André Gorz and Our Youth

Alain Lipietz

André Gorz, along with his wife Dorine[1], took their own lives on Monday, 24 September 2007. They were almost the same age, 84, and had been together for more than half a century.

Of all the men who have "intimidated" me, André was without a doubt, after Abbé Pierre[2], the most impressive. I first came to know him, unhurriedly, in my adolescence, when my own political thinking was developing through such works as *Stratégie ouvrière et néocapitalisme*.[3] Of course, after May 1968 I knew him through his articles in *Le Nouvel Observateur* under the pen name Michel Bosquet, and his book *Réforme et révolution* (1969).

He was exactly the man and the political orientation I needed. As with all those who come to Marxism from a religious or humanist tradition (he was a Catholic Jew who discovered Sartre at Lausanne; I had come to Marxism through reading Henri Desroches and Jean-Yves Calvez), his interest lay in alienation and emancipation. "Our" Marx was, first, the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the sixth unpublished chapter of *Capital*. That is, how does one become and remain a "human individual" notwithstanding the heteronomy, the dictatorship over means and ends imposed on us by capitalism through wage-labour and the market?

In André's works of the 1960s, this desire for autonomy, even in the labour process itself, found evidence of the emergence of a new skilled labour force: the technicians such as those in Sud Aviation or the oil and gas industry. But a few years later, André perceived more clearly that the overly technical nature of these superskilled workers – his candidates for "selfmanagement" – had as its flip side the de-skilling of the specialized workers of Fordism; this was the very essence of Taylorism! Under the influence of Italian *opéraïsme* (Trentin and Foa in the trade unions, Rossanna Rossanda in *Il Manifesto*)[4], he expanded his concerns to the mass workers, the skilled workers of the big factories that were the foundation of *Potere operaio* (Negri) and *Lotta continua* (Sofri, Viale)[5], the spiritual parents of France's *Gauche ouvrière et paysanne* (GOP)[6].

In reality, what I criticized in André and what he could criticize in me was the scope of the adjustments required when taking political ecology into account, and what this implied in the questioning of Marxism.

In response to these dual Italian influences, the organ of the future GOP, *L'outil des travailleurs*, was created in 1970 by Marc Heurgon and some young workers who are still my friends – Yves Bucas, Alain Desjardins, Gérard Peurière, and others. I was a young intellectual, ready to hand, and they entrusted me with the job of editor in chief. Marc immediately took me to see André Gorz. I arrived at his door with the greatest trepidation. Leaning towards me from his chair, with his delightful smile, he looked me straight in the eyes with that infinite clarity, as if to say, "Show me whether you are intelligent, show me whether you are a man."

Thus began an intellectual exchange that was to last for more than 20 years. I was a close reader of Michel Bosquet in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and Bosquet/Gorz was quick to reproduce there the themes and analyses of this or that editorial in *L'Outil*. When my book *Crise et inflation, pourquoi?*[7] appeared in 1979, he wrote an extremely glowing review in *Le Nouvel Observateur* that ended surprisingly with, "Un homme, un vrai" [*a mensch*], which I found completely perplexing. It had never occurred to me that a theoretical work – especially one like *Crise et inflation!* – could have some humanist angle. Needless to say, this did not dispel my shyness.

But this eulogy to emancipation was not the only thing I learned from André. In *Réforme et révolution* he had taught me to mistrust the "all or nothing" of the mythical Big Day when the relations of production would be changed all at once (which wasn't an easy lesson following 1968). I learned there was an enormous range of possible transformations within capitalism, as we would demonstrate with the research program of the Regulation School. As a politician, I have always upheld this radical reformism.

The third thing that Gorz contributed to my youth was that any political strategy now had to be conceived within a supranational, or at least European, framework. As he wrote, back in 1964, in *Stratégie ouvrière*: "The European class struggle will be shaped by European economic integration in whatever form it takes, and by the upheavals which will accompany the process of the internationalization of production on all levels. We should therefore examine what possibilities for action offer themselves to the working class, and we should begin by eliminating those developments which at present seem out of the question. The following developments seem to us to fall into that category: "1. The return to national protectionism – Certain working class organizations (the PCF and the CGT especially[8]) were still quite recently reluctant to raise the question of a supranational struggle against the Common Market … We have already said that in the

intermediate range the failure of European integration was not to be excluded, and that this eventuality would present the working class movement with real possibilities of intervention, although under unenviable conditions and with unattractive long-term prospects … In the long run a return to national protectionism and to economic nationalism is therefore to be excluded as a possibility … a more fruitful strategy would be to investigate by what means the working class, by intervening antagonistically in this construction, can take over the process of internationalization and guide it according to its wishes …"[9]

This struggle, initiated in 1964, resonated with my own "European education" and was to be a part of my political construction. Politically, things happen on a European scale, whether it is May 1968, the opposition to the Iraq war, or the fall of the Wall first foreshadowed at Yalta. For the moment, this struggle has ended in the serious defeat, 41 years later, of the European Constitution, confronted with the nationalist traditions of the PCF, the CGT, the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU)[10], and so on. But I remain confident that the leaderships of the CGT and a section of the FSU have clearly understood the message.

There may be some surprise that I have not yet mentioned ecology. Although he was quick to take up the criticism of the *société de consommation dirigée* (the society of monitored consumption, initiated by *Socialisme et Barbarie*[11] and Henri Lefebvre[12]), and although he played a decisive role in the break with Marxist productivism of a major share of the '68 generation, André Gorz is a "father of ecology" only indirectly. André was above all, for me, the philosopher of meaning, as I explain elsewhere.[13]

This is an opportunity to evoke my relationship to Gorz in connection with another legacy: structuralism. Although he used the name of Michel Bosquet as an economist and André Gorz as a philosopher, his real name was Gérard Horst. But my "economic fathers" were the Althussériens, Charles Bettelheim and Etienne Balibar. In fact, I argued that the regulation approach sought to restore the "subject," divergence, struggle, politics (albeit illusory) and, thus, potentially emancipation within the dictatorship of the reproduction of structures. To restore freedom where Althusser had confined us seemed clearly consistent with Gorz's project, and in *Les Temps Modernes* he welcomed my first political article, "D'Althusser à Mao?"[14] (My answer was no.)

I was therefore surprised to read, in a short note attached to his *Chemins du Paradis*[15] that he sent me in 1983, the mysterious phrase, "I much appreciated your methodological essay … in which I thought I recognized an echo of systems theory (which, from me, is a compliment)." I no longer know what essay he meant (I was fairly prolific at the time), but in any event he was a "regulationist" and therefore not, to my way of thinking, a proponent of systems theory.

So Gorz the Sartrien was a recovered systems theorist! After his death, I discovered his confession that, had he not read Sartre first, he would have become a Hegelian *systémiste*. Well, I think that Marx's Hegel left some opportunity for a class defined by its place in the relations of production to become a subject. And yet it is precisely on this point – the impossibility for a class defined by the relations of production to transform itself into an agent of their abolition, or even of their transformation, in order to subvert a system from within – that the differences between André and me were to deepen.

In fact, these differences (or rather, a series of conflicting steps) had begun to form in the mid 1970s. André's break with Marxist productivism was gradually taking shape and was to assume proportions that were never to coincide exactly with my position at the time. As it was, I had not appreciated his favourable response to the Social Democrats' defeat in Sweden, which perhaps would allow the Right to challenge the nuclear option.

Of course, André's evolution towards ecology (*Critique du capitalisme quotidien* (1973); *Critique de la division du travail* (1973); *Écologie et politique* (1975)) could not help but satisfy my mutual connection with René Dumont. But the *Adieux au prolétariat* (1980)[16] shocked me. However, in the journal *Partis pris* we had already been crossing swords for some time over "the proletarian revolution, a conservative myth" (Jean Tercé's fine title). But there I had the impression that André was dismissing everything – not only the mystification of the historical role of a proletariat, as a class in itself, but ultimately solidarity towards the proletariat as an exploited class. And above all he seemed to me to be deserting the struggle for a dis-alienation of work, which is not a rejection of labour value, but pride in one's work that gives meaning to work.

This time, we had mutual explanations. He told me, "But Alain, you can be interested in your work, love your work, realize yourself in your work, because you are doing research, as am I" (an argument that I will take up later in relation to Dominique Méda!). I replied to him: "Yes, but even before we have built a society in which one could in the morning be a street-sweeper and in the afternoon a researcher, I want reforms that will allow the street-sweeper,

the production-line worker, the supermarket cashier, to have some say in the work he or she is doing, to be able to say about it, 'This is my work.' For if we do not rebuild pride in one's work, the exploited, who are in need of pride, will have nothing more than pride in their exploitation, and that will be terrible."

Neither he nor I ever managed to find the solution to this challenge, despite 15 years of pleading for a new model of capitalist development based on the negotiated involvement of the workers. Years later, Nicolas Sarkozy was to take full advantage of this loophole by glorifying, on the ruins of the labour value the Left had renounced, "the France that rises early". A discourse that successfully opposed those whose only pride is in being exploited to those who lack even the chance to be exploited (these "layabouts on unemployment insurance, these youth who no longer want to work, these immigrants who come here to get allowances").

At the time of this discussion with André, we were not yet there. Le Pen was beginning his ascent and the National Front (FN) was not yet the first party of the working class. But the problem of the disappearance of pride in being a producer was already posed.

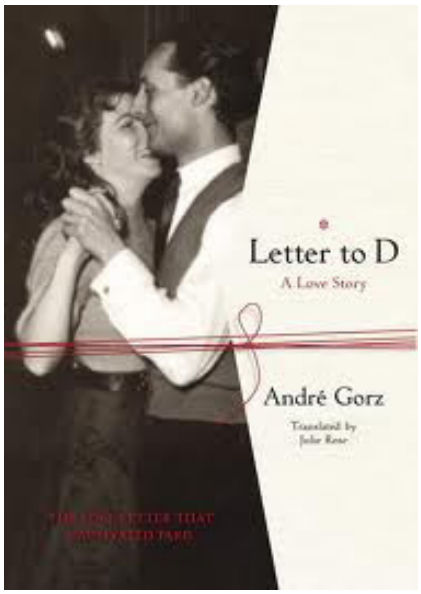
While doing research in a coal mine, and during investigations of the building industry, I had been struck by the fact that workers who are unable to boast that what they are doing is socially useful and irreplaceable find other ways to find value in themselves. They "do their own thing" (make little things for themselves, or more efficient tools: what the Linharts call "paradoxical involvement," which may take some extreme forms, as in the case of the railway worker Léon Bronchart, enslaved at Dora[17]), or intentionally take risks (clown around on cranes). They even find value in the risks imposed on them: "Listen, we risk cave-ins, firedamp, we work in a 3 x 8 space 800 metres underground, we'll die of silicosis, we're tough and the ones up there are sissies," and so on. These miners' comments were recorded in 1967. Twenty years earlier, they would have said, "Look, we're the ones who are getting the mines working again, because the French will be cold this winter, because we're the only ones with the know-how to do it, because the engineers were collaborators, because our Party will soon take power …." And later they voted for Le Pen, and Sarkozy.

In reality, what I criticized in André and what he could criticize in me was the scope of the adjustments required when taking political ecology into account, and what this implied in the questioning of Marxism. This debate is far from closed, and André and I spent years in successive readjustments, including in the debate on the *revenu de citoyenneté*, the citizenship income. He would send me books inscribed, "For Alain, this book, which will bring us closer and further distance us." *La société en sablier*[18], pages 122 and following, stood out as a sort of armistice, after André's *Métamorphose du travail, quête du sens* (1988).

And then there was Dorine's illness. André and she protected themselves in their corner of paradise. To each invitation, he would telephone me: "But I can't, as you know, Dorine …."

When the *Lettre à D.* was published last year, I read only the last paragraph: "Neither of us would like to survive the death of the other. We have often said to each other that if by some miracle we had a second life, we would want to live it together." I recognized Milan Kundera's test in *L'immortalité*, the angel that comes each year and asks the heroine, in front of her husband, "I am in charge of organizing your reincarnation, do you wish to live together again on the same planet?" This is a test that I put to myself regularly. But I read it as well, with a shudder, as the announcement of their decision to leave together. And that could only be imminent. Relieved that the book was not posthumous, out of superstition, as if to postpone the inevitable, I deferred reading it until later.

Dorine and André died together. They had lived to a ripe old age and had an infinite number of children: those whose activism had been nourished by André's books, developed in his secret shop in collaboration with Dorine.



Notes:

Adapted from the text in *Multitudes* 31 (Winter 2007–2008). Translation and endnotes by Richard Fidler.

[1] "When the couple met in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1947, she was Doreen Keir, a 23-year old British woman from a broken home travelling, somewhat aimlessly, through postwar Europe …. The couple married in September 1949, and moved to Paris to be closer to Sartre and the heart of Left-wing thought. She changed her name to its French equivalent, Dorine." (*The Times* 18 October 2007).

[2] 1912–2007, French Catholic priest and founder of the Emmaüs movement, a secular organization with the objective of assisting the homeless and refugees.

[3] Published in English as *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal*, Martin Nicolaus and Victoria Ortiz, (trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

[4] Literally, workerism. An Italian Marxist current that appeared in the early 1960s around the magazine *Quaderni Rossi*. Bruno Trentin (1926–2007), long-time Italian trade union leader; Vittorio Foa (b. 1910), antifascist activist, trade union leader, later university professor, and in the 1990s Senator (ex-Communist PDS); Rossanna Rossanda (b. 1924), expelled from the Italian CP in 1969, later co-founder of the communist daily *Il Manifesto*.

[5] These organizations, the first led by Antonio Negri and the second by Adriano Sofri and Guido Viale (among others), resulted from a 1969 split in the Italian *opéraïste* current.

[6] Then an organized tendency within the *Parti Socialiste Unifié* (PSU). See <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?rubrique77>.

[7] Downloadable at <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article681>.
[8] *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) and the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT, France's largest trade union central, under PCF hegemony).
[9] *Strategy for Labor*, pp. 169–170.
[10] *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU), the major union of teachers and civil servants in France.
[11] French libertarian socialist group, influenced by council communism and a "state capitalist" grouping in the US Socialist Workers Party, that originated in a split in French Trotskyism.
[12] 1901–91, for three decades a member of the PCF, later a neo-Marxist and a prolific author of works on philosophical themes.
[13] "Gorz ou la quête du sens," *Ecorev*. For a longer version, see <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article 2125>.
[14] <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article787>.
[15] Published in English as *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work* (Patagonia, Argentina: South End, 1980).
[16] Published in English as *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1987).
[17] See my blog entry, "Léon Bronchart, juste, ouvrier et soldat," at <http://lipietz.net/?breve259>.
[18] Downloadable at <http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article315>.