

Jacques Marseille

A Strange Kind of Revolution

Forget the spirit of 1789—France has lost the ability to adapt to a changing world

IT'S ALL GOING TO BLOW UP? THIS PROPHECY, WHICH OFTEN comes up in French conversations, suggests that we understand our own history. Indeed, in France—where the word consensus is not exactly common usage, and the word reformist is considered an insult—confrontation always seems inevitable. Whether the First Employment Contract (CPE), the measure intended to encourage job creation by allowing employers to more easily dismiss the young staffers they take on, is good or bad is beside the point. It took an unusual degree of blindness for Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin to think that the French, who said *non* to the European constitution, would approve of this “reform.” After all, it has revealed to young people the extent to which they have been victims of their elders, who have hoarded generous social benefits for the last 20 years. Financing those benefits has created a debt whose annual interest approaches France’s total annual income-tax revenues. Against this backdrop, Villepin has managed to drive onto the streets not just youth who are locked out of the labor market, but also civil-servant trade unions, which habitually block reform on the pretext of resistance against what they sloppily label “ultraliberalism.”

Such unholy alliances have characterized France’s numerous civil wars. In 1358, the *jacqueries* (peasant uprisings), which gave birth to the modern state, united peasants against the nobility. The nobility, in turn, revolted to protect their privileges against the growing power of the state and the Parisian bourgeoisie, who wanted to create an English-style monarchy controlled by a representative assembly. Similarly, in 1648, the stone-throwing agitators who set off the civil war known as the Fronde ended up giving birth to the centralized state of Louis XIV by rallying another strange coalition: civil servants, already then jealously guarding their privileges; local nobility who, like today’s regional presidents, were set on defending their fiefdoms against centralization; and the middle classes, crushed by the weight of onerous taxation.

Historians and sociologists have long claimed that May ’68

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vaccinated the Fifth Republic against instability and upheaval. But look at recent years. First, the far right has a strong showing in the 2002 presidential elections, then France thumbs its nose at the European constitution in May 2005, then violent unrest rocks the banlieues last fall. And now we have the anti-CPE explosion. It all shows that France is reverting to its old habits.

Today, as in the past, the naysayers are hardly a homogeneous group. They include blue- and white-collar workers threatened by globalization, who increasingly abstain from voting or vote for the extreme right; small-business owners crushed by bureaucra-

cy; the middle class, which overwhelmingly said yes to the euro but no to the constitutional treaty on Europe; and the country’s youth, who will live less well than their parents, or so 60% of French people believe. It’s an explosive situation. In the best scenario, it will lead to a rupture of a bankrupt social model. At worst we’ll end up with a lame “appeasement” like the one that led France to humiliating defeat in 1940. Failing to rein in public spending for fear of displeasing those who



ETERNAL FLAME: Protests on Paris streets, this time over employment reforms

JEROME SESSINI FOR TIME

use and abuse it would amount to precisely that today.

In *Strange Defeat*, a superb essay written in the aftermath of France’s capitulation in 1940, the historian Marc Bloch wrote: “Let us have the courage to admit what has just been vanquished in ourselves: it is our cherished small-town ways. The languid passage of the days, the slowness of the buses, the sleepy authorities, the shortsighted political bickering, the unambitious artisans, our taste for *déjà vu* and distrust of anything unexpected which could disturb our cozy habits. All that succumbed to the dynamic energy of Germany and its buzzing hives.” Today, it is no longer a war-like Germany that buzzes but an industrious China, and soon India. As in previous ruptures, France today faces a major choice. It can refuse to fight in the global competition, indulge its cozy habit of the 35-hour week, defend its privileges tooth and nail, and watch its talented youth go abroad. Or it can shake up the well-protected to give more opportunity to the more vulnerable, slash public spending and reduce debt and modernize its social pact to allow French people—particularly its youth—to believe in the future. In short, France has to topple new Bastilles. The only problem is that these days there are a lot of people sheltering inside. ■