Penal Issues

Youth Gangs and « Trouble in the (Housing) Projects »

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Position and methodologie

The analyses presented here are the outcome of a research project conducted between 2001 and 2007, which produced a doctoral thesis on the role families in the forming of youth gangs. This ethnographic study done in a ZUS (*Zone Urbaine Sensible*[1]) in the Paris area is based on interviews and observation of 15 youth groups, including 7 gangs[2], 108 respondents under age 30 (including 82 gang members or former members), 44 members of their families (siblings, cousins, or parents), and 10 people working for institutions (social workers, school staff, etc.). In addition to the recorded interviews, the many informal, everyday discussions were an enriching factor. The author's many roles — resident, school monitor, citizens' group member, community organiser, chief counsellor of a day-camp, and sports coach — were helpful in broaching the various aspects studied.

At the turn of the 21st century, youth gangs have again become an object of societal anxiety, occupying a special place among the different themes forming the magma of concern about crime. Recently (August-September 2007), the media were full of the fights between groups of youths who usually hang out in the La Défense and Gare du Nord areas of Paris. The amount of press received by these violent exchanges may seem surprising. During the same period, several arrests were made in the Val-de-Marne *département*[3] following a homicide connected with « trouble » (« *embrouilles* ») between youths from Valenton and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. Likewise, at the Belle-Épine shopping centre in Thiais (Val-de-Marne), two other youths were seriously injured by sawed-off shotgun shots. Apparently media coverage differs depending on whether these conflicts take place in gentrified Paris or in the anonymous outskirts where everything turns grey.

Media coverage of fights between gangs is uneven and cyclical, but particularly redundant. Frequently, settling of scores over money matters is confused with fights over honour, and no distinction is made between youth gangs and criminal groups. As is often the case for trivial news, the information necessarily comes from the police. Since 1990, the *Renseignements Généraux* (or RG, the intelligence branch of the police) have taken the monopoly of expertise and counting of fights between gangs, labelled « urban violence ». Estimates of the numbers of those fights are regularly found in reports or notes circulated in the press. The RG's counting methods and definitions ought to be subjected to some scrutiny. As for analysis, the Ministry of the Interior recently recognized that *the necessity to interpret each act of urban violence so as to rank it on the scale* (of urban violence) *makes the system excessively subjective*[4]. With an obscure, unverifiable reckoning method and a subjective interpretation, the quantification of fights between gangs is far from satisfactory, and comparison over time cannot be seriously considered.

These « troubles in the projects » have a long history[5], their structure is highly developed. We use the term « trouble in the projects » to designate threats, intimidation, and exchanges of violence that feed ongoing conflict-ridden relations between individuals and groups of youths belonging to different socialising networks and territories. This paper attempts to grasp the mechanics and meanings of this particular form of confrontations.

How Does « Trouble » Start?

Physical fighting is usually preceded by verbal preliminaries (« putting the pressure on », gossip, rumours, challenges). They may also be the spontaneous product of an unexpected encounter. They take the form of duels (« *tête-à-tête* »), fights involving small groups, or more or less planned expeditions. As opposed to a widespread idea greatly encouraged by the media, such spectacular, mass movements as the ones at the Défense in 2000 (between youths from Chanteloup-lès-Vignes and Mantes-la-Jolie) are rare. The kinds of offensive vary with

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[1] Literally *Sensitive Urban Zones*, these are government-delimitated areas, which are targets of high priority urban policies meant to alleviate particularly difficult living conditions of destitute populations.

[2] Peer groups and gangs are informal entities with social ends. Gangs differ in that their dynamics are deviant and conflict-fraught.

[3] Since 1790, France is divided in around 100 political and administrative districts called *départements*, at which level national administrations have local agencies.

[4] Note from the Direction of the National police force to the National Crime Watch (*Observatoire National de la Délinquance*), reproduced in *Rapport de l'OND*, 2006, 455.

[5] See, among others, Gonthier N., 1992, *Cris de haine et rites d'unité, la violence dans les villes, XIIIᵉ-XVIᵉ siècles*, Turnhout, Brepols ; Perrot M., 1979, Dans la France de la Belle Époque, les « Apaches », premières bandes de jeunes, *in* Vincent B., *Les Marginaux et les exclus dans l'histoire*, Paris, UGE, 349-407.

the age and state of mind of the protagonists. Adolescents generally prefer playful, ostentatious moving around, with a somewhat festive atmosphere, whereas the rare movements of « older guys » are more discrete. They prefer to organize their trips more in detail, secretly, and frequently collect information in advance. When risks are entailed (the fight will take place on unfamiliar or enemy territory, at a time when tension is great), the warring parties may carry knives, clubs, hammers, or other. Firearms (mostly pellet handguns) are not always present, and even less used[6].

The actors in these confrontations come from neighbourhoods developed several decades ago. Present violence is often the reactivation of earlier conflicts. For instance, in May 2005, some excitement was perceivable in the neighbourhood in which I am established. Attitudes are unusually tense, faces impassive, and some adolescents can't stay still, they roam around the area, look for a car, go from group to group. I ask the first youth I see what is going on: he is well-informed and disappointed, saying that *trouble is on again.* He asserts a distance, but knows he is indirectly threatened. The dispute between youths from the two housing projects involved is an old one, according to veterans of that « trouble » (now aged 42 to 46): the conflict took shape and hardened, becoming encapsulated, in 1977-1978 (six years after the neighbourhood was built). For thirty years now, children and adolescents on both sides have been taught who « their » project is « in trouble » with. For three decades, successively, a portion of that youth has acted as guardians of the neighbourhood's reputation. Tension of this kind is cyclic, sometimes alternating long periods of calm and short flare-ups of warring. As will be seen further on, the state of conflict is structural, the hostility permanent. People may calm down, but rarely do they forget. A mere argument is enough to reactivate seemingly deeply buried stories, bringing them to the forefront. An incident suffices to introduce distrust in local history. The memory of those conflicts is highly prized, and efficiently transmitted. In fact, the arrival of new actors is often opposed by those who have had enough: (…) *it isn't even with us, it's with the older guys, after that we wanted to participate and the older guys didn't want us to, but we forced our way in* (…). Several years later, the same respondent told us that (…) *at the beginning, the little kids wanted to carry on, but a few of us, we put pressure on them, we told them it's useless, sometimes they don't think it out* (…). To sum it up, *at first it's the older guys who looked for trouble, then they calmed down* (…) *and we carried on, so the little kids are going to do the same.*

That time (in May 2005), the flare-up of fever lasted for about a month. It produced about a dozen quarrels, to our knowledge, most of which were verbal attacks (intimidation, threats with pellet handguns, public humiliation), but there were also four serious beatings (sometimes at ten

against one), and one knifing in the thigh. The latter act brought the police in: a complaint was filed after the injury. The perpetrator was the only one to be sentenced to unsuspended imprisonment. The justice system was faced with one victim and one offender, whereas the trouble had galvanized tens of adolescents and young adults on both sides. The local press recounted a scarce fourth of the facts involved in this affair, and called it a settling of scores between drug dealers – a frequent description, for lack of accurate information. This time the analysis came from the police, often journalists' only source of information.

Geopolitics of « trouble »

Participants rarely make much of the formal reason for the conflict. *It's always some phony thing*, as one participant told me. In truth, the causes are many, and above all futile to the outside observer (a stolen cap, some shoving around, gossip, jealousy, and so on). Yet, if this ongoing confrontational atmosphere persists over long periods, it is in particular due to the tie between distrust and the definition of territories.

These conflicts are the antithesis of urban anonymity, they feed on contact and proximity. The « belligerents » often meet in the same high schools, rarely in the same junior high schools (*collèges*), sometimes in local community groups. Often they travel on the same public transportation. Logically, proximity brings conflicts out. Disputes are born of direct, frequent interaction. The boys who fight each other look alike and frequent each other: it is as if the trouble was wafted in the air of some village. Rivalries between geographically distant gangs don't last as long, but are potentially more violent: (…) *them, with them, on the other hand,* (youths from a distant housing project) *that was the real thing, with them I threw myself into it completely, because I don't know them, we didn't know each other, and I beat on them with hatred.*

Battles mainly occur in five kinds of places: public transportation, institutions where young people are concentrated (schools, community facilities, entertainment places), shopping malls, lively, town-centre areas, and last, the fighters' own neighbourhoods. Interviews with youths from two enemy neighbourhoods brought out a coherent, shared mapping. Urban planning has shaped the way people move around and increases exposure for some protagonists. These practical constraints affect where trouble occurs, locating it around the schools, public transportation and places of residency.

The map also reveals a qualitative categorisation of locations. These youths make a distinction between places that are « prohibited » or « authorized », describing some places as reassuring, others less so. A place is off-grounds when it is near an « enemy » neighbourhood. So they avoid it, since its possession is in hostile hands. The more a youth is well-known, recognized, the more his neighbourhood is in conflict with other towns, the more reduced is his potential for moving around. It is because they feel they are in danger outside the

reassuring limits of the neighbourhood that some youths take human or physical self-protection measures (going out in groups, or going out armed).

The geographic distribution of shopping centres and the spatial origin of the youths who go there explain the concrete effect of these constraints. The malls are lively places, usually not too far from residential areas, and they flaunt all sorts of leisure-time and consumer goods. Whether one goes to a shopping centre depends on the state of relations between the various neighbouring projects. Peaceful coexistence (that is, cold war) between two neighbourhoods indicates that « behind-the-scenes diplomacy » is at work; in its absence, either the territory is left to one clan or the tension is constant.

As a rule, intrusion in an enemy project is uncertain, risky business. It is therefore more reasonable to stick to easier targets and more easily accessible places. That is why educational and transportation facilities are in the forefront. This has serious consequences for the schooling of the most exposed youths (those, that is, who are identified as targets because of where they live, irrespective of whether they assert that identity). When a cycle of violence (re)ignites, some youths drop out of school or try to change schools: the psychological pressure is such that violence is taken into consideration in choosing a high school or an educational option. Likewise, bus and train stations structure population flows and therefore represent opportunities for attacks. For these reasons, many of the victims of trouble in these very busy public places are collateral; that is, at a distance from the interplay of reputations. They are easy prey, at hand, easily approached when leaving a high school or in a shopping centre. Having less control over mobility strategies, they are default targets. They live in the project but don't feel involved in these rivalries, and this fragility handicaps them when faced with belligerents whose goal is to attack the honour of the opponent neighbourhood, and who are good at avoiding exposure to situations where they don't have the upper hand. That is the logic behind the death of young Romuald, on November 8, 2000, shot in plain daylight while walking around the Canal neighbourhood in Courcouronnes.

Rarely, then, is one of the leaders truly physically threatened. The members most deeply involved in this kind of conflict know they are exposed to serious violence, it's the price of glory, the dark side of success; a name that circulates is a threatened name as long as it circulates. The more a youth is known as a *good fighter*, the more he is a top objective. These high-ranking targets adopt various forms of prevention, the main one often being staying out of school and work, the second being their strategies for mobility.

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[6] For lack of information-collecting and centralization, it is hardly possible to quantify this aspect.

« Frankly, I can't go to the BCE (the shopping centre located in Pouilla-le-Grand and mainly haunted by people from the Nodeau-sur-Seine and Pouilla-le-Grand projects) because I know they can't go to ATK (another shopping centre in the area). Because they go to the BCE a lot, because it's near where they live, if I go there I know I may meet them and we can get into trouble (…) unless I go there strapped (armed), but look, after that you shoot at someone, then they notice you, there are cameras, and you can go under for a thing like that (…) I avoided Chatelet (subway station) because there were either guys from Nodeau-sur-Seine or the Gare du Nord guys, the ones who hang around Gare du Nord, or else the guys from Les Hêtres (Seine-Saint-Denis) or from Forgé (Val d'Oise), and there's trouble between us and all them, at one point we were in trouble with almost everyone (…) even with the guys from Pateil (Val-de-Marne), we were having trouble, and I was playing football in Pateil. So it was a little hard on me (…) There was too much trouble, and we couldn't handle it all, so we had to stay in our place, it was a kind of prison, so to speak ».

Excerpt from an interview. Some place names – towns, neighbourhoods or shopping centres – are fictitious.

The social space of reputations

We have repeatedly stressed the strong connection between physical proximity and the state of perpetual distrust pervading relations between youths from different neighbourhoods or gangs. Proximity constitutes a framework but does not, in itself, account for the way communication is structured, or its effects. Before going into the stakes of reputations, the true motors of « neighbourhood trouble », let us take a look at their structure.

The « trouble » is organized around *a space (local and regional) of reputations*, where individual, collective and territorial positions are played out. That space is informal, structured around a series of stable, shared norms. It is made of relations and competition, and those who invest themselves in it edge for the best position. Players are individuals, gangs and neighbourhoods. The collective reputation feeds those of individuals, and vice versa.

If the rewards are to be significant, there must be agreement on how behaviour is judged, as well as a system for the circulation and validation of information. In other words, communication and evaluation are central to the comprehension of the individual investments that make this « trouble » possible. The physical, psychological, family and legal costs hardly discourage the many candidates in their quest for prestige.

As soon as an act is accomplished, the information circulates rapidly, it is commented, and the effects are immediate. For instance, if an adolescent is roughed up in a fight, he is immediate banished until he rights the balance. Social pressure is strong for those involved, especially since this *space of reputations* is the only source of gratification. That space is independent, and tolerates no moderation by adults. It is fluid and fragmented, meaning that information flows rapidly through many communication channels. Last, it is stimulating, for it provides a greatly appreciated space of popularity, and those who care most are very dependent on hearsay. When you have access to the space of reputations, hundreds of people will be informed.

Communication channels

Communication relies on several networks. The initial platform is local and based on acquaintance. You have to be in touch with the stories going around the neighbourhood. Schools, especially high schools, are information hubs where *trouble* is fomented and calmed down. As high school students come from several towns and neighbourhoods, there is greater reverberation. Next comes information circulating via extended families and circles of friends. Broadly speaking, any place where young people cohabit and exchange may have that function. Jails have a special role in this respect: more than anywhere else, prison is where reputations are built and validated, as well as where the deviant elites are structured. Indeed, committing crimes and doing *big jobs* establishes your « pedigree » and you can hope to be coopted to a higher league.

Two further information spheres should be mentioned. Some blogs and forums on the Internet have diversified and reinforced the *space of reputations*. Last, the press plays a specific role in these honour contests. The local and national media are efficient, greatly appreciated relays. Benefits are indexed to the youth-groups' version of spectator ratings. A headline in the local paper guarantees you publicity throughout the *département*. The acme, a prime-time report on TV, means you're playing big league (*then you've hit the jackpot*). So the day-to-day news-in-brief column in the Paris-area local paper *Le Parisien* represents, on a local scale, a sort of public service for youth gangs. A single purchased paper passes through dozens of hands and is the object of as many comments about the places and the identity of the actors. Those articles, considered derogatory by some project residents, cause collective rejoicing among youth gangs. By nourishing the news-in-brief column day after day, the police and justice system contribute, paradoxically, to these informal logics.

Many actors are at work in the background of these confrontations, then. There are the « informers », the « juries », « provocateurs », « moderators », people who « want a fight », and so on. While violent action is very male, the rest is less homogeneous. With very few exceptions, girls are excluded from the physical action of gangs, but they do play a major role, although one more difficult to distinguish, in the functioning of this *social space of reputations*. As a sort of informal jury on male behaviour, they participate actively in the distribution of rewards, which implicitly means that their opinion counts. To take one example, they are sometimes at the core of confrontations between gangs, acting as mediators, helping conflicts between gangs to materialize and continue (through gossip, playing on the cowardice of the protagonists, etc.). They are also depicted as efficient informers, especially when they have fallen out with the youths from their own neighbourhood. Last, a very persuasive female activism sometimes solves conflicts. The girls who work at pacification differ from those who stir up conflicts between males. They are sensitive to the innocent victims, who are usually their classmates. They have moral legitimacy, and these respected, *serious, good girls* may have brothers and cousins in the upper echelons of gangs and use the latter's support to achieve their ends.

The « ouf academy »

The *space of reputations* is not limited to violent exchanges: there are several ways to achieve fame. But in the public space, transgressive virile exploits prevail over other accomplishments (sports, education, religion, political militancy, urban arts, and so forth). This superiority rests on psychological pressure, physical force and the greater propensity to dominate others. At the regional level, the few people who are successful at school or in sports do not contribute to the prestige of the neighbourhood, they are never summoned up in the judgments constitutive of differences in reputation. You have to come from a dangerous project, a *hot* one, an *ouf*[7] project (*cité de oufs*). The main danger in these confrontations actually resides in this competitive mechanism. Be it internally (for individual positions) or through contests (for the hierarchy of groups and neighbourhoods), promotion involves outmatching the others. You have to hit harder than you were hit, and when nothing cools down that dynamic, the physical damage can be great, even if the level of violence remains limited in France. This kind of one-upping has a name, commonly used by the youths involved: the « *truc de ouf* », the *ouf* thing. But today's *ouf* is not necessarily a deviant, or necessarily a gang member. The *ouf* is someone who succeeds in overcoming an obstacle, a leader in case of tension. He enables the group to go further, to go beyond the status quo. We should actually call it « *oufism* », given the extent to which this logic of normative surpassing serves as the matrix for interpreting action. These acts are the preferred grounds on which the *ouf* can assert himself. « *Oufism* » is therefore built around a sort of self-perpetuating one-upping. The fact of going beyond the mere symbolic

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[7] *Ouf* is the *verlan* version of *fou* (literally: crazy). *Verlan* is a particular kind of back slang that has become extremely popular among young people in France. It consists of inverting the syllables of words, and often then truncating the result to make a new word. The word *verlan* itself comes from the expression *à l'envers* (back to front) (NdT).

use of arms, from time to time, is part of this logic, which is never as pernicious and dangerous as in a large group in which no actor (however much he may want to get out) wants to be viewed as having « chickened out », and no-one manages to restrain the others. « *Oufism* » bespeaks the place of excess, of surpassing, and the conception of excellence in our society. When applied to deviancy, it tends to lead to the spectacular transgression of norms.

For whom and for what to enrol?

Honour and reputation are embedded in extremely intense group and territorial identifications. These logics reflect ties to persons or to a place. The tie is so strong as to engage *ego*'s mind and body. The concept of allegiance is very pertinent here. It allows us to understand the many reasons for commitment. Participation in these troubles is never automatic. It is based on *allegiance*, either *affective* (when an intimate is affected) or *sentimental* (sensitivity to unfairness toward a collateral victim). In these cases participants in the violence may be doing well at school or on the job and maintain distant ties with gangs. Next we have *strategic allegiances*, when youths are trying to be integrated in neighbourhood social life (in the case of newcomers or youths with a fragile social status, for instance). These first three categories are infrequent, on the whole. The most frequent pattern is *status-linked allegiance*. This involves those actors whose status and social position are intertwined with the reputation of their gang and their neighbourhood, and who are therefore compelled to commit themselves to defending, forging and maintaining collective prestige. These actors have internalised the obligations of solidarity, the corollary of the right to protection. Contrary to the commonly held idea that youths from the housing projects show mechanical solidarity, their involvement is selective, depending on the local status of the particular individuals. For these reasons, those enrolled are not only the gang's usual public.

Conclusions: which social significance?

Participation in these fights solves (however briefly and somewhat deceptively) a series of individual and collective tensions for some of the youths living in the projects. Even if some of the troublemongers may have conformist school and occupational trajectories, for the main actors this violence affords compensation for the dead ends in which they find themselves: dead ends for access to self-esteem when there is no recognition from school, work, or family; lack of fulfilment; fear of social death tantamount to invisibility. Affiliation with local memory is anything but neutral. That territorialised history often fills a double void: distance from the family history, as well as a distance, reciprocal, between these youths and the national myths. At the same time, success in « troubles » is a way of conforming to social injunctions to perform well, and to gain access to power and popularity. This play with reputations also has a strong symbolic function, offering an alternative space for legitimacy.

Whereas this collective violence yields no material reward and upholds no social or political cause, it does reflect a singular attachment to virility as a value, and to the logic of honour. In spite of a tendency to ethnicise this kind of virile behaviour, owing to the participation of youths of immigrant origin, it should be noted that France has a long tradition of the bellicose use of physical force. The working-class culture of virility and the culture of honour coming from the southern European and African countries have certainly been mutually reinforcing, but with what outcome?

Until the mid-1970s, that fiery virility could be « naturally » recycled in the workshop culture[8]. Unemployment, the breakdown of the manufacturing industries and the growing scarcity of unskilled manual jobs have considerably changed the state of affairs. Social change affects the way this « trouble » unfolds. Physical strength and tough social relations are expressed more forcefully in places where social integration is lastingly weakened[9].

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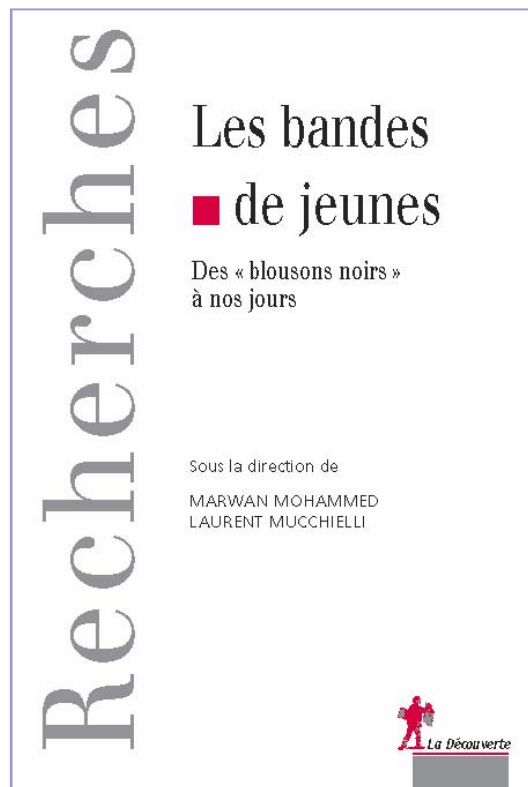
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[8] See MAUGER G., 1998, Bandes et valeurs de virilité, *Regards sur l'Actualité*, 243, 29-40.
[9] See ROBERT Ph., 1999, *Le citoyen, le crime et l'État*, Genève, Droz.

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Des « blousons noirs »
à nos jours

Sous la direction de

MARWAN MOHAMMED
LAURENT MUCCHIELLI

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With a preface of Philippe ROBERT and a postface of Gérard MAUGER

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