

Trying to square the circle

Jean-Paul Sartre, Philippe Gavi and Pierre Victor, *It is Right to Rebel*, trans. Adrian van de Hoven and Basil Kingstone (London: Routledge, 2017). xx+334pp. £65.00 hb., 978 1 13874 976 4

In November 1972 Jean-Paul Sartre sat down with two young militants to conduct a series of discussions that could be published as a book, the proceeds from which would help the soon-to-be launched leftwing newspaper *Libération*. The militants were Benny Lévy alias Pierre Victor, the leader of the most influential French Maoist organisation (Gauche Prolétarienne), and a libertarian activist Philippe Gavi, both co-founders of the paper. Translated now as *It is Right to Rebel*, the book has received a new preface from Gavi, the only one of its three authors who is still alive, which discusses not only *Libération* and the immediate context of the discussions, but also touches on the broader situation of militant politics in the early 1970s around Victor's organisation, on the one hand, and Gavi's own, more libertarian position, on the other. The way Gavi ends his preface by personalising Victor's and Sartre's radical 'beliefs', tends to appear symptomatic of the failure that the political moment of the discussions would soon come to suffer.

The book consists of 23 dated discussions (21 chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion) which run chronologically from November 1972 to March 1974 (apart from a discussion from February 1974 serving as an introduction). At times somewhat arbitrarily titled, the sections move back and forth between different topics around socialism and revolutionary politics, including, for example, the Communist Party, legality versus legitimacy, the division of labour, the figure of the revolutionary, freedom, dialectics, the relations between the people, the masses and class, time and history, marginality versus majority.

The broader structure of the book can be seen to unfold roughly through three stages, defined partly by the historical sequence during which the discussions take place. The first few chapters concentrate mainly on Sartre's personal trajectory, from a 'liberal intellectual' to a 'critical fellow-traveller' of the Communist Party in the early 1950s to a friend and co-activist of Maoist militants in the late 1960s. The

central theme of the subsequent chapters is the practice of the Maoists belonging to Gauche Prolétarienne, led by Victor. Gradually the main attention shifts to contemporary events such as Chile before and after the coup d'état, the 1973 Arab-Israel War, and, most importantly, the taking over (in June 1973) of the Lip watch factory by its workers. Lip marked a defining moment in the sequence of post-68 revolutionary struggles in France, as the focus shifted to fully autonomous workers' mobilisations, thereby encouraging the self-dissolution of Gauche Prolétarienne. This self-dissolution was duly announced in November 1973, although the occasion goes unregistered in the present book.

The English edition puts Sartre somewhat inadequately at the forefront. Where the original French mentions the authors in alphabetical order, Sartre's name now stands in a bigger font and is followed by those of Gavi and Victor. Sartre's picture also appears on the cover of the book. Understandable as this might be for marketing purposes, there is nothing in the content of the book that justifies Sartre's place at the forefront apart from the early chapters which appear as an interview. Although Sartre approaches the discussions often from the perspective of his philosophical ideas (most notably freedom, but also serialisation, groups-in-fusion, fraternity-terror) these ideas do not have any privileged weight, for, as he's the first to admit, it is collective revolutionary practice, or revolt, which has become the only legitimate source of ideas here. As Sartre himself explains, whereas the classical revolutionaries lamented 'the gap between reality and ideas', ideas are now 'formed in the struggle'. This is the lesson of the movement which had started in May 1968 and whose continuity was at stake in the struggles of the time.

The widely-repeated Maoist slogan which gives the book its title affirms a norm to justify revolutionary politics without providing a preformed guide for specific or local subversive actions. Rather, it valid-

ates all such actions by embracing their very illegality. Sartre is unequivocal on this point: 'What must be developed in people is not respect for an order claiming to be revolutionary, but the spirit of revolt against any order.' The central idea of his philosophy is rethought in light of this principle: 'Freedom rebels, and works out a tactic of rebellion.' After years of engagement with the Communist Party and its ideas, 'which passed for thinking', in the Maoist movement Sartre states that he has found a home for some of his old convictions:

What has changed me is what I see reappearing in new aspects: old things I used to believe in, in my teenage years – ethics, for example – which I gave up in the name of realism when I began to work with the communists a bit, and which I'm finding again now in the anti-hierarchical and libertarian movement. Reality is no longer what is, in other words dead institutions and general facts. ... I am rediscovering, this time materially, ethics as the foundation of realism, or if you like, a materialistic and ethical realism.

This 'living ethics' is the basis on which Victor and his organisation attempt to construct and concentrate a force effective enough to overcome the present order. The aim is 'to pass from a set of heterogeneous rebellions to ... a rallying together, a union, a merger'. Victor explains the ways in which Gauche Prolétarienne has tried to achieve this, by creating and spreading general normative orientations out of particular acts of revolt, 'to make a new rule from what was out of whack in the system of enslavement, to make a marginal action into a central action'. 'Mao Zedong Thought' is the very name of inventing such ways to rally together multiple forces in concrete struggles.

Following the guiding idea of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Gauche Prolétarienne wanted to combine organised revolutionary action along with decomposition of all hierarchical relations, all relations of command between centralised power and localised acts. This defines the constantly reoccurring problem in the discussions: How to retain 'freedom within organisation' if freedom is understood first of all in terms of revolt against all order? How to construct an overarching unity without compromising the immediacy and directness of revolt? The constant danger is thus that an 'active egalitarian will'

loses its immediate basis in those who revolt as it is formed into a more organised collective control of the process; or that the overall process generates forms of knowledge that grassroots activists lack, thus restoring intellectual hierarchies and authoritarianism within the revolutionary movement.

The task inherited from 1968 was to destroy the 'outside synthesisers'; the revolutionary 'must be in a milieu of real rebellion', otherwise there won't be 'any real democratic reflex or reflection'. At the same time, the whole point for the Maoists was to create relations between actions which are not related immediately, and the way the question tends to be presented in absolutising terms – full immediate freedom versus organisatory control which sets limits to it from outside – risks making the problem intractable by definition, the political equivalent of trying to square the circle.

It is nevertheless the leader of the supposedly spontaneist Gauche Prolétarienne who here most determinedly tries to insist on the necessity of centralisation – albeit not without constantly problematising it at the same time. Victor knows that, in one way or another, 'the multiplicity of powers' need to relate to 'the co-ordinating centre of those powers'. It is Sartre and Gavi who tend to criticise Victor for not allowing distinct revolts to keep their autonomy, for not paying enough attention to the multiplicity of contradictions and powers. True, Victor holds onto his more classical revolutionary tendencies only to an extent, and the further we advance into the book, the more cautious he becomes with respect to any 'hasty generalisations'.

This takes us to the ultimate irony of the book. While in its early chapters we read about the inadequacy of the Communist Party, which had only served to render people passive and make them wait for the revolution indefinitely, in the end we return from the other side to a comparable wait-and-see attitude. 'When "Leftism" has matured and is better understood', Gavi explains and the others more or less agree, 'it will be time for the question of building an organisation which unites the revolutionaries according to a new system.' As for now, we should withdraw from organising to avoid any traps of our old authoritarian habits.

As we know, the 'leftist' movement was not given

much of a chance to 'mature', and the radical core of May 68 soon came to be seen as but an ephemeral moment of emancipation. In the coming years and decades, many of the most radical Maoists, Victor included, would find the absoluteness included in the ideas of pure freedom and revolt attainable only in the form of religious thought, while others, such as Jacques Rancière, managed to remain within the earthly sphere only by rethinking revolutionary politics in more modest terms, by stressing intermittent disruptions. Reading these old discussions from the

early 1970s gives us an opportunity to revisit the moment which gave rise to currents of radical thought characterised largely by a rejection of any kind of determined and conscious organisational force of synthesis. In so doing, they might allow us to re-evaluate the directions taken by some currents of political thought which would develop during – and fail to challenge adequately – an era defined, in so many ways, by the profound and lasting defeat of radical politics.

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Not German enough?

Tom Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018). 430pp., £123.00 hb., 978 9 00435 602 3

Amid the copious notes taken by Guy Debord on the philosophy of Hegel, the following extract from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* appears repeatedly: 'By the little which satisfies Spirit, we can measure the extent of its loss.' For Hegel, this was intended as a reproach to the parochial obsession with empirical detail. As to why the fragment held Debord's attention, it is not altogether misplaced to assume its significance lay in his competence as a diagnostician of modern society. An *enfant terrible* among other interventions of the New Left, Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle* attempted to give inner coherence to the way in which the capitalist economy develops its fetishised and reified character into an objective social form mediated by appearances. The society of the spectacle refers to the social and unitary organisation of appearances embedded with a meaning that contains both the image and the goal of social development under the commodity economy. As a totality, the spectacle both defines that which appears and gives to appearance essential actuality. For Debord, the spirit of the spectacular epoch is thus reduced to a satisfaction afforded by the objectivity of appearance-forms, which had become – under the 'enriched privation' of postwar prosperity – indistinguishable from a base colourless survival.

If the Hegelian and Marxian resonances of this

description are readily apparent, they have nonetheless been minimised within most scholarship on Debord and the Situationist International. Instead, one finds Debord as a critic of media distraction, of unrestrained consumerism or as a mere heir to Dada and Surrealism. Yet even a cursory encounter with *The Society of the Spectacle* clearly demonstrates that the spectacle is neither chiefly concerned with visual imagery nor reducible to the advertisements and entertainment that saturate modern society. There have, of course, been exceptions to such readings, although not many. Anselm Jappe's authoritative *Guy Debord* (1993) – which Debord himself considered to be 'the best-informed book about me' – remains unmatched in its situating of Debord within the Hegelian Marxist tradition of Lukács. Nevertheless, most accounts have largely ignored the profoundly Hegelian dimension of Debord's works, at best giving it only anecdotal attention and failing to heed what Debord himself exhorts in a 1971 letter: 'I will affirm to you straight away: I understand *perfectly* what I have written. Obviously one cannot fully comprehend it without Marx, and especially Hegel.'

By contrast, Tom Bunyard's wide-ranging monograph convincingly casts Debord as 'a twentieth-century Young Hegelian' and, through the influence of the young Marx and Lukács, as a thinker of histor-