reviews

the watchdogs

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paul nizan, the watchdogs: philosophers and the established order, monthly review press, 1971
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1 introduction

nizan's book is a remarkable one and anyone interested in developing a radical philosophy should read it. it is addressed quite specifically to students and to the young - it is a call to arms against bourgeois academic philosophy and the world-order which it represents.

nizan was an exact contemporary and close friend of sartre's; they went through lyceé together and studied philosophy together at the école normale supérieure. nizan's reaction to this experience, however, was very different from sartre's. it is recorded, in a theoretical way, in the watchdogs (his only book specifically about philosophy), but he describes the experience more directly in his autobiographical novel (?) aden arable (1):

 prudent advice, and the chances of my academic career, had brought me to the école normale and that official exercise which is still called philosophy. both soon inspired in me all the disgust of which i was capable. if anyone wants to know why i remained there, it was out of laziness, uncertainty, and ignorance of any trade, and because the state fed me, housed me, lent me free books, and gave me a grant of 100 francs a month.

soon after leaving the école, nizan joined the communist party (in 1927, in fact). he remained a member of the party until 1939, when he broke with it in the wake of the nazi-soviet pact. he joined the french army and was killed almost immediately, aged 35, at dunkirk.

the watchdogs was written in 1932. the philosophers whom nizan writes about in it are the now obscure and dead 19th century french academic professional philosophers of that time. but despite this fact, nizan's book has the very strongest relevance to the situation here and now. firstly, his attack on early 20th century french academic philosophy is concentrated on one feature which it certainly shares with later 20th century british academic philosophy - namely its academicism and its social role as ideology. and secondly, he deals with a number of the theoretical and practical problems which face the attempt to develop a radical philosophy. the publication of this book in english now is therefore very timely.

2 nature of academic philosophy

the watchdogs is a passionate work and in it there is no pretense of the 'scholarly detachament' which nizan so hated. as sartre says (2):

his books wanted to displeasure: that is their greatest merit... his was a call to arms, to hatred: class against class, against a patient and mortal enemy with whom there could be no accommodation.

the watchdogs, however, is more than a work of mere passion - it is also a theoretical critique of academicism, particularly in philosophy; and it is the best modern one i have come across, for nizan does not take the image which academic philosophers have of their own activity for the real nature of this activity.

bourgeois academic philosophy seems to be a harmless enough thing. its themes have every appearance of being timeless and remote from the immediate reality of everyday life: contemporary philosophers occupy themselves in 'debating' with plato and aristotle and in 'disagreeing with' hume and kant. such philosophy appears to be - indeed claims to be - pure abstract thought; it claims to concern only 'the products of reason' ('concepts' in the contemporary jargon) and not the real world as produced by human material activity. but these, according to nizan, are illusions - merely the appearances which bourgeois academic philosophy presents:

every philosopher, though he may consider he does not, participates in the impure reality of his age.

(p19)

philosophy, argues nizan, is not pure thought:

philosophy-in-itself does not exist: there exist only different philosophies... the various philosophies are produced by different philosophers.

(p7)

philosophy has a material existence, as well as a spiritual-conceptual being.

academic philosophy is created and transmitted in an atmosphere of 'scholarly detachament'. it appears to be entirely remote from the struggles and needs of the world. academic philosophers, both in their thought and in their lives, it would appear, have almost entirely withdrawn from any relationship with the concrete reality around them. they frequently praise themselves for their 'coolness', their 'detachament', their 'ethical neutrality', etc etc. in short, they seem to have 'abandoned' from any socially valuable role, and their work consequently appears to be entirely 'trivial' and 'irrelevant'.(3)

but even this 'abandonment' is not all that it appears:

this state of quietism has a special significance. lenin, an outsider who associated with the rabble, the ignorant laity, made an authoritative contribution to the argument. although he did not have philosophy in mind when he wrote these lines, they are perfectly applicable to our philosophers in politics, indifferent means satisfied... in bourgeois society, the label 'non-partisan' is merely a veiled, hypocritical, way of saying that the

3 this is frequently the main target of criticism of recent british philosophy. see e.g.: gelner, words and things; more recently also c. k. mandle, a critique of linguistic philosophy; and even marx, one dimensional man (ch.7) and perry anderson, 'components of the national culture', in new left review no.50,
person in question belongs to the party of the exploiters." In philosophy, too, indifferent cannot mean anything but satisfied... This is the real significance of abstraction. (pp45-6)

Nisan shares Lenin's uncompromising and stark view of the situation: for them there are only two sides: the side of the oppressed and the side of the oppressors. And Nisan argues that when one looks at the real effects, as opposed to merely the intentions, of bourgeois academic philosophy, it is apparent that such philosophy very definitely takes sides. The academic philosophy that Nisan is talking about, and the academic philosophy of our own time and place, is of no use to the oppressed. In fact, it is positively a hindrance to them, for it obscures and hides the very features of existence which the oppressed, in their struggle against oppression, must bring to consciousness. (4)

The great anonymous mass of human beings ... undoubtedly have a real need for a philosophy - that is, for a consistent world-view and a body of guiding principles and clearly defined aims - this mass is effectively deprived by the bourgeoisie of any ideological material which might prove relevant to their existences. (pp84-5)

Just because of this 'irrelevance', academic philosophy fails to attend to the real conditions of social existence and thus tends to describe the world in dehistoric terms - ignoring the needs, the alienation and the misery which are the real facts of oppression. And by portraying the world in this one-sided way, academic philosophy idealises the world and thus has the effect of justifying the established order:

This, the supreme function of bourgeois philosophy is to obscure the miseries of contemporary reality: the spiritual destitution of vast numbers of men ... and the increasingly intolerable disparity between what they could achieve and what little they actually accomplished. This philosophy conceals the true nature of bourgeois rule... It mystifies the victims of the bourgeois regime... It heads them into culs-de-sac where their rebellious instincts will be extinguished. It is the faithful servant of that social class which is the cause of all the degradation in the world today, the very class to which the philosophers themselves belong. (p91)

But is this academic philosophy worth bothering about? It seems to be an utterly trivial, esoteric and absurd pass-time of a small handful of professional philosophy academics - it seems a harmless enough thing. Again, however, Nisan insists that we look at the actual phenomenon of academic philosophy in its real context. Then we see that philosophy is not just a pass-time for academics - it has definite and real effects upon others.

First of all, most academic philosophers are employed as teachers, and their ideas are taught to students and effect them. For example:

When, day after day, M. Brunschvicg expounds his philosophy without ever mentioning that men suffer, that their private lives are often nothing but a welter of trivial, painful or calamitous episodes, M. Brunschvicg's students tend to forget what real men are like. These dutiful disciples weekly surrender to the illusion (which is so comforting to their consciences) that any man - or rather, any representative of that abstraction they call

4 In so far as it impinges on them, which it does - see below.

Man - would embrace the philosophy of their mentor. (p106)

Furthermore, the effects of the academic's philosophy do not stop with students inside the university; but via these students and other readers etc academic philosophy is disseminated more widely. The ideas which are worked out and refined by academic philosophers are subsequently simplified, crudified and assimilated ultimately even into con- temporary 'common sense' (5). The ideas of academic philosophers, thus worked upon, are used in all branches of ideology: they appear in the pronounce- ments of politicians, in the newspapers and on TV, in moral and scientific thought - in every area of life.

The process may be briefly described as follows: a group of philosophers, occupying the top positions in the University hierarchy, produces groups of ideas. These ideas are the raw material worked up in the University. They pass through a number of different workshops where they are reshaped, polished and simplified - or, to be more precise, where they are vulgarised and made fit for public consumption. (p108)

As regards philosophy, this process is much more clearly at work in France, where state control of education is more centralised and direct than in this country, and where philosophy is a part of the state-controlled secondary school curriculum. Even though philosophy as such is not taught in schools in this country, and even though philosophy as such plays a smaller role in the wider culture here, it would be wrong to think that the ideas of academic philosophers have no effects outside the universities. Although it is less apparent, much the same process is at work here as in France.

Indeed, as a teacher I have been struck by the fact that the students I teach have already formed a definite and surprisingly uniform philosophy before they arrive at university. They come to university with a homogeneous positivistic empiricist and liberal-individualist view, albeit often unconsciously.

Thus Nisan argues that academic philosophy is not merely an esoteric pass-time, it also has an exoteric form in which it is disseminated to the mass of the people.

Just because academic philosophy is not as it appears to be, it is worth attacking. Just because it is not about mere 'concepts' but about reality; and just because what it says about reality is not 'detached' and 'neutral' as it pretends, but serves to justify the established order; and just because academic philosophy is not absurd and pointless games with words but in fact has real and important social effects - just because academic philosophy is not as it first appears, it is worthwhile and even necessary to attack it.

This philosophy is not dead. But it must be killed.... For a philosophy does not voluntarily bow out of existence, any more than a regime dies until it is attacked. A new philosophy does not triumph until its predecessor has been destroyed, but a considerable effort is required to bring about the latter's dissolution. (p48)

'Academicism' is frequently used in an ill-defined and superficial way, and critiques of the academicism of recent British philosophy have frequently concentrated almost exclusively on its immediate appearances (6). Nisan's critique of

5 Hence 'common sense' is not a neutral foundation from which to construct a philosophy.
6 See footnote (3).
academicism goes beyond this which is what gives it its depth and strength. 'Academicism', for Nizan, is not merely a style of thought; for he never loses sight of the fact that academic philosophy (like any other sort of thought) is not just thought - it has not only a conceptual-spiritual being, but also a social-material existence. 'Academicism' is not, therefore, a style of thought, it is also a social-material form. And Nizan's book is not therefore aimed just at academic philosophy, but more precisely at bourgeois academic philosophy.(7)

3 THE REVOLUTIONARY PHILOSOPHER

Because he remains aware of its political consequences, Nizan stresses the importance of the struggle in the ideological realm. But he is aware, too, of the limitations of this form of struggle. He discusses these matters in his last chapter in which he outlines his ideal of 'the revolutionary philosopher'. This chapter has great relevance to the present attempts to develop a movement of 'radical philosophers'.

First of all, and on the basis of the ideas I have already outlined, Nizan argues that theoretical work - work in the ideological domain - is a vital and a necessary part of the revolutionary struggle. And it is wrong, therefore, to despise intellectual work for not being concrete political activity. The vital message of Nizan's book is that knowledge and understanding are weapons that do have concrete practical effects:

Knowledge and understanding are weapons. The question now is: will the bourgeoisie be permitted to consign these weapons to the scrapheap, or will men take up these weapons once again and use them as they see fit? In the universities, the lycees and the elementary schools, young people are indeed learning how to handle and apply these weapons, but for strictly academic purposes. Is there no possibility of their using this knowledge and understanding in more productive ways? (p156)

The tendency to despise theoretical work is widespread on the left in this country (and in America). The slogan that 'theory should not be divorced from practice' is twisted into its opposite: it is interpreted to mean that only concrete political activity has any real effects or any real value in the struggle. Against this Nizan stresses that ideological work does have real effects and that the struggle against bourgeois ideology is an important one. He quotes Marx (p177):

The weapons of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.

Like Marx, Nizan is also very conscious of the limitations of the 'weapons of criticism'; and so he also opposes a second tendency which has manifested itself on the left and particularly among some radical philosophers: the tendency to believe in the absolute value of theoretical work in itself, and the tendency therefore to struggle only for a more congenial intellectual climate in which to think.

Nizan also has well developed views about the ways in which the academic set-up and the class situation of the academic (petit-bourgeois) effect him and his philosophy. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have omitted any account of Nizan's sociology of bourgeois academicism. Nevertheless, it is an extremely important part of his argument and should not be forgotten or ignored.

The criticism has been made that some people are proclaiming themselves to be 'radical philosophers' while in fact taking the 'Academic road'. The whole of Nizan's book is an attack upon the 'Academic road', but his account of the 'revolutionary philosopher' is particularly important in this context. According to Nizan, the revolutionary philosopher must be closely in touch with the revolutionary struggle. He must identify his interests with the interests of the oppressed and exploited - the working class. Nizan continues:

But I would go even further and bluntly assert that the technician of revolutionary philosophy must be and will be a member of a particular political party. (p158)

It seems to me that this is the one major place in which Nizan's views need rethinking in the light of our present situation. This assertion of Nizan's would seem to imply a denial of the value of a movement like Radical Philosophy which is independent of political parties; but I think it would be wrong to draw this conclusion from Nizan's ideas as a whole.

When considering a movement like Radical Philosophy it is crucial to see it in its context. Today, in Britain, the situation on the left is very different from what it was in France in 1952, when Nizan was writing. The forces of the left have concentrated and united overwhelmingly in the Communist Party - 'The Party'. The revolutionary left at the present time, however, does not have the sort of unity which makes reference to 'The Party' possible. The left here now is split into sectarian fragments (and this is indicative of its impotence). Indeed, in the current situation many leftists have withdrawn from active political engagement in any of the 'Parties', and the forces of the left are spread throughout all 'Parties'. It is in this context that a movement like Radical Philosophy becomes necessary. If the forces of the left were concentrated and strong in such a way that there was a 'The Party', then no doubt there would be less need for a movement with such a vaguely and broadly defined type of radicalism, or with such a limited area of activity (philosophy). But in the present context it seems to me that there is a very real need for a movement like Radical Philosophy, and very real and useful tasks they can perform.

As for an assessment of Radical Philosophy in this light - it is still too soon to pass any final judgement. Radical Philosophers (and other intellectuals) have only just begun the process of organising themselves as a group and of working together. Whether an effective group of radical philosophers will emerge from these efforts remains to be seen. But, already, some of the dangers which threaten the development of an effective movement are becoming clear. I have mentioned them already and tried to bring out the way in which Nizan's book is relevant to them. First of all, radical philosophers must resist all the forces of their training and the pressures of their situation (whether as students or teachers) which push them to take the 'Academic road' - a road that can be taken even in Marxist clothes. But secondly, no sort of ultra-radical, 'practise not theory' type of sectarian idealism and purism - whether as Stalinist or Leninist guise - should be allowed to fragment and destroy the movement before it has developed.

Nizan describes the task with absolute clarity and simplicity. And although he says everything that Radical Philosophy has been trying to say - and much better - this only makes the task of contemporary radical philosophers more urgent. Now we can read Nizan and know what is to be done - but still we must do it. This is hard work, and would-be radical philosophers must undertake it together.