

Arno J. Mayer

# Breaking a Silence

In the Matter of Günter Grass

I met Günter Grass only once. In April 1966 Gruppe 47 held its twentieth anniversary conclave at Princeton University. Grass was a member of this loose association of German novelists, poets, and playwrights determined to renew their nation's literature and cleanse its language of its Nazi stain. They met twice yearly for three days, in private, to read and criticize one another's work-in-progress. Their forum had no particular literary orientation. But politically, besides excoriating Germany's Nazi past, they were sworn to support the infant Federal Republic (*Bundesrepublik*), albeit with a social democratic valence. With time, but by no means unanimously, members of Gruppe 47 took positions on contemporary issues and events: the Algerian war; the Soviet repression in Hungary in 1956; the Vietnam war; the construction of the Wall; the student rebellion.

At about 5:00 p.m. on the Thursday preceding the start of the group's three-day meeting at Princeton I received a phone call from Peter Weiss, author of *Marat/Sade*. Just the day before I had seen Peter Brook's breathtaking English-language production of this truly extraordinary play which was inspired by Bertold Brecht and was inspiring Tadeusz Kantor.

I was flustered upon hearing the live voice of my latest culture hero. Weiss insisted he needed to see me, urgently, before Saturday morning. I replied that I was ready to meet him any time, any place. Thereupon he told me that he and his colleagues

were still in New York and would not arrive in Princeton until 1:30 a.m., and he very much hoped I could see him at that ungodly hour.

His wish was my command. I drove to the Holiday Inn on Route One just outside Princeton. The motel's giant electric

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billboard flashed "Welcome Gruppe 47." Forewarned, the desk clerk pointed me to Weiss's room. The closer I came to the room the louder the shouting, in German, of discordant voices – at 1:45 a.m. At first I knocked, then pounded on the door. Forthwith Peter Weiss opened the door and bade me a hearty welcome. Almost apologetically he asked that I bear with him and his colleagues for a short while, long enough for them to wind up their discussion. Before resuming their shouting match, Weiss graciously introduced me to Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Günter Grass, and Reinhard Lettau, among others.

Princeton's invitation to the German men of letters included an understanding that the day following their closed-door forum they would participate in a one-day university conference on "The Writer in the

Affluent Society." But it was only upon their arrival in New York that they learned about the nature and tenor of this colloquium. In particular the more critical spirits among them were disconcerted when informed that it would bring together "a broad cross-section of corporate, foundation, governmental, and educational leaders." To boot, ever eager to bolster its high reputation, the University wanted its uncommon guests to know that the prospect of the meeting had generated requests by "media representatives in the country and abroad" to cover the proceedings, "including a request to tape the meeting for European television."

As for the "exchange of ideas," it would center on the changing role and place of writers in civil and political society. "In the past" their voice "carried a special authority," in that it "echoed the conscience of the race [sic] and has called forth the visions by which men live." Per contra, "in our century social and technological forces

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Arno Joseph Mayer wurde 1926 in Luxemburg geboren. Sein Vater, Frantz Mayer, gehörte zu den Begründern der zionistischen Bewegung im Großherzogtum. In der Nacht vom 9. auf den 10. Mai 1940 floh Arno Mayer mit seinen Eltern und Geschwistern ins Exil nach New York. Hier meldete er sich zur Armee und erhielt 1944 die amerikanische Staatsbürgerschaft. Seit 1961 lehrt er Geschichte an der Princeton University. Der engagierte Intellektuelle ist u. a. der Autor von: *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (1981), *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The "Final Solution" in History* (1988), und *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (2001). Der obenstehende Text, der hier zum ersten Mal abgedruckt wird, wurde im April 2012 verfasst.



Treffen der Gruppe 47 (1962)

have not merely jeopardized the writer's role as model and guide, but have sometimes condemned him to irrelevancy, or have made him, willing or reluctant, an instrument of the economic or political establishment." Indeed, today he is "flattered by the blandishment of public opportunity and personal rewards – cajoled by the enticements of status and security." The pressing question is whether "these rewards undermine the writer's independence of perception and judgment, or whether they contribute to his integrity and craft of driving him to seek new ways of life and expression *lying between detachment and protest*" [italics mine].

Peter Weiss, seconded by Enzensberger and Lettau, begged leave to suspect that what they had been led to believe would be an intellectual and cultural symposium was designed to be an ill-disguised political and media event. Weiss's worst suspicions were confirmed when he learned that William Phillips would chair the panel "The Pressures for Commitment: Art or Propaganda?", on which he was to speak. In 1934, with Philip Rahv, Phillips had founded *Partisan Review*, the official journal of the Communist John Reed Club. He edited this journal of literature, the arts, and politics while also serving as secretary of the club. Within two years, however, Phillips and Rahv defected from Communism, and *Partisan Review* fell silent until late 1937, when its editors turned it into one of the house organs of obsessive anti-Stalinists, Phillips and Rahv being emblematic of the host of would-be left-leaning

intellectual condottieri or renegades for whom the god had failed. During the early 1950s *Partisan Review* placed castigating the victims of the House Un-American Activities ahead of criticizing the rise and ravages of McCarthyism. And presently the editors, contributors, and fellow travelers of *Partisan Review* – like those of a

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**While Grimmelshausen was steeped in the horrors of the Thirty Years War of the Seventeenth Century, Grass was immersed in those of the Thirty Years War of the Twentieth Century**

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raft of kindred magazines worldwide – reflexively and pseudo-innocently signed on to the anti-Communist crusade of the government-subsidized and-informed Congress for Cultural Freedom.

The noise and shouting in the motel room was fired by a rift in Gruppe 47 between those who favored blinking at the symposium's false pretense and those determined not to pocket the affront, even if unintended. Weiss, Enzensberger, and Lettau said loud and clear that they could not square it with their conscience to participate in Monday's politically charged conference without expressing their solidarity with Princeton's anti-Vietnam dissidents. Most of their colleagues would not hear of any such *démarche*. In the words of Günter Grass, their chief spokesman: "Man spuckt nicht in die Suppe seines Gast-

gebers" – "You do not spit in your host's soup." A passionate admirer of his *Blechtrommel* and *Hundejahre*, as well as his political engagements, even if occasionally overly prudent for my taste, I wistfully watched Grass storm out of the room.

Once we were alone Weiss came straight to the point: You *must* organize a teach-in or else a few of us will boycott not the readings but the conference. Though on such short notice, he was asking the impossible, I promised to move heaven and earth.

By noon Sunday I presented Peter Weiss with a line-up of a teach-in on "Vietnam: An International Forum," to be held Wednesday night. In an opening talk Stuart Hampshire, a British subject, would give a philosophic reason for this unexpected but providential occasion. The other speakers: Susan Sontag, Eric Bentley, Leslie Fiedler, Peter Weiss, Reinhard Lettau, Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

With the help of the *Daily Princetonian* and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) word of the teach-in spread like wildfire on campus, and beyond. At the same time a credible rumor circulated that in order to avoid a political brouhaha several senior faculty members and university officials were looking for a way to cancel the conference without embarrassing Princeton's guests and casting the university in a bad light. But the train(s) had left the station...

Wednesday night, it was standing room only in McCosh 10, the university's second



Skizze vom jungen Günter Grass  
(©New Chemical History)

largest lecture hall. Having just read Svend Ranulf's *Moral Indignation and Middle Class Psychology* (1964) Susan Sontag propounded that "indignation is not enough." I do not recall the thrust of the other speakers' presentations. But I clearly remember the gist of Peter Weiss's opening remarks. He claimed he had to lock arms with America's anti-Vietnam resistance because we, in turn, will need your help to prevent the German *Bundeswehr* (Federal Defense Force), a proud member of NATO, from acquiring nuclear weapons and medium-range missiles. At that very moment Günter Grass, the collar of his trench coat upright and his hat pulled over his forehead, entered through the center door in the back of the auditorium. He snuck out through the same door the very instant Weiss finished his talk.

Why this long *megillah*? Günter Grass was – is – a man of many seasons, and as an adult, always his own man. To be sure, as a teenager, at age 17, Grass was conscripted into an anti-aircraft unit of the Waffen SS, for some an unpardonable cardinal sin. Yet he went on to write *Die Blechtrommel* (1959), largely written in Paris, and *Hundejahre* (1963). In both historically saturated novels he wrestled with the problem of collaboration and resistance under the Nazi regime without an iota of either sympathy or exoneration for the Third Reich. In fact, the Nazi era terri-

fied, haunted, and obsessed him all these years. He spoke of himself as belonging to "the Auschwitz generation, to be sure not as a criminal, but in the camp of the criminals." And judging by his literary oeuvre and steadfast political engagements, Grass neither could nor would think of the emergent Federal Republic as an immaculate conception, relieved of the burdens and washed of the sins of Germany's barbarous and heinous past. In *The Tin Drum*, *The Dog Years*, and *The Diary of a Snail* (1972) he explores the horrors of World War Two, including the persecution of the Jews. Rather than drive home the enormity of the Judeocide in cold and abstract concepts and quantitative measures he tries to capture its human inhumanity by recounting the Nazi destruction of the synagogue and expulsion of the Jews of Danzig, Grass's native city. He also faces up to Crystal Night.

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**It speaks volumes that critical intellectuals like Günter Grass and Régis Debray kept their silence on the Arab-Israeli conflict for as long as they did**

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Grass himself claimed that his narrative fiction is "from the bottom upwards," and this largely because he did not write "from the victor's position" – he had read Walter Benjamin – and meant not to write "over people's heads." Indeed, Grass gave voice not to people "who make history" but to those to whom "history happens": those who are "victims and culprits; opportunists and fellow travelers; those who are hunted." And he, like Brecht, followed in the footsteps of Grimmshausen's *Simplicissimus* (1668). While Grimmshausen was steeped in the events and horrors of the Thirty Years War of the Seventeenth Century (1618-1648), Grass was immersed in those of the Thirty Years War of the Twentieth Century (1914-1945) – Europe's two most barbarous and destructive conflicts. Indeed, Oskar Matzetrath, the central protagonist of *The Tin Drum*, is the soul mate of *Simplicissimus*, all the more so since the fabled yet real stories of both are informed by caustic satire and skepticism which often speak in forked tongues.

In addition to Grass's early "novels," notably *The Tin Drum*, gradually being recognized as classics of post-war European literature, he soon became one of Germany's leading and most controversial public intellectuals in the political arena. From the word go he was a free-thinking rather than kneejerk champion of post-war German Social Democracy, advocating a gradual and moderate domestic course. Presently, and for close to a decade, Grass became one of Willy Brandt's principal speech writers. With time he became increasingly critical of Germany's, including the SPD's, blind support of the U.S.-orchestrated Cold War and its attendant arms race. Ere long, Grass all but embraced the world view that had fired the intervention of Weiss, Enzensberger, and Lettau at Princeton. Having backed the German student revolt of 1966-68, he now opposed NATO's deployment of nuclear weapons and intermediate-range missiles in the Federal Republic. He also criticized America's Nicaraguan and Cuban policy. In sum, he was in tune with much of the European left that, in latter-day Bandung fashion, vainly kept looking for a third way between that proposed by the two opposing super powers and their respective socio-economic systems. While Grass fully supported Brandt's *Ostpolitik* he feared that a Western-led conservative reunification of the two Germanies would not only risk the rebirth of a military power in Central Europe but would most certainly inflict serious damage on East Germany's lively culture and infeedate its faltering economy. He pleaded for a social democratic Europe as over one prospering and trapped in a neo-liberal capitalist Western world.

The Günter Grass of the political poem "What Must Be Said" (2012) is being reviled and vilified not only for being anti-Semitic and anti-Israel but for having dared to think and speak outside the cold war paradigm. Like Sartre, but without ever awkwardly and however fleetingly "fellow-traveling" with Communism or the Kremlin, Grass persisted in speaking truth to power and seeking that ever-elusive third way. Incidentally, after being maligned for wartime collaboration, Sartre was also taken to task for his *Reflections on the Jewish Question* (1946) and the special

Grass' Gedicht im Wortlaut:

## Was gesagt werden muss

Warum schweige ich, verschweige zu lange,  
was offensichtlich ist und in Planspielen  
geübt wurde, an deren Ende als Überlebende  
wir allenfalls Fußnoten sind.

Es ist das behauptete Recht auf den Erstschatz,  
der das von einem Maulhelden unterjochte  
und zum organisierten Jubel gelenkte  
iranische Volk auslöschen könnte,  
weil in dessen Machtbereich der Bau  
einer Atombombe vermutet wird.  
Doch warum untersage ich mir,  
jenes andere Land beim Namen zu nennen,  
in dem seit Jahren – wenn auch geheimgehalten –  
ein wachsend nukleares Potential verfügbar  
aber außer Kontrolle, weil keiner Prüfung  
zugänglich ist?

Das allgemeine Verschweigen dieses Tatbestandes,  
dem sich mein Schweigen untergeordnet hat,  
empfinde ich als belastende Lüge  
und Zwang, der Strafe in Aussicht stellt,  
sobald er mißachtet wird;  
das Verdikt „Antisemitismus“ ist geläufig.  
Jetzt aber, weil aus meinem Land,  
das von ureigenen Verbrechen,  
die ohne Vergleich sind,  
Mal um Mal eingeholt und zur Rede gestellt wird,  
wiederum und rein geschäftsmäßig, wenn auch  
mit flinker Lippe als Wiedergutmachung deklariert,  
ein weiteres U-Boot nach Israel  
geliefert werden soll, dessen Spezialität  
darin besteht, allesvernichtende Sprengköpfe  
dorthin lenken zu können, wo die Existenz  
einer einzigen Atombombe unbewiesen ist,  
doch als Befürchtung von Beweiskraft sein will,  
sage ich, was gesagt werden muß.

Warum aber schwieg ich bislang?  
Weil ich meinte, meine Herkunft,  
die von nie zu tilgendem Makel behaftet ist,  
verbiete, diese Tatsache als ausgesprochene Wahrheit  
dem Land Israel, dem ich verbunden bin  
und bleiben will, zuzumuten.  
Warum sage ich jetzt erst,  
gealtert und mit letzter Tinte:  
Die Atommacht Israel gefährdet  
den ohnehin brüchigen Weltfrieden?  
Weil gesagt werden muß,  
was schon morgen zu spät sein könnte;  
auch weil wir – als Deutsche belastet genug –  
Zulieferer eines Verbrechens werden könnten,  
das voraussehbar ist, weshalb unsere Mitschuld  
durch keine der üblichen Ausreden  
zu tilgen wäre.

Und zugegeben: ich schweige nicht mehr,  
weil ich der Heuchelei des Westens  
überdrüssig bin; zudem ist zu hoffen,  
es mögen sich viele vom Schweigen befreien,  
den Verursacher der erkennbaren Gefahr  
zum Verzicht auf Gewalt auffordern und  
gleichfalls darauf bestehen,  
daß eine unbehinderte und permanente Kontrolle  
des israelischen atomaren Potentials  
und der iranischen Atomanlagen  
durch eine internationale Instanz  
von den Regierungen beider Länder zugelassen wird.

Nur so ist allen, den Israelis und Palästinensern,  
mehr noch, allen Menschen, die in dieser  
vom Wahn okkupierten Region  
dicht bei dicht verfeindet leben  
und letztlich auch uns zu helfen.

(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 4. April 2012)

1967 issue of *Temps Modernes* on "The Arab-Israeli Conflict."

Is it really too much to expect or ask that Grass's detractors recall that in December 1970 he was with Willy Brandt when, in Warsaw, the German Chancellor fell to his knees in front of the Memorial Monument to the heroes and victims of the ill-fated Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943? To all appearances, Brandt spontaneously knelt down, silently, his head bowed and hands folded, as an act of public and collective contrition. At the time over 40 % of all adult West Germans considered Brandt's *Kniefall* exaggerated if not humiliating. Thirty years later, in December 2000, Günter Grass was present, again, when German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Polish Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek dedicated a statue of Brandt in Willy Brandt Square in a corner of the park housing the Ghetto Heroes Monument. By then practically all of Europe recognized the authenticity and moral imperative of Brandt's spontaneous and silent gesture.

One need not be either an anti-Semite or a self-hating Jew to question the wisdom of the general thrust of Israeli policy at a time when not only the Greater Middle East but the entire world system is in headlong mutation. Perhaps Grass's *cri d'alarme* about the explosive Israeli-Iranian confrontation would have ruffled fewer feathers had he formulated it in the satirical key of either *The Mouse That Roared* or *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Except that aware of the ambiguity of cynically charged satire, in the political arena Grass's style is always altogether prosaic and direct. Most of what he says about the Israel-Iranian death dance or shared faith in Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) a few public intellectuals had said before, and many more were thinking along these same lines, silently, to themselves. Evidently Grass is not alone to consider that given one's origin, nationality, confession, or social habitus he or she had no right to speak frankly to this uniquely sensitive issue or else could do so only at the risk or cost of being suspected or traduced as an enemy of Israel and an anti-Semite.

*"But why have I kept silent till now?"*

*Because I thought my own origins,  
tarnished by a stain that can never be  
removed,  
meant I could not expect Israel, a land  
to which I am, and always will be,  
attached,  
to accept this open declaration of the truth."*

Few literati and intellectuals had the temerity to break what Grass calls their "silence." I only gradually woke up to this awkward reticence, nay self-censorship, on the Arab-Israeli conflict among my non-Jewish colleagues, even friends. But I did not begin to realize the extent of this iron curtain until the early dawn of this century. In September 2000 the "visit" of Ariel Sharon, one of the settlement movement's godfathers, to the Temple Mount prompted me to begin reading

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**The extent of Debray's actual  
influence on Mitterrand  
– and Grass's on Brandt –  
remains untold.**

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widely and closely in the history of Zionism and Israel. Presently I wrote a critical opinion piece in which I argued that the settlements and settlers were "The Crux of Peace in the Middle East." The concluding thought was that "if Israel does not want to continue eroding what remains of its diplomatic and moral capital it will have to turn to preparing the ground for the liquidation of all the settlements and the repatriation of all the settlers."

My efforts to have the article published in the U.S. having failed, I turned to *Le Monde*, which ran it on June 5, 2001. Since I was in France at the time, that very day Pierre Bourdieu called to invite me for lunch. No sooner had we drawn up to the table at the Brasserie Bofinger, near the Bastille, having read the article, Pierre averred that no doubt I could imagine what he would write on this subject if his name were "Bourdovsky, not Bourdieu." In our discussion of the wages of silence about the Arab-Israeli imbroglio he told me that shortly before his death Georges Duby, his colleague at the College de France, had sadly confessed that during his long life in the academy this was the only

subject he could not broach and discuss with his Jewish colleagues.

The following evening I dined at the home of a Jewish couple, both of them strong supporters of Israel, but the hostess perhaps somewhat less categorically so. During our animated discussion of the Middle East, Régis Debray, the only other guest, all but kept his own counsel. Later that evening, since we did not live too far from each other, Régis Debray and I walked part of the way together, with him pushing along his bicycle with his right hand. Almost instantly Debray raised the "silence" problem in identically the same terms as Bourdieu, insisting that it was one thing to debate, candidly, around a dinner table, as we had just done, but it was quite another to do so publicly, in print or on the air.

Some five years later, in October 2006, President Jacques Chirac asked Régis Debray to study and observe firsthand the problems and possibilities of "ethnic-religious coexistence" in the Middle East, most specifically in the Holy Land. Close to four months later, he submitted his report, with a separate section on the Arab-Israeli impasse. He stressed, above all, Israel's "thirty year annexation process" combined with the exponential growth of the number of settlements and settlers. On closer investigation Debray concluded that "the number of Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories had doubled from 1994 to 2000 and as many Israelis had settled on the West Bank since the Oslo accords of 1993 as in the previous 25 years." Debray noted that this mushroom growth of settlements was driven by Israel's "obsession with security," its leaders considering the country's "strategic border to lie on the Jordan." And everything pointed to their being determined to achieve this goal by the diplomatic tactic of "the fait accompli," by fair means or foul. As matters stood "the physical, economic, and human foundations for a viable Palestinian state were disappearing" and the "two-state solution" had become "an empty phrase."

Régis Debray thought he had broken his silence. But as things turned out, his findings were too extreme and his words too direct for the powers that be to make pu-



Régis Debray in Buenos Aires, 1970

blic his minute. Besides, on May 16, 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy succeeded Jacques Chirac at the Elysée. Rather than accept being muzzled and continue to hold his tongue Debray turned to writing a book about his missions which he dedicated to Chirac – and to François Maspero. Published in 2008, the book's title tipped his hand: *Un candide en Terre sainte (A Candide in the Holy Land)*. It tells the story of Debray's secular pilgrimage in the footsteps of Jesus, as suggested to him by Maspero. Whereas Jesus walked in the Judea and Galilee of the Gospels, Régis Debray's journey took him to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Gaza, Bethlehem, and Nablus, as well as Jordan, Egypt, Syria. To make his way he had to secure visas, pass check-points, and circumvent walls. His ingenuous chronicle is punctuated by the ambiguous satire-cum-cynicism of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Grass's *The Tin Drum*.

But Debray breaks the stride of his literary and philosophic narrative style at the point at which he tackles the Arab-Israeli quagmire, the panglossian counterpoint fading out. He notes Israel's security-driven and Western-supported expansion by settlement, erosion of its socialist and secular vocation, and the establishment of sovereign control over Jerusalem. In his reading this development is both cause and effect of mutual fear and competing victimhood between Israelis and Palestinians – the former fired up by the cult-like re-

membrance of the Holocaust, the latter by that of the Nakba. A non-believing Christian with by now “no religion other than the study of religions,” Debray questioned or feared for the long-term viability of the “valiant small Hebrew state,” even with its border along the Jordan and the support of the U.S. and E.U. And this because Israel, by far the stronger party, bears a heavy responsibility for the evisceration of the peace process, the negation of a two-state solution, and the immiseration of the Palestinians in “the territories which are at best Bantustan-like enclaves.” Grass and Debray are birds of a feather, and this despite their being a generation apart. Born in 1940 Debray was spared a conscious first-hand experience of the defeat of France, the Vichy regime, and the

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**For Grass and Debray to break the taboo of silence on the festering Arab-Israeli conflict was a natural outgrowth of their having fashioned themselves public intellectuals in the Sartrean mode [...]**

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German occupation. For both to break the taboo of silence on the festering Arab-Israeli conflict was a natural outgrowth of their having fashioned themselves public intellectuals in the Sartrean mode, except that they did not burn all their bridges to the reigning institutions of civil and political society.

In the 1960s and 1970s Debray emerged as one of France's most talented and quick-witted young intellectuals. His parents had been in the Résistance, his father to become a prominent lawyer, his mother a member of the Paris City Council. Régis studied at the elite École normale supérieure in the first half of the sixties. Specializing in philosophy, he sat, above all, at the feet of Louis Althusser, the singularly influential structuralist-cum-Gramscian Marxist. But Debray also had an ear cocked to Sartre's writings and political interventions. He cut his first “political” teeth on the Algerian war. Nineteen sixty-one was not only the year of the publication of Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, with Sartre's introduction speaking to the issue

of anti-colonial violence, but also of the U.S.-engineered but abortive invasion of the Bay of Pigs. The repressive imperial violence in both Algeria and Cuba fired widespread attention and opposition to the “First” World's continued or renewed domination of the “Third” World.

In 1959 Régis Debray spent a few weeks observing the infant revolution in Cuba first-hand. He was impressed by Castro's leadership and following his return to France joined the Communist Party for what turned out to be a brief spell. A convert to nascent *tiers mondisme*, in 1963-64 Debray traveled a year and a half in all but one – Paraguay – of Latin America's 20 countries. Back in Paris, in January 1965 he wrote an independent-minded analysis, influenced by Che Guevara's conception of guerrilla warfare, of what he had seen and learned on the ground: “Le castroïsme: la longue marche de l'Amérique latine.” Not accidentally his essay was published in Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*.

El Che, Castro's coadjutor, left Cuba in late 1966 to advise and fight with the guerrilla forces in Bolivia, where Régis Debray joined him in March 1967. Apparently he came as a journalist. Shortly after venturing into a remote zone of guerrilla operations in the foothills of the Andes, Debray, along with a couple of other journalists, was arrested or captured by the Bolivian security service acting in concert with the CIA. Presently he was charged with having collaborated with a guerrilla band and with acting as a liaison agent between Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He is also said to have been held incommunicado and tortured before being sentenced to 30 years in jail.

The harsh detention, sham indictment, and, finally, stern judgment fired up widespread indignation along with high-profile protests throughout the “advanced” world on behalf of Régis Debray. Not only Jean-Paul Sartre, André Malraux, Bertrand Russell, and Robert Lowell, among many other luminaries, made their voices heard, but even President Charles de Gaulle and Pope Paul VI, in roundabout ways, pleaded with the Bolivian government for clemency and a fair trial for the 26-year-old political and intellectual franc-tireur.



Jean-Paul Sartre um 1950

Largely thanks to this campaign Debray was set free after three years, in 1970. Unchastened, he went to Chile to study events in another way station on that “Long March in Latin America,” where Salvador Allende, a democratic Marxist, had just been elected president. He had several interviews with not only Pablo Neruda but Allende, who was under severe attack for his progressive social and economic policies. Debray did not leave for Paris until after the American-supported coup by General Augusto Pinochet had overthrown Allende and Allende, forlorn, had taken his own life.

In the meantime Debray had written and published *Revolution in the Revolution?*, a widely discussed and criticized analysis of the reason, strategy, and stratagem of the violent far-left upheavals in Latin America. Basically it was an expansion of his Castroism article which had advanced a critique of the Marxist-Leninist prescription for revolution in tandem with an essentially unspoken summons to counter America’s imperial reach in Latin America. Perhaps in the spirit of the conference of Asian-African nations in Bandung in 1955, Régis Debray was looking to chart a path of progressive, nay revolutionary, national liberation independent of both Moscow and Washington.

Debray argued that to continue the “Long March” the Latin American left, writ large, needed to take the insurrection of 1953-59 in Cuba rather than that in Petrograd in 1917 as its model. In Russia, and even in China, the proletariat had risen up, guided by a vanguard Communist Party. In Cuba the insurgency was carried by small bands of often leaderless rural guerrillas which grew into an army of exploited peasants which won support among the local peasantry as it fought and outsmarted the government’s better organized and equipped military and police forces.

Of course, cold reality caught up with Régis Debray’s roadmap. To survive Washington’s squeeze play, Castro turned to Moscow, while judging by the outcome in Bolivia and Chile the “Long March”

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**A man of his time, Debray hones in on the singularly omnipresent and invasive media which “trap” and seduce intellectuals, constricting the air and space for critical intellectuals**

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turned out to be so many stations on a way of the cross. All this transpired against the backdrop and in the context of the military, economic, social, and cultural Cold War. It was, after all, the time of the execution of Lumumba, the Berlin Wall, the Prague Spring, the Vietnam War, the lifetime imprisonment of Mandela, and the Arab-Israeli October War.

Of course Debray, unlike Grass, had missed the student revolt of May ’68. It was set off, in Paris, by a spontaneous and leaderless demonstration in support of the Vietnamese in the wake of the Tet Offensive. The police’s brutal repression of the swelling student protest generated broad support among blue- and white-collar workers which soon took the form of major factory occupations and wild strikes, nationwide. At first the leaders of France’s Communist party, nonplussed for being outflanked on the left, decided to stay on the sidelines. But once the party and its affiliated trade unions jumped into the fray, it not merely further radicalized and amplified the revolt but also scared a broad range of activists and sympathizers

who only yesterday had denounced and taunted the Communists for sitting on their hands.

Precisely because both the trans-European student revolt and the Latin American peasant insurrection were caught between the Scylla of spontaneity and the Charybdis of organization, in retrospect, and disenchanted by the outcome in Cuba, Bolivia, and Chile, Debray took a dim view of May ’68. He came to conceive of it as having seeded the ground for an ultra-individualism compatible with a runaway growth of American-style neoliberal capitalism.

Debray, however, did not allow what Max Weber might have called the “disenchantment of his world” to propel him into the ranks of those for whom “the god had failed.” Rather, he sought to further his indelible if chastened *tiers-mondisme* in the corridors of power. In 1981, following François Mitterrand’s election as the first Socialist President of the Fifth Republic, Debray became one of his official foreign-policy advisers and speech writers. Mitterrand remained Debray’s Willy Brandt until 1988, during his first term, which was marked by distinctly social democratic economic, social, and cultural reforms. The extent of Debray’s actual influence on Mitterrand – and Grass’s on Brandt – remains untold.

But Debray may be said to also have spoken for Grass when he insisted that whatever his misconceptions and blighted hopes, his “*sensibilité*” kept him on the side of the unknown, the defeated, the occupied, Haitians, Palestinians, Latinos, and this despite his awareness of the capacity of the oppressed to become oppressors. Besides, left with “little faith in total systems” Debray claimed that he was now focusing on “details, fragments, and flourishes,” which meant that he “felt rather close to Walter Benjamin.”

With time there was one mega-problem that increasingly weighed on Debray’s mind: the role and nature of the sacred in civil and political society. His intellectual and political immersion in “Third World” problems during his far-flung travels left him with one overarching insight: “Islam is the one thing the West was not able to

shatter in the Orient – look at Algeria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.” In his view, try as they did, “the colonists simply could not lay their hands on a way of eating and dressing, a language, a calendar,” which are the warp and woof of “identity.” And this “barricade” is reinforced by the sacred, without which “there can be no collectivity.”

Debray distinguishes between a religious and a profane sacred. The former being by far better conceptualized and understood, he focuses on the latter, which has, above all, an order-keeping function. The profane sacred “speaks the language of hierarchy, respect, and institution,” and as such “comes from above, notably the Army, the Church, and the State.” Debray evokes the Flame of the Unknown Soldier, the Crypt of the Mont Valérien, the Memorial of Yad Vashem, the 9/11 Memorial, the Lenin Mausoleum, the Mao Mausoleum,

and the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk Mausoleum. To drive home his thesis that in modern times the sacred is fashioned on and out of the profane, he notes that “in 20th century dechristianized or secularized Europe the sociopolitical sacred reached an apogee under Fascism and Communism, two secularized religions.”

Standing on Gramsci’s shoulders, Debray set out to explore the mechanisms of the establishment and maintenance of cultural hegemony in which the sacred plays a key part. Whereas Gramsci had broken new ground with his analysis of the critical role of intellectuals Debray places the accent on the ways and means of the transmission and diffusion of hegemonic beliefs, values, and lexicons. A man of his time, he hones in on the singularly omnipresent and invasive media which “trap” and seduce intellectuals, constricting the air and

space for critical intellectuals in whom, from *outré-tombe*, Sartre might recognize himself.

It speaks volumes that critical intellectuals like Günter Grass and Régis Debray kept their silence on the Arab-Israeli conflict for as long as they did, perhaps partly because unlike Jean-Paul Sartre neither of them chose or ventured to secede from the Establishment. But whatever the reason, once these goyim did speak out they were not moved to do so by latent or manifest anti-Semitism or an anti-Israeli animus. Certainly I cannot imagine Ahad Ha’am, Theodor Herzl, Martin Buber, Judah Magnes, Ernst Simon, and Yeshe-yahu Leibowitz – and their recessive and silent descendants? – even entertaining any such thought. In any case, *honi soit qui mal y pense*. ♦

## public forum:

### Warum Feminismus?

Das Erscheinen eines Sammelbandes zu 40 Jahren Geschichte der Luxemburger Frauenbewegung (*Das Gespenst des Feminismus*, hrsg. von Sonja Kmec in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Cid-Femmes) nutzt *forum* am 8. Oktober für einen kritischen Ausblick im Rahmen ihrer Veranstaltungsreihe public forum. Zusammen mit dem Publikum wollen wir die neuen Herausforderungen der Frauenbewegung im 21. Jahrhundert diskutieren:

Welche Bilanz ist aus der Frauenbewegung der letzten Jahrzehnte zu ziehen? Hat sie sich durch ihre Institutionalisierung zu sehr angepasst? Ist Feminismus heute überholt? Welche neuen Denkanstöße erlaubt der Gender-Begriff? Lohnbenachteiligung, Teilzeitarbeit, Prekariat: Wie stellt sich die soziale Frage in Bezug auf Frauen? Und was geht der Feminismus die Männer an?

Es diskutieren mit dem Publikum:

**Nora Back** (Zentralsekretärin für das Gesundheits- und Sozialwesen beim OGBL)

**Stella-Anastasia Gaertner** (Studentin in Hamburg und Aktivistin in der autonomen feministischen Bewegung)

**Colette Kутten** (Aktivistin des MLF, Mitbegründerin des Cid-Femmes)

**Bady Minck** (Künstlerin)

**Francis Spautz** (Psychologe und Männerbeauftragter)

Die Moderation übernimmt Jürgen Stoldt (*forum*).  
(Eine Übersetzung auf Französisch wird gewährleistet sein.)

**Wann?** Am Montag 8. Oktober 2012 um 18 Uhr 30.

**Wo?** CarréRotondes-Exit 07 (1, rue de l’Académie, Luxemburg-Hollerich)