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The decline of critical thought in France after 1968

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Part Three: The decline of critical thought in France after 1968

In France, the psychological formation of the post-war generation was conditioned by very different political and social circumstances, and I believe we should understand the evolution of attitudes towards radical philosophies in light of them. In the 1950s and 60s, the political Left was historically strong, and emancipation movements in the Third World enjoyed deep support among French intellectuals. Since the mid-1970s, on the contrary, "third worldism" has been roundly criticized and rejected by many of the same intellectuals and politicians, now apostate Marxists. At the same time, one hears little discussion of the fact that France is one of the world's leading arms exporters to the "developing" world. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon the fanaticism and terror that, it is claimed, is generated in the benighted "less developed countries".

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The problem is seen not as one of exploitation and domination, but as a lack of reason symbolized by the presence of fanatical religion and irresponsible ideas. Indeed, ideas and discourse are central to the world of the postmodernists. Although they reject the eighteenth-century impulse to "unify" knowledge, ultimately they resort to favoring the stress upon ideas characteristic of the thinkers of the Enlightenment. "*I think, therefore I am*" remains at the heart of an intellectual trend theorized largely by French philosophers.

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Since the late 1970s, France has experienced an astonishing transformation of its intellectual and political life. Where socialist and communist parties seemed to be the most permanently established, they have lost their critical thrust (the Socialist Party), have rapidly lost membership strength and electoral appeal (the French Communist Party, the Revolutionary Communist League [LCR]), or have simply disappeared (the Unified Socialist Party [PSU]). Once the country where Marxism was most openly present in intellectual life in general and university circles in particular, at the present time most prominent intellectuals reject all varieties of anti-capitalist thought as being "utopian" and "simplistic". Economic interpretations of reality and "le social" are now avoided, as the emphasis is placed upon "the political" and the ways in which "information" is communicated. "Liberalism" was once considered to be an ideology designed to justify an irresponsible, class-dominated society. It is now presented by the same politicians and intellectuals on the "left" as the last bulwark of democracy against totalitarian systems, those advocated by archaic extremists at both ends of the political spectrum.

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The change that has taken place in French social philosophy is especially striking among those publicists who were involved in one way or another in the events of May and June 1968. The "leftism" (gauchisme) that led to and emerged out of those events¬ — Maoism, reinvigoration of anarchism and Trotksyism, generalization of anti-capitalist thought — has been discredited, but the "sixty-eithers" have remained, and they are no less ambitious in their efforts to influence French society. However, no longer outspoken revolutionaries, a significant number of the generation of 1968, and especially those who acquired a certain notoriety, are visibly and sometimes admittedly motivated by personal ambition more than by any pretension of "*serving the people*" ("servir le peuple" was the Maoist slogan). Obviously, and unless we attribute unmitigated cynicism to these people, this careerism must be justified. How to be "born again" in a secular, Cartesian way? That is the question. The answer is a new mysticism, or rather a new awakening to the mysteries of the market place. The equation liberal economy-political democracy has

been rediscovered. Gone is the faith in egalitarian social relations or workers self-management (autogestion). Communism and/or the welfare state were revealed to be stalking horses for the gulag and parasitical bureaucracy. In the minds of many, social choice has been reduced to, on the one hand, Adam Smith's "invisible hand" and, on the other hand, Stalinist terror.

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The explosion of May 1968 is now considered by many of its "leading" participants as having been a rite of passage. The form of its expression was less important than the simple will to power that motivated it. The sixty-eighters were "young monsters" whose time had not yet come. At that time, their "utopian" ideas and activities tempered the political acumen that is now ready to be exercised in a "realistic" way. Part of this new realism is an acceptance of established institutions, values and cultural heritage. It is this reaction that has led to spectacles such as a conference connected to the twentieth anniversary of May 1968 that seriously discussed whether the real meaning of May 1968 was a resurgence of Jewish idealism. This is an interpretation most convenient for those Jewish participants who now have changed their ideas and life-styles; if it is accurate, then the soixante-huitards who rejected the social and political ideals of the movement have been perfectly consistent culturally speaking. From this perspective, for some who participated, it is even necessary to entertain the idea that the movement of May was a "Jewish Revolution." [1]

This preoccupation with ethnic "roots" reveals, in part, a desire to avoid established terms of analysis (such as social class and class conflict, and ideological formation and conflict). It is part of a new mysticism that is theorized into a new scienticity. Although, at the present time, there is much talk of "multiculturalism", a generalized preoccupation with ethnicity can sometimes turn into a new nationalism. The mystical-irrational dimension of ethnic identifications is as present among intellectual elites as they are among less-formally educated segments of the population.

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This ideological shift is, in my opinion, related to a growing recognition of France's increasing economic dependence and political vulnerability. It is part of a tendency of psychological withdrawal — the "replie sur soi" discussed as a French cultural syndrome by John Ardagh. [2] At the same time the French find their social and cultural cohesion rapidly weakening, due to the dissolution of French rural communities, the penetration of foreign capital, the explosion of the communications media, and the hegemonic extension of the North American culture of the United States in the form of music, film, television series and enterprises such as the Eurodisneyland constructed near Paris, there is a pathetic and almost instinctive clutching at a vanishing way of life. There is, in France, a preoccupation with national cultural integration and a new "occidentalism" which dictates the rejection of what is now derisively called "third worldism". It expresses a generalized desire to return to the roots of traditional culture.

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To understand the radicality of this transition, the psychic and social nature of the generational phenomenon of May 1968 must be reconsidered. On the one hand, May 1968 effectively represents the beginnings of contemporary "modern" life-styles and attitudes in France. On the other hand, May 1968 was a veritable orgy of direct action: the contemptuous rejection of all institutional restraints, political parties and unions included; the physical assaulting of the forces of law and order; the serious consideration of utopian schemes of social organization; the principled and systematic critique of all forms of elitism. But many of the "leaders" of this movement are now ensconced in influential positions in government, in education, in the communications media and in business. Institutions and the law must now be respected. Pragmatic conformity is now of greater value and elitism seen as a more realistic accommodation to human realities. In sum, the utopian ideas and the youthful imagination and enthusiasm of May 1968 had to be exclusively portrayed as the youthful errors of France's new political class, a group of now responsible politicians who have learned from their adolescent crisis.

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The remarkable conversion of the former enragés of May 1968 to political "realism" was reflected in the successful

two-volume work, *Génération,* written by Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman. [3] This is the story of the movement that led up to and then followed the events of May-June 1968 as seen in terms of the personal lives of a handful of its prominent personalities. The authors explain that their account was purposefully written as a novel and not as a scientific study, so as to enlarge its potential readership. On both scores the effort was a success, and radio and television versions were also prepared and broadcast. The books performed faultlessly the task of reducing May 1968 to the personal histories of a relatively few participants, virtually transforming the events into a melodrama in which the essential is emotional and not political.

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In the (non) celebration of the twentieth anniversary of May 1968, any substantive discussion of socio-ideological conflicts was carefully avoided. Those soixante-huitards who "*sont passés du col Mao au Rotary*" have no desire to witness a repetition of the events which launched their political careers. Times have changed. Consensus, it was hoped, was in the air. And the last thing that the new elites wanted was criticism from unreconstructed intellectuals or initiatives on the part of the "*people*". One editorialist observed wryly in 1988, after recounting Alain Geismar's transition from maoist revolutionary to his new post of "technical advisor" to the Ministry of Professional Training, "[…] *du lyrisme mao ("On trait les vaches à l'heure où le bourgeois rentre ivre chez lui") au lyrisme d'Etat : silence chez les veaux !*" [4]

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However, it is too easy (for both defenders and critics of the soixante-huitards) to focus attention upon the most visible participants in the events. More important for the evolution of social thought are the lesser figures who became professionals in the realm of social analysis. As we have seen, this is a generational cohort whose radicalism is easily explained by their social mobility and political frustrations in the 1960s as the French economy moved into a consumerist phase. The explanation of their relative inaction (relative to the revolutionary character of their rhetoric during the agitated period of their youth) lies in the same socio-economic evolution.

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Those who spoke in its name mystified the "subjectivity" of this generation. An adolescent narcissism continues to legitimate its provocative political stances and its dramatic changes of political position. Louis Janover has analyzed this phenomenon for a number of years, notably concluding that "*Le capitalisme, en révolution permanente, réclame aux fonctionnaires de sa révolution d'adapter les modalités de l'hégémonie de la classe dominante à ce perpetuum mobile du mode de production. Il faut que les rapports sociaux puissent se reproduire en intégrant le «changement» sans que change pour autant la division sociale fondamentale. Aussi a-t-on assisté à la mise en œuvre d'un type d'intégration qui institutionnalise la contestation. L'État n'impose plus la norme, mais la laisse s'imposer. Au lieu de contraindre et d'éradiquer la différence, il se contraint à laisser vivre autrement. Changer pour continuer à dominer, telle est la version moderne du Diviser pour régner*." [5]

The fact that a significant number of the young radical intellectuals studied the human sciences is of the greatest importance. As Karl Mannheim insisted, "*in groups which are not welded together primarily by* […] *organic bonds of community life, but which merely occupy similar positions in the social-economic system, rigorous theorizing is a prerequisite of cohesion. Viewed sociologically this extreme need for theory is the expression of a class society in which persons must be held together not by local proximity but by similar circumstances of life in an extensive social sphere*." [6]

The rapid expansion of sociological study and communications theory in the 1960s expressed, on the one hand, the existential preoccupations of a socially ambitious age cohort. On the other hand, it provided those in charge of established social and political institutions with the means of politically neutralizing most of the new social critics. For those intellectuals who left the university, journalism and politics were the means of simultaneously continuing their criticism of society and of integrating themselves into it. For those who pursued their studies and obtained advanced

university degrees, either teaching or incorporation (for example) into the Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique allowed a continuation of social criticism within the confines of professional activities. Sometimes, although exceptionally, the two tracks intersected: professionals of the human sciences gained access to the mass media.

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In all cases, social criticism was progressively muted as the need to conform to institutional expectations impacted upon considerations of career, family and material needs. Subjectively, conformity to the conceptual and behavioral moderation required by professional institutions was desirable for this age cohort because it signaled the achievement of social goals. Objectively, it expressed the political cooptation accomplished by the institutions. In effect, such cooptation can be considered one of the principal social functions of the university and the CNRS. This is particularly evident in the case of the latter. The employment of social critics as state functionaries who compete for promotions as material need and desire for distinction push them to mount a bureaucratic hierarchy, is a striking example of how the capitalist state as well as private universities or research institutes can defuse political dissidence.

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And it is defused and not suffocated, because careerist imperatives push "researchers" to produce as many publications as possible. The state subsidizes professional reviews in all fields, but these reviews are subject to scrutiny. Not surprisingly, a major criterion is the "scientific" quality of the articles published. However, the definition of "scientific" is not that established by Karl Marx (conceptual rigor); it implies, rather, in addition to numerous reference notes, a certain "reasonable" tone, a dispassionate language of academic discourse that effectively eliminates the impassioned criticisms and/or denunciations associated with social struggle or political revolt.

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This is, then, a generation beset with psychological tensions enrooted in a specific socio-historical conjuncture. Rarely has an age cohort been so preoccupied with sorting-out the "genesis" of its own development and to justify-explain its political attitudes. Consequently, not only has revival of different phases of youth "culture" proved to be commercially viable, "nostalgia" has become a object of sociological inquiry. Formed intellectually in a social atmosphere dominated by "consumerism" (or the "commodification of cultural production"), attached to the cultural-aesthetic icons of their formative years (especially popular music and sartorial innovations), it is equally apparent that this generation only superficially appropriated philosophies of liberation. Different varieties of Marxism, anarchism, Maoism, and libertarian thought were also "consumed" by a generation of parvenu intellectuals whose models were more often rock stars of their own age cohort than revolutionaries whose commitment went beyond a desire to "*épater les bourgeois*".

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This was a generally upwardly mobile generation of intellectuals produced by the tremendous expansion of higher education systems during the first two decades following the Second World War. Both contestation and conformity were necessary to their ascension to social position and acceptance. Few were willing to forego the comforts of "modern" society and accept decades of opprobrium and penury. The essential tension weighing upon the psyche of these people is the memory of their socio-cultural origins and the conflicting feelings of attraction and repulsion that they carry to them. The adolescent anguish accompanying the formation of the first post-war "youth culture" in the 1950s established a (quasi-) permanent and somewhat classic attitude towards authority: rejection and fear combined to produce calculated deviance. The symbols of this deviance — rock and roll music, flamboyant clothing and coiffures, use of slang or "hip" language — continued to be ontological referents into the 1960s and beyond. Even as this generation exposes the non-authentic nature of this "cultural production," it implicitly celebrates it.

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Even criticism of the "nostalgia" evident in the return, in contemporary films and popular music, to the themes and the

forms of youth subculture of the 1950s and 60s remains an expression of cult veneration. The question remaining is whether a certain critique of this nostalgia is not motivated by incapacity to surmount the fetishism characteristic of a particular generation of social thinkers. On the one hand, it is perhaps understandable that filmmakers and other artists draw upon their own formative experiences for creative purposes. On the other hand, it is perhaps regrettable that the contemporary social imagination (at least that of a good number of intellectuals) is dominated by a fixation on the formation or manipulation of popular culture at the expense of greater attention to the evolution of social relations and economic conditions. This is especially the case in the Anglo-Saxon countries where "cultural studies" dominate much creative social thought.


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This is a generation living in aftermath of the aborted expectations of the 1960s, an era characterized by a wide-spread, if short-lived attempt to recreate a romanticized, bohemian "life-style" popularized by journalists. Joyce Johnson, a relatively young member of the "Beat Generation" said of the famous "sixties": "*They seemed anticlimactic, for all their fireworks. Some culmination had been short-circuited. I saw hippies replace beatniks, sociologists replace poets, the empty canvas replace the Kline.*
Unenthusiastically, I observed the emergence of lifestyle. The old intensities were blanding out into «Do your own thing» — the commandment of a freedom excised of struggle. Ecstasy had become chemical, forgetfulness could be had by prescription. Revolution was in the wind, but never came…." [7]


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Inauthenticity, nostalgia, the simulacrum, a narcissistic instinct for self-promotion, a rejection of programmatic "projects" of social change, these may be aspects of the "postmodern condition," but they could be more exclusively the promotional fetishes of a permanently frustrated generation of intellectuals. This is a "crisis" rooted in the cultural history of a generation habituated to a dialectic of defiance, revolt and reconciliation. It is part of a pyscho-perceptual cycle that will be broken only by social structural or geopolitical changes oblivious to the conceptual games of discourse and architectonics.

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[1] See "*Mai 68. Une révolution juive?*," *Passages*, n° 8 juillet-août 1988, p. 14-23.

[2] John Ardagh, *France in the 1980s*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982.

[3] Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération. Les années de rêve,* Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1987 and *Génération. Les années de poudre,* Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1988.

[4] Sylvie Caster, "*Alain Geismar : pavés de bonnes attentions*", *Le Canard enchaîné*, 27 juillet 1988, p. 7.

[5] Louis Janover, *Le rêve et le plomb. Le surréalisme de l'utopie à l'avant-garde,* Paris, Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1986, pp. 87-88. See also Jean-Pierre Garnier et Louis Janover, *La Deuxième droite,* Paris, Éditions Laffont, 1986 and Jean-Pierre Garnier and Louis Janover, *La pensée aveugle. Quand les intellelctuels ont des visions,* Paris, Spengler, 1993.

[6] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge,* New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936, p. 131.

[7] Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters,* New York, Washington Square Press, 1983, p. 276.