

H-France Review Vol. 7 (March 2007), No. 25

Richard J. Golsan, *French Writers and the Politics of Complicity: Crises of Democracy in the 1940s and 1990s*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. x + 198 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-8258-3.

Review by Jean-Philippe Mathy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Richard Golsan's essay examines "the politics of complicity" in the works of six French writers and public intellectuals, three from the interwar period (Henri de Montherlant, Jean Giono and Alphonse de Châteaubriant) and three from the 1990s (Alain Finkielkraut, Régis Debray, and historian Stéphane Courtois, author of the controversial *Black Book of Communism*). At first glance, the combination of two groups of intellectuals living and writing in periods that differ so greatly in terms of the "crisis of democracy," raises a number of questions. Why choose these particular writers rather than others? Why focus on the forties and the nineties, rather than other moments of French history, such as the Dreyfus Affair, or the Cold War period, when the paradoxical relationship between literature and politics was equally prominent? Golsan uses the trope of "blindness" to characterize these authors' complicity and collaboration with political ideologies? But why focus mainly on ideologies from the Right (Nazism, Fascism, Petainism, right-wing anti-Semitism and anti-communism, ethnic nationalism)? What about Jaurès' initial blindness to the threat the anti-Dreyfusard campaign posed to the Republic and the socialist movement? What about Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's (and many others') blindness to the Soviet concentration camps?

Golsan's answer to these questions is twofold. As regards the periodization, he argues that the French life of ideas in the 1990s was dominated by the divisive politics of memory that centered on World War II, the Holocaust and the Vichy Regime. The specter of Nazism and collaboration haunted the period during which Finkielkraut, Debray, and Courtois made their contributions to the ideological debate. The first two authors read the wars in the former Yugoslavia through the prism of the Holocaust and Stalinism, and that alone would justify the juxtaposition of their works with that of the three Vichy collaborators. Political controversies in the 1990s took place within an ideological framework markedly different from the immediate postwar debate on collaboration, i.e. the "anti-totalitarian" movement of the late 1970s. The "new philosophers'" account of the inherent complicity of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition with the Gulag was followed by a campaign within intellectual circles and in the media to discredit the socialist-communist electoral alliance of 1978 and prevent the political Left from coming to power, on the ground that a communist victory would turn France into a soviet-style republic. In the course of the general redirection of French intellectual politics that followed, the term "totalitarian" came to represent, and lump together, all kinds of authoritarian regimes of terror and mass murder, from Fascism and Nazism to Stalinism and Maoism.

The notion of complicity implies that the six writers were selected, not because they were directly involved in political organizations, but because they ended up lending support to them, and compromising with them, for trans-political reasons. They share the misguided assumption that these political forces would help achieve their own philosophical goals, goals as diverse as the regeneration of the nation, the resistance to technological modernity, or the restoration of Enlightenment universalism. The case of Martin Heidegger is paradigmatic of this kind of acute ideological astigmatism. The philosopher supported Nazism in large part because he believed the triumph of the National-Socialists' will to power would help bring about his own reactionary utopia, that of a pre-technological, rural, petty-bourgeois social order, forever preserved from the dislocations of democratic, mechanistic,

individualistic modernity.

Golsan's comparative approach allows him to explore the way in which the 1930s and 1940s were revisited fifty years later as "totalitarian moments," giving rise to the misreadings of the past he calls revisionist history, and underscores the trans-historical nature of his argument. What interests him is less the particular content of each of the writers' compromission with anti-democratic politics, than the fact that their diverse, and in some cases, opposite positions reveal a common mechanism at work in each of these cases. The psychodynamics of ideological thinking rests on the ability to ignore the historical, empirical consequences of an involvement motivated by philosophical interests (in both senses of the word, i.e., concern and benefit) rather than strictly political ones. At the heart of each of the authors' engagement with "totalitarian" ideologies, there lies a dominant metaphysical passion blinding them to the implications of their open support or passive tolerance of oppressive regimes.

Giono's pacifism, Montherlant's nihilistic ethics and sexual politics, and Châteaubriant's Christian mysticism, no matter how diverse, and largely contradictory, these passions were, all led them to collusion with Vichy, Fascism and/or Nazism. The one question of major interest to Golsan is posed in the chapter on Châteaubriant, but could be asked of all three of the interwar writers he discusses: "In historical terms, if Châteaubriant's collaborationism and his Hitler idolatry cannot be explained through recourse to what might be described as a French Fascist template or paradigm, what factors or beliefs account for and explain his complicity?" (p. 55). Golsan's analysis shows that each of the three writers' worldviews represented a specific component of the broader constellation of reactionary thought. None of them were strictly speaking "literary Fascists" (although Montherlant came close to fitting the mold), but they all shared some aspect of antimodernism.

Giono's idealization of peasant life, profound distrust of urban modernity and of the democratic politics of the Third Republic (especially the Popular Front) was a classic example of the antimodern primitivism and rural utopianism of which the work of Martin Heidegger represents the most influential philosophical elaboration. Giono's views before the war were so congruent with Vichy's Barrèsian *retour à la terre* that it is no wonder he actively supported Pétain's regime. His contempt for the interwar Third Republic politicians naturally transferred to the Resistance, leading to his acceptance, and at times open support, of Nazi occupation. Montherlant's cult of youth, virility and misogyny, contempt for slave races, and exaltation of heroic virtues and the beauty of the male body were closer to Fascist politics and aesthetics. Golsan argues that the tension in Montherlant's work between "force and charity" and his obsession with a kind of individual, personal transcendental asceticism eventually led him to a pessimistic disenchantment with and disengaged indifference to the historical fate of Nazism. Because of the centrality of Montherlant's sexuality to his male-centered warrior ethics, his acts of collaboration were also a means to an apolitical, self-serving end, "the freedom to roam the streets and movie houses in search of adolescent boys with whom the writer could have sex" (p. 49). Montherlant's nihilism, whose roots were both metaphysical and sexual, ultimately led to self-deception and allowed him "to convince himself, at least, that he maintained his own 'freedom' during the war, despite compromising involvements and pronouncements, and to claim after the Liberation that he had not collaborated" (p. 50).

Châteaubriant represents yet another strand in the complex tapestry of interwar rightwing illiberalism, i.e., the Maurrasian, *Action Française* legacy. In Châteaubriant's view, both "the biblical evil of Bolshevism" and materialistic liberal individualism were treated as symptoms of the decomposition of culture and decadence of religious spirit, a conclusion that led him to visit "the New Germany" in quest of collective salvation and "a humanity more worthy of Christ" (p. 56). Châteaubriant shared the widespread logic that favored Hitler over Blum and saw Germany as the bulwark against Bolshevism, anticipating the revisionist arguments of the 1980s "Historians' Debate." Golsan aptly remarks that Châteaubriant's total subservience to Hitler and Germany "precluded even the possibility of a fierce French nationalism on the writer's part" (p. 68), and, consequently, his inclusion in the rubric of French

Fascism, literary or otherwise. The “Hitlericized mystico-Breton” novelist’s reaction to the fall of Nazism was similar to that of Giono and Montherlant: he, too, found refuge in a kind of self-described indifferent detachment. He later argued that the Nazis had betrayed their own mission to regenerate European culture by sinking into nationalism.

Châteaubriant’s religious faith ends up playing the same structural role in Golsan’s thesis as Giono’s agrarianism and Montherlant’s nihilism. Although the ideological position of each writer diverged sharply from the reality of Nazism, it provides in each case the key to their complicity with the politics of the Third Reich. Châteaubriant’s “embrace of Hitler and complicity with Nazism,” Golsan argues, “were mandated and ratified by his faith—and not the reverse. But since the two had become synonymous from 1936 until the end of the war, in order to rescue or preserve his religious faith—such as it was—in the postwar period it was necessary, in effect, to deny Hitler and the Nazis their previously assigned roles as the Messiah and his saints” (p. 74).

Although the context of the 1990s differed markedly from the thirties and forties (after all, liberal democracy had triumphed in Western Europe and its principles were in the process of dismantling the Stalinist bloc), Golsan uncovers similar mechanisms of historical blindness and self-deception in the intellectual politics of the post-communist era. Finkielkraut’s insistence in putting the Croats in the place of the Jews as victims of Milosevic’s own brand of ethnic cleansing led him to excuse the excesses of Croat nationalism, with its own roots in WWII collaboration with Hitler. The underlying assumption is the Serbs are the new Nazis, as if all authoritarian, racist regimes with a ruthless, charismatic leader were equally reducible to a generic, one-size-fits-all trans-historical or a-historical form of “Nazism,” in the same way as some speak today of “Islamofascism.” Debray’s position on the ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia is a mirror image of Finkielkraut’s, with Cold War anti-Americanism and Republican nationalism as the driving ideological forces behind his support of Serbian exactions in Bosnia and Kosovo. Both public intellectuals ended up defending opposite sides of the conflict as a result of a similar attempt to “telescope” (Finkielkraut’s word regarding Debray’s blind spots) the Fascist past and the post-Stalinist present. Serbia’s historical resistance to Hitlerism, and the Albanians and Croats’ collaboration with it, framed Debray’s “Gaullist” criticism of NATO bombings fifty years later and justified his support of Serbia as a besieged citadel, while Milosevic’s genocidal persecution of the Croats and Bosnians inspired Finkielkraut to interpret the conflict in direct reference to the Shoah and interwar antisemitism.

Both Finkielkraut and Debray seem unable to conceive of a position that would criticize both the Croat nationalists and the former Serbian Stalinists for their acts of political terror, an inability which may be the defining feature of ideological thinking as a particular acute form of binary, “either-or reasoning.” Because this type of discourse rests on the premise that there can be only one victimized nation in any given conflict (in this case, it was either Croatia or Serbia), it ends up whitewashing the crimes that the so-called victim state might perpetrate against others (for example a third party like the Muslim Bosnians). In doing so, this form of Manichean reasoning replicates the Stalinist logic according to which any criticism of Soviet communism was immediately denounced as an unconditional, and therefore criminal, defense of capitalism, imperialism, and/or Fascism.

This logic is exemplified in a passage from Finkielkraut’s *How Can One Be Croatian?*, in which he attacks, as Golsan puts it, “the falseness of the view of what he describes as the antitotalitarian Left, which is that the fewer nations there are, the more democracy there is” (p. 114). In order to argue that the disappearance of smaller nations in Europe was not a sign of democracy but a goal of the totalitarians from the right and the left, Finkielkraut cites both Friedrich Engels (“I am authoritarian enough to consider the very existence, right in the middle of Europe, of such small, primitive peoples to be anachronistic”) and Drieu la Rochelle (“No more Holland. The number of small, obsolete countries is shrinking in Europe”). The time-tested amalgamation technique never fails: Holland under the Nazis or Finland under Soviet rule was just like Croatia threatened both by Serbia and Western political

correctness. If anti-democrats such as the Marxist Engels or the Fascist Drieu la Rochelle wished the disappearance of small nations, it means 1) that to be a democrat, one must support small nations regardless of what they do (Croatia's right of existence justifies everything, even the exactions of an autocratic regime) and 2) that to criticize small nations is to share Engels or Drieu's views. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*: guilty by association, the "antitotalitarian Left" is complicitous with two notorious apologists of totalitarianism. But why is it that what is justified in the case of Croatian ethnic nationalism is unacceptable in the case of its Serbian counterpart?

Stéphane Courtois' attempt to compare, both numerically and morally, the victims of communism and those of Nazism follows the same exclusionary logic. One set of victims must ultimately eclipse the others, as many of Courtois' critics argued at the time. The main ideological passion behind Courtois' book, his anti-communism, was associated during the controversy following the publication of his book with less noble aims and motives than the legitimate denunciation of Stalinist, Maoist, and Khmer Rouge crimes against humanity. Golsan finds among these motives a complicity, "not only with a fundamental anti-Semitic reading of history but, through some of the 'evidence' provided in his introduction [to the Black Book], with the French (and European) extreme Right today" (p. 159). Golsan devotes a large part of his chapter on Courtois to the exploration of the latter's "seconding" of Ernst Nolte's well-known interpretation of Nazism as a necessary defensive move, a response to the much more destructive, and inhuman, threat of Bolshevism. Once again, the either-or logic of ideology forbids the denunciation of the crimes of *both* Fascism and Communism as comparable, but not similar, instances of state-sponsored, intellectually legitimized atrocities.

In the past three decades, a lot has been written on the blindness and bad faith inherent in twentieth-century intellectual engagement. Richard Golsan brings more evidence to the trial, and he raises insightful questions on ideological passions and the politics of memory. In the introduction, he quotes historian Christopher Browning, who argued in his account of the murder of Jews in Occupied Poland by a Reserve Battalion of the German Police, that "explaining is not excusing, and understanding not forgiving" (p. 19). Golsan's essay traverses the dangerous, equivocal, tension-filled terrain between historical explanation and philosophical justification, understanding and forgiveness, both in the works he examines and in his own assessment of them. His intellectual honesty, scrupulous commitment to critical fairness, and determination "to avoid the twin dangers of demonization and apology" (p. 19) places him at the antipodes of the partisan ideologues whose blindness and complicity with evil he documents in a dispassionate, elegant, and compelling voice.

Jean-Philippe Mathy University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign jmathy@uiuc.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (March 2007), No. 25

ISSN 1553-9172