

I've loved George Orwell's 1933 autobiographical novel about his experiences in Paris and London, right from the time I first read it at 16 years old.

Little did I suspect that within a few short years, I would be in a similar and then worse situation in London and Dublin. That was 1981-84 and I was on a downward spiral of alcohol and drug abuse, unemployed and unemployable, moving from squat to squat, living in squalor with people in the same desperate situation.



But that's not what this piece is about.

I'll keep those stories for other days – how the guy who broke into Buckingham Palace and into the Queen's bedroom not once, but twice, crashed on our floor – how I arrived in Heathrow Airport on the same day Bobby Sands died and spent nearly 5 hours being “interviewed” by police – how Maggie Thatcher who despised “society” was busy dismantling the up till then cherished welfare state while 3 million were on the dole – how I woke up shortly after 7 am one morning to the sound of anti-terrorist police raiding our house, breaking in through the front and back door, and down through the roof and how I lay on my mattress with 2 heavily armed men standing over me, guns pointed – down! down! stay down! don't you f***ing move!

But yes, that's for another day.

Now, January is almost over. Winter is half-way done. The days here are getting longer but the temperatures are still low and I hear we're in for more snow.

Today let's talk about how little has changed in the almost 232 years since the Civil War better known as the French Revolution of 1789-99

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age

of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

This opening chapter of Dickens' 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, set in Paris and London at the time of the French Revolution, is compelling and powerful. And it could easily have been written about 2020-21.

The pandemic has changed the world. Online business is booming. Delivery services are making money hand over fist. Traditional personal contact industries are suffering. For everyone who's winning, there's a corresponding person who is struggling.

Sometime in the most recent, or next, 24 hours we will cross the threshold of 200,000,000 coronavirus cases and 2,200,000 deaths. Who knows when, or if, things will return to normal? I think instead we're going to have to adjust to what will be a new normal.



In any society, 5% game the system. They push the envelope, find loopholes. They exploit everything to their own advantage. A tiny proportion of these are outright criminals - their illegal activities are the result of deliberate and considered choices to operate and live that way.

It is tempting to fall into cynicism, especially when we see the 1%. The 1% that always seem to measure, judge and respond to everything based on the *What's-In-It-For-Me* principle. Some of them ignore the problem, some accentuate it -it's not what they do that's important, but why they do it. We all know examples of man's inhumanity to man - emotionally tone

deaf rules and responses to the suffering of the old, the poor, the powerless.

Because this 1% are highly visible, it's easy to misapprehend what's really going on. We should remember they are the tiny minority.

The 99% are silent and invisible so it's easy to assume they're not there, or not doing active. But we each know many examples of the triumph of Community – that sense of humanity and togetherness that compels us to reach out and help our neighbor.

Nurses, doctors, paramedics, and an entire human healthcare system going above and beyond to save lives and restore health. These same people getting sick and dying in the course of treating the sick, caring for the elderly, comforting the poor. Ambulance drivers, firefighters, police, first responders of every type putting themselves and their lives on the line day in, day out come what may.

It is sad that community and society are negatively associated with the -isms derived from them. Communism should reflect a valuing of community. Instead, it was used as a vehicle for autocracy. Socialism should reflect the importance of remembering that we are social animals, that we need society. Instead, it became sheep's clothing under which the wolves of fascism and totalitarianism lurked and lured otherwise decent people into the depths of inhumanity.

Two of my recent articles focused on Donald Trump, the world's most visible recent example of how close to the edge normality can come in the thrall of a leader with autocratic ambitions. And how easily it happens.

The social order is fragile and danger is never far away. If you doubt this, cast your mind back to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 – a city devastated, 1,800 dead and anarchy on the streets within days.

Will we ever learn?

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