal more scholarly attention than the spring 2006 conflict, owing undoubtedly to its resistance to be classified as an acceptable form of contestation. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic have mostly interpreted the unrest in France's outer cities by making claims about a collapse of certain forms of social integration and the concomitant exclusion of certain categories of people.[5] Whereas these observers treat the fall disturbance as a singular event—the acting-out of marginalized people in response to their marginalization—I want to take another step back to examine this incident's

relationship to a whole class of events through a comparison with an-other event—the CPE conflict—that was similar in some ways, different in others.[6] The CPE conflict, like the fall disturbance, concerned a seg-ment of France's youth and drew as much public attention at the time, but it was not as worrisome to people then and seems to be fading much more quickly from collective memory today. In the end, tracing out what gets classified as transgressive (or not) and why, as well as how people draw that line, should help to illuminate how they organize their social world. This can, in turn, throw light on shared as well as conflicting val-ues within French society, and help define the contours and constituents of power differentials. More generally, this approach should demonstrate the value of using comparison to interpret acts of dissent defined as transgressive in any setting.

My analysis draws primarily on data collected during a year of eth-nographic field research, beginning in September 2005, among young people living in large-scale public housing projects on the outskirts of the medium-sized French city of Limoges. Daphne Berdahl (1994:14) has re-marked that "[e]thnographic fieldwork, like most research, is often a mat-ter of structured serendipity." To say that this observation applies to my own experience is something of an understatement. My project sought to examine outer-city youth's interpretations and uses of media—and especially the mostly negative representations of outer-city areas and their residents that periodically appear in the French news—as a tool for illuminating how they position themselves and others within French society. Both the fall and spring conflicts attracted considerable media attention, much of it focused on so-called struggling youth (*jeunes en difficulté*) from the outer city. So, the timing afforded me a remarkable opportunity to do just that.

Comparing and contrasting the perspectives of my interlocutors in the outer city with what might be called "mainstream" or "dominant" views presented in the local and national media at the time, I argue here that claims about supporting the general interest constitute a potent le-gitimizing force when it comes to classifying collective acts of dissent in France. This in turn exposes fundamental French values and beliefs relating to how society ought to be and its members ought to behave—values and beliefs shared not only by journalists, politicians, and others conventionally thought to belong to the mainstream, but also my outer-city interlocutors. I am working from the premise that where people share

the same terms for drawing distinctions between what is considered "in place" and "out of place" (or legitimate and illicit)—even though they may not agree on the application of these terms—this can be interpreted as meaning they share a culture in some sense.

Researchers have long argued that the second- and third-generation French descendants of non-European immigrants (mainly North-African, but also Antillean, Sub-Saharan African, and Turkish) have overwhelmingly assimilated to the cultural norms dominant in France (e.g., Tribalat 1996). However, when unrest breaks out in multi-racial and multi-ethnic outer-city areas, as it did in the fall of 2005, old debates about this seemingly resolved question are frequently reactivated. Reflecting on the origins of the fall 2005 conflict, for example, literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov blamed the "machismo" of Muslim youth. Whereas Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, permanent secretary of the French Academy, suggested that the polygamous marital practices of Muslim immigrants from West Africa were responsible. Gérard Larcher, then-French Employment Minister, seemingly agreed, telling the British media that he was not surprised that young men from polygamous (and therefore supposedly dysfunctional) families had trouble finding work in France.

To be fair, none of these individuals has credentials in the sociology of France's outer cities.[7] By contrast, those who do have predominantly argued that the fall 2005 disturbance had far more to do with social and economic marginalization, spatial segregation, and anti-immigrant racism than any putative cultural difference (e.g., Cesari 2005). Nonetheless, a growing body of scholarship by mainly American researchers (e.g., Beriss 2004, Bowen 2010, Chapman and Frader 2004, Silverstein 2004) has suggested that immigrant activists are currently engaged in a seminal project of redefining the parameters of the French nation rather than simply assimilating into traditional models of national identity, with the result being a sort of "creolization" of France (Beriss 2004:133). Whether or not such claims are empirically well founded, they tell us little about the expectations and experiences of ordinary youth in France's outer cities. How do these young people position themselves and others in terms of national and cultural identity?

Fieldwork in a French Outer City

As has been noted, surprisingly few anthropologists have written on the fall 2005 unrest in France, and those who have (e.g., Fassin 2006, Ossman and Terrio 2006, Silverstein and Tetreault 2006, Terrio 2006) have mostly based their analyses on data collected from interactions with adults (and especially agents of law and order) who are in contact with outer-city youth, rather than such young people themselves.[8] By contrast, my data, collected during 12 months of ethnographic field research, directly captures the experiences and perspectives of at least some of the young people living on the outskirts of Limoges.

Located in the central Limousin region, Limoges is best known for its fine china and, to a lesser extent, its leather and paper trades—but certainly not its outer-city housing projects.[9] Limoges was, however, a strategic choice. Despite its lack of large-scale industry, the city has a significant and well-documented working class history, grounded in a deeply-rooted left-wing tradition, dating back at least to the French Revolution, and resulting in a precocious labor movement (Corbin 1975, Merriman 1985).[10] This leftist tradition spurred the construction of a multitude of worker housing developments beginning as early as the first decades of the 20th century. Today, a number of large-scale housing projects (some with more than 1,500 units and one boasting more than 2,500 units) circle the city. And because Limoges was never the site of heavy industrial manufacture, the effects of deindustrialization have been less significant there; a sizeable working population remains, with little out-migration of young people from what might be called "blue collar" backgrounds (Duplouy 2003:14). Finally, on a more pragmatic level, the size of Limoges was manageable for ethnographic research. With a population of roughly 140,000, the city provided an urban environment, but was small enough to allow easy access to the local people in a position to facilitate my work, including, most notably, the city's many social service providers.

Although my project focused on young people aged 16 to 25 in the process of transitioning between school and the working world, my first contacts in Limoges were social workers and case managers, outreach workers (*éducateurs*) and employment counselors, association leaders and program coordinators. With the help of these social service providers, I identified entry points into three of the largest housing projects. These included a municipally funded "dry" bar (*bar sans alcool*)

that also serves as a youth information center, a "youth house" (*maison des jeunes*) that aids in the coordination of leisure activities, and an after school homework-help center where I volunteered several days a week. Through these associations and organizations, I was able to meet many local youth and, thanks to their social networks, I was eventually able to expand my base of informants to include young people who might not necessarily frequent any of these establishments.

France's urban peripheries tend to be ethnically diverse, including both immigrants and their descendants and "Franco-French" people. Limoges does not constitute an exception in this regard.[11] My interlocutors in the housing projects included roughly as many young people with deep roots in France as children of immigrants. I collected data through participant observation: I hung out at bars and cafés, I made trips to the unemployment office and sat in on meetings with employment counselors, I attended neighborhood festivals and concerts, watched television, listened to music, and went to the movies. I also conducted "life history" narratives with 33 young people I came to know quite well. During these more formal taped interviews, I asked youth to discuss family life and childhood, school and employment experiences, and plans for the future. Because I undertook these interviews during the last few months of my fieldwork period, I was able to ask respondents to reflect critically on the fall and spring events from a distance. What they had to say greatly enriched the data that I collected during the heat of these two conflicts.

A French Model of Public Contestation

Since at least the Revolution of 1789, public displays of contestation have punctuated French life, and over time a familiar genre has developed—one centered on the principle of *orderly disorder*. For example, general strikes are called with the intention of disrupting public life: mass transportation is shut down, schools are closed, mail service is suspended, and so on. But such actions are carried out within a well-defined frame. The announcement of the intention to strike is made by established unions with clear spokespersons and a well-disciplined membership, and it is generally issued well in advance, allowing those who might be affected by it to plan accordingly. Further, essential services are often maintained, albeit at a reduced rate. In the case of public transportation, for example, one train out of three might continue to run. Such moments of contestation also tend to

be highly managed and supervised. Law enforcement officials are alerted, streets are closed to traffic, and union representatives flank gatherings, all in an effort to maintain public order and safety.

Such orderly disorder potentially carries many legitimizing references to the past. Throwing up barricades, tossing pavement bricks or Molotov cocktails, and other like acts of contestation may conjure up the Revolution, the Commune, or May 1968, for example. Of course, acts of contestation may take on competing or evolving meanings and degrees of importance over time. May 1968, for example, has variously been described as a dress rehearsal for an imminent revolution (Bensaïd and Weber 1968), the founding moment in a march toward narcissistic individualism (Ferry and Renault 1988, Lipovetsky 1983), and a force furthering the dominance of capitalism (Debray 2008). Notwithstanding such conflicting accounts (which tend to be as much about contemporary interests and concerns as a reflection of the historical record) in the popular imaginary moments of collective contestation (like May 1968, but also the Revolution and the Commune) are generally perceived as legendary events that have fundamentally *positively* shaped the contours of modern French society on multiple planes (government structuring and purview, social equality, gender roles, etc.). Taking to the streets in collective opposition to an aggressive, unjust, or wrong-headed regime in power can thus be readily managed as an action completely within the mainstream of the oldest and most quintessentially French traditions.

Familiar in form and with well-recognized historical antecedents, this genre of contestation has also become familiar in content, most often involving claims about the *general interest*. Emphasis on the individual's relationship to the collectivity in France can be traced back to at least the 1870s when the Third Republic's architects drew explicitly on Enlightenment ideals out of concern both to include and to incorporate France's regional diversity (Azéma and Winock 1970, Nord 1995, Weber 1976). In 1882 at the Sorbonne, French philosopher Ernest Renan delivered his famous speech "What Is a Nation?" Stressing what he saw as the fundamental universality of humanity, he repudiated the idea that nationhood is based on commonalities of race, language, religion, or even culture. Instead, Renan insisted that nations are forged through acts of common consent, reflecting "the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (2001:175). Central to this understanding of the nation is the Rousseauian notion of the social contract, which, far from being

relegated to obscurity as the distant ponderings of an Enlightenment thinker, is very familiar and more or less taken-for-granted in France today (Epstein 2011). "Some form of association," Rousseau wrote, "must be found as a result of which the whole strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united to his fellows, renders obedience to his own will, and remains as free as he was before… The Social Contract," Rousseau concluded, "provides the solution" (1964:180). In this instance, the general interest is considered to be both *synonymous with* and *greater than* each member's individual interest. Individuals agree to join the polity and to participate in the construction of its common life because of the range of social protections they can expect to enjoy in return.

Reflecting this logic, what comes to be considered legitimate contestation in contemporary France may begin with a particular group's grievances, but these are apt to be portrayed as shared by society more generally. For example, in May 1968, what began as isolated street battles between students and the police in Paris's Latin Quarter ultimately resulted in ten million workers, mobilized by France's leading labor unions, picketing across the country. The dominant theme was the need for a complete reorganization of modern society in order to break down hierarchical structures and provide greater opportunities for participation. Similarly, in November and December 1995, railway workers who were protesting a new government measure that stripped them of the right to early retirement were joined by postal workers, schoolteachers, and many others. Once again, well-organized unions with clearly identifiable leadership and well-articulated goals played a fundamental role. Despite the inconveniences posed by the nearly complete shutdown of public transportation that resulted, the media consistently reported that overall public support remained firmly with the strikers, with large numbers of people displaying solidarity by sharing rides, using bikes, and walking to get where they needed to go. The issue at stake was not merely the question of early retirement for one segment of the population, but rather the perception that the current government was whittling away at the principle of providing a wide array of social benefits to all French citizens or residents. This same concern was expressed in fall 2010, when public uproar greeted another government initiative, also targeting retirement age. Like the 1995 conflict, disparate groups, including oil

workers, truckers, and teens, banded together under the banners of different unions to block (this time unsuccessfully) the unpopular proposal.

Such public support does not appear to be contingent on the contestation's being nonviolent. May 1968 offers a clear example of publicly sanctioned violent demonstration, but so too do many recent farm protests. José Bové, the leader of the farmers union Confédération Paysanne, was convicted of ransacking a McDonald's fast food restaurant in 1999. Far from attracting the disfavor of most French people, Bové was celebrated as a national hero. Following his sentencing, he drove to prison at the head of a convoy of tractors vigorously applauded by onlookers, then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin lauded him as a "strong, vigorous personality," and the popular media praised him for his willingness to go to jail for the founding ideals of the Republic (Ariès and Terras 2000). Other destructive forms of farmer protest, like hurling cabbage into the ocean or dumping cow manure in front of government offices, have similarly garnered broad public support. They, like Bové's efforts, have been organized and claimed by farmers unions (usually FNSEA) and have also been seen as contributing to the collective good, each being interpreted as an attempt to safeguard France's national dignity and well-being by protecting its food and agriculture from the perceived nefarious effects of free-market forces (Rogers 2000, Thompson 2003).

The CPE and the Defense of the Collective Good

The spring 2006 opposition to the CPE, the government's proposed youth employment reform measure, clearly fit this model of public contestation. A number of general strikes were called by the main national students' union (UNEF) and all of the main trade unions (CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC), each one announced at least a week in advance. Bruno Julliard, chairman of UNEF, emerged on the national stage as a leader of the protests. In Limoges, as elsewhere in France, there was a substantial police and union presence during all major marches and rallies. Claims and counterclaims about how the CPE served or undermined the collective good also frequently surfaced. A spring 2006 interview between Claire Chazal, the weekend news anchor of France's popular Channel One television network, and then-Prime Minister Villepin offers a particularly illustrative example. Although Chazal and Villepin expressed opposing

views on the CPE, they both claimed the moral high ground in terms of defending the general interest.

On Sunday, March 12th, 2006, then-Prime Minister Villepin made a special appearance on the eight o'clock evening news to defend the CPE. This easy-hire, easy-fire employment contract, designed to spur employers to take on young people safe in the knowledge that they would not be bound by France's rigid labor laws, had already provoked weeks of conflict, including walkouts by high school and university students and no less than two days of major rallies across France. On March 10th, upwards of 300 students had staged a sit-in at the Sorbonne, which ended during the early hours of the following morning with their forceful removal. Shaky footage broadcast by the news media that afternoon showed out-of-control student protestors clashing violently under cover of night with helmeted, baton-wielding, tear-gas-canister throwing riot squads. Responding to these troubling images, Villepin pled the CPE's case and, in the process, attempted to portray the students' opposition to it as misguided, arguing that the CPE was not intended for them, but for "struggling youth" (*jeunes en difficulté*) from France's outer cities. "So you mean to say," Chazal probed, "that you are not addressing these university students whom we've seen demonstrating?" Carefully choosing his words, Villepin responded:

[The CPE] is meant for those who have the most trouble gaining access to work, those who go from short-term job to short-term job, from periods of training to periods of temporary work, those who are unable to find stable jobs for years at a time, those who aren't offered any jobs at all. We had a crisis in our public housing projects, we're quick to forget, a crisis in our public housing projects, several months back. Unemployment among youth living in public housing is between 40 and 50 percent. What's our response to those young people? That's the question we have to answer this evening. Listening to what some people have said, you'd think that everything is fine, that we needn't change a thing. Youth unemployment is at 23 percent, 40 percent among those who lack degrees. So, confronted by this risk of precariousness (*précarité*), what should we do? Do we stand with our arms crossed, like we've done for so many years? Do we look the other way? Or, do we seek solutions? I've proposed the CPE.

According to Villepin, the opposition the CPE faced was illegitimate because the measure addressed the problem of a particular group (disenfranchised youth living in outer-city housing projects), and it was in the general interest to do so.

Chazal squarely disagreed, but also based her position on a commitment to the collective good. Siding with the students, she argued that far from combating the social exclusion[12] of a few, the CPE risked increasing it for many. "[This measure amounts to a] chipping away at our social model…violating in a certain way our tradition of social protections, and that's very difficult to accept," she fired back.

Chazal's view was loudly echoed in the news media. In Limoges, for example, the idea that the CPE constituted a significant step away from France's social welfare model toward a more laissez-faire type of capitalism was widely embraced by the local press, which unambiguously denounced the measure, suggesting that it would undoubtedly generalize the problem of social exclusion in France.[13] Some of the more mocking nicknames for the CPE, like "*contrat précarité exclusion*" (contract for precariousness and exclusion) and "*contrat poubelle embauche*" (trashcan hiring contract), which peppered news coverage of city demonstrations, are an indication of this stance.

Reporting in Limoges also tended to focus on the theme of the national collectivity, suggesting that solidarity among all members of French society was the best defense against social exclusion. According to most news accounts, the anti-CPE movement forged solidarity across generations, bringing together people at all life stages—students, workers, retirees. *Le Populaire du Centre*, one of the dailies widely read in the city, made this point explicit. Following the first major demonstration in February, a headline in block letters across the paper's front page proclaimed: "All generations stand up to the 'institutionalization of job insecurity.'" The article that followed stressed that high school and university students had not marched alone; there were also "hundreds of workers and union members…and hundreds of retirees, reaffirming their commitment to *intergenerational solidarity*" (Bourgnon 2006, emphasis added). Another article, published in the other well-read daily, *L'Écho de la Haute Vienne* (Catus 2006b), similarly claimed that "everyone," including "trade union members" and "youth," opposed the CPE.

Beyond explicit emphasis on solidarity within the national collectivity, news accounts implied a sort of cohesion among members of France's

younger generation. Through liberal use of the catchall term "*jeunesse*" (youth), the popular media suggested that the mostly middle class high school and university students who took to the streets against the labor contract represented all French youth. For example, one local news headline exclaimed, "La jeunesse replies, 'Resistance!'" (Catus 2006c). The corresponding article, however, reported on a vote held the previous day by university students to continue striking, even after Villepin had promised to retract the CPE. As we shall see, such homogenizing accounts proved troubling for many of my interlocutors, who by and large drew lines between themselves and the students involved in the CPE protests.

The Fall Disturbance: An Attack on the General Interest?

In contrast to the CPE conflict, the fall disturbance could not easily be made to fit the model of public contestation laid out above, as various French scholars' reflections on it suggest. In his contribution to an online forum, political scientist Stéphane Dufoix (2005) remarked, "[T]he first difficulty is to decide into which kind of frame [the fall disturbance] could—or should—find [its] place." The possibilities, he suggested, are numerous, including urban policy, violence, republicanism, and immigration, among many others. Dufoix ultimately settles on the encompassing "issue of recognition." But he, like a number of French researchers (e.g., Wieviorka 2005), rejects the idea that the fall conflict constituted any kind of "social movement," "revolt," or "revolution," noting that no articulated voice emerged among its participants. Other French academics have been less categorical. Although he underscores the absence of politicization during the fall event, Olivier Roy (2005), for instance, highlights the importance of a collective identity based on sharing similar positions within a social hierarchy, describing the disturbance as a "youth underclass uprising." Didier Lapeyronnie (2006) goes a step further, insisting that the fall conflict was fundamentally political even if it lacked union representation. He argues that the violence observed demonstrated an intimate understanding of the mechanisms of French models of social contestation and functioned as a type of "collective voice" that short-circuited inaccessible and often protracted democratic channels, enabling its "working class" participants to achieve swift political gains in the form of national, and even international, media recognition.

The lack of consensus among French scholars over how to classify the fall event helps to illustrate what, according to the French more generally, the transgressed boundaries were. In all of these accounts, regardless of the conclusions reached, the absence of articulated goals, identifiable leadership, and an institutional frame seems key. As discussed above, we can conclude that these are the crucial elements in acceptable "orderly disorder," as understood in France.[14] Claims in support of the general interest go hand in hand with these elements, and, in this respect, the fall disturbance was often portrayed as deficient, as in a televised speech made by then-President Jacques Chirac at the height of the fall unrest.

During the eight-o'clock evening news on November 14th, 2005, after 17 consecutive nights of unrest in some of France's outer cities, the President of the Republic finally addressed the nation. Uncharacteristically bespectacled and noticeably haggard,[15] he projected a profound sense of dismay—dismay over violence, he admitted, that he struggled to comprehend. "This is a crisis," Chirac maintained, "a crisis of meaning, a crisis of values, a crisis of identity."

Much of what the President had to say that evening seemed to be an attempt to make sense of the situation. It was common knowledge that local outrage over the accidental electrocution of teenagers in a poorer neighborhood outside of Paris had triggered the unrest. Chirac expressed sympathy for all of the victims and their families. But he also suggested that there were other underlying causes. The President acknowledged the challenging situation many young people in the housing projects face: they live in "rough neighborhoods," he reasoned, that have "fewer resources than other areas" and are plagued by "violence," "drug dealing," and "out-of-control unemployment." Some are "over their heads in debt," he continued, and many lack the basic education needed to find good jobs or, frequently, any jobs at all. The risk of social exclusion for this segment of the population, Chirac concluded, is great. And this, he admitted, undoubtedly rouses frustration.

But as much as Chirac said he could empathize with the young offenders, their actions remained for him irrational, the mark of a "deep malaise." If the extent of property destruction was shocking, even more disturbing in Chirac's estimation was that it had occurred in these youth's *own neighborhoods*, putatively marking the progression of a new form of corrosive individualism that threatened the cohesion of the national

community. Other observers in France shared Chirac's dismay. Some news commentators, for example, implied that the destruction would have made far more sense had it occurred in the bastions of bourgeois or official Paris. At least then it could have been explained in terms of class struggle or perceptions of social injustice. That it targeted nursery schools and community centers in the very neighborhoods where the rioters lived was, to them, utterly incomprehensible.

In response to the destruction, Chirac extended the state of emergency that had been issued and promised improvements in outer-city areas, including better housing and increased access to jobs. He encouraged parents to bear their share of responsibility, urging them to exercise authority over their children and instill necessary "values" and "points of reference." Ultimately, though, he called on each individual to embrace membership in the national community:

> Adherence to the law and to the values of the Republic is necessarily achieved through justice, fraternity, and generosity. This is what it means to belong to a national community. It is in words and perspectives, with one's heart and by one's actions that we show the respect to which everyone is entitled…We will never build any enduring thing without respect. We will never build any enduring thing if we allow to rise—from wherever they may come—racism, intolerance, insult, or abuse…We must be proud to belong to a community that promotes, through considerable effort, the principles of equality and solidarity. It is a privilege to belong to the French community. Each individual must understand this and act accordingly…Let us be clear-sighted. Let us be courageous. We must learn all the lessons of this crisis. Each individual must obey the rules. Each individual must know that he cannot violate the law with impunity. But we must also know how to gather together to act with faith in the principles that make France: as a result, the entire national community will emerge stronger.

By invoking such a collective ideal founded on each individual's resolute commitment to the national community's well-being, this speech deftly shifted blame away from society as a whole or even the current administration, placing it squarely on the shoulders of the young offenders.[16] Far from making an effort to partake in or even reorder the national

community, Chirac presented them as literally attacking their own corner of it. As a result, in his view they could be held mostly responsible for the very social exclusion that had led them to riot in the first place.

Riots and Protests Reconsidered: Perspectives from Limoges's Outer City

As "matter out of place," what exactly constitutes transgression is, of course, a question of perspective. Drawing boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior entails the continual assertion of value and the making of choices. So far, I have focused on views presented by journalists and politicians in the national and local media, which do not necessarily correspond to the ideas people on the ground hold. Certainly, the youth I came to know in Limoges's public housing projects sometimes offered different interpretations of both the fall and spring events. Although this could indicate some sort of cultural "otherness," whereby they do not fully embrace dominant French values and beliefs, such a conclusion would be hasty at best. Exploring these youth's individual and collective definitions of transgression at the time of the fall and spring conflicts, but also during everyday life more generally, reveals their internalization of French ways of thinking and being—notably their understanding of the legitimizing powers of claims collectively put forward in support of the general interest, as opposed to the corrosive effects attributed to individualist motivations and actions.

Apart from some isolated incidents involving trash can fires and a few torched cars, little disturbance took place in Limoges even as unrest raged elsewhere in France in the fall of 2005. My interlocutors in the housing projects did, however, intently follow the disturbance, primarily from the vantage point offered by the national media. Although nearly all of them condemned the violence, their interpretations of the conflict varied depending on whether or not they themselves identified with the rioters.[17] Because most of my interlocutors expressed some connection to the youth implicated in the disturbance, I will devote most of my analysis here to that perspective. However, the views held by the small minority[18] who distanced themselves from the perpetrators of the unrest deserve at least passing attention, as they are no less telling of an embrace of the kind of collective ideal described above.

Among my interlocutors in Limoges's outer city who disassociated themselves from the youth implicated in the fall 2005 disturbance, some believed the rioters' ranks to be made up of young people, more or less well-known by residents and police alike in any outer-city neighborhood, who frequently engage in petty criminal behavior, including the consumption and dealing of illicit drugs (mostly marijuana), petty theft, burglary, and vandalism (car and trash can burning, graffiti, etc.). Julien,[19] a 22-year-old high school dropout who worked full-time as a stock boy in a pharmacy in his outer-city neighborhood at the time of my research, described the "rioters" this way: "They're the ones involved in *le business* [sale of narcotics as well as stolen and bootlegged merchandise]. Everyone's a little scared of them. When you live here, you can't completely ignore them, though, or they'll make your life difficult. Especially for guys like me, who work for a living, who abide by the rules. But you gotta keep your distance as best you can."

In the second case, "generational" differences were evoked to draw lines. For example, Yasmine, a 22-year-old from what many regard as Limoges's roughest outer-city neighborhood, mused:

Now, what I really can't comprehend is that these kids you see on television are maybe 15-years-old, maybe younger. Some people will tell you that it's a form of self mutilation because they're torching cars in their own neighborhoods, but I'm sorry, those cars belong to people they don't know. The same thing's happened here before. I really don't think it's a matter of self-mutilation. It's their neighbor's car, not theirs. They don't give a damn. They torch it anyway. So, self-mutilation, I don't think so. No, it's a different generation! They're too young. They're just out to have fun, with their friends. They don't care about anyone else.

In denouncing the fall conflict, both Julien and Yasmine established links between the rioters and groups in their own neighborhoods (delinquents, "kids"), whom they felt differed from them insofar as these groups work against the general interest in one way or another. The petty criminals harass honest, hardworking residents; the "kids" destroy other people's property for the sheer pleasure of it. This view resembles that of more dominant members of society, like Jacques Chirac, for whom

the rioters, because of a patent refusal to embrace collective life, were responsible for their plight.

Unlike Julien and Yasmine, most of my interlocutors in Limoges's outer city said they could at least understand the rioters' motives, even if they overwhelmingly denounced the violent approach taken. For this majority of youth, the fall unrest was above all else a form of *protest*. Rachid, also in his early 20s and from Limoges's largest housing project, had the following to say:

> You can talk all you want about an outer-city crisis, about kids who torch cars. But wait, it makes sense! I'm not saying that it's the only possible reason, you see. I'm not justifying what happened. It wasn't right and it was violent, really violent. But, you've got to understand, there are kids in the outer cities who can't take it anymore. They can't find work, they don't have any money. They've had it and won't stand for it anymore!

Youth, like Rachid, explained the fall's unrest in terms of the social marginalization they feel most young people living in outer-city areas—including themselves—face. Excluded from viable employment options, they struggle to make ends meet and see little possibility of building productive futures. Significantly, they framed their understandings of this marginalization in terms of a more general breakdown of society's commitment to collective engagement, beginning with the daily harassment they reported suffering at the hands of the police.

Recalling how the fall unrest began, Malik, a 24-year-old university student whose parents had immigrated to France from Algeria, sympathized with the youth who had been electrocuted. "If you get caught without your papers, they [the police] can haul you off to the station and make you wait for hours," he explained. "So, you try to avoid the police at all costs." Later in the year, Malik recounted a recent run-in with the police. While talking with friends in the entranceway of one of the apartment buildings in his housing project, he was approached by a woman and two husky men in civilian clothing. Flashing badges, the trio demanded to see Malik's and his friends' identity papers and then searched the youths' pockets, presumably for drugs. "There were two adults and a young child in the entranceway, too," Malik explained. "But the police didn't go near them. It's always the North African kids."

Criticism of the police was indicative of a distrust of state officials more generally, including, notably, politicians. Nicolas Sarkozy in particular came under fire during the fall unrest. As Minister of the Interior in 2005, Sarkozy was responsible for public order and safety and was, therefore, directly involved in the management of the crisis. Well known for his hard-nosed stance against crime, expressed through his *"zéro tolérance"* policy borrowed from former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Sarkozy took an exclusionary line *vis-à-vis* the rioters, publically vowing to clean up this "scum" (*racaille*)[20] with a Kärcher, a well-known brand of industrial-strength pressure washer. In early November, shortly after the conflict began, scarlet scrawls appeared on one of Limoges's outer-city youth centers, declaring defiantly, "Fuck Sarkozy, him and his mother!" (*Nique Sarkozy, lui et sa mère!*), and several months after the riots had subsided, performers at a hip-hop concert organized by local youth rapped about Sarkozy, peppering their lyrics with a slogan popular among young people in France's outer cities during the disturbance: "Sarko, up yours!" (*Sarko, on t'encule!*).[21]

The media in general and journalists[22] in particular were also cited by my interlocutors as contributing to their social marginalization. The following passage from a recorded interview with Rachid is illuminating in this regard:

The image the media show, how are people going to understand that? If you take the United States, for example, how are they going to perceive outer cities in France? They're going to say, "What savages live there!" They're not going to realize how we really live inside. It's like Franco-French people. I work as an aide (*moniteur*) in a high school in the city center, where most of the students are Franco-French. They come from the countryside and everything. But they have the same ideas. They say, "Yeah, those people in the outer city are crazy! You can't go into the outer city." They think that my neighborhood is really dangerous, that you'll get your throat slit there. For them, it's the same as Brooklyn or the Bronx, you see. "Yeah, you've got to be scared of those crazy people in the outer city!" they say. The distance between reality and what they show on TV is enormous.

For Rachid, such media representations not only reinforce a negative view of peripheral neighborhoods that he thinks most people in Limoges's city

center share, they also contribute to a general understanding that these areas are intrinsically different from the rest of the city and, by extension, the rest of France. Indeed, by suggesting that nonresidents' perceptions of outer-city areas might be the same as those of a non-French person, like an American, or conversely, that outsiders equate the outer city with Brooklyn or the Bronx, he is arguing that they see the peripheral neighborhoods as not only fundamentally culturally different (foreign) but also dangerous. Other youth made similar comments, like Yasmine, who denounced the media for likening peripheral neighborhoods to "jungles" and their residents to "animals."

More than any other group, though, my informants blamed employers for the difficulties they face. They insisted that despite their own efforts to find and keep work and therefore contribute positively to society, employers do not keep their end of the social bargain, refusing them the jobs they and their families need to avoid marginalization and exclusion. Xavier's account of a failed internship at a local supermarket meat counter is illustrative of this explanation. Suffering from the flu during his first week on the job, Xavier, a 17-year-old from Limoges's eastern periphery, nonetheless dragged himself to work, intent on making a "good first impression." However, when his new boss saw that he was pale, sweating, and unsteady on his feet, he accused Xavier of using drugs. "I couldn't believe it, I just couldn't comprehend that he would accuse me like that," Xavier protested. Following this incident, Xavier quit his internship and ultimately dropped out of school before earning his diploma. Others accused employers of being racist. Sofiane, the son of Algerian immigrants now in his 20s and living in Limoges's largest outer-city housing project, recounted how he has remained jobless after finishing trades school, while most of his former "white" (his term) classmates are now employed. Similarly, Safia, who lived in the same neighborhood, said that she has only been able to find work cleaning houses to help support her family since dropping out of high school a year ago because of the dark color of her skin and her "Arab-sounding" last name.[23]

For Americans, what could seem like a refusal to accept personal responsibility in the cases discussed above might be seen as part of the problem. In this view, other factors must contribute to these youth's social marginalization, not least of which their general lack of education and employment experience. But it is important to remember that the kind of "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps" mentality that pervades

the American context is much less evident in France. As I have argued above, in France individual interest—but also individual responsibility—is conceived as inextricably tied to collective interest and responsibility; the collectivity's welfare is viewed as the same as each individual member's. What seems interesting in all of these examples, then, is the *way* in which my interlocutors cast blame. They ascribed to police, politicians, journalists, and employers particular qualities that are incompatible with this collective ideal (inasmuch as these qualities rouse conflict in society rather than build cohesion), but when offering such explanations, they were always careful to contrast such destructive behavior with their own *willingness* to work hard to support themselves and others and thereby partake in collective life.

If my interlocutors' commitment to this collective ideal became especially apparent during the riots through the charges they levied against these various groups, no less revealing of this same commitment was the commentary they produced, also during the fall conflict, when positioning themselves distinctively as young people living in a medium-sized, provincial city. Although according to a map published in the national daily *Le Monde* (Bronner 2005), no less than 35 cities (including Limoges) witnessed destruction linked to the riots, Paris, where the violence had originated, was presented as the nexus of the unrest.[24] Youth in Limoges used this understanding to offer competing representations of where they lived.

It is no secret that Limoges suffers a poor reputation in France, beginning with its name. The verb "*limoger*," which figuratively means to "dismiss," "fire," or "cashier," was first used during World War I to refer to the experience of officers who were judged incompetent by their superiors and consequently relegated to Limoges. Today, the term is synonymous with disgrace (Troyansky 1996). It was thus with a snicker that Parisian friends told me I had been "*limogé*" when they learned where I would be conducting my fieldwork. But the perceived undesirability of Limoges goes deeper than mere semantics. As John Merriman has noted, 17th and 18th century visitors to Limoges often described the city in unflattering terms, from its "narrow," "dark," and "dirty" streets to its "disgusting" and "overwhelming" odors (1985:5-6). Little progress toward improving the city's image was made in the 19th century. Limoges, it seems, was unable to cultivate that "pride of place" described by Stéphane Gerson (2003) with regard to other cities and regions. In 1821 and then again in

1825, when city officials applied to the king for the designation of *bonne ville*—an honorific title conferred on a number of provincial towns at the time—their requests were firmly denied, even as a number of smaller French cities earned the rank. For the municipal council, Limoges was a "humiliating exception" (Merriman 1985:9). The repulsiveness of the city and surrounding region does not appear to be entirely imposed from the outside. Recent anthropological scholarship investigating rural tourism has suggested that locals are equally critical of where they live. They are quick "to recite the deficiencies of the area…[and] have difficulty imagining that anyone would choose to come there" (Rogers 2002:483).

The young Limougeauds I came to know by and large shared this perspective. Whenever I made a new acquaintance, he or she would invariably ask me what someone from New York could possibly be doing in an as out-of-the-way place as Limoges. My interlocutors complained frequently about the city's location. According to them, this "hole" (*trou*) is too far from anything of interest (the mountains, the beach) and it lacks activity (cultural venues, nightlife). The climate was also a subject of great contempt. In fact, during one particularly cold, rainy stretch in March, a young woman told me that Limoges's weather was responsible for the city having the highest suicide rate in the nation.[25]

Despite such commentary, when my interlocutors discussed the fall 2005 unrest they tended to paint a generally positive picture of where they lived compared to larger urban centers, especially Paris. Later in the year, I was talking to Olivier, a 23-year-old technician living in Limoges's largest housing project. "The news at the time of the riots, they made it out to be a civil war," he offered. "But I said, 'no, it's not a war! It's just in the projects, in the outer cities.' But here in Limoges, it's a peaceful city. If I lived in Paris or Toulouse, in a project, I wouldn't necessarily be able to say that." Yasmine held a similar view: "Limoges's outer city, it's really open, not at all like Paris or some other places. There's not that sense of insecurity here." Rachid agreed: "People get along pretty well here. Everyone's cool. There's not too much racism, or stuff like that. So Limoges, it's a good place to live."

Paris, by contrast, was extremely dangerous. "Some of Paris's outer cities, firefighters can't even go into them," Baptiste, a 26-year-old unemployed outer-city resident, said. "A fire truck arrives in one of those places and the firemen are done for. That never happens in Limoges." Patricia, a 24-year-old cashier, had an equally negative view of Paris's peripheral

neighborhoods. "If you're walking in Seine-Saint-Denis and look at some-body the wrong way," she suggested, "you'll get a bullet in your head. Or if you don't have a cigarette to offer, you're as good as dead. Here in Limoges, it's not dangerous. It's nothing compared to Paris."

If this image of Limoges-as-haven, presented in reaction to the fall 2005 disturbance, contrasts sharply with the usual one of Limoges-as-hole, what emerges as significant is how my interlocutors underscored the maintenance of social ties in their elaboration of it. They recognized that social life in Limoges, as in other cities, is characterized by social diversity in the form of status in a hierarchy, embodied most notably in an outer-city/city-center divide. However, they claimed that in Limoges, a commitment to collective engagement has mostly prevented the type of social exclusion they believe to exist elsewhere and to which they attri-bute extreme forms of violence. For these youth, then, the fall unrest was above all else about fears of a developing underclass—fears to which they certainly could relate, as we saw earlier, even if they insistently re-jected being categorized in an underclass themselves. They similarly re-ferred to this collective ideal when discussing the CPE conflict, not as a basis for celebrating opposition to the proposed law as the national and regional media did, but rather as grounds for denouncing the forms taken by that opposition.

Limoges, like most other cities in France, witnessed a flurry of activi-ty during the CPE conflict in the spring of 2006. On February 7th, the first of the major rallies, organized by labor unions, political parties on the left, and high school and university students,[26] brought together an estimated 5,000 demonstrators, who marched through the streets of the city chanting derogatory slogans about Villepin (e.g., "Villepin, (you) bas-tard, the people will have your hide!"[27]), brandishing makeshift banners denouncing job insecurity and the risk of social exclusion (e.g., "We're not the Kleenex generation!"[28]), staging sit-ins at major intersections, and lighting firecrackers and blowing whistles. In Limoges, as in many other cities, this first demonstration was followed by a number of others, each one attracting an increasing number of participants, before Villepin finally withdrew the CPE in April. According to local newspaper esti-mates, between 10,000 and 15,000 people turned out for the next major demonstration, held on March 7th; another 15,000 to 20,000 protestors took to the streets on March 18th; approximately 30,000 demonstra-tors turned out on March 28th; and upwards of 40,000 Limougeauds

clamored against the CPE on April 4th. Few of my interlocutors, though, participated in any of these marches.

Initial understandings of the CPE among youth I came to know varied, although reactions to the proposed employment contract were almost always the same. On the whole, they expressed concern over the measure, but not necessarily outright hostility toward it. For them, the CPE was not much different from previous government initiatives meant to aid underemployed youth in the housing projects—some even compared it to the Emplois-Jeunes initiative, established by Lionel Jospin's Socialist administration in 1997. This seems significant. Villepin's proposal, in fact, marked a rather substantial departure from previous youth employment policy insofar as it did not promise employers financial support in the form of tax breaks or salary subsidies but instead sought to create jobs by loosening regulations pertaining to employee termination. This was the point that proved so controversial, the rallying cry of the anti-CPE demonstrators. For my interlocutors, however, this difference seemed to matter little. Mostly longtime participants of past employment programs, which generally functioned on the basis of generating short-term employment contracts (like Emplois-Jeunes), they had become accustomed to a relative lack of job security and, consequently, saw the CPE as a continuation rather than a shift in familiar government policy. Along these lines, they understood the CPE as being geared specifically toward *young people like themselves*—the "*jeunes en difficulté*" from France's working classes, who cannot find good, stable employment. And, having embraced their status as "jeunes en difficulté," they tended to see job insecurity as being distinctively *their* problem and thus objected loudly to homogenizing messages about the risk of social exclusion confronting youth-in-general (*la jeunesse*) as broadcast by the national and local media at the time.

Toward mid-March, I caught up with Julien outside the pharmacy where he worked as a stock boy. The morning had been frenzied in downtown Limoges, where protesters had blocked a number of major intersections, tying up traffic for hours. Julien, who was one of the few outer-city youth I knew who had a driver's license and owned a car, talked to me about the demonstration, complaining that it had made him late for work that morning:

> I don't get it. Those high school and university students don't work. They don't have any experience in the real world. So why are they

so concerned about the CPE? It's not going to affect them, at least while they're in school. And afterward, they're probably going to get good jobs anyway. I really don't understand it. Still, you see them all over France demonstrating like that.

Having left school at age 16, Julien had accumulated a long string of odd jobs, mostly in the construction industry, before obtaining a full-time, long-term position in the pharmacy. "They should be thankful to be in school. Me, I didn't have the same opportunities," he suggested. Other youth echoed this idea. Inès, an 18-year-old outer-city high school dropout who had been looking for work for over three months, said: "Those high school kids and university students, they have it so easy. What do they know about work or job insecurity? They should walk a day in my shoes. Then they'd see."

Whereas some young people in the housing projects, like Julien and Inès, avowed incomprehension over student involvement in the protests, others, like Olivier, who, despite having sent out, according to him, "hundreds" of job applications, remained unemployed, offered possible explanations for this group's willingness to strike. Fighting social exclusion, however, usually did not figure among these. "When you saw all those high-school kids on strike, even some of the university students, I really don't agree," he commented a few months after the CPE had been retracted. Olivier went on to explain that during the strikes that sometimes took place when he was in high school, he and his classmates did not always know (or necessarily care to know) what they were striking for. "We just wanted to skip class, have a good time." He suspected similar motives among the CPE protestors. "The thing is, it was nice in April. You don't want to work when you're in high school, so the CPE was a good excuse for them to go on strike." Rachid, who had a part-time job as an aide (*moniteur*) in what was widely considered a prestigious city-center high school, had similar doubts about the student protestors' sincerity: "Most of those kids in the yuppie school where I work, they couldn't even tell you what the CPE is. I should know, because I asked some of them. They went on strike because they were looking for an excuse to be outside, to skip classes." Olivier and Rachid, like many other young people in Limoges's outer city, believed that the middle class youth who participated in the CPE protests were motivated less by a commitment to social solidarity than the pursuit of individual pleasure.

Conclusions

Focusing on two conflicts in France, I have attempted to show here how we can gain insight into local understandings of how the world works by examining the borderline between acceptable and unacceptable public contestation. Much of my analysis has been concerned with tracking what makes sense to whom and why. According to dominant views expressed in the French media, opposition to the CPE proposal was legitimate but the fall conflict was not. I have argued that this is because mobilizations against the CPE corresponded to a familiar genre of contestation involving orderly disorder, references to past forms of acceptable protest, and plausible claims about safeguarding the general interest. The fall 2005 disturbance, on the contrary, strayed from this model on all of these accounts. Incomprehensible to many, it was widely deemed illicit.

What exactly constitutes transgression is, however, a matter of perspective. In contrast to mainstream views presented in the media, most of my interlocutors in Limoges's outer-city housing projects could at least understand the fall disturbance, even if they rejected the violent approach taken. But like more dominant groups in France, they too drew on understandings of a social contract, where individual interest is expected to coincide with the national collectivity's interest. For most of them, the conflict was not a result of the rioters' unbridled individualism but rather the unwillingness of others, notably police, politicians, journalists, and employers, to honor their end of the social contract. The following spring, they called upon the theme of collective engagement once more—not to celebrate widespread opposition to the CPE as was often done in the national and local media at the time, but rather to denounce what they viewed as the student opposition's unacceptable show of self-interest. Together, these perspectives suggest that a collective ideal functions as an important cultural logic in France, providing spaces for both cohesion and contestation.

In turn, this finding contributes to ongoing debates about how outer-city youth position themselves in contemporary France. During the fall 2005 disturbance and other periodic outbursts, youth living in France's outer cities have been routinely depicted in the media and elsewhere as the embodiment of an assault on "traditional" French values. Such seemingly wanton destruction, it is sometimes argued, is irrefutable proof of outer-city youth's refusal to partake in the life of the community,

to engage with the social contract. And this, it is in turn maintained, is a sign of their status as cultural outsiders. That many (although by no means all) young people living in France's outer cities are of immigrant descent only serves as additional fodder for this line of argument.

Most scholars writing on the fall 2005 unrest have repudiated such claims, countering that the disturbance had far more to do with social exclusion than cultural difference. But these authors have tended to treat the conflict, along with previous instances of outer-city unrest, as discrete events. By and large, such accounts have stressed the *marginality* of youth in the housing projects as an explanatory factor for the violence witnessed. By contrast, I have proposed here examining the fall 2005 unrest from a different vantage point—that of comparison with another act of public contestation, which shared certain qualities with the fall disturbance but, unlike that event, was not viewed by the mainstream as transgressive. Ultimately, this approach has suggested that at least some outer-city youth living in a provincial city share the terms by which legitimate and illicit distinctions are assessed with more dominant groups in France, and this is a plausible basis for claiming shared culture, in some sense. That there was not necessarily a clear consensus regarding how these terms should be applied points, I would argue, to social—and not cultural—differences. These youth's alternative perspectives on the fall and spring conflicts were very much a function of their lower positions in a social hierarchy.

More generally, I hope to have shown here the value of using comparison to interpret acts locally defined as transgressive. My analysis has focused on two events in France, and the interpretations of them offered by variously positioned social actors within that society. Yet, such an approach is apt to offer important insights into local ways of thinking and being, regardless of the setting or groups and events compared. Placing these French youth's perspectives on transgression—and social life more generally—alongside those of more dominant members of society provides a framework for understanding the modes and meanings of political dissent in contemporary France and beyond. ∎

ENDNOTES

[1]A number of scholars (e.g., Fassin 2006, Hargreaves 2005, Kastoryano 2006, Roy 2005) have insisted on the fall 2005 conflict's historical antecedents. Although unprecedented in scope, the destruction was not otherwise novel. Since the late 1970s, more isolated disturbances have plagued the poorer neighborhoods ringing France's largest cities. As Henri Boyer and Guy Lochard (1998), among others, have documented, the media have been quick to highlight periodic flare-ups, such as those on the outskirts of Lyon in 1983 and 1990, or, more recently, in Villiers-le-Bel in November 2007, and Firminy in July 2009. The torching of cars, underscored by the national and international media alike during the 2005 conflict, was also not new, save its intensity (nearly 10,000 cars were destroyed during the disturbance). When, on November 17th, the National Police Directorate declared a "return to normalcy," it did so on the grounds that "only" 98 cars had been torched the previous night—the routine daily national average throughout 2005.

[2]Because France's urban peripheries, with their large-scale public housing projects, tend to have more in common with the American notion of inner city than that of suburb—which tends to evoke visions of middle class stability in the US—I use the term "outer city" throughout this article. There are, however, important differences. As a number of scholars (e.g., Lepoutre 1997, Vieillard-Baron 1998, Wacquant 2008) have pointed out, despite recent claims of "ghettoization" in France (Maurin 2004) the populations living on French urban peripheries are generally more racially and ethnically diverse than in the American context. Under France's social welfare model, these areas have been the beneficiaries of substantial social service support, even if such support has been uneven over the years with transitions between left-wing and right-wing governments. Further, unlike what tends to be the case in the United States, public housing in France historically has not been reserved for only the very low income; the housing developments constructed during the 1960s and 1970s also housed workers and lower-level salaried staff, even if such middle-income earners have increasingly sought private home ownership (Grillo 1985, Noiriel 1990).

[3]The Contrat Première Embauche ("First Hire Contract") was essentially a new type of work contract. It could only be used to hire people under the age of 26 and was restricted to businesses in the private sector with more than 20 employees. It stipulated a mandatory two-year consolidation or "trial" period, during which employers would have far greater leeway to dismiss employees than under standard French labor law. Seen by some as an attack on France's model of social protection, this last point proved highly contentious, leading to the massive opposition witnessed in spring 2006.

[4]According to Charles Tilly's (1986) historical account of popular unrest in France, collective action in France is today generally less violent than in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, while "riotous" collective contestation during the Revolution of 1789 may have been seen as belonging to a repertoire of "normal" political action at the time (Rudé 1972), this is not necessarily the case today.

[5]Contributions by American and French scholars to an online forum organized by the Social Science Research Council at the time of the fall 2005 unrest are exemplary of these kinds of interpretations (available from http://riotsfrance.ssrc.org). A number of collective books have also been published expressing similar views (e.g., Mucchielli and Le Goaziou 2006).

[6]The title of a book—*Émeutes urbaines et protestations: une singularité française* (*Urban Riots and Protests: A French Singularity*) (Lagrange and Oberti 2006)—that appeared in late spring 2006 (shortly after the CPE conflict was resolved) suggests a similar approach. However, the authors, like those cited above, ultimately treat the fall 2005 disturbance as a discrete event rather than linking it to the CPE conflict or other instances of collective action in France. They stress the various "conditions" (dilapidated public housing, large concentrations of "minority" youth, higher-than-average rates of failure at school, out-of-control unemployment, etc.) that, when combined at a specific moment, produced the outburst.

[7]Todorov's work has focused primarily on defining the "fantastic," although he has also dabbled in philosophy, reflecting, for instance, on Rousseau's ideas of happiness. Carrère d'Encausse is a historian specializing in Russian history. Larcher was trained as a veterinarian and practiced for more than 14 years before being elected to the Senate in 1986.

[8]Terrio's accounts, for example, are based on ethnographic research in the Paris juvenile justice system, later published in a book-length monograph (Terrio 2009). Her primary interlocutors were court personnel (judges, prosecutors, attorneys, court caseworkers, social workers, etc.). Similarly, Fassin's (2006) remarks are based on fieldwork alongside crime prevention squads in an outer city.

[9]Such neighborhoods are generally associated in France with urban centers like Paris or Lyon, or with areas, like the North, that have most directly experienced the devastating consequences of industrial restructuring.

[10]In fact, it was in Limoges that the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), one of France's most important labor unions (long affiliated with the once-powerful French Communist Party), was founded in 1895.

[11]Although Limoges has never been an important destination for immigrants, immigration patterns there have tended to follow national trends. During the first half of the 20th century, immigrants arriving in Limoges came from European countries, especially Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Following World War II, the number of immigrants from these countries declined (except for the Portuguese); while at the same time, new groups began to appear from North Africa (especially Morocco and Algeria, but also Tunisia), as well as from Turkey (Desbordes 2004:9). Beginning in the mid-1970s with the implementation on the national level of stricter immigration policy, the number of immigrants settling in the city steadily decreased. However, since 1990 immigration is on the upswing again. Because of the availability of public housing in Limoges, many political asylum seekers (mostly from Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa) have been encouraged to settle there. According to 1999 census data, 5.3 percent of Limoges's population was foreign-born compared to 7.4 percent on the national level (Boëldieu and Borrel 2000). Within Limoges itself, most immigrants tend to live in the outer city. In 1999, 16.9 percent of the peripheral neighborhoods' residents were foreign-born compared to 3 percent in the city center (Duplouy 2003:15).

[12]The idea of social exclusion emerged in France as an important theme in the second half of the 20th century, when some social commentators began suggesting that not everyone was reaping the benefits of the country's rapid modernization. In the wake of the economic downturn of the 1970s, the concept, often coupled with the notion of "precariousness" (*précarité*), gained new currency, expressing wide-ranging fears of a social unraveling, sometimes glossed by the term "social fracture" (e.g., Emmanuelli and Frémontier 2002; Farge, Lefort, and Laé 2000). These fears continue to haunt the French today, as evidenced by the recent republication of a number of works on the subject (e.g., Paugam 2009). An especially sizeable body of scholarship (e.g., Beaud and Pialoux 1999, Chenu 1993, Dubet 1987, Pinçon 1988, Renahy 2005) has examined the disintegration of the working class (*classe ouvrière*), long held as a fundamental component of the French social system, as one important vector of social exclusion.

[13]The local press in Limoges, like the local government, has long been more or less leftist, whereas Villepin and the administration he headed were from the center-right.

[14]Some (unsuccessful) effort was made to impose these elements by trying to recruit an imam to negotiate with the youth responsible for the fall disturbance—as if this leadership/institution was (or could be made to be) behind the event giving it some kind of order.

[15]Chirac's tired appearance, compounded by his choice to wear glasses instead of his usual contact lenses, prompted commentary on his advanced age. In fact, several news accounts suggested that he was all but "washed up" (e.g., Gurrey 2005).

[16]In her work at the Paris juvenile courts, Susan Terrio (2009) notes a trend in the treatment of delinquent minors toward individual accountability, restitution, and revenge, which flies in the face of the supposed legal guarantees in France of equality and due process. The rhetorical gymnastics undertaken by Chirac in this speech, the result of which corroborates Terrio's findings, offer a clear example of how a collective ideal centered on the general interest can be mustered by more dominant groups in France to maintain and reinforce social power differentials.

[17]The varying interpretations of the fall unrest I encountered in Limoges are strikingly similar to those described in a French study (Cicchelli, Galland, and Misset 2007) conducted among youth in Aulnay-sous-Bois several months following the disturbance.

[18]No single "type" of youth existed among this minority. Some were enrolled in university; others did not hold a high school diploma. Some had stable jobs; others were unemployed. Some were of immigrant origin; others were "Franco-French." The one characteristic that they tended to share was an understanding of *already* being "socially integrated," whether through education, employment, or aspirations for

employment. In the examples that follow, Julien held a full-time job, even if he had not graduated from high school. Yasmine was attending classes toward her *licence* (undergraduate degree) and was contemplating graduate work in sociology. Other youth, not part of this minority, also talked a great deal about social integration but claimed to be marginalized or excluded in one way or another.

[19]I have used pseudonyms throughout this paper to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

[20]Youth in Limoges were especially critical of Sarkozy's use of this term. Although within the housing projects, racaille in its inverted (*verlan*) form, *caillera*, sometimes designates a type of outer-city anti-hero—those youth who are viewed with a mixture of reverence and moral ambivalence because of their involvement in the parallel economy—Sarkozy's appropriation of the term was considered entirely inappropriate. Most of my interlocutors saw it as a "media stunt," designed by Sarkozy to garner attention in preparation for his upcoming presidential bid. "Sarko, he's got the media wrapped around his little finger," Olivier, an outer-city youth, told me not long after the fall disturbance broke out.

[21]Consider, for example, the scene in Argenteuil (a poorer town neighboring Paris), broadcast by the eight-o'clock evening news (*France 2*) on October 26, 2005. It depicts Sarkozy as he is met by a barrage of stones and other projectiles, while throngs of local youth chant in unison, "Sarko, on t'encule!"

[22]One obstacle I frequently encountered while conducting fieldwork in Limoges's outer city was the initial perception by residents that I was a journalist. Often it took a great deal of explaining (and time) to convince youth that I was not working on "just another negative news story exploiting the outer cities."

[23]The question of how race is understood and used in contemporary France has of late received a great deal of attention. Some scholars (e.g., Fassin and Fassin 2006) have argued that the fall 2005 conflict signaled a change in the way French society organizes itself, with race increasingly becoming a marker of social and/or cultural difference. As I have argued elsewhere (Murphy 2011), this perspective was troubling for my interlocutors in Limoges's housing projects, who organized their social milieu based primarily on markers associated with class distinctions (income, education, networks of influence, etc.); race, according to them, should not be a consideration in matters of public access. Thus, they loudly denounced proposals for the implementation of affirmative action-style policies, like blind resumes, following the fall 2005 unrest.

[24]Indeed, in that same map a cutout was devoted to the incidents recorded in and around Paris, the only city to receive such treatment.

[25]She was not entirely mistaken. According to national statistics, Haute-Vienne (the department in which Limoges is located) is second only to Côtes d'Armor in terms of reported suicides. Officials blame this high rate on the area's aging (and statistically more clinically depressed) population, though, and not its climate (Thomas 1999).

[26]A general assembly was held at the University of Limoges's Faculty of Letters and Science on January 31st to plan for the February 7th demonstration. In addition to university students, some high school students and representatives of a number of unions (AGEL-FSE, SUD, UNEF, CFDT, CGT) were in attendance (Catus 2006a).

[27]"*Villepin, salaud, le peuple aura ta peau!*"

[28]"*On n'est pas la Kleenex génération!*" The term "Kleenex" was frequently employed by protestors and in anti-CPE literature distributed by labor unions and other organizations during demonstrations to evoke the idea of disposability. Thus, a "Kleenex generation" is a "disposable generation" and a "Kleenex job" (*emploi Kleenex*) is a "disposable job."

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