

Why Paris Is Burning

As France is hit with its worst urban unrest in years, TIME takes an inside look at the deep-seated roots of Muslim discontent

By JAMES GRAFF/PARIS

THE YOUNG MEN IN HOODED SWEATSHIRTS GO by rapper tags—Spion, El Pach, Benou and K-Soc—and like thousands of others from the grimy, soulless apartment blocks that ring France's big cities, they were out cruising the mean streets of Paris' banlieues, or suburbs, in early November. Near the city hall of Bobigny, a rough town on the northeastern outskirts of Paris, a circle of fire marked the spot where a trash container had been set alight to provoke a police patrol. "People mix it up with the police every day around here," says Spion, 19, who is of Moroccan origin. But this is different, says his friend Benou, whose parents came from Algeria. "This is May 1968—but in the banlieues."

France won't soon forget 1968, when ferocious student riots brought down a government, and at times last week Paris seemed to be reliving those tumultuous days. Night after night, another set of embittered citizens turned their forgotten wastelands into a battleground. The rioters were mostly Arab or black, but they were also mostly French, born and bred in the neighborhoods they were setting ablaze. Their anger spread in an arc across northern Paris, just a few miles from the city's glittering heart, as one desolate neighborhood after another joined in the mayhem. Thousands of police and firemen struggled to douse the rebellion and found themselves inflaming it. In one suburb, four shots, a rarity in France, were fired at the cops. French leaders tried to strike a balance between condemning the violence and seeking to understand it, but they seemed powerless to impose order on the streets.

The working-class suburbs of Paris are dominated by sterile high-rise public housing, where Arab immigrants from North Africa were shunted when they started arriving in the postcolonial years. Now their children and grandchildren subsist in squalor alongside fresh waves of African and South Asian immigrants and their French-born children. Families struggle to hang on to their dignity, while drug dealers and petty criminals exploit the only business opportunities to be found in those barren towns. Unemployment in some neighborhoods surpasses 40%, and hope is a rare possession.

The spark for last week's chaos came on October 27, with the deaths of two teenagers from the jumble of apartment blocks that make up Clichy-sous-Bois. Bouna Traore, 15, of Malian origin, and Zyed Benna, 17, whose parents are Tunisian,

thought they were being chased by police. When they took refuge with a third teenager in the relay station of a high-voltage transformer, Traore and Benna were electrocuted. Locals blamed overzealous policing for the deaths, although an official inquiry found that there had been no pursuit. That evening an

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angry group demonstrated in front of a nearby fire station, setting off a rolling wave of nightly clashes between young Arabs and French riot police that leapfrogged across the suburbs of Paris. After nine nights of rage, the uprising had reached as far east as Dijon and south to Marseilles, as rioters torched thousands of cars and set fire to buses, schools and government buildings.

Liberté, égalité, fraternité are ideals that France has nurtured over the centuries. But they were in little evidence last week around Paris. Changing that will require the French to confront the widening disparities between those in the banlieues and the rest of the country. Until then, the rage and resentment inflaming the streets will surely continue to smolder. ■

Questions

1. What sparked the violence in the Paris suburbs?
2. How did French leaders react to the outbreak?