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Youth's actions in the Ivorian public sphere : Youth from Street Discussion Spaces in the *'September 2002'* crisis in Côte d'Ivoire.

Abstract

Since some years, there is a widening of the Ivorian public sphere. Youth are becoming more and more active in the political sphere through street discussion spaces. Even if these spaces are considered *'unofficial'* and stand in the periphery of the authorized and more official political spheres, their interaction with political parties and political organizations has turned them into significant political actors. These alternative spaces are a means for the youth to integrate the political sphere that used to be a closed-space; a space they were excluded from by their elders until the nineties. New political figureheads like Charles Blé Goudé, Soro Kigbafori Guillaume, Damanan Pickass, to name but a few, who arose from these alternative spaces are now playing firsthand roles in the public sphere. This new generation of political actors uses different tools to get sure its message gets through. In street discussion spaces, youth are using Information technologies in all aspects of their activities: mobile phone, internet, Ipod, CD, DVD, all these devices are used in the 'political game'. Since 2002, since the debut of the ongoing militaro-political crisis, street discussion spaces have not stopped growing; this fact is an expression of youth's desire to participate in the political debate, to communicate their hopes and expectations to other components of the social body. Actually, these spaces are also 'spaces of resistance', 'arenas' where youth groups in quest for new political and cultural identities confront one another. A new way of being, a new way of know-how, have emerged from these spaces.

Key words: Political ideology, national identity, exclusion, patriotic movement.

Introduction

A day in April 1990, Abidjan residents were awoken by youth clusters booing the then Head of State, late Houpouet Boigny. They shouted: '*Houphouet, thief! Houphouet, thief!* '. The devastating domino effect reached primary schools troughout the country, where kids walking in their elders' steps brandished slates reading : '*Houphouet, thief! No class! We are hungry!*'.

A music style called *'Zouglou'* came into being that same year. It arose above other musical genres and became a strong protest music. A decade later, in 2002, in the northern part of the country, the rebels from MPCI (french acronym for patriotic movement of Côte d'Ivoire), led by Soro Kigbafori Guillaume came to the limelight. It was believed that Soro was *« too young to shoulder the responsability »* of that rebellion. Many high profile analysts of the country's politics supported that idea. They did not hide their fear that Soro was young and unexperienced to make it. But they were proven wrong as Soro went further and graded up and became the Ivorian premier in 2007. One year later, in Abidjan, in 2003, the young artist singer Douk Saga and his pals formed the *'Jet Set Band'* and created a new dance style to '*save Côte d'Ivoire'*, in their own words.

The facts mentionned show how big is the influence of youth in the animation of the public sphere in Côte d'Ivoire. This influence has not stopped growing. This paper intends to determine the practial details and methods about youth's intervention in the Ivorian political sphere. This paper which is based on interviews and observations aims at digging out youth's intervention in politics via Street Discussion Spaces -SDS[1]- which started to appear in the country in the 80s. The paper focuses on spaces that are in both camps; the rebel-held north and the state-controlled south. For what must be learned, the militaro-political conflict that broke out on September 19, 2002, split up Côte d'Ivoire[2] into two parts: the South, controlled by FDS, defense and security forces loyal to President Gbagbo, and the North held by rebel armed forces called FAFN.

The Research Problem in *'Agora'* and *'Grin'* phenomenon

This study foregrounds perceptions of national identity that people have in the North and the South of Côte d'Ivoire. It aims at understanding, more specifically, the mechanisms by which people construct citizenship. SDS are physical places where people, namely young persons, gather to exchange, discuss and comment the latest news. All these activities happen in the streets (Arnault 2004:9).

SDS are grouped into two categories. There are *'agoras'*, *'parlements'*, *'sorbonne'* and *'congrès'* on the one hand, and *'grins'* on the other hand (Théroux-bénoni.; Bahi 2006:9). The first category of SDS are located in the South of the country. They are managed by young speakers who

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[1] Any use of this acronym throughout the articles refers to 'street discussion spaces'.

[2] Côte d'Ivoire is also known in English as 'Ivory Coast'.

usually inform their audience about the latest hot news. They gather during giant 'meetings' that bring together an important crowd[3]. On the opposite, *'grins'*, are located in the northern part of the country and are run by young people. Tea and *choukouya*[4] are favorite meals that are served within these spaces.

Politicians' interaction with the mentioned SDS has resulted into the immediate politicization of these spaces. These SDS have become now valuable means to convey information and spread ideologies of political parties. From an ideological point of view, *'agoras'*, *'parlements'*, *'Sorbonne'* and *'Congrès'* are very close to FPI (Ivorian Popular Front), the former ruling party. As such, these street discussion spaces share socialist ideologies, and they are supportive of the institutions of the country imbedded in the person of the President Laurent Gbagbo (Banégas 2006:535). On the other hand, *'grins' which are* very close to RDR (the Rally of Republicans) party, advocates liberalism as defended by the leader of the party, Allassane Dramane Ouattara. Following the ideology of the political parties, it becomes more evident that these SDS have diametrically opposed perceptions about national identity.

'Sorbonne' and *'Tout Puissant Congrès d'Abobo'*, disagreed with the process of the nation-wide identification operation at the end of which Certificate of nationality are issued to the sons of immigrants who were born in Côte d'Ivoire. Meanwhile, the *'grins'* approved that operation. These opposed points of view exemplify two opposing perceptions of the national identity: an inclusive perception advocating the integration of all social categories and an exclusive one that denies any form of integration (Moya 2006, Langer 2005, Karel 2004).

Methodology

As far as method is concerned here, a particular emphasis will be laid on the theoretical approaches of dissemination of ideology, namely the theory coined by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1959, Piotte 1970) and Louis Althusser (Althusser 1970:5). Without denying the historicizing of ethnic facts (Coquery Vidrovitch, 1992, Copans, 1990, Anderson 1983), one must acknowledge with the constructivist approach, that ethnicity needs an interactive context to be fossilized, and that the (re)construction of ethnicity remains something that can be controlled especially to one's own political advantage (Akindès 1987, Bayart J-F 1996, Otayek 1999, Whitaker 2005).

The sampling of this study was conducted in the SDS, namely within SDS located in Abidjan: *'Sorbonne'*, *'Tout Puissant Congrès d'Abobo'*, *'L'Université des Temps Libres d'Abobo'*

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[3]   The 'Tout Puissant Congrès d'Abobo' (TPCA), located in Abobo district claims an audience between 3.000 and 4.000 listeners, during week days. During week end and holidays, more than 6.000 persons attend meetings there.

[4]   Local barbecue made of roasted mutton or beef.

and *'Wakouboué de Yopougon'*. It also focusses some youth groups and organisations: 'FESCI' 'FLGO' and 'GPP'.

Concerning data collection techniques, the research methodology was based on an ethnographic approach using participant observation and interview. The interviewees were informed that their points of view would be recorded on a small tape-recorder in order to transcript their saying faithfully.

Youth in the political sphere

Public sphere in Côte d'Ivoire is more and more organized and invigorated by a new category of actors: the youth; the youth from SDS. Who are these young people? Where do they intervene and why?

Youth from street discussion spaces in the Ivorian public sphere

For the Ivorian Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports, a *'young person'* is a person whose age is between 18 and 35 (INS 1998); a human being between teenage-hood and adulthood. But from a biological point of view, some scholars assert that a young person is a person below 25 (Wrzesińka 1995:65), while others say it is difficult to limit the period of youth on the mere basis of biological criterium, as political, economical, social and cultural matters are to be taken into account as well (Mbembe 1991, Comaroff 2000). As such, the definition of the term *'young'* seems to be a difficult task and to apprehend the concept of youth is also a complex issue. But, the present paper arbitraliry sets youth period between age 25 and age 40.

Street discussion spaces, tools for the spreading of political ideologies

The history of SDS in Côte d'Ivoire shows that it is only recently that they entered into politics. *'Sorbonne',* the ever first SDS used to deal with a broad spectrum of subjects. But, it is in 1999, under late General Robert Guéi that it oriented its activities toward political analysis. The war that broke out in 2002 triggered the division of SDS along the lines of political ideologies. Politicians became aware of the benefit they could gain if they sided with these spaces. They started to establish connection with them and as a consequence, SDS were turned into tools to vehicle political ideologies.

Actors from SDS have become somehow political actors in so far as they heel on political positions and make their voices heard amid the chorus of official political leaders. They enjoy a political legitimity which is like a cover that allows them to comment on any political events that occurs in the socio-political life in Côte d'Ivoire. SDS are not legally constituted politial parties, but they claim that legitimacy due to their positionning at the center of the political game and because

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of their connection with political parties. The CNRD (the National Congress for Resistance and Democracy), which is a coalition of political parties that are close to the former ruling party -FPI- exemplifies this fact. Actually, the FENOPACI -a gathering of SDS- which is not a political party is also a member of CNRD.

The dissemination of political ideologies follow three ways. Young actors who are in charge of SDS open the doors of their spaces to politicians who frequently hold meetings there. They sometimes turn to politicians for interviews. Next, the mobility of speakers from SDS, also contributes to the dissemination of political ideologies.

The co-construction of emotions (fear, compassion, overweening verbosity, praise, etc.) and speeches made by political leaders within these spaces also contribute to vehicle ideologies. Interactions with political actors paves the way for young people to turn their political capital into socio-inconomic gain as well.

At the heart of the political game: Youth between ressourcefulness and political networking

Since 1990, there is an increase in the politicisation of interpersonal relationships in Cote d'Ivoire. Mere affairs are likely to take a swift political turn. Even strikes organized by employees in the private sector or by students are considered as actions that target '*the president's seat'*. Ties with political parties weigh heavily in the management of public affairs. Unemployed young people from SDS are aware of that and behave accordingly; they exchange their political capital for some advantages and services that politicians could offer. Actually, many young people agree with the following statement:

In this country, it is only politicians who don't feel the side effects of the economic crisis. They have access to any service. If you want to make it, you have to interact with them.

Young people from SDS are fully aware of this reality. Then, they use their connections with the political sphere to ease their insertion into the socio-political maintsream. It is a *'give-and-take'* relationship between political leaders and young managers of SDS. Young people plan mobilization and organise meetings and rallies to bring youth and political leaders together, in the same arena. (they arrange transportation, they distribute campaign T-shirts, leaflets, gifts and sell gadgets). They arrange and galvanise audience in areas considered as 'politically strategic' before the arrival of speakers; political elders. Sometimes, they organize demonstrations of strength like punitive raids on renegade supporters or on political opponents. They also organise pickets or undertake some intimidation tricks).

In exchange for their cooperation and their political activism, youth from SDS are rewarded

by politicians. They are granted privileges like job opportunities or they are given money to maitain and take care of their SDS. The case of the Chairman of the FENAAPCI -an organisation gathering many SDS- speaks louder than mere words. The Chairman of the FENAAPCI was granted a finance student position at the National School of Administration (ENA). Many speakers from the SDS and other SDS were recruited as employees at the PAA (the Abidjan harbour). Others were able to secure positions in National Police School and other sectors of the public administration. The Ivorian daily *'Le Courrier d'Abidjan'* published on 17th June 2005, a paper on that matter:

> *'Pascal Affi N'Guessan, the chairman of the FPI (Ivorian Popular Front), is about to offer to the FENAAPCI (the National Association of Agoras and Parliaments of Côte d'Ivoire -An organisation gathering Street discussion spaces and directed by Idriss Ouattara) (...) a lot of materials. Our sources say the chairman of FPI's donation to FENAAPCI -gathering about fifty members scattered over the ivorian national territory- consists in audio equipment including megaphones, loudspeakers, benches, tarpaulins, etc. Speakers need to organise debates. (...) Actually, the chairman of FPI who started a tour in the streets discussion spaces in Abidjan tries to solve the problems of equipement voiced by young people from these spaces'.*

Beyond the political struggle led by young people from SDS called *'grins'* and *'Sénat'*, there is an another economic struggle. Actually, young people just integrate these spaces to capture economic ressources which are likely to help them better their social condition. One of these young people confesses:

> *With the ongoing crisis, 'grins' give hope for an integration into the ivorian economic mainstream because, there you can build a small network of contacts and with time passing by, you can be put through small job opportunites or little contracts.* [K. 15 septembre 2006]

In *'parlements'* and *'senats'* speakers get a great benefit from their public speaking skill. The role of speakers in these places is becoming professional. Speakers from *'Sorbonne'*, can earn between 15.000 Fcfa and 20.000fcf a day (between 22, 86 euros and 30,50 Euros). They aslo get very often small tips from people who invite them and give them local food made of roasted meat, hot pepper soup, local couscous accompagnied with dinks. That festive ambiance increased since the announcement of the campaign for the presidential election.

Master IT applications to reign over the space

The use of IT devices has significantly transformed the traditional functionning of the SDS. Between 1980 and 2009, the SDS adapted to the modern communication tools that appeared in Côte d'Ivoire. As far as traditional media is concerned, and when it comes to radio, SDS leaders only go

to radios which they believe are friendly, in terms of political belonging. In the SDS called *'parlements'* and *'agoras'*, opposition press and international media are considered as *'collabos*[5] of the rebellion. Actually, in these spaces, the acronym of the French international radio station, RFI, has been given another meaning: *'Radio Foutaise Internationale'* which could mean *"radio rubbish international"* into English. On the contrary, in *'Grins'* and *'Sénat'*, people praise international media such as RFI (Radio France International), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), Africa N°1 and VOA (Voice of America) which are considered credible media.

Internet is a first choice tool in the set of tools speakers from SDS use to prepare speeches. They spend long hours in internet cafes, they browse the web to stay updated on the latest news and dig out information from the fields they are interested in and download relevant information, data and other findings on flash disks .

The freedom to communicate can be a add value to power. In Côte d'Ivoire, the coup fomented on December 24, 1999 was coordinated with a mere mobile phone (Kieffer 2000:28). The insurgent soldiers used their mobile phones to inform their fellow soldiers about the guiding behavior to observe in order to turn the military uprising into a successful coup. Soro Kigbafori Guillaume also coordinated the September 2002 coup (Soro 2005:85) via a satellite telephone and even Charles Blé Goudé, the leader of COJEP, used the mobile phone to coordinate youth uprising that occurred in November 2004 (Blé 2006:110) in the country. The mobile phone is very often used to mobilize people for collective actions. It is a quick and secure means to send out mass sms or watchwords on how to carry out actions on the ground. One of the leaders of these spaces explains how message are sent via mobile phone:

> *When there is an urgent message to diffuse, General Blé Goudé gives Richard a call, when they are not together. Then, Richard rings the different leaders who in their turn send out messages and watchwords to different 'parlements' and 'agoras' in Côte d'Ivoire. Thus, at the time a single leader of SDS is informed, the other are. By the way, the mobile phone is vital for us (G.6 May 2006)*

The interviewees cannot quantify the number of messages sent so far, but they acknowledge that the use of sms is now an intergral component of the communication strategy used by leaders of SDS.

> *We usually send sms to each other. But, when a very uncommon situation occurs; when political atmosphere gets tense, messages are sent out twice. One can spend a 1000fcfa (around 1,53 Euros) airtime scratch card in less than one hour sending sms. The airtime has gone quickly and messages are sent out swiftly as well.* [K., member of the EDR called 'La Sorbonne', 6 MaY 2006].

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[5] A term coined to identify people or organisations believed to be the traitors, the collaborators of rebel forces.

Young people are seduced by sms which is more secure and discreet as it allows them to send and receive messages unobtrusively (Martin 2007:107; Journet 2007:28). With sms they communicate in a subtle way during crisis situation, without drawing people's attention. The encoded messages young people exchange show a need for discretion and security. They even coined new words and a new way of writing; a writing which aims at preserving the identity of people who are named in it and which also aims at keeping the confidentiality of some information considered as *'strategic'*. Only a handful of insiders know how to interpret and get the gist of the sms which has somehow become *'sacred'* for the outsiders as messages sent via sms are encoded in a way that does not respect french grammar.

In the 1980s, the appearance of the new IT systems (Chénau-Loquay 2003:122) on the African continent has had an influence on Ivorian youth who almost became video clubs addict [9]. In 2000, the rise of IT devices such as CD, VCD and DVD on local markets opened a door to political actors and their supporters to start video editing. As a large part of the population cannot afford to attend political rallies and follow political leaders in their tour throughout the country, young people from the SDS, namely from 'Sorbonne', burn the speeches of political leaders on CD and sell them (the price swings between 500fcfa -0,76 Euro and 1.000fcfa -1,53 Euro).

Toward a reinvention of youth culture

The SDS are similar to a mirror through which one can see the microsom of the Ivorian political society. They show out the blossoming of new forms of sociability.

The production of new success models

The SDS are means through which youth contribute to the life of the city. Youth, between ressourcefulness and violence, try to re-invent new forms of sociability which allow them to break rules and overcome obstacles that prevented them from speaking freely.

Youth use violence in the political field to shrug off the resentment caused by structural violence (unemployment, dysfunction of school, weakness of social networks, etc). Forms of popular protests such as the piracy of copyrighted works, marches, demonstrations, strikes, physical and verbal confrontations between leaders of SDS and between these leaders and armed forces (police, gendarmerie, etc) are the most visible forms of the violence young people have bee using since. Sometimes, when the dialogue is broken off between young people and their elders, the former use force against the later to made their voices heard and then episodes of violences unfold and become collective catharsis by which both sides externalize feelings that had been suppressed so far.

For many young people, violence appears as a ressource, a tool for the conquest of political

power. Emerging young political leaders such as Soro Kigbafori Guillaume, Charles Blé Goudé and Karamoko Yayoro, who appear as new success models, reinforce that idea. A large part of youth is more and more interested in political activities than joining the many football teams that train on makeshift pitches throughout Abidjan, the economic hub of the country. There are various ways to enter politics: they range from the creation of organisations to back political leaders to the enrolment in political parties, in militia groups or in rebellions. While young people from *'Sénat'* want to become like Ouattara Issiaka a.k.a 'Wattao', a famous rebel commander, young people who attend schools are more seduced by the FESCI, the largest students union in the country. They dream of the same carreer as their elders who used to be the figureheads of that union and who left high school or universities benches to occupy important political or administrative positions and who still play firsthand roles in the country's politics.

The story of FESCI [10] leaders is a very fascinating one. The very first chairman of the union is currently the president of a political party and Professor of History at Bouaké University. All the succeeding chairmen and activists of the union have founded political organisations to back political leaders or are now directly working for political leaders. In this connection, Damana Adia Pickas (FESCI's second most important leader from 1995 to 1998) who is currently the special counsellor in charge of political affairs, of Affi N'Guessan (the Chairman of FPI) and who serves at the same time as civil servant at the Ministry of home affairs declared:

> *The Côte d'Ivoire of tomorrow will be run by FESCI leaders (...) it's going to be a matter of FESCI, of the whole FESCI system, not an affair of mere individuals* [11].

The career path of all FESCI leaders directly or indirectly fascinates youth.

ICT in street discussion spaces

A growing number of youth from SDS are using CD, DVD and mobile phones and usually communicate via internet. More recently, Ipod was introduced in the practice of SDS. All these IT devices are used as vehicles to convey ideologies in the social bodies and gave birth to new codes of communication (SMS, MMS, Flash Calls); based on the breaking of the rules of classical writing.

According to Michel de Certeau (1990), the breaking of the rules of writing, as it appears, is a clue of youth's sense of creativity, in so far as, young actors imagine new services that does not appear in the initial projects of mobile phone operators. This new way of writing known as *'texto'* is very complex and exemplifies the emergence of new youth identities in a technology-dominated society.

The persistence of informal

All the mesures undertaken by legal authorities to put an end to the illegal trade of CD and DVD within the SDS, namely within *'Sorbonne',* failed. SDS offer greener pastures to small traders from the informal sectors and the cultural and pharmacy sectors to develop their business. In SDS, street-sold medecines and pirated CDs are laid out side by side on shelves. Police officers, gendarmes, priest, pastors, civil servants, unemployed people, students, teenagers, adults, etc... go there for shopping.

SDS participate somehow in the development of cybercriminality via the selling of pirated Cds. In May and June 2009, a sex scandal about a porn CD filmed and edited in Abidjan, entitled *'A secretary has a love affair with her boss'* raised a nationwide debate on the piracy and the selling of copyrighted CD within *'Sorbonne'*. *'A secretary has a love affair with her boss'* shows an Ivorian lady and her boss in love making scenes. The CD was sold at the price of 1000fcfa (1,53 Euro) or its content was simply transfered via bluetooth from a mobile phone to another for 500fcfa. The whole Ivorian society was deeply affected by that scandal. People felt compassion for the lady; her face was shown in the movie while the face of her sexual partner was hidden. The police launched a punitive raid on *'Sorbonne'* to break the sales chain of the controversial CD in vain. Till now, the CDs are still being sold. *'Sorbonne'* still is at the heart of informal and uncontrolled trade.

Municipal authorities frequently go into war against SDS leaders who illegaly occupy grounds that are public properties. The informal and illegal trade within these spaces is also a controversial issue. SDS leaders appropriate public spaces and turn them their headquarters; these spaces become private spaces; spaces worth dying for. In Plateau District in Abidjan, Clashes occurred between the leaders of *'Sorbonne'* and municipal authorities; the later try to retrieve the land from the former. In Abobo, another district in Abidjan, it is the same story; a debate over the ownership of a piece of land still oppose the *'Congresssistes'* -leaders of TPCA -another SDS- to an economic operator. There, the conflict even ended up with the destruction of construction works that were being built on the ground. The BURIDA -the Ivorian Copyright Office- started an endless war against these SDS as they have turned into markets for pirated Cds.

The SDS also appear as spaces of strong protest. The subtle or violent struggles about land ownership that arise from these spaces is just the tip of the iceberg. Actually, all these struggles exemplify difficulties linked to the planning of public urban spaces in Côte d'Ivoire. Urban spaces become scarce because of the many building construction projects carried out for the accommodation of civil servants and workers from the private sector and individuals.

Street discussion spaces: alternative means of communication

SDS, on one hand, stand as alternative means of communication between populations and authorities. On the other hand, they also appears as a means of exchange between populations themselves. Sometimes, young people call on politicians to give their opinions on issues raised within SDS. Thus, politicians often use these spaces as opinion poll to just *'listen to'* voices from the streets and answer to the many questions raised by these voices (Champagne 1990:215). Populations who attend discussion sessions in SDS stay updated with the happenings and the changes in the Ivorian political sphere. In SDS, any youngster who lives in a working-class area of Abidjan can easily interact with political authorities s/he will never have the chance to meet in other areas. SDS really paves the way for discussions between citizens even if sometimes these spaces are likely to convey rumors or fall prey to the common 'one-way thinking'. SDS offer an opportunity for many people to make their voice heard on some public interest issues.

The SDS phenomenon falls in the range of methods people use to intervene in the Ivorian polical sphere. The information provided within SDS fill the information and training gaps (Nyamnjoh 2005:218).

CONCLUSION

The SDS were founded by youth in the context of the political tension and strong socio-economic breakup of the 1980s. The appearance of SDS in the country started with the space named *'Sorbonne'*, the very first open-air space for street discussions in Abidjan. With the passing of time SDS started to interact with the political sphere. As a consequence the political drama, as it unfolds had a strong influence on them. Now, SDS are divided along political lines; as such, they fall into three different blocks: *'Agoras'* and *'Parlements'* are close to the former ruling party, FPI (The Ivorian Popular Front). *'Grins'* are close to the RDR (the Rally of Republicains) and SDS called *'Sénats'* are rebellion-leaning spaces which back the ideology of rebel forces.

SDS have become part of the communication strategies set by political parties and organisations which have some connections with them. As such, SDS contribute to the construction and the animation of the public sphere and more specifically to the animation of the political one. They help diffuse the ideologies of political parties that they back. The leaders of these spaces host meetings and public debates and give an opportunity to political authorities to interact with populations. To that extent, SDS co-construct political dicourse with political authorities, and their leaders, sometimes, move from one place to another to campaign for political authorities.

For youth, SDS are alternative means to communicate with the whole social body. Via the SDS, they use mobile phones, other IT devices and sometimes they use violence and their political positioning to ease their insertion into the labour market. SDS pave the way for new forms of participation into politics and a new vision of the world; a vision supported by IT applications. Youth consider politics as a tool of social positioning in a public space, a space where heir mobility is almost halved. For the *'en bas des en bas'* (local phrase that designates people from the lowest level of the society), SDS are spaces of resistance, they are also spaces where they can catch some opportunities to improve their life or where they can easily interact with the *'en haut des en haut'* (the elite) and force them to share their opinions about the city managment and urban policy. The life of mere citizens, the *'en bas des en bas',* are more at stake than lives of politicians and decision makers, when it comes to measuring the impact of damaging political decisions on the existence of all citizens. This may explain why the *'en bas des en bas'* are engaged in all games to survive.

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