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From Oakland, Lessons for France:
Review of *la Couleur du pouvoir*

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Scarcely a third of a mile from the south entrance of UC Berkeley's football stadium lies a quiet neighborhood of pricey homes, each individually built to fit into its particular angle of Panoramic Hill, boasting marvelous views across the bay into downtown San Francisco and out to the Golden Gate. Wandering around, one might sense a danger

from fire, or earthquakes, or from veering off one of the narrow winding roads. But for the image of an oak tree on the street signs, it would be absolutely impossible to guess that one has entered a city with one of the highest rates of violent crime in the United States.

Oakland, California, does not lend itself to simple descriptions, and it is therefore a considerable accomplishment that Frédéric Douzet's excellent book achieves an understanding of this diverse polity. Separately analyzing the city's neighborhoods and ethnic groups, then looking at their interactions and resulting public policy, this work makes an important contribution to the study of urban politics. For readers interested in the Bay Area, *The Colors of Power* provides invaluable insight into a poorly under-

* To be published in English as "The Colors of Power" by the University of Virginia Press. John Hanley is a graduate student in political science at UC Berkeley. His current research includes a project with Frédéric Douzet attempting to measure the spatial concentration of minority groups in France.

stood community, as well as into the relationship between the city and its larger metropolitan area. A professor at the University of Paris-8, Douzet brings to this task an external perspective and innovative questions, strengthened by close familiarity with the area (including a degree from Berkeley's journalism school) and personal interviews with many influential Oakland figures. What emerges is a cautionary tale about the limits of power and the fragility of multicultural and multiracial coalitions.

The seeds of Oakland's racial politics go back to the early 20th century, when black Pullman car porters, attracted by climate and proximity to the end of the railroad line, settled in West Oakland. The city's black population rose again during World War II, as blacks arrived to fill jobs in war industries. After the war, this community increased due both to natural growth and black migration from around the country. Oakland's politics, however, made little concession to this growing population. Though members of the city council lived in and "represented" districts, they were chosen by the entire city electorate, meaning that the city's majority-white population could elect white candidates even from districts that were heavily black. As a result, by the early 1970s blacks constituted 40 percent of Oakland's residents, but only one out of the eight members of the council. Such an arrangement, needless to say, did little to address the needs of African Americans. From the war years, when factory workers slept on the streets due to

lack of housing, to the '60s and '70s, as the city dragged its feet in spending federal housing dollars and integrating the municipal workforce, the white political elite took scant interest in improving conditions for black residents. The story of how Oakland's racial tensions boiled over in the 1960s is an interesting one, but in Douzet's focus the important date is 1977, when Lionel Wilson was elected the city's first black mayor. This achievement, followed by victory in another council seat in 1979, set Oakland's black community on the path towards winning influence throughout the city's institutions.

The 1980s, however, would hit Oakland hard. Beset by a drop in property taxes, white flight, and a general decline in the manufacturing sector, Oakland saw only a 1.5 percent increase in the number of jobs for the entire period between 1981 and 1991, compared with over 30 percent in the rest of the county. Douzet punts on whether economics and a precarious racial balance doomed Oakland to a sharp decline during this period, or whether the city missed opportunities to stem the tide of businesses departing for other locations. In any case, the advances of African Americans in city government brought relatively little improvement to the communities in Oakland's "flatlands" that had suffered political and economic neglect under white control of the city.

Meanwhile, demographic changes were occurring in Oakland that would soon weaken black influence and ush-

er in an era of multiracial governance in the city. While the proportion of whites in Oakland continued to decline in the 1980s, the trend slowed, undoubtedly due in considerable part to a large stock of desirable homes in the Oakland Hills, geographically insulated from the difficulties of the flatlands. Meanwhile, the city's Asian-American and Latino populations expanded considerably, trimming the African-American population from 47 percent of the city total in 1980 to 43 percent in 1990 (and just over 30 percent by the 2006 census estimate). For black electoral strength in Oakland, this development was especially threatening, for emergence of other geographically concentrated *minority* groups triggered provisions of the Voting Rights Act, ensuring that these new groups be given an undiluted voice in electing district representatives to Oakland's city council.

The fight for the representation of these new groups in the 1993 redistricting of the Oakland City Council is the turning point in Douzet's story. Redistricting, for all of its consequence in American politics, rarely makes good drama for those not immediately involved, but Douzet's treatment of this episode draws the reader's interest all the way through (and even to a quick Google search for what a few of the more colorful characters have been up to since). However peculiar to Oakland the twists and turns of this saga, it is nearly impossible not to find parallels in this dispute to the conduct of local government nationwide: cringe-inducing community activists, mobilization of eth-

nic-based groups, doubts about the ability of the redistricters to abide by judicial decisions—none out of place in the operations of local governments across the country. By the time the dust settles, both Asian Americans and Latinos are strengthened by the creation of districts in which their groups formed a plurality and where a white/Asian/Latino coalition would translate into an electoral majority. In a way, fate had played a cruel joke on the black community: their political influence, held back for decades, ran aground due to a federal law intended to help blacks and which, had it been around in the 1940s, might have led to significant assistance to the black community during those crucial decades.

Almost instantly, the ethnic dynamic of Oakland's politics shifted from a white-black divide to a multi-ethnic one. A declining number of African-American representatives on the city council and the election of Jerry Brown in 1998 stalled attempts to increase black representation in positions of influence throughout Oakland. Instead, the city's various ethnic communities were forced to accommodate one another's aims and projects. This political equilibrium was not simply a function of raw ethnic percentages, but also of patterns of residential settlement, and of federal law. No better proof is needed for why the geographical settlement patterns of different groups are consequential.

From the redistricting chapter, Douzet moves on to discuss education and crime; these chapters are likely to be

more compelling to foreign readers who are less familiar with American patterns of urban dysfunction. A theme of this section is that multi-ethnic politics in an environment like Oakland's has a tendency to degenerate into a series of negotiated settlements across ethnic groups, as opposed to unity that assesses problems in priority of urgency. Douzet cites as an example of this the controversy over the Oakland Unified School District's 1996 vote to recognize Ebonics as a primary (and "genetically based") language. The infamous proposal—which won the votes of the board's white, Latino, and Asian members—sought to strengthen efforts to build proficiency in standard English among black students. By recognizing Ebonics as a separate language, Oakland hoped to secure more federal education funding. But the rawness of the proposal's claims brought nationwide ridicule and indignation from prominent African Americans. The lesson from this episode is that the school board was willing to accept practically *any* solution that would allow it to avoid undertaking a politically difficult reallocation of resources within the district. Douzet's critique is that Oakland's division of power among groups leads to this type of outcome, rather than setting institutional priorities in order of a group-neutral urgency. It might be said that this critique is very French, as it appears to require the benevolent guidance of a higher level of government: in this case, state or federal government.

But what if benevolence is not forthcoming? Douzet's final verdict on the American experience of race, space, and politics is split: on one hand, acknowledgement of America's ability to integrate new immigrants into the nation's economic and political life; on the other, doubt concerning the prospects of those African Americans who live in the nation's most vulnerable communities. France's predicament lies between the two scenarios posed: recent immigrants do not face the history of institutional racism undergone by American blacks, yet few would argue that France embraces (or even accepts) its recent immigrants to nearly the degree that Americans do. It seems logical that if understanding and accommodation are to occur, however, this is more likely to happen at local levels than with the direction of national government. Local government may lack the ability to confront the big, expensive problems, yet the opportunities for close contact and cultural understanding at the local level nourish solutions to other (no less important) problems of societal integration. But at present, France has been unable to profit from the natural advantage its statist orientation would seem to have in solving the big, expensive problems associated with the integration of its black and North African populations. Why not? France barely knows who belongs to these groups, as it collects data only on country of origin, hampering its ability to understand ethnic neighborhoods composed

of first- and second-generation immigrants. Thus, a completely informed discussion of ethnicity and social problems in France remains *bloquée*. Douzet and a number of other French scholars have been prodding the French government to break with its longstanding practice of not collecting census data, hoping to permit quantification of the ethnic composition of neighborhoods in the same way that the U.S. Census allows for quantitative analysis of race and national origin in municipalities. France's Commissioner for Diversity and Equal Opportunity proposed such a change last month, but popular support runs 55 percent against collection of ethnic data.

Supposing though, a France that loosens its republican model sufficiently to permit consideration of ethnicity, it remains to be seen whether France will maintain its strong institutions, or whether fragmentation will make the state a less relevant actor. From this side of the Atlantic, the election of Barack Obama may reduce the volume of group-based politics in the United States, opening the door for more technocratic problem-solving. Both countries may be tiptoeing towards the middle ground Douzet envisages, but only time will tell whether either is able to develop the tools it needs to balance flexibility with effective action as it confronts social and economic problems within the context of a multicultural state.