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by JAMES GRAHAM
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Paris Live: Who Will Protect Us From the Police ?

We sat on the steps of the Madeleine while the sirens shrieked and the scene unfolded like a ritual with no humans, like one of those unhappy films about the future where everything moves in choreographed, hypnotic motion, the narrative pulsing to a high pitch of danger and fear. You would have thought that Paris was on terror alert or at least some European director with a fat account was restaging the Nazi ballet for the umpteenth time.

It was Acte XII on the new French (Gilets Jaunes) calendar and the police were ready this time – no surprises! – from the Arc de Triomphe all the way to Concorde : flexible barriers you couldn't drive a truck through on the Elysée, at other places barricades or fences, tanks, a cordon of police at entry points, Rue Royale almost completely deserted. (How to get to Maxim's for that drink with F. Scott ? Scheisse.) You could stroll through the gardens, if you could somersault over the guardians of the peace. If the whole acronym army in their riot gear didn't scare you off such a harmless pasttime.

The only problem was – there were no demonstrators, no Gilet Jaunes anywhere. These humble spectres, apparitions of the anti-Etat, were elsewhere. It was strange to sit there and watch it unfold, this display carried out so shop owners could get an extra hour's sleep and nervous tourists could stand on line for the museums without fretting that something extraordinary might happen to them on their harmless holiday. We stared down Royale which leads straight to Concorde, and from our vantage, the entry to the Champs, Saint Honoré where the shops were open but no one was going in, the pastisserie packed and everything at twice the price...Which of us was going to race down Royale, slip into Concorde and – supposing we got that far – stand on the spot where Louis XVI

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got his, give the rebel yell, scream something incomprehensively obscene ? Not worth the weekend in jail. We already know what it's like to the cops on your tail.

Les fântomes de l'Etat abandoned the Champs Elysées weeks ago, taking up position at the equally symbolic Republic and Bastille. Having got my fair share of gas last Saturday I was in no hurry to race over straightaway. We leaned back to watch our friends carry out their symbolic manœuvres, taking up positions, roll the tank so it was just so, eat a sandwich, take orders, roll, repeat. Alex made a move to go inside the Madeleine.

– An anarchist like you. It's disgusting in there... Although I bet the organ can really boom it out.

He smiled sheepishly and repaired inside for a brief tête-à-tête with the Old Man. When he came back, I asked if the unfolding scene reminded him of Roumania, Bucharest, when he was a kid in the waning days of Ceausescu and he reminded me that he was from the mountains near Bacau, the family didn't have a television, the whole thing was far away and he was only a few years old. Still, it struck both of us like the show of force a tottering dictator puts on.

“Un soulèvement sans précédent par tous les moyens utiles et nécessaires.” That's Eric Drouet, truck driver and nominal non-leader of the Gilets, in response to the attack on his friend Jérôme Rodrigues in Bastille last weekend with a call for an unprecedented uprising by all means useful and necessary. He was frustrated and later confessed to speaking in haste

but not before the Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, characterized his text as a call to insurrection and promised judicial proceedings.

For Saturday's rassemblement, plenty of people came out in Valence in the Drôme, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Tours, with 8,000 persons braving the cold in conservative Strasbourg. The numbers may be down a bit for Paris – there's busfare to consider – but 10,000 in Valence and 8 in Strasbourg means something. The Gilets Jaunes are not going away anytime soon, despite the National Debate roadshow playing in the gentler suburbs where they watch politely while President Jupiter pirouettes on the issues for three hours at a stretch, delivering bons mots like “We can do better while spending less, if we spend in the right places.” In other words, Macron remains faithful to his one true love. For a man said to be so intelligent, he has a mind like a steel trap. It's hard to get in.

The police initially denied using the flash-ball on Jérôme Rodrigues, a defense that lasted less than a day into an official inquiry, while Castaner's Interior Ministry continued to deny it, preferring to say he was hit by a grenade. Isn't that joli: unarmed demonstrators in

Place de la Bastille, neither overturning cars nor setting anything on fire, have a choice of being hit with a grenade or flashball (petitions are circulating to ban this product of France's Start-up Nation.) The newspapers, particularly the regionals, and the threads people maintain on social media, are full of accounts of the police going berserk; in all likelihood you too have seen the video of Benalla, Macron's favorite, beating on protestors back in May last year, or the scene at Republique when they fire tear gas and flashballs at the same time : chaos and blood. The story of the young welder is not unusual : a 23-year old who just arrived in Bordeaux to accompany his girlfriend to her studies, passing by a demonstration was flashballed and after hours of surgery has lost the use of his left eye.

Meanwhile it's the Gilets Jaunes who are publishing appels aux calme via video, texts and live stream, one of them by Jérôme Rodrigues himself with his head swathed, which suggests that the mood is roiling under the surface in many Gilets Jaunes localities. As evidenced by Castener's threat, the State now intends to pursue legal avenues to repress the insurgents, a costly burden for many who barely manage to make it to the end of the month and dread the idea of hiring a lawyer. Maybe Macron will debate the rebels from their jail cells, with his perfectly pressed shirts and a smile that makes you think there's a shark nearby.

All of the above, plus the "anti-casseur" (anti-hooligan) law being debated in the Assembly, is how a government behaves when its authority is slowly falling like a sandcastle at high tide. Macron is at a loss to respond. Punch drunk in the first serious fight of his life, he makes matters worse by baiting his opponents, reviving old grudges (les Gaullois réfactaires, so he's one of the conquering Franks, a pretty image) or by gratuitous insults.

They are the punches that have riveted – or terrified – France since early January. During Acte VIII of the Gilets Jaunes in Paris, an ex-boxer, light heavyweight champion of France in 2008-9, comes with his family from the small town of Arpajon to observe.

Christophe Dettinger wants to see Paris and see for himself about these protesters. He gets caught up in a furious tug of war on the Passarelle Senghor, a bridge over the Seine near the museums. He stands head and shoulders above the crowd and gets tear gas lobbed straight in the face, gets separated from his wife. Knocked back by the surge of police, he retreats and then, a minute later, there he is, tossing himself over the inner railing like a rag doll and landing on his feet. He heads straight for the line of police holding the center of the bridge and begins pounding on the cop closest to the rails. It's not a fair fight, even with the riot police decked out in pads and helmets and equipped with truncheons. Dettinger

knows how to connect. He chooses the weak link in the chain and batters away at the shield. He seems capable, at that moment, of pushing the entire crew of cops off the bridge. It's an unprecedented moment, not only because someone is fighting back but because he, no yellow vest on his back, is revealing the awful truth : for all their weapons, the police don't know how to fight. If they're the State's last defense, things are shakier than they seem.

And voilà, Christophe Dettinger, a yéniche, a minority sometimes compared to the Travellers and sometimes to the Tzigane, whose Facebook page reveals a liking for the far-right Marion Maréchal and the comedian Coluche (nice combo) finds himself not only arrested but transformed into a national symbol of resistance.

Shortly after Dettinger made a video apologizing for his actions, saying he got carried away. There's a lot of that happening in France these days.

And even here, in a clear case of aggression (by the cops, by Dettinger) Macron could not resist wrong-footing himself. Instead of following Bonaparte's advice to keep quiet, the President leapt into the judicial process, offering the speculation that prior to his arrest, Dettinger was briefed by an attorney from the far-right. Carried away by his own eloquence he said, "The authoritarian structures watching us are much amused. Don't be fooled. We're extraordinarily naïve...The boxer, the video he made before turning himself in, he was briefed by a lawyer from the far right. It shows! That guy, those aren't the words of a gypsy. Those aren't the words of a gypsy boxer." He goes on to imply that the Russians are organizing the Gilets Jaunes through social media.

A whole candy-box of discriminations, wouldn't you say ? Hard to know where to begin. Here are Dettinger's words in the video he recorded afterwards : "I am a gilet jaune, the people's anger is in me... I was gassed with my friend and my wife and at one moment, I got carried away with anger. Yes, I reacted badly, but I defended myself." And later on, "People of France, Gilets Jaunes, I'm with you whole-heartedly, let's please continue the fight peacefully."

Macron, Mr. 22%, continually refers to the French as "my people," as if, perhaps he hasn't explained himself clearly, he is some sort of monarch.

The oldest demand in the Gilets Jaunes arsenal, dating from their very first weekend on the roundabouts, was Macron Degage. No compromises there, but the Boy Wonder, widely characterized as Dead Meat, shows no sign of giving in. If he goes, will he take the Fifth Republic with him ? (Americans cling to their holy Constitution, the French not.) If

he holds on long enough, it may be inevitable. In that case, he may get a statue in his honor yet.

Dettinger's trial resumes on February 13th in Paris.

Tuesday the 6th saw a call for a general strike, which may not have happened but the Jaunes marched with the unions for the first time, down Rivoli to Place Concorde where we started. (The unions get permission, the Gilets just show up.) Eric Drouet was in attendance with a crowd estimated at around 15,000. Christophe, another Christophe, a CGT member and France Insoumis, put it this way to la Libé : "We've been waiting three months for the unions to get to this point. They tore us down, and now they're here," explaining that the CGT was "jealous : the Gilets knocked Macron for a loop. The unions didn't." Meanwhile the National Assembly debated the "anti-casseur" law that like the Kennedy legislation in the 1980s will essentially strip citizens of the right to organized protest. In France. So it goes.

James Graham lives and works in France : jgcp2017@protonmail.com