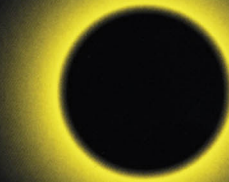


With a new introduction by **Harvey C. Mansfield**

Raymond Aron

**The Opium
of the
Intellectuals**



Foreword by

Daniel J. Mahoney and **Brian C. Anderson**

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of the
Intellectuals**

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Religion is the sigh of the creature overwhelmed by misfortune, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

KARL MARX

Marxism is undoubtedly a religion, in the lowest sense of the word. Like every inferior form of the religious life it has been continually used, to borrow the apt phrase of Marx himself, as an opiate for the people.

SIMONE WEIL



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FOREWORD TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION

THE OPIUM OF THE INTELLECTUALS is the sixth book by Raymond Aron to be published by Transaction Publishers and the fifth in the “Aron series” inaugurated with the republication of *In Defense of Decadent Europe* in 1996. The series’ aim is to make available Aron’s principal writings, with new introductions that highlight their continuing relevance and, where appropriate, with additional materials that clarify the intention of the original works.

The publication of the new Transaction edition of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* is a particularly significant moment for the series. *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955) is undoubtedly Aron’s most famous work—incredibly, however, it has been out-of-print for years—though it remains better known than read. Even sympathetic critics too often pigeonhole it as a skeptical assault on political rationalism or as a complacent defense of “the end of ideology.” Few commentators have studied it with sufficient care to observe that its skepticism is aimed not at truth, but at the nihilism that propels ideological fanaticism in our age. Aron’s “skeptical” assault on the myths of the left, the proletariat, and the revolution, and his philosophical dissection of “the idolatry of history,” are at the service of restoring political judgment to its rightful place as the guardian of the human world. In his introduction to the present volume, Professor Harvey Mansfield of Harvard University highlights both *Opium’s* remarkable contribution to clear thinking during the Cold War and its permanent contribution to understanding the intellectual foundations of non-utopian thought and action. This edition also includes a 1956 text by Aron, “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” that responds to the critics of the original edition of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* and illuminates the Aronian understanding of political judgment. This text is Aron’s magisterial response to the efforts by Sartre and other French intellectuals to fuse Marxist

historicism and existentialist commitment in a way that abandons any concern with political moderation and prudence. In it Aron supplements and explains the intention of *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, and makes clear that his own conservative-minded liberalism is not rooted in radical skepticism about principles per se but in a legitimate skepticism about “schemes, models and utopias.” As Mansfield makes clear in his introduction, Aron’s powerful critique of the fusion of Marx and Nietzsche, of “doctrinairism” and “existentialism,” in the thought of his time continues to speak to the irresponsibility and incoherence of “postmodernist” thought in ours.

It is fitting for us to close with an expression of thanks to those who have made this series possible and have contributed to its success. To begin with, we owe a debt of gratitude to Transaction’s Irving Louis Horowitz, who has been a constant source of encouragement from the beginning, and to Dominique Schnapper, Aron’s daughter and literary executrix (and a distinguished scholar in her own right) who has given us her enthusiastic support along the way. Thanks also to Elisabeth Dutartre of the Centre de Recherches Politiques Raymond Aron for invaluable editorial assistance over the years and to Pierre Manent and Harvey Mansfield for bringing their wisdom to bear on Aron’s work.

Daniel J. Mahoney
Brian C. Anderson
September 1999

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION

RAYMOND ARON'S great polemic, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, was published in 1955 during the Cold War. It is a leading document in that war, which was fought with words as much as arms. The war with arms was between two superpowers and their allies, but the Cold War of words was fought mainly within the West, and the central battlefield was Paris. The question was whether the West would sustain its will and hence its efforts in arms, or would succumb to the doubt and self-criticism of its intellectuals, many of whom wanted, or behaved as if they wanted, the other side to win.

The most advanced of these intellectuals, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, were Aron's particular targets in this work. Americans owe Raymond Aron a great debt for a courageous deed in publishing it, a deed that was also a stroke of strategy against the enemy in his heartland. For however little courage there may seem to be in the act of writing a book, and however minor the consequences may seem to be of what intellectuals in Paris happen to believe, one should not underestimate the benefits gained when Aron took the field. The good sense of non-philosophers needs to be protected against bad philosophy even when it goes over their heads, for there are many, especially among the young, who will be impressed with such high-sounding doctrines as existentialism and phenomenology, especially when combined with the moral content and fueled by the passionate hatred characteristic of Marxism. Moreover, Aron did not dismiss these doctrines with a superiority of his own; he was as far from wishing to demean philosophy as he was from condescending to the good sense of the people. He carefully weighed the arguments of the intellectuals he opposed. While denouncing the myths of the Left, the revolution, and the proletariat, he furnishes evidence of error and exposes weak-

nesses of reasoning that amply reveal those ideas to be the myths that he calls them. Of course, he could not entirely discredit or face down those he proved to be enemies of liberty, since the latter were supported by the dominant trends of thought in the West, but he stood up to them. He let others see that they could be opposed, refuted, and then deservedly and successfully mocked.

Aron was criticized himself for his mostly “sociological,” occasionally satirical characterizations of intellectuals in the book, as if he were an anti-intellectual conservative unwilling to take their ideas seriously. But in fact he supplied his own definition of an intellectual not given to taking opium. The true intellectual, he says, does not content himself with signing manifestos, and when entering politics, he makes an engagement to a party and accepts the risks and the harshness of politics. But in his partisanship he endeavors never to forget “the arguments of the adversary, or the uncertainty of the future, or the faults of his own side, and the underlying fraternity of combatants.” Aron’s part in the Cold War was not a minor one. Coming from among the French intellectuals, taught in their schoolhouse, the *École Normale* in Paris, familiar with their headquarters at St.-Germain-des-Prés, and having shared their preoccupation with German philosophy, he nonetheless made himself an exception to their rule. His passing mention of the “underlying fraternity of combatants” shows that the source of his reproach to his fellows was his sense of honor—a notion not to be found in the strange confusion of individualism and collectivism in their doctrines. Aron’s strength of will derived from his strength of mind, but these two great qualities in him were bound together, mutually moderated, and directed to a common end, by the fact, and by his realization of the fact, that he was an honorable man.

Yet no one should think that *The Opium of the Intellectuals* is a book about the past. To begin with, one could say that the post-war French intellectuals are not peculiar to France; they are the archetype of modern intellectuals everywhere. Deriving from such great modern philosophers as Bacon and Descartes, intellectuals became an avowed international movement in the Enlightenment and expressed their political will in the French Revo-

lution. The notion they represent arises from theory made practical through public enlightenment, in sum, the rational control of societies heretofore stagnating under the authority of superstition and tradition. No longer will reason remain in seclusion apart from society, given over to contemplation, occupied with pure theory, and venturing into politics only to look rather than act under the cover of utopian schemes. From now on, reason will be put to work in society, criticizing the ways of custom and replacing them with new laws and institutions that are of necessity universal because they are rational.

Typically, then, modern intellectuals seek to establish the single way of life or regime that accords with reason. This can be a single constitutional regime like the one proposed by liberals such as Hegel, or the Marxist communist utopia in which the state has been abolished. Whatever its particular formulation, this single regime will be lasting because it is impartial; being rational, it has no inherent bias that might give rise to opposition or revolution within it. The intellectuals' regime may well be set in place by revolution, but that revolution brings an end to irrationality and oppression, thus foreclosing the need for further revolution.

Aron emphasizes that in this picture of the intellectuals' regime there is no need for wisdom to compromise with adverse circumstances. Wisdom, by leaving its closet and going outdoors in the attempt to dominate society, has compromised itself in advance, as wisdom; for wisdom now includes the trick of getting itself accepted and obeyed. The communist utopia is not merely the rational way to live but also rationally predictable as the necessary and inevitable product of history. Here "rational" means in accord with trends and events as well as in accord with reason. From this follows the monumental impatience of intellectuals with human complexity and imperfection. They feel that they have fully discounted the evil in men by appealing to low motives of self-interest rather than depending on noble sacrifice; their optimism is reasonable because it is not based on faith in human goodness. As Aron says, it is "visionary optimism combined with a pessimistic view of reality." Modern intellectuals, therefore, have little understanding of the partiality, the par-

tianship, of politics. They see only the noble end and the low means; they do not see that the high and the low in human beings are connected, so that men, who are always partial to themselves, nonetheless always want to think well of themselves. The concepts of altruism and self-interest are both extreme, artificial constructs, unreal and inhuman. What gets in the way of the intellectuals' utopia is more the unexpected goodness of men than their disappointing faults, a point of which Machiavelli was more cognizant than the systematic philosophers who came after him.

The conclusion of this description is that modern intellectuals do not appreciate the inevitability of partisanship; hence they do not understand politics. Their difficulty is not that they are not politically gifted, but rather that they neither know nor care to know what it means to be politically gifted. They believe that politics is a temporary necessity until the rational solution is put in place. But one does not understand politics unless one sees that it is a permanent feature of human life, and that it defines human imperfection as the striving for perfection of beings incapable of it. Every regime is imperfect but wants to be perfect; not, it is partial and biased but claims to be comprehensive and satisfying. The wish and the claim cannot be dismissed so as to clear the way for a theorist's prescription from outside, for they come from human pride, which is always in part blind, in part admirable. Intellectuals are proud but oblivious of pride. They do not see why others resist their rule, or even that they themselves wish to rule. They are, as such, lacking in the self-knowledge that was once thought to be the end of wisdom. Aron notes that all rivals to the rule of intellectuals have disappeared—the Church, the nobility, and under communism, the bourgeoisie. In that condition intellectuals are kings, or at least bureaucrats. Joseph Stalin, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with mastery over the life and death of millions of men, is also an intellectual. Other intellectuals can hardly refuse their concurrence without calling into question the idea of a single, rational regime: they must obey. When intellectuals rule, intellectuals obey.

Why should Stalin, a vulgar man and a murderer who never had a single interesting thought, be considered an intellectual?

Aron remarks that Stalin's authority comes from a universal doctrine similar to religion, and he conveys the point in the title of his book, which likens the opium that intellectuals take for themselves to the opiate that priests offer to the people, according to Marxists. But the difference is that religion (or the Christian religion) bases its promises on the other world, and therefore always reserves to itself the right to criticize governments. Christianity is not an opiate but rather the contrary – a call to awareness. Under the “secular religion” of communism, however, the other world is transposed to earth, and not merely to the far-off future on earth. Since the communist future is predictable, it must be inherent in the present, in the party of the proletariat, and in the leader of that party, Stalin. Thus communism is driven to understand its heaven as present reality transfigured by words. Here Aron points to the fundamental weakness of totalitarianism, that it cannot sustain its revolutionary faith and fervor. If present reality is said to be satisfactory, then the time for indignation is past and sacrifices to the state cannot be justified. But if present reality is admitted to be unsatisfactory, then how—by what concrete signs—can it be shown to be on the way to the millennium? Some thirty-four years after Aron's book was published, the weakness he discerned took effect, and communism collapsed without a struggle. It fell because, though it was a regime, it had no way to understand itself as one. Its rule was judged by the standard of the termination of its rule, a termination advanced into the present by the necessary impatience of its idea. Communism could not stand, yet could not avoid, comparison with its present reality. Its routine was not inspired by its dream but destroyed by it. Its rulers had nothing to be proud of. They were forced to become intellectuals and either lie unconvincingly about the present or give up on it.

Besides the importance of the regime, Aron has another lesson for intellectuals regarding nihilism, which appears most clearly in the defense of his book, “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” published in the appendix of this edition. The French intellectuals were not Marxists or communists; as Aron said, they voted for the Communist Party, not for communism. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty believed, contrary to Marxism, that the human

destiny is individual and, if one may say so, essentially accidental. As advanced intellectuals, they had moved far from the notion of the rational control of society with which modern intellectuals began. They traveled in theory the same route that the Soviet rulers and intellectuals followed in fact, from exaggerated faith in reason to extreme loss of faith in it. They began from the rejection of Hegel's rational state as too rational by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the very contrary of the Marxist critique that it was not rational enough. But somehow Sartre and Merleau-Ponty found it impossible to leave reason behind, and so they combined it with unreason. To their existentialism and phenomenology they joined neo-Marxism, with the accent on the neo. In this they anticipated the New Left of the late Sixties with its tortuous fusion of Marx and Nietzsche and the postmodernism of the present age with its unserious, happy-go-lucky leftism. All are varieties of what Aron calls "historicist doctrinairism." When intellectuals no longer believe in the possibility of the mastery of reason, they resort to the idea of groundless mastery by unreasoning individuals choosing or opting on their own only for themselves. But when they see that that idea lands them in a predicament where they are negative, irresponsible, and unable to act, they go back to the doctrinairism they had fled. In every swing of this oscillation the consistent mood is hatred of prudence and moderation, which are held to be both too rational and too irrational.

In this book Raymond Aron revealed the nature of the thinker in his century and, probably, in the next one, too. But he also left a powerful antidote in his arguments and his example.

Harvey C. Mansfield
Cambridge, Massachusetts
August 1999

FOREWORD

AT THE beginning of January, 1955, I wrote, to introduce this book to the French public, a preface which opened with the following words: "I had had occasion, over the past few years, to write a number of articles directed not so much against the Communists as against the *communisants*, those who do not belong to the party but whose sympathies are with the Soviet world. I decided to collect these articles and undertook to write an introduction. The collection appeared under the title *Polémiques*; the introduction developed into this book.

"Seeking to explain the attitude of the intellectuals, merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of the proper doctrines, I soon came across the sacred words, Left, Revolution, Proletariat. The analysis of these myths led me to reflect on the cult of history, and then to examine a social category to which the sociologists have not yet devoted the attention it deserves: the intelligentsia.

"Thus this book deals both with the present state of so-called left-wing ideologies and with the situation of the intelligentsia in France and in the world at large. It attempts to give an answer to some of the questions which others besides myself must have asked themselves. Why has Marxism come back into fashion in a country whose economic evolution has belied the Marxist predictions? Why are the ideologies of the proletariat and the Communist Party all the more successful where the working class is least numerous? What circumstances control the ways of speech, thought and action of the intellectuals in different countries?"

Two years later, I wrote another preface to present this book to the English and American public: "'Controversies between intellectuals about the destiny of intellectuals play as big a part in French life as love and food,' to quote Sir Alan Herbert, the most serious of British parliamentarians.

This book, born of discussions with friends, ex-friends, and opponents, continues a French tradition. It expresses the passions, the conflicts, by which the national conscience was rent in the ten years that followed the liberation and the Second World War.

“It will not be without value to place this contribution to the ‘great French debate,’ both in space and in time, in relation to the great debates of other countries and to the events which have intervened in the past two years.

“The fashionable philosophies in France are Marxism and Existentialism. The intellectuals of the Left who give their reserved and uneasy support to the Moscow cause without being members of the Communist Party use concepts taken from Hegel, Husserl, or Kierkegaard to justify their semi-acceptance of it. To answer them effectively I have used the language that they use themselves. They would have rejected in advance the arguments of logical positivism, but they cannot dismiss criticisms derived from doctrines which they themselves invoke.

“At the same time I have perhaps over-emphasised the traditional character of the debate, and I am afraid that British or American readers may be tempted to subscribe to Mr. John Bowle’s opinion, or sally, when he said: ‘It is one of the most depressing aspects of the brilliant French culture that opinions so fundamentally silly should command so much prestige.’

“Such a reaction would be intelligible, but hasty. After all, in the Soviet orbit hundreds of millions of people receive a Marxist-Leninist education. In the free world, outside the English-speaking countries, thousands or tens of thousands of intellectuals partially accept dialectical materialism and the dogmas of the Communist Parties. True, there are good reasons for believing that the final result of this education is rather skepticism than faith. I agree that the loyalty alternately granted to and withheld from these doctrines by the writers and men of learning of free Europe is due more to the unhappy state of the western conscience than to reasoning about the concepts of class or dialectics. Nevertheless the fact remains that the putting of feelings into rational or pseudorational form is of great importance to men of thought,

and that it is neither wise nor convincing to answer ideologies with a contemptuous: 'It's just silly.'

"After all, the way of thinking symbolised by logical positivism is just as provincial, perhaps more provincial, than that of St. Germain des Prés and the French intelligentsia of the Left.

"Whether one likes or dislikes it, welcomes or deplures it, the fact remains that the 'clerks' of Paris still play a role in the world and radiate an influence out of proportion to the place that France occupies on the map. The resonance of the voice of France in spite of her weakened position is to be explained by cultural and historical peculiarities.

"Britain created parliamentary institutions which were imitated in vain elsewhere; the French translated these institutions into ideas which were brilliant, eternal—and equivocal. The British peacefully created the Welfare State; the French also produced a system of social legislation, comparable in many respects with that on the other side of the Channel. But, over and above that, the French invoke 'the classless society,' 'the recognition of man by man,' and 'the authentic intersubjectivity.' These terms are neither so eloquent nor so clear as liberty, equality, and fraternity, but nonetheless they illustrate one of the historic functions of the French intelligence: that of associating itself with humanity's dreams and emotions and transforming for better and for worse the prosaic achievements of society into Promethean tasks, glorious defeats, tragic epics.

"The French intelligentsia is torn between the aspiration to universality and the special circumstances of the national situation; between attachment to democratic ideas and a taste for aristocratic values; between love of liberty and revolt against the power and the technical civilisation of the United States; between moral inspiration and the acceptance of cynicism, the alleged condition of effectiveness. Because of these conflicts the French intelligentsia represents more than itself. College graduates from under-developed countries, Japanese writers, Western intellectuals, are also in varying degrees aware of these divergent pulls, but the French feel them more acutely, and elaborate them in more subtle terms. Indeed, how many readers who loftily dismiss these

speculations will thereby simply be making the mistake of not recognising themselves in an enlarging mirror? *De te res agitur.*

“Whatever may be the importance of Marxism in its ideological form, what we are dealing with in this book is less historical materialism than historical optimism and rationalism. There may be countries in which there is no awareness of the myth of the revolution and salvation by violence, or of the myth of the proletariat as the chosen class; but nowhere in our time is there lack of awareness of the myth of the Left and of the cult of history. In India I had the experience of lecturing on the fallacies of the opposition between Right and Left; my audience, which consisted entirely of intellectuals, was as upset and indignant as my French, British, or American critics. Not that I deny the extent of the opposition between those who sit on one side or the other of an assembly; I deny only that because of their ideas and opinions they can be divided into two camps, one the incarnation of good and the other of evil, one belonging to the future and the other to the past, one standing for reason and the other for superstition. Anyone who maintains the equal validity of both camps and the heterogeneous nature of both is immediately denounced. Both American liberals and the Left in France and Britain share the same illusion: the illusion of the orientation of history in a constant direction, of evolution toward a state of affairs in harmony with an ideal. Marxism is only one version, a simultaneously cataclysmic and determinist version, of an optimism to which rationalists are professionally inclined; it is favoured by the contrast between the promises of industrial civilisation and the catastrophes of our time.

“The idolisation of history of which Marxism represents the extreme form teaches violence and fanaticism. History, correctly interpreted, teaches tolerance and wisdom. I am not convinced that there is no need for these lessons outside France.”

The book appeared in France on the eve of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, therefore before the denunciation of Stalin by the present Secretary General, before the revolts in Poland and in Hungary. Today Stalin no longer

lies in the Mausoleum in Red Square. Living, he was deified. Dead, he has been dispossessed of his ill-gotten prestige and driven out of the Paradise where the heroes of the Revolution live. Is there still need to denounce the opium of the intellectuals?

It is not the author's place to answer that question. The author can only indicate the meaning which he gives today to analyses and polemics, some of which were inspired by the circumstances of yesterday.

Since 1953 what has been the major change in the ideological situation, in France and throughout the world? A Communist would reply: the denunciation of the cult of personality. A non-Communist would express the same thing in different words: for example, he would say that Khrushchev himself has authenticated the accusations of the West against Stalin's regime. One who spoke in 1952 as Khrushchev speaks in 1961 was called a perverted viper. It has now been established, as an historical fact, that Stalin executed thousands, hundreds of thousands of Communists, innocent of crimes as the unhappy victims were, by means of terror and forced confessions. Further, Khrushchev himself, to justify his passivity or his silence at the time of the cult of personality, has invoked a motive that Montesquieu would certainly not have disavowed: fear. As if to illustrate the theory of despotism developed in *L'Esprit des Lois*, the closest companions of the dead tyrant have stated that they were paralyzed by fear, each one isolated from the others by suspicion, all of them incapable of breaking through the web of lies in which they were imprisoned.

With Stalinism, a certain form of secular religion has disappeared. This disappearance does not surprise me; I foresaw it in 1954, for which I claim no great credit. The transfer of the sacred mission from class to party, from party to Central Committee, from Central Committee to Secretary General ended in the transfiguration of a man. That this man was, by accident, almost mad in the clinical sense, put a touch of macabre irony on this shift from a vision of history commanded by impersonal forces to the exaltation of a hero, the incarnation of the proletariat as saviour. But had the Secretary General been an ordinary man or even a man of

good will, nothing would have been changed in the long run. The Leninist version of Marxism requires that the party assume the mission originally given to the proletariat. Once the party is invested with this mission, the vacillation between personalization and depersonalization becomes inevitable: either the Supreme Leader succeeds, by persuasion or terror, in substituting himself for the collective Messiah and in receiving the homage destined for the latter; or else, on the contrary, the new chief, denouncing his predecessor, dissimulates his own power and tries to fade into the background of the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the whole party. The second of these alternatives corresponds to the present phase.

If my quarrel were with the Stalinists, and with them alone, the case would be clear: against what he calls the cult of the personality Mr. Khrushchev is a more persuasive prosecutor than I. But, in reality, the state of mind which I seek to understand is not that of the pure Stalinists or the true believers, of those who, once for all, having given their faith and their life to a cause, wish to ignore what their chiefs decide to hide from them, contenting themselves after the event with the explanations offered them. The faith of the dedicated revolutionary is for all time: it does not call for explanations.

It is entirely another question with the half-commitment, only hinted at but allegedly reasoned, of the progressive, who was not entirely ignorant of the horrors of Stalinism, who is no longer unwilling to recognize them, but who remains nevertheless irreducibly hostile to the West, in sympathy, in spite of all, with the Communist undertaking. J. P. Sartre has condemned the intervention in Hungary, but he continues to see no other road to salvation but that of Socialism: this monster all spattered with blood is none the less Socialism.

Such is the question which I put to myself earlier, and which continues to present itself today in spite of the ideological vicissitudes and the peripatetics of world politics: why this everlasting injustice? Why this preference, in a way a priori, for one side? Why this fear, in France, of not being

on the left, in the United States, of not being a liberal? These questions are to my mind the same, shaped by the French context, but of deep significance for all countries, once one refuses to be misled by the vocabulary used.

But, one may ask, didn't Stalin carry off with him in death not only Stalinism, but also the age of ideology? That which characterizes the present period is no longer an excess of faith, but of skepticism. In a sense, the systems of ideas and beliefs which separated the camps and spiritual families are in the process of disintegration. The affluent society banks the fires of indignation. Imperfect and unjust as Western society is in many respects, it has progressed sufficiently in the course of the last half-century so that reforms appear more promising than violence and unpredictable disorder. The condition of the masses is improving. The standard of living depends on productivity—therefore, the rational organization of labor, of technical skills, and of investments. Finally, the economic system of the West no longer corresponds to any one of the pure doctrines; it is neither liberal nor planned, it is neither individualist nor collectivist. How could the ideologies resist these changes, if one understands by ideology the synthesis of an interpretation of history and of a program of action toward a future predicted or hoped for?

I have evoked, in effect, the end of the age of ideology, a theme taken up by E. Shils, Daniel Bell, S. M. Lipset and other American sociologists. But if I detest ideological fanaticism, I like little better the indifference which sometimes succeeds it. Those who have dreamed of a radical revolution find it hard to accustom themselves to the loss of their hope. They refuse to distinguish among regimes from the moment none of them is transfigured by the hope of a radiant future. Therefore, skepticism is perhaps for the addict an indispensable phase of withdrawal; it is not, however, the cure. The addict is cured only on the day when he is capable of faith without illusion.

“The man who no longer expects miraculous changes either from a revolution or an economic plan is not obliged to resign himself to the unjustifiable.”

Let the reader make no mistake. Ten years ago, I thought it necessary to fight ideological fanaticism. Tomorrow it will perhaps be indifference which seems to me to be feared. The fanatic, animated by hate, seems to me terrifying. A self-satisfied mankind fills me with horror.

PART ONE
POLITICAL MYTHS



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CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF THE LEFT

DOES the antithesis of Right and Left still have any meaning? The man who asks this question is immediately suspect. "When I am asked", Alain once wrote, "if the cleavage between right-wing and left-wing parties, between men of the Right and men of the Left, still has a meaning, the first idea that comes to me is that the questioner is certainly not a man of the Left." This verdict need not inhibit us, for it betrays an attachment to a prejudice rather than a conviction founded on reason.

The Left, according to Littré, is "the opposition party in French parliaments, the party which sits on the left of the President". But the word Left has quite a different connotation from the word opposition. Parties alternate in power; the left-wing party stays left-wing, even if it forms the government.

In stressing the significance of the two terms, Right and Left, people do not restrict themselves to the mere statement that the machinery of political forces tends to divide itself into two blocs separated by a centre which is continually being encroached upon. Rather do they infer the existence of two types of men whose attitudes are fundamentally opposed, or two sets of conceptions between which the interminable and unchanging dialogue continues through every vicissitude of institution or terminology, or else two camps engaged in a never-ending struggle. Do these two kinds of men, of ideas, of parties, exist elsewhere than in the imagination of historians deluded by the example of the Dreyfus affair and by a questionable interpretation of electoral sociology?

The different groups which consider themselves left-wing

have never in any profound sense been united. From one generation to the next the slogans and programmes change. Has the Left of yesterday, which fought for constitutional government, anything in common with the Left which today asserts its authority in the 'People's Democracies'?

The Retrospective Myth

France is generally considered to be the ancestral home of the antagonism between Right and Left. Whereas these terms scarcely figured at all in the political language of England before the 'thirties, in France they were naturalised long ago. The Left has such prestige in France that even the conservative and middle-of-the-road parties are at pains to disguise themselves with pseudonyms borrowed from the vocabulary of their enemies. French parties vie with one another in 'republican', 'democratic' and 'socialist' convictions.

Two circumstances, according to the current view, make this antagonism between Right and Left exceptionally grave in France. The first is the religious question. The conception of the world to which the rulers of the *Ancien Régime* adhered was inspired by the teachings of the Catholic Church. The new outlook which paved the way for the Revolution focused its attack on the principle of absolute authority, including in its condemnation the Church as well as the Monarchy. The party of progress, at the end of the eighteenth century and during the best part of the nineteenth, fought against both throne and altar, inclining to anticlericalism because the ecclesiastical hierarchy favoured, or seemed to favour, the party of reaction. In England, where religious freedom was both the occasion and the apparent reward of the Revolution of 1688, the progressive parties bore the stamp of Nonconformist religious fervour rather than of atheistic rationalism.

The transition from the *Ancien Régime* to modern society was accomplished with unprecedented brutality and suddenness in France. On the other side of the Channel, constitutional government was introduced by stages, representative institutions being developed from the English Parliament whose origins could be traced back to mediaeval custom. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demo-

cratic legitimacy took the place of monarchical legitimacy without completely eliminating the latter, and the equality of the citizen before the law eventually blunted the distinctions between the Estates: the ideas which the French Revolution flung tempestuously across Europe—the sovereignty of the people, constitutional government, elected and sovereign assemblies, equality of rights—were realised in England, sometimes even sooner than in France, without any need for the people to rise, with a Promethean gesture, and shake off their chains. The process of 'democratisation' in England was the joint achievement of rival parties.

Whether one regards it as grandiose or horrific, as a catastrophe or an epic, the Revolution cuts French history in two. It seems to raise up two Frances, one against the other, the first of which refuses to resign itself to oblivion while the other carries on a relentless crusade against the past. Each of them regards itself as the embodiment of a perennial human type. The one invokes family, authority, religion, the other equality, reason, liberty; on the one side we have respect for order slowly evolving through the centuries; on the other a passionate belief in man's capacity to reconstruct society according to the data of science: the Right, the party of tradition and of privilege, versus the Left, the party of progress and intellect.

This classic interpretation is not a false one, but it represents exactly half the truth. At every level, the two types of men exist (though not all Frenchmen can be fitted into either category): M. Homais versus M. le Curé, Alain and Jaurès versus Taine and Maurras, Clemenceau versus Foch. In certain circumstances, when the conflict assumes a mainly ideological character—over the education laws, for example, or the Dreyfus affair, or the separation of Church and State—the disparate elements tend to form themselves into two blocs each basing itself on a single orthodoxy. But it has rarely been pointed out that this apparent homogeneity is essentially retrospective and that it does no more than camouflage the inexpiable quarrels and divisions within the alleged blocs. The history of France since 1789 is characterised by the consistent inability of right-wing or left-wing coalitions to stick together and govern. The myth of a single unified Left is an imaginary

compensation for the successive revolutionary failures from 1789 to 1848.

Until the consolidation of the Third Republic—apart from the few months between the February Revolution and the street fighting of June 1848—the Left in France in the nineteenth century was in permanent opposition (whence the confusion between Left and Opposition). The Left opposed the Restoration, because it considered itself the heir of the Revolution, which was the source and justification of all its historic claims, its dreams of past glory and its hopes for the future. But this nostalgic, backward-moving Left was actually as complex and equivocal as the tremendous events from which it claimed descent. Its unity was purely mythical. It had never been united between 1789 and 1815 and it was no more so in 1848 when the Republic seized the opportunity of filling the constitutional void left by the collapse of the Orleanist monarchy. The Right, of course, was no more united than the Left. In 1815 the monarchist party was divided between the Ultras, who dreamed of a return to the *Ancien Régime*, and the Moderates, who were prepared to accept things as they were. The arrival of Louis-Philippe flung the Legitimists into discontented isolation, and even the triumph of Louis-Napoleon failed to bring about a reconciliation between Orleanists and Legitimists in spite of their common hostility to the usurper.

The civil discords of the nineteenth century followed the same pattern as the dramatic events of the revolutionary period. The failure of the constitutional monarchy led to a semi-parliamentary monarchy, the failure of this led to a republic which eventually gave way to a plebiscitary empire. In the same way, Constituants, Feuillants, Girondins and Jacobins had fought each other relentlessly only to give way in the end to a crowned military dictator. These various left-wing groups were not only rivals for the possession of power, they were agreed neither on the form to be given to the government of France, nor on the means to be employed to this end, nor on the extent of the reforms to be introduced. The Monarchists, who wanted to give France a constitution similar to that of England, were in agreement with the egalitarian

republicans only in the degree of their hostility to the *Ancien Régime*.

It is not my intention here to examine the reasons why the Revolution took such a fatal course. Guglielmo Ferrero, in his later years, was fond of pointing out the distinction between the two revolutions—the constructive revolution which aimed at extending the franchise and establishing certain liberties, and the destructive revolution brought about by the collapse of one principle of legitimacy and the absence of a new legitimacy to replace it. The distinction is satisfying to the mind. The constructive revolution corresponds more or less with the changes which we can regard with favour: representative government, social equality, personal and intellectual liberties; while the destructive revolution can be blamed for all the evil consequences: terror, wars, dictatorship and tyranny. One might well imagine the monarchy itself gradually introducing the essentials of what appears to us, looking back, to have been the Revolution's achievement. But the ideas which inspired the Revolution, without being strictly incompatible with monarchy, shook to its foundations the system of thought on which the French monarchy was based, thus instigating the crisis of legitimacy which brought about the Terror. The fact is, at all events, that the *Ancien Régime* collapsed at one blow, almost without resistance, and that it took France nearly a century to find another régime acceptable to the majority of the nation.

The social consequences of the Revolution seem obvious and irrevocable from the beginning of the nineteenth century. There could be no question of restoring old privileges, or of going back on the new civil code and the equality of the individual before the law. But the choice between republic and monarchy was still in abeyance. Democratic aspirations were by no means exclusively tied to parliamentary institutions; the Bonapartists suppressed political liberties in the name of democratic ideas. No serious French writer of the time recognised a single Left with a united will, representing all the heirs of the Revolution in opposition to the defenders of the *Ancien Régime*. The party of progress is an oppositionist myth, which did not even correspond to any electoral reality.

When the Republic was assured of survival, Clemenceau, against all the historical evidence, decreed that "the Revolution is a bloc". This proposition marked the end of the former quarrels between the various groups of the Left. Democracy was reconciled with parliamentarianism, the principle was finally established that all authority derives from the people, and, this time, universal suffrage encouraged the safeguarding of liberties and not the accession of a tyrant. Liberals and egalitarians, moderates and extremists, no longer had any motive for exterminating one another; the aims which the various parties had assigned themselves were all, at last, simultaneously achieved. The Third Republic, a régime at once constitutional and popular, which guaranteed the legal equality of its citizens by universal suffrage, gave itself a glorious and fictitious ancestor, the 'bloc' of the Revolution.

But at the very moment when the consolidation of the Third Republic was putting an end to the internal quarrels of the bourgeois Left, a new schism, which had been latent ever since the Babœuf conspiracy and perhaps since the beginnings of democratic thought, suddenly came to light. The anti-capitalist Left took over from the anti-monarchist Left. Can it be said that this new Left, which demanded public ownership of the means of production and State control of economic activity, was inspired by the same philosophy, or was even aiming at the same objectives, as the old Left which had risen up against absolutism, the privileged orders and the corporate guilds?

Marxism provided the formula which both ensured the continuity and marked the break between the old Left and the new. The Fourth Estate succeeded the Third, the proletariat took over from the bourgeoisie. The latter had thrown off the chains of feudalism, freed the people from the bonds of enforced allegiances, communal, personal or religious. The individual, freed from his former shackles and deprived at the same time of his traditional security, found himself the defenceless victim of the blind mechanism of the market and the whims of the all-powerful capitalists. It was for the new Left, the proletariat, to complete the process of liberation, to restore a human order in the place of *laissez-faire* economy.

The emphasis on the liberal or on the authoritarian aspects

of socialism varied according to different countries, different schools and different circumstances. Some insisted on a total break with the bourgeoisie, others stressed the need for continuity with the Great Revolution. The Social Democrats in pre-1914 Germany displayed a marked indifference towards the strictly political values of democracy and did not disguise their somewhat contemptuous disapproval of the attitude adopted by the French Socialists, who were firm defenders of universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy.

The conflict between bourgeois democracy and socialism in France presents the same antithesis as the former conflicts between the various groups of the bourgeois Left: the more violent it is in reality, the more vehemently it is denied. Up to a fairly recent date, probably up to the Second World War, left-wing intellectuals rarely interpreted Marxism literally to the extent of admitting a radical division between the proletariat on the one hand and all past holders of power, bourgeois democrats included, on the other. The philosophy to which they were naturally inclined to subscribe was that of Jaurès, which combined Marxist elements with an idealistic metaphysic and a preference for reform. The Communist Party made more headway in its Popular Front or Resistance phases than when the class war was in the ascendant. Many Communist voters still persist in regarding the Party as the heir of the Enlightenment—the party which is pursuing the same task as the other left-wing groups, only with more success.

The social history of no other European country is scarred by such tragic episodes as those of June 1848 or the Commune. In 1924 and 1936 Socialists and Radicals triumphed together at the elections, but were incapable of governing together. From the day when the Socialists first joined a governmental coalition, the Communists became the principal working-class party. The periods of left-wing unity such as the alliance of anti-clericals and Socialists at the time of the Dreyfus affair and the fight for the separation of Church and State—crises which decisively influenced the thought of Alain—are less typical than the split between the bourgeoisie and the working class revealed by the outbreaks of 1848, 1871, 1936 and 1945. The 'unity of the Left' is less a reflection than a distortion of the reality of French politics.

Because it was incapable of attaining its objectives without twenty-five years of chaos and bloodshed, the party of progress conceived, after the event, a new and over-simplified dichotomy—between good and evil, the future and the past. Because it failed to integrate the working class with the rest of the nation, the bourgeois intelligentsia dreamed of a Left which would include the representatives both of the Third and of the Fourth Estates. This Left was not entirely mythical. Sometimes it presented a united front to the electorate. But just as the revolutionaries of 1789 became united only retrospectively, when the Restoration had thrown Girondins, Jacobins and Bonapartists together into opposition, so the Radicals and the Socialists were genuinely agreed only in their hatred of a vague, impersonal enemy—‘reaction’—and in out-of-date battles against clericalism.

Dissociation of Values

Today, especially since the crisis of the 'thirties, the predominant idea of the Left, the idea which African and Asian students take back home with them from the universities of Europe and the United States, is a kind of watered-down Marxism. Its ideology combines, in a muddled synthesis, public ownership of the means of production, hostility towards the concentrations of economic power known as 'trusts', and a profound suspicion of the mechanism of the market. The watchword 'Keep Left' means progress, via nationalisation and controls, towards eventual equality of incomes.

In Great Britain this slogan has acquired a certain popularity over the past twenty years or so. Perhaps Marxism, which crystallised some of the aims of anti-capitalism, helped to foster the historic vision of a Left which would embody the cause of the future and eventually take over from capitalism. Perhaps Labour's victory in 1945 was an expression of the cumulative resentment of a fraction of the underprivileged against the ruling class. The coincidence between the wish for social reform and revolt against a ruling minority creates the situation where the myth of the Left is born and prospers.

On the Continent, the decisive ideological event of the century has been the double schism, splitting the Right as

well as the Left, produced by Fascism or National Socialism on the one hand and Communism on the other. In the rest of the world, the decisive event has been the dissociation between the political and the social values of the Left. The appearance of ideological chaos arises from the clash and the confusion between a strictly European schism and the dissociation of European values in societies outside the Western sphere of civilisation.

It is always dangerous to apply terms borrowed from the political vocabulary of the West to the internal conflicts of nations belonging to other spheres of civilisation, even and perhaps especially when the political parties concerned are at pains to identify themselves with Western ideologies. Removed from their original settings ideologies are liable to develop in a manner diametrically opposed to their original aims and meanings. The same parliamentary institutions can exercise either a progressive or a conservative function according to the social class which introduces and directs them.

When a group of well-meaning officers with a lower middle-class background dissolves a parliament manipulated by Pashas and speeds up the development of national resources, where is the Left and where the Right? Officers who suspend constitutional liberties (in other words, the dictatorship of the sword) cannot in any circumstances be described as left-wing. But the plutocrats who made use of democratic institutions to maintain their privileges are no more worthy of that noble epithet.

In the countries of South America and Eastern Europe, the same combination of authoritarian means and socially progressive ends has often shown itself. In imitation of Europe, parliaments have been created and the vote has been introduced, but the masses have remained illiterate and the middle classes weak: the new liberal institutions have inevitably been monopolised by the 'feudalists' or the 'plutocrats'—the big landowners and their allies in the State machine. Should the dictatorship of Peron, supported by the *descamisados* and despised by the upper classes, attached both to their privileges and to the parliament they created and controlled, have been regarded as right-wing or left-wing? The political values and the social and economic values of the Left, which are on the

way to being finally reconciled in Europe, are still radically dissociated elsewhere.

Moreover, this dissociation is far from having been ignored by political theorists. The Greek philosophers have described the two typical situations in which authoritarian movements are liable to arise, neither of which can be attributed either to the aristocratic Right or the liberal Left: the 'old tyranny', more often military, arises from the transition between patriarchal societies and urban and craft societies, the 'modern tyranny', usually civilian, from the struggle of factions inside a democracy. The 'old tyranny' is dependent on a fraction at least of the up-and-coming classes, the merchants and shopkeepers, and brushes aside the institutions controlled to their own advantage by the old aristocratic families. The 'modern tyranny', in the cities of antiquity, brought together, in a somewhat unstable coalition, the rich 'alarmed by the threat of spoliatory laws' and the poorest of the citizens whom the new middle-class régime left unprovided, a prey to the usurers. In the industrial societies of the twentieth century a similar coalition can bring together the big capitalists, terrified by socialist encroachments, the intermediary groups who feel themselves to be the victims both of the plutocrats and of the working classes protected by trade unions, the poorest elements among the workers themselves (agricultural workers or unemployed) and also the nationalists and activists of all social classes who are exasperated by the slowness of parliamentary action.

During the last century the history of France offered examples of similar dissociations. Napoleon codified the social reforms of the Revolution, but at the same time he replaced a weak and fairly tolerant monarchy with a personal dictatorship, as effective as it was despotic. Social reform and authoritarian government were no more incompatible in the bourgeois era than are Five Year Plans and tyranny in the socialist century.

It was necessary for the Left, in order to retain the ideological purity of the old struggles, to interpret the 'Fascist revolutions' as extreme forms of reaction. Against all the evidence, it was generally denied that the brown- or black-shirted demagogues were the mortal enemies not only of social

democracy but also of the liberal bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. The right-wing revolutions, it was obstinately maintained, kept the capitalists in power and restricted themselves to substituting the despotism of the Police State for the more subtle methods of parliamentary democracy. Whatever the role played by big business in the advent of the various Fascist movements, it is surely a falsification of the historical significance of the 'national revolutions' to dismiss them as up-to-date but not particularly original forms of reaction or as the State superstructure of monopoly capitalism.

Certainly, if we take Bolshevism at one extreme and Spanish Fascism at the other, there can be no hesitation about calling the first left-wing and the second right-wing. Bolshevism took the place of a traditional absolutism, liquidated the old ruling class and everywhere introduced collective ownership of the means of production; it was brought to power by workers, peasants and soldiers, hungry for bread and for peace and for the possession of the soil. Fascism in Spain replaced a parliamentary régime, was financed and wholeheartedly supported by the privileged classes (the big landowners, the industrialists, the Church, the Army) and won its victory on the battlefields of the Civil War with the help of colonial troops, Carlists and German and Italian intervention. Bolshevism invoked all the ideology of the Left: rationalism, progress, liberty. Franco invoked the counter-revolutionary ideology: family, religion, authority.

The antithesis is far from being as clearly defined as this in every case. National Socialism in Germany mobilised millions who were no less miserable than those who followed the call of the Socialist and Communist parties. Hitler, it is true, was financed by the bankers and industrialists, and many of the generals saw in him the only man capable of restoring Germany to her former greatness, but millions of Germans believed in the Führer because they no longer believed in elections or parties or in parliament. In a mature capitalist State, the violence of the economic blizzard combined with the moral consequences of military defeat to create a situation more or less analogous to that of primitive industrialisation: the contrast between the apparent impotence of parliament and economic stagnation; the ripeness for revolt

of debt-ridden peasants and unemployed workers; the existence of millions of out-of-work intellectuals who hated liberals and plutocrats and social democrats, all in their eyes profiteers of the status quo.

The appeal of totalitarian parties asserts itself, or tends to, whenever a crisis comes to reveal a disparity between the capabilities of constitutional régimes and the problems they have to face in governing industrial mass societies. The temptation to sacrifice political liberties for the sake of vigorous action by no means disappeared with Hitler and Mussolini.

National Socialism became less and less conservative as its reign advanced. Army chiefs, the descendants of the great families, were strung up side by side with Social Democratic leaders. Step by step, the economy was taken over by the State and the Party strove to remodel Germany—and, if it could, the whole of Europe—in conformity with its own ideology. In its identification of the Party with the State, in its *Gleichschaltung* of independent bodies, in its transformation of a minority doctrine into a national orthodoxy, in the violence of its methods and the unlimited power of the police, the Hitlerite régime surely has more in common with Bolshevik Russia than with the daydreams of the counter-revolutionaries. Right and Left, or Fascist pseudo-Right and Communist pseudo-Left, can be said to meet one another in totalitarianism.

It could, of course, be argued that Hitlerite totalitarianism is right-wing and Stalinist totalitarianism left-wing, on the grounds that the former derived its ideas from counter-revolutionary romanticism and the latter from revolutionary rationalism, that the one is essentially particularist—national or racial—and the other universal. And yet, thirty-five years after the Revolution, the allegedly left-wing totalitarianism extols Greater Russian nationalism, denounces cosmopolitanism, and retains in all its severity the absolutism of the Police State—in other words, it continues to deny the liberal and personal values which the movement of the Enlightenment sought to uphold against arbitrary power and religious obscurantism.

More valid, at first glance, is the argument according to which State orthodoxy and terror can be excused as the in-