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The Mediocracy

French Philosophy since the mid-1970s



DOMINIQUE LECOURT

Translated by Gregory Elliott



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A Fiction: 'La Pensée 68'

In their laboured construction *La Pensée 68*, published in 1985, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut found themselves stymied by the diverse positions adopted by the protagonists of 1968.²⁸ Carried away by the urge finally to make a clean sweep for the liberal philosophy of human rights – which, in their view, the French had mistakenly ignored or rejected – the two young academics, otherwise so brilliant, had to produce a fantastic theoretical montage, worthy of a grand *agrégation* lecture. According to them, the key question of May '68 was that of humanism. More precisely, antihumanism, which had affected – or rather, infested – the thinking of the principal French theorists of the 'sixties' (as they put it in English, to be chic). This thinking had supposedly inspired, if not manipulated, the student revolt, and determined its wide-ranging social and intellectual effects.

28 Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1990.

In truth, it was not difficult for Ferry and Renaut to demonstrate an identical opposition to humanism in the texts they cited. It was sufficient to review, rubric after rubric, 'French Nietzscheanism' (Foucault and Deleuze), 'French Heideggerianism' (Derrida), and 'French Marxism' (Althusser and Bourdieu). But it remained to be shown that this intellectual current was that of 1968. By their own admission, this was not unproblematic.

Indeed, how is the resolutely humanist tonality of the slogans that fired the demonstrators in May '68 to be explained, if they were inspired by a quite antithetical philosophy? For if the youth on the boulevard Saint-Michel, and those occupying the Sorbonne and the Odéon, did ultimately agree on something, it was on their rejection of the repressive moral order: 'enjoy without restraints!' [*jouir sans entraves*]. They all spat on what they called the 'consumer society', and protested against the alienation of subjects by the system: 'same old routine' [*métro-boulot-dodo*].²⁹ This, as the two essayists candidly acknowledge, represents a veritable paradox, an enigma. But for these crusaders against 'philosophists', such a paradox is evidently merely apparent. Indeed, on page 67 of their lampoon they reckon to be in a position to crow over their victory: 'One enigma has been removed from the domain of our inquiry, albeit only an apparent one. The "philosophists" of the '68 period inscribe their critiques of the idea of the subject within an intellectual horizon that the principal inspirations of the May movement also evince.'

29 Jean Baudrillard, author of the celebrated *The System of Objects* (1968; trans. James Benedict, Verso, London and New York 1996), and very adept at exploiting the Situationist vein, was to publish a book in 1970 whose opening lines accurately capture the spirit of the period. 'There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species' (*The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage Publications, London and Thousand Oaks, CA 1998, p. 25).

It is (so they claim) Gilles Lipovetsky's 'subtle analyses'³⁰ which – a passing courtesy – 'on condition that one has a keener awareness of their limitations', have facilitated this *tour de force*. For they disclose a 'subtle process, where the other face of the affirmation of individuality is the degradation of the ideal of subjectivity'. '*The subject dies with the birth of the individual*,' lament Ferry and Renault, who strive for its resurrection.³¹

Thus, 'the major representatives of '68 philosophy', 'agents of an individualism they frequently denounced', had supposedly 'made history without knowing the history they were making'.³² (Note the emphatic Hegelian wink!) Subtlest of the subtle, Ferry and Renault invite us to turn to the respectable authors who possess the advantage of coherence, and are well versed in moral rearmament of the famous individual-subject: Kant, Fichte, and so on. There you have it.

Alas, this construction makes light of the obvious differences between the authors whose works are subsumed under the category of *la pensée 68*. For example, it is ridiculous implicitly to introduce Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as sons of Lacan, when the old master represents their main target. Yet in their text, *Anti-Œdipe* features, by the same token as the *Écrits*, as a monument of *la pensée 68*, on the grounds that in it one finds 'the figure of the pulverized or disintegrated Ego that appeared on the horizon of the rise of individualism'!³³ Our polemicists are untroubled by such details. Their conception of intellectual generations seems to be straight out of the

30 *L'ère du vide: essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Gallimard, Paris 1983.

31 Ferry and Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, pp. 64–6.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 66. See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, Viking Press, New York 1977.

attitude to computer models at IBM: the latest renders the last obsolete – harsh law of the market. Pierre Macherey summarizes the philosophy of this less than scrupulous book very well: ‘Get out of the way and give me some room!’³⁴

In reality, the events of May ’68 left the thinkers ‘of the sixties’ speechless at the time. And their followers were thrown into enormous confusion. I recall some discreet retreats to the countryside, some hasty departures to Mum and Dad when the petrol began to run out at the pumps. Some of us also remember the peremptory verdict that the most Leninist of the student leaders, reared as they were on antihumanism, publicly delivered on the first night of the barricades in the rue Gay-Lussac: the biggest reactionary demonstration in Paris since 1934! Having rapidly ‘rectified’ this error, cloistered in the Salle des Résistants of the rue d’Ulm, some of us – and I’m not making this up! – desperately sought to confer an identifiable meaning on the events that were overtaking us by feverishly rifling through Lenin’s texts on ‘dual power’.³⁵ We coined slogans infused with all the science at our disposal. We wrote impassioned editorials directed as much against the Communist Party’s treason as against ‘the anti-working-class Gaullist regime of unemployment and poverty’, as a convoluted headline that served as a slogan had it. In addition, we composed revolutionary verses and went to sing them in chorus on what remained of the Parisian cobblestone on the Boulogne (Billancourt) road. But Alain Krivine’s Trotskyists had by far the better choir! As for the orgies attracting

34 *Histoires de dinosaure. Faire de la philosophie 1965–1997*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1999, p. 205.

35 See V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vols 24 and 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964.

crowds of an evening to the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and the joyous verbal spontaneity given free rein at the *Odéon*, most of the politico, whether theoreticians or activists, disdained them as displays of petty-bourgeois degeneracy.

Imagine our relief, our happiness, when we saw the workers' strike suddenly unleashed and spreading. The high walls of the occupied factories, the pickets, the red flags. . . . We were on familiar ground once more. In our theoretical rear-view mirror, we saw 1936, 1871, 1848 and 1793 march past in speeded-up motion. We rediscovered France, 'classical country of the class struggle', as the old Marx had written. Some doctrinaires were predicting the Commune for the end of June!

From the start, the May of the mass of young students and workers, who saw no place for themselves in any organization or movement, proved so recalcitrant to the algebra of revolution that political pundits, switching their attention to Herbert Marcuse, declared that it had been inspired by his thought.³⁶ However, no one in France had read a line of him at the time. I still remember the irritation of a disappointed Jérôme Lindon, owner of *Éditions de Minuit*, in his office on the rue Bernard-Palissy a few years later brandishing in front of me the pathetic sales figures for their translation of Marcuse.

On the other hand, it is incontestably true that the celebrated '60s thinkers' reacted to the events by reorienting their intellectual approach. The question they asked themselves, in complete conformity with their original ambition, concerned the status of their theoretical work *vis-à-vis* the social changes that were under way.

36 *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA 1964) was a universal reference point for student radicals in Germany and the USA.

How could they get some intellectual purchase on this strange movement whose explosion had taken everyone by surprise?

Ferry and Renault maliciously recall that in 1968 Jacques Derrida gave a lecture in the USA on 'The Ends of Man', taking the opportunity to salute the movement of Parisian students. The lecture was indeed given in New York in October at an international colloquium on 'Philosophy and Anthropology', and subsequently published in *Marges de la philosophie* in 1972. Derrida dates the composition of his text from April 1968; he then adds:

It will be recalled that these were the weeks of the opening of the Vietnam peace talks and of the assassination of Martin Luther King. A bit later, when I was typing this text, the universities of Paris were invaded by the forces of order – and for the first time at the request of a rector – and then reoccupied by the students in the upheaval you are familiar with. This historical and political horizon would call for a long analysis. I have simply found it necessary to mark, date, and make known to you the historical circumstances in which I prepared this communication. These circumstances appear to me to belong, by all rights, to the field and the problematic of our colloquium.³⁷

What a godsend this remark is for Ferry and Renault's thesis! But that is to forget the philosopher's very reserved attitude during the events themselves. Contrary to what they suggest, May '68 can by

³⁷ *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, pp. 109–36 (p. 114).

no means be regarded as a product of 'deconstruction'. In actual fact, the notion that made Derrida's fortune, especially in the USA, was diffused post-May.

From April onwards, a serious bout of depression had seen Althusser rushed into a wing of the Eau-Vive hospital on the edge of the Sénart forest, where he was to find himself once more twelve years later, following the murder with which everyone is familiar. Back at the rue d'Ulm at the end of June, in response to the events – what he called the 'tremor' – he set about taking the break with the 'theoreticism' of his earlier work a stage further. In June 1970 he published in *La Pensée* his famous article on the 'Ideological State Apparatuses', essentially devoted to schools and the family.³⁸ It was presented as 'notes towards an investigation' of the two institutions most visibly shaken by the May events. Althusser would not stop calling for those 'concrete analyses of concrete situations' to which, before departing the scene, he still hoped to devote a new institution with the unlikely name of CEMPIT – a project that remained at the planning stage.³⁹ In line with the lecture he had given to the Société française de philosophie in February 1968, in the heart of an overheated Sorbonne, when he had turned up in a cap and called his colleagues 'graduated flunkies', scandalizing Jean Wahl,⁴⁰ he would henceforth define philosophy as 'in the last instance, class struggle in theory', not as the 'theory of theoretical practice'. This comprehensive re-examination led to the publication in 1974, in a

38 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', trans. Ben Brewster, in Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, Verso, London 1984, pp. 1–60.

39 Between 1978 and 1980 Althusser multiplied his contacts with a view to creating a 'Centre d'études marxistes politiques internationales'.

40 'Lenin and Philosophy', trans. Ben Brewster, in Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Ben Brewster *et al.*, Verso, London and New York 1990, pp. 167–202 (p. 173).

short-lived new collection from Hachette, of what he saw fit to call his *Éléments d'autocritique*, with a taste for parody that was adjudged all the more incongruous in so far as – with a good many ulterior motives – he dedicated his book to Waldeck Rochet, former PCF general secretary.⁴¹ He would no longer speak of 'Marxist philosophy', but of the 'Marxist practice of philosophy' – a distinction with a difference.

Let us now turn to Gilles Deleuze, since he features prominently on Ferry and Renaut's list. As I have said, he wrote and published *Anti-Œdipe* with Félix Guattari in 1972. But far from being perceived as an offshoot of theoretical antihumanism, this book seemed at the time to be the manifesto of a philosophy celebrating, *contra* Freud and his established interpreters, the anarchic freedom of the desire expressed with extraordinary vitality during the wild days and nights of May. Its success – which, by the way, was instantaneous – collided with a united front of Marxist and Lacanian 'antihumanists'. Élisabeth Roudinesco – who, at the time, occupied with exceptional pugnacity the junction of Althusserianism and the *École freudienne* – did not mince her words.

As we shall see, however, Michel Foucault is arguably the figure who best illustrates the reorientation to which I referred, and who unquestionably played a crucial part in determining its fate.

Examination of his trajectory will only serve to confirm my statement: a *pensée 68* is nowhere to be found, whether before, during, or after the month of May. It is only by retrospective artifice that Luc

41 'Elements of Self-Criticism', in Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock, New Left Books, London 1976, pp. 101–61. The *Analyse* collection from Hachette included two other publications: Renée Balibar's important books on *Le Français national* and *Les Français fictifs*.

32 The Mediocracy

Ferry and Alain Renaut have thought it possible to identify a common essence consisting in 'antihumanism' and then, joined by others, to denounce it as fundamentally 'Nietzschean': a judgement that is also wanting in accuracy.