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"POLITIQUE HEBDO": NEW CHALLENGE TO THE PCF

Summary: The first number of the weekly Politique Hebdo poses a new type of challenge to the French CP leadership, already concerned about the growth of dissidence since the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The new journal complements the monthly Politique Aujourd'hui, produced by a team of rebel Communists, Marxists and Christian Leftists: where the latter appeals to the intellectual elite, the weekly concentrates on practical political issues.

On 8 October a new phenomenon appeared on the richly varied scene of French political journalism: the first number of a weekly magazine entitled Politique Hebdo. (1) It is the companion publication of Politique Aujourd'hui, the monthly review which a mixed group of dissident Communist, unaffiliated Marxist and Left-Christian intellectuals began publishing in January 1969, and which was dedicated to open dialogue and debate on the problems of socialism.

This venture was a direct consequence of the profound crisis which the invasion of Czechoslovakia brought upon European communism. The core of the editorial committee of Politique Aujourd'hui consisted of former members of the staff of the French Communist Party's editorial organ, Démocratie Nouvelle--which the party leadership had suppressed in the fall of 1968, as it was about to produce a special issue on Czechoslovakia. After a barrage of denunciations the party proceeded to disciplinary measures against the Communist intellectuals concerned, most of whom

(1) "Hebdo" is an abbreviation of the adjective "hebdomadaire"; the title may be translated as "Weekly Politics."

were expelled from the PCF. The most prominent of these was Paul Noirot, former editor of Démocratie Nouvelle, then editor of Politique Aujourd'hui--and now also editor of Politique Hebdo.

Operating on an impressively high intellectual and professional level, the new monthly kept up a wide-ranging and free discussion of socialist ideology and contemporary realities, criticizing authoritarian dogmatism, particularly as manifested in the Soviet regime, and returning repeatedly to Czechoslovakia as a key issue. (2) Contributors covered a wide spectrum of political convictions: they included non-Marxist experts like François Fejtő and Michel Tatu; Czechoslovak progressives like Ota Sik and Jiri Pelikan (3); and the Italian Communist theorist Lucio Lombardo Radice, who offered a provocative essay championing Roger Garaudy shortly before the latter was finally expelled from the PCF.(4)

From Theory to Practice

Interesting comparisons could be drawn between Politique Aujourd'hui and two foreign magazines, the Italian Il Manifesto and the Austrian Tagebuch (reborn as Wiener Tagebuch when the Austrian CP leadership suppressed it). All three posed (in different ways) an ideological-political challenge to the national Communist apparatus; all three saw the Czechoslovak question as a criterion of socialist integrity; all three were radically critical of the Soviet regime. But the differences are equally instructive. On balance, Politique

- (2) For example, the latest issue of Politique Aujourd'hui contains a 26-page section on Czechoslovakia, with a lengthy excerpt from Karel Kaplan's famous Nova Mysl investigation into political trials in the CSSR, an essay by an anonymous Czechoslovak jurist ("XXX") on the breaches of the constitution committed during "normalization," and Jiri Hochman's defiant letter to the Central Committee of the CPCs.
- (3) Politique Aujourd'hui seems to have its own channels of communication with Czechoslovak progressives, and has frequently carried articles by contributors to whom it offers the protective anonymity of the designation, "XXX."
- (4) Politique Aujourd'hui, January 1970

paid less attention to the local Communist party than Tagebuch, and much less than Il Manifesto (which adopted increasingly pro-Chinese positions and, since earlier this year, has been organizing local centers which have brought a steady flow of defections from the PCI). On the other hand, Politique cast a wider net than the other two, appealing to a broad segment of leftist opinion.

These differences (particularly with regard to Il Manifesto) were doubtless due in part to local conditions: the essentially conservative, pro-Soviet line of the PCF was already being challenged by a variety of groups inside and outside the party, such as the Unir-Débat faction, and there would have been little point in adding one more to the list. But they were also due to differences in fundamental purpose. The basic aim of the heterogeneous group of intellectuals behind Politique Aujourd'hui was not to subvert the PCF apparatus, but to stimulate a general rethinking of values on the French Left.

The high intellectual level maintained by the magazine was at once the strength and the weakness of this approach. Its message was reaching an elite minority, but it was inaudible to the factory hand in Billancourt. If the group wished to make a more effective contribution to the renewal of the French Left, it would have to operate also on another, more mundane level. It was clearly recognition of this fact that lay behind the group's announcement in early January 1970 that a weekly version of the magazine would begin appearing in October. In a sense, it was a move from theory to practice.

4,000 Backers; 160,000 Copies

The ten-month preparatory period alone showed that this was a serious undertaking, carefully prepared. An editorial staff was recruited and set to work months in advance of publication. Financial backing was assured through a "Society of Friends of Politique Hebdo"; eventually it numbered 4,000 members, each of whom had subscribed to one or more shares at 100 Francs each. In February a circulation of 100,000 copies was planned; by October the figure had risen to 160,000 (it is not yet known, of course, what proportion of sales was achieved).

Politique Hebdo is a well-produced, 48-page publication in tabloid format. Its most distinctive feature is the division into two sections--an outer, 16-page section printed at the last minute and devoted to "hot" news coverage and comment; and an inner, 32-page section printed by a different process

(offset) devoted to less immediate commentaries, studies, analyses and reviews. In both part, however, the orientation is toward practical political affairs, with the emphasis on current developments and on subjects of domestic concern, such as housing, education and trade union activities.

Editorial declarations explained the raison d'être of the new venture. The aim was to attack the capitalist system on all fronts by undertaking "a radical critique of political practices, modes of living, models of civilization, and of day-to-day life itself, through the study of the social, political and technical conditions which determine it." It would support and report upon all forces working toward this general end. But "Politique Hebdo will not be the springboard or the organ of any group or any party or any man."

With no false modesty, the advent of the weekly was described as "a political event," not least because of the composition of the team behind it:

The journalists and specialists of all disciplines who work in close collaboration are, if they must be classified, men adhering to the New Extreme-Left: Communists, Marxist socialists, revolutionary Christians. This gathering is symptomatic of the new cleavages and new groupings on which tomorrow will pass judgment. It remains to forge a unity which will integrate their differences while respecting the necessary diversity of thought, styles and temperaments.

It must be said that the first issue hardly bears out the group's claim to represent the extreme left, new or old. One is struck by the absence of the kind of ultra-revolutionary rhetoric which fills the pages of factional journals like the pro-Chinese Humanité rouge or the Trotskyist Lutte communiste; in its place there is calmly reasoned discussion of the problems posed by, say, wildcat strikes or urban development. Similarly, while the Politique group has made abundantly clear its radically critical attitude to the Soviet regime, this is represented not by a passionate indictment but by a somber, soberly-worded and apparently objective picture of daily life in the Soviet Union, written by a Frenchman who lived there for many years. (5)

(5) Pierre Olivier, "L'U.R.S., comme si vous y viviez," Politique Hebdo, No. 1, 8-14 October 1970, pp. 23-25.

Even more striking is the fact that the first number pays little attention to the French Communist Party. There is just one short article commenting scornfully on the PCF's achievement of "normalized" relations with the Soviet and Polish parties, and on its efforts to improve its domestic image by holding a series of "assembly-debates" at which (it is promised) "all questions" can be asked and will be frankly answered. (6)

Defensive Image-building

The public-relations exercise referred to is worth a passing comment. After some initial experiments it will open on 22-23 October with major meetings at Brest, Grenoble, Le Havre, Lille, Limoges, Nancy and Toulouse, at which members of the top party leadership, assisted by experts, will answer, and allow debate, on any questions posed from the floor--and a sample list of 26 questions includes "Czechoslovakia." The party weekly, France Nouvelle, promises to carry on the "great debate" in its own columns. René Piquet, who is organizing the meetings, has declared largely: "We shall have thousands and thousands of assembly-debates." (7)

Such a radical departure from PCF tradition is clearly more than a mere image-building exercise. It seems to represent an attempt by the party leadership to guard the rank-and-file members against the impact of new challenges.

And the leadership does have cause for concern. During the past two years--that is, since the invasion of Czechoslovakia--a ferment of dissidence has been at work in its ranks. Roger Garaudy, dropped from the Politburo in February and expelled from the party in May, is not alone by any means. In June he was joined by the veteran Charles Tillon and two former Central Committee members, Jean Pronteau and Maurice Kriegel-Valrimont, in a public denunciation of the Marchais leadership's stand on Czechoslovakia. In July some 30 dissidents, including two leaders of the Unir-Débat faction, Marcel Prenant and Jean Chaintron indicted the leadership for blocking the free debate needed for a genuine democratization of the PCF.

(6) N.M. (Noël Monier), "Le P.C. veut renouveler son image de marque," Politique Hebdo, 8-14 October 1970, p. IV.

(7) See "Le Parti vous écoute," Le Nouvel Observateur, 12 October 1970, p. 24.

On 26 November these rebels will come together for a Paris rally of protest against the "normalization" imposed on Czechoslovakia. Most ominous of all: in December, it is reported, various groups of dissident Communists are planning to hold a national convention to coordinate strategy and tactics.

In this unfolding pattern Politique Hebdo holds an important place, precisely because it offers a challenge of a new type. With a permanent editorial staff of 32 and correspondents in 26 countries, it is obviously a serious undertaking. Time will tell whether it can become a serious political factor in France. For the moment it is content to describe itself as "a reason for hope." For the PCF--which promptly and irascibly denounced it as yet another anti-Communist enterprise doomed to failure (8)--it is a reason for unrest.

(8) See editorial note in France Nouvelle, 7 October 1970, p. 3.

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