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Fueling the Fire: The Backdraft of the French Riot of 2005

Sarah L. Woolard

University of Tennessee-Knoxville

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Fueling the Fire
The Backdraft of the French Riots of 2005

Senior Honors Project
Sarah Woolard
April 28, 2006
As a an American studying in Saint Etienne, France during the fall of 2005, I was completely captivated by the French riots that began in the suburbs of Paris and quickly multiplied across the country to reveal much more than a set of disgruntled citizens. Just like a moth to the flame, I was mesmerized by this event and wanted to dissect the riots in order to reveal their true anatomy.

These riots represent a cultural phenomenon that Americans, in my opinion, truly cannot understand. At the time, I did not comprehend the meaning of what was happening and why the French citizens rebelled with such an uprising that would eventually expose the underlying problems of the country that I had previously only studied in textbooks.

I consider this project to be a visual examination of the events that took place from mid-October to the end of December. What began as a process to determine the American bias in media contrasted with the portrayal of the incidents in France evolved into a photo essay that illustrates the actual events and how they were handled. As a result, I now have a better understanding of what I witnessed.

The study begins on October 19 and progresses with significant incidents that transpire over the following days. The photos demonstrate the evolution of the riots, beginning with somewhat peaceful manifestations, followed by a violent backdraft, and eventually simmering to a manageable calm.
Eventually, the riots mushroomed from the suburbs of Paris to all of France.
October 19

- Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy declares a “war without mercy” on violence in the suburbs.

- In reference to the “at-risk” suburbs, Sarkozy says, "I've said they have to be cleaned -- we're going to make them as clean as a whistle," he tells regional police chiefs.
October 25

- During a visit to the Paris suburb of Argenteuil, Sarkozy is pelted with stones and bottles. He describes rebellious youths in such districts as “rabble”.
October 27

• Two boys in the suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, Bouna Traore, a 15 year old, and Zyed Benna, a 17 year old, flee a police identity check. They scale the wall of an electrical relay station and are electrocuted as they try to hide near a transformer. Youths in the suburb, hearing of the deaths, go on a rampage, burning 23 vehicles and vandalizing buildings and hurling stones and bottles at riot police.
The EDF transformer that electrocuted the two teenagers on October 27.

October 28

- 400 youths clash with police in Clichy-sous-Bois, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. 23 officers are hurt and their colleagues fire rubber bullets to push back mobs. 13 people are arrested and 29 vehicles are burned.
October 29

- 500 people march in silence through Clichy-sous-Bois in memory of the dead teenagers.
- Violence resumes at night. 20 vehicles are burned. 9 people are detained.
Riot in Aulnay-sous-Bois
October 30

- Clashes occur on the outskirts of Clichy-sous-Bois. 6 police officers are hurt, 11 people are arrested and eight vehicles are torched. A police teargas grenade hits a mosque, prompting anger among the suburb’s large Muslim community.

- Sarkozy declares “zero tolerance” policy.
October 31

- Clashes between youths and police take place in Clichy-sous-Bois and in surrounding suburbs. 19 people are arrested and 68 vehicles are torched.
November 1

- Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin meets the families of the dead teenagers.
- Riots and clashes erupt in suburbs to the north and west of Paris. Altogether, 180 vehicles are torched and 34 people arrested.

Le Blanc-Mesnil.

Aulnay-sous-Bois, Fifteen cars were torched and police in riot gear fired tear gas and rubber bullets at gangs of angry youths who threw stones at a firehouse and lobbed Molotov cocktails at a town hall annex, according to reports.
November 2

- President Jacques Chirac tells ministers: “Tempers must calm down.”
- De Villepin and Sarkozy cancel overseas trips to deal with the spreading violence.
- The unrest has sparked a war of words between Villepin and his deputy Nicolas Sarkozy ahead of 2007 presidential elections.
- Trouble erupts in 22 suburban towns north, south, east and west of Paris. A handicapped woman suffers severe burns when youths set a bus on fire. Police say 315 vehicles are torched and at least 15 people arrested.
"I speak with real words," Sarkozy told Wednesday's Le Parisien newspaper. "When you fire real bullets at police, you're not a 'youth,' you're a thug."
November 3

- A criminal investigation is opened into the deaths of the two teenagers.
- The riots spread to other areas around France, in Dijon, Marseille, and in Normandy. Seven cars are set on fire in central Paris. In all, 517 vehicles are torched in and around the capital and another 78 people are arrested.
November 4

- Arson hit-and-run attacks take place in suburbs around Paris and other French cities. A total of 897 vehicles are torched and more than 250 people arrested.

Le Bourget
Aubervilliers, north of Paris

Aulnay-sous-Bois

Le Bourget
Trappes, west of Paris
November 5

- Paris Prosecutor General Yves Bot says, “We can see organized actions, a strategy” in the violence.
- The rampages take place in suburbs outside Paris and other cities. At least 70 people are arrested and more than 600 vehicles burned. Police use seven helicopters with lights and cameras to chase fast-moving youths who set fire to property then flee.

Les Mureaux, northwest of Paris.

Aubervilliers
north of Paris
VIOLENCE

Aulnay-sous-Bois

Acheres, west of Paris
November 6

- Rioters fire birdshot at police, wounding 10 officers.
- Most violent night yet, as more than 900 cars are torched.
- Chirac promises to arrest and punish those who “sow violence or fear”.
- Churches are targeted by rioters.

A gymnasium in Noisy-le Grand, east of Paris.
Evreux, 60 miles west of Paris.

Housing complex

Shopping mall

Pharmacy

Video Store

Mayor Jean-Louis Debre outside a destroyed hair salon
Corbeil-Essonnes, south of Paris.

ATM near the broken window of a post office in Évreux
November 7

- De Villepin announces that France will impose curfews under a state of emergency law and call up police reservists to stop the rioting.
- Unrest spreads from Paris's suburbs to nearly 300 cities and towns.

*Image links:*
- Cenon
- Corbeil-Essonnes

*Caption:
Rassemblement, lundi 7 novembre, à Stains (Seine-Saint-Denis), en hommage à Jean-Jacques Le Chenadec, mort, dans la matinée, des suites de blessures infligées par des jeunes gens. Régis Duvignau/Reuters

*Source:* Le Monde, November 9
As police officers guard the National Assembly in Paris, de Villepin speaks to the Parliament about France's state-of-emergency law and extraordinary measures authorized by the French government.

November 8

- Rioters shrug off emergency laws as they continue looting. A newspaper office is torched and France's second-largest subway system hit by a firebomb.
- Chirac's security measures take effect on Wednesday and are valid for a 12-day state of emergency.

Firefighters in Paris's southern suburb of Gentilly extinguish a torched car -- one of 1,173 cars burned overnight in 226 towns nationwide.
The French Cabinet holds a special session, with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, right, and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy present.
November 9

- Authorities say that, although there was still trouble, there is "a very significant drop" in its intensity. Curfews come into force in 32 French towns and cities, under the emergency powers approved by the cabinet.
- Interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy says that non-French nationals convicted over the riots will be deported, drawing a furious reaction from rights groups. The interior ministry later says minors and other categories would be exempt.
VIOLENCES URBAINES : L'ÉTAT D'URGENCE ENTRE EN VIGUEUR

LA RÉPUBLIQUE SE MOBILISE

Le Dauphin, November 9

Douze nuits de violences urbaines

"12 Nights of Urban Violence"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taux de chômage des jeunes (en %, au 2e trimestre 2005)</th>
<th>Part des RMistes par département (en 2004)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yvelines 0,60</td>
<td>Yvelines 0,60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essonne 1,39</td>
<td>Essonne 1,39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seine-et-Marne 1,65</td>
<td>Seine-et-Marne 1,65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val-de-Marne 2,06</td>
<td>Val-de-Marne 2,06</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

France entière : 25,5%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taux de chômage en 2004 (en %)</th>
<th>Zones urbaines sensibles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hommes - 25 ans</td>
<td>Zones urbaines sensibles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femmes - 25 ans</td>
<td>France entière</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Répartition des contrats d'aide à l'emploi (en %)</th>
<th>Contrat emploi solidarité</th>
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<td>Contrat emploi solidarité</td>
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<td>CJE*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contrat jeune en entreprise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>** Contrat initiative emploi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zones urbaines sensibles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France entière</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unemployment hits almost 2 times as many citizens from "at risk" zones, affecting more than one out of 3 youths.

* Le Figaro, November 9
November 11

- Remembrance Day ceremonies in central Paris draw a large police presence, but no trouble is reported. Authorities in the capital use their new powers to ban public meetings, citing internet calls for youths to protest.
convicted foreigners could start on Monday.
The interior ministry says expulsions of
the first clash in the heart of a major city
as to disperse stone-throwing youths, in
Paris is quiet, but in Lyon police use tear

November 12
from the Third World.

Riots are the result of massive immigration. Par-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen says the confident things are returning to normal. Police are meeting during the day. Police are authorities in Lyon impose a ban on public

November 13
Chirac also announced the creation of national Volunteer corps to provide job training for 50,000 youths by 2007.

Beyond 12 days to three months.
State of emergency declared on 9 November.
Chirac said he had asked Parliament to extend a
since the unrest erupted nearly three weeks ago,
Addressing the nation on Monday for the first time.
country's state of emergency for three months.
The French Cabinet approves a bill to extend the

November 14
Les voitures incendiées depuis le 27 octobre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUIT</th>
<th>Véhicules brûlés</th>
<th>Personnes placées en garde à vue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1ère nuit</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2ème nuit</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1 408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3ème nuit</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1 295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4ème nuit</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>897</td>
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<tr>
<td>5ème nuit</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>1173</td>
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<tr>
<td>6ème nuit</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>1 408</td>
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<tr>
<td>7ème nuit</td>
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<td>9ème nuit</td>
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<td>10ème nuit</td>
<td>1 408</td>
<td>2 652</td>
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<tr>
<td>11ème nuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>12ème nuit</td>
<td>840</td>
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<tr>
<td>13ème nuit</td>
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<td>14ème nuit</td>
<td>482</td>
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<td>15ème nuit</td>
<td>463</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16ème nuit</td>
<td>502</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17ème nuit</td>
<td>374</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Depuis le début des violences urbaines, plus de 8 400 véhicules ont été incendiés avec un pic dans la soirée du dimanche 6 au lundi 7 novembre au cours de laquelle 1 408 voitures ont brûlé.

Aujourd'hui, November 14

The graph shows the decrease in the number of cars that were burned.

La carte montre la baisse du nombre de voitures incendiées.
The bill extending emergency powers is approved by the lower house. It is adopted the next day, Wednesday November 16, by the Senate; Sarkozy warns that "nothing has yet been won for good."

Opinion polls show improved ratings for Sarkozy, Villepin and Chirac.
November 17

- The national police service says the situation has returned to normal. The violence has left more than 9,000 vehicles torched, damaged scores of official buildings and led to the arrest of nearly 3,000 people.
November 29

• De Villepin avowed that weeks of violence by thousands of young people in France were not riots but protests by youths who had lost their identities.
Conclusion

Ultimately, the French riots of the fall of 2005 represent the culmination of much discontent that many Americans cannot understand. This was a problem of racism unlike any other that we know. It was an issue of a whole sector of society rebelling. The rapid spread of the violence showed that it was about more than the death of the two teenagers. Unemployment in many of these communities runs at 30 to 40 percent, even higher among young people. The banlieues are monuments to France's failure to integrate large parts of its Muslim population, despite many of them being from families that have lived in France for two or three generations.

How have these riots changed American opinions of France? The negative publicity has distorted an already biased nation to believe that France is deserving of this sort of travesty. Fox News quotes, “It's hard to feel sorry for the French. After all, they certainly don't waste any compassion on Americans.” The explosive coverage of these events by the American media show just to what extent the relationship between these countries has deteriorated.

Overall, the riots paralyzed an entire nation, and the whole world watched while it was happening. Certainly, the strain on the French economy will become evident, and the government must work efficiently to incorporate these citizens while being sensitive to their needs.
Works Cited

All photos and information of the daily events that transpired came from these sources:

**Aujourd'hui** Nov. 2005.


"France on Fire." *Time Magazine*. 7 Nov. 2005


**La Depeche** Nov. 2005.

**Le Dauphin** Nov. 2005.


