

DAY FOR NIGHT: MARXISM IN FRANCE

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Arthur Hirsh, *The French Left: A History and Overview*, Montreal: Blackrose Books, 1982.

Michael Kelly, *Modern French Marxism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.

D. S. Bell and Eric Shaw, *The Left in France: Towards the Socialist Republic*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 1983.

The history of French Marxism really starts with Hegel whose early appearance in France helps account for the rich tradition of Gallic social theory. Yet the powerful socialist current which facilitated the entry of Hegelian notions worked against those of Marx. Until the 20th century Marxism was only one of a variety of socialist schools of thought, and the philosophical range of Marx's followers in France was no match for the subtlety of Italian, German and Russian strains of Marxism. The lone French theorist whose work stands comparison with that of Labriola, Kautsky, or Plekhanov was Georg Sorel, and his major contribution, *Reflections on Violence*, is anarchist rather than Marxist.

Two of the volumes under review concentrate on the development of the forms of modern French Marxism which have had such a remarkable impact on Marxist thought. Hirsh's book follows the development of Marxism in postwar France while Kelly's more ambitious study reaches back to the 19th century and offers a detailed analysis of Marxism from the 1920s onwards. Even where they cover the same period, however, their contrasting perspectives afford an entirely different subject matter. Hirsh is concerned with the threads of New Left thought which came together to produce the explosion of May 1968 and then unravelled in the 1970s. The adventures of orthodox dialectical materialism and especially its uneasy relationship with Hegel constitute the chief issues of Kelly's philosophically-oriented account.

The victory of Mitterand's Socialists (PS) in 1981 and the frightful performance of the French Communist Party (PCF) since it abandoned the Union of the Left in 1977 constitute a perplexing backdrop for the intellectual histories of Hirsh and Kelly. But these events, along with the evolution and structure of the two massive contenders for power on the left, are marvelously documented and explained in Bell and Shaw's *The Left in France*. This thin volume is an indispensable handbook for anyone wishing to penetrate the mysteries of contemporary French politics and the labyrinth of twists and turns that has been the enigmatic legacy of politics to French social theory.

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Marxism thrived in the embattled atmosphere of 1930's France and produced a number of memorable works. Paul Nizan's *The Watchdogs* was typical in its enthusiastic attack on bourgeois ideology and relative lack of theoretical sophistication. The doctrinaire tendency of this period was powerfully reinforced by the publication in 1938 of Stalin's hackneyed and enormously popular textbook, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. The appearance in the same year of Lenin's *Conspectus on Hegel's 'Science of Logic'* encouraged and leant added weight to innovative studies on the place of Hegel in the Marxist tradition and on the writings of the young Marx published throughout the tenure of the Popular Front by Auguste Cornu, Henri Lefebvre, and Norman Guterman.

Luckily for the Communists, who were caught supporting the fascists because of the Hitler-Stalin pact, they were outlawed and forced into hiding in 1939 by the French government. After the 1940 Nazi invasion, the circulation of Marxist literature was punishable by imprisonment or even execution. (It is sobering to reflect that a copy of *The Holy Family*, a doubtful acquisition at the best of times, meant certain death under the Germans.) The stock of Marxist books and journals in the country was almost totally destroyed and revolutionary intellectuals dispersed to help form the Resistance (they were joined by Communist militants only after May 1941 when the Blitzkrieg crossed over into Russia). Paul Nizan, George Politzer and Jacques Decour were among those who died, but Rober Garaudy, Lefebvre and Cornu survived to extend and deepen Marxist theory after the Liberation, emphasizing the relevance of Hegel and the young Marx for dialectical thought. The Cold War stopped these experiments in their tracks and by the early 1950s all three men had recanted their positions under severe criticism from Party ideologues who saw any interest in Hegel as a sop to fascism.

With official Marxism bedazzled by Stalin and frozen into place first by the Occupation and then the Cold War, the development of Marxism was in the hands of its critics on the left among Hegelians, existentialists and renegade Marxists (*gauchistes*). Liberals and progressives were given relative freedom by the Nazi occupiers to print and circulate their views; Camus published *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942 and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* reached the public a year later. After the war existentialism grew rapidly and prompted bitter attacks from Communists like Georg Lukács and Henri Lefebvre. As its leading figure, Jean-Paul Sartre was also a main target of existentialism's Communist antagonists. Always a leftist, Sartre pursued as varied and contradictory a career as anyone in a country where loyalty to principles is viewed as a political liability. Playing the Bohemian intellectual in the 1930s he eschewed organized politics, studied under Kierkegaard in Nazi Germany and took advantage of the discount fares offered by Mussolini to attract tourists to Rome's fascist Exposition. Together with Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, Sartre attempted to form an independent partisan group during the war but it collapsed and he was not admitted to the Resistance until 1943 when the Communist Party finally dropped its objections to him.

Criticized for its individualist and ahistorical themes (problems later admitted by Sartre himself) *Being and Nothingness* probed questions of authenticity and

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bad faith considered diversionary by official Communism and by most Marxists outside the Party as well. De Beauvoir's existentialist *The Second Sex* transcended Sartre's limited view (along with its pervasive sexism) and also raised important objections to Engels's account of female oppression. Its publication in 1949 stung the patriarchy. De Beauvoir was actually living the alienated experience of the Other in her relations with Sartre who delighted in writing her juicy accounts of his latest flings while she was being pilloried by Communists and conservatives alike. François Mauriac villified *The Second Sex* as pornography and with typical masculine duplicity exclaimed in private that "(de Beauvoir's) vagina has no secrets for me." Her friend Camus accused de Beauvoir of "making the French male look ridiculous." (Hirsh, pp. 39-40) It is symptomatic of the unselfconscious chauvinism of Michael Kelly's study that it includes no account of de Beauvoir's work and dismisses *The Second Sex* as "probably the least successful of her writings." (p. 217)

Isolated by the Cold War and rapidly losing the high status gained through their leadership in the Resistance, the theorists of the Communist Party were also buffeted by telling criticism from ex-Trotskyists gathered around the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. This initially rather obscure publication won a receptive audience when French intellectuals turned to its critique of socialist bureaucracy for an explanation of the dramatic worker revolts in East Germany in 1953 and then Poland and Hungary in 1956. The journal's leading writers Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort argued that a truly socialist society required worker self-management (*autogestion*) and a democratic system of workers' councils. The anti-Marxist standpoint adopted by the journal after de Gaulle's electoral triumph in 1958 contained little that was new but its Weberian critique of bureaucracy influenced many of the intellectuals who were to play a leading role in the climactic events of 1968.

The revival of official Communist theory from its Cold War stupor began three years before Khrushchev's 1956 'secret speech' denouncing Stalin's crimes. The Communists were returning to an alliance with the Socialists after a series of widening postwar splits and the thaw registered in a number of Party conferences devoted to theoretical questions, especially that of Marx's relation to Hegel, who was no longer avoided as a forerunner of fascism. In 1953 Louis Althusser, then an inconspicuous young professor of philosophy, wrote two articles in a journal of education on Marxist philosophy outlining the basic principles he would present in a much more novel and suggestive form twelve years later in *For Marx*. Communist thinkers published articles disputing existentialism's stake in the Hegelian tradition and reaffirming Marx's claim to have overcome Hegel by transcending his philosophy.

Two of these theorists, Henri Lefebvre and Roger Garaudy were leading interpreters of Marx in the 1950s but Lefebvre's writings drifted dangerously closer to Hegel until he was finally expelled from the PCF. Lefebvre is perhaps French Communism's most fascinating writer and his treatment by Kelly and Hirsh illustrates the differences in their approach. Kelly is censorious of Lefebvre's 'abstract and Hegelian position' and applauds his expulsion by the PCF. 'Lefebvre thought ideas led the world; he increasingly forgot that they must

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reflect it. If ideas do not begin by submitting to the world's (sic!) harsh discipline, they invariably fall victim to it later in their course.' (pp. 105-106). Once Lefebvre leaves the Party he vanishes from Kelly's text, whereas Hirsh follows Lefebvre more closely, observing that his trenchant critique of modern consumer society suggested the slogans for 1968: 'Let everyday life become a work of art! Let technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life!' (p. 105)

The revival of official Marxism coincided with Sartre's massive commentary on historical materialism, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* published in 1960. Sartre's study is not entirely successful, which perhaps explains why the promised second volume failed to appear in his lifetime — he turned instead to an equally massive work on Flaubert. The most splendid images in the *Critique* are also rather unconvincing, e.g., two workers separated by a wall and unaware of one another are linked in 'totalizing praxis' by a daydreaming Sartre gazing at both from the balcony of his holiday flat; a queue of commuters waiting for a bus confront the alienation of what Sartre calls, a 'group in series', and so forth. The leading concepts of the *Critique* are problematic; the project of human history is to alleviate scarcity, a category without theoretical elaboration. The notion of freedom which informs the *Critique* is left unspecified in a text that never quite gets beyond the rationalist dualism of Descartes. Sartre's delineation of the links between thought and action, individual and society, theory and history, is important, and his criticism of the concepts of class and class consciousness demonstrates the limits and abstract character of Marxist theory. "Sartre's critique of Marxism," observes Hirsh, "was to prove quite fruitful as a philosophical foundation for the emerging new left social theory." (p. 80)

Sartre's rejection of a dialectic of nature fueled a controversy that culminated in 1961 with Sartre and Jean Hyppolite together debating Roger Garaudy and Jean-Pierre Vigier before an audience of 6,000 people keen to discover whether the dialectic could be applied to nature as well as to history. Neither side won but the debate confirmed Sartre and Garaudy as the acknowledged interpreters of Marx in France.

A humanist who favoured rapprochement between the PCF and Christianity, Garaudy was in the forefront of the Hegelian revival in the early 1960s; Louis Althusser was its nemesis. They fought for the position of chief Party theoretician throughout the decade with Garaudy holding a decisive edge until his criticism of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and applause for the revolutionaries of 1968 created great disfavour in the PCF leadership. He was expelled from the Party in 1970, and Louis Althusser, after keeping low during the May events, ascended to the Communist purple.

The enormous student and worker uprising in May 1968 shattered the Stalinist bureaucracy of the PCF and utterly dissolved the old Socialist party, the SFIO. Traditional Marxist theory could offer nothing to explain the amazing events taking place across France. The winners were New Left theorists like Sartre, Lefebvre and Castoriadis who had been diagnosing for years the problems of alienation and bureaucracy that precipitated the May revolt. Paradoxically the success of the New Left theorists prepared their immediate eclipse just as the events of May culminated in another electoral triumph for de Gaulle. By the time

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Mitterand had succeeded in drafting a Common Programme for the rejuvenated Socialist Party and the PCF, the structuralists had attained supremacy in the field of Marxist theory.

Althusser's spell-binding essays in *For Marx* and other masterful pieces in *Lenin and Philosophy* and elsewhere established his preeminence in theory not only among the Communists but across a broad spectrum of Marxist intellectuals. By completely severing Hegel from Marx and while professing the humblest fealty for the orthodox tradition, Althusser was able to introduce truckloads of concepts and principles from a range of trendy disciplines. Stunned by the clarity and wit of Althusser's prose readers forgot to check whether the magus had actually read Hegel (he had not, though he did translate selected works from Feuerbach in 1960, but that is not the same thing). Levels were added to levels, forms of thought fed on other forms which generated still other ones. The result was a social theory that somehow resembles the PCF as described by Bell and Shaw: "closed, secretive, bureaucratic, Stalinist and thoroughly difficult to deal with." (p. 129) The extreme intellectualism of the Althusserian project was deftly integrated with a wild-eyed Maoism.

While Althusser's theoretical abilities declined precipitously throughout the 1970s attention shifted to his disciple Poulantzas whose brilliant, though often obscure and tendentious, theoretical interventions kept the Althusserians alive. Oddly enough Kelly fails even to list Poulantzas in the index but Hirsh offers a sharp discussion of his contributions. Poulantzas constructs a structuralist theory of the state, the major strength of which is recognition of the state's 'relative autonomy' from the capitalist economic system. His theory points to reform rather than destruction of the state and is in line with the political strategy of Eurocommunism in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece which seeks broad alliances with socialists and progressives. In his last and most promising book, *State, Power, Socialism*, Poulantzas abandoned doctrinaire structuralism and welcomed certain new left themes such as worker self-management which he had previously resisted.

The spectacular crack-up of Althusserian structuralism at the beginning of the 1980s paralleled the PCF's turn to Moscow (as George Marchais on TV live from the Soviet Union defended the invasion of Afghanistan before the French public), its adoption of blatantly racist policies during the 1980 elections, and its miserable performance at the polls. After the eclipse of Althusser, Lucien Sève, the heir apparent, advanced from the wings with a version of orthodox Marxism that underlined the importance of Hegel to the entire Marxist project. Other pro-Hegelians in the PCF such as Jacques D'Hondt and Solange Mercier-Josa have contributed original insights about the importance of Hegel for the work of Marx. As Hegel would say, the Idea has returned to itself.

The dialectic would not be what it is if it did not produce ironies, paradoxes and contradictions. In France where Socialism is installed in government and the Communists have four cabinet ministers, theoretical marxism is a dead letter. In its stead Hirsh offers three allied social movements: self-management, feminism and ecology. The first is a strategy not a theory, and the prospects of the third in France, where almost everyone is in favour of nuclear installments of

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some sort, is not promising, nor is ecology likely in any case to revive Marxism as we know it. Feminist theorists in France (and everywhere else) are moving rapidly away from Marxism rather than toward it. Kelly, in the doctrinaire style that marks his book, admits that research in Marxism is at an end and that the time has come for education of the masses in Marxist principles. "The reversion" to education he declares hopefully, "is not necessarily a regression." (p. 232) A book that concludes with a call for no more research is certainly refreshing and the reader must share Kelly's exhaustion and sense of hopelessly spinning wheels (a sense reflected in his chapter headings: New Beginnings, Innovations, Explorations, Changes, New Directions, etc.). Hirsh's volume is more tightly written and ultimately much more optimistic but equally unconvincing about the future of French Marxism. In France it appears the owl of Minerva has had its wings clipped just as the dusk is gathering.

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