

THE COMMUNIST HYPOTHESIS

THERE WAS A tangible sense of depression in the air in France in the aftermath of Sarkozy's victory.¹ It is often said that unexpected blows are the worst, but expected ones sometimes prove debilitating in a different way. It can be oddly dispiriting when an election is won by the candidate who has led in the opinion polls from the start, just as when the favourite horse wins the race; anyone with the slightest feeling for a wager, a risk, an exception or a rupture would rather see an outsider upset the odds. Yet it could hardly have been the bare fact of Nicolas Sarkozy as President that seemed to come as such a disorientating blow to the French left in the aftermath of May 2007. Something else was at stake—some complex of factors for which 'Sarkozy' is merely a name. How should it be understood?

An initial factor was the way in which the outcome affirmed the manifest powerlessness of any genuinely emancipatory programme within the electoral system: preferences are duly recorded, in the passive manner of a seismograph, but the process is one that by its nature excludes any embodiments of dissenting political will. A second component of the left's depressive disorientation after May 2007 was an overwhelming bout of historical nostalgia. The political order that emerged from World War Two in France—with its unambiguous referents of 'left' and 'right', and its consensus, shared by Gaullists and Communists alike, on the balance-sheet of the Occupation, Resistance and Liberation—has now collapsed. This is one reason for Sarkozy's ostentatious dinners, yachting holidays and so on—a way of saying that the left no longer frightens anyone: *Vivent les riches*, and to hell with the poor. Understandably, this may fill the sincere souls of the left with nostalgia for the good old days—Mitterrand, De Gaulle, Marchais, even Chirac, Gaullism's Brezhnev, who knew that to do nothing was the easiest way to let the system die.

Sarkozy has now finally finished off the cadaverous form of Gaullism over which Chirac presided. The Socialists' collapse had already been anticipated in the rout of Jospin in the presidential elections of 2002 (and still more by the disastrous decision to embrace Chirac in the second round). The present decomposition of the Socialist Party, however, is not just a matter of its political poverty, apparent now for many years, nor of the actual size of the vote—47 per cent is not much worse than its other recent scores. Rather, the election of Sarkozy appears to have struck a blow to the entire symbolic structuring of French political life: the system of orientation itself has suffered a defeat. An important symptom of the resulting disorientation is the number of former Socialist placemen rushing to take up appointments under Sarkozy, the centre-left opinion-makers singing his praises; the rats have fled the sinking ship in impressive numbers. The underlying rationale is, of course, that of the single party: since all accept the logic of the existing capitalist order, market economy and so forth, why maintain the fiction of opposing parties?

A third component of the contemporary disorientation arose from the outcome of the electoral conflict itself. I have characterized the 2007 presidential elections—pitting Sarkozy against Royal—as the clash of two types of fear. The first is the fear felt by the privileged, alarmed that their position may be assailable. In France this manifests itself as fear of foreigners, workers, youth from the *banlieue*, Muslims, black Africans. Essentially conservative, it creates a longing for a protective master, even one who oppresses and impoverishes you further. The current embodiment of this figure is, of course, the over-stimulated police chief: Sarkozy. In electoral terms, this is contested not by a resounding affirmation of self-determining heterogeneity, but by the fear of this fear: a fear, too, of the cop figure, whom the petit-bourgeois socialist voter neither knows nor likes. This 'fear of the fear' is a secondary, derivative emotion, whose content—beyond the sentiment itself—is barely detectable; the Royal camp had no concept of any alliance with the excluded or oppressed; the most it could envisage was to reap the dubious benefits of fear. For both sides, a total consensus reigned on Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan (where French forces are fighting), Lebanon (ditto), Africa (swarming with French military 'administrators'). Public discussion of alternatives on these issues was on neither party's agenda.

¹ This is an edited extract from *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, *Circonstances*, 4, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, Paris 2007; to be published in English by Verso as *What Do We Mean When We Say 'Sarkozy'?* in 2008.

The conflict between the primary fear and the ‘fear of the fear’ was settled in favour of the former. There was a visceral reflex in play here, very apparent in the faces of those partying over Sarkozy’s victory. For those in the grip of the ‘fear of the fear’ there was a corresponding negative reflex, flinching from the result: this was the third component of 2007’s depressive disorientation. We should not underestimate the role of what Althusser called the ‘ideological state apparatus’—increasingly through the media, with the press now playing a more sophisticated part than TV and radio—in formulating and mobilizing such collective sentiments. Within the electoral process there has, it seems, been a weakening of the real; a process even further advanced with regard to the secondary ‘fear of the fear’ than with the primitive, reactionary one. We react, after all, to a real situation, whereas the ‘fear of the fear’ merely takes fright at the scale of that reaction, and is thus at a still further remove from reality. The vacuity of this position manifested itself perfectly in the empty exaltations of Ségolène Royal.

Electoralism and the state

If we posit a definition of politics as ‘collective action, organized by certain principles, that aims to unfold the consequences of a new possibility which is currently repressed by the dominant order’, then we would have to conclude that the electoral mechanism is an essentially apolitical procedure. This can be seen in the gulf between the massive formal imperative to vote and the free-floating, if not non-existent nature of political or ideological convictions. It is good to vote, to give a form to my fears; but it is hard to believe that what I am voting *for* is a good thing in itself. This is not to say that the electoral-democratic system is repressive *per se*; rather, that the electoral process is incorporated into a state form, that of capitalo-parliamentarianism, appropriate for the maintenance of the established order, and consequently serves a conservative function. This creates a further feeling of powerlessness: if ordinary citizens have no handle on state decision-making save the vote, it is hard to see what way forward there could be for an emancipatory politics.

If the electoral mechanism is not a political but a state procedure, what does it achieve? Drawing on the lessons of 2007, one effect is to incorporate both the fear and the ‘fear of the fear’ into the state—to invest the state with these mass-subjective elements, the better to legitimate it as an object of fear in its own right, equipped for terror and coercion.

For the world horizon of democracy is increasingly defined by war. The West is engaged on an expanding number of fronts: the maintenance of the existing order with its gigantic disparities has an irreducible military component; the duality of the worlds of rich and poor can only be sustained by force. This creates a particular dialectic of war and fear. Our governments explain that they are waging war abroad in order to protect us from it at home. If Western troops do not hunt down the terrorists in Afghanistan or Chechnya, they will come over here to organize the resentful rabble outcasts.

Strategic neo-Pétainism

In France, this alliance of fear and war has classically gone by the name of Pétainism. The mass ideology of Pétainism—responsible for its widespread success between 1940 and 1944—rested in part on the fear generated by the First World War: Marshal Pétain would protect France from the disastrous effects of the Second, by keeping well out of it. In the Marshal's own words, it was necessary to be more afraid of war than of defeat. The vast majority of the French accepted the relative tranquillity of a consensual defeat and most got off fairly lightly during the War, compared to the Russians or even the English. The analogous project today is based on the belief that the French need simply to accept the laws of the US-led world model and all will be well: France will be protected from the disastrous effects of war and global disparity. This form of neo-Pétainism as a mass ideology is effectively on offer from both parties today. In what follows, I will argue that it is a key analytical element in understanding the disorientation that goes by the name of 'Sarkozy'; to grasp the latter in its overall dimension, its historicity and intelligibility, requires us to go back to what I will call its Pétainist 'transcendental'.²

I am not saying, of course, that circumstances today resemble the defeat of 1940, or that Sarkozy resembles Pétain. The point is a more formal one: that the unconscious national-historical roots of that which goes by the name of Sarkozy are to be found in this Pétainist configuration, in which the disorientation itself is solemnly enacted from the

² See my *Logiques des mondes*, Paris 2006 for a full development of the concept of 'transcendentals' and their function, which is to govern the order of appearance of multiplicities within a world.

summit of the state, and presented as a historical turning-point. This matrix has been a recurring pattern in French history. It goes back to the Restoration of 1815 when a post-Revolutionary government, eagerly supported by émigrés and opportunists, was brought back in the foreigners' baggage-train and declared, with the consent of a worn-out population, that it would restore public morality and order. In 1940, military defeat once again served as the context for the disorientating reversal of the real content of state action: the Vichy government spoke incessantly of the 'nation', yet was installed by the German Occupation; the most corrupt of oligarchs were to lead the country out of moral crisis; Pétain himself, an ageing general in the service of property, would be the embodiment of national rebirth.

Numerous aspects of this neo-Pétainist tradition are in evidence today. Typically, capitulation and servility are presented as invention and regeneration. These were central themes of Sarkozy's campaign: the Mayor of Neuilly would transform the French economy and put the country back to work. The real content, of course, is a politics of continuous obedience to the demands of high finance, in the name of national renewal. A second characteristic is that of decline and 'moral crisis', which justifies the repressive measures taken in the name of regeneration. Morality is invoked, as so often, in place of politics and against any popular mobilization. Appeal is made instead to the virtues of hard work, discipline, the family: 'merit should be rewarded'. This typical displacement of politics by morality has been prepared, from the 1970s 'new philosophers' onwards, by all who have laboured to 'moralize' historical judgement. The object is in reality political: to maintain that national decline has nothing to do with the high servants of capital but is the fault of certain ill-intentioned elements of the population—currently, foreign workers and young people from the *banlieue*.

A third characteristic of neo-Pétainism is the paradigmatic function of foreign experience. The example of correction always comes from abroad, from countries that have long overcome their moral crises. For Pétain, the shining examples were Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany and Franco's Spain: leaders who had put their countries back on their feet. The political aesthetic is that of imitation: like Plato's demiurge, the state must shape society with its eyes fixed on foreign models. Today, of course, the examples are Bush's America and Blair's Britain.

A fourth characteristic is the notion that the source of the current crisis lies in a disastrous past event. For the proto-Pétainism of the 1815 Restoration, this was of course the Revolution and the beheading of the King. For Pétain himself in 1940 it was the Popular Front, the Blum government and above all the great strikes and factory occupations of 1936. The possessing classes far preferred the German Occupation to the fear which these disorders had provoked. For Sarkozy, the evils of May 68—forty years ago—have been constantly invoked as the cause of the current ‘crisis of values’. Neo-Pétainism provides a usefully simplified reading of history that links a negative event, generally with a working-class or popular structure, and a positive one, with a military or state structure, as a solution to the first. The arc between 1968 and 2007 can thus be offered as a source of legitimacy for the Sarkozy government, as the historic actor that will finally embark on the correction needed in the wake of the inaugural damaging event. Finally, there is the element of racism. Under Pétain this was brutally explicit: getting rid of the Jews. Today it is voiced in a more insinuating fashion: ‘we are not an inferior race’—the implication being, ‘unlike others’; ‘the true French need not doubt the legitimacy of their country’s actions’—in Algeria and elsewhere. In the light of these criteria, we can therefore point: the disorientation that goes by the name of ‘Sarkozy’ may be analysed as the latest manifestation of the Pétainist transcendental.

The spectre

At first sight there may seem something strange about the new President’s insistence that the solution to the country’s moral crisis, the goal of his ‘renewal’ process, was ‘to do away with May 68, once and for all’. Most of us were under the impression that it was long gone anyway. What is haunting the regime, under the name of May 68? We can only assume that it is the ‘spectre of communism’, in one of its last real manifestations. He would say (to give a Sarkozian prosopopoeia): ‘We refuse to be haunted by anything at all. It is not enough that empirical communism has disappeared. We want all possible forms of it banished. Even the hypothesis of communism—generic name of our defeat—must become unmentionable.’

What is the communist hypothesis? In its generic sense, given in its canonic *Manifesto*, ‘communist’ means, first, that the logic of class—the fundamental subordination of labour to a dominant class, the

arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity—is not inevitable; it can be overcome. The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear. The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.

‘Communism’ as such denotes only this very general set of intellectual representations. It is what Kant called an Idea, with a regulatory function, rather than a programme. It is foolish to call such communist principles utopian; in the sense that I have defined them here they are intellectual patterns, always actualized in a different fashion. As a pure Idea of equality, the communist hypothesis has no doubt existed since the beginnings of the state. As soon as mass action opposes state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice, rudiments or fragments of the hypothesis start to appear. Popular revolts—the slaves led by Spartacus, the peasants led by Müntzer—might be identified as practical examples of this ‘communist invariant’. With the French Revolution, the communist hypothesis then inaugurates the epoch of political modernity.

What remains is to determine the point at which we now find ourselves in the history of the communist hypothesis. A fresco of the modern period would show two great sequences in its development, with a forty-year gap between them. The first is that of the setting in place of the communist hypothesis; the second, of preliminary attempts at its realization. The first sequence runs from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune; let us say, 1792 to 1871. It links the popular mass movement to the seizure of power, through the insurrectional overthrow of the existing order; this revolution will abolish the old forms of society and install ‘the community of equals’. In the course of the century, the formless popular movement made up of townsfolk, artisans and students came increasingly under the leadership of the working class. The sequence culminated in the striking novelty—and radical defeat—of the Paris Commune. For the Commune demonstrated both the extraordinary energy of this combination of popular movement, working-class leadership and armed insurrection, and its limits: the *communards* could neither establish the revolution on a national footing nor defend it against the foreign-backed forces of the counter-revolution.

The second sequence of the communist hypothesis runs from 1917 to 1976: from the Bolshevik Revolution to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the militant upsurge throughout the world during the years 1966–75. It was dominated by the question: how to win? How to hold out—unlike the Paris Commune—against the armed reaction of the possessing classes; how to organize the new power so as to protect it against the onslaught of its enemies? It was no longer a question of formulating and testing the communist hypothesis, but of realizing it: what the 19th century had dreamt, the 20th would accomplish. The obsession with victory, centred around questions of organization, found its principal expression in the ‘iron discipline’ of the communist party—the characteristic construction of the second sequence of the hypothesis. The party effectively solved the question inherited from the first sequence: the revolution prevailed, either through insurrection or prolonged popular war, in Russia, China, Czechoslovakia, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and succeeded in establishing a new order.

But the second sequence in turn created a further problem, which it could not solve using the methods it had developed in response to the problems of the first. The party had been an appropriate tool for the overthrow of weakened reactionary regimes, but it proved ill-adapted for the construction of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the sense that Marx had intended—that is, a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state: its dialectical ‘withering away’. Instead, the party-state developed into a new form of authoritarianism. Some of these regimes made real strides in education, public health, the valorization of labour, and so on; and they provided an international constraint on the arrogance of the imperialist powers. However, the statist principle in itself proved corrupt and, in the long run, ineffective. Police coercion could not save the ‘socialist’ state from internal bureaucratic inertia; and within fifty years it was clear that it would never prevail in the ferocious competition imposed by its capitalist adversaries. The last great convulsions of the second sequence—the Cultural Revolution and May 68, in its broadest sense—can be understood as attempts to deal with the inadequacy of the party.

Interludes

Between the end of the first sequence and the beginning of the second there was a forty-year interval during which the communist hypothesis

was declared to be untenable: the decades from 1871 to 1914 saw imperialism triumphant across the globe. Since the second sequence came to an end in the 1970s we have been in another such interval, with the adversary in the ascendant once more. What is at stake in these circumstances is the eventual opening of a new sequence of the communist hypothesis. But it is clear that this will not be—cannot be—the continuation of the second one. Marxism, the workers' movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state—all the inventions of the 20th century—are not really useful to us any more. At the theoretical level they certainly deserve further study and consideration; but at the level of practical politics they have become unworkable. The second sequence is over and it is pointless to try to restore it.

At this point, during an interval dominated by the enemy, when new experiments are tightly circumscribed, it is not possible to say with certainty what the character of the third sequence will be. But the general direction seems discernible: it will involve a new relation between the political movement and the level of the ideological—one that was prefigured in the expression 'cultural revolution' or in the May 68 notion of a 'revolution of the mind'. We will still retain the theoretical and historical lessons that issued from the first sequence, and the centrality of victory that issued from the second. But the solution will be neither the formless, or multi-form, popular movement inspired by the intelligence of the multitude—as Negri and the alter-globalists believe—nor the renewed and democratized mass communist party, as some of the Trotskyists and Maoists hope. The (19th-century) movement and the (20th-century) party were specific modes of the communist hypothesis; it is no longer possible to return to them. Instead, after the negative experiences of the 'socialist' states and the ambiguous lessons of the Cultural Revolution and May 68, our task is to bring the communist hypothesis into existence in another mode, to help it emerge within new forms of political experience. This is why our work is so complicated, so experimental. We must focus on its conditions of existence, rather than just improving its methods. We need to re-install the communist hypothesis—the proposition that the subordination of labour to the dominant class is not inevitable—within the ideological sphere.

What might this involve? Experimentally, we might conceive of finding a point that would stand outside the temporality of the dominant order and what Lacan once called 'the service of wealth'. Any point, so long

as it is in formal opposition to such service, and offers the discipline of a universal truth. One such might be the declaration: 'There is only one world'. What would this imply? Contemporary capitalism boasts, of course, that it has created a global order; its opponents too speak of 'alter-globalization'. Essentially, they propose a definition of politics as a practical means of moving from the world as it is to the world as we would wish it to be. But does a single world of human subjects exist? The 'one world' of globalization is solely one of things—objects for sale—and monetary signs: the world market as foreseen by Marx. The overwhelming majority of the population have at best restricted access to this world. They are locked out, often literally so.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was supposed to signal the advent of the single world of freedom and democracy. Twenty years later, it is clear that the world's wall has simply shifted: instead of separating East and West it now divides the rich capitalist North from the poor and devastated South. New walls are being constructed all over the world: between Palestinians and Israelis, between Mexico and the United States, between Africa and the Spanish enclaves, between the pleasures of wealth and the desires of the poor, whether they be peasants in villages or urban dwellers in *favelas*, *banlieues*, estates, hostels, squats and shantytowns. The price of the supposedly unified world of capital is the brutal division of human existence into regions separated by police dogs, bureaucratic controls, naval patrols, barbed wire and expulsions. The 'problem of immigration' is, in reality, the fact that the conditions faced by workers from other countries provide living proof that—in human terms—the 'unified world' of globalization is a sham.

A performative unity

The political problem, then, has to be reversed. We cannot start from an analytic agreement on the existence of the world and proceed to normative action with regard to its characteristics. The disagreement is not over qualities but over existence. Confronted with the artificial and murderous division of the world into two—a disjunction named by the very term, 'the West'—we must affirm the existence of the single world right from the start, as axiom and principle. The simple phrase, 'there is only one world', is not an objective conclusion. It is performative: we are deciding that this is how it is for us. Faithful to this

point, it is then a question of elucidating the consequences that follow from this simple declaration.

A first consequence is the recognition that all belong to the same world as myself: the African worker I see in the restaurant kitchen, the Moroccan I see digging a hole in the road, the veiled woman looking after children in a park. That is where we reverse the dominant idea of the world united by objects and signs, to make a unity in terms of living, acting beings, here and now. These people, different from me in terms of language, clothes, religion, food, education, exist exactly as I do myself; since they exist like me, I can discuss with them—and, as with anyone else, we can agree and disagree about things. But on the precondition that they and I exist in the same world.

At this point, the objection about cultural difference will be raised: ‘our’ world is made up of those who accept ‘our’ values—democracy, respect for women, human rights. Those whose culture is contrary to this are not really part of the same world; if they want to join it they have to share our values, to ‘integrate’. As Sarkozy put it: ‘If foreigners want to remain in France, they have to love France; otherwise, they should leave.’ But to place conditions is already to have abandoned the principle, ‘there is only one world of living men and women’. It may be said that we need to take the laws of each country into account. Indeed; but a law does not set a precondition for belonging to the world. It is simply a provisional rule that exists in a particular region of the single world. And no one is asked to love a law, simply to obey it. The single world of living women and men may well have laws; what it cannot have is subjective or ‘cultural’ preconditions for existence within it—to demand that you have to be like everyone else. The single world is precisely the place where an unlimited set of differences exist. Philosophically, far from casting doubt on the unity of the world, these differences are its principle of existence.

The question then arises whether anything governs these unlimited differences. There may well be only one world, but does that mean that being French, or a Moroccan living in France, or Muslim in a country of Christian traditions, is nothing? Or should we see the persistence of such identities as an obstacle? The simplest definition of ‘identity’ is the series of characteristics and properties by which an individual or a

group recognizes itself as its 'self'. But what is this 'self'? It is that which, across all the characteristic properties of identity, remains more or less invariant. It is possible, then, to say that an identity is the ensemble of properties that support an invariance. For example, the identity of an artist is that by which the invariance of his or her style can be recognized; homosexual identity is composed of everything bound up with the invariance of the possible object of desire; the identity of a foreign community in a country is that by which membership of this community can be recognized: language, gestures, dress, dietary habits, etc.

Defined in this way, by invariants, identity is doubly related to difference: on the one hand, identity is that which is different from the rest; on the other, it is that which does not become different, which is invariant. The affirmation of identity has two further aspects. The first form is negative. It consists of desperately maintaining that I am not the other. This is often indispensable, in the face of authoritarian demands for integration, for example. The Moroccan worker will forcefully affirm that his traditions and customs are not those of the petty-bourgeois European; he will even reinforce the characteristics of his religious or customary identity. The second involves the immanent development of identity within a new situation—rather like Nietzsche's famous maxim, 'become what you are'. The Moroccan worker does not abandon that which constitutes his individual identity, whether socially or in the family; but he will gradually adapt all this, in a creative fashion, to the place in which he finds himself. He will thus invent what he is—a Moroccan worker in Paris—not through any internal rupture, but by an expansion of identity.

The political consequences of the axiom, 'there is only one world', will work to consolidate what is universal in identities. An example—a local experiment—would be a meeting held recently in Paris, where undocumented workers and French nationals came together to demand the abolition of persecutory laws, police raids and expulsions; to demand that foreign workers be recognized simply in terms of their presence: that no one is illegal; all demands that are very natural for people who are basically in the same existential situation—people of the same world.

Time and courage

'In such great misfortune, what remains to you?' Corneille's Medea is asked by her confidante. 'Myself! Myself, I say, and it is enough', comes the reply. What Medea retains is the courage to decide her own fate; and courage, I would suggest, is the principal virtue in face of the disorientation of our own times. Lacan also raises the issue in discussing the analytical cure for depressive debility: should this not end in grand dialectical discussions on courage and justice, on the model of Plato's dialogues? In the famous 'Dialogue on Courage', General Laches, questioned by Socrates, replies: 'Courage is when I see the enemy and run towards him to engage him in a fight.' Socrates is not particularly satisfied with this, of course, and gently takes the General to task: 'It's a good example of courage, but an example is not a definition.' Running the same risks as General Laches, I will give my definition.

First, I would retain the status of courage as a virtue—that is, not an innate disposition, but something that constructs itself, and which one constructs, in practice. Courage, then, is the virtue which manifests itself through endurance in the impossible. This is not simply a matter of a momentary encounter with the impossible: that would be heroism, not courage. Heroism has always been represented not as a virtue but as a posture: as the moment when one turns to meet the impossible face to face. The virtue of courage constructs itself through endurance within the impossible; time is its raw material. What takes courage is to operate in terms of a different *durée* to that imposed by the law of the world. The point we are seeking must be one that can connect to another order of time. Those imprisoned within the temporality assigned us by the dominant order will always be prone to exclaim, as so many Socialist Party henchmen have done, 'Twelve years of Chirac, and now we have to wait for another round of elections. Seventeen years; perhaps twenty-two; a whole lifetime!' At best, they will become depressed and disoriented; at worst, rats.

In many respects we are closer today to the questions of the 19th century than to the revolutionary history of the 20th. A wide variety of 19th-century phenomena are reappearing: vast zones of poverty, widening inequalities, politics dissolved into the 'service of wealth', the nihilism

of large sections of the young, the servility of much of the intelligentsia; the cramped, besieged experimentalism of a few groups seeking ways to express the communist hypothesis . . . Which is no doubt why, as in the 19th century, it is not the victory of the hypothesis which is at stake today, but the conditions of its existence. This is our task, during the reactionary interlude that now prevails: through the combination of thought processes—always global, or universal, in character—and political experience, always local or singular, yet transmissible, to renew the existence of the communist hypothesis, in our consciousness and on the ground.