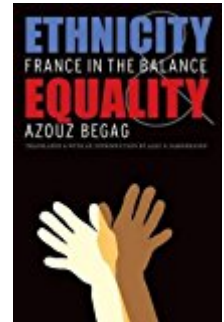


Azouz Begag. *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*. Translated and with an introduction by Alec G. Hargreaves. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xxviii + 151 pp. \$14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-6262-1.



Reviewed by Leland Barrows

Published on H-French-Colonial (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Jyoti Mohan (Morgan State University)

The principal event to which this study of the problems of ethnicity in contemporary France refers is the series of riots that broke out, first in Clichy-sous-Bois, northeast of Paris, in late October 2005, and then spread to a number of other peri-urban ghettos throughout France. The rioters were mostly marginalized youth of North African and other French colonial origins. Shortly before the outbreak, the author, sociologist Azouz Begag, had completed a study, the draft of which became the book under review, of the dismal socioeconomic conditions, the hopelessness, and doubtful future characterizing young people in the peri-urban housing projects (called *cités* and *banlieues*) just before he was appointed minister for Equal Opportunities in the Government of Dominique de Villepin in June. Thus, in a sense, Begag anticipated the outbreaks. In addition to being the first *Beur* (second generation person of North African, particularly Algerian, origin born in France and thus a French citizen) to hold a ministerial post in a French government, Begag is perhaps one of the most prolific and best-known French intellectuals

of Algerian origin. His works, written in French, consist of three genres: academic works on the sociology of immigration in France; novels, many of them incorporating autobiographical material; and children's books, both fiction and nonfiction.

What is most surprising about this book is that it has never been published in French. For reasons that Begag does not explain, he gave the draft, a study of the *banlieues*, to his sometime colleague and friend Professor Alec Hargreaves, director of the Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies at Florida State University at Tallahassee, for translation into English and eventual publication. The result includes a substantial introduction by Hargreaves as well as a short preface by Begag. So far, a French version of this book is not available.[1]

One cannot help being curious as to why the author and the translator wish apparently to target an Anglophone audience. Begag obviously perceives and develops a parallel between the struggle of African Americans to gain full integration

into American society and similar struggles of French citizens of colonial and Algerian origin to gain full insertion into French society. He points out that as a youth a reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* moved him to tears, the hero of the novel reminding him of his own father, a former agricultural laborer from near Sétif in Algeria. And he evokes the inspiration that Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent campaign for African American civil rights in the United States offered to the organizers of the 1983 Marche des Beurs in France. The translator too draws a parallel between the African American struggle for civil rights and the struggles of French citizens of Algerian and colonial origins for civil rights and equal opportunities. He does so explicitly in his "Translator's Introduction" and implicitly by rendering certain French expressions drawn from the immigrant experience into African American slang, referring, for instance, to *banlieues* (suburbs) and *cités* ([public] housing projects) as "hoods" (meaning neighborhoods).[2]

One aim of this book is possibly to describe to an American audience a French model for affirmative action, but Begag seems to have doubts about it even as he describes it. Or perhaps he wishes to show, using himself as an example, that the international diaspora of *Beurs* that he evokes in the last chapter of his book is a reality. Begag, after all, was offered a visiting professorship at Cornell University in 1988. He was probably the first *Beur* to hold such a position in the United States. Later, he served as a visiting professor at Swarthmore College and then at Florida State University in 2002, the guest of his translator who organized a conference at the Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies devoted to Begag's works. We note that a little more than a year after Begag was awarded the distinction of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 2005, just before he was named minister for Equal Opportunities in the Government, he arranged for Hargreaves to receive the same distinction in September 2006, conferring it

to him personally, and by so doing underlining the influence that he, a *Beur*, has in France.

This book, that is both anecdotal, drawing on the author's life experiences in France, and a serious sociopolitical analysis written by a highly qualified French academic, faults the traditional model of French republican assimilation for failing to promote the socioeconomic insertion of thousands upon thousands of persons of colonial immigrant, frequently Muslim, origins into the mainstream of French society. He details the different forms of institutional discrimination that exclude persons with Arabic names and/or swarthy skin from educational and career attainment, frequently permitting them only the most menial employment opportunities.

A large number of these persons are the children and the grandchildren of workers who began to come, in sizeable numbers, from Algeria after World War II during the thirty-year period in which the economy of France underwent unprecedented expansion. While the members of the first generation assumed that they would someday return to their homelands, it became clear by the 1970s, just when the French economy began to slow down following the oil shocks of that era, that the second generation would remain in France, even though France was very ambivalent about accepting them, even when they were French citizens. Begag, who, through his educational attainments, managed to escape from the shantytown in Villeurbanne, near Lyon, where he spent the first ten years of his life, and then from the La Duchère housing project, near Lyon, to which his family moved, argues that it is possible for what he calls "young ethnics" to escape from such environments and to succeed in French society as he did.

Playing with the word for "rust" in French, *rouille*, Begag presents three types of young people from the projects: *rouilleurs*, *dérouilleurs*, and *intermédiaires*. The *rouilleur* is the person, usually a male, a dropout, who will never tear himself

away from the ghettoized projects where he has lived all his life. He has little education, no ambition to move out or to get employment in the mainstream sense, and if he acquires some material wealth, it will be through the parallel economy of petty crime. The *dérouilleurs* are those who will seize educational opportunities, leave the projects, and find satisfying employment and careers in the general society.

Begag presents himself as a very successful *dérouilleur* and makes clear that he wishes that all *Beurs* would do as he did. By his rhetoric (or is it the rhetoric of his translator?), Begag suggests that the *rouilleurs* are at least partly at fault for not succeeding as he did. Begag even makes a play on words, in French, to make his point. He turns the verb, *réussir* (to succeed), normally conjugated in the composed tenses with *avoir* (to have) into a reflexive verb with the use of *être* (to be) rendering “*Je me suis réussi,*” an ungrammatical way of saying “I did it myself” (and the implication: “so can you!”). The tone of pride, conveyed by this grammatical innovation that runs throughout the book is nevertheless tempered with compassion for those who have not become *dérouilleurs* or are not succeeding in their efforts to do so because of discrimination, ethnic profiling, and the like. In an interview in which Begag explained why he had written his 1986 biographical novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba*, he expressed his unease at the fact that of the forty or so children with whom he grew up in the shantytown in which he first lived in France, he was the only one to escape into a successful life and career in French society.[3]

As for the third category of *cit * youth, the *interm diaires*, they are those who are tempted by the world into which the *d rouilleurs* have entered but are afraid to break away from their familiar environments and to separate themselves from their families and their *rouilleur* friends. The *interm diaires* are a large group. The path they take is very important not only for the future

of the immigrant-origin communities in France but also for the future of France itself. Thus, much must be done to induce them to opt for the *d rouilleur* option.

The most difficult part of being a *d rouilleur*, writes Begag, is breaking loose from a traditional family that cannot perceive the value of becoming too assimilated to French mainstream ways, including academic education, particularly if the older family members anticipate a return to the country of origin. The situation is particularly difficult for young women of North African origin who risk having serious altercations with their fathers if they opt for higher education and a career, and possibly marriage to a non-Muslim, rather than premature withdrawal from school and an arranged marriage to a man of similar ethnicity. Yet, despite the heart-wrenching trauma of breaking away from the family and the familiar environment, very few *d rouilleurs* regret the path they chose.

Obviously Begag prefers the path taken by the *d rouilleurs*—his path—even to the point of almost blaming those who do not follow it. But he illustrates the always present possibility that even a very successful French person of immigrant origin like himself may be ethnically profiled and gratuitously humiliated. In ironic tones, he describes how he was stopped and questioned at length by French customs officials at Geneva’s Cornavin railway station as he was preparing to return to Lyon from an interview in Switzerland. He was treated in a similar fashion at the Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport when U.S. immigration officials noticed Arabic language visas in his French passport, never mind that the passport also contained a U.S. A-1 Diplomatic Visa. If an internationally known personage can be so profiled, what must it be for average French ethnics? Thus, among other comments, Begag castigates the tough measures that Nicholas Sarkozy, then the French minister of the interior, wished to employ in the fall of 2005 to quell the riots and to

prevent them from reoccurring. He also deplors the prior failure of the French Left during the two presidencies of François Mitterand to seize the initiative offered by the 1983 Marche des Beurs to develop effective equal opportunities policies and procedures in France.

Begag describes how for a while he came to espouse positive discrimination as a means to provide for the insertion of more ethnics into mainstream French society, but possibly because of the increased unpopularity of the quota aspect of affirmative action in the United States and the French opposition to “*communautarisme*,” he has come to espouse a more subtle way to accomplish the same goal that he hopes will be viewed as unthreatening by the so-called *franco-français* majority. To begin with, he rejects the word *intégration* because it has come to have a bad connotation and also because it is redundant. So many ethnics, particularly those of the second and third generations, are indeed integrated by virtue of being French citizens, and they have assimilated the French language and culture. Their problem is one of being thought of as the illegitimate children of France, an unwanted product of now discredited colonialism. To be legitimized, they must overcome subtle forms of institutional discrimination that serve as obstacles to mainstreaming, and France as a whole must put the colonial period behind it.

Begag argues that to give all persons equal opportunities in French civil society, special assistance should be offered, not on an explicitly ethnic basis, but on a spatial basis, that is, via initiatives targeting poor neighborhoods so that individuals with varying personal histories will have equal chances. There must be equal access to information regarding educational and career possibilities, and the “referees” of the competition or “race” to “win” prestigious but scarce places in society must be taught both to appreciate the potential contributions of French persons of all origins and be themselves of diverse origins. As for the

educational levels to be attained to enter prestigious institutions, like Sciences Po (popular nickname for the Institut d’Etudes Politiques of Paris), for instance, or to be recruited into careers in the upper levels of the French bureaucracy accessible through graduation from the Ecole Nationale d’Administration (ENA), while candidates from disfavored neighborhoods should be given special coaching, again based on their residence addresses rather than on stated ethnicity, the actual selection process should be the same for everybody so that nobody can claim that in France any affirmative action policy might permit a less qualified applicant to grab a slot in a *grande école* or a job from a better qualified applicant. He sums up his anticipation of an equal opportunities policy in France by evoking the image of the differential gears of a motor vehicle that permit the drive wheels to turn at different speeds when the vehicle is going around curves. While at a certain point the wheel on the inside of the curve will be turning at a slower speed than the wheel on the outside, the vehicle will navigate the curve without skidding, and on the straightaway, the wheels on both sides of the vehicle will be turning at the same speed.

For Begag, the key to the insertion that he seeks for French young people of immigrant origin is education. He credits his own French education that began in the public schools of Lyon for his successes. Given, however, that he makes comparisons with the American situation throughout his book, he should have reminded his Anglophone readership that French higher education is, for the most part, free, even if admission to given higher education institutions and course programs is competitive, based on award of the *baccalauréat* with or without a preset quality coefficient and, in the case of the *grandes écoles*, success on entrance examinations. This generous and progressive higher education enrollment policy, which may change given that the current French president, Sarkozy, would like to introduce American-style tuition fees into the French higher edu-

cation system, is a far cry from what prevails in the United States where most students and their families are expected to take on debt to cover the costs of higher education, even for students studying in public institutions. Thus, for the time being, the French higher education system is in a better position to promote equal opportunities than the American higher education system.

With time, Begag argues, as ethnics are employed, particularly in the uniformed services: the military, including the Gendarmerie, the police, public transport, the post office, etc., as well as both *franco-français* citizens and ethnic French citizens, including the residents of the *banlieues* and the *cités*, will get used to seeing persons of immigrant backgrounds in these jobs, eventually finding it perfectly normal. Ethnic minorities will lose their fear of the police, a heritage of the colonial period that has been handed down from the first generation of immigration. Young ethnics will flock into these careers.

But such insertion should be undertaken subtly, without provocation. Begag is very critical of the 2003 public debate begun by Sarkozy, then the minister of the interior, when he called for “positive discrimination,” specifically the appointment of a “Muslim prefect” (p. 105). It would have been preferable, writes Begag, to have simply appointed this prefect, Aïssa Dermouche, citing his first-rate qualifications as an internationally known economist, possibly also his North African origins, and not labeling him as “Muslim.” Of course, as Begag concludes, to promote insertion, it is necessary to have accurate statistical information about the numbers of persons of various ethnic origins in various educational and occupational categories. In France, however, it is very difficult to come by this information, for much of the time it has not been recorded. Institutions, like the Gendarmerie, that Begag cites have claimed (however falsely) that such information is not needed, there being no ethnic discrimination in France. Nevertheless, Begag insists that French institu-

tions must be “vigorous and courageous in irrigating the paths to social mobility by actively going in search of citizens outside the system and diversifying public service personnel” (p. 123). Although he does not go into detail as to how this task can be accomplished without taking opportunities away from *franco-français*, he does, in particular, compliment Sciences Po for the innovative measures that it has taken to enroll qualified students of immigrant origins. He hopes that other prestigious French institutions will recruit in similar ways.

One wishes that this book had been published in French, the language in which the author first drafted it. The English translation seems to reflect a particular sociolinguistic agenda on the part of the translator that may not be altogether faithful to the author’s thought and language. Because both author and the translator are struck by the similarities between the problems of integration faced by African Americans and those of insertion and equal opportunities in France faced by the descendants of the *immigrés*, the translator has engaged in some equivalent translation that sometimes misses the mark. Take, for instance, the case of the word *banlieue* (suburbs). *Banlieue* designates considerably more than an American-style inner-city slum or set of public housing “projects.” A *banlieue* is also a peri-urban residence area for middle-class if not wealthy persons, like a suburb in the United States. One finds suburbs of this kind in the Paris region stretched out along the RER (Express Metro) Ligne de Sceaux. Even the far off town of Fontainebleau (or Versailles, closer in) could be included in this category.

But Begag is targeting the poor and/or ghettoized suburbs, like Clichy-sous-Bois. These suburbs have been a French phenomenon for many years, stretching back to a time before colonial/ethnic immigration became an issue. Originally, they were inhabited by poor, frequently radicalized, *franco-français* proletarians, found particularly east and northeast of Paris proper. In the

1920s and 1930s, one spoke of the *ceinture rouge*, the near suburbs surrounding much of Paris, because the proletarian residents there consistently voted to the Left.

Is it really correct, then, for Hargreaves to refer to *cités* and *quartiers sensibles* as “hoods,” an African American slang expression for “neighborhoods” but not necessarily neighborhoods that are slums or even necessarily poor? A better term would have been “projects” (which he sometimes uses) given the predominance of public housing in the poorer neighborhoods or “ghettos” of American cities, if the French neighborhood being discussed is really a ghetto in the American sense of being inhabited mostly by poor, marginalized people of minority origin. Another false parallel (for which Hargreaves alone may be responsible) is that of equating the white/black dichotomy in the United States with the *franco-français*/North African dichotomy in France, even to the point of referring to *franco-français* persons as “white” and North Africans as nonwhite or colored. This parallel is false however much the *franco-français*/North African relationship has been racialized in popular language by the use of such terms as *racisme*, *raciste*, and *discrimination raciale* to designate *franco-français* prejudice in regard to persons of North African origin. The point of difference, if not conflict, between the two is not racial at all but religious--above all--and cultural. When comparing American and French ethnic prejudices, a far better parallel to draw than that of white *versus* black is that of Anglo versus Hispanic, particularly when referring to those areas of the United States, like California, that were once part of Mexico. Even when Hargreaves's use of American slang is not related to any evocation of ethnicity, like referring to children as “kids,” one can only wonder what the French word originally used by Begag was; *mioches*, perhaps, but one would not expect to find that slang designation for children in any kind of scholarly writing in French. In fact, Hargreaves's efforts to apply black/white parallels and black English to a

French ethnic situation reminds this reviewer of the not too successful efforts of Hopkins, the well-meaning white policeman in the American television sitcom, *Sanford and Son*, to use black slang.

Hargreaves erroneously claims a black origin for *verlan*, a form of French conventional slang consisting of the inversion of syllables in certain French words, something analogous to Pig Latin in English. *Verlan*, however, is not of black origin even if blacks have contributed to it. One example of *verlan* that Hargreaves cites is the word *keuf*, meaning *flic*, slang for policeman/cop, obtained by inverting the syllables. But *flic* has only one syllable. What is there to invert? One wishes that he had provided a more complete explanation as to how *verlan* words are formed; how, for instance, the word *beur*, a *verlan* expression, is derived from the inversion of Arab.

Linguistic quibbling aside, this short book provides fascinating insights into the progress of multi-ethnicity in France from the vantage point of a major protagonist and innovator. It is also a good introduction to the thought and the oeuvre of Begag.

Notes

[1]. In two later books published in French, *La guerre des moutons* (Paris: Fayard, 2008) and *Un mouton dans la baignoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), Begag evokes some of the points that he had raised earlier in the book under review, most notably his disagreements with Nicholas Sarkozy, minister of the interior at the time of the fall 2005 disorders, over the very tough line that the latter wished to take.

[2]. That Begag sees an analogy between the American struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s and the movement for independence in the French colonies, including the prosecution and outcome of the Algerian Independence War (1954-62), strikes this reviewer as somewhat off the mark. Both struggles, he claims, ended institutionalized racism in their respective regions (the mass exodus of French settlers from independent

Algeria notwithstanding). Yet political independence, meaning separation from France, is quite the opposite of integration. However, a twist to Begag's analogy was provided to the reviewer by several Algerian officials whom he met while he was employed in Romania. "True, we got independence," they declared, "but what we really wanted was what Martin Luther King obtained for Black Americans." But then, these were the words of members of the Algerian Francophone elite.

[3]. Information derived from Virginie Linhart and Jean-Marc Terrasse, *Génération beur, etc.: la France en couleurs* (Paris: Plon, 1989), 135, cited in http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azouz_Begag (accessed on September 13, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-french-colonial>

Citation: Leland Barrows. Review of Begag, Azouz. *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*. H-French-Colonial, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25361>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.