

A reply to Michel Brelaz

Steven Philip KRAMER

History Department, University of New Mexico.

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Towards the end of his article, « Henri de Man et le néosocialisme belge », Michel Brelaz writes :

« Partant de l'idée que de Man avait quelque chose de plus cher que le salut de son âme, peut-être trouverons-nous là l'explication de l'intérêt qu'on continue à lui porter en Belgique et ailleurs, et que d'aucuns trouvent incompréhensible : ceux-là il faut aussi les comprendre, car l'interprétation de Kramer leur donne raison* ».

This statement seems to confuse scholarly investigation, which aims at truth, with legal proceedings, which aim at condemnation or vindication. The historian must endeavor to understand the past in all its complexity, not to « point a moral and adorn a tale ». Brelaz seems to feel, quite wrongly, I believe, that my article makes De Man responsible for *everything* that went wrong in the 1930's ; his article would seem to be trying to defend De Man from *any* personal responsibility. Such is certainly the logical consequence of Brelaz' assertion that « L'action politique d'Henri de Man constitue avec les mouvements socialistes de cette époque un ensemble homogène » (266).

It is perhaps because of his passionate desire to integrally defend Henri De Man that Brelaz falls into exaggeration, and tends towards a certain superficiality which undercuts the intellectual value of his work. Let me turn to some of the problems inherent in his article.

1. Errors of Fact

a) « Je ne crois pas comme Kramer que beaucoup d'hommes pré-voyaient en 1940 la défaite de l'Allemagne (peut-être l'espéraient-ils),

* *Res Publica*, Bruxelles, vol. XVIII, 1976, n° 2, pp. 251-266.

ni que les Etats-Unis allaient entrer en guerre, ni que les Russes seraient à leur tour attaqués. Mais il importe peu » (p. 265).

I had written : « In June, De Man thought the war was over. He did not believe that England would fight. He did not realize that America might enter the war, and that the Russians would ultimately be attacked. »

b) « ... de Man ne songea pas à conduire son action ailleurs que dans le parti — raison pour laquelle il n'abandonna jamais l'espoir d'en réformer l'organisation et les principes » (p. 252).

But De Man *dissolved* the POB in June 1940.

c) « Non, il n'a pas cru que 'la révolution était à droite', il n'a pas considéré la victoire allemande et l'occupation comme une victoire du socialisme (p. 265).

I had not said that he considered the defeat as a victory of socialism, but « as an opportunity for European peace and social justice ». The « Manifesto to the POB » reads : « Despite all that we have experienced of defeats, sufferings, and disillusion, the way is open for the two causes which sum up the aspirations of the people : European peace and social justice. » Following which, De Man talks about the superiority of the fascist states to the democracies.

2. Errors of Logic

a) « Kramer estime que 'nombre de vieux socialistes se méfiaient d'Henri de Man à cause de ses fréquents changements de position'. Pourtant, à ma connaissance, aucun n'a déploré qu'il se soit porté volontaire en 1914 contre sa foi d'internationaliste et de pacifiste. Aucun n'a critiqué son réformisme de *La leçon de la guerre...* » (p. 255).

It is hard to see how my general statement can be disproven by these two particular cases. When we are next told that Anseele exclaimed : « Je l'avais toujours dit qu'il changerait ! » we are truly confused. Brelaz' reasoning reminds one of the old story about the man accused of beating his wife. He replies that he never struck her ; moreover, when he hit her, it was in self-defense. Perhaps Brelaz feels that De Man did not deserve the hostility of many old militants. But he does not make himself clear.

b) « Kramer voit dans l'abandon de la solidarité socialiste internationale le prix de la participation socialiste au gouvernement. Or la participation aux deux gouvernements Van Zeeland fut décidée par les socialistes en se fondant presque exclusivement sur les données de

politique intérieure. Ce n'est qu'à partir de 1936 que la politique extérieure devint de plus en plus un objet de préoccupation et de discord. Cependant le principe de la politique d'indépendance avait été approuvé par le POB, même par Vandervelde » (pp. 256-257).

This paragraph is murky. A glance at pp. 68-69 of my article will indicate that Brelaz has merely reassembled what I wrote. Brelaz' syntax would give the impression that he is doing otherwise. Clearly the fact that participation was decided for internal reasons does not disprove the assertion that the result was abandonment of international solidarity. Clearly, the fact that the party supported the *politique d'indépendance* was based on Vandervelde's feeling that it was not the same thing as a *politique de neutralité*. The use of *or* and *cependant* imply that Brelaz is refuting my assertion — but he isn't. Brelaz appears to be using the time honored formula, *Kramer dixit, sed ego dixi*, but his position here is barely distinguishable from mine.

3. Problems of interpretation

« Lorsque Kramer écrit que de Man est devenu la « victime de la dialectique entre ses théories et son échec politique personnel » il fait du néo-socialisme belge un mouvement d'individus somme toute marginaux, sur qui devait retomber une responsabilité qui ne semble concerner le POB et ses leaders « orthodoxes ». Le destin de l'individu vient ainsi providentiellement au secours de l'organisation. La trahison — « cette idée qui surgit chaque fois que l'on refuse de connaître la raison profonde d'une défaite inattendue — la trahison d'un seul devient l'alibi de tous » (p. 253).

This paragraph raises a number of points. First, my article was far from exculpating the orthodox leadership of the POB. I made it clear that they had no solution for the depression. Classical reformist socialism was in dissolution. But that does not mean that De Man bears no responsibility for his position. Brelaz would have it that the POB was faced with a choice between tradition and innovation, between Vandervelde and De Man. Were there only two choices? If one opted for change, did one thereby have to integrally support De Man? Second, I do think neo-socialism was a marginal movement. De Man himself was, in his own words, a direction, he offered a program which satisfied rival groups for different reasons. After 1935, his « governmental socialism » gained him the backing of the trade unions, because it guaranteed continued participation. Had De Man converted the party to the Plan? I doubt it. Moreover, propaganda for the Plan died out once

the party entered the government. I suspect that much of the trade union support De Man and Spaak received came *despite* their ideological pronouncements, not *because* of them.

In another place, Brelaz treats the term « démocratie autoritaire » as « une formule mal choisie », and then explains that « socialisme national » was in no way anti-democratic (p. 256). But why did De Man use these phrases ? Clearly, he chose them because of their resonances which no one at the time could ignore. He was going to « demagnetize » those phrases, he was going to beat the fascists at their own game, and get the support of the middle classes. His opponents feared that in trying to make use of terminology which had fascist overtones, socialism risked becoming infected with the fascist germ. I don't deny that in 1933 De Man was sincere in believing that his methods could stop fascism. But at some point, he himself became convinced of the ineluctable victory of fascism. And at that moment, his words and proposals had a totally different meaning.

Henri De Man is a complex character who lived in a complex age. We historians must attempt to see him, not as a hero or villain (such glib appellations merely beg the question), but as a real person caught in the maelstrom of the late 30's and early 40's. No matter how passionately we are concerned with understanding this period, we must nevertheless attempt to attain that serenity of judgement which enables us to « see life steadily and see it whole ».

