

Learning the Right Lessons from Rostock and Los Angeles

According to the English language press reports available in the United States, the civil (uncivil?) disturbances in Germany concerning asylum applicants are being perpetrated by "radical right wingers, neo-Nazis and skinheads" who are "xenophobic, racist and nationalistic." They are obviously portrayed as not very nice people.

One of the advantages of being able to read a foreign language (in my case, German) is that one can work upstream around such formulaic and politically correct language and consult sources closer to the events. Here is my translation from the lead article, filed from Rostock, of the *Northamerikanische Wochen-Post* for Sept 5-11:

The radical nucleus of the rioters based their action on the shabby justification that "this will wake the politicians up," and continued, "one must torch a few buildings and break a few heads."

These are not very noble sentiments, but they are an example of our "we told them so." From the very beginnings of our work on the immigration issue in the late 1960s, we have been saying that if reasonable people did not take up the issue and deal with it while moderate and socially acceptable measures would suffice, then it was very likely that it would end up in the streets. They did not, and it has. The disaffected are now issuing a wake-up call for the politicians.

There are real grievances, as Wolfgang Bosswick reports on page 36 of this journal. Germany expects about 500,000 asylum applicants this year, for each of whom it costs the government \$880 per month. Housing is scarce and unemployment is very high — 40 percent in Rostock and 57 percent in neighboring Lichtenhagen, where, according to *The New York Times Large Print Weekly*, "neighbors petitioned the politicians [for action] for months. But nothing happened. Then the youths took matters into their own hands." In the town of Breitenheerda, the foreigners outnumber the locals. Is it reasonable to expect the latter not to object?

What are the public options when the system refuses to respond?

Here in the United States, the conditions are in many respects similar. Despite repeated polls showing that the overwhelming majority of Americans, of all political stripes and of all colors, want illegal immigration ended and legal immigration sharply reduced, Congress in 1986 amnestied several millions of persons who had entered the country illegally. Then in 1990, it granted a second series of amnesties to the

relatives of the first wave — and went on to increase legal immigration by 40 percent. The question for the United States is whether, given this sharp disparity between what the people want and what the politicians are giving, we can avoid our own disturbances.

The 'doctrine of American Exceptionalism' holds that we can. Briefly put, this view states that we are the exception to the rule, that it cannot happen here, that God is with Us — *Got mit uns* was the German version of this conceit. But it has already started to happen here, as Jack Miles contends in the cover article in the October issue of *The Atlantic*. Writing on the Los Angeles riots, he highlights the competition that recent immigration policy has fostered between long-resident blacks and newcomer Hispanics. This played a big role in the riots, which were *not* just over the Rodney King verdict. [See page 71 for a summary of this article.]

There have been less serious dust-ups in the past, such as the conflict between Vietnamese fishermen and native Texans in the Gulf of Mexico, and the tension brewing between the Hmongs and the natives in Wausau, Wisconsin. It would not take much to touch things off again.

This is especially true when one considers that affirmative action programs in the U.S. cover some recent immigrants, classifying them as "minorities." Attempts to have the political system address this inequity have been met with a stony silence. Such preferential treatment is also a factor in the German situation.

If we are not careful, the message that more and more people will draw from incidents like Rostock is that violence works. In another article in the *Wochen-Post* that was highly critical of the German rioters, the author concluded "violence triumphs." In the words of *U.S. News & World Report*, "Skinhead violence resolved the problem where bureaucracy could not." Law review articles and polite letters to politicians that get form-letter replies do not seem to do much good; what gets action is raising hell. This will get the media to cover your concerns, and provide the publicity that may finally move the system.

As to American Exceptionalism, we shall see. The combination of economic hard times and continued high-level immigration, coupled with numerous special privileges for the newcomers, could very well tip the scales.

In this issue of *The Social Contract*, we feature a series of related articles on the costs of immigration. The costs and the benefits often end up on different ledgers. High numbers of poorly skilled immigrants may provide a ready supply of inexpensive gardeners for those able to afford a garden, but at the same time

spark fierce competition at the bottom of the economic pile for housing, schooling, medical services, and so on. The tensions produced may not reliably always be confined to less desirable neighborhoods.

In the editorial in our last issue we theorized about the three phases of the immigration debate — the final one being a rational phase of free and unemotional discussion. We're pleased to note the appearance in the last quarter of cover stories about immigration in both *The Atlantic* and *National Review*, summarized on pages 69-72. We take these as welcome signs that the mature phase of the debate is upon us.

On the other hand, our presidential candidates have said nary a word about immigration, and the party platforms offer nothing but platitudes.

What will it take to get our system to respond?■