

# Oh, Rats

In Paris, champions of the *surmulot* impede public pest control.



“It’s not a Siberian hamster, Manuel. Hamsters are cute and cuddly. Cuddle this and you’ll never play the guitar again.”

by Theodore Dalrymple

On my way to take a walk in the Père Lachaise cemetery, from where I could hear the sound of riots, sirens, and the discharge of teargas canisters in the distance, I passed through a small park with a notice on its railings announcing a municipal campaign against rats. Inside the park were lots of the kind of black plastic boxes in which rat poison is placed to lure the rodents to their death. The boxes are

there, but often not the poison: they are Potemkin rat traps.

Outside the railings, garbage was piling up because the dustmen were on strike, protesting President Emanuel Macron's law raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. The rats were having the time of their lives, and it doesn't take long for a rat population to increase. Apparently, the population had been increasing anyway, without this Malthusian boost to reproduction.

It turns out that not everyone in the population or on the city council is unequivocally opposed to rats, according to an article in *Le Figaro*. The rat problem has become ideological, like practically all others. This broader development may be indirectly related to the downfall of the Soviet Union, after which the ideologically minded had to satisfy themselves with a cause other than Marxism, and found one wherever they could.

The Paris councillor and advisor to the mayor on animal questions, Douchka Marcovitch, a member of the *Parti animaliste*, argues that rats, far from being a nuisance, are auxiliaries in the disposal of waste. "We estimate that rats eat several tons of waste per day," she said. "Contrary to received ideas, they are assets rather than liabilities in effectively maintaining the cleanliness of cities. We must change the paradigm. We should be asking ourselves about the way of life of rats, so that we can find efficacious and ethical ways of dealing with them."

Some go further. The pressure group *Paris animaux zoopolis* (PAZ) has put up posters saying "Let us overturn the clichés about rats!" In pink writing, the posters declare:

*Emotions, intelligence, altruism, suffering, social life . .  
. we share the essentials with them.*

And since we share 70 percent of our DNA with rats, no doubt humans are 70 percent rat—or is it that 70 percent of humans

are rats?

According to the PAZ, we need to learn “to share the urban space with non-human animals in a peaceful fashion . . . Today, in its current conception, urban space is exclusively reserved to humans. We must end this anthropocentric idea. The separatist policy conducted by the Paris council with regard to rats, between those in the parks and those in the sewers, is unjust. By what right do we deprive certain animals of all access to the light of day?”

PAZ does make a rational point: the policy of using, almost exclusively, anticoagulants as a means of reducing or controlling the rat population has led, as if to confirm the theory of natural selection, to about 40 percent of the rat population being no longer susceptible to their effects. Other, less painful means of control are now available: oral contraceptives for rats, for example.

Not everyone is so pro-rat, of course. A qualified rat-catcher (and in my experience, rat-catchers are always interesting people to talk to), Jacques d’Allemagne, said:

*Sometimes there are so many [rats] in the parks that gardeners take their retirement. I have seen public housing in which the inhabitants are so afraid [of rats] that they do not take their garbage down to the bins but throw in out of the windows. When you don’t bring a solution to people, they do what they can for themselves. They try recipes that they find on the Internet: meatballs with ground glass, for example, with all the consequences that can have for domestic animals.*

As for the National Academy of Medicine,

it issued a [communiqué](#): , which read in part:

*Whether called Rattus norvegicus, brown rat or Norway rat*

*[or surmulots, as some animalists prefer, to avoid stigmatizing the creatures], it is the most harmful of human commensal species due to its great adaptability, its food requirements, its intense prolificity and, especially, the bacterial, viral and parasitic zoonoses of which it can be the vector . . .*

*It is important to recall that the rat remains a threat to human health because of the many zoonoses transmitted by its exoparasites, its droppings, its bites or its scratches. . . . Rats' urine can contaminate the environment with leptospira [of which there were 700 cases last year in France, 70 of them fatal].*

No doubt the *Parti animaliste* would say that such fears are overblown. What, after all, are 0.01 percent of all human deaths to set against the lives and suffering of millions of creatures that, according to the PAZ, even laugh when tickled?

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this story is that 61 percent of Parisians are now opposed to lethal means to control of rat numbers, and that young people have a better opinion of rats than their elders, possibly because of the film, *Ratatouille*.

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