

The Fundamental Datum

A Public Philosophy Reader, by Richard J. Bishirjian, *New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1978. 336 pp. \$9.95.*

THIS BOOK is infinitely more useful and valuable than anthologies normally are. Richard J. Bishirjian has written an incisive introductory section on "the nature of public philosophy," and in subsequent sections he has included selections from distinguished commentators to illuminate the character and importance of that illusive thing called the public philosophy.

Every society, consciously or not, has a public philosophy; that is, every society has a "way of life." It has a conception of what it is about; indeed, that is what makes it a society, an organic whole. This conception is made of reference points or first principles which allow a people to have a sense of identity, and hence a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction. Without a conception of a public philosophy, a society disintegrates, for it has no center that will hold. Thus, the public philosophy of a people is the fundamental datum about a society.

In keeping with the classical Greek tradition, this anthology suggests that the public philosophy is ultimately no more than the values of the individual citizens written large. The view emerging out of this book is that the public philosophy, properly understood, involves a quest for values, morality, ethics, justice, virtue, and kindred notions. To guarantee the ultimate in sweep, depth, and quality of the public philosophy, it is imperative that there be an "openness to transcendence." That is, the public philosophy is not something to be extracted out of utopian views of the mind's eye; rather, it must be developed out of a proper understanding of the "constitution of being" and of man's need to attune himself to the world of reality.

The enemies of a genuine public philosophy are legion. Relativism, and related isms such as utilitarianism, pragmatism, historicism, hedonism, and positivism are corrosive agents in dissolving a legitimate and mature public philosophy. In spite of their differing emphases, the underlying philosophical denominator of these viewpoints is the notion there is nothing of transcendent, enduring importance, and hence each generation is free to define itself in view of whatever affords immediate self-gratification. In brief, the public philosophy is infinitely flexible and is merely what the current generation decrees it to be. There are no enduring first principles transcending time and place; there are no fixed points of moral and ethical reference. The result is a shattering and fragmenting of philosophical continuity and the ushering in of intellectual and spiritual incoherence and anarchy. As there is no longer any definable and permanent idea of man's dignity or spiritual worth, the philosophical beds are prepared for the implanting of the totalitarian seed. In keeping with the spirit of relativism, the totalitarian mind is free to disregard the philosophical imperative of attunement to "the constitution of being" and to the higher moral law, and is at liberty to construct its own vision of the perfected earthly society and to impose that view with the brute power of the modern police state. Divorced from any conception of a public philosophy as articu-

lated in the classical and biblical heritages, the totalitarian mind operates free from ethical restraints and the wreckage and carnage lie all about.

The conclusion of this book, as reflected through its diverse contributors, is that the American political tradition historically had a public philosophy of the highest order. As contributor John Courtney Murray explains, "Briefly, its principles and doctrines are those of Western constitutionalism, classic and Christian." Hence, the proper mood is one of piety and reverence. There are no pretensions that man is self-produced and capable of restructuring the nature of things, including things social and political. Man is finite, limited, and there are no illusions concerning the perfectibility of the human condition. The role of republican government is to maintain internal order and tranquillity within the rule of law, to adjudicate disputes among the citizenry through an effective system of justice, and to protect the whole of society from external threat. In sum, the role of government is specific and confined, and there are no shrill, clarion calls for the government through elitist design and control to remake society to conform to utopian visions of the Ideal Society. This mood of prudence and restraint is reflected in *The Federalist*, and its character is Burkean. The spirit of the American political tradition arising out of the era of the American Revolution is to be contrasted with the other two major revolutions of the modern age: the French and the Communist. The latter revolutions are overtly secular and atheistic; they are doctrinaire and fanatically utopian; consequently, they stand in stark contrast to the public philosophy of the American experience.

This anthology deals with the most vital element in the study of politics, namely, the question of values as reflected in the public philosophy. Mr. Bishirjian has provided a valuable tool for those interested in studying the nature and quality of the public philosophy in contemporary America. He is to be commended for an impressive contribution.

Reviewed by JOHN P. EAST