

Democracy in Danger

"The Public Philosophy," by Walter Lippmann (Little, Brown. 189 p., \$3.50), is an analysis of the causes of the rapid decline of liberal democracy and the rise of totalitarianism in our time. Here it is reviewed by Frank Altschul, director of the Council on Foreign Relations.

by Frank Altschul

WHEN Walter Lippmann in his latest book, "The Public Philosophy," focuses his attention on some of the shortcomings of liberal democracy in adjusting itself to the manifold problems of the contemporary world, he is the lucid critic with whose incisive commentaries on the passing scene we are all so familiar. But when he enters the domain of philosophy, to say the very least, he is hard to follow. If at times he seems obscure, it would be unbecoming for a Yale man to suggest that this may be due to the two years he spent in the post-graduate study of philosophy at Harvard. More likely it is nothing more than another example of the occupational hazard to which philosophers are exposed.

"The Public Philosophy" is not a book destined to make a wide popular appeal. Yet for the limited audience to which it is addressed, there are nuggets of wisdom and of acute observation in its analysis of the reasons for "the alarming failure of the Western liberal democracies to cope with the realities of this century." In explanation of this "alarming failure," Mr. Lippmann advances the thesis that "there has developed . . . a functional derangement of the relationship between the mass of the people and the Government. The people have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising, and the governments they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern."

What, then, is the nature of this functional derangement—this "malady of democratic states"? It is to be found primarily in the "devitalization of the governing power" consequent upon the "mounting power" which "mass opinion has acquired . . . in this century." Because public officials are "always on trial for their political lives, always required to court their

restless constituents," only the rarest among them are able to maintain that independence of judgment and conduct which in earlier days was looked upon as one of their more engaging attributes. The decisive consideration which weighs with them today is not whether a "proposition is good but whether it is popular," and this very mass opinion to which they increasingly feel obliged to cater "has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death." The trend of this mass opinion has shifted to what Lippmann calls an essentially Jacobin view, which deifies the presumably popular will at the expense of that body of political belief that grew out of Magna Charta, the English Bill of Rights of 1689, Montesquieu's "Esprit des Lois," and our own Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. The principle of constitutional government that rests on these documents, a principle that sets just government above any element in the polity, even above the "people" if they are frivolous or intransigent in the exercise of sovereignty, lies at the root of Lippmann's "Public Philosophy."

A distinction must be drawn, according to Mr. Lippmann, between "The People as voters" and "The People as a community of the entire living population, with their predecessors and successors." It is "The People as voters" who, in accord-

ance with our democratic procedures, so powerfully influence the determination of policy. Yet if, as Mr. Lippmann contends and as experience confirms, "the opinions of voters in elections are not to be accepted unquestioningly as true judgments of the vital interests of the community, it is by no means clear in what way and under what system "the entire living population, with their predecessors and successors" can be brought to achieve a more satisfactory result.

Having posed this problem, Mr. Lippmann leaves it without offering any practical solution, and turns to the respective roles of the Executive and the representative assembly. Here he finds that "the power of the Executive has become enfeebled, often to the verge of impotence, by the pressures of the representative assembly and of mass opinion." There can be little doubt that for reasons which he stresses material encroachments have been made upon the Executive function. Yet he fails to mention the telling weapon which in a democracy the Executive has at his disposal to counter such encroachments. There is no word about the vital importance of imaginative and courageous leadership without which democracy inevitably falters. It would seem that his indictment of a system to which we remain deeply attached should more properly be lodged against some of the occasional possessors of Executive authority. Certainly in the United States there is no substitute for the clear voice of the President in the formation and the marshaling of mass opinion.

A BREAKDOWN in the constitutional order, "the cause of the precipitate and catastrophic decline of Western society," according to Mr. Lippmann, "may, if it cannot be arrested and reversed, bring about the fall of the West." The warning is timely; for surely the West is threatened as never before. But is it the manner in which democratic societies are presently governed that lies at the root of our peril rather than the Pandora's box we opened with the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima? The dawn of the thermonuclear age posed not only for the democracies but for all humanity dangers of a new order of magnitude, leaving the Executive branch of government less concerned with the question whether it can act than what the prudent and intelligent course of action should be.

While many minds are occupied with the practical aspects of today's challenge, Mr. Lippmann, as the title of his book indicates, takes refuge in philosophy. He has reached the



—Fabian Bachrach.

Walter Lippmann—"nuggets of wisdom."

conclusion, which to many will not seem novel, that "there is a body of positive principles and precepts which a good citizen cannot deny or ignore." And here we return to the "public philosophy," which in fact does exist, buried in the subconscious or elsewhere, requiring nothing more than to be exhumed and revived.

But a careful reading of Mr. Lippmann's book reveals the features of this philosophy only in vaguest outline. To the limited extent that the "body of positive principles and precepts" is defined it bears a strong resemblance to what we are taught from earliest school days as basic American doctrine. And, while we do not always in our conduct conform to this doctrine in every particular, it remains, by and large, a vital and driving force in our national life. It is just because we are secure in our beliefs, if not at times in our behavior, that we are wholly engaged on the side of freedom in its mortal struggle with tyranny.

Mr. Lippmann, deeply concerned that both liberty and democracy be preserved, has written an eloquent if an unconvincing book. His prescription seems somewhat less than adequate for the malady he describes.

Europe—Up Front

OUR TIMES: A compact and intelligent study "World History from 1914 to 1950," by David Thomson (Oxford University, \$1), is the latest volume in the Home University Library of Modern Knowledge. David Thomson, who lectures at Cambridge and has written excellent analyses of recent and contemporary European developments, presents the twentieth-century world as a stage on which Europe fills the center and the other continents the wings. His Europocentric focus, acceptable to his English readers, may seem less satisfactory to Americans. But they will find his comments on the United States shrewd and his generalizations about Asia and Africa enlightening. He never forgets the first lesson of twentieth-century politics: that every nation's history now has a global context.

Thomson's first three chapters, The World Scene in 1914, The First World War, and Postwar Decade, 1919-1929, are longer and more judicial than his last three, Prewar Decade, 1929-1939, The Second World War, and Mid-Century Milestones. This is understandable, and one may hope that he will recast his later material in more definitive form a few years from now when time permits him to measure it in perspective.

—GEOFFREY BRUUN.

FICTION

Voracity in the Vosges

"The Royal Hunt," by Pierre Moinot (translated by Ralph Manheim. Alfred A. Knopf, 247 pp. \$3.50), the work of a new French novelist of uncommon promise, tells of men living close to savage beasts in the Vosges mountains and the ambitions and passions that consume them.

By Laurent LeSage

IN THE "Cahiers d'André Walter" André Gide speaks of the "emotion when one is quite close upon happiness—when one has only to reach out and touch it—to pass it by." Is the exaltation of young Gide's self-denial a greater joy than self-abandonment? In "The Royal Hunt" a new French novelist, Pierre Moinot, sets before us again the Gidean dilemma and offers, in a story of great beauty and humanity, some tentative solutions. The characters involved possess fierce appetites for love, for life, for death. They are tempted to give in to them like the wild beasts in whose midst they live—and suspect they would be the wiser for so doing. But wills just as fierce as their appetites make them hold back. Fear of life, shame, and pride stiffen their resistance. And they are tempted by the bitter sweetness of refusal. The great physical combats between man and man or between man and beast, which are fought out against the grandeur of Vosges mountain scenery, are no more intense than the inner struggles these men and women experience, caught between ambivalent lusts for life or renunciation.

Henri has become like a "great wild, but slow-moving animal," scorning all human ties except the companionship of the hunt. His younger friend, Philippe, knows what primitive contentment the forest can offer. He knows, too, the savage thrill of killing, be it game or poachers. Bloodshed and beauty, killing and loving, are all mixed up in Philippe. Yet was the murderous delight in bringing down the Kommera stag sweeter than the "sorrowful slow joy" he felt the time he had not fired? The love he bears Hélène Servance burns all the hotter for being suppressed. He is sorely tempted to remain in a dream of love, like Hélène's mother, whose sole reality is the memory of her



Pierre Moinot—"fierce appetites."

husband, killed years ago after galloping madly through his short life like the accursed royal huntsman of the legend. It is old Céline, convinced of the futility of her own sterile life who pushes Philippe to action—Céline and Hélène herself, who, after bitter rebellion, has given in to her love for Philippe.

THIS novel of rage, blood, and love is cast in a form as pure and restrained as its passions are violent. It progresses swiftly through tersely told episodes to a dénouement skillfully prepared for. No bombast in language, no thumping to emphasize its symbolic overtones, no overdrawn characters. And its frame of natural description has delicate loveliness.

Thirty-five-year-old Pierre Moinot published his first novel in 1951, a chronicle of war experiences remarkable for its sincerity and emotion but without distinction of form. Two years later the expertly constructed "Royal Hunt" appeared. By submitting his talent to strict discipline Moinot had, if anything, strengthened its emotional impact, for "The Royal Hunt" is an elegant and virile novel worthy of the prizes and acclaim it has received in France. In a translation by Ralph Manheim, which seems excellent, and in a handsome volume designed by Charles E. Skaggs, it makes an auspicious appearance in English.