

Demonstrative democracy

PARIS. Well-coiffed ladies with pearls marched with skinheads, Sunday-best farmers, small business people, workers, well-scrubbed youth --10,000-strong to acclaim far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. About 400,000 scruffier counter-demonstrators, an alphabet soup of leftists, centrists, students, worried families and self-appointed intellectuals, denounced Le Pen as a fascist and Nazi.

Never mind Prince Philip's wicked observation that the French abstain from voting, then demonstrate against the result (precisely what happened after Le Pen's April 21 upset in first-round presidential voting). What makes a demo in France, how do demos work, and why do the French demonstrate so often?

Any cause is pretext for parading about in Paris, or indeed in any big French city. The most common excuse for a manif (from manifestation) is wage demands. These are routinely disguised by defences of working conditions or "public service."

Doctors, nurses, lawyers, farmers, laid-off workers, fishermen, teachers, students, name your trade – it's been in the street this past year or two. The most reliably shameless are striking transport workers – airline staff, air traffic controllers, baggage handlers, truck drivers, bus drivers, railway staff of every ilk – though these tend to demo on TV mainly at workplaces so as not to face a furious public.

Other manif are social or cultural. Mothers demand more midwives (common here); parents demand protection against schoolyard violence. Film-makers march to keep subsidies that make French cinema enviably creative – as cherubic media mogul Jean-Marie Messier recently learned to his dismay.

The most scripted manif are political ones. Party leaders march arm in arm with 'compatible' union leaders and outraged intellectuals. Mobs of sympathizers trundle behind, mouthing authorized or prompted slogans. Such incantations stir collective frenzies, and make everybody feel righteous and triumphant.

Slogans are a vital part of manif culture. They should ideally sound aggrieved, angry, idealistic and witty and, if possible, echo some reinforcing historical event. Three anti-Le Pen examples: "F-haine" (or "f-hate" for the Front National's initials); "tu ne feras pas Fuehrer" (instead of "fureur" as in "you won't be a hit"); and the evergreen Spanish Civil War slogan "No pasarán" ("They won't get through our lines").

Marchers don't just make slogans, they chant them endlessly, with rat-a-tat rhythms that excite the blood and feed a sense of solidarity. Chants encapsulate a viewpoint, and hammer it home as threateningly as possible.

A manif needs costumes, bells, whistles, banners and cause-related props. Pig-farmers bring pigs to the Champs-Élysées, fishermen fish. Parading doctors carry stethoscopes, teachers dunce caps, plumbers pipes, and so on. Clowns, painted faces, stilts, whatever it takes to make a show: that's a manif. For high-falutin' causes you need pretty girls on guys' shoulders, waving French flags. Joan of Arc lives.

Such are the rituals, the liturgy of protest. Change is not usually the point – most manif defend "acquired rights" – a relic of Lenin's "irreversibility of socialist conquests." Besides, the manif is itself considered action. It is mass, self-administered psychotherapy more often than not designed to prevent change.

Unless you're aching to see grown-ups playing the fool, or you see manif as an art-form, you will follow police warnings and change your bus or taxi route to avoid the

nonsense. Off-limits routes often tell you which ideological flavor is on offer. Place de la Bastille and Place de la République for the left; rue de Rivoli and avenue de l'Opéra for the far right. The Champs-Élysées for solemn national occasions, or for anybody with a pal in the Préfecture de Police.

Why this endless parade of parades?

- The French political system is so far out of touch with ordinary people that few think of approaching elected representatives. Politicians, “all corrupt and incompetent”, won't listen unless a mob throws a tantrum;
- The French can't manage evolutionary change, only revolution – i.e. the street. With a turbulent, myth-dominated history, they dismiss compromising gradualism. Entrenched élites hunker down and fight change until the kettle explodes;
- In many ways, France is still an absolute monarchy. Memories of peasants with pitchforks and heads on pikes subliminally haunt today's kings and empower the street. Mobs incessantly remount barricades from 1789, 1870 and – the year they freaked out even de Gaulle --1968;
- Back-stratching: Frenchmen accept today's traffic blockade because tomorrow they may want similarly to defend their own privileges: the street is automatically right;
- Manifs are fun. You get off work or out of school, inconvenience thousands, maybe pick up a lover. Singing, chanting, bonfires -- it's all a feel-good fête.

This may be the real secret of manifs. Notwithstanding the gravity of this year's presidential election fiasco, the French crave a party. Don't they say wryly about themselves: “In France, everything ends with a song?”