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“(G)rêve général(e)” in France - “let’s hope the French continue being French”

Friday 29 October 2010, by [POIRIER Agnès Catherine](#) (Date first published: 27 October 2010).

The French Parliament may have passed President Nicolas Sarkozy’s controversial law on pension reform, and the nationwide protests against it may have eased, but as we go to press, they are far from over. The Socialist Party has declared it will seize the Constitutional Council, France’s highest judicial authority, to check on the constitutionality of the law, and more national demonstrations have been planned in the coming weeks. Twenty percent of gas stations are still out of fuel, and wildcat actions continue to disrupt daily life. As Bernard Thibault, leader of the powerful CGT union, declared, “Non, ce n’est pas fini.”

The events that have unfolded in recent weeks were sparked by the increase of the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, still one of the lowest in Europe. But the original protest mutated into a much larger wave of discontent, with the support of more than 70 percent of the French public. How did we get from a necessary reform, which all agreed on in principle, to a massive wave of volatile and disruptive protest?

At the beginning, the opposition was a trade union affair. The proposed pension reform was, in the unionists’ eyes, poorly thought out. Their demands seemed rather reasonable: all they asked of Sarkozy was that he condescend to negotiate and accept a few amendments. In essence, the unions asked for a fairer reform, one that would protect those who have strenuous jobs and should thus be allowed to retire earlier than others, as well as mothers who have to stop working to raise their children, and therefore often lack the number of trimesters needed to claim a full pension at retirement age. Nobody in France, except perhaps the Communist Party, wanted the reform to be scrapped entirely. But all insisted on social justice. Week after week, the unions mobilized a couple of million people in the streets, but Sarkozy dismissed their claims and refused negotiation. If there’s one thing the French don’t take lightly, it is a president who pretends not to hear their grievances.

As time went by, Sarkozy’s intransigence started to irritate the broader French public. His attitude was the last straw. It was as if three years of controversial policies and actions—ranging from rejoining NATO, imposing an unnecessary debate on national identity and asking for a ban on the burqa to ordering expulsion of the Roma, cutting health and education budgets, and trying to put the profit motive at the heart of public services—suddenly came to a head, with a large majority of the public realizing they did not like what the president said and did in their name. A movement was born: youth were in the streets, oil refineries and depots were blockaded, gas stations ran out of fuel and rolling strikes in public transportation began to affect everyone. Millions more were marching in the cold autumn sun.

I was there with them, in the streets of Paris. There couldn’t be a starker contrast between how events have been reported in France and in Britain and the United States. On the covers of Britain’s broadsheets and tabloids like the *Independent* and the *Daily Mail* there were pictures of burning cars, fully geared riot police in action, hooded rioters; on the cover of the *International Herald Tribune*, it was stranded air passengers having to walk the roads. The tone was always somber. The *Daily Mail* even talked of insurrection on the level of the 1793-94 Reign of Terror.

In fact, the mood has been buoyant and the atmosphere in the streets electric and joyful, furious and determined. Beautiful young women raising their fists in defiance, as in Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Guiding the People*, marched alongside their elders, whose banners displayed the street's wit and pugnacity. Quotations from nineteenth-century writer Benjamin Constant and from Aeschylus, on the need for a just and fair state as a guarantee of the people's well-being and happiness, were seen alongside less refined slogans like "Carla, we're like you, we're being screwed by the president." Still others, sprayed in red on the buildings of Paris, were reminiscent of the creative Situationist wordplays of '68: "(G)rêve général(e)"; "Let's strike till we retire"; "Why should we accept the unacceptable?"; "The inevitable is always avoidable."

Across the channel the British, reeling from the most severe cuts in the public sector since the days of Margaret Thatcher (or since World War II; analysts don't seem to agree), looked at their French neighbors with awe and bewilderment. On the BBC's flagship morning news program *Today*, Carolyn Quinn asked, "The Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz thinks that we should take a leaf out of the French book. Should we? Could we? Or is it simply not in our DNA?" The answer—so far at least—is a little brutal: no, it is not in the British DNA to demonstrate. The British simply don't believe in it. In Britain, all political legitimacy lies with Parliament. If Parliament agrees on the government's spending cuts, the British will simply endure hardship valiantly, even if those cuts are unfair. In France, a country that in the past 200 years has known eleven different regimes while Britain's royal family peacefully perfected the art of croquet, legitimacy lies with the people and the street. Institutions and elected representatives are only an expression of the people's sovereignty and can be overruled by the street if the street decides to do so—courtesy of the French Revolution and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

When austerity measures start hitting the public at large, in North America as well as in Europe, let's hope the French continue being French and prove to the world that the welfare state must be saved and that, indeed, as demonstrators chanted in the streets of France, "The inevitable is always avoidable."

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P.S.

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