

Prominent French intellectuals rally to presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy

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With less than two months to go to crucial French presidential elections, a number of prominent French intellectuals have declared their support for the right-wing presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP—Union for a Popular Movement).

A number of these intellectuals, who are loosely associated with the movement of so-called “new philosophers,” are routinely described in the press as “leftist,” although they broke with any form of leftist or socialist politics a long time ago. Nevertheless, the fact that such figures as the writer and *nouveau philosophe* Andre Glucksmann, author Pascal Bruckner and Max Gallo, a novelist and former spokesman for former French president Francois Mitterrand, are now openly backing Sarkozy’s campaign is of considerable significance.

Andre Glucksmann announced his backing for Sarkozy in a commentary for the daily *Le Monde* in which he proclaimed that new thinking was coming from the right. For its part, the left is “stewing in narcissism,” Glucksmann continued. Referring to Sarkozy’s main rival in the presidential campaign, Socialist Party (PS) candidate Ségolène Royal, Glucksmann declared that “the left’s emptiness was even greater than her own.”

The writer and “new philosopher” Pascal Bruckner, who has recently waged a campaign promoting French patriotism, stated that he had initially liked Ms. Royal but was disturbed by the comment made by her partner, Francois Hollande, the leader of the Socialist Party, who said, “I do not like the rich.” Now, Bruckner, according to press comments, has decided that Sarkozy is “brilliant and brave.” Roger Hanin, an actor and author, has also declared in favour of Sarkozy. Hanin is the brother-in-law of late Socialist president Francois Mitterrand, Royal’s mentor. Hanin said he still “worships” Mitterrand, but did not trust Royal.

Another *nouveau philosophe*, Alain Finkielkraut, paid tribute to Sarkozy as the only candidate who was facing up to the “disasters” afflicting France in education, the environment and anti-social behaviour. In an interview with *Libération*, Finkielkraut lambasted Royal’s “manifest incompetence,” declaring that he felt closer to Sarkozy.

Finkielkraut also slammed “the official left,” which in his opinion “is convinced that it embodies the Party of Good in the face of the party of Pétain” (the leader of France’s wartime collaboration state). At this time, Finkielkraut evidently prefers to ditch the “Party of the Good” and side with Pétain-Sarkozy.

Spurred on by the initiative of these figures, a group called “La Diagonale” has gathered the signatures of 1,000 so-called leftists who plan to vote for Sarkozy—including some members of the Socialist Party.

Up to now, the most prominent of the “new philosophers,” Bernard Henri-Lévy, is playing his cards close to his chest. He does not understand Glucksmann’s decision, Lévy says, but in the same breath defends Sarkozy against charges that he is a “fascist and a bastard.” In his typical opportunist fashion, Lévy declares that the main criterion for an intellectual in choosing his presidential candidate is “timing.”

Lévy recently wrote effusively in the *Wall Street Journal* of his highly

enjoyable dinner with Ségolène Royal, but after establishing close links to Francois Mitterrand, Lévy has been associated more recently with such conservative figures as former prime minister Edouard Balladur and the current French president, Jacques Chirac.

In taking up the cause of Sarkozy in the upcoming presidential elections, Glucksmann and others are responding directly to the appeal made by Sarkozy himself during his acceptance speech at the UMP convention on January 14.

In a speech ringing with phrases and references traditionally associated with authoritarian and Bonapartist forms of rule, Sarkozy made gushing invocations of nationalism in which he condemned the class struggle and made corporatist calls for the unification of all true Frenchmen—whether of the right or left. “My France,” he declared, “is that of all Frenchmen, who basically do not know if they stand on the right, the left or the centre because they are, above all, of good will.”

In the course of his speech, he spelled out key elements of his programme. Sarkozy made clear that his vision of the French nation is based on the necessity for discipline in schools and society as a whole, together with the acknowledgement by the individual citizen that in exchange for rights each must accept and fulfil his or her obligations to the state.

Sarkozy’s formulation of the relation between the state and its citizens recalls the criticisms raised by the nineteenth century French conservative historian Ernest Renan, who despaired that France was “nearly losing all memory of a national spirit.” Advising Napoleon III to accept “the truly conservative programme,” Renan condemned in his essay *La Revue des Deux Mondes* (1869) “the idea of the equal rights of all men, the way of conceiving government as a mere public service which one pays for, and to which one owes neither respect nor gratitude, a kind of American impertinence.”

While Sarkozy is enthusiastic about introducing US-style neo-liberal politics into France and has established some close links with American political circles, his vision of a strong corporatist state in which the individual yields his or her rights for the greater good of the nation shares much in common with theorists such as Renan, who was praised later in the twentieth century by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini as an important pre-fascist thinker.

It is no coincidence that the preface to Sarkozy’s newest book *Testimony* has been written by Gianfranco Fini, the leader of Italy’s post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance—NA).

The *nouveaux philosophes* first emerged as a distinct ideological movement in 1977 at a time when the veteran of French politics, Francois Mitterrand, was active in organising a coalition of parties aimed at establishing a political mechanism to challenge the Gaullist domination of French politics. In 1971, Mitterrand took over the leadership of the refounded French Socialist Party and in 1972 was instrumental in establishing a coalition of the Socialist Party and French Communist Party (PCF), together with the Left Radicals—the so-called Union of the Left

(1972-1977). Following frictions in this alliance, the PCF and PS failed to update their so-called Common Programme in 1977.

Under these conditions, a group of former radicals and ideologists intervened in the increasing crisis of the Union of the Left to undertake an attack from the right on the PCF, and the perspective of socialism as a whole.

All of the new philosophers had connections with radical groups and Stalinist organisations active in the radicalisation of French workers and students of the 1960s. A significant number of the group emerged in fact from one organisation—the Maoist group *Gauche prolétarienne* (GP—Proletarian left) (e.g., Glucksmann, Christian Jambet). Others, such as Bernard-Henry Lévy, had watched and sympathised with the student and worker radicalisation from the sidelines.

Though the new philosophers began as a diverse group, they were united in particular by their heritage drawn from Stalinist and Maoist roots—nationalism, a worship of the strong state, and a contempt for the working class, genuine socialism and the Marxist tradition. In particular, Maoist groups such as GP elevated petty-bourgeois forces as a counterweight to the organised working class.

In China, this orientation was to the peasantry. In modern France, *Gauche prolétarienne* appealed to layers of students and radicalised intelligentsia. Already in the early 1970s, GP militants were increasingly dumping even any nominal attachment to the working class and turning to single-issue topics such as the environment, consumerism and sexual repression, as well as declassed and demoralised groups such as prisoners and drug users.

As the wave of political radicalism died down in France and throughout Europe in the mid-1970s, a layer of radicals broke away from their Stalinist organisations and turned increasingly to the right, with a number of them finding a political home in the right wing of the French Socialist Party led by Francois Mitterrand. Mitterrand was quite prepared to accept the services of such former radicals as a means of disciplining his coalition partner the Communist Party and preparing a political turn to the right.

In the mid-1970s, figures like Glucksmann and Lévy seized upon the crimes of Stalinism, which emerged following the publication of such books as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Rejecting any serious historical examination of the history of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, Glucksmann and Lévy equated Stalinism with genuine communism and poured scorn on the Marxist tradition, which they declared was in great part responsible for all of the evils of the twentieth century.

In his book *Master Thinkers* (1977), André Glucksmann (born 1937) ludicrously lumps together such diverse theorists and philosophers as Karl Marx, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Nietzsche, and then concludes that collectively such thinkers are guilty “under the cover of knowledge...of putting together the mental apparatus indispensable to the launching of the great final solutions of the twentieth century...the 60 million deaths of the gulag.” Glucksmann declares that the gulag is “the logical application of Marxism” and goes even further to proclaim that the gulag is “the Enlightenment.”

Glucksmann's broadside against Marxism and the Enlightenment was then taken up by Bernard Henri-Lévy. Lévy was a political advisor to Mitterrand in the mid-1970s and an editor at the Paris publishing house Grasset, which coined the term *nouveaux philosophes*. In 1977, Lévy published three books by members of the group—André Glucksmann, Guy Lardreau, and Christian Jambet—before publishing his own, *La Barbarie a Visage Humain* (Barbarism with a Human Face).

In his viciously anti-Marxist polemic, Lévy also refrains from making any attempt to address the concrete historical development of the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s, when political power was wrenched from the hands of the internationalists who had led the Russian Revolution

in 1917 in favour of a reactionary nationalist bureaucracy. Instead, Lévy bluntly declares that the development of the Soviet Union demonstrated that “revolution is a myth.”

Lévy blames the persistence of Marxist ideas in France on the thinkers of the French Enlightenment, who paved the way for what he terms communist dogmatism by spreading a naive faith in the historical inevitability of human progress. “The harsh truth,” in Lévy's view, is that “the world is in a bad state. We are realising that the twentieth century's great invention may prove to be the concentration camp, which is generalised murder for reasons of state.”

With reference to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, Lévy wrote, “The only successful revolution of this century is totalitarianism.” “The Soviet prison camp is Marxist, as Marxist as Auschwitz was Nazi.”

Twenty years prior to the publication of the notorious *Black Book of Communism* (1997), Glucksmann and Lévy had already raised the banner of “anti-totalitarianism” to equate Stalinism, fascism and genuine communism in order to discredit the latter. By 1977, the conservative business magazine *the Economist* paid its own tribute to the new philosophers, which it collectively praised as “magnificent Marx haters.”

For the following three decades, Glucksmann and Lévy functioned as an extended arm of French (and also US) foreign policy, using their own unique interpretation of single-issue politics and human rights to provide political cover whenever the French state intervened to defend its interests.

Both men supported the US and NATO break-up of Yugoslavia and the bombing of Serbia in 1999 on the basis of the defence of human rights and the “totalitarian” or “fascist” character of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic. They then went on to support French and European intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 on the basis of combating the oppression of women and the necessity to combat Islamic extremism.

Both have been adept at extending their struggle against totalitarianism to include the US-led “war on terror,” and Glucksmann remains to this day one of the most virulent European supporters of the US war and occupation in Iraq.

Glucksmann, Bernard-Henry Lévy and Alain Finkielkraut all come from Jewish backgrounds (Glucksmann lost a number of family members in the Nazi death camps) but have learnt nothing from the tragic fate of Jews in the twentieth century. They have all on occasion raised the accusation of anti-Semitism against those critical of Israeli government policy and recently all three emerged as leading figures in a campaign warning of the dangers of alleged “Islamofascism” or “fascislamism,” according to Lévy.

Last year, Glucksmann wrote in *Le Figaro* condemning “universal Jihad,” the Iranian “lust for power” and radical Islam's strategy of “green subversion.” And in March 2006, Lévy co-signed a manifesto, “Together facing the new totalitarianism,” in solidarity with the *Jyllands-Posten*—the right-wing Dutch newspaper that launched an anti-Islamic campaign with the publication of provocative cartoons of the prophet Muhammad.

For his part, Finkielkraut unleashed a controversy when he vehemently denied that social factors were responsible for the widespread rioting by French and immigrant youth in housing estates and cities across France last autumn: “In France, they would like very much to reduce these riots to their social dimension.... The problem is that most of these youths are blacks or Arabs, with a Muslim identity.... [T]his is a revolt with an ethno-religious character.”

Following some objections to Finkielkraut's comments, the one political leader to come demonstrably to his defence was the current French interior minister and UMP presidential candidate, Nicholas Sarkozy.

Any critical reader with some familiarity of French political and intellectual life will be aware of the debilitating and pernicious role played

in recent decades by such intellectual mountebanks and impostors as Glucksmann, Lévy and Finkelkraut. Their propensity for self-adulation, populism and intellectual slovenliness is only matched by their political opportunism.

Nevertheless, the passage of a number of these figures into the camp of Nicholas Sarkozy is a significant development and represents a qualitative shift in their political orientation. From the semi-legal activities of *Gauche prolétarienne* via the right wing of the French Socialist Party, a group of intellectuals has now undertaken the move into the camp of right-wing authoritarianism. In 1977, their demonisation of communism was the rite of passage from petty-bourgeois radicalism into the camp of the French Socialist Party. Today, their criticisms of the utterly right-wing programme of Ségolène Royal as leftist and inadequate are their qualification for entry into the Sarkozy camp.

The political trajectory of Glucksmann and his ilk is the expression of profound transformations in class relations. Under conditions of growing social polarisation and the rapid growth of inequality in France and many other European countries, the existence and traditional status of broad layers of the middle class are under threat. Sarkozy is quite aware of such processes, and in his new book *Testimony*, poses as the strong man who can rescue the embattled French middle class.

In the chapter of his book titled “The Middle Classes Abandoned,” Sarkozy writes: “Since the end of the Trente Glorieuses [1945-1975] we have steadily given up having a social policy for the middle classes. It is a mistake because it is the middle classes that generate the prosperity of an economy and the mobility of a society. For this reason they ought to be at the heart of all policy.... [T]heir increasing wealth enables all society to move forward.... When the middle classes stagnate, the whole of society is in deadlock, seized up.”

Sarkozy aims to free the middle class from their shackles. In fact, Sarkozy’s message is directed to those wealthy, very privileged layers of the French middle class typified in the figures of Glucksmann and Levy. Under his rule, Sarkozy declares, they need not feel ashamed of their riches: “For 25 years France has ceaselessly discouraged initiative and punished success. The first result of preventing the most dynamic from getting rich is to impoverish everybody else. Through wanting equality for each one of us, we finished by penalising everybody....”

In terms guaranteed to win him the full approval of the *Wall Street Journal*, he continues: “Money is a legitimate reward for extra work or taking risks. It is a means of creating other wealth, which will permit more growth and then more employment. The current ideology concerning money and success only leads to impoverishment, levelling-down and egalitarianism.”

Sarkozy’s attempts to mobilise layers of the middle class together with backward and declassed social elements in a crusade against “egalitarianism” has profoundly reactionary implications. Increasing social divisions, the drive to militarism and a shift to the left by broad layers of the working class as well as sections of the French middle class, expressed in a series of demonstrations and social protests, cannot be contained within the framework of the traditional postwar bourgeois state. Sarkozy has seized the initiative in alliance with influential sections of French big business and finance to commence a debate on new authoritarian forms of rule.

His appeal to the middle class to “enrich yourself” has now met a positive response from a layer of intellectuals. In declaring their allegiance to Sarkozy in the forthcoming presidential election, figures such as Glucksmann, Bruckner and Gallo are now offering their services as obedient demagogues and foot soldiers for Sarkozy’s thoroughly reactionary vision of a revitalised French nation.



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