Racism: a blind spot in French urban sociology?

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Why has the analysis of interethnic relations been so long ignored by French urban sociology? For Élise Palomares, although the fading memory of the Chicago School's legacy and a partial vision of social relations have meant that racism has been somewhat "off the radar" in France, recent work has opened up new avenues of research.

The city – the destination of predilection for migrants both national and international – is, *par excellence*, a place of social, ethnic and cultural diversity, of everyday experiences of otherness, and also of racism. However, the question of interethnic relations in the city – including racism – was, until recently, still an "unthought" within the French tradition of urban sociology.[1] The term "interethnic" is understood here in the sense of a relational, contextual and constantly evolving approach to ethnicity along a line of thinking inspired by Max Weber, where ethnic groups are formed by the processes that lead individuals to claim for themselves – or assign to other individuals – a common origin (Barth 1965; Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995), whether national, regional, religious and/or cultural, or even "racial" in nature.

What do we mean by the terms "race" and "racial", which still recall the history of slavery, of (de-)colonization and of crimes committed by states with a racial legal structure such as Nazi Germany and Apartheid-era South Africa? Although now rid of its historical pseudo-scientific meaning, the term "race" is nonetheless essential if we are to consider racism from a sociological perspective (Guillaumin 1972, 1994). As a radicalised mode of ethnicisation, "racial" categorisation absolutises differentiation according to one's origin or culture; it makes this differentiation an immutable and definitive category, and implies a final explanatory principle: it naturalises difference (Guillaumin 1972 De Rudder 1991 Fassin and Fassin 2006). Aside from, or in addition to, physical markers (largely manipulable and manipulated), when categorisations by nationality, regional or continental subsets ("Europeans", "Africans", "North Africans", etc.), language ("French-speaking Africans" in South Africa), culture ("Berber", "Chinese"), religion ("Muslim", "Coptic") or place of residence ("cities") are used independently of actual nationalities, migration

[1] For Denys Cuche (2008), the root causes of the tendency for the French social sciences to "lag behind" in general on this issue are both ideological and epistemological. At the ideological level, the myth of a homogeneous and timeless French nation must be considered together with the ideology of a French republic that is "race-blind" and the moralising conception of racism as an individual "evil". At the epistemological level, Durkheim's silence regarding ethnic matters played a key role that was subsequently continued by the predominance of Marxism and then structuralism. We can make the assumption that the appropriation of research on racism and ethnic relations, developed in France since the late 1970s, has been somewhat erratic because many researchers feel uncomfortable with regard to ordinary ethnic categorisations, which they say they find difficult to name and handle, this difficulty being, in reality, inherent in the object.

patterns and diverse forms of socialisation – and, above all, when such categorisations are defined as impenetrable barriers between groups (Simon 1986) – then these categories become euphemisms designating racialised groups, maintained in a context of difference and radical inequality. As "races" are the product of racist relations, quotation marks shall be used when referring to groups constituted in this way.

This article re-examines the curious fate of the legacy of the Chicago sociological tradition in the urban social sciences in France, which has long shed its ethnic and "racial" dimension. Alongside this tradition, many works on the "stranger in town" have been developed in parallel in the context of studies on international migration and interethnic relations. Now that a closer dialogue has been established, what promising areas of research have recently emerged for studying minority issues in the city?

The Chicago sociological tradition: a shared heritage

The birth of the "Chicago sociological tradition" is intimately linked to the study of the relationships between "races" and cultures in the city (Chapoulie 2001), so much so that the emergence of studies into interethnic relations is, in the United States, "contemporary with the institutionalisation of sociology as an academic discipline" (Cuche 2008, p. 44). Originally an Indian territory, Chicago experienced spectacular industrial development and population growth in the second half of the 19th century: its population rose from 4,500 in 1840 to 2.7 million in 1920. The city attracted many European immigrants, joined after 1914 by "Blacks" from the rural southern United States (Chapoulie 2001). In 1919, "race riots" broke out between, broadly speaking, "Whites" back from the war and wanting to return to their pre-war jobs, and the "Blacks" who had replaced them in the factories in their absence. The main "racial" groups in the Chicago tradition are thus derived from the three major generators of minority situations from a socio-historical perspective: colonisation, slavery and international labour migration (Juteau 1999).

Although the socio-historical trajectories of the United States and France are profoundly different (if intimately related), it is nonetheless true that, in specific forms, French history is also marked by slavery, colonisation and labour migration to emerging industrial centres. Scientifically, however, a paradox persists: just as the Chicago School – together with the Marxist urban sociology of the 1970s and ethnology in the city – is forming one of the major references of urban research in the current French social sciences (Hayot 2002), ethnicity, while a central question in the US, has long been conceived in France as an uncritical or even fraudulent importation of a uniquely American school of thought, categorisation and history. More specifically, the three urban sociology and urban anthropology textbooks that appeared almost simultaneously in 2001 and 2002 "all present French urban sociology as a project initiated by Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe between the social morphology of Maurice Halbwachs and the Chicago School" (Blanc 2002).[2]

This is the very same Maurice Halbwachs who – though just back from Chicago and in the process of writing, in Paris, his article opposing the Chicago School, at a time when France had the highest immigration rates in the world – "could not imagine that Paris or any other major French city – Marseille, for example – could constitute such an appropriate laboratory for examining an 'ethnic experience'" (Cuche 2008).[3] Three key components would be taken from the Chicago School: the distribution of social groups in the city, with "natural and moral areas" and the Burgess model of concentric growth; the "urban ethnography" method of fieldwork; and the "personality" of the city-dweller. In the early 2000s, two texts by Jean-Michel Chapoulie would fill this strange void

[2] However, Anne Raulin, in her urban anthropology textbook (2001), does stress the importance of the works of Georges Balandier, beginning with *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* in 1950, and provides a chapter on urban minorities.

[3] Regarding the way in which Halbwachs perceived Chicago and its sociologists during his trip to the city in 1930, see Halbwachs 2012 and Chapoulie 2013.

(Chapoulie 2001, 2002), but these work have found an audience mostly among specialists in the fields of migration and interethnic relations.

A broad consensus exists among authors claiming membership of the field of French urban sociology regarding the absolute necessity to take into account the social structure of places studied. What, however, is meant here by "social structure"? Do social relations among city-dwellers and their relationships to places not depend on their social class, age, gender, household structure and residential trajectories (see, for example, Authier 2001)? And yet an awareness of another dimension, seen as elusive and difficult (or even dangerous) to name, is visible in the embarrassment of researchers – for example, in the use of expressions such as "disadvantaged areas" or "young neighbourhoods", that is to say categories of precisely the practice that amalgamates urban, social and "racial" characteristics, from which the authors seem to distance themselves by using quotation marks, but which are employed nonetheless without always being analysed. What are we to make of the ubiquity and the transversal nature of social categories based on origin – all the more transparent for being self-evident – where the dominant group considers itself to be the norm in terms of nationality, religion, language, culture and skin "colour", from which "other ethnicities" are deemed to deviate to a greater or lesser extent? Would the figures of the bourgeoisie, so thoroughly explored by Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (1989, 2007), be any other colour than "white"?

In the detailed analyses made of the "urban riots" in France in 2005, theoretical tools regarding ethnic relations could have been mobilised in order to avoid the essentialist pitfall (Lagrange 2005) or the relative blindness concerning the importance of "racial" relations in the dynamics of the riots (especially in the seemingly ubiquitous disputes with the police), as illustrated, for example, in the earlier work *Violences urbaines, violence sociale* (Beaud and Pialoux 2003), where "racism" is portrayed as a sort of hostile context but remains largely unexplored as a social relationship. Nevertheless, works such as those by Sylvie Tissot on neighbourhoods as categories of public policy (2007), by Françoise de Barros (2005) on the legacy of colonial classifications in housing policies, and by Olivier Masclet (2003) on the municipal management of immigration in Gennevilliers, in the inner Paris suburbs, would change the way sociology considered France's blighted *banlieues*.[4]

In stark contrast with the self-proclaimed domain of urban sociology (Pribetich 2010), a sociology of international migration, interethnic relations and racism has also developed in a dialogue with the Chicago tradition and, more generally, with English-speaking sociology, from which it has borrowed many of its theoretical tools (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995). Since the late 1970s, a body of French-language literature on interethnic relations and racism has developed, part of which has maintained an ongoing dialogue with urban sociology.

Interethnic relations in the city: from pioneering research in the 1970s to new developments in the 2000s

In France, for some time now, numerous works have been produced in the fields of sociology, anthropology, geography and history on the subject of the "stranger in town". Véronique De Rudder (1990, 1999) has meticulously traced the development of this subject and provides a bibliography that borders on the exhaustive: production begins in the 1970s, often in minor publications and in relative isolation, before taking off in the 1980s, in particular thanks to work on multi-ethnic cohabitation.[5] These studies – today too numerous to review in the context of this article – examine

[4] Regarding current media representations of the *banlieues*, see Rivière and Tissot 2012.

[5] We could cite, for instance, the pioneering works of Abdelkader Belbahri, who, as early as 1984, criticised the mistakes of the "overrepresentation of social housing" in Les Minguettes (in the suburbs of Lyon), those of Gerard Althabe and Monique Selim on the production of foreignness in large social-housing estates (1993), of Nadir Boumaza on Grenoble (1989), of Véronique De Rudder, Michèle Guillon and Isabelle Taboada on the "Triangle de Choisy" and the block of streets around Rue de Chalon in Paris (1986, 1987), of Colette Pétonnet on *bidonvilles*

the settlement of places, the social organisation of these places, their day-to-day life, exploring the relationship between foreigners and French nationals from diverse backgrounds, and between French nationals and those who feel they have "always" been indigenous, in public, commercial and residential spaces. Their authors, in this respect faithful to the Chicago tradition, have concentrated on working-class areas and immigrant neighbourhoods as points of entry for migrants into the city: they have helped to rehabilitate these spaces by demonstrating their role as places of protection and integration, as places of conflict and various compromises, and above all as places where urbanity and the concept of being a city-dweller is continually reinvented.

Of late, significant progress has been made in the dialogue between urban sociology and the sociology of interethnic relations and racism, as evidenced in recent works by urban sociologists. Among these, we might cite the studies conducted within the Observatoire Sociologique du Changement (at Sciences Po Paris), which initially focused on the social division of urban space and which has more recently produced quantitative research on ethno-racial segregation in the Paris region (Préteceille 2009), or on the educational systems in the Paris region and in Chicago, demonstrating in particular a greater institutional ability "to diversify socially, ethnically and 'racially' their elite" in the United States than in France (Oberti 2012). Recent theses on policies encouraging social mix through housing (e.g. Launay 2012) or theses in progress such as that of Marine Bourgeois, which builds upon previous research into policies for the allocation of social housing, explore as their main focus the intermingling of social categories and of "racial" categories, this intermingling being an essential part of the credo of diversity.

Anthropological research on cities has also given rise to renewed crossover between the sociology of migration and urban anthropology: in an article on the concept of "urban minorities", Anne Raulin (2009) looks back on a long tradition of research concerned with concrete aspects of urbanity and attentive to the invention of the city by city-dwellers themselves (Agier 1999). In sum, it would appear that it is no longer tenable to adopt a position that seeks to avoid ethnic and "racial" issues – and the common categories that result from them in practice – by insisting on using categories such as "working and immigrant classes", which are generally inadequate for taking account of the complex inequalities and power relations between social groups underlying the dynamics of ethnic boundaries (Jounin, Palomares and Rabaud 2008).

Racism in the day-to-day functioning of the city and its institutions: potential future lines of research

Unprecedented developments could arise by continuing the empirical and theoretical exploration of the social relations of "race" in the city. With regard to housing, there are a number of notable works on discrimination in access to social housing (Ménard, Simon and Palomares 1999; Simon and Kirszbaum 2001; Tissot 2005; Pan Ké Shon 2010), or the "common spaces of decolonised immigrants" (Bernardot 2008) that are detention centres and temporary accommodation. The ethnographic studies by Pascale Dietrich-Ragon and Florence Bouillon (2012) on squats in Paris reveal the close interdependencies between the situations of "squatters" "illegal immigrants" and "Africans". Attention to racism in interethnic relations and gender relations sheds new light on neighbourly relations (Tissot 2011), people's relationship to their neighbourhood of residence, and forms of urban mobility (Le Renard 2011). Aude Rabaud (2002), for instance, shows how, in a social-housing district in the Bordeaux suburbs, the ethnicised categories of "dads", "mums" and "people from the towers" regularly feature in condescending injunctions, which must be dealt with by the residents thus targeted on a day-to-day basis in urban public spaces. Élise Lemercier (2010)

(shanty towns) (1985), of Anne Raulin on "Little Asia" in Paris (2001), of Patrick Simon on Belleville, also in Paris (1995), of Christian Poiret on the communalisation of African families (1996), or of Christian Rinaudo (1999) on casual ethnic categorisation on a social-housing estate in the south of France (1999). Various journals have published articles on the theme of ethnic cohabitation (for instance, issue 45 of *Espaces et Sociétés*, published in 1984).

describes urban mobility practices that enable emotional or sexual encounters between young descendants of North African migrants, preferably outside the neighbourhood of residence. Between the importance attached on virginity before marriage – which has become an emblem of their community (Tersigni 2001) – and the overriding pressure on young North African women to engage in premarital sexual experimentation, the author shows how a shopping centre, described in the words of the interviewees (male and female) as the "pick-up joint for the whole city" has become a place of cultural reinvention, making it possible for young men and women to meet and engage in relationships "while waiting for" (or in order to meet) their "future husband" or "future wife", away from the gaze of others.

These works are innovative because they take account of the racism present in the day-to-day functioning of democratic societies. While it is true that "race" has no legal existence in France, the categorisation and differentiated and unequal treatment of social actors, based on their presumed or attributed "racial" origin, are very much present in day-to-day social relations such as the routine operation of institutions, although not necessarily accompanied by doctrinal racism. This perspective, observed in France by Colette Guillaumin (1972, 1994) and by Véronique De Rudder, François Vourc'h and Christian Poiret (2000), prompts us to ask ourselves how urban forms, lifestyles, segregation processes, the political organisation of the city[6] and the relationships between city-dwellers express, pass on, shift, reinforce, or relax "racial" boundaries, in conjunction with the social relations of class and gender (Palomares and Testenoire 2010). These boundaries have dimensions that are both mental (ideologies, categorisations and representations) and material (inequalities, discrimination, segregation, violence) that here are explored together.

The study of the local urban management of minorities is a very good indicator of the spatial dimension of policies and attitudes regarding relations to the "other", theorised by anthropologist Pierre-Jean Simon (2006).[7] In the course of research in this connection, focusing on the relationships between the municipal council and local associations in a former "red" (communist) suburb of Paris in the early 2000s, I highlighted a process of ethnicisation of social relations and local policies, despite a French context where the use of ethnic categories is officially prohibited. With the end of the "working-class city", the class struggle no longer plays a dominant role in the definition of collective and individual identities; ideals of solidarity and anti-racism subsequently occupy a central position in the construction of a new local identity local, that of the "global city". This shift has been accompanied by a redefinition of immigration as "the public problem" at national and local level, lumping together "social issues", "immigrants and their descendants" and the residential concentration of the latter in the "*banlieues*".

Schematically speaking, two local examples of "strangers" have followed one another: the first concerned migrants from France's (ex-)colonies, who became low-level workers in mainland France (with equal rights to avoid any competition with French workers), and European political exiles, who became comrades. The second emerged in the 1970s with the end of the "working-class city"; and is based on the promotion of an ethno-cultural definition of local belonging, in which "new" migrants are defined as bearers of "different cultures" from those of the native population. The production of local "nativeness" does not depend on the duration of residence: as it is linked to national identification, it reproduces the ambivalences of this identity and also has a very real administrative manifestation, the discriminatory effects of which can be seen in the way social housing is allocated and in policies that call for the demolition of temporary accommodation. In this movement, the process of minoritisation of migrants from former colonies and their offspring takes the form of a well-meaning collective concern: in the city studied, "Malians" have gradually been

[6] We invite readers to refer to recent works on institutionalised racism in the city (Eberhard and Simon 2012).

[7] Taking as his starting point their ethnocentrism – a necessary but not always sufficient condition for triggering aggressive behaviours – Pierre-Jean Simon maps relational attitudes and policies according to two axes: the first horizontal, representing cultural difference (from the maintenance of difference at one end to the disappearance of differences at the other) and the second vertical, representing hierarchy (from inequality of humans at one end to total equality at the other). From here, four basic orientations are possible; racism is the one that combines the maintenance of difference and inequality of humans.

institutionalised as a group that poses a specific social problem because of a supposed cultural distance, requiring affirmative action to promote their "integration".

Contrary to a commonly held view that local authorities are apparently now having to deal with a "new ethnic situation" linked to "non-European" migration,[8] this research shows that not only are institutions not "blind" to people's origins, but they in fact perpetuate, or even produce, ethnic and "racial" categories on a day-to-day basis, through local policies that aim to manage unemployment or which support gentrification; in the allocation of housing; in community work; or in participatory measures (Palomares 2005, 2008; Palomares and Rabaud, 2006). Finally, while the racialisation of people designated as originating from sub-Saharan Africa appears to be particularly strong, the ethnic and "racial" boundaries that are emerging are not fixed: they evolve with the conflicts, alliances, resistance, reinterpretations and circumventions that come into play every day, both in the city and on the subject of the city, between elected officials, associations and party-political movements. For example, the position of "North Africans" has changed in this particular local context: while they might be the very embodiment of immigrants in neighbouring suburbs, their "ranking" is modified here as a result of the greater visibility of (sub-Saharan) "Africans".

The tools and concepts forged over more than three decades of analysis of interethnic relations and international migration have therefore been spreading in recent years, and provide opportunities for research in the French urban sociology. These tools should enable researchers to revisit the traditional objects of the discipline, such as the relationships between landlords and tenants, residential trajectories, urban public spaces and the localised study of social classes, especially the upper middle classes. While discrimination in access to social housing is relatively well-documented, further work could be undertaken on access to privately rented housing. These observations – taken seriously in spite (or even by dint) of their sociological banality – do, however, imply rethinking the dominant theoretical and empirical approach to urban issues, by taking into account more effectively, and in a more coordinated manner, the spatial dimensions of gender relations, ethnic relations and class relations, all inextricably linked, which are the driving force of social differentiation and hierarchisation.

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[8] With regard to the conventional wisdom that holds that cultures and traditions are supposedly more distant for "non-European" immigrants, the historian Gérard Noiriel (1984) recalled that the distancing of Poles and Spaniards was based on the idea that their "retrograde" Catholicism was incompatible with the "enlightened" Catholicism of the French; and yet this same Catholicism is today presented as an explanation for the "easier" integration of Poles and Spaniards.

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