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Paris riots: when police shot a teenager dead, a rumbling pressure cooker exploded

Monday 3 July 2023, by [DOWNING Joseph](#) (Date first published: 30 June 2023).

I've interviewed disaffected people across French suburbs. Their anger has been mounting for years.

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Riots broke out in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, following the lethal police shooting of a 17-year-old boy [named as Nahel M](#). An investigation into his death is ongoing but the situation has already triggered protest and anger. Whatever the investigation concludes, the incident forms part of a complex, deep-rooted problem in France.

It raises the memory of the violence that spread across the city's suburbs in 2005, lasting more than three weeks and forcing the country into a state of emergency. Many of the issues behind the unrest back then remain unresolved to this day and have potentially been aggravated by ever worsening relations between the police and the public.

During my extensive fieldwork in the suburban estates of [Paris, Lyon and Marseille](#) I have seen and heard first-hand the grievances that are now being cried out on the streets of Nanterre.

The suburbs and poverty

Certain suburbs of large French cities have, for decades, suffered from what has been labelled the worst "[hypermarginalisation](#)" in Europe. Poor-quality housing and schooling combine with geographical isolation and [racism](#) to make it virtually impossible for people to stand a chance at improving their circumstances.

Evidence has long shown that people living in poor suburbs can expect to face discrimination based on the very fact of living in those suburbs when they [apply for a job](#). Even just having a certain name on your CV can rule you out of employment thanks to [widespread racial discrimination](#).

Discontent among young people in these places has been brewing for decades as a result. The first riots of the kind currently happening in Paris took place in [Lyon](#) as far back as the 1990s.

And yet, outside moments of crisis, there appears to be practically no discussion by French leadership about how to tackle the problems that drive so much anger in the suburbs.

President Emmanuel Macron presents himself as committed to [re-industrialising](#) France and revitalising the economy. But his vision does not include any plan for using economic growth to bring opportunity to the suburbs or, viewed the other way round, to harness the potential of the suburbs to drive economic growth.

In two presidential terms, he has failed to produce a coherent policy for solving some of the [key problems of the suburbs](#).

Police brutality

Police brutality is a topic of great concern in France at the moment, beyond the Nanterre incident. Earlier this year, international human rights organisation the Council of Europe took the extraordinary step of directly lambasting the French police for [“excessive use of force”](#) during protests against Macron’s pension reforms.

Policing appears stuck in an all-or-nothing approach. In a recent interview I helped conduct for a documentary in the suburbs of Marseille, residents pointed to successive cuts to community based police officers, based in the estates, as key reasons for increases in tension between the [population and the police](#). Protests, meanwhile, are met with [tear gas](#) and [batons](#).

Successive governments have used policing to control the population to [prevent political turmoil](#), eroding the legitimacy of law enforcement along the way.

And yet, the police are extremely [hostile to reform](#), a stance that is aided and abetted by their [powerful unions](#) and Macron himself, who needs the police to [crush opposition to his reforms](#).

Macron vs Sarkozy

Former president Nicolas Sarkozy is infamous for inflaming tensions during the 2005 riots by referring to the people involved as [“scum”](#) who needed to be pressure washed from the suburbs. Macron, too, has been repeatedly criticised for striking an arrogant, tone [during his political career](#), making numerous gaffs including suggesting an unemployed worker only needed to [“cross the street” to find work](#).

However, his consiliatory response to the death of Nahel could not be further removed from Sarkozy’s stance. He has called the killing [“inexcusable”](#) and held a crisis meeting to seek a [solution to the crisis](#).

A trip to [see Elton John perform](#) while the riots occurred was perhaps not advisable and comments about young people being “intoxicated” by video games were somewhat misguided, but Macron has at least tried to calm tensions and not inflame them.

A key problem for him, however, is the diffuse, de-centralised nature of the protestors. There is no leadership to meet and negotiate with, and there are no specific demands that need to be met to defuse the tension. As in 2005, the riots are occurring spontaneously, sometimes estate by estate.

That makes escalation very difficult for the government to stop. And it underscores the need for a far more wide-reaching, thoughtful response to tackle the entrenched, decades-old problems of poor social prospects and police brutality in the suburbs of French cities.

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