

L'Opium des intellectuels, by Raymond Aron. Paris: Calmen-Lévy.

M. Aron is well known for his studies in the philosophy of history and his works dealing with problems of practical politics; he contributes articles on political questions to *Figaro* and other reviews. Several of these essays were collected in a slender volume, *Polémiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955); they constitute an intensive criticism of views current in France today, especially those characteristic of the "Left." M. Aron had planned to write a preface to this collection; out of this preface, however, grew the present *L'Opium*.

The title is derived from the well-known

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saying of Marx that religion is the opium of the people. This quotation figures on the first page; but appended to it is a quotation from Simone Weil, who applied the phrase of Marx to Marxism, which she called—as others have—an inferior variety of religious conviction; only such inferior forms become the “opium of the people.” But it is not merely “the people” who are seduced and deluded by such illusions; the intellectuals are susceptible to this poison. For the intellectuals, or the “intelligentsia,” profess an uncritical faith in three fictions, none of which is countenanced by fact or able to withstand rational analysis.

The first part of this book deals with the three myths which have become the creed of the intelligentsia: the Myth of the Left, the Myth of the Revolution, and the Myth of the Proletariat. Part Two is concerned with the Idolatry of History, and Part Three with the Alienation of the Intellectuals. This last part is a valuable contribution to the “sociology of the intelligentsia,” a topic which, M. Aron believes, has been given too little attention in recent writing.

The author, writing in French and for Frenchmen, is naturally concerned mainly with French affairs; but he is well acquainted also with the situation in other countries, of which he knows many by personal experience. The book, therefore, is of relevance for every student of politics, whatever his nationality may be.

The parties comprised under the name of the “Left” are supposed to agree on certain fundamentals, whatever their politics may be for the rest. (In France, be it noted incidentally, there is a tendency to identify the Left with the followers of Marx, and the Communists together with their sympathizers view themselves as the true exponents of the leftist ideas. The special issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, June-July, 1955, *La Gauche*, furnishes information on this point and also reveals the rather curious interpretation given to the “Ideas of the Right.” The article by Mme. S. de Beauvoir on this subject deserves to be examined and criticized because it is an outstanding in-

stance of distorted and tendentious presentation.) What unites the Left is the a-prioristic belief that the future will be better than the present under all circumstances, that there is determined direction of political development; or, in other words, the myth of the Left presupposes that of Progress. The faith in an unimpeded, natural—as it were, progressive—development, as it existed in the eighteenth century, cannot be maintained any longer, since the Left encounters continually the opposition of the Right. The myth of the Revolution, consequently, becomes a necessary complement. Without violence, the progress envisaged by the Left cannot be realized. The doctrinaires of progress had believed that the attainment of the ideal would be the work of “enlightened” humanity; nowadays this mission is attributed to the Proletariat, which, in contradistinction to the ideas of old, claims to be “The People.” “To believe in the Proletariat is to believe in election by misfortune. . . . Who speaks in the name of the Proletariat . . . does no longer expect the progressive evolution of a natural order but relies on the supreme revolt of the slaves to eliminate slavery.” (p. 107). These ideas, M. Aron remarks, allow for a reasonable interpretation, but become mythical by virtue of an intellectual error which in turn stems from an optimistic belief in the dream combined with a pessimistic outlook on reality. It is by their successes rather than by their failures that these myths have refuted themselves. The Left, which arose in opposition to the *ancien régime*, has achieved what it set out to do. The problems to-day are different: to attain an equilibrium of planning and initiative, of bureaucratic power and individual rights, of economic centralization and intellectual liberty. The Revolution has lost its meaning; it is back and not before us; modern society is in a state of continuous revolution, as shown by USA and, in another sense, by USSR. The Proletariat, as conceived of by Marx and his disciples, is not an inevitable accompaniment of

capitalism, as prove the developments in USA and in the Scandinavian countries (facts which the advocates of the Left carefully ignore).

Instead of recognizing the achievements of reason and the part of man in the gradual overcoming of the confusion modern society indubitably brought forth, the mythic way of thinking prefers to appeal to a “strange demiurge,” History. The faith in History has replaced that in science—that is, Newtonian physics—which animated the thought of *les philosophes*. But it is History interpreted in Marxist terms. “The history of the party is the sacred history which is to result in the redemption of mankind.” (p. 119). The Party cannot err; it enunciates and accomplishes the truth of History. The author makes an interesting distinction between those he calls “men of the church,” organizers and rulers, on one hand, and the “men of faith” who blindly follow, convinced as they are of the verities of the doctrine, on the other. This second part contains many observations on the philosophy of history in general and the manner in which history is interpreted by the Communists and those influenced by their doctrine. It is necessary that one see clearly what the “idolatry of history” signifies, because it is this set of ideas which underlies not only the political theories but also the political actions of the “Left.” But it is not possible to summarize here the author’s views. Only a few words can be added on the third part, which deals with the “Alienation of the Intellectuals.” One finds here, besides some penetrating general remarks, a detailed analysis of the French intelligentsia, compared with that of other countries, which should prove eminently useful for an understanding of certain attitudes on the part of many writers and politicians. What the intellectuals ultimately seek is a new religion. (Perhaps it were better to say “new absolutes.”) It is this longing which renders so attractive the doctrines of Marx and Lenin.

There is much to learn from this work. The American reader will be disappointed

by the fact that there are but very few footnotes and that the author does not substantiate every statement by a pertinent reference. This is not a peculiarity of just this book; it is a common procedure with French writers. There is neither a bibliography nor an index. Measured against the wealth of ideas and of information, however, these are minor defects. Reading M. Aron's book should prove rewarding to all who are concerned with the state of our world.

Reviewed by RUDOLF ALLERS
