

Paris 2024: The Good, The Bad And The Dumbfoundingly Stupid

Louis-Vincent Gave
 louis@gavekal.com

I am writing this from Paris. Thus far, I have attended one men's soccer game (France versus USA, in Marseille), the last day of the Men's rugby sevens, a day of tennis at Roland-Garros and some men's volleyball games. I love being in Paris in ordinary times. But having the city to oneself—most Parisians have left for their summer holidays and it seems as if Paris will pull off the feat of being the first Olympic city to have fewer visitors in an Olympic year than in an ordinary summer—is a genuine treat. The same applies to watching Parisians make a special effort to be nice and policemen speaking English. Readers still on the fence about coming should hop on a plane, or a train. Not only are there no lines at museums and other attractions, but Paris will likely never be this safe, nor this friendly, ever again!

Other obvious takeaways from the first week of the Olympics are:

#1: The good

Security: driving into Paris from the south a week ago, the motorway was one long convoy of police vehicles. And sure enough, walking around Paris, cops are everywhere, with even back alleys and courtyards having a police car or *gendarmierie* vehicle stationed to keep watch. One almost has to worry that criminals in the rest of France are being given a chance to run wild.

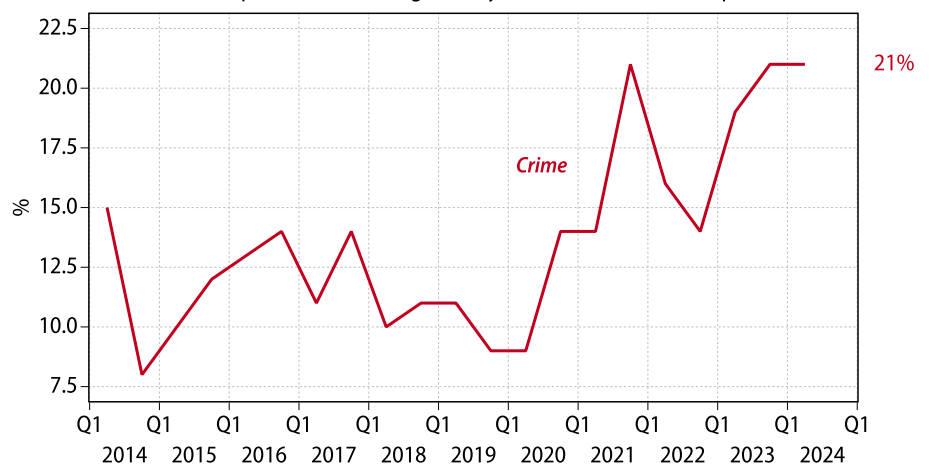
Most of the policemen (and it is mostly men) look fierce enough: machine guns, sunglasses, crew-cuts, tattoos, bulging muscles. All of this begs the question: if we have so many (fairly fierce-looking) police personnel, why is crime perceived to be such a growing problem by the general French population? After all, growing insecurity has been the primary driver of the Rassemblement National's electoral appeal.

France is pulling all the stops for the Olympics' security

French voters are increasingly concerned about crime levels

Crime is increasingly topping the list of French voters' concerns

Most important issue facing country, France, Eurobarometer poll



Gavekal Research/Macrobond

The tightened police presence around the Olympics suggests that rising crime can be tackled, but politics is an issue

The heavy police presence does raise the question of why French people have to endure high crime levels. The number of cops on the streets indicates that it is not due to a lack of resources. So does it come down to a lack of political will? Could a government that took its security function more seriously spur a fairly rapid improvement? This seems to be the recent experience of towns like Nice and Cannes, which elected mayors who campaigned on a promise to put municipal police on the streets, and in rougher neighborhoods. Such police forces seem to have generated quick results as a motivated force can often work wonders. Indeed, a walk through Paris during the Olympics leaves one with the impression that the rising crime wave is addressable, at least with the right resources (which France seems to have) and political will (which has perhaps been haphazard).

The rugby: Of course, I have to mention it. Being a French rugby fan has been a heavy cross to bear for decades—almost as bad as being an English soccer fan. So being there for the men’s Olympic gold win was special. This was all the more so since, during the anthems, the camera focused on three fans in red, white and blue jerseys and the red jersey was a Gavekal-Biarritz Olympique jersey. Nice prime time advertising for the good guys!



French society can be broken down into three main socioeconomic groups

But beyond the jingoistic pride, the rugby mattered as it helped put the Olympics back on the “right foot”. Let me explain: Charles and I have often quoted the French geographer and left-wing intellectual Christophe Guilluy (see [An Alternative Explanation For The French Split](#)). His thesis is that France has broken down into three “circular” zones that contain most of the French population in and around key metropolitan areas:

- At the center are the winners of globalization who work in finance, media, knowledge-based companies, universities and the government. In order to cleanse the area from fellows working in other sectors, policies are adopted that help make real estate unaffordable. This scheme has been especially aided by the central bank maintaining very low interest rates, which have duly caused property prices to go through the roof.

- Next sits a “collar” on the outer region of the city where immigrants live in subsidized dwellings and act as an effective indentured labor pool for those of the inner circle, working as babysitters, cooks, domestic helpers, waiters and Uber drivers. State subsidies for housing, education, public transport and schools are heavily deployed in this second circle.
- Further out is the third circle which contains the rump of the French population, who, having missed the knowledge-based revolution, reside in hollowed-out smaller towns where shops are boarded up, hospitals and schools are closing, and property values are falling. This is home to about half of the French population.

These three societal groups have formed distinct voting blocs reminiscent of France’s pre-revolutionary era

Guilluy first wrote about this split 15 years ago, but its effects are now clearly visible at the polling booth, with the center voting for Macron, the collar voting for the Popular Front, and the third circle voting for the Rassemblement National. As in pre-revolutionary days, France is again split between an aristocracy that lives off the state, a self-righteous clergy and a *tiers-etat* that does most of the hard labor. And as in the pre-revolutionary days, as long as the clergy votes with the aristocracy, the *tiers-etat* cannot achieve very much.

“Le tiers-etat, portant le clergé et la noblesse”. This is why the opening ceremony was an own-goal of epic proportions (more on that later). What could, and should have been a celebration of Pierre de Coubertin (the French founder of the modern Olympic games), of happier moments in French history and an overall PG-show, took a few wrong turns and ended up looking like a poor parody of *The Hunger Games*. Suffice to say that when the International Olympic Committee takes down the video of the events from its own website, or when countries like Algeria, Morocco and others cut off rebroadcasting, then you have failed as a show producer.



The Olympics’ opening ceremony has stirred controversy on both sides of the political spectrum

What the show did not fail to do, however, was trigger disgust in the “collar” and anger in the third circle. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the French leader of the far-left who holds no candle for the Catholic church but does have an astute political sense, was quick to denounce the ceremony. Perhaps less surprisingly, so did most leaders of the French right and populist right.

This was on the Friday. On the Saturday, while most of the people living in the center were congratulating themselves for a transgressive and courageous show, the anger elsewhere was ramping up. Interestingly, this courage quickly melted away once it was realized that the anger had spread far beyond the usual French Catholic whipping boys and had gone global. At this point, statements were walked back as dubious and contradictory explanations were offered up. Personally, I was disappointed that, instead of shifting gears and

saying the inspiration for the [Last Banquet](#) scene was not Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, but a 16th century Dutch piece no one had ever heard of, the government's crisis-manager did not instead refer to the [banquet scenes](#) that stand at the end of every *Asterix & Obelix* cartoon. At least, these would have had the merit of being French!

A French rugby win temporarily united the country, but underlying political divisions remain

Anyway, the opening ceremony left both the outer belt and third estate seething with rage. As a very left-wing friend of mine put it to me that evening “thank God this show didn't happen just before the legislative elections. Le Pen would have won in a landslide!”. So things seemed to start on the wrong foot. But then, on Saturday night, France won the rugby, which changed the conversation—at least for the outer belt and the third circle.

In the likes of England, Scotland, Ireland, Argentina and Canada, rugby is a somewhat upper-class sport, often played in posh boarding schools. However, in France, rugby has historically been a farmer's sport played mostly in rural communities with a fairly gallic disregard for the rules. At least, it used to be, for increasingly, rugby is becoming popular in the rough suburbs. Indeed, while on Saturday the outer ring and the third circle were united in their anger at the opening ceremony, 24 hours later, both parts of France were celebrating the rugby win, hailing as heroes Antoine Dupont (a son of a farmer from the southwest), Andy Timo (originally from Martinique), Jefferson-Lee Joseph (from Guadeloupe) and Rayan Rebbadj (born in Martigues but whose parents came from Algeria). All was forgotten in the celebration of the boys in blue. The magic, and unifying spirit, of sports at work.

But will this last?

#2: The bad and the dumbfoundingly stupid

The IOC has pulled the opening ceremony video from its website

As noted above, when countries cut off rebroadcasting of your ceremony and the IOC pulls your video from its website, you have failed to deliver on your brief. For most of the world, the shocking acts obviously included the overly religious imagery (a clear no-no in Olympic rules), the promotion of transgenderism and the use of children in inappropriate contexts, some standing inches away from visible male genitalia. So this was the bad.

But the dumbfoundingly stupid and—as a Catholic Frenchman—the most shocking scene by far, was the glorification of Marie Antoinette's murder with a backdrop of the *Ah ça ira, ça ira* song that the *sans-culottes* of the late 18th century sang as they brought aristocrats to the guillotine.

Leaving aside that this would have been deeply offensive to the Austrian and Hungarian delegation (Marie Antoinette was an Austrian princess), or to the Spanish King and his family (all Bourbons, as was Louis XVI) and who looked on appalled from the VIP stands at the representation of what would have been the murder of a great-great-great aunt (having a Spanish grandmother, I am disappointed the Spanish king did not walk out). Reveling in the senseless murder of an innocent woman who was in the process of dying from ovarian cancer was especially odd given that France prides itself on having enshrined the “rights of man”, and is a country where the death penalty has long been abolished. What is most shocking about the Marie

Antoinette representation, and the *Ah ça ira* song is that it shows that the guys who composed the show, and those who paid their bills, **think they are on the side of the revolutionaries**. In fact, these guys probably watch *The Hunger Games* and think they are on the side of Katniss Everdeen, while looking like [this](#) from Paris 2024 and [this](#) from a *Hunger Games* fan group (I believe *The Hunger Games* was a cautionary tale, not a “how to” guide).

The reason I highlight this is that the coming months are bound to be fiscally tough for France (see [France’s Olympics Scale Challenges](#)). The European Union is asking France to shave €25bn from its 2024 budget and the likelihood that its 2025 budget is approved by Brussels is even lower than India leading the Olympic medal table. Against such a backdrop, **who in their right mind would want to bring up France’s bloody revolutionary past?**

It was just last year that French suburbs (the outer ring) suffered devastating riots. In 2019, the *gilets jaunes* (the third estate) drove the country to a standstill, tore down speed cameras on roads and stormed government ministries. Do France’s elite really think that, if there is another revolution, they won’t be the ones having to flee to London, Geneva, Brussels or Frankfurt? Why, given all of this, would they even cast such a spell upon themselves: Hubris? A lack of historical knowledge? A complete absence of self-awareness? Sheer stupidity?

Incidentally, this idea of tempting fate brings me to another part of the world that may not have been offended by the portrayal of Marie Antoinette’s murder, but at least made to feel deeply uncomfortable: China and most of East Asia. In most Asian cultures one rarely talks openly about death, and even less portrays it graphically. It is considered as potentially bringing bad luck. Indeed, looking at the representation of blood flowing out of the Conciergerie—the revolutionary prison in which thousands died in horrendous circumstances, some tortured, some starved, some guillotined—was creepy for anyone. But it would have been doubly so for the teams of Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and elsewhere, floating by on boats and pondering why [blood](#) was coming out of this building.

Conclusion

Budgetary cuts have to be made and these are likely to be painful. When these cuts are proposed, in the coming weeks and months, will inviting Celine Dion and Lady Gaga, and blowing €115mn on a party for the global glitterati, end up looking like a “let them eat cake” moment?

If so, France’s leaders may well regret ever having made fun of Marie Antoinette. And for what it is worth, I know the “let them eat cake” quote was “fake news”, as Marie Antoinette never said this. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for this €115mn party, thrown for the world’s great and good, nor for the €25bn in budgetary cuts that Brussels is asking for. It brings me back to the old dictum about bread and circuses. Today, the circus is going great; the Olympics are a lot of fun and readers who can go, should go. But there is a reason the bread comes before the circus in “*panem et circenses*”. The autumn is likely to prove challenging. Especially if, by then, all of France’s police force is on holiday following all the overtime worked.

Dredging up memories of France’s revolution is fraught given the fiscal cutbacks required by the EU...

...especially because large riots rocked France last year

France throwing a big, expensive party for the global elite looks bad given France’s poor budgetary situation