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THE GARAUDY PROBLEM

Summary: The French Communist Party is preparing to denounce and discipline the "heretical philosopher" Roger Garaudy at its 19th Congress -- but it will not thereby settle "the Garaudy problem." In fact, the French rebel speaks not only for himself but for a wider movement -- characterized by emphasis on socialist humanism and criticism of authoritarian communism -- that is gaining strength in the West European Left.

Etienne Fajon, the French Communist Party's prosecutor of Roger Garaudy, today (February 6) opened his attack by dismissing the dissident philosopher as an "isolated" opponent of party policy. He then proceeded to devote a full half of his 70-minute report to the 19th Congress to a detailed onslaught on this isolated revisionist.

Is Garaudy just a one-man pocket of opposition? Or is he a major threat to party unity? The truth probably lies between the two extremes. Garaudy's backing in the party is clearly considerably stronger than the "few supporters" that the party propaganda credits him with. But it is obviously considerably lower than the strength required to turn him into an immediate, organizational threat to the party leaders. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the Garaudy affair as an incident, a problem of personalities, a political boxing-match that the party will this week win once and for all. This is so for several reasons --

First, because Garaudy poses problems in the area of ideas and that is an area where few "matches" are ever won once and for all. One need only consider the way in which the Lenin-Trotsky match, the Kautsky-Lenin match, and many others, are refought every day within the communist movement.

Second, because, although Garaudy represents only a small and arithmetically inefficient minority within French communism, he does not stand alone in international communism. Since the invasion of Czechoslovakia, all the parties in Western Europe have their Garaudys. Some have been "unmasked" like Fischer in Austria. Others as yet have no names, but they exist. So Garaudy is not the individualist the party likes to label him. He is representative of a current of communism.

Third, because Garaudy and his foreign counterparts are only symptoms of a sickness. Garaudy's revisionism and opportunism did not spring spontaneously into being. They were born of mature reflection on a given situation by a communist of 37 years standing, a man with a very superior Marxist education. Symptoms can be suppressed partially or temporarily, but they have to persist unless the cause is cured.

Battle of Ideas

The metaphor of sickness and symptom may be feeble. It may evoke the image of a few revisionist pimples on the face of a powerful giant. After all, the rigorists are in control; the revisionists are removed. Where does this leave the balance of power? Because this is a battle of ideas, the power-balance is not arithmetic, not easy to establish. But the positions of Garaudy and the other "deviationists" of similar strain contain certain intangible assets not to be overlooked.

The Garaudys have placed themselves ahead of an inexorable tide. Non-communists have insisted for a long time that the 120-year-old theories of Marx, the 60-year-old practices of Lenin, were incapable of rising to the requirements of modern society without radical reappraisal. The gap between the doctrine as practised and the problems it has to solve has been

growing steadily. Now that society is caught up in the breakneck progress of the technological revolution, this gap must widen at an accelerated rate until it remains invisible only to the blindest of the rigorists. Right now, the French Party maintains that the technological revolution merely heightens traditional contradictions and that the answer lies in an intensification of the traditional struggle. That is a reflex response that will not withstand the test of the next 10 years. The Czechoslovak Radovan Richta called this period "the crossroads of civilization." Roger Garaudy says it is "the Great Turning Point of Socialism."

The essential first step to choosing the right "turning" at this decisive "crossroads" is to examine and to question Soviet-style orthodoxy. So Soviet socialism was the first; but it is the best, is it the only form? Moscow fears these questions and, unwilling to have its system judged on its merits, launches the movement on its current campaign against opportunism, directed with wicked irony against men who stand firm by principles.

Czechoslovak Witness

But the debate on paths and forms has become irrepressible, and since Czechoslovakia it is no longer academic, restricted to the realm of theory. The modern, liberal form of socialism supported by the Garaudys has lived. In the eight short months of the Prague spring, it showed its power, proved its ability to win the people without repression. At the same time the Soviet, Stalinist form of socialism has shown its weakness. It used force on Prague because its example and its ideas had failed to convince and because it feared the rivalry of the Czechoslovak example and ideas.

Prague 1968 was a demonstration of the good and the bad that the slow-moving communist movement needs time to digest. Right now, using the lingering impetus of the long, strong traditions of pro-Soviet sentiment, Moscow may be able to get such parties as the French to root out challengers to their orthodoxy. But the Prague lesson must sink in. The damage is done: the problem is posed. The French Party can purge itself of Garaudy but, as Garaudy said, it cannot purge

itself of the problems. Garaudy did not create them. He only pointed to them. They exist independently of him.

Also, a point that has no need of emphasis: the liberal progressive socialism of the Garaudys has an undeniable attractive force. Leave aside the issue of its attraction for the masses. It must have an attraction for the communists themselves, the members of the parties.

After all, what makes a man a communist? Many choose the party because they are drawn by the basic spirit of the movement as originally conceived and by the ultimate objectives as they are traditionally defined. The spirit and the aims are noble, and because of that most communists force themselves to adjust to the discovery that in the interests of achieving communism they have to lend themselves to practices and positions that run counter to the spirit that originally moved them to select the faith.

The merit of the Garaudys is to show that it is not necessary to use ignoble means to achieve the noble aims. And what's more to show this by reference to the holy writ. The rigorists can pluck from Marx a sentence here, a paragraph there to support the claim that, for example, the intellectuals must permanently remain second-class revolutionaries. They can search the tomes and find a text from Lenin in favor of authoritarian party structures that lock all power in at the summit. But Garaudy answers back, meeting text with text; and the position he builds up with these texts -- all totally and equally authentic -- is a position in harmony with the original spirit of the movement. While the position the Soviets and their supporters form with their counter-texts is the traditional one in which the path to true freedom passes regrettably but necessarily through "temporary" denials of those very values.

Looked at like this, the revisionism of the Garaudys must eventually exert an attraction on a growing number of communists. It will be resisted

primarily by a minority, by the minority of men who man the party machines, who have a bit of personal power to lose.

The French party congress will undoubtedly close with Garaudy's defeat. But he never saw any other issue -- to this congress. As he told La Stampa last month, this is the 19th Congress. French communism's "20th Congress" is still to come.

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