

# RÉGIS DEBRAY IN PRISON: ON HIS CLASS & HIS COMMITMENT

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This article is not about what you will expect. It does not consider the theory of foci, the specificity of the class struggle in South American countries, or the role of the peasantry. All these things pose important theoretical questions. Moreover, it is for his writings on them that Debray is known. Debray was the first in the field, reporting back from Cuba on revolutionary tactics, employing his originality of mind to propose some profound changes in Marxist theory about the development of revolution. But none of that is my subject.

## A Self-conscious Intellectual

Two other things distinguish Debray. First, his personal career is probably unique. A product of the best in French philosophical education, Normalien, student and friend of Althusser, he committed himself to the revolutionary movement in South America. There, in 1967, he was arrested by the Bolivians while travelling to report on the guerilla front opened up by Guevara. He was tortured (no reason to treat him differently from any other political prisoner in South America!), tried for aiding the insurrection, and sentenced to thirty years' imprisonment (of which he served only three). He not only advocated revolution, then, as any European intellectual might, he also had to undergo the sort of penalty that active South American militants risk. Debray the revolutionary intellectual landed in the thick of the live struggle and, from a personal point of view, lost heavily.

Secondly, though this is little known in the english-speaking world, a good half of Debray's writing is of an entirely different kind from the political analyses which are known in translation. Since his release Debray has published, amongst other things, a memoir on the failures of the Left in France, two novels set in the world of South American revolutionaries, and his personal diary from prison. Part of a peculiarly French tradition to literary self-examination, he is a self-conscious commentator upon the personality of the revolutionary. It is this commentary that interests me here, in particular the question of revolutionary commitment. Debray has publicly confessed what moved him to become a revolutionary intellectual. He believes that only a very particular kind of commitment is possible in the environment formed by advanced media of communication in developed societies. The subject of this article is Debray's self-description and his views on commitment.

Though Debray spent only three years in prison, his period of imprisonment was, inevitably, one of reflection upon his own position, revolutionary intellectual condemned alongside the true activists. A snippet, from his time in prison, of the introspective side of his writing appears in the Penguin Prison Writings (1975), under the title of 'In Settlement of all Accounts'. It is a description of life at the Ecole Normale in the late fifties, dating from just after his arrest, when he was daily threatened

with summary execution. He describes a sheltered, deceitful, predictable world of young men on an assured road to a good degree, a desirable job, their own literary success. Their armoury of sophisticated language was used rather to ward off than to seize the world of urgent conflict, enabling them to concentrate more exclusively upon their little selves. This was the time when Althusser was first making an impact upon his students. Debray describes the notion of theoretical practice not in its own abstract definition, but in the signification it had in that intellectual milieu where it was propagated. Those young men fell upon it; for it taught that their isolated, complacent, disputatious lives were a work of genuine transformation. 'In other words,' as Debray puts it, 'all we had to do to become good theoreticians was to be lazy bastards.' And then, besides theoretical practice, to deal with any lingering urge for reality, there were mock militancy and tame demos, fantasies, according to Debray, 'to pay for our total lack of history (our only connection with it)'. In this hasty, rather vituperative piece are the elements of a view of the motivation of French students, like



George Grosz - 1935.

"A writer, is he?"

Debray himself, flirting with revolutionary ideas.

Both the novels, *L'Indésirable* (Seuil, Paris, 1975) and *La Neige brûle* (Grasset, Paris, 1977), contain a picture of the meeting between intellectual revolutionaries from Europe taking a part in the live struggle of revolutionary politics in South America, and South Americans schooled in the conflict itself. Debray has encountered in his experience two tensions within their meeting: the practical revolutionaries' suspicion of the foreign imitation, come from a different social formation, to meddle in South America's quite particular revolutionary struggle; and the intellectuals' hesitation before the convictions, absolute within their own world, that inspire the practical revolutionaries to so much fearful risk and suffering. There is Frank, the Swiss intellectual of *L'Indésirable*, arranging a vital shipment of arms for a guerrilla band at the request of Lucas, a peasant fighter keeping the gringo at arm's length. When Frank finally meets up with the guerrillas, their physical commitment is beyond him: 'who forces them to trudge through the mud with thirty kilos on their backs and 200 calories a day ... what keeps them on their feet, these flagellants of the revolution?' Likewise, there are Imilla and Boris in *La Neige brûle*, Austrian and French respectively, living on the fringe of the battle waged by Carlos, the Bolivian revolutionary, whose murder leaves them isolated. The meeting of the two continents focuses the gulf between two kinds of commitment, the cool, intellectual and the unquestioning, physical, which, argues Frank, have in some way to be fused:

'We have ... to forge a new race of activists, zealous and sceptical... Reasonable, and hence balanced in their judgement; intransigent in their acts, and hence frenzied... The challenge of the age is to engage in practice without [the support of] a faith.'

The most sustained personal reflection from Debray's time in prison comes from the last few months, when he finally had the facilities to read and to write. The writing of this period was published in French in 1976 under the laconic title *Journal d'un petit bourgeois entre deux feux et quatre murs* (Seuil, Paris). I want to concentrate now upon this work because, buried in an introspective dialogue, it contains a sustained argument about Debray's personal commitment as an intellectual. It is, of course, a very personal work, so that the general applicability of the argument depends upon the extent to which readers may accept that Debray himself is the type of the European left intellectual. To establish that view, by a general survey or analysis of European intellectuals, lies outside the scope of this article.

Despite the improvement in his conditions, Debray had no reason at the time of writing the *Journal* to believe that his sentence would soon be cut short. Here, then, is the petty bourgeois intellectual in jail, where no outside event is going to touch and change him, as Debray puts it: face to face for thirty years with what he is. In prison there can be no cheating; it is 'a long forced test of self-verification, the moment of truth spread out over years' (77 - all numbers in brackets are pages from the Seuil edition of the *Journal*).

The reflections that come to Debray are understandably rambling. He talks of the power of words and of images in films, of student life in Paris, of fatherhood, of *self-identity*, of alienation and of universalism. In the diary form it is often difficult to see the connection between one entry and the one

following, or the whole. Yet all these themes hover around Debray's self-questioning upon the conditions of commitment when his own commitment has brought him to jail. When more systematically arranged, they throw into relief an underlying contradiction in the petty-bourgeois intellectual's motivations and a possible resolution.

The analysis of Debray's reflections that follows reveals how he had by this time departed from the straightforward Althusserian orthodoxy of the essay on 'The Role of the Intellectual' (in *Strategy for Revolution*, Penguin), which he wrote before his imprisonment. There he repeats Lenin: there is no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory; the intellectual contributes his theoretical practice to the struggle. Here we find a subtler and more qualified position, starting not from the premises of a structuralist science of social formations, but from the self-consciousness of an individual intellectual, considering the meaning of his own commitment.

## The Problem of Death

In his *Journal* Debray tries to find the value of his life as if it were already over. By this time he no longer awaited a summary execution (as he had just after his arrest); but that experience of being brought face to face with death carried easily over to his years in prison. Thirty years is twice the length of what we call a 'life sentence'; a long-drawn-out end of life, then. So it is easy to see why the book begins and ends by wondering how an individual can understand his life ended in the course of the struggle. To accept death in a struggle must be the crucial test of commitment, for it is vividly to accord one's whole life to the struggle.

The scientific (i.e. historical materialist) measure of an epoch, Debray points out early on (21), has no regard for the individual and, like a good general, thoughtlessly replaces the irreplaceable, the individual fallen in the battle. But from another point of view that single suffering, 'a single living being cut into pieces by a shell or by another living being in some torture chamber', sets aside all the rational coherence of the scientific view of the epoch, and makes it a scandal. This paradox determines a fear. For the revolutionary, love, music, memories should all pale into insignificance beside the tasks to achieve, the historical role which defines the individual. But these things also feel to Debray like the very flame of life, consuming all the historical data by which he has sought to live (23). Forced to go over his life, then, Debray is unable to content himself with the analysis of the intellectual's role in a revolutionary practice which merely situates him within an epoch. The threat of death takes him beyond marxist orthodoxy, and may overturn the very principles upon which he has based his activity as an intellectual in the struggle.

If the threat of death provokes neither passive, thoughtless resignation nor a restless, futile anger, it stimulates a desire to see the worth of one's completed life as a whole. Debray has, in fact, already known this satisfaction. The night that summary execution seemed most imminent was spent, he says, reviewing his past and his future as a mere spectator, and touching the ungraspable core of his own reality (108-09). According to him, this immersion in their real lives allows condemned men to go happily to their execution. The dying man

may be happy, then, in a sensation of the complete individual identity in the life he has led. Thus the problem of how to accept death is to be resolved by a particular type of awareness of identity, and much of the *Journal* is, in fact, a reflection by Debray upon his own identity - as the self-conscious title suggests.

The problem of death enters Debray's reflections because his commitment seems at the time to have cost him his life. If he can discover something that enables him to face death, then total commitment, one which risks his very life, will not be beyond him. But, as I have just said, he sees the means to face death in a particular kind of awareness of identity. The basis of total commitment will be found also in the same kind of awareness of identity. But, as we shall see, for Debray a sound basis of commitment can be reached only by overcoming a conflict in his own sense of identity, which is the subject of my next two sections.

## Tensions in the Petty-bourgeois Intellectual's Identity

When Debray explores his own identity in order to face up to the near-death of imprisonment, he discovers that it lacks that completeness required for the acceptance of death in the name of the revolutionary cause. He shows, in other words, that the foundation of his commitment was, at the time, unsound. On his account commitment was, in fact, the product of an attempt to elude the tensions in his own identity.

The anticipation of death sharpened Debray's pursuit of his own identity, but it did not create it. Debray has an idea of his identity like anyone else. In fact, he has had one from adolescence onwards; he refers to the idea of his existence which he constructed between the ages of fourteen and twenty (36), and confesses to watching the years go past comparing himself with the great men of history and culture (52-53). (This may even strike a familiar chord with readers. But however that may be, it is important to note in passing that possessing some idea of self-identity is universal; only the circumstances and the inclination to write about it are exceptional. For Debray the pressure of the moment before death is combined with the pace of thirty years' confinement and the habits of a writer.)

Of course, the intellectual will turn to words to lay hold of his sense of identity. The fascination with words is a pre-eminent intellectual characteristic. As the *Journal* ends Debray describes the joy of slotting an experience into the perfect epithet for it as liberation itself. Of course, words are devious servants. The word 'ebb' (*reflux*), designating the disappointing setbacks of the revolutionary process in South America, encapsulates them so effectively that Debray almost hopes for further defeats, rather than face the necessity to reappraise the situation (28). Given his intellectual's addiction to words, Debray has naturally employed his facility with them to define his own identity. Now he resorts to them again to hold that sense of ungraspable reality which came to him under the threat of execution.

His real goal, he feels, has always been to earn some epithet or other (29). He suggests some possibilities: upright, lucid, tough, rational, whole. But now the irony of Debray's goal must strike us. These words can be uttered, representing an ideal Debray; but they are targets which he may or may not have reached. His ideal self-identity (his self-image we might call it) can be set out before, or

without, his real identity's corresponding with it. When he brings into play his habit of using words, Debray makes possible an ideal and a real self - and a gap between them. It would, he feels, have been easier if one knew what to call oneself from the start, a list of advice on the I.D. card stating limits and the result to be expected; that way there would be no danger of false starts (27).

But, in fact, the reality and the ideal description he can invent for himself exist side by side. It would be fatuous to assume the truth of the description. Yet it would be equally wrong to reject the ideal as a nonentity; it is at least an object of desire. Especially for the man with no control over the external manifestations of his life (such as a man in prison), this ideal self is as much a fact about him as his desire to be it, and the unwished-for real events that make up his life.

- '1 The imaginary = the present = the valueless (what I don't want to identify myself with, what I must be without wanting to be, that which does not fulfil the ideal, namely the idea of my existence that I created for myself between 14 and 20)
- 2 The real = what is elsewhere yet not foreign to me = my unconscious, my other self within = my values, which are images at heart.
- 3 The real is the image.'

(36-37)

The intellectual in particular experiences the co-existence of the self-identity forced upon one and the self-identity one would value. This is so, in the first place, because of his ease with words. The experience is not necessarily confined to introspective experience; it can be a phenomenon of interpersonal or public relations. Debray gives a reading of Stendhal as a 'political writer', because Stendhal has observed the power of utterances to evoke the acts they anticipate (28). Nor is the experience in fact confined to intellectuals or common to all of them. But it is as an intellectual that Debray meets it.

Debray takes the formation of an image of self-identity a step further through remarks on literary culture. Poetry, he writes, seizes and holds a moment in the poet's adolescence, that has been lived by each of us; namely that at which the first desire takes physical shape in 'love or more precisely ... the discovery of the body's capacities' (31-32). At that moment 'our ideas (*esprit*) become something physical'. It is, in other words, a moment when image and reality intersect - or rather the one meets the other, which takes off on its own course. Poets hang on to this moment:

'They speak to us in the name of our past, of an illusion, a past ambition ... we are linked to them by the relation we have to that part of ourselves that the adult, the force of circumstances, criticism, clichés ... have repressed.'

The new element in Debray's description of the formation of an image of self-identity is that these adolescent images are not benign. In fact, they are an inhibition in one's contact with the reality of other people:

'The pleasures of love are not for the young... Too much imagination: they lay a woman out of respect for the model, not to lose face, out of pride, vanity, duty, all feelings in the head.'

(71)

The image of oneself which starts one's adult life can be, then, a tyrannical self-image obstructing the way to reality. That is evidently how Debray experienced it, ticking off the years of others' acts

of greatness as his own youth passed without distinction.

In Debray's case, writing itself heightens this tension further. For the written words, like past acts, constitute a real self-identity from the writer's past, a sort of alienated self-identity. Debray admits to himself that he hates his past writings 'for the same reason that mirrors scare me' (62-63); he would hate to see 'what I am in black and white'. He prefers, in fact, words he has just written, which he can still change. The writing of the present offers an apparent freedom to appeal against a real identity from the past, which is preserved in past writings.

'It pleases you not to have an identity, but to be able endlessly to disown names and qualities.

You'd like to look at yourself in the mirror and see everyone and no-one...'

For Debray, then, the self-image, represented afresh by every piece of current writing, tempts him to obliterate the self-identity established in the past.

In two ways, then, the intellectual's taste for words makes of the private self-image a barrier against recognition of the real self-identity. First, language gives greater weight to the models which make up the adolescent self-image because they are communicated and held by language. Secondly, the activity of writing creates a false impression of how easily the real self-identity can be replaced by a new self-image.

## Militancy and Universality

However, it is when he talks about his background as a French, left-wing intellectual that Debray gives this conflict over self-identity a very particular import. For it then appears that the resistance to reality of the private self-image provoked an equally intense urge for the concrete, issuing in a commitment to militancy. The earlier tensions are translated into one between the universalist values of a petty-bourgeois intellectual and the draw of militancy.

Debray describes his lasting personal need for the company of militants of any sort (47-48). Sickened by the self-satisfaction, the lack of awareness and the faith in 'all-powerful concepts' of his fellow students, he dreamed of dry land from the depths of the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He is referring, of course, to the environment he described in 'In Settlement of all Accounts'.

From such a beginning he found professional revolutionaries the most alive of creatures (47-48), 'with the failings of their nature, in particular that indifference, innate or acquired, for anything that does not serve the immediate interests of the revolution'. They (and priests!) 'look at themselves from the other side, from the point of view of their goal'.

'Because they enlarge (redoubler) their lives with an idea of life, they are really forced to reproduce (dédoubler) themselves, and we judge them in the name of that other being that haunts them, which is not an alibi but a demand.

What is the vital difference that Debray discovered in the revolutionaries? It is that their self-image is not a barrier to the recognition of a real self-identity; rather it moves towards realisation by the creation of a world that can accommodate it, whereas the typical self-image of his intellectual associates, like his own, had either to be protected or fade. The revolutionaries transcend a private self-image with a goal in life which seeks out real

existence. This must have been the principal personal attraction for Debray in taking on the revolutionaries' struggle.

In fact, this contrast covers more than simply Normaliens and revolutionaries. Debray has in mind as well a structural feature of European, and particularly French, culture as a whole, which he calls universalism. He has just described its effect on French literary culture (42-46). The writers of introspective journals (Camus, Gide, Debray himself, of course), who are typical of this culture, attempt to embrace others in their own tirelessly explicated identities. But this enterprise is misguided from the start. For one can only succeed in diluting one's own identity and that of others in some general concept, one's type, or (more futilely still) the human race as a whole. But there is no 'situation in general' and the writers end up 'playing with words ... taking seriously the general, subjecting themselves to a style, a vocabulary, an attitude, or rather a preconceived idea that they want to give it', instead of 'playing with situations, ... connecting with the concrete, the singular'. Similarly, there is no identity in general, with one's particular traits removed, corresponding with the situation in general. Debray writes of this later:

'By relying on this identity which goes without saying (identité-qui-va-de-soi) ... I cannot in the end identify ... my most ordinary and striking traits of character, which are just about recognisable to the man next door.' (146)

Universalism is the assumption of the existence of a universally present situation in general and a universally present character in general, and the weight put upon these in European culture.

This explanation of the spirit of the culture to which Debray sought an alternative supplements the mechanism of tensions in identity described in my previous section with what is basically a theory of self-identity. By assuming in his explication of his identity that there is a human situation in general, the man of letters drains his self-identity of substance even as he attempts to realise it on paper. He pares down his self-image to its most general features. But far from bringing it closer to a living identity, he abstracts from the particular situations and traits which make up real existence. This approach to self-identity has eminent philosophical backing. As a matter of style alone autobiographical self-generalisation underlies the very beginning of modern bourgeois philosophy in the Discourse on Method and; to a degree, Hume's Treatise. What is more important, the presupposition of a universal character is expounded throughout bourgeois philosophy from the Cartesian cogito to the Kantian noumenal self. Thus the reliance upon language is not in itself, as first appeared, the source of the tensions between self-image and self-identity. There is a still more widespread disposition in European bourgeois culture and thought, which drains the self-identity while appearing to complete it, expressed in the philosophical presupposition of universalism.

Debray would concur, I think, in most of these remarks about the relation between modern bourgeois universalism and the conflict of identity which he experienced - though he would, I suspect, call it petty-bourgeois universalism.

He makes up a mock interview in which he shocks a serious journalist by explaining that, rather than guerrilla struggles, it is the scholastic debate over

nominalism that is on his mind (90). The vital question is 'Do concepts, names of classes, categories, -isms, correspond with something real or are there only unclassifiable particulars...?' (92)

The presupposition about a universal identity sets up further impediments even to those who consciously try to renounce the vapid self-image it creates. In engaging in struggle, says Debray (24), he has to divide the world into friend and foe; but out of latent liberalism or bourgeois individualism he secretly holds back from the political struggle by making allowances for the enemy as an individual. It is, he maintains (111), typical of the petty bourgeois that he should deny the differences and divisions between men, either by insisting upon a common physical solidarity or by keeping areas of disagreement apart (*chacun à ses goûts*). He clearly touches upon the source of that disdain in which are held the White Liberal, the liberal-minded academic, and the Social Democrat - three types derided by the militant and the oppressed whose advocate they wish to be.

Why does petty-bourgeois universalism cling to Debray, even when the cul-de-sac to which it leads in the development of his self-identity has provoked him to turn from the petty bourgeoisie to the revolutionaries? I think the reason must lie in the nature of universalism itself. In order to move from his petty-bourgeois existence to any other, including that of a revolutionary, the petty bourgeois must suppose his original, given character susceptible to the change. He can only do this by elevating it to the highest possible level of generality; the petty-bourgeois assumption of a universal identity is a vital presupposition for abandoning one's identity as a petty bourgeois. It is thus reinforced by the petty bourgeois' own attempt at

change. The petty bourgeois is driven to a dead end, whether he stays with his class or tries to eschew it.

We might go further. Universalism not only denies the petty-bourgeois intellectual integration into the revolutionaries, it tantalises him with the possibility in the first place. The universal identity which he appears to share with all other men holds out in the first place an illusion of freedom to choose by subjective decision such 'non-essential' features of one's own identity as one's place in society or in class conflicts. Without that illusion Debray might never have thought of taking on the identity of a revolutionary to escape the tensions of his sense of identity.

This, then, is the contradiction which Debray reveals in his identity. Beginning from typical features of the petty-bourgeois intellectual, fluency with words, the habit of writing, the presupposition of universalism, he describes the contradictory motivations they create in his own commitment and the shortcomings from which it suffers as a result. It seemed possible to elude the tension between self-image and self-identity by a commitment to the revolutionary cause of another class. But the route to commitment led through an emphasis on universal identity which excluded serious commitment.

## The Recourse to Particularity

Feeling that his attempt to choose a new self-identity has not, and cannot succeed, Debray reflects instead about what constitutes his original, particular roots and character, and about the forms of culture which can seize this particularity. This reflection marks a change in political direction.

In the light of his own commitment, Debray decides that his own past activity was a specious attempt to evade his original identity:

'Clandestine tasks attract you because for them you change your name, because you are ageless, without a past, or even a fixed nationality, by dint of changing from one to another. You escape from the police, institutions, routine and yourself.' (81)

He makes a new resolve which would avoid this phoney commitment:

'You have ceased to be young from the moment you no longer dream of escaping from the [obligation to] become what you are... From today, no more alibis, even the notebook may fall from your hands. From now on you will always be the same.' (77)

Debray sees in his language an all-embracing identity, and makes the relation to one's language the test-case of a proper relationship to one's particular background. (What would an Englishman turn to in the same circumstances? Inherent common sense, perhaps. Our philosophy of language has usually been a philosophy of common sense.) Linguistics is wrong, he argues, to take language as an instrument (136-37): we do not perceive our own language, as we do a tool, nor change it when we turn to work on a different object, nor choose nor create our language. In terms of the philosophy of language these remarks are not striking; but they lead on to a theory of cultural identity (137-39). A language, which we receive from the past and pass on, is more real than each individual who acquires it. We have to experience ourselves (nous rendre présents à nous-même) and portray the world to ourselves within the shortcomings of a given language. To

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make oneself the child of a language by profound familiarity with it is to 'plunge one's roots as deep as possible in the earth, in a territory, in a nation, in a given history'.

One does not, however, lose one's freedom by immersion in one's particular language. Rather, by identifying his self with his language, the great writer makes the latter a perfect expression of every motion of the former. Debray's thinking appears to be that if a writer's identity is totally integrated into his culture, then it is impossible to say that one is determined by the other. He enjoys something like Spinozistic liberty, necessity well-understood becoming freedom; except that the necessity is in this case not universal but particular to the writer's background. This latter shift is, for Debray, a condition of real integration between one's own identity and a given culture.

Debray does not intend the virtues of this close relationship to particularity to be restricted to the activity of writers. He feels that he requires a relationship of the same sort for authentic political activity, and will obtain the same freedom by it. In 1967 (with his arrest), he writes (79-80), he recalled that he had a family, that he was that family; that he was French; that he was attached to that language, that history, Gaulois cigarettes and so on; that he was a young French intellectual of bourgeois family - all things he had found shameful before. But in recognising his natural filiation he had loosened it:

'To loosen one's filiation (*se désaffilier*) is to begin to be able to be an activist, to cease to be the foreigner, the one-legged one (one foot here but the other elsewhere, no one knows where, retractable and invisible), the half-responsible, the adviser, the contact, the middleman.' (81)

The freedom to assume a new identity was an illusion, which led to partial commitment and merely sustained the conflict of identity. By avoiding that conflict, an open acknowledgement of one's given particularity would make possible true commitment, and hence real action. Thus, although he can no longer choose the limits within which he works, Debray feels he now envisages a real instead of an illusory freedom.

Debray would evidently hold that this acknowledgement of one's own particular roots is sound dialectical materialism - even if those roots are petty-bourgeois. For the writer immersed in his particular language, he writes (139-40): 'You have to inherit a history (local, given) to be able to interrupt and renew it.' The sentence is reminiscent of Marx's famous remark at the beginning of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

'Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are confronted.

(from the Penguin edition of the *Political Writings*; Volume II, *Surveys from Exile*, p145)

The conception underlying this remark, and Debray's, is that of a dialectical conflict between men's intentions to innovate and the historically given social forms, which occurs in two ways. On the one hand, men's aims are diverted to create new social forms different from those which were intended (such as Bonapartism). On the other, it is the contradictions in the historically given social forms that give rise to men's opposition to them in the first place. Because of this relationship between social action and social forms, Debray

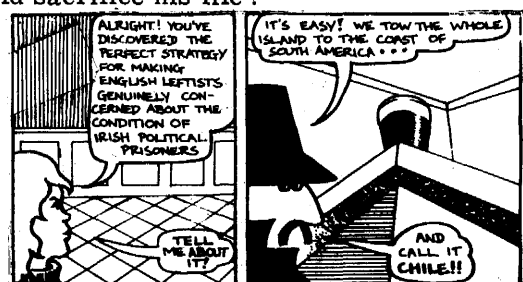
holds that it is undialectical to believe in action in the absence of some particular prior conditions or other, which, though they both determine and divert the pure intention of the action, are also the price of its place in the real world of dialectical development. In Debray's view the suppression of linguistic difference is undialectical for the same reason. It is an 'anti-dialectical illusion' and 'a modern hydra'. The specificity of any man's situation makes his action within that situation real at the same time as it inhibits it.

Debray's view of how the individual commits himself politically is compatible, then, with the dialectical materialist view of men's place in history - though Debray's concern, unlike that of Marx, is, of course, the individual's experience of the process in which his commitment is made, not the process itself. The precondition of commitment is a tension with one's own particularity. But does the notion of a dialectical relationship to one's particularity allow for commitment to a struggle any more total than that arising from the earlier tension in Debray's identity? In theory it may. For, thought of in this way, one's particularity does not entail mere passive acceptance of historically given social forms. One's particular conditions can create a will to see them transformed. The dialectical conflict between one's actions and one's history ends by transforming both. The dialectical conception thus brings to the idea of commitment the notion of a creative relationship to one's particularity which is neither docility nor the self-deluding denial of it which underlay the petty-bourgeois' partial commitment.

## The Basis of Political Commitment

Debray evidently intends that recognition of one's particularity should be not simply a condition of commitment, but also its source. This can be seen in his solution to the problem of death, which constitutes, of course, a test case of commitment, since commitment is at its most total when it makes it possible to accept death. The solution Debray suggests presupposes a dialectical tension between one's actions and one's particularity. And in setting it out, Debray is also sketching, I believe, his own resolution to the contradictions in his commitment, and his own idea of a 'balanced and intransigent' commitment, such as a well-informed modern man could undertake.

Debray feels, it will be recalled, that under the threat of death he had experienced the sentiment of his own existence which is the inspiration of condemned men. As against this, the individual could never make sense of his own death through a scientific analysis of the movement of history in which he is involved. Debray now has a notion of commitment which is consistent with the dialectical science which he had previously found inadequate for the personal situation. Is it possible, then, to discover the reasons why a dialectical materialist should sacrifice his life?



As Debray points out (156-59), such a question is, in the nature of materialism, peculiarly difficult for a materialist to resolve. Whereas any religion has a support for the dying in its justificatory theology, the core of materialism is a rejection of all transcendence, which excludes all realities beyond human existence. Materialist science regards theological systems of thought as non-science or as transient ideology. Were it possible to deny all distinction between individual and collective purposes, the problem could be solved. Yet in European culture the distinction is an established principle. The contradictory fact, which marxist learning appears incapable of understanding, is that a materialist 'is a revolutionary because he loves life, and because he loves life he voluntarily exposes himself to death'. The dying words of a communist executed by the Nazis epitomises the sentiment: 'Vivre la vie'.

What is needed, Debray feels, is 'a religion without transcendence', or rather with only 'a transcendence of the present' - that is, transcendence which extends beyond the time-span of the individual life yet stays within the confines of material human existence. Clearly, the movement of history, which carries the individual with it, would, as understood by dialectical materialism, be a transcendence of this sort. But to find the required transcendence only in history would return us to the contradiction with which Debray began, with history the cool-headed general sacrificing troops who cannot understand their own fate. Debray has in mind a transcendence 'no longer based upon the sense of history (as if there were a universal history or just one history for everyone!); but on the meaning of each of our acts, modestly.'

I think Debray envisages a kind of transcendence in which the individual's acts transcend the limits of his life and connect with the movement of history via his particularity. For one's particularity can, of course, be defined in history as well as being experienced from within. Acts performed in furtherance of the goals deriving from one's particularity may therefore be regarded in two ways. They are, on the one hand, a natural manifestation of one's particular identity. But, on the other hand, they belong to an historical process in which social forms are generating conflicts that transform them.

I take it that it is with this sort of idea in mind that Debray now resolves the problem of death by recourse to particularity. In rediscovering that he had an origin, he says, he discovered as well that there is a particular death which fits the particular life that it brings to an end.

'In giving up your life you ought to have admitted that if life is given, it is taken away, that it is always a given individual who dies because he was born of such-and-such parents, on such-and-such date, here and not elsewhere.' (81)

Now, if the individual's particularity comprehends his particular death, and if, in addition, that particularity is an historical phenomenon, then acts arising from or complementing that particularity, including those which lead to death, have an historical meaning transcending his own life. But, from the point of view of the individual himself, such acts make up at the same time the complete individuality which a person may sense as he faces death. Where death itself is the outcome of those acts an individual may, in Debray's terms, die happy with the sense of his own completeness. In this way a materialist, who does not believe in any

survival after death, may die for the meaning of his acts, which transcend their time-span. Why should an individual commit himself to a political struggle if, in order to sense his own completeness at the moment of death, he has only to fall in with a peaceful historical particularity? The answer must be that some individuals' particular conditions generate a conflict between themselves and him. That this happens is, indeed, a contention of dialectical materialism. For these individuals, falling in with their particularity means making a commitment to a struggle. If they are dialectical materialists, they can combine a scientific judgement of the present moment of history with a total commitment in their own acts. In this way a dialectical materialist may die for the meaning of acts by which he has sought to transform his particular conditions.

In my introduction I spoke of Debray's view that 'the challenge of the age' was to be able to engage in intransigent, unquestioning action yet, in a cool, intellectual manner act without the support of faith. Those who are able, in the way just outlined, to unite scientific judgement and commitment to a struggle meet the challenge. They would be the new breed of activists that Debray calls for. His hero in L'Indésirable, Frank, describes the discipline of mind that stems from such activists' concentration upon their role within history:

'What does revolution mean? To do what? At what cost, to what end?

Out-of-place questions. Less profaning than profane. Irrelevancies which are perhaps relevant from the outside, but beside the point. For the activity of the revolutionary is too disinterested (désintéressé) to stoop to wondering about the usefulness, the result, the limits of revolutions...

Those who wish to ensure their grasp on the world must safeguard like the apple of their eye the blind task in view.'

(L'Indésirable, p112)

What Frank describes is a cool acceptance of an historical necessity directing one without any promise of a particular outcome or of personal gain. Debray has suggested in the Journal how an individual may find such a commitment from his own particularity.

## An Authentic Petty-bourgeois Commitment

Suppose that the petty-bourgeois intellectual (or anyone else) found himself in a position of tension with his own particular history. A commitment to transform it would, of course, be compatible with his given identity, since it would be based upon his acknowledgement, not his denial, of his particular identity. Likewise, it could be a commitment based upon understanding, and thus reasoned, and yet unshakeable because it followed from an objective situation. Debray has described, then, the conditions of an authentic, balanced and intransigent commitment.

But could this situation ever arise for a European petty-bourgeois intellectual such as Debray? One further literary enterprise in which Debray has been involved since his release may provide a case in point. (It was to be expected that the reflections in jail which I have analysed would have an impact upon Debray's subsequent political involvement.) In 1976, a committee initiated by the French socialist leader François Mitterand published its considerations on liberty (Liberté, Libertés, Flammarion, Paris), with a view to proposing a

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formal charter to be appended to the French constitution. Debray was one of the editors. The whole enterprise is thoroughly in the French tradition: a word from the motto of the French republic is subjected to the kind of inventive explication which is taught the French at school. It is also, in conception, thoroughly petty-bourgeois: a cultured, thoughtful exposition in print of one of the first demands of the bourgeois revolution. Thus it is an enterprise in full accord with Debray's particular conditions. Yet it is also an enterprise in opposition to those conditions, which employs marxist concepts (such as the reproduction of the existing model of society) in order to point up the contradiction between the concept of liberty to which the bourgeoisie subscribes and the concrete conditions of French men and women. In short, it exposes a tension between the most hallowed values of Debray's own particular country and the concrete application of those values. It is a case where one part of an individual's particular conditions (his socially given values) generates (by their own logic)

a tension between him and it.

One objection to Debray's commitment to this enquiry is that it is not really a serious attempt to transform the conditions with which he is supposed to be in conflict; in a word, that it is mere reformism. This may be a valid objection to the tactic adopted (though that would not impair the value of the example as an example). But Debray does have an answer, which can be found in his *Critique of Arms*. The book as a whole is a critique of the efficacy of the armed strategy in South America. It examines, amongst other things, the Chilean experience of reform, and draws the conclusion that substantive reform can engender revolutionary crisis. From this conclusion Debray continues:

'If you want to go on to extend this rule to developed countries with representative democracies, functioning in normal (i.e. peacetime) conditions, where "bourgeois liberties" are not just an empty phrase, you might well end up with the theory that only "reformism" is capable of undertaking a sustained, centralised and systematic offensive against the political, economic and even (why not, indeed?) ideological positions of the dominant class.' (trans. R. Sheed, Penguin, 1977, p312)

But regardless of the adequacy or inadequacy of Debray's understanding of the situation of his native country, the committee on liberty does illustrate the sort of mechanism by which authentic political commitment could be undertaken consistent with the implications of Debray's speculations. If it seems a feeble undertaking, that must be because it is rare for there to be historical circumstances which generate for elements of the petty bourgeoisie an obligation, or indeed an opportunity, to enter into an innovative tension with their own given historical conditions. From this historical fact, indeed, arose perhaps some of Debray's original impatience with the unreality of life at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

### 100 YEARS OF THE BERUFSVERBOTE

or  
 PLUS ÇA CHANGE

'After Prof. Nägeli had thus tried to curb our scientific knowledge of nature, his example was followed at the same meeting by Prof. Virchow, who pressed for still further restrictions on "the freedom of science in the modern state". And his eyes are so sensitive they cannot even stand the glow from Nägeli's feeble candle:

"I should like to prove to you that we have reached a point at which we must make it our special business to moderate ourselves and to renounce to some extent our predilections and personal views, so as to preserve the goodwill which the nation still shows us."

Our comrades will have no difficulty understanding what a miserable "nation" is this, whose good will the professor is so anxious to preserve. We can tell the men of property by their single-minded passion for the moderation of others, and by their sensitivity towards anything which might interfere with their digestion.'

Joseph Dietzgen,  
*Vorwärts* 1878