

3/8

Harold

It looks as though
The Economist share your
doubts about Tony
Summers.

It was good to
see you. Ian

With the Compliments of

Ian S. McDonald

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of his decision to return home and his expectation that he would not face any nasty political consequences. The timing of his return aroused understandable suspicion, which was heightened by his professed Christianity in a country where that religion is viewed as subversive.

The nationalism that enticed Mr Wu home was turned against him in the wave of anti-foreign feeling that accompanied the break with the Soviet Union. Decades in and out of labour camps followed. He barely endured the aftermath of the political campaigns of the Great Leap Forward, when famine killed 25m of his compatriots. During the Cultural Revolution he learnt to "sit small" in order to survive.

Such collective insanity was possible only because of China's political culture. Its characteristics of conformity and stress on collective harmony helped produce the persecution of intellectuals and those with any contact with the outside world (and, ironically, are the elements now noted as pillars of China's economic success). When these features of Confucian politics were added to a tendency towards xenophobia and the group dynamics of communist politics, they produced some of the most deadly fanaticism of the 20th century.

When the pressure eased in the 1970s, Mr Wu took to reading Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", and noted the similarities with the dying days of Mao Zedong's communism. But to the end, Mr Wu remained politically naive. The atrocities he endured were made possible as much by Chinese nationalism and political culture as the misguided adoption of communism. As China emerges from the dark days of communism, those like Mr Wu who expect a radiant future now need to worry about how many generations it will take to modernise China's brutal nationalism.



Sartre sidelined

French intellectuals Left-overs

PAST IMPERFECT: FRENCH INTELLECTUALS, 1944-56. By Tony Judt. *University of California Press*; 358 pages; \$30 and £21

FOR many, the term "French intellectual" conjures up a blend of brilliance and commitment as vital to the flavour of post-war France as Christian Dior or the Citroën DS. To others, it evokes the posturing of woolly but, alas, influential Paris cliques. On either view, it is—or used to be—taken for granted that the political opinions of such luminaries as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir or Maurice Merleau-Ponty mattered in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, and not just in France.

No longer. Philosophers dip into Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's theories of the mind. The literary works of Sartre and de Beauvoir are read. But their political writing has aged badly. It ignored hard economics and, despite Sartre's ambitious flop, "Critique de la raison dialectique", was less a theory than a set of protests, some right, some wrong. By and large, it is forgotten.

Not by Tony Judt, a rising star of recent French history, who teaches at New York University's Institute of French Studies. With impressive scholarship, he points out that many of France's intellectuals at the time were soft on Stalinism and harsh about western, especially American, society. His more original—and disputable—claim is that theirs was a "dominant voice", drowning out liberal-minded men such as Albert Camus or Raymond Aron. The left-wing majority's moralising, black-and-white approach to politics made it unable "to think seriously about public ethics".

Mr Judt writes with bite and flare. He trained at Cambridge University and in Paris, where he picked up the French knack of making abstract ideas seem as graspable as knives and forks. He disentangles old rows with the clarity of a Michelin map. His mocking exposure of what he believes the arguments were often really about—sex, violence, betrayal, imagined enemies—should rate an Olympian 9.8 from his old teachers at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, France's top school for mental gymnasts.

Yet was liberalism in France so weak? If so, why after 1945 did France become more open to the world in culture and in trade even, more market-minded in economics and more centrist in politics? Mr Judt seldom checks ideas against history, although he repeatedly ticks off his subjects for just this failing. In gauging the appeal of ideas and the influence of their purveyors, he neither defines the audience nor explains how his audimeter works.

Unwary readers may conclude that all France's intellectuals thought about, apart from dealing with *collabos*, was Stalin's show-trials in Eastern Europe. In his bare courtroom, Mr Judt barely mentions what his subjects had to say about Indochina, Algeria, the atom bomb, workers' control, Europe, the guillotine or de Gaulle. He calls himself a liberal, but liberalism in his hands is hardened into a tool of inquisition. What interests him is not policy but ideology, not the works of intellectuals in their chosen fields, but their public views.

This is Left-Bank thinking in spades: complex life works are boiled down into "isms"; utterances are invested with the force of acts; people are judged for their "stands" on issues beyond their control. Mr Judt admires the lonely, as he sees it, tradition of French liberalism. He himself sounds more like the revolutionary St Just.

G-man's G-string

IT IS hard to see why there is such a fuss over "Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover" by Anthony Summers (G.P. Putnam & Sons; 528 pages; \$25.95; £14.99). Most of its credible disclosures are old hat. The FBI director's rumoured homosexual relationship with Clyde Tolson was common gossip in Washington long before his death in 1972. Everybody everywhere knew that Hoover hated radical blacks and left-wingers of all colours. Criticism of his reluctance to take on the Mafia was a commonplace. And even Martians must by now have heard that some presidents were loth to sack, let alone sack, Hoover lest he spill the

beans on their misdeeds.

The book contains some truly sensational revelations, but they are about as convincing as the scandal sheets at supermarket check-out counters. The Mafia hiring Lee Harvey Oswald to assassinate President Kennedy, for instance. Or, more implausibly still, the disclosure that Hoover and Roy Cohn, another notorious Red-baiter, liked dressing up in women's clothes to partake in sexual orgies with Aryan-looking boys. If this, or anything like it, had really happened, it would have become public knowledge donkey's years ago. The many people in the media who had reason to bear Hoover a grudge would have seen to that.