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OPINION | MAIN STREET

The Crisis of Good Intentions

From Paris to Palo Alto, 'clean and green' policies punish the poor.



By William McGurn

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A car burns during a protest in Paris, Dec. 8. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Almost everywhere you turn these days, someone is claiming that capitalism is facing an existential crisis.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the 29-year-old who will soon be a congresswoman from New York, declares that our “no-holds-barred

Wild West hypercapitalism” is on the way out. French economist Thomas Piketty, by contrast, frets about a future where we are all governed by a ruling class drawn from billionaires, what he calls “patrimonial capitalism.” Meanwhile the archbishop of Canterbury hails the gig economy as “the reincarnation of an ancient evil.”

Let us stipulate it’s foolish to pretend the market is without its costs. A 57-year-old General Motors worker in Ohio who will be laid off as his company expands production in Mexico may understandably balk at the argument that, in the larger scheme of things, it’s all for the best.

Yet the recent protests across France ought to remind us that market decisions aren’t the only ones that can make life difficult for those trying to get by on their paychecks. For in these protests are we not seeing French citizens who have lost faith in the ability of their government to fulfill its most basic tasks, along with a growing resentment of the high price inflicted on ordinary French men and women by the good intentions of their elites?

The “Yellow Vest” protests across France were triggered by an increase in the gasoline tax. But even before this planned increase, the French were already the most taxed people in the European Union, one reason they pay more than double the American average at the pump. A gallon of gas in France costs drivers roughly \$6, nearly two-thirds of which is tax.

Americans spend about \$2,000 a year each on gas, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. If the U.S. price were at French levels, that would rise to at least \$4,000 a year—a considerable hit for most families. To make matters worse, the French taxes have increasingly diminishing returns because France accounts for such a small fraction of global emissions.

Nor are the French the only ones with doubts about the judgment of their elites. Whatever the merits of Brexit, at its core it reflects the British people’s distrust of the proposition that a supranational government in Brussels knows best. Given how their own government has

botched things, it's hard to conceive of any ending for Brexit that doesn't promise even less British confidence in their leaders.

The U.S. has its own versions. Until recently Exhibit A was the war America lost—the “war on poverty.” More than 50 years and trillions of dollars after Lyndon B. Johnson launched it with the best of intentions, all we have to show for it is the devastation of the black family and the dysfunctions of our inner cities.

Today, however, the crisis of good intentions is manifested most dramatically in the green movement, particularly in California. In a recent article for the Orange County Register, Chapman University's Joel Kotkin and Marshall Toplansky write that “California is creating a feudalized society characterized by the ultra-rich, a diminishing middle class and a large, rising segment of the population that is in or near poverty.” California now has the highest overall poverty rate in the nation, they write, and suffers from a level of inequality “closer to that of Central American banana republics.”

Much of this is the fault of California's green agenda, which chokes off economic growth and has been imposed more as a theological imperative than the result of any sober, cost-benefit analysis. As Mr. Kotkin frequently points out, the upward mobility of any family that isn't part of Hollywood or Silicon Valley or doesn't already own their own home is being killed by the state's climate regime.

Though California hasn't reached French levels of rebellion, its own protests are taking interesting forms. Earlier this year a coalition of more than 200 prominent civil-rights leaders filed suit against the California Air Resources Board. They argue California's greenhouse gas policies are disproportionately raising housing, transportation and electricity costs for Latinos and African-Americans. The suit contests California's claims that it has a “clean and green” economy is a “fiction.”

The climate regime, the suit notes, is imperious. Though Los Angeles and the Bay Area already rank among the worst in the nation for traffic congestion, the suit contends California's climate leaders “have decided to intentionally increase traffic congestion” in the hope of getting more people to opt for public transport. In other words, California's greens are willing to inconvenience the poor to get them to do what their feudal lords want them to do.

So maybe what's going on in France isn't as foreign as it may seem. When a once-thriving manufacturing town loses jobs to China, we hear all about the crisis of capitalism. But when progressives squeeze the American worker with high taxes, green agendas and failed government programs, where are the headlines about the crisis of good intentions?

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