Philippe Buton, *Histoire du gauchisme. L'héritage de Mai 68*

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REFERENCES

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- 1 In 1960, according to Philippe Buton, the French Far Left was no more than 200 activists strong, growing to still no more than 600 in 1965. Even on New Year's Day 1968, its total numbers exceeded no more than 3,000, a pittance by all accounts compared to, for instance, the vast sea of members and sympathizers of the French Communist Party in the 1960s. Then, suddenly, the Far Left's numbers grew exponentially, with about 30,000 individuals belonging to the hard core of the Trotskyist, Maoist and Anarchist Far Left by the first half of the 1970s. And the Far Left's influence by then vastly exceeded its already not inconsiderable quantitative base, as a small army of sympathizers gravitated around the various groupings. From a marginal footnote in French history, the Far Left became a cause to be reckoned with in the course of –and the long aftermath!– of 1968.
- 2 This volume is the most important study of this complex topic to have seen the light of day, describing and analyzing this phenomenon with much empathy and detailed knowledge. The author, himself once a card-carrying member of this milieu, displays great insider knowledge of the different nuances separating the multiple pieces of his puzzle. For no two Maoist or Trotskyist organizations were ever alike. All of them changed over time. And Buton succeeds to paint a highly accurate, sometimes even downright whimsical, but rarely misplaced, picture of the kaleidoscope of orientations and motivations behind the phenomenal rise and the ultimate decline of the French Radical Left.
- 3 What are some of the most valuable conclusions drawn by Philippe Buton ? He makes a convincing case for the Far Left to have been the voice of a generation in revolt against the molasses-like conservatism of the Gaullist 1960s. Not that young people identified with the entire array of the specific goals of the Far Left ! And Buton is likewise quick to underscore that it was *not* the rapidly swelling ranks of the Far Left in the course of 1968, which *caused* the May events. May 1968 was a spontaneous revolt by large sections of a new generation, which was no longer willing to follow the political and cultural paradigms mandated by official French society at that time. The role of the Far Left was thus rather incidental in triggering '1968' –but nonetheless of crucial impact ! If the revolt was generational, the specific language adopted by this rebellion was closely linked to the ideology and the concrete proposals of the Far Left. Social movements usually have a limited choice of language and political proposals to adopt. In 1968, it was the menu of options offered by the Far Left which was most convincing to quickly radicalizing young rebels in search of a concrete political vehicle and outlet.
- 4 Little did it matter which specific nuance was emphasized by one or the other of the dozens of competing Far Left organizations. The choice of joining one or the other

grouping was often largely the result of accidental circumstances. Friendship networks played a more important role in decisions to affiliate than differences of ideological orientation. “*La plupart du temps, la musique compte plus que les paroles.*” (p. 47) And this is only one of many insightful sections of Buton’s oeuvre which ring true to anyone who has experienced first-hand or closely studied the Far Left of its day –and not just in France.

- 5 It is impossible to do justice to the many facets of Buton’s analysis, such as his fine-tuned differentiations between the various currents and tendencies the author portrays, which are often not only accurate but –I repeat– entertaining. Thus, his pointed comments on Trotskyism’s idiosyncrasies, e.g. the monastic orientation of *Lutte ouvrière* (LO) or the rigidities of the *lambertistes*, are all the more convincing as Buton himself did *not* hail from this milieu. His comments on the *Ligue Communiste* in particular deserve to be cited here at some length : “*Par son activisme, la Ligue incarne le mieux la révolte gauchiste existentielle. Ses militants ne sont ni culpabilisés comme ceux de LO, ni à la recherche de la rédemption ouvrière comme les maoïstes, ils se veulent pleinement à l’écoute de leur génération, ne dédaignent ni les plaisirs interdits par la loi ni les débats théoriques étrangers à la tradition marxiste. Ils le font généralement avec retard mais avec sincérité ; d’où leur succès.*” (p. 142)
- 6 There are, as can be expected, some important passages where the author puts forth views that, in the eyes of this reviewer, are questionable and/or exaggerated. Given the constraints of space, I only wish to highlight Buton’s comments on the role of violence within the imaginary and the lived reality of the Far Left’s action repertoire. That the role of violence should be frontally addressed in a study of the Far Left is non-controversial. Many of the most important and dynamic organizations of the French (and European !) Far Left at one point or another in the early-to-mid-1970s played with the option of violent tactics. In France, Buton correctly focuses on *Gauche prolétarienne* (GP) and the *Ligue* as instances where such temptations to have recourse to violent tactics influenced key organizations at certain moments in their life cycles.
- 7 Much of what Buton writes here is pertinent, interesting and informative. *Gauche Prolétarienne* and the *Ligue* did at particular conjunctures stand on the brink of employing tactics which belong to the tool kit of what could justifiably be classified as low-level individual terrorism. Both organizations rapidly recoiled from such a reorientation, thus saving France the spectacle of what Italy in the 1970s had to endure : a magma of right-wing terrorism inciting left-wing counterterrorism, in a deadly spiral with (probably more than) cameo roles for certain sections of the Secret Services to further heat up the atmosphere.
- 8 My criticism of Buton’s section on the role of violence within GP and the *Ligue Communiste* is not that he addresses the issue forthright. Far from it. But, in the end, his efforts to portray both organizations as having been involved in “*une vaste entreprise de propagande, dont la finalité est unique : préparer les esprits à faire le saut vers la lutte armée*” (p. 259), remain unconvincing. Those pages where Buton draws on concrete discussions in party circles to advocate such a general move to employ violent tactics are, with all due respect, flimsy evidence for a purportedly massive tactical and even strategic shift. The documents the author cites make me think of the search for a smoking gun, where there is little smoke and even fewer guns, the figurative needle in the haystack, certainly in the case of the League.

- 9 Along similar lines, this reader had to smirk a bit when reading the author's explicit condemnation of 'hatred' as a weapon in political struggle, suggesting that it was Lenin who introduced hatred as a category of analysis within Marxism, supposedly alien to Marx himself. Without dissecting the classics of Marxism on this occasion, I wish to suggest that plenty of Marxists with few connections to the Far Left have taken a rather different approach to the role of hatred. Within the historical profession, for instance, the British expert on Nazism, Tim Mason, had this to say : "If historians do have a public responsibility, if hating is part of their method and warning part of their task, it is necessary that they should hate precisely."¹
- 10 A highly stimulating portion of Buton's passages on violence and hate, however, are those pages where Buton addresses the possible reasons for the divergent paths taken by equally violence-prone sections of the Far Left in France and Italy. Not every single opinion proffered in those precious pages is equally convincing, but I wish to briefly discuss one of his strands of thought in this passage of his book. Buton points out that a crucial role in the ultimate drawback from violent tactics in France was the conjunctural emergence of alternative pathways to 'success', such as the sudden growth of 'new' social movements or, in France, the inspirational struggle at LIP. Such 'legal' outlets for activists' energies could re-channel efforts to break out of social isolation by means of ever-more combative tactics into more constructive forms. This observation absolutely overlaps with my own assessment of the impact of 'new' social movements on the inner life of the Far Left –and not just in France. Previously often living in splendid isolation within their own micro-milieus, the Far Left organizations or, rather, the most flexible and intelligent sections of it, when engaging in common actions with much broader strata of the general population, began to discard their most sectarian habits and engaged in various forms of ecumenical reorientations, which allowed such groupings to grow and develop in generally positive (everything is subjective, of course) directions.
- 11 A key argument by Buton in the final pages of his book is that by assisting second-wave feminism, political ecology, gay rights activism and other "new" social movements to prosper and grow, they crucially affected significant portions of French society as a whole. The most intelligent, flexible and dynamic portions of the Far Left have thus helped to vastly improve official French public culture, which had hitherto been rather stagnant, as a whole. In fact, the author argues, for instance, that "*la grande transformation féministe de la France apparaît bien comme une conséquence du gauchisme culturel*" (p. 357) –and Buton writes in a similar vein about the impact of the Far Left on the ascendancy of ecology in public French culture. The author may just go a tad too far here, but such statements certainly make clear that he is not out to condemn or ridicule the Far Left.
- 12 Yes, there are passages in Buton's volume which are uncharacteristically ill-founded and (dare I say it) hateful, such as his assertion that the "*noyau dur est le refus de la démocratie*" (p. 396) or his bizarre classification of more recent forms of Far Left political culture as a "*pseudo-culture politique*" (p. 413), opinions which may well be a product of the author's own political standpoint in today's France. But the ultimate sentences of his hefty tome more than rectify some 'loose language' in a few other portions of his text. He argues that there is some justification for today's observers to note that Far Left ideology and actions have included highly controversial and even condemnable features : "*Mais la plupart de ceux qui vous font ces reproches n'ont pas de*

mains, n'ayant rien fait. Or il y avait beaucoup de choses à faire dans la France des années 1968” (p. 414). This book is highly recommended, indeed essential reading. It deserves maximal attention –and not just by its francophone readership !

NOTES

1. Tim Mason, *Nazism, Fascism, and the Working Class. Essays of Tim Mason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 230.