Gilles Lipovetsky
(1944–)

After 1968, a generation of young philosophers, including Gilles Lipovetsky, moved away from the Marxist and leftist ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s. Once they had defanged the “ideological” philosophers of the so-called pensée 68 who preceded them (Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, among others), this group split over differences on the emergent intellectual Nietzschean doctrine of nihilistic relativism.

On one hand, the New Philosophers (among them Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, Bernard-Henry Lévy, and André Glucksman) chose to base their resistance to leftist ideology, as well as claims to the legitimacy of their actions and judgments, on universal and “eternal” values inherited from the French Enlightenment. These values, such as “human rights,” human dignity (discussed by Lévy in La barbarie et le visage humain, 1985), social equity, Republican democracy, and a sense of the difference in the values of cultural and intellectual objects, carry with them the presuppositions of universalism and hierarchy. Thus these philosophers rejected the idea that values could be considered contingent, that society tolerated an apparent lack of established moral references, and under no circumstances could they accept that a comic book and a novel by Gustave Flaubert had the same value. In 1991 several of them published a pamphlet titled Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzscheens (1991). As a result of their views, the New Philosophers pledged their allegiance to the modernist movement (see Ferry and Renaut’s Heidegger et les modernes, 1988).

On the opposite side, an intellectual current, defining itself in terms of relativist values and Nietzschean relativism, established the contours of French postmodernism. As the most articulate representative of this group, Lipovetsky, who teaches philosophy in Grenoble, has been fiercely scrutinized and criticized. In the process, he has also earned several nicknames: “the militant of the insignificant,” “our postmodern sociologist,” “the frivolous democrat,” and “the grave digger of French rationalism.”

Lipovetsky is a supporting chronicler of a post-1968 French society perceived as indulgent and narcissistic, living in a satisfying democracy organized as a free market and driven by advertising and frivolous desires generated by fads. This stance places Lipovetsky at odds with the French intellectual tradition, which has always considered individualism for the sake of personal gratification a social poison. Since the French Revolution, the whole social fabric of France has been shaped so as to counteract the idle, narcissistic characteristics of its former aristocracy. Democratic leading figures display a “fraternal” care for the community and do not indulge in a selfish pursuit of individual happiness.

Lipovetsky reads French history as a long democratic drive leading to individual narcissism and proposes a seductive analysis of the mores of the current era. Past political and social doctrines of the Left encouraged workers to seek a communal advancement of their status, to create an egalitarian society of citizens contributing to the betterment
of the common good. Advanced social democracies in the West, however, are experiencing a collapse of the concept of common good. In a 1989 interview, Lipovetsky outlined his interpretation of the historic evolution of France: “The idea that we are entering in a New Age characterized by narcissistic individualism can only be understood if one considers the historical evolution of the last two centuries during which democratic modernity has taken roots in western societies. . . . Neo-narcissism is the ultimate moment of a socialization that has been able to extricate the individual citizen from the servitude of preordained rites and traditions that confined each individual to coercive rules and places within the collective ensemble.”

Lipovetsky was not born and bred in one of the fashionable Paris intellectual épicieres, nor was he the heir apparent of any well-known philosophical figure. His name became known overnight with the publication of his first book, L'ère du vide: Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain (1983), in which he describes the French “Me” generation under the Mitterrand régime. He investigates the reasons why a political régime with strong socialist ideological convictions, which created a Ministry of Solidarity and an Under-Secretariat for Humanitarian Medicine, generated a national lifestyle that is a pantomime of socialism. Rather than condemn this social contradiction, Lipovetsky considers it a mixed blessing and a source of social renewal. Furthermore, he demonstrates that this new social order proves that philosophers of the previous generation were wrong when they predicted the “death of the subject.” For Lipovetsky, nothing today is more important than the attention accorded to the self, not only as an individual state of mind but also in the way the general social fabric has evolved.

In L'emire de l'éphémère: Le mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes (1987), he analyzes the history of fashion as it relates to the social system. This gives him the opportunity to enlarge his study on individualism to show how the development of fashion has accompanied the evolution toward a new, self-involved age. Postmodern France is at peace with itself and enjoys the benefits of democracy and capitalism. The paradox in this case is that the notion of mode, which is considered marginal to the social core of any society, has now become the true ruler of our post-industrial age and, contrary to normal expectations, has led to a time of true freedom for the individual. Thus the slogan of our contemporaneity could be “Freedom through ephemeral fashion.”

His third book, Le crépuscule du devoir: L'éthique indolore des nouveaux temps démocratiques (1992), is constructed similarly to his previous ones, starting with a thorough historical analysis of the notion of moral exigency in Western countries. Lipovetsky suggests that the rise of ethics in these advanced societies is, in fact, the result of the progressive disappearance of the notion of devoir (duty). For him, the fascination with ethics should be linked to a loss of courage and an abhorrence of pain induced by the self-proclaimed right to narcissistic jouissance. Today's ethics is the new civic religion of a noncoercive society that does not seek anything from anyone and places ethical rules at its core; in this way everyone is protected without having to make any individual effort. The burden of individual protection is transferred to an ever-increasing “state police apparatus.” As a caveat, Lipovetsky suggests that the absence of pain and obligation places these advanced democratic societies in peril when they are confronted by any fundamentalism that requires extreme constraint and discipline. Nevertheless, he perceives this type of ethical society as advantageous, as it reduces the number of personal conflicts, renders social conflicts obsolete, and thus allows each of us to pursue, in peace, our own desires for self-gratification.

In La troisième femme: Permanence et révolution du féminin (1997), Lipovetsky continues his exploration of the sociability created by this age of postmodernism. His interest is directed to the effects of absolute democratization of our “advanced” societies and to the fact that we now consider as a right the possibility of defining the modalities of our individual autonomy. After presenting a historical study of the last twenty years of the feminist movement, he recognizes that great changes have taken place. However, the core of his analysis is the exposition of a certain number of permanencies in the relations between genders. The relative continuity of the roles of male and female in contemporary French society is evaluated within four contexts: love, seduction, work, and political power. Lipovetsky concludes that the democratic dynamism at the center of the “Me” revolution of the last twenty years in this case has failed to reach its full potential. Advanced democratic ideas were instrumental in bridging the gap between the genders but failed to deliver a full interchangeability of the roles. The conflict between egalitarian logic and the social logic of alterity did not end, and so both coexist, and difference persists. Both genders have acquired the components needed for autonomy and choice, but among women the postmodern social preference for the complete autonomy of the subject has not achieved an all-encompassing rupture with the past.

Thus Lipovetsky’s intriguing title “The Third Woman” should not be assimilated to a “third type” of feminism; in the French context, it is a clear reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s book The Second Sex (Le deuxième sexe, 1949), and it foregrounds a postmodern woman who is no longer the woman-as-nonsubject of earlier times, nor the ultimate
liberated woman: she is a woman radically different from the extremes of the stereotypes that, so far, have been used to define her.

Lipovetsky’s analysis of contemporary democracies is akin to defining a postmodern society in its early stages. In so doing, he occupies the position of the witness who understands what is happening around him. Thus, in order to justify his approach and his philosophical project, Lipovetsky also has to redefine the philosophical project of our times. According to him, whereas in the 1950s and 1960s institutional philosophy was in an ancillary position in relation to “revolutionary” ideologies, since 1968 philosophy has become an empty verbal game and delivers this glossarial simulacrum in lieu of reflection. Against this evolution, Lipovetsky proposes to reassert the social relevance of philosophy, and he defines his type of philosophical approach as both experimental and inductive. For the experimental component, he relies on empirical surveys conducted according to the general methods of sociology. For the inductive part, he conducts his reflection in what he calls a “philosophic-historical” and “philosophic-sociological” manner. The structure of the approach explains the general organization of his studies: a constellation of facts results in a speculative analysis that brings about the global hypothesis. This empirical-deductive approach, which does not rely on preestablished intellectual schemes, explains in part the originality of his speculative conclusions.

In 2002 Lipovetsky published an ensemble of four essays that expand on his previous analyses, titled Métamorphoses de la culture libérale: Éthique, médias, entreprise. The same year he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Canadian University of Sherbrooke for his philosophical contribution to the definition of a postmodern advanced democratic society. Jean-Jacques Thomas

Further Reading

