

## **The Story Behind the Sneer**

### **The Birth of the French Communist Party**

Julian WRIGHT

**Based on new material and a subtle analysis of individual experiences, Ducoulombier's book offers a refreshing look at the birth of the French Communist Party in 1920. The historian argues that the Congress of Tours followed the development of a marginal culture of political dissent within French socialism during the Great War.**

Romain Ducoulombier, <i>Camarades! La naissance du Parti Communiste en France</i> , Paris, Perrin, 2010, prefaced by Marc Lazar, 428 pp.
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With this important study of the early years of communism in France, Romain Ducoulombier has established himself as a historian of political culture and sociability of the first rank. His examination of the individual biographical trajectories and the coming together and fracturing of narrow groups of political activists that make up the fascinating and complex story of the far left in France after the First World War demonstrates his subtle grasp of the most minute and intimate of political relationships. His claim, indeed, is that the highly-charged historiographical significance of a moment like the 1920 Congress of the SFIO at Tours, when French socialism underwent a crude-edged, uncertain and ragged division, needs to be deconstructed. His patient and passionate exploration of the personal histories of the early communist militants in France, their emotional responses to war, and above all their struggle to identify clearly what 'breaking with the past' would entail for French socialism, is the answer he offers to many decades of historical debate about Tours and the birth of French communism. This makes his book highly detailed, intimate and complex. It will be especially satisfying for historians of political culture and society who have a sense that personal archives need to be read in several different registers at the same time; and that if the emotional force of a letter can be teased out it may well force a reconsideration of traditional views that had not neglected those very sources, but that had perhaps emphasized a more obvious reading.

Annie Kriegel, after all, with whom Ducoulombier is in conversation throughout this volume, was an avid reader of the primary sources at the heart of the intricate negotiations that produced the *Section française de l'Internationale communiste*. Ducoulombier's thesis is simply that Kriegel's attempt to restore the events of December 1920 to their proper status has not been pursued far enough. The arrival of French communism was contingent, confused, surprising, following Kriegel; but it was also, from his reading of the history of the '*minorité de guerre*' and the personal struggles and private tragedies that marked a young generation of unhappy socialists during the First World War, a process that followed the development of a marginal culture of political dissent within French socialism. The sheer complexity of the roots of the Congress of Tours might, if historians wanted to simplify matters, make one inclined to describe that moment as a sudden and unexpected break, that no great manichean narrative could adequately explain; but Ducoulombier has now set out to show that Tours was not an unexpected break in the by-ways of the French socialist movement, especially during the Great War, when the need to break with the past gave a common cultural impetus to many divergent *groupuscules* who otherwise had much to divide them.

### **Socialists into Bolsheviks: Individual Experiences and Emotions**

The results of the Congress of Tours, then, were uncertain and unpredictable; but the causes of Tours were written in the individual experiences of each militant as they struggled to identify a clear political path in the emotional and political conflict of the socialist party during the Great War. These personal experiences, which Ducoulombier restores with great care from personal accounts of unhappiness or confusion in fighting, often from family correspondence, were at the heart of the strange alliance between younger moderates within the socialist party who were anxious to break with the '*Union sacrée*' policy of leaders like Marcel Sembat and Albert Thomas, and far-left activists in the *Comité de la III<sup>e</sup> Internationale* led by Boris Souvarine. Neither side would benefit ultimately from the union. Souvarine, so soon to be displaced at the head of this new brand of French socialism, gave the tone for the activity that would follow in a tract of the committee in 1920. The old socialism erred by allowing a plurality of views, encouraging doctrinal confusion through the institutionalization of a system where different brands of socialism would co-exist within the party. '*La discipline librement consentie et rigoureusement appliquée*' (freely consented and rigorously enforced discipline), however, would now become '*la condition essentielle de l'action socialiste*' (the essential requirement for socialist action). Ducoulombier thus devotes

the second half of his volume to exploring the strange outworkings of this new fascination with discipline and doctrinal purity. He patiently follows the baroque contortions of the young communist party as its leaders purged their older enemies, only to be purged in turn. The contortions into which French communists were thrown by the utterly unpredictable and yet completely compelling messages from the Communist International in Moscow are traced with a fine sense of irony.

The French communists of these early years were not Bolsheviks, though they found much of the Bolshevik style fascinating, given their own personal experiences of frustration and disillusionment. Many were simply French socialists who wanted to see greater focus and purity. But, as Ducoulombier shows time and again – though not always with the sort of clarity that historians less familiar with communist history would appreciate – the attempt to create a socialism that would rise above ‘labels’ or ‘tendencies’ too often degenerated into a constant redefinition of who was on the left and who on the right. Perhaps Ducoulombier has himself become frustrated with the labelling tendencies of those fervent believers in getting rid of a socialism of ‘tendencies’ – he certainly draws out the irony, and, in some cases, the hypocrisy of those communists who perversely re-wrote the political spectrum in order to suit their claim to be rising above it.

Ducoulombier’s main aim in the latter sections of his book is to get inside what might be understood by the ‘new type’ of party so often called for by the early communists. It is the rhetorical touchstones, the habits of interpersonal communication and the development of bureaucratic cultures, not just at the centre of different committees or party apparatus, but also at local levels, that most fascinate him. He devotes some important pages to testing the emergence of new communist cultures of exclusion and justice on a local scale, in the *section communiste de Melun* for example. Here, quintessential features of communist culture, the ritual of exclusion and the reaction of militants who feel unjustly attacked, are laid out with real virtuosity. Ducoulombier gives a voice to the excluded from the new party apparatus, as he had done in earlier sections to the young socially and politically volatile militants on the fringes of the socialist movement, as they voiced their frustration and confusion in the shadow of the trenches.

### **Towards a New Historical Narrative of French Socialism**

The sort of history Ducoulombier wants to write is, therefore, one in which individuals and their instantaneous reactions to the vagaries of party machinations become

the meat of the story behind the development of a distinct political identity on the left in France. But writing this sort of story is complicated, and demands patience not just on the part of the historian but also on the part of the reader. It is admirable that Ducoulombier is setting out to forge his own path in this laborious task, because there can be no doubt that the grand narratives of the French left have long missed the sort of searching, rigorous and intimate concentration that he provides. His work is reminiscent in some senses of the intimate dissection of sociabilities and political networks around Albert Thomas, modelled by Christophe Prochasson;<sup>1</sup> or of Jeremy Jennings' fine treatment of early twentieth century anarchist networks.<sup>2</sup> However, there are pitfalls and difficulties that need to be surmounted in this sort of history. Ducoulombier sets out his material with a clear theme in mind at each stage, which is excellent; these are themes which force the reader to confront orthodox opinion in the historiography of the French left and think afresh about received wisdom. But the material too often flows in a manner that is not entirely helpful. Sections within chapters frequently state their aim, to uncover the responses of certain individuals to a particular debate or issue that happened within a given month or week; but the reader is then led rapidly onto later reflections or issues, before the actual events at stake can be assimilated – only then to return to them later on. There is a tendency in Ducoulombier's writing to upset the chronological rhythm to such an extent that the discussion of a particular theme is in fact weakened by the uncertainty or confusion that the reader experiences in trying to piece together *when* it was that a particular militant *first* felt such-and-such. Another feature of this style is that many individuals have their first full, clear presentation only many chapters after they were first introduced. To the uninitiated, the 'Affaire Fabre' may feel like a mysterious unknown as its ramifications and consequences are discussed at length, and its causes examined in detail, many pages before the precise nature of what was at stake is in fact laid out. Souvarine himself, familiar to most readers, benefits from some very clear discussion right at the end of the book, while earlier sections on his vital role leave much to be filled in from the readers' general knowledge.

Two things could be said in defence of this: first, that the sort of fine-grained reading of personal experiences and the emotional connections that underpin left-wing politics offered by Ducoulombier is still highly original and there are not yet many impeccable

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<sup>1</sup> Christophe Prochasson, « Entre science sociale et action sociale: le "réseau Albert Thomas" et le socialisme normalien, 1900-1914 », in Christian Topalov (ed.) *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle: la nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France, 1880-1914*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1999, pp. 141-158; and more generally, Christophe Prochasson, *Les Intellectuels, le socialisme et la guerre, 1900-1938*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Jennings, *Syndicalism in France. A Study of Ideas*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1990.

models of this sort of history, within the study of French socialism, for him to draw on – though there are some; but in any case we have a sense of a new interpretation being fashioned vigorously, impressively, with great erudition but also some crudeness, from a huge corpus of primary material. Second, Ducoulombier’s aim being both to upset the traditional flow of the narrative of Communist historiography, and to nuance significantly the alternative rhythm of Kriegel’s narrative, it may well be necessary in a monograph such as this to present material in surprising and sometimes challenging ways, in which the comforting connections most historians would reach for are thwarted and replaced instead with associations or details that upset our easy familiarity with the topic. With his range and erudition, and his dogged determination to present the culture of militancy in French communism at this critical period for the French left as a whole, Ducoulombier has presented an impressive, challenging and hard-edged thesis; but he has also drawn the full flavour of the human story behind party militancy and Bolshevik machinations.

Ducoulombier’s account has an eye to the lessons that new generations of French historians might wish to draw when they place this study within the longer history of the rise and fall of communism in France. This book reminds us, following revisionists such as François Furet, that this story is only too full of personal frustrations, unkindness, hypocrisy, misplaced political hope and machiavellian trickery, often cooked up in Moscow. It does something else, however – something I am not sure Furet himself ever really sought to do. It restores – with what Marc Lazar, in his preface, describes as an ‘anthropological’ turn in the author’s approach – a human face even to the most obtuse and frustrating of party hacks. If many historians now find it only too easy to describe the sneer of the party secretary, Ducoulombier has looked behind that sneer to reveal traces of personal pain and bitterness, on the part of the man or woman responsible for the exclusion, which give a depth and richness to this story of the failure of communism in France. With this richness, his book will become an important reference point as historians seek to develop the first wave of questioning of the communist tradition in France, through new, more nuanced and complex studies of the political society that, so strangely and uncertainly, nourished that tradition in its early years.

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