



The wretched of France: the 1983 march for equality and against racism

by Abdellali Hajjat, translated by Andrew Brown, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2022, 278pp., \$35.00 (PB), ISBN 9780253059871

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BOOK REVIEW

The wretched of France: the 1983 march for equality and against racism, by Abdellali Hajjat, translated by Andrew Brown, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2022, 278pp., \$35.00 (PB), ISBN 9780253059871

This English translation of Abdellali Hajjat's 2013 book, originally published as *La Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (Editions Amsterdam) is a timely contribution to the scholarly debates on political anti-racism, social movements and police violence against postcolonial minorities. Hajjat's monograph focuses on the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism, which was led by young people of mainly North African origin living in the working-class outskirts of Lyon, France's third-largest city. The March set off from Marseille in October 1983 and criss-crossed France, arriving in Paris in December 1983 where the marchers were hosted at a reception at the Elysée presidential palace. Hajjat shows how this social movement emerged against the background of chronic socio-economic exclusion and racial discrimination in Vénissieux, a working-class suburb to the east of Lyon. Although focused on France, Hajjat's study is framed in such a way as to draw the attention of readers to the parallels between anti-racist struggles in 1980s France and other key historical moments of global significance. The Introduction to the book argues that whilst the phenomenon of the protest march can be read as "an index of social and racial tensions in France" (1), it can also be drawn upon to consider other national contexts, such as the Civil Rights movement in the United States. The Afterword to the study was written in the wake of the racist murder of George Floyd in 2020 at the hands of the police, which led to the emergence of a global Black Lives Matter movement. Hajjat thus makes the case that the inequalities, racial discrimination, and police violence discussed in contemporary France are both transnational and transhistorical in nature.

Inequality and racial discrimination are the starting points for the first chapter of the book which provides a micro-history of the Vénissieux district of Les Minuettes. Hajjat's rigorous and detailed archival work reveals how housing landlords "institutionalized anti-North African discrimination in access to homeownership by introducing a 'threshold of tolerance', [...] a percentage of foreigners not to be exceeded in one building so as to avoid ethnic conflict." (18). Hajjat shows how local elected officials within the Vénissieux municipality colluded in maintaining residential segregation affecting North African families, many of whom were *harkis* (the name given to those Algerians who had chosen to fight on the side of the French government during the Algerian War of Independence).

The residential segregation and the flight of more socially mobile European families from Les Minuettes throughout the 1970s created the conditions in

which the first major conflicts between young people, the police and the authorities erupted in 1981 and 1983. In Chapter 2 Hajjat develops Norbert Elias's concept of "figuration" to analyse the ways in which the police had become "symbolically disarmed" in the eyes of the local population. He reveals how the illegitimate and racist use of police force against young people of North African origin depleted what limited legitimacy they had enjoyed up until this period. Chapter 3 further explores the theme of rebellion and the ways in which municipal and police authorities fuelled youth disorder, via excessive repression, both in symbolic (political) and physical form. It is thus at the heart of the book that Hajjat analyses the catalyst for the idea of a March for Equality and Against Racism – namely, the shooting of Toumi Djaidja by police officer and dog handler Patrick Besnard in June 1983.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the March itself, from the early stages and what Hajjat calls the "unlikely construction of an anti-racist consensus" through to its final Parisian "apotheosis". Hajjat shows that there was broad support for the March amongst the ruling Socialist government and the media, no doubt, in part, due to the fact that it was a strategically peaceful protest. For example, Georgina Dufoix, (the Secretary of state for family and immigrant workers) praised the non-violent method of protest, thus helping to de-stigmatize the marchers to some extent. However, Hajjat underscores the fact that even if some of the marchers were invited to a reception at the Elysée presidential palace, the invitations did not extend to those with criminal records, such was the fear that an increasingly influential *Front National* would capitalize on what could be constructed as a socialist "soft-touch" approach to immigration, law and order. Hajjat also demonstrates that the mainstream media was generally positive about the March since many journalists had left-wing sensibilities where the idea of the protest march as a tool of political resistance was understood and valued. However, Hajjat also shows that such mainstream media coverage contributed to a problematic and reductive construction of the notion of so-called "Beur Culture", with a tendency to foreground French-North African youth "culture" (music, fashion, literature, art) whilst overlooking socio-economic exclusion and discrimination affecting this postcolonial population. Chapter 5, entitled "The Ambiguities of the Parisian Apotheosis" discusses the mismatch between the marchers' main demands – an end to police violence, equality before the law – and the governmental response, namely the introduction of the 10-year residence permit for foreign nationals. Hajjat convincingly argues that this response reflected the fact that the French government still considered the children of North African immigrants as foreigners, despite the fact that many of them had been born in France and held French nationality. The process of misrecognition of the marchers was further compounded by what Hajjat refers to as the "concealment" of the colonial question by the authorities and the media. Whilst Hajjat argues that the March must be regarded as a success to the extent that it enabled the political socialization of the first generation of French citizens of North African origin (a "May '68" for the children of postcolonial immigrants", 156), the movement was negatively impacted by internal divisions, external criticisms about perceived "co-optation" by the Christian organization La

Cimade (Comité inter-mouvements auprès des évacués) and political “recuperation” by the national organization SOS Racisme, which presented itself as the ideological “heir” to the March for decades to come.

Hajjat dedicates the final chapter to reflect on the commemorations of the March. This chapter provides a fascinating discussion of the divergence between the 20th anniversary commemorations in 2003 and the 30th anniversary in 2013. Whilst the 20th anniversary was fairly muted and sidelined the Marchers, Hajjat writes about an “explosion” of memory in 2013, with a succession of events, ranging from conferences and symposia, to exhibitions, television documentaries, and a mainstream film, *La Marche*, featuring well-known French-Moroccan comedian, actor and producer, Djamel Debbouze. Whilst the 30th anniversary gave more space to the Marchers, Hajjat points to the “ambiguities of mass commemoration” (183) given that they mainly framed the March as moral rather than political anti-racism.

The Conclusion and Afterword provide further space for reflection on the challenges of forging political anti-racist social movements and alliances in the 21st century. Here, Hajjat discusses the 2005 urban riots and their aftermath and shows that despite their unprecedented scale, they did not translate into coordinated political action. Rather he describes a political field fragmented by generational and class/cultural capital divides, isolating the younger “precariat” generation of the post-industrial working-class suburbs from both the “bourgeoisie” generation and the decolonial *Indigènes de la République* movement. The book’s Afterword provides a useful discussion of the perennial issue of police violence, racism and inequality and the global awakening to the severity of the situation via the Black Lives Matter movement. In France, the important work of the Comité Adama, established following the death of Adama Traoré whilst in police custody in 2016, underlines the fact that the grievances which led to the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983 remain urgent forty years on.

At various points in the book, passing mention is made of women – for example, the mothers of youths who came out on the streets to oppose police brutality or the case of the only female permanent marcher. It would have been interesting to develop a discussion of gender more broadly, both in terms of the place of women in anti-racist social movements and their responses to police violence. After all, it is not anodyne that it is Adama Traoré’s sister, Assa, who has been at the forefront of the Comité Adama’s campaigning on police brutality. My other minor criticism is the inclusion of various text boxes with extra background information e.g., the “timeline” of the 1983 revolt or the profile of the marchers, key speeches etc. Whilst this information is clearly very valuable, there is something about the way in which they are inserted into the text that disrupts the flow of reading at times. Both observations do not detract from the overall significance of *The Wretched of France* which will be of great use for scholars interested in racism, anti-racist collective action, police violence, and social movements. Its translation into English makes a highly valuable contribution to this transnational debate.

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