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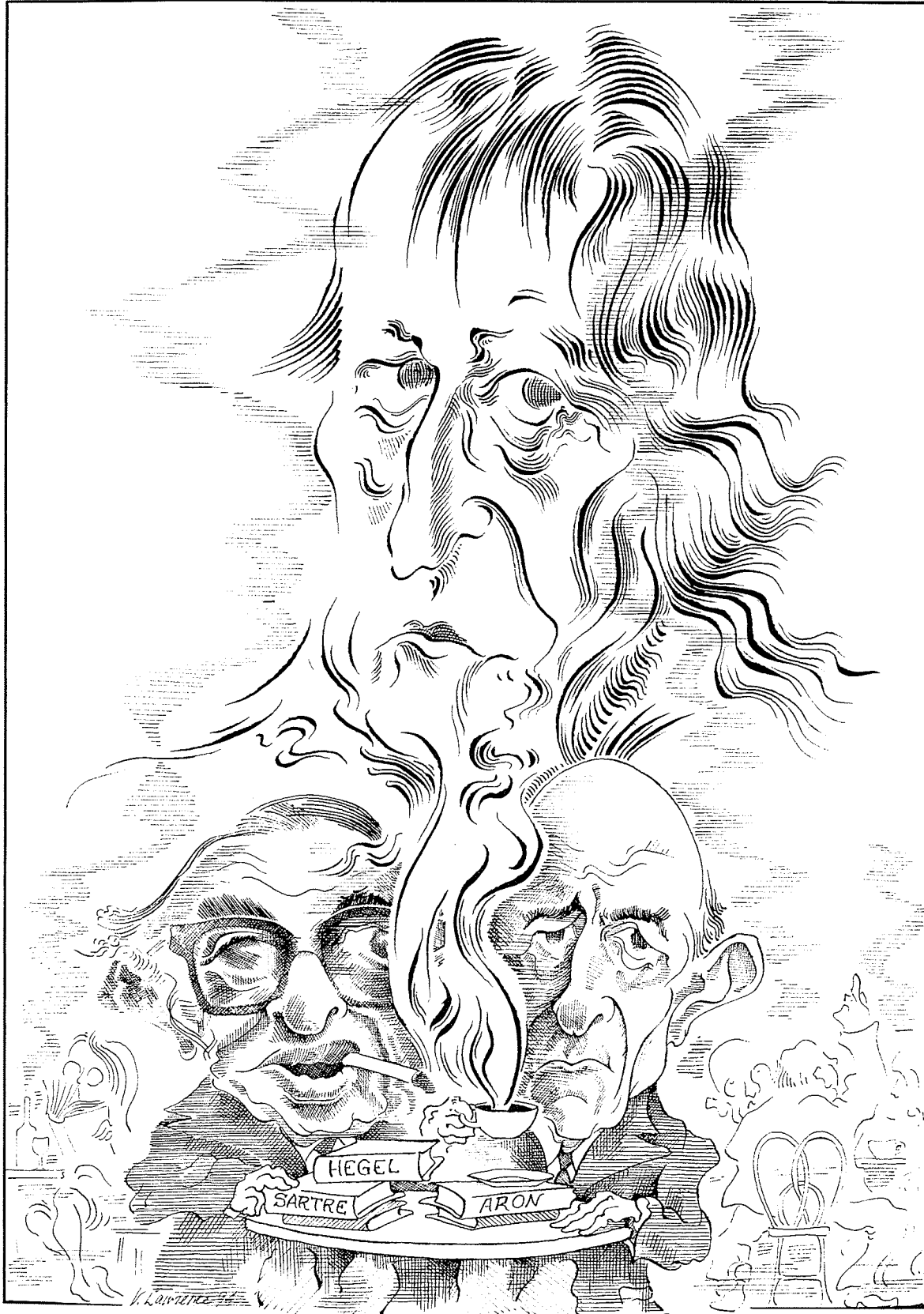
# THE STRANGE BIRTH *of* LIBERAL FRANCE

*The rise of a truly liberal political order was one of the glories of France's "trentes glorieuses," as the first 30 years after World War II came to be called. Yet only in more recent decades has a new generation of French thinkers begun to challenge the reign of such decidedly antiliberal intellectual giants as Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida. Herewith the history of a belated revolution.*

BY MARK LILLA

**F**or much of this century, a chasm has separated political philosophy in the English-speaking world from that of continental Europe. As is well known, this rift did not open overnight. Its origins can be traced back to the early 19th century, when distinctly national styles of philosophical reflection first arose in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. As late as the 17th century, European thinkers shared a common language, Latin, which allowed them to communicate directly with their contemporaries and indirectly with thinkers of the Middle Ages and antiquity. By the 18th century, Latin began to fall out of use, but the outlook of the Enlightenment was shared widely enough to permit the works of the *Lumières* to be appreciated across the whole of Europe. Kant read Hume, Hume read Holbach, and everyone read Rousseau.

But after the Revolution this extensive community of mind disintegrated, and in its place there developed a number of independent circles defined more strictly by language and approach. The German philosophies of Schelling and Hegel, for example, could not be plausibly translated into the English vocabulary of Bentham and Mill. The two heterogeneous constellations we now call "Continental" and "Anglo-American" philosophy—the one growing out of German idealism, the other out of British empiricism and skepticism—owe their births to this 19th-cen-



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tury development, which might be called “philosophical nationalism.”

The estrangement of *political* philosophy in the two traditions had more concrete causes, however. They were, not surprisingly, political. Here, too, we must turn back to the 19th century to understand how they came about. It is a historical commonplace that modern Anglo-American political thought remains within the narrow orbit of liberalism. This certainly is the view of Continental observers ever since Tocqueville, who have long expressed astonishment, whether admiring or critical, at the supposedly incorrigible liberal temper of the British and Americans. Over the past two centuries, liberal ideas and liberal government have survived the age of revolution, the age of industrialization, and the age of total war.

**T**o those of us living in these liberal nations, our histories look far less harmonious. We think readily of our radical dissenters and our conservatives. Nonetheless, even our most radical and conservative thinkers have seldom strayed far from the fundamental principles of liberal politics: limited government, the rule of law, multiparty elections, an independent judiciary and civil service, civilian control of the military, individual rights to free association and worship, private property, and so forth. Our fiercest political disputes—whether over suffrage in England or over slavery and civil rights in America—have been over the application of these principles and the structure of these institutions, rarely over their legitimacy. However great the variety and contention we find within the history of our political thought, the fact remains that coherent antiliberal traditions never developed within it.

On the Continent they did. Indeed, the history of Continental political thought since the French Revolution is largely the history of

different national species of illiberalism opposed to the fundamental principles listed above, albeit for different reasons. They were all born shortly after the Revolution itself, which had left Continental thinkers bitterly divided over its legacy. In every country there could be found a counter-revolutionary party defending church and crown and hoping to restore their authority; opposing them was an equally determined party desiring more radical forms of democracy or socialism to accomplish what the French Revolution had already begun. As time passed, the two parties shared little apart from their hostility to liberalism, but this was enough to marginalize it throughout the 19th century. Their common attitude also led to the distortion of the original liberal idea, which came to be understood by proponents as a narrowly economic doctrine, or by opponents as a political doctrine meant to defend the economic interests of the rising middle classes. In 19th-century Europe, liberalism progressively became a partisan or party label rather than a term employed to describe a type of modern regime. It is true that by century's end, France, Italy, and Germany had managed to construct constitutional regimes that were “liberal” in a great many respects. But this was only accomplished by balancing illiberal political forces delicately against one another, not by making Europeans into liberals. What later would be called liberal “political culture” was absent, and few thinkers promoted it. And by the early years of World War II all these quasi-liberal governments had vanished.

**T**he divide within modern Western political thought was thus the effect of, and eventually contributed to, the differing political experiences of America, Britain, and continental Europe in the century and a half following the French Revolution. “Philosophical nationalism” did

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not arise in a vacuum. Yet one of the paradoxes of postwar intellectual life is that this "nationalism" persisted, even as the political conditions that originally nourished it began to disappear. In the 19th century, differences over political principle also reflected different political histories: Britain and America had unbroken experiences with liberalism; continental Europe had barely known it. But in the decades following World War II, France, West Germany, and Italy all became thriving liberal republics. This was not accomplished overnight, nor was success ever guaranteed. But the political history of postwar Europe now appears essentially to have been the history of its liberalization, a liberalization equally of institutions and of public habits and mores. Whatever challenges governments face in Western Europe today (and they are many), they are challenges that arise *within* European liberal polities, and many are to be found in the United States and Great Britain as well.

Nonetheless, political thought on the Continent remained thoroughly antiliberal in orientation after the war. Its right-wing version had been inescapably tainted by the fascist experience and disappeared almost immediately without a trace. But left-wing antiliberalism of a socialist or communist bent emerged strengthened from the war experience. In Germany the works of Marxists of the '30s—Georg Lukacs, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch—were revived and later reanimated by younger thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas. In Italy the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci were published and became the key texts for understanding the relations between Italian politics and culture. And in France, Marxism became, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, the "unsurpassable horizon" of the age and remained so even as it was reinterpreted in light of existentialism, surrealism, structural linguistics, and even Freudian psychology. In short, while in practice continental Europe was beginning to share the Anglo-American experience with liberal democracy, in theory it still con-

sidered liberalism unworthy of sympathetic study.

For decades, then, a sort of Cold War in political philosophy played itself out. Continental thinkers studiously ignored the writings of American and English liberals, and the compliment was returned. Beginning in the mid-1960s, though, the contemporary writings of a number of these Continental figures were translated and began to be discussed in Anglo-American academic circles. While this development might have signaled a wider debate over the character of the liberal age, it seemed only to transfer this Cold War to America's domestic front. The differences proved deep between those who used the language of analytic philosophy to treat problems internal to liberalism and those who criticized contemporary liberal societies from a more historical standpoint using other vocabularies, whether those of Marxism, French structuralism, or German critical theory. Despite repeated professions of mutual respect and understanding, two independent ways of conceiving the tasks and methods of political philosophy have since grown up within the Anglo-American world.

The real casualties of this philosophical Cold War were the antagonists themselves, who gradually became as provincial as the thinkers of the age of high "philosophical nationalism." It is not that partisans of the liberal and Continental approaches in the United States and Britain have failed to address each other; they have, or at least have tried to. Rather, by addressing primarily each other, they both have lost touch with what is currently being thought, written, and experienced on the Continent. European intellectuals frequently express astonishment that a fixed canon of accepted "Continental" authors who became prominent nearly 25 years ago are still being quarreled over among Britons and Americans today. Whatever one makes of these works, it is clear to anyone familiar with contemporary Continental thought in the original languages that Europeans themselves have moved on to new questions and approaches.

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"Philosophical nationalism" is on the wane in Europe. Not only is Anglo-American thought being translated and read more seriously than ever before; Continental philosophers have also been rethinking their own traditions of political thought, whether those of the postwar era or those running back to the French Revolution. This has involved a critical look at the methods, language, and judgment of those traditions—and, in particular, at what Fritz Stern once called (in reference to Germany) the "failures of illiberalism." Though the works that exist in English translation give little sense of this, Continental political thought is very much in transition today. One has the impression that the Cold War in political philosophy has ceased to engage the best minds on the Continent, and it is now a strictly Anglo-American affair.

**N**owhere has the recent reassessment of the Continental tradition been more dramatic and fruitful than in France. To their admirers, French intellectuals have represented a model of critical thinking about politics for most of this century, and a welcome alternative to self-satisfied Anglo-American liberals. In the last decade or two, however, the French themselves have turned a critical eye toward this heritage, provoking a strong reaction against its most representative figures. Such a development could be seen as part of the natural generational flux of intellectual life in France, where patricide has a long, distinguished history. But in this case it also prompted serious reconsideration of a long-standing Continental illiberalism, of which postwar French philosophy is only one recent form. Young French thinkers today sense themselves to be living at the end of something—if not at the end of history, then certainly at the end of a history that has defined their national political consciousness for nearly two centuries. They have come to see modern French politics and political thought as one continuous struggle over the character of the society that the Revolution created, a society that has, over the past 50 years,

taken on a progressively more liberal cast.

As the French themselves now generally portray their intellectual and political history, their path to liberalism has not been direct; nor does it resemble the one followed by Britain or the United States. The French correctly point out that French liberalism as a doctrine grew up within the 18th-century Enlightenment critique of monarchical absolutism, which gave it a particular cast. While the works of Montesquieu were rather close in spirit to those of English and American liberals, the writings of Voltaire and the other philosophes were more exercises in criticism directed against established political and ecclesiastical power than developed theories of government. Disinterested, concrete reflection on political institutions was rare in France in the decades before the Revolution, and hardly more common thereafter.

Instead, as the historian François Furet has methodically demonstrated in his writings during the past two decades, French political debate in the 19th century soon devolved into a struggle over the revolutionary heritage that largely excluded the kind of liberal politics that developed in England and America. The Revolution was seen, much as it is again in France today, as a threshold separating the modern world from all that preceded it. To take sides on the Revolution meant taking sides on modernity itself, and this controversy over the modern age soon displaced strictly political debate over the aims and limits of modern government.

On this account, it is not surprising that in the history of 19th-century France, which is littered with republics, restorations, revolutions, and empires, the spirit of liberalism in the Anglo-American sense never really took hold. This is not to say that the French did not enjoy extensive liberties and periods of relative political stability during this era. Nor is it to say that France did not develop its own liberal tradition of thought. In the first half of the century there was a very important movement that included Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Staël, Alexis de Tocqueville, and François

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Guizot, who are all much studied today. What distinguished these liberals from their royalist and radical adversaries was that they criticized the means of the Revolution, in particular the Terror, but resigned themselves to living in the society it had created. One reason they are so widely appreciated now is that they anticipated the current French preoccupation with the Revolution as the threshold of the modern age. For the 19th-century liberals, as for their present students, the Revolution had given birth to a new form of society, perhaps even a new human type, that could no longer be understood in the categories of the ancien régime but required strictly modern ones. Whether they used the terms "modern liberty" (Constant) or "democracy" and "equality of condition" (Tocqueville) to describe that society, they believed that liberalism as a form of government was more adapted to its dynamics than a restored absolutism or, later, socialism. At the time, however, their works appeared mainly critical and oppositional, reacting to events of the day: the collapse of the Revolution into the Terror, the rise of Napoleonic despotism and empire, and the threat of social upheaval in 1848. They were without wide intellectual influence after their time.

**B**y the middle of the 19th century, this intellectually important though ultimately impotent school of liberalism had given way to a distinctively French doctrine called "republicanism." *Républicain* is the least precise and most widely invoked concept in the French political lexicon. Even today, after the waning of Marxism, there are hardly any politicians or intellectuals who do not claim it as their own. The term harks back to the rhetoric of the Revolution, which was deeply imbued with references to classical (especially Roman) republicanism. After the Terror it became common, for those who supported the Revolution but wished to minimize its excesses, to refer to the "republic" rather than invoke ideas, such as "democracy," that might have been responsible for those excesses. In the writings of a historian

such as Jules Michelet or in the events of 1848, republicanism meant recapturing and consummating the spirit of 1789. But over time it came to offer an alternative to both radical socialism and democracy, on the one hand, and clericalism and reaction on the other. The central tenets of this doctrine were worked out progressively during the 19th century: an austere secular morality to replace that of the church; an active citizenry educated in public schools; a highly centralized, majoritarian government; a homogeneous culture, achieved through national education but also through a slow war of attrition against signs of diversity (for example, the campaigns against regional French dialects). In short, republicanism was a syncretic mix of political principles, some universal and some chauvinistic.

**R**epublicanism's relation to liberalism is a matter of much dispute today, even among those who have highlighted the dominant illiberalism of post-revolutionary French politics. Some have asserted that it was simply the form that liberalism took in France, and that the historical parenthesis of the Third Republic (1875–1940) saw the creation of a genuinely liberal political culture after a century of revolutions and reactions. Others have pointed out the difficulty of reconciling the theory and practice of the Third Republic with the classic theories of liberalism, even those of French thinkers such as Tocqueville and Constant. Much of the Third Republic's early history was marked by conflict over the principles of republicanism, whether over the secularization of the schools or, most memorably, over the Dreyfus Affair. And while it is true that France had established a relatively stable, quasi-liberal constitutional republic in the decades preceding World War I, it did so by marking its independence from liberal traditions of thought.

However one views the intellectual genealogy of republicanism, its later development distanced it further from liberalism, thanks to the profound transformations wrought by the years 1914–17. The destruction of the Great

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War seemed to make a mockery of republican civic morality and helped to inspire more radical aesthetic developments in the avant-garde. More important still for political intellectuals was the Russian Revolution. For the European Left as a whole this event was decisive: It marked the establishment of "real existing socialism" for the first time. In France this development had a very special resonance, however. For the Russian Revolution was not only an advance for the cause of socialism and the socialists; it was also a *revolution*, and therefore seemed to participate in the French national saga. Until then, the history of the Revolution had been a purely French affair, stretching from 1789 to 1848, then to the Paris Commune, and finally culminating (according to republican historiography) in the founding of the Third Republic. That revolution was over. But to those intellectuals for whom the Revolution was an eternal process, ever to be extended and re-conceived, the Third Republic was a betrayer. Therefore the Revolution was internationalized, with the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Soviet Union now serving as honorary *sans-culottes*.

**W**hat this meant during the interwar period was that intellectuals divided politically into two radical tendencies, each appealing to different elements of republicanism, but both hostile to a liberal interpretation of that tradition. On the right, one saw the growing influence of reactionary nationalists such as Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, who began as anti-Dreyfusards before the Great War. On the left, one saw a turn away from the domestic tradition of French socialism and toward German philosophy for an understanding of the revolutionary age. Central in this regard was Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève, who shaped an entire generation of French intellectuals through his lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The core of Hegel's teaching, according to Kojève, was the doctrine of the "master-slave" dialectic in history, which he understood in the light of the early Marx (whose manuscripts had just ap-

peared) and early Heidegger (who was virtually unknown to the French at the time). With this so-called German turn in political thought, French illiberalism also took on a new cast among intellectuals. Whereas in the 19th century its language was either that of the church or of radical socialists, now the critique of liberal society was cast in the vocabulary of Hegel and Marx. This would remain its vocabulary until quite recently.

**I**f the defeat of fascism in World War II permanently discredited right-wing illiberalism among intellectuals, its left-wing varieties flourished in postwar continental Europe. This was especially true in France, where the humiliations of defeat and collaboration were taken as further evidence of liberalism's "obsolescence." Here, however, the political history of France and that of its intellectuals begin to diverge. Over the next 30 years, which have come to be called *les trente glorieuses*, France built two republics that were fundamentally liberal and a booming economy that utterly transformed the social landscape. The liberalization of postwar French society did not happen automatically. There remained the permanent challenge of the PCF and its unions; there was the untidy process of decolonization whose bloody denouement was the Algerian War; there were threatened military coups associated with that conflict; and, above it all, there was the unpredictable presence of Charles de Gaulle. But certainly by the mid-1960s it was clear that however "exceptional" France was, it was not about to turn to either fascism or communism, if only because the base of such movements had disappeared in the flowering of the affluent society. Nor was it a "republic" in the 19th-century sense. The Fifth Republic had a more liberal constitution, with a strong executive, a bicameral legislature, a constitutional court to check the legislature, and a welfare state that grew quickly within this framework. The severe secular morality of the republican schools had also disappeared, replaced by greater toleration of religion (which itself was less practiced)

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and a wider berth for individual self-expression.

This slow process of liberalization, which took place across Western Europe, is easier to see today than during the 1950s or '60s. But what made it even harder to see at the time was that French intellectuals were almost unanimous in their a priori rejection of liberal society and their adherence to some form of Marxism (and to the one party, the PCF, that claimed to offer the authoritative interpretation of Marxism). This history has been told many times before and need not be rehearsed here. What must be emphasized is how little relation all these intellectual putches bore to the social transformations of the time. If anything, as many French writers today maintain, the history of postwar intellectual Marxism must be understood as a series of reactions to these transformations and the erosion of any hope of another revolution.

**A**t the time, however, the grip of Marxism on the minds of French intellectuals was almost complete. There were rare exceptions. One was Raymond Aron. Aron was a unique figure in postwar French intellectual life. Like his *petit camarade* Sartre, he was trained in the Hegelianism of the 1930s and had spent a short period in Germany during Hitler's rise to power. But unlike Sartre, Aron took from these experiences an appreciation of liberal skepticism and developed an enduring hostility to all forms of historical determinism, including that embodied in Marxism. He wrote many books on these themes during his long career, was a regular journalist, and helped to launch several important reviews. Nonetheless, Aron was almost entirely without influence among his fellow intellectuals in the postwar decades: "Better wrong with Sartre than right with Aron," the saying went. It was not until the eve of his death in 1983, after French intellectuals themselves had abandoned Marxism, that he began to be read more widely.

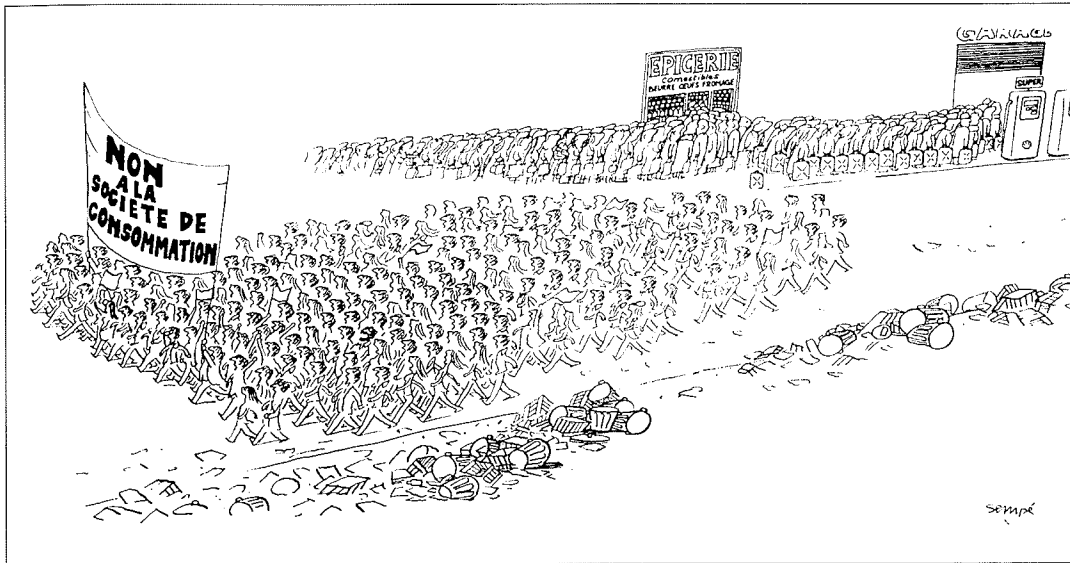
The Marxist Left of the immediate postwar decade had been shaped politically and intellectually by the currents of the '30s—by

the weakness of the Third Republic, by the Popular Front and the Great Depression, by Hegelianism, by surrealism. The generation of thinkers who became prominent during the following two decades, and who participated in structuralism (and what foreigners called post-structuralism), had mostly grown up in different circumstances. Their formative experiences were the war and the occupation, the reign of Stalinism among intellectuals in the early '50s, and perhaps most important, *les trente glorieuses*.

Structuralism is sometimes seen as a continuation of the French radicalism that was born in the '30s—as if Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida were direct descendants of Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And there is a sense in which its lineage can be traced back to Kojève, who was the first to announce that "the end of history is the death of man, strictly defined." But in truth, structuralism's attitude toward politics has always been difficult to characterize. This was already evident in the early '60s, when the first structuralist works were roundly criticized by the PCF and its intellectual spokespersons, such as Sartre, as an abandonment of Marxism, if not a new form of social conservatism. On the other side, to anticommunists such as Aron structuralism represented an apolitical radicalization of the historical determinism already present in Hegel's "cunning of reason" and Marx's materialist dialectic. Whatever their differences, the older antagonists of the intellectual Cold War finally understood what they shared: the presuppositions of a modern humanism that held individual autonomy to be possible, to be the aim of modern politics, and to be discoverable through reason. All these assumptions structuralism denied.

This may be the key to understanding how the structuralist movements, which on the surface did not appear tied to any particular political doctrine, contributed to the long stream of French antiliberalism in the 1960s and '70s. Certainly the anthropological studies of Lévi-Strauss, the literary essays of





*Consumer society was one of the targets of the student uprising in May 1968. But consumerism proved hard to shake, even during the uprising—an irony noted by at least one contemporary artist.*

Barthes, and the psychoanalytic lectures of Lacan did not seem to be about politics at all; if anything, they signaled a retreat from the ideologically charged polemics of the '50s. Even the early writings of Foucault and Derrida steered clear of anything that could be construed as political thought. But in another sense they seemed to render everything political. For if autonomous individuals as conceived by the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition do not exist independently, if it is structures that produce them—whether those structures are linguistic, symbolic, cultural, psychological, ideological, “logocentric,” or simply those of “power”—then potentially every human experience can be interpreted politically through a political analysis of those structures. Structuralists themselves made a game of protesting such “caricatural” readings of their writings, just as many abjured the structuralist label. Nonetheless, this is precisely how their works were read in France: as profoundly political attacks on liberal bourgeois society.

At a time of rising affluence, the decline of the working class, the sclerosis of the PCF—in short, with the disappearance of the political world that Marxism had once described—struc-

turalism seemed to offer new possibilities for resistance. But now, rather than resisting in action the dehumanization of man on the basis of a rational analysis of history, one resisted in theory the ideas of “man,” “reason,” and “history” as the oppressive products of ideology.

The situation of antiliberalism in France after the rise of the New Left and the events of May 1968 was therefore highly incongruous. The intellectual reign of structuralism, which called into question every aspect of modern liberal life, also seemed to undercut all hope of escaping the tentacles of “power” through political action. If “man” and the “author” were dead, then clearly so was man as the author of his political acts. Moreover, the events of May not only failed to bring down the Fifth Republic but may have left it strengthened. To be sure, those events did much to break down hierarchical distinctions in everyday French life, making it less formal and more modern; in this sense it was a real cultural revolution. But the affluence, mobility, and individualism produced by economic growth had already taken their toll on the old idea of a unified Left made up of workers, their unions, the PCF, and the intellectuals. If

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anything, the events of May '68 reflected dissatisfactions with a consumer society that were expressed in the highly individualistic terms of that very society. Politically, May '68 marked the beginning of the end of Marxism, with Maoism and the "boutique" movements of the early '70s (feminism, ecologism, "Third Worldism") left glowing like embers of a dying fire. Intellectually, what remained of the postwar antiliberal tradition was supported by a mélange of structuralism, neo-Marxism, Nietzscheanism, Heideggerianism, and Freudianism—none of it political in the sense that Sartre would have recognized.

**I**t was in this somewhat confused context of progressive political liberalization and persistent intellectual hostility to it that the revival of liberal political thought eventually was to take place in the '80s. The key events were, once again, political. They began in the mid-'70s, long before the events of 1989 and the belated rethinking they provoked among the rest of the European Left. For some reason, world events that elicited little immediate response elsewhere in Western Europe—the translation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the butcheries in Cambodia, the flight of the boat people, the rise of Solidarity in Poland—suddenly set off a profound *crise de conscience* among the French. Why these particular events had such an effect, when innumerable others (Budapest 1956, Prague 1968) did not, is a question that future historians will have to answer.

Whatever the cause, the effect was real. In the space of a few years, intellectuals who once subscribed to Sartre's view that Marxism was the "unsurpassable horizon" of our time began to concede that communist totalitarianism might fall within that horizon and not be a historical accident. And those who had followed Foucault in seeing classrooms, hospital wards, and offices as thinly disguised concentration camps now confronted the real thing. By the end of the '70s, with the publication of "new philosophers" such as André Glucksmann (*The Master Thinkers*, 1977) and Bernard-Henri Lévy (*Barbarism with a Hu-*

*man Face*, 1977), the public record of postwar communism was finally a matter of frank public discussion, and a cooler look at Western liberal societies became possible. The "age of suspicion" was over.

The election of François Mitterrand as president of the republic in 1981, and the simultaneous arrival of the first Socialist plurality in parliament since the war, served as a capstone to this development. On one level, the Mitterrand years brought about a liberal normalization of the Fifth Republic, removing it from the long shadow of de Gaulle and the conservative parties that had ruled France in his name since 1958. But on a deeper level the election of Mitterrand and the Socialists represented the rapprochement of the nation's revolutionary tradition with the liberal institutions of the Fifth Republic. Rather than heralding *la gauche au pouvoir*, Mitterrand's presidency marked the end of a long tradition of political illiberalism and the birth of a "centrist" republic.

**T**he changes in the French intellectual climate over the past 15 years have been as profound as those on the political scene. Most significant has been the almost universal abandonment of the Hegelian, Marxist, and structuralist dogmas that nourished intellectual contempt for liberalism after the war. This shift has also signaled the demise of a certain conception of intellectuals themselves, as "master thinkers" whose philosophy of history or theory of power licensed them to deliver ex cathedra judgments on the political events of the day. This image of the French philosophes may still have its admirers in certain airless corners of American and British universities, but it has virtually disappeared in France. As a result, space has opened up for more serious and reasoned reflection on politics and the liberal age that France has now entered. During the 1980s, discussions of political philosophy centered on books that would have been unwritten, unpublished, or unread 10 years earlier: studies of important political thinkers of the past, theoretical treatises on human rights, essays on

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liberal government and society, even translations of Anglo-American political and moral philosophy of the "analytic" variety. A number of important new reviews were also founded, all concerned with contemporary liberal society and its problems.

**N**onetheless, it would be mistaken to speak of anything like a liberal consensus in French political thought today. Few French thinkers consider themselves liberals in an unqualified sense, and fewer still in an American or British sense. While it is not uncommon for an American or British political theorist to take up a "defense" of one version of liberalism or another, recent French political philosophy has been by and large diagnostic rather than promotional or programmatic. Indeed, there is an air of strangeness, or exteriority, accompanying French analyses of liberal society, as if they were *in* liberalism but not yet *of* it. Another aspect of recent French thought further distinguishes it from that of the British and Americans, and its roots go back to the phenomenon of "philosophical nationalism." This is its historical character, and particularly its concern with the French Revolution.

Ever since the Revolution, French political thought has been "historically conscious." But what is the relation between political philosophy and history? Is political philosophy only possible as systematic reflection on history, including the history of thought itself? Are there historical junctures after which certain political alternatives become literally unthinkable? Or is political philosophy precisely the rational overcoming of such false "historical consciousness"? These questions have been with Western philosophy ever since Rousseau and Hegel. But the French have been forced to confront them again, as they have tried to understand the period of their history that seems to have finished and the one that has now begun.

French thought about liberalism is therefore expressed in two different registers today. One is characterized by what might be called "ordinary" political theory about features of

liberal society: human rights, constitutional government, representation, class, individualism, and so forth. In another register, however, the French have been debating the method appropriate to the conduct of political philosophy as such, and to reflection on liberal society in particular.

Beginning in the 1930s, political theory in the strict sense—that is, rigorous, informed reflection on political principles, laws, customs, and institutions—progressively disappeared in France and was supplanted by "totalizing" philosophies of history. Either it was absorbed into a rationalist account of history (whether Hegelian or Marxist), or it was ignored in the name of structuralist theories of historical "difference." In neither case, however, did it prove possible to reflect philosophically upon liberalism in its own terms. Whatever differences separated these schools of thought, they all agreed that liberalism was illegitimate, as was any "naive," nonhistoricist study of it. To engage in political philosophy in France today and reflect on the liberal prospect therefore requires a prior defense of the enterprise itself, in an environment where its possibility has long been denied. Such an undertaking demands a direct encounter with the whole modern historicist tradition running from Hegel to Heidegger, and its French representatives from Kojève to Foucault.

Broadly speaking, three major tendencies in contemporary political thought have engaged this French historicist legacy and attempted either to move beyond it or to redefine it. Each reflects a different approach to thinking about political history in general and about the liberal experience within it. In general, the proponents of these approaches are sympathetic toward contemporary liberal society, but each has a different notion of what that society is, how it came about, where its strengths and weaknesses lie, and what its prospects might be.

The approach of Pierre Manent, a professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, takes its inspiration from the work of Leo Strauss, the German-born phi-

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osopher who established an important school of political thought at the University of Chicago. Consequently, Manent's ideas will appear the most familiar to American readers. Like Strauss, Manent believes that liberalism must be seen as a development within modernity, which in turn must be considered in contrast to the ancient and medieval worlds that preceded it. In other words, modern liberalism must be understood historically as a product of the modern break with the past. However, like Strauss, Manent maintains that this divide was not the product of "history" as an impersonal force but rather was a conscious "project" conceived by the first modern philosophers (Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes) and carried out by their epigones in the centuries that followed. Therefore, to understand modern liberal politics fully, one must go beyond the presuppositions of modern history, escaping its limited horizon, and try to recover and reconsider the original philosophical break making its development possible.

**M**anent follows Strauss most closely in his history of philosophy and analysis of historicism. In *Naissances de la politique moderne* (The births of modern politics; 1977) Manent maintains that Machiavelli's break with classical thought was responsible for both Hobbes's scientific realism (the cool study of what "is") and Rousseau's utopianism (the restless pursuit of the "ought"). Modern historicism then arose as an attempt to bring the "is" and "ought" together, most compellingly in Hegel's rational dialectic of history.

When treating liberalism, however, Manent departs from Strauss by stressing the specifically Christian context in which philosophical liberalism was born. In *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (1994), Manent emphasizes the fact that the "theological-political problem" in Europe did not arise in a homogeneous city-state or empire but rather out of the tension between universal Christian churches and particular absolutist monarchies. Political power and religious opinion were

theoretically separated quite early in European history, and this separation paved the way for their actual sundering by liberalism beginning in the 17th century. All the dynamics and problems of modern liberal societies, Manent suggests, can be traced back to this radical division of realms, which not only rid liberal politics of religion but also cast doubt on any claims to know what is natural and good for human beings.

**I**n his subtle study, *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (Tocqueville and the nature of democracy; 1982), Manent pursues this reasoning; however, his conclusions about contemporary liberal society are ambiguous, or at least open to interpretation. On the one hand, he appears to regret the "softening" of human nature brought about by modernity. On the other, he considers liberty and self-government to be important compensations for whatever modern humanity has lost, so long as it uses them wisely and learns, as Manent puts it, to "love democracy moderately."

Luc Ferry, professor of philosophy at the University of Caen, and Alain Renaut, who teaches at the University of Paris (Sorbonne), do not share Manent's appreciation of premodern political thought, stating flatly that "there is nothing to be learned from the Greeks," whose philosophy they consider to be so bound up with a false, hierarchical cosmology as to be alien to our democratic age. They too believe that historicism is mistaken and that it has had a pernicious effect on modern politics. But unlike Manent, they blame this historicism not on modern philosophy as such but on an "antihumanism" that grew up within it. Ferry and Renaut wish to remain secular and resolutely modern, yet, simultaneously, avoid what they see as the dangerous political doctrines that have grown out of certain modern philosophies.

Despite their irreconcilable differences with Manent regarding the "quarrel" of the ancients and the moderns, Ferry and Renaut share his view that modern politics and its problems have no history independent of the

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history of modern philosophy. The philosophical history they recount is fundamentally different from Manent's, however, because it focuses on modern theories of the self—and in particular on a distinction they make between the "subject" and the "individual"—rather than on theories of politics as such. Ever since Heidegger, Continental thought has conventionally seen in modern philosophy the relentless rise of a humanist "subjectivity," which Heidegger blamed for the birth of destructive technology, mass society, and much else. Ferry and Renault argue instead that after Kant and Johann Fichte the idea of "subjectivity" was abandoned in favor of a modern "individualism" that carried with it the notion of a surreptitious order emerging from the interaction of individuals. This "antihumanist" conception of an unconsciously created historical order began as a rationalistic one in Leibniz's theodicy and Hegel's "cunning of reason," but later became an irrational and even more dangerous idea in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Ferry and Renault have not hesitated to draw political conclusions from this philosophical history. Most contentiously, they have argued that any political movement appealing to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger is fundamentally individualistic and antihumanist in nature.

The only way out of this modern individualism, Ferry and Renault claim, is to reconceive a "modern humanism" that is neither "historicist" nor "metaphysical"—that is, a philosophy of the subject that makes universal political and moral judgments possible without appeals to religion, tradition, or human nature. However, what they mean by the "subject" is often obscured in their writings, which up to now have mainly been critical and directed against their adversaries. Still, it is clear what they wish such a theory of subjectivity to undergird: a new defense of universal, rational norms in morals and politics, and especially a defense of human rights.

A third approach to political theory being pursued in France today still attempts to reflect directly and systematically upon the historical

development of modern liberal societies. It is a species of historicism, though it is impossible to place it in a single line of descent from Hegel and Marx, or Nietzsche and Heidegger. Its roots are instead to be found in French historical anthropology. Unlike the Anglo-American liberal tradition, which has been closely allied with economic science since the 18th century, French political thought has repeatedly turned to anthropology when seeking a theory of human behavior. Many specifically French reasons underlie this attraction to anthropology, the most important of which probably is the problem of explaining (or explaining away) religious experience after the French Revolution. The "scientific" study of religion culminating in the work of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss actually begins in the 19th-century religious theories of August Comte, Saint-Simon, and even Joseph de Maistre. Ever since, French political philosophy has taken on an "anthropological" cast whenever it has had to treat religion directly.

**T**he anthropologist who has most influenced the latest generation of French political thinkers is Louis Dumont, a figure little known abroad outside professional circles. Dumont has become central in France for the simple reason that he abandoned the Hegelian and Marxist presuppositions that had crept into historical anthropology and focused instead on the problem of modern individualism as first set out by Tocqueville. Dumont began his anthropological research on the Indian caste system. But even his first book on this subject, *Homo hierarchicus* (1966), which begins with reflections on Tocqueville, made it clear that his ambition was to understand the nature of modern life. Dumont's work rests on his distinction between "holistic" societies, whose ideology is "hierarchy," and "individualistic" societies, whose ideology is "equality" (which also, he says, implies "freedom"). Although all societies contain individuals, holistic societies are organized according to principles that do not recognize the individual as the ultimate

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source of value. Hierarchy is a moral ideology rather than a system of political or economic power, one in which society's claims are placed above those of individuals. Dumont's early writings described the Indian caste system in these hierarchical terms, in an effort to recapture the strangeness of holistic society and contrast it to our individualistic presuppositions.

Since then, Dumont's work has centered almost exclusively on the rise of modern Europe, what he calls its "ideology," and lately on the different national forms that this ideology has taken. Assuming that the "hierarchy" of contemporary nonmodern societies is comparable to that of premodern Europe (a debatable presupposition), he has set forth an influential theory of the development of the modern world out of the spirit of individualism. Dumont believes that individualism was born in early Christianity and with it grew the ideology of equality and liberty that challenged the values of ancient hierarchy. European history from the arrival of Christianity until the French Revolution was essentially driven by the tension between these two ideologies, a struggle that finally produced the modern state and the liberal separation of economic relations from both religious and political control. Dumont does not celebrate this history. On the contrary, he believes that the ideology of individualism ignored the fundamentally holistic nature of all societies, and that modern life is beset by problems arising from its persistent unwillingness to accept this fact. Modern racism, anti-Semitism, and totalitarianism must all be understood as holistic reactions to an individualistic ideology that refuses to recognize the natural priority of social claims over those of individuals.

Like Tocqueville's reflections on America and post-revolutionary France, Dumont's anthropological writings assume a philosophy of history without fully developing it. History is treated as a "thing," a continuous stream of human experience that shifts direction at pre-

cise junctures; between those junctures, it is the logical working out of an idea born at one and realized at the next. For Dumont, as for Tocqueville, the birth of Christianity and the French Revolution are such epochal junctures. Since the Revolution, humankind has become *modern*, living in an age unlike any other. We have been freed from the power of one idea (hierarchy), only to begin serving a second (equality). These ideas are ideologies, however, not reasoned philosophies of the sort analyzed by Manent, Ferry, and Renaut; they are imbedded in social structures, which in turn shape human consciousness. Contradictions within society can be understood by studying the ideology dominating it, and thereby perhaps be moderated, but the ideology itself appears to be inescapable. Faced with the bleak picture of modern democratic society dominated by individualism, Tocqueville appealed to historical providence; Manent, Ferry, and Renaut appeal to the possibility of transhistorical philosophy. Dumont offers no such consolation.

Certainly the most ambitious attempt to incorporate these anthropological insights on ancient hierarchy and modern individualism into a more rigorous philosophy of history is *Le désenchantement du monde* (The disenchantment of the world; 1985) by Michel Gauchet of the École des Hautes Études. The book's subtitle presents it as a "political history of religion." In fact, it is a speculative history of politics that considers the development of the state as a function of changes in religious consciousness, or what Gauchet calls a dynamic of transcendence. Primitive man, according to Gauchet, organized his world by placing its source outside of himself in unchanging gods, to whom human beings owed everything. This was once the condition of primitive societies everywhere and remains so for those that survive. But several millennia ago a great historical caesura opened up with the establishment of the great world religions, which presented their gods as changeable and distant,

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though now approachable. At that moment humanity for the first time began to exercise control over its own world; once the gods departed from their terrestrial abode, the state grew up to occupy their place. In other words, the new religions and the state emerged together out of this "dynamic of transcendence," in opposition to primitive societies, which had neither. The key to understanding modern history, according to Gauchet, is to understand how humanity has sought to "possess" itself in politics by slowly "dispossessing" itself of any external debt or meaning in religion.

**G**auchet argues in the schematic second half of *Le désenchantement du monde* and in his other writings on psychology and politics that if liberalism is the product of God's retreat and humanity's advance in history, liberalism can be understood primarily, if not exclusively, in light of this process. He maintains that the assertion of human subjectivity has meant the progressive dominance of democratic individualism in politics but also, among other repercussions of the gods' withdrawal, the rise of ideology, bureaucratization, nationalism, growing state power, even totalitarianism. The more humanity is free, it appears, the greater is social power. Gauchet offers no escape from modern humanity's psychological and political situation in this disenchanting world, only the hope that, having witnessed the death of God, we will cease trying to occupy his place. "The death of God does not mean man becomes God," Gauchet concludes, "but on the contrary that man is strictly obliged to renounce the dream of his own divinity."

The debate over historicism in political philosophy defines only one axis of contemporary French thought. It is a central one, however, because it directly confronts the dominant mode of conceiving political philosophy that existed in France from Kojève down to Foucault. Manent, Ferry, and Renaut all reject that tradition outright

and have set off in different directions; Gauchet rejects it as well but appears intent on rehabilitating aspects of historicism in his own anthropological fashion. Whether these four philosophers will finally succeed in escaping Hegel is an open question; they certainly are not the first to try.

Indeed, it was Foucault himself who, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, made the famous pronouncement that his generation, "whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche, is attempting to flee Hegel." Why that generation failed is a question that deserves to be posed today. One answer that suggests itself on the basis of these newer works is that Foucault's generation may not have been *sufficiently* Hegelian. Foucault also remarked in that same lecture that "truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in what permits us to think against Hegel, of what remains Hegelian." But to "think Hegel," even against him, means if nothing else to "think the present" in Hegelian fashion. And that present, in the postwar world, has been liberal.

Yet the liberal present was precisely what postwar French thinkers dogmatically refused to think through in its own terms. For all their professed desire to escape the presuppositions of prewar Hegelianism and Marxism, they retained one as an unreasoned article of faith: the illegitimacy of liberalism. This was a political presupposition, not a philosophical conclusion, and it trapped them unwittingly in the French Hegelian web. Perhaps what has permitted these younger thinkers to begin to disentangle themselves is the gradual disappearance of that political presupposition from French life, an event for which they are not responsible but from which they have benefited. Now free to "think liberalism," they are also free to "think Hegel" clearly, and therefore free to begin thinking clearly against him.