

“These young people aren’t celebrating together. They aren’t building anything. They aren’t defending any idea. They’re destroying.”

by Marie-Estelle Dupont,* France



Marie-Estelle Dupont.
(Picture crédit
Anthony Quittot)

(CH-S) France has long been familiar with violent riots following major events, even when, for example, a football match has ended in victory for the French team. Nationwide, 22,000 police officers were recently deployed; hundreds of rioters were arrested; and there was widespread damage to property and several injuries.

The author of the following article examines the causes of these outbreaks of violence and concludes that they are primarily the result of a misguided understanding of authority in upbringing, education and the justice system’s approach to violence. Her conclusion: curbing violence requires changes across the board.

* * *

Ms Dupont, football victories used to be a cause for celebration. Today, many French people dread the night after the match. Why is that?

It really saddens me deeply. This is no longer the France of my childhood. Many families are now withdrawing from public life because they fear violence. And not just after football matches. In Paris today, any major event has become a security risk.

How do you explain the young people’s desire to cause destruction?

I believe that, over decades, we have weakened the very institutions that should provide young people with guidance: the family, schools and the justice system. The idea that any form of authority is suspect has left its mark. Yet a ban is



Children playing soccer peacefully. (Picture ma)

not primarily a restriction, but a form of protection. If I am not allowed to destroy everything, that also means that others are not allowed to destroy anything that belongs to me.

Many would be more likely to point to poverty, social exclusion or discrimination. Not you?

These factors alone do not explain this trend. There are poor people who do not set cars alight. And there are affluent societies that also give rise to violence. For me, another question is crucial: how do children become responsible adults? Take school, for example. There, the relationship between teachers and pupils has become increasingly levelled out. Knowledge and education have lost their significance. The joy of thinking and learning is fading. Yet education is not just about learning facts. It creates a distance from one’s own impulses.

What do you mean by that?

If someone has not learnt to control their impulses, they remain at their mercy. Those who find no recognition through either knowledge or achievement seek it in other ways. Violence is certainly one of them. Then what matters is no longer what one creates, but what one destroys.

Isn’t it also about a sense of community?

These young people aren’t celebrating together. They aren’t building anything. They aren’t defending any ideas. They are destroying. But chaos does not satisfy. Anyone who takes pleasure in destroying something finds it very difficult to stop. That is why the pattern constantly repeats itself.

* Marie-Estelle Dupont, 44, is a French psychologist, psychotherapist und author. A mother of three, she became known to a wider audience during the coronavirus pandemic through her critical comments. She now presents the programme “Et si on en parlait” on the radio station Europe 1, in which she examines current issues from a psychological perspective.

You blame the family and the school. Many would be more inclined to say that France has, above all, an integration problem.

That is part of it too. Communitarianism – that is, the tendency for more and more people to define themselves by their ethnic or religious community rather than by society as a whole – is on the rise. France has long believed that an increasingly diverse society could function even without successful assimilation. I consider this to be a mistake. A society needs shared points of reference and rules, a shared understanding of what we owe one another. When these foundations disappear, all that remains is a sense of belonging to one's own group.

What is going wrong with integration?

Certain families no longer instil in their children the sense that they are part of a national community. Instead, resentment is often even fostered towards the country in which they live. When young people develop no attachment to their country or to the common good, even an identity-forming event such as a football match can turn violent.

Who suffers most from this trend?

Certainly not the wealthy. They can move away or find alternatives. The middle classes are particularly affected. And many French people with migrant backgrounds who have built a modest life for themselves in the suburbs over decades. They feel like hostages to a trend they themselves did not want.

You mentioned the justice system as well as family and school ...

Yes, a disastrous way of thinking has taken hold there too. For a long time, it was believed that not punishing someone meant giving them a chance. I consider that a mistake. Anyone who is never faced with consequences learns nothing from their behaviour. In the worst case, you condemn them to repeating their violence time and again – and at the same time create new victims.

What role do social media play?

They are not the cause, but they certainly act as a catalyst. Those who wreak havoc exist through the eyes of others. After all, it's far less interesting to destroy something if no one is watching. Social media reward the staging of vi-

olence. The more spectacular the images, the greater the response. People showcase the damage in the same way others showcase their successes.

On the other hand, hooliganism and vandalism have always existed.

But not in this form. Petty crime in earlier decades often had a rebellious or exploratory quality to it. Today, I see more of a regression. The violence seems more senseless, more brutal and more self-serving.

Why do such riots in France turn out to be more violent than in other countries?

For years now, a mindset based on the motto "everyone against everyone" has been gaining ground in France. Anyone who does not want to be counted amongst the losers must assert themselves as the strongest or the cleverest. At the same time, professions that work with people and safeguard social bonds – carers, teachers, police officers, judges, psychologists – are losing prestige. The American historian *Christopher Lasch* once wrote that the *Narciss* had replaced the honourable person. This is more relevant today than ever.

What, then, still holds society together?

A society that loses all higher standards reduces people to consumption, success and self-fulfilment. This gives rise to constant competition over who possesses more or who can assert themselves more effectively. A society can only endure through things that extend far beyond the individual: through culture, history, moral obligations and shared symbols. When all that disappears, ultimately no one feels responsible for anyone else anymore.

What do the recent riots reveal about the state of the French nation?

They reveal a state that has become both omnipresent and powerless. It regulates more and more areas of life, creates ever more regulations, and yet simultaneously fails in its core tasks. It is increasingly unable to guarantee security, order and high-quality education.

What lesson should France learn from these events?

A civilisation protects itself from violence by educating its children and teaching them rules.

Victor Hugo once said: "He who opens a school door, closes a prison." This idea has lost none of its validity.

Educational standards must rise again. Teachers' authority must be strengthened. The justice system should act more decisively. Parents must be held more accountable. And families who fulfil their parenting responsibilities

should be supported rather than constantly undermined. As long as we refuse to identify the root causes of violence, we will find ourselves having the same debates over and over again.

Source: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, page 3/International, 4 June 2026. (With the kind permission of the editorial team and the author.)

(Translation Swiss Standpoint)