

URBAN VIOLENCE: STATUS REPORT

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In 1950, 30% of the world's total population lived in cities. Now more than half of the population resides in urban areas, and this trend towards greater concentration of people is continuing. In the developed countries, the rate of urbanisation has already reached 75% of the overall population. Cities are the preferred space, enjoying strong power of attraction because they offer easy access to services and to the jobs market. But they are also the place where social tensions rise to the surface and where specific forms of violence appear.

What are we talking about?

Given the worldwide phenomenon of population growth, one can logically conclude that violence of all kinds will experience proportional growth in cities. This initial assertion, elementary if not to say simplistic, fails to take into account the multi-faceted reality of 'urban violence', which breaks down into distinct modalities and very variable intensities: cyclical urban rioting in the United States, the national crisis of November 2005 and the ritual of cars set alight in France, the control of Brazilian favelas by armed gangs, a feeling of insecurity, etc.

Many empirical and/or theoretical approaches to 'urban violence' suggest distinguishing it from classical criminality by proposing a typology centered on actions which are not directed at getting money, at least not primarily or solely. We find here, jumbled together, acts of vandalism, the violence of gangs associated with the idea of spatial domination (a city neighbourhood, a sidewalk, the lobby of a building, etc.), as well as symbolic and/or physical attacks directed against institutional targets (school buildings, police, firemen, etc.). This type of approach considers large-scale rioting to be a higher degree of 'social violence' insofar as it brings together different significant parameters: a generalised increase in the feeling of insecurity, including among populations remote from the riots, very big media coverage which can contribute to spreading the violence, generalised confrontations with law enforcement officers, the appearance of urban guerilla warfare tactics, etc.

This vision of 'urban violence' which we find regularly among professionals in this domain, whether they come from associations or belong to the police, brings to mind the works of James B. Rule¹. In particular, he dealt with the consequences of the rupture, more or less apparent, by certain groups, more or less well organised, with the rule that says the State

¹ See, in this regard: James B. RULE : "*Theories of Civil Violence*", University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1989

should have a monopoly on the use of force and that it should guarantee order and social peace.²

This idea of damage to the rule recognised by the majority done by minority groups which are more or less structured is without doubt an element of understanding the phenomenon which interests us or at least constitutes a path to follow when studying ‘urban violence’.

We may add that the spread, more or less quickly and spontaneously, of the phenomena of collective violence is also a factor which must be taken into account when studying the question.³ The torching of a vehicle or a confrontation between police officers and a group of youths in a suburb would not be very interesting except in the eyes of the protagonists and possible victims. It is the multiplication of this type of event, its reproduction and its spread across an ever more vast geographic area which contributes to turning these events into revealing social phenomena.

In this status report on ‘urban violence’, we shall exclude a priori dealing with the question of delinquency and ordinary criminality (offences, thefts and crimes) which occur as often in rural areas as in cities. We shall concentrate exclusively on acts which do not directly pursue money as an objective even if the money involved is often not negligible. We admit straightaway that this position raises difficulties. For example, the multiplication in a given area of cases of so-called ‘petty criminality’ contributes to an increase in the feeling of insecurity. We shall treat this question when we issue our next analytical article, where we shall focus on this famous ‘feeling’ which is difficult to define and still harder to quantify. Another scenario is that of the control, more or less effectively, of a neighbourhood by an association of criminals who have gotten involved in trafficking of all kinds. On the face of it, in this case, the search for financial profit, often very considerable, is a parameter of primary importance to grasp the reality and scope of the phenomenon. But in this case, as in the preceding one, what particularly interests us is the possible competition for control of the terrain between legitimate representatives of the State and the gangs of traffickers.

This article is the first of a series which the ESISC shall devote to ‘urban violence’ in a treatment which favours an approach focused on competition between the State and organised bands. Our project does not cast doubt on the various interpretative analyses of ‘urban violence’ (*see below*). Whatever their qualities, they are not in our spirit. We shall restrict ourselves to presenting them briefly in this first article.

Critical sociology and a ‘culture of excuses’

As Laurent Bonelli reminds us⁴ : ‘...beginning from the end of the 1970s, for the first time we see in relation to the Peyrefitte report (in France, editor), a separation between ‘crime’ and ‘fear of crime’.⁵ This demonstration of the interdependence and the autonomy of the phenomena of violence, criminality and insecurity, is perhaps the founding ‘moment’ of the

² This is not far from the case of breaking the ‘social contract’ so dear to Thomas Hobbes in his famous “*Léviathan. Traité de la matière, de la forme et du pouvoir ecclésiastique et civil*” [Leviathan, or the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil] published in 1651.

³ In this regard, we cite the article of reference: PITCHER B.L, HAMBLIN R.L., MILLER J.L.L. “*The diffusion of collective violence*”, American Sociological Review 1978, Vol. 43 (February) : 23-35. Article available on line at:

<http://www.uvm.edu/~pdodds/files/papers/others/1978/pitcher1978a.pdf>

⁴ BONELLI L. ; *Renseignements généraux et violences urbaines*“, [General information and urban violence] Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 2001, Volume 136, Issue 136-137, pp. 95-103

⁵ BONELLI L. op. cit., see p. 97 note 4, which states that: “*This report of the Committee for the Study of Violence, Criminality and Delinquency explains in fact that ‘insecurity, criminality and violence are three interdependent phenomena, but also, to a large degree autonomous’.*”

two great analytical currents of 'urban violence' which confront one another with an intensity which is no less great than the phenomena which they analyse.

They challenge one another in the scholarly and media fields, on the one hand, with more or less confirmed and competent partisans of critical sociology, and, on the other hand, the heralds of the denunciation, often radical, of the 'culture of excuses'.

For the first group, the analysis of 'urban violence' necessarily must take into account such factors as accessibility to the jobs market, the failures of educational policies and urban planning policies, etc. For this current of thinking, 'urban violence' is a social subject, a concept which demands constant rethinking and re-elaboration to avoid its becoming just an ideological construct.

For authors like Xavier Raufer, who belong to the current which has never stopped criticising the 'culture of excuses', criminality in general and, in the case which interests us, 'urban violence', is just something which happens when the State is unable to respond to criminal acts. In summation, social factors have had no influence on the path of development of criminality, which is but a consequence of the State's laxness and the feebleness of its security responses.

Those believing in a fully 'repressive' policy regularly illustrate their position by highlighting the positive results of the so-called 'zero tolerance' approach applied most notably by the New York City administration after the election of Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani in January 1994.

It is worth remembering that in its general outlines 'zero tolerance' advocates a visible presence of the police, an abbreviated period of time between observing a crime and the court verdict on the defendant, applying penalties to all criminal acts including lesser offences and the identification of populations considered as being more likely to disobey the law.

This repressive policy has been criticised for risking the condemnation of certain target groups because it is likely to shift the problems linked to delinquency and criminality from the city centres towards the suburbs.

Furthermore, while it is incontestable that the Giuliani period corresponded to a significant reduction of criminality and of the famous 'feeling of insecurity', it has also been demonstrated that the end of the 20th century was a time of economic revival and of a notable improvement in the New York employment market. Despite the vehement protests of those who criticise the 'culture of excuses', one cannot refute the correlation between 'urban violence' and socio-economic factors. This was all the more so because during these years the improvement of the finances of the American metropolis made it possible for the Giuliani administration to not only strengthen its repressive policy but also to develop a broad portfolio of social and preventive actions.

It is also appropriate to close this chapter by remarking that the policy of 'zero tolerance' has also been applied in the United States in an institutional framework. The most representative example is probably that of the educational institutions which have for more than fifteen years carried out a fierce struggle against rudeness, intentional defacement of buildings and trafficking of all kinds. But in this case as well, the opinions of experts are reserved as to the effectiveness of a 'fully repressive' policy⁶.

In 2000, Russel J. Skiba of the University of Indiana published under the suggestive title "Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence" the findings of dedicated research into the practices of repression based on 'zero tolerance' in educational establishments in the United States. It should be noted that Skiba never denied the seriousness of the security situation in the schools. But his conclusions, substantiated at

All that remains is for the sociologists who are critical and the sycophants of ‘the fully repressive policy’ to agree, following separate modalities, to acknowledge a dimension of confrontation between the representatives of the State and the organised or spontaneous gangs in the phenomena of ‘urban violence’.

The scale of urban violence

In December 2009, Lucienne Bui Trong put forward a scale of ‘urban violence’⁷ consisting of eight successive levels going from weakest to highest intensity.

This tool has the advantage of providing concrete indicators which allow us to grasp a concept which remains hazy and prone to various and ideologically marked interpretations.

Every attempt to formalise a social phenomenon is subject to questions and criticisms. This one is no exception to the rule. One can, for example, question the relevance of thresholds which mark the boundary between two levels of the scale. This does not prevent the practical approach developed by Lucienne Bui Trong from being productive insofar as it allows us to grasp the problematic issues by stating clearly ‘what we are talking about’.

Concretely, here is a summary of the scale of urban violence developed by Bui Trong, together with some remarks:

Level 1 : actions against individuals such as vandalism without an institutional connotation⁸, gang criminality leading to a relationship of force and/or spatial domination, settling of accounts between rival gangs also involving the idea of ‘control over the terrain’.

Level 2 : appearance of anti-institutional actions but without physical violence, such as insults and provocations directed against persons symbolising authority or petty vandalism against property or institutional buildings.

Level 3 : physical attacks against institutional staff⁹ other than the police, gendarmes and court magistrates.

Level 4 : verbal attacks and threats to the law enforcement officers, magistrates and/or inflicting minor damage on equipment and buildings of the police.

Level 5 : aggravation of level 4 with, in particular, penetration of buildings or manoeuvres intended to slow down and/or prevent the movements of law enforcement officers.

Level 6 : increased intensity of the violence perpetrated against law enforcement officers, attacks on police stations, determination to attack the physical integrity of members of the law enforcement agencies.

Level 7 : aggravated vandalism, incendiary bombs, etc. but with a clear desire to avoid direct confrontations with the law enforcement officers. Limited number of assailants and short duration of the acts.

length, question the effectiveness of this policy. The report is available on line:

<http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf>

⁷ The complete document is available on line: <http://ns206907.ovh.net/~ville/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/echelle-de-Bui-Trong-revu.pdf>

⁸ By ‘institutions’, we mean buildings and vehicles which are the property of the State or which are controlled by its departments and services, the cartage of the law enforcement officers and the emergency services, as well as vehicles of public transport companies.

⁹ Firemen, ambulance attendants, post office workers, etc. All the staff identified as exercising an activity which emerges from the tasks of the State (whether exercised directly by the State or by a private service provider) except for members of the police, i.e., except for the State employees especially trained and equipped to counter attacks.

Level 8 : long duration, large number of assailants, emergence of urban guerilla warfare tactics. In certain cases, these riots can spread in large scale : the riots in the ghettos of American cities or in the French suburbs in November 2005, for example. It also happens that the law enforcement agencies are confronted with major, even massive use of firearms. The recent operations to retake control of certain Brazilian favelas are a good example of this.

This effort, which we believe was successful, to rank the levels of urban violence reveals a progression of questioning and, finally, openly clashing with the law enforcement officers. At level 8 of the scale, the law enforcement officers are confronted with a considered and deliberate strategy of confrontation applied by gangs consisting of adolescents and young adults who compel them to ‘make contact’. In this scenario, the initiative belongs with the gangs and not with the police. The guerilla strategy of the gangs from the inner city and other neighbourhoods of underprivileged is the number one cause of the multiplication of interrogations and police checks which are so often decried. The checks can be perceived by young people who are victims of ‘facial targeting’ as harrasment and descriminatory ; but they are a direct consequence of the ‘war’ declared against the State.

By following the reasoning resulting from the scale of ‘urban violence’ but also by empirically reporting acts of incivility and the logic of the correlation of forces (gangs versus citizens, gangs among themselves, gangs versus the law enforcement officers), one is led to employ, as we suggested in the introduction, a clear distinction between ordinary criminality and ‘urban violence’. To be sure, the latter term encompasses a series of criminal acts (recorded as such in the official statistics), but it is distinguished from classic criminality by a dimension of territorial control.

Criminality and ‘urban violence’

Obviously, attacks on property (theft with or without violence and intentional damage), physical attacks on individuals including sexual violence and threats, trafficking in arms or narcotics, not to mention murders and assassinations, contrevene the rules accepted by the majority of citizens, as well as peace and social order. Moreover, these crimes and offences certainly contribute to the ‘feeling of insecurity’. However, despite the obvious similarities, we propose to consider them as phenomena entirely separate from ‘urban violence’ except as they reveal a logic of competition for territorial control. This is a competition which operates to the detriment of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the territory concerned, as well as of the persons and institutions which practically and/or symbolically represent the State.

This distinction which we are applying between the classic security question and that more specifically linked to ‘urban violence’ is found more and more regularly, even if it is expressed in a less abrupt manner. The latest issue of the “Lettre de l’INHESJ”¹⁰ [Letter of INHESJ] illustrates in its own way this concern to take into account the specifics of ‘urban violence’: *“This change started in the 1980s with the installation of a ‘city policy’ which rested on the enumeration of various actions starting with diagnosis of the existence and development of a specific criminality which was intimately linked with the urban mutations of this period. The incident which touched it off, at least symbolically, was the explosion of rioting in the suburbs of Lyon¹¹ in 1979”¹².*

The rioting which flared up across France in the autumn of 2005 is a good example of the competition between the State and gangs for territorial control. This dimension, which too

¹⁰ http://www.inhesj.fr/fichiers/inhesj/lalettre/lettre_mars_12.pdf

¹¹ It should be noted that the trigger for the Lyon riots of 1979 was the arrest of a young car thief who had been ordered expelled from the territory, in the district of Grappinière in Vaulx-en Velin.

¹² INHESJ, op.cit., see page 1

often kills, was not lost upon the researchers of the Centre for Strategic Analysis, who carried out a comparative investigation into two neighbouring municipalities¹³.

It should be recalled that Aulnay-sous-Bois experienced extremely violent rioting whereas Saint-Denis remained relatively calm. On the basis of this fact, we might quickly conclude that the different levels of violence assumed by the riots may be explained by the difference in socio-economic level which existed between the two municipalities. But there is nothing to that. The indicators for Aulnay-sous-Bois and Saint-Denis are very close: high levels of unemployment approaching 40% for those under 25 years old, an increase in single-parent families living on limited resources, etc. In both cities, the violence was done by very young rioters, while their 'big brothers' remained passive for the most part, even indifferent. Finally, in the two cases, the riots were of short duration, like a game¹⁴ which quickly loses the interest of the adolescents who are engaged in it. According to the municipal authorities of Saint-Denis, the relative calm which the city experienced during the autumn riots of 2005 was the direct consequence of the policy of prevention conducted at their initiative. This hypothesis was invalidated by researchers of the Centre for Strategic Analysis, who arrived at a conclusion which is clearly more disturbing when they processed the material provided by respondents: *"...there was a continuum of violent events within the neighbourhood and, more generally, in the city which makes it rather difficult to isolate November 2005 from what came before and what came after. Even if everyone agrees that we are talking about an extreme moment, it fits into a certain continuity"*¹⁵.

We may wonder with respect to the effectiveness of a policy of prevention which does not allow a citizen to distinguish clearly the difference between a 'normal' day and a day of organised rioting. If the rioting of Saint-Denis did not degenerate into something worse, it is because the law enforcement agencies made 'contact' with the rioters in great numbers, unlike their colleagues in Aulnay-sous-Bois¹⁶. In that city, the police forces initially hesitated to move massively into the districts taken over by the rioters and, and what resulted was an explosion of violence. The discretion of the police, intended to avoid making the situation more acrimonious, had the opposite effect of what was expected. One must also note that in Aulnay-sous-Bois the rioters sacked their own districts and set afire the cars of their immediate neighbors. There were no attempts to occupy and destroy the property of those living in the nearby private housing estate, conduct which might have been anticipated if the riots really had a political dimension and was a protest – something which none wanted to give it. For our part, we see in all this above all an absolute transgression of the rules of the Republic, the occupation of territory by gangs of minors and very young adults involved in all kinds of illicit trafficking. Their decision to leave and not to engage in a clash depended directly on the correlation of forces present. As soon as the police presence was identified by the rioters as disproportionate compared to their own forces, the violence stopped.

If we may cite another significant example of managing 'urban violence' which in this case explicitly recognises the competition between the State and 'youth gangs' for territorial control, we can refer to the policy of 'gang injunctions' implemented by the authorities of the city of Los Angeles¹⁷. The 'gang injunctions' introduced a new legal notion, recognised by the

¹³ The report of the investigation is accessible in its full version : <http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/> (domain: reports and documents). The research was carried out between April and October 2006.

¹⁴ To speak of a 'game' concerning the riots with violence which is sometimes extreme may seem shocking. But it is no less true that a playful drive comes out of many interviews conducted with rioters over several months following their acts. This fact must be disturbing. If yesterday one 'played' at rioting, why not 'play' at war tomorrow with the same dreadful spirit?

¹⁵ Report cited above, see page 83

¹⁶ Report cited above, see page 98

¹⁷ A 23-page document disseminated by the office of the State Prosecutor of Los Angeles summarises the mode of operation of this policy which links prevention and repression. It is available on line: http://atty.lacity.org/stellent/groups/electedofficials/@atty_contributor/documents/contributor_wb_content/lacityp_006877.pdf

Supreme Court of the State of California, namely that gangs are associations and not just bands of delinquents. This associative dimension today allows the city of Los Angeles to act as a civil party and bring suit against the gangs for a series of infractions which arise from the strategy of controlling a given territory. This can be limited to just one street. Recognition of the associative character results in any person claiming membership in a given gang being subject to prosecution before a civil court, including someone who never personally participated in a crime. For example, a tag made by a member of the gang '18th Street-Pico Union' to mark the 'border' of the territory can lead to all the members of the territory being sentenced to a fine. This policy is intended to restrict the activities of 72 urban gangs and is considered by the State Prosecutor's office of Los Angeles as a preventive action which should reaffirm the predominance and legitimacy of the State in the areas where it is challenged by organisations, the gangs, which operate by following a logic of territorial domination.

The policy implemented by the city of Rio de Janeiro since the end of 2008 to pacify the favelas is another exemplary case where the State has recognised that apart from simple delinquency and criminality, it faces competition to the exercise of its rights and of its responsibility for control of public space. As José Mariano¹⁸ Beltrame, the Secretary for State Security, has said, speaking of the 'war' being waged by the police forces against the various armed gangs who took control of more than 1,000 favelas in the city: "*The objective is for the State to retake control of the territories in which they no longer have the right of entry*"¹⁹. We hasten to add that this retaking of territorial control by the State is still not complete but is making strong progress and that it is possible only due to the fact that besides veritable commando actions being carried out by the law-enforcement agencies, some specialised police units, the 'police pacification units' (UPP), are occupying the terrain in a sustainable way. Moreover, this occupation is welcomed by the population, which previously criticised the police practice of 'striking hard' and then leaving the terrain. To put it in other words, the former operational mode copied that of the local gangs and regularly left the initiative to the latter.

The recent riots in London²⁰ are another example of a level 8 situation on the scale of Lucienne Bui Trong which could only be resolved by implementing a resolute policy of control of the terrain by the public authorities. Apart from the broad scope of crimes reported during these days of August 2011, what struck observers at the time was the total commitment of the State at the levels of institutional communication, occupation of the terrain, the commitment of personnel from the law enforcement agencies and immediate application of the law.

We recall the sensational statements of David Cameron, the British Prime Minister who declared that: "*the British authorities will not allow a 'culture of fear' to reign in the streets of Great Britain and that the police will get whatever resources they need. Whichever tactics the police wish to employ, they will receive legal support to do so. We shall do everything necessary to restore law and order in our streets*".

¹⁸ We urge readers who know Brazilian Portuguese to read the interview dealing with this question which José Mariano Beltrame gave to 'Epoca' in October 2011:

<http://revistaepoca.globo.com/Sociedade/noticia/2011/10/jose-mariano-beltrame-milicia-hoje-me-preocupa-mais-que-o- trafico.html>

¹⁹ Cited on 4 October 2010 on the website of Figaro:

<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/10/03/01003-20101003ARTFIG00256-les-favelas-de-rio-de-janeiro-en-voie-de-pacification.php>

²⁰ From 6 to 10 August 2011, with significant copy-cat disturbances in Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. In London alone, the Metropolitan Police (Scotland Yard) reported 3,296 criminal acts, of which 1,101 were break-ins, 399 vehicles destroyed, 310 robberies of individuals and 162 cases of criminal arson. 1,049 rioters were charged, including 218 minors. The loss of human life was especially noteworthy: 1 death in London and 3 deaths in Birmingham.

This strong expression of political determination was immediately followed by action on the ground: 16,000 police officers were assigned to bringing the riots under control just in the city of London and 500 policemen from the criminal investigation department were dispatched to identify the thieves and looters. For the first time in the history of Great Britain, the law enforcement agencies were authorised²¹ to use water cannon and rubber bullets. All of these exceptional measures deployed on the ground made it possible to limit the duration of the London riots to four days.

Out of the nearly 2,000 persons arrested during the riots, 1,049 were charged, including 218 minors. According to the daily newspaper *The Guardian*²², the sentences handed down during the appearances in court which followed immediately were on average 25% longer than usual.²³

Will it be war tomorrow?

Apart from all the symbolic and material phenomena of violence which we denote now by the expression 'urban violence', shouldn't we detect the beginnings of what the ethnologist Pierre Clastres has called '*War in primitive societies*'²⁴? We are thinking, in particular, about the multiplication of urban gangs taking over exclusive control of a territory, of groups constituting themselves around an identity logic, i.e., a territorial identity and not some religious-ethnic identity which is forged by opposition to the State, by challenging its legitimate right to exercise its authority on all the national territory. It appears to us that the importance of this special dimension of territorial control has been under-appreciated up to now.

If our hypothesis is correct, then in the coming years we should expect the appearance of 'gang wars' similar to those which have taken root in the metropolises of North and South America²⁵. Moreover, if as we believe, war is used to get established in the heart of cities and in the suburbs, then ambushes of the law enforcement officers and of the emergency services will multiply and become more violent.

In case of war, whether it be conventional or not, the first victims will be the civil populations, namely the immense majority of inhabitants of all ages who are taken hostage and forced to respect the law of the gangs, beginning with the mafia law of silence. A study of war remains to be written.

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²¹ With the notable exception of the conflict of Northern Ireland

²² Edition dated Friday, 19 August.

²³ It should be noted that the sentences handed down in these circumstances are often revised downward on appeal.

²⁴ Clastres, P., "*Archéologie de la violence. La guerre dans les sociétés primitives*" [Archeology of violence. War in primitive societies] Paris, Poche Essai, collection "l'aube" ['dawn'], 1997 and 2005 for the paperback edition.

²⁵ Closer to us, in London, Ian Blair, the chief of Scotland Yard, observed: "a 'new trend' towards an increase in serious crimes and murders involving adolescents". And this is so at a time when generally this type of crime in declined in London by 14% in 2006.