A plea for urban disorder

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Can we live together? Can we live together in cities? Robert Sampson’s argument is that signs of disorder in disreputable areas, robust pockets of poverty and the homes of stigmatized minorities or immigrants, generate social differentiation and an urge to avoid both the spatial and the social stigma. Why is social meaning given to perceptions of disorder in the urban context? Why does the endemic ‘unsafety’ of our times – what Bauman (1998) calls Unsicherheit which could also be translated as insecurity or uncertainty – translate into feelings of urban malaise focused on certain places and certain individuals or groups rather than into other forms of social anxiety? Is city life condemned to be overshadowed by forms of social anxiety and their avoidance?

Professor Sampson suggests that our imagination is socially constructed, made of layers of transmitted and accumulated knowledge meant to help us get ‘streetwise’. We learn to be afraid or anxious through urban experience and to be prepared for what might happen. Evolution has put this kind of knowledge into our brains, stimulating fight/flight responses in the presence of risks (Debiec and Ledoux 2004: 807). This knowledge and its transmission by our kin, observations, experience and the city itself is part of our learning how to survive. It triggers actions of avoidance of certain places and people. The Reverend Jesse Jackson is not unique among African Americans in fearing victimization by young African American men (Cohen 1993: A23). There is nothing new here and the comparison of a city with a jungle comes to mind, together with an approach of individual and collective guardedness which has accompanied the history of cities since their beginning.

The mirrors of the past

Like Booth investigating Victorian London and its disorders, historian Louis Chevalier (1984) tells us that nineteenth-century Paris was by no means just a
quiet and beautiful city. It was immersed in global changes including extreme poverty, violence and insecurity. The living conditions were disastrous for the poor who lived in overcrowded, dark, unhealthy neighbourhoods. Social inequalities and racial differences (the good Parisian workers rejected the nasty provinciaux and foreign migrants, suspected of stealing their jobs) explained urban contexts of violence for those who had to survive at any cost (Body-Gendrot 2000: 17–20). As the writer George Sand observed in 1827, ‘there are more poor people on the streets. You have forbidden them to beg on the outside, and the resourceless man begs at night, a knife in the hand’ (quoted in Chevalier 1984: 122). She was implicitly blaming legal authorities for driving the poor into threatening behaviours (begging, stealing, cheating, killing) that is, for generating threats which led people to perceive the poor as ‘dangers’. She also interpreted danger more as a social than a physical attribute. There was compassion in her attitude, a feeling shared by a lot of the population of Paris, according to Chevalier:

We have been told today, that many national guards, shopkeepers or workmen were reluctant in taking arms during the troubles because, they said, they could do nothing but feel sorry for those unhappy workers driven to despair by their great poverty. (Chevalier 1984: 438)

In the second half of the century, the working poor (one-third of Paris population) became labelled as ‘dangerous’, needing to be isolated, a move Baron Haussmann performed with grandeur from 1853 onward, after he became Prefect of the Department of Seine with a mandate to remake the city according to plans, putting an end to the utopias of the body politic and consensual concord generated by the revolution of 1848. Haussmann’s decision to rationalize the interior space of Paris, ‘properly coordinating diverse local circumstances’ in order to form an organicist working whole led him to annex the suburbs ‘where unruly development threatened the rational evolution of a spatial order within the metropolitan region’. Some ninety miles of spacious boulevards were constructed, some of them near potentially revolutionary places, permitting the free circulation of forces of order, if needed (Haussmann in Harvey 2003: 111–13).

Until then, the class and racial opposition was spatially segregated by geographical boundaries marked by the Seine. The dominant categories moved north and west, the popular classes gathering at the centre and east of the city. But after Haussmann and the great bourgeois fear caused by the Commune in 1871, various reorganization schemes pushed the poor into successive waves of exile towards peripheric sites.

As Professor Sampson remarks, the historical continuation of stigmatized perceptions of space is striking. In Paris, some working class areas today were already working class one century ago. A neighbourhood that I am studying currently, the 18th district (where the flea market is located) at the north edge
of Paris, is such an example of spatial/social continuation. Visual signs of disorder abound. The role filled by the former unmeltable ‘workers’ is now played by poor North African or African households mixed with old-stock French citizens frequently living in ill-maintained public housing projects. The young ruffians (Appaches) then scaring the bourgeois have been replaced by groups of youth of various origins, visibly hanging around, ‘owning’ the public space, dealing drugs and now and then fighting from one housing project to the other.

Spontaneous social separatism

The hot spots associated with unrest prevail in current perceptions. They legitimize spontaneous social separatism. Feelings of insecurity and impressions of disorder cannot be dissociated from issues of representation. What is often called ‘urban violence’ in France, in reality frequently refers to ‘disorder’, patterns of antisocial behaviour or incivilities (throwing rubbish out of the window, urinating in lifts, spitting on the street, writing graffiti on the walls, being noisy and drunk in the middle of the night, loitering in public housing projects’ entrance halls, on roofs or in basements). These patterns of behaviour, which are not necessary illegal (i.e. the law does not forbid people to live on the streets) are associated with a youth culture insensitive to order. They reveal an adversarial social assimilation, a desire not to conform to the social norms of the ‘law-abiders’ (Anderson 1999). But they may also betray a growing distanation of individuals within what used to be idealized as homogeneous, ‘socially integrated’ French society. If non-residents have a choice, they would rather walk elsewhere at night, because of the perceived context of insecurity due to weak social control and also because of a sense of ‘placelessness of place’ in this part of the 18th district, a lack of identity, even a hostility due to major noisy ring roads, which do not invite people to stroll in the public space.

The reifying vision of stigmatized groups in disreputable areas, partly shared by the residents, supports the durable stability of urban inequality, Professor Sampson maintains, shaped by social conditions, ‘a process which in turn moulds reputations, reinforces stigma and influences the future trajectory of an area’. He adds that the police, in charge of order, divide up the territories they patrol into ‘readily understandable, and racially tinged, categories’, a process of ecological contamination ‘whereby all persons encountered in “bad” neighbourhoods are viewed as possessing the moral liability of the neighbourhood itself’ (Sampson 2009: 13).

I would like to start from these remarks to analyse the possible convergences but also the differences with the French situation.
Policing space in Paris

Is policing the 18th or the 19th district of Paris perceived by the police as a major or a marginalized mission? Is Paris better policed than the periphery? The question is ambiguous because in this context it associates the city centre and order, and potential disorder and peripheric areas.1 Paris is well policed. Not only are there more police officers per capita (one police officer per 162 residents vs. one for 205 in New York) than in peripheric zones, but the police mission is to guard Paris as a bounty – a chosen destination for tourists, for investors, for employers and employees, for the strongholds of political, social and cultural power. It implies that the Paris police prefect (whose position was established in the eighteenth century and is not accountable to the mayor) make sure that disorder will be avoided. Two examples: During the widespread disorder of Fall 2005, there was a rumour on a blog that angry youth would march on the Champs Elysées. Immediately, 1500 police officers were mobilized, just in case, but the youth never showed up (Body-Gendrot 2007:423). Recently, two rival youth groups, one from close peripheric localities and the other from the Gare du Nord area, well-known by the police, decided to settle a score at Les Halles, the terminal station for regional train lines. They had chosen the underground of the mall where many non-Parisian youth hang out. Most of them of African origin,2 they carried baseball bats, iron bars, and tear gas canisters; estimates of their number varies between 25 and 70. They had chosen this spot due to a former incident which was widely covered by the media at Gare du Nord in March 2007. But the close surveillance exerted by CCTVs spread all over the regional stations sent a warning to the departmental police chiefs: there was a risk that a violent encounter was about to occur. As soon as they were spotted by the cameras of the public transportation system, the information was conveyed to the centralized police headquarters and patrols of police officers and anti-riot squads (80 men) were immediately dispatched there. In twenty minutes the situation was under control.3

Policing space in the peripheric rings

The situation would have been quite different in a poor, marginalized locality of the periphery for several reasons. Instead of well-trained, experienced police officers, ‘rookies’ ignorant of this type of urban culture would have been sent to an Urban Sensitive Zone (ZUS).4 In such zones, associated in common perceptions with potential disorder and generating feelings of insecurity, the concentration of ethnic and racial minorities (forming a large part of the unskilled working class in France) is noteworthy but, unlike the American situation, there is no ethnic homogeneity in these spaces. Thirty to forty nationalities live there, French citizens or immigrants, along with old-stock
French residents. Families with numerous children are located in the poorest segments of public housing, either because they just moved in and do not possess urban skills yet, or because as poor single parents, they cannot afford another location. In 2006, according to official statistics from the Observatory of Urban Sensitive Zones, 31 per cent of ZUS population were under 20 years old (vs. 24 per cent on average) and 27 per cent were under the poverty line, three times more than elsewhere. Schools, medical facilities, public transport, public housing respond inadequately to the demands of parents, tenants, commuters, unable to afford private service delivery, due to their low income.

The isolation and concentration of households with serious social handicaps characterize such urban areas which experience more turn-over than elsewhere. The physical landscape improves only very slowly. Consequently both the residents and their environment are stigmatized and attributed some form of failure, as impoverished African-Americans are in the USA. Because of the ethnicization of social relations in countries like France, they are not seen as workers and part of a collective matrix but as ‘others’, with less identification with the mainstream. This was not the case with the former workers of the nineteenth century pleasantly depicted by cartoonists like Daumier or Gavarni.5

An educator remarked:

Being a policeman in areas where social mixing does not exist and where the concentration of families from Maghreb or from Africa as in Val Fourré, Chanteloup-les-Vignes, Mureaux... is strong... necessarily sets specific problems. Youth living in derelict areas are heavily stigmatized and devalourized. (Kherfi and Le Gouaillou 2002)

Territorial exclusion combined with exclusion from the labour market favour enclosures into self-reliant, isolated communities and exacerbate the relationship with police forces, he added. Their poverty and cultural estrangement from the mainstream, what is called ‘the social fracture’ in a country valourizing the ‘social link’, weigh on the stigmatization they are submitted to.

The betrayal of the ideal of equal treatment for all, once they are French, may partly explain the wide-scale disorder which erupted in the Autumn of 2005 in three hundred urban neighbourhoods in France with contagious copycat actions in nearby countries. The comments of the residents, state employees and outsiders are noteworthy: they emphasize the lack of surprise felt when these events occurred, as if they knew that such areas were a powder-keg, blaming the state for letting this situation of widespread destruction happen. Over ten thousand cars were burnt, 250 public buildings destroyed and property damage on the whole totalled 200 million Euros. Unlike an American riot, there were no deaths (except for the death of two minors hiding in an electrical substation during the police chase which started the mobilizations). Only the length and the contagion were surprising (twenty-one nights, yet never more than four
nights in any one locality) but not the type of disorder which had been repetitive for the last twenty-five years in the usual problem areas in France (Body-Gendrot 2007). Although these events were not perceived as ‘race riots’ by the French, they emanated mostly from second generation immigrant youth. According to court records in the Parisian region, the average arrested youth came from a family of four or five children, 20 per cent of them came from a family of seven or more children, pointing to sub-Saharan origins (Mazars 2007).

England, an old country of immigration, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium also experience repetitive bouts of public disorder in their former industrial areas where poor immigrant households with numerous children are concentrated and isolated. People panic but cannot be surprised when such incidents occur because they expect the same causes – either conflicts of youth of immigrant origin with law enforcers or, as is the case in England and Germany, with far right militants – to generate the same consequences in the same disreputable places.

Following Shaw and McKay (1942), Professors Sampson and Wilson (1995) emphasized the importance of space effects (unsafe public housing projects and streets, interstitial zones well known by the police). But in his current presentation, Sampson insists even more than before on the racial composition of the neighbourhood which reinforces such negative spatial effects, including its potential for violence.

Policing as a determinism

Space is a decisive element of police strategy: the police mission is to control and assign to specific territories those seen as a threat to social order. Such individuals lack the resources to retreat to private shelters or use public space to justify their social presence. In problem areas, residents want to see order enforced by the police and consequently police chiefs make patrolling visible (Mouhanna 1999). Residents, and shopkeepers in particular, expect a dynamic approach, for instance, the removal of the homeless, who are displaced, usually via the checking of IDs because there are few other options in the police repertoire. Punctual and unpredictable interactions make the police an institution distributing definitive and temporary status via its own culture, having diverse expectations according to their ‘clients’. If these clients do not behave as expected according to the place where they are, if their presence causes disorder, they may be stopped. If the territory, however, is perceived as their own by the police and they are not known as offenders, the French police are unlikely to discriminate against them, perhaps unlike the situation in some other countries (Jobard 2006: 224).

Stops in selected neighbourhoods are more revealing than the race or ethnicity of the people stopped. Taking the case of New York, Fagan and his team
observe that in 2007, the probability that an 18–19 year old African-American will be stopped is 100 per cent if neighbourhoods are more than 40 per cent African-American. In other areas, the probability would not be so high (Fagan et al. 2008; Fagan and Meares 2007).

As a member of CNDS (Commission nationale de déontologie de la sécurité), a National Civilian Review Commission for law enforcers, I hear youth complaining of police harassment, of humiliating stops and searches in the grey areas where witnesses will not talk, of their powerlessness to get fair treatment. But if there is discriminatory behaviour on the part of the police, it may sometimes be due to an outrage or an act of rebellion on the part of some young people who address police officers (or their teachers) roughly, as they would address their peers. The transmission of codes, the socialization relative to law abiding within new immigrant families from African rural settings has obviously been lacking. The process of legal socialization, whereby children develop conceptions of the legitimacy of the law, as a result of their own interactions with the police, is consequently biased and the confrontational, adversarial identities they develop imply that all encounters with institutions will be marked by distrust. Distrust in the police cannot solely be explained, then, by a strong ethnic bias in the system but rather by daily experiences of adversarial contact with police required to multiply ‘the stops and searches’ and instill social discipline into the youngsters. Police officers are turned into the wardens of the Republican order. Their presence raises disproportionate expectations in comparison to the resources and the training they have received.

Such top down injunctions transform some of the marginalized urban zones into tinderboxes, calling for continuous surveillance, a heavy cost as said before. Rank-and-file police officers often have the feeling that they are enforcing the ‘dirty work’ of control, surveillance and arrest in marginalized urban areas because other integrative institutions (family, educational, social, occupational) have neglected their missions. Proof of this neglect was revealed not just by the three weeks of disturbances in November 2005, but also by the astounding silence of the state, months after they took place. Until now, three years later, no Commission has been appointed and no answers have been provided to questions related to the triggering incident.

In his conclusion, Professor Sampson places his hope in the diversification of society through immigration and the positive effect of diversity on the re-energization of urban areas. A new body of studies support such views. It meets the conclusion of Governmental Commissions over the past century (for example, the Dillingham Immigration Commission of 1911 or the Wickersham National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement of 1931) which repeatedly have found that, if there was an immigrant crime problem, it was not found among immigrants but in the native-born, in the nation as a whole and in cities with large immigrant populations.
The role of re-energization of poor neighbourhoods is filled in French cities by the upwardly mobile middle classes. But when they gentrify areas occupied by poor immigrant and French families, they soon issue demands to have signs of disorder disappear (like noisy street musicians, youth hanging around, etc.) and erect barriers to protect their privacy and status and mark their distinction. Their imprint on space may be perceived as signs of order; with trees, flowers and zebra crossings popping up, but also as freezing the vitality, the excess energy of youth, the wealth of cultures and of generations, the concentration of potential innovations, the imagination, and the skills deployed in such areas. It is indeed our claim that some inefficiency, disorder and unpredictability are productive for the rejuvenation of cities. We all know the devastating effects of logical, functional or legible architectural design. Mature city-dwellers need the unknown, ambivalence and uncertainty, born of difference and variety. They would feel incomplete without disorder in their lives.

(Date accepted: December 2009)

Notes

1. Cities such as Nice, Marseille, Roubaix or Lille contain poor and marginalized areas, while the urban periphery, west and south of Paris, is well off. The term banlieue itself, now used by the media and in the popular discourse to refer to urban dysfunction, segregation, poverty and crime, is inappropriate. There are numerous types of banlieues, the majority of them without serious problems.

2. What should be mentioned here – as emphasized in my interviews with young people in the banlieues – is that the spontaneous identity they give is territorial. It is frequently correlated to a public housing project or to a locality and comes before religious, racial or ethnic differences. A majority of them resent being called ‘Muslim’ by outsiders, for instance. The constant process of transaction between majority and minority groups explains why ethnicity is no more fixed than the situations in which it is produced and reproduced. At certain moments, a salience of ethnicity may occur but its occurrence is discontinuous.

3. A hundred patrols operate on trains and in stations in the Parisian region, that is 1200 police officers. They stopped and frisked 1687 people in October 2008 to maintain calm and tranquillity in Paris which is their priority.

4. This administrative label was coined for policy purposes and data provided by demographers and mayors.

5. Recent cartoons of Muslims raised an uproar in Europe but for other reasons, due to a specific context of externality that there is no space to analyse here.

Bibliography


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