

ENFORCING ORDER

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF URBAN POLICING

DIDIER FASSIN



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An Ethnography of Urban Policing

Didier Fassin

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*For Thomas, Baptiste and Camille
For their friends in the neighborhood of M. and their parents*

Parrhesia is the courage of the truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears.

Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*

Preface to the English Edition

Everyday Urban Policing in Times of Civil Unrest

From Watts in Los Angeles in 1965 to Tottenham and London in 2011, almost all major urban disturbances during the past half-century resulted from a violent interaction between law enforcement officers and inhabitants of disadvantaged neighborhoods, usually leading to the death of youth belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group. Although broader structural issues, such as segregation, poverty, high unemployment, experience of discrimination and injustice were involved, the immediate cause was nearly always related to abuses by the police. Each of these episodes of civil disorder was abundantly discussed in the public sphere, by journalists, politicians, sociologists, and many others. Official commissions were appointed to investigate the circumstances of the triggering incident, inscribe them in their wider social context and propose policy recommendations. Scientific programs were developed to deepen the understanding of the relationship of the police with their public. The riots were thus political events in the fullest sense of the word, that is, they created a temporal rupture delimiting a before and an after in the social consciousness.

France is no exception to these logics of civil unrest, and the dozens of incidents in the housing projects since the early 1980s followed such tragic encounters. However, France is relatively exceptional in that none of its numerous local uprisings has given birth to public inquiry or political reform, and that most of the research initiatives have been

deterred by the authorities, especially when they included direct observation of the police. In other words, they remained political events from which no lessons were drawn. Not only do we know little about the disturbances themselves but we do not seem to have much more understanding of what goes on between these episodes. And yet, it is generally assumed that the comprehension of the everyday practice of law enforcement in these neighborhoods is key to the analysis of the dramatic outbursts of violence that unexpectedly and occasionally flare, leaving most commentators stunned by their intensity. The present ethnography of urban policing is an attempt to fill this cognitive gap. Conducted in the banlieues of Paris, it started, indeed, a little before the 2005 riots, prompted by the electrocution of two adolescents attempting to escape an anticrime squad in Clichy-sous-Bois, and ended just before the 2007 rebellion of Villiers-le-Bel, succeeding the death of two youths whose motorcycle was hit by the car from a similar special unit. What happened in-between these events, and more generally what happens when no youth is killed, no car burnt, no building destroyed, no store looted – and it is reasonable to imagine that this corresponds to the habitual situation in these neighborhoods – is the subject of this book.

So, an ethnography it is. For most people, the term evokes far-away societies and probably traditional cultures – and I have learned to avoid it in the presentation of my work before non-specialist audiences, especially the police themselves, because of its exotic connotations. Some explanation must therefore be provided here. Ethnography is about entering and communicating the experience of men and women in a given context: their way of apprehending the world, of considering their place in society and their relations with others, of justifying their beliefs and actions. It is an attempt to go through the looking glass, so to speak,

and explore another universe, often initially foreign but progressively becoming more familiar. In other words, it is not about producing otherness, as one would often assume from a stereotypical image of anthropology to which anthropologists themselves are not entirely alien, but, on the contrary, it is about bringing closeness, discovering that those who seemed so different, irrational or incomprehensible resemble us more than we thought, act more coherently than we conceive, and, in any case, think and behave in a manner that can be rendered intelligible to everyone. This is as true of Claude Lévi-Strauss's Nambikwara people and Clifford Geertz's Balinese villagers as it is of law enforcement officers in Baltimore or Paris.

I just defined ethnography as being about entering and communicating the experience of others: both verbs are crucial. Genealogically, ethnography is about fieldwork, as we have known since Bronislaw Malinowski. Etymologically, it is about writing, as we have learned from James Clifford and George Marcus. On the one hand, it corresponds to immersion within a social group allowing long-term observation of their activity: I have indeed spent 15 months with the police, mostly with an anticrime squad, patrolling in housing projects. On the other hand, it implies an account of what one has seen, heard and understood: it is in this instance a description of law enforcement as much as an interpretation of its signification. In both these dimensions, ethnography is not neutral, though: it involves choices. In terms of fieldwork, I favored the study of the everyday over that of the sensational that nourishes media chronicles, the inquiry into the ordinary life of a police station over spectacular events disrupting its course, even if I was occasionally the witness of what can be called quasi-riots, which presented all the conditions for a possible explosion of violence. In terms of writing, I privileged a narrative form rather than the usual sociological analysis, the depiction of

scenes as opposed to abstract developments, preferring to insert my theoretical arguments into empirical situations, in the hope of rendering my work accessible beyond the circle of specialists. This ethnography of urban policing can thus be viewed as a tentative application of the art of storytelling to the monotony of routine.

But do we really need such ethnographies? After all, we have excellent accounts by journalists, vivid memoirs of former officers, and remarkable fictions in crime novels, detective movies and television series. Besides, in their own way, social scientists also participate, through their books, articles, and talks, in the production of public representations of police work that add to the abundant literature and filmography on the subject. So, in what sense is ethnography different? To say that ethnographers endeavor to depict reality as it is actually may be a correct self-characterization of their work, but it is not distinctive and it is deceiving. It is not distinctive because the journalist and the officer make the same claim, and so do, sometimes, the novelist and the film director. And it is deceiving because all descriptions of the social world entail the use of specific lenses that allow viewing of certain dimensions rather than others. Instead of defining the merits of ethnography in terms of realism – although I believe it is a significant part of the ethnographic endeavor – it is probably more accurate and helpful to do it in terms of the combination of presence and distance. Presence – being there – supposes a temporality that is both instantaneous (the immediate now, when a car chase or a stop and search occurs) and expanded (the long duration, which renders regularities and exceptions visible, and therefore discriminations perceptible): it is the infinite repetition of the present. With presence, comes a reciprocal acquaintance between the observer and the observed: a form of mutual trust progressively develops, which makes possible an

access to the everyday and the commonsense of those under study. Distance – stepping aside – results from simultaneous astonishment (the permanent surprise in front of a given state of affairs) and estrangement (the sentiment of not belonging to the group) as well as the search for a distinct perspective (bringing the larger picture into being): it is a distantiating from the taken-for-granted. With distance, what is happening in the field is related to the trajectory of the agents, their professional and institutional environment, the ideological and political context in which they work, and the larger historical and social configuration. The combination of presence and distance thus has the consequence that familiarity is never devoid of alienation: one comprehends the conduct of the police within the logics of the insider as well as with the perspective of the outsider.

Now, how does this combination translate into the analysis of law enforcement? Contrary to the image of relentless action generally associated with police work – including among officers themselves, always keen to emphasize the exhilarating moments they have experienced when they talk to their colleagues – boredom is what dominates most of their roaming through their precinct. Far from being this heroic activity dedicated to arresting thieves and thugs, as many imagined when they entered the job, law enforcement is generally synonymous with inaction and ennui. The rhythm of their urban expeditions resembles more that of the episodes of *The Wire*, which my interlocutors had never heard about, than that of the adventures of the Strike Team in *The Shield*, whose photographs covered the walls of their common room. As has been demonstrated in numerous studies worldwide, the time spent effectively responding to calls from the population – reactive intervention – is very limited, which obliges beat officers to practice random patrolling in search of suspects – proactive intervention. It is all the more so since in France, as in many other countries,

there has been a constant decline in crime, especially in its more serious and spectacular expressions, such as homicides or burglaries, the increase observed for certain offenses corresponding mostly to misdemeanors, including cell-phone thefts, or to incivilities recently introduced in the law, such as loitering in the lobby of an apartment building. Any description of police work should therefore start with the depiction of the long eventless days or nights spent driving through the city and its housing projects, expecting calls that rarely come and often prove to be hoaxes or errors, the sole encounters being with youth of ethnic minorities hanging around in public spaces, immigrants returning home from work or Roma heading toward their camp, whom they indiscriminately submit to frequently aggressive and humiliating stops and searches, in the hope of finding a small ball of hashish, identifying an illegal alien, discovering evidence of an improbable larceny – or simply as a way to kill time. In these mundane conditions, minor facts, such as the noise pollution caused by a motorcycle or the physical altercation between two adolescents, often become major events, generating a flurry of excitement in the crews and inducing disproportionate and inappropriate interventions, which prompt indignation among the local population and sometimes lead to sudden disturbances.

When juxtaposed with what is known of other countries, this preliminary sketch of urban policing in the French outer cities may seem relatively banal to the reader – and in many respects, it is. Studies conducted in North America and Western Europe during the past half-century have established the discrepancies between the imagined and actual contents of law enforcement, the targeting of certain groups bordering on racial harassment, and the exacerbated tensions with the inhabitants of disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, the case of France presents two crucial differences with most comparable countries: police

have a national organization, and insecurity has become a national issue. The two elements are related, although their association was in no way a logical necessity.

On the one hand, law enforcement has essentially been conceived, since the Ancien Regime, as a prerogative of the state, reinforced by the Jacobin policies of the Revolution and Joseph Fouché's authoritarian centralism under the Empire. The attempts to develop municipal police during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have largely failed, even if local initiatives have revived this project in recent decades. That policing is organized on a national basis and is a state prerogative has two important implications for law enforcement. Firstly, the police are recruited in the whole national territory and therefore generally work in places they do not know. Even more crucial to the understanding of what happens on the ground is the social origin of the recruits. Four out of five come from rural areas or small towns, often from white working-class families living in deindustrialized zones. Because their career is based on seniority, the first posting they obtain corresponds to the least desirable precincts, that is, in the outer cities, where they will be working amongst a disadvantaged population of immigrant background. The way this public is introduced to them during their training at the academy contributes to the sentiments of strangeness and hostility they will feel when discovering this new urban environment. Secondly, the police are only accountable to the state, that is, concretely, to the minister of the interior. In other words, their responsibility and commitment are not prioritized toward the population or its elected representatives, as in the United States or Britain where the authority over law enforcement is local. In France, mayors, who are liable before their constituency not only in terms of security but also in terms of relationships between the institutions and their public, are often viewed by officers and commissioners

as adversaries systematically taking the side of the inhabitants against the police. This organization of law enforcement has long been presented as guaranteeing national equality of treatment and avoiding local pork-barrel politics. But in the past three decades, far from being a neutral and distant entity, the state to which the police are accountable has become increasingly embodied through successive ambitious ministers of the interior who have used them for the promotion of their political career. The ideal of impartiality progressively vanished, as law enforcement became an instrument for conquering power.

On the other hand, indeed, insecurity issues were imposed on the national political agenda, a phenomenon one can trace back to three decades ago. The historic victory of the left in the general elections of 1981, after 23 years of conservative domination, provoked the restructuring of the French political landscape, with the rapid rise of the far right and the weakening of the traditional right. The National Front built its success principally on two issues, immigration and security, often mixing the two by presenting immigrants, or their children, as the major source of insecurity. The response of the Gaullist party, at that time the Union for a Popular Movement, later renamed the Union for the Presidential Majority, thus keeping the same acronym, was to radicalize its discourse, adopting xenophobic themes translated into immigration restrictions, and producing alarmist statements about alleged insecurity. Two men, both ministers of the interior, were pivotal in this process: Charles Pasqua in the 1990s and Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2000s, the former having been the political mentor of the latter. In hindsight, the electoral success of this strategy of rejection and fear is undeniable, since the raising of immigration and insecurity issues played a decisive role in three consecutive general elections, allowing 17 years of continuous conservative presidency. It is noteworthy that

the construction of immigration and insecurity as national priorities – the second taking precedence over the first in the past decade – occurred in a period when France was subject to objective threats, that of terrorism in particular, much less than other countries. But, in the absence of an external enemy, it remained possible to identify an enemy within to substantiate the call for security and relate it to the immigration issue. This discourse justified repressive policies. Increasing legal limitations were brought to migratory flows, technologies of border control and identity-checking developed, confinement and deportation of undocumented immigrants boomed. But it is on the front of insecurity that the government devoted most of its efforts. Crime statistics and public research fell under the sole authority of the minister of the interior to allow the massaging of data and avoid independent investigations. The police benefited from additional human and technical resources, and special units – the anticrime squads in particular – were created. The judicial system followed the trend, as the legislators voted new laws enlarging the definition of offenses and ensuring more severe sanctions, while the executive exerted a growing pressure by accusing magistrates of irresponsible leniency. These policies were not meant to be implemented everywhere toward everyone: they concerned certain territories and certain populations. Geographically, the outer cities with their housing projects, and socially, the working-class youth belonging to ethnic minorities, were their main targets. Law enforcement served as the key institution for regulating these territories and taming these populations partially abandoned by the state, the politics of which had largely contributed to the situation of segregation and stigmatization they were facing.

When one considers the two logics just analyzed – the consequences of the national organization and state accountability of the police and the instrumental use of

insecurity and immigration issues – it is not difficult to comprehend that, instead of enforcing the law, as they would describe their activity, the officers patrolling in the disadvantaged neighborhoods are actually enforcing a social order characterized by swelling economic inequality and expanding racial discrimination. But it also becomes clearer that they are not doing so on their own initiative – although the ideological profile of those posted to the special units renders many of them prone to demonstrate excessive zeal in their targeted repression – but rather as part of the mission assigned to them by the government. Here, ethnography proves irreplaceable – first, to establish the shift from law enforcement to enforcing order; second, to articulate the national politics and the local practices. Only the patient and fastidious observation of what has become the norm in the governing of these territories and of these populations can account for the concrete manifestations of this shift and this articulation in the everyday life of the outer cities.

The deployment of supposedly neutral managerial tools in the assessment of police work – and, more generally, of the activity of all public institutions – can serve as an illustration: it has been famously designated as “la politique du chiffre,” the politics of numbers. By establishing quantitative objectives that were most of the time unattainable, in terms of monthly arrests and clearance rates particularly, the government constrained the police to develop adaptive tactics focusing on two types of offense, which became what officers sometimes call “adjustment variables”: offenses in relation to drug use and illegal residence, the offenders being, in both cases, easy prey. Indeed, the targeted practice of stopping and searching youth in the housing projects or city centers, for the former, and immigrants in public spaces like train stations, for the latter, gives a high yield in terms of arrests. This

productivity has a non-negligible social cost, though, which is the banalization of racial discrimination and racial profiling, officially encouraged although illegal. It was fascinating to watch officers stopping teenagers from ethnic minorities in disadvantaged neighborhoods to frisk them in search of hashish, while ignoring upper-class white students obviously under the influence of the drug in the surroundings of their college, just as it was perplexing to see them select individuals in the crowd getting off the metro according to their skin color and physical appearance to subject them to an identity check and a body search. Certain officers expressed discontent about what they considered to be a dirty job serving political interests rather than the public good. Others found obvious satisfaction in a policy of which they approved. In fact, even when they disagreed with this quantitative evaluation and its consequences, the police did it more for practical than for moral reasons – they denounced the pressure of the result on their activity rather than the breach of legal or deontological norms. Conspicuously, in his first statement, Manuel Valls, the new minister of the interior appointed after the election of the Socialist president, François Hollande, in May 2012, announced the end of the politics of numbers, a decision applauded by police unions. But he also stated his reservations regarding the measure proposed by non-governmental organizations, activists and lawyers to regulate the practice of stop and search, namely the presentation of a receipt to each individual checked. In other words, there was no more incentive to harass youth and immigrants but nothing was envisaged to prevent it from occurring.

So far, the story seems to be narrated as a moment in French history – its repressive turn. And there is definitely a national specificity of law enforcement: British, Canadian or US police, to mention the most widely studied, each have a

distinct organization, recruitment, training, supervision, professional norms and disciplinary regulation. Yet, as a result of both the convergence worldwide of a dominant model of urban policing and the global networking of law enforcement institutions, the policies and the practices have become increasingly similar transnationally. The contemporary French police resemble more the US police of today than the French police of yesterday. Significantly, in 2011, debates and lawsuits took place about racial profiling in the practice of stop and frisk simultaneously in Paris and in New York City. Observations made in one place may therefore prove valid in another. Analyses of the discretionary power of the police, of their justification for professional secrecy or of their representation of the public as hostile, in North American sociological and political research during the 1960s and 1970s, were just as relevant for the approach to European law enforcement. Similarly, in the developments presented in this book, I believe that my discussion of discrimination and violence, and of social scientists' frequent reservations in dealing with these questions, permits posing them in terms which have a broader pertinence, to go beyond discrimination as racism and violence as brutality; that my study of the moral economy of policing and the practical arrangements of officers with ethics is of general bearing, since agents always have to try to explain their acts, especially when these differ from what their deontology implies; and that my proposition to interpret police work in relation to the historical situation and its political implications is crucial for the understanding of what law enforcement is like in whatever context.

This is the paradox of all fieldworks: the singular reveals the general; the ethnography becomes an anthropology. It is by entering the details of a specific social world in a particular moment that one can access processes and logics

that have a wider meaning. Subsequently, the question of the possible extrapolation of empirical results from a local observation to society at large, so often opposed to ethnography, is wrongly articulated, and hardly makes any sense in this formulation. The problem is not to know whether the police act identically everywhere, within a national territory or across borders, but whether the type of relation they have with a certain public, the way in which political incentives influence their practice, the effects of various systems of evaluation and sanctioning on their conducts, or the justification they provide for their deviant behaviors are generalizable. If, as I argue, they are – with certain methodological precautions, of course – then some lessons need to be drawn from my investigation in the banlieues of Paris.

The most comprehensive one goes as follows. The contemporary world is increasingly unequal, both when one compares countries among themselves and when one considers categories within each country. International disparities tend to stimulate migratory flows toward richer nations, whatever the risk incurred, while social disparities tend to marginalize those who belong to racially and ethnically stigmatized groups: both dynamics converge, sometimes over two generations, with the tragic disillusionment of immigrant parents who have sacrificed everything for their children, who they realize are now increasing the ranks of the stigmatized urban poor. In recent decades, the concentration of impoverished and discriminated populations, either in inner cities, as in the United States, or in outer cities, as in France, has generated anxieties in the general public, often fueled by conservative parties and rarely addressed by liberal ones. As inequalities deepened, the political response has been the deployment of what is often described as a punitive state essentially dedicated to the disadvantaged segregated areas, even

when they do not have higher crime rates, and the ethnic and racial minority groups, who comprise the impoverished working class: law enforcement has become tougher and more people are arrested for minor misdemeanors; legislation has been revised to impose heavier sentencing, constraining the magistrates to more severity and resulting in mass incarceration. It would probably be too simplistically functionalist to assert that repression exerted on the most vulnerable segments of society merely serves to elude the question of the growing inequalities: instead of speaking of social justice, one would talk about social order. However, it is undeniable – the French case being paradigmatic – that there are political dividends, for right-wing as well as left-wing governments, not only of repression, but also of its publicization and even spectacularization, through highly mediatized impressive police interventions to arrest a few suspects in a housing project, deport undocumented immigrants or evict Roma from an illicit camp. Thus, governments are ready to pay a huge price for these symbolic returns, delegating to the police more than the legitimate monopoly of violence held by the state, as is well known: the power to exert power in unlawful ways, to deploy illegal practices they would never consider deploying in other contexts, to carry out actions that the most elementary morality would make it inconceivable to conduct against other territories and populations – that is, in Walter Benjamin's words, the power to make the exception the rule.

Why, then, is it so crucial to have ethnographies of urban policing? The answer to this question certainly becomes clearer now. It is not simply that ethnography provides a sort of immersion in the world of law enforcement, allowing us to understand what happens when the police are in the field. It is perhaps more importantly that it produces a vision of a world that has been made either invisible or opaque to

most of us. This is what I realized through the numerous reactions I received from readers – whether journalists specialized in urban and social issues, who told me they had just become conscious of a reality of which they were unaware due to their usual reliance on official sources, or youth of the projects, who confided to me how much the book meant to them for the credibility it gave to their version of facts, which neither the media nor the magistrates ever believed. In that sense, by revealing what is generally concealed – or simply ignored – the ethnographer re-establishes citizens in their responsibility to know what is going on and take part in the public sphere, and reinstitutes the individuals and groups affected by these policies in their right to have their experience acknowledged and their voice heard.

D. F., Princeton, September 2012

Acknowledgments

In writing this book, I am repaying a double debt: firstly, to residents of housing projects, particularly the younger ones among them, whose experience of law enforcement, so little considered and so rarely heard, I seek to give an account of here; and secondly, to the police, especially the senior officers who, probably with few illusions about what might be expected from a researcher, accepted being made the object of study. I hope I have not betrayed the trust of either. I therefore wish to express my thanks to the police commissioner who welcomed me at a time when the Ministry of the Interior was closing its doors to research, and I am grateful to the officers in his district, particularly the anticrime squad, for consistently helping to make my work easier. I am also grateful to the teachers, youth workers, adolescents and youngsters who spoke to me about their experience with the police. For a long time, for reasons that I explain in the introduction, I doubted whether I would ever complete this book. If I have succeeded, I owe it in good part to my son Thomas, who convinced me of the pressing need to make public what I had seen and heard, and to my children Camille and Baptiste, who urged me to write in a way that would reach a wide audience. The French version of the book has benefited from the unfailing trust of Hugues Jallon, head of Human Sciences at Le Seuil, and the rigorous editing of the manuscript by Bruno Auerbach. For the present English version, I am particularly indebted to John Thompson for his immediate and constant support at Polity Press, to Rachel Gomme for her elegant translation, to Linda Garat for her scrupulous work of copy-editing and to Leigh Mueller for her tactful final revision of the manuscript. I owe the accurate wording of the English title to Joan Scott who, on several occasions, helped translate the untranslatable.

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The Advanced Grant I was awarded by the European Research Council made a significant contribution to the writing of this study and to its publication. I might still not have been able to undertake this task had I not had the benefit of the exceptional working conditions at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where I am now based. Paradoxically, it was in this place, so far removed in all ways from the banlieues where I conducted my investigation, that I was able not only to find the necessary concentration for thinking and composing, but also to reconstruct a mental image of the atmosphere in the neighborhoods and the presence of those who live there or police them.

Preliminary Remarks

This study was conducted in the “banlieue” of Paris. Literally, the word means “suburbs.” Yet, in France, the social structuring of urban areas is such that most banlieues are constituted of a mix of middle-class residential areas with individual houses and impoverished neighborhoods with large public housing projects. Besides, the term, when used in the plural, has generally taken a pejorative connotation as is perceptible in the generic expression “problèmes des banlieues” or, to designate its youth mostly from minority communities, “jeunes des banlieues.” I will therefore keep the French word to avoid any misunderstanding and complement it with three related topographic terms. “Cités” corresponds to public housing projects, which have come to epitomize the “urban question,” with the combination of dilapidated buildings, poor facilities, high unemployment, social segregation and racial discrimination. “Quartiers” literally signifies neighborhood, but the word, in its plural form, sometimes formulated as “quartiers en difficulté,” has increasingly been used as a euphemism for public housing projects and, more generally, disadvantaged neighborhoods. “Zones urbaines sensibles,” or “ZUS,” which can be translated as sensitive urban zones, is an administrative division of the territory identifying large housing projects confronted with the most serious social and economic situations, for which special measures are implemented as a result of the “politique de la ville,” that is, the urban social development policy.

The police have in each national context their specific organization and hierarchy. In France, patrolling is generally conducted by officers in uniform with marked vehicles, but

in the banlieues special units have been created: the dreaded “brigades anti-criminalité,” often designated by their acronym “BAC,” translated here literally as “anticrime squads,” primarily composed of plain-clothes officers driving unmarked cars. In periods of unrest, “Compagnies républicaines de sécurité,” also known as “CRS,” translated here as “riot police companies,” which are equipped with helmets and shields and move around in vans, are deployed as reinforcements from the garrison where they are usually stationed. It should be noted that law enforcement comprises two distinct institutions with similar missions: the police, a civilian corps based in large towns and cities, and the gendarmerie, a military corps present in small towns and rural areas. In the conurbation where the study was carried out, both were operating, although in distinct territories. For the police ranks, the equivalence in the US system is roughly the following: “commissaires” are commissioners – the one who is at the head of the whole district being translated here as the chief of police; “officiers” are lieutenants, captains and majors; “gardiens de la paix,” literally peacekeepers, are rank-and-file officers. Among the latter, the “brigadier” corresponds to a sergeant and the “brigadier major” to a sergeant major.

Prologue

Interpellation

Hailings hardly ever miss their man.

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State
Apparatuses," 1971

Even if we're innocent, our parents say: "How come they
caught you if you didn't do anything?"

Friend of the boys who were electrocuted at Clichy-sous-
Bois, 2005

December 31, 2006, 7 p.m. In a large conurbation in outer Paris, three smartly dressed teenagers are waiting for their bus in the rain, close to a small public housing project. They are planning to spend New Year's Eve with friends in the neighboring town. The older two are 16, and are long-time friends. The third is 13, the cousin of one of the other boys. He is visiting his uncle for the holidays. The three adolescents have been standing under the shelter for a few minutes when they see a group of five youths run past, jump into a car and speed off. At that moment a riot-police van that has been patrolling the neighborhood appears. Its occupants seem not to have noticed any of this brief flurry of activity. As they pass, they look the boys at the bus stop up and down, and continue on their leisurely patrol. A while later, a police vehicle roars up and halts with a squeal of brakes in front of the three teenagers, who are still waiting for their transportation. Three uniformed officers jump out, call out to the boys brusquely, ask for their papers, search them roughly and question them about what they are doing there. Apparently satisfied with the answers they receive,

they get back into their car to radio details back to the station.

At this point, the youngsters are still under the impression that this was no more than a routine identity check. The two cousins are Mauritanian. Their friend was born in Ecuador, and, all three living in the banlieues, they know from experience that, for them, venturing outside of their home means being frequently exposed to such stops and frisks, which all follow the same humiliating routine – hands on the door of the police car, pockets emptied of their contents on the hood, body searched, legs apart – a ritual that is almost always performed in public, in front of local residents, who will later pass comment on the scene. They have already undergone many similar checks, at different times of day and in different places, while merely waiting for a friend at the train station or walking in the street. While they resent the situation, they are not particularly worried. They have nothing to feel guilty about, and, anyway, have they not shown compliance in submitting without complaint? They are unaware at this point that the police have just called for reinforcements.

Another car, this one unmarked because it belongs to the anticrime squad (BAC, “brigade anti-criminalité”), arrives almost immediately, followed by two vans of riot police (CRS, “Compagnies républicaines de sécurité”), one of them being the one that was already cruising the neighborhood. An officer audibly expresses his relief at this massive support for the squad assigned to the area, which is deemed sensitive on this New Year's Eve, a night which has seen a number of cars set on fire over the last several years. Five officers, two in plain-clothes, now surround the teenagers. One of their riot police colleagues, armed with a Flash-Ball, an impressive non-lethal hand-held weapon, stands nearby; the others have remained in the vans. The tone has hardened. The three boys are searched again, and asked

the same questions about what they are doing at this late hour. The uniformed law enforcement agents who checked them the first time do not seem surprised that they have not attempted to flee, despite the markedly conspicuous arrival of reinforcements. The riot-police officers who passed by a few minutes earlier do not seem inclined to inform their colleagues that they saw the youngsters waiting quietly at the bus stop. Yet when they had recognized the officers who had scrutinized them in the dark, the boys had felt reassured, imagining that they would attest to their innocence. They are now disabused of this idea. "Bring them in," comes the curt command from one of the officers.

Shivering in the rain, the boys offer no resistance. Nevertheless, they are handcuffed, hands behind their backs. The officer fitting the cuffs on the youngest remarks, laughing: "I've put them on backwards." And indeed the adolescent, who does not dare complain, has his arms and body twisted into a painful position which he has to endure for the duration of the trip to the precinct. Throughout this trying ordeal, the three boys have remained silent, simply stating that they have not done anything wrong and were only waiting for their bus. Local residents have gathered around them in the dark, though they keep a careful distance. They are surprised to recognize their own children's friends being manacled like criminals. Witnessing the substantial police deployment and the unexpected recourse to physical restraint, they imagine that the affair is serious.

During the journey the youngest is separated from the others. After a moment of silence, an officer in the car carrying the older two asks: "Do you know why you're here? - No sir. - There's no point pretending, we know it's you. - But we haven't done nothing, sir." Faced with what he interprets as a refusal to cooperate, the officer switches to intimidation: "Anyway we know it's you. So here's what's