

In Memoriam

Andre Gorz

(1923-2007)

The recent death of Andre Gorz and his wife Doreen has virtually escaped notice, not only in the mainstream media, but on the American Left, as well. Perhaps the reason for this neglect is that his work has not been widely disseminated in the United States for at least a decade. But there may be other reasons: Gorz was an iconoclast and, in a period of numbing intellectual conformity, his star, along with other ideological dissenters, has waned among leftists, who seem content to revert to conventional ideas and orthodox personalities. But in the years of political ferment that expired in advanced capitalist societies around 1980, Gorz was truly an avant garde thinker. He was among the small, but influential band of independent French Left intellectuals of the post World War II era, which included fellow journalists Daniel Singer and K.S. Karol, philosophers such as Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, later, Henri Lefebvre, who all refused to join either of the two hegemonic camps led by the United States and the Soviet Union. For a time, he was widely read in English-speaking countries, as well as Italy and France, and had a special appeal to labor activists. He was a regular and founding contributor to the socialist weekly *Nouvelle Observateur*, and was on the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre's independent Left journal that emerged after the war as an alternative to Communist and Social-Democratic journals that rigorously followed the party line. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty believed the parties of socialism had, in different ways, betrayed the interests of socialism and social transformation by their subordination to the Great Powers. Within a few years, Merleau-Ponty split with the journal, because he believed Sartre's ambivalent support of the Communists in the wake of the cold war signified that he had subordinated himself to "ultra bolshevism." At the same time, Raymond Aron resigned from its orbit to join the West and became, together with the American philosopher, Sidney Hook, a leading international anti-communist and supplicant to Western powers.

Gorz was of the next generation and remained close to Sartre until the latter's death in 1980. But he never followed Sartre's eventual pessimistic declaration that the Communist movement represented the best hope of humanity because of its consistent opposition to imperialism and war. Instead he worked on perspectives and strategies that renounced the official Left's pervasive tendency to collapse into reformist electoralism, and was among the initiators and a leading members of the PSU (Unified Socialist

Party) that, after the May events, attempted to build a popular constituency for a “third force” that would unite independent left intellectuals, trade union activists from a radical French union, the CFDT, feminists and anti-war forces. The PSU participated in elections, but saw itself as an extra-parliamentary formation, as well. The PSU lasted until the 1980s, sometimes achieving a respectable vote but always a thorn in the side of the apparently moribund Socialist Party (PS). But François Mitterand and a circle of his friends were bent on rebuilding the PS on the basis of a Grand Coalition of the reformist Left. He proved to be a master politician. After a long period of resistance to Mitterand’s overtures, under pressure from some key leaders who saw a different future than a lonely place in the perpetual opposition, the PSU merged with the Socialists who, in turn, had made a common program with the Communists in the 1976 Presidential election and, finally, came to power in 1981. Gorz did not follow the ambitious politicians in his own party who, with briefcases in hand, were anxious to attain high government office. Seeing no practical alternatives to the surrender of the independent left, he remained outside the French party system for the rest of his life.

Gorz disdained that peculiar combination of reformism, with the endless repetition of dogmatic revolutionary phrase that marked the French Communist Party; and, although influenced by Trotskyism, especially Trotsky’s own Transitional Program (1938), he remained aloof from the many grouplets of French Trotskyism, because, in his view, they, too, were addicted to the revolutionary phrase. Instead, his early writing was, together with a collaborator, the sociologist Serge Mallet, an effort to develop the Transitional Program’s concept of “non reformist reforms,” especially ideas such as workers self-management, even within the capitalist framework. In his very influential book, *Strategy for Labor* (1967), following Mallet’s empirical work on the emergence of a new technical intelligentsia at the industrial workplace, Gorz argued that these apparent cadres of capital were caught in a dialectical contradiction: on the one hand, owing to automation and cybernation processes dominated by intellectual labor, they effectively controlled the labor process; on the other, their autonomy was severely restricted because they were, after all, salaried employees subject to capital’s authority. Gorz saw in this contradiction the possibility of mass radicalization of what Mallet had termed a “new” working class, which could constitute an important component of a new social bloc — including the conventional industrial working class, whose credibility in its quest for power would be immeasurably enhanced, because its constituents could actually run the economy. In effect, as opposed to Nicos Poulantzas’s thesis that the technical

intelligensia was part of a new petty bourgeoisie, a formulation that paralleled C. Wright Mills' notion of the New Middle Class, Gorz was arguing for a "new working class" grounded in the actual transformation of the productive forces. His and Mallet's prognosis was partially vindicated the following year by the May, 1968 events in Paris, many of whose protagonists were students and members of this new "class." It is important to recall that the rebellion against the De Gaulle regime was marked not only by street fighting, but also by factory occupations in which professional and technical workers played a prominent role. In the context of some of these occupations, questions were raised about who should own and control the means of production, not as a political slogan but as a practical possibility. These conversations did not end with the tragic outcome of the revolt; a compromise with the Gaullists, which led to students and workers vacating the streets and taking control over their workplaces. In any case, Gorz's work was studied and debated in New Left circles, and had a certain caché in the sociologies of technology and work.

But even as some in the United States, Britain and Germany were considering the "long march through the institutions" — a phrase invented by the German New Left theorist, Rudy Dutschke, who held views similar to Gorz's position — Gorz himself derived new lessons from the May events. His self-criticism of *Strategy for Labor* was that it failed to anticipate the "explosion" of popular protest and its revolutionary potential that was ignited in many "advanced" Western societies and in Mexico in 1968; and in 1969, the year of the "hot" Italian autumn during which the slogan and practice of the "refusal to work" animated mass strikes at Fiat and other industrial workplaces. The illusion of self-management underestimated what he came to believe was the totalitarian character of capital's factory: that it is not subject to reform. Inspired by the Italian movement, **Workers Power**, in the 1970s and 1980s Gorz wrote several books that announced the reality of the "prison" factory and advocated for a labor strategy, not one of workers' control but of less work, a militant plea for shorter hours in order to free workers from the prison. Finally, in one of his more widely read books, drawing conclusions from his studies of the steady recomposition of the working class and its virtual disappearance as a radical, let alone as a revolutionary force, under the weight of technological change and globalization, he published *Adieu Proletariat (Farewell to the Working Class* [1981]) and a companion volume, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work* (1983). His last important work was an account of Green politics as the most promising social movement that might lead to fundamental political transformation.

I mourn Gorz's death because at a time of my own life when I was in search of alternatives to liberalism and dogmatic Marxism, I found his work incredibly refreshing and always thought of him as the French C. Wright Mills, but with greater political punch. I was fortunate to have met him on several occasions when he came to New York and saw him again in Paris when I taught there in 1976. One event stands out: in 1969, the first incarnation of the Socialist Scholars Conference, which began in 1966 and expired four or five years later, sponsored a meeting at Town Hall in New York City. It was organized by the Left entrepreneur Ralph Schoeneman, and was to have featured two international stars of the period: Gorz and the Belgian, Ernest Mandel, who was the leader of the world's largest Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International. Mandel was also an important Marxist political economist, whose *Late Capitalism* was, perhaps, the most important synthetic work of Marxism of the period. His two-volume *Marxist Economic Theory* became a textbook for the burgeoning radical economics movement in the US. He had also written extensively and perceptively on workers self-management, in the spirit of the transitional program. The State Department refused to grant Mandel a visa, so Schoeneman set up a piped-in speech by Mandel. Gorz showed up with a heavy cold and said he could not speak. For some strange reason, he designated me as his representative. To a packed auditorium of fifteen hundred spirited leftists, I delivered a Gorzian address and went out to eat with him and others after the meeting. By 1976, Gorz's earlier exuberance had been considerably tempered by the French political scene that he saw as having returned to "normal" jockeying among the major parties. But he was impressed by the Italians and began his long journey toward, first, revolutionary socialism and, then, radical Green politics.

Gorz was born Gerard Horst of wealthy Austrian parents. He adopted the nom de plume "Gorz" to assuage his parents' objections to his left politics, but also to smooth his integration into the French intellectual and journalistic scene. In the end, ill and in political despair, he and his wife committed suicide, a tragic conclusion to a rich and varied life as a political intellectual with few peers.

Stanley Aronowitz