

GREGORY RODRIGUEZ

French blinders

LOS ANGELES TIMES
April 30, 2006

PARIS--I CAME TO FRANCE to see how the country is responding to November's violent suburban riots and the increasing social diversity they symbolized. What I found was a nation that has been forced to acknowledge the existence of its alienated minorities yet stubbornly refuses to concede that the French model of integration has failed.

It's not easy to talk about race or ethnicity in France. For one thing, it is against the law for the government and private firms to collect data based on those criteria. As one leading French commentator told me, "Race isn't a natural subject here as it is in America."

As a result, people either use code words or approach the subject indirectly. Though nobody would admit it, a survey released last week by a prominent polling firm of people born in French territories *d'outre-mers* — "overseas" — was understood as a proxy poll of black people. French policymakers hold Britain's now-tarnished social model of separate-but-equal multiculturalism in great contempt. And they don't think much more of what they call American communitarianism — our acknowledgment that society is a patchwork of many distinct groups.

This refusal to allow ethnicity or race to have a legitimate role in civic life comes from the nation's republican ideology, which discourages any loyalties — be they ethnic, racial or religious — that compete with fealty to the nation. In 1789, a French legislator summed up the ideal *liberté, égalité, fraternité* approach to ethnicity and race: "Everything must be refused to the Jews as a nation ... and everything granted to the Jews as individuals."

The problem, of course, is that a difference-blind state does not automatically translate into a difference-blind society. A March survey by the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights found that 30% of French people openly consider themselves to be at least somewhat racist, up from 25% a year ago. Two weeks ago, the findings of a poll suggested that November's riots provoked a backlash. More than one-third of respondents said that France's anti-immigrant far-right is in tune with "the concerns of French people."

It's not that France doesn't have a tradition of welcoming and assimilating immigrants. Indeed, Nicolas Sarkozy, the minister of Interior and leading conservative candidate in the upcoming presidential election, is the son of a Hungarian immigrant, albeit of aristocratic background. But *utter* assimilation is the key.

More than a century after the U.S. largely abandoned a strict Anglo-conformity social model — in favor of the melting-pot ideal in which different groups were expected to add new elements to the nation's cultural milieu — France still adheres to the notion of Franco-conformity. Newcomers can become French only if they can squeeze into the narrow cultural parameters of Frenchness, which include elegantly choreographed language, propriety and style.

But in a world in which technology allows one to maintain homeland cultures more easily than in the past, today's immigrants and their families in France are less and less likely to learn the very particular steps and paces of French culture that they need to be accepted.

Furthermore, today's immigrants are more likely to be what the French call "visible minorities."

Even if they do learn the steps and paces, they are physically distinct from the white majority. "It was easier for France to deal with immigrants when most of them were white," said Philippe Maniere, director general of the Institut Montaigne, a center-right think tank in Paris.

Maniere and the institute have been looking for specific ways to deal with the country's difficulty with difference. For example, in an effort to combat widespread workplace discrimination against minorities, the institute is encouraging companies to accept "anonymous" resumes that only list a candidate's professional qualifications and give no indication of background. They are also pushing for affirmative action — called positive discrimination — an idea that candidate Sarkozy has also flirted with.

Anonymous resumes fit the French republican disdain for acknowledging differences, but it's unclear whether positive discrimination, a policy of preferential treatment for some groups over others, could work without violating that fundamental concept. Given that the electorate is lurching to the right — and the left is unwilling to grapple with differences — such moves are likely to be incremental at best.

Not even all French minorities are likely to agree with a new recognition of difference. Moroccan-French novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun, whose nonfiction book, "Racism Explained to My Daughter," was a bestseller here in 1999, opposes the idea of affirmative action. "Any discrimination is negative," he told me, sounding, well, French.

Ben Jelloun reveres the French ideal of official difference-blindness, and he fears that collecting data on race would only lead to more severe forms of discrimination. "The problem is that if you start counting people, they can always end up in a stadium," he said.

Ben Jelloun is not optimistic about the future. Since the riots, he says, "nothing has been done, and there have been no real solutions. So, it will happen again."

In a world that's getting smaller and smaller, France adheres to its own model of monoculturalism at its own peril. It's too bad the people who taught the world to say *vive la difference* can't find a way to enshrine it in their politics.