

# Taking On Marx

When Jean-Paul Sartre pronounced Marxism "the unsurpassable philosophy of our time," he merely confirmed a philosophical fashion that has dominated French intellectual life since the '30s. Although France has produced brilliant existentialists, neo-Thomists and structuralists, Marxism continues to pervade sophisticated discourse at elite French universities and to fire political passions in Parisian salons of thought. But now a group of nine brash young philosophers—most of them disillusioned graduates of the abortive student riots of May 1968—have mounted an erudite assault on the foundations of Marxism. In fourteen books, all published since 1975, and in a recent round of angry exchanges in the media, these *nouveaux philo-*

in Eastern Europe or to admit that oppression itself is the logical result—and not merely a Russian aberration—of Marxist-Leninist principles. From this position, each author elaborates his own critique of socialist thought, and raises fundamental philosophical questions that their university mentors considered solved by Marxist dialectics. "This is not an anti-left philosophy," says Bernard-Henri Lévy, 28, the movement's progenitor and chief publisher. "It's anti-socialist—a way of saying to the French left that it is making a gigantic and historic error."

In his current best seller, "Barbarity With a Human Face," Lévy blames the philosophers of the French Enlightenment for making reason the religion of the modern state and



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Glucksmann (left), Marx, Lévy: An anti-Marxist assault in pro-left times

sophes have made their anti-Marxist polemics the topic of café conversation. And their critique of Marxism may have a significant effect on the fortunes of the country's emergent leftist coalition of Socialists and Communists in next year's elections.

The young authors have yet to construct a new social philosophy, but their passionate defense of personal freedom, their photogenic good looks and especially their sense of intellectual betrayal by older Marxist mandarins have captured the popular imagination. As ex-Marxists and student anarchists, they represent the first wave of intellectuals to emerge from the 1968 riots. Citing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's exposé of the Soviet prison system, they argue that French Marxists purposely have refused to acknowledge Communist repression

justifying the subsequent use of force to raise the consciousness of the unenlightened masses. He is especially critical of the Enlightenment's faith in inevitable human progress and its later expression in Marx of the historical inevitability of state socialism. Communists, he argues, have transformed state-enforced progress into "a reactionary machine that leads the world to catastrophe." Lévy concludes that power is the mechanism by which society orders itself and the state will never wither away.

**Anti-Semitic:** By contrast, André Glucksmann, 40, perhaps the most seminal thinker in the group, locates the origins of both Marxism and Nazism in nineteenth-century German philosophy. In his best seller, "The Master Thinkers," he claims that Hegel, Fichte, Marx and Nietzsche each developed philosophical systems to

forge the creation of a German state. Each called for a revolution, each elaborated a science of government that separates rulers from the ruled and each looked to the state as the crucible for the transformation of humanity. Glucksmann contends that French Marxists imported this intellectual tradition from the U.S.S.R. and, if given political power, they would crush spontaneity and personal freedom just as the French Communists shut factory doors against sympathetic student rioters in 1968. He also believes that Marxism, like Nazism, is inherently anti-Semitic. "The Jew is a merchant who ignores frontiers," says Glucksmann. "The strong state closes the frontiers."

Much to their own surprise, the new philosophers' rejection of Marxism, rationalism and progress has provoked the liveliest intellectual debate since the advent of Sartre himself. French magazines have featured the handsome young authors on their covers and a 90-minute debate on the new philosophy last spring drew 4 million television viewers.

**'Mayonnais':** In reaction, the left has mounted a counterattack. The Communists have denounced the movement as "The New Right." Marxist revolutionary Régis Debray finds the authors "inexperienced" in tarring French socialism with the excesses of the Soviet gulags. On the other hand, structuralist Michel Foucault, probably the most respected intellectual in France, has praised the upstarts for reminding philosophers of the "bloody" consequences that have flowed from enlightened social theories. Catholic theologian Father Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger recognizes in the new anti-Marxists ideas that religious thinkers Jacques Maritain, Georges Bernanos and Simone Weil put forward a generation ago. "Now suddenly, the same things said at a different time by others ... are understood and welcomed," Bruckberger wrote in *Le Journal du Dimanche*. "It's the miracle of a mayonnaise that curdles twenty times and then suddenly ... takes."

What concerns French politicians is whether this fashionable movement will help tip next year's elections away from the presently favored Socialist-Communist coalition. Socialist Party chief François Mitterrand, the left's likely candidate for Premier, has promised an assessment of the movement's views. President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing has capitalized on the anti-Marxist vogue by entertaining some of the new philosophers at the Elysée Palace. Among themselves, however, the philosophers profess to see little difference between the political left and right. In time, says Lévy, "a new idea for the management of society—other than socialism—could be born." Meanwhile, like the young Albert Camus, Lévy and his colleagues counsel their generation to abandon the search for a new ideological system and to resist oppression as best they can through personal ethics and moral duty.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD with JANE FRIEDMAN in Paris