

# Envy, Hypocrisy, and Inequality in French Politics

by Theodore Dalrymple



The French Minister for Ecological and Solidary Transition, François de Rugy, was recently forced to resign over public outcry at allegations of unnecessary extravagance at public expense—allegations that were given very wide publicity but which the former minister has since denied. He says that he was the object of a “[media lynching](#).”

Personally, I am inclined to doubt the honesty of anyone who agreed to head a ministry with such a vague, obscure, and bizarre name. Transition to what, exactly? “Ecological” conjures environmental concerns. As for the word *solidary*, modern English speakers can confirm that it is not in common use. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (which informs us that *solidary* is the exact translation of the French word *solidaire*), it means “characterized by or having solidarity or community of interests” or in legal parlance “jointly and severally.”

I have some difficulty in construing the phrase “solidary

transition.” It has an Orwellian ring, as if implying the practice of some kind of secret psychological engineering, employing tools such as blackmail, torture, and public shaming. Thanks to the operation of the Ministry, people who were formerly individualistic or hostile to one another might become laudably altruistic, and France henceforth a nation of Good Samaritans.

Courtesy of the British National Health Service, I have quite a lot of experience with the bureaucratic use of phrases that have vague connotation but denote nothing specific. Almost always, they are used as a pretext for the employment and promotion of people whose prolonged and unnecessary education has disqualified them from useful work, and instead prepared them for militant time-wasting and obstruction of others, and for the diversion of useful activity into channels of frustrating meaninglessness so that a deadly combination of frantic busyness and terminal boredom supervenes. This works to the advantage of the powerful: those who are obliged to work hard at nothing are compliant and docile, for they fear to lose their jobs—who else would hire them?

A minister of ecological and solidary transition, then, is *prima facie* likely to be a person of doubtful integrity, moral and intellectual if not financial. And as far as I can make out, M. de Rugy, irrespective of what he has been accused of doing, has spent his entire adult life (he is now aged 45) swimming in the murky waters of the French political bureaucracy, as a member of that hated and despised class that recently was the object of the *Gilets jaunes* protests.

The misdemeanor crimes of which de Rugy was accused were—in the history of political wrongdoing—rather minor. He held several dinners of some luxury in his ministry, with allegedly rare wines (none of which, he claims, cost more than \$35 a bottle), and involving a great number of lobsters. He also had his ministerial apartment in Paris redecorated at a cost of about \$75,000, including the construction of a dressing room

(or, on his account, cupboards) at a cost of about \$20,000. He also bought—or rather, caused to be purchased—a hair-drier for about \$600, first reported as gold-plated (but this was fake news). At no time was it suggested that he had enriched himself personally; moreover, he said that champagne gives him a headache and that he is allergic to shellfish.

Attending the dinners, however, were said to be some of his friends rather than people who might have business with the ministry—lobbying and that kind of thing. If he did entertain these friends, which he denies, his behaviour sounds more like adolescent showing off than anything else. Unfortunately for de Rugy, though, he made a number of enemies when he was a member and speaker of the National Assembly due to his repeated calls for transparency in the incomes and expenditures of political figures. Revenge is a dish best eaten cold—especially when it is of lobster.

The commentary that followed the exposure of this less than world-shattering scandal fell into two main categories: the Caesar's-wife-should-be-above-suspicion school and the victim-of-media-lynching-and-hypocritical-English-morality school. France is not Sweden, said an editorial in *Le Figaro*, the conservative newspaper, although it added that ministers should behave with restraint and good taste.

In the same newspaper, the philosopher Luc Ferry used the occasion to discourse on the French national vice of envy, which he said the whole affair had brought once more to light. In my observation, money is to the French what sex is to the English—namely, the subject of a great deal of hypocrisy. The French (*grosso modo*) are simultaneously egalitarian and avaricious, a contradictory combination which can result in only one of the Seven Deadly Sins, envy.

By implication, then, the significance of the de Rugy affair (according to Ferry) lies in the fact that the ex-minister became the object of envy; that in essence, many people in

France would like to eat lobster and drink fine wines in the dining room of a ministry, and therefore hate those who currently enjoy this ethically-questionable job perk. Ferry quoted some very pointed words of no less a patriot than General de Gaulle on the subject of his countrymen's envy:

*Envy is our national vice, it is the worst of the Deadly Sins, it is what projected the angels into Hell because they wanted to be the equal of God. It is worse than pride because pride has a certain nobility, while envy is the feeling of the defeated and rancorous, it is the crime of Cain against Abel, of him who has failed in everything and kills his neighbour because he is successful, it is the anger of losers. If the French did not have this fault, one could forgive them for many things.*

Ferry goes on to say that "As soon as an individual profits, be it by ever so little or however legal, from his position, *homo democraticus* is ready to rise up against him." And he says that if a man should rise above others, this same *homo democraticus* immediately invents, to explain his success, reasons to pull him down: "if he has succeeded or is more famous, it is because he took advantage of connections or immoral methods, or belongs to a powerful lobby, etc."

No one who has long dwelt among human beings will fail to recognise this, yet it does not quite seem to apply in this case. On the contrary, it sounds more like the defence of a caste to which the author himself belongs than a paean to meritorious endeavour.

Even if we cannot say that living well is a sign of demerit in itself, neither can we say that it is a sign of merit. There are, after all, such things as ill-gotten gains. At a time when millions of people find themselves in a tight financial corner despite having worked all their lives, I do not find it surprising or appalling that they object to seeing a man who

has lived all his life from the public purse, and who raises no objection to public acts of envy, basking in luxury, even if only temporarily (how temporarily remains to be seen).

There is nothing more unjust than economic equality, but this does not mean that we cannot ask about the legitimacy or source of wealth. In matters of hypocrisy and inequality, distinctions remain important.

First published in the