The sociologist, the juvenile delinquent and the public arena.

An ethnographic investigation in the Parisian suburbs of the early 2000s.

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I became interested in how France dealt with juvenile delinquency at the very moment the question became a crucial issue in politics and the media, which was also the time that French politicians were very attracted by the « Zero Tolerance » discourse that came to us from the United States. At the beginning of the new millenium, especially during the French presidential campaign of 2002 (the year two thousand and two), the theme of insecurity, blamed on the behavior of young people in the poor suburbs, was omnipresent in the public arena.

In that context of increasing intolerance, I began studying two legal systems: one were the hearings organized for minors in a *Maison de Justice*, the other was a program for integrating juvenile delinquents. I observed the way magistrates and educators worked and also carried out interviews with the various actors concerned: professionals, juvenile delinquents, their victims and their parents. In 2002 and 2003 (two thousand and two and two thousand and three), I continued the interviews with six youths who had been through the integration program.

My choice of where to do field-work and the initial questions I wanted to tackle were strongly influenced by what was going on then in the public arena. But though current events naturally entered into my choice of research topic in the first place, what I want to stress here is mainly the way they influenced me *during* the research (especially in how I reworded my questions and the way I carried out the interviews). I would also like to stress their impact on my written report: what to say and how to say it without reinforcing the usual stereotypes). Finally, I'd like to return to final analyses to show how, while ethnography can lead to saying where one stands in the public debate, it remains a very special sort of expertise, particularly because an ethnographic investigation takes a long time, is very thought-provoking, and involves a multitude of points of view which must be accounted for.

1. The effects of the media and of the political context on the project

Building the object

When studying the hearings in the *Maison de Justice*, I wanted to understand the reasons why public intolerance concerning petty juvenile delinquency had increased so tremendously. Such hearings bring the authors of petty crimes face to face with their victims, much more informally than in a court. The *Maisons de Justice* were opened in the "sensitive" neighborhoods in the early 1990s (nineteen nineties) in order to bring legal answers to the petty criminality that up

to then remained largely unpunished. For those who sought to promote a « justice of proximity », the idea was to bring the rule of law back into those « lawless zones », and thus answer the « feeling of insecurity » considered to be responsible for the fact the National Front vote had gained such momentum.

By observing the hearings (about sixty in all), and by interviewing some of the victims in their homes, I wanted to work on the meaning of their complaints. It soon became clear that the plaintiffs were in large part members of the *upper*-lower classes while the juveniles they had brought charges against belonged rather to the *lower*-lower classes (we'll come back to this in the second part of my exposé).

Little by little, a second question arose: what kind of impact does intervening in this way have on the youths themselves? How can their deviant behavior be converted into a more acceptable one? Putting the question that way was connected to the fact that social workers and educators were totally looked down upon in the public arena: what was said about the delinquents implied that socio-educational work was worthless and that the juveniles were « hopeless ». That is what led me to work on a second system that exists in the juridical institution, i.e. a six-month training period to become a children's counselor: it allowed me to hear both what the juvenile delinquents had to say (because it gave me time to establish a real interviewer-interviewee relationship with them) and to study another sort of pedagogical intervention, one that stretched out in time. I studied that system in the same town as the first (the *Maison de Justice*), and it involved educators who were working in both.

What I was aiming at really was to question the consequences of educational actions (in the broad sense). Without wanting to cast aspersions on the studies done in the 1970s (<u>nineteen-seventies</u>), which revolved around social control and normalization, I shifted the point of view by applying the tools of the sociology of education to observing social and legal work, in order to show in what conditions a social-educational action can indeed inflect certain itineraries.

<u>The effects of the context on how the interviews were carried out</u>

The influence of the public arena on ethnographic investigation also became apparent in some cases during the course of interviewing.

I say in some cases, because the interviewees themselves used the interview as a platform to give publicity to their own points of view. Walter, for example, was one such case. A young man of twenty whose parents came from the Congo, he was a former gang-leader working as a security guard when I met him. He took advantage of the interview to retrace his itinerary and give his own interpretation of the situation of « suburban youth ». Through me, he was addressing the "State", who he called upon to invest in integration rather than repression. The interview was for him an opportunity to express his satisfaction in seeing that someone was interested in these questions : « It's hard for us. I'm really happy

that someone is interested and is going to shake up the system because this has really got to stop.[1] »

As the research progressed, I myself asked my interviewees what they thought about current events, especially during the presidential elections of 2002 (two-oh-oh-two). The discussions showed that contrary to the drug-dealers studied by Philippe Bourgois, the young people I met didn't completely fit in with the individual responsibility ethic. Even when they sometimes admitted they had « gone off the deep end » and that they had to « pay for it », they stressed the social mechanisms that according to them had determined their itineraries, from the « spiral » of « the street», to more distant causes. Often, they stigmatized the irresponsibility of those politicians who had « invented the housing developments », aware of the effects living conditions there had had on their lifestyle. As time went on, Walter had become aware of the inanity of the fights between rival gangs, even though he never went into Paris unarmed, for fear some old enemy might be seeking revenge: « I don't know why they fight, since they're all the same[2]», he said. He didn't really know who to blame but he was very sure it was the people « in high positions » who had « made them that way » and had let them « get in deeper and deeper ». Frédéric, another former gang-leader reconverted to counselor work, accused the State: « It's as if the State didn't want to do anything for young people. Only put pressure on them. For them, the problem of violence, is the scum. That's the first picture, the façade. But you've got to look harder. The State's the problem. Because they're the ones who invented the housing developments, the tenements, they stuck all the immigrants in there thinking the kids would go the same way as the parents. But these are kids who're born French, who've got the same rights as anybody else, and who don't accept being locked up in there and that nobody do anything for them[3]».

I also asked the young people I met to remark on the omnipresence of the theme of « *tournantes* » in the media (a *tournante* is a sex party and/or group rape the gangs organize in basements). I had not thought of mentioning them myself before, both through modesty and also because it seemed to me to correspond to exceptional events only journalists would consider important. But I changed my mind and asked the kids, when it was their second or third interview, what they

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[1] « C'est dur pour nous. Je suis vraiment heureux que quelqu'un s'intéresse à ça et fasse bouger les choses parce que vraiment, faut que ça s'arrête. »

[2] « Je sais pas pourquoi ils s'embrouillent entre cités parce qu'ils sont pareils. »

[3] « On dirait que l'Etat, il a pas envie de se bouger pour les jeunes. Sinon que de leur foutre la pression. Pour eux, le problème de la violence, c'est les racailles. Ça, c'est la première image, la façade. Mais faut que tu regardes plus loin. C'est l'Etat le problème. Parce que c'est eux qu'ont créé des cités, des bâtiments, qu'ont collé tous les immigrés là-dedans en croyant que les enfants allaient suivre le même chemin que leurs parents. Mais c'est des enfants qui sont nés français, qu'ont les mêmes droits que n'importe qui, et qui admettent pas qu'ils soient bloqués là-dedans et qu'on fasse rien pour eux. »

thought of the way the law and the press treated those « *tournantes* ». I thought their opinions would help me analyze what was being said about them elsewhere. But on the contrary, their opinions threw me off, because they went in the same direction as the dominant discourse and I was afraid that if I repeated them, I would only be reinforcing the stereotypes and stigmatizing a fraction of the population already badly considered even more. That problem was also raised by Philippe Bourgois in his introduction to *En quête de respect* (*Looking for respect*).

In fact, both boys and girls felt that such practices were relatively quite widespread, one of them had even got their sexual initiation that way. One might think their words reflect the fact they had internalized the public discourse: from that point of view, they were saying what they thought they were expected to say, given they knew how the subject was dealt with in the social arena. That hypothesis would have led me to keep quiet about what they told me. However, I thought it was interesting to stop and consider their opinions, because neither the boys nor the girls I spoke with interpreted these « *tournantes* » as being rape. According to them, the girls more or less agreed to participate, either because they wanted to please their boy-friend, or had agreed to go down into the basement, etc.

The girls seen as most likely to accept and who get "worked on" to accept being "had", are the most vulnerable ones (either because they've run away, had an unhappy love-affair, or don't have a brother). The "good" girls are the ones who wear their virginity on their sleeve and thus preserve their reputation: that does not necessarily mean they never have sex; the main thing is that nobody should know. These girls participate in bad-mouthing the others, refusing to see them as victims. To save themselves, they may even help the boys find the "vulnerable" ones. Thus do they defend the boys who, though guilty of such practices, are potential husbands for them in the long-run.

Working on « sensitive » issues in the public arena and saying where one stands

Aside from their opinions on the « *tournantes* », their stories about certain acts of violence that they either performed themselves or to which they had fallen victim, really put me ill at ease: I had thought I was going to cast doubt on the image the media and politicians gave of suburban youth and I ended up realizing that in certain ways, I was on the contrary going to confirm and even approve that image. I felt all the worse as I had heard contradictory and theoretically irreconcilable points of view: exasperated victims on one side, minors praising street culture on the other, and powerless parents in-between. One way of solving that dilemma was to try and "understand" each one's point of view sociologically, by taking each individual position and itinerary into account, and showing the structural dimension of the phenomena under study. I was thus able to « understand » some of the National Front sympathizers, as well as the reasons that made others choose street culture. But I found it difficult to stop

there, to limit myself to having a point of view on their points of view. I wanted somehow to act. I thought that seriously questioning the effects of social-educational actions was a way of taking a stand. But I was afraid then of being associated with a form of evaluation of public policy that was very far from the idea I had of ethnographic research. How can one propose a form of expertise without sacrificing the principles of ethnography?

2. The specifics of an ethnographic expertise

<u>Throwing the points of view into perspective</u>

What was at stake in the treatment of juvenile delinquency in the public arena at the time of my investigation led me to use the hearings from the *Maison de Justice* to reconstitute the « space of points of view »[4] concerning petty crime. In so doing I could first of all avoid being judgmental, and, secondly, propose a truly ethnographic analysis exposing the complexity of the social phenomena by showing how interdependent they are, replacing them in their « configuration », in the sense used by Norbert Elias.

Observing the hearings and listening to the plaintiffs in the *Maisons de Justice* allowed me to account for the meaning of the complaints, and thus cast some light on the reasons for the growing intolerance concerning petty crime committed by poor youths. While teenage transgression by lower-class boys was considered something practically normal until the 1970s (<u>nineteen-seventies</u>) (« boys will be boys »[5]), today it only crystallizes the inner divisions of that social class. For what transpired from the confrontations between the different parties at the *Maison de Justice*, was precisely the distance between the adolescent « street culture » and the values held by the adults belonging to the same lower classes. Whereas during the 1970s (<u>nineteen-seventies</u>) the gang was a prelude to factory work (street culture then being homonymous with working-class culture), street culture today seems to have emancipated itself from working-class culture. Their becoming autonomous (and radical) is the result of the disintegration of the working class and of urban segregation. The tension between « them » and « us » – which was typical of the opposition between the working class and the other social categories – henceforth divides the class itself: for consistent fractions of the lower classes, « them » are now the « tenement youths » whose conduct they can no longer manage to control (their going overboard was better tolerated before also because the lower classes controlled their own, considering that Justice was for the « other world »).

Accounting for the diversity of viewpoints also meant, in this survey, confronting the speech of the youths brought to account by the Law to those of their parents. What then emerges is the helplessness of certain parents (particularly single mothers and immigrant parents) confronted with the

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[4] Cf Pierre Bourdieu, « L'espace des points de vue », *La misère du monde*, Seuil 1993, pp. 9-11.

[5] « il faut bien que jeunesse se passé"

socializing force of « street culture », and the double bind the judiciary creates for them: when they sometimes ask for help with their task as educators, they are told their children are not yet delinquent « enough » to warrant taking such measures!

Therefore, reconstituting the space of points of view surrounding juvenile delinquency today from the vantage point of a specific field, means showing how the lower classes have been broken apart and destabilized. The attraction of « street culture » is of course not new for part of the young people: the gang world has always represented a form of consideration (symbolic capital) for those who found none elsewhere. But the ways of escaping delinquency are no longer the same: going from the gang world into the job market, which was a "spontaneous" factor until the 1970s (nineteen-seventies) because of the continuum that existed between street culture and the factory, has become a problem. That already well-documented fact, as well as the political context, encouraged me to redirect my questioning towards the work of « moral conversion » and its implementation by the judiciary and social-educational institutions.

I would now like to demonstrate that ethnography, combining observation and interviews, *can* account for both acts and words, thus analyzing what may or may not be at stake in an educational relationship (in the broad sense of the term), in short, is indeed able do an « expertise » on it.

Relating theory and practice

In order to account for what was at stake in the juridical and educational interventions I studied, I had to analyze the conditions of efficiency of normative, pedagogical actions (or of « moral education », as Emile Durkheim put it). Ethnographic surveys are valuable for such objects, to the extent they combine the study of theory and practice, observations and interviews, and that they are longitudinal. I chose first to observe the practices: the recall of the law and mediation in the *Maison de Justice* on one hand, the training sessions in the integration program and interviewing the educator in charge on the other. I next asked the professionals to comment on these practices so as to have them explain their pedagogical objectives (taking off from actual cases made it easier to explain). I later questioned the young people I met about how they had experienced those moments, about the « lesson » they had learned from them (or not), the arguments that had caught their attention, the reasons they trusted certain professionals and not others. Observation (as well as the analysis of the survey relationship) also permitted interpreting the silences and avoidance practiced by some. Being able to pursue certain interviews at the end of these programs also made a way of speaking less supervised and less influenced by the institution possible.

From those data, I showed that moral conversion depends first and foremost on being interested in and believing in conversion. Either because the potential consequences of a behavior labeled as deviant within the family – the suffering expressed by the parents – discourage the juvenile delinquents from getting in even deeper. Or for fear of seeing one's future compromised by an eventual punishment (though this is only valid for those who can project themselves into the future, and into one that jibes with the dominant social norms). Or again, because conversion brings with it a different form of consideration that replaces those acquired in the « street » (another distinguished status).

Once the conversion has been achieved, the professional must then be acknowledged as a moral authority (i.e. « impose him or herself » without however « looking down on them », and prove his or her tenacity and dedication). The educational relationship (in the broad sense) can then function in the mode of give-and-take and inflect the young person's itinerary thanks to a « Pygmalion effect ». But that conversion must be closely accompanied (at least for those youths most involved in street culture). For conversion rests on a process of acculturation: the professional plays the role of passer, translator between the realities that carry value in the street culture and those that are necessary in the institutions of conversion and on the job market (which are no longer homologous). Comparing those different universes may then result in the acquisition of « interactive competences » or of a « communicational capital » (I borrow these expressions from Olivier Schwartz).

The length of the survey - I followed up some of the youths I met for two to three years after their training period - warrants including this sort of conditional intervention among the structural processes: for aside from the family's potential role in inflecting the young person's itineraries, it brings to light the importance of their future in the job market. Achieving « status» (i.e. a relatively stable work contract) considerably strengthens the belief in the interest of converting.

<u>Deconstructing the dominant categories in the public arena</u>

If ethnographic expertise is specific, to the extent it restitutes a « space of points of view » and correlates actions and words, it is because it rests on the study of a network of acquaintances. That characteristic is also what makes it the best way to resist the questions and categories which dominate the public arena. A network of acquaintances being a system of interdependency, the ethnographic survey allows one to deconstruct certain categories, or at least to show that the groups it designates are heterogeneous (diverse) and that they cannot be considered separately from the way they relate to the other groups.

After my doctoral dissertation was published, I was once sought out by journalists and by researchers to take a stand on present-day issues such as the situation of girls in the poor districts (these requests were linked to the introduction of analyses in terms of gender in the French public arena in the past

years). It was hard for me to answer them simply, because in my field of research I had taken an interest in the girls as much as in the boys and that it seemed to me rather oversimplified to speak of the ones without speaking of the others. It would have meant keeping quiet about the more general processes that explain the relations that sometimes exist. It would also have meant unifying the category "girls" whereas the indigenous categories separate the « good girls », from the « cailleras » (those who behave like boys), and the « *pétasses* » (those who are not respectable).

I came across the same difficulty when I was called upon to comment on the November 2005(two-oh-oh-five) uprisings, especially during a symposium called « the Africa of the suburbs ». It was implicitly understood that a connection existed between the uprisings and neighborhood youths of immigrant extraction: yet, in the field, I had met young people of all sorts of origins, including "native French" ("*Français de souche* »). What they all had in common was their attraction for street culture because it brought them the consideration they didn't find either in their families, in school or on the job market. In that field (which does not mean this is true everywhere), it seemed to me that living conditions were more important than ethnicity to account for their behavior. At the present time, the importance of discourses on discrimination and on post-colonialism in France poses the same questions. Without belittling the interest those notions represent when studying certain objects, an ethnographer can, in other fields and with other objects, show that other grilles de lecture can be more appropriate (it is not certain that the question of race has replaced the social question/question of class).

Conclusion

The discourse concerning insecurity was omnipresent in the public arena at the time of my investigation, and the growing intolerance concerning juvenile delinquency made me redirect my research towards the question of the conditions that can make a moral education efficient. Reorienting my object in that way also meant taking sides in the debate, and thus proposing a form of ethnographic expertise (the conclusion of my thesis is besides quite political since in it I suggest a « socializing moral education »). However, what I have wanted to demonstrate here is that to remain ethnographic, such an expertise must not forget its basic component, i.e. fieldwork. It then has its own advantages : bringing to light a space of points of view (in that sense, the ethnographer becomes a very particular spokesperson), confronting theory and practice, taking one's distance from the categories and arguments that dominate the public arena. But it is also those very characteristics, because of the complexity of the reality then brought to the foreground, that turn it into an expertise whose recommendations are not easy to follow.