

NOT TO BE MICROFICED

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MUNICH, 23 November 1971 (CAA). The following article on the French Communist Party by Herbert R. Lottman appeared in the October 31 issue of The New York Times Book Review.

There is the (true) story that following the events of May, 1968, in France, when a radical student-worker rebellion brought the country to the edge of chaos and the Communist party was severely criticized for defending the established order, a party cell meeting attended by a friend of mine was opened by the chairman with these words: "Now, comrades, to serious business: the fête of L'Humanité."

The Communist party's annual fund-raising event is probably the nation's major public spectacle, drawing half a million Frenchmen each autumn to a vast fairground in the Paris region for a weekend of public entertainment, the circus atmosphere nourished by hundreds of hot-dog and barbecue stands, tawdry carnival rides coexisting with didactic political displays. "Mon Dieu," a Dutch acquaintance exclaimed, "it's like Coney Island—except that the mustard is better." Cynics say that if a war broke out in September the Communists would denounce it as an imperialist plot to damage their fête. Party cadres worked on this one for over a year; close to 1,000 stands on a vast lot in suburban La Courneuve were distributed over a hundred acres of streets named Lenin and Karl Marx Avenues, Henri Barbusse and Maurice Thorez Squares, and so on.

"It is the major political and cultural event of the season," proclaimed the publisher of the party organ L'Humanité. It is also an occasion for taking the temperature of the party's relationship to its constituency, and to the writers and intellectuals who support it or are supported by it. Major publishers, and some celebrated authors, participate in a busy book fair called Book City, where 100,000 volumes are offered for sale, many of their authors are on hand to autograph them, and the highs and lows in the party's fortunes can be seen in who is fellow-traveling, who boycotting, in any particular year.

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Intellectuals apart, the French C.P. membership is largely indifferent to these highs and lows. It's a sure constituency, perennially against the system, in the way George Meany's A.F.L.-C.I.O. constituency is perennially self-satisfied; they shall not be moved, the Communists in France and organized labor in the States. Rank and file votes can be counted on; membership cards are renewed despite distant thunder out of Moscow, Budapest and Prague. The F.C.P. is the largest party in France today, with 5 million voters, 400,000 card-carrying members, a total press and periodical circulation of 10 million copies daily. At each national election one voter in five chooses party candidates. It is generally conceded that (1) the party has no financial problems and (2) it is not the C.I.A. which is paying its bills.

Lately the party has begun to renew its image in an attempt to recapture its hold on youth and the disenchanted intellectuals. This year it inaugurated a strikingly contemporary smoked-and-bullet-proof-glass-front headquarters designed by Oscar Niemeyer, the creator of Brasilia (wall to wall carpeting is for Politburo members only). To pursue this "house of glass" policy the party is belatedly opening itself to today's culture wherever that may lead.

But in the course of its zigs and zags through the years, the French Communist party has lost most of its talented writers and artists. Whatever the party line was, it always managed to embarrass intellectuals. A book could be written on Jean-Paul Sartre's in again-out again relationship to the party, which he had often seemed to cling to as an uninvited guest, but which he has now renounced again in favor of the more exciting if less practical New Left.

Each crisis in world politics that shook the Communist movement made its slight impression on the French party's seismograph too, and you couldn't help knowing one or two Frenchmen—they could be recognized by their vapid stares—who had broken away from a lifetime of cell activity,

weekly demonstrations and agit-prop work, because they were Jewish, or had seen the films of Soviet tanks in Budapest. Few people you might care about, however, were still in the party when the other shoe dropped in the summer of 1968 in Prague.

Today no distinguished writer remains inside the party apart from that popular saint Louis Aragon, former Surrealist and now the party poet laureate, a prolific novelist and critic. He was on the speaker's platform with other members of the party hierarchy at La Courneuve, discussing literature with visitors, signing books. Actor Michel Piccoli read from his poetry on the immense stage with its 60 microphones and 350 loudspeakers.

Aragon's novels and poetry continue to appeal to youth, as ineluctable and as retrograde as our own Hermann Hesse cult. Now 74, he will surely die a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist party. A loyal band of followers stands by him; they had also come to the party as to the faith. They write for his influential literary weekly *Lettres Françaises*, which is the Communist party's New York Times Book Review. Neither Khrushchev's secret speech, the Hungarian revolt, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, official Soviet and Polish anti-Semitism, nor the French party's fence sitting in May, 1968 (when Sartre concluded that revolution would take place without the F.C.P. after all), shook this band; when the smoke cleared the pecking order was unchanged.

Still, in recent years a certain amount of finger-wagging has been allowed the party's intellectuals. Aragon in an emotional preface to "The Joke," the first novel of the Czech Milan Kundera, spoke of "the Biafra of the spirit" (which he didn't believe would occur in Czechoslovakia—but already this was going very far for Aragon, and the time was autumn, 1968). His Comité National des Écrivains, an organization which grew out of the World War II Resistance, protested the exclusion of Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the

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Soviet Writers Union. Pierre Daix, editor in chief of *Lettres Françaises* and a man who had to live down his loud public denial of the existence of Soviet forced labor camps in the 1950's, finally expressed his heresy in a "Prague Diary," in which he published the text of the now historic "2000 words" Czechoslovak plea for freedom against neo-Stalinism.

I have spoken of *Lettres Françaises*, the Aragon-Daix weekly which no writer seeking sales and publicity can ignore. If the old Communists have long since left the party, and the Aragons and Daix's are allowed their moment of soul-searching, each year brings a new crop of beginning writers (and some well-known ones) content to benefit from the space offered by the party press, or to act as *potiches* (literally a porcelain vase, figuratively a person with prestige but no power—the expression is of the writer-illustrator Vercors, a disillusioned fellow traveler).

This year Edmonde Charles-Roux, a Goncourt prize winner for that novel of fashionable dissent, "To Forget Palermo," chose to be the star of the *fête*. Her recent bad novel "Elle, Adrienne," was on display, and she signed copies for the crowd. *L'Humanité* published her idolatrous text on the event over a full page. A sincere and non-chic proletarian author, Claire Etcherelli, appeared at Book City behind a pile of copies of her latest novel. Neither author would be hurt by exposure to the claue of party critics, the millions of readers of the party's newspapers and magazines.

Publishers paid a minimum of \$1,800 to obtain a share of the estimated \$200,000 in book sales. The Communists' own Diderot Book Club, which services members via computer, offered the latest Aragon, a major work in two volumes on Matisse called (in Norman Mailer fashion) a "novel." Later in the year Aragon would also be publishing a new collection of poetry and notes on his relations with the Surrealists and the Communist party.

Amon, the truly young, the most conspicuous sympathizers of the party had been the editors of the uncompromisingly avant-garde quarterly *Tel Quel*, whose best known contributor is Philippe Sollers. A protégé

of Aragon to begin with, Sollers had started as a conventional first novelist, but then had moved on to the *nouveau roman*, and then to his more extreme, somewhat Poundian present phase. In the last issue of *Tel Quel* he spelled out his relations with the F.C.P. "Free scientific discussion with the intellectuals of the Communist

Party," he wrote, "had always seemed to us one of the essential conditions of an efficacious struggle against bourgeois power. . . . *Tel Quel*, even and especially in the most difficult hours, never fed anti-Communism, stood clearly for unity of all the left, that is, first of all with the Communist Party." He regretted that party publications, on the contrary, spent so much energy attacking him.

But this autumn's *fête de l'Huma*, which took place on the Sept. 11-12 weekend, was the final straw for Sollers and his friends. Books exhibited for sale were subject to close examination by the party machine. When it was discovered that a publisher proposed to display the French edition of "On China," a laudatory report on a 1970 visit to China by Italian Communist party deputy Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, the party censors advised that there was "no room" for the book at Book City. Signora Macciocchi, who had made the journey to China with her husband, a journalist with the Italian C.P. daily *Unità*, and who had never been censured for the deed by the Italian party, was herself declared *persona non grata* at the *fête*.

As it happened Sollers had been involved in the production of the French edition of "Dalla Cina" (originally published by Feltrinelli in Milan). When notified that the book would not be allowed a place in the sun of La Courneuve, Sollers protested in a letter to *Le Monde*: "No avant-garde intellectual and, even more, no Marxist can remain indifferent to this measure." He announced that he would not join the other writers—"some notoriously reactionary"—at the *fête*. *Tel Quel* kept its stand, however, which was manned by a young editor quick to tell inquirers why his colleagues had stayed away.

Other publishers placed the bit in their own teeth, exercising self-censorship, such as

the one who decided not to show "Diary of a Counter-Revolutionary" by Czech playwright Pavel Kohout (never published in Czechoslovakia, although the author continues to reside in Prague). Yet the visitor strolling along the jammed aisles of Book City might come upon the book, a vivid personal account of the 1968 events against the background of the author's apprenticeship as a good Communist and then a doubting one, at the stand run by Aragon's *Lettres Françaises*.

He would learn, if he was curious, that the book was there because it had been translated and prefaced by ex-Stalinist Pierre Daix. You'd have to probe still further to learn that Daix is married to a Czech who happens to be the daughter of Artur London, author of the remarkable "Confession" which shook France at the end of 1968 with its account of the Slansky purge trial from which London managed to escape with his life, one of three of the 16 (mainly Jewish) defendants to have done so.

Pierre Daix, then, had come a long way. In his preface to Kohout's "Diary" he speaks of the civil war now raging between the hope and non-hope of Socialism, between changing the world and not changing the world "because - it - was - changed - once - for - all - time-in-1917." He sees the young Czech martyr Jan Palach as the unknown soldier in this war.

You had the feeling that you'd blundered in during a family feud. That the Communist party's intellectuals, now reduced to a few tired old and young men formed in a hollow square, were no longer hurting anyone but themselves. You wandered along to see which of the "notoriously reactionary" celebrities might be around. And was Edmonde Charles-Roux selling many books? ■

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