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History 209: Europe Since 1945

### What's So Funny About Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité?

#### Immigration and French Identity in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*

What does it mean to be French? This question has been debated in France in the face of immigration, segregation, and violence for decades. In an effort to make France more “French”, a law was passed in 2004 that banned conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. These religious symbols include Islamic headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and Christian crosses. More recently, the French government passed a law that banned women from wearing the burqa, a headscarf worn to cover one's face, in public places. French president Nicolas Sarkozy has made integration one of his main goals for France integration, however through the adoption of a French identity. These two laws are examples of promoting a uniform, French identity across France and suppressing other cultures.<sup>1</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz explores this clash of immigrant cultures and French identity in his film *La Haine* (1995). The film focuses on the segregation of the French immigrants in the banlieues of Paris from the traditional French in Paris. The *New York Times* article, “What Makes Someone French?” by Craig S. Smith, mirrors the film's depiction of immigrants and the segregation they face in France during a time of intensified traditional French nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Shaya, Lecture on Who is European?, Course on the History of Europe Since 1945, The College of Wooster, Ohio, 13 April 2011.

*La Haine*, which was released in 1995, follows the lives of three young men during a 24-hour period: Vinz, who is Jewish; Saïd, who is Arab; and Hubert, who is African. A policeman attacked their friend, Abdel, during the riots that occurred the night before. The attack was so violent that Abdel was admitted into the hospital. Vinz claims that if Abdel dies, he is going to kill a policeman using a gun he found during the riot. The three men debate throughout the day as to whether Vinz should kill the policeman. Hubert continually advises Vinz not to kill the policeman. This is depicted in a conversation between Hubert and Vinz,

Vinz: *Who made you a preacher? You know what's right and wrong? Why do you side with the assholes?*

Hubert: *Who's the asshole? If you had stayed in school, you'd know that hate breeds hate, Vinz.*<sup>2</sup>

Kassovitz seems to use this conversation as a commentary on the situation in France between the immigrants in the banlieues of Paris and the traditional French in Paris. The hate felt between these two groups of people seems to have a circular effect that is becoming increasingly violent. The distrust and the hate of the traditional French towards the immigrants then lead to the distrust and hate of the immigrants towards the “true, traditional French”. Kassovitz as the writer and director of the film makes the statement that hate is the root of the problems between the immigrants and the traditional French. His film portrays the message that tolerance and respect for other cultures is key to ending the violence in France. There is not one French identity, but many.

One scene in particular depicted the physical separation of cultures and identities between Paris and its banlieues. The camera focuses on a DJ mixing songs by Edith Piaf and Suprême

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<sup>2</sup> *La Haine*, Director Mathieu Kassovitz, Canal +, 1995, DVD.

NTM. The words “nique la police” echo throughout the banlieues as a method of resistance against the police. Hip-hop and rap has been recognized as a form of expression and defiance in the banlieues, especially during the riots in 2005,

Hip-hop has come up against the same resistance in France. Two years ago, angry rap made by the sons of disenfranchised African and Arab immigrants served as the soundtrack to riots in the French banlieues, and again in postelection riots this past spring.<sup>3</sup>

The camera pans out from the DJ in his apartment and shows the banlieue from a bird’s eye view. The cement buildings of the banlieue seem to never end. The scene does not even capture Paris in the background, creating an even greater distance between the banlieues and the city. The combination of the words “nique la police” and the endless cement buildings of the banlieue that lack the elegant architecture of Paris provide a visual representation of the segregation and the isolation of the immigrants from the traditional French.

Craig S. Smith, in his article “What Makes Someone French?”, addresses the clashing of immigrant cultures and French identity that is prevalent in *La Haine*. Smith states,

That, in a nutshell, is what lies at the heart of the unrest that has swept France in the past two weeks: millions of French citizens, whether immigrants or the offspring of immigrants, feel rejected by traditional French society, which has resisted adjusting a vision of itself forged in fires of the French Revolution. The concept of French identity remains rooted deep in the country’s centuries-old culture, and a significant portion of the population has yet to accept the

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Chang, “It’s a Hip-Hop World,” *Foreign Policy* 163 (Nov-Dec 2007), pp. 58-65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25462232> (accessed May 1, 2011).

increasingly multiethnic makeup of the nation. Put simply, being French, for many people, remains a baguette-and-beret affair.<sup>4</sup>

This defines the problems and riots that have surfaced in the banlieues. French identity is not changing to accommodate the immigrants and increasing number of ethnicities in France. This resistance on behalf of the traditional French to accept other cultures segregates French citizens and fuels the unrest and violence. Interestingly this article was written during the riots in 2005, ten years after *La Haine* was released. The same issues prevalent in *La Haine* of violence, cultural segregation, and crises of identity occurred in 2005 and are still occurring today. Kassovitz's film seems to be a warning of the hatred between the traditional French and the immigrants.

Smith's article also resonates with the quote in *La Haine* by Hubert discussed previously, "hate breeds hate". He tells the story of Rachid Arhab, a broadcast journalist in France. Rachid Arhab,

Says that he lives with the resentments touched off by the bloody war of independence that Algeria won against France in 1962. 'Unconsciously, for many French, I'm a reminder of the war,' he said, adding, 'now they see the images of second-generation Algerian children in the streets burning cars and buildings, and that brings out the resentment even more.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Smith, "What Makes Someone French?," *New York Times*, 11 November 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/11/international/europe/11france.html> (accessed April 25, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Smith, "What Makes Someone French?," *New York Times*, 11 November 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/11/international/europe/11france.html> (accessed April 25, 2011).

Arhab lived in Algeria during French colonialism. Even though he feels “profoundly French”<sup>6</sup>, his Algerian background sets him apart from French society. The resentment of the traditional French of his Algerian culture and history is further escalated by the riots in France. This exemplifies the circular theme of hate in *La Haine*. French society hates other cultures for not being French in the sense of traditional French society. The other cultures respond to this segregation by burning cars and buildings, which in turn creates more hate between the two groups.

In conclusion, Kassovitz’s *La Haine* is a powerful commentary on the intolerance of French society towards immigrant cultures and the segregation and isolation of immigrants in the banlieues. The film seems to be a warning of the escalating violence and hatred between the traditional French and the immigrants. There is not only a cultural barrier between the two groups, but also a physical barrier as depicted by Paris and the banlieues. The different cultures in the banlieue evoke the question of a French identity in the face of immigration and rising traditional French nationalism. Craig S. Smith’s article “What Makes Someone French?” resonates with the main themes of *La Haine*. He describes French identity as a “baguette-and-beret affair”, even in the face of multiple ethnicities and cultures present in France. Smith marks this as one of the major factors that is igniting the unrest and violence in the banlieues. The immigrant cultures feel rejected and isolated by the single definition of a French identity. They retaliate the hatred from the traditional French society with more hatred and violence. It is a circular pattern that will only be stopped by tolerance and respect for all cultures and the understanding of a French identity as more than just a “baguette-and-beret affair”.

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<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Smith, “What Makes Someone French?,” *New York Times*, 11 November 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/11/international/europe/11france.html> (accessed April 25, 2011).

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