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A Shooting in Nice Exposes France's Crime Problem

A jeweler kills an escaping robber in Nice, and ignites a debate about how to handle crime in France.

By THEODORE DALRYMPLE

"Revenge is a kind of wild justice," said Francis Bacon, "which the more a man's heart runs to, the more ought law to weed it out." But what if that law, far from weeding it out, fertilizes and irrigates it by excessive leniency towards criminals?

In France the current minister of justice, Christiane Taubira, is determined to reduce the number of law-breakers sentenced to imprisonment, despite a recent steep rise in burglaries. By no means does all of the French public approve. Many want severe and unequivocal punishment of criminals, in the absence of which they approve—with varying degrees of reluctance or enthusiasm—of victims taking the law into their own hands.

This was illustrated to perfection recently in the case of Stéphane Turk in Nice. Just over a week ago, the jeweler, of Lebanese extraction, shot dead one of the two armed robbers who had threatened him with what looked like an automatic weapon. Mr. Turk pulled the trigger as they were making their escape, having relieved him of money and jewels. Mr. Turk was subsequently arrested and charged with voluntary homicide.

A page was set up on Facebook in support of the jeweler, and within a week it had accumulated 1.6 million "likes." There has been nothing remotely like this in France before: Evidently the case touched a very raw nerve. Some of the Facebook messages of support of Turk have been startling in their vehemence. "He should be given the Légion d'honneur," writes one supporter. "One parasite less," observes another. "No justice for them, just a bullet in the head. Sick of being bothered by little s—." Also: "It's deplorable that we should have to kill these scum ourselves." "The only thing I reproach the jeweler with is that he didn't get the other," wrote another of Mr. Turk's supporters.



These supporters don't really care whether Mr. Turk killed in self-defense or from sheer vengefulness. The former would be a defense in law but the latter would not be. Mr. Turk told the police that he shot twice at the motor scooter in an attempt to immobilize it, and it was only when one of the robbers turned to him in a threatening way with his automatic weapon that Mr. Turk shot him dead.

Cyril Doderigny/Zuma Press

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Mr. Turk, who has no criminal record, had no license for the gun and therefore was on the wrong side of the law when he used it. And if he really believed that the robbers had an automatic weapon with them, surely it

would have been foolish to shoot at all, *except* to kill. It seems more likely that he acted on an entirely understandable angry impulse, which has now drawn strong support from jewelers and other shopkeepers from all over France, exasperated by such robberies, as well as the general public, who don't really care any longer about the niceties of the law.

For those on the other side of the leniency-versus-severity divide of the debate, Mr. Turk is a worse criminal than the initial robbers, for murder is a worse crime than robbery—even armed robbery. The left-wing newspaper *Libération*, having just reminded its readers that Mr. Turk's action was against the rule of law, did not hesitate in calling Mr. Turk a criminal and a murderer—though in the eyes of the law whose rule it had just extolled, he is still an innocent man.

The man whom Mr. Turk killed, Anthony Asli, would have been 20 in October. According to *Le Monde* he looked 16, and in the words of his understandably distressed father he was still "a little boy." But this little boy already had 14 convictions (which means that he must have committed at least 50 crimes), among them robbery with violence. He had, not long before his death, come out of prison for the theft of a motor scooter. Between coming out of prison and being killed, he had time to make his girlfriend, two years older than he, pregnant. The armed robbery he committed against Mr. Turk did not bode well for his future: If ever there was a murderer in the making, it was he.

Both sides of the leniency-versus-severity debate will draw comfort and sustenance from Asli's trajectory. According to his girlfriend, each time he came out of prison he was a little less light-hearted and more inclined to secrecy—in other words more determined than ever to pursue his life of crime. The justice minister, Christiane Taubira, will therefore see Asli's life history as precisely the kind of evidence that prison does not work, thus justifying her calls to reduce the use of prison as a punishment.

On the other side of the divide, of course, they will see the leniency of a system that releases a man with a history of violence only a short time after his 14th conviction as preposterous and even cruel. Fourteen convictions, including for violence, is surely enough to conclude that a young man is set on a criminal career, and that a long sentence would not in itself be unjust. If he had received such a sentence, he would still be alive and Stéphan Turk would not be under house arrest. A long sentence would have meant release in his 30s or 40s, at the age at which criminality almost always ceases spontaneously. He might even have had the opportunity to receive an education.

In other words, leniency is not necessarily generous and kind, nor is severity necessarily primitive and vicious. But the left in France characterizes those in favor of greater severity as virtually fascist; it is quite unable to see that its own policy brings about the very exasperation so manifest in the messages on Facebook.

President François Hollande said that he understood the anger of people like Mr. Turk, but that there must be justice and nothing but justice. Quite right: But was it just that Asli was at liberty to commit the armed robbery that ended in his death?

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