

The Totalitarian Temptation

by Jean-François Revel

(Translated by David Hapgood. Doubleday; 311 pp.; \$8.95)

Paul E. Sigmund

Jean-François Revel's *The Totalitarian Temptation* is a well-timed attack on the penchant of the European Left to criticize the shortcomings of the West—especially the United States—while defending or ignoring the much more serious evils of Marxist dictatorial regimes. It is well timed because there is a possibility that the Communist party may participate in coalition governments in France and Italy before very long (as they did, it is often forgotten, for several years after World War II). Yet the argument of the book is really a mirror image of the kind of doublethink that it criticizes.

Revel says he is a Socialist and briefly argues for social democracy as both inevitable and just. However, his book is much more concerned with attacking communism than with defending socialism. He praises the productivity of capitalism and observes that in combination with pluralist democracy it has produced a striking improvement in the standard of living of the worker. He sees the European experiments in "co-determination" and industrial democracy as the next step toward social democracy, but he is hostile to the worker self-management system of Yugoslavia—presumably because it has been introduced by a Communist regime. Most of the book is devoted to attacking the inevitably monolithic, totalitarian, and dictatorial tendencies inherent in all Communist regimes—and in Marxism itself. Capitalism can evolve toward socialism because it is compatible with democracy, but communism must be "Stalinist," opposed to the workers, as well as economically inefficient.

There is much to be said for this argument, and if Revel had spent some time on the analysis of Marx (and Lenin) and the experience of Marxists in power he could have reviewed the evidence in its favor. Unfortunately, he uses as his principal evidence three cases—Portugal, Peru, and Chile—in which the role of the Communist party was not central, and he portrays them in a man-

ner that is as one-sided as are the European intellectuals whom he is attacking. I am not qualified to discuss his version of the politics of Portugal after the overthrow of the dictatorship, but I do know the two other examples he cites—Peru and Chile—and in these cases his version misrepresents both the facts and the conclusions one is justified in drawing from them.

To begin with the simpler example, since 1968 Peru has been ruled by the Armed Forces. From 1968 to 1975 the head of the Peruvian junta, General Juan Velasco, was advised by a group of civilian and military reformers of varied political orientations, including nationalists, Catholics, Trotskyites, and Marxists. He embarked on a program of agrarian reform, nationalization of American mining and petroleum companies, worker participation, and in a few cases worker ownership of industry. All this transformed the structure of the Peruvian economy. Velasco ran into trouble in the mid-1970's, principally because of the decline in Peruvian export receipts and because of health problems that led to an institutional decision by the other generals to remove him. Policy since then has been more favorable to foreign—especially American—investment, and the general who succeeded him, Francisco Morales Bermudez, has announced elections for a new constitutional assembly for next year. In Revel's version, however, the Peruvian regime was following a "Yugoslav theoretician's" model for "total nationalization of the economy," has "banned foreign investment," and (after Velasco's overthrow) has become "increasingly dictatorial." Why is he so critical and inaccurate? The answer would seem to be that the Peruvian regime is one of the few military regimes that is supported by the Communist party—so nothing good can be said about it.

The same pattern is evident in Revel's treatment of Chile. Revel is correct in attacking the mythology of the Left that Allende was nothing more than an inno-

cent social democrat overthrown by the CIA and Fascist thugs for trying to bring social justice to Chile, but he refuses to give any importance whatever to the subversive activities of the CIA and the Chilean Right, attributing the 1973 coup exclusively to Allende's domestic economic and political errors. Worse, he uses evidence against Allende that is simply false. Thus he states that the Christian Democrats "supported Allende for two years after his election," when in fact they never gave him full support. By the beginning of his second year in office they were working with the Right in systematic opposition to him in the Chilean Congress. Revel states that the military did not "begin to think of taking illegal action until the spring of 1973," when we know that there were right-wing plots against Allende among the military from the time of his election in September, 1970. Those who carried out the coup have admitted that their planning for it began in July, 1972 (see *Ercilla*, No. 2197, September 7-13, 1977). Revel also claims that Allende's Popular Unity received a 43 per cent vote in the 1973 congressional elections by the use of electoral fraud. In fact the real fraud was the publication by right-wing academics of a misleading and inaccurate analysis of the election figures to prove that the government had stuffed the ballot boxes—thus making a coup almost inevitable by casting doubt on the use of elections or referendums as ways to resolve the constitutional deadlock between Allende and the opposition in Congress. (See the full analysis in my book, *The Overthrow of Allende and the Politics of Chile, 1964-1976*, 1977.)

Allende was overthrown for a variety of reasons. Some of them, such as his economic mismanagement and toleration of arms stockpiling and illegalities by some of his supporters, are cited by Revel. But other important contributing factors, including the destabilization program of the CIA and subversion by the civilian and military Right, are discounted or ignored in this book. Allende himself was not a Communist but a Marxist Socialist. At the outset of his regime he announced his commitment to "a second model" that, he said, was "anticipated by the classics of Marxism" and that would use democratic institutions to carry out a peaceful transition to socialism. Except for a state-

ment by the French writer Régis Debray in an interview with Allende in 1971 concerning the "tactical" nature of Allende's observance of legality, there is no evidence that he ever abandoned that democratic commitment. Some of those in his heterogeneous Popular Unity coalition never believed in the *via pacifica*, but the Chilean Communist Party consistently supported it against the *violentistas* further left. The Left in Allende's Chile was thus much more complex and fluid than in Revel's oversimplified stereotype. More generally, it is at least an open question whether, as Revel

seems to believe, Communists (or, in Allende's case, Marxists) are always and everywhere inevitably driven to bureaucratic and dictatorial centralism by the "totalitarian temptation." Marx's own Social Democratic party evolved to full acceptance of parliamentary democracy, Dubček moved to establish a more libertarian form of communism in Czechoslovakia before the Russians intervened, and it is possible that over time we may observe a similar evolution by the Western European Communist parties as they succumb to another temptation, *la tentation démocratique*.

tifies to a growing recognition of the need to recover it.

Toward such a recovery Professor Catherine Albanese has made an ambitious effort, though with mixed results. Guided by the concepts of comparative religion and structural anthropology associated with Mircea Eliade and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Dr. Albanese has written a history of the "mythology" of the American Revolution, focusing on the years 1763-89. Selecting certain symbols, religious and political, that were widely used by the patriots during these years, Albanese attempts to reveal the unconscious processes she feels formed the psychic backdrop of the events of the revolution. Thus, for example, Albanese shows how the Liberty Trees, which served as meeting places in the early part of the revolution to air grievances and galvanize resistance, were religious symbols that expressed the divinity of Liberty in a way that allowed the ideal to be lent to the historicized and humanocentric project of the revolution. That the destruction of the Trees was considered nothing less than a sacrilege is clear from such events as the one in New York in 1770, when, after one of the Liberty Poles had been cut down by the British, "three people afterward encircled the stump and went through a series of declarations of their rights and their intentions to maintain them."

Similarly, Albanese shows how changes in the dominant image of God during the revolution both reflected and inspired a changing political environment. Thus, during the initial stages of the revolution, the patriots' image of God was modeled on Jehovah, God of Battles, who served to give the new "chosen people" hope and courage during the war. Later, as the revolution progressed, this image changed to a *deus otiosus* (lazy God), or God of Nature, who stood in the background while center stage was occupied by secular man. Such a change took place not just in the dominant image of God but in the way the patriots regarded themselves throughout the revolution: "the patriots began to discover in acting out their liturgies that they were their own men as well as sons of their fathers."

Albanese's aim in all this is to bypass the dualities of sacred and secular, religious and political, and penetrate to the underlying "structures of conscious-

Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution

by Catherine L. Albanese

(Temple University Press; 274 pp.; \$12.50)

Henry McDonald

For most people who have heard the term, "civil religion" refers to religious concerns present in politics. Beyond the vague definition, however, there is little or no agreement. In just what ways religion manifests itself in the political realm—whether implicitly (as in Marxist-Leninist states), explicitly (as in the tradition of divine kingship during the Middle Ages), or some combination of each (as in the U.S.)—and whether these phenomena can legitimately be termed "religions," are questions that have received almost as many answers as there are commentators.

Much of this disagreement stems from the term itself, which links two spheres generally regarded as irreconcilable in one two-word phrase: politics and religion. At a time when politics is equated with matters of economic necessity—or at least with affairs directly dependent on such necessity—and religion is seen as a private affair, superfluous to public concerns and largely "unnecessary," civil religion seems a contradiction in terms. It is important to note, however, that this contradiction exists owing only to the absence, in modern society, of a public arena in which people can voice their spiritual as well as material concerns.

Thus for the ancient Greeks and Romans the term civil religion would have been less a problem than an assumption; politics was considered to be precisely that realm "beyond necessity"—a public arena in which the power of words, not the violence of blind forces, constituted political action. Jimmy Carter, in modern times, expresses this notion of politics when he asserts that "the most significant action that can be taken is the evocation of a concept or idea by words." Such an assertion, however, is true only to the extent that people respect the primacy of language and place themselves under the common horizon of consciousness that language draws. Without such a common horizon, there can be neither agreement nor disagreement about values; spirituality is relegated to a private domain, and consciousness becomes isolated, either exploding itself beyond all boundaries or, what is the same thing, narrowing itself to invisibility. Language is drained of its force and politics becomes violence, soundless. The debate over civil religion, in this context, gives both discouragement and hope. While the uncertainty about what civil religion means points up the lack of that very public arena that the phrase refers to, the continuing discussion of the subject tes-