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Riots in France: Political, Protopolitical or Anti-political Turmoils?

Fabien Jobard

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1980s, France has witnessed a series of small-scale urban riots, which have seemed to recur in a very similar fashion. A deadly encounter with the police (or the rumour thereof) in a deprived urban area is followed by the gathering of angry young men on the main square of the local estates (and not in the wealthier citycentres), who engage in nightly confrontations with the police. The confrontations are themselves marked by the rare use of deadly weapons, uneven scenes of looting and, as a kind of trademark of the French riots, a large number of burned cars. Riots in the Lyon area in 1981 seemed to introduce the model, and the most recent known event (Amiens, a middle-range city about 100 km north of Paris, in August 2012, and Trappes, a smaller city about 25 km south-west of Paris) followed the same pattern. To this extent, the famous 2005 episode, when around 300 cities were hit by riots following the death of two youngsters trying to avoid an ID check by the police (Moran, 2012), escaped this unalterable ritualisation only by its duration (two to three weeks of turmoil) and its magnitude (mentioning the probably unintentional homicide of Mr Chenadec – an inhabitant of Stains, near Paris – through a fist punch in the head, when he attempted to

avoid the burning of some garbage on the street). Riots in France seem to occur and develop along the lines of an imperturbable rituality, with a quite low effectiveness.

Rituality, reiteration, uselessness: these violent but voiceless urban rioters are frequently defined in the academic (and, more broadly, in public) discussion as ‘primitive rebels’, in reference to the famous work of the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm, 1971; for the recent case of urban riots, Wacquant, 2008 or Lapeyronnie, 2009; and for critical assessments directly focused on the urban youths, Lea, 1999 or Rea, 2006). From this perspective, rioters express strong political grievances (the need for recognition, indignation about their social condition and so on), but they lack the willingness and/or the practical opportunity to gain access to the sphere of the political (parties, press, public opinion and so forth), and therefore their rebellions conform to a ‘protopolitical’ form of collective anger rather than political mobilisation.

The aim of my chapter is to shed new light on the notion of ‘primitive rebellions’ on the basis of more than 30 years of urban uprisings in France. I will first briefly describe the evolution of the riots since the beginning of the 1980s and the different phases that can be observed under an apparent sense of continuity. This history of the riots shows that rioters are mainly second-generation male immigrants, which supports the idea that rioting is a first act of gaining a political voice, in fact a protopolitical revolt.

I will then shift my focus to the argument of rituality, and show how this rituality is in no way the choice of deprived actors engaged in issueless collective actions but the cross-result of the state’s tactics (maintenance of order strategies) and town-planning structures of the cities concerned. Moreover, in a manner that refuses to dissociate rationality and rituality, I will use some examples of violent rites as part of a broader political strategy deployed by the rebels. I will show that riots are always local, if not parochial, events and that ‘the

political' at stake is related to local political demands and local political structures, a point that is unseen by large-scope analysis. This will give me the opportunity to contest the assumption that rioters gain nothing in rioting.

Finally, I will support the point that the political dimension of the riots is not so much a protopolitical revolt as an anti-political movement and, as such, a full political voice. At stake in French riots is not the rioters' inability to be part of the political game but their refusal to be involved in it, which in specific circumstances implies a subtle bargaining between violence and vote, and between unconventional and conventional political mobilisations.

At the end, I hope to give a more complex view of French riots than the one which is mostly given in academic debates, and to show that normative views about what should be defined as 'political' actually harm our understanding of this major aspect of contemporary politics in France.

Riots as second-generation migrants' voice?

Riots are numerous and repetitive in France. In reality, they display some patterns of evolution since at least the beginning of the 1980s, when the first urban disorder hit the news and made headlines in the nationwide press. Locating the beginning of this story could fuel a rich debate. In a country characterised by the physical presence on its metropolitan soil of the war in Algeria from 1954 to 1962, and by violent insurgencies of workers and the poor, among whom there were large numbers of migrants, the term 'urban riots' requires cautious use as a historical concept, including the idea that they were first born when they made the headlines at the beginning of the 1980s. (On the unseen history of riots, see Zancarini-

Fournel, 2004 on the Lyons' area; and more recently on Paris, see Blanchard, 2012.) Deadly encounters with forces of order were a frequent cause of urban disorders as early as the eighteenth century in France (Nicolas, 2008).

Meanwhile, it is undisputable that what has been called the *été chaud des Minguettes* (hot summer in the Minguettes estates, near Lyons) created a shock in public opinion and among political elites. From then on, urban riots were a matter of concern, and to some extent they fuelled moral panic; in any case they contributed to promoting the urban issue on the political agenda in France. My aim in the following section is to describe the evolution and the possible phases of urban disorders in France since 1981, and to address the specificity of the autumn 2005 events when more than 250 cities were hit by a wave of violence.

The sociogeographic evolution of riots since the beginning of the 1980s

In 1981, dozens of youths in housing estates around Lyon engaged in joyriding trips with stolen cars, torching them and letting them burn on their own estates. Even though the total number of destroyed cars is really small in comparison with today's numbers (fewer than 300) and though the Lyon area had already experienced such episodes some years before, these anomic forms of action still create a shock wave among the French public and media (Hajjat, 2013). The *été chaud* occurred only a few months after the election of François Mitterrand as president of the republic, the first left-wing government since the mid-1950s, and the events seemed to highlight spectacularly a blind spot on the social agenda. Following the *été chaud*, the urban problem was a matter of concern for the public in France. Terms like *cité* (estates) and *banlieue* (suburb) become usual notions of the everyday political

discourse. These notions encompass social concerns that started to emerge in the previous decade, like the unemployment of urban youth, immigration, petty crime, or violence, but that from then on fell into common use.

The French government reacted promptly by allocating a large amount of financial resources in order to sustain social prevention programmes, prioritising the removal of (putative) troublemakers from their *cités* during the summer, placing them in summer camps on the French coasts or in the French mountains under the supervision of newly hired social workers (programmes called as '*plans anti-été chauds*' (wordly: 'anti hot summers action plans'; see also Juhem, 2000). More structural policies were then implemented, but they could not stop the deepening of the industrial crisis, the multiplication of hate crimes in the *cités*, the growth of violent acts recorded by the police, and the successes of a right-wing political party – *Le Front National* – headed by Jean-Marie Le Pen. These political and social strains culminated in the second half of the decade, when a conservative government headed by Jacques Chirac (1986–1988) supported law-and-order police chiefs, launched anti-immigration policies and finally witnessed Jean-Marie Le Pen's highest score (15% of the votes in the first ballot) in the 1988 presidential election so far. (For an overview of the 1980s and 1990s, see Bonelli, 2007.) Meanwhile, *banlieues* displayed no notable urban disorder during the decade, suggesting the success of the policies implemented in the wake of the Minguettes turmoil.

The situation suddenly changed in October 1990 in a *banlieue* near Lyon called Vaulx-en-Velin, which had experienced civil disturbance as early as 1971 (Zancarini-Fournel, 2004). The death of a handicapped youth during a police chase set the place in flames for two days and nights, during which youths destroyed and plundered the large shopping mall and the local café in the centre of the *cité*, destroyed and burned the local

youth club, and fought against riot police forces. Again, the shock was intense. The day before the riots, Lyon's entire political elite had gathered in the *cité* in order to celebrate the renovation programme that led to the renewal of the estates, a programme that was then benchmarked as a model throughout the country. Media coverage of the burning youth centre violently signalled that the causes of urban crisis were still alive. However, in contrast to the preceding decade, numerous episodes of violence hit different *banlieue* towns thereafter, including Mantes-la-Jolie in 1991, Sartrouville in 1992, Melun in 1993, Paris in 1993, Dammarie-lès-Lys in 1997, Toulouse in 1998, Lille in 2001, Montfermeil in 2006, Villiers-le-Bel in 2007, Saint Dizier in 2007, Grigny in 2008, Romans-sur-Isère in 2008, Woippy in 2010, Clermont-Ferrand and Amiens in 2012, Trappes in 2013. The first half of the 1990s seemed to be particularly intense, when 10–15 urban disorders took place in French *banlieue* towns. In the vast majority of cases, police interaction (or a rumour thereof) was the immediate cause of the violent outbreaks. In all cases, the disorders consisted of a nightly confrontation with the police, the burning of nearby cars and sometimes the plundering of some local shops. During this seemingly undisturbed series of disturbances, significant transformations of riots were at stake.

Contextual aspects of the 2005 riots and their followers

(structural analysis)

Over the years, and specifically after the nationwide episode of 2005, the *cités* hit by the riots were small-scale and remote, located in deprived and underurbanised areas, in contrast to the cities that experienced riot episodes at the beginning of the 1990s in England (Campbell, 1993; Lea and Young, 1993). Saint-Dizier, Romans-sur-Isère, Woippy, Clermont-Ferrand, Amiens and Trappes are no *banlieue* towns swallowed into larger cities but full cities located

in former industrial landscapes. To some extent the 2005 episode as such drew a line of demarcation vis-à-vis the 1990s decade. Except for the Paris *banlieue* towns close to the location where two boys died in an electric substation following an ID check operation led by a riot police unit, most of the places involved were towns in the underurbanised western part of France, known as a place for settlement of new waves of migration from sub-Saharan Africa. Apart from this geographical aspect, some of the recent riots, specifically in the greater area of Paris, have undoubtedly proved to be more violent than the majority of the former ones, the stones being replaced in some cases by firearms (mainly Grigny, 2008 and above all Villiers-le-Bel, 2007, this episode having been studied in depth by Moran, 2012).

Sociologist Hugues Lagrange (2009) mapped the different variables that seemed to contribute to the riots in 2005. Unsurprisingly, the determining factors of these nationwide riots were all things being equal the proportion of youths in the town, the rate of illiteracy and the presence in the town of one of the 750 *cités* targeted by government policy on the basis of their acute deprivation. None of these factors is a matter of surprise. The exclusion of young men from Maghrebian origin from the labour market is severe in comparison with peers with French parents, and more spectacular if one considers that the overall educational level reached by these two groups of pupils is broadly the same (Duprez, 2009). More striking are two other factors: a structural one and an event-related one.

The factor linked to the present juncture is a positive relationship between the implementation (or the foreseen implementation) of an urban renewal programme and the riot. A national renewal programme had been introduced by a law in 2003 and began to be implemented in hundreds of French towns from 2004 onwards. These programmes, which aimed to ameliorate the living conditions in these towns (and specifically in their housing estates or *cités*), led in very practical terms to the temporary or definitive eviction of families

living in the most rundown buildings, thus inaugurating a great period of uncertainty and stress. The provisions of the urban renewal law affected no fewer than 300,000 housing units. As a result, most of the towns that implemented these projects saw riots occurring in November. Even if social determinants played their unsurprising role, riots also seemed to have been the (rather violent) result of a specific period of stress and uncertainty in given areas, or the collective answer to a political change.

In addition, a structural factor was also at play, namely the presence of recent migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, in the concerned *cités*. Like many European countries, France does not feature any 'ethnic' or 'racial' information in its census, and sociologists usually base their analysis on self-made inquiries or on proxy variables. Lagrange's variables used to identify migration processes in riot processes were based on the percentage of foreigners from outside the European Union residing in a town and the percentage of large families (with more than six members), which are family structures that in today's France are mostly encountered in families from sub-Saharan Africa. The double presence of non-European foreigners and of large families is largely correlated with the occurrence of riots.

Second-generation migrants as primitive rebels

Put together, these predictive factors show that the 2005 episode did not occur in towns that were hit by the 1990s waves of riots: the 2005 rioters were not the children of the 1990 rioters, who were mostly the sons of immigrants from Maghreb countries (mostly Algeria and Morocco); and, conversely, the children of the 1990 rioters did not take part in the 2005 incidents, which seemed instead to mostly involve sub-Saharan youths. To sum up, migrants' sons protest in the form of urban disorders, confrontations with the police, and the destruction

of cars and public goods. And as in every deviant life-course, a desistance process then starts, where participation in violence is discarded as soon as the actors enter adult life. More interesting, however, is that their sons seem not to engage in this kind of civil disturbance either. Rioting is therefore not a form of deviant or criminal collective protest at a given individual age; it is, rather, a mode of protest undertaken in a familial, migration-related collective life. New waves of migrants' sons settle down and protest through the same inherited pattern of collective action (Rea, 2006, p. 464).

Under this consideration, riots share aspects of historical 'primitive rebellions'. Originally, Eric Hobsbawn coined the notion for rural, not urban, societies (Hobsbawn, 1965, p. 23), but rural societies demonstrating a pattern of maladjustment to the urban capitalist society. In our case, the clash of societies occurs through the confrontation of new waves of migration and the main society embodied by the police in which an 'incident' (Hobsbawn, 1971, p. 15) gives rise to a collective confrontation, specifically an incident that breaches the code of the local moral economy. The death of the youths in Clichy, or the shooting of a tear-gas grenade by some riot police against the local mosque three days later (see below), were breaches of that sort.

Meanwhile, our protesters are not social bandits. Unlike Robin Hood, they do not seem to be interested in organising a deprived residents' protest. Neither do they, for the most part, turn their involvement in protest into a definitive criminal career. If we keep our eyes on the 1990s rebels' generation, we could say that the then 'primitive rebels' rather disappeared and integrated into society, leaving a place for the next wave of migrants, and protesters.

In order to test more profoundly the accuracy of the notion of 'primitive rebellion', we need to examine the rituality at stake in French urban disorders, and then to shed some light on the parallel movements of protest and destruction, and of vote.

Rituality and rationality

One of the most striking aspects of the riots that have occurred since the beginning of the 1990s in France is their unchanged scenario: a deadly encounter with the police in a *cité*, and one, two or three nights of violent confrontations between local youths and riot police forces accompanied by a number of cars set ablaze. Unlike those in the UK, French riots usually do not feature any looting of electronics or youth clothes stores, nor do they consist of conflicts between different ethnic groups. This apparent repetition prompts one of the recurrent questions of commentators in France: Why do the deprived youths in bleak estates show such an intense willingness to contribute to the self-destruction of their own living conditions and inflict damage on the lives of their parents and relatives? Is this ritualised form of protest not clear evidence of an incapacity, or even lack of willingness, to offer a structured political voice, and on the contrary proof for the hopeless confinement of these youths in a spiral of masculinity, violence and nihilism?

In response, we will focus on (1) the tactical aspects of the confrontations that have taken place in French *banlieue* towns and (2) on the almost invisible aspect of local bargaining behind the spectacular broadcasting of cars set ablaze.

Rituality and repetition as mirrors of city planning and state strategies

Why do the rioters not go beyond the borders of their home area but instead restrict their actions to the limits of the place where, the morning after, their families and friends might be confronted with the loss of their cars (sometimes the only way to go to work in remote

banlieue towns) or the closing down of the school or the sports centre, torched in flames?

This question is among those most commonly asked by commentators in France: Why this apparent self-destructiveness? More theoretically, are French riots the models for what Gary Marx termed ‘issueless riots’ (Marx, 1970)? Are they located even below the line of ‘protopoliticalness’?

To these questions, we are inclined to respond by taking a look at the tactical and political circumstances of the riots. Riots occur, as we said, in *cités* – that is, sink estates that are usually the product of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s urbanism and the erection of huge housing estates away from citycentres which had not been destroyed (unlike in the UK) by the air operations of the Second World War. As a matter of fact, *cités* developed where the land was least costly, on the outskirts of *banlieue* towns. *Cités* are then mostly situated not only at the periphery of main urban centres, such as Paris, Lyon and Lille (Marseille here being here a notable exception), but are isolated from the rest of their own cities. To illustrate this, stop-and-search operations set up by the police in *banlieue* towns usually feature a check of vehicles going in and out of the *cités*, at the crossroads that separate them from the town – leading to what the *cités* residents vehemently refer to as checkpoint operations, drawing a clear analogy between this and what routinely occurs in Israel and Palestine (Jobard et al., 2012).

In such circumstances it is certainly not inconceivable for youths there to gather and join their town centre, if not the centre of the bordering agglomeration. But since the ‘flashpoint that ignites the riots’ (Waddington, 2012) usually takes place in the *cité* itself, it is immediately followed by gatherings in the *cité* (mostly around the mourning family or at familiar places of the victim) and by the surrounding of the *cité* by riot police sent by government authorities (*préfet*): both parties contribute to limiting the conflict within the

strict borders of the area. After the scene is set, it is almost impossible for the young rebels to leave; indeed it would be a nonsense risk to leave with destructive weapons or even self-incriminating clothing (Jobard et al., 2012). Riot police know perfectly well how to manage line-to-line confrontations with violent youths, and they prefer to limit the clashes to places where the damage will be limited in a spatial, but also in a financial, sense. A few cars set on fire are so much less costly than a rampaged city centre, train station or shopping mall. But even in the absence of any local triggering event, as in October-November 2005 where hundreds of *cités* nationwide showed solidarity towards the two dead juveniles in Clichy-sous-Bois, rioters largely prefer to stay in a place where they have the tactical resources to escape riot police. In contrast the police are mostly national units sent by the government in order to calm down the disorder, who will not know the area as well as the rioters. As a result, the riot police units rarely risk engaging in offensive action and penetrating further into the estates, allowing the rioters more time and opportunity to destroy whatever is within range (de Maillard and Roché, 2005).

Urbanism, police organisation and cost-benefit calculations thus strongly contribute to what appears to third-party observers to be collective rituals. In this regard, of great (but largely unnoticed) interest is the recent law unanimously adopted (which rarely happens in France) by MPs of both the left and the right regarding the compensation by judicial authorities of victims of criminal acts (law 2008-644, 1 July 2008). Article 3 of the law explicitly focuses on cars being destroyed on the occasion of confrontations with the police, and aims to facilitate the car owner's compensation by the state (now Article 706-14-1 of the Criminal Proceeding Code, untouched since). The socialist MP Delphine Batho ecumenically defended the law with the following words:

Since November 2005 riots, there are almost 45.000 torched cars in France every year. This number is considerable. During the years before, the ‘norm’, if I may use this term, was a bit above 20.000 torched cars. Since 2005, numbers have then more or less doubled ... Everyone knows how dreadful it is, for a modest family living in a low-income estate, a *banlieue* place, mostly badly served by the public transportation system, to see its car set alight.

As such, the 2008–644 law reinforces the rituality of French riots. In an ambiguous stance towards the insurance fraud that frequently occurs as a result of such events (a typical case for classical ‘social crime’ within the protest, to the benefit of the local community - Lea, 1999), the state is encouraged by the law to regard torched cars during confrontations with the police in the *cités* as the ‘norm’, in the embarrassed words of the MP; or, to paraphrase the classical phrasing of French jurisprudence in administrative law, as ‘normal perturbations in the due course of social life’, riot is not a breach of order or a disruption of society’s life, but a risk which, as such, belongs to the normality of deprived areas (Ewald, 1990), if not ‘institutionalised riots’ in the sense that Paul Brass gives to this notion (Brass, 1996, p. 12). Seen from the stage of law and politics, riots in France belong to a specific area of political economy: burnt cars are a negative externality, and the law is intended to optimise these externalities. It is useless of course to demonstrate how much such a law reinforces the circular rituality of riots occurring in France.

Violence as part of political bargaining: Riots and policies

We just saw that the apparent stability and nihilist form of riots in France is actually the result of urbanism, police strategy and political-economic anticipations by the state. But this view on the form of the riots does not say much about their causes. Rituality is a notion aimed at making sense of the form a riot takes, not of the causes of it. And in our case the strict rituality of the riots in France focuses the debate on their apparent uselessness and clouds possible questions about their causes. Unique forms, unique igniting events, so unique causes?

Mundane and academic research unfortunately has difficulty in engaging in the deep scrutiny of local situations. US-like spatial analysis tends to consider hundreds of riots as mere ‘outcomes of variables to be explained’ in an overview that does not care much about the local, if not parochial, causes of the events. On their side, French social scientists too often collect punchy but imprecise quotes in the *cités* from disadvantaged youths about work, police and education, which does not contribute to understanding why given *cités* stage riots and other do not. (For an overall appreciation of the right distance of social scientists towards riots, see Keith, 1993 or Lea and Young, 1993.)

Fieldwork analysis has provided clear indications that rituality and repetition do not preclude political strategy from the point of view rioters. It can go from a microevaluation of the cars to be burned to a greater appreciation of the opportunity to riot. From my own observations conducted in Dammarie-lès-Lys since 2002, I could see how collective violence after a case of lethal use of force by the police resulted from a collective deliberation aimed at exploiting the opportunity to make use of Molotov cocktails or of conventional forms of peaceful action (leaflet distribution, interruption of the municipal council, open letters sent to the justice minister, gathering in the town, gathering in front of the justice minister in Paris and so on). I could also observe how the overall strategy by the state’s authorities (judicial

and police authorities) contributed to a radicalisation of the protesters (Jobard and Linhardt, 2008). On a more microlevel, I witnessed how the cars that were destined to destruction by fire were actually chosen according to two criteria: the incitement by the car owner to fraud the insurance, and the consideration that the carowner should be punished because 'he does not give a shit about the state of the *cité*' (conversation between two 'rioters', personal observation, December 2007 – tenth anniversary of the shooting of Abdelkader Bouziane, a *cité* juvenile, by a police officer).

Michel Kokoreff (2009) reported precise observations about the fact that given targets had been chosen in Saint-Denis, the largest town of the main deprived urban district in France, on the basis of a very local deliberation on the political intent of such an action. Social scientists could have made a substantial effort to sort out the explanatory factors on the basis of general variables, but his study showed, for instance, that the destruction of a given town's school was decided because of the reputation of the principal for being 'a racist' (Mr Chenadec's death in Stains during the riots could be the consequence of a similar local rumour). Marwan Mohammed (2009, pp. 164–168), who conducted an in-depth analysis of the *cité* where he grew up, could perfectly observe the finest grain of the political bargaining between the local mayor (a political figure who enjoyed a moment of national interest when he attributed the riots to the polygamy of the rioters' parents) and the local youths. In the town concerned, the youths first tried to launch an attack against the large shopping mall in the neighbouring town (150 shops, 10 restaurants and so forth), but the information came to the police's ears and the young rebels did not even dare to get out of their *cité* when they saw the massive presence of riot police on the roads leading to the place where they were heading and heard that the police had begun to close down the shops. Later on in the year, however, they engaged in a series of violent threats towards the mayor. A new building devoted to the wellbeing of local youths was about to be inaugurated by the Ministry of Urban Affairs, and

the youths started to ‘apply pressure’ and ‘to pop up in force’ (to paraphrase the American author Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991, p. 325, who observed the same equilibrium point between violence and bargaining) around the building, leaving some Molotov cocktails in the area or stealing some goods from the mayor’s office. A few days later the mayor hired some of the gang’s members as private security officers devoted to the protection of the new building and other town’s public buildings.

To sum up, ritualisation and apparent repetition of the same patterns develop from a substantial diversity of situations, forms of collective lives and forms of collective deliberations. In Michel Foucault’s terms, rituality must force social scientists to ‘hear the battle rumble’. At this level, violence (or the threat of violence) not only appears to be the result of a collective deliberation over the costs and the gains of the operations, about their aims and their effects, but might also be included in a cycle of group bargaining with local authorities.

Rituality and rationality – is rioting worthy?

More generally, the right framing regarding riots in France should not be one of suicidal forms of collective protest or even nihilist or criminal forms of protest, but of the possible gains of riots for the rioters. Keeping in mind the words of Foucault for which ‘politics is war by other means’ (Foucault, 1980), the right framing should rather point to the gains obtained by rioters in France, with the explicit assumption that such a recurrent form of protest should not be reiterated if it amounts to a negative cost–benefit balance for the protesters. From the beneficiaries of the *anti-étéschaudsactions* in the 1980s to the creation of a Ministry of Urban Affairs in 1990, or to the different ‘marshall plans for the *banlieues*’ decided after episodes of riots, and with a look at important reforms in the field of criminal proceedings in 1993 and

2000, or at the hundreds of possible moves by localelected officials at the parochial level (and this since the very beginning of the 1970s; Zancarini-Fournel et al., 2011), it is obvious that an anticipation of some gains is elaborated by the rioters as soon as they engage in the destruction of public buildings and the cars of their neighbours. It is not our goal here to touch upon the now-classical debate about the usefulness or the hopelessness of ‘disruptive actions’ (Giugni, 1998; Piven and Cloward, 1991), but without inflating the individual rationality and collective ability of resource mobilisation, I focus on the fact that from the local level onwards, riots seem to be articulated with a real sense of opportunity and, more rarely, with a willingness to gain some political or economical advantages – and this rationality goes along with rituality (Buechler, 2008). Too much attention has been devoted in my view so far to the means of the protesters, and much less effort has been made to understand the quest for public resources through collective violence in this ‘murky area’ where collective violence and politics go side by side (Auyero and Moran, 2007; see also Lapeyronnie, 2009). From this perspective I would not qualify riots in contemporary France as ‘protopolitical protests’, but as the continuation of politics with disruptive means; indeed, as political protests in the full sense of the term.

In the third section I will contrast the notion of ‘protopolitical’ no longer with the ‘full political’ option but with its opposite side: the ‘anti-political’ aspect of the riots.

Rebels’ politics

Too often, social scientists suggest a dual schema of prepolitical and full political protest. I would rather suggest the introduction of the notion of ‘anti-political’ to characterise the politicisation process in riot-torn areas of France. I will base my analysis here (1) on the

relationship between disruptive and conventional political voice and (2) on the specific history of the attempts towards an integration of young rebels into the political system.

Vote, protest and violence

Burning cars made headlines, but these destructions happened in places where conventional political protest was far from being absent. In Clichy-sous-Bois, the town where the two juveniles lived before losing their lives in the electrical substation, violence certainly occurred, but it coexisted with the efforts of other (or the same) youths to maintain some dialogue with elected and, more difficult, state authorities. These efforts reiterated those launched two decades before, right after the *été chaud des Minguettes* in 1981. The Clichy group, which included local *cité* leaders and relatives of the two dead boys, reactivated the revolutionary 1789 gesture and the 1983 march that started in the Minguettes (Hajjat 2013): they went across numerous French *cités* and gathered grievance registers (*cahiers de doléance*) in order to solemnly present them to the government in Paris (Kokoreff, 2009, p. 153, and for comparable political entrepreneurship after the Villiers-le-Bel's riots in 2007, see Moran, 2011, p. 310; Moran, 2012, pp. 235–240). In an ambivalent move of refusal and acceptance, the mobilised youths in Clichy disapproved of violence, as clearly suggested by their acronym AC-LeFeu (Association Collectif Liberté Egalité Fraternité Ensemble Unis), an acronym which reads *asassez le feu* (stop with fire). But at the same time they knew that the window of opportunity opened not because of the two deaths but because of the nationwide episode of violence that ignited the country for more than two weeks afterwards. In contrast, the maintenance of a long-term political involvement in the absence of any violence that is able to raise media interest is extremely costly, and is prone to fail due to the weakness of

resources of the protagonists, as shown by the example of the mobilisation in Dammarie-lès-Lys in 2002 and the years after (Jobard and Linhart 2008).

Besides conventional mobilisations, the vote played a crucial role in the collective life of the *cités* in the aftermath of the riots (Braconnier and Dormagen, 2012). First of all, riots contributed to an unprecedented rise in poll registrations in housing estates (around +10% in the *cités* in France, mainly made up of the young people who had not previously registered). In fact, this rise was in a way preceded by a first wave of registration after the right-wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen reached his peak at a presidential election in April 2002. In a way, the riots contributed to a wave of voters' registrations that occurred in a context of voters' polarisation. As such, riots belong to a political cycle that originated in 2002, or in the mid-1980s, when French political debates started to focus on law and order, and on immigration issues, under the active pressure of Le Front National.

The second aspect of voters' mobilisation was the coincidence of voting against Nicolas Sarkozy and the riots. In towns hit by the riots, like Clichy-sous-Bois, Sarkozy only attracted 38% of the voters in the second ballot of the vote in 2007, and between 14% and 27% of the voters in the polling stations of Clichy's *cités* (Jardin, 2009). He received 43% in the wealthier town of Argenteuil, where he staged a tumultuous public appearance two days before the deaths in Clichy, publicly talking about the local *cité* youths as riff-raff (*racaille*; see also Moran, 2012, pp. 40–47), and 36% in La Courneuve, where a few weeks earlier he declared that the local *cités* should be cleaned up with a high-pressure hose. Votes were no different in the first ballot of the 2012 presidential race, when Sarkozy opposed François Hollande. Not only did Hollande reach his best score in the district where the riots were most numerous (Seine-St Denis, 39% of the votes) and achieve among his highest scores in towns

like Clichy (48%), La Courneuve (47%) and Argenteuil (38%), but also he received over 50% in numerous polling stations within the *cités* (Jérôme, 2012, p. 6).

Meanwhile, these votes mean in no way an adhesion to the political system. Voter turnout in the *cités* regressed as soon as the June 2007 parliamentary elections, so much so that it is not an exaggeration to consider the sudden surge in registration from 2002 and notably from 2005 onwards as an adhesion to an overpolarised political scheme in which the vote is used as an ultimate tool against two sources of fear and hatred: Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of Le Front National (Jobard 2009). As soon as these leaders were not individually involved in the race, young voters of the 2007 and 2012 presidential races turned their backs on the polling station. More generally, far more than by the riots, the vote is strongly determined by structural factors: political scientist Antoine Jardin shows that there is a strong correlation in the Seine Saint Denis district between the overall urban marginality index and the weakness of the vote against Sarkozy, in 2007 as well as in 2012, this correlation being much stronger than in English cities, such as Birmingham (Jardin 2009).

The reason for this refusal to vote on a constant basis is linked with the political history of urban youths in France. Rather than indifference, it should be characterised as a refusal to commit oneself in politics – as a protest against past developments, as well as the result of religious alignments in the lives of young protesters in France.

Rioters' retreat from politics

It would be incomplete to describe rioters' attitudes towards the political only in terms of primitive or full political protest. The ambiguity towards the political goes so far that the

collective action clearly serves a need to be heard and to get some resources by the authorities, but also to express an implacable defiance towards politics. This defiance encompasses two aspects.

The first is linked to the earlier revolts that occurred at the beginning of the 1980s and had their first developments during the 1970s in the Lyons area (Bérout et al., 2011). As one remembers, Lyons' *cités* were particularly hit by civil disturbance after 1981. During the summer of 1983, after some violent encounters with the police and in the absence of any reaction from the government, youths there decided after a hunger strike to launch a 'march for equality and against racism' to express solidarity with a local leader, Toumi Djaïda, who had been wounded by a police officer a few weeks before. The march, which started from Marseille in the south of France and passed through numerous *cités* on its way to Paris, succeeded in gathering 100,000 people in the capital. The president, François Mitterrand, who at that time faced great difficulties in the polls, encouraged this mobilisation in order to form a youth movement in his favour. The ruling Socialist Party created for that purpose a competing association called SOS-Racism, which ousted the grass-roots activists from the field and succeeded, through a series of national festival events, in creating a youth movement aimed at the electoral success of François Mitterrand, while sacrificing the autonomy and the empowerment of the *banlieues* activists. This episode, which helped to create a new generation of Socialist Party leaders (SOS-Racism's founder is now head of the ruling Socialist Party), signalled to a whole generation of second-generation migrants that their mobilisation is clearly and definitely incompatible with the French political system, if not confined to a subordinate role under a paternalistic flag. These events are now more than a generation away from the present rioters, but the 'SOS-Racism treason' belongs to the basic corpus of knowledge inherited by any young activist who wishes to know about the history of urban rebellion in contemporary France, and it echoes the larger sense of a 'treason from the

left', since the war in Algeria was decided in the mid-1950s by the ruling party (François Mitterrand was at that time minister of the interior, saying at the Assemblée Nationale that 'The rebellion in Algeria can only find a terminal answer: war', 5 November 1954). Political rap songs, which repeatedly glorify autonomy and purity as indispensable political virtues, still refer to these episodes of 'betrayal'.

The second reason for the defiance regarding politics is immediately linked with political ethos. Autonomy, purity, generosity, integrity or even asceticism, frugality or ascetism, the search for the *sunna* (the perfect ethos achieved by the Prophet Muhammad), and the consequent amount of disenchantment with the world are central notions of young Muslims who, facing a society that denies them fairness and equality, find in different forms of escapism a justification for the overall refusal of any compromise with the mundane political sphere. This attitude, which is richly documented in Gilles Kepel's inquiry in Clichy-sous-Bois (Kepel, 2012, pp. 415–452), is not adversarial to moments of fury, epitomised by the very frequently cited notion of *hogra* (i.e. the exposure to harassment or contempt). *Hogra* is, for instance, the obvious term that linked different generations of Muslims during the 2005 riots. The death of the two juveniles was only a triggering event for the local insurgencies – the ones that occurred in Clichy and in surrounding towns (mainly Montfermeil and Aulnay-sous-Bois). However, the launching of a teargas canister by national riot police on Friday night against a place used as a mosque by Clichy's Muslims was unanimously seen by the Muslim community in France as a sign of *hogra*: if the death of the youths could be seen as an accidental event, what was called in an explicit reference to the Holocaust 'the gassing of the Mosque' could not be understood as anything other than a declaration of war by the state against Muslims living in France. And all of that was in a context where questions of immigration control or the politics towards the religious veil were

constantly raised by the elected politicians, and above all the minister of the interior and president-in-waiting, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Conclusion: An original political voice

In such circumstances where defiance finds historical and religious, mundane and unearthly justifications, it is hard to characterise the political voice of the rioters and their friends or family members as mere indifference to politics. On the contrary, the rioters surely display a set of justifications that rationalise collective violence both as a legitimate reaction against any form of *hogra* and as a natural refusal to compromise with conventional politics. These considerations do not imply, of course, that daily attitudes and behaviours amount to a strict observance of Islamic principles, nor that the place assumed by Islamic ethics in their way of life makes them turn into radical salafists. But, in turn, social scientists are too often prone to considering the place of religion in urban upsurges in France through the (salutary) aphorism that riots are not jihads (Body-Gendrot, 2008), or by making the argument that the apparent refusal of French society hides a strong desire to be part of it (Koff and Duprez, 2009), without having enough consideration of what is at stake in religious-driven notions of what ‘political’ means. To this extent the growing importance given by Islam to the rationalisation of the world and the experience of the self in the daily course of the cités youths’ existence definitely separates their political protest from the institutionalised field of politics. Far from indifference towards politics, this political ethic rather amounts to a strong adherence to a massive refusal of the mundane political as it is practised and celebrated in France. To this extent, such an attitude evokes what Michel Foucault described as the ‘enigma of uprising’ in 1978 Iran: ‘a strike against politics’ launched in a vacuum between an impossible (and

undesired) millenarism for an Islamic society and a political refusal to be part of the usual political game.

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