

THE DEATH OF MARX: A MEDIA EVENT

The 'new philosophers' have enjoyed a recent intense vogue in France,¹ and have even provoked interest in the English speaking press - I have read articles on them in The Sunday Times, The Observer, Encounter and Time magazine. On examination, they appear to be saying very little, so it is interesting to ask what their value is for the foreign press. It will be seen that I too treat them in a 'journalistic' rather than a serious academic fashion, and that this is, in fact, unavoidable.

Nevertheless, whilst of little intrinsic interest, the new philosophers are illustrative of two problems, both of which are of some import. The first is that in French political and cultural thought all problems and debates exist within a framework marked by two reference points - the legislative elections in March 1978, and May 1968. These points are not symmetrical; however, they do mark the beginning and the end of the present 'epoch'. The new philosophers are only possible within this framework. The second is of a different order, and concerns the relations of intellectuals to journalism, and the changes that these relations have been undergoing. I shall return to these problems at the end, but first shall give an outline description of the phenomenon.

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The new philosophy consists primarily of publicity. The publicity has been ferocious - in magazines, journals, newspapers, public discussions, as well as on radio and television. It has been centred on personalities - on the new philosophers rather than the new philosophy - and in the articles, interviews and so on the original books published seem of little importance. We will see this is not by chance. The effect has been somewhat frenzied. To describe the phenomenon I shall have to mention names repeatedly.

Is it right to group these writers together? Labelling is an old and dishonourable polemical tactic, lumping together a disparate group of intellectuals for the purpose of disparaging them better.

The publicity campaign could, however, to those who think in such terms, look like a conspiracy. To start with, almost all the books have been published by a single publisher, Grasset, in one or other of three series, Figures, Théoriciens or Enjeux, all of which are edited by the same man, B.H. Lévy. The label then is self-given. It is one Lévy launched in an article entitled Les nouveaux philosophes in Les Nouvelles Littéraires (10th June '76), and an advertisement appeared in Le Magazine Littéraire (October '76) which read: 'The new philosophers publish in the collections Figures and Théoriciens directed by Bernard-Henri Lévy.' Lévy has since said he does not accept the label 'new philosophers'.

Then again, there has been a very detailed back-up campaign, not only with 'new philosophers' interviewing each other, but also from the weekly Le Nouvel Observateur for whom Lévy has done a lot of work, and for whom Maurice Clavel, who associates himself with the new philosophers, writes a weekly column. In July '76 Le Nouvel Observateur (hereafter abbreviated as NO) published an article entitled The New Gurus (Gérald petitjean, NO 611, 12th July '76), and then in May of this year a series of reviews: Foucault on Glucksmann, Desanti on Clavel, Enthoven on Lévy. This was

followed by some twelve or so articles on the new philosophy from June to August, launched under the title of Objectif '78, with the following rubric from Jean Daniel, the editor, to the first article:

Conceiving our role as a permanent link between institution and opposition, organization and spontaneity, politics and culture, we have naturally welcomed and defended in Le Nouvel Observateur the representatives of the 'New philosophy', who have undertaken a revision of marxism after the discovery of the 'Gulag'. We think that the left has the greatest interest in allowing itself to be questioned by this rich movement, including its excesses (NO 665, 30th May '77; introduction to poulantzas).

However, NO is not the new philosophers' only friend. The journal Tel Quel, formerly of a maoist tendency, allows various new philosophers to review each other's books in its columns. Further, its founder, Phillippe Sollers, published a very favourable review of Lévy's book La barbarie à visage humaine in Le Monde 13th May '77. Le Monde devoted two full pages of Le Monde des livres to the new philosophers at the end of May (27th May) and one full page a week for the two following weeks (3rd and 10th June) - twelve articles in all.

Other magazines took up the story - Playboy, Elle and Le Point. There was a number of radio interviews (on the programme La génération perdue, France-Culture), and a debate on the television programme Apostrophes. Also a book entitled Contre la nouvelle philosophie by Aubral and Delcourt appeared, and a pamphlet by G. Deleuze, which we shall come back to. This list is not exhaustive.

The intellectual world in Paris is very small, and practically everyone has something to say. Nevertheless, the noise was remarkable. From a dead start in June 1976, the whole business took off in Spring this year, and appears to have burnt out by August.

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Who then are the new philosophers, and what do they say? As already pointed out, the articles, reviews, interviews etc. are of much greater importance than the books themselves. The article in Le point illustrates this. Here the 'key' books are classified under two headings - 'easy' and 'difficult'. The books I have read, L'Ange by Lardreau and Jambet, and La barbarie à visage humaine by Lévy, are not argued in any sense, and to suggest that this is a failing would be to miss the point. This is not an 'academic' argument.

So what characteristics do we look for? As the individuals are important, so are their biographies. Guérin, Jambet, Lardreau, Lévy, Nêmo and others were Althusser's students between 1966 and '68. There, to varying extents, they came into contact with the psychoanalyst Lacan, whom Althusser introduced to the rue d'Ulm, and with the maoism of the Jeunesses marxistes-léninistes, founded in the rue d'Ulm. A number of them wrote for the journals of the period - J'Accuse, L'idiot international and the maoist La Cause du peuple; there, for example, Jambet and Lardreau met Dolle and later Glucksmann (see R.P. Droit Le Monde 27th May '77).

From a common radicalism (Dollé and Glucksmann had both been C.P. militants before becoming maoist, and those althusserians who were not activists were rigorous theoreticians) they have derived a common disillusion, and reaction against marxism, in which they are joined by Benoist, author of Marx is dead (1970).

A third characteristic derived from this period, according to Droit, is a reverence for Lacan - or, more particularly, for Lacan's reading of Hegel. From Lacan the image of the 'Master' is borrowed which allows the getting-rid of Marx, or even the emptying of history.

In his name [Lacan's] the hopes of a 'sexual liberation' are condemned as lures and the left wing lampooned, as well as Deleuze and Lyotard, the 'philosophers of desire'. In short, everything happens almost as if Lacanism has gone a fair way to becoming the philosophie indépassable - of all time, this time, since the truths he enunciates would be eternal (Droit: op.cit.).

Around these young philosophers have gathered a variety of 'fellow-travellers' (Benoist's term - Le Monde 3, 4th July '77) - Clavel, Dollé, Benoist, Glucksmann, Sollers. It is worth nothing that Glucksmann's work, at least, merits serious attention. However, he deserves inclusion on the original criterion of 'publicity'; indeed, much of it starts with him.

The real starting point, however, is Solzhenitsyn. The whole spectrum of the French left's intelligentsia took to him: Pierre Daix, then a communist and editor of Les Lettres Françaises; Jean Daniel, editor of Le Nouvel Observateur; Clavel; Claude Lefort, editor (with Castoriadis) of Socialisme ou barbarie, wrote Un homme fort, reflections on the Gulag Archipelago; in Esprit, the catholic journal, Marcel Gauchat wrote The Totalitarian Experience and Political Thought (July - Aug. 1976).

The new philosophers too were enthused by reading Solzhenitsyn, and by the tales of the Gulag. 'The Dante of our time' Lévy calls him, and Clavel wrote: 'I will not hide that I breathe better to know that he still exists...' (NO 479, 14th Jan. '74). Sollers too claims to be one of those whom a reading of Solzhenitsyn has slowly, deeply changed (Le Monde 13th May '77). But they make a very special use of their reading, a rejection of marxism, from this central idea: 'Solzhenitsyn's Gulag is no "accident" but the proper consequence of marxist premisses' (Droit: op.cit.). This idea is first developed by Glucksmann in La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'homme (The Cook and The Man-eater) subtitled 'An essay on the State, Marxism and the Concentration Camps', and more recently in Les Maîtres penseurs. The idea is taken up by Lardreau and Jambet, and reappears in Lévy. The Gulag Archipelago serves as a demonstration of this truth - Marx equals the Gulag. For Clavel, this is the Marx 'to whom Proudhon wrote, in 1844: "Your thought makes me fear for the freedom of men"...' (art.cit.).

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Marxism is taken as the ultimate form of rationality, of 'discourse'. Listen to Lévy, for example:

The problem of our time...is that of this strange cultural object, this political tradition which the modern age has invented and baptized socialism. Why blame socialism? Because, like all optimism, it lies when it promises, and terrorizes when it happens; because, starting from a radical critique of the 'reactionary idea of progress' I think we can see its most crass incarnation in socialism; finally, because I fear that its recent 'marxization' makes it the ultimate thought of order, the most fearful police of minds that the West has produced. Stalin was not only marxist, he was truly socialist. Solzhenitsyn does not only speak of the Gulag, but again of socialism. Here is an enigma it is useless to avoid (Le Monde 27th May '77).

Marxism has become rationality, and socialism has become rationality embodied in the state. The Gulag is the logical consequence of marxist premisses. Yet did not the Young Hegelians expect Reason to take the throne, and were they not disappointed? The major step in this reduction is the notion 'All is only discourse' Clavel, for example, tells us that '...as Jambet and Lardreau say in L'Ange: in the end, there is no world, but only discourse' (Clavel, interview in La Croix 11th June '76). The real and history are only discourse.

The consequences of this step extend further than marxism. 'Desire, history, and language are always already the nets of control for the subject who expresses himself therein' (Enthoven's review of Lévy, NO 16th May 77). Politics in any form then can only lead back to the same slavery.

To the extent that a project of revolt passes via discourse, it is the Master's discourse which will necessarily prolong it... To the extent that a project of revolt will touch on what is called power, the power it installs will lead back to the forms of mastery. That is, to the extent that revolutionaries project their dreams in the forms of this world, they will only ever produce imitations of revolution (Lévy, La folie-Maurice Clavel, NO 598, 29th April '76).

In this world, right is left. Lévy explains: 'Fascism did not come out of the light... Reason is totalitarianism' (Le Matin 27th May '77); hence 'for us it's not a matter of defeating the right, because it's not certain we want a master from the left' (Jambet and Lardreau, interview in Le Magazine Littéraire 112, May '76). However, the left (or their former selves) bear the brunt of the attack: 'Socialists? Impostors!' Lévy declares (La folie-Maurice-Clavel), and Jambet and Lardreau explain: 'The left is no longer precisely political, it is enlisted in technocracy. And the ultimate form of all that, the truth of the left, is, as Glucksmann has seen, the Gulag Archipelago' (interview cit.).

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There is no way out, not in this world. 'Clavel simply says it is necessary to despair of this world, effectively we must try to wager on another world; that if the prince rules this world without division, we must escape it to thwart the prince's schemes; that if there is no rebellion other than illusory in the order of the possible, then we must bet on the impossible to go beyond this illusion' (Lévy: La folie-Maurice-Clavel). Clavel concludes: 'The authors of L'Ange recognise, from their own experience and thought - both profound - that nothing in this world can change the order of the world, that subversion needs a point of attachment [that is] absolutely outside this world' (NO 594, 29th March '76). A pessimistic point of view indeed.

Not surprisingly, given this despair, the new philosophers turn to a series of personal solutions, becoming, as Lévy puts it, '...metaphysician, artist, moralist' (La barbarie à visage humaine). They represent a renewal of metaphysics. 'For the first time in a long while simple questions are being asked again, the questions of traditional metaphysics' (Lévy, radio interview La génération perdue). Lardreau states in L'Ange 'I speak here as a metaphysician'.

Dollé, speaking as a 'contemporary to genocides, death camps and torture raised into a system of government', turns to poetry. He concludes 'So, I will take the "Holzwege", the mountain paths which snake across the forests to the clearing. These are not "paths that lead nowhere". These are the "pathways" of becoming. We are the ones to take them' (Le Monde 27th May '77). Nemo turns to the spiritual values of the 'God of Job'; Lardreau and Jambet to those of the 'Angel'; Lévy to pessimism and...the only tenable position for a pessimist philosophy is probably that of anarchism' (Lévy, Le Monde 27th May '77).

These themes are not new; the questions raised, and the authors turned to, recall, for instance, Camus, Popper and Guy Debord, as critics have pointed out. Nor is the handling of the themes particularly noteworthy or subtle. So the new philosophy is not new. But is it even philosophy, despite the appeal to a variety of 'classical' authors?

These 'metaphysicians, artists, moralists' draw their authority from a common disillusionment with May 1968, as former militants who have learnt a valuable lesson. It is from the failure of militancy that they derive the authority to reject the C.P., the maoists, the masses, the revolution and science. 'It's necessary to have contemplated the Master sufficiently long to be able to begin to think' (Lardreau and Jambet, Magazine Littéraire 112, May '76). So despite their rejection of this world the new philosophers speak, more than anything else, about what will happen if the Union of the left wins in March 1978, and the Communist party comes to power.

The terms under discussion slide, as did those we considered above. For example, Jambet and Lardreau:

What is the P.C.F.? A part of the State's apparatus, which may become the whole State apparatus. Whether the same 'class' domination is to continue through it, or whether it 'represents' another is of little importance... What is important, on the other hand, is that the P.C.F. carries within itself the possibility of a more constraining State apparatus than any known up to now in France: the very ideal of the modern State, in a sense, Marxism

precisely allows the removal of the contradictions to which the bourgeoisie is subject, since the State is not owner of the means of production. These contradictions allow interstices which, however small, let the people breathe sometimes (Le Monde 27th May '77).

The P.C.F. becomes a potential Gulag. There is no discussion of the conditions specific to Russia, or to France. They are, strictly speaking, irrelevant. Benoist states that it is the duty of philosophy to prevent 'a formerly critical thought, marxism, becoming a monopoly and State religion, barbarous and more bloody than the Christianity of the Inquisition' (Le Monde 3, 4th July '77). This is not argued, indeed it would be hard to do so. Glucksmann plays the same game in a recent interview, proclaiming the need for open discussion between the leaders of the left; 'if not, it's the Kremlin, the wall of silence, hidden disagreements, palace intrigues, the mysteries of Brezhnev's illness and of his succession' (Le Matin 30th Sept. '77). 'Communism' becomes a catch-all, a scare-word in a new cold war, which matches the return to an 'end of ideology' very well.

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The authority of the individual to speak is matched by an individual vanity, which not unexpectedly takes form in the new philosophers themselves becoming dissidents. Sollers writes; 'It is the dissidence of our times, and it is both old and new, like all resistance, to the prince, who claims, thanks to our resignation, to reign forever in this world' (Le Monde 13th May '77). Lévy takes up the theme: 'You speak of "elections": Is it necessary to keep quiet because the hour of power approaches? You speak of "rallying": I believe that the dignity of the intellectual is precisely in never rallying' (Le Monde 27th May '77). Jambet and Lardreau become rather distasteful.

Does it take the left being sure of being master of our minds and bodies tomorrow for it to consider that to defend people against the powers is right-wing? We claim the right to laugh at the illusory theatre where the left and the right share out the roles between themselves..But, an old right-wing trick, they say! We must be of the right, for then, not only does no-one have to listen to us any longer, but they will know how to make us shut up. The Gulag - not material certainly, not yet, but spiritual - is already here (Le Monde 27th May '77).

It is from this spiritual Gulag that Lévy wrote his reply to his critics - Réponse aux maîtres censeurs (NO 559, 27th June '77) - but how do you reply to a censor? With the amount Lévy publishes, the irony is striking.

The new philosophers play a double game with their critics, which corresponds to their two roles of metaphysician and dissident. Lévy's article (Reponse...) illustrates it well, as does Benoist's defence of Lévy (Le Monde 3, 4th July '77). On the other hand, Lévy suggests that no one has developed a critique of the new philosophers' work, that all that is opposed to them is polemic; on the other hand, he dismisses the claims of scholarship, pleading the urgency of the case.

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When we turn to the political positions these metaphysicians, artists and moralists occupy, we find a complete spectrum. 'Glucksmann is encouraged by signs of a growing archipelago of dissidents in France and elsewhere - protestors against nuclear plants, operators of pirate radios, resurgent minorities claiming more autonomy - all acting without the need for an all-encompassing ideology' (Time 5th Sept. '77). Lévy too speaks of the 'new resisters' - feminists, ecologists and minority groups - 'people who depend not on ideology but on personal, moral power.' For Time magazine Lévy chooses capitalism rather than socialism, but in France votes socialist (Le Monde 27th May '77). Lardreau and Jambet align themselves with 'the simple people, those without knowledge and without power, the humiliated and the injured...' (Le Monde 27th May '77), whilst Benoist places himself firmly in a gaullist tradition:

It remains to be said that it will be in the country's interest that one day a collection of men from both (political) camps will govern, that they are made to link up - because their attachment to liberties, their vow to construct a France and a Europe independent of hegemonies, joins them beyond the nightmare of mutual excommunication (Le Monde 27th May '77).

If the new philosophers' thought is empty of content (if not of vanity), and they fill a conventional political spectrum from ecologist to Chirac-style gaullism via socialism, what are we left with, other than the publicity with which we started? The new philosophers are of no importance in the political sphere, although Castoradis (NO 658, 20th June '77) points out their function as a 'decoy', distracting from the real problems that this election period holds. Certainly they may stop a number of important questions being talked about simply by the way they have posed them. Julliard (NO 656, 6th June '77) suggests that whilst the left is successful electorally, it is increasingly in a state of crisis intellectually. The new philosophers, indeed, might be seen as a symptom of the end of the ambiguous relation between the intellectuals and a left in opposition - a relation based on being morally right but politically powerless. But a crisis in bad faith is scarcely a sufficient explanation.

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Let us return to our first impression, that the phenomenon is one of publicity, and seek an explanation in the context of publicity and writing, rather than politics. The new philosophy is the introduction of a new process, that of 'intellectual marketing', to use Deleuze's term (G. Deleuze, suppl. to Minuit 24, May '77; partly republished in Le Monde 19, 20th June '77. What follows owes a lot to Deleuze's argument). Marketing, according to Deleuze, has two principles. First, rather than a book having anything to say, one must speak of it, and make it spoken about. At the limit, the multitude of articles, interviews, broadcasts etc. could replace the book altogether. This is why the books written by the new philosophers are, in the end, unimportant. This is a striking change for the academic world. It is an activity, Deleuze observes, which seems to be outside philosophy, even to exclude it.

Second, from the point of view of marketing, the same book or product must have several versions, to suit everyone. So we have pious, atheistic, heideggerian, leftist, centrist, and chiraquian versions. Whence also the distribution of roles according to taste - metaphysician, artist, moralist, dissident. Here variety is no guarantee of difference; it is the label 'New philosophers' that is all-important.

The success now of this marketing is due to two factors, which we mentioned at the start. The historical epoch 1968-78 we will come to in a moment. The other factor is a certain reversal in the relations between journalists and intellectuals, or between the press and the book.

We are in a period when journalism, together with the radio and television has become increasingly aware of its ability to create the 'event' - for example, by enquiries, polls, 'investigative journalism', controlled leaks, discussions - and so has become less dependent on analyses outside journalism, and has less need of people like intellectuals and writers. Journalism, indeed, has discovered an autonomous and self-sufficient thought within itself. That is why, at the extreme, a book is worth less than the article in a journal written about it, or the interview it gives rise to. Consequently, intellectuals and writers are having to conform to this new kind of 'short duration' thought, based on interviews, discussion and so on.

The relation of forces between journalists and intellectuals has then completely changed. One could imagine a book bearing on an article in a journal, and not the other way round. The new philosophy is very close to this. The magazine no longer has any need of the book. Interestingly, the central function of 'author', of 'personality', has moved to the journalist, and writers who still want to be 'authors' have to go through journalists, or, better, become their own journalists. It is this change that has made the enterprise of intellectual marketing possible.

The second factor is that France is in a long electoral period, and this acts as a grill, a value-giving system, that affects ways of understanding and even of perceiving. All events and problems are hammered onto this grill. It is on this grill that the whole project of the new philosophers has been incised from the beginning, and it explains why their project has succeeded now. Some of the new philosophers are against the Union of the left, others hope to provide a brains trust for Mitterand, as we have seen. What they all have to sell, which produces a homogenization of the two tendencies, is a hatred of '68. Whatever their attitude to the election, they declare that the Revolution is impossible, uniformly and for all time. That is why all the concepts which began by functioning in a very differentiated fashion (powers, resistances, desires, even the 'pleb') are made global, reunited in a series of empty unities - Power, the Law, the State, the Master, the Prince etc..

That is also why the thinking subject, or vain subject, can reappear on the scene, the correlate of the meaninglessness of the concepts, for the only possibility of Revolution for the new philosophers is in the pure act of the thinker who thinks the impossible. Along with this function of author returns the function of witness: hence the martyrology of the Gulag and the victims of history.

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The new philosophers, by recreating the 'author' function, the creative subject, are thoroughly reactionary in a wide rather than a political sense: the negation both of any politics and of any experimentation. New, certainly, but utterly conformist. Their work represents the submission of any thought to the media - and to the worst side of the media at that; any intellectual caution is forsaken and the media define all criteria.

The English-speaking reactionary press has taken to the new philosophers then, for they are extremely modern. It is this that makes them so acceptable to America, rather than simply their anti-marxism. Time magazine states 'These young intellectuals are on the same wave-length as many people in the U.S., Jimmy Carter, Jerry Brown, Carlos Castaneda and a host of anti-war and civil rights activists'. American publishers are reported to be fighting over translation rights (NO 669). It is scarcely surprising.

Tim Jenkins

NOTES

1. This article was written in September this year in Paris, where Tim Jenkins has been resident for the past nine months. Translations from the French are the author's throughout. (Eds.).