

A Lost Mandate in Europe

by Theodore Dalrymple



Anyone who has been to church in France will have noticed that the direction of the tide of evangelism has reversed. It used to be from France to Africa, but now it is from Africa to France. Many of the priests are African: they come to serve or convert the heathen who once colonized them.

It would be easy to discount the importance of this fact in as irreligious a country as France, but it surely points to a

loss, not only of faith but also of cultural confidence. The very idea of Europe preaching to the world—except, perhaps, about sexual matters and capital punishment—now seems ridiculous. Europe has lost the mandate of heaven, as the Chinese might say, and it knows it.

Who would have thought, even 30 years ago, that China would be sending humanitarian assistance to Italy, both in the form of medical material and technicians? It's difficult not to read into this a sudden reversal of what we in the West, for so long, took as the natural order of things: an advanced West and a backward East. But the epidemic has revealed what we would have preferred not to know: we are no longer in the forefront.

We console ourselves that if we have not responded to the pandemic with the slightly unnerving efficiency of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, at least we are still free. After all, we do not live under authoritarian rule.

Of comfort let no man speak, as Richard II put it. Walking out to do her shopping on a recent morning in Paris, my wife was stopped twice by the police, who demanded that she show her obligatory *laissez-passer* (admittedly, a document that she printed and signed herself). But talking to a young man this afternoon—at a distance of at least three feet—we learned that he had been fined \$150 because he had put the wrong date on his *laissez-passer*. Taking a short walk in Paris, I half-expect someone to jump out of a doorway and demand *papieren!*

A French newspaper crowed that the epidemic heralded the return of the state to the national scene, after years of what is almost always called neoliberalism. As public expenditure represents about 56 percent of GDP in France, one wonders whether the newspaper was staffed by a host of Rip Van Winkles, who had all been asleep during the expansion of the French state after World War II.

Was it for lack of funds that the French state was unable to provide necessary masks and other protective wear for workers in hospitals? If so, what proportion of the GDP has to pass through its hands for the hospitals to be equipped enough?

It is surely of some interest that those Asian states that—for the moment, at any rate—are believed to have done well during this epidemic, while more authoritarian than we would like, also have relatively small public sectors as a proportion of their economies as a whole (a third or less that of France). The size of a bureaucracy is not necessarily a sign of its strength or efficiency, any more than the selling of an oedematous leg is a sign of its strength and efficiency; rather the reverse. A small bureaucracy concentrates intelligence, while a large one disperses it.

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