

RAP MUSIC AND FRENCH SOCIETY AS VIEWED BY YOUTH OF THE "CITÉS"¹

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Intense controversy has been raging over juvenile delinquency in recent months. Attention is mostly focused on adolescents from reputedly difficult neighbourhoods, where offending and violence are allegedly increasingly systematic, and the individuals or gangs who commit them are increasingly young. Researchers at the CESDIP have been studying this phenomenon, and they have been concerned in particular with determining the limits of its measurement² or with observing offending, and more generally, "at-risk" behaviour, *in situ*³. The present study, intended as a complement to that research, takes a closer look at the way young people who are living in those outlying neighbourhoods view French society, through rap music, their most important means of expression over the past decade.

Rap groups as spokespeople for their neighbourhoods

Rap is now a social, cultural, media and commercial phenomenon of the first order⁴. As an indication, the latest survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture in 1997 reports that 28 % of 15-19 year-olds listen to rap music, and these youths are not all from the lower classes, or among the least educated⁵. With the popularity of groups such as MC Solaar and IAM, it is a fact that the phenomenon is no longer confined to those relegated neighbourhoods (prevalently in the Paris area) from which practically all of the early rappers originated. Today, the groups themselves, as well as consumers and distributors of Rap generally distinguish at least two trends: "Hardcore" rap and "Cool" rap. Rappers and most listeners agree that it is only the former that continues to embody the socially critical edge that was so instrumental in introducing this type of music in France in the late 1980s⁶. At present, it is still hardcore rap that is most listened to and taken as a model by young people in the relegated neighbourhoods⁷. It is because of this very close bond between the groups and their public that rappers view themselves as spokespeople for their social group: "loud-speakers" (as NTM puts it), "journalists" or "sentinels" (IAM). The Démocrates D group called their first record (in 1995) "The voice of the people". The explicit aims of these rappers are to

represent (their family, their gang, their neighbourhood, their suburb, the oppressed), to bear witness (to the bare facts of everyday life and the revolt of young people in the "cités"), and to stimulate awareness.

It was this "Hardcore" rap that we investigated, then, mostly through a collection of over 200 songs written by ten groups over the decade now coming to a close. The present paper presents a résumé of the themes they have in common, as determined by content analysis, without going into the differences between the various groups.

Society is corrupted by money

Far from whining away about a world whose workings they do not understand, rappers present an overall view pervaded by revolt against an unjust, racist society, corrupted by money. NTM, for instance, makes this general statement⁸:

*"Everything's for sale, everything can be bought / Even governments
Are ready to lick asses / For money
Turning coat / Depending on the weather
Weapons, apparently
Have priority over / People's lives
The world is full of bombs / that will dig our tombs
Now you know what they do with the dough
That would be enough to end famine in Africa"*
(*"L'argent pourrit les gens"/"Money corrupts people"*, 1991).

Two domains particularly personify the perverse reign of money: television and politics. The former is perceived as an entirely commercial world in which artificial stars parade around:

*"Too many faithless, talentless people, string-pulling above all
Unfortunately for them, they walk ass first
Systematically, automatically, purely and simply
Manipulated by the wind, by the smell of money, read my lips,
You feel it, I feel it, and yet, that's the way it is
That's the way the sham goes"*
(Suprême NTM, "Sur 24 pistes (remix)"/"On 24 tracks", 1993).

The latter is perceived as a world dominated by corruption, and is rejected all the more violently since politicians are supposed to have the power to make things change.

*"Corruption is a weapon not to be neglected
If you want to succeed in politics
Remember, swindling is a "technique" / An illicit tactic
And it's always the same, the pillars of the system, that get the
benefits" (ibid.).*

Vital feelings of injustice and domination

Analysis of the lyrics also points to the vital dimension represented by the denunciation of injustice, domination and oppression. According to Bachmann and LE GUENNEC, "the symbo-

¹ This term is used to designate those suburban housing projects – frequently built in the 1960's – that serve as territorial identity for their young inhabitants.

² AUBUSSON de CAVARLAY (B.), La place des mineurs dans la délinquance enregistrée, *Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure*, 1997, 29, pp. 17-38.

³ ESTERLE-HEDIBEL (M.), *La bande, le risque, l'accident*, l'Harmattan, 1997.

⁴ For an overview, see BOUCHER (M.), *Rap, expression des lascars*, l'Harmattan, 1998.

⁵ DONNAT (O.), *Les pratiques culturelles des Français*, La Documentation française, 1998, p. 160.

⁶ On the history of Rap music, and more generally of the Hip Hop culture, see DUFRESNE (D.), *Yo ! Révolution Rap*, Ramsay, 1991 ; BAZIN (H.), *La culture hip hop*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1995 ; BOCQUET (J.-L.), PI-ERRE-ADOLPHE (P.), *Rap ta France*, Flammarion, 1997.

⁷ DESVERITE (J.-R.), GREEN (A.-M.), Le rap comme pratique et moteur d'une trajectoire sociale, in GREEN (A.-M.), (Ed.), *Des jeunes et des musiques. Rock, rap, techno...*, l'Harmattan, 1997, pp. 186-187.

⁸ Translator's note: The French lyrics have been translated here mostly for their content: I unfortunately make no pretention of having written rhyming English rap lyrics that would reflect the rhythm of the French.

ism, in the universe of the suburbs, is one of a manichean divide : the sad, humiliated poor against the powerful, envied rich. On the one hand the socially dangerous, and shame. On the other, those who have everything, wealth and success⁹. This judgement confirms a state of affairs that is absolutely self-evident for rappers. It should be added that there are two closely linked dimensions to injustice and domination, as they see it : material poverty and being the children of immigrants.

Material poverty is measured by the contrast between their families and the families of other people living in the same country, the same city, sometimes in a close-by neighbourhood. Equal opportunities is a modern lie :

"Why fortune and misfortune, why was I born with empty pockets, why are his full of bread

Why did I see my dad go off to work on a bike

Just before his father, in grey three-piece suit and BMW

(IAM, "Nés sous la même étoile"/"Born under the same star", 1997).

*"It sure all began / The day I was born
The day I didn't meet the good fairy
Who would've made me / What I'm not
One of the people I envy sometimes
People who life gave a chance"*

(NTM, "J'appuie sur la gâchette"/"I pull the trigger", 1993).

But the injustice that strikes the poor is not a fatality. Behind the material injustices, rappers see a system of social segregation aimed specially at the youthful descendants of immigrants :

*"Always the same who win,
always the same who lose [...]"*

France is organising a plot against foreigners

Everything is being done to make us go under, everything is premeditated

From anti-integration schools to the first make-believe guidance

From the pseudo-jobs to the advice to slave-drivers looking for workers for the country

Don't ask questions : it's automatic"

(Rocca, "Sous un grand ciel gris"/"Below a vast, grey sky", 1997).

This two-sided feeling of discrimination naturally peaks in the perception of relations with the police.

Police oppression and the iniquity of the justice system

The role of police interventions (not to speak of their violence) in triggering "urban rioting" is well known. But what exacerbates the resentment of these painfully conscious young people more than anything else is the banality of everyday police checks. Many songs contain realistic descriptions of these repeated, humiliating identity checks complete with body searches (see, for instance, NTM, "Police", 1993 and KDD, "Aspect suspect" ("Suspect-looking"), 1998). In "En dehors des lois" ("Outlaw"), (1997), Rocca tells how a handful of friends are subjected to a police check, arrested and held in police custody because some of them were in possession of hashish (it is important to note that young people view hashish as an absolutely ordinary substance, of a *different nature* from real "drugs", to which the weak succumb, at a high price : depravity¹⁰). He quotes the threats and racist insults inflicted¹¹, and concludes that the system is iniquitous.

⁹ BACHMANN (C.), LE GUENNEC (N.), *Violences urbaines. Ascension et chute des classes moyennes à travers cinquante ans de politique de la ville*, Albin Michel, 1996, p. 355.

¹⁰ See, for example, Sens Unik, "Le film de ta propre vie" ("The film of your own life"), 1991 ; Rocca, "Garçon" ("Boy"), 1997.

¹¹ On the racist behaviour and representations of police officers, see WEVORKA (M.), *La France raciste*, Seuil, 1992, pp. 219-276 ;

The police, symbol of their domination and catalyst of their "hate", is all-inclusively perceived as the absolute oppressor, with complete license to kill, with full impunity. The group Assassin, for instance, refers to a young Beur¹² killed by two special motorcycle troopers (known as "voltigeurs") during the 1986 student demonstrations in Paris. Other lyrics speak of a black man beaten up in the middle of the street by several police officers, whose acquittal triggered rioting in Los Angeles in 1992 :

"We don't want to end up like Malek Oussekiné [...]"

Bing, bang, the police is like a gang

The state assassinates, Rodney King, a close call

Bing, bang, peace to all its victims !"

(*"L'Etat assassine"/"The state assassinates"*, 1995).

Logically, the same group then denounces the iniquitous justice system that loads charges on young violent offenders, censures rap groups (in the case of the "NTM affair") but sets the police officers who commit violence free and hardly ever punishes corrupt politicians. Over and beyond the question of racism, what is denounced here is class justice.

"The justice system's criteria are clear

80 % of prisoners are workers, jobless or homeless"

(Assassin, "L'Etat assassine"/"The State assassinates", 1995).

And also :

"Car thieves aren't the worst bastards,

The real crooks have their faces on the front page of the papers"

(KDD, "Zone rouge"/"Red zone", 1998).

Understandably, then, the rappers' imagery puts the different aspects together to form a logical system : an unjust, racist social order maintained by politicians and protected by the police and the justice system. Given this overall system, urban public policies do not have much to say for themselves, and are sometimes even viewed as token concessions aimed at perpetuating this logic :

"Far from real life, politics

Much too busy taking care of illegal residents

And then too, what can they do, brothers

You can't be social-minded / and make money

The walls of the project have been repainted / To make it look good [...]"

They cool our heads with basketball courts

I think they really need eyeglasses at town hall"

(KDD, "Galaxy de glaces"/"Galaxy of mirrors", 1998).

A pessimistic view of the suburbs

While the outside world is viewed as belonging to the privileged, who make every effort to maintain young people, when they are poor or of immigrant origin, on the outskirts, rappers do not have a prettified view of the "cités", by any means. The power relations pervade everyday life there.

"The next day ? That's not the problem, we live from day to day

We don't have time or we lose money,

Others take it

MONJARDET (D.), La culture professionnelle des policiers, *Revue française de sociologie*, 1994, 3, pp. 393-411 ; LÉVY (R.), ZAUBERMAN (R.), La police française et les minorités visibles ; les contradictions de l'idéal républicain in CARTUYVELS (Y.), DIGNEFFE (F.), PIRES (A.), ROBERT (Ph.), (Eds), *Politique, police et justice au bord du futur*, l'Harmattan, 1998, pp. 287-300.

¹² The term "Beur" designates young people born in France, whose parents are from North Africa (Translator's note).

*Tomorrow is a long way off, we're in no hurry, we move
One step after another, watching our asses when we talk about the future
Future, the future won't change much,
the next generations*

*Will be worse than us, their lives will be gloomier
Our future, it's the minute after the goal, we anticipate,
avert, before they pin us to the ground"*
(IAM, "Demain c'est loin"/"Tomorrow is a long way off", 1997).

In these young people's (often stigmatised) world, people are well known to each other, and social relations are mostly regulated by codes of honour and reputation¹³. Success is achieved and measured essentially in terms of the possession of consumer goods that carry prestige, and the ability to seduce girls¹⁴. Where can money be found rapidly, in settings where people are poor and work is in short supply? Petty drug dealing is the logical solution for young people:

*"Tempt the devil to get out of the shit, you won, brother,
But it's still real bad for those who grow up later,
Grow, growing in a concrete field
Growing up in a parking lot and seeing the big brothers bringing in
the dough
Being poor makes you think real fast
You cut, press, cut up, package and sell
Fast as you can, you bring the crack money in
Yeah, that's life, and don't talk about RMI¹⁵ here"
(ibid.)*

The threat of prison cannot check the spiralling petty crime. To the contrary, a boy who has been to prison soon becomes a feared and respected local celebrity:

*"You're nabbed, it's bad luck at first, good luck when you get out
You get three months, the word gets around, your reputation grows
Being behind bars is no longer scary, it's the routine, just a plain thorn"*

The rappers rebel against that very routine, as well. It is an often overlooked fact that they constantly encourage people of their kind to rebel in a very different way, by fighting for their dignity:

*"Money's dazzling / Blinds my brothers
Dealing death on street corners / Cutting each other up for a jacket
Hey broth ! Bread won't do you much good
That way"*
(NTM, "L'argent pourrit les gens"/"Money corrupts people", 1991).

*"Sometimes kill your TV, change newspapers
Go into a museum or read a book
The odyssey of life isn't a moving picture
If you don't get yourself an education, you'll stay down !"*
(Assassin, "L'odyssée suit son cours"/"The odyssey continues", 1995).

But they quickly go on to say that it is all vain, since there is no hope of a better future.

Feelings of being left to themselves

The Suprême NTM rap group clearly stated the reasons for its violence from the start, when their first album came out in 1991.

They were violent because of the general malaise, the feeling of being abandoned by the rest of society, and left to their sad fate:

*"And if that's the way it is
It's because for too long, people have been turning their back
On the crucial problems, the social problems [...]
Is this really Liberty, Equality, Fraternity? I'm afraid it is!
Oh yes, it's sad to say, but you never did understand
Why the kids in my neighbourhood have the mentality they do
Delinquency goes on, and it all has a meaning
Because when you've got hate, violence runs in your veins"
(Le monde de demain"/"Tomorrow's world", 1991).*

Four years later their anger and despair in the face of inertia reached a peak. The former feeling is expressed in a song called "What are we waiting for [to set fire to things]?" (1995): ("Qu'est-ce qu'on attend [pour foutre le feu?]"):

*"The years go by, and yet everything is still in the same place [...]
How long will this go on [...]
But you know there's goin' to be trouble, big trouble
You wanted the war of the worlds, here it is. [...]
You've burned out all those young people,
Smashed their dreams, sapped the strength of their hope. / Oh,
when I think of it
It's about time to think about it, it's time for France
To condescend to realise all of those offences
To turn all that shame into easy lessons
But all the same, we're fed up
History tells us, our chances are nil".*

Behind the violence, in fact, is despair, dramatically illustrated by a song entitled "J'appuie sur la gâchette" ("I pull the trigger") (1993). Contrary to some statements in the press, rather than being a call for murder, this song is an evocation of suicide:

*"I've got my neurones affected and my heart infected
Tired of fighting, of having to take the inevitability
And of being a failure".*

Conclusion: violence is always meaningful

The best known feature of hardcore rap is no doubt its calls to violence, in which the mass media often revel. Rappers have of course often copiously insulted and threatened the police (see NTM's "Nique la Police" ("Fuck the Police") and Ministère AMER's "Sacrifice de poulets" ("Sacrificing pigs"). These songs earned both groups problems with the law. Yet, a closer look shows that there is nothing gratuitous about this violence. What does it mean? This is the main question for any researcher and one that should be of concern for all actors in contact with this phenomenon. Two remarks come to mind to begin with

First, the targets of this violence are relatively specific. As we have seen, the rappers recriminate against politicians, the police and the criminal justice system, but never against businessmen. Similarly, they denounce the power of money as a corrupting factor but not as the instrument of social and economic domination in a capitalist society. In other words, it seems that these generations of young people from the lower classes do not run the risk of being alienated by work inasmuch as they live very much outside of the working world and of employer-employee relations. One of the many consequences of this state of affairs is the fact that these youths have nowhere else to turn, but to the public institutions. The latter are the

¹³ See CALOGIROU (C.), *Sauver son honneur. Rapports sociaux en milieu urbain*, l'Harmattan, 1989; LEPOUTRE (D.), *Cœur de banlieue. Codes, rites et langages*, Odile Jacob, 1997.

¹⁴ Whence the flaunting of women as a symbol of male power and success, also present in the lyrics and staging (in their video clips) of some groups. This phenomenon is not very prevalent in French rap, however.

¹⁵ The RMI is the guaranteed minimum income (translator's note).

interlocutors against which they may defend their injured identity, and cry out their distress and anger¹⁶.

Next, it seems that this violence (exclusively verbal, it should be remembered) is actually an outlet for and a defensive reaction against the very negative vision of the world that grows out of their experience of life as well as what they see on television. This vision of the world is grounded in many objective facts (poverty, the harsh realities and violence of everyday life, the slim chances of climbing the social ladder, the geographic segregation of the projects, cut off from the inner city, the racism of a great many French people, the humiliating pressure of police identity checks, the sometimes disproportionate punishment, particularly when compared with how police violence are handled), but it is also, and perhaps most importantly commanded by such a strong feeling of injustice that it often tends to weave imaginary plots. Whereas Rocca speaks of an organised "plot" against the children of immigrants in the schools (*op. cit.*), the

KDD group, from Toulouse's Mirail neighbourhood, concludes that :

*"We deal and we fight, and that's what they want
To give us a bad image, to make us look like savages
After, that justifies the fact that they put us in cages"*
(*"La rhala"*, 1998).

This conclusion shows how deep a gulf has developed between part of today's youth and the rest of society. It also points to the foreseeable failure of all public policies as long as they do not restore a dialogue with these young people, and win their trust.

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For further information, see :

MUCCHIELLI (L.), Le rap, tentative d'expression politique et de mobilisation collective de jeunes des quartiers relégués, *Mouvements, Sociétés, politique et culture*, La Découverte, mars-avril 1999, pp. 60-66.

¹⁶ This corresponds to what S. BOUAMAMA has to say in *De la galère à la citoyenneté. Les jeunes, la cité, la société*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1993, pp. 34-36.