

NOËLLE VAHANIAN
Lebanon Valley College

THÉORIE-RÉBELLION

A Review of Gilles Grelet Ed., *Théorie-rébellion: Un ultimatum*. Paris, France: L' Harmattan, 2005. 159 pages. 15 €.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT? What is wrong with philosophy? How can theory lead a rebellion against the dangers of mundane thinking? How can theory liberate the world from mundane thought? How is this rebellion-in-theory real, and not wishful thinking or make-believe? *Théorie-rébellion: Un ultimatum*, in theory, would have satisfied all these questions. It offers an important list of contributors from various disciplines and from across the globe—they are the *sans-philosophie*. Organized in the fashion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the reader will nevertheless question the direction of the work as a whole and share in the contributors' doubtless frustration in having to explain themselves in three pages or less. To be sure, the reader will gain no sense of mastery, and this is never a bad thing: *Théorie-rébellion* offers a rhizomatic spread of directions within which one can see the need for rebellion against the omnipresent inertia of thought—from religious-studies to ecology. For instance, Gilbert Hottois underscores the faulty reasoning of various strands of ecoethic while Ward Blanton and Creston Davis invoke Paul to rally against the wordly wisdom of imperialism and globalization.

But, imagine that, the work has the feel of an internal conversation, or else, it is a cacophony of voices, or the *sans-culotte* cannot be a *sans-philosophie*.

Michel Maffesoli's "Le narcissisme intellectuel" sets up the problematic of mundane thought. Francis Bacon, in his attempt to redress the enterprise of scholarship under the sway of Aristotelian scholasticism, had already noted the idolatrous penchant of thought. You will remember his famous idols: the idols of the cave, of the tribe, of the market-place, and of the theatre. For Bacon, "the human understanding is like a false mirror, which receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (*Novum Organum*, XLI). This anthropomorphism of thought is the effect of Idols of the Tribe. Anthropomorphism is a form of tribalism—not universalism;

however universal these idols may be.

Now, Michel Maffesoli's message is not so far from Bacon's. French intellectuals, no, better yet, Parisian intellectuals are invoking the virtues of a modern universalism. This, though, is but an unconscious euphemism for French, if not merely Parisian intellectual tribalism. This tribalism goes undetected when intellectuals, like Narcissus warily gazing at his own reflection, if you will, and caught up with all of Bacon's idols, speak a mediocratic, mediocre moralizing language, lose their connectedness to real life, and forget that their main role is not to decry what ought to be, but to reveal what could be.

So it is that intellectuals speak of universalism, but think and act like tribesmen. Unbeknownst to them—or in denial?—intellectuals, just as everyone else, are rooted in a social fabric far different from that of Enlightenment civil society where members act and think rationally and for-themselves. A societal paradigm shift has occurred, and intellectuals are in want of acknowledging it. Social life is a “network of networks” (*réseau des réseaux*, p. 10) built on sentiment, emotion and affect; not on reason and thoughtfulness. Critical and autonomous thought is not a contemporary value. Religious preferences, sexual proclivities, affective ties, and so forth, create clannish, tribal networks. Thought and action are first and foremost clannish.

What is there to do? What is radical thought under these circumstances? It requires leaving the safe dwelling of established theories and mere jargon to grasp the new character of social life which is at the root of all thought and action. This heralds a “contemplative drive” (*libido contemplandi*, p. 12), of which the aim is an appreciation of lived life, of what is.

Can such a contemplative drive be taught? Francis Wybrands in “Fi et défis de la philosophie” deplores the way that philosophy is taught: from within an institution, as though one could institute the dare to think for oneself. Those who teach it are not philosophers, but must act as though they have mastered and own Absolute knowledge. Those who are granted philosophy degrees do not have their eyes set on wisdom, but on socially controlled aims. To teach philosophy is to feign that all is well when the present is bleak, to ignore that ignorance is growing—to be powerless in the face of this crisis, of this situation. So, if philosophy is to have a role today, is to make sense today, this should not be about the seemingly futile task of transmitting some “obsolete” world of knowledge. For philosophy to make sense today, it should confront us with this crisis rather than deny it. One can read Plato out of disdain for philosophy, but to affirm the ever actual power of no saying (p. 14).

So the *sans-philosophie* must know her enemy well. And, here, this sounds a bit ironic: to know the great masters well in order to put an end to this mastery and the sad state of affairs that it proclaims, namely, the *so-be-it* and *such is life*. Indeed, everywhere in the West people appear to be resigned to their post-modern, relativistic condition. But, in “L’age d’or est toujours devant,” Mathias Daval believes that this post-modern matrix can be breached; that in fact, our age is ripe for rebelling against the suffocating, depressing ontological matrix of the post-modern conception of reality. The movie *The Matrix*, explains Daval, is symptomatic of this realization: pick one pill for resignation, the other for rebellion. But, unlike in the movie, the first step in rebellion is to divest oneself of the illusion that reality is hostile—reality is neutral. What is more, according to Daval the good news is that humanity is about to be reborn as evidenced in the weeks following the events of September 11th 2001. But this rebirth will need the midwifery of those who are *sans-philosophie*.

Perhaps such midwifery is what Juan Asensio has in mind when, against philosophy and reason who can only pretend to solve the problem of evil, he defends the idea that although evil is beyond representation and beyond the threshold of consciousness art can nevertheless probe its mystery. Take for instance, as he does in “Infréquentable,” the events of September 11th, 2001. While the constant replay of crumbling towers gave an unheard of intensity to the events, this constant replay also desensitized us to evil. So, there can be no mental representation of evil without art or images, but reason alone can never explain or define it. Here, to be *sans-philosophie*, then, is to argue, against those for whom evil is merely a concept of the understanding, that reason produces nightmares and monsters, and that evil is beyond the limit of consciousness.

Laurent Carraz appears less optimistic about the efficacy of the *sans-philosophie*’s role in the rebellion against stale and imperialistic thought. In his “Un papier pour les sans-philosophie,” he refers to the call of the *sans-philosophie* as both amusing and sad. Sad because it means that the crisis is serious. Amusing in that the death of philosophy is announced and has been announced periodically. Philosophy is periodically denounced for its pretentious claim to self-sufficiency and yet, it still stands. Not even deconstruction can put an end to it as it condemns us, claims Carraz, to endless philosophical crumbs. Should philosophy die, the *sans-philosophie* would be condemned to toy with origami, to throw paper planes at abolished towers and empty fortresses of the academy of philosophy (p. 24).

If every philosopher-apprentice who is astonished by philosophy’s sense of self-importance is a future *sans-philosophie*, then, every generation has its own *sans-philosophie* and each generation’s *sans-philosophie* becomes the next generation’s

philosophy. It is to this that an authentic *sans-philosophie* would resist. But, as Jacques Colette suggests in “La privation se dit de façon multiple,” there are many ways to be *sans-philosophie*, and one can be so without being hostile towards philosophy. One can also be more than a *sans-philosophie*, which is just a label that need not contain the depth of one’s being. Or, one is indeed *sans-philosophie* in that the public and media-related role of philosophy has ceded place to the exact and specialized knowledge of experts. One can be *sans-philosophie* while remaining a philosopher, as is the case with those who have methodically rallied against systematic thought and mastery. And finally, one need not be a philosopher in order to philosophize. So, while one may be a *sans-philosophie* in any of these ways, what one is not without is genuine thought.

Of course, genuine thought and way of reason are not synonymous. The latter has been promoted by philosophy since its inception. Thus, as Pierre Riffard reminds us in “Non-philosophe: ce n’est pas moi c’est toi,” spiritual men and shamans are already non-philosophers with Plato; non-westerners, with some few exceptions, are non-philosophers; and lastly, amateurs are non-philosophers. And if philosophy ought to be about fundamental questions, one can also speak of the *non-philosophie* or non-philosophy of philosophers who seek to avoid doing philosophy. Take Heidegger who can lead his reader to wonder about what Kant might have meant rather than about the limits of knowledge after Kant (p. 43). Another way in which philosophers practice non-philosophy is when they rely on previous thinkers to think for them, when they do nothing but re-think or think over what others have thought before and for them. Such is, claims Riffard, the lot of Christians who do theology, or of the moderns who do epistemology.

For Riffard, a non-philosophy made for philosophizing would have to be precise and sharp; it would have to be able to ask pointed socio-political questions, such as for instance, “par quoi remplacer la drogue?” (With what should drugs be replaced?, p. 43). It would be concerned with daily life on an ethical level by asking, for instance, for a justification of the treatment of poultry. A la Nietzsche and à la Wittgenstein, such a non-philosophy should be engaged, yet impersonal.

Sans-philosophie, one is rebelling against the clannish bent of thought, its inertia, the omnipotence of the way of reason, institutions, globalization, philosophy itself. But are there any methods? The goal is clear, the enemy, identified, but how can one truly rebel against a state of thought that has become a state of affairs? Where, on which playing field, should one attempt to redress philosophy and the ills for which it stands? Here are some indications, some possibilities, some signposts, maybe.

In “Le jeu de mots comme méthode,” Lafcadio Mortimer, who believes as

Wittgenstein suggests that the mystery of language is identical to the mystery of the world, would have us probe wordplays for what they reveal about the world. Natalie Depraz, In "Pratiquer la phenomenology: quelle révolution?" proposes that phenomenology turn away from its strictly hermeneutical enterprise towards other disciplines. She thinks that it is only when phenomenology is a practice that it is renewed. Jean-Michel Lacrosse in "Le choix de la liberté: la liberté de choix" champions freedom as the solitary practice which seeks the most possible choices, the preservation of the most possible outcomes by choosing not to choose. Hence, to the end of freedom, it is desirable to create a philosophy of which the values produce "goals-to-reach" (*buts-à-atteindre*, p. 75). Such a philosophy will seek to eliminate having to make a choice in the present, precisely in order not to limit the choices to come.

In "Liquidier l'homme une fois pour toutes," Ray Brassier speaks of hyperspeculation, of which the aim, unlike cognitivism or phenomenology, is to liquidate man so as to free intelligence and destroy all that slows down the dissolution of mammal stupidity (p. 79). Here it might be helpful to note that, according to Brassier, philosophers know something about reason, but are now only beginning to discover intelligence. Brassier's understanding of intelligence is that it is beyond man. Both cognitivism and hyperspeculation foreground intelligence, but contemporary philosophers who may disagree on ideological points all converge in their desire to fend off the incursion of scientism in philosophy, for the latter understands all philosophical enterprise as serving biological interests. For cognitivism, humanity's encounter with intelligence is a chance event (p. 77), but cognitivism is still caught within a phenomenological paradigm, claims Brassier. What, then, is hyperspeculation? It is a non-philosophy that seeks to mobilize the non-individual, the impersonal, nothingness, the insignificant, the multiple, the *réel-rien* (real-nothing, p. 79). It affirms the non-being of the One, the insignificance of the multiple-being. Since, for hyperspeculation, the real is not a function of human beings, it is precisely by freeing the intelligence of the real from its bio-phenomenological course that man is liquidated once and for all.

François Laruelle, the creator of *la non-philosophie*, proposes in "Obscénité de la philosophie. (*Pour non!philosophes avertis*)" what he calls *non!philosophie* (no!philosophy/non!philosophy) as an interpretation of the *sans* of *sans-philosophie*. To be *sans-philosophie* marshals an effort to think the One according to itself (without philosophy). The One is the *Réel Inconnu* or *L'Homme-en-personne* (man-in-person/man-as-nobody, p. 125). As a result, philosophy, which is made possible by the real, is simplified and understood as semi-necessary: philosophy is not needed for man to be *Homme-en-personne*, but this is why man is with philosophy (p. 124). *La non!philosophie* is the theory of the *personne*

(person/nobody) rather than the persona of man, minorities, or strangers (p. 125).

In “Prolégomènes à la science des pauvres & à la rébellion non-éco-nomique,” what Jacques Fradin terms *la non-économie* is a science of the poor as practice of Laruelle’s *non-philosophie*. Here non-economics and non-philosophy are allied to construct a radical science that can think from the Real (rather than explain it away), according to ordinary Man and the Poor. This, then, is set in contrast to and against the world economy and its philosophy which is without conscience and which produces a reified world—“un monde riche de ses pauvres! Puissant de ses esclaves!” (p. 129).

The radical science of non-philosophical non-economics could study the relative autonomy of the world economy in order to understand conformism, and the mechanization of society. It would tie these findings to some basic structural elements of philosophy, such as, for instance, the idea of a natural law of the social. Finally, this radical science of the poor would also function as an ethic: as a subversive science according to the poor. In this, it would be a partial introduction to the non-religion of theorists (p. 129).

Théorie-rébellion’s last entry, Gilles Grelet’s “Tract(atus) des sans-philosophie,” posits the conditions for authentic and methodical rebellion of the *sans-philosophie* against philosophy or any philosophical world-view that, tacitly or not, wittingly or not, thinks of man and the world in terms of some unchanging, static being. To recapitulate: philosophy is Mastery, the mastery that makes of man a being-of-the-world (*être-du-monde*) and a being-destined-to-death or to-happiness (*être-voué-à-la-mort, au-bonheur*)—remember Laruelle’s *non-philosophie* where man is a nobody-person or Brassier’s version which affirms the non-being of the real; the *sans-philosophie* are the proletarians of theory, they know philosophy, but do not believe that they are made for philosophy—they do not believe in the World (the world that philosophy would have us accept as the real and only world, but which is only a superficial, mechanized and alienating world); theory is their weapon, and philosophy their material (remember Fradin’s science of the poor); the *sans-philosophie* are devoted to philosophy—to that from which they are distinct and which they seek to destroy, and yet need in order to exist (remember Wybrand’s comments on teaching Plato out of disdain for the master and Carraz who sees the *sans-philosophie*’s plight as both sad and amusing). Without this devotion, the rebellion of the *sans-philosophie* cannot be authentic.

In theory, *Théorie-rébellion: Un ultimatum* should function as a color wheel of radical theoretical enterprises. In practice, the novice reader who is looking to broaden his horizons will have to look elsewhere to appreciate and sometimes

simply to understand this nevertheless genuinely exciting effort to rally together the thoughtful voices of those who are united in cause against, in a nutshell, human imbecility.

NOËLLE VAHANIAN is an Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College. She is the author of *Language, Desire, Theology: A Genealogy of the Will to Speak* (Routledge, 2003). She has previously contributed to the JCRT with her article, "Rebellious No" (1.2) and a profile of Richard Rubenstein's *Aristotle's Children* (5.3).