Barthes: ideology, culture, subjectivity

Je n’ai pas du tout une pensée politique, historique ou sociologique. (Roland Barthes)

To pose political questions about Barthes’s texts is to challenge the above statement.¹ It is certainly not to lay claim to an inheritance. Barthes has no legitimate heirs: his work cannot be appropriated in accordance with a Law.² Nor can the text be placed under the sign of an authorial political commitment expressed and lived outside it. ‘Au fond, s’il fallait vous définir, l’étiquette d’ “intellectuel de gauche” collerait pour une fois assez bien’ (At bottom, if one had to define you, the label of ‘left-wing intellectual’ would for once fit quite well), suggests an interviewer. Barthes shrugs his shoulders: ‘Ce serait à la gauche de dire si elle me comprend parmi ses intellectuels’ (It would be for the left to say if it counts me as one of its intellectuals); all he will admit to is an obstinately anarchist sensibility.³

Up to the Left, then, to decide what use it can make of Barthes in its political and theoretical projects. The present paper offers no more than suggestions about possible lines to follow. It is not, furthermore, really a question of making use of Barthes. By this I mean two things. The first, with an important qualification that I shall make presently, is that the aim is not to judge Barthes as the moral subject of his ideological positions, although the positions themselves come under scrutiny. Such evaluations can be left to the bourgeois ideology of the ultimate responsibility of the individual subject. ‘We know’, as Barthes tends to say in his bouts of theoretical euphoria, that the text resists attribution to an individual: it escapes, goes beyond its author.

Paradoxically, though, one of the ways in which the text of Barthes escapes its author is precisely in being attributed to him, against its own drift. The economy it enters into is not an authorless one. At one point Barthes wonders if literature is going to regain its medieval status as ‘un objet à commentaires, un tuteur d’autres langages’ (an object for commentaries, a prop for other languages),⁴ but this would require an institutional death of the author: the medieval culture that identified ‘author’ and ‘authority’ was paradoxically far less author-centred than our own, commenting on pagan, Christian and Moslem authors alike without concern for their individuality. It is a fact—cultural, political and ideological—that modern Western culture consumes texts ‘by
Roland Barthes', and attaches them to him as their author (the present paper itself presupposes this). The whole procedure of the interview is based on this association: the interview is an interpellation of the subject behind the writing, more valuable when rare: 'On vous voit peu, Roland Barthes, et on vous entend rarement: hors vos livres, on ne sait à peu près rien de vous’ (Roland Barthes, we don’t see much of you, we don’t hear from you often; apart from your books, we know virtually nothing about you); but for once, the self is here, rather than a silent text: ‘il a accepté de se confier à Bernard-Henri Lévy’ (he has agreed to unburden himself to Bernard-Henri Lévy). The self that the interview is to reveal is an imaginary construction, as Barthes knows: ‘Nul ne peut authentifier son être ni son devenir’ (no one can authenticate what he is or what he becomes); all he can offer to questions about his ‘evolution’ is ‘une réponse “imaginaire”’. And yet this imaginary reply will be reproduced and distributed in print, and read by people who will on the contrary tend to take it as offering the truth behind the text in which the author is hidden. ‘Roland Barthes’ is differently constructed by each publication that presents him: Elle, Les Lettres Françaises, a photographie magazine (a pity that the reference to the vocabulary of rugby in Critique et vérité did not lead to an interview in L’Equipe or Rugby World).

In other words, to refrain from holding Barthes individually responsible for his political position should not blind us to the ideological effects exerted by the construction ‘Barthes’. One of the relevant effects derives from the possibility of inserting Barthes into a history of the French intelligentsia of the 1960s and 1970s, a history of intense engagement with Marxism, followed by an equally intense disengagement. Such a history, and Barthes’s place within it, can easily fall into one of the available stereotypes: for the liberal, ‘Barthes’ can symbolize a growth away from the sterilities of Marxist theory into a warm humanism; for the leftist, another bourgeois selling out: ‘the early stuff was all right, but . . .’. With the liberal focus on the individual subject goes a teleological picture of his evolution. Barthes sees the connexion between the two when he refuses the assumption of the unitary subject implicit in an interviewer’s suggestion that his whole critical work has been a run-up to the writing of a novel. Instead, Barthes prefers the image of the kaleidoscope: ‘on donne une secousse et les verreries se mettent dans un autre ordre’ (you give it a shake and the bits of glass fall into another arrangement). Again, to the question—the inevitable question—of whether something of the ethical and political commitment of the earlier works has been lost in their successors, Barthes’s reply is that ‘rien ne se
But if we are not viewing Barthes’s writings within a teleological perspective, as the subject of an evolution towards a truth or fullness absent in the early texts, then it becomes possible to reactivate positions, theoretical and/or political, from which Barthes had ‘moved on’, to treat the Barthesian corpus as, precisely, fragmentary, like the glass in a kaleidoscope. I want here to pick out certain constant yet shifting elements in Barthesian discourse: colours, to continue the metaphor, that remain within the field of vision throughout, while being placed in different relationships to one another; sub-discourses about culture, ideology, subjectivity. These discourses do not have a definite intrinsic political orientation, yet they can in part be both resisted and assimilated from a socialist political position.

But the politics of this essay, insofar as they cannot be transmitted by the will of the subject: is it really—miners be damned—a British Coal document, closing down bits of Barthes that are deemed theoretically and politically uneconomic (Barthes is fond of talking about rentabilité in the figurative sense)? I am trying to postpone closure, to eschew arrogance (another Barthesian term): perhaps nothing in Barthes is useless from this political point of view (because the view itself, even if the position is maintained, has to be called into question); but there are problems, as well as delights, in the desirable assimilation of discourse (discourse is an object of desire), and I want to point to these here (but perhaps the pointing is the point: in the empty sky of the Barthesian text, divided up by the gesture of the haruspex, there is no God, no transcendental political signified).

I want to begin, insofar as this is a beginning, with the early texts, that the doxa tells us are generally speaking leftist, because their politics in fact need further examination. The politics is linked to an analysis of class and culture that remains fixed throughout Barthes’s work, while other parts of the theory move on; and this fixity in movement imparts a kind of theoretical or political drag or skew. Barthes’s relationship with Marxism is relevant here. The relationship was never institutionalized in party membership or commitment to militancy. Barthes was not part of the emergent-hegemonic intellectual grouping on the Left in the 1950s, namely the Parti Communiste Français. The early writings show an anti-Stalinist commitment as strong as their opposition to the bourgeoisie (at this point it is perhaps worth recalling that Barthes’s encounter with Marxism came through the influence of a Trotskyist friend).

In Le Degré zéro de l’écriture, Barthes speaks of Marxism as having
been vindicated by history when bourgeois writers perceived literary language as compromised in the impostures of their own ideology. But in a footnote in ‘Le mythe aujourd’hui’, the concluding essay of Mythologies, Barthes observes that aesthetic or ethical opposition to the bourgeoisie can perfectly well co-exist with political indifference, or even a pro-bourgeois political stance. The bourgeois writer’s rejection of bourgeois literary norms is based on a misperception of his or her class, whose representations, says Barthes, cannot be separated from its determinations (its objective political and social position). Although Barthes himself does not draw it, the further inference that this misperception is itself an effect of the bourgeois class-position of the writers in question, seems to fit in with his argument. One up, apparently, to Marxism.

But the corollary of this point is less cheering. For, as Barthes remarks in the same passage, if ‘les adversaires éthiques (ou esthétiques) de la bourgeoisie restent pour la plupart indifférents, sinon même attachés, à ses déterminations politiques’ (the political (or aesthetic) opponents of the bourgeoisie mostly remain indifferent, or even attached, to its political positions), it is also true that ‘les adversaires politiques de la bourgeoisie négligent de condamner profondément ses représentations: ils vont même souvent jusqu’à les partager’ (the political opponents of the bourgeoisie do not take the trouble to radically condemn its representations, which they often even go so far as to share). The explanation of this contradiction is given in Le Degré zéro de l’écriture, where Barthes states that ‘pour le moment, les normes artistiques du prolétariat ne peuvent être différentes de celles de la petite-bourgeoisie (fait d’ailleurs conforme à la doctrine)’ (at the moment the artistic standards of the proletariat cannot differ from those of the petty bourgeoisie (a fact, moreover, that is in line with doctrine)). The word fait seems to imply that he is stating what is the case, not merely quoting the doctrine he refers to. Communist writers therefore practise the petty-bourgeois écriture (‘artistico-realistic’) that combines a debased realism with the signs of Literature (linguistic procedures far removed from the spoken language of the class the writers are supposed to represent). Partly, this conservatism is doubtless due to Stalinism’s inherent fear of any challenge to any orthodoxy: ‘l’écriture bourgeoise est jugée somme toute moins dangereuse que son propre procès’ (bourgeois writing is in the last analysis judged less dangerous than the challenge to it). At the very moment, then, when bourgeois writers are breaking with bourgeois writing, the party of the working class is culturally petty-bourgeois. Le Degré zéro de l’écriture bears the mark of this contradiction, in the
tension between the evident wish to condemn this writing as sterile and artificial, and the political analysis that means that there is no alternative to it on the Left, that an authentically proletarian writing is at this stage of history impossible. For the working class is culturally within the sphere of influence of the petty bourgeoisie, being itself 'exclu de toute culture' (p. 51) (excluded from all culture). It is rather surprising to find Barthes using 'culture' in this rather restricted sense. But this kind of position recurs again and again in his work. In Mythologies he states that 'en société bourgeoise, il n'y a ni culture ni morale prolétarienne, il n'y a pas d'art prolétarien: idéologiquement, tout ce qui n'est pas bourgeois est obligé d'emprunter à la bourgeoisie' (p. 226; Barthes's emphasis) (in bourgeois society, there is neither proletarian culture nor proletarian morality, there is no proletarian art: ideologically speaking, whatever is not bourgeois has to borrow from the bourgeoisie). The petty bourgeoisie is not here specified, but elsewhere it is. In an article that originally appeared in the Times Literary Supplement in 1971, Barthes announces that

le prolétariat (les producteurs) n'a aucune culture propre: dans les pays dits développés, son langage est celui de la petite-bourgeoisie, parce que c'est le langage qui lui est offert par les communications de masse (grande presse, radio, télévision): la culture de masse est petite-bourgeoise.\(^{15}\)

(The proletariat (the producers) has no culture of its own: in the so-called developed countries, its language is that of the petty bourgeoisie, because this is the language offered it by the mass media (the popular press, the radio, the television): mass culture is petty-bourgeois.)

Again, in a late interview (April 1979): 'Le prolétariat, (...) culturellement, est petit-bourgeois'.\(^{16}\) This position is clearly founded on the notion of mass culture, as usual invoked with a tinge of nostalgia for supposedly preceding forms:

Il y a eu des moments où un certain contact était maintenu entre le 'peuple' et la langue, à travers la poésie populaire, la chanson populaire ou la pression même de la masse pour transformer la langue en dehors des écoles-musées. On dirait que le contact a disparu; on ne le perçoit pas aujourd'hui dans la culture 'populaire', qui n'est guère qu'une culture fabriquée (par la radio, la télévision, etc.)\(^{17}\)

(There have been periods when there was a certain ongoing contact between the 'people' and language, through the medium of popular poetry, popular song or the actual pressure of the masses transforming the language outside the
museums called schools. It looks as if this contact has disappeared: it is no longer apparent today in 'popular' culture, which is almost in its entirety a manufactured culture (produced by radio, television, etc.).

More cryptically, in *Le Plaisir du texte* we read:

La [classe] populaire? Ici, disparition de toute activité magique ou poétique: plus de carnaval, on ne joue plus avec les mots: fin des métaphores, règne des stéréotypes imposés par la culture petite-bourgeoise.18

(The working class? Here, disappearance of all magic or poetic activity: no more carnival, no more play with words: the end of metaphors, the rule of stereotypes imposed by petty-bourgeois culture.)

The peremptory (self-consciously Nietzschean) tone of these assertions, offered without proof of any kind, might encourage us not to take this seriously as a description, but to read it as a metaphor for a certain privation of the erotic pleasure of language. Well and good. But this reading strategy cannot dissolve the political implications of this choice of language, as I hope will become clear.

The cultural lack of the proletariat is presumably related to its loss of its sense of identity: the period when it could 'see itself' is over.19 Proletariat and bourgeoisie have become abstractions; only the petty bourgeoisie has substantial reality:

Historiquement et politiquement, la petite bourgeoisie est la clef du siècle. C'est elle la classe qui monte; en tout cas, c'est elle la classe qui se voit.20

(Historically and politically, the petty bourgeoisie is the key to our century. It is the class that is rising; in any case, it is the class that can see itself.)

Barthes was saying the same five years earlier, in 1972, albeit in more nuanced fashion:

Peut-être ce qui domine cette seconde moitié du XXe siècle, en tout cas en France, c'est un grand règlement de comptes entre la bourgeoisie et la petite bourgeoisie. Le problème historique est de savoir si la petite bourgeoisie va faire sa percée dans le cadre général d'un statut capitaliste (de type pompidolien) ou dans celui d'une promotion du type PCF.21

(Perhaps the dominant feature of the second half of the twentieth century, in France at any rate, is a showdown between the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. The historical problem is whether the petty bourgeoisie is going to
stage its advance within the general context of a capitalist régime (of the Pompidou type) or within that of a politics of improving living standards of the Communist Party type.)

The culture of this emergent class—mass culture—is defined as the farcical repetition of bourgeois culture (‘farcical’, of course, in allusion to Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire). Mass culture is a degraded form because it takes the models of bourgeois culture and turns them into stereotypes; State-censored, it does not even allow the scope for challenge that in bourgeois culture proper devolves upon the intellectual.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this representation is, precisely, its stereotypicality. Not only does Barthes trundle it out more or less automatically, in all sorts of contexts, it answers to a diffused spontaneous image of the working classes slumped all evening in front of the television watching soap operas and quiz shows, living a totally vicarious semi-existence indifferent to the burning issues of culture and politics. I am not of course suggesting that this is Barthes’s own image of the working class, but what he says about culture contributes to, and is authenticated by, this representation. The notion of mass culture as universal pap-feeding is to be found all over the political spectrum, in C. S. Lewis or F. R. Leavis (in other ways unlikely bedfellows) as well as, in a more subtle and in an explicitly materialist form, in the Frankfurt School. But, as Raymond Williams has observed, the concept of ‘mass communications’, on which the notion of ‘mass culture’ depends, is itself derived from capitalist practice, in which ‘an “audience” or a “public”, itself always socially specific and differentiated, is seen as a “mass market” of opinion and consumption’. The emphasis on the all-pervasiveness of ‘mass culture’ obscures the fact that working-class culture (and petty-bourgeois culture for that matter) involves social relationships and practices where media representations are not the prime determinant.

But apart from these general objections to the use of the concept of mass culture, it is at least surprising that a writer who builds so much on the refusal of the stereotype, who is at one point prepared to solicit the destruction of the whole Western (Graeco-Judaeo-Islamo-Christian) symbolic order, should also be prepared to leave this monolithic representation of popular culture completely intact. It is doubtless true, as was suggested above, that the image has a rhetorical function: it helps to produce writing like the operators analysed in Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (comparisons, dialectics, couples de mots-valeurs (pairs of value-words)). On the other hand, the topical (in the rhetorical sense) representation of culture enters into other orders of representation...
(political orders), and is, unlike the Text, topical in that sense. Secondly, the components of Barthes's *machine de l'écriture* are for the most part in constant renewal: 'structure', a good thing at one stage, is then constituted as the negative opposite of 'structuration'; 'l'oeuvre procède ainsi par engouements conceptuels, empourprements successifs, manies périsssables' (the work thus advances by conceptual infatuations, successive arousals, ephemeral manias). But the image of culture remains unchanged. Thirdly, positions taken up in the imaginary situation of the interview cannot so readily be recuperated as mechanisms of writing production.

The concept of culture, in its broadest sense, can be related to a certain conception of ideology. It is to Barthes's use of this latter concept that I want now to turn.

In the essay 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui', the Barthesian concept of myth seems to be approaching the Althusserian concept of ideology as conterminous with lived experience, considered as structured by institutions (Ideological State Apparatuses) in such a way as to reproduce the dominant social relations. In the first place, myth, like ideology in Althusser, is an interpellation:

*Le mythe a un caractère impératif, interpellatoire: parti d'un concept historique, surgi directement de la contingence (une classe de latin, l'Empire menacé), c'est moi qu'il vient chercher: il est tourné vers moi, je subis sa force intentionnelle, il me somme de recevoir son ambiguïté expansive.*

(Myth has an imperative, interpellatory quality: setting out from an historical concept, emerging directly from the contingent (a Latin class, the Empire in danger), it comes looking for me: it is turned towards me, I experience its intentional force, it calls on me to accept its expansive ambiguity.)

Secondly, it postulates a recognition. The essence of myth is that it disguises what are in fact bourgeois representations as facts of a universal Nature; it triumphs when a badly paid typist recognizes herself in the spectacle of a bourgeois wedding (or Clarrie Grundy in *The Archers* identifies with 'Princess Di').

Thirdly, myth, like ideology, is omnipresent: it is impossible to get outside it on the level of daily experience: 'Tout, dans notre vie quotidienne, est tributaire de la représentation que la bourgeoisie *se fait et nous fait* des rapports de l'homme et du monde' (Everything in our daily life is tributary to the manner in which the bourgeoisie represents the relationships between human beings and the world to itself and to us.)
But there is a significant discrepancy in the concept of the subject. For Althusser, ‘there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects’.31 But the subject is a weak point in the Barthesian theory. For although the role of the subject in myth is postulated by the emphasis on interpellation and recognition, Barthes’s actual treatment of the subject is rather perfunctory. He distinguishes three subject-positions in relation to myth, according to the type of reading involved. The signifier of the myth (the picture, to give the classic example, of a black soldier saluting the French flag) can be read as merely the empty receptacle of a concept (French ‘imperiality’). This is the position of the myth-producer, who has a concept to illustrate and seeks a form that will illustrate it. The mythologist, however, distinguishes meaning (sens) from form within the signifier, apprehends the semiological process by which the original non-mythical meaning (‘a Black is saluting the French flag’) is displaced by the concept ‘French imperiality’. In the third type of reading, that of the ordinary reader, meaning and form, the image qua image and the image as myth, are perceived as a seamless whole; there is not so much a representation as the actual presence of French imperiality.32

Politically, the first kind of reading is that of the manipulator, the exploiter, of the myth and of the semiological innocence of its ordinary readers. The second, that of the mythologist, is subversive in so far as it exposes the deformation to which the original meaning has been subjected; and subversive in this context means implicitly left-wing, since the field of myth production is, as we shall see, on the Right. Which reading(s) one can adopt depends, as Barthes says, on one’s concrete situation as a subject, and this is not a problem for semiology.33 In other words, semiology needs to be complemented by a sociology of subject-positions, their production and reproduction. No one person can do everything: the trouble is that Barthes does to some extent offer an inadequate substitute for this far more difficult task in the analysis of culture set out above.

Barthes does not on the whole use the term ideology to denote the lived imaginary relation of the subject to the real. In the relatively late essay ‘En sortant du cinéma’ (1975), he does indeed equate the ideological with the imaginary.34 But the place of the ideological is not clear (as it is not, altogether, in Althusser: the ideological seems to be everywhere, since trade unions and political parties are also ISAs: but then again it cannot be, since the class struggle goes beyond the ISAs).35 The essay ‘Le Mythe aujourd’hui’ seems to come close to a theory of ideology as an all-pervasive system of representations by which the ruling class reproduces its dominance at the level of daily experience; but although Barthes is
prepared to refer to bourgeois ideology in such terms, he does not in
general use ‘ideology’ tout court in this sense. ‘Ideology’ in Barthes can
mean in the first place an inverted reflection of the real, secondly ‘l’idée en
tant qu’elle domine’, thirdly, a system of thought, a large-scale ‘fiction’
in this sense Marxism, Christianity, psychoanalysis would all be
ideologies).

The locus classicus of the first conception is of course The German
Ideology, where, in a passage explicitly referred to in ‘Le Mythe aujour-
d’hui’, Marx and Engels assert that ‘in all ideology men and their
circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura’. The
reversal at stake, not quite the same as in the text of Marx and Engels, is
of the particular history of the bourgeoisie into universal Nature. In the
essay ‘La Division des langages’ (1973), Barthes also speaks of encratic
discourses (of which more presently) as presenting the real as the
inversion of the ideological. But the epistemological confidence implicit
in this usage presumably renders it unpalatable to the later Barthes.

The second definition—‘l’idée en tant qu’elle domine’—is offered
polemically. Barthes argues that since ideology is nothing other than
‘l’idée en tant qu’elle domine’, the expression ‘dominant ideology’ is
pleonastic. The will to spike a particular piece of Marxist artillery is
evident here. Barthes allows that one may speak of ‘the ideology of the
dominant class’, but to speak of the ‘dominant ideology’ is to imply that
there is also a ‘dominated ideology’; whereas ‘du côté des “dominés”’ il
n’y a rien, aucune idéologie, sinon précisément—and c’est le dernier degré
de l’aliénation—l’idéologie qu’ils sont obligés (pour symboliser, donc
pour vivre) d’emprunter à la classe qui les domine’ (on the side of the
‘dominated’ there is nothing, no ideology, except precisely—and this is
the furthest degree of alienation—for the ideology that they are forced
(so as to symbolize, hence to live) to borrow from the class which
dominate them). On this showing, it is hard to see how there could be
any ideological conflict at all, or indeed class conflict, since the subordi-
nate class would be unable to symbolize or live its demands except
exclusively in the terms of the ideology of the dominant class. Barthes
implies that the sole alternative to this view is the untenable notion that
social struggle is reducible to the clash of two rival ideologies (p. 54), but
this is not so, and one may accept that the dominance of the dominant
class consists to a great extent in the capacity of its ideology to shape and
to compromise attempts to challenge it, while finding Barthes’s
monolithic view of hegemony unacceptable. It is, however, entirely in
keeping with the representation of mass culture discussed above.

However, in Le Plaisir du texte there was at least (marker of leftist
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impatience) the acceptance of the notion of a dominant class with ideological power. In Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, he proposes to replace the term 'idéologie dominante' by that of 'idéologie arrogante'. But the 'arrogance' of an ideology seems to have nothing essentially to do with any relationship to class power; the use of the term can only be as an ethico-political barometer.

Mythologies announced itself as of the Left through its rhetoric and through the positions it took up: against racism and imperialism ('Bichon chez les nègres', 'Grammaire africaine', 'Continent perdu'), domestic political reaction ('Quelques paroles de M. Poujade'), petty-bourgeois myopia ('L'usager de la grève'). 'Un ouvrier sympathique' uses the Brechtian technique of demystification to expose an apparently 'progressive' film (On the Waterfront) as thoroughly conservative. As Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes points out, the politics in these essays is often kept back till the end, where it appears in the form of ironic allusion (pp. 59–60). It is the absence of such alignments and manoeuvres that has caused the later work to appear to some people as depoliticized. But perhaps more important is the fact that in Mythologies theory as such seemed to be on the side of the Left. For the myth that is its object appears as essentially bourgeois, at any rate in bourgeois society.

In 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui', Barthes raises the question whether there are myths of the Left. The answer is 'Of course'—but only to the extent that the Left is not the revolution. For myth is essentially a depoliticized and depoliticizing discourse, concealing political and historical reality behind images of a universal Nature. Whereas revolutionary discourse is political from start to finish, therefore the antithesis of myth. However, the revolution can in certain situations become 'the Left', abjuring a truly political discourse, adopting (probably for tactical reasons) a discourse of universal Nature. Barthes's example here is Stalinism, in which the political as such is buried beneath the cult of the leader as genius. In such cases myths of the Left grow up. There is a certain fetishism of Revolution in this analysis, as if revolutionary politics could assert or effect a total break with the preceding order of discourse.

Myths of the Left, then, are possible; but they cannot exert the same force as myths of the Right, they are inessential, insubstantial. They can bear only on a few political notions, and cannot impregnate the whole of daily life like their bourgeois counterparts, nor are they an integral part of leftist political strategy. This could be read as a recognition of bourgeois hegemony, of the failure, or impotence, of the Left to develop its own discourses and representations of concrete human relations and practices. But it could also be read as saying that, if the Left were to
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develop such discourses, they would be stamped with the same inauthenticity, as myths, as their bourgeois counterparts. On this showing, the Left would be innocent only as long as it remained powerless—or succeeded in realizing itself in Revolution. This position seems to combine a residual Trotskyist suspicion of reformism with hints of the later attitude that lumps all power together under a negative sign. But the presence of this latter position in the text of Mythologies is only of a shadowy kind, the main emphasis being on the inability of the Left to produce myths comparable in richness to those of the bourgeoisie. The language of the Left, like that of the oppressed in relation to whom it defines itself, is ‘pauvre, monotone, immédiate’ (p. 236) (impoverished, monotonous, immediate): it cannot afford the luxury of a metalanguage (the myth is inherently metalinguistic, language upon language). Whatever one may think of this analysis, it implies that the object of the science of mythology is to be found on the Right, and thus that the science itself is objectively left-wing, devoted to the critique of bourgeois ideology.

By the late seventies, however, Barthes's views on this point have changed. He tells Bernard-Henri Lévy that May '68 liberated the language of the Left, at the cost of imparting to it a certain arrogance; with 49 per cent of the population voting for the Left, it is inevitable that there should have been a change in the mythological atmosphere: ‘les mythes, ça suit le nombre’ (myths go with the crowd). On the other hand, he is not prepared to analyse this mythology except at the behest of the Left itself, as represented, say, by Le Nouvel Observateur (on behalf of which Lévy is interviewing him). This implies a kind of residual solidarity with the Left, but it is hard to find solidarity in the tone in which, three years later, in what must have been one of his last interviews, he speaks, again to Le Nouvel Observateur, of political militancy. By a striking reversal, the Left now appears as the very homeland of myth, since everywhere else fashion is moving too quickly for myths to take shape, while leftists maulder on about police 'mistakes', abortion, ecology, racism: all real problems, Barthes graciously acknowledges, but tending towards mythical (stereotypical) status. The hints of an aesthetic revulsion from the poverty and dryness of leftist discourse (invoked as explaining the absence of left-wing myths) seem now to find full expression, and the characteristics of leftist discourse are no longer referred to its relationship to the oppressed. Again, in the Lévy interview, Barthes identifies the locus of myth not in a socially dominant class, but in terms of statistical preponderance within the population as a whole; as if the fact of 49 per cent of the electorate voting Left were
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in itself sufficient to bring about left-wing control over cultural production.

The passages I have just been discussing show that the concept of myth remains important for Barthes long after his moving on from the project of *Mythologies* into new theoretical areas. It is this move, and its political implications, that I now want to look at.

The essay ‘La Mythologie aujourd’hui’ (translated into English as ‘Change the Object itself’), which dates from 1971, both summarizes the thesis of *Mythologies* and explains the new directions. The project of the earlier work and its central operating concepts—signifier, signified, and the rest—have themselves become quasi-mythical, endoxal: ‘pas un étudiant qui ne dénonce le caractère bourgeois ou petit-bourgeois d’une forme (de vie, de pensée, de consommation)’46 (Any student can and does denounce the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois character of such and such a form (of life, of thought, of consumption)). The denunciation of the myth has itself congealed into a discourse, a body of sentences.

In other words, the doxa itself can now take charge of démystification, and the science of the signifier can move on. The first task Barthes assigns it is ‘semioclastics’: the destruction, no longer of the (ideological) signified, but of the sign itself. The signifier must be liberated from the signified with which Saussurean theory had indissolubly united it; for behind the signified lurk the figures of all authority: the Law, the Father, the Repressed.47 The theory of the text developed by Barthes during the early seventies answers in some sense to this requirement. The second task he identifies is the critique of discourses as tissues of habits, repetitions, stereotypes, inevitable closing sentences and key words. The basic concepts are changed: sign, signifier, signified, and connotation giving way to quotation, reference, stereotype.48 Barthes places this move under a Marxist sign, equating it with the moves from Feuerbach to the young Marx, and from the young Marx to the mature Marx, as conceived by Althusser; but it does not contain much for a Marxist to be complacent about.

The essay ‘La Division des langages’ (1973) makes a distinction between ‘encratic’ and ‘acratic’ discourses that both reproduces and displaces the distinction in *Mythologies* between the many rich myths of the Right and the few poor myths of the Left. The encratic discourse is within power, the acratic discourse without or outside power.49

The relationship of language to power is seldom if ever direct: Barthes sees it as mediated by culture, in the form of the doxa (common opinion, what a certain culture takes as probable truth, to be distinguished from science). The encratic discourse conforms to the doxa: supported by the
State, it is everywhere, diffused through all social practices: ‘les échanges, les rites sociaux, les loisirs, le champ socio-symbolique’ (p. 123) (forms of interaction, social rituals, leisure activities, the socio-symbolic field).

What *Mythologies* presented as characteristic of bourgeois ideology is generalized as a feature of encratic discourse. Though coded through and through, such discourse presents itself not as systematic, but as the negation of system, basing itself on the appeal to universal values, common sense, actual experience.

Although the language of power, encratic discourse is not confined to the class in power: it may be borrowed by classes outside power and seeking to achieve it by reformist or promotional means. By the same token, acratic discourses are defined as such not by a declared opposition to power, but by their repudiation of the doxa (by which power is mediated): they are para-doxal.

Their different relationship to the doxa, and to power, determines the difference between the rhetorical procedures of the two types of language. Being powerless, acratic language must resort to violence: the violence of system (e.g. Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism). Barthes will not allow that the theoretical basis of these systems (‘construit[s] sur une pensée, non sur une idéologie’ (built on an idea, not on an ideology)) can abolish their rhetorical character. Acratic discourse is violent in that it silences the Other, not like its encratic counterpart, by suffocation, but by integrating the response of those outside it into its own system: thus, rejection of psychoanalysis can be interpreted as a resistance, and therefore as falling within the domain of psychoanalysis. The strong system of this type can as a result operate in any situation, irrespective of the individual talent of the subjects involved.

But not only those outside an acratic discourse are oppressed by it. Those who speak it are similarly constrained, since the discourse is a language, and a language is defined less by what it permits, than by what it compels, one to say. In other words, the subject has been called into question far more radically than in *Mythologies*. The speaking subject’s relationship to a strong discursive system is theatrical: the discourse is a staging of arguments, aggressions, ripostes, formulas, in which the subject invests a hysterical thrill. Or, as the remarkable late essay ‘L’Image’ puts it, the language is a sucker (*ventouse*), and the militant subject (another kind of sucker) its happy parasite.

The choice then appears to be between two kinds of oppression: the suffocation of the doxa, the violence of the system. That is to say, there is no choice. Theory cannot validate a specific political option.
Except the espousal of the third term: the Text, Writing. Writing is utopian, it works against the cruel social fact of the division of languages; it openly assumes the theatricality that acratic discourses indulge in but conceal; it mixes together different languages (psychoanalytic, structuralist, Marxist), and can thus operate without an origin, escaping the relentless topicality (and hence bellicosity) of language. Barthes sees of course that the consumption of Text is socially extremely limited, but holds that this does not marginalize or minimize its significance as an anticipation of a state of affairs where reading and writing would take place under the sign of desire, not domination.

Here, then, the two new tasks of the science of the signifier come together: the study of sociolects leads to a recognition of the uniqueness of Text. But the coherence of the schema should not blind us to its problems. Taking the third term—the Text—first. Its actual potentiality to circumvent the social division of languages must be seen as limited when its own use of language is so divisive: both its production and its consumption involve an openness to the different varieties of language that is rarefied by the class structure of society.

There are, furthermore, problems with the basic distinction between encratic and acratic discourses, with the double determination of a discourse as encratic or acratic in respect of (i) its relation to power; (ii) its formal characteristics. When Barthes says that, being outside power, acratic discourse must resort to violence (the violence of systematicity), he implies that level (ii) is determined by level (i). Doubtless, the reverse process always operates: thus, the access to power of acratic discourse is hampered by its resort to theory and what the doxa identifies as jargon; it cannot simply filter into people’s experience. But if this deadlock is broken, and an acratic discourse is installed in power, it becomes encratic. But does it then lose its characteristic of systematicity? Why should it? Christianity is a ‘système fort’ if ever there was one, as Barthes implies: it has a whole battery of arguments and rhetorical manoeuvres for subjecting the other person, as well as (in certain forms) a systematic conceptual apparatus. But these characteristics were even more marked when Christianity was the ruling discourse, when it was being disseminated, in typically encratic fashion, through the doxa, common sense, daily experience, and so on. Thatcherism, too, which glories in its endoxality, was once self-confessedly paradoxal (its basic truths forgotten in the aftermath of the permissive and profligate sixties), but it has a certain philosophical and theoretical basis, in a set of ideas about nationhood and about the economy, and is supported in certain contexts by arguments of a higher level of sophistication than the homely
illustrations so beloved of its governmental mouthpieces. It certainly has its ‘figures de système’ by which those who challenge it can be silenced or disabled (molly-coddled for too long by the Welfare State, they have forgotten how to stand on their own two feet; or, they have too great a vested interest in institutions sheltered from the bracing wind of the marketplace).

It seems, then, that a discourse can be both paradoxal and endoxal: diffuse, ‘natural’, on the one hand, systematic and violent on the other, depending on the social modes and places of its production and reproduction. Here one of the lacunae of the Barthesian schema in fact comes to light. Culture is seen as the necessary mediation between power and language. But the cultural here is defined in opposition to the political: it is equated with the doxa, ideas in people’s heads, codes that structure their thinking, separated from the institutions that actually produce and circulate these ideas. The relation of a discourse to power is more accurately conceived in terms of its relation to these institutions than in terms of endoxality or paradoxality. In fact, the very term ‘doxa’ is useful only up to a point: this is implicitly admitted by Barthes when he contends that its diffuse, full, and ‘natural’ character makes it difficult to study—a claim that serves to motivate a switch of interest to acratic discourses, whose study, as reflection on reflection, is constitutively theoretical. The term ‘doxa’ admirably mirrors the diffuse, apparently unstructured nature of lived experience; at the same time, it obscures the articulations between hegemonic discourses, articulations that take place both in discursive and in institutional spheres. In short, the attempt to define discourses by external and internal characteristics (relation to doxa and procedures of persuasion) seems misconceived.

But if this is so, then one of the major political implications of the argument is called into question. For its tendency was to vindicate the Text as the only escape from the twin oppressions of doxa and system, suffocation and violence. Yet if systematicity is not an inherently acratic trait, then there is less incentive to view it as inherently violent (violence being considered as the only non-Textual alternative to power). This does not mean that marginal discourses operate in a power-vacuum: they have their binds, their traps, their terrorisms. But to accept this does not entail accepting that theory as such is terrorist.

The essays that expound the encratic/acratic distinction (‘La Division des langages’ and ‘La Guerre des langages’) may be read as injunctions to those engaged in theoretical discourse to recognize, at least, their inexpungible theatrical and rhetorical aspects, their aggressive potential.
As such, they are highly salutary. As contributions to the new science of sociolectology, they are seriously deficient.

But they do of course anticipate the notion of power that gains currency in the later works. *Leçon*, Barthes’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, provides a résumé of his semiological enterprise to date. (I find this text, which I am going to criticize, both beautiful and moving, like other of Barthes’s late writings: ‘Au séminaire’, ‘L’Image’, essays, no less than the books: the Fragments, *La Chambre claire*; I do not know what to do with this fact, or this avowal: leave it, like a piece of *bêtise*.) It points to power as the latent stake in the semiological project, and to an evolution of the concept of power: initially viewed as essentially political, it has come to be seen as ideological, also, as everywhere—which comes, in a sense, to the same thing. But the established concept of power, Barthes argues, is still unitary (it is always the same power turning up everywhere), whereas power should be regarded as essentially plural, as breaking out again, like *amour-propre* in La Rochefoucauld, in the very effort to get rid of it: it appears, says Barthes, wherever there is arrogance, wherever discourse constitutes its interlocutor as guilty.64

Or stupid? For it cannot be denied that this conception of power is more subtle than the one that sees it simply as the haves oppressing the have-nots. And the intellectual’s *amour-propre* is at once set in motion: ‘la bêtise n’est pas mon fort’ (stupidity is not my strong point), one mutters to oneself, like Monsieur Teste (Barthes quotes the remark somewhere). Barthes tells us that to go through Marxism and psychoanalysis is an indispensable corrective to stupidity, but that to hang around them too long is, precisely, stupid: reading these words, a déprise takes place in us: a dis-attachment, a falling out of love.65

Still, Barthes’s discourse of power is less powerful than the Pentagon or General Motors.66 And this is where the problem is with that discourse. For if power is plural for Barthes, the plural of power is still power, not powers. Power is plural in that it has many subjects, is present in all discourses: but as to its nature, it seems to be unitary. To say that language is fascist is in a sense to say no more than the truth: as Lavers points out, Barthes’s mother-tongue forces him to choose between masculine and feminine, between the intimacy of *tu* and the formality of *vous*, and so on.67 But then it becomes difficult to say how fascism is fascist: not that one desires to conserve a tautology; but it is clearly important to leave a space for understanding the articulation within fascism of linguistic and other practices.

Like the essays in sociolectology, *Leçon* offers the Text as an alterna-
tive to the ‘guerre des langages’: the Text is the index of unpower (dépouvoir). But ‘L’Image’ offers us two further alternatives. The first is political, a declaration of solidarity: but with the Ghibellines, partisans of the medieval Holy Roman Emperors against the Papacy and its Guelf followers. Following Michelet’s definitions of the terms, Barthes announces himself a Ghibelline, espousing the body, ties of blood, personal attachments, against the Guelf’s obsession with the Law, the Code, the Idea (the militant is the archetypal Guelf). This sensibility to personalities is complemented by an avowed inability to feel indignant about ideas, that is, intellectuals’ ideas, not the stupid ideas contained in the doxa: ‘dans l’intelligentsia, par définition, il n’y a pas d’idées “bêtes” ’68 (in the intelligentsia, by definition, there are no ‘stupid’ ideas). A self-refuting idea, if ever there was one, which moreover obscures the very real possibility of an intellectual’s acting on the assumption that his or her role is to vindicate the common sense of ordinary people (and thus more or less denies the possibility of certain kinds of right-wing intellectual).69

But this abstraction of ideas from their social and political context is part of what Barthes puts forward as a generalized value of suspension of judgement (which, following the Greek, he terms époche). Since ideas belong to the imaginary, not to the body, époche is also a suspension of the Image. Its companion value (the word is apt) is acolouthia, in its double sense of an evasion of the binds imposed by language on its addressees and the company of friends for whom and through whom Barthes thinks out his own ideas.70

It looks as if politics has been totally jettisoned here in favour of personal relationships. In which case, for a socialist to carry on trying to work with Barthes appears as pure Ghibellinism. But, as I argued at the beginning, it is not necessary to assume that the late ideas are ipso facto the best, and in any case there are politically fruitful elements in the later writings themselves.

The first of these concerns daily life, which Mythologies presented as suffused with bourgeois ideology. But daily life is also a potential sphere of ideological resistance: as Diana Knight has argued, it is a potentially Utopian space. This is apparent in the writings about the teaching process: ‘Ecrivains, professeurs, intellectuels’, ‘Jeunes chercheurs’, ‘Au séminaire’.71 All these are concerned with the attempt to circumvent the power relations that invest the academic process. It is true that changing the face of a seminar is not going to ‘change society’—but then what single set of practices is? If feminism, more than socialism, has emphasized the politics of daily life, this is because it realizes that politics
is not simply a matter of working towards the substitution of one set of social relations for another, but of anticipating that substitution in the work itself.72

The second theme (examined more fully in Leslie Hill’s paper) is that of the body. The body, for Barthes, is opposed to the Idea: ‘Comment un corps peut-il coller à une idée—ou une idée à un corps?’73 (How can a body adhere to an idea—or an idea to a body?) Hill argues, rightly, against the view that this late Barthesian emphasis on the body involves relapsing into a celebration of the Natural.74 The body is not a natural object in any sense that would exclude it from history: it is itself historical. Barthes perceives this of his own body, once tubercular, on rereading The Magic Mountain.75 And, being historical, it is politicized: for politics is a fundamental order of history.76

The emphasis on the Barthesian body, then, is always virtually political (there are, of course, other politics of the body, as in Poujadism).77 But it also has the particular effect of liberating pleasure. For pleasure too has its history, social and individual: no one born after a certain date can know the pleasures of the sanatorium, or of the baladeuse.78 Again,

Chaque fois que j’essaye d’analyser un texte qui m’a donné du plaisir, ce n’est pas ma ‘subjectivité’ que je retrouve, c’est mon ‘individu’, la donnée qui fait mon corps séparé des autres corps et lui apprécie sa souffrance et son plaisir: c’est mon corps de jouissance que je retrouve. Et ce corps de jouissance est aussi mon sujet historique; car c’est au terme d’une combinatorie très fine d’éléments biographiques, historiques, sociologiques, névrotiques (éducation, classe sociale, configuration infantile, etc.) que je règle le jeu contradictoire du plaisir (culturel) et de la jouissance (inculturelle).79

(Whenever I seek to ‘analyse’ a text that has given me pleasure, what I find is not my ‘subjectivity’, but my ‘individuality’, the basic datum that makes my body separate from other bodies and endows it with its own suffering or pleasure: what I find is my body of jouissance. And this body of jouissance is also my historical subject; for it is at the end-point of a highly subtle combinatory of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements (upbringing, social class, infantile configuration, etc.) that I regulate the contradictory interplay of pleasure (cultural) and jouissance (non-cultural.).)

The continuation of this passage, and of the one from Leçon I have just quoted, takes them into rather different regions from those I am here concerned with, regions less propitious to the kind of politico-theoretical work a socialist might want to carry out. Nonetheless, their shared
insistence on the historicity of the body and its pleasures helps to liberate pleasure from the puritanical grasp of certain leftist theoretical discourses: frees it to become, as in Brecht, a part of the process of political understanding itself.

By way of conclusion.

The opposition between early politicized texts and late depoliticized ones will not hold. The later texts are largely built around themes (the discourse, for instance, on popular culture) that were already operative in the early ones. The new elements (the persistent reference, for example, to Nietzsche) are not intruders violating an original political purity. Equally, these later texts bear a constant relation to the dimensions of the political and to history, a relation that can be placed under the twin signs of Utopia and of the body. To read these, and to reread the earlier texts, as part of a political reflection on culture (and to refuse the absoluteness of the distinction between politics and the political)—to maintain the Barthesian emphasis on the formative cultural role of class, without accepting his impoverished representation of particular classes and its various implications—is doubtless to betray Barthes’s intentions. But he is the last person entitled to complain of this. To seek to maintain contact with the text of Barthes, to think in and through it in a form of acolouthia, answers not merely to a desire to temper one’s Guelfism with a dash of the Ghibelline: it is in some sense an act of faith in Utopian possibilities of the recovery and preservation of pleasure.

Possibilities that for the moment are submerged by other demands. The present essay has aimed to trace some of the paths of the political in the work of Barthes. These paths lead nowhere: but they follow a certain track of history. The image Barthes likes to apply to the movement of history is Vico’s spiral. In the last seven or eight years, the spiral has completed its path from the days when Barthes started mythologizing. To Poujade succeeds his former follower Le Pen, who served in the Algerian war whose rhetoric Barthes denounces in Mythologies. Mrs Thatcher berates ‘some academics and intellectuals’ for ‘putting out what I call poison’ and ‘pounding every decent value’ out of young people (see ‘Poujade et les intellectuels’). The projection into space of geopolitical fears that nourished the flying saucer myth (see ‘Martiens’) is taking horribly material form in the Star Wars programme. Perhaps theory in its spirals must come back once again to the deconstruction of the encratic discourses that shape, and menace, our lives in this country, in Europe, on this planet. In taking on this task, we run the risk of being
nauseated on occasion by our own repetitions, our own stereotypes. But it seems to be a time for strong heads and strong stomachs.

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NOTES


4 Le Grain de la voix, p. 81.

5 Ibid., p. 244.

6 Ibid., p. 185.

7 On political and ideological trends among the French intelligentsia in recent years, see the vigorous and lucid account in Keith A. Reader, Intellectuals and the Left in France since 1968 (Methuen, 1987).

8 Le Grain de la voix, p. 193.

9 Ibid., pp. 67, 84. The same point is made by Annette Lavers, Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After (London, Methuen, 1982), p. 28.

10 So what are the politics, not of the subject of this essay, but of the writing itself? Differences between writing and speech: this was originally a paper delivered orally, in 1985, a sticker attached to my jacket saying DIG DEEP FOR THE MINERS, as if to place theoretical discourse under the sign of politics were simply to attach a political sign—not even to the body—but to the clothes, signs, of the utterer, thereby signified as ‘the left-wing intellectual’—compare the ‘group of revolutionary students’, that mythical construction every bit as good as ‘war widows’ or ‘old soldiers’ (‘Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs’, in Essais critiques IV: Le Bruissement de la langue (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1984), p. 353). ‘Left-wing intellectual’, and not just your armchair Marxist, but a self-proclaimed activist, linking theory with . . . practice. In writing, this particular imaginary is attenuated, sketched in merely by strokes of rhetoric, but doubtless there all the same.


12 Le Grain de la voix, p. 252.


206 Paragraph

15 'La Paix culturelle', in Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 110.
16 Le Grain de la voix, p. 311.
17 Ibid., p. 177.
19 Le Grain de la voix, pp. 251–52.
20 Ibid., p. 251.
21 Ibid., p. 146. The gloss of *promotion* I have given in the translation is based on the Petit Robert definition of *promotion ouvrière, sociale*: ‘émancipation des classes défavorisées, par leur accession à un niveau de vie supérieur; ensemble des moyens mis en oeuvre à cette fin’.
22 Le Grain de la voix, p. 146; Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 110; and see Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in Marx and Engels, Selected Works in one volume (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, p. 96.
23 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 111. The role of the State in producing mass culture is heavily emphasized in this argument.
25 'La Mythologie aujourd'hui', Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 81; Image, Music, Text, p. 167.
26 Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, pp. 62, 73, 66.
27 'Le texte, lui, est atopique' (Le Plaisir du texte, p. 49).
30 Ibid., p. 227; Barthes's emphasis.
32 Mythologies, p. 214.
33 Ibid., p. 214, n. 8.
34 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 386.
36 Le Plaisir du texte, p. 53.
37 Ibid., p. 46; 'La Guerre des langages', in Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 129.
39 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 123.
40 Le Plaisir du texte, p. 53.
41 Mythologies, pp. 234–35.
42 Ibid., p. 235.
43 By 'hints' I do not mean to imply, teleologically, an inevitable development, or decline, towards the later positions, but the ideological position of
Mythologies is a complex one, permitting drift or displacement towards positions distant from those it appears to take up.

44 Le Grain de la voix, p. 255. I am not clear what election Barthes is referring to.


46 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 82; the translation given is Heath’s (Image, Music, Text, p. 168).


48 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 82; Image, Music, Text, p. 168.

49 Le Bruissement de la langue, pp. 121–22.

50 Ibid., p. 123. Barthes is here carrying on his undercover feud with the French Communist Party, as will appear from a comparison of this passage with Le Grain de la voix, pp. 146, 207. On the meaning of ‘promotional’, see above, n. 20.


52 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 130; and see ‘L’Image’, op. cit., p. 392.

53 The strongest expression of this position is of course to be found in the famous statement in Leçon (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1978) that ‘la langue est . . . fasciste’, because fascism is defined by what it compels one to say rather than by what it forbids one to say (p. 14).

54 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 130. The essay ‘Brecht et le discours’ complicates the picture, by identifying, within theoretical discourse, two varieties: sado-fanaticism (identification of the subject with the signified) and dogmatism (identification of the sign with the referent). Theatre, by virtue of its textual quality (the disorigination of its utterances), is a means of circumventing this second alternative, as are other Brechtian practices: discontinuity, the refusal of metonymy (Le Bruissement de la langue, pp. 243–53).

55 Le Bruissement de la langue, p. 392. It is not clear from the sentence as a whole whether the subject is the parasite, and the language the host, or whether it is not rather the subject who plays host to a parasitic language.

56 Ibid., pp. 125–26, 130–31; and see Le Plaisir du texte, p. 47.

57 Le Bruissement de la langue, pp. 130–31.

58 Terry Eagleton remarks that the view of the modernist text as radical because subversive of the mystifications operated by the naturalizing ‘readable’ text ‘has rarely been coupled with a critique of the social determinants that allow a mere few thousand access to such writing’ (Criticism and Ideology (London, Verso Editions, 1978; first published 1976), p. 165). See also Keith Reader: ‘The public [in writing of the Tel Quel school] was hypostatized in such a way as to suggest that a progressive text remained a progressive text regardless of by whom or in what context it was being read’ (Intellectuals and the Left in France, p. 12).
There is a similar problem with the treatment of the cultural code in S/Z. Barthes refrains from synthesizing these quotations from various knowledges into a cultural totality (p. 27). Roger Fowler protests against this, and against the statement that the voice that delivers the cultural or referential utterances is anonymous (p. 25). See his essay ‘The Referential Code and Narrative Authority’, in Literature as Social Discourse (London, Batsford Academic and Educational, 1981), pp. 96–128, in which he argues that one can and should reconstruct the worldview of the narrator and that of the culture to which he belongs and which he interpellates in the name of ‘a particular sexual cynicism’ (p. 105, and see pp. 99–106). Fowler’s project is a valid and interesting one; but if Barthes refrains from this reconstruction, while seeing it as possible and worthwhile (S/Z, p. 104), it is not from slovenliness but so as to forestall the risk of closure latent in this move. In particular, Fowler’s model, centred on the narrator and the implied author, represses the symbolic dimension in which the narrator and his addressee (and Balzac himself, if he is to be assimilated to the narrator, as Fowler wishes (p. 106)) end up castrated.

A dilemma on the level of the imaginary in the choice of examples: to choose only American references exposes one to the accusation of mechanical left-wing bias, impervious to the oppressions of socialist régimes; to balance the reference to the Pentagon by mentioning the Kremlin is a token sacrifice on the altars of liberalism.

Some right-wing intellectuals are of course elitist, but the Tory New Right quite often represents itself as standing up for the common sense of the ordinary man (sic) on issues like the death penalty, against the ideas imposed by patronizing middle-class liberals.

The relations of Barthesian discourse to feminism are, however, highly problematic, as emerges from an unpublished article by Morag Shiach, ‘Roland Barthes: some feminist fragments’.

Coller here has overtones of ‘to cling to’, or ‘to fit closely to’ that reinforce the corporeality of the image.
74 Hill, p. 112. This view is taken by Jonathan Culler in *Barthes* (Fontana Modern Masters, Glasgow, Fontana, 1983), pp. 95–97.

75 *Leçon*, pp. 44–45.

76 *Le Grain de la voix*, p. 206. This passage makes the key distinction between 'le politique' (the political, 'la dimension même du réel' (the very dimension of the real)) and 'la politique' (politics, a repetititious discursive form of the political). On the appropriation of Barthes for a 'privatized' aesthetic of *jouissance* and the erasure of the historical constitution of the subject, see Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 77.

77 See *Mythologies*, pp. 185–87.

78 *Le Grain de la voix*, p. 163; *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, p. 54 (the *baladeuse* was the open carriage coupled in summer to the trams that ran from Bayonne to Biarritz).

