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# CHOOSING AN "ISM": TWO FLAWED VIEWS

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Like Hilaire Belloc in 1913, Jean-François Revel considers the options but gives up on the free society without careful investigation.

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by Eric Mack

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## **The Totalitarian Temptation**

By Jean-François Revel, translated by

David Hapgood

New York: Doubleday & Co. 1977. 311

pp. \$8.95.

New York: Penguin Books. 1978. 332 pp.

\$2.95 (paper).

## **The Servile State**

By Hilaire Belloc, with an introduction by Robert Nisbet

Indianapolis: Liberty Classics. 1977. 207

pp. \$8/\$2.

**C**APITALISM, SOCIALISM, communism, collectivism—what is it to be? What are the lamentable and laudable features of each? And why do societies end up with this or that alternative? Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in these questions—witness Jean-François Revel's widely read and translated *The Totalitarian Temptation*. And it is a resurgence of interest in a question with a history—witness Hilaire Belloc's 1912 volume *The Servile State*, now reprinted.

Revel's is a very valuable, though very mixed, work. While it is informative and often remarkably insightful about recent social and political movements and trends, it is also utterly confused on the level of political principles. Furthermore, the book never comes to grips with the central question that it raises: What would be the political and economic features of a free, pluralistic, socialist democracy?

That Revel holds to an uncommon and interesting position is suggested from the

start with his claim that "the two primary barriers that prevent the building of a socialist world [are] the state and communism." One is immediately reminded that today "socialism" is many things to many different people, and one hopes that by *socialism* Revel means something pretty attractive. Perhaps he does. But we will never know from anything he says in *The Totalitarian Temptation*.

That things are not going to go swimmingly is signaled by the fact that, after announcing his allegiance to socialism, Revel refuses to define the subject of his praise. In fact, ironically, in this refusal Revel follows his Stalinist opponents in insinuating that those who demand intellectual clarification simply reveal their ill-will. In the ugliest lines in the book, he says, "Socialism is like freedom: if we feel we still need to define them... it simply means we have no intention of putting them into effect. When sects or parties engage in such academic hairsplitting, they do so to mask, and to justify, their authoritarian intentions."

According to Revel, we cannot even find "evidence for socialism," since it has never existed. At least he reveals what would count as evidence for socialism—"any change, reform or revolution that results in making the economic system work a little more for the benefit of man, and a little less for the benefit of the system."

Associated with these less than illuminating remarks are a series of mutually contradictory statements about the ultimate value that political systems should serve. We are told that "freedom has value in itself" and that the goal of politics is "the greatest good for the greatest number" and that the goal is "the greatest possible equality among people." Merci-

fully, Revel quickly turns to more concrete matters.

Revel sees himself as a man of the left in virtue of his opposition to nationalism, reaction, and privileged hierarchical orders. But his most pressing concern is with the totalitarian temptation that stands before the nations of southern Europe and, in somewhat different forms, the nations of Latin America and Africa. This temptation is Stalinism, official or unofficial, in the form of rule by the leaders of the local Communist Party or by the head man in the local version of pidgin Marxism.

## **CORRUPTION OF THE LEFT**

In the case of southern Europe generally and France in particular, a more specific temptation is also at issue. This is the temptation felt by members and parties of the non-Communist left to fawn upon, serve, and surrender themselves to the Stalinist parties of their respective nations. (It is Revel's view that only the Communist Party of Italy has any claim to no longer being Stalinist.) *The Totalitarian Temptation* is addressed, therefore, primarily to the social democrats of France and the rest of southern Europe. And, as such, it is a vigorous attempt to document and undo the ideological, moral, and psychological subservience of these leftists to their Stalinist and neo-Stalinist comrades. Hence, the central sections of the book are, "Of Docility Toward Stalinism" and "The Suicide of the Socialists or the Indirect Justification of Totalitarian Solutions."

What is outstanding in these portions is Revel's vivid presentation, complete with many revolting illustrations, of the intellectual and spiritual corruption of much of the European left, who through willful



Jean-François Revel

# THE TOTALITARIAN TEMPTATION

## JEAN- FRANÇOIS REVEL

The controversial new book  
by the author of  
WITHOUT MARX OR JESUS



Hilaire Belloc

blindness and moral weakness often serve, cheer on, or at least tolerate totalitarian trends even when they themselves will be among the first victims. Revel displays the demeaning and self-destructive character of the social democrats' relationships with Communist parties—their almost infinite willingness to be bullied, insulted, and used rather than risk being denounced as anti-Communist.

On another level, Revel tries to point out that to be anticapitalist is one thing, while to be pro-Stalinist is another. One's proper anticapitalism should not inspire a disgust for the values that (somehow!) are historically intimately interwoven with capitalism—for example, freedom, pluralism, and tolerance.

Revel, then, has a large number of reasonable, myth-debunking things to say in his chapters on excesses in the critique of capitalism. Of course, we are no more told what capitalism is than we are told what true socialism would be. In addition, Revel makes insightful comments on many topics, including Marxist historical theory, the forms that inflation and unemployment take in socialized economies, the attack on the "money" (that is, private) press, capitalism's support of socialism, and the imperialist nature of nation-states. Informative accounts are given of events in Allende's Chile and of politics in postrevolutionary Portugal.

The bottom line for Revel is that Communist parties have no claim whatsoever on the allegiance or even sympathies of the liberal socialist. There is not even any coherent ideal of "free communism." For communism by definition denigrates the "merely formal" values and freedoms of bourgeois society. It proposes the politicization of all life and culture, and it is mo-

tivated ultimately by psychological rigidity and "a hatred on principle of industrial, commercial civilization." The dark secret of totalitarianism is the desire "to live under Stalinism, not despite what it is, but because of what it is."

So Revel calls for a radical reordering of the democratic socialist's worldview. Socialism should not understand itself as "a sort of watered-down Stalinism." Communism is no more a form of socialism than are the various forms of rightism. In the tradition of *classical liberalism*, a system of pluralism, progress, and individual freedom is to be upheld against both the right and all species of Stalinism. But, tragically, Revel seems to have no idea what the economics of such a system would look like.

### VAGUE ECONOMICS

In every section of his book, Revel objects to state economic planning and ownership. Such a system, for which Revel often uses the label "socialist," is described as inefficient, nationalistic, and dangerous to cultural and political diversity. He seems to understand the connection between controlled economics and controlled lives. Yet we are also told that *Revelian socialism* will involve "a globally managed economy, under a political order capable of that global management!"

Revel's most serious discussion of economic proposals occurs in connection with the idea of worker management—management that might evolve out of co-determination schemes for giving employees some voice in the decisions of the firms that employ them. Revel envisions such schemes leading to "virtually direct management of the economy by the unions."

But how is such management to be imagined? One possibility is that "each worker-managed enterprise is truly independent; that amounts to introducing competition and the free market in a socialist economy." For Revel this appears to be the only alternative to "bureaucratic centralism, with all the political consequences we know about, not to mention the economic consequences."

Unhappily, Revel seems to assume that a natural part of this owner-manager system would be all sorts of restrictions on workers' rights to transfer their respective shares of enterprises and all sorts of politically motivated and admittedly exploitive subsidies. So he concludes that instituting this socialist "free market" would yield "a mosaic of small independent units of production needing massive tariff protection" and calling forth "extreme economic nationalists." Thus, he appears ultimately to abandon the worker-owner system—to abandon the more free-market approach because it is too nationalistic!

Stripped, then, of nationalism, central planning, and decentralized worker control, what is left of Revel's socialism? Nothing, it seems, except welfare-state reformism. Part of Revel's problem is that he cannot imagine a society of distinct and competing interests, a pluralistic "free state" in which special interests do not effectively employ the legal institutions to "exercise tyranny . . . against all other citizens." Eventually, then, he retreats to the hope that these tyrannies will not be massive and that somehow a society can take "increased responsibility . . . for each of its members" while "widening the area in which the creativity of individuals, minorities, and subgroups can flourish without hindrance."

## BELLOC'S ALTERNATIVES

Besides his embrace of this bunk, Revel's central weakness is his inability to identify basic socioeconomic alternatives in terms of their underlying formative principles. In contrast, Hilaire Belloc's *Servile State* provides an elegant and precise—though seriously flawed—mapping of fundamental social alternatives. Furthermore, in this work originally published in 1912 and recently reprinted by *LibertyClassics*, Belloc offers the prophetic insight that socialist reformism building on a capitalist foundation will not produce a collectivist paradise. Rather, it will reintroduce the servile state,

### **For Belloc, the enforcement of a system of small property holdings is the only basis for both security and independence.**

“that arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of families and individuals are constrained by positive laws to labor for other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labor.”

What libertarians will find most attractive about Belloc's essay is his anticipation of the thesis that state-enacted “reform” will usually function to protect and solidify the positions of those most dominant at the time these reforms are enacted. Such reforms will convert current and uncertain economic advantages into more permanent legal privileges.

According to Belloc, there are four fundamentally distinct socioeconomic alternatives. One of these, capitalism, is essentially unstable. The other alternatives are the servile state, the distributive state, and the collectivist state.

In the servile state, private property exists but is concentrated in the hands of relatively few individuals. Only these few are economically and politically free, while the remainder of the populace is propertyless and economically unfree—that is, subject to compulsory labor. The servile state is the society of few masters and many slaves.

In contrast, in the distributive state, private property is very widely distributed and so is freedom from compulsory labor. This is the society of the hearty yeoman and the nonalienated artisan. Belloc believes that out of the servile state of ancient times grew, in a mere seven or eight centuries, the distributive state of the late Middle Ages. Allegedly the serfs of this period were essentially autonomous pea-

sants. Any remaining economic constraints functioned, along with the medieval guilds, to safeguard “the division of property, so that there should be...no proletariat upon the one side, and no monopolizing capitalist upon the other.” Restraints on economic liberty merely guaranteed “the small proprietor against the loss of his economic independence.”

## SECURE INDEPENDENCE

The distributive state is favored because, for Belloc, the existence and enforcement of a system of small property holdings is the only basis for both widespread security and general independence and self-respect among a people. The relationship between private property and freedom is rightly emphasized, but advocates of laissez-faire will be made uncomfortable by Belloc's claim that it is the distributive state with its limited constraints on economic exchange and aggrandizement that truly minimizes human servility. Belloc's position is that it is better to have these minimal customary restraints than to have the uncertain and precarious full economic freedom of laissez-faire or to have the rigid social order that the dislocated men produced by capitalism will embrace. We are told, of course, very little about the exact character of the distributive state—about how and by whom control of productive resources and enjoyment of income is to be regulated.

According to Belloc, the medieval distributive state in England was destroyed by the monarchical and aristocratic seizure of Church lands and the subsequent use by the aristocracy of their augmented power to deprive the peasantry of their land. This was the beginning of capitalism, which Belloc characterizes as the system in which private property is held by a relatively small number of people while the remainder are propertyless but economically free—not subject to compulsory labor. Clearly, Belloc is not a fan of capitalism so conceived and, while he

### **Revel seems to have no idea what the economics of a pluralist, individualist system would look like.**

pokes fun at Marxist determinism, he shares with Marx the vocabulary of surplus value and exploitation. The free propertyless laborer is both less autonomous and economically worse-off than his peasant-artisan ancestor.

From the capitalist stage, three transformations are possible. The first is a return to the distributive state. The second is a transition to true collectivism, in

which all productive property is controlled by “public officials” and no one is economically free. The third is a return to the servile state.

It is this third transition that Belloc prophesied. Under capitalism, the primary experience of the majority of people is of economic insecurity. These people are too far removed from the life of independent property holders to miss it or to feel capable of the self-reliance such a life demands. What they want is a guarantee of work at a passable wage. Politically, they are happy to sell themselves into slavery.

Why, though, is the collectivist state not a serious likelihood? Belloc's answer is simply that its establishment would require the violent displacement of the capitalist class and that this is neither possible nor considered acceptable among (British) socialist theorists. The timid socialist becomes the social reformer. But all reformist programs, in fact, reinforce the already dominant class. For instance, the program to transform private into socialized enterprises by buying out the original owners proceeds only by offering these owners a greater revenue flow than they would receive from retaining these enterprises. As a result, those who may be relieved of the need to purchase privately the products of those enterprises will end up paying even more in taxes to finance the socialization of those enterprises.

## CAPITALIST SLAVERY

Socialist-oriented reform in the context of a capitalist society means the return of the servile state with the capitalist as slavemaster. This line of development is furthered by the capitalist's ability to become the administrator of socialist-inspired reforms. When approached with a scheme that would confiscate his property and regulate his employees while providing them with some increased security, the capitalist can usually engineer the deletion of the first goal in return for which he will provide the control and security as an agent of the State. He is happy to say, “I will compel my employees...I will undertake the new role imposed on me by the state. Nay, I will go further, and I will say that such a novel arrangement will make my own profits perhaps larger and certainly more secure.”

Nevertheless, while agreeing with Belloc about the likelihood of co-option of interventionist reform and while allowing his use of *capitalism*, we must still seriously question his central prophecy. For when Belloc talks about the return of compulsory labor, he means it. He even thinks it very likely that the slave will not be “of capitalism in general but of, say, the Shell Oil Trust in particular.” When (Continued on p. 49.)

# THE DETECTIVE AS TRUTH-SEEKER

**A** GREAT MANY PEOPLE who have never read a detective story believe they know well enough what they are like. They are merely puzzles told in the form of a story; the reader's goal is simply to figure out "whodunit" before the sleuth does. The author helps him by planting "clues" along the reader's path, and the reader must find those clues.

But the clues are cunningly disguised and surrounded by red herrings that go off like harmless land mines under the reader's feet. For instance, someone is found stabbed to death and there is no weapon in sight, only a mysterious wet spot around the fatal wound (it is later revealed that he was stabbed with an icicle that subsequently melted). Or the sleuth finds the body of Sir Egbert Mollycoddle, beaten to death, but not a single clue... unless that leg of mutton on the floor is one (he later proves, with a few facts and a chain of syllogisms, that the mutton was frozen at the time of the murder and was in fact the blunt instrument that changed the shape of the late Egbert's head).

The criminals in such stories kill from motives that would never drive anyone we know to an act of violence: for instance, the desire to prove that one is more intelligent than the police (big deal). The author tells his story with a frivolous, Hitchcockian amusement, suggesting that his attitude is really the same as his imaginary killer's—murder, the ultimate act of cruelty, is treated as a pretext for a pointless display of cleverness.

## THE ART OF MURDER

Of course, this is not the sort of story Ross MacDonald writes. He is by all accounts the best living exponent of a tradition that rejected this sort of mystery writing about 60 years ago. That tradition, which is most often called "hard-boiled detective fiction," was developed by a group of American pulp magazine writers in the 1920s. Certainly the best of them was former Pinkerton detective Dashiell Hammett, whose first novel, *Red Harvest*, was published in 1929. With the appearance of this bloody yarn, as Raymond Chandler later said, "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley"; he "gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it for a reason, not just to provide a corpse."

This gritty and sometimes shocking realism was the most obvious innovation of Hammett and the other early hard-boiled writers. More important was the fact that they created an alternative to the bemused detachment that dominated

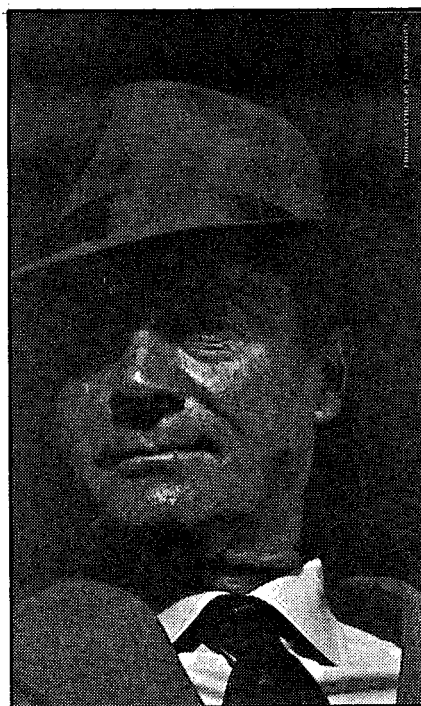
bitter and ironic, and not cute, as befits their subject matter. This new attitude, which is exactly what is "hard-boiled" about this kind of writing, makes it possible to acknowledge the real horror of human destructiveness while holding the distance needed to preserve one's sanity.

Hammett was the great pioneer. Raymond Chandler built on the foundations laid by Hammett's brisk, sophisticated melodramas in a series of novels beginning with *The Big Sleep* (1939), adding some things that were entirely his own—mainly, a vividly atmospheric style as richly orchestrated as a Puccini opera. Each of Chandler's stories is a journey to another time and place—usually in and around the Los Angeles of the '30s and '40s—and each time he convinces us that we know how it looks and smells.

Unlike Hammett (who only wrote five novels) and Chandler (who wrote a total of seven), Ross MacDonald has been consistently productive, writing a book about every year and a half for the past three decades. *The Blue Hammer*, his latest, shows that he is still going strong: it is one of his best. Yet although he is by far a more dependable producer, readers who love his two classic predecessors sometimes find MacDonald disappointing. Next to Hammett's exhilarating directness and moral simplicity, MacDonald's psychological studies—full of Freudian themes and hints of the complexity of moral truth—can seem pretentious. They don't have the sort of atmosphere that Chandler's stories have: the reader is only aware of time and place to the extent that the author explicitly tells him when and where the story is supposed to be taking place.

There really isn't much to distinguish his novels from one another, and it is hard to remember which is which after one has read several. One MacDonald reader told us that she finds herself beginning one only to realize she has read it before. They have an unusually large cast of characters (about 15 important ones in each), and the author makes no attempt to explore any one of them in depth. While we remember all five of the major characters in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* with a sort of reluctant affection, we generally don't remember MacDonald's characters as individuals at all.

We should think twice, though, before holding against him the near-interchangeability of his books. He is easily good enough that if he misses achieving a certain effect, he must not be aiming at it. To appreciate what he does achieve, we have to look where he is aiming.



**A Ross MacDonald novel is more than a thriller.**

by Lester H. Hunt  
and Deborah Katz Hunt

English crime writing at the time. Of course, the alternative could not mean avoiding detachment altogether: mysteries are written and read in larger quantities than other types of fiction, and no one who is not sadistic or masochistic could either read or write many tales of murder in a state of sensitive and passionate involvement.

What they created was a new and more honest kind of detachment: a distinctive bullet-biting toughness. Their humor was