

CHAPTER 12



FRANCE AND ITS PURGATORY

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For the best part of my life, I have conducted fieldwork in two areas alternately: among the Orokaiva in Papua New Guinea, where both boys and girls were initiated together during a ritual that has now been discontinued; and in a French *banlieue* (suburb) with young people who at times act unconventionally or even illegally.

It therefore struck me that some literature dealing with the suburbs also talked about youth initiation to describe the way in which young boys were integrated in what it called gangs (Bloch and Niederhoffer 1963; and, more recently, Marwan and Mucchielli 2007). The authors used this term because they consider that the novices were then submitted to a violent ordeal of the kind illustrated by the famous 1961 film *West Side Story*, which resembles ritual initiations as conducted in ‘traditional societies’. In both cases, the novices are first compelled by numerous rules, obligations and prohibitions, like those concerning honour and solidarity; then, they have to endure strong violence; and lastly, when reaching the end of the ceremony, their status is increased.

However, my long fieldwork in the French suburbs convinced me that this is untrue because one cannot find any established gangs in which the youngster could be integrated. Instead, the groups that, at times, young people form are very fluid, lack a hierarchy of statuses, and do not offer any stable membership. My contention was therefore that using the term ‘initiation’ in this context is an artefact.

The notion of initiation is, however, very relevant when one considers the *banlieues* as a crucial step in the integrative ritual imposed on foreigners settling in France. I have to recognize, nonetheless, that, at first sight, residing

in the *banlieue* does not seem to resemble traditional rites of passage (see, for example, Iteanu 1983). This is why, near the beginning of this chapter, I will attempt to render plausible the idea that, on arriving in France, most legal¹ immigrants are subjected to a rite of passage, a sort of initiation, the meaning of which has been discussed at length by Turner (1969) and many others.

Although the initiation I talk about is different from those we know in ‘traditional societies’, it bears quite an identical structure. In the present case, French social systems apply it as a treatment to immigrant families in order to transform some of their members into ‘acceptable’ citizens. This practice includes government-supervised racial violence and humiliations against young, coloured immigrants. Although I consider these practices inclusive of the ritual complex that I will describe, I also think they are unethical and revolting, just as girls’ sexual mutilation is in certain societies.

Classically, rites of passage are known in anthropology to contain three distinct steps: separation, liminality and reintegration. In France, during the first phase, immigrants are directed to neighbourhoods called *les banlieues*, where they are secluded and thus separated from the rest of the population. Next, they are submitted to a liminal phase, during which they are deprived of their former condition, and new forms of knowledge and ways of being are impressed upon them. Finally, they are reintegrated into mainstream society with the new status of ‘normal’ French citizens.

I have formerly described this process elsewhere (Iteanu 2005), so here I will only present it briefly before I concentrate on the notion of *communitas*, which Turner tightly associated with liminality and which nonetheless poses a number of problems in this context.

France and Its Immigrants

Current European political debates remind us, if needed, that every country conceives of and deals with immigration differently. However, for present purposes, it suffices to remember that immigration specialists often distinguish two broad tendencies. The first one, ‘integration’, which is associated with ‘northern’ European countries, especially England, encourages immigrants to constitute and then preserve their ethnic communities by following their own rules, communicating in their own language, and practising one form or another of endogamy. The second tendency, which is associated with ‘southern’ European countries, especially France, enforces what is usually termed assimilation, a policy aimed at the total transformation of newcomers into ‘prototypical’ national citizens (see, for example, Borooah and Mangan 2009). This distinction is very controversial, as in practice both orientations are always simultaneously present.

Generally, in France, assimilation is considered successful if the immigrants' cultural ideas and practices disappear from public life, although it is conceded that these may survive, to a certain degree, in private. This is well illustrated by the following comment made by a man of North African origin about his brother's colleagues:

My brother works for the town, and when he goes to the café with his colleagues he does not drink alcohol. So, they ask him, 'Why don't you do like Youssef? Youssef drinks, he is integrated.² Aren't you integrated, Youssef?' And this moron answers, 'I bet I am!' My brother tells me, 'I don't drink alcohol because I do not like it; I am a Muslim; what's the problem?' But every time they tell him that he is not integrated! (Wieviorka and Bataille 1999: 102; my translation)

The Separation

To become integrated, immigrants are sent to a particular area, *la banlieue*. Although in French, the term can refer to any geographical space situated on the periphery of towns, it also has a very common restricted sense, in which it designates a poor neighbourhood, mainly inhabited by immigrants and afflicted with all kinds of problems such as violence, poor schooling, and unemployment.

Soon after their arrival in France, immigrants are assigned to one of these neighbourhoods through different channels, the most prominent of which is their entitlement to cheap social housing as they always have a very low income and relatively numerous children. That many of them obtain this benefit is systematically criticized by the conservative parties as an injustice exerted against poor French citizens. However, from an anthropological point of view, I see it as a way to ensure that the immigrants are secluded in quarters that are scary to French people and are quite effectively separated from the surroundings by insufficient and expensive means of transportation. While thus quarantined in their *banlieue*, they can be submitted to an in-depth transformation.

To understand why France chooses to seclude certain populations, it is useful to note that not all immigrants are directed to the *banlieues*. A number of them are left to settle where they choose. These include the Europeans, the Jews, and all highly educated immigrants arriving from urban centres across the world, who usually obtain better salaries and establish themselves as modern people do 'wherever it's best for them'. In the same way, Asians are not assigned to the *banlieues* because they are considered successful in keeping their cultural practices hidden from public life. They are also known for sticking together in selected neighbourhoods, and therefore not running loose in the districts where French people live.³ The latter have it that the

members of these two categories will ‘naturally’ integrate after a while because they came from ‘developed’ societies and have thus only a short way to go to become individuals to whom their culture is but a private folklore. To leave them alone is also very convenient for the state, as their modification costs almost nothing. Conversely, all other immigrants have to be transformed through a costly *banlieue* ritual because the society (region, village) from which they have come is not modern and thus, as we will see, heavily ‘communitarian’.

I use the term ‘immigrants’ here in its contemporary sense, which encompasses aliens coming to settle in France as legal or illegal immigrants, the majority from the Maghreb and West Africa. As mentioned earlier, some of these newcomers possess French nationality. However, less than eighty years ago, the word *immigrant* was uncommon, and the expression ‘foreigner’ (*étrangers*) was used instead to designate not only expatriates but also French citizens who had moved to the suburbs, coming from what were then considered backward French rural areas.

Therefore, yesterday as today, those who must go through the *banlieue* ritual are not chiefly characterized by their nationality but by the fact that they have moved to the *banlieue* coming from a poorer and less developed social milieu or country. In the French view, they are thus prone to communitarianism, a demeaning expression often employed today to qualify *banlieues*’ sociality. By using this term, French people insinuate that most of the immigrants directed to the *banlieues* obey backward traditions, cannot extricate themselves from a wide network of kin relations, are extremely attached to hierarchy and religion, and are consequently unable to think or decide for themselves.⁴ In sum, they are not free individuals and are therefore unable to be free citizens (Iteanu 2013). Thus, although the term *communautarism* is correctly translated as communitarianism, my contention is that in today’s France it rather means ‘holistic tendencies’, which are particularly feared when they take the form of religious ‘radicalism’.

Following Dumont⁵ (1977), I would thus sum up this first ritual sequence as a separation through which the French people seclude in the *banlieue* those whom they consider to be imbued with holistic habits they have inherited from their original social milieu. They then apply a liminal process to transform them into acceptable citizens.

The Liminal Process

I previously stated that the *banlieue* ritual process aims at transforming immigrants into ordinary French citizens; however, this is not entirely accurate. The ritual does not apply to those immigrants who arrive in France as

adults and whose culture can hardly be erased. The official word to designate them is *les primo-arrivants*⁶ (those who just arrived), but everyone in the suburbs calls them *les bledards* (coming from a tiny backward village), a condescending expression that is associated with the idea that they are very kind and law abiding, in fact, very naive. Instead, those who are targeted by the rite of passage are the children of the former, born in France, or who have arrived in the country at an early age. In them, it is said, occurs an unnatural and dangerous mixture of holism and modernity. They thus become the angry young people who are universally blamed for making trouble in the *banlieues* and elsewhere, refusing education, being violent, dealing drugs, and being prone to religious radicalism.⁷ They are the novices on whom the rite of passage must be performed because they cannot be left in their state of confusion.

From a French perspective, in order to leave the *banlieue*, the children of immigrants need to become unrecognizable.⁸ They must jettison the appearance, ethics and attitudes of their migrant parents. They must be modern, go through school, forget their mother tongue, obtain good professional skills, ignore their religion, refuse to send remittances back to their parents' homeland, and be exclusively concerned with their own future and that of their children, not that of an ill-defined and anachronistic extended kindred. They must marry a partner, irrespective of her or his origin. Like Youssef, they must drink alcohol. In short, they must become French.

Classically, initiation rituals rely on the intervention of deities or ancestors to generate the novice's transformation. But people as agnostic as the French must count on something else, or at least they must have a good non-religious reason to think that the ritual will work. French social philosophy that has passed into everyday belief has it that when deprived of social relations, a person reverts to a nearly blank slate. Rousseau (1755) called such a person a 'good savage'. This idea is also firmly implanted in Durkheim (1990: 495) when he says: 'The sacred principle is nothing else than society hypostatized and transfigured' (my translation).⁹ Thus, for him, the forces that transform the novices in the rites of passage are not deities or ancestors but society itself. The same idea is applied to the *banlieue* when, in order to reset anew the young novices, they are first deprived of all personal relations that could have constructed their personalities, and then are exposed only to abstract institutions to reconstruct them as perfect citizens.

Here I must pause to specify that although I consider the *banlieues'* ritual an extreme form of manipulation, I do not imply that it has evolved out of some kind of conspiracy. There is no political dictator, no hidden secret society, and no political party that devised it. Like all rituals, if they were not given by gods, as the legends may have it, they were created through time by slow modification of what previously existed.¹⁰ Therefore, they usu-

ally raise little political resistance. This is the case with the *banlieues*' ritual, which is only criticized for its most extreme manifestations, like police racist behaviours and violence. But by and large, it is approved by most French people, including a majority of immigrants, no matter what their political orientation may be, in the same way that girls' mothers or aunts find 'normal' what we consider sexual mutilation.

As stated earlier, in the *banlieue* during the liminal period, the immigrants' children are deprived of the relationships they would normally have acquired. I will consider two cases: relations with the parents, and local relations.

In the *banlieues*, the novices are detached from their holistic kin (parents and extended family) in various ways, just as boys are detached from their mothers and more generally from women in 'traditional' male initiation rituals. Above all, the French administration¹¹ scatters families and nationalities in *banlieues* that are very distant from each other in such a way that kinship and ethnic networks are shattered. This is sometimes also applied to wives in polygamous marriages and to children who are compelled to move out of their parents' home and offered a low-rate apartment far away from where they had previously lived. In France, this is unanimously considered the best way to prevent 'ghettoization and communitarianism', and therefore all sorts of holistic-originating problems. Thus, in a typical low-cost building in the *banlieue*, a Malian family might, for example, live next to an Algerian one and above Portuguese and Tunisian ones.

Secondly, within the nuclear family, detachment can also occur through the devaluation of the behaviour of the parents, who are often not at ease with reading, writing or speaking French, or even using computers. This is particularly true when parents have to deal with the school that their children attend. Very often, they do not even understand what exactly is required of them, and have a hard time accessing the instructions sent through the internet. This is often solved by sending the older daughter to all meetings with the authorities. The parents are consequently perceived by the children as clumsy and unintelligent. This leads to an 'extra' detachment of the children from their parents, which accentuates the 'normal' universal gap that individualistic societies create between children and parents. In sum, in the *banlieues*, parents are seen as models to avoid at all costs.

One would think, then, that these 'extinct' relations with the kin would leave room for relations with French people or with other immigrants. This is not the case. Everything is done in such a way that no stable relationship can be established while in the *banlieue*. We have seen how neighbours from different backgrounds and origins are purposely distributed in the low-rent buildings. Another example concerns the schools and high schools, where teachers in the *banlieues* obtain a salary rise every time they ask to be transferred from one school to another.¹² As a result, *banlieues*' children are rarely

able to establish a steady relationship with a teacher for more than two years in a row. Furthermore, in these neighbourhoods, there are no shops, no cafés, and no place to bring people together – only shopping malls, where, as we know, it is hardly possible to establish relationships.

Instead, what is offered to these young people is the possibility to partake in abstract institutions: schools, cultural centres, sports clubs, and so forth. However, these rarely construct long-lasting personal relationships. Young people therefore sometimes decide to reject these institutions and stay home playing with a computer or else congregate with other young people in so-called gangs that are, however, no more durable, and have no meaningful social structure.

The liminal process in the *banlieue* thus amounts to a global deprivation of both kinship and local relations in exchange for exposure to a number of state operated institutions.¹³ Turner summed up this situation: ‘The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status’ (1969: 103).

The Reintegration

In the *banlieues*, the ‘holistic’ immigrant is gradually reshaped into a totally different creature: an individual characterized by freedom. This ritual conversion is considered complete when, for example, the young person obtains a diploma and finds a permanent job away from her/his kindred and local relations. Formerly, girls, who performed better in school than their brothers, often left the *banlieue* via this route. Today, however, many women have a hard time finding an employer who allows them to wear a hijab, which, in the French view, betrays their incomplete transformations. Their brothers, on the other hand, can take a different course – for instance, by marrying a ‘French woman’ and adopting a conventional French lifestyle. Other young people, however, may never complete this ritual transformation and are trapped in the *banlieues’* liminality for the rest of their lives. Nonetheless, in this case, their children may later take over the ritual cycle in which they themselves have failed.

In the vast majority of cases, the *banlieues’* ritual produces the anticipated assimilation. However, it also creates a strain of opposed effects, which certain scholars would call resistance (e.g. Foucault 2001: 1056–57). Some years ago, such opposition appeared in the guise of an overvaluation of the social bonds linking the peers in groups referred to as ‘gangs’, whose principal activity was to fight and take revenge over similar groups pertaining to different neighbourhoods. Today, it is mainly expressed through a strong ad-

herence to Islam, bringing forth the idea of an *umma* (the egalitarian unity of all before Allah) that encompasses within a common kinship or brotherhood all differences in ethnicity, age, and so forth. Thus, the *banlieues*' younger residents call those who are their age 'brothers' and the elderly '*la famille*', the family. To gain popularity, conservative French politicians denounce this creation of kinship as the worst form of religious communitarianism.¹⁴

Ambiguity

So far, I have attempted to show how *banlieue* practice conforms to the tripartite structure proposed by van Gennep (1909) for the rites of passage. It is now further necessary to consider two characteristics that Turner considered indispensable to constitute such a rite.

The first of these is ambiguity: 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1969: 95).

A similar ambiguity can be grasped in what is commonly said about the *banlieues*. The topic itself is very common and appears daily in the news and in people's conversations. For those who live elsewhere, the *banlieue*, it is said, is a separate world, often referred to as '*une zone de non-droit*' (a lawless space).¹⁵ This is to say that the common law does not apply to it. Instead, communitarianism dominates in the form of inequality generated by kinship and religion, especially between women and men. Furthermore, the youngsters are rebellious and dangerous, and most people would not venture into a *banlieue*, especially at night, lest something bad happen. Beyond these common representations, the conservative political parties and politicians constantly warn their followers that sooner or later the *banlieues*' inhabitants will cross over beyond their borders and impose their backward communitarian ways on everyone.

One would think that those who are targeted, the *banlieues*' inhabitants, would deny these quite prejudicial assertions. It is exactly the opposite. The youngsters take pride in confirming that they rule their neighbourhood rather than the state, because the police and the authorities are afraid to come in. This, they say, does not lead to anarchic disorder but to a much better-tended sociality, governed by a hierarchy of age, gender and religion. This form of sociality, they add, constitutes their 'identity', and they are ready to fight to preserve it.

Both voices therefore agree with van Gennep's and Turner's definition of liminality, including the suspension of the normal social rules, the status modification, and the separation from what is around. They further agree on the idea that the immigrants' children develop a communitarian sociality.

But all this remains clearly ambiguous for all those, and they are in the majority, who transit from their dreamed *banlieue* to the outside world where, for example, they go to school or to work daily. Only a few people manage to remain in the *banlieue* constantly. I mentioned them earlier as those who had failed their ritual transformation. Therefore, confirming Turner's notion of ambiguity, we could also probably consider them ritual priests or specialists.

From Relief to Liberation

The second of Turner's characteristics is *communitas*, which he developed while reflecting on African rituals and some worldly religions, like the Franciscans, the 'dharma bums' (Turner 1969: 125), and the hippies. *Communitas* is typical of liminality. It contrasts with the normal state of society to be found before and after the rites of passage, in which hierarchy is very constraining or 'polluting' for every individual. Conversely, liminality is a relief from these constraints: 'the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence' (Turner 1967: 106).

In the *banlieues*, however, there is no relief from the social constraints. Their inhabitants think that they are rather more roughly treated than all others. And the police statistics indeed show that they are right. They confront all sorts of economic and legal problems. And for a minority of them, they have a hard time leaving liminality at all. They have a high level of religious practice, and an ever-larger proportion of girls and women wear scarves or hijabs. All these imposed or chosen constraints are truly incompatible with the notion of *communitas*.

Therefore, in the *banlieues*, no relief from the world's constraints is to be expected during liminality. However, such a relief is the advantage promised by the ritual to the novices who accept reintegration. They will then, it is said, be liberated from hierarchical ties to become free and equal individuals. It is as if the *banlieue* ritual operated as a sort of condensed French Revolution for the benefit of every single immigrant's child. Most of the *banlieues'* young people go along with this promise. Others, less numerous, refuse it because it denies, they say, their right to their cultural heritage. For all of them, the liminal phase is therefore not a momentary relief but a stage of violent transformation, ending (or not) in reintegration.

Conclusion

While in classical rites of passage, the novices reintegrate into the same society that they originally left, albeit with a new personal status; in the *ban-*

lieues' ritual, the novices are meant to reintegrate into a social configuration very different from the one their parents originally left. For them, liminality is therefore a period during which they follow a course that will take them away from that of their forebears. If they reach the end of this path, they will eventually conclude the freedom-oriented project initiated by their parents when they first left their place of origin, but which they personally never finalized. Most of these young people are eager to pursue this route and become French, while some of them react against it and attempt to recreate what they consider to be their 'roots' (*racine*), that of 'their origin'. In both cases, their experience as novices takes them away from the place where their parents left them – a midway point between the more holistic social configuration from which they came and the highly individualistic French context. In brief, these young people must choose one or the other, but whatever they decide, they will betray their parents as, above all, they do not want to resemble them.

Seen from a Turnerian anthropological point of view, the *banlieue* resembles a rite of passage with its separation, liminality, reintegration, and ambiguous meanings. However, its liminality lacks a *communitas* characterized by equality, direct relations between its members, and the absence of ownership. Instead, this is what is obtained through reintegration.

This inspired me to take Turner's suggestion seriously,¹⁶ that next to calendrical rites and rites of passage there may be, in complex social configurations, other sorts of rites. In my view, thus, the *banlieues*, along with the stranger-king rituals (Sahlins 2008), is one of these in which the novices end up in a social configuration different from the one in which they started. This displacement appears to be well rendered by Dante's visit into the abode of the dead, from hell, through Purgatory¹⁷ to heaven, described in his famous *Comedia*.

About this journey, which resembles that of the young people in the *banlieues*, Bartuschat writes: 'The crossing of this world is an act of purification and a path to perfection, experienced by Dante as a difficult climb' (Bartuschat 2001: 147; my translation). Most of those whom Dante met in the intermediate sphere, Purgatory, were guilty of sin. But others, like the Greek poets, were doomed for not being Christians. They, like the *banlieues'* underdeveloped immigrants, had to be transformed to be allowed into heaven.

Thus, the *banlieues*, like Purgatory, feature a rite by which the souls expiate outdated practices in view of liberation. When successful, this rite rids the novices of all cumbersome kinship relations, transforming them into free individuals; when it fails, it leaves them in a castrating communitarian condition, conjuring violence and hierarchical immorality. Some of these novices react to this alternative by inverting the value accorded to these two situations. This value inversion is a feature absent from normal rites of pas-

sage. It signals that the *banlieue* ritual is not exactly an initiation but some different practice that we could call ‘purgatorial rites’, in which the novices reintegrate into a world different from the one from which they were originally separated, and which opens the possibility of a value inversion.

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NOTES

1. This chapter does not deal with the contemporary situation. The immigration it is concerned with took place from the end of French African colonization from 1960 to 2010. As France has granted French nationality to certain inhabitants of its colonies (Guichard and Noiriel 1997), a number of those who are considered immigrants possess French nationality.
2. In this context, French people do not use ‘*assimilé*’ but ‘*intégré*’ which implies a more thorough transformation.
3. I leave aside the unusual situation of the Gypsies.
4. Women were also considered as unworthy of being citizens until 1945, when they were finally granted voting rights.
5. French people are more Dumontian than it seems – or conversely, Dumont was a real Frenchman and expressed an important part of French ideology.
6. Here is the official definition of the *primo-arrivants*: Newcomers are foreigners in a regular situation with regard to the right of residence and signatories of a reception and integration contract (CAI), or of the new Republican Integration Contract (CIR).
7. Some of them are believed to have become terrorists or to have joined the jihad.
8. This is a common feature of initiation rituals when the parents (mothers) often do not recognize their children when they come out of seclusion.
9. My previous comment about Dumont (Note 5) also applies to Durkheim.
10. In France, the suburbs have been the focus of a long political history. See, for example, what is called *Les édits de pacification* (1562–98).
11. Mainly through the work of the council estate offices: Office HLM.
12. In middle-class neighbourhoods, teachers hardly change jobs. Although they would also be entitled to a salary raise, they prefer to remain in a ‘good school’.
13. The same thing happens with young social workers. They change jobs much more often than before.

14. This recalls Mitchell's definition of categorical relations, which uses structural categories to designate relations that are much looser and more superficial, and that allow choice (Mitchell 1956: 52–53).
15. Even the government uses this expression to assert that it will not allow any threat to the general rule of law.
16. 'Undoubtedly, in large-scale complex societies, with a high degree of specialization and division of labor, and with many single-interest, associational ties and a general weakening of close corporate bonds, the situation is likely to be very different' (Turner 1969: 202).
17. 'The place to which Roman Catholics believe that the spirits of dead people go and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were alive, before they are able to go to heaven' (Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/purgatory>).

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