

# A Riot in Bordeaux



by Theodore Dalrymple

As I hope to be able to work till my dying day, I am perhaps not the right person to animadvert on the present disturbances in France about the raising of the retirement age from 62 to 64. My work has always been pleasing to me, and it remains so; I even manage to delude myself sometimes that it is important.

I am forced to recognize, however, that not everyone is in the same happy position as I. I am sure that if I had been a dustman all my life, I should not hope to be emptying dustbins at my present age (73), let alone at the age of 85. While my work remains work, and in a certain sense occasionally even hard work, especially when I have to think, what I do is not physically demanding. No one ever got arthritis or fibrosis of the lung by writing a few articles.

The reform of the pension system in France, from my limited understanding of it, is rather unfair. It is true that some reform is necessary: There are ever fewer workers to fund the

pensions of ever more pensioners (the system being entirely unfunded by investment). On the other hand, it is those who do the most unpleasant and unremunerative jobs who have to work the longest, and the reform only increases this unfairness. As the old cockney song has it, it's the rich what gets the pleasure.

Nevertheless, the extreme opposition to the reform, which is hardly a radical one, strikes most foreigners as rather strange. In a way it is also sad, for it implies that a long retirement is the main aim of all that precedes it, which in turn implies that all the work done for several decades before retirement has been an unpleasant imposition rather than something of value in itself. That the *quid pro quo* for a longer life expectancy is a greater number of years spent working seems not to strike anyone with force.

The demonstrators probably think, no doubt correctly, that the reform is the thin end of a wedge: If it is allowed to pass without a fuss, there will be further such reforms until the retirement age will be 70, 80, or never, depending on life expectancy. As for the younger demonstrators, they do not seem to worry much that it is they who will be paying for the people older than themselves to retire early, the distant prospect of early retirement being more real to them than the far more proximate high rates of taxation.

As a well-written editorial in *Le Figaro* surmised, much of the fury expressed so far has probably been about more than the reform. Hatred of the president in France has reached a dangerous pitch; but while he might lack charm and have been politically maladroit in his evident *hauteur* (he once said that being president had taught him to love the French, which makes one wonder what he thought of them before); he is, by world-historical standards, not a monster. Moreover, no one who has traveled round France would think that it was hell on earth, or that only a tiny proportion of the population lived well. The problem is that people make comparisons not with how

people have lived in the past, or live elsewhere, or could conceivably live in the future, but with how they would like to live now; and such a comparison with an impossible ideal always leads to disappointment if not to bitterness.

Some of the anger in France, however, strikes me as distinctly ersatz, a pretext for joyful violence and destruction for its own sake. When, on film, I saw the doors of the town hall of Bordeaux burning, and the (not very large) crowd of young men dancing by the light of the flames, pretending that there was some object to the conflagration other than the conflagration itself, I could not help but think of how little separates us from barbarism. I am not here talking of the French, but of humanity.

Some years ago, during a brief lull in the Liberian Civil War, I visited Monrovia, the capital, which was then surrounded by the rebel forces. The destruction that I saw in the city was extensive but also selective. It particularly fell on manifestations of civilization: Medical records had been used as toilet paper, the university library had been pillaged and the books pulled from the shelves and trodden on, every last piece of hospital furniture in the sophisticated teaching hospital had been carefully and laboriously dismantled beyond repair; but what most struck me was the Centennial Hall, the ceremonial auditorium in which national ceremonies took place. There, what was probably the only Steinway grand piano in the country had had its legs sawed off, and the body laid down on the ground. The legs were strewn, and around the body of the piano was a kind of necklace of human feces, not deposited at random but in a carefully arranged circle.

This was bad enough, but even worse, at least for me, was the refusal of some young British journalists to see anything disturbing or symbolic in this scene. Why was I worried about the fate of a piano when, after all, the civil war had resulted in the deaths of perhaps a quarter of a million people, and the displacement of half the population? That it

did not cross their minds, even for a moment, that there might be some connection between the two was to me highly alarming. It suggested that attachment to civilization itself, and to its achievements, among Western youth, who have not known anything but peace and plenty, might not be very strong.

Civilization is a veneer, it is often said, as is the facing of a building. But the facing of a building is what can make the difference between a beautiful and a hideous construction. The cult of authenticity, or truth to materials and underlying structure, that has been assiduously promoted by driveling modern architectural theorists has led to the visual nightmare that is most modern cities. Destruction is always authentic, because it appeals to a kind of joy that is waiting patiently to emerge from every human breast, or at least from many of them. To see and hear the joy, the pride, of those who burned the doors of Bordeaux's town hall sent shivers down my spine. And do not ever take comfort by saying, "It couldn't happen here."

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