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Sarkozy's Strategy of Violence

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“Bring the War home.” Here was a slogan that resonated throughout the Vietnam War era. It was a good formula, and temporarily successful in that it expressed and reinforced combativeness on the part of those who contested the war. The idea was that the anti-war movement must force the state to confront, within the United States and other western, industrialized countries, a mirror image of its imperialist actions abroad.

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In France, today, this idea is taking a surprising turn. It is the French president who is bringing the war home.

One of the particularities of France has been that the propensity to go out into the streets to fight oppressive institutions is accepted as part of a long established political tradition. This is still the case. But another particularity of this country is the tradition of state repression. If the contemporary history of France is punctuated by revolts and revolutions, it should not be forgotten that bloody crushing of popular movements followed the events of 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871 and 1936. Overseas, the French military carried out genocidal “pacifications” of populations in Indochina, Morocco, Algeria and Madagascar that have been emulated by other imperialist states, with the United States in the lead.

In a country once called the “political laboratory of the world” (by Karl Marx), the present French government is quickening the pace towards the creation of a “police state” in which the forces of repression are not only centralized but also militarized in the strictest sense of the word. The French state is now perfecting its police power in dealing with “civil disturbances” by militarizing population control.

There are two models for this effort. The first is the USA PATRIOT ACT that centralized “intelligence” agencies under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security and erased the distinction between international intervention and domestic policing. The second is the organization of the national security forces in Israel, where the operative principle is the occupation of hostile territory.

The most serious step in the centralization and militarization of the police occurred in July 2010. It was then that the National Assembly enacted into law Nicolas Sarkozy’s proposal to give the Ministry of the Interior financial control over the famous Gendarmes, traditionally considered to be part of military defense, but in reality acting outside the cities as a law enforcement force.

From 1921, the *Gendarmerie* gained special status as a special military corps with an ambiguous kind of autonomy. They were not called upon to engage in crowd control or in real military operations. They are part of the military establishment, but not the regular army. In general, the gendarmes have enjoyed a reputation as being relatively independent of political interference. Since the 1960s—and a series of incredibly popular films starring the beloved Louis de Funès—the gendarmes entered contemporary folklore as the most respected law enforcement agency in France.

But now their independence is seriously compromised, and so will be the respect in which they are held. Not only has Sarkozy proposed that a contingent of Gendarmes be sent to Afghanistan, his incorporation of them into the police means that the distinction upheld until now between public service and repression of the population is effectively obliterated.

Sarkozy has also instituted a quota system—a set of quantitative performance standards—that has pushed the police to arrest people in ever-increasing numbers.

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Now, in France, people can be held in detention for 24 to 48 hours without being formally charged, a practice called *garde à vue* (provisional detention). The idea is that, during this time, the police will be able to question and investigate a suspect without interference. In other words, in the absence of any principle of *habeas corpus*, detention is used to extract confessions or to simply punish those who show lack of respect for police authority.

In recent years the practice has reached such proportions that citizens groups have been created to act against it. In 2009, approximately 900,000 people were detained in this way (out of a population of 65 million). This is almost double the number so detained during the year previous to Sarkozy's election in May 2007. It is frequent that the police beat people who express indignation when they are arrested or incarcerated. It is invariably claimed that they violently resisted, injuring a policeperson, who then files a complaint against the real victim. Protesting by-standers also frequently receive this treatment. As Amnesty International observed in its annual reports of 2005 and 2009: "Amnesty International must conclude that, at the present time in France, law-enforcement agents enjoy practical impunity."

The connection with Israel is paramount in Sarkozy's project. Although no official pronouncements have been made, a highly respected weekly newspaper, *Le Canard enchaîné*, has reported rumors from the ranks of French internal security forces that the Israeli national police, the 26,000-member-strong Mishtara, is now the model, given its fusion of population control, policing powers, intelligence activities and counter-terrorism operations.

Already in 2005, after days of insurrection in some French suburbs, Israeli experts in urban counter-guerilla operations reportedly visited Paris, presumably at the behest of the French authorities (Sarkozy was then Minister of the Interior). In June 2010, it was reported that officers of the Israeli army participated in combat simulations in France and that their French counterparts would soon go to Israel "for combat training in inhabited zones".

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Israeli technology is another dimension of this collaboration, although it is not yet considered that the French population is ready to accept some of the more interesting innovations. For example, the Shofar (Hebrew for a trumpet made of a ram's horn), an Israeli "sound cannon" that emits a noise comparable to a fighter jet flying directly over your head (145 decibels) was rejected. Colonel Didier Quenelle of the Gendarmerie in the Saint Astier (Dordogne) training center explained to Hacène Belmessous in January 2010 (cited in Belmessous' book *Opération Banlieues*, 2010) that he refused to test the device. However, Quenelle's new superiors have not ruled it out. "We concluded that many demonstrators of different ages would be injured and that the capacity of our fellow citizens to accept such a tool seems problematical," it was said in an official report, which nevertheless went on to call for tests. "Rubber bullets", on the other hand, have been accepted.

Why is the French government gearing up for combat operations in cities? In part it is due to the phobias and activism of Nicolas Sarkozy, although the structural instability of the French economy and expected social explosions—such as those breaking out in Greece, England, Ireland and elsewhere—underlie the general situation.

In fact, Nicolas Sarkozy has now been responsible for law enforcement in France for more than eight years. And since he became Minister of the Interior in 2002, police brutality has been increasing. It is therefore not surprising that "security" issues are central in his policies. Ignoring any criticism that he is responsible for the growing insecurity, his tactic is to claim that crime is on the increase and that penalties must be increased. For him, those who protest against police actions are irresponsible at best, and likely part of the problem in some more substantive way.

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Here is a sketchy chronicle of some of Sarkozy's more recent exploits.

On October 26, 2005, still minister of the interior, but already campaigning for the presidency, Sarkozy made a surprise visit to the suburban town of Argenteuil to visit the local police station. Objective: to show his unqualified support for the police. Finding himself hassled by 200 young residents, but surrounded by riot police guards, he declared to the ubiquitous cameras that he was going to get rid of this “*racaille*” (literally “scum”), meaning the young people of the suburbs where working-class people are concentrated including, naturally, a high proportion of immigrant workers of different generations and their children.

The next day, in Clichy-sous-Bois, another suburban community, two teenagers were electrocuted trying to hide from police behind a wire fence enclosing an electrical power transformer. The police claimed they were investigating thieves but did not chase the boys, a claim denied by witnesses whose testimony was subsequently confirmed. The boys were playing soccer when approached, and ran because of a generalized fear of the police and the all-too-frequent interrogations inflicted on young males in the neighborhood. Six days of rioting ensued during which the police and residents engaged in continuous clashes.

After Sarkozy was elected president on May 6, 2007, three nights of rioting followed in cities throughout France during which 1,400 automobiles were burned, store windows were smashed and other damage occasioned.

On November 25, 2007, riots broke out in Villiers-le-Bel, another suburb north of Paris. Two nights of combat between the police and young residents followed the deaths of two teenagers on a mini motorcycle when a pursuing police patrol car ran into them. (It later came out that the police had lied about the speed their vehicle was traveling when it ran over the teenagers.) Around 100 police and firemen were injured. Shots were fired at the police from high-rise buildings.

In response to the events of the previous November, on February 18, 2008 33 people were arrested at dawn by no less than 1,100 police of different types who converged on a residential complex composed of high-rise apartment buildings. The consequences are telling for the pursuit of justice. Six months later, in July 2010, five of the 33 young people arrested were sentenced to 3 to 5 years in prison on the strength of testimony from one anonymous informer who received a monetary bounty for his or her efforts.

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But here a paradox must be mentioned. After all, Sarkozy was elected by 54% of those voting in the May 2007 election. And there were many people in the suburbs believing Sarkozy would take action to make their neighborhoods more secure. In reality, he was largely responsible for this violence. What people didn't understand is that Sarkozy needs to be able to point to insecurity in order to justify his repressive and regressive policies.

This has now changed. Sarkozy is less popular with such people, but it is too late. Now he has an absolute majority in the National Assembly, where his proposed laws and policies are rubber-stamped.

Yet even before the election Sarkozy was unpopular with people in general. After five years of Sarkozy as Minister of the Interior—or the *premier flic* (tr. “top cop”) in France—most residents in the poor suburbs already understood. The 35% who voted for him there certainly helped push him over the top and win the election. But the others detest him to the point that Sarkozy has been unable to visit their neighborhoods for fear of causing riots.

This is now true everywhere in France. Wherever Sarkozy goes, poor suburb or not, the area he visits is emptied and sealed-off from the population. When a crowd is needed, people are generally recruited from his political party—the UMP, Union for a Popular Movement—and the participants are given “invitations” that allow them to go through police barriers! Everyone else—quite rightly considered potential protesters—are held blocks away behind police barricades. Tear gas and clubs are used in the event of attempts to break through the barriers.

The demonstrations against the reform of the retirement system in October and November 2010 provided additional evidence of militarizing urban population control. In Lyon, the second largest city in France, scenes of guerilla warfare were enacted by hundreds of robocops pitted against adolescents from the suburbs who came especially to fight the police. Estimates range from 1,300 to 1,600 youths of both sexes present at any one time who joined the tens of thousands of people protesting against the regressive reforms. It appears as if the government wishes to provoke this combat so as to advance military control over the population.

At times during these events, the police completely enclosed the central square in Lyon—the Place Bellecour—refusing to let people leave. The technique of sealing off areas has also been used in Paris and other cities in recent demonstrations. Sometimes people, unable to leave the area, are forced into underground subway stations, only to find riot police waiting for them when they arrive.

The night of June 24, 2010, Sarkozy made an unannounced midnight visit to the suburban city of St. Denis (north of Paris) with television cameras in tow for the best photo ops. A young (21 years old) black man happened to see him and immediately called out: “*Va te faire enculer, connard! C’est chez moi ici!*” (tr. “Go fuck yourself, asshole! This is where I live!”). Police guards immediately jumped on him. The young man’s nose was broken and he was arrested. A cameraman working for one of the public television channels was also struck when he tried to film the scene.

It is possible that Sarkozy was not displeased with this incident. The insult proffered him by a young black man with (it was later learned) an Arabic name can be presented as more evidence that young residents of the “ethnic” ghettos are cultural (if not “racial”) barbarians having no respect for institutions and their representatives. Moreover, the young man openly claimed that his neighborhood is off-limits to the French president. So much the better, Sarkozy may have thought: it justifies his crusade to momentarily capture territory and create the illusion of pacifying the rabble.

And this is the whole point: Sarkozy and his government are re-conceptualizing the territory of France into occupied and unoccupied zones. Like other heads of state, he needs a permanent war against an ill-defined but stigmatized enemy in order to justify his authority. It is significant that military planners are now re-evaluating the role of the French army in the “battle of Algiers” in the late 1950s. Long considered a model for Israel in the Occupied Territories of Palestine, and for the United States in Iraq, the lessons of the murderous occupation of the Casbah in Algiers are now taken positively by strategists in France, for France.

What is really the problem in the French suburbs? Well, it was announced on December 14, 2010 that 43% of young males and 37% of young females in the suburban cities are unemployed. Here is where “ethnic” youth (overwhelmingly born in France) with few future prospects are concentrated, and this is the population Sarkozy has designated as scapegoats.

In 2002, Sarkozy ended the policy of the previous (socialist) government of providing more police presence in the neighborhoods with the objectives of integrating the police into the local community and reducing tensions. Instead, Sarkozy has pulled police out of the suburban ghettos, preferring to make punitive military “incursions” into them. By now, it should be clear why.

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Post-scriptum :

Larry Portis has just published *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme? Un phénomène social d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (What is Fascism? A Social Phenomenon Yesterday and Today). He can be reached at larry.portis at orange.fr

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