

## Doing fieldwork and crossed practices in Post-Western Sociology (3) : Inequalities, mobilization and citizenship

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### *Do riots matter? A City after riots*

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Urban rioting raises a vast range of sociological questions relating both to its objective causes and its subjective meaning or effects. We will concentrate here on a perspective less frequently adopted, that of local political management in the period after rioting. What happens after riots at a local level? Do riots matter? What are the effects of urban riots on the neighbourhood, on the city and on public policies at a municipal level? How do local actors and in particular municipal actors perceive and interpret riots? To what extent do local political responses address the claims (where explicit claims are expressed) or interests of the rioters themselves? And more specifically, what does local political management post-rioting teach us about the political formations in cities that have been affected economically by their industrial past and politically by left-wing approaches at a municipal level? Because rioting in urban areas is closely associated with the young populations in working-class neighbourhoods, this question is inextricably linked to the way in which “youths” are framed as a public problem, and the way in which young residents in these areas are represented politically at a local level, given that many of them belong to ethnically labelled groups within French society.

The analysis will be done in two phases.

- We will begin by providing an overview of studies focusing on the sociology of the post-rioting period and the way in which it was managed politically, with an emphasis on the French context but without excluding other references.
- Secondly, based on a field study conducted in Firminy<sup>1</sup>, we will put forward a hypothesis that the political management of this period at a local level is indicative of the state of

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork had two main dimensions. Firstly, it consisted of a dozen of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2010 with local actors (elected representatives, municipal technicians, heads of local structures, residents and

political relations, and specifically of a crisis in local democracy. The study led to the following observation: regardless of the causes of and reasons for the riots (the study of which is complex and not the purpose of this text), these events had a “ripple effect” on the region and on local politics, which were destabilised. The local political response to the rioting can be analysed as a dual symptom: first, the inability of the left-wing municipal authorities to listen to and represent certain segments of the young population in its working-class areas, and second, the “entrepreneurial turn” in urban policies, which focus more on attracting potential residents and users than on improving the living conditions of (some of) the residents “already there” (Harvey, 1989).

#### **The case study: Firminy**

Firminy is a mid-sized town (17,000 residents) located within the agglomeration of Saint Etienne, in France’s Loire department. The Firminy-Vert neighbourhood was designed as part of a 1954 urban planning scheme inspired by the principles of the Athens Charter. At the time, Firminy was an industrial town experiencing strong growth. Its mayor from 1953 to 1971, Eugène Claudius-Petit, called on his friend Le Corbusier, who oversaw the creation of an exceptional architectural heritage that included a housing unit, a cultural centre, a stadium and a church.

Since the 1950s, the local social and economic climate has undergone significant changes. Deindustrialisation has transformed the conditions of employment and local economic development and led to significant demographic decline: the number of *Appelous* (name given to Firminy’s residents) fell from 25,000 in 1975 to 17,000 in 2011. In the 1990s and especially the 2000s, the neighbourhood’s “Le Corbusier legacy” was the subject of official recognition of heritage status by the municipal authorities (Guillot, ed., 2008).

Politically, Firminy was firmly left-wing from the time its communist mayor Théo Vial-Massat took office in 1971. The shift to the right, when Dino Cinieri took over in 2001, proved to be no more than a hiatus which ended in 2008 as the town hall was reclaimed by the left under the authority of the communist mayor, Marc Petit (re-elected in 2014).

During the night of 7-8 July 2009, rioting broke out in Firminy. For three nights, there were violent clashes between youths and police in the Firminy-Vert neighbourhood. Around 30 vehicles were burned out; several public buildings and the premises of certain associations (municipal crèche, community centre, Restos du cœur<sup>2</sup>, etc.), as well as local businesses, were damaged. These events took place following the death of a young local resident, Mohamed Benmouna. He had been placed in police custody on Monday 6 July, and according to police was found lifeless in his cell at the end of the day after attempting to hang himself. He was transferred to hospital in a coma, where he died the following Wednesday. His family and certain local youths immediately challenged the version of the police and raised the possibility of police error – fuelled by the fact that the decision to place Mohamed Benmouna in custody had not been officially recorded.

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tenants), observations of a workshop held by the municipal authorities nine months after the riots in March 2010, focused on the future of the Firminy-Vert neighbourhood (two days of debates involving elected representatives and local technicians, State officials, professionals such as architects, urban planners and social workers, and “residents”), as well as the analysis of local institutional documents and press articles. Secondly, the fieldwork involved 20 interviews with young inhabitants focusing on the interpretations of the riots given by young residents in the neighbourhood: the results have been presented elsewhere (Sala Pala, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Les Restos du cœur is an association founded in 1985 by comedian Coluche. It provides food aid to people in difficulty.

## I. Towards a political sociology of the aftermath of riots

- It is important first of all to point out that in the (impressive) realms of sociological texts dedicated to urban riots, few studies focus on the question of how the aftermath is managed politically at a local level. Two other issues are striking: the objective causes, both structural and circumstantial, and the “reasons” identified by the participants, to whom we will avoid referring as “rioters”, given that this is a term that carries negative connotations and also suggests the existence of a clear boundary between the “rioters” and “other” residents, a boundary that is understated in most field studies. The question of the meaning of the riots, in particular, gives rise to vigorous sociological debate between, on the one hand, observers for whom riots have political or “proto-political” significance – rioting youths are expressing feelings of injustice – and, on the other, those who see them primarily as a form of deviance that is bereft of any political meaning.
- The question of the aftermath of rioting is also addressed, from three main perspectives: the positions adopted and efforts to describe and dismiss the riots and their protagonists, mainly on the part of political and media representatives (Mauger, 2006); the processes of mobilisation, collective action (by associations for example) and politicisation likely to develop in the aftermath of rioting (Dikeç, 2007); and, lastly, the effects of rioting on public policies (Piven, Cloward, 1971). In the case of this third aspect, which we are focusing on here, the approach favoured in existing research is to adopt a national perspective. In this regard, it would appear that the responses to rioting by public authorities vary from one nation to another depending on their institutions, the national ideology when it comes to citizenship, and political circumstance. According to L. Wacquant (2006), these responses point to a continuum ranging from the criminalisation of misery and of vulnerable populations to a politicisation of the problem by renegotiating social and economic rights. In other words, governments either favour repressive measures or social measures; the latter can themselves either be liberally oriented or universalistic. Comparing the cases of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, L. Wacquant argues that until the mid-1990s the phenomenon of criminalising social misery was most striking in the United States and that the politicisation of rioting was strongest in France, with the United Kingdom occupying the middle ground. In the US, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles resulted in a state of emergency being declared, a massive military presence and criminal sanctions against the rioters, whereas in France the riots that took place in the 1980s and 1990s produced a dynamic towards the emergence and institutionalisation of a form of “politics of the city”.<sup>3</sup>
- A diachronic perspective, however, points to clear changes in direction in the political responses to rioting in France, from the so-called “rodeos” in the Minguettes district of Lyon from the summer of 1981 to the current day, to the massive wave of rioting that swept through France in November 2005 (Sala Pala, 2006). There was a clear shift towards political intent to criminalise social misery and at the same time depoliticise

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<sup>3</sup> In the French context, “politics of the city” refers to public actions dedicated to the management of disadvantaged areas, and in particular the large blocks of social housing built on the outskirts of cities between the 1950s and 1970s (areas often referred to as the “banlieues” or “cités”).

the rioting. In November 2005, the dominant actors on the political and media stages above all offered depoliticised interpretations of the events, justifying a repressive response; the main features of this response were the declaration of a state of emergency and the way in which the police and judiciary handled the rioters, thereby relegating the social dimension of the political response to the background (Duprez, 2006).

- In a critical text that went on to become a key reference, F. F. Piven and R. A. Cloward (1971) analysed the massive increase in social aid in 1960s America as a response to the race riots that shook the country, thereby suggesting that behind the deceptive features of a policy of redistribution and solidarity the main function of this aid was in fact to pacify social relations and “calm the poor”. In the case of France, the areas that experienced rioting in November 2005 benefited from more State aid than other areas which were objectively in as much difficulty but had not “budged” (Lagrange, 2006, p. 121). Seen from this perspective, rioting seems to have a certain political “effectiveness”, at least when it comes to the distribution of social payments. More broadly, Piven and Cloward’s analysis raises the question as to whether the “politique de la ville” implemented in France since the 1980s is not also designed for the purposes of pacifying and controlling segments of the population – and in particular the youths in working-class areas with strong ethnic identities –, rather than for social redistribution. Although based on a discourse that emphasises the consensual themes of residents’ participation and “social mixing”, this political approach is an indication of the high levels of mistrust on the ground towards the forms of expression used by residents, particularly when critical of local authorities. It thereby contributed to the delegitimisation of the social movements and dynamic forces in the areas concerned. In this regard, the French “politique de la ville” served more to keep the peace than to meet the expectations collectively expressed by residents or to structure social redistribution (Bacqué, Mehmache, 2013).
- Ultimately, the sociological analysis of urban riots and the political responses to this phenomenon in France since the beginning of the 1980s depicts a **dual political dynamic**, one of resistance on the one hand to the political participation and representation of youths in disadvantaged areas – especially ethnic minorities –, and on the other of the depoliticisation and criminalisation of rioting, which is stigmatised as an illegitimate, apolitical and deviant form of expression that is linked to a delinquent culture or the eruption of conflicts between communities allegedly promoting their specificities and who are incapable of integrating into French society. To say it in other words, the crisis is not only social but it is also highly political (Kokoreff, Lapeyronnie, 2013).
- To what extent have local political actors, especially in areas controlled by the left, distanced themselves from the dominant interpretations and posturing at a national level? Few researchers have addressed this question. The study by M. Dikeç (2007) on Vaulx-en-Velin is an exception. The author shows that following the 1990 riots the municipal authorities in the town – a communist stronghold – prioritised the projection of a positive image and urban attractiveness, injecting massive resources into plans to transform the town centre rather than trying to improve the living conditions in the

most disadvantaged areas. The political choices made locally to favour “urban entrepreneurialism” raise questions about the changes in communism at a municipal level and its relationship with residents in working-class areas. All of these questions form the basis for the study conducted in Firminy.

## II. The local political management of riots as an indicator of a political crisis: a case study

In this section, we draw on the field study in an effort to answer three main questions. First, what are the effects of the riots, whether desired or not, direct or indirect, immediate or likely to last? Second, because these riots are not “transparent”, how do local decision-makers interpret them and establish them as a local problem? Finally, how do they try to respond to these events and to their more or less direct consequences?

### *The traces left by the riots*

First it should be said that from several points of view, riots matter! The events that took place left profound marks on the neighbourhood and the municipality as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Most apparent are the immediate and direct effects, i.e. the material damage caused. Cars, businesses and the premises of associations and institutions were damaged or destroyed. But more indirect or collateral effects can also be observed.

- The first is the **perception that social and ethnic boundaries became more pronounced** in the area. Interviewees described how a climate of fear, unease, incomprehension, “war” (or “civil war”, an indication that residents were becoming polarised), and “shock” had developed since the riots. Many of them also referred to a sharp rise in racism; indeed, this was the primary effect identified by the mayor during his interview. The view that the riots not only sparked racist remarks against North Africans<sup>5</sup> but also led to the exacerbation of ethnic labelling was frequently expressed by local decision-makers; for example, some of them pointed out that some French children whose parents or grandparents had immigrated from Algeria were now dressing “Algerian-style”. This perception of social relations increasingly based on ethnicity can also be found in the plans for a new community centre. The document outlining the plans, dated February 2010, is based on an assessment which identified a “rise in communitarianism”, difficulties in communal living, social division and a decline in social “mixing” within the neighbourhood.
- The second clear effect of the riots was the **“flight” of certain residents in the neighbourhood**, especially among tenants in its social housing units: “The primary effect of the riots was I want to get the hell out of here” (interview with the director of the public housing department (OPH), which is responsible for allocating social housing in the town). 77% of the accommodation in the neighbourhood is made up of social housing, almost all of which is managed by the OPH. This public body is facing a massive rise in transfer requests from tenants in the neighbourhood, particularly those in the

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<sup>4</sup> This is made clear not only in the formal interviews conducted in the year after the riots, but also in more recent informal exchanges.

<sup>5</sup> This was the observation made by a consultant asked to survey tenants managed by the public housing department (OPH). The survey was conducted in two phases, 15 days and again 8 months after the riots.

building known as the “Grand H”, where the young man who died was a resident and which was at the epicentre of the rioting. The statistics confirmed this tendency towards flight: whereas in 2008 the “Grand H” saw just 6 departures and 15 relocations, in 2009, the year of the riots (which broke out in July), there were 17 departures and just 3 relocations out of a total of around 100 social housing units. In 2010, around 30 of these units were empty.

- The riots had a **broader impact on the local housing market**. Although dominated by social housing, the neighbourhood also includes affordable housing and privately owned apartments. The “Grand H” is partly made up of privately owned apartments. Since the riots, owners wishing to sell their property have encountered major difficulties due to the collapse in its value. These changes on the local housing market are a source of major concern for municipal actors – and more broadly those working in accommodation and housing – with regard to the future of the neighbourhood and the accommodation and housing policies to be introduced. These concerns arose against the backdrop of a local housing market in difficulty as a result of deindustrialisation and the corollary levels of significant demographic decline.
- Lastly, the riots resulted in a perception among local decision-makers that the **image of the neighbourhood – and the town generally – had significantly deteriorated** in the eyes of “outside observers” (the media and the “public”, in particular potential residents and users). The events attracted huge media coverage, a result of the mobilisation of local media (primary among them the television station France 3 and the local daily newspaper *Le Progrès*) as well as national media: they received coverage in a news bulletin on TF1 and in an article published in *Paris-Match* which was widely quoted by local sources. The mayor deplored this media coverage: “One thing is certain: the media, the audiovisual media in particular, played a negative role as far as we are concerned” (interview). This mediatisation nonetheless made it possible to obtain State resources, and the mayor himself clearly made use of the media when interviewed during a news bulletin on TF1 on 10 July 2009: “We have a crisis situation here, unprecedented, we need exceptional resources, we need really exceptional resources”. Ultimately, however, the negative impact of this mass media coverage is above all perceived as a problem by the municipal authorities, which had committed to a strategy of economic development and attractiveness based on promoting Firminy-Vert’s Le Corbusier heritage. The town’s application for UNESCO world heritage status constituted the cornerstone of this strategy. It was postponed in 2011.

### *The political neutralisation of the riots*

How do local decision-makers interpret the riots? Although there are perceptible variations from one individual to another, this study allows us to identify a dominant version of what took place, found both in the comments made by those interviewed and in the positions they adopted publicly.

The main feature of this dominant interpretation is their **denial that the riots were of any potentially political significance**: in the eyes of local elites, these events simply should never have taken place. The mayor’s discourse (both at public events, such as the opening of the

workshop in 2010, and during his interview) is typical of this. He spoke of “events” or “incidents” rather than riots; for him, these “events” had “nothing to do” with the town and could have happened anywhere. Indeed, he insisted on the key role which he says was played by individuals from outside the town, referring to “gangs of vandals” and “people from other towns in the department with the sole aim of causing damage in Firminy. This discourse tends to overlook those neighbourhood residents who participated (in no small measure). Finally, he unequivocally adopted the official police version of Mohamed’s suicide.

The mayor’s version of the riots is broadly the same as that of the other local decision-makers we met. This discourse has **five particularly striking features**:

1. The first is their manifestation of **incomprehension** and incredulity. Most of those we met (elected representatives in particular) expressed almost complete “surprise” that such rioting should take place: they said they did not understand how riots could have broken out in Firminy.
2. The second is their **refusal to distance themselves from the official police version of the young man’s attempted suicide**, the truth of which is never challenged. The attempted suicide is presented as self-evident, and those we interviewed emphasised the strong likelihood that that is what happened (alleging that it is a well-known fact that young people in police custody sometimes try to injure themselves in order to be transferred to hospital, and their actions can go awry). This support for the police version is in stark contrast with the fact that a significant proportion of the neighbourhood’s young residents (interviewed in the other part of the study) expressed misgivings about the official version, without necessarily refuting it.
3. The third characteristic feature of the dominant version is the **depiction of the deceased young man and the rioters as being “deviant”**. Mohamed Benmouna is described as a young delinquent and repeat offender. His family is presented as a “problem family”. The rioting is described as irrational, violent and incomprehensible, and the actions that appeared most irrational are highlighted using a vocabulary that points to their savage nature and is full of reproach. For example, the “pillaging” of the Restos du cœur premises is often cited. According to several local decision-makers we interviewed, the riots were initiated by “professional agitators” and their actions had been prepared in advance (some people had brought stones up to their apartments).
4. The fourth recurring element in the dominant version of the riots is the way in which it is framed to understate and **neutralise the political nature of the riots and rioters**. There is an apparent desire to “erase” this episode, which is perceived as harmful to the town and its image, particularly in terms of the UNESCO project. This attempt to neutralise the riots was highly visible at the workshop dedicated to the future of the Firminy-Vert district.
5. Finally, in addition to this denial and neutralisation, there were certain **ambiguities in the way in which those interviewed interpreted the causes of the riots** and referred to the youths thought to have participated. They offered explanations in terms of deviance, educational problems (associated with single-parent families), and culture

(the influence of Islam was highlighted), as well as more social explanations highlighting racism and discrimination, problems accessing employment, the absence of social heterogeneity in the neighbourhood, and the role of housing policies in producing urban segregation.

### *Local policy answers to the riots: pursuing an entrepreneurial urban strategy*

The dominant interpretation of the riots described above underpinned the political responses given at a local level. As an immediate response, the damage caused was publicly condemned in the strongest way by the mayor, and the authorities expressed their intention to remedy the harm suffered, in particular by renovating the shopping centre. In the medium term, in response to the riots the municipality drew up a list of local actions in which four major objectives can be identified.

1. First, the **(implicit) priority would be given to urban attractiveness**, economic development and the town's image. The workshop held in March 2010 was particularly indicative of this priority and symptomatic of the tension between two political courses: urban renovation – prioritising demolition and reconstruction – or the heritage approach, i.e. protecting the town's architectural legacy. The discussions held clearly revealed the emergence of two positions: while the town's elected representatives defended the UNESCO application and the heritage approach as the best path towards local economic development, other local actors – in particular those involved in local State services and the OPH – warned against adopting such an approach and protecting social housing for which there was no market (due to demographic decline but also the more general fall-off in the attraction of large “old” structures, a phenomenon that had been worsened by memories of the rioting in the case of Firminy-Vert). One local decision-maker, who was strongly committed to the social housing policy and highly sceptical of adopting a strategy for economic development based primarily on attracting tourists with the town's Le Corbusier heritage, described as a “walking catastrophe” a renowned architect who favoured the heritage approach and was interviewed at length during the workshop. Studies have shown that this heritage is not cherished by residents in the town and neighbourhood, who do not attach any strong significance to it (Guillot, ed., 2008). Ultimately, by focusing primarily on the promotion of Le Corbusier's architecture, the municipal authorities showed they were more concerned about developing the attractiveness of the town for potential residents or tourists than meeting the expectations of the residents “already there”, a position that is symptomatic of the entrepreneurial turn in urban policies.
2. However, the list of local actions to be implemented after the rioting also included a **social dimension**. A few months after the events, the local community centre, which struggled to get neighbourhood youths “on board”, developed plans to put in place new social and cultural initiatives. It was boosted by securing State funding to recruit an adult interlocutor for 18-25 year olds. The local secondary school also received additional resources from the State and departmental Council to recruit a mediation officer and a vice principal. In order to encourage employment, a post financed by the community of the wider agglomeration was established as part of the local plan to encourage social



integration through employment (PLIE); the person recruited is appointed to work certain hours in several neighbourhoods, including Firminy-Vert.

3. The third objective that can be identified in the list of actions to be implemented at the municipal level relates to **security**. Faced with what the mayor describes as “extremely high demand” from residents, and elderly persons in particular, the municipal authorities installed a video surveillance system – reluctantly according to the mayor, who insisted that “the State must take responsibility”. In relation to security, the mayor was highly critical of the State’s lack of commitment, when in 2003 it got rid of the gendarmerie station in Firminy and later the auxiliary police station near the shopping centre in Firminy-Vert.
4. Finally, the list of actions proposed after the rioting included a major initiative to **“develop participatory democracy”**. In response to the rioting, the municipal authorities identified as a major objective the development of neighbourhood councils, participatory budgets and “general assessments of the young population”. They anticipated that these initiatives would improve links with residents, “youths” in particular. On this issue, the other part of our study involving members of the neighbourhood’s young population, confirmed the gulf that had built up between certain segments of this population in Firminy-Vert and the local political institutions, and not just where the participants in the riots were concerned (Sala Pala, 2011). The scale of the rift between young people and the political institutions raises questions about the effective capacity of such participatory schemes to break down the divide (Bacqué, Sintomer, 2001), against the backdrop of a representative democracy that is failing to represent these segments of France’s young population (Masclet, 2003).

## Conclusion

Do riots matter? The field study points to a twofold response to the question raised at the start of this text.

- First, we can see that riots produce very concrete and relatively long-lasting effects on the town and on social and political relations at a local level. They have an impact on real or perceived social relations in the neighbourhood affected, on the local housing market, and on the town’s image.
- Second, by presenting the riots as an anomaly, an “event” that should never have occurred, and by denying that they have any significance in political terms or as a statement of opposition, local decision-makers present an apolitical reading of the riots, thereby neutralising their potential political charge. The municipal authorities reasserted their choice of an economic development strategy based on promoting architectural heritage, with the riots seen as a potential obstacle to the deployment of this strategy.

Ultimately, local political responses to the riots are indicative of a crisis that is not only social but also political, of the inability of the political left at a local level to represent certain segments of the young population in working-class neighbourhoods. In this regard, the political emphasis placed by the town’s authorities on the development of participatory democracy appears to be

a weak remedy given the scale of the rift that is apparent not only in the rioting itself, but also – and even more importantly – in the way it was managed by local politicians.

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