

# To Get Rid of the Signified: An Interview with Jacques Bouveresse

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Knox Peden (KP): To start, could you say something about the origin of your participation in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*?

Jacques Bouveresse (JB): That's a little difficult. First of all, these things are really distant from me now and my memories are a little imprecise. At the time, we were a team, a gang – I'm not sure how I should put it – who found ourselves together at rue d'Ulm.<sup>1</sup> But I held a position that was, I think, already very marginal in many ways, because I had started to study Wittgenstein. I was very interested in analytic philosophy. I had begun to learn mathematical logic very seriously and had begun teaching in 1966. So I was an assistant at the Sorbonne then – it was still called Sorbonne at the time – teaching mathematical logic. I was surrounded by people whose interests were for the most part, let's say, very different. There were extremely committed Heideggerians, in the style of French Heideggerianism, that is to say, Heideggerians whom we could say without any exaggeration were more than sectarian, generally more sectarian than German Heideggerians. It is a French phenomenon, a type of Heideggerian idolatry. So there were Heideggerians, and then there was also what we could call structuralism, of course here I'm using the term extremely generally.

But inside this structuralist constellation, the dominating force was really 'Lacano-Althusserianism', which was a phenomenon that was born around this time. I had myself just arrived at the ENS in 1961 and I already kept a distance from all this. I mean 'Lacano-Althusserianism' was a rather surprising phenomenon. It was born from Althusser's encounter with psychoanalysis, first, and then more precisely with Lacan. And I think we can date this meeting with some precision: I think the beginning of all this was Jules Vuillemin's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, which must have been in 1962, if I remember correctly. There – I see it as if it were yesterday – at the exit, Althusser says, 'Lacan is here, I should go talk to him'. Lacan had attended this inaugural lecture of Vuillemin, who was already an exception. He was already at that point very interested in logic and he was in the middle of working on his monumental work, the *Philosophy of Algebra*; he may have already published the first volume.<sup>2</sup> He was among those who had truly started to introduce logic and a philosophy inspired by logic into France – at the same time that Granger did so; they were the two big exceptions of the time. Althusser had been at the ENS at the same time as Vuillemin. Vuillemin, Althusser, and Granger were more or less the same age. They knew each other well, and Vuillemin and Granger had been students of Jean Cavaillès. Vuillemin explained to me once that, 'to do what I have done', i.e. to work on the philosophy of logic, the philosophy of mathematics, 'that's the least you can do when you had Cavaillès as a teacher'. So there was a legacy that was transmitted to them.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rue d'Ulm' is the street on which the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) is located, and often serves as its metonymic stand-in.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Vuillemin, *La Philosophie d'algèbre, t. 1: recherches sur quelques concepts et méthodes d'Algèbre Moderne* (Paris: PUF, 1962, second edition, 1993).

That's to describe a bit of the context. I took up a role that was complicated and a bit unstable since I was already in some regards very far from all this. I remember having attended Derrida's course, which was called 'The Idea of Ontology in Husserl and Heidegger,' and most of us left with a headache. Most of the people who found themselves in the Cercle d'Épistémologie could not stand this sort of philosophy and we couldn't really understand it. We found it completely irrational. In the Heideggerian context, science, which is very significant for me, was treated, to put it as mildly as possible, in a very contemptuous way. So these were the kinds of things that were ignored, and especially the human sciences, at the moment that they had in fact become very important. The Heideggerians were livid about the human sciences at the very moment that they had, on the contrary, become extremely important. This was the moment when linguistics had become very fashionable, anthropology too. So linguistics meant Saussure, Hjelmslev and Jakobson, who were not in fact the most representative figures of linguistics. I don't think they are. Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* was published in 1959. We should have been interested in this, but of course we did not discover it until much later.

KP: So it was the Cercle d'Épistémologie who asked you to participate?

JB: Yes, yes, they asked. I no longer remember whether it was Miller or Milner or both of them. You will have noted the '*liminaires*' [introductions], as they were called; we called them the '*limilners*' in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, which were written by Miller and Milner most of the time. I found them almost incomprehensible. They were written in a language that was so hermetic, so precious. I think that there was a respect for what I did or what they thought that I did. I remember clearly that what interested me at the time was Wittgenstein and Frege, and other similar authors. Not so much French epistemology but, well, we will speak about this later, because it is an important aspect of the problem. So again they probably asked me to participate in the Cercle because I was interested in logic and epistemology and because perhaps they were really convinced that there were things to be done in this domain and maybe I was capable of doing them. But my participation remained completely formal, because I don't remember having participated in the meetings of the Cercle. Did they even have meetings? I don't really know.

KP: I noticed that in the volumes of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* themselves, your name is always listed with the Cercle d'Épistémologie, but never with the editorial board.

JB: Yes, I think – obviously we must distrust our memoirs – I believe I never participated either in a meeting of the Cercle d'Épistémologie or of the editorial board.

KP: You spoke a little bit about the role of Heidegger, of Heideggerian idolatry and it's clear that in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* there's a critique of phenomenology from beginning to end. But at the same time we know that Cavaillès's engagement with phenomenology cannot be reduced to a complete rejection. There were also others like Suzanne Bachelard, Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Granger, Vuillemin, who continued to engage in the project of Husserl, if not Heidegger, in the fifties and sixties. So there was a difference at the heart of French phenomenology itself.

JB: I would say that it was Suzanne Bachelard above all; she was the one who understood Husserl very well.<sup>3</sup> Our paths crossed in 1965, passing the *agrégation*; she had given a course on Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, a text that she knew very well. Ten years later it became difficult to find someone who could give a good course on *Logical Investigations*, in part because Heidegger had supplanted Husserl, especially the early Husserl. The later Husserl was relatively well known, thanks to Ricoeur and Derrida. But the early Husserl is still classical, and shares many common points with analytic philosophy; this did not escape people like Gilbert Ryle for example. This Husserl had already started to become less known. So Suzanne Bachelard had a very good knowledge of Husserl. Vuillemin and Granger also, but they had a much more critical position.

KP: Similar to Cavaillès's position, I imagine.

JB: They were even more critical than Cavaillès. As for Desanti, it's obvious; his thesis was called *Les Idéalités mathématiques*,<sup>4</sup> a truly phenomenological title. So clearly there's a whole lineage here that's interesting, because Vuillemin had succeeded Merleau-Ponty at the Collège de France, when Merleau-Ponty died in 1961. Actually, there's not really anything like a succession at the Collège de France. The fact is that we passed from a philosopher like Merleau-Ponty, who was probably the best representative of French phenomenology, to something fundamentally different, which meant a more emphatic opening toward the Anglo-Saxon world, to logic. So I think Suzanne Bachelard was the one who remained closest to phenomenology. I had many discussions with her, which was not always very easy because she had difficulties with analytic philosophy. They all had problems with it, but she had the most. For example, she had an enormously difficult time in accepting the idea that Bertrand Russell might be a great philosopher. She found him dull.

There was this idea that philosophy was a literary discipline, that it ought only to concern writers, those who knew how to write. This was an extremely important difference. The style, the mode of writing counted infinitely more for French philosophers than for Anglo-Saxon philosophers. I am not saying that it doesn't count at all because there were analytic philosophers, Anglo-Saxons as we say, who were great writers. Quine for example has a remarkable style. But Carnap didn't, neither in English nor in his own language. So Suzanne Bachelard had real difficulty reading this sort of philosophy and she found it a little puerile, a bit simplistic. As for me, this surprises me still. I find the kind of philosophy done by people like Bertrand Russell to be anything but puerile. Actually, it's extremely difficult most of the time. It was a bit like Poincaré. We have the impression the he is very easy when we read him. He wrote in superb French, very clear, but when we see what is going on in the background...

So, we remained at a stage where a truly French tradition dominated. What this meant was that we were interested in a number of foreign authors, but most of the time these foreign authors were German and very rarely English or American. This ties in to a phenomenon that I have described often, because it really struck me. After the end of the Second World War, it was obvious, or it should have been, that the centre of gravity of philosophy had changed in a spectacular way as a result of the emigration. Practically all the best minds of that generation had left Germany or Central Europe, Austria, Poland, etc. Gödel and many more, Carnap, Popper. And they found themselves either

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Suzanne Bachelard, *A Study of Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic* [1957], trans. Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), see Idem., *La Conscience de la rationalité: étude phénoménologique de la physique mathématique* (Paris: PUF, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Toussaint Desanti, *Les Idéalités mathématiques: recherches épistémologiques sur le développement de la théorie des fonctions des variables réelles* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).

in England or the United States, a few started again in Australia and New Zealand. Or actually, I believe New Zealand was a little different.

It was a bit paradoxical because I was a Germanist by training and I was enormously interested in German literature. I even thought about passing my *agregation* in German. And all of a sudden, just as I started to do so – I didn't know English at the time – I learned English to read Anglophone philosophers. I was immediately struck. I felt like I'd found just what I needed, namely philosophers that I understood. In fact I understood them rather well except for what concerned the technicalities of logic. This was obviously something that people like us didn't know anything about. We had to learn everything. So I started to become interested in this and it turned out that, for reasons we'll have to consider more closely, formal logic was something that also interested many Lacanians and Lacan himself. In 1970-71, I had done a French translation of Carnap's *The Logical Syntax of Language*, which had never been published and will no doubt be published soon. Well, I hope that this will happen in the next year. Gallimard has agreed to publish it.<sup>5</sup> But you see the point. We practically had to wait forty years for this translation to be published. This means that there really has been an important transformation, and it took a long time, this realization that there are some things really worth knowing in philosophy written in English. You should know too that I still hear it said, fairly recently, by people who are not idiots, that English is not really a philosophical language. I also heard people like Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who were Derridians, say that philosophy is not to be done in English, or something like that. At a given moment, it was done in Greek, then in Latin; in the seventeenth century, it was done in French and then, well, it was German that took over. This was how things were.

KP: In an interview with Jean-Jacques Rosat, you said that there is an almost nationalist element in philosophy of science in France and in particular with the Althusserians.<sup>6</sup> There's the need to 'buy French'. It's obvious that they were very interested in Canguilhem and Bachelard.

JB: Absolutely. There was a French tradition in epistemology that supposedly represented the only epistemology worthy of the name. In certain respects, Bachelard was thought to have created epistemology, thanks to what we call the 'epistemological break'. But before him there were many extraordinarily important authors, Poincaré, Duhem, Meyerson. For example, we are rediscovering Meyerson, people have started rereading Émile Meyerson, who is remarkable. But here in this situation, there is the application of a familiar Althusserian schema, which is to say that a science begins to exist due to an epistemological break. Galileo had created dynamics due to a break of this sort. Darwin had created...you get the idea. There was this succession of epistemological breaks, which marked the start of a new science each time, and epistemology was the product of a creation of this sort. But this is a French phenomenon, which is to say that there really should have been a few Germans deserving of reference. In any case, all those who were referenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition were excluded. So in a general way, all the scientists, what was called the spontaneous epistemology of the scientists, was generally considered as totally not worthy of interest. This meant that the contributions made by authors such as Helmholtz, Mach, Boltzmann, or Poincaré himself, were considered to be of very little interest. Well this was what interested me. I had already begun, for example, to read Boltzmann, whose philosophical and

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* [1934], trans. Amethe Smeaton (London: Kegan Paul, 1937). As of November 2011, Carnap's volume remains unpublished in French.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe et le réel: entretiens avec Jean-Jacques Rosat* (Paris: Hachette, 1998).

epistemological work is still quite unknown. I had already begun to read Hertz, Hertz's *The Principles of Mechanics*, which was published in 1894. The introduction to this book is a true classic in epistemology. And at the time it was almost impossible to convince anyone that this sort of thing could count as epistemology.

This was very curious because this was a recent phenomenon. Bachelard would not have reacted like this. Bachelard knew Mach for example, whom he held in high regard. He would not have spoken like Althusser's students. It's the same with Popper. This is also a fascinating phenomenon. When Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* was translated, it had a preface by Jacques Monod, who opened with something like, 'here, finally, is this powerful book translated into French'. Monod was surprised that people were not interested in this book sooner, rather paying attention to what he called 'the most obscure extravagances of German metaphysics'. In other words, the references of French philosophy remained turned toward what we called the 'the blue line of the Vosges', i.e. Germany.<sup>7</sup> We may think that Monod was wrong, but the fact is that we had our eyes fixed on Germany. As for Germany, that meant Heidegger. He was at any rate the only philosopher of calibre who remained. Practically all the others were gone. Cassirer had died. I don't remember when Husserl died, but he was no longer really part of the discussion as people considered him to have been supplanted by Heidegger. In short, the reactions to publishing Popper were surprising. Canguilhem for example, whom I knew quite well, was indignant. He asked me, 'But why translate this book? What reason is there for translating this book? What we have in France is much better.' He meant Bachelard. I told him, 'Listen, if this book contains things that you and others don't agree with, you can express your disagreement. But these sorts of books need to be translated. It needs to be known, needs to be read, it needs to be discussed.'

This is to describe the climate, which was a climate that was extremely difficult and that was hard for me to support, because I was caught in a desperate battle of trying to persuade people. I don't mean that I was persuading people that Popper was right; no, I was simply persuading them to open his books, to go look at what Popper had really said. I believe I was the first to publish an article on Popper in a French newspaper. I think that that was in 1974, in *Le Monde*. They requested an article on Popper and I managed to get it done. It was even accepted without being truncated, because they wanted to cut it. I said, 'No, come on, we never talk about Popper. We need to make more of an effort.' They tried but the general mindset was basically as follows: Popper was thought to be a more subtle positivist, and thus more dangerous than the members of the Vienna Circle. Marxists saw him in this way, for example. He was more dangerous in their eyes, because the theory of falsifiability had the appearance of being more plausible, more acceptable. So we must take stock of the fact that Popper's situation was not that much better than Carnap's. It was even worse in certain ways. Then all of a sudden everything changed. I don't remember exactly when, at the beginning of the 80s or around then, all of a sudden Popper became practically fashionable. Carnap never became fashionable. In my view, Carnap is one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. But he was not at all thought of in this way in France. In general, he was thought of as a narrow-minded positivist, *grosso modo*.

So that was the state of mind. But it's more complicated than you'd think at first with the Cercle d'Epistémologie, because they had a certain respect for logic and formalism that they separated, or rather that they found convenient to separate in every possible way, from the philosophy it could have been in dialogue with. The philosophy of the Vienna Circle was something that was categorically rejected and then there was

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<sup>7</sup> The expression '*la ligne bleue des Vosges*' was used by the French premier Jules Ferry in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 as a reminder that Alsace, on the other side of the line, was in Germany.

modern logic, in the end, mathematics and the use to which they put it. The use they made of it was one thing, but there was also logic, its possibilities and the possibility of employing it in a completely different way, for example what Lacan had tried to do. But that's a whole chapter that we'd have to talk about, because Lacan had shown the greatest respect for logic, for mathematics, but it must be said that he didn't know much about it.

KP: For Lacan, as for the editors of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, the interest in logic was inseparable from formalism and the search for precise forms. In the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, there was an accent put on the 'singular', the singular of *the* logic of the signifier, for example. But the question of formalism was much larger than linguistics. In any case, it's clear in your contributions on Fichte and Wittgenstein that you were criticising the accent on singularity and the primacy of a certain form of discourse.

JB: Yes, you're right. I had developed the habit of looking instinctively at original texts, which is to say that each time I formulated a judgment on a philosopher my initial reaction was suspicion and I always had to go read the texts. I did this with Hilbert, for example, because I wanted to understand what exactly formalism in mathematics was. And as soon as one does this, one notices that the discourse that one takes it to be most of the time came from people who don't have an idea of what real mathematical formalism is. Take, for example, the controversy between formalism and intuitionism in philosophy and mathematics, the great controversy between Hilbert and Brouwer; people did not really know about this.

But then there was an idea that was strictly associated with structuralism, the idea that one should be interested in the signifier and in the play of signifiers and forget the signified. Well, I schematize a bit, I simplify things, but let's say that people were very opposed at the time to any apparently Platonist theory of signification. The dream was even to get rid of the signified. This explains why someone like Lacan was interested in Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language*. Because Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language* defended a point of view that was rigorously syntactic and claimed that we can pass over semantics, or more precisely that syntax is capable of providing a theory of signification which would be all that we'd need as a theory of signification. Now this may seem surprising and paradoxical, but I think that the mentality of these structuralists was often not too far from this. Basically, they would have loved to get rid of the notion of signification and this was what Derrida had started to do, in another way, with the idea of deconstruction. The signified had to be deconstructed. And if you deconstructed the signified, what effectively remained was the signifier and then the more or less serious or frivolous games that we can try to play with the signifier. So, if you like, this might partially explain this interest in formalism.

You mentioned the two articles that I published. To explain a bit about what's happening in the Fichte article (CpA 6.7), it was taken from what was at the time called a *diplôme d'études supérieures*<sup>8</sup> on the legal and political philosophy of Fichte, under the direction of Raymond Aron. And to give you a sense of how strange this situation was, I did it at Althusser's recommendation. But the specific idea of working on Fichte came from Vuillemin. Vuillemin had given a course at the ENS in 1961-1962, if I remember correctly, and he explained to us that much remained to be done on legal philosophy, on Fichte's political philosophy. Many texts were not translated at the time, by the way. I worked principally on German texts. And at this time, I was still very close to German philosophy. I had begun discovering Wittgenstein a little bit. I think the *Tractatus* was translated in 1961. So some of us read it; we understood *nothing*. And

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<sup>8</sup> The *diplôme d'études supérieures* is roughly equivalent to a masters thesis.

when I say nothing, I mean nothing. We did not understand the least bit of logic. It was not complex logic, not difficult logic, but we didn't have the minimal logic that was required. We totally lacked the background in the tradition that was necessary to understand what was going on. Frege was an author with whom we were not, so to speak, familiar. Claude Imbert had begun to translate him, but I can still say that we weren't familiar with him, and if we had read him, I doubt we would have had the means to understand him. It was a universe that was completely foreign. But I had already effectively begun; I was already drawn by Wittgenstein. I more or less had a premonition that he was a truly important philosopher. At any rate, it was the style of those in charge of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* to contact people who had completed theses on an interesting subject, and to invite them to write an article and publish it. Knowing that I had completed a thesis on a subject that was, basically, little studied, and was relatively unknown, as not much had been published on legal philosophy and the political philosophy of Fichte, this is what they did with me in the case of Fichte.

In the case of Wittgenstein, I don't remember if it was they or I who proposed it, but what happened was that *Die Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, [*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*] was published in 1967. So I took this book out from the library of the ENS – in principle, they purchased books as soon as they appeared – and I was basically dumbfounded, literally. The fact was that this book did not resemble anything that I was used to in the philosophy of mathematics. This was someone who said that 'the quarrel of realism and formalism in mathematics such as it had occurred is of no interest. This will disappear very soon and there are other things to be done in the philosophy of mathematics, e.g. the clarification of the grammar of mathematical statements' etc. In any case, you know all this, but to me this was a novelty, a considerable novelty. So, at the time the book was fairly poorly received. There were two aspects of the philosophy of Wittgenstein – the philosophy of mathematics and anthropology – and they did not really interest many people. And yet, these were the two things that, to the contrary, interested me the most. So, taking up the philosophy of mathematics, I wrote this article, with the means of interpretation that were at my disposal, which weren't really too well developed (CpA 10.9). Today, I'd like to think I'd be capable of doing better than that, but I had a certain credit for what I did at the time. And this totally interested the people in the Cercle d'Épistémologie, because obviously this was philosophy of mathematics. It was Wittgenstein, so it must be said that he enjoyed a great prestige, and I must say that this was largely due to his enigmatic character. So it totally worked. An important philosopher ought to be surrounded by an aura of mystery. An immediately accessible philosopher like Carnap doesn't interest people. Yes, Suzanne Bachelard's reaction was a bit like this. Philosophy should be a little impenetrable.

KP: We might say that Heidegger and Wittgenstein are alike in this way.

JB: Sure, why not. They share something in this point of view, absolutely, in this same category of history – but still, extremely different. But you are right, on this point, there is an analogy. And I think that Wittgenstein has been recognized more easily and has been perceived more easily as a continental philosopher than Carnap for example; there is no comparison. People may not know him very well, but in the *Tractatus* there are these final propositions, all the same: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. This really excited people. There was the question of metalanguage.

For example, there's an article by Blanchot that I have cited somewhere, I think in *La Rime et la raison*,<sup>9</sup> on metalanguage as it concerned Wittgenstein where he says,

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein: La Rime et la raison – science, éthique, et esthétique* (Paris: Minuit, 1973).

'Ah yes, Wittgenstein is very good because he demonstrates that there is no metalanguage.' Well this enormously excited Lacan. But this obviously all rested on an approximate understanding of what Wittgenstein had really said. With Blanchot this was clear. With Lacan, this was less clear but no less true. In short, you see that there were all these ambiguities. So I think that a large part of what intrigues you was constructed from ambiguities, almost misunderstandings. The Cercle d'Épistémologie was interested in Wittgenstein, and I was too, but it is clear that we were not at all investigating the same thing.

KP: Your critical position in this regard is evident in your contributions. I'm thinking in particular of your epigraph taken from Alain that you chose for your article on Fichte.

JB: It's good that you mentioned this because I was just thinking of it. I wondered: would they accept it? 'It is certain, in the light of [Kant's] Critique, that socialism as a party depends on this initial error of wanting to go from the concept to existence.' I figured, given the mindset of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, that they were not going to tolerate this, especially because Alain was an extremely religious philosopher. Be he also incarnated French radicalism. And so, they accepted it, they left the thing as it was.

KP: And then in your article on Fichte when you speak of 'the misadventure of analytic reason', we have a kind of 'immanent critique' of the project.

JB: Yes, so I remained absolutely marginal. I took no account of what we might call the underlying ideology of the Cercle. It's true. I was interested in two authors, Wittgenstein and Fichte, and I wrote exactly what I wanted, what I thought about them, without the least bit of pressure to revise.

KP: Another question on formalization. It's clear that there was a transformation over the course of the existence of the *Cahiers*. It seems to me that at the beginning there were two tendencies, one toward formalization, toward abstraction, and another effort toward reconciling formalization with the vital and affective concepts found in psychoanalysis. I think of André Green, for example. But it's clear that in the end, formalism was dominant. But even there your articles can be read as exposés of the *aporia* of formalism. And this is striking because your article on Wittgenstein appeared in the same volume as Alain Badiou's 'Marque et Manque' (CpA 10.8) which is also a critique of Miller in his use of mathematical formalism. It's clear, even at the time, that you and Badiou had taken different positions on mathematics. But in any case, it's striking to see you and Badiou so close like this, for the first and last time, I imagine.

JB: Yes, probably. But here we should emphasize that Badiou had and still has a real understanding of mathematics, which Miller obviously didn't have; this is absolutely clear. Badiou has written books that have really shocked me, for example his book on the concept of model, which made a lot of noise.<sup>10</sup> Here there was a failure to understand Carnap. There was a sort of hatred against Carnap, which was really representative of the time. Not only did he incarnate positivism, but technocratic capitalism too – something close to this. There were even those who went so far as to place bourgeois logic to one side, and then, on the other, true logic, or the good one. So there was at once this interest in formal logic alongside a considerable suspicion with respect to its representatives for political reasons. First of all, most of the time these representatives belonged to the Anglo-Saxon world, the American world. And basically

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Concept of Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics* [1969], trans. and ed. Zachary Luke Fraser and Tzuchien Tho (Melbourne: re.press, 2007).



the American world was capitalism, technocracy, and all that. One should not forget that we were judged according to this sort of criteria, not really on what we wrote or more precisely on the content of what we wrote.

For example, each time things started to change, when it became possible from time to time to publish these authors, these representatives of analytic philosophy, or to write articles on them, the reaction provoked in certain French philosophical contexts, in the context of the most politicized context of French philosophy, was pretty much invariably: 'What is the political point of view behind this? What is the political background?' I'm not exaggerating; this was really what happened. They didn't say, 'What did they write?', 'What do they mean?', no, 'What is the political intention?'

KP: That's a Marxist tendency. And there was this course given by Althusser on the spontaneous philosophy of scientists where we find a variant of this analogical thought.<sup>11</sup> Althusser had greatly criticized phenomenology for borrowing theological concepts. That's the critique: this is nothing but theology. But at the same time his philosophy had borrowed concepts from the Marxist canon. The name 'materialism' is equivocal in this regard, the idea that, since proletarians are materialist in their practice, and I am with them, therefore my philosophy – or rather, my 'theoretical practice' – is 'materialist' also.

JB: Well, I knew Althusser very well and I had excellent relations with him because he was, speaking personally, extremely warm and not at all dogmatic. In fact, he invited Granger, Vuillemin, and me to the ENS. In 1966, I taught a course. So this didn't bother him at all. The dogmatism that is so characteristic of his disciples did not apply to him at all. He did not proselytize his philosophy, so to speak. But his disciples were another story. I found myself in the middle of these people, soldiers, if you like. They had a military conception of philosophy. We leave from the countryside and we launch waves of assault. This was the language used by Pierre Raymond, who worked on philosophy of mathematics. If we launch the first wave, and this isn't enough, we will launch a second wave. Whatever, but this scared me a little. Intellectually, they really were Stalinists. Well, they were hyper-intelligent Stalinists, how's that! I mean I rubbed shoulders with the most brilliant of this generation, intellectually speaking. Not necessarily serious, that's another thing. But brilliant, that they were.

There were disparities, as we just noted. Badiou, once again, was very competent on questions of formalism, of logic. This is clear. The others were not. So obviously these things are in *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* – the title itself was already really surprising. I mean, 'The zero is the lack'. Now that's a play on words, a 'pun'. That's it, nothing more, because there's nothing serious in this article that compares the problem of zero in Frege with lack in the Lacanian sense.

KP: But the argument of Miller is that yes indeed, there is a relationship between the two. It's precisely that zero is the mark of lack.

JB: Given that at the time I was in the process of reading Frege and doing so seriously, I had the feeling that Miller had really understood nothing. He didn't even really try. In the end, we could discuss this at length for it's always a problem knowing at what point we can judge an analogy absurd and unproductive. It's not easy. Most of time we do not know. We have a certain idea, we say that we can pull something out of one analogy, but out of another we can't.

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<sup>11</sup> Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and other essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1990).

KP: It's clear that you were troubled by these more or less precarious relationships between science and politics or ontology and politics. I know that you were marginal to project but do you think the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* is a living document today? What are its effects in your view?

JB: It's a little hard for me to respond. It's surely a living document, an extremely interesting document, from the point of view of cultural sociology at least. I think that it's an irreplaceable document. It was the sixties. Future generations will probably make use of it as one of the most characteristic phenomena of the time. As to what remains in terms of the content or substance, this is difficult to say. I said once, with regard to the behaviour of the Althusserians, that this had created above all bad philosophy, pseudoscience, and imaginary politics. Well, I think it was 'an imaginary politics'. I remember a discussion with Vuillemin. Vuillemin was justifiably surprised that one could call what they did political action, this procedure that consisted of tracing a line of demarcation between materialism and idealism.

But this was unbelievable, for they did this in a totally arbitrary way! For example they had decided that Husserl was not good because he was an idealist. Frege was good because he was a realist, *thus* a materialist, because Frege thought that, first there is being and then thought, something which arrives after and depends on being, and does not create it in any case. Obviously they forgot that Frege was a very reactionary thinker and even an anti-Semite – for as much as they knew it, because I don't know if they did know this. None of this had any importance. The members of the Vienna Circle like Carnap, Neurath, were all people on the left, in certain cases very much on the left. Carnap was called '*der rote Professor*', 'the red professor'. Well, I tried to tell them, 'Since what counts above all for you is politics, you might consider that these people here are not the ones to beat up on, these are not the enemies!' 'But yes, yes, yes!' Because, here again, they don't have science, they don't have good theory, etc. They might be right politically speaking, but by accident.

So my spontaneous reaction would be to say, there you go, what remains is relatively little. But in saying this, I feel like I'm committing an injustice. Because when we compare it with the current situation, it was a period that was extremely lively. An enormous number of things happened. We should take into account the fact that one of the reasons why I felt closer to them, a feeling that I would not have had spontaneously, was the distance with respect to the traditional university. We had a certain common point in that we were fed up with 'Sorbonne' philosophy – we were not the first because many other people have had this experience – and in my case the history of philosophy. This practice of philosophy that still largely exists in France consists, basically, of confounding philosophy with the history of philosophy. French philosophers are in general good historians of philosophy; they are often among the best in this domain. Gueroult, for example, was absolutely remarkable. I attended the final courses of Martial Gueroult at the Collège de France, in the 1970's, I think. I attended the last two years; I saw the book on Spinoza being written. And the election of Vuillemin to the Collège de France was made possible by Gueroult. It's Gueroult who invited Vuillemin to the Collège de France.

But my point was that I was personally very irritated and extremely disappointed by the philosophical education that one received at the Sorbonne. It was a surprising period. There were people like Vladimir Jankélévitch who taught moral philosophy, which I found simply to be rhetoric. There were also a great number of historians of philosophy, people like Maurice de Gandillac, who taught medieval philosophy. And then there were people on the other hand that I appreciated, like Raymond Aron. Politically speaking I was always diametrically opposed to Raymond Aron, but I knew him quite well. I still lunched with him a bit before the time of his death. Aron had a

chair in sociology but not in philosophy proper. What dominated was still metaphysics, the history of philosophy and I would say theology, because there was, there *is* in French philosophy an extremely tight relationship that is maintained between theology and philosophy and that subsists through people like Jean-Luc Marion, for example, who is really typical of the great Catholic philosophy and who has become an academician.<sup>12</sup> Well that, I was horrified of that. So there, in an instant, seen from this angle, I'd say '*Vive les Cahiers pour l'Analyse!*', without hesitation!

Translated by Tzuchien Tho.

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Marion was elected to the Académie Française, one of the highest honors for a French scholar, in 2008.