

Musings on the Bedbugs of Paris



by Theodore Dalrymple

Paris and the whole of France is now infested with bedbugs—so, at least, the media tell us. But so mistrustful of the media have I become, that I can't help but wonder whether the whole story isn't what the French call a coup monté—that is to say, a put-up job.

In the absence of basic trust, everyone is apt to see such put-up jobs everywhere. When Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested for the alleged sexual assault of a chambermaid in a New York hotel room, he was within a few weeks of being elected president of France, so superior was he to all of the other candidates. But almost everyone believed that he had been deliberately entrapped by those who didn't want him to be elected president—a theory the more strongly believed because

it's so impossible to disprove.

In the next election, the front-runner, François Fillon, was discovered, just before the polls, to have been allegedly defrauding the French taxpayer for nearly a quarter of a century in precisely the way that many, if not most, of the French political class do. What a coincidence that it should come to light just before the election, after a period of nearly a quarter of a century of uninterrupted activity! No one, of course, believed that it was just a coincidence.

But if the bedbug epidemic is a coup monté, who is the plotter and who the beneficiary?

To these questions I shall return, but let me just say that in 30 years of traveling to Paris, staying in hotels, taking trains, and watching films in what used to be called fleapit cinemas (Paris is by far the best city in the world to see the kind of films that interest me, namely from obscure and far-flung places, often screened only once on a Tuesday morning at 11 o'clock, when I share the aforementioned type of cinema with one or two people of the same strange ilk as myself), I have never seen or been bitten by a bedbug. But now they're apparently everywhere and not just in beds.

People are worried about sitting on upholstered seats in public places, from the Paris métro to the banquettes of famous restaurants. They examine where they sit and probably start to itch even before they're bitten. Are they in the grip of a mass psychosis, or are their fears justified?

Alas, I can't say. I still haven't been bitten, but one swallow, so to speak, doesn't make a summer. Personal experience isn't a reliable guide to the best answer to such a question.

My knowledge of bedbug biology is exiguous, although I'm a doctor. I don't remember having been taught much about it, even in dermatology, although it's possible that I wasn't

paying much attention. Probably bedbugs were then thought to be going the way of infectious diseases; they would soon be a thing (or creature) of the past. Moreover, apart from being repellent, they weren't a threat to health, apart from iron-deficiency anemia in exceptionally severe infestations. There was no need to learn much about them.

To this day, most of my knowledge of insect parasites of man derives from two small volumes published during World War I, in 1915 and 1916, respectively, titled "The Minor Horrors of War" and "More Minor Horrors," by the great entomologist E.A. Shipley. The books consist of chapters devoted to lice, fleas, bedbugs, and so forth, which flourish among troops during war. Shipley tried to keep morale high by being amusing and light-hearted (as well as informative) about these supposedly minor horrors, but many of them weren't minor in the least.

The body louse, for example, spreads typhus fever, which killed about 3 million people in Russia in World War I, during the Revolution, and in the subsequent Civil War. It killed more than 3 percent of the Serbian civilian population, and half of its medical profession, during the first year of World War I, and 70,000 Serbian soldiers. Quite apart from its disgusting nature, the louse could hardly be regarded as a minor horror, except by those who faced even more unimaginable horrors.

The bedbug was more a cause of misery than disease. It interfered with sleep, even of the exhausted; but misery is misery. Interestingly, Shipley mentioned the use of hydrocyanic acid for the de-infestation of wooden barracks, without the faintest intimation that this chemical would one day, a mere 28 years later, be used to kill millions of people.

The most amusing thing that he says about bedbugs is that they can survive for a year without a bloodsucking meal, although in the process they become so thin and transparent that you

can read The Times through them, albeit only the larger and heavier print. The bedbug's ability to survive without food makes it especially difficult to eradicate.

It isn't often that we count our blessings, but when we consider the contents of these two books, we ought to be filled with gratitude that most of us have, for the first time in history, gone through our lives without being plagued by the subjects of the chapters. In my own case, I should have done so had I not chosen to live sometimes where infestation by them was commonplace. I won't recount my personal encounters with ectoparasites.

But back to the bedbugs in, or of, France. Is the news veridical or fake, and if the latter, cui bono, who benefits?

I would like to think that the rumor of bedbug infestation, if false, has been spread to discourage people from attending the Olympic Games in Paris next year. This would indeed be a public service, both from the point of view of Parisians and that of visitors. The city is already heaving with tourists beyond its capacity to cope well with them. Their vast numbers ruin whatever they have come to see. They turn beauty into its opposite. And, of course, they might bring bedbugs with them, for that's how infestation spreads.

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