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## Metacrisis, not civil war: Examining France's unrest in June/July 2023

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## Introduction

The killing of Nahel Merzouk, shot point blank in the chest by a policeman during a traffic stop on June 27, 2023, and the initial falsification of the events by the police exposed by the viral video of the shooting, sparked five nights of spectacular urban violence in one of the gravest sequences of public unrest in France's recent history. Its intensity led to fear of renewed unrest tarnishing the celebration of Bastille Day on the weekend of July 14<sup>th</sup>. Against the images of extreme violence, observers and commentators have wondered whether France was, once again, on the brink of chaos and civil war. In this commentary, I show that this view is problematic and yet propelled by dark journalistic assessments and dominant right-wing political discourses. I contend that the French society is in fact in a state political theorist Albena Azmanova has described as a 'metacrisis' (Azmanova, 2020a, 2020b), a condition where a crisis enters a crisis of its own and a dangerous situation of *stasis* (a situation of social strife) ensues. While *stasis* is often part of a war narrative, invocations of civil war will yet only direct attention away from France's most salient systemic issues, namely, the country's problematic policing politics against the backdrop of structural inequalities, and a sense of abandonment experienced by large parts of the population.

## Unrest in the streets of France

In contrast to the three-week-long riots of 2005, following the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré (who hid in an electrical substation to escape the police), unrest has fast expanded in scope and radicalized in style of action. Violence in June 2023 has more systematically spread out from the marginalized and territorially segregated suburbs, the *banlieues*, to affect many city centres all over France, leading the United States and other countries to issue security alerts. Clashes between rioters and anti-riot police, marked by the massive use of fireworks directly targeting the police in seemingly unlimited barrages of lights and explosions, gradually moved to widespread looting, pillaging, and property destruction. As of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 250 attacks against police stations were reported, up to 1,000 buildings were torched, including numerous city

halls, social and public buildings, and cultural venues, 5,000 vehicles burned down, and 10,000 fires were set in public spaces.

According to videos posted on social media, rioters used vehicles, trucks, and construction engines to force entry into stores and buildings but also to transport their 'troops'. Police stations and cars were looted, and equipment was stolen. Buses and trucks were carjacked. Bystanders were assaulted. Cash dispensers were forced with explosives and circular saws. Entire crop fields were set on fire. On the second night of violence, rioters attacked one of the largest French prisons in a spectacular display of audacity and defiance. On the fifth night, they carried out raids against civil society leaders and their families. Firearms from the black market were exhibited in shows of force, directed toward surveillance cameras, and occasionally fired against police officers in Nîmes, Paris, and Vaulx-en-Velin, sparking reactions from Twitter's owner Elon Musk. In Marseille, a gun shop was looted.

In response, while educators mobilized to talk to the youths and cool down spirits (although with less efficacy than in 2005), and mothers demonstrated to urge calm, the French government raised the numbers of policemen and *gendarmes* deployed from 9,000 to 45,000, and employed armored vehicles, helicopters, and drones. In a rare precedent, it simultaneously made use of all of France's special intervention and counterterrorism units: the RAID (Research, Assistance, Intervention, Deterrence), BRI (Research and Intervention Brigade), and GIGN (elite unit of the National Gendarmerie). The RAID reportedly fired controversial 'bean bag' shotguns for the first time in metropolitan France. (Previous uses of bean bags were reported in French overseas territories in Guadeloupe and Antilles in 2021, and in Mayotte in April 2023). In June 30 in Mont-Saint-Martin, a young man fell into a coma after a bean bag ammunition hit him in the head. Between July 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, another young man died in Marseille after being hit in the chest by a rubber bullet ammunition.

Local curfews have been imposed and the government progressively instructed its forces to engage the rioters in a more offensive manner. In parallel, it 'judicialized' its response by considering limiting access to social media during riots, and by arresting and prosecuting large numbers of rioters. As of July 4, 3,486 persons had been apprehended and prosecuted according to the controversial procedure of 'immediate appearance' (*comparution immédiate*) in which defendants are immediately tried following arrest and subsequent interrogation during the 24 or 48 hours of custody (*garde à vue*). As of July 19, nearly 1,300 verdicts have been handed down, with over

95% of defendants convicted. 700 persons were sentenced to prison in a questionable exercise of justice. Under the procedure of immediate appearance, 20 minutes are on average devoted to the hearing of a case.

### **Civil war in France? Definitionally problematic and politically dangerous**

As the outcome of an internal disorder generally determines the nature of the disorder retrospectively, a detour by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is appropriate to factually examine France's June 2023 riots before reviewing claims of civil war in French media and political discourses. The problem is precisely that, although politically, visually, and imaginatively telling for the public, 'civil war' has "no legal meaning as such" and remains an umbrella term that encompasses all kinds of social and political violence. As a result, the notion's imprecision generally amplifies the perception of an internal disorder. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) generally avoids it to prefer the one of 'internal' armed conflict.

At first sight, the criteria advanced by IHL to define internal armed conflicts (see p.3 here) seem broad enough to apply to the June 2023 French riots to a certain extent. First, hostilities "must reach a minimum level of intensity", for example "when military force instead of mere police forces must be used". To that end, the spiraling of violence and the decision to deploy France's special police units seems to enter the repertoire of civil war (of note, among the RAID, BRI, and GIGN, only the GIGN is part of the military but placed under the direction of the Interior Ministry). The objective was to create a psychological and operative shock on rioters. Second, non-governmental groups must "possess organized armed forces [...] under a certain command structure and have the capacity to sustain military operations". The first section evidenced that groups of rioters displayed an undeniable sense of tactical organization and creativity. It remains unclear, however, whether social media were used to actually coordinate actions beyond encouraging copycat acts of violence and setting up rendezvous points.

Nevertheless, the ICRC is adamant that an internal armed conflict "is to be distinguished from lesser forms of collective violence such as civil unrest, riots, isolated acts of terrorism or other sporadic acts of violence". The problem is however to define these lesser forms of violence against each other. There is no definitive agreement on

how to distinguish one from the other, much less on how to name and characterize the more general phenomenon they are part of (Price, 2001, p. 33; see, however, Armitage, 2017; Cullen, 2010). Ultimately, ‘riots’, ‘revolts’, ‘unrest’, ‘disorders’, ‘factions’, etc., mean different things to the eyes of the beholders. Nevertheless, the ICRC cites as examples of internal armed conflicts “the hostilities that broke out in northern Mali in early 2012 between armed groups and the Malian armed forces, and those that have been occurring in Syria between armed groups and Syrian government forces”. Surely, as serious, violent, and volatile as they have been, the June 2023 French riots do not compare to such events and therefore do not qualify as the outbreak of a civil war, understood as a militaristic clash between two enemies with weapons of war. Governmental authorities did not resort to a widespread use of lethal force, and no civilian armed groups killed each other in the streets of France. Similarly, a complete takeover by the French authorities of civil society, despite local curfews, has not happened. A state of emergency has not been declared like in 2005. Emmanuel Macron preferred a more gradual response and “walked a fine line” between appeasement and repression. (One must note that the state of emergency has already largely been normalized in French common law since the terror attacks of 2015).

Furthermore, although intense, violence has not been continuous. It mostly erupted at night, despite examples of looting at daylight in Lyon, Marseille, Strasbourg, and other cities. In addition, the bulk of civil society, despite being concerned and affected by the events on a varying scale, has continued to function and has not been caught up in the dynamics of violence or the policing process, despite examples of citizens protecting their goods themselves, far-right anti-rioter groups policing the streets, and far-left groups trying to stop prosecution of rioters. Finally, the use of firearms against the police remained marginal considering the number of firearms in circulation in France, whether legally or illegally owned. And importantly, the rioters did not seem unified by specific political claims, which yet does not mean that their violence is completely apolitical. Overall, a significant part of rioters are youths, sometimes under legal age, soaked up into an “explosive cocktail of angst, rage, revolt, and delinquency”.

Arguing that a civil war is unfolding in France is therefore inaccurate. It is also problematic and dangerous for several reasons. First, the term, accessorized with select images of the riots, imposes a sensationalist, dark, and apocalyptic imaginary

that impairs a sober diagnosis of the current state of French society, thereby preventing the constructive trajectory of political and social transformation needed to address the underlying drivers of the crisis. Second, the line is sometimes thin between a genuine concern for France and the temptation to bash a Western country prone to moralistic positions on human rights and yet seemingly incapable of controlling its own domestic affairs. (Russian TV for example mocked the French riots as symbolic of Western decline). Third, invoking a civil war and calling for reactionary measures will just reinforce the asymmetries of power in French society, thereby annihilating any openings for transformative politics. Normalizing the idea that France faces a civil war will only stiffen France's policing politics; rioters will truly start militarizing their tactics and weapons, as they already demonstrate strong organizational and logistical skills; and civil society will further be pushed to 'choose a side' and renounce civil liberties.

### **Civil war in France: Entrenched imaginaries**

However, this is not to say that we do not walk a fine line in terms of *perception*. The June 2023 events reignited and gave further traction to dark journalistic assessments and political discourses about France's societal situation.

### ***The civil war discourse***

With the commentaries triggered by the riots, one can reasonably think that the term civil war now firmly sits at the back of everyone's mind in France and abroad, as the result of an explosive combination of: (i) the events themselves, (ii) the flurry of calls for reactionary measures and escalation in harsh rhetoric as the riots were unfolding, and (iii) the shock and ideological polarization the sequence of unrest has triggered.

Whether France stands on the brink of a civil war is a question that has been discussed with dark fascination for several years now across party lines and live news channels. Politicians in power did not eschew embracing the rhetorical codes of the far right and affirm the 'descent to savagery' of French society. Emmanuel Macron himself, reacting to several shocking and violent events occurring in France earlier in June 2023, spoke of 'decivilization' to describe the state of the country. In 2021, more than a thousand retired military personnel, including high-ranked generals, issued an open

letter warning the President he must restore order in the ‘lost territories’ of France, and that “if not, tomorrow civil war will put an end to the mounting chaos, and the deaths [...] will be counted in their thousands”.

Following the third night of unrest, far right leader Eric Zemmour warned “we are at the preambles of civil war, [...] this is an ethnic war, we see this right now, this a racial war”. He called for a “ferocious repression”. That same day, two prominent French police unions issued a bellicose statement implicitly threatening to secede and declaring: “we are at war with savage hordes of vermin and nuisances”. Meanwhile, Jean Messiha, a former close associate of far-right politician Marine Le Pen and spokesman for Eric Zemmour, launched a fundraising operation on GoFundMe in support of the police officer who fired the shot. The fundraising garnered more than €1.5 million, sparking outrage and becoming a “flashpoint in a divided country”. As violence eased during the weekend (Nahel Merzouk was shot on a Tuesday), conservative *Les Républicains* (LR) party leader Eric Ciotti pointed on Monday July 3<sup>rd</sup> to the role of mass immigration and “barbarians” in “attacking the Republic”, urging nationality revocation to be applied to rioters with dual nationality. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, French senator Bruno Retailleau (LR) contended that French immigrants taking part in riots were undergoing an “ethnic regression”.

Abroad, on June 29, the German weekly *Die Zeit* argued that France was living its ‘George Floyd moment’. That same day, the weekly Italian journal *La Repubblica* assessed the unfolding situation in France as a guerilla war. The leading Belgian daily newspaper *Le Soir* deemed that all the ingredients were reunited to make the French “pressure cooker” explode. On July 1<sup>st</sup>, Julian Reichelt, former editor in chief of the German daily newspaper *Bild*, tweeted that France was living an Islamist civil war, as a result of its failing migration policy. In Hungary, *Origo* claimed that “Islamic-leftist hordes have set fire to French cities”.

### ***Prophetic cinematographies***

In addition, many works of fiction portraying the apparent disintegration of the French society over the last years served as an interpretive lens for the riots. The resonance between the events, radical political discourses, and popular culture about civil unrest in France worked as a background that contributed to establishing in the collective imagination the diagnosis that France is drifting toward a protracted and latent form of

civil war, which episodically bursts into furies of violence and could possibly lead to a full-fledged civil confrontation.

In April, 2023, in the anticipation novel *Tsunami*, French writer Marc Dugain slipped into the skin of France's next president to depict a country about to implode. I contend the depiction is rendered even more impactful when filmed from a bottom-up perspective. In September 2022, in the Netflix's motion picture *Athena*, French director Romain Gavras portrayed an electrifying and post-apocalyptic cinematography of the uprising of a *banlieue* following the death of a youth. The scenes of violence in June 2023 sparked multiple reactions on social media that *Athena* was happening 'for real' and that the film had prophesized the June 2023 riots. In the dense networks of videos and online commentaries, the movie has definitely served as an interpretive lens to describe the events. Back in 2022, Romain Gavras declared: "*Athena* is the spark of a conflagration that has not yet arrived in the suburbs". June 2023 highlights (if need be) the blurry limit between reality and fiction in a digital age.

Before *Athena*, *Bac Nord* (2021, Studio Canal) and *Les Misérables* (2019, Amazon Original) had already pictured uprisings in French *banlieues* against the backdrop of drug trafficking, poverty, and police brutality. *Les Misérables*, especially, based on a real-life occurrence of police violence, remains to this day a critical acclaim for providing an accurate depiction of intergenerational injustice in the *banlieues*. The movie won the 2019 Jury Prize of Cannes Festival and was selected as France's official submission for International Feature Film at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards. In 1995, Mathieu Kassovitz's cult movie *La Haine*, depicting 24 hours in the lives of three young men from the *banlieues*, had already been applauded in France and abroad. Lesser known movies such as *Ma 6-T va crack-er* (1997) and *Le Cercle de la Haine* (2003) are comparable to *La Haine* for their sociological accuracy.

This critical acclaim testified that France's problems resonate with the situation of the *banlieues* in the French society. Yet the evolution of tone and cinematographic style from *La Haine* and *Les Misérables* to *Bac Nord* and *Athena* increasingly engaged the audience of the entertainment industry in a more depoliticized manner. *Bac Nord* has sparked controversy for leaning to the right wing of the political landscape due to its twisting of the real-life occurrence inspiring the movie and its dehumanized portrayal of the suburbs inhabitants. *Athena*'s violent cinematography is a technical masterpiece in single-continuous sequences filmmaking comparable to Sam Mendes' *1917*, but the core of its plot actually lies more in the tragic brotherhood relationship of the main



characters than in the *banlieues*' socio-political context. In 2008, Romain Gavras's violent musical clip *Stress* had already sparked similar controversy for depicting the gratuitous violence of a group of *banlieusards* (youths from the *banlieue*) outside of any context.

### War in the minds: *Stasis* in France?

What is striking in such discourses and imaginaries is that, although the *relation* of the 'combatants' arguably does not fall into the category of internal (armed) conflict, it is a different story when it comes to their *condition of mind*. Rioters from the *banlieues* are adamant that they are at war against the police (except for those perpetrating opportunistic vandalism and pillaging). The police unions are adamant that they are at war with the rioters. And surely, *Athena* is a war movie. Thucydides precisely identified *stasis*—the processes of strife among citizens of a polis—based on the condition of the combatants, not their relation to each other. The Athenian historian and general stated that "internal war is a state of mind and the actions and speech patterns arising from it" (Price, 2001, p.30).<sup>1</sup>

To what extent does Thucydides's concept of *stasis* illuminate the situation in France? Surely, the term has a connotation of civil war and seems to contradict the argument that unrest in France is *not* a civil war. After all, *stasis* was originally put forward by Thucydides as a model to narrate the Peloponnesian War as a fundamentally internal conflict (Price, 2001). However, war is not the only context or model in which *stasis* can develop. In addition, *stasis* does not *inevitably* lead to war, and vice versa (Price, 2001, p. 28). And the use of *stasis* in the context of France ought to be more informed by Albena Azmanova's take on physics and political theory than by Thucydides' medical epistemology.

Let me clarify. For Thucydides, *stasis* itself is a state of sickness, as he viewed both disease and war as similar processes of nature. (Thucydides analyzed the social breakdown during the epidemic in Athens in 430 as following the same course of *stasis* in relation to war; Price, 2001, p. 29). Albena Azmanova uses *stasis* in a seemingly similar medical fashion when she describes how an "intermediary state of agitation",

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<sup>1</sup> The exact translation and definition of *stasis* remains to date highly problematic; see Palmer, 2017.

similar to the one of an “organism being in a state of a low fever or persistent anxiety” (2020b, p. 604), comes to characterize what our societies continue to experience after the financial crisis of 2007-2008. But her analogy here is not with medicine, but with physics and chemistry, as she refers to the concept of a ‘metastable state’ of an entity to coin her notion of ‘metacrisis’ and depict how it is “beset by chronic inflammation”—*stasis*. Metacrisis then refers to the condition in which a crisis enters a crisis of its own, where “the radicality of the crisis is avoided, but the crisis itself is not solved” (2020b, p. 604). The added value is to switch gears and think in terms of *energy*. She thus transposes the concept of a ‘metastable state’ into the idea of an ‘energy trap’, “in which the entity does not have sufficient energy to transition into another state”—the entity in question being our societies.

Adopting Azmanova’s lens of metacrisis illuminates our understanding of the June 2023 riots by challenging our conception of them in two ways. First, the riots represent more than a brief moment of extreme uncertainty for France, insofar as they tell us something about France’s underlying state of agitation that is less a disease to diagnose than a structural crisis to reflect on. Second, the notion of metacrisis moves us away from the narrow Thucydidean perspective of a confrontation between two ‘factions’ of the society. Instead, we are bound to interrogate what led to this process of ‘factionalism’ in the first place (factionalism has been a common translation of *stasis* in the literature).

### **France’s Metacrisis in a Multi-Crisis Era**

Metacrisis is of course not specific to France in Albena Azmanova’s thought. For her, it is a structural condition of contemporary capitalist democracies. But in France, the state of agitation Azmanova describes stumbles upon a series of crises that are, this time, specific to France. Put simply, what is specific in the context of the French riots is that the riots themselves are already a multidimensional crisis, crystalizing in the *banlieues* and propelling looping effects on the French society. In this sense, the *banlieues* are part of France’s metacrisis but the crisis *in* the *banlieues* was already an unsolved multi-crisis. While the exact clarification of the relationship between *multicrisis* and *metacrisis* stands outside of this commentary’s scope, a few points can be made to highlight the historical intricacies and specificities of France’s metacrisis.

### ***France's missed postcolonial moment***

If we subscribe to the view that the June 2023 riots were fueled by an 'antipolice ecosystem' in the *banlieues*, it means that the riots's political significance pertains to the rejection of the 'security dome' imposed on the postcolonial youth in the *banlieues*. We then need to get back to the historical unfolding of this imposition to begin with.

France's strategy of de-industrialization since the mid-1970s has profoundly affected the country's structural capacity to provide good living standards and generational renewal for its subaltern populations: the poor and immigrants, who have traditionally served as cheap industrial labor. The *banlieues* were not initially as racially and territorially segregated as today, but the progressive evaporation of France's industrial tissue diminished exit opportunities for the subaltern populations. Their future increasingly turned inward in these large building ensembles rather than outward, and the remaining inhabitants of the *banlieues* became increasingly immigrants or of immigrant descent. The aging infrastructures after initial construction in the 1950s-1960s made life more difficult and territorially segregated from the rest of the country despite renovation programs.

Importantly, the political administration and governance of these territories increasingly relied on the French police to compensate for the lack of economic opportunities, the sense of social downgrade, and the nascent social contestation. In a context already marked by the police's accountability turned to the government rather than to the citizens (Zauberman & Lévy, 2003), this led the French police to *de facto* re-establish its colonial legacy over subaltern populations (Blanchard, 2021; Kokoreff, 2020) *within* metropolitan France, rather than emancipating from it. Such structural forces would then further politicize both sides, entrapping them in a Thucydidean *stasis* and a confrontational dialectics that culminated first in 2005, and then in 2023, this time encompassing larger parts of subaltern France outside the perimeters of the *banlieues*—the peripheral France (*la France périphérique*). As the deteriorating situation in the *banlieues* mobilized more and more security resources and led to ever increased political radicalization, it became increasingly difficult to escape this entrapment to actually soberly portray the 'reality' of the *banlieues*, if not the middle classes overall (the 'France from below', *la France d'en bas*<sup>2</sup>), in order to identify paths of transformation for these territories. The unrest of June 2023 only reveals and

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<sup>2</sup> See Masclet et al., 2019.

exacerbates this long-lasting catastrophic social divide between the subaltern and marginalized *banlieues* alongside other parts of France's social tissue, on the one hand, and a dominant policing establishment, which is criticized for its lack of parliamentary control, its rejection of de-escalation techniques, its martial ideology, and its brutal policing practices during protests, on the other hand.

### ***France's problematic policing politics***

French policing and crowd control is one of the harshest of Europe mostly due to the import into mainstream policing of practices (such as tear gas,<sup>3</sup> kettling, and less-lethal projectiles, especially rubber bullets, and charges) from (i) the context of urban violence in the *banlieues* and (ii) the resistance to globalization expressed in transnational anti-globalization movements and protests.<sup>4</sup> The government resists reconsidering its policing practices and standards despite the sheer number of casualties since the Yellow Vests movement (with the massive use of LBD 40 rubber bullet launchers and GLI-F4 grenades and improper firings of Cougar grenade launchers), or the rise in fatal shootings like the one of Nahel since the police won authority to shoot at drivers in 2017.

Similarly, the effects of militaristic tactics and weaponry in weakening the relationship between the population and the government are ignored, despite being thoroughly examined by French scholars.<sup>5</sup> French authorities cannot address the anger and resentment of marginalized and territorially segregated communities only in the name of law and order and through a security approach, which is not to say that nothing has been done for the *banlieues*. Academic research on the needed social reforms is in abundance, which brings into sharper light the ruling elite's reluctance to undertake a critical analysis of what has been done so far.

In a series of articles published in the immediate aftermath of the riots, French leading mainstream newspaper *Le Monde* examined with scholars the colonial history of French policing politics, the damaging influence of bad policing practices on the

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<sup>3</sup> On tear gas, see Feigenbaum, 2018; Mankoo & Rappert, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> On (i) and (ii), see Fillieule & Jobard, 2020, esp. Chapters 2 & 6. Also, the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in Seattle would become a defining moment in how law enforcement manages mass demonstrations by generalizing tear gas and mass arrests in particular.

<sup>5</sup> On 'less-lethal' weapons and police militarization in France, see especially Douillard-Lefèvre, 2021; Rocher, 2020. For a broader view on the role of the police in the French society, see Roché, 2016, 2022; Motta, 2022.

foundations of the French Republic, the absence of political outcomes for the suburbs, and the reasons for inaction, 40 years after the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism. The newspaper also gave a voice to teachers in suburbs and how they analyze the riots. But the systematic resistance of the country's decisional elites to examine France's 'colonial aphasia' (Stoler, 2016) contributes to, if not generates, the condition of unresolved societal malaise, especially in the *banlieues*.

Yet, in a telling move, the French government outright dismissed the UN invitation on June 30 to address racism and discrimination in law enforcement: "Any accusation of systemic racism or discrimination by the police in France is totally groundless", the French Foreign Ministry declared. (Nahel Merzouk was reportedly of Algerian and Moroccan descent). In 2020, amidst the George Floyd global protests and the death in France of Cédric Chouviat, a Frenchman of North African origin who died of asphyxiation after police officers pinned him down to the ground and fractured his larynx, France's Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin declared: "When I hear the term 'police violence', personally I choke". "There is no police violence," Mr. Darmanin recently told the French radio station RTL. And, following the shooting of Nahel, Gérald Darmanin simply denied that fatal shootings at fleeing motorists increased since the 2017 law's passage.

Similarly, since Emmanuel Macron took office in 2017, he denied the notion of police brutality despite thousands of documented reports online. After remaining mostly silent over the riots, Emmanuel Macron called on July 24 for the "return to authority 'at every level' [in the French society]". In parallel, on July 23, in a dangerous affront to the separation of powers, France's national police chief, Frédéric Veaux, publicly opposed the remanding in custody of a French policeman charged with three other police officers for the beating of a man, Hedi, R., until left for dead in the city of Marseille. In an astonishing statement, he declared: "In general, I believe that ahead of a possible trial, a police officer should not be in prison, even if he may have committed serious faults or errors in the course of his work". Laurent Nuñez, Paris police chief, publicly endorsed Veaux's position. Nuñez previously denied issues of brutality and racism in the French police. More broadly, Emmanuel Macron's political entourage is systematically denying any problem in France's policing politics while police officers see themselves under siege, representing France's 'last line of defense'.

### ***Beyond race and policing***

But the point also goes beyond race and policing. The June 2023 spectacular eruptions of violence happened against the backdrop of intense unrest since the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) revolt that erupted in 2018, the large-scale and violent protests over the March 2023 pension reform, and violent clashes over water management in Western France. This timing further indicates that what should be examined is not only the *who*, but the contours of the *what* that the French society overall experiences as a chronic ‘inflammation’; and how this *what* impedes the country’s efforts to retrieve a sense of normalcy, even when the initial experience of the crisis in question dissipates.

The Yellow Vests was principally a movement for economic justice against a planned increase in fuel prices.<sup>6</sup> It quickly became a plea for decent politics, social justice, and for revising the existing social contract in France (Devellennes, 2021). Similarly, the 2023 French pension reform unrest was primarily directed toward questions of inequalities and gaps between generations before turning into a crisis of itself, as the reform was forced into the legislative process without a vote at the National Assembly. Finally, the violent clashes over the water reservoirs pertain to the equitable distribution of a scarce natural resource amidst fears about public-private monopolization. In that sense, they interrogate water management (Cuvelier, 2023), all the more in the context of climate change.

As the violence seemed to briefly expand to Brussels and Lausanne and prevented Emmanuel Macron’s planned official visit to Germany (Emmanuel Macron already had to postpone King Charles III’s first official trip to France in March because of protests against the government’s pension reform), European authorities would do well to examine how such riots are the product of structural inequalities and precarity powered by the political economy these elites have been putting in place for the past three decades across the left-right divide (Azmanova, 2020a). Similarly, they would do well to urgently examine France’s policing politics in relation to the rise of the far right in the country and across Europe.

If anything, deepening and converting existing knowledge into transformative politics to “fight against the sense of abandonment experienced by the poorest” is the real battle France (and other countries in Europe) must fight. If we recognize this sense of abandonment and precarity is the common denominator between all of these crises,

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<sup>6</sup> The original list of demands of the Yellow Vests included predominantly cost-of-living concerns.

forging a renewed common sense of humanity by rethinking the actual Republican model becomes thinkable. Otherwise, these crises only appear as isolated.

### ***The Missed Opportunity of July 14<sup>th</sup>***

July 14<sup>th</sup> could have been an opportunity in this direction but was a missed rendezvous instead. It came to further exemplify that, although the radicality of the riots had calmed, the crisis that fueled them remained unsolved. First, the fact that the French government has pre-emptively redeployed the exact same security apparatus<sup>7</sup> for the festivities of the National Day on July 13 and 14 is indicative of the pervasive animosities and disunity blocking the normal flow of democratic politics. Certain French towns affected by the riots made the decision to cancel all events. This is not to deny the rationale behind such decisions but to highlight the state of tension in France, and the fact that, once more, the perception and narrative of crisis became a new 'normal'.

Such unprecedented security measures for July 14, 2023 actually put France under a security lockdown, in a cognitive dissonance with the traditional imaginary of Bastille Day. On this occasion, July 14<sup>th</sup> and transformative politics work in hand in hand in the French collective imagination to celebrate the seizure of the Bastille fortress in Paris (symbol of royal power) by thousands of Parisians on 14 July 1789 as the victory of the people over the 'old regime' (*l'Ancien Régime*, the French monarchy from around the 16th Century). The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, proclaimed in August 1789 was then a revolutionary statement about how radically different the organization of society would be, and a symbol of the 'grandeur' of France, as the Declaration was to be considered one of the great turning-points in world history.<sup>8</sup> In sharp contrast, the security apparatus surrounding this particular July 14, 2023, combined with the traditional military parade, consecrated the dominance of state power over the French society in a silent denial of problems raised by the riots only three weeks earlier.

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<sup>7</sup> Including 130,000 members of law enforcement across the country on Thursday and Friday (45,000 each evening), the deployment of special police units, armored vehicles, drones, and helicopters.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this legacy can be historiographically discussed, as in the years after 1789 people could not agree on the practical application of the Declaration's principles, forcing governments to take measures to preserve the Revolution itself during the 'Terror' of 1793–94. When Napoleon Bonaparte then seized power in 1799, he established an imperialistic political system that historian Martyn Lyons characterized as 'dictatorship by plebiscite' (Lyons, 1994).

Emmanuel Macron, in particular, refused to heal the nation by announcing on July 12 that he would not make the traditional presidential speech of July 14. This impression of silence on the events was only reinforced by the controversial invitation of India's Prime Minister Modi to the July 14's festivities, who supervised a major crackdown on India's civil society. Having promised "one hundred days of appeasement" following the forced adoption of the pension reform in March, Emmanuel Macron is now entrapped in an untenable promise. Worse, his silence means that the 2023 riots are increasingly perceived as apolitical and nihilistic, in the sense that they represent an anti-George Floyd moment: not only did they lead to no political and societal change, but there is actually little evidence that the events are even picked up as a grid for understanding France's political problems by the political establishment.

### **Conclusion. France divided: Resisting the War of the Worlds**

Sadly, the sequence of events will further reinforce the vision that France is at war with itself, wiping out the progress made between the youths and the police and reinforcing their distrust vis-à-vis the media. In addition, although the conflict sparked energetic commentaries, a general sense of apathy remains, all the more since convergence among social struggles (*convergence des luttes*) is not happening. The riots have not revived the *Gilets Jaunes* movement. And like youths in the *banlieues*, French labor union members (*syndicats*) and journalists have been targeted during the 2023 pension reform protests (especially by the Motorized Brigades for the Repression of Violent Action, BRAV-M, known for its long record of heavy-handed methods and brutality) leading the Council of Europe and Amnesty International to slam France's excessive use of force, yet with no effects. (Of note, Florian M., the police officer who killed Nahel, is a former member of the BRAV-M. He is also a former soldier deployed in Afghanistan and was recruited in the French police at a time the institution was looking for recruits with military experience following the French withdrawal from Afghanistan).

While the perception and narrative of crisis become a new normal, societal energies and political will for exiting the crisis (other than through hardening policing and drifting toward state authoritarianism) are lacking. In parallel, the right side of the French



political landscape increasingly moves to the far right. The far right hijacks the socio-political analysis by framing a clash between rural France and the *banlieues*, whereas these two worlds actually face similar problems and challenges in terms of territorial inequalities. A debate about police reform is not happening and Emmanuel Macron and the *banlieues* will remain a series of missed opportunities. The Fifth Republic is increasingly questioned for running out of democratic gas, yet without perspectives for radical politics (Giddens, 1994).

The June 2023 unrest comes as an additional proof of the chronic ‘exhaustion of utopian energies’ (Habermas, 1991; in Azmanova, 2020b) leading to unsolved inequalities and fragilities, perpetual crisis management, and political tetany when it comes to enhancing democratic control over policing doctrines and practices. Overall, although unrest in France is not part of a civil war, a dangerous metacrisis is yet slowly but surely eroding the country.

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