I don’t really feel Parisian … Courneuvian? Yes … The mentalité is different. When we go to Paris, they look at us in a different way… they think: ‘they are not from here’… They are not like us. They live in Paris, we are living in La Courneuve. It’s very different… (Slimane, 17)

**Introduction**

The peripheralisation of poverty in Paris began with Haussmann’s renovations in the 19th century and came to a head with the construction of mass housing (the grands ensembles) on the northern and eastern peripheries of the city in the 1960s. The latter arguably represents the purest example of how a metropolis can be re-centred, with the preservation and pacification of a historic centre and business district and the expulsion to the periphery of the working class and immigrants who are denied the right to the city and right to use of the centre (Lefebvre 1996: 34). For Hazan (2010: xiii), contemporary exclusion from the city is very much in line with the history of Paris, in which, ever since the great confinement of 1657 that locked up the poor, deviant and mad in the Hôpital Général, ‘the combined action of town plannars, property speculators and police has never stopped pressing the poor, the “dangerous classes” from the centre of the city.’ Paris has led the way in establishing a centre–periphery relation that appears a perfection of the practices of exclusion that are now common in London and New York.

The term ‘state-space’ is used here in the sense outlined by Brenner et al. (2003: 6) to refer to the historical territory and place-specific ways in which the state and its institutions are strategically mobilised to organise and regulate the social and economic relations of advanced capitalist
society. This definition builds upon Lefebvre’s (1991: 9) argument that ‘each state claims to produce a space wherein something is accomplished – a space, even, where something is brought to perfection [...]’. Yet even where social relations can be territorialised or homogenised in space, as is the intention with the grands ensembles of the banlieues, established grids of state-spatial regulation are frequently unsettled, particularly under conditions of socio-economic instability or systematic crisis (Brenner et al. 2003: 10).

After a brief geohistory of La Courneuve, Paris, the stigma that is attendant to the state-space of the banlieues is scrutinised. The aim then is to uncover how residents negotiate, live with or resist this stigma. Finally, the ‘post-colonial’ is considered as a useful metaphor to help make sense of resistance to the symbolic ignominy of the exclusion of colonial ‘immigrants’ from the city. It is suggested that the post-colonial helps make sense of the present by establishing continuities with the past. This chapter draws on qualitative data collected in La Courneuve during 2008, where twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with ordinary Courneuviens, youth workers, community activists, artists and council officials.1

**Geohistories**

From the second half of the 19th century until the end of the Second World War the town of La Courneuve, situated to the north-east of the city, was a mix of industry and agriculture, with factories lying side by side with bean plantations. During the 1960s, when Paris could no longer meet the demands of a rapidly rising population, La Courneuve, like many other north-eastern suburbs of the city, was designated a ‘zone à urbaniser en priorité’ (ZUP), an area to be urbanised quickly. In fact, the housing crisis in Paris was so acute that during the 1950s much of the surrounding area resembled a shanty town (or ‘bidonville’). These makeshift dwellings were built mainly by Portuguese, Italian, and later Spanish and Algerian immigrants who had arrived in numbers in Paris to swell the post-war urban workforce. Unsurprisingly, native residents and politicians viewed bidonvilles as a blight on the city. The camps were associated with ‘dangerous and dirty immigrants’ and in parliamentary debates the terms bidonville and ‘foreigners’ were used interchangeably. As de Barros (2004: 67) explains, while officially complainants ‘insisted on the fact that the shantytown was a danger to them and to their children, in private they complained about the “Arabs” themselves’. 