

## Why and How the “Street” Governs France.

PARIS. Laughing crowds, clowns, trumpets, whistles, drums, bullhorn-led chants, dancers, fireworks, banners demonizing reform. A good-humoured celebration for over a million youth, workers, old folks and children, led by linked-armed union and leftwing party leaders. Welcome to street democracy French-style.

Teenage girls swarmed, beaten up and robbed in downtown Paris. Boys on the ground kicked by hoodlums wielding baseball-bats. Small shopkeepers and news vendors assaulted and their livelihoods destroyed as politicians dither, policemen struggle, and judges suspend sentences. Schools, roads and railway stations blockaded, with students and unionists telling TV: “The street governs!” Weigh now the price France pays for romanticizing anarchy.

“The street” in healthy democracies means a road you cross. In dictatorships, it means the gossip of discontent, as in “Arab street.” In France, it means ‘mobocracy’ – festivals of hyped-up anger, leftist sloganeering, fat-cat unions, coddled law-breakers, and a general belief that, in the end, a legally elected government should bow to the threat of violence. It’s France’s national sickness: *manifs*, or disruptive demonstrations. And it ‘demonstrates’ only one thing: the failure of representative democracy.

As so many times in its turbulent history, France has again let mobs defeat elected leaders. Friday night, President Jacques Chirac, to salvage his impetuous prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, said he would promulgate Villepin’s “CPE” (first-job contract) youth employment law. This seemed to reject the street’s demand he withdraw the law. But in the next breath, he caved in to the street. He promised a new law to gut the CPE of the two clauses giving it a chance to create jobs: a two-year probation period (now one) and employers’ right to dismiss underperforming kids without going through France’s costly, kafkaesque labour tribunals. He simultaneously proclaimed the law and suspended it.

This bizarre charade fools no one. Villepin, disavowed, has lost his tough-guy game of defying the street. The new watered-down law echoes calls for “compromise” by his bitter rival for the 2007 presidency, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy – now, humiliatingly, replacing the PM as point man on Villepin’s signature CPE. Saving Villepin’s face, Chirac avoided the hot-button word “withdrawal” opponents demanded. But this only further provoked the street. The leftist coalition of unions, students and politicians promises a fifth demonstration on Tuesday.

The government fears agitation is drawing in a broader, older public. Most dangerously, it is starting to rally jobless youth from the boiling immigrant ghettos, scenes of last November’s car-burning violence. If new “contestation” united workers, general public, students and these immigrant *banlieues*, France would face hard-to-contain trouble.

Why does France allow street psychodramas to poison its democracy? First, history. You can trace France’s love of tumult to 14<sup>th</sup> –century pitchfork *jacqueries*, the 1789 storming of the Bastille, and the 1871 workers’ Commune – the latter updating class war with Marxist doctrine. The May 1968 student revolt drew 10 million people into a general strike and eventually brought down De Gaulle. Mobs also bounced Prime Minister Alain Juppé in 1995.

Second, psychology. Intimately tied to “equality,” street-sovereignty is the most powerful political idea in France. It is the threat-flaunting defence of hard-won privilege. Ordinary Frenchmen love to see people defying authority – as though elected politicians (“all crooks!”) were elected by Martians. They tend to back marchers’ privileges, hoping the street will back theirs tomorrow.

Third, the élite’s “autism.” Villepin rammed his CPE through Parliament, consulting mainly, it seems, the ghosts of his heroes Bonaparte and De Gaulle. The CPE aimed to make it easier to hire young people. Impenetrable explanations (plus knee-jerk leftist disinformation), convinced most people it aimed to ease *firing*.

Fourth, France’s ambient leftist ideology. The CPE is now a trampoline for every discontent tied to “precarity:” jobs, health care, pensions -- especially globalization. In all these fears seethes distrust of free enterprise – hated “ultra-liberalism.” Roughly two thirds of France’s population question the market economy in which France lives.

Finally, culture. Demos feed French people’s love of drama, circuses and celebrations. “Everything ends with a song,” they say of themselves. But beneath the crowds’ clowning, spoiled-child defiance of elective democracy, and Red Square-style sloganeering lie values far from fun. Street bullying is not democracy. It is fascism of the Left.

Contempt for elected politicians and identification with the street lead to fuzzy thinking. Beaten-up demonstrators deplore that “some people use violence to ruin our beautiful rebellion.” They forget that their beautiful rebellion is rooted in violence – including law-breaking, blockades and frivolous transport strikes against millions of travelers.

The sanest voice in France is Nicolas Sarkozy’s, the almost preternaturally astute minister of the Interior. He is the only voice clearly identifying street violence as an enemy of democracy. In next year’s presidential campaign, in which “precarity” will predominate, watch for “Sarko” to offer France a new program: Liberty, Equality, Security.