

THE 'NEW PHILOSOPHERS' AND THE END OF LEFTISM

Peter Dews

Introduction

Fashion moves fast in Parisian salons, and the taste for intellectual scandal demands the constant breaking of fresh taboos. Three years ago, in the spring of 1977, a group of young authors styling themselves the 'New Philosophers' moved rapidly to the centre of attention, making headlines not only in France but around the globe. The shocking novelty of the New Philosophers consisted in the fact that here was a group of young thinkers who were no longer prepared to dialogue with or work within the framework of marxism, but who openly denounced marxist thought as a philosophy of domination. After decades in which the vast majority of French intellectuals had instinctively placed themselves on the left, this attitude marked an important departure. Indeed, the 'New Philosophy' opened the floodgates - from then on no theoretical or political position was too absurd or reactionary to merit attention. In dreadful confirmation of this, two years later the cultural pages of a weekly magazine with a circulation of 85,000, the Sunday supplement of Le Figaro, were taken over by a 'New Right' whose racist and elitist doctrines throw the anti-authoritarian and humanist character of the New Philosophers' critique of marxism into sharp relief. In this respect the New Philosophers already represent a fading page in the history of recent intellectual and political debate in France, their pamphleteering too flimsy - despite its original impact - to merit sustained attention as a theoretical contribution. Yet to affirm the ephemeral nature of the New Philosophers' work is not to deny the importance of the attitudes it expresses, or the significance of the moment of its emergence. For this emergence marked definitively what one recent chronicler of French philosophy can describe as marxism's 'disappearance, perhaps temporary, from the field of discussion' in France (Descombes, 1979, p155). In a country where marxism, in one form or another, has provided a dominant frame of reference for work in philosophy and the 'human sciences' ever since the end of the Second World War, such an event clearly represents a major turning-point, and one which cannot fail to have repercussions in Britain. The following pages will hopefully make the reasons for these developments clearer.

The New Renegades

At the time of its first appearance the New Philosophy was surrounded by a good deal of confusion. Did its emergence signify, as the sympathetic response of Le Nouvel Observateur, France's leading left-wing weekly, seemed to suggest, the first serious attempt by thinkers on the left to deal squarely and without double-think with abuses of power by socialist states and the question of human rights? Or were the New Philosophers, as the approving reaction of certain commentators, and some of the company they kept, might lead to believe, the heralds of a swing to the right among intellectuals in the advanced capitalist countries? In part this uncertainty was due to the way in which the Nouvelle Philosophie was reported in a press always eager to relay the opinions of intellectuals 'disillusioned' with marxism. The Time cover-story which immediately assimilated the ideas of the New Philosophers to those of such stalwarts as Arthur Koestler and Daniel Bell was a good example of this process, drawing some sarcastic feedback from Le Nouvel Observateur, which had originally given the new thinkers space to air their opinions. (At the other end of the political spectrum, an article in Pravda quoted opportunistically from a condemnation of the New Philosophers by Gilles Deleuze, a thinker with whom orthodox dialectical materialists could have little sympathy.) But the ill-defined image of the Nouvelle Philosophie cannot be attributed entirely to partisan reporting. The work of the New Philosophers is in fact an ill-considered mélange of theories, attitudes and responses, in which positions inherited from the post-'68 far-left mingle with themes which, under their veneer of novelty, can be seen to belong to the traditional repertoire of the Right.

This confusion and laying of false trails appeared clearly in the debate which occupied the literary magazines and weekly press in the year of the run-up to the legislative elections, and in which the established standard-bearers of the Left - Poulantzas, Debray, Castoriadis, Rancière - were aligned against the disruptive and voluble newcomers. In reply to those critics who suggested that a great deal of patient theoretical work would be required to back up the kind of generalisations which the New Philosophers were willing to make, Bernard-Henri

Lévy, the publisher and de facto spokesman of the group, asserted that 'urgency today is a genre in itself', thereby justifying any intellectual shoddiness in the name of political 'relevance'. With the fervour of apostasy and revelation the New Philosophers denounced Reason itself, particularly in its marxist and historicist form, as a kind of insidious balm, an ironing-out of the bloody irrationalities of history. Thus it was easy to reply to accusations of theoretical incoherence with the suggestion that the critic was attempting to impose a 'totalitarian' rationality on the spontaneity and truth (for the New Philosophers the two terms are practically synonymous) of their protest, thereby betraying the implicit authoritarian designs of the Left in general. In portraying even social democracy as the thin end of a totalitarian wedge, the New Philosophy made its own a favourite delirium of the Right.

An alternative ploy was to suggest that the Nouvelle Philosophie was merely the construct of dogmatic imaginations: that there was only a disparate group of writers 'with nothing in common except the hazards of biography'. Here disingenuousness shaded into dishonesty. For it was Lévy who invented the name 'New Philosophers' as the title of a dossier which he edited for Les Nouvelles Littéraires in the summer of 1976, and in which he undertook to 'introduce a few friends'. Furthermore, while Lévy was publishing articles whose titles proclaimed that: 'La Nouvelle Philosophie n'existe pas' (Lévy, 1978), Grasset, the publishing house for which he works as an editor, continued to print an advertisement in which it was boldly announced that: 'The "New Philosophers" publish in the collections Figures and Théoriciens edited by B.-H. Lévy'. Admittedly there is a certain diversity in the output of the New Philosophers - but no more so than with any other group of thinkers who share certain common assumptions and emerge from a common context. On a cynical view, such as that of Gilles Deleuze, the 'varieties' of the Nouvelle Philosophie - Christian, leftist, liberal, Nietzschean - were simply different ways of dressing up the same reactionary message so as to appeal to as many tastes as possible (see Deleuze, 1977). But even if the whole phenomenon had not been manipulated by the publicity-conscious Lévy in order to produce maximum impact, there would still be sufficient themes common to the New Philosophers, and these themes would be sufficiently rooted in a more general shift in the climate of opinion, to justify collective treatment.

On the question of political allegiance the New Philosophers betrayed further evidence of their evasiveness and bad faith. Most of them insisted that they were writers of the Left, addressing their appeals to the Left. Yet their denunciations of 'totalitarianism' were focussed almost exclusively on states where marxism is the official ideology, predominantly the Soviet Union seen through the prism of the work of Solzhenitsyn. They equally exploited every opportunity of publicising their views in the only-too-willing capitalist press and media, while depicting themselves as dissidents persecuted and censored by the rising 'red bourgeoisie'. If they were attacked by the Left as reactionaries, this could only be because they represented the true Left, despite the fact that they perceived little more than the shadow of the Gulag in Marx, and casually

suggested the need for the abandonment of the 'entire socialist tradition'. In fact their self-location on the left was chiefly made possible by an insistence on the continuity between their writings and the spirit of the uprising of May '68: for the media the New Philosophers belonged to a 'lost generation', disillusioned by the fading of the dreams and expectations of that time, yet continuing to bear witness to the 'inner truth' of the movement. In the similar terms of the 'minor' New Philosopher Michel le Bris: in May '68 a new experience of freedom had been born, but it had taken nearly a decade for 'consciousness to return into itself' and for the thought of that freedom to emerge (Le Bris, 1977). However one interprets these claims, it cannot be maintained that the reference to May '68 is simply a publicity gimmick. On the biographical level, most of the New Philosophers were active in the May events, and subsequently became militants in far-left organisations, the majority in the 'maoist' Gauche Prolétarienne. Michel le Bris, for example, was jailed in 1970 for editing the GP's paper, La Cause du Peuple, as a result of which Sartre was invited - and accepted - to take over the position. Himself from a Breton peasant background, Le Bris was subsequently active in the Occitanian autonomist movement.

In repudiating marxism, writers like Le Bris do not repudiate this past militancy. What has happened is that May '68 and its aftermath are now interpreted from a new post-gauchiste perspective which assumes the redundancy of the marxist categories which classified '68 as a prelude to revolution, failing to recognise in the events a socio-political convulsion of a new kind. The libertarian aspect of May is prolonged in a critique of all official doctrines of revolution. (Le Bris' particular concern, for example, is with the positive values of the peasant way of life, condemned by marxism, with its obsession with industrialisation and the role of the proletariat.) It would therefore be naive to portray the New Philosophers, as the Right attempted to do, as simply having 'woken up' to the totalitarian dangers of marxism. As E.H. Carr has recently pointed out, the volume of criticism of the Soviet Union in the West has never risen and fallen with the actual level of repression in that country - it has always rather been an index of changes of political climate in the country where it was voiced (Carr, 1978). Accordingly, an understanding of the Nouvelle Philosophie must be genetic and contextual: it cannot be treated as a collection of statements to be assessed in abstraction as to their truth or falsity.

So there you have it. Bernard-Henri Lévy has become a best-selling author, a true media star, an adored and loathed spokesman simply by writing a book in which he says, in effect:

- Marxism is evil—inherently so.
- Capitalism leads to great evil; that too is inevitable.
- Both ideologies are dangerous.
- Individual rebellion is important and desirable . . . but ultimately a lost cause, providing only temporary benefits.

The French who could listen to this sort of thing for hours, have in fact done so. At this moment there are about eight similarly-minded new authors running around Paris. And they call themselves "the new philosophers."

The Vision that Failed

How does one deal with an experience of exaltation, in which a radical transformation of human relations abruptly becomes a concrete possibility, when the moment of vision has faded and existence appears to have lapsed into a dreary normality? A useful way of looking at the diverse forms of the New Philosophy - and one which helps to explain the religious dimension of some of its productions - is to see them as different attempts to come to terms with this same fundamental problem. One immediate and evident response would be to strive to prolong or revive that experience, and this is precisely what most of the intellectuals now become New Philosophers did. After May '68 most of them became militants in the Gauche Prolétarienne, a group which was formed from a fusion between the anti-authoritarian student movement, the Mouvement du 22 Mars, and the maoist current of Althusserianism, the Union de la Jeunesse Communiste (M.-L.). Along with a number of other groups such as Vive la Revolution, which went even further in its rejection of Leninism, the GP attempted to keep alive the flame of the May revolt in anticipation of an eventual 'people's war' (the lack of a sense of reality is not something new in the New Philosophers). Although still organised on strict democratic-centralist lines, its message was populist and spontaneist. Mao had affirmed that 'the masses are always right', that all knowledge stems from and returns to the suffering people, and accordingly the traditional roles of intellectual leadership and pedagogy had to be abandoned. The role of the party was no longer to form the vanguard and revolutionary elite, but to facilitate the expression of the desires of the masses, and to encourage their impulse towards rebellion by means of exemplary action. Yet no matter how far the GP went in this direction, it continued to work within a marxist framework to the extent that May '68 was read as a prelude to some greater insurrection, a sign that the proletariat was no longer willing to accept bourgeois rule unquestioningly, and that hegemony was being increasingly transformed into naked domination. With the rapid decay of French maoism in the early 70s, and the reoccupation of the political terrain by the traditional parties of the Left, this confidence in the anticipatory meaning of May '68 for the class struggle began to fade. The new tendency was to accept May '68 'on its own terms', as a form of rebellion which could not be slotted into the marxist schemas. A characteristic example of this interpretation can be found in Foucault's preface to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: 'Had the utopian project of the thirties been resumed, this time on the scale of historical practice? Or was there, on the contrary, a movement toward political struggles that no longer conformed to the model that Marxist tradition had prescribed? Towards an experience and technology of desire that were no longer Freudian. It is true that the old banners were raised, but the combat shifted and spread into new zones.' (Foucault, 1977, pXXI). Despite the theoretical justifications of this reorientation, one should not overlook such 'banal' factors as the PCF's role in May '68. If the embodiment of the worker's movement could act as simply one more apparatus of repression, then the real struggle seemed to be no longer between worker and capitalist, but between institutionalised power and resistance. Progressive-

ly the idea of a 'critique-of institutions' associated with the Events began to be detached from any reference to relations of production or the conflict of social classes.

The Nouvelle Philosophie 'transcendentalisation' of this re-reading is perhaps most fully represented by Maurice Clavel, a novelist and philosophy teacher in whom Christian belief and sympathetic collaboration with the post-'68 maoists combined to produce an avuncular enthusiasm for the new thinkers. In Clavel's interpretation May '68 was not a prelude to revolution in the political sense, but rather to a transformation of consciousness. It signified the opening of a 'cultural fracture' (a coinage intended to avoid the menacingly cyclic connotations of the term 'revolution'), a crumbling of the 'historico-cultural foundation which can be summarily termed "capitalo-communist".' (Clavel, 1977, p59). Clavel is inevitably rather vague about what he understands by this, throwing off references to Berdiaeff ('we are living the last days of the Renaissance') or lapsing into the Christian vocabulary of the 'liberation of the spirit'. But he is convinced that what happened after May '68 was an 'Indian summer' of marxism in its anti-Communist Party forms. Because the radical novelty of the 'cultural revolution' would inevitably at first be misrecognised, its immediate participants were destined to continue trying to fit their experience into the outworn framework of marxism. Yet the repercussions of the 'fracture' of May were bound eventually to result in a break with marxist modes of thought (1). Clavel claims to have foreseen that, after the debacle of maoism, and after having passed through a period of despair, the true critics of Marx and harbingers of the coming spiritual/cultural transformation would emerge from the ranks of the former militants. Lardreau and Jambet, friends of Clavel and authors of L'Ange, one of the earliest successes of the Nouvelle Philosophie, take up some of the same ideas. During their time as activists in the GP they were both adamant marxists and not marxists at all, undergoing an experience which was at once political and spiritual, calling for the rehabilitation of Stalin and preaching a radical spontaneism. Like Clavel they now interpret their experience of 'the absolute certainty that the revolution was not only possible, but that we were in the process of making it' (Lardreau and Jambet, 1976, p57) in quasi-religious terms, in which the liberating break of revolution is opposed to the tyrannical continuity implied by the marxist dialectic of historical progress.

Not all the writings of the New Philosophers have this overtly religious dimension, but in all some kind of celebration of the experience of rupture and rebellion is to be found. In André Glucksmann, for example, this experience is expressed in the secular form of a frantic anti-statism which has become an established part of the radical doxa in France, and

1 This interpretation is not the unique property of groups like the New Philosophers, but has more or less become the 'authorised version' of recent intellectual history in France. Vincent Descombes, in his history of French philosophy, gives the following account: 'In this month of May 1968 the French lettered class got the biggest surprise of its life: the revolution which had been talked about for so long broke out without bothering to notify anyone; but this revolution, after all, was perhaps not a revolution... For more than twenty years the intellectuals had made enormous efforts to become adepts of historical materialism, in the hope of breaking away from the "petty-bourgeois ideology" inherited from their origins: only to discover in this theory of history, in this mode of political thought, an obstacle which cut them off from history, when history came knocking at the door.' (Descombes, 1979, p196)

whose potential for exploitation by the Right is all too evident. There are several features, however, which distinguish this anti-statism from the traditional doctrines of anarchism. Rather than being based on a faith in the innate goodness of human nature, its backdrop is a kind of despair which, at its limit, depicts human society as permanently and inherently oppressive. Its inevitable outcome is the search for a 'provisional morality' and a 'politics of the least evil', the desire to be - in Camus' phrase - 'neither victims, nor torturers'. The *Nouvelle Philosophie* has no conception of historical advance or permanent transformation, but can only imagine brief fulgurations of rebellion which will inevitably fade back into the long night of oppression. In a further contrast with traditional anarchism, the *Nouvelle Philosophie's* denunciations of totalitarianism, as has already been mentioned, are directed almost exclusively against left-wing regimes. The rationalising, modernising apparatus of state socialism appears as the dismal terminus of an increasing centralisation of power. Typically Lardreau and Jambet can claim that: 'today, to think against the state is, to a large extent, to think against marxism' (Lardreau and Jambet, 1978, p36).

Of course, other, very different, accounts of the political trajectory of the New Philosophers are possible, perhaps the most incisive of which was produced by Régis Debray in a pamphlet published as a counterblast to the wave of sentimental celebration which marked the tenth anniversary of May '68. Debray begins by debunking the idea that the Events marked a major revolutionary upsurge, a fundamental challenge to the structures of capitalism. He does not deny that in certain respects there was a violent confrontation with bourgeois order, but suggests that this was less because of the revolutionary temper of the proletariat than because the French bourgeoisie found itself 'politically and ideologically well behind the logic of its own economic development' (Debray, 1978, trans. p48). Debray sees the central factor in the aetiology of the May movement in the far greater disjunction in France than elsewhere between the requirements of advanced capitalist technology and industry and cultural forms dominated by an extremely traditionalist, catholic and rural-based bourgeois ideology. Whereas in other countries the transition to advanced consumer capitalism, and the corresponding transformation of attitudes to the family, sexuality, the forms and content of education, took place comparatively smoothly, in France it required an abrupt convulsion to begin the process of bringing base and superstructure back into line. May '68 was therefore not a crisis of the capitalist system, but a crisis in the system, which - in contrast to a genuine revolutionary crisis - led, after the reimposition of order, to the installation of a regime very similar to that which had gone before, but now committed to the political and legislative assimilation of the innovations of the uprising. In the vagueness and self-proclaimed aimlessness of May 'the imaginary anticipated the real, and the law of the heart coincided with the law of efficiency' (ibid, trans. p48).

Given this analysis, Debray can make clear, in a different way to the New Philosophers themselves, the connection between their present activity and their militant past. Cut off from the workers movement by the action of the Communist Party and the

trades unions, the intellectuals have returned from 'politics' to theorise this isolation in anti-marxist terms, and to exchange the quest for an alliance with the best traditions of the workers' movement for an adoption of the better political and cultural traditions of the bourgeoisie (human rights, Albert Camus, the Centre Beaubourg). Only in France could the North-American commonplace of 'no necessary correspondence' between economic liberalism and social conservatism be experienced as a revelation. Whether one sees a genuine reflux from marxism taking place, or whether, like Alain Touraine, one sees a confusion between libertarianism and Bolshevism which dates back to Sartre finally being cleared up, and an essentially liberal critique of state-power emerging from its ill-adapted marxist-leninist shell (see Touraine, 1977), the fact is that the positions of the *Nouvelle Philosophie* (the state is the ultimate evil, 'to think is to dominate', the individual is sovereign) could merge almost imperceptibly into the doctrines of neo-liberalism, with its aggressive belief in private endeavour and the minimal state.

What remains of 68 in 78, at the bottom of the retorts of social experimentation, and after the sieve of ten years of apprenticeships by trial and error, is the lowest common denominator: life can be changed without changing the State. (And if one cannot change other people's lives, at least one can improve one's own.) ... The aberrant politicisation of the private sphere (68) has been reversed into the aberrant privatisation of the political sphere (78). (Debray, 1978, p56)

Debray clinches his argument with a reference to the recent proliferation of pirate radio stations in France. The nationalist and jacobin fraction of the bourgeoisie, Chirac's RPR, forced through a strict law against the 'free radios' in 1972, while other countries (Britain, Italy) were opening the way for a big expansion of private broadcasting. Thus in France it is left to the dissidents and autonomists of the airwaves to struggle against the now-outmoded idea of centralised state control of all broadcasting. Yet, despite appearances, they are merely blasting a trail towards the moment when advertising-overload will force French legislation into conformity with the requirements of consumer capitalism. 'Anarchists' and 'capitalists' advance by opposed and yet converging paths (2).

In a perceptive article (Rancière, 1978) Danielle and Jacques Rancière - who, like the New Philosophers, took the road from Althusser through maoism, but who have gone on to uncover an important vein of historical enquiry - have similarly traced the itinerary of the intellectuals after May '68, this time with regard to their changing status, and to changing conceptions of their own role. In the period immediately after '68 the attack on the hierarchies of the faculty became a kind of populism, in which the trickery and untruth of the discourse of the intellectuals was opposed to the authentic knowledge of the toiling and suffering masses. This was the time of *établissement*, the movement in which many militants abandoned courses and potential

2 However, in *New Left Review* 115 Henri Weber has offered a cogent critique of Debray's account, pointing out that the May uprising cannot be reduced to a simple functionalist 'ruse' of the mode of production, and that the genuinely anti-capitalist potential of May could only be deflected through a process of ideological class struggle. Unfortunately Weber's own account is vitiated by its return to the tired Trotskyist thesis of workers betrayed by a reformist leadership.

academic careers to work on the docks or in the big car factories (3), and of Sartre's pronouncements on the coming end of the old-style intellectual cut off from the life of the people. The Rancières suggest that around 1972 disillusionment began to set in, due to the failure of the masses to manifest the kind of combativity which had been hoped for (the lack of any significant working-class response after the shooting of Pierre Overney, a young maoist worker, by a factory guard at Renault was a particularly bitter blow). Consequently the intellectual began to reassume an autonomous function. This time, however, the idea was not that he or she take on the role of leader, representative, or universalising spokesman, but that the task was to remove the institutional blocks which prevented the masses themselves from being heard. Thus Sartre described the scandalous nature for the bourgeoisie of La Cause du Peuple, the paper of the Gauche Prolétarienne, as consisting in the fact that - in contrast to papers which speak on behalf of the working class - it allowed the voice of the masses themselves to be heard. In this context a role for the intellectual appears, in which it is his or her prestige (as in the case of Sartre's editorship of La Cause du Peuple) which is put to use, rather than a capacity to provide a universalising counterpoint to the concrete activity of the masses. But once this step has been taken the way is open for the intellectual to reassume her/his traditional status, while masking this reassumption with a rhetoric in which universalising discourse is denounced in the name of the masses. The Nouvelle Philosophie consists of a series of simplifications which betray the desire to 'have it both ways': the intellectual is restored to full rights as bearer of the banner of freedom against all forms of oppression and domination, but such domination is no longer conceived of in class terms. Rather it is theorised with convenient vagueness in a vocabulary of 'power', or in terms of a multiplicity of powers. At the same time the source of her/his authority is a past of militant activity and an appeal - in a reminiscence of maoist populism - direct to the masses, to what is now termed the 'pleb'. Thus the inevitably complex and contradictory relation between the intellectual and popular movements, which Jacques Rancière and his team have recently been analysing in its historical detail, is transformed into a harmonious unity, in which the post-gauchiste intellectual employs the image of the pleb, of the suffering and downtrodden people, as the moral blackmail at the heart of an attack on the power-affiliations of learned discourse. The Rancières see the attack on marxism as playing a central role in the elaboration of this elitist populism. By attacking the abuse of power by marxist governments and parties, and attributing these abuses to the nature of marxist theory itself, the New Philosophers can all the more efficiently avoid disconcerting questions about their own former role as militants. Furthermore, the attack on marxism betrays a despair of the capacity of popular rebellion to significantly transform society, born out of the disappointments of their own experience. A blanket condemnation of marxism spares one the trouble of analysing the nature and content of popular movements, since the Socialist Revolution can be explained away as an idea stuffed into the heads of the workers by the Master Thinkers in order to ensure their own universal domination. The rejection

of marxism, enthroned by their former master Althusser as the Theory of theories, becomes the only way for the New Philosophers to continue to affirm the plurality and gaiety of the revolts of May.

Reason and Desire

The New Philosophy, however, is not simply the terminus of a political itinerary which began in May '68; it is not just a collection of political attitudes, but also has a more specifically theoretical lineage, which can be deciphered in the debased forms of the theoretical 'underpinning' of its arguments. Since the mid-60s, with the crumbling of the orthodoxy of 'scientistic' structuralism, the avant-garde of French theory has placed an ever-increasing positive investment in the disruptive effects which plurality and singularity oppose to the efforts of theoretical system-builders. Whether this opposition is set up in terms of metaphysical closure and différance, as in Derrida, or of linguistic system and enunciating subject, as in Tel Quel, what has been valorised is the breaking-down and evasion of order. Given the close interaction between philosophical and political ideas in France, without parallel in the sealed world of analytical philosophy, it would have been naive not to expect, sooner or later, a political pay-off from this theoretical emphasis. Certain thinkers sought to delay this nemesis, in the case of Derrida by denying any ultimate incompatibility between his ideas and marxism, and in the case of Tel Quel by projecting their theories into the imaginary real of maoist China. But with the Nouvelle Philosophie it finally took the stage in an eclectic and virulent form (and the modish litterateurs at Tel Quel were among the first to follow the new trend). However, the New Philosophers were not the first to attempt a marriage of the themes of difference and singularity with the more specific concerns of post-'68 gauchisme. The invasion by leftism of the theoretical terrain had begun to take place several years earlier, perhaps most decisively marked by the publication in 1972 of Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus.

Anti-Oedipus is not, and does not claim to be, a work of coherent theory. It is a celebration of the liberating force of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'desire', conceived of as free-flowing by nature, unrestricted in its choice of objects, and existing prior to any systematisation. If only one could reach the level of this desire then all would be well, for 'desire is revolutionary in itself, and as if involuntarily, in wanting what it wants'. The universality of free affirmation would lead automatically not towards socialism (Deleuze and Guattari are convinced that socialisation of the means of production can only increase the despotism of the state), but towards a vaguely-imagined utopia. The true revolutionaries are authors such as Nietzsche, Artaud, Henry Miller, the constant reference-points of the book, and not, in the words of fellow désirant Jean-Francois Lyotard, those 'paranoiacs who call themselves marxist politicians'. Yet Deleuze and Guattari are also acutely aware that what they call 'true desire' is extremely difficult to discover. True desire exists at the unconscious and pre-individual level, whilst all we are aware of is structures and social institutions which determine relations between 'whole persons'. These structures are the result of an ordering, which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as

3 For a first-person account of this movement see Linhart (1978).

a 'territorialisation' of desire, in which (since 'social production and desiring production are one and the same') desire turns against itself and begins to solidify into its own prison. Thus what begins as a celebration of untrammelled desire ends by being confronted with precisely the same problems as classical Freudianism, the difference being that Deleuze and Guattari see the Oedipus complex not as the original 'tragedy' of desire, but as one further codification (the hermeneutic reduction of all libidinal relations to the sad, repetitive triangle of Daddy-Mommy-Me) imposed in the interests of preserving an increasingly unstable social order.

Three aspects of Anti-Oedipus are of primary significance for the form of the Nouvelle Philosophie will take. The first is a radically undialectical view of the relation between individual and social formation: both are seen as constructed, in a way which remains unelucidated, by the activity of apersonal 'desiring machines'. All forms of order or codification are seen as oppressive, including the order of theory: 'It is not the sleep of reason which engenders monsters', write Deleuze and Guattari, 'but a vigilant and insomniac rationality' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, p112). By distinguishing between investments of desire at the unconscious level and pre-conscious investments of interest, Anti-Oedipus can suggest that apparently subversive organisations, and in first place the revolutionary party, can in fact be reactionary and repressive from the point of view of desire. But by this time the concept of desire has become so extended as to have lost all meaning. It is no longer clear what Deleuze and Guattari are affirming. In a book devoted to its celebration, it is all but impossible to discover examples of liberated, non-oedipalised desire. Schizophrenic delirium seems to offer the closest approximation, but again Deleuze and Guattari claim that clinical schizophrenia represents a truncated and codified version of the true liberating experience. One is tempted to agree with René Girard when, in his perceptive critique of Anti-Oedipus, he writes: 'Do (Deleuze and Guattari) not limit themselves to placing beneath the Freudian edifice, shaken but intact, a new layer of the unconscious, far below or far above if you prefer, whose repercussions on our humble activities are about as concrete as would be the discovery of a new layer of gas in the atmosphere of Venus?' (Girard, 1972, p961). Anti-Oedipus, and this is a prophetic trait, pays for the 'radicality' of its challenge to social institutions with an almost total vacuousness.

The second significant aspect of Anti-Oedipus is the way in which it takes up and elaborates a central theme of Wilhelm Reich's analysis of fascism. The libertarian impulse of May had encouraged the undertaking of analyses of the interplay between power (the institution) and desire (liberation), but Anti-Oedipus was perhaps the first work to emerge from this milieu to suggest that this interplay was more than a simple opposition. Just as in Reich's analysis of fascism a role is given to the pleasure derived from submission to power, so Deleuze and Guattari depict desire as capable of satisfaction through investment in authoritarian structures. Yet as good libidinal revolutionaries they feel obliged to disentangle this bad 'paranoiac' desire from liberating schizoid desire, a task which becomes increasingly difficult, and which in the end is tacitly abandoned.

Even the much-maligned Oedipus complex returns to haunt Deleuze and Guattari, who are unable completely to conjure away the idea that Oedipus is based on something more than a psychoanalytical imposture: 'The oedipal practices of synthesis, oedipalisation, triangulation, castration, all that refers back to forces which are a little more powerful, a little more subterranean than psychoanalysis, the fault, ideology, even taken together' (cited in Girard, 1972, p961). Thus it is easy to see how the frantically affirmative Lebensphilosophie of Anti-Oedipus could rapidly flip over into a radical pessimism, since there seems to be no way of assuring the independence and priority of 'good' desire over 'bad' desire, the schizophrenic over the paranoiac, and the revolutionary over the fascist. Deleuze and Guattari lose themselves in a maze in their effort to deny the ultimate identity of these proliferating doubles. Their book is closest to schizophrenic delirium not in what it advocates, but in its own self-misrecognition and in its desperate attempts to escape conclusions ever more opposed to those which were intended.

Thirdly, Anti-Oedipus is important in the pre-history of the Nouvelle Philosophie as much for its tone and style as for its content. There is an element of random and peremptory affirmation in the book which neglects the patient work of argument in favour of the bludgeoning of repetition, and which even employs its own advocacy of delirium as a counter to rational critique. In addition Anti-Oedipus represented one of the first appearances of a kind of throw-away philosophy. Neologisms and theoretical innovations abound; yet shortly after its publication Deleuze and Guattari announced that they had now abandoned the concept of 'desiring machines', the central organising concept of the book, and one or two years later even initial enthusiasts had lost all interest in the new 'schizoanalysis'. Unargued affirmation and the built-in obsolescence of the affirmed seemed to go hand in hand (4). This kind of 'theoretical practice' undoubtedly played an important role in the setting of the stage for the New Philosophy. This is not to say, however, that the New Philosophers are sympathetic to Deleuze's positions. Lardreau and Jambet express admiration for his scholarship (Deleuze published several widely-respected studies of classical philosophers before beginning the elaboration of his own ideas), but are severely critical of his affirmative conception of desire. Lévy goes even further. He suggests that the practical extension of Deleuze and Guattari's doctrines, in our imperfect world, would be an amoral individualism in which the pursuit of gratification would be set above any personal or social cost: Anti-Oedipus contains the seeds of a new fascism. Along with a number of other philosophers of his generation, Deleuze has replied in kind, denouncing the Nouvelle Philosophie for its flimsiness and commercialism. This antagonism is not universal however. The New Philosophers do have their heroes and mentors among the previous generation of thinkers, but these are not the hard-nosed structuralists or philosophers of desire, rather the far more ambiguous Lacan and Foucault. The question of Foucault's influence on the Nouvelle Philosophie has been covered in detail elsewhere (Dews, 1979), but the way in which the New Philosophers have taken up the ideas of Lacan deserves some consideration here.

4 This account of the connections between Anti-Oedipus and the New Philosophy is indebted to Kambouchner (1978).

The Subject of Structuralism

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Lacan on recent French thought, not only through his writings, which were not published in collected form until 1966, but through his celebrated and long-running seminars. His work has been important for several generations of French intellectuals, its richness and ambiguity making it possible for diverse theoretical and political currents to discover a reflection of their own preoccupations: Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite and Louis Althusser are among those who have learned from Lacan's teaching. It was not until the late 60s, however, with the publication of the *Écrits*, that Lacan became a truly central figure; his work played an increasingly important role in the critique of structuralism which was then gaining momentum. This may at first appear surprising, since Lacan is often depicted as the originator of 'structuralist' psychoanalysis, but in fact right from the early 50s Lacan's use of ideas borrowed from Saussure or Lévi-Strauss entailed a simultaneous 'displacement' and critique. Throughout the period of high structuralism, with its asseverations of the theoretical redundancy of the subject ('the spoiled brat of philosophy', in Lévi-Strauss's phrase), Lacan persisted in theorising the place of the subject in psychoanalysis. Thus it was predictable that, when the structuralist orthodoxy began to break down, Lacan would be at the centre of attempts to pose the question of the subject in a new way which would avoid the assimilation of the concept of 'subject' to that of 'consciousness', since his work is marked by a profound ambiguity, in which a structuralist emphasis on the determining effect of symbolic systems is in interplay with the suggestion that there is always something which eludes and displaces such systems - the movement of desire. In terms of recent French philosophy, Lacan can be seen as playing Hegel to Deleuze's Schelling and Lévi-Strauss's Kant, attempting to integrate the insights of romantic philosophy into the value of individuality and the subjective moment into a theoretical form which assumes the ultimate supremacy of the concept. The tensions of this position, midway between the seekers of immutable structures and the celebrants of *délire*, are given characteristically enigmatic formulation at the end of an interview dating from 1966: 'Psychoanalysis as a science will be structuralist, to the point of recognising in science a refusal of the subject' (Lacan, 1966, p13).

In a sense this ambiguity has been infused directly into the *Nouvelle Philosophie*, with its combination of an idealisation of rebellion, and an ultimate passive pessimism or acquiescence in the status quo. The *Nouvelle Philosophie* may be seen as a rash politicisation of the Lacanian thesis of an irreparable disjunction between the subject of enunciation and the 'grammatical' subject of the sentence. For Lacan the subject may be 'alienated in the signifier' - the entry into language entails the loss of a primary experience of unity - but at the same time the subject is irreducible to the signifier, so that its desire to articulate that lost unity continually destabilises the pre-given system of meanings. Lacan opposes the 'truth' of this desire - which, like Heidegger's truth, is revealed only in the traces of its own concealment - to the truth of constative discourse. In this perspective what we refer to as

science is seen as an attempt to 'suture' the fault-lines continually opened up in representational discourse by the moment of enunciation. Even in the discourse of science it is ultimately desire which speaks, although such discourse is constructed upon a systematic misrecognition of this fact. This location of science by Lacan as an 'ideology of the suppression of the subject', which is not incompatible in his work with the capacity of science to reveal 'asymptotically' something of the real, has been inflated by the New Philosophers into an attack on the 'totalitarianism' implicit in the rigour of scientific method, complemented by a turn towards subjectivist and 'irrational' forms of expression. The tone of their own writings, poetic, oracular and avowedly 'metaphysical', confirms this order of priorities, in which madness or - in some cases - religious belief liberates, while rational discourse constructs a prison. Solzhenitsyn, the lone dissident and Christian believer pitted against the forces of a state ruled by 'marxist science' becomes the central hero of this vision.

There is another aspect of Lacan's work, however, which is of equal importance for the New Philosophers. If the subject is irreducible to the signifier, it is at the same time dependent on the signifier, for there can be no subject beyond or outside language. The most that can be hoped for is that, through analysis, the subject can be brought to a tragic acceptance of its own alienation, and of the ultimate inaccessibility of truth. In contrast to Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan denies that the desire of the subject is a positive force restrained by the Law (the symbolic conventions of a society, particularly with regard to sexuality). His reinterpretation of psychoanalytic doctrine in terms of the primacy of the signifier entails an erosion of the original Freudian energetics of libido, so that 'primary repression' is no longer the restraint of a pre-existing polymorphous sexuality, but the process whereby desire comes into being. Lacanian desire desires first of all the unnamable Other which is the place of the signifier, that is to say, in a certain sense, its own subjection to the Law. For without the Law it would cease to exist as desire. The possibility of an extension of this doctrine into a conservative politics is all too obvious, especially since Lacan has never attempted to conceal his own cultural pessimism (one of the authentically Freudian aspects of his work): 'In what way can one transcend the alienation of work? It is as if you should wish to transcend the alienation of discourse.' (Lacan, 1966, p9). Since the early 70s, with Lacan's equation in his seminars of science with the 'discourse of the Master', in which a subject produces knowledge, legislates for the real, while simultaneously erasing itself as subject, these implications have become more explicit. Even before the *Nouvelle Philosophie* spelled them out, Elisabeth Roudinesco, a marxist member of the *Ecole Freudienne*, had noted that: 'with the adoption [by Lacan] of Lévi-Strauss's myth/science division there is a strong risk of postulating, under the aegis of the discourse of the Master, a concept of history which conforms to the ideals of the eternal return: the slaves merely change their master, and the master is in charge of the Revolution' (Roudinesco, 1974, p67). More recently Stephen Heath has indicated how the anchoring by Lacanian psychoanalysis of the symbolic of sexual difference in the - in its own terms -

'imaginary' vision of the phallus results in the evacuation from its domain of social formation and history (see Heath, 1978). These criticisms appear to be conformed by the work of Pierre Legendre, an historian of institutions and Lacanian psychoanalyst who has produced a detailed study of medieval canon law. In his book Legendre attempts to show an essential continuity in the juridical science of western bureaucracies, which has centred on the devising of symbolic strategies which oblige subjects to desire their own submission to authority. Legendre's book, whose title - *L'Amour du Censeur* - speaks for itself, has been criticised for neglecting the moment of force in all domination. But it has been hailed by several of the New Philosophers as the first break-through to a 'Lacanian politics'. It appears to confirm their vision in which conflict is no longer a political conflict between social classes, but an ethical struggle within the individual between the 'desire for submission' and the 'love of freedom': in some sense we are all oppressors and we are all oppressed.

Bernard—Henri Lévy

Perhaps the best way to explore the amalgam which these theoretical antecedents produce in the *Nouvelle Philosophie* itself is to look at the work of a particular representative author. Lévy is the obvious choice, since he has acted as the publisher and figurehead of the group. In addition his own book, which was probably the biggest success of all the *Nouvelle Philosophie*'s publications, is constructed to a large extent with ideas borrowed from his associates, so that it represents, for all its callowness and inconsistency, a useful compendium of *Nouvelle Philosophie* attitudes. A survey of *La Barbarie à Visage Humain* should give a good idea of the tone and content of the movement as a whole.

Lévy begins by presenting his biographical credentials, and this in itself is characteristic: the *Nouvelle Philosophie* has been marked not simply by the overshadowing of the work by its author, elevated to the status of a media 'personality', but by the irruption of the subject of enunciation into the text itself, an assertion of subjectivity against the blank uniformity of theory. The trick is once again due to Lacan, with his *ex cathedra* 'je dis que ...', but with the New Philosophers it takes on fresh significance. For the New Philosopher is equally, if not more, important for who he/she is and what he/she has been, than for what he/she actually says. It is a past of militancy and disillusionment which confers authority on current utterances. Lévy cannot himself claim a specifically 'maoist' past, so a more general historical location has to suffice. His book opens with the following piece of self-dramatisation: 'I am the bastard child of a diabolical couple, fascism and stalinism' (Lévy, 1977, p9).

Lévy's first attack is against the theory of power of marxism and of the Left in general, in which power is seen as maintained by varying combinations of ideological mystification and naked repression. In these theories Lévy perceives two apparently contrary but related mistakes. The first is a substantialisation of power: power is seen as exercised through a specific range of mechanisms, as the possession of a dominant class. The second is the

illusion that - since power is a delimited entity - it can be defeated or overthrown and that a 'liberation' from power can take place. Against this model Lévy deploys a vulgarised fusion of ideas drawn from Foucault and Lacan, in which power becomes both 'everything' and 'nothing'. It is nothing, since it cannot be located in specific mechanisms of institutions; rather than being imposed from above, it filters up from below, permeating every social relation; we are victims of 'the cop in our heads', of our own 'exteriorisation of the law'. Against the marxists, Lévy finds the most suitable metaphor for power in the Freudian concept of the phantasm. Like the phantasm, power is in some sense 'unreal', and yet it is inescapable in its effects, it is everywhere and 'everything'. With a little help from Legendre, Lévy attacks Deleuze and Guattari's idea of an autonomous and rebellious desire, or any concept of a 'freedom' anterior and counterposed to power: the final step is taken - and this is characteristic of the New Philosophy - towards the restoration of a concept of closure which the whole tendency of post-structuralist philosophy had been to undermine. Although condemned to a losing battle, in Foucault there are at least 'resistances' counterposed to power, and in Lacan 'la subversion du sujet' is a subversion by the subject, and not merely the subject being subverted. But with the *Nouvelle Philosophie* the idea of a difference or otherness opposed to the closure of the system (whether political or theoretical) becomes so aetherialised as to lose all effectivity. Since power and the real are now co-extensive, and since - in a flattening-out of Lacan - 'to speak is (in all the senses of the term) to become subject' (Lévy, 1977, p51), 'otherness' can now only take the ultimate form of transcendence (as in the religious thinkers among the New Philosophers - Clavel, Nemo, Lardreau and Jambet) or disappear altogether as in the case of Lévy, for whom - at least during his blacker moments - 'desire is nothing but, and is entirely homogeneous with power' (ibid, p47). On this basis we can draw the conclusion that 'the Prince is the other name of the World', that the social bond is inherently oppressive (although some societies, i.e. liberal bourgeois ones, may be preferable to others), and that 'the idea of a good society is an absurd dream' (ibid, p38).

Having demonstrated a priori the impossibility of liberation, Lévy can go on to the next stage of his task, which is to show, following the *Nouvelle Philosophie* tradition of deducing the historical real from ideas, that socialism is merely an aggravated combination of capitalism and metaphysics. After all, the post-structuralists - Foucault, Derrida - have shown that teleological views of history are simply the last refuge of a doomed humanism, and the bourgeoisie at least seems to have learned the lesson. It no longer believes in an appointed mission, or pretends to the legitimacy of historical destiny. Capital's desacralisation of all traditional beliefs and social practices has rebounded upon its owners, who are content opportunistically to manage an arbitrary system (there is a hint in Lévy's book of the switchover already noted by Régis Debray, in which the kaleidoscopic, thrillingly aimless world of consumer capitalism begins to be seen as offering a kind of liberation which the struggle for political ideals cannot match). The socialists, on the other hand, still believe in the rationality of history which, throughout all its reversals and detours, is slowly

He mingles fluidly at Marty Peretz's luncheon for him at Il Giardino, a dark, exquisite woman named Sylvie by his side. Over the asparagus, the guests murmur among themselves. Aren't they beautiful together? Just like movie actors.

It is as if he revels gloriously in all the contradictions he has assigned to himself. He is anti-Marxist, but his is not the comfortable anti-Marxism of Nixon or the CIA. He is an intellec-

moving towards the realisation of the Universal. Interestingly, Lévy does not suggest that such a realisation is impossible, merely that it could only serve to increase our present misfortunes. The planned and ordered society of socialism is indeed being brought to maturity in the womb of capitalism, but not in the way that marxists believe. Socialism is merely the capitalist ideal of technological rationality pushed to its ultimate conclusion. The 'transparent' society of the future is the society in which all social relations are visible and controllable from the central watchtower of the social scientists and the police. In fact Lévy begins to restore - one of many incoherences in the book - the teleology which he has just abolished. Capitalism is the destiny of the West, the ultimate stage of Platonism and the inevitable corollary of Descartes' mathematisation of nature. The Russian Revolution did no more than speed up the tempo of this transformation of nature and human society into a system of calculable relations. Thus marxism is merely the 20th-century form of this occidental destiny: 'the most formidable doctrine of order that the West has ever invented' (ibid, p202), allowing the discontent of the masses to be marshalled by politicians and parties, insisting on the demolition of traditional bastions of culture and belief, and paving the way for the installation of a socialism which can only be the 'barbarous modality of capitalism'.

It is not difficult to see this ill-considered jumble of attitudes as the reductio ad absurdum of a decade of French thought in which the concepts of reason, theory, and history have been subjected to an incessant critique by theorists for whom Nietzsche and Freud have replaced Marx as the definitive maitres-à-penser. The critique of dialectics elaborated by such thinkers as Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze has exacted a serious toll in the form of an inability to think in terms other than those of an all-or-nothing showdown, in which both the 'power' of the system and the 'dissidence' of its other become hypostatized contraries, while the rejection of the 'white terror of theory' (the phrase is again due to Jean-Francois Lyotard) has led to paradoxical attacks on science, and in particular on the human sciences, not because of the falsity of its discourse, but precisely because of its 'truth'. In Lévy's attack on marxism, for example - and this applies to the Nouvelle Philosophie as a whole - his ultimate argument is not that marxism is a false theory of society and of political action, but rather that it is an all-too-accurate account of the coming fate of the West. In Lévy's view we are enclosed within marxism as Ptolomaic astronomers were enclosed within their cosmology, so that to reply to marxist theory with a counter-theory would only result in a lapsing back into the 'discourse of the Master'. Thus the protest against marxism can only take a moral form, and in this Solzhenitsyn, 'the Dante of our time', has shown the way.

Roots of Pluralism

Thus the Nouvelle Philosophie possesses a cover for its own extravagance and theoretical incoherence in the form of the assumption that the only reliable defences against the linked totalitarianisms of science and politics are asesthetic and ethical. The idea, of course, is not new. It can be found on the political Right in Heidegger and in the long tradition of romanticising reaction, and the New Philosophers have taken up something of this tradition, in their exaltation of inherited beliefs and practices against 'planning', in Clavel or Nemo's nostalgia for the 'personal' bond between master and man in feudalism contrasted with the anonymity of commodity relations under capitalism (see, for example, Nemo, 1975, p141), and in a generalised hostility to the inheritance of the Enlightenment. (For Lévy the Gulag is simply 'the Enlightenment minus tolerance'. As Jean-Pierre Faye has pointed out (Faye, 1977), the New Philosophers, with their incapacity for historical dialectic, fail to appreciate that the concept of 'human rights' to which they are so attached is precisely one of the central acquisitions of the Enlightenment.) But it can also be found on the left in thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse, and the New Philosophers have something of their sense of an all-pervading one-dimensionality which has become so internalised as to be almost invisible. What may at first appear surprising is that such a combination of ideas should emerge again in Paris in the late 1970s.

There are a number of explanations of this phenomenon which do not simply remain at the level of the 'history of ideas'. First of all, the New Philosophy



is not just the aberration of a handful of the high intelligentsia, but must be seen as mirroring a widespread mood of disorientation among the 'generation of '68' which ranges from - at its worst - a corrosive disillusionment and cynicism, to - at its best - a belief that smallscale cultural innovation and institutional reform are preferable to chasing the mirage of revolution. At another level, as Jean-Claude Guillebaud has suggested in his lively - if frequently facile - book *Les Années Orphelines*, the New Philosophy can be seen as a reaction to an increasing sense of ideological incoherence in a world in which Cuban columns march against marxist partisans, while socialist states invade each other in South-East Asia. Guillebaud also rehearses the more cynical theory according to which, with the prospect of the Left coming to power through the ballot box in March '78, the obvious way for the intelligentsia to maintain the reassuring integrity of an oppositional stance was to make an anticipatory shift to the right. At the same time, however, recent developments in French theory cannot be viewed as simply a reflection of political developments: important texts by Derrida, Deleuze and Lacan which valorised alterity over identity and system had been published well before May '68, so that the turn against marxism is more than a generational phenomenon. The intellectual autobiography recounted by Francois Chatelet, France's leading historian of philosophy, in his *Chronique des Idées Perdues*, is instructive in this regard. Beginning from an 'existential marxist' position in the early 60s, Chatelet has shed more and more of what he sees as the Hegelian and historicist baggage of marxism, welcoming the Althusserian intervention on the way, to arrive at a position which rejects the idea of sitting at 'the tribunal of Reason and History' in favour of a pluralist 'tracking-down of divinities of all kinds'. Similarly, Sartre has recently stated that he would prefer the label 'existentialist' to that of 'marxist' (Sartre, 1976, p192), and is said to be working on a new philosophy of freedom.

This revival of emphasis on the singular and the subjective (recent editions of French periodicals have been devoted to the 'New Individualism' and the 'New Romanticism') is not entirely to be regretted, and can be seen as inevitable, given the 'anti-humanist' severity of structuralism and Althusser. It is arguable that there are elements of human experience which marxism ignores at its peril, and which, if neglected, will sooner or later return to haunt its theoretical edifices in ambiguous forms. On the other side, however, the New Philosophers have at least rendered the service of making clear that the theorisation of plurality and difference, already well established in France and beginning to appear in Britain in writings which reject a priori the idea of the social formation as an analysable totality, can only lead into a political cul-de-sac if taken as an ultimate. The emergence of regional, ecological and feminist struggles has taught the valuable lesson that not all sites of social conflict can be reduced to a unitary class contradiction, yet these struggles seem condemned to hopelessness in remaining localised, since what they contest is specific effects of the process of capitalist development. In order to resolve this dilemma a 'principle of articulation' seems to be required which will not alienate these movements by reducing them to an a priori class determination, but is capable of

hegemonising and directing them towards common goals of democratisation and social control. In the current theoretical confusion and loss of bearings on the left - marked vividly by the New Philosophy and its aftermath in France, but starting to make itself felt no less here - this conception seems to offer a possible direction for advance. We need to know how the unity of struggles, no longer pre-given by an ontology of class, can itself become a purpose of struggle (5).

5 These concluding remarks are based on discussions taking place in the Hegemony Research Group.

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