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Why the French Loathe Sarkozy

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Thursday, March 3, 2011. She was just an adolescent in the isolated cathedral town of Le Puy-en-Velay high in a volcanic region somewhere between the equally isolated burghs called Clermont-Ferrand and Saint Etienne, where nothing ever really happens. Like others, she waited smilingly behind a barrier to have a glimpse of the reigning chief of state. And here he came : Nicolas Sarkozy in person, after having recalled how important Catholicism remains in providing the fundamental values for French civilization. Now the President of the Republic was to actually touch the hands proffered by a small number of excited citizens kept in place by metal fences as the inevitable security agents scanned them with cold eyes. When the erstwhile monarch came abreast of the girl, she extended her right hand. But when Sarkozy reached for it she immediately drew back as if recoiling in self-preservation from communion with the tainted, presidential flesh. Then she laughed. See link :

http://www.wat.tv/video/elle-met-vent-sarkozy-puy-3gm71_2exyb_.html

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L255xH389/sarko_3303-5deef.jpg

A small incident, but a telling one. It was not the first time that people have refused to take Sarkozy's hand, and it will not be the last. In fact, it is a standing joke, ever since 24 February 2008 when Sarkozy reached to take the hand of a man at the annual agricultural fair (Salon de l'agriculture) in Paris, only to have it refused with the comment : "Don't touch me. I don't wish to be sullied." To which France's president replied : 'Alors, casse toi, pauvre con.' (Then fuck-off, asshole.) The result was that Sarkozy's now rare appearances are often punctuated by cries of "Casse toi, pauvre con !" And this is long before the slogan "Dégage (get out) Ben Ali" was used by demonstrators in Tunisia. The sequel was that, in France, demonstrators carrying signs reading "Casse toi pauvre con" have been singled out and at least one was arrested and taken to court on charges of defamation, like the philosophy professor who witnessed police brutalizing a man in the train station in Marseille and called out "I see Sarkozy !" He, too, was arrested. Oh, such mini events are many, and I can't mention all of them.

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But how to foresee or detect signs of change, those obscure indicators that something is percolating beneath the seamless surface of an apparently placid, humdrum reality ?

It is hard to do, for the arrogance of prediction is far more often than not a road to ridicule, a road dangerously strewn with wishful thinking and illusory deduction.

It is for this reason that I'm reluctant to pronounce on the current situation in France. What I can do is recount, as Victor Hugo called them, "Choses vues" – things seen, and heard. In his book with this title, Hugo wrote about the period between 1830 and 1848. The historical reference is, I think, a good one. This was the period between two political revolutions, during which popular movements confusedly blundered to some sort of reckoning with a political authority – the "constitutional monarch" Louis Philippe – considered by more and more people throughout the period as being without imagination or solutions to outstanding problems, as well as – most seriously – boring and corrupt.

The parallel with the flailing Sarkozy government seems accurate enough. On March 6 it was announced that a new poll accorded Sarkozy an approval rating of 22 percent. Two days later yet another poll put him at 20 percent. Twenty percent ? Did George Bush II ever fall that low ? Well, yes, he did. But it was just days before the 2008 election, in which he was not a candidate and after eight years of lying and other exposed deceitful, bungled atrocities. These polls in France also projected Sarkozy as unlikely to survive the first round of voting in the 2012 election.

Moreover, the polls reveal Marine Le Pen – new president of the neo-fascist National Front – as the leader of the current pack of presidential candidates. Marine Le Pen is the daughter of the party's founder, the acknowledged torturer (in the Algerian war), Jean-Marie Le Pen. In the wake of the worldwide economic difficulties following the financial shakedown of 2008, populist rhetoric is the way to go, but only Le Pen is allowed to go for it.

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Although some on the Left—like Jean-Luc Mélançon of the somewhat confidential "Le Parti de gauche" (The Left Party) formed of "left socialists" and allied with the largely defunct Communist Party, and Olivier Besancenot of the floundering Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist Party), the former Ligue Communiste révolutionnaire of Trotskyist inspiration—are willing to rail against the "oligarchy," the "plutocrats," and "capitalism" more generally, they can't reach the people. The media carefully keeps them closeted behind the scenes. As in the presidential election of 2002, the political and economic status quo is best served by allowing the extreme Right to work as a spoiler between the two major parties : the scarecrow of neo-fascism will, the power brokers are betting, at the very least result in a run-off election pitting Le Pen against either Sarkozy or the socialist candidate. In either case, the eventual winner will preserve the present program of accelerating de-regulation, declining social services and control by international finance, the European Union and adherence to NATO.

So much for the high level manipulations and orchestrations structuring political action and thinking.

But there is one major consideration that these manipulations cannot control—direct action by the populace. Here is the fear that haunts virtually all politicians and the labor unions in France : what if a sufficient number of people decide to take matters into their own hands ? The influence of popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere was immediately compared to the astonishing decorum that characterized the massive demonstrations in France in October and November 2010. Although the movements in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean have been prudently vaunted as "pacific" and "democratic" in thrust, one needs to suspend imagination not to take into account the range of direct actions employed there : self-immolation, civil disobedience entailing the risk of torture, death and injury by gunfire or beating, the burning of police stations, the stoning of police, the sacking of official buildings and, at least in the case of Libya, armed insurrection.

Sarkozy kept a low profile after the passage of his partial reform of the retirement laws and the on-running regression of social programs in general. He then reshuffled his ministerial cabinet, hoping to overcome revelations of corruption and conflicts of interest among them. But then the unexpected uprisings broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, where his prime minister (François Fillon) and his minister for foreign affairs (Michèle Alliot-Marie) had recently or were taking vacations as guests of one or the other of the dictators then in residence (Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Moubarek). When the revelations were made—only under the impetus of Le Canard enchaîné's investigative journalism—Alliot-Marie was forced to resign, and Sarkozy forced to re-shuffle the cabinet once again.

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Fortunately, a providential man was available to replace the disgraced foreign minister. This is Alain Juppé, immediately touted as supremely competent, and even independent, a decidedly innovative qualification for a Sarkozy dream team. But who is Alain Juppé ? Independent, yes, but his competence, and his honesty, are subject to serious question. Close collaborator of former president Jacques Chirac, minister of several departments and prime minister, in 1995 Juppé was accused of nepotism and misuse of public funds in the allocation of swanky apartments to himself and his son, and was forced to vacate the premises. More seriously, also in 1995, as Chirac's prime minister, his attempts to reform the social security system resulted in a general strike that shut France down for almost two months and forced withdrawal of the regressive reform. In 2004, he was sentenced to eighteen months in prison (that he was not required to serve) and a period of ineligibility for political office for financial manipulations based on falsified municipal employment records.

Just before his appointment as foreign minister in February, Juppé was named Sarkozy's new defense minister. In January 2011 two French hostages were killed in Niger, according to Juppé by members of an organization linked to al-Qaeda. It then came out that bullets fired from a French weapon killed one of the hostages, besides the fact that it is Sarkozy's policy to not negotiate with kidnappers, a decision fraught with danger to the kidnapped. In spite of Sarkozy's efforts to influence fellow heads of state, his foreign policy is generally acknowledged to have been

catastrophic. From his statement in Dakar on July 26, 2007, in the presence of his Senegalese hosts, that Africans have not yet succeeded in it is questionable that Juppé's supposed experience and competence will reassure the French electorate.

entering the modern world, to his frenetic and largely futile efforts to sell his friend's "Arnaud Lagardère and Serge Dassault" airplanes, Sarkozy is known for letting business deals override any principle or human value. When, for three days in December 2007, he hosted Muammar Gaddafi in Paris "sucking up to the desert dictator in every figurative way, even to the extent of allowing the pop-star potentate to set up a Bedouin tent on the presidential lawn" his own minister for human rights, Rama Yade, critically observed: "France is not a doormat." Wrong Rama. Sarkozy has made a career of licking any boot necessary for his own advancement and, especially, that of his fat cat friends and patrons. For him, Gaddafi is just another potential pigeon. No sentiments are involved.

All this must be kept in mind when attempting to make sense of his more recent Libyan escapade. Here, Sarkozy was assisted by the intellectual dandy Bernard-Henri Lévy, who seized the opportunity "as he had done in Bosnia" to pose as André Malraux in Revolutionary Spain.

The game plan went like this. Arriving in Benghazi on March 3, two days later Lévy (BHL, as he is unaffectionately referred to) was then interviewed on various television networks. He appeared before the camera in uniform "immaculate white shirt with unturned collar, black suit coat and disheveled hair". This was, after all, a potential combat zone.

His message was urgent but reassuring. "No," said he, "Gaddafi is not capable of launching an offensive against the opposition. He does not have the means to do so. He no longer has a real army but is rather surrounded by well-paid mercenaries. This is not the equivalent of the Egyptian army. However, he does have planes. This is the real danger." BHL thereby called for the scrambling of radio communications, the destruction of landing strips in all regions of Libya and the bombardment of Gaddafi's personal bunker. In brief, this would be a humanitarian intervention, the modalities of which he did not "and to be fair, could not" specify.

Next step, as BHL explains: "I called him [Sarkozy] from Benghazi. And when I returned I went to the Elysée Palace to see him and tell him that the people on the National Transition Council are good guys. [...] I'm someone who goes all the way. I go where the action is and when I come back I'm ready for anything, really anything, which means go see Sarkozy, the Pope, or whoever you want in order to stop the bloodshed."

Indeed, on March 6, Lévy returned to France and met with Sarkozy. Four days later, on March 10, he saw Sarkozy again, this time with three Libyans he had encouraged to visit France, along with Sarkozy's top advisors. On March 11, Sarkozy declared the Libyan National Transition Council the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people. History was made. Back in Benghazi, people screamed in relief and cheered Sarkozy's name. Soon after, the resistance began to fall back. Not only did Gaddafi have planes, he had armored vehicles and heavy artillery.

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As throughout the almost four years of Sarkozy's presidency, official announcements took precedence over analysis, preparation and effective action. When interviewed on al-Jazeera during these events, BHL was asked about the accusation that Sarkozy was attempting to use the situation in Libya for electoral purposes. The mediagenic popinjay only smiled, saying the French are a cautious people, and that Sarkozy would not be so opportunistic as to think he could manipulate them by engaging in such a purely humanitarian, idealistic endeavor.

In the midst of declining real income, rising unemployment and generalized insecurity about an economy unable to withstand the strains of a new global division of industrial and agricultural production, French people are perhaps, at

last, slowly and groggily emerging from a fog of perplexity.

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As in Madison, Wisconsin and elsewhere, seeing repining populations rise up in places where authoritarian rule has sharper profile is undoubtedly inspirational in France. The French "contemptuously called by general and then president Charles De Gaulle "veaux" (calves), meaning they are gullible and easily manipulated" may be wakening after years of obfuscating propaganda and induced conceptual confusion. If this is so, then perhaps a more apt comparison would be to invoke British author John Brunner's subversive, social science-fiction novel, *The Sheep Look Up* (1972). In effect, living in darkness in the midst of environmental destruction, feeling blindly as existence is squeezed until only rage can well-up in self-less fury, only then will the sheep look up to strike fear in their oppressors, who will morally and physically crumble faced with a rebellion unimaginable to all.

The title of Brunner's book, more relevant than ever to a world on the edge of ecological and political collapse, is taken from John Milton's *Lycidas*, written in 1637, on the eve of the English Revolution :

"The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swain with wind and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread ;
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said ;
But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more."

Post-scriptum :

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