

tions. Le troisième chapitre est à cet égard très révélateur : l'auteur y traite alternativement de l'iconographie sur fresque puis des textes édités, ce qui aboutit à un aller-retour regrettable et qui laisse le lecteur quelque peu confus. L'objectif, plus descriptif qu'analytique, de l'auteur est en partie responsable du contenu parfois désordonné de l'ouvrage. Faire état des nombreuses traces de danses des morts tout en les replaçant dans la culture macabre de l'époque ne laissait assurément pas beaucoup de place pour répondre aux nombreuses questions que soulève l'étude de ce thème. Il reste que cet ouvrage comble une lacune et qu'il couvre un aspect important de la culture chrétienne en Europe.

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François Furet — *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (translated by Deborah Furet). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 561.

Now available in a fine English translation, François Furet's *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* originally appeared in 1995, shortly before the French historian's death at the age of 70. A quirky, opinionated meditation on the failure of Revolutionary Socialism, the book is a history with the future prominently in mind. Its author, a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and member of the Académie Française, warns against romanticizing Marxism and the experiment that was the Soviet Union; one finds this caution repeated often, as if to alarm the reader.

Furet dismisses the Russian world of 1917–1953 as helplessly idealistic, hierarchical, and repressive. In his estimation, all that came of the Communist creed was totalitarianism and — an inarguable fact — the annihilation of horrendous numbers of people. Citing Hannah Arendt, Waldemar Gurian, Bertrand Russell, and Simone Weil as crucial inspirations, he emphasizes that the Bolshevik and the Third Reich's National Socialist were cut of the same devilish cloth: "The fact that Communism and Fascism assigned contradictory roles to history and reason — the emancipation of the proletariat versus the domination of the Aryan race — mattered little" (p. 191). Indeed, "it was in Nazi Germany that Bolshevism was perfected" (p. 205).

While Furet acknowledges that Vladimir Lenin was not the remorseless murderer that Joseph Stalin became, he categorically denounces both these leaders and their supporting apparatchiks. To believe him, neither the founder of the U.S.S.R. nor his successor cared about their citizenry, but concerned themselves only with matters of personal success, international influence, and historical stature. There is no mistaking *The Passing of an Illusion's* purpose: it seeks to establish that Karl Marx's historical critique of capitalism, when turned into an emancipatory logic of government, necessarily creates "inequality" (p. 6). Furet ignores Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro, but by extension his thesis applies also to Vietnam, China, and Cuba.

Furet continually returns to the story of that Western intellectual coterie which, after championing the Soviet Union's virtue, turned on the nation, condemning its intolerance of diversity and criticism. Taken together, his study's most passionate and compelling passages read like a political biography of dissent. True, *The Passing of an Illusion* includes much more. A great many pages are dedicated to the Comintern, the Spanish Civil War, and the German-Soviet Pact of Non-Aggression. These sections at the text's centre are all informative, but a careful review of either Richard Pipes's or Sheila Fitzpatrick's scholarship proves that Furet's narrative is rarely distinguished by original arguments. Its examination of conferences, policies, and such only serves as context for the fresher appreciation, however episodic, of comrades-turned-dissidents like Pierre Pascal and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn.

The Passing of an Illusion lavishes special praise on André Gide. He emerges as an exemplar of independent judgement and humane conscience — not, then, because of his *Voyage to the Congo* (1927), a critique of imperialism, but on account of the exposé *Back from Russia* (1936). In this report on a journey north, the Symbolist writer, already an erstwhile Protestant, changed his mind about the progress of Soviet civilization, damning it as a hideous sham.

The adulation bestowed on Gide goes also, by grace of their own defections from the Communist camp, to Panaït Istrati, Victor Serge, Boris Souvarine, and others. The earlier and stronger the dissenter's break with Communism, and the more mordant and determined his subsequent criticism of the U.S.S.R., the greater Furet's admiration. (*The Passing of an Illusion's* Pantheon of Disenchantment holds no space for György Lukács, who on his deathbed moralized, "I have always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism" [p. 117].)

A fundamental problem in *The Passing of an Illusion* is that it never adequately explains why Communism enjoyed a large following. We never learn why anyone became a proponent of the Soviet way — why any labourer should have cared to brandish high, with optimism, the hammer and the sickle. For most of the Communist faithful, their programme of just and popular liberty was something real, quotidian, and no easily discarded utopian fancy. Their commitment to cooperative work and profit-sharing deserves explanation in any study of the U.S.S.R. It frequently appears that Furet means only to investigate Communism as a whim of the socially conscious literati. Yet his writing consistently suggests otherwise, a contradiction that is never resolved.

Many contemporary Russians wish for the return of Communism, a fact that gainsays Furet's glibly absolute thesis about an ideology demystified into "a sort of nothingness" (p. ix) — "an object for autopsy" (p. 157). Contending that "Communism is completely contained within its past", he forgets not only his own fear of its return, but also this abiding attachment.

Strangely, *The Passing of an Illusion* represents an attempt at personal introspection. "I have a biographical connection with my subject," Furet admits in passing, since he himself was a Communist from 1949 and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization until the Soviet Union's reconquest of Hungary. This was a connection that he, like Gide, came to regret with a vengeance, calling it a product of

“blindness” (p. xi). Furet makes a significant error in refraining from a discussion of his reversal. (He confesses to “a masochistic passion for force” but never explains it [p. 420].) A less oblique and half-hearted investigation of his *volte-face* would have made for a more focused, accessible, and meaningful contribution. Instead his analysis contains much inchoate anger and can therefore ramble, even viciously. Moreover, in its subjectivity Furet’s disappointment with Communism tends to compromise rather than strengthen his contentions. It casts serious doubt over his ability to pass reasoned judgement on, say, the Kremlin’s negotiations with Germany’s New Order in 1939–1941. Were these regimes actually candid conspirators — of a mind?

Furet’s closed-mindedness is particularly apparent whenever he compares Russia with France, which he does at the beginning of the book and periodically thereafter. In an influential yet controversial indictment of Jacobinism, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978), Furet argued that the Mountain led by Maximilien Robespierre failed not only on account of its own hubris and conspiratorial pathology, but also because of its inexperience — a deficiency tragically manifest in its fascination with freely radicalized language. As if it stood above any law, the Committee on Public Safety pursued speculative Enlightenment theories to their extreme logical ends, which made possible satanic bloodshed, the guillotine. Now, in *The Passing of an Illusion*, without ever explicitly comparing specific historical situations or ideas, an unrepentant Furet contends that the Russian Revolution is the child of this Terror. However much truth there is in the notion of such an ancestry (a relationship better explored in Arno J. Mayer’s just published *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*), it also contains much untruth. Most obviously, the condemnation denies all the good that the *Grande Révolution* bequeathed to the modern West.

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Guy Gaudreau — *Les récoltes de forêts publiques au Québec et en Ontario 1840–1900*, Montréal et Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999, 178 p.

Dès le début de son ouvrage, Gaudreau nous sert une citation de Séguin et Hardy, deux auteurs connus pour leurs travaux sur la forêt mauricienne : « Les écrits sur l’histoire de la forêt ont recréé un monde imaginaire des forestiers sur la base de témoignages plus ou moins cohérents, plus ou moins fidèles » (p. 5). Le ton est donné. Le texte de Gaudreau évite bel et bien de proposer une histoire inspirée par une forêt conçue comme un lieu enchanteur ou un repaire hostile. Ses sept chapitres se nourrissent plutôt d’une analyse de données concernant les récoltes et les exportations de bois durant la deuxième moitié du XIX^e siècle. L’étude des textes législatifs de l’époque, visant à encadrer l’usage des forêts publiques en Ontario et au Québec, complète cette information. L’auteur nous invite à prendre la mesure de l’importance économique des opérations forestières d’une époque révolue pour mieux saisir un effet structurant qui se fait encore sentir aujourd’hui.