

## INTRODUCTION TO SIMONE WEIL

*Of the three most remarkable women thinkers born in the last century, Simone Weil (1909–43) was a year younger than Simone de Beauvoir, herself a little over a year younger than Hannah Arendt. From a secularized Jewish family in Paris, she declared herself a Bolshevik at the age of ten, and proved a brilliant student, first at the elite lycée Henri IV and then at the École normale supérieure. There after listening to a homily on patriotism by the sociologist Célestin Bouglé—a fellow spirit of Durkheim, toast of today’s ‘social liberals’ in France—she got up and read out a speech of Poincaré in 1912, who took the country into the First World War two years later, advocating an invasion of Belgium. Bouglé, dumbfounded at this exposure of Entente hypocrisies, could think of no better answer than to announce it was 12 noon and time for lunch, a response that immediately became a legend in the school. When she passed her agrégation in philosophy in 1931, Bouglé made certain that the ‘Red Virgin’, as he called her, was not allowed to teach in an industrial town as she had requested. She was dispatched instead to Le Puy, a rural backwater. There, nevertheless, she was soon active in solidarity work with the local trade unions and writing in La Révolution prolétarienne, a libertarian journal of the left edited by militants expelled from the Communist Party. In 1932 she made a trip to Germany on the eve of the Nazi takeover, and on her return composed a ten-part report on the political situation in the country. In condemning the passivity of the SPD and the sectarian blindness of the KPD in the face of the rise of fascism, her judgement of it corresponded closely to Trotsky’s warnings of the time, but was more clear-sighted in questioning the notion that Hitler was little more than a tool of big capital, and doubting whether the German working class was still in a position to resist his seizure of power, a fait accompli by the time her last installment appeared in late February 1933.*

*Six months later she published a pessimistic balance-sheet of the prospects for proletarian politics at large. Capital had reached the limits of its reproduction. But the Russian Revolution had given birth to a bureaucratic regime that had nothing to do with Socialism, Nazism was triumphant in Germany, and the New Deal in America offered no more than a technocratic variant of authoritarian capitalism. To a friend, she had written after returning from Berlin: ‘Insurrections on the order of the Commune are admirable, but they fail (true, the proletariat is much stronger than it was then; but so is the bourgeoisie). Insurrections of the October 1917 type succeed, but all they do is reinforce the bureaucratic, military and police apparatus. And at this moment nonviolence à la Gandhi seems simply a rather hypocritical species of reformism. And we do not yet know any fourth type of action.’ Now she concluded: ‘No workers’ state has ever yet existed on the earth’s surface, except for a few*

weeks in Paris in 1871, and perhaps for a few months in Russia in 1917 and 1918. On the other hand, for nearly fifteen years now, over one sixth of the globe, there has reigned a state as oppressive as any other, which is neither a capitalist nor a workers' state. Certainly, Marx never foresaw anything of this kind. But not even Marx is more precious to us than the truth.' Yet she continued to give classes in Marxism at the nearest Labour Exchange, even as Trotsky denounced her for regression to an individualistic liberalism, attacking the 'revolutionary melancholics' among whom she had now to be numbered. Weil took no offence, arranging two months later for Trotsky to hold a secret meeting in a flat in Paris owned by her parents, at which the two continued to argue fiercely. Trotsky nevertheless told the Weils on his departure the next day: 'You can say that the Fourth International was founded in your home.'

An admirer of Luxemburg, Weil had never shared her confidence in the spontaneity of the proletariat, and by 1934 had ceased to believe that the trade unions she had helped were sources of much hope. Deciding to withdraw from all political activity, she took leave from her teaching to become a factory worker, not only in order to experience the proletarian condition at first hand, but to see if there were other ways than those tried hitherto in which it could be transformed. Before doing so, she composed the long essay she would ironically call her testament, 'Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression', conceived as a critical balance-sheet of Marx's theory of history and the movements it had inspired, as well as a theory of struggles for power, not simply for property, which he had neglected, and of contemporary tyrannies of bureaucracy and technology that he could not have foreseen. She was just 25. The turn to factory work left her heuristically disappointed, and the advent of a Popular Front government in 1936 politically cold. But when the great wave of factory occupations exploded a few months later, she was filled with joy, reporting from the Renault plant where she had been employed and kept a journal. In the summer, she joined the CNT militia in the Spanish Civil War, but after an accident was invalided out. Back in France, she attacked her country's colonial record in Indochina, Madagascar, North Africa as almost no one on the left cared to do at that time. In the last years before the Second World War, grappling with the growing threat of the Third Reich she first adopted and then relinquished a pacifism that, after Munich, could no longer be grounded in the lessons of 1914. When the Wehrmacht entered Paris in 1940, she escaped with her parents to the south, finding precarious refuge in Marseille.

There, in the next two years, she converted to Catholicism, conceived in an irregular mystical register of which the first premonitions had come on a holiday in Portugal in 1935. While working as a farmhand, and later for the Resistance, her intellectual energies now turned to questions of religion—not only Christian, but Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist texts—and philosophy,

where as an accomplished Hellenist her range extended from the pre-Socratics to Plato, not to speak of Homer and Pythagoras; alongside an aversion to Judaism—did the Old Testament not celebrate the extermination of the Amalekites and others?—that would be a thorn to her posthumous admirers. In the spring of 1942, she and her parents got visas to the us, arriving in New York via Casablanca in July. There she fretted till the autumn, impatient to join Free French operations in England, a wish she achieved in November with the help of Maurice Schumann, an old classmate from Henri IV, future Prime Minister and progenitor of European integration. In London she served in the exile equivalent of the Interior Ministry, under the Socialist André Philip, generating summaries of reports from France and drafting political proposals for its future after Liberation, constitutional schemes including a spirited critique of the ideology of human rights that was just coming into fashion. Working round the clock, at home and in the office, in four months Weil produced a prodigious volume of writing before expiring at the age of 34—from tuberculosis or anorexia?—in the summer of 1943. All but a handful of her texts lay unpublished when she died.

Among these was the draft article ‘Méditations sur un cadavre’, translated here. An obituary of the Popular Front written in mid-1937, it is one of the most eloquent expressions of her political temperament and its tensions. Treating Blum’s resignation in June as a categorical finis to the experience, at a time when the Front itself still existed—it was not dissolved till March 1938—and technically formed the next government, Weil’s opening verdict was put even more brutally in a variant draft, which read: ‘The government of the Popular Front—the first, and which will continue to pass by that name—is dead: it now belongs to history, it is as much the past as the reign of Antoninus Pius or Caligula’. For a brief moment, it had reversed the class order of speech and power. But at its helm was a leader endowed with every gift of mind save political intelligence, completely unable to master the quicksilver relation between the balance of objective social forces and shifts in collective imagination. That was no accident. Social democracy had never produced a single free spirit; like every other of his kind, Blum lacked any spark of the cynicism that was a condition of political clarity. The collective imagination itself lacked any mind—only individuals could possess that—but it defined the parameters of political action, and only they who could coolly command it, like a maestro an orchestra, could time effective reforms when they briefly became possible. Marxist dogmas of progress were no basis for such judgement. Machiavelli was a better master. When Weil wrote this, no candidate for such a role was visible in France. But, from a position on the left, she had sketched with uncanny accuracy just the skills with which De Gaulle would rule his country in years to come.

SIMONE WEIL

## MEDITATIONS ON A CORPSE

### *Sketch for an Article*

**T**HE GOVERNMENT OF June 1936 is no more. Freed of our obligations, as partisans or opponents of this now dead thing—removed from the present, and as alien to our concerns about tomorrow as the Constitution of Athens—let us at least draw some lessons from its brief history; a beautiful dream for many and a nightmare for some. Dream or nightmare, there was something unreal about the year just passed. Everything depended on the imagination. A cooler look is needed for that prodigious history, still so close, yet already, alas, so far away. Between July 1936 and, for example, the preceding February, what real alteration had there been in the facts of social life? Almost none; but there was a total transformation in feelings, like that carved wooden crucifix which expresses serenity or agony, depending on where one stands. Power seemed to have changed sides, simply because those who, in February, only spoke to command, felt themselves fortunate, in July, to be allowed a voice in negotiations; whilst those who, at the start of the year, thought themselves relegated for life to the category of men whose only right was to stay silent, imagined months later that the very course of the stars depended on their shouts.

Imagination is both the fabric of social life and the motor of history. Real needs, real resources and interests act only indirectly, because they do not figure in the consciousness of crowds. It requires attentiveness to become aware of even the simplest realities, and human crowds are not attentive. Culture, education or status in the social hierarchy make only a slender difference in this regard. Two hundred heads of industry gathered in a hall make a herd as unaware as a meeting of workers or small shopkeepers. If someone ever invents a method that would allow people

to gather together without the extinction of thought in each mind, they will have produced a revolution in human history comparable to the discovery of fire, the wheel or the first tools. In the meantime, imagination is and will remain a factor whose importance in human affairs it is almost impossible to overstate. But the effects that flow from it will vary depending on how we manage it—or indeed, neglect to manage it. The state of imaginations sets the limits within which power can be effectively exercised to get a grip upon reality, in any given instance. In the next instance, those limits will have moved. It can happen that a public state of mind allows a government to take a particular measure three months before it becomes necessary, whereas at the moment when it's needed, the state of mind won't let it through. It should have been done three months before. To sense these things, to keep a perpetual look-out for them, is to know how to govern.

The flow of time is the instrument, the material and the obstacle in nearly all the arts. If, between two notes of music, a pause is held an instant longer than it should be, or if a conductor calls for a crescendo at this moment, not that, the musical emotion won't work. If, at a particular moment in a tragedy, there is a brief reply instead of a long speech, or at another moment, a long speech instead of a brief reply, or if the dramatic climax is placed in the third act instead of the fourth, then it will no longer be a tragedy. The operation that can save a patient's life at a certain stage of illness might prove fatal a few days later. Could the art of statesmanship alone be exempt from this law of timing? No, it is bound by it more than any other. The newly deceased Popular Front government never understood that. Leaving aside Léon Blum's sincerity, sensitivity and high moral character, which rightly endear him to those not blinded by party prejudice, where else in the ranks of French politics is there a match for his intelligence? But *political* intelligence is one thing he lacks. He is like one of those dramatists who conceive their works as printed books; their plays never work on stage because things are never said at the moment when they should be. Or like those architects who can do beautiful designs on paper, but take no account of the character of the building materials. People like this character are generally described as pure theoreticians. That's wrong. They err not from excess of theory, but from lack of it. They have failed to study the material question of their art.

In the art of politics, that question is the dual perspective, always unstable, linking the real condition of the social balance of forces and the

oscillations of the collective imagination. The latter never bears exactly on the really decisive factors of a given social situation: whether it is the collective imagination of popular forces or of dinner-jacketed clubmen, it either lags behind or leaps ahead or goes astray. Political leaders must above all extract themselves from its influence and consider it coldly, from outside: a current to be deployed as a motive force. If legitimate qualms prevent them from whipping up artificial surges in public opinion with the help of lies, as they do in totalitarian states (and elsewhere), no scruple should prevent them from making use of groundswells of opinion that they are powerless to correct. These can only be put to use through transposition. A torrent of water can do nothing but cut a channel, bear away earth, sometimes cause a flood; but set a turbine in its path, link the turbine to an automatic lathe, and the torrent will turn out tiny screws with miraculous precision. The screw will bear no resemblance to the torrent and may seem insignificant by comparison to its great roar; but some of these tiny screws inside a large machine will help to lift boulders that had resisted the torrent's force. A tidal shift in public opinion may help to accomplish a reform that seems to have no relation to it, which may be small, but would have been impossible without it. Likewise, for lack of a small reform a great wave of public opinion may dissipate and vanish like a dream.

An example, among many others: in June 1936, with the factories occupied and the bourgeoisie trembling at the word 'soviets', it would have been easy for the Blum government to push through tax measures and clamp down on capital flight and fraud; in short, to impose the rule of law on finance. But at that stage such measures were not yet essential, and the factory occupations monopolized the attention of the government, as of the working masses and the bourgeoisie. By the time the crisis had rendered these measures the last resort, the moment when they could have been imposed had gone. It was vital to look ahead, to seize the moment when the government's room for manoeuvre was greater than it ever would be again, to push through, at the very least, all the measures at which previous left governments had faltered, and a few more beside. Here we see the difference between the political leader and the amateur. Methodical action, in any sphere, means taking a measure not when its efficacy is needed, but rather at the moment when it is possible, with a view to when it will be effective. The good intentions of those who do not know how to use these wiles with time are the sort that pave the path to hell.

Among the many extraordinary phenomena of our epoch, one is worth our astonishment and our meditation: social democracy. What vast divergences there now are between the various European states at the moment, the critical moments of recent history, the disparate situations! Yet almost everywhere, social democracies appear identical, decked out in the same virtues, undermined by the same weaknesses. Always the same excellent intentions that pave so well the road to hell, the hell of the concentration camps. Léon Blum is a man of refined intelligence and high culture; he loves Stendhal and has no doubt read and re-read *The Charterhouse of Parma*. But he lacks that grain of cynicism indispensable to clear-sightedness. One can find everything in the ranks of social democracy, apart from genuinely free thinking. Its doctrine is flexible, susceptible to as many interpretations and modifications as one might wish. But it is never good to rely on a doctrine, above all when it includes the dogma of progress and unswerving faith in history and the masses. Marx is not a good thinker for decision-making; Machiavelli is worth infinitely more.

*June or July 1937*