

The Future Belongs To Us

by E. Christian Kopff

“Reaction is the consequence of a nation waking from its illusions.”

—Benjamin Disraeli

Charles de Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation

by Régis Debray. Translated by John Howe
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Anna Mireck-Wodecki

In the 1960's, when those of us who are now “of a certain age,” as the old-fashioned French expression goes, were young, we used to talk about the Revolution. I remember one excited student at little Haverford College, on the Main Line outside of Philadelphia, saying that things had gotten so bad, it would soon be time to get our rifles and set out for the mountains to fight the government. “You’re going to fight in the Poconos?” I asked. “No!” he exploded, “not the Poconos. The Rocky Mountains. We’ll hide by day and strike by night.” Many of those putative revolutionaries went on to graduate school, or law or medical school, and are now serving the United States government as bureaucrat, professor, or some other type of skill.

We used to talk, in those days, about Régis Debray, the young Frenchman who went from school in Paris to Cuba and fought with Ché Guevara in Bolivia. He was captured when Ché was killed in 1967, and French President Charles de Gaulle telegraphed the Bolivian authorities to ask them to spare his life. The government did so and, after some unpleasant years in prison, Debray returned to France, one of the few intellectuals of his time who had actually risked his life trying to rouse indigenous peoples to revolt. The experience changed him.

“I became a ‘Gaullist’—the term is incorrect but appropriate—around May 1968 [at the time of the student protests that eventually led to de Gaulle’s fall]. A bit late, you might think, but better late than never. . . . It was the Guarani Indi-

ans of the Chaco who recruited me, affiliated me to that discredited brotherhood; convinced me that what is immaterial about a nation, a culture or a memory may constitute the ultimate axis for historical action. The Indians of the Bolivian Chaco did not speak Marxist, but this (although regrettable) was not unexpected: the same had been true of the Chinese peasants in Yunnan 30 years earlier. The problem with this lot was that they did not even speak Spanish. Ché made speeches, gave them the word; they understood not a word, not a single blessed word.” Their culture was too different. Debray had years in a Bolivian prison to ponder the lesson the Guarani Indians taught him. *La révolution mondiale n’est pas une patrie*. I can explain that sentence more easily than I can translate it. I think I know what it means: “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his country?”

The World Revolution did not work. Proponents of “Global Democracy” and “Global Free Trade” will derive little consolation from Debray’s conversion, because what did work, what turned out to be real, was the nation and the religious element that structures the nation. As he made clear to Jean Ziegler, a conventional leftist, in discussions on “France Culturelle”:

Marxism and free trade liberalism are in my eyes almost the same thing. They are two sides of an illusion that belongs to the first industrial revolution . . . and which I call the ‘Economist Illusion.’ We thought the essence of History would be decided in the economy, in the production of material goods. In this sense Marx, Adam Smith, Ricardo seem to me variants of the same postulate which I believe false. . . . The Religious element . . . is not a passing factor. It is the structural basis of every human society, no matter how secularized. I believe that History has shut the book on that kind of Economism, and what was true for Communism will be true for Capitalism as well.

The great figure in recent history who saw that the nation is realer than the global economy or the world revolution was Charles de Gaulle. In this little book, Debray pays his belated respects to the man who took time out of a busy schedule to write on behalf of a French citizen locked up in a foreign jail, and stood for reality in a world grown frantic on hallucinations.

“We always sniggered at De Gaulle,” at his pompous style (“Fécamp is a seaport and intends to remain so”) but, more than that, at his anachronistic views. He walked out of NATO, offending his old ally, the United States, to build an independent atomic *force de frappe*. He went to Moscow and refused to recognize the German Democratic Republic. “Artificial creation. Won’t last. Prussia, living entity. Will last. . . . The old boy just could not grasp the fact that Communism had altered the European set-up. He went on stubbornly talking about ‘Russia’ as if we were still in the time of the Czars. Well, yes: ‘Soviet Union.’ Artefact, interesting but transitory, superficial. Won’t last. ‘Russia,’ serious entity, leathery, great people. Will endure.” He was always embarrassing

E. Christian Kopff is a professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

responsible conservatives and progressive socialists, as when he went to Canada and in a moment of enthusiasm, or visionary transport, cried out, “*Vive le Québec libre!*” “Hurray for free Québec!” They said he was senile, but he turned out to be right.

And he will be right in the future. (The title of Debray’s book in French is *A demain De Gaulle*.) “It is not lunatic to bet on the self-determination of peoples, but it is fanciful to attempt to make a mobilizing project out of a phony subject: the European Community, for example, which is being ‘constructed’ behind the backs of the people, between the lines of real life. A likable but artificial creation which (alas!) won’t last.”

“The problem is that the legislator of the future should have been seen in his lifetime as a ‘frozen mammoth,’ an albatross, an elderly bull in a china shop, while the mechanical model maker, the Meccano enthusiast, passes for a great humanist.” (There was Jean Monnet in de Gaulle’s time, and Jacques Delors today.) “Let’s speak clearly: de Gaulle saw and predicted what the Left neither saw nor predicted. . . . When a ‘reactionary’ is always first aboard the train of the future, while a ‘progressive’ regularly turns up panting as it steams away, there is something amiss with our categories.” “From 1945 to 1975 my guild professed as a scientific fact that class struggle was the motor of history, that the collapse of capitalism was inevitable, that the eventual appearance of something resembling socialism . . . was inherent in the structure of things. On discovering their error, most of them responded by espousing a new one with the same energy, application and trenchancy they had applied to the first . . . individualism is the predominant force of our time, Human Rights the motor of history and the development of Democracy inevitable. The lads are in for another disappointment.” (Don’t think that Debray reserves all his venom for his friends on the left. *En passant* he savagely attacks the French neocons, like Jean-François Revel and André Glucksmann.)

The real divisions of our age are not between right and left but between nations and the globalist delusion, and also between the rational word and the irrational image. Debray’s appreciation of de Gaulle and the nation is, in fact, a *parergon* in his work. His most important recent books make a brilliant trilogy,

not likely to be translated soon into English, which discusses how the centralizers and globalists use the irrational image to control people, to lead them into delusion and disaster and away from the nation and from the word.

Debray himself cannot always transcend the old categories. He did break ranks with his old leader, François Mitterand, whom he served as advisor during the 1980’s, to become the “brains of NO,” in opposition to the European Union and the Maastricht Treaty. He still believes in the left, however, and devotes the last chapter of the book to ways of making it relevant again. He admits, “I do not shop at *Le Figaro*,” although it was *Figaro*’s economics editor, Yves Meszarovitch, who got Sir James Goldsmith to put down his thoughts in *The Trap*, the most accessible antiglobalist book in recent years. He distinguishes carefully, but not convincingly, between “De Gaulle’s nation and Le Pen’s tribe.” Such minor inconsistencies, which undoubtedly helped get the book translated, cannot disguise the key to reality he gives us. Try it yourself. The Serbian people are a lasting reality; Yugoslavia was transitory, as are NATO and the U.N., whose blue-helmeted “peacekeepers” are the catspaw of America’s interventionist elite. Québec is a nation, an enduring reality held down by Canada, which is neither; Canada is, in the German phrase, an *Unding*. Peoples are real; a people with a religion and a shared history is a nation.

Is there a lesson here for the United States? Does our future belong to global interventionism (“gunboat humanitarianism”), global free trade, and open immigration, or shall We the People reclaim our traditional religion and reclaim our history and our literature? In *The Empires versus Europe* (1985), Debray wrote prophetically that intellectuals “forget that nations hibernate, but empires grow old . . . that the American nation will outlast the Atlantic Empire as the Russian nation will outlast the Soviet Empire. . . . Most of all they forget the law of diminishing returns of hegemony which has for 6,000 years progressively shrunk the longevity of empires, and bodes ill for their contemporary imitators. These same good technocrats confuse politics with economics, values with material goods, the autonomy of what is alive in a culture with the interdependence of markets and currencies, in a word, the primary with the secondary.”

Debray’s views have carried off this review and I have not mentioned that the book is beautifully and wittily written, well translated by John Howe. A few sentences, out of context: “Let us start by setting the facts aside and concentrating on serious matters—legends, for example.” “The hardest thing in politics, the thing that distinguishes the statesman from the politician, is to want the consequences of what you want.” “De Gaulle on the subject of his lost referendum: ‘What else could we do, these days? We had to choose democracy, so we had to have popular support.’ This relativization of democracy resembles a scandalous shrug of the shoulders, on the scale of the epoch we are saddled with. *Sub specie historiae* it is rigorously logical: the French people had governments *before* the storming of the Bastille. It will probably still have them *after* what we now understand by democracy, perhaps after the storming of the Fraternity arch at La Défense, in a couple of hundred years’ time.” That last remark may be hard to follow, if you don’t know Paris, but it made me laugh till I cried. (And I do not believe for a minute that it will take 200 years for the French to march on La Défense.) Its untranslatable Frenchness is typical of Debray’s thought. “How much longer are we going to confuse the love of thought with the love of general ideas, when intellectual work consists precisely of producing concrete, singular ideas which cannot be generalized?”

They can be appreciated, however, and applied with discretion and a feeling for diversity and nuance. It is striking that, of the books Americans should read this year, two—Goldsmith’s *The Trap* and Debray’s *Charles de Gaulle*—were written in French for French audiences. Despite Goldsmith’s moony mysticism and Debray’s sentimental leftism, these works speak to American readers and may help lead us from our sentimental attachment to the imperialist Churchill toward a rational affection for the nationalist de Gaulle, who was certainly right about a lot. He saw that France was more enduring than the victorious German armies in 1940, and Germany more so than the occupying forces of the United States and the former Soviet Union. Even his gaffes may turn out to have been inspired. We live in an age when we are told that we must all learn to give up our customs and our traditional ways of making a living to respond to the va-

garies of the global market and to the world's hungry mouths and empty hands, which are willing to work so hard for so very little. In such a world, it may

turn out that what de Gaulle had to say about a little port in Normandy was not a fatuity, but the fiery challenge of a prophet and a statesman. "Fécamp is a

sea-port and intends to remain so." To that, I can think of only one thing to add, *Vive le Québec libre!*

Testament

by Paul Lake

In this, my fortieth year of age,
I wake beneath a surf of sheet,
Stone sober, my mind a crumpled page,
My life a sentence, half complete;
Still mired in the old conceit
And lust for literary fame,
I stare down darkness, death, defeat—
(But is the candle worth the game?)

I think of Baudelaire's refrain—
"Get drunk!—on wine or poetry,
On virtue, hashish, crack cocaine—
But get drunk ceaselessly, or be
In moments of sobriety
Another martyred slave of time"—
And how on such authority
For twenty years, I binged on rhyme.

But now, in more prosaic days,
I see my life's been chiefly spent
(While others won the jobs, the bays)
In silence, exile, unemployment,
And third-rate jobs; my sole enjoyment,
Arranging words in borrowed rooms,
For which, to meet demands for rent,
I've sold possessions, hocked heirlooms—

In short, behaved like any addict
Who mortgaged future time to buy
(Instead of houses) one more crack
At fame, that last infirmity. . . .
I gambled all on poetry,
That swaybacked Pegasus, whose wings
Have been clipped by modernity
To Hallmark cards and *Elvis Sings!*

Ah God, had I instead pursued,
With such ambition, more degrees
Or shown a higher aptitude
For essaying in Theorese—
"(En)Gendering the Boundaries
Of Discourse: Gay's Transgressive Plays,"
Or "(De)Constructing Patriarchy's
Cruel, Objectifying Gaze"—

I'd teach at Yale—or Kansas State;
I'd spend my summers in Milan;
I'd edit, collate, annotate,
And publish work in *Raritan*.
I'd have a house, a minivan,

A Macintosh, and two grants pending.
Returning from the Caribbean,
I'd vow to cut back on my spending.

Too late for that. At forty, who
Can overthrow a lifetime's vices?
I'll spend my life in Timbuktu
Composing verse, although the price is
A bleak old age, enduring crisis,
And thoughts embittered by the knowledge
That cash alone is what suffices.
A name won't put my kids through college.

And so, like Crusoe on his isle,
I put the State of my Affairs
In writing—not as in a Will,
Since I am like to have few Heirs—
But setting Comforts against Cares,
And weighing Bad against the Good,
As Debtors do with Creditors,
To soothe my self as best I could:

*I am cast up in Russellville,
Void of all hope of Rescue.*

—Good:

But could be teaching in Brazil,
Or in a high crime neighborhood.

*I'm separated from the World
Of Letters, banished from humane
Society; alone; exiled.*

—But have the Mail, stamps, and a phone.

I have few Clothes to cover me.

—True, but nowhere else to go.

No talk

—But book clubs wonderfully
Supply the occasional bon-mot.

And so on . . . till, upon the whole,
I'm reconciled to my condition
As well, almost, as R. Crusoe—
Except my life is not a fiction.

What use to moan and beat my breast,
Curse fate, or slander my vocation,
Counting myself among the oppressed
Because I've reached no higher station?
I give a local habitation
To airy nothing, and a name
To shapes formed in imagination—
(But is the candle worth the game?)