

France Is Aware of Real Fascist Evil

On May 8, 2015, French president François Hollande spoke at the Elysée Palace at a ceremony at which prizes were awarded to middle and high school students for the best essays in memory of the Resistance and Deportation. It was exactly seventy years since Charles de Gaulle on May 8, 1945 broadcast the official end of World War II: "We have won the war. Victory is ours. It is the victory of the United Nations and the victory of France."

Twenty years later, de Gaulle, aware of the divisions in France, said, or is reputed to have said, "How can anyone govern a nation that has 246 different kinds of cheese?" By coincidence, in the same month of May as the 70th anniversary of the end of the war for France, there were three reminders in Paris of the relevance of de Gaulle's jibe.

One was an exhibition marking the centenary of the birth of Edith Piaf, "the little sparrow." A second was the bitter feud between the extremist Holocaust denier Jean-Marie Le Pen, opposed to immigration and defender of the wartime Vichy regime, and his less extreme daughter Marine, who had him expelled from the Front National (FN) party he founded in 1972.

The third was the opening of an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, dedicated on the 50th anniversary of his death to the work of the modernist architect Le Corbusier, born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris in Switzerland in 1887 and who became a French citizen in 1930. The exhibition, "The Measures of Man," a collection of 300 of his paintings, sculptures, architectural and other drawings, photographs, and films, aimed to illustrate his humanism.

No one can be seriously troubled by the wartime activities of Piaf, who has been accused of giving recitals during the Nazi occupation and of sleeping with the enemy. The sexual peccadilloes of this national icon who “regretted nothing” are of little concern except to the two or three people involved.

Many more are concerned about the behavior of the right-wing FN, its present political strength and success in local and regional elections, its attacks on the French political class, and the presidential ambitions of Marine Le Pen. The theory of quantum mechanics suggests that information can never be lost, even when it falls into a black hole. Though the FN under her leadership is trying to appeal to mainstream voters, its past opposition to the democratic French republic and its continuing approval of the anti-Semitic Vichy regime cannot be forgotten – nor can the significance of the party logo, a tricolor flame, with neo-Fascist implications.

French artists and writers have long been involved in political partisanship, whether communist, Maoist, monarchist, fascist, or anti-Semitic. The best-known incident illustrating this interest in affairs of state was during the Dreyfus Affair, when strong divisions developed, with Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet affirming and Degas and Cézanne denying the innocence of Dreyfus. In the twentieth century, French avant-garde modernist artists took part in or were attracted to fascist movements and fascist mythmaking. Among them were the symbolist Maurice Denis, the Fauve Maurice Vlaminck, the sculptors Charles Despiau and Aristide Maillol, and the architect Le Corbusier.

The work of Le Corbusier has long been admired but has also been the center of controversy. Many other architects have been influenced by his works, the most famous of which are the La Cité Radieuse in Marseille, which is under consideration as a World Heritage site by UNESCO; the Corbusierhaus in Berlin; the High Court building in Chandigarh; the Unite d’Habitation; Villa Savoye; and the Catholic chapel Notre Dame du Haut in

Ronchamp.

Once praised for his modern architecture, such as innovative pairing of functional apartment blocks with parks, Le Corbusier became increasingly criticized for being obsessed with mass regimentation and order, and for creating ghettos.

He was held responsible for destroying historic city centers; for formulating the concept of segregated suburban communities, such as the banlieues, with the alienation and violence they generated; and for erecting buildings that were not well-suited to everyday life. Paris was fortunate that his 1925 plan to raze the center of the city and replace it with high-rise blocks and motorways was rejected.

His creation in 1943 of The Modular, a system of measurement based on the height of an average man, to be applied to architecture, was criticized as a fascist aesthetic for its mechanistic approach. Le Corbusier was accused of dehumanizing the individual by proposing a universal module for domestic structures, constructing machine houses for machine bodies. The human animal would then become like a bee, living in geometric cells.

Le Corbusier's political ideas and his architecture were part of a pattern. His fascist politics and political urbanism go hand in hand – fascism in concrete. By imposing a uniform configuration of straight geometric regularity and standardization on the urban environment, he felt he could banish the chaos of a diverse society and create a milieu that would encapsulate a concept of purity and order, virile and hygienic.

Now, as the result of two books about him, he has, posthumously, become a controversial political figure. His relationship with the Vichy regime, where he kept an office for 18 months, has long been known. What is new are revelations about the extent of his fascist-related activity over a 20-year period, starting in the 1920s, when he was a

close friend of Pierre Winter, a doctor who was the head of the Revolutionary Fascist Party. He also endorsed the Faisceau movement of Georges Valois, a Fascist leader in the 1920s. He also approved the ideas of regional syndicalism, opposing capitalism and calling for direct action, and of Hubert Lagardelle, who became the minister of labor in the Vichy regime.

He was involved in *Plans*, an urban planning journal, writing some anti-Semitic articles. He attended Fascist rallies in Paris, had connections with Italian fascists, and was hostile to parliamentary democracy. His references to "social hygiene" indicate his belief that modern society was unhealthy and in need of transformation.

The two books, *Un Corbusier* by François Chaslin and particularly *Le Courbusier: A French Fascism* by Xavier de Jarcy, make clear that this important artist was an outright fascist.

Le Corbusier was a member of a militant fascist group and approved of the demonstration in Paris on February 6, 1934 to overthrow the democratic regime he detested. He was the author of some 20 articles arguing in favor of a corporatist state on the model of Mussolini's ideas in Italy. He welcomed the Vichy regime, which he thought would deal with Jews and freemasons, "who would feel just law." The regime would build a new France. He had an office at the Carlton Hotel in Vichy as an adviser on urbanism until his city plans for Algiers were rejected in June 1942.

It is pleasing to know that contemporary France understands that the unwelcome expressions and actions of the past must not be repeated. The recent speeches of President Holland and Prime Minister Manuel Valls are reminders that France today is and must be vigilant against the resurgence of anti-Semitism and racism. Imaginary evil, as distinguished from real evil, according to the French philosopher Simone Weil, is often seen

as romantic and varied. France, like all democratic countries, must be on guard against real evil and disagreeable realities.

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