

# PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION, SOCIAL FRUSTRATIONS AND URBAN VIOLENCE. THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE

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The research that we have been carrying for a decade on the living conditions in the deprived urban areas in France, commonly referred to as 'les banlieues'<sup>1</sup>, are intimately connected with the notions of distance and mobility. Issues of integration, exclusion, accessibility, proximity are to be examined through the double social and spatial aspect. In this paper, we would like to defend the idea of the necessity of irrigating the poor neighbourhoods with public transportation in order to avoid their marginalisation from the city – and furthermore to bring them closer to the centre – but simultaneously we would suggest that if the public transportation provide the low-income residents of these remote poor neighbourhoods with the opportunity of an easier access to richer and more various spaces, they also generate social frustrations and contribute to empty the peripheries of their most creative human resources.

## **I- City, velocity, violence : invisible frontiers.**

### **The city as space of frustrations**

If the city has historically been a place of exchanges, richness, diversity, it's been also a space of contradictions, of illusionary proximities, loneliness, of out-of-reach opportunities, in other words of frustrations. Generating unequal developments between groups of populations, between neighbourhoods, the city as a system is subject to – as well as producer of - pull and push forces that aggregate and disaggregate, connect and separate. Being a place of confusion of landmarks for groups and individuals, it creates social violence.

In France, since the early sixties, the urban violence has been an increasing social phenomenon whose evolution has followed the economic cycles and identity crisis of the nation<sup>2</sup>. The spatial specificity of this concern is materialised by those huge housing estates, *les banlieues*, located in the fringes of the French big cities and where working class and mostly Black African and North African immigrant families have been housed, thus creating an ethnic dimension to urban problems to French Republic. Though differently located, the French *banlieues* are the sociological equivalent of British and American inner-city areas. Typically, these districts are dominated by high-rise estates catering for the poorest sections of society.

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<sup>1</sup> Equivalent of British council housing and American housing projects. See Alec G. Hargreaves, Immigration, race and ethnicity in contemporary France, Routledge, London, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Wieworka Michel, Violence in France, Edition du Seuil, 1999

## From integration spaces to spaces of disintegration

In France, since the end of the second world war, several steps have marked the function of the city as a place of work. During the 1945-1975 economic growth period, the industrial city has dealt with workers, indigenous as well as foreigners, as manpower units spatially identified within slums, shantytowns, transit camps, and other housing estates built in the remote fringes of the city. Then came the time of frustrations, following the 1975 economic crisis. The increase of unemployment among the poorest classes has given birth to urban enclaves and accentuated fears of the others and stigmatisations against foreign workers and their French-born children. Then came the time of hate : when the desire to participate to consumption society has become uncontrollable it has generated among the youths originating in African immigration a violent reaction against their social exclusion. Surprisingly, it should be noticed that the time of hate was also the time a sacrificial rites, a modern version of collective suicides : in the French *banlieues*, the urban riots of these last few years have shown some conscious or unconscious strategies leading to threat global social order through spectacular massive destructions of urban materials, cars, burnings, attacks against police and firemen...<sup>3</sup> The spatial consequence of these ethnic riots is a attempt of self-isolation of the territory of relegation vis-à-vis the rest of the city. From a psychological point of view, within the exclusionary system, the individual has lost his space-and-time landmarks, the urban space where he lives and survives turns out into an illusion and creates a feeling of double bind.

As a preservation mechanism, the global urban system seems to activate a response tending to 'isolate the problem' : the poorest dilapidated neighbourhoods have been unbound from the rest of the city and portrayed as unsecured areas. It has been to this point that in French, the word 'Zone' or *banlieues* have become synonymous with areas of acute social disadvantage, unsecured, ethnic ghettos. This type of discrimination often based on a word-of-mouth stigmatisation has largely participated to split the city at a social level between *us* and *they*. Widespread media coverage of violent confrontations between police and disillusioned youths has helped to give these *banlieues* a reputation of lawlessness.

Suffering exceptionally high unemployment rate, youths of immigrant origin have often been to the fore in street disorder provoked by aggressing policing. This points out that in France -one of the richest country in the world - participating to the society, having a role, a social utility remains a privilege. Lots of youths originated in poor African immigrant families living in housing estates have been expressing a feeling of being trapped within a system that turns faster and faster<sup>4</sup>, reinforcing their sentiment of immobility, giddiness and frustration. The reality of their social and spatial immobility is worsened par the illusion of hyper-mobility which is positively valorised by consumption society. For the individual, frustration is brought out from the sensation of being in a virtual moving world though he is himself fixed, or from watching the others moving faster and faster while he is himself immobilised. Living a situation of social captivity and spatial relegation is made more painful by the conscious that society is based on the propensity of the individuals to move, to adapt themselves to changes, and notably to velocity. Undoubtedly, this sentiment of being rejected out of the mainstream is a source of social violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Body-Gendrot Sophie, *Ville et Violence : l'irruption de nouveaux acteurs*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1993

<sup>4</sup> See for example the inauguration in June 2001 of the new railways connection Paris Marseille - 800 km- by TGV (high speed train) in 3 hours !

## Velocity and poverty

Hence the relation between poverty and velocity. For the individual, velocity becomes the symbol of power. Showing it up can definitely testify his full participation to society, as a refusal of fixity and immobility. Magnified as an object of power, it is often used by the youths of poor neighbourhoods as an instrument of violence. What is commonly referred to as '*les rodeos*' in French *banlieues* appears to be an interesting illustration of this sociological phenomenon. Etymologically, the rodeo is a festivity celebrating the stamping of the cattle in the USA during which the cow-boys compete for the domestication of the animals. It is striking to note how stimulating is the shift from the classical rural definition of this rodeo and its urban contemporary version in France as far as the rite of stolen cars is concerned.

In this latter case, the non domesticated object is not represented by an animal but rather by a powerful car stolen in some rich place of the city, brought back within the neighbourhood limits to be possessed, marked... and eventually burnt. The idea of domesticating, possessing, mastering the object of power is violently present in this sacrificial rite where the risk of death is permanent. The show has a precise orchestration : a youth of the *banlieue*, alone or with other peers, brings back from the outside world his capture, usually a powerful fancy car and gives a show within the neighbourhood buildings, drive perilously in the narrow lanes, makes noise with the engine, gears and brakes... until the car is projected against a wall and finally burnt, as an expression of the end of the celebration. The object is dead but the symbol of its power has been transferred into the hands of these youths as a process of social self rehabilitation. From a geographical point of view, it is worth noting that the arena for this play is the neighbourhood, the place where people know each other, where these youths have their landmarks as community members. Thus, the process of this furious appropriation of the velocity takes place at home, inside a territory where the police forces fear to penetrate, where the youths can count on the protection and defensive solidarity of their peers, but also where the children are playing in the streets and are therefore exposed to accidents, where the workers have parked their own cars that could be damaged by these stolen-car-races...

The message that can be read from this celebration is that the exclusion of an individual is all the more frustrating as he is physically located near the core of the consumption society, as he is *inside* without means to cross the borders, as he feels himself immobilised by constraining forces, with the right to watch without touching. The tyrannical acceleration of the execution of human activities in a consumption society contributes to increase the sentiment of urban abandonment and loneliness, of being left out of account by the system. Simultaneously, it increases the sentiment of hate, insecurity, as well as conflicts between the different groups that make up the general population (youths and adults, natives and aliens, girls and boys, youths and police forces...). In the French housing estates, one of the hardest difficulties the social workers have to deal with is the fact that they are confronted with disillusioned youths who have nothing to lose<sup>5</sup>.

## 2- Buses of integration versus stones of separatism

Within the poor neighbourhoods, youths originating in African immigrant families do not make up a homogeneous population. Though they have been living in the same neighbourhood, they present different psychological profiles. In fact, several researches that we have been carrying for years have led to a typology that organises their diversity in three sub-groups : the *disintegrated*, the *in-between*, the *integrated group*. This partition will be helpful to understand how the distance of exclusion is instrumentalised by the different groups and why the public transportation systems are the target of the urban violence in these neighbourhoods.

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<sup>5</sup> Lusane Clarence, *Pipe dream blues. Racism and the war on drugs*, South End Press, Boston, 1991

### **The disintegrated group**

Let us present in few words the first group. It is not rare to find in these poor districts unemployment rates of one third or a quarter among the youths between 16 and 24. Globally, one can consider that in the housing estates one third of the youths are out of the system, with dramatically limited chance of escaping social exclusion. For them, time has no economic value, the world is a great today, they live for the passing time, and parallel economy is the only means of survival, notably the drug economy that has increasingly become the principal cash-generating activity<sup>6</sup>. In this group, rent payment, car purchases, and the provision of food and clothing for many families is completely tied to the drug trade. One can define this first group as people who have nothing to lose, no religion, no concept of morality, no civic responsibility, no fear ; they are for ever frustrated. Their socio-spatial strategy leads to the idea that the neighbourhood should be isolated from the rest of the city/society, in order to avoid any social control on their parallel economy and other illegal means of survival. They are the leading actors of urban violence and riots against police in the '*banlieues*'.

### **One third integrated.**

Living in the same territory, one other third of these youths are 'integrated' in the system. They have got a job, stable revenues, no major difficulties to conduct projects, a correct level of education. They are 'in', that is to say they are melt in the mainstream French population, though they make up a visible population subject to various discriminations in society. Those people have contradictory interests to those disintegrated who have nothing to lose and hinder the global integration process of children of immigrant families in French society. For the 'integrated' group, the territory has to be closely bound to the rest of the city, notably through the public transportation system. They have learnt from French society to act as individual, not as member of a minority group, which is not the case for the other.

### **One third in-between**

In the middle of the scale, a later third of youths are neither integrated nor disintegrated and can be referred to as the in-between third. They are still at school, college or in professional training, so to say in between two situations. For them, the issue of revenues are of great importance and aggravated by their young age, because they are attracted by the phantasms of consumption society. In the long term, in France the future of the *banlieues* will partly depend on the following alternative : either the *in-between* group youths will find out in the system the way to join the *integrated* third, or they will not and therefore they will inevitably contribute to increase the weight of the disintegrated third. In this latter case, the risk will be huge to the French model on integration to be confronted in the next few years to the reality of ethnic ghettos.

As we mentioned it earlier, the issue of social integration of the *banlieues* poor immigrant families can not be untied from the context of consumption society in which it takes place. For the youths, the participation to the mainstream of the society is made of symbolic aspects and requires to get the means to purchase the distinctive signs of the fashion society (sport shoes, clothes, powerful cars...) and therefore the *business society*, while illegal and risky, still pays dividends than would otherwise be possible, and provides access to luxury consumption that many of these working-class youths know they could otherwise never aspire to.

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<sup>6</sup> For a comparison with American society, see Steinberg Stephen, *The Ethnic Myth. Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1989

## **Territorial stakes**

Among the youths, these social behaviours have a direct consequence on the representation and use of urban territories : those who have been making profit of the parallel economy tend to consider themselves 'above the law' and make of their neighbourhood a 'reservation', while those who make it through the educational system or other channels aspire to escape it. These mobility-immobility behaviours clearly illustrate the stakes of urban mobility for the future of the poor neighbourhoods. It is possible to articulate them into two chapters :

- policy of *irrigation*, maintaining the integration of poor neighbourhood into the global urban context ;
- policy of *isolation*, cutting the linkages between them.

This duality appears to be relevant for imaging the challenges that the democratic French city is confronted to. How did we get there ?

### **3- The mechanisms of isolation**

In France, the mechanisms of isolation of housing estates have been fed by external and internal factors.

#### ***Historical lessons***

Historically, the removal of poor neighbourhoods from the city is a result of several complementary processes :

- comparative distinction : the stigmatisation of these neighbourhoods is a process by which the others neighbourhoods that make up the city value themselves positively. The circumscription of the perimeter of the 'bad' is a way to remove the threat of the *near Other*. Creating psychological distances through the production of mental representation discriminating the ethnic districts participate to keep aside the Other, to maintain him at *distance*.

- give credit to the thesis 'let them live together'. This culturally-based argument leads to the gathering of people who share a common culture in the same urban district to avoid differential shocks and conflicts.

- political resignation : the remoteness of poor neighbourhoods from the rest of the city justifies their political abandonment under the pretext that they are so remote that it is difficult to run a public policy.

- visualisation and control : the removal 'of the problem' makes possible a better knowledge, control and repression of youth delinquency.

#### ***Contemporary evolutions***

The historical remoteness process of the poor neighbourhoods has a contemporary consequence. Today, in the ethnic French urban enclaves the distance of exclusion is reactivated by the poor themselves at their own profit in a strategy of renegotiation of their social and spatial situation. It is remarkable to note these strategies based on the claiming of the urban ghetto as a 'private' reservation, where police and other uniform wearers are not welcome. In the context of urban violence, buses are the first and most symbolic targets of *the separatists-disintegrated*. A bus driver wearing a professional uniform is assimilated to the forces of order, to the repressive society in general, the hate-generating system. In fact, French urban society is confronted in its poor districts to some kinds of battle for the control of the bridge. The development of fears, insecurity, aggressions, in all spheres of public space, schools, stores, transports, streets... contribute actually to dig the difference, to physically cut off the communications between the poor district and the rest of the city. Boycott is a frequent answer to violence against bus drivers in the *banlieues*. As a consequence, *there*, in this part of the bridge, the State legitimacy is overtly

contested. Since buses are the most visible linkage between different districts of the city, it is not surprising –given these strategies- that they are at the forefront of urban violence involving the inner-city youths. Globally, the means of public transportation are a moving mirror of a social organisation. To illustrate this purpose, it is interesting to go back to the early century in France. Thus, when the first cars began to circulate in the countryside in 1900-1904, they sparked serious conflicts between peasants and car drivers. Velocity and frequent accidents caused by cars were the most invoked arguments to justify violence from the poorest parts of the rural populations against the urban car drivers, pioneers of *the invasion of automobile*. In the rural roads, hidden behind trees peasants would place in ambush and launch stone attacks against cars. Sometimes, physical aggressions against drivers would be committed. Therefore, evidence with contemporary phenomena are clear. A century ago, automobile was a favourite target for the poor peasants because it was the symbol of the social inequality. Wasn't it a luxury good, exclusively owned by the rich wealthy bourgeoisie ? Therefore, it inevitably accentuated the sentiment of frustration of the poorest. Such a problematic of spatial diffusion of modernity could be transferred as such to the relation between the poor contemporary housing estates vis-à-vis the rest of the city<sup>7</sup>. How did society manage to alleviate these structural social tensions ?

### **The ethnic solution : the big brothers**

Since one and a half decade, in most of the public urban companies, in order to remedy the increase a violence against drivers and vehicles working in the poor areas, a solution has been implemented consisting in an ethnically-oriented recruitment of security agents –mostly of Black African and North African origin- whose role is to ensure a human presence of board the vehicles and metro stations and to prevent conflicts and deterioration of materials. The underlying philosophy of these recruitments is to get the public transportation reinvested by the people of the poor neighbourhoods as their own service. This is why the agents are referred to as ‘the big brothers’ : being themselves members of the poor district communities, they are supposed to be known, recognised by their peers on board the vehicles and therefore respected by the trouble-maker youths. It is worthwhile noting that a problem a social violence within neighbourhoods of high concentration of economically precarious immigrant families, has been given an ethnic solution, which is in the history of public transportation in France the starting point of a new era : the introduction of the ethnic dimension as a parameter of social public action. In other words, a policy of *positive discrimination* that has benefited to the employment of youths originated in poor immigrant urban districts, but nevertheless remains in flagrant opposition to the so-called Republican French model of integration based on the non-segregation of the citizen according to his ethnic origin.<sup>8</sup>

In France, this final step of the integration of poor ethnic neighbourhoods within the city has marked a constant policy of irrigation of the remote districts with public transportation aiming at avoiding ghettoisation process. Since a generation, constant efforts of investments and innovations have been engaged and supported by public as well as private funds to facilitate travels from remote urban areas to city centre and therefore neutralising the constraint of geographical remoteness. Today the effects of these policies can be considered as disappointing in terms of integration. It appears –paradoxically- that the improvement of urban travel conditions destined to the poor inhabitants of the remote housing estates has partly contributed to the their disaffection. Clearly said, those of the inhabitants who had the means to choose their living place have escaped –in their daily activities or for good- these deprived neighbourhoods. Better public transportation

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<sup>7</sup> Begag Azouz, *Quartiers sensibles*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Noiriél Gerard, ‘Difficulties in French Historical research on Immigration’, in D.L. Horowitz and G. Noiriél (eds), *Immigrants in two democracies : French and American Experiences*, New York and London : New York University Press, 1992

has brought to them enlarged social and economical opportunities and consequently made effective avoiding social strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, it can be estimated that the improvement of urban linkages through public transportation networks after the beginning of the big 1975 economic crisis have produced several subsidiary effects :

- regarding the commercial activities : bring the inhabitants of the housing estates shopping in the city centre supermarkets rather than in the street corner stores of their neighbourhood, thus contributing to the decline of the local economy, an essential element of social life ;

- regarding the social life : desertion of the neighbourhoods at the profit of the big city where opportunities of social personal development are much higher (especially as far as the choice of primary and secondary schools is concerned for the children education) ;

- regarding the sentiment of frustration : as we mentioned it previously, the improvement of accessibility of city centre (shopping, theatres, cultural activities...) has increased the sentiment of exclusion among the poorest (what is the use going to the city centre without any means to consume ?) and deepen the gap between the 'in' and the 'out'. Therefore, it has played a part in the increase of urban disorders among the youths of the *banlieues*.

In conclusion, in France the radio-concentric binding of the housing estates districts to the city centre has operated at the expense of the most vulnerable remote districts. This is due to the fact that this 'technical integration' –by means of public transportation– has placed in a competitive situation two unequally developed urban areas and the one has begun to empty (the periphery) at the other's profit (the centre). The public transportation systems have worked as a catalysis in the process and have not been able to turn down the trend of the disaffection of the poor neighbourhoods. This proves that public transportation may not in fact be the best answer to the problems plaguing an urban area, or even the best use of limited financial resources<sup>9</sup>. In many cases, money could more wisely be spent on community facilities, housing, schools, local cultural equipments (theatres, bookshops, libraries...), creation of job opportunities, aiming at improving life nearby and to avoid long and expensive travels to the city.

In France, one of the paradoxical effect of the improvement of urban public transportation is that a unilateral draining movement has taken place. The residents of the poor neighbourhoods have actually gone to the city, but those of the city have not gone to the *banlieues*. In France, the public rulers of the policy of the city<sup>10</sup> are presently confronted with the formation a real poor ethnic ghettos and –more than ever - violence against buses are to be considered as a highly burning symbol of the dislocation of the Republican city. As long as the others spheres of social life are not taken into consideration in a global policy of integration (struggle against racism and discriminations, against poverty, revitalisation of traditional values, social work programs...), public transportation will stay of limited efficiency in the city.

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<sup>9</sup> Owen Wilfred, *The accessible city*, The Brookings Institutions, Washington D.C., 1972

<sup>10</sup> In French : politique de la ville.

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Azouz Begag is a social scientist who has been carrying research for fifteen years on the issue of social and spatial integration of immigrant families in the poor neighbourhoods of French cities. Born in 1957 in Lyons of an Algerian immigrant family settled in France in 1949, he spent his childhood in a shantytown until the age of twelve. He got a Phd in economic sciences at the Lyon 2 university devoted to the immigrants' urban travel demand in 1984.

From 1982 to 1999 he was a researcher at the Lyons laboratory of transport economics led by professor Alain Bonnafous. He carried many researches on the issue of the role of public transportation in the policy of integration of the inhabitants of the suburban districts. In 2000 he joined the space and culture laboratory of the institute of geography of Paris 4-sorbonne where he's been carrying research on the relations between 'distance' and 'social exclusion' within the french housing estates referred to as les banlieues where immigrant and low-income families are concentrated.

He published lots of articles and books on that subject, among them

- L'immigré et sa ville, lyon, presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1987
- Quartiers sensibles, editions du seuil, 1994
- La ville des autres, lyon, presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1990
- Espace et exclusion. Mobilités dans les quartiers périphériques d'avignon, paris, editions l'harmattan, 1995.
- Du bon usage de la distance chez les sauvageons, editions du seuil, 2000.