

GODS THAT FAILED

by *Diana Pinto*

During the recession-ridden summer of 1983, when President François Mitterrand's two-year-old Socialist government was sagging in the opinion polls, the prestigious daily *Le Monde* took action. Its editors ran a series of front-page articles lamenting "the silence of the intellectuals."

Indeed, the lack of support for Mitterrand from Paris writers and thinkers was surprising. He not only had led the return to power of the Left, the historic home of the French intellectual, but, given his authorship of four books (including *The Wheat and the Chaff*, 1982) and his literary inclinations, he could claim a special affinity with the intellectual world. So why the silence? Bernard-Henri Lévy, one of the anti-Marxist New Philosophers who emerged during the 1970s, had a theory: "The Left triumphed when it was already dead."

Perhaps. Yet intellectuals, too, are not what they used to be, despite *Le Monde's* traditional emphasis on their importance.

The French both coined the term "intellectual" and, in a variety of ways, granted to those who claimed the title a special influence unmatched anywhere else in the West. During the Enlightenment, Voltaire's invective in *Candide* (1759) against the nobles, Catholic clergy, and other powers of the Old Regime, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas about a "social contract" that would end inequality among men, inspired leaders of the 1789 French Revolution and contributed to the 18th-century rise of republican government. Thinkers and writers would continue to command attention after the heyday of Victor Hugo, who fought Napoleon III's dictatorship while writing *Les Misérables* (1862) in exile, right on through the World War II German Occupation. From his Left Bank haunts, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist author of *Nausea* (1938), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and *No Exit* (1944), spoke to the world on existentialism, the Soviet Union ("the country of freedom"), and "imperialist" America.

Such sages were courted by men of power. When Gen. Charles de Gaulle, the Free French leader, met a delegation of intellectuals led by André Gide (*The Immoralist*) in Algeria in 1943, he pointedly expressed a belief that "art has its honor, in the same way that France has hers." He later made writer André Malraux (*The Human Condition*) his Minister of Culture.

From the time he emerged as a distinct figure during the 18th century, the French intellectual enjoyed a special role. Men of letters, Voltaire declared, were "a necessary part" of society. They were the defenders of Reason. They were Humanity's conscience, a bulwark against the State, whose power had burgeoned under Louis XIV and was consolidated after the 1789 Revolution by Napoleon Bonaparte. In contrast to Britain and America, where government mediated local interests, the French State embodied France's universal interests. It brooked no opposition from regions and classes. Its will was absolute.

France's intellectuals sought to rule the empire of Truth as absolutely as France's kings ruled the State. When Rousseau wrote about the "General Will" and Voltaire penned his hymns to Reason, they claimed as much of a monopoly on the idea of Progress as France's rulers did on power. Like the 18th-century nobility whose privileges they denounced, intellectuals knew little of "the people" they spoke for and disdained mundane matters such as economics. They argued that wisdom, as Voltaire said of philosophy and good taste, belongs to a few "privileged souls. . . . It is unknown in bourgeois families, where one is constantly occupied with the care of one's fortune."

Quite a contrast to Britain's pragmatic thinkers, who included John Locke and Adam Smith. "Out of touch with practical politics," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), the French intellectuals "lacked the experience which might have tempered their enthusiasms."*

The 19th century, which saw three kings, two republics, one emperor, a civil war, and the birth of an international socialist movement, brought the intellectuals' apogee as custodians of Truth: turning false charges of treason against a Jewish army captain named Alfred Dreyfus into a *cause célèbre*. When Emile Zola published his "J'accuse. . ." in the journal *L'Aurore* in 1898, what became known as *le parti des intellectuels* joined in a battle between champions of justice on the Left and, on the Right,

*Historian Ernest Renan shared that lament in *La Réforme Intellectuelle en France* (1871): "England has achieved the most liberal state that the world has known up to now by developing its institutions from the Middle Ages. . . . Freedom in England [comes from] its entire history, from its equal respect for the rights of the king, the rights of the lords, the rights of the commons and guilds of every type. France took the opposite road. The king had long ago swept away the rights of the lords and of the commons; the nation swept away the rights of the king. The nation proceeded philosophically in an area where one should proceed historically."

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Voltaire in the Bastille in 1717. A witty favorite of Paris salons and leader of the Enlightenment philosophes who questioned the old order, he was jailed for 11 months for mocking the Duc d'Orleans. His era, he wrote, saw "astonishing contrasts: reason on the one hand, the most absurd fanaticism on the other ... a civil war in every soul."

the military, the church, and other Old Regime pillars. The triumph of Dreyfus's defenders led to the 1905 separation of church and state (which closed out the Old Regime) and established the Left as a power in politics. It also began the intellectuals' *engagement* in left-wing causes.

Yet the Dreyfus case would be the last French *affaire* to provide the intellectuals with a "big" issue; afterwards, the durable if shaky Third Republic (1870-1940) offered little that could be attacked as absolute evil. The next *cause* would come with the 1917 Russian Revolution: the combat between communism* and capitalism. The Soviet Union became the center of Reason and Progress, America a force of evil (it was "counter-revolutionary" before it became "imperialist" after World War II).

From the 1920s on, attitudes about the Communist Party often determined one's position in cultural fields. Allegiance or non-allegiance to the Party divided the writers and artists who followed the pioneering surrealist André Breton. Pablo Picasso

*Though Lenin adopted the label "communism," the word seems to have first appeared in France. In 1779, a self-described *auteur communiste* named Hupay proposed an experiment in "Spartan" communal living near Marseille that would be the "nursery of a better race of men." Restif de la Bretonne, a prolific Paris writer, made the term a revolutionary concept. During the 1790s, he urged that the "uncompleted republic" that followed the 1789 revolt be replaced by a *communism* that would eliminate private property. Only this would be "worthy of reasonable men."

PEAS, GHERKINS, MAN, MARX

Existentialism long ago receded into the French intellectual background. But when Jean-Paul Sartre unveiled his ideas about Man's essence in Being and Nothingness in 1943, he stirred a commotion—and confusion. The existential argument that the diminutive leftist set forth in his dense, 800-odd page work was variously hailed as the hope of a war-numbed generation that had found all other “isms” empty and mocked as a sour atbeist's Marxist fraud. Responding to the critics, Sartre protested in the journal Action that his notion was really “rather simple”:

In philosophical terminology, every object has an essence and an existence. An essence is an intelligible and unchanging unity of properties; an existence is a certain actual presence in the world. Many people think that the essence comes first and then the existence: that peas, for example, grow and become round in conformity with the idea of peas, and that gherkins are gherkins because they participate in the essence of gherkins. This idea originated in religious thought: It is a fact that the man who wants to build a house has to know exactly what kind of object he's going to create—essence precedes existence—and for all those who believe that God created men, he must have done so by referring to his idea of them. But even those who have no religious faith have maintained this traditional view that the object never exists except in conformity with its essence; and everyone in the 18th century thought that all men had a common essence called *human nature*. Existentialism, on the contrary, maintains that in man—and in man alone—existence precedes essence.

This simply means that man first *is*, and only subsequently is this or that. In a word, man must create his own essence: It is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself. And the definition always remains open ended: We cannot say what *this* man is before he dies, or what mankind is before it has disappeared. It is absurd in this light to ask whether existentialism is fascist, conservative, communist, or democratic. . . . All I can say—without wanting to insist too much on the similarities—is that it isn't too far from the conception of man found in Marx. For is it not a fact that Marx would accept this motto of ours for man: *make, and in making make yourself, and be nothing but what you have made of yourself?*

linked up with the Party briefly; so did Jean Vilar, head of the Théâtre National Populaire. In science, the Nobel laureate Frédéric Joliot-Curie, who would be the first chief of France's Atomic Energy Commission, led his colleagues in the Communist camp of “progress” against “bourgeois” foes.

“Intellectuals” divided into Party fellow travelers (such as Sartre) and those who were totally *engagé* (novelist Paul Nizan). There had long been non-Left writers, such as Honoré de Balzac during the 19th century and Drieu la Rochelle, Celine, and the Catholic novelists Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac dur-

ing the 20th. But they were not accepted as “intellectuals” by the left-wing writers, editors, and other panjandrums who dominated the realm of “ideas.”

Sartre and the Marxist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty set the “proper” line for the faithful in their review, *Les Temps Modernes*. Along with Albert Camus and other *grands intellectuels*, they were national figures. They made headlines in *Le Monde*, *Combat*, and the weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Like their counterparts in *haute couture*, whose designs would be copied widely, they set intellectual style.

Down with the Lackeys!

Their views on who was in the “good” camp of Progress (or in that of Reaction) and other matters percolated out to school-teachers, *lycée* professors, film producers, and others who were the “consumers” of intellectual fare. This was a large group: The 1954 French census listed “intellectuals” as a professional category and counted more than 1.1 million. It was also a disgruntled group, uneasy about the economic transformation of France that had begun after 1945. Often the attitudes of *le parti des intellectuels* paralleled those of the government (e.g., the Gaullists’ anti-Americanism). When they did not, few politicians would risk a clash. In 1959, some Gaullists urged that Sartre be tried for treason for encouraging, in a famous petition signed by 121 intellectuals, the desertion of French soldiers in the Algerian war; de Gaulle refused, saying simply that “one just does not touch Jean-Paul Sartre.”

By coupling France’s revolutionary tradition with that of the Soviet Union, the intellectuals kept the world as a stage at a time when France’s role was shrinking. They could transcend France’s social and economic problems, which did not interest them, by being the “conscience of humanity.” As they saw it, French “ideas” provided the cultural substrate for the “progressive camp” incarnated by the Soviet Union. Sartre’s existentialism asked people to choose between “good” and “evil” by embracing political engagement on behalf of the Revolution. Camus’s *The Rebel* (1951) and Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror* (1947) suggested other ways of dealing with the nihilism wrought by war.

Those who argued for democracy and/or a more balanced evaluation of the superpowers were ostracized from the community of “intellectuals.” In 1955, the liberal political philosopher Raymond Aron, who had been a university classmate of Sartre’s, wrote a brilliant pamphlet, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, de-

nouncing their psychological "need" of the Party and of revolution. He, and the antitotalitarian thinkers and Eastern European refugees who wrote for the liberal but anti-Communist review *Preuves*, were dismissed as "lackeys of the bourgeoisie." Pluralism was not part of the French intellectual tradition.

The coupling of the French and Soviet revolutionary identities survived the early evidence on the Soviet system—the Moscow show trials of the 1930s, the denunciations of Stalin's crimes at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 and the Hungarian invasion that year, even the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. When, during the 1960s, the intellectuals decided that the Soviet Union had become "too revisionist," they merely turned to China and Cuba. As Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film, *La Chinoise*, detailed, French students took to Mao Zedong with a passion. Régis Debray, now a Mitterrand adviser, joined Che Guevara in his ill-fated attempt to export Fidel Castro's revolution to South America.

Sartre, too, discovered the Third World; he became the director of *La Cause du Peuple*, a quarterly that was so communal it listed only him and Mao as contributors. As late as 1975, intellectuals could still rejoice in the victory of North Vietnam, while hoping for a "true" Portuguese revolution as a first step toward a Marxist Western Europe.

But then, in just a decade, the scene changed totally. Why?

The basic reason was France's rapid transformation from an essentially rural, tradition-bound nation with a small, almost priestly intellectual class of writers, professors, and teachers into an urban, mobile, industrial society—a society whose better educated younger generations increasingly questioned all authority and were exposed to what was going on in other countries. One casualty was the intellectuals' old confidence in the *universal* importance of France's culture and ideas.

An Addiction to Ideology

Younger thinkers, among them the "structuralists" who emerged during the 1960s, saw things differently. As applied by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, historian Michel Foucault, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, literary critic Roland Barthes, and linguistic philosopher Jacques Derrida, structuralism diverged from the Sartrian view that man could remake his world—and that literature, science, and all else must thus be politicized.

Though less a philosophy than a method, structuralism held that human freedom was limited; thought and action were "structured" by innate cultural traits that defied subjective will and history. The importance of ideas, per se, was exaggerated, Fou-

A pride of intellectual lions: Jean-Paul Sartre, his life-long companion Simone de Beauvoir, and, behind them, Albert Camus (partially hidden) and André Gide. Devoted to "the revolution," Sartre, unlike Camus and Gide, rejected his Nobel Prize for literature (1964), and even in old age joined street riots to make good on his motto that "commitment is an act, not a word." When he died at 75 in 1980, 25,000 attended his funeral.



cault argued in *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966): "If we study thought as an archaeologist studies buried cities, we can see that man was born yesterday and may die tomorrow." The French not only lacked a monopoly on truth, Lévi-Strauss argued; they suffered from a psychological addiction to ideology and revolution.

It was in this new context that younger intellectuals embarked during the late 1960s and '70s on a re-reading of France's past. Its "silences" were scrutinized. Books and films, including *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1972), sought to shed light on dark spots such as Vichy France's wartime collaboration with the Germans and the persistence of French anti-Semitism.

Even so, when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* appeared in France in 1975, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and other voices of the intellectual Left could still argue over the propriety of publishing the Soviet dissident's "reactionary" revelations about Moscow's network of prisons for political opponents—even if they were true. Intellectuals had known about the Gulag before; during the early 1950s, Sartre himself had anguished over reports of the "camps," as they were then called. But the intellectuals, including Sartre, chose to blind themselves to the truth. They said that history was on the side of the Soviets, the "black marks" were passing phenomena. By the 1970s, young intellectuals refused to accept this old orthodoxy.

Could the *origins* of the Gulag be found within the French revolutionary tradition? That was one question that absorbed Bernard-Henri Levy, André Glucksmann, and other New Philosophers. They were veterans of the 1968 student rebellion who had gone on to rebel against Marxism. In his angry 1977 book, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, Levy railed at how the prevailing intellectuals had brushed aside embarrassments such as the Gulags as "mistakes," when in fact "the Soviet camps are Marxist, as Marxist as Auschwitz was Nazi." Marxism, he discovered, was "not a science, but an ideology like the others, operating like the others to conceal the truth at the same time it forms it."

Collapses of the Communist ideal elsewhere reinforced the Gulag revelations. The fighting that embroiled the "fraternal" Communist regimes of China, Vietnam, and Cambodia after the U.S. withdrawal and the brutal conditions that dotted the seas around Indochina with "boat people" could not be ignored. One result was a rather confessional piece published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1976 by French journalist Jean Lacouture, an old Vietnam hand who had made a return visit. Not only did he find Communist rule in the south to be "oppressive"; he admitted that in years of previous reporting he had not focused on what a Communist victory might lead to, out of a "kind of solidarity" he felt with "a people struggling for independence."

Looking at America

Then there was Angola, Afghanistan, and further repression in Eastern Europe, which the intellectuals on the Left had also refused to examine during the entire postwar period. The agonies of Soviet dissidents, notably physicist Andrey Sakharov, continued. With the end of reform hopes in Poland, signaled by the 1981 crackdown on Solidarity, intellectuals found virtue in what they had dismissed as the "formal" rights of the democracies.

Meanwhile, the French intellectuals' home base was transformed. Pursuing a broader public not notably devoted to high culture, publishers became less ready to rush the latest polemic into print. As "ecologists" and others with a cause began competing for media attention, younger intellectuals became less content to write for eternity and a small audience; they wanted visibility *now*. To have a book reviewed in a serious journal was good; it was better to be asked by TV Host Bernard Pivot to hold forth on *Apostrophes*, a Friday evening author-interview show that draws five million or more viewers. The left-wing press struggled. While *Le Monde* remains influential, its circulation has slipped from its 1979 peak of about 450,000 to 385,000. *Le*

Nouvel Observateur has become a sedate, glossy weekly, fat with ads for ski condominiums and exotic vacations.

Several trends produced an "opening to America," which had long received bad press from both intellectuals and the Gaullists. Perceptions changed as more and more French academics visited U.S. campuses; books like Edgar Morin's *Journal de Californie* (1969) ventured behind the caricatures, just as Jean-François Revel's *Ni Marx Ni Jesus* (1970) explored the secular United States as the road of the future. Especially after the end of the Watergate drama in 1975, intellectuals and journalists came to admire the Americans' robust two-party politics, independent press (print *and* broadcast), and decentralized economy.

The country also attracted young backpackers in search of wide open spaces (psychological as well as geographical) and upward-bound executives seeking firsthand experience with U.S. technological and managerial know-how to add to their résumés.

In short, what Levy describes as "a kind of metaphysical hatred for everything American" has turned to intense fascination. Ronald Reagan's presidency has provoked several intellectual treatises and a somewhat superficial best seller, Guy Sorman's *The Conservative Revolution in America* (1984).

The 1981 victory of the Left consolidated the sea change for French intellectuals. It ended the old association of "power" with "the Right"—and of the intellectuals with anyone. "The essential merit of the left-wing government," sociologist Alain Touraine has said, "has been to rid us of socialist ideology."

A poignant sign of the intellectuals' abandonment of their 18th-century certitude has been the belated honors that have been accorded to Raymond Aron. So long overshadowed by Sartre, he has been avenged by younger writers aiming to emphasize who turned out to be right on totalitarianism. In a 1979 event, arranged by the New Philosopher André Glucksmann, Sartre agreed to meet Aron at the Elysée, the presidential palace in Paris, to seek aid for boat people fleeing life under communism in Indochina. Said Aron: "It's Sartre who has changed, not me."

The French intellectual was the grand old figure of an authoritarian past. His loss of a central role in shaping political discourse marks, more than any other social or economic development, France's entry into the ranks of those pluralist democratic societies that Tocqueville admired. For the autocrats of ideas, the past decade has been a time to step down, "to cultivate one's garden," as Voltaire put it. It has been a step for the better.
