

The Chicago Tribune
November 22, 2005

A Deja Vu Moment 1965 vs. 2005

By Jeremy Rifkin, author of "The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream."

Americans shook their heads at the recent violence that unfolded in the ghettoized communities across France. In largely Muslim neighborhoods, young people--most of whom are French citizens--torched vehicles, burned down schools and shot at police in what appeared to be a spontaneous outpouring of resentment against a society that has turned its back on them.

America has been there. In 1965, riots broke out in the poor black minority neighborhoods in Watts in South Central Los Angeles. Looting, torching of vehicles and pitched battles with police brought Los Angeles to a halt. Whites in the middle-class suburbs worried that the rampaging youths might invade their neighborhoods, spreading mayhem. Some northern cities experienced similar violent outbreaks, culminating in the burning down of large swaths of inner-city neighborhoods in Newark, Detroit, Washington, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and other cities in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Much of the rage was directed at white America, which had systematically excluded young black males from employment opportunities. The jobless rate among black males was more than 22 percent nationally in 1968, or twice the rate of that for white males, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Like America's black ghettos of a generation ago, unemployment among male Muslim youths in France is double the rate of overall youth unemployment, reaching as much as 40 to 50 percent in some communities. These are the children and grandchildren of immigrants who migrated to France from former French colonies in Africa more than a generation ago. Poor, uneducated, unemployed and shunned by the rest of French society, the youngsters of the banlieues, the poor immigrant suburbs of France, live with little hope of ever improving their circumstances.

These young people stand in stark contrast to the college-educated, middle-class French youths and their European Union peers who are reaping the benefits of the European Dream, with its emphasis on quality of life, mobility, social and human rights, sustainable development and peace-building. France still is waiting for its own Martin Luther King Jr., someone willing to say, "I have a dream that every French citizen, Christian and Muslim, black and white, will one day live together in a society of equals ..."

The French governing elite should pay close attention to what the Muslim youths are

saying. In countless interviews over the last few weeks, young rioters complain that while they are French citizens, they aren't afforded the same respect or consideration as their fellow countrymen ... virtually the same argument heard from the lips of countless black and Hispanic young people in the ghettos of America a generation ago.

But, unlike the American situation, which has gone from bad to worse in the ensuing 40 years, the French situation is somewhat more hopeful. At least the alienated youngsters still are crying out to be part of French society. Beware if and when they no longer care. That's what's happened in America.

While the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s made some headway, with the busing of poor black students to white middle-class schools, affirmative-action programs (positive discrimination) to improve employment opportunities and enrichment programs for preschoolers to enhance academic performance, many of the modest gains made by African-Americans slipped quietly away in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, the bulk of African-American youths is little better off than a generation ago. Social programs have been abandoned and black youth unemployment is at record highs. Worse still, 30 percent of black males in the United States in their 20s are either awaiting trial, in jail or on parole, according to the Sentencing Project. We have incarcerated a large number of black males in less than a generation, with little public discussion.

The French public needs to learn from America's mistakes.

Don't believe that a simple crackdown and the subsiding of violence, or the introduction of a few token social reforms, are all that's required to quell the discontent. Instead, the French ought to take advantage of the moment and engage in a national discussion. Serious thought ought to be given to establishing an independent commission on the plight of minority youth, made up of representatives of every sector of French society, including representatives of the disaffected communities.

The important point is to begin listening to the grievances of these young people and joining with them to fashion appropriate reforms to ameliorate their plight. Let the young people know that the rest of French society truly cares about them. Do it before the young French Muslim citizens no longer dream about being part of French society. Because then, it's too late.

If spontaneous cries for inclusion give way to more organized calls for insurrection, then French society itself may be at risk. Moreover, it would be naive to believe that what is happening in France can be contained there. Large pockets of alienated immigrant populations--mostly Muslim--exist across Europe. It is possible for the violence in France to spread. If it does, the European Dream might be in jeopardy, with grave consequences for the future of Europe.

Copyright (c) 2005, Chicago Tribune Company.