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- 1 It was an inspired choice by the Nobel Committee: Liu Xiaobo is China's Solzhenitsyn. Three leitmotifs expressed or implied in his *The Philosophy of the Pig* are similar to Solzhenitsyn's: falsehood, memory, and morality. Solzhenitsyn: "It is difficult to imagine the extent to which deceit has distanced us from being a normal society." Liu: "In post-totalitarian China (meaning one no longer under Mao-era terror), the system has no resource other than deceit to ensure its survival" (p. 139). The conclusion is inescapable: "If everyone rejects falsehood [...], the regime built on falsehood will fall apart" (p. 33 of Béja's brilliant introduction). It is certainly so for someone of Liu's stature. Some intellectuals tackling such moral questions prefer a less restrictive casuistry, such as that set out by Professor Qian Liqun: 1) speak the truth; 2) if that is impossible, keep mum; 3) if silence is likewise impossible, rely on falsehoods that do not hurt others (p. 179). Liu rejects this

third line of defence with admirable patience: he is as forceful as but less mocking than Pascal in *Lettres Provinciales*.

- 2 Liu does not willingly stay silent, either. He backs the Tiananmen Mothers led by Ding Zilin but does not stop at those killed on 4 June 1989: without memory, which has been banned by a Party that has imposed amnesia, “we would be ignorant of the many catastrophes [...] it created” (p. 128). “More than half a century of these catastrophes [...] have been erased from our national memory and replaced with the false history of the Party’s glory” (p. 131). In Liu’s view, “Lack of memory is for a nation a form of spiritual suicide”: “without memory, [...] there is no future” (pp. 133 and 127). It is impossible not to evoke Solzhenitsyn, who played the part of historian in the first part of *Gulag Archipelago*. Liu takes care to remind the reader of this: “So far, we have not had a [Chinese] *Gulag Archipelago* that could show our real face to the whole world as well as to ourselves” (p. 131).
- 3 After falsehood and memory, the third theme is morality. While it is not Liu’s style to preach or to invoke morality, it is present throughout this book, as in Solzhenitsyn’s, who inveighs with indignation, disrobes the calculations of careerists, and derides their well-meaning talk (*Cancer Ward*). For Liu, the horror lies in the “pigsty existence, with food but no freedom” (p. 299): “The promise of ‘relative comfort’ has well and truly bought souls”; “the mediocre primacy of interests has penetrated us to the bones and the line between right and wrong has been blurred by communal greed” (p. 147). The most avaricious flatter and support the authorities so as “to get some pieces of the cake privatised by the oligarchs”(p. 120). Liu, however, is less severe towards this “dominant social class” of the affluent dependent on the powers that be (there will always be arrivistes and profiteers) than he is towards its intellectual counterpart. He fulminates against their spinelessness and against the contradiction between their private and public utterances as well as between speech and action – or lack thereof. Since terror ended with Mao, Liu can conceive of no motive other than greed for “willing submission” on the part of “famous people claiming to be elites” (p. 140). It is a safe bet that it wasn’t only friends he made on the way to being persecuted by the authorities! While leading thinkers are his preferred targets, he does not spare the post-June 4th generation either, deeming them “pragmatists and opportunists” (p. 308), nor students for their cynical patriotism: They “most naturally insult the United States and equally naturally leave to study there” (p. 312). He also targets the “slavish mentality” of the all too holy masses with their “ignorance, cowardice, and blindness” (pp. 423 and 420).
- 4 After all this, the reader might well conclude that Liu is given to tirades against the whole world! Quite the contrary: he is even less indulgent towards himself than towards others, occasionally accusing himself of cowardice for having been silent for too long in his view, or for not having done enough. He is careful not to demand that everyone “become a sage, saint, or martyr” (p. 198). He would be content with a “liberal morality *a minima*” (*ibid.*), a discreet and modest morality founded “on a relatively balanced assessment of interests in tune with human nature” (p. 202). A morality radically different from Mao’s intolerance and grandiloquence. If everyone abided by the elementary decency required by this “liberal morality,” which in his view is opposed to totalitarian infallibility, it would be possible to see the back of a regime based on falsehood.
- 5 Such beatific optimism risks being mocked: as if a regime could be brought down by refusing to lie! Has there been such a simpleton since Prince Myshkin?¹ It is necessary

to clarify the impression given earlier: this man with the obsessive dream, nay design, to rid his compatriots and the world at large of a regime he deems nefarious has none of the attributes of a classic revolutionary. He stands for non-violent struggle; “A limited violent resistance can always be repressed and a violent revolution could well lead to a new tyranny” (pp. 140-141). He acknowledges that limits to the number of terms at the helm (of Jiang Zemin, and now Hu Jintao) lend some flexibility to the despotic regime (p. 341) and that it remains entrenched because the people at large are for now content with the deal, “slaves, get rich.” In the end, post-totalitarianism inevitably follows totalitarianism, the regime is “much weaker than in the Mao era” (p. 326), no one has faith in its ideology, the robber baron capitalism it presides over has enraged a society that is less myopic now (pp. 428 and 439), more inclined to protest, and more able to express itself, if only via the Internet, “God’s greatest gift to Chinese people so that they could defend their rights” (p. 474). Further, he says, “The cost of defending the *ancien régime* [what Liu calls those now in power, taking on revolutionary vocabulary while rejecting such methods] is rising ever higher” (p. 301). In the final analysis, Liu prefers modest and gradual victories that chip away at the regime bit by bit, revealing its true nature: he suggests nothing more than “developing societal forces favourable to freedom and democracy” so as to “compel the authorities to evolve through gradual social change” (pp. 301-302). This is the plan of the criminal condemned to 11 years in jail, not counting previous punishments. Of course, Charter 2008 demands more, but surely no more than the application of rights enshrined in the constitution of the so-called People’s Republic.

- 6 If Liu’s political tools resemble Solzhenitsyn’s, the two part company on the issue of nationalism. Here again is a trait that inspires admiration for Liu: quite clearly he does not spare his own country. He praises Lu Xun for having revealed like no one else has “the defects in China’s national character” (p. 63). He speaks of a “cynicism with Chinese characteristics” (p. 117) as if it is self-evident, and regrets that “Chinese society’s nationalist zeal surpasses that of the authorities” (p. 310). Plainly unmoved by China’s revered sages, Liu accuses them of “fostering two-faced cynics” (p. 200) and detects a link between the untenable (and therefore hypocritical) morality they advocate and that of Mao, “the greatest representative of this line of two-faced personalities” (p. 201). His famous criticism of post-Maoist literature, which from the outset scandalised the literary establishment, was largely inspired by the extra-literary aspirations of a mind devoid of any “patriotic” prejudices. Listing the “pitiable, lamentable, detestable, and abominable national failings” as exposed by Lu Xun in the Chinese conscience (p. 72), Liu makes sure not to omit reverential attachment to tradition, which blocks and even inhibits all capacity for change. In 1986, Liu conveyed to a chorus of critics (most given to singing praises of the “new literature” born of the post-Maoist thaw) his conviction that “new literature merely repeats all that is wrong in old literature” (p. 65) (pre-May Fourth Movement), and that under the “searching for roots” banner, it pursues “a dangerous and reactionary harking back to traditionalism” (introduction, p. 16).² In 2003, when everyone sounded ecstatic over the speedy modernisation of China’s economy and society, Liu persisted in deploring that “after a century of efforts, China had really failed to modernise” (p. 245). An as yet unknown Liu complained in 1986: “I believe new literature has produced nothing to be proud of” (p. 86). No wonder that this whippersnapper who was so innocently outspoken was initially regarded as a “black horse”!

- 7 There is nothing original in the ideas and values Liu upholds, nothing but the commonplace. He is least bothered about making an original contribution to political science or philosophy. And he is not fussy or niggling like scholars who might be inclined to juxtapose the “ethics of absolute ends” (ethics of conviction) that underlies his actions and the “ethics of responsibility” (Max Weber) represented by, among others, the main author of the June 4th massacre.³ Liu is not a research scholar but is concerned about what really matters. He launches frontal attacks on problems that haunt him, tracing grand perspectives and eschewing flourishes, hurrying to combat other injustices and denounce other base acts.⁴ A brave and sincere person who returned from the United States in May 1989 to take part in the pro-democracy movement, the defects of which he was quick to attack given his incorrigible honesty, he pleaded with students to vacate Tiananmen Square before the army advanced, and finally negotiated a peaceful evacuation with the army. A good, reasonable man who counsels responding “to hate with love, to prejudice with tolerance, to arrogance with modesty, to humiliation with dignity, to fanatical violence with reasonableness” (p. 433). Better still, what he preaches he practices consistently and with candour, mounting a brave and dignified defence during his trial and in his final declaration (“I have no enemies, no hate,” p. 510), which ends the book.
- 8 Two Nobel prizes very badly received by the authorities – the Soviets in 1970 and the Chinese in 2010 – incite comparison between Liu and Solzhenitsyn. But Liu is more akin to the recently deceased Vaclav Havel, who likewise embodied courage, honesty, and humility. Liu would unhesitatingly subscribe to this Havelian dictum: “Love and truth will conquer hate and falsehood.” It is no surprise that Charter 77, which was so much Havel’s handiwork, inspired Charter 2008, which cost Liu 11 years in jail.

NOTES

1. Hero of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*.

2. This formula of Liu’s is reported by Grmie Barm, as Bja has noted (p. 16, note 2). I highly recommend Barm’s stimulating article, initially a contribution (“Confession, Redemption and Death: Liu Xiaobo and the Protest Movement of 1989”) in the volume previously edited by George Hicks, *The Broken Mirror: China after Tiananmen*, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1990 (pp. 51-99). The reference to the “roots” literature is to be found on page 55.

3. The subject of a recent biography unlikely to be bettered soon: Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011. The ethics of responsibility and the ethics of absolute ends are clearly defined in Richard Swedberg, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 89-91.

4. Liu’s direct challenges to the Chinese authorities (he only acts in the open) being too numerous to list, it should suffice to note his letter to Yahoo’s CEO (pp. 373-90). Yahoo had conveyed to the Chinese Public Security Bureau material used in convicting and sentencing the journalist Shi Tao to ten years in jail. This open letter was translated by Jrme Bonnin for *Esprit*, January 2006. Apart from Bonnin, others who have translated some texts into French are Frank Muiyard, Jacques Seurre, and Sebastian Veg. All others were translated and annotated by Bja,

who has rightly given greater place to Liu's essays of the past decade: There is, it seems, greater maturity in his writings following the three-year (October 1996-October 1999) "re-education" in a labour camp.

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