

The March for Equality and Against Racism: the “Migrants’ May 1968”?

Muriel Cohen

Reviewed: Abdellali Hajjat, *La Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2013, 264 pages.

Abdellali Hajjat looks back at the event that went down in history as the “Marche des Beurs” (“Arabs’ March”), and its beginnings three decades ago in a suburb of Lyon. Through a detailed analysis of the role of local and national contexts that led to the march, he underlines the political misunderstandings it generated and the historic opportunity that was missed for closer links between the Left and working-class neighbourhoods across France.

The title of Abdellali Hajjat’s work, *La Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (“The March for Equality and Against Racism”), is more significant than it may at first glance appear. In particular, it seeks to distance itself from the informal – and nowadays most common – name for the event in question, “*la Marche des Beurs*” (“the Arabs’ March”¹), first used by the media when the event took place in 1983. This expression, now preserved for posterity, is somewhat problematic, as not only does it exclude a large proportion of those actually on the march, but it also masks the marchers’ true objectives. By re-examining the history of this march, which left Marseille on 15 October 1983 and arrived in Paris seven weeks later on 3 December, Abdellali Hajjat aims to dispel at least two commonly held but erroneous beliefs: first, the affiliation between the association SOS Racisme and the march; and second, the comparisons that are currently made between the “good” second-generation immigrants of the 1980s and those of today.

A relatively abundant literature already exists concerning this “milestone event in the history of immigration” (p. 9). However, in place of the “assimilation”-based analysis produced by Didier Lapeyronnie in the 1980s (Lapeyronnie 1987) or the “generations”-based analysis proposed by Stéphane Beaud and Olivier Masclet after the 2005 riots (Beaud and Masclet 2006), Abdellali Hajjat takes a resolutely empirical approach that focuses on the local configuration, the precise sequence of events in Lyon, and the key players in the movement. He seeks to move away from the political lines held by the various stakeholders and commentators of the event (Delorme 1985; Bouamama and Abdallah 1994) in order to reveal the factors behind this exceptional mobilisation that attracted some 100,000 people in Paris, despite starting out with only a dozen marchers in Marseille. To achieve this, the author takes an approach inspired by social history. By combining archives (private, municipal and departmental – some previously unexplored), interviews (with figures including Djaïdja Toumi, president of SOS Avenir Minguettes; Christian Delorme, the local Catholic priest for Les Minguettes; and the main protagonists) and extracts from the press, Abdellali Hajjat strives to contextualise the events, analyse power relationships, and deconstruct

¹ Translator’s note: in Verlan (a type of back slang commonly used in France that typically involves moving the first syllable(s) of a word to the end and truncating the result), *Beur* is back slang for *Arabe* (“Arab”) – the first syllable (“a”) is dropped, and the second syllable (“ra”) is placed after the third (“be” or, phonetically, “beu”); this gives “beu-ra”, which is truncated to “beur”.

representations so as to understand the practices at play. In doing so, he manages to combine an analysis of social structures and a careful historical reconstruction of the event.

From Les Minguettes to Paris: different scales of mobilisation

The first part of the book is devoted to a socio-historical study of Les Minguettes, a large district of predominantly social housing in Vénissieux (a working-class suburb of Lyon) that was home to the key players behind the march. This helps to explain the convergence of factors that led to the movement in the first place. The focus on the local context provides a real insight into the daily lives of the descendants of immigrants on large suburban social-housing estates in the early 1980s, which typically featured – among other things – police brutality, unemployment, and general hardship. A detailed statistical study shows how the population of the area declined from 34,000 (including 18,000 young people) living in 9,000 dwellings in 1974 to 25,000 in 1982, with nearly 3,000 empty homes on the estate. The author’s analysis illustrates with finesse the dynamics at work in this “exodus” process, based on multiple factors: social mobility, a desire for better housing conditions, and tensions within the working classes. The ethnography of the area presented in the book is particularly detailed: it retraces the histories of the various meeting places for young people in the neighbourhood, despite the 30 years that have since passed. The author identifies in particular the central figures involved in the association SOS Avenir Minguettes, who were the “little brothers” of local “personalities” in the neighbourhood.² Their “big brothers” had already made a name for themselves by challenging authority, and enjoyed high levels of sympathy and goodwill among locals, which transferred to their younger siblings. One of the conditions leading to the mobilisation of these young people was therefore the position they occupied in the local space, together with certain family ties, which gave them the legitimacy required to engage in a protest movement on behalf of the other residents.

Here, it would have been nice to find out a little more about the social and residential trajectories of foreign families living in Les Minguettes: depending on whether families had come from *cités de transit* (temporary “transition estates”), had moved from renovated neighbourhoods, or had obtained housing directly upon arrival from their country of origin (via the 1% employer contribution scheme), they had different social positions that could have an impact on trajectories in terms of their children’s education, participation in associations, and level of activism. Other local factors are nevertheless highlighted by Abdellali Hajjat: the difficulties in dealing with this working-class youth; the experience of the first “urban rebellions” (Chapters 2 and 3); the presence in the neighbourhood of seasoned activists involved in the struggles of the 1970s who had already forged links with some of the younger residents during the first rebellions; and, finally, strained relations with the communist municipal council in Vénissieux, which – based on a racial rather than social analysis – denounced “ghettos” and refused to accept new foreign families in the town.

After this presentation of the local context, Abdellali Hajjat looks back on the events that directly led to the march. The time frame chosen by the author extends from 1981 to the immediate aftermath of the march, with occasional incursions into the 1970s. Within this temporal framework, the author identifies three distinct phases. The initial phase corresponds to the “revolts” in Les Minguettes – first, those of the summer of 1981, followed by those of March 1983, less well known – which are well documented. In the second phase, a non-violent movement began to develop at local level: a hunger strike was launched in support of one of the youths detained during the riots of March 1983. This strike ended in success, conferring upon the young people of Les Minguettes a new-found status as legitimate interlocutors in dealing with the authorities. They then founded the association SOS Avenir Minguettes, with the aim of “symbolically disarming the police” by promoting non-violent action. It was in this context that the idea of a march was first envisaged by Djäidja Toumi, who had himself been wounded by a policeman. The objective was to obtain national support in dealing with police brutality, in order to break the “deadlock of the local

² Whereas Stéphane Beaud and Olivier Masclet saw these individuals as community elders instead (2006, p. 817).

configuration”, whereby young people were not supported by the communist mayor, Marcel Houël. The third phase identified by the author is the preparation of the march, which did not receive immediate recognition. The death of Habib Grimzi, pushed out of a window by three men on the Bordeaux–Ventimiglia train on 14 November 1983, marked a turning point. The media focused their attention on the marchers, while members of the government – hitherto reluctant to get involved – took charge of hosting the march upon its arrival in Paris, forming what Abdellali Hajjat calls an “unlikely alliance” between descendants of immigrants and the political, trade-union and media elites close to the ruling centre-left Socialist Party. The years that followed the march, which included a failed attempt by descendants of immigrants to construct a political movement, are addressed more concisely.

Misunderstood protests

The idea of an “immigrants’ May 68” – with its “unlikely alliance” between the dominant and the dominated, and with young people of foreign origin finally making their voices heard – seems very convincing. One particularly original aspect of Abdellali Hajjat’s work is the way in which he analyses the shift from the initial claims and protests made by activists from SOS Avenir Minguettes to those made by the march itself. From the very start of these youth mobilisations, there were occurrences of “violent police misconduct”. This issue has been the subject of numerous studies that show that this was indeed a major issue in the lives of the working classes and populations of foreign origin, over the medium term.³ Accordingly, the initial tactics and slogans focused on the (in)equality of treatment by the police, as well as by the justice system, in reaction to a situation where youngsters from working-class neighbourhoods were given disproportionately harsh sentences in the light of their alleged offences, while racist crimes – very common throughout the 1970s – were dealt with much more leniently. The other claims related to access to the job market and social housing for foreigners, who were excluded from both at the time. The role of Christian Delorme, the parish priest for Les Minguettes, appears to have been instrumental in the shift from violent to non-violent action. It was he who introduced more consensual slogans and tactics, such as the “right to life” and the fight against racism, so as to build up a movement with sufficient clout to force the government to support descendants of immigrants, despite a context of rising racism.

This consensual, toned-down approach explains – in one of the book’s particularly salient conclusions – the march’s mixed reception among young people in certain working-class areas, and especially the “glacial” welcome it received in Les Minguettes. Ultimately, the national success of the march appears to have been more the result of support from the political and cultural elites than of support by the populations concerned. Finally, the author stresses that the changes achieved by the march were relatively small. Obtaining a ten-year residence permit for all foreigners was in fact the result of a misunderstanding on the part of François Mitterrand – demonstrating that the marchers were perceived by politicians as foreigners calling for a right of residence and an anti-racism policy, while the social and political dimensions of their initial claims, concerning access to housing and the job market, and police and judicial discrimination, were largely ignored.

Les Minguettes: an “exemplary” space?

The author’s choice to focus on Les Minguettes in the early 1980s, enabling him to reveal the combination of factors that led to the emergence of the march, nevertheless leaves a number of questions unanswered. For example, a comparison with other places would have no doubt more

³ For a perspective that is both historical and sociological, see the works of: Emmanuel Blanchard, on Algerians and the Parisian police and Algerians (Blanchard 2011); Alain Dewerpe (2006), on the disaster following the repression of a demonstration at Charonne metro station; Fabien Jobard (2002), on the French police today; and Didier Fassin (2011), on the BAC (*Brigade anti-criminalité*, the French serious crime squad) in a town in the Paris suburbs.

effectively underscored the uniqueness of Les Minguettes and why exactly it was in this neighbourhood that urban revolts were triggered in 1981, before the adoption of a non-violent approach. Several other areas, such as Nanterre near Paris, or the northern suburbs (“les Quartiers Nord”) of Marseille, were also affected at the time by unemployment, police violence and segregation, and were also home to political activists and associations founded by children of immigrants. Indeed, spatial relegation in these areas appears to have been even greater than at Les Minguettes, owing to the ongoing existence of *cités de transit*, which had been swiftly eradicated in the Lyon region. From this point of view, we might even put forward the hypothesis that the origins of the march in Les Minguettes can be explained by the higher level of spatial and social integration of young people in Vénissieux, compared to those who lived in *cités de transit* in Paris or Marseille, or even compared to those on the troubled Olivier de Serres estate in Villeurbanne (another suburb of Lyon), where mobilisations focused on rehousing. It would seem that the desire for access to normal housing conditions (not specific to immigrants) is what made other forms of discrimination less tolerable.

Expanding the time frame of the book would also have allowed for a more detailed analysis of the context of mobilisation. The author highlights attacks from the government (evictions), prefectures (especially in the Rhône-Alpes region around Lyon) and local councils (communist mayors’ refusal to grant housing to foreigners) against North African immigration in the mid-1970s, but these merely represent the radicalisation of a process that was part of an ongoing and very clear rejection of immigration from the Maghreb since the Algerian War of Independence. Tensions between communist municipal councils and descendants of immigrants regarding the appropriation of urban spaces and suggestions of a “tolerance threshold”, for example, can be considered as a continuation of slum-clearance efforts initiated at the very end of the 1950s, studied by Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard (2012a). Another key factor behind mobilisations was the establishment in the early 1970s of a particularly dynamic local network of associations and activists in certain municipalities by young people and workers (Blanc-Chaléard 2012b). This process is referred to by Abdellali Hajjat in well-documented insets, but it perhaps deserves further development.

Post-colonial mobilisation?

For Abdellali Hajjat, the march marks the appearance of the “children of post-colonial immigrants” in the public space. The author shows that marchers of Algerian origin thought of themselves at the time – when it was not yet an issue of public importance – as descendants of colonised people, and saw in this an explanation for their position as dominated populations. While there is no doubt that discrimination against Algerians and the negative representations to which they were subjected played an essential role in mobilising young people, the presence of descendants of Algerians nevertheless appears uneven across the different groups mobilised. Half of the marchers were children of Algerians, including *harkis*⁴ – to whom, it must be emphasised, exceptional attention is paid in this book, compared to most works on descendants of immigrants – but activists of French origin formed the other main component. The activists from SOS Avenir Minguettes, meanwhile, were of various nationalities and origins. Above all, we might question the make-up, in terms of immigrant backgrounds, of the 100,000-strong crowd that marched through Paris on 3 December 1983. Despite their critical role in the success of the march, little mention is made of them in the book. The question of whether the young people of Les Minguettes, and of France, demonstrated as descendants of workers, descendants of foreigners or descendants of colonised populations (or even simply as residents of working-class neighbourhoods) does not seem to be clearly answered here.

Furthermore, if indeed descendants of post-colonial immigrants living on suburban social-housing estates were over-represented on the march, it would be interesting to examine, in parallel, the diverse range of positions regarding the march adopted by descendants of Algerians according

⁴ The *harkis* were Muslim Algerian loyalists who served as auxiliaries in the French army during the Algerian War.

to social status. France's 1982 census records over 130,000 individuals born to Algerian parents between 1958 and 1967, aged 15 to 24.⁵ Many of these were living in social housing (50%), but not all on large system-built housing estates like Les Minguettes, while other descendants of Algerians grew up in older city-centre areas or on private suburban housing estates. Taking account of this diversity is necessary to break with the stereotypical image of *jeunes de banlieue* (the equivalent would be “inner-city youths” in English-speaking countries) that was commonplace in representations at the time, and has not disappeared since.

Bibliography

- Beaud, Stéphane and Masclat, Olivier. 2006. “Des ‘marcheurs’ de 1983 aux ‘émeutiers’ de 2005”, *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, vol. 61, pp. 809–843.
- Blanc-Chaléard, Marie-Claude. 2012a. “Les quotas d'étrangers en HLM : un héritage de la guerre d'Algérie ? Les Canibouts à Nanterre (1959-1968)”, *Métropolitiques*, 16 March. Retrieved 1 December 2013, URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Les-quotas-d-etrangers-en-HLM-un.html>.
- Blanc-Chaléard, Marie-Claude. 2012b. “Les travailleurs immigrés en quête d'autonomie”, in Tartakowsky, Danielle et Pigenet, Michel (eds.), *Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France : de 1814 à nos jours*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Blanchard, Emmanuel. 2011. *La Police parisienne et les Algériens : 1944-1962*, Paris: Nouveau Monde.
- Bouamama, Saïd and Abdallah, Mogniss H. 1994. *Dix ans de marche des Beurs. Chronique d'un mouvement avorté*, Paris: Desclée De Brouwer.
- Delorme, Christian. 1985. *Par amour et par colère*, Paris: Le Centurion.
- Dewerpe, Alain. 2006, *Charonne, 8 février 1962. Anthropologie historique d'un massacre d'État*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Fassin, Didier. 2011. *La Force de l'ordre. Une anthropologie de la police des quartiers*, Paris: Seuil.
- Jobard, Fabien. 2002. *Bavures policières ? La force publique et ses usages*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Lapeyronnie, Didier. 1987. “Assimilation, mobilisation et action collective chez les jeunes de la seconde génération de l'immigration maghrébine”, *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 287–318.

Muriel Cohen holds a PhD in modern history at the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne – for which she defended a thesis titled “Des familles invisibles. Politiques publiques et trajectoires résidentielles de l'immigration algérienne (1945–1985)” (“Invisible families. Public policies and residential trajectories of Algerian immigration (1945–1985)”) – and is a member of the Centre d'Histoire Sociale du XX^e Siècle (Centre for 20th-Century Social History). Her research focuses on the social history of Algerian immigration and the history of housing for immigrants. Her publications include “Les bidonvilles de Nanterre, entre ‘trop-plein’ de mémoire et silences” (*Diasporas*, no. 17, 2011).

To quote this article:

Muriel Cohen, translated by Oliver Waine, “The March for Equality and Against Racism: the ‘Migrants’ May 1968?”, *Metropolitiques*, 4 December 2013. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-March-for-Equality-and-Against.html>.

⁵ All were recorded as Algerians, even though over half of them were actually French, as they were born in France to parents born in (what was) a French territory. This once again highlights the public administrations' inability to comprehend that these descendants of immigrants were in fact French citizens.