Journalism at the Margins: *Afrika* as a Case Study of Ethnic Minority Press and Alternative Representations of the Banlieue

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**Résumé**: Cet article analyse la manière dont les médias ethniques en France établissent une image plus intégrée de la nation. Il propose que depuis les années 1990, le discours dominant, et les représentations journalistiques des périphéries urbaines, ont perpétué une image menaçante des banlieues en tant que hors-lieux de la communauté nationale, emblématiques de la crise postmoderne de la France. Se concentrant sur les reportages de La Courneuve dans la presse ethnique, il argue que l'ordinaire de la couverture de ces créations, leur questionnement de l'identité ainsi que leur lutte continue contre le racisme, traitent de l'espace, de la culture et de la politique, d'une façon qui problématise le discours externalisant sur les banlieues. Malgré leurs limites en terme d'impact, ces reportages alternatifs, conçus dans les marges urbaines par les minorités ethniques, offrent des images qui défient les représentations communes sur les banlieues et contribuent à reconstruire une nation française perçue comme menace.

**Abstract**: This article analyses the part played in France by the ethnic media in establishing a more integrated image of the nation. It proposes that since the 1990s, dominant discourse in France, and journalistic depictions of the urban periphery, have often perpetuated an image of the banlieues as menacing spaces detached from the national community and emblematic of France’s postmodern crisis. Concentrating on the ethnic press reports about La Courneuve, it argues that the ordinariness of the coverage these creations convey, along with the questioning of identity and their continuous fight against racism, deals with space, culture and politics in a way that problematises the standard ‘externalising’ discourse about the banlieues. Despite their limits in terms of circulation, these alternative reports, made in the margins by the ethnic minorities, offer images that contribute to challenging traditional representations of the banlieues and help to reconstruct a French nation perceived under threat.

**Mots clefs**: alternatif, ethnicité, presse, nation, représentations, banlieue

**Keywords**: alternative, ethnicity, press, nation, representations, banlieues

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Introduction

The last few decades, which have witnessed the relentless diffusion of globalisation, have coincided with a significant change in the representations of national communities that has been noticeable in the public sphere in general, and the journalistic field in particular. Within the ‘global turn’, the journalists of information have proposed a complex and problematic vision of nations and identities, which has mainly been reflected through dominant depictions of national fragmentation and erosion (Ignatieff, 1994). A characteristic of this outlook on the dynamics of national communities is that it has more often than not relied on a dramatic and sensational representation of (sub-) urban ethnic communities. Generally speaking, such ethnic communities have been studied through the prism of mainstream representations and a more ‘radical’ (Downing, 2001) form of journalism has often been ignored or left aside. My study of the representations of the urban periphery in contemporary France is based on this observation. Here, I shall examine the portrayals of the notorious banlieues in the ethnic minority press and examine the alternative views of France they project.

Since the 1980s, depictions of the French nation have not varied much from the general pattern of other western national communities. Divided between the spectacular and the dramatic, impressions of France have essentially revolved around portrayals of gradual disintegration or, worse, collapse. The question of the banlieues, these peripheral enclaves largely stigmatized by the media (Sedel, 2009), has recently become one of the most important topics within the national discourse. Presented in a relatively positive way in the early 1980s as the new emblem of a possible multicultural future, these segregated territories have, since then and into the 2000s, given rise to the development of perceptions more and more frequently used to insidiously suggest both a threat to, and peril for, the nation. In the context of a spectacular turn-around regarding the question of immigration (see Wieviorka, 1992), their deprivation and marginalisation have called into question the principles of ‘liberty’, ‘equality’ and ‘fraternity’ as the basis of the French nation. They have also interrogated the questions of ‘race’, assimilation and citizenship in the national community.

Journalism, as a prominent discursive form (Kuhn, 1994), has played a dominating part in forging the debate about the banlieues and their link to the nation. More specifically, mainly mainstream journalistic depictions circulated by the television and the press have been used to examine, evaluate and frame the fast-changing evolution of France and Frenchness in their relation to the urban periphery. Here, my purpose will be to trace the evolution of portrayals of the French nation in another way and to explore representations of the city margins in the ethnic minority press. My study is based on the portrayals of the multi-ethnic council-estate of the Cité des Quatre-Mille, located in La Courneuve, near Paris. Through a comparison between the dominant journalistic discourse about the banlieue immigrée (Dubet and Lapeyronnie, 1992: 58) and ethnic journalism conceived in this notorious cité, I shall demonstrate how, over the last two decades, the ethnic press has played a significant part in the making of alternative depictions of the French nation and the banlieues.

More specifically, my main goal is to demonstrate how certain reports of the peripheral spaces, which were made locally by ethnic reporters, offer new ways to oppose and resist hegemonic discourse in the context of the ‘peur des banlieues’ (Rey, 1996). For media critics, the ethnic minority press and its subtle approach to issues of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ (Rigoni, 2010: 7) provides a significant rupture with the rhetoric of mainstream media. The coverage of the cité with its specific

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1 The term banlieues, mainly used in the plural form, and also synonymous with cités or grands ensembles, refers to council estates built between the 1950s and the 1970s on the outskirts of French cities, and emblematic, nowadays, of France’s racial divide.

2 Kuhn (1994: 1) observes that the media discourse is not only ‘the most convenient means by which elites communicate both with each other and the general public’, it also has ‘the capacity to bring issues on to the news agenda and to mobilize public opinion in support of a particular point of view’.
approach to ‘difference’ and ‘belonging’, I shall propose, offers a more complex ‘map of reality’ (Hall, 1977: 341), apt to supply the reader with a singular insight into the ‘mythical’ discourse of the nation. My analysis is grounded on the bulletin, Afrika, which was launched in the Grand Ensemble de La Courneuve, during the 1990s. Run by a group of local activists, this bulletin vigorously participated in the fight against ethnic absolutism and national belonging in France. Drawing on Ignacio Ramonet’s conception of journalism and democracy, I shall argue that this ethnic periodical has, by way of different treatment of ‘difference’ and ‘belonging’, not only fought differently against certain stereotypes of the banlieues, but has also fostered ‘other’ representations of contemporary French society, allowing for new ways of conceiving the French nation and its identity.


Like many other advanced nations, France has been facing a growing ‘national crisis’ (Silverman, 1992: 1) that has been going on for several decades now. In the French context, this crisis, commonly attributed to the arrival, at the turn of the 1980s, of North African immigrants, has led to a ‘reconstruction’ of the perception of the banlieues that coincides with a profound re-ordering of the discourse on the nation. First, a general feature of national communities is that their existence, as frequently indicated, is not based upon objective criteria; a malleable paradigm, a nation consists, to paraphrase John McLeod (2000: 74), of a combination of elaborated conceptual elements including a unified collective land, with which people identify; a political and organisational infrastructure ensuring the people’s expression; a common history with shared memories; and cultural traditions and symbols that sustain the specific continuity of the past into the present. At the basis of this ‘imagined’ narrative, these fictional elements combine to represent a ‘mythical’ (Balibar, 1997: 118) and ‘ideal nation’ (ibid.: 131).

Within the French mediated sphere, the reactivation of the banlieues image as a threat to the fictional nation is certainly not new. A symbol of ‘otherness’, the banlieues have long nourished wild fears of France’s possible decline or, in certain cases, imminent disintegration (Fourcaut, 1992: 12). However, the ‘manufacturing’ of the presence of immigrants as a ‘problem’ in the 1980s, provided the foundation for a drastic re-framing of the national myth. To put it succinctly, over several years, and in the context of France’s ‘great mutation’ (Wieviorka, 1992: 25), the reconfigured representation of the urban periphery, as an alien extraordinary territory, came to emblematize the fears and fantasies surrounding the break-up of the French community. At the core of the political discourse, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this new ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1972) about the representation of the French national community was also amply and largely circulated in the French media, most glaringly in mainstream productions of the television and the press.

The topic of the cités has captured much attention among journalists during the 1990s and 2000s and, as such, has given rise to what can be labelled a journalisme de banlieue. More than ethnic newspapers, big national media were seen as the primary contributors to the fast promotion of the cité

3 I shall specify, here, that the editorial team of the bulletin is composed of M. Hadjam, F. Bennour, M. Boutadjine, T. Moez and P. Gilet. This militant bulletin is also the main organ of the organization AFRICA, which was set up by Hadjam in 1986.

4 Ramonet’s thesis is grounded on the demise of journalism as a ‘fourth power’ and the subsequent risks of a democratic regression. To counter the new ‘police de la pensée’ (2001: 12) accompanying the rise of a ‘messianisme médiatique’ (ibid.: 7), Ramonet argues for the creation of ‘force civique citoyenne’ (2003) acting as a ‘cinquième pouvoir’ (ibid.). For Ramonet, only the creation of this ‘force civique’ will help to decontaminate information and restore ‘democracy’.

5 On this theme see, for instance, Champagne (1991: 67-75) and Agier (1999: 70-71).
immigrée inside the public sphere. As generally acknowledged, the journalisme de banlieue, coinciding with the rise of the ‘information spectacle’ (Ramonet, 2001: 11), and concomitant with the ‘suspicion’ of the immigrants (Bouamama, 2006: 196), is considered as having shaped a ‘sensational vision’ (Champagne, 1993: 67) of the segregated cités. As Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 159) suggests, this main vision has testified less to suburban ‘reality’ than to the ‘effects of reality’:

Parler aujourd’hui de ‘banlieue’ (…) c’est évoquer, presque automatiquement non des ‘réalités’ (…) mais des fantasmes, nourris d’expériences émotionnelles par des mots ou des images plus ou moins incontrôlés, comme ceux que véhiculent la presse (…)

The issue of whether the dominant representations of the cité immigrée have been overtly challenged inside the journalistic ‘field’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 46) remains, to date, a surprisingly neglected subject. In the context of the new ‘unanimisme fabriqué’ (Halimi, 1997: 21) of the news, numerous critiques have demonstrated how mainstream media contributed, by their racially-encoded image of the suburbs, to constituting them as a peril for the national community. On this subject, Christian Bachmann and Luc Basier (1989) have analysed through the national press the ‘fantasmes qui planent sur les banlieues (…) et le fonctionnement réel de ces images de la peur’ (ibid. back-page). More recently, Henri Boyer and Guy Lochard (1998: 72-73) have detailed the ‘ethnicisation’ of the urban periphery on television while Alec Hargreaves (1996: 607) showed how ethnic minorities appeared as the causes rather than the problems of urban troubles in France due to the prevalence of descriptive conglomerations in lieu of explanation and analysis’. I certainly agree with the fact that these studies have improved our understanding of the journalistic ‘manufacturing’ of space and ‘otherness’ inside the national community. However, I want to suggest that this hegemonic discourse about the banlieues and their inhabitants has not remained unchallenged, as shown by the contribution of the ethnic press since the 1990s.

Systematically associated with violence, danger, alterity and a complete rejection of the French way of life, alternative impressions of the French banlieues - even if the fact seems to have gone mostly unnoticed - are also due to the continued diffusion of the minority press, which has provided a considerable quantity of other images of France. Affiliated with the influential rise of ‘médiactivisme’ (Cardon and Granjon, 2010), the ethnic press in France has proven particularly dynamic in proposing different representations of the demonized grands ensembles and the endangered nation.

Traditionally and historically, the strong presence of the ethnic minority press in French society has offered alternative and dissident views, in the shade of the dominant discourse (consult El Yazami, 1997: 115). The ethnic journals and bulletins, conceived in the margins by militant reporters, have espoused the legendary tendency of the press to défend the oppressed (Alméida and Delporte, 2003: 7); as such, they have forged a more critical vision of the nation.6 Like these titles, Afrika bulletin and its anti-racist tone participates in that aim and contributes to a new vision of the peripheries in their relation to the national community.

As noted, I am dwelling here on the question of the provision of a different insight into the journalistic construction of the urban periphery, one that demonstrates how amateur reporters of the suburban ethnic press in France proposed a more radical outlook towards the banlieues leading to new perspectives on the erosion of the French nation. As a basis, I shall suggest that the minority press and its alternative treatment of suburban ‘reality’, together with its original approach of ‘belonging’ and its active political militancy, fosters a new critical image of the cités immigrées in the journalistic sphere. Concentrating on the experience of the immigrants living in the suburbs, I argue that Afrika bulletin, which circulated between 1993 and 2004, participated in re-integrating the banlieues and its inhabitants, socially, politically, culturally and spatially, showing them as not apart but as a part of the

6 To cite only a few examples, the publications, Za’ama de Banlieue and Rock Against Police, have played a significant part in disseminating a dissident discourse on immigration and the cité. More recently, the BondyBlog, set up after the notorious 2005 riots, provided a salient and fairly popular counterpoint to the externalizing discourse on the banlieues by evoking the discrimination and racism experienced by the suburbanites.
same common entity, France. I will first deal with the ‘ordinary’ image of the banlieue. I will then examine the focus on the complex issue of identity. I will finally call to mind the counter politics towards racism. My objective is to show how, at the turn of the millennium, the suburban ethnic press enabled the reader to re-think the position of the banlieues in relation to the national community.

Afrika and Alternative Representations of La Courneuve’s Quatu-Mille (1990s-2000s)

Even if it is not an isolated case, it is important to mention first that La Courneuve and its Quatre-Mille, located in the highly stigmatized département of Seine-Saint-Denis, ‘9. 3.’, has been used in journalism to represent a special urban territory (Berlot, 1994). Identified as a suburban ‘médianôme’ (Gandonnière, 2002: 91), its proximity to the capital and notoriety has made it a preferred choice of location for a long list of journalistic reports and, as such, it has often been used to construct a certain vision of the nation intersecting with traditional perceptions.

The format of Afrika, entirely produced in the Quatre-Mille, shares many similarities with the new radical forms of mediation. Testifying to the growing significance of ethnic media (Rigoni 2010), this illustrated bulletin (including 16 issues varying in size and partly available on-line) provides its readers with alternative information, and can be associated with the rise of ‘citizen journalism’ (Trédan 2007). Although sponsored by the state, this ethnic newsletter reflects first and foremost a desire to provide an alternative outlook on issues of ‘race’ and space inside the national community. A very noticeable element of the change of perspective fostered by the journal, and its more objective approach to the margins, relates directly to the widening of the coverage of the banlieue.

‘Ordinary’ News and the ‘Other’ Cité

The dramatic and sensational report of the outskirts has made it difficult - not to say impossible - to imagine a banlieue depicted other than with crimes, flames, and riots caused by violent and threatening immigrants. The ‘extra-ordinary’ approach of the cités, typical of the mainstream media, has both activated and reinforced the ‘ethnicisation of the banlieues’ (Grewal, 2007: 45) making them a ‘special’ place, a dangerous site, an ‘other’ space of the nation, though situated within its limits. The focus of the ethnic reporters on the ‘ordinary news’, concomitant to a ‘routine cover’, can be regarded as a first set of signs that help to reshape and reconsider the usual image of the Quatre-Mille and other ‘banlieue à connotation chargée’ (Afrika April-May 1993: 2) in relation to the nation.

Whereas the dominant discourse emphasises the ‘extra-ordinary’ and simultaneously dismisses the ‘daily reality’ of the cités, typifying them as distinct, abnormal spaces, a noticeable feature of the coverage of La Courneuve by the ethnic press is the way a high proportion of the articles released by Afrika portray the cité as simply ‘ordinary’ with regard to the rest of society. Examples in this bulletin showing La Courneuve and the Quatre-Mille in a different light are numerous. Some articles about the vie locale and associative evoke the banality and mediocrity of life inside the estate by publicizing social meetings, cultural events, sports etc. Others indirectly refer to the mediocrity of the site by

7 For a list of journalistic reports about La Courneuve in the 1990s and 2000s, see my on-line ‘archive’ of the Cité at http://cite4000.blog.fr/(Levasseur, 2006).

8 Based and read in La Courneuve, Afrika’s readership is also found in several French towns where the association runs activities (Drancy, Bobigny, Blanc Mesnil and St. Denis but also in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Eure, Lyon and Aix-en-Provence).

9 ‘Citizen journalism’ can defined as ‘the act of collecting, reporting and discussing the news and information’.

describing the services provided in the vicinity (leisure activities, health services, administrative facilities and assistance). The routine information broadcast certainly hints at the specificities of La Courneuve and its suburban population (architectural gigantism, poverty or filth), but they also, and more importantly, cast a revealing light on the profound ‘ordinariness’ of the neighborhood, giving rise to an ‘other’ image of the segregated estate. Particularly revealing of the existence of this ‘other’ portrayal of the cité are the various articles devoted to the ‘Repas de quartier’ (Afrika June-August 2002) which demonstrate the existence of pleasant, peaceful and convivial moments in the neighborhood - people congregating, eating, drinking, laughing. Amply illustrated, the following photo reportage nicely captures the ordinariness of the Quatre-Mille. Breaking with the ‘mal-représentation’ and ‘sur-stigmatisation’ (Rigoni, 2010: 8) of the banlieue immigrée, it effectively contributes to widening the image of the estate, away from the ‘hyper-reality’ (Baudrillard, 1981) circulated by the dominant media:

As shown above, examples of the vie locale and associative repeatedly appear in the newsletter, and in various subtle ways testifying to the ‘normality’ of life in La Courneuve. The change of ‘cadrage’ and ‘agenda journaliṣtiques’ (Macé, 2005: 188-200), fostered by the routine coverage of the Cité, thus participates in disrupting the dominant discourse on the banlieues in its ‘extra-ordinary’ relation to the nation. Yet, this is not to say that ‘difficult’, violent or spectacular moments are not reported by the ethnic journalists. Appearing episodically, many articles indeed testify to sensational moments. For example, the anniversary of the demolition of the Renoir block (‘Renoir, un an après’, Afrika June-August 2002) refers to a remarkable and spectacular piece of news. However, because such an article is deprived of its dramatic and sensationalist tone, these events tend to be seen as seen exceptional and rare. Replacing the Cité in a context of normality, such incidents come to be regarded as rather unusual and insignificant compared to ‘ordinary life’ in La Courneuve. Besides the focus on ‘ordinary news’, the treatment of the issue of ‘identity’ also contributes significantly to deconstructing the traditional image of the periphery. Countering some common assumptions regarding the non-reconcilable character of the banlieues, the subtle take of ethnic journalists on the subject reverses the enduring image of the Quatre-Mille as leading inexorably to the break-up of the nation.

The Columns of Identity and the Reconsideration of ‘Difference’

If, during the 1990s and 2000s, the banlieues gradually came to symbolise a serious menace for the cohesion of the French nation, a second characteristic of the ethnic minority press, and the way amateur cité reporters modify suburban depictions, has to do with the emphasis placed on the issue of ‘identity’. In his study about ‘otherness’, Alain Touraine (1997) argues that the racism afflicting the ‘other’ in western democracies represents a matter of urgency, and must be transcended. ‘[I]l faut (…) reconnaître à chacun’, Touraine writes, ‘le droit et la capacité de combiner son identité culturelle (…) Ainsi seulement pourrons-nous vivre ensemble’ (ibid: back page). The manner in which the journalists of Aïrika transcend fixed notions of identity provides a sharp contrast with the essentialist journalistic discourse published in the mediated sphere. Marked by ‘l’écart’ (Begag and Chaouite, 1990), their approach to suburbanite ‘identity’ not only deconstructs ‘differentialist’ notions of the cités but also reflects differently on the evolution of France and Frenchness.

The discourse of the Aïrika bulletin, and its thorough treatment of belonging, firmly contradicts the alleged ‘difference’ (Wieviorka, 2001) of the diasporic population prevailing in public discourse (see Battegay and Boubeker, 1993). In a similar way, to the focus on the ‘ordinariness’ of life on the city margins, the obvious connection between the inhabitants of the suburbs and the French nation provides a strong contrast with stereotypes categorising the cités as ‘foreign’ territories and their residents as menacing ‘aliens’. A significant point about the newsletter, which exemplifies the rapid distribution of ‘journalisme amateur’ (Damian-Gaillard and al., 2010) among minority groups, relates to the editorial team’s practice of using the French language to publicize the news about La Courneuve. In doing so, Hadjam, Boutadjine, Zekkour, Saadoui, etc. situate themselves as part of the ‘communauté de langue (Balibar, 1997: 132) at the basis of the French nation. Therefore, while it may appear inconsequential, their adoption of French to report the news, continuously reminds the reader that the banlieues and their inhabitants are not ‘apart’ but ‘part’ of the French national community.

Another significant interest of the articles circulated by the suburban ethnic press resides in the advertising of the rich diversity that the residents of the banlieues present. In recent decades, the dominant rhetoric about the cité immigrée has almost exclusively been disseminated through discursive modalities enhancing both danger and exoticism (Bachmann and Basier, 1989: 22). Allowing for a penetrating insight into the immigrants’ split identities, the articles circulated in the ethnic press reflect the locals’ subjective experience and quest for identity, and are typical of the new heterogeneity to be found in a French national community undergoing profound change. Going beyond the dichotomy of cultural belonging characteristic of mainstream journalism (Bonnafous, 1991), they transcend boundaries to engender new manners of perceiving identity in the banlieues. The interview with Salima and Malika, related to the article ‘Femmes immigrées’ (Aïrika April-May 1993) resists and opposes dominant depictions of these immigrant women. If the insert of indices visuels showing smiling face contrasts with the cliché of the Islamic veil, their reflection on their conditions as femmes, immigrées, mères, citoyennes, not only highlights the multiplicity of their identities but also provides a significant counterpoint to dominant views of the Maghrebi as the new fundamentalist forces ready to take over French culture and identity (Saddek, 1998).

Overall, however, it is undoubtedly in its rendering of the participation of the immigrants in the vie locale and associative that the suburban ethnic press best shows the reader the resemblance between identity in the banlieues and so-called Frenchness. Critic Stephen Riggins (1992: 3-4) has explained how the minority press, which operates as an instrument of cohesion and cultural maintenance within the ethnic group, also promotes and encourages the assimilation of their audience by keeping their readers informed of the dominant values of their ‘host’ society. Multiple examples in the ethnic press that plunge the reader into the margins, in fact display habits and tastes in La Courneuve that are prevalent in society at large. The Courneuviens and their suburban counterparts are thus depicted as being interested in leisure, culture and politics. If some questions related to an écart identitaire actually
remain self-evident, the articles show that the inhabitants clearly share generic references ranging from the ‘rentrée’ (Afrika June-August 2002), ‘noël’ (ibid. January 2004) or la fête de la musique (ibid. June-August 2002).

The alternative portrayal of the banlieue in the suburban ethnic press does not limit itself to the focus on the local news or identity matters on the estate, but also make a stand against the cités immigrées as a threat to the integrity of the nation. One last and most significant singularity of Afrika and its alternative portrayals of the Quatre-Mille is certainly connected with the political commitment of these amateur journalists against racism. This emphasis, in a subtle but visible way, helps to re-politicise the journalistic discourse and lifts the veil on the levels of racism inside the nation.

**Fighting Racism in the Suburb**

In France, in the last few decades, the journalistic discourse about the banlieues has frequently equated the urban periphery with ‘lost territories’ of the nation. The mainstream depiction of the banlieues have thus come to be perceived as separated zones, as savage enclaves, far from the normative and national. The chief interest of the ethnic suburban press and its different approach to inclusion-exclusion is to contradict the construction of the banlieue as ‘external’ to the nation. The Afrika journal and its alternative portrayals of the Quatre-Mille is certainly connected with the political commitment of these amateur journalists against racism. This emphasis, in a subtle but visible way, helps to re-politicise the journalistic discourse and lifts the veil on the levels of racism inside the nation.

Although the cités have been continuously ‘sur-exposées’ (Boyer and Lochard, 1998: 122), the emphasis of the ethnic journalists on racial politics proposes a break with the mise à distance of the suburbs in the nation, which manifests itself most clearly in their treatment of France’s ‘racisme évolutionniste’ (Taguieff, 1997:14 As an emblematic brainchild of suburban political activism, the Afrika bulletin assigns the history of immigration a significant space. A long series of articles reveal historical features of immigration and banlieues, from economic prosperity to more recent and difficult times, and contribute to a comprehensive re-historicising of the suburbs inscribed in the process of depreciation, inferiorization and violence against the immigrants. To cite only one example, the article devoted to the memory of the 1961 October massacre (‘Au nom de la mémoire’, Le 17 octobre 1961’ Afrika, April-May, 1993) is eloquent. Written in a straightforward way, it not only associates the cité immigrée with a long history of racism and oppression but stresses the urgent need for more tolerance and openness: ‘Que les crimes du 17 octobre soient jugés comme crime contre l’humanité’, ‘Il faut l’ouverture des archives’, ‘Que l’Education Nationale prenne en charge l’histoire coloniale et celle de l’immigration’ (ibid.)

Beyond this ‘présence du passé’ (Balibar, 1997: 56), the main political feature of the journal denouncing the French ‘racisme évolutionniste’ is probably related to the massive presence of articles belonging to the new forms of ‘gestion differentialiste des minorités ethniques’ (Castel, 2007: 47). While televisual and printed media invariably represent the banlieues as a threat, Afrika reporters deconstruct the ‘immigrant problem’ by showing how France and its authorities have actively segregated and confined immigrants and foreigners to the margins of society. Thus, the special issue (‘Ecole lieu des savoirs ou d’exclusion?’ Afrika, September 2001), which concentrates on the ‘planned shrinkage’ regarding education is revealing. The reduction in subsidies gives a perfect insight into the neglect of education affecting primarily children of African descent while enhancing a ‘racisme scolaire’ (Dubet, 1996: 296). When a similar analysis is made about housing and transportation

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12 See, for instance, the article ‘Vacances au pays’ (Afrika June-August 2002) where a young woman (Assia), interviewed about a recent trip to the Maghreb, states: ‘Personnellement, j’ai pris beaucoup de recul grâce à ses vacances et je peux dire que je suis à la fois culturellement algérienne et française’.

13 I am adopting the metaphoric title used by Brenner (2004).

14 Taguieff’s concept refers to the evolution, and perpetuation, of racism from French colonialism to more recent times (see ibid: 90-97).
opportunities (‘Les services de proximité en panne?’ April 2002), Afrika’s treatment of the ‘policing of immigration’ is probably the most appalling case. In that respect, the ethnic journalists not only vehemently condemn the strengthening of the lois sur la nationalité (‘Nabila et la nationalité française ou du désir de la douche froide’, Afrika April 2002) but also resist and oppose the new ‘zero tolerance’ which affects all the non-nationals. The following lines, published on the eve of the 2002 election, are eloquent. Illustrating the strong militancy of certain articles, they include a lucid critique of the dominant journalistic discourse and remind the reader of the discriminations perpetrated against some French citizens perceived as ‘external groups’ to the nation:

Les médias multiplient les reportages sur la violence dans les quartiers dits ‘sensibles’. On devient plus attentif aux faits-divers qui sont propulsés à l’avant-plan de l’information. (…) [C]’est dans une véritable psychose sécuritaire que s’enclenche cette campagne (…) Et revoilà l’étranger ou le Français d’origine étrangère stigmatisé et accusé, en des termes à peine voilés (…) Plus grave, les mesures de répression commencent à être conçues en termes de territoire et de population, comme le couvre feu instauré dans 14 villes de France pour les mineurs de moins de 16 ans (‘Droite et gauche, une seule promesse: plus d’insécurité pour les étrangers!’, Afrika April 2002)

As can be seen, these journalistic practices which offer a more nuanced outlook on racial exclusion, account, on the one hand, for political activities widespread among ethnic suburban reporters while showing the special partiality of the Afrika journalists for ‘rebellious communication’ (Downing, 2001). More significantly, they appear as a way for these ‘reporters indigènes’ (Damian-Gilbert and a l., 2010) to express themselves and contradict the institutional racism of the nation. Poles apart from the threat of the banlieues immigrées, this ‘voix des sans-voix’ (Ramonet, 2003) coming from the margins reshapes the discourse of the ‘pouvoirs médiatiques’ (ibid.) on the urban periphery.

**Conclusion**

In France, the ethnic minority press reflected in different ways on the representations of the banlieues and offered a significant renewal of traditional depictions of the nation during the 1990s and the 2000s. Generally speaking, ethnic reporters departed from fixed and determined discourses, and projected a different political view on the national community. Far from the formatted depictions of the mainstream media, I propose that the ethnic suburban press succeeded in circulating alternative conceptions of the banlieues, which challenged the conventional depictions of the French nation.

The ethnic minority press, as examined through Afrika, has certainly contributed to transmitting other images of the cités immigrées, which are a far cry from the essentialist depictions relayed by the big media. By taking a different approach to the periphery and concentrating on the ‘ordinariness’ of existence, identity matters and political engagement against racism, ethnic reporters have participated in the re-evaluation of the question of immigration and short-circuited most of the negative stereotypes usually associated with the portrayals of immigrants. By reflecting on other facets of the margins, they have supplied the reader with an instructive insight into the manufacturing of the French banlieues as a societal issue (Laachir, 2006: 62). In the same way, they have also lifted the veil from the imaginary dimension of the national community (Balibar, 1997: 127).

However, this dissident take on hegemonic representations of the banlieues proposed by the ethnic suburban press possesses certain limitations. In the first place, the treatment of immigration proposed by these amateur journalists is certainly illuminating and of great interest, but it only appeals to a limited proportion of the audience. Consequently, the possibility of influencing and changing the debate in the long term remains limited. Moreover, the critical attitude expressed towards the French authorities is certainly consistent with regard to the Republican principles of the nation. However, the discourse can be judged as somewhat lacking. Although the message it broadcasts favours an opening of France to ‘difference’, it remains inadequate in the face of the new ‘république du mépris’ (see Tévanian, 2007).
In his analysis of the ‘tyrannie de la communication’, Ramonet developed the notion of a ‘force civique citoyenne’ to counter a depoliticized culture, and strongly encouraged ordinary people to invest in a ‘résistance civique contre le superpouvoir des médias’ (ibid. 2003). Overall, it can be said that ethnic reporters living in the banlieues imparted a symbolic force to this knowledge. Even though their critical discourse has not reached a wide audience, they have certainly provided continuing debate about the ongoing ‘tyrannie nationale’ (Noiriel, 1991) by publishing a broad range of complex and challenging ideas on immigration. In so doing, the ethnic minority press has revealed itself to be a significant player to be followed closely. At a time when national communities invariably continue to be seen as disintegrating, the radical change of perspective it offers should not remain in the margins.

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