



# **A Few Steps towards an Emancipation of the Spectators of the French Banlieues, Notes Critiques Sur Dahman N. et Al., Reading Mustafa Dikeç's Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics and Urban Policy**

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## **A few steps towards an emancipation of the spectators of the French *banlieues***

How can one understand the recurring suburban riots in France over the past three decades and the scale and intensity of the November 2005 riots, in spite of the substantial urban policies adopted by the state since the early 1980s? Mustafa Dikeç, in *Badlands of the Republic*, provides some insight helping us to understand this disturbing French paradox. He relates the history of the spatial construction of France's urban policy between the early 1980s and the middle of the first decade following the year 2000. At the beginning, this policy conceived the *banlieues* (suburban areas) as "threatened" territories that the state needed to help by implementing temporary policies and promoting local democracy. Gradually the *Politique de la ville* (urban policies, subsequently *PV*) changed and was linked with fear of immigration and minorities, considered a threat for the Republic, *banlieues* turning into "danger zones".

The strength of Mustafa Dikeç's account derives from his distinctive theoretical approach which links space and policies, helping to understand France's urban policies over the past thirty years. He shows in an empirical and very convincing way, that the *banlieues*, far from being a given, homogeneous territory, are the result of a construction and the object of political manipulation. From a rich corpus, he manages to analyze the way some *banlieues* were established as *badlands* as descriptive names, spatial indications and statistic categories were specifically created for them, by a whole set of representations which he defines, referring to Jacques Rancière, as the "police".

He shows, in practical terms, how the tough suburbs had received assistance from the State in the early 1980s (by means of a flexible and empirical concept of space) and are now analyzed within a more and more bureaucratic framework. This has resulted in an increased number of neighbourhoods which are statistically set-up as sensitive areas and whose marginal status is quasi-naturalised. He demonstrates the close links that exist between space and policies, which very few studies related to the *PV* in France had previously interrogated (Genestier, 1999, Estèbe, 2001, 2004).

The same year as *Badlands* was published, *L'Etat et les quartiers* (*The State and the Neighborhoods*) by the sociologist Sylvie Tissot also came out (Tissot, 2007). Both projects were similar in their constructivist approach to France's *PV* which highlights the highly political dimension of the territorialising of public initiative. The comparison of the two books allows us to underline the originality of Mustafa Dikeç's reflection, which, in our opinion, is the consequence of his background as a geographer and as an academic, steeped in the

Anglophone tradition. From the outset, their initial point of view appears to be quite different. Sylvie Tissot's opinion, as a sociologist, is that the "spatializing of social problems" (Tissot and Poupeau, 2005) set up by the *PV*, is highly problematic as it intrinsically downplays social and political relations. Mustafa Dikeç by contrast, as a geographer, assumes that all policies are essentially spatial, as is resistance to such policies (local rallies, riots...). In his reading the problem results not so much from the jurisdiction of urban policies as from their underlying ideologies.

Both authors are highly attentive to the conditions in which the *PV* is developed. However, whereas the social context and the relationships between the actors involved in the development of the *PV* are at the heart of Tissot's analysis, Dikeç demonstrates special sensitivity towards France's political and cultural specificities both within the national and the international contexts. He shows how these specificities account for the transformations of the imagined *banlieues* and shape the policies targeted at them on a more or less short term basis. He analyzes more specifically the emergence of what he calls "republican nationalism" in France, with its contradictions. Beginning in the middle of the 1990s, the increasing reference to the merits of equality and social cohesion conceals a confused fear of the immigrant who is now considered a threat and for which the "*banlieues*" have become the spatial embodiment.

In opposition to Sylvie Tissot, who claims her study to be empirical (although explicitly founded on academic debates on the *PV*), Mustafa Dikeç roots his empirical analyses in theoretical reflections, most notably the concept of "police" which he borrows from Jacques Rancière. This leads to stimulating philosophical developments, which attests to the skills of the author of *Badlands* for linking theory and empirical research. For French readers, his way of writing in the area of social science is typical of the Anglophone academic tradition. His work is also a good example of the appeal for '*French Theory*', this "transatlantic hybrid" (Cusset 2004) that originated from a group of French intellectuals and which has had considerably more impact on the social sciences in the United States than in France.

Last, whereas Sylvie Tissot focuses her analysis on the spatial construction of the policies dealing with the "*quartiers*" (neighbourhoods), Mustafa Dikeç expands his questioning to the practical impact of these policies on the inhabitants of the given spaces, and shows how they suffer from inexorable and degrading confinement through the branding names that have been specially created by the *PV*. *Badlands* endeavours to link the voices "at the top" (from the people in charge of the *PV*) to the voices "at the bottom". The author explains that the voices do not

correlate and that the latter have been trying, in vain, to voice their strong will for urban and social integration.

We contend that this analysis is in fact the weakest point in the book. Only one chapter out of eight is devoted to these “alternative voices” through a study of an association in Vaulx-en-Velin in the city of Lyon and the unsuccessful attempts of its members to participate in local democracy and have an impact on the future of their neighbourhood. This disjuncture is unfortunate, for it is important to expose how legitimate and vital this participation of the inhabitants of the *banlieues* is. In addition, we regret the lack of reference to some studies (Kokoreff, 2003, Pialoux and Beaud 2003), which explore in depth the alternative voices of the *banlieues* inhabitants, whose analyses complete and confirm those found in *Badlands*.

One of our other points of contention, is that Dikeç has hardly engaged with the existing wide range of local interpretations of the *PV*, though they enable multiple local solidarity regimes (Estèbe, 2004). According to their means and their political choices, the municipalities play a determining role in this diverse appropriation. Thus we find the possibility of multiple negotiations in the setting up of local projects (that are not simply the embodiment of State policies at a local level) and that may offer overtures to demands for justice. This diverse appropriation of urban policies can help analyze the diverse geographical realities for the 2005 riots: some of the *quartiers sensibles* remained calm, in spite of their negative social and economic indicators. Thus, we note that due to the proximity of downtown Paris, to the availability of work, to various other sources of income (among which drugs are included), to financial assistance provided by the town council enabling the implementation of social policies and to considerable investment in local democracy -within a strict framework- for the poorest neighbourhoods, a city such as Nanterre is in no way similar to Clichy-sous-Bois.

Working-class *banlieues* are plural and the constellation of local authorities, everywhere under the constraint of national policies, sometimes manage to deal with programs differently and in collaboration with their community inhabitants. In this regard the government's focus on particular spaces can be problematic. This approach condemns them to acknowledge failure because “sensitive neighbourhoods” are increasingly the areas of residence of the most precarious, due to the policies themselves. Symmetrically, some of their inhabitants have made use of these places as passageways, using the successive policies to find jobs and apartments and have often chosen to leave the “sensitive areas”. The mobility approach changes the perspective for those studying these areas (Gilbert, 2011).

Since *Badlands* was published, the situation has deteriorated even more and PV is facing drastic financial cuts. The main issue the government has been bringing up since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 is the demonizing of the suburbs and immigration in France. The PV budgets and human means are constantly getting smaller (the police force included), whereas the president in his speeches points to the *banlieues* increasingly. This spectacular construction seems to initiate new uses of the *banlieues*. The cycle of urban renovation is ending and a new story begins, where the *banlieues* could be used as a regulating means, through fear (to the point of preparing a potential intervention of the army in the *banlieues* (Belmessous, 2010)).

Mustafa Dikeç's analyses provide welcome tools to help us better understand the impact of the Sarkozy years on France's *banlieues*. His account brilliantly initiates, in Rancièrian terms, the emancipation of our sight of these *banlieues*.

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