

The Cold War and the intellectual history of the late twentieth century

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In retrospect, the mid-1970s seem like the high point of what one might call the crisis of the West – or at least the high point of an acute consciousness of crisis in the West. The famous report to the Trilateral Commission claimed that European countries might be in the process of becoming ‘ungovernable’: the oil shock of 1973 had brought the *trente glorieuses* of unprecedented growth and social peace to a definitive end; the hitherto unknown phenomenon of stagflation – combining high unemployment and runaway inflation – seemed there to stay. In fact, the conservative German philosopher Robert Spaemann claimed that the oil shock was, from the point of view of intellectual history, the most important event since the Second World War. Domestic and international terrorism, from Right and Left, were on the rise; and, not least, the high levels of social mobilisation and political contestation that had begun in the late 1960s continued unabated.¹

The 1968 phenomenon had not in any narrow sense ‘caused’ large-scale social and cultural transformations, but ‘1968’ became shorthand for them. Because changes there were: a new quasi-libertarian language of subjectivity – foreshadowing the ‘me decade’ – and a new politics of individual life-styles. All over Europe, the traditional family came under attack – in some countries, such as Italy, for the first time.² Students, the sons and daughters of the middle classes, who had been on the Right for most of the twentieth century (and highly active in the promotion of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s), all of a sudden were to be found on the Left. Most importantly, there was a widespread loss of belief in the capacity of societies for collective self-transformation through mass political action, whether inside or outside institutions such as parliaments. Instead, individual personal transformations mattered – as did the idea of a

This chapter partly draws on my *History of Political Thought in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹ See also Jeremi Suri’s chapter in volume II.

² Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (London: Penguin, 1990), 304.

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whole socio-cultural reconstruction of society. The events of '68 and after called into question traditional concepts of the political, tearing down the ideological barricades between the public and the private, and making culture and everyday experiences explicitly politicised. The dramatic developments also completely sidelined established (and in a sense loyal) oppositions, such as the French Communist Party, which reacted with impotent fury to the students, as did some leading intellectual supporters of the Communist Party. In June 1968, the director Pier Paolo Pasolini had already published an anti-student poem in the magazine *Espresso* which began: 'Now the journalists of all the world (including / those of the television) / are licking your arses (as one still says in student / slang). Not me, my dears / You have the faces of spoilt rich brats.'³

The promise of liberation was followed by a sense of malaise – and what also appeared in the eyes of many observers to be a failure of nerve on the part of the West. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn declared in his 1978 address to the graduating class at Harvard that 'a decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today. The Western world has lost its civic courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, in each government, in each political party.'⁴ This impression was not confined to cultural pessimists such as Solzhenitsyn. Liberal anti-totalitarians and Social Democrats felt that a Western postwar consensus had come apart: the generation of '68 appeared to despise parliamentarism and called for direct democracy, personal autonomy, and authenticity – values that seemed directly opposed to core goals of the 1950s and early 1960s, such as political stability through corporatism, high productivity, and social peace, and personal fulfilment through consumption. In the eyes of thinkers such as Raymond Aron, the hard-won gains for a more liberal political culture in countries such as France and Germany seemed to be squandered for nothing, weakening the West as a whole in the process.⁵

How then did the West get from what the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas had called the 'legitimation crisis of late capitalism' and a widespread suspicion of liberalism to the supposed triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama in the late 1980s, and to the apparent vindication of apologists for capitalism such as Friedrich von Hayek? Was this a case of a rapid 'liberalisation' of European thought and of Western thought more generally – following

³ Quoted *ibid.*, 307.

⁴ *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, ed. by Ronald Berman (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980), 5.

⁵ Raymond Aron, 'Student Rebellion: Vision of the Future or Echo from the Past?', *Political Science Quarterly*, 84, 2 (1969), 289–310.

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perhaps the example set by the turn of dissidents in the East to liberalism, as some observers have claimed? Or was it the victory of a neo-liberal conspiracy which had already begun on Mont Pèlerin in 1945, but whose chief conspirators – Hayek and Milton Friedman – conquered intellectual ‘hegemony’ only in the 1970s, as critics on the Left have often alleged? And, more interestingly from the perspective of a comprehensive history of the Cold War, what, if anything, was happening *between* East and West during those final years of the conflict? Is there such a thing as a *single* intellectual history – or at least a single European intellectual history – of the late twentieth century, when examined from the perspective of the end of the Cold War?

The Crisis of Democracy

The Crisis of Democracy was the matter-of-fact title of the influential *Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, published in 1975. The report claimed to respond to a widespread perception of ‘the disintegration of civil order, the breakdown of social discipline, the debility of leaders, and the alienation of citizens’.⁶ The social scientists who had authored it feared a ‘bleak future for democratic government’; more specifically, they were concerned about an ‘overloading’ of governments by demands emanating from society, and in particular what one of the principal investigators, Samuel Huntington, was to describe as a ‘democratic surge’ afflicting the United States. Too many people wanting too many things *from* government and ultimately also too much participation *in* government made governing increasingly difficult, or so the diagnosis went.

In addition, Michel Crozier, Huntington, and Joji Watanuki stated in their introduction that ‘at the present time, a significant challenge comes from the intellectuals and related groups who assert their disgust with the corruption, materialism, and inefficiency of democracy and with the subservience of democratic government to “monopoly capitalism”’.⁷ They contrasted the rise of the ‘adversary culture’ of ‘value-oriented intellectuals’ bent on ‘the unmasking and delegitimation of established institutions’ with the presence of ‘increasing numbers of technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals’.⁸ Interestingly enough, while they listed a whole range of challenges – including the already widely debated shift to ‘post-materialist values’ – the supposed

⁶ Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

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weakening of Western democracies appeared as an entirely domestic phenomenon; at the high point of détente, it seemed to have nothing to do with threats from the Soviet Union and its allies. Consequently, the proposed solutions to the ‘crisis of democracy’ were also fashioned in domestic terms – especially changes in economic policy and a novel conception of how the state should relate to society.

One possible response was indeed by what the *rapporteurs* for the Trilateral Commission had called the ‘policy-oriented intellectual’. Its greatest late twentieth-century representative was arguably the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann – not because he had vast influence on policy, but because he offered the most sophisticated theoretical justification for why policy should be shielded from widespread participation and essentially be left to technocrats. Luhmann’s ‘social systems theory’ – a kind of ‘radical functionalist sociology’, much influenced by Talcott Parsons, but also by older German right-wing social theorists – held that modern societies were divided into numerous systems running according to their own logic or ‘rationality’ (such as the economy, the arts, and the government).⁹ Systems served, above all, to reduce complexity; any interference from one system in another was prima facie counterproductive; and any expectation that governments could immediately realise ‘values’ from outside the system of the state administration itself constituted a kind of category mistake. The upshot of Luhmann’s theory was that the business of government should be left to bureaucrats. Social movement types, listening to nothing but their consciences, could inflict much damage on modern societies, if governments acceded to their misguided demands and illusionary hopes for participation in decision-making. Such a diagnosis often went along with contempt for members of the ‘adversary culture’. Luhmann’s teacher, the sociologist Helmut Schelsky, for instance, derided intellectuals as a new class of ‘high priests’ trying to gain power, while ‘others are actually doing the work’.¹⁰

Luhmann eventually became the prime theoretical adversary of Habermas, the most prominent heir to the German Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, who had kept his distance from the ‘68 rebels, but tried to hold on to, broadly speaking, social democratic hopes – including plans for further democratising the state administration and the economy. Habermas became arguably the most important philosopher for the environmental and feminist social

⁹ Chris Thornhill, *Political Theory in Modern Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000), 174.

¹⁰ Helmut Schelsky, *Die Arbeit tun die anderen: Klassenkampf und Priesterherrschaft der Intellektuellen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975).

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movements that emerged in the 1970s alongside the revolutionary *groupuscules* that the aftermath of '68 had produced. His primary concern was the protection of the integrity of what he called 'the lifeworld', that is, the realm of family and other interpersonal relations, as well as civil society, which ought to be shielded from the instrumental logic of the market and of the bureaucracy. The market and the state would always, to Habermas, have a tendency to 'colonise' the lifeworld; but social movements, pressure groups, and, not least, intellectuals in the public sphere could resist such a colonisation – and perhaps even achieve gradual decolonisation.

France's anti-totalitarian moment

A suspicion of bureaucracy and a demand for personal (as well as group) autonomy animated a whole range of intellectuals who had emerged from the upheavals of the late 1960s, but who did not want either to subscribe to orthodox Marxism (they viewed the established Communist Parties in Western Europe as themselves prime examples of bureaucratic ossification) or to invest in Maoist and similarly exotic hopes. Older philosophers, such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort in France, who had emerged from a Trotskyist background, advanced a critique of bureaucracy under state socialism, which could also inspire younger intellectuals looking for new forms of social organisation with autonomy as a central value. One of the watchwords of the mid- to late 1970s was *autogestion* (roughly, self-management), which was theorised in France by members of what came to be called *la deuxième gauche*. Pierre Rosanvallon and other intellectuals around the non-Communist, originally Christian trade union Confédération française démocratique du travail advanced a political agenda that was meant to invigorate the French Socialist Party, but also draw a clear line vis-à-vis the Communists.

The debates around *autogestion* eventually became enmeshed with the wide-ranging disputes about totalitarianism in mid-1970s France. By the early 1970s, the myths of Gaullism had been shattered – almost logically, it seemed, it was now time for what had always been Gaullism's great adversary in the Fifth Republic – Communism – to come under attack. Politically and culturally, the two had divided up the Republic, with the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, or PCF) not offering just a 'counter-culture', but even a kind of potential 'counter-state'.¹¹ The major myth of Gaullism had of course

¹¹ Pierre Grémion, *Modernisation et progressisme: fin d'une époque 1968–1981* (Paris: Editions Esprit, 2005).

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been General Charles de Gaulle himself, who left with a whimper in 1969, having lost what many considered a minor referendum – but, then again, there was a certain logic to the idea that a man who was supposed to embody *la France* could not possibly lose a popular vote.

Communism's myths had been more of a moral and intellectual nature, rather than personal; and so it was only logical that left-wing intellectuals themselves had to dismantle them. Many claimed to have been shaken out of their ideological slumber by what came to be known as the *choc Soljenitsyne*; arguably nowhere else did the publication of the *Gulag Archipelago* have such an impact as in France – but not because what Solzhenitsyn described had been completely unknown.¹² Rather, the attack on Communism was prompted at least partially by very concrete domestic concerns: in 1972, François Mitterrand had created the Union of the Left between Socialists and Communists, with a five-year 'Common Programme' for governing. In the run-up to the 1978 elections, there was a real sense that a Socialist–Communist government might actually come to power, which made it all the more important who would win the battle for political – and intellectual – dominance within the Socialist–Communist coalition. It was thus no accident that a new intellectual anti-Communism – though phrased in the language of 'anti-totalitarianism' – peaked at precisely this moment. The reaction of the Communist Party to Solzhenitsyn (PCF leader Georges Marchais claimed that the Russian dissident could, of course, publish in a socialist France – 'if he found a publisher'¹³) was widely interpreted as a sign of its authoritarianism; left-wing magazines like *Esprit* argued forcefully that the PCF had not really broken with its Stalinist past and that the Common Programme proposed a far too state-centric approach to building socialism.

Then the so-called New Philosophers burst onto the scene. Young and telegenic André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy produced a string of bestsellers, feted in popular magazines and on the small screen, in which they argued that socialism and Marxism and, in fact, all political thinking inspired by Hegel was fatally contaminated with authoritarianism. The ex-Maoist Glucksmann, especially, appeared as strident in his condemnation of more or less all recent philosophy as he had previously been in his endorsement of the Little Red Book. His polemic culminated in the notion that 'to think is to dominate', while Lévy exclaimed that the Gulag was simply 'the Enlightenment

12 The following draws partly on Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: France's Antitotalitarian Moment* (New York: Berghahn, 2004).

13 Quoted *ibid.*, 96.

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minus tolerance'.¹⁴ Moreover, an opposition to the state as such as well as a thoroughgoing historical pessimism pervaded the literary output of the New Philosophers – to the extent that older liberals such as Aron consciously distanced themselves from *les nouveaux philosophes*, whom they suspected of black-and-white thinking, where black and white had simply changed places.¹⁵

Nevertheless, more serious intellectuals were moving in a similar direction. The historian François Furet, a brilliant organiser and institution-builder no less than an outstanding historian, relentlessly attacked Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution. He argued that totalitarianism had been present in the Revolution from the very start and that the Marxists were right to draw a direct line from 1789 to 1917 – except that the continuity in question was one of terrorism and even totalitarianism. Furet claimed that 'the work of Solzhenitsyn raised the question of the gulag everywhere in the depths of the revolutionary design . . . Today the gulag leads to a rethinking of the Terror by virtue of an identity in their projects.'¹⁶

So the revolutionary imagination appeared to have been depleted: the Russian Revolution was no longer the legitimate heir of the Jacobins. Rather, parts of the French Revolution had now retroactively been discredited by Stalinism; and revolutions elsewhere in the world – China and Cuba in particular – had lost their glow. As Michel Foucault put it in 1977:

For the first time, the Left, faced with what has just happened in China, this entire body of thought of the European Left, this revolutionary European thought which had its points of reference in the entire world and elaborated them in a determinate fashion, thus a thought that was oriented toward things that were situated outside itself, this thought has lost the historical reference points that it previously found in other parts of the world. It has lost its concrete points of support.¹⁷

Sartre died in 1980 and with him a certain model of the universal intellectual who could speak on anything, based purely on his moral stature. Aron, the sceptic, the sometimes pedantic-seeming academic, and, above all, the anti-Sartre, enjoyed a late and gratifying moment of recognition when his *Mémoires* appeared in 1982. What at least two generations of French intellectuals had taken as a moral-political catechism – that it was better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron – seemed to have been revoked on the Left Bank.

¹⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, 186.

¹⁵ Raymond Aron, 'Pour le Progrès: après la chute des idoles', *Commentaire*, 1 (1978), 233–43.

¹⁶ Quoted in Christofferson, *French Intellectuals*, 105–06.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "'Die Folter, das ist die Vernunft'", *Literaturmagazin*, 8 (December 1977), 67.

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Human rights came to the forefront – even if, soon after, it was already questioned whether by themselves human rights would actually be sufficient to constitute a positive political programme. Marcel Gauchet, managing editor of *Le Débat*, which had been launched in 1980 and established itself quickly as France’s premier intellectual magazine, questioned whether human rights were enough. He sought to continue a strong role for the state and what could broadly be called social democracy.¹⁸ Others extended the attack on the Left from orthodox Communism to strands of thought that were often subsumed under the category ‘anti-humanism’: something summed up as ‘68 thought’ was globally indicted for being insufficiently sensitive to the worth of the human individual. All ‘68 philosophers, so the charge went, were really amoral Nietzscheans who ultimately believed in nothing but power.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, then, the intellectual climate had changed, although largely for reasons that had more to do with domestic French political factors. Even when Socialists and Communists finally triumphed in 1981, rather than realising anything resembling the Common Programme, or advancing on the road to self-management, François Mitterrand presided over a radical U-turn. Under intense pressure from financial markets, he and his prime minister abandoned their ambitious welfarist plans in 1984. As it turned out, the age of diminished expectations that had begun in the early 1970s could not be transcended with an act of political will. Both the dream of ever-continuing modernisation (shared, after all, by Right and Left) and the left-wing ideals of ‘progressivism’ had lost their hold. As Tony Judt has pointed out, anti-totalitarianism was not just revived anti-Communism or a loss of faith in any vision of violent revolutionary action. Anti-totalitarianism undermined a whole left-wing narrative about the twentieth century, as ‘the traditional “progressive” insistence on treating attacks on Communism as implicit threats to all socially-ameliorative goals – i.e. the claim that Communism, Socialism, Social Democracy, nationalization, central planning and progressive social engineering were part of a common political project – began to work against itself’.²⁰ And what remained of socialism in France seemed rather uninspired: the more exciting ideals of the *deuxième gauche* were never put into practice, not least because Mitterrand was obsessed with destroying the political chances of Michel Rocard to succeed him as president.

18 Marcel Gauchet, ‘Les droits de l’homme ne sont pas une politique’, *Le Débat*, 3 (1980), 3–21.

19 Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68: essai sur l’antihumanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

20 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 561.

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The neoconservative moment – in the United States and elsewhere

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the 1970s saw the rise of an intellectual phenomenon whose precise character – let alone policy implications – still causes much dispute today: neoconservatism. Neoconservatism emerged from the world of the ‘New York intellectuals’ – children of poor Jewish immigrants who had gone to City College, joined the anti-Stalinist Left, only then to turn into fierce liberal Cold Warriors, with some joining the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In other words, the milieu from which neoconservatism proper was to emerge had already been through one major experience of political disillusionment. The prominent neoconservative publicist Irving Kristol, for instance, had been a member of the Young People’s Socialist League, then went to the army, which, as he put it, ‘cured me of socialism. I decided that the proletariat was not my cup of tea, that one couldn’t really build socialism with them.’²¹

Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer became successful editors, journalists, and university professors – while continuing their anti-Communist intellectual combat. All were fiercely proud of the United States (and its universities) – the country and the institution which had allowed them to ‘make it’ (to paraphrase a book title by a later neoconservative, Norman Podhoretz).²² The key moment in the intellectual formation of neoconservatism came with the rise of student radicalism, on the one hand, and the failure of the ambitious social programmes associated with Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, on the other. The students appeared to be attacking the very things that intellectuals such as Bell and Kristol believed in most: the university – and the idea of America itself. Partly in response, they founded *The Public Interest* in 1965. The magazine, while devoting much space to the unintended consequences of policies and taking culture and morality seriously, in a way that supposedly rationalist liberalism had not, eschewed any discussion of foreign policy. The topic of Vietnam was simply too controversial among a group that could still best be described as disillusioned social democrats.

Neoconservatism came into its own – and acquired a name – in the 1970s. Kristol, unlike Bell, decided to support President Richard M. Nixon. He also now used magazines such as *Commentary* and the op-ed page of the *Wall Street*

²¹ Quoted in Geoffrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 132.

²² Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Random House, 1967).

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Journal to propound strong doses of American nationalism and a pro-capitalist attitude that erstwhile allies such as Bell – who still described himself as a democratic socialist – found hard to accept. The term ‘neoconservatism’ itself was first applied by the Left as a term of opprobrium – but was eagerly appropriated by Kristol and others.

Eventually, neoconservatism also developed a distinctive view on foreign policy. In 1979, Georgetown professor Jeane Kirkpatrick, who had started her political career as a Democrat, famously drew a distinction between evil totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union, and right-wing authoritarian ones. She argued that the administration of Jimmy Carter had been blinded by ‘modernization theory’: it interpreted revolutionary violence in countries such as Iran and Nicaragua as the birth pangs of modernity, when in fact such countries were turning sharply against the United States and possibly in a totalitarian direction, often directly or indirectly supported by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Carter supposedly adopted a naïvely moralising attitude to right-wing autocracies aligned with the United States, admonishing them to heed human rights. But, argued Kirkpatrick, ‘only intellectual fashion and the tyranny of Right/Left thinking prevent intelligent men of good will from perceiving the *facts* that traditional authoritarian governments are less repressive than revolutionary autocracies, that they are more susceptible of liberalization, and that they are more compatible with US interests’. This, it seemed, was the most serious charge against Carter: that he recklessly kept ignoring the American national interest.²³ Ronald Reagan appointed Kirkpatrick ambassador to the United Nations in 1981.

So, neoconservatives unashamedly propounded the national interest. But, above all, they exuded optimism. Unlike any European conservatism, they did not have, broadly speaking, a negative view of human nature. Unlike libertarianism, they did not completely reject government beyond some absolute minimum. As an editor of *The Public Interest* was to point out: where the libertarians subscribed to the primacy of the economic and older American conservatives hankered after a primacy of culture (a quasi-aristocratic, Southern culture in particular), the neocons thoroughly believed in the ‘primacy of the political’.²⁴ As Kristol himself put it, ‘neoconservatism is the first variant of American conservatism in the past century that is in the “American grain”’. It is hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic; and its general

23 Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’, *Commentary* (November 1979), 44.

24 Adam Wolfson, ‘Conservatives and Neoconservatives’, in Irwin Stelzer (ed.), *Neoconservatism* (London: Atlantic, 2004), 215–31.