

ALAIN BADIOU

ROADS TO RENEGACY

Interview by Eric Hazan

One of the most striking aspects of Sarkozy's rise to power was the support he attracted from Left renegades—from turncoats such as André Glucksmann. As someone who still wears his coat very much the same way round, how would you explain this strange phenomenon?

I THINK YOU HAVE to put this in perspective, or rather look at it more closely. First of all, it would be better to ask: why so many Maoists from the Gauche Prolétarienne? Because it is among them that you find those who 'went wrong' in this way. Secondly, as far as I am aware, only a few rank-and-file activists in the GP made this about-turn. So, to give your question a slightly more technical character, I would say: why did so many people in the GP leadership take such a bad turn?

There were other Maoist organizations—for example the UCFML, which I was involved in establishing, along with Sylvain Lazarus, Natacha Michel and others, in 1970.¹ In fact, Lazarus and Michel came from the GP, in the wake of a split of sorts, whereas my own background was completely different: I came from the PSU, the social democrats. I'm not aware of a single leader or activist in our organization who took a wrong turn, in the sense we are speaking of here. People from other organizations, such as the GOP and VLR, often went back to the PCF, and there was a sprinkling of other groups, in particular the PCMLF, whose idea was more to rebuild the good old Communist Party, which was already in pretty poor shape.² On the whole, these people are still somewhere or other 'on the left' today.

But those who ‘went wrong’ in public and spectacular fashion—some of them, like Glucksmann, becoming official supporters of Sarkozy—did come from the GP, which was broadly hegemonic in this milieu, particularly among intellectuals. We could mention Serge July, founder of *Libération*, Benny Lévy, who was the GP’s leading figure, Jacques-Alain Miller, Jean-Claude Milner, Olivier Rolin, head of the military wing, or indeed Glucksmann himself, who joined rather late in the day, but joined all the same. There were also less well-known intellectuals such as Jean-Marc Salmon, who played a major role at Vincennes and later became a die-hard pro-American.³

There are a number of ways to understand this turncoat phenomenon. The first is that many of these people had a mistaken analysis of the situation at that time, in the years 1966–73; they thought that it was actually revolutionary, in an immediate sense. The Miller brothers gave me the tersest formulations on this point. A few years later, around 1978, I asked them: ‘Why did you just quit like that?’ Because they dropped out very suddenly—even today there are elderly workers, Malians in the hostels, Moroccans in the factories, who ask us: ‘How is it that, overnight, we never saw those guys again?’ Jacques-Alain Miller said to me: ‘Because I realized one day that the country was quiet.’ And Gérard: ‘Because we understood we were not going to take power.’ It was a very revealing response, that of people who saw their undertaking not as the start of a long journey with a great deal of ebb and flow, but as an avenue towards power. Gérard said as much in all innocence, and he later joined the Socialist party, which is something else again.

So, a mistaken understanding of the conjuncture, leading either to a blocked ambition, or to the realization that it was going to take a great

¹ UCFML: Union des Communistes de France Marxiste-Léniniste. [Footnotes by NLR]

² GOP: Gauche Ouvrière et Paysanne, formed in 1968, dissolved in 1972; PCMLF: Parti Communiste Marxiste-Léniniste de France (1967–1970); VLR: Vive la Révolution (1969–1971).

³ Benny Lévy (1946–2003): *nom de guerre* Pierre Victor, co-founder in 1966 of the Union des Jeunesses Communistes (Marxiste-Léniniste); set up the GP in 1968; Sartre’s private secretary after GP disbanded in 1973. Jacques-Alain Miller (b. 1944): Lacan’s son-in-law, dominated the Vincennes psychoanalysis department with his brother Gérard (b. 1948). Jean-Claude Milner (b. 1941): linguist and philosopher, author of works including *Constats* (1992) and *Le Juif du savoir* (2007). Olivier Rolin (b. 1947): novelist, journalist at *Libération* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*; member of pro-American think-tank, Le Cercle de l’Oratoire. Jean-Marc Salmon: sociologist.

deal of trouble and hard work in a situation that was not all that promising. You could see them in Balzacian terms as ambitious young men who imagined they were going to take Paris by dint of revolutionary enthusiasm, but then came to understand that things were a bit more complicated. The proof of this is that a large number of these people have found positions of power elsewhere, in psychoanalysis, in the media, as philosophical commentators, and so on. Their renunciation did not take place along the lines of: 'I'll go back to being anonymous', but rather: 'That wasn't the right card, so I'll play a different one.'

There was a second principle involved in this reversal, less Balzacian and more ideological. This was embodied by the '*nouveaux philosophes*'—themselves part of a long history—and by those who followed them, often with a certain honesty and not necessarily for personal ends. What happened at that point was a transition from the alternatives of 'bourgeois world or revolutionary world' to those of 'totalitarianism or democracy'. The shift can be given a precise date: it was articulated starting from 1976, and a certain number of former GP activists were involved in presenting it. Not just them, but them along with others. This was particularly the case with Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau, when they wrote their book *L'Ange*, a kind of philosophical balance sheet of their involvement with the GP.⁴

Here you can see the reversal at work. It revolves around the idea that, at a certain point, absolute commitment becomes indistinguishable from absolute slavery, and the figure of emancipation indistinguishable from that of barbarism. Grafted onto this was the question of the Soviet camps as depicted by Solzhenitsyn. Above all there was the matter of Cambodia and Pol Pot, which played a very major role for those who had been actively involved in supporting the Khmer Rouge cause, and then learned what an appalling story that was. All this gave rise to a kind of standard discourse of repentance: 'I learned how absolute radicalism can have terrifying consequences. As a result, I know that above all else we must ensure the preservation of humanist democracy as a barrier against revolutionary enthusiasm.'

I can certainly accept that many people sincerely believed this, and not just because they wanted a place in the media spotlight. A number of

⁴ Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau, *L'Ange: Ontologie de la révolution*, Paris 1976.

them remained honest people—like Rony Brauman, like Jambet and Lardreau, who went quite far in this direction but then stopped: they saw that this was no reason to become pro-American and cosy up to the likes of Sarkozy.⁵ By and large, these people, whom you can call honest renegades, resigned themselves to the politics of the lesser evil, which in one form or another always leads to the Socialist party. But others, like Glucksmann, instrumentalized this fear of totalitarianism and rode the wave it created. They saw that the figure of the renegade from the Communist project, who steps onto the media stage to stigmatize its horror and is able to say that he experienced it in the flesh, and tell how he made a narrow escape, how he almost became a Polpotist, could fill a gap in the market. They weren't wrong—they were orchestrated, all doors were opened to them, you hardly saw anyone else on television; they built up a whole intellectual media empire on the basis of this business.

What about BHL?

Bernard-Henri Lévy, as you can imagine, was never a very convinced Maoist, more of a sympathizer. But there was Olivier Rolin, who went on to make quite a name in the literary world. And others, who were activists or sympathizers of the GP, such as Jean-Claude Milner—who, in the 1980s, starting with his book *Les Noms indistincts*, declared that formal freedoms were not something to be trifled with, and that the Cambodian business should be called 'genocide'. But Milner is a transition to a third point of entry.

This involves the long history of Palestine–Israel, the question of the name 'Jew', etc. This aspect was all the more important, in the case of the GP, in that its central character was Benny Lévy, alias Pierre Victor. He was the GP's charismatic leader, and on top of that had been anointed by Sartre. He had a great capacity for intellectual seduction, as well as being very forceful, and the combination captivated a number of activists before seducing Sartre. This third aspect cannot be seen like the others, as a visible political U-turn, a renegacy; it was rather the idea that there was something higher than politics. Benny Lévy could maintain, in substance, that in the end he had only ever been interested in one thing, the absolute, and that his involvement in the GP

⁵ Rony Brauman (b. 1950): physician, co-founder and president of Médecins Sans Frontières from 1982 to 1994.

was a misguided approach to this absolute. In the event, he converted in a very precise sense: from progressive politics to Jewish studies. To his convert's eyes, revolutionary political commitment seemed not just secondary and limited, but a wrong turning. All of this adds up to a sophisticated kind of renegacy.

Many people who came out of the GP took this route. Not to the extent that Benny Lévy pushed it, making religion and Jewish identity the organizing centre of their existence. But they did—whether they were Jewish or not, that is not the significant factor—turn the extermination of the European Jews and the name 'Jew' into the emblems around which all should rally, against any political radicalism that was bound to end up totalitarian. All those who had long been bothered by the question of Israel, and those who at a certain moment, often for personal reasons (being anti-Islamic today is always very close to a 'fear of the masses', a fear of the *banlieues* and the poor), became anti-Arab—they all plunged into this symbolism. A far from negligible role in this sorry affair was played by a certain professorial republicanism, made up of a secularism that was as pugnacious as it was corrupted, and a low-grade feminism. All ingredients from which first Le Pen and then Sarkozy were the only ones to benefit politically.

In conclusion, I would say that the GP was marked by three characteristics: first, a kind of impatient megalomania with regard to the course of history, a conviction that the Maoists were in a position to take power or at least to overturn the situation very rapidly. Second, they were extremely ideologized: what they took from the Cultural Revolution was that ideology and personal re-education were in command—which led them to launch a series of absurd campaigns, completely detached from reality, out of pure ideologism, with a radicalism that was vehement and imaginary in equal measure. I remember how, out of this over-estimation of ideology, they created 'apolitical' committees of struggle at Renault Billancourt. That already anticipated Milner's hatred for the 'political view of the world'. They went to the brink of armed struggle, and at the moment when they pulled back in fear there were also a number of U-turns, always couched in a rhetoric of compassion and repentance: 'Look how far I almost went.' Thirdly, they were always communitarians. One of our many run-ins with them—our relations were always dreadful—was when they decided to establish a 'movement of Arab workers' in the factories. We opposed this communitarian separatism

with the idea of the ‘international proletariat of France’. It was a decisive struggle with long-term implications: those who set up a movement of Arab workers can one day make a U-turn and become apologists for any other communitarian signifier. A good number of those who today are hitmen for the Israeli army were rabidly pro-Palestinian at the time of the GP—in an adventurist and very precarious fashion, far too unreal relative to the actual situation.

Once again—and I’m not speaking just for my own crowd—the combination of these three characteristics is only applicable, as far as Maoism is concerned, to the GP, and still more precisely to the GP after 1969. You might say that this GP was the heir, in France, of all that was worst in the Chinese Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Certain Red Guard groups, in the years 1967–69, developed the idea that you can overturn a situation by means of all-powerful ideology and spectacular violent actions. I always thought that Kuai Dafu, the leading figure of the Beijing Red Guards, was a lot like the GP leadership; they adored Lin Biao, their favourite Chinese leader, who said that you had to ‘change man at the deepest level’. They liked that activist metaphysics.

It’s strange. As I recall, the organization you were with was known for being highly sectarian, whereas the GP attracted the decent types. I wasn’t alone in thinking this. The UCFML used to march carrying banners with Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, chanting their names in that order.

No, that’s not how it was at all, what a muddle! The people you’re talking about were the PCMLF—a closed bunch, Stalinists in fact. They were attached to the Chinese state from the time of the Sino-Soviet conflict. You could say that, seen from today, the difference between the PCMLF and the UCFML . . . But in revolutionary politics, as you well know, such ‘nuances’ are of major importance. The PCMLF and the UCFML, they were like night and day.

I believe there have been three different interpretations of Maoism in France. The first, and the oldest, was that, contrary to the USSR under Khrushchev, China held on to an original hardline Stalinism—and that the abandonment of Stalinism would lead sooner or later to a general dissolution (in which regard they weren’t mistaken). These people started the PCMLF believing they would rebuild a genuine Communist

party of class struggle, against the revisionism of the official PCF and the USSR. It was both a dogmatic and a nostalgic interpretation. But it was also the only place where you found old working-class activists—there were young people in all the Maoist groups, but not older ones, nostalgic for the great era of Thorez, the 1950s, when the Party ruled in the factories and housing estates. It was really a conservative interpretation. At the other extreme there was the ultra-left interpretation of the GP, which was almost anarchist: you launched bold attacks, set up stunts, made ‘revolution in the head’, ‘melted into the masses’, always with a very keen eye to the media. The organization was highly centralized—in secret; in public it dissolved itself every five minutes in order to ‘liberate’ the energy of the masses.

As for us, the UCFML, I would say that we were a centre-left organization, in the sense always advocated by Mao, who described himself as a ‘centrist’. There were three essential points of Maoist provenance that we practised: the first was that you always had to link up with the people, that politics for intellectuals was a journey into society and not a discussion in a closed room. Political work was defined as work in factories, housing estates, hostels. It was always a matter of setting up political organizations in the midst of people’s actual life. The second was that you should not take part in the institutions of the bourgeois state: we were against the traditional trade unions and the electoral mechanism. No infiltration of the so-called workers’ bureaucracies, no participation in elections; that distinguished us radically from the Trotskyists. The third point was that we should be in no hurry to call ourselves a party, to take up old forms of organization; we had to remain very close to actual political processes. As a result of all this, we found ourselves sharply opposed to the two other main currents. Our founding pamphlet attacked both the PCMLF on the right and the GP ‘on the left’. A struggle on two fronts . . .

And Tel Quel?

They were latter-day Maoists.⁶ The first lesson that the *Tel Quel* people drew from May 68 was that they should join the PCF—an entryism which

⁶ *Tel Quel*: set up in 1960 by anthropologist and former surrealist Philippe Sollers (b. 1936) as an alternative to the *littérature engagée* promoted by *Les Temps Modernes*; politicized as of 1966.

rather repeated the Surrealists' stance in the 1920s and 30s, with the idea of revolutionizing the Communists from within, by the innovatory power of the word. They went on to adopt a more Maoist posture, which in my view remained a superficial crust. But they did, it must be said, pass through Maoism, and Philippe Sollers was one of several who had a strange itinerary between the 70s and today—from Waldeck Rochet to Balladur and Royal, via the Great Helmsman.⁷

It is important to note that Maoism of the GP type was very marked by having been fashionable among intellectuals for five years or so, say from 1969 to 1974, and many people gravitated to it for that reason—as well as Sollers and Sartre, there was Jean-Luc Godard, for example. What attracted these intellectuals and artists was an aura of activism and radicalism, and they didn't look too closely at the actual politics the GP was conducting, which often involved trickery and throwing dust in people's eyes. Almost everything put out by GP propaganda was half untrue—where there was a kitten, they described a Bengal tiger.

In terms of milieu, was there a difference in social origins?

I haven't studied this point in any detail, but in my personal perception of things, it is clear that there were a lot of young *grands bourgeois* in the GP, which made it reminiscent of the Russian anarchist movement. There were also many young women from the same milieu, who had broken with their families. It is well known that the GP would hold meetings in enormous apartments—I sometimes attended these and took part. When the GP sent a big contingent out to the Renault works at Flins in June 1968—we should remember that one of them, Gilles Tautin, was killed by the riot police—they organized an emergency network to bring back the guys who had scattered into the surrounding countryside; and a large part of the Paris intellectual bourgeoisie, including myself, went out in their cars to rescue these activists. Godard's film *Tout va bien* gives a good picture of this kind of sympathy—simultaneously bourgeois, activist, distant and fashionable. The fascination of Yves Montand's character with events in the factory is totally characteristic of the attraction the GP exercised on the intellectuals of the time. But remember that the GP, like the UCFML, also contained workers, young people, Algerians, all kinds of people.

⁷ Waldeck Rochet (1905–1983): PCF General Secretary from 1964 to 1972.

I think that if my experience with the Communists hadn't made me rather wary, I might have gone in that direction myself.

Yes, and me too, if I hadn't been put off early on by the element of flagrant posturing—boasting of things that didn't really exist—and a kind of hystericization of activism, which I sensed very quickly would not stay the course. For my part, I made a permanent commitment, it wasn't a youthful prank. Theirs was an adventurist and fallacious style of action, but one that was exciting at the same time, a politics that was also a fashion, its personal roots in actual fact not very deep—all this, in the GP, made possible those spectacular reversals that we have now seen. Politics as excitement is not a good thing. The canonical example in France was Jacques Doriot, the great hope of the 1930s when he was Communist mayor of Saint-Denis. He was the Dionysian leader who set off for battle at the head of his proletarian troops. That kind of visionary can make a total about-turn, because the moment comes when, to remain in the spotlight, to maintain your own excited self-image, you have to be able to pull off a complete change of course. Doriot became a notorious fascist, an extremist collaborator with the Nazis.

The phenomenon of Doriotism was aggravated by a French characteristic: the link between intellectuals and politics—an excellent thing in many respects, but which has its specific pathologies. This was how, around 1969, a kind of hegemony of the most superficial form of 'Maoism' established itself in the trendy intellectual milieu, and how we are now seeing an equally bizarre phenomenon, that of ex-Maoist intellectuals who made a complete about-turn and whom you hear on television railing against any kind of progressive politics. When Doriot was killed in his car by machine-gun fire, he was wearing an SS uniform. As far as our 'Maoist' renegades are concerned, we should really speak of Doriotism as farce.