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 going to happen. We're gonna hold you for twenty-four hours." He adds sarcastically: "Do you want to know your rights? You can ask for a lawyer or a doctor. And since you're minors, we'll even call your parents." Minutes later, the cell phone of one of the older boys rings in his pocket. He recognizes the ring tone: "It's my father calling me, sir. – So pick it up and answer him," the police officer taunts the handcuffed teenager, who can hardly move. At each bend in the road, the officer sitting between the two boys in the back of the car pretends to be thrown onto one or other, crushing them with all his weight toward the door. The vehicles arrive in spectacular fashion at the station, with flashing lights and sirens in virtually deserted streets.

Once inside, the interrogation resumes, this time individually, and more roughly. The adolescents are commanded to take their hands out of their pockets and submitted to insulting comments. An officer passes close to them as their details are being taken, and makes a derogatory remark about their skin color. His young colleague casts an embarrassed glance toward the boys and laughs: "Hey, no, they're good-looking kids." He tries to reassure them, telling them that if they have not done anything they will be free to go. The older officers, however, seem convinced of their guilt. They try to trick one of the older two, whom they have taken aside: "Your cousin's just confessed. You'd do better to admit what you've done. – It isn't possible, sir. He can't have confessed. We haven't done anything." Between two interrogations, the three boys, relieved of their wallets, watches and personal items, are led into a small room walled with plexiglass panels, known as the "jar." This is where suspects are held while waiting for a decision to be made on their case, either to release them or to keep them in custody. There are no chairs in the room,

and its occupants withstand the mocking gaze of the police, amid the fetid odor of urine from their predecessors who did not get access to the toilets in time. The enclosure, the anxiety, the presence of other more or less angry suspects, the taunts of the officers passing through the adjacent room, all contribute to a psychological tension which is supposed to encourage confessions.

After a lengthy interval, the teenagers are led into a corridor where they are placed in front of a one-way mirror. A woman – the victim of the crime they are accused of – is on the other side. She is there to identify the individuals she maintains she saw from a distance, in the dark, in the rain, running away after they committed it. Without understanding what is expected of them, the three boys turn to show themselves full-face and in profile in response to each order shouted at them by an officer. Later they learn that the witness claimed to recognize the two cousins, whom she described as "blacks dressed in dark clothing." But there is one troubling detail, which will prove decisive: the third adolescent is wearing a hooded sweatshirt with blue and white stripes, rendering it easily recognizable, whereas the woman's statement mentioned a similar garment in plain gray. In these conditions it becomes difficult to confirm the teenagers' guilt, at least assuming that they were all three together. The boy who does not conform to the description is therefore taken into another room and interrogated once again by four officers. One of them puts the deal in his hands: "Look, we know your mates messed up. The victim recognized them. So you've got two choices. Either you tell us you weren't with them, then you can go. Or else you tell us you were with them the whole time, and we throw you in the slammer. – But I was with them the whole time, sir. – In that case you're guilty, we'll put you in custody with your pals." For a quarter of an hour, the officers continue to try to persuade him to break solidarity with his friends. Although he fears the consequences of stubbornly insisting on what he knows to be the truth, the boy does not yield to pressure. He is finally taken back to join the other two in the "jar." They still do not know what they are accused of, but remain convinced that they will be placed in custody.

However, just as the victim's testimony is inconclusive, a search into the infamous "STIC" the Reported Crime Processing System (Système de Traitement des Infractions Constatées), the national crime database which holds information on all persons who have come into contact with the police, including suspects who have been exonerated and those who are simply victims, offers no evidence to support the suspicion about the three boys: they are unknown to the police. The captain therefore decides to call the parents of the two

older boys to inform them their children are being held at the police station and they should come and collect them. They are given no explanation as to the reasons for the police questioning. When the two anxious fathers arrive, they are greeted by the captain, who explains that a vehicle was damaged (the door was scratched) by a group of teenagers close to the spot where the three boys were waiting for their bus, and that their description seemed to match that of the culprits. Although he acknowledges that in winter and at this time of night, the majority of youths are clad in dark hooded sweatshirts, making this a minimally distinguishing feature, he concludes, in a threatening tone addressed toward the teenagers who are now being released, and pointing to the one dressed in the striped shirt: "They're lucky he wasn't wearing grey" – as if, rather than an error having been made on the part of his colleagues, it was just a clever trick the boys managed to play on the police. He clearly still suspects them and is only sorry not to have been able to establish their guilt. Neither he nor any of the other officers offers a word of apology for their mistake and the distress it has caused.

It is almost midnight. The adolescents have spent more than four hours with the police, under threat of being taken into custody. For them, the New Year's party is over. But, more than the disappointment of their ruined evening, they resent the injustice they have suffered and the indignity of the situation in which they found themselves: being arrested in front of friends' parents, the handcuffs, the threats, the taunts, the insults, the racist comments – all of them vexations that they realize they have endured because they live where they live and they are who they are. If they had not been on the outskirts of a public housing project, and if they had not been visibly of non-European origin, they would not have become the "usual suspects" for a banal misdemeanor and would not have had to experience these humiliations.

The scene I describe here resembles many others I observed during the course of the study of the police in the Parisian outer cities I conducted between the months of May 2005 and June 2007. Usually going out in the evening and at night, most often with the anticrime squad, I witnessed many stops and frisks of young men taken in for questioning in similar circumstances, which gave occasion for like practices. This particular episode brings together in both exemplary and banal form many of the ingredients of law enforcement interventions in working-class neighborhoods: ineffective repression of crime (the riot-police van passed the car carrying the young men fleeing the scene of the crime without the officers on board paying any attention to it, even after the event), made up for by the identification of

unlikely culprits (the arrest represents an "act" that can be included in administrative statistics for the crew that made it, and might even have translated into an incident that would have been credited to them as "solved," had it not been for the non-matching clothing); disproportionate character of the resources deployed (four vehicles with approximately 15 officers, the brandishing of a Flash-Ball which in principle is reserved for riot control or situations where the police are exposed to physical danger) given the trivial situation (three frightened teenagers, the youngest only 13 years old, who showed no intention of resisting); finally, recourse to harassment (putting on handcuffs in front of the friends' parents) and intimidation (the reiterated threat of custody).

An everyday scene of the life in the banlieues, in short, which at least ended well, with the release of the three boys without charge. It falls within the normal order of things. For the police, in fact, it was no more than an ordinary identity check and properly conducted interrogation, both justified by a reasonable suspicion of participation in a criminal act. For the adolescents it was no more than a brush with law enforcement, admittedly more traumatic than previous episodes, but which they knew was not the first and assumed would not be the last. And for me, it would have been just another observation in my field notebook, had one of the three boys not been my son.

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In a famous text on ideology, Louis Althusser proposes the distinctive concept of interpellation.[1] Taking the word in its customary sense of hailing, rather than its juridical sense of formal police questioning (since in French the same term, "interpellation," means both), he imagines the following scene. In the street, a police officer hails an individual: "Hey, you there!" The hailed individual turns round: "By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*." His gesture shows, indeed, that he has recognized that he himself is the individual hailed, either because he believes himself more or less guilty of something, or because he feels targeted for no reason. He has understood that "it was *really him* who was hailed"; in other words, he has accepted the terms of the hail which was addressed to him. This "little theoretical theatre" presents an allegorical model of what we might call the elementary structure of ideology which consists, paradoxically, in forcing individuals to submit freely to the law and hence to become subjects. Thus, freedom does not exclude subjection, but, rather, reinforces its legitimacy. Broadening this proposition, we may posit that the state, through the way it treats its citizens, "transforms individuals into subjects" who

recognize themselves in the condition imposed on them. In a democratic space, however, this is not a simple process. Interpellation is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon that Michel Foucault's analysis of power can help us to understand in more nuanced ways.[2] On the one hand, it proceeds by "subjection" (the individual submits to domination, in this case that of the police), but, on the other, it is a matter of "subjectification" (the individual constructs himself through this identification, in this example on the basis of the social position to which he is assigned). The political subject is therefore the product of this dialectical relationship of subjection and subjectification, through which the individual is assigned a place which he can either recognize as his own, or reject.

Let us return to our initial scene. Playing on the two senses of the word, the *interpellation* of the three youngsters can be grasped on two levels of reading. First, in the literal, or juridical sense, interpellation (police questioning) is the gesture in which they are stopped, frisked, arrested, taken to the police station and finally released without any further form of legal proceedings. Second, in the figurative, and therefore political, sense, interpellation (ideological hailing) is the action through which they discover that they are at the mercy of police discretion – since they understand that it is not enough to be innocent in order not to be deemed guilty – and above all through which they become aware that what is happening to them is related not to what they have done, but to what they represent. They learn who they are to the gaze of others ("project youth" who can be treated as they are treated, precisely because they have been constituted as such, in social but also in racial terms). This questioning thus represents a key moment in the experience of the three boys, different as it is from that of teenagers of their age who live in less stigmatized neighborhoods and do not bear such visible signs of their origin. On one level, of course, this experience merely confirms what they already knew – because other institutions, from primary school onwards, had already taught it to them, because their parents or elders had warned them about it, and ultimately because, in the more specific context of their relations with the police, they had already, despite their young age, been subject to identity checks and body searches on several occasions – acts they understood were not carried out at random, but related to what they represented in the eyes of the police. Nevertheless, what they went through that New Year's Eve was beyond anything they had previously experienced. The brutality of the arrest, the harshness of the language used, the lack of any justification for the use of physical restraint, the powerlessness they felt in the face of the omnipotence of law enforcement created a sort of accelerated

apprenticeship, not only in a particular social order in which they had just been assigned a place, but also in their own individual condition of subjects with no choice but to resign themselves to accepting it.

This apprenticeship is much more than a simple coming to awareness. It is "*an* experience," in the strong, "vital" sense that Dewey gives to this expression, in opposition to the everyday "flux" of experiences[3] – one of those moments that may not be important in itself, but which becomes so because of what it means to the person living through it. In short, an event that stands out from the ordinary run of life and gains meaning after the fact. And this experience is not merely an intellectual one. It is inscribed in the boys' bodies – in two distinct and complementary ways. On the one hand, they come to understand what they embody in the eyes of society: "This is what you are," they are told. On the other, they internalize this representation they are given of themselves: "Become what you are!" they are ordered. This engagement of the body – embodiment and internalization – is not entirely at a conscious level. It is experienced rather than analyzed. It emerges through affects, first and foremost the fear that certain individuals say they feel when they see the police – individuals who not only have already had dealings with them, but also know that, because of what they represent, they are particularly susceptible to finding themselves once again subjected to distressing procedures and insulting comments, and do not know how far all this might go. At a deeper level, this humiliating and unjust experience often induces a sense of shame and sometimes guilt which is all the harder to repress because it is not based on any objective reality: the individual is ashamed of the violence to which he has been subjected, and feels guilty of a sin that he has not committed.

In the interview he granted me shortly after the riots of 2005, the chief of police for the district in which I was then carrying out research expressed his amusement and surprise at the attitude of youngsters from the projects who, he said, would routinely run away when they saw a police car. "So they're running, but they don't even know why. I often have officers telling me that when they get somewhere they see kids running away. They catch them and bring them in to the station. And they find out they've done absolutely nothing. So they ask them: 'But why did you run off?' It's amazing: it must be a Pavlovian reflex." I refrained from replying that his description of such a scenario seemed considerably more benign than what I had already witnessed, but I could not hold back from suggesting that the fact that the police officers chased after the youngsters when they saw them run was perhaps a similar reflex. I am not sure he appreciated the irony of my remark, but his observation seems to me illuminating.

Rather than a reflex, I would see this as an embodied memory:[4] before we even have time to think, the body remembers. What is manifested in these frantic flights is past experience of interactions with the police, and their occasionally playful aspects should not mask the real base of irrepressible fear. In short, a sort of immune reaction which, unlike that produced by vaccination, allows the danger to which one is exposed to be recognized, but does not protect one from it.

The death of two teenagers from Clichy-sous-Bois, news of which triggered the riots of that fall, offers a tragic reminder of the irrepressible power of this memory, and what it allows the individual to anticipate.[5] What is known is that a small group of boys were returning home from a soccer game when they heard police sirens, saw youths from their neighborhood running away and caught sight of a plain-clothes police officer brandishing a Flash-Ball. Panicking, they took flight, three of them seeking refuge in an electricity substation where 15-year-old Bouna Traoré and 17-year-old Zyed Benna were electrocuted, while Muhittin Altun, also 17, suffered serious burns. Contrary to what was immediately stated by the Ministry of the Interior, the three boys had committed no crime, but, like the youngsters referred to by the chief of police in his interview with me, they had run off in fear, to escape the prospect of arrest and interrogation, which would probably have ended less happily than the case I have recounted above, since this incident took place in a town where relations between youngsters and the police were much more strained.

The phrase "Dead for no reason," which became the central slogan in demonstrations in memory of Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna, emphasizes the extremes to which teenagers may be driven, informed as they are by previous contact with law enforcement and therefore terrified of the potential consequences of police questioning, whether these consequences consist of being held in custody at the precinct or being punished by their parents. Lawyers subsequently explained that the boys fled because they did not have their identity documents with them, but as my account above indicates, even if they did, they could not have been certain they would avoid being arrested and detained, particularly in a context in which the officers were searching for teenagers suspected of breaking into a construction site. Thus, while they were not subjected to "interpellation" in the legal sense of questioning, the three youths were certainly "interpellated" in the political meaning of being hailed: they understood that the police might be after them; hearing sirens and seeing the Flash-Ball, they "recognized" themselves, ran off and found somewhere to hide. Although innocent, they behaved as if they were guilty, realizing that

if they were caught they would be treated the same way regardless. And when the minister of the interior accused them the following day of a break-in which they were already known not to have committed, he confirmed that they were right to fear that things would not go well for them if they were taken to the precinct.

Nothing like that occurred, of course, in the episode I recounted above. Readers will, moreover, have noted that, perhaps less experienced in these dangerous liaisons with law enforcement, the three teenagers did not move when the riot-police van passed the bus shelter, or when the police car halted abruptly in front of them, or even when they saw the three other vehicles arrive. Confident of being within their rights, they thought this was nothing more than an ordinary stop and search (at 16, my son had already experienced several times what his father had never been exposed to during his entire life). The three boys would no doubt be less trusting another time. This "interpellation" had decidedly begun to bear fruit, constituting them as docile subjects in the face of law enforcement. For my part, I have to confess that I had anticipated such situations. When this event transpired, I had already been engaged in researching the police for a year and a half. Enlightened by my observations, I had begun a rather special kind of civic education with my son and his friend, explaining to them – not without deep discomfort – that in contemporary France, the color of their skin made them susceptible to frequent stops and frisks, and that, if they were faced with this kind of situation, they should not react in any way, however they were treated by the police. There was nothing very original in my approach: I later learned that parents in the neighboring housing project had the same conversations with their sons. Having to teach one's children that discrimination is an everyday fact and that they should remain docile in the face of injustice – one should certainly not underestimate the seriousness of the question of what such an obligatory concession to the rule of law means in a democracy.

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My aim in presenting this personal take here is not simply to offer a "testimony." Journalists and sociologists have gathered many of these. Social workers and community mediators have recounted them. Some have been published, like the moving tribute by Alain Badiou during the riots of fall 2005.[6] Returning to the events that triggered the riots, he writes: "Of all the complaints made by the youth of this country in revolt, the omnipresence of being checked and arrested in their everyday lives, this harassment without respite, is the most constant, the most widely shared. Do we really realize

what this grievance means? The dose of humiliation and violence it implies?" In an attempt to exemplify this situation, the French philosopher chooses to recount the experience of his "sixteen-year-old, adopted son who is black." Over the previous 18 months, he had been subjected to so many checks that he had lost count; as to arrests, there had been six, the most recent of which was reported in substantial detail, the handcuffs and the threats, the insults and the harshness. Finally, when nothing could be held against the boy, he was released, and the police offered his father, who came to pick him up, an apology. "I suppose that those from the projects don't even have the right to apologies," the author observes lucidly; for the officers I had dealt with, such a prospect was indeed unimaginable, whatever mistakes they had made or cruelty they had inflicted. This, then, was an edifying tale, and publishing it represented both a revelation and an accusation. On the one hand, it testifies, from the pen of an academic who made sure to list his titles and qualifications, to what cannot be articulated by those who have no access to the media, or who, even if they had, would still seem suspect to many: people wonder, do they really have nothing to reproach themselves for, these young people who are checked or arrested by the police? On the other hand, it denounces practices deemed iniquitous and dangerous in forceful terms, comparing the police to "dogs unleashed on children of working-class people and people of foreign origin"; one may nevertheless query whether this denunciation succeeds in doing more than preaching to the converted. In effect, this testimony both bears witness and moves us, but it does not enlighten.

I propose a different approach in this book, seeking less to establish the veracity of the harassment of some young people by the police than to reflect on the truth that this situation holds for our society. I am interested less in the anger that may legitimately be aroused by an account of police questioning than in how to make such an account intelligible.

To be more specific, the truth that I am trying to grasp is the very precariousness of the actual story of these three adolescents, that is, the risk that its reality may elude us. It is in fact possible to live one's entire life in the banlieues and never encounter such situations. It is also possible to live one's entire life in the banlieues and be exposed to them daily. French society is divided, and its territory is segregated, in such a way that one may be unaware of large parts of one's environment, even while living alongside those who usually have little choice but to remain there. For a large proportion of the young people of France, violence and injustice are an everyday experience stemming from interactions with the police about which the majority

of citizens have no inkling; and if they were to find out about it, they would be led to believe that it is simply the price to be paid for maintaining public order. It is therefore from this point of view that I felt the necessity to conduct my investigation.

As to the intelligibility I seek, it implies something like a shift to the other side of the mirror: condemnation may be legitimate and necessary, but it is not enough. Thus, rather than putting the police on trial, it seemed essential to me to inquire into their activity in the outer cities. Although there are some excellent studies of the profession, the organization, the culture, and now also the history of the police in France, there are still few investigations of the modalities of their interventions in working-class neighborhoods that are based on observation of their practices. By sharing their daily routine at a police station and in an anticrime squad, I tried to grasp the logics and constraints of their actions, at the same time attempting to resituate these in the process of transformation of our societies. In this way I hope to shed some light on how and why the officers come to be what they are. Perhaps this truth and this intelligibility will, in their turn, stimulate readers not to anger but to indignation:[7] in other words, to a moral sentiment capable of generating not impotence or violence, but action.

When my son and his friends were arrested, I realized – in some ways retrospectively, for I was already well into my research by that time – that it was the search for this truth and this intelligibility that led me to undertake this work. Quite simply, I was trying to comprehend what made such incidents possible. And I understood over the following days that it was no longer possible for me not to write this book.

In 1945, presenting the fruits of 16 years of "philosophical investigations," Ludwig Wittgenstein concluded his preface with these words: "I make them public with misgivings. It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another – but, of course, it is not likely."[8] Similarly clear-sighted as to the insufficiencies in my own work, but also aware that we are once again passing through dark times, I shall nevertheless venture greater hopes for the reception of this anthropological research. If therefore, serendipitously, reading this book was to stimulate some debate among the police or the public, this would give some meaning to the long hours spent on patrol with an anticrime squad and to the labor of writing I have undertaken since then to make it accessible beyond the usual social science readership.