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Claske Dijkema

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# What is urban about urban violence in France?

## Violence in marginalised neighbourhoods as body politics

**Claske Dijkema**

In France, urban violence is associated with juvenile violence that concerns certain marginalised spaces of the city and certain, specifically racialised, inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> In comparison to British and American contexts, the term is used mostly to address anti-institutional violence: what is called *violences urbaines* in France corresponds to 'race riots' on the other side of the Atlantic. The term 'urban' violence is problematic for three reasons. First, it is used as a euphemism for a racialised representation of juvenile violence. Second, the seemingly neutral term 'urban' underplays the political significance of these forms of violence. Third, the term renders other forms of violence invisible, by symbolically confining violence to certain spaces.

This contribution approaches *violences urbaines* – such as setting objects on fire, in order to provoke police intervention and altercation – as a form of self-defence by subaltern groups. The youth turn the hypervisibilisation of urban violence by mainstream media into a means to publicise their own anger: they choose fire as a means of public address because they refuse to engage in conversation if they are not heard. The riots that took place in Grenoble in 2010 serve as empirical grounding of this argument.

In July 2010, important riots broke out in Villeneuve, a marginalised social housing neighbourhood in the southern part of Grenoble. The riots followed a pattern that has become familiar in France, starting with the death of a racialised young man from a marginalised neighbourhood as the result of a police operation. In many cases, such deaths provoke acts of destruction and setting fire to objects, leading to further police intervention. Confrontations generally last for a couple of days but can last longer, as has been the case in 2005, when riots lasted for a month and spread throughout the entire country. In Villeneuve, the riots that broke out in 2010 lasted three nights. What sparked these riots was the death of Karim Boudouda who was tracked by the police after he had robbed a casino with his partner in crime in a wealthy town not far from Grenoble, and shot in Villeneuve, at the foot of the block where his mother lived. Boudouda was hit in the back by a bullet, after he fired at the police. That night a group of about thirty young men went out on the streets to express their anger about his death: burning roughly 75 cars, breaking the glass of the neighbourhood's tram stops, throwing stones at the police and firemen, and setting fire to street furniture.

I analyse the image that has become symbolic of the 2010 riots in Villeneuve as an example of the hypervisibilisation of violence (Fig.1), and I use the theoretical input of Haraway's space of constructed

Claske Dijkema is Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at swisspeace and carries out research on Urban Peacebuilding. She is in particular interested in the peace-building agency of marginalized civilian actors. During her Ph.D. research at the University of Grenoble she developed a de-colonial approach to stigmatised neighbourhoods in France dealing with urban violence.

[claske.dijkema@swisspeace.ch](mailto:claske.dijkema@swisspeace.ch)

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visibility, of Butler's analysis of inverted projections, and Dorlin's input on violent subjects acting out of self-defence to analyse the interaction between speaking through acts of violence, silencing practices and the hypervisibilisation of violence. They help to answer the question what is urban about urban violence.

### **Violence as a means to make public statements**

If one has the feeling that one is not heard, violence – in this case, setting objects on fire – can become a viable option. While the established may well require that post-colonial immigrants and inhabitants of marginalised neighbourhoods ask for their rights politely, and patiently wait for their demands to be taken into account, eruptions of violence are only to be expected if the established are perceived to be unwilling to listen

*Violence becomes an option in a context where the use of words does not make sense for those who lack access to the channels of verbal expression*

and refuse to recognize the subaltern as legitimate political adversaries (Dijkema, 2021; Springer, 2011). Violence becomes an option in a context where the use of words does not make sense for those who lack access to the channels of verbal expression. If they cannot make themselves heard, what does lie in their power is the ability to make themselves visible and to do harm. This approach to urban violence breaks with the common interpretation that violence is a sign of anomie, of powerlessness, and/or a desperate act to exist in some way. Since rioters know that their voices will not be heard, most of them do not even try to speak and instead choose silence. A postcolonial reading of riots leads Piettre (2013) to the conclusion that it was not an incapacity to speak, but a refusal of interlocution that characterised the 2005 riots in France. It is because rioters understand that they cannot speak – in the sense of Spivak – that they choose alternative means of communication, they choose to speak in terms of acts rather than words.

### **The urban dimension of 'urban violence'?**

This type of violence is 'urban' insofar as it uses physical space strategically, to provoke direct confrontations with the police and to make a public statement. The act of setting something on fire has an important performative function, it produces spectacular images that make visible feelings of anger and revolt. Those involved in riots use the hypervisibilisation of violence by the mainstream media to publicize their anger. I consider the burning of cars, tires, garbage bins, and schools as smoke signals. Hence, fire becomes a means of public address. The only space available to publicize their anger is urban public space. It is there that their public address can meet its audience. Cars, street furniture and walls (graffiti statements) were used in July 2010 to express anger about this death. This message targets security forces but addresses a larger audience. The chosen location for the exhibition of flames, a parking lot at the edge of the neighbourhood, should also be taken into account. Three reasons may have played a part in the choice of this location: it was here that Boudouda was shot; a car park is a logical place to burn cars; and the parking area functions as a transition zone between what is considered to be inside and outside of the neighbourhood. A statement made on the border of the neighbourhood is most likely addressed to those outside of it, but from a space that is considered theirs.

The political impact of these smoke signals is however limited because rioters have little influence on the interpretations of these events, and these expressions of anger mostly lead to the strengthening of the security discourse and to measures that negatively affect racialised inhabitants of marginalised neighbourhoods. The hypervisibilisation of urban violence in mainstream media simultaneously leads to silencing and to making this publicized anger incomprehensible.

## Hypervisibilisation of violence

The problem for racialised subjects is that they are seen all the time because they are made visible as 'others' (e.g. skin colour), but they are not heard. According to Haraway (2004: 12), "vision is always partial and provisional, culturally produced and performed, and it depends on the spaces of constructed visibility that – even as they claim to render the opacities of 'other spaces' transparent – are always also spaces of constructed invisibility". It is specific of racism that "those who are 'imaged' or 'pictured' (*mises en image*) are in reality the objects of a 'design' (*dessin*) that has little to do with them in first instance" (Dorlin, 2007: 153). The image of the riots in Villeneuve is such an example. While the image of the rioting youth has come to represent Villeneuve to a certain extent, the neighbourhood's inhabitants feel it has little to do with them. I consider images that hypervisibilise violence in the neighborhood as means to disqualify acts or statements in public space and therefore as a form of epistemic violence. To make this argument, I draw on Butler's concept of inverted projections that transform the meaning of voices and acts through racist representations. The empirical case on which Butler (1993) drew to build this conceptual tool of inverted projections is the Rodney King case, in which physical self-defence was interpreted as an act of aggression. Inverted projections focus on the visual rather than the discursive domain of representation, they deal with an image (projection) of an act that comes to represent the reality. In the interpretation of this image by the established, the intentions behind an act (of a marginalized or subaltern person) are not only made inaudible but the intentions of the aggressor and victim are being inverted: the victim becomes the aggressor. The idea of inverted projections helps therefore to understand the way in which racialised bodies in danger come to be seen as sources of danger.

The image of riots in Villeneuve is not object of an inverted projection as such because the young man's hands in the centre of the picture are not raised in self-defence as in the case of Rodney King. The two other men next to him are throwing objects in the direction of the police. Seeing them as aggressors is therefore not only a projection of white paranoia. However, what this image has in common with the footage of the raised hands of Rodney King is that it suffers from the effect of the "frozen frame", of using an image taken at one moment in time to portray a whole situation. Butler's observation (ibid: 20) that "the raised hand, is torn from its temporal place in the visual narrative" is applicable here. In this case the image comes to speak for the 2010 riots and Villeneuve as a whole but does not say anything about what happened prior to this moment. In other words, what this image brings into visibility leaves out of visibility other aspects of what happened that evening: Karim Boudouda being shot by the police, his body being left unattended for over six hours, and the much more structural tensions around police conduct in marginalised neighbourhoods. This frozen frame reinforces the representation of urban violence as "senseless" or "barbaric" and has the function of a "bestialisation of the [racialised] crowds", as did the frozen frame in the Rodney King case (ibid: 21).

The decontextualization of this image by the mainstream media was subsequently to be recontextualised by the French President, explaining the riots in 2010 as a problem of immigration and integration. This political treatment of the riots in 2010 meant that twenty people, the estimated number of people who participated in the riots, came to speak for an entire neighbourhood, while other voices were made inaudible. While visibilising violence, media did not capture the alternative and everyday prefigurative politics that inhabitants are engaged in.

While urban violence is interpreted by the established as an attack on the Republic, it is interpreted by many in the neighbourhood as an act of defence. The sentiment is widespread in the neighbourhood that the state either abandons the neighbourhood or represents an oppressive force. Dorlin (2017) explains that if the subalterns are not considered worth defending by those in power, physical violence is one of the few tools they have left to defend their dignity. The violence of the subalterns

can therefore be reinterpreted as an act of self-defence. In the case of 2010, rioting and entering into violent confrontation with the police should not be seen as an act of individual physical self-defence, but as the defence of their neighbourhood and the defence of their dignity.

## Conclusion

This article analysed urban violence as subaltern violence and focused on the dynamics between speaking through violent acts, being made visible and being made inaudible. I have demonstrated that, at the same time as subalternised rioters are brought into the field of visual representation, they are maneuvered beyond the range of hearing. Subalterns are not mere victims though, they adopt tactics that use the visual attention that is drawn to their physical appearance, such as skin colour, they use this visibility to publicize their anger. I argue that rioters have developed a means of public address adapted to this condition of the subaltern, and to this age of the image and social networks. Media do the work of widely distributing the images produced by angry young people. They use this visibility that media provide to make public statements, to publicise their frustration and anger.

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