André Gorz & the Philosophical Foundation of the Political

by Dick Howard

Although André Gorz (1923-2007) was known during the past two decades as one of the leading proponents and innovators of left-wing ecological politics, I will try to show here that the basis of all of his political thought, as it evolved with the times and the circumstances, was philosophical.

There are biographical grounds for this claim. Sent to Switzerland to avoid service in the Wehrmacht, this son of an Austrian Jew and his Catholic wife, remade himself into a French philosopher under the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre. Although he remained close to Sartre, and was for many years the leading political thinker on the editorial board of Les Temps modernes, the crucial decade in his life’s work was his time in Switzerland and as a stateless resident in France surviving by odd-jobs and translations while writing what he considered the moral philosophy necessary to complete the existential ontology of Being and Nothingness. This massive manuscript, Fondements pour une morale remained unpublished for 15 years. In the interval, Gorz published The Traitor (1957), accompanied by a magnificent Preface from Sartre[1]; this volume presented as a phenomenological autobiography was his self-affirmation as a philosopher, although hardly of the professional kind. His continued collaboration with Sartre was not just political or journalistic; the reader of the Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960) finds strong traces of Gorz’s La morale de l’histoire (1959). During the next years, writing under the pen name of Michel Bosquet, Gorz became a well-known journalist and a co-founder of the influential weekly, Le nouvel observateur where he directed the (political-)economic reporting. For all that, he did not abandon but elaborated the philosophical foundations worked out in that early crucial decade.

By the mid-1960s, when I first met him, Gorz was known as a leading theorist of radical trade unionism that was built on the idea of “revolutionary reforms” and came to be associated with the New Left of the 1960s.[2] Although he wrote no more ontological-moral tomes, there is an underlying continuity from the beginning to the end of his political evolution. The Marx to whom he returns again and again is not the stagnant Stalinist of the communist party; he is the theorist of alienation, the critic of the commodity-form and the critical theorist of value; he is also the Marx of the Grundrisse who challenges the logic of capitalist productivism and who anticipated the ecological crisis more than a century before it began to be acute. He is in effect an existentialist, just as Sartre claimed in the long introductory essay to the Critique of Dialectical Reason that “Marxism is the unsurpassable philosophy of our time.”[3] From this perspective, the evolution of Gorz’s politics—from revolutionary reforms through trade union interventions to self-management, on to his “farewell” to the proletariat, to his
support for the right to a basic income for all, as well as his explorations of ecological themes that began in the 1970s and grew deeper and more subtle over the years— was undergirded by the philosophical thought formulated in his earliest years. This was its strength; it gave him a solid foundation, a mode of thinking rather than a theoretical framework from which to explore the new conditions of technologically changing, financially dominated global capitalism.[4]

This philosophical foundation left a question that continued to deepen during the 35 years during which we corresponded, often at length: what is the relation between the practical politics that Gorz proposed and the philosophical foundation that he assumed? This is of course the old problem of the relation of theory to practice. In this case, it became the question of the relation of morality to politics (or, sometimes, that of “the political” to “politics”). I often had the impression that his analysis of the contradictions of capitalist reality left the reader with what Marx, after Hegel called a *hic salta, hic rosa* imperative, an existential dilemma that could be resolved only by a choice, a leap—or by the crash that the system seemed always to stagger through until the next crisis. Then would come a new book by Gorz, presenting not only a convincing explanation of the reasons that this was only a temporary reprise in a basically self-contradictory mode of social reproduction, but pointing to new sources of discontent, rebellion, refusal… the first signs of a new leap, or of a more radical crash.

Although the problem of the relation between theory and practice, morality and politics, which is not a one-way street, was constantly present in my discussions with Gorz during all of these years, I had never returned to his earlier philosophical writings. It was only when I met recently two people who were researching and writing about Gorz’s life and work— a French woman, Françoise Gollain, and a German, André Häger— that I was led to take the old volumes from the shelves. Both researchers had been to the Archive of Gorz’s papers at the IMEC (Institut de la mémoire contemporaine), where they had much of found the long correspondence between us. I was also encouraged to turn back to these themes after reading the impressive collection of essays edited by Christophe Fourel, *André Gorz. Un penseur pour le XXIe siècle.*[5] This reading and rereading led me to see a dimension of his thinking of which, I suspect, even he was barely aware. I return to this in my conclusions.

**The First Clues**

The first clues that I found were in the *Letter to D…*, a short essay published in 2006, that is the biography of a couple, the history of a shared adventure, a meditation on their being-together, and a declaration of eternal love. In this sense, it recalls *The Traitor*, Gorz’s first publication, which was a phenomenological autobiography whose narrator describes the transformation of the Gorz as an object (“him”) becomes a subject capable of speaking in the first person (“I”). But why did Gorz write it? And more to the point, why did he publish it? The *Letter* acquires a further significance from the fact that a year after its publication, on September 24, 2007, Gorz and Dorine committed suicide together, unable to bear the thought that one of them could live without the other.

At the cathartic turning point in the *Lettre à D…*, Gorz recounts how he was overcome by a terrible guilt when preparing a new edition of *Le Traître* in the winter of 2005. He realized that he had described the beginning of his life-long love with his partner and accomplice as if it were merely a sort of existential “project” similar to his choice to
remake himself as a Frenchman, a wager that had only a subjective and accidental foundation.[6] And yet, he explains in the *Lettre*, it was this literally and philosophically charnel love that truly had permitted him to say “I.” I’ll come back to the reason for calling this love doubly “charnel” in the context of what he means by “philosophy.” He explains somewhat lamely his cavalier mistreatment of his relation to Dorine (“Kay” in the book) by the fact that he never reread his manuscripts, and only lightly perused page proofs because, as a man defined by his projects, he considered that what’s done is done; and when it’s well done, you’re already embarked on the next project. Thus, he continues, he was already thinking about politics, about Marx and Lenin and revolution, and that perspective colored his vision of his own lived experience as something that had been, but no longer was, his present. To portray himself now not just as a lover but as *in* love, seemed both too bourgeois and too banal for someone turning his attention to revolutionary politics. This may indeed have been Gorz’s state of mind at the time; but it does not explain why he felt the need to return to it 50 years later, and to apologize publicly. Searching for hints, I returned to the philosophical beginnings.

For those who are not familiar with *The Traitor*, two points will suffice to set the stage. The book contains four chapters, whose titles present a phenomenology through which the book’s author, who is also its object, evolves as the story moves existentially from the nothingness of (the subject’s) being to the being of (the author’s) nothingness. In other words, the book describes how the initial project of the individual takes shape in a warm and yet smothering world of the “we” (nous) over which he has no control; how that individual tries and yet fails to affirm himself among “them” (eux) in the world, before he encounters, beyond the life-worlds of familial Sameness and worldly Otherness, a beloved “thou” (tu) whose reciprocity permits the subject finally to affirm himself by saying “I” (je). Each moment of this existential phenomenology moves from sometimes cruel, but always lucid, objective descriptions of the subject presented in the voice of a third person singular external observer of an object; it tries to understand the moment at which the author comes to recognize that what “he,” the observed subject, was doing is just what “I,” the first person singular, wished, or would have wished, to do. This phenomenological method that passes between the third and the first person descriptions, and between the past (third person) and the present (first person). Gorz applies this dual perspective in a more sociological form in later works to analyze the opposition between the imperatives of the reproduction of the system as described by a disincarnated external observer concerned with functional necessities for maintaining order, and the liberty of the individual incarnated by the participants in the life-world in which their intentions and actions become alien and unrecognizable to them.

**Personal Experience**

Before coming to the more sociological later works, I want to suggest some of the political questions posed implicitly by Gorz’s philosophical autobiography. I’ll take the liberty of illustrating some of these questions by referring to a few of my own encounters during more than three decades of friendship.[7] In an essay on the “the new working class” theories of Gorz and Serge Mallet published in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism since Lenin* (1970), I emphasized the theory of “revolutionary reforms” that Gorz had anticipated in his 1964 book *Stratégie ouvrière et néo-capitalisme*, and elaborated in 1967 in *Le socialisme difficile*. I justified my
reading in part by appeal to philosophical arguments from the the 1959 theoretical essay, *La morale de l’histoire*, particularly the articulation of Marx’s theory of alienation as a direct critique of Stalinism. This had led Gorz to the lapidary introductory paragraphs written for the English translation of *Stratégie ouvrière* in 1967, in which he asserted that in modern capitalism revolutionary politics can no longer be based on the misery of the working class; new needs have become the potential root of revolt. To translate these new needs politically, Gorz rejected a “syncretic” politics that tries to impose an external unity on a diversity of separate struggles in favor of a “synthetic” strategy that develops the immanent potential of the new working class. The coherence of this first phase of Gorz’s work was apparent to me at the time in the light of my own experience of both May 1968 in Paris and the August invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact subordinates. I did not see, and at this point I am not sure that Gorz realized, that these “new needs” were rooted in an ineradicable life-world that the imperatives of the capitalist system could in principle never satisfy. In other words, Gorz’s political argument had a philosophical foundation.

I was not surprised to learn that in 1970, the same year that I published my account in *The Unknown Dimension*, Gorz republished the central arguments of *Stratégie ouvrière* along with a crucial chapter from *Le Socialisme difficile*, under the title *Réforme et Révolution* [8]. For me, his use of the inclusive conjunction “and” rather than the exclusive “or” was telling; one of the lessons I had learned from New Left politics was ironically an old one, famously repeated in 1936 by Maurice Thorez, head of the PCF: *il faut savoir terminer une grève*. Revolution, in other words, is not a once-and-for-all revaluation of all values. Although he would make this point repeatedly in different contexts, it is worth noting that in April of that same year 1970, as he came increasingly under the influence of Ivan Illich, Gorz published an editorial in *Les Temps modernes* titled “Détruire l’université.” This was perhaps a too human response to the excitement of the days of May ’68; but it seems to express a problem in Gorz’s argument that socialism could be based only on a synthetic politics of immanent critique. The root of this problem, I think, is that Gorz was and remained a philosopher in the tradition of existential phenomenology, as he admitted in a long interview at the end of a three-day meeting organized by the German Trade Union Federation to discuss his work.[9] I want to explain what this “philosophy” was and why it was, for all of its difficulties, at the roots of Gorz’s astute political sensibility.

**Realizing Philosophy: The Traitor**

At the beginning of *le Traître*, the author looks from his window as “Morel” and an editor emerge from a darkened doorway. Morel— who is Sartre—has proposed the publication of “the thing,” a massive manuscript on which Gorz had labored for nine years. Gorz knows already, instinctively, that publication will be refused. Translating this instinct, the self-understanding of his nothingness, will become the inner motivation of *Le Traître*, as Sartre’s Preface to the publication suggests.[10] Along the way, Gorz proposes paths toward the existential theory of morality— more precisely: the existential “conversion”— that Sartre left incomplete in *Being and Nothingness*. The challenge was to overcome the dualism— the “or”— that separated the dead materiality of the in-itself (*en-soi*) or Being from the active negating praxis of the for-itself (*pour-soi*) or Nothingness. Gorz then elaborated the practical-historical implications of this theory in *La morale de l’histoire* (1959) during the same period that Sartre returned to
the question in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Gorz’s apparent agreement with Sartre’s claim that Marxism is the “unsurpassable horizon of our times,” and the similarity between his theory of alienation and Sartre’s central concept of the practico-inert led me to describe Gorz as a Sartrean in the “Afterword” to the second edition of *The Marxian Legacy*: he was, in fact, a more consistent or more philosophical Sartrean.\[11\] For Sartre, in a world dominated by scarcity, the practico-inert is the expression of the alienation of the free praxis of the pour-soi that prevents individuals from freely cooperating to achieve shared goals. The escape from this reification of individual praxis takes place through a moment of “fusion” which comes about through the agency of what Sartre calls the “totalizing Third,” which is of course recognizable as the political party (or perhaps its leader).

Gorz points to the antipolitical consequences of the role played by this external third party in creating the fused group. To maintain its unity, the group has to create something like a modern bureaucracy, with its specialized functions, separation of the person from the task, and division of the personal from the private. This alienated politics was accepted by French communist apologists who justified it as a means to a glorious end; but that is not the “moral” or the morality that Gorz sought to analyze in *La morale de l’histoire*. “For us,” he italicizes in the concluding pages of the essay, socialism is not a value for members of a future socialist society; “for us,” again in italics, it is not identical to any given society; “for us,” he stresses again, it is the project of creating a human world and a human person that will overcome the reign of need and necessity; “for us,” he repeats, its value is not found in what it will be when it has been created, precisely because that depends on *us*.\[12\] As Gorz is using the term, the “us” is the editorial voice, the author in the person of all people; it is, in other words, the existential voice of the philosopher. But this voice is barely audible in this early exploration of the place of situated thought in history; it is drowned out by the collective phantasy of the Marxian proletariat still present on the stage of historical progress.

It is only when Gorz has said his “adieux” to the proletariat that the voice of the philosopher becomes again audible\[13\]. Although the “goodbyes” are the theme of the first two parts of the book, there is still an echo of Marxism in the third section, “Beyond Socialism.” Its first chapter presents the “Death and resurrection of the historical subject [as] the non-class of post-industrial proletarians.” Appealing to Touraine’s theory of post-industrial society (and of course to Marx), Gorz argues that members of this “non-class” are not defined by the quality of the work they do but by the routinized and indifferent abstract labor that they exchange for a wage. As a result, their self-understanding, and their sense of self, depends only on their subjectivity. The subjective freedom of this “non-class” represents *in principle* the negation of the imperatives of the capitalist system. This negation is not just a refusal of capitalism or the projection of a utopian vision; it is what Hegel called a “determinant negation,” a sublation that produces a higher synthesis that is based on an immanent critique, just as was the earlier quest to discover the emergence of “new needs” This time, however, these needs will be situated outside of the labor process and the experience of the proletariat. Gorz’s turn to the themes of ecology is inseparable from a critique of capitalism, but it does not reiterate a variant on the old socialist dream.\[14\]

*Philosophical Foundations of the Political*
The *Adieux* does not explain how the principle of subjectivity incarnated by the “non-class” can become an active force of liberation? In existentialist terms, how does this “non-class” become an actor “for itself,” a subject whose force of negation replaces the proletariat that had been transformed to a passive “thing in itself.” Gorz suggests two possible evolutions. The first looks for the emergence of forms of freedom outside of the constraints of capitalist, bureaucratic or systemic necessities. In *Adieux*, for example, he talks of the way feminism affirms the values of intimacy, and he refers to the Illitchian idea of “tools of conviviality.” These are not just private escapes without consequences for society at large; they are indeed a negation of the logic of bureaucratic reproduction. Gorz continued to look for these incipient challenges to the reigning (dis)order in successive works, appealing in his last essay, in 2007, for example to the “hacker ethic” and the “appropriation of technology” by South African townships or Brazilian favela communities. There are two problems with this first explanation of the way in which free subjectivity can negate the alienated rationality of post-industrial society. On the one hand, Gorz is aware that unmediated communitarism can become a threat to subjective freedom when it takes, for example, the form of a tribalism. On the other hand, it is unclear whether a “tipping point” exists, and if so where, when and how the tipping becomes effective. Is it only an existential leap? Or is there a place for politics?

The second way in which the principle of subjective freedom can be realized draws on an insight from Marx (especially in the *Grundrisse*) that was also stressed by Sartre: scarcity must be overcome before freedom can be realized.[15] Only when the streams of wealth flow freely, as Marx said, can the opposition of freedom and necessity be overcome. Even if the “cultural mutation” proposed by the first realization of freedom were to take place, subjectively free subjects would still face the constraints of scarcity. This difficulty leads Gorz to propose a “dualist society” which distinguishes between the spheres of autonomy and heteronomy and the imperatives of technical rationality and the free choice of moral values. These two domains are not predefined nor are they water-right; each can and does affect the other. The way in which they affect one another *defines the political*, which is for that reason not a substantive, autonomous sphere of its own[16]. The moral imperatives of the free subject put into question the claimed technical necessities of systemic reproduction, whether in the choice of the means of production or in the regulations governing social relations. Should robots replace living labor? At what human cost are gains of productivity desirable? These are not “objective” questions; they must be understood as political choices.[17]

In this dualist framework, the morally free political actor confronts the fact of necessity. The replacement of the self-regulating market has by the regulatory state means that necessity takes the form of the rule of laws that are in principle valid for all citizens individually! Although the concern of the state is the reproduction of the system, and although the administration of law may appear to be an instance of heteronomy limiting subjective freedom, Gorz recognizes that the universality of these laws, by protecting the rights of the individual, make possible the political struggle to define the sphere of necessity. As he puts it in *Adieux*: “The political is the specific place where society becomes conscious of its production as a process involving everyone, where it seeks to master its results and to control its constraints.” The political struggle is thus inherently pluralist; interests compete with one another while moral claims are debated publicly. This means, significantly, that the goal of the political is “not the exercise of power. Its function, on the contrary, is to delimit, to
orient and to codify the actions of power, to define its means and its goals, and to make
sure that it does not go beyond the framework of its mission.”[18] Its formal role makes
possible substantive individual freedom. This definition of the political might be read
as a restatement of French republican theory, in which case it recalls the implicit disdain
of that tradition for participatory democracy. It is better to see it as the expression of
Gorz’s concern with the emergence of moral values within the processes of social
reproduction. But if that is the role of the political, what is the relation of these moral
values to politics?

The warning against the confusion of the political with the exercise of power is
reinforced in Gorz’s account of the passage from the post-industrial subjective freedom
described in Adieux to the social vision described in his 1983 essay, Les chemins du
paradis. The ironically titled “paths to paradise” are not defined by the old
revolutionary vision in which power is seized and then, in a second moment, it is used
to impose freedom onto social relations in order to overcome the constraints of
necessity. That would in fact put an end to the political by treating it as a means toward
an end that lies beyond itself and that has no substantive moral foundation. On the
contrary, Gorz insists that the political must remain “the place where moral demands
confront external necessities. That confrontation must continue for as long as, in
Hegel’s words, consciousness does not meet the world ‘as a garden planted for it.’ It is
only the permanence and the openness of that confrontation that will be able to diminish
to a maximum the sphere of necessity, and thus maximize the sphere of
autonomy.”[19] While his critique of the inherited model of revolution is convincing,
there is still too little flesh on the bones of Gorz’s dualist theory. Indeed, it could even
be mistaken for a leftist version of what has passed for normative or deontological
political theory since John Rawls’ Theory of Justice. To read him in that light would
neglect the fact that he was a philosopher, indeed, he was a moral philosopher, and that,
although neither philosophy nor morality can be assumed to be an Hegelian “garden,”
they cannot be separated from the charnel embrace of the subject and the world.

The Critique of Normativity

It is important to distinguish Gorz’s moral and political theory from the debates in and
around the Rawlsian normative theory. Gorz thought long and hard about that kind of
question, particularly as reformulated by Jürgen Habermas. Apparently abandoning the
post-modernist theory of Touraine, Gorz was attracted by Habermas’s critique of
modern capitalism as caught between the imperatives of systemic social reproduction
and the need to protect the freely flowing springs of the life-world. This opposition,
which Habermas had defined earlier as a “legitimation problem,” acquires a normative
dimension in his Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns; and the question is further
elaborated as a moral theory of democratic law in Faktizität und Geltung. Rather than
focus on my own discussions with Gorz about these issues and their implications, I will
focus on a wider political debate in which he was very much a participant in order to
illustrate what Gorz meant by philosophy and political morality.[20]

After the post-Marxist left moved from a politics based on the idea of worker self-
management to a broader vision of autonomy as both the means and the ends of radical
politics, a precondition for its realization was the demand for a right to a guaranteed
revenue for all citizens. Such a right, it was claimed, would free the individual from the
alienated and alienating system of wage labor, and would thus make possible the
autonomous creation of a rich social and personal freedom. The problem was how to justify this right? Was it demanded, or at least made possible, by the need to reproduce the increasingly “immaterial” system, to use one of Gorz’s themes?[21] Or was this right a normative, de-ontological claim based on the rules of reason. One of the leading participants in the debate was Philippe Van Parijs, who returned to it in a celebratory essay on Gorz that was published after his death. In his essay, Van Parijs recalls his first encounters with Gorz; he describes their agreements as well as their disagreements, and above all their friendship. He then expresses his pleasure when they came to agree finally about the need for a politics built on the demand for a guaranteed revenue for all citizens. He then cites a letter dated November 7, 1990 in which Gorz explains that despite their practical political agreement, they disagreed on the philosophical principles that justify this politics:

“I agree with the conclusions, [but] I feel again the unease provoked by that Anglo-Saxon school of thought to which the supporters of the “basic income” appeal. Why? Because the arguments remain at the level of a quasi-algebraic logic and because justice cannot be reduced to that level. Justice is also based on a sense of the normative that precedes all possible rationalization. One can move from the normative to a logical and juridical formalization but one cannot start from the latter in order to go in the opposite direction. In a word, what is missing is the untranslatable lebensweltichen Interessen und Zusammenhänge [the interests and relationships that exist in the life-world] that permit individuals to feel “at home” in the social space where they live.”[22]

This passage has to be read carefully. Norms whose foundation precedes formal rationalization can be given a rational form as rights protected by law, or as political institutions, for example. But legal rights or political choices that may be rationally justified as necessary for the reproduction of the system cannot by themselves insure the subjective assent of the participating individual citizenry. That is the practical dilemma that confronts proponents of a deontological, normative and rights-based political theory. How can one be certain that what ought to be done (for systemic reasons) will in fact be done? Gorz offers two solutions, which complement one another. The first was contained in his definition of the political in Adieux. His argument presupposed the existence of universal legal protections, and thus of individual rights, which insure the ability of citizens to defend themselves and their interests. This definition describes the political as it exists from the external perspective of the (socio-economic) observer who analyzes the reproduction of the system. Gorz’s second argument appeals to justice, a value that lies beyond (formal) rights because it is their justification, that which makes them legitimate for the participants. Justice, Gorz maintains, is rooted in the life-world of the individual and of the society. This distinction suggests that the sentence in which Gorz insists on justice in his letter to Van Parijs should read: “Justice is also based on a [lived] sense of the normative that precedes all possible [systemic] rationalization.” In this way, the second argument complements the first, whose definition of the political remained at a systemic level.

Gorz’s appeal here to the ideal of justice returns him to insights from his earlier work that have accompanied the evolution of his political theory. That is why I have insisted that Gorz was and remained a philosopher. Although he uses here the language of normative political theory and that of Habermasian critical theory, he is applying the same the dialectical method used in Le Traître to show how and why the third person objectivating perspective (which he used so effectively in that first book) has to be
supplemented by the first person subjective evaluation of the life-world in which the participant feels “at home.” Justice belongs to a pre-reflexive life-world; it is the existential experience that in the last instance becomes the determining factor in the passage from the principle of subjective freedom to its realization in the form of rights that are in turn maintained and challenged in the reproduction of the political process. [23] This pre-rational, subjective sensitivity to the demands of justice is neither innate nor is it unaffected by the world in which it appears. It is that “morality” whose foundations Gorz sought during the years consecrated to “the thing,” which for him was more than just the physical book that appeared 15 years after its completion. Its practical form was expressed “for us” as the value of socialism in the concluding arguments of La morale de l’histoire. It is the practical motivation of the Chemins du paradis, and the “sense” of the modern Métamorphoses du travail (1988), as well as the “wealth of the possible” that contrasts with the Misères du present (1997). It animates once again his final essay, “La sortie du capitalisme a déjà commencé,” published in 2007, which describes the systemic changes that “have begun,” and concludes with the simple statement that “I am not saying that these radical transformations will realize themselves. I am saying only that, for the first time, we can will that they be realized.” [24] Despite this consistency, and perhaps just because his account of the systemic imperatives that undermine modern capitalism is so lucid and convincing, it is not clear why Gorz is so sure that justice will be finally realized since the system alone cannot impose it. There must be some foundation in the experience of the modern life-world that explains this certainty.

Return to The Traitor

I am not certain that Gorz was ever able to explain completely the reasons for his optimism (if that is what it was! Or is it just “existentialism”?). He doesn’t say why he decided to republish The Traitor in 2005, after it had been out-of-print for decades. And his explanation for appending to it an essay titled “Le vieillissement,” (Aging), which first appeared in Les Temps modernes in December 1961 and January 1962, seems to contradict his insistence that the pre-reflexive life world is the source of a deep demand for justice. Gorz writes here that “the question that [this essay] explores intransigently is ‘How do we enter this society without abandoning our possibilities and our desires?’” He insists that, forty years later, in 2005, the question remains valid. But he doesn’t say why it remains valid. Surely Gorz is not returning to the classical liberal political argument. He does not assume that the free individual inherently free subject exists outside of a society into which it subsequently wants to (or is forced to) step. Nor can he be updating classical social contract theory to defend the rights assumed by contemporary normative theorists in their de-ontological reanimation of the social contract. The most plausible reading is that the distinction between system and life-world, like the distinction between the third person perspective and the first person standpoint that he used so effectively in his self-analysis in Le traître is artificial. That means that the moral demand for justice is not founded in pure subjectivity; it is, as I suggested at the outset, a charnel demand in the same way that Gorz’s philosophy is charnel, as he came to recognize when he reread Le Traître and recoiled with horror at the unpardonable légerté with which he had treated the love of his life, indeed: his life, which was not his alone. The fact that he was so affected by this discovery seems to have leaped out at him like an aggression; it was as if his own life-world, his sense of self and his values were robbed of their foundations.
It would be an exaggeration to say that “Le vieillissement,” written by a new star on the Parisian horizon, presents a sort of moral conversion crisis similar to the one that gave rise to the Letter to D.... Nonetheless, Gorz, who is usually a dispassionate author, describes his shock at the recognition that he has aged. Using the method he had employed in The Traitor, he describes himself in the third person, as an object to be studied; and then, at several crucial moments, he reverts to the first person to explain what he has understood. The process can be described briefly. Aging is not physiological; it is a social process. The child for itself has no age; it ages as it passes through the stages that lead to—or rather fabricate[25]—what society considers to be adulthood. One aspect of this adulthood is the loss of a kind of freedom that belonged to the young, who are seen by others as a bundle of possibilities. This freedom is not only “situated” from without; their liberty is limited and defined not just by the results of their own action because it is the product of their own choices, the way in which the past seizes the present and delimits the course of the future. Although Sartre and Nizan had denounced the ideal of youth as a bourgeois illusion, Gorz insists that even in a classless society there will be a conflict of generations as the old leave institutions and expectations into which the young are socialized in spite of themselves.

Gorz personalizes his thesis. He had just turned 36; he is now a recognized author with a steady job as a journalist. People look up to him; they expect him to behave in a certain way, to write critically about politics, and to be a figure in society. He is at once proud of his achievement, revolted by it, and resigned to it as the fate of “everyone.” He’s become “someone”; but to be someone is to have become a thing. Describing himself in the third person, he says that “he experienced this as a fall…” The formerly free youth whose possibilities were infinite because he was himself nothing now has responsibilities and a career. As a result, “you are no longer oppressed: you oppress yourself…you personalize your otherness.” Is there another choice than this reified subjectivity of the adult? [26] You could, he says, prefer yourself to the results of your action, to be an adventurer, a saint, or simply an aesthete living in the fullness of the now. Indeed, the long second chapter of the Fondements analyzes the price of such attempts by the subject to preserve its subjectivity. It shows that their cost is self-defeat, failure, and above all the inefficacity that denies the validity of moral values, as the axiology of the final section of the tome demonstrates.

You cannot return to the infinite possibilities of youth, Gorz concludes; you’re caught in a web of your own making, which you restore every day even as you reproduce your life through a “dynamic conformity.” It is not clear, either, that you should wish to return to these infinite possibilities that were open only because you were nothing, a bundle of infinite possibilities, and your action left no trace in the world. The price of your success is that “you have to accept finitude: you have to be here and not elsewhere, to do this and not something else, to be now and not never or always; you are only here, only this, only now—you have this life only.”

This sober conclusion is puzzling, and a bit formulaic. Is it the expression of resignation? Perhaps. But resignation is not the abandonment of the subject or of its projects. It is the recognition of projects are always situated, and that their value is determined by judgments that recognize the thickness of lived-life. Gorz had made a similar point in the final paragraph of Le Traître when he wrote that “It is necessary to will that action goes beyond its intention [i.e., that it is alienated, becoming part of the
system] because this is the price of its reality.” But, he continued, it is necessary “to know the general situation into which the action will be incorporated, that is to say, the camp and the sense in which one wants to be engaged.” In these conditions, he concludes, his is willing to be “betrayed” in the sense that his act has implications for those whose values he shares that he could not have achieved on his own.

This conclusion suggests that Gorz added his essay on aging to the new edition of Le Traître as a reaffirmation of his philosophy of engagement. But it leaves open a final question that also returns throughout his work: what is the relation of the analyses of the constraints of systemic reproduction of society to the liberty of the subject who is “at home” in the life-world? And how does this more basic conflict affect the political dynamic set into motion by the contradictions of capitalist— or more broadly, industrial— reproduction? Gorz was apparently trying to formulate an answer to these questions in the draft manuscript of a Preface to the new edition of The Traitor. His title is significant: “We are less Old than we were Twenty-Years Ago.”

Gorz returns to the reception of his essay on aging, which led to invitations and discussions among the group around Sartre and especially Beauvoir (a social life that he evokes in the Lettre à D, as a kind of shared worldliness). He reaffirms his thesis in a lapidary phrase: “Every person struggles against an order that crushes him and [yet] to whose support and reinforcement he contributes.” He recalls that the essay on aging was written at the time when hopes lay with “young peoples” in Algeria, Cuba, Brazil and among proponents of liberation theology. What some call their immaturity was in fact not backwardness but an advance; and so “I was thus, like everyone at the time, a Third-Worldist, although for a short time.”

That hope seems to have returned as he wrote, while capitalist industrialism drives toward its limits, producing adults who remain adolescents because they are unable to identify with their work, while others remain in that state because the precariousness of work, or its lack, leaves them open to now possibilities. And, concludes Gorz, “I didn’t predict that when I was 36 years old. I didn’t predict that after the age of 60 I would begin a second life with the companion with whom I was united forever.”

This allusion to the Letter to D... reveals a rooting of Gorz’s moral philosophy in a vision of the life-world that is deeper and more complex— but also more intuitive— than he ever admitted. I have called it “charnel” because of its embodiment in nature and humans as natural. Patrick Viveret’s suggestive attempt to formulate systematically the lessons of the Letter in terms of what he calls the “emotional” elements of social change reflects a similar vision of the way in which an unarticulated intuitive relation to the life-world is a supplement to the transformative critique of the social system. Another version of this intuition is found at the outset of the Fondements, when Gorz points out that his debt is not only to Sartre but also to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of corporeity. That is why the book’s first chapters are concerned with nature and the body in nature. The same impulse returns in the crucial discussion of “axiology” in Part III, where “nature” brings a constant renewal of morality in the process through which the refusal of natural givenness implies the need to overcome the passivity of nature.

This intuitive, never wholly thematized anchorage in a pre-reflexive charnel life-world was evident in Gorz’s everyday life. Let me conclude with two personal examples, more carnal than theoretical. I can still recall his nearly visceral reaction forty years ago, at a conference in Buffalo, New York, organized by the journal Telos, to early
American attempts to assimilate feminism and Marxism by means of the demand for “wages for housework.” This, he insisted, would destroy the personal and immediate intimacy of human bonds putting a shadow over any vision of a just moral relation between the sexes. This intuitive reaction was later explained and explored in Gorz’s demonstration of the systemic harm inflicted by the capitalist reification of “service” into an industry destructive of conditions for the creation human relations capable of benefitting from the surplus that might be produced. The second example is more personal, and will be familiar to those who were fortunate to know him. It is illustrated by another anecdote, this one dating from 20 or 25 years ago, during a visit to Gérard and Dorine at their home in Vosnon. Gorz took me for a ride to what I remember as a small forest. He walked me to a particular tree, which was very much alive despite the fact that its quite hollow core was surrounded by four pillars of a trunk that mounted to the sky. “Feel these pillars; you will sense the life that pulses upward,” he commanded. Was it his imperative certainty or real sap flowing? It surely was charnel, alive. I don’t know either whether a “civilized exit” from the “miseries of the present” will be found; but I’m sure it won’t come naturally or rationally. I know only that I want it to occur, and that André Gorz has helped me to understand my own intuitions.

Notes

[1] Sartre’s preface is entitled “Of Rats and Men.” The book was well-received, as was the preface. Its English translation (by Richard Howard) was published in 1959 by Simon & Schuster. After it had been out of print for many years, Verso reissued The Traitor, which remains available.

[2] Our first encounter was not encouraging. I had written an essay on the American New Left, which I submitted to Les Temps modernes; I received a letter of acceptance from Claude Lanzmann, another editor of the journal. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1966, I arrived in Paris as a student and went eagerly looking for my article in bookstores, to no avail. I later learned from Gorz that his disagreements were the cause of the journal’s refusal. I do not remember his reasoning, but do know that at that date I knew very little about Marx and Marxism, and not so much about politics either! This took place during a period when Gorz had developed relations to critical voices in the student union (the UNEF), initiating contributions to Les Temps modernes from leaders such as Marc Kravetz.

[3] In a letter to me dated August-September 1986, Gorz remarked that despite my criticisms of Marx, “he was very prolific, and thus his writings contain lots of “loose ends,” such that it is possible to use Marx against himself. “I derive great pleasure in doing this.” (Françoise Gollain’s reminded me of this passage (c.f. note 5 below).) The Sartre passage (in the 1960 edition of the Critique de la raison dialectique, p. 29) reads: “Il reste donc laphilosophie de notre temps: il est indépassable parce que les circonstances qui l’ont engendré ne sont pas encore dépassés.”

An expanded edition of this volume was published in 2012 (Paris: Éditions la Découverte). Françoise Gollain will soon publish an introduction to the philosophical work of André Gorz; and André Häger will finish his doctoral thesis on Gorz at the beginning of 2014. A biography of Gorz is also underway. I should add that the IMEC does not have most of my correspondence; there is a nearly complete version of it in my archives, which are housed at the Library of the Stony Brook University, which also contains the letters of Gorz, often with hand-written supplementary reflections.

In a word, Gorz’s “unforgiveable” sin was to have treated Dorine as a dependent object—a Scottish woman in Lausanne, often sick, with few friends, mastering poorly the language who would be crushed were he not to choose to remain with her—while he remained the active subject. “Who was I, when I wrote those lines?” The Lettre restores their life together; one could say that the “I” of the existentialist who wrote Le traître shows itself as a “we.”

I will for the most part rely on my own memory rather than return to the many letters exchanged over the years (although Françoise Gollain has showed me her detailed notes concerning some of the exchanges, which concern not only Gorz’s work but his reading of my own—but this essay concerns him, not me).

It should be noted that the new material does not refer to the Soviet invasion, although it does criticize the politics of Leninism and those of the French CP. In the conclusion added to Réforme et révolution he tried to outline the nature and functions of a new revolutionary party—noting that this chapter had been written in already in 1966. In a letter to me from 2003, written after I had sent him my book, The Specter of Democracy, Gorz begins by stressing three points that we share: writing in 3 languages; the importance of immanent critique; and that we are determined to denounce antipolitics. But, after praising my critique of “real socialism” he adds that for his part, it is neo-liberal antipolitics that is his major concern.

The interview, “L’homme est un être qui a à se faire ce qu’il est,” was published in the original German in the Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte in January 1984. Gorz sent me a copy, which is either lost or in my Archives. The French translation appeared in Autogestions, and is reprinted in André Gorz. Un penseur pour le XXIe siècle, Christophe Fourel, editor (La Découverte, 2012). At the outset of the interview, Gorz explains: “Je me vois comme un philosophe naufragé qui, à travers des essais en apparence politiques ou philosophiques, essaie de faire passer en contrebande des réflexions originellement philosophiques.” (p. 250) It should be noted, in addition, that so far as I know, Gorz never reprinted “Détruire l’université” in collections of his work. Another similar inconsistency, with perhaps similar motivations, is seen in the brief temptation of Third Worldism expressed in the short letter “Au camarade Che Guevera,” published in la Casa de las Americas in Havana in early 1968, and reprinted in Fourel, ed., op. cit.

When he had become well known, in 1977, Gorz published “the thing” under the title Fondements pour une morale (Paris: Galilée). In his new Introduction, he explains that much of the theory developed both Le Traître and in La morale de l’histoire had been elaborated in that manuscript.
Gorz was also more astutely aware of the social transformations going on around him. His theory of alienation went beyond the critique of alienated labor to show how alienation transformed the worker into a consumer. This insight then led him to introduce into the French left the work of David Riesman and C. Wright Mills.

One difference between Gorz’s reading of Sartre and my own turns around the problem of the status and role of this Third party. He doesn’t seem to object to its revolutionary role; what worries him are the alienated and bureaucratic consequences once the group has come to power. My critique of Sartre stressed more the antipolitical logic by which the Sartrean dualism is only apparently overcome by the group in fusion. In other words, my critique is political whereas Gorz’s stresses the personal and social costs of antipolitics. On Sartre, c.f., my discussion in The Marxian Legacy (2nd edition, London: Macmillan, 1988).


This is clear in their two early volumes, Écologie et politique (1975) and Écologie et liberté (1977). For this reason I will not devote a separate discussion to Gorz’s ecological theories.

This theme, which becomes increasingly important for Gorz, was first clearly articulated in the 1983 complement to the Adieux, Les chemins du paradis, which announces the “revolution of free time” as creating “true wealth” on the basis of the advances of new technology. In this context, attention should be called to Daniel Mothé’s L’utopie du temps libre (Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1997), which is a sustained critique that develops the thesis is that this “utopia” can be in fact only a “path to paradise” for those whose wealth permits them to buy the contents of the time that is freed by the new wealth of society. This will increase social divisions without attacking the major problem of our time which is unemployment and pracrarity of life-conditions. Gorz is accused of “a naturalist ideology” that encourages “the narcissim of the individual.” (p. 19n) It should be noted that Mothé’s criticism comes from the left, refusing individualism in favor of the priority of the common good. (Mothé, who worked for years as on the production line at Renault’s fabled plant in Billancourt, was a former member of the group “Socialisme ou Barbarie”; after a workplace injury, he became a sociologist, writing under his legal name of Jacques Gautrat while continuing to write on politics under the pseudonym of Mothé.

This is the source of one difference between Gorz and Habermas. The German critical theorist uses a modified Weberian theory of modernity whose development is articulated by the autonomization or differentiation of distinct spheres of life. The political, like the family or the legal system, becomes increasingly autonomous and therefore, it is implied, increasingly rational. The problem, as Gorz stresses, and Weber knew, is that this rationality remains formal. C.f. the discussion by Françoise Gollain and Christophe Fourel, to appear in La Vie des idées.

What Gorz meant by “the political,” and its relation to actual political choices, was a frequent theme of our correspondance. In the essay that he dedicated to me, “L’écologie politique entre expertocratie et autolimitation” (in Ecologica: Paris: Galilée, 2008), he added a footnote referring to the Preface to the second edition of my From Marx to Kant, praised The Marxian Legacy, and noted that he “gave a related definition.
in the last chapter and the postface to *Adieux au prolétariat.*” I will refer in a moment to the idea of judgment that was another theme of our exchanges.

[18] The citations are from *Adieux, op. cit.*, pp. 166 and 167.


[20] Much my discussions with Gorz at this period turned around the politics of democracy, a theme that I will not address here. I should say that my interpretation of that theory was not taken seriously by the normativist and legal scholars who attended an international seminar on the book at Cordozo Law School, which made my exchanges with Gorz the more meaningful to me. My essay was included in the proceedings of the conference (*Cordozo Law Review*, 1996, pp. 1392-1440) but was excluded from the bound volume that followed (Rosenfeld and Arato, eds., *Habermas on Law and Democracy. Critical Exchanges* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). It is reprinted, with some modifications, as “Law and Political Culture,” in Dick Howard, *Political Judgments* (Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp. 171-210. The same themes are addressed in “Habermas’s reorientation of Critical Theory toward Democratic Theory,” in Dick Howard, *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 261-270.


[22] Philippe van Parijs, “De la sphère autonome à l’allocation universelle,” reprinted in C. Fourel, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-177. À propos of Gorz’s notion of autonomy, and its relation to his ecological politics, Timothée Duverger has published a richly documented essay, “Écologie et autogestion dans les années 1970. Discours croisées d’André Gorz et de Cornelius Castoriadis,” in *Ecologie et politique*, Nr 46, pp. 139-148. The crucial point in the present for both thinkers is that autonomy is the primary attribute of humans; but that the challenge is to conserve that autonomy, or to reaffirm it, in the face of the various forms of social alienation. A crucial difference, not mentioned by Duverger, is that Gorz continues to find inspiration in Marx’s theory of alienation as well as from Marx’s *Grundrisse*. Perhaps significant in this regard is his use of the term *Selbständigkeit* in both the *Fondements* and *le Traître*, as if the idea of autonomy was not, as it were, *selbstverständlich* in French!

[23] The fact that justice, and values more generally, are pre-reflexive does not mean that they exist in the temporal mode of the past which is assumed to guide the present; it is only in the third part of the *Fondements* that Gorz examines the practical-ethical values that concern the future praxis and projects of the *pour-soi*. But the passage among the three domains is not linear, nor need there be a congruence between the “vital attitudes” that naturalize existence for example in the case of fanaticism, resignation, or the cult of force or worship of the race; the “aesthetic attitudes” that derealize the real in the behavior of the gambler, the adventurer, the poet or the mystic; and the “moral conversion” through the kind of self-elucidation practiced in *Le Traître*. None of these “attitudes” suffices on its own; the lower cannot determine the higher, but the higher has no value if it is not realized.

Gorz suggests that he is “not at all certain that the contradiction between physiological age and social age can be eliminated in industrial societies” because these societies need 16 years to form people who can run their machines and administer their institutions. He adds in this context that “adolescence” is something that didn’t exist in other societies.

In an aside, Gorz suggests that the only social category that escapes from this heteronomy is “those internal emigrés, impoverished students.” (400) He doesn’t develop this thought, which can be seen as another variant of his quest for a free subject capable of translating the principles of justice into reality, a replacement for the proletariat or working class or the non-class of non-workers… Recall however his cri de coeur: Destroy the University!

The draft manuscript is published in Christophe Fourel, *op. cit.*, pp.268-274.

C.f., the two page testimony “Au comarade Che Guevera,” in Fourel, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-47.


Gorz drops any reference to Merleau-Ponty after the latter’s quarrel and rupture with Sartre, to whom Gorz remains unfailingly loyal. When his German interviewers suggest (in “L’homme est un être qui a à se faire ce qu’il est,” *op. cit.*) that some people see the *Adieux* as also an adieu to Sartre, but gently modify the claim by saying that perhaps it is only a break with Sartre’s “idea” of politics, Gorz reacts defensively. Of course they had disagreements, in the 50s concerning the global import of Algerian nationalism, and particularly after 1969 when Sartre became too sympathetic to the Maoists and their “typically populist, sectarian and dogmatic doctrine,” which seemed to Gorz “a resurgence of Stalinism.” But, he insists, Sartre never prevented him from publishing in *Les Temps modernes*; and indeed, because Sartre “was fundamentally antipolitical” political differences could not lead to the breaking off of friendships. (Fourel, *op. cit.*, p. 255)

C.f., *op. cit.*, pp. 550, 556, for example.