

# The Relevance of Raspail

*Visionary French author saw it coming*

BY MARTIN WITKERK

One of the pleasures of hindsight is finding out who got it right—who best predicted the future in which we are now living. In 1959, with most observers focusing on communist expansion as the great danger facing the West, French philosopher Bertrand De Jouvenel asked his contemporaries to consider the possible long-term effects of improved transport:

Difficulties of transportation have in the past held back geographic movements of populations. In the nineteenth century the westward trek of the Americans and the northward trek of the Boers were considered epic. Now, however, vast movements of population are physically feasible.

Cheap travel could combine with egalitarianism to make for a dangerous witch's brew:

Reducing inequalities *within the nation* was the great theme of the last few generations, since people naturally compared their condition only with that of their neighbors. But we have invited the other nations of the world to take cognizance of our living standards. The pressure to emigrate to countries which have achieved great success will be renewed, and it will pose moral and political problems.

Even today, of course, there are those who persist in seeing these developments as heralds of a new global community embracing all mankind, the actualization of the "unity of mankind" celebrated by the philosophers of antiquity:

But the world today is "One" in a sense quite opposed to that which the Greek Stoics had in mind. [Their] purpose was to contrast physical distance with moral proximity: moral nature made it as easy for men to get on together as physical nature made it difficult

for them to come together. Now the situation with which we are faced is utterly different; it is one of physical proximity and moral distance. Progress in transport has flung down the walls of distance which insulated the many human communities; but men have not rushed over these toppled walls to greet each other as long-lost brothers. The prolonged presence of Western man in Arab, African, and Asian countries has quickened a feeling of kinship not with him, but against him.

Twelve years after Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote these prescient lines, his fellow countryman Jean Raspail, age forty-six, was looking out his window on the French Riviera. Raspail had traveled widely in his youth and already had ten books to his credit, more than one based on his experiences with third-world peoples. France itself, under De Gaulle's successor Georges Pompidou, was then still basking in the afterglow of postwar prosperity, the "thirty glorious years" as they are now nostalgically named. But Raspail, contemplating the Mediterranean that day in 1971, had a thought similar to Jouvenel's:

"What if *they* were to come?"

I did not know who *they* were, but it seemed inevitable to me that the numberless disinherited people of the South would, like a tidal wave, set sail one day for this opulent shore, our fortunate country's wide-gaping frontier.

An affluent society such as found on the Côte d'Azur is the end product of generations of hard work, intelligence, and self-denial. In most of the world, one or more of these elements has generally been lacking, and they cannot be made up for within a single generation, even by the coordinated efforts of an entire society, let alone by individuals. The only way for a poor person in a poor country to enjoy the fruits of prosperity within his own lifetime is to *move* to where they already exist. And moving is getting easier all the time.

Raspail was a man of letters, not a political analyst like Jouvenel, and his idea quickly began to take on imaginative form. An armada of a hundred ships setting

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sail from a squalid third world slum, crammed with hungry, filthy, desperate people all bound for Europe: how would today's guilt-ridden West react?

Raspail began writing, not knowing himself where the story was headed. "I would stop in the evening," he relates, "not knowing what would happen the next day, and the next day, to my surprise, my pencil raced unhindered over the paper. It was like that all the way to the end. If ever a book of mine was inspired, it was this one." Raspail has a picture of himself, taken just as he completed the manuscript: he looks haggard and twenty years older.

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The story begins at the Belgian consulate in the slums of Calcutta. Local Catholic priests, like American evangelicals in our own day, have been promoting the adoption of third-world children by the folks back home as a form of "good works" and an answer to poverty. When the government realizes that 40,000 have been sent in a period of just five years, they take emergency measures to halt the flow. But this merely serves to whet the local appetite for some type of Western relief. A ragged mob swarms the consulate, ignoring protestations that no more children will be taken and defying calls to disperse. As they wait, they tell one another stories of a land of milk and honey, where rich harvests grow spontaneously in untilled fields watered by rivers brimming with fish.

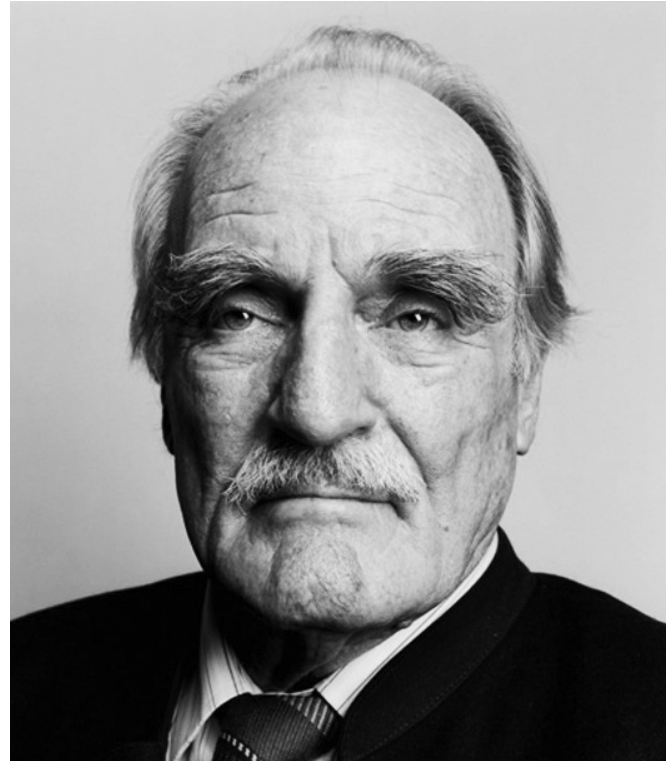
The most wretched of the entire mob is the "dung man" (collecting excrement for use as fuel is an actual profession in parts of the world). He carries a malformed child on his shoulders and emerges as a leader of the mob. As a white "humanitarian aide worker" makes his way through the crowd, the dung man falls upon him, crying "take us with you." The man responds: "Today, I say unto you, you shall be with me in paradise."

(Such echoes of the New Testament are scattered throughout Raspail's novel; the book's title—*The Camp of the Saints*—is taken from *Revelation 20: 8-9*: "Behold the nations which are at the four corners of the earth rising up; their number is like the sand of the sea. They shall set out upon an expedition across the surface of the earth, they shall invest the camp of the saints and the beloved city.")

The white man and the dung-gatherer lead the crowd down to the docks. The ships at anchor are dilapidated wrecks of Western origin, either left over from the days of British colonialism or bought cut-rate when European nations were finished with them. They are suitable only for river traffic. But there are many of these hulking wrecks, and some are quite large, with names such as the *Calcutta Star* and *Star of India*. The crowds swarm aboard. One hundred ships are tightly packed until they are in danger of sinking. But the

weather is perfect and the seas are calm; they set sail.

Raspail outdoes the naturalism of Zola in his description of conditions onboard. The stench, the filth, the crowding, the hunger, the misery, even the casual and public fornication employed to pass the time—no detail is spared the reader.



Jean Raspail

As the flotilla passes through the straits of Ceylon, helicopters start hovering overhead—Western journalists capturing images to transmit back home. Raspail clearly enjoys himself satirizing the mawkish and impractical reaction of his countryman. He shows us French schoolteachers assigning their charges themes such as: "Describe the life of the poor, suffering souls on board the ships, and express your feelings toward their plight in detail, by imagining, for example, that one of the desperate families comes to your home and asks you to take them in." At a press conference called to discuss the French governmental response to the events, a minister bloviates:

The spirit of France, her particular genius, has always guided her path through the great waves of modern thought, like the noble flagship whose instinct shows her the way to go, as she plies resolutely forward, colors flying for all to see, at the head of the fleet of enlightened nations, setting their course, now left, now right, showing them how to sail into the storms spawned by the great compassionate gales of human progress....

Clearly representing Raspail's views is the journalist Jules Machefer, publisher of *La Pensée Nationale*, "a poor, eight-page daily with no pictures, practically no ads, badly printed and more badly sold." He rises to address the minister as follows:

Monsieur Orelle, let's suppose the Western nations go along with the government's proposal and provide for the fleet as long as it's off in mid-ocean. Can't you see that you'll simply be feeding your enemy, fattening up a million invaders? And if this fleet should reach the coast of France, and throw those million invaders out onto the beach, would the government have the courage to stand up to the very same hordes that its kindness had rescued?

The minister describes the question as "revolting" and, when Machefer persists, threatens to have him forcibly ejected from the room.

Another memorable character is lefty journalist Clément Dio, real name Ben Suad:

Dio possessed a belligerent intellect that thrived on springs of racial hatred barely below the surface, and far more intense than anyone imagined. The journalist's pen gave him many a size and shape, but one thing never changed: his contempt for tradition, his scorn for Western man per se, and above all the patriotic Frenchman. In column after column, [he] became, by turns, an Arab workman, snubbed and insulted; a black bricklayer, insulted by his boss; a street tough, shot in his tracks; a student terrorist; a rebel leader dispensing guerrilla justice; an incurable delinquent, victim of his genes or society's pressures; a murderer calling for prison reform; a bishop spouting Marx in his pastoral letters; a Bengali dead of starvation.... And so many more.

As the fleet approaches, Dio outdoes himself by publishing a "spectacular special on *The Civilization of the Ganges*":

[It] had something for all those who thought they could think. Arts, letters, philosophy, history, medicine, morality, the family and society—everything found its way into the issue, signed by the best names in the business. Considering all the wonders the Ganges has bestowed on us already—sacred music, theater, dance, yoga, mysticism, arts and crafts, jewelry, new style in dress—the burning question, by the end of the issue, was how we could do without these folks any longer!

Indeed, the idea that Europe must help the people of the Ganges is gradually replaced by the view that Europe will be the beneficiary of "the fleet's mission to cleanse and redeem the capitalist West."

At the same time, the ordinary people of Southern France are clearing out, abandoning their properties and heading north. Raspail describes two rivers running through the land: "one towards the sea and the Ganges fleet, but it was merely a river of words; the second, throbbing with life, fleeing toward the interior of the country." Throughout the novel, Raspail contrasts the many who spout sentiments without effect with the few who attempt to take responsibility for the situation.

As the fleet heads toward the Gulf of Aden (and by implication the Suez Canal), they are met by an Egyptian gunboat. Unaffected with post-colonial guilt, the Egyptians are determined not to run the risk of letting the fleet pass through their canal. First they issue a warning, then fire a warning shot; the Indian captains understand that the Egyptians mean business, and steer for the south, toward the Cape of Good Hope.

As the ships pass through South African waters, the Afrikaner government surprises the world by sending out barges full of supplies: fresh water, rice, medicines. The men of the Ganges dump everything overboard. The international press is ecstatic, running headlines such as "Blackmail in Human Despair"; "Armada Poison Plot Fails"; "Armada Dumps Rice, Keeps Self-Respect"; and (Clément Dio's article) "No Compromise for the Ganges Refugees."

Western leaders are certain the refugees will know how to distinguish "good whites" such as themselves from the "bad whites" of South Africa, so they prepare to meet the fleet as it passes São Tomé island. Every church and charity in the Western world has airlifted supplies to the tiny island. Barges set out to meet the flotilla, but "it soon became clear the Ganges fleet had no intention of stopping. The *India Star* even seemed to change course, heading straight to ram one of the barges!" Not everyone takes the hint:

The Papal barge held out longer than the rest, like a stubborn sheepdog prodding the flock. Abreast of the *Calcutta Star*, she was making her third attempt to board, when a naked cadaver, hurtling down from the deck, fell with a heavy, sickening thud at the feet of the Dominican friars. White skin, blue eyes, blond beard and hair. The man had been strangled.

The matter is hushed up.

As the fleet passes through the Straits of Gibraltar, the French President orders troops to the Mediterranean coast and prepares a tough-talking address to the nation: "Cowardice toward the weak is cowardice at its most

subtle and, indeed, its most deadly.” But in the middle of delivering it, he breaks down; he abandons his prepared text and leaves the soldiers free to follow their own consciences. Some do not even wait. Even before he speaks, soldiers are deserting their posts, fleeing inland with everyone else. As the hoards descend from the ships and stampede over the beach, the last troops fire a single machine gun blast and take to their heels.

They take refuge in a tiny nearby village where they receive a warm welcome by a stubborn old man who has chosen to remain and make his last stand at his home. The atmosphere of comradeship is remarkable:

[Calguès] seemed to know just what the colonel was thinking. And why not? Partaking of the same community of thought, it was no surprise that they should understand each other. That was part of the Western genius, too: a mannered mentality, a collusion of aesthetes, a conspiracy of caste, a good-natured indifference to the crass and the common. With so few left now to share in its virtues, the current passed all the more easily between them.

They live out a brief idyll, sharing good food and fellowship, picking off the occasional intruder with a long-range shotgun. Within a few days, fifty-four airplanes descend on their little village, on the orders of a certain “Provisional Government of the Paris Multiracial Commune,” and they are buried beneath the rubble.

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*Camp of the Saints* was brought out in January 1973 by the well-known French publishing house of Robert Laffont. Laffont himself took a strong personal interest in the work, and expected it to become a bestseller. The initial print run was twenty thousand copies, but five thousand remained unsold after a year. The left wing press maintained a studied silence, the officially conservative *Figaro* panned the novel; the rest of the right was non-committal, and just three small journals reviewed it positively. This appeared to be the end of the story.

In 1975, however, Charles Scribner’s Sons brought out an English version that did better than the French original. At about the same time, a slight rise in sales was reported in France itself, and it continued and gathered strength for weeks on end. Raspail’s novel was catching on by word of mouth. Gradually, anecdotes began reaching the author illustrating the processes involved. The deputy mayor of one large French city kept a stack on his desk and offered a copy to everyone who visited his

office. Another story concerned a taxi driver who discussed *Camp of the Saints* with every passenger, as if to pass the time. If there was interest, he would offer to sell them a copy at the end of the ride. His success rate was about 50/50.

Some prominent men contacted Raspail personally to express their pleasure with the book, including playwright Jean Anouilh and demographer Alfred Sauvy, whose National Demographic Institute nowadays gets the results its political bosses desire. Raspail emphasizes the cordial responses he has gotten even from men of the left, including François Mitterand and Lionel Jospin:

Some have been simple thank-you notes, others go more or less into the substance of the work...but in all cases, the general tone in no way corresponds to the vituperative laws all of them have voted for with both hands.

Raspail is referring here to the Pleven Law of 1972 and its many successors, setting penalties for criticism of certain protected groups, including immigrants. *Camp of the Saints* was published a short time before this law went into effect; otherwise it would have been subject to criminal proceedings. And the penalties attached to such laws are made more severe every few years; as I write, current Socialist President François Hollande is calling for a further round of intensification. Before the most recent French reprint (2011), Raspail had the work evaluated by a lawyer, and he found 87 passages in violation of French law; these are helpfully listed in an appendix.

Real life analogues to *Camp of the Saints* have been reported every so often. On June 6, 1993, a cargo ship called the Golden Venture ran aground at Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York, holding about three hundred illegal Chinese immigrants. A photograph of the event is featured on the cover of the English edition from The Social Contract Press. On February 20, 2001, an unidentified cargo ship with about a thousand illegal Kurdish immigrants aboard deliberately ran itself aground on the beach not fifty meters from where Raspail had written his novel twenty years before!

But these coincidences do not testify to the author’s prescience as much as does the ordinary course of immigration from Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent over the past four decades. Raspail’s story of the Ganges fleet was simply a device for heightening the drama and fitting it into a story line of a few weeks. His primary merit is to have seen when few others did: that Europeans stand to lose control of their destiny within the lifetime of men now living. ■