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Azouz Begag, *Shantytown Kid* [*Le Gone du Chaâba*]. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Ed., intro., Alec G. Hargreaves; trans. Naïma Wolf and Alec G. Hargreaves. xii + 212 pp. Map, photographs, glossary and bibliography. \$15.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-6258-4.

Azouz Begag, *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Trans., intro., Alec G. Hargreaves. xxvii + 151 pp. Author's preface, notes, glossary and index. \$14.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-6262-1.

Azouz Begag, *Un mouton dans le baignoire*. Paris: Fayard, 2007. 377 pp. 20€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-63375-6.

Review by Daniel A. Gordon, Edge Hill University.

It is a great paradox that France's first ever ministers from a family with a background in postcolonial migration were appointed not by the Left, with its universalist rhetoric of internationalism (and for whom most ethnic minority voters actually vote), but by the Right, traditionally associated with xenophobia and exclusion. But while much publicity surrounded Nicolas Sarkozy's first appointments, before Rachida Dati and Rama Yade, there were Tokia Saïfi, Hamlaoui Mékachéra, and Azouz Begag, who served in Dominique de Villepin's government from 2005 to 2007. Born the year of the Battle of Algiers, Begag's life story, from a shantytown in the suburbs of Lyons to minister, via a successful career as the author of more than twenty books, mirrors chronologically that of the Fifth Republic. Now that Begag has celebrated his fiftieth birthday, and the Republic prepares to mark its own, what does the encounter between the two tell us about the recent history of France?

Alec Hargreaves, the leading specialist on Beur literature and sociology, has now translated into English (with Naïma Wolf) two of Begag's books: his most famous work of autobiographical fiction, and a new political essay. Published in English as *Shanty-Town Kid*, *Le Gone du Chaâba* recounts Begag's early experiences in the 1960s, before and after his family left the Chaâba shantytown outside Villeurbanne. Since it is now over two decades since *Le Gone du Chaâba* was published in French, and one since it was released as a feature film, we may wonder who is the audience for the translation. The book and film, along with similar works by other authors, have largely contributed to bringing the shantytown era back into French public memory. Anglophone specialists in the field will already know the work of both Begag and Hargreaves. Students of French literature would presumably be sent to the original (though they could profitably make use here of Hargreaves's introduction and bibliography on the critical literature on Begag).

Therefore this is presumably a welcome attempt at popularisation in the English speaking world.[1] One would hope that the general reader, browsing for a novel to read, might pick up this reasonably priced paperback. This good humoured tale of integration of Muslim immigrants in the West could well serve as an antidote to simplistic notions of a clash of civilisations, and the excessive pessimism that often dominates anglophone media discourse on ethnic relations in France. Although in some senses the young Begag is caught between two value systems--his politeness to a policeman, in accordance with a recent school lesson, leads him to unwittingly inform on the whereabouts of his uncle's unlicensed butchers--conflict between family and state authority is a universal theme. And eager to please, the narrator always tries to cross boundaries. He pretends to be Jewish to become friends with two North

African Jewish boys in his class. He gets on with a friendly teacher, who confounds the stereotype of the racist *pied noir*. Begag's father greets the news that the *pied-noir* teacher knows Arabic (better than Begag himself) with *Allah akhbar*, yet celebrates by buying the teacher a bottle of wine.

While the detached perspective of the adult Begag means that it can be read at a deeper level, this is also an enjoyable romp through the life of a boy of ten or so, and therefore the kind of 'growing up' novel that should find a place in translation as an accessible but eye-opening set text for secondary school students. Though there is some limited sexual content—when first used in a French school in 1987, allegations were made that it was pornographic—the fact that the complaints were orchestrated by *Front National* (FN) supporters suggests that their real objection was to the author's ethnic origin.[2] There are linguistic issues that might, depending on how one looks at it, either restrict its appeal or open the reader's mind. Since there is much use of Lyonnais slang and Arabic dialect, readers may be reaching for the glossary at the back of the book, as Hargreaves sensibly chooses to avoid translating such phrases into some vaguely equivalent Anglophone idiom.

Another key readership for this book should be undergraduate students from disciplines such as history taking courses on France with little or no knowledge of French. Those of us teaching such courses know there is a real gap in the market for this kind of translation. All too few books on contemporary France ever get translated into English, making students overly dependent on the second-hand interpretations of Anglophone scholars. The by now forty year old setting of the book would make it a useful primary source for history students. Indeed, outside the Franco-Algerian context, the book would be of interest to anyone considering the 1960s more generally, since such themes as encountering modern consumer goods like inside bathrooms and televisions for the first time, and the advantages and disadvantages of old and new ways of life, replicate the experience of millions of people across Europe and beyond. Nevertheless, some themes of the Sixties, notably political activism, are absent. Unlike some other autobiographical novels by Beur authors,[3] there is nothing here on the flirtation of some first and second-generation Algerians with post-1968 French leftism. While this presumably reflects Begag's own itinerary, it may also be linked to the fact that the narrative takes place in the relatively quiet years after the end of the Algerian War but before May '68 (the only brief reference to May '68 being some disruption to his schooling).

But in recent years, to the different facets of Begag's identity—*Shantytown Kid*; novelist; CNRS sociologist, has been added a fourth: politician. It is in this context that *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance* should be viewed, being in a sense a historical document, having been completed in May 2005, just before Begag's ministerial appointment. Begag is clearly an accomplished teacher—those of us who worry about how to teach our students to think critically will enjoy his description (pp. 60-73) of convincing a classroom that the earth is flat—and the student wanting an accessible introduction to contemporary immigration issues in France could certainly do worse than begin with *Ethnicity and Equality*.

The book opens with an anecdote about being singled out to be searched as Begag crossed the border into his home country on return from an appearance on Swiss television. Although anyone of non-white appearance who has crossed an international frontier since 11 September 2001 will probably have a similar story to tell, and there is a touch of 'Don't you know who I am?' about his angry reaction to the officials, he recounts the incident with an irony and panache that invites the reader to read on. How have things come to this, that a recipient of the Legion of Honour can be treated in this way? But in contrast to *Shanty-Town Kid*, *Ethnicity and Equality* focuses not on Begag's own generation, but on the so-called 'third generation', born in France since the 1980s (p. ix). In making the difficult choice of sifting through the thirty-odd different ways in which they have been described, he settles on *jeunes ethniques* (pp. 22-23) on the grounds that many choose to affirm their identity by doing the very things for which society have negatively stereotyped them. More pessimistic than *Shanty-Town Kid*, *Ethnicity and Equality* gives us a powerful analysis of what went wrong, especially in Chapter 3 ("Disintegration"), where Begag

provocatively but pertinently argues (pp. 43-44) that:

'In reality what is happening in France's *quartiers sensibles* (hoods) is on one level not much different from what is happening in other countries, both rich and poor, around the world. The social damage arising from the confusion of personal success with financial gain goes far wider than the banlieues and youths of immigrant origin. The question of value at stake here could be summarised in the following terms: If we take young people living in poverty who have seen their fathers exploited as cheap labor, then thrown onto the scrap heap of unemployment, who have no culture, are completely depoliticised, are subject to constant racism and are able to express themselves only through violence, how can we expect them to take a temporary job for a thousand euros a month when they can earn that much in a day or two in the parallel economy?'

Though focused on contemporary society, *Ethnicity and Equality* is rooted in history. He puts today's situation in the context of collective memories of the discriminatory treatment of *banlieue* youth since the mid-1970s (pp. 11-18), though in asserting that their parents "had never claimed" the streets (p. 17), he omits the mobilisations of the early 1970s associated with the Mouvement des travailleurs arabes.

This book, especially the author's preface, in which Begag reveals how as a teenager he was influenced by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Martin Luther King, bends over backwards to please an American audience. Readers outside the US may find the translator's use of American-specific terms like "hood" to describe French cities (although Hargreaves himself is British) grating or just faintly risible, the linguistic equivalent of seeing Sarkozy jogging in a New York Police Department T-shirt. Indeed, it might be asked whether, in English translation, the book constitutes preaching to the converted. Is Begag, in his understandable desire to rebut French assumptions of the superiority of the republican model over Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism, perhaps insufficiently critical of the situation in the English-speaking world? After all, Begag has himself (pp. 25-27) been subject at Atlanta and JFK airports to similar humiliations to that at the Franco-Swiss border.

There is an unwitting danger, I think, that the necessary study of racism in France may reinforce among students the idea that France is somehow "more racist" than the Anglophone world. It might make sense, therefore, to pair this book on reading lists with a text defending the French system and set up a debate between the two. The most controversial aspect is likely to be Begag's advocacy of American-style affirmative action. While Begag, who is critical of communitarianism (pp. 85-88), remains enough of a French universalist to clearly oppose "crude ethnic quotas" (p. 105), he nevertheless commends practices such as Sciences Po's, of instead favouring student applications for admission from deprived areas (p. 111). While this approach is in many ways attractive, it does leave unanswered questions. What about privileged individuals living in deprived areas, and vice versa? And if it is wrong to deny someone a job purely because of their ethnicity (p. 105), how is it right to do so purely on the basis of their class or place of residence?

On the other hand, some will question Begag's advocacy of "individualism" and "meritocracy" (p. 96), which sits uneasily with his nostalgia elsewhere for the time in the Seventies when "There was a Communist Party. There were trade unions. There were leaders who wanted to change the world" (p. 54). While, using a sporting metaphor, he rightly argues that meritocracy does not exist in practice, because some leave the starting blocks with more advantages than others (pp. 97-100), the implication is that if there were an equal race, all would be well. But what about those of us who are not so "meritworthy" (p. 97)? After all, the word 'meritocracy' was originally devised, by the British sociologist Michael Young, not as a recommendation but as a dystopian satire of the future.^[4] Idealising "individual merit and talent" (p. 96) might, and arguably does in the contemporary Anglo-Saxon world, itself create injustices by excessively rewarding those who are merely fortunate to be the most talented at the expense of the rest. It also exacerbates the arguments about affirmative action, by making more dependent on it. If rewarding and secure employment could be provided more widely, not only for the

most talented, then the arguments about who gets the few limited openings would be less divisive. In this respect it might be questioned how Begag's support for the ill-fated *Contrat première embauche* (CPE), which would have made young people easier to sack than their elders, was compatible with equal opportunities.

While Hargreaves provides some context to Begag's involvement in political controversy, those seeking further detail should turn to *Un mouton dans la baignoire*, Begag's own account of his two years in government. It is no coincidence that the book was published in April 2007 in the midst of the presidential election. Outraged by Sarkozy's unrepentant pandering to FN supporters by talking of sheep being slaughtered in baths, Begag supported François Bayrou for president, and this book received some publicity for its unflattering depiction of Sarkozy. Begag alleges (p. 161) that whilst he was on a TGV, Sarkozy rang him on his mobile phone, threatening physical violence against him. How had this state of affairs come about? In *Un mouton dans la baignoire*, Begag dates (pp. 11-13) his political career to a chance meeting with de Villepin at a book fair in Brive-la-Gaillarde in late 2003. Begag, who had admired the then foreign minister since his famous speech at the United Nations against the American invasion of Iraq, half-jokingly, and egged on by fellow writers, sent a message on a serviette suggesting he would like to be an ambassador. When de Villepin became prime minister in 2005, the phone call came from him appointing Begag not as an ambassador but as Minister for Equal Opportunities. For Begag, who demonstrates throughout the book a keen awareness of the sweep of history, the appointment of France's first ever [5] Arab minister marked a partial reimbursement of the nation's debts toward the peasants from his late father's village who, like Begag's own grandfather at the Somme in 1918, had died for France in two world wars (pp. 16, 106).

Ironically, though, this giant leap for equal opportunities came about through the patronage of a man much ridiculed as an effete, aristocratic poet who had never been elected to anything. The chronology given in the book might be quibbled with, since Begag's political career could also be said to have its origins in the less auspicious surroundings of a Formule 1 hotel in the Lyons suburb of Vaux-en-Velin in 1995, where he met Jacques Chirac for the first time at a *banlieue* summit during the Khaled Kelkal affair. Chirac was impressed by Begag, later bestowing official awards on him--though as late as 2001, Begag described himself as "un homme de gauche", turning down offers from the Right in Lyons of a seat on the town council.[6] But the point is that the Left's failure to select a single minister or even deputy in twenty-five years--Begag's response (pp. 34-36) to those who accuse him of selling out--left the historic breakthrough to such supposedly walking caricatures of cosy elitism as Chirac and de Villepin.

Much better written, and more self-deprecating, than the average political memoir, *Un mouton dans le baignoire* is a useful, if *parti pris*, primary source for the end of the Chirac era and the beginning of the Sarkozy one. It is a very readable perspective on the nature of modern political power by an outsider--triple so given his ethnic background, being a writer rather than a professional politician, and a Lyonnais more comfortable talking to ordinary citizens than inside the Parisian political "cage." To say that Begag experienced government as a disappointment would be an understatement. Unprepared for the harshness of political life, tormented by stomach pains and lack of sleep, facing opposition accusations of being the government's token *Beur de service*, Begag had few friends inside the government either. Snubbed by colleagues too busy to keep their appointments with him, even at first mistaken for a security guard (pp. 38-40), Begag fell victim to the rivalry between Chirac and de Villepin on the one hand and Sarkozy on the other. When Begag criticised Sarkozy's use of the term *racaille* ("scum") as the *banlieues* burned in autumn 2005, Begag found himself frozen out by the Sarkozy camp (who, embarrassingly, dug out an old article by Begag which had also used the word *racaille*), denied media coverage, and his ideas stolen by other ministers. Nevertheless, the French state, in the shape of Chirac's speech on the "poison of discrimination", began to accept the analyses of *banlieue* sociologists such as himself (pp. 112-113).

Begag's tenacious determination on this issue thus bore fruit, marking an advance from previous official denial. (When Begag first met Chirac in 1995, Chirac had been genuinely surprised to discover that Begag was refused entry to nightclubs because of the colour of his skin! [7]) Later, Begag recovered his confidence, but remained marginalised. When he marched in the midst of the demonstration to protest against the antisemitic murder of Ilan Halimi in February 2006, Begag found his toes literally and symbolically trodden on by Sarkozy, who rushed straight to the front of the cortège for maximum publicity, not even recognising his government colleague (pp. 147-151). Begag is equally cutting about the Left, though, accusing the head of SOS Racisme of doing the same thing at a demonstration over an assault on a Turkish man in Nevers (pp. 265-266). He has little time for the anti-CPE demonstrators, accusing them of trying to stage a reenactment of May 1968 (pp. 174-175).

But Begag is above all an intellectual, and as fervent a believer in self-improvement through education as any nineteenth century republican. At that first meeting with Chirac, he criticised the president for commending the practice of martial arts to teach banlieue youth discipline: for Begag, it would be better to have a library in every HLM block. [8] Acclaimed by crowds of Beurs in Marseilles on an election walkabout with Bayrou in April 2007, Begag explained to reporters why he had finally left the government:

Malheureusement pour lui, les propos de Sarkozy ne sont pas tombés dans l'oreille d'un sourd, mais dans la plume d'un écrivain. [9]
Time will tell what further contributions the Shantytown Kid has to make to the Republic.

NOTES

[1] Begag has previously often addressed himself to such an audience: in 1999, for example I heard him talk at the Institut Français in London.

[2] Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: voices from the North African community in France*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997, p. 35.

[3] See Daniel A. Gordon, " 'A Nanterre, ça bouge': immigrés et gauchistes en banlieue, 1968 à 1971", *Historiens et Géographes*, no 385 (January 2004), pp. 75-86.

[4] Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1958.

[5] Saïfi and Mékachéra, though appointed in 2002, both held the more junior position of *secrétaire d'Etat*.

[6] Bruno Cassé, "M.Chirac face aux fractures sociales et ethnique des banlieues", *Le Monde*, 14 Oct 1995; "La reconnaissance d'Azouz Begag", *Le Monde*, 3 July 1996; Azouz Begag, "Lointain écho d'une Marseillaise à tue-tête", *Le Monde*, 18 Sep 1996; Sophie Landrin, "Azouz Begag, écrivain de gauche, convoité par la droite lyonnaise", *Le Monde*, 9 Jan 2001.

[7] Dominique de Guilledoux, "Votre histoire de boîte de nuit, ça me sidère", *Le Monde*, 14 Oct 1995.

[8] Guilledoux, "Votre histoire de boîte de nuit"

[9] Nathalie Raulin, "A Marseille, Begag soutien Bayrou, l'homme providentiel", *Libération*, 13 Apr 2007.

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