

# *A Propos de* “A New French Thought”: Review and Reflections

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**A** NEW FRENCH THOUGHT: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IS THE third book of a series, “French Thought,” devoted to bringing “the cultivated public the best of recent French writing in the humanities in clear, accessible translations.”<sup>1</sup> The new book is a collection of articles, grouping together several of the most influential authors of recent years from French intellectual circles.<sup>2</sup> “Reflections on Liberalism”<sup>3</sup> is to be the theme that unifies this collection of diverse essays. The return of this type of reflection to France is perhaps an opportunity to end what Mark Lilla, the editor of the book, calls in his introduction the “cold war” between the Anglo-American and the Continental currents of thought, begun more than two centuries ago.

The causes of the appearance and disappearance of the split, argues Mark Lilla, were essentially political. Before 1789, there existed a “community of mind” in the Western world — everyone spoke the same language and read the same books — which disappeared with the French Revolution. From this unsettling event, two distinct traditions began to develop: one Continental, developing from the German Idealism of Schelling and Hegel; and the other Anglo-American, growing out of Bentham, Mill, and the British empiricists and skeptics.

After the French Revolution, according to Lilla, the development of these two distinct traditions was primarily because different political regimes were in place on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The Anglo-American world was dominated by politically liberal regimes whereas in Europe, and in France especially, illiberal political forces developed. If liberal regimes were able to come to power from time to time in France, it was only because they succeeded in balancing illiberal forces against each other.

At the end of World War II, largely because of the discrediting of right wing “illiberalism,” French political practice began to diverge from French political theory. At the time of de Gaulle’s resolutely liberal Fifth Republic,<sup>4</sup> “the grip of Marxism on the minds of French intellectuals was almost complete.”<sup>5</sup> Political philosophy found new life in its critique of liberalism — a critique which had already been renewed during the inter-war period, abandoning religious rhetoric inherited from the 19th century. It was near the height of structuralism and the reign of the great names: Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault,

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Derrida. Even if they did not claim partisanship with one political doctrine or another, Mark Lilla observes, these intellectuals nonetheless contributed to the prolongation and the reinforcement of the anti-liberal intellectual currents in France.

Coincidentally, it was precisely at this moment that the "cold war" between the two traditions of political philosophy began to end: from this moment on, translations of political thought from the opposing camps began to appear on both sides of the Atlantic. French structuralism, illiberalism and "neo-Marxism" entered American intellectual circles and remain today. As Lilla notes judiciously, "European intellectuals frequently express astonishment that a fixed canon of accepted 'Continental' authors who became prominent nearly twenty-five years ago are still quarreled over among us today."<sup>6</sup> The Europeans have, Lilla adds, "moved on to new questions and approaches." It is unquestionable that during the past twenty-five years, and especially during the last fifteen, numerous events have led French intellectuals to go beyond this "canon" of authors.

May '68 seems to have been the pivotal event.<sup>7</sup> At the time, it seemed to be both a rejection of liberalism (which it probably was, at least partially) and the expression and support of the illiberal political thought of the moment. However, there has been subsequent reinterpretation of these events. According to Gilles Lipovetsky, May '68 represented the end of a "revolutionary age," one which can only be understood in the context of the growth of a "modern individualism" which he differentiated from an individualism "à la Tocqueville," likening it more to an extreme, a negative individualism, an individualism "à la Dumont."<sup>8</sup> For Mark Lilla, May '68 marked "the beginning of the end" of Marxism as a political mode of thought, and the beginning of an "age of liberalism" — which normalized itself with the election of the socialist Mitterrand to the French presidency in 1981. Between 1968 and 1981, various events hastened this change in French intellectual orientation: the publication of Solzhenitsyn's novel *The Gulag Archipelago*, the events in Cambodia, and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland.<sup>9</sup> One could add to this list the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops and, of course, the attempt to crush the Polish Solidarity movement — this last being perhaps the fact which contributed the most to the abandoning of the Sartrean adage "Marxism is the unsurpassable horizon of our time."

One of the objectives of this book is to consider the changes which have taken place over the past fifteen years in France. What were they about? *A New French Thought* suggests that it was a movement in three stages. In the first stage, the French intellectuals turned their back on the aspects of those systems of thought whose ultimate result was to prevent thought — because of their determinism or their lack of perspective. These post-war strains of thought were structuralism, Heideggerianism, Nietzscheanism, and Marxism. The second stage consisted of rediscovering a liberal tradition long ignored. The third stage, made possible by the two previous stages, was the production of a "new French thought," open to new methods and themes. This stage still continues today.

Thus, the first part of the book, provocatively called "Les Adieux [Goodbyes]," presents three articles, each a critique of a different French intellectual: Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Bourdieu. However, the articles in the last part of the book, Lipovetsky's in particular, show clearly that liberal thought has not been accepted uncritically in France: It is still criticized, often by remaining adherents of the

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Marxist and structuralist camps. It is nonetheless correct that, during the late seventies and early eighties, important criticism of structuralism took place. The most famous in the United States (and probably the most contested) is that of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in their work '68-'86: *Itinéraire de l'individu*<sup>10</sup> — an extract of which forms the critique of Foucault in the first part of *A New French Thought*. It is Tzvetan Todorov who gives the critique of another “great man” of the French intellectual pantheon of the 20th century: Claude Lévi-Strauss. Todorov points out the ethical relativism and the anti-humanism of the ethnologist. The article of Philippe Raynaut differs slightly from the preceding two. It is a translation of his critique of the most famous work of Bourdieu, *La Distinction*. It was published only one year after the publication of Bourdieu's work. The article, which has not the critical depth of the Lévi-Strauss critique, shows some of the cul-de-sac to which Bourdieu's system can lead. It concludes on a significant note: “if any subjective claim is gradually reduced to misapprehension; if rights only affect the system of domination called formal democracy..., if all this is true, one must simply give up.”<sup>11</sup>

As *A New French Thought* shows, French thinkers did not simply give up. At first, it is the reevaluation of a French and European heritage that the French undertake: Benjamin Constant, Kant, Fichte and Tocqueville<sup>12</sup> — well known in the United States thanks to his study of democracy in America, but who was for a long time neglected in France. One can regret the absence in the book of a study of Raymond Aron, a precursor of the return to liberalism whose work has certainly not been exhaustively studied. It was only after his death that Aron began to be recognized; while living, he was in the shadow of Sartre — and the victim of the French intellectuals' sad, famous formula: “better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron.”

In a remarkable article written by Bernard Manin, “On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation,” a reflection on the difference between Rousseau's concepts of “general will” and of “the will of all” serves as a point of departure. The author then considers the works of Sieyes and Rawls, showing that all three of these intellectuals neglected the idea of deliberation, which according to Manin, is central to the idea of legitimacy.

As Manin's article shows, French intellectuals take up the liberal authors of the past in order to reflect on the liberal society of the early eighties — the titles of the different parts of *A New French Thought* are suggestive: “What is modernity?”; “What are Human Rights?”; “The Liberal Political Order”; and “The New Individualism.”

Thus, over the course of the last fifteen years, French political thought has undergone a transformation that can be described as a “shift from Marx to Tocqueville,”<sup>13</sup> as the historian Keith Baker said in describing a similar shift in the interpretation of the French Revolution. In the mid-sixties, the historian Alfred Cobban<sup>14</sup> called for a renunciation of the existing terminology used in discussing the French revolution, claiming it was too “Marxist,” as far as social history is concerned. In France, it was with François Furet,<sup>15</sup> near the end of the seventies, that the change was visible: a new interpretation took place, one which put the emphasis on the political rather than the social and which turned to Tocqueville the historian,

abandoning Marx. It is interesting to notice the similarity of evolution in the different domains of history and political philosophy — in both cases, there is even a return to some of the same authors; the most striking example is Tocqueville. This similarity is not due to chance. Mark Lilla notes, “to take sides on the Revolution meant taking sides on modernity itself...this interpretation of the Revolution and its polarizing effects on French political culture lies behind much of the recent historical and philosophical writing about liberalism.”<sup>16</sup>

In history as well as in political philosophy, if the change of orientation from Marx to Tocqueville does not signify the abandonment of Marx, it reflects, in any case, a re-evaluation of the heritage of the past and, consequently, an opening of new areas of research. In history, as in political philosophy, it is largely because theories were confronted with the facts of the past (the true social origins of the participants of the French Revolution) or of the present (end of communism) that this shift occurred. In the case of political philosophy, *A New French Thought* is a good introduction to some of the effects of this shift. ¶

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The articles published in *A New French Thought* are the following:

Tzvetan Todorov, “Lévi-Strauss”

Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, “Foucault”

Philippe Raynaud, “Bourdieu”

Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, “Kant and Fichte”

Philippe Raynaud, “Constant”

Marcel Gauchet, “Tocqueville”

Marcel Gauchet, “Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State”

Pierre Manent, “The Modern State”

Jean-Marc Ferry, “Ancient, Modern and Contemporary”

Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, “How to Think about Rights”

Blandine Kriegel, “Rights and Natural Law”

Stéphane Rials, “Rights and Modern Law”

Pierre Manent, “The Contest for Command”

Bernard Manin, “On Legitimacy and Deliberation”

Jean-Marc Ferry, “Modernization and Consensus”

Gilles Lipovetsky, “May ‘68, or the Rights of Transpolitical Individualism”

Anne Godignon and Jean-Louis Thiriet, “The End of Alienation?”

Anne Godignon and Jean-Louis Thiriet, “The Rebirth of Voluntary Servitude”

<sup>2</sup>One of them, Bernard Manin, is actually teaching at the University of Chicago.

<sup>3</sup>The principles of liberal politics according to Lilla are “limited government, the rule of law, multi-party elections, an independent judiciary and civil service, civilian control of the military, individual rights to free association and worship, private property, and so forth.” (*A New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, p. 4).

<sup>4</sup>The Fifth Republic began in France in October 1958 and is the current political regime of France today.

<sup>5</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>May 1968 is still considered one of the most serious crises of the French Fifth Republic. It began in the student milieu in Paris and eventually spread to the workers. It was supported by many intellectuals. The fact that, after the end of the movement, the legislative election was won by de Gaulle’s party showed that the public opinion tended to disapprove of the movement: the movement actually reinforced the political regime of the Republic. This might also be seen as a reflec-

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tion of the disjunction between French political practice and political thought.

<sup>8</sup>Louis Dumont is especially known for his anthropological works on the Indian caste system. He has also written reflection on “modern” societies. Cf. for example, *Essais sur l'individualisme: une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1983. [English translation: *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.]

<sup>9</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Published in Paris (Editions Gallimard) in 1986.

<sup>11</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup>One of the most recent translation of Tocqueville's *De la Démocratie en Amérique* dates from 1990: Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, edited with introduction, editorial notes, and bibliographies by Phillips Bradley; with an introduction by Daniel J. Boorstin, New York: Vintage Books, 1990. (2 v.)

<sup>13</sup>Baker, Keith, *Inventing The French Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Cobban, Alfred, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1964.

<sup>15</sup>Furet, François, *Penser la révolution Française*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978. [English translation: *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1981].

<sup>16</sup>*A New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.