



Viewpoint

Why have the French police become the most violent in western Europe?

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Do the police and government not have the required knowledge and experience for the violent repression they are enacting? Are they clumsy? There is neither an authoritarian drift, nor one towards a police-military state, but rather a dominant logic which excludes any negotiation. 'Democratic' fascism and what is called democracy always coexist, with the only likely outcome of provoking revolts which become increasingly fierce.

After the G8 in Genoa, it was Italian police forces that were considered the most violent in western Europe. However, it must be recognised that, since then, more or less all police forces have adopted more violent modes, techniques and means of intervention.²

The drift towards violent practices by the French police began with Sarkozy. This is obvious from the various contributions in a book edited by Laurent Mucchielli, *La frénésie sécuritaire*, in particular those contributions by Christian Mouhanna, Serge Slama and Mathieu Rigouste.³ Rigouste is also the author of *La domination policière, une violence industrielle*, in which he shows the colonial genealogy of the BAC [*brigade anti-criminalité*, anti-crime brigades] units.⁴

However, it was mainly under [former interior and prime minister Manuel] Valls and then the [Gérard] Collomb- [Christophe] Castaner- [Emmanuel] Macron trio that the muscular drift of the 21st century French police developed. In particular, the first flagrant episode in this violent

¹ Pourquoi la police française est devenue la plus violente d'Europe occidentale, *Mediapart*, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/salvatore-palidda/blog/040519/pourquoi-la-police-francaise-est-devenue-la-plus-violente-d-europe-occidentale>

² Salvatore Palidda, 'Hollande, Valls et la dérive néo-libérale de la gestion de l'ordre en Europe', *Mediapart*, 16 May 2016, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/salvatore-palidda/blog/160516/hollande-valls-et-la-derive-neo-liberale-de-la-gestion-de-l-ordre-en-europe>

³ Editor's note: Laurent Mucchielli (dir.), *La frénésie sécuritaire. Retour à l'ordre et nouveau contrôle social*, La Découverte, Paris, 2018. The chapters referred to in the article are "Police: de la proximité au maintien de l'ordre" by Christian Mouhanna and especially, on the BAC, "La guerre à l'intérieur: la militarisation du contrôle dans les quartiers populaires", by Mathieu Rigouste.

⁴ Editor's note: for an English-speaking audience, 'Enforcing order: an ethnography of urban policing' by Didier Fassin provides a critical, first-hand examination of the BAC.

crescendo appears to have been on 1 May 2016. I was there and I saw, around Ledru Rollin [metro station], how the police violently penetrated the demonstration to divide the march with grilles that were more than four metres high, using sting-ball grenades, teargas and truncheon blows. It was an action that for a long time would have been unimaginable during a May Day demonstration. This event became even more shocking when, on 1 May 2019, there was a direct attack against the front line of the CGT [the *Confédération Général du Travail* trade union] march.⁵

After the first actions by the *gilets jaunes*, there was also an escalation of police belligerency and misuse of these new weapons: particularly flash-balls, which caused hundreds of sometimes-serious injuries; systematic beatings with truncheons, even against peaceful demonstrators and journalists; and actions by plainclothes police officers that in Marseille went as far as a case of attempted murder against a young woman.⁶

In the view of some commentators, the French police are not yet adequately prepared for or trained in the management of demonstrations and this is supposedly the reason for the 'clumsy' use of the resources with which they have been equipped. Likewise, according to these views, police actions reveal improvised reactions and confusion when facing unprecedented mobilisations such as those of the *gilets jaunes*, who often mix with the black block or adopt the modes of action of this component of demonstrations (present since Seattle [in 1999], and even before that). Moreover, they also stress how flash-balls as well as taser guns were deployed to avoid the use of firearms, or to avoid deaths. While this is true, it has taken place at the cost of a shocking number of people being injured, sometimes seriously.

The few French experts on the police who often express their views on this issue (particularly in *Mediapart*, *Le Monde*, *Libération* and elsewhere) do not appear to have provided any convincing explanations (notably Fabienne Jobard and Jacques de Maillard). In an article that offers several points of view on police violence,⁷ claims by the ombudsman Jacques Toubon were mentioned. He advocated the prohibition of flash-balls (LBD40) in public order operations in his report of 10 January 2018, saying: "*Let us rule out the risk that exists due to the dangerousness of these arms by suspending their use... prevent rather than cure*". It is well known that "*the police of the police*" (IGPN [Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale]) has received hundreds of complaints about very violent actions and people seriously injured by the police since the beginning of the *gilets jaunes* movement.

Yet, the outcome of investigations by this body does not promise anything to assist in slowing down the drift that is underway. Neither do judicial inquiries offer any hope, considering the unfair or squarely reactionary guilty verdicts handed down to so-called violent demonstrators. It has already been said: the modalities of police action, almost everywhere in countries that claim to be democratic, display a hybridisation between police and military practices. For

⁵ Editor's note: there were allegations of serious violence by the police at the 2019 May Day demonstration in Paris, including of "truncheon rape". See: 'French police watchdog to investigate 'truncheon rape' video', *The Local*, 4 May 2019, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20190504/french-officials-probe-claims-of-may-day-police-violence>

⁶ Pascale Pascariello, 'A Marseille, des policiers fracassent le crâne d'une jeune femme à terre', *Mediapart*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/300419/marseille-des-policiers-fracassent-le-crane-d-une-jeune-femme-terre>

⁷ Grégory Rozières, 'Violences policières: le vrai du faux décrypté par des chercheurs', *Huffpost*, 17 January 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2019/01/16/violences-policieres-le-vrai-du-faux-decrypte-par-des-chercheurs_a_23644000/

example, consider the use of flash-balls as war-type weapons that are nonetheless deemed “non-lethal”, or that we are in the midst of the conjuncture of an increase in oxymorons (“humanitarian wars”, “proactive action” to justify the use of forceful intervention to prevent violence or even to “guarantee the freedom to demonstrate”).

Some people claim that the police have been forced to resort to violence because today, demonstrators are more violent. Isabelle Sommier (in *Libération*) mentions a figure according to which only 5% of demonstrations were violent during the 1980s and 1990s (within the obsession of providing figures, it does not matter what contorted form of reasoning is portrayed as a reliable source). Let us just recall that during the 1970s and even the 1980s, in Italy and other supposedly democratic countries, there were far more violent demonstrations than there are today (in which some demonstrators went so far as to strip police officers of their firearms... and it was not armed groups like the Red Brigades). This is also recalled by Christian Mouhanna (interviewed here⁸).

It is true that the hardening of police action also corresponds to a will to power to ‘strike a blow’, to show that it defends affluent people’s neighbourhoods, those who have felt protected from this ‘dangerous population’ for a long time. But we have seen that the outcome of this action has not protected rich people’s boutiques. Nonetheless, the Castaner-Macron duo have insistently repeated and modified this same deployment and this same practice which leads to undermining the supposed goal of this repressive action. In reality, as has been highlighted by many commentaries, the *gilets jaunes* movement and sometimes the black bloc have obviously foiled the traditional modality of repressive intervention by the police because they have not created structures and they do not have any leaders who will negotiate with the police, nor do they follow the model of well-bounded marches (although the leaders of the CGT, who did negotiate, were attacked...)⁹.

Some police experts who ponder the lawfulness or unlawfulness of police violence think that it is caused by a lack of negotiation between demonstrators and the police, as well as by the government’s negative attitude to negotiation. However, what has one of the government’s main goals been? As Mouhanna has stated: “*to use a rhetoric according to which it could be dangerous to turn out to demonstrate. Therefore, the people do not feel they are listened to and an instrumental use is made of the police in order not to negotiate.*”

Contrary to the illusory outlook of the doctrine of the maintenance of order which refers to a “de-escalation” (aiming to try to minimise collateral violence that is useless or dangerous, and hence engage in a “permanent dialogue with the crowd” – as recalled by experts on the police and protests, Fillieule and Jobard¹⁰), Castaner and Macron have gambled on the deployment of an enormous number of cops, including the two-thirds of them who are not trained to maintain public order, while even those who are trained behave in a quite disorderly way (from the perspective of repressive professionalism).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Edwy Plenel, ‘Un pouvoir incendiaire’, *Mediapart*, 3 May 2019,

<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/030519/un-pouvoir-incendiaire>

¹⁰ Olivier Fillieule and Fabien Jobard, «La police tend d’abord, ailleurs en Europe, à la pacification des cortèges», *Le Monde*, 6 May 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/05/07/la-police-tend-d-abord-ailleurs-en-europe-a-la-pacification-des-corteges_4915375_3232.html

Beyond the specificities and particular features of the French context, as can be deduced from the many reports and dossiers published by *Médiapart* over the last few months, it seems clear that the problem is not that the Castaner-Macron administration and the police are not equipped with the appropriate knowledge and means to manage public order. The fact is that the government has chosen the “WALL” approach, the negation of any negotiation, as is obvious from the second speech through which Macron sought to wrap up the story of the *gilets jaunes*, and the spiel about his pretence of listening to the people.¹¹

This was very predictable, not just because this government believed it was holding the knife from its handle with the absolute majority it enjoys in Parliament, alongside support from all the larger and smaller dominant actors. The government’s choice fits within the neo-liberal logic which uses and misuses the force of the state at the service of lobbies willing to do anything to support it. It is a logic which seeks precisely to rule out negotiation, which in turn is something it seeks to erode, while it also looks to make trade unions and opposition movements disappear (as is shown in material terms by the attack against the CGT march’s front line – it is shocking that this union’s leaders do not realise that this is the nature of neo-liberalism).

There is also a need to recall that the matter is not that we are facing an authoritarian drift heading towards a police state or a state of exception. Authoritarianism and pseudo-democracy, exception and peaceful management of conflicts caused by the powerful, have always coexisted. Confirmation of this may be sought from the youths in the suburbs or people from the ZAD [*Zone à défendre*, an ongoing struggle against an airport development near Nantes], and plenty of other victims of all these harms, starting from mortality resulting from pollution. When these people react, they are either badly beaten or treated like terrorists or as enemies of the state.

We are already within what in the past has been called ‘democratic fascism’, but it is encroaching without the need for a *coup d’état* or a regression to the beat of marching police and military parades. This is largely because it is inherent in the rise of the self-styled sovereignty-minded populism. The populations of countries that are supposedly democratic will be forced to choose between the Macrons and other pseudo-democrats; or the Trumps, Les Pens or Salvini, that is, between two sides of the same coin.

As is shown by Gérard Noiriel’s *Histoire populaire de la France* – as well as the entire history of humanity – there have always been historical conjunctures marked by defeats of the struggles of workers and dominated peoples more generally, and those marked by their (albeit short-lived) victories. But these are expressions of the very instinct of survival, and the violence of power can only push back against revolts and resistances. The tendency of dominant groups to take advantage of the asymmetry of power and to refuse any negotiation and concession for the dominated will only propel them towards increasingly fierce uprisings, and it is likely that the black bloc model will become commonplace among those rebelling. Further,

¹¹ Le discours d’Emmanuel Macron en réponse aux « gilets jaunes », *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws52k8CTaHQ>; ‘Verbatim : Le discours d’Emmanuel Macron face aux « gilets jaunes », *Le Monde*, 10 December 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/12/10/le-verbatim-de-l-allocation-televisee-du-president-de-la-republique_5395523_823448.html

alas, there will no longer be cause to be surprised if in the future we will also witness a return to the use of firearms by police forces and also by demonstrators.

This text was written before the publication of the appeal *Nous Accusons* [We Accuse],¹² which I entirely support.

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¹² The original in French: 'Nous accusons!', <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/040519/nous-accusons-0>; and in English: We accuse!, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2019/may/fr-we-accuse.htm>