



ILLUSTRATION BY EUNKYUNG KANG

QALANDAR MEMON AND JACOPO MORONI
IN CONVERSATION WITH
TARIQ ALI
**‘Scoundrel times’:
Paris, Baghdad, Lahore...**



Jacopo Moroni — Mr. Ali, we would like to begin by concentrating on the recent events in the French *banlieues*. First of all, it seems undeniable that the events are of fundamental importance for the future political and socio-cultural European landscape, forcing us to grasp for a theoretical understanding of the dynamics working on the multi-cultural ground of the European cities. By this I don't mean to say that the riots had not been foreseen — Mike Davis recently suggested that urban centres are destined to become the battlegrounds of the future as neo-liberal economics and global conflict intensifies — but, rather, it is clear that only a few recognized that the revolts were by themselves a clearly defined political act by a subaltern class towards the mechanisms of the French republican state. Can you then tell us whether what you have seen can be considered as a foundation of a collective political, even revolutionary, project or rather an unarticulated apolitical gesture?

Tariq Ali — Well, I believe that the French events of 2005, which saw large numbers of young, dark-skinned French citizens coming out in revolt against the system, are extremely important. They are important for a number of reasons. I would not personally describe them as revolutionary because of the lack of ideology, even the sort of inchoate ideology that has anything to do with a process of social transformation. But I think they were in the great French tradition

of semi-insurrections and revolts against authority, which we have now seen continuously since the time of the French Revolution. From that point of view, I think that the first thing one has to say about the French events of 2005 is that *they were very French*. In this sense, all the talk about these young immigrants, this generation of children of immigrants born in France – they were the ones who did it, - is misleading as it deals with their failure to fully integrate in French society. This is true, *but I think that they are partially integrated in French society by the way they acted*. And that they understood what to do immediately as they targeted what French radicals had traditionally targeted in the past: property and not individuals. They burned the symbols of oppression - the schools, - and they burned cars, and the reason they burned the schools is that these were the institutions that gave them the false ideology that once they entered into society they would be treated as fully-fledged French men and women – and they were not. There was a great deal of hostility to a system that proclaims the equality of all but cannot fulfil it. And, secondly, burning cars of course is something that we remember well from 1968. Just think of the famous story of the great European Marxist leader Ernest Mandel, who watched his car burning on the barricades on the night of May the 10th and said, "*C'est beau. C'est la révolution*". (laughter)

So, the events are in the old tradition and I can say that to an extent they have retained the best features of the French tradition and have rejected some of the worst. What is deeply shocking to me, and I have to express this strongly, is the *total and complete failure of white France to carry out public acts of solidarity with these young people*. We know what is the French right and we observed Sarkozy pandering to Le Pen every single day. I speak of liberal France, 'human rights' France, the France of the far left, the gauchistes. There was not a single meeting at the *Mutualité*. Not a single demonstration. That I find frightening. It is an indication of how far France and the dominant culture has moved since the seventies of the last century. On this concern, I believe that the division

goes so deep that it is a division of colour. Some of the liberal newspapers underlined the importance of these events, there were some interesting pieces, but by and large white leftist France has remained isolated. This is even more so surprising as the events had nothing to do with religious rights, they were not demonstrating in favour of religion. It was instead a demonstration of anger against their condition that reminded me very much of that movie that came out several years ago, *La Haine*, in which the living conditions in these French *bidonvilles* is shown to be pretty terrific. And you can see that sometimes when you go to Paris. You do not see these youths in Paris - it is a very odd thing. When you go to Berlin you can see mixed crowds and in London you sense that very strongly. You can see these kids on the Metro but in Paris itself – no.

JM: I think that there are and there have been some points of conjunction in the past between white radical France and these disenfranchised youths, the recent no-vote in the referendum on the European Constitution being an example. Which is why the silence of the political left is hard to believe.

TA: Yes. I agree.

JM: And do you think that this failure points toward the need to create a political capacity that is extra-parliamentary, that articulates outside the domain of the state?

TA: Yes, but I think that the campaign against the European Constitution was a very different thing. This was a campaign that won because of the way the left organized it. The *Attac*¹ groups played a big part in this - they went into every village and city in France and organized seminars and public events to discuss the Constitution,

1. See the Declaration of the Administrative Council of Attac France – <http://www.france.attac.org/13963>