

France: Emmanuel Macron's republican order

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While the French people strike, protest against, and decry Macron's law raising the pension age, Macron remains unmoved, immune to the people's demands. This, Jacques Rancière argues, inaugurates a new era for the French state: one of brutal police repression.

In recent weeks, Emmanuel Macron and his ministers have deliberately crossed three red lines that his predecessors had stopped short of. First, they imposed a law that the Chamber of Deputies had not voted for and that was clearly unpopular. Then they gave their unconditional support to the most violent forms of police repression. Finally, in response to criticism from the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, they suggested that public interest associations could have their subsidies withdrawn if they expressed reservations about government action.

It is very clear that these three decisions go together, and enable us to see quite precisely the nature of the power that governs us. The first, of course, was in striking contrast to the position adopted by Jacques Chirac during the 1995 strikes or his minister Nicolas Sarkozy during the movement against the youth employment contract in 2006. Neither of them exactly had a strong social commitment. The former had been elected on a programme to win back the right, while the latter would declare the following year that he wanted to put France to work. However, they felt that it was impossible to pass a law modifying the world of work that was massively rejected by the people themselves. As old-fashioned politicians, they still felt indebted to a subject called the people: a living subject that was not limited to the electoral count and whose voice, expressed through trade-union action, mass movements in the streets and the reactions of public opinion, could not be ignored. That is why the law passed by parliament in 2006 was not promulgated.

It is clear that Emmanuel Macron no longer shares this naivety. He does not believe that, apart from counting voting papers, there is anything like the people that he has to worry about. Marx said, with some exaggeration at the time, that states and their leaders were merely the business agents of international capitalism. Emmanuel Macron is perhaps the first head of state in our country to verify exactly this diagnosis. He is determined to apply to the end the programme he has been charged with: that of the neo-conservative counter-revolution which, since Margaret Thatcher, aims to destroy not only all vestiges of what was called the social state, but also all forms of countervailing power stemming from the world of work, to ensure the triumph of an absolutised capitalism submitting all forms of social life to the sole law of the market. This offensive has given itself a name, that of neoliberalism, which has fuelled all sorts of confusion and complacency. According to its champions, but also to many of those who believe they are fighting against it, the word liberalism simply means the application of the economic law of laissez-faire, and its correlate is a limitation of the powers of the state, which would henceforth be satisfied with simple management tasks, dispensing with any constraining interventions in public life. Some self-confident minds add that this freedom of movement of goods and the liberalism of a facilitating rather than repressive state would fit in well with the mores and state of mind of individuals who are now concerned only with their

individual freedoms.

Yet this fable of permissive liberalism was belied from the outset by Margaret Thatcher's 1984 mounted police charges in the battle of Orgreave, designed not only to force the closure of the mines but to demonstrate to trade unionists that they had no say in the economic organisation of the country. 'There is no alternative' also meant 'Shut up!' The programme for the imposition of absolute capitalism is in no way liberal: it is a warlike programme for the destruction of everything that stands in the way of the law of profit: factories, workers' organisations, social legislation, traditions of workers' and democratic struggle. The state reduced to its simplest expression is not the managerial state, it is the police state. The case of Macron and his government is exemplary in this respect. He has nothing to discuss with the parliamentary opposition, nor with the trade unions, nor with the millions of demonstrators. He doesn't care about being disapproved by public opinion. It is enough for him to be obeyed, and the only force that seems to him required for this, the only one on which his government can ultimately rely, is that which has the specific task of compelling obedience, that is to say the police force.

Hence the crossing of the second red line. The right-wing governments that preceded Emmanuel Macron had tacitly or explicitly respected two rules: the first was that police repression of demonstrations should not kill; the second was that the government was at fault when the will to impose its policy resulted in the death of those who opposed it. This was the double rule to which Jacques Chirac's government submitted in 1986 after the death of Malik Ousseine, beaten to death by a flying squad during the demonstrations against the law introducing selection in higher education. Not only were the flying squads disbanded but the law itself was withdrawn. This doctrine is clearly in the past. The flying squads, re-established to repress the Gilets Jaunes revolt, were resolutely used to repress the demonstrators in both Paris and Sainte-Soline, where one of the victims is still between life and death. And, above all, the declarations of the authorities all agree that there is no longer any red line: far from being proof of the excesses to which the determination to defend an unpopular reform leads, the muscular actions of the BRAV-M are the legitimate defence of republican order, that is to say the governmental order that wants to impose this reform at all costs. And those who go to demonstrations that are always likely to degenerate are solely responsible for the blows they may receive.

This is also why no criticism of the action of the police forces is acceptable and our government has seen fit to cross a third red line by attacking an association, the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, which its predecessors had generally been careful not to attack head-on, since its very name symbolises a defence of the principles of the rule of law deemed to be binding on any government of right or left. The Ligue's observers had indeed taken the liberty of challenging the obstacles that the forces of order placed in the way of evacuating the injured. This was enough for our interior minister to question the right of this association to receive public subsidies. But this is not simply the reaction of a chief of police to the challenging of his subordinates. Our very Socialist prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, put the dots on the i's: the reaction of the Ligue to the extent of police repression in Sainte-Soline confirms an anti-republican attitude that has made it an accomplice of radical Islamism. After having questioned the validity of various laws restricting individual freedom, which prohibit certain types of clothing or forbid covering one's face in public places, it was reacting to provisions of the law 'to consolidate the principles of the Republic', which in fact restrict freedom of association. In short, the sin of the Ligue and of all those who wonder whether our police forces respect human rights is not to be a good republican.

It would be mistaken to see Élisabeth Borne's words as a casual remark. They are the logical outcome of this so-called republican philosophy, which is actually the intellectual version of the neo-conservative revolution whose economic programme her government is applying. 'Republican' philosophers have long been warning us that human rights, once celebrated in the name of the fight

against totalitarianism, are not so good. They actually fact serve the cause of the enemy that threatens the 'social bond': mass democratic individualism that dissolves the great collective values in the name of particularism. This appeal to republican universalism against the abusive rights of individuals quickly found its preferred target: French people of Muslim faith, and in particular girls who demanded the right to cover their heads at school. An old republican value, secularism, was unearthed against them. This used to mean that the state should not subsidise religious education. Now that it was in fact subsidising this, it took on a whole new meaning: it began to mean the obligation to keep one's head uncovered, a principle that was equally contradicted by schoolgirls wearing headscarves and activists wearing hoods, masks, or headscarves during demonstrations. At the same time, a 'republican' intellectual coined the term 'Islamism' to equate the defence of the violated rights of the Palestinian people with Islamist terrorism. The amalgam between the demand for rights, political radicalism, religious extremism, and terrorism was then complete. In 2006, some would have liked to ban both the wearing of headscarves in schools and the expression of political ideas there. In 2010, the ban on concealing one's face in the public space allowed an equation between the burqa-wearing woman, the headscarf-wearing demonstrator, and the terrorist hiding bombs under her veil. But it is Emmanuel Macron's ministers who deserve credit for two advances in the 'republican' amalgam: the great campaign against Islamism in the universities and the 'law to consolidate the principles of the Republic' which, under the guise of fighting Islamist terrorism, makes the authorisation of associations conditional on 'contracts of republican commitment' that are sufficiently vague to be used against them. The threats addressed to the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme are made in the same line. Some people thought that the rigours of 'republican' discipline were reserved for Muslim populations of immigrant origin. It now appears that they are aimed much more widely at all those who oppose the republican order as conceived by our leaders. The 'republican' ideology that some people still struggle to associate with universalist, egalitarian and feminist values is simply the official ideology of the police order intended to ensure the triumph of absolutised capitalism.

It is time to remember that, in France, there are not one but two republican traditions. In 1848, there was already the republic pure and simple, that of the royalists, and the democratic and social republic, crushed by the former on the barricades of June 1848, excluded from the vote by the electoral law of 1850 and then crushed again by force in December 1851. In 1871 it was the republic of the Versaillais which drowned in blood the workers' republic of the Commune. Macron, his ministers and his ideologues may well have no murderous intent. But they have clearly chosen their republic.

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P.S.

• Verso. Blog post. 11 May 2023:
<https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/emmanuel-macron-s-republican-order>

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