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Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xx + 468 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. $34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-3199-4.

Review Essay by Jonathan Judaken, University of Memphis.

In commenting on Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, I want to focus as much on form as on content. Its 468 pages are divided into 25 chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. This is, of course, an unusually large number of chapters for a single volume monograph. The chapters in turn are organized into four parts. This division of the text means that some chapters are only three pages long. In doing this, Bourg fragments his overarching argument, which is to describe a shift over the course of the 1970s from a period defined by the radical politics of the *soixant-huitard* generation to one where ethics became the preeminent grid through which this generation of intellectuals came to see the world by the late 1970s. In dividing the chapters into a clutch of *petites histoires*, it matters less whether the overall frame holds up than what the reader learns in the four main stories that Bourg tells.

So what does one learn? As a stand alone narrative of the events of May 1968 and their early and influential mythologization by both the Left and the Right, one is hard pressed to think of a better thumbnail sketch than what Bourg offers in chapter one. He does so with a twist toward the argument of his book: "1968's revolutionary politics themselves contained the seeds of the turn that ultimately substituted ethics for revolution" (p. 38). Or as Bourg sums it up more poetically at one point: "The twentieth century began with Vladimir Lenin's observation that making an omelet meant breaking eggs; it ended with the assertion of the rights of chickens" (p. 38). His book is an examination of the ethical quandaries buried in the New Left agenda and the ways they were acted out and worked through in the cultural politics of post-68 *gauchiste* groups over the 1970s. These were sometimes numerically large entities like the Gauche prolétarienne and sometimes just a couple of rebels like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who tapped into the *soixant-huitard* politics of desire. Sometimes they were a coterie of the like-minded such as the Mouvement de libération des femmes or the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire. Bourg also discusses the media sensation created at the end of the 1970s by the New Philosophers, hyped as the voice of a generation sobering up from political radicalism and calling for a new humanitarianism.

Bourg's text is anchored in his overview of 1968.[1] But his larger point is to tell the story of post-1968 French theory without it devolving into a catcall of post-1968 adherents and critics. "May 1968 was neither the best nor the worst of times," he writes. It was "Neither a nihilistic and relativistic sign of Western civilization's decline nor an authentic but failed nineteenth-century revolution. May 1968 was an ambiguous event that opened a period of significant transformation in French politics, society, culture, and intellectual life" (p. 4). In order to get beyond depicting May 1968 as an "intellectual, cultural, and political Rorschach test" and viewing the 1970s only through the political matrix of a shift from revolutionary politics to

liberal politics, Bourg enjoins us to focus our attention otherwise. "It is one of my aims here," he states, "to fill the gap in the historical understanding of French theory and to unsettle the seemingly dried and fixed, failed-revolution-return-to-liberalism version of post-1968 French intellectual life" (p. 13). A double agenda then: to historicize French theory or at least the "socio-institutional camp of French theory, figures such as Michel Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari" rather than the "textualist" camp of Jacques Derrida**,** Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and others. But just as importantly, Bourg also looks at theory as a gauge of the ethos of a cultural moment.

The four parts of the book break the overarching argument into a series of flashpoints in intellectual life in the 1970s that tell the larger tale: "The four principal case studies that form the core of the book are structured by the tension between the themes of ethos and law…The story of the post-1968 period is the story of May's immanent antinomian ethos encountering transcending or transcendental laws. I follow those forces and dynamics from revolutionary contestation against the state and its institutions (part one) to the vicissitudes of the liberation of desire as it pertains to institutions, intersubjectivity, and legality (parts two and three) and then to the translation of the posture of rebellion and dissidence into supra-statist humanitarianism (part four). Only then, in the final chapters, will we see the ethical turn completed" (p. 14).

To get there, Bourg first covers the political undertakings of the Maoist Gauche prolétarienne, perhaps the most influential of the post-1968 French New Leftists. Their sphere of influence would include the Groupe d'information sur les prisons, founded under the inspiration of Michel Foucault. This first part is the most densely situated in the specific conflictual conditions of the early 1970s, reconstructing the point of emergence of the notion of the "specific intellectual," for example, and the grass-roots struggles that helped to shape Foucault's *Discipline and Punish.* Indeed, Bourg is so steadfast in reconstructing the context that even while claiming that "Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), was itself symptomatic of the historical moment in which it was written" he remains untempted to "take a closer look at the book, tempting though it is" choosing instead to "delve a little more deeply into its context" (p. 96).

The result is that philosophers and political theorists busily working out the logic of the later Foucault in his published works will certainly want to turn to Bourg's careful reconstruction of the circumstances of Foucault's politicization and how and why he turned to the forms of intellectual engagement that preoccupied him through his death in 1984. Indeed, Foucault is a re-emerging presence throughout the work: "an activist mobilized around the 'intolerable' conditions of prisons, a participant in debates about the sexuality of children, an influence on Maurice Clavel, and in a limited sense a kindred spirit of the New Philosophers" (p. 321). It was also Michel Foucault who claimed that Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* was "a book of ethics, the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time" (p. 15). These four Foucaults thus correspond to the four parts of Bourg's argument. Foucault is therefore the ultimate instantiation of the shifts Bourg traces. And one way to understand Bourg's book is to read it as a multi-layered contextualist rendering of Foucault.

But if in part one Bourg does not read texts so much as "eventalize" their emergence, then it is also the case that methodologically he has no trouble prying open works with hermeneutic insight. He makes this talent clear in part two, which centers squarely on Deleuze and Guattari's notorious best selling *Anti-Oedipus.* He gives a synoptic reading of this difficult text and touches upon some of its reception before teleporting us through the individual intellectual itineraries of Guattari and Deleuze before their fateful convergence. In doing so, "We found that prior to their meeting both Guattari and Deleuze had formulated stances that were not ethically incoherent; the former in his experiences with the ethical pragmatics of Institutional Psychotherapy, and the latter in his Spinozist philosophical vitalism." But in the fusion of their

agendas that resulted in *Anti-Oedipus* "the antinomian ethos of 1968 reached a certain peak" (p. 171).

What the philosophy of desire announced so emphatically by *Anti-Oedipus* has to do with an ethical turn is not evident until part three. There Bourg traces the tensions involving gender and sexuality to the debates between feminists and gay liberation activists over the limits of the liberation of desire. Leftist anti-feminists were one shrill note articulated in the midst of anti-rape campaigns. At the same time pedophilia—re-examined around the meaning of normality and normalization, sexual liberation and pedagogy, and homosexuality and its strictures—brought to the surface the strains in the philosophy of desire. It was this clash of viewpoints that ultimately bore out François Picq's suggestion that the 1970s "witnessed the shift from the 'pleasure principle' of May 1968 to the 'reality principle' of progressive politics having to work within the limits of existing political institutions" (p. 221).

The "Main Event" of the ethical turn, as Bourg titles his opening chapter to part four, was the rise to stardom of the New Philosophers in the late 1970s. They shared a great deal with French postmodern theorists: some were the students of Louis Althusser, and they developed the same themes in their work: "emphasis on language, suspicions about the unified self, doubts about historical progress, valorization of desire, and anxieties about power—[of these themes] only the second did not seem germane to New Philosophy" (p. 238). This difference is crucial. Centered on a re-vivified defense of the human subject, the New Philosophers articulated their program around the discourse of "human rights, humanism, morality—or ethics" (p. 238). As such, they rose to stardom by re-activating a time-honored French tradition: the role of the *intellectuel moraliste*, the Dreyfusard intellectual, Julien Benda's secular cleric. The New Philosophers are surely the strongest evidence in Bourg's claim that the ethos of the epoch had shifted direction toward ethics.

In making the argument that is the title of the book, a significant aspect of Bourg's success rests on his subtle reworking of the conventional narrative form, doing so by breaking the book into many shorter units. His chapters are often structured backwards in time from a particular moment rather than chrono-linearly. Not all of the chapters chronologically line up inside the parts of the book either, so that he sometimes jumps between incidents. "The narrative as a whole," Bourg states, "moves from one scene to the next like a slide show or a collection of short stories" (p. 17). Each part is tagged with clever titles, like the second section, "Spinoza on Prozac: From Institutional Psychotherapy to the Philosophy of Desire." His snappy monikers turn into mnemonics for the claims he makes. The prose, too, relies on sharp formulations and erudite asides that connect the rarified to the banal in our contemporary setting. For example, Bourg suggests that perhaps history department meetings could use the kinds of Institutional Psychotherapy experimented in at La Borde clinic, where Guattari was a pioneering influence. The result is that he never writes in an antiquarian or monumental vein, rather mining the critical potential of past discussions for the present. He always insists upon raising unresolved philosophical issues that emerge from Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, or Guy Hocquenghem's work, to site some of his important interlocutors. But he does so by historicizing the debate that surrounded their work. Bourg thereby reconstructs the ways in which grand theoretical discussions were themselves adjudicated and addressed in their situational specifics.

But in the end, the very categories of Bourg's overarching argument are themselves too encompassing or too empty to account for what he actually does in the quiver of separate stories that make up his chapters, regardless of how valiantly he tries to specify their meaning (pp. 337-340). This is evident in the second framing figure of Bourg's book, Jean-Paul Sartre. In Bourg's opening pages we read, "Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, for example, in their final years, assigned ethics a primacy it had not previously held in their thought" (p. 5). In the penultimate

chapter, once more, Bourg turns to the late Foucault and to the late Sartre to find a new emphasis on specifically ethical concerns.

But in Sartre's case the claim for a fundamental shift does not bear out. Sartre wrestled with ethical quandaries from his earliest literary works, for example the eponymously titled short story "The Wall," set during the Spanish Civil War, where the protagonist, Pablo Ibbieta, is faced with the decision of whether to divulge information about his comrades in arms. Indeed, many of the situations in which Sartre's characters find themselves in his plays and literature are about the ethical choices they face. Sartre would famously conclude his philosophical magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* with a section entitled "Ethical Implications," in which he sketched out the possibility of an ethics based on his phenomenological ontology, which he promised to take up in a future work. It was a project that Simone de Beauvoir would take upon herself in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948). In his famous lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," the ethics of existentialism is once more of paramount concern. Sartre would produce hundreds more pages on the topic in the spring of 1947 and ending sometime toward the autumn of 1948, published posthumously in 1983 as *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Still unpublished are the hundreds more pages on ethics he wrote in preparation for a lecture given at the Gramsci Institute in Rome; a typewritten manuscript of 499 pages dating from 1964; and a manuscript in six sections totaling 293 typewritten pages, probably penned as the basis for a series of lectures Sartre was scheduled to give at Cornell University in 1965 but which he canceled in protest against American involvement in the Vietnam War. Sartre therefore produced thousands of pages on ethics over his whole career. It was a constant preoccupation, one that simply could not be separated from his radical politics at any point. Indeed, to read the controversial dialogue with Benny Lévy published on Sartre's deathbed in this way, as Bourg does, is to misapprehend Sartre's long engagement with ethics.[2] Bourg is spot on in the conclusion to this section when he claims, "At the end of his life, then, Sartre returned to the ethical dimension of human experience, *a familiar problem* [my emphasis added] whose solution continued to elude him" (p. 321).

Since Sartre is one of Bourg's bookends, however, this problem in his reading points to the problem of his overarching argument about the ethical turn. It is not that Bourg does not point to something, since clearly the zeitgeist had shifted over the seventies, and ethics was a buzzword by decades end. There were many signals of this shift, like the fact that thinkers renowned for their focus on ethics, including Vladimir Jankélévitch and Emmanuel Levinas, experienced a late-blooming upsurge of interest (pp. 310-313). But the category of "ethics" is as vague as politics in an era that had claimed, "the personal is the political." Ethics came to mean many things. Bourg writes in conclusion, "The ethical turn can be read in a number of ways: as an ersatz liberation discourse replacing a failed revolutionary paradigm; as an attempt to grapple with evolving social mores; as straightforward reaction; and as a return to a form of thought neglected in France during the 1960s, to mention a few" (p. 337).

So as a loose label on the era, "from revolution to ethics" might do. But the real virtue of Bourg's book is that the parts are greater than the whole. The *petites histoires* are more compelling than the grand narrative. After all, this was the era stamped by what Jean-François Lyotard called the postmodern condition: "incredulity towards metanarratives." And the fragmentation of Bourg's structuring of the narrative captures this spirit better than his overarching argument because it parallels the fragmentation that emerged from the short-circuiting of May '68's revolutionary aspirations. "There was thus a certain disarray in the late 1970s," Bourg maintains at one point, "a fragmentation of previously coherent standpoints, factions, and battle lines, and a fraying of the historical *fil conducteur*, or unifying thread" (p. 308). The way that the form of Bourg's book intersects with its content ably captures this generational disaggregation and its impact on contemporary French thought.

NOTES

[1] As such this is a revisionist history of the period that aims to get beyond the impasses of either Kristin Ross's contemporary version of the new Left take on May '68 or the line from Raymond Aron through Gilles Lipovetsky to Luc Ferry and Alain Renault.

[2] For a very different take on *Hope Now*, see my *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska, 2006), 208-239.

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