

In the Driver's Seat

By Theodore Dalrymple

In the days when I would occasionally report from far-flung and obscure countries—not far-flung and obscure to their inhabitants, of course—I would often rely on the opinions of taxi drivers. They were usually far more reliable than the opinions of officials, who had an official axe to grind—or else. And some of the most wildly inaccurate or unperceptive viewpoints I have heard were from the press attachés of embassies.

I therefore respect taxi drivers (not that I don't respect all humanity). They have the kind of insight into human nature that Peeping Toms would have if they were not obsessed by vicarious sexuality. People are apt to conduct conversations in the back of a taxi as if the drivers were deaf or inanimate. And no one is afraid to tell a taxi driver what he really thinks. In anonymity, there is truth.



On a ride recently from the airport to the center of Paris, it was the driver who did most of the talking, having sized me up as a member of the middle class.

“Are you being reimbursed for the fare?” he asked.

I was unsure of what I should answer. It was not a matter of truth. If I said no, it was obvious that he would think me rich; but if I said yes, he would want to come to some

arrangement about overcharging and providing me with an even larger receipt. The fare from the airport to the center of Paris is fixed, however, and I replied that we must be honest, whoever was paying.

"I am an honest man," he said.

Does any honest man proclaim his honesty?

He then asked me whether I had any girlfriends.

"I'm married."

"All the same."

I asked him about his girlfriends. "Many," he replied, and proceeded to telephone three of them with the speakerphone on so that I could hear his lovemaking. Two did not answer, and the third said that she was busy that evening.

We declined from personal life to politics. Here he made all the running. He was what, in 1950s Britain, would have been called an angry young man.

He was of Algerian Berber origin but had been born in and educated in France. He spoke French, Arabic, and Berber. He was planning to return to Algeria to start a business because, he said, Europe was finished and France was "shit."

He had spent five years training to be a constructor of roads and bridges (I did not ask to see his diplomas), at the end of which he would have a salary 50 percent of which would go in rent if he lived in central Paris. He decided to drive a taxi instead, a bit like professors of physics or history in Russia after the downfall of communism.

"Is it easy to start a business in Algeria?" I asked. "Will there not be much bureaucracy?"

"I have my network," he replied.

It is true that in over-administered and centralized countries, nepotism and corruption conduce to efficiency. It is the combination of over-administration and honesty that is fatal.

He was 27 years old. He would have finished his education at the age of 23 or thereabouts. That left four years for taxi driving, yet he owned his house in the suburbs and his taxi, which was a very fancy hybrid-powered Mercedes, with frightening powers of acceleration that he demonstrated to me in a narrow street, and he had also built a house for himself in Algeria—all starting from nothing, he said. Not a bad return on four years' work as a taxi driver, I thought but did not say. Of course, I did not know the precise source of his income, or whether indeed he was like Mr. Bounderby of Coketown, the character in *Hard Times* who claimed pridefully to have been self-made but was nothing of the kind.

His ambition was to drive a Ferrari or a Lamborghini and to have a house to match. Impossible in France, he said, since the government took half his money to pay good-for-nothings to do precisely nothing. He was thinking of giving up his taxi and going on social security himself—combined, of course, with a little trafficking. In France it did not pay to work; the only thing that was really profitable was unemployment or pretense of illness.

“But there are rich people in France,” I said.

“They all inherit their money,” he said.

I did not point out that he had said earlier that in France it is impossible to leave even a house to your children. It is true that it is not easy; you can avoid the majority of very heavy death duties by paying a much-reduced percentage in advance when making a donation of a house to them, but few people are able to do even this. Only the rich can do it; in other words, as the driver put it, to be rich in France you

have to be rich to begin with.

He seethed with real anger and even hatred. From the political point of view, it hardly matters whether this anger or hatred was justified; its existence is what counts. Like many resentful people, he believed that he had been given nothing. The fact that he had had a good education (on his own account), and that he owned two houses and a car by the age of 27, without assistance from his parents, who were too poor to give him any, counted for nothing in his mind.

“When are you going to move to Algeria?” I asked.

“Soon,” he replied. “I will sell everything here.”

“Everything? You won’t keep your house just in case?”

“No. France is finished.”

Whether his ambition was fixed and real or pie-in-the-sky, I cannot say, but it pointed at the very least to a real mentality, not necessarily to our advantage, as the Emperor Hirohito put it after the dropping of the atom bombs.

It was not the first time I had heard something like this from a Parisian taxi driver. I met such a driver of Senegalese origin who was returning to Senegal to start a business, which was much easier to do than in France.

The corruption? But where there is too much administration, corruption conduces not only to efficiency but also to freedom—for those with the money to buy it.

“I want to be free,” said the driver. Thanks to the money he had earned in France, he could be free in Senegal.

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