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RACIAL GASLIGHTING OR SELF-FULFILLING BELIEFS? RETHINKING POSTCOLONIAL EXPLANATIONS IN THE PARISIAN *BANLIEUES*

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Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2019 [1978]), postcolonial anthropology has increasingly explored how dominant groups employ stigma against ethnic minorities to uphold and reinforce existing power structures. Robert K. Merton's well-established concept of self-fulfilling beliefs posits how such subordination is perpetuated through a direct justification using derogatory stigma (1968: 475ff.). More recently, postcolonial philosophers Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst (2019) have proposed an alternative framework: 'racial gaslighting' analyses how stigma operates to conceal subordination and thereby sustain it. This paper is the first to critically compare the two models and demonstrates how social anthropology can analyse the persistence of subordination through stigmatisation beyond self-fulfilling beliefs, as racial gaslighting. It examines the ethnographic case of police violence and stigmatisation against Parisian *banlieue* residents in contemporary France. The analysis shows that, although French police officers may justify oppressive actions against *banlieue* residents through beliefs that render their violence self-fulfilling, actions are heavily informed by power interests, which racial gaslighting identifies as the underlying force sustaining them. The paper further discusses the implications of this for understanding *banlieue* residents' experiences of resistance, hegemonic power structures in France, and the potential for systematic change.

Keywords: self-fulfilling beliefs, racial gaslighting, postcolonial France, *banlieues*

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Introduction

On 30 June 2023, the UN Human Rights Office raised concerns with the French government about systematic racism and discrimination in the French police system (Shamdasani 2023). The Foreign Ministry of France replied shortly after:

> Any accusation of systematic racism or discrimination by the police in France is totally unfounded […] The forces of law and order deal with situations and acts of extreme violence with great professionalism (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2023, my translation).

On the same day, two of the biggest police unions in France posted a press release on X, responding to riots against police violence: they were 'fighting a war' ('*nous sommes en guerre*') against 'the dictates of these violent minorities' ('*le dictat de ces minorités violentes*'), 'savage hordes' ('*hordes sauvages*') and 'pests' ('*nuisibles*') (Alliance Police Nationale and UNSA Police 2023). The riots were initiated following the death of Nahel Merzouk on 27 June 2023, a 17-year-old boy from the Parisian suburb of Nanterre (Richardot 2024). He was shot by a police officer during a traffic stop, during which he was hit with rifle butts several times and threatened with a bullet to his head if he did not cut the engine (Boutros 2024: 15). His death was the third in 2023, and part of a larger history of police killings in traffic stops, with victims being to a large extent People of Colour and/or of Arab origin (Jabkhiro and Foroudi 2023). And yet, the Foreign ministry insisted: 'Any accusation of systematic racism or discrimination by the police in France is totally unfounded' (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2023).

As early as 1948, sociologist Robert K. Merton studied the enduring nature of racist domination in contemporary Western societies (Merton 1968: 477ff.). His examination spans merely 15 pages, using one concise framework of explanation:

> The self-fulfilling prophecy is in the beginning a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come *true* (Merton 1968: 477)

Actors internalise the stigma as true, enact it as such so that initial expectations 'come *true*' (Merton 1968: 477) or are 'real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). 'For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning' (Merton 1968: 477), domination over ethnic minorities is justified and hence perpetuated; systematic racism in the French police is publicly declared as 'totally unfounded' because the officers' oppression is seen as necessary in the face of 'extreme violence' that they provoked themselves.

The impact of Merton's framework cannot be underestimated. Formulating this in 1948, he shed light on the structural causes behind naturalised racist beliefs where other anthropologists still contributed to 'the birth of an anthropathology of "the American Negro"' (Tapper 1997: 269). Until today, his concise model has been cited in thousands of academic pieces (Wineburg 1987: 28), spanning sociology (e.g. Killian 1959), social psychology (e.g.

Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968), economics (e.g. Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton 2005) political science (e.g. Harvey 2022), and, *the* discipline thoroughly invested with domination contexts in its ongoing 'dark turn' (Ortner 2016: 47), social anthropology (e.g. Dozier 1951; Bourdieu 1991: 220ff.; Said 2019).

Over 70 years after Merton, however, postcolonial philosophers Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst asked again, 'How does white supremacy […] remain inextricably woven into the ideological fabric of the United States?' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 761). 'Racial gaslighting' is what they call their explanation, a term stemming from the 1944 feature film *Gaslight*, in which a husband secretly dims the lights in the house, making his wife Paula feel 'crazy' for seeing variations in lighting (Cukor 1944). Joining the new philosophical field of epistemic gaslighting research (e.g. McKinnon 2017, Berenstain 2020, Ruíz 2020), Davis and Ernst use the term to show how stigmatisation of minority groups does not *justify* but '*obfuscate* the existence of a white supremacist […] power structure' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 761, emphasis added); systematic racism is sold as 'totally unfounded' by the French government with reference to 'extreme violence', not to necessitate but to conceal the power-informed abusive violence enacted by the police.

Despite their different assumptions, self-fulfilling beliefs[2] and racial gaslighting have yet to be brought into conversation. Considering the abundance of social anthropological analyses on contexts of cultural power, domination, and their reproduction (Ortner 2016: 49ff.), the need for reliable and postcolonial-sensitive frameworks in these fields is apparent. I argue that racial gaslighting offers a lens for understanding the complexities of stigma-informed subordination that lie beyond the explanatory scope of Merton's self-fulfilling beliefs model. To develop this point, I place the two frameworks in dialogue, by applying them to the government-led and police-executed stigmatisation of Parisian *banlieue* residents in France, exemplifying how each interprets dimensions of the same phenomenon from a different perspective. Anthropologists have extensively analysed the 'territorial stigma' (Wacquant 1993: 375) attached to Parisian suburbs, *les banlieues*, spanning racism, xenophobia and socio-economic discrimination (Mbembe 2009: 48ff.; Tshimanga, Gondola and Bloom 2009: 5ff.; Slooter 2019: 10ff.; 47). More than being a textbook example of subordination through stigmatisation, the Nahel Merzouk case from 2023 exemplifies the actuality and decades-spanning endurance of these dynamics, making the French case particularly instructive for examining the mechanisms each model seeks to explain.

[2] Merton did not use the term 'beliefs' himself, but he grouped both the persistence of racial prejudice in the United States and the collapse of a bank triggered by depositors' expectations of failure under the heading of the self-fulfilling *prophecy* (Merton 1968: 477ff.). Yet only the latter example operates through the realisation of a temporal prediction, with depositors' initial beliefs prompting them to withdraw their savings, thereby causing the very bankruptcy they feared. In applying his model to racial prejudice, Merton instead highlighted how pre-existing assumptions shape behaviour in ways that reproduce and reaffirm those assumptions (Merton 1968: 478ff.) – an instance that hinges far less on a prediction being realised than on the recursive effects of entrenched beliefs. For this reason, I refer to 'self-fulfilling *beliefs*' in analysing racial stigmatisation in France, emphasising its grounding in persistent assumptions rather than prophecy.

La crise des *banlieues*

Racial gaslighting[3] and self-fulfilling beliefs are both explanatory concepts that were developed in contexts where stigmas – 'false definitions' or 'spectacles' – are constructed by dominant groups to perpetuate their superior positions in society (Merton 1968: 475ff.; Davis and Ernst 2019: 761ff.). Since the 1980s, anthropologists have examined how ethnic stereotypes particularly in colonial power contexts[4] serve to justify their own dominant ruling status (e.g. Todorov 1987; Mason 1990; Overing 1996) with Western systems 'constru[ing] the colonized as a population of degenerate types' (Bhabha 2004: 101). Edward Said provided the famous example of how the West constructed 'the Orient' to be 'aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' (Said 2019: 300), 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over [it]' (Said 2019: 3). In a similar manner, for Merton, false realities target the inferiority of out-groups, 'all those who are believed to differ significantly from "ourselves" in terms of nationality, race, or religion' (Merton 1968: 479). In racial gaslighting, it is 'spectacles' that are built on racist stereotypes and aim at pathologising ethnic minorities in light of upholding white supremacist power structures (Davis and Ernst 2019: 763f.).

These perspectives assume a definition of the dominant group drawing upon its capability to construct cultural ideology as objectified truth (Asad 1973: 14ff.; Sharma and Gupta 2006: 357ff.; Said 2019: 205ff.) Said builds on Gramsci's conception of 'hegemony' (Gramsci 2005: 5ff.), defining dominant groups in their capacity to construct leading cultural ideologies that uphold their ruling status (Said 2019: 7). Pierre Bourdieu emphasises the 'orthodoxic mode' of these cultural contents, as being the only 'acceptable way … of thinking and speaking the natural and social world' (Bourdieu 2013: 169). The stigma's universalised shape is understood – or 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 2013: 172) – in the realm of the stigma's unbroken universality. Knowledge about 'the Orient' had 'the epistemological status equal to that of historical chronology or geographical location' (Said 2019: 205), so that assigned inferiority was established as a naturalised truth (Said 2019: 7).

Merton's work on self-fulfilling beliefs builds on a similar analysis (notably made 30 years before Said's conceptualisation), also using assumptions about truth and power as the foundation for his framework to explain the persistence of subordination through stigmatisation. Where dominant group members 'produc[e] the very facts which [they] observe' (Merton 1968: 478), they enact the stigma's truth and hence perpetuate the subordinate position of 'the other'. It is the upholding of this stigma-as-truth that fuels its continued enactment and corresponding reproduction of domination through stigmatisation (Merton 1968: 483f.).

[3] Although constructed in the context of racial oppression against People of Colour, their framework is applicable, and has been applied, to different discriminatory domination contexts, also beyond race (e.g. Berenstain (2020) or Stark (2019) for women's gaslighting experiences in patriarchal societies). Since the stigma examined here entails a strong racist connotation, I will refer to the authors' original term, while suggesting a more general label of 'discriminatory gaslighting' for other contexts.

[4] Beyond the focus of this paper on 'othering' as part of the contemporary Western colonial gaze, 'the other' is constructed and applied in culturally diverse manners that do not have to be connected to subordination (e.g. Overing (1996) on Native Amazonian discourse). For an elaborate literature review on this, see Falen (2020).

In contrast to this convention for understanding, racial gaslighting offers a different perspective. The framework assumes that the objectified stigma is first and foremost not the mental basis for finding 'natural' confirmations for the existing power order but that it obscures power. Through objectifying dominated group members' 'actions or mental states [as] problematic' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 764), oppressive actions are not *justified* in light of the stigma but *detached* from being an outcome of power structures in the first place. And it is this obscuring of power that is analysed as the fuel behind the enacted reproduction and eventual persistence of domination through stigmatisation (Davis and Ernst 2019: 771). Gaslighting is hence 'put[ting] out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world', notably by contrast with the term's psychoanalytical application, in which the stigmatised are driven into psychological, rather than 'epistemic breakdown' (Pohlhaus 2020: 677).

Assessing both frameworks for the purposes of social anthropological analysis, an ethnographic example is inevitable. With his concept of 'territorial stigma', Loïc Wacquant (1993: 375) opened the academic discussion on the subordination of Parisian suburbs, *les banlieues* (according to Müller 2024: 213).

These residential areas came into being as a response to housing scarcity after the Second World War. The French government invested heavily in social housing units around Paris, building completely new neighbourhoods of large apartment blocks, *les cités*. Beginning with the 1980s, new immigration regulations encouraged migrants who already lived in France to move to these projects. Simultaneously, the so-called 'Barre Law' promised economic incentives for many former inhabitants from better-off financial backgrounds to aspire to home ownership outside the *banlieues*. Over time, the *banlieues* developed into central residential areas for vulnerable societal groups, especially immigrant and ethnic minorities. Such segregated living arrangements further worsened their already precarious situation, subjecting them to racial discrimination, low education levels, poverty, and unemployment (Slooter 2019: 33ff.).

Dismissing these factors as 'sociological excuses' (former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, cited in Fassin 2013: Fn. 32, 242), political leaders in the 1990s did not acknowledge the socioeconomic hardships of *banlieue* residents as part of the welfare state's responsibility. Driven by the political competition for votes, the 'real' issue identified especially by the political right were the security concerns stemming from these '*Zones Urbaine Sensibles'* – one of three spatial categories to identify degrees of security concerns institutionalised by the government in the mid-1990s (Slooter 2019: 46) – in which particularly young men of Colour and/or of Arab origin were represented as 'thugs/gangsters (*voyous*), scum (*racaille*) or drug traffickers (*trafiquants de drogues*)' (Slooter 2019: 53). The result was a shift in the political agenda that, continuing in 2025, prioritises addressing 'the security issue' over tackling systematic socioeconomic hardships (Fassin 2013: 44ff.; Slooter 2019: 59f.).

The content and racial connotation of 'the violent other', particularly in its targeting of youngsters of Arab origin, fits neatly into the dogmata Said identified in Western 'Orientalism'. With police officers having 'been inculcated with the idea that venturing into the *banlieues* means entering dangerous territory akin to a "jungle," whose residents are "savages"' (Fassin 2013: 168), they not only understand residents as 'aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' but the *banlieue* as 'at bottom something to be feared (...) or to be controlled' (Said

2019: 300f.). In June 2005, for instance, Nicolas Sarkozy famously announced his 'zero-tolerance' strategy against urban violence with the words of cleaning these areas with a *Kärcher*, a type of pressure washer: "'*nettoyer les cités au Kärcher*", meaning that he would "clean out" the housing projects, removing their "*racaille*" ("scum")' (Sarkozy 2005, cited in Garbin and Millington 2012: 2068).

Although abundant socio-historical examinations have confirmed this situation of subordination through stigma, detailed *ethnographic* accounts of how territorial stigmatisation plays out in reality are rare (Slooter 2019: 14). One of the most elaborate ethnographies that does exist comes from Didier Fassin. In his book *Enforcing order: an ethnography of urban policing* (2013), the social anthropologist provides a detailed ethnographic analysis of how discriminatory domination manifests in practice. Fassin spent 15 months, between May 2005 and June 2007 with officers of the *Brigade Anti-Criminalité* (BAC) (Fassin 2013: 29), a police unit established in 1994 in response to the 'supposedly worrying increase in crime' in the *banlieues* (Fassin 2013: 219). Apart from the numerous examples he gives of interactions between '*les jeunes des banlieues*' and anticrime squad officers, Fassin also analyses his observations as instances of self-fulfilling beliefs (explicitly Fassin 2013: 57). This provides a valuable source for how Merton's model is understood and applied in social anthropology.

Domination and 'honest mistakes'

During the 15 months Fassin spent with police officers of the anticrime squad he observed abundantly how officers treated residents with a 'spectacular deployment of public force' (Fassin 2013: 42), while the crimes were generally relatively minor. Disproportionally inflated police presence and physical violence were the norm in most operations Fassin took part in (Fassin 2013: 41f.; 63ff.). For example, in May 2005 he observed how residents had to endure an excess of physical police violence as a response to a noise complaint due to vehicle driving in a nearby park:

> Seeing their friend [the driver] in difficulty, a dozen teenagers who were in the vicinity rushed to his rescue and formed a threatening circle around the officers, who, outnumbered by their opponents, had to retreat and call for reinforcements. Once alerted, all the uniformed and anticrime squad patrols active that night swiftly arrived, overrunning the project as they searched for suspects. The police deployment was striking and brutal. On that spring evening, many children were at the playground, the youngest under the watchful gaze of their parents. In the ensuing disorder, a number were pushed. One officer, aiming to intimidate a nine-year-old he had judged insolent, put the barrel of his Flash-Ball [a non-lethal gauge weapon] to the boy's head. A mother who tried to shield her children was questioned aggressively. Horrified residents looked out of their windows as the police stormed the neighbourhood paths and the stairway of the buildings. The door to the apartment where the family of one of the suspects lived was broken down, the furniture overturned and several persons hurt, including the teenage sister of the young man being sought. She was doing her homework, and, as she came out of her room at the wrong

> moment, she was roughed up, ending the night in the hospital with a broken arm and a neck injury. Her brother – a well-known drug dealer – was finally arrested but released a few hours later, when the police realized he was blind and could not therefore have been involved in the initial altercation. (Fassin 2013: 39)

The exceptional reaction of the anticrime squad is apparent. From the framework of self-fulfilling beliefs, officers behaved in this manner due to their belief that 'the violent other' is real. This conviction becomes obvious in many examples. As Fassin overheard a conversation between a sergeant major and his colleague in the anticrime squad patrolling car one evening in May 2005:

> We were passing by a middle-class apartment complex. The sergeant major observed: 'See, I've never been in that complex in all the time I've worked here. I don't even know what it's called'. His colleague asked: 'Is it public housing?' Answer: 'Not necessarily, but there are hardly any blacks or Arabs.' Silence followed, then he pulled himself together: 'Not that there aren't any whites who wreck everything, well, little French kids who don't want to get left behind and copy their black and Arab buddies!' His colleagues laughed. His reasoning seemed irrefutable. (Fassin 2013: 146)

The trouble caused by 'blacks or Arabs' is classified in sharp distinction to what 'little French kids' do. His logic appears as a textbook self-fulfilling belief, that because People of Colour and/or of Arab origin are 'the violent other', anticrime squads focus most operations on them, leading him to 'cite (...) [this] course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning' (Merton 1968: 477). Similarly, in the noise complaint operation, the model of self-fulfilling beliefs interprets publicly displayed violence as empirical proof for the officers that 'the violent other' is indeed reality. It is a performance for the 'mainstream population […] that only a quasi-military expedition was capable of reestablishing the authority of the state in territories that threatened to escape it' (Fassin 2013: 42).

The belief in the necessity of countering (assumed) violence by young male residents of Colour and/or of Arab origin does not exclusively result in disproportionate exercises of physical violence. Anticrime squad officers also withhold them from filing complaints. Fassin elaborates on how a young man of North African origin was hit by a police bullet by accident when he returned from a soccer game and the crime squad agents had a dispute with a group of teenagers on the other side of the road (Fassin 2013: 138f.). When Fassin was surprised why the man never filed a complaint,

> the anticrime squad officers told […] [him] they had explained to the young man that, since he had 'little brothers who had already been in trouble', it was better for him to hold back. (Fassin 2013: 139)

Likewise, creating a 'habitus of humility' (Fassin 2013: 92) is a further means in the eyes of officers to keep 'the violent other' in line:

> One evening in the spring of 2005, uniformed officers patrolling on foot in a neighborhood of modest detached houses saw three boys of North African origin, about 15 years old, playing soccer peacefully in a small square. For no reason, they decided to conduct a stop and frisk. 'I live just over there, don't search me here', begged one of the teenagers; 'I don't want my mother to see.' But the three had to submit to the humiliating ordeal of the body inspection in full view of their neighbors and the boy's mother, who came to find out what he was being accused of. (Fassin 2013: 91)

By carrying out public frisks such as this that serve no real necessity, the presumed violence of 'the other' is enacted by the police, and thereby confirmed as reality. As a police captain who responded to Fassin asking her about why they use 'painful armlocks, throat compressions, suffocation and beatings' (Fassin 2013: 127) with suspects, summarised this mindset:

> '[I]n fact, it's just taking precautions', because 'if someone refuses to cooperate, we don't know to begin with if we're dealing with a dangerous criminal or just a driver without license.' (Fassin 2013: 127)

'Taking precautions' becomes both the result of, and the justification for, the belief in 'the violent other'. It is this internalised, circular self-affirmation that Fassin identifies as the underlying fuel for the anticrime squads to reproduce banlieue residents' subordination through oppressive actions. And it is the firm belief in the danger posed by *banlieue* residents that comprises the root of this vicious circle.

However, many of the ethnographic accounts Fassin provides do not fit this model of necessity. In the example of the three school kids, it is a questionable assumption that a peaceful, football-playing boy, fearful of what his mother might think and even willing to be searched in a discrete location, poses a threat on the ground, thereby justifying a full-body inspection in sight of everyone around.

On the other hand, one could argue that officers see themselves threatened by potential violence in *any* encounter with youngsters from the *banlieues* in light of the generalising stigma, rendering not only refusals of cooperation but all interactions a matter of 'just taking precautions' (Fassin 2013: 127). However, Fassin gives further accounts where the evoking of humiliation appears to exceed the level of intimidation enacted. The following scene occurred in November 2008, when youth workers called the police after a youngster started vandalising a Youth Judicial Protection hostel:

> Without greeting the adults or attempting to determine what had been happening, around 20 officers rushed up to the second floor where the teenagers had taken refuge and were pretending to be asleep. […] A female officer, claiming that a boy had insulted her from the hostel window, rushed up to one of the black youngsters and slapped him in the face. Her companions burst out laughing. One officer pointed out that this was not the youth in question and she had struck the wrong one, which set the law enforcement agents' laughter off even more.

> On the bedside table of one of the African boys was a box in which he kept small objects and souvenirs that were significant to him. His family name – Koné – was inscribed on the box. One of the officers picked up a marker and wrote the letters 'a' and 'n' over the 'é.' 'It's Conan the Barbarian!' he chuckled. The others found the joke hilarious. (Fassin 2013: 160f.)

In line with self-fulfilling beliefs, one would have to argue that the officer acted to intimidate, slapping the teenager she thought insulted her. However, the reaction of missing her actual offender resulted in a moment of laughter rather than a continued search for 'the dangerous culprit'. Classifying this as an act out of justified necessity in the face of danger seems inaccurate.

What this example lets shine through is that police officers do not necessarily enact a belief in the stigma but their position as dominant group members. As one police officer implicitly admits his own actions of illegal frisks:

> 'It's like a game. I'm the cop, I'm going to check you. You're the alleged culprit, you submit to a check. Of course, it doesn't serve any purpose, except to perpetuate the unhealthy atmosphere between the police and the youth.' (Fassin 2013: 92f.)

On the one hand, this officer mirrors the 'precaution-taking' captain from above, in the manner that they both assume the criminalisation of *banlieue* residents. Here, however, the officer admits that body searches are not driven by an assumption of violence, but by an understanding of sustaining existing 'unhealthy' dynamics and power games. Self-fulfilling beliefs fail to capture that although individuals state they act out of necessity in light of perceived danger, they do not always do so; some of them enact their dominant group status, reflecting a performance of unequal power rather than a necessity arising from the stigma.

Obscuring violence and 'the violent other'

Racial gaslighting assumes that reactions by dominant group members to 'the violent other' 'obfuscate the existence of a white supremacist […] power structure' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 761). Whereas Merton's concept of self-fulfilling beliefs explains the reproduction of subordination through assumptions that justify oppressive actions as necessary, this framework treats such explanations at most as spurious correlations and proposes a deeper, underlying mechanism: subordination may be *justified* by actors along their held beliefs but persists primarily because oppressive actions are *obscured* as practices of domination in the first place.

The examples from above can be embedded in this analytical perspective. After police officers arrested the blind young man while breaking his sister's arm in the example from above, one of the biggest police unions released a public statement the next day, writing about "'attacks of indescribable savagery" against the police, making reference to officers "set on [by residents] and seriously injured.'" (Fassin 2013: 39) Hence, far from talking about any form of oppressive action by officers that would be in need of justification, officers are even framed

as the victims of the situation. Fassin observed this self-staging of victimhood in different contexts. As a police union official told him:

> 'In the difficult outer cities, our colleagues' routine work has become impossible: they get metal pétanque boules thrown at them from the top of the apartment blocks, they're sprayed with gasoline. In those no-go zones, it's good to get in the habit of debriefings with a shrink so you don't lose it completely.' (Fassin 2013: 192)

The pathologisation of 'the violent other', living in 'no-go zones' and insidiously attacking officers, obscures that any application of power by the police happened in the first place. However, the framework agrees with Merton that there are cases where officers indeed justify their oppressive actions with the stigma. Racial gaslighting understands justification and obscuring not as mutually exclusive but in an interplay with each other. As the following situation during a traffic check in May 2005 illuminates:

> The driver and his passenger, both Turkish, were subjected to an identity check and body search. The former's papers were in order, but the latter had none. The driver, a young man, quietly pleaded with the officer: 'Look, he's just come to look for work, he hasn't done anything, he hasn't stolen anything.' The sergeant major, immovable, replied firmly: 'I'm not here to discuss the law, *I'm here to uphold it*.' […] On arrival at the precinct, we met the senior officer in charge of the control room, who commented mockingly: 'So, anticrime squad, you're going after illegal aliens now?' In a transparent allusion to the alleged invasion by immigrants to which he often referred in my presence, the sergeant major replied: '*I'm defending my country!*' (Fassin 2013: 147f., emphasis added)

The lens used by the officer in front of the suspect is that he must arrest him to 'uphold the law'. In line with Merton, domination is justified through the idea of him being a criminal. In conversation with his colleague, however, his reasoning for arresting the man is suddenly not a rationalised enactment of the law anymore, but a defence of 'his' country against 'the immigrant other'. For racial gaslighting, the criminalisation of the suspect first and foremost masks power enactment as a justification. It accordingly does not matter whether dominant group members obscure oppression intentionally or without awareness. What counts is that *any* justification of action through the pathologisation of 'the violent other' – in front of suspects like this man or in public statements – obscures its dominant power-informed nature.

Returning to the police officer who admitted the 'game' of illegal searches to actually not serve any purpose except perpetuating 'the unhealthy atmosphere between police and the Youth' (Fassin 2013: 93), Fassin adds the following observations:

> He continued for a moment, expanding on this idea of the uselessness and even harmfulness of identity checks, but suddenly stopped, probably judging that he had gone a little too far in confiding to a stranger and, moreover, a researcher. 'Identity checks can be useful sometimes,' he said; 'If a crime is committed and we realize afterwards that the individual we've checked was present, that makes him a suspect.' (Fassin 2013: 93)

He shows his two lines of arguing in the same manner as the officer above; the official story of necessity and danger, just like his colleague, obscures the underlying maintenance of the anticrime squad's power superiority.

Accordingly, violence against *banlieue* residents, such as putting a Flash-Ball to a 9-year-old's head or defacing a teenager's personal items, cannot be assumed to happen as 'honest mistakes' under the false assumption that violent self-defence or intimidation are necessary. Whereas the idea of self-fulfilling beliefs would classify officers' reactions to potential danger as the justifying fuel for the persistence of oppression, racial gaslighting embeds them as a means to obscure oppression, opening the possibility for officers to not primarily enact a stigma, but superiority belief.

'Damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't'

The question arises how both models deal with the other side of the story: the experiences of dominated group members when subject to oppressive actions. Against how his model is usually applied (e.g. Rist 1970; Zulaika 2009; Glover, Pallais and Pariente 2017),[5] in Merton's initial definition, dominated groups do not necessarily have to enact the assigned stigma for the belief to be self-fulfilling. Rather, subordinates are caught in a 'damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't process' (Merton 1968: 480), in which whatever they do, the dominant group's virtues are *always* regarded as the out-group's vices (Merton 1968: 483f.). What dominated group members eventually internalise is not 'what they are' but 'what they are damned for' in the eyes of society.

Fassin picks up on this and fixes *banlieue* residents' understanding of their virtues as vices with 'know[ing] they only have the right to remain silent' (Fassin 2013: 92). He gives examples for this internalisation: on one of his visits at the Youth Judicial Protection hostel, Alassane, a 16-year-old boy of Malian origin, had become subject to police violence earlier that day. He was approached by two officers who asked to see his identity card, and, not having it on him, he ran back to his hostel room to retrieve it. The officers interpreted this as a flight attempt, although he came back with his ID (Fassin 2013: 142). One of the youth workers described the scene that followed:

> 'They were so violent I got involved. They were shouting at him. Stuff like: "I'm going to kneecap you," several times. And then "You're a failure in your family, you're a failure at school, little faggot." It was so violent, what they were shouting, it was incredible.' (Fassin 2013: 142)

When Fassin joined, the youth workers were trying to encourage the boy to file a complaint:

[5] Many scholars do not even cite Robert K. Merton as the father of the self-fulfilling prophecy (or belief), instead attributing it to Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen (Wineburg 1987: 36, fn. 2). In their social psychological study on how teachers' expectations form the test results of marginalised students, they framed the truth-becoming of beliefs in the one-to-one realisation of the in-group's expectation in the out-group's behaviour, leading many scholars nowadays to see this as a condition for the framework. (Wineburg 1987: 28ff.)

> But the boy was clearly reluctant to do so, and although he seemed distressed by the blows, the curses and especially the insulting comments, he was minimizing them: 'No it's nothing, it doesn't matter. – I don't agree, you mustn't leave it at that, you have to make a complaint.' (The adolescent, getting angry): 'Yeah, if I had been by myself, I would have hit him. I was had. – No, you were right to behave that way, otherwise they'd have taken you into custody. But that means we have to do something as well […]' (The boy, stubbornly): 'No, it doesn't matter, it's in the past, it's done. […] There's no point!' […] He swallowed his frustration and rage. (Fassin 2013: 143)

In the interpretation of the concept of self-fulfilling beliefs, Alassane internalised that the only action available to him was to remain silent, and so he did. Dominated group members are assumed to regard their scope of action as limited to this 'damned-if-they-do-and-don't' arena.

It is this internalisation that allows Merton and Fassin to focus on institutional mechanisms as the drivers of change, effectively excluding the actions of dominated group members from the possibility of disrupting their ongoing subordination (Merton 1968: 488ff.; Fassin 2013: 228f.); '[t]he systematic condemnation of the out-grouper continues largely *irrespective of what he does*' (Merton 1968: 482; emphasis in the original), concludes Merton. '[I]t is […] a policy rather than individuals that needs to be analysed', is how Fassin ends his analysis (2013: 228).

Merton's assumption that residents are limited in their ability to remain silent already appears doubtful when looking at Alassane's reaction: 'if I had been by myself, I would have hit him' (2013: 143). Likewise, even the encouragement by youth workers to file a complaint counters this assumption of passive acceptance.

Anthropologists have widely agreed with what James C. Scott phrases as subordinate groups' reactions 'to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites' (Scott 1990: 136). In contrast to Fassin, conflict researcher Luuk Slooter captures this 'vast territory' in his monograph *The making of the banlieue* (2019). Having spent nine months between May 2010 and August 2011 in 4000*sud*, one of the four neighbourhoods of the North Parisian *banlieue* La Courneuve (Slooter 2019: 84f.), he provides numerous ethnographic examples of residents' vast variety of reactions to the police, the government, and social structures in France more broadly.

He picks up on what Fassin and Merton see as the only possible form of reaction and shows how remaining silent is just one of several ways in which individuals navigate the assigned stigma. In an interview with Hassan, a 27-year-old resident of 4000*sud* in July 2010, this understanding becomes apparent:

> 'Okay I am gonna tell you something that probably carries too far […] Have you heard of the Shoah? […] The Germans that put the Jews in the ghetto? This is exactly the same. Only the barbed wire is missing. We live here together. We will die here together. That's how it is. Guys in the neighbourhood don't feel French. They know that they are different, even though almost all of these boys have the French nationality.' (Slooter 2019: 181)

At first glance, Hassan, like Alassane in Fassin's example, has internalised his lack of right to speak up. He knows he is 'the other', or 'different' despite his passport, and assumes 'we will die here together', thus feels he has to remain silent. This reaction however stems not from the internalisation of what is a vice but from an understanding that it is an *assigned* racist stigma, in his drastic comparison to the antisemitic genocide by the Nazi German regime. 25-year-old resident and youth worker Moussa, in discussion with Slooter and his friend Hamza, exemplifies this level of reflection even more drastically:

> 'Maybe we look like gangsters...' Moussa points to Hamza and himself '[…] with my jacket, he with his hoody, but we are not. What about you?' Moussa looks at me. 'Didn't you think it was very dangerous before you came here? And what do you think now? Maybe you have seen something. Minor crimes. It's not all the time the case. And it happens everywhere. Even in politics. Sarkozy also steals, but he does it in such a way that nobody sees it.' (Slooter 2019: 174)

More than that, Slooter observed that it was common knowledge among residents that the police and the government were primarily responsible for keeping 'the violent other' alive. As Hassan continues his elaborations:

> 'I distrust a guy with a tie more than a guy with a hoody. You know what I mean? The man with the tie uses difficult words, an incomprehensible language, but in the meantime he knows exactly where he goes. Humans are bad. Humans are bad. We are here to clean up the shit of the Whites. That's how I see it...' (Slooter 2019: 182)

Although he is like Alassane in accepting this fate, he does not do so out of internalisation of what is 'damned by the in-group' but because he believes he cannot escape the assignment of the stigma by the men 'with the tie'. In other words, both Moussa and Hassan understand their lowly position with respect to power, far from having unreflectively internalised that 'they are not allowed to speak up'.

Against Merton, Slooter accordingly demonstrates how residents not only connect the dominant group's power superiority to stigma ascription but indeed let action follow. Especially by showing themselves overtly present in the neighbourhood, with visibility being 'emphasized by big Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses, an expensive Adidas shirt, new [trainers] and the correct up-to-date haircut', some 'young people identify themselves as tough and cool and their neighbourhood as (potentially) dangerous and threatening' (Slooter 2019: 184). Slooter elaborates on their common 'routines of surveillance', in which youngsters 'allow and prohibit the presence of particular people' and thereby '*police* and discipline ''their neighbourhood''' (2019: 143; emphasis added). As he describes one of the many encounters of surveillance in June 2010, when he walked down a street past a group of five boys around 16 or 17:

> They fall silent when I pass by. Somewhat uneasy with the situation, I nod a greeting. Move along. After ten seconds, one of them shouts: 'Eh!' And then louder 'EH!!!' I turn around. One of the guys is coming to me, still holding a

> plastic tray with French fries in his hands. He has a downy moustache, sleep in his eyes and asks aggressively:
> 'Are you a *keuf* [slang for a cop]?'
> 'No, I am not'.
> 'So, you are not a *keuf*?'
> 'No'
> 'What are you doing here?'
> 'I live here'
> 'Where?'
> 'There' (*I point to the Leader Price*).
> 'Where is there?'
> 'Next to the Leader Price'.
>
> In an attempt to calm him down, I say that I come from the Netherlands. To no avail.
>
> 'Are you fucking with me?'
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'Shut the fuck up!! Fuck off!!'
>
> The guy spit on the ground, his saliva lands just before my feet. He walks back to his friends. (Slooter 2019: 91f.)

Against assuming a passive submission to the police's wants, these youngsters could not care less about the vices assigned to them. Beyond Hassan's and Alassane's recognition of the stigma's origin in the power position of the 'man with the tie', they are resisting the dominant power position of '*keufs*', in light of their knowledge that the stigma of 'the violent other' is ascribed by them in the first place.

This is not the only form of resistance to the subordination through stigmatisation Slooter observed. The municipality of La Courneuve launched an extensive campaign against *banlieue* inequality, in which Slooter's interview partners contributed through a variety of actions, e.g. releasing rap songs about daily life experiences on social media, organising demonstrations or founding associations to improve the neighbourhood (Slooter 2019: 179). He describes how residents came together for an event called *Ma Courneuve* organised by citizens and the municipality in June 2010:

> There are belly dancers with oriental music; an old man reads his favorite poems; rappers give an ode to La Courneuve; and a boy reads out the love letter that he wrote for the girl he is secretly in love with. At the end of the evening, they all come together on the stage and sing: […]
>
> *My Courneuve,*
> *I am proud of it,*
> *And too tired*
> *To always justify myself for living here.* (Slooter 2019: 176)

Such actions seem to question Merton's claim that bottom-up change is close to impossible – because dominated group members remain silent knowing that their 'systematic

condemnation […] continues largely *irrespective of what he does*' (Merton 1968: 482; emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, given the continued persistence of the belief in 'the violent other' despite residents' reflections and actions, there must be an additional reason why bottom-up change remains so difficult.

'Good echoing'

Racial gaslighting does not assume that resistance to stigmatisation necessarily collapses under the circular reasoning of in-group actors. Rather, what is crucial is that, 'for those who are aware of racial gaslighting, it can be almost impossible to combat their pathologisation by the dominant narrative, due to the ubiquitous nature of white supremacy' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 764).

Firstly, the model acknowledges that members of dominated groups can indeed be aware of the stigma being assigned and the power-informed gaslighting process itself. 'Sarkozy also steals, but he does it in such a way that nobody sees it', says Moussa (Slooter 2019: 174). 'The man with the tie uses difficult words […] but in the meantime he knows exactly where he goes', observes Hassan (Slooter 2019: 182). Or, as 23-year-old rap artist Michel reflects even more clearly on the stigma assignment: 'There is a *will* to show it like that. Whose will? Politicians. The media. But the biggest gangsters don't live in La Courneuve.' (Slooter 2019: 173, emphasis in the original).

However, the approach does not assume this level of reflection to be generalisable for all dominated group members, confirming Scott's assumption of a 'vast territory' of actors' reactions (1990: 136). Building on Davis and Ernst, Cynthia Stark exemplifies how, in Western patriarchal societies, women at times struggle to reflect on their own pathologised subordination. She embeds contexts into the framework of discriminatory gaslighting in which women express that victims of sexual assault are

> […] perhaps making a big deal out of nothing or that the boys should be allowed to make one mistake. They are tempted to laugh or express outrage along with others when women make allegations of mistreatment, yet they also feel a nagging discomfort in doing so. (Stark 2019: 231)

In light of this acknowledgement, instead of assuming inaccurately a generalised non-reflective internalisation, racial gaslighting is concerned with showing why some dominated group members are 'knowers' (as Hassan, Moussa or Michel) and others are not (as in Stark's case). Gaile Pohlhaus elaborates on how although dominated groups lack the hegemonic power to establish societal definitions of reality, they can still engage in the same practices of 'echoing' within 'plausibility structures' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 174), as police officers do when spending their workdays with like-minded colleagues. '[S]urvival echoing counters epistemic gaslighting by providing support for beliefs to those under conditions of systematic and structural epistemic gaslighting'; it is the '[f]inding and maintaining [of these] sources of good echoing' that are critical for remaining knowers under domination through stigmatisation (Pohlhaus 2020: 682).

Coming back to Slooter, examples such as youngsters collectively claiming the *banlieues* as 'their' neighbourhoods or residents gathering to sing songs about '*Ma Courneuve*', reveal sources of echoing that fit the framework. Racial gaslighting opens up the scope for analysing the degree of reflection of *banlieue* residents as an outcome of 'survival echoing', conducted in its own 'plausibility structures' within communities, i.e. institutions, event formats, and social networks.

Secondly, racial gaslighting acknowledges that bottom-up change is still 'almost impossible' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 764). This is, however, not because dominated groups do not resist, but, in light of gaslighting's mechanisms, 'due to the ubiquitous nature of white supremacy' (Davis and Ernst 2019: 764). Beyond the scope of self-fulfilling beliefs, Alassane might as well have followed his youth workers' advice and filed a complaint. This act of resistance would likely have failed regardless, because even had he explained that he was called 'a failure in your family, […] little faggot' (Fassin 2013: 142), the judicial system would probably have interpreted this not as a form of power informed oppression but as an act of necessity attributable to his categorisation as 'the violent other'.

Whereas Alassane's case remained hypothetical, in one court proceeding Fassin examined, a *banlieue* resident of Turkish origin refused to remain silent. He had been beaten to the point of hospitalisation by police officers who believed he had insulted them. The sergeant major responsible was questioned in court about a statement he had made to his squad minutes before they left the car to commence their operation: 'We lost the Algerian War. 40 years ago we chickened out. We're not going to do it again today. Take no prisoners: it's no holds barred!' (Fassin 2013: 121). Defending himself in court, he argued:

> 'But it wasn't meant at all in a racist way. Anyway I've lived in an Arab environment for 30 years. My first wife was an Arab, and my second one is too. I really said that to relax the younger officers, because some of them were quite wound up.' (Fassin 2013: 121)

A classic case of racial gaslighting, his enactment of structural police racism is detached from being oppressive in any way and instead reframed as a necessary response to the violence stemming from *banlieue* residents – the pathological explanation for why his young protégés were afraid. Even the public prosecutor confirmed in the end, 'We're all aware how difficult this job is, the incredible conditions in which police interventions take place' (Fassin 2013: 123). Eventually, the officers got convicted with minor penalties that were never enforced (Fassin 2013: 124). As the gaslighting approach explains, resistance against stigma subordination is undermined because it is not acknowledged as such in the first place.

Crucially, gaslighting does however not equate the status of knowers with resistance. Alassane's cry of 'There's no point!' (Fassin 2013: 143) and Hassan's resignation – 'We will die here together' (Slooter 2019: 181) – both reveal moments of reflection, yet neither translates such reflections into action. Gaslighting researchers thereby stress that those being pushed into 'epistemic breakdown' (Pohlhaus 2020: 677), through denial and discrediting of their experiences of oppression, for which they are instead blamed, is a form of 'white supremacist violence' and has to be acknowledged as such (Davis and Ernst 2019: 771). The framework embeds Alassane's and Hassan's reactions as forms of suffering, stemming from

obscuration and pathologisation. In addition to resistance being hindered from success through being obscured, it is this despair and frustration stemming from gaslighting acts of concealment that prevent resistance in many cases from happening in the first place.

Whereas Merton sees change as possible only through transformed institutions – while ignoring the very good reasons why these institutions are not being changed by the group in hegemonic power – gaslighting examines the concrete hindrances bottom-up resistance is confronted with. The outlined processes sustaining oppression function precisely because they remain obscured. Deconstructing these mechanisms as racial gaslighting hence undermines the very conditions that give them their force, enabling a clearer understanding of how they may be countered – through institutional change *and* bottom-up resistance.

Conclusion

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote, 'After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom […] must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies.' (Said 2019: 6) How social anthropologists can capture this more formidable something, is what I attempted to exemplify in this paper. I showed how French anticrime officers operate in a structural world that 'their kind' created in the first place, informed by the hegemonic power that is reproduced through it. It is this reality that postulates, two days after a 17-year-old boy from the *banlieues* is shot in a traffic control: 'Any accusation of systematic racism or discrimination by the police in France is totally unfounded' (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2023).

I argue that the persistence of subordination through stigmatisation should be analysed not just as self-fulfilling beliefs, but more within the framework of racial gaslighting. The ethnographic examples demonstrated that (a) Merton's conceptualisation of actors who justify oppressive actions through their belief in the truth of stigma does not adequately explain the persistence of structures of subordination, whereas racial gaslighting accounts for the power-laden nature of these contexts, arguing that such structures endure primarily because oppressive actions are obscured as practices of domination. The vicious circle fuelling this continuous obscuring is (b) rooted in the fact that the hegemonic power to establish stigma also entails the power to structurally maintain it. This watertight concealment of subordination through stigma is (c) the reason why bottom-up change is as difficult, and power structures as persistent. Accordingly, racial gaslighting embeds mere collections of lies into dominant groups' formidable capacity to obscure oppressive actions by using stigma as a rationale.

Merton's theory is of course not wrong. That initial hegemonic definitions of reality are sustained by their capacity to shape individuals' perception of confirming evidence, is a fundamental assumption across the social sciences. It is this profound nature that makes the model simultaneously insufficient for analysing the purposes he developed it for. This highlights the need to critically reflect on the contexts in which social anthropologists apply Merton's theory and to always keep our eyes open for new perspectives – even if they stem from a fictitious film character in the 1940s messing with gaslights.

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