
Michel Maffesoli: Between Civilizational Crisis and Soft Totalitarianism, a Look at Today's France, Both Conflictual and Communitarian

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Article Information•

Research Article • UDC: 316.4.054:321.01(44)

Volume: 21, Issue: 1, pages: 144-162

Received: October 14, 2023 • Accepted: December 13, 2023

<https://doi.org/10.51738/Kpolisa2024.21.1r.144t>

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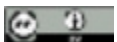
We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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• Cite (APA):

Tournois, L. (2024). Michel Maffesoli: Between Civilizational Crisis and Soft Totalitarianism, a Look at Today's France, Both Conflictual and Communitarian. *Kultura polisa*, 21(1), 144-162, <https://doi.org/10.51738/Kpolisa2024.21.1r.144t>



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Abstract

Sociologist, Professor, and, among other positions, holder of the "Emile Durkheim" chair at the Sorbonne, and director of the Center for Research on the Imaginary, Michel Maffesoli is an essential personality in the French academic-media landscape. Although he is often contested as a scientist, he nonetheless remains an enlightened observer of postmodernity and his socio-political analyzes on various themes linked to societal developments remain references with strong prophetic value, whatever his detractors may say. In his essay *The era of uprisings* (Maffesoli, 2021), he is a critical observer of the growing divorce between political-media elites and French citizens which is manifested by the multiplication of protest movements. This thesis leads us to go beyond conventional interpretations of poverty or inequalities in order to understand the extent of the civilizational crisis we are experiencing and the transition to after-modernity. The latter serves as a preamble to a denunciation of 'soft totalitarianism' and the rejection of human finitude which are rampant today in France since the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, and perhaps paradoxically, it fuels 'the trial of utopian imagination' (Wunenburger, 1978) while calling for the revival of a revolutionary spirit. This review essay aims at 1) putting the author's arguments into perspective with previous but also current works in order to gain impartiality, and 2) comparing the achievements of the work with socio-political aspects touched upon or even ignored, this which makes it possible to extend the political and social scope of the analysis.

Keywords: Protest movements, civilizational crisis, soft-totalitarianism, scientism, communitarianism, France

Michel Maffesoli: Between Civilizational Crisis and Soft Look at Today's France, Both Conflictual and Communitarian

Since Emmanuel Macron's first mandate, ordinary citizens, journalists, political figures and experts have witnessed the acceleration and hardening of reactionary times in France. From the Yellow Vest movement or 'November 17 movement' [2018] and its repression, to the refusal by a significant part of the population of restrictions on freedoms imposed by public authorities through the 'health pass' until the social movements against pension reform, the French case testifies to a dialogue that has become impossible between the people and the elites. Is this conflict situation new? Faced with the multiplication of protest radicalism and its brutal repression, it has become common to search for similar events in (recent) history in order to have a framework for analysis.

Due to the intensity of their violence, both real and symbolic, the marginalization of opposition currents and the growing denial of democracy, the current socio-political phenomena seem to baffle the so-called classical (read modern) frameworks. Because of its nature, outside any political or union structure, and its diffusion beyond national borders, the yellow vest has become a global symbol of the ongoing transformations in the expression of social conflicts (Comment l'imaginaire révolutionnaire, 2019) and the revolutionary imagination inherited from the 1789 Revolution. Facing the specter of a resurgence of 'revolutionary barbarities,' state violence aimed at maintaining order was expressed, certainly in no way comparable to that which repressed the Paris Commune in 1871, in a disproportionate or even regressive manner in the sense of a return "to a previous political state" (Autour du livre, 2023), a behavior although unsuitable for maintaining order as it has been underlined by nonprofit organization such as Amnesty International.

It is this dynamic and this singularity that Michel Maffesoli, sociologist of the imaginary and post-modern tribes, explores and deciphers in *L'ère des soulèvements* [*The era of uprisings*] (Maffesoli,

2021). This essay is part of the critical trend of progressive capitalism (let us call it 'postmodern'), sited somewhere between books such as *Révolte contre le monde moderne* [*Revolt against the modern world*] (Evola, 1934) and *The shock doctrine – The rise of disaster capitalism* (Klein, 2007) or even, and this is more surprising given the background of the authors¹, of *Et si les salariés se révoltaient?* [*What if employees rose up?*] (Artus & Virard, 2018).

Whether he is portrayed as a pamphleteer or a polemicist, the author, in this socio-political analysis of the profound changes taking place in French society, unravels how the political media elite governs growing 'anger and divergence' with the people. Wielding the image of 'the Palace and the public square' (Landi, 2011) used by Nicolas Machiavelli during the Florentine Renaissance, he interprets protest movements as a symbol of a disconnection between instated power and popular power. It is worth remembering that, during the Roman Republic, as a sign of opposition to the established order, patricians seceded groups of citizens by leaving the city. Today, the Yellow Vest approach retains the same symbolism by occupying roundabouts outside urban areas. Then, while participation in the democratic game was refused to them during the pension reform, the informal exercise of power by the plebs moved to the city centers with the consequences known to all.

At first glance, *The era of uprisings* may seem confusing without a clear structure. In fact, there is no point looking for one. The development of the author's thoughts is done through a *lectio divina* (La *lectio divina*, 2023) mixing observation and reflection to end with a 'prayer' addressed to the people to demonstrate their refusal of a logic of domination. To the calculating thinking specific to current elites,

¹ Patrick Artus is a French economist, director of research and studies at Natixis and director of Total. In the context of the European migration crisis, he supports immigration which he considers to be a source of potential growth. He also advocates budgetary austerity. While his predictions preceding the subprime crisis turned out to be erroneous, he anticipated the beginning of deglobalization of the economy during the Covid-19 pandemic which it relates to the crisis of neoliberalism. Marie-Paule Virard is a journalist specializing in economics. In the past, she was editor-in-chief of the magazine Enjeux-Les Echos.

he opposes meditative thought or “rumination” inspired by Heidegger, “a societal rhapsody somehow” (Maffesoli, 2021, p. 14). As with *The Time of the Tribes*, the prophetic value of the analysis should not be underestimated. It is therefore not an academic exercise because if the author offers a certain number of keys to understanding, it is up to the reader to make an intellectual effort to comprehend things that may seem difficult to seize at first. Consequently, this led me to choose a slightly different approach from traditional book reviews. His in-depth reflections are put into perspective not only with the central themes addressed in other works, such as *Le Temps des tribus: le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés de masse* [*The time of the tribes: the decline of individualism in mass societies*] (Maffesoli, 1988), *Logique de la domination* [*Logic of domination*] (Maffesoli, 1976), and *Le temps des peurs* [*The time of fears*] (Maffesoli, 2023) but as well as interviews carried out especially during the Yellow Vests’ episode (Maffesoli, 2019) and on behalf of various think tanks and online magazines, as well as a certain number of previous works aiming to objectify his statements.

This review comprises five sections. The first one discusses what Maffesoli understands by civilizational crisis, a preamble to entry into ‘after-postmodernity’. The second and third examine how the French ruling elite staged ‘soft totalitarianism’, which is so characteristic of after-postmodernity. The author views soft totalitarianism as an updated alteration of what everyone names ‘politically correct’. The fourth section examines how the weakening of the democratic base caused a return of communitarianism (that of the tribes) and its protest expression—the uprisings. The concluding remarks end this review essay by discussing the ins and outs of the author's half-silent call to revive a revolutionary ideal.

Civilizational crisis and change in societal values

Through the current protest movements that must be overcome in order to figure out the scale of the civilizational crisis French society is experiencing, Michel Maffesoli invites us to become aware of the

change in societal values which notably materialized during the Covid-19 pandemic: "a civilizational crisis reduced to a health crisis" (Maffesoli, 2021, p. 22). This is a difficult exercise because it would be wrong to equate these "crises" with banal economic and social demands. This thought is not new, but it seems to be a recurring one. From the twenties, René Guénon, a French metaphysician, vaticinated the 'crisis of the modern world' and reduced it mainly to Western civilization. What he interprets as an encouraging sign is that the "belief in 'unlimited progress', which until recently was still considered a sort of intangible and indisputable dogma, is no longer so generally accepted" (Guénon, 1927/2021, p. 9). Given that the author does not clearly explain the content of this paradigm shift, I suggest interpreting it as a double overcoming, that is, from modernity and postmodernity *towards* after-postmodernity.

If one of the foundations of modernity is to offer the individual the possibility of defining the standards of their existence for themselves (Guillaud, 2005), then the (management of the) pandemic and its procession of security measures symbolize the abandonment of this state of mind. As matter of fact, this is only the umpteenth stage of the 'security hysteria' (Mucchielli, 2008) that began around fifteen years ago, materializing the end of modernity through an increasing imprisonment of individuals in extensive and multiform social dependencies, which often equates to violence over these individuals (see more: Bjelajac & Matijašević, 2013). On the other hand, paradoxically, the universal nature of the health crisis will deny man any idiosyncrasy (it will be sanctioned) and will impose on him a certain number of standards of behavior 'for the good of all.'

In essence, the spirit of after-postmodernity is characterized by a loss of autonomy (one of the new societal values). Therefore, the multiplication of popular uprisings must be understood as acts of resistance by which an individual refuses to see his reality and principles determined by an external authority. Here, it is contended that the use of the term 'real' reflects the influence of the story on the existence of individuals. This argument is also found in Alexis Haupt's recent works (e.g., Haupt, 2023) for whom the radical change in

society underway, what he describes as a 'pharmaco-punitive society', "deprives the citizen of having control over his body".

While individualism and universalism were the two fundamental characteristics of modernity, as a historical operation of social and individual liberation (Renaut, 1989), the current period consecrates a universalism, understood as a globalism (in the sense of materialism) and not as a receptacle of superior and transcendental values, without individualism, that is to say that man would lose a 'humanity' carrying the right and the aspiration to happiness, in addition to human alienation that occurred as a consequence of technological changes (see more: Bjelajac, 2014), then opening the door to all forms of totalitarianism (Citot, 2005) that Michel Maffesoli has described as "soft" during the pandemic episode.

Theatricalization of public discourse, denial of democracy, and the manufacture of consent

The instrumentalization of trauma by governments to weaken the resistance of society is an inherited idea. According to the journalist, committed essayist, and anti-globalization activist Naomi Klein, this 'recipe' or politico-economic doctrine was applied by authoritarian regimes, whether in Chile in the 1970s, in China at the end of the 1980s, in Russia in the 1990s, or even in the United States following the attacks of September 11, 2001, which involves relying on a major collective trauma, which hinders or temporarily suspends the application of democratic principles (Klein, 2007) in order to promote the implementation of structural reforms relating to education, health, market economy, security, etc.

This process and its different modalities of historical expression, sometimes openly violent and sometimes soft, takes on complex forms that Michel Maffesoli explored in *Après la modernité? – La logique de la domination, la violence totalitaire, la conquête du présent* [After modernity? – The logic of domination, totalitarian violence, the conquest of the present] published in 2008 (Maffesoli, 2008). Today, he uses the shock metaphor by applying it to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, the author deciphers how the political elite governed the pandemic by applying one 'system of forces to another'... with the support of a large part of French citizens. The health shock which was, with its political, economic, and social dimensions, presented as a threat generated fear among leaders as well as citizens and generated destructive consequences, particularly towards 'living together.'

Then, how can this 'soft totalitarianism' so characteristic of after-postmodernity be staged? Through the dramatization of public discourse, the use of a narrative schema resulting from the conduct of war, with the support of experts, medical and non-scientific, and the media in general, the latter little or no questioning the decisions taken. To return to the older theme of 'the manufacture of consent,' the arguments developed aimed to falsify the representation that individuals had of the crisis, renamed 'health war,' through a set of common practices marked by extreme partiality of the media in the treatment of international events, and above all inherent to the functioning, management and financing of the media industry, all trends combined, in a market economy (Hermann & Chomsky, 2020). It is notable that, although not expressly addressed by the author, this 'health dictatorship' as some have called it (e.g., Amossy, 2023; Schlegel, 2021) went far beyond the mere verbal dimension: French government used the pandemic to weaken human rights conditions and undermine accountability systems to the extent that (this 'process' started after the attacks of 2015) "the state of emergency regime ultimately became common law" (Saidi-Cottier & Ferey, 2020, p. 2).

It is therefore a question of building, for ordinary citizens, a narrative of national and international health issues and their constraints rather than allowing them to base their judgment on a multiplicity of sources so that they do not construct their own representation of the situation, the fear of the pandemic leading to "a psycho-pandemic of worrying appearance" (Maffesoli, 2021, p. 20). The author interprets this phenomenon as the ongoing decadence of modern values - notably that of a quantitative conception of life—which has the sole aim of allowing the 'political-media oligarchy' to remain in power by overplaying the fear of illness. However, the author goes

further because the anathema also concerns individuals who, under the pretext of being protected, have accepted submission or domination, a process symbolizing the 'totalitarian violence of power'. Indeed, the author's other argument is that, during the pandemic, this quest for freedom was accompanied by a deeper renunciation that he analyzed through the prism of the negation of the natural cycle of life.

The return of scientism and the negation of the natural cycle of life

In this period of civilizational crisis, the fear of death and of life itself, or rather the denial of the risk inherent in existence (that is, the rejection of human finitude), is in Maffesoli's view the other pillar of after-postmodernity. Furthermore, 'between the lines' lies a criticism of scientism, until now considered as an "ideology of knowledge" (Wikiberal, 2011).

It is again through the presentation of the technocratic and rational management of the pandemic by the public authorities that the author develops one of his main theses: Science (re)becomes the magic formula by which political elites, bureaucratic, intellectual, and media are guarantors of the positive organization of the social order. The dominant narrative pattern is that of a science (without being associated with real scientific progress) more than ever allied with the well-being of humanity. Such absolute faith in scientific methods will guide the management of the pandemic and infuse (almost?) "all areas of intellectual and moral life without exception" (Lalande, 2010, p. 960). Following the author is made easy when he observes that the use and diffusion of words or expressions such as 'science', 'scientific', 'scientific committee, and 'trusting science' have become new markers of knowledge that are supposed to be universal.

That kind of knowledge constitutes the basis of a moralizing discourse that, in the name of science in the service of collective well-being, has led to marginalizing or even accusing conspiracy theorists of all those who do not adhere to the common ideology of 'having to be' for Maffesoli. Thus, the progressivism of after-postmodernity has

blurred the boundaries between the scientific and speculative approaches, which is similar to a pseudoscience or ideology (Juignet, 2015). Above all, it has seriously damaged the social cement of living by creating a binary opposition between vaccinated and unvaccinated.

It is then clear that scientific knowledge, or knowledge that cannot claim to be scientific within the meaning of Karl Popper (see Popper, 1974/1981), has very little enabled people to escape ignorance in a field where experimentation is a phase essential to the development of knowledge and is part of life itself. Science has become dogmatic, eliminating any critical attitude or originality, even though these are the roots of all scientific progress. Danger is then substantial of falling into the 'scientific system' of Emile Zola, within which it is enough to "replace the word *doctor* with the word *novelist*, to make my thinking clear and bring it the rigor of a scientific truth" (Laporte, 1894/2012).

Therein, it is indeed a question of civilizational mutation, that is, reorganizing (scientifically) humanity in the sense of Ernest Renan's missionarism (see Petit, 1987), what Karl Schwab and Thierry Malleret call a societal, economic, etc. reset (Schwab & Malleret, 2020). However, faced with the abandonment of hitherto dominant intellectual and social frameworks and the advent of the reign of 'true reason', Michel Maffesoli advocates the return to a modern spirit, a "Promethean humanism", it is to say in an unwavering confidence in the capacity of man to find in himself the foundation of norms and values, as well as access to the truths of this world" (Citot, 2005, p. 39). In truth, he goes further, even if this will only be mentioned in his essay, *The time of fears* (Maffesoli, 2023), by prophesying a return of the community ideal and tradition. It is interesting to note that, if Michel Maffesoli announces a return of tradition, he does not, unlike Julius Evola, refer to the 'sacred'.

From the democratic ideal to the community ideal

In 2019, Michel Maffesoli, accompanied by Hélène Strohl, declared bankruptcy of the elites and the rise of the community ideal

(Maffesoli & Strohl, 2019). The civilizational crisis, or rather democratic in its temporal materialization, was only in its beginnings, but the question of the (non)representation of the elites was seriously posed. The underlying argument is that the power of elites is no longer exercised in the name of a power delegated by the people but through the sole means of violence conceived as unique and legitimate.

The expression, theorized by Max Weber, according to which the State has the 'monopoly of legitimate [physical force] violence', has been brandished in France for several years by political figures and journalists as a means of justifying all the police violence (Escalona, 2023). It has also contributed to many TV shows, political programs, and press articles. Sailing against the tide, Catherine Colliot-Thélène suggests that the current validity of Weber's thesis be discussed "rather than being overused by the pseudo-erudite histrionics of political leaders in need of arguments to justify the repressive excesses of the Republic" (Colliot-Thélène, 2021).

Faced with this politicization and mediatization of a sterile debate opposing those who legitimize police violence to those who stigmatize it, the author subtly does not take sides but explains with pedagogy that power is no longer real—that is to say, irrigated by popular power, but imposed, institutions are no longer a common good and the very expression of this force takes increasingly conflicting forms.

Roundabout blockages, demonstrations against pension reform, and riots following the death of young Nael Merzouk during a road check are all paradigmatic expressions of deregulated popular power (Maffesoli & Strohl, 2023). Expressed in a trivial manner, they sound the death knell for the 'good old days' of unity. Sociologists of imaginary and post-modern tribes symbolize the return of the need to reaffirm differences, linguistic and ideological specificities, gatherings around a common origin, real or mythical, and occupy public space. The latter is perhaps today the only remaining common good, and the locus of a certain opportunism consisting of vandalizing and openly looting city center shops during the riots of June and July 2023, which can be perceived as an ultimate attempt to compensate for the exclusion of the benefits of globalization.

Concluding remarks

Throughout *The era of uprisings* (Maffesoli, 2021), Michel Maffesoli gives a glimpse of the foundations or values of after-postmodernity. As *In the Hollow of Appearances* (Maffesoli, 1990) published more than thirty years ago, the present essay is highly representative of France's upcoming entry into the second quarter of the 21st century. The myths, beliefs, and representations that grounded social cohesion during (post-)modernity no longer operate, and the transition from the democratic ideal to the community ideal is now complete.

If postmodernity was "an important change in our way of being" (Maffesoli, 1990, p. 25), after-postmodernity is just as much, if not more so. This transition period, also called 'reset,' is proving to be a failure in terms of respect for democracy and the fundamental freedoms of citizens. It is even the refutation of "man's affirmation of his basic position" (Citot, 2005, p. 39) the progressive abandonment of autonomy in decision-making.

The individual, however, proves to be little flexible or receptive to statist injunctions also, faced with the "ill will of the people" in the sense of Machiavelli (Nadeau, 2003, p. 344) to comply with health requirements, the confinement decided by the public authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic has perpetuated the organization of movements contesting the legitimacy of the order imposed by 'the castes in power' and has established the basic trend of a gradual shift towards an era of popular uprisings not only in France but also abroad argues the author.

However, today there is no longer a question, as in Antiquity, of mass retreats that the plebs made outside of Rome to obtain political concessions, but of conflicts. Does Michel Maffesoli, like Nicolas Machiavelli before him, see these conflicts, which then opposed the plebs to the nobles (the opposition of social classes is not yet? – visible today) a real engine that would allow the French Republic to remain free and expand? It seems unlikely. This is indeed part of the paradigm shift characteristic of this 'change of civilization'. Here, urban conflicts

end only with the annihilation of an adversary. Peace is only temporary, and ultimately sees the logic of conflict embodied in new political and/or social protagonists. Instead of imploding due to divisions, protests mutate into micro-conflicts with their own underground logics that are difficult to grip but have an ever-increasing force of annihilation, threatening the future of French society.

On the one hand, the author makes a particularly critical judgment on the action of the political power that he considers responsible for it; on the other hand, he suggests supporting this community ideal rather than rejecting it, and even encourages the people to continue to rebel. This is a major change in the author's thought process in terms of understanding new aspects of the current condition of human beings. Michel Maffesoli seems to definitively abandon his plea for the "dignity of the senses" which are both a source of pleasure and the origin of knowledge as the idealized future, mixing classical rationalism and scientism, and abusively restrictive which he invited to refuse thirty years ago is now a reality. On the contrary, there is in a certain way an optimistic, even utopian vision of "organizing a liberating future" (Allaire, 1978) from the *Logic of domination*, a work published in 1976 (see Maffesoli, 1976).

Such position is assumed, but one can deplore that, as a sociologist of the imaginary, the author has not outlined a new way of making connections as the need is felt. Because the socio-political environment is far from the creative impulse of May 1968: when the old authoritarian and conservative world was challenged and disintegrated, slogans nourished by utopia such as "it is forbidden to prohibit" or "Under the paved the beach" have become the pointers of a world to be born. There is also an important contradiction here because, in the present conditions, it is difficult to find a collective imaginary for all these protest movements because, in addition to geographical isolation, different social groups have expressed the need for cultural isolation (Piot, 2002). Risk (should one not speak of fear?) is that of a convergence of hatred of the State and its various manifestations, of capitalism, and, more generally, of the Other.

Let's then accept that in Michel Maffesoli's essay there is no revelation but rather a questioning and an opening towards new reflections concerning notably the delineation (coming from the streets?) of a new social contract against the backdrop of a multiplicity of imaginaries of France, ranging from "peripheral France" (Guilluy, 2015) – by extension a popular, economically and socially fragile France and its links with the Yellow Vest movement – to "underground France" (Scappaticci, 2017) which is a way of telling the story of France's ethnic diversity notably through the Bondy Blog, an online media created after the 2005 riots (Bondy Blog, 2023).

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