



A LETTER TO OUR AMERICAN COUSINS

ILL WILL

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Cover image by Ken Light.

Today, rare are those who know still what the State and politics (and thus 'history') are, or rather were.

—Alexandre Kojève to Carl Schmitt, June 28 1955

So yeah, the Joker seized the White House. It wasn't part of the script. It didn't take a truck loaded with explosives, and there was no countdown on an LCD screen. He simply showed up to the elections, as democratically as could be, and he won.

The news was greeted with universal incredulity, painful for some, triumphant for others. In this world, for a truth to rise up and present itself is always an event. It is therefore customary to swiftly bury it under dump trucks of "commentary," "explanation" and other chatter. We dismiss the fact that it happened on the grounds that it should not have happened, that it was an accident. The problem is that, as the accident becomes the rule, as Brexit prevails in the United Kingdom and bloody Duterte in the Philippines, it likewise becomes increasingly difficult to mask the unreality of all that "should have been." To disqualify as "fascist" the result of procedures that one otherwise considers "democratic" only adds to the dishonesty and aberration.

Let us instead take the presidential election of Donald Trump as a moment of truth. Let us formulate the truths, old or new, that follow from it. Let us look at the reality that arrays itself therein, and take our bearings within it.

1. An election is not a “democratic” procedure. It was practiced in all varieties of monarchical regimes. The Pope is elected. Universal suffrage is a plebiscitary procedure. The plebiscite has always been favored by dictators. The first “democratically elected” President in France was the dictator Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.

2. Dictatorship is an institution, and not the negation of every institution. It was invented by the Roman republic as the most effective means of confronting emergency situations — a pleb secession, for example. If the dictator is granted full powers, it is for the sake of saving the Republic or restoring the “normal situation.” Dictatorship is a republican institution.

3. Politics is essentially the art of manipulating appearances, of subterfuge, stratagems, the game of alliance and betrayal, of the permanent coup d'état, of bad faith and domination — in short, it is the art of effective lies. What could be more logical than electing a patented liar as president? Those who regard this election as the triumph of a “post-truth politics” simply because the current winner doesn't “respect the facts” only obscure the obvious, which is that if Donald Trump was elected it was precisely because he embodies the truth of politics, the truth of its lie. The reason why the left is so roundly detested is that it lies about the lie by attempting to do politics in good faith. Each time that the left attacks Trump's obscenities it only further exposes the smarmy character of its own moralism. The polite restraint of which the left boasts keeps it at an equally polite distance from the truth, which only prolongs the reign of lies. This helps explain why some regard Trump as the end of the lie. All that's missing is for them to read their Gracián, who once wrote of the man of the court that, “when his artifice is seen, his dissimulation reaches a higher pitch, and he tries to deceive by means of truth itself. He changes both his game and his weapons, in order to change his ruse. His artifice is to no longer have one.”

4. If governing today consists principally in the act of enunciating the emergency; if politicians do little more than play their part in a sort of

spectacular distraction accessible to all; if they do so only to postpone, day after day, our consideration of the whole range of vital questions whose unresolved state undermines our existence; if the exercise of state power offers nothing but a lure enjoining those who possess real power, because they have real interests in the world, to continue to serve them; if, therefore, government is no longer in the government, if its palaces stand empty...then it is entirely reasonable to elect a professional reality TV star as president. A clown is quite simply the best candidate to play the principal role in a clown theater.

5. For as long as “democracy has been in crisis” experts have lost themselves in superfluous rumination over “votes of confidence,” “protest votes,” and the like. They ought to add one more to their list of bankrupt categories: the “vote of contempt.” It should not be ignored that a whole host of libertarian enemies of government voted for Trump. To place a contemptible being in a role one holds in contempt, to put a grotesque character at the head of a body one takes to be superfluous, is there a more effective way to display its inanity? To elect nothing as president is simply one more way of annihilating the presidential function. It leaves us at liberty to believe ourselves clever while deriding the triumph of “idiocracy”.

6. The encounter with the White Man left an enduring memory in some Amerindian people, a memory that was not dispelled even where the people in question were exterminated. According to popular opinion, the White Man is a vulgar being, a senseless narcissistic liar, a ferocious hypocrite hungry for profit and ignorant of all that surrounds him and for whom nothing is sacred. He is a criminal, a defiler, a nihilist, a moron, and wretch to the point of profusion. By giving themselves a degenerate on the scale of Donald Trump for president of “the Western hemisphere,” the citizens of the United States have insisted on making this truth a brilliant fact, and for some a blinding one.¹

7. Across the world, the juridical-formal edifice of the state is in the process of being dismantled and replaced by the unique criteria of

police work, namely, that of efficacy (which coincides — and not by chance — with the ideal of management). Where ends are lacking, what plausible goal remains other than an infinite intensification of pure means? Soviet-style purges, repression with live ammunition, mass incarceration, the “war on terror,” states of emergency, “immigration politics,” shameless propaganda, the “war on drugs,” paramilitary and citizen massacres, liquidation of opposing forces with no explanation given: what we are seeing is not a “state of exception become the norm” but a specific mode of governmentality that is spreading rapidly across the world. Duterte, the “Filipino Trump,” who proposes extra-judicial executions in the streets of his country as the measure of effectivity of his politics and encourages the citizenry to join in the bloodbath with enthusiasm indicates a path as well as a new paradigm for the exercise of power, one entirely in “transgression.” Obviously, the most unsettling part of the Filipino paradigm is that there are still human rights groups publicly asking themselves if we might not be “exiting the rule of law.”

8. Western civilization has not finished finishing. All this is of a piece with the torture it has inflicted on itself for more than a century, such that even its most fanatical partisans can no longer stand it. Voting for Donald Trump was an immense gesture of “let’s have done with it!”: literally, to prefer a fearful end over an endless fear. A certain Calvinist taste for the apocalypse is expressed here, alongside the properly Western desire for catastrophe — a way of giving-in to vertigo, a cessation of self-restraint, a need for a decisive confrontation, or, to put it in theological terms, a rupture of the katechon whose effects will be felt well beyond the United States.

9. Since its birth in Ancient Greece, democracy has functioned essentially to ward-off civil war — the civil war that gave birth to it and by which it maintains itself, but also civil war as the ultimate reality of the coexistence between different forms-of-life, human and non-human. From Athens on, external warfare has been the most banal method of warding off this internecine war. It is one of the marks of democracy that it treats its enemies as “enemies of civilization,” as “barbarians,”

“monsters,” “criminals,” and more recently as “terrorists” — in short, to eject its enemies from “humanity.” It is this way of conducting war that Trump has “brought back home,” that he has dragged back to the center of classical politics by treating Hillary Clinton not as an adversary with whom one debates but as a “criminal” to be sent to prison. Thus we see democracy, once again, as the continuation of war by other means. Among distinguished people, it has of late been customary to speak of “pacification” rather than counter-insurrection. This is clearly no longer the case. If democracy is essentially that form of civil war that consists in denying civil war, there are some citizens in the United States who would like for it to visibly appear as what it essentially is. This is one of the first steps taken by democracy in America off the path anticipated by Tocqueville, the precedent for which was, in this sense, Russia.

10. If Trump’s victory appears so plainly as the revenge of those defeated in the American Civil War of the 1860s, the danger is great that, as this event brings into view for many the subterranean continuum of civil war, it will nonetheless be grasped as a lamentable scourge rather than a fact to be taken on. Beyond the puppet-like character of the United States presidency, this election may still serve as an invitation for vengeance, a *carte blanche* to the police to slaughter as many Blacks and leftists as they wish. It is always difficult to forgive one’s victims for all the evil one has inflicted upon them. And it is true that the partisans of Trump seem, by and large, to be well-armed. But it is also imaginable that the obvious madness of this new government could bring it face-to-face with a new war of secession² along a reversed front, that the illegitimacy of the new powers could nourish an infinite fragmentation of the national territory — an end to the United States of America — where the multiplication of militias would necessitate the multiplication of communes. What is fundamentally ineligible in the character of Donald Trump could, by contact, destroy the function that he is supposed to occupy and the system in which this function is inscribed. The aberration reigning at the center could bring about the end of all centrality. No longer a State, only those territories we pass through, and those we avoid. The end of hegemonies. A contamination of every single Western leader

by mere contact with Trump: how could we take seriously a head of state who appears to take this Donald seriously? What will come of the administration of things and the government of men when they no longer wear the impersonal mask of the State?

Dear cousins, we send you these thoughts from France as a way of saying you're not alone, regardless of whatever fate befalls us through our own electoral system over here in a few months.

Notes

- 1 To deepen this intuition, we recommend the little-known article by Georges Devereux, "*Schizophrenia: An ethnic psychosis, or schizophrenia without tears*," in G. Devereux (ed.), *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry*, 214–236.
- 2 French history books typically refer to the American Civil War as a *guerre de sécession*, or a "war of secession." —Trans.

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