

Parable of the Mustard Greed

Shortages of the condiment in France lead to suspicion and rumor, illustrating a timeless human tendency.



by Theodore Dalrymple

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed to us what we should have realized all along: namely, how extremely fragile was an economic system that relied on long supply chains, a lesson only reinforced by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Among myriad smaller consequences of that war is an acute mustard shortage in France. Mustard has all but disappeared from supermarket shelves, having first increased in price dramatically. This has surprised everyone who lazily assumed that Dijon mustard came from Dijon. Why should a war waged in Ukraine lead to the disappearance of mustard throughout France? After all, the famous brands, familiar to everyone, proudly announce on their labels that they are Dijon mustard.

Can there be anything more French than Dijon mustard?

Perhaps the mustard is elaborated in Dijon, but the mustard seed, it turns out to everyone's surprise, is imported from Canada and Ukraine. Apparently, Canada has seen a disastrous harvest of mustard seed, while there is no need to explain the shortage in Ukraine. Dijon mustard is about as local to Dijon as a modern soccer team is local to the city in which it has its stadium.

What is striking about this mustard crisis, unimportant except to those trying to make a proper vinaigrette or *lapin à la moutarde*, is its revelation of a perennial aspect of social psychology: namely, a resort to conspiracy theory. For some say that there is not really any mustard shortage at all—that mustard has disappeared from supermarket shelves because the supermarket chains are hoarding it, that they have a plentiful supply in their warehouses and will release it little by little, thereby profiteering by the resultant high prices. The war in Ukraine is only a pretext.

This is an old, indeed medieval, trope in times of shortage. There may well have been times, of course, when people really did hoard for the purposes of profiteering, but people rarely hoard something that is in abundant supply.

Yet many people require no evidence or proof to believe in the hoarding story. Does it not, after all, stand to reason? Do not merchants try to maximize their profits, and is hoarding not an easy way to do so? Practically all the mustard in France is sold in supermarkets—themselves a cartel that could easily agree to remove the product from the shelves. Surely no further evidence is needed.

The mere rumor that merchants are hoarding quickly leads to real customer hoarding. If mustard were to reappear on shelves tomorrow in its normal quantities, it would be swiftly snapped up by people buying far more than they normally would. Only

after several rounds of reappearance would this domestic accumulation of mustard cease.

Rumors easily take hold of populations, supposedly rational in their choices. In fact, the supermarket shelves have some other shortages—recently, a rumor circulated that butter would be next, though the connection between a war in Ukraine and a shortage of butter is even harder to make. Unless, that is, we discover that the grapes in Burgundy come mainly from the Donbass.

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