

When History Breathed Down Our Necks

In the trial of the past before the future, contemporary memoirs are testimony, history is the judge, and the verdict is almost always iniquitous, whether owing to the falseness of depositions, or their absence, or the ignorance of the court. Fortunately, it is open to appeal, and the light of new centuries, projected from afar on centuries past, denounces this judgement of the shadows.

– Auguste Blanqui

One must be modest enough to tell oneself that the moment in which one lives is not the unique, fundamental or eruptive moment of history, on the basis of which everything reaches a culmination or begins again.

– Michel Foucault, 1983

For Michel Foucault, ‘the urgency of posing the question of the subject differently’ was the point at which such authors as Althusser, Lacan and himself converged, all charged with ‘structuralism’ despite their denials. According to Foucault, what mattered was to challenge the supremacy of the sovereign subject that then reigned over European philosophy by way of phenomenology or existentialism.

With the general strike, this subject repressed by structure resurfaced and suddenly proved its strength. In a spectacular reversal, interest turned once more to the ungraspable fluxes of a desiring subjectivity. Foucault, a great deconstructor of the classic subject, set out to explore the manner in which the subject is constituted by way of its resistances to ‘practices of subjugation’.¹

After a century of defeats and betrayals, the defeated would finally have the right to revenge and reparations:

Things really are starting to shake,
 The bad days will come to an end.
 And beware the revenge
 When the poor all get down to it . . .

The ‘objective conditions’ now being met, we would have nothing more to do than resolve as rapidly as possible the question of subjective conditions, under pain of vertiginous collapse into a barbarism of which the century already offered too many examples. We were in a hurry. In one debate within the Ligue, I summed up this sense of urgency in the phrase that ‘history is biting us in the neck’. This formula had an unexpected success, becoming the maxim of our revolutionary impatience. The time was propitious for emphasis and grandiloquence. It would have been more sober and more exact to say that history was breathing down our necks.

If May 68 was the dress rehearsal, all that remained was to prepare for the grand première.

If May 68 was only a beginning, the rest remained to be written. We had to prepare for the founding congress of our new organisation. To launch a new paper, give ourselves statutes and programmatic documents. September saw the appearance of the fortnightly *Rouge*, with an enormous hammer and a formidable sickle on the front page, in a stylised form that would be easily recognisable – our ‘logo’, to use an anachronistic expression.

In the autumn, Alain Krivine was released from prison but had immediately to leave for his military service with the Verdun garrison! Jeanette Habel’s apartment on the rue René-Bou langer, which I sublet from her, was very close to our tiny premises, at the corner of the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis and the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Martin. It became an annex. On certain sleepless nights it took on the look of Smolny.

After delivering to Maspero the manuscript of the book written with Henri Weber, and defending, at the home of Henri Lefebvre on the rue Rambuteau, my dissertation on the notion of revolutionary crisis, I extracted from this, with the help of Sami Naïr, an article on Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg for *Partisans* journal. This disciple of Lucien Goldmann and Serge Mallet, with an intellect as sharp as a razor, had just arrived from Algeria. He had the look of a hungry young wolf, poised for an assault on the capital. Our article became the theoretical reference point of an (ultra-) Leninism, dominated by the paroxysmic moment of the seizure of power.²

The most polemical question in the congress debates was whether our organisation should join the Fourth International. During the summer break, Henri Weber and Charles Michaloux, already members of the tiny French section, had undertaken to convince me of the project.* The dissolution of the Ligue, they argued, offered the opportunity for a new departure. We had to dare to break with the routines of a groupuscule, starting with bringing together in one organisation the stalwarts of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste and the youngsters of the JCR, before we could open a serious discussion with Lutte Ouvrière. These perspectives left me perplexed. From the Black Panthers to the Zengakuren,³ from the Guevarist *guerrilleros* to the Indochinese liberation movements, new heads were finally emerging, as André Breton had prophesied in 1953 in his 'Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto'. Without having the slightest hostility to Trotskyism (I had the greatest respect for those veterans who had experienced the 'midnight in the century' evoked by Victor Serge without abandoning their faith), I felt rather that, with history accelerating, we had to turn the page, go forward to meet the new that was in the process of being born, and envisage an unprecedented Fifth International.

The congress debates sowed confusion in the ranks.⁴ Already before 1968, the majority of the JCR leadership defined themselves as Trotskyists,⁵ but they never sought to recruit me. Embarrassment? Timidity? Or rather, the elitist syndrome of a 'chosen people' with little inclination to proselytism (being 'chosen' does not go very well with conversion)? Perhaps my comrades simply thought that my singular status as 'independent' was useful to them as a pledge of the effective autonomy of the JCR in relation to the International and its French section, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste. At the end of the controversy, I finally made my decision, partly in negative reaction to the argument of the opponents of the Fourth International.⁶ The positive reasons were given me by Sami Naïr. Instead of insisting, as Ernest Mandel did, on an unlikely inventory of existing forces, he held to a purely logical demonstration. Isn't capitalism a world system of exploitation and domination, ruled by the law of uneven and combined development? Yes. Isn't an international

* Charles Michaloux (Aubin), a left-Zionist scout with Hachomer Hatzair (the Young Guard). In the UEC then the JCR, LC and LCR, serving on the politburo of the latter. Director-general of the ApexIsast group advising works commissions and on workplace health and safety.

revolutionary organisation needed to combat it? Yes. Well, there is one, certainly minuscule, but one that has survived without betraying or succumbing to the tests of a terrible century. Still in agreement? Ergo, it is up to us to join it, transform it, and make it the instrument that we need. What objection can be raised to such implacable logic?

Three weeks after the congress, a text signed by the ‘non-Trotskyists’ on our provisional leadership⁷ took a firm position in favour of membership. To rally the hesitators, all we had to do was stop hesitating ourselves. The impulse became irresistible. To avoid poisoning the atmosphere, we had envisaged a delaying compromise at the last minute, but the enthusiasm of the new young militants swamped us. You have to know how to end a debate!

At Easter 1969 the founding congress of the Ligue Communiste was held. Because of the ban still in force in France, it had to be held clandestinely in Mannheim, with the hospitable help of our German comrades. Michel Rotman organised an ingenious athletic diversion to smuggle in the delegates. The two hundred attending slept on the floor in a gymnasium. In the morning, they jostled at the few sinks available for a hasty wash. For apprentice revolutionaries dreaming of guerrillas and maquis, this was a minimum inconvenience. After three days of hot debate, the statutes, including the adhesion of the Ligue Communiste to the Fourth International, were accepted by 80 per cent of the delegates.

On our return to Paris, far from these poetic flights, prosaic French politics caught up with us. De Gaulle was preparing his referendum on institutional reform. To our eyes, a plebiscite was bound to be strongly favourable to its initiator. Henri Weber, however, who had a head for politics (the future senator already emerging from the rebel youth!), had a revelation when he flicked through the pile of newspapers awaiting us: ‘They’re going to ditch the old man!’ It was clear from *Le Figaro* that de Gaulle envisaged defeat after being abandoned by Giscard. Draped in his dignity, he left for the Irish bogs. His resignation automatically led to the organisation of a presidential election.

Our recently elected national leadership was urgently summoned to the *cit  universitaire* at Antony. Michel Rotman stopped by to collect me. On the way, he cautiously suggested that we might consider presenting a candidate. For an organisation of a thousand members, and an average age under twenty-four (at twenty-eight, Alain Krivine seemed a venerable figure; I was just twenty-three!),

that took a lot of cheek. Henri Weber was reticent, and not without reason: we didn't have a penny in our funds, or any experience of the media, and we weren't even familiar with the electoral law. We would break our neck by displaying our amateurism so flagrantly. This dissuasive speech culminated in one of those maxims of exotic wisdom that would characterise the future senator: 'The higher the monkey climbs up the tree, the more he shows his arse!' But even this sharp verdict failed to quench our intrepid enthusiasm. We thought first of all of Jean-Michel Krivine,* a respectable surgeon, still a member of the PCF, then of André Fichaut or Jeanette Habel. The solution suddenly burst out as self-evident. What about Alain Krivine, who was absent from this meeting, being at Verdun under the colours, but who, as a soldier, we hadn't thought would be eligible? This was not to show faith in the virtues of bourgeois democracy. Perplexed but disciplined, Alain accepted, without really assessing the lasting consequences. Candidate squaddie!

Thirty years later, you can say this was a good choice.

With his studious glasses and his tie (object of libertarian derision), Alain had the look of a romantic doctrinaire. But appearances can be misleading. Alain was rather a hyperactive pragmatist, inspired by a vocation for politics and a genuine passion. He showed himself to be incorruptible both materially and morally, as well as in relation to the media. The 1969 presidential campaign was only the second to profit from television. It was not certain that such a young candidate could resist so well the flattery and seduction of personalisation. Formed in the struggle against all forms of bureaucracy, Alain was a kind of reassuring elder brother, and an example of egalitarian rigour, always ready to play his part in hard graft, always available, even in the middle of the night, to rush to the aid of a comrade held in a police station, always ready to enjoy the most frugal snack or be satisfied with the most uncomfortable hospitality from a fellow militant.

This bundle of qualities had of course its counterpart in the way of faults. Out of a visceral reaction to all privilege and all hierarchical relations, Alain never liked to organise the work of others. Spurning any logic of power, he was a rare prototype of the leader who refuses to lead. Certainly this failing was better than its opposite would have

* Jean-Michel Krivine, 1932–2013, PCF and then FI member. Internationalist solidarity activist (Algeria, Nicaragua, Saint-Domingue, Thailand), member of Russell Tribunal and the Franco-Vietnamese Medical Association. Hospital surgeon.

been. All the same, this type of non-leadership often had disorganising effects, impeded collective work, and perpetuated an organisational *bricolage* that used up too much energy and good will. If Alain set the tone, we all had our share of responsibility in these constitutive features of our current.

Alain could only enjoy exceptional leave if he received the hundred signatures of local mayors that the electoral law required at that time, so I had to give the press conference announcing his entry into the lists of the presidential campaign. The journalists were not thick on the ground, but our boldness paid. *Rouge* began to appear every week.⁸ We had several hours' worth of television and radio spots, which we did not yet always know how to use. The apartment on the rue René-Boullanger was transformed into our campaign headquarters, and a permanent bivouac. We spent sleepless nights drafting speeches, leaflets, pamphlets and posters. One sympathiser put at our disposal a small tourist aircraft for provincial meetings. A visit to Marseille was particularly memorable. A valiant sailor, recently recruited, who was charged with meeting us at the airport, was moved by the importance of his mission to play the racing driver. After a couple of speedy corners, the car turned over. Getting out of the wreck through the shattered windscreen, we ended up at the feet of an astonished motorist who had just managed to avoid us. With the accent of the Marseille Vieux-Port, he cried: 'Come and see, Gilberte, it's Monsieur Krivine!' Alain's mug was then displayed every day on posters and TV screens. His sudden appearance in the midst of debris and shattered glass was a great joke.

Still under the shock, we reached the meeting covered in dust and with grazed limbs. As in the famous 'Grand métingue du métropolitain',* a brawl suddenly erupted at the back of the hall. Our vigilant security service moved swiftly to throw these supposed disrupters out on their ear. The stage director Daniel Mesguich later told me, without hard feelings, that as a young municipal councillor he had been among the ruffians, and experienced the muscular assault of our red guards.[†]

The popularity of the squaddie candidate, recognised in the street and deluged with messages of sympathy, began to intoxicate us with electoral illusions. We were ready to dream of a surprising score.

* An 1887 music-hall song.

† Daniel Mesguich, born 1952, council communist. Actor, director, writer.

And so it was, but not in the sense we had hoped. Behind Georges Pompidou and Alain Poher, who alone remained in the field for the second round, Jacques Duclos had obtained some 20 per cent, the Defferre-Mendès tandem hardly 5 per cent, Michel Rocard around 3 per cent, and Alain Krivine only 1 per cent. Even an unknown Louis Ducatel did better.* Just a year after the general strike, this experience taught us much about the glacial slowness of electoral phenomena. The result was not dishonourable. It confirmed us none the less in the idea that elections were definitely the 'trap for fools' that we had denounced the previous year with the legislative elections, and that revolution would not involve the 'electoral farce'.⁹

During the campaign, my particular responsibility was to reply to mail that arrived for the candidate. Hundreds of letters brought a deluge of grievances, evoking the frustrations of the unsuccessful general strike, but also disputes over rents, administrative complaints, domestic quarrels, cats stuck up a tree despite the intervention of the fire department . . . I drew a definitive lesson from this. If an electoral result is indeed a statistically significant indicator, individual motivations are highly erratic.

The ways of the electoral urns are sometimes as impenetrable as those of the Lord.

Latin America was a kind of twin continent in our political imaginary. Cuba had proclaimed itself the first liberated territory of the New World. Che had abandoned the exercise of power to devote himself to permanent revolution. No matter where death had surprised him . . . It was in a remote and desolate Bolivian village. So many people, in Chile, Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay, sought to take up the weapons he had left them with his farewell message to the Tricontinental. In a generational mirror game, we recognised kindred spirits in the young militants of the Chilean Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), the Uruguayan MLN-Tupamaros, and a fortiori the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Argentina (a section of the Fourth International). These organisations were born in the decade of the shockwave triggered by the Algerian, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions.

In April 1969, the 9th World Congress of the Fourth International decided on a solidarity campaign with Bolivia. The Peredo brothers

* Alain Poher was the candidate of the 'democratic centre', Jacques Duclos of the PCF, with Gaston Defferre (supported by former premier Pierre Mendès-France) for the SFIO, and Michel Rocard of the PSU. Louis Ducatel stood as an 'independent radical-socialist'.

were preparing to take up the struggle interrupted by the murder of Che.* We launched a collection of funds explicitly designed to buy arms for the guerrilla. In colleges all over France, intrepid school students climbed on roofs to unfurl scarlet streamers demanding weapons for a country that most of them would have had difficulty locating on the map, despite the educational sessions at which we explained, figures in hand, the strategic importance of tin production and traced the heroic epic of the miners of Siglo Veinte and Huanuni.

It was again for Bolivia that we brought together a group of sympathising actors and singers at the home of Delphine Seyrig.† They included Paul Crauchet and Jacques Charbit (son of the revolutionary syndicalist who had been a comrade of Monatte and Rosmer), former members of the support network for the Algerian FLN.‡ There was also a very young Coline Serreau.§ An unknown person

* Guido Álvaro Peredo Leigue ‘Inti’ (born April 30, 1937 in Cochabamba, Bolivia) and Roberto Peredo Leigue ‘Coco’ (born May 23, 1938 in Cochabamba, Bolivia) – both early participants and critical components of Che Guevara’s Bolivian guerrilla, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN). They joined the Bolivian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Boliviano – PCB) youth wing when it was founded in 1950, and were among the most trusted and veteran cadre within it, in spite of their significant differences with the leadership over the armed struggle. Both were also critical in formation and support of other *foquista* groups in the region, notably the Argentinian People’s Guerrilla Army (Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo – EGP) – which operated near the border with Bolivia, and was meant to have been part of the strategic plan of which the Bolivian guerrilla was the center – and the Peruvian ELN, similar to the EGP. They would both die as part of the annihilation of the ELN upon defeat – Coco on 26 September 1967 fighting in the ELN, a few weeks before Che Guevara himself was executed, and Inti on 9 September 1969 after a siege, capture, and torture (after returning to Bolivia to try to restart the guerrilla as an urban effort).

† Delphine Seyrig, 1932–90, born in Lebanon to French parents, a film director and actress of stage and screen. Worked with directors such as Alain Resnais and François Truffaut, but perhaps best known in the Anglophone world for her appearance in *The Day of the Jackal*.

‡ Paul Crauchet, 1920–2012, theatre and film actor. A member of the clandestine Réseau Jeanson supporting the Algerian independence struggle, he spent seven months in prison in 1960 prior to his acquittal due to lack of evidence.

§ Jacques Charbit, 1929–2006, French actor, director, writer, from 1944 to 1947 member of the Socialist youth organisation, active supporter of the Algerian revolution as member of the Réseau Jeanson, in the 1970s member of LC/LCR.

¶ Coline Serreau, born 1947, composer, conductor, actress and producer, she has staged various operas, operettas, plays and films (the first being *Mais qu’est-ce qu’elles veulent?* [1975], a feminist documentary), as well as the comedy *Trois hommes et un couffin* (1985), which achieved one of the largest ever audiences in France for any French film and was remade in English as *Three Men and a Cradle*. Her 2010 documentary film *Solutions locales pour un désordre global* looked at growing alternatives to environmental destruction.

buttonholed Alain Krivine, to discuss with him the windfall he had received from Claude Lelouch's film *Un homme et une femme*. Alain, knowing little about cinema, imagined he was talking about the white slave trade or some other illegal traffic. The man in question was the singer-songwriter Pierre Barouh.*

Not discouraged, we embarked on a masterly presentation about the strategic role of Bolivia, the 1952 revolution, the pillage of mineral resources, the theory of permanent revolution. The audience rapidly began to show signs of fatigue and distraction. Our guests politely awaited the moment to chat around the buffet where wine and olives were laid out.

Our didactic zeal didn't weaken for all that. We refused to reproduce with our sympathisers the relationship of utilitarian manipulation that often marked the relationship of the PCF to fellow-traveling intellectuals, confined to the role of signatures on petitions and decorative trophies on electoral platforms. We insisted that their support should be based on detailed information and reasoned conviction. Perhaps this was naïve. But after so many years when intellectuals served simply as petition fodder, our scruples were respectable.¹⁰

Following the discussion, Delphine Seyrig whispered to me in her mysterious and caressing voice, in which I heard the captivating echoes of *Stolen Kisses*, that she would keep a room available for visiting Bolivian miners.

Preparation for the congress was not just hard grind. Alexandra, a distant relative of Jane Fonda, was a young American aged seventeen. In 1968, during the Sorbonne occupation, she arrived at the JCR booth on a pair of roller skates, wearing leggings and a mini-skirt. She left with a bundle of leaflets under her arm, to go and convert the stagehands at the Opéra and the bronze-makers. I fell under the charm of her appreciative gaze, her overflowing vitality and her delicious Hollywood accent. She combined an American false naïvety with a New York Jewish humour. Her grandfather, a fundraiser for Israel and a friend of Ben-Gurion, had made an appearance in *Exodus*. Her mother Mary-Jo, a friend of Aimé Césaire and René Leibowitz, and a signatory of the Manifeste des 121, was a picturesque Austro-Jewish-American, thick-set and resourceful,

* Pierre Barouh, born 1934, composer, writer and actor, appeared in *Un homme et une femme* and was also responsible for the soundtrack. This film was a great success and won the Palme d'Or at the 1966 Cannes film festival.

rather akin to Costello (of Abbott) and involved with support networks for deserters from the US Army.

Besides her valuable bilingualism, 'Alex' had the rare skill – at that time – of dexterity on the typewriter. This led to her being mobilised more often than her due turn to type internal bulletins for the preparatory debates of the founding congress. One evening in January 1969, tired of the clattering of the machine and polemics over organisational principles or the 'dialectic of sectors of intervention', we decided to go out dancing at the Roméo Club. This was the start of a romance that lasted two happy years. As in love songs, however, it had a rather sad ending.

In these years of liberation of morals and attacks on the sanctuarising of private life, militants sought to free themselves from outdated prejudices about relationships and fidelity. Despite solemn shared proclamations of liberation, however, individuals were not all equal in the face of jealousy and heartache. The old Adam (or Eve) is not so easily shed. If one might hope to overthrow political power by assault, or revolutionise property relations by legislative decision, the Oedipus complex or the incest temptation cannot be abolished by decree. The transformation of mentalities and cultures is a matter of very *longue durée*.

I wanted to experience to the full my passion with Alex, but I couldn't (and didn't want to) break with Martine, a nervous and anorexic lady: a dilemma of novelistic banality. If, following a slogan of the time, we were determined to 'live without down time', this was not always compatible with the vow to 'enjoy without obstacle'. On top of repeated demonstrations and interminable meetings, we conducted an exhausting agitprop activity under the wing of Clovisse Versa, a teacher in Cannes who had been expelled from the PCF. Evidence of this, besides the run of the paper, is the impressive number of pamphlets published in two years, both in the collection 'Classiques rouges' and in an educational series, as well as leaflets written day by day in response to Nixon's speeches or French government projects to criminalise drugs. A phlegmatic cinephile, Clovis was inspired by a kind of pedagogic genius allied to an acute sense of opportunity. He made a great contribution to the quality and quantity of our prolific literature.

Caught up in a fearsome whirlwind of activities, I also found myself torn between two relationships and entangled in a time budget as baroque as Postman Cheval's Ideal Palace. These years of double

life left me, perhaps not with regrets, but with a painful and bitter aftertaste.

Early in 1971, therefore, I faced departure for military service with a certain relief, forcibly cutting, as it would, ties that had become stifling. My comrades decided that I should apply for discharge on health grounds. Despite our republication of the classics of revolutionary anti-militarism in the collection 'Classiques rouges', 'They give you a rifle, use it!' had not yet become a sacrosanct command. The class of 1946 was oversupplied, and the 68-ers too rebellious for the army. The ministry of defence was not unhappy at skimming many recruits off on the least pretext. After a few weeks under observation at the Larey military hospital in Toulouse, the authorities notified me of my exemption, giving me to understand perfectly well that they were not duped by my simulated illness.¹¹ During this enforced stay in hospital, to struggle against the boredom of empty days on a camp bed I gave myself up to the reading of *Death in Venice* and *Cancer Ward*. Gloomy meditations.

Such a dispensation from military service would have been for most people a cause for rejoicing, but I received the news with mixed feelings. My stay in military accommodation meant that my love life remained in suspense for a few months, until my first appointment as a certified teacher at the lycée of Condé-sur-Escaut. True to our great hopes, none of us made anything much in the way of career plans. In 1969, the *agrégation* examinations in philosophy turned to farce. A struggle committee was formed, against exams in general and the *agrégation* in particular. The day of the written exam, fearing an active boycott, the police stood guard around the Sainte-Geneviève library. While confusion reigned and there was lively discussion on whether or not to write the exam papers, the barrels of guns appeared above the library shelves. 'We're not taking the *agreg* with a rifle at our backs!' Alain Brossat and I stoked the flames of sedition, to the great despair of our studious fellow-students. There was weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. The sitting was postponed until the autumn.

The following year, the competition fell on the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth. The Ligue celebrated the event with a meeting at the Mutualité. This took place on the eve of the last test. The meeting ended joyfully, but very late, followed by supper at the Épi d'Or. The next day, I was hardly in a state to face the thorny question of 'Leibniz's God'. I came to a complete dead end on monadology and

theodicy, and my whole theological imagination was not enough to see me through. No matter. The old world was in its death-throes. Ernest Mandel promised us a revolution in Europe within five years. To hell with the *agreg!* It wasn't even worth filling in your tax return. I convinced Henri Weber of this, and one fine day he found himself and his furniture outside his apartment, with the bailiff's seal on the door.

The same year of 1970–71, I did my CAPES* practical first at Jean-Baptiste Say (where the lycée student Michel Field, active in the Ligue, turned out to be an agitator with a great future), then at La Fontaine (where my fellow apprentice turned out to be a certain Sylviane Agacinski) and at the Auteuil École Normale (where my team-mate was Patrick Viveret, a promising young supporter of Michel Rocard).† At the return to class in September, I received my marching orders. My request had been modest, either Gourdon (on the railway from Paris to Toulouse) or Vendôme (in homage to Pierre de Ronsard), or – with little hope – Sète, where the sand is so fine. Condé-sur-Escaut! I didn't have the faintest idea where this charming little town was situated, but the river Escaut immediately conjured up a foggy dampness:

*Avec de l'Italie qui descendrait l'Escaut,
Avec Frida la Blonde, quand elle devient Margot . . . ‡*

But nothing daunts the fearless and irreproachable black – or red – hussar of the Republic. Politzer had been sent to Cherbourg. Nizan had landed up at Bourg-en-Bresse, Lefebvre at Clermont. I could be

* Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré.

† Michel Field (Michel Beauchamp), born 1955, an LC activist from age fourteen. Expelled from the Lycée Claude Bernard in May 1971 for haranguing his classmates. One of the leaders of the movement against the Debré Law (making it harder to delay or avoid military service). On 3 April 1973 he confronted the education minister Joseph Fontanet in a TV debate, with some success. Today a well-known mainstream TV and radio presenter.

Sylviane Agacinski, born 1945, French feminist philosopher, associated with 'differentialism', since 1994 married to Lionel Jospin.

Patrick Viveret, born 1948, was in the 1960s a member of the Christian-Left youth movement JEC, then in the PSU after May 68. Then joined the Parti Socialiste, directing the democratic-socialist reviews *Faire* and *Intervention*. Appointed by Rocard to the Cour des Comptes (state audit council) in 1990, later responsible under the Jospin government for a report on measuring inequality and wealth indicators. In 2006 behind the complementary currency 'Sol', designed to promote a 'solidarity economy'.

‡ Lines from the Jacques Brel song 'Le Plat Pays'.

modestly satisfied with Condé. The lycée recruited its students from an area of thirty kilometres around, mainly families of miners or engineering workers. I rented a tiny room above a roadside petrol station. In the evening I dined in its restaurant. The regulars had pigeonholes for their check table-napkins. The owner stamped your bill with a voucher, ten of which entitled you to a free meal. Time flowed slowly on the banks of the Escaut.

The Condé lycée had scarcely been touched by the earthquake of 1968. At the first teachers' meeting, a Thermidorean headmaster announced, in turgid claptrap, that he would be available 'at the centre of everything, like a resonant echo'. He strongly advised against reading *Le Monde* in the staff room. An English teacher was even hauled over the coals for having his students listen to folk music. Our colleagues looked askance at the formation of a union branch, suspected of sowing discord in their little community. The main activity of their 'club' was devoted to organising disorderly excursions on Saturday evenings, to enjoy a *couscous royal* across the Belgian border. What an adventure! Life at Condé was spiced with the forbidden pleasures of *harissa* . . .

A few days into the new term, the 'resonant echo' sharply chided me for having recommended students to spare their families the cost of the famous two-volume philosophy textbook by Huisman and Vergès. This book, stressing the separation between action and knowledge, was hardly a good sign. It seemed to me all the more unnecessary in that the *Communist Manifesto* was officially on the curriculum. Purchase of this would be more economical and more profitable. The local bookshop, which specialised in second-hand textbooks, thus remained with an unsold stock. My Paris arrogance had interrupted its annual business cycle and the patient accumulation of its tiny commercial capital. The admonition I received was the result of the shop having complained to the principal. A note in the far-right *Minute* reported the arrival of the Paris philosophical *chien-lit* in the peaceful town of Condé.

My pedagogic experience there did not last long. I stuck to my post bravely, like the hero of *The Tartar Steppe*, while civil war was brewing up behind.* My comrades believed I was wasting time. And so I deserted, my only regret being for my students, still sleepy in the mornings, who lived mainly in housing estates with no cinema or

* *Il deserto dei Tartari*, a novel by Italian author Dino Buzzati, published in 1940.

library, and the TV as their only window on the world. The girls wore pleated sky-blue skirts, and pullovers with patches on the shoulders, far indeed from the low necklines and sexy miniskirts of the seductive students of La Fontaine. After classes, the students killed time in a bar while waiting for the school bus. I preferred their company to games of table football with my colleagues, old before their time. We played epic games of the 7-14-21 drinking game, with horrible draughts of Vinadox and grenadine, Fernet-Branca and lemonade, and other concoctions each more disgusting than the other. When I took leave of them to prepare for revolution, they offered me a bound copy of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, inscribed with touching dedications.* Months later I still received letters from these adolescents, full of tender distress and interminable boredom.

This fleeting exile on the banks of the Escaut was an opportunity to tidy up my disorderly love life. On Sunday evenings I took the train from Paris to Valenciennes, returning on Thursday afternoon. There was little time to sandwich in my two love affairs between all the meetings. The combination of teaching, political, emotional and sexual activity became unsupportable. The break-up with Alex was already under way, though separation was no less painful. I tried to appease an indefinable sadness by reading Aragon's *Roman inachevé* and *Les Yeux d'Elsa*. On the other hand, Martine became pregnant – the father was a mutual friend. She left to have an abortion in England. On return, she learned of the death of one of her best friends in a road accident. She started drinking, and increasingly had a raw and hunted look. From emotional upset to marital disaster, career disappointment to odd jobs, her suffering became an endless trail of stations of the cross.

Martine died in the Montpellier hospital in January 2000, a few days before her fifty-fourth birthday. I would never have imagined she would have the strength to pursue her declining life for so long. Her funeral was a desolate reflection of her disordered existence. At Saint-Bauzille-de-Montmel, where she then lived, she was the first person buried in the new cemetery. On the day of the funeral, a snow-storm fell on the village. Her solitary open grave made a dark hole in the virgin snow. Neither flowers nor wreaths: the florist had mistaken the address and made the delivery to the church in another village.

* *Les Chants de Maldoror*: Poetic novel written in 1868–69 by the Comte de Lautréamont (pseudonym of Isidore Lucien Ducasse). An inspiration to many surrealists.

Some twenty of us¹² stood sobbing and stamping our feet, while waiting for an unlikely hearse that had got lost in the weather. The coffin was eventually lowered into the frozen ground. Martine's son David, who had been rescued from a chaotic childhood, pronounced the words of farewell. I read a few extracts from old letters, full of distress and black humour. Martine always exercised a magnetic attraction on the people around her, arousing devotion and infinite patience. She never showed any gratitude in return. As if this society could never render her more than a tiny part of her due.

Between social conflicts, university and school student mobilisations, solidarity campaigns with Vietnam, skirmishes with the far-right groups at street markets, 1970 and 1971 sped by on the wing. We sometimes organised up to three lightning actions in a single day, from hanging a banner on a monument to occupying an embassy or consulate. In January 1972, for Richard Nixon's investiture, the American embassy organised a reception at a large hotel. We knew Che's farewell message by heart: harass the enemy everywhere, so that he never feels secure. We printed false invitation cards and smuggled in, among the carefully filtered guests, a group of 'plainclothes' militants. They dressed up well enough in suits and ties to be above suspicion. The ceremony ended up in a slapstick brawl worthy of a Marx Brothers film.

In January 1972 I set off for Toulouse to organise a defence campaign for three comrades¹³ who had been arrested at the Spanish border on New Year's Eve, with bundles of underground literature hidden in the panels of their vehicle. After satisfactorily turning the page (one page each!) on my defunct love affairs, I plunged body and soul into games of love and chance. This new disorder went hand in hand with a political forward flight.

We had long been repeating that 'the problem of power is raised'.* Under the impulse of Gérard Guégan, the Champ Libre imprint was republishing classical texts of strategy.† I was responsible, along with Robert March, for relations with the first nuclei, in Catalonia and Madrid, of what would become our sister organisation in the Spanish

* See below, p. 107.

† Gérard Guégan, born 1940, writer and film critic. From 1958 a member of the UEC, he worked for two years on the cultural section of *L'Humanité*. Broke with the PCF after May 68. In 1969 was among the founders of far-left publishing house Champ Libre, but forced out in 1974.

state.* At the same time, we had several meetings, in Bayonne and Bordeaux, with the leaders of the '6th Assembly' ETA. This group, a majority at their organisation's last congress, had developed from traditional Basque nationalism towards a Guevarist internationalism under the influence of the Cuban revolution. Four of their number, including José Iriarte ('Bikila'), held a hunger strike in the church of Saint-Lambert in spring 1972.† Curled up in their duvets, they received several visits of support, from Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi among others.

This new ETA leadership had produced a manifesto boldly titled 'Euskadi, the European Cuba'. The diehard nationalists accused them of '*españolismo*' for collecting funds in support of building workers on strike in Andalucía. We believed our new friends to be influenced by Maoism, and had therefore proposed putting on the agenda of our meetings a balance sheet of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, in exchange for a presentation on their part on the national question. Not giving a fig for Maoism, they didn't understand very clearly why we insisted on talking about China. No more did they pay much attention to the studious notes we provided for an article in their underground organ, *Zutik*.

In this spring of 1972, we were equally proud of the exploits of our Argentinian sister organisation, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT). It had made international headlines in 1969 with its role in the popular uprisings in Córdoba and Rosario, then by spectacular prison breakouts, and finally with the kidnapping and execution of the head of Fiat Argentina. One day, a smartly dressed man in his fifties arrived at the fortified entry to our office at 10, impasse Guéménée. He had been sent by the multinational to make contact with 'our Argentinian friends', with the object of preventively negotiating a kind of immunity for the executives of his company over there.

* Robert March (Paco Rops), graduated from the École Centrale, professor at an engineering school. A member of the LCR politburo, with a particular interest in questions of armed struggle. A Latin America specialist.

† José Iriarte 'Bikila', born 1945 in Renteria in the Basque country. He joined ETA in 1964 and in 1973 participated in the fusion between ETA VI and the LCR (section of the Fourth International in the Spanish state), to form the Basque sister organisation the LKI. During the 1980s he was a member of the FI leadership. In 1991 he participated in the fusion of the LKI with the EMK (Communist Movement in Euskadi) founding an independent revolutionary organisation, *Zutik*. This organisation disintegrated some twenty years later. Bikila is now spokesperson for the Basque anti-capitalist organisation *Gorripidea*.

At Easter I made my first conspiratorial trip to Barcelona. In the early hours of the morning, the names of Catalan villages passed by like so many places haunted by the phantom characters of Ramón Sender's *Seven Red Sundays*, or the novels of Arturo Barrea and Juan Marsé. Armed with a textbook of *Espagnol en 90 leçons* and a few copies of *Mafalda*, I tried to revive my memories of Latin conjugations and master the use of *ser* and *estar*. When the Talgo train passed the little stations of Massanet and Fornells in the grey dawn, I saluted the memory of Francisco Sabaté Llopart. On 6 January 1960 he had been arrested, carrying arms, on the 06:20 train for Barcelona. A rearguard fighter in a lost war, he was wounded, then killed, at San Celoni. His odyssey is traced in Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits*, which had just appeared in French.

I had a rendezvous in a dark bar on the Paseo de Gracia, opposite Gaudí's Pedrada. A small man with a moustache introduced himself as 'Agustin', like someone from the pages of Malraux's *Man's Hope*. He was a young engineering worker, dark-haired and swarthy, like the men in the newsreels of May 1937, dressed in blue overalls and a beret, a cigarette between his lips and a finger on the trigger, defending the Telefonica on the Plaza Cataluña.

Our discreet conclave was held on a housing estate in Hospitalet de Llobregat. At that time, such meetings had a bit of a festive air. The majority of our comrades were living a hidden and underground existence. Jesus Idogaya 'Pexto', for example, stayed holed up for a year in a flat in Pamplona, from where he edited the clandestine ETA-6 press. The organisation generously presented him with an exercise bike as an outlet for his overflowing energy. (After ending a hunger strike in Bayonne, Pexto swallowed some twenty cutlets before our terrified eyes.) Meetings were the occasion for warm re-encounters and a friendly relaxation. A thousand stories were exchanged, the least sign of rebellion against the regime was monitored. People busied themselves round the hearth where *butifarras* dripping with fat were roasting. The soul of the group was Enrique, the son of reserved Catalan peasants.¹⁴

At this Easter meeting in 1972, the Madrileños were preparing a historic Mayday, inspired by the patterns of mobilisation that had been tried out in France: secondary rendezvous, strictly timed trajectories, mobile groups and Molotov cocktails. It was a bold operation, and successful despite the arrests. After the 1969 repression against the student movement, it confirmed a revival of combativeness and represented a (modest) moral victory.

The person who explained the battle plan to me, armed with a sketch, was introduced as El Moro.* A native of Melilla, this Moor had the head of a bird of prey, cutting speech and a sense of effectiveness. Over the years, we became the greatest of friends. In 1973, following a wave of executions in Madrid (our apparatus, the ‘*appa*’, was hardly a year old), the leadership of the LCR-ETA-VI (which had become the section of the Fourth International in the Spanish state after a merger between the Liga and ETA-VI) had to move to Barcelona. El Moro shared a lodging there with two Basque comrades, Petxo and Xirri, close to the old popular quarter of Pueblo Seco and El Molino.† When the TV broadcast a match of Atletico Bilbao, the world revolution paused in its tracks. Iced beers emerged from the fridge and, as if ourselves present on the terraces, we chanted ‘At-le-ti-co! At-le-ti-co!’ to salute the exploits of a team that was 100 per cent Basque, including a number of players (such as the goalkeeper Iribar) who were reputedly ETA sympathisers.¹⁵

Before catching my return train to Montpellier, I spent my last hours strolling in the neighbourhood of the Falcon hotel, the legendary headquarters of POUM in 1937, following the tracks of the derelict character in Manfiargues’s *La Marge*, and tasting *churros* saturated in oil on the Plaza Real, accompanied by *horchata de chufa*.

The Montpellier comrades were at the heart of the winegrowers’ unrest in the Midi. Already before 1968, the Occitan singer Claude Marti and the winegrower Claude Rives were members of the JCR in Carcassonne.‡ When the Occident heavies threatened to disrupt

* Miguel Romero ‘El Moro’, born in 1945 in Melilla, Morocco, was a militant of the Frente de Liberación Popular, a Guevarist organisation very active on university campuses in the late 1960s. Subsequently in the LCR, in which he was a member of the leadership until it dissolved in 1991 on fusing with the Movimiento Comunista. He was a member of the leadership of the Fourth International from the end of the 1970s until the beginning of the 1990s, including a period in the early 1980s as a full-timer for the Bureau in Paris. Today an activist of the Izquierda Anticapitalista and editor of the journal *Viento Sur*.

† José Vicente Idogaya ‘Petxo’, born 1948, was the principal leader of ETA-VI, the then-majority current of ETA, which fused with the LCR in 1972. Was leader of the unified organisation and subsequently of the LKI, when it was agreed that the Basque organisation of the LCR-ETA-VI should be independent and take the name LKI. Chair of Social Communication at the Universidad del País Vasco. Part of the advisory board of the journal *Viento Sur*.

‡ Claude Marti, born 1940, JCR member (Carcassonne), activist for the *occitaniste* cause (Institut d’Etudes occitanes). School teacher, singer, poet, novelist.

Claude Rives, JCR member (Carcassonne). Farmer and leading figure in the winegrowers’ action committees (Comités d’action viticoles).

performances of plays by Armand Gatti at the Grenier in Toulouse, Maurice Sarrazin provided us with free seats in exchange for neutralising the troublemakers.* We summoned Marty as reinforcement. He arrived with members of his weightlifting club, their forearms bursting with impressive muscles. At the first shouts of the reactionaries, ‘Shakespeare, not Gatti!’, our robust Occitan guard imposed silence on these ranters, who were surprised by this muscular defence of popular culture.

The ‘red Midi’ was in ferment, rekindling the glorious memories of Marcellin Albert and his ‘*brave pioupiou du 17e*’.† Marti sung ‘La Commune de Narbonne’. Claude Rives and Jean Huillet organised ‘winegrowers’ action committees’ able to mobilise hundreds of winegrowers in a few hours at any point in the Aude or Herault.‡ Today a Socialist regional councillor and pillar of the Convention pour la VIe République, our comrade Paul Alliès inspired the *Cahiers Occitanie Rouge*, which carved out a niche for itself and disputed the terrain of Occitanism with the regionalists.§

Under the stimulus of the impending death agony of Francoism, inspired by the winegrowers’ revolt and in solidarity with the distant Argentinian guerrilla, Paul Alliès, Antoine Artous, Armand Creus ¶ and myself published a contribution to the preparatory debates of the third congress of the Ligue in spring 1972, under the title: ‘Is the question of power raised? Let’s raise it!’ This aroused the indignation of some and the enthusiasm of others. The ‘BI-30’ (internal bulletin no. 30) became a kind of manifesto of ultra-leftism in our ranks. Whatever its failings in political sense, it made up in terms of formal logic. In 1969, the 9th World Congress had adopted an orientation of

* Maurice Sarrazin, born 1925, actor-director. Founded the Compagnie du Grenier de Toulouse.

† These ‘squaddies of the 17th’, celebrated in a popular song, mutinied in Béziers when sent to repress the revolt of the winegrowers in 1907.

‡ Jean Huillet, originally from Béziers, a leader of the Comités d’action viticoles and member of Lutte Occitane in the mid-70s. Very concerned with regionalist politics, at one point close to the Montpellier LCR.

§ Paul Alliès (Stéphane, Guilhem), professor of political science at the University of Montpellier. Driving force behind the LCR in this city in the 1970s and 1980s, founder and editor of the *Cahiers Occitanie Rouge*, member of the central committee. Several times an LCR electoral candidate, particularly in Sète.

¶ Armand Creus (alias Arthur), born 1948, a student leader in Perpignan in May 68. In the LC, arrested for his anti-militarist work; in the LCR, co-founder of the Lyon coordination for vigilance against the far right. Now a regional councillor for the Front de Gauche in Rhône-Alpes, and member of the Gauche Unitaire.

armed struggle for Latin America. In Chile under the Popular Unity government, threats of coup d'état were direct. In Spain, Francoism was still hanging on. Italy was in permanent effervescence, from 'creeping Mays' to 'hot autumns'. In terms of strike figures, Britain challenged Italy for top position. Ernest Mandel predicted imminent revolutionary eruptions in Europe. Fatal confusion between the performative statement of a conditional strategic prophecy and a divinatory prediction!

It was impossible, however, to claim indefinitely that 'objective conditions' had reached the point of being over-ripe, and at the same time rest content with deploring the absence of a 'subjective factor' up to the task, or denouncing the eternal betrayals of bureaucratic leaderships. It was urgent to correct this divergence between subject and object. All the more so as our press denounced the 'advance of the strong state' on a weekly basis, and the passing of exceptional legislation that would subsequently pale in relation to the security policies of Sarkozy and recent 'anti-terrorist' laws. A dramatically unequal struggle was thus impending. The plausible hypothesis of a Chilean scenario, in the event of an electoral victory of the left, raised the problem of a development of our own military forces. The classics had called for subversive work in the army. We had made a start on this,¹⁶ establishing a mysterious 'front of revolutionary soldiers, sailors and airmen'. We also studied the classic experiences of urban insurrection, as analysed under the pseudonym A. Neuberg in the Comintern volume *Armed Insurrection*, republished at this time by Maspero, and that of the Asturias rising as related by Manuel Grossi.*

Urban insurrection was a confrontation of rapid decision. We did not see very well how, in a modern state with a strong institutional and democratic tradition, we could build up forces over a long term. France was not China. It did not have the vast expanses that the young Mao could count on in his famous 1927 pamphlet *How Can Red Political Power Exist in China?* A rebel peasantry, moreover, was not a more favourable milieu than the factories that had seen a primitive accumulation of military experience and homemade weapons. The legendary precedent of the Limousin maquis led by George Guingoin under the German occupation was evidence of this. Finally, the small-arms factory set up by Michel Pablo on the Moroccan border to

* See A. Neuberg et al., *Armed Insurrection* (London: New Left Books, 1970); Manuel Grossi, *L'Insurrection des Asturies* (Paris: EDI, 1970).

help the Algerian FLN held pride of place in the golden legend of the Fourth International.¹⁷ We even envisaged repeating this operation for our Basque and Spanish comrades, in the perspective of a rapid fall of the Franquist regime. It was not a purely theoretical question.¹⁸

This was the time of ‘hasty Leninism’, according to Régis Debray’s formula in *La Critique des armes*, except that the ‘foquismo’, whose theorist he was, was hardly Leninist despite being hasty.¹⁹ Our feverish impatience was inspired by a phrase from Trotsky that was often cited in our debates: ‘The crisis of humanity is summed up in the crisis of its revolutionary leadership’. If this was indeed the case, nothing was more urgent than to resolve this crisis. The duty of each person was to contribute his or her little strength, as best they could, to settle this alternative between socialism and barbarism. It was in part up to them, therefore, whether the human species sank into a twilight future or blossomed into a society of abundance. This vision of history charged our frail shoulders with a crushing responsibility. In the face of this implacable logic, impoverished emotional life or professional ambition did not weigh very heavy. Each became personally responsible for the fate of humanity.

A fearsome burden.