

On Jaime Semprun

An Interview with Miguel Amorós

Cazarabet

April 9, 2017

Cazarabet:¹ As a friend of Jaime's who shared his views, what impact do you think the figure of his father, Jorge Semprun, had on him?

Miguel Amorós: Jorge Semprun was his father only in the biological sense. On the few occasions that Jaime, a non-conformist adolescent, mentioned him, he accused his progenitor of having been a Stalinist and therefore of having contributed to the totalitarian work of the pseudo-communist Soviet regime. His father's celebrity as a writer and a friend of politicians seemed vulgar and obscene to Jaime, as it was founded on a big lie from which he derived a good payoff.

Jaime was precisely the opposite. He soberly and discreetly cultivated the truth. He never put his qualities up for sale and he did all he could to distance himself from the monster of publicity; he let it play its game while ignoring it. He was so capable of concealing himself from the spectacle that finding a photograph of him in the media today is "mission impossible".

Cazarabet: But he did of course further develop the ideas of those at whose springs he quenched his thirst for years, so to speak... What was his background?

Miguel Amorós: Quite early in life he acquired a solid literary foundation and, especially after the revolt of May '68, in his philosophical and political education he took giant strides forward in a relatively brief span of time. His library contained a complete inventory of revolution from A to Z. He engaged in a brief flirtation with experimental filmmaking, and he even directed a couple of experimental films, which he later ordered to be destroyed.

He was very much influenced by the situationist critique, because it provided a coherent theoretical basis and historical meaning to the youthful rebelliousness that was so widespread at the time. It gave him reasons and oriented his readings. Talent did the rest.

In 1975, after encouragement by Debord, he was capable of writing the best international defense of the Portuguese Revolution, which took the form of the text, *La Guerra Social en Portugal* [The Social War in Portugal], based exclusively on what he read in the newspapers and the accounts of a comrade who was in Portugal during the revolution.

His relations with Debord were brief and frustrating. Jaime did not expect someone like Debord to be capable of using people like pawns on a chessboard, but in those days Debord was playing at being a strategist.

¹ "Cazarabet" is the name of a bookstore in Mas de las Matas, Spain: www.cazarabet.com/ [Translator's note].

Cazarabet: A man of rare audacity and, one could say, he was ahead of his time. You knew him well; what can you tell us about him?

Miguel Amorós: He was more like a man who kept abreast of reality, a man who was inflexible with respect to his times, to which he had no desire to accommodate himself. His lucidity arose from his absolute non-conformism with regard to theoretical matters and a formidable capacity for synthesis. He was quick to denounce the recuperative thought fabricated by the ideologists of power from revolutionary materials in a book that has not been translated into Spanish, *Précis de récupération* [Manual of Recuperation].

He never sought spiritual refuge in timeless verities from which one could issue ex cathedra judgments of the world, or, to put it another way, he never hid behind an ideology, and therefore he never succumbed to an epigonic situationism.

Nostalgia did not suit him at all, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when the possibilities for world revolution that would put an end to the old world, or at least another wave of that revolution, were not yet exhausted.

Back then, we were all still optimistic because the situation of generalized dissatisfaction that characterized the 1960s was still a factor and because the crisis of national capitalism was generating revolts everywhere.

He implacably opposed those who, instead of forging a global critique of class society by way of direct action, reproduced the mystifications of contemporary life by giving them a modernist look. For that reason alone, he was surely never a popular author among militants. He was the last of the revolutionaries in the true style, made on the basis of profundity, truth, rigor, good sense and dialectics.

What was truly special about Jaime is the fact that he made his greatness of spirit compatible with a surprising amiability. Unlike others, such as Debord, for example, Jaime was friendly and welcoming to those who approached him. His collaborators were also his friends and he spent most of his time with them. I don't think he ever really broke off relations with anyone.

He was the most noble, open-hearted and generous person I have ever known. And the only one with a charismatic personality that was capable of productively bringing together a circle of individuals with strong and divergent personalities, and helping bring their projects to fruition.

Cazarabet: He addressed the process of the Spanish transition when he wrote "Manuscrito encontrado en Vitoria" [Manuscript Found in Vitoria] with you.... At the time, it was published under the name of "Los Incontrolados". Tell us what it was like and what it meant for you and your friends, I assume it was like a minor earthquake, wasn't it?

Miguel Amorós: We first met in 1975, shortly after I went into exile and settled in Montreuil, a town on the outskirts of Paris. We kept in touch with each other and attempted to intervene in the Spanish revolutionary process with a pamphlet, "La Campaña de España de la Revolución europea" [The Spanish Campaign of the European Revolution], which was supposed to be followed by a book to be published by Champ Libre. That book was the "Manuscript...", completely re-written and revised by Jaime.

For bad reasons that have already been discussed in the Introduction to the new edition of the "Manuscript..." published by Pepitas, Debord prevented its publication and we then decided to publish it in Spain in the form of a pamphlet. I had in the meantime returned from exile and the "Manuscript..." was intended to be used as the basis for the formation of an autonomous group in Spain.

Unlike the Portuguese events, the unsustainable situation of the declining Franco regime and the impulse of the Spanish workers movement were publicized in all the European communications media and as a result it was all the more necessary to publish a strong dose of truth, for which the “Manuscript...” was an excellent vehicle, in Spain itself. The text, published in April 1977, did not represent any kind of earthquake, since the urgent demands of the labor movement and trade unionism of every variety and type were much more important at the time than the battle of ideas.

The proletariat did not want to abolish its condition under the capitalist regime and therefore was perfectly willing to coexist with every kind of ideology until its self-destruction as a revolutionary class. The “Manuscript...” was not totally ignored but it did not have any influence on the course of events, either. It has nonetheless been reprinted on several occasions, a sign that interest in that missed opportunity for the Spanish revolution has not entirely disappeared. It is a text that is still not obsolete.

Cazarabet: With regard to what you said about Jaime being “ahead of his time” because he was just that and he showed, at least it seems to me, that in those days it was more difficult to denounce nuclear power than it is today, although it is just as necessary today as it was then—what can you tell us about this? And it was a major turning point in his career, since that was when he wrote *La Nucléarisation du monde* [The Nuclearization of the World]. It was an important new beginning.

Miguel Amorós: The proliferation of nuclear power plants as a capitalist response to the energy crisis of the seventies provoked widespread opposition that was capable of concentrating much larger masses of people than those that were mobilized to challenge the continuous closing of enterprises that could no longer compete in a world market without customs barriers.

The accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, not far from New York, in March 1979, revealed that the nuclearization of the capitalist countries implied a series of measures of population control which, under the pretext of security, is tending towards the establishment of a police state.

Capital is no longer content with exploiting the workers and imposing a way of life upon them that is in conformance with the laws of the commodity; it can also plan their deaths by way of nuclear terror and its effects.

The Nuclearization of the World was published as an anonymous pamphlet in 1980 by the journal, *L'Assommoir*. In that book, Jaime repudiated moralistic criticism by employing an original device, the spurious defense, or satire disguised as apologetics, in emulation of Swift’s style in “A Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For making them Beneficial to the Publick”.

His collaboration with *L'Assommoir* made it possible to publish a French translation of the “Manuscript...” and a text defending the Portuguese Revolution against the pusillanimous Bordigism of a handful of ideologists who specialized in denying the evidence of modern revolutions like May ’68, the Portuguese Revolution and the Spanish Revolution. This important document, *Les syllogismes démoralisateurs*, was never published in a Spanish edition, whereas the foul excretions of anti-councilist ultra-Leninism found a minuscule, but persistent, sectarian audience, in the virtual space, of course. Such is the fascination exercised by abstract extremism on impotent neo-militantism.

The fourth issue of the journal was devoted to the Polish revolt, which marked the end of the proletarian cycle that began in 1968. The text, *Consideraciones sobre el estado actual de Polonia*

[Considerations on the Current State of Poland], dated January 1981, written for the most part by Jaime, concluded his collaboration with *L'Assommoir* and to a certain extent provided the impulse for a qualitative leap with respect to his critical work, which crystallized with the founding, in the year of Orwell, of the journal, *l'Encyclopédie des nuisances* [Encyclopedia of Nuisances], the most perspicacious of all intransigent publications and the most intransigent of all perspicacious publications.

Cazarabet: What do you mean by “nuisance”?

Miguel Amorós: It is a key concept in the thought of Jaime and his circle. The word “nuisance” is a neologism in French that refers to any factor that molests or harms the common people, and among these factors, some ideal candidates are pollution, nuclear power, wage labor, industrial food, consumerism, *machismo*, experts, leaders, capitalists, etc., and above all, the supreme nuisance: the State.

With the idea of nuisances, the *Encyclopedia* denounced the most common characteristic of the current social organization and the principal result of modern production.

Cazarabet: He was an environmentalist when it was harder to let the cat out of the bag, because at that time people still benefitted financially from the system as it was; although we shouldn't deceive ourselves, there will always be a sector where the pork barrel preferentially rolls, as always....

Miguel Amorós: The word “environmentalist” is often misunderstood; we use the word to designate both the broad multitude of nature lovers and the political activists who engage in action in defense of nature.

Jaime was never an environmentalist, nor did he ever refer to environmentalism in a positive way. Nature is not something distinct from society. To defend it effectively, you must radically transform society.

In fact, the environmental movement, from its very inception, only sought to put a price tag on the destruction of the environment and, at most, to manage catastrophe, but never to subvert the existing social framework. Within that framework, however, there is no possible solution for any problem of real life, beginning with the degradation of nature. In the market of degradation, the environmentalists are like the trade union militants in the framework of the labor market; one is an intermediary interested in the regulation of the contradictions brought about by the exploitation of the territory; the other is an intermediary interested in the regulation of the contradictions brought about by the exploitation of labor. The environmentalists' existence is bound up with the commodification of nature, as negotiators concerning the permissible degree of harm.

The struggle against nuisances can only be victorious as an anti-economic and anti-state movement, not as a “green” party reconciled with the economy thanks to the formulas of “sustainable” development.

That was the conclusion of the encyclopedists, particularly in their “Message to All Those Who Would Rather Abolish Nuisances than Manage Them”, a pamphlet distributed in 1990.

Cazarabet: But in that work Semprun criticizes the fascination that people have displayed and expressed for the world of machines that are responsible for a certain kind of “social order” ... is that correct?

Miguel Amorós: Machines promise a liberation that, despite its obvious falsehood, continues to exercise an enchantment that is growing stronger as the degeneration of the subjective conditions proceeds. The *Encyclopedia* could not ignore this.

We started from a situationist conception of the world, but Jaime's genius introduced some decisive changes:

the critique of the idea of progress as a bourgeois legacy;

mistrust of science and technology as tools of domination and as vehicles of a superstitious reverence for progress;

modern production as the production of nuisances;

and the struggle against nuisances as the basic terrain of the new historical consciousness.

These points constituted the basis of the anti-industrial critique (on the peninsula we call it anti-developmentalism), the most pertinent form of contemporary revolutionary critique.

In particular, the reasoned critique of the role of technology in modern alienation and slavery was inspired by the voluminous work of Lewis Mumford (author of *The Myth of the Machine*) and Jacques Ellul (author of *The Technological Society*). And also by Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of "instrumental reason", and Günther Anders' indispensable exposure of the "obsolescence" of the human species caused by the disjunction between technical "advances" and the social inability to assimilate them.

Cazarabet: We shouldn't entertain ourselves with machines and their machinations. What do you think?

Miguel Amorós: It's not just about machines. Modern science and technology are above all else ideologies, as well as subsystems of domination with a totalitarian character.

When they emerge they develop until they completely determine the course of society, and as a result they also colonize life itself. No one can escape their influence—everyone is free to consume them or just put up with them, but no one is immune to their effects, no one is allowed to disconnect.

Under this slavery, life is subjected to such a degree of simplification that it can no longer properly be called life. Individuals, as prostheses of machines, no longer live, they merely function.

Two examples of this negative aspect of technocracy are high-speed trains and genetic engineering, which merited two collectively-authored pamphlets entitled, respectively, "A Provisional Statement of Our Complaints against the Despotism of Speed" (1991), and "Observations on Genetically Modified Agriculture and the Degradation of the Species" (1999).

Both aroused the anger of leftist workerists, those frenzied supporters of the techno-industrial system which they would like to see placed under the self-management of its victims.

Cazarabet: Then in 1997 this book was published, which is now being reprinted in a new edition by Pepitas de Calabaza, *El Abismo se Repuebla* [original title: *L'Abîme se repeuple*—The Abyss Repopulates Itself]. What can you tell us about the piano keys that our Jaime Semprun plays with such somber tones...?

Miguel Amorós: The Editions Encyclopédie des Nuisances (EdN) was at first an extension of the critical project initiated with the journal, but the stagnation of the collective labor involved in writing articles transformed the publishing house into the heir of the original publication. With the books published by the EdN, the anti-industrial critique acquired a solid basis and the vacillating position of the journal as a bridge between the situationist critique and anti-productivism was superseded.

The Abyss Repopulates Itself constitutes a milestone in the fight against the false consciousness of our time. Jaime was proceeding towards a systematic critique of the economic horror, already outlined in his two previous books, his two previous musical scores. The "Dialogues on the Consummation of Modern Times", signed by Jaime, is a "*detournement*" of Berthold Brecht's

“Dialogues d’exilés” (“Flüchtlingsgespräche”—Exiles’ Dialogues), and in this form reconstructs a conversation in which the various aspects of the collapse of social consciousness, a sign of the consummation of bourgeois modernity, are reviewed: today we all have the right to think, but we have lost the ability to do so. Under these conditions, the useless knowledge of disaster leads to resignation, and that is why mere verification is not enough and why we have to attack those who are responsible for these crimes.

The problem of the weakness of consciousness in an epoch in which the radical transformation of social relations is so necessary is particularly obvious in contemporary workers’ protests, which, when they come to an end, leave no trace. The main features of the decline of the traditional working class, now incapable of questioning the world of the commodity, were exposed in the text, “Observations concerning the Paralysis of December”, a collective work signed by the Encyclopedia.

Cazarabet: He asked, what kind of world are we going to leave to our children? But he also went further, and asked, what kind of children are we going to leave to our world? What does he actually mean by this?

Miguel Amorós: It was not Jaime who asked the first question, but the citizen-environmentalist, who does not want to see that barbarism arises like a force of nature from the total technologization of life to which he is totally devoted. The dehumanization caused by this technological invasion also entails the more disturbing consequence of rearing a multitude of children-consumers, without any real childhood, but perfectly adapted to the simplification of life brought about by machines.

Cazarabet: To what extent is the book a turning point in critical revolutionary thought?

Miguel Amorós: The reflections contained in *The Abyss Repopulates Itself* are grim, and correspond to the darkest moment for rational thought which is simultaneously the high point of irrationality. The working class milieu has been destroyed by mass culture; the abstract universality of the commodity and dramatic advances in the technology of surveillance are now taken for granted.

Jaime said what no one wanted to hear, that history has been abolished by power, that there are no environments where revolutionary consciousness can be rejuvenated, that the vanguard of modernity, or more accurately, of post-modernity, was in fact the vanguard of alienation, among whose ranks we find not only the old leftists recycled into the civil society movement, but also a good part of the extra-parliamentary spectrum, libertarian and non-libertarian, the part that is fighting on behalf of an extremist version of the values that are dissolving the new order.

He spoke of the new forms of barbarism that issue from a life devoted to the present moment, of the bleak future of the new generations brutalized by the spectacle, of the use by domination of terrorist opposition and even of the simple, everyday instruments of its perpetuation, of the role of the new middle classes as the social base of politically correct decomposition and, finally, he spoke of the abyss, of the spaces abandoned by the system, where the desperate masses turn against everything, and against themselves.

Jaime had the merit of not falling prey to any illusions, and of depicting the real conditions of our time, when the veracious reconceptualization of the social question could not be more difficult.

After *The Abyss Repopulates Itself*, critical thought abandoned the solid foundation of the old obsolete, useless verities, and embarked upon an unstable terrain. There cannot be a social rev-

olution without revolutionary thought, but the historical movement in which the latter was inscribed can only be reconstituted with great difficulty.

Cazarabet: As a critic of industrial society he would have gotten along quite well with Ludd?

Miguel Amorós: He said that industry has been waging war on life for more than two centuries. It is undoubtedly true that he would have felt just as much at home among the machine wreckers as he would have felt out of place among the language wreckers, the pseudo-Luddites of liquid modernity.

Of course, he would have gotten along quite well with García Calvo, too. He rediscovered, in Orwell's 1984, the term "Newspeak" to describe a radical linguistic overhaul intended to make a clean break with the past, a re-elaboration demanded by industrial society and its technology: "*It is the natural language of a world that is becoming increasingly more artificial*", as Jaime declared in his book, *Defense and Illustration of French Newspeak* (2005).

Without our even noticing it, we use a technically inflected language that hinders the formulation of coherent reasoning, even in the milieu of protest "lite"; just consider such barbarous terms as "intersectionality", "transversality", "empowerment", "poly-love", "rhizome", "queer", etc.

Returning to Ned Ludd, or rather to Captain Swing, Jaime called attention to a revolt that went largely unnoticed precisely because of its subversive potential of a new kind: the Algerian revolt of the "*ârchs*", the ancient tribal councils transformed by insurrectional necessities into popular assemblies. Tradition and novelty, youth and experience, all converged in the revolt of the Kabyles, conferring a maximum degree of freedom to resist the police state with unexpected success. The participants in the assemblies were true Luddites confronting the state bureaucracy in defense of their traditional ways of life which, in the end, were too modern to coexist with state power. *The Apology for the Algerian Insurrection*, published in 2001, reveals Jaime's less intellectual side, his instinct for insurrection that was already manifested in *The Social War in Portugal* and in "The Manuscript Found in Vitoria".

Cazarabet: What were his views during his last years? What was the message he was trying to convey?

Miguel Amorós: Jaime died suddenly in August 2010, with his boots on. Therefore, his views were still evolving. His last book, published in 2008, *Catastrophism, Disaster Management and Sustainable Submission*, written in close collaboration with René Riesel, is a continuation of the work of demolition undertaken in his previous writings, which he assiduously cited. The book did not mark the end of a cycle, nor did it put the final touch on any debates, which is why it cannot be considered as a testament. It is simply a verification of his previous analyses, in aggravated circumstances: neoliberal capitalism can now be defined as disaster capitalism.

The book includes, as an appendix, the text of *The Ghosts of Theory*, a supplementary critical gem that examines the magical objectivism that resolves every practical question from the vantage point of the writer's desk. There is no theoretical sphere that is immune to contradictions; no ideological certainty escapes the hammer and Catastrophism is proof of this.

Without a revolutionary subject that will rectify the situation and dismantle industrial mass society, the official future that lies in store for humanity is extinction.

The real catastrophe is not the one that our leaders are announcing, but the persistent blindness of the oppressed majority, which lacks the will to act on the causes of its oppression, and basically wants the same things that are offered by the owners of the world. We must face the fact that the deterioration of life is not driving the masses to revolt but to a condition of submissive adaptation. The most absolute conformism prevails without any effective opposition. Conflicts dissolve with

shocking ease among citizens re-educated in green consumerism and internet voting. Disaster management underlies the policies of all States, which are, in their own way, environmentalists. The catastrophism of official propaganda justifies compulsory submission to the directives of a now-“sustainable” domination.

To quote a former member of “Socialisme ou barbarie” who died in 1979, Pierre Souyri:

“Capitalism has entered a stage in which it will be compelled to introduce a series of new technologies for energy production, mineral extraction, recycling wastes, etc., transforming part of the natural elements that are necessary for life into commodities.”

This is the stage of “sustainability”, that is, of the authoritarian regulation of the world economy based on environmental emergencies.

This analysis sounds familiar because we already read something similar in *The Nuclearization of the World*. The wars for oil, minerals or water, along with all the other geopolitical operations by which zones of influence are defined, are the consequences of the bureaucratic-environmentalist reconversion of the capitalist world.

Those who try to oppose the system from within, who are treated so badly in the book, will accuse Jaime and René of being pessimists, or even defeatists. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rebels still exist, the critical imagination resides in those who have not thrown in the towel, who have not lost their taste for freedom and who fight to live without constraints:

“In times crushed by the prospect of the worst, possibilities are still just as open.”

You could say that was his message.

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Retrieved on 11th May 2021 from libcom.org
Translated in May 2017 from the Spanish original, “Cazarabet conversa con ... Miguel Amorós sobre el libro *El abismo se repuebla* (Pepitas de Calabaza) de Jaime Semprún”, La Librería de El Sueño Igualitario, April 28, 2017 [source: www.cazarabet.com]

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