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Paul M. Cohen. *Freedom's Moment: An Essay on the French Idea of Liberty from Rousseau to Foucault.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997. x + 229 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-11285-5.

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The Consecrated Heretics of French Culture

Paul M. Cohen's *Freedom's Moment* is a gracefully written, elegantly organized meditation on the evolution of what the author argues is a peculiarly French intellectual role: that of the author as "consecrated heretic," the gadfly who regularly scolds the very society which sustains him and accords him prominence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in Cohen's opinion, inaugurated this role which the author then traces through an intellectual lineage as follows: Robespierre as the political embodiment of Rousseau, Stendhal in the guise of his fictional alter ego Julien Sorel in *Le Rouge et le noir*, Jules Michelet as the liberal conscience of the July Monarchy, Henri Bergson as the metaphysical inspiration for the generation preceding the Great War, that most mercurial martyred poet Charles Peguy, the politically very conspicuous Jean-Paul Sartre, and finally Michel Foucault, the would-be anti-Sartre who, despite himself, played a role similar to Sartre as social critic. Cohen displays close familiarity with the original French texts for each of these authors, and is able to support his carefully constructed argument at key points with well-chosen quotations.

He begins by describing three distinct types or models of "liberty" which have been associated in the modern West with more or less national traditions of political thought. The English "school," as found in the works of John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill, is that of "negative liberty," which defines freedom as the absence of external obstacles or impediments, as in the absence of obstacles in the path of economic gain, the essence of the classical liberal outlook seeking to safeguard the market economy. Hegel and others in the German idealist tradition defined liberty as a "positive" self-mastery, wherein self-actualization is linked necessarily to the destiny of the state. And finally, as Cohen shows, French democratic theory has preferred a concept of "autonomous selfhood" which comes to citizens through their participation in the "general will."

This notion of autonomy as linked to the general will, then, has served to establish a kind of dialectic in French thought whereby a maverick or outlaw thinker, for all his iconoclasm, must still defend his views through reference to some social good for all, for example, Michelet's stance of giving voice to *le peuple* through his histories, or Sartre's unpopular advocacy, *a la Voltaire*, on behalf of downtrodden groups such as Algerian immigrants. These are examples of what Cohen in his introduction calls the French "established anti-establishment," with Rousseau as its founder.

In his introduction, Cohen also comments on those, most notably Pierre Bourdieu, who have sought to explain the unique prestige enjoyed by French intellectuals. He cites Bourdieu's analysis of the importance of the *Ecole normale superieure*, which he has dubbed "the great lay seminary," and also the *College de France*, whose unique role has made it a platform for prominent intellectuals to assail the establishment from specially created chairs which nevertheless define the pinnacle of French academic life. Three of the great professors who take their places within the intellectual procession around which Cohen builds his book are vivid examples of the prophetic potential this platform affords: Michelet, Bergson, and Foucault.

Touching briefly upon Joseph Campbell's concept of the mythic hero–who challenges society by delivering a message which is initially received only with uncomprehending scorn–the author argues that the rise and fall of Stendhal's Julien Sorel constitutes a "master fiction" on which the careers of "consecrated heretics," in the role inaugurated by Rousseau, are so many narrative variations. Borrowing Jean-Paul Sartre's chilling observation "*L'enfer, c'est les autres*," Cohen then moves on to examine how "other people" represent a kind of hell for the consecrated heretic, who fears dependency on them even as he seeks to persuade them: from Rousseau and his aristocratic benefactors to Foucault and his abhorrence of the policing and surveillance generated by the very academic

and political discourses in which he himself was caught up.

Next, Cohen examines in some detail the principal kinds of social critiques delivered by his parade of heretics. First, there is the criticism of the privileged class, whether aristocracy or bourgeoisie (e.g., Robespierre's attacks on the new class of profiteers who opposed the "general interest" of the people, Peguy's Bergsonian denunciation of the crass materialism of bourgeois society, or Sartre's scorn for *les salauds* ("the bastards"). Then there are varying degrees of anti-clericalism, beginning with Rousseau's defrocked Savoyard priest. Finally, each of Cohen's intellectual figures has offered some form of critique of the state and its abuses.

In his penultimate chapter Cohen describes what he calls the defining "moment of freedom" in each "heretical narrative," whether in revolutionary political struggle as in the lineage traceable from Rousseau through Robespierre to Michelet, Bergson's advocacy of *l'elan vital* over sterile intellectual analysis, Peguy's mystical patriotism, Sartre's *engagement*, or Foucault's deliberately transgressive "limit-experiences."

Freedom's Moment reveals both the virtues and the limitations of the "history of ideas" essay. Cohen is far from dogmatic, and he clearly understands that an essay is never intended to provide the last word on a subject. Instead, it is meant to stimulate a reader's thinking, inviting further reflection. Cohen's book will have an immediate appeal to readers with an interest in French intellectual history, perhaps especially to Francophilic Americans chagrined at the marginalization of writers and intellectuals on this side of the Atlantic and envious of the Gallic style. The book holds the reader's attention, and certainly stirs admiration of the courageous *engagement* of the intellectual heroes it profiles.

However, the particular intellectual genealogy Cohen seeks to recount can seem contrived and even tiresome through repetition. As the book's argument unfolds toward a surprisingly anti-climactic conclusion, each chapter presents a concept or set of related examples of "consecrated heresy," and then runs through the identical chronological sequence. Why not group the biographical examples differently, according to type? As one rough example, maverick figures like Rousseau, Sartre, or Peguy could be opposed to those ensconced within prominent institutions (Michelet, Bergson, Foucault).

As the predictable sequence repeats itself, the reader has more and more occasion to ask why these figures, exclusively, deserve membership within this heretical fraternity. Would not the *epater le bourgeois* tradition of the modernist avant-garde, where initial outrageous provocation so often gives way to artistic fashion and acceptance, serve as a source of examples for the tradition of consecrated heresy? At times, such writers as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry, Andre Gide, Tristan Tzara, Jean Cocteau, and Georges Bataille, to name some of the most prominent examples, have played this kind of role in French culture. What about the very celebrated and lionized figures of Victor Hugo and Emile Zola? Even the beloved Hugo got his start, prefiguring Jarry, by outraging the theater-going public of 1830 with his play *Hernani*.

While these modernist literary figures may not fit the mold Cohen wishes to describe as well as those he has selected, at worst one fears he has created an overly rigid Procrustean structure which intellectual and biographical details (and, in the case of Stendhal, a fictional character) must be contorted to fit. At the very least, he seems to accept uncritically the critical/biographical legend attending each of the writers he includes, and not to entertain alternate, against-the-grain readings of their texts. For example, Rousseau's reputation as an apostle of freedom must be weighed against Jacques Derrida's examination of his logocentrism or, more significantly, Sarah Kofman's feminist critique, emphasizing especially the gender asymmetry of Rousseau's ethical teachings.

In his influential essay "What Is An Author?" Michel Foucault described the seductive power of the "author-function," the received wisdom about a celebrated author which brings readers to certain texts with a fixed set of assumptions acting as a filter, preventing consideration of details or inconsistencies which fail to fit the pattern of critical orthodoxy. Foucault urged a new emphasis which would force examination of the uses made of certain texts as they circulate and are employed in decisive institutional settings and discursive practices.

In keeping with this argument, a new "history of reading" has emerged in recent years which, among other things, puts standard readings and interpretations to the test by seeking to discover what can be learned about responses of communities of readers, publishing practices, book selling, and the like. Robert Darnton's chapter on Rousseau in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984) is but one very impressive example of this kind of scholarship. Attention to such topics could serve to overcome the rather abstracted, intellectually remote level at which much of the argument of *Freedom's Moment* is carried out.

The question here is one of entertaining alternate ex-

amples and interpretations that may or may not threaten the overriding interpretative scheme Cohen has adopted. For example, the material provided on Jules Michelet is relatively slight. The author uses him primarily as a foil for Robespierre, whose excesses the famous historian decried. Cohen touches briefly on Michelet's rather eccentric works on nature, women, and the family. Greater emphasis on these less canonical texts could add an interesting dimension to Cohen's study and give a more rounded treatment of this familiar figure. Linda Orr's *Jules Michelet: Nature, History, Language* (Ithaca, 1976) remains a valuable source for these "other sides" to Michelet.

In at least one case, Cohen leans too heavily and uncritically on one very controversial secondary source, i.e., James Miller's flawed and highly problematic biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993). The biographer, who admitted he was prompted to research the life because of the vicious rumor that Foucault had deliberately infected several sexual partners with the AIDS virus, appears to take ironic delight in uncovering Foucault's "true" self as a means to explain the work he produced; ironic because Foucault was so famously "antihumanist" and opposed to overdetermined categories of self and subject. Cohen does not cite the voluminous literature produced by outraged reactions to Miller's biography.

Treatment of other figures appears more nuanced. To be sure, Cohen drives home the point that each of the intellectual figures he examines experienced great ambivalence about his role vis-a-vis the public. Nearly all of them, possibly even Robespierre, call to mind American comedian Groucho Marx's ironic quip about not wanting to be a member of a club that would have him. Jean-Paul Sartre made a habit of refusing awards and prizes, most notably the Nobel in 1964. Michel Foucault spoke often in interviews of his desire for anonymity. And no one bit the hands that fed him more eagerly than Charles Peguy. No sooner had he plunged into the pro-Dreyfus movement than he began to assail those he believed had cheapened the cause through turning it to political advantage.

Given the high drama of such examples, Cohen's understated conclusion, with its tentative tone, seems an afterthought rather than something which would set the stage for further study. He briefly considers the all-too-fashionable *Aronesque* argument, made more current by Tony Judt, that modern French intellectuals have exhibited a totalitarian streak. He then moves on to comment on the frustrations of France's tradition of centralized bureaucracy. Finally, in a section one wishes had been more fully developed and carefully considered if Cohen were to introduce it at all, he suggests a gendered interpretation of writers' ("masculine") rebellion against ("feminine") social niceties and strictures.

After the very interesting material the author presents in earlier chapters, and given the promise of the perspectives he introduces even briefly, his conclusion is rather odd. One example of an avenue which might have been explored more fully is the institutional emphasis of Pierre Bourdieu, who has provided a very detailed examination of the history and workings of French intellectual culture. Discussion of the tradition of the *normaliens,* which recent biographers of Sartre, Foucault, and Louis Althusser have all emphasized, might have provided a more satisfying means of describing "consecrated heresy" in its most recent manifestations.

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