1. INTRODUCTION

Why do we have the feeling that the concept of violence is more elusive than ever? Is not the use of the term overstretched? Violence is a multifaceted, socially constructed and highly ambivalent phenomenon. The definition of violence is elusive and recognising its essential contestedness is fruitful for research. When associated with urban, is the concept less elusive? It is doubtful since the city has become a useful metaphor to address a cocktail of fears and tensions, the origins of which escape the very representations conveyed by urban violence. As P. Milburn points out, the notion of violence acts as a synecdoche for illegal acts, especially those committed by youths, and for the lack of security. \(^2\) ‘The synecdoche effect – the figure of rhetoric by which the part is used to designate the whole – reduces a whole range of behaviours to an empirically fuzzy notion’. Here, I will use the expression urban violence, for purpose of simplification and I will focus on the social use of the term. \(^3\)

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\(^3\) The distinction between violence and crime has to do with the values societies emphasise, with processes changing according to times and with the social status those two terms have. Take the United States. In the 1960s, the country was alarmed by levels of violence tearing cities apart, after long and bloody summers. President L.B. Johnson became aware of it and appointed two commissions, one on urban and racial disorders chaired by Judge Otto Kerner and the other on the causes and prevention of violence under the chairmanship of Milton Eisenhower, the former President’s brother. Most of the commissions’ recommendations were ignored. Yet what is noteworthy was the use that was made then of the term violence. The societal debate was internal and relative to ‘Why is our society producing so much interpersonal violence?’ Then a shift occurred in the 1980s and concern was expressed about the violent crimes and the so called underclass rather than about the social production of violence. Once crime was used however, all the language that led up to it
Why is it that certain forms of violence are constantly brought in socio-political debates while others are ignored? To attempt to answer such questions, international comparisons are useful. Who gets understood, accepted, rejected, feared, criminalised vary indeed according to the countries. The expression urban violence does not exist anywhere else in Europe where the concern is more about juvenile delinquency. Urban violence is socially constructed because who the accusers are and who the accused are and what is considered as violent varies according to specific historical and socio-cultural conditions. As revealed by the conclusions of the European network I chaired on the dynamics of violence in Europe, some Western countries construct their ‘Dangerous Others’ out of asylum seekers, others out of racial minorities, others out of hooligans or out of nationalists or out of Islam. France has constructed a ‘peril group’ out of urban male youths – the subtext being poor, Muslim and of post-colonial origin.4

Based on the O. Hirschman’s trilogy (exit, voice and loyalty), my assumption is that ‘urban violence’ in France is the voice of a minority of disenfranchised youths of Muslim and post-colonial immigrant origin, unable to emancipate themselves from marginalised spaces and insert themselves in the mainstream, in part due to specific characteristics of the French Republican model of social integration. Voice is one of the few choices they have with exit to be heard. The threats this form of voice conveys are largely overblown and the excessive security policies displayed deroute more essential questions. Why do men rebel? asked Barrington Moore.5 We should ask: Why don’t they rebel more often?

The aim of this paper is first to track down the origins of the expression urban violence. Secondly, it evaluates the respective contributions of the city, of space in particular and of agency escalating in violence. Thirdly, it attempts to explain why this issue is so overblown in France.

The information has been gathered through field work I carried out in the French banlieues6 of the Parisian region and other French cities, when studying urban violence.

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4 This European Cost programme was comprised od eighteen scholars from various countries between 1999 and 2003.
6 Banlieue has become synonymous with derelict space loaded with social problems, at the outskirts of large cities. In English, it would be translated as the inner city.