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## A Tale of Two Cities



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Here follows a tale of two cities — not, as in Dickens' novel, Paris and London, but Paris and Madison, Wisconsin.

Besides the obvious differences between the City of Light and a modestly sized Midwestern state capital and college town, there is also this: that while Dickens could justly write of the world he described, the world of the French Revolution, that “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” no sane person could say at least half of that

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about the world today. The best of times it certainly is not – not with Donald Trump on the loose.

There are probably more than a few comparatively clear-headed beneficiaries of the Trump administration’s tax cuts for corporations and the rich and of its efforts “to deconstruct the administrative state,” as Steve Bannon infelicitously calls it, who would agree.

Included among them are fossil fuel and “defense” industry magnates and other high-flying capitalists, along with top military brass and their counterparts in the various institutions of America’s overblown national security state.

To be sure, some well-off Trump supporters are committed free market ideologues, and some are fools who believe their own propaganda. But there is little doubt that many of them maintain a comparatively sound purchase on reality, and therefore support Trump only because they are greedy and because their time horizons are short.

May their wickedness cause them anguish. The sad truth, though, is that, if it does, it will likely only be all the way to the bank.

The judgments of the uninformed and terminally gullible constituents of the Trump base are, on the whole, less sound.

They are therefore more to be pitied than blamed. If they think that they are benefiting themselves materially by supporting Trump, they are flat out wrong. Perhaps they can delude themselves into thinking that they are doing all right in other respects but the fact remains that, for them, these are emphatically not the best of times. At some level, they have to know that.

The other half of Dickens’ proclamation is less problematic because these surely are if not “the worst of times,” then a close enough approximation — for everyone insofar as Trump or his more civilized but no less odious EU counterparts have anything to do with it.

Everywhere, outrage follows outrage. And so, from time to time, people rise up – and act out. For the most part, little, if anything, comes of it.

Sometimes, though, (small-d) democracy does happen – more often in some places than in others. The difference between what is going on now in Paris and Madison is a case in point.

Among the factors that account for that difference are the somewhat different legacies of the French and American Revolutions. This is the sort of contrast that fascinated Dickens, and therein lies this tale.

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From an ocean away, it would be hard, even for someone with a deep understanding of French culture and politics, to grasp the significance of the gilet jaune (yellow vest) events – our media call them “riots”—that seem to have become the new normal on weekends in Paris and other French cities. For the rest of us, try as we might, it is practically impossible.

For this, our media and theirs have a lot to answer for; ours for largely neglecting what is going on altogether, theirs for the usual misrepresentations.

As a general rule, Trump’s self-serving “fake news” gibberish is laughable, and he has outdone himself in recent tweets “blaming” the Paris “riots” on the Paris climate accords. But on this, as on so much else, Trump’s defiance of liberal pieties is not entirely off base, and his general sense of things is no worse than the conventional wisdom.

Getting to the truth in “all the news that’s fit to print” is never easy. It requires background knowledge that is not readily available, and skills that take time and effort to develop.

Getting to the truth in news coming out of France is even harder on this side of the Atlantic, not just because our own media are useless, but also because French media can be as opaque as our own.

It doesn’t help that most Americans know little and care less about the world outside America’s borders.

In this case too, it would be hard for anyone far away to make sense of what has been going on lately. When situations are novel enough, one pretty much has to be there.

Thus it took Americanists abroad and American ex-pats a longer time than similarly well-informed people on the scene to appreciate the nature and extent of the menace Trump poses.

The presidency of a transparently buffoonish narcissistic ignoramus is novel enough to cause the judgments of even the soundest commenters to go astray. A far-reaching challenge to the status quo in France that is seemingly spontaneous and that does not fit in any obvious way into the traditional left-right divisions of French society is at least as novel as that.

There are however features of the events in Paris that stand out so plainly that we can hardly fail to grasp their nature, regardless of the geographical and cultural distance that a more grounded understanding would have to span.

For one, it is plain as can be that les gilets jaunes are fed up to the breaking point. This is obvious from what they say and do, and also because, in France as throughout the developed world, being fed up is the new normal. Thank the main scourges of

contemporary capitalism for that: de-industrialization, financialization, globalization, and the decline of traditional working class economic and political institutions.

The gilet jaune revolt started out, we are told, as a protest movement, a spontaneous expression of opposition to the Macron government's plan to impose steep taxes on carbon emissions.

On the face of it, that would be a good thing – if it costs more to burn fossil fuels, motorists and others will use less of them, and will therefore contribute less towards global warming and climate change.

From Day One, mainstream media on this side of the ocean have implicitly impugned the demonstrators' apparent indifference to this consideration. However, they have also come to depict the gilets jaunes as Gallic versions of Bernie Sanders supporters, opposed to austerity more than environmental sanity.

When it comes to reconciling these conflicting impressions and to accounting for them, they are somewhat at a loss. Perhaps this is just how the French are – inscrutable, flighty, and as quick to change course as Paris fashions.

But, of course, it was never Trump-style climate change denial that spurred on les gilets jaunes. Quite to the contrary, it was the conviction that people like themselves, victims of neoliberal austerity policies, should not be the ones to bear the lion's share of the costs of doing the right thing with respect to climate change.

Some of the demonstrators are in increasingly desperate straits; others are better off but nevertheless dependent on their cars and trucks for getting about and making a living. We Americans, with our glaringly inadequate public transport systems, can certainly relate to that.

It has always been the gilet jaune view that the costs of doing the right thing should be born, for the most part, by the beneficiaries, not the victims, of the neoliberal order, especially by those who have become egregiously rich thanks to the ways that the capitalist system, in its present dispensation, distributes benefits and burdens. For many, maybe most, of the demonstrators in the streets, the motivating principle is not self-interest; it is fairness

Thus it was never a matter of some interest groups pitted against others, of those who would be made worse off by a high carbon tax versus environmentalists.

As if to underscore this point, the samizdat press in the United States has reported lately that gilets jaunes and environmental activists have been demonstrating together in Paris and other cities. These are not people out to enrich themselves in disregard of others and

the earth itself. Their motivations have always had more to do with equality and solidarity than their own bottom lines.

According to the usual economic metrics, neoliberal policies have been a boon for economic growth. But the only people doing exceptionally well are at the very top of the income distribution. Some tiny fraction of the top one percent has become obscenely rich, the one percent generally has been doing spectacularly well, and the upper decile is holding its own. After that, there isn't much to boast of.

Recent research indicates that it is mainly in the lower half of the income distribution that there is serious and pervasive immiseration and eviscerating levels of economic insecurity. But, above that line, people are just barely getting by.

To that, and to egregious levels of inequality generally, the gilets jaunes are saying *ça suffit, basta, enough!*

The second point that can be seen clearly from afar is that the gilets jaunes are not just talking about what they want; they are making it happen. This marks a decisive contrast between Paris and Madison, the Wisconsin capital — or, because much the same is going on there now, Lansing, the capital of Michigan.

The difference speaks to many factors, among them the difference between the French and American revolutions.

Those two revolutions are often spoken of in the same breath because they were roughly contemporaneous and because they involved some of the same figures and promoted some of the same Enlightenment ideas. However, in key respects, they were not at all alike.

The American Revolution was a war of independence fought mainly in the countryside by armies in pitched battles, not insurgents in the streets.

The French Revolution more closely resembled the popular rebellions and civil wars of Greco-Roman antiquity. Organized armies were involved, of course, but the action was mainly in urban centers and in political clubs and public fora.

In that regard, it should be noted that, in line with the example laid down some four score and seven years before, the American Civil War was not a civil war in the classical sense either. It was a war between states and between the armies of their federated (or confederated) governments. This seems to be the American way.

The French way, which is closer to classical norms and also to real world politics in developing countries today, empowers an insurgent populace. This was the case in the Revolution itself and then in greater or lesser degrees thereafter, especially in revolutionary and pre-revolutionary years — 1830, 1848, 1871 and 1968.

The idea of power in the streets is, of course, just an idea. By 1848, if not long before, an unarmed or minimally armed populace was no match for the organized repressive power of the state. And yet people throwing cobblestones behind flimsy barricades has made change happen. Deeply engrained historical memories make it happen still.

In just the past week, they have made Macron capitulate just a little – trying to buy insurgents off by proposing to raise the minimum wage and to make the tax system more progressive.

This probably won't be enough; Macron is in for trouble ahead. There have even been intimations of impending civil war – in the French (and world) sense, not the War Between the States sense. Some of that talk has even managed to make its way into the mainstream media in the United States. This is what happens when real demonstrators, not just the usual explainers, get a moment or two of airtime. Insurgents say the darndest things.

Even if it goes no farther, who could not envy French workers for forcing as much change as they have!

Recall the days leading up to the war of choice that the second worst American president in modern times was determined to launch. More people marched – at home and around the world – than in any other anti-war (or impending war) demonstration ever. And yet the Bush-Cheney administration went right ahead with their nefarious and manifestly “stupid” (Obama's word) plans. Demonstrators demonstrated in unprecedented numbers, enough to put the current Parisian weekend demonstrations to shame, but it had no effect whatsoever; the stewards of the empire could not have cared less.

Thanks to the dead weight of the past, Bush and Cheney, unlike Macron, could not be compelled to give in even if only a tad.

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The shameless disregard of “the voice of the people” as registered in the 2018 midterm elections by defeated Republican legislators and governors in Wisconsin and Michigan provides yet another, even more perspicuous illustration.

There is precious little democracy (rule of the demos, the people, as opposed to elites) in our so-called democracy, but there is usually at least a pretense of democratic virtue.

Not in this case; not with Wisconsin Governor (and Koch Brothers protégé) Scott Walker and his cronies in the state legislature calling the shots. Their offenses to democracy are so flagrant that even Republican muckety-mucks are embarrassed.

Upon taking office in 2011, Walker set out to decimate the union movement in that once progressive state; his attacks on public sector unions were especially effective.

At the time, Madisonians reacted in much the way that Parisians would. The state Capitol was occupied for days, and not just by liberal namby pambies. Workers, mainly but not only, from public sector unions were in the forefront of the struggle. That doesn't often happen these days.

And, as in some of the Parisian populace's finest moments – May 68, for example – it was perceived to be and actually was part of a much larger phenomenon.

In 68, the spirit of rebellion had a generational character that spanned the globe from eastern and southeast Asia to Europe and North America.

It was much the same, though on a lesser scale, with the events in Madison. There was also the Arab Spring in its still hopeful phases, and there were insurgent, anti-austerity peoples' power movements in Greece, Spain and throughout Europe's southern periphery. And, of course, there was the Occupy Wall Street Movement spreading from Zuccotti Park to the four corners of the world beyond.

The events in Paris are changing something; exactly what and to what extent is not yet clear. The events in Madison are more like the anti-Bush-Cheney War demonstrations of 2003, writ small; a righteous gesture that changes nothing.

Unlike at the national level, in many states, voters have a more practical recourse than impeachment, or waiting for the next scheduled election, when they realize that, by electing the candidate they did, they made a terrible mistake. In this respect, most state constitutions are more democratic than the Constitution of the United States.

In Wisconsin, if citizens can gather enough signatures, they can hold a recall election. However, the Wisconsin constitution requires an elected official to have served at least one year before a recall election can be held.

In the year that followed the occupation of the Capitol building in Madison, enthusiasm waned. Where there had been talk of a general strike, there was only conventional electoral campaigning.

A general strike might have been feasible, for a brief stretch of time, in Madison, but except for parts of the Milwaukee area, hardly anywhere else. Madison is the state capital and, because the "flagship campus" of the university is there, it is Wisconsin's intellectual center. Bit apart from these superficial similarities, Madison's place in Wisconsin is nothing like the place of Paris in France. There was nothing to do but wait for a year to pass.

Even so, Walker might have lost the recall election had Barack Obama deigned to do more than issue a tweet or two for Tom Barrett, the Democratic candidate. By all accounts, enthusiastic campaigning on Obama's part could have made a difference, especially in the sizeable African American areas of Milwaukee, and in the formerly industrial cities to Milwaukee's south along Lake Michigan.

But although Obama could find time to raise money from gzillionaires in Chicago and the Twin Cities while the campaign was on, he could not manage stepping across the state line to campaign for Barrett.

The Democratic National Committee, then led by Debbie WTF Schultz, was similarly useless. They had money to spare for all things Obama, but next to nothing for fighting back against Walker.

We know how that worked out. The consequences still reverberate; the people of Wisconsin continue to pay the price.

This is a cautionary tale that should be born in mind – not just to lament the shortcomings of our electoral system compared, in this instance, to the French, but also to underscore how much our Trump problem is a consequence not just of Trump's and his party's snake oil, but also of the machinations of Democratic Party grandees.