

ANALYSIS

France: How Macron's crusade against 'decivilisation' is a far-right diversionary tactic

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Last week, following a series of violent but unrelated incidents in the country, French president Emmanuel Macron told ministers that the government needed to “counter this process of decivilisation”. The expression immediately provoked controversy. In this analysis, Mediapart's publishing editor Edwy Plenel says that despite what his supporters claim, the president's choice of the word “decivilisation” owes nothing to the late German sociologist Norbert Elias and instead owes everything to the normalisation of far-right ideas

Words matter. We have already witnessed how they assist the arrival of the very worst that society can offer. They do so by kindling the habits, the indifference, the turning of a blind eye that makes such things possible. “The power of words is so great that it's enough to designate in well-chosen terms the most odious things to make them acceptable,” warned French psychologist [Gustave Le Bon](#). He was the author in 1895 of '*Psychologie des foules*' (published in English as 'The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind'), a pioneering essay from which fascist intellectuals and then Nazis would later draw practical lessons.

“Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all,” the German linguist [Victor Klemperer](#) wrote in 1947, after the grim experience of living under Nazi rule, in his book '*The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook*'.

Emmanuel Macron at Roubaix in northern France on May 25th 2023, after the death of three police officers in a car crash. © Yoan Valat / Pool / AFP

So, having insisted he had “no scruples” after [forcing his pension reforms through Parliament](#), Emmanuel Macron has now launched a crusade against “decivilisation”, according to [comments he made](#) at a meeting of ministers on May 24th. His pretext for doing so was a crude conflation of completely unrelated events, employing a generalisation that - lacking any factual rigour - enabled the president of the Republic to point to a vague notion of “violence” as the main evil plaguing France.

It being understood that, in his mind, this can only be only violence at the bottom, a violence that comes from society, its groups and from individuals, and not violence from the top, coming as a result of his own authoritarian policies and economic decisions, and from the denials of democracy and the social injustices they cause.

Recent violent events include: the [deaths of three police officers](#) at Roubaix in the north of the country after their vehicle was hit head-on by a car whose driver was speeding under the influence of alcohol and drugs; the [murder at Reims](#) in northern France of a nurse by a patient with a history of mental problems; an [arson attack at the home of a mayor](#) in the north-west town of Saint-Brevin after a hate campaign by the far-right over the creation of a hostel for asylum seekers; a number of [score-settling murders in Marseille](#) among rival gangs; [violence aimed at Members of Parliament](#) and other elected representatives made worse by the climate of resentment fuelled by the pension reform crisis.

To conflate these news stories, which have very different contexts and causes, is to concoct something fake, just like the customary stage-managing that is performed for the media when it comes to issues of law and order. It also means that the everyday hate crimes and racist violence unlocked by the rise of the far right become invisible, as they get lost in a mishmash of news stories. And it also makes one forget the feeble or late response of the state in warning about and suppressing such acts.

The reference to “decivilisation” is a diversionary tactic. According to [Le Monde](#), it was an opinion pollster who inspired this linguistic innovation during a lunch held the day before the ministerial meeting at which it was tried out. “A process of decivilisation is getting underway,” were reportedly the words of [Jérôme Fourquet](#), director of the opinion department at polling firm IFOP, who also spoke at the lunch of “tensions in all sections of society”.

The guest list for this meal, at which the president’s chief of staff and his special advisor on communications were also present, also included a [retired sociologist](#) who had been a candidate for Macron’s party, a media-friendly [university economist](#) and a [young essayist](#) who has also been a co-author with the pollster. The whole scene, both in its participants and the way events transpired, highlights the level of isolation and solitude of a president barricaded in his institutional castle, far away from the vitality and richness of French research.

What’s at stake in the coming years is the issue of civilisation.

Éric Zemmour, September 2022

Out of the comments, criticism and advice dispensed by his guests, Macron therefore retained just one word: “decivilisation”. In the current French political and media context, in which the far right has succeeded in promoting its identity-based obsessions, this is no innocent concept. Far from being a simple appeal for civic-mindedness or civility, by using this word the president is expressing concern about a civilisational decline that is apparently threatening France’s very existence.

Yet this is exactly the ideological refrain that was at the heart of a September 2022 gathering of the far-right [Reconquête](#) party founded by Éric Zemmour. “What’s at stake in the coming years is the issue of civilisation,” thundered the former presidential candidate. The vice-president of his party, Nicolas Bay, declared: “The fundamental issue that we are focussed on is the preservation of our

civilisation.”

This fantasy of decline, downfall and ruin, fuelling an irrational fear of the world and of others, of diversity and plurality, has been characteristic of far-right groups ever since they have existed, as they fight against the proclamation of equal rights and as they seek to rank humanity according to people’s origins, appearance, beliefs, sex and gender.

It is no coincidence that Renaud Camus, the inventor of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, a racist and potentially deadly ideology, is also the author of a 2011 book called ‘[Decivilisation](#)’, which considers equality to be the central cause of French misfortune.

So unless we believe he is uneducated, it is indeed this far-right political fantasy that the president of the Republic was invoking when he used this word. In fact, the far-right political family itself was convinced of this, with the Rassemblement National presidential candidate, [Marine Le Pen](#), stating that “Emmanuel Macron has once again proven [*the party’s*] point”. It was a similar story on the increasingly-extreme right wing of Les Républicains, with the president of its group in the Senate, [Bruno Retailleau](#), attacking what he called a “hatred of this civilisation that some in the West want to fuel”.

Using the same words of “barbarism” and “descent into savagery”, the Right and far-right have thus greeted this presidential brainwave by speaking similar language. Nor were they slow in seeking to link these presidential comments to [their own current attempts to raise the stakes](#) over immigration, ahead of planned new legislation on the issue. Emmanuel Macron has himself contributed to upping the ante on this subject, as well as some of his ministers, by imposing immigration as the new government priority, immediately after using Article 49-3 of the constitution to force through the pension reforms.

Whether this lexical choice was the result of calculation or improvisation, the disastrous result is the same: the endless hunt to scapegoat migrants - a diversion from what society needs, from what democracy requires and from the environmental emergency - will now be linked to a fight against “decivilisation”. And this word will drag in its wake the [old colonial vision](#) of fundamentally barbaric peoples, in contrast to those whose origins guarantees a degree of civilisation.

Norbert Elias’s concept of this had nothing to do with the precarities of everyday life conflated by Emmanuel Macron, and everything to do with the fascist ideologies of inequality and the ranking of humankind.

When faced with the anger of the Left over this clear borrowing from far-right references - and [not for the first time either](#), as shown by Marine Le Pen’s “once again” comment - the president’s supporters tried to counter this by making reference to the German sociologist [Norbert Elias](#). His major work, ‘[The Civilising Process](#)’, sought to describe how over the long term the Western world gradually learnt to control passion and violence. It is today debated as much as it is studied, with its central premises not attracting unanimous agreement. The paradox of the book is that it was first published in 1939, at the very moment that Western civilisation was in the process of producing Nazi

barbarism.

It was in another book, his last, that Norbert Elias confronted the issue of “decivilisation”. In this 1989 work, later published in English as *'The Germans'*, the sociologist revisited the catastrophe whose advent had seemed to refute the long process described in his 1939 work. Yet the concept of decivilisation here has nothing to do with the precariousities of everyday life conflated by Emmanuel Macron, and everything to do with the fascist ideologies of inequality and the ranking of humankind. In *'The Germans'* Norbert Elias painfully tackles - a Jew himself, he lost his mother in the genocide - the process of barbarism in a civilisation that gave birth to the politics of state discrimination and to racist ideologies of exclusion.

Set against the challenges now posed to our democracy by the normalisation of xenophobic, racist and authoritarian ideas, this reference to Norbert Elias is thus a misinterpretation that backfires on Emmanuel Macron by highlighting his lack of vigilance - to say the least - when faced with the far right, when he had twice been elected to block them.

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<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/280523/how-macrons-crusade-again-decivilisation-far-right-diversionary-tactic>

The original French version of this article can be found [here](#)

- English version by Michael Streeter.