Paris, City of Blight

by Theodore Dalrymple

Returning to Paris after an absence of only a few months, I was dismayed by the deterioration it seemed to have undergone in that short time. It struck me as dirty and grossly overcrowded, while the mayor has for a long time been doing everything possible to reduce the city's beauty in the name of saving the planet. In the former, at least, she is succeeding.

Of course, mass tourism doesn't beautify anywhere and results in the cheapest kind of commerce, in this case of Eiffel Towers and teddy bears with T-shirts saying that they love Paris. The famous *bouquinistes* along the *quais* of the Seine are increasingly giving up on books and turning to tea-towels,

baseball caps and key-rings, presumably all made in China; football-crowds of people walk in both directions down any street, badly dressed and with an air either of existential vacancy or of doing a less than pleasurable duty.

In the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville, the late-nineteenth-century reconstruction of the sixteenth-century building destroyed, together with the city's ancient archives, at the end of the Commune, there was a large encampment of African migrants, in the midst of a mess of blanket and cardboard. This seemed to be accepted as normal, or perhaps as inevitable, by passers-by, who ignored it as if it were not there; but presumably the encampment and its inhabitants will be swept away, *manu militari*, in the run-up to the Olympic Games next year, that festival of stupid international rivalry from which only India ever emerges with cause for national pride because it wins so few medals by comparison with the size of its population, indicating a proud and rational indifference to the whole wretched business.

However, even if the migrants are swept away, they will, like General MacArthur, return. The giant state apparatus, that generates or consumes nearly 60 per cent of the country's large GDP, is unable to control the flux of migrants into the country, partly for organisational (or *dis*organisational) reasons, and partly because of doubts in much of the educated population about its right to do so. As one young person put it to me, "There are no illegal immigrants on the earth."

The corollary for her seemed to be that everyone had the right to go wherever he chose—and, of course, to be housed and fed when he got there. And I know from experience that to ask for further details, including numerical or financial ones, of this arrangement is likely to generate heat but no light, and to lead to accusations of fascist sympathies, if not of outright fascism. For such as she (and there are many), there are no tragic situations in the world requiring hard choices, only the Manichaean struggle between good and evil.

Another problem struck the city on my return: bedbugs. I have been going to the city regularly for many years, sometimes for months at a time, but I have never encountered a single bedbug. Now, however, and very suddenly, they were supposedly everywhere, not just in beds, but in the velveteen benches of cafes, bars and restaurants, in trains, in cinemas and theatres. I am used to going to what used to be called fleapit cinemas (I am writing a second journey round the world in the cinemas of Paris, by attending films from countries not usually associated in the minds of most people with the making of films), but now I suppose they will have to be called bedbug cinemas. As yet, I am glad to say, I have not been bitten, or not knowingly bitten.

Can bedbugs suddenly appear in huge numbers, as if by spontaneous generation? Do populations of bedbugs suddenly explode, like those of locusts? I am afraid I am not entomologist enough to answer this question; the explanations of the rise of bedbugs in Paris range from moral panic and false news (including attempts to cause the Olympic Games to fail), to Airbnb and the influx of immigrants. At any rate, the authorities have vowed to deal with the bedbug problem before the opening of the Games—if it weren't for the Games, presumably, the problem wouldn't be so urgent.

Not long ago, there was a rat problem in Paris: the number of rats had multiplied. The rats found their defenders on the city council: they (the rats, not the councillors) were said to be intelligent creatures with emotions such as love and fear, with just as much right to existence as we. We had therefore to learn to live with rats (not that we have much choice in the matter; a rat-free world is less conceivable than a human-free one). Therefore, I now look forward eagerly to the appearance of municipal defenders of bedbugs, on the grounds of biodiversity, and to the establishment of a Bedbug Defence League. After all, a bedbug can't help being a bedbug, any more than a drug addict can help being a drug addict; it

is wrong to stigmatise creatures from birth.

Besides, think of the advantage of the bedbug infestation to some future Albert Camus, along the lines of *La Peste*! The bedbug will serve him or her as a metaphor for the condition of our society (in fact, it already has once served such a function, for Mayakovsky in his play *The Bedbug*).

But to return to the question of migrants to France. It so happened that on the evening after having first walked past and been horrified by the encampment outside the Hôtel de Ville, my wife and I had dinner with one of my late mother-in-law's carers, who was of francophone West African origin. Her care was never less than devoted and we have remained in contact with her.

She had once been an illegal; her husband, a legal immigrant, had refused to help her regularise her situation because his power over her was greater if the threat of denunciation and expulsion hung over her. Nevertheless, she had managed, by her own efforts in the bowels of bureaucracy, to secure permission to stay.

This did not mean that her life became easy. Her husband constantly threatened to destroy her papers; she had to take them with her everywhere she went, and even slept with them under her pillow. She had no idea how much money he earned or what he did with it, nor would he tell her. It was she who paid the household bills.

Because she had a daughter back home and others to support financially, she now had two jobs, and worked between six and seven days a week. She had no time to spend on pleasure, and no money either. For her to come to dinner with us was an unimaginable luxury.

She was an estimable person, untempted by crime or by illicit ways to make money. Her good humour and ability to laugh were, in the circumstances, a human triumph. She was not unique,

however: my mother-in-law had needed several carers, and most of them were of the same ilk, all African women (or one Haitian). We owed them a debt of gratitude, for without them my mother-in-law would have had to go into a home, where she would soon have died, or we should have had to devote our own lives to looking after her and doing little else. I say it somewhat guiltily, but this was not a prospect that I relished: I was too attached to our own way of life.

In other words, the existence of these women was essential to our own well-being, or at least happiness. Therefore, whenever I experience distaste or even disgust when I see encampments of illegal immigrants in the centre of Paris, I experience also a sense of guilt as well as of cognitive dissonance. True, most of the encampments are of men, and I suspect that the women are much better, on the whole, than the men; but without the men, there would be no women.

It is difficult to look down both ends of a telescope at once; or, as Dr Johnson put it in *Rasselas*, "No man can at the same time fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile." I recognise that public policy cannot be derived purely from private sympathy; but at the same time, it pains me to imagine my late mother-in-law's former carer having been treated as if she were merely an irritating unit of national dissolution, when she was a highly estimable person.

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