

# The Poverty of the “New Philosophy”

Fatos Tarifa

In the midst of intense anti-American sentiments prevailing in France and throughout much of Europe early in 2006, a book by Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo* (Random House), made it to bookstores all across the United States. It was apparently directed against the French and European anti-Americanism that has become rampant since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Lévy, who visited America in 2004, wrote his book to assess “the state of health of American democracy”<sup>1</sup> one hundred seventy-three years after Alexis de Tocqueville published his seminal work *Democracy in America*. To most Americans, Lévy is a totally unknown author. His name, however, is not quite unknown to those familiar with French intellectual life of the past three decades.

Lévy is a French quondam philosopher, a wealthy bon vivant, bohemian intellectual, who, with his movie-star lifestyle, his picture frequently featured on the cover of the *Paris Match* magazine, and his celebrity friends the late Yves Saint-Laurent, Alain Delon, and Salman Rushdie, has long become a fixture of the continental gossip rags. A man not particularly encumbered by modesty, Lévy

FATOS TARIFA is a former Albanian ambassador to the United States and a Visiting Professor at Eastern Michigan University. He is the author, most recently, of *Europe Adrift on the Wine-Dark Sea* (2007).

is anecdotally known for his words “God is dead, but my hair is perfect.” *American Vertigo*, as the author himself admits, is “not a book of philosophy,” but “it’s journalism, it is literature, it is funny,” it is also, still in his words, “*un geste philosophique*.” It is precisely this “philosophical gesture” in Lévy’s most recent book that recaptured my sociological imagination, to use C. Wright Mills’s language, which, by grasping history and biography and the relationship between the two within French society, evoked a glitzy but otherwise short-lived episode in France’s intellectual history of the mid-1970s that came to be known as the *Nouvelle Philosophie* (New Philosophy). The self-announced anti-anti-American author of *American Vertigo*, Bernard-Henri Lévy, was its founder and the figurehead of an assemblage of a dozen or so young intellectuals in Paris, whose “new philosophy” vanished as swiftly from the French intellectual stage as it appeared on it.

## I.

The May 1968 events in France, as well as a number of political events from the mid-1950s to the second half of the 1970s, produced a profound *crise de conscience* in French Marxist thought. The *Nouvelle Philosophie* emerged as a byproduct of this crisis. A coterie of French intellectuals, self-proclaimed

“new philosophers,” frantically denounced all forms of Marxism as a “philosophy of domination” and, as Lévy put it, an “opium for the people.” The “shocking” novelty of their “new” philosophy was believed to mark the “end” of Marxism in French social thought. Thirty years later, however, a number of questions linger in the intellectual horizon. What was new in the *Nouvelle Philosophie*? What were its tenets? Why did it fail to emerge as a distinctive school of thought? If *Marx est mort*, as the “new philosophers” and the media announced with fanfare in the mid-1970s, why couldn’t the French “new philosophy” escape the fate of an ephemeral phenomenon? Were the “new philosophers” misunderstood, incorrectly interpreted, or badly read in their time? Or did they simply fail to provide a new conceptual framework for the understanding and the interpretation of human society at the *fin de siècle*? In what follows I attempt to answer some of these questions.

## II.

France is a country where Marxism in one form or another, but most importantly in the form of Marxist existentialism and humanism as developed in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as of a more orthodox Marxism championed by Louis Althusser in the early 1960s, has provided a dominant frame of reference for work in philosophy, sociology, and the “human sciences” ever since the end of World War II.<sup>2</sup> During the first two decades after the war the grip of Marxism on the minds of French intellectuals was virtually complete. It became the cerebral orthodoxy in Parisian intellectual life, or as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, the “unsurpassable horizon” of the age. As a matter of fact, it remained so even as it was reinterpreted in light of existentialism, surrealism, Saussurean structural linguistics, and even Freudian psychology.

It was not until the mid-1960s—a period of affluence, mobility, and individualism produced by remarkable economic growth, decline in working-class activism, and the tedious sclerosis of the *Partie Communiste Française*—that the intellectual reign of Marxism in France became vulnerable to profoundly ideological and political attacks from all sides of the intellectual establishment. Marxism lost its terrain to structuralism and to what is called post-structuralism in the Anglo-Saxon world. It was now clear that capitalism, which Marx had so thoroughly analyzed a century earlier, was no longer the same, and the alternative of a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society was neither the order of the day nor desirable anymore. Structuralist movements at this time not only called into question every aspect of modern liberal life, they also seemed to wipe out all hope of escaping the tentacles of “power” through political action. Instead, they offered “new possibilities” for resistance, including what Lévy considered a “moral and religious resistance against the evil.”<sup>3</sup> The shift was of such magnitude that, as Mark Lilla points out, “rather than resisting in action the dehumanization of man on the basis of a rational analysis of history, one resisted in theory the idea of a ‘man’, ‘reason’, and ‘history’ as the oppressive products of ideology,”<sup>4</sup>

After the rise of the New Left and the events of May ’68, all this became clear. An idiosyncratic historical work like Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* succeeded in casting a far darker shadow of suspicion over liberal society than Louis Althusser’s laborious analyses of Marx’s *Capital* in the mid sixties....Politically, May ’68 marked the beginning of the end of Marxism, with Maoism and the “boutique” movements of the early seventies (feminism, ecology, “Third Worldism”) left glowing like embers of a dying fire.<sup>5</sup>

This radical transformation in the intellectual life of France and other parts of

Western Europe was further influenced by a series of political events, such as the Hungarian tragedy in 1956, the 1968 Soviet repression of the “Prague Spring,” and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in 1973 and its translation in 1974 and, as significantly, the butcheries in Cambodia in the second half of the 1970s. By revealing the repressive nature of state socialism and shaking liberal sympathies for Third World socialism, such events set off a profound *crise de conscience* among French intellectuals.

There is no doubt that the signs of crisis in French Marxist thought had appeared much earlier. One of the events that bred such a crisis was the Korean conflict in 1950. For Merleau-Ponty the war in Korea proved the imperialist nature of the Soviet Union, whereas for Sartre it marked “the end of idealism” and the beginning of “realism.” It was in the mid-1950s that Merleau-Ponty, in his *Les aventures de la dialectique* (1955, *Adventures of the Dialectic*), announced his renunciation of Marxism.

There is not much point in trying Bolshevism all over again at the moment when its revolutionary failure becomes apparent. But neither is there much sense in trying Marx all over again if his philosophy is involved in this failure or in acting as if this philosophy came out of this affair intact.<sup>6</sup>

For Sartre, it was a few years later when, in his *La critique de la raison dialectique* (1960, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*), he “settled the accounts” both with his own previous thought and with that of the Communists, who, he then believed, falsified “true Marxism.”<sup>7</sup> It was the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s work, however, that had the most shocking impact among French intellectuals. As Lévy puts it, Solzhenitsyn’s work was “enough to immediately shake our mental landscape and overturn our ideological guideposts.”<sup>8</sup> In the span of a few years, intellectuals who once subscribed to Sartre’s view on Marxism as

the “unsurpassable horizon” of our time began to confess that Communist totalitarianism might fall within that horizon and not be a historical accident that can be explained simply as a consequence of the Bolsheviks’ mistakes and the Stalinist deviations. Such a view was most eloquently expressed by Michel Foucault in his review of André Glucksmann’s *Les maîtres penseurs* (*The Master Thinkers*), which was for Foucault himself a final settling of accounts with Marxism.

The whole of a certain left has attempted to explain the Gulag...in terms of the theory of history, or at least the history of theory. Yes, yes, there were massacres, but that was a terrible error. Just reread Marx or Lenin, compare them with Stalin and you will see where the latter went wrong. It is obvious that all those deaths could only result from a misreading. It was predictable: Stalinism—error was one of the principal agents behind the return to Marxism—truth, to Marxism—text, which we saw in the 1960s. If you want to be against Stalin, don’t listen to the victims; they will only recount their tortures. Reread the theoreticians: they will tell you the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Such was, briefly, the context in which the *nouvelle philosophie* emerged in the mid-1970s.

### III.

The expression “*nouveaux philosophes*” (new philosophers) derived from the title of a dossier edited by Lévy in the literary weekly *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in June 1976. The collective noun referred to a number of young—and for the most part unknown—intellectuals including Lévy himself, Jean-Marie Benoist, Michel Guérin, Christian Jambet, and Guy Lardreau. The dossier consisted of several articles presenting the views of such young authors, interspersed with interviews or exchanges of letters with well-known figures such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. In this way the impression was created that the *imprimatur* of the philosophico-literary establishment was

granted to the “new movement,” which the dossier purported to herald. Lévy’s introduction of the dossier aimed at producing maximum impact in public, giving the impression that something truly new, original, unusual, ground-breaking, and exciting was happening in French thought, but displaying also a number of important theoretical points of reference—from Nietzsche and Heidegger to structuralism’s “Gang of Four”: Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, and Althusser.

A month later, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, France’s leading left-wing weekly, published a lengthy article by Gérard Petitjean,<sup>10</sup> in which a number of other young writers were launched as “new philosophers” including Jean-Paul Dollé, André Glucksmann, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Hocquenhém, and Nikos Poulantzas. Although that article made no reference to Maurice Clavel, Gilles Susong, Alain Finkielkraut, and Philippe Nemo, the latter were no less affiliated with the *nouvelle philosophie* than the others. Most of the thirteen or fourteen “new philosophers” ranged in age from twenty-eight to forty. Lévy, the youngest of all, emerged as the mastermind, the founder, the figurehead, and de facto spokesman of this shifting assemblage, not least because most of the “new philosophers” were published in the “Figures” and “Théoriciens” series which he edited for Grasset.<sup>11</sup>

Although the label “new philosopher” was inevitably a somewhat fluid term, not least of all because it is stretching the word to call any of them—apart from Glucksmann—a “philosopher,” the authors who were self-styled the “*nouveaux philosophes*” moved rapidly to the center of attention. They dominated public perception of the day, creating the impression that a moment of philosophical adventure was happening in contemporary French thought. They were featured on magazine covers and TV talk shows and, *mirabile dictu*, became overnight celebrities.

They made headlines not only in France, but also in Germany, England, Italy, and to some extent also in the United States. *Time* described the advent of the “new philosophy” as “probably the liveliest intellectual hubbub to hit Paris since the early 1950s.”<sup>12</sup> For the rest of 1976 and the next year or so the *nouvelle philosophie* truly became media property. Appearances on television and public debates were accompanied by a flood of press interviews, many in magazines not normally noted for their interest in philosophical or political issues, such as *Lui*, *Paris-Match*, the French edition of *Playboy*, etc. It seemed impossible to read a Parisian newspaper or to turn on the radio without finding some mention of the “*nouveaux philosophes*.”<sup>13</sup> Media exposure of the *nouvelle philosophie* was so great as to lead to a new coinage: “*pub philosophie*”<sup>14</sup> (from “*publicité philosophie*”—publicity philosophy). In summer 1976, Paris was once again showing itself to be the city where fashion in the realm of ideas moves faster than anywhere else, as was earlier the case with the *art nouveau*, the *nouveau roman*, the *nouveau cinéma*, and the *nouveau réalisme*.

Besides their young age, there were basically two things that the “new philosophers” had in common: first, they emerged from the same socio-political context; second, they shared certain political beliefs and philosophical assumptions. More specifically, however, the “new philosophers” shared a common past of Maoist *gauchisme*<sup>15</sup> and their actual anti-Marxism. As Sheehan metaphorically puts it, they all had set flame to their recent Maoist past and “had risen like Phoenix from the ashes to go on to condemn Marxism and modern liberalism, the Gulag and Coca-Cola, fascism of the left and the right...and the rule of the masses.”<sup>16</sup> David Macey, in his biography of Michel Foucault, points out that to the extent that any unity could be found in the work of this somewhat disparate group, it was “a negative unity

centered upon a violent rejection of Marxism in all its forms.”<sup>17</sup> On a cynical view, such as that of Gilles Deleuze, the “varieties” of the *nouvelle philosophie*—Christian, leftist, liberal, Nietzschean—were simply “different ways of dressing up the same reactionary message so as to appeal to as many tastes as possible.”<sup>18</sup>

Virtually all the “new philosophers”—except for Benoist—had a leftist past. They were veterans of the May ’68 movement and former leftist militants descending from different Maoist groups.<sup>19</sup> Their biography of political militancy became an almost indispensable trademark for the “new philosophers,” for it provided not only the authenticity of disillusionment in their denunciations of Marxism, but also served as “a source of moral authority for their later pronouncements and provided their work with a vague aura of leftism.”<sup>20</sup> For the media, the “new philosophers” belonged to a “lost generation,” disillusioned by the fading of the dreams and expectations of May 1968, yet continuing to bear witness to the “inner truth” of that movement.

The extreme *gauchisme* of the “new philosophers,” which was tempered on the road from Althusser through a French-style Maoism, was converted in the mid-1970s, under the impact of the Soviet and East European dissidents, into open anti-Marxism. They subscribed to the idea that Marxism is an evil and an obsolete ideology that leads inevitably to totalitarianism and terror. For them, Marx and his holy scriptures alone were responsible for the Soviet labor camps and all the crimes committed by state socialism. This conviction became the central thesis of Glucksmann’s *La cuisinière et le mangeur d’hommes* (1975, *The Cook and the Man-Eater*), and was further expanded in his *Les maîtres penseurs* (1977).

The first book is a generalization from the Soviet example to all of Marx and all social-

ism. Inspired by Solzhenitsyn’s disclosures of the horrors of Stalin’s Gulag, *La cuisinière* is a favorable review of the *Gulag Archipelago* in terms of Foucault’s reading of the European prison system and lunatic asylums. Glucksmann, who had been Foucault’s student, described the revolt of the “new philosophers” against Marxism as a refusal to be swept along the rails of “a system that was issued 150 years ago by an illustrious long-beard.” Marx and his nineteenth-century philosophical doctrine, which was not only out of date but, most importantly, dangerous in the new era, were made responsible for all crimes committed by Stalin since, according to Glucksmann, there would have been “no Russian camps without Marxism.”<sup>21</sup> Communism, in his view, equals Nazism, for “a camp is a camp, be it Russian or Nazi.”<sup>22</sup>

Lévy, on his part, simply echoed Glucksmann’s view when in his *La barbarie à visage humain* (1977, *Barbarism with a Human Face*)—a patchwork of ideas borrowed from the writings of his associates (Lardreau, Jambet, and Glucksmann), which immediately became a bestseller—he strongly attacked the promises of Marxism as empty, blaming Marx for all evils of the Soviet Union where the state had grown into a monstrous “reactionary machine.” “The Soviet camps,” Lévy rephrased, “are Marxist, as Marxist as Auschwitz was Nazi.”<sup>23</sup> All this, according to Lévy, became evident with Solzhenitsyn, whom Lévy called “the Dante of our time,” and “the Shakespeare of our time, the only one who knows how to point out the monsters.”

We needed another *Divine Comedy* to represent Hell, the modern Hell of the Gulag, whose horrendous topography he [Solzhenitsyn] has outlined in book after book. Hence there was a chain reaction, first of all within reference to Marxism. It was enough that Solzhenitsyn *spoke for us* to wake up from a dogmatic sleep. All he had to do was *to appear*, and a very long history finally came to an end: the history of those Marxists who,

for thirty years, had been retracing the path of decadence in search of their guilty party, moving sorrowfully from the “bureaucratic phenomenon” to the “Stalinist deviation,” from Stalin’s “crimes” to Lenin’s “faults,” finally from Leninism to the blunders of the earliest apostles, going through the layers of the Marxian soil one by one, sacrificing a scapegoat at each step, but always preserving above suspicion the one he dares to denounce for the first time—the founding father himself, Karl Capital and his holy scriptures.<sup>24</sup>

Like Glucksmann, Lévy found that Foucault’s description of the great confinement in his *Histoire de la folie* (History of the Madness) was applicable to the Soviet Union and, therefore, he called for “a Foucauldian analysis” of Soviet society. The advocacy of the “new philosophers” for the Soviet dissidents and for Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* was so zealous that Deleuze, in a virulent pamphlet, expressed his disdain, saying that he was disgusted by the way the “new philosophers” were trying to create “a martyrology...feeding on corpses, blaming the inhabitants of the Gulag for not having ‘understood’ earlier,” and showing rather “too much scorn for the inhabitants of the Gulag.”<sup>25</sup> Other authors also criticized the “new philosophers” on similar grounds, pointing out that with their writings they only “contributed to make the reality of Gulag a myth.”<sup>26</sup>

#### IV.

Critics usually agree that the “shocking” novelty of the “new philosophers” consisted of the fact that they were a group of young intellectuals who were no longer prepared to dialogue with—or work within—the framework of Marxism but openly denounced it as a philosophy of domination.<sup>27</sup> For them, Marxism had proved incapable of explaining the struggles and the sufferings of men in the present day. Its theoretical tools were no longer valid; hence, as Lévy wrote in his *La barbarie*, it had become “urgent to rethink

the spectrum of our society, according to new guides, new systems of power, and new orders of concepts.”<sup>28</sup>

The question for the “new philosophers” was not criticizing Marxism as a philosophy and ideology and its alteration in light of the new social realities. Their aim was rather an out-and-out liquidation of Marxism as a worldview. In 1970, Jean-Marie Benoist had announced the “end” of Marxism in his book *Marx est mort* (Marx is Dead). After decades in which the vast majority of French intellectuals had almost unanimously adhered to Marxism, the attitude of the “new philosophers” seemed now to mark an important departure. Whereas the Paris events of May ’68 had led to the “stagnation” of French Marxism, the advent first of Deleuze’s “philosophies of desire” (1970–1975), and then of the *nouvelle philosophie* (1976–1978) “marked the ‘disappearance’ of Marxism—at least temporarily—from the field of discussion in France.”<sup>29</sup>

Be that as it may, the “new philosophers” cannot be credited with originality in regard to their vehement denunciation of Marx and Marxism. Anti-Marxism in French modern thought did not arise in 1977. As early as 1948—that is, three decades before the “new philosophers” voiced their anger at and repugnance of Marx, Marxism, and the Soviet totalitarian system to which it was applied—Marxism and Sovietism were strongly denounced by Claude Lefort, who was directly influenced by Victor Kravchenko’s book *I Chose Freedom*. Other important examples of earlier denunciation of Marxism in French modern thought include Raymond Aron’s *L’opium des intellectuels* (1955, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*), and Merleau-Ponty’s *Les aventures de la dialectique*. Earlier still, André Gide and Arthur Koestler, among others, had abandoned communism and Marxism to which they had previously subscribed, in bitter disillusionment with



Stalin's purges and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.

Despite the zealous ambition of the "new philosophers" to search for tools for understanding the new social world more adequate than those Marxism provided, they were utterly unable to create any coherent system of concepts and propositions. The "New Philosophy" indeed produced nothing that could be compared with other philosophical schools (i.e. the Frankfurt School or existentialism), nor were the "new philosophers" allied to one another through some kind of a common doctrine. One could argue, as Hirschhorn does, that the "new philosophy" was, in 1976–1977, still "a school in the making."<sup>30</sup> But even if we agree with such a claim for a moment, there is no doubt that the "new philosophy" failed to emerge as a distinctive school of thought, regardless of some praise it received initially. On the one hand, besides their rejection of Marxism, which became a central theme in all fourteen books that the "new philosophers" churned out and in numerous magazine and newspaper articles and interviews—their whole theoretical repertoire—there was not much else that they had in common. Even though almost every one of them declared himself a moralist in philosophy, a nominalist in worldview, and an anti-totalitarian in politics, it is impossible to discuss the "new philosophers" as if they represented a unified viewpoint on anything.<sup>31</sup> At the crest of their jubilation, in 1978, Michael Ryan pointed out that

The "new philosophers" could be said to exist in name only. The homogeneity of the movement rests on a mutual espousal of heterogeneity. Hence, their "program": a rejection of authority of any kind whatsoever (be it right or left), a pessimistic belief that the Master (any form of authoritarian power, from parents to state) is ineliminable, that the only moral alternative is neutrality or a Christian detachment from the arena of power, that the only political alternative

is a perpetual revolt which dances constantly out of the grasp of the Master in the hope of a future free from mastery; a condemnation of reason as a weapon which reinforces mastery in the form of state power; and finally (and it is this which has earned them notoriety) an arraignment of Eurocommunism, as well as of Marx and of socialism in general, as a modern Master, whose inevitable expression is Gulag.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the public perception that the "new philosophers" formed a coherent group, they themselves insisted that there were important differences in their views and some bridled at being lumped together. The group's oldest member, as well as its best-regarded thinker, Glucksmann, refused even to be grouped with them.

On the other hand, the content of their works also is eclectic. Emmanuel Garrigues refers to Glucksmann's works as an example of philosophical eclecticism where Nietzsche, Wagner, Clausewitz, and Mao Tse-tung are all mixed up together.<sup>33</sup> Peter Dews, for his part, points out that the work of the "new philosophers" is in fact an "ill-considered mélange of theories, attitudes, and responses, in which positions inherited from the post-'68 far-left mingle with themes which, under their veneer of novelty, can be seen to belong to the traditional repertoire of the Right."<sup>34</sup> Old reminiscences of Althusserian Marxism and Maoism—although Marx, Althusser, and Mao were now rejected *en bloc*—were mixed up with a set of notions borrowed from Lacan, Kojève, Foucault, and Solzhenitsyn, who became their new gurus. This resulted in an amalgam of beliefs, ranging from Lévy's nihilist spiritualism—at first of a moralistic form in his *La barbarie* and then with plain religious tones and references to the biblical heritage in his *Le testament de Dieu* (1979, The Testament of God), which *Elle* magazine referred to as a signal of "*un nouveau mysticisme*"<sup>35</sup>—to a sort of Lacanian Christianity in the work of Philippe Nemo, and, furthermore, to Gnosticism to be found in

*L'ange* (1976, *The Angel*), a book written by Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet. Gilles Deleuze, who criticized the “new philosophers” probably more harshly than any other French scholar, disdained them as “sophists” and “TV buffoons,” who should be credited for nothing.<sup>36</sup>

As was previously suggested, besides their admiration for Solzhenitsyn, the thought and idiom of the “new philosophy” was marked by Lacan and Foucault. Lacan’s work had been important for several generations of French intellectuals, including Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite, and Louis Althusser. Especially after the publication of his *Ecrits* in the late 1960s, Lacan became a truly central figure. The “new philosophers” made extensive use of Lacan’s perception of science as an “ideology of the suppression of the subject,” expanding it into an attack on the “authoritarianism” implicit in the rigor of scientific method. This, as Michael Ryan asserts, might explain their rage against theory, science, reason, and Marx, all of which they lumped whole-sale with Gulag and the concentration camps.<sup>37</sup> For Lévy, the totalitarian state means “scientists in power.”<sup>38</sup> “Total power,” he wrote, is synonymous with “total knowledge.” The threat of totalitarianism is even greater when a society imposes the duty of “telling all.” This is, in Lévy’s view, the case with state socialism and its Marxist ideology, for by sanctifying “the Hegelian dream of the truth becoming the world and the world becoming the truth, [it] ends up with an ideal which is...one of the definitions of modern tyranny.”<sup>39</sup>

The theme of “power/knowledge” became central also in Glucksmann’s *Les maîtres penseurs*. Inspired by Foucault, who insisted that power is irreducible, that no system can do away with the structures of power and that a system can at best merely shift them, Glucksmann extended his criticism to what

he calls “the Revolution-State,” arguing that all philosophers, without exception, display a will to domination, which explains their complicity with tyrants. Rephrasing Hegel, Glucksmann maintains that “to dominate is to know; to know is to dominate.”<sup>40</sup> This, according to Glucksmann, is a vicious circle. And the circle of circles: “The master fabricates all the truth.”<sup>41</sup> Glucksmann accused modern philosophy since Hegel of intellectual complicity in the violence of a history dominated by principles of the revolutionary state. Demonstrating such an understanding of the relation *pouvoir/savoir*, the “new philosophers” tried to find the seeds of “totalitarianism” in the 1844 *Manuscripts* of the young Marx and in Hegel’s *Logic*. In their view, all Marxism becomes Stalinism or Gulag, whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat is Hegel’s monarchical state, or Fichte’s police state. As Foucault, who welcomed the publication of *Les maîtres penseurs* puts it, Glucksmann’s basic question is: “By what trick was German Philosophy able to turn Revolution into the promise of a true, a good state, and the State into the serene and complete form of Revolution?” Foucault himself, in his review of this book, endorsed Glucksmann’s blanket condemnation of the hyphenated monster “State-Revolution,” portrayed as inevitably devouring its own children.<sup>42</sup>

Glucksmann’s and Lévy’s views on the complicity of knowledge and power or philosopher and tyrant show how much the “New Philosophy” was influenced by Alexandre Kojève’s teachings, for it was Kojève who, over two decades earlier, had announced that there is “no essential difference between the philosopher and the tyrant.” The tyrant, according to Kojève, is never anything but a statesman attempting to realize a philosophical idea in the world. Since the truth of a philosophical notion is judged by its realization in history, the



philosopher, Kojève argues, cannot reproach the tyrant for tyrannizing in the name of an idea, as is always the case with modern tyrannies, where those in power consistently claim to represent an ideology.<sup>43</sup>

More directly still, the subject of the knowledge/power relationship, as it was thematized in the works of the “new philosophers,” and their belief in the inherent oppressiveness of reason seem to have been inspired by Foucault’s early work *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*) and, even more importantly, by his *Surveiller et punir* (1975, *Discipline and Punish*). For Foucault,

Power and knowledge directly imply one another.... There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.<sup>44</sup>

Just as Foucault demonstrated that, in general, power produces knowledge and knowledge in turn reinforces power, so the “new philosophers” located the origin of authority in reason. Reason, as a powerful, ordering, and system-making device, lies behind the desire to create hierarchy in the order: Theory, Party, State, Gulag; hence the movement from rational thought, as a form of *theoretical* mastery, to the concentration camps, as a form of *practical* mastery. Glucksmann considers Marxism a “rational theology,” hence Gulag and the camps are already inscribed in Marx’s text, which as a rational theory has decided how things are and which therefore constitutes a law that demands overall obedience and precludes challenge. In his view, Marx’s theory, because it is a rational system, is in itself authoritarian and, as such, it leads inevitably to Gulag. “C’est comme ça,” that’s how it is—as Jambet and Lardreau, citing Lacan, put it.

Similar arguments were used by other “new philosophers” to explain the complicity

of language and power domination. Lévy, for example, maintains that language is power. Moreover, language is the essence of power, and “grammar is the science of power.” He writes:

There is an obvious relationship between the form of power and the shape of language, between the orders of a Prince and the images of a sentence.... There is an idiomatic science of power, an algebra of domination, and there is no politics that is not first of all linguistics.... Speech is not as Aristotle proposed, a pacified space in which conflict can be expressed; neither is it, as the Marxists say, a political instrument which oppressors and oppressed in turn make use of; nor is it even, as Foucault’s followers assert, a critical stake in the struggle for power. Language is simply power, *the very form of power, entirely shaped by power* even in its most modest rhetorical expression.<sup>45</sup>

Although we do not intend to go into further detail as regards Lévy’s ideas on the language/power relationship, a number of questions instantly come to mind: Does the oppression of man by man and political domination coincide in time with the birth of human language? Has language, over the course of history, contributed to the progress of society? How is it that some societies have a more repressive state apparatus than others even though they may use the same language? Can there ever be a society free of exploitation and class domination while people will still speak the same language that they use today? In this context it is appropriate to recall the sarcastic words with which Marx and Engels once disparaged the Young Hegelians:

They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world.<sup>46</sup>

The rejection of the “white terror of theory” led the “new philosophers” to paradoxical attacks on science, not because of the falsity of its discourse, but precisely because

of its “truth.” “We have lost all the respect for science,”<sup>47</sup> declared Lardreau. In Lévy’s attack on Marxism, for instance—and this applies to the *nouvelle philosophie* as a whole—his ultimate argument is not that Marxism is a false theory of society, but rather that it is an all-too-accurate account of the coming fate of the West. In other words, Marxism is authoritarian from the very outset by virtue of its very rationality. As Lardreau and Jambet put it, Marxism is oppressive because it is “true,” or at least represents the “untransvencible philosophy of our time.”<sup>48</sup> In Lévy’s terms, “we are today enclosed within Marxism as Ptolemaic cosmologists were enclosed within their cosmology,”<sup>49</sup> so much so that to reply to Marxist theory with a counter-theory would only result in a lapsing back into the “discourse of the Master.” According to Lévy, the protest against Marxism can only take a moral form, since in the end “nothing remains but ethics and moral duty”—and in this, Solzhenitsyn has shown the way:

The idea of an anti-Marxist politics is absurd, untenable, and a contradiction in terms. Anti-Marxism is and can be nothing but the contemporary form of the fight against politics....For a long time to come, we are condemned to the language of *Capital* as long as we resign ourselves to play the game of politics....We no longer have a politics, a language, or a recourse. There remain only ethics and moral duty. There remains only the duty to protest against Marxism, since we cannot forget it.<sup>50</sup>

## V.

Despite a good deal of favorable response and the unusual attention they initially received in the French media, the “new philosophers” never had a wide popular following, nor did they have much impact on French intellectual or academic life. As Deleuze pointed out, the impact of the “new philosophers” was due much more to self-advertisement—media hype—than to a conscientious reader-

ship.<sup>51</sup> In point of fact, the critical response in relation to the “new philosophers” in the French academy was one of derision. Very soon they became an object for both polemic and mockery. One year after Lévy had announced the aurora of the “New Philosophy” *Le Nouvel Observateur* published a “jeu-test,”<sup>52</sup> which proposed a series of multiple-choice questions to allow readers to conclude if they were “new philosophers.” Anyone who could honestly claim to have rejected Althusser in the last year scored a maximum of three points; rejection of Foucault scored no points. The ideal “new philosopher” was someone who had at various times been an orthodox communist, a Maoist, and a militant Roman Catholic.

The *nouvelle philosophie* was a fashion in Paris. As such, it vanished quickly with the end of the season, which lasted for about two years. Before the 1970s ended there was no longer any publicity for it; no important works written by any of its adherents; no serious reference made to them. Indeed, since 1977 when Lévy published his *La barbarie* the French public had been fed up with the “novelties” of the “New Philosophy” and the media fanfares. Commenting on this, Lévy would write with sadness and narcissism at the same time:

There is a strange discrepancy between the public that has been reached and the one that has been addressed, and some have to pay a heavy price for this. I know that these books are read, but I also know that they carry no weight; they are foreign bodies for the official left, transplants that cannot be assimilated by its established institutions....I don’t think Glucksmann has persuaded anyone on the left, and not a single Marxist has been shaken by *Marx est mort*. This is not uncommon in the history of ideas: Many significant ideas were rejected or ignored in their age and always as a direct result of their critical and subversive force. The “*nouveaux philosophes*”...have been misunderstood, incorrectly interpreted, and badly read. How could it be otherwise with a somnambulistic and somehow confused left which is still

rehearsing obscure debates about reform and revolution, and whose theoretical spectrum has not got beyond the sour polemics of Lenin and Hilferding?<sup>53</sup>

Marx *est mort*. Yet, he remains a central figure in much of contemporary debate in the social sciences. This is not true for the “new philosophers” who, apart from their zealous ambition and self-aggrandizement proved unable to provide a coherent frame of reference for the understanding of the complexity of contemporary society, which might have defined their “movement” as a new philosophical moment. Hence, in the history of modern French philosophy, which Alain Badiou defines as the history of ideas that took shape between 1940 and the end of the twentieth century, that is from the publication of Sartre’s fundamental work *L’être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness) in 1943 to the last writings of Deleuze *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (What is Philosophy?) in 1992,<sup>54</sup> the *nouvelle philosophie* occupies no place of

distinction. It failed to pass the test of time, even though the social and intellectual *milieu* and the *time* in which the “new philosophy” appeared were particularly conducive to novel ideas.

This episode in French intellectual history provides an object lesson in how *not* to set about a philosophical reconstruction of French intellectual life, which could not be delivered from the dominance of Marxism by a faction of young men with no resourceful or consistent idea of their own. The “new philosophers” deployed a mélange of postmodern slogans, including the denial of reason itself, against Marxism, but offered nothing substantially new, coherent, or noteworthy in its place. Although historical events in the mid-1970s had rendered Marxism intellectually vulnerable and politically obsolete, the failure of the “new philosophers” demonstrates that mere opposition to discredited ideas is not enough to introduce a new philosophical movement without sound, coherent ideas of its own.

1. See the conversation of Francis Fukuyama with Bernard-Henry Lévy “It Doesn’t Stay in Vegas,” *The American Interest* 1, 3 (2006): 105. 2. A relevant literature on this issue includes David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); George Lichtheim, *Marxism in Modern France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Michael Kelly, *Modern French Marxism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labor and Politics in France, 1830–1881* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (University of California Press, 1992). 3. Quoted in Georges Suffert, “Bernard-Henri Lévy un philosophe sur la montagne,” *Le Point*, 16 April 1979, 118–19. 4. Mark Lilla, “The Legitimacy of the Liberal Age,” in M. Lilla (ed.), *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13. 5. *Ibid.*, 13–14. 6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 91. 7. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Autoportrait à Soixante-Ans,” in *Situations X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 149–50. 8. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La barbarie à visage humain* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977), 178. 9. Michel Foucault, “La grande

colère des faits,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 9 May 1977, 84–6. 10. Gérard Petitjean, “Les nouveaux gourous,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 12 July 1976, 62–68. 11. Lévy himself admits that he became “a kind of sponsor, at least through publicity and editorial judgment” (Lévy, *La barbarie*, 209). Sheehan comments that without Lévy’s skillful use of the press and television, “the so-called ‘New Philosophers’ would never have been launched” (Thomas Sheehan, “Paris: Moses and Polytheism,” *The New York Review of Books*, 24 January 1980). 12. See “The New Philosophers,” *Time Magazine*, 12 September 1977. 13. David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 382. 14. Expression used by François Aubral and Xavier Delcourt in their book *Contre la nouvelle philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), chap. VII. 15. Lévy admits that Mao Tse-tung was “the last word in fashionable thought” in France in the late-1960s (Henry-Bernard Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (New York: Random House, 2006), 4. 16. Sheehan, *op. cit.* 17. Macey, *op. cit.*, 382. 18. Gilles Deleuze, “À propos des nouveaux philosophes et d’une problème plus general,” *Minuit*, 24 May 1977, No. 24. 19. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 134. 20. Peter Dews, “The *Nouvelle Philosophie* and Foucault,”

*Economy and Society* 8, 2 (1979), 130. **21.** André Glucksmann, *La cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes: Essai sur les rapports entre l'Etat, le marxisme et les camps de concentration* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), 40. **22.** *Ibid.*, 37. **23.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 181–182. **24.** *Ibid.*, 181, 180. **25.** Deleuze, *op. cit.* **26.** Régis Debray, “Les pleureuses du printemps,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 13 June 1977, 61. **27.** Peter Dews, “The ‘New Philosophers’ and the End of Leftism,” *Radical Philosophy* 24 (1980): 2. **28.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 111. **29.** Descombes, *op. cit.*, 129. **30.** Monique Hirschhorn, “Les nouveaux philosophes: l’écume et la vague,” *Stanford French Review* 2, 2 (1978): 302. **31.** Sheehan, *op. cit.* **32.** Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Michael Ryan, “Anarchism Revisited: A New Philosophy,” *Diacritics* (June 1978), 67–68. **33.** Emmanuel Garrigues, “Pour la relève des intellectuels français le Marxisme n’est plus la valeur refuge,” *Realites* 381 (November 1977): 27. **34.** Dews, “The ‘New Philosophers’ and the End of Leftism,” 2. **35.** See “Rendez vous avec Bernard-Henry Lévy,” *Elle*, 23 April 1979. **36.**

Deleuze, *op. cit.* **37.** See Spivak and Ryan, *op. cit.*, 69. **38.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 177. **39.** *Ibid.*, 141–142. **40.** André Glucksmann, *Les maîtres penseurs* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977), 149. **41.** *Ibid.*, 271. **42.** See Foucault, *op. cit.* **43.** Alexandre Kojève, *Tyrannie et sagesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 252. **44.** Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27. **45.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 48–50. **46.** Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part One (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 41. **47.** Guy Lardreau, *Le singe d’or* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974), 82. **48.** Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L’ange* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1976). **49.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 218. **50.** *Ibid.*, 217–218. **51.** Deleuze, *op. cit.* **52.** “Etes-vous un ‘nouveau philosophe?’” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1 August 1977, 46. **53.** Lévy, *La barbarie*, 209–210. **54.** Alain Badiou, “The Advent of French Philosophy,” *New Left Review* 35 (September 2005), 67.