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# Beyond "red" and "black" : Publishing in pursuit of libertarian socialism (2)

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## The trap of anti-sovietism

When back in France in June 1945, René Lefeuvre had to adapt to a political landscape that had of course undergone significant changes. The PSOP had sunk without a trace during the war. The Communist party had now been in a coalition government for a year, and it would remain in it for another two years. The movements born in the Resistance and which, from various standpoints, advocated a "revolution", meaning the advent of a society making a clear break with the defunct IIIrd Republic on the basis of the popular alliances built during the war, had to make way for the political parties, that had but one goal : to restore as quickly as possible the State apparatus, and authority in general. For instance, workers who had taken charge of their firms received no support from any of them. [1]

Thanks to a friend, René found a job in the editorial secretariat of the *Populaire*, the SFIO's daily, and then at the Party's *Éditions de la Liberté*. In January 1946, he started publishing again on his own account : a new *Masses*, and the *Cahiers Spartacus*. He was able to recover unsold brochures from before the war. Over the next four years, he added around forty titles to his catalogue, from tiny brochures to sizeable books. His goal was obvious : to contest the Communist party's and its support organisations' monopoly of Marxist expression ; to supply doubters with the tools of a revolutionary critique of the Russian revolution, the Soviet regime and the Communist party's politics.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L200xH279/luxemburg_octobre1947-200pix-018e2.jpg

Significant publications in this period include writings of Rosa Luxemburg (*Questions d'organisation de la social-démocratie russe*, published with other writings under the cover title *Marxisme contre dictature, Réforme sociale ou révolution ?, Grève générale, parti et syndicats*), Anton Ciliga's *Lénine et la Révolution* (excerpts from his *Ten years in the country of the disconcerting lie*, which was published only two years later), Sylvain Wisner's *L'Algérie dans l'impasse*, which sought to draw attention to the looming crisis in that colony, Ida Mett's *La Commune de Cronstadt* [2], Guy Vinatrel's L'URSS concentrationnaire and historical studies by Maurice Dommanget, among which, in 1950, his Sylvain Maréchal, 500 pages strong, which cost so much and sold so little at the time that it practically caused René to stop publishing.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L200xH307/masses1946-e2bc9.jpg

*Masses* was meant to be a monthly, but only eleven numbers would be published until its discontinuation in May 1948. Among its contributors were comrades from the first *Masses*, from *Spartacus*, from the PSOP, revolutionary syndicalists and members of the left wing of the socialist party, such as Marceau Pivert ; there were regular contributions from abroad, among them those of Victor Serge, until his death in 1947.
The leading article of the first issue, under the title *Socialisme et liberté* (which is also the sub-title of the paper) reminded readers that statism and nationalism are enemies of socialism. Starting with the third issue, *Masses* became the expression of the International movement â€" socialism and liberty, launched by Marceau Pivert and

which, according to its manifesto, was grounded in libertarian socialism and revolutionary internationalism. But this initiative, with no social basis, quickly disappeared.

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René and his comrades felt the need to transmit the experience gained at such a high price over the past thirty years. But to whom ? In 1946, to judge from party and trade union membership, mass interest was strong, even if the hopes raised at the time of the Liberation faded when faced by the hardships of daily life, rationing, spiralling prices and the start of colonial wars. Never had the memberships of the Communist and Socialist parties been so high (the former's being twice as large as the latter's), and never would they ever be again. Another gauge of mass interest for social matters, *Le Libertaire*, the *Fédération anarchiste*'s weekly, printed up to a 100 000 copies. But the SFIO belonged to the government coalition, it would head it several times in 1946 and 1947. It had no tendency to compare with the pre-war *Gauche révolutionnaire*. Its members were not for the most part attracted by a project which charted a route totally different from the Party's, even if it supported them in their hostility to the Communist party. The SFIO was soon caught in a pincer between that party, then the most powerful in France both electorally and socially, and a Gaullist party, the RPF, which was seen as a threat to the parliamentary republic. The opposition between the Soviet Union and the British-American alliance took centre stage in the political debate, and, with it, the Communist party, whose overarching objective was to "*prevent a Western coalition which would tilt the balance of power to the disadvantage of the USSR* [3]". The Communist party set the terms of the debate for years to come : on the one side (its side), the forces of socialism and progress, the working class, peace ; on the other side, all the others (foremost among them the Socialists), the bourgeoisie, imperialism, war.

Those who, between those two poles, tried to promote a third way, struggled all the more to get a hearing that a "third way" is reminiscent of the "third force", the centrist coalition that then governing the country after the sacking of the Communist ministers. Such an attempt was nonetheless made.
In November 1947, a number of renowned intellectuals, among whom were Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and David Rousset signed with Marceau Pivert and a few socialist MPs an Appeal for a neutral and socialist Europe. David Rousset went further down that road and, in February 1948, with Sartre, some journalists, a few left-wing socialist MPs and trade unionists, launched an appeal for a Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire (RDR). Its aim is to move beyond the confrontation between the SFIO, a loyal manager of capitalism, and the Communist party, a tool of Soviet foreign policy. The RDR was not a party, Rousset explained : "It is only in the experience and practice of common struggles that the necessary theoretical solutions will be found...The rally...is the result of an agreement on more limited, more immediate, objectives, which fit more directly the current situation, in relation to its limits and urgency.*David Rousset, Autour du Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire », in Les Temps modernes* nÂ°36, Paris, 1948." He was also aware that the RDR is not grounded in the workers' movement : "A party is also the expression of a social class...Our aim is to unite, on the side of the working class, those elements of the middle classes which are led to struggle by today's social and economic situation. [4]"

In the first issue of *La Gauche*, the RDR's bi-weekly, Sartre calls for "*the rally of this country's men, as consumers and as producers, in neighbourhood committees, in village committees, in factory committees...where they will become conscious of their democratic and revolutionary humanism...The first goal of the Democratic Revolutionary Rally is to bind revolutionary claims to the idea of liberty*." This call for "soviets" to be thus created "on tap" in firms, in the towns and in the countryside was repeated in the RDR's program, which also included the creation of a democratic revolutionary federation of peoples and a "positive" struggle against the Marshall plan. The RDR attracted a few left-wing socialists, such as Jean Rous and Léon Boutbien, who had contributed to *Masses*. Jules Moch, the Socialist Home Office minister, an old foe of the left who was in the process of bloodily crushing the miners'strike in the North, branded them as "*Stalinist agents*". For the Communist party, the RDR was "*the RPF disguised as a left-wing party", "an appendage of the SFIO*". For *La Vérité*, the paper of the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (Trotskyist), it is "*an enterprise in confusion*".

After one year, the RDR had established branches throughout the country, with total membership something less

than 2,000. In the Manche department, for instance, members published a paper called *Combat prolétarien*. The RDR attracted trade unionists who campaigned for trade union unity "on a democratic basis". But it focused on the organisation of big meetings to promote that Europe which would be independent from both imperialisms and for which it was set-up. In what appears to be a response to the World Peace Congress held in Paris two weeks earlier, it organised on 30 April 1949 a day of "international resistance to war and dictatorship". But the support it received from the SFIO and the CGT-FO is too obvious, some of the speakers at its main meeting were too controversial, for the RDR to capitalize on it. Geopolitics on its own rarely attracts support from exploited classes. Sartre, for his part, had already distanced himself from the RDR, assessing it as anti-communist.

The exposure of the Soviet regime's bleakest features, even when widely advertised as is the case in 1949 and 1950 with the Kravchenko and Rousset trials, seems to have had little impact on the political orientation of working class activists as long as they had not directly experienced the consequences of Communist party policies. The war and the Resistance weakened conservative influences over a new working class generation in areas where they used to be strong, and the case of the *Mouvement de libération du peuple* may confirm that hypothesis.

The *Ligue ouvrière chrétienne* was a family self-help charity sponsored by the Roman Catholic church. In 1941, it changed its name to *Mouvement populaire des familles* (MPF) [5]. In 1946, its membership was about 150 000 strong. *Monde ouvrier*, its weekly, printed up to 200 000 copies. State-financed family support introduced after the war turned it into more of a manager of social services. A good number of its activists were keen to contribute in a more radical manner to the improvement of workers' lives. In their actions, the reference to the faith faded. In 1948, they actively supported striking miners. They also campaigned with the Communist party against the Marshall plan. In 1949, the MPF opened a debate on political action ; it widend its membership to technicians and engineers who found it difficult to join trade unions. Recognizing that new orientation, the Church took the "action catholique ouvrière" label away from it.

In 1950, the MPF changed its name to *Mouvement de libération du peuple* (MLP) to publicize its new role. No later than the following year, it split in roughly two equal parts : some of its members wanted to focus on popular education (they launched the *Mouvement de libération ouvrière*), while the majority of the MLP wanted to turn it into an "organised political force", based on the following principles :

"1. *The final goal of the Movement is the total fulfillment of Man through the collective advancement of Man based on the sense of History.*
*2. To achieve that goal, two means : the downfall of the capitalist regime, the setting-up of a classless society.*
*3. We will contribute to the downfall of the capitalist regime through the class struggle.*
*4. To reach the classless society, there will be a workers' revolution, and the Movement has to conduct it (l'animer).*
*5. In the current period of workers' resistance, the Movement, while retaining its identity, must operate with all working class forces striving for an authentic revolution, including Communist organisations, even if they stand alone.*
"

Because of the fierceness of social conflict at the time, the MLP's members were convinced that a revolutionary upheaval was imminent. For them, the expression of anti-communism (hostility to the Communist party and to the Soviet Union) is anti-worker. The prospect of a revolutionary rising receded with the improvement of economic conditions in the early 1950s. In 1953, some of the members left to resume the family, union, cultural and social work which was once that of the MPF. Others, asserting that there is but one party of the working class, the Communist party, left the MLP when it tried to chart its own political course.

The MLP then reached out to youth and to students, and joined the anti-colonialist struggle. As for other organisations claiming revolutionary socialist intent, the Algerian war opened an opportunity for the expression of strong commitment : the MLP, like the *Fédération communiste libertaire*, like the Trotskyist groups, like

 

anti-colonialist socialists, materially supported Algerian nationalists. This involvement, and the condemnation of the Hungarian crackdown in 1956, distanced the MLP from the Communist party. In 1957, it merged with part of the *Union progressiste*, itself an association of the *Parti socialiste unitaire* and of progressive Christian movements, until then very close to the Communist party, and with the *Tendance socialiste révolutionnaire*, an offshoot of Trotskyism, to launch the *Union de la gauche socialiste* (UGS). In 1960, the UGS and the PSA, an anti-colonialist scission of the SFIO merged with other smaller outfits to create the *Parti socialiste unifié* (PSU).

# The last golden age ?

After 1950, René Lefeuvre ceased to publish until the end of the 1960s. He left the SFIO, which was on its way to oblivion. He kept unsold papers and books. In 1968, René, now retired, and supported by the small group operating the *Vieille taupe* (Old mole) bookshop which sells the writings of non-Leninist Marxist revolutionaries, started publishing again. The first new Cahier of that age, Ida Mett's *Le paysan dans la révolution russe*, was released in 1969. Over the next ten years, René will add about fifty new titles to the *Cahiers*' catalogue, not including books supplied by other publishers and new editions of past titles. From 1975 to 1979, he also published fifteen issues of a periodical called Spartacus, sub-titled "*Socialisme et liberté*" : the continuity of the editorial project is obvious.

In the aftermath of May 1968 came a boom in publishing about working-class movements and of revolutionary writings. Revolutionary ideas and history attracted the interest of a wider range of social groups and individuals than ever before. All major publishers vied to meet this new demand. New, activist, non-for profit publishers also cropped up, sometimes for a brief existence, concerned only with contributing to the debate by publishing as quickly as possible writings they deemed to be essential. In 1969, for instance, Bélibaste released, among others, Archinov's *Makhnovchtchina*, Rosa Luxemburg's *Letters from prison* and a collection of documents on the Kronstadt Commune ; Champ libre published Krouchtchev's report to the XXth congress of the Soviet Communist party, followed by Lenin's *Testament*. Available in the Cahiers Spartacus are Rosa Luxemburg's major political writings, to the exception of the *Crisis of social-democracy*. In that same year, the *Cahiers Spartacus* released again Herman Gorter's *Réponse à Lénine* and published, among others, Louise Kautsky's *Souvenirs sur Rosa Luxemburg*. They reissued Karl Kautsky's *Les trois sources du marxisme*, with a critique of Lenin's theory of class consciousness by the comrades of the bookshop.
This abundance of publications about revolutions and revolutionaries continued to increase throughout the following years.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L200xH275/luxemburg_1948-200pix-c0e61.jpg

At the same time, it seems that it is the groups claiming the Leninist inheritance, and the Communist party foremost among them, that were increasing their memberships the most. Various Trotskyist groups, others claiming to be Maoists, gained in visibility and influence, particularly among the young. For René Lefeuvre, as was the case twenty years earlier, it was necessary to try and propagate not only the works of the diverse historical strands of non-Leninist socialism, but also viewpoints on current events broadly in continuity with those strands. His accomplishment would be to gather around this project small groups, and individuals of all ages, who accepted a plurality of viewpoints, a diversity of experience, and who understood that sectarianism is often the product of thought no longer exposed to practice. Events in Poland, the capitalist development in China, the Portuguese revolution of 1974, the findings of collectives on trade union practice or the means to abolish wage labor, enriched the catalogue, as did historical studies and works by Karl Marx, Max Stirner or Anton Pannekoek.

Again, who were the intended readers of those publications ? It is true that the interest kindled by the resurrection of the idea of revolution explains the general increase in sales of revolution-related books, without their readers necessarily being activists in any way. Because of their singularity, the *Cahiers Spartacus* indeed faced a peculiar phenomenon : anarchists would generally not consider "Marxist" writings, and few, at the time, would recognize the

 

*Cahiers* as "libertarian". For Trotskyist tendencies, the *Cahiers* breed "confusion". Their more knowledgeable members knew that the "Old man" had designated the PSOP as "centrist" and that René Lefeuvre had been a member of the SFIO after World War II.


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But the groups and individuals who, in that period, offered their writings or support to René had a feeling that the reach of his publications was not circumscribed by a hypothetical "council communist" constituency which had never had any influence on social movements in France. It was unthinkable that the mobilization in 1968 of a large part of the French people, in particular of new social categories, and taking new forms, would not spawn new political projects : it was necessary to provide all those who were taking part in that process with as many tools as possible to identify and avoid the traps laid for them by those whose aim was above all to gain and exert power.

This is Alain Guillerm's [6] purpose in his 1974 foreword to the Marxisme contre dictature brochure of Rosa Luxemburg writings : "…the grand workers' party that could arise from the merger of the Socialist party, of the PSU, of the CLAS [7] and of other members of the CFDT cannot be anything – let's say it clearly – but 'luxemburgist'. Without a distinctive theory, it can only be either a reformist and conservative party...or an ideological and practical appendage of the Communist party…The comrades who work towards that merger…are fully conscious of that danger. They believe they can counter it by putting forward the rousing rallying call of 'autogestion'...The word has taken so many meanings that it has become confusing …For some, it means the management by people of society at every level, the withering of the State and of wage earning, while for others it is only a variety of economic management...leaving Capital and State unchanged."

Alain Guillerm was probably mistaken about the class nature of the Socialist party. But he was stressing the specific political phenomenon that had emerged in May 1968 : the formulation, outside anarchist circles, of a political prospect designated as "self-management". At the time when he wrote his Foreword, an appeal had been launched by well-known union leaders for the convening of "Assizes for socialism" which could result in the birth of a unified self-management socialist ("*socialiste autogestionnaire*") movement.

How did that prospect emerge ? Outside some anarchist groups, "self-management" used to refer more specifically to the management system that Yugoslavia had introduced for firms after its break with the Soviet Union in 1948, and then by Algeria, in particular for some of its farms, after having gained its independence in 1962. Such "actually existing" self-management in countries where most social activities were controlled by the State did not help to clarify the notion. In France, *Autogestion*, a periodical launched in France en 1966, was dedicated to surveying its various meanings.


http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L250xH368/Abolitionsalariat-2-689f8.jpg

It is the CFDT trade union federation which, as early as 1968, put forward self-management as a radical, society-transforming project. The notion itself may be vague, but its meaning is easy to understand : if socialist revolution becomes once again a prospect for social forces, the CFDT makes it clear that it would oppose the advent of state socialism. It rejects State control of firms and the subordination of trade unions to the State. Its stand is not a product of theorization : in May, the longing for self-management had been much in evidence in a good number of branches and activities, in the economy and in the wider society. In 1970, the CFDT fleshed out this prospect at its congress. It came out in favour of a democratic socialism resting on three "pillars" : self-management, social ownership of the means of production and exchange, and democratic planning. It did not deny that power had to be wrested from the ruling classes, but it firmly opposed monopoly power by a revolutionary organisation. From then on, in the French workers' movement, a new socialist project â€" self-management socialism â€" joined battle with the old democratic socialism and state socialism. The Communist party, and Leninist revolutionaries of all stripes, were quick to reject what they denounced as a new idealistic or opportunistic deviation. For its part, the PSU endorsed self-management in 1971, but only painfully, by a small majority of its members. In the immediate aftermath of May, its membership, although still miniscule compared to that of the Communist party, had increased significantly and the

 

PSU had become a battleground for a number of tendencies, some inspired by Trotskyism and several others by Maoism. The self-management socialist majority was mainly united by its rejection of the competing proposals for the construction of a Leninist-type vanguard organisation put forward by other tendencies.
If, by 1972, the PSU had reformulated its project as self-management socialism, the Socialist party was also making references to self-management. Later on, the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*, and even the Communist party would also embrace self-management.

The Assizes for socialism proved to be an opportunity for nearly half the membership of the PSU to negotiate their entrance into the Socialist party. The rump of the PSU then had to clarify the exact nature of its political project. A minority demanded in vain that self-management socialism be recognized as the project for achieving power of a new, emerging, class within wage-earners ; and, facing this new potential ruling class, an emerging exploited class much larger than the industrial working class which it was necessary to help achieve political expression [8].

As the PSU went on to support the government of the Left, it sunk into irrelevance and folded. Today, the legacy of self-management socialism is being claimed only by the Alternatifs [9], with a membership in hundreds, and no clear political project beside anti-liberalism.

# Bearers of tradition, or bearers of the future ?

Having worked for many years as a proof-reader in newspapers, René Lefeuvre was fully acquainted with the workings of the press. In France, the NMPP, a publisher cooperative, was in charge of distributing all papers and magazines throughout the country. Through it, his publications could be found at newsagents, much more numerous and accessible to a popular audience than are bookshops. But to benefit from this network, the *Cahiers Spartacus* had to maintain the fiction that they were a periodical [10] and meet two requirements : a minimum frequency of eight issues per year, and print runs high enough to supply a significant proportion of all newsagents. To reach the required number of issues, previous publications have had to be repackaged as new ; high print runs have meant significant upfront costs and also returned quantities for which handling charges had to be paid.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L281xH400/Portugal_l_autre_combat_1975-W-2-aacab.jpg

In 1979, a combination of health trouble and straightened circumstances led René to set up a formal collective to help him more and, in due course, to ensure that his publishing endeavour would live on. In the 1980s, new authors were added to the catalogue and a number of important titles were published, as for instance a new edition of Anton Pannekoek's *Workers' councils*, the translation of which by ICO had originally been published by Bélibaste ; under the cover title *Trotski, le Staline manqué*, writings by Willy Hühn analysing Trotsky's political project ; *À la recherche d'un communisme libertaire*, a revised collection by Daniel Guérin of his writings in the perspective of the reconciliation of the "twin brothers, feuding brothers" ; Larry Portis' *IWW et syndicalisme révolutionnaire aux États-Unis*, the only book in French dedicated to the history of the wobblies. Altogether, about twenty new titles.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/IMG/gif/IWW.gif

René died in 1988, shortly before the break-up of the Soviet empire. This downfall may have rendered the fight against Marxist-Leninist theories and projects less necessary. The *Cahiers Spartacus* carry on, faithful to the history of their catalogue [11]. But their editorial work is not fed anymore by revolutionary attempts in Europe, as had been the case in the 1970s. In France, the publication of writings on social revolution and revolutionaries remains lively. Several dozen publishers keep them available and add to the list. But for the *Cahiers Spartacus*, it seems that once again the libertarian socialist current which gave them birth and that legitimates their existence has gone back to sleep. Hence a number of questions, which may be so many research topics :

 

1) Assuming that the history of the *Cahiers Spartacus* may be backed by less visible data, such as the internal debates of political organisations and trade unions, could it be :

- That doctrines of social revolution do not exist before revolutionary crises, but that they are produced by them ?

- Therefore, even if teachings can be drawn from previous revolutionary episodes by those who could live through new ones, do the doctrines themselves lose a good deal of their relevance because of the changes wrought into the social structure between episodes ?

- That once the revolutionary wave has broken, do the social groups that have ridden it necessarily fail to maintain the doctrine they formulated during it, either because they are now ensconced in the new power structure and in need of a new doctrine (re. the Bolsheviks) or because the doctrine is of no use outside the revolutionary moment (re. the *autogestion généralisée*) ?

2) Political currents of the workers' movement have as often as not expressed themselves in writing and their travails are also a subject matter for historians. Is it at all possible to gauge the influence writings such as those once published by René Lefeuvre, or published today by publishers of the social revolution, may have had, or can still have, on their intended readers ?

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[1] See i.a. Robert Mencherini, *La libération et les entreprises sous gestion ouvrière. Marseille 1944-1948.* L'Harmattan, Paris, 1994.

[2] Ida Gilman (1901-1973). A Russian anarchist, she took part in Paris in the debate around the Platform. In 1938, she had submitted her *Kronstadt Commune* to the group of the *Révolution prolétarienne*, which had not wanted to publish it, finding it too harsh on Trotsky.

[3] Gilles Martinet, *Partis et mouvements dans la France nouvelle*, Questions d'aujourd'hui nÂ°35, Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1945.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] About the transformation of the *Mouvement populaire des familles* into the *Mouvement de libération du peuple*, see Cahiers du GRMF (Groupement de recherche sur les mouvements familiaux), in particular issue nÂ°9, 1995.

[6] 1944-2005. A member of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, then of the PSU. His writings include *Le luxembourgisme aujourd'hui*, Spartacus, Paris, 1970 ; *L'autogestion généralisée*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1979 ; *Rosa Luxemburg, la Rose rouge*, Picollec, Paris, 2002 ; and, with Yvon Bourdet, *De l'autogestion*, Seghers, Paris, 1975.

[7] *Comité pour L'Autogestion Socialiste*, a forum of the PSU, the Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire, the Centres d'initiative communiste (set-up by former Communist party members), Objectif socialiste, and non-party movements such as La vie nouvelle and the Groupes d'action municipale (GAM).

[8] See contributions of the PSU's "Courant communiste autogestionnaire", or "courant 'C'", to its IXth, Xth et XIth congresses (1974, 1977 and 1979) or, for a synthetic approach, André Fontaine, *Les socialismes : l'Histoire sans fin*, Spartacus, Paris, 1992, and his forthcoming *Mai 68 dans l'Histoire*.

[9] The Alternatifs publish a periodical, *Rouge et vert*.

[10] This is why, and to this day, each book carries a chronological number.

 

[11] The list and description of available titles can be found on http://atheles.org/spartacus/livres/index.html

 