

# Thinking Hatred in Identity Through a Social Fact: the 2005 Suburban Riots in France

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The question of hatred animates this issue. It is known as a reaction to injury or to the suffering of mourning (*I hate the one I loved who left me*), but beyond this aspect related to pain, it is possible that it maintains certain intimate structural relations with identity. I propose here, in order to think about this difficult question at the level of the individual, to start from a social fact within society. As soon as one considers the question of the relationship between hatred and identity in the social field, a first link appears: it is not uncommon for a society to consider *the immigrant as a potential threat to its identity*. Following this line of thought, one may think that, in certain cases, what is perceived or described as radically foreign could be, upon analysis, *a very part of the subject's (or society's) own identity, not recognized as such*. Might there be something similar at the level of the individual?

In 2005, France went through a serious social crisis. Two adolescents, B. Traoré and Z. Benna, attempting to escape a police identity check, died after taking refuge in an electrical transformer station. Following their deaths, the suburban areas erupted, triggering intense urban violence that spread throughout the country. For three weeks, riots affected more than 300 municipalities, nearly 10,000 vehicles were burned, and close to 5,000 people were arrested, leading the government to declare a state of emergency.

Very quickly, political circles and the press suggested that these events might have been manipulated by fundamentalist terrorist groups. Thus, *Le Monde* reported that the Minister of the Interior (N. Sarkozy) stated that the violence was “*perfectly organized*,” thereby echoing the arguments of certain police unions that spoke of “*terrorism*” and referred to “*radical Islamists, known to the General Intelligence Services (RG), who allegedly trained and manipulated young people.*” Subsequently, N. Sarkozy asked prefects that “*foreigners, whether in a regular or irregular situation, who have been convicted, be expelled from the territory,*” adding: “*when one has the honor of holding a residence permit, the least one can say is that one should not be arrested while provoking urban violence.*” Initially introduced by the political class and then relayed by the press, this hypothesis found resonance with a segment of public opinion.

In *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud writes that, for the infant, at the beginning “*the external world and what is hated are identical.*” The experience of unpleasure linked to absence or lack of the breast, and to pain in general, will lead the subject to establish a radical difference between himself and the world through hatred. Thus, the thesis emerges that the ego is constituted archaically through a movement of hatred, expelling unpleasure outward in order to preserve the integrity of the pleasure-ego. This induces the paradoxical theoretical consequence that, psychically, alterity and the psychic representations of the world are first sculpted from the primary psychic material of the ego itself. This primordial hatred also has the consequence that, theoretically, violence and aggressiveness cannot be directed at the ego, since, from the infant's point of view, they are turned toward the external world.

Freud adds that the question of the ego includes an idealized image, with which the individual will identify in order to build his identity. The individual is thus caught in the attempt to preserve an image of himself that he uses to sustain himself, and this will not occur without conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://umbral-red.org/es/la-red-vista-de-umbral.html>

Let us return to the events of 2005. If we maintain that these incidents pertain to a problematic linked to the question of identity in society, it becomes understandable that *“the foreign origin of the perpetrators”* was invoked, even though it would later be shown that these hypotheses were largely false. A report from the General Intelligence Services denied that this was an *“organized insurrection,”* speaking instead of *“a popular revolt of the housing projects without leaders (... while), contrary to the declarations of many political leaders, (...) nothing was organized or manipulated by groups, whether mafioso or Islamist.”* The report concluded that the cause of the violence was to be found in the *“social condition of exclusion from French society”* of those involved.

The choice of targets is particularly interesting: while banks, supermarkets, and private-sector organizations were relatively spared, schools, law enforcement, the national education system, and public transportation were attacked. These targets are not insignificant and represent the Republic and the signifiers of the integration of citizens into society.

As for the identity of those responsible, of the 4,800 people arrested, 94% were of French nationality... (which should not be surprising, since it is difficult to imagine why foreigners in an irregular situation would organize or participate in a national revolt in the country where they are trying to find their place). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this explanation worked. And for good reason: hatred has to do with identity.

It took an address by the President of the Republic to the nation for calm to return. Its content is certainly not insignificant. This time, there is no longer any mention of foreigners, and the presidential speech even speaks of a *“crisis of identity.”*

Here are some excerpts: *“This serious situation bears witness to a crisis of meaning, a crisis of reference points, a crisis of identity.”* Denouncing *“the discriminations that undermine the very foundations of our Republic,”* J. Chirac added: *“(I want to say) to all the children who live in difficult neighborhoods that, whatever their origin, they are all sons and daughters of the Republic, (and that) French women and men, particularly the youngest, must be proud to belong to a nation that makes the principles of equality and solidarity its own.”*

The question that arises here, treated through the French context, could be formulated as follows: *“Why did society spontaneously produce—and adhere to—a hateful explanation of the riots that located their cause as being external to itself?”*

It is well known that it is often when groups are weakened in their cohesion that they become exposed to or resort to persecutory fantasies. Here again, the function of hatred is sometimes to participate in a process of recomposition or consolidation of identity. If persecution is a foundational datum in the constitution of identity from a collective point of view, it may also be so from an individual point of view.

Hatred thus seems to be deeply addressed to identity. The social situation evoked shows this when it identifies its own citizens as foreigners. Identity spends its time producing the foreigner.

Extending these reflections would undoubtedly make it possible to think about why the most violent separations are those that occur between *“blood brothers,”* as is the case in countries that shared an identity or a common history and were separated by political forces. One can think of Kosovo, Pakistan and India, or the complex relationships that colonizing countries maintain with former colonies. In this regard, during the last Football World Cup, a survey indicated that the team France most feared encountering from a sporting point of view was Algeria... even though the two teams have never faced each other in competition.

By constructing an anachronistic image of itself, which corresponds neither to its present nor to the reality of the composition of its population, French society may be neurotic—perhaps in the same way that an individual can be neurotic when attempting to preserve an idealized image of himself, even at the cost of a dangerous denial of reality.

Perhaps hatred is never so strong as when it is directed toward a fragment of the ego that it knows it cannot or does not want to reintegrate. Does not S. Freud write that the one who loves (or hates) does so with that *“which has been a part of one’s own self”*?

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