

Forty Years of Urban Revolts

Éric Marlière

The death of 17-year-old Nahel M., shot dead by police during a vehicle check in Nanterre on June 27, 2023, triggered a wave of indignation and a series of riots across the country. How is it that for over forty years we have witnessed young people from working-class neighborhoods committing urban revolts against the forces of law and order and institutions in a country that is nevertheless democratic?

Riot continuities

Most “urban riots” are triggered by the death of a young person, the result of a chaotic interaction with the forces of law and order. Scuffles between youths and police ensued over the following nights, resulting in injuries on both sides, and mass arrests that put the future of these young people in jeopardy. In the space of two or three nights, the housing estate was set on fire and some public property was vandalized: police stations and public buildings were targeted to point the finger of blame at the state. Finally, a silent march was organized by local activists and the family of the deceased to support their loved ones and call for calm, without however extinguishing the anger.

As with the “riots of 2005”, those in Villiers-le-Bel in 2007 and Sartrouville in 1991, the funeral march organized in Nanterre on June 29, 2023 did not put an end to the riot scenario. It spread to other working-class neighborhoods (sometimes to larger provincial towns with a reputation for calm) and more upscale city centers. The responses of the various governments are virtually identical each time - although, on this occasion, the government expressed temporary support for the family of the young man who died, their response boiled down to the usual condemnations: stigmatizing the young people, referring them to their “origins” and repressing them with a “curfew”, mass arrests with immediate appearances and admonishments of the parents¹.

The end of the working-class world

Previous generations of workers, from the metalworkers of the interwar period to the specialized workers of the Thirty Glorious Years, evolved in a difficult environment, sometimes in conflict with the police and various political authorities. They

¹ Yet other answers are possible: see Manuel Boucher, with Mohammed Belqasmi and Éric Marlière, *Casquette contre képis. Enquête sur la police de rue et l'usage de la force dans les quartiers populaires*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. “Recherche et transformation sociale”, 2013.

were perceived by the powers that be as a political, social, and cultural danger², but also as the future of industrial society.

Six factors account for the deterioration in their lifestyle since the early 1980s: the end of popular youth leadership, linked to the decline of trade unions and socialism; the political construction of a new internal enemy, the “youth of the housing estates”, particularly from North African and sub-Saharan immigration, often perceived as Muslims; the social relegation of the children of workers and immigrants, who can no longer become workers and are perceived as useless or even dangerous for national cohesion; the fact that the “middle classes” and the upper working classes have deserted the “neighborhoods”, reinforcing the stigma and sense of abandonment in working-class estates; repeated tensions with the police due to “exceptional treatment” in working-class neighborhoods, resulting in ritualized violence and stubborn personal grudges; a lack of political opportunities. As a result, residents and young people living in working-class urban neighborhoods see their future compromised.

Another new development since the 2010s has been the pitting of the working classes against each other: a caricature of the “good” white working classes, impoverished but silent, versus the “bad” working classes of the housing estates, impetuous yet “bottle-fed” by urban policies³.

A new generation?

A few nuances distinguish the riots of summer 2023 from previous riots. Firstly, social networks influenced the way images were disseminated and encouraged other young people from the “quartiers” to take part in the events, encouraging competition in violence and vandalism, including in a number of towns a priori unconcerned by the police “blunder” in Nanterre, such as Montargis in the Loiret region.

Secondly, artistic productions such as Ninho’s video clip for *25 grammes* (2023) and Romain Gavras’ film *Athéna* (2022) were mentioned by some of the teenagers we interviewed during the riot weekend. They bear disturbing similarities to the tragedy that took place at the end of June and are as much a part of the cultural repertoire of the teenagers we met as NTM, IAM or Assassin were for rap, and *Ma cité va craquer* (Jean-François Richet, 1997) or *La Haine* (Matthieu Kassowitz, 1995) for cinema⁴.

2 See Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle*, Paris, Plon, 1958; and Henri Rey, *La peur des banlieues*, Paris, Presses de Sciences-po, coll. “Bibliothèque du citoyen”, 1996.

3 See in particular Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique. Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*, Paris, Flammarion, 2014. This thesis, put forward by the far right and now certain right-wing elected representatives, accentuates a prejudicial media view of the inhabitants of suburban HLM housing estates.

4 See Laurent Mucchielli, “Le rap de la jeunesse des quartiers relégués. Un univers de représentations

What's more, while state institutions such as police stations, schools and other public buildings that house youth support structures were once again attacked, we saw more intense attacks on certain businesses, symbols of consumer society and the financial capitalist world, such as PMU bars (bars where one can gamble) brand-name clothing stores and, more rarely, banks. While some youngsters looted with the intention of reselling, others pilfered basic necessities (milk, cereals), showing that the living conditions of some teenagers in these neighborhoods are rather difficult.

Some teenagers obviously joined the riots to share thrills with their friends and be part of a collective experience. Minutes show that some teenagers took part in the violence without knowing the event that triggered it, namely the death of a young person killed by the police following a refusal to obey. But the riot was seen as a political achievement by the protagonists, a far cry from daily failures or submission to institutions perceived as repressive⁵. Admittedly, these young people have no revolutionary aims and are not seeking to reform society, but they are expressing a desire to free themselves from economic and social constraints, between an elitist and humiliating school system and access to a first job, often unrewarding and poorly paid, that is always delayed⁶.

Repoliticizing youthful anger

The riots at the start of the summer come after a series of states of emergency that have weakened the legitimacy of institutions among the French, particularly the working classes: the crackdowns that followed the 2015 attacks, the *Gilets jaunes* movement, the handling of the Covid epidemic and pension reform. Attacks on town halls and elected officials, such as the ram-car attack on the home of the mayor of L'Haÿ-les-Roses, are seen as an expression of revenge against institutions that the working classes see as contemptuous of their difficulties⁷.

The riots are a revelation of the country's political situation: a denunciation, albeit violent or uncivil, of the way in which elected officials, whether on the left or the right, refuse to negotiate with working-class people facing growing economic and social difficulties. The riots reflect the despair of parents, the disappointment of a neighbor involved in a neighborhood association, or the bitterness of a grad-

structuré par des sentiments d'injustice et de victimation collectives", in Manuel Boucher and Alain Vulbeau (eds.), *Émergences culturelles et jeunesse populaire. Turbulences ou médiations*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. "Débats jeunesse", pp. 325-355.

5 See Romain Huët, *Le vertige de l'émeute. De la ZAD aux Gilets jaunes*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2019.

6 See É. Marlière, "Les recompositions culturelles des 'jeunes de cité' à l'épreuve des déterminismes sociaux et des effets du chômage, de la discrimination et de la ségrégation urbaine", *Lien social et politique*, no. 70, Fall 2013, pp. 103-117.

7 See É. Marlière, *La France nous a lâchés! Le sentiment d'injustice chez les jeunes de cité*, Paris, Fayard, 2008.

uate sister, confronted with precariousness and discrimination. The repressive response, in the form of summary trials, minimum sentences and prison sentences for minor offences, illustrates the political determination to delegitimize popular anger. Why not listen to the activists and association leaders from the “neighborhoods” instead?⁸

The 2005 riots have been described as “*proto-political*”, “*infra-political*” or “*metapolitical*”.⁹ While the rioters’ motivations were not directly political, long-term economic and social issues underpinned their actions. Politicians should therefore pay particular attention to popular revolts if they want to put an end to the vicious cycle of urban riots.

Éric Marlière

Professor of sociology at the University of Lille, researcher at the «Individus, épreuves, sociétés» research center (ULR 3589), he is notably the author of *Les quartiers (un)populaires ne sont des déserts politiques. Incivilités ou politisation des colères par le bas?* (Le Bord de l’eau, 2013).¹⁰

8 See Julien Talpin, *Bâillonner les quartiers. Comment le pouvoir réprime les mobilisations populaires*, Ronchin, Les Étaques, 2020.

9 See Gérard Mauger, *Lémeute de novembre 2005. Une révolte protopolitique*, Broissieux, Éditions du Croquant, coll. “Savoir/agir”, 2006; Denis Merklen, *Quartiers populaires, quartiers politiques*, preface by Robert Castel, Paris, La Dispute, 2009; and Alain Bertho, *Le temps des émeutes*, Paris, Bayard, 2009.

10 First published in *Revue Esprit* Nov 2023.