

A Response to André Glucksmann

Philip Spencer

André Glucksmann is a man of considerable intellectual courage and integrity, who has waged many important battles in the past to rescue the honour of the French left. A member of the generation of May '68, he was among the first – despite his own opposition to the Vietnam War – to react to the subsequent tragedy of the Vietnamese boat people. Unlike many on the left, he has always understood that genocide and mass murder are crimes of a different magnitude, crimes against humanity itself, regardless of whether they are committed by right wing or (supposedly) left wing regimes, as in the Soviet Union, in China, and in Cambodia.

But his judgement, one has to say, seems largely to have deserted him in this provocative and polemical piece. This is not so much because of his evident lack of enthusiasm for the Socialist candidate, Segolene Royal, whose lack of clarity on key issues, domestic and foreign, have left her open to doubt and suspicion on many sides. One can share some of Glucksmann's frustration that a candidate who ran successfully against the long-established leaders of the French left (the 'elephants' as they are sometimes mockingly known), should not have been able to articulate a clearer set of principles. But much of the criticism that she has attracted has come from people who have little or no moral credit themselves. The so-called far left, for example, has shamed itself in France, as in Britain, with its crude anti-Americanism and flirtation with anti-Semitism. The 'no' vote in the European referendum (which Royal did not join in with, significantly) saw the far left and elements of the Socialist Party itself (such as the former prime minister Laurent Fabius) line up with the far right, not only in voting 'no' but in advancing arguments that reeked of a narrow, protectionist nationalism. Much of the left is still obsessed with an outdated conception of national sovereignty that is reactionary not only in the European context but more fatally so in the international arena.

It is this nationalist doctrine, as Glucksmann points out, that is always and everywhere invoked by regimes engaged in the systematic violation of human rights, in order to ward off international efforts to bring them to account. In its familiar and hegemonic 'anti-imperialist' version, the nationalist doctrine has most recently been invoked by the regime in Darfur, which can count on the support of other states in the international arena (notably China and Russia) to block calls

for intervention, especially when they come, however inadequately, from Western governments.

But the French left is not the prime culprit here. It is the French right which has been in government for several years and has colluded with such regimes. One can argue that Sarkozy has made some effort to distance himself from Chirac's opposition to the Americans over Iraq, an opposition he called 'arrogant' rather than what it actually was – grossly hypocritical and grounded in past collusion with Saddam's regime. This French government has been complicit, or worse, with several murderous regimes around the world, from Rwanda in the 1990s to the Sudan today. There is mounting evidence that the French knew about and abetted the plans of the Hutu Power genocidaires. Most recently it was the French government which welcomed Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir with full pomp and ceremony at the very moment a global campaign was calling for his regime to be indicted for genocide.

Sarkozy is a powerful figure in this government. He may have differences with Chirac but he is not a candidate running against the machine or the right itself. He is the unchallenged leader of the right and a prominent figure in its government – Minister of the Interior no less. In that position, from which he has repeatedly said he has no intention of resigning (despite credible claims that he has abused it in the presidential campaign itself) he has openly flirted with racism against minorities, calling for the banlieues to be 'hosed clean'. This was widely perceived as a semi-naked appeal to Le Pen's voters on the racist right. At the same time, and perhaps almost as troublingly, he has made efforts to ingratiate himself with some of the most reactionary elements and leaders of France's large Muslim population, funding organisations which they control and which repress Muslim voices, not least those of women trapped by patriarchal rules and controls over their bodies and movement. In funding such organisations, Sarkozy has given a further boost to a divisive communalism when what is most urgently needed is a strong defence of secularism and a robust commitment to civil liberties for all.

None of this is to suggest that the actually existing French left has many answers to deeply troubling domestic and international problems. But if answers are to be found they will come not from the right, and not from a deeply suspect figure such as Sarkozy, but from a reformation of the left itself, by those who are committed to the left's basic and most fundamental beliefs: equality, liberty and solidarity at home and abroad.

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