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Gangs of Paris or thereabout

Michel KOKOREFF

Youth gangs are often discussed but rarely investigated. In an ethnographic study that examines families, schools, and the street, sociologist Marwan Mohammed reconstructs the principles according to which these groups are formed in the Paris region.

Reviewed: Marwan Mohammed, *La formation des bandes. Entre la famille, l'école et la rue*, Paris, PUF, collection « Le lien social », 2011, 453 p., 29 €.

Sociologist Marwan Mohammed's new book is an important contribution to the definition of French youth gangs, whose definition is often very uncertain. Based on a dissertation defended in 2007 that has been substantially revised since he joined the CNRS the same year, his book analyzes the social mechanisms that contribute to gang reproduction in the housing projects of the Paris region. Building on Thrasher's classic perspective, he reveals the "compensatory logic" that operates between three forms of juvenile socialization: the school, the family, and the street. The author relies primarily on a monographic study conducted between 2001 and 2007 in the housing projects of Villiers-sur-Marne, where he was raised, worked, and was politically active. While I cannot do justice to the study's analytic and ethnographic richness, I will consider the social and territorial conditions of the gangs he studies and the significant contributions made by the chapters on schools and families, before turning to the question of gang dynamics.

The Ecology of Gangs

A first major point concerns the relationship between structural change and local rhythms in the town investigated. The social stratification of the Hautes Noues housing project once consisted of households of skilled laborers who worked in textile factories located to the south of Paris. They included a significant number of refugees from Southeast Asia and an even larger Portuguese community, residing in a neighboring shantytown. In 1982—ten years after the first units were built—85% of these employees were laborers, of which 60% were skilled laborers. While overall unemployment (6.7%) was below the departmental average (7.2%), the rate for youths under the age of twenty was considerably higher (34.7%). Over the eighties and nineties, the neighborhood's social and economic condition deteriorated significantly. This sociological shift was characterized by a threefold transformation of the job structure, as employment became more precarious, feminized, and service-based. Even so, the town's loss of its working class character did not affect its cultural identity, since "Villiers-sur-Marne was never a 'red suburb'" (p. 36). But the consequences were the same: the unity conferred by working-class identity was replaced by multiple cleavages and identities segmented by age, gender, and ethnicity.

It was in this context that the town's street life and "deviant side" began to change. A major turning point was 1996, following changes in the town's morphology and a judicial offensive against its drug trafficking networks. The result was a deepening of ethnic cleavages, the imprisonment of the major figures in the local drug trade, and the arrival of a new generation, whose ages ranged from fourteen to sixteen. The latter engaged in assault, violent robbery, and confrontations with gangs in the neighboring town (Champigny-sur-Marne). The combined effect of these developments was a "negative emulation dynamic occurring at several levels" (p. 40). These adolescents staffed the culture of "remunerative delinquency that has reigned in the streets for over a decade" (p. 41). At the same time, the experience of prison became commonplace among these groups.

Segregation and Scholastic Deviance

A second interesting aspect of the study is its analysis of the effects of the social and residential environment on adolescents' scholastic experiences. Needless to say, their education is characterized by generally weak performances, the fact that middle schools steer them towards

undervalued tracks, and a high dropout rate due to exclusion and neglect. Even so, an examination of local statistical data suggests an increasing “polarization of scholastic statuses” (p. 47). Three groups can be distinguished: high school dropouts; high school graduates (i.e., recipients of the French baccalaureate) and university students; and, between the two, holders of technical or professional diplomas (such as the CAP or BEP[1]). Not all the adolescents living in the Hautes Noues project who have failed in school join a gang. A comparison of two groups, each consisting of around fifteen youths of similar ages whose families share a comparable standard of living, shows that they are nonetheless differentiated from one another by their level of education, their attitudes, and their ambitions. These insights can be refined by considering the temporal dynamic of “scholastic demotivation” and “transgressive associations.” Two moments are critical: between first and third grade and from the beginning of sixth grade through seventh grade.

The true significance of these “timetables of demotivation” becomes apparent when they are connected to the subjects’ experiences in middle school. The author’s immersion in the projects and the local middle school, as well as the interviews conducted with students and parents, offers high-quality, first-hand material. It suggests that this stage of life is one in which the norms, codes, and values of the projects are observed and experimented with. Middle school helps to connect these lifestyles and unites students with difficulties, thus contributing to the development of scholastic deviance (absenteeism, lack of work, disobedience, etc.). In these circumstances, the disconnect between the school and parents, who find themselves particularly helpless in relation to written culture and feel fatalistic about the neighborhood and “bad company,” makes it difficult to buck these trends. “The nature of relationships begins to change and the adolescents’ powerful sense of injustice begins to solidify in response to the institution’s hardening line” (p. 74). For their part, parental powerlessness when faced with scholastic demotivation stands in sharp contrast to institutional discourse about “parental resignation,” as parents do in fact have high expectations as to what schools can do.

[1] Vocational Training Certificate (*Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*/CAP); Technical School Certificate (*Brevet d’études professionnelles*/BEP).

Family Break-Ups and Parental Involvement

If schools contribute in this way to "manufacturing" delinquency (p. 52), what is the role of the family? On this topic, Mohammed offers a particularly stimulating analysis, emphasizing the diversity of family histories, temporalities, and configurations. He addresses the structural role of home life, the impact of misconduct at school on family atmosphere (notably the way that it challenges parental myths about immigrant children's success), and how petty delinquency makes it possible to downplay failure in school and elicits different reactions from fathers and mothers. Next, Mohammed considers the specific effects of family turmoil on the decision to join a gang, including break-ups (divorce, separation, moving away, or death), with their statistical and relational consequences, and unemployment. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it would seem that the correlation between juvenile delinquency and single parent families is not self-evident. On the basis of ninety interviews with gang members, he finds that 79% of two-parent households include gang members, as opposed to 21% for single-parent households.

Relationships between parents and adolescents are often based on paradoxical expectations. Parents condemn attitudes and behavior that they value in other circumstances, such as violence. For a little over half of the subjects, there was clear continuity between a harsh family life and the roughness of the gangs. Relationships to institutions constitute another aspect of these contradictory signals. Parents' superficial support of schools, the police, and the judicial system may conceal a less clear-cut position at home. Parental complicity can delegitimate institutional attempts at regulation without offering additional support. Similarly, economic precariousness often accompanies petty crime (transportation fraud, administrative violations, identity switching, workplace theft, etc.). The many situations Mohammed analyzes make it apparent that family lenience is tied to group dignity and that a kind of working-class social conscience downplays crime in the name of social justice.

Adaptive postures complete this tableau of obvious educational contradictions. For instance, the gang members studied use a wide array of deceptive techniques to sidestep rules that prohibit stolen objects or "dirty money" within the domestic sphere. Only a minority of parents "close their eyes." The practice of lending and trading both legal and stolen objects in the projects make it difficult to determine their precise origin. And there are, of course, cases of

family-based crime. But aside from the fact that these have less to do with gangs than with dealing or organized crime, they are, according to the author, few and far between. If the term "parental delinquency" is consequently nonsensical, Mohammed nonetheless shows that a connection exists between fluctuating norms and gang membership.

Though it is rarely addressed by French sociological literature on working-class neighborhoods,[2] this exploration of family life is supplemented by a consideration of the classic theme of authority and its foundation in working-class relationships. Mohammed analyzes the many facets of these families' material conditions. He shows the various domestic discomforts that make the street appealing: the presence and accommodation of third parties (pp. 167-169); the boundaries between male and female spheres in the household, which result in gendered homework spaces; noise; domestic chores and the fatigue they entail; and the precarious and arduous jobs with long commutes and unconventional hours, which contribute to "parental unavailability" (p. 172). He shows how the routinization of delinquency, deferred by generational complicity and concealment tactics and disclosed by "the arrival of penal authorities" (p. 192), destabilizes familial and educational routines and triggers a "weakening of parental control" (p. 183). The latter is, consequently, less a cause than an effect.

How can this situation be controlled? Educational strategies shift from anticipation to minimization and from deterrence to intimidation. But they must struggle against negative dynamics in neighborhoods where there is a great supply of deviance. This exacerbates the "relinquishment of the parent's educational role" (p. 194). Understanding the parents' educational challenges requires an understanding of the process that Mohammed calls "educational delegitimation," that is, the way in which their authority unravels in practice. He identifies two typical forms this process assumes: "commiserative delegitimation" and "moral delegitimation" (pp. 200-201). In the former, a youth gang turns away from their parents without condemning them; in the latter, they exhibit aversion towards their fathers (more than towards their mothers). But here, too, the author brings to light the variety of parental reactions, the failure of which "has as much to do with the paucity of available resources as the incapacity of

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[2] As a counterexample, see the classic work, which has recently been translated into French, by Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1966).

the various authorities involved to construct a multi-pronged response. Yet this is precisely what gangs do well" (p. 229).

Social Norms and Informal Codes

Ultimately, adolescent socialization processes go well beyond the school and the family. This recognition brings to light the diversity of normative regimes; the tension between school, family, and street norms; the way in which deviance or misconduct at school functions as a "normative filter" (p. 69) (which precedes the joining a gang) and the story of neighborhoods as "normative limits" (p. 167); and the conflict between "vertical" and "horizontal norms," which results in a "normative explosion." Yet the perspective is not always the same: at times, norms become relative, even delegitimized; at others, they are operative through street codes. On one hand, Mohammed writes that "the street realizes and radicalizes norms but does not create them" (p. 251); on the other, they are produced within this social and residential environment and reproduced efficaciously from one generation to the next. Violence and intimidation are not the only means of regulation, as "enduring gangs are those that regulate themselves internally on the basis of the double exigency of respect and reciprocity" (p. 286). Could it be that social norms are split and located on both sides? Must we not distinguish between the normative realm (institutional, stable, and internal) and the informal realm? In other words, could the difficulties that institutions face in embodying the norm dissimulate more informal regulatory mechanisms, which explains not only why certain neighborhoods are "well kept," but why they experience a degree of social peace?

These questions are not only theoretical, but eminently practical. Over and above the issue of deviant behavior, they teach us about the normative boundaries upon which social experimentation and practices depend; and about the informal rules in which public policy might anchor itself in urban spaces, rather than seeking to reactivate "from above" normative ideals that have, precisely, become meaningless.

Gangs and Neighborhoods

The latter point makes it possible to interrogate the porous boundary between the universe of gangs and the social world of neighborhoods. The author proposes the concept of

“normative poles” as a way of, on the one hand, identifying the various strata in which individuals and the groups they form are inscribed, and, on the other, of characterizing the “deviant pole” of gangs that structures street life. The groups associated with the deviant pole are primarily male. The presence of girls is rare.

But many of these traits are not unique to gangs. If the author emphasizes the central role of fighting and its spatial dimensions, he also addresses “parents’ fights.” This original type of social bond, based on relationships of force and debts, characterizes many aspects of social relations in working-class neighborhoods, where social, generational, sexual, and ethnic cleavages tend to proliferate. Similarly, does the gang world end where the dealers’ world begins? Are gangs a kind of recruiting ground where dealers make new hires? Or are gangs, as their members get older, fully implicated in drug usage and dealing, phenomena that have contributed to the transformation of French gang life? Is this not one of the differences with girls’ gangs, which, while less visible, are no less real?

What is certain is that the street is not the exclusive territory of gangs and that gangs do not have a monopoly on feelings of injustice, a fact revealed by incidents of police violence that made it to trial, which only served to reinforce those feelings (pp. 376-379). In addition to groups of adolescent peers with a strong territorial basis and older “teams” whose activities are directed to organized delinquency, there exist more ephemeral gatherings that crystallize around juvenile violence occurring either in the neighborhood or nearby communities. But there are still other forms of social bonds. I have often noticed the importance of masculine duos. Often ephemeral and serial in nature, they consist of two friends who “hang together,” which implies an entire array of activities ranging from leisure time to shared illicit behavior, both in the neighborhood and beyond. As they have almost no secrets between them, these groupings steer clear of fights and brawls. They are often more mobile. These duos offer a form of reassurance in the face of the fragility of social bonds and the harshness of social relations.

Racialization and Ethnicization

Finally, faced with the emergence of “ethnic gangs,” Mohammed puts forth the hypothesis of an “intensification of uses of ethnicity” (p. 290) that are “plural, fragmented,

disorderly, fluid, and occasionally intertwined" (p. 305). This leads him to identify twelve uses of ethno-racial belonging, divided into two main types: "connecting uses" and "disconnecting uses." He concludes that "no gang is organized around a principle of racial exclusion." Gang recruitment in the Hautes Noues project is aimed at adolescents who are "failing academically and lacking diplomas, and originates with large cohorts of siblings" (p. 323)." Yet is this conclusion really original?

The fact remains that the weight of racism and ethnic discrimination in these contexts cannot be overestimated. This important experience illustrates the contradictions, even the limits, of the republican model, the principles of which are violated at a practical level on a daily basis. To say this does not amount to endorsing a racialist reading of social relations or to sidestepping the issue of economic disparities. At an analytical level, it means distinguishing the process of *racialization* (from above) from that of *ethnicization* (from below) and grasping how prescribed and subscribed identities interact with one another. It is understandable, given that class cleavages seem to have lost their efficacy, that such processes have become more charged and visible. Even so, a great deal of research has shed light on the reality of ethnic discrimination in different realms of social life and the links between juvenile misconduct, academic failure, and cultural origin.[3] Ethnic dynamics have apparently made inroads in the most segregated of urban spaces, particularly when they pertain to Islam, which can function both as a rampart against delinquency and a way out of it.

On this point we should concede that, as in many other instances, there is plenty of room for debate. It is thus worth repeating, in conclusion, that Mohammed's book is an important one, which grapples with an issue that is too often vulnerable to ideologically and politically-motivated approximation. It also exemplifies a certain way of doing sociology, one that is attentive to the diversity of spaces, situations, and experiences, and, while blending quantitative data and ethnographic material in a remarkable way, is careful to let speak those who rarely do.

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[3] One could mention the recent debate between Didier Fassin and Hugues Lagrange on the notion of culture in the most recent edition of the *Revue française de sociologie,* October-December 2011 (52:4), 777-796.