Youth Gangs and "Trouble in the (Housing) Projects"
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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 following a homicide connected with « trouble » (« embrouilles ») between youths from Valenton and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. Likewise, at the Belle-Epine 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 ». 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, 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 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. 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.

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1 Literally Sensitiv 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.
of 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. Firearm (pallini guns) are not always present, and even less used.°

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 was 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 alternated long periods of calm and short flare-ups of warning. 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 conflicts. For instance, after that we wanted to participate in the disturbances of 2005, the youngest explained to me: « I beat on them with hatred, I don’t know them, we didn’t know each other, 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. Villages between geographically distant gang’s 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 throw myself into it completely, because I don’t know them, we didn’t know each other, and I beat on them with hatred.

Battles mostly 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, causes of trouble are close around and increase 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 « where it less so », and other place is off-patrols 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, « going tough »).

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 being staying out of school and work, the second being their strategies for mobility.
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 ATX (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 you notice you, there are cameras, and you can go under for a thing like that (…) I avoided Chattelet (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 Fôrê (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 stances 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 immediately 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 from one communication channel to another. 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 базed 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. falls but 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 promoted to a higher league.

Two further information spheres should be mentioned. Some boys and girls on the Internet have diversified and reinforced the space of reputations. Last, the press plays a special 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 department. The acronym, 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 violent exchanges: there are several ways to surpassing serves as the matrix for interpreting action. These acts are the preferred ground on which the ouf has a particular advantage, especially in creating a 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 ouf itself comes from the expression à l’envers (back to front) (NdT).

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) through informal milieus (urban areas, 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 commit dangerous projects, a but one, an ouf project (cité de ouf). 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 neighbours), promotion involves Outfitting 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 « true 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. It enables a 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 ground on which the ouf has a particular advantage, especially in creating a 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 ouf itself comes from the expression à l’envers (back to front) (NdT).

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 ouf 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. For these reasons, those enrolled are not only the gang’s usual public.

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. 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.

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