WE NOW LIVE IN THE CABARET: LAISSEZ LES BON TEMPS ROULER!

By Herman Greene

The elections hit me hard. I have never been directly affected by war or a major catastrophe such as an earthquake, the direct hit of a tornado, major flood or drought, a tsunami or a major volcanic eruption that buries cities and darkens the skies. I’ve never lived under a dictatorship or endured torture or lived under the threat of torture. People have had to live and die under terrible conditions. Many people have found themselves relatively powerless in the face of evil. Many people have truly been victims and pardon me while I retch when people say these people became victims only because they didn’t have the right frame of mind or spiritual condition. Many people have suffered grave injustice, poverty, sickness, deprivation, unbearable living conditions, and hunger.

I don’t know if I could say what I am about to say if I had had to face such conditions. Perhaps if I had, what I have experienced around the elections would have seemed minor. I have this rather strange thought that having my hand cut off with a machete, as many have as a form of punishment, would be more traumatic than Trump and the Republicans winning so many elections and the populist wave that is occurring around the world. I can imagine if that happened to me I would be in a desperate state of fear and loathing and I don’t know how I would get over it.

But I don’t bring the perspective of that kind of trauma to what I experienced around the elections. I can only relate what I experienced to my experience, which has had its pathos and hardships if not these kinds of extreme trauma. This is probably good. I suspect that if one has suffered extreme trauma it blots out a historical perspective. It is difficult to live history under duress. Duress I would think brings one to this moment—this moment of duress—which endlessly repeats itself.

Part of the mystery of being human is that on the whole we are historical beings. We are conscious of larger patterns. We weave our actions and cultures out of these larger patterns. We do what we can to reduce those elements or factors that bring about extreme trauma and suffering.

On an ordinary day, the traumatic potentialities of life recede. We get dressed and go about our business. We assume many things are true about the world and that we will be supported. If we considered all that could happen to us even on just an ordinary day we would have difficulty even getting out of bed.

There are times though when a sense of foreboding overtakes us individually and collectively. This is not always directly correlated with the level of immediate threats. We, and I mean humanity as a whole, seem to be in such a time. Strange, because there is no world war, or pandemic, or great depression. Yet there is a foreboding. After 9/11 Thomas Berry wrote about
how we were entering a new age of anxiety, I think though it is more than that. There is an underlying sense, conscious or unconscious, of foreboding and because of that strange things are happening.

Donald Trump’s election has been, for me, the most upsetting thing that has happened in my 71 years of experience of American history. I am living in a country I don’t recognize. I am seeing people I don’t recognize. I don’t understand their language or thoughts. The madding crowds at Trump’s rallies bring to mind dark periods of history as I have understood them from books or films. Why is it that demagogues rise up and thrill the masses and bring them to a state of frenzy? I realize I am not alone, I am somewhat comforted that a majority of voters did not vote for Trump . . . and yet I feel alone.

I read of how authoritarian leaders have been cheered by Trump’s election. Fareed Zakaria wrote in the Washington Post about those who were cheered by Trump’s victory.

“This was a victory for the forces which oppose globalization, are fighting illegal migration and are in favor of clean ethnic states,” declared a spokesperson for Golden Dawn, Greece’s far-right party, which is sometimes characterized as neo-Nazi. Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister who has said he wants to build an “illiberal state” in his country, hailed the results as “great news.” The deputy leader of France’s right-wing National Front Party, historically seen as ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic, was exultant as well. “Their world is collapsing. Ours is being built,” he said. Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad called Trump a “natural ally.” Rodrigo Duterte, the authoritarian leader of the Philippines, said of him, “We both like to swear . . . we’re the same.” Robert Mugabe, who has clung to power in Zimbabwe for 36 years while destroying that nation’s economy and liberties, has been similarly hopeful. A full-page editorial in a state-run paper there hailed the election of “the mighty Trump,” and the 92-year-old dictator has reportedly described Trump as a “friend.” . . .

What unifies Trump’s foreign admirers is the idea that the existing global order is rotten and should be torn down. . . .

But what is this globalism to which these people are so opposed? After 1945, after the Great Depression and two world wars, Western nations established an international system characterized by rules that honored national sovereignty, allowed for the flourishing of global commerce, and encouraged respect for human rights and liberties. This order resulted in the longest period of peace among the world’s major powers, marked by broad-based economic growth that created large middle classes in the West, the revival of Europe, growth in poor countries that lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and the spread of freedom across the globe.

Another article in the Washington Post was about how “Trump’s win may be just the beginning of a global populist wave.” At first sight, one might think, “well how could that be bad?” Isn’t populism, attending to the needs of the poor and marginalized, a good thing? I have learned
that populism has a more definite meaning than I had thought. At least in one interpretation of the term, populism involves the rise of strong leader who has an appeal to ethic and/or nationalistic sensitivities and develops a narrative of how the system is rigged and only that leader through strong effort can right the wrong. Populism is a turn inward and a distrust of foreigners. The Brexit vote preceded Trump’s victory. Following Trump’s victory, the right-wing former prime minister François Fillon, who upset former President Nicholas Sarkozy and also former première Alain Juppé, became the Republican Party’s presidential nominee who will in 2017 face the further right Marine La Pen of the National Front and a yet to be named Socialist candidate. Italians voted to bring down the center-left government of PR Renzi. Hungary is already ruled by an authoritarian leader. Beyond Europe there is Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Narendra Modi in India, and Vladimir Putin in Russia. I haven’t followed China as closely as I used to, but there is something worrying about President Xi Jinping of China. We are seeing the rise of a new group of authoritarian leaders in the Middle East. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey has crushed dissent and departed by the secularism that was a feature of Turkish government since Ataturk. There are other signs of upheaval.

In short, the liberal world order, which I had assumed as a basis for my action, may have ended. I have a wise old friend who thinks that may be a good thing. I don’t. Take Trump for example. In the name of helping the people, he is establishing an even more powerful elite even more driven by moneyed interests. He will remove protections for the poor. He will dismantle parts of the regulatory state pertaining to business while bringing more intrusive government intervention in other areas. He will pursue militarism with increasing zeal. He will support authoritarian leaders around the world. He will run roughshod over various cultures and cultural protections and against those who want to protect the environment. He lives in a three-story gilded penthouse at the top of Trump Tower on 5th Avenue in NYC that would have evoked envy from Louis XIV with his Palace of Versailles.

He will revel in his apparent success as he initially bolsters the world financial system which is strangely newly exuberant about his election. He will ride the tide of the economic recovery of the Obama years, at least for a while. As an article I read said, Trump is getting more credit for the 1,000 jobs he “saved” at a Carrier furnace plant in Indiana, than Obama is for the 16 million jobs created during his administration. Trump is a showman and a scoundrel. Yet he will have his legions and the realities of a fading world order will pass by unnoticed for them hidden by the giddy lights of his grand theater of macabre entertainments and distractions and moral relativism, where free speech has become license to say and believe anything you damn well please; and they and we will all be ruled by a new and even more arrogant and inaccessible global cabal than before.

This has become our new reality. We now live in the Cabaret. As the people of New Orleans, the “city that care forgot” (or did it?), say, “Laissez les bon temps rouler! Let the good times roll!”