

BANDS OF JUVENILES AND MOTORING RISKS

While there is an abundant literature on the sociology and anthropology of bands of juveniles, on the one hand, and on risk on the other, few studies have combined these two fields of research. The present text, based on several research projects, examines the overall question of risk, as a socially differentiated norm. The anthropological approach is certainly the most appropriate one for studying bands of juveniles from popular backgrounds. Our data was collected from two bands living in two housing projects in the Paris suburbs : the first had forty members, and the second about thirty. Semi-directive interviews were conducted, notes were taken following informal exchanges and participant observation was done during the many real-life situations encountered.

1. Norms for risk

Our society glorifies individual risk when taken by athletes and modern adventurers, and simultaneously floods the population at large with advice about security and offers of a multitude of guarantees.

While there is no absolute norm for risk, there is a limit to what each society finds acceptable at a given epoch. Risk is a social construction linked to a value - security -, so important in contemporary society. The laws regulating road safety may be viewed as establishing the official norm for risk where motoring is concerned.

A look at motoring risks uncovers a contradiction: the vehicles available are increasingly powerful, corresponding to the values of mobility and personal success, and at the same time measures are implemented and campaigns developed to reduce the risk involved in the use of these very same vehicles. The population at large tends to minimize the motoring risk: attraction for individual motor vehicles, along with the idea that "it can't happen to me" go hand in hand with relative public indifference to accidents and the tacit acceptance of large numbers of injuries and deaths, especially in the younger generations.

Furthermore, security and abiding the law are not correlated in the minds of many drivers, whose personal norm differs from the official one, and who therefore view law-breaking as legitimate.

The norm for risk depends on the image each social group has of that risk.

Young people from the ruling classes of society take their values from their environment : they prize speed, competition, material goods, and stage their risky driving, with the conviction that they deserve to be in the limelight in the public sphere. As opposed to youth from popular backgrounds in economically and socially insecure situations, they are aware of the existence of the official norm, and transgress it under the pretence that they suppose themselves capable of controlling the danger.

Young people from working class, white collar worker or middle management families, who in turn are socially integrated (as high school or college students or working in stable, qualified positions), take risks on the road to compensate for what they experience as an adventureless, frustrating day-to-day life.

The risk of incurring an accident is particularly high for the lower classes, because of the poorer quality of the vehicles

used, and a tendency to take greater risks because of a specific cultural attitude towards the body, leading people to pay less attention to themselves. The more the body is solicited to do work, the more it is galvanized, and the limits of its resistance pushed back. Tolerance of pain and the view of bodily damage as commonplace lead to risky driving, especially among young people.

Severe traffic accidents particularly affect economically and socially insecure young people from popular backgrounds. They take risks continually, and consider body damage as commonplace. The impossibility of projecting themselves into the future makes them unable to visualize the long-term consequences of a possible injury. They rely on their own ability to recover : medical advice is only followed inasmuch as it generates immediate well-being, and rejected when unpleasant.

This culturally determined body-rapport is tied to the way risk is cultivated by these bands, and its features are accentuated by the group's closure and its inaccessibility to messages on prevention.

2. Bands of juveniles

The twentieth century is characterized by the exponential development of means of transportation, both collective and individual (cars and cycles). The latter have always strongly attracted organized bands of juveniles in central urban neighborhoods.

Bands differ from institutionally organized groups, spontaneous groups that evolve out of the latter, crowds and gangs such as those found in the USA. When committing offences they are amateurish and poorly organized, and they rarely participate in formal trafficking networks. They are characterized by a youth group structure devoid of any adult intervention, by group cohesiveness in the face of the outside world, the delimitation of a territory for action - the neighborhood in which they live -, a definite series of values, and norms that differ from those of the rest of society.

The band lives in the present, a present that it stretches to fit the contours of its accession to the mythical attributes of adulthood, without going through the phases proposed by society at large. It turns inward, to weather the period of crisis that brought it into being. In this sense, it does not help its members to achieve adulthood, which remains relegated to a vague future.

It is grounded in the rule of mutual segregation : contacts with the outside world (adults, institutions, other youth groups) are based on the logic of verbal or physical struggles for power. It is a form of organization that arises in response to the absence of socialization provided for that portion of the lower class youth with the least educational and cultural capital.

In the bands we observed, most of the young people are of Maghrebine, essentially Algerian, origin. They are bound by a shared history, that took shape at the same time as their particular neighborhood. Their sub-culture is made of bits and pieces of their culture of origin and others from the culture in which their parents came to live, patched together in a specific type of acculturation. The fact that their family had migrated caused cultural blocks in the parents, who attempted to enforce a lifestyle that was not operative in their society of adoption: great freedom given to boys and strict

control of girls, respect for tradition, predominance of primary relations over secondary relations. The young people found themselves faced with a paradox : the injunction to conform to tradition, in which the group prevails over the individual, and simultaneously, to climb the social ladder, as desired by their parents, and in doing so, to opt for a strategy of individual social achievement requiring autonomy and independence.

In addition, there was the awareness of the stigma placed on them by their ethnic origins. The band was formed in reaction to and in defense against the outside world, with a reversal of sign for the stigma, making it a part of its identity. Members of the band had experienced this stigmatization, concentrated in the formula "youth-foreigner-delinquent", since childhood. The forming of bands by those groups least able to withstand the negative way their reference group is marked may be viewed as a warrior-like expression of the diffuse but not explicit demand for a place in society.

This form of organization, in bands, is only found in a small minority of young people born to immigrants, but its visibility is enormous. Many members come from problem families (marital difficulties, violence, etc), a fact that may partially account for their presence in the band. Some sibling groups were obliged to fend for themselves as soon as they became adolescents (because the parents had returned temporarily or permanently to the Maghreb, divorced, etc). The band sub-culture is pervaded with male values: power, potency, speed, prestige. To make its values visible, it advances a normative system different from that of the rest of society, which accounts for and justifies its deviant behavior. By enforcing its segregation, the band reifies the outside world. Only when it falls apart can some of its members succeed in communicating and empathizing with that world.

Juveniles in bands are hemmed in on their territory, which they reconstitute through the accentuation of their distinctive signs when they leave it. They use their vehicles, mostly cars, for short excursions elsewhere (for war expeditions or going on the town ("*virées*") in order to reassure the group in its virile values. Thefts for immediate use correspond to this objective. The mobility afforded by a car enables them to leave the scene rapidly following a physical or verbal aggression, and to avoid prolonged confrontation.

Bands take passing possession of the presumed attributes of power and wealth. To do so they steal and buy for display. This fleeting appropriation maintains the cohesion of the group and does not challenge the overall functioning of society. It also enables these adolescents to ward off the feeling of social uselessness aroused by confrontations with members of the established society.

Cars are instruments for settling scores, symbols of in-group and external power relations, and the expression of sexual potency. The fact that their parents' culture demands that women be respected makes it possible to tolerate the presence of some girls, provided they accept male supremacy. Others may be the object of aggressions when the band or a small group is on the town. Moreover, girls do not have the same symbolic investment in cars as boys, and do not take the same risks when driving.

3. Risky motoring: a norm for bands

The risks taken by young people of Maghrebine origin do not differ fundamentally from those taken by other youths of similar sociological background irrespective of ethnic origin. Their focus on cars stems from the virile value system, in which the dominant sexual role is ascribed to boys. While this is a common phenomenon in popular milieus in general, it coincides, for the young people in both of these two bands, with the respective roles of men and women in their parents' culture. Cultural origins and popular culture are synergistic here.

Risk-taking is a norm for bands in the sense that it is a means for young people to set up challenges, and a way of seeking immediate pleasure without paying attention to the possible consequences. The laws regulating road security are either not known or considered bothersome - many youths drive without a licence -, for the perception of the risk is quite reduced in comparison with other milieus. The risk entailed in stealing is viewed as minor, since prison is a part of the lifestyle, and the benefits in terms of prestige override the prejudicial effects of arrest. The only serious danger acknowledged by bands of juveniles seems to be the risk of accidents induced by the police during night-time arrests.

A serious accident does not constitute an initiation through which a youth gains status within his group or in society. To the contrary, his peers first stage an intense emotional mobilization around him, then gradually lose interest, since other events are constantly occurring, and replace the accident as a focus for the group. In addition, the aftermaths of the accident prevent the youth from living up to the virile values and activities demanded by the band. He is gradually excluded, without finding another setting in which to achieve social integration, made even more difficult by his impaired physical capacities, psychological shock and limited vocational prospects.

Neither the causes nor the circumstances of severe accidents are analysed. Since risk-taking is essential to group reassurance, and the consequences are considerably relativized, the accident in no way dissuades either the individual involved in it or his peers from taking subsequent risks.

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For further information, the reader is referred to :

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