The *six février* 1934 and the crisis of the French Third Republic

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The Paris riots of the *six février* 1934 are remembered chiefly as the event that provided the initial spark and the eventual rationale for the anti-fascist mobilisation and convergence of the French Left in the shape of the Popular Front. However, as regards the political significance of the riots themselves, most French historians have tended to downplay their importance, arguing that the Republic was not under serious threat, and that the Left at the time greatly exaggerated the danger. Indeed, the fact that the regime ‘survived’ these events has often been cited as proof of its resilience, of France’s deep-rooted ‘democratic political culture’, and its inbuilt ‘immunity’ to fascism.

This paper will argue that the standard interpretation of the *six février* developed notably by Serge Berstein and Michel Winock is deeply flawed, especially in its tendency to deduce the intentions of the actors from the outcome of the events. Drawing on the work of Michel Dobry and his methodological critique of the so-called ‘immunity thesis’, I will endeavour to show that the *six février* constituted a serious challenge to the regime, that it created a dangerously fluid situation in which a variety of ‘outcomes’ became possible, and that it should be analysed not as a discrete and temporally circumscribed event but as a key moment in an ongoing process of political radicalisation on the French Right.

Mainstream historiography has been unhelpfully preoccupied with proving the *six février* was not an attempted ‘fascist coup’. This indicates a serious misreading of the processes that brought the Italian Fascist and German Nazi movements to power, and it means that the *six février* has never been examined from a genuinely comparative perspective: one which goes beyond generalisations about differences of political culture or ideological tradition to look more closely at political context and process. This paper will argue that once we focus more directly on the real political dynamics at work in the countries concerned, previously unobserved parallels and distinctions begin to emerge, opening up potentially fruitful areas of historical enquiry.