

## Social conflict in the contemporary French *roman noir*

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Conflict is by definition at the heart of the crime novel: most evidently in the usually violent conflict between victim and perpetrator but also in a more abstract, though equally important, way in the conflict between the perpetrator and the social order that s/he has transgressed. The classic detective story that Tzvetan Todorov classifies as the “whodunit” in his typology of detective fiction (1977, p. 43), in which the mystery of a crime, usually a murder, and the circumstances leading up to it are investigated and resolved by an authoritative detective figure, is one in which the criminal is the enemy of a social order, often that of bourgeois or upper-class society, that he or she has disrupted. Contemporary French crime writer Dominique Manotti (2009) opposes the essentially reassuring nature of the *roman policier*—similar in its structure to Todorov’s ‘whodunit’—as a form which is “by definition a novel of order”, to the *roman noir* she espouses. The *roman noir*, akin to Todorov’s “thriller” (1977, p. 47) offers little reassurance. In this type of fiction, the disorder engendered by criminal acts, symptomatic as they are of a permanently disordered society, is dispelled only to return. According to Manotti (2009):

If order is restored, it is never more than a fragile restoration [...] of a surface appearance of order and peace. [...] Disorder is rooted in the very heart of society, it is society’s irremediable truth.<sup>1</sup>

As Manotti’s comment suggests, this notion of crime as pervasive and omnipresent in *noir* fiction is often associated with a critical view of society itself, and this social critique provides a fertile source of inspiration for Manotti and other contemporary French writers of the *roman noir*. It is this *noir* version of crime fiction that will form the focus of this essay. Discussion will establish the links between French crime fiction and socio-political critique, before considering the ways in which a nineteenth-century discourse of a dangerous underclass in conflict with mainstream society has re-emerged in the political arena and is reflected in contemporary crime fiction. It will do so through an analysis of two crime novels illustrating this conflict and its consequences.

The French Republic’s problematic relationship with its ethnic and religious minorities has never been far from the political agenda in recent years; in its responses to violent unrest in those suburbs known as *banlieues chaudes* in 1990-91 and again in 2005, in its treatment of immigrants, legal or otherwise,<sup>2</sup> in the problematic legislation surrounding the wearing of the veil and the burqa in public spaces,<sup>3</sup> or most recently in the context of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings of January 2015, events which exposed the gulf between secular, republican values that prioritise freedom and the values of a minority that sees such values as subordinate to religious values. It could be argued that certain minority groups, at odds in one way or another with the secular republican ideal, have come to be identified in the media, particularly in the discourse of the far, and not so far, right with a term that has its origins in the nineteenth century: *les classes dangereuses*. The expression was used then to designate those who, flowing from the countryside to the cities in search of work, formed a growing urban proletariat, linked in the public mind not just with poverty, but with criminality, prostitution and disease. Reformist Honoré-Antoine Frégier observed in 1840 (p. 11):

The poor and depraved classes have been and always will be the most productive breeding ground for all kinds of criminals: these are the ones we shall designate more specifically by the term dangerous classes.

In the nineteenth century the dangerous classes were located well within the confines of Paris *intra muros*. The existence of the poor and criminal classes in Paris pre Haussmann was graphically documented in literary form in Eugène Sue's *feuilleton* novel *Les Mystères de Paris*, a work that in some ways prefigured the detective genre. Taking as its backdrop the poverty and criminality of nineteenth-century Paris, it was published in serial form and voraciously consumed by a huge reading public between 1842 and 1843.

The disquiet that these groups and their otherness engendered within nineteenth-century bourgeois society is, I suggest, similar to that provoked in contemporary French society by rather different groups. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is the inhabitants of the Paris *banlieue*, as well as other groups such as travellers and prostitutes that have been, and are still being, represented as threatening in the eyes of the state and subsequently in the public imagination. Jacques Chirac's re-election campaign in 2002 was characterised by its emphasis on law and order, and March 2003 France saw the implementation of a law on internal security that gave police new powers to clamp down on various forms of delinquency seen to challenge public order. The law criminalised gatherings deemed to be "threatening or hostile", along with soliciting and procurement, aggressive begging and the use of public land by travellers, implicitly designating those who contravened the law as dangerous or threatening (*Nouvelle politique sécuritaire*, 2003). In 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy, then Ministre de l'Intérieur, infamously referred to the groups involved in that year's riots as "scum" [*racaille*] that needed to be cleansed from the suburbs, thereby reinforcing in the political discourse the notion of a dangerous class that threatens the law-abiding citizen and needs to be controlled. Whilst in the nineteenth century the designation "dangerous classes" was primarily a marker of class and economic status, connoting alterity through poverty, class and criminality, in twenty-first-century France those deemed in the popular consciousness to represent a danger to society are more usually members of groups defined by ethnicity, race, religion, rather than by their economic status, though often those two factors are closely associated. If, as Christopher Prendergast (2003, p. 5) has suggested, Chevalier's designation of the 'dangerous classes' was intrinsically associated with the 'labouring classes' in that particularly class-oriented way,<sup>4</sup> the association attached to these groups in twenty-first-century France is different in that the often marginalised inhabitants of the *banlieue*, while poor and disadvantaged, are often so precisely because they lack employment, itself often associated with educational and social marginalisation. Along with these rather different indicators of social exclusion, the locus of spatial exclusion has shifted from the less salubrious areas of Paris *intra-muros* to its outskirts and more specifically to the northern suburbs, represented in particular by the department of Seine Saint-Denis.<sup>5</sup> In an article discussing the ways in which the old Red Belt, the left-leaning working-class suburbs of Paris, have now become a Black Belt, where marginalisation is more to do with race than with class, Tyler Stovall underlines the discourse of danger that accompanies evocations of the *banlieue*, commenting on the emergence in the 1980s of "a new image of dangerous suburbia" and the way in which 1990s unrest in the *banlieue* "focused national attention on the suburbs as centres of crime, violence and social problems" (2001, p. 13).

Sue's fictional depictions of the marginalised dangerous classes within the framework of the nineteenth-century urban mysteries [*mystères urbains*] form an early, though somewhat tenuous, link between the nascent crime novel, the articulation of socio-political concerns and the evocation of excluded groups. As Prendergast has observed (2003, p. 22), there is little if anything of the politically radical in *Les Mystères de Paris*:

Despite the attempt to infuse the theme of 'crime' with a new social seriousness by articulating it in terms of the theme of urban poverty, despite the accompanying rhetoric of protest and reform, it is now generally held that the underlying conception of working-class life and social change in *Les Mystères de Paris* is ultimately committed to a vision of no change at least at any fundamental level of social organization.

However, in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the crime novel in France began establishing itself as a favoured form for the articulation of socio-political views. This association between the form and politics was particularly evident in the aftermath of the events May 1968 when the widespread contesting of state power found expression in a number of ways, one of which was the emergence of a new development in crime fiction, the *néo-polar*. This sub-genre was characterised by its contestatory stance vis-à-vis the state and its structures and became what David Platten has called "a site of resistance to the perceived violence of the State" (2007, p. 175). It was often accompanied by a particular focus on excluded and marginal groups, and as a form has been described as "a fusion of various kinds of exclusion, as well as a revalorization of the deviant and criminal" (Atack, 1999, p. 135).

While the *néo-polar* was a form very much of its time that did not survive beyond the 1970s, social and political critique has continued to provide a fertile source of inspiration for French crime writers in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In a special issue of *Le Matricule des anges* dedicated to the question "Is literature still politically committed?", Lionel Destremau comments on the politicised nature of the contemporary *roman noir*: "the *roman noir*, as it is currently constituted, is steeped in politics"; and he identifies a number of writers who "all, one way or another, offer a radical, social critique that is of a piece with their desire to be politically committed" (2012, p. 26). Left-leaning crime writers such as Didier Daeninckx, Jean-François Vilar, Thierry Jonquet, Dominique Manotti, Maurice Gouiran and Patrick Pécherot, to name but a few, have continued to use the framework of the crime novel, and particularly its *noir* variant, in order to challenge accepted versions of historical episodes, to criticise present-day political or economic corruption and, as such tensions rose up the political agenda, to examine racial and religious conflicts in contemporary France. It is within the context both of a renewed perception of marginalised groups as dangerous and of French crime fiction's preoccupation with socio-political matters that this article will examine two contemporary French *romans noirs* that represent minority ethnic groups as "dangerous classes" and that evoke the conflict between them and the state, particularly as embodied in the justice and educational systems. The novels share a temporal focus on the incendiary year of 2005 during which anxieties about the *banlieue*, particularly as the locus for the activities of a threatening group of ethnic others, were at the forefront of media attention.

Dominique Manotti's *Bien connu des services de police* (2010) is set in Panteuil, a fictional *banlieue* town in 2005, the year of the explosion of suburban violence in France that achieved international news coverage, and explores tensions between police and the various ethnic groups in Panteuil. Thierry Jonquet's 2006 novel *Ils sont votre épouvante et vous êtes leur crainte*, also set in the Paris *banlieue* in 2005, was being written as the riots unfolded in real time. In it, Jonquet explores the consequences of a toxic mix of criminality, religious fundamentalism and social deprivation, though from a rather different perspective than that offered by Manotti. Both novels represent marginalised groups that have become, in the eyes of the public, a dangerous underclass in conflict with society: criminals, religious extremists, urban youth and prostitutes. Yet in these novels, questions of responsibility for criminality are far from straightforward. While popular, right-wing discourse tends to identify those perceived to be a threat to society as the unemployed, uneducated, disenfranchised, often *beur*<sup>6</sup> youths who inhabit the *banlieue*, in these novels, criminality is depicted as being far

more pervasive. State agencies, the police, local and national politicians are not the trusted bulwarks against crime and disorder that they represent in traditional detective fiction. In some cases, police or politicians are themselves engaged in activities that are either explicitly criminal or at least have a damaging effect on those whose interests they are meant to protect. The neat and reassuring dichotomy between the criminal classes and state agencies is thus problematised.

This is most obviously the case in Dominique Manotti's *Bien connu des services de police* which takes an intensely critical look at state agencies, notably the police, but also at the ways in which stereotypical perceptions of certain minorities as intrinsically dangerous lead to serious consequences. Panteuil is an area of high criminality

overpopulated with illegals and drug addicts... Once night falls we can no longer set foot there. It's impossible to clean up such a place... the biggest drugs supermarket in the department. (Manotti, 2010, p. 31)

While this poses obvious policing problems and reinforces the area's dangerous reputation, it suits the ambitious police chief, Commissaire Le Muir, for this reputation to be maintained since it provides ample pretext for a project of renovation that will involve "the cleansing of the area" (Manotti, 2010, p. 31). Far from representing a desire to improve life for Panteuil's inhabitants, Le Muir's aim is a cynical, political one, intent as she is on reducing the crime figures in order to bolster her own ambitions. Frustrated by her failure to make progress through legal channels, she resorts to criminal methods to achieve her ends. Through her driver and faithful aide Pasquini—who in the past has been involved in far-right activities including arson and bomb attacks on hostels for immigrants—she arranges for an arson attack on buildings in which illegal immigrants are squatting. A fire will provide a justification for the demolition of the buildings that are currently politically untouchable because of the presence in them of squatters. Once the buildings are demolished, the land can be sold for redevelopment and a substantial profit made. The demolition of the squats will further satisfy a dual political imperative: firstly, it will reinforce the perceived dangerousness of the minorities housed in the squats and thus, secondly, reassure a public concerned about threatening groups that the authorities take their concerns seriously. The fire will be presented as the responsibility of the squatters, thus making their ejection not only acceptable, but desirable to ensure public security. The discourse used by the press in the wake of the fire neatly illustrates the latter point as it manipulates public anxieties about the dangerous nature of the squatters:

The fires in the squats have become major arguments in shoring up the minister's law and order policy. The squats are overpopulated by illegal immigrants, drug addicts, criminals, parasites and polygamists. They are potential dangers for the whole French population and must be cleaned out. (Manotti, 2010, p. 207)

Police investigator Noria Ghozali becomes convinced that the fire is being deliberately blamed on drug dealers in order to bolster public concerns about law and order by playing on ingrained prejudices about immigrants and criminality, and thus make their ejection more palatable: "Immigrants, illegals, criminals, drugs, fires, danger. Plenty there to fuel fears" (Manotti, 2010, p. 137). The parallels between these tactics and the reassurances Sarkozy made to the law-abiding public of the *banlieue* during the 2005 riots of his intention to clear out the *racaille* are clear.

Commissaire Le Muir's involvement in the arson attack demonstrates that criminality is not the exclusive preserve of the *classes dangereuses*. The fluid borderlines between criminality and the forces of law and order are graphically illustrated in the novel's opening scene, which features a group of men running prostitutes from a car park. The women are Eastern European gypsies, vulnerable enough to consider the brutality of their treatment as an acceptable price for the 'protection' offered them in a judicial environment hostile to prostitutes (Manotti, 2010, p. 15). The reader does not realise until some way into the episode, which foregrounds the casual rape of one of the women, that the men in charge of them who, one might assume from their appearance—"Young, sturdy, short hair, wearing light cotton jackets, jeans and trainers" (Manotti, 2010, p. 9)—and the environment within which they operate, to be criminals, are actually police officers. In nineteenth-century France, prostitutes were considered to be part of the dangerous classes, offering a very specific threat to the health of (male) bourgeois society. As such they were routinely subject to state control of their activities and bodies. In the contemporary context, the prostitutes are no longer considered to represent such a danger to public health and morals, but are still vulnerable to state control, either licit in terms of the legislation relating to prostitution or illicit in terms of their subjection to the activities of their police pimps.

Other assumptions about the dangers represented by another minority group, that of suburban, often unemployed, ethnic youths, are the triggers for a near disastrous police intervention. The reported theft of a mobile phone belonging to a white woman, a theft thoughtlessly and wrongly attributed by the victim to "a young North African looking man" (Manotti, 2010, p. 56), is clumsily tackled by a team of inexperienced officers surrounded by a hostile crowd and soon out of their depth. The incident rapidly escalates into a full-scale police operation, driven in large part by fears of the assumed dangers posed by inhabitants of the suburbs. The emotively charged words of the sergeant back at police headquarters make explicit this perception of the *banlieusards* as elements of a dangerous class in their presentation of the contrast between his inexperienced, white, junior officers, strongly connoted as innocent, and the mob of delinquents, equally strongly connoted as dangerous and brutal, that rapidly surrounds them: "Those four rookies. Thrown in among bandits... They are savages, particularly the women, and their kids are all delinquents" (Manotti, 2010, p. 60).

Such fears of the suburban, ethnic other are at the heart of another key incident in the novel. It involves the case of Ivan Djindjic, a story acted out in narrative retrospect through a court case. Djindjic is a policeman who was involved in a bungled stop-and-search incident during which a fellow officer was badly disfigured by a kick to the head. The kick was in fact delivered in the panic by Djindjic, but was blamed on Toufik, one of the youths who had been stopped and searched, and who is now on trial for the alleged assault. The verdict is presented as a foregone conclusion: "Djindjic's foretold victory" (Manotti, 2010, p. 153) on one side, with the innocent youth Toufik on the other, facing the police establishment, as it closes ranks to protect its own. The result is a payout of 20,000 euros to both officers to compensate for their suffering, and six years in prison for Toufik, a result made possible by the demonisation of the youth of the *banlieue* as an unquestionably dangerous class. The subsequent celebration of "the police triumph and the despair of the hooligans' camp" (Manotti, 2010, p. 159) is an apt illustration of the gulf between the two sides.

A final pessimistic illustration of the demonising of the young ethnic minorities of the *banlieue* is offered in the novel's epilogue where Rifat, a friend of Toufik and himself a victim of police violence, attempts to avenge his friend by painting a graffiti message on a motorway bridge. Caught in the middle of his intended message—"Murdering cops, we'll kill you" (Manotti, 2010, p. 209)—he is spotted by a police patrol that views the opportunity to give chase as "[a]n opportunity not to be missed. A bit of risk free fun" (Manotti, 2010, p.

209). In his flight, Rifat falls from the bridge into the canal below and is deliberately left to drown by the police, the futility of his protest underlined both by his unnecessary death and, symbolically, by the rapid erasure of his 'tag': "It lasted less than forty-eight hours" (Manotti, 2010, p. 211). The police are exculpated from any blame since the young man is automatically assumed to be the one posing a danger, purely on the basis of where he lives and his ethnic background. The immediate conclusion of the police—that "he was involved in reprehensible and dangerous night-time activities" (Manotti, 2010, p. 211)—remains unchallenged and triggers the tragedy. The riots of 2005 do not figure in *Bien connu des services de police* since the events of the novel predate them slightly.<sup>7</sup> They were triggered by an explosion of anger at the deaths in Clichy-sous-Bois of two teenagers returning from a football match and pursued by police who assumed, incorrectly, that they were causing trouble. The youngsters took refuge in an EDF transformer, only to be killed there. The circumstances surrounding the death of Rifat—the automatic, albeit incorrect, assumption of guilt, the police chase, the victim's subsequent death—bear sufficient resemblance to these deaths to suggest that Manotti was hinting at an inevitable and violent reaction to come, given police and public assumptions about young members of ethnic minorities in the *banlieue*.

Commissaire Le Muir's post hoc account of the phone theft incident to her superiors stresses the ghettoised nature of Panteuil and suggests, with unconcealed cynicism, that social cohesion actually requires such fear of the other:

We are attempting, at a cost that is socially acceptable, to contain problems and to ensure the stability of French society as a whole. For, let there be no mistake, today it is the fear of insecurity, strongly linked to the fear of foreigners, the dread of the ghetto [...] that generates social cohesion. (Manotti, 2010, p. 65)

Manotti thus seems not only to be acknowledging the reality of perceptions of the inhabitants of the *banlieue* as a dangerous class and the demonisation of certain ethnic groups that results from such perceptions, but also to be suggesting that such perceptions are deliberately sustained for reasons of political expediency.

Whilst the social separation between different, conflicting groups in the *banlieue* is still very much in evidence in Thierry Jonquet's *Ils sont votre épouvante et vous êtes leur crainte* (2006), his analysis of the situation is differently oriented. The construction of the ethnic other as intrinsically dangerous is still very much a feature of the novel, though that other is emphatically identified as Muslim. The narrative standpoint reinforces rather than questions this construction, skewed as it is by the fact that one of the two central characters, from whose perspective we view events, is Jewish. The reader is thus apt to empathise with her and that perspective. The novel is set in the fictional *commune* of Certigny, in Seine St.-Denis, *département* 93, to the north of Paris. The area is introduced to the reader through the eyes of Richard Verdier, a deputy public prosecutor trying to make sense of and to keep under control an area that he acknowledges to be, in policing terms, "a disaster" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 38). The sector of the *département* for which he is responsible is divided along clear ethnico-religious lines with feuding groups, some involved in criminal activities, battling for supremacy. Les Grands Chênes is "the uncontested territory of the Lakdaoui brothers" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 30), Algerians whose business has been built upon drugs money; Les Sablières is under the control of the Senegalese "Boubakar, alias le Magnifique" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 32), who treats his territory as a pseudo kingdom run by himself and his 'ministers' and funded by a prostitution ring. Such crime as there is in Le Moulin, jokingly, and tellingly, referred to by the local police as Médine [Medina], is of a very different nature since the sector is led by "a rather fiery imam" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 35) and is home to a number of

Islamic fundamentalists engaged in fund-raising for terrorist activities. By an unfortunate accident of geography and fate, Le Moulin is located next to the *commune* of Vadreuil with its burgeoning population of orthodox Jews, thus setting up the central conflict of the novel.<sup>8</sup>

The novel focuses on the ways in which agencies of the state, specifically the police and the educational system, fail to deal with the problems posed by the juxtaposition of these feuding groups. It does so from the dual perspective of the two central characters—Verdier, the deputy public prosecutor, and Anna Doblinsky, a newly qualified teacher at a local *collège*. Verdier's view that Certigny is a disaster is spot-on: the police struggle to maintain order in the face of organised and established criminal networks that play into the hands of politicians keen to manipulate anxieties about public disorder in order to demonise certain groups as dangerous. Jonquet makes explicit reference to Sarkozy's comments at the time of the 2005 riots: "*Kärcher, scum*, words that would come to weigh heavily in the events to come" (2006, p. 215). The riots and the subsequent police round-ups of those involved in criminal activities set Verdier to thinking about the nature of those under his jurisdiction and about his role as law enforcer. Thoughtful and conscientious, unlike the venal police officers who rule the roost in Manotti's Panteuil, he is torn between feelings of compassion for those he sentences, the realisation that his role does not permit him the luxury of too much empathy and a certain level of defeatism:

Richard Verdier was only a tiny cog in the machine. His role was to keep it supplied with new flesh. The rank and file who passed before him inspired in him a vague sense of pity, a slight touch of compassion, but no remorse. [...] Otherwise he might as well resign straightaway. (Jonquet, 2006, p. 245)

After a particularly trying day in court, he reflects on the stream of young men passing before him for sentencing: "There were Moulouds, Oumars, Rachids and Sékous by the dozen, with one or two Frédéric's or Jean-Claudes for good measure" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 245). These young men, the majority explicitly identified as North African by their names, remind him of a word little used nowadays but which seems to him to be apposite as a description of the *banlieusards* as a class apart, an underclass, rather than a dangerous class: "Some old words came back to him. *Lumpenproletariat*. Although now fallen into disuse, it was a perfect fit for the gang creating havoc across the area" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 244) Not content with remembering the term, he locates a particular paragraph in Marx and Engels's *German Ideology* where the notion is discussed, and particularly appreciates the irony of the word's juxtaposition, within a Marxist text, with another that has much more contemporary, right-wing, resonances—*racaille*:

Verdier was already jubilant; this was promising. By unearthing relics like this he was going to make enemies for himself. "The lumpenproletariat, the dregs of fallen humanity of all classes, with its base in the cities, is the worst of all possible allies. This rabble is utterly venal and troublesome." The word *racaille* in less than ten lines. What could be better! (Jonquet, 2006, p. 246)

Verdier's compassion for the Lumpenproletariat is elaborated through a lengthy quotation from "A ceux qu'on foule aux pieds", part of Victor Hugo's poem *L'année terrible*, written in 1872 about the Communards, themselves a radical group that threatened and briefly overcame the government. Verdier sees a parallel between the defeated Communards Hugo evokes in his poem and the young men he has just sentenced during the riots. The parallel turns on the poem's opposition between the third person *ils*, designating the downtrodden and an unnamed *vous*, responsible for their condition. The *vous* suggests, in the contemporary

context, an attribution of collective responsibility for what *they* have become, and for the mutual mistrust between the state and the downtrodden:

You did not guide them or take them by the hand,  
Or tell them about the darkness and the true path,  
You left them a prey to the labyrinth.  
They are your terror and you are their fear. (Hugo, cit. Jonquet, 2006, p. 47)

Nowhere is this dereliction of duty to the downtrodden more obvious within Jonquet's novel than in the educational system's failure to stop the vicious circle of disengagement from education, underachievement, unemployment and criminality. Newly qualified teacher Anna Doblinski arrives in Certigny in September 2005 to take up her first post at the local school. Her preliminary visit to the town engenders a profound sense of discomfiture at having ventured into alien, rather threatening, territory: "In all innocence, Anna and Loïc seemed to have broken some kind of rule, to have been guilty of infringing the ethnic division of the territory" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 24). Her otherness, although largely internalised, is underlined by her colour and dress, though on her first day in school it is more problematically associated with her Jewish identity, something that her new, largely Muslim, pupils note very quickly.

Through Anna's reflections on her own training, the reader is primed with a view of a dysfunctional educational system underpinned by abstract pedagogical theories perpetuated by disillusioned teacher-trainers relieved that, unlike their students, they will not have to "take on reality" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 18), the reality, that is, of the *banlieusard* classroom. Some teachers are unable to cope with that reality. The plight of English teacher Guibert, who is unable to control his pupils and regularly comes out of class with spittle on his jacket, is quietly ignored by the other teachers who see in his treatment a safety valve that protects the rest of them (Jonquet, 2006, p. 133). Another such safety valve was Rachel Feldman, forced out of the school by pupils' antagonism to her Jewish identity, and unprotected by a head teacher who feared creating waves in the school's "Arabo-Muslim culture" and within a context of political correctness (Jonquet, 2006, p. 275). Even Anna, a novice teacher who has the inner reserves to cope and even retain some of her idealism, is brought up against and defeated by the limitations of the system. She develops a particular empathy for an unusually motivated pupil, Lakdar, who has a gift for drawing, but has been the victim of a medical accident that left his hand paralysed and thus robbed him of his ambition to become a cartoon artist. Anna's desire to help him is discouraged by another, more jaundiced, teacher who points out the limitations of what she can achieve within the system, referred to, not for the first time, as a machine:

There are more than seven hundred pupils in the school... It's a huge machine that has to keep on turning. If you want a good piece of advice, don't dwell on individual cases, you risk wasting a ridiculous amount of energy and getting nowhere... There are plenty of other Lakdars who will not make it and you have to tell yourself that it's not your responsibility. (Jonquet, 2006, p. 133)

Given such levels of defeatism, it is unsurprising that the school fails to counteract the development of fundamentalism that flourishes in a climate of division. The most striking example of this is the grooming of the intelligent, though naive, Lakdar by the older Slimane, a friend who has become radicalised in prison. Lakdar admires Slimane, who, unlike many of his age and background in Certigny, is well dressed and apparently successful. He thus establishes himself as a role model for the young boy, who eagerly watches the Islamist



propaganda videos Slimane passes to him. One has a profound influence on him: ostensibly a history of the Rothschild family, it plays on age-old anti-Semitic fears. The film is realistic enough to convince Lakdar of the truth of some of its wilder allegations. The boy's repeated playing of the violent video, which includes an execution scene, together with his discovery that the doctor whose negligence paralysed his hand, and has thus ruined his life, is a Jew, ensures his transformation from an open-minded, intelligent child into a vengeful figure, buying into stereotypical notions of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy. He eventually kidnaps, imprisons and kills a Jewish child, the doctor's younger brother, before killing himself.<sup>9</sup> Nothing in his experience of a divided social environment or failed education has given him the tools to recognise the power of the propaganda to which he is subjected.

The educational establishment's inability to counter the insidious reality of religious and racial separatism, as well as its symbolic value as part of the state apparatus, is made apparent during the 2005 riots. Part of the school is burnt down, an event that strikes fear into the staff who revert to a discourse of 'us and them'. Caretaker Bouchereau falls back on hackneyed racist slogans that fail to acknowledge the fact that the rioters are actually French, but instead play on fears of a dangerous, alien minority that does not really belong: "they have to understand that we are in France here. If they don't like it then they can just go back to where they came from" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 280). The teachers also react to events by emphasising division, seeing their pupils as a threat: "Them and us. [...] Two irreparably opposing camps. The task before them was inordinate, herculean" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 281). Nor is Anna immune from this instinct. The final pages of the novel see her turning to a much more defiant espousal of her religion than she has articulated before, as a reaction to the anti-Jewish feeling amongst her pupils. Where before she played down her difference and even proclaimed her atheism, by the end of the novel she offers a defiant provocation to her pupils when they assert that Lakdar's death was "a Jewish job" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 342), finally acknowledging to them that she *is* Jewish: "So what?" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 342). These were the fateful words used by Rachel Feldman before she was chased out of the school, the verbal parallel suggesting both that history risks repeating itself and that Anna's allegiance with and sympathy for her largely Muslim pupils has been irretrievably damaged.

Unlike Manotti's novel, which shows that those perceived and depicted as members of the *classes dangereuses* are not so much dangerous as the deprived members of an underclass of poor, unemployed and often ethnic minorities, at the mercy of a venal police force in which the few decent officers struggle to make a difference, Jonquet clearly locates the dangerous classes among the ethnic and religious others. Although he demonstrates that such groups are not well served by the state, his portrait of them is very much coloured by the chosen narrative perspective, which prioritises a view of Muslims as intrinsically threatening either as terrorists or individuals easily duped by anti-Semitic propaganda. The Jewish characters are seen as justifiably defensive. While Anna is atheist and initially plays down her religious background, she reclaims it under pressure. Her father Simon is a left-wing Jewish intellectual who has supported the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation and who resisted the temptation to demonise Muslims in the wake of 9/11. However, his liberal convictions are undermined by his Zionist brother Herschel, now living in Israel, who views Simon's views as unrealistically utopian at a time when anti-Semitism is raising its head, even on the Left: "[Simon Doblinsky's] awakening had been brutal. The vultures were feasting in the burial ground of utopias. Death to Jews! [...] How had it come to this?" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 233). If such a man can have his convictions about the religious other shaken, there is little hope for a politically naive, albeit intelligent, youth such as Lakdar. His distress at his injury is transformed from an undifferentiated anger at his lost opportunities into a fury against all who ill-treat Muslims, and he is persuaded, as he kills the young Jewish boy, that he is enacting a role in a holy war: "The memory of Slimane's smiling face came back to him.

Jihad. That's what this was. He got up and took a step towards the little Jewish boy" (Jonquet, 2006, p. 334). The dangerous class in this novel is thus clearly, and problematically, identified as the Muslim minority. Whether out-and-out fundamentalists or impressionable youths, all are shown to be actually or potentially dangerous, neatly illustrated by the diptych offered by the two final chapters: the penultimate showing Slimane taking on his next mission—an attack on Les Halles RER station—and, finally, Anna's defiant affirmation of a Jewish identity she had previously denied, and thus her identification of herself, like her predecessor Rachel, as a potential target for her pupils' aggression.

In their focus on the excluded and the marginalised in contemporary society, whether they be the unemployed, homeless, prostitutes or members of ethnic or religious minorities in the *banlieue*, each novel demonstrates in its different way the persistence of the notion of minority groups perceived as dangerous and in conflict with mainstream society. This threat is often more perceived than real, and is certainly not always a criminal threat. Indeed criminality is by no means the preserve of the dangerous classes, a stereotype challenged by these two writers who show that the agents of the state—police, politicians and developers—are venal and corrupt and just as likely to be the authors of crime as those in the classes designated in the popular imaginary as dangerous.

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<sup>1</sup> The novels that are the subject of this paper have not been translated into English. All translations are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> The controversial deportations of Roma gypsies in 2010 are a case in point.

<sup>3</sup> In 2004, legislation was introduced to ban the wearing of conspicuous religious signs in public spaces, while in 2011, legislation banning the public wearing of face-covering veils was voted in.

<sup>4</sup> Prendergast is here referencing Louis Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, originally published in 1958.

<sup>5</sup> More recently, this notion has been referenced within the televisual crime genre. In series 5 of French crime drama *Engrenages* (2014), police chief Herville confides that he is about to be transferred to the *département* of Seine Saint-Denis (known as the Quatre-vingt-treize, after the administrative number of the *département*), commenting "It's the Wild West; no-one wants to go there."

<sup>6</sup> The term *beur* is used to designate French citizens of North African origin.

<sup>7</sup> The riots began in late October, while the end of the novel is precisely dated to the night of 7-8 September 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Bastien Bonnefous has pointed out the similarity between the fictional Certigny and Vadreuil and the real life Clichy-sous-Bois and Le Raincy (2006, p. 11)

<sup>9</sup> This incident bears an uncanny resemblance to the anti-Semitic murder of Ilan Halimi in February 2006, several months after Jonquet began the writing of his novel (Bonnefous 10).