An Ethnographic Inquiry into Shifting Discourses of Diversity and Social Inequality in France

Dr Beth Epstein *ISRF Mid-Career Fellow 2019*

NOTE: The Mid-Career Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

In France as in much of Europe, the first decades of the millennium have been marked by an increase in racially-inflected social tensions, generating intense debate about the capacity of European nation-states to make room for difference, and about the impoverished conceptual means available to meet these challenges in the 21st century. The lifeways and perceptions of those who are the putative subjects of this debate, however, are often overlooked or fitted into pre-existing social categories that do not reflect the variety and particularity of their experience. For this project I propose to return to the post-industrial suburb outside of Paris that I first studied for an extended period in 1994-1995, in order to investigate the tensions that especially since the (sub)urban uprisings of 2005 have dramatically reconfigured French national debates around identity and immigration, moving interest away from a predominantly socio-economic framing of social inequality toward a growing preoccupation with identity and ethno-racial concerns. Building on my previous work, I will explore how these shifts have impacted the lived experience of those who reside in the multiethnic and socially fragile suburbs that are the object of so much of this debate, and inversely investigate what their experience can reveal about contemporary polemics. Of particular concern is the precarious tension between the increased reification of identity claims and the multiple admixtures of contemporary life. I aim to investigate that tension, to see what it reveals about how typologies of difference are constituted, the gaps they fill, the restraints they impose, and the ethics to which they are tied.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

In France as in much of Europe, the first decades of the millennium have been marked by an increase in racially-inflected social tensions, generating intense debate about the capacity of European nation-states to make room for difference, and about the impoverished conceptual means available to meet these challenges in the 21st century. The lifeways and perceptions of those who are the putative subjects of this debate, however, are often overlooked or fitted into pre-existing social categories that do not

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Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

The disadvantaged French suburbs or banlieue have been the subject of substantial commentary, especially since they first started to attract attention as the seat of rising ethnic tensions in the 1980s. Often the backdrop for studies on minority/ majority relations, these districts are less frequently considered for what their multiple aspects reveal about how variegated notions of integration and social exclusion are constituted and put into practice.   Important exceptions are works that situate these districts in relation to broader political economic processes. A limited number of ethnographic studies effectively capture how diverse residents of these neighborhoods perceive and make something of their place in the world; limited to a particular ethnographic moment, however, they can only suggest how such processes may change with time.

The question of ethno-racial tensions in France is equally the subject of a vast literature, and far more polemical. Debate on this topic tends to crystallize between those who deplore official French 'race-blindness' for upholding a general disregard for the realities of racial oppression, an argument that has gained noticeably in recent years in the form of a post-colonial critique. Against this, others attempt to expose the essentialist perils of such forms of analysis, while making claims for the necessity of a diverse and transcendent public sphere; these debates join critical discussions in the social sciences more generally. As tensions in France mount around these issues, so have elements of

this debate come to shape the social and political landscape across which these struggles are being waged.

The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Originally from the US, I have been a permanent resident of France since the late 1990s. Since that time, I have been able to observe first-hand a series of striking shifts in everyday French life: how on-going social and economic tensions have given rise to controversies about the merits of the French republican project and/or the exclusionary consequences of its 'difference-blind' ideal; how the troubles of the disadvantaged suburbs have been met by a ratcheting up of security measures and anxiety about a putative breakdown of the French republican pact; how these concerns have led to heightened attention to 'diversity' - at one time considered a particularly American, or 'Anglo-Saxon' problem -- as critics of the French republican model try to reveal evidence of a persistent racist order at the root of the country's problems of discrimination.

But how have these shifts in shared ideas about French society shaped the lived experience of those who reside or work in the very places that constitute the focus of so much of this concern? I will address this question by returning to my previous fieldwork site in order to touch again the dense matter of the ethnographic terrain; to probe the more commonplace and sensationalized renderings that oftentimes populate popular and official reports on these matters; and to examine if and how broader transformations, linked to neoliberal restructuring, have moved the social processes I was able to examine nearly a generation ago.

Theoretical Novelty *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

Inquiry into processes of social and racial differentiation must consider identity claims not as rigid blueprints but as ideological resources that shift over time. In the current conjuncture, the crucial questions have to do less with the unfulfilled promises of particular regimes than with why racialization is gaining in importance. What are the dynamics that render broader conceptualizations of sameness and difference meaningful in particular contexts? How are the insecurities of the current global moment shaping such conceptualizations, and how do they correspond to the shifting permeability of the contemporary world? In France as elsewhere, the increased reification of identity claims exists in precarious tension

with the multiple admixtures of contemporary life; I aim to see what that tension reveals about typologies of difference: the gaps they fill, the restraints they impose, and the ethics to which they are tied.

Fundamentally shaped by my experience of moving between French and American renderings of these issues, my approach is also marked by a meaningful sense of disjuncture. The ostensibly 'Anglo-Saxon' articulations of diversity taking hold in France and elsewhere risk creating the illusion of consensus on matters that to the contrary are quite variable, and of limiting the conceptual means available for understanding social difference. I am wary of the extent to which increasingly politicized rhetorics of diversity match people's lived experience; it is necessary to stay attentive to that experience so that we may investigate the notions that drive these polemics, and imagine social relations in other terms.

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

In 1994-1995 I conducted 16 months of fieldwork in the city of Cergy, located on the outer limits of the Paris metropolitan area, to gain an ethnographic understanding of the French integration ideal and its practice in everyday life. That project was realized through a combination of participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, and research on the history of suburban development in France since World War II.

I now propose to return to the same neighbourhood where I conducted my earlier research, to catch up on local structural changes and to trace the discursive and ideological shifts that have occurred there since the 1990s. I will use the same techniques as in my earlier work; these include collecting data from people's public utterances as they meet and debate on issues of local interest in various formal and informal settings, an approach that allows me to map out the intersections and relative levels of influence of different institutions and organizations, and to track how players position themselves in relation to broader overarching concerns. I will also conduct interviews and record life narratives with a few key informants, to glean how self-identifications vary in relation to key events in an individual's life trajectory. This material will be complemented by interviews with local officials, analysis of a selection of official documents, and consultation of the secondary literature, in order to sketch the major shifts in social and urban planning policy of the past two decades.

Work Plan *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

I am requesting monies from the ISRF to cover six months of salary replacement from my full-time position at NYU Paris, ideally for the period January - July 2019. Relief from my substantial administrative and teaching responsibilities will be invaluable, and is necessary to allow me to dedicate my time to research. As I live close to the proposed field site, and have maintained contact with several of the people I met during my initial research, I expect to be able to re-integrate into the rhythms of life there with little difficulty.

I will first trace the major institutional and demographic changes in the neighbourhood since I worked there in the the mid-1990s. I will meet with my former interlocutors to discuss their perception of how life has shifted in that time, and then select a few key sites in which to conduct in-depth participant-observation research. In addition I will establish a chronology of the major urban social policy shifts since the 1990s. Finally, toward the end of my research period I will conduct interviews and gather life narratives with eight to ten key interlocutors.

Outcome *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

As tensions related to questions of identity, exclusion, and diversity escalate, not only in France but in other countries of Europe and the US, the experiences and perceptions of people who are the putative subjects of so much of this debate are often overlooked. It is necessary to stay attuned to the particularity and variability of these experiences, both across time and across space, in order to achieve a critical perspective on what has become an entrenched reading of social inequality and ethnic diversity in the 21st century. An incarnation of the flagged hopes of the modernist project, the disadvantaged zones of the French banlieue provide exemplary spaces in which to study these questions to the extent that they denote the focus and cause of contemporary anxieties, while also standing on the front lines of challenges associated with neoliberal restructuring, shifting representations of difference primary among them. An appreciation of how residents of these districts manage and articulate these conflicting claims, and of how these claims have changed over time, will help enlarge our understandings of the processes tied to social differentiation, and of the political passions so ardently tied to questions of 'diversity' and related concepts in our times. I am committed to examining these questions that have deep repercussions on both sides of the Atlantic, so that I may weigh in on these debates through my scholarly output, teaching, and public presentations.