

Chalk and Cheese: Different Reactions to Teen Deaths in France Reveal Underlying Tensions



by Theodore Dalrymple

The murder of a 16-year-old boy at an annual village party in rural France has revealed with stark clarity the tensions that lie near the surface not only of French society, but that of several European countries.

No one had heard of the village of Crépol in the southeast of France until a gang of about 10 youths and young men from a housing project called La Monnaie, 12 miles away, descended on the party and, armed with knives, stabbed a 16-year-old called Thomas to death and wounded several others, two seriously. Soon, everyone in France had heard of Crépol.

The gang had reportedly tried to gain entry to the party, but a security guard stood in their way. (It surely tells us something about modern society that a party in rural France *needs* a security guard.) He was attacked, and some of the partygoers rushed to defend him. The gang then allegedly started to stab everyone they could reach, and they stabbed Thomas fatally in the heart and throat. The gang then fled. Initially, the episode was presented to the French public as the kind of dispute that often breaks out where young men gather to flirt, drink, and dance. It was officially denied that the attackers came from a single housing project, but no one believed it. Moreover, everyone suspected the ethnic origins and religion of the attackers from the outset.

Official information was released in dribs and drabs. The police soon found and arrested the alleged attackers. Some were evidently trying to leave the country. Some had criminal records for a variety of crimes, and it's a fair bet that they had committed far more than they had ever been accused of. A minister let the cat out of the bag when he said that none of the suspects had a French-sounding name. Everyone knew what *that* meant: that the suspects were of North African origin. They were said to be of French *nationality* with mothers of French *nationality*, with the implication that they were not just French.

A regional newspaper, Le Dauphiné, interviewed two witnesses present at the event, who claimed that they heard one of the attackers say, "We've come to kill whites." This evidence hasn't been tested in court and must therefore be taken with a pinch of salt. Another hypothesis is that the gang came to settle scores with an individual attending the party; but it's also possible that they were inspired by Hamas's incursion into Israel. More than a week later, there's much that remains unclear about the case, but which is probably known to the authorities.

The official denial that the gang came entirely from La Monnaie was soon followed by revelations of what life was like there. By day it seemed calm enough, but at night it became

dangerous. Cars were burnt, and there were loud vehicle rodeos. There was an ongoing turf war between the drug lords of La Monnaie and the much larger fiefdom of Valence, a city of 130,000 people, which was trying to absorb it into its territory. In drug turf wars, violence is the method of making a takeover bid. Of course, the principal, chronic victims of the failure of the authorities to impose order on places like La Monnaie, of which there are now hundreds, are the residents themselves. They're obliged to live by the social, or anti-social, order created by psychopaths.

It's obvious by the response of the authorities to the events in Crépol that they were, and remain, very nervous, fearing the development of something like a race or religious war. The so-called far right has, of course, made much of the difference in the reaction between the death of another teenager, Nahel, and that of Thomas. It's meat and drink to them.

The contrast with the case of Nahel Merzouk, who was shot dead by police in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, in June this year, is striking and not reassuring. Nahel was shot while driving a car with foreign registration plates that was "rented," though he was without a driving license and therefore without insurance. He was driving fast in a lane forbidden to cars and refused to obey an order of the police to stop. When, finally, he had to stop because of traffic conditions, the police caught up with him, and one of them shot him dead at point-blank range.

This was a gross and even possibly criminal overreaction on the part of the policeman (though the case has yet to come to court), but clearly Nahel, who might have changed with time, was no respecter of the law. He had in the past repeatedly refused to stop when ordered by the police, and if he had no formal criminal convictions, it was possibly because, under French law (as in many other jurisdictions), there's little point in prosecuting minors for non-serious offenses. A

prosecution involves huge labor for little or no result, practical or even symbolic.

Whether unlawful killing by an agent of the state is worse, morally, than an unlawful killing by an unsocialized (or anti-socialized) gang of young men, I leave for others to decide, but there's no doubt that the reaction to the two cases was as chalk to cheese. After Nahel's death, there has been much lamentation and very little else besides; after Nahel's death, 5,000 vehicles and 1,000 buildings were burned or damaged, 250 police stations attacked, and 700 police officers injured. The disproportion is evident. On the one side restraint; on the other unbridled self-righteous violence.

The prospect that the restraint might one day be replaced by a similar rage, all the more volcanic for having been for long repressed, must haunt the authorities who, at the same time, must know that the responsibility for having created this situation in the first place is theirs. It's they who for years, or decades, have tried to smooth away the problem by emollient words and slogans that were vacuous where they were not outright false.

The fear in France, as in other countries in Europe, is that it's too late to do anything about it. I have therefore encountered two reactions to the situation: gloom and despair on the one hand, and denial that there's a serious problem on the other. Neither points to a solution.

First published in the [*Epoch Times*](#).