

Barbed Wire Enclosed Spaces and Places: Elites, Ethnic Tensions and Public Policy

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University

Abstract

When the suburbs of Paris went up in flames in October 2005, the newly erupting crisis focused attention not only on France's model of immigration, but also on the issue of media coverage and diversity worldwide. Newspapers and other forms of media played a powerful role in crafting citizenly images of young Frenchmen who participated in the unrest. Using the French *banlieues* as a model, this paper examines how elites—the network of journalists and pundits—shaped public perceptions of participants in the riots through the employment of a common vocabulary. The goal is to understand how elite discourses work, and by extension, create a new democratic policy that recognizes our common humanity.

Introduction

Jeff Faux opens his engaging book, *The Global Class War*, with a dazzling story that tells us a great deal about the compelling power of elites. In 1993, Faux had a lively conversation with a corporate lobbyist in the corridors of the United States Capitol who was trying to make him “see the virtues of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)” that her company was supporting.¹ After some exasperation over her failure to make Faux understand the hefty significance of the treaty, the lobbyist finally said to him: “Don’t you understand? We have to help Salinas. He’s been to Harvard. He’s one of us.”² The lobbyist was referring to Carlos Salinas who was president of Mexico at the time.

The lobbyist’s reference to “one of us” hugely magnifies the difference between those who belong to an elite class and those who do not. A “pond” away in France in 2005, things of a “not one of us” sort played out on October 27, 2005 when teenagers Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore were electrocuted after climbing into an electrical sub-station in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois.³ For three months, a wave of riots swept across France and newspapers, magazines and other media worldwide covered the events with

¹ Jeff Faux, *The Global Class War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 1.

² Ibid.

³ BBC News, October 27, 2005.

great intensity. And the socially constructed discourse surrounding the rioting tied stories of the incidents together through metaphors and descriptors, creating a unique opportunity for examining in microcosm the role of elites in shaping public perceptions. Understanding the language of elites is especially important today because of myths circulating worldwide about imagined communities, diminishing hierarchies, democratization and global interdependence.⁴ In practice, however, language that elites use to frame the “other” is more resilient than some globalists anticipated, as media coverage of the French riots reveals. The linguistic and attitudinal dispositions of elites have a powerful influence on the imaginary because of the way they express and consolidate views of the “other; in this instance, perceptions of youths in French *banlieues*, and by implication, views of the underclass worldwide.

Although there are several dominant aspects of elite discourses, this paper focuses on the relationship between elite discourses and press coverage of the 2005 riots in the French suburbs. I argue that the vocabulary of elites in shaping public perceptions of French youth was so clear and overpowering as to “compel a single design”—a constitutive moment. By constitutive moment, I mean “at times of decision when ideas and culture of elites come into play, as do some constellations of power, preexisting class legacies, and models.”⁵ Elites are minorities with particular areas of influence, power and competence. I will direct most of my focus to vocabulary--lexical items, metaphors and descriptors-- their salience and substance. Words are not mere concepts but condense values, beliefs and attitudes, and have consequences beyond utterance.

⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Short History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 1.

Discussion

The Media

Tuen van Dijk notes that elites “control or have preferential access to the major means of public communication, e.g., through political media, educational, scholarly or corporate discourse. . . .”⁶ Such controls have serious implications for who gets to say what, when, how, under what conditions and with what effect—especially in areas of public space and public perception-making. Something so basic, and yet as strategically powerful as what themes and topics appear in newspaper headlines and how they are treated, “define the overall coherence or semantic unity of discourse, and also what information readers memorize best from a news report,” as van Dijk argues. Furthermore, the headline and the lead paragraph express the most important information of the cognitive model of journalists, that is, how they see and define the news event. Unless readers have different knowledge and beliefs, they will generally adopt these subjective media definitions of what is important information about an event.⁷ This means that vocabulary and the way that news is structured can have far-reaching consequences for what readers and listeners take away from their media encounters.

Elites’ control of the media is further strengthened by what George Lakoff calls framing. According to George Lakoff, every word evokes a frame. A frame is a conceptual and moral structure used in thinking.⁸ The word elephant evokes a frame with an image of an elephant and certain knowledge: “an elephant is a large animal (a

⁶ Teun A. van Dijk Denying Racism: Elite Discourse and Racism, <http://www.daneprarie.com>, p. 179; Teun A. van Dijk, Discourse and the Denial of Racism, *Discourse & Society*, 1992 (3) 87-118.

⁷ Van Dijk, Denying Racism, p. 182.

⁸ George Lakoff, Simple Framing, http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/simple_framing, p.1; George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know your Values and frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing,)

mammal) with large floppy ears, a trunk that functions like both a nose and a hand, large stump-like legs, and so on.”⁹ Across time and space, elites have evoked frames that shape what we think and how we *see* the other—in systematic and enduring ways.

Historically, systematic and enduring framing helps to explain why black Americans, Native Americans and other indigenous groups as far a field as New Zealand and Australia continue to grapple with negative images. Moreover, framing explains why black slaves were labeled as “lazy,” “shiftless” and “irresponsible” when they failed to speed up their cotton-picking, cotton-hoeing, pea-picking, corn-shucking and other “ing” acts deemed both worthy and necessary by slave masters. For malingering, language was co-opted and blacks were soon defined as ‘lazy,’ and not the slave masters who appropriated the labor of the slaves. The masters were not viewed as “lazy,” because they got to define the other and because they were in control of symbolic capital. This is a crucial point to make in terms of how the language of framing and labeling works. It extends its rhetorical tentacles into the realm of public policy. Ronald Takaki observes that attitudinal perceptions of black Americans soon “found their way into the public consciousness and political rhetoric” of America.¹⁰

Since elites are keenly instrumental in the selecting and apportioning of content, it is important to understand how they framed youths living in French *banlieues* in terms of lexical choice and metaphoric clusters and descriptors. N. Fairclough argues that there are many individuals who do not have equal access to mass media in terms of selecting, writing, speaking or broadcasting. One reason for this is that “media output is very much under professional and institutional control, and in general it is those who already have

⁹ Lakoff, *Simple Framing*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 113.

other forms of economic, political or cultural power that have the best access to the media.”¹¹ Furthermore, in general, elites have preferential access and control over such features as historical/rhetorical content, time, place and even control over whether in the instance of French youths, the participants would have a chance to speak—to answer charges against them—as well as control over the various aspects of rhetorical texts such as topics, style, manner of presentation and so on. In such instances, those without voice often remain in barbed wire enclosed spaces and places.

Impetus: Rioting in France’s *Banlieues*

Rioting in French *banlieues* dominated newspaper and magazine coverage from October 27, 2005 to December 1, 2005. Two days before teenagers Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore hid from police in an electrical sub-station in the poor, immigrant Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, French Interior Prime Minister –and now President of France—Nicolas Sarkozy visited the Paris suburb of Argenteuil to determine how measures were working against urban violence. In assessing the social situation, Sarkozy said that “crime-ridden” neighborhoods should be “cleaned with a power hose” and then described violent elements in Argenteuil as “gangrene” and “rabble.” He also called youths “thugs” and “scum.”¹² Such terms reveal the presence of disease metaphors to characterize youth demonstrators and his language also manifests the rhyssomatic nature of utterances by other elites, as we shall see.

¹¹ N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London, UK: Longman, 1995), 40.

¹² Craig S. Smith, “Rioting by Immigrants Embroil Paris Suburbs,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2005; John Carreyrou, “French Minister Sarkozy Stumbles over Paris Riots,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2005, A10; BBC News, November 14, 2005.

Forum on Public Policy

Two important points are immediately clear from Sarkozy's language. First, language suggests that he perceived Argenteuil residents as inhabited by a vile and potentially invasive social disease, and second, he presented himself as capable of constructing a different cultural and social space for young Frenchmen from Morocco, from Mali, from Senegal and other places that were formerly parts of Colonial France—a space defined by the cultural--conquered through an operation of discourse that “reproduces social relations of domination and power.” In terms of context, then, and in terms of how discourse functions, Sarkozy carved out terrain that he and other elites would occupy. This is a pivotal constitutive moment, because Sarkozy's rhetoric instantly created a different mode of communication from one that had traditionally dominated French political communication. For years, France had prided itself on its egalitarian and universal democratic culture.¹³

In 2005, however, France was struggling to live up to its democratic principles and fully integrate its Muslims into all sections of national life. But let us not be detained by a discussion of Muslims' struggles to enter the body politic. Rather, it is significant to note that as far as I can determine, Sarkozy made no effort to place empathy in public space and he attempted no rhetoric of mediation that later could be used as an instrument for preserving the peace, for crafting sensible and reasonable public policy, and for calming a people so downtrodden and potentially pessimistic about their future as youths living in French suburbs. Against this cultural and social backdrop, it is unsurprising that rhetoric would ossify and that Benna's and Traore's tragic deaths would create unrest that

¹³ Alstair Horne discusses the historical drama behind the creation of the French Revolution. His discussion of France's descent into the revolution of 1789 helps to explain why French riots in 2005 cast the words “liberty, equality and fraternity” in a new light. Alistair Horne, *La Belle France, A Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 173-204.

resulted in the destruction of 15 vehicles on October 27, the official start of the unrest. Somehow, through spontaneity and through modeling, unrest spread from Clichy-sous-Bois to other places in France.¹⁴

On October 29, mourners in T-shirts imprinted with “dead for nothing” language held a silent march to remember Benna and Traore. By that time, it still was unclear as to whether the police had triggered the deaths of the two young men. The next day, on October 30, Sarkozy once again entered political public space by pledging “zero tolerance” of rioting and, seizing an opportunity to implement public policy, sent police reinforcements to Clichy-sous-Bois.¹⁵ British Broadcasting Company (BBC) News reported that Azous Begag, a junior minister in charge of equal opportunities, had condemned Sarkozy’s employment of the word “rabble.” Although Begag offered no elaborate rhetorical explanation of Sarkozy’s term and its potential for disturbing fragile human relations between youths of the suburbs and other French citizens, Begag’s rhetorical condemnation clearly spoke to the fact that Sarkozy’s use of the word “rabble” was ill-chosen.¹⁶ By implication, Begag sensed that Sarkozy had not set up a condition sine qua non for overcoming the effects of factionalism; his language became the constitution of a place within which interests and ideology became elements not of civic dialogue and participation but of civic rupture.

The rhetoric of elites, however, found constraining influence in the language of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin who, on November 1, 2005, pledged a full investigation

¹⁴ Semou Diof, a French citizen, but born in Senegal, speaks to this democratic and cultural challenge. He writes the problem is “the French don’t think I’m French.” Craig S. Smith believes that this view and the fact that for many people being French “remains a baguette-and-beret affair” were “at the heart of the unrest.” Craig S. Smith, “France Faces a Colonial Legacy: What makes Someone French?” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2005.

¹⁵ *Economist*, May 6, 2006.

¹⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Europe/4413964.stm>

into the deaths of Benna and Traore at a meeting with their families. In this specific regard, the symbolism of Sarkozy and de Villepin presented contrasting rhetorical views of not only uses of public policy but also uses of language.¹⁷ In the meantime, rioting spread from Clichy-sous-Bois and Seine-Saint-Dennis to three other regions in Paris. From November 1 to November 8, before French cabinet members authorized emergency power to manage the unrest, records indicate that over 2,000 vehicles had burned, 400 people had been arrested, 12 police officers had been injured, and disturbances had spread to more than 30 French towns and cities.¹⁸ Such was the nature of urgent constitutive moments and accompanying rhetoric.

The Reporting

While Paris and other cities and towns in France burned, newspapers, magazines and other media vied for coverage of the events, providing opportunities for one to understand what the press deemed worthy about the incident, the perspective it would take, and whether descriptors of the rioting would favor the interests of ruling elites, who got quoted in the news and who did not, and most critical for our purposes, what types of metaphors and descriptors were used to frame the French unrest and the young men who participated.

The assumption that members of the *banlieues* are culturally unsuited for participation in the civic order was legitimized by elite editors and writers. Newspapers were replete with a language of defamation. On November 11, 2005, under the title “French Lessons,” *The Wall Street Journal* noted that the rioting in France was an “underclass

¹⁷ Graham Murray argues that “ethnic youths in the *banlieues* of France face exposed a racism that scores deep into the French nation.” Graham Murray, “France: The Riots and the Republic,” *Race & Class*, 47 (2006) : 26.

¹⁸ Craig S. Smith, “Target of Cities, Chirac says he’ll discuss French unrest after Order Prevails,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2005.

problem” as well as a “problem with structures,” and then the editorial proceeded to use the following descriptors to characterize the rioting and rioters: “hooliganism,” “pathologies of the *banlieues*” and “mayhem.”¹⁹ On the same day, *Neu Zürcher Zeitung* employed the word “a gang” and a day earlier, *Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* had used the term “the vandals” to indicate the caliber of people who were participating in the unrest.²⁰

To hold youths in check, other writers and keepers of the culture also used labels discrediting the behavior. “Young fire-starters” wrote *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. “Fiery delirium” and “snowballing zones of anarchy” noted *Die Welt*.²¹ “Highly alienated and fanatical young men” decreed David Brooks under the byline “Gangsta in French.”²² “Suburban gangs” declared BBC News.²³ In wielding such labels, elites exercised one of language’s most potent properties: the capacity to name and to reinforce dominance.²⁴ Each label identifies its object as a deviant to be shunned. Each deprives the subject of those disposed to have an open view of the participants in the disturbances, but disinclined to hear a “gangsta,” “scum,” or a “fanatic.” Pierre Bourdieu in his work on language and symbolic power illustrates rather convincingly the power of naming. “There is the world of particular perspective,” according to Bourdieu, “of individual agents who, on the basis of their particular point of view, their particular position, produce meaning –of themselves and others—that are particular and self-interested

¹⁹ *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2005.

²⁰ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 11, 2005; *Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 7, 2005.

²¹

²² David Brooks, “Gangsta in French,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2005.

²³ BBC News, October 30, 2006.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 239.

(nicknames, insults, and even accusations, indictments slanders, etc). . . and thus create a truly symbolic effect.”²⁵

Bourdieu’s work also suggests that language of elites both sanctions and represents the State. Such authorized point of view of elite agents—in some instances delegates of the state and state policies-- use indicting names, including such all-inclusive descriptors as “rabble-rouser,” “hooligan,” “roamer,” “gang,” “extremist,” “mayhem,” “gangster,” “thug,” “scum,” “vandals,” “insurgent,” “fire-starters,” “troublemakers,” “riff-raff,” and “nihilist”—all of which are defamatory and specify a nonrational genesis for the disturbances that occurred in Paris. According to my count, of the forty plus articles and pieces that I examined, editors and writers used a total of fifteen major negative descriptors to characterize French youth.²⁶

Such descriptors tell young people and others a great deal about what elites think of their culture. Based on the selection and apportioning rhetorical process, metaphors and descriptors suggest that the young men’s behavior was spun either from a maladaptive culture or from a diseased and demented mind. Is this the rhetoric with which to build common ground? Citizenly virtues and visions? Descriptors also suggest that the behavior of the young men came from their free-ranging and ungoverned emotions. Significantly, the vocabulary functioned such to reveal inner emotions of rage and discontent as an effective means of potentially threatening the social order—creating underpinnings of *content* for the creation of public policy. The words “mayhem,”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* served as a source for the definitions of all terms. The definitions, plus the linguistic context in which the terms were used in journalistic sources, were helpful in determining whether terms carried pejorative meanings. Van Dijk, Hartman and Husband note that the dominant view of minorities and immigrants is that of problems. Of course, some changes in human perceptions have occurred over the past decade. Teun A. Van Dijk, “Discourse and the Denial of Racism,” *Discourse & Society*, 1992 (vol 3) 87; P. Hartman & C. Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974).

“pathology,” and “nilhism,”—all contain within them an aggressive, unsobering, menacing quality: They constitute, in effect, resistance to efficiency, discipline, work, productivity and cultural cleanliness.²⁷

While it is the case that not all media viewed the disturbances in this manner, a preponderance of the stories that I examined circulated the metaphors and descriptors identified in this paper. CNN, for example, tended to use denotative words instead of relying heavily on connotative, emotionally-charged language. CNN employed such descriptors as “young people,” “unrest” and “spreading violence.”²⁸

As we have seen, newspaper columnists and editors explained French disturbances in both cultural and sociological terms. Moreover, the language of elites consigned young men to a space habituated by disease, by invasion and by mutation. Foucault’s term for linguistic barbed wire enclosed spaces and places would surely be something akin to an “insane asylum.” In his piece, “Questions on Geography,” Foucault speaks to the effect that “a system of regular dispersion of statements” can have on human perception.²⁹ By implication, Foucault’s ideas regarding the way that elite discourses enclose humans into regions and areas speak compellingly to what happened in French *banlieues*.

The repetitive and constant employment of metaphors and descriptors implicitly suggested to readers that the geographic space that members of the French suburbs occupy is precisely where they should be: in barbed wire enclosed spaces and places. As

²⁷ These conclusions are based on an understanding of how words work rhetorically. In his book, *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric*, Carroll C. Arnold uses the terms “suggestive” and “implicit” “to refer to bits of communication that seem to invite listeners to *associate* (italics his) what is said with other parts of the speech or aspects of the situation or with private experience.” The same principle also applies to written discourse. Carroll C. Arnold, *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1974), p. 69.

²⁸ CNN News, November 9, 2005.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 63.

Foucault argues, “Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power.”³⁰ Words—sheer vocabulary—can demonstrate the effects of power through repetition, because repetition acts “as if” messages and meanings inhabit the world of facts—the factual *is*. Thus, words and terms repeated often enough arrange themselves “as if” they are true. Such was the rhetorical potential of the language of elites in describing French disturbances.

Of the over forty pieces that I examined, I found no instance of a columnist or editor quoting a student who lived in French suburbs.³¹ Their voices were muted. They had no access to a public amplifier. They were given virtually no platform from which to discuss, to engage, to talk about their actions, to signify, or otherwise establish links among cultural, political, psychological and psychoanalytic concerns. Youths in the *banlieues* had to shout from the margins of public discussion.³²

Several important major implicit and explicit cultural and perceptual factors may be drawn from this analysis of media coverage of the French riots and how the riots intertwine with ethnic conflict and the symbolic capital of elites. Of course, no single factor can explain everything. Rather, I am just theorizing and extending the data base as far as it can reasonably go. Although there is no final word on this complex and various

³⁰ Ibid, 69.

³¹ Although clusters of metaphors and descriptors are taken from such newspapers and magazines as *Economist*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, other print and non-print sources were also consulted. For example, *The American Conservative*.

³² Underrepresented minorities are often discredited and given fewer economic opportunities than whites. Murray uses the phrase, “the two Frances” to signify economic and social disparities between France’s ethnic and non-ethnic populations.

subject, I offer some implications of how metaphors and descriptors fit into a total constitutive symbolic and cultural system.

First, the descriptors of elites fence-in some people and fence-out others, symbolically creating barbed wire enclosed spaces and places. By using special appeals to primordialisms, elites use variations of language that signify the presence of tribal groups, that is, the notion that recent immigrants to France are very different, and their “vile” ways are pitted against others who are more homogenous. The metaphors and descriptors are constitutive and promote tribal consciousness and a “we” versus “they” orientation. Paul Gilroy explains a similar idea when discussing the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging. He writes “Identity helps us to comprehend the formation of that perilous pronoun “we” and to reckon with patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help creating.”³³ This suggests that as soon as elites characterize youths as “thugs” or “scum,” patterns of inclusion and exclusion are advanced. For this reason, it is unnecessary for elites to articulate something akin to the sentence “French youths are *not* part of the civic and cultural order” for audiences to understand the serious thrust and power of their arguments and perspectives. Both explicitly and implicitly, a choice of words is telling, because a “choice of words is a choice of worlds.”³⁴ Steven Pinker also reveals this special power of language. He notes, “For you and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability: we can create events in each other’s brains with exquisite precision.”³⁵

³³ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 99.

³⁴ The phrase “a choice of words is a choice of worlds” was used by student protesters at Columbia University during the 1960s.

³⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995) 15.

Second, youths were framed as permissive creatures who are out of control. (they are hardened and predatory)—maybe yes, maybe no—but here I am more interested in how words work. “Fire-starters,” “trouble-makers,” and “rabble-rouser” are permissive words that by implication, relate to permissive people, who are outside the civic and cultural order. When such words circulate freely they can become cultural chants through the sheer volume and structure of repetition. Furthermore, language of elites suggests that cultural insiders would never behave in such a fashion, that is, use violence as a form of protest. The danger of this type of rhetorical construction, however, is that permissive labels invite accusers to go on the attack and facilitate ethnic tensions.

Mohammed Rabie is very perceptive when he observes that ethnic conflict occurs primarily because two or more people who perceive themselves to be different are bound together in formal relations in the same country. Moreover, such perceptions are pushed along by relationships that are unsatisfactory or discriminating.³⁶ This means that cultural and ethnic tensions arise not from small disagreements or mundane matters. Rather, they arise because each group’s stories are firmly grounded in its own ideas of what is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, relevant or irrelevant, and important or unimportant. Each source of story-making has associated with it a line of argumentation. But suppose, for example, that elites and French youths could articulate a language in which their differences could be *undistortively expressed to the satisfaction of both sides*. Broader understanding could be achieved by employing *comparison and contrast*, which is a starting point with which we ought to approach analyses of difference.

³⁶ Mohammed Rabie, *Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 45-65.

Third, the language of elites potentially, and in actuality, contributes to the maintenance of social relationships and cultural structures because of the power dimension. In terms of public policy, a crucial question to ask is who gets to decide who gets included in divisions between margins and majority?³⁷ And how does the discourse of elites help to explain the behavior of ethnic groups and the way that societies achieve or fail to achieve power? What, then, are some key implications of my findings for public policy?

At the outset, it should be noted that discourses and accompanying attitudes of elites toward specific ethnic groups can have a constraining influence on public policy primarily because in some instances individuals who shape public policy, are for the most part, the same ones who shape perceptions of those whom they govern. For example, members of Policy Formation Organizations, individuals who serve on boards of directors and political appointees typically are members of the power elite.³⁸ In effect, such individuals occupy the center of concentric circles and national interests are implicated because the scope of political and educational deliberations is curtailed. It would seem to follow that elites, “those who are able to, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations” also “affect outcomes regularly and substantially.”³⁹ How can “ordinary” citizens participate meaningfully in decision-making and democratic public conversations if ideas and debates are restricted to a few?

Conclusion

³⁷ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

³⁸ Jeff Faux observes, for example, that such political appointees as Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Warren Christopher and Le Aspin have ties to the governing class. Jeff Faux, *The Global Class War*, pp. 53-54.

³⁹ Michael Barton, Richard Gunter & John Higley. “Introduction: Elite Transformations and Democratic Regimes.” Quoted in John Higley & Richard Gunter, eds. *Elites & Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

The first way that we might reconcile the language of elites and potential behavior that emanates from such cultural chromosomal imprinting mechanisms and begin to foster a more harmonious public culture is to *change the environment of public* discourse—ever mindful that ideas have consequences. James Hunter argues sensibly that media technologies are primarily responsible for passing along the *content* of debates that flow between opposing groups.⁴⁰ Giving groups along the great class divide an opportunity to confront one another face-to-face should resurrect old-fashioned modes of discursive discourse, which would encourage a serious and rational public discussion. I have in mind here an environment that would discourage rhetorical excess. As my research reveals, much of elite discourse surrounding French *banlieues* potentially created bipolar worlds of mine vs. thine, we vs. they, friend vs. foe and good vs. evil. This witting or unwitting presence of negative metaphors and descriptors carries with it divided sentiments concerning interpretations of the other. By implication, this also helps to explain why particular public policy agendas are promoted and others are muted. Although my findings are a microcosm of concerns emanating between elites and non-elites, it is not hard to imagine that a rehabilitation of language is a starting point for the creation of a fairer and more democratic public policy. A more open discussion allows those with lesser voice to find tongue and challenge procedures and laws of countries that impair access and movement.

Second, policy makers might revisit a notion of what constitutes modes of citizenship. Danielle S. Allen astutely points out some things that we might do to shape our public spaces (and not rely so heavily on police, as was the case in France), such as design benches, fountains, lighting systems and beautiful pathways—making spaces both

⁴⁰ James Hunter, *The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

inviting and easy to leave in order to encourage us back to interaction.⁴¹ She argues that if we rely too heavily on police oversight to shape our public spaces, we fail at our jobs. Moreover, we will have acquired forms of citizenship akin to a police state, and will have diminished the very idea of public space and democracy.

Allen provides a dramatic example that resonates for politicians and other citizens responsible for French youth living in Paris suburbs and elsewhere. She suggests that urban planners build exit routes into public space. In this way, an ordinary citizen can move about with a special type of attentiveness to what exits and options signify spaces safe enough to “talk to strangers.” Allen’s advice regarding how to treat human beings in public space has compelling implications for rethinking modes of citizenship. In instances when one confronts a potentially threatening French male immigrant from Mali or Morocco on a public street, especially when “there aren’t other watchful eyes around, “what is a typical citizen to do? Allen admits that there will be times when one will need to cross a street for safety’s sake, but the question is, she argues, how one does it. Thus, she underlines the importance of process in developing citizenship in public squares.⁴²

In such instances, Allen suggests that one should not cross the street too early because doing so would signal to others what we think of them. She maintains that “One needs to display to strangers, as much as possible, that one is willing to give them the benefit of the perceptual doubt—assume good will.” Moreover, as she argues, “to cross early is to leave open the possibility that one has crossed for reasons unrelated to the stranger’s approach: that possibility gives the stranger a chance not to take personally

⁴¹ Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 65.

⁴² *Ibid.* 166

the fact that one has crossed the street.” Democratic trust depends on public displays of an “egalitarian, well-intentioned spirit.”⁴³ And yet there was insufficient display of public trust in the discourse of elites surrounding events in the French suburbs to suggest an “egalitarian, well-intentioned spirit.” Of course, one must not lose sight of the fact that the disturbances heightened the very environment in which the discourse functioned and perhaps altered the rules governing what could or could not be said, when and where.

Third, and finally, policy makers might create a compelling public policy vision. No matter how beautiful and uplifting the 1789 French vision of liberty, equality and fraternity is, in a post-modern world, abstract principles can be problematic. As Jeremy Rifkin notes, a post-modern world is “characterized by increasing individuation, where personal identity is fractured into a myriad of sub-identities and meta-identities, reintegration with the whole of the biosphere may be the only antidote encompassing enough to ensure that the individual does not lose all of his or her moorings and disintegrate into a non-being.”⁴⁴ This is precisely where some cultures are headed unless we create a sense of purpose that encourages people to change their language and behavior—and this cannot be helped by elites who fan the embers of division by framing young people outside the civic culture and placing them in barbed wire enclosed spaces and places.

References

- Allen, Danielle S. 2004. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Arnold, Carroll C. 1974. *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
- BBC News, October 25, 2007; October 27, 2005.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language & Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴³ Ibid. 167

⁴⁴ Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004) 375.

Forum on Public Policy

- Brooks, David. "Gangsta in French," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2005.
- Burton, Michael, Gunter, Richard & Higley, John. "Introduction: Elite Transformations and Democratic Regimes," quoted in John Hghley and Richard Gunter, eds. 1992. *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Europe*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Carreyou, John. French Minister Sarkozy Stumbles over Paris Riots. *The New York Times* (November 3, 2005), A 10.
- CNN News, November 9, 2005.
- Die Welt*, November 11, 2005.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2003. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Economist*, May 6, 2006.
- Fairclough, N. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Faux, Jeff. 2006. *The Global Class War*. New York, John Wiley & Sons.
- Frankfurter All gemeine Zeitung*, November 10, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power, Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1999*. New York, Pantheon Books.
- Freidman, Thomas L. 2005. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux..
- Gilroy, Paul. 2000. *Against Race: Imaginary Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Hartman, P. & Husband, C. 1974. *Racism and the Mass Media*. London: Davis-Poynter.
- Horne, Alstair. 2005. *La Belle France: A Short History*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hunter, J. 1991. *The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lakoff, George. 2004. *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know your Values and Frame the Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co.
- Lakoff, George. "Simple Framing." http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/simple_framing (accessed March 6, 2005).
- Murray, Graham, "France: The Riots and the Republic," *Race & Class*. 47, no. 1. (2006) : 26-45.
- Neue Zurcher Zeitung, November 7, 2005; November 11, 2005.
- Nussbaum. Martha. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pinker, Steven. 1995. *The Language Instinct*. New York, HarperPerennial.
- Rifkin, Jeremy. 2004. *The European Dream*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.
- Starr, Paul. 2004. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books.
- Takaki, Ronald. 1990. *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. 1989. Oxford University.
- The Wall Street Journal*. November 11, 2005
- The New York Times*, November 11, 2005.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. "Discourse and the Denial of Racism," *Discourse & Society*. 3 (1997): 87-118.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. "Denying Racism," <http://www.danepararie.com>.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.