

A Political Impasse

By Theodore Dalrymple

In life, we are always dancing on the edge of a volcano. The dance may last longer than it did in times gone by, what with the great increase of life expectancy; nevertheless what John Donne wrote in 1624 remains true:

We study health, and we deliberate on our meats, and drink, and air, and exercises, and we hew and we polish every stone that goes to that building; and so our health is a long and a regular work; but in a minute a cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all; a sickness unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiosity; nay, undeserved, if we consider only disorder, summons us, seizes us, possesses us, destroys us in an instant.

How often have I heard those seized by a mortal illness protest that they did nothing to deserve it, that they ate organic food, drank two liters of fluid a day, never smoked, drank alcohol in moderation, were vegetarian, went to bed early, walked 10,000 steps a day, and so forth! And this is the reward for all their effort! What an ungrateful world we live in!

I am in rural France, where I confess to being in a state of cognitive dissonance. Today, for example, I took my car to the garage for its two-yearly checkup, and everything was just the same as it has always been (by always I mean, of course, as I have known it). I bought some bread and groceries, and likewise nothing had changed (except the prices). No Martian visitor, having paid a visit last year, would have noticed anything different this year. Even in Paris, the center of the world, I failed to detect any tension in the air, certainly not when I went to my favorite restaurant. And yet...

The seeming solidity of the everyday world contrasts with the evident fragility of the political world. No wonder we who go about our business in a normal fashion despise and detest the political class who yet might smash everything up and cause us untold misery and distress. Why can't they just leave us alone, with all our minor pleasures in life and still bearable dissatisfactions? Why must they threaten to bring the whole edifice crashing down, like some evil prophet in an imperfect temple?

The problem is that things cannot go on as they go on now, at least according to economic projections. The present situation is untenable from more than one point of view. But countries like Britain and France are caught in an insoluble dilemma bequeathed them by politicians and policies of the past.

President Mitterand, for example, lowered the retirement age in France to 60, back in 1983. This was a time bomb that has still to be properly defused. The problem is that once a so-called right has been given, it cannot be abrogated without a great deal of bitterness or even conflict, irrespective of the reigning circumstances (French life expectancy has risen by nine years since the age of retirement was lowered). The right to retire at the age of 60 became the same as the right to a fair trial, and he who tried to meddle with it was seen as a villain or, worse, the heartless lackey of a sinister conspiracy. Somehow the fact that the lengthened retirement pensions would have to be paid for—assuming them not to be based on a return on capital invested—somehow never penetrated the popular psyche as much as the fact that part of the population was being deprived of its “rights” when the pension age was raised. It still rankles; but it was, by strange coincidence, the 19th-century French economist Frédéric Bastiat who pointed out the difference between what is seen and unseen as the consequence of any policy, the latter often being more important than the former. You can control rents, for example, which is good for those who already have a

property to rent, but at the cost of reducing the supply of rented property, in the process creating a caste of the privileged who enjoy rent at a controlled price.

The underlying problem is that, in many Western countries, deep reform is necessary and impossible at the same time. It is necessary economically but impossible politically. We all know what to do, said the former head of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker; it's just that we don't know how to get elected afterward.

The recent vote in France, for example, was in essence a vote to extend the welfare state even further. The *Rassemblement National*, with 33.5 percent of the vote, is often described as being of the far right, but its economic policies are of the left, and were it not for its attitude to immigration it could easily join with the left-wing *Front Populaire*, with 29.5 percent of the vote. In a sense, the two groups even see eye to eye on immigrants: The *RN* wants to be hard on them because they are criminals, while the *FP* wants to be nice to them in order to reduce their criminality. But criminals in their opinion they are.

I confess that I see no easy route away from the impasse of many Western societies. If you make people dependent on you, it is difficult to withdraw your support all of a sudden, however necessary it might be to do so. If you try, publicity will be given at once to cases of hardship, many of which may be genuine enough, and there will be an outcry. Moreover, an alliance between the needy and the sentimental can often secure a majority of votes. Finally, in the matter of fending for ourselves, we have eliminated the difference between *can't* and *won't*.



f the possible and not of the ideal. The French philosopher Raymond Aron said that an election is a competition between the detestable and the preferable, but we seem *en route* to making all parties and all leaders equally detestable, though in slightly different ways. I recall the answer of the Peruvian peasant who, when asked why he had voted for Fujimori, said, "Because I don't know anything about him." But our cynicism won't help us when the volcano on whose edge we are dancing erupts.

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