

The "Teissier affair"

Astrology rehabilitated at the Sorbonne university in Paris

By Stefan Steinberg
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For some months France's best known astrologist Elizabeth Teissier has featured heavily in the media and has been at the centre of an almost surreal debate on the scientific merits of astrology.

In April, Ms. Germaine Elisabeth Hanselmann, better known as Elizabeth Teissier, defended her doctorate dissertation, entitled *Epistemological situation of astrology across the ambivalence fascination/rejection in post-modern societies*, at Paris' Sorbonne University.

Her 900-page thesis, supposedly demonstrating the scientific qualities of astrology, was subsequently accepted by a majority decision of a panel of professors, as the basis for awarding Teissier a doctorate in sociology.

Not only does a closer look at *l'affaire Teissier* throw a revealing and bizarre light on the way in which a French president conducted politics in one of the most developed countries in Western Europe, the acceptance of Teissier's paper by one of France's most prestigious universities makes clear the degeneration of scientific thought that has taken place in the French educational system, heavily influenced by so-called *post-modern* ideologists.

Elizabeth Teissier, a former model for Chanel, the luxury fashion and perfumery house, and more recently the most publicised astrologer in France, revealed some time ago that she had served as an advisor to the French president Francois Mitterrand for a period of seven years. She has written a book on her work for the president entitled *Sous Le Signe de Mitterrand* (*Under the Sign of Mitterrand*). In the book she claims she used the stars to guide the president in choosing his every political move, including military actions during the Gulf War.

At the start of her collaboration with Mitterrand, she writes, she predicted a major international incident, which she said would take place in the summer of 1990. In August of the same year, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Mitterrand immediately called upon her to compute Saddam Hussein's horoscope and determine the dictator's next move. Reflecting US propaganda at the time, which justified its aggression against Iraq by demonising Saddam Hussein, Teissier relates in her book that she foresaw that Saddam would be very slow to pull back his troops, since he possessed "the same astrological cocktail as Hitler—a Taurus with Libra ascendant."

It is of course difficult to say how much of Teissier's account is true. What is clear is that Teissier did have a close relationship with President Mitterrand and was known to attend his office on regular occasions. It is also a matter of record that Mitterrand was intrigued by astrology, levitation and poltergeists. At a speech before assembled scientists, the president confused astrology with the science of astronomy.

Teissier makes clear that she relies heavily in her work on the statistical research of Michel Gauquelin, who has sought to prove a connection between the movement of the planets and the fortunes, careers and performances of leading sportsmen. In her recent doctoral paper, Teissier attempts to justify her thesis by boasting of how President Mitterrand "asked her to sketch the astral portrait" of his Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy. (In the course of drawing up such a portrait, Teissier somehow missed the conjunction of stars that pointed to Bérégovoy's suicide a short time later.)

Teissier's work and book could be dismissed as some sort of practical joke, were it not for the fact that her recent thesis was accepted and approved by a panel of prominent professors at the Sorbonne. Although the panel accepted it as a treatise on sociology, Teissier abruptly dismisses any discussion of sociology at the beginning of her paper, writing, "a discussion about the philosophy of sociology... would be out of place here..." Her entire 900-page paper is peppered with reactionary nonsense. Without over-testing the patience of our readers, here are a few examples:

* "Recent investigations have allowed us to establish a relation between cancer and even AIDS with the dissonances of these two planets [Neptune and Pluto] with respect to the natal theme." (p. 213)

* "... miscarriages, uterine cancers and other gynaecological disorders are foreseeable, because they become more probable by the transit of a dissonant star sign." (p.239)

* On page 127 Teissier examines the horoscope of author and former leading Gaullist minister Andre Malraux and concludes that he probably inherited his "considerable talents from a former life."

* In the course of her paper, she makes clear that her targets are, "the aggressive rationalists who are allergic to the stars" (p. 42) and "the militants of official science." (p. 767)

The recognition being afforded to astrology in France and other

countries is one of the clearest expressions of the crisis of social thought, which has taken particularly intense forms during the past decade. It is well known that US President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy called upon the services of an astrologer during his term in office, and a college of astrology has recently been accredited in the US. In the United Kingdom, a research fund has been set up to investigate the potential of astrology, and in Denmark and Austria, business astrologers are active, with university backing. In India, the Education Minister has called upon all 200 universities to offer astrology courses, offering them each five extra places for teaching and support personnel, and he has demanded that all high schools teach Vedic mathematics and astrology.

Nevertheless, the revival of a debate over astrology in France—the home of the rationalist thought of Descartes—has an especial significance. Astrology has had a difficult time in France for the past three centuries. The categorisation of genuine sciences and the development of an Encyclopaedia of human knowledge was a principal task of the Enlightenment, which permeated the thinking of an emerging French bourgeoisie, and which was to play such a major role in the French Revolution of 1789.

Already over a century before the Revolution, astrology was denounced as a discipline unworthy of study by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, chief minister to the French monarch Louis XIV, and the man who founded the French Académie des Sciences in 1666. Following the trial 12 years later of the mystic and poisoner Voisin, a monarchical decree was passed which threatened to punish practising soothsayers with banishment. Now nearly three and a half centuries later, soothsaying has been rehabilitated at the Sorbonne.

It is significant that Teissier regards her thesis as a contribution towards the comprehension of astrology in a *post-modern* society. Postmodernist thought, as it has developed over the past three decades, is characterised by a radical relativism that denies objective truth and evinces a scepticism towards all theories aimed at providing a general explanation of the world. For the postmodernists the scientific study of reality is reduced to the exchange of mere discourses, or *stories*, whereby religion, forms of mysticism or even astrology can be afforded equal rank—indeed prioritised over scientific disciplines.

An empirical examination of many of the leading figures in postmodernist thought reveals their participation at some time in Stalinist or other organisations of the radical left. In his biography of the prominent French philosopher and postmodernist Michel Foucault (1926-1984), *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, author James Miller describes how the French academic establishment sought to defuse the radicalism of the 1968 movement by offering its leading lights top positions in colleges and universities. Foucault, who sympathised with the Maoists in the aftermath of '68, was given a leading post at the Collège de France, while his friend, philosopher and fellow Maoist sympathiser Gilles Deleuze took over Foucault's old post at the university of Vincennes.

After the events of 1968—when France was gripped by a general strike and President de Gaulle was set to flee the country—and the betrayal and subsequent discrediting of the French Communist Party, a certain division of labour took place in French academic

circles with the emergence of an openly right-wing, anti-socialist movement of ideologues and thinkers, the *New Philosophers*. For their part, many of the so-called postmodernists in France and elsewhere were able to retain a certain aura of radicalism for a period of time. The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s was regarded by many radicals, already moving to the right politically, as the final collapse of any alternative to capitalism. Witnessing the meteoric rise of the stock market and the apparent final victory of the Moloch "Capital", there was a concerted retreat by many ex-radicals into the types of individualism, mysticism and forms of idealism that characterise much of postmodern thought and which now has considerable influence in French academia.

Over half a century ago, the founder of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky, conducted his own struggle against a petty bourgeois, radical opposition inside the Fourth International. Denouncing the pseudo-radicalism of the Burnham-Shachtman opposition, which based itself on the most vulgar forms of pragmatism, and proclaimed its "scepticism to all theories", Trotsky responded: " 'Scepticism towards all theories' is nothing but preparation for personal desertion." (*In Defence of Marxism*, New Park Publications, p.230). He also described the Burnham-Shachtman opposition to materialist dialectics and scientific thinking as follows: "The struggle against materialist dialectics... expresses a distant past, conservatism of the petty-bourgeoisie, the self-conceit of university routinists and.... a spark of hope for an after-life." (*ibid*, p.67)

With their accolades for the dissertation of Teissier and her attempt to rehabilitate astrology, the Sorbonne professors have sought to fan the "spark of hope for an after-life" into a flame. Their decision makes abundantly clear that the struggle against mysticism and ideological backwardness will not be resolved in the university classroom, but in the construction of a mass socialist movement against capitalism based on the powerful wealth of materialist and scientific thought embodied in the Marxist movement.

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