

**Detrivialising democracy:
Marcel Gauchet between enchantment and disenchantment**

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In *L'Avènement de la démocratie (The Advent of Democracy)*, Marcel Gauchet claims that our democracies are in crisis as a result of modernity's difficulty in letting go of the religious order. But this thesis, while challenging, suffers from being over systematic, viewing any desire for unity as nostalgia for the divine. Moreover, it throws the issue of social struggles into the shade.

Review: Marcel Gauchet, *L'Avènement de la démocratie*, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque des sciences humaines", 2007 ; vol. I, *La Révolution moderne*, 207 p., 18,50 € et vol. II, *La Crise du libéralisme*, 312 p., 21,50 €.

Marcel Gauchet has begun the publication of four volumes brought together under the title *L'Avènement de la démocratie*. Overall, the quadrilogy adopts a historical order. The first volume, *La Révolution moderne (The Modern Revolution) (RM)* outlines the whole project and then covers the period from the beginning of the 16th century to 1880. The second, *La Crise du libéralisme (The Crisis of Liberalism) (CL)*, is about the period 1880–1914. The third will cover the totalitarianisms of the 20th century and the last, from 1970 to the present day.

In this editorial collection we see the conclusion of a more extensive cycle. In the majority of his works since *Désenchantement du monde (The Disenchantment of the World)* (Gallimard, 1985), Gauchet has applied himself, from various slants, to considering the difficulties encountered by modern democracies in stabilising and subjugating the recurrent crises confronting them. The four volumes of *L'Avènement de la démocratie* aim to provide an

overall principle for understanding these crises. The collection is presented as an attempt to “detrivialise the idea of liberal democracy” (*RM*, p. 45): behind this apparently obvious statement lies undeniable complexity. It means taking the central paradox of our time by the scruff of the neck: liberal democracy has become our only horizon, the only conceivable way to govern our fate; however, the fact remains that it is largely opaque to itself. The author sets out to find the key to our understanding by delving deeper into the arguments he established in *Désenchantement du monde*.

In that work he was demonstrating how the creation of the modern world is based on substituting one type of foundation for another, moving from a transcendent, magical-theological foundation to a rational, immanent one. Thus, *L’Avènement de la démocratie* develops the following hypothesis: modernity is the child of its own, painful labour. Emergence from the religious world is an infinitely more difficult, lengthy process than we tend to imagine. It happens by stages and takes winding detours. The “religious formula” – defined as the power of attraction of “The divine One” or “The Immemorial One” – continues to serve, in various disguises, as a formal model. Liberal democracy’s “growing pains” can therefore be described as expressions of overwhelming grief that it must nevertheless overcome to find its own truth and succeed in its plurisecular effort to achieve autonomy, because the latter produces two inextricably linked yet contradictory effects: “we are less and less masters [of our world], while we are its only masters” (*CL*, p. 69).

The three inventions of the modern revolution and the “unexpected divinity” of liberalism

The first volume details the emergence of the three successive elements in the “mix” of the modern order: “politics”, “law” and “history”. “Politics”, as theorised by Machiavelli and Bodin is the establishment of the State – expedited in particular by the Wars of Religion – at “a point in human space from where mankind is judge of its own existence”, and “the enclosure of the human sphere in its relative self-sufficiency” (*RM*, p. 65). “Law” is the affirmation that the individual is the basic component of any legitimacy: In three different ways, Hobbes, Locke and then Rousseau theorise: “a genesis of power that at the same time is a theory of its legitimate organisation” built upon the pedestal of individual rights. (p. 82). Hegel is the master of thought on “History”, which rejects the belief that progress moves only towards the future – as perceived by Lumières – in favour of awareness of a future structured by double-polarisation. Increasingly, there exists “the idea that we are coming out of the past,

in both senses : we are distancing and separating ourselves from it but recognising it, at this distance, as where we have come from and what has made us ” (p. 147). From this ‘discovery’ of history follows the idea of a self-produced and self-regulating civil society, the result of slow sedimentation and a selective process over time.

However, if these three elements constitute the “modern revolution”, there is no guarantee that they can strike a chord and form a harmonious whole. In contrast, says Gauchet, such harmonisation is what we see in the almost miraculous and therefore short-lived nature of the “surprise divinity” of the “liberal conservatism” of 1815-1830 and the “conservative liberalism” of 1830-1848. It is also illustrated, after “the setbacks of 1848”, by “the golden age of liberalism beginning around 1860” and culminating around 1880 (p. 187-192). A miraculous period, firstly because state sovereignty and individualism are reconciled in a doctrine of limited representation (censal, according to Guizot’s theory) that goes some way towards satisfying the spirit of emancipation without jeopardising public order. This age of politicians is the moment when the politics of power descended from on high to dominate the social order (p. 163-165) starts to be replaced by politics as “consultative government” : The State becomes the servant of civil society’s aspirations. A miraculous period, furthermore, because first Comte, then J. S. Mill, forge a concept of progress that does not turn its back on the past : on the contrary, it “germinates the seeds of the past, linking it with the present”, and accommodates “modern activism” and “ancient godliness” (p. 205-206).

Three “liberal idols” – “progress”, “nation” and “science”, maintain this “transitional concurrence of opposites”. But these three idols are based on beliefs, extending the form of religious belief without realising it. So this “happy coincidence” has a “hidden dimension that robs its agents of a crucial part of the history they are living”: “The two sides of the coin are opposed, but at the same time, one side is shaped by the other – the religious One” (p. 194). In summary, the “crisis of liberalism” is inevitable, as “the new idols will very quickly be hit by disbelief”: “this will be the frightful experience of the 20th century” (p. 206).

Liberalism’s crisis: the experience of detachment

The second volume dissects the first fruits of this “disbelief”, this “crisis of liberalism” of 1880-1914. Here, Gauchet is in his element. His great scholarship comes into its own when he elucidates the spirit of less than four decades over 300 pages, whereas the 200 pages of the first volume skim four centuries. Suffice to say that the second volume is more rewarding, interesting reading than the first: Gauchet’s virtuosity is much more evident in his

rough sketches – capturing the real-life character and concrete detail of a moment in history – than in fresco or panorama.

Nietzsche is the first to prophesy liberalism's crisis: "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries", he wrote; and according to Gauchet, he knows not how right he is. Despite accelerating the detheologisation of western thought by proclaiming that God is dead and shattering the liberal idols by making himself an apostle of integral relativism, he remains troubled by the "religious formula". "By dint of positive espousal of the thirst for power and the eternal return, one still finds, after complete deconstruction, [...] something like The One and something like a cosmos" (CL, p. 43). In this he goes on to name a whole series of philosophical heirs: according to the author, Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger would not escape this nostalgia for pre-rational authenticity.

However, the subject does not stay with the philosophical formulations of crisis and is mostly dedicated to "historico-social" change. It describes the arrival of the "organisation age" (by this Gauchet means associations, unions or mass parties as well as large firms), leading to the advent of a "world without masters" (p. 62). The separation of civil society and State becomes inevitable: societies, torn apart by the struggle of the vested interests organising themselves *against* the State, must mourn the passing of the very idea of the general will (p. 154). Gone, too, is the miraculous compromise between faith in the future and respect for the past. This "detheologisation of history" (p. 136) is borne out not only in Sorel's historical catastrophism but also in the crisis of tradition as an idea, the overvaluation of an absolutised present (symptoms of which are the inventions of "news" and science-fiction) or again, by Tönnies and Durkheim's theory on the disappearance of community ties in favour of contractual ones.

In a word, the status of the State becomes increasingly weak. If parliamentary regimes appear to establish themselves in definitive style, it is only to find themselves nurturing immediate anti-parliamentarianism that reproaches the politicians both for their powerlessness and for the confiscation of power to the detriment of any real representation of civil society. This turn of the century State certainly finds its learned theorists in Jellinek, Esmein, Hauriou or Carré de Malberg, who recognise the realisation of the modern political order in the abstract, impersonal power of legislative-administrative structures: the real sovereignty lies with the formal institutions of the State machinery and the civil service that assures its continuity and efficiency, not in the froth of visible political power – unstable even when uncorrupted. But while the State increases internal activity, it decreases in external legitimacy, because it is via those seen to be in charge – its representatives – that public opinion perceives it. But the representatives, caught up in the political dance, are no longer perceived as the

expression of a natural aristocracy or as baton-carriers of the aspirations of those they represent.

This disrepute is rendered all the more threatening by the fact that the political stage is the scene of a clash between two contradictory trends: on one hand, a resurgence of dominating, interventionist State action illustrated, for Gauchet, by the beginnings of the welfare state as well of colonial imperialism; and on the other, a rising assertion of individual rights against the State. On the horizon of this “return of the entitled individual” is the outline of a new individualism (depicted by Ibsen, Georges Palante, Henry Michel), a “libertarian stance” that does not flow into any kind of collective, and drastically violates the principle of “The One”. But this individualism engenders fear of detachment and creates a desire to regain some kind of integrative identity “allowing the individual to embrace his community, to feel completely at home there”: this desire is “one of the main drivers of the folly ahead” (p. 297). This folly will be the subject of the third volume.

Where philosophy is thinking with its feet again

It is impossible here to detail all the food for thought offered by these two volumes – especially the second – which are frequently convincing, subtle and scrupulous in their arguments, at times also so dazzling as to become peremptory or oversimplified. Instead we shall focus on highlighting the problems posed by the general hypotheses that set the tone of interpretation.

Gauchet links the elements of modernity with great figures in the history of thought: Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche. As the topic suggests a comprehensive, exhaustive method, one is left to question two huge omissions: Adam Smith and Marx. Both are certainly mentioned in passing, but they are not considered as contributors to the shape of the modern ideological universe. It is as if theirs were not among the possible orders within which modern politics would have to make its crucial choices. The idea of the self-regulating market is left unanalyzed, in that it consists of theoretical hypotheses whose test conditions would have to be examined. It is not portrayed as a matrix of debate and political decision. It is reduced to one of the components in the discovery of history, namely the self-organisation of civil society, itself presented as an obvious and established fact: “The market [...] develops, in the age of progress, with the multiplication of the goods of labour [...]. It becomes autonomous in the age of history, with the double consecration of free agents and working society. It fastens to itself and begins in earnest to function as a self-regulated

system” (*RM*, p. 183). Thus, there are no employers exploiting employees, but “entrepreneurs” who “mobilise other individuals *via* the labour market” (*RM*, p. 178). Suffice to say that the Marxist hypothesis, describing the advent of the bourgeois world as the plundering and exploitation of a majority of workers by a minority of owners, is never seriously mentioned either, not even in refute.

The meaning of these concealments becomes clearer subsequently. Everything happens as if the social and economic questions were non-existent in the problems facing liberal democracies. Doubtless – and the paradox is considerable – Gauchet is well aware both of changes in the economic order and of social tensions; he even accepts their role in significant developments. But these aspects of the modern political order serve only as a kind of background scenery, mere opportunities to crystallise the real problems of modern democracies, which are portrayed purely in terms of symbolic social organisation, pursuit of meaning, and legitimacy and identity.

To throw out economics, wholesale, for the benefit of rehabilitating the discursive and political order is taking things to an extreme that is hard to support. One can understand thus how a world organised around the values of Guizot (an “informed and balanced ethos”) or Thiers might constitute “unexpected divinity”, a “harmonious blend” in the eyes of the author (*RM*, p. 187-189). It would no doubt be improper (and so old fashioned) to recall that these are the miraculously harmonious times when strikes are outlawed and suppressed by the army; when workers are also forbidden to organise themselves into unions; when the majority of them, including women and children, work day and night, sometimes more than 12 hours a day, in exchange for what Adam Smith himself had called a “subsistence wage” – until a hesitant labour law places some restrictions on what Marx called capitalism’s “orgiastic age”. It is no surprise, then, to find social legislation and the resurgence of an ethos of military conquest treated similarly in the second volume. Social protection and redistribution are presented as the expression of an archaic desire for an all-powerful State. No mention, in this political history, of the slow and painful struggle led by the exploited classes, to redefine how profit was shared between capital and labour – a struggle that, as such, could also be meaningful in our understanding of today’s political question.

As for colonisation and the imperialist tendencies of Western states, they have nothing to do with a large-scale plundering exercise, says Gauchet. To penetrate the unfathomable “mystery”, one must put aside explanations based on the logic of economic desire: imperialist enterprises are just “narcissistic constructions”, symbolic strategies to deal with the problems of national identity and collective anxiety (*CL*, p. 212-244). No doubt Gauchet is partly right on this point (which, besides, is broadly in line with recent historiographical tacks), but it is

difficult to follow in the unilateral nature of his interpretation and there is something suspect, even uncomfortable, in its insistency.

Haunted by “The One”

The other confusing theme thrown up by these two volumes is the role they attribute to “coming out of the religious” in understanding the crises of liberal democracies. It is a seductive hypothesis and certainly helps to shed light on Gauchet’s questions. But its massive, systematic and exclusive dimension undermines its credibility. The author’s rendering of the “religious formula” is particularly striking. Its “key characteristics”, he writes, fit “into one single word: *unity*”; unity of power, unity of the seen and unseen, unity of the social order, continuity of the historical order (*RM*, p. 52-55). From this perspective, it is hardly difficult to see traces of this “ghost that haunts history” (*RM*, p. 9) more or less everywhere: the moment unity is sought within plurality, disorder or division, “The Sacred One” interferes with and hinders the work of emancipation.

Gauchet himself qualified this far more in *Désenchantement du monde*, in which the fascination with unity was linked with religious belief only in certain of its belated forms, attributed to contamination of the unifying ethos of *logos* (*op. cit.*, part I, ch. III, p. 48-49). In this work, it was “The Other” (governing the heteronomic electorate) whose figure was most indicative of the religious, rather than “The One”. In fact one might argue that the “religious formula” contains more than just “The One”. Conversely, it is possible to imagine a preoccupation with “the One” that owes nothing to a longing for transcendence; or even - and why not - that the body-politic’s unifying aim has its own role to play in the history of emancipation.

This would require, for example, that we think in terms passed down by a philosopher who applied himself eminently to “detrivialising democracy”, namely, Rousseau. It would require us to acknowledge that the notions of the general interest and the general will – which is what this finally comes down to – are neither the modern names of divinity nor the old names of totalitarianism. But it seems that Gauchet decided a long time ago, at least since the French Revolution, that Rousseau’s formulation of the democratic imperative represents a blind alley, pure and simple, in the history of political thought.

Further reading:

Gauchet's blog: <http://gauchet.blogspot.com/>

Gauchet interviewed by Philomag:

<http://www.philomag.com/article.entretien.marcel-gauchet-le-politique-permet-a-la-societe-de-tenir-ensemble.256.php>

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