

Marxist Misunderstandings: Perry Anderson and French Politics

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Editor's Note: We present here a revised version of a talk given by Dick Howard on 22 April 2005 to a symposium organised in New York by The journal *French Culture, Politics and Society*. The subject of the symposium was Perry Anderson's sweeping re-interpretation of French history and politics published in *The London Review of Books* in 2004 ('Dégringolade,' 2 September; 'Union Sucrée,' 23 September). Anderson's essays, with a reply by Pierre Nora, were published in French in 2005 as *La Pensée tiède. Un regard critique sur la culture française, suivi de La Pensée réchauffée, réponse de Pierre Nora*, Le Seuil, Paris.

Dick Howard introduced his talk by recalling that he first met Perry Anderson in London in 1969. Both young leftists, Howard had just arrived from the Paris of '68 while Anderson, the editor of *New Left Review*, was, oddly, freshly returned from Enver Hoxha's Albania. Meeting again, thirty six years later, to debate Anderson's LRB articles, Howard concluded that part of Anderson was still evading the novelty of the democratic revolution that exploded in '68, and its real meaning for the left. Anderson, he decided – in a post-symposium reflection on the debate – was still, so to speak, 'returning from Albania.'

Howard's critique offers an alternative narrative of the Left that begins from Paris rather than Tirana. 'The critique of totalitarianism and the politics of human rights' he argues, 'are more useful than the teleological history of the Old Left for understanding the dilemmas of the present ... the peculiarities of recent French history that Anderson well-underlines can be understood within a different storyline: that of an history of democracy.'

Introduction

The question mark at the end of the title chosen for our conference – The End of French History? – makes it appear that Anderson offers a critique of the neo-liberal political choices that have enervated a once-vigorous culture that sought to fulfil the promises of the French revolution. But another reading would stress that for the still-Marxist editor of the *New Left Review*, the 'end' refers not to the exhaustion of a tradition but to a telos: an historical trajectory marching toward

a goal that would fulfil its ordinary thrust. I think that this is a more accurate characterisation (of Anderson, though not of French history). It can explain not just his critique but also the subtle optimism with which his essay concludes, to which I will return in due course.

Anderson presupposes that the telos of French history is the creation of a democratic republic characterised by a rich socialist culture. Neo-liberalism as a culture, rather than an economic 'declinism,' would interrupt that historical process and impose neo-liberal options, deny its telos, and rob it of its meaning. Anderson still wants to find, *malgré tout*, the grains of hope that animated the French exception. As a result, his critical teleology portrays the fall of a political culture (which he calls the 'dégringolade') that seems to have lost its motor force (by accepting the compromises he denounces as a 'union sacrée'). But this descent takes place against the unspoken premise of an always-present positive telos, which reappears in his conclusion. Citing Raymond Aron, he reminds us that 'le peuple' has not disappeared into the maw of global capitalism.

In short, Anderson's account reproduces a familiar figure from critical theory: a decline which carries within itself nonetheless the possibility of a renewal. From this standpoint, let me first summarise, very quickly, my understanding of Anderson's argument before commenting on some of its assumptions – and its omissions.

Anderson's Argument

His story really begins with May 1968, which is said to have opened radical possibilities that remained present until the rupture, before the 1978 parliamentary elections, of the Common Program that had united the socialist and communist parties. [1] A period of political decomposition followed, during which a new hegemonic intellectual-cum-ideological program developed. However, though the ideology of economic liberalism dominated political debate, every government that tried to impose it, left and right, was defeated in the next election. The political class was discredited and the only decent newspaper had become a rag. Underneath the new ideology, Marx's revolutionary 'old Mole' was digging. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and its political incarnation, Attac, would come to represent an anti-globalist counter-force.

Anderson is not Vivianne Forrester, nor even Pierre Bourdieu, whose popular books denounced the moral evils of the globalised economy. For Anderson,

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France incarnates a political culture that is more open to the world of literature and cinema than any other. And thus, while the neo-liberal offensive has weakened the foundations of the old revolutionary culture, the 'relève' is germinating. What Raymond Aron called the still dangerous 'peuple, apparemment tranquille' is not, in Anderson's schema, a savage force of recalcitrance (as Aron feared); rather, it has inherited that higher cultural goal traditionally identified with France's democratic republic.

Critique

I like this story; it's familiar and comforting, giving hope at a time that needs it. But Anderson criticises his enemies without challenging the assumptions of his friends. His radicalism becomes unintentionally conservative because his syncretism permits him to avoid self-doubt.

To begin at the beginning, Anderson's description of the intellectual world before May '68, marked by names like Foucault, Barthes, and Lacan, doesn't mention the fact that their creativity owed little to Marxism. Why did French intellectuals make no contributions to Marxist theory? French Marxism was dull and repetitive, orthodox and unimaginative. The reconstruction offered by Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) fell on deaf ears. What passed for creativity called itself 'science,' with Althusser's wielding of the epistemological coupure to show that the young Marx's theories of alienation had to give way to the new 'continent' discovered by the mature Marx. The party had no reason to complain. But why was Marxism at once omnipresent in French political culture while remaining theoretically so underdeveloped? [2]

It is no surprise that the 22 mars movement, the catalyst of May '68, was influenced by the critical work of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group.[3] There was little sympathy for either the PCF (recall Cohn-Bendit's widely repeated denunciation of its leader, Georges Marchais, as un tas de fumier ambulant), and only disdain for the emerging socialist party led by François Mitterrand (widely booed as its leaders stood vainly and in vain on their balcony, watching the massive demonstration of May 13, the front rank of which had reached Denfert before the last demonstrators had left the République). The Maoist followers of Althusser had already denounced the petit-bourgeois students during the night of the barricades (May 11), and set off for the banlieues in search of true revolutionaries. But, to be fair, even the PSU of Michel Rocard, which did exercise some influence on the movement, was itself still

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clinging to revolutionary dreams. Its final demonstration, at the Charlety Stadium, hoped to install Pierre Mendès-France as emergency Prime Minister – a sort of Kerensky who would rule during the time needed by the vanguard to awaken the masses. [4]

The period after May did see the regrouping of an organised left that Anderson portrays. But many who joined the PCF, or various Trotskyist or Maoist organisations, did so *faute de mieux*, or without really thinking, since these were not the only choices. For others, May 68 proved not that revolution remained possible but rather that it was impossible, a metaphysical dream rather than a real political option. Drawing the consequences, they moved toward a radical reformism that came to be identified with the PSU and what Michel Rocard called the ‘second left’ – which would be later denounced as ‘la gauche américaine.’ Ideas from André Gorz, Serge Mallet, Henri Lefèbvre or Alain Touraine could be mobilised to try to think through the new situation. In practice, the CFDT trade union, led by Edmond Maire, became a catalytic force. None of this fits into Anderson’s story. These forces were trying to create a new narrative, not replay the old script, and so are omitted.

Anderson is correct to assert that, for a moment, it looked as if the left could come to power through the electoral process. The right’s narrow electoral victory in 1974 left the door open; the Common Program of the Left promised results in the 1978 parliamentary contests that would be followed in 1981 by new presidential elections. Anderson blames the failure of this ‘Common Program’ – whose content he never really analyses – on an ideological manoeuvre attributed to the so-called New Philosophers, and to the Solzhenitsyn-effect. This manoeuvre seems to have been able, all by itself, to discredit leftist political choices. This exaggerates the role of the New Philosophers – whose ‘philosophy,’ such as it was, borrowed without attribution from Castoriadis and Lefort, and showed no potential for autonomous development. As for Solzhenitsyn’s three-volume indictment of the Soviet camp system, *The Gulag Archipelago*, it is hard to imagine that those who bought it actually read much of it. Its influence was due, rather, to the number and vehemence of the attacks on its author, and even more, to their weakness, which discredited far more seriously the faith of the orthodox.

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Anti-Totalitarian Politics or Getting Furet Wrong

The French critique of totalitarianism (which was not due, as Anderson suggests, to the absence of good sovietology) brought with it a re-evaluation of the politics of human rights – against the backdrop of the Helsinki Accords, and the first awakenings of what became an autonomous civil society. This critique reached its political high-point with the campaigns in favour of the Vietnamese ‘Boat People,’ and the recognition of the mad totalitarian logic of Pol Pot. Its symbolic climax came with the reunion of les petits camarades, Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron, who, together with New Philosopher André Glucksmann, took up the cause of human rights. But Anderson evades the radical implications of anti-totalitarian politics by invoking the critique of multi-culturalist rights-based politics as an ersatz-politics.

Anderson’s story then moves from the political sphere to the ideological, where François Furet is denounced as the puppet-master. It is true that Furet’s role as intellectual, administrator of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, journalist at *Le nouvel observateur*, and later founder and director of the Fondation Saint-Simon was significant. But Furet’s work does not represent an ideological counter-offensive against a left on the verge of power. Rather, it was part of the process by which French political culture was attempting to draw lessons from the failure of May 68 (and of the Common Program) and from the critique of totalitarianism which had put democracy at the heart of the left’s political agenda.

Anderson mentions only briefly Furet’s *Penser la révolution française*, whose publication in 1978 coincided with the upsurge in anti-totalitarian rethinking. Its first chapter casts doubt on the mythical revolutionary origin of French political culture, and the idea that 1789 culminates in the radicalism of 1793, which was finally realised in 1917 (an idea which suggests that Marxist-communism is somehow inherent in French political culture).

Anderson claims that this new ideological climate, created in part by Furet, explains the public acceptance of Mitterrand’s 1983 decision to abandon the radical platform which won him election in 1981 in favour of devaluation and acceptance of the dictates of the market. But this claim depends on a series of false assumptions about what Furet was arguing in the provocative series of books that he – a former communist – began to publish in 1978 with *Penser la révolution française*. Anderson reads that book as a denial of the radical vision revealed in 1789. He reads Furet’s later history of a century of French politics, in *La révolution*,

1770-1880, as a demonstration of the thesis that the hope of revolution has ended. And he reads *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution française*, co-edited by Furet in 1989, as a sustained critique of the inner contradictions of the revolutionary project per se.

But Anderson's reading can be challenged. *Penser la révolution française* opens with a long critical explanation of why 'La révolution française est terminée.' The book begins with a withering critique of the 'revolutionary catechism,' and it aims to destroy the 'edifying discourse' by which the past is used for (what is taken to be) the good of the present. The chapters on Tocqueville and Cochin that follow make up a unity: the first shows the need to understand the 'long revolution' that, for Tocqueville, had reached fruition in 1787; while the second makes the point that without the development of an adequate mode of action (analysed by Cochin), that historical possibility would not be actualised. Furet had read not just Marx but Machiavelli (no doubt via Claude Lefort [5]). Furet's work was a creative engagement with the failure of May 68 (and of the Common Program), a refusal to evade totalitarianism, and an insistence that democracy form the heart of the political agenda.

Evading Anti-Totalitarianism

Anderson too-easily assimilates anti-totalitarianism to post-1989 savage and global capitalism. He suggests that 'enthusiasts [of human rights politics] would do well to re-read what Marx had said on the subject.' Anderson is no doubt referring to Marx's 1843 essay 'On the Jewish Question,' which criticises the supposed formalism of these merely bourgeois rights while demanding their realisation through the material completion of what had been undertaken in 1789. That was also the year in which Marx discovered the proletariat, a product of previous history that, by becoming conscious of its exploitation, could make the revolution. That radical consciousness, Marx wrote, would be awakened by 'the lightning of thought.' Anderson, however, lets the matter drop.

The difference between Anderson's history and the one that I want to propose can be seen in his discussion of the great strikes of 1995 which paralysed France for more than a month, and which Anderson compares to May '68 (perhaps because of its size and duration, since the similarities end there). The battle is said to have opposed the radical economic liberalism of Prime Minister Juppé and the striking unions supported by the radical intellectuals, led by Pierre Bourdieu. Curiously, the

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anti-totalitarian left is assimilated to the side of Juppé. This is not just factually false but logically and historically inconsistent. On the one hand, Anderson ignores the ‘corporatist’ aspect of the strikes, limited as they were to the protected public sector and labelled, by those who couldn’t deny that fact, ‘grèves par procuration’ – the part acting in the name of the whole. On the other hand, he neglects (as always) the role of the reformist CFDT trade union.

Anderson might have applied to the strikes the positive argument suggested by Furet’s *Penser*, whose integration of Tocqueville’s long term developmental account with Cochin’s analysis of a new mode of political action recalls the two poles that were to be united in Marx’s vision of proletarian revolution. Indeed, that structure seems applicable as well to the emergence of Anderson’s originary moment, that of May ‘68, which occurred when the transformations of post-war French capitalism came together with a new sense of political action. But such a perspective would change the fundamental outline of Anderson’s story – it would make democracy, rather than revolution, into both the critical normative standpoint and the telos of (post-1789) French history. Instead, Anderson embarks on a different and rather unexpected path.

Anderson’s Hope

In a sense, despite his implicit faith in what Marx called the always-digging ‘old Mole’ of revolution Anderson’s picture of the fatal advance of financial capitalism along with the corruption of an inbred political class confirms my suggestion. He describes the anti-globalist counter-polemics, typified by Bourdieu’s *La misère du monde*, but he recognises the limits of blunderbuss criticism which articulates frustration but not politics. He rightly challenges this simplistic French ‘habit of mind’ concerning politics. Anderson is nothing if not well-read. He notes that Rousseau had seen that something like a ‘civil religion’ was needed to hold together a society of individualists; and he points out that this insight recurs in the 19th century founders of sociology, Comte, Cournot and Durkheim, and then in the 20th, with the transgressive theories of Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille and the Collège de Sociologie that have influenced contemporary post-modern thinkers in the wake of Lacan and Derrida. Ever alert to new publications, Anderson sees the pattern return in former leftist Régis Debray’s, *Dieu, un itinéraire* (2001), as well as in the work of ‘France’s most incisive jurist, Alain Supiot.’ But he goes no further; he recognises a trend but only fits it to a pattern rather than analyse it. His essay becomes a book review, curiously omitting once again anti-totalitarian

leftist notions such as Castoriadis's concept of the 'imaginaire,' or Lefort's notion of 'the political.' Instead, he emits a surprising oberta dictum. 'If singular agents will not associate freely to shape or alter their condition, what is the pneuma that can unexpectedly transform them, from one day to the next, into a collective force capable of shaking society to its roots?' The reader of Marx cannot help noting here that this 'pneuma' – a term often used to refer to the Holy Spirit – recalls the 'lightning of thought' that Marx invoked in 1843, after he had discovered the revolutionary proletariat.' Is the French tradition more materialist than Anderson? Or has Marx been, again, misunderstood by his reductionist disciples?

Anderson of course avoids simplifications, criticising this 'pneuma' for being too vague or idealistic; he wants a society in which people rationally chose their forms of association. He therefore moves on, denouncing the 'nervous undercurrent' hidden within the optimism of the more centrist journal *Le Monde* before taking us to visit its radical cousin, *Le Monde diplomatique*, and then ATTAC, Porto Alegre, José Bové before returning, again, to Pierre Bourdieu. But this is misleading; Anderson is no more an economic determinist than are the center-right 'declinists' he denounced at the outset. The France on which he pins his hopes finally is a land of culture, open to world literature and to the cinema. Somehow, without further elaboration, Anderson suggests that this cultural heritage could provide the spring that sets in motion that formerly 'tranquil' people that so worried Aron.

Perhaps. But in that case, how does this slightly optimistic conclusion differ, finally, from the 'pneuma' that he denounced earlier? In the last resort, he seems to offer only his own version of Marx's 'lightning of thought.'

Republican Democracy

I asked at the outset why the French have made no contributions to Marxist theory. At the end of this rethinking, helped by Anderson's remarkable if idiosyncratic synthesis, we see that Marxism, like Anderson's essay, developed the originary logic of French politics: the republican breakthrough of 1789 was to be followed by a sort of social-democratisation in 1793... or 1848, or 1871, or 1917.... That was the basis of Marx's critique of human rights in 'On the Jewish Question.' The difficulty, as Furet saw in *Penser la révolution française*, is that historical origins are not fixed causes (e.g., 'class struggle' or the economic 'determination in the last instance') that remain unchanged over time.

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France has changed. Not simply at what Anderson rightly criticises as the merely ‘superficial level’ of the economy but also in its political culture. The voluntarism of a telos seeking a democratic republic has been replaced by the search for what I have called elsewhere a republican democracy. A ‘democratic republic’ seeks to bring social content to the republican form, eliminating the difference between society and the state, between man and the citizen, between private and public life. The ‘republican democracy’ understands that the political-institutional structure of the republic guarantees the freedoms of the individual that impart to social relations their dynamic potential.[6] That is why the critique of totalitarianism and the politics of human rights are more useful than the teleological history of the Old Left for understanding the dilemmas of the present.

The angle-point from which to begin to develop this alternative account is suggested by Anderson’s ironic opposition of a French democratic republican vision of a ‘république une et unie’ and the American quest, written on every vulgar dollar but incapable of realisation by the economy alone: *e pluribus unam* (out of many, one). Malgré Anderson, but also grâce à Anderson, it is hard not to conclude by thinking that the ‘pneuma,’ or spirit, which historically seemed so fundamental to the French republic, can in fact be actualised by the American-style republican democracy that recognises – even though it doesn’t always practice the idea – that true unity is possible only on the basis of division: the one exists only because the many are actively present. The political implication of this variant of *e pluribus unam* is that radical politics seeks to preserve plurality and diversity rather than devote its efforts to what Anderson (and the so-called ‘left of the left’ in France) desire: an egalitarian society in which all forms of division are eliminated in a unity that leaves no space for difference.

Blindness and Insight: reflections on the intellectual who doesn’t think

(Additional note by Dick Howard) I found the subsequent symposium discussion of Perry Anderson’s theses disappointing. He defended himself well, but I’m not sure that the entire purpose of intellectual debate is to defend established theses. As a result, early in the morning of April 23, I tried to understand what had taken place, placing my remarks under the heading: Blindness and Insight. I sent them to a number of the participants in the conference, and present them here, with some minor elaborations, as they were written. They are also available, along with my original text and those of the other participants, on the web-site of the journal *French Culture, Politics and Society*, which had to abandon plans to publish the

proceedings when Anderson decided that he would not offer a written version of his remarks.

Perry Anderson's in many ways remarkable synthesis of half a century of French intellectual and political life calls to mind the title of Paul de Man's vastly influential volume of essays, *Blindness and Insight*. The price of great insight, de Man suggests, is blindness to other aspects of the surrounding world. Anderson's ability to propose a comprehensive framework that, as Aristotle would have it, has a beginning, a middle, and an end, depends not just on his blindness to this or that detail – for example about the nature of the French intellectual's relation to political life typified by his archetype, and archenemy, François Furet – but depends more importantly on his blindness to the all-shaping force on his own thinking of his own guiding teleology.

Anderson's synthesis calls to mind Harold Rosenberg's remark that the political militant is 'an intellectual who doesn't think.' Rosenberg was referring to the Marxist intellectual, for whom history – or better: History – was a teleological process toward which all events, positive or negative, were tending. This secular theodicy was of course another variant of that blindness that generates insight. Think about Rosenberg's aphorism. The militant can be seen as an intellectual in the sense that the mind is put into play; but a mind that adjusts the ingredients of a puzzle in order to reproduce the order that has been presupposed. There is the party line, the direction of historical progress or even the moral imperative; and there are the facts, which have to be interpreted in order to fit that initial order. Or, as the scientist would have it, there are the universal laws to which the particular instance must be shown to conform. This kind of judgement consists simply in the subsumption of the particular under the universal. Such subsumptive judgement is not genuinely reflective. The need to think that there is something new under the sunshine of radiant tomorrows is not felt.

Introducing my remarks on Anderson's sweeping synthesis, I recalled my only personal encounter with him, which took place in June of 1968. I had come to London fresh from the May 1968 'events' (as the French, in the good Marxist tradition, are wont to call experiences that don't fit the given historical paradigm). Anderson had just returned from that workers' paradise, Enver Hoxha's Albania. He had been one of the first westerners to gain admission to Albania, the only ally of China's ill-named 'Cultural Revolution,' about which *New Left Review* was wildly enthusiastic. The details of our encounter are not important (I don't remember

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them, nor, I imagine, does he). What counts is the symbolism: two paradigms, one trying to understand the new, in this case, a mutation of a democratic republic to what I would later come to call a republican democracy, the other seeking to restructure an old paradigm, the dream of a socialist society in which unity would replace division, the individual finding the meaning of life in a social calling.

Still returning from Albania

Anderson had received (most of) the papers discussing his work well in advance of the colloquium. His prepared remarks took up this-and-that challenge, sometimes better, at other times, worse. No particular criticism could breach the walls of a veritable synthetic fortress. Anderson could be generous to his critics, showing how their comments could be integrated into his edifice; or he could return to the fortress to fend off the slings and arrows of minor critics. This historian could be happy, that militant rejoice, in a renewed certainty that all will be well in the happy tomorrows yet to come.

In Anderson's replies, my own comments came in for only occasional mention. I was told, for example, that Jean-François Lyotard was far more interesting than Claude Lefort, whom I'd mentioned. Perhaps, at least to someone of Anderson's taste. To my suggestion that it was curious that Marxism was so culturally dominant in France for so long, but yet the French contributed nothing to Marxist theory, Anderson replied with a list of names. Perhaps. A colloquium should be concerned with the argument for a general thesis.

When it came to the final round-up, after Anderson's initial reply, I returned to my thesis. But I made a tactical mistake. I referred in passing to a particular case, one mentioned in an oberta dictum by Anderson, that of Max Weber. Rather than take on my thesis – which he had already avoided in his replies to the conference participants – Anderson jumped on my example, invoking with a sarcastic delight the received vision of the thinker he labelled as simply a German national-imperialist who just happened also to found modern sociology. Of course, he had the last word; and there would have been no more sense in replying with citations from Mommsen's great political-biographical study of Weber than there would have been in discussing the relative 'interest' of Lefort or Lyotard. The issue lies elsewhere.

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My thesis, as I suggested in that final round-up, is that nearly all of the peculiarities of recent French history that Anderson well-underlines can be understood within a different story-line: that of a history of democracy. My point is not that democracy is a kind of inevitable (or even morally desirable, or normatively imperative) goal toward which civilised history must or ought to be directed. Democracy is a dangerous game. Its Athenian progenitors are famous for having voted death to Socrates (after having decided their own political fate by invading Syracuse). It's because democracy is a dangerous game that politics is necessary, even while politics can prove fatal – at least in the short run. Why not, then, interpret recent French history within this uncertain framework?

Whereas Anderson turns to history to teach us lessons – and to show the superiority of his own science – it seems to me that another approach is possible, and desirable, and even useful. Its master was not Marx but Machiavelli, whose *Discourses on Livy* don't teach lessons but show us how to read, and to question, the history of unique events. But there aren't any of these in Anderson, who has no place for singularity, no room for novelty, and a surprising lack of curiosity. [7] Perry Anderson's contempt, reflected in his refusal to engage and his preference (as a well-bred academic) to accord recognition only by facile nit-picking, makes dialogue impossible. That's too bad. It poses the question from which I began: is the price of insight a self-willed blindness? And is that price too high?

The 'end' of French history is not a 1793 that would realise – and put an end to – the conflicts unleashed in 1789; it is, rather, the realisation of the republican democracy put on the political horizon in 1789. Perry Anderson is still returning from Albania. I'm still wondering what horizons were opened by 1968.

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References

Howard Dick, 2002, *The Specter of Democracy*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Notes

- [1] The Common Programme of the Union of the Left was signed in July 1972 by Francois Mitterrand of the Socialist Party (PS), Georges Marchais of the Communist Party (PCF) and Robert Fabre for the Left Radicals. The PCF broke the Union in September 1977.
- [2] I try to suggest an answer to this question in Chapter 2 of *The Specter of Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2002).
- [3] For a discussion of this group of thinkers, see Chapter 5 of *The Specter of Democracy*; and for a discussion of its two most important leaders, Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, see Chapters 6 and 7.
- [4] I am relying for the most part on my own memories from this period. The Kerensky story was told to me by Serge Mallet, then a member of the leadership of the PSU.
- [5] Lefort's massive *Le travail de l'oeuvre. Machiavel* was published in 1971. An English translation will be published by Northwestern University Press in the not too distant future.
- [6] I have developed this distinction in *The Specter of Democracy*, especially in Chapter 10.
- [7] I've tried to show what that challenge might entail in *La démocratie à l'épreuve. Chroniques américaines* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2006). That book consists of 50 'chronicles' written weekly during the year that followed the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004. Each essay treats some aspect of the life of a democracy – a 'dangerous game' that re-elected Bush, and that has now placed him at the lowest ebb of polling history.