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Stéphane Hessel and the Re-kindling of Protest in France

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Date de mise en ligne : lundi 28 mars 2011

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Like every roughly defined "national culture," that of the French is full of contradictions. It's one of those things that make it interesting to be alive, but it also means we take a chance with fairness whenever we say that such and such people are like this or that. A lot depends on whom we are talking about.

As far as the French are concerned, I generally quote Voltaire, so as not to incur anybody's wrath—few would dare challenge him. So this is what the greatest of Enlightenment philosophers said about his compatriots. The French, he said—in *Candide*—are most interested in doing three things : eating, making love and criticizing other people. Here is an affirmation that few would deny even if the statement incites pride for some, and disgust or envy for others.

Another generalization about the French is that they have fallen upon bad times. Already in the 1980s they were said—by John Ardagh—to be "turned in on themselves." Moreover, Perry Anderson then called France "the most reactionary country in Europe." And if you see many of the typically self-absorbed French films you understand what they mean. Although French self-centeredness has, perhaps, always been characteristic of them, the syndrome seems to have reached a critical point in recent years. For some time now it has been common to hear that the French are morose and turning around in confused circles.

Why are the French morose ? Which ones are and which are not ? Is it—as a very astute French resident in Canada recently wrote me—that the French are tired, worn down by an uncertain social environment in which unemployment, loss of social gains and a largely uncompetitive economy have traumatized an increasingly depoliticized population ?

How to explain the rise of Nicolas Sarkozy, generally known to the French as the "bling bling president," referring to his taste for cheap flash ? And here we can observe that at least the French have not lost the passion for criticizing each other. But still, what happened to the innate elegance of French people, and their love of cultivation ? Difficult to imagine how the French could have elected such a vulgar parvenu, a mafia-like chieftain who walks like a duck and speaks like a vulgar...well, let's drop it. No use aping the French.

In *Counterpunch*—January 27, 2011, Tariq Ali called attention to the mock trial of Henri-Bernard Lévy held in the "9-3," the proletarian department of the Seine-St. Denis. Indeed, this ageing "New Philosopher" deserves every ounce of ridicule and opprobrium that can be thrown against his pretentious and mendacious hide. Lévy is famous for his open-collared white shirt and parlaying his inherited personal wealth and ambition into media stardom. My only reservation is that focusing on such media-driven icons of the locked-up ideology machine tends to distort the tension-filled contradictions comprising what we might call "public culture" in contemporary societies.

Here is an example : the two current bestsellers on the French book market.

On the one hand, we have the latest novel by Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le Territoire* (The Map and the Territory, 2010) propelled to banner sales by receiving the most prestigious literary award : the Prix Goncourt. Houellebecq is the self-styled bad boy of contemporary French literature. Whatever he writes is ultimately about his self, but he cleverly weaves his narcissistic preoccupations in and out of current concerns he shares, like the fear and hatred of Islam, the decline of the West and disgust with the other. Sporting a beat-up parka and a disheveled, wasted look for the fans, he nevertheless has embarked on expensive hair transplants. He currently lives in Cork, Ireland, where he pays far fewer taxes on his phenomenal royalties.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L255xH399/Houellebecq_0319-71b53.jpg

In October 2008, Houellebecq and Bernard Henri Lévy published together some "conversations" about themselves—titled "Public Enemies." It was a media operation, best left not described and unexplained. A hundred

thousand copies were on sale in supermarkets that, mercifully, seem to have left no trace.

Posing as disgusted with contemporary society, Houellebecq nevertheless profits well from his wealth and professes great admiration for president Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni, the fatuous ex-model and pop star groupie who seized the main chance in latching on to Lilliputian Nick in the weeks following his divorce in 2008. (For those who may wonder at my nastiness when referring to this pampered, seemingly clueless daughter of one of the richest Italian families, I invite you to see and listen to her version of "Nobody Loves You When You're Down and Out." Go to You Tube for this, and you might compare her soul with that of Bessie Smith.) At any rate, after he collected his prize Houellebecq was invited to a cozy dinner by the presidential couple.

But let's be fair. France is a country where people still read a lot, and most know that these literary prizes are not on the up and up—the juries are cherry-picked and nothing but deals are made behind the scenes. Reception of the Prix Goncourt means overnight sales of hundreds of thousands of copies. It's a corporate thing.

Still, and this is my point, in a country where people read a lot there are also bestsellers that seemingly come out of nowhere, that are rooted in the aspirations of the populace in a way that escapes control by the mind managers and the merchandizing mavens. Here is the other side—the hidden side—of French intellectual life.

The most recent example of a bestseller chosen by the people and not by the managers of the media driven star system is Stéphane Hessel's work titled *Indignez vous !* (Get Indignant ! 2010). This little book—or pamphlet, given its 32 pages—was published in late 2010 and in six weeks sold almost a million copies. In fact, Hessel's text includes only pages 9 through 22—the rest is a few pages of "editor's notes and after word," plus some more page padding. Of course it's not every year that such a non book published by a quite unknown publisher—one with no previous success and no marketing budget to speak of—pulverizes the most hyped books of the major publishers.

So who is Stéphane Hessel—this literary phenomenon ? Why have so many French people elevated him to sudden stardom ?

If you are expecting the discovery of an amazing new talent, I'm almost embarrassed to respond. Hessel is a 93-year-old former diplomat who has worked for the UN and for a succession of French governments. He has published a few books, but only since he turned 80—his memoirs, a book of poems, some "conversations" with someone else, but nothing that brought him to general public attention. Hessel has lived a distinguished and, I would say, highly dignified life. He played an active role in the French Resistance, was arrested and transported to Nazi concentration camps, narrowly avoided being hung on two occasions, escaped, and then joined the allied forces. Before the war he studied politics and philosophy in Paris and at the London School of Economics. Originally of German nationality, he became a naturalized French citizen in 1937. His mother was the scandalous woman immortalized by François Truffaut's film *Jules and Jim* (1962). In the film he is played by a little girl. After the war he entered into administrative and diplomatic service becoming a specialist on human rights.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L255xH340/walter-083cd.jpg>

So why has he become famous ? It has only been since last year, when he was seen in a low-budget documentary film about Walter Bassam, another member of the Resistance. The film is titled *Walter. Retour en résistance* (Walter : Return to the Resistance, 2009). A young, provincial documentary filmmaker—Gilles Perret—made it. To date, Perret has only made films about his mountainous region of the Haute-Savoie. Walter is an interesting resident, and Perret thought a filmed record of him should be made, but he had no great expectations for his film. Walter is indeed an admirable person. He also was arrested by the Gestapo, at age 16, and sent to a concentration camp in Germany to die. Like Hessel, he also survived and continued to speak out. Walter is a friend and not-too-distant neighbor of the progressive British writer John Berger, as they both live in the Haute-Savoie.

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Stephane Hessel and Walter Bassan on the Glières Plain

Hessel's popularity owes itself to the film, but the film became known accidentally thanks to Nicolas Sarkozy.

What happened is that Sarkozy went to the Resistance memorial on the Glières Plain where each year a ceremony honors the memory of those, including two Spaniards, who died fighting the fascist occupiers. Sarkozy had his sound bite "all he was interested in" and then self-consciously spoke with some of the people in attendance. He didn't seem to realize that Perret's camera still turned.

Clearly knowing nothing and caring nothing for the Resistance, Sarkozy talked trash, saying, for example : "Great ! I like the Spanish. But the Italians are pretty good too...now that I'm married to one, huh ?" Seeing a young man in uniform, Sarkozy improvised : "Hey, the mountain guide is handsome. Did you know that I was young once myself ?" Silent consternation is the reaction of those in hearing distance. Then an aged, uniformed resister says to the Chief of State : "We refused to leave the fallen resistance fighters in unmarked graves, so we brought them here to lie in dignity." Sarkozy looks around nervously, and in response says, his gaze fixed on a mountain ridge : "Look at that waterfall." He then turned and walked away, saying : "Well, nothing wrong in having a little fun...."

After Sarkozy left, lesser-known dignitaries said a few words to the assembled crowd. One of them was Stéphane Hessel. In his brief remarks he congratulated those of the wartime Resistance and those today who "prefer legitimacy to legality, those who prefer fundamentally progressive values to the dubious legality of such and such government." What citizen resisters must do, he said, is to create solidarity networks such as that which defends and protects the right of children of immigrants and refugees to be educated in spite of laws that limit their rights to an education and to live without persecution because they do not have residence permits. After these remarks, Hessel was filmed speaking to a young girl from Kosovo. The sensitivity and warmth of this man cannot be more contrasted with Sarkozy's cynicism and lack of culture. And this is undoubtedly why Gilles Perret's film had such unexpected success.

Hessel's published text "Get Indignant" is a slight elaboration of his spoken remarks at Glières. He says being indignant is necessary for everyone. Only by being indignant can we live with dignity. Of course indignation should be followed by action, he insists. For him and for everyone the indignation is different. His indignation presently concerns three things : the disparity between wealth and poverty ; the lamentable state of human rights and condition of the planet ; and the injustice and cruelty inflicted on the Palestinians by the Israeli state. He says in passing : "You have to be Israeli to call non-violent action terrorism." In contrast, Hessel calls for "non-violent insurrection."

So the question is : why have a million French people gone to a bookstore to buy a pamphlet exhorting them to break the law and to rise up, albeit non violently, against what Stéphane Hessel clearly considers an illegitimate government ? There is something happening in this country.

Not long ago, in early 2009, in the French department of Guadeloupe, a general strike shut down the island for weeks. In Fall 2010, there were sometimes 3 million people in the streets at one time in France. In early 2011, there have been non-violent insurrections in Tunisia and Egypt. Let us not be deceived by appearances. Intimidation, manipulation and humiliation can long endure, but not forever. The sudden stardom of 93-year-old Stéphane Hessel may be a harbinger of something dramatic.

Post-scriptum :

This article was published in Counterpunch, volume 18, number 2, January 16-31 2011.

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