

**Azouz Begag.****Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance.**

Translated and with an introduction by Alec G. Hargreaves.

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This book is one of the latest by the prolific and acclaimed French sociologist and writer Azouz Begag. The author was born in Lyon to Algerian parents, first generation émigrés who left Algeria during the French colonial occupation. Begag is a member of the so-called “Beur Generation”. The term Beur was created by inverting the term “arabe” into Beu-ra-a, then shortened to Beur. The author’s personal background is important to the book. Begag relies on his experience to describe the living conditions of those who, in October 2005, shook Republican France and showed its social cracks. Written in March, before the riots and the author’s appointment as a Minister Delegate for the Promotion of Equal Opportunity in June 2005 (a position which he held until April 2007), the book has not yet been published in French. Alec Hargreaves, a well-known British figure in French Cultural Studies, translated the book and explains, in a very engaging introduction, the context in which it was written.

*Ethnicity and Equality* raises important issues that seem to me crucial in the understanding of the emigration/immigration French context. The first is what we may call the “semantic mishmash” when naming the youths originating from emigration. Begag notes that debates that deal with them are loaded by “terminological confusion” which includes at least four referents: territorial (youths from the “projects”, the “ghetto” or “the hoods”), religious (young Muslims, young Arab-Muslims), ethnic (youth of Maghrebi origin, Beurs, Blacks, Franco-Arabs) and temporal (second generation, immigrant youth). This confusion seems to bother the author to the extent that he claims not to know “about who[m] and what we are talking about [when we refer to them].” He adopts the expression “young ethnics,” because the expression clearly refers to the “roots”, and because the youths themselves adopted it. One cannot but be puzzled by such an argument, both because the term “ethnics” is not the only one which was proudly adopted by the youths (I am thinking here of Beurs), and because critical race studies show that derogatory terms are often reversed and used positively by racialized groups, as was the case of the term “Blacks” in the late seventies and early eighties in England. In addition, Begag fears, despite its relevance the term itself seems insufficient to signify that these youths are “free electrons with variable identities” (23), as if they cannot be named or are the only ones who have multiple identities.

Second, Begag tries to show that the reality of multiethnic France puts into question its Republican principles, especially the principle of universalism. The latter is a political fallacy because it ignores those who live in the margins. Begag does not refer to the debates initiated by French scholars in the mid-nineties about what they view as a non-contradictory link between multiculturalism and universalism, at least as it was problematized by Michel Wierwoka (1997). Rather, Begag bases his argument on a more pragmatic point of view. He argues that since “integration” policies have failed, France has to implement affirmative action policies that target all marginalized segments of the society, not just ethnic minorities (as is the case in the United States). Focusing on a “spatially-defined approach” which targets disadvantaged neighbourhoods will have a greater impact on reducing exclusion and social inequalities, Begag argues. This approach should be reinforced by what he calls “a system of counting difference,” because it is essential to “quantify the progress in diversifying the labor force” (117). Indeed, the absence of data on minority individuals working in

such security bodies as the police and the *Gendarmerie* shows that the abstract conception of citizenship pretends, through its very existence, to protect those who have been discriminated against. For Begag, equality should not be considered an already-existing absolute, but should instead be challenged in light of real social inequalities.

Begag is not anti-Republican, and his many references to the United States as a model for affirmative action programs, or his too-easy and undemonstrated parallels between Afro-Americans and French ethnics past and present, do not signify a rejection of French society. On the contrary, he thinks that social integration is achieved via economic integration and real job opportunities for ethnic individuals. Similarly, he suggests that employing members of ethnic groups in the police forces will both be beneficial to the individuals and contribute to a better social fabric. School should be reformed, but it is in no way obsolete. Begag praises the elite *l’Institut d’Études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po)* for its open policies to attract students from marginalized neighborhoods, because as recently as a decade ago such a school did not figure in the dreams of even the most ambitious ethnic youth. Injecting State resources to fight exclusion is insufficient if it is not accompanied by collective, reformed Republican values.

These suggestions are not new, but what makes them more sound are the connections he draws between the retreat of the State in the “hoods” and the differences that split “ethnic youths” themselves. The typology he offers of ethnic youths — 1. “*rouilleurs*” or “rusters” are disjointed both internally and externally; 2. “*dérouilleurs*” or “de-rusters / movers” are the successful “*bourgeoisie*”; 3. “intermediaries” are between the other two groups — shows that the youth who succeed despite crude racism and exclusion are the ones who interiorize and are able to defend the idea of the common good. His description of the gaps between “*rouilleurs*” and “*dérouilleurs*” is the best part of the book. Such divisions are explained not only by the access of a few to State resources or by wise and lucky individual trajectories through a mass of obstacles, but also by the abyssal difference of social values carried by each group. Begag’s views on the negative effects of the “*rouilleurs*” on the “hoods” is predictable and unoriginal in so far as these youths seem to react exclusively to the consumer society’s pitfalls (hence their lack of collective values) and are, by the same token, dispossessed of any political, if not social claims. His analysis of the social, behavioral and ethical clashes between the “*rouilleurs*” and “*dérouilleurs*” and on the fragile positioning of the “intermediaries” leads to three conclusions: first, that exclusion and discrimination are deeply entrenched in French society; second, that the “hoods” are complex sites that should be treated as such; and finally, that the game is not over — things can be changed. France can pretend to be a modern and pluricultural society only if it succeeds in addressing the issues that are raised by its ethnic population. One wonders if Begag’s pragmatism — that the Republic and its ethnic constituents should institute a give and take process in good faith — does not fall into a voluntarism that posits “Where there’s a will there’s a way”?

Wiervorka, Michel. 1997. “Culture, société et démocratie.” In Michel Wiervorka (ed.) *Une société fragmentée. Le multiculturalisme en débat*. Paris, La Découverte: 11-60.

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