

Sensible evidences

Mustafa Dikeç
Department of Geography
Royal Holloway, University of London

I.

Despite variations, the last three governments in France have been characterized by a commitment to a so-called ‘securitarian ideology’ (*idéologie sécuritaire*) – a term commonly used in the media and critical scholarship. And this ideology has a very precise spatial referent: ‘the *banlieue*’ (in the singular), a shorthand term to denote the inhabitants of social housing neighbourhoods in the peripheral areas of cities.

But what does it mean to talk about a ‘securitarian *ideology*’ as opposed to, say, a securitarian strategy or orientation? How is it materialized? In considering these questions, I will talk about ideology as an aesthetic affair, and will argue that ‘the *banlieue*’ is not the object of this ideology, but, first and foremost, its product.

II.

There have been many media review studies that show the changing image of ‘the *banlieue*’ over the years. However, the current image of the *banlieues* is not simply the product of journalistic accounts. Many of the journalistic categories used to frame *banlieues* have been institutionalized by the state through its various practices of articulation – including spatial designations, descriptive names, categorisations, definitions, mappings, and statistics – what I call, drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, as ‘*sensible evidences*’.

III.

‘The police’, in its non-pejorative sense, is the name Rancière gives to orders of governance. It is based on a particular regime of representation, to which he refers to as ‘*the partition of the sensible*’, defined as ‘that system of *sensible evidences* that discloses at once the existence of a common [i.e., the whole to be governed] and the partitions that define the respective places and parts in it’. The partition of the sensible, as a system of sensible evidences, arranges the perceptive givens of a situation – what is in or out, central or peripheral, audible or inaudible, visible or invisible. The police, then, is not self-evident or naturally given, but rather a product of a particular regime of representation – of sensible evidences. It is exemplary in this sense that one of the first measures the then French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy had proposed, when he first took office in 2002 with a stated aim to ‘restore the Republican order’, was to modify the periodicity of the publication of figures of delinquency, and to make them publicly available more frequently.

Rancière’s conceptualization of the police as consolidated through the putting in place of sensible evidences suggests a way of looking at state policies. State policies put in place

certain sensible evidences (policy documents, spatial designations, mappings, categorisations, namings and statistics) that help to consolidate a particular spatial order and encourage a particular way to think about it. In the French case, the spatial order that state policies helped to consolidate with its designations of intervention areas (the *banlieues*) became officially so accepted that when the French Intelligence Service decided to engage with the question of *banlieues*, it was the list of urban policy neighbourhoods that they took as a starting point. When the Ministry of Justice engaged with the issue with a stated aim to restore the law, its measures aimed at the same neighbourhoods. Similarly, other repressive measures (like security contracts, Sarkozy's flash-ball guns, etc.) and growing anxieties about the 'values of the republic' were all guided by the same spatial imaginary, which became the basis for the consolidation of what I call the 'republican penal state' from the 1990s onwards.

These, I would like to argue, are ideological achievements – the *products* of the so-called securitarian ideology. I define ideology, following Rancière, as a reconfiguration of a perceptive field through putting in place sensible evidences, which has real effects on ways of being, saying, and doing. It is in this sense that ideology is an aesthetic affair, aesthetics understood not as a theory of art or beauty, but as the framing of what is (made) available to the senses (what is visible, audible, inside, outside, excluded, included, and so on). This spatial configuration conditions perceptions of lack and surplus ('too many immigrants', 'not enough repression'), and in so doing, it reconfigures the thresholds of toleration, terms of recognition or reject, and perceptions of the 'whole' and its 'parts'. Ideological configuration of a perceptive field plays on sensibilities and may easily reify an identified lack or surplus as an object of fear and threat in the social imaginary, as the French case illustrates. It is remarkable that 'the *banlieue*' was listed as one of the 'major phobias' of the French in the new millennium by the daily paper *Libération*.

This, however, is not meant to imply that state policies provide us with a distorted version of 'reality', concealing the 'truth' under ideological distortion of one sort or another. Ideology, in the way I conceive it, has nothing to do with the truth-value of a statement, declaration, or policy. A claim may be true or false, but this does not make it less or more ideological. Ideological value of a particular claim, statement, policy, or representation, in other words, is not determined by its 'truthfulness' or 'falseness'. In other words, there is no assertion, in my conceptualization of ideology, about a relationship of truth to falsity. The 'non-ideological', however defined, has no mastery over 'truth'. Ideologies, indeed, speak to real conditions; they are about sensible evidences.