

# NEWS

## French Socialism and Philosophy Since May 1981

Has the new French Socialist Government made any moves to alter the position of philosophy in French education where (in spite of a diminution of the proportion of philosophy in the syllabus in the mid-seventies) philosophy still retains a role in school education not entirely unlike that of religious education in the UK: a compulsory element in a number of syllabuses for 15- to 18-year-olds ('baccalauréat') intended in part to further moral and civic education.

One pointer is the number of candidates accepted for a life-long teaching contract (at 'agrégation') to teach in secondary or tertiary education. According to a member of the agrégation panel, the mid-seventies changes plus the falling popularity of those baccalauréat syllabuses in which philosophy was extensively taught affected the number of places the Ministry of Education was prepared to offer until, in 1979, only 20 candidates were accepted from the entire country. But there was already an upturn in 1980 (to 25) and again in 1981 (to 33). The new government raised that figure to 42 upon taking office last May, and has maintained that level for 1982.

But the increase has to be seen in context. Other straws in the wind suggest what long-term developments in education and research the government has in mind. One is the introduction of syllabus changes, a new more attractive baccalauréat option with considerable emphasis on philosophy and the insertion of philosophy in a service role into other programmes.

Another sign of things to come is the report on the state of the human and social sciences drawn up by a commission headed by Maurice Godelier at the request of the Minister for Research and Industry, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, known for his leadership of a 'left-wing' grouping in the Socialist party, CERES. The human and social sciences incorporate more or less our social sciences plus history and law, but in French universities they are generally split between faculties of letters and of law. The commission of twenty university and research figures analysed 2000 responses to questionnaires from educational institutions and public bodies such as political parties, and then produced a commentary on the state of both the infrastructure and the ideas in the various fields it had to cover. The report complains of interference and austerity by the previous administration, which tended to impose short-term benefits on research (compare the current restructuring of the Social Science Research Council), to

favour politically agreeable areas such as Neo-classical economics, and to discourage profounder and more critical research, and in various ways it makes great play of the principle of academic independence from the state.

Though philosophy as such did not come into its range, some specific kinds of philosophy (such as political philosophy - reckoned to have 'collapsed' conceptually) were covered, and various of the report's arguments and recommendations must bear on philosophy. For example, the report names the history of science and technology and women's studies as large gaps in current research; and it identifies numerous research areas needing development between different disciplines, including written expression and the civilisation it forms, and again the history and epistemology of science and technology. Finally, the report recommends a battery of new institutions such as a national institute of history and epistemology of science and technology, a centre for psycho-analytic research and an interdisciplinary college of philosophy.

Uncannily to cue comes a third initiative, a proposal from Chevènement to establish a new International College of Philosophy - which several of the big names of French philosophy (such as Jacques Derrida and Dominique Lecourt) have been asked to organise. Can it be accidental that these two are so prominent in two fields mentioned by the Godelier report: the civilisation of written expression and the epistemology of science respectively? Chevènement managed, in setting out this proposal, to combine respectful, even chauvinistic, reference to the place of philosophy 'at the heart of [the French] cultural tradition' with a view, more technocratic in inspiration, that 'research and reflexion on scientific methods and paradigms, on transfers between sciences, on procedures common to several sciences and the phenomena which arise when several sciences meet, merit more concentrated attention.'

All in all, it looks as though the socialist government, while probably intending a larger role for philosophy in education, research and culture at large, will be asking for something from philosophy in return. Whether that something will be the off-spring of recent growth in philosophy alone or of the government's positivist need to obtain development remains to be seen.

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