Why French Racial Minorities Do Not Mobilize More Often.

Disempowerment, tactical repertoires and misrecognition of antiracist movements

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Abstract

This article demonstrates why collective action remains a rare phenomenon among French racial minorities. Three factors – at individual, organizational and institutional level – have been identified. First, the investigation reveals that despite feelings of racial injustice and identification expressed more frequently than previous research had indicated, French minorities demonstrate a strong mistrust of politics and collective action, distracting them from civic engagement. Then, the study over several years of eleven antiracist collectives in six cities indicates that their dominant repertoire of action is out of tune with the targeted public, mostly working-class. Finally, antiracist NGOs are subject to misrecognition and channeling by institutions, which explains activists' tactical choices, but limits their mobilization potential. This article is based on a survey comprising 160 semi-directive interviews with a diverse panel of French racial minorities and the ethnographic follow-up over several years of eleven antiracist collectives in six working-class towns in France.

Key Words

Antiracism ; social movements ; banlieue ; misrecognition ; discrimination ; strategy

Introduction

In June 2020, France, like many other countries, experienced large antiracist demonstrations following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. For several weeks, thousands of people, mostly young and belonging to racial minorities, marched in the streets of Paris and other cities, perhaps embodying the emergence of a new cycle of protest (Tarrow, 1994) and a new generation of activists. The global spread of the protests against the death of George Floyd also testifies to the extent to which these experiences of institutional racism resonate with the daily life of many people of color, including in a country where state racism is openly denied (Chapman, Frader, 2004; Stovall, Van den Abbeele, 2003; Mbembe, 2011). These demonstrations bear witness to the way certain traumatic events, even when they are experienced only indirectly via images disseminated on social networks, can constitute moral shocks (Jasper, 1998) and foster collective action. They may illustrate the existence of an abeyance structure (Taylor, 1989), of dormant networks of mobilization, perhaps not so much dormant as discreet and invisible (Scott, 1990) with regard to the very unfavorable political opportunity structure in which many antiracist organizations operate in the French context.

A less optimistic interpretation emerges, however, from an investigation conducted over several years in six working-class neighborhoods in France focusing on the ordinary experience of discrimination and antiracist organizing. This research indicates that despite the frequency and violence of racist encounters, which are reported by a large majority of respondents, and the feelings of injustice that these experiences generate, they rarely lead to collective action. This investigation therefore invites to take a fresh look at mobilizations of subaltern groups (Piven, Cloward, 1977; Chabanet, Royall, 2014), asking anew why, despite the anger generated by racism and systemic inequalities, individuals do not mobilize more often. As such, this article investigate the routine course of social order more than the exceptional moments of mobilization, even though the latter may find part of their explanation in the former.

The sociology of collective action has pointed out that minority mobilizations have been relatively infrequent in France compared to other European countries (Bleich, 2000; Koopmans et al. 2005; Cinalli, Giugni, 2014; Gianni, Giugni, 2014). The main explanation put forward is the role of the political and discursive opportunity structure in the French context. While the argument has some merits, it nevertheless presents two major flaws, which the present investigation aims to remedy. First, research projects based on the method of protest event analysis run the risk of letting more discreet, informal and local-scale mobilizations slip under the radar (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, Soule, 2004), all the more so as French minorities mostly organize through small-scale neighborhood associations (Wihtol de Wendel 1994; Garbaye, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007). While the concept of "discursive opportunity structure" constitutes an advance over the overly objectivist notion of the structure of political opportunities, it risks lacking in finesse in the analysis of the roots of (de)mobilization (Meyer, Minkoff, 2004). If the cultural context matters, it is in the way it shapes the practices of actors, which can only be grasped through qualitative methods. Studying the emergence (or not) of mobilization processes therefore also requires a closer grasp of the feelings of injustice, the modes of identification and actors' agency at a micro-level. As such, this article does not question the influence of the structure of discursive opportunities on the dynamics of mobilization, but allows to set it in motion and see it at work. Often, the study of civic engagement focuses either on the individual level through survey research, or on the organizational level by studying protest events, their media treatment or institutional channeling. We need to do both to understand why individuals engage or not. By studying together the micro/individual level and the meso/organizational and institutional one, this research allows understanding how actors dispositions, aspirations and identifications can be converted – or not – into collective action depending on the opportunities of engagement offered. The research design therefore includes both individual biographical interviews and the meso-analysis of antiracist organizing. Following this research design, the first part of the article tackles the question of the mobilization potential of race in a colour-blind context. The analysis of 160 interviews conducted with a diverse panel of French minorities (descendants of post-colonial North-African and Sub-Saharan immigrants, mostly belonging to the working classes and residing in poor urban neighborhoods) indicates that racialization and discrimination often fuels identification and politicization processes. Then, the second part of the article investigates why this potential is rarely grasped by the eleven antiracist collectives studied over several years in six working-class towns (Le Blanc Mesnil, Grenoble, Lormont, Roubaix, Vaulx-en-Velin, and Villepinte). In this section I put forward three factors – at individual, organizational and institutional levels – that allow understanding of why non-mobilization is the rule. At an individual level, drawing in particular on the work of William Gamson (1992), the investigation

reveals that despite feelings of racial injustice expressed more frequently than previous research had indicated, French minorities demonstrate a strong mistrust of politics and collective action, distracting them from civic engagement. Then, at an organizational level, the study over several years of eleven antiracist collectives indicates that the dominant repertoire of action is out of tune with the targeted public. Often consisting in training, conferences and workshops – which aim at legitimizing the cause in the French public sphere –, these tactics appear dissonant with the resources of the actors they are trying to mobilize, who share a limited cultural capital and a conflictual relationship with the school. Finally, going deeper into the institutional contexts in which these mobilizations take place, we will see that they are subject to disqualifications or misrecognition (Dobbernack, Meer, Modood, 2015), which explains activists' tactical choices, but limits their capacity for change.

The combination of this individual and organizational material, as well a more detailed analysis from an ethnographic survey I have been conducting in the city of Roubaix for 10 years, allows understanding why French racial minorities do not mobilize more often. In a nutshell, the French cultural repertoire and the policy feedbacks that it generates embody a form of "iron cage" for activists who aim at undermining it, but in so doing often fail to engage the victims of discrimination.

A qualitative research at individual, organizational and institutional levels

This article is based on a collective research that I coordinated between 2014 and 2018, unfolding in six working-class towns in France: Roubaix, Villepinte, Le Blanc-Mesnil, Vaulx-en-Velin, Grenoble and Lormont near Bordeaux. The choice of cities was linked to: 1) the spatial concentration of working class members and racial minorities; 2) the diversification of cases between territories governed by left-wing and right-wing majorities, more or less known for their investment in the fight against discrimination. The variation allowed to grasp the impact of local institutional and political contexts on reactions to discrimination and antiracist organizing. Focusing on towns located in the banlieue of large metropolises also allowed studying the impact of the concentration of poverty and racial minorities on identification and mobilization processes. For each site, the investigation unfolded at two levels: 1) biographical interviews with a diverse sample of residents - 160 interviews in total; 2) ethnographic inquiry and follow-up of non-profits and public devices that aim to fight discrimination, by observing their mobilization work and conducting interviews with their leaders and staff members. This research design was aimed at grasping both the experiences and aspirations of *banlieue* residents, as well their relationship to politics, the opportunities of engagement offered to them and the organizing work conducted to spur mobilization.

The 160 respondents demographic profile is fairly representative of the population of their cities of residence. We sought to vary the profiles in terms of age, gender, socio-professional category, civic engagement, origin and migration generations (from the 1st to the 3rd) by focusing on individuals with French nationality (who therefore can vote, as we were interested in political behavior). The corpus reflects this diversity, as the respondents are, like their neighborhoods of residence, mostly members of the working classes and racial minorities. Nevertheless, the way in which the respondents were recruited influenced the structure of the corpus. The respondents were recruited by snowballing from our contacts in the neighborhoods, often from non-profits. As a result, the corpus is marked by an over-representation of people

who frequent social centers and local public services. Overall, these individuals are slightly more involved than the average resident, and above all more socially affiliated, participating in collective activities in their area of residence: afterschool programs, self-help and recreational activities, sport associations, etc. In this respect, these residents have generally a positive relationship with their neighborhood, although some want to leave it or see it as a stigma. An overrepresentation of university graduates and of the lower middle classes can also be noted in the corpus. It is therefore a population that is a slightly more interested in politics than the average.

While 12% of the corpus are white, the vast majority of the respondents are descendants of immigrants and belong to racial minorities. The selection of the interviewees was thus done in part by name, being recommended by acquaintances. Certain groups end up being over-represented, such as descendants of North Africans (59% of the respondents) or people who identify as Muslims (47% of the respondents). The number of "no religion" (declared atheists or agnostics) is consequently relatively low in the corpus. While a stronger religiosity among French racial minorities has been noted, especially among the younger generations, this is accentuated in our research.

The interviews were not negotiated as specifically dealing with racial discrimination, but, in order to avoid framing issues, were presented more broadly as dealing with the relationship of the respondents to their neighborhood of residence. We then focused on the respondents' residential, educational and professional trajectories and their relationship to politics. If the question of racism and discrimination was not spontaneously mentioned during the first part of the interview, we addressed the issue directly in the second part, in the following way: "Some of the people we have met told us about experiences of racism or unequal treatment that they may have endured during their lives, have you had this kind of experience?". Such negotiation process (see also next section) allowed avoiding interviewing only people sensitive to racial discrimination or comfortable enough to talk about it.

Then, in each city, we investigated the range of participation opportunities related to discrimination and racism, identifying non-profits or sometimes public devices focusing on the issue[1]. We chose to focus on autonomous associations not affiliated with large national NGOs, the former appearing more dynamic and bringing together more racial minorities than the latter. These historical associations indeed mainly gather white people. French antiracist movements are today profoundly divided, between the historical antiracism - represented by associations such as SOS Racisme, LICRA, MRAP or the Ligue des Droits de L'Homme (see Lentin, 2004) - and the more radical and recent "political antiracism", born after 2004-2005 and the mobilizations provoked by the law banning headscarves in schools and the *banlieue* civil unrests. This current is mainly led by racialized people and was born in opposition to the moral and individualizing framing of racism by historical non-profits (Bleich, 2000). In contrast, these new actors defend an institutional and systemic understanding of racism. The main

[1] These groups, which mainly take the legal form of non-profits, are *Sorties Scolaires avec Nous* and the "Collective for information and the fight against discrimination" (CILDA) in Blanc Mesnil; *Le Labo Décolonial* in Bordeaux and the Collective *Vivre Ensemble l'Egalité* (VEE) in Lormont in the Bordeaux suburbs; the *Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse* (ANRJ), the *Université Populaire et Citoyenne* (UPC) and the *Collectif de Lutte contre les discriminations* in Roubaix; Agora and the *Fédération régionale de Hip-Hop et de cultures urbaines* (Fedevo) in Vaulx-en-Velin; Zonzon 93 in Villepinte. The survey in Grenoble focused on the experience of discrimination but little on the mobilization of associations, although the *Alliance Citoyenne* – and the actions it organized on the ban of Burkini in swimming pools – was also followed.

organizations are the Indigènes de la République, the Brigade anti-Negrophobie or the Comité Adama. These groups, which operate on a national scale, particularly in Paris, do not have direct relays or chapters in the *banlieue*. The non-profits we studied were therefore not affiliated with either side.

How the ordinary experience of racism generates a mobilization potential

The common experience of discrimination in the French context

A first factor could be put forward to understand the relative scarcity of antiracist mobilizations in France: given the color-blind context that characterizes this country, race does not make sense for individuals and their feelings of injustice are not primarily structured by race, but are class or place-based. A number of scholars have argued that identification with the neighborhood has supposedly compensated for the decline of identification with the working class in the French context, more than race (Wacquant, 2008). However, our investigation offers different findings.

First of all, we were surprised by the number and frequency of the experiences of discrimination collected. 77% of the French respondents reported at least one direct experience of discrimination or stigmatization in their lifetime, and 63% of them claimed to have witnessed such an experience, so that in total, 93% of our respondents reported direct or indirect discrimination. These figures confirm the frequency of these experiences for residents of working-class neighborhoods. They are higher than those collected in statistical surveys, starting with Trajectories and Origins, the most systematic one despite the ban on ethnic statistics (Sabbagh, Peer, 2008; Escafré-Dublet Simon, 2011) conducted by the National Institute of Demographic Studies (Ined) and which indicates that about half of French descendants of migrants report discrimination over the last five years (Beauchemin, Hamel, Simon, 2015).

Even if our qualitative survey is not intended to be representative, how can such discrepancies be accounted for? First, we focus on working-class neighborhood residents, who face discrimination more frequently according to INED data. In addition, we not only record discrimination – in the legal sense of the term – but also experiences of stigmatization and the more ambivalent micro-aggressions and feelings that they generate. Finally, as our research was conducted mainly between 2014 and 2017, the terror attacks that occurred on French soil and the subsequent rise in islamophobia, combined with the spread of notions of discrimination in French society, may also explain why respondents told us about it more spontaneously than in previous research. Nevertheless, could such high figures be due to a methodological bias?

Several elements demonstrate that the methodology followed did not lead to overestimate discrimination and stigmatization. First, the interviews were not negotiated as dealing directly with race, in order to avoid framing issues, especially in a context where racial categories are perceived as controversial.[2] This methodological choice had another advantage: it allowed to grasp how sensitive the issue of racism and discrimination is for the inhabitants of

[2] Our approach is similar to the one followed by Michèle Lamont and her colleagues (2016: 296) for the conduct of their Brazilian fieldwork, where, due to the low legitimacy of ethno-racial frames in that country, they chose to negotiate their interviews as dealing with "social mobility", in order to identify if and when the issue of ethno-racial discrimination arose.

working-class neighborhoods. Thus, 40 respondents spontaneously mentioned experiences of racism and discrimination without the interviewer asking about the issue or without the interview being negotiated as dealing specifically with this theme. Second, the majority of the interviews was conducted by white interviewers, which could also have led respondents to conceal experiences that they may have considered incomprehensible to their interlocutors. In light of these elements, it does not seem that our research overestimates the extent and frequency of personal experiences of discrimination and stigmatization experienced by the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods.

While we investigated territorial, religious and racial discrimination in particular, the latter was the most frequently mentioned. Thus, of the 900 stories of discrimination collected, over 50% were racial experiences. The second criterion was religion, with Muslims frequently reporting religious discrimination. On an individual level, 70% of the respondents reported racist discrimination or stigmatization, 49% religious and 36% related to address of residence. Respondents also frequently mentioned institutional discrimination. Thus, more than 60% of them reported discrimination, stigmatization or violence from a public servant, most often at school (for 40% of respondents) and in interactions with the police (30%). The experience of institutional discrimination often creates a discrepancy with the official color-blindness of the French society. While policies in France are officially framed according to a color-blind template, they are not, or not always, understood and experienced as such by individuals. The French republican myth of the non-existence of race hardly holds up in the face of recurrent discrimination. This discrepancy invites to investigate not only the feedbacks created by policies at a macro-level, but more practically those that are experienced through direct interaction with state agents. While the literature on policy feedback points to the symbolic and political effects of the categorizations conveyed by public policies, it has paid less attention to the possible mismatch between the frames conveyed by policies and the way they are interpreted by the recipients (Mettler, Soss, 2004). If policy feedbacks occur, they are less the result of official (color-blind) discourse than of the implementation of institutional practices experienced and interpreted as racialized.

The rise of reactive racialized identifications

In spite of a research design that could have led to minimizing, underestimating or even silencing the experience of racism, it thus came up very frequently during our interviews. Another unexpected result is the relative frequency of racialized identifications mentioned during the interviews.[3] Ethno-racial identifications – such as “we Arab people”, “we Black people”, “we Blacks and Arabs”, “we Maghrebi”, “we Muslims” – were expressed spontaneously by nearly one third of the French respondents. These phrases – expressed in an inductive way, without a prior question on their self-identification – constitutes the most frequently mentioned collective identification, far ahead of territorialized identifications – “we residents of the *banlieue*s” that nevertheless recurs relatively frequently – and even more so than class-based expressions – “we the working-class” “we poor people” – that are almost absent from the corpus.

[3] I use the concept of “identification” which appears less vague, encompassing and reifying than that of “identity” (Brubaker, Cooper 2000).

Contrary to what a number of previous studies have suggested, it is less neighborhood than race that now seems to constitute a – still fragile – cement of identification for French residents of the *banlieues*. These identifications are mainly reactive, as they are generally mentioned in reaction to discriminatory experiences. Some respondents almost apologized for formulating such categories, like Naji, a former social worker of Moroccan origin, aged 35, in the Bordeaux suburbs: "As long as we, those who suffer discrimination … I say *we* because I suffered discrimination regularly when I was younger...". The words of Malika in Roubaix, a 47-year-old French woman of Algerian origin, unemployed despite having a bachelor's degree, a situation she links to the widespread racism in French society, also illustrate a reactive identification, surprising to her:

> M: The problem is: what do we do? We are being pushed... I never thought I would ever say "we" or "us".
>
> E: It's because you are categorized that way that after...?
>
> M: We keep asking ourselves the question of "we".

These racialized identifications are primarily shaped by the experiences of stigmatization. Three-quarters of those who express an ethno-racial identification have experienced at least one discriminatory or stigmatizing experience that they attribute to their origin, skin color, appearance and/or supposed belonging to an ethno-racial group. By dint of being labeled or treated as "others" (Black, North African, Asian, etc.), the interviewees seem to end up identifying with this group, or even returning the stigma by asserting themselves as a member of the targeted group. In Vaulx-en-Velin, Akim, unemployed, aged 43, explained how the experience of racism shapes symbolic boundaries where race and class intermingle:

> A: We have always been seen in a different light.
>
> E: When you say "we", who's that?
>
> A: The foreigner, the swarthy one. Because we know who is racist. The owners of the fields, they have acres and acres, the old ones, the big families.

Beyond direct discrimination, particularly in the labor market, which is the most frequently mentioned, many respondents explain how the spatial concentration of minorities in working-class neighborhoods shapes identifications. In addition to the racialized settlement policies, the concentration of "Blacks and Arabs" (an expression that frequently recurs in the mouths of respondents when they raise these issues) in certain streams of schooling, and especially technical courses, also contributes to shaping a minority "us". This is what Karim expresses, evoking with bitterness the years spent in an elementary school in a neighborhood with a majority of North Africans:

> "In second grade, when something happened, it had to be the North Africans. We used to get slapped and kicked every day, and it's no joke because I'm scarred for life. (…) All we North Africans have suffered."

However, these identifications remain fragile and hesitant, as the respondents are aware of the weak legitimacy of these categorizations in the French public sphere (Lamont, Morning, 2002). As such, if collective identifications are expressed, they rarely take the form of the affirmation of a "linked fate" (Dawson, 1994; Michon, Tiberj, 2013). But despite a cultural repertoire that delegitimizes the expression of minority identifications, they are emerging in contemporary France in response to the discriminations experienced by individuals.

The dissociation is so strong that some respondents construct racialized identifications almost against their will. The subjective effects of islamophobia in particular are striking among the least religious people: for the latter, stigmatization somehow activates an identification that they had hitherto chosen to ignore. Since North Africans are often perceived as Muslims, they are frequently summoned to take a stand on terrorist attacks or the attitude of their alleged co-religionist. Rachid for instance, a French Tunisian and an expert in Islamic art, now defines himself as "Muslim" although he does not practice religion at all:

> "I have never felt as Muslim without being Muslim as I do now. The political-propaganda machine has created in me an identity that I did not believe was my own. As a result, I became a Muslim before I was Arab, a Muslim before I was Tunisian, a Muslim before I was French, a Muslim before I was an immigrant. It's not an identity on an individual level, but they take me, my person, and put me in it. I don't feel Muslim at all, but I feel more or less obliged to respond [to stigmatization]."

These forms of racialized collective identifications, while they may provide a cultural repertoire useful for collective mobilization, are nevertheless very different from the frames and categories conveyed by antiracist organizations (Fleming, 2012; Laplanche-Servigne 2017). The terms "indigenous" or "racialized" used by these groups came up for instance very little during the interviews.

How discriminations shape feelings of injustice: a potential for mobilization

It is not, therefore, the invisibility of race in France that would explain the weakness of antiracist mobilizations, since for many minorities race now embodies a meaningful frame for interpreting experience and self-definition. Moreover, discrimination frequently gives rise to the expression of feelings of injustice, a factor seen as a necessary condition for collective action (Gamson, 1992). Another striking result of the research is indeed the frequent politicization of the experience of discrimination, that we assess through the interpretation of causes of discrimination. 45% of victims or witnesses of discrimination/stigmatization attribute it to general, structural or institutional causes, compared to 41% for individual or interpersonal causes (see Table 1)[4]. Thus, when a cause is mentioned, individuals often target a "them" that is political or institutional: the media, elected officials, France and its colonial history, certain laws, etc.

Table 1. Causes of the discriminatory experience according to the victim

Causes of discriminatory experience, according to the victim		**Occurrences in interviews**
Individual / situational causes	Stereotypes / prejudices / "intolerance"	69
	Ignorance / stupidity / demeaning others	61

[4] Figures based on inductive analysis of the corpus of interviews with Atlas.ti software. Numbers do not represent a statistically significant survey of the French population responses to discrimination.

	Living in a mixed space or neighborhood	32
	Attitude of the victim	21
	Total individual / situational causes	***183***
Political / general causes	Stigmatization of Muslims after terrorist attacks	51
	Local institutions (town hall, school, public services)	43
	Laws (on veil 2004, state of emergency, etc.)	35
	Colonialism / national history / slavery	21
	Police racism	13
	Media	13
	Racist country	8
	Total political / general causes	***184***
Difficult to identify		18

The case of Chérif, a local authority employee, offers a good illustration of the politicization of the experience of discrimination, through the attribution of responsibility, in his case France's colonial past. He spontaneously tackles these issues that seem crucial to him. He is full of anecdotes of discriminatory treatments, from entry into nightclubs in the 1990s to the world of work. When he mentions a conflict with his boss about promotion, the politicization of the experience is immediate:

> E: And do you think your manager was racist?
>
> C: It's not that he was racist. In France, that's what we taught them, especially politicians, because people swallow what they're given on TV. And it's colonial. For them, an Arab is someone who is inferior. So inevitably he cannot claim the same position as they do. For them, I am an employee, but I am an employee lower than them. So they can give me orders and I have to take them. It's yes bwana, yes bwana.

Reference to "France" is frequent among respondents who attribute a general cause to their experience, referring to the country's history and to other deep-rooted mechanisms. 21 encounters are thus directly attributed to national history, colonization and slavery. In addition, stigmatization is frequently attributed to the routine of certain institutions (mentioned 43 times, more specifically the police). Beyond public institutions, some respondents target elected officials, considering they play a role in the stigmatization of certain groups, both through the discourse and categorizations they convey and the public policies implemented. Omar, for instance, a 43-year-old municipal civil servant in Roubaix, of Algerian descent and a practicing

Muslim, connects his experiences of discrimination with ordinary racism from "politicians": "I blame the politicians for that. It's the politicians who made it grow, who made it germinate."

These feelings of injustice therefore embody an ordinary form of politicization. They contrast with claims that the working-class neighborhoods' residents are depoliticized, as evidenced by the constant rise in electoral abstention over the past 30 years (Braconnier, Dormagen, Pons, 2017). Electoral demobilization does not prevent an ordinary form of politicization (Eliasoph, 1998) that is diffused among the respondents. In the end, these data indicate that the *banlieue* residents we interviewed express both feelings of injustice and collective identities structured by the experience of racism. These elements could be seen as favorable grounds for collective action.

The roots of racial minorities demobilization

Three factors explain why antiracist collectives have a hard time building on these individual experiences: at an individual level a strong distrust of collective action; at an organizational level, misaligned tactical repertoires; at an institutional level, repressive or channeling practices, limiting the capacities of action of non-profits, which, in return, fuels collective disempowerment.

A widely shared feeling of disempowerment

Social movement scholars posit that a necessary condition for mobilization is that individuals see it as a useful and effective way to solve problems or promote interests (Gaventa, 1980; Gamson, 1992). However, this belief is rarely shared among the respondents. Rather than apathy, French working-class neighborhood residents seem marked by a deep sense of powerlessness. While they frequently interpret their situation as unjust, they see few ways of transforming it, since politics or collective action rarely appear as effective means.

Disempowerment is fed by a feeling of non-representation due to the social and racial gap between citizens and elected officials. While few respondents explicitly claim to be represented by minority elected officials, as this idea is frequently disqualified in France as "communitarianism", some nevertheless argue that elected officials from privileged social groups cannot understand certain social experiences of their constituents. Thus Farid, a 44-year-old unemployed man in Roubaix, emphasizes the essential role played by identification with elected officials:

> E: When you say... that he [a candidate] is of North African origin, do you think that it helped mobilizing people?
>
> F: Obviously. It's crucial. Because people have to identify with the candidates. If they are blonde with blue eyes, a Swedish type, people will say, "Look, the candidate... He doesn't live like us" or: "We don't know him. We don't believe in him. He doesn't eat what I eat. He didn't grow up with us. He didn't suffer the torments of the textile industry...." So if we don't identify with him, we don't cling to the discourse."

In addition to the weak minority representation in French politics, the lack of attention paid to the issue of racism and discrimination, or even the active role it plays in the stigmatization of Muslims, contribute to the distance from politics. As pointed out by Younès, a man aged 35, unemployed, a practicing Muslim living in Roubaix:

> What is unfortunate is that when you are a Muslim citizen, you often imagine that most politicians, all political parties, will hit out at Muslims. As a result, most Muslims do not feel represented in any political party."

Not only would elected officials not represent the interests of minorities, they also turn into undifferentiated opponents of Muslims constituted as a homogeneous group. These elements fuel the disempowerment of French minorities (Bobo, Gilliam, 1990; Mansbridge, 1999).

While disinterest and mistrust of institutional politics have already been documented (Maxwell, 2010), contentious politics does not seem to garner more trust. For instance, recent social movements against the labor market reform in 2016 or the Yellow Vests movement in 2019, which took place during my fieldwork, did not mobilize any resident nor much enthusiasm in the neighborhoods studied. What about antiracist mobilizations? They should resonate more favorably with the ordinary experience of racial minorities. First of all, almost no respondent was able to mention any racial justice organizations. Even at the local level, and while we surveyed towns and neighborhoods where antiracist associations were active, these groups remain mostly unknown to the residents we met. Then, when they are known, antiracist actors also do not get a good press. *SOS Racisme*[5], one of the few associations mentioned, thus almost never attracted positive opinions. Most respondents not only consider that *SOS Racisme* has failed to fight discrimination, but it is also criticized for its dubious financial practices in connection with the Socialist Party. It is also dismissed, by the more militant, for having instrumentalized autonomous antiracist mobilizations such as the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983 (Hajjat, 2022).

Two reasons are put forward to explain distrust towards contentious action. One is that non-profits and protest are perceived as useless, incapable of transforming power relations that seem too unfavorable. Siham for instance, aged 26, in Roubaix, of Algerian descent, unemployed for two years, which she attributes to repeated discrimination, expresses a form of resignation towards social mobilizations:

> "I'm the first one when I'm told, 'Let's go to the demonstration,' to say, 'But what is it going to change? Nothing is going to change. They block the road for an hour, and then that's it. (...) A lot of people I know say, well why should I march? It's not going to change anything in my life. (...) It's not that I don't want to rebel, but (...) Then I also have plans: I'm buying a house, so I have my own life. And then, I think it's also a spiral: I'm disgusted, I remain disgusted. I don't want to engage."

One of the conditions of commitment is the belief that it can produce change, a belief that is less and less widespread in working-class neighborhoods. Another reason frequently put forward is the self-interested nature of activists and social workers, who are said to be there primarily "for the money". Thus for Farid in Roubaix, "associations are like a business." Or as Fayçal says in Vaulx-en-Velin: "Change will not come from this campaign against discrimination. We're just going to make flat-rate envelopes for associations and that's it! Non-profits' staff will make their money. But in the end, it won't change anything." Clientelism shapes the relationship with politics and nurtures a very disillusioned conception of collective action. Indeed, in neighborhoods affected my mass unemployment, civic life often appears as

[5] A national anti-racist association created in 1984 after the March for Equality and Against Racism, still active today. It has been strongly supported by the Socialist Party.

an escape route. It has over the time nurtured a very instrumental and disillusioned relationship to civic engagement.

In this context, it is difficult to envisage engaging in collective actions. There are, however, groups working to combat racism and discrimination in working-class neighborhoods, such as those I studied. How, in this unfavorable context, do they go about it?

Organizational level: Misaligned intellectual mobilizations

While it is hard to sum up the repertoires of action of the eleven non-profits we followed, we can say what they do *not* do. Thus, while we have surveyed several groups in six different cities for several years, none of them organized or took part in mobilizations that took the form of direct action or protest: no demonstrations, petitions, occupations, shaming or civil disobedience episodes were observed in the field. While these tactics are frequently used by contemporary French social movements, these forms of action were simply absent among the antiracist groups we studied. Given the diversity of the modes of action that social movements can deploy, we can restate Charles Tilly's (2010) question with regard to the relatively limited range of "protest performances" that we observed. The conundrum becomes even greater when it is added that a historical actor in the struggles of working-class neighborhoods in the 1990s, the *Mouvement de l'Immigration et des Banlieues* (MIB), precisely used non-violent direct action: disruption of city council meetings, unannounced demonstrations, hunger strikes, etc. Whereas French activists frequently refer to American minority struggles (Talpin, 2017), and to the practices of civil disobedience that were central to the civil rights movement (Morris, 1984), how can we explain that these forms of action almost disappeared in the 2010s?

The non-profits studied frequently organized debates and conferences on racism, inviting academics or well-known activists. They also held many training sessions to learn more about the antidiscrimination legal framework. These forms of cognitive mobilizations have sometimes led to the production of videos, exhibitions or comic strips. These actions aim to raise awareness of discrimination. Faced with the misrecognition of racial issues by institutions (Thompson, Simon and Majid Yar, 2011), the solution, in the eyes of many activist, is therefore to carry out "popular education" and empowerment projects (Eliasoph, 2010). To illustrate the forms taken by this tactical repertoire, we can look more closely at the city of Roubaix, one of the sites of this research.

The *Association Nouveau Regard sur la Jeunesse* (ANRJ), founded in 2004, has tried in recent years to induce antiracist mobilization. First, by encouraging the creation of an inter-association collective after the 30th anniversary of the 1983 March against racism. Then, by supporting various events and meetings. One of them, organized in the fall of 2014, focuses on police violence. It reflects its routine repertoire of action. Some thirty people gathered in the association's poorly heated premises. Activists' networks from the nearby city of Lille were well represented: there were a few antiracist activists, members of the Lille anti-discrimination association Kif-Kif, a few adults from the ANRJ and students not residing in the neighborhood. The forum brought together some contributors to the book *Permis de tuer* [*Licence to kill*], families of victims of police violence and members of the Parisian collective *Angle Mort*, as well as Mogniss Abdallah, a figure of the struggle for immigrants' rights in France. Although racial minorities were well represented, there were few inhabitants of the neighborhood, and no

teenagers. After the presentation of a documentary film dating from 1986 on the mobilization of the families of victims of police crimes, the members of the collective *Angle Mort* presented their approach, born out of the "revolts" of Villiers-le-Bel, in the banlieue of Paris, in 2007, after the death of a young man pursued by the police. Then one activist introduced the topic of the evening: "How can you organize to bring support to the families and take action?" The debate began. Some proposed greater racial diversity in police forces. But the majority seemed to believe that the problem lay in the systemic functioning of the police institution, the use of certain weapons and arrest techniques or the targeting of certain groups. This debate, however, only brought together activists who were already convinced by the cause, and did not broaden the circle of those who were mobilized. It eventually strengthened the links between different segments of the antiracist movement. Other debates followed, yet the collective appeared unable to mobilize further due to a tense local context and neutralization of the associations by city authorities. It was dismantled after a few years of existence.

Despite the inconclusive effects of this type of actions, I have observed many of them over the years. Three factors emerge to explain the importance of this cognitive and "intellectualizing" repertoire of action: tactical choices, actors' resources, and institutional constraints. First, it is a tactical choice. Through these meetings and discussions, non-profits seek to equip actors cognitively, or to encourage an empowerment process. For groups who suffer stigmatization, engaging in "struggles for recognition" involves the dissemination of counter-discourses. This repertoire is also based on the idea that fighting discrimination implies "changing mentalities" and fighting denial. A number of antiracist collectives, at the local and national levels, are thus involved in a struggle over the meaning of words, language and symbols: they are waging a cultural battle. If one considers that in France the primary source of discrimination is its poor recognition by the political and economic elites, it could appear relevant to focus on this type of discursive action.

These tactical choices are also rooted in the sociology of the activists. There is indeed a real intellectual appetite among activists from working-class neighborhoods who have experienced a trajectory of upward mobility that the organization of debates and conferences, particularly with renowned sociologists and philosophers, partly fills. These aspirations are part of a desire to defend the dignity of the residents of the *banlieue*, frequently presented in the media as "savages". Faced with the diffusion of stigmatizing categories even within institutional arenas, activists seek to defend their respectability. "Respect" or "pride" are words frequently heard – like the "Marches for Dignity" organized in 2015 and 2016 in Paris – as a reaction to the stigmatization they face. For neighborhoods presented as "no-go zones" the diffusion of counter-discoureses can contribute to their symbolic requalification.

While this repertoire of action fits the skills of the activists, who belong to the upper strata of the working classes or even the lower-middle classes, they appear largely out of step with the social characteristics of the majority of the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods. The latter are indeed not only marked by poverty, but also by a weak cultural capital and a conflictual relationship with the school. This is due both to the objective school failure that affects this fraction of the population – especially men – but also to the forms of institutional violence and discrimination experienced. During the interviews, several testimonies regarding discrimination at school were gathered, whether in orientation, through remarks and micro-aggressions by teachers – such as Djamel, repeatedly described as "bearded" by one of his teachers – or Kevin, also in Roubaix, who mentions the very layout of the

classroom, with a math teacher separating "Arabs" from "Europeans". Given the highly conflictual relationship to the institution that these experiences nourish, many respondents mistrust formats that may resemble the school setting (conferences, training, exhibitions, etc.)[6].

Scholars of collective action warn however against an overly strategic analysis of repertoires of action. Tactical options are not always real choices: they are part of a set of constraints and routines. In many respects, the organization of discursive events is part of the organizational routine of the associations studied. Indeed, most of the leaders have been socialized, both politically and professionally, within popular education and social work circles, which shape their repertoires of action. As one of the leaders of the Roubaix anti-discrimination collective frequently repeated: "We're not going to reinvent anything, we've been fighting the same battles for twenty years". At the end of a rally on the Grand-Place in Roubaix, which took the form of a large collective discussion, he was questioned by a woman after he had invited the participants to repeat the operation the following month: "But what for? If it's just talk, I'm not coming!" He answers: "You have to talk to act ! We want to show that people are ready to participate and have ideas." In fact, the choice of a tactical repertoire depends both on the biographies of the leaders and on the collective identity or culture of the group (Polletta, 2005). In the case of the Roubaix antiracist collective, it is carried by the *Université Populaire et Citoyenne*, which embodies a fairly classical tradition of "popular education", using relatively top-down forms of transmission of knowledge from the elites to the masses. Historical antiracist actors were also present in this collective, such as the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* and the *Mouvement pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples*, which also reproduce a discursive repertoire of action associated with the intellectual profile of their members (Agrikolianski, 2001).

Institutional channeling and misrecognition

Institutional constraints also shape non-profits' tactics. Funding appears crucial from this regard. In France, associations remain very dependent on public funding. While philanthropic funding has developed in recent years, it remains limited in comparison with public funders[7]. Most of the associations studied have therefore strong links with public authorities, relying in particular on their subsidies.

This creates dependency and shapes the repertoires of action. Public funding appears easier to obtain to set up training courses and conferences than for organizing protests or marches. In Roubaix, the anti-discrimination collective has received funding from the national Urban Policy Ministry to organize a two-day training course and carry out a territorial diagnosis. The non-profits involved have also received funding for the organization of conferences and exhibitions on the history of immigration. These funding opportunities have strongly oriented the collective's activities, focusing its energy on the organization of these non-contentious events.

Beyond financial channeling, associations also face forms of symbolic repression that weaken their capacity to mobilize. While the sociology of collective action has emphasized the

[6] This can also explain why schools and libraries are frequently burned down in case of civil unrests in the *banlieues* (Merklen, Murard, 2013).

[7] In 2019, 44% of French associations total funding came from public authorities (it was 56% in 1999). But smaller local associations and community organizations, such as the one studied here, rely quasi-exclusively on public funding. Sources : Paysage associatif français, 2019.

role of state repression in shaping collective action, it has focused on its most violent forms, notably law enforcement practices (Della Porta, Fillieule, 2004; Earl, 2013). As aforementioned, the collectives studied in our research have little recourse to protest actions. However, they face more ordinary forms of soft and symbolic repression and disqualification (Marx Ferree, 2004), which, although less violent, have a direct impact on their mobilization capacities. For instance, the ANRJ, in Roubaix, has been attacked for its supposed "communitarianism". In the fall of 2017, the local press published an article accusing the association of religious proselytizing and indoctrination with the precepts of the islamologist Tariq Ramadan. The article criticized the ANRJ for having organized a buffet around a lecture in the region by the Swiss islamologist, a buffet intended to finance a trip to Spain for teenage girls. The press article also accused them of collecting food for the poor and prisoners from the neighborhood during Ramadan. The journalist questioned the granting of public funding to an association insidiously pursuing religious goals[8].

The accusations of "proselytism" formulated *mezzo voce* had immediate consequences. While the association was supposed to meet with State representatives, the meeting was cancelled following the publication of the article. As an updated version of the article pointed out, "the State has indeed observed a form of proselytizing in the activities of the ANRJ. However, the association continues to receive nearly 12,000 euros a year from the Region and the city of Roubaix. (…) For next year, we will give clear guidelines so that this agreement is not renewed," said the Prefect. This cut led to the dismissal of the last employee of the association (for more details, see Talpin 2018).

A few weeks later, the local radio station Pastel FM, also part of Roubaix antiracist collective, lost its regional funding, following an attack by the far-right party National Front, accusing it of "religious proselytizing" due to the invitation of imams on the air. A far-right elected official noted that it was "the first time he [Xavier Bertrand, the right-wing president of the region] has followed one of our proposals," demonstrating the growing consensus over these issues within the French political class. These symbolic attacks – despite weak legal grounds – thus have important financial consequences for associations.

This phenomenon is not limited to the city of Roubaix. It is becoming increasingly common to require of non-profits that wish to receive funding to sign a "charter of *laïcité*", as voted by the Ile-de-France Regional Council in 2017 or promoted by the law against "separatism", voted in 2021, where associations have to claim their commitment to religious neutrality. These measures contribute to the spread of an extended version of *laïcité*, initially a concept describing the neutrality of the State and its agents, but increasingly used to secularize French society (Bowen, 2009; Fredette, 2014). These measures are part of a discursive context in which minority organizations are perceived as illegitimate, or even as evidence of an insidious form of "separatism" (Parvez, 2018). In view of this particularly closed political opportunity structure, collective action appears as an uncertain option.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates why collective action remains a rare phenomenon among French minorities. While discrimination is a widely shared reality that gives rise to feelings of

[8] « Le mélange des genres politico-religieux d'une association de jeunesse », *Nord Eclair*, October 10th 2017.

injustice and collective identifications, these rarely lead to collective action. Three main factors have been identified. First of all, French minorities, especially when they belong to the working classes, express a deep sense of disempowerment, and a distrust of politics and collective action. Second, the non-profits studied, due to their highly discursive repertoire of action, appear little inclusive of minority working classes. The choice of such a repertoire, which is part of a strategy of legitimizing the antiracist cause in a context of denial, proves to be ill-suited to the sociology of French racial minorities. Finally, since public institutions oscillate between repression, disqualification and financial channeling, they contribute to the weakening of mobilizations that struggle to accumulate both material and symbolic resources. These external factors induce the choice of tactical repertoires and further away non-profits from potential members, making the mobilization of French racial minorities all the more uncertain. The different factors identified in this article therefore connect: the distrust towards collective action stem from the weakening of antiracist organizations – due to institutional channeling and repression, as well as to the choice of repertoire of action – that do not manage to motivate *banlieue* residents into contentious action. The accumulation of losses therefore creates a vicious circle that fuels disempowerment and powerlessness, individuals considering participation useless. This article therefore demonstrates the centrality of political and institutional factors in the demobilization of French racial minorities. In this context, it takes exceptional moments and moral shocks to provisionally shake the iron cage of racial politics in France.

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