Europe at a Dark Crossroads: Letter from France

written by Richard Greeman | January 12, 2013

WHEN *NEW POLITICS* ASKED ME this July to write a piece about France under the new Socialist government, I excitedly drove out to Serviers-et-La Baume — my Provençal sweetheart Elyane's little village located in the heart of *la France profonde* — to interview her rural neighbor Robert about this big change (and sip some of his home-made plum brandy).

François Hollande's June electoral victory had just ended seventeen long years of conservative administrations — the last six under the insufferably loathsome Sarkozy. In June, Sarko was ushered out of office with the same popular cries of *dégage* (beat it) that attended last year's ouster of his former North African clients, Tunisia's corrupt tyrant Ben Ali[1] and Libya's unspeakable Gaddafi[2]. Good riddance! Moreover, that very week *Le Monde* had headlined Hollande's proposed budget: hire 65,000 teachers to fill France's overcrowded classrooms and break through Sarkozy's famous "fiscal shield" protecting the rich by raising the top tax bracket to a whopping 75 percent. Could this guy mean business?

Robert has the best vegetable garden in the village and is counting the months until he can take early retirement from France's newly privatized phone company and begin to farm his family plots in earnest. His friend Michel provides boar meat for Christmas dinner. As the conversation turned around to the best way to preparing olives, I waited impatiently for the right moment to ask them what they thought of the new government. My question was received with rolling eyes and Gallic shrugs.

Both these guys are traditional anti-clerical village radicals, nostalgic for the rebellions of 1968, so I mentally discounted their apparent cynicism. However, I kept getting the same reaction all summer every time I brought up the subject with French people from every sphere. Michel, the boar hunter and self-proclaimed "anarchist," finally broke the embarrassing silence, muttering "Obama, Hollande — they're all the same: puppets of the banks."

"But what about the tax on *les grandes fortunes*?" I naively pursued. (I couldn't even imagine the cries of class war in the United States if Mr. Obama, already stigmatized as a "socialist," proposed such a tax.) Patiently, a pained-looking Robert explained to me how the tax actually hurts the "people in the middle," folks whose "fortunes" may amount to 150,000 € ($200,000) — the cost of a tract house. "The poor are supported and warehoused in public housing to keep them quiet. The rich get away with murder. People like me," says Robert, who has seniority at the telephone company and inherited two houses in the village from his grandparents, "pay all the taxes, do all the work."

The New French Malady:
"Suffering in the Workplace"

ON THIS LAST SCORE, I can personally testify, having seen Robert come home from work Friday evening looking like Hell warmed over. He barely said "bonjour," and I ran for the door, suddenly remembering an urgent errand. In recent years, Robert has seen France-Telecom, the once-proud government service that pioneered e-commerce with its Minitel home terminals, turned into a

privatized Hell, known for employee suicides. First, Telecom was gutted from the inside to cut costs, push up profits artificially, and get a higher price on the market for their IPO after merging with the British firm Orange. Then Orange introduced a new management system designed to crush the highly professional workforce by "individualizing" each employee, making him responsible for meeting ever-shifting personal "contracts," de-skilling work (for example sending line-men trained to handle high-tension wires 30' in the air to work behind a desk), and breaking up informal groups by transferring employees to other sites, often with exhausting commutes.

This kind of *Souffrance au travail* (suffering in the workplace), the subject of a startling book and TV documentary by a concerned psychiatrist Christophe Dejours, is the direct product of new destabilizing French management practices aimed at breaking the morale of the traditionally feisty French worker, and its results are visible on the faces of the letter-carrier and the other workers with whom one is used to exchanging *bonjours* (they no longer have time). The only people who look sadder are the unemployed, and by the latest official statistics there are five million of them here.[3] Industrial areas like Northern Normandy are particularly hard hit, with 25 percent youth unemployment among men and 36 percent among women, inspiring the headline, "How barren is my valley: an everyday story of France's disappearing industrial fabric."[4] Moreover, in August, France's flagship industry, automaker Peugeot-Citröen (PSA), embarrassed the new Socialist government by making public its plans (kept secret during Sarkozy's bid for re-election) to close its plant near Paris and lay off 8,000. Following PSA, Alcatel and Air France both announced *plans sociaux* (the French euphemism for firings) affecting 5,000 workers each.[5]

Change Nobody Believed In

CANDIDATE HOLLANDE HAD PROMISED to curb layoffs, revive the economy and fight the proposed European Union austerity plan, but four months after his election *Médiapart* was headlining "In the spring we elected him and in the autumn he betrayed us."[6] (How many months or years did it take some of us U.S. Lefties to see through "Change You Can Believe in"?) No wonder village cynics like Robert and Michel —and everybody else I tried to interview — replied to my questions with shrugs. These folks knew that François Hollande and the Socialists, committed to making France "competitive," were not about to do anything significant to relieve their suffering. It turned out, for example, that the tax on the rich ("more show than dough") was full of loopholes, exempting for example, income from investments (!)[7]

Moreover, the Administration of President Hollande, whose moving speech in July memorializing France's national "infamy" in the deportation of French Jews to German death camps as "The Crime Committed in France, by France" was honored by a full translation this fall in the *New York Review of Books*,[8] has distinguished itself by a consistent practice of brutal armed police expulsions all over France of peaceful families of Roms (Gypsies, barely mentioned in Hollande's Holocaust speech). Since July, Hollande's Interior (Police) Minister Vals has ordered the demolition of Roma encampments in Paris, Lille, Marseille and Aix en Provance for "reasons of public sanitation." (Shades of Zuccotti Park). These Roms from Bulgaria and Romania are part of the European Union and legally have transit rights in France, where towns must provide camping grounds.[9] Interviewed during one Roma expulsion, a CRS riot cop criticized the disproportionate means (two CRS companies plus the police) used to round up a small number of peaceful civilians: "When you see their poverty, it makes me sad. They have a right to live, those people." Asked about Sarkozy's high profile crackdowns on Roms, he replied: "Whether it's under the Left or the Right, it doesn't change much, there weren't more before and no more since the government changed."[10]

Racist Underpinnings of French Prosperity

As a Jew in France, I am naturally gratified by President Hollande's recognition of the atrocities of 1943 and by his vows, following recent attacks on Jewish students and a Jewish market, to severely punish anti-Semitism. However, I am also concerned with French racism as it affects my fellow-Semites, the six million or so Arabs who make up about 10 percent of the local population here and are subject to what to American eyes are outrageous forms of both racial and religious discrimination. My Franco-Algerian friend Hacène considers the North Africans in France an "internal colony" and repeats (in Arabic) the saying handed down by his father and grandfather: "*Mah Hi Habounech*" — "they don't like us; they don't want us."

I learned this to my own discomfort this July, when I went to the Préfecture to renew my *Carte de Séjour* (Residence Permit) which I had carelessly let go out of date. Since as a non-European alien I am in the same category as the Africans and Asians, every year I stand on a long line early in the morning , one North American among about 300 Arabs and a dozen or so Asians, waiting for the Prefecture to open in the hope of getting a ticket and submitting my renewal application. This July they changed the rules. Since I am technically an alien in a *situation irrégulière* I am now barred from entering the Prefecture except on Thursday or Friday mornings, when tickets are distributed by the CRS Policemen guarding the outside gates. I asked the officer how early I should come to have a good chance of getting in, and he pointed to a groups of elderly Arab women and headscarves under some trees nearby: "They've been waiting since yesterday for tomorrow morning." "How many tickets do you have to give out?" I asked the cop. "Fourteen." I then understood that these fourteen mothers and grandmothers of North African workers vital to their families were holding their places. When I complained to Hacène, he told me that in Lyon the Préfecture used to renew their permits only during a designated period of five days in mid-winter, causing them to camp out in the cold by the hundreds.

These Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians, or their parents and grand-parents, were recruited by the French during the 60s, after their countries became independent, to do the dirty, low-paid jobs the French didn't want, for example in construction and on the roads. Along with oil and mineral revenues from Algeria and other former French colonies (*La Françafrique*) their cheap labor powered France's post-war modernization. Far from being the burdensome "welfare profiteers" of mainstream media and politicians, these Arabs literally rebuilt France. Typically, they were hired "off the books," with little or no payroll contributions. Single men, often housed in dorms or shacks, who sent their meager earnings to their families back in the village. Now thousands of these old, mostly illiterate Chibanis have reached retirement age, only to find that they're only entitled to 30€-300€ ($40-$400) a month, including some meager poverty allowances for old people and immigrant laborers. Worse still, indeed heartbreaking, the French subject their pensions to strict residence restrictions that keep them from retiring to their villages and at last enjoying the children and grandchildren they slaved to support. To collect their pensions, they must reside 9 months of the year in France. If caught, not only do Chibanis lose their retirement benefits permanently, the government sues them for retroactive fraud so as to recover the stipends already paid.

This odious, racist French government regulation is second only to the one regulating the lives of (mainly) Arab women, who entered France as the spouse of a French citizen and who then separate or divorce, generally as a result of wife-beating and other spousal abuse. On the presumption that these abandoned or battered immigrant women only married as a legal ploy to enter France, they are immediately deprived of residence permits and all social benefits. On this, the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence, won at the price of a terrible war of attrition, one would hope that the new French President would say a few words about this anti-Semitic "Crime committed in France by France." However, to add insult to injury, a "Museum of France in Algeria," praising the benefits of colonialism and glorifying the terrorists of Algérie française, has been opened in Perpignon.[11]

The Dark Side of Modern France

AS FOR FRANCE'S REPUTATION for religious toleration, the Rights of Man, and *la Laïcité*, the much ballyhooed French version of secularism and the "separation of church and state," allow me to make three observations.

- Although up to 1962 Algeria was an integral part of the secular French Republic, divided into Départments with Préfectures, only Christian (and occasionally Jewish) citizens were allowed to vote. The "Moslems" (as the indigenous Arabs and Berbers were officially known) were denied the suffrage on the (religious) ground that they practiced polygamy. Otherwise, they would have outvoted the white settler minority at the polls and shifted the balance of power in continental France.
- The French government subsidizes the Catholic schools and pays the upkeep on half of the Catholic churches ("historical monuments") in which Mass is celebrated. Christian church towers, crosses and belfries dominate France's landscape and city squares and their bells ring out daily calling the Faithful to pray at taxpayer expense. On the other hand, except for the Great Mosque in Paris, there are zero minarets in this country of six million Arabs, and no *musseins* are permitted to call the Faithful to prayer outside of their generally makeshift storefront mosques.
- After fifty years living here, I can't recall seeing any Arabs in official uniforms or behind the grilled windows of government offices, the telephone company, the bank, or railway stations — at least not here in Montpellier in the South, with its heavy *pied noir* influence. These posts are ubiquitous in this bureaucratic land where the public sector employs as much as the private.

As a veteran of the U.S. Civil Rights movement (and of the French student anti-Algerian-war movement) I am appalled by these shocking observations of obvious discrimination, all the more so when I attempt to bring them to the attention of my Leftist French acquaintances who don't even seem to see them. As Hacène says: "They wear veils over their eyes and then attack us over our veils."

Faced with capitalist regression on the cultural and economic fronts, the best that French intellectuals have been able to come up with has been Stephane Hessel's runaway best-seller pamphlet *Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!* and its sequel, co-written by another octogenarian, the philosopher Edgar Morin. Both call for the restoration of the 1944 Program of the National Council of the French Resistance, which established social justice as a human right and set up the welfare state whose admirable benefits are now under attack in the name of profitability and competitiveness. This step backward would indeed be a step forward. (So would a return to President Eisenhower's tax code in the United States with its 91 percent top bracket.) But it is hardly an adequate response to the total crisis of 21st Century.

Moreover, the Hessel-Morin nostalgic picture neglects the 'dark side' of the Liberation — starting with the exclusion from the victory parade of the Spanish-Republican and Algerian troops who helped liberate Paris in August,1944, and continuing with the 1945 V-E day massacre of thousands of Algerians demonstrating for their civil rights and the sending of Gen. Leclerc's expeditionary force to Indochina to crush the native resistance. It forgets that post-Resistance France was dominated by a nationalistic alliance between the right-wing Gaullists and the Stalinists dedicated to restoring capitalist order, disarming the partisans, and protecting the big collaborators, while punishing a few Rightist writers with death and shamefully parading young French women through the streets, heads shaved, for the crime of having loved a German boy. Hardly an edifying example for today's indignant youth.

The French Exception?

LAST SPRING, as the peoples of Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal were fed into the meat grinder of Austerity, François Hollande pledged that France would resist debt-mania, restore growth, and refuse the social spending cuts imposed by the *diktat* of the German banks (fronted by the "Troika" of IMF, European Commission and Central Bank). On Sept. 29, Hollande suddenly reversed himself and adopted the policy previously scorned as "Merkozy," provoking defections among the Socialists and their coalition partners, the Greens, as well as howls from the more radical Left Front of renegade Socialist Jean-Luc Mélanchon, who had made a significant showing in the first round of the 2012 Presidentials. On Oct. 11, the first anti-Socialist, anti-Treaty mass demonstration (80-100,000?) descended into the streets of Paris under the aegis of the "Left of the Left": 60-odd organizations including ATTAC, the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party) and Melanchon's crowd.[12] A week later the CGT organized a separate march with other unions.

At issue were Hollande's stark austerity budget and his support for the new neo-liberal European Treaty. Known as the "fiscal austerity pact," the Treaty, which supersedes national sovereignty, establishes a "Golden Rule" limiting deficit spending (the classic Keynesian solution to recession) to 3 percent and curbing inflation (which normally helps debtors and debtor-nations keep their creditors at bay). Despite defections on the Left, the Socialists were able to ram both the austerity budget and the European Treaty through the Chamber of Deputies without recourse to votes from the Right. Once ratified, the Treaty will (to paraphrase William Jennings Bryant) "crucify" the people of Europe "on a cross of Euros" — just like the hard-money/gold-standard deflationary policies that transformed American farmers into debt-peons and provoked the 19th Century Populist revolt.

A Senile French Disorder:
Parliamentary Cretinism

ONE RECALLS that the feisty French electorate (along with the Dutch) had previously dealt a stunning blow to this neoliberal project by voting a resounding Non to an earlier version of the European Treaty in 2006. In the election year 2007, there were high hopes that the grass-roots coalition of the "Left of the Left" forces that, against all odds, had won the referendum with a Non vote could unite around a broad program behind a common candidate — for example the popular Jose Bové of the Peasant Confederation. Alas, these hopes dissolved in sectarian power struggles, leaving a field of nine far-left parties (including three brands of Trotskyists and two Greens) scrambling to get onto the ballot — a tedious process that requires militants of each group to obtain signatures from a minimum of 500 elected officials on their petition. At stake, among other things, in this *querelle de boutique* (shopkeepers' rivalry) were the subsidies the French state gives to qualified minority parties. Just before the deadline, when my local comrades of the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR), predecessor of the NPA, well short of 500 signatures, were despairing, they were rescued by none other than Nicolas Sarkozy. Calculating that far-left voting would hurt his Socialist opponents, he ordered his conservative party's local mayors to sign as many petitions as possible!

The LCR's candidate, the adorable young postman Olivier Besancenot, scored 1.5 million votes (4 percent), on the strength of which the LCR (an affiliate of the IVth International) was encouraged to re-invent itself as the openly electoralist NPA (New Anticapitalist Party). But this reincarnation fell apart over the question of whom to form electoral alliances with — the CP and super-Trotskyist *Lutte ouvrière* on their left or Mélanchon's Left Front? — resulting in defections, an historically low score in 2012, and the loss of government subsidies. This was yet another hopeful effort fallen victim to what Lenin considered the congenital vice of the French Left: "parliamentary cretinism."

These farcical misadventures would be laughable were it not for their demoralizing consequences. So let us pause to admire French capitalism's success in channeling all this radical

energy into the electoral swamp. A small political class recruited from *Les Grandes Ecoles* and the five hundred families continues to run France and her neo-colonial African empire, alternating Left and Right administrations in defense of French capital while diverting thousands of militants full of energy and a will to change the world away from the social struggle. Between electoral periods, the leaders of the unions (Communists included) are also co-opted by French Government subsidies and can be counted on to divert the spontaneous mass strikes that periodically paralyze France by channeling them into harmless, spaced, one-day demonstrations. These ritual parades are designed to let the steam out of the pressure cooker of social struggle — an ongoing practice I recently documented and analyzed in these pages with reference to spontaneous mass strikes from 1936 and 1968 to 1995, 2003, 2009 and 2010.[13]

France Becalmed in the Eye of the European Storm

MEANWHILE THIS FALL, as the French Left lay paralyzed in the electoral doldrums, all hell was breaking out in Southern Europe with massive, spontaneous, self-organized strikes and demonstrations protesting austerity measures in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. In Portugal on September 15 over a million people — one tenth of the population — poured into the streets of Lisbon and thirty other towns to block the imposition of a new sales tax and a change in social security deductions raising the workers' contribution and lowering the employers' share. No unions called for this demonstration, which was organized over the Internet. The following Monday, the government withdrew the proposed law, while the CGTP and other unions belatedly called their own march for the end of the month.

In Spain on Sept. 25, tens of thousands of demonstrators surrounded the Parliament, which was defended by a phalanx of 2,000 riot cops whose brutality was "a throwback to the Franco era." Undaunted, the protesters came back on Sept. 29 and surrounded the Parliament for the whole evening. In Italy on Sept. 28th, 30,000 public sector workers demonstrated in Rome against cutbacks. In Greece, general strikes and violent confrontations with the police have continued, culminating in the "warm welcome" that attended Angela Merkel's state visit in early October. Previously, the government had launched a diabolical plan to collect revenue from the common people by adding their tax bill onto their electrical bill. But this outrage was foiled by solidarity among consumers who refused to pay and electrical workers, who turned the current back on.

All these largely spontaneous popular movements are directed against Troika-dictated austerity measures aimed at making the working populations pay for the debts incurred by their "betters" — measures imposed by these same local elites with the acquiescence of mainstream left parties and unions pledged to "save the Euro." In practice, these measures are identical to the "structural adjustment" measures imposed by the IMF on the emerging African nations in the 80s, demolishing their public educational and social institutions, allowing their local infrastructures to decay, and reducing them to debt peonage. Today, these measures are being deployed against the (mainly) white populations in Europe and the United States — chickens come home to roost as it were. Naomi Klein calls this process "disaster capitalism," and the Crash of 2008 was the "disaster" that prepared the ground here, starting with Greece, the weakest of the debtor nations.

Solidarity Solutions vs. Salami Tactics

THE MOSTLY-GERMAN BANKS, acting through the Troika, have up to now succeeded in applying 'salami tactics' — carving up and subjugating Europe piecemeal, much as Hitler did in the 30s. Then, as now, the "democracies," rather than uniting, practice appeasement, allowing themselves to be picked off one at a time until it was too late. The political class in each of the so-called PIIGS thinks it can make a better deal with the central European banks who own their national debt. Instead of

chanting "better to hang together than be hanged separately" they bleat "every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost." Clearly, Socialist France has chosen to cleave to German capital at whatever cost to France's social structure. Thus, Chancellor Merkel seems to be succeeding in imposing Chancellor Bismarck's dream of German hegemony over Southern Europe, using peaceful means where the bellicose Kaiser and Hitler both failed.[14] If the old Russian Empire was rightly known as the "prison-house of nations," the German-dominated Euro-zone may soon be accurately described as the "debtors-prison of nations."

Predictably, despite shows of international solidarity displayed in slogans on banners and signs visible in recent spontaneous anti-austerity demonstrations, there has been no significant attempt at building a united front among the official trade unions and left parties of France, Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. As a result, the workers and general populations of these once-proud nations stand disarmed and dis-united in the face of a united adversary: the creditors' "Europe" of the Troika. Meanwhile, the near-total lack of international solidarity in a European Union that has abolished national borders and currencies is shocking to a U.S. observer. One hopes that in the next phase of this struggle, which will likely intensify as the inflated capital markets careen toward another, more devastating Crash of 2008,[15] the peoples of Europe will be able to form their own horizontal solidarity networks, perhaps with the help of the Internet and social media as during the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements of 2011.

As George Caffensis has pointed out, the example of the South American countries like Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Venezuela who over the past decade or so successfully stood up to the structural reforms of the IMF and World Bank evokes the nightmare that must be haunting the European Troika: the specter of a debtors' cartel uniting to collectively bargain down the terms of repayment or simply walk away from their "obligations" to the big banks. More recently, the new popular government of Iceland refused to pay the mountainous debts contracted by their naive bankers and former officials with no apparent negative consequences. As opposed to the nation-based "every-man-for-himself" approach (which opens the door to Nazi-type scape-goating of immigrants as in Greece and increasingly in France), such a "debtors vs. creditors" approach would have the advantage of bringing the European peoples together on the basis of class. The first step toward constructing a "peoples' Europe."

Alas, so far I have not heard any such solutions being discussed here.

Footnotes

1. To whom Sarkozy's Interior Minister offered police assistance to ben Ali during the January 2011 pro-democracy demonstrators.
2. Ghaddafi was Sarkozy's official guest in Paris was permitted to pitch his tents in the garden of the presidential Elysée Palace.
3. This breaks down to three million 'job seekers' still collecting unemployment, plus another two million in the various 'discouraged' categories who try to get by on welfare.
4. Liza Fabbian, "How barren is my valley: an everyday story of France's disappearing industrial fabric," *Mediapart*, Sept. 26, 2012.
5. Steven Erlanger, " In Peugeot's Troubles, a Test of Contradictory Campaign Promises for Hollande," *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 2012.
6. *Médiapart,* founded and edited by ex-Trotskyist former *Monde* editor Edwy Plenel is a subscriber supported, left-wing online full-fledged daily newspaper, with an informative English-language page. See " In the spring we elected him and in the autumn he betrayed us," *Mediapart*, Oct. 5, 2012.
7. La rédaction de Mediapart, ""French socialist's wealth tax 'more show than dough'," *Mediapart*, Sept. 7, 2012.

8. *NYRB,* Sept 27, 2012, pp. 40-41.
9. One wonders if Hollande is trying to imitate the Obama Administration's high-profile roundups and brutal imprisonment of a half-million undocumented Latin-American men, women and children pending their deportation (ironically banned from their ancestral Mexican States of CA, NM, CO, TX, and AZ)?
10. Louise Fessard, " 'It's all for show': French police officers speak out on Roma evictions," *Mediapart*, Aug. 21, 2012.
11. Information based on articles in Oct. 2012 *MotivéES,* the local bulletin of the NPA.
12. Mathieu Magnaudeix, "Manifestation anti-TSCG: une 'première étape' pour la gauche de la gauche," *Mediapart*, Sept. 30, 2012.
13. Please see my "General Strikes and Massive Demonstrations Challenge Neo-Liberal Reforms in France,"*NP*, Summer 2011.
14. Indeed, toward the end of his life the "Blood and Iron" Chancellor urged the militaristic Kaiser to use financial and diplomatic, rather than military methods to dominate Europe. Please see my essay: "Germany Gambles on the Old Dream of European Hegemony," Nov. 16th, 2011.
15. This is a safe prediction, given that nothing has been done to eliminate the immediate causes of the Crash of 2008. Please see my "Is There Life After Capitalism?," *State of nature,*" *Autumn 2012.*