

Our American Friend Paul Piccone Was a Free Spirit and a Loud Talker

Alain de Benoist

Paul Piccone, the senior editor of the journal *Telos*, died in New York on July 12 at the age of 64 from cancer which he fought with extraordinary courage for four years. He was, one could argue, an atypical American. Born on January 17, 1940 in L'Aquila in Abruzzo, he left Italy at the age of 14 for Rochester, New York, where he settled with his family. Shortly after, in the mid-1950s, he quit school and landed various jobs in automobile factories. A few years later, however, he took up his studies, first at the Rochester Institute of Technology, then at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, and finally at SUNY at Buffalo, where he worked on his doctorate in philosophy, which turned him into a respected scholar.

The charismatic Paul Piccone soon gathered around him a crowd of young intellectuals, then decided to launch a journal, which he chose to name *Telos*, referring to Husserl's philosophy. The first issue appeared in Buffalo in May 1968 during the "world youth revolt."

Telos was initially the journal of the American disciples of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno), and as such it quickly established its status as one of the main theoretical organs of the American New Left. The principal idea taken from Critical Theory was the analysis of modernity as a product of the logic of Enlightenment ideology and of an abstract universalism, hostile to concrete particularities. The main authors of reference were Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, Karl Korsch, Alexandre Kojève, Edmund Husserl and Antonio Gramsci. They talked a lot of dialectics about revolution, fetishism of consumption, monopolistic capitalism, and alienation. In fact, they intended to develop a new Marxism free of all references to the disastrous Soviet experience

and of all forms of economism or political voluntarism.

Nonetheless, the phenomenological and epistemological project of adapting Marxism to our times would crumble fast, partly because of some internal conflicts, and partly because of the rise of structuralism on the other side of the Atlantic. The Marxist reference was gradually abandoned, starting in the mid-1970s, in favor of a more phenomenological approach inspired both by Hegel and Husserl, but the general direction of the journal remained firmly grounded in the spirit of the radical Left and in Critical Theory. The opposition to Soviet communism became more pronounced with an elaborate analysis of the causes of the evolution of the USSR, and a parallel critique of intelligentsia and of the Western New class, again faithful to Frankfurt School thought. In the 1970s and early 1980s, *Telos* clubs appeared in many American and Canadian universities.

In the 1980s, after the collapse of the New Left, there was a new development. *Telos* began engaging in a dialogue with various intellectual currents from all over the world. The strong influence of Christopher Lasch's thought drove Piccone and his friends to elaborate their critique of the New Class, relying on federalist principles and coining a profoundly redefined "populism" (with a positive reevaluation of the notions of tradition and organic communities). The critique of nationalism, of liberal individualism, and of "culture industry" is paralleled with a critique of the state practices inherited from the New Deal, of the egalitarian neo-feminism (gender studies), and of the "liberal-progressive" ideal, whereby all reasoning is done in terms of "rights." Gary Ulmen, a Carl Schmitt scholar, multiplied the references to the work of the great German jurist, who gained popularity in the US through *Telos*. At the same time, there was a complete rupture with the second generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, essentially represented by Jürgen Habermas, whom *Telos* accused, not unfoundedly, of having abandoned the best in the legacy of the previous generation in order to adopt a neo-Kantian theory of communicational practices in service of social reformism.

Marcuse and Alain de Benoist

Paul Piccone was the engine of this evolution. He did it with so much enthusiasm as if *Telos* was truly his child. A curious spirit, an excellent theoretician, familiar with all doctrines and problems, he always required from his friends that they never be satisfied with the assumed positions, that they always question everything, going as far as writing introductions in which he criticized articles appearing in the same issue!

This freedom of the spirit — together with the interest that *Telos* kept in ideological debates in Europe (a trait that already distinguishes it from the rest of American journals) — has allowed the journal to publish over time authors as different as Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Alain de Benoist, Claude Karnoouh, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Russell Jacoby, Agnes Heller, Alvin Gouldner, Martin Jay, Norberto Bobbio, Luciano Pellicani, Cornelius Castoriadis, and many others — a list of which only a few others can be proud, and which explains why *Telos* has survived, while all other journals of the American New Left have already disappeared.

Paul Piccone met Alain de Benoist in March 1983 in Chicago at a colloquium on the evolution of political forms and structures in Europe to which he was invited. Their friendship was enforced by a passionate and often loud exchange of ideas that they had the chance to discuss on numerous occasions, namely in Perouse, in Paris, in New York, and in Rome.

In the winter of 1993, *Telos* published a special issue on the French New Right (*The French New Right — New Right, New Left, New Paradigm?*) causing reactions on both sides of the Atlantic, as it stigmatized without any ambiguity the grotesque behaviors of “vigilantes.” It included texts by Paul Piccone, Frank Adler, Pierre-André Taguieff, Marco Tarchi, Paul Gottfried et al., as well as texts and interviews with Alain de Benoist. “What makes the French New Right especially interesting,” Piccone wrote in his introduction, “is that it proposes to put an end to the traditional division of Left and Right in order to create a new paradigm.” Since the appearance of this issue, Alain de Benoist became a regular contributor to the journal, as Piccone indicated in the important interview he gave for the journal *Eléments* (issues 99 and 100 of November 2000 and March 2001).

Other special issues also proved to be decisive in the development of the journal. Such was the case with the issue dedicated to federalism (issue 100, summer 1994), two special issues on populism (103 and 104, Spring and Summer 1995), which included articles by Piccone, Ulmen, Taguieff, Luke, Gottfried, Thomas Fleming, Adler, Bendersky, Kaveh Afraziabi, et al., 3 special issues on Carl Schmitt (starting with 109, fall 1996), etc.

As a person, Piccone was loud. He would express himself in an English particular only to him, with endless phrases evoking his native Italy. When he explained, argued, polemicized, it was always in an explosive manner. The words would cascade hurriedly out of his mouth. Not everything was understandable, but one could see his face light up with a

large smile. He was volcanic, passionate. He also had a big heart. Since its creation, *Telos* owed everything to him.

Piccione was buried on July 15 close to his house in Candor, upstate New York. At the request of his lovely wife, Marie Piccone, Russell Berman, a well-respected Germanist from Stanford University, took over *Telos*. Needless to say, without Piccone the journal will not be the same, but it is unthinkable that the journal should disappear and stop playing the important role it has always played in the US and in the rest of the world. Paul Piccone was a free spirit, a great man, an original and profound thinker. We salute his memory.