

BOOK REVIEW

An Ideological Revolver?

Andy Stafford

Roland Barthes, *'The "Scandal" of Marxism' and Other Writings: Essays and Interviews, Volume 2*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2015).

In a review of *Mythologies*, in France in 1957, one critic (the Swiss novelist, Yves Velan) suggested that, such was the acidic and corrosive nature of Roland Barthes's demystifications, the book should be considered as an ideological revolver that could be unholstered and used at any time against bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology. Could the same be said of this recently collected set of (mainly) political writings by Barthes, taken largely from the same period? Indeed, if we range across all of Barthes's writings, are we always – or nearly always – able to find an essay or a fragment that responds to our own time in the here and now, with its (ever-growing) urgencies and emergencies, horrors and terrors?

Like the other volumes in the series, *'The "Scandal" of Marxism' and Other Writings* might show a slightly different, nuanced side to the Barthesian purchase on the world, specifically in relation to the question of Marxism, in its philosophical, political, intellectual and literary purview. It does so successfully, especially in comparison to the third translated volume, *'Masculine, Feminine, Neuter' and Other Writings*. This title seems to announce a sustained meditation on gender binaries and normativity that the volume does not really contain – aside from the eponymous essay, and even then, it is about only *literary* representations of gender. This second volume, by contrast, 'does as it says on the tin', by showing how the early Barthes was not only heavily influenced by Marxist (mainly Trotskyist) theories of social change and explanation, but also acutely aware of the ideological distortions and chilling forms of

intimidation that were deployed by anti-Marxists of all stripes especially during the McCarthyite 1950s. Hence the volume's title drawn from Barthes's 1951 review in the former Resistance-newspaper *Combat* – the first of two reviews, the other in *Esprit* is also included here – of Roger Caillois's (rather cheap) broadside against Marxism and its growing popularity in the post-war period, *Description du marxisme*. The second review of Caillois's 'sociology' of Marxism allows Barthes to investigate – briefly (these are all shortish pieces) – the metaphorical level on which the cold-war critique of Marxism's growing popularity by Caillois (Georges Bataille's former friend and colleague) is based; for Barthes, this is the spectre of 'analogy': blithely comparing Marxism with a religion; hence Barthes's title, 'On a Metaphor. (Is Marxism a Church?)'. This critique of analogy picks up on a slightly earlier book review by Barthes, also in *Combat* and included here: his 1950 assessment of liberal philosopher André Joussain's analysis of the mechanics of revolutions, *La Loi des revolutions* (1950). There is a striking similarity between Barthes's arguments, here and in the two Caillois reviews, and Walter Benjamin's final, unfinished and now seminal piece 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Indeed, it is Jules Michelet who brings Barthes and Benjamin together, especially in the historiographical populism that both see at the centre of the nineteenth-century historian's writing. For this reason, it is a shame that Barthes's impressive (and very long) 1951 article in *Esprit*, 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', still not translated anywhere into English, is not included here, possibly due to constraints of space; in an interview in *Barthes Studies* 1, the translator of the five volumes, Chris Turner, made a similar point in relation to Barthes's long 1952 essay on Jean Cayrol, also in *Esprit*, which was deemed too long for inclusion.

As usual with the series, each essay is introduced and contextualised helpfully. 15 of the 23 pieces translated here are from the 1950s, including Barthes's brilliant demystification of the verb 'to be' in the expression 'l'Algérie est française' (Algeria is French) in 1959, at the height of the Algerian War of Independence from France. A couple of the pieces here have been translated elsewhere – 'A Case of Cultural Criticism', on hippies in Morocco from 1969, and 'So, How was China?', written on his return from the notorious *Tel Quel* visit in April 1974.

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So, to return to my question of whether, like *Mythologies*, this volume could be used politically, we could say that all the writings here – including the later pieces on violence, on utopia, even the slightly risky 1977 letter to the *nouveau philosophe* Bernard-Henri Lévy on the latter’s style of writing in his anti-totalitarian philosophy (read: recanting of his Maoist past) – suggest that it could. However, the one piece, in my view, that is missing – but which so deeply connects Barthes with the burning issues especially in France today – is his 1958 preface ‘Voltaire, le dernier des écrivains heureux?’ (included, but edited and with a slightly different title, in his 1964 *Essais Critiques*). Now, *that* is a weapon against the shallow – and, ultimately, Islamophobic – manner in which some tried to defend *Charlie-Hebdo*’s racist cartoons in the aftermath, in 2015, of the horrendous attack on its office. The defence was conducted by way of Voltaire’s essays on freedom of speech which suddenly saw sales of 100,000 copies in a week in French bookshops; and to which Barthes’s 1958 preface on Voltaire provides, essayistically, the perfect antidote.

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Andy Stafford is the author of *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth. An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh 1998); co-editor (with Claude Coste) of Roland Barthes's seminar notes, « *Sarrasine* » *de Balzac* (Les Editions du Seuil 2011); and translator of Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (Berg/Power Publications 2006). His most recent book is a 'Critical Life' of Barthes (Reaktion Press 2015). He is a member of the 'équipe Barthes' at ITEM/CNRS in Paris and a Senior Lecturer in French Studies at the University of Leeds.

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