

From Revolution to Restoration?

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If there was no such thing as a *pensée 68*, was there – is there -- a *pensée anti-68*? Eye-opening as his collection of soundings is, Serge Audier’s book stands, or falls, on its thesis that he is studying an interlocking *restauration intellectuelle* — that the various oppositions to May 1968 add up to a general tendency.

Reviewed : Serge Audier, *La pensée anti-68: essai sur les origines d’une restauration intellectuelle*, La Découverte, 2008, 379 p., 21, 50 €.

When Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut published their profoundly flawed book *La pensée 68* in 1985, they were immediately denounced, and rightly so, for homogenizing a series of philosophical enemies who had weak links to each other, and even less connection the May explosion they allegedly represented -- somehow.

It is a fact, after all, that the “antihumanist” archipelago targeted by Ferry and Renaut was one whose texts had mostly accumulated by the time the *événements* occurred, without discernibly provoking them. Yet more troubling, the authors of the texts of this “French theory” were not central to May 1968 as it unfolded -- if they were even around to live through it. Michel Foucault had built his structuralism long before, and was criticized on the brink of the events for its apparent failure to authorize radical action. (He was in Tunisia during May itself.) Jacques Derrida did not take any prominent stand. And Louis Althusser, close to communist orthodoxy, even criticized the revolts (Philippe Sollers did too, and for similar reasons, though this doctrinaire position did not save him, or many of Althusser’s followers, from a Maoist temptation later). And so on. It was a judicious decision for the

English translation of Ferry and Renaut's book to have the title *French Philosophy of the Sixties* (unfortunately the change of title could not save the book from its other shortcomings).

Reception History or Rorschach Test?

If there was no such thing as a *pensée 68*, was there – is there -- a *pensée anti-68*? Serge Audier, in reversing Ferry and Renaut for his new book's title, is right to want to avoid their homogenizing artifice: Audier relaxes the stringency of the definition of his own category by emphasizing the raucous pluralism of the voices raised against May 1968 in the forty years since the events. It was one thing for the PCF to worry about unconventional revolt at the time, and another for reactionaries to bemoan its supposedly catastrophic impact on French society. As time passed, as the "official discourses and ceremonies" (Régis Debray) of one anniversary passed and new ones approached, the variety of responses only mushroomed further. Yet Audier is clearly right both that for all their individuality, different responses to May 68 at time crisscrossed, and that prior studies of the "afterlives" of the events have been radically truncated in their coverage.

There is much to be learned from Audier's guided tour through the various territories in which May 1968 has been held in contempt. Audier has chapters on conservative and leftist attacks on the revolts, immediate and delayed, before longer sections enumerating the problems with Ferry and Renaut's confabulation and the larger liberal and republican positions to which those authors were close at various times.

Yet with responsibility comes its own risks. Audier is careful enough a scholar that his catalogue of those who have opposed May 1968 at one or another time comes close to an exercise in accumulation, classification and distinction. Avoiding the Scylla of false association means approaching the Charybdis of excessive diffusion: intellectual history as the making of lists. If Audier's text undermines not simply the strong thesis of unity announced in his title, the threat is that it might leave no reason to study such a motley crew of intellectuals and publicists in one place. So what that so many ideologically distinct groups polished their weapons every time May's anniversary returned? What is to be learned by grouping them into an even seriously extended – and often bickering -- family?

One response might be that the very variety of reactions to May is what matters most: reception history, in other words, as Rorschach test. But Audier rejects this argument. Already

in 1970, as Audier cites, Henri Lefebvre asked: “Qui ne s’y est reconnu? Qui n’a pas retrouvé son apport, ses prévisions, ses conceptions? Chacun et tous, jusqu’aux autorités, jusqu’aux idéologues de la police, des institutions et de l’État.” He finished: “Tous ont raison.” Audier, however, characterizes Lefebvre’s nominalistic conclusion – everyone sees what they want to see, revealing more about themselves in what they say of May than about the events themselves – as offered “un peu vite.”

Eye-opening as his collection of soundings is, Audier’s book stands or falls, therefore, on its thesis that he is studying an interlocking *restauration intellectuelle* — that the various oppositions to May 1968 add up to a general tendency. In this way, Audier’s proposal is similar to Daniel Lindenberg’s allegation some years ago of a wave of new reaction.

The New Conservatism

Audier’s picture is powerful and disquieting, even if one can at times be forgiven for wondering if 1968 is so central to every element of the fearful backlash he presents, not simply in their historical origins, but in their ideological content. One of Audier’s most interesting and revealing sections, for instance, is a long discussion of Pierre Manent’s revival of a version of liberalism. Emphasizing Manent’s little-known affection in his earliest publications for the Catholic right-winger Aurel Kolnai, Audier recalls very usefully Manent’s promotion of Kolnai and Leo Strauss in the conservative liberal circles of journals like *Contrepoint* and *Commentaire*, and the effect of these allegiances on the exclusionary definition of liberalism that Manent advocated. But in these sections 1968 doesn’t appear, except by a supposedly significant absence. Straussians were, as Audier records, hostile towards 1960s activism, but Audier also shows that Manent himself carefully avoided reproducing their arguments on this score. Audier speculates that Manent left this material on the dock, even as he imported the rest of emerging American neo-conservatism, the better to avoid having to reject American liberalism at the same time as he claimed to be liberalism’s champion. It remains true all the same that 1968 is not a major reference point in Manent’s *œuvre* and so Audier’s coverage of him and other figures reads at time like a general portrait of conservative renaissance in France that sometimes vilified May 1968 as a special object of scorn but sometimes did not. For this reason, Audier’s studies of the liberal and republican revivals frequently stray beyond the official justification for his book’s existence.

The *bête noire* of Audier's book, damned not simply for his own liberal and republican rejection of 1968 but also for his promotion at *Le Débat* of that of several others in the book, is Marcel Gauchet. As in his section on Manent, Audier asks his reader to trawl through sources that antedated 1968, with if anything a weaker connection to the events and their legacy than Ferry and Renaut's master thinkers had. Yet Audier can certainly now congratulate himself for finding in Gauchet's prior writings the signs of his remarkably strident and uncompromising new critique of May's legacy, published in *Le Débat* as "Bilan d'une génération" (March-April 2008).

Yet Audier's presentation of Gauchet as a longstanding and unambiguous enemy of May, even if now ratified by its subject's opinions, also colludes in some very serious distortion of the past. Gauchet's path from his anarcho-libertarianism of 1968 to his later liberalism was not simply one of conversion against his origins. Put differently, if Gauchet has now flatly dismissed the positive resources of 1968 and of "1968 thought" to French culture and society, then he is committing a colossal error of self-reference. Figures like Foucault and (especially) Jacques Lacan were some of the major sources for Gauchet's work over the years – certainly far more so than the René Guénon to whom Audier's book implausibly links him! And whatever one concludes about what Gauchet did with these sources, there is no denying the impressive creativity of his transformation of them. Gauchet's sense of the intellectual servility of his generation to "master thinkers," in other words, is disproven by his own case.

What's more, Gauchet himself has -- in one of his most valuable earlier writings, not cited here -- argued that in the farrago of responses to the events, the most crucial had to draw, however critically, on May's energies: "Il appartiendra aux historiens du futur," Gauchet wrote in 1994, "de reconstituer le processus de décrochage et de dispersion qui s'est silencieusement déroulé au cours de ces années soixante-dix et où s'est forgé, loin du théâtre public, le vrai destin intellectuel de la 'génération 68'." He then went on to classify this dispersion, awarding most credit to those who knew how to be for May 1968 and its thought *and against it*: "Pour beaucoup, ce sera l'abandon pur et simple ... Pour bon nombre encore, ce sera le retour discret aux voies éprouvées et aux valeurs sûres. Pour d'autres, ce sera la plongée en eaux profondes, dans des puits et des chenaux purement personnels, dont on commence seulement, vingt ans après, à voir émerger les produits. Pour quelques-uns, paradoxalement les plus rares, ce sera l'approfondissement et la critique interne des prémisses

dont ils étaient partis avec les autres.” In 1994, Gauchet presented his recently deceased partner as falling into the last category – internal not external critique and clarification rather than rejection -- and self-evidently classified himself there too. Historically, his own new sense of the absolute uselessness of 1968 is far less compelling.

Frenzy in France, Silence in the States

The point is not really that the nominalistic view that there were many roads to travel away from this Rome is correct, though one can never fail to emphasize the sheer pluralism of response against those who insist on some unitary pattern. It is that once this *génération* has passed from the scene, the hard work of dispassionately assessing the profound dependence of its contributions to the experience of May will remain to be assessed, wherever its psychodramatic relations to its activating experience have come to rest.

Audier’s book begins by alluding to Nicolas Sarkozy’s campaign denunciation of 1968 as the rationale for his “genealogy” of opposition to the event, and readers will find in his book the various sources of this facile dismissal of the event -- and much more. The most sobering implication of this study, whether or not its object ever comes fully into focus, is that the progressive left in France has failed to control the legacy of the May events, reconciling their democratic invention with programmatic vision and institutional enterprise. While it has become ritualistic in France to complain about the ritualistic frenzy of commemoration this month, it could be worse. In the United States, no major intellectual venue – not the *New York Times*, not the *New York Review of Books*, not even *The Nation* – has had much to say about 1968, in France or in general. There was no such thing as a *pensée 68* -- and that is the problem.

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