The Banlieues and Violence

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Abstract: The place where the failure of architecture seems to cause more anxiety today is not the metropolis but the banlieues. In these difficult zones, located at the periphery of some major European cities, architecture reveals itself more like a specter than a constructive manifestation. In these nameless zones, which function more like camps than residential areas, communities from Africa and the southern banks of the Mediterranean have been banned from participating in the economic, political and cultural life of the host environment. Living like refugees under the banner of exclusion, stripped of their minimum rights, they have become marginalized groups and modern urban pariahs who, in times of crisis, take it to the street to express their frustration and despair. An awareness of this reality presupposes an understanding of its sociological and political roots. Drawing on the writings of Agamben, Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Balibar, Belhaj, Iveković and others, the paper will undertake an examination of this phenomenon in its relation to urban violence in its diverse manifestations.

1. Introduction

For three long weeks in the fall of 2005, angry groups of unemployed youngsters had vandalized property, burnt cars and scorched schools in several French towns and suburbia. Triggered by the death by electrocution of two boys fleeing the police in the Parisian banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois, these émeutes (riots) quickly engulfed other impoverished suburbs throughout the whole country. In reacting to this “profound malaise,” as the former French President called it, the government was forced to reactivate the law of the state of emergency for the first time since the Algerian war in 1955. The French public learnt, at last, that colonial legislation had never been abrogated and that there has never been a renegotiating of a new social and political project for postcolonial France. Measures to put off the riots were taken but, substantially, no serious long term solutions were envisaged. Two years later, in the fall of 2007, the same émeutes surfaced again mostly in the Parisian region when two teenagers from Villiers-le-Bel, riding on a mini-bike, died after they collided with a police car. In reacting to these events, the French Prime Minister told Parliament that the clashes were
incomprehensible, and he pledged punishment for the offenders in the affected suburbs (Sciolino, 2007.)

While the scale of the 2007 unrest did not compare with the 2005 agitations, it reinforced the thesis that violence in French suburbs is not a passing event, but a polymorphous phenomenon that constitutes the most visible aspect of the condition of violence in which live the populations of these ghettoized cités (Balibar, 2007.) Structural factors – such as the accelerated deterioration of the urban environment and public services, the massive, long-term unemployment and the ethnic and geographical stigmatization– appear to be continuously playing the real causes underling this phenomenon which, in its diverse manifestations, mirrors the functioning of a political system where the members of one specific category of French society (mainly of Arab and African origins) have found themselves living as refugees in segregated high-rise dilapidated housing, routinely stopped by the police for identity check.

2. Development

The perception among these unemployed, undereducated youths of being stigmatized and abandoned by the very same State that is supposed to protect and defend them, has emphasized the need among scholars to examine suburban violence beyond the arguments of immigration control, delinquency, illegalism and public security. One specific view that needs to be first considered here is the relation between rioting and postcolonial culture. As Rada Ivekoviç has noted, the suburban riots meet the current phenomena in the making of Europe through the refusal to face historic and colonial responsibilities. Whether in the banlieues, in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, or on the shores of the island of Lampedusa where the unfortunate would-be immigrants are drowned on a regular basis in the Mediterranean, the story remains the same: extra-constitutional exceptions are constantly made on a larger scale. The endless repression and stigmatization of those who live in the poor outskirts of Paris should be seen from this angle, and cannot be isolated from the policies of refoulements (forcing back) and the invisible detention centres for the undocumented, the main purpose of which is the exportation of European borders into neighboring countries which function as buffer zones policing for Europe by proxy (Ivekoviç, 2005.)

Achille Mbembe draws a similar correlation between state racism at home and French neocolonial policy in African countries that remain dependants of the former empire (with the complicity of corrupt bourgeoisies and
military castes.) Mbembe calls this phenomenon the “geography of infamy.” Accordingly, he argues that we are witnessing a near-resurrection of the Code de l’Indigénat (Natives’ Code) that once governed the subjection of colonial peoples in the form of “laws of exception,” the development of a “penal state” and of other quasi-military methods applied by police and public administration to deal with the banlieues. These methods reenact the ‘race war’ and inscribe it in the global context of clashes between the “civilizations” of the North and the South, on the basis of a very French colonial tradition whose administrative habits have never been eradicated (Mbembe, 2005.)

This new experience of borders and identity is engaging a subtle mechanism whereby the post-colonial and post-democratic State tends to monopolize legitimate violence through an included exclusion of its citizens and former colonial subjects. One particular elaboration of this interpretation sees in the rioting the resurgence (in the post-political, post-democratic, postcolonial, post-national age) of the archaic figure of the bandit, regarded as characteristic of pre-political times. As defended by Belhaj Kacem, the banlieue has become the ban-lieu, that is the space that embodies the fundamental structure of the ban in all its topological and political dimensions (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006.) In the little but interesting book titled Psychose Française (French Psychosis), Kacem maintains that to be at the ban “does not mean to be outside, excluded from the community as it were; it means to be both inside and outside”( Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, pp. 22-23.) As a space where a particular class of French society has found itself literally a-ban-donned, like waste in the outskirts of the city, the banlieue has turned into the ultimate ground of the modern pariah (Moussaoui, 2006.)

The metaphor of waste is here significant enough especially if we remember that the sociology of these difficult neighborhoods points to the sovereign’s desire to perceive these groups as both contaminating and contaminated. Economic exclusion goes hand in hand with the social ostracization of particular defamed social categories, as is clear for example from the declarations of the former Minister of Interior when he derogatorily referred to the young rioters as “racailles”("scum" and "rabble"), suggesting also that many of the suburbs needed some "industrial cleaning."(Sciolino, 2007.) The State representative’s urge to “cleanse” these suburbia not only appeals to the sentiments of the poor whites but points to the extent to which the conduct of the police in these zones bears a mimetic dimension. As Balibar has pointed out, “police squads act like gangs fighting other gangs in an escalation of virile exhibitionism – the difference being that they are armed, sent by the state
into ‘hostile territory,’ and that their own disproportionate violence (insults, beatings, shootings, arrests, detentions, threats) is inscribed within a more general process of intimidation, profiling, and harassment of legal and illegal immigrants.” (Balibar, 2007, p. 50.)

Through this continuous relationship with a power that has banished and rendered him/her at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat, the suburban dweller has become, according to Kacem, an updated version of the ancient figure of homo sacer who is continuously excluded from the community and who could be killed at any time without legal redress. Drawing on the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, Kacem argues that the structure of the ban means that the sovereign throughout history needs this sort of borderline character, or homo sacer, to frame (set up) the order of the State. All this reveals the “obscure association binding together sovereign and bandit….It is this specter, Derrida would say, that haunts every political-state system, even a democratic one” (Belhaj Kacem2, 2006, p. 102.) Kacam also stresses that the most extreme arrangement of this double structure, which binds the sovereign to homo sacer as in a mirror, is Nazism and the concentration camp (Belhaj Kacem2, 2006, pp. 98-99.) This fact compels us to look at the suburban reality from new angles.

2.1 Agamben and the homo sacer

The repositioning in which the suburb is seen as an echo of the reality of the camp is a specific application of Agamben’s philosophy to which we now turn. Interrogating the foundations of western political metaphysics, Agamben starts, in Homo Sacer, by making a distinction between bare life (bios) and political life (zoē) (Agamben, 1998, p. 2.) The Greeks, we are told, had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” Instead, they used two distinct terms: zoē, which expressed the simple fact of living, common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, in particular, would not have used the term zoē, since what was at issue for both thinkers was not at all simple natural life (zoē) but rather a qualified life, a particular way of life (bios.) To speak, for example, of zoē politikē of the citizens of Athens would have made no sense. In the classical world, simple natural life is excluded from the polis in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of oikos, or home (Agamben, 1998, pp.1-2.)
But this distinction, Agamben argues, would later disappear especially at the threshold of the modern era, as made clear by Foucault in the *History of Sexuality*, for example, when natural life began to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, that is when politics turned to biopolitics. Agamben also refers to a later lecture by Foucault at the Collège de France titled *Society Must be Defended* (1977), where the French thinker stresses that what followed this shift “is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.” (Agamben, 1998, p. 3.) Agamben concludes that in any case the entry of zoē into the sphere of the polis – the politization of bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought (Agamben, 1998, pp. 1-5; and Juniper, 2006.)

In trying to dig deeper into the nature of sovereignty and into the code of political power in Western thought, Agamben then refers to the ancient figure of the homo sacer who, in accordance with Roman law, is one who may be killed and yet not sacrificed. Agamben remarks that under both divine and human law, the human life of homo sacer is included in the juridical order solely in the form of an exclusion based on homo sacer’s capacity to be killed without legal redress (Agamben, 1998, p.8.) The homo sacer is excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his gens, nor can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death. He is pure zoē, but his zoē is as such caught in the sovereign ban and must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude or deceive it. “In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more ‘political’ than his.” (Agamben, 1998, pp. 183-184.)

This process of exclusion constitutes the concealed foundation of sovereignty which comes to fruition in the modern political state through a process whereby the exception becomes the rule. Drawing on Alain Badiou’s topological research, Agamben writes, “what cannot be included in any way is included in the form of the exception….The exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot
be a member of the whole in which it is always already included.” (Agamben, 1998, pp. 24-25.) For set theory distinguishes between membership and inclusion. A term is included when it is part of a set in the sense that all of its elements are elements of that set (one then says that \( b \) is a subset of \( a \), and one writes \( a \subset b \).) But a term may be a member of a set without being included in it (membership is, after all, the primitive notion of set theory, which one writes \( b \in a \)), or conversely, a term may be included in a set without being one of its members.

2.2 Abandonment and the camp

Just as with the exception that is included only through its exclusion, the subject of the ban is not simply excluded from the realm of the law, set outside and untouched by it, but is given to the law in its withdrawal. Taking up Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of “abandoned being,” Agamben applies the name ban (from the old Germanic term that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign) to this potentiality (in the proper sense of the Aristotelian dynamis, which is always also dynamis mē energein, the potentiality not to pass into actuality) of the law to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying (Agamben, 1998, p.28.) For, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, the origin of abandon is to put to bandon. The bandon (bandum, band, bannen), is an order, a prescription, a decree, a permission and the power that holds these freely at its disposal. To abandon is to remit, entrust, or turn over to such a sovereign power, and to remit, entrust, or turn over to its ban, that is, to its proclaiming, to its convening, and to its sentencing. “The law of abandonment requires that the law be applied through its withdrawal. The law of abandonment is the other of the law, the one which makes the law. The abandoned being finds itself forsaken to the point that it finds itself remitted, entrusted, or thrown to this law which makes the law…” (Nancy, 1983, p. 149.) Agamben comments that “the relation of exception is a relation of ban.” He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable…” (Agamben, 1998, p. 28.)

Despite the apparent archaic character of the homo sacer, Agamben traces the various metamorphoses it is exposed to in historical terms. During the medieval ages, for example, homo sacer is manifest in the form of the wargus, or the wolf-man (Agamben, 1998, p. 104.) Agamben first cites the research of Rodolphe Jhering who, in L’esprit du droit romain,
establishes an etymological link between the concepts of bandit (wargus), outlaw (vargr) and sacred wolf (vargr y veum) common to the Anglo-Saxon tongue. He also refers to the work of Wihelm Eduard Wilda who discerns a similar train of concepts within Germanic Law, where peace (freid) is contrasted with the wrongdoer as “the man without peace” (freidlos), and whom anyone was permitted to kill without committing homicide. Under the legal code of Edward the Confessor (1030-35), the bandit is referred to as the wolf’s head (wulfesheud), the were-wolf who is banned from the city and condemned to live at the threshold between man and beast, between the city and the forest (Agamben, 1998, p.105.)

The argument then takes on another resonance. When, in our own age, the exception has become the rule and the unlocalizable has become localized, Agamben warns, the direct outcome is the concentration camp. In this zone of absolute exclusion, first realized under a defined state of siege or emergency, it is martial rather than penal law that is exercised (Agamben, 1998, p.20.) Agamben cautions that the camp, which he views as the “paradigm” of modern power, is topologically distinct from the spaces of confinement so eloquently described by Michel Foucault in his books on discipline, madness and the clinic. The camp- and not the prison- is the space that corresponds to this originary structure of the nomos. “This is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is (as we shall see) martial law and the state of the siege. This is why it is not possible to inscribe the analysis of the camp in the trail opened by the works of Foucault, from Madness and Civilization to Discipline and Punish. As the absolute space of exception, the camp is topologically different from a simple space of confinement”(Agamben, 1998, p. 20.)

If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception, and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography.

The theoretical point of inspiration for this view comes from the eighth fragment of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where he writes that the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. “We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of
emergency, and will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 257.) Agamben mentions few cases of this condition: The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the Germans, the Konzentrationslager für Ausländer in CottbusSielow in which the Weimar government gathered Jewish refugees from the East, and finally the zones d’attente in French international airports in which foreigners asking for refuge status are detained. All these spaces should be regarded as camps.

In all these cases, an apparently innocuous space (for example, the Hôtel Arcades in Roissy) delimits a space in which the normal order is de facto suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign. The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a dislocating localization that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken. The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the zones d’attente of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities (Agamben, 1998, pp. 174-175.)

This clearly has implications for a consideration of rights within contemporary politics, though this topic is not something that can be discussed here in any detail. Suffice to say that Agamben rejects recourse to rights as a limitation on the violence of sovereign power. Since the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, zoē and bios, “every attempt to found political liberties in the rights of the citizen is, therefore, in vain” (Agamben, 1998, p. 181.) If anything characterizes modern democracy, as opposed to classical democracy, it is that modern democracy presents itself as a vindication and liberation of zoē, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the bios of zoē.

“Hence, too, modern democracy’s specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place – ‘bare life’- that marked their subjection… Modern democracy’s decadence and gradual convergence with totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies may well be rooted in this aporia, which makes the beginning of modern democracy and forces it into complicity with its most implacable enemy” (Agamben, 1998, pp.9-10.)
2.3 The ban and resistance

Bearing in mind the above caution, what does all this imply at the level of political changes sought by Kacem? The remaking of the ban-lieu in the image of the camp and the bearings that the figure of the homo sacer can take, point to an old truth, namely that fundamental things in the history of mankind are to be found in the ban. From the ancient homo sacer to modern times, the real pioneers of change and the real nemesis of the established order have been those whose rights are revoked (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, pp.16-22.)

We encounter here an echo of Agamben’s identification of the refugees with the avant-garde. Commenting on Arendt’s little but important article titled “We the Refugees” (1943), Agamben has written that Arendt overturned the condition of refugee in order to propose this condition as the paradigm of a new historical consciousness. The refugee who has lost all rights, yet stops wanting to be assimilated at any cost to a new national identity so as to contemplate his condition lucidly, receives, in exchange for certain unpopularity, an inestimable advantage. Quoting Arendt, Agamben stresses that for the refugee, “history is no longer a closed book, and politics ceases to be the privilege of the Gentiles. He knows that the banishment of the Jewish people in Europe was followed immediately by that of the majority of the European peoples. Refugees expelled from one country to the next represent the avant-garde of their people”(Agamben, 1995, pp.114-120.)

Agamben then goes on to suggest that our political survival depends on the recognition that we are all, in one way or another, refugees. For the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which we may see today the forms and limits of a coming political community (Agamben, 2000.) In a global state of exception, or emergency, the so-called citizen has become as vulnerable as the refugee. Bringing politics face-to-face with its own failures of consciousness and consequence, Agamben frames his analysis in terms of clear contemporary relevance and proposes a politics of gesture, or a politics of means without end. The refugee, accordingly, breaks the bond between the human and the citizen and moves from marginal status to the center of the crisis of the modern nation-state, that is to the sphere of pure means or gestures (those gestures which, remaining nothing more than means, liberate themselves from any relation to ends) as the proper sphere of politics. It is only in the direction of the camp and the figure of the refugee (rather than the nation-state and the figure of the citizen) that we
must therefore begin to imagine a community to come. Such a stand alone will make it possible to clear the way for the new politics, a politics which remains largely to be invented (Agamben, 1998, pp.10-11.)

In a similar vein Kacem articulates the notion that in paganism and monotheism, for example, the heroic and messianic destiny often overlap with a circumstance of abandonment. The paradigm of monotheistic religions, in particular, is in this sense significant in that a people of slaves had successfully invented, out of a historical necessity, an original egalitarian subversion that made their emancipation and departure from Egypt possible. These men of the ban, who were abandoned by pagan gods, discovered Being itself, that is God, as a faceless and egalitarian deity (Belhaj Kacem2, 2006, pp. 108-110.) Throughout history, this scenario has repeated itself under the following form: those who live in the margins of society can turn their own exclusion into an affirmation. The intellectuals of the 1968 generation, thinkers like Deleuze and Foucault for example, became rivals of the political right because they assigned to the mad and to the delinquent, to these “figures of the outside,” a place in history. To this ‘68 generation, which also includes people like Bourdieu and Derrida, the fate of the pariah throughout history cannot be detached from the fate of the intellectual himself/herself as an excluded figure (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, p.19.) To be a pariah, in this sense, is not a hindrance but a mission that begins with the negation of the very logic of exclusion. In the language of Kacem, “être un paria, ça se mérite;” a pariah is something to be deserved (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, pp.18-19.)

2.4 The Inoperative Community

But is it possible to construct a politics around this reality of creative abandonment? In an interview conducted by L’Humanité (Moussaoui, 2006), Kacem acknowledges that he didn’t elaborate a clear idea on how to construct a politics around the theme of the ban, but he sees a potential in promoting the concept of désœuvrement (or inoperativeness), a concept that has been recently associated with the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy.

The question we must ask now is in what sense this new category could be appropriated, if at all, in order the promote the prospects of a community to come. Let us recall here that in La communauté désœuvrée (The Inoperative Community), Jean-Luc Nancy argues for an understanding of community founded not on the immanence of individuals being-in-common, but on an “unworking” (désœuvrement) of togetherness brought about by that which presents a limit to community – such as death, work and love. Although the origins of the current debate on the notion of
community are embedded in a long philosophical tradition, one can identify a starting point for an updated discussion of it in this complex text where Nancy relies on Maurice Blanchot’s central notion of désœuvrement (inoperativeness) in order to re-interpret the oeuvre of Georges Bataille which treats of this same question (Blanchot, 1988.)

According to Nancy, the traditional concept of community rests on an assumption of commonality (in race, religion, outlook, goal, or normative framework) in which individuals are sublated and fused into an organic whole, that is into a unified political body founded on consensus and commonality. This notion of (mythic) community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways and by all kinds of paradigms including the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods. What revolves around these conceptions is always a notion of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious bonds and in which, above all, it played back to itself -through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols- the representation of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy (Nancy, 1991, p. 9.) The infrangible bonds of this original, mythic community have vanished, however, and there has surfaced a nostalgia and a retrospective consciousness the identity of which is based upon no more than false premises. Nancy argues that this lost community never existed in the first place and, therefore, the nostalgia for its loss must be treated as no more than mere nostalgia (Nancy, 1991, p. 10.)

Within the frame of this type of immanent conceptions of community, Nancy argues, the individual is sublated through the intertwined ideals of death and work. Under these two promises, generations of citizens and militants, of workers and civil servants have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community yet to come. But by now we have nothing more than the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community, be it the people, the nation, or the society of producers.

On the other hand, Nancy argues, death is not and cannot be sublated (Nancy, 1991, p. 13.) For death irremediably exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject. This death, upon which community is calibrated, does not operate the dead being’s passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community for its part, operate the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject – be this homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body. Death is an experience that a collectivity cannot make its work or its property in the sense of something that would find its
meaning in a value or cause transcending the individual. A society may well use it (in the celebrations of heroes or the sacrificial victims), but there is a point at which death exposes a radical meaninglessness that cannot be subsumed. And when death presents itself as not ours, the very impossibility of representing its meaning suspends or breaches the possibility of self-presentation and exposes us to our finitude. Nancy argues with Bataille (and as a tragic intuition this is profoundly Nietzschean too) that this exposure is also an opening to community. “Outside ourselves, we first encounter the other” (Nancy, 1991, p. xvi)

To conceive an alternative conception of community, Nancy turns to Bataille’s notion of community as a kind of withdrawal from work and production, where the modern experience of community is neither a work to be produced nor a lost communion, but rather a spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-itself (Nancy, 1991, p. 19.)

While Bataille does not reduce community to a work to be produced, he also resists the idea of the “labor of the negative,” which is at work in Hegel, Marx and Kojève. In Bataille, according to Nancy, we encounter an opening of the thought of community through a resistance to the unitary conception of community which underpins fascism and, disturbingly enough, which continues to dominate the thought of community (even in some of the most “democratic” or “progressive” paradigms of community.) Along these lines, Nancy proposes a new conception of community based not on the immanence of individuals being-in-common, but on an “unworking” (désœuvrement) of togetherness. Community should be the existence of a “Being-in-Common,” where the concept of “common,” does not denote a uniform substance that binds separate individuals but is rather a “shared experience.” In this shared experience of finitude there is no communion, or unity, but an alterity. Community, for Nancy, is this shared and constant exposure to finitude, this simple mode of exposition in common, this being-in-common. Thus the classical “individual” is replaced with a singular being. This singular being is not given meaning by the community, or by its own subjectivity, but is instead the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. As an inclination and as an inkling from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other, community is the clinamen of the individual (Nancy, 1991, pp. 3-4.)

Sharing comes down to the fact that community reveals (to the individual) existence outside the individual self, but an existence outside the schemes of reinvesting this truth in or by community. Under this formulation, finitude is not sublated. It is the community of finite beings, and as such it
is itself a finite community. Community means, consequently, that there is
no singular being without another singular being, and that there is,
therefore, “what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an
originary or ontological ‘sociality’ that in its principle extends far beyond
the simple theme of man as a social being (the *zoon politikon* is secondary
to this community)” (Nancy, 1991, p. 28.) In order to designate this
singular mode of appearing and this specific phenomenality, we would
need to be able to say that finitude co-appears or compears (*com-parait.*)
Finitude always presents itself in being-in-common, and it always presents
itself at a hearing and before the judgment…Communication consists
before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of
finitude (Nancy, 1991, pp. 28-29.)

This is why, according to Nancy, community cannot arise from the
domain of work. Relying on Blanchot’s notion of “unworking,” he argues
that community cannot be produced in sites, persons, buildings,
discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects. Products derived
from operations of this type, notwithstanding their size and significance,
“have no more communitarian existence than the plaster busts of
Marianne” (Nancy, 1991, p. 31.) Community necessarily takes place in
“unworking,” that is in that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws
from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production
or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation and suspension
(Nancy, 1991, p. 31.)

This unworking of community also takes place around what Bataille once
called the “sacred.” But Nancy would not unconditionally follow Bataille
in equating the sacred with the “unleashing of passions.” If the
inoperative community is to be located in the neighborhood of the sacred,
it is only inasmuch as the “unleashing of passions” is not the free doing of
a subjectivity, and freedom is not self-sufficiency (Nancy, 1991, p. 32.)
What is communicated and what is unleashed, should only be the passion
of singularity as such and no more. The presence of the other does not
constitute a boundary that would be limited by the unleashing of my
passions. On the contrary, Nancy stresses, only the exposition to the other
unleashes my passions. Whereas the individual can know another
individual, juxtaposed to him both as identical to him and as a thing – as
the identity of a thing – the singular being does not know, but rather
experiences his like (*son semblable.*) This is passion (Nancy, 1991, pp. 32-
33.)

In a similar fashion, always proceeding in this quasi-negative mode of
defining community, Nancy tries to dissociate love from any experience of
communion. He shows that within the limits of Bataille’s thesis of community as the community of lovers, love is presented in many respects as communion, where the lovers themselves represent the despair of the community and of the political. Nancy stresses that love does not expose and capture the entire community and that lovers neither form a society, nor its negative, nor its assumption. Love does not in particular offer a refuge or substitute for lost community but an ecstasy of the instant. Love does not produce a union (it is NOTHING) but this nothing itself is also, in its consummation, a communion (Nancy, 1991, pp. 36-37.) Lovers, in their communal aspect and intimacy, expose above all the unworking of the community which already shares their intimacy. For the community, lovers are on the limit, they are inside and outside, and at this limit they have no meaning without the community. Reciprocally, it is the community that presents to them, in their very love, their singularities, their births, and their deaths (Nancy, 1991, p. 40.)

This way of defining the community may, of course, undermine any practical political application of Nancy’s thought. As Christopher Fynsk has noted in his foreword to *The Inoperative Community*, it is difficult to define, for example, how one might move from this definition of a nonorganic, differential articulation of social existence to any currently existing politics. This may easily turn into a frustrating exercise. “There is a point at which this move becomes properly unthinkable in the terms of any traditional conception of the relation between theory and practice: one cannot work to institute or realize this thought of community”(Nancy, 1991, pp. x-xi.)

But how do Agamben and Kacem read the above thesis? The first (Agamben) understands désœuvrement or inoperativeness as the figure of the fullness of man at the end of history (a theme that first appeared in Kojève’s review of Queneau and was later taken up by Blanchot, and eventually by Nancy.) Agamben notes in this respect that everything depends on what is meant by “inoperativeness.” It can be neither the simple absence of work (as in Bataille) nor a sovereign and useless form of negativity. The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like an individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) (Agamben, 1998, pp.61-62.) And thus, from this point of view, community becomes an open project.

It is the actualization of this potentiality that could become the ultimate strategy of the rioting pariah. This is Kacem’s reading, based on the realization that despite the fact that the spontaneous nature of the riots and
the self-generated rebellion had no clear political structuring, they still point, potentially at least, toward a community to come (Immanuel Wallerstein also stressed this spontaneous character of the 2005 riots, noting in particular that what was remarkable about this rebellion was the absence of the religious factor. It was a spontaneous class uprising whose recurrence remains always a possibility in the future, and will not eventually disappear unless the gross inequalities are overcome (Wallerstein, 2005.)

And so one must think, Kacem insists, of a strategy that can give suburban youngsters the theoretical and political means needed to develop a clear vision of their aspirations, the conviction being that beyond its apparent nihilism, rioting could, in the long term, trigger the emergence of a first-rank political actor. To that end, the necessary work has to be done at the level of promoting a process of education among the marginalized suburban dwellers, a process that should give these populations the political consciousness needed for the possibility of a collective political action.

2.5 Rap, resistance and violence

Within the experience of the ban, the pariah is often depicted by official media as a violent entity, vandalizing property, burning cars and scorching schools. In an immediate sense, this reading fails to acknowledge that the aggressiveness associated with the suburban rioter should also be seen as a natural reproduction of a previous aggression that had been committed by the sovereign power itself. The ban is, in a way, a replica of empirical life itself, from which it is always different but never entirely detached. Here, violence reveals itself rather as a migrant phenomenon.

The migration of violence from sovereign to pariah, and the reverse, is clear in the appropriation of the other’s side main mode of expression. The pariah, as a destructive demonstrator, willingly identifies with the capitalist bandit; s/he likes both the destruction but also the appropriation of capitalist symbols. Goods are desired but cannot be accessed by legal means. The suburban pariah, like the hero in Brian de Palma’s Scarface takes a shortcut to capitalist affirmation by trying to violate the established rules of ownership. But this is not a matter of psychology; rather, it is a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached its climax in capitalism. This is on the one hand.

On the other hand, the realm of the bandit, as represented in many rap songs and movies, can meaningfully become a field where capitalist
profits are cultivated and where dissidence can turn into a form of profitable affirmation and a fashionable attitude. Gangsta rap has been in this sense criticized for its material emphasis and for exploitation and commodification of rap artists by large multi-nationals (e.g. advertising Pepsi, Sprite and Nike). It is no secret also that Hip-hop culture has been attracting the youngest members in almost every society, including the well-to-do youngsters who appropriate the rappers’ dress code: old baggy jeans, oversize sunglasses, Adidas sweaters, classic basketball jersey, cool hat and bandana (the bandana on the head and the hat over the top of it), a gold or platinum chain, some rings or caps for the teeth, some appropriate shoes: Nike, Reebok, Adidas or Timberland. Rap has transformed fashion with its sneakers, boots, loose-fitting clothes, and “whacked” colors and designs in the same way the “writing” (graffiti) of hip hop practitioners “writing” (graffiti) has sparked a renewed interest in street art.

It is to suggest that the mechanism of appropriating and exporting aggressiveness is complex in more than one way. What is remarkable in the unfolding of violence in the banlieues is a paradoxical blend of contradictory manifestations in that it embodies contradictory notions. As carefully noted by Balibar, this violence often appears in part as self-destructive, especially if we note that rioters tend to burn “their” own cars, “their parents’ cars”, “their” schools, “their” sports facilities, and “their” means of transportation (Balibar, 2007, pp.50-51.) The notions of exclusion and despair are here mixed with those of nihilism and depersonalization. The object of destruction is in large part a “thing” from which the young rioters are contradictorily excluded as non-citizens. This “thing,” to which the rioters only have limited and illegitimate access, is part of themselves; it constitutes in a way one dimension of their identity. Rather than being a pursuit of nothingness or the dissolution of any political objective that can be represented or expressed in a “rational” way, the riots appear as a form of violence in search of targets and adversaries. On the basis of this deep ambivalence, Balibar argues that other telling aspects of the violence of November 2005 could be highlighted, such as its relatively narrow limits. Compared to other, often invoked historical episodes (the Brixton riots in London in 1981 and above all the riots in Watts and South Central Los Angeles in 1965 and 1992), and contrary to what television coverage suggested, the 2005 highly spectacular violence remained relatively limited in terms of its destruction and victims. There were only three dead (including the two youths whose indirect murder by the police lit the powder), but very few attacks on persons. What was targeted were consumer items and symbolic places. This spectacular character, however, was in no way marginal, as it underlies the advent of a new age in which the means of mass communication acquire the role of
passive organizers of social movements. Balibar here notes that, very shortly after the first episodes, a “national competition” arose between cités, towns, and regions to appear on French and even international television with the most spectacular scenes of “civil war.” It is very hard to say “who is using whom,” but what should be taken from this “virtual violence” is that it transforms real, endemic social violence, to which it responds, into a spectacle, thereby at once making it visible in its intensity (Balibar, 2007, pp.51-52.)

This leads us to the next point. As a spectacle, rioting does not seem to constitute the only form of visible resistance in the banlieues, or, more precisely, the banlieue creates other forms of spectacular struggle against sovereign violence than pure rioting. One of the areas where the ban has secreted these other forms of resistance is militant feminism. When the movement known as “Ni putes ni soumises” (Neither whores, nor doormats) started in 2002, the demands of the demonstrators were both general and specific. The general demands included the usual call to improve the situation inside the ghettoized cités. The specific demands had to do with women’s struggle to put an end to bullying, gang rapes, and humiliations inside the banlieues themselves. Within this context of racial and cultural tensions, the “other” is not only the sovereign, but also the “brother,” the “father,” and the “community.” When demonstrations and marches organized around France started to gain some sympathy from the general public, the press and even the National Assembly, criticism of the movement started to materialize. The main accusation is that the “Ni putes ni soumises” movement has been appropriated and recuperated by the political parties, on both sides, left and right. The ultimate decision of the president of “Ni Putes ni Soumises,” to become a Secretary of State in the current government had reinforced this criticism (Iveković, 2005 ; Amara and Zappi, 2006 ; Bouteldja, 2007.)

The other area where the ban has engendered alternative forms of resistance is rap music. In France, a country second only to America in the consumption and production of rap songs, the type of rap music associated with the banlieues is often seen as an expression of a new form of life to come, that is as the ground of a coming politics over and against the nexus of sovereign violence. As an expression of this future life, rap music has imposed itself as a subversive and pertinent medium to disseminate and voice suburban resistance, despite the controversial nature of its aggressive lyrics and the “bad attitudes” of its actors. By refusing to play by the rules of the sovereign culture, rap necessarily has put itself in a fragile and defensive position. It is constantly discredited on the grounds of sexism, misogyny, glamorizing violence, materialism and associations
with criminality, which explains the numerous lawsuits, parliamentary condemnations, and public condemnations of rap and rappers that have taken place.

Commenting on the relation between rap music and the 2005 riots, Kacem weighs in against the tendency to devaluate the significance of suburban expressions, or to speak of them with depreciatory reserve (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, pp. 14-15.) He notes that during the 2005 events, a respectable intellectual initiated a public debate in response to some rap lyrics that derogatively talk about France and the police. At the end of the debate, the same intellectual went so far as to claim that freedom of speech should be restricted. Two days later, a deputy resumed the same line of argumentation in the Parliament, arguing that rap lyrics were both scandalous and influential in encouraging the rioters. In reacting to this thesis, Kacem has used the term *psychosis* to depict the inability of some public figures to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. The tendency to draw a parallel between urban rap and rioting, and the effort to picture this comparison alongside other historic associations between words and aggression, is judged by Kacem to be purely grotesque (Belhaj Kacem1, 2006, pp.14-15)

Against parliamentary accusations, rap artists and their defenders articulate the view that their music congruously represents both a harsh reality, and an attempt to provide a comfort that is lacking in the banlieues. This, incidentally, reminds us of Bourdieu’s link between taste and social classes. In aesthetic judgments, he argues, taste and social classes are connected to positions in social space. Despite the apparent freedom of choice in the arts, people's artistic preferences (e.g. classical music, rock, traditional music) strongly correlate with their social position. Also, subtleties of language such as accent, grammar, spelling and style — all part of cultural capital — are a major factor in social mobility (e.g. getting a higher paid, higher status job), etc. (Bourdieu, 2007.)

Rap could therefore be judged in a more objective sense, as a display of cultural values, a vehicle for self-expression, an educational tool, a vehicle for social control (within the hip-hop community) and a political forum. This position, including an analysis of the criticism cited against rap music, is defended, among others, by Cheryl Keyes in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Keyes, 2002). In particular, it is denied that the primary intention of the lyrics is to inculcate violence in its hearers, although it is often acknowledged that rap remains a reflection of the (violent) economic and social reality of the suburbs where an alienated
underclass society has been, to quote French rapper Mino, “Knocked out by the welfare check, sitting on a bench, paid to do nothing…” (Poggioli, 2005.)

What constitutes the abandonment of the suburban dweller according to rap artists is not an irrational tendency toward delinquency, but a violent reality imposed on the life of suburbia by objective forces, resulting in hunger, fear and suffering. In one of Marseille-based IAM songs Demain c’est loin (Tomorrow is Far) the lyrics highlight this resentment in a more detailed way: “Ink flows, blood is spilled, and the blotting paper absorbs. Absorbs the emotion, a bag of images inside my memory. I talk about the way my relatives live and about what I see. Guys seized by despair heading to the dérive. Here kids dream of Golf GTI, women, and Tacchini jogging suit. I like Scarface who, at the end, he loses his life. Thank God I’m still alive; wicked I’m no more…The end and hunger justify the means. Four to five bad hits, enough for a day or two. Then we’ll take it from there. In the shadow of danger we walk from eve to dawn,…a rag in the corner, a knife in the hand. Big time bandit.” (IAM, 1998.)

This apologetic view is also defended by some rap theorists. Commenting on the aesthetics of rap in America, Richard Shusterman has noted that the media publicity of crime and violence has fuelled rap’s fame but obscured its deep philosophical import. Rap’s deepest philosophical message, according to Shusterman, is the claim that it itself can be practiced as philosophy in reviving philosophy’s ancient meaning as a critical, unconventional art of living. But to grasp rap’s role as a philosophical life one must first grasp its aesthetics (Shusterman, 2003, pp. 419-428.)

Rap is an art whose cultural and aesthetic importance suggests that there must be some core of artistic fire that rocketed the genre to its amazing, enduring international popularity-despite its initial lack of material means, organization, and cultural legitimacy that continues to plague it. But rap’s clouds of controversy – including its alleged links to gangsterism, rape, race riots and its proud self-identification as ghetto music in an age of contestatory identity politics – have distracted cultural critics from coming to grips with its artistic significance (Shusterman, 1986, p. 150.) In Pragmatist Aesthetics, Shusterman goes to some lengths to connect rap not simply with postmodernism but with American pragmatism as a philosophical school of thinking, by showing how rap's aesthetic suggests the Deweyan message that art is more essentially process than finished product (Shusterman, 2000.)

As Elizabeth A. Wheeler has also pointed out, rap may be the most political medium in America today, because it specifically points to rift in
the structure of American society so much so that to listen to rap music is in a way to acknowledge the split between two Americas: one getting rich, the other getting evicted (Wheeler, 1991, pp.193-216.) Besides this split, rap functions as a medium to disseminate the dissident voices of those who have been excluded from dominant news cable television networks. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and popular speech, she admits that there is a strong analogy between Bakhtin's theories of parody and hidden polemic and the structures of black expression. Like rap music, the medieval carnival Bakhtin describes is the creative resistance of oppressed people, an unofficial culture that always existed and had never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes (Wheeler, 1991, p.196.)

3. Conclusion
The question now is to know under which conditions this insurrectional capacity (whether through rioting, rap or other forms of suburban resistance) can be turned into an actual political process. If the consciousness and action of the suburban pariah should bring effective reactions, not just mere visible forms of political violence, some precise guidelines are needed to actualize this potential and to make it move toward the possibility of an effective political finality. To address such a scenario, it is necessary to highlight an aporia. The capacity to transform the sense conferred on the rioting class by the dominant system is resisted by this same system so much so that the fate of suburban resistance seems to endlessly dwell outside the bounds of politics itself, that is to endlessly remain politically unrecognized. Notwithstanding the objections of immanence highlighted earlier, and the consequent reservations regarding the definitions of the community-to-come and limits of an inoperative community, the main question has to address the practical conditions under which this excluded community could negate stigmatization and the reality of its own exclusion in order to carve a place for itself within the political spectrum, that is to be recognized not as a threatening and superfluous phenomenon only but as a legitimate refusal. Much will depend on how this refusal is to be appropriated (or not), but in the absence of a political representation, the articulation with other rights claims or protests against injustice could perhaps be constitutive of a possible citizenship within a democratic framework. Only then can an articulation of the architectural reading become both possible and pertinent.
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