Abstract

The outbreak of the November 2005 riots in France brought new attention to debates over the situation of underprivileged areas. This article offers a new perspective on this question. Rather than analyzing what happened in these territories, I examine how this social problem was constructed, publicized, and thus became an object of public policy since the end of the 1980s. I show that the political focus on underprivileged areas was not primarily or only an effect of increasing problems on the ground, such as unemployment, poverty or juvenile delinquency. The focus instead resulted from and contributed to a fundamental restructuring of the French Welfare State, by authorizing a recentering of public action on specific urban spaces — rather than across the nation—and on social ties, rather than economic reality. This constructivist study seeks to understand why politicians, experts or civil servants have associated the question of “underprivileged areas” with certain problems (like lack of communication and the weakening of social ties) while ignoring others (such as ethnic discrimination).

Keywords

Underprivileged areas, Social problem, Welfare state, Constructivism, Activism.