

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

From Ferguson to France

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96g6n8kh>

Journal

Contexts, 14(1)

ISSN

1536-5042

Author

Beaman, Jean

Publication Date

2015-02-01

DOI

10.1177/1536504214567852

Peer reviewed

from ferguson to france

by jean beaman

In August 2014, Darren Wilson, a White police officer, shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American in Ferguson, Miss., a suburb of St. Louis. Wilson and another police officer had stopped Brown and a friend as they were walking to Brown's grandmother's house. The young men were told to get off the street. Eyewitness accounts varied, but some say Brown was holding his hands up in surrender when Wilson shot him multiple times. Brown's dead body lay in the street for four hours. After a candlelight vigil, residents and others marched. Many held their hands up in the "don't shoot" gesture bystanders saw Brown use, while one officer was overheard referring to the protestors as "f-cking animals." In the months that have followed, since a grand jury declined to indict Wilson in Brown's death and have cleared others in similar cases around the country, police officers in Ferguson and elsewhere have met protestors in riot gear. An officer in Oakland, CA was accused of inciting looting while undercover at a protest of police killings of civilians, then turning his weapon on reporters photographing the scene.

Compare that with the following: In October of 2005, Zyed Benna, a 17-year-old of Tunisian origin, and Bouna Traore, a 15-year-old of Malian origin, were electrocuted in an electricity substation as they fled police in the Parisian *banlieue*, or suburb, of Clichy-sous-Bois. They were apparently trying to avoid police identity checks targeted toward youths. A few days later, police emptied a tear-gas grenade inside a local mosque and refused to apologize. These events led to uprisings throughout France's *banlieues*. The protests lasted about three weeks. Jacques Chirac, the president at the time,



Paul Sableman, Flickr Creative Commons

The death of Mike Brown brought worldwide attention to American inequities.

declared a state of emergency. The Interior Minister (and later president) Nicolas Sarkozy called individuals involved in the uprisings *racaille*, or scum, and suggested cleaning the banlieues with a *Kärcher* (a brand of high pressure water hose).

As a sociologist who has conducted ethnographic research with second-generation North African immigrants in Parisian banlieues, I was struck watching the events in Ferguson unfold so similarly.

banlieues of Clichy-sous-bois, Seine-Saint-Denis and similar communities the result of a loaded past. French colonialism in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa and related post-colonial migration, as well as the lack of economic resources, lack of employment opportunities, and difficult living conditions in *banlieues* in France were behind the uprisings there.

The framing of both events is also similar. Both African Americans and North

Racial and ethnic minorities on the outskirts of society face structural racism and economic distress.

Both highlight the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities on the outskirts of society. Both populations face structural racism and economic distress. As the events in Ferguson result from years of legalized racial residential segregation, uneven policing, and socioeconomic disadvantage throughout the United States, so too are the uprisings in the Parisian

African and Sub-Saharan-origin individuals are dehumanized, labeled animals in Ferguson and scum in France. Police officers often presume African Americans in the United States and immigrants and their descendants in France are criminals; the relationships between them are tense due to their histories of everyday police aggression and hypersurveillance. Through these



Paul Sableman, Flickr Creative Commons

St. Louis, MO graffiti, 2014.

uprisings, both populations are responding to being continually denied their place as full citizens, despite the supposedly post-racial ethos of the U.S. and France's Republican ideology that denies race and ethnicity as meaningful categories. The media, too, depicts and frames individuals in both contexts as criminals, particularly by presenting images of looting and

race and ethnicity. For example, the *New York Times* described Michael Brown as a criminal and "no angel" when writing about his death. Similar reports emphasized how Brown had barely graduated high school, enjoyed rap music, and had traces of marijuana in his system when he died. We are therefore encouraged to see Michael Brown not as a child or a victim,

cases, been framed not as appropriate responses to the handling of Brown's death and the tensions between the community and the police, but as the outbursts of criminally-prone individuals igniting trouble that necessitated a hyper-militarized police response, including from the National Guard. For example, many protestors were tear-gassed and met with police officers in armored cars and camouflaged uniforms. Antonio French, a St. Louis Alderman, was arrested along with journalists Wesley Lowery of the *Washington Post* and Ryan Reilly of *Huffington Post* for unlawful assembly. In a press conference, President Obama called on residents to "seek some understanding rather than simply holler at each other," downplaying the severity of the protestors' concerns. Missouri governor, Jay Nixon, instituted a curfew for in Ferguson, further isolating the majority-minority community from outside society. Protestors in many cities are being treated as individuals who must be "contained" to preserve order, rather than as citizens who need to be protected and allowed the right to demonstrate.

Banlieue communities are commonly framed in the media, government policies,

There are parallels between past oppression and what happens today.

destructive behavior without properly describing the social context.

The 2005 *banlieue* uprisings were heavily covered in the American media. The coverage often bemoaned how France's Republican ideology, which does not acknowledge race and ethnicity as legitimate categories, has failed to integrate its immigrants and minorities or fully address its colonial legacy. Yet, when we connect these events to Ferguson, we can see how the U.S. has also failed to fully address its racial history and its contemporary manifestations.

The events in Ferguson reveal how victim status in the U.S. is often skewed by

but rather as a danger or threat. This framing extends to the local police, who released a surveillance video of a convenience store robbery in tandem with releasing Wilson's identity, suggesting a connection between the shooting and the robbery. In his grand jury testimony, he said Brown looked "like a demon." After facing no charges and resigning from the police force, Wilson told reporters that he wouldn't have done anything differently the day he killed Brown.

More media attention has been placed on the protestors and demonstrations following Brown's death than on his actual death. These have, in many



London graffiti, 2007.

and popular discourse as culturally distinct from mainstream French society. These cultural distinctions are often code for racial or ethnic difference. And these distinctions were cemented during French colonialism in North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the decades afterwards, which saw migrants from these former French colonies concentrated in these *banlieues* and given few opportunities to be fully incorporated into French society. They and the places in which they live are set apart from French society. Their connection to Islam—whether or not they personally identify as Muslim—is seen as a further threat to the French republic and its identity. And their values are seen as antithetical to French norms; they are presupposed to engage in criminal behavior and to not value school and work.

Much of the media commentary subsequent to the uprisings, as reported in *Le Monde* and other French news outlets, characterized those individuals involved as unwilling to integrate themselves into mainstream society, and rejecting its norms and values. On a French nightly news program, Sarkozy argued that the individuals involved in protests must learn to adapt to France.

The media asserted that these individuals were rejecting French society, not the other way around. They were “too different” to ever “assimilate” into the society in which they were born and raised. Immigrant-origin individuals, similar to African Americans, are depicted as uniquely responsible for their own plight. Both groups are seen as not trying hard enough to “make it.”

However, as I have found in my own research, even when North African origin individuals do everything “right,” like getting university degrees and professional jobs, they are still excluded from mainstream society. Even if French society rejects a racial and ethnic frame to make sense of events like the 2005 uprisings and the current situations facing immigrant-origin individuals, ethnic and racial minorities themselves know differently.

In both Ferguson and the French *banlieues*, we are seeing a community *reframing* of dominant narratives. The Ferguson events have led to the #blacklivesmatter social media campaign, an effort to affirm and legitimate the existence of African Americans in the U.S. Now that another officer has gone uncharged in the choking death of Eric

Garner, even celebrities have donned t-shirts reading, “I can’t breathe.” French protestors began carrying signs stating, “*Nous sommes tous les racailles*,” or “We are all scum,” reclaiming Sarkozy’s moniker and demanding that France see them as just as French as they are. Both contexts reveal how being a citizen becomes radicalized, particularly when that citizen is a racial or ethnic minority.

When we connect Ferguson to France, it becomes clear that there are many examples—international examples, even—of what can happen when individuals from often-ignored communities are devalued, whether in the continual devaluing of African American life in the U.S. or the devaluing of immigrants and their descendants in French society. There are parallels between past oppression and what happens today. Our idea of who belongs to a particular nation and who is seen as a full member of society is undergirded or circumscribed by race and ethnicity. Rather than reject their societies, however, African Americans in Ferguson and immigrant-origin individuals in France and other people around the world are, instead, claiming their rightful places *within* their societies. In saying, “We are all scum” or “I am Michael Brown,” these citizens are asserting themselves as deserving of rights and privileges meant for all.

Jean Beaman is in the department of sociology at Purdue University. She is finishing a book on how second-generation North African immigrants are denied cultural citizenship in France.