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FRANCE

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Stuck in Dreux

By K.A. Dilday

March 2007

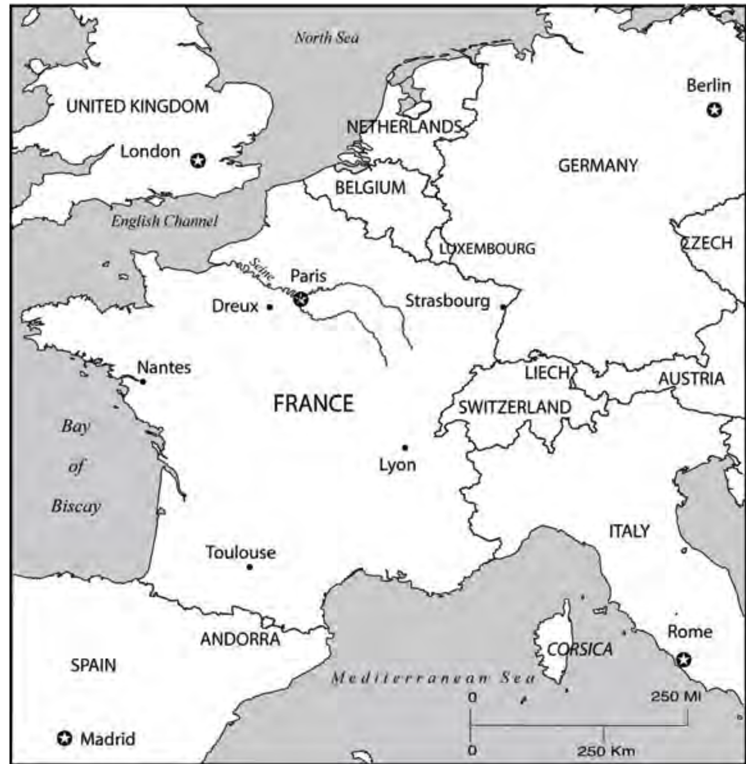
PARIS–I met Leila Laouati at a conference about Employment Issues for Young Graduates of Immigrant Origin. She stood up when the floor was opened to the audience and in a breakneck delivery recounted her story: “I had an internship at UNESCO. When it came time to hire someone for the position, the woman from the French delegation told me that France wasn’t ready to be represented by someone with my face.” Leila has a welcoming friendly face, but her skin isn’t pale. It’s the light brownish color from which “beur” — a variant of the French word for butter and a term used to describe Maghrebin immigrants in France — is derived. Her hair is slightly kinky. Leila’s parents’ Algerian heritage has left its physical imprint on their daughter.

I went up to her after the conference and asked if I could meet her later that week to talk about some of the experiences she’d had. “I don’t live in Paris,” she said. “I live an hour away in Dreux. You may have heard of it. It is famous because it was the first town to elect a National Front Mayor.” [The National Front is the anti-immigrant political party founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, a veteran of France’s colonial wars with Indochina and Algeria.] Only the type of job she seeks, diplomacy work, makes Leila’s story of failure to find employment unique among people of her ethnic background. All across France young people are unemployed. The burden falls disproportionately on youth whose parents are of immigrant origin. And many of them are trapped in small cities where work has disappeared as they make a slow and hard transition from their former identity as a factory towns. Dreux is one of these cities.”

Sixty miles from Paris, Dreux seems both near and far from Paris. The journey is indeed an hour by train and one leaves every hour for Dreux from Montparnasse Station in Paris. Unable to afford the fare for a stagecoach, in 1821, it took Victor Hugo three days to walk from Paris to Dreux to visit the woman he loved. Skip to the 20th century, when Dreux maintained a strong resistance during World War II when the Vichy government was installed by the Nazis. During that period Jean Moulin, the famed Resistance hero, was the department’s prefect (a department is one of France’s regional divisions). He supported Dreux’s non-collaborating mayor, Maurice Violette, until both were imprisoned. Moulin was killed; Violette survived and again became mayor of Dreux. After World War II, Violette and the city welcomed the American Air Force, which opened a base in Dreux bringing with it a community of Americans. In 1966 the base closed and the Dreux American High School graduated its last class. But in a slow trickle Dreux was getting a new influx of foreigners; as the Americans were leaving, Maghrebins were arriving. A large group of “Harkis,” Algerians who fought for the French in the Algerian War, came in 1962 after the war ended.

Between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, the population of Dreux doubled. It grew from a small city into a medium-sized one with a diverse population. Like most of France in the early part of the 20th century, Dreux’s immigrants were primarily from Italy, Spain and Portugal. In the mid-century, Moroccans

and Tunisians followed the Algerians to Dreux, in the wave of North African workers that came during France's 30-year economic boom, the *trentes glorieuses*. Dreux was a relatively tranquil city known primarily for its factories, of which two Philips plants were centerpiece. This changed in 1983 when the city elected the first mayor from a coalition party of the RPR and the decade-old anti-immigrant party, the National Front. In a close election Jean Hieaux of the RPR (a new party constructed by Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, from several center right parties) and Jean Pierre Stirbois, the National Front's flashy outspoken man in the Eure-et Loire region, defeated the socialist candidates. Most of the Socialist candidates had been incumbents. It was a sea change for Dreux, which instantly became the most infamous city in France. The Front's slogan was: "One million unemployed, One million immigrants too many. French first." Dreux's transition was a harbinger of an anti-immigrant rightward drift that has continued in Western Europe in the 1990s and 2000s.



By 1983 Leila's family wasn't so new. They had a nearly two-decade history in Dreux. Her father had arrived in 1965 taking a year to make his way there from Algeria. He had stopped in southern France where he harvested fruit by day and slept outside with the other North African seasonal workers by night. When the season ended, he followed another job to Belgium. There Mr. Laouati heard that Philips, a Dutch electronics company with factories in Dreux was hiring. He arrived in Dreux alone. He could neither read nor write, nor was he trained in any particular field. But there were plenty of low-skill jobs at Philips and he was hired to move boxes and perform other brute tasks.

Some 40 years later, those Philips plants are closing. During the past five years, more than 3000 factory jobs have disappeared from Dreux, according to a report by *Les Echos*, a French financial newspaper. The unemployment rate in Dreux is around 12 percent, a little higher than the national average, but among people age 15-24 who finished only the basic level of education, the rate of unemployment is 56.4 percent.

These second-generation immigrants, many of whom are children of the factories' unskilled laborers, have been trained to take the jobs their parents vacated, but they are victims of a dearth of work. By contrast, for second-generation immigrants like Leila Laouati, who were trained for white-collar work, employment problems seem less attributable to a changing economy and more to deep prejudices in French society.

Leila studied international institutions at the Sorbonne, a prestigious French university. Her degree should have qualified her for intellectually skilled work in diplomacy or aid work, i.e., a change of social class. But after years of searching, she has yet to find a full-time job in her chosen field. Leila pieces together part-time jobs; since last fall, she has been working at Maurice Violette, a professional lycée named for Dreux's long-time mayor. The school is only a few-minutes walk from the housing complex where she grew up.

Lycees are the French equivalent of American high schools. Students enter lycée after completing middle school, called college, at about age 16. French children are only required to attend school until age 16, at which point many youth of North African origin leave. Students continuing their education after college attend either a general, professional or technical lycée. General lycées are typical liberal-arts high schools: students follow one of three tracks, science, humanities or social sciences, in preparing to eventually enter a university or another form of higher education. Professional and technical lycées train people in various jobs, sometimes white collar, usually not.

Leila's family lived near one of Dreux's technical lycées, in a high rise, the likes of which were built across France to house workers imported from North Africa during the economic boom. She was born in 1977, the second child born after her father married a cousin from Algeria in 1975. Everyone Leila knew lived in her cluster of buildings, each of which, in an unofficial form of social communitarianism, was home to emigrants from a particular region. There is a Turkish building, one filled with Maghrebins, a sub-Saharan African building. Instead of going to one of the technical or professional

schools where most of the complexes children were sent, Leila did well enough to attend the general high school in the center of town, a school that was filled largely with *Français de souche* (long-standing French) children. Francoise Gaspard, a socialist and mayor of Dreux from 1977 to 1983, recalls the debate about the Godeau School, a well-regarded general lycee in Dreux. If Dreux's districting was properly adhered to, a large housing project of mostly Turks would have been zoned for Godeau. In her memoir about her time as mayor, Gaspard writes that periodically a mayor tried to enforce the proper zoning, but the parents and the long-time headmaster, a man she describes as a staunch communist, protested. The headmaster went so far as to recruit *francais de souche* children from other districts to fill the school to capacity so that there would be no room for the children from the housing projects.

Maurice Violette is a relatively new professional lycee, built in the 1990s. To get there, I walked past a succession of housing projects. Then the school appeared, a salmon-colored building set far back on a long plaza protected by a barbed wire fence. The cheery color does little to dispel the sense that it is a reform school. I had to be buzzed in by a faceless door guard whom I discovered hidden some 500 feet away in a gazebo. According to Leila, the fence is there because Maurice Violette is across from Les Bates, a series of housing complexes that she says were once coveted homes but these days are known more as being a way station for the marijuana trade between Morocco and Europe rather than a desirable place to live.

At professional lycées like Maurice Violette, students prepare for the type of jobs that are useful at a factory: truck driving, machine operating and sales, etc. Students aren't quite forced into a particular profession but they aren't quite allowed to choose freely. When a student leaves college, teachers suggest that those going on to professional or technical lycées study a particular subject. The French educational system is arcane (teachers' children are known to have the most success at navigating it) and the method by which administrators choose paths for students is just as mysterious. There are standardized elements: at college, students accrue points based on a variety of factors including grades, teacher recommendations, and their geographical location. Based on these the regional administrator assigns them to a specific school and if they are going on to professional lycée, recommends a profession, often something as specific as plumbing or charcuterie. The largest educational divide is between general and professional / technical lycées. Since the mid-1980s all lycées now prepare students for some form of baccalaureate — the once coveted post-high school degree, yet unless students enter a general school, the likelihood of going on to academic higher education is very small. This is the earliest level at which the state systematically begins applying the boot, establishing that there is a level of society beyond which certain people will never move.

Leila Laouati in the classroom at Lycée Maurice Viollette

Leila graduated from lycée and in 1993 she entered the Sorbonne with plans to study Arabic. A sage advisor had told her that Westerners who spoke Arabic would be in demand at the United Nations, her dream employer. On the first day of Arabic class, the professor asked all of the students of Algerian heritage to raise their hands. When they did, he told them that he had fought for France in the Algerian war, and that Algerians were not going to fare well in his class. The students huddled together after class and formed a plan. After all, this was France, a republic where all French people were equal regardless of origin. They weren't going to take his blatant racism. The students went as a delegation to lodge a complaint with the head of the university, who told them he would speak to the professor. The next class the professor summoned them and told them: "I am the master here. The university president is just a slave. This is my class and I will do what I want." Leila left Arabic class that day and never went back. She switched majors and graduated with a degree in international institutions in 1997.

Since then Leila has been looking for jobs and takes internships. A series of internships (*stages* in French) are a very common route to a job for university graduates, yet Leila has never managed to move from an internship to full time-employment. Leila has managed to piece together a modest living from part-time jobs, which is how she came to Maurice Violette. Since last fall she has worked part time as what the school calls a pedagogic assistant. She counsels students about their professional opportunities. Leila wants to live abroad, to represent France as part of the diplomatic service or to work for a non-profit organization. But instead, she is living in her childhood room and walking to a job five minutes from her home, with students from the complex where she grew up. Despite her efforts she's fallen into the pattern that many residents tell me is the key to understanding

Les Bates, a housing complex in Dreux, and a way station for drug traffic from Morocco into Europe.

life in Dreux: No one ever leaves.

The transition in Dreux coincides with the economic downturn. The loss of jobs has been relentless in recent years. In the mid 1990s, with unemployment levels between 11 and 12 percent, the French government classified areas with a higher-than-average rate of unemployment and a low level of economic activity as ZUS (Zone Urbaine Sensible). Employers in these zones are exempt from paying 85 percent of the social costs for workers. Within the ZUS quarters with the most dire employment statistics were classified as ZRUs *(Zone de Rydnamisation)*. Employers receive tax exemptions for locating there. Dreux is classified as both ZUS and a ZRU. But these measures have not stemmed the crisis and young people are training for jobs that have disappeared.

Jobs have been disappearing since the end of the *trentes glorieuses*. The socialist government, mindful of this, changed the educational system to lengthen the training period for those in professional lycées and allow them to work toward a new degree — the professional baccalaureate. Not only did it appear to equalize the system, but it was cheaper and safer to have young people in school rather than unemployed and on the streets. Yet the professional baccalaureate in secretarial work or sales isn't adequate preparation for studying much other than that limited discipline. In the 1990s, the French universities' medical programs sent applicants with those sorts of qualifications letters telling them that more than 90 percent of students with their degree failed medical school during the first year and they might do well to consider another program.

Inside the fortress of Maurice Violette the school is relatively calm, perhaps due to the "education assistants," men and women in their late 20s to early 30s, most of whom are of Maghrebin origin. As they recount their duties I realize that they're actually security guards. They keep the students in-line and assign rooms. Three of them, Mohammed, Mohammed and Mustapha were able to sit down with me for a moment. They all grew up in Dreux, moving when they were toddlers from Morocco. The Dreux they remember from their childhood was harmonious: "Everyone used to get along in Dreux," "CNN came here because there have never been any burnings of mosques or churches" they told me. But, they said, everything changed after September 11, 2001. I ask if it's true, as I've heard from other men of African origin, that they are asked for their identification papers every day. "Some days I'm asked several times." They seem more resigned than angry and they even joked about it. "Maybe it will get better now that I shaved my beard," Mustapha said, rubbing his clean-shaven chin, and then laughed good-naturedly as I diligently began to write that down. "I'm just joking."

Communitarianism, the habit of allying politically

and socially with a certain ethnic group is the *bete noir* of French republicans. But a systemic communitarianism of the type that critics of the republican ideal have pointed out is apparent in Dreux. “The kids at this school live around the same people. They go to school with the same people. They never meet anyone different from them,” the elder Mohammed tells me. “They aren’t optimistic that anything will change.” There is a dual system at work even in Dreux. Leila told me that no one she knows ever leaves; the logistics teacher at Lycée Maurice Violette echoed her sentiment, as did the education assistants. But in her book, *A Small City in France*, about Dreux, Francoise Gaspard, the former mayor and a native of Dreux, writes that of her lycee classmates she was the only one who still lived in the town. And she only lived there she wrote, because she decided to enter politics. Over the last three decades Dreux — no longer a vibrant factory town — has been abandoned by those with choice.

At Maurice Violette, Leila counsels the students about career opportunities. Students at the lycee might enter the workforce as soon as they turn 16, they might graduate at 18 or perhaps they will go on for two more years of training after obtaining a professional baccalaureate — a BAC +2. “It’s hard for me to inspire them when they look at me and I have a BAC+5 from the Sorbonne [the highest non-doctoral university degree] and I still don’t have a job,” Leila says. “One of the other teachers asked me to tell the students that there is no racism in France but I wouldn’t because it isn’t true.” Leilia introduced me quite cordially to the teachers in the lounge, but when we left the room she said, “I hate them all. They criticize the students all of the time and say negative things about them and think they’ll never succeed.”

The students I talked to, girls 16, 17 and 18 years old, were inarticulate in the way that many teenagers are. All three were studying sales. They expressed an amorphous impression of racism—“Yes there is racism in France,” but when pressed, they had little to add. As girls they were less apt to be harassed by the police, one of the main disturbances for people their age. They seemed like ordinary teenagers. What I noticed most was the difference between the students and the education assistants. Ten years of looking for decent work had left the older ones resigned. It was a weary rather than angry resignation. They were fortunate because they had jobs even though their choices were limited. Paris calls to them with the promise of more and better-paying jobs but the logistics make it difficult. “I’d have to take two buses to get to the train,” Mustapha says. And the train, an hour’s ride each way, costs about $33 for a round trip, which is high for a daily commute. The cost of a small apartment in Paris would also reduce their gain, because in Dreux, most of them still live at home.

Like Leila, none of the people I met in Dreux believed that France is the color-blind, religion-blind place that is described in the textbooks the students are reading, but they seem to feel that the state judges them because of their appearance rather than their fellows citizens. The education assistants claimed the different ethnic and religious communities in Dreux get on well, but their relationship with the police was a different matter. In addition to constantly being asked to prove their right to be in the country, they said that during prayer time at the local mosques, the police sit and watch with guns trained on them.

For Leila, who unlike most of the people she grew up with, has attempted to leave Dreux, rejection by society is more frequent. After so many years of trying to find work, she is discouraged but remains determined and she still believes in France. Leila would like to work for women’s rights or perhaps promote the use of the French language. When she stood up and told the story of her interview with the French delegation at UNESCO at the conference where we met, everyone seemed visibly shocked. But another audience member remarked a few minutes later, that there were no French people of color in any major positions with French diplomatic services.

A week later when I saw Leila in Dreux and heard her stories, I kept saying: “But isn’t it against the law? Don’t you have recourse?” She just shrugged. “If you say anything, people always say, ‘Well maybe it’s you, are you sure you didn’t do anything wrong, maybe you didn’t work hard enough.’” Leila has a lot of spunk: she had taken the train in that day I met her, taking the $33 journey to stand up and tell her story at the conference in hopes that someone would help her. After she told her story a representative from the organization sponsoring the event, the Association to Facilitate the Insertion of Young Graduates into the Work World *(Association pour faciliter l’insertion professionnelle des jeunes diplômés)* arranged a counseling session for her. She’s been looking for so long Leila said, that when the counselor she met with criticized parts of her c.v., she had to fight back tears because she was so frustrated. She’s determined, but in some ways Leila is daunted by what seem like almost insurmountable systemic obstacles: she hasn’t taken the test to enter the diplomatic service, a crucial step. Leila said when she went to register, the black woman behind the desk told her: “Look at the list of people who’ve passed. Do you see any names like yours?” Chastened, Leila left.

“What do you think of Leila’s situation?” her sister Nadia asked me over lunch. “Does it seem strange to you?” I explained that while prejudice exists in the United States, no employer would dare say those things for fear of a lawsuit, at least not to a person of a higher educational level who would know how to counterattack legally. “It could cost the company or the state a lot of money,” I explained. “No one would discriminate so explicitly.” Leila and Nadia nodded, knowingly. Like

most people of color whom I have met in France, they seemed both aware and in awe of the power of minority communities in the United States.

Leila is unmarried. At 29 she has turned down the numerous distant relatives from Algeria her parents have tried to convince her to marry. “They think I’m nearly dead at this age,” she says. But in many ways she is a dutiful Muslim. She does not wear a veil, but she always wears a long skirt and she only eats Halal meat. She met a Japanese man during one of her internships and she would like to marry him, but he is not Muslim so her parents would not approve. But Leila thinks that if her marriage is a *fait accompli*, if she comes back from an overseas job with her husband and child, her parents will have to accept her choice.

When I left Dreux, Leila waited with me for the bus I would take to the train that would take me back to Paris. As we stood there I asked her: “What do you feel is your identity? Do you feel Muslim, do you feel French?” She rocked on her heels and looked away. “I don’t feel that being Muslim is my identity and everyone keeps telling me that I’m not French, so I don’t know who I am.”

This sense of dislocation, of being caught between two cultures but not fully accepted in either has been echoed so often in reporting on Muslims in Europe that it seems trite to repeat it, but even as it is an old complaint, it is quotidian struggle. There are many people like Leila caught between a past and a future, forced by societal structures to remain perpetually in limbo. Despite her efforts, at this moment, her old identity, an Algerian in Europe, is the only one available to her, ill fitting as it may feel.

As I write, France is about to choose its next president and the candidates have begun to speak more and more of how they might reify the abstract concept of French identity. Ségolène Royal, the socialist party candidate, has said recently that all people should hang the French flag in their windows on national holidays and that citizens should learn the Marseillaise, a battle cry of a song that is France’s national anthem. Nicolas Sarkozy, the centre right candidate for president announced that he would appoint a minister of integration and national identity if elected president. In defending it he said, “To be French is not a race or an ethnicity, it is a collection of values.” Fair enough, but what they don’t acknowledge is that it may be France’s oldest families and not the first and second-generation immigrants in France who need the most convincing. ❏

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Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

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A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer,* her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

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As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post,* the *Weekly Standard, Foreign Policy, the Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

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An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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