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The Student World prior to 1968

part of *The Anarchists in Paris, May-June 1968*

Alexandre Skirda

2018

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Although I had been studying at the Sorbonne since 1961 – a bit of an oddity in those days for somebody coming from a modest (though not uncultured) background (that year, if memory serves, there were 160,000 students, or around a fifteenth or twentieth of today’s numbers). Leaving the regimentation of high school behind, my expectations of the Sorbonne were very high. I was quickly disabused by the teaching of History and Social Sciences which even then was mostly in the hands of communists and “fellow travellers”, with the occasional exception. For instance, in my propedeutique (first year on campus back then) year, my main History lecturer in the Sorbonne’s huge amphitheatre which held anything up to 1,500 students, was Jean Bruhat, renowned for his editorials in *L’Humanite* back in 1937-38 endorsing the death sentences passed on those accused in the Moscow Trials – he had gone so far as to refer to them as “slimy snakes”! Just imagine this mini-“Goebbels” delivering lectures on historical objectivity! On the other hand, as Philosophy lecturer I had Jean-Francois

Lyotard, a brilliant Hegelian and outstanding educator (I still have my roneoed copy of his “Saying and Doing”) who was at that point a member of the group (a breakaway from Trotskyism) around the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (as was Castoriadis) before splitting away with Claude Lefort to launch the bulletin *Pouvoir ouvrier* (singular in the minds of these great intellectuals!). We were on good terms personally, he and I: he used the familiar form of address with me which was a sign of equality and respect for the 19 year old that I was at the time, well used as I was to “academic mandarins”, full of their own “knowledge” and full of themselves. He appreciated my dissertations, punctuated with references to workers’ councils (he told me that I wrote like Daniel Mothe, the group’s token worker, who was working at Renault at the time: and even though he never gave me any more than 11 or 12 marks out of 20, that was top marks in his eyes!). He was probably intending to recruit me into his group and he supplied me with a collection of the *S ou B* review and then one day he asked me if I was a marxist? When I replied that I was not, he expressed the opinion that that was “a pity”. To which I replied that one did not have to be a marxist in order to offer an economic explanation of History, that Marx had “wound up” the First International and that I held deeply-anchored libertarian views. In fact, I had accumulated a sound anarchist culture through the classic authors (Bakunin, Kropotkin, Reclus and many others whom I had stumbled across thanks to the sterling efforts of my friend Louis Louvet, the publisher of *Contre-courant* and distributor of a huge store of *Temps nouveaux* pamphlets and books, Jean Grave writings and Bidault’s *La Brochure Mensuelle*.

As fate would have it, after ‘68, having become the darling of the highbrows, JF Lyotard came up with “libidinal economics” and argued that Marx had written *Das Kapital* with one hand whilst wanking with the other! Belated though it may have been, this was quite amusing and typical of the intellectual masturbation of all of those who looked to that bearded +++. Paradoxically, towards the

end of his days, a few years ago he delivered himself of an unbelievable paean to Andre Malraux! We ought to point out where other *S ou B* stalwarts ended up: Castoriadis became an erudite author, university lecturer and psycho-analyst highly regarded even by the “leftist *Le Monde* set”. Claude Lefort became a lecturer at the *College de France*! And Daniel Mothe, “working man” turned into a highranking official with the *CFDT* trade union. Superb and pitiful promotions! And let us say nothing of the ‘leftist’ “wooden-tops” who ensconced themselves in every conceivable ramification of the state, especially after 1981. Political activism – especially in the “socialist and pseudo-revolutionary” lists – as a springboard to professional success. A ploy well known to all social “climbers”. What a far cry from the “refusal to ‘make it’” preached by the revolutionaries of yesteryear!