

The "Criminal Gang," a French Ectoplasm?¹

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By way of all-too-frequent news of crime, and sometimes the death of courageous innocents, we have observed a steady increase in the harmful effects of street gangs in France.

And yet a journalist can begin an article on gangs in France as follows: "These are not the armed gangs of Harlem or of the Bronx of yesteryear." How can we claim in this way to be some kind of "French exception," when all the facts show the opposite to be the case?

For thirty years, we have repeatedly been told that the situation "is not like that in the United States," that it is a matter of "sporadic occurrences." We have been repeatedly told that it involves "nonorganized groups" that are spontaneous and volatile, even though homicides, a visible sign of turf wars, and fierce competition, are on the increase, thus demonstrating the structured character of these groups and the sophistication of their trafficking.

This common perception of the phenomenon is false. It is not "youths" who kill each other with Kalashnikovs and then burn the cars in which they dump the bodies; it is thugs, *affidés*², and criminal gangs who settle their conflicts of interest with their usual instruments of negotiation—not mere ectoplasms.

This criminality has been brushed under the carpet for years, because it calls into question the dogmas of exonerating penal policies and it disturbs because it is close to home for much of the population.

It has only recently been taken into account in France, but is it really serious? It is hard to be sure whether the realities of the phenomenon are appreciated; this is why it is necessary to make them known, so as to reveal more clearly criminal practices that are little known and even less well understood. Here is an illustration.

Shitland

The Police closed "Shitland" on October 14, 2011. Shitland was not an amusement park. It is the name that a gang had given to "its" territory, which was transformed into a supermarket for drugs and systematically bled dry; for years, the inhabitants of the neighborhood of Les Boullereaux in the Champigny-sur-Marne city had been subjected to the predations of the gang, living in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation and enduring the presence of aggressive junkies in need of their fix.

The gang, whose "hardcore" was familial, took possession of four tower blocks in the neighborhood and established a considerable traffic of cannabis in them. This gang had three cousins as its leaders: one of them lived in the Basque country, from where he shipped out most of the merchandise, delivered on an express basis by professional drivers from outside the group, who transported the drugs in large, stolen cars. The other two oversaw the operations at Champigny. As soon as they arrived, the

¹ Ectoplasm: a being without consistency, of a substance a little more visible than that of a phantom.

² *Affidé*— A gang member in French. The definition of the word given by the Petit Robert dictionary corresponds precisely to the almost legally binding relationship, the bond of blood between an individual and his gang: "one who can be trusted to be ready for any escapade . . . an accomplice ready for anything." We will use here the usual american terminology : *gang member*, *gangbanger*, *homie*...

drugs were repackaged into "commercial" quantities in a dedicated apartment in the town.

Buyers came from the entire Parisian region—Shitland had a reputation for the quality of its merchandise. Up to five hundred "clients" a day could be handled, and sometimes queues formed at the foot of the buildings.

The junkies, Shitland's "consumers" in a sense, were escorted from the ground floor of the tower blocks, and led toward the dealer of the day, situated, for strategic reasons, on the sixth or seventh floor of the twenty-story blocks. According to investigators, upon entry, the consumers could read the inscription "Welcome to Shitland." Higher up there was another, reading "Prepare and show your banknotes." Further on, there was a warning: "Fake banknotes = down to the basement for punishment." The clients were then searched, before finally meeting the person who would hand over the precious product for which they had gone to so much trouble. This individual was hooded up and hidden behind (stolen) street furniture to protect him against potential aggressors.

On the upper floors were the wet nurses—that is, residents of the building who kept stocks of drugs in their apartments, and were paid around two thousand euros per month for doing so. And higher still, "squatted" apartments that could serve as a backup in case of a raid by the police.

Gangbangers, usually kids, positioned on mattresses on each floor, were paid around three hundred euros a night to keep watch and tip off about any possible police activity. And to make access difficult and hold up the progress of "invaders," the traffickers had painted the windows in the

communal areas black, and wrapped the lights in dark duct tape; there was even a plan to tip oil down the staircases, just in case.

As for the residents of the area, they had to pay ten euros if they wanted to use the elevator, or else hand over a part of their shopping in order to be allowed into their own homes.

During the trial of some members of this Shitland gang in April 2013,³ the prosecuting attorney recounted "a system of terror" when describing the life of the inhabitants, speaking of an area "where threats and violence were an everyday occurrence." And then there was the trafficking, which, according to police informers, generated a "turnover" of around thirty thousand euros a day.

Can we still say that this is not a matter of organized crime, when we see coming together here all the symptoms of a true criminal organization?

Recipe for a Criminal Genre

The "street gang" is a primitive, collective, and organized criminal genre that has manifested itself with varying intensity throughout history. The gang has been known since way back, from ancient Rome to seventeenth-century London. In Europe, the contemporary version of this criminal phenomenon, inspired by the US model, first began to affect France around the middle of the 1980s.

Since that time, comparable phenomena have been observed in Spain, in Great Britain, in Belgium, in the Scandinavian countries, and in the north of Italy. And with current means of communication and circulation, the genre continues to extend itself.

³ In fact there were two trials, a week apart. Sentences of up to six years of imprisonment were passed for "traffic in narcotics" and "criminal conspiracy." The general atmosphere was confused, because the general opinion was that the main ringleaders were absent.

This form of organized criminality obviously exists in the United States and elsewhere in the world: in South Africa, in the Philippines, in Thailand, in South America; in Central America, it has attained unimaginable proportions.

What is the recipe for a criminal gang? Its essential ingredients are three in number. Two of them are symptomatic of the existence of the phenomenon, whereas the third is pathological:

- A territory that is claimed and dominated, with all that follows from this;
 - Specific manifestations and forms of expression, only certain aspects of which are found in France;
 - A criminogenic behavior that the English-speaking world calls *gangbanging*, a word that has no equivalent in French.
- A gang emerges from a territory that it dominates. The territory is the initiating and federative element of the street gang, in the United States and in France alike. This territory is the geographical extent of the gang's physical and "commercial" grip. In France, this territory is generally a "town" or a "neighborhood."

On "its" territory, the gang makes sure that an atmosphere of fear and intimidation reigns. This is what Americans call, and what we should also call, "street terrorism:" terror, in the primary sense of the word—exactly what the prosecutor deplored during the *Shitland* trial.

Not only is this domination cruelly felt by the inhabitants of the zone, but it is often visible, and thus symptomatic of the appearance or of the existence of a gang. The territory is delimited by graffiti: this trait is common to all gangs in the world, thus making this visibility symptomatic.

The appropriation of a territory brings about the behavior of the gang, its

"rules of engagement" on the street. As it is the foundation of the constitution of the gang, it is theoretically sacred: territory must be respected. This means that the gang has to respond to all provocations of which it or its members might be the object, and is thus led into violent confrontations whose causes are rarely clear, and which are becoming ever more numerous in France, with Marseilles only one case among others.

The "value" of territory—that is to say how much it can yield, through all forms of criminal activity, can be one of these causes, but it is far from being the only one; sometimes these reasons for conflict can seem pointless, like a "sketchy look" or a lack of "respect."

Still, this "sacred" character does not prevent criminal gangs from preying on their own territory; it is this behavior that leads to the street terrorism to which residents are subjected.

It is they, living in this atmosphere of fear and intimidation, who undergo this terror that plagues a territory materially delimited by a gang, having to pay the homies to take the elevator in their own building. Hence the importance of listening to these residents, and maintaining ongoing intelligence and informant operations among them. For it is often only through this criminal intelligence that one can get to know a gang, its importance, its practices, its 'bangers, and really fight against it.

- The gang also generates specific manifestations and characteristic modes of expression.

The gang members are visible, just like the territory. Homies most often have a "high profile"—that is to say, they do not hide their affiliation with the group, unlike most criminal societies; on the contrary, they are proud to be part of it, and show this through codified modes of dress, or tattoos

expressing the unshakeable bond with the group. This serves to affirm the prestige of their gang, and they are ready to defend it at any moment.

This visibility is also found in "gangsta rap," an expression of gang psychology, which usually consists of little more than hate, racism, and sexism. "Gangsta rap" is a message of incitation diffused to the masses by a consenting or complicit media, written in a crude, insulting, vulgar language that impregnates a broad public with this subculture of drugs, violence, and hatred. There is no lack of examples. Here is one:

*J'aime voir des CRS morts,
J'aime les pin-pon, suivis d'explosions et
des pompiers
Un jour j'te souris
Un jour j'te crève
J'perds mon temps à m'dire qu'j'finirai bien
par leur tirer d'ssus . . .*

*[I like to see a riot squad cop dead,
I like the sirens, then explosions and fire
One day I smile at ya
Next day I make a hole in ya
Waste my time in tellin' myself I'ma end
up shootin' 'em down . . .]*⁴

• The criminal pathogeny of the gang is expressed by the American term gangbanging, which covers practices that are identical in France and elsewhere, in particular in the United States. "Gangbanging" is a concept that defines everyday life in a gang. It is the term that brings together the elements that constitute the "criminal career" of agang member.

In the words of a Los Angeles gangbanger, " 'banging ain't no part time thang, it's full time, it's a career'"⁵ It consists in hanging out in the street, generally starting very young, and doing "business" (this is what illegal "transactions" are called in French); in always being on the lookout for any opportunity for misdeeds, for there is no criminality specific to gangs. It is a continual grasping of opportunities, and we know obviously that drugs play a central role, above all with the arrival en masse of cocaine in France, the lowering of its price, and its distribution by gangs. It is this that explains to a large extent the normalization of the use of the Kalashnikov: to fight against other gangs so as to protect markets and develop new ones, or to ensure that one is "respected."

This culture brings about the form of gang organization. As we have already noted, we often hear it said in France that gangs are not organized—and above all, "not like in the United States." This is untrue; it is a rejection of reality: the organization of these criminal groups is wholly similar in form and in its fundamental logic. How can tons of drugs circulate and be distributed without any form of organization?

This organization, which rests upon personal bonds, from individual to individual, is arranged like a galaxy;⁶ it is not a matter of a vertical hierarchy in the form of a pyramid, the only model that we know in our societies.

The gravitation of the elements of this galaxy around the center, and the cohesion of the whole entity, stem from the

⁴ Excerpt from "Mafia K'1 Fry" Gangsta rap band, "Violence/délinquance."

⁵ According to Tray Ball, a member of the "Eight-Tray Crips," cited in Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 107.

⁶ A galaxy is a set of stars, dust, and interstellar gas turning around a center, whose cohesion is ensured by the forces of gravitational attraction, and forms a well-defined entity.

intensity of attraction exerted by fascination with the “success” of a leader or of the “hardcore” members.

This organization also rests upon the degree to which the gang member is implicated, and the time he spends with the group, which will allow him to get progressively closer to the center and to indicate his place in relation to power.

Finally, the organization rests upon the permanence and the “sacred” character of the social bond that unites the homie with each other and binds the group together. When dissent appears, it is generally because of some rupture—whether real or imagined—of this bond: it shows that the leaders are replaceable, proof of the durability, even if short-lived, of the organization. It also reinforces the bond through violence and the quest for radicalization that generally brings about the replacement of a weaker leader by a “stronger” murderer.

The adhesion to this form of criminal entity and its durability are thus explained by the desire to become like the leaders who have “succeeded,” or even to take their place: there is nothing new here. They become the models of where the gangbanger wants to get to so as to finally hold what he believes to be the keys to life: money and power. Money and “power:” the logic of the gang is primal, simplistic, but effective. It is doubtless for this reason that it succeeds in reproducing itself, even though it is often difficult to profit from the money, and “power” only exists through the group, without which individuals are nothing.

“Gangbanging” also creates a particular relationship with prison. Prison becomes a “criminal university,” an obligatory rite of passage for every ‘banger who wishes to progress, generating another criminal genre that deserves to be treated separately.

Realism against Gangs

We, observers of criminality at the Department for Research into Contemporary Criminal Threats at the Université Panthéon-Assas, have witnessed the birth and the growth of these “street” criminal phenomena in France, and have alerted the authorities and the public since the debate began during the 1990s. Up until now, we have identified territorial gangs, comparable to those observed in the United States, and examined the way they function and their actions.

There are today many hundreds of gangs in France (somewhere between three and five hundred), but in the absence of any coherent definition, we do not know precisely how to evaluate the exact number. There are thirty-three thousand in the United States, and almost 1.5 million gang members; they are responsible for most of the homicides in the country. What part do French gangs play in criminality and homicides? So far, we do not know.

Not so long ago, we read that it was a matter of groups “consisting of fifteen to twenty youths;” today we are talking about groups that number many hundreds of members, and girl gangs that are also taking the path of extreme violence.

We had to wait until 2004 before the term “gang” was publicly accepted, until June 2009 for the question to be broached in the French Parliament, and until September 2009 for the matter to be seriously and concretely addressed by the minister of the interior. But although what is being done goes in the right direction, it is far from being enough, and the standard texts have a poor comprehension of the matter.

In order for the struggle against gangs to be effective, it is necessary to consider the gang as a specific criminal phenomenon. Accordingly, we must create

suitable instruments for understanding, evaluation, statistics, and criminal intelligence. And ultimately we need a specific and appropriate apparatus of enforcement, more qualitative than quantitative, one that above all is able to take into consideration the essentially collective and organized nature of the phenomenon.