The Barbarians at the Gates of Paris

Surrounding the 'City of Light' are threatening 'Cities of Darkness'

by Theodore Dalrymple

Everyone knows *la douce France*: the France of wonderful food and wine, beautiful landscapes, splendid *châteaux* and cathedrals. More tourists (60 million a year) visit France than any country in the world by far. Indeed, the Germans have a saying, not altogether reassuring for the French: "to live as God in France." Half a million Britons have bought second homes there; many of them bore their friends back home with how they order these things better in France.

But there is another growing, and much less reassuring, side to France. I go to Paris about four times a year and thus have a sense of the evolving preoccupations of the French middle classes. A few years ago it was schools: the much vaunted French educational system was falling apart; illiteracy was rising; children were leaving school as ignorant as they entered, and much worse-behaved. For the last couple of years, though, it has been crime: *l'insécurité, les violences urbaines, les incivilités*. Everyone has a tale to tell, and no dinner party is complete without a horrifying story. Every crime, one senses, means a vote for Le Pen or whoever replaces him.

I first saw *l'insécurité* for myself about eight months ago. It was just off the Boulevard Saint-Germain, in a neighborhood where a tolerably spacious apartment would cost $1 million. Three youths – Rumanians – were attempting quite openly to break into a parking meter with large screwdrivers to steal the coins. It was four o'clock in the afternoon; the sidewalks were crowded, and the nearby cafés were full. The youths behaved as if they were simply pursuing a normal and legitimate activity, with nothing to fear.

Eventually, two women in their sixties told them to stop. The youths, laughing until then, turned murderously angry, insulted the women, and brandished their screwdrivers. The women retreated, and the youths resumed their "work."

A man of about 70 then told them to stop. They berated him still more threateningly, one of them holding a screwdriver as if to stab him in the stomach. I moved forward to help the man, but the youths, still shouting abuse and genuinely outraged at being interrupted in the pursuit of their livelihood, decided to run off. But it all could have ended very differently.

Several things struck me about the incident: the youths' sense of invulnerability in broad daylight; the indifference to their behavior of large numbers of people who would never dream of behaving in the same way; that only the elderly tried to do anything about the situation, though physically least suited to do so. Could it be that only they had a view of right and wrong clear enough to wish to intervene? That everyone younger than they thought something like: "Refugees … hard life very poor . . . too young to know right from wrong and anyway never taught … no choice for them … punishment

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cruel and useless"? The real criminals, indeed, were the drivers whose coins filled the parking meters: were they not polluting the world with their cars?

Another motive for inaction was that, had the youths been arrested, nothing would have happened to them. They would have been back on the streets within the hour. Who would risk a screwdriver in the liver to safeguard the parking meters of Paris for an hour?

The *laxisme* of the French criminal justice system is now notorious. Judges often make remarks indicating their sympathy for the criminals they are trying (based upon the usual generalizations about how society, not the criminal, is to blame); and the day before I witnessed the scene on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, 8,000 police had marched to protest the release from prison on bail of an infamous career armed robber and suspected murderer before his trial for yet another armed robbery, in the course of which he shot someone in the head. Out on bail before this trial, he then burgled a house. Surprised by the police, he and his accomplices shot two of them dead and seriously wounded a third. He was also under strong suspicion of having committed a quadruple murder a few days previously, in which a couple who owned a restaurant, and two of their employees, were shot dead in front of the owners' nine-year-old daughter.

The left-leaning *Libération*, one of the two daily newspapers the French intelligentsia reads, dismissed the marchers, referring with disdainful sarcasm to *la fièvre flicardiaire* – cop fever. The paper would no doubt have regarded the murder of a single journalist – that is to say, of a *full* human being – differently, let alone the murder of two journalists or six; and of course no one in the newspaper acknowledged that an effective police force is as vital a guarantee of personal freedom as a free press, and that the thin blue line that separates man from brutality is exactly that: thin. This is not a decent thing for an intellectual to say, however true it might be.

It is the private complaint of everyone, however, that the police have become impotent to suppress and detect crime. Horror stories abound. A Parisian acquaintance told me how one recent evening he had seen two criminals attack a car in which a woman was waiting for her husband. They smashed her side window and tried to grab her purse, but she resisted. My acquaintance went to her aid and managed to pin down one of the assailants, the other running off. Fortunately, some police passed by, but to my acquaintance's dismay let the assailant go, giving him only a warning.

My acquaintance said to the police that he would make a complaint. The senior among them advised him against wasting his time. At that time of night, there would be no one to complain to in the local commissariat. He would have to go the following day and would have to wait on line for three hours. He would have to return several times, with a long wait each time. And in the end, nothing would be done.

As for the police, he added, they did not want to make an arrest in a case like this. There would be too much paperwork. And even if the case came to court, the judge would give no proper punishment. Moreover, such an arrest would retard their careers. The local police chiefs were paid by results – by the crime rates in their areas of jurisdiction. The last thing they wanted was for policemen to go around finding and recording crime.

Not long afterward, I heard of another case in which the police simply refused to record the *occurrence* of a burglary, much less try to catch the culprits.

Now crime and general disorder are making inroads into places where, not long ago, they were unheard of. At a peaceful and prosperous village near Fontainebleau that I visited – the home of retired high officials and of a former cabinet minister – criminality had made its first appearance only two weeks before. There had been a burglary and a "rodeo" – an impromptu race of youths in stolen cars around the village green, whose fence the car thieves had knocked over to gain access.

A villager called the police, who said they could not come at the moment, but who politely called back half an hour later to find out how things were going. Two hours later still, they finally appeared, but the rodeo had moved on, leaving

behind only the remains of a burned-out car. The blackened patch on the road was still visible when I visited.

The official figures for this upsurge, doctored as they no doubt are, are sufficiently alarming. Reported crime in France has risen from 600,000 annually in 1959 to 4 million today, while the population has grown by less than 20 percent (and many think today's crime number is an underestimate by at least a half). In 2000, one crime was reported for every sixth inhabitant of Paris, and the rate has increased by at least 10 percent a year for the last five years. Reported cases of arson in France have increased 2,500 percent in seven years, from 1,168 in 1993 to 29,192 in 2000; robbery with violence rose by 15.8 percent between 1999 and 2000, and 44.5 percent since 1996 (itself no golden age).

Where does the increase in crime come from? The geographical answer: from the public housing projects that encircle and increasingly besiege every French city or town of any size, Paris especially. In these housing projects lives an immigrant population numbering several million, from North and West Africa mostly, along with their French-born descendants and a smattering of the least successful members of the French working class. From these projects, the excellence of the French public transport system ensures that the most fashionable *arrondissements* are within easy reach of the most inveterate thief and vandal.

Architecturally, the housing projects sprang from the ideas of Le Corbusier, the Swiss totalitarian architect –and still the untouchable hero of architectural education in France – who believed that a house was a machine for living in, that areas of cities should be entirely separated from one another by their function, and that the straight line and the right angle held the key to wisdom, virtue, beauty, and efficiency. The mulish opposition that met his scheme to pull down the whole of the center of Paris and rebuild it according to his "rational" and "advanced" ideas baffled and frustrated him.

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The inhuman, unadorned, hard-edged geometry of these vast housing projects in their unearthly plazas brings to mind Le Corbusier's chilling and tyrannical words: "The despot is not a man. It is the … *correct, realistic, exact plan* … that will provide your solution once the problem has been posed clearly. …*This plan has been drawn up well away from … the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims*. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds."

But what is the problem to which these housing projects, known as *cités*, are the solution, conceived by serene and lucid minds like Le Corbusier's? It is the problem of providing an Habitation de Loyer Modéré – a House at Moderate Rent, shortened to HLM – for the workers, largely immigrant, whom the factories needed during France's great industrial expansion from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the unemployment rate was 2 percent and cheap labor was much in demand. By the late eighties, however, the demand had evaporated, but the people whose labor had satisfied it had not; and together with their descendants and a constant influx of new hopefuls, they made the provision of cheap housing more necessary than ever.

An apartment in this publicly owned housing is also known as a *logement*, a lodging, which aptly conveys the social status and degree of political influence of those expected to rent them. The *cités* are thus social marginalization made concrete: bureaucratically planned from their windows to their roofs, with no history of their own or organic connection to anything that previously existed on their sites, they convey the impression that, in the event of serious trouble, they could be cut off from the rest of the world by switching off the trains and by blockading with a tank or

two the highways that pass through them, (usually with a concrete wall on either side), from the rest of France to the better parts of Paris. I recalled the words of an Afrikaner in South Africa, who explained to me the principle according to which only a single road connected black townships to the white cities: once it was sealed off by an armored car, "the blacks can foul only their own nest."

The average visitor gives not a moment's thought to these *Cités* of Darkness as he speeds from the airport to the City of Light. But they are huge and important – and what the visitor would find there, if he bothered to go, would terrify him.

A kind of anti-society has grown up in them – a population that derives the meaning of its life from the hatred it bears for the other, "official," society in France. This alienation, this gulf of mistrust – greater than any I have encountered anywhere else in the world, including in the black townships of South Africa during the apartheid years – is written on the faces of the young men, most of them permanently unemployed, who hang out in the pocked and potholed open spaces between their *logements*. When you approach to speak to them, their immobile faces betray not a flicker of recognition of your shared humanity; they make no gesture to smooth social intercourse. If you are not one of them, you are against them.

Their hatred of official France manifests itself in many ways that scar everything around them. Young men risk life and limb to adorn the most inaccessible surfaces of concrete with graffiti – BAISE LA POLICE, fuck the police, being the favorite theme. The iconography of the *cités* is that of uncompromising hatred and aggression: a burned-out and destroyed community-meeting place in the Les Tarterets project, for example, has a picture of a science-fiction humanoid, his fist clenched as if to spring at the person who looks at him, while to his right is an admiring portrait of a huge slavering pit bull, a dog by temperament and training capable of tearing out a man's throat – the only breed of dog I saw in the *cités*, paraded with menacing swagger by their owners.

There are burned-out and eviscerated carcasses of cars everywhere. Fire is now fashionable in the *cités*: in Les Tarterets, residents had torched and looted every store – with the exceptions of one government-subsidized supermarket and a pharmacy. The underground parking lot, charred and blackened by smoke like a vault in an urban hell, is permanently closed.

When agents of official France come to the *cités*, the residents attack them. The police are hated: one young Malian, who comfortingly believed that he was unemployable in France because of the color of his skin, described how the police invariably arrived like a raiding party, with batons swinging – ready to beat whoever came within reach, irrespective of who he was or of his innocence of any crime, before retreating to safety to their commissariat. The conduct of the police, he said, explained why residents threw Molotov cocktails at them from their windows. Who could tolerate such treatment at the hands of *une police fasciste*?

Molotov cocktails also greeted the president of the republic, Jacques Chirac, and his interior minister when they recently campaigned at two *cités*, Les Tarterets and Les Musiciens. The two dignitaries had to beat a swift and ignominious retreat, like foreign overlords visiting a barely held and hostile suzerainty: they came, they saw, they scuttled off.

Antagonism toward the police might appear understandable, but the conduct of the young inhabitants of the *cités* toward the firemen who come to rescue them from the fires that they have themselves started gives a dismaying glimpse into the depth of their hatred for mainstream society. They greet the admirable firemen (whose motto is *Sauver ou périr*, save or perish) with Molotov cocktails and hails of stones when they arrive on their mission of mercy, so that armored vehicles frequently have to protect the fire engines.

Benevolence inflames the anger of the young men of the *cités* as much as repression, because their rage is inseparable from their being. Ambulance men who take away a

young man injured in an incident routinely find themselves surrounded by the man's "friends," and jostled, jeered at, and threatened: behavior that, according to one doctor I met, continues right into the hospital, even as the friends demand that their associate should be treated at once, before others.

Of course, they also expect him to be treated as well as anyone else, and in this expectation they reveal the bad faith, or at least ambivalence, of their stance toward the society around them. They are certainly not poor, at least by the standards of all previously existing societies: they are not hungry; they have cell phones, cars, and many other appurtenances of modernity; they are dressed fashionably – according to their own fashion – with a uniform disdain of bourgeois propriety and with gold chains round their necks. They believe they have rights, and they know they will receive medical treatment, however they behave. They enjoy a far higher standard of living (or consumption) than they would in the countries of their parents' or grandparents' origin, even if they labored there 14 hours a day to the maximum of their capacity.

But this is not a cause of gratitude – on the contrary: they feel it as an insult or a wound, even as they take it for granted as their due. But like all human beings, they want the respect and approval of others, even – or rather especially – of the people who carelessly toss them the crumbs of Western prosperity. Emasculating dependence is never a happy state, and no dependence is more absolute, more total, than that of most of the inhabitants of the *cités*. They therefore come to believe in the malevolence of those who maintain them in their limbo: and they want to keep alive the belief in this perfect malevolence, for it gives meaning – the only possible meaning – to their stunted lives. It is better to be opposed by an enemy than to be adrift in meaninglessness, for the simulacrum of an enemy lends purpose to actions whose nihilism would otherwise be self-evident.

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That is one of the reasons that, when I approached groups of young men in Les Musiciens, many of them were not just suspicious (though it was soon clear to them that I was no member of the enemy), but hostile. When a young man of African origin agreed to speak to me, his fellows kept interrupting menacingly. "Don't talk to him," they commanded, and they told me, with fear in their eyes, to go away. The young man was nervous, too: he said he was afraid of being punished as a traitor. His associates feared that "normal" contact with a person who was clearly not of the enemy, and yet not one of them either, would contaminate their minds and eventually break down the them-and-us worldview that stood between them and complete mental chaos. They needed to see themselves as warriors in a civil war, not mere ne'er-do-wells and criminals.

The ambivalence of the *cité* dwellers matches "official" France's attitude toward them: over-control and interference, alternating with utter abandonment. Bureaucrats have planned every item in the physical environment, for example, and no matter how many times the inhabitants foul the nest (to use the Afrikaner's expression), the state pays for renovation, hoping thereby to demonstrate its compassion and concern. To assure the immigrants that they and their offspring are potentially or already truly French, the streets are named for French cultural heroes: for painters in Les Tarterets (rue Gustave Courbet, for example) and for composers in Les Musiciens (rue Gabriel Fauré). Indeed, the only time I smiled in one of the *cités* was when I walked past two concrete bunkers with metal windows, the École maternelle Charles Baudelaire and the École maternelle Arthur Rimbaud. Fine as these two poets are, theirs are not names one would associate with kindergartens, let alone with concrete bunkers.

But the heroic French names point to a deeper official

ambivalence. The French state is torn between two approaches: Courbet, Fauré, *nos ancêtres, les gaullois*, on the one hand, and the shibboleths of multiculturalism on the other. By compulsion of the ministry of education, the historiography that the schools purvey is that of the triumph of the unifying, rational, and benevolent French state through the ages, from Colbert onward, and Muslim girls are not allowed to wear headscarves in schools. After graduation, people who dress in "ethnic" fashion will not find jobs with major employers. But at the same time, official France also pays a cowering lip service to multiculturalism – for example, to the "culture" of the *cités*. Thus, French rap music is the subject of admiring articles in *Libération* and *Le Monde*, as well as of pusillanimous expressions of approval from the last two ministers of culture.

One rap group, the *Ministère amer* (Bitter Ministry), won special official praise. Its best-known lyric: "Another woman takes her beating./ This time she's called Brigitte./ She's the wife of a cop./ The novices of vice piss on the police./ It's not just a firework, scratch the clitoris./ Brigitte the cop's wife likes niggers./ She's hot, hot in her pants." This vile rubbish receives accolades for its supposed authenticity: for in the multiculturalist's mental world, in which the savages are forever noble, there is no criterion by which to distinguish high art from low trash. And if intellectuals, highly trained in the Western tradition, are prepared to praise such degraded and brutal pornography, it is hardly surprising that those who are not so trained come to the conclusion that there cannot be anything of value in that tradition. Cowardly multiculturalism thus makes itself the handmaiden of anti-Western extremism.

Whether or not rap lyrics are the authentic voice of the *cités*, they are certainly its authentic ear: you can observe many young men in the *cités* sitting around in their cars aimlessly, listening to it for hours on end, so loud that the pavement vibrates to it 100 yards away. The imprimatur of the intellectuals and of the French cultural bureaucracy no doubt encourages them to believe that they are doing something worthwhile. But when life begins to imitate art, and terrible gang-rapes occur with increasing frequency, the same official France becomes puzzled and alarmed. What should it make of the 18 young men and two young women currently being tried in Pontoise for allegedly abducting a girl of 15 and for four months raping her repeatedly in basements, stairwells, and squats? Many of the group seem not merely unrepentant or unashamed but proud.

Though most people in France have never visited a *cité*, they dimly know that long-term unemployment among the young is so rife there that it is the normal state of being. Indeed, French youth unemployment is among the highest in Europe – and higher the further you descend the social scale, largely because high minimum wages, payroll taxes, and labor protection laws make employers loath to hire those whom they cannot easily fire, and whom they must pay beyond what their skills are worth.

Everyone acknowledges that unemployment, particularly of the permanent kind, is deeply destructive, and that the devil really does find work for idle hands; but the higher up the social scale you ascend, the more firmly fixed is the idea that the labor-market rigidities that encourage unemployment are essential both to distinguish France from the supposed savagery of the Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal model (one soon learns from reading the French newspapers what *anglo-saxon* connotes in this context), and to protect the downtrodden from exploitation. But the labor-market rigidities protect those who least need protection, while condemning the most vulnerable to utter hopelessness: and if sexual hypocrisy is the vice of the Anglo-Saxons, economic hypocrisy is the vice of the French.

It requires little imagination to see how, in the circumstances, the burden of unemployment should fall disproportionately on immigrants and their children: and why, already culturally distinct from the bulk of the population, they should feel themselves vilely discriminated against. Having been enclosed in a physical ghetto, they respond by building a cultural and psychological ghetto for themselves. They are of France, but not French.

The state, while concerning itself with the details of their housing, their education, their medical care, and the payment of subsidies for them to do nothing, abrogates its responsibility completely in the one area in which

the state's responsibility is absolutely inalienable: law and order. In order to placate, or at least not to inflame, disaffected youth, the ministry of the interior has instructed the police to tread softly (that is to say, virtually not at all, except by occasional raiding parties when inaction is impossible) in the more than 800 *zones sensibles* – sensitive areas – that surround French cities and that are known collectively as *la Zone*.

But human society, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and so authority of a kind, with its own set of values, occupies the space where law and order should be – the authority and brutal values of psychopathic criminals and drug dealers. The absence of a real economy and of law means, in practice, an economy and an informal legal system based on theft and drug-trafficking. In Les Tarterets, for example, I observed two dealers openly distributing drugs and collecting money while driving around in their highly conspicuous BMW convertible, clearly the monarchs of all they surveyed. Both of northwest African descent, one wore a scarlet baseball cap backward, while the other had dyed blond hair, contrasting dramatically with his complexion. Their faces were as immobile as those of potentates receiving tribute from conquered tribes. They drove everywhere at maximum speed in low gear and high noise: they could hardly have drawn more attention to themselves if they tried. They didn't fear the law: rather, the law feared them.

I watched their proceedings in the company of old immigrants from Algeria and Morocco, who had come to France in the early 1960s. They too lived in Les Tarterets and had witnessed its descent into a state of low-level insurgency. They were so horrified by daily life that they were trying to leave, to escape their own children and grandchildren: but once having fallen into the clutches of the system of public housing, they were trapped. They wanted to transfer to a *cité*, if such existed, where the new generation did not rule: but they were without leverage – or *piston* – in the giant system of patronage that is the French state. And so they had to stay put, puzzled, alarmed, incredulous, and bitter at what their own offspring had become, so very different from what they had hoped and expected. They were better Frenchmen than either their children or grandchildren: they would never have whistled and booed at the *Marseillaise*, as their descendants did before the soccer match between France and Algeria in 2001, alerting the rest of France to the terrible canker in its midst.

Whether France was wise to have permitted the mass immigration of people culturally very different from its own population to solve a temporary labor shortage and to assuage its own abstract liberal conscience is disputable: there are now an estimated 8 or 9 million people of North and West African origin in France, twice the number in 1975 – and at least 5 million of them are Muslims. Demographic projections (though projections are not predictions) suggest that their descendants will number 35 million before this century is out, more than a third of the likely total population of France.

Indisputably, however, France has handled the resultant situation in the worst possible way. Unless it assimilates these millions successfully, its future will be grim. But it has separated and isolated immigrants and their descendants geographically into dehumanizing ghettos; it has pursued economic policies to promote unemployment and create dependence among them, with all the inevitable psychological consequences; it has flattered the repellent and worthless culture that they have developed; and it has withdrawn the protection of the law from them, allowing them to create their own lawless order.

No one should underestimate the danger that this failure poses, not only for France but also for the world. The inhabitants of the *cités* are exceptionally well armed. When the professional robbers among them raid a bank or an armored car delivering cash, they do so with bazookas and rocket launchers, and dress in paramilitary uniforms. From time to time, the police discover whole arsenals of Kalashnikovs in the *cités*. There is a vigorous informal trade between France and post-communist Eastern Europe: workshops in underground garages in the *cités* change the serial numbers of stolen luxury cars prior to export to the East, in exchange for sophisticated weaponry.

A profoundly alienated population is thus armed with serious firepower; and in conditions of violent social upheaval, such as France is in the habit of

experiencing every few decades, it could prove difficult to control. The French state is caught in a dilemma between honoring its commitments to the more privileged section of the population, many of whom earn their livelihoods from administering the *dirigiste* economy, and freeing the labor market sufficiently to give the hope of a normal life to the inhabitants of the *cités*. Most likely, the state will solve the dilemma by attempts to buy off the disaffected with more benefits and rights, at the cost of higher taxes that will further stifle the job creation that would most help the *cité* dwellers. If that fails, as in the long run it will, harsh repression will follow.

But among the third of the population of the *cités* that is of North African Muslim descent, there is an option that the French, and not only the French, fear. For imagine yourself a youth in Les Tarterets or Les Musiciens, intellectually alert but not well educated, believing yourself to be despised because of your origins by the larger society that you were born into, permanently condemned to unemployment by the system that contemptuously feeds and clothes you, and surrounded by a contemptible nihilistic culture of despair, violence, and crime. Is it not possible that you would seek a doctrine that would simultaneously explain your predicament, justify your wrath, point the way toward your revenge, and guarantee your salvation, especially if you were imprisoned? Would you not seek a "worthwhile" direction for the energy, hatred, and violence seething within you, a direction that would enable you to do evil in the name of ultimate good? It would require only a relatively few of like mind to cause havoc. Islamist proselytism flourishes in the prisons of France (where 60 percent of the inmates are of immigrant origin), as it does in British prisons; and it takes only a handful of Zacharias Moussaouis to start a conflagration.

The French knew of this possibility well before September 11: in 1994, their special forces boarded a hijacked aircraft that landed in Marseilles and killed the hijackers – an unusual step for the French, who have traditionally preferred to negotiate with, or give in to, terrorists. But they had intelligence suggesting that, after refueling, the hijackers planned to fly the plane into the Eiffel Tower. In this case, no negotiation was possible.

A terrible chasm has opened up in French society, dramatically exemplified by a story that an acquaintance told me. He was driving along a six-lane highway with housing projects on both sides, when a man tried to dash across the road. My acquaintance hit him at high speed and killed him instantly.

According to French law, the participants in a fatal accident must stay as near as possible to the scene, until officials have elucidated all the circumstances. The police therefore took my informant to a kind of hotel nearby, where there was no staff, and the door could be opened only by inserting a credit card into an automatic billing terminal. Reaching his room, he discovered that all the furniture was of concrete, including the bed and washbasin, and attached either to the floor or walls.

The following morning, the police came to collect him, and he asked them what kind of place this was. Why was everything made of concrete?

"But don't you know where you are, *monsieur*?" they asked. "*C'est la Zone, c'est la Zone*." •