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FEATURED INTERVIEW

Between Populist Anti-intellectualism and Leftist Messianism: An Interview with Bruno Chaouat

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Abstract
In this interview, Bruno Chaouat discusses Donald Trump, anti-Americanism, the tradition of *laïcité*, the preoccupation with safe spaces in American higher education, the impact of French literary theory on the American academy, the reception of Critical Race Theory in France, French intellectual antisemitism, and other topics. He criticizes recent developments in French and American theory while also highlighting some of the promising new developments in French literary scholarship as practiced both in France and the US. Throughout the interview, Chaouat articulates the shortcomings of current ideologies on the Right and Left and the need for independent thinking about contemporary social problems.

Keywords Anti-Americanism, · Antisemitism, · Critical Race Theory, · French Republicanism, · Laïcité, · Postmodernism, · Safe Spaces · Pierre Bourdieu, · Judith Butler Michel Foucault

Daniel Gordon and Andreas Hess (editors in chief of *Society*): You were born in France and now live in the United States. Do you still experience culture shock? How does your background as a literary theorist structure your perceptions of the US?

I have been in the U.S. for thirty years. I was here during 9/11, the Iraq War, the 2008 crisis, the Obama election. I thought I had seen it all and had become jaded, but I never anticipated the election of Donald Trump. That was a shock, not because I am particularly on the left, but because my literary background makes me conscious of form in politics. I was sensitive to the fact that Trump had, during his campaign and before, violated conventional rhetorical norms and forms. I was concerned with the long-term impact of such a destruction of forms and norms on world politics. Trump was the first President of the age of social media, in a way. The absence of thought (which for Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, is one of preconditions of evil) was being rewarded by his election. Trump seemed to be the first radically *thoughtless* President of a liberal democracy. It is not by chance that his election came in a whole era characterized by the decline of forms, especially as we can observe in the rhetoric of social media. Reactivity instead of responsibility, mob mentality, slanders, invectives and ad hominem salvoes–those have become the new norms of world communication and human interaction.

The problem of Trump is metapolitical, it is not merely a question of right versus left. It has to do with the assault on culture that we see on both sides of the political spectrum. On the right, it is the traditional contempt for intellectualism and the nativist tradition; on the left, a new form of anti-intellectualism is evident as well. Thoughtlessness is on both sides, and it goes beyond politics; hence the notion of metapolitics. Let us say, to simplify, that it is a problem of civilization, a crisis in culture. I saw Trump as a symptom of this crisis, rather than a sign of the return of older modes of fascism or racism. *Trump is the symbol of the abandonment of forms and norms that characterizes our age.* He is not at all a conservative; his style is in fact transgressive of all traditions.

In light of this crisis, does being anti-Trump mean being anti-American for you?

No. I am extremely sensitive to French and European anti-Americanism. I have taught courses on this topic. It is a fascinating subject because students can become

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conscious of the distinctive features in their own history and culture through the prism of French anti-American prejudice, which goes back two centuries. For many years I was an admirer of American society. I became a citizen; but then came Trump, and with Trump, as a reaction, a new left radicalism. I feel myself caught between right wing anti-intellectualism and the attempt to dismantle Western culture by the radical left. It is an uncomfortable position in which I can identify with no side of the culture war or the standard political spectrum. I identify with intellectual mavericks on both sides of the Atlantic, since this anti-intellectualism has reached Europe. Fortunately, there are voices that speak up against this madness. I am thinking of Mark Lilla, John McWorther, Laura Kipnis, to name a few, in the US; Pierre-André Taguieff, Pascal Bruckner, Jean Birnbaum, and many others in France.

You have written, "Education is an unsafe business." Please explain. Is your background in France and in French theory relevant for your conception of what education should be?

The notion of a safe education imprisons students in bubbles. It risks replicating the proliferation of echo chambers that we observe in social media. Education should be an "unsafe" space where it is possible to escape one's social, ideological, racial, and religious determinations and prejudices.

I come from a middle-class Jewish family from Northern France. In France, there is a strong tradition of *laïcité*, a concept lost in translation. The word secularism does not cut it. *Laïcité* comes from *laikos*, that which belongs to the people, i.e., to the public of the *res publica* or republic. *Laïcité* is the cornerstone of modern France, it is a metonym for the Republic.

In France, students, young and old, are supposed to come to class and abide by the principle of neutrality required for receiving an education based on the presumed equality of all citizens and on the equal right of all to receive the highest quality education. Many Americans find *laïcité* to be mere hypocritical meritocracy because it claims to strip students from their identity, race, religion, etc., while real discriminations persist. Some Americans say: you may as well recognize the differences from the very beginning, since they will persist anyway at the level of the outcomes.

But the French are viscerally attached to this notion. They are aware that this is a fiction, a fiction, however, that facilitates the coexistence of different religions and ethnicities within the territory of the Republic. We can call it a regulative fiction. For France, *laïcité* is a philosophical notion with roots in the separation of Church and State; it has also been framed as a kind of Kantianism (the idea of the autonomous subject who uses critical reason without following any dogma.) This explains why reactionary forces, Catholic and monarchist in particular, fought against *laïcité,* which they deemed anti-national, Protestant, Jewish, etc. Curiously, today *laïcité* is reclaimed by reactionary forces (Le Pen's far-right) as a tool against Islam, and it is threatened at times by the rise of radical Islam. On the one hand, we see a perversion of *laïcité* by the far right; on the other hand, a serious threat to *laïcité* by the alliance of radical left and radical Islam against the values of the Republic.

Incidentally, I learned a lot about French *laïcité* from an American scholar and friend, Leon Sachs, who has written a book entitled *The Pedagogical Imagination* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014) that goes beyond the historical and legal notion of *laïcité*. By way of literature and film, he shows that this notion is critical for the construction of a symbolic space (the "classroom") where one can retrieve a sense of the dialogical, genuinely democratic, approach to knowledge and esthetics.

I experienced the last years of traditional *laïcité*, before the rise of a virulent critique from the left in the late 1970s. Mass immigration from former colonies was accompanied by the rise of multicultural ideology which in turn weakened the tradition of *laïcité*. Also detrimental to the French model was Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, which claimed that the French system of education was based on elitism and privilege and that some students are just more equal than others. Bourdieu's sociology is sometimes known as the sociology of dominance and the dominated. It assumes that esthetic taste and high-brow culture, maintained in the educational system, constitute and preserve social inequalities. His thought rejected the purely economic basis of class associated with Marxism but encouraged social scientists to continue to frame modern society in terms of the excluded versus the elites. He considered that the consecration of classic art and literature was determined by elitism. Art and literature were to be unmasked or disenchanted, "demystified." Gradually the Bourdieu doctrine became mainstream on the left. Domination was the universal key to understanding all forms of real or symbolic violence.

We see today in the U.S. echoes of that doctrine adapted to racism. Think of Princeton dropping the requirement in Greek and Latin for the major in classics based on the idea that it is elitist and that learning a classical language is not socially neutral but a default position of white supremacy. What is called "decolonizing" music consists of filtering artistic creation through ideology. No more great works, no more masterpieces–the very idea of "genius" is now suspicious. Hence, in the field of music theory, we have recently seen "decolonial" scholars demoting Beethoven as the fabrication of a white privileged elite.

French school, free and mandatory for all citizens since the end of the 19th century, exposed students to the great books.

Again, this is a horizon, and never a complete accomplishment. Indeed, chapters of French history were missing, the literary canon was not inclusive, etc. But the will was there not to censor on the basis of sensitivity, religion, identity, etc. This is pretty much the educational culture I came from when moving to the U.S. in 1991.

In contrast with that model, for a couple of decades now in the U.S., there has been a trend of tailoring curricula in accordance with what Mark Lilla, in *The Once and Future Liberal* (Harper, 2018) calls "identity liberalism." This is a form of progressivism that has replaced social struggle with a conflict of identities and a tendency to reclaim individual or collective victim status. And we have seen the emergence of the notions of "safe" and "unsafe" with regard to course content. By contrast, I believe that humanistic education should train students to be critical thinkers and readers. To sanitize content is to ignore or filter out unpleasant realities. It creates spaces completely secluded, protected from reality. Words by themselves now are scary, and language keeps being revised to avoid offending some groups. The sanitizing operation suppresses ("cancels") authors who have not behaved morally according to present-day norms.

There is a striking allegory of this attempt at protecting kids from reality in an episode of the dystopian series *Black Mirror*. A particular segment, written by Jodi Foster, tells the story of a mother terrified of everything that could happen to her daughter. She acquires a computer, named Arkangel, that, paired with an implant into her daughter's brain, allows her to see and hear everything her daughter sees and hears. There is also a special function that allows the mother to filter pieces of her daughter's experience and perception that could be frightening to the child, such as a barking dog, and later in life more aggressive online content. This strategy is "safe," if you will, and psychotic, because the child continues to live in utero. Or at least the fantasy of the mother is that her daughter will remain in utero, that the child would never have been born, i.e., would never be exposed to danger and death. To put it trivially, the mother can't cut the umbilical cord. It does not end well, needless to say. A safe education is a form of regression to some symbolic womb. The exact opposite of education, which means to lead out of infancy, to help the child grow.

Michel Foucault once said that philosophizing is to escape oneself: to escape the prison of social and cultural determinations, to inhabit, albeit a few hours per day, a neutral identity within the walls of a classroom, open to a wide scale of ideas, including the strangest and offensive ones. This does not mean to accept them and embrace them, but to evaluate them, to assess them, to assign value to them, or to reject them. In other words, to be educated is to be able to "discriminate," in the original sense of the word–to filter, to hierarchize, to judge.

Concerning French theory and its transmission to the United States, is it possible to sum up the net impact of French theory on the American academy?

When I came to the U.S. in the early 1990s, Derrida was still considered the ultimate thinker in French and Comparative Literature departments. Gradually, throughout the '90s, the humanities in the U.S. started to embrace ideas that in part came from France but also bent French thought to an American ethos. For instance, we saw the development of testimony and trauma studies and the beginning of a curriculum based on personal experience, where personal experience becomes the truth, where if this is my memory or my amnesia, somehow it *is* the truth. Now, whereas personal experience is a very American thing—the "American religion," as Harold Bloom claimed, consists in finding one's real, authentic self—*laïcité* was very distrustful of personal experience. What we have with the importation of French theory to the U.S. is a re-personalization and a massive insistence on experience, personal or collective. In other words, if the French did all they could to neutralize subjectivity, the Americans brought the subject (community, individual, minorities, etc.) back into the picture. The French literary scholar Éric Marty (*Le Sexe des modernes: Pensée du neutre et théorie du genre*, Le Seuil 2021) has recently shown that Foucault and the French in general have been appropriated and distorted to the point of becoming hardly recognizable.

Recall that French theory was all about depersonalization and de-subjectivation: Roland Barthes invented the "death of the author," Derrida deconstructed the author's intention and thus the subjectivity of the author, Foucault believed that his job was to analyze utterances ("*énoncés*") outside of subjectivity, and so on. I sometimes wonder if this does not have something to do with French *laïcité*, this deconstruction of the self, the abstraction of the self, although we would find similar moves in the New Criticism's return to the text.

French postmodernists influenced American humanities beginning in the 1960s and at the invitation of literature departments. Deconstruction and postmodernism were not welcomed by analytic philosophers but became a trademark of Comparative Literature and French departments by the end of the 1960s. Interestingly, Derrida found a better reception in the U.S. than in France at the time. The genealogy of deconstruction and postmodernism was threefold: (a) structural linguistics and anthropology (Saussure, Benveniste, Levi-Strauss); (b) German philosophy (from Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger and to an extent the Frankfurt School); (c) psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan). Literature departments in the U.S. would thus become the place where continental theory would survive, after philosophy departments had gone mainly analytic.

In the U.S., today, there is a return of the self and of identity in a way that goes pretty much against French theory. So, we

see again a major difference between the two approaches. U.S. campuses have used but also distorted French thought, at times reducing it to a skeleton of itself and even to mere slogans. Plus, French thinkers (Lacan, Foucault, Lyotard) had an extraordinary sense of humor and self-irony. Self-irony and humor are not the staples of race or gender or decolonial studies today. Those fields seem to be dominated by what Nietzsche called the "spirit of gravity." Literal-mindedness has never been very French. The French theorists were "artists of thought" (Marty). They were stylists, they were dandies. They are considered idle esthetes at best, white supremacists at worst, by the new activists. Milan Kundera and Philip Roth have both warned us against literal-mindedness and the destruction of laughter. The literal is the enemy of the literary.

Finally, I think that the book by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories* (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), though somewhat reductive, is helpful to understanding the history of the *translatio studii* between France and the U.S. and the transformation of a theoretical, conceptual and esthetic postmodernism into militant forms.

Is French theory on its way out?

The problem is that we are now seeing less and less complex and nuanced readings of literature, philosophy, film, and the arts. French thought required nuance and complexity and irresolution of meaning. Suspension of meaning, as it were. At times it was frustrating and one wondered what kind of ethics, let alone politics, could be drawn from an indefinite suspension of meaning and perpetual deferral of presence and truth! And yet today, some, including myself, are nostalgic for the time of French theory because it had a very special ear for aesthetics. Many in my generation deplore the current lack of nuance. What we often observe now is Manichean ideology where an evil God is called "cisheteropatriarchy" and everything else is oppressed by this bogey-man. The problem with a concept such as cisheteropatriarchy is that it subsumes the manifold, the multiplicity of world problems under one name, and a vague name at that. Never would the French artists of thought have reduced the world to one culprit. Indeed, when Derrida talked about "phallogocentrism," it was never to condemn it or to cite it as the ultimate problem that had to be removed from this world. Derrida was perfectly aware that one could only think within the domination of Logos, within a language that works through binary oppositions, and he was interested in subverting, or undermining those binaries, but never did he fantasize that one could sanitize philosophy, purify it, immunizing it against "phallogocentrism." Quite the opposite–Derrida and most of French thinkers did not believe in purification. What we have now instead is a suspicious aspiration for purity.

Multiple campuses in the U.S. mandate anti-bias trainings, with participants required to separate into Black and White groups. People who have been identified as White are being told that they are accomplices to supremacy and oppression. In such incidents that have recently multiplied, Jews are required to identify as White, i.e., as historic oppressors. The Jews once again find themselves in a situation of obstacle to the global social justice revolution, to this new messianism of social justice. The internal contradictions of the new ideology are so massive that they cannot be enumerated here. In the recent war with Gaza, for instance, departments of

Gender Studies endorsed the condemnation of Israel in at times very virulent terms.[1] I would like to draw your attention to a connection between the fight against cisheteropatriarchy and the obsession with Israel, as though Israel embodied all the ills that those departments claim to fight. I thus formulate a hypothesis, that the movement to dismantle sexual difference and "patriarchy" rests on a religious unconscious–namely a profound resentment against a theology that consecrates distinctions, against the God who creates difference, against religion based on law, limit and separation: against Judaism. What I am trying to indicate here is that we are witnessing the return of a repressed religious unconscious in those new ideologies. In my new book I try to identify this religious unconscious as "gnostic," i.e. as a form of heterodoxy that takes the God of the Hebrew Scripture, the Creator of this world, as an evil demiurge who imposed sexual difference and all kinds of limitations. I strongly believe that the anti-Judaic obsession, clothed as anti-Israelism and a critique of "settler colonialism," bears witness to an archaic rejection of the origin of monotheism. It is not the first time that the crisis in Western culture manifests itself as a rejection of the Jews as the emblem of moral Law. In fact, when Freud was exiled in 1938, he wrote his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, in order to understand the crisis in European civilization and its connection with antisemitism. He suggested that antisemitism was the expression of a resentment against the Jews as the origin of guilt and moral Law. This is not to say that Freud was right in his odd speculations, but that any messianic, secular, revolutionary doctrine is haunted by a religious unconscious. Columbia University linguist John McWorther (*Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, Porfolio, 2021) argues that the new antiracism has some strange affinities with religious thinking. Secular movements that claim to purify the world are not immune to mystical resurgences and to redemptive thinking.

[1] Editor's note: See "Gender Studies Departments in Solidarity with Palestinian Feminist Collective," http://genderstudiespalestinesolidarity.weebly.com.

The flow of theory is now a two-way street, is it not? President Macron recently criticized the growing influence of American "Critical Race Theory." Can you explain what CRT means to those who embrace it in France and the controversies it is creating?

The French have a tendency to borrow the worst from the U.S. and then complain of how bad "Americanization" is and how it corrupts French identity! They buy fast food and complain about it. They buy the worst products from the entertainment industry and wonder why French cinema or music are in crisis. Now they are importing the new American antiracism and gender theories and even the #Metoo movement and try to apply those to a culture substantially different from American culture. For example, the conversation between the sexes in France is historically more fluid than in the U.S. This is obvious for any reader of French literature since the early modern era and has been well described by historians of *galanterie*. When it comes to racism, France has a particular history that is different from the American one and the American way of working through the wounds of the past often does not apply to France. The Hexagon never had Jim Crow, for example. Nonetheless some public figures and academicians mimic the language spoken on U.S. campuses. This is obvious when they use English words such as "racialized" or "gendered" and desperately try to find their French equivalents. Recently a French antiracist militant, Houria Bouteldja, published a book entitled *Whites, Jews and Us: Towards a Politics of Revolutionary Love* (Semiotexte, 2017), which attacks white "philosemitism" and the alleged racism of the French left from a post-colonial perspective. Such a book would have been inconceivable twenty-five years ago. This title indeed represents the nightmare of French republicanism–a division of the Republic into hostile ethnic groups, between us and them. Precisely what the French Revolution, and a century later *laïcité*, had tried to abolish. There is much pushback in France against this importation of divisive ideology and against the "decolonial" movement. Yet, not unlike what is happening in the U.S., those in France who object to those new ideologies are often labelled right-wingers.

Isn't it necessary to challenge the taboo in France against recognizing the very existence of race and racism? The government refuses even to collect data on race for the census, correct?

In France there is fierce resistance, legal and cultural, to counting people based on their race or ethnicity, thanks to the tradition of *laïcité* and the French republican ethos that does not officially recognize communities but only individual citizens. The French Republic was built on a rejection of elevating ethnic, racial, and religious communities above the sovereign people, and on the unity and equality of all citizens before the law. France suffers from colonial guilt, but the Republican ethos resists, or at least has long resisted, the guilt trip when it comes to legislation. Do I think that the French should align themselves with the Anglo-Saxon model with regard to ethnic census? Not really. I think that France has a certain conception of citizenship that is quite different from the U.S. although Americans have also been known to uphold the ideal of common citizenship above and beyond ethnicity. Of course, slavery and segregation, and the ethnocide of indigenous people, run counter to common citizenship. But the French do not have the same history. So, the question I would ask you in return is: How exactly has the collecting of data on race helped fight racism in the U.S? Can we measure the effectiveness of censuses based on race and ethnicity? More philosophically, is it ethical to identify people by race and ethnicity, while we know that race is a historical construct? I know that the answer is that perception is everything, and if one appears Black to White people, one is Black. That is fine for our personal and social judgments. But I remain unconvinced that the state should make the very categories that constitute racism part of the nation's official way of classifying, and I continue to believe that colorblindness, horresco referens, should be the horizon of any liberal society, because it is the only humanistic horizon. It certainly has been the French republican horizon and I would prefer for it to stay that way.

A thread in your scholarly work is your focus on how particular types of theory intersect with Judaism and antisemitism. You already broached this subject when you spoke about "resentment" against theology. Can you tell us more about your work on theory and antisemitism and especially your book *Is Theory Good for the Jews? French Thought and the Challenge of the New Antisemitism* (2016)?

The starting point of my book is autobiographical. I wanted to lay out my departure from the world of French theory (postmodernism, deconstruction) due to a certain disappointment regarding its inability to grasp the rise of new manifestations of violent antisemitism. Responses to the 2012 Toulouse tragedy (the cold murder of Jewish children in a schoolyard by an Islamist) made me realize the shortcomings of French theory. I avoided generalizations in the book; I do not reject theory uncritically. I even continue to find some aspects of certain authors very useful to understanding our world. But in the

postwar period, French thought built, perhaps out of guilt regarding French collaborationism and the Shoah, a "figural Jew," a Jew as a metaphor for something else, and this metaphor was one of exile, wandering, literature, writing, etc. To such an extent that the real, political, historic, Jews were eclipsed. Scholar of literature and religion Sarah Hammerschlag (*The Figural Jew*, University of Chicago Press, 2010) has come up with this notion of "figural Jew" in the context of a book that examines the French modern construction of Jewish identity in philosophy and literary theory. To give a simple example of the French postwar metaphorical stance on Jewish identity, Maurice Blanchot, a massive influence on deconstruction and literary theory, wrote an essay entitled "Being Jewish" in the 1960s that starts with: "The Jew is malaise and affliction." That was supposed to be a liberal statement from a repentant antisemite, but you can imagine how Jews can receive such a strange declaration! What French theory has privileged is a Judaism of pathos and suffering that left no room for a historic and political awakening and national liberation. And you know the joke: What is a philosemite? An antisemite who loves Jews…

Hence the inability of French postwar literary theory to understand, for instance, Jewish national sovereignty (there is very little engagement with the nation state of Israel in French postwar theory, as though Zionism were threatening the French figural Jew). Hence also the relative uselessness of French theory to understand the phenomenon of the new antisemitism coming from unexpected quarters (the radical left, radical Islam). French theory, a philosophy based on the deconstruction of borders and of identities, was very good at warning against right-wing, nationalist, antisemitism, and very good at deconstructing the fantasy of origin, belonging, etc. French theory owes to existentialism the distrust of all forms of essentialism.

French theory was useful until one realized that something else was cropping up, an antisemitism rooted in a very different tradition, perhaps a return of Pauline thought with its overcoming of the Jew of the flesh, a condemnation of Jewish exceptionalism and Jewish particularism. Suddenly, the Jew, the Zionist, Israel, became figures of racism and nationalism and oppression. This, French theory, with the major exception of Jean-Francois Lyotard (*The Hyphen,* Humanities Press, 1999), failed at understanding because it tended to treat the Jew as a metaphor and, as a result, to disembody the Jew. Add to this a certain fetishization of the status of the victim and you get an ideological cocktail not only useless for denouncing the new antisemitism but at times even accomplice to its new manifestations.

One of the heirs to French theory is Judith Butler, and I devoted a chapter to her stance on Zionism as found in her *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press 2013). Butler sees Judaism as a positive force of subversion, and Zionism as a force of oppression. In a way, she queers Judaism and calls it "Jewishness." Her anti-Zionism, which she claims is inspired by Benjamin, Arendt and other more or less secular European Jewish intellectuals, rests on the idea that Jewishness must remain diasporic because the diaspora is a state of marginality and of subversion of all norms. This of course is a very strange understanding of Judaism which, while it is a very critical tradition, is also rooted in norms. What is the Law, after all, if not the Norm par excellence? This idiosyncratic redefinition of Judaism allows a queer theorist such as Butler to reclaim Jewishness and condemn Zionism. This is an example of the ethical and intellectual limits of theory. This is also the problem of oversimplification and Manichean tendencies–in this instance, creating a dichotomy of Judaism versus Zionism.

There is a growing scholarly interest in the phenomenon of "left antisemitism." Is this a new realization, that antisemitism is not limited to right-wing ideology?

I am not an expert on left-wing antisemitism, but I would like to respond at a philosophical rather than a historical or sociological level. What is the promise of the revolutionary left? First and foremost, revolution, the transformation of the world. That is, the promise of a movement that projects into a not so far-off future the end of injustice, the end of inequalities, etc. It is a movement that locates the Golden Age in the future, but that does not wait passively for it. Instead, the movement pretends to bring it through ideological and armed struggle. The revolutionary left is thus a millenarian movement, a political religion. Today, what we call "social justice" carries over this millenarian promise—that of a society emancipated from all inequalities. In the 1950s and 60s, philosopher Eric Voegelin (*The New Science of Politics, University of Chicago Press, 1952)* had characterized revolutionary movements as "millenarian." To describe them he talked of the "immanentization of the eschaton," i.e., the belief that the end of history (*eschaton*, in Greek) belongs to this world and will come soon rather than in some sort of City of God. The City of Man will be a perfect one, but to this aim, one needs to purify it from every element that stands as an obstacle. For communism, the bourgeois was the obstacle; for Nazism, it was the Jew; and today, with the very disturbing return of race in the name of antiracism, the hindrance is the White, and the Jew as "super-white." Note that I am talking of the revolutionary left here, but extremely dangerous eschatological thinking can be found on the far right (within white supremacism, for instance) and also of course in some neo-Christian movements as well Jewish extremists.

I believe that secular eschatological thought is precisely that which threatens the Jews today. This explains why many American Jews, especially the younger generation, are

tempted to part ways with Israel and Zionism and embrace this fusional model which, they think, will bring finally some sort of perfected humanity. This is not Jewish self-loathing, this is rather a form of moral narcissism, the certainty that anti-Zionism is the righteous, revolutionary position.

Now, is this movement more dangerous than the traditional right-wing antisemitism? That is very difficult to assess. In the U.S. right-wing antisemitism kills, whereas the radical left antisemitism acts as a slow poison that delegitimizes the Jew in the flesh (say, the pro-Israel Jew) and turns him or her into an enemy, into an obstacle on the path to fusion and universal reconciliation. Hence, the absence of the Jew in the "intersectional" project. Today the Jews are "White" for the radical left and still too dark for white supremacists.

French sociologist Danny Trom (*La Promesse et l'obstacle,* Éditions du Cerf, 2007) has written about the radical left and the Jews. His premise is that the promise of total emancipation always stumbles on the Jewish "obstacle." That Judaism resists total emancipation has been powerfully argued by Lyotard, who understood that starting with Pauline universalism Judaism has staked out a position against the immanentization of the eschaton, this end of history, this messianism that claims to put an end to waiting for the Messiah.

Another way of putting it is to suggest that Judaism consists in a critical acceptance of the world rather than in a metaphysical rebellion, i.e., a rebellion against the world and creation. Here I am referring to Albert Camus's masterpiece *The Rebel*, in which he distinguished between the importance of rebellion to affirm human dignity all the while condemning the justification of violence that one sees in revolutions. Violence, for Camus, was at once inevitable and unjustifiable. This tragic and intractable condition of history has also been highlighted by Emmanuel Levinas. To take an illustration close to us: the Black Lives Matter movement is a rebellion against humiliation and an affirmation of human dignity. The problem comes when such rebellions drift into nihilism and justification of violence.

Returning to your biography, you came from France to the United States to study French literature. Why?

This sounds indeed paradoxical; there is a pragmatic response and a more substantial one. The pragmatic response is that it is extremely hard in France to receive funding for doctoral studies. Usually, one has to work and pursue a Ph.D. on the side. The U.S. not only has exceptional libraries but also provides fellowships for doctoral students.

The more substantial reason is that the U.S. had all the exciting people who did not separate disciplines as the French did at the time. Literature and continental philosophy were not kept apart. This tradition began at elite institutions such as Johns Hopkins, Yale, and Stanford, where French intellectuals used to lecture one semester per year. I am thinking of René Girard, Michel Serres, Louis Marin, Lyotard, Derrida of course, Foucault. They were very intriguing, very transversal figures, at the crossroads of literature, anthropology, psychoanalysis and philosophy. This interdisciplinarity intrigued me greatly at the time. I could not imagine myself working only in the field of literature, with literary history, philology, narratology, thematic approaches, etc. I found extremely refreshing the conversations among disciplines of what the French called *sciences humaines*: a mix of the humanities, psychoanalysis and the social sciences in their structuralist and post-structuralist definition.

Can you sum up the current state of French studies and literary criticism? Can you cite any positive developments, any younger scholars or theorists whose work you admire and would recommend to readers of *Society*?

Despite my pessimistic tone, there are plenty of reasons to rejoice at the state of the field of French studies in France and in the U.S. Scholars of my generation and of the next generation have come up with works that combine close reading with historical context. I am thinking of Sachs (already mentioned), but also of a scholar of French literature such as Maurice Samuels (*The Right to Difference*, University of Chicago, Press 2016) at Yale whose work on French identity and Jewish difference in the 19th century is crucial, or a younger scholar such as Clémentine Fauré-Bellaïche has a forthcoming book on the Protestant origins of French literary modernity. I also need to mention Robert St. Clair, a 19th century scholar whose *Poetry, Politics and the Body in Rimbaud* (Oxford University Press, 2018) is a promising sign of a renewal of historical and hermeneutic rigor in French studies.

As for France, I have mentioned the work of Marty, who has made a major contribution to our understanding of the French "Modernes" (1950-1980), by combining rigorous textual analysis with long-range history. In the field of philosophy I cannot recommend strongly enough Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Stanford) and his recent reflections on transhumanism and environmental ethical issues, or the work of political philosopher Pierre Manent on democracy. I am also very interested in cultural critique and critique of new technologies, and I would strongly recommend Columbia University political scientist Bernard Harcourt's *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Harvard University Press, 2015). There is also important work being done in France on conspiracy

theories. I am thinking here of Gérald Bronner's books on social media such as *Apocalypse Cognitive* (PUF, 2021).

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