Reading for April 4 2019

For this Sunday the Today's Issues will discuss two essays from the New York Review of Books.

From the March 21 issue, page 58, "Low Visibility," a review of a book about the Yellow Vests movement and the future of France

From the April 1 issue, page 32, ""The City that Wouldn't Die," a review of a book about New Orleans

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings follows:

Low Visibility James McAuley MARCH 21, 2019 ISSUE
Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France
by Christophe Guilluy, translated from the French by Malcolm DeBevoise
Yale University Press, 177 pp., $25.00

Thomas Dworzak/Magnum Photos
A yellow vest demonstration, Paris, December 2018
Driving was already expensive in France when in January 2018 the government of President Emmanuel Macron imposed a tax that raised the price of diesel fuel by 7.6 centimes per liter and of gasoline by 3.8 centimes (about 9 and 4 cents, respectively); further increases were planned for January 2019. The taxes were an attempt to cut carbon emissions and honor the president's lofty promise to "Make Our Planet Great Again."

Priscillia Ludosky, then a thirty-two-year-old bank employee from the Seine-et-Marne department outside Paris, had no choice but to drive into the city for work every day, and the cost of her commute was mounting. "When you pay regularly for something, it really adds up fast, and the increase was enormous," she told me recently. "There are lots of things I don't like. But on that I pushed." In late May 2018, she created a petition on Change.org entitled Pour une Baisse des Prix du Carburant à la Pompe! (For a reduction of fuel prices at the pump!)

Over the summer Ludosky's petition—which acknowledged the "entirely honorable" aim of reducing pollution while offering six alternative policy suggestions, including subsidizing electric cars and encouraging employers to allow remote work—got little attention. In the fall she tried again, convincing a radio host in Seine-et-Marne to interview her if the petition garnered 1,500 signatures. She posted that challenge on her Facebook page, and the signatures arrived in less than twenty-four hours. A local news site then shared the petition on its own Facebook page, and it went viral, eventually being signed by over 1.2 million people.

Éric Drouet, a thirty-three-year-old truck driver and anti-Macron militant also from Seine-et-Marne, created a Facebook event for a nationwide blockade of roads on November 17 to protest the high fuel prices. Around the same time, a fifty-one-year-old self-employed hypnotherapist named Jacline Mouraud recorded herself addressing Macron for four minutes and thirty-eight seconds and posted the video on Facebook. “You have persecuted drivers since the day you took office,” she said. “This will continue for how long?” Mouraud’s invective was viewed over six million times, and the gilets jaunes—the yellow vests, named for the high-visibility vests that French drivers are required to keep in their cars and to wear in case of emergency—were born.

Even in a country where protest is a cherished ritual of public life, the violence and vitriol of the gilets jaunes movement have stunned the government. Almost immediately it outgrew the issue of the carbon taxes and the financial burden on car-reliant French people outside major cities. In a series of Saturday demonstrations that began in mid-November and have continued for three months, a previously dormant anger has erupted. Demonstrators have beaten police officers, thrown acid in the faces of journalists, and threatened the lives of government officials. There has been violence on both sides, and the European Parliament has condemned French authorities for using “flash-ball guns” against protesters, maiming and even blinding more than a few in the crowds. But the gilets jaunes have a flair for cinematic destruction. In late November they damaged parts of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris; in early January they commandeered a forklift and rammed through the heavy doors of the ministry of state—the only time in the history of the Fifth Republic that a sitting minister had to be evacuated from a government building.

The gilets jaunes are more than a protest. This is a modern-day jacquerie, an emotional wildfire stoked in the provinces and directed against Paris and, most of all, the elite. French history since 1789 can be seen as a sequence of anti-elite movements, yet the gilets jaunes have no real precedent. Unlike the Paris Commune of 1871, this is a proletarian struggle devoid of utopian aspirations. Unlike the Poujadist movement of the mid-1950s—a confederation of shopkeepers likewise opposed to the “Americanization” of a “thieving and inhuman” state and similarly attracted to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories—the gilets jaunes include shopkeepers seemingly content to destroy shop windows. There is an aspect of carnival here: a delight in the subversion of norms, a deliberate embrace of the grotesque.

Many have said that the gilets jaunes are merely another “populist movement,” although the term is now so broad that it is nearly meaningless. Comparisons have been made to the Britain of Brexit, the United States of Donald Trump, and especially the Italy of Cinque Stelle. But the crucial difference is that the gilets jaunes are apolitical, and militantly so. They have no official platform, no leadership hierarchy, and no reliable communications. Everyone can speak for the movement, and yet no one can. When a small faction within it fielded a list of candidates for the upcoming European parliamentary elections in May, their sharpest opposition came from within: to many gilets jaunes, the ten who had put their names forward—among them a nurse, a truck

driver, and an accountant—were traitors to the cause, having dared to replicate the elite that the rest of the movement disdains.

Concessions from the government have had little effect. Under mounting pressure, Macron was forced to abandon the carbon tax planned for 2019 in a solemn televised address in mid-December. He also launched the so-called grand débat, a three-month tour of rural France designed to give him a better grasp of the concerns of ordinary people. In some of these sessions, Macron has endured more than six hours of bitter criticisms from angry provincial mayors. But these gestures have quelled neither the protests nor the anger of those who remain in the movement. Performance is the point. During the early “acts,” as the weekly demonstrations are known, members refused to meet with French prime minister Édouard Philippe, on the grounds that he would not allow the encounter to be televised, and that sentiment has persisted. Perhaps the most telling thing about the gilets jaunes is the vest they wear: a symbol of car ownership, but more fundamentally a material demand to be seen.

Inequality in France is less extreme than in the United States and Britain, but it is increasing. Among wealthy Western countries, the postwar French state—l’État-providence—is something of a marvel. France’s health and education systems remain almost entirely free while ranking among the best in the world. In 2017 the country’s ratio of tax revenue to gross domestic product was 46.2 percent, according to statistics from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—the highest redistribution level of any OECD country and a ratio that allows the state to fight poverty through a generous social protection system. Of that 46.2 percent, the French government allocated approximately 28 percent for social services.

“The French social model is so integrated that it almost seems a natural, preexisting condition,” Alexis Spire, a sociologist of inequality at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, told me recently. A number of the gilets jaunes I met said that despite the taxes they pay, they do not feel they benefit from any social services, since they live far from urban centers. But anyone who has ever received housing assistance, a free prescription, or sixteen weeks of paid maternity leave has benefited from the social protection system. The effect of redistribution is often invisible.

And yet the rich in France have gotten much richer. Between 1983 and 2015, the vast majority of incomes in France rose by less than one percent per year, while the richest one percent of the population saw their incomes rise by 100 percent after taxes. According to World Bank statistics, the richest 20 percent now earns nearly five times as much as the bottom 20 percent. This represents a stark shift from the Trente Glorieuses, France’s thirty-year economic boom after World War II. As the economist Thomas Piketty has pointed out, between 1950 and 1983, most French incomes rose steadily by approximately 4 percent per year; the nation’s top incomes rose by only one percent.

What has become painfully visible, however, is the extent of the country's geographical fractures. Paris has always been the undisputed center of politics, culture, and commerce, but France was once also a country that cherished and protected its vibrant provincial life. This was la France profonde, a clichéd but genuinely existing France of tranquil stone villages and local boulangeries with lines around the block on Sundays. "Douce France, cher pays de mon enfance," goes the beloved song by the crooner Charles Trenet. "Mon village, au clocher aux maisons sages." These days, the maisons sages are vacant, and the country boulangeries are closed.

The story is familiar: the arrival of large multinational megastores on the outskirts of provincial French towns and cities has threatened, and in many cases asphyxiated, local businesses.1 In the once-bustling centers of towns like Avignon, Agen, Calais, and Périgueux, there is now an eerie quiet: windows are often boarded up, and fewer and fewer people are to be found. This is the world evoked with a melancholy beauty in Nicolas Mathieu's novel Leurs enfants après eux, which won the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize, in 2018.

The expansion since the 1980s of France's high-speed rail network has meant that the country's major cities are all well connected to Paris. But there are many small towns where the future never arrived, where abandoned nineteenth-century train stations are now merely places for teenagers to make out, monuments of the way things used to be. In these towns, cars are the only way people can get to work. I met a fifty-five-year-old truck and taxi driver named Marco Pavan in the Franche-Comté in late November. What he told me then—about how carbon taxes can seem like sneers from the Parisian elite—has stayed with me. "Ask a Parisian—for him none of this is an issue, because he doesn't need a car," Pavan said. "There's no bus or train to take us anywhere. We have to have a car." I cited that remark in a Washington Post story I filed from Besançon; in the online comments section, many attacked the movement for what they saw as a backward anti-environmentalism—missing his point.

Few have written as extensively as the French geographer Christophe Guilluy on la France périphérique, a term he popularized that refers both to the people and the regions left behind by an increasingly globalized economy. Since 2010, when he published Fractures françaises, Guilluy has been investigating the myths and realities of what he calls "the trompe l'oeil of a peaceful, moderate, and consensual society." He is one of a number of left-wing French intellectuals—among them the novelist Michel Houellebecq, the historian Georges Bensoussan, and the essayist Michel Onfray—who in recent years have argued that their beloved patrie has drifted into inexorable decline, a classic critique of the French right since 1789. But Guilluy's decline narrative is different: he is not as concerned as the others with Islamist extremism or "decadence" broadly conceived. For him, France's decline is structural, the result of having become a place where "the social question disappears."

Guilluy, born in Montreuil in 1964, is something of a rarity among well-known French intellectuals: he is a product of the Paris suburbs, not of France's storied grandes écoles. And it is clear that much of his critique is personal. As a child, Guilluy, whose family then lived in the

working-class Paris neighborhood of Belleville, was forcibly relocated for a brief period to the heavily immigrant suburb of La Courneuve when their building was slated to be demolished in the midst of Paris's urban transformation. "I saw gentrification firsthand," he told Le Figaro in 2017. "For the natives—the natives being just as much the white worker as the young immigrant—what provoked the most problems was not the arrival of Magrebis, but that of the bobos."

This has long been Guilluy's battle cry, and he has focused his intellectual energy on attacking what he sees as the hypocrisy of the bobos, or bourgeois bohemians. His public debut was a short 2001 column in Libération applying that term, coined by the columnist David Brooks, to French social life. What was happening in major urban centers across the country, he wrote then, was a "ghettoization by the top of society" that excluded people like his own family.

Guilluy crystallized that argument in a 2014 book that won him the ear of the Élysée Palace and regular appearances on French radio. This was La France périphérique: comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires, in which he contended that since the mid-1980s, France's working classes have been pushed out of the major cities to rural communities—a situation that was a ticking time bomb—partly as a result of rising prices. He advanced that view further in 2016 with La Crépuscule de la France d'en haut—now translated into English as Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France—a pithy screed against France's bobo elite and what he sees as its shameless embrace of a "neoliberal," "Americanized society" and a hollow, feel-good creed of multicultural tolerance. In 2018, one month before the rise of the gilets jaunes, he published No Society, whose title comes from Margaret Thatcher's 1987 comment that "there is no such thing as society."

Ludovic Marin/AFP/Getty Images
French president Emmanuel Macron meeting with young people as part of the 'great debate' he launched in response to yellow vest protests, Étang-sur-Arroux, France, February 2019
In Guilluy's view, an immigrant working class has taken the place of the "native" working class in the banlieues on the outskirts of major cities. This native class, he argues, has been scattered throughout the country and become an "unnoticed presence" that France's elite has "made to disappear from public consciousness" in order to consolidate its grip on power. Cities are now the exclusive preserve of the elites and their servants, and what Guilluy means by "no society" is that the visible signs of class conflict in urban daily life have vanished. This is his trompe l'oeil: rich, insulated Parisians have convinced themselves that everything is fine, while those who might say otherwise are nowhere near. "The simmering discontent of rural France has never really been taken seriously," he writes in Twilight of the Elites.

Since November, much of the French press has declared that Guilluy essentially predicted the rise of the gilets jaunes. They seem, after all, a fulfillment of his prophecy about "the betrayal of the people" by the elites, even if he is always elusive about who exactly "the people" are. While

critiques from the movement have remained a confused cloud of social media invective, Guilluy has served as its de facto interpreter.

No Society puts into words what many in the gilets jaunes have either struggled or refused to articulate. This is the hazy middle ground between warning and threat: “The populist wave coursing through the western world is only the visible part of a soft power emanating from the working classes that will force the elites to rejoin the real movement of society or else to disappear.”

For now, however, there is just one member of the elite whom the gilets jaunes wish would disappear, and calls for his violent overthrow continue even as the movement’s momentum subsides.

An intense and deeply personal hatred of Macron is the only unifying cry among the gilets jaunes. Eighteen months before the uprising began, this was the man who captured the world’s imagination and who, after populist victories in Britain and the United States, had promised a French “Third Way.” Yet the Macronian romance is already over, both at home and abroad.

To some extent, the French always turn against their presidents, but the anger Macron elicits is unique. This is less because of any particular policy than because of his demeanor and, most of all, his language. “Mr. Macron always refused to respond to us,” Muriel Gautherin, fifty-three, a podiatrist who lives in the Paris suburbs, told me at a December march on the Champs-Élysées. “It’s he who insults us, and he who should respond.” When I asked her what she found most distasteful about the French president, her answer was simple: “His words.”

She has a point. Among Macron’s earliest actions as president was to shave five euros off the monthly stipends of France’s Aide personalisée au logement (APL), the country’s housing assistance program. Around the same time, he slashed France’s wealth tax on those with a net worth of at least €1.3 million—a holdover from the Mitterand era.

Macron came to office with a record of unrelentingly insulting the poor. In 2014, when he was France’s economic minister, he responded to the firing of nine hundred employees (most of them women) from a Breton slaughterhouse by noting that some were “mostly illiterate.” In 2016 he was caught on camera in a heated dispute with a labor activist in the Hérault. When the activist gestured to Macron’s €1,600 suit as a symbol of his privilege, the minister said, “The best way to afford a suit is to work.” In 2018 he told a young, unemployed gardener that he could find a new job if he merely “crossed the street.”

Yet nothing quite compares to the statement Macron made in inaugurating Station F, a startup incubator in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris, housed in a converted rail depot. It is a cavernous consulate for Silicon Valley, a soaring glass campus open to all those with “big ideas” who can also pay €195 a month for a desk and can fill out an application in fluent English. (“We won’t consider any other language,” the organization’s website says.) Google, Amazon, and

Microsoft all have offices in it, and in a city of terrible coffee, the espresso is predictably fabulous. In June 2017 Macron delivered a speech there. “A train station,” he said, referring to the structure’s origins, “it’s a place where we encounter those who are succeeding and those who are nothing.”

This was the moment when a large percentage of the French public learned that in the eyes of their president, they had no value. “Ceux qui ne sont rien” is a phrase that has lingered and festered. To don the yellow vest is thus to declare not only that one has value but also that one exists.

On the whole, the gilets jaunes are not the poorest members of French society, which is not surprising. As Tocqueville remarked, revolutions are fueled not by those who suffer the most, but by those whose economic status has been improving and who then experience a sudden and unexpected fall. So it seems with the gilets jaunes: most live above the poverty line but come from the precarious ranks of the lower middle class, a group that aspires to middle-class stability and seeks to secure it through palliative consumption: certain clothing brands, the latest iPhone, the newest television.

In mid-December Le Monde profiled a young couple in the movement from Sens in north-central France, identified only as Arnaud and Jessica. Both twenty-six, they and their four children live in a housing project on the €2,700 per month that Arnaud earns as a truck driver, including more than €1,000 in government assistance. According to statistics from France’s Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insée), this income places them right at the poverty line for a family of this size, and possibly even slightly below it. But the expenses Arnaud and Jessica told Le Monde they struggled to pay included karate lessons for their oldest son and pet supplies for their dog. Jessica, who does not work, told Le Monde, “Children are so mean to each other if they wear lesser brands. I don’t want their friends to make fun of them.” She said she had traveled to Paris for gilet jaune protests on three separate weekends—journeys that presumably cost her money.

Readers of Le Monde—many of them educated, affluent, and pro-Macron—were quick to attack Arnaud and Jessica. But the sniping missed their point, which was that they felt a seemingly inescapable sense of humiliation, fearing ridicule everywhere from the Élysée Palace to their children’s school. They were explaining something profound about the gilets jaunes: the degree to which the movement is fueled by unfulfilled expectations. For many demonstrators, life is simply not as they believed it would be, or as they feel they deserve. There is an aspect of entitlement to the gilets jaunes, who are also protesting what the French call déclassement, the increasing elusiveness of the middle-class dream in a society in which economic growth has not kept pace with population increase. This entitlement appears to have alienated the gilets jaunes from immigrants and people of color, who are largely absent from their ranks and whose condition is often materially worse.2 “It’s not people who don’t have hope anymore, who don’t have a place to live, or who don’t have a job,” Rokhaya Diallo, a French activist for racial

equality, told me recently, describing the movement. “It’s just that status they’re trying to preserve.”

The gilets jaunes have no substantive ideas: resentment does not an ideology make. They remain a combustible vacuum, and extremist agitators on the far right and the far left have sought to capitalize on their anger. Both Marine Le Pen of the recently renamed Rassemblement National and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the left-wing La France Insoumise have tried hard to channel the movement’s grassroots energy into their own political parties, but the gilets jaunes have so far resisted these entreaties. The gilets jaunes also found themselves at the center of a diplomatic spat: in early February Italy’s deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, met with two of their members on the outskirts of Paris in a jab at Macron. Two days later, France withdrew its ambassador to Rome for the first time since 1940, but the gilets jaunes have not attempted to exploit this attention for their own political gain. Instead there was infighting—a Twitter war over who had the right to represent the cause abroad and who did not.

The intellectual void at the heart of an amorphous movement can easily fill with the hatred of an “other.” That may already be happening to the gilets jaunes. Although a careful analysis by Le Monde concluded that race and immigration were not major concerns in the two hundred most frequently shared messages on gilet jaune Facebook pages between the beginning of the movement and January 22, a number of gilets jaunes have been recorded on camera making anti-Semitic gestures, insulting a Holocaust survivor on the Paris metro, and saying that journalists “work for the Jews.” Importantly, the gilets jaunes have never collectively denounced any of these anti-Semitic incidents—a silence perhaps inevitable for a movement that eschews organization of any kind. Likewise, a thorough study conducted by the Paris-based Fondation Jean Jaurès has shown the extent to which conspiracy theories are popular in the movement: 59 percent of those surveyed who had participated in a gilet jaune demonstration said they believed that France’s political elites were encouraging immigration in order to replace them, and 50 percent said they believed in a global “Zionist” conspiracy.

Members of the movement are often quick to point out that the gilets jaunes are not motivated by identity politics, and yet anyone who has visited one of their demonstrations is confronted with an undeniable reality. Far too much attention has been paid to the symbolism of the yellow vests and far too little to the fact that the vast majority of those who wear them are lower-middle-class whites. In what is perhaps the most ethnically diverse society in Western Europe, can the gilets jaunes truly be said to represent “the people,” as the members of the movement often claim? Priscillia Ludosky, arguably the first gilet jaune, is a black woman. “It’s complicated, that question,” she told me. “I have no response.”

The gilets jaunes are also distinctly a minority of the French population: in a country of 67 million, as many as 282,000 have demonstrated on a single day, and that figure has consistently fallen with each passing week, down to 41,500 during “Act 14” of the protest on February 16. On two different weekends in November and December, other marches in Paris—one for women’s rights, the other against climate change—drew far bigger crowds than

the gilets jaunes did. But the concerns of this minority are treated as universal by politicians, the press, and even the movement's sharpest critics. Especially after Trump and Brexit, lower-middle-class and working-class whites command public attention even when they have no clear message.

Stephane Grangier/Corbis/Getty Images
Christophe Guilluy, Paris, 2015
French citizens of color have been protesting social inequality for years without receiving any such respect. In 2005 the killing of two minority youths by French police in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois ignited a string of violent uprisings against police brutality, but the government declared an official state of emergency instead of launching a grand débat. In 2009, the overseas departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique saw a huge strike against the high cost of living—a forty-four-day uprising that also targeted fuel prices and demanded an increase to the minimum wage. In 2017 an almost identical protest occurred in French Guiana, another French overseas department, where residents demonstrated against household goods that were as much as 12 percent more expensive than they were in mainland France, despite a lower minimum wage. The French government was slow to respond in both of these instances, while the concerns of the gilets jaunes have resulted in a personal apology from the president and a slew of concessions.

Guilluy, whose analysis of la France périphérique ultimately fails to grapple significantly with France's decidedly peripheral overseas territories, does not shy away from the question of identity. He sees a racial element to the frustrations of la France périphérique, but he does not see this as a problem. Some of the most frustrating moments in his work come when he acknowledges but refuses to interrogate white working-class behavior that seems to be racially motivated. "Public housing in outlying communities is now a last resort for workers hoping to be able to go on living near the major cities," he writes in Twilight of the Elites, describing the recent astronomic rise in France's urban real estate prices. "These projects, mostly occupied by immigrant renters, are avoided by white French-born workers. Barring some utterly unforeseeable turn of events, their expulsion from the largest urban centers will be irreversible." It would not diminish Guilluy's broader point about la France périphérique if he acknowledged that victims of structural changes can also be intolerant.

Guilluy also regularly recycles anxieties over immigration, often from controversial theorists such as Michèle Tribalat, who is associated with the idea of le grand remplacement, the alleged "great replacement" of France's white population by immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. In making his case about "the demographic revolution in process," Guilluy has been accused of inflating his statistics. France, he wrote in Fractures françaises, "welcomes a little less than 200,000 legal foreigners every year." But these claims were attacked by Patrick Weil, a leading French historian of immigration, who noted in his book Le sens de la République (2015) that Guilluy failed to consider that a large number of those 200,000 are temporary workers, students who come and go, and others of "irregular" status. Guilluy has not responded

to these criticisms, and in any case his rhetoric has since grown more radical. In No Society he writes, “Multiculturalism is, intrinsically, a feeble ideology that divides and weakens.”

Whether the gilets jaunes will eventually come to agree with him is a crucial question. Like Guilluy, they are responding to real social conditions. But if, following Guilluy’s lead, they ultimately resort to the language of race and ethnicity to explain their suffering, they will have chosen to become a different movement altogether, one in which addressing inequality was never quite the point. In some ways, they have already crossed that line.

On the afternoon of Saturday, February 16, the prominent French intellectual Alain Finkielkraut got out of a taxi on the Boulevard Montparnasse. A crowd of gilets jaunes noticed him and began hurling anti-Semitic insults. The scene, recorded on video, was chilling: in the center of Paris, under a cloudless sky, a mob of visibly angry men surrounded a man they knew to be Jewish, called him a “dirty Zionist,” and told him, “go back to Tel Aviv.”

Finkielkraut’s parents were Polish refugees from the Holocaust. He was born in Paris in 1949 and has become a fixture in French cultural life, a prolific author, a host of a popular weekly broadcast on France Culture, and a member of the Académie Française, the country’s most elite literary institution. In the words of Macron, who immediately responded to the attack, he “is not only an eminent man of letters but the symbol of what the Republic affords us all.” The irony is that Finkielkraut—another former leftist who believes that France has plunged into inexorable decline and ignored the dangers of multiculturalism—was one of the only Parisian intellectuals who had supported the gilets jaunes from the beginning.

I spoke to Finkielkraut after the attack, and he explained that the gilets jaunes had seemed to him the evidence of something authentic. “I saw an invisible France, neglected and forgotten,” he said. “Wearing fluorescent yellow vests in order to be visible—of being a ‘somewhere’ as opposed to an ‘anywhere,’ as Goodhart has said—seemed to me an absolutely legitimate critique.” The British journalist David Goodhart, popular these days in French right-wing circles, is the author of The Road to Somewhere (2017), which sees populist anger as the inevitable response to the widening gulf between those “rooted” in a particular place and cosmopolitans at home anywhere. “France is not a ‘start-up nation,’” Finkielkraut told me. “It can’t be reduced to that.”

Finkielkraut said that the attack was a sign that the reasonable critiques orginally made by the gilets jaunes had vanished, and that they had no real future. “I think the movement is in the process of degradation. It’s no longer a social movement but a sect that has closed in on itself, whose discourse is no longer rational.”

Although the Paris prosecutor has opened an investigation into his attackers, Finkielkraut has not pressed charges. He told me that the episode, as violent as it was, did not necessarily suggest that all those who had worn yellow vests in recent months were anti-Semites or extremists. “Those who insulted me were not the nurses, the shopkeepers, or the small

business owners," he said, noting that he doubted he would have experienced the same prejudice at the roundabouts, the traffic circles across the country where gilets jaunes protesters gathered every Saturday. In a sense, these were the essence of the movement, which was an inchoate mobilization against many things, but perhaps none so much as loneliness. The roundabouts quickly became impromptu piazzas and a means, however small, of reclaiming a spirit of community that disappeared long ago in so many French towns and villages.

In Paris, where the remaining gilets jaunes have now focused most of their energy, the weekly protests have become little more than a despicable theater filled with scenes like the attack on Finkielkraut. There is no convincing evidence that those still wearing yellow vests are troubled by the presence of bigotry in their ranks. What is more, many gilets jaunes now seem to believe that pointing out such prejudice is somehow to become part of a government-backed conspiracy to turn public opinion against them.

Consider, for instance, a February 19 communiqué released in response to the attack on Finkielkraut from La France en Colère, one of the movement's main online bulletins. "For many days, the government and its friends in the national media seem to have found a new technique for destabilizing public opinion and discrediting the Gilets Jaunes movement," it begins. "We denounce the accusations and the manipulations put in place by this government adept at fake news." But this is all the communiqué denounces; it does not address the anti-Semitic violence to which Finkielkraut was subjected, nor does it apologize to a national figure who had defended the movement when few others of his prominence dared to do the same.

A month after our last conversation, I called Priscillia Ludosky back, to see if she had any reaction to the recent turn of events in the movement her petition had launched. She was only interested in discussing what she called the French government's "systematic abuse to manipulate public opinion." She also believes that a government-media conspiracy will stop at nothing to smear the cause. "If there was one person who ever said something homophobic, it was on the front page of every newspaper," she told me.

In the days after the attack, Finkielkraut lamented not so much the grim details of what had happened but the squandered potential of a moment that has increasingly descended into paranoid feverishness. As he told me: "This was a beautiful opportunity to reflect on who we are that's been completely ruined."

The City That Wouldn't Die

Garry Wills

APRIL 4, 2019 ISSUE

City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300

by Jason Berry

University of North Carolina Press, 412 pp., $35.00

Alex Webb/Magnum Photos

Musicians in the Original Four Social Aid and Pleasure Club's annual second line brass band parade, New Orleans, October 2018

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005, devastating an area seven times the size of Manhattan, flooding 80 percent of the city, ruining buildings, forcing a million people to flee, and stranding millions more in misery. Many of us remember this as a great failure of George W. Bush's administration and of his appointee to head the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job" Brown. Jason Berry, in *City of a Million Dreams*, a sweeping history of his native city, thinks it was something else: "the worst civil engineering disaster in American history." (Brown does not get a single reference in the index.) The levees that were supposed to

protect a city largely constructed at or below sea level were badly designed and poorly maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers. The coastal forests and wetlands, which could once have absorbed a storm surge, had been built over. Local authorities were incompetent, especially the mayor, Ray Nagin (who later went to prison for tax evasion, fraud, and bribery).

Some of those who fled the city considered not going back, and Mayor Nagin seemed to encourage that, "touting a 'market-driven recovery,' which many people took as a dog whistle for keeping the poor from returning," Berry writes. New Orleans was 67 percent black before Katrina. It is still 60 percent black. Black organizers encouraged people to return, reminding them especially of cultural institutions they had created. Wynton Marsalis, of the great New Orleans musician family, led an effort to restore the "talent pool," largely focused on the city's deep heritage of jazz music.

Berry fled at first, but then came back. He already knew that New Orleans has a trick of not dying when it ought to. The city is a cheeky insult to the natural order, a mix of incongruous elements that somehow reinforce one another while trying to tear one another down. It has been the target of hurricanes and floods throughout its history—Hurricane Betsy killed eighty-one people in 1965. Fires long rivaled floods in deadliness—the fire of 1788 destroyed 856 buildings and 80 percent of all homes; that of 1794 destroyed 212 buildings in three hours. Yellow fever, carried by the city's huge population of mosquitoes, leveled human populations. Changes in imperial masters (first French, then Spanish, then French again) altered the choreography of power without breaking a certain continuity. Slave revolts were often threatened and sometimes occurred. Pirates were both a menace to and carriers of trade. Yet from its birth in 1718, the city kept improbably springing back.

It is appropriate that this kaleidoscopic city had a kind of shapeshifter as its founder. Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, was born into a privileged French colonial family in Canada. He learned about battle as a naval cadet on the French warship commanded by his older brother Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville. At seventeen, Jean-Baptiste was wounded when Iberville's ship sank a British man-o'-war in Hudson Bay in 1697. Then the brothers started exploring French holdings in and around the mouth of the Mississippi River, looking to control entry from the Gulf of Mexico.

For a base of operations Bienville settled on a crescent-shaped ridge of comparatively hardened sludge in the soupy terrain. It was Indian-held land. With a small army of Europeans and freed black men he fought to secure it, negotiating with six Indian tribes, learning their languages, pitting some against the others, fighting in their own manner. Some Indians fought naked, to show their talismanic tattoos to the foe; so did Bienville, flaunting his snake tattoos. This flamboyant beginning gives Berry a clue to much that will follow in the history of New Orleans.

The city has what sociologist Clifford Geertz called the cohesion of a "theatre state." In his study of rituals in nineteenth-century Bali, Geertz described "the power of grandeur to organize a world," creating a belief system from "a lexicon of carvings, flowers, dances, melodies, gestures, chants, ornaments, temples, postures, and masks."[1] He gave another example of this when he studied the wrenching shift in England from the Catholic court of Queen Mary Tudor to the Protestant realm of Elizabeth I. The medieval calendar of rituals, feast days, fast days, guilds with patron saints, high masses, and religious processions was replaced with a Renaissance series of masques, plays, processions, emblems, and royal cults.[2]

Berry does not refer to Geertz, but he is undertaking something similarly ambitious when he claims that New Orleans has always had a culture of spectacle. Geertz thought the theatricality of Bali and England was a way of underlining the rulers' authority. Spectacle in New Orleans could not only underline authority but also undermine it. Miming official rituals, it could give them a subversive twist. The love of spectacle blended Indian war drums, Congolese circle dances, *sangamento* (mock war) ceremonies, spiritualist invocations, exorcisms, faith healings, ecstatic worship, and imitation of Catholic high masses with fancy vestments and processions and saints' days. The city's many funeral customs show how multivalent such displays could be. In the early days, slave funerals were banned as possible incentives to rebellion, and so they were carried out furtively at night. The official "krewes" of Mardi Gras were followed by informal "second liners" mocking the already exaggerated "royalty" of Carnival. Jazz was brewed from such confluent rhythms and improvisations.

Another theme explored by Berry is the strong but heterodox spiritualities of New Orleans. He shows how the voodoo cult of famous dead leaders resembled the Catholic cult of saints. The city has a way of enacting its beliefs. There is no better personification of this than the Capuchin monk Antonio de Sedella, red-haired, sandaled, bearded, and charismatic. A secret agent of the Spanish Inquisition, he arrived in Spanish-held New

Orleans in 1781 to sniff out heresy. The local Spanish governor did not want secret agents encroaching on his authority, so he sent the monk back to Spain in 1790.

But in 1795 Sedella returned to New Orleans, where he became a wildly populist leader of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. His popular power grew as the Spanish lost control to the French in 1800 and President Thomas Jefferson bought the territory from Napoleon in 1803. When the Marquis de Lafayette came to America for his famous return tour in 1825, he was officially welcomed by Sedella, who was so beloved by the French population that Padre Antonio had long been known as Père Antoine. When Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, to whom the Vatican had given authority over the territory, ordered him to surrender the New Orleans cathedral to its rightful bishop in 1806, a mob prevented the bishop from ousting Père Antoine. The populace again thwarted Catholic Church authority in 1815, when a bishop (as required by canon law) was sent to take over the cathedral. A mob drove the bishop chosen by the pope out of town and reinstalled Père Antoine as the churchman chosen by the people. He reigned in the cathedral for the rest of his life.

The man who first came to New Orleans to enforce Church orthodoxy ended up usurping Church authority in order to baptize, marry, and bury ecclesiastically prohibited people—slaves, Masons, creoles of all sorts, even Jews and Protestants in "mixed marriages" with Catholic partners. Père Antoine was as inclusive as the multiracial New Orleans populace, and when he died in 1829 he was buried under the floor of his usurped cathedral after lying in state there while the community mourned him. He became the spirit of New Orleans, appearing after death as a ghost or dream visitor to spiritualists.

Berry knows that the city's spiritual life could not be contained within even the most tolerant boundaries of a folk-hero monk. Holiness preachers of amazing theatrical spectacles have commanded rapt attention in New Orleans. Utah Smith (1906–1965) sang his sermons while playing an electric guitar and flying on wires wearing two huge white wings (representing the Old Testament and New Testament) that would carry him to heaven. Berry's own favorite spiritual leaders are women who created their own rituals, evangelists like Cora Williams or Margaret Parker. Mother Leafy Anderson (1887–1927) was a medium whose services called up the spirit of Black Hawk, the Native American warrior, as a guide and protector of black people. She also held parties on the roof of her church, at which jazz musicians played.

Berry gives special attention to Mother Catherine Seals (1887–1930) and Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980). Mother Catherine created a mission for abused, homeless, and pregnant women called the Manger, since Christ was being reborn there every time a woman gave birth or carried her baby into the two-block compound. As the novelist and amateur anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote after staying at the Manger for two weeks in 1928, "Mother Catherine's concept of the divinity of Christ is that Joseph was his foster father as all men are foster fathers, in that all children are of God and all fathers merely the means."

Hurston wondered at the collection of animals in the Manger's compound and at the chapel ("a place of barbaric splendor, of banners, of embroideries, or images bought and created by mother Catherine"). There were snake images on the walls and on Mother Catherine's self-designed vestments, honoring the "rebirth" of serpents when they shed their skin. In the tent services, from a stage with a piano, young jazz musicians found their first audiences. Mother Catherine, a social force in the city, created a line of female bishops from her followers and drew crowds to her faith healings.

Sister Gertrude Morgan not only preached with music (she played the guitar) but with the visual arts, painting biblico-cosmic scenes with her own system of symbols. She claimed she heard a voice telling her she was the Bride of Christ, sent to save souls with sounds and sights. She became a famous folk artist after a hustling gallery owner named Larry Borenstein began collecting and selling her paintings in the 1960s. Borenstein, a Jew from Milwaukee who was married in a Buddhist temple, was not only a collector of pre-Columbian art along with Sister Gertrude's paintings, but also a jazz fancier who let mixed-race bands play in his gallery's patio while segregation was still being enforced in more open venues. Borenstein moved his gallery next door and left his original site to be developed, first as the Slow Drag Hangout and then, after its sale to Allan Jaffe (1935–1987), a tuba-playing jazz musician, as Preservation Hall.

Borenstein exemplifies how New Orleans traditions not only jostled alongside one another but crisscrossed back and forth. Another symbol of this was the Bourbon House tavern, which had two entrances on different streets, one for gays and one for straights; Tennessee Williams often preferred the straight side for its better jukebox music. What is one to make of a city where the Bride of Christ played the guitar, where an Inquisitor-monk became a welcomer of dissent, and where the aristocratic founder was a tattooed warrior?

Berry not only traces these overlaps of sound and spectacle; he uses overlapping narratives. We first meet a character in one scene without any forecast of the future until that character pops up in later circumstances. For instance, a slave boy named Jordan Noble, with his master's permission, was a military drummer at the Battle of New Orleans, won by Andrew Jackson with the help of black militiamen, pirates, and Choctaw Indians. Jordan was freed after many celebrations of the battle he had served in; he turns up later in Berry's book defending his state in the Civil War (and trying to preserve his freedom by showing his loyalty in case the South won).

Henry Latrobe was a young architect in New Orleans directing 150 slaves in building a defensive barrier during the War of 1812, before he died of yellow fever, the ancient New Orleans curse. Only later in the book does his father, the more famous architect Benjamin Latrobe, come to New Orleans to complete his dead son's waterworks and undertake new projects (such as a tower for Père Antoine's cathedral) before dying of yellow fever himself. The elder Latrobe was not only America's first professional architect, appointed by President Jefferson to oversee construction of the Capitol in Washington; his journal is among the most perceptive of his time. He gives one of the best descriptions of the African "circle dances" in New Orleans's Congo Square. Latrobe also reveals the sadistic racism of the city: he left the boarding house he first stayed at when the woman running it had a mulatto servant tied naked and whipped for not making a bed.

The same overlapping narrative technique has us first meet the noble Sieur Bienville fighting against England for control of Hudson Bay and later fighting with and against Indian tribes. Or we learn of Padre Antonio as an enforcer of the Spanish Inquisition, before he comes back as a populist churchman, Père Antoine, leading the people in an ecumenical spirit.

And then there is the jazz clarinetist Michael White. Before Katrina, Berry had collaborated with White for a documentary on the musical funerals in New Orleans. White was both a jazz performer with his own Original Liberty Jazz Band, which toured in America and China, and a scholar who earned his doctorate in Spanish from Tulane University and teaches musicology from an endowed chair at Xavier University.

After Katrina, we get a second look at White as Berry reconnects with him, going for the first time to his drenched and moldering home in the Gentilly neighborhood, where it had been inundated by nine feet of water. There they saw that four thousand of White's

books, along with musical scores, records, photos, and jazz memorabilia, were sluiced off walls and shelves onto the floor in a mush-mound of irrecoverable scholarship. Then we follow White as he resumes his irrepressible jazz band, makes new recordings, collaborates with Wynton Marsalis, and continues teaching music at Xavier. That is, we see New Orleans, after another of its near-death experiences, still stubbornly not knowing how to die when it ought to.

1

Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 102–104. ↩

2

Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1983). ↩