

Boy Murdered by French Police, Protests Follow, Macron Calls them “Inexplicable,” After all, Race Doesn’t Exist in France

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Nahel Mezouk, boy murdered by police.

Rioting erupted in Black and Arab communities in Paris and several other cities in France last week after a police officer murdered a 17-year-old French boy, shooting him pointblank in the chest. He had been stopped for a traffic violation. Rioters in several cities and towns—infuriated by the murder of a child—have demonstrated, burned cars and businesses, and looted, while riot police have unleashed furious violence against the young Arabs and Blacks, wading into the demonstrations to chase, beat and arrest protestors. One police union has called the protestors “savages” while another declares the police are engaged in a “war,” which can only mean a war against the protestors. France’s police are at war with the people—or at least some of them.

How did things get so out of hand? Why so much violence?

Let’s start with this: French traffic cops murdered a French child.

I say he was a French boy, because in official circles in France and in society at large race does not exist and so therefore neither does racism. But, being that we’re here in America—where unfortunately we know a lot about racism—I will tell you that he was a French boy named Nahel Merzouk and that he was a descendent of Algerian immigrants. And that fact is not irrelevant.

French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the killing but spoke out most strongly against the

rioting, which he called, “inexcusable.” He deployed 45,000 police nationwide to put down the riots. Thousands have been arrested and hundreds tried. At the same time, he also called the uprisings “inexplicable.” Why were so many people behaving violently? What could be the matter? Macron makes it sound as if he has no idea what could have led tens of thousands of Arabs throughout the country to riot.

After all, since the French Revolution of 1789, everyone is equal. No races and so no racism. The country is color blind. Who could complain? Nor, the French will argue, is there any religious bigotry. The concept of *laïcité*, the notion that France is a completely secular society of social equals, means that there is no religious discrimination against Muslims.

The French people are not color blind. They are just blind—most of them—from the top of white society to the bottom. Since the French Revolution of 1789, everyone is equal. No races and no racism. Who could complain? Then too there is the concept of *laïcité*, the notion that France is a completely secular society of social equals should mean that there is no religious discrimination against Muslims. Or is it so?

The Condition of Arab People in France

There are between 4 and 7 million people of Maghrebin origin in France, that is North African Muslim Arab, people principally from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, but also West Africans. They make up between 7 and 9 percent of the population. No one knows exactly how many because the authorities refused to keep ethnic statistics.

Most of these people immigrated in the 1960s and 70s when France’s economy was expanding. Many initially settled in Paris or Marseilles but over time some migrated to other cities. Many initially settled in immigrant communities in the suburbs, *les banlieues*, where there were others who spoke their language, shared their religion and customs. Governmental neglect, lack of resources, and poverty have turned some such communities into ghettos.

Everywhere Muslim Arab immigrants—even as millions, half of them—became French citizens, faced racial discrimination and religious bigotry. They were discriminated against in the usual places, housing and employment. They were looked down upon because of their skin color, their religion, and their North African origins. They became perpetual foreigners, never accepted. Today unemployment in France is about 7%, but for French people of Arab origin or descent it is about 14%.

The economic question is central, but it is not the only issue. Policing is another. Human Rights Watch reports:

French police use broad powers to stop and search Black and Arab youth even when there is no sign or evidence of wrongdoing. These “identity checks,” as they are known in France, often involve invasive searches of bags and cell phones as well as humiliating body pat-downs, even of children as young as 10. In poor neighborhoods, where people of immigrant origins represent a significant part of the population, Human Rights Watch takes the view that police use identity checks as a blunt instrument to exert authority.

French police, like American police, are all too often racist and violent. They have been sent out to defend the system, to defend systemic racism, integral to French capitalism, and they do so with enthusiasm, which is just what the authorities expect and desire.

Amnesty International reports that

In December [2021], the CERD Committee [U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination] urged France to redouble its efforts to effectively prevent and combat racist hate speech due to “persistent and widespread racist and discriminatory discourse... by political leaders against certain ethnic minorities, in particular Roma, Travelers, Africans, people of African descent, people of Arab origin and non-citizens”. The committee was also concerned about law enforcement’s persistent use of racial profiling.

Men are stopped, roughed up, humiliated. But Muslim women too face discrimination. They are told they should not wear their *hijab* head scarf or veil as it is called, nor should they wear their *burkinis*, or dress covering the entire body, to the pool or beach. There have been court cases over those issues. Police have forced women on the beach in Nice to remove their *burkinis*.

Mosques are another issue, seen as centers not only of Islam but of extremism and perhaps terrorism. The French police recently closed 22 mosques based on secret evidence, claiming they encourage “hatred toward France.” Fionnuala Ni Aolain, a UN special rapporteur on the protection of human rights called it “Kafkaesque” and said the practice violated international treaties. There was a similar but large crackdown on 76 mosques in 2020.

Political Parties and Race

The driving political forces behind France’s systemic racism and bigotry are the inertia of French political institutions and ideology and the major conservative parties: La République en marche (LREM or LaREM), Macron’s self-made party, Les Républicains (LR), the main French Republican Party, and Le Rassemblement national (RN), the largest of the far-right parties in France. For these parties, France—implicitly or explicitly—is a white, Christian country. One might say it is a nation of the descendants of Charles Martel (Charles the Hammer), who defeated the Muslim invasion of Europe at the Battle of Tours in 731 AD. Since then, for the conservative parties, since World War II and the anti-colonial wars and the massive Arab immigration, the gates have been breached, the enemy is within. One must deal with them once again with the hammer. Today French police wield it.

The parties of the right—neoliberal, conservative, and quasi-fascist—propound ideologies from colorblindness and *laïcité* to white Christian nationalism and crude racism and bear most responsibility for the perpetuation of French racism. But, until now the left parties, labor unions, and ordinary French people of all social classes have also argued that France was colorblind and that there was no racism.

I have been shocked by this attitude for several years. In February of this year, I went to Paris for an academic conference and arrived just in time to join friends in one of the several massive labor union demonstrations against Macron’s plan to raise the retirement age. I walked a couple of miles down the length of march listening to the enthusiastic changes, impressed by the unity of the unions. But I noticed that there were very few Black or Arab workers, and I wondered why.

A day or two later at the conference, I met a French man of Tunisian descent, we started talking and hit it off. I posed to him the question of the whiteness of the anti-Macron retirement movement and the lack of Blacks and Arabs. “We have given up he said. We don’t go to these demonstrations. We don’t participate in politics, don’t vote. We have withdrawn from French society.”

A few years before I had been in Paris where I gave a talk on American politics to a meeting of a leftist political group called Ensemble, which means together. They are people who left the New Anticapitalist Party to support the France Insoumise movement, believing it was important to have a mass movement, even though they had reservations about the party's leader Jean-Luc Melanchon. I talked to the Ensemble meeting about labor and the social movements, about support among different racial and ethnic groups for different parties, about the candidates. I discussed racial segregation and economic inequality. I used some statistics. People started to squirm in their seats and a couple grumbled. I thought it must be my far-less-than-perfect French, but in the subsequent discussion it was clear from the questions that they had understood everything I said.

Afterwards I asked the friend who had invited me what the squirming and grumbling meant. "They didn't like it when you talked about race," he said. He himself is part of the Syllepse collective that publishes books about race in America, and he understood why I had felt it necessary to talk about race. But the others, all leftists, were uncomfortable with that. Talking about race was bad form.

France has kept no statistics on race and ethnicity since World War II, ostensibly in reaction to the Nazi-Vichy-French round up and depuration of Jews to work camps and death camps. France stopped the record keeping, but not the deportations, no longer Jews but now Arabs. On another occasion when I was in Paris, I accompanied protestors against those deportations of immigrants to a rally at a travel agency in Versailles where we demonstrated our support a pilot who refused to fly the plane full of immigrant out of the country.

A year or so ago, a Parisian intellectual of the left asked my wife, a physician and an epidemiologist, about her work. She said that she studied workers health, particularly health disparities across race and ethnicity. "Race?" they said "We would never look at these things by race. By class, yes. But by race? *Non!*"

The current protests throughout France are reminiscent of similar protests that took place in 2005 after police chased two boys who tried to hide in an electrical substation and were electrocuted. Arab and African immigrant communities—French citizens most of them—rose up in violent protest in Paris and some other 274 cities and towns, torching 10,000 cars and damaging over 230 public buildings. President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency and send thousands of police to suppress the rebellion.

What was the reaction of the French far left to those events at that time? The Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire spokesperson Charles Picquet criticized the protest movement for having no "no unifying platform, no demands, and no prospects." But to his credit he added, it was "an authentic popular revolt by those excluded by liberalism." Lutte Ouvrière, a completely clueless Trotskyist group, complained that the "disoriented young protestors" had burned the cars of working-class people, demonstrating a lack of class consciousness. LO called the protests "hooliganism."

Today the left is doing better. Labor unions posted an appeal on behalf of French youth calling for programs to end structural racism. The New Anticapitalist Party's statement titled, Criminal policing, systemic racism, anti-social policies: supporting a legitimate revolt," which concluded:

The NPA calls on people to mobilize alongside angry young people, to gather in front of town halls, every evening, if necessary, to express our rage and our demands. It calls on the organizations of the workers' movement, trade unions, associations and parties to meet as soon as possible to discuss how to build a mobilization on the scale and in the forms that will support the current revolt, obtain justice and launch a counter-offensive

against the anti-democratic and anti-social power of Macron and his government.

Some members of La France Insoumise, the largest left party, have reportedly supported the protestors.

White people in France and Arab and Black people live in two worlds geographically, socially and politically. Two worlds that are unequal in most things. If France is to be a democratic and progressive nation, that must end.

The Arabs and Blacks in France and white people of good will of all social classes must unite to dismantle the country's systemic racism and leave behind the false theories of colorblindness and *laïcité*. The left and the working class could play the most important part in such a process if they will. It is encouraging to read the statement from French labor unions call for reform to end structural racism.

We in America—while fighting our own racist economic and political system—must show the French our solidarity. We should learn from each other in the struggle against systemic racism and state violence.