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Discrimination Towards Algerian-French Citizens in Post-Colonial French Cinema

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French 499 Independent Study

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Abstract

Three French films, *Elise ou la vraie vie* by Michel Drach, *La Haine* by Matthieu Kassovitz, and *The French Democracy* by Alex Chan, were analyzed in order to view the discrimination by Caucasian-French citizens towards Algerian-French citizens. The films were released in the aftermath of a significant event in France dealing with racism. Two main themes were prevalent throughout this analysis: discrimination by Caucasian-French citizens towards Algerian-French citizens in public spaces, and Caucasian-French police brutality against Algerian-French youths. The findings from this analysis suggest that discrimination and racism in France still persist today, although in different forms.

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Discrimination Towards Algerian-French Citizens in Post-Colonial French Cinema

Introduction

2015 has seen Paris in the international spotlight twice due to Islamist terrorist attacks. While these acts of terrorism have affected all French citizens, regardless of religion or race, the Algerian-French community has faced particular challenges. Indeed, racial discrimination in France against Algerian-French citizens dates back to the 1970s after the end of the Algerian War of Independence. Recently, after the January 7, 2015 attack in Paris at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, racism has once again, in a dramatic and unprecedented way, come to the national forefront in post-colonial France. Among the various sources available to us, French cinema offers compelling documents to study the different types and notions of discrimination that exist in France against Algerian-French¹ citizens.

French directors have often examined prejudice in French society on the part of *les Français de souche*² towards the Arab-French community. For instance, Michel Drach was one of the first French film directors to bring to national attention the discrimination Algerian-French people faced every day from *les Français de souche* in his film *Elise ou la vraie vie*.

¹ Algerians who immigrated to France, as well as people from Algerian descent who were born and raised in France.

² This term best translates to native-Caucasian-French citizens. I will use this term interchangeably with "Caucasian-French citizens."

Additionally, Matthieu Kassovitz has demonstrated the effects of racism by Caucasian French police towards the youth of Algerian descent residing in France in his film *La Haine*. Finally, Alex Chan has reiterated the sentiments of racial discrimination in addition to the struggles the Algerian-French community experiences on a regular basis in his short animated documentary, *The French Democracy*. In their respective films, each director calls into question the national beliefs of liberty, equality, and fraternity embedded after the French Revolution, but which do not seem to extend to all citizens living in France in the 21st century.

The three films chosen for this project are works of fiction that were produced over a period of 35 years. Each one of these films was released in the aftermath of a significant event dealing with discrimination and racism in France. Throughout this thesis, two main themes and types of racism as well as discrimination against the Algerian-French community will be highlighted: French police against youths, and *les Français de souche* against individuals in public spaces. This analysis will clearly show that while prejudice against the Algerian-French community might have diminished over time, it remains a critical issue in France today. By focusing on individual stories, these films show the changing nature of prejudice in French society.

In the three main sections of this thesis, each devoted to one main film, an analysis of the following three films, *Elise ou la vraie vie*, *La Haine*, and *The French Democracy*, will reveal that racism and prejudice are still prevalent in French society. In the introduction of each section, there will be a brief historical overview, with mention of other similar contemporary films. The first section will focus on interracial relationships in *Elise ou la vraie vie*, the second section on police brutality against Algerian-French youth in *La Haine*, and the third section on the 2005

riots in *The French Democracy*. Section 4 will summarize the evolution of French racism and discrimination as well as highlight areas of progress, versus stagnation and regression.

Section 1: Post-Colonial Discrimination

Algeria's war for independence from France lasted approximately seven years, from 1954 to 1961. Although the French government granted independence to its other North African mandates, Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, it refused to give the same rights to Algeria. Dr. Jim Jones³ notes that "believing that Algeria was not just a colony, but a region of France, the French government viewed the uprisings as acts of treason and responded with massive force to crush the rebellion" (Algerian Independence, 2013, n.p.). It also helps to know that France's colonial interest in Algeria was largely based on its expansive oil supply. But, what started off as an uprising in the villages of Algeria soon became an all-out revolution in the capital, Algiers in 1954. The *Front de Libération Nationale*, also known as the FLN, became incredibly dissatisfied with the French government. Thus the FLN launched armed as well as violent riots throughout Algeria "...and issue[d] a proclamation calling for a sovereign Algerian state" (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). At first, the French government did not think the rebellion would be successful, yet it still deployed its troops to Algeria to observe and pacify the situation (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). For a while, the protests were nonviolent; however, in August of 1955, the FLN commenced violently and aggressively targeting civilians, especially French citizens residing or vacationing in Algiers (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). The FLN's plan was to begin by mixing terror "...with a little persuasion and re-education..." (O'Ballance, 1967, 63). The FLN increasingly initiated violence through mob and bomb attacks. September 30, 1956 marked the beginning of the Battle of Algiers⁴ when three women planted bombs in public places that killed hundreds of civilians (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). The following years were filled with violence from French troops as well as from the FLN. For example, "in May 1958, soldiers of the FLN executed three French prisoners in retaliation

³ Professor of African History at West Chester University.

⁴ I do not discuss the film *The Battle of Algiers* since it is an Italian production, not French.

for the French execution of three Algerians” (Jones, 2013, n.p.). A film that portrayed the violence in Algeria during this time is known as *Avoir vingt ans dans les Aurès*. In this film, French pacifists from Brittany were sent from France to Algeria for combat, where they slowly became killing machines as a result of the horror and atrocities they witnessed (*Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès*, 2014, n.p.). The film dramatizes real life events of the violence in Algeria.

By May of 1961, both sides had grown exasperated by the violence that had led to a massive casualty count, so “the first round of negotiations between the French government and the FLN commence[d] in Évian, but [it was] not productive” (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). Almost a year later, in March of 1962, the second round of negotiations began in Évian-les-Bains, France, and this time they were successful. The French government declared a cease fire and the Évian accords were drafted which claimed *Algérie algérienne*, or Algerian Algeria (Hitchens, 2006, n.p.). July 1962 marked the independence of Algeria from France. The approximately seven-and-a-half year war had witnessed over 42,000 terrorist attacks, 10,000 European casualties, and 43,000 Muslim casualties in Algeria (O’Ballance, 1967, 200). The extremely high numbers of attacks as well as human losses were the price Algerians had to pay for freedom.

After the end of the Algerian War of Independence, Algerian immigration to France skyrocketed. According to Dr. Jim House,⁵ “under the terms of the Évian Accord settling Algerian independence in 1962, Algerians enjoyed relative freedom of movement between Algeria and France, and by 1965 there were over 500,000 Algerian nationals in France” (House, 2006, n.p.). Most immigrants were refugees of the Algerian War of Independence who were seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families in the then-booming French economy.

⁵ A French lecturer at the University of Leeds specializing in Algerian-French colonial and post-colonial relations.

“In the 1960s, the number of North Africans that sought asylum, accounting for a few hundred thousand immigrants, combined with about a million invited workers and hundreds of thousands of reunited family members, also from this region, resulted in a dramatic increase in immigrant communities all over France” (Vladesku, 2006, 4).

The issue of immigration is reflected in the film *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, directed by Yamina Benguigui and released in 2001. The film follows Zouina, an Algerian woman, who immigrated to France with her family during the early 1970s to rejoin her husband who had already been residing in France and working in a factory. The film begins with a sequence depicting Algerians' massive immigration to France by boat soon after the end of the civil war. However, Algerians faced unexpected struggles in their new country. The living and housing conditions for Algerian immigrants were severely poor. Countless Algerians lived in shanty-towns, and “...spent years in segregated temporary accommodation in prefabricated buildings...” (House, 2006, n.p.) Although public housing was provided by the government, it was prioritized for French nationals, immigrants of European descent also known as *pieds noirs*⁶ who had left Algeria during the civil war (House, 2006, n.p.). Algerians faced even greater hardships during the time period between 1975 and 1985. During this time, while Algerian youths were expected to embrace native French culture, “they also had to contend with widespread discrimination within state institutions (in particular the police and judicial system), and throughout sectors of French society” (House, 2006, n.p.). Algerians, specifically the youth, faced relentless discrimination from French nationals, including police, during this period of high immigration.

Another film that discusses Algerian immigration to France after the war is *Elise ou la Vraie Vie*, directed by Michel Drach and released in 1970. The film portrays Elise, a young woman from Bordeaux, who migrated to Paris and began working in a car factory with her brother, Lucien, a revolutionary FLN supporter. While working in the factory, Elise befriended

⁶ *Pieds noirs*, literally translated to “black feet,” are white French colonists living in Algeria.

and fell in love with Arezki, a young Algerian man who also held membership with the FLN.

Elise and Arezki began to date but were confronted with racism because of their interracial relationship. For example, when Elise and Arezki went to public places, such as cafés and restaurants, *les Français de souche* screamed obscenities directed towards them. Another scene in the film depicts Elise and Arezki on a date at a café, surrounded by French nationals. As they sipped a cup of tea at the bar, the man sitting next to them said: “Me, I want an atomic bomb dropped on Algeria” (Teaser *Elise Ou La Vraie Vie*, Daily Motion, 2015, 0:35, translated⁷).

Another man chimed in and claimed: “For the atomic bomb, I don't agree with that. We should collect all the rafts we have in France and shove them into planes and above the water, the doors open and splash! Everybody into the water” (Teaser *Elise Ou La Vraie Vie*, Daily Motion, 2015, 0:42, translated). This scene illustrates the types of racism *les Français de souche* inflicted on Algerian immigrants dating one of theirs in the early days of post-colonial France. A third man sitting in the café near the interracial couple murmured: “My son is over there, and these bastards here, they mess around and they do it with our women” (Teaser *Elise Ou La Vraie Vie*, Daily Motion, 2015, 1:05, translated). Racism at this time was at its height towards interracial couples, specifically North African immigrant men with French women. *Les Français de souche*, as depicted in this scene, are judgmental, stereotypical, and hateful towards Arezki and Elise. The couple had attempted to ignore the comments, but at a point, as they can no longer tolerate the insults, they end up leaving the café. This scene shows how early Algerian immigrants were dealing with overt racism in their adopted country to the point where they no longer felt comfortable going out to public places, such as cafés and restaurants. In a later scene we learn that Elise had not told her brother about Arezki because she is worried and afraid of his reaction. Paradoxically, even though her brother Lucien is himself an FLN supporter, Elise does not

⁷ All translations are done by me, unless noted otherwise.

believe that her brother will accept her relationship with an Algerian man. This film, thus, also reflects upon the inexperience of *les Français de souche* with people from other races and ethnic backgrounds. Historically, the period of post-colonial immigration of Algerians to France was one of the first times that Caucasian-French citizens interacted systematically with people from other races and cultures in their own neighborhoods, schools, and other public domains. Indeed, this scene is only one of many that demonstrate prevalent racism and prejudice from *les Français de souche* towards the Algerian-French community in public spaces in 1960s post-colonial France.

The 1970s witnessed racism against the Algerian community, particularly toward immigrants, since *les Français de souche* were infuriated with the loss of Algeria and the loss of lives during the war of independence. Caucasian-French citizens took out their frustration on immigrants from Algeria by ridiculing them and making them feel uncomfortable in France. The post-colonial legacy in France left Algerian immigrants segregated from the rest of French society. In an interview conducted by the Comité Lillois d'Opinion Publique, Michel Drach stated that he chose to direct the film *Elise ou la Vraie Vie* because of three main themes: the Algerian War, the era of racism, and the conditions of women, especially those working in factories (*Présentation du film Elise ou la vraie vie*, 1971, 0:30-0:38). These themes were relevant around the time period of the release of the film: the Algerian War had recently ended, and the era of racism against Algerian immigrants, as well as against citizens of Algerian descent residing in France, was beginning. As the number of Algerian immigrants increased, so did the prejudice against them in particular from the Caucasian-native-French people. Furthermore, the film highlights the racism and brutality from Caucasian-French police directed toward Algerian immigrants. In another interview conducted by Luce Sand, Michel Drach insists that:

“When you see the news on TV or even now documents on May, or even in 36, the film of Henri de Turenne, agents clubbing people, it's very strong and very good, because these are real documents. But I could not, in the story of Elise, leave my characters and me to do a documentary about police actions. I think this is already quite violent like that” (Sand, 1970, n.p., translated).

Police brutality was evident in 1970s France towards people of North African-Arab descent. In his film, Michel Drach depicts very little of this brutality, since he didn't want to focus on the violence. Nevertheless, in the trailer for *Elise ou la Vraie Vie*, the audience can hear Elise screaming “no” while the police are rounding up Algerian immigrants before the camera closes in on Arezki in custody, wearing only his underwear and raising his hands as two French men humiliate him (Trailer: *Elise*, 2013, 1:00). Although this is a fictional film, Michel Drach based the brutality on an event from real life. One of the most brutal and violent attacks by the police against Algerians had occurred nine years prior to the release of the film *Elise ou la Vraie Vie*. On October 17, 1961 approximately 25,000 Algerians had taken to the streets of Paris to peacefully protest a night-time curfew imposed on them. Shortly after the protests began, the French police arrived on the scene and began shooting and beating the Algerian protesters (World News Briefs, 1998, n.p.). Police took thousands of Algerians into custody and killed numerous people. The exact death toll from the protest varied depending on the source, ranging from 7 to as many as 300 fatalities (World News Briefs, 1998, n.p.). Although the brutality of the French police has been well documented throughout history, citizens of Algerian descent had clearly become the focus of it in post-colonial France.

Section 2: Terrorism at Home

1995 witnessed several terrorist attacks in France by an Algerian-based guerilla group known as the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA. The attacks from the GIA were incidents of revenge and retaliation. In December of 1994, four members of the GIA hijacked an Air France plane in Algiers with the intent of blowing up the aircraft above Paris. However, French troops stopped the hijackers by killing them. Since then, the GIA “warned that it would take revenge” (Simons, 1995, n.p.). On July 25, 1995 as the underground train in Paris entered the St. Michel subway station near Notre Dame Cathedral, a gas bomb exploded on the train killing eight passengers and injuring approximately a hundred more (Riding, 2002, n.p.). This attack was the worst committed by eight terrorist cells led by the GIA that occurred in 1995. Colonel Alain Michel, a member of the Paris fire brigade, recalled the attack and the treatment of the injured as “nearly like wartime surgery” (White, 1995, n.p.). A majority of the people who were injured had their limbs immediately amputated by doctors while they were still in the subway; nearby stores were turned into infirmaries where doctors operated on the wounded, and helicopters and rescue workers transported those in critical condition to hospitals across Paris (White, 1995, n.p.). The horrendous attack was merely the beginning for the GIA. On August 17, 1995 the Armed Islamic Group injured about 17 people when they plotted a gas bomb with nails near the Arc de Triomphe (Simons, 1995, n.p.). Additionally, on October 17, 1995 another bomb blast was heard coming from a Paris subway station that injured roughly 29 people (Humi, 1995, n.p.). The GIA continued planting bombs throughout Paris to cause chaos and fear amongst the French public, as well as in hope “to force France to end its aid to Algeria's military rulers” (Humi, 1995, n.p.). Overall, the attacks caused an increase in police patrol and searches on the streets of Paris to prevent future violence.

The previous year, in 1994, violent protests had broken out throughout Paris between those living in poverty in *les banlieues*⁸, the housing projects of Paris, and the French police. Although “in France, collecting statistics by ethnicity or religion is illegal,” it is, however, futile to attempt to collect exact numbers when the people residing in *les banlieues* are typically Arabs and Africans (Packer, 2015, n.p.). In many ways the disorder and violence in *les banlieues*, ranging from nonviolent riots to clashes with police, is merely “one more front in the long war between France and its Arabs, especially Algerians” (Packer, 2015, n.p.). Andrew Hussey, British scholar at the University Of London School Of Advanced Study in Paris and author of *The French Intifada*, believes that “The kids in *les banlieues* live in this perpetual presen[ce] of weed, girls, gangsters, Islam...They have no sense of history, no sense of where they come from in North Africa, other than localized bits of Arabic that they don’t understand, bits of Islam that don’t really make sense” (Packer, 2015, n.p.). Algerian-French people, especially the youths who are residing in *les banlieues* are constantly experiencing the pressuring dilemma of adjusting to French culture while maintaining their identity as Arabs and Muslims. However, as Hussey claims, the turmoil is caused by the Algerian-French youths feeling as outsiders in their homeland as they fall victims to the staggering rate of unemployment and its subsequent poverty in disproportionate numbers. The French government has not done much to improve the situation of *les banlieues*. Indeed tourists as well as Parisians rarely venture out to the projects, and journalists only report the negative stories of drugs, car burnings, and shootings (Packer, 2015, n.p.). All these adversities incite the residents of *les banlieues* to riot and desire revenge against their own government and fellow citizens responsible for their marginalization. An example of such a violent riot ensued in the early morning on January 27, 1994 after a fatal police shooting.

⁸ “France has all kinds of suburbs, but the word for them, *banlieues*, has become pejorative, meaning slums dominated by immigrants” (Packer, 2015, n.p.).

In Rouen, three individuals, one of them an 18 year old of Senegalese descent named Ibrahim Sy, were raising suspicions while in a parking lot when police officers arrived on the scene in time to witness the three youths stealing a car. They pulled up meters away from the car and shot eight bullets, one of them piercing through Sy and killing him (Gilbert, 1994, n.p.). On January 29, 1994 the people of *les banlieues* in Rouen organized themselves and began demonstrating with signs saying “Justice for Ibrahim!” and “A car is not worth a life” (Gilbert, 1994, n.p.). The protestors had been planning on being peaceful; however, the police officers claimed that “kid got what he deserved” and called for the end of demonstrations (Gilbert, 1994, n.p.). This resulted in complete violence by residents of *les banlieues*, with them setting fire to garbage cans, breaking shop windows, and building barricades (Gilbert, 1994, n.p.). The protestors’ demands were met and an investigation opened where the officers were found guilty of murdering the teenager and not calling for the medical attention which could have saved his life (Castetz, 1995, n.p.). Thus, brutality by the police force against the Arab as well as the black-African minority, deeply rooted in post-colonial France, may offer an explanation as to why it continues today.

The film *La Haine*, or *Hate*, directed by Matthieu Kassovitz, was released in 1995, around the time of the bombings in Paris. The film depicts the lives of three friends residing in *les banlieues*. One of the young men is of North African descent, Saïd, the other is a black-African boxer, Hubert, and the third is an Eastern European Jew, Vinz. The film opens with a scene of riots and an Algerian-French youth screaming “Easy for you to gun us down! All we got is rocks!” (*La Haine*, 1995, 0:48) The police use ultimate force to clear the demonstrations, when all the protestors want is justice and peace. The film then continues to show real-life scenes depicting police brutality against the Algerian-French as well as black African-French. One after

another, scenes feature police throwing gas canisters at peaceful protestors, beating youth to the ground for demonstrating their rights, and opening fire on the activists as they run for their lives. The film quickly transitions to the fictional story where an Algerian-French teenager, Abdel, was brutally beaten into a coma by the French police during a protest in *les banlieues*. This incident sparks the hatred of the three friends as they vow to get justice for Abdel. After a series of run-ins with the police, Vinz obtains a police gun during riots, with which he fantasizes about killing the police. Possessing a gun leads Vinz to believe he can kill any police officer that humiliates him, and to think that he should be respected as well as feared. This mentality also causes the three youths to incite violence by being confrontational almost every time a police officer is involved. For example, when they go to the hospital to visit their friend Abdel, a Caucasian-French police officer calmly asks the boys to respect the family's wishes of privacy and leave the premises. However, Vinz and Saiid began screaming obscenities at the officer which instigates the arrest of Saiid (*La Haine*, 1995, 20:19). Vinz and Saiid thought that the police officer was simply being racist by not allowing them to visit their friend, and they couldn't comprehend that he was just doing his job. When the rest of the gang went to pick him up from the police station, they were looked at with disgust by the officers on duty. It was a commonly known fact that police officers often felt superior to the North African-Arab citizens of France.

The film also depicts the incessant police brutality towards minority youths. In another scene, the trio is depicted exiting a building after they visit a friend who gave Vinz bullets for his gun. Police officers begin searching them, but Vinz, fearing he would get arrested for illegally possessing a gun, pushes the officer and runs away. His actions lead the other officers to beat Saiid and Hubert and arrest them for no reason (*La Haine*, 1995, 65:00). At the station, the officers torture the two young men by putting them in a headlock and choking them to try and

get them to confess that they knew Vinz (*La Haine*, 1995, 68:30). The youths did not deserve to be brutally treated as savages by the police officers since they were not being investigated for a crime. Their torture was simply a source of entertainment for the police officers. Later, Vinz attempts to get revenge on a police officer by violently beating him and almost killing him with his gun (*La Haine*, 1995, 122:43). Revenge was a common feeling among the three friends since they constantly experienced police brutality and maltreatment. However, Vinz hesitates and allows the officer to leave, bloodied but alive, as he finally realizes that he is not the heartless bandit that he had pretended to be. The film ends tragically when the police officer that Vinz had hit the previous night, pulls up next to the trio, taunting his assailant with a gun, and accidentally pulls the trigger. The camera then zooms in on Hubert and the police officer pointing their guns at each other; the screen goes black; and we hear a gun fire. The audience is not certain who died, which suggests the uncertainty of the future resolutions between the two sides in *les banlieues*.

Kassovitz attempts to present both sides of the conflict, the immigrant youths and the French police. “The film serves as both a warning, and documentation of the pressures to which those on all sides of *les banlieues* life are subjected” (Cartelli, 2008, 64). On the one hand, the three young men provoked violence by being confrontational and disrespectful toward the police. Repeatedly, the audience observes Saiid, Vinz, and Hubert vandalize, steal, as well as yell at everyone, including police officers. On the other hand, they also witness the police officers humiliate, torture, and assault the youths unnecessarily. Therefore, the audience is left to question “who is in the right?” Multiple reasons caused the tensions that led to violence between the Caucasian police officers and the immigrant youths. In the film, the young men strongly believed that they were mistreated by police officers and misjudged by society as criminals and

hoodlums. They also believed that the only way to break the stereotype was through violence. Since the majority of immigrant citizens, especially those from Algerian descent, were not wealthy, they could not afford to live anywhere else other than in the projects of Paris. Life in *les banlieues* was not easy for youths; there were drugs, gangs, and crimes everywhere. The youths were bound to eventually engage in this dangerous lifestyle and to begin causing chaos to express their anger. The police, instead of diffusing these tensions, further cracked down on the immigrant youths. Although the French police officers were reflected in a negative light in this film, Kassovitz argued that his intentions were to bring to attention the injustices and violence by both sides, stating that he doesn't "want people to understand the film as being anti-police, but as being against any form of a police-state" (Deussing, 1996, n.p.). Even though the story of the three young men was fictional, Kassovitz's views are all the more compelling since he based them on reality and the then-recent events that had occurred in France.

Kassovitz chose to film this drama in black and white to show the graveness of the issue of police brutality towards the minority, especially those of Algerian descent. Additionally, the absence of color can be understood as an emphasis on the lack of a happy ending. The film opened on the youths as "being in hate," and concluded without a resolution to their hatred. The youths abhorred the manner in which the French police viewed, treated, and humiliated them. Yet, the police officers continued to mistreat the trio by brutally, and even fatally injuring them, both physically and psychologically. Consequently, the film ends with the three minority members still feeling as outsiders in their own homeland, which brings even more fire to their hate.

Section 3: Riots in the Streets

A decade after the terrorist bombings in France and the unrest in *les banlieues*, the situation was worsening. Nicholas Sarkozy, the then-interior minister of France, visited the ghettos of Paris shortly after a child was killed by a stray bullet, and promised to “clean out troublemakers there ‘with a *Kärcher*’” (Bernard, 2007, n.p.). Sarkozy’s comments sparked outrage among the French people of African and Arab descents. Two days after Sarkozy’s comments, on October 27, 2005 two Algerian-French teenagers, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore, were fatally electrocuted while climbing into Clichy-sous-bois’ electrical sub-station (The Deaths that Set Clichy Ablaze, 2005, n.p.). A third teenager who was also with the youths was badly injured but survived the electrocution. The teenagers were allegedly running away from the police, who denied this accusation. François Molins¹⁰ claimed that “they [the teenagers] ran because other young people were running - they thought they were being chased but they were not” (The Deaths that Set Clichy Ablaze, 2005, n.p.). Nevertheless, as the residents of Clichy did not believe the police account, riots emerged on October 29, 2005 in Paris. In actuality, the riots started out as peaceful, non-violent protests. The first day, “a silent march to remember Zyed and Bouna [was] held in Clichy-sous-Bois by mourners in T-shirts reading ‘dead for nothing’” (Timeline: French riots, 2005, n.p.). Nonetheless, Sarkozy sent police to the neighborhood to maintain security and to quell any violence (Timeline: French Riots, 2005, n.p.). Instead, it was widely believed that the police caused the protests to become violent and the tensions grew deeper between the two sides. “Rumours that the tear gas was thrown by the police into a place of worship fuelled the unrest” (Paris riots prompt extra security, 2005, n.p.). Rioters began

⁹ A company known for its high-pressure washers and cleaners. In this statement, Sarkozy meant that Algerian-French citizens should be pressure washed off the streets.

¹⁰ Public prosecutor for the Seine-Saint-Denis district.

burning cars, ransacking police stations, and targeting *Français de souche* in train stations. A North African-French man asserted that “It’s the police who are provoking us... They don’t like foreigners” (Smith, 2005, n.p.). Countless other people of African and Arab descent shared the sentiments of this man and believed that they were consistently treated unfairly in their own homeland. After “nearly three-weeks of rioting that left some 10,000 cars burned, hundreds of public buildings damaged, around 3,000 people arrested, and a state of emergency imposed in many areas surrounding major French cities,” the protests and violence finally stopped (Crumley, 2012, n.p.).

The French Democracy, a thirteen-minute computer animated film, was released in 2005, weeks after the riots erupted in Paris. The film attempts to illustrate the events that occurred in late October 2005 that had led to an increase in racism and bias. In an interview with Alex Chan, the director of the film, he is quoted as saying that he produced the film with English subtitles “to correct what was being said in the media, especially in the United States, who linked what was happening, the riots, to terrorism and put the blame on the Muslim community” (Diderich, 2005, n.p.). The film begins by showing the two teenagers running away fearfully into the electric sub-station. Even though they realize the dangers of electrocution, the two teens proceed, although still very frightened, into the sub-station (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 0:56). The camera then zooms in on a police officer who is depicted as prowling around the area and phoning his partner saying “Did you find them? No I lost them near the electric powerstation building” (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 1:30)¹¹. Although the police officers denied that they were chasing the youths, Chan believed that no one would go willingly into an electrical sub-station if it was safer outside. The film suggests that the police were chasing the two teenagers

¹¹ All quotations from the film *The French Democracy* are direct subtitles from the director Alex Chan.

because they believed the youths were involved in a burglary. Moreover, the film uses Sarkozy's speech in which he claimed that there needed to be a crackdown on *les banlieues* by using a "Kärcher" and urged that "we [*les Français de souche*] mustn't be afraid of the police when we have nothing to blame" (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 2:25). By using Sarkozy's own words verbatim, Chan represents the real-life events as closely as possible. The film then cuts to a scene where three young men were discussing the incident that occurred. One of the men is outraged and asserts "they were only two kids! Come on! Even for a burglary, it's too big, no?" (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 2:50) The Algerian-French became infuriated with the police after this incident, as many claimed that the police would shoot them for no reason other than their skin color (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 3:13).

The film not only portrays the excessive brutality of French police against Algerian-French people, but also the racism that citizens of Algerian descent face every day. As the film continues, the camera zooms in on an Algerian-French man in the Metro being stopped by the police for an identity check. Since the man is not carrying his I.D. on him, the police officer wants to take him to the station. The man then screams "But why!! I'm French, I live here!" (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 4:00). The police officer ignores this fact and takes the Algerian-French man to the station in handcuffs with a gun pointed at him. In a later scene, an Algerian-French man who was allegedly dealing drugs, is arrested without any evidence and is severely beaten by police officers screaming "Monkeys like you should stay in their zoo" (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 8:15). Yet another scene depicts a dark-skinned man named Mamadou during an interview for a job for which he is over qualified, being told by a Caucasian-French recruiter: "This is a French company selling product to French market and we need some sellers who can be trust[ed] and appreciated by our customer. Even if you have a great pedigree, sir, you can't

match to our brand, sorry...” (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 6:00). Mamadou then goes to a bar where he asks if there are any job openings, and again, he is denied employment (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 6:35). As he is leaving, two *Français de souche* men mock him by saying “Nobody told you? They don’t serve monkey here even if they are disguised” (*The French Democracy*, 2005, 6:48). Similar to *Elise ou la vraie vie*, racism in public places is still occurring 35 years later.

The Algerian-French community in France is still struggling to fit into French society. *The French Democracy* also demonstrates the sad reality behind the high unemployment rate in France. Countless people of Algerian descent struggle to find decent jobs to help support their families, while many end up in prison for petty crimes. *Les Français de souche* constantly discriminate against Algerian-French youths by denying them basic needs such as housing and employment. As previously mentioned, because it is illegal in France to collect statistics based on ethnicity, there are no exact numbers for the unemployment rate among people of Algerian descent residing in France. However, according to an independent study, “The unemployment rate of populations of immigrant origin is generally twice the rate of the overall population, and that rate is even higher among youth of North African origin” (“Being Muslim in France”, 2012, n.p.). Since Algerian-French youths believe there is little hope for them to attain a job in the future, they are not motivated to study and succeed in school, which causes a never-ending vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty, and violence. Nevertheless, even breaking out of this cycle holds no guarantee of success. In *The French Democracy*, as we saw, Mamadou, an overly-qualified candidate, was denied a job solely on the basis of his skin color. Therefore, the high unemployment rate among the Algerian-French community can also be traced to *les Français de souche*’s continuous racism. Additionally, the French police routinely abuse their

power by performing repeated “random” identity checks on Algerian-French youths. A report done by Human Rights Watch finds that “Minority youth, including children as young as 13, are subjected to frequent stops involving lengthy questioning, invasive body pat-downs, and the search of personal belongings” (France: Abusive Identity Checks, 2012, n.p.). Such identity checks are verbally and physically abusive. As the film *The French Democracy* illustrates, a person who is checked but doesn’t have the proper identification is prone to be humiliated and sent to prison. Another study conducted by the Open Society Justice Initiative and the French National Center for Scientific Research discovered that “In France, black people were six times as likely as white people, and Arabs almost eight times as likely, to be stopped” (France: Identity Checks, 2012, n.p.). These recent findings have definitely increased the collective awareness of the brutality by French police against Algerian-French youths. Yet, despite Human Rights Watch’s call for more legal and moral ways to conduct identity checks, little has changed today in the French police’s behavior. Although Chan, through his film, brought attention to these unlawful acts of racism back in 2005, it is clear that prejudice against the Algerian-French community continues to increase tensions today in post-colonial France.

Section 4: Conclusion

January 7, 2015 is a day that will live in infamy. At approximately 11:30 that morning, two masked gunmen approached the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris, France and burst into the building. The men forced their way into the weekly staff meeting, fatally shooting five prominent cartoonists, three editorial staff members, as well as a guest. Later, witnesses in the building recounted hearing the gunmen scream “we have avenged the prophet Muhammad” and “God is great” in Arabic (Charlie Hebdo Attack, 2015, n.p.). After a three-day search and an 8-hour stand-off between the runaway assailants and the police, the gunmen emerged out of a suburban office building while opening fire on the police officers and claiming they wanted to die as martyrs. The two *Charlie Hebdo* attackers were fatally shot by French police officers (Charlie Hebdo Attack, 2015, n.p.).

French people were shocked by the deadly attack and the gunmen’s long escape. The two gunmen were identified as brothers Cherif Kouachi, 32, and Saiid Kouachi, 34, whose dead parents were Algerian immigrants. There is little known about Saiid Kouachi, but Cherif Kouachi had come to the attention of French authorities in 2005 after he was arrested for aspiring to wage a Holy War against American troops in Iraq (Higgins, 2015, n.p.). A documentary about jihadism released in France in 2005 featured Cherif’s transformation from a seemingly well-adjusted 21-year old who loved listening to rap music and hanging out with his friends and women into a 22-year old who believed that God wants him to die a martyr thanks to the teachings of Farid Benyettou, a “preacher calling for jihad in Iraq and justifying suicide bombings” (Higgins, 2015, n.p.). After three years in prison, Cherif was released on the grounds that “he understood that he had been tricked and sucked into something that he himself didn’t control or understand” (Higgins, 2015, n.p.). However, on January 7, 2015 Cherif with the help

of his brother went back to his original dream of attacking Jews living in France. *Charlie Hebdo* is known for its satirical cartoons that poke fun at all religions, as well as political parties and figures. Although the magazine had previously stirred controversy with its depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, no one ever imagined that Islamists would retaliate in a manner as extreme as the attack on January 7, 2015.

Over three million people, including leaders from all over the world, took to the streets of Paris on January 10, 2015 to show unity. Countless French-Muslims as well as French people from North-African descent joined hands with *les Français de souche* “to convey that the ideology embraced by the Muslim gunmen does not represent the whole of the faith” (Fantz, 2015, n.p.). Signs were held up reading “We are all Muslims” and “We are all French” to show solidarity regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious affiliation (Fantz, 2015, n.p.). To confirm the unity, a study conducted by Pew Research Center found that positive attitudes towards Muslims in France increased after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, with 76% of the people saying they have a favorable view of Muslims (Wike, 2015, n.p.). Nevertheless, after the attacks occurred, “The French news media rarely missed an opportunity to note the assailants’ Algerian origin, though they were born, raised, and educated in France and held French passports” (Zerdoumi, 2015, n.p.). News sources across the nation continuously hinted at the attackers’ Muslim faith as well as their ethnic origins as a way to put blame on Algerian-French citizens. Consequently, tensions again quickly ran high between *les Français de souche* and the Algerian-French. Several attacks on mosques have taken place in two French towns. For instance, in the city of Le Mans, “Three blank grenades were thrown at a mosque. A bullet hole was also found in a window of the mosque” (Paris shooting triggers, 2015, n.p.). Although the animosity has significantly abated

since January, it has become clear that both blame and hatred towards Muslim-Algerian-French have remained prevalent.

Because this attack happened so recently, there are no feature films released yet based on this event. However, a documentary by Daniel and Emmanuel Leconte called *Je Suis Charlie* has already been produced and will be released in December 2015. The documentary retells the story of the attack through interviews by survivors and witnesses. Although the directors focused on “creating a portrait of the magazine and the people behind it” (Handling, 2015, n.p.), the question remains: how are Algerian-French citizens going to be portrayed in this film as well as in French cinema in the future?

Throughout this study, we have seen how with the surge of Algerian immigrants to France in the 1970s, racism in post-colonial France has been rampant. With *Elise ou la vraie vie*, French audiences witnessed the severity of prejudice from *les Français de souche* against Algerian immigrants. They also learned about the discrimination endured by interracial couples, who were not accepted in French society. Moreover, for the first time, they discovered the brutality of the police against Algerian immigrants.

Twenty-five years later, in 1995, French audiences came face to face with *La Haine* portraying the intensification of police brutality against the minorities living in *les banlieues*. Although Kassovitz showed both sides of the conflict - the troublemaking black-African-French and Arab-French youths vs. the vicious police officers - the film favors the youths since they were subjected to a life in poverty in *les banlieues*, as well as to humiliation and torture by the police. This film alerted the viewer in post-colonial France that racism against the Algerian-French by *les Français de souche*, particularly the police officers, had actually worsened.

A decade afterward, the animated film *The French Democracy* was released to depict the causes of the 2005 riots. Chan believes that the two Algerian-French teenagers who were fatally electrocuted were indeed being chased by the police. The first half of the film focuses on this Algerian-French narrative of the tragedy that led to the massive riots in 2005. The second part of the film focuses on the injustices French-Algerians have experienced, from “random” identity checks by police officers to mockery by *les Français de souche*. This film sadly confirms that in the 21st century, conditions have only deteriorated for the Algerian-French community while tensions have grown even deeper between the two groups of French citizens.

Yet another decade later, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks rocked France’s capital and shook the world. Despite recent reports that found an increase in positive attitudes by *les Français de souche* towards the black-African-French and Arab-French Muslim communities, tensions continue to remain high today. Under these circumstances, to which we must add the attacks of November 2015, the aftermath of which as of this writing continues to unfold in Paris, it is difficult to project how these events will impact the future portrayal of citizens of Algerian descent in subsequent French films. Will the attacks of Charlie Hebdo and November 2015 intensify the discrimination between the two groups of French citizens? Will French focus on the prejudice by Caucasian-French citizens towards Algerian-French citizens? Mahatma Gandhi eloquently asserted, “Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.” Could French cinema inspire audiences to fulfill their democratic ideals at home and beyond? And if it does not, what is the future of democracy in France?

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