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Translator's Introduction

In the fall of 2005 widespread disorders broke out in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Paris and other major French cities. Prominent among those who took to the streets were minority ethnic youths who torched thousands of cars and attacked police stations and other public buildings. The political controversy generated by the disorders quickly pitted the ambitious center-right interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, against a new member of the government, Azouz Begag, France's first-ever cabinet minister of North African immigrant origin. Angered by Sarkozy's dismissal of disruptive youths as *racaille* [scum], Begag insisted on the need to understand the long-standing social and ethnic tensions in which the disturbances were rooted.¹ Just days before joining the government in June 2005, Begag had, in fact, completed

a manuscript in which he conducted precisely such an analysis, laying bare the festering social and ethnic injustices that only a few months later were to plunge France into its most serious civil disturbances in almost forty years. In the wake of the riots Begag complemented the typescript with a preface highlighting the intimate connections between those disorders and the deep-seated malaise that he had analyzed just a few months earlier. It is that manuscript, previously unpublished, that is presented here, translated into English.

Begag, a leading sociologist and best-selling novelist, has for more than twenty years been researching and writing on the evolution of French society in the light of immigration from former colonial territories. He has also lived that evolution personally since his birth in 1957 to Algerian immigrant parents in the city of Lyon. His childhood years in a shantytown there were described in his autobiographical novel *Le Gone du Chaâba* [Shantytown kid], first published in 1986.² His work as a sociologist has been constantly informed by his unfettered access to disadvantaged minority ethnic groups concentrated in stigmatized urban areas commonly referred to as the *banlieues*. It was here that the disorders of 2005 erupted. Just as, in his literary and sociological writings, Begag had drawn extensively on his firsthand knowledge of the banlieues, so, while Sarkozy sent in the riot police to quell the disorders, Begag threw off his security escort to walk unaccompanied and unannounced through the burning hoods in order to see for himself what was happening. What he saw confirmed what he had written only a few months earlier: that entrenched socioeconomic inequalities compounded by widespread ethnic discrimination and decades of political neglect had bred

a subgroup of disaffected youths whose resentment was such that they were ready to erupt into violence at the slightest provocation.

These youths—mainly teenagers and almost exclusively male—can best be understood as part of a third generation among minority ethnic populations rooted in immigration from former French colonies, especially those in former French North Africa, a region also known as the Maghreb. The first generation—migrant workers (mainly male) and their spouses—began settling in France in significant numbers during the 1960s. The second generation, born in France of immigrant parents, reached adulthood during the 1980s, when those of North African origin—among them, Begag—became known as *Beurs*. The third generation have been born in France since the mid-1980s. Not all of the third generation are of Maghrebi origin; growing numbers are of West African, Caribbean, or other non-European ancestry. Neither are they all in the strict biological sense third generation, that is, the grandchildren of migrants. Some are the children of migrants who entered France as recently as fifteen or twenty years ago, while others are the youngest children of older migrant parents with large families in which the age gap between the oldest and the youngest children can in some cases be twenty years or more. What distinguishes this third generation is that, unlike the first two, it has never known anything other than the ethnically stigmatized environment into which it was born, and many of its members are convinced that there is no hope of their ever escaping from the banlieues.

Migrants, by contrast, regarded France as a land of opportunity, one that they frequently compared with

their country of origin, to which (paradoxically in some ways) many dreamed of returning. As children, the second generation saw their migrant fathers defined by the jobs they had found in a French economy experiencing labor shortages during a period of rapid economic growth. When they came of age in the 1980s amid the onset of rising unemployment, this second generation had a reference point from which to hope for better prospects, and many believed that, if they used the rights of citizenship that they (unlike their immigrant parents) enjoyed, they could advance in French society. But, with the almost uninterrupted rise of unemployment experienced in France during the final quarter of the twentieth century and the disproportionate impact of this arising from discrimination against minority ethnic groups, the third generation, which grew up during the 1990s, has had neither the firsthand memory of a worse past (the poverty of their parents' or grandparents' country of origin) on the basis of which to count their blessings nor the memory of a better past (a period when jobs were plentiful) to serve as a reference point for future hopes. Instead, theirs is the flat horizon of teenagers who have seen their fathers and/or older brothers largely excluded from the labor market and can see little if any reason to suppose that better prospects await them.

It is on the members of this third generation that Begag focuses in this new book. To describe them he invents the neologism *jeunes ethniques* [young ethnics], which served as the title of his original manuscript. The innovative use of the word *ethnic* as a noun rather than as an adjective signals both the pertinence and the peculiar role of ethnicity in shaping the experiences of these youths when compared with the generations that

preceded them. Before moving to France migrants internalized the cultural norms of their home country, which they would attempt to transmit to the children they were to raise in France. Possessing a strong sense of ethnic identification with their country of origin, they were hampered in their efforts to transmit those feelings by limited cultural skills (most Maghrebi migrants, for example, were illiterate) and by the preeminence of majority ethnic cultural norms in French educational, media, and other institutions, which deeply affected their children, weakening their identification with the homeland of the older generation. Among the grandchildren of migrants, familiarity with the cultural heritage of the land from which their ancestors came is weaker still. But this does not prevent them from being ethnicized by members of the majority ethnic population, in whose eyes swarthy skins, Arabic names, or other signs of non-European ancestry are regarded as synonymous with layers of cultural alterity that necessarily place those concerned outside, if not, indeed, in outright opposition to, mainstream French society.

This kind of ethnicization, in which majority ethnic observers project onto minority ethnic youths barriers that are more imagined than real, is apt to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for those who are stigmatized in this way may be tempted to respond by displaying hostility toward those who reject them, even if they have little or no alternative sense of belonging beyond the confines of their local neighborhood and only the loosest of affiliations with the homelands of their migrant ancestors. It was precisely this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that erupted on the streets of the banlieues in the fall of 2005.

Author's Preface

When I became minister for equal opportunities in June 2005, I did not know that the government in which I had agreed to serve would be faced a few months later with the most serious civil disturbances seen in France in almost forty years. But, when the disorders broke out in the fall of 2005, I knew what lay behind them, for, shortly before entering the government, I had painted a portrait of the young men from whose ranks the rioters were to come and invented a name for them: *jeunes ethniques* [young ethnics]. That portrait, based on my work as a sociologist and many years of firsthand experience in the disadvantaged urban areas known as the *banlieues*, lay at the heart of a book manuscript that I completed in May 2005. When I gave the typescript to my friend Alec Hargreaves, he proposed to translate it for English-speaking

readers, and I immediately agreed. Neither of us imagined that, even before the ink was dry on the translation, the government in which I was about to serve would be forced to declare a state of emergency in response to widespread attacks by groups of young ethnics on police and public buildings in the banlieues. Yet those attacks came as no surprise to me, for they were rooted in the alienation and anger that I had highlighted among young ethnics toward the more favored and powerful parts of French society.

I call these youths *young ethnics* because they are the children or grandchildren of immigrants from former French colonies who have been stigmatized by members of the majority ethnic population, many of whom feel that people of non-European origin do not deserve to be treated as equal members of French society. Young ethnics are, in that sense, ethnicized. But this does not mean that they are themselves motivated by a desire to perpetuate an ethnic or cultural identity inherited from their immigrant parents or grandparents. On the contrary, they are far more attached to the material values dominant in French society than to the Islamic heritage of migrant forebears from former French colonies in North or West Africa. During the fall 2005 disturbances, a number of prominent intellectuals and politicians blamed the disorders on Islam. Such claims were quite unfounded. The police, intelligence services, and mainstream media all reported that there was no evidence of an Islamic agenda among the rioters. Where Islamic organizations intervened, it was to urge an end to the violence, not to stoke it. Few, if any, of the rioters said that their aims were Islamic. In fact, very few of the rioters were quoted in the mainstream media as saying

anything at all. This was not simply because mainstream journalists lacked contacts among young ethnics. More fundamentally, it was because the young ethnics who had taken to the streets were generally poorly educated and lacked the training, experience, and leadership with which to articulate a coordinated set of demands. Exactly as I had said in the portrait I had painted, their frustration over ethnic discrimination and social marginalization was such that they were liable to erupt into violence at the slightest provocation, especially if it came from the police. When two of their number died while fleeing a police identity check and the government minister in charge of the French police described disruptive youths in the banlieues as *racaille* [scum], their seething resentment exploded in cities throughout France.

The task we now face is to reconstruct the Republic. That reconstruction is a double process. We must first understand how the Republic came to this pass and then find the tools with which to repair it.

French politicians have often prided themselves on the supposedly unique virtues of their “republican” model of integration, which they have frequently contrasted with the ills attributed to so-called Anglo-Saxon (i.e., American and British) approaches to “race” relations. The events of 2005 demonstrated the illegitimacy of this arrogance. As a citizen, as a writer, and as a sociologist, I have learned much from the United States, especially where the experiences of minorities are concerned. As a teenager at junior high school in my hometown, Lyon, the first book that moved me to tears was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Its poverty-stricken and generous African American protagonist reminded me of my father. And in reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* I also recognized myself

for the first time as a person of color, though I already knew that I was an Arab—and, of course, French. In the 1980s I was one of many young people of North African origin in France who found inspiration in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. In 1983 Martin Luther King's nonviolent campaign for equal rights directly inspired what became known as the *Marche des Beurs*, the first nationwide demonstration for equal rights by young people of North African origin, popularly known as *Beurs*.

Unlike the United States, France never instituted slavery on its own soil. But in parts of France's colonial empire slavery flourished until 1848, almost as late as in the United States, and in other colonies, such as Algeria, right through until the middle of the twentieth century, France practiced forms of institutional racism that were similar in spirit to segregation in the American South. It was to escape the poverty and injustice of colonial Algeria that, in 1947, my father left his native village near the city of Sétif to seek better economic opportunities as an immigrant worker in the French city of Lyon. His trajectory was not dissimilar to the Great Migration of African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century, which took them from the rural South to Northern industrial cities such as Chicago and Detroit.

When desegregation came in the United States, opening the way for policies of integration and, later, affirmative action, the effects of those policies were felt not only in the South, where racism had been institutionalized by the state, but also in the North, where other forms of discrimination were present. When, at almost exactly the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, decolonization in the South brought an end to insti-

tutionalized racism in North Africa and other former French colonies, no comparable measures were taken to address racism in the North, in France itself. No one at that time expected that France would become the home of sizable immigrant minorities originating in former colonies. And, when those minorities did settle there, politicians in France went into denial. Those on the extreme right—Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Front National—denied that those minorities had any right to be in France and called for their forced repatriation to North Africa. More mainstream politicians called for their integration, but on the condition that they became, in effect, invisible. They could stay in France provided that they became so completely French that no one would notice them. They did become French, both in terms of citizenship and to a large extent in terms of culture. Yet, no matter how French they became, their swarthy skins and Arabic names made them the targets of widespread discrimination by members of the majority ethnic population. For many years, mainstream politicians denied or minimized the existence of ethnic discrimination. As the Republic's constitution and laws banned discrimination, the matter was considered closed. Yet what good is the theoretical principle of equality, consecrated in the motto of the Republic ("Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"), if in practice it is flouted every day in the lived experience of countless citizens?

Only recently has it been acknowledged that the failure to enforce antidiscrimination laws has called into question the credibility of the republican credo. As minister for equal opportunities, I have been attempting to close this gap through the Equal Opportunities Law of 2006, which provides better job opportunities for young

people in the banlieues and gives new teeth with which to enforce antidiscrimination laws.¹

The measures now being taken will not solve at a stroke the problems that, sadly, have become endemic in French society. It will take years to repair the consequences of decades of political neglect. During the period immediately following the Second World War, the French enjoyed what they came to look back on nostalgically as *les trente glorieuses*, thirty glorious years of economic expansion and near full employment. During that period economic migrants were actively sought in response to labor shortages in France. Many came from colonial or former colonial territories in Africa and elsewhere. The economic slowdown that began with the oil shocks of the 1970s gave rise to what I call *les trente calamiteuses*, thirty disastrous years of high unemployment and economic insecurity in which the children and grandchildren of migrants, especially those originating in the Islamic world, were treated as suspect or illegitimate parts of French society. It is now time to inaugurate *les trente prometteuses*, thirty promising years for which it is our responsibility to prepare the way by removing the obstacles and injustices placed in the path of minority ethnic citizens. A France that turns its back on diversity is a nation unfaithful to the principles of the Republic. A Republic that embraces and celebrates diversity is the harbinger of a richer and stronger France.

FEBRUARY 2006

Introduction

Welcome to France

I love Switzerland. One morning, I arrived cheerily at the train station in Geneva with my usual Arab face and little black briefcase. The previous evening I had recorded an interview for a literary program on Swiss television about my much-commented-on success story in French society. Now I was ready to take the 10:30 train back home to Lyon. The sky was blue except for a few clouds in the east.

At 10:15 precisely I presented myself at the French customs post through which passengers had to pass before boarding the train. My only luggage was the little black plastic briefcase that I had picked up at a recent conference on the topic of “frontiers” at the University of Toulouse. It contained a few overnight toiletries and three books. Following in line behind a mixture of French and

Swiss passengers, I entered a narrow corridor at the end of which two customs officers, one male and one female, were taking a close look at the people filing past them. A third officer was holding on a leash a dog trained in the detection of drugs. I moved forward. I bade a routine good day to the inspectors; then suddenly, just as I was about to move past their gaze, they both ordered me to halt and blocked my passage by standing in front of me as if a drawbridge had suddenly dropped down. I stopped dead, then smiled. For a moment they seemed a little embarrassed to have acted in exactly the same way at exactly the same moment. Their professional reflexes were no doubt primed to sniff out suspicious characters like me. With an ironic exclamation I made light of their overzealous synchronization and let them do their work. The woman started asking me questions. Looking me straight in the eye, she asked if I had anything to declare, valuables or sums of money exceeding seventy-five hundred euros. Looking her straight back in the eye, I immediately replied that I had nothing of any kind to declare. Otherwise I would have done so . . .

Now came a heavy, innuendo-filled silence. She seemed to be wondering what to do next. Should she believe me and let me go on my way or dive in, indicating that she had doubts? I could see her eyes focusing on my little briefcase. She asked me the purpose of my visit to Geneva. I said that I had been invited to appear on Swiss television to talk about my work as a writer. My poor little briefcase was still in her sights. I said my train was due to leave in ten minutes. She finally made her mind up and, feigning interest in my literary career, politely asked me to follow her to a cubicle so that a search could be conducted. She opened my briefcase. She ran

her fingers through the books and a few papers, opened my toiletries bag, closed it again, then opened an empty envelope stuffed in among everything else. There were no banknotes and no drugs. She closed my briefcase and looked at me. I didn't say a word. Then, with the same meticulous professionalism, she asked to see my wallet. I jumped. My wallet? But I don't have a wallet! I never carry one. All I have is my identity card to prove where I'm from. The customs lady was surprised. Well, well, a passenger without a wallet. Strange, very strange . . . So where does he keep his money? Another long, heavy silence. To my astonishment she pushed her luck further and asked if she could feel my overcoat. I felt furious. She was determined to uncover the little something her razor-sharp flair had instinctively sensed was there. Her fingers worked through the pockets and every nook and cranny of my coat. Nothing. She was forced to give up.

There were only a few minutes left before my train, so there was no point getting angry. So why on earth did I suddenly explode? I couldn't restrain myself any more. I told the lady that, since she had asked about my work, she might be interested to know my politico-literary specialization was, in fact, antidiscrimination policy, if she could see what I meant. She remained unmoved. No, she couldn't see what I meant at all. So then, overwhelmed with anger, and trembling with rage, I shouted that I had just been awarded the Legion of Honor by the president of France and that . . . But she simply shrugged her shoulders. So what? Did that excuse me from the same border checks as everyone else? By now I was choking with rage. "That is not the issue, Madame. What I'm telling you is that the swarthy-skinned suspect whose plastic briefcase you've just searched has been publicly honored by the

nation and won't hesitate to make use of that distinction to draw the attention of the public to the dirty little discriminatory practice to which you've just submitted him." I pointed out that she and her colleague had both reacted simultaneously when they saw me and that their clumsy synchronization indicated an intolerable type of profiling. It was no coincidence, I shouted, that the only person pulled out of the line was me, the only *Beur* [second-generation Maghrebi], complete with regulation swarthy skin. That was exactly what I shouldn't have said to her. Her colleague came up. I whispered that I felt ashamed for them, the way their arbitrary, capricious, and utterly irrational inner alarm bells had been triggered by my foreign-looking face. Annoyed by these impertinent remarks, the customs lady took my identity card and disappeared into an office from which she re-emerged two minutes later. She gave the card back to me. I supposed she must have taken a photocopy. She was determined to show me that she was the one who held the power, notably that of making me late for my train. I had two minutes left. Nursing my wounded Legion of Honor, I took back my identity card and ran for my train. I leaped aboard just as the doors were closing.

I was on my way back to France, on my way back home. Could I really call it home? I felt disgusted. I told myself to forget all about it and drop the matter; there was no point spending my life fighting such stupidity. I slumped in my seat and drank the bitter cup to the end. I was tired. Maybe I was paranoid, but in that case every other swarthy immigrant and the swarthy sons and daughters of every swarthy immigrant had the right to be paranoid too. As the train followed the meandering gray waters of the Rhône, I nodded off. "Bellegarde!

Bellegarde! Two-minute stop!” The name of the town awoke me with a start. “Belle Garde!” [On Guard!]. It was a sign. I sat up in my seat. Yes, I would keep up my guard. No, I wouldn’t keep quiet. I wouldn’t let the matter drop. My name is Azouz, diminutive of Aziz. I am a French citizen, born in the third arrondissement of Lyon, and regard myself as the spiritual son of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. I loathe racism and discrimination, and I want to live free from such scourges. I’ll make sure that there’s an inquiry into the behavior of the French customs officers at the train station in Geneva. I know perfectly well that they’ll deny the facts, that they’ll claim that I was treated “just like everyone else.” My complaint won’t get anywhere. In spite of that, I write my complaint and send it off, like a bottle thrown into the ocean, an act of resistance.