The Rise and Fall of Attali

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Jacques Attali, *Verbatim: 1981-1986* (Paris: Fayard, 1993)

This book, politically important and informative, is also a bit of a scandal. Or rather it is one part of a larger scandal, for the author, Jacques Attali—who was for ten years President François Mitterrand's confidant and "Special Advisor" with access to most presidential meetings and Elysée Palace secrets—has had his fingers in several pies. A man of manic intellectual energy, Attali's Elysée odyssey showed that advising the president of an important country is not necessarily a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, at least for those who need sleep only a few hours a night.

Jewish and Algerian *pied noir* by origin, a polymath *enarch* by accomplishment, Jacques Attali during 1981-1991 was a sort of intellectual shadow of the Elected King of France. Because of François Mitterrand's own formidable intellectual grasp of his office, Attali never appeared to be an *éminence grise* of Mitterrandism, despite several moments in which his advice counted crucially, particularly in economic and financial matters.

The first of these was a reckless mistake, the "Union of the Left's" mistimed "Keynesian socialist" pump-priming of 1981, which led disastrously to three devaluations of the franc in three years.

The second, in March 1983, was Mitterrand's decisive decision for financial rigor, choosing to keep the French franc inside the European Monetary System rather than taking a nationalist float that would have gravely wounded the entire EMS. This fiscally very conservative decision showed that Mitterrand the socialist humanist and Attali the theoretical economics professor had the capacity to learn from their mistakes about managing the money, even if this unbuckled French socialism's erstwhile promises about "changing society." Today, despite speculative runs against the franc to test the government's political will on interest rates, it is now a solid currency in terms of economic fundamentals, for which a decade of Socialist finance ministers (Jacques Delors and Pierre Bérégovoy) can be thanked, along with François Mitterrand—and also Jacques Attali.

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For ten years Jacques Attali thus was close to major policy-making, navigating rather freely around the very top of the French state. Amazingly, during this time he also wrote—between dawn and breakfast, before going off to the Elysée—some eight or nine books. *Pace* those who judge Attali a mere technocrat, two of these books are novels, though not very good.[1]

But to get to the scandal: after only two years in his post-Elysée job, Jacques Attali in early July was obliged to resign in disgrace—it made page one in international newspapers—from his presidency of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). At the same moment, *Verbatim*, the book under review here, was published in Paris to accusations, not new to Attali, of shoddy authorship.

The EBRD had been established in London in 1991, with high hopes of financing key aspects of the Eastern European transition to postcommunist regimes and economies. The EBRD's creation owed much to President Mitterrand's personal commitment to an Attali bright idea, and to the French president's determination to have a French presidency of the new institution, meaning of course Attali. It was hard to say which was the more difficult—getting other governments to agree to the bank or to Attali, who, despite his accomplishments, did not inspire the greatest confidence.

The EBRD's mission is to channel multilateral public lending by western governments to rebuild Eastern Europe. It was to supplement private business investment from the west, making sound investments that private-sector investors refused to take on.[2] In particular, it would aid privatization schemes (30 percent of its loans are to Poland and 32 percent in telecommunications), while tangentially storing up small amounts of French public financial-political leverage against the weight of unmatchable private German investment in Eastern Europe.

The Bush administration, after hard skirmishing with the French over the bank's membership (the U.S. opposed allowing the Russians as a partner in the EBRD, fearing Russia's undeniable needs would drain money that should go to Eastern Europe), agreed to fund 10 percent of the bank's capital. With the British, the Americans also agreed to let Attali have the top job, while giving notice that the EBRD's twenty-three international directors would closely monitor the intimidating, mercurial Frenchman, inexperienced in banking. Though the bank's loans were well enough done (if less

numerous than had been hoped), the top staff's use of money, perks, and privileges got out of control.

Attali was without doubt a very quick study (he had been Mitterrand's *sherpa*, sent ahead to fix international summit meetings) and, whatever his CV lacked for the EBRD job, he did have a lot of, as one says, the vision thing. When asked to define his relationship to the controversial Attali, Mitterrand liked to reply that his brainstormer had ten big ideas a day and, if only one was worth pursuing, that was reason enough to endure the rest.

Attali, according to recent newspaper revelations, misused EBRD funds. He is said to have mixed his personal finances with bank expense accounts, to have asked for unjustified and/or double reimbursements, and also to have used bank credit cards liberally for personal purposes, including the patronage of exotic nightspots.[3]

As for institutional mismanagement, the EBRD, at this moment of Attali's departure, apparently had spent more money to create an imposing London headquarters (including Carrera marble for a majestic entrance hall) than it had actually dispensed to the Eastern Europeans as initial payments in its 1.9 billion ECU loan portfolio (to the end of 1992). Investigation indicates that the bank had become a playground for its top officers (Attali was not the only one to use corporate credit cards for personal expenses). Internal financial procedures at the top were thin, if any rigorous accounting had ever been put in place.

Notwithstanding being caught with his fingers in the jam, Attali in his forced letter of resignation told Anne Wibble, Sweden's finance minister and the EBRD's chair of the board, that "I know of no action that I have taken that in any way could be worthy of reproach." This brazenness particularly irritated the bank's directors and outside observers in financial and government circles.[4]

When, on July 16, the official EBRD internal report was published, Attali, having fought for several months, resigned the same day; he did not wait for his successor and he abandoned his claim to a $221,000 golden parachute of one year's salary.

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Verbatim: 1981-1986 was published in France just as the EBRD scandal broke, involving Attali in yet another scandal—this time concerning the rules of scholarship.

It was not the first time Attali had faced allegations of plagiarism and misuse of sources. In his part-time essayist's production during his decade with Mitterrand at the Elysée, Attali understandably (even for him) did not do all his own research or write every word himself; he had a lot of research assistance. Several of Attali's books are certainly worthy: for example, his biography of the banker Sigmund Warburg (*Un homme d'influence* [Fayard, 1985]), and his interesting, if quirky essays on "time" (*Histoires du temps* [Fayard, 1982]) and on *1492* (Fayard, 1991) in particular. On the other hand, his first novel, *La vie éternelle* (1989), a gothic fable, was a bit inane.

The problem of authorship was that Attali had developed, no doubt in his haste, a habit of simply copying passages of research work given him by his assistants. And they in turn sometimes had just copied from other books, with or without quotation marks. Probably without intending to plagiarize other published works (worse than a crime, it would have been a blunder . . .), Attali's hundreds and hundreds of pages did contain unquestionable instances of plagiarism. But his new book, *Verbatim*, features controversial authorship of yet another kind.

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I met Jacques Attali on several occasions. The first was in 1974 or 1975. I was a young American Ph.D., trying to master French politics. One of my mentors, Professor Annie Kriegel, the former PCF Central Committee member turned academic sociologist and anticommunist, brought him in to give an exposé in her University of Nanterre seminar on international communism, which I was attending.

Not that Attali was going to talk about communism. Indeed, at the time his first two books were slim econometric analyses of *Les modèles politiques*.[5] But his rapidity had already forged a certain Parisian reputation, and Attali was making the rounds. I don't remember much of what he said—though in any case it was abstract, with little relevance to real politics, whatever his rapid-fire fluency at saying it.

A few years later, perhaps in 1977, I encountered Attali again, while waiting to have an interview with François Mitterrand at the Socialist party's

headquarters. Mitterrand's door opened (*comme d'habitude* about seventy-five minutes late), and *le premier secrétaire* appeared with . . . Jacques Attali, now a young "economic" advisor to a presidential candidate who certainly needed tutoring, since his one outstanding thought about economics at the time was his "hatred of the power of money in society."

Mitterrand reintroduced us. Playfully mocking Attali's ambitiousness, Mitterrand quipped that one had to keep Attali on a short leash: "*Cet homme est dangereux*," said the future president of France. "*Il veut le pouvoir!*" Needless to say, Mitterrand was on target, though he didn't stop to specify the difference between his own ambition and the young advisor's!

A third, more impressive, "Attali moment" occurred when, in August 1981, the newly elected (May 10) President of France accorded a young American professor of politics an unhoped-for interview at the Elysée Palace. To reach the president's office I had to make the passage, even then already famous, across Jacques Attali's office, the big room right next to the president's, set up with Attali's desk near Mitterrand's door as if he were some French *dezhurnaya*.

I approached naturally somewhat intimidated. "*Comment vas-tu?*" Attali suddenly greeted me in his rapid-fire delivery. I could only reply: "*Tu te souviens de moi?*" "*Oui, bien sûr,*" he said, and I felt a great surge of warmth for him.

During the few minutes we chatted, I was grandly informed (as newspapers said he was regularly telling visitors) that he "already called twenty-two [or fifty-two, or seventy-two, who knows?] heads of government and heads of state by their first names." Was he really keeping score? Would he bag the whole world? Was the lust for status so naked? And, if it could be, what was it doing sitting so openly outside François Mitterrand's door, which had a reputation for a certain discretion?

In I went to see the president. I recall behaving like an over-awed nitwit. Mitterrand was polite.

I most recently saw Jacques Attali at a NATO council meeting in Brussels in 1990, where I had a journalist's credential. The NATO heads of state and government were filing out in a modest yet august procession, snaking through the building's narrow halls. I spied Attali, following his leader as if

he and President Mitterrand were basically One Person, embodying, with appropriate solemnity, the millennial French State.

I intercepted Attali to ask quickly if he might have a bit of time to give me a meeting in Paris. He looked at me—did he see me? did he still remember me? was he still of this world?—Attali sighed deeply, more of a groan, a royal groan, and didn't bother even to reply. He walked away, his grimace giving the impression that someone had created a very bad smell.

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All that said, *Verbatim: 1981-1986*, the political diary under review here, is, despite its "scandalous" flaws, worthwhile and important.

What is the new scandal of authorship here?

It is that in this 958-page book Attali has quoted extensively and without permission from a book-length conversation, yet to be published, between François Mitterrand and Elie Wiesel. Furthermore, Attali inexplicably cut and pasted what he quoted from the Mitterrand-Wiesel manuscript, putting passages at different dates over several years (see pp. 165, 558, 691, and 742), as if there had been a running series of conversations on the dates recorded, rather than a new manuscript of a joint book-length interview.

Why he did this is not clear. This time around Attali's failures of authorship seem more a question of fecklessness than plagiarism in the formal sense of conscientiously stealing from other writers (although using the Mitterrand-Wiesel material without permission and prior to its intended publication is another matter; Mitterrand has not, to my knowledge, publicly objected.)

Attali in his preface writes that only two people read the book in proofs, his publisher Claude Durand of Les Editions Fayard, and President Mitterrand. The president "had the right to eliminate," Attali says, "whatever he wanted," but he chose not to touch Attali's manuscript (p. 8). Why? Were there no corrections at all to make in 958 pages?

Rather, President Mitterrand had two obvious good reasons to leave well enough alone. First, he had neither the time nor the energy to correct the proofs of someone else's 1000-page tome, even Attali's. It is doubtful that Mitterrand read much of Attali's book. Second and more important, if he began to do corrections, would he not thereby be authenticating all of Attali's book? Would it not be preferable to preserve both ambiguity and

deniability, while at the same time getting credit for endorsing the publication of a revealing inside account of his presidency, at the least far more detailed than any other in the history of the Fifth Republic?

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Finally we can get to the main question, which is to ask: of what specific value is this long political diary of the years 1981-1986 of the Mitterrand presidency? Does it provide important material about French and international politics from 1981 to 1986? And can it be trusted?

The answers to these two questions are, respectively, a strong "yes" as to importance, with the Reagan "Russian proverb" as to *fiabilité*: "Trust, but verify."

Attali in this book presents an immense amount of "quotation." But, given the not very rigorous usage of inverted commas characteristic of French publishing, and given Attali's own, let us say, multifaceted conception, the term itself needs to be put into quotes here.

Much of the quotation is of Mitterrand himself, reconstructed by Attali from daily notes. For students of contemporary France, and for the understanding of international relations in the last fifteen years as well, this material is of intense interest and often of first-rate political importance. Naturally, not all of Mitterrand's words should be taken as literally his, sometimes it is an Attali summary, the gist of a long conversation. But how can we then know which words are, and which aren't, the Prince's policy discussions and/or *Tischgespräche*? There is no way to know, and my advice would be to avoid relying on Attali alone as a source of direct quotation. On the other hand, as a collection of gists of Mitterrand, and of his meetings with other leaders, this book is a considerable education in politics at various levels.

In addition, Attali also reproduces in full or part many *verbatim*, the stenographic records or protocols of Mitterrand's encounters with other heads of state and government (thus the book's title). Of greater interest are those of meetings with American leaders (Reagan, Bush), with Soviet leaders (Gorbachev), with the West German leaders (Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl) and, especially interesting on the French attempt to have a special Mideast and Arab policy, with Arab leaders (Mubarak, Hafez El-Assad, King Hussein, and others).

These *verbatim* are official government documents, established outside Attali's personal control. Assuming they are reproduced with no changes other than elision as indicated, and assuming Attali has obtained all the permissions necessary from the leaders involved, these verbatim are a fascinating, unprecedented contribution to knowledge of French politics and of international meetings in which France's president had a role.

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There are several outstanding examples one can cite.

Right at the beginning of the first Mitterrand presidency, in May and June 1981, there arose the question of whether to bring the French Communist party into the "Union of the Left" government to be led by prime minister Pierre Mauroy. Mitterrand invited the Communists in, "only because I'm not forced to do it" (p. 43). The French president's explanation to Vice-President George Bush (pp. 45-47) is an important summary of Mitterrand's calculation about the Communists, which had influenced French politics and foreign attention since the signature of the "Common Program" in 1972. (Mitterrand's remarks are given in quotation marks, but this passage must be a summary.)

There are several long excerpts from talks between Mitterrand and West Germany's leaders. Helmut Schmidt was worried about a France led by a left-wing Mitterrand with Communist partners. (In 1977 Schmidt had said, "A Mitterrand victory? Don't even mention the possibility!" [p. 24]). Mitterrand's stern line, on the Communists and in support of NATO, won over the Germans as it did the Americans. A high point was Mitterrand's courageous January 1983 Bundestag speech endorsing the Euromissile development (pp. 384-389). Together Mitterrand and the West German leaders became the reformed "Franco-German couple," at the center of all major European Community developments of the 1980s, including the Maastricht treaty on European union.

In talks with Arab leaders, Mitterrand, unlike previous French presidents, always expressly emphasized his commitment to Israel's security, as well as his personal sympathy for what the Israeli democracy represents in historical terms. This candor was on particular display during his visit to Syria in late November 1986. Ten pages of conversations between Mitterrand and Hafez El-Assad (pp. 723-733) are dense and full of insight into Syrian thinking

and French policy. As Attali comments, "Never had a western leader spoken publicly in Damascus about Israel's rights as François Mitterrand did, in President Assad's presence, during the press conference" (p. 733).

At the same time, in his talks with Israeli leaders, Mitterrand always underlined his support of Palestinian autonomy and self-government, though not for a separate Palestinian state. To speak out this way was part of Mitterrand's permanent policy as, to cite yet another instance, in 1984 he had breached a Soviet rule of intellectual blackmail by speaking out on the case of Andrei Sakharov in the Kremlin itself (pp. 655-656). In Mitterrand's view this freedom of speech was part of France's "special role," as it had been in an even more thunderous way during de Gaulle's time.

Mitterrand and Attali naturally had particular curiosity about their American counterparts, and Attali makes interesting comments on the various American officials he dealt with.

The main point in Mitterrand's private conversation was naturally the desire that France not be pinned down by American decisions, let alone American *diktats*. For example, Mitterrand said to Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone in 1984 that "we won't accept that the U.S. discusses our security with the Soviets in our place. That's why we refuse [G7 security] texts" (p. 648).

Curiously, Attali gives an extremely positive evaluation of Reagan's national security advisor Robert "Bud" McFarlane, of Iran-Contra notoriety, finding him intellectually acute, genuinely interested in France and in European politics, and altogether one of the sharpest American officials he dealt with. McFarlane apparently reciprocated the esteem: at the end of a White House meeting with Ronald Reagan—which had Reagan reading from note cards, Mitterrand improvising acute and dialectical geopolitical summaries, and the American president ending by telling an off-color joke about Brezhnev—McFarlane said to Attali about Mitterrand: "What good luck you have to be able to work with a president like that!" (p. 611). Perhaps he was also saying, Attali thought, that Mitterrand was lucky to have such a sharp advisor . . . .

Most of all, Attali's book gives us Mitterrand's own conversation, a very rich inside commentary, at the top, on a decade of French and European politics. For those familiar with Mitterrand, this political talk is a lode to mine; it rings true in general, while any specific item demands corroboration.

Overall, there is not likely to be another book that gives us so much of the rather underrated Mitterrand, and so much of the thinking in French foreign policy. The memoirs of Gaullism (e.g., Maurice Couve de Murville's *Une politique étrangère* [Paris: Plon, 1971]) are either hagiographies or loyal recitations of the policy. After de Gaulle, neither the Pompidou nor the Giscard presidencies produced major accounts written in terms of policy, personnel, and overall historical-political outlook.

At the same time, Attali's brief commentaries in *Verbatim* show that, however brilliant in the abstract, he was no Kissinger, let alone a Mazarin or a Richelieu. He certainly held his own, even given his weaknesses, among Mitterrand's domestic and foreign policy advisors. And Attali did play a significant role in many episodes of the Mitterrand presidency.

Attali writes of "the strange role that I had: the intellectual whom the Prince keeps reined in, but in whom he has enough confidence to make him the witness of all the meetings, the filter for all the documents, to give him many missions and to accept him as his daily confidant; the one whose counsel is kept private, without ever mixing him into the collective action" (p. 8).

Why did François Mitterrand keep this very unlike alter ego so close to him for so long? One reason surely is to be found in Mitterrand's own nonconformism. Americans who know Mitterrand only from news coverage of state occasions understandably think him wooden, formal, solemn, a short, pompous stickler for protocol—in an (American) word, "really French."

And Mitterrand's own personality has always had a romantic and bohemian side. In one regard this fueled his desire to break taboos, to do the unexpected, to break out of routines. I think the Mitterrand-Attali odd couple genuinely suited the French president, because he could think to himself with satisfaction that only a freethinker (who, for example, never wears a watch) could put such a person as Attali in such a position for so long. And a certain French pride might have been involved when the super-smart Attali acted the *sherpa* role faced with more pedestrian summit-setters: other governments would notice that France is, whatever French arrogance, still *le pays de l'intelligence*, and a culture of prowess.

Another explanation for Attali's prolonged propinquity to the Prince has, I think, to do with the desire for company of Mitterrand's own formidable

intelligence. In sheer brain power, if not in the manipulation of political power, Jacques Attali was Mitterrand's equal, or better. This kept Mitterrand on his toes, or, in a cycling term he often uses, "not losing the pedals." Having Attali as a daily foil meant, for Mitterrand, that he was less bored by an entourage that contained few weighty counterplayers. Mitterrand had long had adversaries, but inside his own Socialist party and his governments he had also dealt with a great deal of servility. However much flattery is in fashion, "[F]ourteen years," as Mitterrand said in another context, "is too long." At least if one is in fact a president and not a king . . . .

And there is one final reason for Mitterrand's complaisance with Attali. Was he not grooming and stroking the one who would write a (great) book about a (great) president? Thinking ahead, as he did, was not the ambiguous pleasure of Jacques Attali's company one of François Mitterrand's hostages to History?

No doubt Mitterrand is disappointed with Attali's shenanigans in London and his misuse of the upcoming book with Elie Wiesel. Overall, for his patronage and his loyalty, does Mitterrand feel adequately served by *Verbatim*, and by Jacques Attali? It is not easy to judge, and there is material to argue the case either way.[6] It depends on what the French president wants most, and Mitterrand is famous for keeping his decisions for the last possible moment.

And what will Attali do now, resigned in disgrace from an important international institution he himself conceived, having already had several careers while not yet fifty? Paris life must seem small to Attali now, but there is Europe and perhaps also international business or, in a forgiving and cupid world, banking. Or perhaps Attali will return to his old idea of an American professorship of economics (the Stanford business school refused him, when he thought of getting out of Paris in 1987, during the "cohabitation" low point in Mitterrand's first term).

Will Jacques Attali relax? Probably not. He now has the added motive of revenge to keep him getting up at four a.m. Poor Jacques!

[1]*La vie éternelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), and *Le premier jour après moi* (Paris: Fayard, 1990). Indicating his reach, his most recent book before the one considered here was *1492* (Paris: Fayard, 1991). Altogether there are seventeen books, not bad for a man not yet fifty years old.
[2]See *The Economist,* July 10, 1993, p. 71, and July 24, 1993, p. 75.
[3]For months, Attali argued that $30,000 in expenses were not personal, but he finally reimbursed the bank.
[4]*The Economist*, ibid.
[5]*Analyse économique de la vie politique* (Paris: PUF, 1973) and *Les modèles politiques* (Paris: PUF, 1974).
[6]Roland Dumas, the former foreign minister, and other loyalist Socialists have argued that Attali's dismissal from the EBRD was worked by "an Anglo-Saxon conspiracy" of the British press and the U.S. government. Such a conspiracy may or may not exist, but Attali's own behavior, as documented in available sources, was certainly enough to seal his fate.