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Urban Violence: What Common Denominator?

Source: Population & Avenir, No. 676, January-February 2006,
www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm ; www.cairn.info/revue-population-et-avenir.htm

In the autumn of 2005, televisions all over the world opened their daily news on events in France and more precisely urban violence which erupted on 20 successive nights, from 27 October to 17 November. Many explanations were advanced, yet only one common denominator subsists: the territory¹.

Initially, some commentators felt that nothing very unusual was happening. This form of protest had already been seen in France, for example in Vénissieux and Vaulx-en-Velin in 1981, or abroad. The media recalled the terrible events in Los Angeles, which had started on 29 April 1992. However, neither the triggering event, nor the length nor the geography had much to do with what happened in France in 2005. That episode of urban violence started after the death of two youngsters, electrocuted in an electricity transformer station, while a third one was severely wounded, with a controversy around the circumstances of the accident, in the context of a police intervention.

In Los Angeles, the 1992 riots were triggered by an iniquitous verdict: three of the four policemen who, thanks to an amateur video film relayed by televisions all over the world, were seen to thrash a black petty offender, were acquitted. It would take a federal court convened by President George H. Bush to redress this judicial decision. The Los Angeles riots lasted only three days, but with horrific results – over 50 dead and 4000 injured – and they remained limited to Los Angeles.

In the fall of 2005 in France, as days, or rather nights, of urban rioting added up, the conflagration seemed unprecedented by its duration and the number of towns involved : three hundred in all.

Since the phenomenon could not be compared to any other in the history of France or other countries, it triggered a wild search for causality, the magical explanation which would resolve all: by turn, it was ascribed to, *inter alia*, **religious motives** (but the

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French Union of Islamic organisations issued a fatwa stating that a good Muslim must not act like a delinquent), **political movements** (but neither extreme left nor extreme right parties had any handle on the events, while the traditional left, far from taking advantage politically of the President's weakened position, supported a calming down of events through its votes in Parliament), **social causes** (but no trade union associated itself to these nightly episodes, their usual approach being to act in broad daylight in order to obtain a better media coverage) or **ethnic ones** (but many districts of the big French conurbations whose population is definitely of a wide ethnic diversity did not participate in this violence).

Some also expressed concern about the population density in sensitive areas. Again, there was nothing exceptional there: often lower than in many urban areas, it was much smaller than that of most Paris districts.

In the end, it was essential to find at least one of what is called in social sciences “direct determinants” of two people killed, thousands of cars burnt down, a hundred schools and public buildings as well as dozens of businesses set on fire. In other words, was there a common factor between the rioters and the victims which would allow for an objective evaluation and therefore a proper qualification of such urban violence?

There was only one: the rioters lived in districts born of the functionalist ideologies of the 1960s², in insulated areas, and the victims also lived in these areas “outside town”³. **Therefore the common denominator is the territory, for populations living on territories which simply lack urbanity.**

So the challenge for the future is awesomely simple: create urbanity in aid of social harmony in all French territories. ☺

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

1. Gérard-François Dumont gives here a synthesis of his many interventions on televisions and radios at the time.

2. Born of the anti-humanist ideology of the 1932 Athens Charter.

3. An expression that *Le Monde* newspaper used, for example, to qualify the Rose-des-Vents or Cité des 3000, in Aulnay-sous-Bois, 18 November 2005, p. 25.