

## Levinas and the Right

It's amazing what can pass for a 'radical' philosophy nowadays. Howard Caygill's article, 'Levinas's Political Judgement: The *Esprit* Articles 1934–1983' in *RP* 104 raises a number of questions about Caygill's own political judgement, and, indeed, about the judgement of the *RP* collective.

Caygill tells us that 'it is necessary first to recover the specific political conditions to which [Levinas's] ethics was a response' and then proceeds to misrepresent those 'specific political conditions' throughout. What, for instance, are we to make of Caygill's claim that 'Of all the twentieth-century philosophers Levinas was the most directly touched by the violent events of the century's political history'? It is not to diminish Levinas's time as a POW or, indeed, the death of his close relatives in the Shoah, to seek to remind *RP* readers of Antonio Gramsci's death in 1937 during incarceration in a Fascist jail, or of Walter Benjamin's suicide upon fleeing occupied France and being refused entry to Spain. Levinas, though, Caygill tells us, 'taught students from North Africa and the Middle East during the decolonization struggles ... and at the height of the student movement in 1968 was teaching at Nanterre.' Is it perhaps necessary to remark here on Sartre's wartime imprisonment and his explicit commitment to the struggle for liberation in Algeria and opposition to US imperialism in Vietnam, or Antonio Negri's imprisonment at the hands of the Italian state in the crackdown on the *Autonomia*? The point, I should make clear, is not to score points, but simply to suggest that the extent to which 'philosophers' are 'touched' by political history might have something to do with the extent to which their thought and actions seek to interrupt that history and to challenge the 'official' makers of the history of their time.

Perhaps most surprising, in an article on Levinas's involvement with Emmanuel Mounier's journal *Esprit*, is Caygill's uncritical acquiescence to Levinas's description of *Esprit* as 'representing progressive, avant-garde Catholicism' and his further suggestion that Mounier 'aspired to combine the insights of Marx and Kierkegaard' in a 'moral and political anti-capitalism' which was 'politically committed' and was 'against Hitlerism'. We are told that Mounier flirted with Vichy, as did Ricoeur, and we are given Ricoeur's explanation for this dalliance, as rooted in the 'intense propaganda' of the day and 'the feeling that a new, stronger France had to be formed'. All very noble. Except that what Caygill omits is that Mounier, who was indeed a vigorous opponent of what he called the 'established disorder', listed as his enemies 'individualism, capitalism, liberalism, Marxist determinism, democratic "disorder" and bourgeois mediocrity'. In May 1935 Mounier accepted an invitation to attend a congress at the Institute of Fascist Culture, as part of a delegation including Robert Aron of *L'Ordre Nouveau* and a representative of the *Jeune Droite*. In a report in *Esprit* following the conference, Mounier paid tribute to the 'authentic anticapitalist elan' of the 'active fraction of the fascist world'. Mounier described the difference between fascism and personalism as being between fascism's assertion of the primacy of the state and personalism's 'pluralistic' view of the state. He made a point of making clear, though, that the two philosophies shared a rejection of 'false liberties'.

*Esprit*, in the 1930s, carried articles by Otto Strasser, and Mounier had his 'What is Personalism?' translated for publication in a journal edited by the Nazi Party propagandist Otto Abetz. Under Occupation, Mounier worked for more than a year uncritically with the Vichy regime. His follower Jean-Marie Domenach wrote that 'Mounier is not sorry to see bourgeois liberalism come to grief. The situation is open: beyond the disaster he

hopes a new world will come into being.' Mounier, to be fair, was not a fascist, but he, as also Ricoeur, saw opportunities for dialogue between the 'left' currents within fascism and those elements around *Esprit* seeking a 'third way' between capitalism and Marxism. What they all had in common was a rejection of 'bourgeois individualism', materialism and the 'left wing mythos' of democratic socialism.

In the decade leading up to the establishment of the Vichy regime, France was polarized between an increasingly militant working class and a Right that deployed pro-fascist and pro-royalist organization against workers in pursuit of a Bonapartist project that manifested itself first in the mobilization that led to the 1934 Doumergue government and finally the rule of Pétain himself. Mounier's critique of the 'established disorder' could only have found realization either in support for the working class or support for the fascist project of 'critiquing' democracy by suppressing it. His alliances up to 1940 suggest clearly his orientation towards the latter. Even a cursory reading of Sternhell, or of Winock's *Historie politique de la revue 'Esprit'* (Editions du Seuil, 1975) would have brought all of this to light.

A similar refusal of 'specific political conditions' takes place in Caygill's dealings with Levinas's application of his 'ethics' to the Palestinian question. Caygill remarks that Levinas's radio discussion with Alain Finkielkraut about the Sabra and Chatilla massacres reveals one of 'its unacknowledged strengths'. In the discussion Levinas clearly fudges the question of direct Israeli responsibility for the massacre and refers to 'whoever' was responsible. The murders were carried out by Phalange militias armed and trained by Israel, who slaughtered Palestinian civilians under light provided by Israeli Defence Force flares. The explicitly fascist nature of the Phalange appears not to trouble Levinas's 'ethics'. Levinas's ethical sense (which Caygill tells us 'shows the link between his exercise of political judgement and the broader development of his philosophy') is, in any event, a peculiar thing. Between 1967 and 1982, Palestinians were responsible for the deaths of 290 Israelis. Israeli-caused Arab casualties, though, stood at 20,000 for the period July–August 1982 alone – before the September 1982 Sabra and Chatilla massacres.

All of this represents for Levinas, as Caygill makes clear, 'an adventure' by a 'great Modern state ... one that serves humanity', which perhaps suggests that the Palestinians, for Levinas, are not part of that humanity-to-be-served. The point, really, is that behind Levinas's posturings about 'a destiny confusedly felt' and his 'unhated enemy' is an explicit defence of Zionist expansionism and of the Zionist state 'proclaimed in the aftermath of Auschwitz' which for Levinas was 'a religious event', albeit one built upon the bloody massacre and expulsion of the Palestinian people. Levinas's *Esprit* article 'Space is Not One-Dimensional' is a justification in philosophy for the imperialist designs of the Israeli state, which puts what Caygill calls 'the messianic mission of Israel in Jewish sacred history' above the right to a homeland for the dispossessed of the Middle East. Its 'ethics' are an ethics shared by Moshe Dayan and Zionist expansionist settler groups such as the Whole Land of Israel Movement, Gush Emunim and Meir Kahane's Kach movement. There can be no ambiguous reading of Levinas's writings on the 'truth and destiny' of Israel. Levinas, like the settler-extremists, believed Jews were *am segula* – a chosen people. From this flows the belief in the *mitzvah*: the religious duty to conquer, possess and settle the 'Promised Land.'

There is, in all of this, a wider point to be made, beyond the deficiencies of Caygill's article. Post-Marxist philosophy, in its ethical turn, has embraced a politics and philosophy which correspond almost exactly to personalism's rejection of 'liberalism, Marxist determinism and materialism'. Alongside this has gone an attempt to demonstrate that, contra Lukács, all philosophy is, somehow, innocent. We have seen the whitewashing of Heidegger, the rehabilitation of Schmitt, and, now, Levinas's Zionism put forward as a 'strength' of his linking of ethics and politics. Should not *Radical Philosophy* seek to stand against all this, to subject it to critique and rebuttal?

**Nick Stone**

# Reply

**N**ick Stone's response to 'Levinas's Political Judgement: The *Esprit* Articles 1934–1983' (*RP* 104) amounts to a sustained calumny on the life and work of Emmanuel Levinas. He attempts to put into question the anti-fascist motivation of Levinas's work by insinuating that (a) Levinas wrote for a journal with fascist inclinations, (b) he supported the Lebanese fascist Phalange, (c) he published in the alleged fascist journal 'an explicit defence of Zionist expansionism and the Zionist state'. Each of these charges is perverse and without foundation.

Stone devotes considerable effort to defaming the journal *Esprit* and its founder Emmanuel Mounier. His reference to Michel Winock's balanced history of the journal (usually referred to under the title of the second enlarged edition '*Esprit* *Des intellectuels dans la cité 1930–1950*, Seuil, 1995) in support of his one-dimensional condemnation shows a singular lack of scruple. Winock describes the *Esprit* of the 1930s as a journal of the Left with a consistently anti-fascist editorial policy. Winock sets Mounier's visit to Rome in 1935 in a quite different context to that of Stone, and situates the publication of Otto Strasser as part of a dossier documenting the dangers of Nazism, commenting '*Esprit* thus offered a rich dossier to the attention of the French who were still little aware of the realities of fascism and of national socialism.' To insinuate that *Esprit* was sympathetic to fascism is unfair to a journal that defended the Spanish republic, defended the anti-Stalinist militant Victor Serge, and opposed the colonial adventure of the Italian Fascist regime.

Similarly unworthy is Stone's suggestion that Levinas was sympathetic to the ideology and actions of the Phalange. There is no evidence whatsoever of this in the Finkelkraut broadcast. His description of the essay 'Space is Not One-Dimensional' as a 'justification in philosophy of the imperialist designs of the Israeli state' forgets that the prime concern of the essay is to confront the anti-Semitic canard of the 'double allegiance' of Jewish citizens that had re-emerged in France following the Six Day War. Levinas's position on the State of Israel was in fact complex and tormented, and by no means a simple 'philosophical justification' of its policies.

It is striking that at the outset of his response Stone refers approvingly to Sartre and at the end to Lukács. While he considered it 'necessary' to mention Sartre's imprisonment and opposition to French and United States' imperialism, it was apparently not necessary to mention in his opening flourish Sartre's support for the State of Israel, nor at the end that Lukács too published in *Esprit*. Such details would have introduced precisely the element of complexity into the issue of political judgement that Stone resists but which should be respected by any responsible philosophical radicalism.

Howard Caygill

visit our web site:

[www.radicalphilosophy.com](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com)

[www.radicalphilosophy.com](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com)

[www.radicalphilosophy.com](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com)

[www.radicalphilosophy.com](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com)

[www.radicalphilosophy.com](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com)