

The Dividing Effects of Unification in Modern France

Intro

1789 is not the beginning of disunity in France, but the explosion of anger and tension borne out of division and disunity. One might argue that attempts made to unify the French people often lead to further disunity and division. The start of the 1789 revolution was an attempt made by the people to rectify the ills of their nation, however only ended in a coup by Napoleon Bonaparte due to disunity perpetuated by products of the revolution such as The Directory. Napoleon himself tried to unify and settle the people of France, but again set the tone for a new form disunity that was made possible by the codes and laws he sanctioned in 1803. Balzac uses fiction to expose how this new litigious justice system has provided the means for people to divide and disunify themselves. Dreyfus is an unfortunate real life example of a person being abused by the overly litigious justice system, and has brought people like Jean Jaurès to blame this injustice on the corruption of the bourgeoisie – agitating the division between the proletarians and bourgeoisie. In more recent history, it is seen that people who were once united during times of economic growth face division and disunity when economic conditions worsen. We see examples of this in Dreux and La Haine. For this essay I believe it is appropriate to use division and disunity interchangeably, and to use disunity as a way to describe general division whereas division can be used to comment on particular instances of disunity.

The French Revolution

The French revolution of 1789 is marked largely by division and disunity among the French peoples. Many French nobles and other members of the first and second estate such as Anne Louis Henri de La Fare left France out of self-preservation or loyalty to the monarch (Hunt, 97). Even among those who stayed there was division. One major division was between Catholics and non-Catholics. The issue of emancipating Jews, for instance, caused debate and disunity among religious and political figures such as Abbé Maury and Count de Clermont Tonnerre (Hunt, 86-9). With disorder reaching terrifying levels, the revolution, an event borne out of a divided nation, failed to unify the people of France and gave way to governments like The Directory.

Napoleon

Growing tensions in France, which led to the revolution of 1789, continued and posed serious issues for Catholicism in the aftermath. Napoleon Bonaparte ended the revolution of 1789 when he seized power and became Emperor of France. In a way, Napoleon ended one of the first major periods of violent division and disunity in modern French history. Napoleon was concerned with domestic tranquility and unity and turned to religion as his first political move to rectify the damage done by the opportunistic government of The Directory.

His Holiness, for the good of peace and the happy reestablishment of the Catholic religion, declares that neither he nor his successors will in any way disturb the purchases of alienated ecclesiastical property and that, as a consequence, the ownership of this same property, the rights and revenues attached to them, will remain untransferable in their hands or those of their assigns (Mason, 338).

In bringing back the church and settling the aftermath of The Directory, Napoleon was a step closer to unifying post 1789 revolutionary France. Napoleon also replaced the old system of law with the French Civil Code (1803-4) (Mason, 340). By creating this new system of unified laws, Napoleon hoped to bring people together in unity under a justice system that was more relevant

and accessible to the people. Napoleon wanted to have a population of tranquil, passive people and he thought restoring religion and law would suffice. Some people however saw this as a step towards further disunity among French people.

Colonel Chabert

The litigious justice system that serves as the context for Honoré De Balzac's, *Colonel Chabert*, highlights a new kind of disunity and division among the French people in 1832. In this novel, Balzac uses fiction to emphasize the underhandedness and injustice that is commonplace in that contemporary justice system. "“I will shoot her!” ‘Madness! You will be caught and executed like any poor wretch. Besides, you might miss. If you are going to shoot your wife, you mustn’t, under any circumstances, miss her’” (Balzac, 75). This justice system allows, encourages and defends the decay of social solidarity by means of boundless and divisive litigation between common people. "...in our society there are three men, the priest, the doctor, and the lawyer, who cannot appreciate the world? They wear black robes perhaps because they are in mourning for all virtue and hope” (Balzac, 100). Balzac comments that systems devised to protect and unify people under an agreed upon set of rules and laws has actually become a tool for people to use against one another, legally and politically dividing them further apart.

France and the Dreyfus Affair

In 1898 Jean Jaurès wrote, *The socialist Concern*. *The socialist Concern* is more about corruption of government which legally allows subjugation of common people than about ethnic intolerance or even Dreyfus himself. Jaurès uses Dreyfus and this affair as an icon to expose the brutality of the justice and power systems in France when controlled by the bourgeoisie – highlighting the division between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

He is no longer part of those ruling classes who, because of cowardly ambition, hesitate to reestablish for him lawfulness and truth. He is only a model of human suffering at its most poignant. He is living witness of the military lie, of political cowardice, of the crimes of authority (Burns, 119).

Jaurès writes that divisions between the proletariat and bourgeoisie are protected and enforced by law; “There is an entire set of laws destined to protect the fundamental inequality of our society, laws that concentrate the privilege of capitalist property the exploitation of the wage earner by the owner” (Burns, 118-9). Dreyfus is the shining example of the kind injustice that French people face when the law is setup to cater to the governing and not the governed. I believe that this kind of power structure that the Dreyfus affair emphasizes can be traced back to the overly litigious system that Balzac writes about in his novel. Dreyfus is a victim of the system that was initially setup to protect and unify the people under the law. However, the law has lent itself to the will of the hands that exercise it, and disunifying corruption is the outcome.

A Small City in France

Recent history in France suggests that the issue of unity and division can be a factor of modernization and urbanization. In Françoise Gaspard’s, *A Small City in France*, we see how growing industry and development can actually polarized the people of Dreux. From 1954 to 1970 proletarian worker demographics in Dreux doubled, tripled, and quintupled; “As the city developed, the skill level of its population declined” (Gaspard, 56). The polarization of the population happened when the economy slowed and these proletariat workers faced unemployment. These people flocked to Dreux for employment opportunities, but when conditions changed and they were no longer fit for the work force, they were the center of discrimination. Due to high illiteracy rates and low skill levels, these workers faced long term unemployment and discrimination in post economically booming Dreux. In this way, modernization and urbanization brought people together so that they can be ultimately divided

once more in the wake of what brought them there in the first place. A more modern example that reflects on the conditions and attitude of the people who ended up in projects is the film, *La Haine*.

La Haine

This film, produced in 1995, is a commentary on ethnic minorities and the dichotomy that exists between them and the rest of France. The three main characters of this film represent a unity that is based on larger demographic divisions. Most of the setting of the film takes place in the projects where lower class people of many different ethnic backgrounds co-exist harmoniously. I believe that this is actually a symptom of government oppression – that people are more willing to forgo prejudices when faced with police brutality and other forms of government oppression. In a sense, the unity we see in the movie may be a product of previous divisions between ethnic minorities and the majority. This calls to question whether the development of these projects were in order to house lower class workers, or organize and separate these people from other French people.

Conclusion

With Jacques Chirac's presidential victory speech of 2002 as evidence, one could claim that social solidarity and unity is still an issue that the French are semantically embracing. A line from this speech reads, "As president of all the French people, I want to unify the nation. The republic must serve all of its people. The values of liberty, equality and fraternity must again assume their full meaning".

There is evidence that supports the idea that France suffers from disunity and division because of attempts made to unify. With the revolution of 1789 as the first major attempt by the

people to unite and take back their country, we see the establishment of The Directory and institutionalized corruption. From Napoleon we have a ruler who by attempting to settle the population paved the path to further division and disunity; the Dreyfus affair stands as an example of how that disunity manifested. Recent history provides examples of how people can be drawn together and divided by the same factors – modernization and urbanization.