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The Anthropological Turn in French Thought: The 1970s to the Present

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

Jacob Joseph Collins

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Anthropological Turn in French Thought: The 1970s to the Present

by

Jacob Joseph Collins

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Lynn Hunt, Chair

This dissertation focuses on post-1968 French thought and looks at how French thinkers responded to a new set of challenges that emerged in the 1970s and 80s: the economy had begun to falter, the revolts of 68 failed to produce an alternative to capitalism, and the “great ideologies” that had once sustained cultural life in France – Catholicism, communism, and Gaullism – no longer mobilized people in the same way. I argue that philosophers and social theorists met these challenges by reconceiving the language of politics, using concepts and methodologies associated with anthropology to do so. They wanted to rediscover the roots of political sentiments and social bonds as a way of understanding how they had gone so astray in the twentieth century. Much of their writing was focused on the legacy of totalitarianism, the role of religion in contemporary life – which they all took to be of first importance – the fragmentation of political identities with the advent of globalization, and the persistent social inequalities that attend modern democracy. The thinkers I examine cover the entire ideological spectrum: on the far left, Régis Debray, a revolutionary in the 1960s turned militant republican in

the 70s; on the center-left Emmanuel Todd, demographer, political liberal, and sharp-eyed critic of neo-liberalism; on the center-right, Marcel Gauchet, former left-libertarian turned theorist of democracy; and on the far right, Alain de Benoist, architect of the “New Right” movement, cultural essentialist, and implacable critic of egalitarianism. I show how each thinker constructed a meta-narrative of modernity, and how, in spite of their political differences, they came to see fundamental issues in similar ways.

The dissertation of Jacob Joseph Collins is approved.

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Perry Anderson

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Introduction

This dissertation identifies and unfolds the making of a new paradigm in post-1968 French thought, the “anthropological turn.” It follows the work of four thinkers, Régis Debray, Emmanuel Todd, Marcel Gauchet, and Alain de Benoist, all non-anthropologists who nevertheless attempted to reconstruct the foundations of political theory with reference to anthropological concepts and methodologies in the 1970s. The questions they wanted to answer – what is politics?, what constitutes a true political community?, what is the role of human agency in the context of the group? – were given renewed urgency in the aftermath of 1968. Anthropology was an obvious place to look for thinkers who wanted to breathe new life into their field of study, both for its prestige in post-war France, and for its attention to origins. We thus find each author giving an anthropological interpretation of politics, in many cases identifying politics as a reified entity – “the political”, analogous to the “social” or the “economic” – and tracing it back to “primitive” society. For Emmanuel Todd, to use one example, anthropological politics was rooted in pre-modern family structures, which continue, in spite of their antiquity, to shape social relations and ideological formations in modernity. The itineraries of these four thinkers were very different, as were their particular fusions of the political and the anthropological, but the fact that they all considered, at the very same moment, this fusion necessary signals the existence of an important current of thought that has yet to be explored.

The dissertation before you is a work of intellectual history, and, in keeping with its methods, tries to interpret and contextualize the published writings of some of France’s leading thinkers. I have given a stronger contextual reading than is customary for intellectual history, relating developments in philosophy and political theory very closely with events, crises, and

discourses in the period between May 68 and the election of Mitterrand in 1981 – the “entre-deux-Mai” as it is sometimes called. If I have insisted on such a strong link between political events and theory, it is because the world-historical singularity of the post-war French intellectual moment,¹ the enormous diffusion and popular resonance of its ideas from 1945 to 1980, invites us to look beyond the text for its meanings.

The first chapter deals at length with the intellectual scaffolding of the anthropological turn, its core themes and methodologies, as well as its contribution to the field of political philosophy in France. Here I would say only that the anthropological turn represents a way of thinking about political questions that deviates from what many of us expect to find in post-68 French thought. It reinstates the mode of “grand-narrative” that Lyotard famously claimed post-modern philosophy to have surpassed. The respective work of these four thinkers feature great syntheses of events and ideas that stretch back to the origins of human society, with specific views on the forms politics will take in the present and future. In this regard, it marks a return to the “savage” political theory of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Diderot, but within a distinctive late-capitalist, post-structuralist context. The latter component is essential for appreciating how the anthropological turn attempted to negotiate an urgent theoretical problem of its time, namely the confrontation of structuralism (and its attention to impersonal social mechanisms), with new demands for “agency” and “practice” within the ambit of the human sciences. The anthropological turn suggests its own way of balancing history, practice, and structure to yield a theory of politics.²

¹ This view is expressed forcefully by Alain Badiou in “The Adventure of French Philosophy,” *New Left Review* 35 (Sept.-Oct. 2005): 67-77. With classical Greece and enlightenment Germany, Badiou names post-war France as one of the three greatest “moments” of intense philosophical production.

² The work of both Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins in the 1970s and 80s were benchmarks in terms of resolving this impasse. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford

All four thinkers considered here were part of the same post-war generation. The eldest, Debray (b. 1940), is eleven years the senior of Todd (b. 1951), the youngest of the group, while Benoist (b. 1943) and Gauchet (b. 1946) fall roughly in the middle. The left-wing figures, Debray and Todd, were born and raised in Paris, though with different kinds of middle-class backgrounds. Todd descends from an illustrious literary-bohemian line, his grandfather the great communist writer of the interwar period, Paul Nizan, his father the well-known author and journalist, Olivier Todd. The family had strong ties to England, as Nizan's wife was English, and both Olivier and Emmanuel were sent to Cambridge for university. Olivier, a main contributor to *Nouvel Observateur* during the seventies, was among the most vociferous anti-totalitarians of the era, as were many of his closest friends, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jean-François Revel, for example. Emmanuel Todd would end up inverting his father's trajectory: whereas the latter began with communist-sympathies, later taking a sharp turn toward liberalism during (and because of) the Vietnam War; the son began as a liberal, his early work on the Soviet Union receiving the highest plaudits from Olivier's circle, only to adopt a more radical perspective in his later work. Debray's family background was, by contrast, of a high-bourgeois, conservative character.³ A brilliant student, Debray breezed through France's finest schools, Lycée Janson de Sully, Louis-le-Grand, and finally, the École normale supérieure, where he studied with Louis Althusser, and became "*agrégé de philosophie*." Debray's political awareness was fired by France's war with Algeria, and his sympathies lay not only with the Communist Party, but with the burgeoning Third Worldist movement. As a university student,

University Press, 1990), and Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

³ Debray's uncle, Pierre Debray-Ritzen, was a right-wing thinker close to Benoist's circle.

he travelled to Latin America, made contacts with revolutionaries, and eventually, in 1965, took a teaching post at the University of Havana at the behest of Fidel Castro.

On the right, Benoist and Gauchet both come from conservative strongholds in the provinces, the former from the Loire Valley, the latter from coastal Normandy. Benoist's family was actively involved in conservative circles, allowing Benoist to make contacts easily within the right-wing community. After attending Louis-le-Grand, he was taken on as a journalist for the reactionary newspaper, *Lectures françaises*, edited by the *ultra* (conservative) Henry Coston. As a student – first studying law at the *Faculté de droit*, and then philosophy at the Sorbonne – Benoist linked up with the student wing of the extreme right, writing for the *Fédération des étudiants nationalistes*, and *Cahiers universitaires*. Like Debray, he was formed politically by France's war with Algeria, but as a militant for the opposing camp, those committed absolutely to *Algérie-française*. His first published books lionized the struggle of fascist paramilitaries to defeat de Gaulle and retake Algeria.⁴ In 1968, Benoist assembled a crew of young intellectuals from these assorted groups, launching a new organization, *Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne* (or, *GRECE*), and a new journal, *Nouvelle École*. This group would constitute the core of what would later be christened by the media as the “New Right.”

Gauchet was of Normandian middle-class extraction, though his family, politically Gaullist, was not as resolutely conservative as Benoist's. Like most French families of this era, the Gauchets were practicing Catholics, Marcel included, who dutifully performed the role of altar boy in a local church in Poilley. Gauchet recalls being politically awakened by the French-Algerian War, though his engagement was bound to be more passive than Debray's or Benoist's considering his age (fifteen) and location (Poilley, Normandy). Nevertheless, the political

⁴ Alain de Benoist [pseudo. Fabrice Laroche], *Salan devant l'opinion* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Just, 1965), and [pseudo. Fabrice Laroche] and François D'Orcival, *Le Courage est leur patrie* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Just, 1965).

climate put him in contact with a syndicalist group at the teacher's preparatory college he was sent to as a teenager: "Our mobilization was all the stronger as the war in Algeria came to a close. From provincial apoliticism, I was suddenly plunged into the fiery atmosphere of syndicalist debate."⁵ From there, Gauchet proceeded to study philosophy and history with Claude Lefort from 1966 to 1971 at the University of Caen. Intellectually, Gauchet greeted him as a kindred spirit, having had, "since the age of fifteen, a copy of *Socialisme ou barbarie* in my hands", and having shared with Lefort an abhorrence of Communism, though Gauchet admits to "quickly becoming more anti-Marxist than him or Castoriadis."⁶ Notwithstanding this minor difference, he identified root and branch with the positions of Lefort and Castoriadis, describing himself as an "ultra-gauchist anti-Stalinist". He adopted their stance on 68, welcoming it warmly as a "*brèche pour de bon en termes de culture politique*" – "*brèche*" being the well-known metonym for May used by Lefort and Castoriadis.⁷ In the seventies, he participated in the launching of a new journal with the latter two, *Libre*, before joining up with Furet and Pierre Nora for the founding in 1980 of *Le Débat*, one of France's most respected journals, which Gauchet has actively edited since its inception. Gauchet still likes to think of himself as a maverick thinker of the Left – a self-stylization that this dissertation will contest. His true place on the political spectrum is the center-right.

Overall, the backgrounds of the four thinkers reveal a rough unity of experience that might help to explain their simultaneous adoption of anthropological themes, while not so similar

⁵ Marcel Gauchet, *La Condition historique: entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 30. The text in question is, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and Edgar Morin, *Mai 68: la brèche: premières réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Fayard, 1968).

that they could qualify as strictly and inevitably determining.⁸ The series of impasses emerging from 68 and the economic recession of the early seventies produced new kinds of theoretical questions. The anthropological turn was not the property of one party or political line, but belonged properly to the entire political spectrum, which our four thinkers represent in miniature. In selecting candidates for this group, it was essential that he or she not be formally trained in anthropology. To be sure, the thinkers concerned here profited from the exceptional creativity of French anthropology in the seventies: Maurice Godelier reflecting on primitive communism from a Marxist perspective; Pierre Clastres working through an anarchist conception of primitive society; and Louis Dumont unpacking modern individualism and free-market ideology in anthropological terms. The point is that thinkers from diverse intellectual lineages came to anthropology with a similar set of dilemmas, searching it for answers that could not be found within their own disciplines.

The anthropological turn is not limited to this quartet of thinkers, but exists as a larger movement within the world of French ideas. This dissertation could easily be made to accommodate any number of thinkers whose work affirm the themes of the anthropological turn. Alain Supiot (b. 1949), a figure on the Left, might be slotted under this rubric. Trained in legal studies, Supiot has turned juridical thinking inside out with *Homo Juridicus*, a study in the “anthropological function of law.” It too lays bare the fabric of social and political relations, challenging us to consider how law, seen from anthropological point of view, is capable of rekindling a sense of community and *doxa* within the body politic.⁹ Pierre Rosanvallon, a figure

⁸ I am eager to avoid putting too much weight on the overused concept of the generation. Here, I use it as a framing device or a control to fix the otherwise porous nature of something as broad as anthropology. I do not assume it speaks for an entire generation of 68ers.

⁹ Alain Supiot, *Homo Juridicus: On the Anthropological Function of Law*, trans. Saskia Brown. (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

closely associated with Gauchet and Furet on the center-right, deserves mention in this group as well. His earliest texts, *Pour une nouvelle culture politique* (1977) and *le Capitalisme utopique* (1979), attempt to work through the intellectual problems posed by the crisis of the seventies, and do so by rethinking the postulates of capitalism and democracy. From a slightly older generation, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Cornelius Castoriadis, the writing pair of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Supiot's mentor Pierre Legendre (b. 1930) engaged deeply in anthropological speculation in the 1970s.¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari in particular had devoted much attention to concepts of the "primitive" and the "savage" in their attempt to understand the transhistorical workings of the State, and more abstractly, "flows" of desire as they have existed throughout time.¹¹ Castoriadis – another figure decisive in Gauchet's formation – used explicitly anthropological language and concepts in his post-68 work on the "imaginary institution of society." In fact, the sentiments expressed in his lecture from the University of Lausanne in 1989 might have been uttered by any of the four thinkers of the anthropological turn: "It has been stated over and over again for the last 40 years that there is no human nature, no essence of man. This negative remark is completely inadequate." He then attacks both Hegelian and Structuralist philosophies for giving a crude and overly schematic definitions of human nature, and argues for his own view, that the essence of man lies in his/her creative capacities.¹² Indeed, a more capacious intellectual history of the anthropological turn would ideally include all of

¹⁰ Legendre's enormous body of work specializes in the analysis of the West's juristic institutions as anthropological data (and in fact pre- and post-dates the 70s).

¹¹ Both *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* feature extensive speculation on "primitive" societies, much of it informed by a reading of Pierre Clastres, one of Gauchet's mentors. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 153-294; *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 39-75, 351-374, 424-474.

¹² Cornelius Castoriadis, "Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics," *Thesis Eleven* 49 (May 1997), 102-103.

these figures. With limited space, however, it seems best to include those thinkers for whom the principal thematics exist in the purest, most concentrated form.¹³

A curious feature of the quartet I have selected for this study is that the figures on the Left, Debray and Todd, have been loners on the French intellectual scene, while those on the Right, Gauchet and Benoist, have been organizers. Alain de Benoist has, since the birth of the New Right in the late 1960s, consolidated a coterie following throughout France and much of Western Europe. Loyalists have been lavish in their praise of Benoist as the honorary father of the movement.¹⁴ Gauchet's influence has been of a different character: as day-to-day editor of *Le Débat* (and a key player in the EHESS-Gallimard-Fondation Saint Simon complex), he has helped fashion mainstream opinion, or at least one powerful current within it. The figures on the Left, by contrast, have had little success in galvanizing a following, and have more often fallen afoul of the mainstream press. The irony is that while Debray and Todd have written sharper, more accessible texts, with a wealth of empirical hypotheses about the real world, they appear to have had little influence within French intellectual life; whereas Gauchet and Benoist, whose writing is on the whole so much more abstract, not to say nebulous, have had significantly more.

Interactions within the quartet have been disappointingly few and far between. The most substantial exchange was between Debray and Gauchet in the pages of *Le Débat*, where they defended their opposing theses on the decline of religion in modernity. Otherwise, cross-commentary has been episodic. Todd criticized Gauchet in *Après la démocratie* (2008) for having designated Islam as a problem religion, and thereby contributing to anti-Muslim sentiments in France. This strike was likely prompted in part by Gauchet's orchestration of the

¹³ The other thinkers mentioned here do not always fit this mold perfectly: Supiot writes *Homo Juridicus* long after the seventies, for example, whereas for Rosanvallon and Rancière, the anthropological current tends to run weaker than for the other thinkers.

¹⁴ See *Liber amicorum Alain de Benoist* (Paris: Amis d'Alain de Benoist, 2004).

attack on Todd's *l'Illusion économique* (1998) in *Le Débat*. Benoist produced a very thorough and thoughtful response to Debray's *Critique de la raison politique*, which was never answered by its author. The lack of conversation between them is perhaps part of a general pattern of French intellectual life for many years now, where serious critical exchange appears to be evermore scarce.

Some will complain that the approach taken in this dissertation collapses the distinction between Left and Right. To this I reply that the ideological spectrum in France began to rapidly contract in the 1970s, closing the distance between the two extremities. After an initial profusion of left-wing grouplets in the aftermath of 68, excessive fragmentation and the discrediting of the PCF pushed many on the Left, like Debray, toward the Socialist Party, fronted by Mitterrand from the early 70s to the mid 90s. Few would argue, I hope, that the Mitterrand governments, especially after the 1983 *tournant*, widened the distance between Left and Right. If anything, it contributed mightily to the center-heavy politics that dominates France today. Thus, the collapsing spectrum is a real enough feature of the period. I would also add that the spectrum device provides a litmus test for the intellectual penetration of an ideology or discourse. The fact that thinkers with very different political agendas could adopt anthropological reasoning is a clear marker of its diffusion within French intellectual culture. Moreover, a transverse analysis of this sort does not necessarily entail the reduction of distances: Left, Right, and Center may have similar intellectual commitments without the differences between their politics being thereby minimized.

Finally, I wish to make clear that, as a historical treatment of the usages of anthropological language, this dissertation does not claim to speak for anthropology. The discipline of that name, which continues to be vibrant in France, has its own set of trajectories

and dilemmas that are not to be confused with those of the anthropological turn, even if they were, as I show in the conclusion, often closely related. I thus claim no responsibility for how *they* understood the uses of anthropology. Nor does this dissertation claim to represent “French Theory” – the mode of philosophizing associated with Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, etc., which has been translated into most major languages and attained a global readership.¹⁵ The thinkers treated here have equally ambitious intellectual projects, but their impact has been more local (which is not to say that their ideas are provincial). A central aim of this dissertation is to introduce these kinds of figures – in their proper context – to new audiences. The chief aim, however, is to show how a political-intellectual tradition confronted a series of challenges specific to post-68 France, and developed new ways of thinking through them.

¹⁵ François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Chapter One - The Anthropological Turn in French Thought: The 1970s to the Present

A unique cluster of events – de-marxification, neo-liberalization, a pervasive “anti-totalitarian” discourse, economic downturn – laid the groundwork for a new intellectual configuration in France of the 1970s. One outcome of this conjuncture was a marked turn toward the anthropological in French thought, a systematic rethinking of politics and social relations from a kind of point zero. In thinking about the political – as an autonomous sphere of action – the anthropological turn engaged with questions that had been either ignored or underdeveloped by earlier intellectual movements. These were questions of the sacred, the religious, and the political – here considered from an anthropological vantage point – which enabled thinkers to comprehend anew the role of politics and history in contemporary life. This mode of thinking also reflected a new set of tensions over France’s place in the world: with the US exerting unrivaled influence in the West, and the end of decolonization as signaled by the US withdrawal from Saigon in 1975, France’s external relationships were open questions, not only with the superpowers along the East-West axis, but with the rising Third World along the North-South meridian. Intellectually, the “anthropological turn” often overlaps with adjacent movements, its ancestors, existentialism and structuralism, but also its siblings, postmodernism and neo-humanism. Nevertheless, it has its own set of parameters, themes, and logics. The hope is that this construction will cut across the usual boundaries and lead to new insights about the conditions and outcomes of intellectual production in France in the late twentieth century.

The 1970s was a decade spectacular for its sense of malaise in France. The emancipatory politics of the 60s failed to realize its collectivist ambitions, or even to produce a unified Left. Only in retrospect can we see that 68 had been made possible by the affluence of Europe’s post-war boom. When the slowdown of capitalist growth set in in the early 70s, France was all too

quiet, limping along as the prospects for revolution faded. What most intellectuals – including the ones studied here – were likely to have noticed was the deterioration of social and political discourse, i.e. that the “great ideologies” – communism, Catholicism, and Gaullism – were losing traction. Their response was to construct a theoretical vocabulary by which the polis could be reinvested with meaning and political community could be imagined along new lines. New narratives would have to be invented for meeting these impasses head on. Intellectuals did so by reactivating a long tradition of anthropological thinking in France, drawing from its vast repertoire of themes and methodologies. As evidence for the character and breadth of “the anthropological turn”, I offer a systematic exploration of the work of four thinkers, Alain de Benoist, Marcel Gauchet, Emmanuel Todd, and Régis Debray, who span the ideological spectrum, which moves here from Right to Left. Treated separately, each thinker works through a set of problems delivered up by the multiple crises of the seventies, producing in response a novel political-anthropological system by the early eighties. Considered together, this unlikely quartet of figures reveals a remarkable uniformity of trajectory. Their visions of a new political order were not always coherent or attractive, but they do indicate new ways of thinking through impasses whose logic has been imperfectly understood.

Markers

The anthropological turn is a specific mode of political thought that treats contemporary human society as the expression or outgrowth of an antique and invariable social dynamic.

“Anthropology” is here used in its loosest sense, meaning both an inventory of human nature in all of its forms, but also the comparative study of primitive societies. The French tradition will tend to keep these usages separate, calling the first “anthropology” and the second “ethnology,”

whereas they are more typically conflated in the Anglo-American tradition.¹ A ramified genealogy of these concepts will be provided below. In the meantime, what I am calling the anthropological turn has a stock of methodological procedures, one being a refusal to accept rational choice paradigms in the human sciences. Each thinker of this foursome, for example, will excoriate classical liberalism's philosophy of *homo aeconomicus*, the idea that humans are rational actors with transparent motives and interests. This critical motif features most prominently in the work of New Rightist Alain de Benoist: liberalism's hollow promise of liberty and "false idea of equality lead to the stripping of man of his attachments, of all the inclusive tendencies that make him share in a collective identity."² Marxism is equally culpable in the eyes of Benoist, as it too partakes of this shallow, egalitarian anthropology. At the other end of the spectrum, Régis Debray attempted an ambitious rewriting of Marxism's philosophy of man, one that could at last account for the affective, sub-rational foundations of social cohesion. Symbols, myths, rites – historically the greatest stimuli to mass mobilization – had too long been overlooked in Marxism's preoccupation with the relations of production. Louis Althusser, the greatest French Marxist of his generation and Debray's friend and teacher, once wrote, "This rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific discovery."³ Debray ultimately agrees with this formulation, but regards it as a misfortune of Marxism, not as a triumph. We might see Debray's work from the 1970s and beyond as an attempt of fill in this missing picture.

¹ They are often translated interchangeably in English. The first chapter of Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*, "Histoire et ethnologie," is rendered as "History and Anthropology."

² Alain de Benoist, *Les idées à l'endroit* (Paris: Hallier, 1979), 87.

³ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 227.

More surprising perhaps is the disdain shown by the two liberals, Gauchet and Todd, for the economistic strand of liberalism. Todd, who anchors modern political and social arrangements in early-modern kinship relations, insists that “la vie économique” is “strongly modeled and regulated by anthropological systems, which provide an invisible and unconscious frame for the rational and calculating *homo aeconomicus*.”⁴ Economic motives have already been hard-wired into the socius. For Gauchet, there is something called “the political condition,” an ontological disposition toward a certain kind of social behavior whose purest expression could be traced back to primitive society. In his elemental struggle for social cohesion and political self-definition, primitive man revealed that social life was religious and political – because at bottom symbolic – before it was ever economic. It was the duty of any power holder in primitive society to refuse exchange and safeguard the political from the intrusion of the economic.⁵ In both instances, thus, a unique anthropological angle of vision leads to a break with conventional liberal prescriptions. Their pathways to liberalism terminate neither in a juridical, rights-based paradigm, nor in a deployment of utilitarian criteria – the familiar destinations of the Anglo-American tradition – but in a historically determined development of the political community. Ethical-juridical strictures are altogether missing from the work of Gauchet and Todd.⁶

The impasses of the 1970s led French thinkers to explore new political and intellectual options, and even to reconsider old ones. A close look at French thought in the post-68 period reveals an archaeological mission, an effort to unearth a specifically French set of

⁴ Emmanuel Todd, *l'Illusion économique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 20.

⁵ Marcel Gauchet, “Politique et société: la leçon des sauvages”, *La condition politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 101.

⁶ Gauchet’s complex relationship with the liberal tradition is captured best in a pair of commentaries on Benjamin Constant. See “Benjamin Constant: l’illusion lucide du libéralisme”, Benjamin Constant, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997): 11-110; “Constant: le libéralisme entre le droit et l’histoire”, *La condition politique*: 277-305.

anthropological references. Intellectual historians have rightly surveyed the importation of German thought and the transformations it wrought on the French intellectual tradition: existentialism, Althusserian Marxism, French psychoanalysis, but also certain strands of liberalism and sociology, were unthinkable without a formative German influence. The tendency has been rightly to study the transmission of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger within France as a major fault line of twentieth-century French thought.⁷ In this pursuit, however, France's relationship with its own intellectual tradition has been obscured. There was, for instance, the rediscovery of Tocqueville in the seventies, which gave renewed vigor to the liberal critique of the French Revolution and revitalized the study of democracy.⁸ Likewise did the thinkers of the anthropological turn excavate neglected or under-appreciated figures as a way of rubbing the political tradition against the grain. The presiding figure in Benoist's reimagining of European society is Georges Dumézil, the prolific French linguist-anthropologist and doyen of Indo-European studies. For Gauchet, the debt is two-fold: Tocqueville, on the one hand, who models a lucid and stereoscopic analysis of democracy, and the anthropologist Pierre Clastres on the other, who furnishes Gauchet with his idiosyncratic account of the relationship between the state and society. Todd's deployment of demographic criteria for the study of ideology is borrowed from the nineteenth-century social scientist Frédéric Le Play, author of a deeply conservative study of European kinship relations. Debray's plundering offers rich rereadings of

⁷ On Hegel, see Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Heidegger, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that Is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Geroulanos highlights the importance of anthropology for French thought in the interwar period, but specifically its negation by anti-humanists, who were steeped in Heidegger's thoroughly anti-anthropological philosophy.

⁸ Daniel Lindenberg, in his well-known polemic, noted how Claude Lefort, François Furet, and Blandine Kriegel – all liberals – were instrumental in reviving the work of Constant, Quinet, and Tocqueville in the 1970s. See *Le rappel à l'ordre. Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil and La République des Idées, 2002), 8.

Auguste Comte and an anthropologist of primitive society, André Leroi-Gourhan, yielding a highly original account of the relationship between religion and technology in modernity.⁹

Another methodological signature of this movement is the attempt to synthesize invariant, anthropological claims with historicist narratives. The effect would be to retain some of structuralism's ahistorical insights – claims about the static components of human society – without abandoning a developmental or historicist framework. Each thinker would reconfigure these variables in his own distinct way. From his most proximate reflections on 68, the 1969 essay “Time and Politics”, down to the present day, Régis Debray has deliberated carefully over the problem of historicity. His approach is given its most full-throated articulation in the *Critique of Political Reason* (1981): on the one side, group dynamics are determined by formalistic constraints that are static and exist outside of history, while on the other side, these dynamics are subjected to change as the cumulative force of technological innovation, the motor of history, exert different pressures on the group. In other words, history is not jettisoned by Debray, but is rather reformatted with an anthropological constant.

At the other end of the spectrum, Benoist would found his restorationist politics on a new conception of time, in which the deep past was accumulated in the present: “The question of knowing whether one can relive the past or not becomes irrelevant: the past-conceived-as-past lives on always in every present. It is one of the perspectives that enables man to elaborate his projects and forge his own destiny.”¹⁰ In the center, Todd and Gauchet would reperiodize the history of democracy, tracking its development on the scale of centuries. Todd, like Veblen,

⁹ This is not to say that the German influence completely dissolves. Benoist remains deeply indebted to Nietzsche and the philosophers of the German “Conservative Revolution”; Gauchet to Heidegger; Debray to Feuerbach, Marx and Benjamin. The point is that these are no longer *the* dominant figures of intellectual life.

¹⁰ Benoist, *Les idées à l'endroit*, 38.

Schumpeter, or Polanyi before him, is preoccupied with the pre-modern social arrangements that cross over into modernity and continue to inform political, social, and religious attitudes. It is the inverse tendency that interests Gauchet, the undoing and replacement of antique relations in modernity. The domestication of the once-unknowable future becomes the contemporary world's substitute for religion: "it allows us to believe, in the fullest sense of the term, and to reap the rewards of modern activism without losing those of ancient devotion."¹¹ For each thinker, the past – often the very deep past – is awarded a certain primacy as a structuring force of the present: old relations accumulate and sediment over time, irrespective of modernity's fantasy of a clean break.

The anthropological turn is not an ideology, rather a new approach to the study of late-capitalist political society. Much of its way of looking at the world is embedded in the methodological procedures described above. Apart from these formal innovations are a set of recurrent themes that need to be explored. These are: a new emphasis on the idea of the "political," a fixation on the role of religion in the shaping of late twentieth-century culture, and a preoccupation with the long-term fate of European culture (tending toward messages of reassurance).

The "political" refers to the idea that politics is a sphere of activity with its own laws and procedures, independent of prior determinations, whether economic, religious, or biological. The innovation can be attributed to Machiavelli, the first thinker to unfix political thought from any religious or organic moorings. With the rise of natural law theories in the seventeenth century, however, the political again would slide into a subordinate position; likewise for the moderns, especially liberals and Marxists, for whom political relations were reducible to economic ones.

¹¹ Marcel Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie*, tome I: *La Révolution moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 206. See also Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

The political made a powerful return to Western thought in the aftermath of the First World War, when it was marshaled by conservatives – like Carl Schmitt in Germany – and revolutionaries – like Lenin – as a protest against the weakly constituted liberal-parliamentary regimes of Europe. The revival of the political in France occurred on the one hand as a translation of Schmitt’s thought in the mid 1960s, undertaken by a Strasbourgian thinker close to Schmitt, Julien Freund.¹² Freund was later befriended by a young Alain Benoist in the early seventies, who took a keen interest in Schmitt’s work, incorporating it into his own philosophy, but also publishing translations and commentaries of his extensive *oeuvre*. Benoist would fuse Schmitt’s “political theology” with the cultural arrangements of the Indo-European peoples to formulate a new kind of political theory. Such a powerful synthesis of the political and the cultural could help salvage European society from the twin threats of socialism and liberalism.

On the other hand, the political was appropriated in the late sixties by a group of ex-communist, leftist intellectuals, foremost among them philosopher Claude Lefort and anthropologist Pierre Clastres. Independently and with very different reference points, they reached the same conclusion, here reported by Lefort: “only the intelligence of the political [*du politique*] could get us out of the positivist rut that Marxist theory and the social sciences had kept us in.”¹³ For both thinkers, political anthropology could uncover universal and irreducible features of the structure of social experience. Clastres put the political at the very origins of human society in his research on Amer-Indian chiefdom. He argued, contrary to existing anthropological canons, that primitive societies were not just stateless, but were specifically against the state – a refusal of power that revealed a complex political attitude among societies

¹² Freund’s greatest and most Schmittian text is *L’essence du politique* (Paris: Sirey, 1965).

¹³ Claude Lefort, “L’oeuvre de Clastres”, Miguel Abensour, ed. *L’esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 190.

that pre-existed the state.¹⁴ This insight was the impetus behind Gauchet's early work: "I was convinced", wrote Gauchet many years later, "that this enigma of primitive politics – politics in the apparent absence of politics – contained the keys to the intelligence of our political condition. It's on this wager that I staked my intellectual career. The rest came as a solution that I believed could answer this problem." Gauchet supplemented Clastres' work by focusing on the religious origins of political reason. In the religious structure of primitive societies, founded on the separation of the visible from the invisible, the here from the above, Gauchet detected the origins of the State. "In this primordial knot, the political and the religious illuminate one another."¹⁵

Debray took a more idiosyncratic route to the political. Contemplating the failure of Che Guevara's guerrilla campaign while serving a prison sentence in Bolivia, Debray concluded that class politics, in the last instance, had been no match for the livelier national sentiments of the Latin American people. Indeed, affective attachments – to nation, God, or community – would always trump interest-based calculations. Hence, a more penetrating political theory should excavate the conditions and fluctuations of belief within groups, and attempt "to capture the political in its embryonic state."¹⁶ Debray, though working within a Marxist tradition quite distant from Gauchet, would hit upon the same hidden identity of the religious and the political, traceable to the origins of human society. Unlike Gauchet, however, Debray will find a remedy for the contemporary hollowing out of the political in the form of secularized religious concepts, namely that of republican brotherhood, or *fraternité*.¹⁷ As for Todd, he is the only thinker for

¹⁴ Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l'état: recherches d'anthropologie politique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974). See especially chapter 1, "Copernic et les sauvages."

¹⁵ Marcel Gauchet, "Introduction", *La condition politique*, 13.

¹⁶ Régis Debray, *Critique de la raison politique, ou l'inconscient religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 25. For his reflections on Bolivia, see *Loués soient nos seigneurs: une éducation politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 248-258.

whom politics is not an autonomous sphere of activity, it being an outgrowth of pre-existing family patterns. Even so, Todd's underlying conception is quite similar: political action is determined before reflection, answering to an archaic, non-rational schema.

Religion is another common focal point among the four thinkers. All are professed atheists, but nevertheless remain fixated on religion's power in shaping the contours of modernity. For Todd, "religion is at the heart of all logical and historical interactions", acting as the pivot between the founding matrix of kinship relations and the modern ideological patterns that grow out of them. Secularization is structurally linked to literacy, and becomes inevitable once this threshold is crossed. But, argues Todd, religion is never entirely unmade since "Men instantly replace the vanishing image of the city of God with the new image of the ideal society."¹⁸ Political ideologies all have their roots in religious traditions. Benoist is the most implacably hostile to Judeo-Christian religion, but in so being, implicitly acknowledges its awesome longevity. As in Todd's analysis, it is not religious practice that survives, but the customs, habits, and mores – in short the *mentalités* – that prove so enduring in modernity. This is a problem for Benoist insofar as Judeo-Christian values have infused and corrupted the soul of European civilization, eclipsing its authentically pagan origins. Like Debray and Gauchet, Benoist holds the sacred to be an integral component of politics – if not its structuring force – and likewise provides his own anthropology of its laws of motion. Only by reappropriating the sacred along pagan lines, Benoist will argue, can Europe reverse the transvaluation of all values, and unmake its petty Judeo-Christian materialism.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Régis Debray, *Charles de Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 5; and Régis Debray, *Le moment fraternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

¹⁸ Emmanuel Todd, *L'invention de l'europe* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 94, 193.

¹⁹ Alain de Benoist, *Comment peut-on être païen?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981).

Debray and Gauchet occupy center stage in this discussion of religion. Gauchet has produced one of the most influential theories of secularization with *The Disenchantment of the World*, while Debray's frontal engagement with religion has carried over into public debate, particularly during the "head scarf" controversy. But more to the point, they defend polar opposite positions on the role of religion in the modern world, and once even debated these views in the pages of Gauchet's journal, *Le Débat*.²⁰ Debray contends that as the centrifugal forces of technological modernity accelerate, so must the need to maintain group cohesion, leading to a spike in religious identification. Thus, we find religion – historically the greatest mobilizing force mankind has known – acting as the centripetal mechanism of group solidarity across the world. Being more atomized, modernity has more need of enchantments to hold together. Gauchet, on the other hand, argues that the process of secularization began with the advent of monotheism around 3000 BC, and made its deepest inroads with the beginnings of the modern state in the late Middle Ages. The West has been living with disenchantment for centuries, any resurgence of religious enthusiasm – including its political pathologies, fascism and totalitarianism – being symptomatic aftershocks of this underlying transformation. Notwithstanding their considerable differences, both thinkers treat religion as the unconscious of politics, which obliges them to borrow from the anthropology of "primitive" peoples. In a way, all four thinkers are dealing with a problematic set out by Tocqueville nearly a century and a half before, namely whether modern politics – i.e., democracy – could survive without the binding "habits of the heart" provided by Christianity.

Culture, for each writer considered here, stands for more than just a loose collection of mores, habits, and artistic productions. It is taken by each in its more ancient sense, as a defense

²⁰ For comments on this exchange, see Michael Behrent, "Religion, Republicanism, and Depoliticization: Two Intellectual Itineraries—Régis Debray and Marcel Gauchet", in Julian Bourg, ed, *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

against nature and the elements. Absent this bulwark, societies undergo precipitous decline, and begin to lose their autonomy. Debray is the most alarmed by this unfolding, fearing, from the late 70s onward, the impending cultural immiseration of France. 68 unblocked the way for the processes of liberalization and mediatization, and within a decade, France's cultural integrity was under siege: intellectuals now sided with the established order, a wave of consumerism flushed away centuries of culture, and the proletariat – a key agent of France's national identity – was in the process of disappearing. Debray would be compelled, in light of these developments, to embrace a republican worldview that emphasized the role of nationalism and a strict republican education in the remaking of French culture. If we take cultural pessimism in this softer sense – not as nihilism, but as an implicit belief in the imminence of decline – then the others too partake of this tendency. Gauchet marks the year 1970 as the beginning of a new conjuncture in which the forces of disintegration are unleashed upon France with unsettling velocity. In this era of tawdry individualization and formalistic human rights, community and politics become empty shells of their former selves. Benoist's paradigm is also, as we have seen, one of steady decline, culture moving ever farther from its true destination in pagan antiquity. Even Todd's otherwise Whiggish narrative, which sees the pathologies of modernity resolved by the universalization of the literacy/democracy pairing, is darkened by clouds on the horizon. Two of Todd's two most recent works, *After the Empire* and *After Democracy*, conjure up a world on the brink of ruin, sucked into the vortex of finance capital and empire.

Never is the despair thoroughgoing, however. In all cases, the sense of decay is offset by an underlying optimism, a trust in the power of human institutions to lift France out of its malaise. Todd's picture of a world democratic peace is never actually blackened, and the reassuring message wins out in the end. On this point, the anthropological turn must be

distinguished from a sister movement, post-modernism, which shares the former's interest in archaic structures, but ultimately refuses its historical approach to social and political concepts. Famously, post-modernism claims to disengage from all "meta-narratives", finding solace in diffuse analytical structures – "webs" of language, semiotic "codes" – rather than the dualistic field of conflict common to "modernist" approaches (i.e. Marxism).²¹ The despair over the immobility (or banalizing hyper-mobility) of history was accompanied, for the post-moderns, by a utopian drive, a joyful submission to new forms of reality, whether the "hyper-reality" of Baudrillard, or the "libidinal economy" of Lyotard. The ludic ethos was anathema to our thinkers, who still nourished an underlying faith in history, politics, and culture to rescue modernity from its current malaise. Save for Benoist, who has been deliberately excluded from public culture for his extreme-right views, all have been leading voices in shaping public opinion, and indeed, without exception, have actively disseminated their ideas through different media (journals, cultural institutes, think tanks, etc.).

Roots

What are the deeper sources of this intellectual configuration? First, political anthropology as practiced by our thinkers is nothing new in the Western tradition. In fact, a strong argument could be made that much of modern thought is political anthropology, that the break from the late medieval corresponded to the "discovery" of non-European peoples in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The Americas, for example, formed a powerful backdrop to the political theory of More, Hobbes and Locke; in France, the line of thinking beginning with Montaigne

²¹ Fredric Jameson has noted post-modernism's obsession with genetic codes for example, and with cybernetic coils – braiding, looping structures without a rectilinear trajectory. See *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 155; and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 16.

and extending through Rousseau and Diderot was shaped around (imaginary) encounters with the non-European; and likewise in Germany and Italy, Herder, Kant, and Vico were, at some moments, more anthropologists than they were philosophers (indeed, the distinction between the two would have been unavailable to them). The revolution of modern thought was to have folded together both spatial and temporal comparison in the search for a new language of politics. In the past, these operations had been performed separately: for the purposes of taxonomy, many classical philosophers were interested in devising a synchronic grid of different political systems, while Renaissance thinkers like Machiavelli were occupied with diachronic analyses that could bring to light problems of time in the understanding of politics. Modern thought, by contrast, is the intertwining of these two comparative registers, the consequence being that the modern is unthinkable without both the antique and the far-away. They are embedded in its way of looking at the world.

It should come as no surprise that anthropology was at the heart of the Enlightenment philosophical project, whose aim it was to naturalize social relations. The “savage” of the Americas had proven useful as a foil to European decadence: unspoiled simplicity in contrast to Thomas More’s nobleman “who lived in idleness and luxury without doing any good to society.”²² But it was more than a device for criticizing European society, as historians of the Enlightenment have emphasized. It was also an ingenious technique for discovering, on a universal basis, the constitution of human behavior and the social modalities that could be deduced from it. Rousseau performed this theoretical reduction with incomparable elegance in the *Second Discourse*, peeling away the layers of society and culture that concealed the true characteristics of the human being.²³ Noting their regard for self-preservation and their natural

²² Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 19.

sympathy, Rousseau could envisage a political society that preserved the sentiments of natural man under artificial conditions. Anthropology thus enabled the construction of political community from a different and compelling vantage point.

In France, the anthropological tradition had always to contend with a powerful Cartesian rationalism, which was born of a new philosophy of the subject in the seventeenth century. Whereas the anthropological philosophy took up social questions, the Cartesian traditions tended to privilege the individual and his/her relationship to the world, providing a solid foundation for future developments in science and epistemology. Both currents had separately influenced the philosophy of the Revolution, and would continue to flourish well after the First Republic, banking the prestige garnered during the *Siècle des Lumières*. Naturally, both would change in complexion over the nineteenth century. The anthropological tradition made greater strides toward professionalization: from anthropology – roughly, the study of human nature – it moved toward ethnology, the comparative study of racial or ethnic groups. Even where not explicitly informed by ethnological criteria, many of the social-scientific masterpieces of France's nineteenth century – principally Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* – appropriated this outlook as if unconsciously. But its professionalization had less to do with individual thinkers, and more to do with institutional demands, the University, obviously, but also the State. The colonial bureaucracy in Algeria, for example, sponsored ethnographic studies – keeping a close eye on the reports, redacting them if necessary – that would capture local populations in their irreducible otherness. As such would the natives be marketed to the French people, and made to feel the guiding hand of progress.²⁴ If the projects of anthropology and ethnology were conflated

²³ Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 33-34.

in France, it had much to do with the construction of its empire and the retrospective links to the eighteenth century: enlightened universalism required an anthropological excavation not only to develop a true image of the human being, but also a comparative diagram of human progress.

It is with Émile Durkheim, at the century's end, that ethnology achieves its enormous prestige in the French tradition. He endows it with greater rigor and systematicity, enlarges its scope, in effect combining sociology, anthropology, and the study of religion into one discipline, but also, and perhaps most importantly, placing it in the service of a left, social-democratic politics. Durkheim's most proximate influence was Auguste Comte, a protean figure who made an earlier, if highly idiosyncratic fusion of anthropology and (what we now call) sociology at mid century. Comte had been a follower Saint-Simon, and later founded an all-encompassing scientific system, positivism. His late work, however, shifted away from its scientific foundations, much to the disappointment of his admirers like Mill, into the mistier "religion of humanity" to search for "a systematic basis of an Anthropology, or true science of man."²⁵ In retrospect, Comte had not so much abandoned the rigorous study of society as broadened it to include new fields of research and new analytics.

More vital yet to Durkheim's thought were Rousseau and Montesquieu, the former appealing to his anthropological side with the conjectural history of man, the latter to his sociological side with the careful typology of political systems.²⁶ This is not in itself enough to explain Durkheimian sociology's appropriation of ethnology. We would also have to consider

²⁴ George R. Trumbull IV, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44-45; Alice Conklin, "The New 'Ethnology' and 'La Situation Coloniale' in Interwar France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, 2 (Summer 2002): 29-46.

²⁵ Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, vol. II (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1875-1877), 356.

²⁶ These debts are made perfectly clear in a posthumous text, Émile Durkheim, *Montesquieu et Rousseau: précurseurs de la sociologie* (Paris: Rivière et Cie, 1966).

how the inclusion of ethnographic research allowed Durkheim to effectively oppose the reactionary politics of nineteenth-century ultra conservatives, Louis de Bonald and Joseph Maistre, which had developed in response to the French Revolution. For they too had posed a theory of organic group solidarity, but theirs was in the service of a conservative message: to emphasize the importance of the group's submission to a higher authority (i.e. the monarchy or the Papacy).²⁷ Marshaling ethnographic research could provide Durkheim with a way of both reinforcing the sacred nature of the group and of outmaneuvering the counter-revolutionary proto-sociologists, whose social philosophy lacked proper analytical depth.

Durkheim's endowment to French social science was far-reaching, on the order of Weber's influence on German thought. Politically, his sociology was aligned with a late nineteenth-century republican project, backing "science" over religion, rule by law over arbitrary authority, and group solidarity over individual liberty.²⁸ This last point is more ambiguous, as Durkheim was a thoroughgoing rationalist who believed strongly in the value of individual liberty – a liberal of a more conventional sort in this respect. And yet, the solidaristic side of his work, which became more pronounced in his later years, was dissonant with that very same liberal tradition. As one commentator notes, "Durkheim's extreme valorization of the collective placed sociology at odds with the dominant economic and political individualism of liberal theory."²⁹ His affront to the heroic tradition of individualism and its attendant liberal economic philosophy would be internalized by the coming century of social thought, as would his abiding preoccupation with the social as the dominant unit, fused together through organic links. Weber,

²⁷ Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 111.

²⁸ Claude Nicolet, *L'Idée républicaine en France, 1789 – 1924: essai critique d'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 312-324.

²⁹ Richman, *Sacred Revolutions*, 111.

for instance, undertook an ambitious investigation of non-European societies and their religions, but his analysis led in an entirely different direction, equally influential to the German tradition. He had privileged the believer's subjective point of view, the motivations leading him or her to act in a certain way, whereas Durkheim was far more attentive to the social function of these beliefs at the level of the group.³⁰

Though Durkheim cannot convincingly be accused of ahistoricism in his sociology, he tended to focus on the ways that religion acted to reinforce the stability of societies. Another quick comparison with his German analogue will underscore the point. Weber foregrounded the components of religion that were the potential source of dynamic social change. Magical forces, for instance, were not independently capable of guiding human destiny, but religious forces were.³¹ From this hypothesis, Weber could make further deductions about a given society's propensity for change, whether and how it could develop modern economic and political institutions. Hinduism provided a barrier to capitalist development in India, for example; Protestantism a spur to it in Western Europe. Durkheim, by contrast, remains fixated on what religions help societies to preserve, "by what principle are maintained the lives of the clan's people, the lives of the animals or plants of the totemic species."³² This analytic would tend to emphasize static, rather than dynamic social processes. In both respects – that is, on the question of groups and of historicism – Durkheim furnishes a rock-solid foundation for the century to come, and certainly for the thinkers of the anthropological turn, all of whom borrow from Durkheim's intellectual treasury. Finally, there is the enduring legacy of his late masterpiece,

³⁰ See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), and the helpful introduction by Talcott Parsons.

³¹ Parsons, "Introduction," *Ibid.*, xxx.

³² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 206.

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912), where Durkheim formulates the sacred/profane dichotomy with reference to the totemic religions of Australia. This is the axis of religious thought for Durkheim, dividing the world into two genera: “sacred things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance what is sacred.”³³ It is difficult to overstate the impact this conception would make on generations to follow. Durkheim’s own circle, gathered around his journal *L’année sociologique*, quickly adopted the distinction as the dominant paradigm of its sociological investigations. Robert Hertz made it the touchstone of his great study on right-handedness, the supremacy of which “is at once an effect and a necessary condition of the order which govern and maintains the universe” – a residue of primitive thought’s inherent dualism.³⁴ But it was Marcel Mauss, nephew and star pupil of Durkheim, who bent the original framework into a shape that would be enormously appealing for social thought during the interwar period.

Mauss’s most celebrated text, *The Gift* (1923), was the first systematic and comparative study of gift exchange in primitive societies. It presented this social phenomenon in its complete totality – an approach Lévi-Strauss and others have claimed distinguished Mauss from his uncle. With archaic gift exchange, Mauss was able to see the moral, juridical, aesthetic, religious, political, and mythological implications of the primitive “economy.” The totalizing approach was only one reason for the appeal of *The Gift*. Another was Mauss’s idea of treating the economy in its archaic form, as a matter of symbolic exchange. His text was a register of all that had been lost in interpersonal communication with the modern development of a rational, money-centered economy. Elegiac as Mauss’s conclusion may have seemed, he was not a

³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁴ Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960), 110.

primitivist, and maintained, like his uncle, an image of human progress. Modernity might make *homo œconomicus* into “a calculating machine,” but it would also transform him into “the moral man, the man of duty, the scientific man, the reasonable man.”³⁵

So it was very much against the conclusions of Mauss that the Collège de sociologie announced its mission to reactivate the sacred in the late 1930s. Their terms and inspiration were drawn from Mauss and Durkheim, as were their theoretical premises: society was over-rationalizing, moving ever farther from the sacred. The thinkers of the Collège – Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris – were distraught at this prospect. These were left-leaning figures on the margins of intellectual life – Bataille, a librarian at the National Library, Leiris, employed at the Musée de l’homme – who were united “in response to the general ambience of paralysis and doom” afflicting France in the late 30s.³⁶ They formed as a group in 1937, just in the wake of the Popular Front’s failures – a time of retreat for the Left.³⁷ Anxious that social life was coming to end, the Collège enjoined its readers to indulge in rituals of “collective effervescence,” another Durkheimian concept. Festivals, which allow people to engage in orgiastic outbursts of idleness; excessive expenditure, which recover the pleasures of non-productive outflow; the “practice of joy before death”; mystical experiences; “ecstatic contemplation”: these were modes of being that re-enchanted society. Their common denominator was an idea of the sacred as an agency fostering the “communication between beings, and thereby the formation of new beings.”³⁸ As an avant-garde intellectual movement,

³⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 74.

³⁶ Richman, *Sacred Revolutions*, 119.

³⁷ Denis Hollier, ed, *The College of Sociology, 1937-1939*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xxiv, xiii.

the Collège was marginal and short-lived in its day, its members dispersing in 1939. While the thinkers of the anthropological turn seldom drew from the Collège's work, it is unlikely that the prestige of the sacred – so central to their own work – would have been possible without Bataille and company.

Finally, the figure to have single-handedly elevated the reputation of anthropology in the post-war period was Claude Lévi-Strauss. Like the Collège thinkers,³⁹ he placed himself in the lineage of Durkheim, who “incarnated the essence of France’s contribution to social anthropology,” and of Mauss, who “freed” it of its provincialisms and applied it to the study of society as a whole. Lévi-Strauss’s own work assumed a unity of both the anthropological and ethnological perspectives. The former, he claimed, could provide an “inventory” of human nature, “a conversation of man with man,” without conflicting with the mission of the latter, “to reconstruct the past of primitive societies.” The project of Rousseau and the *philosophes* is thus reborn in Lévi-Strauss: to study, on a universal level, what we share in common as human beings, and how we differ, at a particular level, as members of a cultural unit.⁴⁰ Lévi-Strauss’s codicil is that we suspend all moral judgments on these differences, cultural relativism being preferable to the old evolutionist narratives that justified European colonialism. If Lévi-Strauss vastly enlarged the scope and prestige of anthropology by purging it of its colonial associations and renewing its moral imperatives, he also did so by infusing it with a structuralist methodology, borrowed from the discipline of linguistics. As legal scholar Alain Supiot notes,

³⁸ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116-129, 236-237, 251.

³⁹ Stefanos Geroulanos has connected the intellectual foundations of structuralism to an interwar “antifoundational” anthropology, purveyed by Bataille among others. He mentions that Lévi-Strauss was a “participant” of the Collège, and that the latter greatly supported the former’s post-war ascendancy. See Geroulanos, *op cit.*, 308.

⁴⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. II, trans. Monique Layton (Chicago: University Press, 1983), 4, 9, 11, 12, 24.

“the strength of the linguistic model for Lévi-Strauss was to bring to light such syntactic and morphological laws, of which we are not conscious.”⁴¹ The mission of anthropology was to unearth the universal laws that regulated the activities of the human mind. The appeal of this methodology was far-reaching, affecting virtually every discipline in the French academy during the heyday of structuralism.

That appeal had begun to deteriorate by the late 60s, one of Lévi-Strauss’s own students, Pierre Clastres, noting that “this elegant discourse, often very rich, does not speak about society.” Clastres’s response was categorical: “We want to talk about society, tell us about the society!”⁴² Each thinker of the anthropological turn (and many of their contemporaries) would likewise bemoan the hermetic tendencies of structuralism, its inability to pose questions that pertained to the world. There were new impasses and crises to consider after 68, and structural analyses were inadequate to meet the challenge. For one, the role of the State came under question in the aftermath of 68, provoking anthropological thought to use a more political angle of vision. One way of approaching this question was to study stateless societies, which might shed new light on the nature and function of the West’s less-than-transparent state, and help lay new foundations for the understanding of politics. At the same moment, anthropologists in the US and Britain turned their attention on Europe for the first time, confirming in a sense what the anthropological turn already knew, that the world was turned upside down, that Europe could no longer look on the rest of the world with a sense of superiority, as it once had in the eighteenth century. Decolonization, but also the onset of the long downturn undermined Europe’s satisfied triumphalism. Lévi-Strauss’s work sensed this transformation, and its somber outlook on

⁴¹ Alain Supiot, *Homo Juridicus: On the Anthropological Function of Law*, trans. Saskia Brown (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 63.

⁴² Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 224.

European history attracted a great deal of sympathy in France. One of his future collaborators remembered being “sensitive to the pessimism, to this end-of-the-road aspect” of Lévi-Strauss’s thought.⁴³

This sense of malaise, of vanishing horizons of growth within Europe, led the thinkers of the anthropological turn to create a new philosophy of the subject that was neither structuralist nor neo-humanist, but shared aspects of both. The neo-humanists, in reaction to structuralism’s proclamation of the “death of man” and belief in the absolute contingency of the subject, posited a restoration of the autonomous human actor in the 1980s, a lucid, transparent self fully accountable for his or her actions. The anthropological turn took a middle road, disclosing a rational, self-conscious subject whose constitution was nevertheless determined in ways that escaped his or her notice. Debray and Gauchet will speak of heteronomy as a fundamental condition of human existence in society, and will sometimes regard it as a virtue – a condition for realizing a new sense of community. Todd and Benoist too are inclined to see the archaic constraints on our autonomy as positive signifiers: familial and cultural attachments continue to structure group behavior, acting as a break on the centrifugal forces of modernity. Conceiving the subject in this way immunized the anthropological turn from the rhetoric of human rights, and forestalled any easy rapprochement with such juridical paradigms. The tendency to characterize the post-68 period simply as the “return of the actor” would thus appear premature, missing as it does this important collectivist current of thought.⁴⁴

⁴³ Michel Izard quoted in Patrick Wilcken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 217.

⁴⁴ For a lucid deconstruction of this concept (here, in the context of film), see Jean-Pierre Garnier, “Le social sans la politique”, *L’homme et la société* 142 (October-December 2001): 65-89.

Impasses

The next task is to link the germination of the anthropological turn to the multiform crisis of the 70s in France. Marxist critics, but especially Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, have made the greatest strides in elucidating a “late capitalist” paradigm that could account for the rise of post-modernism in art and philosophy. Post-modernism, even if the most generalized and recognizable of them, may not be the only intellectual mutation that has emerged from the helix of global capitalism in the late twentieth century. Taking a closer look at France in the 70s, we get a sense of how thought reacted not only to the onset of downturn in the advanced industrial economies, but to a series related of social and cultural impasses. Turbulence in the regime of production and accumulation might generate turbulent modes of thought, as Harvey argues with respect to postmodernism. But it may in fact produce its opposite tendency, sending thinkers on the search for firmer ground in the domain of political theory – toward an anthropological constant. The prestige of the anthropological tradition in France did not guarantee that its intellectuals would make this turn, but it certainly increased the likelihood. With the rumbling turbulence of the 70s, a powerful intellectual-cultural tradition was unlocked and remade in France.

All four writers sensed a seismic shift in the underlying social structure of France, namely the vanishing of the proletariat as a significant historical actor.⁴⁵ On this point, there is an arresting convergence of their thought in the late 70s. Todd’s *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (1979) predicted the coming dissolution of the Communist Party, as the proletariat became fully

⁴⁵ The literature in French on this topic is rich and extensive. See André Gorz, *Métamorphose de travail: critique de la raison économique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004, c1988); Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière: enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard*. (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

integrated into capitalism. The sexual revolution of the sixties, according to Todd, had stabilized the working class, liquidating the pathologies that had kept it on the margins of society for nearly a century. That no demonstrations took place after the crisis hit in 1973, that no gains were made by the PCF in the election of 1974, in spite of a spike in unemployment, was proof that France was on its way to realizing its true petty-bourgeois origins. This normalization would spoil only if the Socialist Party chose to exploit what was certain to be a trying time psychologically for the proletariat.⁴⁶ Debray's narrative is nearly identical to Todd's, but the valuation is inverted: individuality, consumerism, and the death of the proletariat, instead of saving France from imminent ruin, would undermine its cultural and political integrity. Debray foresaw that this sociological shift would endanger the PCF's survival, and lead it to adopt a series of desperate ploys, including sabotaging the Union of the Left. In his *Lettre aux communistes français* (1978), he publicly announces his break from the PCF, and there explains why any intelligent program of the left would have to abandon the doxa of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", and move under the Socialist banner.

The right side of the political spectrum was less stricken over the impact of the proletariat's disappearance in the mid-seventies. For Benoist, reflecting on May 68 ten years later, there would be no sequel to the May Movement. The most intelligent factions of the Left perceived what was already in the offing, that "the proletariat dreamed of only one thing: to become bourgeois". Having lost its principal sources of political and intellectual legitimacy – working-class solidarity and decolonization – the Left descended into crisis, "militantism spinning its wheels, factional schisms multiplying, electoral results becoming thinner and thinner."⁴⁷ The space opened by the declining Left could be filled by an ascending Right. It was

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Todd, *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (Paris: Laffont, 1979), 258, 18, 265.

time to “think without” Marx and Freud, and return to Nietzsche. Gauchet’s position in the late seventies is subtler. In “Tocqueville, America, and Us” (1980), he pays homage to the proletariat as one of the greatest forces of equality in history, asking rhetorically, “Did it not, by and large, fulfill its *real* historical mission, rather in spite of its ideological mission of total emancipation: to include as social partners in the collective process those who were previously reduced to silence and kept outside of social decision making?” Again, the proletariat is socially and politically absorbed by capitalism. That it should not continue to exist in the future is a mark of democracy’s success, for this implies that its work has already been accomplished: “the specific problem posed by the existence of a proletariat exterior to civil life has in large part been resolved.”⁴⁸ A proletariat fully adjusted to capitalism is no longer a proletariat, but a normalized group functioning within the democratic system. Thus, for all the thinkers concerned, the crisis of the proletariat is the occasion to rethink the terms of politics and history.

By far the most influential discursive event of the mid-seventies was what historian Michael Scott Christofferson has called “the anti-totalitarian moment” – the assault mounted by the non-communist Left against the united political party of the Socialists and Communists, the “Union of the Left.” As Christofferson shows with great care, it was not the revelations of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* that alarmed the moderate Left – for much of this had already been known – rather it was the PCF’s vicious attack of it, rousing fears that the PCF was poised to take control of the Union with the PS and forge a new intellectual hegemony. As a rhetorical strategy meant to thwart this possibility, leading thinkers of the non-communist Left invoked the concept of “totalitarianism”, the idea that the PCF, if given control of government, would impose a repressive regime of socialism similar to that of the USSR. By the end of the seventies, as

⁴⁷ Alain de Benoist, “Postface: Mai 68”, *Les idées à l’endroit*, 292-293.

⁴⁸ Gauchet, *La Condition politique*, 378.

Christofferson correctly notes, a consensus emerged around this concept, such that Foucault, Domenach, but also the New Philosophers, and François Furet, “either embraced or tolerated the conclusion that communism, Marxism, and revolution were totalitarian.”⁴⁹ Even though Mitterrand eked out a victory in the election of 1981, the intellectual legitimacy of his program had been undermined by the entirely successful anti-totalitarian counter-revolution waged by the moderate Left and Center.⁵⁰

The account of the anti-totalitarian moment offered here expands on and deepens the one presented by Christofferson. Whereas his focuses on the genealogy of “totalitarianism” as a rhetorical device in a bitter political struggle, mine investigates the intellectual consequences of this deployment, which were more far-reaching than Christofferson imagined. For not only had the non-communist Left assimilated and purveyed this discourse, but so had sectors of the Right and Marxist Left. Every member of the quartet studied here felt compelled to frame their *opera magna* in the late seventies/early eighties around the concept of totalitarianism (or at least to critically interrogate it). Only Debray (among the quartet) was aware of its scare-crow effect, writing, “*Totalitarianism* serves much the same function in the arsenal of our political science as *fanaticism* did in that of the Enlightenment or *totemism* in primitive anthropology: it is both an excuse for mis-recognition and a rite to ward off evil.”⁵¹ The pervasiveness of the “totalitarian” discourse was such that it commanded a theoretical response from nearly everyone, even those who dismissed it as ideological smoke and mirrors.

⁴⁹ Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: the Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 20.

⁵⁰ Mitterrand won by a three point margin after finishing second to Giscard in the first round.

⁵¹ Régis Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 1983), 11 (italics in original).

The other three were, at least in the late-seventies, zealously anti-totalitarian. Christofferson is correct insofar as the liberals were the most enthusiastic in brandishing this cudgel. Todd's *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (1979), for example, perfectly illustrates Christofferson's thesis: it identifies the PCF as a totalitarian threat to France's way of life, and suggests that a victory by the Union of the Left in 1981 would turn France into a Soviet-like state. To focus solely on this localized "moment", however, is to miss the ways that anti-totalitarianism figured as a cornerstone in Todd's subsequent work. *La Troisième planète* (1983) is an ambitious mapping of world ideologies and their corresponding roots in certain family structures. And yet this text, which would help establish Todd's reputation as a serious scholar, remains intellectually beholden to the "totalitarian" concept. Constantly Todd returns to the claim that nuclear-type family systems, such as are found in Anglo-Saxon world and parts of France, are "incapable of engendering political and ideological forms of totalitarianism."⁵² Likewise, the implied goal of Todd's kinship-based anthropology is to offer an alternative explanation for the worldwide attachment to communism, one that demolishes the Marxist myth of class struggle. "Totalitarianism" would eventually disappear from his work after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but its formative role in Todd's political theory is indisputable.

As for our other liberal, Gauchet, he occupies pride of place as the most committed anti-totalitarian in France. Christofferson awards this honor to Furet, who indeed wrote one of the more influential texts of anti-totalitarianism, *Penser la Révolution française*, but in the last instance, there is no comparison with Gauchet, who was and remains absolutely fixated on the concept. It appears with metronomic regularity from Gauchet's first articles in the mid-seventies down to the present. His most recent work, *À l'épreuve des totalitarismes, 1914-1974* (2010) is easily its most thorough, if turgid monument to date in France. In a sense, Gauchet was ideally

⁵² Emmanuel Todd, *La Troisième planète. Structures familiales et systèmes idéologique* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 119.

situated to perform in this capacity: a young thinker apprenticed in Caen under Claude Lefort – a leading theorist of the concept – but also close to Furet at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociale*.⁵³ His attachment to “totalitarianism” is a function of his unique political anthropology, which holds that the political community, in its purest form, is constituted in such a way as to repudiate power reflexively. Stateless societies are self-governing, stable entities that are only nominally run by a leader. Only with the development of the state was the primitive dream of “self-management” threatened, and eventually consumed by this external menace.

Totalitarianism was thus a natural trajectory for the state conceived as such. While Gauchet may have adopted “totalitarianism” in the context of inter-factional political debates in the mid-seventies, this idea has a much deeper intellectual resonance in his *oeuvre*, mapping on, quite handily, to his articulation of political anthropology.

Benoist, on the far right, fully endorsed the “totalitarian” construct in his writings from the mid-seventies. Here, its polemical function is indistinguishable from the intellectual project of Benoist and the New Right: to stigmatize many of the West’s philosophical commitments as corrupt and dangerous, and begin to rally around a different set of ideas. “Totalitarianism” was perfectly suited for this task, provided it was understood in a certain way, as a logic that pervaded certain ideological systems, and not simply as a matrix of the political. In “Totalitarisme égalitaire” (1977), he writes, “totalitarianism is not the natural product of the exercise of power. Nor is it a permanent avatar of the human passions. Totalitarianism is rather the product of *l’esprit égalitaire*, and its corollary, *l’esprit économique*.” We have, it would appear, a revisionist anti-totalitarianism on our hands, shifting responsibility away from the field of political action, whose dignity Benoist would like to preserve, onto that of economic relations.

⁵³ For Lefort’s writings on the concept, see principally *Les formes de l’histoire: essais d’anthropologie politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), and *Essais sur le politique: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

There is nothing inherently wrong with the political, claims Benoist. Looking at the pagan world we see societies governed by ideas and customs that “were natural to them, a certain conception of the world being lived out in a way that was coextensive with their social activity.”⁵⁴ It was modernity that disrupted this scheme, introducing universalist ideologies – monotheism, economism, democracy – that eventually overpowered local political arrangements. The irony is that Benoist is using anti-totalitarian rhetoric against the anti-totalitarians (and not exclusively against the communist Left, as Christofferson supposed). The principal target is the New Philosophers, who, according to Benoist, fundamentally misrecognized the totalitarian phenomenon when they insisted that one must choose Jerusalem over Athens, i.e. fuse politics with morality. Their pieties gave renewed legitimacy to the gauzy politics of human rights, a sure sign, for Benoist, of the West’s decadence.

Signs of a deeply seated intellectual crisis were everywhere. To many thinkers of the 70s, it appeared as though a definite phase of history was coming to an end, and that the future had something entirely new in store. The same conditions of thought we now associate with the global post-89 conjuncture, namely the sense of history’s exhaustion, of moving beyond “ideological” politics, were visited upon France a decade earlier, but with more urgency, since they were, in a sense, happening at home. Reactions were varied: the postmodernists prophesied, or at least fantasized, the end of history; many liberals saw it as the end of French exceptionalism and an invitation to take up philosophy along Anglo-American lines (in fact, another variation on the end of history); and finally, the anthropological turn seized upon this occasion to reformulate the grammar of political thought as it had been known in France.

Another symptom of this crisis was a system-wide attempt to rethink the state, or even sovereignty *tout court*. The message many on the Left had taken away from 68 was that the state

⁵⁴ Benoist, *Les idées à l’endroit*, 160, 159.

was invariably a reactionary body, and that power ought to be exercised locally by autonomously run worker organizations. The anti-totalitarian myth, of course, fed directly into this ethos. Foucault and others would write of a certain “state-phobia” by the late 70s.⁵⁵ A backlash, however, would soon emerge, as some discerned that a reduced role for the state might produce undesirable consequences, allowing for greater privatization and weakening France’s position in international politics. At the forefront of this flurry of writing about the state were Foucault, Nicos Poulantzas, and Blandine Kriegel, all of whom defended radically different positions. That they could and did was a token of the state’s ambiguous role in this period, an uncertainty that resonated in the thinking of the anthropological turn. Compounding this programmatic uncertainty was a nagging anxiety about France’s role in the world at large. Our thinkers were attentive to the shifting sands of geo-political solidarities – the imminent decline of the Soviet Union, the end of decolonization in 1975 with the US’s defeat in Vietnam – and how this would affect France’s place therein. Should it move toward greater integration into the European matrix, slide under the American umbrella, or simply go it alone?

These concerns would crescendo during the administrations of Mitterrand and Chirac. Both, but especially the first, were faced with difficult questions about France’s geo-political commitments: the decisions to join the European Monetary System and NATO in the early 1980s, the Maastricht controversy concerning the adoption of a single currency in the 1990s. On these issues, each thinker of the quartet would take a resolute stance, which in most cases could be traced back to the political-anthropological template each had drafted during the crisis-ridden seventies. Debray’s stalwart republicanism, eschewing both European integration and the Atlantic Alliance, emerged directly from his political anthropology of the human collective: no

⁵⁵ See *inter alia*, Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2004), 78.

political unit could function as the appendage of another. Therefore, the state – an ambiguous entity for Debray – must carve out a decisive program of national autonomy, and maintain firm control over its nuclear arsenal – the means of its autonomy. Todd performs the greatest volte-face of the group, beginning as an anti-Soviet crusader, writing enthusiastically of France’s assimilation into the European Union. By the millennium, he is a committed national-republican, excoriating both free-market policies and US imperialism, while also composing impassioned *apologia* for state-run protectionism.⁵⁶ The underlying pillars of his thought, however, remained fixed: the anthropology of the family is still the *grille de lecture* for ideological formations.

Where Todd and Debray share an affinity for republicanism, they also share a critique of American empire. For both, its domination over the world market menaces the cultural and economic autonomy of France (and other nations). This position is more surprising in Todd, who can hardly be pegged as a rabid anti-American (though he often is). *After the Empire*, a bestseller across Europe, portrays the US as a superpower gone wild, using its asymmetric military and financial power to exact “tribute” from the rest of the world so as to compensate for its declining manufacturing advantage. A colossus, the US will soon alienate its remaining allies, lose its competitive edge on the world market, and make way for a fast-emerging Eurozone. Debray, on the other hand, is an anti-American by conviction. His credentials speak for themselves: from fighting “yanqui” in Cuba and Bolivia in the 1960s, all the way down to his brilliant satire of the Atlantic Alliance, *L’Édit de Caracalla* (2002), his position has been

⁵⁶ Though skeptical of the Euro, Todd is politically committed to the idea of European integration. Consider the following passage from *Après la démocratie*, “L’Europe cependant pourrait être bien autre chose. Entre le déclin des États-Unis et l’arrivée à maturité de la Chine, elle représente à nouveau, et pour quelques décennies encore, la concentration la plus considérable de savants, d’ingénieurs, de techniciens et d’ouvriers qualifiés de la planète.” Emmanuel Todd, *Après la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 251.

unyielding.⁵⁷ Typically, the critique is simply assumed in his texts, and rarely has Debray engaged in a sustained analysis of American society or politics. One exception is *Les empires contre l'europe*, an impassioned Gaullist breviary written under the auspices of the un-Gaullist Mitterrand. Here, Debray outlines a statecraft that could outmaneuver the rival superpowers and preserve France's national autonomy (and this meant, controversial at the time, a firm adhesion to its nuclear program). Embedded in this account is a lucid comparison of the Soviet and American empires, the first slated to fall, the second to rise.

Benoist was in favor of greater European integration, but strictly on a cultural level. He writes in 1979, "If Europe does not become a united, autonomous, willful, and sovereign power, its inhabitants will no longer make history; it will be made for them by others. ... European culture, like all cultures, is self-sufficient."⁵⁸ This cultural program was thinkable only by virtue of the pre-existing inner unity of Indo-European cultures – a schema that gave Benoist and the New Right a lasting basis for opposing the dominion of foreign powers like the US, but also for decrying the cultural imprint of immigrant communities in France. As a critic of the United States, Benoist is perhaps the most implacable and vicious among the quartet, lashing out not only against the empire, but also against the "American way of life" – its puritan origins, its noxious egalitarianism. In its imperial form, according to Benoist, the US is a consumerist behemoth tramping liberal-materialist values across the world, unmaking native cultural formations wherever its feet land. Strangely enough (for someone of Benoist's political sensibilities), Europe finds itself allied with the Third World, as both are sandwiched between the great superpowers, struggling for cultural autonomy. In *Europe, Tiers monde, même combat*,

⁵⁷ For more personal reflections on his relationship with the United States, see "Un 'anti-Américain' à New York", *Contretemps: Éloges des idéaux perdus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 82-118.

⁵⁸ Alain de Benoist, "L'Europe retrouvée", in Maiastra, *Renaissance de l'Occident?* (Paris: Plon, 1979), 313-315.

Benoist argues if “Europe is to come in to its own, it must engage in dialogue along the North-South axis, and break the East-West dialectic.”⁵⁹ The theoretical inspiration for Benoist’s counter-geometry of world politics is Régis Debray, a leading thinker of North-South cooperation. Of course, an entirely different politics underlies this convergence of thought.

Gauchet is the sole member of the quartet to have supported France’s rapprochement with the US. In some sense, he remains tethered to an idea of the West, of Europe and America sharing a common historical destiny that is inscribed in their “genetic program”.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, we can still see Gauchet as working within the terms of the anthropological turn, that is, as making an argument for the autonomy of a cultural-political unity. If the anthropological turn is the attempt to rethink autonomous political collectives along an anthropological axis, then a critique of American empire is a sensible position, given that the US is often seen as a menace to this autonomy. This holds equally for Todd and Debray, who operate, roughly, within the context of the nation-state. For Gauchet on the other hand, the relevant political-cultural unit is much larger, stretching to include the entire bloc of the West. Conflict happens not between neighborhood, nations, or regions, but between civilizations; encroachment comes by way of interference from other religions, or ways of life. This is to say that Gauchet’s pro-American stance is not completely at odds with the *topoi* of the anthropological turn, but plays out as an interesting variation on one of its key outcomes.

Finally, the effects of the economic downturn will not be perceived immediately by the thinkers considered here, none of whom, save for Todd at certain moments, show much of an

⁵⁹ Alain de Benoist, *Europe, Tiers monde, même combat* (Paris: Laffont, 1986), 223. For the New Right’s place in the ecology of anti-Americanism, see Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 217-218.

⁶⁰ Marcel Gauchet, *La condition politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 402. This appears in a 2005 post-script to Gauchet’s 1980 essay on Tocqueville, “Tocqueville, l’Amérique et nous.” See also, *La Révolution moderne*, 43-44.

affinity for political economy. Nevertheless, we find among their writings intuitions of a social-economic paradigm shift. Gauchet will write that by the 1980s, “the market regains its legitimacy, monetarism imposes its formulae, and the financial industry takes off. An immense transformation of the industrial and entrepreneurial apparatus develops amidst the distress, providing for the emergence of a new technical regime centered on computers and information.”⁶¹ Meanwhile, urges Gauchet, “the previously established equilibrium between politics, law, and history is broken. Everything will be remade.”⁶² Debray too senses post-industrial shifts in the regime of production. Once capitalism had successfully pacified the working class and exhausted the usefulness of the nation-state, the 68 revolts helped ease its transition to the age of information, where it became international, financial, and cultural. “What good is a cult of work”, muses Debray, “when the principal source of surplus value is no longer in the quantity of labor provided, but in its technological quality, that is, in the grey matter employed?”⁶³ In its “mediatic” phase, capitalism unmakes the present’s relationship with the past, and short circuits the institutional mechanisms that ensure group cohesion and provide some semblance of meaning to life. Debray’s subsequent work oscillates between two registers: one scientific, laying bare the machinery of mediatic capitalism, the other public, giving voice to a passionately defended republican politics. In the latter capacity, Debray recreates a republican-socialist mythology, brilliantly illustrating how tradition can be used to serve radical ends.

⁶¹ Marcel Gauchet, *La Démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), vii.

⁶² Gauchet, *La Révolution moderne*, 11.

⁶³ Régis Debray, “Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire” (1978), reprinted in *Mai 68, une contre-révolution réussie* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2008), 27-28.

Conclusions

Narratives of the post-68 period have been dominated by different versions of a triumphant liberalism. One tendency, reflected in both Anglo-American and French scholarship, is to see the seventies as a period of welcome sobriety for French thought. For this line of thinking, now associated with its greatest spokesman, Tony Judt, French philosophy, under the aegis of Sartre and company in the 1940s and 50s, was morally degenerate, prey to the worst breaches of right thinking in refusing to renounce its ties to communism. The same could be said of the 60s and early 70s, decades no less intoxicated with the alluring swill of Marxist philosophy, pushing as it did for Third World revolution and anti-colonial violence. The French were never lacking in sagacious and sensible intellectual figures – Blum, Camus, Aron – but their moral complexity, so the argument goes, was never fashionable, leaving them to wilt on the margins of intellectual life. With the Marxist thaw of the late seventies, this would all begin to change (for the better).⁶⁴ This verdict was reinforced by American historian Mark Lilla’s launching of the “New French Thought” series with Princeton University Press, which introduced – commendably – a class of relatively unknown and often very original liberal thinkers to English-speaking audiences. It was, nevertheless, a thinly concealed paean to the de-marxification of French thought. Lilla wrote in his introduction to the series, “Whatever differences separated these schools of thought

⁶⁴ As noted above, the key register of liberal histories of this period is that of disillusionment, which has produced a litany of sardonic, disavowing, and self-exculpating texts – a recipe for shabby histories. Judt’s screed against French Marxism is, as he admits, a psycho-history, more about the “men and women” who espoused Communist philosophy, and less “about their words and deeds.” Moreover, there is no need for neutrality or contextualization in the face of such bald intellectual felonies: “In seeking to explain something that is intrinsically unattractive, to which the reader would normally respond with distaste, one is not excused from the obligation to be accurate, but neither is one under a compelling obligation to pretend to neutrality. With respect to the history of postwar French intellectuals, I too make no such pretense.” Likewise, Richard Wolin’s history of Maoism in the seventies, *A Wind from the East*, is dripping with condescension, the author having little to no respect for his protagonists. Wolin’s narrative mode is that of a sportscaster, a winking, jokey sort of style with a flare for the dramatic. François Dosse’s *Histoire du structuralisme* presents this intellectual movement in comic-strip fashion, with short, thumbnail chapters with goofy titles, “Get a Load of that Structure!”, for example. See, Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2, 8; Richard Wolin, *A Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme: vol. I, le champ du signe, 1945-1966* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995).

[i.e. Hegelo-Marxist rationalism and structuralism], they all agreed that liberalism was illegitimate, as was any ‘naïve’, nonhistoricist study of it. To engage in political philosophy in France today and reflect on the liberal prospect therefore requires a prior defense of the enterprise itself, in an environment where its possibility has long been denied.”⁶⁵ Much of the post-war intellectual tradition would appear as a regrettable detour to Lilla.

A younger class of American historians has undertaken a revision of this narrative, positing the idea of an “ethical turn” as a framework for tracking developments within French philosophy. These authors deploy a roughly uniform periodization, showing a new paradigm of ethics and rights-oriented language to have emerged with the crisis of Marxism in the late seventies. For Samuel Moyn and Paige Arthur, writing monographs on Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre respectively, the ethical turn is the pivotal moment in their intellectual itineraries, the point at which unripe, inchoate reflections mature into fully articulated doctrine.⁶⁶ The obvious chronological disparity – Sartre and Levinas writing a generation before the supposed turn – is pitched as evidence of their uncanny prescience. Julian Bourg’s history of the 1968 revolts is more ambitious in design, assessing the vicissitudes of the *événements* through a close look not only at the ideas which it bred, but also the institutions which followed in its wake. Its overarching thesis is by now familiar: 68 marked the moment of transition from an age in which “revolution” was the hegemonic discourse to one in which “ethics” carried the day – the

⁶⁵ Mark Lilla, “The Legitimacy of the Liberal Age”, Mark Lilla, ed. *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17.

⁶⁶ Moyn writes, “Levinas’s thought, both his general ethics and his Jewish thinking, matured at a moment in which he joined a cohort of thinkers – anti-utopian, indeed antipolitical, existentialists – who stressed as a group the importance of the revival of moral norms. They did so as a minority, especially in French thought, and they conceived of their mission as the defensive isolation of a realm of interpersonal moral intimacy against the totalizing claims of Hegelian and Marxist intellectuals who argued for the priority of collective politics and historical progress to intimate morality and eternal norms.” Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 219. For Arthur, the decisive moment is the sixties, as demonstrated by Sartre’s defense of Lumumba, chairmanship of the Russell Tribunal, and attempt to work through ethical problems in his Rome lecture (1964). Paige Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London; New York: Verso, 2010), 139-155.

road from Maoism to “the revival of political philosophy, Tocqueville, and liberalism” passing necessarily through May. In Bourg’s case, the ethical turn of the seventies is precisely what gives retrospective meaning to the 68 events.⁶⁷ Thus we have a neat and convenient teleology: postwar French philosophy is all leading toward the revival of ethics in the 1980s, and away from a presumably “unethical”, “irresponsible”, and “revolutionary” paradigm of the Cold War era. In these histories, the judgments are more nuanced and better researched, but the structure is still left standing.

Marxist analysis has been closer to the mark in pegging the early 1980s as the beginning of a no less regrettable neo-liberal “counter-revolution”, paradoxically overseen by Mitterrand’s Socialist government. More often than not, however, its narrative of intellectual developments has been slipshod, tending to confirm the liberal narrative (while inverting its positive signification of course): ex-communists sold out, 68ers became yuppies, second-rate liberal intellectuals co-opted the media, and ethical paradigms offered a bland, consensual substitute for sharp political and social analysis. These developments need to be tracked more closely, nuanced and supplemented.

The anthropological turn offers a different view of intellectual developments in these decades, blurring the often crudely drawn boundaries between Left and Right. The post-68 conjuncture would not bring a seamless unity of thought in France, but it would unlock a shared set of tropes and biases that could be serviced as a powerful critical philosophy. Without fail, each thinker of the anthropological turn imagined himself as a maverick critic of the political establishment, but as we have seen, this perception was largely false. They were part of a larger intellectual current that ran back to the Enlightenment. The collapsing distance between Left and

⁶⁷ Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 38.

Right in this era had been the function of a singular French trajectory: the Left took power in 1981 when its cultural prestige was at its post-war nadir. The Right and Center were dead-set against Mitterrand, and so was much of the Left, especially those aligned with the Communist Party. Initial supporters of the Socialist presidency were apt to revoke their allegiance after 1983 when Mitterrand made his famous “tournant,” undertaking a series of neo-liberal reforms. There could be, as a result, some gesture toward a common fund of criticism between all segments of the political spectrum. How critical this philosophy is is another question. A friendly commentator might praise its close attention to the beliefs and value systems that permeate our thought world in the early twenty-first century, and commend its refusal to concede to pessimism or apoliticism. A more skeptical commentator might call to mind what Marx and Engels once called the “Holy Family,” spiritualist, reactionary thought masquerading as “Critical Criticism”. In activating France’s dormant anthropological tradition, these thinkers conceal and obfuscate the materialist bases for social and political relations. Their attention to idealist constructions – the nation-state (Debray), imaginary kinship relations (Todd), “social-historical” autonomy (Gauchet) and the ancestral cultural unit (Benoist) – can only obscure the character of the relations of production, and foster an idealist conception of political community. What emerges is a common propensity for “the art of changing *real objective* chains that exist *outside me* into *mere ideal*, mere *subjective* chains existing in *me*, and thus to change all *exterior* palpable struggles into pure struggles of thought.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family, or, Critique of Critical Critique* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 111, emphasis in original.

Chapter Two - Alain de Benoist: A Restorationist Anthropology

Alain de Benoist is a key figure in the history of the post-war European Right, particularly as the leading thinker of what came to be known as the New Right (la “Nouvelle droite”). Since the late 1960s, his mission has been the intellectual rearmament of a Right that, according to Benoist, was constitutionally anti-intellectual and could never compete with the Left in the war of ideas. For a young rightist, there would also have been compelling historical reasons for rethinking the philosophy of the Right, whose reputation had been thoroughly discredited, first by intimate collaboration with the Vichy government, and later by association with the right-wing terrorists fighting to preserve Algeria as a French possession. The latter was Benoist’s early milieu: he was active in far-right student groups that lent intellectual support to the OAS, chiefly by defending the unholy trinity of racism, colonialism and ultra-nationalism. By the late 60s, Benoist renounced political militancy to pursue “the life of the mind.”¹ It was at this point, the end of 1967, that he assembled a group of friends and colleagues to launch the journal *Nouvelle École*, and began looking for new ways of jolting the Right out of its complacency, for “openings – new paths to follow.”² By the 1980s, now operating solely in the world of ideas, Benoist experienced a modest degree of success in reviving interest in right-wing thinkers and propagating the ideas of the New Right throughout Europe, though especially in Germany and Italy. Intellectually, he is the movement’s most visible and cogent thinker, and an important linking figure between the right of the immediate post-war period and that of the post-68 period.

In France, Benoist has been treated as a hateful, racist thinker with political aspirations. The New Right was an unknown force in French intellectual life until a media blitz in the summer of 1979 made it into a *succès de scandale*. The press seized upon some of the main

¹ Alain de Benoist, *Mémoire vive: entretiens avec François Bousquet* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2012), 167.

² Alain de Benoist, *Vu de droite: anthologie critique des idées contemporaines* (Paris: Copernic, 1978), 26.

tenets of New Rightist thought – cultural essentialism, paganism, elitism – and churned out an avalanche of alarmist responses. Hundreds of articles were devoted to the New Right over two months, and Benoist made the rounds on the intellectual programs that were just becoming popular on television (notably, “Apostrophes”). Afterwards Benoist was essentially blacklisted from respectable academic institutions, though his contacts were good enough to land publishing opportunities at the major Parisian publishing houses (including Albin Michel and Hallier).³ Thirty years later the reaction seems extravagant if typical of the intellectual atmosphere of late-seventies Paris: a growing liberal consensus took a special interest in discrediting the political extremes, while intellectual affairs were evermore attuned to the (televisual) media cycle (which produced the “New Philosophers” and the “New Economists” a few years before). A cooler look might regard Benoist’s work as emblematic of a larger shift in French thought after 68, as partaking of a repertoire of themes and problems common to the entire political spectrum. This interlocking set of concerns – which deals principally with the cultural foundations of political society – I have been calling the anthropological turn, and its main characteristics are fundamental to Benoist’s theoretical project. He will use them to assemble a unique and striking restorationist project for Europe.

Benoist was born in 1943 and grew up near Tours, a medium-sized city in the Loire Valley. He was of the provincial petite bourgeoisie, comfortably established but far from the hub of intellectual life in Paris – in this respect like Gauchet, the son of a road worker in coastal Brittany, and likewise a choirboy in the local parish. Benoist’s father was an accountant for a regional perfume company and relocated the family in 1950 to Paris in pursuit of a higher paying

³ For the most part, however, Benoist tends to publish with unknown houses (or to self publish). For Benoist’s response to the media circus of 1979, *Les idées à l’endroit*, the well-known publisher Hallier printed a disclaimer on the flyleaf: “We do not support the ideas of the New Right, expressed herein by one of its heralds, Alain de Benoist. We are opening a debate. It would be suicidal for the Left – new or old – to confront it without full knowledge of the facts. This is why we are publishing this book.” Alain de Benoist, *Les idées à l’endroit* (Paris: Hallier, 1979).

position. Like many Frenchman of his generation, the elder Benoist went to war in 1939, came home in 1940, eked out an existence in occupied France, and possessed an implicit faith in General de Gaulle – the extent of his political convictions. The younger Benoist was educated in Paris, but identified with France “periphérique”, not to be confused with “la France intérieure”: the former signified communion with nature and the anonymous people of the land – a political regionalism – the latter a “Jacobin” French nationalism that is totally abhorrent to Benoist. A voracious reader, his only actual link to intellectual life was through his paternal grandmother, Yvonne de Benoist, former secretary (and perhaps lover) to Gustave Le Bon, and published author in heavyweight journals like *La revue des deux mondes*. She was by sentiment and conviction an aristocrat and she taught her grandson to appreciate the true meaning of “noblesse oblige”: “to belong to the aristocracy consists not of enjoying more privileges and extra rights, but of imposing more responsibilities on oneself, of placing greater stock in one’s duties, of feeling more responsible than others.”⁴ Benoist was also taught to despise bourgeois values – callow self-interest and debased materialism – and he soon came to profess a sentimental and aesthetic attachment to the values of the aristocracy. His political attitudes would develop much later – a reminder that aestheticism has always been a priority of Benoist’s theoretical work.

By a curious coincidence, Benoist’s father, now risen higher in the world, purchased a summer home for the family in the town of Dreux, birthplace of Le Pen’s *Front national* (which Benoist has never supported).⁵ It was here that Benoist – on summer vacations as a teenager – made the acquaintance of Henry Coston, a veteran of the interwar Right and author of poisonous

⁴ *Mémoire vive*, 23.

⁵ *Locus classicus* for the FN’s rise and the politics of Dreux is Françoise Gaspard, *A Small City in France: A Socialist Mayor Confronts Neofascism*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). The Socialist mayor in question is Gaspard herself, the small city, Dreux.

diatribes against foreign elements in France – but mostly Free-Masons, bankers, and Jews.⁶ He invited a seventeen-year old Benoist to contribute to a volume on political movements in France – the protégé took Action française – and later, impressed by his work, introduced him to a friend who had founded two young nationalist movements, *Jeune nation*, and its student wing, the *Fédération des étudiants nationalistes* (FEN). Benoist joined the latter in 1960 when the war between France and the Algerian rebels was reaching a climax. This was an organization of counter-revolutionary militants, fighting tooth and nail for the preservation of French Algeria, a struggle which they saw as the stepping-stone to “a second French Revolution” (whose meaning remains unclear).⁷ Intellectually, their strategists were Marxist revolutionaries – Lenin, Sorel, and Serge, all de rigueur – their idols interwar “literary” fascists – Drieu La Rochelle, Céline, Rebatet. Benoist took on both intellectual and activist responsibilities in the FEN. He toured the country, distributing flyers and leaflets throughout the provinces, often sleeping in the woods for lack of money for proper accommodations. The FEN’s parent organization, *Jeune nation*, was an illegal, clandestine entity with strong connections to the OAS, while the FEN was its “respectable” legal face. Clearly there was a great deal of traffic between the two groups, some of the students, Benoist recalls, storing weapons and explosives in their offices. Many of his friends were arrested and imprisoned for seditious activities in the last years of the Algerian conflict. Benoist himself seems to have little stomach or aptitude for this side of the group’s work, managing to avoid serious legal trouble.

His intellectual work for the FEN, on the other hand, was completely enamored of the militant’s heroism. He published his first book at nineteen, *Salan devant l’opinion*, a gauzy

⁶ These include *Franc-maçonnerie, voilà l’ennemie* (Paris: Nouvelle éditions nationales, 1935), and *La finance juive et les trusts ...* (Paris: Jean Renard, 1942).

⁷ *Mémoire vive*, 71.

defense of the General who founded the OAS and led the putsch against General de Gaulle in 1961, with hopes of establishing an anti-communist military junta. The same publisher – Éditions Saint-Just, the brainchild of Dominique Venner, student leader of the FEN – released Benoist’s second book, *Le courage est leur patrie* (whose title is borrowed from Malraux’s line in *L’espoir*, “le courage est une patrie”). The book is a nauseating vindication of the OAS militants and their heroic struggle, written in a knock-off Malruvian style, romantic clichés abounding. He did a great deal of journalism for the organization’s paper, *Cahiers universitaires*, writing under various pseudonyms on diverse intellectual topics. The same Venner,⁸ who wrote the key manifesto for the young rightist movement in 1960, *Pour une critique positive*, launched a new journal in 1963, *Europe-Action*, a follow-up chapter in the young rightist movement after the Algérie-française campaign had been lost. Benoist came on board, as did a number of sympathetic young radicals, many of whom had fought with the OAS. Their program was the restoration of a “traditionalist” order, as *Europe-Action*’s first issue made clear: “No illusions: what is true for France is true for the entire West. Traditional society is a cold cadaver whose rags are being used by the new masters. Too bad if this is difficult to hear. We must be lucid.” The France of Barrès and Péguy – “le pays réel” – had at last been superseded by “le pays légal”: defeat in Algeria had proven this, as had the ascendancy of financiers and capitalists.⁹ A robust nationalism, complemented by a biological racism was necessary for defending the cultural superiority of the West.¹⁰

⁸ Venner spent 18 months in prison in the early sixties for being a member of the OAS. He later drifted away from the New Right movement, but continued to publish incessantly, mostly on military history.

⁹ “Editorial”, *Europe-Action* 1 (1963): 7.

¹⁰ See Pierre Milza, *L’europe en chemise noire: les extrêmes droites en Europe de 1945 à aujourd’hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), 83.

In this there was not much to distinguish the young rightists from the interwar Right: nationalism, racism, anti-semitism, hatred of democracy, anti-capitalism, anti-communism were the watchwords of both movements. There were a few differences, however. One was the degree to which Venner and *Europe-Action* embraced Marxist revolutionary theory. The interwar “leagues” – Venner’s father was a member of one of these, Doriot’s PPF – took inspiration from Sorel and Proudhon. Venner went a step further and read Lenin and Gramsci – anathema for most of the interwar rightists.¹¹ The second was a thoroughgoing anti-Christian doctrine, which again was not uncommon among interwar rightists. The last was Venner’s absolute contempt for the old Right, the very figures who popularized these ideas and continued to publicize them after the War, in a toned-down fashion of course. Maurice Bardèche, nephew of Robert Brasillach, launched *Défense de l’Occident* in 1952, Lucien Rebatet, Vichy collaborator and author of *Les décombres*, began a right-wing newspaper *Rivarol* in 1951, and *Action française* changed its name to *Aspects de la France* after the War, but barely changed personnel. Benoist fondly recalls lampooning these right-wing dailies with Venner and others: *Aspects* became “Craspects”, etc.¹² At any rate, Benoist’s later work with the New Right would preserve all three of these thematic departures: an affinity with the anti-capitalist, revolutionary rhetoric of left-wing political thought, hostility toward the Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition, and a deep skepticism with respect to the old Right.

After the War, the Left enjoyed thirty years of uncontested hegemony in the cultural-intellectual sphere, roughly corresponding to the economic miracle, *les trentes glorieuse*, lasting from 1945 to 1973. The Communist Party, whose reputation was exalted after its heroic role in

¹¹ Excerpts of Venner’s *Pour une critique positive* can be found in Paul-André Taguieff, “La stratégie culturelle de la ‘Nouvelle Droite’ en France (1968-1983), *Vous avez dit fascisme?*, ed. Robert Badinter (Paris: Éditions Montalba, 1983), 13-152. There seems to be some basic confusion ...

¹² *Mémoire vive*, 77.

the Liberation, held an unparalleled attraction for young thinkers. One hears little about the Right in this period, mainly because it was disgraced and forced into a marginal position. Its intellectuals were not spared in the post-war “purge”: Brasillach, a leading journalist and collaborator with the Vichy government was executed, and Charles Maurras, head of Action française, was given a life sentence. The far Right’s self-immolation is only part of the story, however. Of equal magnitude was General de Gaulle’s commanding presence in French politics, which effectively absorbed right-wing ideas – sentimental nationalism, anti-communism, with a pro-military, pro-Church stance – under a popular, non-partisan program. De Gaulle himself had been sympathetic to Action française in the twenties, and often portrayed himself as the savior of the French nation. In hopes of appealing to the Left – whose war record he respected – he called his new party of 1947 the “Gathering of the French People” (*Rassemblement du Peuple français*), avoiding the divisive language of “party.” De Gaulle quickly alienated the extreme Right, betraying his backers in the putsch of Algiers in 1958, and then promising to turn over Algeria to the Algerians. It was in this temper that Benoist began his career in rightist circles, though it would undergo a profound change by the end of the 60s, when Benoist reconsidered his relationship to the older, non-conformist Right and attempted “to sketch the contours of a *possible* Right.”¹³

Ecologies of the Right

The old Right, which Venner and Benoist had enjoyed maligning, was still active intellectually after the War. Its itinerary has been captured in two very different, but equally valuable texts on the post-war Right, the first by Simone de Beauvoir, from 1954, the second by a German academic Lutz Niethammer, from 1989, a generation later. For Beauvoir, writing in *Les temps*

¹³ *Vu de droite*, 17.

modernes, the interwar Right was still at large, having modified and toned down their controversial positions, rather than abandoning them altogether after the War. In many respects, their thought was indistinguishable from respectable, liberal opinion. The integral nationalism of the interwar period, for example, was exchanged for less threatening sounding doctrines: “the Atlantic pact”, writes Beauvoir, “required the bourgeoisie to move from the old nationalism toward what it called Europe, the West, and Civilization.”¹⁴ These only sounded more anodyne, argued Beauvoir, but they still implied a sense of superiority and elitism, now simply under a different name. And yet, the complete convergence of right-wing thought and bourgeois interests was illusory, incomplete for Beauvoir. Why? Instead of letting go of their old ideas and embracing the realities of post-war capitalism, the Right’s ideologues developed a thoroughly pessimistic (and self-serving) philosophy of history: they were witnessing the end of civilization, the exhaustion of history, and other clichés recycled from the *fin-de-siècle* (Nietzsche being their idol). They adopted the somber, world-weary persona of the mystic, leaving the material world to the egoists and calculators. Here was the key disjunction for Beauvoir: “The bourgeoisie is engaged in the class struggle, defending, which is to say imposing a politics. It acts. Its ideologues preach catastrophism, skepticism, quietism, and a philosophy that condemns all worldly projects. The bourgeoisie believes in science; its thinkers oppose it. The bourgeoisie takes a strong interest in its empirical existence; its thinkers malign it at the expense of the Transcendent.”¹⁵

Beauvoir leaves the implications of this discrepancy unstated, but she pretty clearly saw it as portending a deeper crisis for the bourgeoisie, especially as the Left consolidated forces

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, “La pensée de droite, aujourd’hui,” in *Privilèges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 100. The text appeared originally as a two-part essay in *Les temps modernes*, nos. 112-113 and 114-115 (April-May and June-July, 1954).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

behind the proletariat. Beauvoir's assessment is sober and sound, even if it would be another 27 years before the Left came to power – a quirk of post-war French politics being that the intellectual hegemon never (or almost never) corresponds to the ruling party. Her intellectual portrait of the post-war Right too is perceptive. It foregrounds the thematic continuities from the interwar era (which the authors took some care to conceal), and deftly illustrates the logic and import of the Right's leading ideas, especially those of Jules Monnerot, Raymond Abellio, and others. Finally, Beauvoir's text reveals a key feature of the post-war Right (as will Niethammer's) that is often neglected, namely its international, pan-European profile. The defeat of fascism will leave its ideologues in a similar position – i.e. the political wilderness – throughout Europe, and their work will come to draw from the same sources – Nietzsche, Spengler, Pareto – and adopt the same despairing tone. Beauvoir can perhaps be excused for conflating, or rather insufficiently distinguishing between Right and far Right, as their battle lines had not yet been drawn. By the 60s and 70s, there could be no confusing Aron's views,¹⁶ for example, with those of Benoist and other spokesmen of the far Right. The striking thing about Beauvoir's image of the Right in the mid 50s is how closely it captures the ideology and ethos of the New Right, which would emerge yet fifteen years later.

Lutz Niethammer's *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* is a wider panorama of post-war European thought in all respects: it covers both Right and Left, includes more thinkers, and tracks the principal themes over a much longer time span. Appearing in 1989, the beginning of the post-communist era in Europe, it sets out to describe and historicize an idea that will define its intellectual landscape, the so-called "end of history." Niethammer's rigorous conjugation of this idea demands separate treatment; what interests us here is the way

¹⁶ Beauvoir classes Aron among these thinkers like Monnerot and Maulnier, which makes sense only in light of his early work on history. The later Aron, a stalwart defender of bourgeois-capitalist values, is a poor fit for this group.

Posthistoire can be read as a first-rate intellectual history of the post-war Right. The leading exponents of “posthistoire” were Beauvoir’s protagonists, disaffected and isolated figures of the pre-War non-conformist Right, “at once committed and distant.”¹⁷ “Posthistoire” was not only a theory of history’s exhaustion, but of society’s capacity for self-regulation (above and beyond the activity of subjects), and of “the return of culture to natural premises,” meaning that culture is given a special weight or determinacy for these thinkers. Niethammer takes Ernst Jünger’s image of the *anarch* making his home in the forest as emblematic of this intellectual’s path: the so-called “forest way” is where the wanderer “is no longer a legal subject and resumes his bare existence in confrontation with nature” – a metaphor, yes, but a recurrent trope in the thought of posthistoire: Heidegger, Schmitt, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Henri de Man would conjure up this same imagery in their post-war work.¹⁸

Benoist will not take the “forest way”, though he will have inherited the post-war Right’s propensity to do so – indeed, his creation of the New Right marks a clear retreat from political action at the very moment when it would explode in 1968. He will never fully partake of their disenchantment, and will retain, with Gauchet, Todd, and Debray, an optimism with respect to history’s outcomes and the ability of actors to influence them. What he will inherit more strongly from the post-war Right are its political and cultural sensibilities, but more specifically its federalist (anti-centrist) political theory, annexed to a romantic, nostalgic cultural politics. Many of the thinkers that were attracted to the “neither right nor left” movements of the interwar period turned toward federalist political theory after the War. One such figure was Bertrand de Jouvenel, a patrician non-conformist who joined Doriot’s PPF in 1936 and collaborated under

¹⁷ Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London; New York: Verso, 1992), 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 71.

the Vichy regime before linking up with the Resistance in the Corrèze. In 1943 he fled to Switzerland, pursued by the police, and there remained until well after the War's end.¹⁹ With his collaboration record carefully concealed, Jouvenel never had to contend with the forced isolation of figures like Schmitt and Heidegger, and was able to forge a brilliant post-war career in liberal circles: founding member of the Mont-Pelerin society (with Hayek and Rueff), as well as the Club de Rome, and recipient of countless awards, prizes, and foreign teaching posts, etc.

Before the War, Jouvenel's work consisted of economic interventions; after, of political essays in the tradition of Constant and Tocqueville. Jouvenel's principal anxiety was the inevitable metastasis of the modern state, which he referred to, menacingly, as the Minotaur in his 1945 *opus magnum*, *Du pouvoir (On Power)*. The centralizing Jacobin state tramples individual liberties and imposes a dangerous coherence on society that ends in a regime of repression and surveillance – “totalitarianism” according to Jouvenel. Non-tyrannical government would have to be grounded in natural law, “such that the pure Government of Law, though unrealizable to perfection, remains the model to which one must refer.”²⁰ Where laws fail to conserve social harmony, the deserving few would complete the task: “It's up to those who create new conditions, to the innovative elites, guided by spiritual authority, to create the code of conduct and the images of behavior around which the social order must cohere.”²¹ This was his sketch of the singular political unit, much of whose inspiration was drawn – ironically – from Rousseau, a centralist, yes, but also a theorist of the cantonal polity and Jouvenel's great hero. On the international level, Jouvenel envisaged a European federalism, which might allow

¹⁹ Jouvenel's past was the subject of minor scandal when Israeli-French historian Zeev Sternhell classed Jouvenel among the interwar fascists. Jouvenel sued successfully for libel and was defended by Raymond Aron – who collapsed and died leaving the trial. Jouvenel's personal papers, which were donated to Bibliothèque nationale in France begin conveniently in 1943, when he joined the resistance.

²⁰ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Du pouvoir: histoire naturelle de sa croissance* (Paris: Hachette, 1972), 489.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 598.

the smaller units to maintain their cultural integrity – whereas the nation-state flattened them – while creating a common basis for decision-making and a solidarity of sentiments. Any such arrangement would require a sterling moral leadership, “an ultramontane sentiment that could stir up civil disobedience against national leaders, and neutralize their ability to do evil.”²² A pendant to Jouvenel’s old-regime liberalism was an increasing attention toward environmental matters. He thought a high-growth, capitalist society could be consonant with a proto-Rousseauist sylvan paradise, in which cities were uncrowded, farmers and peasants still worked the land, and everyone was fulfilled in their occupation. One commentator notes that there was little separating Jouvenel’s philosophy from that of Poujade in the 50s.²³

The path of Thierry Maulnier offers a similar trajectory. He too was an integral player within the “neither right nor left” matrix of the interwar period, writing for Maurras’s newspaper *Action française* throughout the thirties, while enjoying a successful publishing career under Vichy. In reality, Maulnier was a poor fit for Maurras’s traditionalist movement, believing that nationalism was in league with capitalism to destroy civilization, and encouraging disobedience of laws. Otherwise, his work was the typical mix of anti-materialist, anti-democratic, elitist revolutionary mysticism.²⁴ After the War, he distanced himself from politics, concentrating on his literary *oeuvre*, which later earned him election to the prestigious *Académie française*. When Maulnier did eventually return to the world of politics in 1958, it was as contributing editor of the newly reconstituted *XXe siècle*, journal of “La Fédération: Mouvement Fédéralistes Françaises”, founded in 1944. It was a mix of liberals and old members of the non-conformist

²² Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Quelle Europe? Raisons de craindre, raisons d'espérer* (Paris: Le Portulan, 1947), 143.

²³ See Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Arcadie: essais sur le mieux-vivre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002, c1968), 144-147; Evelyne Pisier, *Autorité et liberté dans les écrits politiques de Bertrand de Jouvenel* (Paris: P.U.F., 1967).

²⁴ A great deal of attention is devoted to Maulnier in Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 228-245.

Right like Maulnier – Robert Aron, for example, was given his own column. Its pro-European political stance was backlit by the same Occidentalism motif that was so prevalent among the interwar non-conformists, and traceable back to the work of Spengler. The journal published an early article by Alain de Benoist in 1971, arguing that Occidentalism had to be defended from youth culture, and that the “European is by nature enracinated.”²⁵ Maulnier and Benoist struck up a friendship, and the former became an avid supporter of the New Right in the 1970s.

Maulnier also founded the “Institute for the Study of the West”, an “apolitical” organ created “in the wake of the events of May 68,” and played an active part in Venner’s journal, *Cité-Liberté*.²⁶

This is where Beauvoir and Niethammer impart a valuable lesson: the post-war Right was far from irrelevant in the world of ideas, but rather proved quite adept at adjusting and repackaging its core tenets to suit a new conjuncture (which, after 1945, meant principally building cooperative international bodies and the welfare state). The “posthistoire” intellectuals of the mid century created a powerful subcurrent of thought that would be channeled by the younger generation of rightists, coming of age in the 60s. Often the lines of communication between the two generations were direct: Maulnier, as mentioned above, but also Lucien Rebatet, Julien Freund (close friend of Carl Schmitt), Raymond Abellio, Georges Dumézil – in other words many of the great right-leaning non-conformists of the interwar period – were friendly with Benoist, whose work is full of admiring profiles of these figures and deliberate usage of their ideas. But there was also a more concealed transmission of ideas from one generation to the next, of which the latter was likely to be insensible, and this concerned, principally, the federalist, “European” ideals of the Fourth Republican Right, as articulated by Jouvenel, Maulnier, Denis de Rougemont, and others. The other tendency it would inherit was the

²⁵ Alain de Benoist, “Jeunesse et valeurs,” *Le XXe fédéraliste* 401 (Jan.-Feb.-Mar. 1971), 18-20.

²⁶ The phrase appears in a flyer in the first issue of *Cité-Liberté* (Nov. 1970), 14.

naturalism of the “posthistoire” thinkers, their interest in ecology, the animal, the primitive, and so on. Benoist and the New Right translated these themes into a more coherent political-cultural agenda, grounded in Georges Dumézil’s anthropological work on Indo-European societies.

When Benoist criticizes the “old right” in his programmatic writings, he does not mean these thinkers – whose non-conformism he takes as his own – but the traditionalist Right of family, church, and order.

New Right

De Gaulle’s founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958 brought with it a new political dynamic for the Right. For one, it radicalized the younger generation of rightists, born just before or during the War, who were clinging to a set of crude positions – nationalism and racism – that the old non-conformist Right had either renounced or toned down. Benoist, writing for *Europe-Action* from 1966 to 1967, still adhered to these positions and continued to identify himself as a militant. At the end of 1967 *Europe-Action* folded and Benoist decided to reassess his politics: “I wanted to submit all my views to a critical test, to sort out, in a way, the true ideas that could be conserved from the false ideas that had to be abandoned. I was conscious of making a double rupture: first with extreme right, second with political action. The latter seemed to lead nowhere.”²⁷ It was a convenient moment to break ranks, as decolonization had dealt a serious blow to the extreme Right. Its candidate, Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour put up a respectable showing in the presidential election of 1965, finishing in fourth place with 5 per cent of the vote, but hardly enough to sustain a movement with any kind of momentum: by 1967, his party

²⁷ *Mémoire vive*, 103.

collected less than a per cent of the overall vote in the parliamentary elections.²⁸ Benoist's former comrades dispersed in the late 60s: Venner went off and started his own journal, *Cité-Liberté*, and Jean Mabire joined the editorial board of *Minute*, a minor journal of the Right. Benoist renounced both nationalism and racism, and set to work redefining an intellectual program for the Right. He even came to see the Algerian War in more nuanced terms, now admitting that "all the actors in the Algerian tragedy had their reasons, and none of these reasons were contemptible."²⁹ Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1967, Benoist had organized a reunion for members of the FEN in the Vendée, there announcing, with the support of his colleagues, his intention to launch a new review, to be named after Sorel's syndicalist movement, "Nouvelle école" ("New School"). The first issue appeared in the winter of 1968, just a few months before the student protests broke out in Paris.

The journal is funded by a committee of patronage, which originally included a number of notable figures of the interwar Right, including Maulnier, Monnerot, Abellio, Louis Rougier, Stéphane Lupasco, and Hans Eysenck. Originally, Benoist imagined *Nouvelle école* as the flagship vessel in a "flotilla of specialized reviews: one dedicated to archaeology, another to the history of religions, another to the sciences, etc." None of this was realized, except that in early May of 1968, Benoist helped found a supporting grouplet, "Groupement de recherche et d'études sur la civilisation européenne" (*GRECE*), not unlike those that were forming on the Left in the late 60s. Twenty-seven out of thirty-six of its original founding members, according to Benoist, belonged to the FEN, though around twenty left within the first year because "they were not

²⁸ Tixier-Vignancour, a lawyer, worked for the Vichy government during the War, and later defended Salan and other members of the OAS in 1962 and 1963. After receiving slightly more than a million votes in the first round, he supported the left candidate Mitterrand, who lost by a landslide to de Gaulle. His campaign secretary was Jean-Marie Le Pen.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72. A rather surprising fact emerges in Benoist's memoir, that he had been received on several occasions in the 80s by the first president of independent Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, and learned much from their conversations.

interested in ideas.”³⁰ It nearly collapsed under the weight of these departures, but picked up again strongly in 1970, organizing conferences that were attended by a large cross-section of the intellectual Right. Though *GRECE*’s patrons and membership structure were different from *Nouvelle école*, there was considerable overlap in personnel between the two groups.³¹ The flow of money between them has never been clear, however: Benoist maintains their mutual independence; other sources confirm that *GRECE* funding was behind *Nouvelle école* and a second journal edited by Benoist, *Éléments*, which appeared in 1973 (and is still going strong).³² In any event, Benoist’s success in getting these movements off the ground owed to a shrewd diplomacy, appealing to the older guard by foregrounding the intellectual component, and to the younger cohort by playing up the “meta-political” dimension.

Ideological continuity would also require a balancing-act. The only issue on which *Nouvelle école* differed significantly from *Europe-Action* and *Cahiers universitaires* was nationalism, which Benoist and his collaborators repudiated. *Nouvelle école* still professed a committed Occidentalism – i.e. a belief in the cultural superiority of the West – and relied on biological conceptions of culture as a marker of real differences between peoples. This latter was more or less masked, however, under a broader appeal for a new “cultural” politics – a polysemic signifier in the lexicon of the New Right. Later, when the New Right distanced itself from biological doctrines, “culture” was, in effect, substituted for race, signifying the means for understanding (real) social distinctions: Bretons were by personality different from Franks, who

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

³¹ Among *Nouvelle école*’s founding editors were Guillaume Faye, Michel Marmin, Jean-Claude Rivière, Jean-Claude Valla, and Pierre Vial, all of whom, save Rivière, were also members of *GRECE*. The latter included figures like Jean Mabire, a contributor to *Europe-Action*, who were not on the board of *Nouvelle école*.

³² On the former, see *Mémoire vive*, 103; the latter see Julien Brunn, ed. *La Nouvelle droite: le dossier du ‘procès’* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Oswald, 1979), 381, and Anne-Marie Duranton-Crabol, *Visages de la nouvelle droite: le G.R.E.C.E. et son histoire* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1988). Duranton-Crabol’s work is the starting place for any serious analysis of the New Right.

were different from Berbers, etc. “The Right to Difference” would eventually be one of its rallying cries. In the meantime, “culture” stood for the political program of a newly constituted movement of the “Right”. A fellow-traveler, speaking at a *GRECE* conference would remind his listeners of the New Right’s mission: “recognizing the importance of the theory of cultural power, which is not about parties preparing for the accession to political power, but about transforming mentalities to promote a new system of values.”³³ This program they referred to interchangeably as a “Gramscism of the Right” and as “meta-political” action – a typically hollow neo-rightist provocation, the former taken from an Italian Marxist, the latter from the *ultra*-traditionalist Charles Maurras. In this fashion, the New Right styled itself as yet another “neither right nor left” movement, so prevalent during the interwar period. Benoist’s twist on this conception would be another banality: the New Right was *both* right and left.

The mediasphere in France has never taken the New Right at its word on its cultural agenda, believing it to nurture secret political ambitions. Most of the alarmism is derived from this suspicion, though Benoist has never, nor have his three journals – *Nouvelle école*, *Éléments*, and *Krisis* – endorsed a political party or candidate. In the 80s, some of the New Right’s personnel defected to Le Pen’s *Front national*, but this required breaking ties permanently with the New Right, which saw the FN as vulgar racism. And, we have seen what Benoist thought of comrades who cared more for political action than the intellectual *Kampfplatz*. The New Right would be more accurately viewed as an avant-garde intellectual movement – provocateurs in the world of ideas and culture. In this respect, the New Right’s double homage to Gramsci and Action française is misleading: Gramsci was an activist and the head of a revolutionary organization; Action française was a mass movement with an activist wing, the Camelots du roi,

³³ Michel Wayoff, “Pourquoi un ‘gramscisme de droite,’ in *GRECE, Pour un ‘gramscisme de droite’*, XVIe colloque national (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1982), 7. For Benoist’s own usage of this concept, see “Le pouvoir culturel”, in *Les idées à l’endroit*, 250-262.

who led a coup d'état against the left government in 1934. Neither party would have been welcome among Benoist's ranks, where books and ideas ranked first in priority.³⁴ Benoist tried to instill a communalist ethos in *GRECE* that would replicate Ferdinand Tönnies's idea of *Gemeinschaft*, group solidarity based on organic, rather than contractual (and hence artificial) ties: "At one point we proposed doing our own ceremonies for births, marriages, and deaths – always careful not to fall into sectarian practices. The ideal was not only the 'complete man', which accorded with all our ideas about living life, but also *Zusammenleben*, living together – a term that today is a little misleading. It was about creating a counter-culture."³⁵

Benoist's assertion is a reminder that the New Right's politics have always been communitarian, setting it apart from much of the libertarian or anarchist right-wing tradition that has been strong in France (because of Proudhon's influence). For Benoist, individualism is simply an expression of vulgar materialo-egalitarianism, the degraded mode of being in bourgeois culture. His work – like that of Todd, Debray, and Gauchet – is devoted to "the deconstruction of liberal anthropology,"³⁶ that is, the idea that the human being is programmed to heed rational motivations, to which passions, belongings, desires – affect, in short – take a backseat. For him, as for the others, the human is a communal being, whose personality and fate are bound up with the group's. And like the others (more than Debray, less than Gauchet), Benoist is influenced by the anthropology of Louis Dumont, specialist of the Indian subcontinent, who introduced a generation to the notion of holism, the study of society in its completeness, with no attempt to break it into component parts. More will be said of this later.

³⁴ The younger generation of Action française antagonized the New Right, accusing it of racism. *Nouvelle école* sued for libel, winning 1,000 in damages. *Mémoire vive*, 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

The other striking feature of the Benoist quote is the emphasis on “counter-culture,” which leaves open the question of its political strategy. The New Right’s “meta-political” stance is a self-conscious refusal to engage in actual politics, but, at the same time, a commitment to a core set of ideas, which it would like to see put in place. What exactly distinguishes a philosophy from a strategy? One perspicacious response renders it as “the necessity to take into account the *timing* of an action, and to evaluate its effect not from the perspective of its internal rationality, but from the point of view of the leverage it operates on a given terrain.”³⁷ There is no timing, no engagement with the real in the meta-political strategy of the New Right, and therefore it should qualify as a philosophy – not that this disqualifies it as an avant-garde intellectual movement. It only reminds us that its sensibility might reasonably be described as aesthetic, rather than political.

Ideas: Culture and Religion

Benoist’s philosophy is firmly anchored in the canons of the post-Revolutionary Right. In the tradition of Joseph de Maistre (and the ultras), Benoist denies that abstract, universalist claims about human nature can be valid. And just like Maistre, who once said that he had never met an abstract man in his life, only Frenchmen, Italians, Persians, etc., Benoist maintains a “nominalist” philosophical position, for which “there is no existence ‘in itself’, every existence being particular – and likewise Being is indissociable from Being-there (the *Dasein* of Heidegger).” Opposed to this conception is any doctrine that imputes an underlying metaphysical sameness to things, among which Benoist files liberalism, Marxism, and the rationalism of Aquinas. For Benoist, as for the entire non-liberal right tradition in France,

³⁷ Jason E. Smith, “Strategy and the Passions: Guy Debord’s Ruses,” in Mark Potocnik, Frank Ruda and Jan Völker, eds. *Beyond Potentialities? Politics between the Possible and the Impossible* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2011), 171.

diversity represents the political-philosophical ideal for human beings, and is something good in itself: “For the nominalist, *diversity* is the fundamental fact of the world; for the universalist, on the contrary, it’s a matter of searching, beyond the play of contingencies and particular attributes, for the *essence*, which, among humans, renders them all equal before God.”³⁸ It was always the view of the extreme Right that universalist claims enabled states and tyrants to employ violence as a means of instituting this sameness – what later, in the twentieth century, would be called “totalitarianism”. One had only to look at the Jacobin Terror for an early confirmation of this politics. This too Benoist maintains, but he gives it a slight twist in bringing God into the critique. At bottom, totalitarianism is nothing other than a historical consequence of monotheism: “The idea of a unique God implies a unique, *absolute* truth to which human beings must submit because it is true in itself.”³⁹

Benoist’s equation of universalism, totalitarianism, and monotheism will set him at variance with much of France’s conservative tradition, including the original *ultras*, Maistre and Bonald, who retained an ultramontane politics in the face of Revolutionary change. The problem for Benoist is that monotheism tends to stifle human creativity, imposing a coercive conceptual framework on otherwise free-thinking, autonomous people. Ideas, truths, and even habitus are pre-ordained in the monotheistic systems. Doctrines like Christianity and Marxism supply a pre-told future, and this prevents human beings from shaping their own historical destiny. For Benoist, we must start with the proposition that humans create meaning for themselves: “To make oneself, to give oneself a form, means passing from the status of an individual to that of a person.” A good historicism will be obedient to the creative capacity of human kind, not the other way around, Benoist offering his “tri-dimensional” theory of history as a counterweight:

³⁸ “Fondements nominalistes d’une attitude devant la vie,” *Les idées à l’endroit*, 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

“Every present is an intersection, not a point; and each instant of the present actualizes the totality of the past and potentializes the totality of the future.”⁴⁰ History has none of the linear or dialectical properties imputed to it by liberalism and marxism. It is, rather, a series of open possibilities that could push off in any direction.

There is an ethical-historical corollary to these claims that has been a mainstay of neo-rightist philosophy, namely that the Judeo-Christian tradition is foreign to and thus incompatible with, on some level, European civilization. In *Comment peut-on être païen?*, Benoist writes that “Instituted Christianity could only survive as a result of a compromise between its constitutive principles and a basic political realism whose origin was Roman.”⁴¹ The idea here is that Europe was originally pagan and remained so at the level of popular belief. Christianity could only have been imposed from above, and only at the price of a pragmatic accommodation (and hence miscegenation of its beliefs). In a text from 1970, when Benoist was unknown and less guarded about some of his more provocative claims, he pointed specifically to the origins of this religion: “That Christianity was born in an ethno-geographic area, the Near East, cannot be denied. It wears the indelible mark of this region. Like other near-eastern faiths ... it preaches submission and renouncement.”⁴² Benoist differs from the run-of-the-mill atheist in seeing paganism as a spiritual alternative for European peoples: “In pagan thought, the human conscience belongs to the world, and as such, is not radically dissociable from the substance of God.”⁴³ Behind this assertion lies an entire intellectual program, which requires Benoist to reconstruct the original religio-cultural matrix of European peoples, and elaborate a series of political and ethical views

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46, 38.

⁴¹ Alain de Benoist, *Comment peut-on être païen?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981), 193.

⁴² Alain de Benoist and Jean-Luc Marion, *Avec ou sans Dieu?* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1970), 66.

⁴³ Benoist, *Comment peut-on être païen?*, 54.

that would conform to this disposition. This mission will take Benoist into the heart of the anthropological turn in the 70s, rethinking politics in terms of the sacred, the cultural, and the archaic.

Roughly speaking, these two positions – i.e. nominalism and paganism – will be the two constants of Benoist’s thought from the founding of *Nouvelle école* to the present. The first places him in the far-right, counter-revolutionary tradition of the *ultras*; the second, which would exclude him for the latter’s company, belongs to a later iteration of the far-right, namely the interwar non-conformists discussed above. The two great sources of inspiration for these thinkers were Nietzsche and Spengler, both committed anti-Christian, pro-pagan philosophers, both heroes of Benoist.⁴⁴ Benoist’s passage through the anthropological turn will play out as a variation on the themes and methods of this interwar movement, refracted through the cultural politics of the post-68 period. His positions change, becoming more cultural as the decade advances; and his political theory adjusts to the demands placed on it by these cultural arguments. At the moment of its infancy (the late 60s), neo-rightist thought tended much more toward biological views of cultural difference – a hold-over from the racist thought of *Europe-Action* and *Cahiers universitaires*. Pierre-André Taguieff has correctly identified this as a move from “race to culture.”⁴⁵ As a complement to its socio-biology, the early New Right employed a positivist methodology, reflected in its close attention to scientific thinkers; and continued to endorse Occidentalism as its geo-political position. In the early years, Benoist and the New Right were first and foremost anti-communist, later to become anti-liberals.

⁴⁴ Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio identifies both as main currents of the far-right tradition in Europe. See *Left and Right: The Significance of a Distinction*, transl Allan Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20.

⁴⁵ Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite: jalons d’une analyse critique* (Paris: Descartes and Cie., 1994).

During the media squall of 1979, with accusations of racism ricocheting through the press, Benoist was loath to concede the biological component of the New Right's thought. His (rather flimsy) defense contended that only thirteen per cent of *Nouvelle école's* 3,500 articles had been devoted to the life sciences – just 430 in all. The rest covered other subjects. In 2012, Benoist mounts a different kind of defense: attention to biology was “perfectly natural. We were in the era when biology was in the process of dethroning physics as the queen of the sciences. Look at the innumerable debates raised since then by bio-technologies, bio-ethics, artificial insemination, cloning, voluntary eugenic practices, etc. ... It was normal to participate in these debates.”⁴⁶ Indeed, but the New Right took a particular line on biology, which is that it determined or greatly influenced social behavior. Early issues of *Nouvelle école* are full of insinuations about racial mixing: “All people of the Asiatic or Indo-European race were (and still are) racially white, and all people of Chamito-Semitic languages were (and still are) the product of an ancient mixing of Blacks and Whites.” Benoist typically confuses racism with xenophobia when recusing himself. Since he harbors no ill-will toward a given ethnic group, he cannot be accused of racism. He loves difference; “diversity is the source of everything good.” Obviously, racism is often expressed in the cold, clinical terms of science. Moreover, Benoist's positivist methodology was meant to reinforce the claims of science. Biology must be “understood in hard-scientific terms”, the editors wrote in the issue dedicated to the life sciences.⁴⁷

This line of inquiry will not take us very far, however. The establishment media fell into this trap in 1979, playing the out-of-context citation game ad nauseum. But, in the media's

⁴⁶ Alain de Benoist, “Préface,” *Les idées à l'endroit*, 22; *Mémoire vive*, 174.

⁴⁷ Gilles Fournier, “Rome et la Judé,” *Nouvelle école* 1 (Jan-Feb 1968), 6; “Fondements nominalistes,” 39; unsigned leader for Wesley George, “Biologie du problème racial: génétique et comportement,” *Ibid.*, 7 (Feb.-Mar. 1969). One also finds in early issues of *NE* contributions from Benoist like, “Le LSD et les altérations du stock héréditaire,” *Ibid.*, 1, and “Intégration scolaire et psychologie raciale,” *Ibid.*, 10 (Fall 1969).

defense, it was a trap. Benoist tends to amplify controversial claims when removed from the public's eye, only to nuance, bend, and circumlocute around them in public view. Provocation has always been the root of the New Right's success.⁴⁸ At any rate, what is interesting about Benoist and the New Right is not their (early) biological understanding of difference, but their (later) cultural-anthropological one, which begins to take more definite shape in the mid 1970s, as the New Right's principal target shifts from Marxism to liberalism. The latter had displaced the former as the new intellectual vulgate in Benoist's view. He later summarized this trajectory as follows: the "right was in the process of rallying in full force to economic liberalism, which, along with the principles of Gaullism, had been a part of its historical heritage. The Left too began to cut itself off from the people, also rallying to the market and abandoning its anticapitalist positions. ... This is what had to be challenged above all, and this what I tried hard to convey in my texts from this period, whose common denominator was the critique of market philosophy and the deconstruction of liberal anthropology."⁴⁹ This is also the point at which Benoist turned hostile critic of the United States, changing positions on the Vietnam War (now celebrating the US's defeat), and inveighing against the Washington-led Atlantic alliance. Philosophically, he renounced the positivism which had buoyed the New Right's socio-biological views. No longer would one find glowing references to the Karl Popper and the Vienna School in their journals, but more like corrosive profiles Hayek, Smith, and other liberal economists.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ In other words, it would be wrong to see Benoist and the New Right as a victim of this publicity. They encouraged it and profited from it.

⁴⁹ *Mémoire vive*, 208.

⁵⁰ See Alain de Benoist, "L'empirisme logique et le 'Wiener Kreis,'" *Nouvelle école* 13 (Fall-Winter, 1970), and "Bertrand Russell, une bio-bibliographie," *Ibid.* 12 (March-April, 1970).

At the time, Benoist was earning a good living as a journalist, writing on a regular basis for *Valeurs actuelles* (a conservative weekly paper) and its monthly subsidiary, *Le Spectacle du monde*. The New Right was starting to flourish as well. *GRECE* launched a new journal in 1973, *Éléments*, intended as a more popular digest of the New Right's ideas, and founded a publishing company, Copernic, in the mid 70s. One of its first publishing endeavors was an anthology of Benoist's columns from *Valeurs actuelles*, *Vu de droite* (*Viewed from the Right*), which won a jury prize from the Academie française in 1978. The text is a useful compendium of Benoist's intellectual interests – displaying, rather ostentatiously, a broad erudition – but it is also valuable as a register of his reflections on a changing philosophical conjuncture: “Until 1965-1968, the key political events consisted of an extension of the situation created in 1945. Christian democracy, the Cold War, decolonization, etc. were likewise *residual* phenomenon. The events that we live today have no end, do not ‘complete’ an epoch. They announce another. They are already forming another.” He says little about the shape of this future, only that it will frustrate expectations, and lead to a new appreciation of foreign politics – “the only politics that matters.”⁵¹ Benoist's nascent anthropological project is formed as a pendant to this perception of a paradigm shift. At the dawn of a new conjuncture, a new philosophy will have to take shape, and where better to begin than the beginning?

Henceforth, Benoist will fasten onto culture as the originary and unique arbiter of human communities. He writes, “Man is inseparable from his culture, inseparable from his milieu (spatial) and his heritage (temporal). Man is born an inheritor. ... From this observation result the necessity of identifying the values proper to one's culture, which also means, in this era of

⁵¹ *Vu de droite*, 26.

confusion, disentangling [*démêler*] heritage.”⁵² This is not such a new idea after all. It rather seems a minor variation on old conservative notions of *terroir*, tradition, and (the dangers of) deracination. The difference is in Benoist’s insistence on culture as a principle of inscription, without which humans are left bare and alienated: “As a social animal,” argues Benoist, “man possesses an instinctual disposition to identify with what resembles him.” What of man’s contradictory impulse, in accordance with the strictures of vitalism, to overcome himself, to surpass what is given, to be an individual? This presents no real contradiction: human beings express themselves differently in the context of and with reference to the group. “Diversity in similitude, difference in repetition” is his formulation, the “personality” of the group always remaining the outer limit of personal expression.⁵³

Benoist’s sources for this anthropological dynamic – i.e. the pan-historical dialectic between self and group – are drawn largely from German thinkers of the Weimar and Nazi periods, in particular the anthropologist Arnold Gehlen. Gehlen plays a central role in Niethammer’s story, not only as a leading exponent of “posthistoire,” but also as the figure who revived and defined the concept after the War. He joined the Nazi party in 1933, enjoyed a brilliant career as a member of the “Leipzig School,” teaching at the University of Frankfurt and then the University of Vienna until 1940, when he was drafted into the Wehrmacht. After the War, he could only teach at administrative and technical schools, but his thought nevertheless gained a wider currency, not only in the Adenauer period, but also as late as the 70s and 80s in the FRG. Gehlen’s “philosophical anthropology” centered on the idea that humans, in contrast to other life forms, are born with a deficiency of instinct and risk being disunited in consciousness by the forces of nature. To overcome this, man requires a contextual authority that will

⁵² “Fondements nominalistes,” 41.

⁵³ “L’enracinement,” *Les idées à l’endroit*, 135-136.

guarantee his self-preservation through action.⁵⁴ So he gravitates toward social space, and “draws upon a highly complex hierarchy of skills and establishes within himself a developmental order of abilities.”⁵⁵ The human’s “world-openness”, in short, constitutes him/her as a needy, incomplete, and action-oriented being who finds unity and order in the context of the group. For Benoist, who identifies himself in the lineage of this “philosophical anthropology,” Gehlen’s profile of the human as *Mängelwesen* (“a being of lack”) leads to an obvious conclusion: “The diversity of cultures is the direct consequence of the multiplicity of choices that humans are always in the process of making. It’s by creating cultures and establishing institutions that humankind can stabilize its ‘instinctual dilettantism.’”⁵⁶ Thus for Benoist, as for Gehlen, culture is the only context in which the human can occur.

Of the four thinkers treated in this study, Benoist is the most indebted to Germanic philosophy, in particular the vitalist-pagan tradition that comes from the Romantics, through Nietzsche, up to Spengler, Gehlen, and the interwar non-conformists. It gives an existentialist flavor to Benoist’s work, which, in following Heidegger, emphasizes Being-in-the-world as a significant component of human experience. He goes perhaps farther than his German predecessors in posing culture as the unique arbiter of collective destiny, provoking one commentator to remark that “Benoist’s thought is sometimes magical.”⁵⁷ Benoist’s account of culture runs as follows: “Every specifically human behavior is *cultural* behavior. The emergence of man is itself a ‘cultural’ fact ... Hominization is a *rupture* with ‘nature’: there is no ‘natural

⁵⁴ Niethammer, *Posthistoire*, 16.

⁵⁵ Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Natural Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28.

⁵⁶ *Mémoire vive*, 177. For an earlier usage, see “Fondements nominalistes,” 44, and *Vu de droite*, 171-173.

⁵⁷ The expression is from an obscure gauchiste figure, Jacques Camatte. See his journal, founded in 1968 and still running, *Revue invariance*, series III, “L’écho du temps,” 1979. The text can be found at <http://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/s%E9rieIII.html>

man' or 'good savage'. From the moment the hand of man touches nature, from the moment his eye perceives it, and in the same stroke, *conceives* it, it *becomes culture*.”⁵⁸ Benoist’s formulation gives voice to an anthropocentrism that would be unacceptable to Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom were skeptical of human subjectivity as it was traditionally conceived. It is as throughgoing account of culture as one can find – culture here even preceding nature. Benoist takes this theory, borrowed from the Germans (and vulgarized), and combines it with the same communitarian French tradition appropriated by Debray, Todd, and Gauchet: the Durkheimian school of social anthropology. The idea here is that “the community, in contrast to society, preserves social relations that are, by nature, organic, and that allow a collectivity to develop on the basis of shared values.”⁵⁹ He does not, as should be obvious, take this in a Lévi-Straussian, structuralist direction, but rather attempts to balance the subject-centered view of culture with the organic holism provided by Durkheim. The latter’s work has usually been a touchstone for Social Democracy-type movements, whose philosophy hinges on social solidarity. Rarely has it been taken in a conservative direction. Perhaps it is fitting that the intermediary figure would have been trained in the tradition of Durkheim, Georges Dumézil, the French linguist-anthropologist who helped pioneer the field of Indo-Europeans studies.

Dumézil is not an easy figure to nail down. Born in 1898, Dumézil went *agregé* in classics at the ENS in 1919 before going on to pursue a brilliant career in comparative linguistics. In 1929, he composed an early iteration of the “tri-functional hypothesis,” arguing that prehistoric Proto-Indo-European society had comprised three main groups with three principle functions: priests, serving the function of sovereignty; warriors, that of the military; and workers, that of productivity. Dumézil’s work drew controversy on two counts. First, the

⁵⁸ *Vu de droite*, 324.

⁵⁹ *Mémoire vive*, 228.

existence of something called “Indo-European society” – stretching from Ireland (Celtic tribes) to the Indian subcontinent – was seen as highly speculative. Nobody denied the magnitude of Dumézil’s finding and the incredible erudition he mobilized in its service (he claimed to speak 200 languages by the end of his life); but the account seemed too neat and prettified to hold up under scrutiny. The other controversy surrounded Dumézil’s politics, or rather, the politics inherent in his work. He, like many other respected figures of his day, courted the far-right, anti-semitic Action française movement – not in and of itself cause for scandal. More alarming were the fascistic affinities of Dumézil’s work, particularly his 1939 *Myths and Gods of the Germans*, which is full of positive-seeming references to Aryan culture. Here the charge was led by two Italian historians, Arnaldo Momigliano and Carlo Ginzburg, the latter of whom contended that Dumézil’s work, in attempting to report neutrally on the repopularization of Indo-European myths under the Third Reich, “occasionally edges from a descriptive to a normative plane.”⁶⁰ Dumézil was hurt by the accusations, countering that his work had always been apolitical. An entirely different kind of reception occurred in post-war France, where the heralds of structuralism – but especially Lévi-Strauss and Foucault – cited Dumézil’s comparative linguistics as a precursor to the structuralist method and a principal inspiration of their work.⁶¹ Feeling unwelcome in France in the 1920s and 30s, Dumézil returned from successive teaching posts in Turkey and Sweden after the War, acquiring a position at the Collège de France from 1949-1968. He was elected to the Academie française in 1978, just after it awarded his friend Alain de Benoist its annual essay prize.

⁶⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, “German Mythology and Nazism: Thoughts on an Old Book by Dumézil,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 130; see also Arnaldo Momigliano, “Georges Dumézil and the Trifunctional Approach to Roman Civilization,” *History and Theory* 23, 3 (Oct. 1984).

⁶¹ For Dumézil’s response, see *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 205.

Benoist had been attracted to Dumézil's work as early as 1966, when he published a small volume on the Indo-Europeans. As the philosophy of the New Right matured and took on greater coherence over the next decade, Dumézil's name appeared with greater frequency among their works. The tenth issue of *Nouvelle école* (1969) featured an interview with Dumézil; a special issue from 1972 was dedicated to his work. Dumézil supported the journal financially, joining the committee of patronage in the early 70s, while making it known that his endorsement was not political: "Personally, I see myself as a philologist rather than a philosopher, and I do not think one can generalize my method or my results."⁶² In fact, Dumézil had always maintained that his insights into Indo-European society were linguistic in nature, and not anthropological. Benoist honors this distinction, but believes the first naturally entails the second: "The idea of the 'Indo-European' is a purely linguistic notion, ... but as each language presupposes speakers, it is legitimate to investigate the culture of people who spoke Proto-Indo-European." The key point, for Benoist, is that Indo-European studies "adds a deeper dimension to the study of Europe's roots, while it also constitutes a clear alternative to the *ex oriente lux* ('light from the east') thesis, or the simple Rome-Athens-Jerusalem trilogy."⁶³ What depth does the Indo-European hypothesis add exactly?

The most important point for Benoist is that Indo-European society furnished the original cultural matrix of European civilization, and on this basis, lays a claim to superiority. It is, in other words, the first and most authentic expression of the European, the perfect spiritual fit:

It is important to emphasize that the consolidation of Indo-European structures went together with the development of a religious system, Indo-European paganism. ... This formed the keystone of the entire society, while endowing events with an air of finality. From the very start, the society of gods were in conformity with that of humans: religion connected [*reliait*] members into the

⁶² Georges Dumézil, "Entretien," *Nouvelle école* 10 (Oct. 1969), 44.

⁶³ *Mémoire vive*, 166.

same social grouping. This system, a product of will and circumstance, showed itself to be so productive, so prosperous (socially, materially, and spiritually), and so adapted to the deepest aspirations of European peoples, that over time it came to seem natural, almost pre-given. Over the centuries, its institutions could be transmitted from generation to generation.⁶⁴

For Benoist, contemporary European civilization has jeopardized this heritage, slowly converting to Judeo-Christian, egalitarian values. Like the non-conformists of the interwar era, Benoist expresses sympathy for aristocratic values – “la noblesse exige la noblesse” – but has little regard for the monarchy. His nostalgia is of an entirely different order, which the same non-conformists rarely imagined: for a preservation of the sensibilities, if not the social structures, of pre-historic European man. In a moment we will try to unfold the implications of this unusual standpoint, especially as it debouches into a political program; but for now we should note the legerdemain employed by Benoist in his frequent recourse to the slogans, “the right to difference” and “diversity is a good thing.” These are easily confused with postmodern clichés, the well-meaning, but often empty or naïve sentiments of certain late twentieth-century leftists. At any rate, their underlying position is essentially a relativist one – no culture is superior to another – and they typically celebrate the values of hybridity, métissage, and so on.

Benoist means something completely different by “right to difference.” For him, cultures have an original disposition that develops in response to environmental and social demands. The arrangements will be more “suited” to the character of the people than others, and therefore superior to anything that could be imported from outside this fold (even though, Benoist would concede, the imported customs or rites might be perfectly matched to the exporters). In this sense, there is a general equivalence that holds between all cultures for Benoist, and here he is a true relativist. In another, he is an absolutist – or maybe “foundationalist” would be more accurate – about the internal components of each culture: there is one, singular expression of a

⁶⁴ “L’ordre,” *Les idées à l’endroit*, 104.

people's personality, which should not be diluted or flattened. Flexibility is to be expected within the original matrix of customs and values: the tripartite hierarchy of the Old Regime, for example, is an outgrowth of the Indo-European arrangement of orders, and therefore welcome. What Benoist will not tolerate is the importation of values (which is imposed and hence unnatural), or cultural mixing (which really amounts to the same thing). And he makes no attempt to conceal this: "mixing is not a value in itself because it is just as legitimate to prefer endogamy and homofiliation to exogamy as the inverse. Which is to say that one cannot be for both mixing and diversity, since the immediate consequence of the former is the reduction of the latter."⁶⁵ Mixing leads to homogenization according to Benoist (but how can this argument be valid, either logically or historically?), while cultural isolation preserves diversity. The sleight of hand in the New Right's use of "right to difference" is the conflation of the general equivalence and the far more austere, traditionalist argument about internal structures. As a final note to this discussion, it is worth pointing out, with *toute proportion gardée*, that Benoist's case for cultural foundations is strikingly similar to Emmanuel Todd's, in that they both agree that antique practices and customs will determine a culture's personality (expressed in political, religious, social, and intellectual terms). Their differences are vast, of course, in the normative register.

Politics

Through Gehlen and Dumézil, Benoist constructs a theory of culture that is at once unusual and analogous to the work being done by contemporaries in France, but especially Gauchet, Debray, and Todd – all of whom argue for the priority of culture in determining modern political sensibilities. The anthropological turn is not complete, however, without a corresponding theory of politics delineating the features of the ideal human or political community. Here we track just

⁶⁵ *Mémoire vive*, 174.

this development in Benoist's thought: from cultural blueprint to political program.

Thematically, Benoist is occupied with the same problems as the other three thinkers, namely totalitarianism, human rights, the sacred, the state, and the political. Ultimately, the derivation and complexion of these views are going to be very different.

As mentioned above, a growing liberal consensus in the 1970s impelled the New Right to adjust its polemical focus, from anti-communism to anti-liberalism. The shift was no doubt accelerated by the media's "scoop" on the New Right in 1979, launched principally by the non-communist Left, just as the anti-totalitarian assault of a few years before. Benoist had advanced in the world of journalism, now writing for a leading conservative dailh, *Le Figaro*. The scandal began when its editor, Louis Pauwels, famed author of the neo-mystical best-seller *Morning of the Magicians*, identified his own views with those of a certain "New Right" (meaning Benoist, his friend). Then came a very hasty attempt to pigeon-hole this young group of thinkers as highly intellectual, throwback fascists, infiltrating the cultural sphere with designs on power (this in the days before the *Front national*). This picture was not so difficult to achieve, as Benoist and company tended to hold fairly controversial positions, and as the relationship between the journals of the New Right and certain right-wing think tanks was nebulous (even for members of the New Right itself). The non-communist Left saw yet another face of totalitarianism in Benoist's ideas. Bernard-Henry Lévy warned against his "entrism at the highest level, which consists of occupying strategic posts in the administration or state apparatus." He continued, "it is urgent that people of this country take heed of all totalitarianisms, whether they come from the Left, or, now more than ever, the Right, and resist them."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Table ronde, Alain de Benoist, Bernard-Henry Lévy, Jean-Edern Hallier, et al, "Que faut-il penser de la Nouvelle Droite?", in Brunn, *La Nouvelle Droite*, 331.

The mainstream press's reaction certainly emboldened Benoist in his critique of liberalism, and decreased the distance between the extremes of Left and Right. And true to form, one encounters an implacable hostility to human rights in Benoist's writing, and a greater occurrence of anti-capitalist rhetoric throughout the 80s and 90s. The irony, though, is that Benoist had his own reasons for joining the anti-totalitarian chorus of the 70s, which was so damaging to the communist Left. This should give us some indication of the "totalitarian" motif's discursive power in the post-68 context: those who were condemned in its name refused to disclaim it. Benoist takes full aim at Lévy's anti-totalitarian handbook, *The Testament of God*, which traced the occurrence of tyrannical regimes in the twentieth century to the erosion of morality within the political tradition, and closed with a plea to revive Judeo-Christian values as a moral salve to European barbarism. Benoist mocks Lévy's pieties, scolding him for "awaiting the end of history, the end of all conflict, the complete distinction between the identity of the subject and object, a disembodied justice, universal peace, the disappearance of borders." One can imagine any member of the anthropological turn writing this passage, not only as a grenade against Lévy, but also as a broad statement of its program (though Todd, at his more optimistic moments, might assent to "universal peace"). Benoist does not refuse the totalitarian moniker so much as deflect it back to Lévy: "In paganism, the gods are made in the image of men. The diversity of the gods is an idealized, harmonious projection of human diversity, which is recognized and made sacred. Peoples are different, just as the gods are different." In fact, monotheism is the thing to be blamed: "It implies the devaluation of the Other for the profit of the Above, and it poses as a principle the exclusivity of one god over others, of a single truth that rejects all other opinions as so many errors." Benoist has simply inverted Lévy's terms: monotheism is now the problem instead of the solution.

Moreover, monotheism is a perversion of a much healthier Indo-European paganism. In general, the rhetorical structure of Benoist's work – which always assumes the superiority of Indo-European antiquity – furnishes a ready-made narrative of decline, and a convenient critical weapon to brandish against modernity. His idols remain Nietzsche and his followers in Weimar Germany, the so-called Conservative Revolution – right-wing non-conformists who were at odds with the Nazi Party (but sometimes joined anyway). These were literary figures – Ernst Jünger, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, the young Thomas Mann – as well as theorists – Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, and Arnold Gehlen.⁶⁷ Overwhelmingly, their historical narrative was one of degeneration, the imminent exhaustion of advanced civilization. Nature would be destroyed by technology, noble virtues of honor and glory diluted by bourgeois-capitalist values, creativity sapped by over-refinement. It is easy to see the intellectual roots of Niethammer's post-histoire in this movement (and the survivors, like Jünger and Schmitt, would become part of it). Benoist devotes a great deal of his time to marketing these thinkers in France, publishing reprints of their work, critical overviews, anthologies, and bio-bibliographies.⁶⁸ And whereas his own theoretical work is amply informed by this particularly German *Kulturpessimismus*, it is nevertheless, like the work of the anthropological turn in general, undergirded by a sense of historical optimism. Here, it is the difference between nihilism – certainly a strong, if not dominant tendency in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Spengler – and a true, albeit unusual

⁶⁷ The movement was given intellectual coherence by a friend of Benoist's, Armin Mohler. See *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989, c1949). Mohler is an important figure in the history of the French New Right and a leading thinker of the German Neue Recht. Swiss-born, Mohler rallied to the Nazi party and defected to Germany in 1942, after the invasion of the USSR, with hopes of joining the Waffen SS (who refused to take him on). After the War he returned to Switzerland, where he was incarcerated for desertion. He did a short bid as personal secretary to his idol Ernst Jünger before going on to work for conservative thinktanks like the Siemens Foundation. He was the first person to receive the prestigious Konrad Adenauer prize in 1967.

⁶⁸ See, *inter alia*, Alain de Benoist, "Arthur Moeller van den Bruck: une 'question à la destinée allemande,'" *Nouvelle école* 35 (Janvier, 1980): 40-74; "Ernst Jünger: la figure du travailleur entre les dieux et les titans," *Nouvelle école* 40 (Novembre, 1983): 11-61; *Carl Schmitt actuel: "guerre juste," terrorisme, l'état d'urgence, "nomos de la terre"* (Paris: Krisis, 2007).

conservatism, which harkens back to a better, ideal moment in history. Benoist's position implies the possibility of (positive) change, and accords a primacy to politics in effecting it. He could never truly be tempted to take the "forest way", grumbling about the end of history all along. "The end of history is always *possible*", argues Benoist.⁶⁹ The point is to make sure it never actually happens.

His theories of history, politics, and the sacred are easily fitted with those of Gauchet and Debray, two thinkers Benoist admires. Gauchet's narrative of secularization – which, as I show in another chapter, is greatly indebted to Nietzsche – supposes the hollowing out of Judeo-Christian values and institutions as the general form of modernity, a very Christian secularization in other words. Benoist can only assent to this theory, believing as he does that modernity has been ruined by the transvaluation of Christian values into secularized norms and customs. Like Gauchet, he thinks that "totalitarianism" comprehends different political religions, which are more or less secularized versions of Christianity. Benoist writes that "Marxism, as everyone knows, eliminated religion only to better inherit it, taking over its messianic ideas" – a formulation which might have just as easily come from Gauchet's pen.⁷⁰

The affinities are deeper (with both Gauchet and Debray) when it comes to Benoist's theory of politics, which likewise sees a fundamental indistinction between religion and the rules of the polis. He quotes Gauchet, "belief is a part of human functioning, a component of the mental equipment of humankind"; at other times Debray, "It is possible to have a society without God, but it is not possible to have a society without religion."⁷¹ The lesson at any rate

⁶⁹ Alain de Benoist, "L'ennemi principal," *Éléments* 41 (March-April, 1982), 48.

⁷⁰ *Comment peut-on être païen?*, 114; see Marcel Gauchet, *À l'épreuve des totalitarismes, 1914-1974* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

⁷¹ *Mémoire vive*, 192.

is clear: there is no use in trying to eliminate religion (or better, the sacred) from politics; one can only reroute it and safeguard it from abuse. For Gauchet, the solution lies in the proper configuration of powers, the so-called mixed regime, the idea being that dividing and balancing rival forces will prevent its monopolization by any one of them. Our constitutional need to believe will still be satisfied by politics in the public sphere, and by religion in the private. For Debray, the nation-state, a secularized religious community, supplies the mythic and symbolic framework by which communities are able to cohere. This sense of eternity engendered by the nation, combined with its secular rituals and emblems, completes our anthropological need to belong and submit to something outside ourselves. For Benoist, the operative distinction is between myth (*muthos*) and reason (*logos*), the latter being a superficial apparatus of cognition, the former constituting the “truth” of humankind, a primitive affirmation of Being.⁷²

Now, one might expect Benoist’s preference for myth over reason to move in the direction of Georges Sorel’s thought, which employed myth – particularly that of the “general strike” – as an affective detonator of revolution, a principle around which workers could unite to overthrow capitalism. Carl Schmitt, another key reference point for Benoist, appropriated this theory of myth and put it in the service of the conservative revolution. Schmitt once wrote, glossing Sorel, “Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, springs great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. ... Every rationalist interpretation falsifies the immediacy of life.”⁷³ But Benoist unexpectedly rejects the usage of myth as a political weapon, and distances himself from the position of Sorel and Schmitt. Theirs is too voluntarist for Benoist: one cannot simply create myths *ex nihilo*. In fact, he is much

⁷² Alain de Benoist, *L’empire intérieur* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1995),

⁷³ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 68-71.

closer to the views of Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss in arguing that we need “to interpret ancient mythological narratives as an exemplary system of values, and as a set of symbols from which we need to draw lessons.”⁷⁴ In other words, as his predecessors believed, myths tell us how we live. However, in making the normative leap – i.e. “exemplary” and “need to draw lessons” – Benoist moves beyond Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss: myths are already out there for Benoist, belonging to an ancient, primitive moment of human history. In no sense do they “reflect” our consciousness, become our mode of thinking, or function as an internalized (and primitive) set of codes and laws. If they were once, long ago, the creation of humans, they are now like Platonic forms, remote from consciousness and accessible only through the words of poets (“the poet does not create myth, but is satisfied with telling it”). The injunction is to discover, interpret, and live in accordance with myths invented by the Indo-European peoples of pre-history. Benoist concludes, “myth is always present, always open because it outlines the form of a possible that no actualization could exhaust, and because it introduces to those who live it a dimension of life that supersedes historico-empirical existence” – a slow revolution just to listen to the myths spoken by the Indo-Europeans.⁷⁵

Benoist is always looking back to Indo-European society as the most primitive and authentic expression of culture. He must think, if he does not want to fall into the Sorel/Schmitt position, that the values and ideologies of Indo-European society were good in themselves, and not merely useful as myths for mobilization. The tri-functionality hypothesis, for one, is deployed as a regulative model in Benoist’s work. Though he admits that “tri-functionality is above all an idea, not a human social reality,” it is a useful instrument for gauging the wellbeing of a society, which should find a correct ordering of three functions (religious, political, and

⁷⁴ *Mémoire vive*, 192.

⁷⁵ *Empire intérieur*, 66-67.

economic).⁷⁶ Modern Europe has been afflicted with an inflation of the economic component, to the detriment of the two others: “One can see the depth of changes in social structure – and mental structure – that have taken place of late in modern Europe, where, under the influence of egalitarian doctrines, the distinction between the three ‘orders’ or ‘functions’ has essentially been erased. But also, the traditional hierarchy has been completely inverted, such that now it’s the economic function, i.e. the production of material goods, which occupies first place, and thereby shapes *mentalités* and determines needs and values.”⁷⁷ The tri-functionality hypothesis, in other words, is the underlying basis for Benoist’s larger normative claims: Europe *should* find a way to undo the regrettable expansion of the economic.

This leaves the other two components, the religious and the political. Of course Benoist believes they should overpower the economic, but what ought their relationship to one another be? What kind of values do they stand for? Here, Benoist appropriates the juridical philosophy of Carl Schmitt, in particular his notion of “the political”, but gives it an anthropological twist. “All forms of human activity,” argues Benoist, “contribute to the establishment of order, but it’s only the political [*le politique*] that assures its stability.”⁷⁸ For Benoist, as for Schmitt, the political denotes something different than politics: whereas the latter suggests the minor and contingent events, dilemmas, and confrontations that make up political life, the political suggests an invariant feature or structure of that life, centered on an implicit distinction between friend and enemy. Politics is always, at its core, agonistic, conflictual (though not necessarily militaristic). The liberal state – and here was Schmitt’s polemical thrust – was premised on the

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁷ Alain de Benoist, “L’Europe retrouvée,” in Maiestra (pseudonymous collection of authors), *Renaissance de l’Occident?* (Paris: Plon, 1979), 308.

⁷⁸ “L’ordre,” 110.

effacement of the political: its thoroughgoing legalism would attempt to reduce the number of decisions made in the political arena, and ultimately weaken the security of the state.

Liberalism's politics were always determined by other things: the market on the one hand, bourgeois morality (meaning abstract notions of justice, universal peace, and so) on the other. Benoist would repeat these criticisms of the bourgeois state in his own time, lashing out at its underlying economism.

On the whole, Benoist's reading of Schmitt is more traditionalist and conservative than the latter might accept. The obvious difference is that Schmitt's work has no foundationalist ideal, whereas Benoist's does. In the passage cited above, the political is made to preserve something (in this case, Indo-European customs), and its deployment is instrumental to that end. Neither conception would be permitted by Schmitt, for whom the political is a universal feature of human society. For Benoist, on the contrary, it is a feature of European society: "The necessary primacy of the political, so well emphasized by Schmitt, and later by Claude Polin and Julien Freund, finds its roots in the sources of our culture."⁷⁹ Ethnologically, European man is disposed toward this conception of politics by virtue of his Indo-European heritage.

Schmitt's conception of the political was part of a larger philosophy of sovereignty and the state. He is famous for arguing that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts", and for advancing a decisionist theory of sovereignty.⁸⁰ In both domains, we find ambiguous appropriations in Benoist's political philosophy. Benoist endorses Schmitt's theological conception of politics: "the liquidation of political theology leads necessarily to the liquidation of the political itself. But if the political is

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

above all secularized theology, then the suppression of the political would be equivalent to atheism.”⁸¹ Benoist envisions a political order in which the state retains both the religious vocation of the Indo-European priestly class and the militaristic vocation of the warrior caste. He writes, “In areas of Indo-European expansion, one finds a splitting of the sovereign function, represented by two distinct divinities, who, by means of symbolic analogies, preside over spiritual and temporal authority.” Indo-European kings were originally elected, and though they often emerged from the warrior class, they were invested, like the *rois thaumaturges*, with magical abilities. As is usual in Benoist’s writings, the descriptive becomes, subtly, the prescriptive, such that secular and spiritual authority “are indissolubly linked at the core of the sovereign function, but without instituting a theocracy.”⁸² Rather, they operate reciprocally, attending to both aspects of political government, that is, ensuring that order and hierarchy are maintained, while also running the day-to-day affairs of the state.

The convergences with Schmitt are clear. Benoist views authority, order, and obedience as positive characteristics of the state. A certain (libertarian) sector of the extreme Right has always been attracted to anarchism, including many thinkers of the interwar cohort named earlier. In fact, alongside the New Right emerged a movement in the mid-70s known (confusingly) as the “Nouvelle droite française”, headed by Georges Micberth and professing right-wing anarchist ideas – individualist revolt against all authority, combined with a nostalgia for the self-less aristocratic values of the Old Regime.⁸³ Benoist’s New Right has never taken individualism nor iconoclasm as its benchmarks, writing of politics in holist terms (that is, at the

⁸¹ Alain de Benoist, “Préface” to Carl Schmitt, *Du politique: "légalité et légitimité" et autres essais* (Puisseaux: Pardès, 1990), xi.

⁸² *Empire intérieur*, 91, 100.

⁸³ The concept, “anarchism of the right”, was coined by one of its proponents, François Richard. See his *Anarchistes de droite* (Paris: PUF, “Que sais-je?”, 1991). Micberth made a very memorable television appearance in 1977, where he outlines his restorationist program and distinguishes it from the New Right’s agenda.

level of the group), and of authority in glowing terms. Without order and authority, society becomes dangerously rudderless, and risks total disintegration and social atomization. Benoist will also equip himself with an arsenal of Schmittian arguments in the field of international relations, but these are best saved for a different discussion.

Where Benoist tends to diverge from Schmitt is on the conception of the state itself. In essence, Schmitt is a unitarist, who favors a centralized ruling body that sits above society, while Benoist is a federalist, who abhors the legacy of the “Jacobin” Revolutionary state in France.⁸⁴ Historically, conceptions of the state fall into two camps according to Benoist. One is statist and rooted in Jean Bodin’s theory of sovereignty, which argues that sovereignty cannot be divided or alienated. Hobbes and Schmitt belong to this camp, as do the French Revolutionaries, who inherited this theory of power from the Bourbon monarchy. It produced a singular statist trajectory that culminated in the barbarities of the twentieth century: “The Bodinian conception of sovereignty inspired, in turn, the absolutist monarchy, revolutionary jacobinism, statist nationalism, republican ideology, fascism, and the totalitarian regimes.” The other camp is federalist, descending from the work of a German jurist of the seventeenth century, Johannes Althusius. In this conception, sovereignty is always divided and shared among a confederation of communities or groups. The state naturally consists of two governing bodies, one tending to the needs of the local community, which tries to “retain as much power as it can realistically exercise,” and the other, situated at a higher level, regulating the needs of the confederation.⁸⁵

For Benoist, the underlying basis for the superiority of federalism is its greater sensitivity to cultural autonomy. The terms by which Benoist marks out praise for Althusius emphasize this

⁸⁴ Benoist is aware of this difference from Schmitt. See *Mémoire vive*, 217. For Schmitt’s theory, see Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 165.

⁸⁵ Alain de Benoist, “‘Souverainistes’ et souveraineté,” in *Critiques – Théoriques* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 2002), 482. See also Benoist’s “Johannes Althusius,” *Ibid.*, 283-313.

anthropological disposition: he “describes man as a social being, naturally inclined toward mutual solidarity and reciprocity. . . . Political science consists of methodically describing the conditions of social life, ‘symbiotic’ being his chosen term for these relations. Challenging the idea of individualism, he affirms that society is always prior for its members, and that it establishes itself by a series of political and social pacts reached successively, from bottom to top, by a multitude of autonomous associations.”⁸⁶ The federalist state preserves the continuity between nature and culture that Benoist takes as his regulative ideal, and ensures that no foreign body can penetrate and destroy the human’s symbiotic relation with its environment. It is at this stage of his work that Benoist will avail himself of a populism that was seldom to be found in the early writings of the New Right, and likewise of a greater preoccupation with ecology.⁸⁷ The federalist theory of the state, which Benoist develops in the 1990s, will allow him to effectively braid these different strands together into a coherent position. Politics becomes the conservation of nature and culture, which are deposited in the customs and habits of the small people who live off the land.

One way to understand Benoist’s later political theory is as a reappropriation of the post-war Right’s turn to federalism. The early New Right had taken umbrage to that generation’s compromises with liberalism, but never strayed too far, intellectually, from its mold. It took Benoist time to grow into some of these positions, and they would only become sure-footed once he had worked out his theory of culture – a quick comparison of his 1970 and 2002 essays on federalism would confirm this. By the latter date, he is sounding evermore like Jouvenel in the domain of political theory, that is, a pluralist-federalist (and hence anti-nationalist) with respect

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁸⁷ On populism, see Alain de Benoist, “Populismus,” *Junge Freiheit* (18 February 2000); on ecology, see inter alia, “Sur l’écologie, I” and “Sur l’écologie, II”, both in *Critiques – Théoriques*; and “Écologie et religion,” *Éléments* 79 (January 1994), 13-18.

to the state, and a populist-aristocrat with respect to social values. The assemblage is more consistent in Benoist, even, who, unlike Jouvenel, was a declared enemy of liberal-capitalism. For both thinkers, social hierarchies provide a natural solution to the problem of order and submission. It is because the higher social classes have a selfless regard for the entire community and defend the interests of the popular over the merchant classes that the state can be bypassed as an ordering mechanism. In this way, populism and elitism are natural allies for both Jouvenel and Benoist. Likewise, by virtue of the principle of enracination – lifelong immersion in the same community – the person attains the status of citizen.⁸⁸ Civic participation, an active duty of political life, becomes the means of realizing democracy, of which both Benoist and Jouvenel are suspicious, but choose to support in more heterodox terms. Benoist, for his part, is loath to criticize democracy at the risk of sounding too Maurrassian; and yet his defense is couched, one cannot help but notice, in very circumspect language: “Universal suffrage is one technique among many for verifying popular consent or for evaluating the agreement that exists between governed and governing. A society is all the more democratic when all who have the status of citizen participate actively in the *res publica*.”⁸⁹ But of course for Benoist, not everyone has an equal title to citizenship: the immigrant, the foreign born, etc. There needs to be a ranking mechanism for democracy to truly work.

The nuance of Benoist’s federalism is its stress on regional cultural autonomy. It is the only political system that truly respects “the right to difference” and recognizes the needs of Bretons, for example, as equal to those of Parisian Frenchmen. On a larger plane, Benoist has

⁸⁸ Jouvenel writes, with sylvan exuberance, “Planted on his piece of land, fond of or perhaps related to his neighbors, stable man was the good citizen *par excellence*.” Jouvenel, *Arcadie*, 138. In his 1985 book, *Démocratie: le problème*, Benoist writes that “Bertrand de Jouvenel summarized the problem neatly: ‘The discussion of democracy, the arguments for or against it, point frequently to a degree of intellectual shallowness, because it is not quite clear what this discussion is all about.’” *Démocratie: le problème* (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1985), 7.

⁸⁹ *Mémoire vive*, 158. He endorses the civic republican tradition of political thought identified here with Machiavelli, Harrington, Pocock, and Skinner.

mobilized this argument in support of a certain construction of Europe, not at all coextensive with the present Union, which is, fundamentally, a coordination of economic interests. As the New Right's thought ripened over the 70s and passed through the anthropological turn, it dropped Occidentalism from its roster, replacing it with a position it identified as "European." The difference is that the Occident includes the US and implies a transatlantic alignment of interests – a regrettable outcome for Benoist, who sees the US as the great materialist-egalitarian satan, a nightmarish commercial society with no past and too much military power. For this reason, "The idea of 'the Occident' is devoid of meaning, and it allows the US to run the show without admitting it, to insinuate itself as the 'natural leader' of this shell." The pro-Atlantic centrists in France – like Aron and later Gauchet – were inviting this hegemony, and therefore held, in Benoist's view, "an untenable position." The picture was no better in the East, where the other great materialist hobgoblin – this one, "a past without a future" – imposed russification and dictatorship on its satellite states.⁹⁰ Only a politics of non-alignment could secure an autonomous future for Europe. In this sense, its fate was linked with that of the Third World, which was also caught in the crossfire of the materialist duopoly. Benoist had come a long way from the overt racism of the days of *Europe-Action*, and his position on Europe was now (in the mid 80s) indistinguishable in many respects from the republican one of Debray and Todd (which Benoist cites approvingly in a book from 1986, *Europe, Third World, Same Struggle*). There were a couple of important differences however: whereas Debray and Todd saw France as the embattled political unit and employed a left anti-colonial rhetoric, Benoist was defending Europe from (a very different) right-wing anti-colonial perspective.

⁹⁰ Alain de Benoist, "L'Amérique," in *Critiques – Théoriques*, 153; Alain de Benoist, "Pourquoi nous sommes anticommunistes," *Éléments* 57-58 (Spring 1986), 2.

After the creation of the New Right in 1968 Benoist became a stalwart anti-nationalist, associating the nation's rise and universalization with the worst Jacobin (hence materialist-egalitarian) excesses. Europe, however, was a different affair. Its common fate was culturally programmed, and for this reason, it is one of the only positive political agendas to be found in Benoist's work: "Above all, one must never forget that beyond what distinguishes them (which should definitely be preserved), Europeans issue from the same cultural-historical matrix. It is clear, in an era where national-statisms become more and more inoperative, that it's only on a continental scale that one can face the challenges of today."⁹¹ How can cultural heritage be translated into a continental politics? What will be the basis of sovereignty if the nation-state is illegitimate as such? The solution requires us to weave together many threads of Benoist's work: cultural foundationalism, federalism, and finally his pro-empire arguments. Certainly, federalism is and has been easily reconciled with a European political project, many of the current Union's proponents having misgivings about the nation-state as well. But few have tried to construct the Union around cultural principle, and perhaps fewer yet have deployed pro-imperial rhetoric to make this case.

Benoist's pro-imperial arguments proceed quite logically from his federalist orientation and his never-ending quest to circumvent the nation-state as the locus of sovereignty. Empire gives Benoist at last a theory of sovereignty and allows him to cut the Gordian knot of European politics. Essentially, empire has been understood mistakenly in the modern period as a territorial, expansionist unit, whereas, if one were to consult more antique usages, the Roman one for instance, empire would appear as an "idea" or a "principle." "The principle of empire," argues Benoist, "aims to reconcile the one and the multiple, the universal and the particular." It is, moreover, a spiritual idea, with its own sense of political consolidation, which is "never a

⁹¹ *Mémoire vive*, 248.

mechanical, but always an organic unity that exceeds the contours of the state.” Rome furnishes the model, uniting different peoples under a common basis of citizenship, but “without converting them or suppressing their identities” – an empire of perfect tolerance then. But why do these disparate culture units need to be federated, or linked under an imperial government?⁹² Benoist, like Debray, often writes of an anthropological need to belong, but the local autonomous unit would no doubt satisfy this need (besides, Debray uses this argument *for* the nation, *against Europe*, as is logical). Most supporters of Europe or federalism would cite common material interests as the key *raison d’être*, but these are almost completely absent from Benoist’s work.

Roman law is one option that Benoist sometimes chooses, but this is a tenuous path for him to follow. To argue both that Rome effectively imposed its legal system on conquered peoples and that it respected cultural autonomy is a difficult sell. It would suppose that law and culture are entirely separate, something that the conquered peoples, at any rate, did not believe. His other line is even more baffling, however: “The Roman empire’s foundation is religious. The justification for imperial power rests both on the merit of the emperor and on the protection of the gods, in a straight line that descends from the Hellenistic monarchical tradition inaugurated by Alexander the Great.”⁹³ How would this not amount to the chauvinism of the dominant culture over the smaller ones? Does this not endorse a model of plunder and conquest? How can one view Napoleon as a tyrant but Alexander as a herald of federalist, cooperative politics and a beacon of tolerance? What of the more recent examples of multi-national empires: Yugoslavia, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman? These were not exactly success stories. He vaguely

⁹² Alain de Benoist, “L’idée de l’empire,” in *Critiques – Théoriques*, 460. The pro-empire texts are littered with references to the “post-histoire” cohort, here most notably Kojève.

⁹³ *Empire intérieur*, 131.

cites a contemporary fascination (whose?) with the Austro-Hungarian empire as a sign of its enduring popularity.⁹⁴ Moreover, how can he inveigh against the empires of the US and the USSR, and then turn around and defend the imperial model as an ideal? After all, they are not territorial empires in the traditional sense, both abide by a kind of spiritual principle (one capitalist, the other socialist), and both operate as federalist polities. And indeed, Emmanuel Todd makes a very compelling case that the US after 1990 has many affinities with the Roman empire. Benoist takes little care to iron out these inconsistencies. He typically prefers “superpowers” “or colonial states” to “empire”, and lazily contends that the US is Carthage, not Rome.⁹⁵ Then of course come the usual torpedoes: materialist, egalitarian, commercial, etc. But why are his own political principles never called into question?

Evaluations

The answer is less that Benoist is concealing some sinister political program – the resurrection of the Third Reich? – and more that his intellectual method will have naturally produced such an outcome. As a relatively successful journalist of fifty odd years, Benoist is a sensitive and able political commentator. He responds, for example, to the question, how would the ideal Europe look, with a straightforward answer: it would be led by a kind of avant-garde, “grouping together only the countries that decide to go forward with the deepening of political institutions. This avant-garde would link France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Hungary, and Austria. It would not be a matter of replacing the existing Union, but of creating within it a structure of development extending to those wishing to go to the next level in the process.”⁹⁶ This is not to

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹⁵ Alain de Benoist, “L’Amérique, c’est Carthage,” *Éléments* 70 (Spring 1991), 3.

say that his plan is totally coherent or convincing, but it is at least crisply conceived: a mild cultural chauvinism of Western Europe over the East within a single cultural-political framework.

His theoretical treatment of the subject is much more convoluted. Why? Benoist's positions are a series of contrarian provocations that have been worked over, awkwardly, into a system. Some of these gibes have been spirited and well-aimed: he coined the pejorative term now widely used to describe French neo-liberal thought, "la pensée unique" (which was adopted by the left journal *Le monde diplomatique*, probably in ignorance of its origins).⁹⁷ Some have gone astray, stigmatizing Benoist as a racist buffoon. He is infamous for having remarked that he would rather be made to wear the helmet of the Red Army soldier than to "spend his last days eating a hamburger in Brooklyn" – a throw-away line, certainly, but if one takes into consideration his history of anti-semitic and anti-black sentiments, the line has a more unsettling ring.⁹⁸ In any event, his relentless iconoclasm will lead to some awkward theoretical problems. He will, for example, argue, like Gauchet, that fascism and communism have differences of character, but are, deep down, symmetrical regimes, both radically modern political religions. This way, Benoist gets to needle the Marxists, who reject the idea of the comparison in the first place. But then, unlike Gauchet, he will continue to argue for a strong family resemblance between Soviet communism and liberal capitalism (sometimes calling it democracy). This enables Benoist to antagonize the anti-totalitarian liberals, even if he consents to most of their claims and appropriates their rhetoric, as argued above. The results of Benoist's comparative

⁹⁶ *Mémoire vive*, 248.

⁹⁷ See Alain de Benoist, "McCarthyisme: le retour," *Éléments* 78 (September 1993); also, "Pensée unique, nouvelles censures," in GRECE, *Non à la censure! De la police de la pensée à la Nouvelle Inquisition* (Paris: GRECE, 1998).

⁹⁸ "L'ennemi principal," 48. The line was quoted in London's *The Independent* as an example of France's anti-Disney, anti-American sentiments.

analysis are, as one might imagine, sloppy: a loose equivalence is posed between communism, fascism, and liberalism (or maybe democracy, it is difficult to discern), with no stable set of criteria.⁹⁹ He works at the level of ideas, rarely going below, bending them to suit his point: “this idea resembles this idea, which is also like this other one,” etc. It would be naïve to lay the blame solely on polemicism, which after all, can be put to good use in the right hands (Debray’s for instance). The larger problem is Benoist’s method of reading and quotation, which represent a perverted tendency of philosophical idealism.

Able though he is as a journalist, his work for the New Right has a stale, intellectualist tendency. That is, most of his views consist of selective quotations or reworked summaries of his favorite thinkers. Benoist is a compulsive reader, and his library is the stuff of legend – 10,000 titles just in German. He boasts that half of every dollar he ever earned was put toward books. This dilettantism is at once a great strength of Benoist’s – resulting in the republication of many forgotten or insufficiently studied thinkers, like Carl Schmitt and Julien Freund, and exhibiting a staggering intellectual curiosity – and a crippling weakness, tending to arrest originality and resurrect bad ideas. Many of his texts come off as the work of a publicist trying to market an intellectual movement, or perhaps more kindly, that of a clip-artist pasting together roughly corresponding texts. He has published many such collages, including his four volume *Bibliographie générale des droites françaises*, which strings together with no apparent logic Benoist’s favorite thinkers of the far Right. F.A. Hayek’s characterization of the intellectual as the second-hand dealer in ideas would not be unfair in this case. There is a stark lack of attention to the material world in Benoist’s thinking, which can be a consequence of (a vulgar) idealism.

⁹⁹ He writes, “to try to clear the name of communism by virtue of its deeper inspiration – the very ideals of modernity – is to obscure the fact that this inspiration constitutes the roots not only of its crimes, but also those of Nazism.” A few pages later, “One understands that liberal democracy and communism represent two courrents flowing from the same ideology of the Enlightenment.” Alain de Benoist, *Communisme et nazisme: 25 réflexions sur le totalitarisme au XXe siècle* (1917-1989)(Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1998), 124-5, 128.

The implicit assumption of all his work is that the idea supersedes the thing itself: the way to investigate democracy or capitalism is to study their ideas or ideas of them, but rarely to look at how they are practiced or experienced by people. He remarks that “I have certainly been more influenced by readings than by events in my intellectual career” – a regrettable method for a hard-line nominalist, who is supposed to attending to instances instead of universals.¹⁰⁰

The assemblage of Benoist’s work, finally, has a peculiar construction. It promotes revolution on the one hand, but in the most conservative sense of the word, as a return to origins, as restoration. The royalist movements, like Action française, to which the New Right is often (mistakenly) compared, were restorationist within the boundaries of everyday politics. They had a position, however untenable, that was readily comprehensible to even the uneducated; not so with Benoist, whose idea of returning to the customs and practices (on a European scale) of Indo-European tribes is so impossibly remote, recondite, and abstract as to escape the comprehension of the most lettered people. It is not, in other words, a political restoration-revolution that might be found in Maistre or Maurras, but a cultural revolution with a baffling scope (Benoist claims to admire the Maoists in France for this reason).¹⁰¹ If one were to take the restorationist politics of the French tradition and filter it through the Collège de sociologie, existentialism, and 60s/70s cultural radicalism, the New Right is what you might get: a culturalist-archaicist utopian restorationism. On the other hand, the New Right is heir to a long tradition, cultivated principally in nineteenth-century Germany, of cultural pessimism, the idea that civilization is gradually decaying. The more practical side of its work, then, is devoted to stalling this eventuality, and this is where Benoist’s apprenticeship with the figures of post-

¹⁰⁰ *Mémoire vive*, 153.

¹⁰¹ For the different meanings of revolution in the history of ideas, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 43-45.

histoire bleeds through. His most compelling ideas – federalism, ecology, the critique of capitalism – are borrowed from this tradition and serve the more immediate end of overcoming or slowing down cultural degeneration. When taken together, these two strands lend Benoist's work an unusual sensibility, which is both positive, programmatic, and even utopian; while at the same time negative, piecemeal, and even despairing. The same combination is to be found, with different resolution, in the work of Debray, Gauchet, and Todd.

It might also be worth emphasizing that Benoist's political theory, though marginal seeming, has had an international resonance among non-conformists on both sides of the political spectrum. Most notably, the American journal *Telos*, an organ of the New Left founded in 1968, turned anti-communist by the late 70s, brought Benoist into its fold in the early 80s and translated many of his most important texts. They were interested in setting up a transatlantic dialogue that recalibrated the critique of capitalism with an anti-statist (and anti-communist) ethos, for which Benoist's work was an ideal fit. It was made to correspond to the far-right regionalist movements occurring in Italy in the 1980s, linked principally to the work and career of Gianfranco Miglio, founder of the Partito Federalista and elected member of Umberto Bossi's Northern League. This must have been a pleasing outcome for Benoist, who styles himself as a true, cosmopolitan European. Ironically, he is the most trans-national thinker of the four concerned here, and his work has been the most influential on an international scale – not only by virtue of translations, but lectures, radio appearances, and close collaboration with the German and Italian cognates of the New Right (Die Neue Recht and la Nuova Destra). Any proper history of the New Right would need to track its international reception.

In Parisian intellectual affairs, Benoist typically plays a maverick role, which tends to play toward the Left rather than the Right. This is intentional, as Benoist sees himself more and

more sharing in the Left's critique of capitalism. Politically, his record has been respectable from a leftist perspective. He has opposed, with great vehemence, every imperialist war since Vietnam, including those instigated in the name of human rights (of which Benoist remains, with Gauchet and Debray, an implacable critic). He is, of course, deeply anti-American, sometimes excitable on the subject, as when he wrote that the Gulf War was the "first skirmish of World War III," and demanded an "intifada" against the US.¹⁰² The journal he launched in 1988, *Krisis*, was more receptive than ever to the ideas of the Left, most notably those of Baudrillard and Debray, for whom Benoist retains a great deal of respect. And his theoretical work has begun to speak of the Capital-form of late, though there is and can be no true critique of capital within the scope of the New Right's thought, beholden as it is to culturalist explanations (of nearly everything). Finally, Benoist succeeds in keeping his work relevant. The dilettante-publicist in him ensures that he is abreast of the latest developments in philosophy. And true to form, he has been at the forefront of these in France, including the philosophy of the "animal," the reception of Carl Schmitt's work, and the critique of neo-liberalism. But in the end, there is no mistaking Benoist's ideas and politics: they are of the right, even if in an avant-garde, intellectualist capacity; and committed, at some level, to the restoration of an elitist, hierarchical, nativist order – one which any materialist would immediately reject. If Benoist can be said to have enlarged the intellectual respectability of the Right, we might recall the opening words to Beauvoir's essay of 1954: "The truth is one; error is multiple. It's no wonder if the Right professes pluralism. Its doctrines are too numerous to be all taken seriously."¹⁰³

¹⁰² "L'Amérique, c'est Carthage," 3.

¹⁰³ Beauvoir, 93.

Chapter Three - Marcel Gauchet: Anthropologies of the Liberal State

Marcel Gauchet is not typically regarded as an anthropological thinker. But his early work is based on a series of assumptions about the nature of “primitive” society, without which the development of modernity’s political and social arrangements would be incomprehensible. Years later, Gauchet would admit, “I was convinced that the enigma of primitive politics ... contained the keys to the intelligence of our political condition. It’s on this wager that I staked my intellectual career. The rest came as a solution that I believed could answer this problem.”¹ What impelled Gauchet to make this wager, and what would its eventual outcome be? What could the “savage” reveal to us about our political situation that was previously invisible or hidden? Only by carefully reconstructing Gauchet’s project in relation to his immediate political and intellectual context can these questions be settled. In tracing Gauchet’s path through the anthropological detour, we come to understand the roots of an influential line of French liberalism, one quite distant from that of Emmanuel Todd, and much closer to what is now called neo-liberalism.

More so than any other thinker studied in this dissertation, Gauchet is at the center of Parisian intellectual life. He edits the widely respected centrist review, *Le Débat*, teaches political philosophy at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), publishes all his work with Gallimard, and writes papers for influential think tanks. He coined the term “social fracture” in an article from 1990,² a notion that would figure prominently in the rhetoric of Jacques Chirac’s 1995 campaign for president (the rough message being that France was

¹ Marcel Gauchet, *La condition politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 13.

² The essay is, “Les mauvaises surprises de la lutte des classes,” in *La démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 211. The passage reads, “What needs to be understood is how the deep-seated social fracture, of which the increasing hold of the Front National is the tangible expression, took place.” The phrase was originally attributed to Emmanuel Todd, who used it in a paper written for the Fondation Saint-Simon in 1994. He publicly condemned its appropriation by Chirac. Gauchet, by contrast, neither endorsed nor denounced the action once it was discovered that he had coined the expression.

becoming evermore socially Manichean and a healthy sense of social mobility ought to be restored). *Le Monde* selected him as the candidate most likely to fill the place left vacant by Pierre Bourdieu as France's *maître penseur*.³ Intellectually, Gauchet's work has brought a unique perspective to questions of religion, democracy, subjectivity, and education, and his theory of secularization, *The Disenchantment of the World* (1985), has been hailed as a milestone thesis on the subject, enjoying a warm reception both inside and outside of France.

Gauchet's origins are the humblest of the four thinkers. He was born in 1946 to lower middle class circumstances in a small town in Normandy. Politics was never discussed in his family: his father, a road-worker (*cantonnier*), and his mother, a fervent Catholic and a dress maker (*couturière*), suspected that "it was not for them." He was a Catholic choir boy in his youth, and later, as an adolescent, decided to pursue a career in education, enrolling at the *École normale d'instituteurs* at Saint-Lô at the age of fourteen. By 1962, the Algerian War noisily winding down, Gauchet would abandon his "peasant apoliticism" by joining up with the vibrant university syndicalist movement, which had mobilized impressively against the war. This entry into politics was marked by an immediate suspicion of communists, one that Gauchet has never abandoned. He recalls, "I discovered Stalinism at the same time. I had never seen communists in flesh and blood, and it only took observing two or three at work for me to be permanently cautioned against seduction from the Party."⁴ The remaining details of Gauchet's early political and intellectual activity are sketchy. He developed a liking for philosophy, history, and sociology in the mid sixties, and left behind the teaching profession to pursue these studies more seriously. He claims to have taken an early interest in Marxism, but says very little about which

³ Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, "Marcel Gauchet, au chevet de la démocratie," *Le Monde* (Nov. 22, 2002).

⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *La condition historique: Entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 20.

texts or questions captured his attention. Through circumstances unknown, Gauchet met philosopher Claude Lefort in 1966 – “the most important intellectual encounter of my life” – and enrolled at the University of Caen, where Lefort was then teaching. In his autobiographical interview, *La condition historique* (2003), Gauchet awards full credit to Lefort for his intellectual education: “[This period] gave me the chance to systematically clarify what I had begun to understand and unfold thanks to Lefort, the irreducibility of democracy, the centrality of the political, the necessity of thinking together democracy and totalitarianism in their convergences and divergences.” What Gauchet thought or believed before his meeting with Lefort is still uncertain, though historians have suggested that he was involved in a grouplet in Caen with Cornelius Castoriadis and Lefort, *L’anti-mythes*.⁵ Also mysterious is Gauchet’s about-face on the question of Marxism. After declaring his early Marxist leanings, he writes, “It should be said that I became noticeably more anti-Marxist than Lefort, and for that matter Castoriadis [co-founder with Lefort of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*].”⁶ What had changed in the meantime?

May 68 was a period of great excitement for Gauchet, as it was not for the two figures on the left in this dissertation (Todd and Debray): “I was, if I may say so, in full subversive effervescence. May 68 in my memory was about meetings and incredible and exhausting journeys between Caen and Paris. ... We discovered suddenly that there were tons of people who thought like us, sometimes just like us. We needed to bridge the gap between these scattered individuals and grouplets.”⁷ Exactly what had excited Gauchet intellectually about 68 is less than clear, except that he admired its non-violence, the “explosion of public speech”, and the

⁵ François Dosse, *Empire of Meaning: The Humanization of the Social Sciences*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 55-57; Samuel Moyn, “Savage and Modern Liberty: Marcel Gauchet and the Origins of New French Thought.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 4, 2 (2005): 183, n.9.

⁶ Gauchet, *La condition historique*, 22, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

sense that, reproducing the term made famous by Lefort and Castoriadis in this context, a “breach” had opened in French society, that something new was in store. Again, hesitations abound here. At one moment he aligns himself with the ultra-left; at another, he pulls back so as to dilute his radicalism. “I remember,” he recalls of the late sixties, “our dilemma regarding the war in Vietnam. We were torn between unthinking support for the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people and the avowed hope that the Americans would win and crush a regime for which we had no sympathy. ... In this era, I was a firm partisan of the Atlantic alliance.”⁸ When asked where he situated himself politically between 1960 and 1970, his first response was “nowhere.”

Historiography

Serious work on Gauchet is only beginning to emerge, and principally outside of France. Within France, whose republic of letters is now a vapid shadow of its former glory, commentary on Gauchet oscillates between the extremes of fulsome praise and vicious attack, with nothing like a sustained and balanced overview of his work in sight. In the former camp belong the reviews of his friends and admirers around the journal *L'Esprit*, including the first book-length study of Gauchet's work by Marc-Olivier Padis, *Marcel Gauchet: la genèse de la démocratie* (1996). Not a whiff of criticism is to be found there, though its intention, admittedly, is to introduce Gauchet's work to a broader audience (which it does quite well). Pierre Manent and Olivier Mongin (both at *Esprit*) have repeatedly intervened on his behalf during various controversies, and the book reviewers at *Le Monde* have always been generous to him.⁹ In the hostile camp

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

belong the crude *ad hominem* attacks of Daniel Lindenberg, author of *Le rappel à l'ordre*, Didier Eribon, biographer of Foucault, and Miguel Abensour, former friend and collaborator. Eribon's perverse attempt at criticism is to relate an anecdote from Foucault: "I asked him about Gauchet's *Pratique de l'esprit humain* [a collaborative work on psychiatry with anti-Foucauldian conclusions] and he responded, 'It's nothing! Neo-Aronian bullshit!'"¹⁰ In the French response to his work, there is little to be found between hagiography and defamation.

Outside of France, Gauchet's biggest following has been in Australia, in particular around the journal *Thesis Eleven*, which has offered a rich set of commentaries on the political side of his work and its relationship to Lefort's theses on democracy.¹¹ Quebecois scholars have also taken a lively interest Gauchet's *oeuvre*, but focused primarily on its implications for religion. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wrote the forward to the English translation of *The Disenchantment of the World*, judging it to be a pathbreaking theory of secularization, even if, regrettably for Taylor, "we are dealing here with an atheist view of the matter." Patrice Bergeron's book, *La sortie de la religion: brève introduction à la pensée de Marcel Gauchet*, approaches Gauchet as one of Christianity's most damaging (because persuasive) critics: "he is not a 'comforting' author for Christians." Quebecois thinkers are also responsible for the

⁹ Manent's own political theory has taken many of its cues from Gauchet's meta-narrative of democracy and religion. See, Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Didier Eribon, *D'Une révolution conservatrice et de ses effets sur la gauche française* (Paris: L. Scheer, 2007), 117. This of course says more about Foucault, who was notoriously touchy when it came to criticism, than it does about Gauchet. See also, Daniel Lindenberg, *Le rappel à l'ordre: enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil and La République des Idées, 2002); Miguel Abensour, *Lettre d'un "révoltiste" à Marcel Gauchet converti à la "politique normale"* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2008).

¹¹ See, inter alia, Antoon Braeckman, "The Closing of the Civic Mind: Marcel Gauchet on the 'Society of Individuals,'" *Thesis Eleven* 94 (2008): 29-48; Natalie Doyle, "Democracy as Socio-Cultural Project of Individual and Collective Sovereignty: Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet and the French Debate on Modern Autonomy," *Thesis Eleven* 75 (2003): 69-95.

omnibus collection, *Religion, modernité et démocratie: en dialogue avec Marcel Gauchet*.¹² In the United States, intellectual historians Warren Breckman and Samuel Moyn have begun to examine Gauchet as a serious thinker, focusing, again, on the political dimensions of his (early) work.¹³ Even within this much more fair-minded community of international critics, no one has provided a strong contextual reading of Gauchet's philosophy, or a definitive statement on its possible meanings.

I will attempt to provide both in the space of this chapter, focusing primarily on the formation of Gauchet's theoretical system in the 1970s, and its transformations through the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. The texts I examine are those that deal with his views on the state, democracy, and religion (which all constitute the lion's share of Gauchet's work). I will leave aside, regrettably, the psychiatric philosophy he developed with his life partner Gladys Swain – co-author of *Pratique de l'esprit humain* and *L'Inconscient cérébral* – on the grounds that it requires engaging with an entirely different set of literature and is not directly germane to his theses on politics and religion. This philosophy of the subject also brings Gauchet in and out of conversation with Heidegger – a relationship that will not be developed here, but deserves further consideration. I emphasize here, rather, his French influences: Merleau-Ponty, Lefort, Castoriadis, Clastres, and Nora. With more space to flesh out his relationship to the Germans, I would say this: that his philosophy oscillates between a Hegelian optimism, which sees

¹² Charles Taylor, "Foreword", Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xiv; Patrice Bergeron, *La sortie de la religion: brève introduction à la pensée de Marcel Gauchet* (Outremont (Québec): Athéna, 2009), 19; François Nault, ed., *Religion, modernité et démocratie* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008).

¹³ Warren Breckman, "Disenchantment and Political Theology: French Post-Marxism and the Return of Religion," *New German Critique* 94 (Winter 2005): 72-105. Moyn has written three important articles on Gauchet, which will be referred to throughout the essay.

autonomy and self-consciousness as the inevitable result of historical forces, and a Heideggerian pessimism, which speaks of alienation from the world and “anthropological mutation.”¹⁴

Predecessors

Any attempt at a reconstruction of Gauchet’s thought will have to pass through Claude Lefort’s presiding influence. At the time of his mentorship of Gauchet, Lefort was at work on an interpretation of Machiavelli, the sprawling *Le travail de l’oeuvre: Machiavel* (1972). Hitherto Lefort had been educated, as a high school student in the early 40s, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and was profoundly influenced by the latter’s theoretical and political commitments. During the War, he joined and organized for the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, the French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International. By 1946, he founded, with Cornelius Castoriadis, a young philosopher newly arrived from Greek exile, a dissenting tendency within the PCI, which maintained that the Soviet Union was a new variation on a class-based, exploitative society, and not, as the orthodox line held, a degenerated workers’ state.¹⁵ In 1949, they left the PCI and launched the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* – marginal in its day, but now widely acclaimed for the quality and originality of its contributions to the postwar French left.¹⁶ Lefort was *agregé* in philosophy the same year and taught in provincial high schools before landing a post in

¹⁴ Marcel Gauchet, “Sur la condition historique” (interview with Philippe Sollers), *L’Infini* 87 (Summer 2004), 10. Though this expression is employed in the context of a discussion of Heidegger, Gauchet probably takes it from Castoriadis, who frequently used it to decry the poverty of the present, as in “the instauration of totalitarianism has corresponded to what we must label a sudden and brutal anthropological mutation.” Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Evolution of the French Communist Party,” *Political and Social Writings: Vol. 2, 1961-1979* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 298. Then again, Castoriadis’s meta-narrative autonomy has strong Heideggerian affinities, as when he writes, “Thus I have tried to show for a long time that Marxism has remained the prisoner of the capitalist ideology, and, beyond that, of the entirety of Greco-Western ontology.” Castoriadis, “The Revolutionary Exigency,” *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁵ Philippe Gottraux, “*Socialisme ou Barbarie*”: *Un engagement politique et intellectuel dans la France de l’après-guerre* (Paris: Payot, 1997), 21.

¹⁶ See Daniel Bensaid, *Les trotskyismes* (Paris: PUF, 2001), 68-70; Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 128-130.

sociology with the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique), where he would more or less remain – a brief stint teaching philosophy in São Paulo in the 50s and five years in Caen (1966-1971) – until his appointment to the EHESS in 1976.¹⁷ It was at Caen that Lefort undertook and completed his thesis on Machiavelli and assembled a coterie of young intellectuals, Gauchet one of them.

Gauchet's move toward anthropological speculation is usually attributed to his encounter with the ethnologist Pierre Clastres. While this is not inaccurate, as will become plain, it would be a mistake to overlook the anthropological character of Lefort's work (and Merleau-Ponty's too), and its influence on Gauchet. Phenomenology, especially in its French incarnation, tended not to be very anthropological in its thinking. Sartre and Beauvoir borrowed from Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss on occasion, but their ontologies – and the ethics derived from them – were comprehensible without recourse to ethnological concepts. This was less true in the case of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work subtly embraced an anthropological vantage point. In his attack on Sartre of 1955, Merleau-Ponty claimed that his own philosophy gave greater weight to “the socialization of society,” the way in which society “arranges itself as a center or an interior from which it is possible to think it”; whereas in Sartre, the category of the social does not appear “because the social can enter his philosophy of the cogito only by way of the alter ego.”¹⁸ What Merleau-Ponty recognized – implicitly here – was that alongside the sociological-anthropological tradition in France, which had always, from Montaigne to Durkheim, privileged the logic of the social (and the socialization of consciousness), there existed a powerful Cartesian

¹⁷ Lefort also wrote occasionally for *Les Temps modernes* until his 1953 polemic with Sartre, whose reply to Lefort inspired Merleau-Ponty's philippic, “Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism,” and ultimately provoked his exit from the journal he had co-founded.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 37, 155.

tradition that asserted the primacy of the individual subject and his/her consciousness. The traditions were, at bottom, difficult to reconcile, as would be clear in the debate between him and Sartre.

Increasingly, Merleau-Ponty was prone to collapsing ethnology and sociology into the very definition of philosophy. Philosophy is the study of our “insertion into being”, the domain to which ethnology and sociology grant access. Of the former, he writes, “Ethnology is not a specialty defined by a particular object, ‘primitive societies’. It is a way of thinking, the way which imposes itself when the object is ‘different’, and requires us to transform ourselves. We also become the ethnologists of our own society if we set ourselves at a distance from it.” Sociology too bears the weight of this collectivist disposition: “Ultimately, our situation is what links us to the whole of human experience. ... ‘Science’ and ‘sociology’ will designate the effort to construct ideal variables which objectify and schematize the functioning of this effective communication.” Notice Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Sartrean terminology, “situation”, which here takes on a collectivist meaning (in the first person plural) where it resonated principally on the level of the individual for Sartre.¹⁹ Properly speaking, for Merleau-Ponty “philosophy is everywhere ... [and] thus the partisans of ‘pure’ philosophy and those of socio-economic explanation can exchange roles before our very eyes, and we do not have to enter their interminable debate.”²⁰

Merleau-Ponty’s approach to philosophy as the attempt to bring out “le principe du logos sauvage” of human interaction was positioned explicitly against Hegelo-Marxist (and *a fortiori*,

¹⁹ Stefanos Geroulanos has also signaled the anthropological character of Merleau-Ponty’s work. He describes it as a “negative anthropology,” one that privileged intersubjective relations in the determination of subjectivity, rather than man’s grounding in a natural order. Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that Is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 270-286.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 123, 120, 110, 130. These quotes are drawn from three short but essential methodological chapters of the book, “The Philosopher and Sociology,” “From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss,” and “Everywhere and Nowhere.”

all evolutionist) views of historical development.²¹ This conception made its way into the work of Claude Lefort, who confesses to an early fascination with ethnology, presumably prompted by his tutelage under Merleau-Ponty: “Infatuated with ethnographic literature in my youth, I acquired the conviction that the phenomena of so-called primitive societies called into question the principles of the philosophy of History – those of Hegel and Marx. ... In an article from 1952 I tried to bring out the difficulties of a theory which sought to exclude the course of History from societies that seemed closed on themselves and showed no sign of evolution, but which could not properly designate them as natural because this theory saw in them a prefiguration of humanity.”²² Lefort developed this cross-disciplinary philosophical method alongside his commitment to (non-orthodox) Marxist theory. An early text on Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* has Lefort highlighting its similarities to the young Marx: “Both speak of ‘total man’ as bearer of a social and historical truth, and attack any theory that treats society as an abstraction.” His work on Machiavelli is conceived in dialogue with Marx, treating them both as forerunners of a sociology that refuses to concede to idealist (pseudo) criticism, empirical relativism or dogmatic historicism. By contrast, the sociology of Machiavelli and Marx is resolutely realist, with the aim of apprehending the totality of social relations, and of, unconsciously reproducing Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, capturing “the insertion of un être avéré du monde.”²³

If Lefort took from Merleau-Ponty his conception of philosophy (as something ethnologically grounded), he also appropriated his distinction between the “visible” and the

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 139. This passage is cited in Marcel Gauchet, “Le lieu de la pensée,” *L’Arc* 46 (1971), 29 n.30.

²² Claude Lefort, “L’oeuvre de Clastres,” Miguel Abensour, ed. *L’esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 186-7.

²³ See respectively, “L’échange et la lutte des hommes,” (1951) and “Réflexions sociologiques sur Machiavel et Marx,” (1960) Claude Lefort, *Les formes de l’histoire: essais d’anthropologie politique* (Gallimard: Paris, 1978), 15, 170.

“invisible” (which will be no less central to the work of Gauchet).²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, in his late work, employed this pairing to reframe his ontological description of the world, presenting the “invisible’ as the ‘lining’ and the ‘inexhaustible depth’ of the visible, the necessary and constitutive relationship between the figure and the ground, surface and depth, presence and absence. ... Together visible and invisible form the flesh of the world.”²⁵ This idea of “flesh” – “an existential field whose interiority is experienced” – became a key motif in Lefort’s subsequent work, where it was used to formulate a new (and specifically) political ontology.²⁶ No longer would politics – or rather, the “political” – be treated as one domain of social life among many, but as its central form-giving principle. In Lefort, the invisible is a synonym for the political, the hidden structuring principle of what we experience as politics, the visible. Moreover, the “flesh” of the political gives way to a pervasive language of corporality in Lefort’s work, one that will be powerfully confirmed in his reading of Machiavelli. The young Gauchet, still a pupil of Lefort, also seized on this idea of the “flesh of the world” in his first published article. With great attention to Merleau-Ponty’s text, Gauchet limns out the stakes of Merleau-Ponty’s enigmatic formulations, settling on a reading that will echo Lefort’s: “The world, in a sense, is totalized in its division, but in such a manner that nothing confines the world, that its borders are absolutely indeterminate.” From the very beginning of his intellectual formation, thus, Gauchet is partial to these ontological-topographical questions, of talking about the world as a series of inside-outside relationships. Gauchet also does well to remind us that “flesh” is a

²⁴ This idea is also taken up by his colleague at *Le Débat*, Krzysztof Pomian, who employs it in a discussion of art collecting, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500 to 1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁵ Warren Breckman, “Disenchantment and Political Theology,” 86.

²⁶ The expression is from Diane Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 178.

figurative notion in Merleau-Ponty, is simply a way of talking about the world, and by no means designates a materialist orientation “or a something of existing reality.”²⁷

For this circle, a major breakthrough came with Lefort’s doctoral work on Machiavelli, which culminated in *Le travail de l’oeuvre: Machiavel*. There, Lefort lays the groundwork for an original theory of politics, which preserves the idea that class struggle, or rather, social conflict, is the essence of politics, but, at the same time, breaks with any conventional Marxist employment of these concepts. For Lefort, Machiavelli provided the key to understanding the logic of the social: society is always torn by inner conflict – perpetually divided between “haves” and “have-nots” – and that the source of this division is political in nature, rooted in the desire “to oppress” and “not be oppressed.” The lesson to be drawn for Lefort is that this constitutive division is what enables society to function politically, and thus, no attempt should be made to overcome or resolve this elemental tension – a dangerous fantasy that often ends in totalitarianism. If democracy is to live up to its name, society can never be totally present to itself: there must be a series of gaps or overhangs between the rulers and the ruled. Power cannot be incarnated or occupied as it once had in the Old Regime. The Revolution, for Lefort, instituted an entirely new symbolic order: “when the body of the king was destroyed, when the head of the political body fell, when, by the same stroke, the corporality of the social dissolved,” new possibilities were opened in the constitution of power. In breaking with this older logic of representation – here explicitly connected to Kantorowicz’s notion of the “king’s two bodies” – democratic power reveals itself to be “an empty place [*un lieu vide*] and those who exercise it, simple mortals who hold it temporarily or take it by force or by deceit. ... Unity can never erase social division. Democracy inaugurates the experience of an unseizable, unmasterable society where the people will be called sovereign, but where there will never cease to be a question of its

²⁷ Gauchet, “Le lieu de la pensée,” 28, 22.

identity.”²⁸ So long as this disjunction is preserved, that is, between society and its structuring principle, democracy will function smoothly.

Lefort’s innovation in the theory of politics inspired the launching of a new journal in 1971, *Textures*, produced in collaboration again with Castoriadis, but now with a younger generation of theorists too. Its contents were more esoteric than *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and its readership even more limited. Most of the contributions tried to unpack – typically with a formidable theoretical density – the consequences of Lefort’s reflections on democracy as social division. It lasted for only six years. As many commentators have observed, Lefort’s return to prominence came only with the anti-totalitarian surge that followed the reception of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, Gauchet worked carefully through Lefort’s thesis in a review for *La Critique* in 1974. Lefort’s reformulation of politics was quickly taken up by his friends and students, not just Gauchet but also Marc Richir, Miguel Abensour, and Max Loreau.

The other great intellectual encounter of Gauchet’s early career was with the anthropologist Pierre Clastres, a student of Lévi-Strauss and author of the influential *Society against the State* (1974). In his student years, the mid 1950s, Clastres was a member of the Union des étudiants communistes (as were later Emmanuel Todd and Régis Debray), and an avid reader of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.²⁹ He did his field work in the 1960s among the Guayaki Indians of Paraguay, and published his findings as *Chroniques des indiens Guayaki* (1972). By this point, Clastres had turned against both Marxism and structuralism, and in his second book, *Society against the State*, he broke with both movements and offered a new understanding of primitive society. The standard view among anthropologists was that primitive societies were

²⁸ Claude Lefort, “L’image du corps et le totalitarisme,” *l’Invention démocratique: les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), 172-173.

²⁹ Gottraux, “*Socialisme ou Barbarie*,” 205.

those that lacked anything resembling a state. What Clastres argued in contrast was that primitive societies had in fact *refused* the state, that their political activities and institutions were designed to ward off or neutralize sovereign authority. A key insight was missing from the orthodox position according to Clastres: “political power is *universal* [and] immanent to social reality.” This simple proposition would authorize a completely new perspective on primitive society: “Even in societies in which the political institution is absent, where for example chiefs do not exist, *even there* the political is present, even there the question of power is posed: not in the misleading sense of wanting to account for an impossible absence, but in the contrary sense, whereby, perhaps mysteriously, *something exists within the absence.*”³⁰ For Clastres, one studies primitive societies not to understand how our political structures developed from nothing into something – in other words as the inverted image of our world – but to see our deepest political instincts in their purest form, to view a spontaneous mode of political being that is immanent to our culture. In this sense, we see much of ourselves in the savages.

As Clastres gained a stronger footing in a theory of the political, he amplified his assault on Marxism. Like Lefort, and Merleau-Ponty before him, Clastres constructed his theoretical model in opposition to the Hegelo-Marxist view of history. The latter’s evolutionary propensity was anathema for someone trained by Lévi-Strauss: “savage thought” was to be taken seriously; Marxism had only condescension to offer, as it was really only interested in capitalist society. But there was a more fundamental problem with Marxism: in foregrounding economic relations, it could only regard political dynamics as derivative. Clastres’s work would explicitly challenge this causality. He writes, “The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation. Alienation is political before it is economic; power precedes labor; the

³⁰ Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 22-3.

economic derives from the political; the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes.” So what does the economy actually do in primitive society? The economy is principally a symbolic institution and is organized around three exchangeable units (goods, women and words), or “signs” as he sometimes calls them.³¹ Power, not currency, is the magnitude that determines the exchange value of these goods. In this sense, the economy functions as an apparatus that communicates power relationships: all circuits lead to separating and cancelling out political power. The designated power holder, the chief, appears to be the beneficiary of exchange, but in fact his duty, as it is understood by everyone, is to remove these goods from circulation, to refuse reciprocity. Only then can power be seen as contrary to the interest of the group and thus regarded with skepticism. “Indian cultures,” he claims, “are anxious to reject a power that fascinates them: the affluence of the chief is the group’s daydream. ... Power, paradoxical by its nature, is venerated in its impotence.”³²

There is a powerful nostalgia for primitive society in Clastres’s writings, as when he writes that “by depriving the ‘signs’ of their exchange value in the domain of power, these cultures take from women, goods, and words their function as signs to be exchanged; and consequently, it is as pure values that these elements are grasped, for communication ceases to be their horizon.” Primitive societies elude the logic of commodification and thus allow these goods to be realized as values in themselves (and not exchanged as instrumental objects). Moreover, class divisions are non-existent, “as there is nothing in the economic working of primitive society, a society without a State, that enables a difference to be introduced making

³¹ This is taken directly from his teacher, Claude Lévi-Strauss: “In any society, communication operates on three different levels: communication of women, communication of goods and services, communication of messages,” *Structural Anthropology*, vol. I, trans. Claire Jacobson (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 296.

³² *Ibid.*, 198, 46.

some richer or poorer than others.”³³ For Clastres (as for Lefort), the existence of the state presupposed a division of classes, a rift in the social totality that would require the mediation of a third party. The world of the savage revealed what society could be like without a state: not only could it be self-managed, but in fact this was the only way to prevent relations of domination from developing.³⁴ Thus, if historians and anthropologists wanted to locate the point of exit from primitive society, they would have to look toward the emergence of the state, and not toward economic or demographic dynamics. Clastres’s work was headed in this direction when he died suddenly, at the age of 43, in a car accident. His own hypothesis was that warfare in primitive society had ceased to be the sole province of the individual warrior, and had in fact become a collective enterprise. The power to decide on matters of war and peace – for the group – upset the unreflective indivision of these societies, and set the groundwork for the rise of the state.³⁵

Clastres was a well known figure among radical, non-communist leftists in the seventies who saw in *Society against the State* support for an anarcho-libertarian politics. Ineed, the increasing attention given to Clastres’s work over the 1970s is a good indication of the rapprochement between political theory and anthropology. In the case of Deleuze and Guattari, who experimented profoundly in anthropological registers after 68, Clastres exchanged thoughts on the primacy of desire and power in primitive societies. The language of *Anti-Oedipus*, which Clastres hailed as “a new thought, a revolutionary reflection,” is strewn across the pages of his later essays: “I attempt to zero in on the arena of desire as a political space, to establish that the

³³ Clastres, *Society against the State*, 204.

³⁴ Clastres specifies that primitive society is egalitarian, but in a different sense of the term: “These are ‘egalitarian’, because they are unaware of inequality: no one is ‘worth’ more or less than another, no one is superior or inferior. In other words, no one can *do* more than anyone else.” Pierre Clastres, “Freedom, Misfortune, the Unnameable,” *Archeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 175.

³⁵ Clastres, “Sorrows of the Savage Warrior,” *Ibid.*, 302-3.

desire for power cannot be realized itself without the inverse and symmetrical desire for submission.”³⁶ Clastres would even flirt with the idea that primitive societies were “a place where flows are encoded”³⁷ – a signature claim of *Anti-Oedipus*. What he shared with Deleuze and Guattari – and on this point, Foucault too – was the analysis of power as something immaterial, dispersed and omnipresent – essentially, a metaphysical notion with a strong account of how power works, but a weak account of why it works that way. Another affinity would be their common rejection of exchange as the founding principle of society, though Deleuze and Guattari were not so insistent as Clastres on a rigid separation between the political and the economic. The authors of *Anti-Oedipus* were still interested in working within the parameters – with some modifications – set by Marcel Mauss in his essay on gift exchange.³⁸ Irrespective of these differences, Clastres’s work, especially when read alongside that of Deleuze and Guattari (and even the later Foucault), helps ground the anthropological orientation of what would later be known as postmodernism.³⁹

Lefort’s circle would give a rather different emphasis to Clastres’s work. These thinkers were not interested so much in economic structures or narratives of symbolic exchange (as were Marxists like Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, and even Debray at certain moments). Rather it was a theory of politics they were after, especially a totalizing one that could provide a structural theory of social and political consciousness. This could be readily furnished by Clastres’s texts.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Deleuze and Guattari Fight Back ...”, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 226; Pierre Clastres, “The Return of the Enlightenment,” *Archeology of Violence*, 218.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 226.

³⁸ Clastres, as shown above, was not inclined to see reciprocity as an important component of primitive economy. For this, and comparative points on Deleuze and Guattari and Clastres, see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Untimely Again,” which serves as the introduction to the English text of *Archeology of Violence*, 32-38.

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari respond extensively to Clastres’s work in the follow-up volume to *Anti-Oedipus*, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

A leading figure of the Lefort circle, Miguel Abensour, recalled Clastres's influence as nothing less than "a Copernican revolution in the field of politics. In one and the same movement, Clastres affirms the universality of the political ... and denies to Western political theory the universality of its form."⁴⁰ His work allowed for a reconceptualization of political reason itself, and gave birth to what Abensour calls a "savage politics" – that is, "a set of devices [*dispositifs*] whose function is to prevent the emergence of a separate power and whose aim is to block, at the heart of the political, the appearance of a division between power and society." Debray too, as we have seen, was precisely interested in reformatting the boundaries of political reason – hence his *Critique de la raison politique* – in light of what he experienced in South America during the sixties. And he too thought he had discovered the essence of the political in the New World – "a digression through the so-called periphery is the quickest way for the so-called center to trace the link between its present state and the conditions that gave rise to it."⁴¹ What cannot be missed here is the sense of Europe's decline among both Debray and the Lefort circle, the sense that politics is somehow *introuvable*. Political theory had to start from scratch, so to speak, and traverse the mists of time back to something more primordial.

It had also to carve out its own theoretical space, and break from the strictures of both structuralism and Marxism (with Gauchet and Debray focusing their attacks principally on the latter).⁴² For Gauchet, Clastres was a seminal figure in the transition away from both systems,

⁴⁰ Miguel Abensour, "Présentation", *L'Esprit des lois sauvages*, 15.

⁴¹ Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, 16.

⁴² Neither were very sympathetic to the structuralist philosophy. Debray writes about it with derision in his autobiography (see *Par amour de l'art*, 423), while Gauchet demonstrated only limited patience for its analyses in his (see *La condition historique*, ch. 1). Through Lefort – who was extremely critical of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism – Gauchet was more interested in phenomenology in the 60s. For Lefort's views on Lévi-Strauss, see Partick Wilcken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 177, 185. It should also be said that Debray and Gauchet criticized Marxism from very different vantage points, the former as a

one who demonstrated a clear awareness of what was at stake for the human sciences:

“Combined with the increase in strength of the human sciences, a strong – and legitimate – demand has thus emerged among researchers and students: we want to talk about society, tell us about society!”⁴³ Indeed, however contested the legacy of 68 is, it remains indisputable that it opened a new horizon of possibilities for a young generation of leftists, that it signaled a renewed desire to discuss and think about politics (as opposed to structures and codes). At the same time, it is a perennial feature of the anthropological turn not to have completely shed the language of structuralism: it is present among all of our thinkers, who were all educated in the heyday of structuralist thinking. The Abensour quote above betrays this affinity with his use “dispositif”, meaning “system”, “device”, or “operation”, and which appears frequently in the writing of Althusser and Foucault. It is likewise pervasive in the work of Gauchet (and that of Debray as well).⁴⁴ A “savage politics”, or more properly speaking a “political anthropology”, will attempt to uncover *a* structure of politics, but typically in a programmatic direction. Politics has no compass at his point, and what all the thinkers of the anthropological turn agree on is that recovering a theory of politics will somehow reignite and give form to political struggle. The restoration of “the political” is what they take to be the first order of theory.

Gauchet, having worked through Merleau-Ponty’s *oeuvre* in his first essay, and then through Lefort’s in his subsequent essays, now turned to that of Clastres in the mid 1970s. This reading would complete the foundation of Gauchet’s intellectual education: his later work on

revolutionary who had come to see certain theoretical blindspots in Marxism, the latter as a philosopher who was always skeptical of its outlook.

⁴³ Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, 224.

⁴⁴ See Gauchet’s essays in Kantorowicz. See Debray’s *Critique de la raison politique*, especially p. 57: “Une paléontologie exacte, particulièrement attentive au fait technique, et donc aux phénomènes de rupture, a reconnu dans l’‘organisme social’, depuis le premier seuil de stockage agricole impliquant la sédentarisation du groupe, jusqu’à l’urbanisation contemporaine de la planète la permanence d’un dispositif territorial et fonctionnel.”

Tocqueville, Constant, Kantorowicz, and Necker would modify the superstructure without much affecting the base. “Politique et société: la leçons des sauvages”, Gauchet’s most mature and systematic essay to date, appeared in *Textures* in 1976. Here, Gauchet achieves an original synthesis of the work of both Lefort and Clastres, and also reactivates – in his own terms – the ethnological tradition that we have shown to exist powerfully within this line of French thought. On the second point, there is a fundamental continuity with Durkheim-Mauss-Lévi-Strauss-Clastres, and that is the treatment of belief in all its variations – religion, politics, myth – as not just a “social fact” (Durkheim), but as a “total social fact” (Mauss-Lévi-Strauss).⁴⁵ Typically, what this approach authorizes is a functional position on different kinds of belief, and there is indeed an element of this in Gauchet’s discussion of primitive thought, as when he writes, “The true impulse of primitive religions is political faith. And one now has a better grasp, as a function of this articulation, of both the profound *unity* of productions of savage thought and the *necessity* to which they respond.”⁴⁶ Here, one sees both the totality of Gauchet’s treatment – i.e. “*unity* of productions” – and the functional component, which emphasizes the necessity impelling a certain rite or behavior. Their conjunction will allow for comprehensive and universal statements about the nature and function of apparatuses of belief. Never again will Gauchet enter into discussions of the work of Lévi-Strauss and Mauss, but it is a detail worth nothing that they appear at the very place where he begins to formulate his own political-theoretical system.

⁴⁵ Lévi-Strauss emphasizes this in his sterling introduction to a collection of Mauss’s writings: “In order to properly understand a social fact, one must approach it *totally*, that is to say, from the outside like a thing.” Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction à l’oeuvre de M. Mauss”, in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1950), 28.

⁴⁶ Marcel Gauchet, “Politique et société: la leçon des sauvages,” in *La condition politique*, 110.

But there is also an important sense in which Gauchet departs from this tradition, especially when he emphasizes that collective dispositions are the result of a certain “choice” or “Decision.” This subtlety is reflected in his critique of Lévi-Strauss: contrary to what the latter believed, “Savage thought is not thought in its savage state, ... but thought that is *instituted* through and through, explicable only in light of its social anchoring and the investigation of which ... unveils the possibility for the existence of other modes of thought equally instituted.”⁴⁷ The opaque emphasis here on “instituting” (which will become clear) takes us back to the other point, Gauchet’s rewriting of Lefort-Clastres. He preserves Lefort’s theoretical insight that politics is organized around a primordial division, a foundational absence which can never be occupied by any singular or collective figure. The establishing of a social order presupposes some great, pre-existing Other who will collectively be held responsible for the unity of the group. In Gauchet’s loftier terms,

Society consists, fundamentally, in the establishment of a radical rupture, splitting society from its ordering principle, and from the proper awareness of the reasons and ends of social organization. It is by the total withdrawal of social ordering from the everyday awareness of human beings, and by the refusal to allow them to recognize themselves as the ‘inventors’ of society that this latter takes shape as the refusal of a separate, exterior power.⁴⁸

Social division, in other words, *pace* Lefort, is a constitutive feature of political society, one that is covered over and concealed from the view of social participants: only much later in history will human beings achieve a fuller awareness of the principles of social ordering and the conditions of political inequality. We also see here, *pace* Clastres, that the apparent apoliticism of primitive society is an illusion: in fact, a complex set of relationships – political, social, ontological – is embedded within these embryonic structures.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

The State and Totalitarianism

At this point, Gauchet decides to follow Clastres, pursuing not an explanation so much of “savage” thought and practice – i.e. the route of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss – but of primitive power structures, perhaps with the ultimate goal of arriving at a theory of the state. Clastres, in effect, reframed the question of the state when he claimed primitive societies to have implicitly rejected it. This implied that the state had always existed as a possibility, but had been deliberately suppressed. Gauchet seems to have accepted what could only be a hypothesis by Clastres as an irrefutable discovery.⁴⁹ In “Politique et société: la leçon des sauvages,” Gauchet begins to experiment, lightly, with this idea and its implications: what might the state have looked like in savage society, how had the savages so effectively refused it? To the second question, he responds that the intellectual heteronomy of savages, their dependence on a sacred Other (recognized to be responsible for their existence), ensured that no worldly power could fill the empty space of politics: “The subjection in thought provided the ultimate means against the reality of servitude.”⁵⁰ So, whereas Clastres was interested in understanding the refusal of power in terms of the economic-political relations between the people and the chief – i.e. notions of exchange, reciprocity and warfare – Gauchet was interested in seeing this political dynamic in religious terms.⁵¹ The balm of primitive religion allows the ontological fact of social rupture to

⁴⁹ Castoriadis, for example, rejected this analysis, writing, “The savage societies of which Clastres (in *Society against the State*) speaks are not politically divided in an antagonistic and asymmetrical fashion.” Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Revolutionary Exigency,” *Political and Social Writings: Vol. 3, 1961-1979* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 245.

⁵⁰ Gauchet, “Politique et société”, 112.

⁵¹ Clastres is the first to acknowledge this innovation in Gauchet’s thinking: “Society’s foundation is exterior to itself, society is not the founder of itself: the foundation of primitive society does not stem from human decision, but from divine action ... – an idea developed in an absolutely original way by Marcel Gauchet.” Clastres, “The Return of Enlightenment,” 214.

be displaced or transferred onto an external, imaginary deity, thus sparing the social body from enduring this painful split.

The other question, that of the state, had the greatest urgency for Gauchet and his collaborators. The state became, in the seventies, the object of intense theoretical reflection because it proved so elusive to characterization (and not because it was a contested institution and somehow up for redefinition). What must have struck young intellectuals during and after May 68 was how aloof and inscrutable the state had appeared during the revolts, its reactions having at times a bewildering quality (as in de Gaulle's unexplained flight to Baden Baden). 68 never managed to close the distance between the people and the state (though it extracted some concessions). But certainly it would have left people wondering if the state could ever be taken, or if it was even worth taking. It should come as no surprise that mid seventies France was a major flashpoint for theorizing the state, but also for theorizing without and against the state. A pendant to Clastres's work in this regard was not only Deleuze and Guattari's massive *A Thousand Plateaus* – establishing a metaphysical “counter-tradition” for thinking about the state⁵² – but also the work of Foucault (in a post-structuralist vein), Blandine Kriegel (in a liberal vein) and Nicos Poulantzas (in a Marxist-Althusserian vein).

What is striking about Gauchet's theory of the state is that, from the very start, it is bound up with a notion of totalitarianism. He never goes as far as saying that the primitive state, had it been allowed to develop, would have immediately generated a totalitarian form. Nevertheless, the implication of Gauchet's argument is clear: from the moment the state is no longer refused, the way is open to totalitarian government. Every state, in other words, implies the virtual presence of totalitarianism, the possibility of its future production. Its nature is typically

⁵² Kenneth Surin, “The Undecidable and the Fugitive: *Milles Plateaux* and the State-Form,” *SubStance* 66 (1991): 102-113.

described by Gauchet as “the all-knowing, all-powerful enterprise of the State over society and its aim of completely taking over, down to the last detail, the organization and management of collective life in the name of a final truth on the meaning of history and the destiny of the human project.”⁵³ A state of this description could not materialize overnight since its existence would require, in effect, the dissolution of the originary religious frame that held society together. What distinguishes totalitarianism from other forms of despotism is the pretension to replace the religious, to co-opt, in a secularized form, the thoroughgoing, totalizing quality of the sacred. Primitive society was still very much in the grips of a religious understanding of the world. The savage despot would likely be seen simply as an inheritor or representative of the gods to which society owed its existence, a relatively powerless mediator between the “visible” and the “invisible.” The chief was principally a shaman, a manipulator of divine forces who could never legitimately pretend to be the sacred Other. Religion is thus a bulwark against totalitarian power in Gauchet’s conception: “The despot, even if recognized as the keystone of the existing order, is nevertheless prevented from attributing to himself the permanent and omniscient origins of collective organization, and he is so prevented by his anchoring in the religious.”⁵⁴

Gauchet’s invocation of totalitarianism at this moment has its own history. The concept was not new, and in fact had been commonplace as early as the mid 1930s (it appears casually, for example, in Keynes’s *General Theory*). But it was exiled Central Europeans – Hayek, Polanyi, but especially Arendt – who transformed it into a major political concept, and gave it the Cold War flavor that it still retains. It was their way of characterizing the otherwise politically distant regimes developing immediately to their east and west: the alienation of liberties to the party-state was the common trait. Lefort made conspicuous use of the concept in

⁵³ Gauchet, “Politique et société,” 113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

a response to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” inflecting the notion with his signature analysis of social-symbolic structures. The mythic, religious qualities of Stalin’s “cult of personality” had already become systemic and were thus destined to outlive the leader, as many of his Trotskyist compatriots would have been reluctant to admit.⁵⁵ France’s other expositor of “totalitarianism” was Raymond Aron, whose *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (1965) marked out the rivalry in more classical, political-economic terms: totalitarian regimes were monopolistic of power, while democracies were constitutional-pluralistic in outlook.⁵⁶ Christofferson notes, correctly it would seem, that Aron “failed to convert other intellectuals” to his usage in the mid sixties.⁵⁷ Totalitarianism would have to wait another decade before receiving a full hearing in France, at which time Aron’s observations would be belatedly taken up by a younger, and less perspicacious generation.

The fanfare which greeted the French translation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* has been well documented. For the non-Communist Left, it presented an opportunity not to be missed for discrediting the PCF, whose complicity with a criminal regime could now be easily demonstrated. Christofferson has persuasively argued that the principal motive for this demolition job was an attempt to frustrate the galloping popularity of the left coalition (of the PCF and PS) headed by Mitterrand. In this way did “totalitarian” become common currency in France of the 1970s, as a term of opprobrium designating the Soviet Union and its supporters, and one taken up eagerly by Parisian publicists, writers and journalists. There

⁵⁵ Claude Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” *Éléments d’une critique de la bureaucratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). For commentary, see Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 199-201.

⁵⁶ Raymond Aron, *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 284, 337. Gauchet was a great admirer of Aron, naming this very book as one of his favorites: “I had the feeling of being in agreement with the facts and observations that he put forth, but of remaining hungry for more theoretical and practical that could be drawn from them.” *La condition historique*, 25.

⁵⁷ Christofferson, 16.

were in fact diverse uses to be made of totalitarianism. Many of its leading expositors, as suggested, were devoted strategically to the demise of the PCF, particularly figures like François Furet and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, intellectuals of an older generation who had become disillusioned with the party in the 50s or 60s. Then again, thinkers like Gauchet and Pierre Rosanvallon, of a younger generation and never very sympathetic to the Party, divined a deeper significance in “totalitarianism”, namely a political-philosophical around which a worldview might be built. Their devotion to the concept would be primarily intellectual, though not innocent of the more mundane advantages it might offer to the convert.

Lefort figures as a slight exception to this rule: he, like some of the veteran figures of the non-Communist Left, broke with the Party quite early in his career and expressed his misgivings about the Union of the Left; but he also went on to become a leading theorist of totalitarianism, like some of the younger adherents. The progression was logical in the case of Lefort, who had been developing a critique of the Soviet Union along these lines since the mid fifties. These early labors were rewarded by France’s change of temperament in the seventies. As Gauchet recalls,

In 1971 we were completely isolated. We peddled as best we could our thousand copies [of *Textures*] in a deathly silence and without the smallest return. Around 1974, there emerged what would become the anti-totalitarian breakthrough. *The Gulag Archipelago* was welcomed with extraordinary enthusiasm, and it penetrated deeply, providing a rare occasion where the review breaks out of its theoretical reserve to engage in a contemporary battle. Our work, especially that of the older members, began to make an echo.⁵⁸

Thereafter, Lefort and Castoriadis found themselves at the center of intellectual life in Paris: they were both awarded teaching posts at the EHESS in 1976; and the left-leaning, non-Communist review *Esprit*, which at that point was leading the anti-totalitarian charge, solicited their

⁵⁸ Gauchet, *La condition historique*, 158.

contribution (Gauchet's too) to an upcoming special issue on totalitarianism.⁵⁹ There was a great deal of overlap between these two institutions at any rate, Furet acting as the key link.

This is all to say that when Gauchet broached the question of the state in “Politique et société” and foregrounded its totalitarian qualities, he had already been deeply immersed in this anti-totalitarian milieu. His article for *Esprit*, “The Totalitarian Experience and Political Thought” (1976), might be seen as the proper beginning of Gauchet's life as a public intellectual, his consecration as a figure worth reading. Its style is distinctly Gauchet's, even if many of the ideas are borrowed from Lefort. The uncharacteristically strong assertion that opens the essay – “To reflect on politics today requires one to reflect first on the totalitarian state” – was reminiscent of Lefort's own language (“I think that one cannot take a single step toward understanding the political life of our time without reflecting on totalitarianism.”)⁶⁰ At this point, Gauchet had not quite worked out the historical account of totalitarianism's rise in the twentieth century. That would come in a later phase of his work, after his conversion to a liberal theory of history. Here, the thesis is principally structural: totalitarianism is the “return of the repressed, the political.” It can be traced to the state's desire to overcome society's natural division – a tendency that is native to Marxist thought, the impossible dream of communist society as complete unto itself. Heuristically, the point of the essay was clear: all theories, most of them German, which saw the state as an outgrowth of society were mistaken.

While preparing this text for *Esprit*, Gauchet also contributed to the 1976 republication of a well-known text from the sixteenth century, the *Discours de la servitude volontaire* [*Discourse*

⁵⁹ It was Olivier Mongin who wrote the piece in praise of Lefort and Gauchet for *L'Esprit*. In their work, he detects a major sea-change in French ideas: “It's time to quit the theater of politics – the limited field of political science – in order to rethink the political in our societies, to found the authority of the political insofar as it institutes ... the social – to think the political, against domination.” Olivier Mongin, “Penser le politique contre la domination (sur quelques travaux de Lefort et Gauchet),” *Esprit* (October 1975), 516.

⁶⁰ Marcel Gauchet, “L'expérience totalitaire et la pensée de la politique,” in *La condition politique*, 433; Claude Lefort, *L'Invention démocratique: les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), 12.

on *Voluntary Servitude*] of Étienne de la Boétie. This volume, published by Miguel Abensour's house, Editions Payot (known principally for bringing the Frankfurt School into French translation), features multiple versions of La Boétie's text, earlier interpretations (one by Simone Weil), new readings by Lefort and Clastres, and a critical introduction co-written by Gauchet and Abensour. All regard La Boétie as a prophet of modern domination. Earlier readings, according to the introducers, recognized the trenchancy of his political reflections but were so "terrified by the abyss which opened beneath their feet" that they applied themselves to a quick solution so as to "quit this critical space and rediscover *terra firma*." For Gauchet and company, posterity has been unable or unwilling to pose the question at the center of the *Discourse*, namely, "Why is there voluntary servitude instead of friendship; why, in the terms of Pierre Clastres, are there societies with a state rather than societies without a state?" This text, more than four centuries old, identified something new and distinct about the modern state at the very moment it began to develop, and this message has been lost over the centuries.⁶¹ Only now (1976), when the totalitarian state in the Soviet Union has reached its full maturity, can this lineage be properly reconstructed and appreciated.

What La Boétie saw in 1548, before anybody else, was the virtual presence of the totalitarian form of government in the modern development of the state. He understood that states would no longer derive their legitimacy from an external principle, but look to do so immanently, with reference to the social – a truly remarkable insight, if it is to be believed, considering that divine right kingship was still in its infancy. Once the state is severed from its external ordering principle and develops an atheistic inner logic, it commences its march toward totalitarianism, becoming "The State that claims to preside over society in its totality, always

⁶¹ Miguel Abensour and Marcel Gauchet, "Les leçons de la servitude et leur destin", in Etienne de la Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (Paris: Payot, 1976), xiv, viii.

present in society; the transforming State *par excellence*; the State as producer of society; and in its final expression, *the Revolutionary State*.”⁶² In negative, we begin to comprehend the impulses behind the *autogestion* (self-management) movement of the 1970s: the state, even in its revolutionary incarnation, is irremediably constituted as a totalitarian, dominating agency. It is not worth taking. Meaningful political activity will have to take shape beyond, underneath, in spite of, but not within the state. The introduction to the *Discourse* is as close as Gauchet will ever come to affirming the anarcho-libertarian politics common on the Left in this period, to which Abensour, who is likely responsible for this more radical edge, has been a lifelong adherent. Here, we find Abensour and Gauchet in eloquent defense of the peasant tax revolts of Guyenne that apparently provoked La Boétie to write the *Discourse*. The authors are keen to look past the conservative components of the rebellions – “impregnated with religion and fundamentally past-oriented” – and instead to fixate on the “true desire for liberty” embedded in the anti-statist outbursts: “The resistance of the peasants becomes resistance to the penetration of the State and its modernizing force.”⁶³

The terms on which they lend support to the revolting peasants lead the authors into a nest of problems however. What appeals to them about La Boétie is that he understood the power of the modern state to be diffuse and bureaucratic in character, rather than coercive and forceful (and did so long before Mill and Tocqueville unfolded the implications of this kind of power). The modern state, in their words, aims “not to control society from above and at a distance so as to extract surplus value, but to literally penetrate society, ... to preside over the inner workings of society: to rule, codify, redefine, change, modernize.” And yet, when they speak of the tax revolts they revert to the coercive conception of power. What did the peasants

⁶² *Ibid.*, xxvii [emphasis in original].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xxii, xxv.

want? “*Free space, autonomy* for the family and village unit, which, in a remarkably universal way, the older forms of statist domination had allowed to subsist, and which the modern State would set out to destroy.” As described here, the revolts seem to be inscribed within an older pattern of domination, developing in response to direct force. But the problem is that Gauchet and Abensour want to see the peasant insurrections as instating a new logic of revolt, which “reveals new avenues” and finds “the means to name the enigma of the social: voluntary servitude.”⁶⁴ One could, as the authors try for a moment to do, emphasize the intrusion of the state into the daily life of the peasant through taxation and the resentment that it bred among the peasantry; but 1) it is not clear that this is a new sense of power: taxation in the 1540s was a simple exercise of force, 2) it is difficult to dispel the sense that these revolts were very economic in nature, and in fact had everything to do with surplus extraction. The attempt to define a populist politics that could resonate with the present is not very convincingly presented.

With Abensour, there has always been a certain aesthetic attraction to the primitive in politics, a tendency to romanticize the pre-modern way of life. In the introduction to La Boétie’s text the peasant is heroized for dealing an eternal “no” to power, a refusal – Clastres’s language, recall, for explaining the statelessness of primitive society – that resonates across the centuries and “remains to be taken up” by moderns. Again, if power is diffuse, everywhere and nowhere at once in the totalitarian age, how can it be refused? In what sense does the French intellectual or even the Soviet worker (to grant an unspoken premise of the argument) share the plight of the sixteenth-century peasant, and in what sense is the “refusal” of the primitive available to the late twentieth-century laborer? The language of choice that pervades these pieces – *refusal, desire, voluntary servitude* – already seems dubious in the case of primitive societies as described by Clastres. In the context of modern states, it seems ridiculous, even perverse to suggest that a

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiv [emphases in original].

simple refusal might suffice to undermine the state's expanding power, that subverting totalitarian power could be a matter of will.⁶⁵

What could explain these inconsistencies? The “savage” – for Clastres, but for Abensour and Gauchet as well – is prevailed upon to provide a romantic means of escape from the present, not to offer a genuine intellectual alternative or counterweight to the present, as they would have it. In 1979, a group of anthropologists responded (in a collected volume bearing the title, *Sauvage à la mode*) to the work of Clastres and his followers, detecting the very same escapist impulses in their work. There, Jean-Loup Amselle writes, “Primitive Society for Clastres and Lizot [a close associate of this group] is equally a society of ‘leisure’, of ‘the refusal to work’, of ‘abundance’, and a form of social organization that lacks an ‘economy’. At bottom, the Tropics are not sad: the climate is warm and humid, the plants grow on their own ... and people, as if at Club Med, have few needs, working little if at all.” Amselle and company correctly understood this intellectual move as symptomatic of a larger political-intellectual crisis: “What is happening in the West? It’s the crisis, the ‘crisis of civilization’ first of all. May 68 is the demise of the productivist myth and the limitless growth of the economy. ... One goes organic and hopes for a more convivial society, where social relations are transparent. ... What is there left for the ‘lost generation’ of May 68, which has seen and understood all and is bored by it: the savage of course!”⁶⁶ Gauchet and Abensour are, as indicated above, self-conscious about the conservatism of their support for the peasant rebellions, but ultimately – and this is the really telling admission – they believe any apology for modernization theories to be debased and dangerous. The “march

⁶⁵ It is difficult to imagine that the authors intend this as their solution. The language of “choice” typically employed by Clastres and Gauchet does not signify a consciously willed decision, but a kind of implied collective disposition. In this text, however, with the emphasis on voluntary servitude, the valences of “choice” are less clear. Indeed, they never settle on the question of what voluntary servitude means, nor in fact, according to commentators, does La Boétie in his original text. See Brian Singer, [Review], *Telos* 43 (Spring 1980), 228.

⁶⁶ Jean-Loup Amselle, “Les métamorphose du sauvage”, in Jean-Loup Amselle, ed. *Sauvage à la mode* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1979), 15, 13.

of Reason”, they intimate, is destined to end in “Soviet tanks.” Their way of thinking through this historical fatality is to return to and privilege the savage over the modern.

However much Gauchet actually subscribed to this position – and there are good reasons for seeing more of Abensour’s hand in this piece and doubting Gauchet’s anarcho-populist tendencies – his flirtation with “savage” democracy would be short-lived. His subsequent writings turn more seriously on the role of religion and the state in history. Moreover, he comes to deny explicitly that primitive society could furnish a “model to which we should return.”⁶⁷ Savages pay an extraordinary price for their sense of equality: they have no room to question the organization of their society, war is a commonplace, and the law is, as reported by Clastres, not codified in a formal document, but cruelly etched on the flesh of each individual. The point is not to romanticize primitive society as somehow superior or more perfect, but to resituate the origins and function of the state: to use the savage, in other words, as a conjectural device for redefining the contours of modernity. With this method, Gauchet makes Rousseau’s move, becomes a meta-anthropologist *par excellence*, pinning his counter-narrative of modernity on the imagined conditions of original man. Furthermore, Gauchet will never again reproduce the Foucauldian-sounding language of power – as diffuse and omnipresent – but will invent his own narrative and description of its workings. Nor will he ever again declare himself to be a partisan of the people. Gauchet’s former associates on the Left have decried his (eventual) break with the Lefort circle as a regrettable political move to the right, to which one might reply that Gauchet was never that practically or doctrinally committed to the Left in the first place.

The following year, 1977, saw the creation of *Texture*’s successor journal, *Libre: Politique, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, organized by the same team, minus the Belgian

⁶⁷ This is delivered in Gauchet’s obituary for Clastres: “Pierre Clastres,” *Libre* 4 (1978), 66. The essay was originally published in two parts in *Libération* in 1977.

contingent – thus, Abensour, Gauchet, Clastres, Lefort and Castoriadis.⁶⁸ If anything, Gauchet’s position within this circle was more established than ever after his success at *Esprit* and the impressive progression of his theoretical work (generously endorsed, as mentioned above, by Clastres himself). Gauchet’s first essay for the journal, “La dette du sens et les racines de l’État” [“The Debt of Meaning and the Roots of the State”], confidently set down his theory of the state. Recall that Clastres, at the moment of his death in 1977, sought to explain the development of the state as the outgrowth of a war-making agency. For Gauchet, who pursued the same question – i.e. why and when did people stop refusing the state? – the answer was to be found in the elementary religious structure of early societies, which Clastres had more or less neglected. In conformity with Lefort’s earlier hypothesis, Gauchet thinks that society, in order to be constituted as such, requires some kind of internal division: without a point of contrast, a *them* or an *other* so to speak, it is impossible to have an *us*. What he comes to realize is that religion and politics partake of the same impulse in the earliest stages of human history. They both recognize a divine “beyond” – typically ancestors – as an external agency controlling the group. The “debt” in this instance is what society owes to the gods, without whom there could be no imaginable group. By this means, the other becomes the sacred Other, the giver of group identity. The indistinction of religion and politics, *pace* Clastres, is what enables primitive equality: everyone is equal to another, internally, by virtue of mutual submission to these forces. It is, in other words, the heteronomy of equals. Like Rousseau of the *Social Contract*, Gauchet will be interested not in the freedom man is born with, but the chains that tether him to society.

That state is born when this absolute separation – between worldly supplicants and divine authority, the here-below and the beyond – is broken or reversed. The Gods will begin to have

⁶⁸ *Textures* apparently dissolved after a flare up between the Belgian and French factions. The reconstituted *Libre* saw its intellectual mission as continuous with that of *Textures*.

representatives on earth to interpret and carry out their mission, setting in motion a new system of social and political relations. For Gauchet, the state occupies the primordial gap between society and the gods; it “arrives by rerouting against society the system [*dispositif*] of differences that had originally preserved society against the State.”⁶⁹ In other words, the possibility of primitive equality is shattered once an authorized elite of mediators arrives on the scene: a class of masters will be legitimized by their proximity to the divine; a class of subjects stigmatized by their distance. If inequality is one regrettable outcome of this process, society’s slow emancipation from the gods – holding human beings prostrate in fear – is something to celebrate. It turns out that true democracy (and not “savage” democracy, *pace* Abensour) will be possible only once this liberation has taken place. For now, however, Gauchet is interested in this originary dynamic, whereby religion – in transcendental terms – is a positive condition for the possibility of the State in the first place; but, later, a negative condition, since the growth of the state will necessarily entail the decline of religion.

Why should the state enter the picture at all? What prevents human beings from remaining in the stagnant society of the primitives? Here again Gauchet reverts to the language of desire/will/choice: “Because of repetitions, the conscience awakes to the constraints that it has had to obey – however obscurely or invincibly – to preserve the organization of society. To bring them to the fore, to learn to recognize them, is this not in some sense to begin to dissolve the invisible limits which have enclosed and constrained the human experience?” The weakness of this position is brought home in the closing sentences of the essay, where Gauchet poses the question rhetorically: “And if, after millennia of refusing to see the origins of submission for what they are, there was born among men an unprecedented will to confront the logic of power?”

⁶⁹ Marcel Gauchet, “La dette du sens et les racines de l’État – Politique de la religion primitive,” *Libre 2* (1977): 5-43, here cited in *La condition politique*, 66.

A will not to conjure domination, but to take hold of its principle; a will not to deny the master, but become it.”⁷⁰ This amounts to attributing the greatest moment of transformation in world history to a weak psychological mechanism, the equivalent of saying “something simply changes in people at a certain point” – a conclusion that will strike the reader as particularly flaccid after pages of very structural, social-symbolic analysis. Marxists, however one-eyed about primitive society, never run into this problem since the economy (or more specifically, social-property relations) always provides a mechanism for explaining change. Nor do theorists of desire, like Deleuze and Guattari, who have a working account of how desire and will function (as does Clastres in fact). Gauchet cannot commit himself, for political-intellectual reasons, to Marxism, nor to desire-based explanations, since he wants to pursue a social-symbolic (Lefortian) account of the emergence of the state. He is left with a weak causal mechanism dredged up from the Nietzsche-inflected language of Clastres.

Consider for a moment the title of Gauchet’s essay, “The *Debt* of Meaning and the Roots of the State,” which reflects a pronounced tendency in the writings of the anthropological turn, to write about the economy as a social-symbolic enterprise – the legacy of Mauss’s profound *Essai sur le don* no doubt.⁷¹ In this particular instance, Gauchet’s use of “debt” is borrowed, it seems, from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*. The entirety of Gauchet’s analysis pivots on this sense of debt, which opens the essay: “To understand why humans thought of themselves as *debtors*, why societies so obstinately thought their *raison d’être* depended on something or someone else is to understand why the State became possible at a certain moment of the human becoming.”⁷²

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 49, 89.

⁷¹ Perhaps this tendency could best be described as a variation on the Maussian optic: he wrote about exchange in symbolic terms, they write about the symbolic in economic terms.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 45.

Now read Nietzsche in the “Second Treatise” of the *Genealogy*: “Here [in “primeval times”] the conviction holds sway that it is only through the sacrifices and achievements of the ancestors that the clan *exists* at all – and that one has to *repay* them through sacrifices and achievements: one thereby acknowledges a *debt* that is continually growing, since the ancestors, in their continued existence as powerful spirits, do not cease to use their strength, to bestow on the clan new benefits and advances.”⁷³ The consequences of this existential debt are very different for Nietzsche and Gauchet: for the former, the debt spirals out of control, giving rise to an anxiety so profound that it transfigures the ancestor into a god (and helps produce the slave morality); for the latter, the anxiety of debt encourages the primitive to revolt against the creditors and set up their own banking system, so to speak, the state. For Gauchet, debt is liberating, its anxiety – like that of Weber’s god-fearing Protestant – is salutary. The usage of Nietzschean concepts complements the language of will and desire that suffuses the essay, implying something like a theory of group emotions – constituted by vulnerability and anxiety. It is, moreover, good evidence that Gauchet is working through a hybrid of existential and structural logics (as is Debray at this moment), even if the synthesis is not altogether convincing.

The larger point to be made here, however, is the way the economy becomes anthropological for Gauchet (as it was for thinkers like Baudrillard and Debray in the 1970s). A patient reader could track down thousands of instances where the economic and the anthropological converge in Gauchet’s writing, but a few will suffice here: “economy of social relations,” “economy of the visible sphere,” “reinvestment of the heteronomous relation,”

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 1988), 60.

“investments mobilized by the invisible.”⁷⁴ One way of reading these formulations would be to see them as instances where anthropological variables are treated in economic terms – roughly speaking the approach taken by Pierre Bourdieu (who understands everything as an economy). In fact, a latter-day philosopher-anthropologist, Alain Supiot, has complained that the economy had become an all too dominant model in the social sciences – citing the work of Bourdieu – and that anthropological readings of social phenomenon – in his case, law – would be a most welcome development.⁷⁵ What Supiot misses is that the anthropological model had been foundational to the post-68 philosophical conjuncture in France, as reflected in the work of Debray, Todd, Benoist, Gauchet, Baudrillard, and Deleuze and Guattari – a metanarrative in its own right.

In Gauchet’s case, the conception is of an economy rooted not in needs of a material order that have to be satisfied, but in, to use the words of Émile Benveniste, “the far wider range of ideas that concern the whole field of relationships between men and the relations of men with the gods.”⁷⁶ Economic relationships (in our contemporary usage) were originally anthropological, and not the other way around. It would not be a stretch of the imagination to see Gauchet’s views on the economy as influenced by Benveniste’s linguistic investigations into Indo-European culture. Gauchet wrote one of his early texts on Benveniste’s remarkable *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, where he would have come across some very provocative reflections on the origins of economic concepts, but principally the idea that across

⁷⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *L’avenement de la démocratie*, t. II, *La crise du libéralisme, 1880-1914* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 13, 227; Marcel Gauchet, *L’avenement de la démocratie*, t. III, *À l’épreuve des totalitarismes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 48; Marcel Gauchet, “Sur la religion,” *La démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 86.

⁷⁵ Alain Supiot, *Homo Juridicus: On the Anthropological Function of Law*, trans. Saskia Brown (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 64-69.

⁷⁶ Marcel Gauchet, “Figures de la souveraineté: à propos de ‘La Royauté’ et ses privilèges, livre I, volume II, du *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*,” *Textures* 2-3 (1971). Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

the Indo-European world, concepts like “loan,” “borrow,” and “debt” always carried some notion of reciprocity and mutual obligation.⁷⁷ The economy was subsumed in social needs and customs, which preceded material ones. Clearly, Indo-European culture will not exercise the same fascination for Gauchet as it did for Benoist, but it is an aspect of his thought that cannot be neglected.

“La politique normale”

After “The Debt of Meaning”, Gauchet published nothing until 1980, save a glowing overview in *Annales* of the work of liberal anthropologist Louis Dumont. Sometime in 1980 Gauchet and Lefort had a falling out, evidently over an editorial matter at *Libre*, which was already imperiled by an increasingly disaffected Castoriadis. The latter had trouble convincing his colleagues that the Soviet Union was properly seen as a “stratocracy” – a form of military government where the army and the state constitute the same entity – and threatened to break with the journal.⁷⁸ For his part, Gauchet felt that his contributions were not being sufficiently appreciated by the two senior members, but the tension obviously went deeper than this. Lefort evidently accused him of “becoming a thoroughgoing democrat in breaking all ties with the extreme left” – a charge which Gauchet, twenty-three years later, acknowledged, conceding that “the philosophy of democracy and the subversive radicalism of the imaginary make a bad couple.” “I do not share,” he continues, “this faith in the creative effervescence of the margins,” and in breaking with Lefort, “I ‘turned to the right’ by rallying à *la politique normale*.”⁷⁹ This is a very enigmatic statement,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 145-159.

⁷⁸ Castoriadis developed this analysis in *Devant la guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 1981). He was widely and sharply criticized for exaggerating the military power of the Soviet Union and for echoing the hawkish views of American cold warriors. See, *inter alia*, Vincent Descombes, “La prochaine guerre: Cornelius Castoriadis, *Devant la guerre*,” *La Critique* 411-412 (August-September 1981): 723-743.

raising more questions than it answers: what was the nature of his former commitment to the “margins”; what does “normal politics” mean in this case; would Lefort have used “democrat” as an insult; how long had this sentiment been brewing? His new convictions were, at all events, no harm to his career. For Gauchet was soon offered and accepted a lucrative position as co-founding editor, along with Pierre Nora and Polish dissident Krzysztof Pomian, of *Le Débat* in 1980. The inspiration for the journal had come from Claude Gallimard – head of the publishing house of the same name – who wanted a review that would do for the human sciences what the *NRF* had done for literature, and one that could compete with rival publishing house Seuil’s new journal, *L’Histoire*.⁸⁰ He enlisted the support of François Furet, then president of the EHESS, and Nora, another well-respected historian in the EHESS-*Esprit*-Gallimard complex, who insisted on running the journal once the funding was in place. Both historians had been impressed by Gauchet’s piece in *Esprit*, and decided that their journal might profit from having an up-and-coming figure as one of its editors.⁸¹

Le Débat was part of larger change of scenery that was taking place in Paris. The impasse of the seventies destabilized what it meant to be intellectual in France. He/She faced a crisis of representation, of which the rise of the New Philosophers was an obvious symptom. For many, their caricature of the philosopher *engagé* (e.g., Sartre and Nizan) signaled a sure decline of the public intellectual. That the appearance of *Le Débat* coincided with the death of Sartre – the world’s emblematic intellectual – afforded its editors the occasion to reconsider the role of the intellectual in public life. The inaugural issue hosted its first debate on this issue (“A quoi

⁷⁹ Gauchet, *La condition historique*, 160-161.

⁸⁰ François Dosse, *Pierre Nora: Homo Historicus* (Paris: Perrin, 2011), 495. *Nouvelle Revue Française* was the most prestigious and influential literary magazine of its generation, founded by André Gide and others in 1909, published by Gallimard.

⁸¹ *Le Débat* has never had a typical “editorial board” format, only co-founding editors (for life?): Nora, Gauchet, and Pomian to this day.

sert-il l'intellectuel”), and Nora made its position crystal clear: “The time of the intellectual as oracle is up. ... However great his prestige, he is no longer sacerdotal. The intellectual has been largely secularized; his prophetism has undergone a change of style. Scientific investment has immersed him in a wide network of research teams and funds.”⁸² The issue appeared in early May of 1980. Sartre died on the fifteenth of April, and in case anyone missed the connection, Nora told a reporter for *Le Monde* that the fact that “*Le Débat* went to press on the day of Sartre’s death, was a symbol, the sign of a change.” Nora’s presumption obviously incensed the editorial board of *Les temps modernes*, who responded in turn, calling Nora “a shameless specialist of cultural marketing.” Aron too was irritated by Gallimard’s decision to launch a journal so close to his own, *Commentaire*, which was founded in 1978. He apparently asked Nora if his rival review was a declaration of war. Foucault, still smarting from Gauchet’s criticisms in *La pratique de l’esprit humain*, was no less irritated by this new review.⁸³ Clearly an intellectual shakeout was underway.

Gauchet and Nora would embody *Le Débat*’s redefinition of the intellectual as a man of institutional affiliations. Gauchet’s appointment to *Le Débat* opened channels that would have previously been closed to him: he secured election, with the help of Furet, as a full professor at the *Ecole* (in 1990), published his major works at Gallimard, and participated in the Fondation Saint-Simon and the Centre de recherches politiques Raymond Aron, two influential liberal think tanks founded by Furet. He was also able to contribute to two of the most ambitious collective research endeavors of the day, *Les lieux de mémoire* (edited by Nora), and the *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution française* (edited by Furet, Mona Ozouf, and others). Commentators,

⁸² Cited in Dominique Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since 1968*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London; New York: Verso, 2001), 74.

⁸³ Quotes taken from François Dosse, *Pierre Nora: Homo Historicus*, 502.

especially those sympathetic to Lefort, have treated Gauchet's de-campment as an unexpected and unforgivable betrayal of the Left.⁸⁴ While it is difficult to dispel any suspicion of worldly considerations in his move toward "la politique normale", is it really that surprising given Gauchet's previous record, or really that extreme of an abdication given the proximity of Lefort to Furet?

On the first question, Gauchet had scarcely ever registered a political judgment in his writings from the seventies. Indeed, the most politically explicit piece was co-written with Abensour, who was much less cautious politically. Moreover, the alleged affinities those writings have with Marxism or anarchism are very *sotto voce*, undetectable even. If anything, his work *acquired* a political sensibility once he joined Nora at *Le Débat*. On the second question, followers of Lefort like to pretend that Lefort's later work was a radical alternative to Marxism, but worlds apart from the liberal revisionism of Furet (what essentially amount to a conservative position on the French political spectrum). Early Lefort – of *Socialism or Barbarism* – was certainly radical, and his later work was certainly an alternative to Marxism, but it was not the radical alternative that people wanted to see in it; rather a loftier articulation of a liberal-centrist critique of the Left that had been gestating over the decade. In fact, his positions from the late seventies are much closer to Furet than to anyone comparable on the Left: pro-democracy, vehemently anti-totalitarian, anti-republican, anti-Jacobin. Granted, there was always something creative about Lefort's philosophy, a search for new political concepts, that was lacking in Furet, and granted that Lefort was never so friendly to the establishment; but, in the end, the convergences between Lefort's iconoclastic vision of democracy – irrespective of

⁸⁴ American historian Dick Howard, for one, wants to preserve the anti-Marxist radicalism of Lefort from conservative tendencies. See the unctuous *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). See also Abensour, *Lettre*, and Eribon, *D'une révolution conservatrice*.

the reasons behind it – and the standard liberal program of the day are too striking to dismiss.

Gauchet might have parted company with his friends, but he did not undergo a total conservative epiphany as some have charged.

Human Rights and Civic Desertion

Gauchet's output in 1980, following his break with Lefort, was staggering: a book co-written with his life partner Gladys Swain, *La pratique de l'esprit humain*; a book-length overview of Constant's writings; another on Tocqueville; and a series of articles in the first issues of *Le Débat*. The most famous of the latter is his early salvo against the fast-growing discourse of Human Rights, "Human Rights Is not a Politics." Lefort had recently taken up their defense in the final issue of *Libre*, arguing, against Marx's well-known critique in *On the Jewish Question*, that rights discourses offered an independent source of appeal for the oppressed to contest (totalitarian) state power.⁸⁵ Marx, never a sharp-eyed theorist of politics, counted on the dissolution of bourgeois civil society with the withering away of the state, when in fact it, civil society, dissolved only with the hardening of the state in its totalitarian form. Thus, "Marx's framework has been undermined by the events of our time." Lefort then proceeds to defend human rights as a loose framework of guarantees and protections by which citizens look after the interest of the community and protest against intrusions of the state – "a movement antagonistic to that which is propelling state power towards its goal." It is the form of rights that matter, not their content according to Lefort: they can always be adjusted to fit the needs of the group.

Lefort closes his article with an emotional appeal to the peoples of Poland, Hungary,

⁸⁵ For more on the relationship between Lefort and Gauchet on Human Rights, see Samuel Moyn, "The Politics of Individual Rights: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort," in Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt, eds., *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 291-310.

Czechoslovakia, and China in their revolt against totalitarianism: “it is they who can teach us to decipher the meaning of political practice.”⁸⁶

Gauchet’s response is only obliquely critical of Lefort’s theses. He might have attacked it more directly, asking for instance, who establishes the rights to which citizens appeal for mutual protection, or how can one simply eliminate power in civil society when power is everywhere, or why is France anything like the “totalitarian” regimes of the East? But he opts for a more global critique of Human Rights, which reveals a striking ideological and methodological rift with Lefort’s circle. The key modification here – that will inform all of Gauchet’s subsequent work – is that contemporary society is afflicted not by an omnipotent, “totalitarian” state, but by a problem of “civic desertion”, of individual atomization. The pendulum had swung too far in the other direction: the West’s exaltation of individual liberties introduced a precarious disjunction between the group and the individual that risked hollowing out any meaningful sense of political action. Gauchet’s anthropological assumptions serve him in good stead here: we are programmed as group beings, and any attempt to undermine or overcome this primordial condition will inevitably meet with failure. Human Rights is one variation on this perversion, as it pits “the individual against society, and falls prey to the old illusion that one can build society on individuals, on his or her needs and rights.”⁸⁷

Authorially, the argument of “Human Rights Is not a Politics” allows Gauchet to put his finger on a fatal weakness of Lefort’s position, namely “the altogether surprising idea that what is good in the East must constitute our truth in the West.”⁸⁸ One might assume that Gauchet

⁸⁶ Claude Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights,” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge [England]: Polity Press, 1986), 248, 266, 272.

⁸⁷ Marcel Gauchet, “Les droits de l’homme ne sont pas une politique,” *Le Débat* 3 (July-August 1980): 3-21; republished, with new footnotes, in *La démocratie contre elle-même*, 17. Citations will be given for the republished version.

would drop the “totalitarian” construction altogether after taking Lefort to task on this point, but, in fact, he clings to it for the remainder of his career, as we shall see. Gauchet’s position in the Human Rights essay also diverges from the formalist, structural-sounding language that colors Lefort’s interpretation of the political. In the seventies, Gauchet was wont to reproduce what should strike readers as a strong Lacanian tropism in Lefort’s writing: the “symbolic” (which constitutes the founding matrix of societies), the “One” (power as a master signifier), essential concepts of Gauchet’s early work in other words, are lifted from Lefort, which are in turn lifted from Lacan. Lefort’s essay on Human Rights features a string of Lacanian formulations: to wit, one reads, “As soon as one confuses the symbolic and the real one falls into double illusion ...”⁸⁹ Gauchet does not completely mute the structuralist language in his forthcoming work, but he does make a historicist turn that will soften it. On the one hand, he lashes out against the theoretical “anti-humanists”: “the Lacanian denunciation of illusory subjectivity brought about the signifying chain, the Derridian vision of writing as a process of difference in which identity dissolves ...: these ‘discourses’ no longer interest anyone.” They draw attention away from what Gauchet sees as the central paradox of democratic modernity: “The mechanism which establishes, legitimates and inspires the expression of individuals is the same which, rigorously, from the start, engenders both the strengthening and the detachment of the political sphere.”⁹⁰ The problem is familiar to us after reading Debray’s work: freedom for the individual seems to require some degree of subordination; self and group are mutually constituting; no autonomy without heteronomy. Thus, on the other hand, after dismissing the anti-humanists and laying down the principal contradiction of democratic modernity, Gauchet brings a historicist focus to

⁸⁸ Gauchet, “Les droits de l’homme,” 3.

⁸⁹ Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights,” 271.

⁹⁰ Gauchet, “Les droits de l’homme,” 17, 20.

the problem, arguing that the present impoverishment of the social could be understood as the outcome of a certain historical development.

Liberalism Redefined

The shape of this historical narrative will be fashioned in dialogue with two of France's greatest liberal thinkers, Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville. The very fact that Gauchet would set these two thinkers as his benchmark has been and should be taken as evidence of his newfound respect for the liberal tradition in France. Besides, it was fashionable in this period to plumb the canon for forgotten allies, rediscover and retouch kindred figures, much as Furet had done with Cochin and Quinet. Gauchet would likewise strike an ideological note in his resurrection of Constant: "the reasons for the dismissal of Constant's work and the general obliteration of liberal thought" is a product of "the Jacobin-Stalinist vulgate's hegemony over the understanding of this period" – a formulation which is surely owed to Furet.⁹¹ Accompanying this ideological declaration was, as I have been suggesting, a conceptual readjustment, an attempt to rethink the trajectory of the state and the prospects of democracy. Tocqueville proved indispensable for the latter, Constant for the former. What emerges from Gauchet's readings is an altogether new interpretation of liberalism, provoked by a sense of history's exhaustion and the troubling immobilism of the present. The significance of Gauchet's work – however one judges its outcomes – surely lies here, at the crossroads of a new epoch of liberalism.

From Constant, Gauchet began to understand the critical error of liberal thought, the idea that the expansion of liberties in civil society would correspond to a less invasive, less domineering state. Liberals had mistakenly conceived civil society and the state as enemies in a

⁹¹ Marcel Gauchet, "Benjamin Constant: l'illusion lucide du libéralisme," Benjamin Constant, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997): 21.

zero-sum game, “as if there were a sum total of power or authority to be shared, and that an augmentation of one side would lead to a diminution of the other.”⁹² On the contrary, what Constant and other failed to see was the invisible growth of the state lurking behind the satisfied dilation of bourgeois civil society through the nineteenth century. The way Gauchet describes it, the state’s ineluctable expansion has a flavor of conspiracy, of manipulative intent: “But in reality, the apparent (and real) autonomization of the social provided power with the opportunity to realize its vocation for exteriority, to unmake the organic ties which had kept human communities intact, and to gain control over an entity that it would no longer simply maintain, but shape through and through [*faire de part en part advenir*].”⁹³ Later, I will comment on the explanatory value of such a claim, but for now it will suffice to acknowledge the magnitude of Gauchet’s thesis: all those liberals who had championed civil society *against* the state – that is to say, nearly every liberal, and non-liberals, like Clastres, too – had fundamentally misrecognized the distribution of power. Two essential consequences follow from this position. First, it reveals the political naivety of classical liberalism, which thought it could achieve a peaceable civil society by eliminating the state. This would prove to be its greatest illusion.

The second consequence is that democratic subjects must be reconciled to the state. The state will continue to expand, even (and especially) as one struggles against it. The worst thing to do would be to ignore its metastasis. A doctrine like Human Rights enables this tendency: in the long run, it assists, unwittingly, in the growth of the state. Gauchet writes, “The self-possession that is returned to individuals through Human Rights, and the instituting power that comes with their political association can only be realized with their imminent dispossession, to the profit of the common power that rules over them. The deeper Human Rights penetrate into a

⁹² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

society's definition of itself, the more the organizing hold of the bureaucratic state ... will strip society of these faculties."⁹⁴ Now we get a better sense of why Gauchet elects to preserve the concept of totalitarianism: while it does not account for our present (1980) difficulties, it might return to haunt a naïve and forgetful Europe (since Human Rights helped cloud over its historical memory). Human Rights convinces us we can live without a state, which will only make the state all the more formidable. Again, the essence of the problem is not the growth of the state – democratic societies can flourish with large states – but the ignorance of, and hence lack of control over that growth.

Constant made a more interesting mistake with respect to the state (and now we speak of the “lucid illusion” of liberalism, as opposed to its “originary illusion”, the belief in society against the state). He thought that the protection of liberties would require some higher, non-representative agency or principle. “Suffrage alone,” Gauchet paraphrasing Constant, “is not sufficient for republican liberty”: rather, “what is needed is a place of power exterior to human will, in reference to which society creates itself, constituting itself as an entity capable of self-recognition.”⁹⁵ There would thus be a neutral agency that could negotiate the power differential between society and the state, and prevent popular government from imploding (as it would naturally do). Constant's otherwise brilliant insight had been, for Gauchet, invalidated by the totalitarian experience of the twentieth century. The exterior structuring principle – society's necessary *au-delà* – was the invisible point of unity that had galvanized totalitarian regimes. Gauchet replies, “Intellectual neutrality is not a brake on power, it is the condition of it.” Constant's scheme is “the movement that created the possibility and the appeal for an enterprise proposing to restore an ultimate intellectual unity, to make society fully present to itself, to close

⁹⁴ Gauchet, “Les droits de l'homme,” 21.

⁹⁵ Gauchet, “Benjamin Constant: l'illusion lucide,” 102, 104.

history.”⁹⁶ Thus, Constant’s proto-monarchical solution to the problem could not be entertained either, for it too was headed straight for totalitarianism. But at least it was aware that society could not live without the state.

Gauchet’s own attempt to negotiate the dilemma (of the state’s role vis a vis civil society) brings us closer to his theory of democracy, which is situated at the level of social awareness. To live in a smoothly functioning society is for individuals to acknowledge a necessary balance between society and state, freedom and subordination. It also means that individuals become actors, as opposed to inhabitants, within their universe. They realize that they control their own destiny, so “The power of society to make itself takes the form of a capacity to foresee, control, and *possess*, literally [sic], the future with which it is pregnant.” The role of the state in all this, keeping up with the metaphor, is to be “the privileged midwife of our tomorrows, invested with the important mission of representing and forming, with its organizational resources and planning capabilities, human beings’ mastery of the future.” The ideal state converts its power to dominate into power to educate, allowing citizens to master their collective destiny: “Such is the necessity obeyed by the growth of sovereign power in democratic societies, the necessity of confronting the challenge of the future.”⁹⁷ Gauchet’s burden has been to show that the autonomy of civil society – a fundamental prescription of the liberal project since the nineteenth century – requires some degree of subordination (or “heteronomy”) to the state, which, under the right conditions, allows civil society to realize its highest aims.⁹⁸ With this argument, he has

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95, 96.

⁹⁸ A pendant to Gauchet’s revision of liberalism was the work of Blandine Barrett-Kriegel, whose 1978 *L’état et les esclaves* would try to overcome the old nineteenth-century bias against the state. Foucault too would write (negatively) of “phobia” of the state in this period.

suggested how liberalism might overcome its phobia of the state, and why democratic societies must learn to do so.

In Tocqueville, Gauchet found an ideal partner for the resurrection of democracy as a political ideal. “Democracy” had not been a keyword in the Revolutionary lexicon, nor had it been used much in the post-Revolutionary epoch (one scarcely finds it for example in the writings of Constant). Tocqueville, of course, figures as the great exception with his magnum opus on America, but otherwise, democracy is a late addition to the political vocabulary of the French tradition. In the 1960s, Raymond Aron made an effort to rally support for what might prove an alternative to the robust republican tradition, given renewed vigor – with epaulettes and gauzy nationalism – under the aegis of General de Gaulle. It had little traction for most of the *trentes glorieuse*. In the aftermath of 1968, however, it appeared with greater frequency, as student groups and worker organizations experimented with different forms of self-management and direct participation. Only with the liberal-conservative presidential campaign of Valérie Giscard d’Estaing and its supporting program, *Démocratie française* (which sold over 800,000 copies in its first weeks), did the locution have national resonance. Afterwards, one finds it as the subject of countless political interventions, indeed becoming a theoretical fixation for centrists on the lookout for non-republican, non-Marxist political concepts. Its association with Anglo-American political theory was – for Aron and Giscard, as well as their successors – a major source of its attraction.

On conceptual points, Gauchet’s democratic theory will often appear close to republican political thought, with an emphasis on civic participation, talk of a “mixed” regime, and a preference for a “closed” political order over an “open” one. This is to be expected of a product of the French republican school and a former disciple of Lefort, who was steeped in the political

theory of Machiavelli. It is a fact worth noting, however, that Gauchet avoids republican language (and logic) at all costs. He has none of Machiavelli's (or Rousseau's) fondness for the virtue of the ancients, nor their attraction to civic activism; he writes contemptuously of de Gaulle, and extols Thermidor as the greatest moment of the Revolution (in which he situates Constant, its greatest philosopher). With democracy, there is perhaps greater room for maneuver, more space for innovation. Emmanuel Todd too picked up democratic theory in this period, giving it the same kind of historicist, panoramic treatment. Even if their approaches to this history are quite distant – Todd's global, dispersed, demographic; Gauchet's European, unitary, philosophic – the projects have a certain symmetry, tracing out the long curve of democracy's ascendancy historically, and its multiple breakdowns and inadequacies in the present. Worth noting too is their historicist construction of liberalism, which places the burden of political development on variable sequences of events, rather than on legalistic foundations (i.e., constitutions, etc.). Likewise, their historicism will not be entirely thoroughgoing, as both conceptions are, as I have been arguing, beholden to invariant, anthropological claims.

Democracy

Democracy is a form of self-knowledge according to Gauchet, its history the process of overcoming obstacles to this awareness. Gauchet will repeat, time and again, that “the misfortune of the Moderns is their ignorance of themselves, which is rooted in their poor ability to understand what they are in light of the becoming process which made them.”⁹⁹ Twenty years down the line, this frustration will prompt him to write his definitive history/theory of democracy, which takes shape around the urgent need for democratic subjects to grasp the

⁹⁹ This appears in a second essay on Constant, “Constant: le libéralisme entre le droit et l’histoire” (1986), *La condition politique*, 286.

conditions of their own existence (and Gauchet opts for the language of medicine, presumably in line with Hannah Arendt, when writing about the body politic: *La condition historique*, *La condition politique* are a few of his recent titles). Meanwhile, Gauchet will redouble his efforts to expose these conditions, burning the candle from both ends so to speak: he writes, on the one hand, of its present impoverishment, on the other, of the ancient preconditions of its later rise in the early-modern period. Reading Tocqueville helps Gauchet bring this narrative into perspective. He accepts Tocqueville's idea that democracy is a "social condition above all else", that is, a world in which the possibility (and perhaps inevitably) of social equality has been posed.¹⁰⁰ Where he diverges from Tocqueville is on the supposed compatibility of religion and democracy. Gauchet charges Tocqueville with doing to democracy what Constant did to the state, of introducing a higher organizing principle to negotiate what must have seemed like an inevitable move toward anarchy. Both refused to confront the radical novelty of the democratic condition, turning back to old-regime paternalism as a prophylactic against democratic chaos: "What's inconceivable for Tocqueville is the abandonment of people entirely to themselves. There is, in the idea of minds relying only on themselves, the element of an unbearable and radically impossible dissolution."¹⁰¹ The autonomy that Gauchet saw as natural to the democratic condition was terrifying to Tocqueville, who called upon religion to serve as the binding agent of an unordered society. Tocqueville had replaced one form of social heteronomy with another.

Nevertheless, Gauchet earnestly takes up Tocqueville's challenge to think through the advent of democracy. The ensuing project will have many components: the most original and far-reaching, Gauchet's attempt to trace the long curve of secularization in the West, *The*

¹⁰⁰ A later formulation, *L'avenement de la démocratie*, vol. I, 23.

¹⁰¹ Marcel Gauchet, "Tocqueville, l'Amérique et nous," (1980) *La condition politique*, 319.

Disenchantment of the World (1985); two texts on the Revolution, which address the novelty of its political forms and their consequences for the future, *La révolution des droits de l'homme* (1989) and *La révolution des pouvoirs* (1995); a series of texts on psychology that follow scientific and philosophical debates about the role of the individual in society, *L'inconscient cérébral* (1992) and *Le vrai Charcot* (1997)¹⁰²; finally, a history of democracy itself, *L'avenement de la démocratie* (2007), with four projected volumes. The components are interlocking to the extent that they attempt to frame the intricacies of our political situation in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, and guide us toward a resolution of their impasses. Gauchet once wrote that, "What we are searching for through our more or less confused discussions of Human Rights or the role of the state, is, in truth, the conditions of a new representation of the collective fact."¹⁰³ This would be a fair approximation of Gauchet's own project, to come to terms with the situation of democratic subjecthood. What does Gauchet's ideal polity look like, what direction should European governments be moving in the twenty-first century?

A perennial difficulty with Gauchet's work is getting straight on the spatio-temporal coordinates: *The Disenchantment of the World* covers 5,000 years of history, *La révolution des droits de l'homme*, in the same amount of pages, covers a few years. Likewise, the geographical scope often seems to encompass the "West" as a singular, cohesive entity, while many of the texts concern France only. No contradiction need be implied here, only a certain haziness with respect to some of the formulations, which become lost between the two optics. The short-run

¹⁰² The aspect of Gauchet's work that treats the history of psychiatry and its implications for the subject will be unfortunately be ignored in this account. Interested readers should consult Samuel Moyn, "The Assumption by Man of His Original Fracturing: Marcel Gauchet, Gladys Swain, and the History of the Self," *Modern Intellectual History* 6, 2 (August 2009): 315-4.

¹⁰³ Marcel Gauchet, "L'école à l'école d'elle-même," *La démocratie contre elle-même*, 118.

narrative is the French one, beginning with the Revolution and dealing principally with the nineteenth-century implications. The work of historian François Furet is, as I have explained, likely to have influenced Gauchet's rendering of this narrative. In *La révolution des droits de l'homme*, Gauchet identifies the philosophical-political contradictions faced by the constitution writers of 1789, 1793, and 1795, reconstructing, with great sensitivity, their strained and exhaustive debates. The key problem with which the Revolution continually wrestled was of representation: what exactly was the shape of this new collective sovereign, and how could it be detached from the monarchical structure of power? The dilemma had been foreseen (and performed) strikingly by Rousseau, who saw collective sovereignty sometimes as direct (i.e., popular), sometimes as representative (i.e., "oligarchic," for Gauchet). The *Declaration* of 1789 failed to provide a lasting and stable framework for negotiating this impasse, and would leave the republic to oscillate between excessive individualism (1789), and absolute subordination to the social (1793) for the next two hundred years.¹⁰⁴

Fundamentally, Gauchet would assent to the verdict of Furet and others that the Revolution was "lost as a political model", that republicanism, as it had been known for the last two centuries, was defunct.¹⁰⁵ And yet, for Gauchet, this did not mean that there was nothing to learn from it. In fact, one was duty-bound to reconstruct its breakdowns and pathologies as a way of appreciating the fragility of democracy. The trouble here is that Gauchet has always maintained, *pace* Lefort, that democracies must resist closure and remain, on a fundamental level, divided against themselves. This was the principal lesson of his engagement with Tocqueville, that "what we know of democracy today was fashioned in large part by, and as a

¹⁰⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *La révolution des droits de l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), xiv, 251.

¹⁰⁵ Marcel Gauchet, *La révolution des pouvoirs: la souveraineté, le peuple et la représentation, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 7.

function of, the opposition to democracy.”¹⁰⁶ The texts on the Revolution, as well as a searching think piece on the left-right dichotomy (that appeared in *Les lieux de mémoire*) argue that the dilemmas and impasses of the Revolution had sown the seeds for a century of dynamic political struggle. In this event, why should the closure of the Revolution’s paradoxes be interpreted as a boon? Shouldn’t French society rather like to preserve this constitutive antinomy? Gauchet might respond that there is more than one way of being divided against oneself. He pursued one avenue in the Tocqueville essay, “the split between the possessors and the dispossessed, the owners and the proletariat,” which he lamented was now coming to end. But later, after Mitterrand’s victory in 1981, Gauchet would abandon this position (which greatly resembled the rhetoric of left-wing republicans). He was rather looking to deflate the momentum of the Revolution, downplay the virtues of class struggle, but also retain the sense of democracy’s fragile self-awareness.

The coup of the revisionists, like Furet and Gauchet, was to pit *a* democratic tradition against *the* republican one. Gauchet reads this struggle back into the nineteenth century, arguing that “With the new forms of political organization and the advent of suffrage, the cohesion of French republican thought [which stressed the unity of a general will], began to crumble. This is the originality of the French case: democracy had to constitute itself in opposition to the Republic.”¹⁰⁷ What so offends Gauchet about the republican tradition? Its aspiration toward unity – expressed in the “cult of the Nation” – reproduces the sovereign authority of the monarchy, now in the guise of popular government. The implication, as always, is that this sort

¹⁰⁶ Gauchet, “Tocqueville, l’Amérique et nous,” 325.

¹⁰⁷ Marcel Gauchet, “La droite et gauche,” *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 419.

of monism will breed totalitarianism – the perennial trump card of the right¹⁰⁸ democrats against the republicans. More and more, converts to the revisionist line were interpreting twentieth-century political history as the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy. Republicanism was guilty by association: Jacobinism led to Bolshevism, the Terror to Stalinist terror. The logic was not failsafe, but it carried a certain weight in the pre-1989 world. It set the terms of the debate for the Bicentenary in 1989, and provoked Debray – a republican stalwart – to redefine the terms in his influential polemic, “Are You a Democrat or a Republican?”, where he excoriates democracy as a thinly concealed celebration of consumer capitalism.¹⁰⁹ Republicanism did experience a small renaissance in the 1990s during Chirac’s (conservative) tenancy as president, and the swelling anti-European sentiments of the post-Maastricht period. That momentum – represented politically by Jean-Pierre Chevènement – failed to produce lasting results, and the PS has slowly drifted away from the socialist-republican discourse embodied by Mitterrand and his followers.

Returning to Gauchet and our earlier question, how was democratic government supposed to look if it was to constitute a real alternative to republican political theory? In the first place, sovereignty would have to be divided between different branches of government so as to stall any lingering monist temptations. On this point, he would take the line of Montesquieu and his American devotees over that of Rousseau and company: sovereignty can and must be split between different institutions. Gauchet has often commended de Gaulle’s constitution for the Fifth Republic, which diluted the parliamentary sovereignty of the Fourth Republic by expanding

¹⁰⁸ This is to distinguish a radical version of democracy that has developed alongside that of Furet and company, of which the work of Jacques Rancière stands out as exemplary.

¹⁰⁹ Régis Debray, “Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?” *Nouvel Observateur* (November 30 – December 6 1989). In general republicans and socialists have pointed to the weaknesses of the revisionist line, but to little avail. See Debray’s *Que vive la République* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1988) and Jacques Rancière’s *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London; New York: Verso, 2006). One point on which Gauchet and republicans like Debray agree is the poverty of Europe’s recent attachment to juridical formalism, betokened by the return to Kant.

the powers of the executive (making the president what it is today). Otherwise, Gauchet's democratic theory tends to be fluid and anti-foundationalist: we might call it "postmodern" in a loose sense for its lack of structure. The different components of power encompass much more than their officially sanctioned capacities at state level, rather an entire social-cultural landscape. Legislative power, for example, is re-expressed by Gauchet as that of the "social-historical," the body politic's grasp of its own history and power over itself. Similarly, executive power is one aspect of "the political," a more general scheme for the construction and enactment of political community. The juridical component is "law" [*droit*], which "unites people by consent, instead of attaching them through dependence."¹¹⁰ Each order is shaped and defined by its key institutions, which are historically determined and thus subject to constant fluctuation. A well-functioning democratic order is one in which these three variables are correctly balanced – a "mixed-regime" as Gauchet calls it.¹¹¹ Thus, internal division remains the metaphysical precondition of any true democracy, but now it is configured as the division and diffusion of the state's power in society, rather than the division between social classes. Emblematic of this underlying shift is the phrase he chose for a collection of his essays, *La démocratie contre elle-même* (*Democracy against Itself*) (2002). Whereas the early Gauchet might have seen such internal tension as a positive augury for democracy, the late Gauchet regards it rather as a regrettable development, "causing democracy to regress along the same path upon which it had progressed, emptying it of substance amidst its consolidation."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Marcel Gauchet, *L'avenement de la démocratie*, vol. II, *La crise du libéralisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 7.

¹¹¹ This is the framework of his tetralogy on democracy, *L'avenement de la démocratie*, begun in 2007, awaiting its final volume.

¹¹² Marcel Gauchet, "La démocratie à la recherche d'un second souffle," *La démocratie à bout de souffle: une introduction critique à la philosophie politique de Marcel Gauchet*, ed. Antoon Braeckman (Louvain-La-Neuve: Ed de l'Institut Supérieur de philosophie, 2007), 21.

The School: Laboratory of Democracy

Gauchet tends to avoid direct political or institutional analysis, preferring to situate his narrative at a bird's-eye, historical-philosophical level. The one exception is education: Gauchet has written extensively of the public school in France, stressing the importance of *laïcité* as a regulative ideal. *The Disenchantment of the World* unfolded the long path of secularization in the West, which began with Christianity's overthrow of the religious worldview of primitive man, and accelerated dramatically with the advent of Protestantism and capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A *sine qua non* for the arrival of democracy would be the completion of this process of secularization. Religion, even in its secular makeover, produces a congregational impulse that is the very stuff of totalitarianism for Gauchet. What enabled (actual) totalitarianism in the twentieth century was the illusion that religion had been outmoded and banished from a thoroughly scientific, parliamentary, de-confessionalized Europe; when in fact, the party-states of the future totalitarian regimes had an easy time smashing this fragile order and creating an "ancient order by modern means."¹¹³ That is, they parlayed religious energies – through charismatic leadership, ritual, pageantry, propaganda – into monstrous war-making machines – far more terrifying than the technologically primitive war machine of Clastres's pre-peasant societies. Hence, self-consciousness and full secularization are absolute requirements of Gauchet's democracy, in stark contrast to Debray's prescriptions in the post-89 period, which would have us looking directly to religion for lessons in collective solidarity – an ethos increasingly rare in atomized modernity.

It falls upon the republican school – "a characteristic institution of democratic modernity" – to complete and preserve secularization in France. The school also carries the burden of

¹¹³ Gauchet, *À l'épreuve des totalitarismes*, 49.

socializing citizens in the correct manner, creating a nexus between individual (private) and collective (public) identities. In this sense, it is more than just another democratic institution for Gauchet, rather *the* essential institution, without which democracy could not survive. Its goal is to liberate the student from the private attachments of family and religion and train him or her to see the future as a common, collective enterprise. On the first point, Gauchet's rhetoric has been controversial in France, not only because it opposes the multi-cultural arguments in favor of an open school, but also because it, more gravely, verges on nativist language. It is not customary, as we have seen, for Gauchet to make controversial political statements, and yet in his writings on education he often targets Muslims for failing to assimilate into French society. He softens the impact by prefacing his attack with a reasonable assessment of the dilemma, "To refuse the imposition of a national standard of language is to protect the individual from a certain violence that would be done to her; but it's also to enclose her in the ghetto of particularity and deprive her of the access to freedom conferred by the appropriate usage a common language." One might question the prudence of "ghetto" here, but otherwise this statement is well within the bounds of acceptable discourse. A few lines later, he regrets that France has not retained the Third Republic's absolute faith in assimilation, and then adds, "One does not eradicate the imprint of Islam as one erased the mark of the Picardy patois or undid the Breton habit of thinking."¹¹⁴

In the same year, Gauchet would claim that "Christianity remains the most relevant religion in a post-religious society," the implication being that secularization (in Europe at least) was from the beginning a Christian process, and so it continues to be.¹¹⁵ The argument allows Gauchet to pose secularization as a necessary and hence welcome condition for the arrival of

¹¹⁴ Gauchet, "L'école à l'école d'elle-même," 120, 121.

¹¹⁵ Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, 4.

democracy – roughly in line with most liberal narratives – but also to use the singular (Christian) quality of that process to block calls for tolerance in the public sphere. It is, in other words, a backhanded Christian dogmatism that insists on one path to secularization and sees alternative configurations of the concept as a threat. Gauchet tends to be combative toward such alternatives. The republican model, adhered to by Debray and others, is vilified for supposing too dogmatic a relationship with the past (and this plays into the second point, above): the sacred heritage of the Revolution lives on, dangerously, as an ideal in this program. Marxisant conceptions of the public school are dismissed with a wave of the hand: his own theory will “flay the tautological poverty of the category of *reproduction* . . . , which has no trouble amusing simpletons, but fails to sate greater appetites.” Pierre Bourdieu, the sociologist to whom Gauchet nudgingly refers, would hardly qualify as a “simpleton.” Finally, the soft-minded liberals come in for a drubbing, for it is “the invariable stupidity of the idea of the ‘multicultural society’” that dooms immigrants “to live on the margins, in the daily humiliation of not possessing the keys to the universe in which they must thrive.” Rather, argues Gauchet, “to recognize the immigrants among us as fully fledged individuals is to provide them with a deep acquaintance with *our* culture.”¹¹⁶ It should be said that these prescriptions have alienated Gauchet from his liberal colleagues, who accuse him of betraying liberalism’s commitment to tolerance and conceding too much to the rhetoric of far-right reaction.¹¹⁷

What emerges from this discussion is that Gauchet sees the republican school as a model for consensus – a political, rather than an ethical concept. The argument strangles any remaining breath in the erstwhile claim that inter-class conflict was a necessary condition of modern

¹¹⁶ Gauchet, “L’école à l’école d’elle-même,” 164, 112, 122 [emphases in original].

¹¹⁷ This was the essence of Lindenberg’s attack in *Le rappel à l’ordre*.

democracy. The school is here conceived as an instrument of inter-ethnic and inter-class pacification. It screens out conflict, neutralizes differences and educates the body politic in collective self-determination. Any threat to the politics of consensus becomes a threat to the democratic order in Gauchet's increasingly narrow vision for the republic. For as much as he likes to argue that conflict is a healthy component of democracy, and imagine himself a partisan of the people, he has only ever mocked the social protests that have erupted in his lifetime. On the strikes of '95, he recorded his "boredom with this trumped up radicality, which is not very enlightening. It hardly clarifies the situation it has the virtue of protesting, to say nothing of its intended solutions."¹¹⁸ Besides, the language of these protests was too indebted to an outdated Marxist rhetoric, which could only resurrect unwanted specters. Recently he opposed strikes staged by his own students at the EHESS, claiming that occupations and blockages were ultimately ineffective. The University had to first "reflect on itself", and then try "to conquer public opinion."¹¹⁹ Gauchet's answer is, moreover, indicative of an elision that can be found in most of his writing on institutions. It is as if they are not made of people. Devoid of social relationships, interests and hierarchies, they are personified, having only a unitary voice (i.e. the University "reflects on itself," etc.). This is perhaps the touch of the anthropologist in Gauchet, who sees only the larger symbolic, cultural meaning of education. This approach tends to produce a theoretical clumsiness when actual interests start to collide and crises erupt.

¹¹⁸ Marcel Gauchet, "Le tournant de 1995 ou les voies secrètes de la société libérale," in *La démocratie contre elle-même*, 325.

¹¹⁹ From the transcript of a debate that took place at the EHESS in November of 2009 between Gauchet and Isabelle This Saint Jean. Participants included Michel Agier and Luc Boltanski. See, <http://pds.hypotheses.org/228>

The State and Totalitarianism Revisited

In Gauchet's late work, the school is indicative of the state's capacity to steer contemporary society toward an ideal democratic balance. It too functions as an adhesive agent, sealing over leakages in the system of distribution, and joining disparate groups together to envisage the same collective ends. Its purpose is to de-link the individual from "the family or communal attachments which previously afforded an essential source of protection."¹²⁰ We have already seen how Gauchet, in the early eighties, began to defend the state as an instrument of, rather than an obstacle to the preservation of liberties. Through the 1990s, his conception of the state's historical role as this agent remained hazy, hovering on the plane of abstraction. Prodrômes of the later theory are scattered among his nineties writings, as for instance in his text on the place of religion in contemporary France, *La religion dans la démocratie*, which has Gauchet sketching some rough notes for a new historicization of the state. The full narrative comes with his most ambitious project to date, a four-volume philosophical history of democracy in Europe, *L'avenement de la démocratie*. The tetralogy is of especial interest for us because it revisits the idea of "totalitarianism," which has never ceased to figure prominently in Gauchet's work, but had lost much of its referential impact in the post-Soviet era. These volumes would attempt to renew its cogency, presumably for a younger generation having little awareness of the concept's former associations.

The arguments picks up where the narrative of *The Disenchantment of the World* ended, in the late Middle Ages, with the structures for what would become the absolutist states of Europe in place. In a synoptic, philosophical register of analysis he passes quickly through the multiple revolutions of the early modern period, which greatly accelerated the inroads of secularization. For Gauchet, this meant a growing awareness by historical actors of their

¹²⁰ Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie: parcours de la laïcité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 68-69.

predicament as arbiters of their own destinies; in more concrete terms, it meant that the three pillars of a democratic regime – the “political” (sphere of action), the “social-historical” (roughly, the legislative), and the juridical (principles of legitimacy) – had all cast off their religious moorings by the end of the nineteenth century. The complete eviction of the religious worldview will turn out to have been an illusion however. In the second volume, *La crise du libéralisme, 1880–1914* (2007), democracy experiences a reversal of fortune in the era of liberalism, just as it looked as if it would settle down.

What happens, in effect, is that the forces of modernity overpower the brittle religious framework inherited from the old regime. Science, parliamentary government, parties, trade unions – the signal developments of modernity – break the community’s dependence on outside forces, and introduce an insurmountable process of pluralism: “The sacred One can no longer manage to contain the vectors of autonomy.”¹²¹ This unloosing might not have been problematic if the different forms of human community (of “being-together”) could have adjusted to the quickened tempo of modernity. Obedient to an older logic, they were left atomized and starved of a higher principle of inscription. In the hollows of a de-sacralized modernity, religious simulacra – for Gauchet, revolution, the drive toward empire and ultimately totalitarianism – gained an enormous appeal. As the crisis of liberalism deepened in the years leading up to World War I, individuals and groups, clamoring for a sense of belonging, would scramble toward the sacred (now secularized). The collapse of the liberal order was far more catastrophic than anyone could have imagined, resulting in two World Wars and the rise of a new and dangerous kind of ideology, totalitarianism. Volume III is devoted to this somber phase, undertaking a detailed comparison of what Gauchet considers to be Europe’s three totalitarian

¹²¹ *La crise du libéralisme*, 15.

regimes, Bolshevism, Italian Fascism and Nazism, each, in its own way reappropriating the sacred to achieve a powerful spiritual unity in politics.

The totalitarian interval, though of brief duration, signals Europe's final and painful exit from religion, and sets the groundwork for a revitalized democracy. The narrative here is not so much one of good triumphing over evil, but a Hegelian one, of totalitarianism providing the necessary conditions for the restoration of democracy in its ideal form. How did the post-war order manage finally to align the components of democracy's mixed regime? The welfare state arrived to solve all of Europe's problems: "the function of this body is not to know all and order all, as with its totalitarian homologue, but to return the totality of social experience to the level of the intelligible and the governable." It could provide a semblance of unity for disparate social actors, and act as "a cognitive agency of social change" – all without succumbing to the totalitarian dream of complete mastery.¹²²

In other words, the post-war democratic order succeeded where its liberal and totalitarian predecessors failed, namely in immunizing itself against—and not simply ignoring or seizing hold of—society's attraction to the sacred in politics. It achieved this by delegating greater powers to an executive figure, a small dose of charisma being a reliable vaccination against the *Führerprinzip*. Though no fan of De Gaulle, Gauchet credits the General with this constitutional innovation in France, which rescued the Fourth Republic from its parliamentary doldrums. In social terms, the individual was neither isolated, nor prompted to find personal redemption in some amorphous general will. Again, the state intervened to effect this delicate balance, gently subordinating the individual toward collective ends, reminding citizens of the benefits to be had of 'being-together', but at the same time giving free rein for individuals to flourish independently of the group. Finally, the forthcoming Volume IV, *Le nouveau monde*, promises to document

¹²² *À l'épreuve*, 589-90.

the unmaking of this dispensation in the aftermath of the 1970s recession, when the legal component of the democratic order, underwritten by a regime of human rights, began to grow out of proportion to its foundations.

Tensions

We have now traced the development of Gauchet's thought from an inchoate set of reflections on Lefort and Clastres to a wide-ranging theoretical system. In the most general terms, Gauchet's trajectory is, like the other figures treated in this dissertation, ambiguous. His work, as with that of Debray, Todd, and Benoist, can be used to contradict premature reports of the supposed flight from reality of French theory. Gauchet's questions – of the state, democracy, religion, political community – have an immediate and pertinent resonance. And even at its most disabused at moments, this work never verges on the despair that is common to late twentieth-century theory. It is also exemplary for its thorough dedication to a historicist method of analysis, which, contrary to the plaudits of Mark Lilla and others, defies rather than affirms the procedural aspects of the Anglo-American approach to liberalism. Gauchet is no constitutional liberal. The architecture of the system is rather constructed on a set of ingenious anthropological pillars that have allowed him to construct very powerful narratives of secularization, and track patterns of collective thought – much like the *mentalités* that Todd had pursued – across the millennia. His greatest strength contribution to French thought is this enormous anthropological metanarrative.

In a more specific register, Gauchet's theoretical system is full of tensions, poorly conceived ideas and contradictory outcomes. We begin with the state as conceived in these late texts. For Gauchet, who is thoroughly historicist in his reasoning, it matters how our institutions develop. It is therefore surprising that he is so reticent about the historical origins and

development of the post-war state, which he so much admires. Which of its features had emerged out of the totalitarian ordeal? How did they develop? Were they tied to the war effort, which required states to intervene more directly in the economy? What were the prospects for democracy in the actual totalitarian states? The sections of Volume III devoted to this part of the story – a meagre 100 of 650 pages – are extremely thin and far too synoptic to provide satisfactory answers. As a result, the formation of Gauchet’s prized post-war democratic state seems strangely *ex nihilo*. In choosing to privilege the archaic over the modern features of Europe’s twentieth century, Gauchet is poorly situated to explain the historical forces that defined that state: popular sovereignty, interstate competition, the development of supranational political entities, decolonization, the Cold War or capitalism, these have virtually no role in the narrative.¹²³ A slight exception is made for the last-named, which Gauchet, a philosophical idealist, has been at pains to de-emphasize. The oil crisis of 1973 is almost solely responsible for jerking Europe out of its post-war paradise into the despair of the “new world” (the projected title of the fourth and final volume).

Gauchet’s whitewashing of the post-war state – where are the soaring defense budgets, colonial wars, the ouster of communist parties from Western European parliaments, etc? – reflects poorly on his deeper political prescriptions. For all its theorizing about the advantages of democracy, Gauchet’s work passes over what many would take to be the term’s most potent resonance: a system of popular government with aspirations toward inclusivity.¹²⁴ In the French

¹²³ The weakness of this narrative is easier to detect in truncated versions of the argument, where distractions and digressions are less admissible: “Totalitarianisms would hold the rope in the thirties, to the point that the bourgeois liberal era seemed to be at an end, overwhelmed as it was from both the left and the right. And then, after 1945, liberal democracies would transform themselves in a sufficiently deep way [de manière suffisamment profonde] to overcome the evils believed, wrongly, to be incurable.” The “transformation” is instant, impersonal, transnational, almost supernatural: we are dealing with metaphysics, not history. Gauchet, “La démocratie à la recherche d’un second souffle,” 17.

debates around the Bicentenary, democracy could play these strong suits – openness, greater tolerance – against a republican model that tended to be more closed off, restricted.¹²⁵ But the more benevolent, popular side of democracy is missing from Gauchet’s work, as was evident in the discussion of the public school. His confession of having rallied to “la politique normale” in the early 80s takes on renewed significance in the trajectory of his political theory, which concedes evermore to the normalizing role of the state. “It is time to shine a civic light on the terrible outcome of the ‘abnormal’ childhood”¹²⁶ and find a model of integration that could eliminate this dysfunction, argues Gauchet. Paired with his dismissive comments regarding popular struggle, such calls for integration will inevitably sound patronizing – the asserted prerogative of an elitist, white overclass.

Here, Gauchet unwittingly communicates an important lesson about contemporary politics: one can be a neo-liberal *and* support the state. This is especially true in France, whose political culture has tended to be more skeptical of free-markets than its Atlantic trading partners, and whose own path through neo-liberal reforms was scaled, less proudly of course, by a Socialist government. One imagines, as Gauchet seems to, that neo-liberalism amounts to an absolute faith in the free-market, with a minimum of state intervention. This is rather a utopian variant on a more commonplace politics; it might more correctly be seen as a certain contempt for popular politics, a deep suspicion where the people are concerned. Alain de Benoist, a thinker outflanking Gauchet to the Right, has lately tried to tone down his elitism by appealing to

¹²⁴ For a recent and eloquently argued popular-theoretical account of democracy, see Luciano Canfora’s indispensable, *Democracy in Europe*, trans. Simon Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). For a no less essential response to Canfora’s theses, see Dylan Riley, “Freedom’s Triumph,” *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009): 43-59.

¹²⁵ Here I mean “open” in the liberal sense of toleration, i.e. within Gauchet’s own tradition. Marxists, for example, will have a different sense of “openness”, as involving a productive antagonism between those included and excluded.

¹²⁶ Gauchet, “L’école à l’école d’elle-même,” 137.

the history of popular struggle in France.¹²⁷ Gauchet's work has become shriller over time. By the 2000s, Gauchet completed a slow *volte-face*, thirty years in the making: his work begins with the people against the state and ends with the state against the people. In pressing for expanded powers of the state, Gauchet imagines that he is aligned with a broadly socialist program (as opposed to the specific one of the PS).

Gauchet's enduring fascination with totalitarianism – a concept that can be found in almost every one of his texts, even long after the “totalitarian” fervor of the seventies had passed – tends to dominate his theory of democracy. In his early work, totalitarianism is a virtual presence concealed within the democratic novelty – the monster within, waiting to be unleashed as it were. Gauchet, then at his most anthropological, saw domination as an inborn feature of human society, impossible to eradicate. And like Tocqueville, he understood the expansion of state power to be inevitable and irreversible; though, like Foucault, who had a similar narrative of state power, he could never explain why the state should expand in this fashion. For both thinkers, power was ultimately an anthropological and metaphysical notion whose character they could readily convey, but whose causality and historicity they had more difficulty capturing. Gauchet's later work – from the 1980s onward – tries to preserve the anthropological quality of totalitarianism – as a latent religious drive – while endowing it with a more substantial historicity, i.e., connecting it to actual, historical governments.

In essence, this history will be one that has so often been written of the twentieth century, during and since the Cold War: the battle of democracy against totalitarianism, West against East. Indeed, his idea that totalitarianism represented a secular religion, here presented as a pathbreaking claim, was a commonplace in this era. The bigger problem, however, is one that

¹²⁷ See Benoist's recent memoir-interview, *Mémoire vive* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2012), 205.

Gauchet pointed to in Lefort's defense of human rights, namely that conditions of the East are not those of the West, that the two never should be confused. But this is exactly the fallacy Gauchet embraces in *L'avenement de la démocratie*. The problem here is that totalitarianism does not appear at the core of Gauchet's Europe, that is, England, France and occasionally the US, but rather on the fringes, in Russia, Italy and Germany—bit players in the first two volumes, now asked to occupy centre stage. For most of Volume III, the Western powers recede into the background with little explanation. What prevented the return of the religious from metastasizing in these states? If these powers, the protagonists of Gauchet's narrative of political modernity, were able to prevent the rise of totalitarianism at home, how central could it be to the plan of modernity? Gauchet's anthropological bias, which holds on to the idea of totalitarianism as an invariant presence within the structure of human society, prevents him from realizing a coherent historical narrative. The underlying metaphysical terms are poorly transposed into a world of states and actors.

Finally, in terms of method, there is a constant tension in Gauchet's system between a deeply entrenched historicism – events moving irreversibly and inevitably in one direction – and social voluntarism, which enjoins actors to make something of their own historical situation, or “condition” as he calls it.¹²⁸ The liberal panacea of education, so pronounced in Gauchet's work, makes no sense without this second component; and yet, in the background, history seems to make all our decision for us. Another way of putting this would be that the anthropological framework – which allows Gauchet to suppose structural invariants of human society – is overpowered by a thoroughgoing historicism. The role of Choice and Decision – inherited from Lévi-Strauss and Clastres, given majuscules by Gauchet – has never been entirely clear in his

¹²⁸ Geneviève Souillac makes a similar criticism in *Human Rights in Crisis: The Sacred and the Secular in Contemporary French Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 25.

work: it signifies an Event formed unconsciously by actors, which sets in place a series of lasting structures. In this sense that we still live with the consequences of the early Christians' "decision" to embrace the Christ – a contingency gives rise to a future necessity. But at what point do these structures break? Where is more contingency to be found? Describing oneself as a "philosopher-historian" and one's method as "transcendental anthroposociology" makes it easy to avoid methodological commitments.¹²⁹ As Patrice Bergeron has noted, Gauchet will vacillate between any of these disciplines at his convenience: taxed with being too historical, he will ally with philosophy, etc.¹³⁰ The synthesis of these different disciplines in Gauchet's work has given rise to an ambitious theoretical system, affording new insights into religion, secularization, liberalism, democracy, and marking out a new historical metanarrative with "the political" as its protagonist. As such it tells us much about a certain trajectory of French thought, but all too little about the actual problems of the present.

¹²⁹ Gauchet, *Condition historique*, 10.

¹³⁰ Bergeron, *La Sortie de la religion*, 25.

Chapter Four - Family Trees: Emmanuel Todd and the Roots of a Gallic Liberalism

Emmanuel Todd, born in 1951, is the youngest member of the quartet. Todd's family background is unusually illustrious. His father, Olivier Todd, is a well-known writer and journalist in France, formerly as a leading voice behind *Le Nouvel Observateur* in the 1970s, and recently as the official biographer of André Malraux and Albert Camus. Todd's grandfather (Olivier's father-in-law) was Paul Nizan, a major communist intellectual of the interwar period, well known for his blistering attack on the airy metaphysics and intellectual formalism of the "Republic of professors," *Les chiens de garde*. Shortly before his death, which came at Dunkerque in 1940, Nizan broke with the PCF over its endorsement of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, prompting the Party's leaders to laid siege to his character, accusing him of being a police agent. It was only years after Nizan's death, when his life-long friend and classmate, Jean-Paul Sartre composed a dithyrambic tribute for the republication of *Aden Arabie*, that his reputation was in part restored: "His life is explained by his intransigence: he became a revolutionary out of a sense of rebellion when revolution was necessarily eclipsed by the war, he rediscovered his violent youth and ended as a rebel."¹

Emmanuel's father Olivier was to born to bohemian circumstances in Paris in 1929.² Abandoned by his father (of Austro-Hungarian descent), raised by the ever-quarrelling tandem of an English mother (Helen), who frequented intellectual circles, and a lesbian grandmother (also English), who recognized Helen as her niece, Olivier trafficked between London and Paris for much of his childhood, and was treated as an outsider in both places.³ His university years were

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Portraits*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 194. This piece originally appeared as a preface to Nizan's *Aden Arabie* (Paris: Maspero, 1960).

² As chance would have it, Olivier Todd was one of the first journalists to report on Régis Debray's imbroglio in South America. See "Fusilleront-ils Régis Debray?" *Nouvel Observateur* 132 (May 24-30, 1967).

³ Olivier Todd, *Carte d'identités. Souvenirs* (Paris: Plon, 2005), 12-15.

spent at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he read Moral Sciences (philosophy), and came to admire the rock-steady common sense of English philosophy – a useful antidote, in later years, for “fight[ing] the tendency one may have in France of talking pompous, correct, and rubbishy like some modern French thinkers, such as Derrida and Deleuze.”⁴ Olivier Todd’s aversion to continental philosophy is, in fact, much more thoroughgoing and personal than this statement suggests. By the circumstances of his courtship of and eventual marriage to Nizan’s daughter, Todd was brought into contact with Sartre, who was entrusted with the tutoring of Nizan’s children. Todd’s memoir, *Un fils rebelle (A Rebellious Son)*, recounts his multi-decade relationship with Sartre, pulling on, as the title promises, the familiar oedipal strings: “A bastard, I found my father only at the age of forty-two. For a long time, Sartre played this role by proxy.”⁵ Olivier Todd writes of his embrace of English philosophy – in particular, Ayer’s logical positivism – as an opportunity to exfoliate his Sartrean heritage, the “jargon” of which had “infected” a good part of the intelligentsia. This sober brew of English empiricism helped Todd see what he already knew: “Behind the theoretical constructions of Sartre, beyond the inexcusable obscurities, there is an even greater degree of naïveté and stupidity.”⁶

Olivier Todd had long-standing ties with the Left, even if he would later abandon them for neo-liberalism in the 70s. Emmanuel was radicalized as an adolescent in the 60s, recounting that “For reasons unknown, I was not brought up in hatred of the Communist Party, which explains why at sixteen I joined – completely normal in those days – the Communist youth.” It was only after 68, when Todd visited Eastern Europe and saw real socialism, that he decided “to

⁴ Olivier Todd, “Olivier Todd on 68 Riots and Vietnam,” *The Connexion* (August 2009).

⁵ Olivier Todd, *Un fils rebelle* (Paris: Grasset, 1981), 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

make a pretty spectacular anti-communist career.”⁷ In Paris, Todd quickly grew “tired of the atmosphere of the French university after 68”, and immediately defected to Cambridge. Anglophilia was something of an heirloom for Todd, given the career of his father and grandfather. It was a philosophical-aesthetic decision as much as a practical one: “I despise the universe of the obscure phrase. I share the aversion expressed by Paul Nizan in *Les chiens de garde* toward verbose philosophy. I prefer that which is clearly expressed, English philosophy, Marx’s thought, or even certain historians of *mentalité* in France.”⁸ At Cambridge, Emmanuel Todd was attracted to the quantitative, statistical orientation of English social history, in particular that of Peter Laslett and Alan Macfarlane, who supervised Todd’s dissertation, a comparative study of peasant communities in pre-industrial Europe.⁹ The centrality of demographics to Todd’s work places it in the *Annales* tradition – an association that Todd cultivates. After all, it was Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, close friend of Olivier, who gave young Todd his first works of history, and encouraged him as an up-and-coming historian.¹⁰

Emmanuel Todd is best known, both inside and outside France, as the historian who correctly predicted the downfall of the Soviet Union in his 1976 essay, *La Chute finale (The Final Fall)*. The book was perfectly in step with the temperament of Parisian intellectuals, who

⁷ Emmanuel Todd, “Emmanuel Todd: Contre la monnaie unique, le choix de la nation et du bon sens économique,” *Les cahiers du communisme* 1-2 (1997), 71.

⁸ “Emmanuel Todd: l’inhumanité des bien-pensants,” *L’Humanité* (27 October 1995). Compare Olivier and Emmanuel Todd’s comfortable immersion into Anglo positivism to Debray’s reminiscences of his *lycée* years: “Et la philosophie que l’on inculquait aux lycéens, davantage apparentée au subjectif qu’au positif, ignorait ce qui avait pu se construire à Vienne, Cambridge et Chicago”; or, “Sartre, dont la faconde et l’omniprésence m’impressionnaient déjà: un as de reportage, mais une créature des journaux. Russell et Wittgenstein: des noms inconnus”, *Par amour de l’art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998): 53, 61-62.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “I am a student of a very great French historian, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. I am a product of the *Annales* School, which is devoted to the analysis of developments over the *longue durée*, using statistics and the observation of certain trends.” Emmanuel Todd, *Allah n’y est pour rien: sur les révolutions arabes et quelques autres* (Paris: Le Publieur, 2011), 38-39.

in 1976 were lowering their guns against Soviet-sympathizing intellectuals. It was accordingly greeted by the elder statesmen of anti-communism, Jean-François Revel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and François Furet – all friends of his father’s – as a prophetic work; and reviled by (once) radical publications like *Libération* as fashionable drivel.¹¹ At only 25 years of age, Todd was one of the youngest members of the anti-totalitarian chorus. A quarter century later, Todd produced a work similar in structure and tone to *The Final Fall*, this time calling attention to the imminent collapse of the American empire. Impeccable again was the timing of this work, *Après l’empire (After the Empire)*(2002)¹², delivered on the heels of September 11 and the subsequent US-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan. Todd’s reprise of the Cassandra role was rewarded almost immediately, as his comments about America’s “theatrical micromilitarism”, its tendency exaggerate its military capabilities by targeting weak powers, were amply confirmed by the US’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003.¹³ The book was a bestseller among European audiences, and received an English translation within a year of its publication.

Between *The Final Fall* and *After the Empire*, Todd produced an impressive array of bold and original works that have continued to challenge *idées reçues* with regard to European social theory. The inner unity of this body of work can be said to rest on an anthropological constant, on an irreducibly cultural conception of human activity that is ultimately rooted in family-kinship structures. Its explanatory matrix is foundationalist, reductive, and teleological. In this respect, Todd’s work, anchored firmly in the social sciences, is quite unlike that of de Benoist,

¹¹ Critical responses have been conveniently collected in the 1990 edition of the book, *La Chute finale: essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1990). The review from *Libération* is amusingly entitled, “Ha! Ha!”.

¹² Todd makes the parallel between the Soviet and American cases obvious by giving *After the Empire* the same subtitle, “essai sur la décomposition du système américain.”

¹³ See preface to the American edition, *After the Empire: the Breakdown of the American Order*, trans. C. Jon Delogu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xvii.

Gauchet, and Debray, each of whom would call himself a philosopher, and take a measured distance from any such causally oriented, statistical outlook on the world (whereas Todd despises philosophy: “the only label I reject is that of philosopher; as for the rest I couldn’t care less”).¹⁴ And yet, for Todd, as for the others, human beings are defined by their propensity to believe and to belong, rather than their capacity to reason, to calculate, or to truck, barter and trade. For Todd, the key to the present is to be found in the deep, subterranean behavioral structures of the past, not in the flow of capital, or in the relations between states. Moreover, as France underwent its profound transformation in the late 1970s toward neo-liberalism, and away from the great ideologies of its past – Gaullism, Communism, and Catholicism – Todd more and more explicitly articulated the anthropological foundations (“*le fond anthropologique*”) of human behavior as a critique and alternative to liberalism’s view of the human being as a rational, self-interested agent (*homo aeconomicus*). Thus, we shall presently evaluate Todd’s work as a powerful provocation and alternative to the market paradigm that has overtaken French thinking in the last thirty years, stopping to consider along the way the potential lessons to be drawn and the potential limitations of this extraordinary body of work.

Todd is not simply a researcher at *l’Institut national d’études démographiques* (National Institute for Demographic Studies), his permanent post since the early 1980s, but also, like the other thinkers studied here, a public intellectual with a public profile. According to *Le Monde* at least, Todd’s voting pattern is newsworthy: “Emmanuel Todd, who was one of the inspirations behind Chirac’s focus on the issue of ‘fracture sociale’ during his presidential campaign, indicated that he ‘will happily and without qualms vote communist’ in an interview published in *L’Humanité* last Tuesday.”¹⁵ Similarly, one occasionally finds sentences of this sort in Todd’s

¹⁴ *Allah n’y est pour rien*, 40.

work: “The Prime Minister asked me to open the ‘Conférence sur l’emploi et revenus’ with a short speech.”¹⁶ Todd has also been aligned with some of the most influential French think tanks of the last thirty years. First and foremost, he was involved with the Fondation Saint-Simon, a liberal think-tank spearheaded in the early 1980s by the EHESS circle: François Furet, Pierre Rosanvallon, Pierre Nora, Marcel Gauchet, among others. In spite of the Fondation’s intention to be, in Furet’s words, “la moins engagée possible”, its lucid anti-totalitarian, pro-American-style liberal-democratic politics nevertheless helped provide the intellectual architecture of *la pensée unique* (i.e., the philosophy of neo-liberalism, coined by Alain de Benoist in 1993, picked up by *Le monde diplomatique* in 1995).¹⁷ Todd may perhaps be the best witness to this influence. In 1995 he wrote an article for the Fondation, “Aux origines du malaise politique français”, that made use of the concept of “fracture sociale”. The phrase appeared soon after in Chirac’s campaign rhetoric, and indeed became integral to his efforts to engage with the left in his bid for the presidency.

At this point, Todd’s politics were slowly undergoing a leftward move. In his own recounting, “At the time, I was a left anti-Maastrichtian, pretty radical, with an affection for the Communist Party,” and thus, “was pretty ashamed of what Chirac made of my ideas.” In 1998, Todd joined the Fondation Marc-Bloch, the national-republican answer to the Fondation Saint-Simon, this after becoming involved with a smaller republican organization founded by Régis Debray in 1992, Phares et Balises. Todd later broke with the national-republican crowd when “the defense of the nation minimized the gravity of the extreme right party’s rise to power in

¹⁵ “PCF: Emmanuel Todd, qui fut l’un des inspirateurs de la campagne présidentielle de Jacques Chirac indique qu’il votera ‘communiste’”, *Le Monde* (30 April 1997).

¹⁶ Emmanuel Todd, *Après la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 167.

¹⁷ Quoted in Laurent Vincent, “Enquête sur la Fondation Saint-Simon: les architectes du social-libéralisme,” *Le Monde diplomatique* (September 1998). For Benoist’s original usage, see “McCarthyisme: le retour,” *Éléments* 78 (September, 1993).

Austria, birthplace of Hitler!”¹⁸ Theoretically, or so Todd claimed, the national-republicans were unable to adequately distinguish between nation and state. With the leftward drift of Todd’s politics came an accompanying shift in the tone of his work to a much more polemical and critical amplitude. Few contemporary works can match the vitriol of Todd’s attack on neo-liberalism in *l’Illusion économique* (1998), or especially his savaging of the Sarkozy presidency in *Après la démocratie* (2008). Any *tentation radicale* that these works may exhibit is checked by a pro-protectionist stance against Europeanization – Todd’s most resolute and long-standing political position – and is offset by his involvement with Pierre Rosanvallon’s new project, “La République des idées”, a more loosely structured model of a think tank, devoted to “the refoundation of intellectual life in Europe and France.” Tellingly, Todd, in an interview from 2001, rated Marx as a thinker with a great amount of contemporary relevance, but then added, “on the other hand, it seems to me all the more urgent to read or reread Keynes on the moderate regulation of capitalism than it does to dive into the violently anticapitalist writings of the Marxist tradition.”¹⁹ Any push toward the extreme left in Todd’s work, it seems, is moderated by a latent commitment to Keynesian economic philosophy, and a methodological anti-marxism. Todd looked as if he might back Mélenchon in the presidential election of 2012, but in the end, put his weight behind Hollande, claiming that he could be France’s new Roosevelt.²⁰

¹⁸ Emmanuel Todd, “J’ai de quoi être honteux de ce que Chirac a fait de mes idées,” *Le Monde* (16 September 2001).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Emmanuel Todd, “Emmanuel Todd: ‘Hollande peut devenir le Roosevelt français,’” *L’Express* (3 July 2012). Viewed online, at http://lexpansion.lexpress.fr/economie/emmanuel-todd-hollande-peut-devenir-le-roosevelt-francais_285698.html. In 2011, Todd participated in a discussion with Jean-Luc Mélenchon on a television program, “Arret sur images”. It can be seen at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xi8jzz_melenchon-et-todd-la-rencontre-arretsimages-net_news

Reactions

The intellectual architecture of Todd's work is shaped by a Cold War mentality. From *The Final Fall* to *Après la démocratie*, Todd conceives a bi-polar world order dominated by a rivalry between megalithic empires – the United States in the West, Russia in the East (with hints at a rising China in *Après la démocratie*) – that essentially reduces less powerful actors on the world stage to client states of the major empires. Europe is especially vulnerable, as it is geographically, culturally, historically, torn between both poles of the world order. For Todd, and many other thinkers of his generation, including de Benoist (in *Europe, Tiers monde, même combat*), and Debray (in *Les Empires contre l'Europe*), the challenge is to envisage a French, or in some cases a European politics that overrides this tendency and preserves a sense of regional autonomy. From the appearance of *The Final Fall* in 1976 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, Todd consistently takes aim at the Soviet pole of the world order, and by extension, of communism as an ideology, and it is the United States that provides the necessary counterweight to this force in the world. In the post-Soviet years, Todd inverts the signifiers to criticize the American pole of dominance and its accompanying philosophy of unregulated, free-market capitalism, while offering a reconstructed, powerful Russia as a potential counterweight.

The Final Fall and Todd's second book, *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (1978) are best considered as companion volumes, though their subjects of analysis are respectively quite different. Methodologically, they predate Todd's systematic demographic/anthropological mapping of world ideologies that comes with the more technical and erudite works, *La Troisième planète* (1983) and *L'Enfance du monde* (1984); and thematically, they both reflect on the problem of totalitarianism. For my purposes, these works announce a critical trajectory that Todd shares with de Benoist, Gauchet, and Debray: a sense of exhaustion within the world of

French ideas by the late 70s, followed by a move to re-imagine, in anthropological terms, a new and systematic theory of political and social relations. This is not the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, with synchronic readings of myths and symbols; rather an evolutionist and humanist kind of cultural analysis (that the structuralist would have abhorred). A trademark of “the anthropological turn” is precisely the fusion of invariant, pan-historical claims about human nature with a theory of historical change. Ironically, Todd’s working sense of human nature – not fully articulated until the late 90s – would have a certain affinity with Lévi-Strauss’s: “the human being is the animal who wants to know.”²¹ From this innate curiosity would flow a historical development that will culminate in universal literacy and the advent of (universal) democratic peace. Todd’s Whiggishness puts him firmly in the liberal camp; his sympathy for popular revolts and immigrants, economic protectionism, not to mention his latter-day criticisms of US empire will put him on the Left of that camp. The unfolding of this system is of great interest.

The unarticulated problematic fundamental to all of Todd’s work, namely the relationship between ideology and an underlying demographic reality, appears for the first time in *The Final Fall*, where it is presented as the contradiction between a paralysis of Soviet politics and economics, and a process of demographic and cultural progress fermenting below the surface. Todd’s trust in the stubbornness of demographic data is a persistent feature of this and all subsequent works: “demography, a discipline whose variables have a great consistency and inertia – indeed the first and no doubt only true human *science* – ends up betraying communist

²¹ Emmanuel Todd, *l’Illusion économique: essai sur la stagnation des sociétés développées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 380. Recall, from the first pages of *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss’s injunction to take “primitive thought” seriously: “This thirst for objective knowledge is one of the most neglected aspects of thought of the people we call ‘primitive’. ... When we make the mistake of thinking that the Savage is governed solely by organic or economic needs, we forget that he levels the same reproach at us, and that to him his own desires for knowledge seems more balanced than ours.” *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 3.

systems.”²² For Todd, mental, rather than material capacities are the movers of history, and only through patient demographic analysis can one have rigorous scientific access to these cultural patterns. The hallmark of Todd’s later work will be to enlarge this project into nothing less than a global atlas of political and economic ideologies, all of which are rooted in a comparative anthropology of peasant family structures.

Le Fou et le prolétaire, Todd’s follow-up to *The Final Fall*, merits a place within the burgeoning “antitotalitarian” literature of the 1970s. In a strict sense, the “antitotalitarian moment” marked an intellectual turn of a particular sort, adeptly tracked in Michael Scott Christofferson’s essential *French Intellectuals Against the Left*: leftist intellectuals, drawing on the anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional, and direct-democratic spirit of 1968, turned against the PCF on the grounds that its politics were too Stalinist and authoritarian. Todd does not belong to this cohort of leftist converts. His ties to the Marxist Left were weak by this point, and his reaction to 68 was cooler than that of the left antitotalitarians (whose ranks included Claude Lefort, Jean-Marie Domenach, and André Glucksmann). Rather Todd might be fitted into a broader antitotalitarian impulse, whose roots lay outside the Marxist tradition in liberalism. Indeed, Raymond Aron, the doyen of post-war French liberalism, had linked communism to totalitarianism as early as the 1950s, but the concept failed to attract attention.²³ In the 1970s, however, this conception took on new life as the Common Program of the Left (uniting the Socialists and the Communists on a single platform) threatened to bring communists into government for the first time since 1947. The upshot was a united front against the specter of totalitarianism, which the anti-communist left saw “not as the product of social or historical conditions, a thesis that minimized the danger posed by the Union of the Left. Rather, they

²² Todd, *The Final Fall*, 20.

²³ Raymond Aron, *Démocratie et totalitarisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 282-299.

found the origins of totalitarianism in revolution, revolutionary projects and ideology, and the oligarchic tendencies of political parties ... These understandings of totalitarianism all served to highlight the danger of a totalitarian adventure in contemporary France.”²⁴ *Le Fou et le prolétaire* is entirely faithful to this program.

The frenzied and alarmist overtones of *Le Fou et le prolétaire* are premised on France’s deepening economic recession, exciting Todd’s historical imagination:

French political thought can now be reduced to an interrogation on the inroads of totalitarianism. Mentally, the economic crisis has taken hold of Europe. This economic depression leads naturally to a certain political, if not existential, pessimism. ... The crisis of 1929 engendered one of the most spectacular totalitarian systems, Nazism. It also favored the growth of other totalitarian movements, both fascist and communist. It is thus completely legitimate, in 1979, to ponder the possible consequences for liberty of an economic crisis that has lasted for more than four years, and shows no signs of coming to an end.²⁵

For Todd, a committed anti-materialist, totalitarianism is a mentality, and not the outcome of any social or economic conjuncture.²⁶ In fact, one of the critical aims of *Le Fou et le prolétaire* is to theoretically de-link the State from any necessary connection with totalitarianism, and resituate the discussion on a psycho-social plane: “I will attempt, in revisiting European history since the middle of the nineteenth century, to show that the State is not the motor of totalitarianism, but that certain statist perversions are, on the contrary, the effect of a social and mental disintegration.”²⁷ In other words, the State becomes schizophrenic only when it is hijacked by such people. Where is this organized madness to be found? Todd’s reply: “On a global scale,

²⁴ Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, 21.

²⁵ Emmanuel Todd, *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (Paris: Laffont, 1979), 29.

²⁶ Todd is downright scornful of the materialist position: “Seuls des penseurs ‘marxistes’ attardés et déments peuvent encore se forcer à interpréter la plongée de l’Allemagne de 1933 dans l’hystérie totalitaire comme un phénomène descriptible et compréhensible en termes de rapports économiques et de conflits de classes rationnels,” *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

communism remains the most important and spectacular totalitarian phenomenon. One cannot take away from it this glory, nor the privilege of ranking first among contemporary horrors ... In psychiatric terms, one could say that communism is a powerfully structured delirium.”²⁸ Thus any nation with a strong communist party is susceptible to totalitarian takeover, especially in times of crisis and instability.

The keynotes of antitotalitarianism are foundational to *Le Fou et le prolétaire*. Todd joins the others in liberating totalitarianism from social and historical conditions, redefining it as an ideological deviation, effectively ensuring that the threat of totalitarianism is always present. That it should in all cases (after the Second World War) be linked with communism aligns Todd with the political agenda of the antitotalitarians. His opposition to the Common Program is marked out on the first page of *Le Fou et le prolétaire*: “In the case of a victory for the Left, the invasion of the administrative and economic apparatus by stalwarts of the communist party or the CGT would have certainly presented a serious threat to the security of liberal institutions. In this sense, the defeat of the Common Program was – it must be said frankly – a prerequisite for the solution to today’s problems.”²⁹ This passage expresses something fundamental to *Le Fou et le prolétaire*: beneath the alarmism and the quasi-messianic indictment of communism runs a thread of cool optimism that sees a healthy future for France. At one point Todd exults, “For the first time in the history of France, four years after the onset of a global economic upheaval, nothing has happened. No strikes, no terrorism, no ideological subversion. Social discipline remains intact ... The country of 1793, 1848, 1871, the Dreyfus Affair, the Popular Front, the Algerian War is no longer worthy of its reputation!”³⁰ In Todd’s rationalization of France’s

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

improving fortunes we find, I argue, the groundwork for the anthropological turn that comes four years later with *La Troisième planète*. The point to recognize here is that Todd's later empire of demographic research has its origins in a political impulse. In effect, what happens in *Le Fou et le prolétaire* is that Todd, without explicitly articulating it, marshals his research on the family structures of peasant communities to illuminate a contemporary problem – a move that will be necessary for Todd's later linkage between modern ideologies and pre-modern family structures. Thus, from the rubble of economic and political despair, Todd pieces together a program for re-conceptualizing politics and ideology in anthropological terms.

In the pre-anthropological framework of *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, the explanatory paradigm is predominantly psycho-social. The argument, whose putative goal is to explain the character of inter-war European totalitarianisms and the sources for conflict of the First World War, proceeds roughly as follows. Totalitarianism occurs when psychotics – violent, competitive, disturbed individuals – take control of the state. This pathology is bred and socialized in the nineteenth-century classroom, where the State instituted a national educational curriculum that was morbid and authoritarian. In France, for example, “Under the Third Republic, pedagogic techniques produced a series of little robots, respectful of authority, sexually repressed, good soldiers, excellent workers, anxious, very inclined toward suicide.”³¹ This “maladie mentale” becomes insurrectionary only when inflamed by economic insecurity, a combination that is likely to afflict the petit-bourgeois class (the haute-bourgeoisie has the aggressiveness, but without any real sense of insecurity, while the uneducated proletariat and peasantry have the latter and not the former). The half century of political upheaval leading up to the Second World War was instigated by the aggressive instincts of an increasingly powerful

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

petite bourgeoisie: “Between 1900 and 1945 the inhibited and repressed bourgeoisie will transfer its overflowing anxiety into political action. It will produce nationalists, fascists, anarchists, Nazis, Bolsheviks, and communists.”³² Workers by contrast, were well integrated, both socially and psychologically, and seldom inclined toward suicide or fits of hysterical violence. World War I was fought as an “end in itself,” a Jüngerian “recherche de la mort,” and not as a rational struggle between classes or states.³³

After the Second World War, a chastened bourgeoisie returns to equilibrium, and the pendulum of revolutionary disaffection swings toward the proletariat, again, not because it holds any numerical or strategic advantage over other classes, but because it has absorbed the psychotic values of the pre-war petit-bourgeoisie. Education has opened its eyes to its precarious existence, and has stirred up a sense of roiling injustice. Seething with *ressentiment*, the proletariat, under the aegis of the PCF, embraces an aggressive and paranoid worldview, emblemized by the psychotic doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For Todd, such a doctrine makes sense only as false consciousness acting out: “Discontent for reasons that have little to do with the nature of the mode of production, the proletariat is prevented by its inhibitions from articulating the problems that it tends to express, obliquely, in the convenient language of Marxism. When a communist says, ‘the quality of life for the working class is threatened,’ it should be translated, ‘I feel cheated and threatened.’”³⁴ A major economic crisis of the order of 1973 might provide the spark that detonates the explosive *tentation totalitaire* into frenzied action. What is needed is an anti-psychiatry of the PCF, a massive deprogramming,

³² *Ibid.*, 111.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

even if “this would leave to their own making tens or hundreds of thousands of unhappy individuals.”³⁵

Now we come to the optimistic element of *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, and the germ of Todd’s future research. The map of petit-bourgeois aggression – the *elementum* of totalitarianism – is demarcated along national lines in Todd’s argument. Britain and Sweden, for example, fared comparatively well during the twentieth century, because unlike the continental trifecta of France, Germany, and Italy, they lack a strong petit-bourgeois tradition. In Britain, Todd’s standard for healthy, balanced development, the working class never inherited the mantle of petit-bourgeois values: in the early twentieth century, it was dominated by a well-organized aristocratic class of industrialists, not by a parvenu bourgeois class; its quality of life rose gradually, not in fits and starts; and after the War, its frustrations were absorbed into the culture of rock and roll. Britain’s national economy painlessly transitioned to a tertiary, post-industrial society, which for Todd, signals a move away from a punishing ethos of production and labor to a supple and relaxed economy of consumption. Where contemporaries see the decline of Britain’s economy, Todd sees the rise of a stable society, a healthy “*decrispation mentale*” in Britain. In Germany and Italy by contrast, the sharp rise in terrorism during the 1970s is ample evidence, for Todd, of a failure to make this transition and eliminate petty-bourgeois angst.

How does France make out in this narrative? It is well on its way to normalization *à l’anglaise*. For one, the PCF’s poor showing in the national election of 1974, at the onset of the long downturn and a spike in unemployment no less, signals a permanent reversal of communism’s fortunes in France, as does the necessity of forging a Common Program with the PS. When Todd rejoices in the defeat of the Common Program, it is to celebrate the prospect of a healthy, normal France, shorn of its destabilizing petty-bourgeois mentality. Todd anticipates a

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

complete disappearance of the PCF as an electoral presence by 2055, and maps the future recovery of France: “The ideological transformation is innervated by the slow renewal of generations. Certain experiences and traumas are not easily washed away. Only time, aging, and death can make for the disappearance of archaic habits, which are perishable at the level of the social, but indelible at the level of the individual.”³⁶ Ironically for Todd, who is cool toward May 68 in interviews and in later works, it is the libidinal revolution of 68 that is largely responsible for loosening the repressed, puritanical delirium of France’s lower and middle classes. For Todd, “the explosion of 1968 made of France a modern, appropriately relaxed country – liberated, in other words, from its “habitudes archaïques.”³⁷

Methodologically, *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, much like *The Final Fall*, is erratic, even improvised in places. The argument cycles through explanatory criteria at rapid clip: sociological criteria, namely rates of suicide and alcoholism, demographics, literacy, and economic policy all jostle for explanatory hegemony in this work. Yet its political conclusions are delivered with serene confidence and consistency. A more robust European State is necessary for moving Europe’s major economies toward post-industrial stability. France is in the midst of this transition and will need partners to shepherd its main rival, Germany, through it. On the national level, a strong interventionist state must act as a bulwark against the lethal combination of unemployment and communist recruitment, and should also promote “technological and cultural progress.” Finally, the disappearance of PCF is a necessary condition not only for a flourishing liberal-democracy, but also a rational, genuinely progressive Left to emerge. Clearly, we see a wobbly methodology lagging behind a resolute political program – not surprising in a work of transition. The rigorous typology of family structures with

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

their corresponding political and religious ideologies is only faintly legible in *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, where Todd struggles to anchor differences in national character in a substantive structure. One finds him havoring on this very question: “It would be wrong, however, to make of these differences of sensibility historical constants, or even ethnic, racial, and genetic ones. It is not a matter of immutable characteristics, but rather of a slow evolution of habits.”³⁸ On this matter, no like equivocation will be detectable in Todd’s subsequent works, where such traits are essentially immutable and constant as derivatives of family structure. In *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, family structures are tied to national character only fitfully and *en passant*, but they look ahead to Todd’s future work. He would look back on this book with some embarrassment in later years.³⁹

Family

Todd’s expansive research on the family constitutes his principal contribution to French thought. From *La Troisième planète* and onward, family structures operate as a first principle in Todd’s work, and provide a generative dynamic on which all social, political, and ideological arrangements are founded. This starting point owes much more to English than French traditions, and should be traced back to Todd’s doctoral work at Cambridge with Laslett. Laslett’s own demographic research on the family, as with his study of pre-industrial England, *The World We Have Lost* (1965), overlapped considerably with his work on the political theory of Locke and Filmer in the 1950s.⁴⁰ It would thus not be too much to suppose that the great

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁹ See Todd in *Les cahiers du communisme*, op. cit., 71.

⁴⁰ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost – Further Explored* (London: Routledge, 1988). In the preface, Laslett dates the conception of the book as 1959, the year before the publication of Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government* with Laslett’s extensive introduction and commentary.

stress Filmer placed on the relationship between family structure and social and political authority stimulated Laslett's ongoing interest in family life in England.⁴¹ One is hard-pressed to find this same emphasis in the French political tradition, where the political community, both during and after the Old Regime, was imagined as a break from, rather than extension of private relations. In the opening pages of *Du Contrat social*, Rousseau entertains the idea of the family as a model of social relations only to quickly dismiss it: "Thus, the children remain tied to the father only as long as they need him for survival. As soon as this ends, the natural tie dissolves." Likewise, for Tocqueville or Durkheim, family structure is always muted and surpassed by powerful, underlying social developments – democracy for the former, the division of labor for the latter. Montesquieu occasionally slips into the kinship-demography nexus in the latter third of *Lettres persanes*, especially with respect to China, which "has such a prodigious amount of people because of a certain manner of thinking: because children regard their fathers as gods, venerating them as such during their lifetime, honoring them after their death through sacrifices by which they believe their souls ... take on a new life; and so each family tends to increase, since it is so submissive in this life and the next." But this indeed only a slip, for in Montesquieu's congeries of an explanation for population growth – "la douceur du gouvernement", "des climats si heureux" being the foremost – family relations typically appear as a dependent variable, as in the "European vanity" which bred a system of primogeniture.⁴²

Todd's work on the family, even at its driest moments, rarely falls into the mind-numbing technicality normally encountered in studies of kinship. On the contrary, Todd's

⁴¹ See Laslett's introduction to John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 44.

⁴² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume III (Paris: Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la pléiade", 1964), 352; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 560; Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 128-130; Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 262-267.

buoyant prose, punctuated by a flair for definitive, sweeping conclusions makes for accessible, satisfying reading.⁴³ Between *Le Fou et le prolétaire* and *La Troisième planète* – Todd’s first and most classic work of anthropology, the one that “would be my roadmap for the rest of my career”⁴⁴ – Todd co-authored with demographer Hervé Le Bras a hybrid work of geography and anthropology, much in the tradition of André Siegfried’s *Tableau politique de la France de l’ouest* or Vidal de la Blache’s *Tableau de la géographie de la France, L’invention de la France* (1981). *L’Invention* proceeds by way of an ingenious use of morphological data, though principally marriage ages from the 1975 census, to account for the existence of ancient and stable family types that were difficult to establish with the demographic statistics. In this sense, their approach was “archaeological as much as anthropological,” their assumption being that “only the rural world of today can reveal the very deep differences, from one side of France to the other, in the structure of family households.”⁴⁵ A higher age of marriage would indicate the existence of an authoritarian-type family, as a longer stay in the parent’s household is the index of a greater submission to authority; a lower age assumes a certain independence in the children and becomes the hallmark of the nuclear family. From here, the authors posit a homology between different family types and the character of political society in diverse regions of France, suggesting that the correspondences are rooted in much older, unconscious structures. There follows an agglomeration of maps (hundreds, most of them uncited, as many critics have complained) that establish these correspondences across a wide number of variables (religion, political leanings, etc.). The conclusion, at any rate, is consistent with all of Todd’s subsequent work: France has

⁴³ This is especially true of Todd’s first two forays into kinship, *La Troisième planète*, and *L’Enfance du monde*, but perhaps less true of the dense *L’Invention de l’europe* – Todd’s most comprehensive, synthetic work on family structure.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Todd, *La Diversité du monde: structures familiales et modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 8.

⁴⁵ Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd, *L’invention de la France: atlas anthropologique et politique* (Paris: Pluriel, 1981), 30.

the great fortune of sustaining many different family types, whose productive tension contributes to the nation's greatness: "France is neither unitary nor bipolar. The opposition of north and south does not exhaust the diversity of its regional cultures." This anthropological quirk is the sure mark of France's "historical exception."⁴⁶

Only the slightest transposition would be required to move from the descriptive to the prescriptive: anthropological diversity is the harbinger of a liberal, tolerant politics. *L'Invention* identifies an underlying, core model of development for France that is naturally exclusive of extremist deviations, communism on the one hand, Le Pen's nativism on the other. The latter is given special attention in the book, as a potential pathology of that development. In the end, the authors reassure that anti-Semitism, in order to truly flourish, requires a countervailing myth of racial superiority, which France could never be capable of producing: "it is too diverse to cultivate this kind of movement." Indeed, "as long as diversity subsists in France, it will be condemned to tolerance."⁴⁷ We might here note the striking convergences with the work of Alain de Benoist, who was working through the same problem at the same moment: how to make the most of – i.e. build a politics out of – the profound anthropological diversity of France, without succumbing to the usual liberal or Marxist methods? For he, like Todd and Le Bras, would be captivated by the idea of regional differences, the ancient and natural-seeming disparities between the Breton and Picardian. Whereas both constructions would presuppose a certain degree of essentialism, Benoist took his in a very different direction, putting it in the service of an extreme-right intellectual agenda that appealed to a notion of cultural purity, and militated against any national unifying myth for France. Todd and Le Bras are interested in reconciling cultural diversity with liberal tolerance, yes, but also with the existence of a strong,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

centralized State, which gently, but necessarily presides over these different cultural zones. In this sense, “there exists a fortunate coincidence between its anthropology and administration.”⁴⁸

What Todd took away from his research for *l’Invention* would be long-lasting. First, it put him onto his signature correspondence theory of culture, all modern political and social arrangements being rooted in older anthropological patterns. Its axial logic is one of *mentalités*, of intellectual and ideological dispositions, only now with a much deeper theoretical mooring: “it is not impossible,” claims Todd, “but it is not easy to defeat anthropology.”⁴⁹ Second, it establishes the relation between culture and ideology as a process of unconscious retention or transmission. “Buried underneath the rational layers,” the authors rhapsodize, “exist hidden structures that silently determine attitudes and choices, be they economic or political.”⁵⁰ Todd will find it difficult to avoid psychoanalytic language in his work: this is a play of transferences, filiations, fraternal rivalries, and existential anxieties, all born of the family unit. Finally, *L’Invention* is where Todd puts to use a taxonomy of family structures that is essentially lifted from the work of the nineteenth-century social scientist and apostle of counter-enlightenment, Frédéric Le Play. The invocation of a specifically French and social-scientific figure was itself an intellectual strategy unique to French thinkers in this period, allowing them to circumvent the overwhelming Germanic influence of the Hegelo-Marxist tradition, and find some native soil in which to plant their political gardens. In 1980 Todd complained that even a sensible liberal like Aron could not be cured of this German deviation: “His work rejects Durkheim, passes over Tarde and Le Play only to vindicate Weber.”⁵¹ At the same moment, Furet would revisit

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Todd, “La vie intellectuelle française du Néant à l’Être,” *Le Débat* 4 (Sept. 1980), 84.

Tocqueville, Quinet, and Cochin; Debray would look to Comte and Leroi-Gourhan; Gauchet to Constant and Necker, and so on.

Todd's next work, *La Troisième planète* (1983), borrows some of the anthropological devices of *l'Invention*, but proceeds in an entirely new direction. We might first speculate as to why Todd elected to (1) continue on this anthro-historical trajectory, and (2) then reject some of the methodologies used in the work co-authored with Le Bras. On the first point, *l'Invention de la France* was seen as an important book at the time of its appearance, combining the patient demographic analysis of *Annales* with the cartographic emphasis of the earliest and best French political theory (and it was honored with a thirtieth-year republication by Gallimard in 2011). But more importantly, it confirmed Todd – still on waivers from *The Final Fall*, an impressive but mainly journalistic endeavor⁵² – as a serious social scientist, and put him in the orbit of Gallimard, with whom he would publish (like Gauchet and Debray) for the rest of his career. But also, if political science and economics had become the almost exclusive domain of marxism in the social sciences, why not branch out into less crowded, less controversial fields? Demography, cartography, anthropology: these were treasures of the national social-scientific tradition that were relatively untainted by ideological (read Marxist) agenda. So they became a useful means for exploring new layers of reality and of imaging social-political relations from a new point of view: “anthropology is only an instrument” he would later admit. Political science, in its current form, could not explain why communism appeared in certain place and not others. There had to be a way to get a handle on this.

No clear answer suggests itself to the second question. Le Bras and Todd had tapped into a new and exciting intellectual current that perhaps had not been perfectly realized with their

⁵² The same article from *Le Débat*, that is, before the publication of *L'Invention*, will list him as a “journalist and writer.”

book. It had obvious and substantial problems, and both authors would immediately develop different strands without fully adhering to its template. Le Bras's *Les trois France* (1986) adopted the developmental dynamics of center and periphery as suggested in *L'Invention*, and basically abandoned the kinship side of the work.⁵³ Todd did exactly the opposite: he grabbed hold of the familio-centric grid in *La troisième planète* (1983) and let everything else fall to the side (though the irony is that Todd will return to the center-periphery analysis in his most recent work – all in due time). For the reviewers of *L'Invention*, kinship patterns were the weakest points of the book, since they invited readers to ignore processes of socialization that were clearly at work in voting patterns and certain cultural affinities.⁵⁴ What did Todd do in response, but amplify these claims all around. Not only did he increase their explanatory weight, but he universalized them as well – an extraordinary gamble. Family type is no longer linked to locality in *La troisième planète*, nor strictly to marriage age as a metric. Instead, it is configured as an anterior logical type, a structure of human existence that plays out in a limited number of variations. An analytical tool of this sort could tackle ideology on a global scale, and this is exactly what *La troisième planète* sets out to achieve: “One might formulate a completely general hypothesis: everywhere, the ideological sphere is a form determined by family structure, a transposition to the level of the social the fundamental values that govern elementary human relations: liberty, equality, and their negation for example. To each family type corresponds one ideological type, and one only.”⁵⁵ Todd poses the relationship between family structure and ideology in the strictest possible terms, as a necessary, absolute connection. Of all the authors

⁵³ For this comparison I rely heavily on Hugue Lagrange and Sebastian Roche, “Types familiaux et géographie en France,” *Revue française de science politique* 38, 6 (1988): 941-964.

⁵⁴ Most devastatingly, see Jean-René Tréanton, “Faut-il exhumer Le Play? ou les héritiers abusifs,” *Revue française de sociologie* 25, 3 (1984): 458-483.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Todd, *La Troisième planète: structures familiales et systèmes idéologiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 26.

considered here, Todd will be the only to conceive ideology as a relatively straightforward correspondence between experience and thought, and to retain the pre-Marxian innocence of the concept – a departure from *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, which supposed something like “false consciousness” among the ranks of the blinkered communists. In Debray’s work for example, the relationship between the two is more diagonal, ideology being something like a second-order principle of cohesion whose deposits have crystallized in all social institutions. As such, ideology is eternal, rooted in nothing in particular, and often beyond the conscious grasp of individuals.

For Todd, ideology can be graphed as intersecting axes of liberty and equality. Each quadrant of the grid reflects the ideology of a given family structure, mediated, on the liberty axis, by the vertical relationship between father and son, and on the equality axis, by the horizontal relationship between siblings. The family type that tends to engender a sense of both equality and liberty is what Todd calls the “nuclear egalitarian family”, native to the Parisian Basin of France, Northern and Southern Italy, Central Spain, Greece, Romania, Poland, Ethiopia, and Latin America, where the equality between brothers is certified by customs of inheritance, and their liberty by the pressure of married sons to establish their own, independent households. For the quadrant demarcated by liberty and inequality there is the “absolute nuclear family.” Here, one finds a like pressure for filial independence, but the laws of succession, which are not precisely defined in this system, tend toward primogeniture, and thus to establish a sense of fraternal inequality. This type is common to the Anglo-Saxon world (England, U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), Holland, and Denmark.⁵⁶ As a bloc, the nuclear family features a strong individualist ethos, and maintains a clear distinction between civil society and the State,

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

making it “incapable of producing political and ideological forms of totalitarianism.”⁵⁷ The Anglo-American nuclear model corresponds to a liberal-democratic political tradition, in which there is a marked preference for a system of rotating elected officials, whereas the “egalitarian” variant oscillates between anarchy and militarism – its native sense of absolute equality being corrosive of order and authority. The disposition toward inequality of the Anglo-American model makes it susceptible to the kind of soft racism one finds in both countries throughout their respective histories, while the more Latinate tradition tends to be relatively blind toward difference.

In the quadrant where the two negative axes of inequality and authority intersect, we find the “authoritarian family”, native to Germany, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Bohemia, Scotland, Ireland, peripheral France, Northern Spain and Portugal, Japan, and Korea. In these regions, the inequality among brothers is defined strictly by laws of succession and transmission from the father, while married sons remain within the patriarchal household. From this matrix is born the ideologies of social-democracy and Catholicism, both of which feature a vertical vision of social relations, and a natural respect for bureaucracy and authority (the State for the former, the Church for the latter). The authoritarian family also gravitates toward dynastic politics, where, as in the case of Germany, Sweden, Japan, and Norway, the majority party almost never leaves office. Psychologically, its disinheritance of all but one of the sons generates a high mark of ambition among young men, who must create their own fortunes. The opposite pole of this dynamism is a neurosis or delirium inflamed by the two-pronged rivalry between brothers and between father and son, compounded by a punishing emphasis on individualism and discipline. When united with the other negative tendency of this family type, namely to seize violently on difference, its natural spirit of rivalry explodes into paroxysms of hate, producing, in cases where

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

the violent party is in the majority, the fascist and racist regimes of Germany and Japan, and in cases where it is in the minority, the terrorism of the Basques or the Quebecois. The verticality of social relations does reveal some advantages however, a principal one being a stronger transmission of values from one generation to the next. Thus education is likely to have more weight in authoritarian family types, in which children remain dependent on the parents.⁵⁸

We come, finally, to the fourth quadrant, where authority intersects with equality, and produces the “communitarian family”, native to Russia, Yugoslavia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, Albania, Central Italy, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Northern India. Equality is guaranteed by laws of inheritance in these societies, while married sons remain within the parental household. The dynamic produced by this family type is dangerously unstable since a band of equal brothers finds itself in conflict with a patriarchal figure: “it proclaims the abolition of paternal power and the autonomy of the couple. Across the world and throughout history, only the communitarian exogamous family arouses such a sentiment of hatred, such a will toward sociological murder.”⁵⁹ Exogamy is a decisive variable for the communitarian family insofar as it introduces a woman from a different family into the parental household, further destabilizing the relationship between generations. On the subject of communism, Todd proceeds with greater interpretive boldness, drafting a much more refined, descriptive account of this family type. Todd redefines communism as, “the transfer of the moral characteristics and regulatory mechanisms of the communitarian family to the Party-State.”⁶⁰ The communitarian family is the only type which abolishes the foundation of its social relations with the advent of modernity, only to reproduce them at state level.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

This hypothesis is quickly and inexplicably undermined when Todd, a few pages later, claims, “Anthropology is an explanation of communism, not a legitimation of it. Nowhere in the electoral history of the planet has a communist party ever attained 50% of the vote, not in Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, nor in Yugoslavia. Marxist-Leninist parties always establish control through an act of violence.”⁶¹ How can an ideology rooted strongly in a family type be invalidated by electoral results? Would this not directly contradict Todd’s assertion about the correspondence between family types and ideology? If the Russian people vote for Social-Democracy are they suddenly a people of the authoritarian family type? Moreover, hasn’t Todd just convinced us that the communitarian family is highly unstable and tends toward the violent elimination of its own basis, in which case the revolutionary trajectories of these regimes is perfectly comprehensible? Furthermore, aren’t electoral politics themselves conditioned by family structures? Todd’s impatience to “disprove” the legitimacy of communism seriously imperils his otherwise carefully constructed theory.

In addition to the four dominant family types outlined above, there are four others which Todd describes, all of them being variations on the dominant four. The most common is the communitarian endogamous family, whose cross-cousinate marriage pattern (usually the children of two brothers) strengthens solidarity along the horizontal axis. Indigenous to the Arab world and also to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, this family type is disposed religiously to Islam, politically to “socialism without a state.” In particular, it “recognizes two levels of integration: the family and the community of believers, the Umma. The ideas of nation, State, and party politics are imports.”⁶² Another variation on the communitarian endogamous family displays an asymmetrical preference for endogamy:

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 166.

between the children of sister and brother, rather than brother and brother. This model is native to Southern India, and its closed nature (based on endogamy), mixed with its practice of asymmetrical marriage tilts it toward a caste system in which only certain individuals are treated as equal and marriageable. Todd describes an “anomic” family type, in which equality between brothers is uncertain, cohabitation of married sons with their parents is discouraged in theory but accepted in practice, and consanguine marriages are frequent. This family structure is to be found in Southeast Asia and among the indigenous peoples of South America. Finally, there are the “African systems” of family, whose unstable domestic group, and practice of polygamy undermine fixed forms of religion and politics, and frustrate the rise toward literacy.

Only the crudest summary of Todd’s rich and ambitious project in *La Troisième planète* has been possible within the limited scope of the chapter. Lost here are the idiosyncratic variations of family types when subjected to different pressures, which Todd ingeniously uses to explain historical contingencies – why fascism developed in Italy, a country without an authoritarian family type, or why certain countries have socialism but not communism. As if the promise to supply a comprehensive atlas of world ideologies were not enough, Todd also provides new theories of communism (outlined above) and democratization. Tocqueville misunderstood the latter when he combined massification (the accession of the “couches populaires” to political consciousness) with democratic egalitarianism.⁶³ For Todd, only the former is a universal property of democratization; the latter may be variable. This idea, that democracies come in many different forms, not all of them strictly egalitarian in nature, will be fundamental to Todd’s teleology of democratic peace, developed in subsequent works. If one of the strengths of the book is the ambitious global reach of its conclusions, another is its accentuation of pre-modern social arrangements as the foundation of modern religious and

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.

political ideologies. With the latter, Todd can provide some explanation as to why homologous political and religious structures transcend the modern nation-state, and often show up on maps as sprawling regional archipelagos.

Two great weaknesses of Todd's family-based mapping of the world system immediately suggest themselves. First, *La Troisième planète* can reasonably be accused of presenting a deterministic outlook on patterns of belief. Certainly, Todd is deserving of plaudits for the sheer breadth and audacity of such a vision, which indeed suggests a number of connections and relationships that have never been as forcefully articulated. But as a recursive model, it is clearly too reductive. Even a sympathetic reader like Régis Debray was forced to acknowledge this determinism, writing of *La Troisième planète*: "These sorts of correspondences can rationalize synthesizing trains of thought leading in interesting and unpredictable directions. But they have their limits. (Recognizing such limits does not deny them their value.) Plainly, a monocausal explanation is no explanation at all."⁶⁴ Specialists have leveled the same complaint against Todd, one reviewer asking pointedly if one variable could reasonably explain something as complex as an entire people's system of values? It rather seems that family types become ideology-generators in Todd's work, "machines that produce social representations in an unconscious manner."⁶⁵ The other weakness is that family structure, "first principle" of Todd's anthropological work, is taken for granted by the author with virtually no attention to its historicity. It rather appears that the family archetypes have been plunked down arbitrarily. Why do certain family traditions emerge in certain places, and what justifies their existence as archetypes? At any rate, it is very difficult to believe that family structures are not (heavily) mediated by modes and forms of production. One sociologist contended that the "multiple

⁶⁴ Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 92.

⁶⁵ Lagrange and Roche, "Types familiaux et géographie en France," 945.

family household” assumed by Todd to have a kind of pan-historical permanence was “nothing more than a transitory form that occurred in the long cycle of peasant life.”⁶⁶ Production demands, in other words, shaped the formation of the family unit: not the reverse. Religion sometimes acts as the determining factor for Todd, as with Jews, who have their own family type. This problem has been acknowledged by Todd, who is presently at work on a magnum opus that promises to fill these lacunae, and provide greater relief for the historical origins of these archetypes.⁶⁷

The construction of Todd’s work will naturally tend to underestimate major socio-historical categories like nation, state, class, and empire – a refreshing feature to be sure, but also a frustrating one. His demographic-anthropological optic cannot account for why particular nation-states arise where they do. Why, in the Iberian peninsula for example, do Portugal and Spain become separate nation states if there is significant overlap between their family types? Likewise with Germany and Austria, who share a language? In one of the few of the commentaries on Todd’s work from the Anglo-American world, Tom Nairn, historian and theorist of nationalism, writes perspicaciously: “The back pages of that volume [*La Troisième planète*] contain two maps known to all toilers in the stony vineyards of nationalism theory, showing ‘Family Types’ in Europe and the world respectively. ... The trouble with the famous charts was always that they explained far too little: the family types only half coincide with the actual contrasts and borders of the modern globe, tantalizingly suggesting explanations rather

⁶⁶ Tréanton, “Faut-il exhumer Le Play? ou les héritiers abusifs,” 476.

⁶⁷ This objection is, however, very damaging to Todd’s theory. When Ernest Gellner claims that industrialization is the subject of modern history, and then demurs from explaining the reasons for or causes of its appearance, he is, in writing about an epochal, complex transformation, on firmer footing than Todd, who is writing not about an event on which everyone agrees, but on a structure he himself has imposed. “Industrialization” and “family structure” do not hold equal epistemic weight in this respect.

than providing usable ones.”⁶⁸ Nairn’s perception is essentially correct: Todd never confronts theoretically the logic of the nation-state system – a glaring absence in a system which pretends to explain the ensemble of modern political and social arrangements.

Finally, the most frustrating feature of Todd’s work – and the one critics have pointed to most often – is the improvised nature of the theoretical structure. There will be frequent accusations that Todd manipulates evidence and subtly modifies claims to avoid serious inconsistencies – charges that would seem to be true, as we will see below in greater detail. The prodigious use of maps makes it easier to stretch claims and deceive the reader; the selective use of dates as well. The problem can be traced to a tension between Todd’s anthropological determinism and his method: he wants on the one hand to have an elegant, monocausal theory, but at the same time to have it explain a wide range of complex phenomena with great sensitivity. So Todd – especially as he gets to be a more able and experienced researcher – is forced to tinker with his analytical instruments with each new study. *La nouvelle France* (1988) introduces, perhaps in response to the above criticisms, a typology of agricultural production systems that can be aligned with certain family types. In his next book, *l’Invention de l’europe* (not to be confused with *l’Invention de la France*), he is obliged to write in a footnote, “Here I seriously nuance the account I gave of the relations between family and agricultural systems in *La nouvelle France*.”⁶⁹ Theoretical consistency and explanatory precision will be difficult to reconcile in these instances. Todd is aware of this, as when he recalls: “It seemed very scandalous at the time to jump from one determinism to another, to avoid class belonging as an explanation only to fall upon family tradition.”⁷⁰ But even in adjusting for the determinism, his

⁶⁸ Tom Nairn, “Out of the Cage,” *The London Review of Books* (24 June 2004).

⁶⁹ Emmanuel Todd, *L’Invention de l’europe* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 79n.

explanations take on a Ptolemaic complexity, producing an atlas of world systems with so many different laws, codicils, and sub-rules as to defy easy comprehension.

History and Telos

Todd's early work on family structure poses a thoughtful and provocative challenge to the primacy accorded by liberal and Marxist narratives to the Industrial Revolution as the predominant cause of Europe's ascendancy in the world from the seventeenth century to the present. In fact, all the revolutions from this epoch – political, social, and economic – are the products of latent and anterior family structures.⁷¹ Todd's picture of historical causality is mapped out, albeit somewhat sketchily, in a theoretical excursus to *L'Enfance du monde*. Family structure sits atop this top-down grid as the a-historicized unmoved mover of all historical development. Over time, a rise in literacy for any given society combines with a rise in the age of marriage to produce a dramatic spike in “cultural advancement,” which will often in turn foment epoch-making political transformations.⁷² Thus, for Todd, as for his predecessor on this point, Lawrence Stone, the great European political revolutions, England of 1640, France of 1789, and Russia of 1917, arrived shortly after the male literacy rate crossed the 50% threshold. When the age of marriage is low, so the thinking goes, the years between birth and reproduction, the period during which man's opportunity to educate himself is the greatest, is usually insufficient to produce rapid cultural advancement.⁷³ But when significant cultural advancement does take place, the fruit it bears is always a democratic revolution, conceived in grand

⁷⁰ *La Diversité du monde*, 10.

⁷¹ Todd, *L'Enfance du monde*, 15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷³ Here, Todd is careful to note that there is no necessary causal relationship between high age of marriage and high rates of literacy, only a high rate statistical correlation. *Ibid.*, 31.

Tocquevillian fashion as an all-embracing and inevitable leveling force across society. In Todd's words, "Learning to read and write put within the reach of a majority of adult males the texts and ideological concepts, which in the context of traditional societies, had been reserved for a more or less restricted elite class. Mass literacy is, in a sense, democracy, equality before the written word."⁷⁴ Realized on a mass scale, literacy irreversibly transforms the mentality of a society, corroding the political and social authority of the ruling class, softening mores, raising the bar of civilization.

Alongside the revolution in literacy occurs a demographic transformation. Todd finds a strong statistical correlation between literacy and high life-expectancy rates, stronger than any correlation with socio-economic determinants.⁷⁵ With literacy come the yardsticks of civilization: hygiene and a general amelioration of sanitary conditions, which have the effect of dramatically lowering mortality rates. Mortality rates drop before birth rates have the opportunity to do so, thus producing, for a short time, a major population increase. This boom settles down once the effects of literacy – contraceptives, education – temper the otherwise increasing rate of births, and gives way to an overall rise in life expectancy as population growth slackens. This transition is a painful one according to Todd, as the initial population boom spirals a society into a demographic crisis of Malthusian proportions, and is resolved only when a desperate drive to increase agricultural production coincides with a fall in fertility rates.⁷⁶

Coming in last place in the sequence of modern revolutions is the economic one. Whereas Todd is somewhat inconsistent about the dependency of phase two on phase one throughout the text, he is unambiguous about the contingency of the third phase: "The economic

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

revolution, inseparably tied to the set of processes that bring one into modernity, is simply the last *dependent* variable to appear.”⁷⁷ The connection between the earlier phases of modernity and this necessarily dependent one are, however, more ambiguous. The only indicator of economic modernity supplied by Todd is a “rise in the quality of life”, expressed in terms of per capita income (*revenus par tête*). With low birth rates figured as a necessary component of demographic modernity, per capita income might easily rise without a tremendous growth in productivity. Moreover, the major signposts of economic modernity, from developments on the national, macro-economic plane, to transformations in the relations of production at ground level, are almost entirely missing from the *L’Enfance du monde*. “Capitalism” appears seldom, if at all. Todd might reply that he is less interested in the character of economic modernity than in the fact of its late arrival in a society’s development – likewise with the example of political revolution. It can take any number of forms, but it must happen at a certain moment.

As a rule, Todd sees the chronological succession of modern revolutions in differentialist terms, as programmed on a national scale, each nation having its own tempo of development. We also note the predictive dimension of *L’Enfance du monde* (as with most of Todd’s works), which is trying to map the laggard Third World’s prospects for realizing these benchmarks of civilization. On this point, Todd cheerfully concludes, “Though differential, the rise in the rate of literacy is universal. The current statistical projections allow us to foresee, in a not-too distant future, a completely literate world, that is, a world freed from ignorance. Such a situation will certainly allow for the resolution of the most pressing demographic and economic problems.”⁷⁸ Indeed, not only will the Third World catch up with the European world, it will make the entire transition from literacy to high per capita incomes in half the time it took the European states to

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

achieve it. In other words, Todd is articulating a world-historical teleological model generated by developments in literacy. It comes as no surprise that Todd invokes Hegel, Comte, Durkheim, and Condorcet at the beginning of *L'Enfance* – the great teleologically-minded liberal thinkers of the long nineteenth century.

Todd has, between *La Troisième planète* and its sequel volume, *L'Enfance du monde*, embarked on a massive undertaking that tests the limits of liberal and Marxist historiography, which places so much emphasis on economic processes – especially industrialization – as the touchstone of modernity. The anthropological move made by Todd in this work, as in virtually all of his posterior works, is an unusual one within liberalism, whose metaphysical picture of man is typically grounded in a Smithian conception of sympathy-cum-self-interest, or in a Millian notion of rational choice theory. Rather, Todd will remain a liberal in our consideration because of his faith in human progress and his positivist methodology – a Whiggishness with new analytical tools. With regard to the theory progress, Todd's thesis on the irreversible effects of literacy on the human mind – a transition that allows for a universal rise in individualism irrespective of family type – is a derivation that refers back to the liberal, progressive keynotes of the Enlightenment tradition. The doctrine has metaphysical colorings of course – i.e. man is the kind of being who excels under certain conditions – but its realization is ultimately historically contingent. As for positivism, Todd's serene confidence in the neutrality of demographic statistics, most insistently invoked in *The Final Fall*, places him securely within the canons of this tradition. The humanities are far too ideological for Todd's tastes.

The attempt to remap major philosophical systems along an anthropological axis is, as I have argued, a symptom of a conceptual paralysis that afflicted France in the 1970s. Todd's work is likewise a systematic and thoroughgoing re-imagining of politics, society, and culture

within an anthropological frame.⁷⁹ If we now look at the outcome of this anthropological turn, what kind of explanatory leverage does it give Todd? In a singular admission, Todd writes in the conclusion to *L'Enfance du monde*: “This model eliminates all recourse to the heavy conceptual arsenal of the traditional social sciences, which in general postulate the existence of abstract social actors that transcend the individual and bypass man in himself: society, nation, class, the economy, and the State are the transcendental aggregates most frequently used, but there are others as well. Man is to be defined not by his abstract rationality, but rather by a system of local and regional interpersonal relations, the core of which is constituted by the organization of the family.”⁸⁰ Thus, for Todd, family structures offer a more modest, empirical account of human interaction than the overly abstract, theoretical categories of the social sciences. History moves from the “bottom up” in Todd’s model, not from the “top down.” Herein lies an original feature of Todd’s work: a sweeping teleological vision of history in which nation, class, economy, and society, traditionally the privileged categories of great teleologies, are accorded secondary status.⁸¹ But this can also lead to problems.

If literacy constitutes an epochal transformation in the history of societies, upsetting old patterns of behavior and belief, heralding an age of equality and democracy, what guarantees that our political, social, and cultural arrangement will remain anchored in family structures?

⁷⁹ That Todd is selectively borrowing from the canons of anthropology, and not adopting it as his fundamental outlook, is plainly evident in his skepticism toward anthropology as a discipline: “Mais ici, le choix intellectuel [de l’anthropologie] découle de l’observations des faits et d’une acceptation des principes de base de l’empirisme. Sur le plan philosophique, je déplore la permanence des systèmes anthropologiques.” Todd, *La Diversité du monde*, 12.

⁸⁰ Todd, *L'Enfance du monde*, 217.

⁸¹ It is difficult to ignore a deterministic side to Todd’s thought. Todd deflects this criticism in the early anthropological works: “La famille joue dans cette interprétation le rôle d’infrastructure: elle détermine, au niveau des masses statistiques que sont les sociétés humaines sédentaires, les tempérament et systèmes idéologiques. Mais la famille, diverse dans ses formes, n’est elle-même déterminée par aucune nécessité, aucune logique, aucune rationalité,” *La Troisième planète*, 221. Looking back at fifteen years remove, Todd apparently changes his mind: “Nous vivions, au début des années quatre-vingt, le crépuscule du matérialisme historique. Il paraissait à beaucoup scandaleux de sauter d’un déterminisme dans un autre, de n’échapper à l’appartenance de classe que pour tomber dans la tradition familiale,” *La Diversité du monde*, 10.

Crossing the literacy threshold provokes a “psychological disorientation of population” – a “mental deracination” – that revolutionizes all aspects of life.⁸² But how and why are the social relations derived from family types able to weather this transformation without succumbing to extreme mutation or even disintegration? Moreover, are the principal ingredients of capitalist modernity – urbanization, industrialization, proletarianization – so derivative of the kinship-literacy dynamic as to have no reciprocal influence on these structures? Indeed, are Todd’s pre-modern family structures, even as unconscious archetypes, supple enough to accommodate the scale and rapidity of industrial and post-industrial change? It often seems as though Todd is trapped within an explanatory paradigm that was adopted initially as a way of comparing pre-modern societies, and was then seized upon precipitously in the late 1970s as a master-key that could unlock all ideologico-political mysteries.

The problem is as follows: either family structure is the generative principle that subsists behind all sociological and ideological forms, and remains so indefinitely, as Todd assumes; or, an irreversible, “threshold” event – i.e. literacy – fundamentally unsettles our fragile psychic equilibrium, and thrusts us headlong into modernity. One can have structure or history, but not both. As soon as one enters the terrain of “deracinement” or “atomization” – real historical changes in other words – the reliability of structures melts away. A brief look at three great European liberal thinkers might illuminate this point in contrast. Hannah Arendt, Ernest Gellner, and Elie Kedourie all write of a process of “pulverization” that accompanies modernity, through which “the bursting open of self-sufficient economies could not fail to bring about in those who

⁸² Todd, *After the Empire*, 27, 48.

were subject to this process a serious and distressing psychological strain.”⁸³ Once pulverized, a people becomes susceptible to new forms of social organization and new patterns of thought, so much so that within a couple of generations, most aspects of traditional society have often been completely erased. All of them are writing about nationalism, yet each understands the link between nationalism and pulverization in his or her own distinct terms: for Arendt, it is a political process allowing the nation to hijack the state, for Gellner, an economic-industrial process that atomizes a society, creating the need for a bureaucratic state, and for Kedourie, the upshot is intellectual, stimulating the spread of European ideas in Asia and Africa.⁸⁴ In all cases, once the threshold of modernity is crossed, pre-modern forms of sociality are unfixed from their moorings.

Of course, some pre-modern features of human life do cross the modernity threshold, most notably religion. Does family structure, however, have the same ontological status as religion? For some thinkers, like Freud, it clearly does. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the family is the scene of a primordial, harrowing psycho-drama from which all subsequent human (mental) history unfolds, including the history of religion, in which God clearly acts as a substitute for the father.⁸⁵ Todd, however, resists embracing a view human nature which is too biased toward the irrational, be it atavistic urges of a Freudian sort, or primordial needs of a Feuerbachian variety. Todd’s construction is, after all, an empirical, rather than a theoretical one: the family is the cradle of our worldly experience, and not so much a primordial, existential

⁸³ Elie Kedourie, ed, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 25. See also, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego; New York: Harcourt, 1968), 231; and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 63.

⁸⁴ For Gellner, there can be “obstacles to entropy”, but in order to qualify as such they must be characteristics that are unevenly dispersed through society, like skin color. Family structures would thus not qualify. *Nations and Nationalism*, 64. See also Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 168.

⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 92-93.

attachment. There is, nevertheless, a temptation to take the atavist route in Todd's work. He loves to remark, especially recently, at how the original, pre-historic family type was today's nuclear family: "At the deepest recesses of historical time, we simply find the present."⁸⁶ From here, it would be easy to argue, normatively, for a return to humankind's original disposition. But this would clearly be fatal for Todd's theory, however, since such a view is impossible to reconcile with an optimistic teleology. Liberal thinkers who have laid great stress on atavisms, namely Joseph Schumpeter and Thorstein Veblen, have greeted them as unwelcome, dangerous obstructions to modern progress.⁸⁷ It takes a thinker of Nietzsche's stamp, or of one of his right-wing followers like de Benoist, to embrace atavisms as a positive signifier; but of course, this is always constituted as "return", and never as progress.

The nineteenth century was unusually preoccupied with the role of the family in the social order, probably because this role had changed so quickly as a result of the industrial revolution. The Germanic tradition, especially with Hegel and Marx, considered the family to be an institution integral to "bourgeois civil society", the sphere of private social relations that developed beneath and against the State. For Marx, in fact, civil society "has as its premises and basis the simple family and the multiple, the so-called tribe."⁸⁸ Famously, *The Communist Manifesto* called for the "abolition of the family", which had already been accomplished within the proletariat, and would be imminent within the bourgeoisie, where the family existed only for private gain. Thus, only at an early stage of bourgeois civil society did the family exert a tangible influence on social relations, after which it was rendered subordinate to the imperatives

⁸⁶ Emmanuel Todd, *L'origine des systèmes familiaux, vol. I: Eurasia* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 41.

⁸⁷ Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, trans. Heinz Norden (Cleveland; New York, Meridian Books, 1965), 65. "Imperialism is thus atavistic in character." See also, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover, 1994).

⁸⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Christopher John Arthur (New York: International Publishers Co., 1970), 57.

of capital, and ultimately evanescent. Marx had planned to write a study of American anthropologist Lewis Morgan's matrilineal theory of the origins of human society, which propounded the existence of stateless primitive societies organized around communal property. If Marx had bigger plans for modeling communist society around an originary anthropological arrangement, they can only be patched together through his rough notes on Morgan collected in *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, and Engels' interpolation of these reflections in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884).⁸⁹

Todd's work on the family is in plain defiance of the Germanic model. Rather, its inspiration harkens back to the work of a deeply conservative, Catholic thinker, Frédéric Le Play, one of the few important thinkers in France to have treated the family as a category of the first priority. Whereas the Hegelian-Marxist line had anticipated the withering away of the family within the dynamic relationship between civil society and the State, Le Play saw the family as constituting a more durable pattern of social relations, which could in fact act as a bulwark against the forces of industrialization. In his massive six-volume study, *Les ouvriers européens*, Le Play strings together an astonishing 36 monographs, cataloguing, with statistical rigor, "the jobs, domestic life, and moral conditions of the working populations" across Europe.⁹⁰ Conceived in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, which had horrified Le Play, *Les ouvriers* is designed to show how and under what conditions the working classes of Europe would remain satisfied and docile. With steady work and some guarantee of future stability, the welfare of the working class would be secure. In the absence of these bare necessities, however, society would

⁸⁹ See Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, transcribed and edited by Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972). See also Kevin B. Anderson's illuminating study of these texts, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁹⁰ Le Play quoted in Maguelone Nouvel, *Frédéric Le Play: Une réforme sociale sous le Second Empire* (Paris: Economica, 2009), 49.

have to call upon “protective institutions” – i.e. the family and *le patronage* (church-led attempts to help the poor) – as moral counterweights to the lure of revolution. Should the economy sag, “The resulting decline in the workers’ welfare could be compensated by the advantages stemming from institutions that complement one another, the Decalogue and the family.”⁹¹ For Le Play, no country better illustrated the necessity of strong moral institutions than France, which at the moment of its economic liberalization in the nineteenth century had foolishly looked after liberties instead of protecting the social order from imminent chaos.

Though Todd in no sense agrees politically with Le Play, and purges all vestiges of paternalism and moral judgments from his own family-based atlas, there is no escaping that Todd’s fundamental understanding of the family shares a deep affinity with Le Play’s. For one, they shared a mutual antipathy to Marxist understandings of social relations, to which the system of family structures offered a sensible alternative. Naturally, claimed one critic, “those who prefer class struggles to ‘family quarrels’ will see these ideas as outdated and politically reactionary.”⁹² We also do well to recall the inspiration behind Todd’s social scientific work, namely that political science in its present state could not account for the emergence of communism in certain places. As he would say years later, “The map of communism, at its apogee, strikingly resembled that of a certain type of family system.” In very different ways then, the work of both thinkers seeks to delegitimize political revolution: Todd by over-normalizing it (i.e., communitarian family-types will tend to produce revolution); Le Play, inversely, by stigmatizing it as aberrant (i.e., social protest is the breakdown of the family order). The role of the father, so to speak, becomes eternal for both, a first principle, whereas the

⁹¹ Frédéric Le Play, *Les ouvriers européens*, vol. III (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1877), xvii.

⁹² Claudette Savonnet-Guyot, “La force du destin: anthropologie et politique,” *Revue française de science politique* 33, 4 (1983), 730.

relations of production – which might develop outside the household – are always accorded a dependent role. As a consequence, “the social” is robbed of complexity. Indeed, Henri Mendras, the doyen of French demographic studies, once charged that Todd has no working sense of “the social”, that it is more or less herded under the canopy of the family with little respect for its inner workings.⁹³ It could be said – without being too deterministic – that such neglect is one possible legacy of the *Annales* tradition in France. Its foundations were, as Jacques Revel has shown, in Mauss’s anthropology, and its explanatory tendencies were, even where statistically oriented, culturalist. “Collective mentalities,” “the social imaginary,” “sensibilities”: these were the privileged and persistent categories of *Annales*, here too constructed as an alternative to Marxist sociology (of the relations of production). The anthropological turn has, as I have argued, very deep roots in France.

These objections aside, Todd’s global conjecture presents an honorable attempt to apprehend the world in its diversity. Against the common tendency to assume one capitalism, one industrialization, one state, one communism, Todd proposes a plurality of models for each category, all based on different family structures. Empirically, Todd’s claim for diversity is well founded, as different nations have industrialized in different ways, Soviet communism had little in common with its Cuban counterpart, and Japan and America do seem to have different conceptions of capitalism. The question that arises is not so much whether this diversity is rooted in the anthropology of the family – though this question must be posed to Todd – but whether one can gloss over the monolithic, unitary structures that seem to link world-historical developments, not to mention the increased traffic between different peoples since the advent of the industrial era. War, conquest, immigration, capitalism (as a global development) are

⁹³ Henri Mendras, “Untitled Review”, *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul. – Sep., 1984): 484-489. Mendras is considerably warmer toward Todd’s theories in *La seconde révolution française, 1965-1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

conspicuous lacunae in Todd's work. This *oeuvre* excels in rendering sharp and original readings of socio-political developments in single national contexts, *La nouvelle france* (1988) being a prime example. And yet, though it does feature a chapter on immigration in France, it scarcely mentions any of France's twentieth-century wars, this including the two world wars. "Vichy" does not even appear in the index of the English translation. Todd appears to have sensed this inadequacy, as the next phase of his work will address more frontally the problems of immigration, empire, and trade.

American Dilemmas

One gets the sense that Todd was aware of the deficiencies of his anthropological work, and wrote his next four books with an aim to redress these systemic oversights. As each work tries to accommodate unregistered developments – immigration, globalization – within his family-based system, one wonders to what extent the theory retains its intelligibility after so much taxation. All of these works, save perhaps the first, *L'invention de l'europe*, are written with a different temper than the earlier ones. The Maastricht Treaty, the election of Chirac in 1995, and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower radicalized Todd's perspective. *Le destin des immigrés* (1994) is both an accommodation of the empirics of immigration into his family-based system, and also a deflation of the myth of multiculturalism in America. Todd argues that true diversity must be measured not by the proportion of diverse people in a society, but rather by the rates of intermarriage between different races or ethnicities. Only with the latter, which touches on sensitive questions of miscegenation and interracial taboos, can one apprehend a culture's proper racial imaginary. England and the United States, two countries widely extolled for their multiculturalist ethos, betray a racist, inegalitarian attitude toward non-whites, while

France, disparaged universally for the intolerance of its political culture during the 1980s and 90s, shows itself to be the most tolerant, boasting the highest rates of exogamy among immigrants.⁹⁴

What little Todd says of the United States in *La Troisième planète* foreshadows his position in *Le destin des immigrés*: America shows neither the murderous hostility characteristic of the *famille souche* toward the Other (i.e. Germany), nor his/her universal acceptance by the nuclear egalitarian family (i.e. France), but a racism more reminiscent of Apartheid – a refusal of equal status with no accompanying drive for extermination.⁹⁵ How does Todd reconcile this claim with the United States’ undeniable racial diversity? As with all families of the absolute nuclear type, which presume a necessary inequality between brothers, the white Anglo-Saxons of America are inclined to see difference as absolute, with the result that historically, Native Americans, Blacks, and Chinese were seen as absolutely Other, while white immigrants from Italy, Poland, and Germany were accorded equal status, and assimilated with relative ease. Todd’s next step is a necessary one, in that he is required to explain how the United States eventually comes to accept immigrants of Asian descent as equal and pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but it stands out as a dubious one within the constraints of his system. He argues, “The emergence of the concept of equality *at the conscious level* introduces a dynamic element into the mental and cultural system. Egalitarianism seems to require extension, by virtue of the autonomous play of thought and conscious political action, to all men, without distinction of race.”⁹⁶ In effect, Todd admits that ideas have a certain autonomous dynamic that allows a

⁹⁴ Emmanuel Todd, *Le destin des immigrés: assimilation et ségrégation dans les démocraties occidentales* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 12.

⁹⁵ *Troisième planète*, 149; *Destin des immigrés*,

⁹⁶ *Destin des immigrés*, 93.

mentalité to bypass the constraints of familial determinations – something he is loath to do elsewhere his work. For instance, Todd’s case study of France, *La nouvelle France*, goes to great lengths to show how each specific religious or political ideology is rooted in a particular family dynamic. What accounts for this apparent discrepancy?

What is distinctive about America is of course its newness, its post-feudal origins – a circumstance which might be expected to frustrate a pre-modern, agrarian-based typology such as Todd’s. Any arguments about the deep structures of habit and patterns of thought are going to be de facto less convincing when applied to the founding sect of Puritans, who were a deracinated community of exiles, possessing an almost absolute degree of political and religious uniformity. And yet Todd carries forth with the argument, in contempt of the main current of historiography, which has placed great explanatory weight on the political theory of the Puritans. However, Todd, like those before him, Tocqueville, Chateaubriand, or Baudrillard, is compelled to acknowledge the indomitable spirit of democracy and equality embodied by the United States, which could not possibly stem from the absolute nuclear family type. Hence the conscious force of democracy, which is external to this family type, acts as a kind of *deus ex machina*, pushing America slowly away from its racial tendencies toward a more tolerant society.⁹⁷ This “autonomous dynamic” of egalitarianism begins to take definitive shape amidst the late nineteenth-century surge in immigration to America, long after the transition to modernity (when democratization is supposed to take place for Todd), and is responsible for the inclusion of Native Americans and Asian immigrants into the dominant White society. But the process of egalitarianism can never be totally complete, as the White cultural unconscious will always require an Other to satisfy its root differentialism. The scapegoat has always been and remains

⁹⁷ This nebulous force of universalism becomes a familiar prop in Todd’s subsequent work, where one finds phrases like the following: “This interpretation would imply the existence of an independent egalitarian force that would hold the principle of equality to be intrinsically superior to the principle of inequality,” *After the Empire*, 108.

the African American. The contrast, as usual, is France, where the natural profundity of family types protects it from bipolar division of the Anglo or American sort.⁹⁸

The post-Soviet era politicized Todd to the Left. The tenor of *The Final Fall* and *Le Fou et le prolétaire* dovetailed with the anti-totalitarian climate of the 1970s, and placed Todd in the company of France's most strident liberal – Furet, Olivier Todd, Jean-François Revel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Marcel Gauchet. Even if Todd's cultural politics were liberal in their sense (that is, anti-communist and pro-democratic), his economic position had always been protectionist, and hence skeptical of the above cheerleaders of Atlanticism. In the mid 1990s, when the conservative Jacques Chirac replaced the Socialist Mitterrand and the formerly dispersed Left began to galvanize as a single voice, the pro-Statist, protectionist side of Todd's thinking became more fully defined. Todd joined ranks with the republicans in the 1990s, both intellectually, with *l'Illusion économique*, and politically, as a member of the Fondation Marc-Bloch and Phares et Balises. As Régis Debray had pointedly argued twenty years earlier in his left-republican manifesto, *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire*, class struggle and the nation had always been allies in France. And so it was for Todd in the 90s, writing, “The word Republic, which is but the name of the left for the nation, is once more at the heart of our political vocabulary.”⁹⁹ His skepticism with regard to democracy, especially its American instantiation, is of a piece with this tradition-wide move toward republicanism.

L'Illusion économique (1998) and *After the Empire* (2002) track the post-Soviet ascendancy of the United States as the world's sole superpower, and deftly outline the

⁹⁸ *Destin*, 94, 227.

⁹⁹ Debray's claims may be found in *Mai 68: une contre-révolution réussie* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2008); *L'Illusion économique*, 294.

international order in which it takes place. Both texts were greeted with hostility by France's centrist-liberal establishment. *L'illusion économique* addresses the consequences of a world-wide move toward free-market systems in this period. By the mid-1990s, France found itself at the center of a harrowing tug-of-war between two capitalisms with two different social models: one was Anglo-American and rooted in the nuclear family type. It produced an open, associative civil society with a free-trade-oriented economic policy. The other was a Japanese-German style capitalism – a product of the stem family – generating a closed, corporative social paradigm with a protectionist view of trade.¹⁰⁰ France happened to be vulnerable at the very moment that American hegemony had begun to assert itself in new ways in the 90s. Its social model was rotting from the inside, and here Todd has recourse to some of the sociological categories that his earlier work had tried to avoid. Atomization, social fragmentation, the breakdown of the “lien social” in short: these were now realities in France. The principal culprit was an underlying shift in education patterns, which accelerated social inequalities and helped, in the long run, to destroy France's “great ideologies” – Communism, Gaullism, and Catholicism, all of which “had functioned to unify the body social.”¹⁰¹

Without this ideological bulwark, France was all too susceptible to imported ideas, which in this case latched onto the two dominant family patterns in the country: “Drawn toward the individualism of the center's anthropological system, French elites looked for solutions in Anglo-Saxon individualism; pushed toward the discipline of the peripheral stem family system, they looked to Germany for economic answers.”¹⁰² France had, like so many other countries on

¹⁰⁰ *L'illusion économique*, 100-101.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 322. Todd joins Benoist, Debray, and Gauchet in decrying the decline of these ideologies, which takes shape definitively in the 1970s. All of them subscribe at some level to a view of social solidarity, or at least the ‘lien social’ that harkens back to Durkheim and his followers.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 268.

the map, succumbed to bipolarity, and lost the productive tension – its claim to exception – of the quaternary family model. Its politics had become depressed, swinging moodily from “la pensée unique” (dubbed here “la pensée zero,” which for Todd, substituted money for the gods of defunct ideologies) to provincial particularisms like Le Pen’s National Front. Fearing that either might take over, Todd pleaded for “the return of conflict and beliefs,” which included a strong defense of the nation-state, and a stirring call to protectionism.

Le Débat hosted a forum on *l’Illusion économique*, where it came in for a drubbing by the center right. All of the participants objected to Todd’s selective use (and misuse) of economic data. Had he looked at the key trade statistics, one of them charge, he would have seen that economic development and policy conform to set models (and at the very least are caught up in intra-regional dynamics).¹⁰³ Another hit back with the claim that there is and can be only one capitalism, since it is above all a system of businesses, which “are fundamentally productive and export-oriented at no-matter what latitude.”¹⁰⁴ Besides, what Todd saw as one country’s preference for consumption over production had only to do with the banking system and the availability of credit, and indicated little about cultural attitudes. They also found Todd’s analysis of US hegemony to be exaggerated beyond belief: “to consider American culture to be regressive and its economic future to be compromised, this is truly lacking in sobriety.”¹⁰⁵ To be fair, this was 1998 (and not 2003 or 2009), a moment of unrivaled US supremacy that might have looked ahead to a *pax americana*. It is a tribute to Todd’s perspicacity that he was able to see decline in the offing.

¹⁰³ Élie Cohen, “Une nouvelle pensée,” *Le Débat* 101 (Sept.-Oct. 1998), 107-108.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Luc Gréau, “L’économie n’est pas une illusion,” *Le Débat* 101 (Sept.-Oct. 1998), 112.

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, 106.

What was marked only as a haunting potentiality is acknowledged as a bleak reality three years later in *After the Empire*: the uncontested reign of US capitalism, now taking on imperial dimensions. Todd's Whiggish anthropological narrative will be overpowered by grim forecasts of a regression-generating US imperium, helping the Western democracies lapse into oligarchies, and debtor nations to stagnate, crippled by hefty payments of tribute to the American consumption machine. During the Cold War, the United States could legitimately claim to ensure the well-being of most of the planet according to Todd, and this was amply borne out by unprecedented rates of economic growth throughout the world from 1950 to 1975. And yet, with the onset of global recession in 1979 and the concomitant move toward the deregulation of international trade, the world market experienced a steep fall off in demand, which the United States attempted to off-set by ramping up consumption. From this point, the United States more or less drifted into empire after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. Domestically, the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s and 90s dramatically accelerated economic inequality within American society, creating an "imperial overclass" analogous to the Roman plutocracy under the Empire. Egalitarian, universalist societies do not usually submit to imperial temptation. On the international scale, with the disappearance of the Soviet military menace, the rest of the world found itself financing American consumption – witness the exponential growth of trade deficits from 1989 onward – without benefiting from the once necessary military protection of the United States. This, referred to by Todd as an "imperial levy", is another prerequisite for empire (with specific reference to the *phoros* of classical Athens).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ If *After the Empire* compares favorably to its rivals in contextualizing US imperialism within the post-war global order, it does not always do so with respect to a comparative typology of empires, which are limited here to the distant models of Greece and Rome. For more persuasive accounts, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London; New York: Verso, 2003); Giovanni Arrighi, *Geometry of Imperialism: The Limits of Hobson's Paradigm*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1978) and *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London; New York: Verso, 1994); and Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

The economic asymmetries of the US-dominated global market were unsustainable in the long run according to Todd. Contrary to the assertions of establishment-minded liberal economists, capital seeks not the most profitable investments, but rather the most secure ones. Time was when the United States, as “*the* monetary and military leader”, guaranteed the safest return on investment. Yet, once the US entered its vampiric stage – over-consumption and under-production – and the massive capitalization of the stock market no longer corresponded to the real growth of the economy, one was forced to acknowledge that “the money traveling to the United States is literally traveling to a mirage and not the true oasis that many took it for.” One likely outcome would be “a stock market crash larger than any we have experienced thus far that will be followed by the meltdown of the dollar.” With or without this calamity, states and investors will likely interpret the growing inegalitarian tendencies of American society as a warning signal. According to Todd, “The United States must win the periphery’s allegiance through its universalism – by its words as much as by its economic deeds – to the idea that ‘we are all Americans.’ But rather than feeling more and more American, we non-Americans are increasingly being treated as second-class citizens because, unfortunately for the rest of the world, a decline in universalism has become the central ideological tendency of America today.”¹⁰⁷ Ideologically unattractive to the rest of the world, the United States will find it increasingly difficult to compel allegiance, and exact its imperial levy.

Todd provocatively contends that the US is weak militarily. Though undeniably stronger in the air and on the sea, its ground forces are insufficient to corral regions of geo-strategic and economic importance, whose resources are necessary for the day-to-day existence of the US. A far-sighted, responsible ruling class might have taken stock of its country’s disastrous course,

¹⁰⁷ All quotes here taken from *After the Empire*, 96-99.

and adopted measures to stave off a coming crisis – protectionism, combined with new energy policies are Todd’s first recommendations. In this case, the US might have remained a “leading nation”, a kind of *primus inter pares*, instead of an empire – conceptualized by Todd as “*the state of the entire planet*”, a supra-national Leviathan, presiding over the state system. The bleary-eyed Washington leaders were, however, only partially aware of the geo-political conjuncture when they chose empire: “It is not the result of a strongly willed plan but instead presented itself to American leaders as the easy way out. It is a product of circumstances. The collapse of the Soviet system, while offering the momentary illusion of absolute power, led to the dream of establishing a stable, global hegemony.”¹⁰⁸ This imperial drift occurred around 1995-1996, after which the US committed its military to defending economic interests abroad through a series of asymmetrical military threats, in effect bullying the smaller nations of the Middle East and Korea, while circumventing conflicts with the more evenly-matched powers of China and Russia.

After the Empire, a bestseller in France, was almost universally maligned by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Crude anti-Americanism was the usually the charge, though Todd has insisted in interviews that he is a conjunctural, not a structural anti-American. Tony Judt used Todd’s work to illustrate the banality of contemporary anti-Americanism – “the master narrative of the age” – as did Peter Baldwin, trying to reduce the perceived differences between Europe and America. These responses were typical in that they mocked the argument instead of giving it a fair hearing: Todd, for them, was “a mad scientist,” “a French prophet of collapse,” and “something of the Ancient Mariner.”¹⁰⁹ Soberer replies were no less shrill, a reviewer from the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 123, 125.

¹⁰⁹ Tony Judt, “A New Master Narrative? Reflections on Contemporary Anti-Americanism,” in Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne, eds. *With Us or Against Us: Studies in Global Anti-Americanism* (London: Palgrave, 2005), 11, 23; Peter

US-friendly *L'Esprit* dribbling on for pages about the anti-American clichés to be found in the book (that “Russian communism defeated the German Nazis,” and not the Americans, etc.).¹¹⁰ What they all miss is Todd’s underlying positive valuation of the US (or at the very least its ambiguous stance). After all, it had played a salutary role as the world hegemon from 1950 and 1975 in Todd’s estimation, ensuring, for example, a smooth transition to liberal-democracy for Japan and Germany. This view – itself a long-standing cliché – is never challenged by the author, though there is ample evidence to suggest that the US had not only colluded with both governments in suppressing labor unrest in the 40s and 50s, but also had tried to block German and Japanese manufacturers from taking a greater share of the market in the same period.¹¹¹ His claims about the US being a weak military power will seem strained, especially after the leveling of Baghdad in 2003, and the introduction of drone strikes across the Middle East under the Obama administration.

While Todd’s report is hardly favorable, it assumes that the US could terminate its imperialist ambitions and reprise its role as a “leading nation” in the world, enforcing “the establishment and stabilization of liberal democracy.”¹¹² Todd’s teleology of literacy is a subtext of *After the Empire*, as it is of all his works. On this level, the book is meant to reassure: “If one assumes that the process is likely to accelerate, we can imagine that among the younger generations universal literacy will be achieved by 2030.”¹¹³ This law, rooted in human curiosity,

Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe Are Alike* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

¹¹⁰ Justin Vaïsse, “Ni Todd, ni Revel: pour un regard lucide sur les Etats-Unis,” *L'Esprit* (February 2004), 210-211.

¹¹¹ See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 46-49.

¹¹² *After the Empire*, 128, 54. Similarly, “What the world needs is not that America disappear but that it return to its true self – democratic, liberal, and productive,” 199.

is the banner which prevents the world system from sliding too far off course. In this respect, he is very close to Fukuyama and his well-known thesis on the end of history, which Todd criticizes for privileging economic factors (even though the theory has nothing to do with economic determinants, based as it is on a Hegelian struggle for recognition). In any event, there are real differences between their whiggish theories. Todd's version is premised on access to literacy, which eventually has to become universal, Fukuyama's on our human propensity to assert our freedom and be treated "like adults rather than children," conditions satisfied only by liberal-democratic systems.¹¹⁴ In Todd's case, how serious a threat could the US empire pose to the ineluctable march of history? There is nothing structural or necessary about the American imperium, which is not surprising as there is little room in Todd's system for these kinds trans- or inter-national dynamics. Fundamentally, it begins with a patchwork of local family structures, and then builds outwards.

Todd's other conclusion is more unexpected and likely to have excited (and perhaps flummoxed) its European readers. Surveying the international balance of power, Todd claims that Europe's interests are now fundamentally at odds with those of the US. As he puts it, "Unlike the United States, Europe has no particular problems with the outside world. It has normal commercial relations with the rest of the planet, buying the raw materials and energy that it needs and paying for these imports with the revenues earned from its exports. Its long-term strategic goal is therefore peace." The US, on the other hand, relies upon global disorder to maintain its dominance, and finds itself in conflict with Europe's two most immediate neighbors: Russia (the only military threat to the US, now economically and ideologically on the rebound from its bleak post-Soviet years), and the Muslim world (a convenient ideological target for the

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), xix.

US administration). Economic and geopolitical exigencies would thus suggest that both regions of the world “will be brought within the sphere of cooperation centered in Europe and largely exclude the United States.”¹¹⁵ All signs point toward a serious conflict between the US and Europe in the near future, with the odds tilted in the latter’s favor.

If the conclusions of *After the Empire* are ambiguous, they are the product of a tension internal to Todd’s work. The nominalist kinship-based template of *La troisième planète* and *L’Enfance du monde* is asked to compete in *After the Empire* with a vision of global economics and statecraft that is not fundamentally rooted in family structures. The inaugural shift away from this grid in *Le destin des immigrés* – signaled by recourse to a supra-historical law of democratization – was on the order of a patch, or an adjustment to the standing theory. By *After the Empire*, however, the international order defined by Todd seems to obey an entirely different logic than could be accommodated by the anthropological system, and thus the two orders of reality appear to be superimposed on one another, rather than tightly linked. The underlying realism of the book presumes a Westphalian system of nation-states, each with its own set of strategic interests, and a world order in which power/hegemony is linked to economic clout and the control of key markets. In both instances, Todd’s language – “objective parameters” of imperial prerogative, or “ontological necessity of capitalism” – suggests a self-contained system of rules and objectives.¹¹⁶ The points at which the anthropological arguments are inserted within this system nearly always appear unconvincing. Todd supposes that the ‘anthropological unconscious’ neatly carries over into the realm of foreign relations: “the weakening of its of its universalist sensibility has made it forget that if it wants to continue to rule, it must treat equally

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185, 186.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143, 95.

and fairly its principal allies, Europe and Japan, who together dominate world industry.”¹¹⁷ Are we really to believe that the realism of foreign policy is somehow tempered by such oblique determinations, especially considering that American differentialism, at least as argued in *Le destin des immigrés*, has been directed toward Blacks and Latinos, not toward Europeans and Asians? Moreover, while few would dispute an acceleration of social inequalities in the US after the 1970s, many would object to the claim that the US has moved from universalism to differentialism between 1950 and 2000 – a difficult argument considering that segregation was legal until 1954, and that immigration rates have never been higher from the 1990s onward.¹¹⁸

Europe and the World

Todd was similarly conflicted about France’s prospects for the third millennium in his next volume, 2008’s *Après la démocratie*. It is, principally, a graphic story of France’s decline, sealed by the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007: “Only a sick society could continue to treat as normal a sick president.” Not that the alternative was any better. Ségolène Royale, a candidate for the Socialist party, had “the cheek to place her campaign under the banner of the ‘just order’, a contradiction in terms for a true leftist.” She too was out of touch with reality, another symptom of France’s “metaphysical crisis.” The presentation of the latter is more of a mosaic than a continuous thread of argument. France’s ideological vacuity, which Todd once traced to the decline of its “great ideologies,” had finally taken its toll, leaving its citizens socially

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹⁸ Todd presses forward with his linkage between a differentialist unconscious and low rates of interracial marriage. He is, however, obliged to note a significant increase from 1980 to 1995 in the rate of interracial marriage (between black women and white men), which he then explains away in the following terms, “But this [jump] was no doubt already too much for the statisticians in charge of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, who sensed instinctively that his increase, no matter how small, was impossible. For the year 1999 they judiciously separated the statistics for blacks and Hispanics ...”, *Ibid.*, 110. Such an argument requires no real refutation.

atomized and starved symbolically. This bleak scenario was exacerbated by stagnation in education, civic exclusion of minorities, familial frictions, and searing income inequalities in the 90s and 2000s. And yet, for all of this, there is still an underlying note of optimism to be found in *Après la démocratie*. Beneath “the powerful rise in negative, anti-democratic forces,” the vital signs of France’s value-system are still in good shape.¹¹⁹ The old exceptionalism might save it in the end from these pathologies.

But it has been nearly thirty years since *L’invention de la France*, and Todd no longer keeps so faithfully to the old justification for exceptionalism: France’s four competing family structures. In *Après la démocratie*, the anthropological criteria are more fitfully applied than ever, though this does not detract from the general interest of Todd’s arguments. He contends that education had not completely broken down: general intelligence tests measured a significant rise in aptitude between 1981 and 1995; while the rise in the proportion of baccalaureate holders was a tribute to the education system. Cultural intolerance was likewise illusory. France may have had twenty years of votes for the anti-semitic National Front, but it had far more mixed marriages – recall from *Le destin des immigrés*, the true marker of multiculturalism – than either Britain or Germany. While elites had indeed retreated from social obligations into private worlds of luxury, leaving the lower classes culturally immiserated, there was still a lively sense of class consciousness brewing among France’s educated middle class, who were excluded from high-paying work and increasingly voting to the left. It was no less alive among the poor of the *banlieu*, who rioted in 2005 in the best tradition of French radicalism: “A raw reaction against discrimination, a clumsy expression of a will to participate in civic life, the uprisings gave voice to the old French value of equality.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Emmanuel Todd, *Après la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 15, 17.

The only way for France to salvage its democracy, according to Todd, is to embrace protectionism, not just on a national, but a European scale. When stretched from Great Britain to Russia, “European protectionism would, in the long run, allow each country to avoid the reduction of wages, the insufficiency of demand, and the indeterminate rise in inequalities.” But only a few pages earlier, Todd had claimed – consistent with the premises of the book – that Europe’s “true difficulties are ideological, sociological, psychological. But the main one is the structural incapacity of the European individual to think and act collectively.” How could mere tariffs correct maladies of this magnitude? Two distinct registers, it is clear, have emerged in Todd’s work, reflecting two different temporalities: the one is the demographer’s *longue durée*, in which habits, beliefs, and customs change slowly over time; the other is the public intellectual’s moral interventionism, in which judgments and analyses are calibrated toward the short run. These disparate projects are more emulsified than ever in *Après la démocratie*.

Politically – calls for protectionism aside – *Après la démocratie*’s outlook is bleaker than anything that comes before. Here, Todd turns against the republicans with whom he had consorted during the 90s. Their vision of an ideal past, when the nation and the republican school were lived as real values, has the same Panglossian ring as *la pensée unique*.¹²¹ It was no less untenable. Besides, their sense of national closure had inflamed anti-immigrant, but especially anti-Muslim sentiments in the wake of the 2005 riots. Also to blame were “ethno-Atlanticists” like Samuel Huntington and Marcel Gauchet. The former had propagated the damaging myth of clashing civilizations, playing directly into France’s Islamophobia. The latter, however, was guilty of worse: “In France, an even older theory contributes furtively to the designation of Islam as a problem, that of Christianity as the ‘religion of the exit from religion’,

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

put forward by Marcel Gauchet in 1985, but simplified by its appropriators and returned against the Muslim world. Christianity was different because it was capable of transcending itself. This vision of history conferred on the Western world a unique specificity.”¹²² Now the imperative is to defend immigrants and the Muslims of the *banlieu* from their nativist detractors.

Todd’s recent work explicitly take up this challenge, bringing special focus to the demographics of the Islamic world. While his research had always pretended to the encompass the globe, it rarely strayed too far beyond Europe – some of his early critics complaining that he had completely ignored Africa, for example.¹²³ *Le rendez-vous des civilisations (The Convergence of Civilizations)*, co-written with Youssef Courbage, fills in this gap, supplying readers with an explanation of Islamic political and cultural patterns, and deflating a number of myths in the process. For Todd and Courbage, the Islamic world – from Morocco to Indonesia – is in the midst of a demographic revolution, literacy rates reaching the revolutionary threshold of fifty per cent in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and birth rates falling in response. A crisis of belief is the typical upshot of demographic transition, and this is precisely what we see among Muslims: on the one hand, an ebbing of religion that tends to accompany declines in fertility and rises in literacy (and certainly did so with Christianity and Buddhism), but also a resurgence of religious fundamentalism and an outburst of political revolution.¹²⁴ This destabilization will be unpredictable in the short term, even if the long-term trend is toward a weakening of traditional beliefs. History need not necessarily work in this way, the authors clarify. The decline of Islam was not a cause of lower fertility – witness its tolerance of

¹²² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹²³ See Savonnet-Guyot, “La force du destin: anthropologie et politique,” 730.

¹²⁴ Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd, *Le rendez-vous des civilisations* (Paris: Seuil, “La république des idées,” 2007), 25-35.

contraceptives – but a consequence. Thus, “to present Islam as a religion hostile to modernity is an exercise in banality.”¹²⁵

Within this framework, Todd is well situated to explain the upheavals that have issued from the Islamic world – though especially the Middle East – in the last fifty or so years. Iran, which for Todd represents the most democratic country in the Middle East, reached fifty per cent male literacy in 1964, and fifteen years later the Shah’s regime was overthrown.¹²⁶ In some cases, as in Turkey, which reached the same threshold in 1932, the political revolution precedes the one of literacy. Tunisia would logically be a candidate for political revolution, being demographically the most advanced country in the Middle East, though Egypt, epicenter of the Arab revolts, is a statistical laggard – a point glossed over very quickly in his 2011 *Allah n’y est pour rien! (Allah Has Got Nothing to Do with It!)*. As always, the correlations proposed by Todd are agreeably dissonant with the usual pieties, if a little nebulous in their conclusions. Moreover, now that we are back in the demographer’s temporality, the adverse role of the US empire seems to have fallen away from view – and this in a discussion of the Middle East. In any event, as “civic interventions,”¹²⁷ these texts are a welcome addition to the literature on the Arab revolts, well worth consulting for their unusual and perceptive outlook. Few non-materialist theories have been able to offer a totalizing explanation of these phenomena.

Finally, Todd has gotten around to writing his *magnum opus* on kinship patterns, *L’origine des systèmes familiaux* (2011). It looks to address some of the questions and criticisms posed by readers since the early 80s, and does so principally by supplying a historical account

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁶ *Rendez-vous*, 34; *Allah* 25. Iranians are still in a moment of transition after their demographic revolution. Underneath their repressive regime is a literate citizenry that votes, discusses, and displays many of the characteristics of a European-style democracy.

¹²⁷ *Allah*, 53.

for the emergence of different family types, which had simply been assumed as anthropological constants in Todd's earlier work. For Eurasia, the subject of the massive first volume, all different permutations could be traced back to one original type: the nuclear family, with the conjugal couple as the basic unit.¹²⁸ Only with the later developments of agriculture and the State were the variations – stem and communitarian families – produced across the landmass. To explain the latter, Todd has recourse to a pseudo-Darwinian model of development. Variations emerged as a result of local necessity, the successful ones surviving and producing their own chain of consequences. It was sensible for clans to develop a “patrilinear principle, which is like a permanent army, organized for war, with different rankings and pre-established hierarchies.”¹²⁹ The strong paternal orientation would allow for the later development of communitarian and stem families – authoritarian systems for Todd, and hence a “regression” from the egalitarian foundation. Notwithstanding this moral judgment, the analysis replicates the “diffusionist” logic of evolution: from one to many, the world can support a diversity of modes of being.

Readers might be surprised to find a reversion to the language and methods of *L'invention de la France* in *L'origine*. Earlier I noted how Todd's co-author Hervé Le Bras developed one strand of their book, the core-periphery dynamic of French kinship types, and expanded it into a larger theory (whereas Todd had focused on the family patterns themselves). Now Todd is interested in this other side of *L'invention*, putting forward a theory he calls the “principle of conservatism for peripheral zones,” which holds that systems marginal to the dominant variation will tend to retain the same anterior trait (which explains why, in cartographic analysis, very similar nuclear family types can be seen orbiting a large stem family

¹²⁸ *L'origine*, 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

zone). The reasons for taking up these instruments are hinted at by Todd in the footnotes: whereas his previous work was “structural, establishing a correspondence between an anthropological typology and a political typology,” *L’origine* would be “diffusionist,” explaining how different forms of organization and cultural patterns developed over time.¹³⁰ If Todd had changed his mind about which anthropologists to follow – now Gabriel Tarde instead of Lévi-Strauss – he never questioned that anthropology itself was the royal road to our political unconscious.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21n.

Chapter Five - Tracking the Sacred: The Political Anthropology of Régis Debray

The collected writings of Régis Debray offer a critical narrative of late twentieth-century France that centers on the decline of the sacred and the accompanying “death” of France’s great ideologies – Catholicism, Gaullism, and Communism. This perspective, by now familiar, which looks toward anthropology and religion for a more sure-footed standpoint on the present, is one Debray shares with three of his contemporaries, Alain de Benoist, Emmanuel Todd, and Marcel Gauchet – none of whom are trained in anthropology or religion. Politically, Debray’s diagnostic will be to the left of Todd and Gauchet’s fundamentally liberal political anthropology, and even more so of Benoist’s ultra-conservative cultural politics, though their respective analyses will, on many points, converge. As in previous chapters, the task here will be to offer a lucid, tightly contextualized account of Debray’s ideas, followed by a sustained critical engagement with their key theses. With Debray, this prospect is especially daunting given that his books number somewhere in the neighborhood of 75, and his articles in the hundreds, not to mention the protean nature of this *oeuvre* – novels, plays, philosophical tomes, revolutionary pamphlets, illustrated art histories, polemics, travel writing, etc. There is, nevertheless, an inner unity to this sprawl that can be apprehended without visiting each work individually.

Régis Debray spent much of the 60s and early 70s in Latin America as a revolutionary. First in his graduating class at Louis-le-Grand (high school) and a brilliant philosophy student at the École Normale Supérieure, Debray was on his way to an eminent career in the French university system.¹ He became quickly disillusioned with this world, its parochialisms and snobbery. In the meantime, outraged by imperial chauvinism in Algeria, and increasingly wary of the fashionable Marxist-Leninist “novitiate,” which “ran off me like water off a duck’s back”

¹ Donald Reid, “Régis Debray: Republican in a Democratic Age,” in K. Steven Vincent and Alison Klairmont-Lingo, eds, *The Human Tradition in Modern France* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000), 166.

– this in spite of a great esteem held for his mentor Louis Althusser – Debray was restless to exit the Latin Quarter: “the leader within was greedily eyeing the planet’s red belt from between two quarto tomes.”² At the end of 1965, Debray, aged 24, received his summons from Castro himself, based on a brilliant article on the Cuban Revolution, “Castrism: The Long March in Latin America,” published in *Les Temps modernes* (which had caught Che Guevara’s attention in Algeria). Debray served first as an advisor to Castro in Havana – who referred to him as “Danton” – and then as a messenger for Castro in Guevara’s Bolivian army. He earned international renown as author of the revolutionary pamphlet, *The Revolution in the Revolution?* (1966), and then as a jailbird after his capture by Bolivian authorities in 1967.

The early work, beginning with the 1965 essay on Castrism, ending with posterior reflections on the Latin American years, *Les rendez-vous manqués* (1975), form a distinct phase in Debray’s writings, which I will touch on only briefly here. These writings belong to a more or less defunct genre, that of “revolutionary strategy,” and revolve around a set of original theses put forward in “Castrism” and *The Revolution in the Revolution?*. What Debray develops is a theory of the guerrilla unit (the revolutionary *foco* as it is called) in which the relationship between the Party and the masses is reconfigured. The *foco*’s role was tactical as much as symbolic: in the first case, its high degree of mobility enabled it to act with great flexibility and respond quickly to changing conditions – a necessity in Latin America, where peasants and the urban workers were cut off from one another; in the second case, the *foco* was a microcosm of the completed revolution, acting as the future government in coordinating the struggle, and representing a cross-class alliance (of workers, peasants, and intellectuals). As Debray writes, “The guerrilla army is a confirmation in action of this alliance; it is the personification of it. When the guerrilla army assumes the prerogatives of political leadership, it is responding to its

² Régis Debray, *Praised Be Our Lords*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 11-14.

class content and anticipating tomorrow's dangers. ... In the mountains, then, workers, peasants, and intellectuals meet for the first time. ... These men all have something to learn from each other, beginning with their differences."³ There is much to say about the role this theory played in the socialist-theoretical landscape of the 60s:⁴ how it was taken up by Black revolutionaries in the United States, or how it acted as a third way between Soviet (urbanized) and Chinese (rural) revolutionary strategies. Here, I would only signal Debray's early penchant for heterodoxy, and the intensely political character of his work – but especially his attention to relations between classes, and the problematics of power inequality and subordination. Otherwise, the character of these writings differs greatly from what follows, particularly if we take into account, as Fredric Jameson has, the utopian aspect of these writings, how the *foco* “abolished all prerevolutionary divisions and categories” and gave rise to “a newly emergent revolutionary “space” – situated outside the “real” political, social and geographical world of country and city.”⁵

Debray's career changed trajectory when he was arrested by Bolivian authorities in the spring of 1967, shortly after meeting up with Che Guevara's guerrilla army. Debray was indicted under military law, and the alleged offense (of being a guerrilla) was punishable by a maximum of thirty years in jail, as Bolivia had just abolished the death penalty. Many understood the prisoners' lives to be in jeopardy, however, given that no guerrilla had yet been captured alive, and the army's fondness for the *ley de fuga*, under which prisoners were shot “while trying to escape.” To inflame the matter, General Barrientos coerced the people of La

³ Régis Debray, *The Revolution in the Revolution?*, trans. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109-110.

⁴ Much has been said on this subject. For a trenchant collection of essays, see Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy, *Régis Debray and the Latin American Revolution* (New York: MR Press, 1968); and also Robin Blackburn's introduction to the English translation of *Essais sur l'Amérique latine, Strategy for Revolution* (New York: MR Press, 1970). See also Jack Woddis, *New Theories of Revolution; a Commentary on the Views of Frantz Fanon, Régis Debray, and Herbert Marcuse* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), and Hartmut Ramm, *The Marxism of Régis Debray: between Lenin and Guevara* (Lawrence, NE.: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 508.

Paz into a “spontaneous demonstration,” stirring them against the red menace, and raising cries of “Debray must die.” Debray’s friends and family pressed vehemently for his release, his publishers – Feltrinelli and Maspero – showing up in Camiri, only to be promptly turned away. What seems to have ultimately saved Debray from summary execution was external pressure for a proper trial – perhaps influenced by letters from de Gaulle and Pompidou? – and the CIA’s insistence upon a full interrogation. The military’s trial of Debray was swiftly botched, offering little semblance of justice, and allowing Debray to make a rousing speech in the dock, which only confirmed that the junior officers had let the trial get out of their hands. Debray was nevertheless found guilty of “rebellion, assassination, theft, and injury,” and sentenced to “thirty years of hard labor.”⁶ Three years into the sentence, fortune again worked in Debray’s favor, as the Barrientos-Ovando regime was succeeded by the left-leaning, reform-minded presidency of Juan Jose Torres. The latter appears to have furtively approved the Frenchman’s release, and sent a special detachment to smuggle Debray into Chile against the will of most of the officers. Here, Debray would remain until his return to France in 1973.⁷

May 68

Upon his permanent return to France in 1973, Debray spent the first few years reflecting on his experience in Latin America, producing the backward-looking *La Guérilla du Che* (1974), *La Critique des armes* (1974), *Les Rendez-vous manqués* (1975), and *l’Indésirable* (1975). By the mid 70s, however, his work began to change focus and take up questions specific to France and Europe. His fiery attack on the legacy of May 68, *Modeste contribution aux discours et*

⁶ Debray’s speech, as well as the official sentence quoted here, can be found in, *Le Procès Régis Debray* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), 128.

⁷ Much of this account is based on James Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins: Political Struggle in Bolivia, 1952-1982* (London: Verso, 1984), 136-47, 182-83.

cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire [de Mai 68] and a lesser-known companion volume, *Lettre aux communistes français et à quelques autres* (also 1978), set in motion a series of considerations on contemporary France that are deeply informed by the neo-liberalizing measures of the Giscard government (1974-1981) and the anti-totalitarian ferment of the mid 1970s. Ultimately, many of these ideas will be canalized into Debray's major theoretical statement of political anthropology, *Critique de la raison politique* (1981), braiding around four principal themes, all hallmarks of twentieth-century European thought: the intellectual, nationalism, ideology, and media/technology.

As the revolutions of 1968 raged across the world, from Berkeley to Karachi, Debray was languishing in “the morose boredom” of a ramshackle Bolivian prison, serving the first of his promised thirty years.⁸ Two pieces from 1969, later collected in a volume appearing only in English as *Prison Writings*, register Debray's immediate reaction to the revolutions of 1968. “Time and Politics”, a rich theoretical examination of Marxism's analytical categories, born of an implicit comparison between Latin American and European revolution, shows an ambivalent judgment of May 68. The key thesis of “Time and Politics” supposes a two-fold nature of political-social crises in capitalist societies. In times of crisis, the vertiginous acceleration of time unveils contradictions deeply imbedded in a society's past, which may either produce a genuine revolutionary opening, or allow capitalism to absorb those contradictions and renew its strength by turning them to good effect. For Debray, “One may even measure the vitality of a bourgeois society by its capacity to welcome or absorb its own crises, its internal dissensions, the forces that would otherwise split it apart.”⁹ Later, in *Modeste contribution*, the student revolts of

⁸ Régis Debray, *La Critique des armes* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 261.

⁹ Régis Debray, “Time and Politics,” *Prison Writings*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Random House, 1973), 141.

68 will unwittingly produce this precise effect, of helping the French state to bilge the system of its inconsistencies. As of 1969, however, Debray is still uncertain of 68's prospects, hazarding that, "June 1936 and May 1968 can be considered as issues still in dispute, still hanging in suspense, while at the same time they also constitute determining moments in the decision process."¹⁰ And while Debray has no illusions about the farcical elements of 68, the revolts still expressed genuine contradictions in French capitalism, and had a real basis in the plight of the industrial working class: "In themselves, the barricades in the Latin Quarter were a joke. It was their concrete connection with a symbolic period (May 1968), with an economic situation and with the struggles of the workers, which made them politically decisive."¹¹ Though by no means a ringing endorsement, this assessment is much less corrosive than the one in *Modeste contribution*.

Furthermore, Debray's intention in these pieces is to reexamine Latin American revolution in light of the 1968 revolutions in Europe, not the other way around, as it will be in his later works. He writes, "The tremendous achievement of the revolution now going on in Latin America is to have swept away all these prejudices inherited from Europe, and to that extent to have 'desectarianized' us," the "us" referring to Latin Americans, not Europeans. And, if we look carefully at the second piece, "A Schema for the Study of Gramsci," we notice an inversion of the typical metropolitan narrative, which supposes that all varieties of political and social invention begin in Europe and radiate out into the periphery: "This need [for a myth of revolution] was born of the hiatus produce by the imbalance between an immediate, local, grey, reformist profane history and the breath of a revolution, a disruptive yet mediated and distant

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

force (China, Vietnam, Cuba) – without the two moments being able to meet on the ground of the *hic et nunc*.” The Third World provides the revolutionary wind, but Europe is unable to overcome its reformist habits. Debray’s comment on myth and its relationship to 68 hits closer to the mark of his later attack, especially when he argues, “The drama of ‘May 68’ is that it is already fulfilling the same function for left extremism as ‘June 1936’ fulfilled for communist reformism: the function of a justificatory myth, the residue of decades of illusions.”¹² But, again it falls short of the later piece’s outright condemnation, in which a comparison with the Popular Front of 36 would be too generous. Thus, many of the components for Debray’s later, more elaborate critique of 68 are in place here, but the perspective is inverted – the exteriorized Frenchman playing insider to Latin American politics. Once Debray returns to France, the perspective will again be reversed, and a repatriated Debray will begin to anatomize the political and social realities of France in the same way he did for Bolivia in the *Prison Writings*. With a different vantage point, and the benefit of ten years of hindsight for lucid political analysis, Debray will be fully prepared for a more systematic critique of 68.

In the intervening years between 1969 and 1978, Debray did have occasion to remark on 68, though usually very much *en passant*. Most unexpected, given his previous and later position, is Debray’s sympathetic, if slightly wary attitude toward the 68ers after his release from prison. “What would you have done during the events of May 68 had you lived in Paris?”, asked an interviewer in 1971, to which Debray replied, “What a question! As a simple militant, I would have participated in the mass movements. I would have followed them to the end of the line, but without illusions, eyes wide open.”¹³ Four years later, and apparently chastened by a return to

¹² *Ibid.*, 166.

¹³ Régis Debray, “Régis Debray: Ce qu’il n’avait jamais dit,” *Nouvel Observateur* 317 (December 7-13, 1970), 31.

Paris, Debray's judgment of 68 had appreciably soured, and his absence from the revolts now seemed like an advantage, rather than a missed opportunity: "I was able to escape the spectacle of what is called the 'syndrome of hysteria of May 68'. I'm not complaining."¹⁴ More than simply voicing his skepticism of the haloed legacy of 68, however, Debray here anticipates the Hegelian-Marxist thesis of *Modeste contribution*: "Because it's in May 68 that the comedy attained its highest point: the point where it took itself for tragedy, and where the scarcely violent student parade donned the garb of Revolution."¹⁵ As Debray regained his footing in France, his analytical compass would begin to point away from the Marxist-Leninist coordinates of his past writings, toward a more idiosyncratic conceptual vocabulary. In *Les Rendez-vous manqués*, we find Debray's thinking in transition, skittering over new and borrowed ideas. Some of them will be retained, and indeed will prove central to his future work, while others – "simulacra", "spectacle" – will be dropped, and sometimes categorically rejected (namely "spectacle").

At last we come to the broadside itself, *Modeste contribution*. Debray remarked in "A Schema for the Study of Gramsci," "What is new in comparison with 1936 is the speed with which the phenomenon made the transition from history to myth, from the real to the symbolic"¹⁶ – a shrewd observation, amply borne out by the dispersion of leftist groups waving the banner of 68 in the 1970s. Libertarian strands of the left saw in 68 the headwinds of a utopian-democratic movement toward self-management, while the Maoists saw a real (but missed) opportunity for students and workers to link arms against the capitalist state.¹⁷ Julian Bourg has lucidly shown

¹⁴ Régis Debray, *Rendez-vous manqués: pour Pierre Goldman* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ *Prison Writings*, 166.

¹⁷ Kristin Ross gives an account of the Maoist responses to 68 in *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

how many of the movements for specific rights in the 1970s – for women, prisoners, homosexuals, immigrants – had drawn explicitly from the rhetoric of 68.¹⁸ Thus, May 68, at least in the 1970s, was sacred property on the Left. In the doldrums of the 1980s, when Mitterrand’s rudderless Socialist government began to renege on its promises, left critiques of 68 would become common coin: Lipovetsky’s *L’ère du vide* (1983), Hocquenghem’s *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary* (1986), and later Emmanuel Todd’s *l’Illusion économique* (1998) would fulminate against the legacy of 68. And, of course, criticism from the Center and Right was legion, coinciding with the events themselves. Raymond Aron, proclaimed by Serge Audier to be the “père du discours anti-68,” issued a thoroughgoing demolition job on the student revolts as early as 68 with *la Révolution introuvable*.¹⁹ By 1978, however, sustained attacks on 68 from the Left were rare, thus making Debray’s intervention all the more timely and deadly.

Modeste contribution is a philosophical-historical critique of May 68 which argues that France had two identities in 1968: one industrial and technological, fast-moving and open to the outside world, the other, social and cultural, set to the snail’s pace of old-world customs and mores. As the first grew explosively during the *trentes glorieuses*, it was able to reveal all the more clearly the backward nature of the second. The madness that seized the revolutionaries of May, the fury of their rebellion against the France of their fathers was simply the imperative to resynchronize France to the beat of economic reason: “The differential of the two circuits

¹⁸ Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Serge Audier, *La Pensée anti-68. Essai sur les origines d’une restauration intellectuelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), see Ch. 3.

demanded a change of voltage; one country plugged into 110 volts, the other to 220.”²⁰ The cunning of History had come to play the cruelest trick on the 68ers, who thought they were making revolution, but were actually clearing away the obstacles for a more functional neo-liberal society. The revenge of Hegel could not have been more treacherous: “Just as Hegelian great men are what they are because of the world spirit, the May revolutionaries were the entrepreneurs of the spirit needed by the bourgeoisie.”²¹ As anticipated by the two articles from the *Prison Writings*, the May movements represent forces of stabilization and normalization, not those of rupture and radical innovation. Capitalism, in the developed democracies of the West, is a self-adjusting system that relies on crises to preserve the illusion of dissent. As such, crises are rather a sign of the system’s health: “It’s order that would be its death.”²²

More inflammatory yet would be the specific conjunctural analyses that Debray would marshal for this dramatic thesis. In effect, what *Modeste contribution* outlines is an arresting profile of France in the throes of a neo-liberal revolution, or, to put it in Debray’s terms, the move from “l’idéologie française” to “l’idéologie américaine.”²³ The affinities with the American model of capitalism were underwritten first and foremost by France’s transition to a post-industrial economy, relying evermore on services and high-tech automated labor. The underlying reorganization of the modes and forces of production mandated a system-wide

²⁰ I will be referring to the 2008 republication of the pamphlet, which bears the new and more direct (though less sardonic) title, *Mai 68: une contre-révolution réussie* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2008), 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26, translation here is from Régis Debray, “A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary,” *New Left Review* I/115 (May-June 1979), 48.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ To be clear, Debray’s use of “l’idéologie française” precedes that of Bernard-Henri Lévy’s, who applied it to a specific fascist tendency embedded in French thought in *l’Idéologie française* (1981).

readjustment in France's institutional apparatus.²⁴ The first site of struggle would be the university, not only because of quantitative (demographic) pressures, which threatened to burst asunder the entire system, but also because, qualitatively, capital needed a highly-trained type of cadre to manage an increasingly unskilled and disorganized labor force – a type no longer being produced by the university system.²⁵ The proletariat, class struggle, and the entire grammar of collective action attendant upon them – parties, unions, strikes – would be exorcised in the institutional retrenchment of the post May period. For Debray, the consequences of this rupture are grave and far-reaching, for without the strength of tradition to anchor its political unconscious, France lives only for the moment, blithely chugging away at the pace of technological change. If, as Debray claims, “The principal role of the working class in France is to reduce scandalous social inequalities”, the new regime of capital also portends the normalization of inequality.²⁶

As for the blustery rhetoric of 68, it expressed a hedonistic and libertarian style of individualism that was perfectly consonant with this new spirit of capitalism: “There is a natural, but not pre-ordained harmony between the individualist rebellions of May and the political and economic needs of liberal capitalism.”²⁷ The fundamental selfishness of the students' demands linked up seamlessly with the Anglo-American understanding of man as a rational, egoistic

²⁴ Debray asks rhetorically, “A quoi bon le culte du travail, quand la source principale de plus-value n'est plus dans la quantité de travail fourni, mais dans sa qualité technologique, c'est-à-dire dans la matière grise utilisée?”, *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁵ Both the qualitative and quantitative pressures named here are common themes in the literature on 68. Few, however, have posed the problems so directly as a reorganization of capital. Tony Judt, for one, hints at this problematic, but then devotes more attention to the “psychodrama” of 68 – a now standard interpretive category borrowed from Aron's *la Révolution introuvable*. The concept plays as an assumption or leitmotif in *Modeste contribution*, but is not central to Debray's social-economic (and not especially psychological) analytic. For Judt's analysis, see *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 408-413.

²⁶ *Mai 68: une contre-révolution réussie*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

agent, and was complicit in spurning the collective for the individual, the past for the present, the metaphysics of commitment for that of flux and movement – in short, *homo socius* for *homo æconomicus*. If a dominant motif of May was to make everything political (sexuality, architecture, cinema), and to publicize all that was private, it would be all too easy to invert this totalization and declare that nothing was political, in effect privatizing all that was public. By 1978, the contours of a depoliticized society were becoming all too evident for Debray, its signal features being the increasing dominance of media in political affairs, and the corresponding acceleration of time (in that everything is oriented toward the present and future, while the past is ignored). He laments, “The slow and wrinkled tempo of the projects of the past ... has given way to the blow-by-blow temporality of ad-men and sleazy TV personalities.”²⁸ The upshot of this transformation will have structural implications for Debray, who again pictures society in cybernetic terms, as a kind of circuit board: “Observe how one becomes a minister, a deputy, or even president in this day and age. The television and the central apparatuses of diffusion/domination have short-circuited the old network of mediations, the cultural (the University), along with the political (national parties or local assemblies).”²⁹ All that was required to effect this system-wide restructuring was the liquidation of “l’idéologie française” – essentially what amounts to a latter-day republicanism for Debray – which the 68ers accomplished *allegro con brio*.

Since the two pieces from the *Prison Writings*, Debray’s conclusions on the significance of 68 have changed little. He still holds, implicitly, that where a society is not ripe for revolution on the ground level, a crisis works in favor of capital instead of revolution, and also that May was able to engender, with unprecedented velocity, a series of myths on the Left that would

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

obscure the true nature of this crisis. However, the conjunctural theses of *Modeste contribution*, which Debray only could have developed in the seven-year interval between his return to France and the tenth anniversary, betray a change of analytical perspective, and the rudiments of a new program. The logic of this perspectival shift is made especially clear in *Modeste contribution*: “And if May was a crisis, it was more cybernetic than political, such that, in order to understand the sequence of events and its consequences, the usual categories of Leninism or of historical materialism must give way to those of systems and information theory.”³⁰ If revolution no longer appears on the European horizon, then a Marxist-Leninist paradigm will offer scant illumination. Better to heed Gramsci’s insight, and study how the Western democracies, with their developed civil societies, are able to absorb or placate revolutionary energies. From this moment forward, Debray will fixate on the mediatic apparatus of late twentieth-century capitalism, and work toward developing an anatomical, systematic critique of its mechanisms. *Modeste contribution* also foreshadows the connection Debray will make between a critical theory of media and a positive theory of republicanism.

Critics have objected to nearly all of Debray’s conclusions, and often the premises as well. Some, like Serge Audier, have complained that the arguments of *Modeste contribution* are often indistinguishable from those used by the extreme Right to attack 68.³¹ In itself, however, this cannot be admitted as a true criticism. The extremes of both ends of the spectrum will normally, by virtue of their marginality, converge on many points, but rarely – and this is what matters, as this dissertation attempts to show – will they be directed toward the same ends, or have the same underlying ideological conditions. Another of Audier’s shakier criticism holds

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *La Pensée anti-68*, 99-100. The neo-Catholic thinker Thomas Molnar is the referent.

that Debray's Hegelian-Marxist analytic is a "philosophical dogmatism" that is schematically imposed on the poor reluctant facts³² – an objection which implies 1) that Debray's framework is pre-fabricated (or too theoretical), and thus not context-specific; and 2) that the facts contradict and thus invalidate this framework. The first point would be more persuasive if Debray showed a history of repeating or overusing this same analytic, but the fact is that aside from a sketchy anticipation of this argument made in 1969 ("Time and Politics"), Debray has never before deployed this framework. Thus, we have to assume that Debray chose this theory because it was best suited to account for the facts at hand, not because he was already committed to this or that theoretical system. In fact, of the many remarkable features of *Modeste contribution*, one that stands out, as noted, is the dramatic evolution of Debray's thought. The second objection is potentially more damaging, and has been shared by a number of critics. Audier's version of the argument is, however, left-handed and specious. To Debray's diagnosis of post-68 France as a bastion of neo-liberalism that had dangerously liquidated its great (and historical) collective enterprises – class struggle, the nation – Audier responds with an example taken from England: "The neo-liberal counter-revolution of Thatcher was accompanied by ... a conservative rearmament and a reassertion of the national."³³ *Modeste contribution* aims to elucidate specifically French developments of the post-68 period, not to provide a theory of neo-liberalism. The English example would therefore be irrelevant.

The persuasiveness of Debray's analysis will in some measure depend on one's interpretation of the period in question. It should be said, however, that the arguments of *Modeste contribution* are consonant with more measured and historical approaches to 68. Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison's history of postwar capitalism, for instance, argues that the

³² *Ibid.*, 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

impetus for May can be attributed to de Gaulle's break-neck modernizing reforms – his celebrated attempt to make France “marry her century” through greater rationalization of the labor process. The reforms caused the position of public sector workers to deteriorate rapidly in comparison to the private sector, leading to “unprecedented dislocations” in the labor force. They cite a government report released shortly after the May events, which states, “The changes on the labor market had come with greater rapidity than anticipated, too much reliance had been placed on the automatic adjustments, the mobility, of the market mechanism.”³⁴ According to this view, Debray may have underappreciated de Gaulle's determining role in the May Movements, but his key premise, that of two, a-synchronized Frances, appears to be sound. Nor can the links Debray makes between the rhetoric of 68 and the victory of the center-right candidate, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, be easily disputed. Giscard's victory over François Mitterrand in the 1974 election owed in large part to his successful incorporation of the libertarian rhetoric of the 68ers. This irony is eloquently recorded in Rod Kedward's extraordinary history of twentieth-century France, *La Vie en Bleu*: “Radical legislation, sexual politics on the floor of the Chamber, a feminist campaign brought to fruition, an appeal to youth, and all stemming from a Presidency which had been thought to represent the right against the reforming left in the elections. ... All these items had been on the May '68 agenda. They were now the program of the center.”³⁵

Another idiosyncrasy of *Modeste contribution* is its unusually disabused perspective on the meaning of 68. For forty years, the Left has pinned the “failure” of 68 on the fatal conservatism of the PCF during May: its ejection of far-left militants from the Party, its concomitant refusal to link up with the student protests, or even to incorporate any of their

³⁴ Philip Armstrong, Andrew Glyn and John Harrison, *Capitalism since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 204-205.

³⁵ Rod Kedward, *La Vie en Bleu: France and the French since 1900* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 457.

rhetoric. Maoists and their descendants, for example, wistfully reflect on what could have happened had these two forces united in 68, the new forms of social intercourse that might have developed. For Debray, on the other hand, revolution is objectively impossible in France (and Western Europe): the state's power was never, and could never be, legitimately threatened. Thus, no amount of solidarity between the workers and the students would have engendered a genuine revolutionary opening. Here, Debray no doubt profits from the ten years of retrospection, for, as of 1978, the objective decline of the PCF was in plain evidence (allowing him to effectively backdate this decline into the 60s). A post-industrial society obviates the need for a classically industrial proletariat, and hence reconstitutes the matrices of class relationships: the PCF would naturally disappear along with the proletariat.

While centrists and right-wingers were only too glad to concede the non-revolutionary character of May, the Left was, and still is, after forty years of hunting for demons and traitors, reluctant to make this concession. Some, like Henri Weber, readily agree that the general strike of 68 was not a revolutionary crisis – “conquest of State power by armed insurrection was not even considered” – but insist that May nevertheless held true revolutionary potential: “Both the authority system and the bourgeois model of civilization were called in question, raising the possibility of generalizing workers’ control over production and popular control of all institutions.”³⁶ Debray would presumably reply that in fact bourgeois civilization had not been called into question at all, but had rather been reaffirmed as pro-American, pro-globalization, anti-Statist, through the rhetoric of 68. And indeed, the State had been more successful in co-opting this language than any of the reconstituted factions of the Left. Nevertheless, the objections of Weber and others do in fact raise an interesting question for Debray: could the meaning of 68 lay precisely in the reorientation of the mission of the radical Left, away from the

³⁶ Henri Weber, “Reply to Debray,” *New Left Review* I/115 (May-June 1979).

conquest of State power, toward a more diffuse model of organization? After all, if a new regime of capital was in the making, new forms of protest and critique would have to be forged or invented. For all the erstwhile “radicals” of 68, like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who hijacked the rhetoric of 68 for bourgeois objectives, there are thinkers and organizations who continue to draw from the legacy of 68 inspiration for a critique of capitalism, and the germs of a new kind of collective action – one that extends beyond the narrow and reformist demands of worker self-management, so prominent throughout the 1970s.³⁷ This more unshakeable current of May has far outlasted the State’s approval of 68: to wit, Sarkozy’s acid invective against 68 during his presidential campaign in 2007.

Moreover, the text is suffused by an awkward tension between the national and the international. Debray laments France’s newfound openness to the global economy, and its corresponding abandonment of a strong national identity – for Debray, the privileged locus of collective action. It is this receptiveness to the global economy that is in fact responsible for the libertarian rhetoric of the otherwise hollow men of 68, not any real confrontation with, or serious importation of non-French thought: “They [new ideas] are the products of an objective national development, ... of an objective decline of national autonomy with respect to the world market. It’s not ‘new ideas’ that create new conditions of life, but the identity of conditions of labor, life, and exchange that determine the increasing identity between ideas and dominant patterns of behavior.”³⁸ This explanation obviously deflates, in a radical way, the importance of May 68, and lays the emphasis on impersonal historical developments. Critics have balked, with good reason, at the purported inevitability of these changes spurred on by the logic of capital: would

³⁷ Krisitin Ross observes how a few opportunists from the May Movements have come to represent 68 as a whole, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 4-5.

³⁸ *Mai 68: une contre-révolution réussie*, 69.

they have occurred without 68 as the midwife, or perhaps have been delayed? Was there a national program that could have blocked the transition to a neo-liberal society, or were the forces of change bound to steam-roll over any serious resistance? Debray carefully keeps the discussion of 68 – clearly an international phenomenon – within national boundaries, but then refuses to stake any kind of national defense program, republican or otherwise, that might have frustrated the onward march of history.

The one solution Debray does offer resonates chiefly on an international level. He concludes in the closing paragraphs of *Modeste contribution* that European capitalism will continue to economically oppress the rest of the world, and “if that is the game, sooner or later the floor will go to demography.” In the meantime, “the European by birth still has the opportunity to scrape his grain of sand from the ramparts of the fortress-West, by lending a hand to the ‘barbarians’ struggling outside the walls against our sophisticated barbarism.”³⁹ This tableau, however arresting, has the air of desperation and evasion, and indeed forecloses the possibility of struggle within Europe. Here, Debray’s disregard for the international dimensions of 68 will reveal his theory’s shortcomings. A glance across the Alps at Italy might have provoked a thoughtful basis of comparison. Its similarities to France’s 68 – the transition to post-industrial labor, the conservatism of the CP, deep questions about the nature of class composition, the splintering of radical leftist factions in the 1970s – might have led Debray to broaden his thesis about the post-war development of capitalism.⁴⁰ Could the 68 Movements, more globally, have been a symptom of capitalism’s reconfiguration of the capital-labor pairing

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122, translation from *New Left Review* I/115, 65.

⁴⁰ For comparisons between Italy and France in 68, see Judt, *Postwar*, 407-416; Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 114-119; Giovanni Arrighi, “1968: The Great Rehearsal,” in Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London; New York: Verso, 1989); Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (London; New York: Verso, 2009), 342-345.

after the economic miracle? Were such protests attendant on the opening of these formerly inward-looking nations to global markets? The differences from Italy's more protracted and violent 68 would also have been instructive. Debray is fond of comparing May 68 negatively to genuine revolutions, which generate violence, hatred, and compel "neutral" parties to choose sides. Italy's 68 was much closer to this model – a "creeping May" followed by a "hot autumn" – yet it still failed. Its constellation of differences – a weaker state, a stronger CP, a stronger Right, and a different composition of the labor pool – might have prompted Debray to reconsider the potted inevitability of capitalism's restructuring, and pay closer attention to its internal developments on an international scale.

Around the *Union de la Gauche*

Intellectually, the 1970s in France played out as a kind of tribunal for the many new ideas of the 1960s. Whereas ideas bloomed and beetled out in the astonishingly creative 60s, they tended to wilt and re-twine in the belt-tightening years of the 70s. The *autogestion* movements capitalizing on the spirit of 68 eventually petered out after a few isolated episodes of fleeting success. "Third Worldism," the idea that the prospects for revolution hinged on the fate of the non-Euro-American "wretched of the earth," was called into question as the post-colonial regimes of Asia and Africa quickly slid into fascist or totalitarian governments (the correct label often depended where one stood politically). Debray's corrosive *Modeste contribution* represented one such attempt to reexamine these loose threads of the 60s, threads which had, for him, quilted into a justification for the neo-liberal state *à l'américaine*, and left Third Worldism as a desperate, last-ditch response. *Lettre aux communistes français et à quelques autres* (hereafter *Lettre*) attempts to come to terms with another major development of the 1970s, the

“Common Program” of the Left, which united the PCF and PS in an electoral campaign to unseat the increasingly powerful Right. In spite of its gathering momentum – losing the 1974 election by one percent – the Common Program had in fact alienated many on the Left: the non-Communist Left feared its strength, while Socialists and Communists were mutually suspicious of the other’s desire to hijack and dominate this marriage of convenience. *Lettre*, written shortly after *Modeste contribution*, reveals Debray in mid-thought, reflecting on the meaning of the Left with the advent of the Common Program, and the anti-totalitarian discourse of the non-communist Left.

The left-leaning Parisian weekly *Nouvel Observateur* was at the center of the anti-totalitarian controversy after the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (translated into French in 1973). After the PCF had violently attacked Solzhenitsyn’s book as anti-Soviet propaganda, Gilles Martinet, a member of *Nouvel Observateur*’s editorial board, fulminated against Georges Marchais and the PCF, claiming that they did not have a monopoly on the interpretation of the Stalinist period. Jean Daniel, fellow member of the editorial board and animating spirit of *Nouvel Observateur*, reinforced Martinet’s critique of the PCF, escalating the polemic into trench-style warfare. The ferocity of the PCF’s ensuing campaign against *Nouvel Observateur* revealed, what would be for many, the unrepentant crudity and blindness of the Communists’ thinking. The gathering sympathy around *Nouvel Observateur* hardened into the core of the non-communist Left that supported Solzhenitsyn, and regarded the Union of the Left with suspicion (even though many members of its board, including Daniel, supported it).⁴¹

Though *Nouvel Observateur* had never endorsed the Third Worldism which Debray emblemized in the 1960s, Debray, perhaps out of respect for his friendship with Daniel, or

⁴¹ Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Bergham Books, 2004), 92-95.

perhaps for the high caliber of journalistic talent associated with the weekly, contributed several articles throughout the 70s. As reported by Daniel in his memoir of the 70s, *L'Ère des ruptures*, Debray was anxious over the hostility between the PCF and *Nouvel Observateur*, and had even tried to get the two sides to mend fences in early 1974. According to Daniel, "Régis was unhappy about the injuries that I had suffered," even if, he would tartly add, "his friendship for me squared poorly with the deep respect he maintained for the communists."⁴² After his famous television appearance across Solzhenitsyn on the television program *Apostrophes*, Daniel complained of being misunderstood by the entire public, save for a few close friends, one of them being Debray. And again, if Debray's friendship was never in question, neither were his political loyalties: "Understood, which is not to say supported. Régis Debray claimed he was proud to be my friend, but was unable to share in my disappointment."⁴³

Debray first gravitated toward the Communist Party while under the tutelage of Althusser at the *Ecole normale*. Of his experience at Rue d'Ulm, he would recall, from prison, "Most of us were communists, by which I mean members of the Communist Party and faithful readers of its press. ... Some of us, though in fact very few, were communists by family tradition. They got on so well with their fathers, and still lived in such sweet dreams that it would have been cruel to disturb them. For the majority, it was simply a glorious chance that had brought us into contact with the philosophy teacher who guided our work and our reading. ... We knew he was a communist, and under his influence, though without telling him, we became so too."⁴⁴ And yet, as I have been at pains to show, Debray's militancy was not a function of the Party – a concept

⁴² Jean Daniel, *L'Ère des ruptures* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), 183.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁴ Régis Debray, "Some Literary Reflections," *Prison Writings*, 197-198.

central to the Marxist tradition, but under-theorized in Debray's post-Latin American writings – but that of a more mercenary, adventuring nature. An oft-repeated sentiment in Debray's writings holds that “staying in one and place and being promoted spoils a revolutionary. The veteran will turn tyrant or pirate, bureaucrat or delinquent (or any combination of these).”⁴⁵ Besides, Debray, as with most well educated intellectuals, never felt at ease within the rank-and-file of the Party. Thus, should we be surprised, irrespective of Daniel's avocations Debray's loyalty to the PCF, that Debray would publish an open letter to the Party, attacking its worldview, and announcing his own decampment to the PS?

Debray's break with communism in *Lettre* is unusual in comparison with the absolute renunciations of the PCF that were appearing every week in France. *Lettre* eschews the millenarian rhetoric of these apostates for a sympathetic and balanced, but nevertheless sharply critical tone. The text is prefaced with a kind of valentine, tellingly expressed in a conditional mood: “Because if communism is capable of creating men of this kind of nobility [referring to Cuban revolutionaries], then yes, I am and remain a communist. ... I write to you because of your roots and your worldview. The first connect you to the history of World Revolution and to the international communist movement; the second ties you to Marxism-Leninism.”⁴⁶ But of course, communism in France has all but reneged on its once venerable charter according to Debray. The nature of his critique is the second atypical feature of the text: the PCF is not faulted primarily for maintaining a bleary-eyed and outmoded loyalty to Stalinism (although this will be a subtext of sorts), nor for failing to capitalize on the revolutionary moment of 68 (which Debray denied was revolutionary), but for torpedoing the much-vaunted Union of the Left, and by extension, for blocking French socialism from renationalizing. He writes, “if the Union of the

⁴⁵ *Praised Be Our Lords*, 93.

⁴⁶ Régis Debray, *Lettre aux communistes français et à quelques autres* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 10-11.

Left, version 1977, is broken, it's because you wanted it that way. To speak frankly, because you *decided* this. It will not be without consequences – for you, for France, for Europe and the world.” Distancing himself from the anti-communist zeitgeist, Debray continues, “‘Not another one’, you will say. ‘It must be the season! At least give me a reprieve from all this confusion’. I have not exactly followed the same path as my former classmates. As far as anti-communism, my credentials leave something to be desired. All who matter on the Left (of the Seine) take me for a rancid Stalinist.”⁴⁷

Debray first reproaches the PCF for what he sees as an historically embedded contradiction in its motivations. On the one hand, a divided Left tends to favor the PCF at the expense of the PS, as demonstrated by the elections of 1958 and 1962. But, of course, a divided Left also strengthens the Right. On the other hand, a united Left tends to boost both parties, but also favor the Socialists over the Communists. Thus, since “the dynamic of unity works in your disfavor, while the dynamic of division works in your favor”, the PCF would naturally appear to support the Union while sabotaging it from within – exactly the course it had taken throughout the 70s according to Debray.⁴⁸ Whereas Debray only months before had despaired of the possibility of revolution in Europe and entreated would be militants to take up arms with the oppressed of the Third World, *Lettre* finds him more sanguine about effecting change within Europe, but specifically as *change*, and not necessarily as *revolution*. Indeed, the perspectival reversal, which began with the European viewing Europe from Latin America (“Time and Politics”), and then oscillated between the two vantage points in *Modeste contribution*, at last completes its movement: the European now sees the Third World from Europe’s perspective.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

Commenting on a passage from Marx, Debray writes, “It’s in the new countries that the old filthy business finds its ideal terrain. If something *new* is to happen, it will be in the Old World, or nowhere.”⁴⁹ Debray now turns his attention to the “golden triangle of modern socialism” – the Catholic bloc of France, Spain, and Italy – and suggests that France is the linchpin, the link between Northern Protestant Europe, and its Southern Catholic rim.

Emmanuel Todd, it will be recalled, made a similar observation in *Le Fou et le prolétaire* (also 1978), but put it to different use: as France was home to, in roughly equal proportions, both the absolute egalitarian family pattern of Southern Europe and the differentialist stem family of Northern Europe, it was ideally situated to bridge Europe’s cultural divide. For Todd, this meant partnering up with Germany to found a working European State that might at last liquidate the schizophrenic social relations persistently dogging the nation-state since the nineteenth century. Debray, however, arrived at the opposite conclusion. While the French exception might eventually help foster broader European unity (qua revolution), for Debray, it was an invitation to reframe revolutionary struggle in national terms, to return to the ancestral socialist tradition of France. The upshot will often have an unapologetically Francocentric ring to it:

It’s not our fault if history made France the country *par excellence* of socialism: Cabet invented the *word* communism, which could already be found in the work of Restif de la Bretonne; the *concept* came from Marx in 1844 while he kicked around in Paris; the Commune gave to the *thing* its first and yet exemplary incarnation (allowing Marx to forge the instruments of transition, such as the dictatorship of the proletariat, among

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 15. The un-cited, emended passage is from *The German Ideology*, and reads, “This development of productive forces (which itself implies the actual empirical existence of men in their *world-historical*, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it *want* is merely made general, and with *destitution* the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced. . . .” See *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 161-162. Debray’s truncation of the quote matches that of Trotsky’s in *The Revolution Betrayed*, where the passage is marshaled to denounce the Soviet regime’s incapacity to eliminate and transcend “the struggle for individual existence.” See Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, trans. Max Eastman (Garden City, NY: Dover, 2004), part III, chapter 4. Could this be roughly what Debray is thinking with respect to the Third World, that it is still mired in the struggle for existence?

others); the Internationale was the *song* of the martyrs of Belleville; the red *flag*, before circling the globe, had to circle the Champ-de-Mars one summer day in 1791⁵⁰

Revolution had to be a national enterprise before it ever became an international one, and Europe's hopes would have to be vested in France, "whether one likes it or not, even if Francocentrism makes you smile."

In failing to embrace this program, the PCF ceased to represent French socialism for Debray. He complains thus, "I don't see why we should be condemned to assume, under the banner of *internationalism*, the patriotism of others – the Soviets, Cubans, Vietnamese, etc. – without taking up first and foremost our own national history, which is not only that of an imperialist nation, but also that of a nation which sowed the workers' movement across the world." The inward turn of Debray's thinking will assemble around two new *topoi* in *Lettre*. First, there is a new interest in the State and its multiple apparatuses of legitimation and domination (Debray owes much, as will be shown later, to Althusser on this point). Just as the 68 revolts seemed only to happen in France for Debray, the world economic crisis of the 70s also had the most profound and contradictory effects in France: "If the economic crisis of capitalism is global, it is only in France, by virtue of *political* effects, that it opens a break in the state apparatus, provoked by a like void [*vide*] in social consciousness [*la conscience sociale*]." ⁵¹ The old Leninist preoccupation with State power, as against the many burgeoning strands of Marxism that will de-emphasize the role of the State and necessity of taking it over, will continue to suffuse Debray's writings.

The other *topoi* will be a new fixation on the democratic process. Clearly, embracing the Union of the Left requires one to discard one's belief in the violent takeover of the State, and to

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16, 17.

submit to the sovereignty of the democratic political system. And yet Debray's relationship with this process would be ambiguous. On the one hand, universal suffrage has always been the bugbear of revolution in France: "It's in France more than anywhere else that universal suffrage has fulfilled for two centuries its principal role as an instrument of reaction." But at the same time, the socially determined base, where the economic struggle between classes is supposed to play out, cannot be superimposed on the level of political determinations in France. As the latter will decide the nature of struggle, "this world turned upside down forces us to submit to its law, in spite of the most obvious dictates of Marxist logic, and the laws presiding over social development."⁵² Paradoxically, revolution will be impossible *through* the electoral process, but also impossible *against* it. An intelligent, realist socialism, however, which takes its cues from the successes of Chilean Popular Unity, could offer a resolution to this impasse, and revitalize the *political* momentum of socialism.

The novelty of Allende's Chile was not only to have shown a peaceful, democratic route to socialism, but also to have eschewed economism for a distinctly political struggle against the bourgeoisie: "The Chilean hypothesis was the transformation of the class character of the State *without its prior destruction.*" Thus, from within the bourgeois state, the popular movement could break – though "the phase of transition is long and tortuous" – the power of the dominating class, nationalize industry, and redistribute the wealth. The Parliamentary route to socialism was thus a necessary evil, "corresponding to an historically necessary phase."⁵³ It had eventually failed in Chile not from lack of resolve, but from a lack of "economic and geographic means." The French model of socialism, on the other hand, was better equipped to carry out this mission by virtue of its political history and superstructure. Such being the case, Debray could announce

⁵² *Ibid.*, 37, 40.

⁵³ *La Critique des armes*, 275, 319.

at a Socialist gathering in 1974, “the socialism we desire is not a socialism like others: it is infinitely superior because it will incorporate all the historical gains of our country – and France has an exceptional political maturity, the fruit of so many centuries of popular and democratic struggle, which will find its culmination in the socialism that France will invent.”⁵⁴

How might we explain Debray’s makeover as a republican, especially one who is now suspicious of communism, Third Worldism, and democracy? The first-named, as we have seen, represented an outmoded internationalism, which was no longer compatible with the needs of French, and more broadly, European socialism. The latter two were reprocessed in the anti-totalitarian shuffle of the mid 70s, leaving the (socialist) Left in an awkward position vis à vis its old standards. Through the presidential election of 1974, “democracy” had become synonymous with the market-friendly, moderate reformism of Giscard, who issued a widely read summation of his political philosophy in the second year of his term, *Démocratie française* (1976). Giscard’s political Atlanticism, seeking greater rapprochement with Anglo-American sphere, was ratified by an anti-totalitarian discourse which indissolubly linked the French tradition of democracy with totalitarianism. François Furet and Claude Lefort would provide the most sophisticated articulations of this position – the former in historical-historiographical terms, through a re-reading of Tocqueville and Cochin, the latter in historico-philosophical terms, through a re-reading of Kantorowicz.⁵⁵ For both thinkers, the foundational moment of French democracy during the Revolution carried within it the germs of a new kind of tyrannical politics, later recognizable, in its more mature, Soviet iteration, as totalitarianism. Many intellectuals on

⁵⁴ *Lettre aux communistes*, 58; Régis Debray, *L’espérance au purgatoire* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1980), xx.

⁵⁵ For Furet’s views, see François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), especially part II, chapter 3; and Christofferson, 229-267. For Lefort: Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986); and Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 163, 195-269.

the Left, Jacques Rancière for instance, would attempt to rescue democracy –especially in its French incarnation – from the drubbing it had received from the anti-totalitarians.⁵⁶ Others, like Debray, would seek a republican route to the renewal of the French political tradition.

Third Worldism would suffer a fate similar to that of “democracy” in the 70s: dispersed and thereby neutralized in one sense, roundly attacked and nearly destroyed by the anti-totalitarian infantry in another. In the 1960s, Third Worldism had signified a radical solidarity with the oppressed of the Third World, often with the implicit premise that the “wretched of the earth” constituted the new revolutionary vanguard. We have already noted how Debray carried this commitment to new dimensions, from the written expression of solidarity with Sartre, to the active, but temporary engagement of Jeanson and the *porteurs des valises*, to the full-time, fraternal solidarity of the transplanted guerrilla fighter. Once Europe conceded the loss of its various empires, and the gathering momentum of New Lefterian protest had been defeated handily in the revolutions of 68, Third Worldism lost much of its immediacy as an intellectual position. Its rhetoric was increasingly marshaled to support worthy, but plainly non-revolutionary causes in Asia and Africa, most notably the Vietnamese “boat people” of the late 70s – a cause so ecumenically appealing that even Raymond Aron could endorse it. Paige Arthur notes how regionalist movements in France pulled on the language of decolonization to support regional autonomy.⁵⁷ One could thus be a Third Worldist in one’s backyard – a guerrilla with a bus pass. The other development was more conjuncturally linked to the critique of totalitarianism. From this standpoint, the quick lapse of recently liberated colonies into unstable, tyrannical regimes was further evidence of the implicit totalitarian nature of all revolutionary

⁵⁶ See, *inter alia*, Rancière’s *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London; New York: Verso, 2006). The first chapter focuses especially on Furet’s critique of the Revolution.

⁵⁷ Paige Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London; New York: Verso, 2010), 190-192.

movements. This conclusion impelled many sectors of the French intelligentsia to collectively renounce their erstwhile commitment to the Third World, and, as was the fashion, to scapegoat anyone foolish enough to defend it. Who better than Human Rights activist and Sarkozy appointee, Bernard Kouchner, to expose the hypocrisy of Third Worldism? “And so the *maquisards* of present-day Cambodia persist without anyone being too concerned. None of the old sympathizers with Asia protest in the streets, nor do our progressives risk speaking out after a million deaths. I already hear the quibbling over the figures, the same who bickered over those of the Gulag.”⁵⁸ Thus was Third Worldism disarmed on two fronts.

Kouchner’s *sortie* was part of a larger debate about the legacies of Third Worldism and decolonization that took place around the pages of *Nouvel Observateur*, later to be anthologized in a small book edited by Jacques Julliard, *Le Tiers monde et la gauche*. The authors consist mainly of former Third World activists and partisans of the Algerian cause who now question the wisdom of their earlier positions. Many of the contributions are on the order of Kouchner’s, that is, a syllabus of errors, detailing the misdemeanors of Third Worldism, followed by an impassioned plea for Human Rights. Julliard pins the blame on the perverted nationalisms of the Third World, concluding, with apparent agony, “The moment has come to wake ourselves up: *the right of peoples* [droit des peuples] *has become the principal instrument for the strangulation of the rights of man*. We continue to live and reason from the 1848 idea of an indissoluble alliance between the principle of national autonomy and the principle of liberties against the State’s prerogative.” Only by drawing failed or crippled states into a solvent international order and asking them to surrender some of their sovereignty will there be any hope of waylaying such perversions: “However long and narrow it is, this path is the only one possible today. Every

⁵⁸ Bernard Kouchner, “Les bons et les mauvais morts”, *Le Tiers monde et la gauche*, ed. Jacques Julliard (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 47.

other attitude makes us accomplices of the executioners.”⁵⁹ Some of the contributors would dissent from Julliard’s lapidary verdict, denouncing the abstraction and Eurocentrism of any pretension to construct a universal legal framework for patrolling Third World tyranny.⁶⁰ It would amount to a new form of colonialism for these authors. Debray’s response hews closely to this critique at many points, but also suggests a new and surprising perspective on the supposed tyranny of Third World regimes.

In “Il faut des esclaves aux hommes libres” (1978), Debray argues, in a thesis that is similar to the Dependency Theory arguments coming out of Latin America in the 1960s, that the rich countries of North America and Europe owe their prosperity, including the enjoyment of liberties and rights, to the permanent exploitation of the poor, undeveloped countries of the Third World – “the *here* is explained by the over-there.” The doctrine of universal human rights is, for Debray, an ideology in the classical Marxist sense: a system of ideas or legal norms that obscures and thus perpetuates a relationship of domination, in this case the asymmetry of the world market. Human rights effectively absolves the rich Western states from acknowledging and coming to terms with its historical responsibility for the “backwardness” of Third World states. Debray writes acidly, “The liberal-imperialist system needs a short memory and a low viewpoint to conceal from view [*escamoter*] the millions of bodies that both propped up its future and put it on a pedestal.”⁶¹ This concert of liberal powers – though chiefly Carterist America and Giscardian France – will tout human rights so long as their safeguarding does not interfere with overseas economic and financial interests. When it does, however, and “the contracts of

⁵⁹ Jacques Julliard, “Le Tiers monde et la gauche”, *Ibid.*, 38-39, 40.

⁶⁰ These would include Jean Lacouture, Thomico Sisowath, Gérard Chailand, Jean Rous, and Claude Bourdet.

⁶¹ Régis Debray, “Il faut des esclaves aux hommes libres,” *Ibid.*, 89, 93. This text originally appeared in *Le Monde diplomatique* in October of 1978, and later in a collection of Debray’s journalistic writings, *L’espérance au purgatoire*, op. cit., 64-71.

exploitation connecting the metropole to its satellites are in danger of being broken”, “the rights of man cease to apply.” If economic interests are the motive, human rights the cover-up, then the principal cheerleaders are the intellectuals, who are able, by purveying human rights, “to reduce psychic tension to its lowest level for their clientele.”⁶²

Debray’s critique has the advantage, as against the ad hoc or offhand commentaries provided by many of the debate’s contributors, of giving a structural account of Europe’s relationship with the Third World, and the ideological impulses that sustained it. As compelling as this explanation is, it is, however, neither completely original, nor does it bring us any closer to understanding Debray’s views on a suitable counter-model to European-Third World relations. He offers one thought in the latter direction, namely that “the Cambodian people do not suffer from an excess of the state, but on the contrary and to the point of agony, from an absence of a State – juridically and practically independent of the arbitrariness of the party.”⁶³ Debray’s recommendation is conveyed negatively through the critique of human rights, a discourse which prevents “the promotion of the *legal state*, whose existence is the first condition for the exercise of individual rights.” Julliard, in his summation of the debate, notes with an approving nod the irony of Debray’s position: “One is surprised to see a Marxist like Régis Debray fall upon an extremely juridical definition of the State, and affirm, in the name of this definition, that Cambodia under Pol Pot suffers from an absence of a State; but one cannot but approve of his will to promote the *legal state* as the first condition for the existence of individual rights.”⁶⁴ Indeed, if this position does mark a considerable shift, what does it signify for the evolution of

⁶² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

Debray's thought, and how can it be reconciled with the views minted in *Modeste contribution* and *Lettre aux communistes*?

If anything, "Il faut des esclaves aux hommes libres" signals the waning of the possibility of revolution in the Third World. This hope, which Debray nourished from *The Revolution in the Revolution?* (1967) to *Modeste contribution* (1978), albeit with less and less conviction, gave way at last to a more cynical outlook: the Third World was now reduced to servitude in the new global order, and no amount of support from European intellectuals and fellow-travelers could help undo this relationship of domination. Was the only option, as suggested in *Modeste contribution*, to wait for demography to take its revenge? In fact, Debray's approach to the problem will only reinforce the nationalist-republican program that we have flushed out of *Modeste contribution* and *Lettre*: national autonomy would remain, vintage 1921, the *elementum* of the international system, while an intelligent and effective foreign policy would have to respect and foster this principle. Thus we reach a critical juncture in Debray's thought: if, as all three texts from 1978 consistently argue, the world is now dominated by a (neo-) liberal-imperialist system, dissolving national boundaries, blurring the lines of class composition, then a suitable antidote cannot be sought in ideologies of like abstraction – i.e. human rights – which only replicate and mask the relations of domination, but rather in the nation itself as a bastion of resistance to globalizing trends. The national at last supplants the international in Debray's thinking.

In particular, we should note the nimbleness with which Debray maneuvers through the thicket of debates surrounding totalitarianism and the politics of the Union of the Left. Without denying the abject state of Europe's former colonies in the Third World, or quibbling with the scale of atrocities committed in these countries, Debray effectively decouples, with his "weak

state” thesis, the applied category of totalitarianism from the politics of Marxism. Excessive violence visited upon one’s own people is a product of a weak state, not a strong, totalitarian one: thus the communism-totalitarianism link made by so many of his interlocutors is inapplicable in the Third World. This position did not, however, prevent Debray from giving a systematic critique of the Soviet Union in *Lettre*. The problem in the USSR would not be, as it would for revisionists like J. Arch Getty, the weakness of its state, but the rigidity of “real existing socialism” in the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ Debray has recourse to a metaphorical language of scientific systems that will soon become a hallmark of his work: “The absence of distinction (between the Party and the State, the direction of the Party and the base of the Party, society and the State) engenders the absence of circulation, which necessarily engenders a *uniform temperature* at every point of the system – the statistical definition of death.”⁶⁶

Moreover, we recall how Emmanuel Todd in *Le Fou et le prolétaire* crudely drew upon the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss to castigate all Marxist thought as Manichean and thus primitive. Debray, without the pretention of characterization all Marxist thought as such, arrives at a critical conclusion on the USSR via a similar path: “The history of the species has already known societies ‘which produce very little disorder – that physicists call entropy – and which have a tendency to maintain themselves indefinitely in their initial state. This explains what appear to us as societies without history and progress’ (Lévi-Strauss) ... These are ‘primitive societies’ ...”⁶⁷ The rigidity of the Soviet system is not the outcome of any historical contingencies of development, but rather of a certain ideological-structural weakness, originating

⁶⁵ See the very convincing analysis in J. Arch Getty, *The Origin of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁶⁶ *Lettre aux communistes français*, 85.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

in the foundational principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this moment of anthropological excavation, Debray strikes upon what will be the basis of his own political anthropology, later translated through Kurt Gödel's theorem of incompleteness, but here given a more rudimentary gloss: "No system without a fulcrum. That of 'real existing socialism' (Souslov) orbits around a *point of equilibrium* called 'the directing role of the communist party'. It constitutes the inviolate principle of the system, and is accordingly given sacred or consecrated status. The sacred and enclosure [*fermeture*] imply one another, and it is with and by this principle that system continues to exist as such."⁶⁸ As an ideological-structural problem, Debray's thesis about the Soviet Union extends to all "real existing socialisms" – "Existing socialist societies live and think on the model of"

In other words, Debray's condemnation of Communism is not as dissimilar to that of the anti-totalitarians as we once thought. To be sure, he avoids the over-used category of "totalitarianism" to characterize communist regimes, and circumvents the simplistic tendency to brand all Marxist thought as inherently totalitarian, but he nevertheless sees an indissoluble, structural link between the ideology and tyranny of actual communist states. All the shortcomings of the PCF were peripheral in comparison to this one structuring flaw: its first principle, namely the dictatorship of the proletariat, was a flawed doctrine. Thus, like many of his interlocutors in France, he will turn away from history toward an a-historical, anthropological rethinking of political and social activity during the "anti-totalitarian crisis." Years later, in *Les empires contre l'europe* (1985), Debray would resubmit a critical balance sheet of the Soviet Union, this time in comparison with its rival superpower, marshaling a wealth of historical and comparative observations to presage its imminent collapse. If Debray turned away from history as an explanatory tool, it was only temporary, a natural symptom for the adoption of a new

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

analytical system. Marxism-Leninism, as Althusser pointed out, decisively broke with “every philosophical anthropology,” as its understanding of human culture and behavior was dialectically synthesized in its philosophy of history.⁶⁹ As this model decomposed in Debray’s head, he would reassemble a critical system by first separating an anthropological and historical analytic, formerly unified in the doctrine of historical materialism, and then recombining them into a grander synthesis. Thus, at this critical point, we often find Debray’s thought in transit between these two strands, both historical and a-historical.

By way of summation, we have zoomed in on one year in the long career of Régis Debray, and carefully attended to the subtle transformations his work would undergo in the period of anti-totalitarian crisis. As the ten-year commemoration of 1968, and the twin crises of anti-totalitarianism and anti-Third Worldism move in and out of the frame, we observe how Debray has completely inverted his perspective on the relationship between Europe and the Third World: the latter is now seen through the eyes of the former. If *Modeste contribution* clung to the last thread of a less and less certain Third Worldism, then *Lettre* and “Il faut des esclaves” decisively foreclose this prospect, finding revolution no longer to be possible in an enslaved Third World, stuck in an endless cycle of reproduction. Accompanying this bleak diagnostic is the positing of neo-liberalism as the regnant regime of accumulation – a system with fundamentally new methods of surplus extraction, new standards of labor, and new forms of legitimation and domination. This paradigm, it should be noted, is more or less assumed by Debray, and is never submitted to any kind of rigorous definition or analysis. It simply appears after the 1960s and coincides with the Giscard presidency. Nevertheless, it is foundational for Debray’s incipient critical system, which will be particularly attentive, in the classical fashion of Western Marxism, to the superstructural contradictions of this system – the cultural and political

⁶⁹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 227.

forms of legitimation and domination. We have also seen Debray substitute his former allegiances to communism and the PCF for a new trust in the program of the Socialist Party. This conversion corresponds to a renewed interest, which was given only a refractory treatment in *Modeste contribution*, in the nation-state, not only as the proper locus of sovereignty, but also as the site of a greater struggle against the centrifugal tendencies of the world-market. Debray also anticipates in these texts the principal anthropological thesis on which the rest of his work will be cantilevered, and a structural critique of neo-liberalism's therapists, the intellectuals. Before addressing the former and thus completing Debray's path to the sacred, we will first look at the latter, which is chronologically the last step on this path.

Intellectuals

In the Latin American cycle of writings, Debray's position on intellectuals is open and broad-minded. One of his earliest texts, "Le rôle de l'intellectuel (1966)," declares the distinction between manual and intellectual labor to be a relic of feudalism that implicitly signaled a metaphysical fatalism between the serf and the lord. Capitalism perpetuates this distinction with its division of labor, "but no revolutionary can accept it. To organize, promote, and develop the culture [of revolution] is a political task that belongs to the Party; to organize the Party, to organize the Marxist-Leninist avant-garde is the task of the intellectual: the two must work together."⁷⁰ In fact, the division of labor within the revolutionary movement need not be as schematic as this at all, as there is no one form of political militancy: "To be a militant in a capitalist country is to distribute flyers on the street, collect money for the Party, and above all, to prepare oneself for armed insurrection. But to be a militant is also to combat ideologically the class enemy through one's intellectual labor, as through one's artistic labor, which rips away

⁷⁰ Régis Debray, "Le rôle de l'intellectuel," *Essais sur l'Amérique latine* (Paris: Maspero, 1967), 185.

from the dominant class its monopoly on beauty.”⁷¹ The voluntarism of this early definition is of course entirely consistent with Debray’s own activity as a political militant, and speaks to an understanding of the intellectual that is humanistic, expansive, and unambiguously positive. As a species, intellectuals are powerful, revolutionary, and can overcome the reified class distinctions immanent to capitalist society.

As late as 1973-74, Debray would still be tinkering with this Leninist conception of the intellectual. In *La Critique des armes* (1973), Debray writes, “There is no phrase of [Lenin’s] *What Is to Be Done?* that cannot be directly translated, without detour, into the language of the *foco*: indeed, one can replace ‘organization of professional revolutionaries with ‘political-military avant-garde’ without destroying the internal coherence of the Leninist argumentation.”⁷² Once again, the revolutionary vocation of the intellectual is taken for granted, and is in fact always taken for granted in Debray’s early works, as the party is seen as the true locus of revolutionary organization in the Latin American context. Accordingly, “the true problem is not: party or guerilla?, but: what sort of party? How is it built? What relationship does it maintain with the masses?”⁷³ When Debray turns his attention to Europe and France in the mid 70s, he inverts the relationship between intellectual and party to suit the specificities of European conditions: intellectuals constitute a much more powerful force in France than in Latin America, and are typically outside of the Party, if not openly hostile to it. And, what’s more, intellectuals have become not only more powerful in the present global conjuncture, owing in large part to the hypertrophy of the media, but also more reactionary as the *porte-parole* of the State. Debray’s imminent work on intellectuals, most immediately *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* and *Le*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷² *La Critique des armes*, 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 175.

Scribe, ambitiously sight the “invariant function of intellectuals” within a complex social and political system, and ultimately, the reasons for their collective strength and reactionary tendencies.

Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France, which created a minor sensation a few years after its publication in 1979, is the book for which Debray is best known. It corresponds to and should be contextualized within a new paradigm for understanding the intellectual that arose with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in the late 60s. Formerly, debates surrounding the intellectual were couched in humanist terms: “betrayal,” “commitment,” “truth” had, since the Dreyfus Affair, been the currency used to understand their function in France. The thread running from Julien Benda’s *Trahison des clercs* (1927) and Paul Nizan’s *Les Chiens de gardes* (1932), through to Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) and Aron’s *L’Opium des intellectuels* (1955) took the writer’s self-definition at face value, and maintained an implicit separation between the intellectual’s power and his or her socio-economic position. In short, these texts lacked a systemic, structural weight. Bourdieu’s innovation was to treat the cultural realm as a semi-autonomous “field” of production with its own set of oppositions and determinations.

This field operates as a kind of economy in miniature with intellectuals in competition to accumulate the most “cultural capital”, and ultimately “to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”⁷⁴ The field is semi-autonomous because it connects back to a larger field of power whose polarization helps structure the cultural-intellectual field. In this case, as Bourdieu argues, the influence of the field of power is inverted: the artists and intellectuals with the most cultural capital will be those who are seen to be the least beholden to the channels of power,

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed”, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 42. The closest analogue to Debray’s work, however, is *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

while lesser intellectuals, stationed at the bottom of the hierarchy, will align with powerful agents (external to the field) as leverage against the hegemonic intellectuals. As the confluence of two histories, that of the positions intellectuals occupy, and also of the history their “dispositions”, the structuration of the cultural-intellectual field happens quasi-mechanically, “almost independently of the agents’ consciousness and wills.”⁷⁵ The import of Bourdieu’s theory is therefore to purge the humanist ballast from the sociology of the intellectual, and to recast the debate in structural terms. The object of analysis is not so much the content of the intellectual’s self-definition, but the act of defining and its resonance within the cultural-intellectual field.

The structural orientation of Debray’s approach in *Pouvoir intellectuel* and *Le Scribe* converges with Bourdieu’s on many points, so much so that Debray would comment, “The problematic of this text [Bourdieu’s “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur”, 1966], which I discovered only recently, is so close to my own that I have gone over certain of my formulations and clarified them as a result of reading it.”⁷⁶ Similarities aside, we need to appreciate the significant departures Debray makes from Bourdieu’s precedents, both in terms of the internal trajectory of Debray’s writings, and the local historical conjuncture that informs it. For one, the leading theme of *Pouvoir intellectuel* is the mediatic function of intellectuals, their role, to put it in abstract terms, as an interface between two unlike surfaces. In the foreword to *Pouvoir intellectuel*, Debray relates, “this text originally concluded a larger theoretical work, *Traité de*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

⁷⁶ Régis Debray, *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France*, 119n. Unless otherwise noted, translations will be taken from David Macey’s excellent English edition, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France* (hereafter TWC)(London: NLB, 1981).

médiologie, which is about to be published.”⁷⁷ As such, the metastasis of the media-form in the post-68 emergence of neo-liberalism, of which Debray complained bitterly in *Modeste contribution*, naturally acted as a powerful stimulus for Debray’s thinking in *Pouvoir intellectuel*. The meteoric rise of the “Nouveaux philosophes”⁷⁸ in 1976-77, the tsunami-like backlash of the media against the “Nouvelle droite” in 1978-79, and the crescendoing popularity of the talk show *Apostrophes* all reinforced Debray’s suspicions about the pernicious effects of media and their enlargement in neo-liberal society. The success of *Pouvoir intellectuel* owes more to these local stimuli than Debray was willing to admit, for, in a sense, the text is a mordant polemic masquerading as an objective analysis. Much of its readability and charm – which far surpass any Bourdieu text – is staked on Debray’s literary talents as an ironist. To wit, before moving on to a serious sociological analysis, *Pouvoir intellectuel* opens with a sophisticated jeer (borrowing from Hegel and Balzac): since intellectuals have no self-consciousness, and are thus equivalent to animals, the appropriate taxonomy would have to be zoological.

In the analytical sections of *Pouvoir intellectuel* Debray moves beyond the idea of the intelligentsia as a class, since its existence is irreducible to its place in the material process of production. “Caste,” “corporation,” and “group” are quickly dismissed as well. He rather prefers to see the intelligentsia as a “social category” straddling several areas at once: from liberal professionals to wage earners at the state level, from senior managerial personnel to self-employed artisans. The point is that intellectuals exist as a quantitative force that can be

⁷⁷ *Pouvoir intellectuel*, 13. The larger work in question is *Cours de médiologie générale*, which would be at last published in 1991.

⁷⁸ The “nouveaux philosophes” were the subject of countless attacks from the Left in the mid 70s. Apparently, Althusser had beseeched his students to refrain from intervening publicly against them, because, according to his former student Dominique Lecourt, “he reckoned that there were no grounds for taking the group seriously as such.” The ingenuity of Debray’s structural critique of the “nouveaux philosophes” is to explain and attack their predominance without taking seriously their philosophy. For Lecourt’s comments, see *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy since the mid-1970s*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London; New York: Verso, 2001), x.

counted, broken down, and studied (which Debray assuredly does). But, in fact, Debray is much more preoccupied with the intellectual's qualitative function in the social-political system, which has to do with his or her relationship to power. In the functional definition, "the value of an intellectual is calculated on the basis of his power of social communication."⁷⁹ If the intellectual acts as a kind of medium between two unlike "surfaces" – these being the State (the subject of power) on the one hand, and the people (the object) – then the more access a given individual has to these channels of communication, the more power he or she will command – keeping in mind, of course, that access is not a matter of individual talent, but is rather socially determined. This system naturally produces a demarcation between a "high" and "low" intelligentsia: "That group socially authorized to express individual opinions on public affairs independently of the normal civic procedures to which ordinary citizens are subject will be referred to as the *high intelligentsia*, to distinguish it from the mere *professionals of the intellect*"⁸⁰ – teachers, doctors, scientists, researchers, etc.

In anticipation of the socio-religious analytic of *Le Scribe*, and linking up with Julien Benda's description of the intellectual as a cleric, Debray provides a running comparison of the intelligentsia to the clergy of the Old Regime, likewise split into lower and higher contingents. The dynamic within their respective ranks would be homologous: "The feelings that the lower intelligentsia inspires in the high intelligentsia are rather like those the second order of the clergy inspired in the first, two hundred years ago: a mixture of scorn and fear. The high intelligentsia despises the lower as a *backward* class and fears it as *dangerous* one. Backward because it is still duped by dated 'vulgates' (Marxism, progressivism) and outdated 'mythologies' (laicity, the working class, public service, nationalization); dangerous because, being made up mainly of civil

⁷⁹ *TWC*, 169.

⁸⁰ *TWC*, 32.

servants with socialist leaning, it may identify its own emergence as a ruling class with the domination of a civil society by a bureaucratic state.”⁸¹ In moral-political terms, the balance sheet of this analysis should be transparent given what we have seen in Debray’s earlier texts: the anti-Statist, anti-Marxist epigones of the high intelligentsia co-opt the airwaves by taking the moral high-ground against all socialist politics, and by capitalizing on the “scoop” of anti-totalitarianism, in effect short-circuiting the numerically more powerful and politically more honorable sectors of the lower intelligentsia. The polemical fury of *Pouvoir intellectuel* is thus reserved for the highest echelons of the intelligentsia – those most conspicuous, influential, and power-hungry – and much of the book will be devoted to a phenomenological description of the vast machinery of self-promotion and corruption on which these intellectuals rely. Indeed, “If a history of ambition could stand as a prologue to an applied mediology, a treatise on corruption could well form its epilogue – or table of contents.”⁸²

That Debray, as a member of the species “intellectual”, can move through the institutional network of French culture with the familiarity of an insider lends greater force and toxicity to this corrosive polemic. The “New Prestige” details the process by which authors are “made” or consecrated – another isomorphism with Bourdieu – in the Parisian literary establishment. The “New Logistics” attests to the dissolution of recognizable disciplinary identities for public intellectuals: it no longer matters that one is a philosopher so long as one has all the marks of a philosopher. The “New Strategies” pays homage to the economic incentives underwriting the mediocrity of cultural production: “There would seem, rather, to be an inverse relation between labor time and the volume of remuneration. A novel that cost me three month’s work may sell one hundred thousand copies and give me enough to live on for three years. A

⁸¹ *TWC*, 197.

⁸² *TWC*, 141.

theoretical work that cost me ten years' work will sell one thousand copies, all but ruin my publisher and reduce my family to living on bread and water." Debray complements these pleasantly derisive culture-as-honeypot chapters with a chain of searing differential analyses: a chapter on the inherent sexism of the national cultural apparatus in which "relegation means feminization; promotion means masculinity"; another on the asymmetrical scale of incomes for which "salaries in the mass media are out of all proportion with those in the university or publishing."⁸³ Thus, just as Debray disfigured the revolutionaries of 68 into the dupes of capitalism, he makes the intellectuals into the unwitting servants of state power. This unflattering picture of the intellectual depicts a creature that "always homes in on power. When it comes to tracking down the site from which the ideological direction of a given society can best be exercised, the watch-dog is the best of all hounds." In another passage, he likens intellectuals to "iron filings" that magnetically cluster wherever the potential for promotion is the greatest.⁸⁴ It so happens that these sites of clustering naturally occur in places where "the asymmetry between sender and receiver of messages is the greatest," or, in other words, where the directives of state power encounter the most resistance.

As will be obvious from the implicit narrative of decline happening in the passages cited above, *Pouvoir intellectuel* is not solely a synchronic sociological profile of the Parisian intelligentsia, but is also an historical one that tracks large-scale changes in the French cultural apparatus. The methodological procedure of *Pouvoir intellectuel* is of fundamental importance for our study of Debray's thought, for it crowns the synthesis of two narratives – one static and eternal, the other cumulative and historical – into a single composite system, and thus inaugurates the reconstitution of Debray's former Marxist-Leninist analytic into a more

⁸³ *TWC*, 161, 172, 185.

⁸⁴ *TWC*, 131, 48.

idiosyncratic and original one. Though Debray will later refine both narratives, the formal composition of the system will remain essentially unchanged. In *Pouvoir intellectuel*, the history of the intelligentsia begins in the nineteenth century with the industrial revolution and the dawn of mass literacy, a time when the precipitous rise of the newspaper – memorably, Hegel’s substitute for morning prayers – lured intellectuals en masse into the public domain. Here they acquired, by virtue of number and function, a sociological identity, and also, by virtue of the newspaper’s popularity, a considerable degree of social power. For Debray, as for Bourdieu, the intellectual playing field is internally striated, operating according to its own set of rules and power dynamics.⁸⁵ In the age of the newspaper, intellectual capital accrued to those who were able to most successfully commandeer public opinion – a station captured and well-guarded by the *grand écrivain* – Lamartine, Hugo, Zola – for the latter half the nineteenth century. And yet so mutually destructive was the polemical violence of the Dreyfus Affair that it unseated the hegemony of the high intelligentsia, which simply could not weather this storm, and allowed the sector of the low intelligentsia with the most institutional security – the university mandarins – to move into its place and capture the flag of intellectual hegemony. The University, rarely at odds with the State in this era, thus became the privileged locus of intellectual authority during the Third Republic, its foot soldiers, the professors, becoming the chosen bearers.

Authorially, *Pouvoir intellectuel* is a milestone in the trajectory of Debray’s critical-philosophical work. For one, it inaugurates, albeit in broad, under-defined terms, the mediological project that will be the hallmark of Debray’s subsequent writings, resumed with full attention after his appointment in the Mitterrand administration. The idea that material artifacts constitute the “ideological forces of production” around which intellectual production

⁸⁵ There is an important difference between their views on this point, however. Whereas Bourdieu holds that the intellectual field is invariably structured like a market, Debray shows the gradual encroachment of the economy into intellectual life, as a force of immiseration.

coalesces is an implicit and governing assumption of *Pouvoir intellectuel*. To wit, the concept of an “ecosystem” as a way of demarcating different intellectual modes of production – a staple of the mediological system – makes its first appearance in this text with fitful application.

Methodologically, *Pouvoir intellectuel* models a new historical-sociological approach to the study of politics and society, braiding together a static, a-historical picture of social relations with a cumulative historical narrative of culture and economics – in effect recomposing the threads of a Marxist-Leninist system into something more unusual and heterodox. The development of this system is arrested by the fundamentally polemical nature of *Pouvoir intellectuel*, leaving both sides of the critical system to suffer from under-description. There are holes in the historical narrative, and the sociological profile is often in need of deeper relief. Finally, and this applies to the broader historiography of intellectuals, *Pouvoir intellectuel* provides a detailed, complex map of the national cultural apparatus – a stroke virtually unprecedented among theories of the intellectual.⁸⁶ Within Debray’s writings, this procedure – of closing off the national as the object of analysis – completes an arc begun five years earlier in *Les Rendez-vous manqués*, and presaged even earlier in *Journal d’un petit-bourgeois*. Within the historiography of the intellectual, it offered a new hermeneutics for engaging the cultural sphere.

In the 1986 preface to *Pouvoir intellectuel*, Debray would recall that if the latter tried to capture the “function of the intellectual ... from the bottom, through its connections with the material means of communication, and thus the transformation of these means,” then *Le Scribe*

⁸⁶ One notable precedent is Perry Anderson’s “Components of the National Culture”, *New Left Review* 1/50 (July-Aug., 1968), reprinted in *English Questions* (London; New York: Verso, 1992). Edward Said has drawn attention to the similarities of Anderson’s and Debray’s respective analyses, in “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” *Reflections on Exile*, 141-142.

tried to illuminate it “from the top, through its connections with political power.”⁸⁷ At first glance, *Le Scribe* (1980) appears as a deeply historical text, mining ancient and medieval history in its excavation of the “intellectual function.” And yet, the logic of *Le Scribe*’s argument hinges on the invariant function of the intellectual, and so history becomes an archive of examples and precedents, rather than a dynamic force of change. Debray alerts us to this false trail from the first page, and announces the true object of the study: “Thus we have a history book whose plot has no history because it traverses all histories – ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary: the domination of man by man.”⁸⁸ Thus, the study of domination remains the analytical task of *Le Scribe*, in continuity with *Modeste contribution*, “Il faut des esclaves,” and *Pouvoir intellectuel*, but the nature of this domination is given a new interpretation, as is the method for approaching it. For one, the economic framework set up by *Modeste contribution* and extended to new proportions in *Pouvoir intellectuel* is in effect replaced by a more static, anthropological model of the social: marketization and profit motives are noticeably absent from *Le Scribe*, exchanged for the transhistorical categories of “the political”, the “religious” and the social. Likewise, *Le Scribe* finds Debray deepening his critique of Marxism-Leninism. What first emerged as a political attack on the strategy of the PCF in *Lettre*, now reaches into the theoretical edifice of Marxism.

The opening theoretical gambits of *Le Scribe* show Debray straying beyond the epistemological canons of Marxism, engaging in a kind of methodological *bricolage*. Sociologies, histories, ontologies of the intellectual have already been written, but perhaps, remarks Debray, “there remains a small place for a *genealogy* of the personage, which could be detached from its essence.” The correct question, he insists, is “by what conditions is the

⁸⁷ *Pouvoir intellectuel*, 9.

⁸⁸ Régis Debray, *Le Scribe* (Paris: Grasset, 1980), 11.

intellectual possible?”⁸⁹ The first point is clearly indebted to Nietzsche/Foucault’s philosophical-historical method, the second to Kantian transcendental philosophy, which always interrogates the conditions of the possibility of something existing. In neither case is the precedent cited, intellectual generosity not being one of Debray’s strong suits. If ontology, in the above passages, is discarded as a proper way of apprehending the intellectual function, it is smuggled back in where certain activities of the intellectual are in discussion, for example writing: “Still, writing does not act as a mediation between man and a meaning or an object, but between man and man. This tool is intellectual by nature, while its function or its use is political by nature.”⁹⁰ The phenomenological inflexion of this passage – bracketing the essence of a given activity – is borrowed from the conjunction of Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology and Derrida’s deconstruction of it (this time attributed). Readers might also be surprised to find positive references to Alain de Benoist’s hero Georges Dumézil, the doyen of Indo-European anthropology: “In the West, the modern intellectual is but the last incarnation of an ancestral social function, the sacerdotal one, itself connected to the tripartite structure of the Indo-European order, already abundantly excavated by Dumézil and his school.”⁹¹ Finally, and perhaps most forcefully, the theoretical impulses of *Le Scribe* owe much to the nineteenth-century French sociological-anthropological tradition, especially the figures of Comte and Durkheim – the “functional” apparatus deployed by Debray having much in common with the latter’s sociological exposition. Thus, the sources of *Le Scribe* are overwhelmingly French, anthropological, and non-marxist.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁹² Debray also makes use of the sociology of Bourdieu, and the political theory of Blandine Barret-Kriegel.

It would be seemingly difficult to repeat the bravura performance of *Pouvoir intellectuel*, and yet *Le Scribe* manages to sustain the audacious and lucid irony without letting it interfere with the theoretical vocation of the work – indeed Debray’s most theoretical work to date. The principal innovation of *Le Scribe* lies not in the domain of the intellectual – the theory will retain the most recognizable features from *Pouvoir*, as mediatic surfaces and “watch-dogs” of the State – but rather in the arena of the political, for which Debray proposes nothing less than a redefinition of political science: “As long as it will not have produced a rigorous knowledge of the religious, that which has been known until now as ‘political science’ ... will remain in a very bad, or perhaps bumbling state, dealing in simple illustrations or pure inconsistencies ... [i]t being understood that ‘the religious’ is to ‘religion’ what the political is to the politics of political scientists, or the mental to the conscious: the sea to the archipelago.”⁹³ In other words, the political constitutes its own autonomous realm of laws and operations, which are coextensive with those of the religious, or what Debray refers to more specifically as “the sacred”. Against a formidable line of thinking, from the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment to twentieth-century thinkers like Charles Péguy, who tried to separate the mystical from the political, and the mythic from the rational, Debray rather insists on their equivalence. The logic of Debray’s assertion boils down to a “theorem” – here called the “theorem of completeness”, later, and for the remainder of his works, the “theorem of incompleteness” – which holds that for a group to constitute itself as such, in effect to delimit itself from adjacent configurations, there needs to be an absent Other, a structuring element of the group that is itself not part of the group.⁹⁴ The sacred is the element – whether a person, force, or principle – that comes to fill this foundational void. According to this thinking, where there is a group in formation, a principle of the sacred is

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

at work: the logic is automatic and binding. Hence, the political and the religious cannot be logically separated: “religion is the meta-logic of the logic of power.”⁹⁵

Since, according to Debray, a human community can never completely close in on itself, can never achieve full presence, there will be a perennial gap in the constitution of a group, an existential separation [*écart*] between two unequal presences (i.e. an invisible and a visible). Politics, partaking of a religious vocation, is and has always been the art of managing this separation. This is the sense in which politics, like power for Foucault, or ideology (*tout court*) for Althusser, has no history. Intellectuals, or “clerics” as Debray prefers to call them in *Le Scribe*, are constant accessories to power, a *sin qua non* of an anthropological order for which power must negotiate or mediate between two unlike forces. If, as Debray claims, “pure force is a philosophical abstraction”, and, correspondingly, no social formation is conceivable without its members maintaining some imaginary connection to their real conditions of existence, then “there will always be a need for ideologues” as mediators of this symbolic order. Hence, “the cleric is the organ of this referential function inherent to all social formations ... [and] is thus neither ornamental or instrumental, but the very currency of an essential intellectual collective.”⁹⁶ As with the high intelligentsia of *Pouvoir intellectuel*, the cleric of *Le Scribe* comes to share the objectives of power, warring against the forces of chaos and disaggregation, while ensuring the reproduction of its own class (“maintaining a sacerdotal *corps*, a *caste* of administrators, or a bureaucratic *apparatus*”).⁹⁷ Unlike Benda’s renegade intellectuals, Debray’s cleric never betrays, is in fact constitutionally incapable of doing so.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

Notice, intellectuals, though subservient and unprincipled, are unusually powerful in Debray's account. Their propensity to dominate, claims Debray, is embedded in the very project of culture – a bold conceptual move. Indeed, writing itself – here, the Derridean undertones – is an act of domination. He writes, “at the origin of all culture, there is a conservation of signs [*traces*]. It follows that there is no (eventful) culture but that of masters, for the slave's peculiar function is to leave behind no signs. ... It's a law that the one who reflects, records, or writes carries the seal of power.” Writing is a form of symbolic appropriation, coextensive with the act of naming, which fixes the terms of orthodoxy (and heterodoxy). Herein lies the irreducibly powerful function of the scribe: to inscribe right practice. This efficacy, cum representation and reproduction, presupposes a corps of permanent producers, “an undifferentiated mass of slaves” for whom the privilege of culture is off limits. Debray makes this claim very strongly: “In sum, the first condition for the existence of the ‘intellectual’ is that there are many others who cannot be intellectuals – who are constrained materially (wage earning) or juridically (slavery, servitude), in their condition as non-intellectuals.” In the syntax of Debray's anthropological system, the relationship of the scribe (non-producer) to the worker (producer) is an historical constant: Socrates occupies the same position in the symbolic, sacerdotal order as Voltaire or Sartre, the slave of Athens becoming the wage-slave of Lagos or Mumbai. The operation here is a peculiar form of surplus extraction by which the intellectual profits from the excess time created by the worker: “the scribe consumes without producing. That is, he consumes the time of others.”⁹⁸

As the “*hommedium*,” the intellectual embodies a material force of transmission. The function is inescapable, even for revolutionary of intellectuals of Lenin's ilk, or for solitary writers, who claim to write only for themselves. The outcome is to have deepened the earlier

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 191, 198, 207.

critique of *Le Pouvoir intellectuel*, which had focused primarily on conformist intellectuals, and extolled writers and artists as their intransigent opposites. The latter entertain the fantasy of producing outside the general system of exchange, of creating unique, irreplaceable use-values: “Literary language, this laborious uselessness, invests all of its exchange value in its use value, and this reduction within, or perhaps beyond the established networks of communication exacts its toll.” Who better than Debray, the relentless autobiographer, to point out that there is no completely private audience when it comes to writing, no non-exchangeable production? The act of writing implies publication: “The paradox of the literary act is that in closing its borders, by putting itself outside of circulation, writing frees up a surplus of meaning, opening itself up to an unforeseeable and all the more intense reception.”⁹⁹ The myth of the independent, solitary thinker – the monk, as opposed to the sociable, glad-handing cleric – forms part of the ideological edifice of the intellectual in the modern world: “Conflictual nature of politics, conflictual nature of thought.”¹⁰⁰ Thus in deepening the subservience of the intellectual function, which is crystallized in the essence of writing and thinking, *Le Scribe* delivers an even bleaker, more totalizing picture of the intellectual than its predecessor. And yet, there is no explanation, at least historically or politically, of why the scenario has blackened. For these, we will have to wait for Debray’s more systematic forays into mediology.

While much of *Le Scribe* takes aim at the “bourgeois idealism” embedded in the contemporary understanding of the intellectual – especially at *bien-pensant* organizations like CIEL (Comité des intellectuels pour les libertés), ex-leftists who rallied behind liberalism and promoted the rights of man as an international ethics in the 1970s – it also develops a more systematic critique of Marxism, this time from the perspective of mediology. This critique has

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

two moments: one being a theoretical challenge to the Marxism developed by Marx himself, the other being a critique of revolutionary intellectuals. The first moment draws attention to Marx's phobia of intellectuals, which for Debray is a misguided faith in the auto-liberating potential of the proletariat. The nature of the Marxian dialectic holds that everything is always-already present within the system of capitalist relations – the conditions of exploitation as well as liberation. Hence, if social classes are always present to themselves, that is, if no inputs exist outside of the system, then there is no need for mediation in general, and certainly no need for intellectuals in particular. For Marx, “the intelligentsia is diabolic by nature, in the original Greek meaning of *diabolos*: it divides and separates the essence of a phenomenon, the present of the future, the class from itself.”¹⁰¹

The conclusion that “Marx was unable to think mediation” is indicative of a larger theoretical blind spot in Marx's work, namely that it is “absent of a theory of politics.”¹⁰² Accordingly, Debray complains that, “Economic catastrophism, which allows one to skip over political strategy (and, by the same gesture, the reactions of the intelligentsia), is one of the worst traditions of the politics of the Marxist International.” If, however, politics is irreducible to the economic, how does one negotiate the relationship between them? For on the one hand, “to free a theory of the State from the prejudice of the economic and restore to it its own proper sphere is a theoretical necessity, period.” But on the other, one cannot ignore the modern State's complicity in (and legitimation of) surplus extraction on a planetary scale. One need only look at contemporary European imperialism, claims Debray, to understand the imbrication of the political in the economic: “Alas, imperialism does not override anything, least of all the State,

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 173, 204. As a commentary on Marx's revolutionary politics, the former claim is perceptive and convincing, but perhaps less so with respect to his theoretical *oeuvre*. One need only think of the *belles passages* in *Capital*, vol. I on circulation and the money form.

which provides the most useful contributions under the form endlessly renewed stock: reserve funds, raw materials, and pools of laborers.”¹⁰³ To this lucidly posed problem, the text offers, *prima facie*, no definitive solution. Yet, if we consider its deeper implications, especially the development of a language and theory of politics that is inseparably linked to a religious/cultural logic, the outlines of an answer begin to appear. Clearly, Debray is poised to transfer the production, consumption, and circulation of goods into a cultural system of objects – all aspects flowing from the original anthropological position of a sacred-symbolic order.

Ultimately, the intellectual’s function as transmitter is dictated by the demands of the sacred. In summarizing *Le Scribe*, Debray writes, “By virtue of the fact that every organized society rests on a metaphor, that all political power assumes a metaphysics, as I believe I have shown, there follows the social necessity of a corps of translators, charged with referring the event [*le fait*] to the foundational value.” In other places, he effects this change of register (to the cultural) by imagining the intellectual as a substitute for money: “Printer of paper, the intellectual, faithless, odorless, rootless, bereft of inherent value, circulates throughout the world like money, a stranger to nationalities and to the hallowed realm of human feeling.” Understanding the intellectual means understanding something deeper about the nature of power and domination: this has been the lesson of *Le Scribe*. Indeed, “the intellectual opens us up to the necessity of making the *between* [*l’entre*] or the ‘intersecting’ an object of science.”¹⁰⁴ Sociology will always have missed this function of the intellectual, and only a certain anthropological conception of human society, accompanied by a rigorous mediology will move us closer to a radiography of modern political, cultural, and social arrangements.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 170, 204, 205.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 277, 266, 300.

There is no stirring call to action in *Le Scribe*, only a recommendation to ‘politicize’ the act of thinking, for which the discipline of mediology is ideally suited. If, on the one hand, Debray’s withdrawal into mediology signals a retreat from political action, and an end to the Debray of Latin American revolution, on the other, it completes a move to a well-reasoned realism, the urgency of which had been reinforced by the political crisis on the Left in the late 70s, and foreshadowed in the critique of communism (and Marxism) in *Lettre aux communistes*. This sense of realism is now underwritten by a theoretical apparatus – which I have termed anthropological – that sees any attempt to close what should be the incomplete circle of human society as dangerously utopian. Realism means acknowledging and working with, not overcoming or suturing, the logic of incompleteness. Accordingly, it would be impossible, as Marx had attempted in theoretical terms, to eliminate intellectuals as a category: their function is invariant and inescapable. Besides, anti-intellectualism has always been a necessary (but not sufficient, one presumes) condition of fascism.

Fortunately, muses Debray, the subsequent history of Marxism unapologetically betrayed Marx’s suspicions by rehabilitating the intellectual as the core of the revolutionary party, such that, “everywhere that socialism of a Marxist pedigree achieved a victory, it signified the victory of the ‘intellectuals’ of the revolutionary movement over its workers and militants.”¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, and this is the second moment of Debray’s critique of Marxism alluded to above, the revolutionary intellectual’s promise to make man complete to himself is vain and illusory. Names change, but functions do not. Thus, when Debray writes, “Those who have their historical origins in the first *productions of the State*, with a specialty for *the service of transmissions* and an eye toward *the reproduction* – or destruction – of existing states, incarnate, *in vivo*, the theoretical correlates that we must reveal,” we must read this as a condemnation of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

both conformist and revolutionary intellectuals – hence the “or destruction.”¹⁰⁶ As for his colleagues on the French Left, Debray is of the same mind as Emmanuel Todd in *Le Fou et le prolétaire*: their opaque, jargon-laded dialect – the “langue de bois” in Todd’s terms – is the highest proof of their implosion and irrelevance. For many on the Left, the late 70s was a time of abdication, but for others like Debray, it was time of reappraisal and regrouping. This is clearly the import of Debray’s anthropology.

Critique of Political Reason

In the previous section, we related the development of Debray’s theoretical system to the immediate political ferment of the 1970s in France. Debray, like his contemporaries, de Benoist, Todd, and Gauchet, sensed that France had entered into a new phase in the “entre-deux-mai.” As of the 1960s, the Gaullist-led state, which cannily retained a degree of autonomy for France during the Cold War stand off, and the PCF-led working-class, which looked East rather than West, had combined to stem the pull of Atlanticist tides. May 68 undoubtedly helped to unseat the dominance of both parties, and move France under the umbrella of the US-captained Atlantic Alliance. Though Gaullism would linger as a political force, first in the presidency of Georges Pompidou, and later, though less credibly, in that of Jacques Chirac, its hold on the French political imaginary was broken with the election of Giscard d’Estaing in 1974. Likewise, the PCF died with a whimper, managing to putter along in the 1970s only as the weaker party in the Union of the Left. In *Le Fou et le prolétaire*, Emmanuel Todd predicted the extinction of the PCF by 2055. Could he have known that by 2002 it would draw an anemic 3.7 per cent of the vote in the presidential election?

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 300-301.

Beginning in the mid 1970s, the impact of the anti-totalitarian crisis would de-stabilize the foundations of political thinking in France, aggravating the already tarnished reputation of the communist left, while galvanizing the non-communist left's embrace of an Anglo-American-style political liberalism, which favored market mechanisms, institutional development, and ethical paradigms. Communist sympathizers like Debray were impelled to reappraise their deepest held political beliefs. Though in fact unique among the quartet of thinkers studied here for rejecting the concept of totalitarianism as it was understood in mid-70s France, Debray nevertheless participated in the offensive against the PCF (with *Lettre aux communistes*), and declared his allegiance to the PS and Mitterrand. During this period (roughly 1973-1981), we find Debray at once sharpening his critique of the Soviet Union – as an ideologically rigid weak state, not a strong totalitarian one – and deepening his critique of Marxism, first of its lacunae – religion, nationalism, mediation, politics – then of its principal theoretical coordinates (i.e., “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” “economic catastrophism”). This Demascene road ultimately brings Debray to a critique of ‘real existing socialism,’ fittingly in religious terms: “Unable to conceal its hietolatry or the great ages of its hierarchs, the communist movement sets great store by *hierarchical* customs and principles.” This option will allow one to circumvent the “clinging weight of clichés. The most blinding, of course, is that overworked concept of ‘terror’ which conceals a permanent and much more frightening characteristic of ‘real socialism’, namely boredom. We have already seen ‘socialist societies’ without Gulags.”¹⁰⁷

We also find an increasingly ambiguous position on the possibility of revolution. In one instance, Debray could write, soon after his repatriation in 1973, “I would only note that the principal *political* fact since the coming of the Gaullist regime is the transformation of the

¹⁰⁷ *Critique de la raison politique*, 21; *Critique of Political Reason*, 10. Hereafter I will cite both French and English editions in their respective truncated forms: CRP, CPR. Translations will again be taken from the David Macey's English edition, unless otherwise noted.

socialist party from a party of class collaborators into a party of the class struggle. The PS is the decisive link, the lever which could topple the regime in the present conditions.”¹⁰⁸ However, by the time Debray makes his final break from the PCF in 1978 with the *Lettre aux communistes*, does he still hold this to be a genuine possibility? If *Modeste contribution* retained a sense of revolutionary hope, it was only for an imminent and necessary liberation from neo-colonial rule in the Third World. *Le Pouvoir intellectuel* and *Le Scribe* deliver a more despairing verdict, seeing the scope for revolutionary action as dramatically reduced (in both Europe and, implicitly, the Third World). By the time we get to *Le Scribe* in 1980, the question of strategy, once a staple of revolutionary theory (and the guiding impulse of Debray’s work from *The Revolution in the Revolution* to *La Critique des armes*) is transferred over into the sphere of politics and culture. The germs of an original critical system are dispersed throughout these texts – strong republican leanings in *Modeste contribution*, a cumulative history of technology in *Le Pouvoir intellectuel*, and an anthropological theory of politics in *Le Scribe*. Once impelled, after the crisis of the Left, to abandon the familiar coordinates of French (and Marxist) political thought, Debray will collate these elements into a grand theoretical system, the achievement of which will constitute his impressive summa, *Critique de la raison politique*. Would it be inconceivable to see this text as the philosophical expression of a reimagined socialism? Will it lay the philosophical groundwork for a programmatic politics, or rather ossify into a sui generis politics?

The narrative sketched out here, which sees the *Critique* (1981) as the pivot of Debray’s philosophical-political trajectory, corresponds not only with a coherent historiographical conjuncture in French politics – the “entre-deux-Mai” between the student revolts of 68 and the election of Mitterrand in 1981 – but also to Debray’s own personal reconstruction of that trajectory. Of the 1970s, Debray writes, “It is probably unusual to live through such a cruel

¹⁰⁸ Régis Debray, “Un bon débarass,” *L’espérance au purgatoire*, 28.

discrepancy between the things we thought and the things we fought for, between rigor and urgency, research and resistance, as the discrepancy we have experienced in recent years. Thinking against oneself is a common enough fate. But that was not enough. You had to be out of step, even if it meant going against your own investigations.”¹⁰⁹ In this long decade of disparate temporalities and disorienting political change, the ex-prisoner returned to his prison notebooks, overflowing with reflections on the failure of socialism in Latin America, and also revisited the Marxist “Opus,” “not to set up as an exegete”, but to decide on Marxism’s continued relevance, on whether it could grow up, or should be left to die. His conclusion, that “the first duty of a socialist is to account for existing society and not to draw up yet another ‘project for a society,’” brings to light an important feature of the *Critique*: its descriptive aspirations as a diagram of the machinery of collective dynamics. Programmatic ukases and utopian forecasts are best deferred until this urgent task is addressed. In this respect, the *Critique* seamlessly continues on the path of *Pouvoir intellectuel* and *Le Scribe*, evermore sealing off the theoretical from the practical. The baleful consequences of this turn are duly registered by Debray: “My ideas are not my ideal. My only friends are those who share my ideal and loathe my ideas. It would be an understatement to say that I dislike the conception articulated in this book: I find it repulsive and contemptible. However, it seems to me the only one that conforms to the available data, even though it contradicts my own practical interests.”¹¹⁰

Debray’s method of accounting for “existing society” in the *Critique* holds great interest for us as an extension and clarification of his political anthropology. The subject position adopted by Debray is that of the militant-turned-ethnographer, scanning the extra-European world for deeper insights into the mechanics of the political. Whereas Rousseau, the doyen of

¹⁰⁹ *CPR*, 31.

¹¹⁰ *CPR*, 53.

this intellectual method, had to rely on the fiction of a pure state of nature, Debray the participant-observer could report first-hand knowledge of the world's experiments in new political forms: "For the purposes of investigating the norms and forms of political incorporation, we may ascribe to *homo socialisticus* the role played by *homo sylvestris* in Rousseau's investigation into the foundations of civil society. The difference, not all negligible, is that the former actually exists."¹¹¹ The constant making and unmaking of political regimes in the extra-European world provides a laboratory for grappling with the political, as "the concept of the political lies within the birth of the political": "The Third World is in the forefront of research, as it is only there that we can see unities breaking up and separate things coming together. Nations are appearing, territories are being mapped out and 'social systems' are being tested in places where, only ten years ago, there was nothing but sand and grass."¹¹² It is here that a political anthropology must commence its exploration.

Debray's conspectus of political society is given as a series of invariant syntactical rules, guided by a transcendental approach to the problem – that is, an investigation into the conditions of the possibility of the human group's existence. "Critique" is thus meant in this narrow Kantian sense. "Political" conversely takes on a broader definition as "a specific field of reality delineated by the formation and disintegration of large (and non-natural) human groups. Obviously, political in that sense is distinct from 'state', and the private/public opposition is not pertinent here."¹¹³ The exemption of "natural groups" is clearly meant to exclude family arrangements from consideration, and should thus serve to illustrate an important departure from

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12. There is a slight (and perhaps deliberate?) misunderstanding of Rousseau's epistemology of the state of nature here. Rousseau was not forced to construct a conjectural state of nature for lack of empirical evidence, but rather chose to as a way of configuring a universal narrative for the development of political society. His contemporaries excavated primitive societies in the Pacific Isles for similar purposes.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

Todd's own anthropological endeavor. Whereas Todd has shied away from theorizing about the centrality of the family as an anthropological zero-degree, preferring to classify the political and social modalities that could be derived from its arrangements, Debray's anthropological venture is by comparison far more searching on the philosophical front. Highly abstract in conception, the *Critique* is also promiscuous in its choice of interlocutors – leading lights of the French philosophical-anthropological tradition (Rousseau, Comte, Durkheim, Mauss, Leroi-Gourhan), the Patristic thinkers, the nineteenth-century Germans, and finally canonical texts from the scientific tradition are all breathlessly (sometimes too much so) covered in the book's sweep. Likewise, the temporal sweep of the *Critique* is suitably wide as Debray historically tracks the ahistorical constants of political society back to the remote annals of human history, a predilection he shares with both Gauchet and de Benoist (whereas Todd's unmoved mover, the family is fixed no earlier than the seventeenth century).

What are the key theses of the book? The central axiom, already foreshadowed in *Les Rendez-vous manqués* and *Le Scribe*, is the so-called theorem of incompleteness,¹¹⁴ the idea that for a group to constitute itself as such, there must be an absent Other – an *'au-delà* – providing a unity of affective solidarity within the group. In concrete terms, the idea is straightforward. Take, for example, a group of Franciscan monks. A mere gathering of people calling themselves “monks” will not cohere as a group until they collectively submit themselves to some beyond – in this case, the figure of Saint Francis. Without this structuring belief in St. Francis – automatically bestowing to him the role of the sacred – they are a simply a gathering of atomized individuals who have no collective identity once they leave the room. The external point of reference is what allows them to draw a boundary between a “we” and a “them,” and thus form a

¹¹⁴ Debray returns to this postulate in nearly every text he publishes. The clearest and most rigorous explication of the theorem appears in the published text of his dissertation defense at the Sorbonne: “L'incomplétude, logique du religieux?”, *Bulletin de la Société française de la Philosophie* (January 1996): 1-35.

sense of organized unity. This principle holds for all groups, irrespective of size – from local political associations, to broad religious communities, to nations. Naturally, the content of the sacred will vary according to the group’s size, as well as its material and geographical circumstances, but the fundamental form, of uniting around an absent sacred, remains constant. The few critics who have bothered to comment on Debray’s work, it should be noted, have rightly zeroed in on this theorem as the crux of Debray’s political theory. Whether their complaints of its questionable validity as an “axiom,” or its negligible heuristic value are justified will be assessed in a later section.

The upshot of the incompleteness axiom is to have privileged the affective ties of belonging as the bricks and mortar of human society. Pure reason has categorically overlooked the subjective side of the human character in pursuit of man’s rational capacities. Political reason, by contrast, takes this side as its very object, and as such, can be described as a critique of political unreason. What explains this imperative to belong, and why must this need be satisfied through membership in a group? As Debray sees it, man is in a natural position of heteronomy vis-à-vis the external world, forced to take cover and cushion himself from its menacing precarity. Insecurity, however, is a stimulus to sociality in Debray’s view, not a foundation for rational egoism as it had been for thinkers like Hobbes. To wit, “The most premature of all mammals is so constructed, anatomically, that it has to seek protection throughout its life – initially from adults.”¹¹⁵ To the extent that, “Man has no foundation ... [and] does not bring himself into being,” individuality – in the most basic sense of identifying oneself as a subject – is meaningful only in the context of a group. A dialectic of self and other is thus a natural and automatic feature of human existence. In Debray’s terms, “The individual

¹¹⁵ *CPR*, 194

can only truly find himself when he belongs. ... A *we* is possible because every *I* proceeds from and gives itself *to*.”¹¹⁶

Let us further unpack Debray’s political anthropology. Just as the individual is placed in a condition of heteronomy before nature, so too is the group, for it is likewise (a) constantly threatened with disintegration from the external world, and (b) subjected to an authority or force which transcends itself, and which provides an underlying pattern of belief. It follows thus, “If the human group does have a ‘superhuman nature’, social man qua social must naturally be religious, and the untranscendable nature of group membership must renew the supernatural element in him.” In becoming social, man thus becomes religious. It is no wonder, considering the absolute dependency of man and the group, that “history is a succession of various offers of religious protection: the *tutelary spirits* of primitive polydemonism, the *protective gods* of polytheism, the *supreme Savior* and *patron saints* of Christianity.”¹¹⁷ A religious logic is programmed into the nature of human society. In light of this, Debray appeals to a reworked notion of “natural religion” as a universal schema for the behavior of human beings in groups. Modern thought, especially Marxism, has specialized in wishful promises to overcome nature and thus has consistently missed the religious programming of social behavior. To this effect, socialism, in hypostasizing the human will, might be seen as an attempt to annul heteronomy, and deny “the natural irreducibility of social relations”: “the category of *praxis* is invoked to dissolve the singularity of the concept of *physis* via a sort of amphibological ruse.”¹¹⁸

Historicism in general has fared no better, cautiously dedicated to “endless descriptions of singularities,” rather than leaping into the realm of the general. The advantage of a “critique of

¹¹⁶ *CPR*, 146.

¹¹⁷ *CPR*, 187, 194.

¹¹⁸ *CPR*, 202.

political reason” is that in deploying a transcendental optic, it is not constrained by the methodological procedures of history or sociology, and thus can proceed directly to the heart of the political – the art of managing belief and all its subsidiaries (opinion, conviction, emotion), rather than of managing interests or economics.

A concept of human nature – a term which Debray admits “has had a very bad press” (and still does thirty years later) – is at the center of this demanding work, and from it flows the different modalities of human belonging.¹¹⁹ Before taking a closer look at the fascinating genealogy of these “modalities”, it is worth pausing over the final invariant dynamic, indeed the cornerstone, of the human group: ideology. In Debray’s functionalist terms, ideology is the modern secularized equivalent of natural religion – but the latter understood in Debray’s idiosyncratic terms, as “the elementary form of energy conservation in a social totality”; the force that institutionalizes the sacred and reinforces the group’s seamless cohesion.¹²⁰ In this sense, ideology is an organizational process, rather than a residue of activity in the material realm, as Marx had conceived it. It no longer makes sense to separate the material from the ideal, for ideology itself is a material force: “An idea becomes a material force when it is transformed into a meeting-place, something capable of elevating a collection into a congregation.” Ideas with no material bearing are sterile, as they have no affective draw. If action is to take place, some form of belief is required, and it is the task of ideology to underwrite congregation through belief. As a consequence, the ideological can tell us much about the religious, while the religious can return the favor to ideology.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Régis Debray, “Marxism and the National Question”, *New Left Review* I/105 (September – October 1977), 28. Many of the *Critique*’s key theses are anticipated in this muscular exchange with Michael Löwy.

¹²⁰ *CPR*, 206.

¹²¹ *CPR*, 147. Here it is important to recognize that “the religious” does not have its basis in religion (as an historical manifestation), but the other way around.

As a critique and reconfiguration of the notion of ideology, this account owes much to the conceptual innovation of Althusser's canonical essay, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus", which provocatively and brilliantly refashioned ideology as a material process. If Debray is equally attuned to how ideology "closely controls individual mental cathexis ... [and] ensures the internal unity of a set of conduct and the conduct of a set", principally through social forms – "eating, producing, loving, praying, walking, speaking, dressing, and so on" – he also claims to refine and surpass Althusser's precedent. The latter missed the mark by reifying ideology in the form of an apparatus – an unfortunate choice of vehicle given that ideologies are *organic* processes, and "an apparatus knows neither genesis nor growth. It is manufactured and set to work." As such, it has "spared us from having to come to terms with the somewhat sordid realities of the organic." Althusser's misstep leads us down the road toward a theory of institutionalized power, whereas Debray's goal is to understand why and how these processes become incarnated in, or as, institutions – for him, a more fundamental excavation of ideology's function. Its enigma lies not in "a system of statics (of institutions) but within a dynamic of messages." Parties, churches, and nations, as institutions, have goals, but these goals do not correspond to those they set for themselves; their function is not in their immediate task – repression for Althusser – but in a logic that necessarily escapes them. Ultimately, "there can be no theory of ideology without a theory of incorporation or belonging. 'Ideology' works at the level of men's bodies and it works in the long term. If we have to keep the state ideological apparatuses, heavy masonry should at least replace domestic appliances."¹²²

The function of ideology is to mobilize, above all in the name of group cohesion, and not to repress. "By holding out an ideology," supposes Debray, "the group offers us protection in the knowledge that we need it. The contract on offer is not with a system of 'true' or 'correct'

¹²² *CPR*, 126, 154, 162, 156, 162.

ideas, but with a fraternity that keeps us warm. The ideas of an ideology function as a promise of belonging precisely *because* the group guarantees them.”¹²³ All great historical ideologies – Christianity, Islam, Marxism, the nation – work in a like manner, deploying hierarchies of priests, teachers, cadres, and bureaucrats who preserve the integrity of the ideology’s dogma, and tend to its transmission. Notice how the content of ideology is immaterial to its formal mechanisms: no system of ideas without a means of transmission, no message without a medium, no Christianity without St. Paul, no Marxism without Lenin. In other words, “we are free to invent as many ideas as we like, but we are not free to invent the organic process whereby the idea does or does not become a ‘material force’” – “a doctrinal corpus is hollow.” As agents of collective security, ideologies are inherently conservative, but not necessarily peaceable, for any assertion of group identity is simultaneously an act of inclusion and exclusion. If complete closure is off limits to the group, openness, a well-paved inroad to entropy, is likewise so. An agonal logic is thus a constitutive feature of all group formations: “There would be no circumscription if there were no encirclement. The *force majeure* of ‘hostilities’ creates the major forms of doctrines.”¹²⁴ No one understood this principle better than Rousseau when he imagined the act of enclosure as the foundational moment of human society.

Even if the *Critique* purports to be an ahistorical account of group dynamics, its angle of vision is ultimately fixed on contemporary forms of collective behavior, and their archaic genealogies. Parties, states, nations – the very stuff of modern politics – are, on the one hand, rooted in a constant, “programmed” ontology of human collectives (i.e. nature), and on the other, descended from a long, slow-changing pattern of practices and beliefs (i.e. culture). Thus, Debray can claim that “much of present-day discourse on political philosophy cannot be

¹²³ *CPR*, 142.

¹²⁴ *CPR*, 160, 279, 276.

translated or decoded in theological terms for the very simple reason that it is pre-theological,” and at the same time argue that “the Christian incarnation is at the origin of our *political faith*.” The first is eternal, and the proper object of a Critique of Political Reason; the second is genealogical, marching to the beat of “technical-industrial time”, and this is the domain of historical analysis. Human history is an interplay of these two forces – “the ‘obliging mobility of Hermes’ and the ‘painful immobility of Prometheus.’” The *Critique*’s final chapter fuses these two temporalities into a meta-political law, “the principle of constancy”: “there is a constant ratio between so-called progressive factors and so-called regressive factors. The history of mankind is written in a double-entry ledger. Whenever its equilibrium is disturbed by technical progress, ethnic factors intervene to re-establish it.” Historical time, as the cumulative development of technology, acts as a force of disintegration for collectives, accelerating ever more rapidly since the advent of industrialization in the West. On the production side, it engendered a massive rural exodus to cities, uprooting and dislocating older communities. On the consumption side, the devices and gadgets of modern life – cars, phones, computers, to name a few – reinforce the growing atomization of human communities.¹²⁵

Riven by these forces of disintegration, the ethnic component of the group dynamic, or what might also be called “the symbolic” or “sacred” in Debray’s terminology, tends to reassert itself with proportional vigor. Debray writes, “Physically, social humanity gets out of its depth as it becomes industrialized; mentally, it agrarianizes itself so as not to drown completely. Cultural territories effaced by technical progress are reconstituted in the imaginary.”¹²⁶ At the same moment that the economy is becoming planetary, the world is being convulsed by “territorial neuroses” and religious zealotry: sectarian communities, irredentist nationalism,

¹²⁵ *CPR*, 69, 294, 323, 324.

¹²⁶ *CPR*, 332-333.

religious fundamentalism have paradoxically multiplied with globalization – a continued source of embarrassment for thinkers across the political spectrum who see the end of history, whether capitalist or socialist, as consubstantial with the triumph of rationality. The ingenuity of Debray’s description is to have given a structural, unified account of this unreason, rather than explaining it away. These forms of social irrationality are simply the revenge of the human group – the archaic – on the centrifugal forces of history – the modern – and they are at the center of our present world situation, not at the periphery. Dialectics, the bread-and-butter of rationalist historical prescriptions, is the wrong model to apprehend what is in fact an “historical spiral,” or an “inverted evolutionism.”¹²⁷ Each new equilibrium of forces produces a new disequilibrium: “Tension rises until the final zero is reached. By then the various hostile tribes will have discovered nuclear fire.” In contrast to dialectical visions of history, there is no guarantee of recuperation, no *Aufhebung* in this downward cascade into nuclear annihilation.

The darkness of this prophecy surpasses both *Le Pouvoir intellectuel* – the coming of cultural and symbolic immiseration – and *Le Scribe* – Western culture as exploitation of human capital in the Third World. Does Debray envision an antidote or counterweight to this evolutionary spiral? His response harkens back to the anti-hero of *Le Pouvoir intellectuel*, a figure all-too familiar to us, one who had been skipped over in *Le Scribe*: the militant. Debray punctuates the *Critique*’s long introduction with this consideration, surely meant to be followed by ellipses: “In the present state of affairs in our hemisphere, one historical sub-species stands out for its exceptional failure to adapt and its unreasonable conduct: the militant for whom

¹²⁷ A point of clarification: the overall functioning of the system works in a dialectical way, as a unity of opposites, but the temporal progression is evolutionary. In this sense, and in many others, Debray is closer to Comte (whose evolutionism he negates) than to Marx. At one point, he remarks, “The best overall description of the societies that claim to be inspired by Marx’s theory is actually to be found in Comte rather than Marx,” *Ibid.*, 231.

‘socialist emancipation’ is both a password and a myth around which to mobilize.”¹²⁸ Using the terms of Debray’s own analysis, especially as they developed from *Lettre aux communistes* through the *Critique*, on what basis can there be hope in the socialist militant, unless as an aesthetic longing for what is now impossible? *Lettre aux communistes* made a very persuasive case for the obsolescence of communism in Western Europe, and its rigidification in the East. As for intellectuals, whatever positive function their lower rungs might serve was cancelled in *Le Scribe*, which doubted that any sector of the intelligentsia could break free of the gravitational pull toward power and its reproduction. And finally, the *Critique*, as a grammar for the behavior of human collectives, dramatically reduced the scope of individual action as an historical force. By these criteria, the bases for socialism and militant political action have been eroded by the effects of historical progress on human groups. They are now extrinsic to the system Debray has elucidated. But of course, this is the point. Their impossibility is their appeal, Debray converting their “failure” into a messianic hope.

If the prospect for revolutionary change comes from forces exogenous to the system, what ought are positions be with respect to the endogenous elements? In one register, Debray insists that the logic of group behavior adumbrated in the *Critique* is abhorrent, lamentable but undeniable; in another, he appears to admire the kind of solidarity mandated by the logic of the political, the existential injunction toward unity that (theoretical) Marxism perilously ignored.¹²⁹ While Debray, in 1981, has yet to fully embrace the national-republicanism that will be his future trademark, he has already shown – especially in *Modeste contribution* and an interview for

¹²⁸ CPR, 55.

¹²⁹ Alain de Benoist has zeroed in on this dynamic in his sustained and thoughtful engagement with Debray’s *Critique* – indeed, *the* most thoughtful of all immediate reactions. Citing Debray, he writes, “‘Une société sans croyance forte est une société qui meurt.’ A supposer que l’on ne veuille pas mourir, ne faut-il pas dès lors *préférer* les sociétés qui donnent à croire *fortement*?” Alain de Benoist, “Régis Debray et la ‘raison politique,’” *Nouvelle école* 37 (Spring 1982), 134.

Critique communiste, “Marxism and the National Question” – an intellectual attraction to nationalism, which is also in evidence in the *Critique*. Why then is he hesitant to endorse the forces of nationalism in this text? In fact, the “principle of constancy” as defined in the *Critique* provides no way of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” nationalism, or say, the civic, democratic variant of the French Revolution and the ethnic, elitist one of National Socialism. All nationalisms fall under the heading of ethnic reactions to technological modernity, and are lumped in with religious fundamentalism, irredentist political movements, and so on. Here, there is no sense, as there will be later, of national-republicanism as a bulwark against the atomizing tendency embedded in the technical forces of production. Later, he will come to rename the constancy principle “the jogging-effect”, and in doing so, refine the meta-historical antinomy between atomization and group cohesion found in the last pages of the *Critique*.¹³⁰

As a headlong plunge into all things Marxism has in theory despised – religion, nationalism, ideology – the *Critique* is a beguiling book for someone in the Marxist tradition to have written. The scope and ambition of its revisionism – not simply tinkering with certain ideas within the tradition, but enlarging, even inserting ethno-religious components – could only have been conceived in a period of deep ideological thaw, as indeed it was. In one sense, the *Critique* was continuous with an older Western Marxist heterodoxy, its anti-idealist inflection having been anticipated by the work of Althusser and the Italian philosopher Lucio Colletti, both of which tried to expurgate the Hegelian influences from Marx’s work. In another sense, it corresponded to a revisionism of a more recent vintage, one that emerged out of the failures and

¹³⁰ This meta-historical model, explained above, seems critically lacking in one respect: the absence of a third element. If history is a series of pendular swings between equilibrium and disequilibrium, what is the element responsible for breaking equilibrium? Thus, the language of constancy would have to be abandoned.

crises of the mid 70s. Debray's contemporaries within British Marxism¹³¹ – Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, and Eric Hobsbawm – would, for instance, take up similar questions in the late 70s, early 80s, focusing specifically on the embattled concept of nationalism. But unlike Marxism's canonical texts on nationalism, which were by and large skeptical if occasionally tolerant for instrumental reasons, Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain* (1977) and Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) viewed nationalism as a positive signifier overall (though with many prudent reservations), as a potential locus of resistance on the periphery. With the prospects for revolution in Western Europe finally dashed in Portugal, and a neo-liberal merger under the American umbrella seeming inevitable, it was time for Marxism to reassess the phenomenon that had occasioned its defeat so many times in the past.

Is there a sense of politics or ideology that is not beholden exclusively to belief, perhaps extending into the domain of interest? Are rational faculties as clear-cut as Debray assumes, or beliefs for that matter? As Debray claims to have spent May 68 in the company of Febvre (while in prison), we might pose a question worthy of Febvre's great study: is unbelief possible where groups are concerned, not just in the sixteenth century, but in history writ large? Surely not says Debray, as "belief is non-negotiable." But if belief's hold on us is often diagonal and backhanded, as he admits, could it be because there is often deep cognitive confusion over rational and non-rational structures of motivation, the truth lying somewhere between pure and political reason? Moreover, what becomes of politics once the structures and institutions of belief are ossified and hollowed out? Debray offers a rudimentary contrast between the developed societies of the West and the weaker states that populate the rest of the world, based on the growth of civil society: "Since civil society is *de facto* absorbed into the Party-State,

¹³¹ To be precise, this should read, 'Anglo-Irish-Scotch-American Marxism'. There is, moreover, an astonishing parallel between these three works: each one ends with an appeal to Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – a text with a messianic ellipsis of there ever was one.

social existence is not merely organized but petrified in the solemnity of civic liturgy, whose spectacles are the very substance of the day's news."¹³² And yet with belief eroded from within, politics continues its forward march. Finally, modern political ideologies are supposed to have replaced the religious ideologies of old. Debray's chosen example is, without fail, communism – a political ideology that has tended to command more conviction than its modern counterparts. Yet, what of more watered-down varieties of political ideologies – liberalism, mild conservatism – that now dominate the world's political horizon? One would be hard-pressed to identify deep religious affinities in this landscape, or at the very least, strong belief.

The *Critique* can be read, in one sense, as a syllabus of Marxist errors. Consider the following charges: "The nation is Marxism's sore point"; "There is a Marxist religion, but no Marxist theory of religion"; "The absence of any theory of *representation* in Marx is, as we have seen, matched by the absence of a theory of decision-making"; "It is typical of all utopian socialisms – Marxism included – that they exclude the factor of war from their plans"; "Although Marx was only half-mistaken about the facts, his theory [of dialectics] was totally wrong." What remains after a list of this magnitude? Perhaps Marxism's original and extensive critique of political economy. And yet, we read the following in the *Critique's* introduction: "Basic political relations are not explicable in terms of themselves or the manifest forms they assume, but nor can they be explained by the material conditions of life. Not only are they irreducible to the mere projection of an economic base; they cannot be deduced from it either. In other words, politics is not 'concentrated economics' (Lenin)."¹³³ What Marxism has to tell us about the economy is thus bracketed off from the arena of politics, culture, and sociality – hence

¹³² *CPR*, 9-10.

¹³³ *CPR*, 26.

the play of separations.¹³⁴ How absolute is the separation of the political from the economic in Debray's thinking? The locution "irreducible to" is ambiguous, leaving unspecified the amount of influence one variable has on the other once it is established that the relationship is not deterministic. Moreover, Debray, just a year before in *Le Scribe*, was loath to abandon the conceptual framework of political economy. Has the *Critique* taken this radical step? What do we make of Debray's injunction, "Thinking after Marx means, first and foremost, thinking Marx through to the end"?¹³⁵ In what sense is this taking Marx to his conclusion?

In separating, rather than synthesizing different levels of determination, is Debray able to reconcile his analysis of political reason with a meaningful historical narrative? He has already suggested one method, by fusing technological-historical time (modern) and political-religious time (archaic), and yet the *Critique* is far from giving a convincing account of the former. As I have tried to argue, the political anthropology of the *Critique* is the culmination of Debray's work in the seventies, overwhelmingly dedicated to the archaic side of the system. Historical considerations, as leitmotifs, were often fitfully applied in these texts to accommodate the leading theme of political reason. With this now complete, Debray can look more to the time-dimension.

¹³⁴ To appreciate the originality and heterodoxy of the *Critique*, it should be noted that Marxists had begun to develop a Marxist anthropology around the concept of the "Asiatic Mode of Production" as early as the late sixties. Debray never once addresses this concept or the literature surrounding it (much of which is French). Even if Debray is right to criticize Marx's relative indifference to these matters, there are interesting reflections to be found on primitive societies in the *Grundrisse* and *The Ethnological Notebooks* that might have merited Debray's attention. For the most recent considerations of these questions, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx on the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹³⁵ *CPR*, 26.

Chapter Six – Legacies of the Sacred: The Political Anthropology of Régis Debray

Now we have to consider the full implications of Debray's move toward the Parti socialiste (PS) in the late seventies. As we saw in *Lettre aux communistes*, this switch of affiliations was tightly bound up with a thoughtful and far-reaching critique of communism, punctuated by an attack on its first principle, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Was Debray's remapping of Marxist theory meant to be compatible with a Socialist praxis, and if so, what kind of praxis? An answer to these questions will naturally bring us closer to an understanding of Debray's continuities with Marxism. His liberal and conservative critics, it should be said, have interpolated this continuity for us, accusing Debray of having repackaged an already-discredited Marxism as an emotional, irrational set of commands, and thus of having heralded a "new obscurantism."¹ The evidence for this charge, as I have suggested, is ambiguous. But even if it were not so, Debray's plea for a socialism that could marshal the forces of nationalism and totemism in its favor was necessary for a wavering, crisis-stricken Left, and need not be seen as a replication of totalitarian logic. After all, plenty of beloved French Socialists, most notably Jaurès and Blum, had fused nationalism and socialism to wildly popular effect, without, moreover, yielding some heinous and degenerated political community. In this sense, Debray's *Critique* might be seen as a philosophical defense of this respectable socialist tradition, and its naysayers, as shamans of another time-honored tradition of anti-socialism. Indeed, as it would turn out, the Union of the Left registered a landmark victory at the polls in May 1981, just as the *Critique* hit the shelves, and its appeal to a patriotic brand of socialism would prove a critical ingredient of Mitterrand's success. This coincidence by no means exonerates Debray's theoretical elisions and

¹ The phrase belongs to Pierre Manent. "Régis Debray révolutionne la science", *Commentaire* (Winter 1981-1982), 596. Eugen Weber, in a less than serious review, makes a similar charge: "Like all heresies, however, Mr. Debray's seeks to revivify and reaffirm the faith." "A Sentimental Marxist", *The New York Times* (29 January 1984).

inconsistencies, but rather should invite closer critical attention, preferably in terms that bypass the alarmist tones of his anti-Marxist critics.

The Republic

Upon François Mitterrand's victory in the presidential election of 1981, Debray was taken on as a minister of foreign affairs (*Conseil d'État*). Their association dated back to 1973 when Debray, recently returned from Chile, was dispatched by Allende to deliver a message to "his French equivalent." Debray was immediately enamored of Mitterrand's character, in spite of all misgivings of the latter's record in the sixties, namely as a loyalist of French-Algeria. Mitterrand returned the compliment, asking Debray to join him in his car while on tour, and the two "spent the next three days as a joyous team, visiting every corner of a smilingly complicit south-west."² Mutual admiration aside, the relationship was not without its *arrière-pensées*. Crudely put, Debray was clearly useful to Mitterrand as an icon of a younger, more intellectual New Left. Debray was well aware, if ultimately forgiving of this political calculation: "By the time I started my official career as an adviser, on 21 May 1981, I had already served my purpose; all I was good for now was assuaging that taciturn character's guilt and sticking semi-colons in speeches."³ He was thusly tucked away in a broom-closet office in the Elysée, a former stripped-down bathroom far from the well-trekked paths of its higher dignitaries, and given occasional dutiful hearings by Mitterrand.

Debray could forgive Mitterrand of his exorbitant princely privilege because the latter had rescued him from ignominy: "national education closed its doors to me; no newspaper or

² *Praised Be Our Lords*, 167.

³ *Ibid.*, 176.

journal would employ except as freelance. Mitterrand alone received me without asking questions, without caring what people would say. That marvelously imprudent moderate was always hospitable to orphans of lost causes.”⁴ This was one side of Debray’s opportunism, the pragmatic. The other, more distant and theoretical, was Mitterrand’s symbolic presence as an avatar of French republican socialism, a tradition in which Debray had begun to dabble as early as 1974, and later embraced with full-throated conviction by the mid eighties. The early flirtation was announced in a dithyrambic panegyric to Mitterrand in the pages of *l’Unité*: “I mean to say that François Mitterrand is not a Leninist ‘revolutionary,’ but a liberal socialist. In forging his own path, the only candidate of the Left sets his course by the stars of 1789, 1848, and 1936. He knows the October Revolution, the Long March, and the Sierra Maestra, but they are not part of his firmament.”⁵ If pressed, Mitterrand would put the *patrie* above class struggle, the nation above revolution; and if the tenor of the *Critique de la raison politique* was any indication, so too would Debray if given the choice. He entered the Elysée a convinced Socialist, nourishing the hope that “a government that returns to power after a quarter of a century of voluntary opposition is there to make *History*, not just politics.” His Mitterrandian wager would prove a losing one, eventuating in his 1988 resignation.

Debray has remained tight-lipped about his official duties as an advisor. Likely, these ranged from speech writing, to organization of cultural events, to involvement in France’s diplomatic relations with Central and South America. In the earliest years of his administration, Mitterrand was eager, in near complete continuity with Gaullist foreign policy, to retain an

⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵ Régis Debray, “Lettre d’amour,” *L’espérance au purgatoire*, 43.

alliance with the United States, but to avoid alignment.⁶ Accordingly, it would pay lip-service to Reagan's openly chauvinistic foreign policy, that what was good for America was good for the world, and do its utmost to quell Washington's anxiety of a Socialist government in the Hexagon, but it would not endorse open markets as a solution to the world economic recession, nor would it cease to proclaim solidarity with the Third World. Central and South America were potential hazard areas in this fragile relationship, insofar as Washington wanted a stable zone, free of Marxist revolutions of the sort accomplished in Nicaragua and underway in El Salvador, whereas Mitterrand's Socialist government wished to reach out to socialist governments in the Third World, and to preserve its historic grandeur and presence in Latin America. When France decided to lend assistance in arms to the Sandinista government in 1982 (presumably to be passed on to El Salvador), at the very moment that the US was in the process of arming and training the Contras, it seems Debray was called upon to help broker the conflict (on the Latin American side of course, as Washington was very leery of Debray given his role in Bolivia).⁷ Debray himself was in awkward position, supportive of the Sandinistas and how they had dealt with their internal conflicts (non-violently), but more dubious with respect to the El Salvadorian revolutionary leadership, which had executed his friend Roque Dalton in 1975. Debray was ultimately able to make amends with the Salvadorean guerrilla leader, Salvador Samayoa, and help France retain its broad commitment to social-democratic solidarity in Latin America.⁸

⁶ See Stanley Hoffman, "Mitterrand's Foreign Policy, or Gaullism by Any Other Name", in George Ross, Stanley Hoffmann and Sylvia Malzacher, eds, *The Mitterrand Experiment: Continuity and Change in Modern France* (London: Polity Press, 1987), 295.

⁷ Pierre Mélandri, "L'Alliance, la 'différence', l'interdépendence: les relations franco-américaines de 1981 à 1984," in Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, Jean-Louis Bianco, eds, *Les années Mitterrand: les années du changement (1981-1984)* (Paris: Perrin, 2001), 227-234.

⁸ Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 129-133. Castañeda's detailed and colorful account of this episode is based on interviews with Debray, who only hints at these events in *Praised Be Our Lords*, 234. Roque Dalton was a member of the National Resistance (FARN) in El

As a cultural ambassador in the Elysée, Debray's influence was not profound. He was asked to surround Mitterrand with writers and experts in various cultural and intellectual fields. These events, according to Debray, "were gloomy occasions. On his guard, terrified that someone might slip him an *a priori* between the fruit and the cheese, he eluded all discussion of fundamentals. The stilted occasions that resulted were neither exploitable – photographers being absent – nor profitable in other ways."⁹ His preference was for more agreeable conversation and stylish anecdotes – Françoise Sagan, Antoine Blondin, and François-Marie Banier. On this point, Debray is a disabused and dissenting voice among a chorus of plaudits for the premier's high intellectual merits. Debray continued to serve the administration to the end of Mitterrand's first term, eventually resigning because "I could no longer see anything socialist (something I could have lived with) or even, at base, anything republican (much more painful) in the general policy followed by my associates."¹⁰

In these seven years, Debray halted his philosophical and novelistic work, limiting his output to personal reflections on the one hand (*Éloges*, tributes to his favorite writers and artists, *Comète ma comète*, a memoir, and *Les Masques*, an autobiography), and bird's-eye-view ruminations on foreign policy strategy on the other (*La Puissance et les rêves*, *Les Empires contre l'Europe*, and *Tous azimuts*). Within a few years, Debray would undergo a new transformation, now as a would-be entrant into France's university fiefdom, taking a PhD from the Sorbonne in 1994, with the intention of building an institutional following for the discipline

Salvador before it split, and was subsequently executed on suspicions of being an agent of the Soviet Union and/or the CIA. In addition to being a revolutionary, Dalton was a poet and critic, and author of the best-standing critique of Debray's *The Revolution in the Revolution*, the manuscript-length *¿Revolucion en la revolucion? y la crítica de derecha* (Havana: "Cuadernos Casa", no. 9, 1970).

⁹ *Praised Be Our Lords*, 179.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

of mediology. In the meantime, Debray's leftist credentials had been compromised by employment in the Mitterrand government, at least from the perspective of the few self-identifying leftists that survived the anti-totalitarian thaw. Perhaps most unkindly, Guy Hocquenghem, in his *Open Letter to those who Passed from the Maoist Collar to the Rotary Club*, wrote to Debray: "Did you become an instrument of the CIA, or, as some have said, the bait for a clever trap set by Castro to rid himself of his troublesome rival Che Guevara? ... You pass through Santiago and Allende falls; you accompany Che and he dies. Constant is your role of Father Joseph of the bad augury."¹¹

To be sure, Debray's latent republican sympathies fully ripened during his tenure in the Mitterrand government. Now unburdened by official duties, and with the Bicentenary around the corner, Debray at last gave full expression to a republican program in the searing polemic, *Que vive la République* (1989), to be followed immediately by an inflammatory paean to General de Gaulle, *A demain de Gaulle* (1990). The articulation of a republican philosophy in Debray's thought is best seen as a wholehearted endorsement of the principles of group dynamics that had been diagnosed in the *Critique* with guarded sympathy. "Spirit, power, and communication," within the context of the modern nation-state, could be marshaled to bind together "affectivity, efficacy, and community."¹² The lure of myth, incarnated in France's inimitable Revolutionary tradition, complemented by the binding spell of charismatic authority would galvanize the

¹¹ Guy Hocquenghem, *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), 128. Curiously, Hocquenghem seems to have plagiarized this remark from an article in *Der Spiegel* mocking Mitterrand's appointment: "Régis Debray a soutenu Che Guevara et il est mort sous les balles. Régis Debray a soutenu Allende et il est mort de la même façon. Régis Debray soutient Mitterrand; espérons que ce locataire aimable et intelligent de l'Elysée s'est confessé avant d'engager cet homme." Robert Frank, "L'effet Mitterrand' à l'étranger (1981-1982): un 'état de grâce', un jeu de miroir et une politique extérieure de l'image," in *Les années Mitterrand*, 122. Also, of interest for this dissertation, Hocquenghem compares Debray to the New Right, as an insult of course: "Que l'ex-tiers-mondiste à revolver à bouchons se fasse l'apôtre du réarmement européen comme un vulgaire adepte de la Nouvelle Droite ne m'a même plus étonné."

¹² Régis Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, trans. David Macey (London: New Left Books, 1983), 128.

secular political community against the centrifugal momentum of globalized liberal-capitalism. It is this angle of vision that legitimates Debray's unusual blend of Gaullism and Revolutionary republicanism, the latter underwritten by a strong totemic prejudice for the symbolics of nationalism – flags as the icons of collective solidarity, song and festival as hymn and liturgy. To parry the shock of modernity's bracing centrifugal momentum, one must, to invert Rimbaud's celebrated slogan, be absolutely archaic.

France's republican tradition can crudely be divided into two camps: a moderate lineage tracing its ancestry back to the principles of 1789, and a radical line taking 1793 as its degree zero. The former has been the bedrock of French republicanism at least since the instauration of the Third Republic in 1871, given renewed coherence and vigor by its principal architects, Léon Gambetta and Jules Ferry. With a liberal economic philosophy, and a metaphysics of a decisively positivist cast, their vision of the republic privileged the liberty and equality vortices of the Revolutionary triangle: equality by means of universal education – the school being the crown jewel of the Third Republic – and liberty by means of a parliamentary *Rechtstaat* – neo-Kantianism being the favored juridical (and moral) philosophy. Though radical in its crusade against clericalism and in its commitment to universal education, the Third Republic was ultimately a model built on consensus – Gambetta refusing to employ the word as divisive as “class,” preferring instead “couches nouvelles” – as well as a chauvinistic imperial mandate to fulfill the republic's universalizing mission.¹³ The other line, drawing on the Jacobin spirit of 1793, favored a class-oriented articulation of the Republic, less shaped by consensus, and more by fraternal notions of the nation-at-arms. If it shared major affinities with nineteenth-century socialism, it sought, in the end, to achieve its program through parliamentary means – indeed a

¹³ Claude Nicolet, *L'idée républicain en France (1789-1924)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). For comments on the Republic's positivist vocation, see especially 188 and 250; on consensus and class, see 208-209.

robust statism was built into its program. This Jacobin line was, moreover, outflanked on the left by a marxisant revolutionary syndicalism in the early twentieth century, which excoriated Jaurès, the greatest icon of radical republicanism, for his parliamentary reformism, and called for a mass general strike to overthrow the state.

Debray's *Que vive la République* delivers a powerful reconstruction of the Jacobin line against the Revolutionary nay-sayers like François Furet and Pierre Rosanvallon, who had presumptuously declared the Revolution to be over, and demanded "the end of the French exception."¹⁴ Worse yet, they arrested the Revolution in its earliest phase, plucked out a few of their favorite concepts – liberty, rights – and used them as pillars of a de-politicized, de-territorialized pseudo-religion of Human Rights. Limited to 1789, the Revolutionary legacy is commensurate with the enlargement of civil society over the State, a privacy-oriented and hence passive sense of citizenship, and the enthronement of *homo aeconomicus* over *homo politicus*. This antiseptic version liberates France of its true Revolutionary heritage, and in doing so, eliminates the basis for an equal and solidaristic society, and underwrites a surrender of national sovereignty to multi-national bodies. Debray chides, "In separating the message from its carriers, the universal from the particular, one will have the idea of the Revolution without the revolution, the mind without the matter." This coup, emblemized by Furet, the "roi de la Révolution," signaled the "apotheosis of the right's old clichés," and sealed the triumph of the "Counter-Revolution."¹⁵

In Debray's alternative description, "the ideal announced to the world by the French Revolution was the nation as a radical novelty, more than universal right as the promise of the

¹⁴ See François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La république du centre: la fin de l'exception française* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1988).

¹⁵ Régis Debray, *Que vive la République* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1989), 44, 31.

future.”¹⁶ The nation-state acts as a principle of resistance, perhaps the last, against the global flow of capital, for it is able, uniquely, to mobilize collective energies and galvanize shared belief through the power of myth. In this sense, “the Republic is not a political regime like any other. It is an ideal, and a struggle. It requires not only laws but also faith.” In the interest of preserving group integrity, the Revolutionary tradition must be protected at all costs: “At its very core, the French Revolution is interminable. This is precisely what differentiates a revolution from a revolt. The revolt looks toward the past, while the revolution anticipates the future. The dynamism of its principles goes beyond the event, and this going-beyond is called the Republic, which itself is always being remade, just like the nation in Renan’s conception, a permanent creation and a daily plebiscite.” The Revolution as incarnated in the Republic produces a model of dissensus, a restless and civic-minded intervention on behalf of the disempowered: “To be precise, we are here to break the consensus and help the losers prevail, not the winners ... To disturb the slumbering, to unseal the cement, to sow turbulence and dissonance where all seems normal. I don’t see how republicans could have any other vocation than to enlarge *the zones of dissensus*. This is their sole *raison d’être*.”¹⁷

Individualism, Human Rights, and Democracy are the principal enemies of the republican ethic: all have been legitimated seamlessly under Mitterrand, the addressee of *Que vive la République*. Individualism is consubstantial with an expansionary private sphere that reinforces isolation, selfishness, and political apathy. This ethos is perfectly serviced by a civic religion as trite and uninspiring as that of Human Rights, which, in this case, only bastardizes the legacy of 1789. On the one hand, “this illusion of a world without illusions” passes for religion because it rests on metaphysical foundations – principles that transcend laws – and shares with ecclesiastics

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13, 55, 110.

the same principle of immunity from rational criticism. On the other, it fulfills none of the salutary communal functions of religion *stricto sensu*, offering bland homilies to an abstract conception of human suffering, but no basis for collective mobilization. Whether one assents or not to Debray's critique, it is founded on a correct linkage of the ascendancy of Human Rights as an ethical paradigm in the eighties, to the anti-totalitarian rhetoric that erupted with great fanfare in the mid-seventies. Respect for the victims of political tyranny and a sincere pledge to avoid another Gulag-like catastrophe should oblige France to discard its realist foreign policy, which adopts a state-by-state approach to diplomacy, in favor of an idealist one, which caters to an abstract, supranational view of international relations. For Debray, ever the republican strategist, this change ruined France's diplomacy in the East, ceding its influence in Mitteleuropa to German, English, and Italian interests. At home, the association of statism with totalitarianism helped legitimize the neo-liberal retrenchment of the state, and accelerated the erosion of the public sphere. Debray's pointed critique of Human Rights has been echoed powerfully by Marcel Gauchet, who supports an anti-totalitarian program in the East, but bemoans its application in the non-communistic West. Here, as for Debray, political life has been compromised and hollowed out by egoistic individualism – a tendency that would only be exacerbated by a program based on Human Rights. If politics is to retain any meaning as a sphere or mode of activity, it must emphatically eschew the rhetoric of Human Rights.¹⁸

The most provocative arm of Debray's critique has been his assault on democracy, developed in a manifesto-like companion text to *Que vive la République*, "Êtes-vous démocrate

¹⁸ Marcel Gauchet, "Les droits de l'homme ne sont pas une politique," *La Démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). "Au-delà de cette sensibilisation, de cette ouverture tardive aux réalités totalitaires, ce qui me retiendra proprement, c'est leur contrecoup théorique, l'idée infiniment plus surprenante que ce qui est bon à l'Est doit constituer notre vérité à l'Ouest, que ce dont nous avons besoin nous aussi, en France, c'est d'un mouvement des droits de l'homme, et pas pour aider les victimes des militaires argentins ou des psychiatres soviétique, mais pour efficacement peser, *ici et maintenant*, sur la politique française," 3-4. This article originally appeared in *Le Débat*, 1980, shortly after Debray's early critique of Human Rights in "Il faut des esclaves."

ou républicain?” (“Are you a democrat or republican?”). The trenchancy of this antimony has been widely acknowledged, even by the likes of historian Mona Ozouf – not an obvious candidate for a Debray admirer – who hailed it as “très brillant.”¹⁹ Democracy, for Debray, is essentially Anglo-Saxon, commensurate with the sovereignty of the economic over the political, the private over the public, society over the state. Socially, democracy tends toward tribalization, “each person defining himself by his ‘community’, the ensemble of communities making “society.”²⁰ It is also much more comfortable with the public role of religion: whereas in a republic, the state is free of all religious control, in a democracy, the church is free of all state control. *Grosso modo*, its worldview is amnesiac and presentist, celebrating youth, speed, and vitality. The republic, by contrast, is French, statist, secular, and historically-minded – “memory is the first virtue of republics.” It draws a hard and fast distinction between public and private spheres, and “refuses to judge public figures according to their private lives, as in the United States.”²¹ If democracy enthrones the market, the republic endows the school with its mission: it forms active citizens in a single, unitary curriculum, untainted by relations with the market or religion. Republicans have, moreover, a much more concrete relationship with the law, as rights are inscribed within political communities, as opposed to the abstract positing of Human Rights favored by democracies.

The stakes of the Bicentenary, as conceived by Debray, were thus critical. Either France would heed Furet’s call to end the Revolution and complete the accelerating process of democratization, or it would reappropriate its revolutionary republican legacy and build a strong

¹⁹ Mona Ozouf, *Composition française: Retour sur une enfance bretonne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 239.

²⁰ Régis Debray, “Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?,” *Le Nouvel observateur* (30 Nov 1989), 117. This text was reprinted in Régis Debray, *Contretemps: éloges des idéaux perdus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118, 117.

institutional network to carry out its mission. By most accounts, the former program won out: Furet's cautious endorsement of 1789 as the birthplace of modern democracy, tempered by a visceral hatred for the scourge of '93, commanded assent throughout the media-sphere. More distressingly for socialists, this program became a reality under the last twelve years of Mitterrand's administration ('83-'95). Whereas the first administration had boldly pushed through a socialist program, nationalizing key industries, strengthening the bargaining power of unions, decentralizing France administratively, the second government, hemmed in by the Right's easy victory in the 1986 legislative elections, and thus forced to "cohabit" with a right-wing prime minister, produced a tepid platform emphasizing national unity, consolidation, and consensus politics.²² Shortly thereafter, Mitterrand would become more pro-American than any previous president of the Fifth Republic, the first to visit Israel, and a staunch advocate of the single market in 1992. By the end of Mitterrand's second term, the PS was indistinguishable from the center-right party. Mitterrand elected to back the communist-leaning historian of the Revolution, Michel Vovelle during the Bicentenary, but might have more consistently endorsed Furet, even if the latter had described Mitterrand's first term as "a kind of attenuated Terror."²³

Debray's interventions introduce a welcome counter-proposal to 1989's joyous celebration of consensus politics, and easy rapprochement with American democracy. It is a great historical irony that Debray and Emmanuel Todd, representatives of the Left in this

²² See the exceptional analysis of Nick Hewlett, *Modern French Politics: Analysing Conflict and Consensus since 1945* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), especially chapter 4. Liberal economists have taken a reverse perspective on Mitterrand's record in the eighties, arguing that the well-intentioned demand-side policies of the first two years were unwise in the context of a persistently over-valued Franc. To make matters worse, the very election of a Socialist had so frightened investors to precipitate a run on the Franc. France's economic health improved when Mitterrand, in 1983-84, focused more on supply-side policy, tightened capital controls, eased off on expansionary measures, and began listening to Jacques Delors, instead of Jean-Pierre Chevènement. See Jeffrey Sachs and Charles Wyplosz, "The Economic Consequences of President Mitterrand," *Economic Policy* 1, 2 (April, 1986): 261-322.

²³ The expression belongs to Steven L. Kaplan, meticulous referee of the bicentennial debates: *Farewell, Revolution: The Historian's Feud, France, 1789/1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 126. Mitterrand was evidently an admirer of Furet's.

dissertation, would herald French exceptionalism as *the* modality of collective struggle, while Alain de Benoist, avatar of the counter-Revolutionary tradition, would place these hopes in a supranational cultural framework. But such was the cumulative force of France's increasingly marginal role in the new world order, moving evermore decisively into the Atlantic alliance as the Cold War receded, forming tighter bonds with Anglo-American capitalism and democracy. All four thinkers were engaged in the project of unthinking this eventuality, imagining cultural and anthropological frameworks that might substitute for and deflect a market-based democratic politics. Debray's articulation, even accounting for his usual brinkmanship, often seems conservative, the nation, tradition, and good schooling being the hallmarks of the "good" republican order. Nevertheless, Debray assures, "the republic is socialism, and democracy is liberalism" – Michelet as opposed to Tocqueville. How coherent is Debray's republican vision, and to what extent is it a persuasive alternative to the democratic model? Is it consonant with a consistent socialist program?

By this point, Debray's work has forsaken entirely class politics as a central dynamic of late twentieth-century societies. The relations of production, political economy, sociology: these no longer have the same relevance in an age where ethno-religious politics hold sway. This had been the message of *Critique de la raison politique* in 1981, and it was completely ignored on the Left – indeed, any thoughtful response coming from the Right. In retrospect, Debray understood what had been concealed (from the Left) by Mitterrand's victory in 1981: the anti-totalitarians had won the battle of ideas before Mitterrand ever entered office, and that any workable Socialist program would have to reckon with the non-class-based forces of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism if it was going to compete with the center and right. Moreover, the enemy was not as easily identifiable as it had been in the era of Sartre: no partisans of *Algérie-*

française to point to, no Gaullist despot to abuse. It was rather a moderate, centrist politics that would destroy France internally by opening it up to the market, and it would do so under a sensible, appealing platform. In this respect, Debray's move toward republicanism can be seen as a prescient and sensitive response to a real transformation in the nature of French politics in the late twentieth century. This prescience was vindicated in the nineties, when republicanism became a rallying point for the Left against Chirac. Even those few who remained on the Marxist left, like Alain Badiou, were obliged to engage with religion and ethno-politics as forces of resistance in late capitalist society.²⁴

In another sense, Debray's fervent republicanism seems ill-conceived, left-handed, and out-of-touch. Its nostalgia, its fondness for the antique often appears as a denial of the problems afflicting the present, not so much a confrontation. Religion, the republic, the nation: little is said of their deeply ambiguous historical lineages, and yet they somehow manage to work in effortless harmony when pitted against late capitalist democracy. First, the nation: how does Debray define it, especially in comparison to the adjacent concepts of national identity and nationalism? For Debray, the nation is a poetic, rather than an historical concept – an essence that is indefinable, a “certain idea” in de Gaulle's legendary phrase. The General is indeed Debray's principal source of inspiration on the nation, and we find him most loquacious on this subject in his homage to de Gaulle: “Defining a collective personality, distinguishing a nation from a tribe or some other type of collectivity, is not so straightforward. But it is not because the idea of nation is badly defined that the reality it designates is not a determining one. ... De Gaulle was a man *for*. He was no more anti-German than anti-Soviet, no more anti-American than anti-British. In fact he was all of these things, but only ‘as required’, by accident, not in

²⁴ See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For commentary on these developments, see Göran Therborn, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* (London; New York: Verso, 2008).

essence. His concept of the nation was not Manichaeic; he paid no attention to the ‘anti-Frenchness’ so important to nationalists. There was nothing bipolar about his vision of the world.”²⁵ “Are You a Democrat or Republican?” will likewise evacuate the nation’s rallying cry – nationalism – of its antagonistic elements: republicans are patriots, “never separating the love of liberty from the love of one’s country, recognizing no superiority of essence in one’s own country over one’s neighbors.” In a democracy, on the other hand, “patriots carry the name of *nationalists*, people to be feared because prepared to exchange liberty for power.”²⁶

No doubt, Debray is keenly aware of nationalism’s perversions, and is likely unsettled by the popularity of Le Pen’s rising *Front national* (though it is never mentioned).²⁷ Thus, he wants to ensure that his republican-nationalism is not mistaken for this xenophobic nationalist discourse, and so distinguishes between an opportunistic mobilization of national sentiment, and an essentializing, racist mobilization. The latter is proper to democracy, the former to republics. Debray is obviously confused here. In the United States – Debray’s ideal-typical democracy – nationalists were called “patriots” during Reagan’s presidency, this jingoist rhetoric being libertarian, “patriotic”, and not especially racist.²⁸ Likewise, the US’s partner in the democratic spirit, England, has never had a strong nationalist movement. In France however, a (would-be)

²⁵ Régis Debray, *A demain de Gaulle* (Paris: Gallimard), 79-80. Citations and translations will be hereafter taken from the English version, *Charles de Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 62. Debray has been taken to task for his Gaullism, somewhat flippantly in Jean-Marie Colombani (present editor of *Le Monde*), *Les Infortunes de la République* (Paris: Grasset, 2000), and more seriously, from a hard-line Gaullist perspective, in Paul-Marie Coûteaux, *De Gaulle, espérer contre tout: lettre ouverte à Régis Debray* (Vevey, Switzerland: Xenia, 2010).

²⁶ “Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?,” 117-118.

²⁷ This is all the more surprising since, as this article went to press in late 1989, Le Pen’s *Front national* would score its most impressive victory to date in the parliamentary elections. This rates one passing mention in article that subsequently appeared in *L’Express*: “Et si, chez nous le dilemme de demain n’était pas ‘fédéralisme ou nationalisme’, mais la nation selon de Gaulle ou la tribu selon Le Pen?” Reprinted in *Contretemps*, 160.

²⁸ There is a strong case to be made that this was the greatest showing of “American nationalism” in US history – a point that does not work in Debray’s favor.

republic, a highly racist nationalist movement was making considerable inroads into French politics, probably as a consequence of the continuing economic recession set off in the seventies, and the enduring high rates of unemployment. But Debray eschews any kind of political or economic analysis in his articulation of nationalism. More seriously, there is a possible theoretical elision at work here. In the *Critique*, Debray claimed that “the *we* is a bellicose affair,” that group identification is inherently agonistic, obeying a friend-enemy logic. This belligerence need not be racist and essentializing, as Debray hopes to show through de Gaulle’s supra-conflictual variant, but what exactly is to prevent it from being so? Racist nationalism, throughout its history, has proven to be just as opportunistic as Gaullist nationalism: Jews, blacks, Muslims all being targets of this discourse from the Third Republic to the present. If a “them” is a necessary condition of an “us,” it seems likely that an essentialized “them” could develop quite naturally.

In its underlying basis, Debray’s distinction between patriotism and nationalism conforms to the terms set out in an American debate on their respective dynamics. Here, patriotism is an essentially conservative notion, the desire to defend one’s country as it actually is, whereas nationalism hinges on a forward-looking, unrealized notion of what one’s country ought to be.²⁹ This is more to the point for Debray, who sees future-orientation as the true spirit of democracy, and the scourge of all contemporary politics and culture. In the seventies and eighties, French postmodernism registered its own dissent from the present by means of a *fuite en avant*, taking flight, as with Derrida, into a spectral “a-venir” (“to come”), or with Baudrillard, into a futuristic hyperreality whose paradise was the American desert. Its despair marked a retreat from politics and reality into sealed off domains: texts (“il n’y a pas de hors-texte”),

²⁹ The distinction is attributed to Irving Kristol. For an illuminating discussion, see Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7.

language, and surrealistic musing. Debray is too much of a political realist to ever succumb to these temptations, as the most cursory glance at his autobiographical *oeuvre* will confirm – the lesson of these works being the inescapability of political reality. Even at its most satirical – his humor often flirting with disengagement – moments, Debray’s work is always in dialogue with the real. And yet, if there is no flight from the real, there is a flight from the present, but toward the past instead of the future. Submission to the past unburdens the present, wiping away the conceit of forward-looking historical narratives. In *À demain de Gaulle*, he writes, “A lot of countries have had a bourgeois economy and a working class. But the Bourgeoisie was no more a collective subject than the World Proletariat. Yes, there are democratic societies, as there are revolutionary situations. But democracy is not a social subject and revolution not an agent of history, to be embodied successively in this or that society or situation. There is something that existed before the ‘democracy’ condition, before the ‘revolution’ condition, and will survive them. Something older, more active, more durable, that for some time has been known by the vague name of ‘nation.’”³⁰ With this quote, Debray enacts the ultimate gesture of the anthropological turn, and submits to its principal failing: the substitution of the archaic for a now-vanishing subject of history – in this case, the proletariat – and the fallacy of identifying the good with the antique.

There is almost nothing consistent in Debray’s formulations of the nation. Above, it is an enduring, immutable form, and thus, by virtue of its stasis, a much-needed dam in the river of time. Elsewhere, it is “neither an end in itself nor a supreme value, but the first stage of the universal, turning the patriot towards humanity as a whole instead of shutting him into his

³⁰ Debray, *Charles de Gaulle*, 61.

circumscribed animal's territory."³¹ At the nation's helm, de Gaulle possessed a sense of balance in politics that "gave him a sense of the *possible*." Among the people, however, this sense of political realism gives way to a politics of affect, a language of the heart which feeds on the "*impossible*" as a point of *ralliement*. For the *demos*, the nation is a residue of memory, and yet for the politician, it is always dignified with the status of an "idea": "Jaurès's question, 'what would be the use of holding power if one weren't guided by an idea?', is not a matter of doctrine, but of principle, of moral biology"; likewise, "De Gaulle never improvised. He trusted his instinct and did not talk gibberish. But he was guided by a prudent theory of instinct."³² These discrepancies in Debray's characterization of the nation are rooted in contradictory perceptions of the conjuncture: on one hand, the victory of Anglo-American liberal-capitalism in the Cold War, and its imminent global extension; on the other, society's increasing tendency toward cultural, as opposed to economic or interest-based, forms of organization in the late twentieth century. The nation plays a leading role in both scenarios, but not necessarily a consistent one. In the first, it is a hold out against the encroachment of American interests, and as such, is opportunistic, and amenable to the kind of rational political strategy that Debray lauds in de Gaulle. In the second, it is an end-in-itself that allows for the realization of a higher sense of community. Here, the demotic, affective properties of the nation are what matter.

Thus, two different nations appear in Debray's writing, and are often neatly superimposed on one another, effectively concealing the breach. We know, on some level, that Debray takes these discrepant analyses of the present to be inter-related, the *Critique*'s "constancy principle" supposing a proportional religious-ethnic surge to the ever-deepening global penetration of capitalism. But this does not imply, as Debray does elsewhere, that modes

³¹ *Charles de Gaulle*, 77.

³² *Que vive la République*, 133-134; *Charles de Gaulle*, 64.

of sociality and production have changed; just that the “irrational” flares up more dramatically as capitalist rationality tightens its hold over the world. The tension is rather more embedded.

From *Modeste contribution* and *Pouvoir intellectuel*, in which an overpowering economic logic is shown to have destroyed France and the culture industry from within, respectively, to *Que vive la République*, where it threatens both, the economization of cultural and political forms has been a centerpiece of Debray’s critical work. In *Que vive la République*, he imagines the coming neo-liberal take-over France, and its banal ethos of economic homogeneity (reminiscent of Marx’s “exchange value”): “first, that *homo æconomicus* defines the human essence, second, that enterprise is society’s center of gravity, and third, that politics is reduced to a market of opinions.” What are the political or historical causes for this change? On these points, Debray is evasive (as in *Pouvoir intellectuel*), motioning on occasion toward the decline of the Left.

This etiology is repeated in *Charles de Gaulle*, but this time to serve the countervailing conclusion, namely the changing basis of social organization: “The socialist Left could no longer define itself as the spokesman of the ‘working classes’, the champion of the exploited against the exploiters. Now that production is no longer dominated by material labor and information is supplanting energy, the factory has stopped being the center of society and working time the center of life. When society is no longer divided into two opposing groups of classes united by common interest, but increasingly into cultural (national, religious, linguistic) and natural (age or sex) groups.”³³ Has capitalism undergone a change in its nature then? Does it invoke new rationalities and forms of organization in its globalized form? Otherwise, how could it be both globally dominant, and increasingly obsolescent in the sphere of social relations?

Debray’s above rendering of the nation as a “collective personality” recalls our discussion of autobiography in Part I. Broadly, “personality” cuts two ways in Debray’s writings:

³³ *Que vive la République*, 31; *Charles de Gaulle*, 97.

in one sense, the plural subject of the revolutionaries, and hence the attempt to forge a “collective autobiography” in *Les Rendez-vous manqués*; in another, personality as charismatic authority, as the unique property of “nos seigneurs” – Castro, Guevara, Allende, Mitterrand, and de Gaulle most immediately, Stalin more distantly. In the autobiographies, Debray positions himself as the medium between these two “personalities,” partaking of both types without fully embodying either. The militant, we recall, is both lucid and rational as an individual subject (with a touch of Lawrence’s adventuring charisma), but self-effacing and convivial as a member of a collective subject. From which side does the nation take its “collective personality”: the leader or the people? The answer would seemingly be “both.” In Debray’s cone-shaped anthropological grid of human societies, in which horizontal solidarity is premised on an absent other, figured as an “*au-delà*” (“above”), the leader typically occupies the foundational hole in the group’s schema. Both sides mutually confer personality: de Gaulle is just as much the nation as the people, but there can be no national personality without both inputs. Close attention to Debray’s favorite examples of national solidarity will invariably reveal the co-presence of both terms: Robespierre in 1793, Jaurès (or the ghost thereof) in 1914, Blum in 1936, and de Gaulle, 1940-44. The Paris Commune, where no clear leader-figure emerged from the struggle, rates hardly even a mention in Debray’s work.

The originality of Debray’s work is in fact staked on a unique bet, that one can learn as much from the “Guarani Indians of the Chaco” as one can from heads of state, that the perspective from “above” can be fused with a populist dynamics from “below” to create a more unified, solidaristic polity.³⁴ But we might wonder if these modalities ever truly intersect, and if they did, how attractive their outcome would be. Debray would no doubt share the first

³⁴ *Charles de Gaulle*, 5.

hesitation, offering a critique of the complex system of mediation – its corruption and distortion – as an explanation for this hiatus, or perhaps citing the mediocrity of the State and its officials. Even granting Debray these critical points, the model is prey to a disquieting dynamics by which all rationality is conferred from above, never quite reaching a stupefied and apathetic demos. The people have been evacuated of their rationality. If they act, they do so as an unintelligent, amorphous lump, often as a force within a field of gravitation. Their solidarity and resistance is always pre-given and delivered from the exterior, as in the eternal form of the nation, which, if marshaled correctly, brings out the best in Frenchmen.

The otherwise laudable coda of *Que vive la République* offers a case in point: “The world has changed, and we change with it. ‘One must adapt.’ We should not allow ourselves to be fooled by the rhetoric of change which assumes a kind of automated illiteracy, and which is only a pedagogy of conditioning. ... The Bastille wasn’t taken in order to adapt to the world, but to make it other than what it was. You turned out to be a people resilient to a good education.”³⁵ The injunction not to adapt – reminiscent of the *Critique*’s panegyric of the militant, as the one who refuses to adapt – is misleading, since resistance to “the terrorism of the new” is achieved by seeking common cause through a pre-existing form – adaptation by another name. It is doubly misleading for citing the French Revolution, which had truly created new modes of collective behavior in the struggle to bring down the Old Regime, the nation being the most formidable. Two hundred years later, the nation is still called upon to shoulder this burden. His repeated insistence on seeing the French Revolution as an essentially backward-looking event is a fanciful anachronism, one which Mona Ozouf spotted at once: “The prophecy [of Debray’s] always seemed a little strange to me, since I am inclined to think that it is precisely on a denial of

³⁵ *Que vive la République*, 210-212.

history that the Republic was founded in France.”³⁶ There is a tendency for Debray to associate the *new* with the abject in the republican writings, giving them an air of anti-modernism.³⁷

The remark from *Que vive la République* also reveals a dubious penchant for accepting the media sphere’s “dumbing” of the people. Stupidity can be both emancipatory or enslaving for Debray, but it is always present: television and the media-sphere writ large stupefy the people into apathy and bourgeois isolation; but another kind of stupefaction, as with the revolutionaries’ “resilience to good education,” is necessary for organization to take place. If “you have to learn to be ‘stupid,’” where is this (un)education to be found?³⁸ Collectively, Debray’s autobiographical trilogy implicitly forms an answer to this question: “an amorous education” (*Les Masques*), “a political education” (*Loués soient nos seigneurs*), and “an intellectual education” (*Par amour de l’art*). As for love, it would appear to be an inauspicious starting place for intelligent political organization. To be sure, love is a political passion for Debray, the deep admirer of Stendhal, and it will later provide an underlying basis for political action as brotherly love, or *fraternité*. But again, love, as with its opposite, hate – another favorite political passion of Debray’s – is potentially reckless, destructive, and unintelligent. Moreover, if the media-sphere produces and reinforces social pulverization, “imputing all that happens to things, not to men,” where and how is this love supposed to develop?³⁹ At what point do these passions atrophy?

³⁶ Ozouf, *Composition française*, 239.

³⁷ Debray’s Swiftian polemic, *Le Plan vermeil*, satirizes a culture obsessed with youth, speed, and immediacy. Régis Debray, *Le Plan vermeil. Modest proposition* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 46, 59.

³⁸ *Charles de Gaulle*, 64.

³⁹ *Que vive la République*, 211.

The “political education” of *Praised Be Our Lords* is the most *sui generis* response, juxtaposing what might be called limit experiences – armed revolutionary struggle on one side, personal service to princes on the other. Debray gestures at a universal lesson by including a section, “Advice to Younger Generations,” counseling the young in the proper balance of political rationalism and passion: “1. Act towards all your friends as if they were going to become your enemies. 2. Where there is a community of interests, danger arises when one of the parties becomes too powerful,” etc. The model here is limited because unrepeatable. The *fait divers*-like quality of this autobiography, as with the “confessions” of both Augustine and Rousseau, invites us to smile at, and ultimately forgive the author’s youthful folly. It is the conceit of all autobiographers to have passed off their *apologia* as a lesson to humanity, and to have spun their *bêtises* into wisdom. Debray, as we are reminded elsewhere, occupies a specific role as a medium: not everyone gets to be one. Between the people and the state, Debray finds himself in the middle: “From each according to his position, to each according to his temperature: I would place myself between the two.”⁴⁰ But more importantly, the atomization and apathy wrought by the arrival of the televisual regime after 68 tends to dissolve political distinctions, and negate the very passions on which meaningful struggle could be based. Plainly, these formulas will ring hollow in the age of de-politicization.

The “intellectual education” of *Par amour de l’art* demonstrates a model of learning that Debray would hold to be universalizable as a training of the rational faculties. Its institutionalized form is the secular public school, “whose first mission is to mold citizens in their capacity to judge solely according to their natural reason.”⁴¹ Pedagogically, its method of instruction dovetails with Debray’s anthropological theory of heteronomy, and reproduces the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 211, 118.

strict master-pupil relationship we find to be a commonplace among Debray's autobiographical writings. The public school is the one uncorrupted medium in Debray's account of political and institutional processes, where heteronomy is converted into autonomy through the benevolent intervention of the state: "we cannot forget that there needs to be a master in order to learn to repudiate the master, and that our School refers to a particular idea of man considered as an end."⁴² Through the public school, something like a virtuous republican circle is completed, in which a rational, enlightened state reproduces its own kind. Here, the state is the privileged *primum movens* of the just society: "One finds that in France, the State has had a wholly progressive role from its appearance in the sixteenth century to the modern day." It is much more than simply an instrument of class domination, as Marx thought, but an institution in step with the human condition: "For me, man is not a force of spontaneity, but an institutional being, a being of education, and this institution of the state seems to me a guarantee of human dignity." The State, a synonym for "Republic," must be defended at all costs, as "We are not on the threshold of a transcendence of the State, but the extinction of the State, and thus the rebirth of feudal relations."⁴³

As a unity of State, School, and Nation, this republican synthesis institutes a politics reminiscent of the classical *polis*, demarcating a public sphere where citizens come to exercise their reason communally. It comes replete with an injunction for a citizen's army (never to be professionalized), physical, alongside intellectual education, and the subtraction of all religious instruction from the public school.⁴⁴ For Debray, the Republic institutes its own sacred, and

⁴² Régis Debray, *Ce que nous voile le voile: la République et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 24.

⁴³ Régis Debray and Jean Ziegler, *Il s'agit de ne pas se rendre: conversations sur France Culture* (Paris: Arléa, 1993), 44.

⁴⁴ For the first, see Régis Debray, *Le code et le glaive: après l'Europe, la nation?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 20; for the second, see *Journal d'un petit bourgeois entre deux feux et quatre murs*, 69, and ; for the third,

effectively acts as a “religion without religion,” national anthems replacing prayers, flags replacing religious totems, and so on.⁴⁵ Notice the active sense of *laïcité* demonstrated here. Public space is not meant simply to be a neutral arena where individuals are left unmolested by the religiosity of others, but a space in which citizens are organized and bonded through a common outlook. The Republic is, as emphasized above, an historical enterprise, imagined here as a community of destiny through a community of memory – instruction in the latter domain being the real fruit of the republican school.⁴⁶ Where Nature threatens to subsume and subvert political relations – hence the “rebirth of feudal relations” – the republic interjects a cultural community, founded on the promise of equality under the law, and universal access to education and citizenship – a legatee of Sièyes’s republic as articulated in 1789. With the republic, politics is restored of its ancestral purpose, “to manage the sacred,” but more specifically to deflect two forms of immiseration brought on by democratic civilization: symbolic immiseration on the one hand, and personal isolation, or detachment from the group, on the other. As the republican school, ideally, balances a rational education with a sentimental one, training reason, but also introducing students to a sense of community, to “the effects of the group,” it creates the conditions for a politics that can recuperate these two lacunae together, linking person to community, community to culture.⁴⁷

L’enseignement du fait religieux dans l’École laïque (Rapport au ministre de l’Education nationale) (Paris: O. Jacob, 2002).

⁴⁵ *Ce que nous voile*, 45.

⁴⁶ In fact, Debray often conflates (purposely, it would seem) Renan’s formula for the nation – “un plebiscite de tous les jours” – with a republican algorithm, thus invoking the community’s voluntaristic propensity to shape its destiny through memory. Ironically, the slogan would be implicitly adopted by de Gaulle, who would use it to legitimize his own democratic populism, rather like that of Napoleon III. But more seriously for Debray’s argument, does the republic have this kind of plasticity, hemmed in as it is by the Revolutionary tradition? To what degree must fidelity to the Revolution be maintained? See, *inter alia*, *Ce que nous voile*, 37. Here one also finds Debray’s reference to the “communauté de destin.”

⁴⁷ *Ce que nous voile*, 25.

We are now in a position to appreciate the problem. Passion and affect are the ABC of politics, and if resistance is going to take place, these sentiments will have to be mobilized. “Becoming stupid” plays on the ambiguity of stupidity, as both abandonment of reason, and as stupefaction, awe-struck submission to the power of myth, symbol, charisma. Both are required for resistance. The republican school provides what often seems to be missing in Debray’s anthropology of politics, namely a rational education for the people. But in fact it offers much more than this, an insertion into a ready-made political-religious order – the Nation – and the substitution of a community of destiny for the biological family, the very same substitution we saw Debray make in *Comète ma comète*. Emancipation from one community occurs at the moment of submission to another – a chain that goes from teacher, to State/Republic, to Nation. In effect, the Republic takes over both the intellectual and sentimental education, formatting what, from a generous perspective, might be seen as a salutary insertion into a cohesive group, but from a less generous one, a powerful model of social conformity. In this framework, communal action loses its edge. It becomes difficult to imagine how the much-vaunted political passion of the revolutionary is meant to be engaged, or what its provenance might be. Politics, in Debray’s anthropology, is everywhere, a presupposition of all social relations as we are told in the *Critique*. And yet, it is strangely nowhere in Debray’s later excursus on French politics. The political militant, the one who “refuses to adapt” in the *Critique*, and who must be “rehabilitated” in *Que vive la République*, intervenes only as a *deus ex machina*, for his or her stupidity must be other-than-republican, and hence come from elsewhere.

The problem is that the Republic solves all problems. Its institutions pick up the pieces of the shattered Party – with no proletariat to represent – and become the loci of all militant political activity. Accordingly, the language of political action assumes a more and more

disembodied appearance in Debray's work. In a later work on mediology, he writes, "The contrast is thus stark, to my way of thinking, between the warmer and fuzzier notion of communication and the *militant*, suffering nature of the struggle to transmit." Similarly, an intervention on the *voile* affair of 1989 politicizes the republican school in terms of the Nazi occupation of World War II: "the Bicentenary will have proven to be the Munich of the republican school"; "Ceding to the *voile*, as you [Jospin] have done, this has a name: capitulation"; "les *partisans* de la 'nouvelle laïcité'"⁴⁸ Institutions or procedures are militant, not people or groups. Debray's repeated insistence on seeing the Republic in terms of Renan's formula for the nation – "a daily plebiscite" – takes on renewed significance: it provides the illusion of a voluntaristic, elective community, concealing the asymptotic, ready-made character of the Republic. Moreover, the Republic's "militancy" is underwritten by the gigantism of its polemical archrival, democracy, which Debray always overstates and often simply conflates with capitalism (i.e., "Democratic government takes man to be, in his essence, a productive animal, born for fabrication and exchange").⁴⁹ The Republic washes its hands of commerce and exchange, and returns political man to his institutional habitat, where his communal soul reunites with his corporeal form. The solution is a philosophical variant of Todd's neo-mercantilism, protectionism as a shield from the forward march of history. It often seems no more than a stubborn denial.

It should nevertheless be clear why Debray would make the trip to republicanism.

Temptations were littered throughout the seventies' writings, fawning eulogies of Mitterrand and nostalgic appreciations of the nation-state slipped between the lines of political strategy. The

⁴⁸ Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 4; Elisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elisabeth de Fontenay, Catherine Kintzler. "Profs, ne capitulons pas!" *Nouvel Observateur* (2-8 November 1989).

⁴⁹ "Etes-vous démocrate ou républicain?", 117.

political crisis that came later that decade, detonated and massively inflected by the anti-totalitarian discourse, discredited both the state and the PCF, as both were held to be complicit in the crimes in the East. Their elimination, combined with a post-68 anti-statist, anti-authoritarian *zeitgeist*, created a powerful legitimacy for a neo-liberal program, which was swept into the Elysée under the Giscard-Barre regime in 1974, and then resumed after Mitterrand proved incapable of repelling it in the first years of his administration. Debray, who was acutely aware of these developments, both as the author of *Modeste contribution*, and as a minister to Mitterrand, sought to rescue from this ignominy what he took to be the patrimony of the French Revolution, and hence the source of the French exception – State, Nation, and Republic, all seen from a certain Jacobin angle of vision. Together, these ideals could realize a higher political community, one that was integrated and self-sufficient enough to ward off the commercial values of liberal-democratic civilization. Authoritarianism, another bugbear of the 68ers, could be understood as a highly desirable pedagogical model – mastery through apprenticeship, emancipation through temporary submission – and divested of its associations with Stalin and de Gaulle. The infantile slogan of 68, “it is forbidden to forbid,” could be reversed: “though touched by your kindness, we respond that it is permitted to forbid.”⁵⁰ With this in mind, can Debray be rightly accused of negating the 68-cum-neo-liberal program, of erecting an intransigent contrarianism into a cultural and political theory? Does this polemical brilliance require Debray to turn his back on social and economic developments, and forgo the kind of Marxist-Leninist reading of the present that distinguished his earlier writings? Whatever may be have been the underlying motivation, the move to republicanism brought with it a train of inconsistencies and blind-spots – though productive ones that reveal a peculiar pathology of development after the chaotic seventies. These I have tried to show in this section.

⁵⁰ “Profs, ne capitulons pas!”

Mediology

The critical system that had been undertaken in *Le Pouvoir intellectuel* reaches its fullest, most mature articulation in the 1990s with *Cours de médiologie générale* and *Vie et mort de l'image*. “Mediology”, or “the study of how technological systems inform our cultural and political arrangements”, constitutes Debray’s signature contribution to France’s legacy of critical philosophy, and marks a significant achievement in its own right. Debray imagines it as self-contained discipline with its own set of methodological procedures, and has tried to endow it with an air of institutional legitimacy in the French university. In the early nineties, he wrote a doctoral thesis on mediology under the supervision of François Dagognet (later *Vie et mort de l'image*), and soon after presented a *doctorat d'état* to a jury at the Sorbonne, presided over by Daniel Bournoux, Bernard Bourgeois (chair), Roger Chartier, François Dagognet, Jacques Le Goff, and Michel Serres. Now more than thirty years after being recalled from a teaching post in Nancy by that “telegraphic *deus ex machina*” from Castro, Debray returned to the university, taking a position as professor of philosophy at Lyon III in 1999, where he teaches to this day. In spite of Debray’s best efforts, mediology’s institutional success has been limited, attracting only a cult following among academics and students, many of whom write for its journal, *Medium*. Then again, considering the stifling rigidity of the French University, the smallest inroads of a new discipline ought to be taken as a sign of success.

Debray’s already impressive rate of production multiplied in the 1990s, such that there are too many texts, even on mediology alone, to warrant treatment on an individual basis. I will therefore limit my considerations to a handful of what I take to be the seminal mediological texts – *Cours de médiologie générale* (1991), *Vie et mort de l'image* (1992), *L'Etat séducteur* (1994) –

with passing references to some of the less salient, but nevertheless interesting writings of the period – *Manifestes médiologiques* (1994), *Transmettre* (1997), and *Introduction à la médiologie* (2000). These texts pose questions that engage both the historical dimension of this inquiry, and the internal problematics of Debray’s intellectual itinerary. In the former domain, we might ask how mediology reinforces or recasts the anthropological thinking that Debray invented in the wake of the anti-totalitarian crisis? How does it frame France’s role in the late twentieth century, especially in relation to competing currents of thought – postmodernism, critical sociology, and neo-liberalism? What future does it envision? In the latter domain, we need to ask how mediology completes the hitherto weak or missing historical component of Debray’s thinking, how it theorizes the relationship between the technological and the archaic, the material and the religious, and how it threads together cultural and political analysis. In what ways does it endorse and refine the left-republican program delineated above?

Mediology is best seen as an attempt to rewrite Marxian historical materialism with different variables: technology rather than capital, anthropology of groups rather than a sociology of classes. This is the essence of Debray’s mediological revolution, a critique of cultural-political economy from the standpoint of the late twentieth century, a negative dialectics that shares more with the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School than with that of Marx, which Debray is always keen to enclose within its nineteenth-century context. As with Marx’s critical system, mediology implies a tension between theory and practice, a struggle between an analytical system with scientific pretensions and a philosophy of liberation oriented in the present. Debray’s critics within the University have always cited this as a weakness – two Debrays, “the first, the one interested in mediations and the *longue durée*, the second, the one

interested in politics and current events”⁵¹ – whereas it should be regarded as an invitation to thought, and a new way of conceiving the link between theory and action. Whether these converge to form a coherent is a question we have been weighing since *Critique de la raison politique*, and one which hangs in the balance of mediology’s program. My position, in accordance with Bernard Stiegler’s, is that mediology lacks a mechanism like Marx’s “accumulation of capital,” a generative dynamic that shapes the material and formal contours of an epoch, controls the rhythms of the present and future, and thereby sets the coordinates by which a program can be plotted.⁵² Debray’s philosophy, as we have emphasized, is typically allergic to the future, preferring to return to older forms – nation, republic, the age of print – instead of authorizing new ones: hence a negative dialectics, a premonition of humanity’s onward descent into barbarism.

Any respectable critical system is difficult to apprehend in its inert state. Theory is philosophy in motion, elastic concepts shadowing transformations in the real world. *Manifestes médiologiques*, *Transmettre*, and *Introduction à la médiologie* are admirable sorties into the domain of methodology, perhaps necessary for solidifying mediology’s disciplinary aspirations, but are ultimately unsatisfying as a first encounter. As the discipline that “treats higher social functions and their relationship with technological structures of transmission,” mediology is related to many adjacent disciplines, but self-standing nevertheless.⁵³ Like semiotics, it deals with signs, but always with a materialist edge (whereas Saussurian linguistics imagines meaning to be contained within the sign); Foucault’s archaeological method sets an estimable precedent as

⁵¹ Jean-Louis Missika, “Régis Debray contre Régis Debray,” *Le Débat* 85 (May – August, 1995), 43.

⁵² Bernard Stiegler, “La croyance de Régis Debray,” *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³ Régis Debray, *Manifestes médiologiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 21.

an inquiry into the rules and mechanisms that determine discourse and thought, but regrettably turns its back on material causes, always falling upon metaphysical explanations; and finally, it shares with the history of *mentalités*, “our best interlocutor,” a keen interest in patterns and registers of belief, but whereas the historian “is a specialist in inertia, the mediologue is a specialist of movement and transformations.” Its proximity to Marxist historical materialism is closer than Debray would have us believe.⁵⁴ If “nothing is less ‘*matérialiste*’ at bottom than this philosophical materialism,” there are nevertheless salient mediological moments in Marx’s work, for example, in the *Grundrisse*, when he asks, “Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?,” or in a well-known letter to Engels concerning the needle-gun, which asks, “Is there any sphere in which our theory that the *organization* of labor is determined *by the means of production* more dazzlingly vindicated than in the industry for human slaughter?”⁵⁵ Oversights notwithstanding, mediology’s virtue is to have broadened this conversation, opening it up to many of Marx’s own interlocutors – Feuerbach, Comte, Proudhon – and to his descendants, especially Walter Benjamin.

More precisely then, mediology studies the intersection between what is often called within the historical discipline “material culture,” which privileges physical artifacts as causal agents, and the “history of *mentalités*.” Its problematique implicitly challenges the liberal-progressive regard for technology as a force of liberation, as a purgative of archaic customs and habits. Mediology’s task lies here, in capturing the (often positive) relationship between the material and the religious. It tries to capture the effects of material artifacts on our beliefs – the

⁵⁴ Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 46-57.

⁵⁵ *Manifestes médiologiques*, 118. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 111; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 291.

camera for instance, giving rise to “the instantaneous, the scoop, atmosphere” – but also to the material conditions in which culture is appreciated and consumed – the construction of museum space, the layout of a movie theater, and so on. If technological determinism is mediology’s greatest virtue, unburdening historical analysis of its ancestral dependence on events and key persons, and defying the program of the linguistic turn in the humanities (which threatened to dematerialize historical reason), it is also, as Stiegler observes, its principal limitation.

Mediology is best appreciated *in vivo*, above all where concerned with the “two movements that most interest me: primitive Christianity and proletarian socialism.”⁵⁶ *Le Pouvoir intellectuel*, Debray’s 1979 dissection of the French intelligentsia, offered a preliminary model of mediological analysis. It diagramed the social being of an entire “category” by looking at the institutions of France’s cultural apparatus, and experimented with a three-fold historical periodization, which defined each era in terms of its dominant cultural institution. The later mediological project expands and deepens this taxonomy to encompass all of human history. The earliest “age,” the “logosphere,” is defined by its principal medium of expression, writing. This is a theological age that begins with the appearance of monotheistic religion in the Middle East and expires with the arrival of the printing press in Europe in the fifteenth century. Continuing in the functionalist vein (of the *Critique*), Debray determines that writing developed as a way of codifying the word of god, and of fixing orthodoxy among the believers. What is privileged in this universe is, however, not the written, but the oral. God’s word is the sacred datum, thus making for “the sanctity of Language, the theological omnipotence of the Word, as indicated by the idea of *Logos* or *Verbe éternel*.”⁵⁷ As we know from the work of Marshall

⁵⁶ *Transmitting Culture*, 8.

⁵⁷ *Cours de médiologie générale*, 387. “D’où la sainteté du Langage, et la toute-puissance théologique de la Parole indiquée par la notion du *Logos* ou Verbe éternel.”

McLuhan, another predecessor and fellow-traveler in the domain of mediology, the “content” of any medium is another medium: speech is the content of writing, writing the content of print, and so on.⁵⁸ For Debray, this property of media carries within it a dialectical tension: the material artifact that is meant to encode and preserve another medium will itself become the dominant mode of communication. The spoken will eventually give way to the printed, and the medium of writing will have transformed into the message itself in the age of print.

Debray’s mediological treatment of early Christianity stands out for its originality. It approaches the Transfiguration with the same awe-struck reverence Marx used to describe the commodity in *Capital*, as an allegory for an entire system of production and circulation. With the figure of the Christ, Christianity redefined what mediation could mean, transforming Word into flesh through the vehicle of the God-man (“hommedium”): “*mediology is simply a delayed Christology*, reflected in the realm of the profane. ... In our civilization, *Incarnation* will have been the first code-name, or baptism, of the ‘cybernetic’ mechanism.”⁵⁹ For Debray, the Incarnation would provide the touchstone for a complex mediatic system more powerful and successful than any other in world history, success here meaning longevity. “*The genius of Christianity is that of intermediaries*”, a vast network of offices (church hierarchies), heavenly emissaries (angels, saints), liturgical practices (Eucharist, catechism) instituted to propagate and preserve orthodoxy.⁶⁰ More than doctrines or ideas, it was the voice that galvanized group cohesion, an instrument that incarnated emotion, simplicity, and proximity – the Word being read aloud in groups. And where the efficacy of sentimental bonds broke down, the material

⁵⁸ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), ch. 1.

⁵⁹ *Cours de médiologie générale*, 93-97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

incarnation of the corpus mysticum, the Church, closed the loop, not simply as the distributor of the sacred, but as the sacred itself (enacted through Christ's Latinized pun, "Tu es Pierre et sur cette Pierre je bâtirai mon Église," which retains the ambiguity of the Church as both material and spiritual entity).⁶¹

There is a fairly transparent formula for revolutionary organization buried in Debray's admiration of early Christianity – the "revelation in the revolution." Christianity's capacity to mobilize large numbers of people throughout its long history, its universalist vocation, traditions of militancy and fraternity, and (relatively) stable doctrinal corpus make for an enviable political-intellectual program. "Storming heaven" need not be pejoratively rendered in its modern context. This gesture has since been replicated within the European Left, but with no salute to Debray's preceding explorations. We find, for example, a similar wager in Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: la fondation de l'universalisme* (1997), which heralds Paul as "our contemporary", the exemplar of a militant figure to replace Lenin. Badiou's bearings are remarkably similar to Debray's, piqued by the reign of "monetary abstraction, whose false universality has absolutely no difficulty accommodating the kaleidoscope of communitarianisms." Paul then, is the authentic figure of universalism, the one who separates the "truth procedure" from cultural particularisms, and who understands the coming of Christ – Badiou's "event" – as a "pure beginning," to which the militant must be absolutely loyal.⁶² Badiou joins Debray in tracing the originality of Christianity to its peculiar accommodation of both Hellenic and Jewish traditions, "a cultural mixity to which Christianity owes its propulsive force." Otherwise, this Paul is an abstract figure removed from his religious context, an avatar of Badiou's own philosophy of

⁶¹ See François Dagognet, "Régis Debray, médiologue", *Faut-il brûler Régis Debray?*, 139.

⁶² Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 7, 49.

truth and the “event”: “With Paul, we notice a complete absence of the theme of mediation. Christ is not mediation; he is not that through which we *know* God. Jesus Christ is pure event, and as such is not a function.”⁶³ For Debray rather, mediation and functionality are the very essence of early Christianity, and by extension, of a politics with a realist edge. As a conceptualization of institutions and the matrices of belief, this framework offers a much more fruitful intervention on the potential uses of Christian practices within the contemporary political idiom.

Another index of Christianity’s “genius” is its fluency in the medium of images, yet a further legacy of the Incarnation: “From a divine body, itself material, there could thus be a material image.” The image, like writing, is not a Kantian end-in-itself, rather “a *means* of divination, of defense, bewitchment, healing, initiation,” whose logic is encoded within the anthropological community, as a medium “between the living and the dead, a community and a cosmology.”⁶⁴ The image’s efficacy always betrays this ancestral purpose, though its resonances will modulate along with transformations in the nature and scope of human communities. If the Western eye was magical before becoming artistic in the *graphosphere*, it has now become economic in the *videosphere*. The rise of Christianity comes late in the *logosphere*, as the purely religious function of the image – constituted principally through stationary idols, invested with the supernatural power of translating the invisible into the visible – gives way to a notion of image-making as artistic in the *graphosphere*, as something to be appreciated in-itself, detached from its religious function. From a mediological perspective, the Church was caught in a bind with respect to images. Their affective power could prove

⁶³ *Cours de médiologie générale*, 118; Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 49.

⁶⁴ Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l’image: Une histoire du regard en Occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 77. “D’un corps divin, lui-même matière, il pouvait par conséquent y avoir image matérielle.” *Ibid.*, 30-31.

indispensable as a medium for transmitting faith and orthodoxy, but also, for the same reason, a dangerous means of demotic empowerment. Behind Christianity's iconomania has always lurked an iconoclasm, a "tentation totalitaire" that would arrest the social power of image-makers: "Taking control of the studios was, for the Empire, as it was later for the first civil powers in the West, a way of seizing a key lever of hegemony. Politics and theology are inextricably linked."⁶⁵ To the extent that Debray admires the social and political innovations of Christianity, this reverence is reserved for the demotic movement of the faithful, which displays a fraternal and militant spirit that would be the envy of any revolutionary. The mediating apparatus of the Church, however, grew too powerful, especially once annexed to the Roman Empire, and effectively stifled or assimilated this demotic fervor.

Nevertheless, the groundwork for the democratic revolution had been laid with the invention and popularization of writing. Here, the narrative reads much like Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, in which something like print-capitalism sets in motion a process of vernacularization, allowing for the reconstitution of old imperial loyalties along ethnic-linguistic-national lines: "the passage from oral to written culture marked a notch in the *national unification of territories* through the liquidation of dialects and regional patois."⁶⁶ For Debray, the *graphosphere* is an all-around improvement on the theological age that preceded it. Whereas spoken culture is particularist and contextual in nature, underwriting a cosmos in which space, time, politics, and images are localized *in extremis*, print culture dramatically enlarges the scale of the written word's circulation, making it possible to conceive the world in generalist or universalist terms. The move toward abstract generality will open the way to the Scientific Revolution, political revolution writ large – as founded on ideas of general interest and abstract

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

legal equality – and the rise of the modern nation-state.⁶⁷ The image too will undergo a profound and salutary transformation in the *graphosphere*, now becoming what the Renaissance and Enlightenment mistakenly attributed to the Greeks, but which took shape only much later in the European Middle Ages: “art” as the production of aesthetic objects, created by individual “authors.” This scopic regime makes possible and reflects a world liberated from the temporal power of religion, but not yet disenchanted by a totalizing process of technological atomization – an age for which revolution will be thinkable in its truest sense, as a return to something idyllic (time is pregnant), and as a leap into an unknowable, limitless future (the empty homogeneous time of Benjamin-Anderson). Graphically, its conception of time is not the circle of the theological age, nor the straight line of the video age, but a hybridized spiral of the two.⁶⁸

Debray’s tri-partite historical schema (of successive “ages”) is borrowed directly from Auguste Comte, but its progressive, positivist trajectory is intentionally distorted into something different. He avoids simply negating the same evolutionary path, and gives a triangular diagram of the process, history peaking in the age of print, only to regress in the age of television. Where had the *graphosphere* succeeded where the others have failed? Underlying the positive developments named above – the nation, citizenship, science, revolution, and art – the age of print allowed for an ideal relationship between, in anthropological terms, the invisible and the visible, or in political terms, the governing and the governed: that of representation. This is the key to the evaluative register of Debray’s mediology. Representation implies distance between the signifier and the signified, but also a tight correspondence between these semiological partners. In the *logosphere*, images were in a relationship of contiguity with their referent, such that its objects (idols) were conceived as a part of the supernatural being they were supposed to

⁶⁷ See Régis Debray, *L’État séducteur: Les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 70-71.

⁶⁸ See *Vie et mort de l’image*, 156.

signify, not as copies or manifestations. In the technical terms borrowed from American philosopher C.S. Peirce, this relationship is “indexical”, one in which distance is abolished in favor of immediate presence. On the other side, the video age’s scopic ethos is “symbolic,” the relationship to the object being purely conventional and necessarily deciphered as code. Unlike the indexical fragment, it implies distance, but also unhooks the message from its intended referent, thus cultivating a visual culture of instant recognition, given over more and more to simplified pictorial signs as messages about class, religion, ideology, and so on.⁶⁹

Only the “icon” resembles the object without strictly speaking, being of it. *Grosso modo*, this is the relationship we find pervading the *graphosphere*, reaching into all domains of symbolic of life (including politics, art, social relations). Debray typically makes this point by negative contrast. For instance,

The slippage of the scriptural model to the indexical model implies and accounts for the changing emphasis of the abstract to the concrete, law to jurisprudence, morality to ethics, the universal to the singular, the generic to the individual. ... The Republic, a reality that is trustworthy, as are all things political [*du politique*], gains in charm, but loses out in reliability: stars age and die faster than impersonal symbols. To abolish the semiotic *coupure* is a great pleasure, but a costly one. An abstraction without a body, like an allegory, is without appeal, but a body without symbolic referent is without longevity.⁷⁰

Time is the natural enemy of politics given that the natural state of things tends toward entropy and disintegration. Endurance, longevity, these are the markers of organizational, and thus political success. Here, Debray’s political theology seems indebted to Ernst Kantorowicz’s celebrated notion of the “king’s two bodies” – a Christianized theory of sovereignty in which the king embodies both an eternal, mystical, supra-personal power, and a temporal, corporeal power.

⁶⁹ This schema is laid out in a wonderful chapter of *Vie et mort de l’image*, “Les trois âges du regard,” and is slightly reworked in the first chapter of *L’État séducteur*, “La révolution photographique”. For Peirce’s original use of “index”, “icon” and “symbol”, see “On a New List of Categories”, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, ed. Edward Moore, et al (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).

⁷⁰ *L’État séducteur*, 37-38.

For Debray, the sacred mantle of authority is a necessary component of politics, as a demystified political order, one which is “complete to itself,” and lacking in the “au-delà” that is required for a group to be constituted as such, risks lapsing into totalitarianism – a suffocating unity of State, Party, civil society. The king’s mystical body acts as a kind of insurance policy against the group’s becoming-present-to-itself, providing a healthy distance between governing and governed, conserving the sacred foundation of the political order, and organizing symbolic production.

By no means is this meant to be a retrospective justification for divine right kingship, or a latter day appeal to a *Führerprinzip*, rather a critical appreciation of the losses incurred by the elimination of the “aura” from politics – a point that resonates deeply with our time, as modern leaders shed their sacred body, giving over to the pure presence offered them by televisual media. This transformation is not the doing of our leaders, but the result of a cumulative logic of technological development, which changed the reality of politics in the process of changing our way of seeing. Mediologically speaking, the revolution began with the invention of photography in the 1830s, soon after to be adopted and manipulated by the state. Photography is the indexical medium *par excellence*. If painting “presupposed the superiority of the Idea over reality, and political activity belonged to the domain of symbolic production,” then “the photographic record implies, by contrast, the primacy of the Object over the Idea.” The upshot is, in the long run, the “Kodak State”, “society apprehending itself directly on a monitoring screen, without delays, without decoding,” such that the photographic-cum-televisual medium does not speak of the world, but is itself of the world.⁷¹ Immediacy, interactiveness, and presence define the ethos of the televisual age, and these values are reflected by the practice of politics in our own day.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 33, 34.

Leaders have indeed been asked to retire their mystical bodies, granting the public access to the most mundane matters of private life. De Gaulle was perhaps the last leader in France to have maintained a separation between the two bodies, as amply demonstrated in the tenor of his magisterial memoirs. His abdication effectively legitimized the revolution of 68 as the harbinger of the televisual regime – “year one of the videosphere”, bringing with it the demand for absolute transparency and de-mystification with respect to politics.⁷² In these terms, democracy, as the perfect continuity between the governing and the governed, and hence the political apotheosis of the “indexical” televisual regime, is increasingly anathema, but at the same time, the only available option for political organization.⁷³ Republicanism might work as an antidote, as it guarantees a strict separation between state and civil society, past and present, not to mention the visible and invisible. But it proves no match for the power of the televised image, and becomes the vocation of nostalgics and cranks.

Most of all, the *graphosphere* is to be saluted for making possible Debray’s other great interest, proletarian socialism. Mediological revolutions take decades and centuries to develop, such that Gutenberg’s fifteenth-century innovation in printing could be adapted by nascent socialist movements four centuries later, at nearly the same moment of photography’s invention, and hence the beginning of the end for the *graphosphere*. Debray elects to give a mediological history of socialism, or rather, an ecology of its technological means of production. In contrast to the republican writings – especially *Que vive la République* – Debray will ignore key events,

⁷² *Cours de médiologie générale*, 259.

⁷³ This critique of democracy can be found at moments of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, for instance, “in democratic republics, where public life is incessantly mixed with private life, where the sovereign is approachable from all sides and where it is only a question of raising one’s voice to reach its ear, one encounters many more people who seek to speculate about its weakness and to live at the expense of its passions than in absolute monarchies. It is not that men are naturally worse there than elsewhere, but the temptation there is very strong and is offered to more people at the same time. A much more general abasement of souls results from it.” *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 246.

like the French Revolution and 1848, and, in the spirit of the *Critique*, deliberately understate the role of ideas in the genesis and propagation of socialism. The result is a refreshingly original panorama of socialism, braiding together “men (militants, leaders, theoreticians), tools (schools, newspapers, books), and institutions (associations, factions, parties)” as the principal components of the ecosystem, while assigning a special role to the professional typographer, “who makes the link between proletarian theory and working-class conditions.” These practical matrices began to coalesce within the Saint Simonian movement soon after the July Revolution, but specifically on the “winter’s night of 1831 with the meeting of the carpenter Gauny and the bookseller Thierry.” A program was drawn up to educate workers by neighborhood, leading to “a new set of encounters between hatters, clothiers, binders, cabinetmakers, tilers, etc.”⁷⁴ A generation later, these developments would acquire European characteristics with the creation of the First International in London in 1864, followed in train by the founding of the Education League in Paris (1866), and the invention of the rotary press by Marinoni (1867), which permitted a tenfold rise in the rate of impressions.

In short, socialism was a politics of the printed word, a culture of the book. As Debray relates, “All the revolutionaries I have personally come across, from Che Guevara to Pham Van Dong, passing through Castro (not the autocrat, but the former rebel), not to mention those walking encyclopedias, Trotskyists, were voracious readers, obsessed with old books and resistant to images.”⁷⁵ Most of socialism’s greatest practitioners were directly involved in the dissemination of the printed word, either as printers, librarians (Lucien Herr, Mao Tse-Tung), teachers (Jaurès, Guesde), or editors (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci). Socialism’s historicity is

⁷⁴ “Vie et mort d’un écosystème,” *Cours de médiologie générale*, 258-259.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

constituted by a dialectic between texts and men, “the myth begets acts, which beget myths, and the movement of narratives incites the movement of peoples.” As we have come to expect, Debray highlights the inherent conservativeness of the socialist movement, as one machine for “making believe” and propagating ideas like any other: “The revolutionary act *par excellence* begins with nostalgia, the return to a forgotten text, a lost ideal.”⁷⁶ Writing and reading are at once gestures of conservation and collectivization, hence the sacrosanct character of the archives in socialist states – repositories of the collective’s sacred foundation. Again, Debray displays the historian’s skepticism with regard to socialism’s capacity to found a new order: “socialism was an historical attempt to establish a counter-medium of dissemination within a hostile milieu, ... alternative communities and counter-cultures that owed their capacity for resistance to the forces that besieged them from without.” The state’s mediatic apparatus, by contrast, is far more totalizing and homogeneous, “tending to dissolve non-conformist nuclei into a common hegemonic gas.” The spell is broken once the state is seized (something Lenin well understood and tried to counteract with *State and Revolution*): socialism was never meant to leave the underground. Nevertheless, we can admire in retrospect, says Debray, its passion for the printed word, the socialist states of Eastern Europe being the last holdouts in a world given over to the televisual fix. Here, “the atrophy of sound and image came with a hypertrophy of the text, its *aura* enhanced by censorship.”⁷⁷

Nowhere are the virtues of mediology better illustrated than in this case study of socialism. What lessons do we take from its execution? The first is historiographical, offering a compelling balance of material and ideal forces. History, for Debray, is always encoded in

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 266, 265.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 292, 293, 271.

materialist script: machines, tools, objects will forever format the limits of the thinkable, as is evident in the history of socialism, essentially the union of cheap printing means and working-class resentment. And yet, here, what might appear to be simply another hard-line materialist metahistory, is offset by a keen attention to the immaterial, anthropological dimension of human activity, to the “myths that beget acts.” The Idea pushes back against history’s materialist tide, itself becoming a meeting point for the disempowered. “Revolution,” “Republic,” “Nation”: these are not shibboleths if underwritten by the appropriate technological means. The *graphosphere* is, for Debray, the juncture where history’s two forces are productively interlocking, evenly matched. Culture, which “splits apart the human species,” is the dominant vector in the *logosphere*, an age without the means of global awareness, whereas technology, the force uniting the human race, dominates the *videosphere*, such that culture is threatened by the accelerating push of homogeneity.⁷⁸ In the age of print, they are in balance. Indeed, in this thumbnail history of socialism we find that rationality and belief, hitherto out of proportion in *Que vive la République*, are right in step. A culture of brotherhood, with militants “storming heaven” on the one hand, “working-class socialism was also a creature of reason – deduced from the Book, carried out by the school, and translated by the newspaper.”⁷⁹

The second lesson is one of strategy, a domain in which Debray excels, no doubt a habit acquired from his stint in Latin America and service to Mitterrand in France. Much as one might romanticize the age of print as ideal terrain for socialism, one must never confound two historical ages, or de-historicize the technologies of belief: “The crisis of socialism is that it can easily resume its founding political principles, but not the cultural logic of its foundations, its circuits of

⁷⁸ *Transmitting Culture*, 57.

⁷⁹ *Cours de médiologie générale*, 262.

development and diffusion. Meanwhile, the death of the *graphosphere* forced it to pack up its weapons and join the *videosphere*, which is fatal to its culture.” A successful socialist movement will have to be organized within the confines of the *videosphere*. The political obstacles it erects are formidable, as foreshadowed in *Modeste contribution, Pouvoir intellectuel*, and *Que vive la République*: home-bound spectatorship, leading inevitably to de-mobilization and de-politicization. But also, the homogeneity of the televisual medium erases the distinction between friend and enemy, as the “dominated adopt the culture of their dominator.” Thus, not only are the people increasingly apathetic and isolated, but politics itself begins to lose its very shape. As further proof of the latter, the vast network of media that nourished dissident activity in the *graphosphere* – be they institutional, intellectual, or mediatic – are short-circuited in the age of video. Debray writes that “television is a Bonapartist medium which puts an atomized people face to face, unburdened of intermediary bodies, with a leader that speaks to them eye-to-eye, in close-up. The authority of Parliament is connected to rational debate, a deliberative culture of critical exchange. Wedged between the computer and television, it begins to fade away.”⁸⁰ What should never happen to a body politic – to become present to itself, and to lose its institutional-mediatic bulwark – easily comes to fruition in the *videosphere*, looking evermore like the totalitarian societies of the former Eastern bloc. Its greatest casualty is the break between theory and action as the virtual triumphs over the real.

This critique might be read as a supplement to or continuation of the “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School, updated for the age of neo-liberalism. These thinkers too took a dim view of supposed technological “advancement,” seeing in mass production and consumption the imminent deterioration of politics and culture. Adorno and Benjamin especially, were mediologists *avant la lettre*, careful analysts of technical artifacts in the dying days of the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 298, 324.

graphosphere. Benjamin takes all the credit in Debray's eyes – "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is cited at every turn – but this is short-sighted, as Adorno was not only an early critic of television, but also capable of writing what should appear to Debray as mouth-watering mediological insights: "In a world where books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one. If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive means of dissemination." Though quite different by intellectual milieu – experience of fascism, tutelage in Hegel for the Germans, Third World activism, anti-Hegelian structuralism for the Frenchman – there is a nevertheless a striking convergence of thought here. Both sides would extend Marx's analysis of exchange value as an unremitting force of homogenization, into the realm of technology and culture. But whereas Marx counted on the attendant consolidation and empowerment of the working class as a side effect of capital accumulation, Debray and the Frankfurt School never doubt the proletariat's complete absorption into the structures of capitalism. The resulting *Kulturpessimismus* – "no work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival" – could give way to a backward-looking ethos of dissidence – resilience as resistance. Recall Benjamin's black prophecies in his *Theses* concerning the "angel of history," his neurotic obsession with antique objects and books. For Adorno, the objects of everyday life would appear profoundly alienating, producing a longing for now extinct or transformed modes of interaction: "The eccentric psychology of decadence traces the negative anthropology of mass society: Proust gave an allergic account of what was about to befall love."⁸¹

We might also add that both systems have achieved much in the way of elucidating the cultural logic of different stages of capitalism. What Critical Theory revealed of mass

⁸¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 51, 50, 167. What little Debray says of Adorno is disparaging. With Benjamin, he sees a kindred spirit, a fellow mediologist. He often refers to the *zappeur* (channel-changer) as the *flâneur* of the video age.

production's cultural ethos, nowhere better articulated than in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, is matched by Debray's radiography of the post-industrial age, which implicitly connects the rise of the "virtual" in cultural media with the late twentieth-century move toward finance capital, itself a highly virtual displacement of the profit drive. And yet for all these similarities, how do the systems compare differentially? First, mediology has a stronger historical footing than the predominantly philosophical Critical Theory. The historical component was missing or underdeveloped in Debray's anthropological and republican writings, but has taken on greater definition in the nineties. The gains are impressive: the mediological case studies of *Cours de médiologie générale* and *Vie et mort de l'image* are far clearer and more compelling as genealogies of the present, tempering philosophical with institutional and phenomenological analysis, than, say, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is not to say that mediology's historical narrative is free of problems. Quite to the contrary, it is silent on vital questions, namely on how and why certain mechanical inventions take hold at a given historical moment. Also, the overarching meta-narrative is somewhat vague, as signaled by Debray's repeated mixing of metaphors. Critical of both Marx and Althusser's use of scientific metaphors, Debray nevertheless describes the historical process in both thermodynamic terms, as a "regulation of temperatures," or a "conservation of energy," and in biological terms, as an "evolutionary spiral," or "genetic helix". Overall, however, mediology delivers a powerful and coherent materialist history of the West, and tends to avoid the "civilizational" critique native to the Frankfurt School.

Second, the anthropological axis of Debray's thought, which has no analogue in Critical Theory, gives added leverage to the system's critical thrust. This "constant," as we have seen, is inversely bound to the development of technology, such that an acceleration of the latter will

tend toward the disintegration of the anthropological community, even inviting it to reassert its privileges with accelerated velocity. The construction gives Debray a solid basis by which to measure the extent of alienation and immiseration: human beings belong and are nourished symbolically in groups – always clustered around a sacred – and to endanger this unity is to undermine human well-being. It also enables Debray to account for the persistence of ethnic and religious warfare in a supposed age of Kantian universal peace. After all, people are willing to die for something they hold sacred, and politics, at its root, is a bellicose, religious affair. The problem for Debray, however, is that technology is not a mechanism that works like Marx's capital, which allows for a proportional concentration of capital's antonym, labor, and provides a dialectical basis for its undoing. Rather, as mediology plainly shows, forces which could broadly be called "religious" are increasingly marginalized and neutralized in the video age. If nationalism provided a secular displacement of the religious in the age of print, what has replaced nationalism in the post 68 era? There are no candidates in sight. Mediology insists that a renewed socialism cannot draw its poetry from the past and fight the video age with the weapons of the *graphosphere*. And yet this is exactly what we find in Debray's political writings, socialism hitched to the wagon of nationalism. Why should either survive in the *videosphere*, outside of their material habitats? There is no good news from the dialectic either, as mediaspheres move far too slowly for a dialectical negation to catapult us out of the *videosphere* into the next era, which would probably be much bleaker anyway. Thus, the anthropological component, though valuable as an added critical gauge, cannot be relied upon to negate the cumulative growth of technology. The *polis* is, unfortunately, no match for *techne*.

Mediology therefore shows no great advantage over Critical Theory as a prescriptive application. Debray occasionally appears modest with respect to the critical parameters of

mediology, claiming, in reply to his critics, “But this critical distance from the self which you ask of me brings to light a series of reflections that go beyond the field of investigation itself. This is exactly why I am not a full-time mediologist, so that I might also engage – always problematic – in the love of philosophy.”⁸² Mediology thus has no claim to totality as a critical system. The work of criticism and resistance must continue – a tribute to Debray’s enduring activism and talent for political strategy – even if it has to come from outside the framework of the mediological apparatus. This disconnection between theory and practice has been a persistent conceptual problem in Debray’s thinking, the links being more casual than tight. For example, the “militant,” the subject of autobiography and the sole figure of resistance that remains constant across all of Debray’s work, always comes from outside the operation of the dialectic, as if some individuals were immune to the historical pressures on the anthropological community, or could respond to them with greater intransigence. As the exponential growth of the technological means of production accelerates the unity of the world – McLuhan’s “global village” – the demand for meaningful interpersonal relationships, for communal solidarity, will be at a high, but the supply will be at a low if we follow Debray’s mediological thinking. This is a symptom of the contradiction described in the previous section: Debray wants to argue, for political reasons, that the world is increasingly organized in cultural, tribalistic terms, but the conclusions of his critical philosophy state otherwise, that the technological axis overpowers and neutralizes, except in the extreme cases of fundamentalist terrorism, the anthropological axis. Debray’s language of thermodynamics would imply that some energy is invariably lost in the course of history, and for the moment, these losses are profound in the realm of belief and unity.

If theory and practice are not tightly bound within an all-encompassing critical system, then the intellectual, as Debray implies, must work at least a few part-time jobs. Mediology is

⁸² See Régis Debray, “Chemin faisaint,” *Le Débat* 85 (May-August 1995), 61.

the scientific branch, the supposed value-neutral, indifferent measurement of historical forces: “it recommends and implies no bias, neither for nor against. Of the withering away of public power, this essay in mediology, limited to the surfaces and interfaces of state power, does not pretend to draw consequences valuable for all, but simply to free up, among many other things, a set of causes recognizable by all.”⁸³ As a supplement to scientific critique, Debray would resume his role as a critical intellectual with ever greater vehemence in the 1990s, intervening as a sharp observer in key domestic and international issues during the Chirac presidency.

In the role of public intellectual, he sat on the influential Stasi Commission, convoked by Chirac to consider a law against religious symbols, and also reported, at the behest of Minister of Education Jack Lang, on the role of religion in the secular school. This report, and the book Debray wrote in response to his experience with the Commission – *Ce que nous voile le voile* (2004) – are of exceptionally high quality, thoughtful and balanced, if nevertheless firm in their argumentation.⁸⁴ In 2004, Debray headed an independent commission, this time reporting to Dominique de Villepin at the Quai d’Orsay on Franco-Haitian relations. The resulting text is an unsightly blemish on Debray’s otherwise honorable record of Third World engagement. *Prima facie* it pleads for solidarity and cooperation between Haiti and France, but the underlying meaning is clear: the Haitian state, as shown by the crisis of 2004, is incapable of governing its own people. Thus, in no way should France consider honoring Aristide’s request for reimbursement for the billions of dollars France demanded of Haiti for its independence in the nineteenth century: “Certainly it is scandalous in our eyes that Haiti was made to purchase in

⁸³ *L’État séducteur*, 14-15.

⁸⁴ The finest overview of the *voile* issue and the work of the Stasi Commission is to be found in John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

France its international recognition after having won its independence through the price of blood, but shouldn't it be recalled that the right of self-determination of peoples did not exist in 1838?"⁸⁵ Debray's report simply gave a philosophical justification of the administration's treatment of Haiti in 2004, to silence and destroy Aristide's remaining popular support.⁸⁶

Debray came out strongly against America's role in the Gulf War, France's integration into the EU via the Maastricht treaty, and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 – all of which, but especially the latter earned him the opprobrium of France's *bien-pensant* mediatic intellectuals.⁸⁷ Ringleader of the tormentors Bernard-Henri Lévy, in the pages of *Le Monde*, wished that Debray would have stayed in the Balkans permanently. This rough treatment appears to have embittered Debray, who soon after remarked, "The hour belongs to optimism, to humanitarianism and wars without objectives, to the supremacy of law, to values and not reasons of state, to judges and not heroes. A realist, in this context, will have no trouble fulfilling his duty in the city, and even if he will have had no taste for persecution, must continue to satisfy the obligations of the intellectual function, to think and act against one's milieu. ... This is business as usual, but once the milieu begins to beat its drums, there are consequences." Thus, he concludes, "the part of my life formerly devoted to political affairs seems to me at present to be the most external to, if not the most estranged from my larger purpose."⁸⁸ His last word on the intellectuals, *I.F. ["Intellectuel français]: suite et fin* (2000), is written from the perspective of a

⁸⁵ Régis Debray, *Häiti et la France: rapport à Dominique de Villepin* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2004), 23.

⁸⁶ For an excellent *compte rendu* of this affair, see Peter Hallward, "Option Zero in Haiti," *New Left Review* 27 (May-June 2004).

⁸⁷ On Iraq, see "Mêmes tambours, même croisade?", "Je ne me range pas parmi les pacifists", "Lettre ouvertes aux socialistes à la veille de la guerre," "Retour sur une guerre accomplie", all in *Chroniques de l'idiote triomphante, 1990-2003: terrorisme, guerres, diplomatie* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), and "Résister," *Contretemps*. On the EU, see *L'Édit de Caracalla ou plaidoyer pour des États-Unis d'Occident*, par Xavier de C***, suivi d'une épitaphe par Régis Debray (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

⁸⁸ Régis Debray, "Post-Scriptum pour répondre à une postface", *Faut-il brûler Régis Debray?*, 191, 189.

disabused public intellectual, not a mediologist, as in *Le Pouvoir intellectuel* and *Le Scribe*. Its tone of moral outrage is, as always, impeccably crafted and well-founded, if somewhat wanting in imagination and given over to ranting. The ironic, self-reflexive character of Debray's texts can easily slip into self-congratulation and backhanded apologetics, and this is true of *I.F.* more than others. *Supplique aux nouveaux progressistes du XXIe siècle* (2006) is the most flagrant of these contrarian apologia, electing to identify with the media's accusation of conservatism: "Being a reactionary has certain advantages: it raises hackles and sounds the alarm, much more so than the condescending *ringard* [someone behind the times], who will be pitied and asked to catch up."⁸⁹ Aside from these occasional interventions, Debray would by and large leave behind political commentary in the new millennium (remaining silent, for example, on the second war in Iraq), and devote himself "to exploring our religious sources (why men believe and form themselves into groups), whose paths lead us, in the here and now, to who knows what collective happiness."⁹⁰ Follow these paths will perhaps bring us closer to Debray's thoughts on the future of collective struggle, an enterprise of which mediology has been so skeptical.

Conclusion

Debray's work has been especially strong is in theorizing the religious character of politics, but has seldom tarried with the nature of religion itself. This last cycle of texts reconsiders the history of Western religions from an atheistic-cum-mediological point of view, with the hope of gaining a better grasp of the mechanisms of belief, transmission, and mobilization – the elementary forms of political life for Debray. From this standpoint, one can begin to reconstitute

⁸⁹ Régis Debray, *I.F.: suite et fin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Régis Debray, *Supplique aux nouveaux progressistes du XXIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 19.

⁹⁰ Debray, "Post-Scriptum," 189.

a viable political life and build a new set of collective relationships, this time within the parameters of the *videosphere*. In *Dieu: un itinéraire* (2001), a wide-ranging mediological history of the monotheistic religions, beginning with the invention of Judaism, Debray persists with the thesis that “the trajectory of the Only One in the West strongly affirms a reading [of religion] not in decline, but on the rise.” But here, Debray engages frontally with the lacunae of the mediological writings: namely, the nature and extent of the process of secularization in the West. Thus far we have been told contradicting narratives, that more than ever belief constitutes the fundamental matrix of modern societies, but also that the televisual age is one of isolation, despair, and apathy – in short, a milieu in which belief cannot survive. In the age print, to extrapolate what Debray only insinuated in earlier writings, secularization occurs through a process of *replacement*, nationalism being a secular substitute for religious belief. Presumably, whatever “energy”, to maintain Debray’s thermodynamic language, is lost in this transfer equals the extent of secularization. This process works differently in the *videosphere*, namely as a massive diffusion religious energy throughout the world, such that no clear replacement is in evidence. By all appearances, the world seems to be secularized, belief to be depleted. But in actuality, religious energy has simply been dimmed because of diffusion.

How exactly does this work? Debray claims that only by apprehending the totalized history of monotheistic religion from a mediological point of view can one grasp what is, in effect, a cumulative process of dispersion. Thus, he writes:

One could almost call this culminating point an *atheistic monotheism*. This would be a mix of the ingredients successively harvested in its forward march to correct one local accent by another. Yahweh would have brought the foundations, with the dogma of the Law; Christ would have fulfilled them, softening them with the idea of the person, of the moral interior; Mohammed, seeing Christianity abandon its original project of a radical reform of unjust societies, would have added a strong dose of social equality (to which it owes its contemporary success); and a Buddha, coming to our latitudes out of curiosity ... In this multicultural blender,

our agnostic piety, not wishing to be left out, spiced up the mixture with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Geneva conventions, humanitarian interventions, a dash of spiritual tourism and a touch of astrology.⁹¹

Strikingly, Debray goes on to describe this as a “process of moral industrialization”, carrying us from our theological cradle across the threshold of modernity, where belief is not so much evacuated or transferred as banalized. Universal Human Rights, spiritual tourism, “New Age” religions: these are the forms of the sacred suited to the age of video, formalistic, de-mobilized, individualistic. With this formulation, Debray has at last managed to unite religious and technological histories into one cumulative narrative, showing how “each new circle finds itself inscribed in the following one, which liberates it of its particularisms, and which will itself be unburdened by the following one.”⁹² This accretion of religious structures is dynamized and globalized by technical innovations: writing universalized access to the transcription of sacred language, printing assured its speedy reproduction and dissemination, and “computing” gives to reproduced language “an autonomous productivity.” The elementary forms of religious life, after three millennia of accumulation, are not easily dispatched. This sedimentation of belief, which by now has largely surpassed the limits of formal religions, is what must be stirred up, and channeled toward more collective and active ends.

With this tighter, more systematic history of the technologies of belief comes an urgent appeal toward voluntarism, putting to rest any lingering doubts (on our part) about a dialectical concentration of belief in Debray’s global narrative. Decay is the future of belief under liberalism, and if no action is taken, even from outside this process of accumulation, our immiseration will be accelerated. Religion, the greatest force of mobilization the world has ever

⁹¹ Régis Debray, *Dieu: un itinéraire Matériaux pour l’histoire de l’éternel en Occident* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001), 357.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 358.

known, would be an obvious candidate for just such an enterprise. Its Roman origins, and subsequent crudescence as a central legitimizing element of the Empire, have however tarnished “religion” as a concept fit for contemporary mobilization. Moreover, religion is historically obsolete: “it belongs to a period passed and surpassed.” “Spirituality”, as a potential alternative, has none of the contaminant aspects of religion, but it lacks the latter’s organizational syntax, and has a “weak extension.” Debray proposes a third term, “communions humaines,” as the ideal synthesis: “Its narrowly liturgical reference, taken from Christianity, does not exhaust its richness. It resonates at the level of *community*, aligning interests, goods, and shared goals, but also serves as a *common* denominator for all of humanity (whether as tribe, clan, city, association, state, nation, federation, etc.). . . . But above all, the word conjoins the horizontal – ‘to be a member of’ – with the vertical – ‘to adhere to.’” In other words, it satisfies Debray’s basic definition of a social order, one structured around a sacred at the local level, but also presumes a universal extension, “communions coming in all shapes and sizes.”⁹³ This is a palliative meant to combat the twenty-first century’s consensus on democracy as the terminal political form – one that simply flattens the sacred according to Debray – and the kind of rational absolutism that Jürgen Habermas has brought to the discussion of religion and its public uses.⁹⁴

With “communions humaines”, the rational and the emotional are at last equilibrated (as was not the case, as we saw, in the *Critique*). *Laïcité*, or what Debray oxymoronicly calls an “atheistic monotheism,” is the rational axis of an operative community, but it is incomplete in itself: “The asymptotic ideal of *laïcité*, which helps to judge, distinguish and discern, does not create a *we* by itself. Where it asserts its laws, it must borrow their propulsive force from pre-

⁹³ Régis Debray, *Les communions humaines: pour en finir avec ‘la religion’* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 60, 66.

⁹⁴ For Debray’s critique of Habermas, see *Le Feu sacré*, 418-419.

existing, and not very rational vectors.”⁹⁵ The former is a principle that can be universalized – a formal mechanism – whereas the latter, the emotional charge, will be drawn from local histories and experiences. “Communities” means something very different in France and America, say – as “there is no sacred in itself” – but the process should be homologous. This construction is very similar to Emmanuel Todd’s atlas of family structures: globalization, no matter how slick, cannot undo the stickiness of local cultural patterns. And yet, whereas Todd’s conceptual coordinates are perfectly clear, Debray’s sense of the religious and the sacred are considerably blurrier. The philosopher Jacques Bouveresse has posed this question sharply to Debray: “The sacred being defined in a particularly vague way [as that which allows a group to constitute itself as such], this opens up as many possibilities and variations as one wants. The only thing that one can expect to find in every instance is what Debray calls a ‘social relation of consecration.’”⁹⁶ Indeed, to what degree must strong belief, which comes in so many different forms – philosophical, sporting, religious – be supplemented by liturgical and ritualistic practices to count as communion? If fans of a certain football team are constituted as a group, and frequently congregate as such, is Manchester United sacred? If the sacred is this fluid, this plural, how robust or meaningful can its mobilizing potential be?⁹⁷

Debray’s assertion of the sacred’s relative value gives his theory a global reach, and allows him to fill in some of the gaps of the republican narrative. His attack on democracy, for example, always under-estimated its capacity to answer the spiritual-religious calling of its people, as in the American, Turkish, or Israeli political systems. In 2005, Debray could explain

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁹⁶ Jacques Bouveresse, *Peut-on ne pas croire? Sur la vérité, la croyance et la foi* (Paris: Agone, 2007), 193-194.

⁹⁷ Sartre encountered a similar problem in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and devised an ends-based criteria for rating the integrity of different orders of groups: serialities, the fused group, etc.

that “the American communion is a mixture of the patriotic and the biblical; a democratic combination of liberalized monotheism and liberalized theology.”⁹⁸ And yet, this *prima facie* tolerance is repeatedly offset by a prescriptive constant: the injunction to fraternity. This theme has been a leitmotif of Debray’s work since at least the early seventies, but in the post-millennial era, it becomes the dominant one, endowed with a certain normative force. The closing pages of *Dieu: un itinéraire*, for instance, in which Debray assesses the global (and not just French) import of secularization, conclude: “This spiral movement toward a religion which we all embrace without knowing it, atheists above all, and for which the common paternity in God will have simply been a necessary detour for the arrival of fraternity among men, did not unfold in the heavens.”⁹⁹ Here, the recourse to fraternity is merely descriptive, but nevertheless problematic for announcing, with Hegelian inflections, the unfolding religious and organizational destiny of the world. Are all “communions” fraternal in shape? Clearly not, as the American case shows. Why, then, the insistence on this one organizational form?

2009’s *Le Moment fraternité* gives central billing to this forgotten member of the Revolutionary triptych, and renews the urgency of its appeal. Amid reports that Debray had been attending Socialist Party meetings in 2008/9 after a long break from political activism, this text has the air of a decisive political intervention. Indeed, its earnest, prescriptive flavor is a marked departure from the usual fare of sardonic quips and bleak forecasts, and could even be called a return to pre-carceral form. One suspects that Sarkozy’s victory in the presidential election, and the ensuing civil war that it triggered within the Socialist Party, were alarming enough to stir Debray into further reflection on the role of the militant – a figure of which the PS was in desperate need, having effectively forsaken its militant base in its relentless drive to fine-

⁹⁸ *Les communions humaines*, 65.

⁹⁹ *Dieu: un itinéraire*, 359.

tune its electoral machinery. At last, Debray will confront one of the enduring enigmas of his work – the militant as the potential union of theory and practice – while also theorizing fraternity within the context of his more recent work on religion. On the latter point, he will be tapping into a republican tradition that has implicitly marshaled fraternity as a regulative ideal for more than two centuries. In remission by and large since the liberalizing push of the seventies, it has begun to resurface on the Left in recent years, Alain Badiou featuring it prominently in *Le Siècle* as one of the central motifs of the twentieth century, and Alain Supiot resurrecting it as a model for combating the dominance of the market in *L'Esprit de Philadelphia*.¹⁰⁰ Debray's intervention on fraternity will be the most impassioned and head-on engagement to date.

Fraternity, for Debray, signifies an act of rebellion, a contravention of the natural order for the purpose of forging new bonds of solidarity. True brotherhood transcends the family circle, and rewrites our genetic code by making common cause where there was none before: “One is not born a brother, one becomes one. Only this strange and unnatural act of *fraternization* can restore the energy and strength to a dull and faded fraternity.”¹⁰¹ The appeal of fraternity lies in its potential to reconnect man to the sacred via secular paths, and to re-anchor group solidarity in a sense of tradition – both severed in the age of video. In the final section of the book, Debray reaches back across the millennium, tracking the development of fraternity from the radical brotherhoods of medieval Christianity, through the Masonic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, up to the revolutions of the twentieth. Common to all these traditions is a repertoire of liturgical practices which ritualize the ethic of fraternity. The festival, the banquet, the oath, and the song consecrate its ideals of order, radical equality, discipline and

¹⁰⁰ Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 132-139; Alain Supiot, *L'Esprit de Philadelphia: la justice sociale face au marché total* (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Régis Debray, *Le Moment fraternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 272.

self-sacrifice – “a solidarity of the moment licensed by the chain of generations.” In Debray’s positive prescriptions for renewing “conjunctive tissue”, future brothers and sisters will need the patience and self-discipline to re-learn the experience of rites, frontiers, historical consciousness, and “the humility to understand that different worlds exist.”¹⁰²

There is a strong geo-political component to *Le Moment fraternité*, Debray addressing global power imbalances between the “cold” societies of the West – representing 80 per cent of the world’s wealth and 90 per cent of its arms, if only 20 per cent of the population – and the “hot” societies of the rest. Coldness is the function of well-developed political structures evacuated of ethno-cultural content, such that Human Rights – a formalistic, juridical, elite simulacrum of a religion – could constitute a dominant matrix of belief. But worse, this pseudo-religion is nothing more than “a doctrinaire and colonialist democratism, bombing in the name of emancipation and degrading in the name of education”. In the “hot” societies, by contrast, political underdevelopment is overshadowed by a hypertrophy of the cultural, “Islamic fundamentalism, militant Hinduism, Han supremacy being contemporary inflammations of the *ethnos*.” How would a politics of fraternity correct these distortions? By helping to equilibrate these imbalances: “Future brothers and sisters in Mumbai and Beijing will stress the universality of basic rights. Future brothers and sisters in Paris and New York will remind their fellows that there is a significant ethnic component in their ‘ideas without borders’; that the universalism of the new world order conceived in Washington strongly resembles a global village à *l’américaine*.”¹⁰³ The centrality given to Evo Morales’ 2006 inaugural address in Bolivia – a paragon of fraternal communion in Debray’s tableau – is presumably meant to serve just such a

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 349, 350-361.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 348-349.

purpose, to remind the West that politics can once again become a meaningful experience if interlaced with ethno-cultural dynamics.

Much as one would like Debray's prescriptions to convince, it is not clear they work, even on his own terms. Where is the necessary *au-delà*, the uniting element of fraternity that is external to the group? This conception of fraternity would, in effect, flatten Debray's carefully elaborated political anthropology. Moreover, the process of learning articulated here – mutual instruction across spatial zones – is contrary to everything Debray has argued thus far. The correct model of education follows from the architecture of the social: a period of apprenticeship under a master, the vertex of this pyramidal structure, cements and reinforces horizontal solidarity, the structure's base, eventually allowing for the group's emancipation from the master, and the assertion of brotherhood in his/her absence. Fraternity might have important local consequences, but it is stretched beyond its capacity in *Le Moment fraternité*, such that it becomes difficult to imagine it as a palliative to the challenges Debray so persuasively describes. Also, Debray continues his onslaught against the West's regime of Human Rights in this text, calling it "the Religion of the Contemporary West," and bemoaning its hypocrisies and ideological shallowness – a position he has sustained since the late seventies. This critique is a valuable articulation of dissent, but could do with greater clarity and contextualization. He gives a potted history of its ascendancy since 1789, which serves only to underscore the conceptual underdevelopment of his usage. Likewise, in describing the pseudo-religious features of Human Rights, the argument only reminds us that there is nothing remotely "religious" about this juridical doctrine. Do citizens, even at the level of government, entertain strong beliefs in these abstract principles? How plausible is it that the cumulative history of religion in the West, as

Debray argues in *Dieu*, congealed into this formalistic framework, which in fact has its own separate history? *Le Moment fraternité* provides scant clarity on these questions.

Nevertheless, the thematics and style of the text, which braid together mediological and anthropological analysis, cutting polemical interventions, and autobiographical reminiscences, give us the occasion to reflect upon and summarize the culmination of forty-five years of intellectual production. Few thinkers in contemporary France, if any, have delivered a body of work that could match the ambition and range of Debray's. This, in itself, is not enough to endow an *oeuvre* with greatness. For this, it requires insight and continued relevance, both of which, in spite of his detractors' charges, are in high supply in Debray's writings.

Philosophically, his vision points to questions that are fundamental for the twenty-first century: the deepening dialectic between technology and culture, which ensures anything but tranquility and "perpetual peace" on the horizon; the nature and effects of accelerating de-politicization in the West; and the institutional dynamics of late capitalist societies, with special attention to the intellectual-educational apparatus. Politically, his writings have partaken of a relentless and intelligent realism, all the more refreshing in the wake of the anti-totalitarian crisis, when the Parisian intelligentsia began to close ranks around a liberal utopianism, staked on free markets and humanitarian intervention. Debray was absolutely steadfast in his opposition to this consensus, for which he was repaid in kind with hysterical rebukes. He has been a fierce and perennial critic of American empire since his earliest engagement in Latin America, but never to the extent, as is common in France, that it biliously consumed his writings; and a long-time friend of the Third World.

Debray's work is no less interesting – in fact, is more so – for the contradictions and inconsistencies embedded within it, as I have tried to show. *Le Moment fraternité* provides an

implicit answer to one of these dilemmas by blending – though not necessarily uniting – critical analysis with positive prescriptions for militancy. Hitherto, militancy appeared as a resolution coming from outside the system of determinations, a quasi-messianism that seemed to originate in the determined will of the individual. This inconsistency is the outcome of a deeper uncertainty in Debray’s work, an unresolved, but productive tension between a subject which is suffused with multiple mediations – man as an institutional animal, a heteronomous – and a subject that is fundamentally autonomous, and incapable of being represented by anyone but the author himself. Political activism will require some parallel construction of collective and individual subjectivity, if not exactly this instantiation. His critical philosophy hesitates between a world almost completely given over to the de-territorializing logic of technology via late capitalism, and one which is increasingly organized on a cultural, ethnic basis. Again, if not completely coherent, this antimony squarely confronts a paradox of the modern world, rent by ethno-religious unrest in the periphery, and capitalist alienation in the core. One often wishes, however, that Debray brought the same spatial curiosity and rigor to his theoretical writings that he does for the temporal. There is, for instance, a persistent underlying juxtaposition between the global North and South in Debray’s work, suggesting an enduring imperial division of labor. To what extent are the cultural forms Debray unpacks responsible for producing or conserving this domination? Is nationalism still a viable model of grass-roots activism in the non-European world, and not just in France? We are treated to fragments of an explanation – the soft cultural power of American empire in *Les Empire contre l’Europe*, “the imperialism of the image” in *Vie et mort de l’image*, the domination implied by the intellectual in *Le Scribe* – rather than the thing itself.

Likewise, we might tax Debray for having overlooked the relations of productions in the whirlwind of his collected works. Of the world of labor, demographics, social dynamics, let alone global trade or capital movements, very little is said. But this would be to miss what is unique and refreshing in Debray's thought: the voyage into the anthropological foundry of political society implies that relations of productions are secondary to a more primordial division of labor, in which symbolic production precedes material production. What of Debray's fixation on the past as a site of resistance? The sentiment has become popular on the Left in recent years – Slavoj Žižek writing in “defense of lost causes” for example – but it is necessarily limited as a rallying cry, and can be taken as a litmus test for the Left's options in the post-1989 conjuncture. Finally, on the vexed matter of Debray's Marxist affinities, and his staunch republican loyalties, I have tried to pose these commitments as relatively continuous, rather than mutually conflictual. If Debray abandoned the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and walked away from the Communist Party in the late seventies, he replaced them with a set of coordinates unknown to Marxism, but nevertheless compatible with its critical mission. We might thus say of Debray what he said of Sartre in his own *Critique*: “His thought changed its form, but never its nature. That is typical of all philosophical trajectories.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *Critique of Political Reason*, 351n.

Concluding Remarks

The idea that a “turn” toward anthropological thinking had taken place in the 1970s is sure to raise some eyebrows. After all, it was in the decades following the Second World War when anthropology achieved its unrivalled supremacy in France, with Claude Lévi-Strauss as its standard bearer. In what sense, then, can the appropriation of anthropological themes by four non-specialists in the 1970s and 80s be regarded as a “turn”? I argue that what distinguished this movement of thought was a novel and productive intersection of political theory and anthropology in France, one that was formed amid the backdrop of the “red” 1960s and articulated during the glum 1970s. In its so-called heyday at mid century, anthropology was in conversation with literature on the one hand, and science on the other – a matrix that would be overturned by the more political anthropology of the post-60s conjuncture. A quick review of anthropology’s detours through the inter and postwar periods will put the later “turn” in perspective.

In the 1920s and 30s, Marcel Mauss had tried to endow his own brand of anthropology – more like a hybrid of what Anglo-Americans call sociology and anthropology – with scientific rigor. Mauss, an avid collector, had also helped build a network of museums in the inter-war era that would display primitive and colonial objects gathered by anthropologists. The venture was successful insofar as it stirred a lively interest in the nascent discipline and attracted the public’s attention. But it had also, ironically, contributed to an aestheticization of primitive “artifacts,” giving anthropology a certain artistic caché that would be shed only much later. Major figures in the surrealist movement were deeply influenced by what they saw on display at these museums.

A recent study by Vincent Debaene has reframed the development of mid-century anthropology as a discipline caught between artistic and scientific enterprises. In doing so, he

has brought the literary-artistic vocation of mid-century anthropology into sharp focus.¹ The poetry of André Breton, for example, was unthinkable without this ethnological exposure, as was the literature of Georges Bataille in the 1930s. The inverse could also be shown, as many of the great mid-century anthropologists drew heavily on literary techniques. The work of Michel Leiris and filmmaker Jean Rouch would serve as prime (and highly successful) examples of surrealist anthropology. Biographers of Lévi-Strauss now highlight his early association with surrealist circles, and the enduring aesthetic quality of his life's work.² Debaene too emphasizes how easily Lévi-Strauss crossed over between literature – to wit, his classic non-travel narrative travel narrative, *Tristes Tropiques*³ – and more sober “scientific” work – i.e., his *Mythologiques* tetralogy, an extensive inventory and interpretation of primitive myths. Debaene also points to the popularity of post-war publishing series dedicated to ethnographic literature, the “Terre humaine” collection launched by Plon being a particularly successful assay into the mass market. Thus, if we are looking for anthropology's greatest impact after the War, it is likely to be found, as Debaene suggests, in the literary-artistic domain.

Adopting an even broader perspective, mid-century French anthropology could be seen as one instance of the century's long romance with the primitive, a development in modern art that many have traced back to the work of Picasso in the 00s, but whose imprint would be greatly extended through the century. Art historian Daniel Sherman has suggested that Yves Saint-Laurent's 1967 show, which made obvious use of motifs from African art, marked an “epochal”

¹ Vincent Debaene, *L'adieu au voyage: l'ethnologie française entre science et littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

² Above all, see Patrick Wilcken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

³ The famed first line of this text reads, “I hate travelling and explorers.”

penetration of the primitive into Western culture.⁴ The theoretical and ethical issues surrounding primitivism in European art would be hotly debated with a controversial MoMA exhibition in 1984, “‘Primitivism’ in the Twentieth-Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal Modern.”⁵ Before this moment of critical reassessment, however, the diffusion of primitivist motifs in European society was such that these themes could be found in all domains of culture.

The main currents of French philosophy in the immediate post-war period tended to keep anthropology at arm’s length. The existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir offered a case in point. Its principal source was the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger in Germany, which had been highly critical of what they took to be humanist idiocies, in particular the idea – embodied by neo-Kantians in the German University – that rationality was a straightforward, unproblematic assertion of the human will. In response to major theoretical innovations in physics – i.e. quantum theory – philosophers in the inter-war period now questioned whether the world of the observer could be ontologically conflated with the observed’s. The picture of “man” produced by phenomenology was, to quote Geroulanos, “one of a being struggling with and forcing itself on the world it exists in, a world that does not quite ground Man’s knowledge of it and forbids him any transcendental perspective on it.”⁶ This revolution in thought had, in effect, demolished the priority Western thought had awarded to anthropology for centuries. The French existentialists have repeatedly been accused of anthropologizing philosophy yet again, but Geroulanos cautions us against any such reading, which “involves a specific

⁴ Daniel J. Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

⁵ For a sterling résumé of these debates, see Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 45-70.

⁶ Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 52.

misunderstanding of the context of contemporary French thought, where the attack on the humanist emphases of the 1920s resulted in anthropological discussions only in the sense that they rejected the primacy and self-sufficiency of anthropology, its status as at once an ideal, a goal, and a ground of thought and action.”⁷ To evoke Man is not necessarily to engage in anthropological speculation.

The existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir is famous for having reasserted the primacy of humanism in the 1940s and 50s: the human being was once again capable of transcending his or her immediate social environment. Did the return of humanism thereby imply a greater affinity with anthropological reasoning for Beauvoir and Sartre? While there is a great deal of sympathy for innovations in mid-century anthropology in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*, and in the philosophical work of both thinkers, there is little evidence that it contributed to the formation of their ideas. The early chapters of Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* rely heavily on ethnographic data, and refer frequently to Lévi-Strauss’s first book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (which she had reviewed, in the most glowing terms, before its publication in 1949). Upon closer inspection, however, Beauvoir’s work was in fundamental opposition to Lévi-Strauss’s: her idea of “the situation”, which posed an essential openness and variability in social relations, implicitly refuted the latter’s structuralist view, which assumed a closed system of social relations that positioned subjects within a pre-ordained and fairly rigid template. Had she been thinking in the terms of Lévi-Strauss, Beauvoir might have easily argued for the irreconcilable, metaphysical duality of the two sexes. In this case, notes one interpreter, there would have been no *Second Sex*: the point has to be that sexuality is socially constructed, which Lévi-Strauss’s system could

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

not easily accommodate.⁸ As to the ethnographic data in the *Second Sex*, this was marshaled as historical evidence of the early sexual relationship between human beings, and is hardly central to the book's theoretical apparatus.⁹

A great irony of structuralism, which in many ways superseded existentialism as an intellectual movement in the 1950s, was how thoroughly un-anthropological its uses became in the social sciences, considering that Lévi-Strauss had done so much to boost its prestige. In linguistics, history, and psychoanalysis it was deployed as a model that could formalize values and meanings within a fixed set of complex rules (in effect, removing actors and intentions). In the field of philosophy, a structuralist-leaning Althusser could imply that anthropology had little to reveal about human society: one had to carefully study of modes of production to apprehend social relations, and this applied to all societies, modern or ancient. If the structuralist method had caught on, in other words, the rigorous study of “primitive” peoples – i.e., the foundation of anthropology – had not. Institutionally, anthropology made significant inroads in France at this time, with new research centers and libraries opening throughout Paris in the 1940s and 50s.¹⁰ Intellectually, however, the post-structuralist movement was to imperil the reputation of Lévi-Straussian anthropology. Whereas a structuralist like Lévi-Strauss thought he had devised a way of doing anthropology – studying cultural meaning as revealed through myths, for one – that broke with humanism, the post-structuralists, namely Foucault and Derrida, detected a crypto humanism underlying his work, which for them amounted to a cleverer way of deriving a tired

⁸ Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Press, 1991), 108-9.

⁹ I would in fact argue that Sartre and Beauvoir both *become* more anthropological in their later work. The Sartre of *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), and the Beauvoir of *La Vieillesse* use anthropology in ways analogous to the four thinkers covered here.

¹⁰ Debaene, *L'adieu au voyage*, 439.

anthropocentrism – “a metaphysics of presence” as Derrida was fond of saying.¹¹ Philosophical anthropology, which for centuries had tried to answer the question “what is man?”, was an antiquarian question for the post-structuralists.

Much of the work involved in tracing the uses of anthropology in post-war France has to do with the frequent conflation of “anthropology” and “humanism” (for both contemporaries and historians). The latter is an assumption, sometimes a philosophy, that positions the human being at the center of the universe; the former is a discipline that studies cultural practices. Until the twentieth century, anthropology was likely to have been humanist in most instances, but this can no longer be assumed in light of the changes that took place in philosophy after World War I, as Geroulanos and others have shown. Existentialism was humanist without being anthropological, Lévi-Straussian structuralism was anthropological without being humanist, and post-structuralism was neither (though it could be made to be anthropological with some adventurous conceptual reworkings).¹²

Primitivism, existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism: all had particular dealings with the concepts and methodologies of anthropology in post-war France. Where does this leave us in terms of the anthropological turn? My contention is not that French social theory turned to anthropology for the first time in the 1970s, but that anthropological speculation became linked

¹¹ There is ample evidence for the hostility of both thinkers to conventional notions of anthropology. Derrida, in a quick paraphrase of his own project, wrote, “The thought of Being, therefore, can have no *human* design, secret or not. Taken by itself, it is doubtless the only thought which no anthropology, no ethics, and above all, no ethico-anthropological psychoanalysis will ever enclose.” Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 137. Foucault criticized the study of historical continuities in the following terms: “In various forms, this theme has played a constant role since the nineteenth century: to preserve, against all decentrings, the sovereignty of the subject, and the twin figures of anthropology and humanism.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 12.

¹² While Foucault and Derrida were, in the main, hostile to the epistemology of anthropology, their followers in Britain and the US have easily found anthropological applications for their work. For instance, Foucault’s greatest champion in the US has been an anthropologist at Berkeley, Paul Rabinow, whose own work is very indebted to Foucauldian concepts.

to political questions – indeed political theory – after the 1960s in ways that it never had before. An important corollary to this argument is that anthropological reasoning has been unusually vibrant in the French humanities and social science since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By no means had a “dormant” tradition been suddenly reawakened in the 1970s: it was very much alive, in different combinations and iterations, throughout the interval.

One explanation for the “turn” identified in this dissertation is that the generation who came of age in the 1960s did so at a time when anthropology’s cultural resonance was at a high point. It would have been part of their greater intellectual awareness. Debray’s attitude to the presence of anthropology in the French University offers a telling example. In the admittedly rarified world of the ENS, Debray felt the pull of the social sciences, ethnology in particular, “the choice made by Claude Lévi-Strauss.” He recalled his own internal dialogue: “‘A problem is philosophical insofar as it does not have a scientific solution,’ interjected the ethnologist; ‘don’t trust the high-voltage dialectic that allows everything and its contrary to be demonstrated.’ It was this great shadow that enjoined me to renounce the hermetic community of verbal acrobatics and rally to more invigorating exercises in open air.”¹³ Debray was also, in his youth, enthralled by the aesthetics of the ethnographic voyage, having been steeped in the literature of Chateaubriand, Flaubert, and Malraux – the genre to which *Tristes Tropiques* naturally belongs, even against its own wishes. Indeed, he returned from his decade-long engagement in Latin America with an ethnographer’s eye for cultural practice. Todd too had been exposed to the enchantments of anthropology. As a youth, he developed an interest in history from reading studies of agrarian life, particularly those of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, an historian of the Annales school, famous for having fused historical and anthropological methodologies. When

¹³ Régis Debray, *Par amour de l’art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 22-23.

he migrated to Cambridge, it was at the intersection of anthropology, history, and political science that he pursued his research.

It should also be noted that philosophers and political theorists did not somehow endow anthropologists with a political mission. The field had undertaken its own process of self-reflection – particularly where concerned with former colonies – in response to structuralism’s perceived inadequacies. The anthropological moment of political theory had been in fact preceded by a politicization of anthropology a full decade earlier, in the mid 1960s. I have already cited the opinion of Pierre Clastres, who was convinced of the importance of anthropology for answering basic questions in the social sciences, but dismayed over its schematic, apolitical character. He and others developed an approach that would place politics at the center of anthropological speculation. In 1967, an early forerunner of this movement in anthropology, Georges Balandier, attempted to systematize what he was calling “political anthropology,” defined as the search for transhistorical political structures, or, “the establishment of a science of politics, regarding man as *homo politicus* and seeking properties in common to all political organizations in all their historical and geographical diversity.” The program was as old as Aristotle’s *Politics*, but had been given new momentum and urgency by the process of decolonization, particularly in Balandier’s own area of expertise, Africa, from which “theoretical developments [were] beginning to emerge.”¹⁴

Balandier predicted that political scientists would now be obliged to “recognize the necessity of a political anthropology” – a prediction largely borne out by theory-to-come. In Debray’s case this was perhaps not a coincidence, as Patrick Wilcken’s recent biography of

¹⁴ Georges Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Allen Lane, 1970), 1, 2.

Lévi-Strauss suggests that Debray had attended Balandier's seminars in the early 60s.¹⁵ And while Debray never cites Balandier, it seems highly likely that the latter was a key source of his later reimagining of the political as a set of invariant, universal structures subtending to the formation of groups. Marcel Gauchet had also been exposed to the outlook of political anthropology, specifically by way of Pierre Clastres, whom Balandier regarded (at least in the 60s) as an important fellow-traveler of the movement. If Balandier defined the first task of political anthropology as, "A determination of the political that links it neither to 'historical' societies alone, nor to the existence of a state apparatus," then both Debray and Gauchet – pioneers of "the political" in France – honorably represented its agenda.¹⁶

For Balandier, the idea in *Anthropologie politique* (1967) was not so much to abandon structure – since the political had to be "seen in terms of *formal* relations that express the real power relations between individuals and groups" – but to reconnect it with history and politics.¹⁷ The conspicuous absence in the text is Lévi-Strauss, perhaps a sign that Balandier wanted to save structure from its Lévi-Straussian overlays, and reconstitute its methods. He also sought to revitalize the work of Marx and Engels as thinkers of a distinctly economic anthropology. According to Balandier, their aim was "to discover the process of the formation of social classes and the state through the dissolution of the primitive communities and to determine the particular characteristics of an 'Asiatic' society."¹⁸ The invitation to reassess the anthropological legacy of Marx and Engels was taken up enthusiastically by a younger generation of Marxist anthropologists working principally in Africa. In attempting to reconcile structure with more

¹⁵ Wilcken, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 219.

¹⁶ Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

pressing political questions – i.e., social power dynamics, the role of culture in exploitation – their work intersects in many ways with that of the anthropological turn.

The figures classed under the broad category of “economic anthropology” in the 1960s and 70s were in reality quite disparate, but they were all committed to extending key economic concepts in Marx’s thought to non-European societies. Many of them – Claude Meillassoux, Emmanuel Terray, and Pierre-Philippe Rey – were students of Althusser in the early 60s, and took his close reading of *Capital* as a point of departure.¹⁹ Maurice Godelier, perhaps the best-known of these thinkers, was unique for having come to Marxist anthropology independently of Althusser.²⁰ They rarely if ever agreed on their basic concepts – “exploitation,” “surplus-value,” “inequality” – but they had a common project nevertheless. Liberal anthropology, they concurred, which trusted in the universal validity of classical economics (and rational decision making), was inadequate to explain social and economic behavior.²¹ The French Marxists, by contrast, denied the classification of economic systems based exclusively on forms of exchange. Their common task was to focus on productive relationships with reference to cycles of material production and biological reproduction (which are intimately connected for these thinkers). They also focused their inquiries around the Althusserian-inflected notion of “mode of production,” being careful to avoid monistic or deterministic analyses: typically, there were a

¹⁹ The most direct application of Althusserian philosophy to anthropology is Emmanuel Terray’s *Le marxisme devant les sociétés primitives: deux études* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1969). One of these studies is of Claude Meillassoux’s classic, *Anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d’Ivoire: de l’économie de subsistance à l’agriculture commerciale* (Paris: Mouton, 1964).

²⁰ Godelier’s most thorough engagement with Marxist questions is *Horizon, trajets marxistes en anthropologies* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1973).

²¹ Here I rely on a highly informative discussion in John Clammer, *Anthropology and Political Economy: Theoretical and Asian Perspectives* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 32-37.

plurality of modes of production for a society, one of which was dominant at a given moment. To track these fluctuations, anthropology would have to become a historical science.

Louis Althusser, the mentor of these anthropologists, had never been that well disposed toward ethnology. He rejected the idea – in Lévi-Strauss and others – that “primitive society” was a useful concept, as it implied that such societies were “originary,” containing a truth that has since been alienated in modern culture. On the contrary, “there are no ‘primitive societies’ ... only *social formations*, which we can *provisionally* call primitive.”²² In his reading of Marx’s work, Althusser classed anthropological and humanist notions among the early writings, which would be abandoned and surpassed in the scientific analysis of *Capital*.²³ It was ironic then that his work resonated so much in the field of anthropology, inspiring one of the last great Marxist movements in France. It also, but not so directly, inspired the anthropological reflections of Régis Debray. Debray, like the others, wanted to understand meta-social concepts – those that invariably and pan-historically structured any field of social relations – before looking at any particular society. The main difference was that Terray and others wanted to privilege production – including practices of reproduction – as the determining matrix of social relations, whereas Debray took the sphere of circulation – or “mediation” – to be the linchpin. Methodological differences were informed by their respective objects of analysis, the anthropologists looking for backward projections of class exploitation in “primitive societies,” Debray focusing on the European present and the increasing predominance of consumerism therein. No published dialogue or exchange exists between Debray and the Marxist anthropologists, but their affinities are plain enough.

²² Louis Althusser, “Sur Lévi-Strauss,” *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. II (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1995), 436. This text, unpublished during Althusser’s lifetime, was well-known to Terray, who planned to attach it to *Le marxisme devant les sociétés primitives* as an appendix (but never did).

²³ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 227.

A thorough comparison of the Marxist anthropology of the 60s and 70s and the work of the “anthropological turn” deserves separate treatment. But a few points need to be raised nevertheless. The first is a theoretical one, and it serves to illustrate a distinctive feature of the anthropological turn. If the Marxist thinkers were ultimately in search of points of weakness and contradictions within social systems – i.e., class antagonism, exploitation, surplus extraction – then Debray, Todd, Gauchet, and Benoist were ultimately interested in what held society together. Their outlook, in other words, tended to be Durkheimian, underscoring mechanisms of “organic solidarity” in the realm of culture and politics; trying to understand why society tended to function instead of break down. The respective theoretical endeavors of Debray, Todd, Gauchet, and Benoist were not less critical for being so: individually they produced pointed attacks on ostensibly sacred institutions – human rights, democracy, diversity, etc. – while, collectively, they participated in a round denunciation of orthodox liberalism (in terms similar to the Marxist anthropologists). But again, what distinguishes the anthropological turn is the attempt to derive a positive philosophy and form a critical alternative to post-modern variations of nihilism.²⁴ The other point of contrast is also highly revealing of the “turn.” It is that the Marxist anthropologists would likely have looked upon the latter as amateurs, and ultimately corrupters of their own discipline. This is certainly the subtext of the Marxist response to the anthropological turn.²⁵ And yet, in as much as this view is (trivially) true, one wonders if this is not one of the great virtues of the anthropological turn, the fact that it reinstated narrative into the writing of political theory, and attempted to reach a more popular audience. Theory-with-history tends to be more accessible than theory-without-history.

²⁴ This is not to say that the Marxists veered toward nihilism or post-modernism, only that they were fighting a different battle than the anthropological turn.

²⁵ Emmanuel Terray, “Sur *Le Désenchantement du monde* de Marcel Gauchet.” *Le Genre Humain* (May 1991): 109-129.

The explicitly political content of both the Marxist project and the anthropological turn is what I take to be the signal of a “turn” in French theory. In the mid 60s, issues surrounding decolonization and the war in Algeria impelled young anthropologists to rethink the foundations of their discipline, this time attending to issues of violence, inequality, and exchange. A decade later in the mid 1970s, political theory examined its own conscience, taking recent developments in politics – the 68 revolts and their aftermath, the turn away from Marxism – and economics – the end of the *trentes glorieuses* and the onset of turbulence – as an opportunity to ask new questions (or rather, old questions, from a new point of view). What is politics? Is it derivative of something else, or rather does it have its own set of rules and logics? What is man? A surface appearance, as the structuralists thought, a rational actor and master of his/her environment as the classical liberals thought, or something entirely different? What is the relationship between the individual and society? Does the social amount to an aggregation of individual components, or does it constitute something greater than its parts – holism, reinvigorated by Louis Dumont in the 1960s and 70s? These were questions posed with great regularity after the 60s, and they begged for an anthropological (and sociological) analysis. As this tradition had been vibrant in France since the era of Montaigne, and had never drawn a hard-and-fast distinction between the two disciplines, it proved a rich treasury of concepts and methodologies. Beforehand, political theory in France had been fairly conservative in scope, amounting on the one hand to a history of political ideas, or, on the other, to a social-scientific analysis of statistical trends.²⁶ Its theoretical options were greatly expanded by the experiences of the 60s.

²⁶ Pierre Rosanvallon, “Le politique,” in Jacques Revel and Nathan Wachtel, eds, *Une école pour les sciences sociales: de la VIe section à l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996), 300-301.

Historians and theorists are still coming to terms with the complex legacy of this tumultuous decade. The anthropological turn represented one aspect of it, braiding together techniques from history, anthropology, political science, and philosophy to create a new way of doing theory. Its core themes were adjacent to, and in many cases informed by the major cultural and social events of the 1970s: experiments with worker self-management, the development of environmental – “green” – movements, and expectations of a “post-industrial” society. In no way does this suggest that the anthropological turn exhausted the intellectual possibilities of the 1970s. It had little to say, for example, about the struggle for rights waged by women and gays – movements which gave birth to Foucault’s now-prevalent notion of “bio-power.”²⁷

Nor does it suggest that the senses of “anthropology” were exhausted by this movement. The discipline went in many directions after the 70s, some eminent practitioners, like Marc Augé, developing a highly flexible and globalized anthropology of urban spaces, with others, like Philippe Descola, breaking new ground in the anthropology of the non-human (and its relationship to the human).²⁸ What it does suggest is that anthropology was an integral component to much of the philosophy that emerged from the 1970s, helping to broker a series of intellectual impasses that had been inherited from the 60s. The terrain of anthropology could even be considered a kind of battleground in that beleaguered decade. In 1979, anthropologist

²⁷ For an account of the social movements of the 1970s, see Arthur Hirsch, *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). The theorist of post-industrial society in France is Alain Touraine. See his *Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Post-Industrial Society*, trans. Myrna Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Foucault’s notion of bio-power takes shape in his first volume of the *History of Sexuality*.

²⁸ Augé was president of the EHESS from 1985 to 1995. His best-known contribution to post-modern anthropology is *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la supermodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). Philippe Descola holds the chair in anthropology at the Collège de France. See his *La nature domestique: symbolisme et praxis dans l’écologie des Achuar* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1986).

Jean-Loup Amselle edited a volume whose very title, *Sauvage à la mode*, suggested an irritating pervasiveness of the anthropological device. It was one thing to draw cautiously upon the work of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, but “the annoyance begins,” claimed Augé, one of its contributors, “when the mixture of genres inverts meanings, when philosophers use bits and pieces of ethnographic data as the axis of a general interpretation, when *ethnologues* present their philosophical speculation as empirical facts. In other words, when they are simply feeling around in the dark.” Impressively, Augé was able to see the uses anthropology had for a society steeped in intellectual malaise: “The taste for the past, so apparent in the contemporary sensibility, is no doubt evidence of a fear of the future and of a political skepticism that is not unfounded. Nevertheless, it remains remarkable that, at the moment when mankind explores the universe, the framework of philosophical renewal is a dreamy anthropology.”²⁹ There is no better statement of what the anthropological turn was about.

²⁹ Marc Augé, “Ces sauvages ne sont qu’une idée,” in Jean-Loup Amselle, ed., *Sauvage à la mode* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1979), 22, 25.

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