



French Riots for Dummies

Franck Salameh

Self-discovery is Man measuring himself against the obstacle.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

In late June 2023, I received a text message from an American friend, an academic and specialist of the modern Middle East, wondering “What the hell [was] going on in France?” “It’s 1975 Lebanon, on a larger scale,” was my terse answer; a tale of two people, I later explained, no longer able to live together under one roof; a struggle between, on the one hand, a millennial France “Eldest Daughter of the Catholic Church” and maven of Enlightenment, Revolution, and Secularism, and, on the other hand, a young globalist (and, in this case, “Islamist”) antithesis of France, its history, culture, and republic.

This answer may shock those who prefer privileging ideological conformism and tidy *bien-pensance* to debating uncomfortable topics, those sound-bite hounds who rely solely on often perfunctory journalistic consensus to explain 1,500 years of French history—or, for that matter, France’s modern predicament with out-of-control immigration and a growing, ill-adjusted French Muslim population. But that was the quickest answer I was able to muster for a friend, a seasoned Lebanon expert to whom the 1975 Lebanese Civil War would have made perfect sense as a comparison. One illustration in particular, a scene from the Paris riots showing a masked young man trying to burn a French flag to shouts of “*Wallah, nique la France,*” was especially reminiscent of 1975 Lebanon. The snippet and its language (the Google Translate English translation is solid) would replay themselves throughout the June–July 2023 French riots—just as such scenes had become commonplace in the years and months leading up to Lebanon’s civil war.

Notwithstanding the comparison to the Lebanese experience, which many may dispute, the answer I gave was also the fruit of my long years of courtship, of intimate communion with France, of cogitation and observation—not to say “France-stalking”—both in close proximity and from a distance. For more than forty years now, I have been a France watcher, a disciple, one might say, often a long-term resident of Paris who’d spent a good part of his life walking the city’s quaint cobblestoned alleys, caressing its ancient stones, frequenting its cafés and

An Essay from The Caravan Notebook

bookstores like one courts a beloved, daydreaming in its cathedrals, sitting in prayerful contemplation in its millennial churches, breathing the air of the centuries, listening to the dainty silence left behind by generations past.

But for forty years I have also been watching France's transformation, its degradation, its looming demise losing touch with the *Douce France* of Charles Trenet, the fancy of my younger years, the France that I savored and learned to love in my history books, in my summer readings of Proust, Molière, Daudet, Saint-Exupéry. . . . Yet, that France of the "thousand cathedrals" that one Victor Hugo—a "social justice warrior" in a very good way—transmitted to children of my generation, the one that I wished to transmit to my own children, seems to have run its course, ostensibly warranting the calumny and hostility thrown its way in some quarters, on account of alleged racism and discrimination against French Muslim populations. Indeed, feigning discerning explanations of failures uniquely Gallic, a cavalcade of America's authoritative media outlets, from the *New York Times* to CNN and *Newsweek*, somehow deemed it journalistically edifying to normalize cheap sound bites and clichés, finding for instance a "George Floyd moment" in urban riots triggered by a police shooting of a young Frenchman of North African extraction. Yet, as compared to the United States, France is a country molded by a different history, formed by distinctive experiences, and informed by unique conceptions of identity, citizenship, republican responsibility, and secularism. What is more, depicting hordes of adolescent vandals rampaging with abandon as beatific "social justice warriors," and sanctifying a shooting victim who was also a repeat offender "known to French authorities" as an innocent "angel," smack of both moral and journalistic dishonesty. Loss of human life, a young human life, is a tragedy in any context. But crass jingles for ratings, and misleading oversimplifications, likewise cheapen and defile human life.

THE RIOTS EXPLAINED

On Tuesday, June 27, Nahel Merzouk, a seventeen-year-old Frenchman of Algerian descent—it is illegal in France to publicly divulge a person's religious affiliation—was killed at the conclusion of a police chase that might have otherwise remained a routine traffic stop. As details of the events that led to the young man's shooting began to emerge, French authorities disclosed that he was driving without a license—his fifth such violation since 2021—in a rented luxury vehicle, and that he had minutes earlier refused to comply with police orders to stop. This led to a high-speed chase around the Paris suburb of Nanterre, ending in the young man getting stuck in traffic. When confronted by police again—this time including repeated instructions to shut off his car engine—he still refused to comply, at one point driving off with a police officer still clinging to his car window, culminating in the tragic shooting.

What followed was a weeklong orgy of urban riots, vandalism, looting, arson, and wanton violence unleashed on police headquarters, government buildings, schools, municipalities, private property, and cultural centers throughout France. Although the five days of rage that ensued resulted in only one death—that of a firefighter—and most injuries remained limited to police officers—more than seven hundred were hurt by July 2—the cost in physical damage in major metropolises stretching from Paris to Marseille reached over one billion euros.

On Wednesday, June 28, rather than calling for calm, and in an apparent attempt to exploit the tragedy for political gain, about twenty deputies from the far-left New Ecological and Social Popular Union coalition (NUPES) gathered outside the French National Assembly to “demand justice.” At the prodding of its chief spokesman, the deputy of the France Unbowed party (LFI), Jean-Luc Mélenchon, NUPES parliamentarians pledged to march alongside protesters, keep pressure on police and the government, question the official version of events leading up to the fatal shooting, and refrain from calling on rioters to stop until justice was served. In a tweet on that same day, Mélenchon vituperated French authorities, whom he referred to as “pit bulls, commanding us to call for calm. We call for justice, [and] there shall be no peace without justice.” When French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin took Mélenchon to task for his inflammatory statements that essentially egged on the rioters, Mélenchon stuck to his guns, dismissing Darmanin as a “deplorable, incompetent, irresponsible” politician.¹

Mélenchon was not that far off the mark. French politicians on both sides of the aisle have indeed shown remarkable incompetence and dishonesty, not only in this instance, but in fact for the past four decades, opting for mutism in face of mounting popular discontent with immigration policies, and marking the question of French Islam as “off-limits.” The irony, however, is that Mélenchon himself has been the poster child of this incompetence, persisting in denying obvious links between the urban violence he often stokes and the unbridled, out-of-control immigration that he favors. Indeed, the latest spates of violence and destruction of “republican symbols” are only the more recent symptoms of an old French malady gone untreated: unwieldy bureaucracy, open borders, failed assimilation policies instead favoring ambiguous “integration,” and a national educational system more concerned with inculcating self-hate and resentment of France’s colonial past than molding young minds into critical thinkers able to read, write, do basic math, learn about, and—why not—appreciate their country’s storied history, and practice a modicum of civics and civility. This malaise, French minister François-Xavier Bellamy noted in a *Le Figaro* editorial, is the result of eighteen-year-olds unable to read their own language, “growing up in this country without attempting to learn about it, get to know it, master its basics of knowledge. How can this not lead to utter disintegration?”² This laxity, argues French philosopher and public intellectual Michel Onfray, is setting France on the path to a civil war whose first salvos have already been fired, what he called a “guerre civile à bas bruit,” or a “hushed civil war,” bound to become a full-fledged national conflagration.³ Franco-Moroccan author Driss Ghali agrees, proposing a similar evaluation, describing the riots as symptomatic of a Muslim separatist project: a battle over a historically “French territory contested by two civilizations at odds with one another,” a project that will inexorably conclude with “either separation, or the neutralization of the alien civilization.”⁴

To be clear, the June–July 2023 rioters attacking French institutions and destroying public and private property were Frenchmen, not foreigners. The deceased boy was a Frenchman of Algerian descent—a Franco-Algerian—and those raging (ostensibly) on his behalf were in the main Franco-Algerians, the progeny of generations of ill-adjusted immigrants who might have come to France for socioeconomic reasons, but not without carrying in their luggage animus and political resentments, begrudging France’s colonial past, persisting in dwelling on old injuries, oblivious to the fact that France not only excelled in colonial pursuits but in fact also invented the very antithesis of colonialism, the critical analysis of colonialism,

and the academic field of postcolonial studies. But when Algeria itself, sixty-one years after its independence, declares its war against France “not yet over,” continues to paint France as the incarnation of evil, exhorts French authorities to fully assume their duty of protecting *the Algerians of France* in their *host country*, this ought to give pause to Frenchmen and fully assimilated immigrants, Algerians in particular. Indeed, such language leaves little doubt as to the Franco-Algerians’ own conceptions of themselves, and their country of origin’s view of them. This is all summed up in the term “Algerians of France” (as opposed to, say, “French of Algerian descent” or “Franco-Algerians”), and their referring to France as their “host country” (rather than “their country” *tout court*). This casts a veil of ambiguity over the national allegiances of Franco-Algerians, establishing Algeria’s own view of them as Algerian and *not* French nationals. Ironically, much of this abiding resentment has recently resurfaced, with the Algerian government restituting to the country’s national anthem a Francophobic stanza that had been previously omitted, with lyrics reading “O France, the time of castigation has passed, / We have long since turned this page, / O France, this is the Day of Reckoning / So, prepare and take the answer from us, / In our Revolution there is determination, / And we have resolved that Algeria shall live. . . .”

And so, “No, the Algerian War has not ended,” writes tongue-in-cheek Franco-Algerian novelist Boualem Sansal, and Algeria’s official anti-France animus has not yet subsided. Indeed, Sansal goes on to note caustically, mocking the Algeria of his birth, that Algerians demand an official public French act of contrition, and “compensation in the amount of 100 billion Euros . . . [with additional] lawsuits to be brought by individual Algerian citizens against the French administration for damages suffered by their ancestors. After that, we can discuss peace.”⁵ Notwithstanding Sansal’s derisive tone, Franco-Algerian anti-French resentments are real, and the “*Wallah, nique la France*” moment mentioned earlier seems more endemic than accidental. Indeed, Driss Ghali dismisses out of hand the journalistic consensus about the riots being the result of “poverty, social dislocation, inequality, or racial discrimination,” noting that “the rioters did not loot supermarkets, but instead despoiled Nike and Apple stores,” and not to the cries of “we are hungry” but to rabidly “anti-France chants and incitements to violence against fellow Frenchmen.”⁶ In sum, the riots were nothing if not symptoms of a struggle between an old, timorous France, ashamed of its history, afraid to revel in its cultural accretions, and another France of the banlieues, resentful of its republic’s past, rejecting its very existence, deeming it racist, intolerant, detestable, and wishing to do battle against it.

FRANCE EXPLAINED

But what is France’s problem with religion? With Islam in particular? But also with Judaism, Christianity, and every other proselytizing religion? France’s *laïcité* is not simply secularism, nor is it the “separation of church and state” that the average American may be accustomed to. Unlike France, the United States of America was not founded in the aftermath of a revolution against a Catholic Church. In France, the Revolution not only yielded the end of a monarchy, it also led to the destruction of religious symbols, the banishment of the Church from French public and political life, and the clergy’s fall from grace. There are no such stories of

“rebellion against a Church” in the annals of American history. There is in fact the opposite. The United States was founded by Protestant pilgrims, refugees from Europe escaping religious persecution, who ultimately established a state that would guarantee them religious freedom.

French *laïcité*, by contrast, is complete absence of religion from the public sphere—in other words, freedom *from* religion instead of America’s freedom *of* religion. Thus, the separation of church and state in the French understanding, and the application of the concept, is the rejection of orthopraxy and the relegation of religion to the private sphere; it is Matthew 6:5–6 on steroids versus America’s fervent religious flag waving. To put it simply, French “secularism” is a synonym for “discretion in the practice of religion,” whereas American “secularism” involves ostentation in religious practice and the unbridled public display of religious symbols. Another way to say it is that the French Republic was established to protect government from religion, whereas the American Republic was founded to protect religion from government. That is partly why “In God We Trust” emblazons our national currency, our presidents get sworn in on family Bibles and brandish “God Bless America” every chance they get, and our justice system, state seals, and university mottoes are all redolent with biblical references. That is why Americans, by and large, and American media in particular, may feel justified badgering the French—in this most recent instance of riots specifically—about their supposed “racism” and “Islamophobia” in dealing with overwhelmingly Muslim immigrant populations. Yet at issue is less France’s inability (or unwillingness) to accommodate Islam than French Islam’s inability to accept and accommodate France’s secular republican values.

Such a dilemma would of course be unheard of in an American context and would therefore be incomprehensible. And so whereas, say, the Muslim veil in public may be deemed a supreme symbol of “religious freedom” in an American context, in France it is considered an inappropriate, even illegal, religious invasion of the secular public space. And while it may be comforting, and intelligible, for Americans to explain France’s recent upheavals in terms of socially underprivileged non-White minorities revolting against a state’s instruments of racism, French Muslims’ frustrations with the French Republic have at their heart supremely religious and cultural grievances—to be exact, Muslim values incompatible with France’s experience with *laïcité*, Muslim values that French Muslims are unwilling to relinquish in return for citizenship. Yet, relinquishing elements of oneself is exactly what previous generations of other immigrants had done for generations, in France as elsewhere. Indeed, that is what is ordinarily expected of all generations of immigrants—“assimilation,” as the French say, *not* “integration”; *venir d’ailleurs et devenir d’ici*, which is to say, “to hail from elsewhere and become from over here.” Lax immigration policies, or inadequate French policies to facilitate assimilation, might have played a role in some Muslim communities’ unease with an onerous (nonreligious) Frenchness. But by the same token, French Islam cannot be held harmless either; the onus is always on the immigrants to negotiate and integrate the culture of their host society.

Of course, cultures and cultural rituals—even for a millennial collective like France—are not static. Cultures evolve, identities adapt, and memories change. Even history itself is written

and rewritten often to suit the arrogance of the present. But there are sacrosanct essentials in the life of a nation. There is a modicum of Frenchness despite the regional, ethnic, and religious diversity that characterizes France. In that sense, there is a France of the Rooster—a reference to the French word *coq* and its Latin equivalent *gallus*, with the latter’s English cognate *Gaul*. But there is also a France of the Cross, the Eldest Daughter of the Catholic Church, the manifestly Christian France of even French atheists who defend Christianity as a cultural symbol. Michel Onfray reminds us in this context that French cultural and literary icons spanning the centuries, like Rabelais, Montaigne, and Voltaire, were all Christian; that ultimately all that is ancient and modern in France issues from France’s Judeo-Christian foundations; that France’s fascination with Cartesian values, critical thinking, enlightenment, liberalism, universal art, love of allegory, love of images (iconophilia), irreverence, symbolism, hermeneutics, secularism, blasphemy, even France’s atheism and freedom *from* religion, are all the offspring of Christianity and Christendom.⁷ This is nowhere better expressed than in French poet André Suarès’s expression that “churchgoing or not, the French have the Gospels coursing in their veins.” Suarès was incidentally of Portuguese descent.

In this same spirit, another atheist Frenchman *and* offspring of immigration (*issue de l’immigration*, as the French say) published a distressingly “Christian” op-ed on the day after the accidental fire at the iconic Notre-Dame de Paris in 2019. As a non-Christian, Fabrice Luchini noted that he would always remain heartbroken, orphaned, disoriented by the loss of what had been to him a supreme symbol of Frenchness. “I am not a Christian,” he stressed, but for years, for decades, he claimed, he’d been watching the world around him, scrutinizing Notre-Dame, opening his eyes to its beauty, teaching him how to look, how to see, how to appreciate and savor the charms of a quotidian French life that might have become mundane to him. Notre-Dame, noted Luchini, was one of those stunning French beauties that he might have come to take for granted, but it was always a companion, always an accomplice, silent perhaps, reserved in its elegance, reticent, yet “a confirmation and affirmation, always a pledge and consolation,” an awesome symbol not only of France and Frenchness, but of Western civilization. Even if one is not a Christian, concluded Luchini, even if one were, like him, an avowedly atheist humanist who had long since ceased being Christian, one ought to remember that France itself remains Christian, if not in form and practice then in essence and by tradition and history.⁸

Similarly, speaking in a televised interview on France 2 in the fall of 2015, French member of the Académie Française Alain Finkielkraut, also the son of immigrants (in his case, Polish Jewish refugees), described France and Frenchness as a complex of rich millennial, intellectual, artistic, and Catholic traditions broadly defined by luminaries such as

La Fontaine, Blaise Pascal, Charles Péguy, Jean Racine, Monet, Matisse, and Saint-Saëns among others. . . . France is characterized by its ancient stones, its emblematic vineyards, its churches, its cafés, its iconic Deux-Cheveaux Citroën automobile, its châteaux, its Louis de Funès, Charles Trenet, Édith Piaf, and Serge Gainsbourg. . . . France is ultimately the *république*, a single indivisible republic, a millennial civilization that deserves, nay demands, to be accommodated, nurtured, and transmitted.⁹

In sum, Finkelkraut's France was unapologetically that of the millenarian Notre-Dame and the supersonic Concorde: France of the Rooster and the Cross; a secular France spawned and molded by its Catholic past; a Catholic edifice giving rise to modern France's revolutionaries, organized labor, trade unions, syndicates, professional guilds, teachers, philosophers, carpenters, inventors, sculptors, and writers. In this spirit of the refractory Gaul, a harsh March 5, 1959, Charles de Gaulle declaration did not mince words, and may not sit well sixty years later with modern "woke" pieties. But it speaks to historical realities that only ideological straitjackets may seek to dismiss. "Those lecturing me on integration are certified morons," wrote de Gaulle:

It is to our credit as Frenchmen to be among Black, Brown, and Yellow Frenchmen; this is eloquent validation of France's openness to all ethnicities; part and parcel of France's universalist vocation. But this ought to remain the case so long as [French minorities] remain minorities. Otherwise France would cease being France. It ought to be said plainly, unambiguously, the French are after all a European, White people, issuing from a Greco-Roman-Christian civilization. Let us not kid ourselves! . . . Do you really believe that this France can absorb ten million Muslims today, who may become twenty million tomorrow, and forty million the day after tomorrow? . . . If this were to happen, my native village would cease being Colombey-les-Deux-Églises to become Colombey-les-Deux-Mosquées.¹⁰

Daring to spout unvarnished realities in such language today, de Gaulle would be "canceled," tarred a racist, an Islamophobe, a xenophobe. And yet, he was stating the obvious in 1960s France—that France was French; a child of a millennial civilization; a carrier of values that are the outcome of a millennial history; a nation, a civilization, a country that ought to not become a boardinghouse, a caravansary open to every passerby, every newcomer. In his telling, France was and ought to remain a *terre d'accueil* (a host country), but it ought to remain true to its history and its memory. Still, under the weight of massive uncontrolled immigration, France seems overwhelmed today, exsanguinous, ashamed of its culture, embarrassed by its history and its memory, deeming it less onerous to kowtow to newcomers who are unwilling to assimilate. Yet, as Victor Hugo notes, France "is synonymous with the Cosmos"; it is a gentle homeland, a civilization whose language speaks in universal tongues; it is a Greece and Rome at once; an ancient Mediterranean and a Jerusalem; a "promised land abbreviating all civilizations," owed adulation and conservation, not eradication.¹¹

IMMIGRATION EXPLAINED: A CONCLUSION

In the end, France *does* have a founding community, a distinct indigenous culture that is worthy of being preserved, perpetuated, respected. And outsiders who want in (the process ought to be simple) have an obligation to assimilate into those founding cultures and adopt—even expropriate—those founding cultures' symbols and historical accretions, not seek to erase and replace them. The fashionable, narcissistic *bien-pensance* of our times would pull back in horror at the preceding suggestions. But the dismay of the decent ought to be the horror of watching the collapse of the France of yore, unable to intervene to prevent its

dismantlement. Immigration is after all a marriage between immigrant and host, a marriage in the Catholic sense: a sacrament, not merely a contract; a marriage bound by a willingness, a desire to become one; a devoted understanding, a sacred obligation, an act of faith on the part of an outsider to become one with the insider, to melt into the culture, the mores, the history of the host society.

All immigrants are at some point outsiders wanting in; outsiders who may face disheartening challenges in new, alien, alienating societies, but who are expected (*willing*) to assimilate the ways of the dominant culture. I am persuaded that my own Lebanese example (I came to the United States as a war refugee) is not unique, and I believe that I would have replicated my American experience in France had I picked France as *pays d'accueil*. The immigrant's initial difficult period of adjustment ought to begin by "sucking it up," working hard, learning the language, hustling, then proceeding to making contributions to the host society, enriching it, assimilating its values, and aiming to "become somebody" in its social, political, intellectual, and cultural life. This is the sine qua non of immigration: "coming from elsewhere, and becoming from over here"; becoming locals, natives, expropriating "our Founding Fathers"; getting tearful goose bumps listening to Whitney Houston's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" on a Fourth of July, and, in my own case, hearing my heart pounding with pride at a US port of entry, seeing my American passport getting stamped by an immigration officer blurting out "Welcome home."

I will conclude with another personal intrusion, a piece of unsolicited advice to my fellow immigrants and refugees who are still having a hard time assimilating into their host societies. Immigration and exile are above all assimilation. There is no other way. To the Bostonian in me, assimilation is a daily period of mourning, a stroll along the River Charles, where bits of my old self get tossed over and into the Boston Harbor, making room for new memories, a new identity, a new language, and all the baggage that comes with it. Echoing this attitude, Charles Aznavour, another Frenchman who was also a product of immigration, a child of refugees and survivors of the Armenian Genocide who became one of the building blocks of modern French culture, stressed that French identity is earned, not given. Redolent of Ernest Renan's *What Is a Nation?*, Aznavour noted that "Being French is a choice"—that one may very well be born a Frenchman and still never become French, because being French remains above all a choice. "I became French first and foremost in my head," he said in a 2013 interview. "I became French in my head, in my heart, in my manner of being, in the language that I speak, in discarding a massive part of my Armenian origins to make room for France, for the benefit of France. . . . One must do this, or one must simply go away."¹²

NOTES

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3. *Punchline*, Michel Onfray interviewed by Laurence Ferrari, originally aired July 2023, Europe 1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njm9kBr6xKE>.
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11. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables, Tome II* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1972), 130–34.
12. "Charles Aznavour: 'Être français, ça se mérite,'" *Le Parisien*, October 24, 2013, <https://www.leparisien.fr/archives/etre-francais-ca-se-merite-24-10-2013-3254157.php>.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



FRANCK SALAMEH

Franck Salameh is professor of Near Eastern studies and chair of the Department of Eastern, Slavic, and German Studies at Boston College. His work centers primarily on Levantine minorities and the history of ideas and political thought in the modern Middle East, with special focus on Arabism, Zionism, Islam, France and the Francophonie, and French missionaries in the East.

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Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

