

Macron and Civil War in France

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We say a lot of bad things about Macron and the recent forced passage through France's parliament of the pensions reform law. He is said to be egotistical, arrogant and inept. We forget that he is the actor of a wider situation, whose historical function today consists in pursuing a project greater than his own person. It is in fact necessary to set aside micro-scale "psychological" analysis, to objectively consider a policy which, for all its brutality and sometimes tragic irrationality, nevertheless has a precise meaning in the history of our societies. The personal and even sociological characteristics of an individual clearly matter but only through having made Macron this warlord whom we admire or hate. The hatred, even the rage that he inspires in many, is explained by an understanding of the reasons for, and effects of his action. Certainly Macron is not Napoleon, nor Putin. This war does not deploy planes or tanks, it is muted, diffuse, slow, made with both politics and police, ideological as well as budgetary, parliamentary as well as fiscal.

It is not fighting an external enemy, it is a war waged on the population, and quite deliberately on its poorest part, that of the lowest-grade jobs and harshest work. It weakens, distorts and destroys, when circumstances and the balance of power allow it, anything that might oppose the great project of an ideally made "fluid society": innovative entrepreneurs, young people dreaming of billions, and a mass of individuals who must rely only on themselves to survive in a world of generalized competition. One should not take lightly the programme Macron was elected on in 2017, which promised a "revolution". It was the title of the book of his campaign, which, contrary to what has been often said, was not just a minor marketing operation. This revolution from above is that of the people at the top, the home-grown oligarchs, the well-connected economists and rising commentariat. In a word, this announced neoliberal revolution is still, and even more than ever, on the agenda. Let's be clear, Macron did not invent anything, he is the current lead performer in a scenario that has been creating effects for a long time. What is special about him is a political career which was "outside the box", sufficiently "disruptive" not to bother with the elementary forms of democracy, even less with social dialogue, and not even legality when it is necessary for example to defend with armed force "ecocidal" projects halted by the courts, as is the case with a number of the giant reservoirs or "mega-basins". Macron is the "transgressive" and "brutal" actor required to accelerate the process of in-depth transformation of society, at the very moment where it would have been much more urgent to think "responsibly" about this project's social, ecological and political basis.

The impasse of current power is often explained by the use of means that are hardly consistent with political liberalism. It is very convenient that the constitution of the Fifth Republic offers the President options to sideline both parliament and public opinion. It is obvious that by using and abusing those powers he weakens a so-called representative democracy that was already destabilized, but these forms of brutalization are not the whole meaning of the action itself. In other words, the clause 49.3 emergency decree mechanism, like the police and their immoderate resort to violence, is only here the generic weapon of a more specific war.

Some people have mistakenly believed that neoliberalism was too variegated and incoherent a thing to pose a serious threat. Others thought its doctrine was already discredited, along with the political actors and governmental fashions that clothed themselves in its rationality, as if it was enough to observe its catastrophic effects on nature and society to be conclusively liberated from its spell. So

many mistaken analyses, so many things overlooked and missed.

We now urgently need to understand how neoliberalism is a doctrine of civil war, in the sense that Michel Foucault suggested as a way of analyzing certain forms of power in his lecture series *The Punitive Society. Course at the College de France, 1972-1973*, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 13: “civil war is the matrix of all power's struggles and strategies”.

The current government knows this perfectly well, since it knowingly and systematically pursues that course, while at the same time blaming various "enemies of the republic", using an inversion of truth which works at the same time as a denial of responsibility.

1- The fear of democracy

Neoliberalism – a doctrine that Macron's prime minister Édouard Philippe hailed in 2019 in an address to France's Competition Authority, paying homage to one of its main founders, Friedrich Hayek, and to his conception of the state as the legal guardian of effective economic competition – was born at the turn of the 1930s with the aim of establishing a firm and consistent political order that would protect private property and guarantee competitive market exchange – “economic freedoms”. It was judged necessary to “renovate” liberalism by making the state the protective layer of market competition, because the policy of laissez-faire of the classical liberals and their doctrine of the minimal state had failed to preserve the market from the masses' powerful and dangerous desire for equality. From the outset, the acolytes of neoliberalism have thus explicitly identified the main problem that threatened their project of liberation of the market by the State: democracy is always liable to endanger economic freedoms.

Their political strategy, which has its roots in a deeply rooted reactionary demophobia, has remained invariant from Hayek to today. It consists of containing, neutralizing or destroying all forces that attack the economic interests of the private sector and the principle of competition, prevailing over the idea of social justice, which it denounced as a myth.

Foremost among these forces are the trade unions, the “collectivist” opposition, social movements, electoral majorities “manipulated by demagogues”. The neoliberal doctrinaires devoted countless pages to devising ways to hold democracy in check, not hesitating to wish for a right of exception giving government unlimited powers over parliamentary bodies, which one of them, Alexander Rüstow, called “dictatorship within the limits of democracy”. Others went sometimes so far as to emphasize the usefulness of fascist violence in saving “European civilization” from socialist “barbarism” (Ludwig von Mises). Other more “legal” ways are also practicable, depending on the circumstances, for example the establishment of an “economic constitution” making it possible to grant sanctuary in law to all the conditions of a capitalist economy, so as to insulate them from political choices and popular will.

Everything must be done to defeat the “social state” that one of the neoliberal thinkers, Wilhelm Röpke, considers a “rotten fruit”. Instead of this social State, it is necessary to build and defend a “strong State” which he defines as a “totally independent and vigorous State which is not weakened by corporatist and pluralist authorities”.

2-A war that never ends

But is it legitimate to speak of “civil war” to describe the establishment of the strong neoliberal state against social and political forces that are hostile to capitalism or simply seek more equality and solidarity? In this regard, history does not lie when it repeats itself with this regularity. In 1927, Mises applauds in Vienna when emergency powers given to police to put down a workers' demonstration left 89 dead. The three Nobel laureates in Economics, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and James Buchanan met in 1981, within the of the Mont Pelerin Society, to celebrate

Pinochet's dictatorship at the height of its repression. Röpke supported apartheid in South Africa, while Hayek sent a copy of his book *The Constitution of Freedom* to the Portuguese dictator Salazar in order, he said in the accompanying letter, "to help him in his efforts to conceive a constitution protected from the abuses of democracy". Thatcher, who corresponded with Hayek, made *The Constitution of Liberty* the bible of the Conservative Party: she put down the miners' strike militarily, killing three people and injuring over twenty thousand, just as she dealt harshly with urban riots of blacks and Asians, while allowing free range to the far right. As Governor of California at the turn of the 1970s, Reagan introduced obligatory payment for tuition, and repression of the student movement by the Californian National Guard killed one person. In his first speech as President to the Republican Party after his victory in 1981, Reagan thanked Hayek, Friedman and Mises for "their role in [his] success". "Civil war occupies, traverses, animates, and invests power through and through", said Foucault. "We see the signs of this war precisely in the forms of surveillance, threat, and possession of armed force, in short in all the instruments of coercion that established power acquires in order to wage civil war." (ibid. pp.31-32)

The imposition of market order by neutralizing or destroying democracy cannot, however, recruit the adherence of society in the long term, with the exception of pro-business classes who always benefit from it. For this reason, the strategy of *enemyfication*, of the constitution of enemies made responsible for the chaos, is essential to the policy of neoliberal civil war, because, through the cultural and media battle that it triggers and which the State seeks to control at all costs, it brings together around power the social coalition of those who take sides against the designated social enemy. For neoliberals, all those who criticize "capitalist civilization" fall under the category of enemy: in the 1920s, Mises saw in Soviet Russia a "barbaric people"; in the 1940s, Röpke called workers "barbarian invaders within their own nation," and in the late 1950s he equated black South Africans with an "overwhelming majority of black barbarians"; in the 1980s, Hayek referred to the protesting students of the seventies as "undomesticated barbarians" and Buchanan called them the "new barbarians", while Thatcher referred to the miners' union as the "enemy within".

3-Macronism or the convulsive form of neoliberalism

We therefore miss the core of neoliberalism if we overlook its inherently authoritarian character. Hayek's formula: "I prefer a liberal dictator to a democracy without liberalism" by itself sums up the attitude of the neoliberals towards democracy: acceptable when it is harmless, democracy must be denied in one way or another, including by the most violent means, when it threatens the unlimited rights of capital.

Macronism is therefore not violent by chance or accident. It is one of the forms of policies that neoliberalism can take, because it is in line with its strategy of neutralization of the power of collective decision when the latter opposes the logic of the market and of capital. Macronism's historical peculiarity is that it radicalizes neoliberal logic against the trend of the times, at a time when all the social, political and ecological signals are at red, so it can only serve to aggravate all latent or open crises. We see the result before us: Macron's convulsive rigidity provokes massive and determined resistance in society.

Those who interpreted Macronian neoliberalism as a moderate third way, at a distance from ultra-liberalism and socialism, were seriously mistaken.

And those who thought they saw in it an alternative to the extreme right, took illusion to its maximum. In this regard, Macronism is not a bulwark, it is a springboard, for a double reason: because it accentuates and widens resentment against elites and institutions; because it uses methods, in particular police violence, which would not look out of place in the picture of what is euphemistically termed "illiberalism". It suffices to listen to a Minister of the Interior like Gérald Darmanin to grasp the ongoing hybridization between Macronism and the far right.

Macron thinks it useful for his cause to play the role of defender of "republican order", and believes it even clever to compare demonstrators against the pension reform to the extreme Trumpist right attacking the Capitol, or to counterpose the "riots" of the "crowd" to the "legitimacy of the people who express themselves through their elected representatives". The reasoning here is as simple as it is sophistical: whatever the government orders or decides to protect is, by this very fact, legitimate and democratic, even when it resorts to the emergency powers of constitutional clauses 47.1, 44.3 or 49.3 to cut short parliamentary debates. And, conversely, all moderates who dare to demonstrate their opposition to the government in the name of democratic, ecological or redistributive values find themselves charged not only with illegality but of illegitimacy, or even of unacknowledged neo-fascism. We already saw a similar rhetoric against the Yellow Vests, who were compared to the Fascist leagues of 1934. Denouncing "factions and rebels", as Macron did, has no other purpose than to manufacture an enemy within, according to a well-established tradition of neoliberal authors. This is an essential aspect and mainspring of any civil war.

With contemporary neoliberalism, *enemyfication* targets all those who, through their practices, their forms of life or their struggles, today seem to threaten the normative logic of the market or the supposed indivisible unity of the State. In the chaotic course of Macronism, we have witnessed the continuous invention of categories of enemies depending on the circumstances, whether it is "populism", "Islamism", "non-mixity", gender theory, "separatism", "communitarianism", "postcolonialism", "wokism", "deconstructionism" or "intellectual terrorism". With the decision to dissolve the Green protest movement "Les Soulèvements de la Terre [Uprisings of the Earth]" which challenged the Sainte-Soline mega-basin scheme in favour of a non-productivist model of agriculture, the terms of "eco-terrorism" and "ultra-left" are now being systematically used to neutralize any critique of Macron's market-based ecology. The advantages of such a dizzying spiral of denunciations cannot be underestimated. It is useful to be able to cast those who denounce various forms of inequality and predation as enemies of the Republic, and thereby sustain belief in the pacifying function of the State, while at the same time denying the war waged by this same state against the adversaries of the neoliberal order.

We therefore see that Foucault's invitation to consider all power – and therefore neoliberal power itself – according to the "matrix" of civil war contains something decisive, in a conjuncture like ours. It avoids giving in to the illusion that the state has, in essence, the function of harmonizing differences and points of view through a "dialogue", rational if possible, between "partners", in order, on the contrary, to consider the state as a leading player in the conduct of civil war. But it also enables full appreciation of the scope of the mobilizations in progress, by bringing to light the profound coherence which links the policy of regression of the social state and Macron's ecocidal politics.

Behind the "chaos" that Macron has unleashed, one needs to heed the other world that the "rebellious" carry within them. How is it that the defense of a decent life for older workers and people approaching retirement and the defense of nature against destructive projects today offer a rare potential for coalition? Because in each case, it is a question of a desirable life and an inhabitable world. And this desire and this dwelling are irreconcilable with the subordination of life and the domination of the world by capital and its state. We will have to get used to it: the logics of the common and of capital, in face of the urgency of crises and of the neoliberal hardening, now look irreconcilable to most people. It is in this sense that there is no "dialogue" or possible "compromise" between those who lead this civil war and the large mass of the population that are its target.

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Translated by Colin Gordon, amended 18/05/23.