

# The Killing of Clément Méric

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The killing of Clément Méric, an 18-year-old anti-fascist activist and member of a student union, by a young fascist skinhead in Paris on May 6th has shocked French public opinion. It comes in a context which many see as a sinister remake of the events that fostered the rise of the far right in France and Europe in the 1930s—increasing poverty, a financial crisis with mass unemployment which successive governments seem powerless to stem, a rise in physical attacks on homosexuals, immigrants and left-wing militants, and the recent mass pro- and anti-gay marriage demonstrations, together with an endless string of corruption scandals and an increasing mistrust of the European Union. All of these have encouraged the rise of so-called “populist” movements, particularly the far right National Front (FN), under its present leader Marine Le Pen, whose skillful rants against a mainstream political class that is “rotten to the core” resonate strongly with more and more regular voters.

Critics of this alarmist view point to differences between the France of the 1930s and the France of 2013. First, thanks to unemployment and social benefits, the depth of poverty in France today cannot be compared with that of the 1930s, which should keep social tensions under restraint. Secondly, the violence in mass demonstrations is mostly caused by a minority of hangers-on and trouble-makers outside the main body of peaceful marchers and is on a very small scale, compared to the levels reached in the 1930s, when for example there were 15 deaths and 1,500 people injured in a single mass demonstration organized by the right wing Croix de Feu on 6 February 1934. In addition, the international context today, in which France is one of the foremost actors in the European Union, bears little resemblance with the Europe of the 1930s, with Mussolini’s fascists in Italy, the Nazis in Germany and in Spain a civil war which would end in the victory of Franco’s fascist party.

However, such reassurances can only go so far. According to the traditional Marxist definition, fascism is characterized by its boast of reconciling “workers and bosses” through nationalist propaganda, its strong ruling party, and its gangs of street thugs. Fascism is a reactionary ideology, whose aim is to crush democratic movements and workers’ rights and to destroy autonomous trade unions. However, fascism is also a populist movement that claims to empower the “common man” and give voice to the aspirations of various layers of society, especially those that feel let down by social and economic changes—the lower middle classes, small business owners, and the unemployed. Fascism was in the past characterized by a constant contradiction between its reactionary aims and the lower middle class origins of many of its supporters, who thought of themselves as “the people.”

Indeed, the Nazi appeal to the German middle class was directed against the bankers above them and the communists and trade unionists below them, both of which were better organized than the middle classes and both of which the Nazis asserted were dominated by Jews. Especially in Germany after the Nazis took power, the working class could be won over, on the basis of the economic expansion driven by militarism and the nationalist ideology that the Social Democrats had to some degree shared.

Today, with the left parties and unions now so weak, the fascist movement has greater appeal to the working class, with many applauding when the financial establishment is regularly criticized and who are receptive to a xenophobic sentiment that is increasingly easier to articulate and manipulate. Immigrants and certain minority groups are thus lambasted as scroungers and parasites. Greece has witnessed the rise of Golden Dawn, a party with overtly Nazi views, and traditionally open and

tolerant societies, like the Netherlands and Sweden, have been the scenes of anti-immigrant hostility.

The growth of far-right views is undoubtedly on the increase in Europe. Growing social inequality, poverty and unemployment mean large segments of the population feel disenfranchised. Fascism in France and in Europe today feeds on fear of the future, fear that tomorrow's children will be worse off than today's. There are 5 million French people unemployed and every month 30,000 more swell their ranks; 8 million are living in poverty, and the questions of social justice and the fair distribution of wealth have become acute. Political democracy has not delivered and desperate people are ready to try something different, outside the beaten track.

The current French President, François Hollande, and his "Socialist" government have rapidly become more unpopular, losing the confidence of their own voters because of the austerity policies they have introduced. Hollande has reneged on his campaign promises, and instead of "change" has begun to implement a string of anti-social measures such as a decrease in pensions and social welfare benefits, together with tax increases that do not particularly target the rich, but rather force middle and working class families to pay more. This was why, in an attempt to placate progressive supporters, the Hollande government decided to implement a "societal" measure, one of Hollande's campaign promises: the legalization of gay marriages and the right for gay couples to adopt. Opponents of these proposals, mostly social conservatives and members of the Catholic Church, organized mass demonstrations in Paris which counted up to a million protesters. The government was taken aback by the scale of the disturbances, with debates dragging on for months in Parliament, thus preventing the study of terribly pressing economic problems.

The right-wing opposition saw here a means to embarrass the government and lent support to the anti-gay marriage protesters. An elected FN politician marched in Paris with politicians of the mainstream right-wing parties, who until now had sworn never to have any dealings with the far-right. This seemed to confirm previous signs that the mainstream right, Nicolas Sarkozy's former party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), has indeed become more hard-line. In an effort to surf the right-wing populist wave, the French right has openly used traditional far-right rhetoric in connection with issues of immigration and law and order, and has more openly opposed the granting of rights to minorities. "The Right has lost its inhibitions," claimed the present leader of the UMP, Jean-François Copé. While the demonstrations and counter-demonstrations proceeded week after week, more and more members of small neo-fascist groups started mingling with the marches, rioting and attacking the police.

The issue of same-sex marriage was seen as a unique opportunity for the far right groups to appear in the open. With the divisive debate surrounding gay marriage, radical right-wing views with a homophobic and anti-immigrant slant have begun to be voiced more openly. Clément Méric was, like many other progressive activists, directly engaged in the struggle for working-class emancipation and for the rights of immigrants, women, and LGBT people.

On May 6, Clément Méric and three or four friends went to a private clothing sale in an apartment building in Paris where they encountered some members of the Jeunesse Nationaliste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Nationalist Youth), a far-right group. Insults were hurled about and when Méric came out onto the street with his friends, in the ensuing fight his head was battered by a 20-year-old skinhead and he was pronounced brain dead even before being transported to a hospital. The Prime Minister called for the banning of "extremist groups," the media analyzed the meaning and ramifications of the horrifying event, the trade union movement issued a joint condemnation and an anti-fascist march has been called for June 23 in Paris.

In an attempt at damage control, the right-wing media hastened to qualify the killing as a sort of

unfortunate gang encounter and not a politically motivated murder. (The present charge against the perpetrator is involuntary homicide.) However, there is something disturbing in the glib equation of “left-wing extremists” with “right-wing extremists” that is being spouted by many politicians. Physical violence and political murder is an integral part of the ideology of fascist groups. In a sense it is their *raison d’ecirc;tre*. Indeed some far-right web sites do not hesitate to pour scorn on Clément Méric, accusing him of having a big mouth but being a weakling, without the guts for a real fight. Thus, to say that they were simply rival gangs facing up to each other and that both parties are equally guilty is disingenuous.

Like its infamous predecessors in Germany, Italy and Spain, the French FN claims to be neither right wing nor left wing and to have distanced itself from its neo-fascist origins in the early 70s. So far it has remained aloof from the Clément Méric killing and Marine Le Pen has denounced such violence as unacceptable. In fact, the FN is terrified of being linked to the killing and denies any connection with such thuggish behavior. Over the past few years, all demonstrations involving the FN have been carefully policed by its own marshals who have strict instructions not to engage in controversial incidents—such as displays of the Hitler Salute or intimidation of journalists and political opponents—that often characterized such gatherings when Jean Marie Le Pen was in charge of the movement. Indeed the FN has undergone a major makeover since Marine Le Pen took over as leader from her father, Jean Marie Le Pen, whose outspoken anti-Semitic views grated on people who were otherwise attracted by the FN stance. Polls today show Marine Le Pen is one of the most popular French politicians and she is regularly invited to give her views on the media, whereas before her father was regularly persona non grata. She is collecting the good opinions of disappointed working class voters, and even many former Socialist voters and upper and middle class voters, as she calls for priority to be given to French people when it comes to jobs, housing and social benefits, and as she rails against the European Union at present seen by many as the source of France’s woes.

Although some fear great success for the FN in the 2014 municipal elections and the European Parliamentary elections, the movement so far has never done well in local elections, first because it does not have enough good local candidates embedded in the community and secondly because there is still some stigma attached to a vote for the FN and many people will still hesitate to indicate such a preference to their neighbors.

However, the political scene is definitely changing in favor of the FN. A vote for the party is no longer seen as a wasted vote for an insignificant minority party but an empowering vote that can actually bring the party to power. The reason for this lies in the particularity of the French two-round electoral system; that is, there is a first round of elections to allow citizens to express their real preferences, for example for minority parties, and this eliminates the weaker candidates. A week later, the two leading candidates face off in the second round.

The problem today, as illustrated in a by-election last week, is that the FN is now strong enough in many election districts to qualify for the second round. There is also a growing threat of a second round “triangulaire,” that is a triangular list of three candidates—an FN candidate, a mainstream conservative right-wing candidate and a mainstream left-wing candidate. The dilemma for the two mainstream parties is whether one of them should withdraw its candidate, thus allying all the mainstream democratic forces against the FN candidate, but losing its Parliamentary seat in the process or, on the contrary, should both mainstream parties maintain their candidates thus allowing the FN candidate to win, as occurred in two circumscriptions in the 2012 elections. The alliance of the mainstream parties against the FN of course plays directly into the hands of Marine Le Pen, who condemns the whole political caste for being exclusively focused on protecting their collective interests and feathering their own nests at the expense of the common people.

A further development is the hardening of attitudes in the mainstream conservative UMP, which has adopted certain positions inspired by the FN in order to cash in on the perceived growing conservatism of the French population in general. So far, the official UMP line has been “no alliances with the National Front,” but local ad hoc alliances look increasingly probable in the coming years. According to an FN spokesman, if a partial system of proportional representation is introduced soon—another of Hollande’s election pledges—on the basis of current election polls the FN could have over 100 elected members of Parliament.

The leader of the FN, Marine le Pen, is aiming for the 2017 Presidential elections and her prospects appear to be steadily increasing as she presents herself as a respectable and effective alternative to the mainstream right and left. It is this gradual, insidious spread of authoritarian ideologies that the movement protesting the killing Clément Méric seeks to prevent today.

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