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## Jules Verne's *Very Far West: America as Testing Ground in Les 500 millions de la Bégum*

Peter Schulman

In his famous interview with the American journalist Robert H. Sherard in 1894, Jules Verne, nearing the end of his life, regretted not being able to see America one last time. "I should have liked to have gone to Chicago this year," he lamented, "but in the state of my health [...] it was quite impossible. I do so love America and the American," he continued, "As you are writing for America, be sure to tell them that if they love me – as I know they do, for I receive thousands of letters every year from the States – I return their affection with all my heart. Oh, if I could only go and see them all, it would be the great joy of my life!" (Sherard 7). Indeed, the mutual affection between the United States and Verne's works has been so strong that Verne is often even erroneously considered an American writer by many Americans. As Jean Chesneaux has observed, it is not surprising that "twenty-three out of a total of sixty four novels take place in part or entirely on American soil, and that important roles are given to American characters," as, initially at least, in the mid-nineteenth century "it was the United States which came the closest to the 'model of progress' that Jules Verne envisioned for humanity" (Chesneaux, *Yale French Studies*, 112). "[Verne] saw America as the frontier linking the 'known and unknown world,'" Chesneaux explains. "The United States was very much a part of the contemporary political scene and the Civil War, in particular, had made a deep impression [on him]. But at the same time, this country, in the throes of rapid demographic, technical, and economic change, with few real ties to the past, had already become a major futuristic theme" (111-112).

Although many of Verne's most famous works such as *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* depict America as a land of adventure, geographical beauty and sunny optimism, Verne's *Les 500 millions de la Bégum* is so scathingly grim that it has traditionally been considered a "turning point" in Verne's career in terms of his own ideological evolution from cheerful optimist to guarded pessimist. Written shortly after the Franco-Prussian war, *Les 500 millions de la Bégum* paints a dark picture of two scientists, a benevolent Frenchman, and an evil, despotic German who each inherit millions from a long-lost relative. Whereas the Frenchman, le Dr. Sarrasin, attempts to create a "germ-free" utopia on the West Coast of the United-States called France-Ville, the German, Herr Schultze, builds Stahlstadt or "City of Steel," a dystopian factory village in Oregon, essentially a slave camp similar to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* where: "la liberté, l'air manquaient dans cet étroit milieu" (*Bégum* 100). While France-Ville is a socialist society appropriately situated along the Pacific Ocean, Stahlstadt is a warmongering proto-fascist state, an environmental disaster which produces war materials to bellicose nations in general, and Germany in particular so that it might dominate the world militarily: "L'opinion générale était d'ailleurs que Herr Schultze travaillait à l'achèvement d'un engin de guerre terrible, d'un effet sans précédent" (*Bégum* 102).

Yet, while Schultze is obsessed with war, Sarrasin is propelled by a fear of microbial contamination. Whether it be Schultze's military-industrial complex or Sarrasin's hygienic but obsessive-compulsive one, Verne suggests that the only utopian choice is between a brutal dictatorship or a neurotic one. While seemingly at opposite poles, the fact that both their names begin in "S" (and that they are both related by lineage) underlines the notion that their roots are fundamentally the same: financial capital seems to be the springboard for their diametrically opposed attempts at creating new societies. It

is therefore logical that the near apocalyptic struggle between France-Ville and Stahlstadt should take place on American soil. Curiously, the United-States serves as the monopoly-like *jeu de l'oie* board game for the participants frenetically seeking millions of dollars in prize money in the *Testament d'un excentrique*'s capitalist free for all but a land of failed social experimentation and all-out capitalism in *Les 500 millions*. Just as America might have started out as a haven for what were then considered religious cults such as the Puritans and Quakers who helped found the first colonies, it would be soon transformed by religious intolerance on the one hand, and then, towards the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, by industrial injustices on the other. Similarly, its image abroad also changed, as it became, little by little, the "péril américain," a land of exploitation rather than naive idealism. As such, the America depicted in *la Bégum* can no longer be seen as a joyful playground but as an ideological "testing ground" where, as Arthur B. Evans has explained, Verne's nationalistic, war-driven microcosm in fact mirrored a more general trend in post-Industrial Revolution France in which the "utopian focus of the French bourgeoisie of the Second Empire and the Troisième République began to shift with the times. The traditional utopian 'nowhere' was soon replaced by a potential 'anywhere;' the pastoral setting by the industrial; personal ethics by competitive expansionism" (Evans 99).

Verne saw *Les 500 millions* as more than a simple cautionary tale of what happens when science and technology fall into the hands of an evil scientist (*Les 500 millions* was the first Verne novel to in fact feature an evil one), but as a warning against unbridled capital mixed with ideological aspirations which Verne increasingly considered a particularly "American" threat in his later *L'île à hélices* (1895), in which two millionaires create a floating city called Standard-Island, filled with the most state-of-the-art luxuries for their comfort, only to see their high class utopia crumble under the weight of their disputes. Set in the near future, Verne dreads an expansion-driven America, gobbling up every country that it can purchase: "Ils sont dans l'entier épanouissement de leur puissance industrielle et commerciale, après s'être annexé le dominion du Canada, jusqu'aux dernières limites de la mer polaire, les provinces mexicaines, guatémaltèque, hondurassiennes, nicaraguiennes et costa ricaines jusqu'au canal de Panama" (*Hélice* 5). Even the charm of an America that can attempt to reach the moon in *De la terre à la lune*, and where "tout est simple, tout est facile, et quant aux difficultés mécaniques, elles sont mortes avant d'être nées" (*Lune* 34) becomes dangerously absurd and destructive in its cynical sequel, *Sans dessus dessous* (1889) when J.T. Maston tries to shift the axis of the globe so that a group of American investors (who had purchased the North Pole during an auction) can drill for coal regardless of the amount of devastation and displacement such a cataclysm would provoke. In *Sans dessus dessous*, Verne fiercely attacks an America that can simply purchase any country or territory that it wants, for the sole purpose of exploiting it, impervious to the incredible environmental or human costs. As he writes so pithily, when the indigenous people of the North Pole lose any kind of say about who will own their own land:

Mais ces peuplades - en somme les véritables naturels, les indiscutables autochtones des régions du nord - ne devaient point avoir voix au chapitre.

Et puis, comment ces pauvres diables auraient-ils pu mettre une enchère, si minime qu'elle fût, lors de la vente provoquée par la *North Polar Practical Association*? Et comment ces pauvres gens auraient-ils payé? En coquillages, en dents de morses ou en huile de phoque? Pourtant, il leur appartenait un peu, par droit de premier occupant, ce domaine qui allait être mis en adjudication!

Mais, des Esquimaux, des Tchouktchis, des Samoyèdes!...On ne les consulta même pas. Ainsi va le monde! (23)

Verne's famous phrase, "Tout ce qui est dans la limite du possible doit être et sera

accompli" (*Maison à vapeur*, I:VIII.125, II:1.274), has long been considered to be proof of his faith in technology and progress. Yet, in light of his predictions in *Les 500 millions*, one can read that very same quote with horror, as the ruthless industrial hegemony, Stahlstadt, and its megalomaniacal leader, Herr Schultze, have come to pass all too often in the cataclysmic 20th century. As Michel Serres has observed, in reference to the societal structure put forth in *Les 500 millions*:

Ce n'est pas de l'anticipation. Le capitalisme anglais sacrifiera l'Irlande en pensant que le progrès entraîne avec lui des pauvres. Cette idée d'origine anglaise devint vite américaine. Donnons plutôt l'argent public aux riches puisqu'ils sont les moteurs de l'économie. Ainsi les pauvres gagnent à l'entraînement progressif ainsi amorcé. Nous latins avons plutôt l'idée qu'il faut partager l'argent entre les riches et les pauvres. (101)

Serres's dichotomy between Latin and Anglo-Saxon seems to be reflected, at first, in the two states put forth by Verne. Schultze's Stahlstadt enslaves the poor workers while wealthy investors in New York and San Francisco grow rich from his industrial production which continues to expand as long as vast amounts of capital keep flowing in: "Grâce à la puissance d'un capital énorme, un établissement monstre, une ville véritable, qui est en même temps une usine modèle, est sortie de terre comme à coup de baguette. Trente mille travailleurs sont venus se grouper autour d'elle et en former des faubourgs" (62). Stahlstadt is a heartless city where individual identity is removed, as workers are assigned numbers, work zones and must pass through a series of labyrinthine gates, doors and check points:

En arrivant sous les murailles mêmes de Stahlstadt, n'essayez pas de franchir une des portes massives qui coupent de distance en distance la ligne des fossés et des fortifications. La consigne la plus impitoyable vous repousserait. Il faut descendre dans l'un des faubourgs. Vous n'entrerez dans la cité de l'Acier que si vous avez la formule magique, le mot d'ordre, ou tout au moins une autorisation dûment timbrée, signée et paraphée.

Verne's later vision of America is a far cry from the more naive, but ethical one seen in his earlier novels. What was once a virginal and adventure-filled land, in the typical paradigms set up, for example, in Fenimore Cooper novels (which were very popular in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France), becomes a built-up, industrial behemoth that ruins a previously untouched landscape: "Dans ce coin écarté de l'Amérique septentrionale, entouré de déserts, isolé du monde par un rempart de montagnes, situé à cinq cents milles des petites agglomérations humaines les plus voisines, on chercherait vainement aucun vestige de cette liberté qui a fondé la puissance de la République des Etats-Unis" (*Bégum* 64). If, according to the Saint-Simonian model favored by Verne's early novels, society must "go from the exploitation of man by man to the exploitation of nature by mankind" as Chesneaux suggests (*Yale French Studies* 115), Stahlstadt exploits both: workers are subjected to a type of penal servitude, and the Oregonian countryside, known for its expansive beauty, becomes a polluted wasteland as both nature and humans lose their sense of freedom. Comparing it at first to an American Switzerland, because of the natural mountain serenity that surrounds it, it quickly becomes apparent that it has become, in fact, a mutated, ravaged opposite of Switzerland built for the purpose of immediate profits at all costs: "Fausse Suisse! A sa limite nord, au point où les contreforts viennent se fondre dans la plaine, s'ouvre, entre deux chaînes de collines maigres, ce qu'on appelait jusqu'en 1871 le 'desert rouge,' à cause de la couleur du sol, tout imprégné d'oxydes de fer, et ce qu'on appelle maintenant Stahlfield, 'le champ d'acier' (*Bégum* 60). *Écologiste avant la lettre*, Verne already foresaw the vast amounts of toxic dumping that still plague the United States and which ravage the innocent land, a

passive victim of industrialist excesses: “Qu’on imagine un plateau de cinq à six lieues carrées, au sol sablonneux, parsemé de galets, aride et désolé comme le lit de quelque ancienne mer intérieure. Pour animer cette lande, lui donner la vie et le mouvement, la nature n’avait rien fait; mais l’homme a déployé tout à coup une énergie et une vigueur sans égale” (60).

Moreover, the modern factory town envisaged by Verne creates an obligatory air pollution that spews destructive chemicals and strips the territory not only of its sense of liberty, but of any kind of natural life at all:

Les chemins macadémisés de cendres et de coke, s’enroulent aux flancs des montagnes. Sous les touffes d’herbes jaunâtres, de petits tas de scories, diaprées de toutes les couleurs du prisme, brillent comme des yeux de basilic. Ça et là, un vieux puits de mine abandonné, déchiqueté par les pluies, déshonoré par les ronces, ouvre sa gueule béante, gouffre sans fond, pareil au cratère d’un volcan éteint. L’air est chargé de fumée et pèse comme un manteau sombre sur la terre. Pas un oiseau ne le traverse, les insectes mêmes semblent le fuir, et de mémoire d’homme on n’y a vu un papillon. (60)

If even Phileas Fogg, during his whirlwind tour of the States, sees American cities in terms of “[de] vastes échiquiers à longues lignes froides, avec la tristesse lugubre des angles droits, suivant l’expression de Victor Hugo [...] Dans ce singulier pays où les hommes ne sont certainement pas à la hauteur des institutions, tout se fait carrément: les villes, les maisons, et les sottises” (*Tour* 157), it goes without saying that Stahlstadt, the dystopia within America, should also be governed by a dehumanizing uniformity and “cookie-cutter” aesthetic:

C’est au centre de ces villages, au pied même des Coals-Butts, inépuisables montagnes de charbon de terre, que s’élève une masse sombre, colossale, étrange, une agglomération de bâtiments réguliers percés de fenêtres symétriques, couverts de toits rouges, surmontés d’une forêt de cheminées cylindriques et qui vomissent par ces milles bouches des torrents continus de vapeurs fuligineuses. Le ciel en est voilé d’un rideau noir, sur lequel passent par instants de rapides éclairs rouges. (62)

As Schultze constantly spouts a litany of anti-French, anti-“*untermensch*” diatribes against his “latin” neighbors in France-Ville, whom he compares to pygmies which must be squashed, Stahlstadt becomes consumed by his annihilatory quest for world domination. As such, one would expect France-Ville, the peaceful utopia that he seeks to destroy, to be a socialist paradise where individuality and freedom can blossom. Sarrasin in fact follows a series of utopian thinkers who considered America to be an ideal space to experiment with their societal models such as the Englishman Robert Owen, who established New Harmony in Indiana; the Japanese communist Sen Katayama’s who set up a model colony for Japanese peasants in Texas, and especially the mid-19th century philosopher Etienne Cabet who created Icaria (which was originally supposed to be called Sarrasina) in Illinois. Similar to France-Ville in its design, Cabet’s colony (in his book *Voyage en Icarie*) is founded on the notions of peace and justice, yet, as far as urban planning is concerned, also resembles Stahlstadt in its obsession with order and symmetry: “Et toutes les maisons d’Icarie sont pareilles!” a visitor marvels, “Heureux pays! Tous les agréments de la variété avec les avantages de l’uniformité!” (*Icarie* 71). Moreover, Cabet delineates a society with a focus on work and where “l’oisiveté [est] aussi infâme parmi nous que le vol est ailleurs” (102).

In parallel terms, France-Ville’s urbanism is also built around the “right angles” Fogg found so disheartening: “les rues croisées à angles droits, sont tracées à distances égales, de largeur uniforme, plantées d’arbres et désignées par des numéros d’ordre”

(*Begum* 153). Just as one has to be armed with the proper papers, permissions and approvals to enter into Stahlstadt, France-ville is similarly restrictive: "Il est nécessaire de donner de bonnes références, d'être apte à exercer une profession utile ou libérale, dans l'industrie, les sciences ou les arts, de s'engager à observer les lois de la ville. Les existences oisives n'y seraient pas tolérées" (153). Once accepted into the state, one is immediately issued a long list of rules and regulations to follow throughout which Sarrasin's fixation on hygiene is overdetermined and relentlessly advocated. "Pas un germe morbide ne peut s'y mettre en embuscade" (151) adds rule #8; "Les édretons, couvre-pieds piqués et autres alliés puissants des maladies épidémiques en sont naturellement exclus," (152) warns rule #9. Its mantra is spelled out at every turn: "Nettoyer, nettoyer sans cesse, détruire et annuler aussitôt qu'ils sont formées les miasmes qui émanent constamment d'une agglomération humaine, telle est l'oeuvre principale du gouvernement central" (153).

The "Far West" that fascinated such 19<sup>th</sup>-century French adventure authors such as Gustave Aimard and Gabriel Ferry, and that would later enchant the French imagination through the lens of John Ford's westerns, filled with vast expanses of land, desert, cowboys and Indians has no place in Verne's imagined West which swiftly becomes an example of pre-urban sprawl when what was once inexhaustible space is eaten up by new apartments. As a brochure for France-Ville proudly states: "Il faut avoir visité le Far West pour se rendre compte de ces efflorescences urbaines. Encore désert au mois de janvier 1872, l'emplacement choisi comptait déjà six mille maisons en 1873. Il en possédait neuf mille et tous ses édifices au complet en 1874" (156). Parallel to Stahlstadt which seemed to have emerged "comme à coup de baguette" (67), France-Ville too seems to have sprouted as if by magic: "C'est qu'en effet, les premières maisons, une fois bâties, les autres sont sorties de terre comme par enchantement" (156). Yet, as Verne knew all too well, it was not by "enchantement" but by the "invisible hand" of capitalism that both societies are able to exist and grow not spiritually, of course, but in terms of assets and real estate investments: "Il faut dire que la spéculation a eu sa part dans ce succès inouï. Construites en grand sur des terrains immenses et sans valeurs au début [...] A l'heure qu'il est, France-Ville compte près de cent mille habitants" (153). While Stahlstadt desecrates the environment with chemical waste, France-Ville would even consider polluting the mountains with advertisements unabashedly draped around the Rockies were it not already so successful so as not to need the extra publicity: "Il avait même été inutile d'adopter le procédé de publicité en grand, par voie de lettres gigantesques sculptées sur les pics des montagnes Rocheuses, qu'une compagnie était venue offrir à prix réduits" (147).

Although France-Ville is only described once in the novel, in a biased article written for a German newspaper, it is not surprising, however, that this first real description of it ends on a rather cynical or direct note that one cannot help to think might echo Verne's opinions regarding utopian societies in America as well: "Les fondateurs de France-Ville auront bien pu déblayer le terrain, élucider quelques points spéciaux, mais ce n'est pas encore sur ce point de l'Amérique, c'est aux bords de la Syrie que nous verrons s'élever un jour la vraie cité modèle" (159). Despite his lofty aspirations to create a "Cité du Bien Etre" or his claims that his utopian paradise belongs to all of humanity, "Ce n'est pas à moi que ce capital appartient de droit c'est à l'Humanité, c'est au Progrès!" (35), Sarrasin in effect creates a type of "gated community" that is essentially exclusive rather than inclusive. In its mission to keep out germs, France-Ville keeps people out as well, such as the Chinese coolies who are unceremoniously exploited, then expelled in order to preserve the city's economic stability. Taking advantage of them for their cheap labor, France-Ville has no use for them as citizens or even as refugees from the racist attacks and scapegoating they had been subjected to in San Francisco. While the leaders of France-Ville are sympathetic to the plight of the coolies, they are mostly concerned with

how they will effect salaries rather than their well-being as immigrants which they view as ultimately threatening: “Il faut dire aussi que l’affluence des coolies chinois dans l’Amérique occidentale jetait à ce moment une perturbation grave sur le marché de salaires,” Verne writes, “Plusieurs États avaient dû recourir, pour protéger les moyens d’existence de leurs propres habitants et pour empêcher des violences sanglantes, à une expulsion en masse de ces malheureux” (147). France-Ville proudly comes to their rescue. How? In its typically autocratic and controlling style, it monitors their activities, infantilizes them by making sure that they put in a full day’s work before collecting their dollar-a-day wages, and most importantly, supervises their departure, lest they wish to stay on and destabilize the harmony within the city:

Le produit des travaux était déposé toutes les semaines, en présence des délégués, à la grande Banque de San Francisco, et chaque coolie devait s’engager, en le touchant à ne plus revenir. Précaution indispensable pour se débarrasser d’une population jaune, qui n’aurait pas manqué de modifier d’une manière assez fâcheuse le type et le génie de la cite nouvelle. (147)

As Michel Serres has observed, the impulse to keep germs out, for example, and then exclude threatening elements, begins with the Puritan quest for religious “purity,” for example, that will conversely lead to more corruption, more bacteria and more infection than if it had been more tolerant. As Serres explains, the drive towards inclosure in these types of artificially conceived societies ultimately leads to their downfall:

La tentation de faire des fermetures de ce genre est forte. Et donc à peu près toutes les villes en connaissent aujourd’hui. Qu’est-ce que le Puritanisme? C’est le souci que, dans un espace donné, il n’y ait pas de mal. Alors on supprime tous les germes, et donc, on obtient un endroit qu’on appelle en biologie “axene,” c’est-à-dire sans corps étranger. Mais dès lors que l’on construit un état de ce genre [...] Il est clair que les milliards de bacteries qui bondent cet espace vont être irrésistiblement précipitées par ce puits attractif... par conséquent, c’est à l’endroit le plus propre que croît au maximum le risque de maladies. (108-107)

Yet, contrary to Serre’s warnings, Verne has a fundamental distrust of the American notion of “melting pot.” His uneasiness with mixes of cultures and races is most apparent, for example, in his description of the San Francisco Stock Market which he considers to be a dangerous composite of the “caractère cosmopolite” of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Northern California. While the word “cosmopolite” was a code word used by such xenophobic writers as Maurice Barrès to denote unsavory foreign elements who corrupt the “rooted” French nation, Verne views the multicultural aspects of California in terms of a cryptic code that homogenous-minded Europeans might have difficulty unraveling at that time: “La Bourse de San Francisco, expression condensée et en quelque sorte algébrique d’un immense mouvement industriel et commercial, est l’une des plus animées et étranges du monde” (191-2). Indeed, in *Les 500 millions*, ethnic diversity is a sign of decadence, above all, and a trope used to describe Sarrasin’s son Octave’s dissipated life in Europe. Describing the types of *mondains* dinner parties he attends, Verne focuses on such things as the guest list “[qui] ne portait guère que des noms étrangers” (161). Octave revels in a world where only money counts (rather than merit) and where, “si l’on pénétrait plus avant, on pensait plutôt se trouver dans une exposition vivante d’ethnologie” (161-2). Far from the sanitary order of France-Ville, Octave is at the mercy of unscrupulous foreign characters:

Tous les gros nez et tous les teints bilieux des deux mondes semblaient s’être donné rendez-vous là. Supérieurement habillés, du reste, ces personnages cosmopolites, quoiqu’un goût marqué pour les étoffes blanchâtres révélât

l'éternelle aspiration des races jaunes ou noires vers la couleur des "faces pâles." (162)

While Octave eventually returns to France-Ville to be salubriously rehabilitated by that hygienic and obsessively "clean" society, the rest of America must endure the unreliable and uncontrollable whims of the stock market. What might be a culturally stimulating cross-cultural episode for the contemporary reader seems hallucinatory and nightmarish for Verne who writes of the Stock Exchange as though it were an infernal epicenter for negative encounters rather than simply commercial ones:

Sous ses portiques de beau granit rouge, le Saxon aux cheveux blonds, à la taille élevée, coudoie le Celte au teint mat, aux cheveux plus foncés, aux membres plus souples et plus finis. Le négre y rencontre le Finnois et l'Indou. Le Polynésien y voit avec surprise le Groenlandais. Le Chinois aux yeux obliques, à la natte soigneusement tréssée, y lutte avec finesse avec le Japonais, son ennemi historique. (192)

Rather than marveling at it as a synergy of diversity, Verne sees the Exchange as a hubristic and scrambled Tower of Babel which, as its Biblical referent implies, can only lead to discommunication and dissonance: "Toutes les langues, tous les dialectes, tous les jargons s'y heurtent comme dans une Babel moderne." If the citizens of the Biblical Babel were doomed to diasporic exile and confusion as a result of their need to build a conspicuously high structure, the citizens of Verne's modern Babel become victims of the American stock market's need for higher and higher profit margins which - when there is an inevitable downturn - can evaporate quickly and erase any traces of wealth earned through the peak periods of capital gains. As such, when news of Schultze's bankruptcy reaches the major American lending banks such as Verne's imagined "La Banque du Far West" or the "Mining Bank of New York," frenetic and hysterical fluctuations within the markets lead to a domino effect of economic collapse chillingly similar to the 1929 Crash. If Schultze's war machine represented a military threat to the world in terms of actual combat machinery and weaponry, his financial ruin leads to similar ripples of devastation which Verne describes with a quasi-military vocabulary: "Quels soubresauts! Quelles hausses! Quel déchaînement effréné de la spéculation [...] Dès le soir même, les boutiques à nouvelles furent prises d'assaut" (196). Fear becomes the generator for more and more destruction as even newspapers seem to have their voices obliterated: "[L]es informations se réduisaient, en somme, presque à néant" (196) and, to follow the Babel metaphor to its inevitable conclusion, truth and trust give way to bedlam and chaos: "Dès lors, il n'avait plus été possible de dissimuler la vérité. Des créanciers principaux avaient pris peur et déposé leurs effets au tribunal de commerce. La déconfiture s'était dessinée en quelques heures avec la rapidité de la foudre, entraînant avec elle son cortège de ruines secondaires" (197).

Verne's vision of the spiraling collapse of Schultze's empire and the ensuing financial collapse of the stock market underline his suspicion of inherent weaknesses in the foundations of an America too reliant on a greed-driven, but ultimately fragile capitalist typology. Once the capitalist strings that kept Schultze's war machine marching along are removed, there are no pretenses of production or conquest to keep the workers of Stalstadt going - just human suffering, hopelessness, and destitution:

Il y eut des réunions, des meetings, des discours, des projets. Il n'y eut pas de plan arrêté, parce qu'il n'y en avait pas de possible. Le chômage entraîna bientôt avec lui son cortège de misères, de désespoirs et de vices. L'atelier vide, le cabaret se remplissait. Pour chaque cheminée qui avait cessé de fumer à l'usine, on vit naître un cabaret dans les villages d'alentour. (202)



On the one hand, as in the Babel analogy, workers deprived of labor and salaries take off in their covered wagons, diasporically seeking survival within new factories throughout America: “Les plus sages des ouvriers [...] se hâtèrent de fuir avec armes et bagages [...] et les enfants joufflus, ravis par le spectacle du monde qui se révélait à eux par la portière du wagon. Ils partirent ceux-là, s'éparpillèrent aux quatre coins de l'horizon, eurent bientôt retrouvé, l'un à l'est, celui-ci au sud, celui-là au nord, une autre usine, une autre enclume...” (202). On the other hand, those who had not had the foresight to predict the disaster, are left without any type of safety net at all and remain, un-helped, abandoned, and prey for those quick to exploit the misfortunes of others:

Ils restèrent, vendant leurs pauvres hardes à cette nuée d'oiseaux de proie à face humaine qui s'abat d'instinct sur tous les grands désastres, acculés en quelques jours aux expédients suprêmes, bientôt privés de crédit comme de salaire, d'espoir comme de travail, et voyant s'allonger devant eux, noir comme l'hiver qui allait s'ouvrir, un avenir de misère! (202)

Implicit in Verne's description of Post-Schultze Stahlstadt is a general unease with the Social Darwinism that characterizes America's image abroad, and which continues to frighten French workers today when they are confronted with “American-style” pink slips and layoffs. While in earlier adventure novels, it was the “American spirit” which could propel great visionaries into space or the outer reaches of the North Pole, it is within their own country, it would seem, that a “laissez faire” economy can lead to so many catastrophes. This is why France-Ville is described with such a flair for control. If capital rather than morality is the basis for a society, Verne seems to be warning, than no matter how prosperous such a society may appear initially, its foundations are basically frail and, in the case of Schultze's mini-empire, can fall apart like a house of cards: “On se trouvait en face du néant pur et simple, et tout cet édifice formidable s'écroulait comme un château de cartes” (200).

Although *Les cinq cents millions* ends on a happy note, with Stahlstadt defeated and with France-Ville not only saved but taking over Stahlstadt and making it economically viable again, it is hard to see it as a completely “happy ending” in so far as even the victorious, “ideal” society is somewhat frightful. Sadly, industrial productivity remains the highlight of the utopian societies created by the millions inherited by the Begum's heirs rather than true progress for the welfare of all humanity. Shockingly, Marcel, the novel's hero, refers to the vanquished Stahlstadt (which had previously threatened not only totalitarian world domination, but also the complete physical and racial destruction of France-Ville) in relatively favorable terms of “si c'est la paix pour nous, c'est aussi la ruine pour l'admirable établissement qu'il avait créé, et provisoirement, c'est la faillite” (233). Once again, economic collapse remains the primary concern of the utopian victors. He declares enthusiastically: “Il ne faut pas laisser périr son oeuvre” (234). Although Marcel and Sarrasin intend to use Stahlstadt's infrastructure as a deterrent to future wars, “nous aurons, dans Stahlstadt résuscitée, un arsenal d'instruments tel que personne au monde ne pensera plus désormais à nous attaquer! Et, comme, en même temps que nous serons les plus forts, nous tâcherons d'être aussi les plus justes” (234), there is little to prove that the best of intentions will not lead to more aggression along the way. The last line of the novel, in fact, underscores the notion that the real utopian idea put forth by the victors is essentially a capitalist-industrial model as Stahlstadt is simply converted into a more clement version of its old self: “On peut donc assurer dès maintenant que [...] l'exemple de France-Ville et de Stahlstadt, usine et cité modèles, ne sera pas perdu pour des générations futures” (241).

Despite the fact that the imaginary communities at war in *Les 500 millions* may well have been meant to exemplify the ongoing conflict between France and Germany, two nations which had still been trying to heal right after the bloody and -for France-

humiliating Franco-Prussian war, that Verne should be compelled to place them in the far reaches of the American west rather than maintain their European position, or place them in some other far away locale is indicative of the mistrust he felt towards the ever growing American predilection not for world conquest through armaments necessarily, but through capitalist expansion which might ultimately lead to an even more insidious destruction of the world through an erosion of morals and ethics. In *Maître du monde*, for example, written at the tail-end of his career, Verne wistfully remarked that "Il va sans dire que l'Amérique ferait largement les choses. Les millions ne lui manquent pas [...] Le monde entier devint un marché public, une bourse universelle où se débattaient d'inraisemblables enchères" (*Maître*, 102). While Verne has often been given credit for predicting the rise of submarines, air travel and space exploration, it is often forgotten that he was also prescient in forecasting American-led globalization well before McDonalds and Starbucks would storm across Europe.

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