

Andrea Gabler, Harald Wolf

An Anthology Unprinted: Who Is Afraid of „Socialisme ou Barbarie“?

Once upon a time, in the 50s and 60s of the bygone century, there were some bold people united in a tiny revolutionary group in France calling itself „Socialisme ou Barbarie“ („Socialism or Barbarism“). In dark times, in a journal of the same name they published seminal analyses of the Eastern and Western capitalistic systems of oppression and exploitation calling out to sabotage and abolish these systems.

A decade ago (2007), former members of „Socialisme ou Barbarie“ - Helen Arnold, Daniel Blanchard, Enrique Escobar, Daniel Ferrand, Georges Petit, and Jacques Signorelli - edited an anthology of texts published in the journal in the French publishing house Acratie (La Bussière), with texts, amongst others, by Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, Jean-François Lyotard, and Daniel Mothé. Now, after a long time and initiated by David Curtis, for many years the translator and editor of Castoriadis' writings, and by Richard Greeman, director of the International Victor Serge Foundation, there should have been published an extended English edition of this anthology, translated by Curtis, at Pluto Press, London. But the publication of this edition, already announced in the autumn preview of Pluto Press, is now being stopped. The contracts on which this project was based were nullified in an apparently unilateral manner by the Victor Serge Foundation and Pluto Press. A grave act indeed, for which one can expect explanatory statements.

What has happened? To understand this, we addressed an e-mail, dated 15th May 2016, to David Castle, in charge of the project at Pluto, and Richard Greeman. This is what we wrote to them:

„Dear David Castle, dear Richard Greeman,
let us, please, express our great irritation and concern about the publication project "Socialisme ou Barbarie - An Anthology", announced in the Pluto Press preview. We, that means: Dr. Andrea Gabler, a German sociologist who worked and published for many years about the group Socialisme ou Barbarie and teaches on these topics at universities and in adult education; and Dr. Harald Wolf, also a German sociologist who has spent many years studying intensively the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and the group Socialisme ou Barbarie and who is the co-editor of the German edition of Selected Writings of Castoriadis, published in seven volumes between 2006 and 2014.

We were really very pleased when we learned that this anthology which appeared almost ten years ago in France finally can appear now in English by Pluto Press, and thus can find even more interested readers worldwide. Such an English translation would be not least a facilitation of access for German scholars and the politically interested who often don't read French. And we were just delighted, too, when we learned that - through the mediation of the Victor Serge Foundation - David Ames Curtis was entrusted with the translation. One could not find a better one - as even a cursory glance at the Castoriadis translations and editions by him shows. For over 20 years now we know David as a highly dedicated and conscientious translator, author and cooperator.

But now, suddenly, the public has to realise that the work on this project cannot be brought to an end, because Pluto Press obviously puts in claims that violate the contractual arrangements with the Serge Foundation and David Curtis. We draw that conclusion from the hints in the beta version of the „Anthology“ (online but not downloadable), and now from the statement of David Curtis. That must worry all those who are extremely interested in these matters.

If we understand it correctly, Pluto Press wants to reserve it the right to make changes in the delivered manuscript as a last resort and without final consultation with the translator / author. A strange claim, we think - especially since it even, as we have learned, has been contractually explicitly agreed on a "passed for press" approval of the final corrected proof by the translator. What causes you to question this - and thus the release of a long awaited, excellent (anyone can convince him/herself off that already online) translation work (and a very good introduction)?

We also - shocked - must realise today (via a dry notice by David Curtis) that you, Richard Greeman, "and the others" (?), will now abandon this whole project! We are lost for words: Why so?

We would be very grateful if you could explain all that to us. Should it come to a prohibition of the publication of the Anthology by Pluto Press, many people will ask such questions - and would be outraged and rightly so.

Yours sincerely..."

We got prompt answers from David Castle... who short-spoken only repeated in two e-mails some known facts. We tried it again, 17th May 2016:

„...sorry, we can't find any clarification in that what you say. Far from it!

You state in your first e-mail that the "planned publication of an English language edition of the Socialisme ou Barbarie anthology was based on a contract with the Victor Serge Foundation [...]. By mutual consent, Pluto Press and the Victor Serge Foundation have now cancelled this contract." In the second you write: "Pluto certainly has not prohibited publication of the book, nor would it ever wish to." So the cancellation of the contract on which the publication was based is not a prohibition of the book publication?

Unfortunately, not one of the questions we raised is answered now by you.

What the public now sees: There is a very fine project, long-awaited, realised with a huge expenditure of time and skill, by a translator who also provided the whole thing with a very good introduction. Everyone can see this and probably many wish to have this book in their hands. Of course, they puzzled will ask: Why do Pluto Press and the Serge Foundation cancel this project, more or less ready for print?

What the public now gets: a statement by Pluto Press about an accomplished fact and if one asks "why so?" the kind information "that you are not in possession of the full facts of the matter"...

So let us ask again:

a) Is it true that Pluto Press wants to reserve it the right to make changes in the delivered manuscript as a last resort and without final consultation with the translator / author of the introduction (David Curtis) although there has been contractually explicitly agreed on a "passed for press" approval of the final corrected proof by the translator? Is David Curtis' refusal to accept this the pivot and the reason for the cancellation?

b) And who, Mr Richard Greeman, are "the others" who abandon now, like you, this project; are we right with our conjecture that Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard, two of the original French editors of the Anthology, are included in "the others" - the two who, to our knowledge, a couple of weeks ago wanted to prevent the publication of Curtis' introduction at all?

If this all is not the case, please, give us the full facts of the matter you surely possess, including your very reason for the cancellation of this fine project. As we wrote to you: many people will ask such questions - and would be outraged if they get such "answers" and rightly so."

In an e-mail from 18th May David Castle then told us that the cancellation of the contract between Pluto and Serge Foundation was a totally private matter and that he wouldn't wish to disclose the reasons out of respect for all parties concerned. That one of those parties concerned - David Curtis, the translator, that means: the party who did the real work, to whom we'd openly forwarded („cc“) the correspondence - had circulated these (in Curtis' eyes understandably not that) „private“ statements was „vexatious“. This should be stopped, or otherwise we wouldn't get any further answer at all. We answered to this as follows, May 19th:

„...Sorry, this wasn't intended as intrusion into your or others' privacy. But seriously, there is a distinct public and scientific interest in the publication of the Anthology and your publication decisions in this case. Aiming at the highest possible transparency, it should be a sign of respect for all parties concerned - as our headings made clear - that all these parties are informed likewise.

We very much regret that your are not willing to answer our questions by giving us factual informations.

As you may presume, we are not longer interested in this kind of „private“ correspondence either."

Then Richard Greeman - as said one of the initiators of the project together with Curtis a couple of years ago - also wrote us an e-mail (19th May) - in which he blamed the translator David Curtis that he failed to inform him that the editors of the French Anthology had previously „barred“ him from the translation. And also, that later on any compromise was undone because Curtis insisted on „total control“ over the project, excluding both Greeman and Pluto. [NB: A translator/worker with total control over a project...!]

On May 21st we finally wrote to Richard Greeman:

„Dear Mr. Greeman,

thank you very much for your extensive answer to our e-mails from May 15th and 17th - and thank you generally for your original initiative to make this important translation project possible!

Your version of the order of events contradicts in a couple of decisive points the - comprehensible and documented - version of David Curtis. If, for example, the French editors later „relented“, as you seemingly told David, the ten year old „barring clause“ (which furthermore is mentioned in David's Introduction, thus you were informed) is invalid, isn't it? In very general terms, you speak of „concessions“ made or made not, of bad faith or good will etc. We don't see what this factually means. What remains for us finally as factual conclusion: At some point you decided - together with or influenced by Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard [two of the original French editors] - to abandon the project and to cancel unilaterally an existing agreement. Just as an aside, that you address the costs of Pluto and not the actual performance and effort of the translator seems quite inappropriate to us at that point.

What is, from the outside, especially and badly disappointing in this whole affair (like in a lot of other things regarding the strange handling of the heritage of Castoriadis and S. ou B.) is that personal animosities seem to be the main concern of some of the involved persons in the end. They don't seem to be able to swallow their pride - and the real important things are really totally eclipsed by this behaviour. This costs a lot of energy for a lot of people - for nothing. We thought in enabling this project you had decided to help to overcome this mess. We think the old one cited somewhere a sentence fitting here: Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

Yours sincerely...“

Since then: no further answer to us, no further explanations to the public.

What we think about the whole sad matter should be clear. Disappointing seems to us not only the impact of personal animosities but not at least this treatment of the affair by alleged radical and leftist organisations. Everyone can get an idea of the matter by looking at the documented informations (see also this [timeline](#)) and the [unprinted publication](#); the result, for the rest, of quite a few months of translation work, worth several thousands of Euros.

We can't believe that this will be covered all up in silence.

Göttingen, June 6th, 2016