

John Western, Cosmopolitan Europe: A Strasbourg Self-Portrait (2012)

Throughout Western Europe minarets and domes are today adding accent to the urban skyline. In both Kehl and Strasbourg large mosques are currently under construction. Kehl's seems slightly sad, at the end of a park-and-ride lot, pinched between the tracks of the railway station and freight sidings over which the flanges of container trains squeal as they curve into the Rhine-side docks. In contrast, Strasbourg's Grand Mosque has in my opinion been afforded a fine quasi-central site on the River Ill, courtesy of the city. Yet its construction took far longer than Kehl's, turning out to be a tale two decades long, not only because of a range of official reactions from city governments (from enthusiasm to dutiful resignation or indeed to foot-dragging) but also for the depth and complexities of intra-Muslim disagreements. Thus Amir, who has told of his immigrant's trajectory above, without any prompting whatsoever expressed strong irritation that the whole thing has been dragged out for so long. He felt that it was mostly about the clashing ambitions of the different, exclusively-minded Muslim factions: "Too many chiefs and no Indians" was his exact phrase. Others confirmed this, complaining with some exasperation of the mistrust between the Turks, the Moroccans, and among not one but *three* Algerian factions.

As we discussed this issue one evening, Abdésamad Boukari ruefully recalled a saying his Moroccan father (he of the Rif Uprising) used to employ when he'd get irritated by overlong disputes: "*attiḡaḡa al'Araba alla yattafekun*"—"The Arabs have come to an agreement that they will not come to any agreement." For example, in 2008-09, no work was done on the mosque for over a year. The steel rods were rusting in the poured concrete. The construction company, from Germany, was in litigation with Strasbourg's Muslims over non-payment of bills and contention regarding the quality of the work. Then in May 2009 a new contractor was engaged, construction recommenced, and on Eid el-Kébir,

November 27, the frame of the cupola was lowered into place. Original plans for a minaret were nixed by the conservative "Tandem" local administration after it had come to power in 2001. Now that in turn Roland Ries, a socialist, has returned as mayor, he has stated that the minaret will be restored. That the mosque will be completed is not in doubt, but it has, surely, not been a swift smooth ride. (Coincidentally, in neighboring Switzerland two days later [November 29, 2009], a referendum drawn up by the Far Right to ban any further construction of minarets was passed by a strong majority.)

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As already noted in the Prologue, Samim Akgönlü, a Turkish Strasbourg and social scientist, pointed out the specific reasons why this city should have so very high a proportion of Muslims among its minority groups. How might this reveal itself in the city's urban geography? There is of course the feature just glanced at: the construction of the Grand Mosque. There is also the efflorescence of halal groceries and doner kebab cafes. There is the striking array of satellite dishes on HLM balconies aligned to catch the TV programs from Algeria or Turkey or the Middle East. There are the women in Muslim robes thronging the markets in the neighborhoods. On a Tuesday it's open-air market day in the La Meinau quarter, and the majority of people on the street seemed to be Muslim women, sheathed in long dun/orange-brown clothing. "Ah," M Ouamrane said, "so you see it's all these Muslim women, lots of Moroccans? It's because they don't only go there to shop, they go to get out of the house, and to talk to each other, to socialize. Otherwise they're shut up inside the house. Look at this place! It looks just like a souk in Algeria!" Indeed, his wife does leave us and go off down the street to shop at La Meinau market, but as she's going tells me that in fact the one she likes best is in the boulevard de la Marne, in the favored Orangerie quarter where for many years she 'did' for a succession of elderly persons.

More importantly, both Muslim and non-Muslim persons allege that a pattern of spatial separation has been developing in the city. We heard this in the quotations that were employed to start off this chapter. Now we will hear from a Muslim woman in her early thirties, Amina, born and raised in the *maillies* of Hautepierre. She is seriously concerned about "... this city I love. It's getting too bourgeois. And so the poor are getting set aside [*écartés*] and pushed out of the heart of the city, and the Center City becomes exclusive. Can you 'go out for the evening' in Hautepierre? [An ironic, rhetorical question.] And if you go out in Center City, you really only see a certain type of person, and a certain type of comportment is demanded. You can't make noise, you can't wear whatever you like. And so the city is not for everybody." "Then you're saying that this is an injustice?" "Evidently this is an injustice! This is the embourgeoisement of Strasbourg. I really don't like it. It could end up putting a division [*clivage*] within the city. *This could lead to real problems*." She makes this last pronouncement with decided emphasis. Then I ask: "Is one of the things that's associated with

this, Islamism?" [i.e., "Fundamentalism?"]. "Absolutely. Oh, that's a whole other story. We could *really* talk about that. I'm at risk there. My old Hautepierre schoolfriends, who expected me to remain a real Muslim ... and I go and marry a Frenchman! I should have married one of us. So am I a traitor? Even worse, I married a bourgeois Frenchman—I mean, his father works up on the top floors of CLAL [a major regional bank]."

In her strongly-expressed criticisms of what she sees as separatist trends in the city, Amina is, still, showing concern for a Strasbourg of which she feels herself a citizen. Kamal, likewise a proud citizen of Strasbourg, and raised in the *cité* de Cronenbourg, also spoke of separation. He alleged: "The French government put all the traditional Maghrebians in the HLMs, not a good idea. It ghettoized them—the very worst of things to do. If you speak of communitarianism today, it's the government's fault." Later in the interview he's changed his tune somewhat, and is at some pains to underline that the, well, sort-of-livable *cités* are painted far worse than they actually are. "You know, people get the idea that Cronenbourg and Hautepierre are impossible. Rubbish! We go walking around without problems, no one beats us up. It's the media. 'Have you burnt any cars?' they joke with me at work at New Year. I'm not sure if I find that funny; there's always a little bit of truth in a joke."

I certainly recalled nothing in the least unsettling on the sunny mid-morning I was looking out of Kamal's father Amir's fifth-floor window at the extensive HLM apartment buildings in the *cité* de Cronenbourg housing project. Apart from the fact that the open grassy areas were uneven and scuffed with yellowy-brown patches, this looked like it could be a Modernist urban planner's success story. Similarly with the Neuhoef zone, probably the most stigmatised of all Strasbourg's public housing complexes, to where I was riding my bike in early summer 2011 (Figure 7.9). These places felt an awful long way away from the intimidating stereotype of an American urban ghetto, and light-years from the South African ones I once knew. Were they more like the ethnic concentrations one can find in, say, London's Brixton, where maybe not even a numerical majority of the local inhabitants can be seen to be of immigrant origins? To walk around the *cité* de Cronenbourg was not to feel as if I were trespassing onto some unwelcoming Other's territory.

Kamal no longer lived in the *cité*. He, like the Pied-Noir architect or the supermarket checkout clerk born poor in rural Lorraine, had managed to move up and out of the Cronenbourg-Hautepierre HLMs. But until he left six years ago, it was the only place he had lived in. "I was *quartier*-centered. It was as if we were programmed. It was Elise who got me out of that." Elise spoke of being raised in Cronenbourg also, how it was really working-class, how there was so much unemployment or underemployment [*petites jobs*], how if you got a job of whatever kind you held fast to it if you could. Or should you take a chance? They married, and took the chance. "We've already made a journey—a social one—out of our quarter. We've embourgeoisied ourselves. Our parents never went to restaurants. 'Why not eat here [at home]? they'd say, 'Why pay?' ["Oh, just like my parents," I thought.] ... We've loved to go around different parts of Strasbourg walking

since we've been together, eight years now, just to discover the whole metropolis. And public transport is improving. You can get around so easily on the tram. It pulls people together. It pulls them in, especially in Haute-pierre, the tram lands you right in the middle of it. Now they're expanding the tram network—it used to be an expedition to go to the southern suburbs, to Neuhof." Nadia Boudiaf, the former city councilor, was also particularly pleased about this most recent extension of the tram network: "Yes, I was involved in the political battle to get the tram to Neuhof, and we got it there!"

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Official record-keeping on ethnic and racial identities has not been a priority for Republican France. This has currently become a major focus of debate in France, but until now the more-or-less consistently followed official line of the French state has eschewed such discriminations. It is citizenship that is central. One is either a French citizen, or the citizen of another land. French government censuses, unlike those of the United States and (since 1991) of Britain, decline to ask for information as to whether any French citizens might consider themselves "Moroccan." There are to be no official ethno-racial subsets among the French such as are used in the United States or Britain for affirmative action programs or ethnic monitoring, no official countenancing of subsets with differing entitlements among the category of French citizen: "the rhetoric of Republican indifference to difference" (Mitchell 2011: 418). Thereby any person may become truly, acceptably French if they fully follow the rules. For the individual the promise exists of classic insertion into French society, to assimilate into the life of a nation whose public culture claims to welcome such genuine new adherents. Furthermore, this is no lie. This has been the valid experience of a number of the Strasburgers whom I interviewed, including (insofar as I can judge) some persons of color.

However, these admirable and lofty goals hardly aid the empirical, lower-level aims of the social researcher. I am not able to simply go and ask the Strasbourg authorities what proportion of the population is composed of persons judged to be of "visible minority" status (as the Canadians might put it), persons of color of recent immigrant origin: that is, of the "New Immigration." In being inquisitive about people's claimed or felt (multi-) ethnic/racial identities, I occasionally suspected I was viewed by some French colleagues as pursuing notions that were not quite proper, that somehow my agenda might necessarily lead to an abridgement of persons' rights to equal treatment or to equal socio-cultural honor. Was I in fact engaged in reinscribing race and ethnicity—a penchant perhaps dangerously close to pandering to the divisive and exclusionary *Le Pen* mindset?

Parallel to the French situation, imagine I was trying to unearth some data not provided by my own government's census: how many Jewish people are there in Syracuse? This does not currently seem to me to be a deeply sensitive question, one which I might feel constrained not to pose. We happen not to ask it in the US census because ostensibly it addresses religion and thereby contravenes our

constitution. In continental Europe, however, the question is far more sensitive because in living memory it was used to pinpoint an entire category of people for annihilation. In Africa, they came with a list into my former classroom in April 1972, eighteen months after my departure, and in a "selective genocide" took my Hutu students away for annihilation. Such lists are dangerous. In the USA we have attempted to answer this particular question—How many Jews?—by using surrogates, such as enumerating persons of Russian origin. Or, investigators have searched out figures from leaders of Jewish community organizations. Thus although the American state will not provide any figures, one can approach useful approximations by other means.

Likewise in Strasbourg: when the *CUS* [metropolitan government] is perfectly pleased to inform me that, of the foreign *citizens* in the population in 1999, 19 percent were Moroccan and only eight percent Algerian, I take it that there are indeed significantly more "Moroccans" than "Algerians" around, and relatively few Tunisians or black Africans. I then asked other contacts, such as a number of persons at a high level in the public school system, did this tally with their information? They assured me that this was so. Ah, but then other persons told me, hold on, you have to keep in mind that Algerians are more likely to give up their former citizenship and take on that of France than are Moroccans. So figures are fuzzy. Nevertheless, it is agreed that the largest single component of "minority" persons settled in Strasbourg are, as elsewhere in France, of North African provenance. That Algerians here come second to Moroccans, however, is the reverse of the general French situation.

The commonsensical-seeming use above of the label "Algerian" or "Moroccan" begs a very big question. Why are these persons not simply considered "French"? Yet, certainly for some of them, there would maybe have to be a nod to a North African background, because already by 1989 there were, for example a million inhabitants of France who possessed both French and Algerian nationality. Such persons are thus, with varying motives and with varying degrees of aloofness, *voluntarily* holding themselves back from a full identification with France. Add to this the *involuntary* component: we in France continually see "them" as different. Although invisible legally, "they" are not yet invisible in everyday societal interactions. "They" themselves often can feel this, sometimes almost unconsciously. My neighbor Odile, of long-term Alsatian roots, told of her husband Abdésamad having stayed up till gone five in the morning to watch the 2008 US presidential election results, because it was, in her phrasing, so important to him "as a Black." This set me back, for I'd always in my mind slotted him in as "a Moroccan," and I'd never thought of him as "a Black." My racisms are attuned to other contexts, these days mainly the USA. Related Odile: "He woke me up exultantly. 'We've won,' he cried." So, Abdésamad Boukari, at least in that particular context of Barack Obama's victory across the Atlantic, had rejoiced as a fellow-Black: "we." Odile said she had never realized how important this could be to him, how that symbolically, at last, we black folks, globally perceived as being on the bottom, had struck a real blow for respect. "Things are not going

to be the same for us now," he said. At a neighborhood meeting the following evening, one of her three fellow school councilors elected from among the parents was Guadeloupian. He leaned over to her and happily grinned conspiratorially "We've won." "I was included, John," she said. "I was an honorary Black, because married to Sam."

People of color cannot be imagining something that is not there. Despite admirably accepting and nondiscriminatory official structures, their life among the white French majority is clearly tinged by a humiliating and frustrating racism. In the immediate wake of the French urban riots in fall 2005, Craig S Smith reported on November 11 in the *New York Times* that a respondent had told him: "I was born in Senegal when it was part of France, I speak French, my wife is French and I was educated in France. [The problem] is the French don't think I'm French." *Le Monde* (March 21, 2006) commented on a just-issued official report that observed that fully one third of a representative sample of 1,011 persons were prepared to call themselves racist. Smith's report noted a 2005 study by Karim Zeribi, "... who found that résumés sent out with traditionally French names got responses 50 times higher than those with North African or African names." The March 26, 2009 issue of the *Economist* reports that the Sorbonne's Jean-François Arnadien's research reduces the imbalance to three-to-one; but the point remains the same. Memorably, in May 2002, over one in six of those who voted in the first round of the French presidential election voted for the explicitly anti-"immigrant" Extreme Right figure of Jean-Marie Le Pen. ("Two million unemployed, two million immigrants too many," had already been his clamorous slogan twenty years previously.) Such setting off of "immigrants" and of "minorities" is part of Le Pen's project. This is what those French social science colleagues were resisting.

However, this becomes a tricky issue if one wishes to do something about the evident inequalities and exclusions. If French republicanism chooses not to recognize communities on the bases of ethnic, cultural, or religious groups, and if it will not enact any kind of explicit "positive discrimination" policies toward such collectivities, how can the evident disadvantages of certain identifiable sections of the population be addressed? Well, if "they" happen to be concentrated to any significant degree in particular areas, one could establish *territorial* policies; these would not contravene the traditions of French republicanism's focus on the individual, fully equal citizen. Thus, particularly since the coming to power of the socialist Mitterrand government in 1981, *geographical* affirmative action has been a major urban policy in France: state action targets particular quarters known for their deprivation. After intense government study, the first sixteen such *DSD* (Social Development of Neighborhoods) zones were designated in 1982, and one of them was Neuhof. (A thorough account of successive urban policy initiatives can be found in Mustafa Dikeç's *Badlands of the Republic*, wherein he addresses not only the events of autumn 2005, but also earlier French urban unrest in the Lyon banlieue in 1981 and 1990.) One of the apparently almost unavoidable outcomes of such spatial policies is that the neighborhood in question becomes yet more stigmatized. It rapidly comes to be seen not just as the unfortunate site

of problems, but somehow the cause of the problems themselves. And if it is the cause, well then, it must be dealt with: thus, *police it, and firmly so*. Such issues rumble on below the surface of much that is told by Strasburgers as they consider newer, "visible" immigration and its presence in the zones of social housing.

Hassan Lamrini, who has already recounted some of his life story, volunteered that there was indeed some racism around, and also this had to be seen in the context of a current lack of work. He spoke of automation taking away factory jobs: two workers now in the place of ten. And in his day they didn't ask for paper credentials, they didn't even demand competence in French. But it's got tough now: "Once upon a time, if someone in the family had the *bac* [school-leaving certificate] you were somebody. Now it doesn't help even if you have the bac-plus-five-years. That's been the case with my young brother-in-law. If they see the name Ali, if your face doesn't fit, they won't give you the job. That's the story for young Maghrebians—so why bother to work in school anyway? ... I'll tell you, lots of the young in this *cité* have the American Dream, or they want to go to Canada or to the UK. It's okay to look Muslim there in England. There is one young fellow from here in Haute-pierre who's gone to London. He does electronic finance there, moves millions of euros around every day."

Then there's Amir, who the day before had begun his response to the question on how the city had been doing in a somewhat more sanguine manner. Strasbourg had got better, and it could get even better. "We need that Socialist city government back: Ries, Trautmann. [He got them back in 2008.] In the past when there was good political leadership, as with Mitterrand, we advanced. With a more open-spirited intelligence, we could move this city forward." Then he pauses. In my notes to this long interview with him there is only one word that I wrote in capital letters to indicate the immense emphasis he put on this: JOBS. "It's the problem of work. We've got to jolt France's economy awake. These kids without jobs, they hang out in gangs. If you can get work and make a life for yourself, then you won't make trouble [*faire des bêtises*]. If you have a job, money, a car, you have a life. Once upon a time we really had lots of jobs here. I didn't worry, I could change jobs, lots of times, just like that. Now, even with a diploma you can't get a job. Plus there's racist discrimination against us."

This brings us directly to the views held by general French society on the young of immediate immigrant ancestry: those who are "*issus de l'immigration*." Many non-Muslims seem to be going through a moderate-level "moral panic" over these allegedly unruly young males. Plenty of older Muslims, also, agree that there's some unpleasantness abroad, although elderly French women might prima facie be among those most fearful. Mme Weber was outspoken: "We have Algerians everywhere. It is shameful. Their young have no respect. I was walking in the Orangerie with an old friend minding my own business and about six of them, just kids, one a girl, walk around us, and the girl touches my bag and asks for money and one feels very threatened. They didn't attack, they stole nothing, but... They give you such looks—the nerve of it!" Two other widows, Mme Metzger and Mme Mathis, claimed how they felt less safe on the streets now than

they had during the Nazi annexation (!) and Mme Wanner saw these sidewalk encounters in terms of adversaries testing each other: "I and my grandchild were strolling down the sidewalk in Schiltigheim. Two burly Maghrebian kids were coming the other way. They didn't squeeze in, so they shoved us off into the road! Oh, the next time I stood my ground, gave not an inch, and *they* went into the street. If you're in someone else's place you show respect, isn't that right? It's a provocation." Mme Müller, in her mid-seventies, told me she didn't like to drive in town, and so she'd just take the car over to the pont Phario tram stop to get on Tram B there to the Homme de Fer, get whatever she had to get done quickly in the city center "...and come straight back. Because the city center's become dangerous. It's becoming a dead city. Everyone's going out to Vendenheim now. The only people who walk around down there are the real roughs [*pracaille*]. Hold your bags close, close your pockets...."

It's not just the elderly. Danielle Barthe talked of the unsavory types who congregate around the central tram hub of the Homme de Fer adjoining place Kléber, and who harassed her teenage daughter. Or Véronique, a 40-year-old high-level administrative professional born and raised in Strasbourg and who has known me for seven years, replied with great candor to my question on diversity. That is to say, she gazed at me for long seconds, in silence. How to reply? She eventually raised her eyebrows as if to say, well, okay, here goes. And then she said: "I'm not of the Extreme Right. But, Neuhoef, even the police don't go there. The street cleaners hardly go there, nor to Hautepierre. And Les Halles [the in-city covered shopping mall, one tram stop from Homme de Fer] on Saturday afternoon, is that 'diversity'? You've got to be on the lookout there, or you'll get stolen from. I'm scared. I don't go there." My genial retired neighbor at the end of our little out-dé-sac in La Robertsau said to me one day how great it was to be in this quiet spot, a hideaway from "*cette faune d'immigration*" [this zoo-full of immigrants].

Nor is it only Whites who complain with bitterness. On my first visit to Said Ouamrane, the first Muslim city councilor, I had arrived a trifle early. The public housing project had no bike-racks that I could see. So outside the apartment building's door I start to chain my bike to the pillar of a big trash can. He appears: "Don't leave your bike outside. Come on in." I carry the bike down the steps to the basement to which he's leading; we open a dingy metal door to the *cave*, the cellar. There's smelly water on the corridor's floor. "Don't step in that. It's urine. It's the local kids." We lock the cellar, go up to the apartment, and he and his daughter warm to the theme of these gross incivilities. She: "It's the third generation. They have no respect for the old, for teachers, for anyone. They're *voyous* [thugs]." "You see them riding motor scooters down the street, up on one wheel, in broad daylight," he complains, "without helmets, even with a friend holding on to them behind, also without any helmet." (And I did see precisely this, as I bicycled home from our meeting.) His hard-faced, handsome daughter who has teenage sons, added in: "I rebuked one, politely, for something at the bus stop recently, and the mother said 'Don't you talk to my child like that!'"

On perhaps the third occasion I cycle over he proceeded to get a bit worked up about the scooters again: "These kids belting by, those things are made for children, you can get 'em for €169 at Auchan. They go up to 50 K/h *on the sidewalk*. They go along hot-dogging, up on one wheel, without helmets. Two of them robbed an old woman of her handbag, they knocked her down and sped off. They injured her leg, the ambulance had to come for her, she was Alsatian. It's the kids who are '*issus de l'immigration*' who do this. I really understand the racism [of Whites]. I am a racist." He looks at me as if to say, how about that, eh? "What about the police?" "Hah," he laughs, "the police don't come by here. They'd rather keep away." "C'mon," I rejoin, "you of all people 've got pull. You know whom to call." "Yep, and I did. But then we got pebbles thrown at our windows, and even a bit of acid poured on my car's bodywork. They say I'm an informer."

The most recent occasion on which I met the Ouamranes, in February 2009, I found they had moved out of their HLM block. He told me: "The Avenue de Normandie was becoming impossible. The youth. The crime. The drugs. They'd hang out in the parking lot right next to our apartment. [They had been living on the ground floor.] Then when they needed to they'd come into the building and go down to the basement or sometimes the corridor with their wine and beer and pizza and leave their trash and their urine. I was always clearing it up. They'd mess with the car. They scratched it all over, and it would have cost a €3000 paint job to fix it here. So soon enough we went to Algeria and we had it done there for €300! Then the tires got slashed. That was when I went and found the garage for rent—€65 a month—over near the Hohwart tram stop [beyond the public housing zone]. But I also had to pay a *taxe d'habitation* [city tax] of €105 a year on that! So, we moved. We've been in here 10 months. It's a renovated building, we're part of a CUS-subsidized co-operative. It was the third offer, we turned the first two down, the first hadn't enough bedrooms, the second was on the ground floor—not safe enough. Up here on the fourth floor we don't have to close the shutters at night like we always had to on the ground floor, we've got the light, we can look down on to that nice big green play area. It's totally calm here. The only disadvantage is that Madame has asthma and there's no elevator. She has to rest on every landing as she comes up home. There are two security systems. The first is a zipper, to raise the barrier into the parking lot where each of us has one numbered spot. Then the door to the building—there are ten apartments—is on an electronic code. The door itself is steel, reinforced. We feel very safe here now."

I admit to my ignorance of the world of these young people who constitute the threat portrayed in the previous paragraph. I never once simply ambled out onto the sidewalks and engaged a group of them in conversation. Maybe I should have hung out. Fortunately, however, at least one in-depth ethnographic study of these Canadière-Est youths has been undertaken, by Catherine Sélimanowski and her associates during 2000 - 2002. They found that the young people there had locked themselves into this enclave via a firm sense of local territoriality. For the males, the ruling values were a cool edginess [*nerrosité*], pride-in-place, solidarity, mutual support, and bravado, which burst into defiance and often

conflict at the appearance of the police or especially of the CRS [*Compagnie républicaine de sécurité*—riot police with a certain reputation for muscularity]. Life was geographically circumscribed. Any “travel” simply consisted of taking the tram—it was a point of honor not to pay the fare—to the city center’s *Homme de Fer* hub or the Les Halles in-city shopping mall. Otherwise they didn’t go anywhere very much.

The Ouamranes did not have, nor wished to have, any entree to such young men. So I wondered if I could approach them via some other families whom the Ouamranes might know, could they send me on to some of their Maghrebian-origin acquaintances, please? “No,” said Mme Ouamrane; and she meant it. (I had known her for seven years by the time of this request.) I looked to him. “No,” he said. “But you know something of me. Surely I’m not a threat?” “Can’t do it,” he said. “Will they think I’m a spy?” He laughs: “That’s not the point. People have closed in on themselves. They don’t want to talk to *anyone*. And, we’re a liberal family.” The precise freight of this last remark eluded me, so Mme Ouamrane explained: “You see, I don’t wear the veil. Would you believe, a little boy of seven or eight came to the outside door the other day and took me to task for not wearing the veil!” M Ouamrane developed the point: “We can have a hard time as a liberal family. If we sent you to nice enough people we know, the women would all leave immediately and hide in the bedroom. The man would talk with you, and then after you’d gone the women would immediately come out again, and the man would call us up and say ‘Why on earth did you send that guy to us?’” “You mean, it would really bother him?” “Yes.”

How to overcome such geographical and cultural divides between my bourgeois city and their *banlieue*? One way was not open to me, but was to the partner of a Eurocrat friend in La Robertsau. She decided, as the mother of breastfed young children herself, that she ought to attempt to start a La Leche group for Muslim women living in *la banlieue*. “The Muslim women couldn’t come to Robertsau, but the other women in our group here didn’t want to take their cars to Hautepierre. So I started a La Leche group for them there. There was nothing there. I got in contact with the Paris headquarters, they sent me the stuff. The women were very uncomfortable coming to this house when we were first starting out in case my husband appeared. So over there—was it Cronenbourg or Hautepierre?—we met in the basement of one of those concrete HLMs. Once it was up and running the Muslim women did it themselves, they didn’t need me any longer. I just provided the material. That was fine by me, no problem.”

Said Ouamrane regrets that such cross-town links may be becoming less frequent these days: “Algerians have closed in on themselves. Life moves forward, but they are going backward. But me, I come here, I make my living here, I submit myself to the laws of France, I encounter French culture. I say to them, ‘This is the way you should do it.’ ‘No,’ they say. *Un refus*—refusal. They are *renfermés* [closed in]. ‘If you make your living here, then you cannot live on an isolated little island here,’ I reason with them. ‘No,’ they say. ‘No.’ ... Their religion is much *stricter* than it used to be at home too, it’s a new kind....” Abdésamad Boukari

agreed: “They have turned in on themselves. [His verb is *se replier*.] And this is not a return to something traditional. This is *not* the way things were at home, in the old days. Islam was never this hard, this strict with women. It’s something from here, it’s to do with immigration to rich countries.” For Said, however, it is the young roughs rather than the Islamic *intégristes* who are the targets of his ire, and religion is not part of the equation: “These *voyous* haven’t been taught right from wrong, the parents haven’t said no, haven’t put their foot down. So they don’t work at school. They don’t care. It’s *je-m’en-foutisme*.” “Well, if they don’t listen to their parents, and don’t care about their teachers, what about religious leaders? I mean, can imams call them to order?” This evidently betrays my naivety. “Oh, they don’t care about *religion*! They curse away like crazy. I hear them swear, ‘By Mecca! You mustn’t ever say that in Islam.’”

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Already mentioned in passing is one other major dimension in the lives of North African Strasburgers of which to be aware. It is a transnational one: the annual trips “home.” I have expressly chosen not to use the word “holiday” of such trips because for some they’re clearly a family duty as opposed to a relaxing time off. Some trips, it is true, do have nothing particular in mind; as with Carla D’Alessandro returning to southern Italy, these are simply visits, time-outs from one’s distant present home and workplace. Conversely, some other trips may well have something particular in mind; recall how Mme Ducroz is planning to return for good to her Portuguese hillside village, and how Tony Visconti has already retired to his place overlooking the coast of Sardinia. So some of these North Africans are just visiting back there, whereas some are projecting a retirement home; some are not sure, maybe scouting things out; and in some families husbands and wives have different opinions on the matter.

It reminded me of the middle-aged Barbadian Londoners with whom I once worked, deciding whether to go back to their small, sparkling Caribbean island or to stay in great grey drizzly London—where nearly all their grandchildren were. Quite a dilemma. The word “transnationalism” was, as far as I am aware, not even in currency when I was talking with the Barbadians in 1986–1988, whereas now in retrospect I see that for some of them it truly fits their lives. Again, at the time when I was living in South Africa a dozen or more years earlier still, the term would also surely have been appropriate to the lives of migrant laborers on the mines from neighboring countries such as Mozambique, Lesotho, or Zambia. But it is the relative ease, the speed, and the ever-more-ubiquitous presence of such modes of living that have come to give the term such enormous currency. Yet simply to celebrate this ever-greater ease of accessibility is to overlook ramifications that may not be benign. Timothy Garton Ash (2011) contends that whereas the impediment presented by physical distance between old and new homelands has never been smaller, the experiential and cultural distance between them (in the case at hand, between rural North Africa and urban France) has never

been so great. Such a paradox, he proposes, can give rise to an unsettling "cultural schizophrenia," which underlies the malaise of the banlieue.

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that transnationalism's temporary and circular migration is the coming thing. To judge, however, that such full-fledged transnationalism is now the norm in the lives of most international migrants would stretch the facts, at least those which present themselves in the lives of this non-random collection of 47 Strasbourg migrants I interviewed. And, transnationalism is also clearly a matter of degree, the behaviours and experiences associated with it distributed along a continuum. One can presumably be "fully" transnational, or "somewhat," or "just a little" transnational?

Of the North African Strasburgers, first there are the "just a little" ones, those to whom a trip over there is but a visit. Nadia Boudiaf wasn't even born in North Africa, but she loves going to her Algerian parents' home region in Oran. Mme Ben-Walid also knows Oran well, and for her too it seems that when they go there for a month or more each summer it's a visit, something that helps make life quite bearable in Strasbourg. There's other family there, and her parents are still alive. But no, she will not ever go back to live in Algeria. She will stay in Strasbourg. The children were born here, and she has two grandchildren born here now. "True, we do have a little place back there for vacations—nothing ostentatious, we don't like that. But you do see Maghrebians back from here acting rich. We have a joke about them out there. If you see 'F' on a car (for 'France'), that really, y'know, stands for 'Facances' (the allegedly stereotypical Arab mispronunciation of 'vacances'—on vacation); and 'B' (for 'Belgium') really stands for 'Bermissons' (ditto re. 'permissions'—on leave)." Abdessamad later confirmed this: "On my first visit back once I started studying here, that would be 1969, I noticed that all the people from northern Morocco were going to Belgium. Tangerines were going to Belgium. From other parts of Morocco, it was to everywhere around France. Yes [in response to my question] a lot of them had those 'B' stickers. But do you know why Belgium? Because in those days you could drive in Belgium *without having passed a driving test*. No, really! It wasn't obligatory. So we got all these accidents in Tanger with these idiots in their cars back from Belgium who couldn't even drive properly!"

Amir Aiboud's trips to Morocco are something more than holiday visits. He tells me those two brothers have built their own houses now, and that he has been building his own holiday home near them for twenty years. So each year they drive to Almeria, then go across by ferry to Morocco or to Melilla. They stay there for four weeks. With retirement in view, he's hoping they'll get back to Morocco for three or four months in the winter, to enjoy the combination of the mountains and the sea. But he also says that, sure, they're going to stay in Strasbourg, there's nowhere else they want to go for good. This has the appearance of a commonplace transhumance, a Mediterranean equivalent of those "snowbird" Torontonians or Syracusans who winter in Florida every year.

Hassan Lamrini also goes nearly every year to Morocco to see the family. It's in fact the only place they go on long trips at all. They drive to the old village way

up in the Rif mountains where they've built a house, and now there's electricity there. It takes them three to four days to get there in the minibus-with-trailer. And with the longer term in view, well, he is soon to retire, but his youngest is only thirteen so they'll be here in Strasbourg for a while. "So, I'd like to go back to that dry heat, to my home. I've put in 30 years of work here. But you bet I'll keep my French nationality—dual nationality with the Moroccans is fine. Did you know that in Morocco there are now over 10,000 French retirees? (His term is *Français de souche*—i.e., white folks.) They live properly there, there are no security problems. We've got it together there. We are a calm country. (I suspect a belittling comparison with Algeria is implied.)

Mme Ouamrane, who says she will stay in Strasbourg because she loves to be with the children, nevertheless likes going back to "my country, Kabylia" for long holidays. Over the years the Ouamranes have taken vacations widely at *colonies de vacances* [communal holiday villages] especially in the South of France—"The Midi's a bit like Algeria." "There's the heat, so it feels *and* it looks like home," said M Ouamrane. He, like Madame, fully intends to stay in Strasbourg, but just like Mme Ben-Walid, he seems delighted that, having just retired, he can come and go as he pleases. "We can more or less afford it. We're off for two months now, for May and June. We drive, and take the ferry across. We bought the biggest station wagon you can get." It's a low-slung, old black tank of a Citroën (Figure 7.10). "We absolutely load it up. We have a great vacation home. You must come and visit!" Talking to one of the daughters on the phone a few weeks later, she observed of her dynamo-driven father, newly retired, that "He's not busy any more. He's lost. I mean, they're fine out there, but they're bored. There's nothing to do. The grandchildren are here. There's always someone coming through the house here. All you do there, is the two of you just sit. They're bored. They want to come back now."

One year later I was back, and noticed that they had a different car—their big old Citroën had gone. "Oh, that was a great car! We used to call it 'the hearse'! It never let us down on those long journeys to Algeria, loaded right up. The place we go to is our apartment in the town of Tizi Ouzou, the capital of Kabylia. There are lots of emigrants who have places there, yes. No, we have no friends there. We have no friends left [they both say this, at different moments during the conversation, independently] because we've spent far more time here than there. We have no moorings [*repères*] there anymore." "Don't you make new friends with people like yourselves, fellow-retirees?" "Oh no, you've got to be careful! People absolutely want to take advantage of you: 'Would you like to carry this over for me?' or 'Can you help my cousin get his Green Card [*carte de séjour*]?' One must be wary of being used. It's so poor. *Everybody* there is trying to get out to here [his strong emphasis]."

Nadia Boudiaf was telling me over lunch of her and her siblings' unhappiness with their father. "He's 94. He's just married a divorced woman of 46. We call her the 'painted lady.' All we kids despise her. She's simply getting papers to live in France. He knows that. It doesn't bother him. (And we kids are going to get

the house.) Why did he do it? Hmm... uh, he has nothing to lose. He has all he wants. He can do his macho thing—you know, I married a woman half my age and I still have my sexual vitality. This kind of thing happens all the time. Apart from asylum, which is now tough, marriage is the only way of getting into France. Everybody wants to do it. If you're over there single, whether man or woman, you can't take ten paces without someone making that marriage proposition to you! People are *crazy* to get out."

* * *

Now that Said Ouamrane is retired, it's not as if he sits in their apartment wishing he was in Kabylia. That's not the only place for a time-out. Time-outs do not have to be taken in such big chunks, nor in so geographically strenuous a manner as to cross the Mediterranean. For Said has had a local escape for years, a pursuit shared by Amir and by tens of thousands of fellow Strasburgers. He has a *jardin familial*, a victory garden. Surrounded by high hedges, his municipally-allotted plot is one of seven little such gardens demarcated off near the Rhin Tortu backwater. Inside the locked metal gate to the compound are others' getaway spots. He enumerates them for me: a Turk, a Spaniard, a "Yugoslav," two Algerians, an Italian, and an Alsatian — "*C'est la cohabitation; c'est Strasbourg!*" He roundly approves of this cosmopolitan comity. "We all help each other with seeds. There's no problems. I've lost a few tools once or twice, but there's been no nastiness, no destruction." He has a little hut with a plastic-topped table and chairs, and round the back of it is a barbecue. All this about a kilometer from the apartment. In his plot grow vegetables, roses, and a variety of other flowers. He has also brought a fig cutting from his land in Kabylia, and it has taken. A little fig-tree now stands next to that most Alsatian of fruit trees, the *quetsch* plum, both thriving in the Rhineland alluvium. There is a symbolism here that appeals.



Figure 7.1 Hassina Saada, a Strasbourggeoise born of Algerian Harbi refugee parents in Neuho.

Just to quit the matter there would seem something of a disservice to the 160 Strasburgers who have shared their thoughts on the city with me. To sum up this place of theirs in a few academic-sounding pronouncements, of course girded cagily about with provisos aplenty, feels somewhat treasonous. Strasbourg is not to be reduced to sociological formulations. True, I have not hung out of an evening on the street corners of the *ci  s* too much, so the disaffected young get short shrift in this book. Likewise, of course, I have been prevented from conversing with those adult women who are part of more traditional Muslim households. Nor have I met anyone who would fit the description of that current bogeyman of the Western world, the aggressive Islamic extremist, despite the fact that Strasbourg possesses a relatively credentialed one in Mohamed Ennacer Lat  che, an imam upon whom France's sober newspaper-of-record, *Le Monde*, chose (April 27, 2004) to bestow the adjective "sulfurous." (Ternisien, 2004) The comparable *L'Express* similarly considered (June 22, 2011) that, despite his having received only 1.4% of the vote in recent municipal elections, Lat  che spooked people out [*une figure d'  pouvantail*] (Trentesaux, 2004). In point of fact, studies indicate French Muslims are neither more nor less inclined to zealotry than members of any other of the country's religious persuasions.

These exceptions notwithstanding, I'd claim that the representativeness here is pretty broad. Is it not reassuring, then, that this remarkably varied collection of Strasburgers generally agree on a good number of positive dimensions of the city? They cherish its beauty, its culture, and its history. They esteem its human scale, its manageability. They are proud of being from it when they're elsewhere, whether in Toulouse or Mauritius or Morocco. Whatever their party political leanings, they see a significant and legitimate role for the state in the conduct of the life of the city. When, for example, the conservative "Tandem" local administration took over power from the Socialists in 2001, it continued to expand the universally-appreciated tram network, despite the fact that a basic reason for light-rail construction had been social engineering of a progressive, redistributive stripe.

I do not deny that there is, especially among the elderly, a sense of a decline in public safety on the streets, plus a widespread unease regarding Islam. Unease was transformed into fear when a conspiracy by four Algerians resident in Germany to bomb the Christmas market at the cathedral was uncovered; a court in Frankfurt found them guilty in March 2003. My own experience of Islam in Strasbourg has been limited, but it has hardly been an uneasy one. I think of my conversation with Hassan, for example, who had expressed an abundance of discontent over the disrespect France had shown him. Yet there was no personal animus toward me in it at all, and indeed, the ending of our meeting had something fine about it.

After a wide-ranging conversation, he asks me, what are you doing, what's this all for? I try to explain that I wish to learn, I love to learn. Without getting too earnest about it, I also try to teach my students in America things they might not otherwise hear, in part in hopes that they also might continue to wish to learn. All unknowingly I had thereby uttered something very close to his heart. This I only

realized two-and-a-half years later when, paging through an oral history of the Strasbourg mosques, I found there his own testimony to the value of an education:

When I was a kid, you had to walk ten kilometers to get to school, with your shoes in your hand so you didn't spoil them.... I remained illiterate.... [until I got to France] to the Strasbourg mosque. I only knew traditional Islam [by rote]. But [in Strasbourg] I found the Islam of books. The students encouraged me to learn to read.... My eyes were opened here.... I often think of what my life was like as a child, and contrast it to my life today. I consider what I owe to those whom I met here, for they educated me. I remember that these knowledgeable folks came here to the mosque, and that I could simply sit down right next to them. I find that wonderful (Abdoun et al. 2004: 66; my translation).

Quite simply, coming to France had liberated him as a Muslim. And again, it was only later that it occurred to me that this tale had a Strasbourg stamp and continuity about it. For how—not to wade into doctrinal controversy—had people been “liberated as Christians,” it might be claimed, hundreds of years earlier in Strasbourg, one of the great cities of the Reformation? By learning to read their Bible, provided by the amazing invention of movable-type printing, conceived by Johannes Gutenberg in, it is believed ... Strasbourg.

My questions were finished, so here now were Hassan and I discussing more generally. My affirmation of belief in education causes him to get up, go to the bookshelf, and come back with the Hadith. He reads a verse to me in Arabic. He explains that the Scripture just quoted enjoined me to seek wisdom where it may be found. “Wisdom has no particular religion,” he says to me. He now goes and comes back with the Koran and searches for a verse to share and finds it: Surat 49: 13. “*Ho! les gens...*” “Hear, O ye people....” People of whichever tribe, be they male or female ... *that’s* the point. Here I am in his Haute-pierre social housing apartment on a June morning in France, far from home, being instructed in a language of which I know nothing which then has to be translated into my own second language. Yet this is universal. This is equality. No one is excluded. And I, who am an emotionally impressionable type, at this instant feel included by him.

This is a sturdy man, with a strong upper body. He has a genial, rounded-square face, moving towards the chunky, edged by white curly bristles though I’m not exactly sure whether or not this constitutes a beard. Preparing to leave, I get down to put my shoes on again in the entrance passageway. As I crouch there, he claps me on the back a couple of times. I stand up straight again, and he arranges the collar of my sports shirt for a good five seconds. This feels like an uncommonly fraternal gesture.

* * *

In conclusion, then, Strasburgers’ perceptions of rising sidewalk violence and of some monolithic Islamic threat seem overall to be outweighed by a countervailing

sense of liveability and *ouverture*. The wonderful Erasmus students—and the presence of the great university is certainly part of the soul of Strasbourg—give particularly joyful voice to this. It is however not just these privileged and intelligent young people who are so appreciative and hopeful. According to my 160 interlocutors, it appears that Strasburgers in general also feel this way, and by a wide margin. Yet, this is perhaps the moment to remind the reader that the great majority of the interviews were made before the US’s subprime mortgage crisis in late 2008 triggered the current global economic uncertainties. Would these respondents now still hold to their optimistic cast of mind?

Were they inclined to take the long view? I do suspect they would. Formerly enchained by Franco-German antipathy, formerly “a city asleep on its feet” (Samia Ouamrane), surely, has not Strasbourg changed for the better? Yes, replied a strong majority of these respondents. By a margin of over four to one, the respondents were positive about the direction in which Strasbourg was moving. Look how many of those of the New Immigration appreciate this city, sense there’s something special here in this fortunate place they find so fine, despite all the obstacles they may have encountered. They are part of it now, this formerly Rhenish city, they are contributors to its *ouverture*, to what is making it so livable. A current instance which immediately springs to mind is that of the Grand Mosque presently under construction (FIGURE 9.1). Can this evolution that is evidently proceeding at the heart of Western Europe be achieved without violence to either the old or the new? Are they necessarily incommensurable?

Père Varoqui—livewire, enthusiast, missionary priest among the Senufo in West Africa and parish priest among the social housing projects in the Strasbourg industrial suburb of Bischheim—looks me right in the eye: “Do you like our city?” “Very much.” “So. That’s all that matters.” And as for him?

“Mon cher Monsieur Western, j’adore Strasbourg.”