How Reclaiming Solidarity Can Heal A Sick France: A Research Proposal

COMMENTS IN CAPS…

Although the old regime is still so near to us in time - every day we meet persons born under its auspices - it already seems buried in the night of ages.

- Alexis de Tocqueville, The Old Regime and the Revolution, 1865

Preface: Why France Fascinates Me

I remember the nights in Paris vividly when the *Fondation des Etats-Unis* in the fourteenth arrondissement would be abuzz with a certain sort of giddy excitement that we American exchange students could relate only to nights before snow days in grade school. Although the feeling was so reminiscent of home, its source was so entirely un-American. News of all-day metro strikes would spread quickly throughout the city the day before they were to occur, and for us, the strikes meant no way to get to the Latin Quarter for class - - a snow day - - French-style. It was hard to fathom how an enormous city's massive transportation system could just *shut down* for a day, and we were always skeptical that it would really happen.

WHAT A BRILLIANT START…

But outside the doors of the *Fondation*, there was no mystery. For the French, there was no doubt that there would be a strike, and there was no bewilderment concerning workers missing a day of work, students missing a day of class. These "snow days" were routine. While the strikes may have been frustrating, there was something intrinsically *French* in them, and in turn, something essentially *un*-American. The city's collective acceptance of routinely compromising a day of productivity, all in the name of solidarity, in the name of preserving the uncompromised welfare state that had made France the world's "exception," both baffled and amazed me. I found myself committing the ultimate treason as an American: I felt jealous of the French. In my lifetime, I had never known a society where protest by the people could have such an effect on the government, a society where protest was not looked down upon by the mainstream as ultra-leftism but accepted and embraced as part of a national identity.

I'M GLAD YOU ARE INTRIGUED, AND I CAN SEE YOUR APPRECIATION FOR DE TOCQUEVILLE…

On October 27, news broke out about the riots in the Parisian suburb Clichy-sous-Bois, triggered by the accidental death of two North African youths rumored to be fleeing from the police. Three weeks of national, violent unrest followed, and before it was over, 9000 cars had been set ablaze and 3000 people had been arrested. Although the high-rises of the *banlieue* were visible from my window in the *Fondation des Etats-Unis*, so was the Eiffel Tower, and so I focused on the idyllic Paris, not the real Paris. In light of the riots, in light of the 55 percent vote to reject the European Constitution, in light of a France where the Eiffel Tower and the violence-ridden suburbs can be seen from one window, I am compelled to understand how the ideological France, the one held in esteem by the French, differs from the real France, the one held in contempt by its unemployed, young immigrants. I am compelled to understand the myths of ideological France and how the nation must reshape this ideology to accommodate a new generation of European integration, globalization, and immigration. GREAT.

HOW RECLAIMING SOLIDARITY CAN HEAL A SICK FRANCE

Why The French Fear Change

Outside of France, the world is changing. Globalization is becoming an increasingly powerful force whose strength spares few countries. The European Union, with the 2002 initiation of the euro and the draft of its own Constitution, is on a trajectory towards increased power and influence on the world stage. Immigration rates into France, particularly from the North African region known as the Maghreb, continue to rise. Yet, as a whole, the French are resistant to change. In a 1990 World Values Survey, only 30 percent of the French reported that they "welcome change" and only 12 percent said that new ideas were better than old ones (Smith 60). They perceive globalization as a threat to their cherished national identity which becomes increasingly compromised with every "McJob" created and every step towards privatization. A 2001 poll found that 72 percent of the French are suspicious of globalization; 65 percent believe it to be the primary cause of social inequality; and 55 percent believe it a threat to French companies and jobs. Only 12 percent reported that they were enthusiastic about it (55).

Much of this resistant ideology is learned from French political leaders. Because creating a scapegoat is easier than admitting to mistakes, French politicians are quick to blame domestic economic and social problems on external factors, most notably on globalization. They are reluctant to admit to the public that certain cuts in state spending could actually benefit the masses, henceforth blaming the demands of globalization to defend any policy involving spending cuts. Unlike in the successful reform stories of Denmark and Sweden, French political leaders have avoided honestly and boldly proclaimed the necessity of reshuffling social spending. When former French president Francois Mitterand and current president Jacques Chirac made cuts involving the civil service, they attributed them to being forced to meet demands of the European Monetary Union rather than to their own decision-making. In a symbolic gesture of support for the anti-globalization movement, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin took France's most powerful and famous anti-globalization activist, José Bové, out for a highly publicized dinner to congratulate his radical efforts which have involved widespread vandalization of McDonald's restaurants and General Motors plants (59). By expressing official political support for the anti-

globalization movement, French politicians have used their authority to legitimize it. Intertwining highly defensive nationalism with public policy diminishes prospects of rational dialogue.

There is a vicious cycle in French domestic politics: the people wish to preserve their distinct cultural identity which is largely embedded in the enormous welfare state; the politicians, wishing to appease the people and maintain their support, resist unpopular pressures to adapt to external change; the people, seeing that the politicians who possess authority are resisting change, believe their own resistance to be legitimized and grow more stubborn in their belief systems. Understanding the powerful ideology that drives French pride in the existing system and hinders their willingness to change is an essential step towards convincing the French that reform need not be equated the type of Anglo-Saxon/American, laissez-faire, often ruthless, capitalism they so fear.

Solidarity: Truly A French Value?

Behind nearly every gesture of resistance to change lies the notion of solidarity. It is an ideology that the French seem to have claimed as its own, and many feel that their nation cherishes it more than any other, Solidarity's origins are embedded in the French Revolution, when legislators proclaimed their "sacred debt" to eliminating extreme poverty. At this time, they created the noble idea of a state dedicated to old-age pensions, wage supplements, widespread access to education, and the guarantee of the right to work (Ambler 3). These proclamations failed to become reality, however, and it was not until the end of the 19th century that the first anti-poverty legislation was passed. The language of solidarity was reborn at this time, and it was a language of redistribution, of the obligation of the privileged and comfortable to their less fortunate compatriots. The belief was that in a nation with high solidarity, individuals were bound to their families, their fellow citizens, and the state, and they were expected to make certain sacrifices for the common good. This rhetoric was again reclaimed in the 1970s by the Socialists in power, but again, it failed. Yet, the French, as well as much of the world, perceive France as a state with high solidarity.

To begin to explain how this is possible, one must examine the benefits of being part of the 59 percent of the French population with stable employment. For these people, France is an ideal place to call home. The healthcare system is the best in the world, according to the World Health Organization. There are few waiting lists for surgeries, pharmaceuticals are covered from 75 to 100 percent, and they are consumed at twice the rate as in Britain (Smith 4). Contrary to the U.S., where public housing has

never surpassed one percent of total new housing, one fifth of French housing is built with public money, and it benefits over one third of the population (4). On top of the 35 hour work week, the French have three to four times more vacation time than their North American counterparts, and the mean age of retirement is 58.5 (3). The minimum wage has been raised every year with inflation and is over 60 percent of the median wage, whereas in the U.S., it is only 39 percent of the median wage (5). There is excellent state-funded daycare, greatly subsidized, efficient public transportation, and the world's most impressive system of museums.

Yet, there is another France, which looks nothing like the notion of solidarity defined during the Revolution. Out of all Western nations, France has had the highest increase in unemployment and the poorest record of job creation during the last quarter of the 20th century. Since 1980, the unemployment rate has hovered at 10 percent (Kresl 27). Of the unemployed, 45 percent have been out of work for a year -- six times the U.S. rate of long term unemployment which is eight percent (133). Between 1980 and 1991, only 5 percent of France's budget went to job creation, as opposed to 43 percent in the U.S. and 20 percent in the more comparable Germany (Smith 109). Youth and immigrants, independently, are particularly susceptible to long-term unemployment, and young immigrants face a double jeopardy. A young North African immigrant is four to five times more likely than a young French-born man or woman to be unemployed, and when accounting for education, still 1.5 times more likely (French Violence). The general youth unemployment rate has hovered between 20 and 30 percent since 1980 (Smith 9).

France is plagued with inequality. Its tax system is more regressive than any other European nation, and the wealth tax affects only the wealthiest one percent of the population, as opposed to the Swedish, Danish, German, and Canadian tax on the wealthiest 25 percent (Kresl 125). In no other nation is the public sector more privileged. Public sector workers constitute 30 percent of the labor force but consume 60 percent of the nation's annual pension costs (Smith 23). The absentee rate is twice as high as in the private sector, and there are 500,000 to 1,000,000 too many public-sector workers in France (24).

The Power of A Myth

Despite the inequality between the winners and the losers in the French welfare state, the public sector takes the language of solidarity to the streets whenever the government proposes redistributive

legislation. In the mid-1990s, with healthcare and pension funds running up an annual deficit of the franc equivalent of 30-50 billion euros, Prime Minister Alain Juppé proposed legislation that would have targeted the top half of the income ladder to improve employment opportunities for the poor and unemployed (Smith 38). Six weeks of strikes ensued throughout the country, and the world looked on, interpreting the protesters as noble defenders of a humane type of solidarity in face of U.S. neo-liberal globalization. With 60 percent of national support for the strikes, Juppé's agenda failed (39). Many French believe that a state with a high level of social welfare is the height of civilization, and moreover, that defenders of the large welfare state are defenders of civilization. Theoretically, this idea has a lot of truth; but current France is a nation plagued with unemployment, instability, and racism - hardly a model for the ultimate goal of civilization and hardly a representation of the original definition of solidarity.

While the French see changes in state spending as threats to solidarity, embracing such change could help them reclaim the original notion of solidarity that was born during an era of greater idealism. In the Netherlands, for example, unemployment was 12 percent during the 1980s, and by the mid-1990s, it had declined to only 4 percent. New jobs appeared at 4 to 6 times the rate of its European neighbors, and the majority of them were desirable jobs with good benefits (120). This was accomplished through honest dialogue between the state, labor, and business, and wage restraint for low-income workers was compensated with tax reductions and strengthened family policy. The Netherlands began to use social policy as a way of supporting the market, not fighting it. France could do this as well if its definition of solidarity was not in reality security for the already privileged and comfortable. NICE!

The Stage is Set for Change, But Who Will The Actors Be?

Perhaps the May referendum in which 55 percent of the French decided to reject the EU Constitution and the November riots have incited the flame that could potentially lead to reform. Although France was not obliged to hold a referendum on the Constitution vote, Chirac was so confident that his people would support him in backing of the Constitution that he chose to hold one anyway. The Constitution would have strengthened European foreign policy by creating an EU foreign minister - a longstanding French goal. It also included a charter of fundamental rights in alignment with core French rights regarding employment and welfare. It has widespread political support; even Francois Hollande, head of the opposition Socialist party, supported the Constitution (Can the Constitution be Saved?). Yet,

the right worried that the Constitution would pave the way for Turkey's admittance into the EU, and the left worried that it entrenched too many Anglo-Saxon liberal market policies. If the shocking vote has a silver lining, it is that politicians are finally speaking honestly about France's role in the European Union as essential to its reputation and survival. Before the referendum, Chirac predicted that France might "cease to exist politically" if it rejected the Constitution, and after the referendum, he addressed the nation proclaiming "We cannot preserve our economic and social model, we can't bring our values to other parts of the world without holding our full place in Europe" (Chirac Appeals for Unity).

In another shocking episode, the recent riots have exposed the chronic problem of concentrated poverty and racism in France. 60 percent of the French admit to harboring racist feelings, and 75 percent think there are too many Arabs in the country (Smith 177). In the 2002 presidential election, 5 million voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the xenophobic National Front party and France's loudest voice in favor of completely closed borders. The riots required Chirac to acknowledge concentrated poverty and racism. He has vowed to create new opportunities for young people, calling racism a "poison" and announcing measures for the training of 50,000 youths in 2007. He said that for these young immigrants, there was a "crisis of meaning, a crisis of identity" (Chirac in New Pledge…)

However, as the history of France has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate, politicians are entirely inert without broad popular support. Because solidarity is such an all-inclusive ideology, I believe that through reclaiming its original French definition, popular opinion will shift to support of a more egalitarian state. With true solidarity, the French would have voted in favor of the EU Constitution, because they would have recognized that a favorable reputation within the EU is intrinsic for creating jobs for the unemployed. A nation with true solidarity would not have witnessed three weeks of violent rioting by a resented and disintegrated population.

A Campaign for Solidarity

I propose that a massive, public campaign should be launched in France to reclaim the true ideology of solidarity. It would assume similar qualities of successful public health campaigns; it would be endorsed by politicians, but have broad support; it would be pervasive - on billboards, in metro stations, in newspapers, on T.V. commercials; it would find a way to reach the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the employed and the unemployed, the native French and recent immigrants. It would use the

ideology born in their cherished revolution to link the idealistic past to the troubled present to hopefully a more egalitarian future. It would appeal to patriotism and national pride by reclaiming what it truly means to be French, part of the “exception francaise.” Before such a campaign could be launched, many questions must be asked about the nation and its people. First, I will learn how the ideology of solidarity fits into French history. Second, I will find out how the French perceive the ideology and reality of solidarity. Finally, I will discover whose support of the campaign would be most effective.

Historical Appeal: Primary Texts

Understanding and appreciating national history is an essential component of French culture. History is often discussed at dinner tables and is the most valued school subject. Thus, a solidarity campaign should appeal to the French historical conscience. To do this, I must learn *who* has defined solidarity as an egalitarian notion and impart into the campaign those who are held in historical high esteem. A billboard could contain a quote on solidarity by a respected Frenchman from the Revolution over a picture of a car burning – a manifestation of how French the notion of egalitarian solidarity is and how far France has strayed from its history and roots. To do this, I must learn who has defined solidarity as an egalitarian notion and impart into the campaign those who are held in historical high esteem.

I will also use primary texts and existing scholarly literature to understand how attaining true solidarity has failed in the past. Not only will this enable the campaign to learn from past mistakes, but it will present solidarity as an intrinsically French value that no other generation has been able to fully realize. This sense of responsibility could give a downtrodden population a sense of purpose again, as they take on a new effort to reclaim their “Frenchness” in a more productive manner than turning to the insular Le Pen or protesting globalization.

Attitudes of the People: Focus Groups

In order to design a campaign targeted at the entire French population, it is essential to understand how different segments of the population view solidarity. To accomplish this, I will hold focus groups across a wide gamut of demographic groups, broken down by age, race, socioeconomic class, public/private employee, and rural/urban residence. I am interested in finding answers to the following questions: 1) What does it mean to be French to you?; 2) When you hear the word solidarity, do you think of France? Even if you don’t think current France is defined by solidarity, do you think that, at heart, it is a

French value?; 3) How do you define solidarity?; 4) (After telling them the original definition of solidarity) Do you think France fits this definition?; 5) What do you think would give France more solidarity?; 6) What do you fear are the greatest threats to solidarity?

Although these six questions will be central to the discussion of every focus group, I expect different demographic groups to beg very different sub-questions. I expect white, middle-aged, comfortably employed focus groups to believe that France has a high level of solidarity. Thus, I must probe answers for the following: 1) how they explain the high unemployment rate and the riots; 2) if they believe that it is essential to make sacrifices to create more employment opportunities; 3) how much they would be willing to sacrifice if it meant stability and greater equality; 4) if they believe solidarity is being threatened and by what. If the comfortable, privileged class believes there is high solidarity in spite of the nation's current social and economic problems, then it is essential to understand to what they attribute the problems. Only through understanding of this can a public campaign effectively debunk common myths. If they believe that sacrifice is unnecessary in creating a more egalitarian, more productive, more stable society, then a campaign must clearly explain how sacrifice has been an essential component of reform, not in the ultra-Capitalist American way, but in the democratic socialist way of the Dutch and the Swedes.

I expect the less fortunate, including the unemployed and many immigrants, to have a negative perception on their nation's level of solidarity. After all, they are benefiting far less from France's enormous welfare state. Although their support of a solidarity campaign is not as important as the support of the wealthier class that votes more, has a more powerful voice, and will be asked to make sacrifices, it is still important to learn what their most pressing concerns are. If the people whose lives would benefit from a successful campaign do not perceive it that way and do not loudly voice their support for it, then it will be difficult to convince the elite that the campaign is legitimate. From focus groups with the less fortunate, I will focus on what the participants believe are the most pertinent actions to take to create a society with more solidarity. The campaign will need to emphasize the seriousness of the government towards these suggested actions and target rural and urban concerns in their respective environments, and immigrant and native concern in theirs.

Leaders of the Campaign

The campaign must receive broad support from multiple political parties, organizations, and even

businesses. Some theorize that the EU Constitution was rejected because of Chirac's unpopularity, and that many of the "non" voters were rejecting support of his administration more than the Constitution. The more widespread the support for the campaign is, the more people it is likely to reach. However, quantity does not mean quality when deciding who should support the initiative. If the variation of involved ideologies is too extreme, it will be plagued with divisiveness and inertia. Therefore, I will do extensive research on politicians, organizations, and businesses respected by the French population.

First of all, regarding politicians, the likely succeeder of Chirac will either be Nicolas Sarkozy, the current interior minister or Dominique de Villepin, the current Prime Minister. Both were criticized for their handling of the riots. Sarkozy called the rioters "scum" and said that their neighborhoods need to be "hosed down" (Vinocur) De Villepin acquired a reputation in the media for possessing arrogance and a hot temper when questioned on the riots. An unpopular president's backing of the campaign would likely incite mistrust for it, just as in the case of the EU Constitution. Although they will address the riots in their campaigns for presidency and hopefully restore their reputations, other political parties than those in power much support a solidarity campaign. I plan to research how to best convince more moderate parties to back the campaign, which will involve great investigation into their platforms and their party leaders. Although, I would not change the goal of the campaign to pander to a wide range of platforms, I believe that because solidarity is such an inclusive ideology, there would be aspects of every platform that would support its revival, except perhaps ones on the far Left and far Right.

The support of renowned organizations is also necessary, and there should be a mixture of organizations viewed as uniquely French and organizations dedicated to more progressive causes, such as combating racism. Ideally, the campaign should have the support of many unions, since it is ultimately pro-labor, but it will difficult to convince the unions to which the privileged belong of this. Because I am not familiar with many French organizations, I would need to learn about them through newspapers, magazines, and evaluative research articles. I would look for qualities such as effectiveness, widespread appeal, and high name recognition. Regarding businesses, I would have to research their histories to ensure that they were started in France and have an ethical reputation. For this, I could rely primarily on the internet, but once I have narrowed down a list, it would be wise to poll the French public about their attitudes toward these businesses.

Why France Matters

The past six months have made it clear to Europe that France matters. The rejection of the EU Constitution was a blow to European power and prestige. It will slow down the advancement of its forward trajectory while the Constitution is being revised. As stated earlier, this delays the creation of an EU foreign minister and a European charter of fundamental rights, not to mention, could diminish the international perception of the EU's potential to unify and strengthen. France is a key player in the European Union: it was one of its founding members and has historically joined with Germany to drive European integration (Can the Constitution be Saved?). The entire European community is dependent on the attitude of the French turning in favor of change.

The European community is also dependent on France becoming a more integrated society with a lower unemployment rate. Although it would be unfair to blame the spread of riots to Brussels and Berlin solely on the French, one cannot deny that the unrest in France inspired its neighbors. Other European nations should fear that continued inequality in France will incite violence that will influence the oppressed classes elsewhere to also resort to violence in order to be noticed. France must notice its oppressed class before this happens.

If France continues on the same trajectory – using globalization and immigration as scapegoats for its economic and social problems – control of the nation could eventually fall into dangerous hands. In the first-round of the French 2002 presidential elections, Le Pen received almost 17 percent of the vote – only 3 percent less than Chirac. A political leader on the far Right with such reactionary views would be a disaster for the European and global community. The world cannot afford France to be completely isolationist. Many nations are dependent on its economy which is the second largest in Europe and the fifth largest in the world. France's influence spreads around the world, from America to Northern Africa. I believe that as France grows more insular, it is inclined to grow more anti-American, and a longstanding friend and political ally will cease to exist. Closing France's borders will restrict the opportunities of those from the Maghreb who immigrate for economic and political reasons and choose France because of its imperialistic history in this region. France's lenient immigration policies are the debt they owe the Maghreb for colonizing their culture and rendering them economically dependent. Revoking this debt could fuel great resentment and increased attitudes of anti-Westernization in an already unstable region.

How A Campaign Aimed At Ideology Can Serve As A Model

While it cannot be denied that the French fear change more than many other nations, fear of change is by no means uniquely French. Fear of change appears all over the world, from women's rights in the Middle East, to adopting a market economy in post-Communist nations, to globalization protests in South America, to permitting gay marriage in North America. While politicians and organizations fighting for change might go to great lengths to relay its benefits, rarely do they target their campaign at the ideology behind resistance. In some cases, this would not be feasible or practical. Sometimes there are many ideologies driving a single attitude and sometimes these ideologies are dangerous. Attacking negative ideologies is riskier and less effective than accentuating and redefining positive ones. However, there are more cultures like France, with a widespread, collective ideology with its heart in the right place but its reality in the wrong place.

For example, in America, the notion of the American dream is pertinent to the nation's collective conscience. The notion that with hard work, anyone can succeed in America is cherished by Americans and many firmly believe in it. An anti-poverty campaign could use the ideology of the American dream to show that many no longer find it attainable, because of an unlivable minimum wage, unequal educational opportunities, areas of concentrated poverty and racism, etc. Demonstrating that a treasured principle at the core of American ideology is no longer a reality of America could potentially change many attitudes in favor of supporting legislation to reclaim the American dream. This is how France could serve as a model to other nations and cultures.

Conclusion: An Encore to the *Trente Glorieuses?*

The *Trente Glorieuses* refer to the thirty years after World War II when France's GNP grew by over 5 percent annually and unemployment never superseded a level of 3 percent (Kresl 2). The French reflect on these years with bittersweet nostalgia. In fact, they are nostalgic about much of their history, even that which preceded them by centuries. They are a preserving society. They preserve their cities, their chateaux, their cathedrals, their art, their small cafes, their smoking habit, their language, even their wine and cheese. They are a changing society. There is McDonald's on the Champs Élysées and Starbucks near the Louvre. Maroon 5 and Natalie Imbruglia drew a crowd of thousands at a free concert at the Eiffel Tower to boost support for the Olympic bid. They even have reality television now. It is no

wonder that the French are resistant to change, but change does not necessarily mean Americanization and a slippery slope towards complete privatization. Change comes in many forms. In France, change must create jobs and bolster tolerance. Focusing on solidarity is a strategy that turns to a cherished past to write a new chapter in French history that can be narrated with pride as the world and France continue to change.

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