

Gangs and Their Evolution: A Major Criminological Problem

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On the morning of February 9, 2015, in the Castellane housing project of Marseille, gunfire broke out. Various witnesses who alerted the police described groups of individuals wearing masks and carrying automatic weapons. One witness recalled,

I saw the first masked guy, Kalashnikov in hand, down at the project. It was perhaps around 9:30 a.m. Usually the dealers aren't out so early, and in any case, you never see them armed! I went across the project and I saw these masked men everywhere. They had automatic weapons out.¹

Upon their arrival, the police could only confirm shots. Having been clearly identified by the criminals, they were being targeted. The operation undertaken in the neighborhood led to the discovery of a number of military-grade weapons. The criminals' actions reflected the rivalries between gangs in these areas, the "use value" of which is created by drug trafficking. Their modus operandi was rudimentary: Kalashnikovs fired in quick bursts. The alleged perpetrators were criminals born in sensitive housing projects. More than often repeat offenders, they are actors in an emerging and endogenous threat : neogangsterism.

The strategic criminal threat of today is the emergence of hybrid and transnational criminal groups, as stated in the annual report, *Serious Organised Crime Threat Assessment* (SOCTA) of EUROPOL, the European Union's intergovernmental police authority. In France, according to the Organized Crime Information, Intelligence, and Strategic Analysis Service, a body belonging to the Central

1 "Tirs de la Castellane à Marseille: 7 kalachnikovs retrouvées," *La Provence*, February 9, 2015.

Headquarters of the Judicial Police, the single greatest threat—even greater than the Camorra or Albanian-speaking or Romanian groups—is organized criminal groups from the sensitive housing projects of large urban areas.

These are not creations *ex nihilo*. Their development is linked to the emergence of a new generation of young offenders from the disadvantaged areas. Structuring by the street and by gang is a cornerstone of this new kind of gangsterism. It allows some to lay claim to dominant positions in illicit criminal markets. The fertile ground of the sensitive housing projects of major urban areas illustrates and accelerates the violent transformation of humanity that has characterized the start of the century. It is the consequence of a triple phenomenon : an increase in group delinquency, a growing involvement of young minors, a systematic use of violence. Where social rules that ban acts of evil against others lapse, street gangs emerge and persist. Far from being external to the insecurity felt by the population, they are a factor of “close dangerousness.”²

TERRITORY, POPULATION, AND UNLAWFUL COERCION

Territory is a concept that forms the basis for the establishment of a group. Seizing it is a central element of competition between gangs. They place an almost sacred value on it. This polysemous notion of territory has three meanings.

Territory represents a delimited and controlled space. For gang members, it represents their roots. It is a landmark, a point of anchoring. It is the place where they live, and the streets that they rule becomes a place hostile to people from the outside. It is often a “microterritory” whose limits are linked to the ability to exercise control and coercion over the area in question. A gang’s territory is also an identification marker. It is the basis of an individual or collective identity: the identity of the group mixes with that of a neighborhood and an ethnicity, which are often homogeneous. It generates its own culture—one hostile to the outside and to any institutional representation. The territory is a place of learning and socializing. One grows up there, lives there in a group, and occupies its public space. It is the key to entering the first circles of the group—and their rivalries. Finally, the territory is a vector for income. It is the place where an underground economy and the trafficking of drugs are organized. The sums in play are considerable, depending on the locations of the points of sale for drugs and the capacity of the locals to develop the “business.” The territory thus has a monetary value. It carries a price, and it is a space to be defended.

If there can be no gangs without territories, then there can be no gangs without members to make up their numbers, give them a shape, and drive them

² Marwan Mohammed, *La Formation des bandes, entre la famille, l'école et la rue* (Paris: PUF, 2011).

on. Any street gang is in fact structured, even if that structure is primitive. Gangs do not have a pyramidal, or hierarchical structure. They are organized concentrically, and they are founded above all on a strong core. Their starting point is often the existence of a small cohesive group, composed of members of the same family, or of longstanding friends. This core is the backbone, the spine without which the gang could not exist or “stand up.” This base has a double function.

The strong core provides a driving force. It provides tempo, leads the gang, and coordinates the group’s activity. It has the power to include or exclude members and accomplices. This role is all the more important owing to the fact that when police action and legal proceedings are carried out against the hard core, the gang shrinks or even disappears. Its presence attracts accomplices toward it, like a magnet. Individuals on the fringes of gangs are often recruited by this first circle. Parents, relatives, and friends often facilitate integration into the group. Sometimes accomplices are co-opted or introduced by former members of the gang. The system is clan-like and medieval. Leadership is often exercised on a collegial basis by the core. Street gangs have no military-style hierarchical organization with a head or an undisputed leader. Nevertheless, one personality will sometimes emerge from among the rest. It will often be a young man with a strong character, charisma, and a certain experience with the forces of law and order—attributes that he will make use of.

Accomplices gravitate around the strong core. These are occasional members who serve as labor (lookouts or small-scale sellers) or even soldiers in the event of conflicts with outside groups (rival gangs or law enforcement). They are generally younger and less experienced. They are sometimes devoid of authority and seek no ambition beyond furtively participating in “little hits.” They are easily interchangeable followers. They amount to the “useful idiots” of more organized criminal groups.

The authority exercised by the gang has a bearing on a bigger whole: on the territory itself, and also on the infrastructure and individuals within it. It is directed against rival gangs, locals, and any “institutional” intervention (law enforcement, public transportation, private companies). Local inhabitants are not exempt from the tutelage of gang members. Sometimes young people from outside the community are banned from flirting with the territory’s girls. There was a tragic example of this in Seine-Saint-Denis (district close to Paris). On July 24, 2012, a young man aged twenty from the Fauvettes housing project of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine was lynched by a group from the neighboring community of Stains. Put into an irreversible coma, he died three weeks later. Five men and a young woman were suspected of having taken part in the deadly ambush. The motive for the attack suggests a struggle for hearts and territory: the victim had been seeing a young woman from the project while she was not living there.³

3 “Pierrefitte: lynché parce qu’il venait d’une autre cité,” *Le Parisien*, November 29, 2012.

FROM LEARNING TO THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD: THREE STRATA

It must be noted that there is no single form of gang, but rather several different ones. Despite the concept having a single definition, it is a diverse phenomenon. Gang warfare is nothing like the war between kids depicted in Louis Pergaud's *The War of the Buttons*. It can be classified using several criteria. These relate to the composition of the gangs, their activities, and their members' modes of expression. Using these, the classification of gangs produces three strata.⁴

A first stratum that could be described as primitive is that of discovery. It includes gangs whose strong core does not have a defined structure. Within it, the first criminal acts are regarded by their perpetrators as playful and provocative. They take the form of antisocial behavior, violence that is often gratuitous, and petty, particularly acquisitive crimes: thefts that may or may not involve violence. The first armed gatherings start to take place. The second stratum is a period of deeper development. It includes gangs with a nascent structure, consisting of a core and a group of perpetrators involved in small to medium-scale delinquency. These gangs do not hesitate to use violence either to commit their crimes or to protect their territory. The third stratum is gangsterism in the housing projects. It includes highly structured gangs that have a leader, individuals who give orders, and perpetrators carrying out the acts. Gangsterism is far more structured form of crime (for example, large-scale drug trafficking or trafficking with go-fast boats). Members in more likely to be major, multiple repeat offenders. This third stratum gives rise to "neogangsterism."

Members of these groups—especially the leaders—pass through several phases in what it seems appropriate to call a "criminal career." Before, prison was what won promotions for individuals. Today, carrying out violent acts allows people to make a name for themselves on the street. The limits of violence are therefore pushed out, and criminals devoid of expertise are placed in a position of carrying out actions that they would never have attempted before. This produces "unbalanced gangsterism."

FROM WARNING TO A SETTling OF ACCOUNTS: A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

On Saturday, May 19, 2012, while sitting at a table in a fast-food restaurant in the Ampère de Goussainville housing project in Val-d'Oise district, a twenty-year-old man was taken to task by three individuals because of an account that he had allegedly given to police about the theft of a quad bike. After

4 As in geography, the term *stratum* evokes the idea of superposed layers. These are not hermetic, and the possibility of a certain movement between them exists. The idea of *class* or *group* evokes a certain immobility. This is the reason why we have opted for a classing in strata and not classes or a group.

failing to respond to the provocations, the victim was placed into the trunk of the perpetrators' lowly Renault Clio, which sped off to a parking lot in the local housing project. Refusing to confess despite multiple beatings, the young man was then driven to a nearby forest, where he was forced to dig a grave-shaped hole. He was finally abandoned—alive—in the middle of the night by his attackers.⁵

Initiation into the cycle of violence begins with the first steps onto the street. Violence is inherent to the functioning of gangs. It is one of their features, and it is the result of learning. It is also initially a tool to acquire and develop the subculture of the street and the group, and it reveals the strengths and the weaknesses of young candidates' personalities. The central place afforded to reputation additionally gives violence an initiatory role. The objective is "respect," a key word for any gang member. To be "respected" is above all to be feared.

One type of violence dear to the armed struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, but which had never really prospered since then, is "kneecapping," a physical attack on a person's lower limbs. In France, this practice is enjoying a second wind. It has moved away from terrorist and revolutionary movements to become a commonly used practice in the world of street gangs. Rarely life-threatening to the victim, it is above all carried out as a punishment or a warning. It has the value of sending a clear message that allows an adversary to be neutralized without killing him. At the same time, it avoids more significant legal risks. The victim is often silent on the reasons for such an assault. But he is rarely targeted by chance. This is a mode of conflict resolution within the "thugocracy."

"Kneecapping" is often a first step in the settling of accounts. The day of his release from prison, Yassin A, thirty-five, was the victim of an execution. Sentenced in 2012 to five years in prison following the dismantling of an operation that imported cannabis resin from Morocco, he had acted as an intermediary between Marseille traffickers and wholesalers. From Malaga, he oversaw the supply of the Ninth Arrondissement's dealing points. Yassine A. would have remained a run-of-the-mill criminal if the method of his elimination had not marked a new – and quickly confirmed – step in the employment of unhinged violence. Targeted in daylight around Lançon-de-Provence, he was stopped at the wheel of his car. Immobilized in the left lane of a well-known highway for holidaymakers before the eyes of stunned motorists, he was shot with a burst of automatic weapons fire in front of his girlfriend and his sister. A pileup was narrowly avoided. The two women were left in shock, and one of them was wounded. The punishment was final.⁶ Henceforth, once out of prison, members of drug trafficking networks would be targeted. Those who had taken their place during their absence did not plan to give it up. In this environment, people do not share.

The "barbecue" technique is a dreaded way to be eliminated. It involves burning the victim's body, or the vehicle in which it is located. The goal is obviously

5 "Enlevé et séquestré pour avoir témoigné," *Le Parisien*, May 22, 2012.

6 "Tirs sur l'A7: un mort et un blessé léger," *Le Figaro*, March 24, 2014.

to erase usable evidence and interfere with identification of the individual; it is also an opportunity to convey a clear message. Within the projects, the imagination soon has it that the victim was burned alive. The fear inspired serves as precedent. Legend attributes the invention of the technique to a notorious gangster from Salon-de-Provence, whose life was ended by Corsican thugs in 2006 in a bar in Marseille. Farid B, aka “the roaster,” was a figure in the illicit drug market and gambling along the Étang de Berre. He had few qualms about eliminating those who overshadowed him. His reputation had been forged by the violence of his actions and his signature: his victims were killed by automatic weapon, then locked in the trunk of a car that was set on fire. His disappearance had led to the “barbecue” technique going out of fashion. It is being emulated once more today.

The sensitive housing projects in our urban areas are fertile breeding grounds. They produce a criminality that changes like the contemporary world, eliminating the line between crime that can be envisaged, crime that is envisaged, and crime that is committed in the wrongdoer’s acting out. The evolution towards fanaticism conforms to a parallel process. The threat of the years to come is the radicalization of members of street gangs. The culture of violence developed from the earliest age in these groups by recidivist thugs and their hatred of society makes them susceptible to a process of psychological conditioning turned toward religious fanaticism. This evolution happens when young men and women who grew up in the same environment, choose at one point to fall into the path of fanaticism. This unbridled relationship with violence receives the commitment of somewhat lost young offenders, who in armed action see exaltation and a role to play that society does not give them. The story of “neoterrorism” therefore meets that of “neogangsterism” in the projects.