

When Pascal Parked His Porsche

by Theodore Dalrymple

There are riots in France every time the government tries to liberalize the sclerotic French labor market to make the country as a whole more competitive. That (considerable) part of the population which benefits from the legal privileges it currently enjoys is either unable or unwilling to grasp that, in a market, the protections of some are the obstacles of others. As ever, such privileges set one part of the population against another.

The latest attempt to reform the labor market, the proposed “loi El Khomri” (so-named after the current Labor Minister, who devised it), has provoked a series of demonstrations, some of them violent, throughout the country. The proposed law would, among other things, make it easier and less ruinously expensive for an employer to sack an employee, as well as make it cheaper for the employer to require employees to work beyond the statutory 35 hours. The news that the economy grew more vigorously in the last trimester than expected will only encourage the rioters: why change anything if the situation is improving?

One of the images of the riots that has been shown everywhere is of a Porsche in flames, set alight by rioters in the city of Nantes protesting against the El Khomri law. It was torched because it was taken by the rioters as a symbol of plutocracy. The more ordinary cars in front of and behind it were left alone.

Apparently the Porsche’s owner was not a plutocrat but an electrician, aged 30, who happened to be visiting Nantes on the day of the riot. According to an article in the center-

right newspaper Le Figaro, the man, whose name is Pascal, was an enthusiast for Porsches and, as bad luck would have it, not only did he choose the wrong day to drive it to Nantes from his coastal Atlantic hometown (he rarely drove it anywhere), but he parked it in the wrong place, near the town hall where the riot took place.

“On Twitter I saw that it was called a boss’s car, though I am only a worker,” Pascal told Le Figaro. The article noted that support for him quickly sprung up on social media under the rubric, “I am Porsche.” What Pascal and his defenders said is interesting though not entirely reassuring.

His comments implied that if indeed he had been a boss, which is to say a plutocrat, then the burning of his car would or at any rate might have been justified. This, in turn, implies that there is no such thing as justified or justifiable wealth: only if we had all the same incomes would the ownership of such a fine car be morally acceptable. Moreover, what applies to the ownership of fine cars would presumably apply to the ownership of everything else.

The outcry from the “I am Porsche” sympathizers, while better than the justification for having burnt the car, was not wholly pleasing, either, for it implied that what was important was that it was a Porsche that was destroyed, not simply that it was someone’s private possession. Suppose that instead of a Porsche, it had been (shall we say) a painting or an antiquarian book, or indeed any object of equivalent value to the Porsche’s, that had been incinerated. One assumes that those who love Porsches would not have piped up to object. It was the right to own a Porsche, not the right to own private property in general, that was being defended.

One cannot help but feel sorry for Pascal, who had probably sunk a considerable part of his savings into his car. Most insurance policies specifically exclude damage caused by riot or civil disturbance—or acts of God—as insurable losses, and

so he might lose all that he put into it, a great deal for a non-plutocrat like him.

Understandably, he is seeking recompense for his completely undeserved loss. Where to find it? The actual incendiaries will almost certainly never be found or, if found, will probably not have the means to repay him. There is only one possible recourse in the circumstances: the state.

When Pascal parked his car near the town hall, there were many police standing around. They knew there was going to be a demonstration, if not a riot, yet they did not warn him not to park his car there as they should have done if they had reasonably foreseen that this, like other political gatherings of resentful Frenchmen and women, could turn ugly.

Thus the liability of a few people will have been transferred in Pascal's mind to the liability of all, for the liability of the state is the liability of taxpayers, the state having no means of its own independent of them. It seems likely that the unfortunate electrician will persuade himself that the agents of the state, not the rioters, have done him the injustice, and therefore that the state should compensate him.

What delight and happiness those who set fire to his Porsche must have felt as they saw the flames envelop it! What greater joy can there be than arson in the name of social justice—in other words, to destroy to further a righteous cause? And yet, of course, the real satisfaction in the destruction was that of the destruction itself. It is extremely unlikely that the arsonists were in the last extremity of want, which might have explained, if not justified, what they did.

Indeed, it is even possible that they were potential beneficiaries of the proposed El Khomri law, in so far as it would encourage French employers to take on new employees, thereby reducing the country's chronically high rate of unemployment. The law's purpose—which is not to say that, if

enacted, it would actually be achieved, for the arrow of law seldom hits its target and nothing but its target—is to lift the least fortunate in society by creating jobs.

In the meantime, the prejudice that somehow makes the hatred of wealth and the wealthy into a generous sentiment may be expected to survive and even flourish.

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