

French elites are nervous about a social explosion in 1994

by Mark Burdman

In a Feb. 12 speech in the Meyzieu suburb east of Lyon, French President François Mitterrand made some extraordinary comments about the depth of the crisis now facing France. Mitterrand warned that “we are finishing the 19th year of a crisis, or of an economic depression, such as we have not known the likes of since the 1930s. The 1930s ended up with a world war and the coming into power of regimes of the fascist type. The same causes could provoke the same effects.”

Mitterrand stressed that “we must wake up to the state of mind of the French. Certain Frenchmen are suffering a lot. Pay attention to fundamental revolts when reason no longer works! . . . If I see so many professional categories living today in fear, anguish—and why not tomorrow in revolt?—I tell myself that we have a great national responsibility.” Noting that the success of France, today and in the coming period, depends on the success of policy toward cities, Mitterrand reported that “certain neighborhoods near Paris” reminded him of his visits to certain countries of eastern Europe: “I had the feeling of having been at the same spot.” The President warned that the current “social differences” in France could “succeed in creating, in a country like ours, a world of castes where each person shuts himself off behind his habits and lifestyles, and ignores the others.”

This said, Mitterrand had no solution to propose to end the emerging crisis, beyond talk of strengthening various community “associations” in the cities. Indeed, one must see Mitterrand as having two, not necessarily consistent, motivations. One is that the situation in France is, without a doubt, heading toward the crisis that he is describing, evidenced by growing unemployment and homelessness and the increasing pattern of protests by workers—last year farmers and Air France employees, this year fishermen in several regions of the country. The other, narrower motivation is that Mitterrand, ever the wily political animal, knows that his prime minister, Edouard Balladur, is beginning to experience significant political difficulties for the first time since he came to power in March 1993 as the head of an opposition RPR/Gaullist-led government “cohabiting” with the Socialist Mitterrand. The French President, who up to the present

has stood fast to the post-election honeymoon relationship with the prime minister, would now be eager to capitalize on Balladur’s difficulties, in view of the fact that the latter is likely to be a candidate for the French presidency in the 1995 national elections. There are rumors circulating in Paris that Mitterrand himself, even though he is nearing 80 and sickly, could decide to run for President for a third seven-year term.

‘1994 will be the year of all dangers’

These factors must be kept in mind in judging why the words “social explosion” (or “social revolt,” in Mitterrand’s variant) have suddenly become a central part of the French political vocabulary. Until February, the all-powerful “French public opinion” was favorable toward Balladur, with polls showing him having a 60% or higher popularity rating, certainly the highest among western heads of government at this moment. This has not meant that his *policies* were popular, but rather, that the French electorate, in its collective mood of littleness, has seen in the pompous Balladur a projection of their own state of mind, or at least of the kind of leader they prefer in power.

But now things are beginning to come apart. Balladur had been in Rennes, an historically important city in the northern French region of Brittany, on Feb. 5-6. There, he was treated to the spectacle of protesting fishermen erupting in violent clashes, with riot police throwing tear-gas canisters in the public square before him as he was speaking. According to the weekly *L’Événement du Jeudi*, Balladur began murmuring while in Rennes that “1994 will be, for us, the year of all dangers, and that is beginning very fast. . . . There will be a major risk of social explosion.”

On Feb. 6, another event undoubtedly panicked Balladur even more than the riots in Rennes. In two electoral districts, one in Paris and the other in Blois, the opposition Socialists won elections for seats in the National Assembly that had earlier been vacated, triumphing over Balladur-backed candidates. The Paris seat was one usually held securely by the French “right wing” in recent years.

Balladur went on French television on Feb. 14 to defend his policy course (“We are on the right path”; “It is, for me,

out of the question to express doubts about what is beginning to have good results"; "We have emerged from the recession," and so on), but the fact is that time is running out for his tricks and games. It is bad enough that his Gaullists had loudly insisted, during the election campaign in early 1993, that they would break decisively with the pro-Serbian policies of the Socialists and end aggression in former Yugoslavia by military force, and that they have done exactly the opposite since coming to power. That alone has created a smell of hypocrisy, immorality, and cowardice around the whole regime. Also bad enough, has been the increase of homelessness and unemployment in Paris and other major French cities over the past 10 months. But worst of all, has been the destructive economic policy course of the Balladur government, which has infected French society with a mentality of greed, worship of money, and selfishness.

Balladur has accelerated the "privatization" of many of the jewels of the French state sector, with the aim of reducing the public sector component of the French economy to 12%, from the level of 24% some ten years ago. Enterprises either sold or up for sale include Pechiney, Rhône-Poulenc, Total, Elf Aquitaine, and many more. This process has been managed by a select few investment houses, most of them of the same "Anglo-Saxon" species that the French traditionally rail against. These few houses—mainly Lazard, Paine Webber, Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, and Morgan Grenfell—have made a financial killing in commissions gained by managing the sell-offs of tens of billions of French francs' worth of state assets.

As in Britain, such privatization has inevitably led to more unemployment, as workers are laid off because of measures of "rationalization" and "efficiency." To calm down these angry unemployed workers, Balladur has repeatedly used the funds coming from privatization to "compensate" the workers laid off by the same privatization! This ridiculous policy cannot go on forever, but is characteristic of a regime that is obsessed with its own survival. This is the same regime that has put out the line that a central motivation in the current round of frantic French international diplomacy around Bosnia, is to reverse the decline in Balladur's popularity ratings.

Mitterrand knows that the sell-off of assets and the buy-off of workers cannot go on much longer, and it is this vulnerability that he is now exploiting. But also in Balladur's own RPR/Gaullist camp, Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac, a rival candidate for the presidency, is profiling himself as an opponent of such Balladur methods. According to *L'Événement du Jeudi*, even the monetarist French Treasury and Bank of France have begun indicating their displeasure, since Balladur's policies are steadily eating away at the state coffers.

Le Monde Diplomatique has taken the lead in documenting how insane and destructive the privatization policy is. In its February 1994 issue, this policy is denounced as the

triumph of "rentier" capitalism and as "a farce." Author Serge Hamili warns that "without being restrained by the regulatory intervention of the state, the 'invisible hand' invented by Adam Smith would have succeeded everywhere in demolishing society as one observes today in Russia." A society can only survive, the monthly insists, by state-supported investment in vital infrastructure.

Fears of a 'collective eruption'

The daily *Le Monde* has also heated up the public debate. On Feb. 10, its managing director Jacques Lesourne authored a signed, front-page editorial entitled "Between Resignation and Explosion." He asked bluntly: "Will France witness a social explosion in the coming months?" Stating that he was providing an analysis rather than a refined forecast, Lesourne pointed out that "in effect, the very mechanism of a collective eruption makes it difficult to forecast. Doesn't it involve a series of events, beginning with setting off a detonator, the transmission of the flame to a powder keg, the release, from the latter, of a chain reaction, an eruption that changes, more or less profoundly, the rules of the game?"

Lesourne wrote that this sequence is what happened in the famous "May 1968" uprisings in France, when a local problem at the University of Nanterre extended to other universities in the country. At that time, "the fire propagated itself via the trade unions, to the totality of wage-earners." Today, he stressed, there could be numerous "detonators," ranging from workers in public enterprises, with the railway workers most likely to follow the direction of revolt that the Air France workers took in 1993; to certain farm groups; to segments of the student organizations. Up to the present, the Balladur government has been able to buy off this or that group rising in protest. But can this continue indefinitely?

All that need happen for there to be a *generalized* rather than a localized, isolated eruption, is for one group to "communicate its fever" to larger groups, Lesourne said. Maybe the angry fishermen who rioted in Rennes are too isolated to accomplish this. But the "powder" could be provided by groups fearful of becoming unemployed, such as young middle-class graduates who see that their studies will not secure them a future, or by the little-skilled youth of the deprived areas who already form a "counter-society." Lesourne characterized the state of things in France as: "Nervous, filled with anguish, the entire society is on the way toward becoming a conducting circuit."

Can the powder be dampened, he wondered? Perhaps the "resignation" of the unemployed, or the individualism of the middle classes will prevent these layers from acting. But at any point, links could be established. For the moment, Balladur is still doing well in the polls. But, in 1967, Charles de Gaulle also seemed impossible to uproot—until the events of May 1968. "The year could be calm," he concluded, "but the alarm signals are already orange"—i.e., just short of a red alert.