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MAX BOOT

Fires illuminate Europe's problems

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BACK IN 1992, when cars were burning in Los Angeles, not Paris, French President Francois Mitterrand thought he knew why. It was, he explained, because of the "absence of social legislation and protection" in a "conservative and economically capitalist" country.

"There can be no comparison between us and what happens elsewhere," he assured his countrymen, "for France is the country where the level of social protection is the highest in the world."

Au contraire, mon ami. It is precisely because of France's high level of "social protection" that it is now experiencing its own version of urban hell. The welfare state that is the pride and joy of postwar France has become a ball-and-chain hobbling its ability to keep up economically with the despised Anglo-Saxons. In the United States, the government spends 35.9% of gross domestic product; in France, it's 54.5%.

Generous unemployment benefits, free housing and healthcare and other goodies make life cushy even for those without a job. Yet this generosity has not bought social peace. The prisons in France are filled with young men of African and Arab descent who decided to supplement their subsidies with the proceeds from muggings, break-ins and drug deals. The crime rate in France is soaring even as it is declining to a 40-year low across the Atlantic.

No welfare check, no matter how large, will satisfy young men who desperately need the sense of self-worth that comes from holding a steady job and providing for their family. But in France there simply isn't any work to get, especially not if you're young and foreign. In addition to heavy tax burdens, employers are hobbled by countless regulations that discourage job creation. The overall French unemployment rate is 10%; among young first- and second-generation immigrants it's three or four times as high. By contrast, in the cold, capitalist United States, the unemployment rate is a mere 5%. And while the U.S. economy is roaring ahead at 3.8% this year, the French economy limps along at 1.4% growth.

Lack of economic opportunity is not, of course, the only reason why France faces growing *insécurité* from a surly underclass congregated in dingy *banlieues* (suburbs). France, like most European nations, defines itself in ethnic, cultural and religious terms that can leave non-Caucasian and non-Christian outsiders feeling excluded, however long they have lived there. Foreigners find it much harder to become "French" or "German" than "American." Thus the growing European problem with Muslim residents who are so estranged from the mainstream that they are attracted to extremist ideologies.

However severe the cultural obstacles to assimilation, the bleak economic outlook makes this task all the harder. In theory, it ought to be easier to reduce barriers to growth than to redefine notions of nationhood. But, in practice, Europeans are finding it almost impossible to Viagrify their sclerotic economies because the political class lacks the will to face down such powerful entrenched interests as labor unions, farmers and pensioners. The mention of mild reform can lead to massive strikes, such as the "black Tuesday" walkouts that paralyzed France on Oct. 4.

French voters are fed up with their dithering politicians. In the 2002 presidential election, they gave 18% of the vote to

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Gallic equivalent of David Duke. This year, they voted down a European Union constitution crafted by a former French president. But though the French don't like the status quo, they haven't yet shown the willingness to stomach the short-term pain needed for long-term gain. Plans for serious cuts in luxurious agricultural, medical, retirement and unemployment benefits are consistently stymied. The situation is not much better in Germany, where the last election produced a hopeless muddle.

The outlook for the Continent may appear hopeless, but it's not. Britain faced an equally severe crisis in the winter of 1979, when a series of strikes left the dead unburied and the garbage uncollected. Things got so bad that voters tossed out the Labor government and brought in free-market firebrand Margaret Thatcher. Today, Britain is the envy of Europe. France and its neighbors could make a similar rebound. Perhaps the flames emanating from Clichy-sous-Bois will illuminate Europe's problems and burn down some of the barriers to change.

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