

Why are people setting fire to libraries?

Social violence and written culture

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Past outbreaks of unrest in the French *banlieues*¹ have confirmed that libraries were a favourite target during riots. Sociologists Denis Merklen and Numa Murard have investigated the conflicted relationship that some young people have with written culture. They are sharing their results with us in this article.

The 2007 popular riots in Villiers-le-Bel have brought renewed attention to the issue of the violence that is inflicted on local libraries. The latter have in fact been the target of various attacks. During the November 2005 riots, around twenty public libraries had stones thrown at them or were set on fire. On a more daily basis, the libraries and librarians who work in the *quartiers*² are often subjected to violence: this includes theft of computers, CDs and DVDs, arson, stones thrown at windows, graffiti, disturbances in reading rooms, threats, employees being followed in the street. During the night of the vote count for the second round of the presidential election in 2007, there were more attacks on libraries. In one *quartier* in Saint-Denis, young people said to a librarian: “If Sarko gets through, we’re going to burn your library down,” which was a somewhat paradoxical threat to direct at facilities provided by the (Communist) city council of this town located in the deprived *département*³ of Seine Saint-Denis, often referred to using its code number of 93.

We have been engaged in a field study to try and understand these events for a little over a year now⁴. How can we overcome the perplexity that we feel when we are faced with a library that has been set fire to? How can we understand these actions? What is the target here? A public institution? A building that represents power, or the Republic? A library... But what is a library? And what is a library to them, to the originators of this violence? To “them” – does this mean, to people who are not the same as us? The first step we need to take to escape from this confusion is to become aware of the fact that we ourselves, librarians, teachers and sociologists, are all part of one same, specific group: we earn our living and assert our social status within the book market. The book is often presented as an attribute of

¹ Translator’s Note: Literally “suburbs”, but this term is often used to refer specifically to impoverished suburban areas, such as those to the North of Paris, where social problems are rife.

² TN: Literally “district” or “neighbourhood”, but likewise, in this context, used as shorthand to refer to impoverished local areas that tend to be affected by various social problems.

³ TN: administrative entity – several *départements* make up a region.

⁴ *Pourquoi brûler des livres ? Violence, culture et politique populaires* (“Why burn books? Popular violence, culture and politics”), a joint study carried out by D. Merklen and N. Murard within the framework of an agreement with the Bibliothèque publique d’information (“Public Information Library”) of the Georges Pompidou Centre.

the individual, a support for deepening one's self-knowledge and self-reflection. But it is also a social object, which is used to define limits between groups and categories.

Ambivalent Libraries

For over thirty years, the library has been a major vector of municipal policy⁵. All over the country, towns promote “public reading” in their *quartiers*. This books movement gives “culture” a centrifugal impulse, and the town grows. Peripheral *quartiers* welcome this presence, which, in principle, plays a role in gentrifying the *quartier*. Because it contains books, the library is a mark of prestige. Municipal policy thus has a direct impact on the collective identity of the *quartier* (since its inhabitants increasingly constitute a social group that is identified in territorial terms).

This proximity of communal facilities also becomes social capital that is prone to be appropriated by individuals. Various studies have shown quite how much the multitudinous uses of local libraries reflect just so many types of appropriation by the inhabitants. The multiplicity of universes that are created by the individual-reader when he/she opens a book (on this subject, see Roger Chartier's work on the multiplicity of “reading practices”) is amplified by the multiple uses encouraged by the library. It is invested as a place for exchange and meeting, for contact with the press and with the other “media” that can be found on its premises. Now that they have been modernised, local libraries have become “mediatheques”: they do not just contain books, but also CDs and DVDs, and they provide Internet access, and spaces to carry out research, to do your homework, to learn languages etc. Concerns about “ethnic” integration or about avoiding national discrimination encourage libraries to stock foreign language collections. In one *quartier*, it will be Arabic, in another Asian languages, a little further down the road it will be Spanish – all of this based on criteria which are not so much based on any surveys as on the ideas which librarians have about the “*quartier*” and about the morphology of the lower classes.

The library is a resource for girls and women for whom it provides spaces and means to escape from male or familial control. It is also a resource for young people dealing with the labour market and school requirements; it is also a service that is used by children and elderly people. By offering a route into the city, and contributing to opening up the “*cités*”⁶, the library affirms citizenship⁷. And because it is used as a support both to explore subjectivity and one's investment in the world, the library also promotes numerous forms of individual affirmation. By enabling multiple investments in individuals, the local library constitutes a genuine public space. It is often the only space that is (in principle) open to all, free, offering (in principle) direct access, with no compulsory mediation, without the necessity of “showing that you belong”.

But the presence of libraries in the *quartiers* also represents a major dividing force. It contributes to the creation of social boundaries, and while it opens up many doors to integration, it also closes some others. Along with schools, libraries represent a barrier or a vector of exclusion for some people. Within the framework of the dynamics that animate the

⁵ Anne-Marie Bertrand, *Les bibliothèques municipales : acteurs et enjeux*, Paris, Editions du Cercle de la librairie, 1994 (2nd edition, 2002).

⁶ TN: colloquial French term used to refer to social housing projects and, by extension, impoverished city districts.

⁷ Michel Petit et al., *De la bibliothèque au droit de cité. Parcours de jeunes*, Paris, Editions de la Bpi, 1997.

lower class world, libraries are sometimes viewed as a social force that comes from the outside. They therefore have a different aspect. Rather than being a public space, they become the emblem of one group being pitted against another, of the choice of a mode of integration which disqualifies those who do not have access to it, which discourages one type of sociability and promotes another. Starting with the very fact that, under the current conditions of its social presence, the relationship to books and to reading requires a certain type of individualisation, a relationship with intimacy, a certain dexterity and a relationship to the body that is based on discipline, isolation, silence, and an internalisation rather than an externalisation of emotions.⁸ While reading practices may take on many different forms, they are currently largely dominated, in lower class communities, by the way in which schools teach people to read. It is thus understandable that access to books requires a type of socialisation which, like any socialisation, may imply a rupture from some social and cultural environments. Are those that we associate with rap, with hip-hop and with street culture compatible with the kind of intellectuality that the book stands for, or are these various worlds defined in contrast to each other? Of course, this culture is no stranger to the written word. But it uses a written word which fulfils the requirements of the spoken word and of those means of communication that the group is well-versed in (blogs, mobile phones, email, songs – rap music would doubtless fall into the category of “text-based songs” and of the “popular savant”). Within the social movement that it originates from, this popular culture often ends up opposing the requirements of official, institutional language, of the grammar and syntax of books and of school. This latter form of written language fulfils the requirements of a different social position, and it looks like a foreign language to many inhabitants of the *quartiers*.

Changes in Popular Cultures

The activities of libraries within the *quartiers* contribute to creating changes in popular cultures. These doubtless mirror the changes in the living conditions of the lower classes, and above all those of the working class; this is the larger framework within which we must situate located and sporadic outbursts of violence, which appear here and there, but which have taken on too endemic a character for us to be able to interpret them exclusively in “local” terms. Deindustrialisation and the disintegration of the world of the working class, the decrease in solidarity within it, its loss of ability to self-reproduce (see for example the work of Beaud and Pialoux), the erosion of its past political, social and urban frameworks, started in the 1970s (see for example the work of Michel Verret) and have now become so exacerbated that, while it is still possible to talk about the plight of the working class, it has become almost impossible to make visible the existence of the working class itself. Even when it is possible to define a specific identity in terms of circumstances, and when people feel the need to act collectively, the cognitive resources which used to provide the basis for social identity appear to have been exhausted. Simultaneously, there have not been any very visible manifestations of the other major social category: that of employees, which is mostly female. Finally, craftsmen and shopkeepers have been less and less recruited from the ranks of the working class, following the retirement of those who were still living rooted in the lower class world, so that this world has become a fragmented and almost illegible landscape, unless you repaint it with the colours of nostalgia.

⁸ In a recent study into “vulnerable readers”, Véronique Le Goaziou shows how the book’s requirements for solitude, calm, silence and concentration are some of the main factors in withdrawal from or even opposition to reading, to books and to school. Véronique Le Goaziou, *Lecteurs précaires. Des jeunes exclus de la lecture ?*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2006.

In this fragmented landscape, what is the position of written cultures? We do not adhere to interpretations which view new cultural productions, in particular those that are referred to using the umbrella term of “urban cultures”, as heralding the end of the acceptance of written culture by the lower classes. We rather believe that these new forms express the ambivalence of this relationship to the written word, somewhere in between acceptance and rejection. This ambivalence is the result of a rupture and of a conflict between the practical conditions of life and of survival. In his survey of the “private world of workers” (*Monde privé des ouvriers*), Olivier Schwartz highlighted the transformations that have affected people’s lifestyles following deindustrialisation; these transformations allow some people to escape from proletarianisation, while others sink into it. A gap widens over an old division, which the solidarity of the lower classes used to paper over but which was no less profound for it: the division between the “respectable” working class, or the better integrated parts of the lower classes, and the rawer proletariat, or the parts of the lower classes that were most fragile and also most deviant, be it in terms of their family structures, educational models, modes of collective action and of the behaviour of their young people as well as of social gender relationships. Hedonism and asceticism, these two major ethos of the lower classes, were able to change scale, social side and content. The hedonism and the individualism which characterise those that have escaped proletarianisation are perfectly compatible with a concern for cultured culture, while this may appear to the others like an essential tool of the humiliation which they are subjected to. In the obscurity of the “proletarian nights”, to take Jacques Rancière’s expression⁹, some people continue to read and write in accordance with the forms of universal literacy¹⁰, while others are already expressing themselves using spray cans and arson. But the survey also shows that, sometimes, an individual can be successively one and the other, or even one and the other at the same time.

This division overlaps with a generational and memorial rupture between those who experienced the time of spatial, social and political aggregation, and those for whom these references mean nothing at all. In the language of aggregation, activist discourse is reminiscent for example of the Popular Front, of the Resistance, of the time of comrades – all of which are references which fall flat when they move from the workspace which they were rooted in to the disqualified urban space on the walls of which current outsiders write out what differentiates them from the establishment. It is difficult to truly perceive the sharpness of this division, not just because the massification of discourse about the *banlieues* tends to promote the mistaken idea of these being homogenous places and environments, but also and perhaps above all because the discourse of experts about the lower classes is itself haunted by an overall loss of symbolic capital, as, in the heights of the social realm, the economic bourgeoisie takes over from the intellectual bourgeoisie. At the two extremes of the social space, we might thus see a vacillation of the idea that is so solidly anchored in progressive thought, namely that knowledge and culture are necessarily equivalent to emancipation. What if, for more and more people, literacy was first an opportunity to suffer and then to get angry, by listening to or reading the speeches of all sorts of intellectuals, of all those for whom this literacy is both a profession and an article of faith?

Professionalisation and politicisation

⁹Jacques Rancière, *La nuit des prolétaires. Archives du rêve ouvrier*, Paris, Fayard, 1981.

¹⁰Cf. for example the stories of Jean-Pierre Levaray, in particular *Putain d’usine*, Montreuil, L’insomniaque, 2002.

The positions occupied by books and by written discourse within society place libraries at the centre of a major social issue. By observing libraries, we can see how major conflicts that oppose different positions within the lower classes can come into being within the space of the *quartier*. In the previous stage, that of “cultural democratisation” policies, the library was one tool among many aimed at social progress. Now that social conflict has moved from the workspace to the urban space, setting up a library takes on a new meaning. In this context, it is the expression of a public policy, and more precisely, of a political intervention into the world of popular culture. And, because it associates the action of the State with a representation of virtue, it assigns anything that stays outside of this to the “negative pole”¹¹, almost to an image of barbarianism. This is probably one of the reasons why attacking libraries seems incomprehensible to us.

This State intervention in the *quartiers*, with all the ambivalence that it involves in the eyes of their inhabitants, is part of a process of rupture with a previous popular written culture. This written culture had built up a connection to the book through a laborious and lengthy process that came from Catholic and left-wing traditions. All those involved, be they activists from different groups, trade unionists, priests, teachers and artists, all intellectuals, used to address the lower classes in order to offer them a social deal in which “talking about what you have read” was an asset, or even a requirement¹². In contrast, the current situation can be at least partially assimilated to a revival of the old opposition between “savant” and “popular”. We should remember that it was only possible to overcome this opposition for a while thanks to some major political work.

Is politics absent from the *quartiers*? Are libraries less politicised than they used to be? Absolutely not. What has changed, however, is the mode of access to the political realm that is provided by the library, the type of political socialisation which it works on. As a municipal project, the library legitimises its intervention thanks to the “public” nature of its activities. It is aimed at individuals, at the Individual, as an open, multifaceted space. Local authorities have given up on making libraries the vectors of partisan action. The policy and politics of a local library can clearly no longer be partisan, and they must be secular.

One of the things that we observe immediately is the impact of the professionalisation of the role of the librarian. This individual, who used to be an activist at the heart of the popular library, has become a professional who defines his/her task as being situated somewhere in between that of a youth leader or community coordinator, and that of a librarian proper when he/she is recruited to work in a local library or in one of the “annexes”, as they are referred to in the jargon of municipal authorities. The aims of “public reading” initiatives are no longer defined by activists and volunteers, as they were in the past. Professionalisation has changed the politics and policies of libraries, which now look to schools and teachers to recruit their allies, where before they would have gone to political parties and activists.

Conclusion

The librarians whom we met in the field are dedicated individuals. They all display a strong sense of vocation, even if they are at pains to deconsecrate the book and to avoid

¹¹ Gérard Althabe, « Procès réciproques en HLM », in G. Althabe et al., *Urbanisation et enjeux quotidiens*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1993, pp. 13-47.

¹² On the subject of this debate between Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Chartier, see « La lecture : une pratique culturelle », in R. Chartier, *Pratiques de la lecture*, Paris, Payot, 1993, pp. 277-306.

presenting their work as a “calling”. They believe in their work, and with good reason. All the more so given that this trust in the written word is ultimately a vital source of support in a profession that is often carried out under difficult circumstances. This difficulty becomes acute when an individual is attacked. How can we understand violence when it is enacted in response to dedication? The conflict with which librarians and local inhabitants are faced is rooted in the centre of our political structure. Because the library, the written word and the book are essential elements of our political culture, and because they play a part in defining the limit between the political realm and what is unacceptable, librarians and local inhabitants find themselves at the front line of a conflict which is taking place on the fringes of the city, but which goes right to the heart of our societies.

The division quickly takes root, not just because part of the population is no longer in contact with a market where it might be empowered by its reading, but also because both sides of the conflict experience the behaviours of the other as threatening, and therefore stubbornly fight against them. Many individuals who have been proletarianised, have seen their identity and their modes of participation assigned to a territorial definition, and have been excluded from school and employment, feel threatened by those who base their power on a mastery of the written word. Authors and readers, permanent employees and pensioners, social workers and teachers, journalists, politicians and intellectuals feel threatened by people who make a noise and move when they listen to music, who dance or walk down the street to a rhythm that allows them to claim some form of social belonging within the public space. “Youths from the *quartiers*” or “youths from the *cités*”, as they are known.

In the present context, an assault on a local library can however not be considered merely as an instance of book-burning. Nor can it be interpreted unequivocally as an act directed against culture, democracy, against the city. Its nature is fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, it should be taken as one aspect of the conflicts between the state and the lower classes, and on the other, as being part of the divisions that divide the lower classes themselves, including and above all within what we call “the *banlieues*”. Let us take for example the words of a person who was recently interviewed in a *quartier* to the north of Paris: “Give them work instead of a library”, “so that they can buy books!” (he is talking to us as though we are part of a vast category which here includes the government, the city hall, the sociologist, and more or less refers to “us” when we speak about the “*quartiers*”). Suggesting that only work can allow you to educate yourself, this twenty-eight year old man says that “you get this thing forced on you, it’s to pull the wool over our eyes.” He takes it as meaning: “Don’t go too far from where you live!” “I’ve always got ulterior motives behind everything they give to us, [these are] ideas to pull the wool over our eyes”: “here you go, while you wait.” But ultimately, “no solution” is provided. What solutions would he like? “Facilities”, “accesses”. Because “here, we’re screwed, all the Arabs, all the black guys.” Anyway, he says, “someone who inflicts violence is someone who is a victim of violence.” Then, he specifies that it can be “verbal”. “What young people are asking for is work. But the answer is: ‘educate yourselves and stay in your corner’. That’s not what you need to learn!” Finally, he explains that the inhabitants of the *quartier* could very well go to a library elsewhere.

This answer is one example of many. It is partial in both senses of the word: biased and incomplete. But could it be any different in the current context? Perhaps the opposite perspective is just as partial. The ambiguities of the lower classes in dealing with written culture and institutions such as local libraries reveal a very fragmented universe. Public policy itself is referred back to this partiality: it sees its basis of common consent weaken and loses its nature as a public space, starting instead to be identified as a symbol, that of the “others”.

Librarians, like many stakeholders and social workers, thus find themselves stuck in a position that is ambiguous and confused to say the least. Their work is guided by a strong sense of vocation, they end up in their positions by following social “careers” that are close to those of activists, they are animated by political missions, they come in the footsteps of activists who have left the world of the lower classes in order to leave room for municipal and State policy, and their position is thus close to that of an activist. But because they are professionals working within a public institution, the requirement of secularism constrains their work and limits their political action from taking on any partisan nature.

How can we find a new way of escaping from the conflictuality that is currently fragmenting the world of the lower classes? Of course, “social” or even “economic” initiatives come to mind. But we might think that these elements of popular culture will only be connected by a seam that is political in nature, and with a thread that can only be partisan. Now that they are professionalised, libraries are not in a position to carry out such a task. Political parties act on the lower class world from the state downwards, and through the mediation of institutions. Perhaps it is time to come out into civil society in order to participate more directly, and face-to-face, in the political socialisation of individuals and in the formation of social groups. This would remove a weight from the shoulders of librarians and other social or cultural workers, and might clarify the role of our institutions.

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Further reading:

The report from the *Centre d'Analyse Stratégique sur les violences urbaines de l'automne 2005* (“*Centre for the Strategic Analysis of the urban violence of the autumn of 2005*”):
http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/article.php3?id_article=353

The 2005 report from the *Observatoire des Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (“*Observatory of Sensitive Urban Areas*”):
<http://www.ville.gouv.fr/pdf/editions/observatoire-ZUS-rapport-2005.pdf>

One perspective, “*Les intégristes de la République et les émeutes de novembre*” (“*The Republic's Extremists and the November Riots*”), by François Gèze, an article that was initially published in *Mouvements*, in the report on “*Les émeutes et après*” (“*The Riots and their Aftermath*”), no. 44, 2006, copied on the website of the Toulon *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (“*Human Rights League*”):
<http://www.ldh-toulon.net/spip.php?article1252>