MARXISM AND THE FRENCH LEFT

Studies in labour and politics in France, 1830–1981

TONY JUDT

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TO THE MEMORY OF
GEORGE LICHTHEIM

Acknowledgements

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Foundations exist to help scholars, but individuals have other calls upon their time and resources. I am thus especially indebted to all those friends and colleagues who have discussed some of the themes of this book and thereby contributed to my own education, if not to the improvement of the end-product, whose inadequacies are my responsibility alone. I owe special thanks to Jan Gross, Gareth Stedman Jones, Dave Travis, David Levy, Tim Mason, and Eric Foner. Rich Mitten has confirmed my belief that there are still people around who take arguments about marxism (as distinct from arguments *within* marxism) seriously. I always enjoy our discussions—I hope he will not despair upon reading this, their interim product. Colleagues in the Oxford Politics department, notably David Goldey and Vincent Wright, have tried in vain to save me from an obsessive interest in theory; I am grateful for their efforts and stand in awe of their encyclopaedic acquaintance with the practice of politics in France. As to what it is really all about, only the subjects of our mutual interest would suppose it was necessary or possible ever to know.

My debts to the work of many others will be clear from text and notes alike, but to John Dunn I remain particularly grateful for the reiterated reminder that the history of ideas must above all be *historically* intelligible. The 'Cambridge' school of intellectual history is now so well established that the work of Dunn and Skinner is occasionally downplayed as 'obvious'. No one who has kept abreast of the historiography of socialism and 'popular culture' would be so optimistic—the obvious can take a long time to penetrate. To Leszek Kolakowski I owe particular thanks. This is in part because of his generosity in reading some of my work, but chiefly through the stimulus of his many writings. It is not necessary to agree with a book, nor even to share its intellectual approach, to recognize the immensity of its achievement.

Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*, with his earlier essays, forms part of the upheaval in the European radical consciousness which has contributed so much to the subject-matter (and, doubtless, the perspective) of this book.

I also owe thanks to my College, St. Anne's, which provides so pleasant a working environment, and to my colleagues there who have generously allowed me ample leave to prepare and complete this book. My editors at the Press, Ivon Asquith and Nancy Lane, have been tolerant and patient and very understanding in the face of a book which is rather different from the one we first discussed. They should know that their forbearance is much appreciated.

I owe thanks, appreciation, and much else to Patricia Hilden, without whom this book would not have happened, and other things besides. Nor is this the extent of my acknowledgement to her, since her own work has greatly influenced mine. Her research on the working women of French Flanders and their experience of French socialism in its early years has taught me a lot that I did not know, and encouraged me to look afresh at old subjects. I have also learnt from her, sometimes by example, a lot more about radical politics. I know that this book has benefited enormously thereby. I hope it shows.

The book is dedicated to the memory of George Lichtheim. He died more than a decade ago and some of his work has been overtaken by new research. But Lichtheim is still quite unmatched in his ability to capture, in taut and succinct prose, the essential features of the history of the Left in Europe. Reading him now is as much a pleasure, above all a pleasure, as it was when it first stimulated my interest in the 1960s. Nobody, as the jingle goes, does it better. Lichtheim was unique among those writing in English in his thoroughly European grasp of the importance of the history of ideas in the history of social movements, and was magnificently gifted in his ability to illustrate and elucidate the point.

Although his interests were encyclopaedic (his *Europe in the Twentieth Century* is a masterpiece of its kind, witty, allusive, and the best textbook in its field), he had a special interest in France. His essays on the elucubrations of the French intellectual Left in the 1960s should be required reading for all those who discovered marxism in the 1970s and disillusion a decade later. His commentary on the history of the socialist idea in France, *Marxism in Modern France*, is still, twenty years after its appearance, the best place to acquire an *understanding* of what was going on, though like all Lichtheim's work it presumed a curious intelligence in the reader and made no concessions to intellectual indolence.

What Lichtheim did not write, though he frequently alluded both to the desirability of such an undertaking and its extraordinary difficulty, was a social account of left-wing thought and its political practice in France. This book is in no way an attempt to meet that need. Instead, it treats a number of themes illuminated in passing by Lichtheim's own work, and takes as its premiss and

justification his own emphasis: the impossibility of saying anything intelligible about the history of the popular movement in France since 1789 without a well-founded grasp of the history of socialist thought. If I have succeeded at all in conflating the two in some way which illuminates them both, the credit is his, and I am glad of the opportunity to say how and why this is so.

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The Left in France

In 1970, while doing some research in the city of Toulon, I was invited for lunch to the home of a family all of whose members were active in the local Socialist movement. It was a time of upheaval in the Socialist Party, the period between the death of the old SFIO and Mitterrand's final seizure of control, and lunch was dominated by heated debate on the subject. Afterwards, sitting on the balcony looking out to the Mediterranean islands, we talked about the socialist tradition in the region and I asked whether anyone knew when the tradition of being 'on the Left' in this family had begun. There was some confusion on the husband's side because of an Italian ancestry dating from the annexation of Nice, but his wife had no hesitation. We have been 'à gauche' since the 1790s, she announced, when an ancestor stood out against Toulon's 'treason' with the English. But as to *why* they had always stood so firmly on one side of the great divide in France, for this there was no ready answer.

Two reflections struck me at the time. The first was how much this family (of schoolteachers, incidentally) stood in contrast to some others I had known elsewhere in France, despite sharing similarities of occupation, income, taste, and sometimes even opinion. I had often supposed that the difference was simply political, and of course it is. But it is more, and deeper. There is a *culture* of the Left in France, whose profound historical significance lies precisely in the frequent inability of those who share it to say just what it is that accounts for and describes their views. Those French acquaintances of mine who are not on the Left cannot be so readily identified, nor are they so quick to locate themselves in that way. Deep in the Sarthe, the Vendée, or the Morbihan, of course, one still can (or could, until quite recently) meet people for whom the events of 1793 are as yesterday, and whose whole social vision is dominated by the experiences of their forebears. But even though this not infrequently has the political consequence of benefiting the Right at election time, it does not by any means entail a consistent political conservatism. And it certainly does not give the

Breton anything very positive in common with similarly inclined voters from Alsace, the eastern foothills of the Massif, or the people of the Béarn and Basque departments of the far south-west.

In short, there is not a culture of Right, or 'Centre' in the same way that there is one of the Left. It is the Left which provides its opponents with their common ground, without which regional, religious, and personal antagonisms would divide them deeply.

The second reflection concerns the sheer longevity of radical political traditions in France. It is customary, at a time of Labour's decline in Britain, to speak of it as retreating to its heartlands, its long-held and impregnable bases in the industrial communities of the north and the 'celtic fringe'. Yet by comparison with France, these are footholds only recently established. Before the rise of industrial cities, with the revolution in textiles and the growing importance of coal, most of today's Labour strongholds were villages, and when they had a local political tradition it was quite different in kind, dating to the old politics of the restricted suffrage. Even its most sympathetic historian does not propose the existence of a working-class political tradition in Britain before the 1820s, and as for some more formal expression of that tradition and its interests, we must wait at least until the 1880s for firm evidence. There was a history of radical opposition, of course, from Wilkes to Cobbett and beyond, but the extent to which it can be said to have linked with and contributed directly to the rise of the modern Left in Britain is, to say the least, a matter of heated debate.

No such controversies surround the history of the Left in France. (There are, of course, others.) To be 'à gauche' in France, whether in Lille, Paris, Toulon, or a thousand tiny villages, was to be Republican, Radical, Socialist, or Communist at different times (or at the same time in different places). All, however, were related in some very ancient way, and indeed that relationship and its complexities and contradictions were a source of strength, often in the apparent absence of more determinate political characteristics and programmes. And my friends in Toulon were remarkably representative of their half of France in the confidence with which they averred their political identity, the antiquity of their claim to it—and the uncertainty surrounding the exact meaning to be attached to the tradition to which they were so unwaveringly faithful.

Tracing the ancestry of the geological cleavage in French political culture may not be the most profitable way to proceed, even though everything points to history and memory as the most important

ingredient in the division. The vocabulary of the Left certainly encourages such an undertaking: workers/bourgeoisie, *peuple/exploitants* (in the pejorative sense acquired after 1830 in the towns), patriots/traitors, *travailleurs/oisifs*, us/them. And there are other, sometimes older oppositions which intersect with more recent divisions: order/movement, Catholic/anti-clerical, provinces/Paris, periphery/centre, north/south, urban/rural. These cast us back to the great domestic conflicts of the monarchical centuries and beyond—the Wars of Religion and the Albigensian Crusade. To bind all of these together in some tidy manner is a profound error, of course, a mistake in causality at the least, crude reductionism at worst. But the Manichean character of political argument in France does point towards one very relevant aspect of the question, that of vocabulary. To be on the Left in France is before all else to share a style of discourse, a way of talking about politics, present and past. When Georges Clemenceau announced that one is either 'for' or 'against' the Revolution, he was appealing directly to a rich, or 'thick' complex of beliefs on which he and his audience could rely for communication and identification.

It is the French Revolution which supplies the form for much of this discourse, both in the vocabulary itself, but also in the resonances produced by that vocabulary in popular memory. The very scale of national political mobilization in the decade after 1789 ensured that certain phrases would retain their force and emphasis well into the twentieth century (indeed until at least the late 1960s, in the hands of the educated élite). This is especially the case for certain particularly contentious matters, such as the problem of legitimacy. Who might rule, and on what terms? It is worth noting that from St Just to Blum, the Left in France was consistently more interested in the grounds on which a person or party could claim to inherit authority, than the ends to which that authority was to be used. This is why political programmes in France always seem, to the Anglo-Saxon eye, so extraordinarily vapid (and are thus erroneously dismissed as so much flannel, as though cynicism were a more truly human characteristic than faith). The *locus classicus* here is the Bonapartist inheritance. Only a thoroughgoing Revolution could produce Napoleon, whose claim to power resided more completely in the putative support of the people than did that of the clubs or the Assembly. Hence the ease with which both Bonapartes, Grand and Petit alike, could invoke, successfully, a populist and revolutionary legitimacy. What they *did* might horrify the

Left, then and since, but the only effective barrier was institutional—in ideological terms, their claim was embarrassingly plausible.

Formally, then, the history of the French Left begins with the French Revolution, and many of its problems arise from this source. But some of the key motifs in left-wing discourse breach the Revolutionary barrier reef and are rooted in earlier national concerns. The discussion of power, and more specifically the powers of the state, are rather different in France from elsewhere, in that they are manifestly more inclined to a sympathy for the central authority. This is frequently and erroneously held to be the unfortunate result of the French Left's failure to impose strict quotas upon the importation of ideas. If only the indigenous socialist movement had kept German marxism at a distance, it is suggested, the modern Left would not be saddled with such a misplaced enthusiasm for planning, control, and central authority in general.

In truth, however, it was the early modern French philosophers, and their enlightenment heirs, who first drafted the maps onto which the socialists have superimposed their own topography of political authority. From the sixteenth century, critical observers in France were far more apprehensive (and for good reason) of the over-mighty individual subject than of the sovereign, individual, or institutional. And while they did not themselves universally propose or approve the historical solution to this—the melding of state and society into something at times resembling a unity—their instincts, like those of their successors in the 1790s, where to favour the state as the fountain-head of authority, even at the cost of a steady diminution of the powers of the localities. As to the rights of individuals, these had never been estimated very highly by critics of absolutism, much less by its apologists; in so far as they were identified as a subject for consideration, they were thought best protected by the disinterested powers of a well-founded and powerful authority. It was the Fronde, not Hegel, that supplied this instinct to radical political theory in France, and it is still there today.[1]

A side-effect of this unbalanced concern with social security, so to speak, has been the inability of the French Left ever to theorize very convincingly about the state. Not that they have not tried. From St Simon to Poulantzas the history of socialist thought in France is permeated with a concern to *define* the nature of authority, a concern

[1] See Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980), esp. pp. 453–61.

which became the more urgent after 1880 when the marxists faced the problem, then as now, that Marx himself had never satisfactorily explained where the modern state stood in a system of social intercourse determined by production relations. But even here one notes a curious absence of interest in what it is that the state may properly *do* (the abiding focus of Anglo-American writings on the subject). The French socialists have tried mightily to *account* for the state, and in particular to show how the state just must be the servant of a given social group (for good or evil). As to what it might *do* with its power, this is assumed to be entailed in the description of its origins and not to merit discussion.[2]

A different perspective, surfacing in the Proudhonian tradition and in the work of radicals such as Alain, *appears* to offer an alternative branch of left thinking in France, emphasizing popular initiative and a diminution of the state's powers. It has sometimes been supposed that this is *the* socialist tradition in France, overpowered by foreign competition but indigenous to radical thought there and unjustly underestimated.

Yet of the two strands in socialist thinking it was the 'anti-state' position which was the more recent—indeed, it was a direct response to the dominant emphasis in the French Revolution upon administration and regulation. As such it was always tinged with 'reaction', however unfair the charge, and was at one point accused of being the 'objective' collaborator of the enemies of Revolutionary government. At only two moments during the nineteenth century did those who doubted the efficacy or desirability of the paternal state gain a firm foothold in popular sentiment: in sections of the workers' movement under the Second Empire, with political and sectional reasons for seeking a reduction in the regulatory powers of government, and in the partial re-emergence of provincial consciousness towards the end of the century.

[2] This preference for the abstracted theoretical premiss over the empirical outcome seems to be deeply rooted in French thought. De Tocqueville tells a story of an eminent French engineer who was sent to study the Liverpool–Manchester railway shortly after its opening. After a cursory observation of the railway itself, Monsieur Navier, the engineer in question, made some theoretical calculations of a complicated nature to test certain information he had been given about the workings of the railway. His conclusion was, 'The thing is impossible, it does not fit at all with the theory'. Whereupon he returned to France. It is a pity that M. Navier made his career at *Ponts et Chaussées*—he would have been a wild success at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure.* See A. de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland,* ed. J. P. Mayer (London, 1958), p. 113 (quoted in Jack Simmons, *The Railway in England and Wales 1830–1914* (Leicester, 1978)), p. 22.

One can go further. The 'alternative Left' in France founded its thinking about power and authority upon the same central premiss as that which underpinned the dominant strand. This was the common assumption that the people retained the final power to confer legitimacy upon those who governed them, and to withdraw it when the need arose. Disagreement (in so far as it was not merely a matter of personality) concerned the optimum way to guarantee this power to the citizenry and the extent to which the services owed them by those in office could be provided with or without the further enhancement of the capacities of the state. In other words the area of disagreement was formal and practical. It was thus of secondary significance (for a discussion of this point see chapter four in this book).

As a result of the way in which the debate over power and government was thus cast in the French socialist tradition, the minority tradition (whether we call it *autogestionnaire,* decentralizing, or simply anarchist) has always been wrong-footed. Its strongest suit has been the defence of vested interests, whether those of Proudhon's privileged property-owning artisans or Alain's suspicious villagers, fearful of taxation, conscription, and Paris. The Left, especially the Radicals and more recently the Parti Socialiste, have had good electoral grounds for incorporating elements of the anti-state vocabulary into their own programmes, but the historial sentiments behind such promises as decentralization or workers' control have never sat comfortably with the political culture of the mainstream Left, and it is Michel Rocard's identification with these and other iconoclastic preferences, for example, which have isolated him today in his political family.

The Left, then, is fairly clearly and closely associated with a particular sense of the state in France (which does *not* mean that it is, or always has been, a friend of the authority vested in Paris—but its opposition has never hinged upon a questioning of the powers of government, only their source). On other matters it is much less determinate, which is a reminder of just how much the problem of institutions has dominated political debate in French history. Indeed, much of what passes for radical political thought in France might better be understood once again as variations upon a mode of discourse. For all its many continuities with and from the Old Regime, contemporary France is above all the first European nation to have been constructed around a self-consciously revolutionary doctrine. Loyalty to such a doctrine is thus an integral part of the meaning of being Left in France. This was much clearer in the years from 1815 to

1945 than it is today. In that period the institutional form of revolutionary sympathy, the Republic, was under constant threat, or at least in question, and the institutional problem thus uppermost in left-wing concerns (this was true for the Socialists during most of these years and even for the Communists from 1934–8 and again from 1941).

Since 1945 loyalty to the revolutionary doctrine has taken on a rather anachronistic air, in keeping with the rapidity of social change in the country over the past generation. But it has been rather easily replaced by a no less compelling loyalty to certain residual tenets of the marxist tradition. This tradition was facilitated by a long period of overlap during which the socialism of Jaurès and Blum combined marxist social analysis and final goals with democratic or republican methods drawn from the earlier tradition. So long as political marxism itself *had* no methods of its own this peculiar combination worked rather well. After 1917 it was no longer plausible as a *revolutionary* practice, and there followed two decades of ideological confusion. The difficulty was sorted out by the experience of fascism, and the new orthodoxy of the Left from 1945–75 emerged thence.

Beyond doctrine, there is the importance of *debate.* The French are notoriously slow to join national organizations (unions, political parties, social or charitable associations), but the history of radical politics in France has none the less been a story of collective activity grouped around incessant discussion. From the clubs of the Revolution to the clubs of 1848, from the *chambrées* and *cercles* of the 1840s to the clubs (again) of the 1960s, public engagement in political argument has been a vital part of the action of the Left in modern France. The peculiar force of this way of mobilizing support and establishing programmes and tactics is that it derives from the way in which *power* was broked at the moment of the creation. In the high months of the Great Revolution, in Paris but also in some provincial cities, the right to rule could depend upon the government's ability to claim that it spoke for the men of the clubs. This in turn gave the debates of the latter a special interest, as the *de facto* source of political legitimacy.

From this feature of the history of the Revolution (a moment at best, but a terribly important one) there has emerged the peculiarly French relationship between theoretical debate and radical political action. In other countries this is frequently seen as a fine example of the hubris of intellectuals, unable to act but given to proclaiming that their very words are action incarnate. But here again, history has served France