Book Reviews

Alain de Benoist. *Mémoire vive*. Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2012. 330 p.

At the age of almost 70, Alain de Benoist, the leading light – we could even say ‘organic intellectual’ – of the *Nouvelle Droite* retraces his life in a book of interviews. The book is very well written, which makes it a pleasant read. It will interest students of the *Nouvelle Droite*, a school of thought that Benoist helped to found in 1968. In the interviews, he provides us with information about the *Groupement de recherches et d'études pour la civilisation européenne* (GRECE) its structure and the lives of its members, in particular the most well known among them, Benoist himself. In a sense, it is his intellectual biography.

The reader discovers lots of exciting things about the *Nouvelle Droite* and Benoist himself, but he or she is also, at times, taken aback: we learn, for example, that Benoist had modest grandparents who worked on the railway. Benoist has never highlighted this point before. Up to the first decade of the 21st century and beyond, he systematically emphasised his aristocratic origins, including in his pseudonyms (such as the famous ‘Robert de Herte’). Putting the focus on his working class ancestors fits with his discovery, or rediscovery, of authors of the revolutionary left, mainly Sorel and Marx, and his evolution in the field of economics, however. They are part of a tradition of Marxist contestation of Capitalism.

Another interesting point is his wish to create distance between the *Nouvelle Droite* and *Europe-Action*, an openly fascist group: in *Mémoire vive*, he insists the two groups had different origins while at the same time establishing kinship with the *Fédération des Étudiants Nationalistes* (FEN). The reality is more complex, however. Benoist was in fact copy editor of the eponymous *Europe-Action* magazine under the pen name Fabrice Laroche. Furthermore, several FEN activists came together around *Europe-Action*, including one named Fabrice Laroche, i.e. Benoist. In fact, the FEN should rather be seen as an extension of the early political involvement of Dominique Venner – the founder of *Europe-Action* and a founding member of the GRECE under the pseudonym Julien Lebel – while a member of *Jeune Nation*, a fascist group banned in 1958. Venner is said to have recruited a group of around 15 militant students as

well as some 60 active sympathisers from 1957 onwards. Finally, some of the FEN militants who had regrouped around Venner, including Benoist, became members of *Europe-Action*, which was founded in 1963.

Benoist professed a virulent racialism during the *Europe-Action* era. In fact, on returning from their trip to the Republic of South Africa, one man by the name of 'Gilles Fournier' (a pseudonym) and 'Fabrice Laroche' became propagators of the segregationist policy and the superiority of the 'white race' in a volume entitled *Vérité pour l'Afrique du Sud*,¹ published by Éditions Saint-Just, the publishing house of *Europe-Action*. Similarly, the same 'Fabrice Laroche' published an article promoting American segregation on his return from a trip to the United States.²

This racism was subsequently taken up in the first body of doctrine of the *Nouvelle Droite*. Its members, notably Benoist, who indeed accepted racism at this time, adopted certain, often Darwinist, hypotheses of scientific raciology from the 19th century, for example the supposed differences in intellectual capacities between races.³ All these points are erased in this book of interviews, although it is recognised in *Mémoire vive* by Benoist:

I also accepted racism. I accepted it sincerely and also because of 'party discipline'. At most, I intended to emphasise the differences between human races rather than the theoretical basis on which they could be prioritised. But I accepted the idea that race was a key factor in universal history. I wasn't shocked by racism but by racist behaviour, while theoretically I helped to legitimise it. One anecdote in this regard: I was in a restaurant one evening with two dear friends, one of whom is now dead. A nun came up to us collecting money for the Third World. 'So, sister,' said one of my friends, 'do you belong to the *Société protectrice des animaux*?' The unfortunate woman babbled: 'What do you mean?' 'Well, you look after monkeys, don't you?' I dropped my head into my plate. I was ashamed. My stomach was knotted. But I didn't say anything. I regret not having said anything even today. I don't tell you that to mitigate my responsibilities. At that time, I defended racism, or at least 'racialism', and I defended it without any soul-searching, but things are always more complicated than they seem. (p. 79)

This account by Benoist is indicative of a true evolution: normally he refuses to speak about or denies this past. Even today, he admits being fascinated by racial differences, but objects to all forms of racism, and in an ambiguous fashion it is true: he still remains true to the idea that difference creates a sense of inequality.

¹ Gilles Fournier & Fabrice Laroche. *Vérité pour l'Afrique du Sud*. Paris: Saint-Just, 1965. It is interesting to note that this book does not feature in Benoist's supposedly exhaustive bibliographic volume *Bibliographie 1960-2010*. Paris: Les amis d'Alain de Benoist, 2009.

² Fabrice Laroche. 'Je reviens d'Amérique.' *Europe-Action*, no. 34 (October 1965), p. 9-10, 12.

³ Cf., Alain de Benoist. 'Différents, mais inégaux.' *Éléments*, winter 1978. Reproduced in: Collectif. *La Nouvelle Droite: Le dossier du procès*. Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Oswald, 1979, p. 90-96. Dossier compiled by Julien Brunn.

Finally, this book allows readers to understand Benoist's chaotic life: a key intellectual on the extreme right in the 1970s, he disappeared from the national media following the violent campaign against the *Nouvelle Droite* in 1979. Several comments in this book demonstrate that he still hopes for media recognition. In fact, he is already appearing in the media again, mainly on television. Today, he justifies this internal exile saying his intellectual work is indifferent to mediatisation.

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