

France Under Riot



by Theodore Dalrymple

Some American visitors to my house in France have been impressed by a market in a small and beautiful town nearby: the quality of the local produce, the good humor and atmosphere of conviviality, in short, the *savoir-vivre* of which the market seemed to be so fine an example.

The night before, in the nearest town of any size or importance, rioters had injured three policemen, and another policeman was saved from murder only by his bulletproof vest.

It is as if France were not only two countries, but two continents, the one of beauty, prosperity, and contentment, the other of ugliness, poverty, and seething hatred. This is an oversimplification, of course, for intermediate layers exist between the two extremes; nevertheless, it is the contrast between them that is so startling.

No one, of any political stripe, has been surprised by the

present riots, though agreement on their cause is not as universal: sooner or later, everyone knew, some pretext or other would occur for yet a further episode of widespread violence. In this respect, France is like a patient with impaired immunity who will one day suffer a serious infectious disease, though no one can be sure exactly when.

This is the second time in a few months that President Emmanuel Macron has had to cancel state visits because of rioting—the first time involving a visit from King Charles, whose safety could not be guaranteed, the second a visit of Macron's to Germany because it would not be politic to leave the country while so many of its towns and cities are the scene of arson and looting.

Compared with the riots that prevented the visit of Charles, which in essence were frivolous street theater, the present ones are serious. They are also more serious than those of 2005, in the sense that some of the rioters have felt emboldened to rampage in city centers, which their predecessors did not. This implies a weakening of the state's capacity to control and repress.

The pretext for the mayhem was the shooting dead by a policeman of a young man named Nahel. It seems likely that the officer was unjustified in his action, though the president of the republic has in effect abrogated the presumption of innocence by all but pronouncing him guilty. No doubt he did this in the hope of calming tempers, but if so, he was sadly mistaken.

Because Nahel was perhaps unjustifiably killed by an agent of the state, he is already in the process of secular canonization, à la George Floyd. The French press has been remarkably reticent in emphasizing or enquiring into certain of the circumstances before the killing. Nahel was driving a stolen car without a license and therefore without insurance; he had been admonished several times before for doing the same

thing; the car had Polish number plates, and it is well known that cars stolen in Germany, taken to Poland, and given such plates, are used by drug dealers in France.

It was not so difficult, then, for Nahel to avoid being stopped by the police in these circumstances, but he was a victim of the culture that he admired and wanted to be a part of: indeed, *was* part of, insofar as he made an appearance in the video of a French rap singer called Jul, in a song with the title "Ragnar." I confess that I cannot understand many of the lyrics, even when translated into English, but a few lines are clear enough:

J'côtoie des gens qui font des trucs dans l'illicite en tous genres (I rub shoulders with people who do all kind of illegal things.)

The video accompanying this song would agitate the susceptible and is full of gestures of violence and aggression.

Of course, Nael was only 17 and did not deserve to be shot dead just because he was driving a stolen car and was an admirer of and participant in one of ugliest subcultures known in the world. He might well have grown out of this subculture that glorifies criminality and violence, especially toward women.

The most heartening thing to come out of the riots, up to now, is the statement of Nahel's grandmother, named Nadia, who [told](#) a French television station:

Fortunately the police are here. The people who are destroying, I tell them to "stop." They are using Nahel as an excuse.

They need to stop breaking the windows, the buses, the schools. We want things to calm down. We don't want them to destroy.

I am tired, I can't take it anymore, I can't sleep, I turned off the TV, I turned everything off I don't want to listen to this anymore."

And an excellent article in the *Guardian* describes the horrors, not of policing, but of the absence of policing in Marseilles, where some of the worst violence has taken place, and where last year 32 people were murdered by drug gangs; this year, the tally is 23 so far. The author describes the experience of a resident, Amine:

The vacuum of effective policing . . . allowed a twisted cycle of brutality to fester; ferocious violence that Amine knows too well. On 29 December 2020 his brother disappeared. For six days his mother scoured the city until tipped off that the 21-year-old would not be coming home. Brahim Kessaci was found beside another body in the boot [trunk] of a burned-out car on a road heading out of the city. A third body had been sliced into pieces with a chain saw and images sent to his traumatised father.

There was no widespread rioting in response to these horrible crimes.

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