



# JULIEN FREUND: A TRIBUTE TO A GREAT MASTER

*Posted on February 1, 2022 by Jerónimo Molina Cano*



*Julien Freund (1921-1993) is one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century. But his ideas and work have often been poorly understood and thereby harshly and unfairly judged. To commemorate his birth centenary, Éditions Perspectives Libres PYR have just republished L'aventure du politique (The Adventure of the Political), which are a series of interviews, by Freund, of Father Charles Blanchet (1923-2004), who taught philosophy at the École des Cordeliers, in Dinan. In these interviews, Freund reflects upon his own life and career, his ideas and his work.*

*Through the kind agreement of Éditions Perspectives Libres PYR, we are indeed very pleased to bring to our readers the first English translation of an introductory essay by Jérónimo Molina Cano, who is one of the best scholars of Julien Freund's thought. Cano is member of the Real Academia de Ciencias Morales y Políticas and professor of political science at the University of Murcia. His expertise includes the thought of Raymond Aron, Gaston Bouthoul, Carl Schmitt, and Wilhelm Röpke. He is the author of several essays and books on Freund, including Julien Freund, lo político y la política and Conflicto, gobierno y economía. Cuatro ensayos sobre Julien Freund. He also wrote the erudite preliminary study of The Essence of the Political, published by the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, in 2018.*

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## **1.**

Julien Freund was born on January 9, 1921, in [Henridorff](#), a small village of barely six hundred inhabitants in the Moselle department of Lorraine, a border region between French and Germanic culture. In a culturally centralized France, Freund, who was perfectly bilingual, experienced in his youth the misunderstanding of compatriots who did not see in him the Frenchman, but only the man who spoke a Germanic language.

Julien was the eldest of six children born to Emile Freund and Marie-Anne Mathis. His father, a railroad worker, was a "red socialist" in the German tradition—a kind of social democrat who went to Mass every Sunday and ignored the anticlerical prejudices of the French socialists. Marie-Anne, his mother, a simple and pious peasant, was for a time in charge of the public baths of [Sarrebouurg](#). The young Julien did his secondary studies at the [minor seminary](#) of [Montigny-lès-Metz](#), without ever intending to take his vows.

In 1938-1939, after his baccalaureate and preparatory classes, he enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy in Strasbourg. The socialism that he displayed at the time was spontaneous, natural, instinctive and "utopian," a bit like the elementary and congenital communism of the Italian [Ignazio Silone](#), whose work he appreciated. At the same time, he assiduously read [Jacques Maritain](#), a sort of discreet tutor who [introduced him](#) to the understanding of [politics](#), but who nevertheless remained absent from his quotations and bibliographical references. Further, the writer and aviator, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, was one of the authors who contributed most to the formation of his literary sensibility. The premature death of his father in 1938, on New Year's Eve, when he was barely seventeen years old, upset his plans and made him head of the family "in spite of himself." From then on, Freund studied philosophy as a free student at the university in order to combine his studies with agricultural work.

Freund's destiny once again changed, during the Second World War. In less than six years, he lived almost all the lives of a Frenchman of the dying Third Republic: hostage of the invader, refugee, clandestine, terrorist, prisoner, escapee, maquisard, journalist and politician. In 1940, during the day, he helped with farm work and took care of his mother's beehives; and at night, he helped people flee occupied France. On November 11, Freund was summoned by the Gestapo in Sarrebourg. He went to the summons without much concern, but one of the political police henchmen warned him that he was on his way to Dachau (*Sie werden nach Dachau kommen!*).

The Kreisleiter, the NSDAP representative in Sarrebourg, asked him about his activities. Freund answered frankly that he would like to leave Lorraine. The German authorities were quite happy to get rid of him and allowed him to leave for the Auvergne, which he did the same day. Like a shipwrecked man, Freund found himself among the thousands of French people in exodus and arrived in Clermont-Ferrand on November 26, 1940. Out of a taste for adventure and admiration for his Strasbourg professor Jean Cavaillès, he joined the Liberation movement. With his group, he engaged in small-scale sabotage, even though the word is excessive to describe the actions, sometimes facetious, of young people who painted graffiti and stole the official portraits of Marshal Pétain. A search of his apartment and the discovery of the portraits, which had been amassed for destruction, led the police to believe that he was some sort of obsessed but harmless Vichy supporter.

Freund plotted while preparing for a graduate degree. In January 1942, he joined the Groupe Franc de Combat. Without realizing it, he crossed the line between diversion and real danger, between academic rebellion and terrorism. After some hesitation, he embarked on direct action. The use of explosives transformed his nocturnal adventures of a young non-conformist into political terrorism. He was

arrested on June 27, 1942, the day after the foiled attack on Laval, then president of the Council of Ministers. Released in July, he was arrested again in September. In the first trial against the Combat group, Freund was sentenced to six months in prison. As the charges against him mounted, he was transferred to several prison camps.

In the summer of 1944, shortly after D-Day, he escaped from the citadel of Sisteron and joined the communist maquis (the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans de France). He was soon confronted with the abjection and moral degradation of the communists, and later recognized that his conception of the world would become that of a mature or experienced man.

The Resistance was the defining experience of Freund's life. He describes it in a collective book of "decisive personal experiences," *Was meinem Leben Richtung gab*. These years taught him that one cannot engage oneself fully in politics and claim to come out with clean hands. To believe that this is possible is only a sinister fantasy of a political intellectual or an intellectual who indulges in party politics. "My hands are stained, I admit it, but I don't boast about it," he confessed in 1975 to a German radio station. And again: "I do not belong to the brotherhood of Jean-Paul Sartre," who confused the problem of political violence in a self-serving way and moralized it for his own benefit.

Once the war was over, Freund's political action shifted from open struggle to editing newspapers, such as *L'Avenir Lorrain*, and to the regional offices of political parties. In less than a year, he was a delegate of the [Mouvements Unis de Résistance](#) (MUR) in the [Allier](#), a delegate of the [Mouvement de Libération National](#) (MLN) in Moselle, and finally the departmental secretary of the [Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance](#) (UDSR), a non-Marxist socialist party, also in Moselle. But he was soon disappointed and even dismayed by the maneuvering and scheming during the establishment of his party's electoral lists. A few months earlier, at the end of 1944, he had given up his circumstantial membership in the Communist party. But the exclusivism of the Communists of the time would stop at nothing, and Freund, who "knew too much," was harassed and threatened with death by "ex-friends" of the [PCF](#).

In June 1945, after an election meeting on the market square in Sarrebourg, a communist ambushed him, shot at him from 30 meters and miraculously missed. A year later, disgusted by his experiences, he definitively stopped all political activity and decided to prepare for the competitive examination to become a philosophy teacher. He already had the main idea for his doctoral thesis: "What is politics, *Was ist Politik?*" The book, *L'essence du politique* (*The Essence of the Political*) [1965], the result of a long

and mature reflection, allowed him to overcome his political disappointment.

Freund became a philosophy teacher at the Lycée Mangin in Sarrebourg in 1946. In the summer of 1948, he married Marie-France Kuder. He became a town councilor in Sarrebourg, while preparing for the agrégation in philosophy. In 1949, he joined the Lycée Fabert in Metz as an associate professor. In 1953, he moved to the Lycée Fustel de Coulanges in Strasbourg where he taught [hypokhâgne](#) classes to future students at the Ecole normale supérieure. Seven years later, in September 1960, he became a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), in the sociology section, thanks to the sponsorship of Raymond Aron, who was his thesis director.

On June 26, 1965, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Julien Freund defended his doctoral thesis on the essence and meaning of the political. Raymond Aron solemnly opened the session: "It is extraordinary that a Resistance fighter should have written such a thesis. That is why I ask you to stand up." Commenting on the passages at the end of the book on courage, Aron took the opportunity to praise physical and moral courage, but especially the intellectual courage of the doctoral student. Freund was speechless. With great emotion, he finally spoke: "The work that I have the honor of presenting for your approval was born of a disappointment that was overcome. The disappointment, for which I do not hold others responsible in any way, but only my capacity for illusion, found its nourishment in the experiences of the resistance, that is to say, on the one hand, in the events of the time of the Occupation and the Liberation, and on the other hand, in those that it was given to me to face in the modest sphere of political and trade union activity that I carried out for a few years."

In the packed Edgard Quinet amphitheater, where the defense was held, the most intense moment was the debate raised by [Jean Hyppolite](#) on the central political element: "If you're really right, I'll just have to cultivate my own garden," said Hyppolite, who was initially the provisional director of his thesis before giving up, alleging: "As a socialist and a Hegelian, I can't sponsor a thesis like yours at the Sorbonne."

Freund replied without hesitation: "I think you are making another mistake, because you think that you are the one who designates the enemy, like all pacifists. 'As long as we don't want enemies, we won't have any,' you reason. But it is the enemy who designates you. And if he wants you to be his enemy, you can make the most beautiful protestations of friendship. As long as he wants you to be the enemy, you are. And he will even prevent you from cultivating your garden. Hyppolite's answer was tragic: "I have no choice then but to commit suicide."

A great reader of Machiavelli, Freund did not agree to be classified as a "political realist," and this is largely due to the confusion introduced by the false semantic friends of the concepts of Political Realism or Power Politics, which originated in the Anglo-Saxon theory of international relations. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, either about himself or about the nature of his political analysis, he returned to the subject in the appendix of the 1985 edition of *The Essence of the Political*. The distinction he makes is quite simple: to be Machiavellian is to have a "theoretical style of thought without concessions to the moralistic comedies of power." To be Machiavellic, on the other hand, is to adopt a practical conduct in the political game that consists in committing "generous villainies": do as I say; don't do as I do.

A Machiavellian, Freund was the great proponent of [Carl Schmitt](#) in France. The *damnatio memoriae* never affected his will. He always laughed at defamation and, to be honest, at his colleagues who preferred to read about Schmitt's reputation rather than read the Schmittian corpus. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Schmitt did his utmost to disseminate the work of his French counterpart in Germany. Regardless of the theoretical differences between the two thinkers, no author has developed the Schmittian friend-enemy dialectic, which is one of the presuppositions of the essence of the political, as much as Freund. This criterion, which he made his intellectual motto, appears to him as a transcendental discovery. Its reality is verifiable and within the reach of every mind, because it "has the evidence of simple ideas" and does not need demonstration because of its "immediate evidence." It is, after all, a superior, forgotten banality.

## 2.

Julien Freund was a polymath, a scholar, a rigorous erudite whose repertoire of knowledge was as vast as it was varied. Metaphysics, political philosophy, sociology, polemology, political science, legal philosophy and sociology, painting, architecture! The list of his scientific and philosophical "vis," as well as his irrepressible curiosity for the spectacle of the world, did not end there. Although he was not a film buff, and cinema is more about the imaginary than the real, his book *Sociologie du conflit* opens with a note on Marcel Carné's *Les enfants du paradis*. In the pages of *Philosophie philosophique*, a treatise nourished by personal confidences, it is the unforgettable actor Louis Jouvet who suddenly appears. Moreover, no one could say that his "Alsatian" studies are minor or that they are only for lovers of the singularities of the Alsatian region and its folklore. Even if they are circumstantial, they always bear the mark of the master. But this being so, the heart of Julien Freund's political philosophy undoubtedly lies in his theory of essence. Essence is inseparable from experience; it is the result of reflection on the

constants that characterize the different human activities. The essence constitutes "a reality which lasts in time and which does not die out under the action of the circumstances."

With the theory of essence, Freund sought to discover the criteria that fix each of the six essences discerned in the framework of social relations. On the political level, he asks the question: "Are there conditions that make politics political, so that when they are missing, the social relation is no longer political, or only secondarily political?" But of course, the notion of essence is not limited to the political domain. There is an essence of politics (the political) as there is of economy (the economic), of religion (the religious), of aesthetics (the aesthetic), of science (the scientific) and of ethics (the ethical). But then why six essences? This number is the result of a continuous reflection on ideas and experiences, which does not exclude possible correction. Nevertheless, Freund considers that these are the founding and irreducible essences of human nature. All other activities or social relations can be reduced, in one way or another, to one or other of these essences; or else to an antinomic dialectic, fruit of a conflict between two or more essences. The exact description of this dialectic relation, peaceful or polemical according to the circumstances, is the "mediation" of the essences.

The quid of each essence resides in the "prior and determining conditions" that make each activity possible. These conditions are the "presuppositions." In the same way, the essence would only be an invention if it did not respond to "something ineffaceable" that belongs to human nature, a kind of irreducible residue. This residual data is natural, consubstantial to the man, "present in every man," permanent and invariable. Correlatively to each datum, there exists, by necessity, a singular "finality" or "specific goal," not interchangeable with those of the other essences, since the final cause of each of them is different according to the datum. Finally, if each human activity—historical and sociological reflection, so to speak *hic et nunc*, of each essence—has a privative finality, it can be reached only by specific means: "One cannot reach the end of a determined activity by just any means."

In summary, the notion of essence is defined by four facets: data, presuppositions, purpose and means. "Thanks to the notion of data, I can answer the question of the foundation of an activity. Thanks to that of presupposition, I can determine the conditions of the exercise of this activity. And thanks to that of finality, the goal that man pursues by relying on this activity." And, finally, the means, reveal how to reach the goal in each case.

"There is an essence of the political" is the pithy statement that opens *The Essence of the Political*. Once its existence is established, the notion of the state and, in general, of any other historical political

form, is automatically superseded. The distinction between the political and the State appears on the very first page of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*. The concept of the state presupposes the political concept: "Der Begriff des Staates setzt den Begriff des Politischen voraus." There are few of Schmitt's books which do not start off like a rocket. Similarly, a strong idea runs through *The Essence of the Political*: the distinction between the political and politics, which is itself a reaction against the diluting sociologism of the political in the social system: "The political is a power of society that politics translates into concrete and contingent acts of organization." As opposed to the political as nature, politics is adventure, the "concrete way of negotiating" the political in human life according to historical situations, regimes, ideologies.

### 3.

Uncomfortable with the baseness of university life, instrumentalized by educational unionism and the left's desire for hegemony, Freund took early retirement at age 58, claiming for the first time in his life a privilege of resistance. "I didn't feel comfortable at the university anymore, and then I had something else to do than to constantly counter the whims of the so-called progressives and democrats." In reality, university life was another of his great disappointments—along with politics, union life and even religious life. In a letter to his teacher Raymond Aron, dated April 10, 1967, he confessed: "I cannot overcome the disappointment that has lasted for more than a year; that is, since I became familiar with university life." Apparently, as he kept telling his thesis director, he had always felt embarrassed and uncomfortable in academia "because of my plebeian temperament." He did not flee, but retired to [Villé](#), "his good retreat," "su buen retiro," as Carl Schmitt says in Spanish, alluding here to the home of the kings of Spain. In Villé, his *locus amoenus* (an attractive, even idyllic place), Freund found his [San Casciano](#), as Schmitt found his [Plettenberg](#). "It is better to make internal emigration the only possible form of resistance under the present conditions."

In any case, always faithful to his political profession of faith, Freund, the Frenchman, Gaullist, European and regionalist, read and wrote in complete freedom, which is rarely the case for an author. He maintained contact with a few faithful and remarkable students, while drawing new students as well. But he had no real disciples, nor successors, not even in France. He gave lectures in a few foreign universities, especially in Canada and Belgium, the most important being those of Montreal and Louvain. But in France, in his homeland, his voice was silenced; it was stifled in Germany. It is said with disdain that he frequented the circles of the New Right or that he gave lectures at the [Club de l'Horloge](#)... Freund did not ignore what it means to carry such a stigma. Nor was he afraid of being seen



as a "[franchouillard](#)," or of risking being told that he wears a beret everywhere "to be noticed." But here again, the reality was more subtle than the clichés. According to Dr. Bertrand Kugler, nephew and godson of Julien Freund, his godfather "wore his beret in all circumstances as a sign of commemoration and homage and loyalty to all his companions in the Resistance, especially those who had died for France and for freedom. For him, this apparently banal gesture was of great importance."

He suffered from loneliness, but he never lost courage. He did indeed go to the various forums and he would go to many others... if he were invited, but in truth he was not. The circle of silence is the price to be paid by the Machiavellian. In spite of everything, he gave conferences in Greece, Spain, Italy and Argentina. At the end of June 1982, he also went to Chile, invited by the Fundación del Pacífico and the University of Chile. That same year, his lectures were collected in a volume, entitled *La crisis del Estado y otros escritos* (*The Crisis of the State and Other Writings*), which included a large number of texts from a book that had never been published in French, *Capitalisme et socialisme*. He also had the opportunity to visit Peru (1982) and, two years earlier, Brazil (1980), at the invitation of the University of Sao Paulo. At that time, he shared with Raymond Aron, albeit discreetly, his opinion of military regimes and did not want to remain silent in order not to be an accomplice to the lie. Military dictatorships compromise political freedoms, but do not always affect civil liberties... But in the end, the article he wrote for *L'Express* at Aron's suggestion was not published.

Freund was allergic to the labels of right and left, epidermal, accidental and changing notions, incapable of specifically characterizing the political. Although he was above this "moral hemiplegia" of the intellectual world, he knew that it did not depend on him to be pigeonholed, by enemies of the right or the left, even for his alleged "intentions." He is a fascist for some, a Marxist for others, and if the latter are less numerous, they are even more uninformed than the former. Freund was not a conservative for writing about decadence, nor was he a socialist for being invited by socialist organizations, nor was he a member of [GRECE](#) (Groupement de Recherche et d'Études pour la Civilisation Européenne) for "speaking in New Right circles." There is perhaps something [palinodic](#) in his comments in 1981. And even if not, I think the wound was hurting him. The "hunter of sacred shadows on the eternal hills"—to use the expression used by the Colombian Gómez Dávila to qualify himself—was already tired by the 1980s, but he nevertheless kept a vigilant eye, always attentive to the "regularities of politics," like a guardian of the facts.

In any case, Freund was not the kind of person to make friends with the enemy, nor to cede to him the foundations of political definitions. With paradox, he knew how to disarm the mechanism of political

demonization and stigmatization. He clarified not only the tactical but also the metapolitical meaning of his personal label by saying: "I am a reactionary of the left," an "authentic revolutionary, [that is,] a conservative." As a reactionary, Julien Freund refused to follow the herd. He knew how to say "no." Always exposed to the elements, his spiritual strength was extraordinary; one cannot endure defamation without a large dose of intellectual courage.

Because of his character (he would probably have preferred to say his "inclination of mood"), Freund was always predisposed to be rebellious and annoying. He had little tolerance for accommodation, compromise, and even less for cheating reality. He did not want to compromise on what was essential and indispensable. His vehemence was hardly conciliatory and he perhaps lacked the skill, the astuteness, the worldly gentleness of a Raymond Aron, always affable. I am," he said, "more turbulent in my behavior, more belligerent in my interventions, more polemical in my work." For having cultivated the spirit of paradox, but above all for his idea of the political, which was refractory to the mystifications of the right and the left, he was marginalized and silenced. At the end of the 1980s, he confided to Chantal Delsol, who had been one of his doctoral students a few years earlier: "They don't call me from anywhere." His mistake, wrote Delsol, ten years after his death, was "to have been right before his time." Sometimes overwhelmed by the triumph of the Marxist intelligentsia, Freund nonetheless continued to question the meaning of his work on the "eternal political," which could well have been written two thousand years earlier by an informed politician or a disappointed political thinker like himself. But nothing ever distracted him from his passionate political vocation—or rather from the passion of politics—not even disappointment, that spur to intelligence: "I prefer the reading of Book VIII of Plato's *Republic* to the follies of Alcibiades."

#### 4.

Julien Freund's work is impressive, as the successive bibliographies of Piet Tommissen, Juan Carlos Valderrama and Alain de Benoist attest. Its reception in the academic world is, however, far from doing justice to this work that projects itself into history and transcends the politics of the moment. But time filters out the essential, and Freund's political philosophy, like his polemology and his profound meditations on decadence, undoubtedly have a promising future, which will be counted in centuries. His lineage is that of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt. The same cannot be said of many other geniuses of the past century whose political understanding and work were marked by the Cold War and outdated like it.

This being said, it is perhaps not useless to recall here, to orient the reader, that the present book, *L'aventure du politique* (The Adventure of the Political), an extraordinary and moving dialogue with Father Charles Blanchet, whose first edition dates from 1991, has also been the object of two recent translations and editions in Spanish and Italian (Encuentro 2019 and Il Foglio 2021). This French edition would not have been possible without the generosity of M.M. René and Jean-Noël Freund, Julien Freund's two sons, and his godson, M. Bertrand Kugler. It would not have been possible either without the interest and the love of risk of the publisher, Mr. Pierre-Yves Rougeyron, to whom I am particularly grateful for having asked me to write an introduction to this precious dialogue. With this edition, my debt to Mr. Arnaud Imatz is even greater.

Also noteworthy is a bilingual French and German edition of the epilogue to *La décadence: Europa im Niedergang?* (2020), and an anthology of texts, perhaps too brief, presented by Alain de Benoist and Pierre Bérard: *Le Politique ou l'art de désigner l'ennemi* (2020). Two other works were also reprinted, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Julien Freund's birth, *La fin de la Renaissance* (2021), a book once rejected by [Calmann-Lévy](#), and *La décadence. Histoire sociologique et philosophique d'une catégorie de l'expérience humaine* (2021), whose 1984 edition was not without its difficulties either. Finally, a long-awaited book was recently published, *Lettres de la Vallée* (2021), a political realist meditation with Rousseau's *Lettres écrites de la montagne* as a counterpoint.

2021 was thus the year of Julien Freund's return, with all honors.

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