

The Despotism of Democracy

by RALPH RAICO

POLITICAL MESSIANISM: *The Romantic Phase*. By J. L. Talmon. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963 607 pp. \$7.50.

PROFESSOR Talmon of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is already well known and widely respected as a historian of ideas for his book *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, which was the first installment of what promises to be a highly stimulating in-depth analysis of modern totalitarian ideologies.

In this work, Talmon examined the thread of the philosophy of the Enlightenment which led, not to toleration, representative government and the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, but to the first of the modern totalitarian movements: Jacobinism. The source of this element he found principally in the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a conclusion which will surprise only those who have never read any further in the *Social Contract* than the famous sentence that opens its first chapter. Talmon thus continued the tradition of Rousseauian interpretation, beginning with Benjamin Constant, and including Emile Faguet and C. E. Vaughan, which has seen in the celebrated 18th-century bohemian not a godfather of liberal individualism, but a prophet of state supremacy and the unlimited sway of the "general will."

I

THE ideas of Rousseau began their march through political history chiefly in the person of Robespierre, who, for little over one memorable year (1793-4) played Lenin to Rousseau's Marx. After the fall of Robespierre, Babeuf (whom Tocqueville was to call "the grandfather of all modern social-

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ists") and his followers had the bad luck to encounter a French public for whom the excitement of the daily tribute to the guillotine no longer outweighed the chaos and uncertainty of life produced by the Reign of Terror. But if the conspiracy of the Babeuvists had little practical effect, their raising of the "property question," their theory of the revolutionary vanguard, and their contempt for democratic processes in any meaningful sense, were more influential, and, carried on by the chief survivor of the conspiracy, Buonartoti; take us into the period dealt with in Talmon's new book.

At no time before or after this period—from about 1800 to about 1848—was there such a flowering of philosophies of history, all attempting to demonstrate how the laws of historical development would lead to a perfect social order. Man, as Marx proclaimed, was about to jump from the realm of necessity to that of freedom. Political Messianism is just this drive to create a "heaven on earth," to make the world anew, to achieve the millenium through conscious human striving. The philosophical issues raised by this recurring aspiration have been dealt with by writers such as Karl Popper, while the "pre-history" of political Messianism has been investigated by a number of scholars in recent years;¹ Talmon examines the period that saw its high tide.

II

PROBABLY the most important group of radical social reformers during this time, and one which especially deserves our attention for being relatively so little known, was the one inspired by Henri de Saint-Simon. An incessant writer and propagandist until his death in 1825, Saint-Simon was the originator of a number of interesting and novel ideas (although he labored under the

1. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millenium and Utopia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (New York: Harper, 1961).

misfortune of frequently verging on insanity). But his great significance for Talmon's theme lies in the fact that he was the man who first and most clearly issued the call for a renovation of the social order on the basis of the new "science of society" which he thought he saw developing. Significantly, Saint-Simon was no friend of the French Revolution, but quite the contrary. A student of the reactionary writers, de Maistre and Bonald, he viewed "that frightful crisis" as the latest manifestation of the instability and conflict characteristic of the modern open society. What the times required above all was a comprehensive philosophy and a dedicated group of experts in social and economic affairs, to play the admirable part that Catholicism and the Catholic Church had played in the Middle Ages. Thus, while he agreed with the two ultramontane thinkers in rejecting the modern bourgeois order, he differed from them in expecting social salvation not from re-immersing society in age-old Christian tradition, but from a "new social synthesis," which included the rational planning of society and the inculcation of a new "religion of humanity."

In a sense, Saint-Simon may be said to have been more of a forerunner of our contemporary social democrats² than were Marx and Engels. For while the latter, at least on the rhetorical level, were bitter opponents of the state, Saint-Simon taught that, in the modern world, it is foolish to continue to regard government as an enemy. He attacked the idea of checks and balances against state action. For him, government was, as he put it, "the head of society, destined to unite all individual activities into one bundle, and direct them towards a common goal."

This is not to say, however, that Saint-Simon championed the democratic process. In the face of the possibility and necessity of scientific planning, popular government, according to Saint-Simon, was a costly snare.³

2. This is a term which both logically and from the point of view of tactics I find preferable to either "liberals" or "modern liberals." The doctrine may be referred to as "democratic socialism."

3. But to some extent, at least, the parallel to modern social democrats does not yet break down. The ease with which the latter sacrifice their democratic commitment when it conflicts with certain of their favorite proposals for social engineering is striking, and awaits detailed analysis.

The new social order required a unitary conception and execution. Thus, socialism made its appearance in the modern world not in combination with democracy, but in scornful opposition to it. Indeed, Saint-Simon was for a time an enthusiastic admirer of Napoleon (as Auguste Comte was to be of Napoleon III), and the following passage indicates the reason for the philosopher's support of the dictator:

The Emperor will soon conquer the world and give it laws . . . when the war has come to an end the sciences will become the exclusive object of his attention . . . on the basis of reasoning and observation he will found the general principles, which will forever serve as guides to humanity . . . The Legislator . . . the most transcending genius that ever made its appearance to give laws to mankind . . . It was necessary that he should unite all powers in his hands . . . The Emperor is the scientific chief of mankind, as he is its political head. He holds in one hand the unfailing compass, and in the other the sword which exterminates all opponents of the progress of enlightenment.

Although he advocated central direction of economic activity and had nothing but contempt for the classical liberals, who were forever seeking to tie the hands of their rulers, instead of freeing them for the great work that lay ahead, Saint-Simon was equivocal on the question of ownership and property; it is therefore difficult to decide whether he is to be classified as a socialist in the strict sense. No such difficulty exists in regard to his followers, *Enfantin* (the Saint-Simonian "pope"), *Bazard*, etc., who ceaselessly preached over-all central economic planning by the state, government ownership of the means of production, and the abolition of personal inheritance of property. They were influential propagandizers in the 20's and 30's of the last century, and some of their doctrines, including the idea of the "anarchy of production" under capitalism, and the view that those who argue for capitalism—e. g., the economists of the day—were simply expressing their own "class interests," were later taken over by the Marxists. The Saint-Simonians, moreover, with their bizarre religious ideas—they expected the momentary appearance in Constantinople of a Great Mother, who would bring redemption to mankind—present the clearest example of the connection between personal salvationist strivings and utopian plans for social regeneration.

The Saint-Simonians were just one group of millenarian reformers in the period we are considering: Fourier, Comte, Blanque, Robert Owen, Louis Blanc are all dealt with by Talmon, although we have no space to examine their ideas or influence here. What ought to be emphasized, however, is that these and similarly-oriented writers in this period are quite deserving of attention: because the movements they fathered petered out, especially after the generally abortive revolutions of 1848—and because Marx and Engels created movements which are, to say the least, rather powerful even today, there has been a tendency to overlook the fundamental contributions to socialist theory on the part of the earlier "utopian" reformers. And yet it is quite demonstrable, as H. B. Acton, Ludwig von Mises and other scholarly critics of Marxism have underscored, that Marx and Engels are fundamentally in the debt of writers like Saint-Simon and Fourier. As befit thinkers who had fathomed the mysteries of Hegelian metaphysics, the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* spoke condescendingly of their French predecessors. Nevertheless:

the fact is that Marxism, when it is obliged to leave the field of pompous dialectical rhetoric and the derision and defamation of its opponents, and to make a few meager remarks pertinent to the issue, never has anything different to advance from what Fourier, the "utopian" had to offer . . . Marxism believes that from the height of its "scientific socialism" it is entitled to look down with contempt on romanticism and romantics. But in reality its own procedure is no different from theirs.⁴

4. Ludwig von Mises, *The Free and Prosperous Commonwealth* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 15-16.

III

ONE of the many merits of Talmon's book is that it demonstrates how unacceptable is the view that socialism emerged primarily as a response to the "intolerable conditions" created by the Industrial Revolution. We need not discuss the fact that modern historical research has questioned, if not overturned, the earlier naive view of the Industrial Revolution as a catastrophe for the working classes. What is important here is that the great change in industrial techniques began and was most intense in England: yet it was in France, and, to a lesser extent, in Germany, that the most important socialist theoreticians first arose, and it was above all in France that socialism first began to play a significant part in practical politics. Doubtless the fact of the new industrial society and the problems it created had to be taken into account by the socialist writers and agitators; but Talmon emphasizes that the roots of socialism are to be found in a complex intellectual tradition—much more powerful in the two leading nations of the Continent than in England—which lent form to Messianic strivings. His book thus serves as a plea for putting the "economic factor" in its proper place in historical interpretation, and recognizing the importance of psychological elements:

The love of liberty and the yearning for salvation, the craving for self-assertion and the longing for self-surrender, the urge for self-expression and the quest for justice, the wish to break away and the desire to be huddled together—these are the permanent setting of our existence, no less, rather more, than the changing material conditions.

Political Messianism is a book rich in learning and insight, and the student of political ideas—especially the student oriented towards individualism—will find it a book to repay careful reading.