

Why the Cultural Battle Over the Meaning of the Notre Dame Fire Is Playing Into the Hands of the Far-Right

There is a battle for the meaning of the terrible fire's symbolism.

Ben Davis, April 18, 2019



Smoke billows as flames burn through the roof of the Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral on April 15, 2019, in the French capital Paris. Photo courtesy Fabien Barrau/AFP/Getty Images.

One of the more unpleasant features of the contemporary media climate is that no event can go for very long without becoming the subject of bitter cultural debate. So it is, unfortunately, with the heartbreaking spectacle of the burning of Notre Dame Cathedral.

In the case of the blaze at Notre Dame, you might even say that it is partly *because* it is so senseless and removed from the obvious political narratives that it has immediately become the site of a proxy war over its meaning. The awful images are riveting; so far, there is no real explanation. There is thus a powerful current of raw emotion to be tapped into in these first

moments when the rubble is still smoking, waiting for a villain, a hero, a story to latch onto—anything to give it structure.

And that energy cannot go untapped for long in a deeply polarized environment. For 22 consecutive weekends, France has been riven by protests against technocratic president Emmanuel Macron—once the hope of centrists all over the world, now derided as “president of the rich.” Indeed, Macron had been scheduled to address the nation about the ‘Yellow Vest’ movement before the tragedy at Notre Dame transfixed the nation. Instead, he spoke from in front of the ravaged cathedral, appealing to the “deep destiny” of the French nation, vowing to rebuild.



French President Emmanuel Macron addresses the nation on French private TV channel TF1, vowing to rebuild Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral within five years. Photo courtesy Ludovic Marin/AFP/Getty Images.

Already there, his simple appeal took on secondary political insinuations. The BBC’s Lyse Doucet noted that Macron’s rhetoric in his address about Notre Dame sounded suspiciously close to what had been expected from his ‘Yellow Vest’ address.

“When he spoke about the cathedral, he could have been talking about the unity that he wants to achieve in France,” Doucet reported. “And so, in some way, although no one would have wished for this to happen, a man who’s been under political fire and still is, has in some sense been given a little bit of a reprieve because of another fire.”

Far more sinister forces have sought to make hay of the tragedy. The conspiracy mongers and online right instantly went to work trying to twist the emotional connection to Notre Dame to their ends—mainly by linking the disaster to narratives of anti-Christian persecution, perpetuating nasty stories that masses of French Muslims have been celebrating the destruction. (Media Matters has rounded up a selection.)

So it actually is important to keep a level head and a critical eye on how the rhetorics of French identity and European civilization bubbling up around the Notre Dame tragedy are put to work, and what they leave out, even amid all the mourning and shock. In the years since 9/11, visceral outpourings of emotion around spectacular news events have often been catalyzed toward hateful ends—to launch wars and fuel racism. Progressives have become admirably vigilant.



Editions of the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times display images of Notre-Dame Cathedral burning in Paris on their front page on April 16, 2019 in Washington DC. Photo courtesy Eric Baradat/AFP/Getty Images.

Yet I am also vexed by the direction the insta-criticism of the Notre Dame coverage has taken online. “As is often the case,” Carl Kinsella notes of the backlash in the immediate aftermath of Monday’s news, “those nightmarishly

frustrating contrarians were everywhere, taunting the mourners.” I don’t know about how things look in your filter bubble, but that describes one current in mine alongside all the heartbreak—I think it is particularly hothoused in culture, media, and activist circles.

I know it’s important to be mindful that we are talking about social media here. A lot of people pooh-poohing the grief over Notre Dame are not crafting arguments meant to convince a wide public. They are simply voicing frustrations with the blind spots of mainstream opinion to their immediate friends and followers.

But there is a reason why, as far as I can tell, the industrial-strength troll factory Breitbart News was the outlet quickest to seek out and actively call attention to the most “frustratingly contrarian” positions of social-media pundits (e.g. “Notre-Dame burning is cosmic karma for all the historical sites and artefacts France destroyed and stole when being colonialist scum,” “Genuinely awful but if you mourn for this one building and not, say, the entirety of Syria, your white supremacy is showing”).

A very active online right is hell-bent on claiming the raw emotion people feel for this wounded cultural symbol, and channelling it towards an identification with white nationalist extremism.

An equally active online left has a clear sense of how ideas of “Western greatness” and “French identity” are heard very differently by the colonized than by the colonizer, and is keenly attuned to the “empathy gap”: how a tragedy like the one at Notre Dame elicits massive floods of public mourning while, say, the grotesque US-sanctioned Saudi slaughter in Yemen elicits minimal attention. The latter conflict, incidentally, has involved the “systematic degradation of the country’s millennia-old cultural heritage”—and Macron’s France is currently accused of enabling war crimes in Yemen by its sale of weapons to the Saudis.



A crowd gathers outside Saint-Sulpice church during the annual mass held in the wake of the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral on April 17, 2019 in Paris, France. Photo courtesy Dan Kitwood/Getty Images.

But the vast, vast majority of people around the world observing the pictures of Notre Dame exists outside of any such ideological narrative. In the flames, most simply see senseless loss.

And I just don't understand how it is useful if the cause of social justice becomes equated with the insinuation that people should be ashamed of themselves for expressing sorrow at the destruction of a beloved 850-year-old work of Gothic architecture. In the context of a war of ideas, this doesn't seem radical to me; this seems self-defeating and self-isolating.

If there are two sides, and one says, "Your grief about this is important—come over here!" and the other says, "Your grief about this makes you a bad person—shut up!" then it is obvious which of these two sides' narratives is going to resonate most broadly. The latter's unforgivingness becomes the hard surface that the alt-right can bounce off of, to amplify itself to the broad, mixed-up mainstream as the more reasonable party.

That's scary. I also think it is unnecessary.



A bouquet of flowers is seen in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France, on April 17, 2019. Photo courtesy Xinhua/Alexandre Karmen via Getty Images.

It does not necessarily follow that someone who cares about Notre Dame is an apologist for French colonialism or deaf to the loss of lives in Syria. You can feel attached to Notre Dame and still be deeply suspicious when the rhetoric of “Western civilization” is invoked uncritically. You can want to see Notre Dame rebuilt and be disgusted by the contrast between the ease of fundraising for the Paris landmark and the difficulty in getting money to all the many humanitarian crises raging around the world.

I say “can,” not that it necessarily *is* the case. There are plenty of nefarious forces looking to claim the symbolism, to shape it in chauvinist ways. But if the only critical alternative becomes rejecting any connection with popular sentiment in this of all cases, then I really worry that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of permanent isolation, and that this present-day cultural tragedy becomes a political tragedy as well.