REVIEW ESSAY

Sentinels in a Pitch Black Night

The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century. By Tony Judt. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1998, 196 pp., $17.50 (cloth).

The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century. By François Furet. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. Translated by Deborah Furet. 1999, 596 pp., $35.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Peter Baehr

These two books belong together, and not only because *The Burden of Responsibility* is dedicated to the memory of François Furet, who, until his death in 1997, was the preeminent historian of the French Revolution. Both volumes are concerned with twentieth-century intellectuals: more specifically, intellectuals who either espoused or repudiated the "communist" idea but who could not escape entirely its claustrophobic embrace. Both books are composed by authors of a liberal, skeptical temper. And both seek to examine some of the most perplexing questions raised by the conduct of twentieth-century intellectuals. What is the nature of intellectual, moral and political responsibility? What predisposes or impedes it? And what are the consequences for society when responsibility is displaced by ideology?

Among the salient differences of these texts are their purview and scholarly emphasis. In *The Burden of Responsibility*, a coda of sorts to his scathing *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, Judt examines three writers, all active in politics, who resisted in different ways the pressure and blandishments of ideological conformity. His book is a kind of morality tale complete with heroes who "stood, in the end, only for themselves and what they believed," and, precisely because of that stance, are beacons of independence and integrity: Léon Blum is "the prophet spurned"; Albert Camus "the reluctant moralist"; Raymond Aron, "the peripheral insider." *The Passing of an Illusion* is much broader in scope than Judt's study, though not quite as broad as first it seems. For while its subtitle appears to promise a world, or at least European, history of the communist idea, Furet's book focuses mainly on the Soviet Union, France and Germany. Other countries are mentioned briefly, if at all, and even the People's Republic of China is afforded little discussion. Moreover, this is very much a history from above, documenting the communist idea through the statements, struggles and machinations of intellectuals and party leaders. Furet's primary concern is to describe and explain the "illusion" of communism, to make it humanly explicable, while at the same time showing the political and moral catastrophes to which it led.

Judt argues that from 1918 until the middle of the 1970s "French public life" was distorted by "three overlapping and intersecting forms of collective and individual irresponsibility" which Blum, Camus and Aron instructively avoided. The first form of irresponsibility, which Judt calls "political" (in fact, all three dimensions of irresponsibility have political implications), is characterized by partisanship of the most extreme and narrow kind: myopic, divisive and unable "to think disinterestedly about the national interest." Its apogee came during the inter-war years, but was conspicuous, too, in both Vichy and in the period up to 1958 (the beginning of the Fifth Republic under de Gaulle), when the French Community Party (PCF), their socialist rivals, and the enemies of both presided over a chaotic domestic and foreign policy.

A second, "moral," kind of irresponsibility dogged French public life from roughly the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s. The cardinal element of this infirmity, Judt argues, was the belief that political engagement was a value in its own right; more than that, a value of the highest kind for which other considerations—honesty, fairness, prudence—might legitimately be compromised. What gave this belief its peculiar dogmatic power was the conviction that once a choice had been made, there was no abandoning it, whatever the price one had to pay. There was a "duty to pursue the logic of one's choice, in the face not just of opposition but of the unwelcome company in which one traveled and the troubling actions of one's own side" (Judt, p. 15). Where, as in various brands of Marxism and post-colonialism, History was enlisted on the side of the engaged, the chosen commitment was pursued with particular ferocity; from that standpoint, one's political "enemies" were not simply advocates of different values, but irrational, perverse and pusillanimous agents of reaction. Such hyper-engagement both poisoned the atmosphere of discussion, allowing no principled difference of view to be respected, and sacrificed individual judgment to group allegiance—even if such allegiance demanded acquiescence to, or apologia for, show trials, revenge killings and the dictatorships of post-colonial states.

Judt notes that moral and political modes of irresponsibility in French public life were by no means the monopoly of writers and culture critics; they were prominent, too, among civil servants, politicians, the military, teachers and students. The third kind of liability he delineates, however, was characteristically the failing of intellectuals. French intellectuals, he remarks, showed a strong aversion to real poli-

tics—its dilemmas, its need for restraint and objectivity—and created instead a shadow world in which everything was *politicized*: "the search for ultimate solutions displaced sustained attention to the costs of economic or social stagnation or the limits upon political action" (Judt, p. 17). This "radical fallacy" was compounded by the widespread supposition that real intellectuals bore a unique obligation: to speak on all subjects, to pronounce definitively on them, and to be undeterred by a lack of expertise that was to take "second place to political or ideological affiliation." In France, intellectuals have a public standing unparalleled in such countries as Britain, Canada and the United States. Judt's argument is that the intellectuals' inflated sense of their own importance produced a kind of doctrinaire mentality and dilettantism that corrupted their discourse and their manners.

It is against this backdrop that Judt assesses the contribution of his three subjects, showing that all of them took a stand against irresponsibility as previously defined. What makes Blum, Aron and Camus exemplary "is their shared quality of moral (and, as it happens, physical) courage, their willingness to take a stand not against their political or intellectual opponents—everyone did that, all too often—but against their 'own' side. They paid a price for their loneliness, in reduced influence (at least for much of their life), and in their local reputation, which rarely matched the one they had gained among friends and admirers abroad" (Judt, p. 20). While all three were cultural insiders, they were also distinguished by outsider qualities: Blum and Aron were Jews; Camus hailed from Algiers. All three were anti-communist, repelled by what Blum, best remembered as the leader of the Popular Front coalition government of 1936, once called "a foreign nationalist party," and by the duplicity of party members who vocally deplored western racism but ignored the Moscow purges and the Gulag. All three accepted the fallibility of their own judgement and were willing to acknowledge their mistakes.

Assuredly, to concentrate on the similarities of these men is to reduce complex lives to a schema and Judt cares too much for his subjects to do that. Instead, after distilling their family resemblances, he goes on to sketch three idiosyncratic individuals who are interesting precisely because they are atypical. Blum traversed a variety of public careers: as a literary critic, a jurist and then, after the assassination of Jaurés in 1914, a political figure. He was first elected to the Chambre des Députés as a Socialist representative from Paris in 1919—he was forty-seven—and from then, until his death in 1950, was the most prominent figure of French socialism.

Aron belatedly came to recognize the importance of his commitment to Israel.

Hated by the PCF for his opposition to the Third International and his espousal of democratic, republican socialism; vilified in the most lurid colors by communists and rightists alike as a Jew; imprisoned by Pétain in September 1940 following his public stand against the Vichy regime; deported in 1943 to Buchenwald; Blum risked his life for the principles in which he believed. Yet, as Judt shows, these were not the principles of the fanatic. The Popular Front government of June 1936 to June 1937, whatever its undoubted failures, attempted to improve in very practical and lasting ways the conditions of the French working class through the provision of wage increases, paid vacations, the right to collective bargaining, and a forty-hour working week. In that it succeeded. After the war, Blum refused to join the chorus of hate and revenge that resounded in post-liberation France, concentrating his energies instead on the painstaking task of reconstruction.

An aversion to fanaticism and a receptiveness to complexity also marks the careers of Aron and Camus, though again in their own peculiar ways. A mandarin and an intellectual, Raymond Aron let each role inform the other; realism was their common currency. However, the kind of realism that Aron promoted was not that of *Realpolitik* but of Max Weber's *Sachlichkeit*: self-discipline, distance from oneself, matter of factness. Accordingly, Aron opposed many of the predilections of his contemporaries: dogmatic Marxism, visceral anti-Americanism, and casual assaults on government and the law—for him the bulwarks of a free society. He would remark that "it is mere wordplay and an abuse of false analogies to present all human aspirations in the language of rights and liberties" (Judt, p. 181). Aron supported Algerian independence not because he was in principle opposed to Algeria being a French colony, but because he had come to believe that only the greatest violence could keep it French, and even that would ultimately fail given the appeal of Algerian nationalism. When, in 1967, Aron belatedly came to recognize the importance of his commitment to Israel, it was characteristic of him that he could understand the Arab position too. But, most of all, Aron was particularly sensitive to the seriousness of politics. Such seriousness meant reminding oneself what one might have to do *if* one were in a position of actual power; it meant, as he put it, understanding the difference between writing an article and governing a country. The tendency of French intellectuals to ventilate at length on subjects they knew nothing about was one he abhorred. The point was not for politics to be the plaything of the literati, but for intellectuals to become educated in political realities and to realize that "a good policy is measured by its effectiveness, not its virtue."

By the time Aron died in 1983, his contribution to the intellectual life of France was widely respected by his French contemporaries. When Camus' life was cut short in 1960 in a car crash, his reputation in France was at its lowest ebb. It took two-and-a-half decades to recover. Camus had a keen eye for

texture and detail, evoking with an unforgettable sensuality the people, terrain and flora of his native Algeria. He was equally adept at describing the exotic moral landscape of Paris. The source of his artistry, he once remarked, lay in the "world of poverty and sunlight that lived in me for so long, whose memory still saves me from the two opposing dangers that threaten every artist: resentment and self-satisfaction." In Paris those dangers were nowhere more evident than in the hallowed doctrine of "existentialism." Of Sartre's *Nausée* (1938), Camus wrote, "The mistake of a certain sort of writing is to believe that because life is wretched that it is tragic.... To announce the absurdity of existence cannot be an objective, merely a starting point."

However, Camus' posthumous vindication has a curious side to it, which has become evident since Judt's book was published. During his lifetime, Camus was damned for a variety of apostasies. Refusing to play the Cold War game, he insisted that concentration camps and show trials were an evil wherever they occurred. His ambivalent position on Algerian independence—he hoped against hope for a federal solution but, fearing the worst, gradually withdrew into a shell of silence—infuriated the apostles of engagement. Today he is lionized. But French publishers who would metaphorically kill for the privilege of releasing a novel like *Le Premier Homme* (1994) have been strikingly reluctant, until Editions Complexe and *Le Monde Diplomatique* recently took the plunge, to translate Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1994). Why? Hobsbawm is associated with Marxism, and Marxism has lost its former cachet. The cultural atmosphere that today embraces Camus, in short, has little to do with the diffusion of skepticism; it represents instead yet another dogmatic oscillation that this time must anathematize the Left.

How ironic, then, that a major beneficiary of this oscillation is François Furet, who for so long contested the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. And how fitting it is, in a peculiar way that Furet himself would have surely appreciated that *The Passing of an Illusion* is not his best work. The title's resonance with Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* is obvious, and therefore unstated; just as 1914 punctured the aura of "civilization," so the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 witnessed the evaporation of the communist fantasy. Yet unlike Freud who, at least analytically, distinguished between an "illusion" (a belief animated by a desire for wish fulfillment) and a "delusion" (a belief that flatly contradicts reality), Furet has no need for such niceties.

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Furet argues that communism was not accompanied by an illusion but was actually constituted by one: the idea that history is a singular rational subject to whose necessity all rational people must succumb. From this Olympian perspective, the vital obligation of intellectuals is to discern, beneath the surface mosaic of particular events and shifting constellations, the path of the march of history, and, having ascertained that path, to join it. What gave this illusion its remarkable transformative power? Furet is too worldly to believe that human beings are motivated and mobilized by ideas alone, so he searches for the emotional charge that powered the communist idea. He finds it in the visceral loathing of the bourgeoisie, an "ideological passion" that was "sufficiently abstract to contain many symbols, sufficiently concrete to offer a convenient object of hatred" (Furet, p. 4).

In the first and most arresting chapter of his book, Furet offers a scintillating reconstruction of "the bourgeoisie" as a lightning rod of contempt and as a social abbreviation for all that was, and is still, wrong with modern society. The "bourgeoisie," Furet argues, refers to a category of people defined by economic relationships alone. Unlike the "citizen," the feudal lord, or the member of an estate, the bourgeoisie "is a class without status, without a definite tradition, without established outlines; its title to dominate is owed to a single, fragile thing: wealth. Wealth is fragile because it can belong to anyone, and the rich man could as easily have been poor as the poor man rich." As an economic phenomenon, the bourgeoisie sees the world in economic terms; its "values" center on the liberty to increase one's property, and the equality of all to pursue opportunities for acquisition, unburdened by community obligations. However, the competitive character of this society not only eviscerates any substantial notion of the common good and the public interest, but constantly drives its agents forward in unceasing movement. The root cause of this "corpuscular agitation" is the uneasy, unrelenting feeling that for wealth to have any value, it must mean being richer than one's neighbor; hence the constant drive for inequality in a society that proclaims the opposite. Accordingly, the bourgeoisie's "development belies its principle." By the same token, to the degree that the condition of inequality is equated with moral and economic failure, it loses its previous traditional or divine justifications.

To describe and condemn bourgeois society, this "place of coexistence" to which community has ostensibly been sacrificed, was a recurrent preoccupation of nineteenth-century intellectuals; Furet's objective is to "bring [that] particular sensibility and outlook back to life." As he shows, that sensibility was at first most evident among strata outside the bourgeoisie, for instance, Romantic writers and aristocrats who either took up the cudgels of the *ancien regime* or looked back to a cherished past that was irretrievably over. Later, the revulsion was spearheaded by discontented members of the bourgeoisie itself, and eventually carried into movements on the Left and Right they championed. On moral, aesthetic and political grounds, bourgeois society was condemned by those who saw its moral deficit and contradictions from the inside and

who, with growing self-hatred, lashed out at a world despoiled. So long as vestiges of aristocracy survived and in some cases flourished, as in nineteenth-century Prussia, the bourgeoisie was protected from the most violent extremes of detestation. Revolution seemed to have been indefinitely postponed. During the twentieth century, however, those last impediments were rapidly removed by the assimilation of aristocratic and bourgeois strata and by an event that democratized the revolutionary impulse, sucking into its maelstrom both the Left and Right.

That event, of course, was the Great War; its symbiotic progeny were communism and fascism, coagulated by the bloodletting of trench combat and the rapid disillusionment that followed the onset of peace. After the war, "bourgeois society" stood condemned as a fraud, its trappings of civilization and democracy exposed to be as bankrupt as the economy it soon presided over. Revolution, followed by the dictatorship of a party representing the common people, was the alternative advocated by communism and fascism alike. Obviously, the idioms of these two competing ideologies were distinctive, as were their putative goals. Communism preached the message of classless universalism, while fascism espoused the particularism of race and nation. However, before they could liquidate each other, these "colluding enemies" had "first to eliminate what separated them": the liberal, democratic order and all independent spaces of freedom.

Like Ernst Nolte, Furet believes that while fascism and communism grew out of the same soil, the two ideologies have an asymmetrical relationship to each other. Fascism is essentially a reaction to, and an outgrowth of, communism from which it learned many of its political methods. In power, both regimes combined ideology and terror in a manner that was unprecedented, rightly earning them the "totalitarian" epithet. Once Bolshevism had tightened its grip on the Russian people and on neighboring nations, its promise of liberation quickly dissipated at home. But outside the Soviet Empire, the "ideological passion" lasted much longer. Sequestrated from the brutal reality of Soviet life, many Western intellectuals continued to propagate the communist idea. Fascism provided the necessary foil and justification. Since, in the 1930s and 1940s, no foe was greater than fascism, it appeared to follow that no position was more correct, urgent, and obligatory than "anti-fascism."

In this polar discourse no one could be an authentic anti-fascist who was also a critic of Russian communism because the Soviet Union was deemed to represent the chief alternative to fascism and the only antagonist committed to defeating it. (Agonizing contortions were required to adapt this position during the short interregnum of the Nazi-Soviet pact.) In France, drawing on an immense fund of national pride and legend, it was common for intellectuals to invoke the historical parallel of the French and Russian Revolutions; the latter was considered to be a continuation of the former, the Jacobin republic devoid of the Thermidorean "reaction." This *idée fixe* Furet considers to be both an historical travesty and a moral-political error of the most invidious kind allowing its apologists to believe that historical necessity had not been deflected by anything so insignificant as real events.

After the war, the Soviet Union assumed the mantle of the foremost anti-fascist conqueror, and, the earlier pact with Hitler conveniently explained away, consolidated its hegemony over eastern and central Europe. Stalin's death in 1953 was the beginning of the end. Thereafter, the legitimacy of communism suffered a fatal, but protracted, hemorrhage. Though Cold War communism, again, encouraged Western Marxists and others to argue that criticism of the Soviet Union was political sacrilege, tantamount to supporting the arms race and imperialism, this kind of argument increasingly foundered on the spectacle of a people's state repressing the people in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, within the Soviet Union itself, the process of de-Stalinization "opened up a kind of geological fault in the regime, presenting its architects with the uncomfortable choice between a return to the past or a flight toward the future" (Furet, p. 444). There was no turning back. Gradually, the totalitarian system began to fall apart as its ideology fractured under the weight of reform, and as its willingness to use terror receded. Western Marxism registered the transformation by abandoning its defense of communism and concentrating, instead, on the deformities of bourgeois society.

Responsibility, irresponsibility and illusion: these, then, are the key concerns of Judt's and Furet's books. Few issues should be more important to intellectuals, and Judt and Furet are to be commended for reminding us of the obligation to confront them. However, while both of these books are disquieting, they provoke unease in ways that their authors may not have intended. It is not, principally, that Furet's book contains a number of small factual errors, or even that, despite his own warnings, he occasionally succumbs to an interpretation of Soviet history in which the French Revolution is employed as an interpretive grid. Nor is it that Judt believes, erroneously, that Max Weber denied the autonomy of the political and the incommensurability of personal "truths." These are small blemishes.

More troubling for the sympathetic reader is something else. Communism was invidious not only because it was repressive, but because it promoted orthodoxy and collapsed the great complexity of history into a tidy, theoretical schema. Is it possible that those of us who share the values of Judt and Furet are in danger of creating a new counter-orthodoxy and caricature? To say that communism was essentially motivated by hatred is simplistic; it reduces the communist *idea* to one theme, and dramatically underplays the hopes that animated it: the hopes for a better society, rather than simply an anti-bourgeois one. Moreover, the very notion of a communist "illusion" presupposes that there is a clear

distinction between what is real and what is dissimulated, transparent and opaque. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case. This is not only because events are generally too complex for us to understand them with any great certainty, particularly as they are happening, but also because totalitarian regimes were themselves able to *fabricate reality* to an unprecedented degree. As Hannah Arendt pointed out in "The Seeds of a Fascist International" (1945), the Nazis in the end destroyed Germany "to show that they were right when they said the German people were fighting for its very existence; which was, at the outset, a pure lie. They instituted chaos in order to show they were right when they said that Europe had only the alternative between Nazi rule and chaos. They dragged out the war until the Russians actually stood at the Elbe and the Adriatic so as to give their lies about the danger of Bolshevism a *post facto* basis in reality." Equally, the macabre history of Stalinist show trials offers many examples of party cadres who came to believe that they were "objective" opponents of the state notwithstanding their good intentions towards it. Let those of us who share the political and moral values of Furet state plainly that we think communism was wrong and that Stalinism was an evil; however, they were all too real and if they had been victorious it would be liberalism that seemed naive, simplistic and benighted.

Still, the substance of Furet's point is more important and persuasive than the term he uses to articulate it. Communism was a mistaken and obfuscating idea because it promised a world without divisions, because, in the ostensible attempt to end violence, it perpetrated violence systemically and on a massive scale, and because capitalism has become the future of communism rather than the other way around. The outcome of communism's failure is a European and North American Left that is in disarray, no longer able to cling to the idea of "progress" (though still, as the Blairite project reveals, wedded to a similarly vacuous notion of "modernization"). With communism's eclipse, there is no determinate conception of history, no future "stages" that the Left can bring into existence; only stages that are to be avoided.

The other problem of the books summarized here is that both fail to clarify (I do not say "answer," because this is asking too much) a question they urgently raise about political irresponsibility: How is it that some individuals fail to be persuaded by a political ideology while others fall prey to it? Like Judt, Furet is concerned to document ideological dissent as well as conformity, though unlike Judt, he focuses on a number of communist erstwhile believers or fellow travelers—Boris Souvarine, Pierre Pascal and André Gide among them—who ended up condemning the Soviet Union for its crimes. However, the explanation of how they were able to do this is invariably circular. Dissenters could see through the "illusion" of communism because they were independent minded, courageous and free spirited, and these virtues were available to them because of their independence, courage and free spiritedness. Judt argues in a similar vein when he considers the extraordinary personal qualities of his triptych.

Something is missing, but what is it? Let me concentrate on Blum, Aron and Camus. Is it possible that the strongest moral prophylactic against communism and fascism was not virtue but an awareness of the vices to which humanity is, by constitution, subject? Blum, Aron and Camus were encouraged to be independent minded because they were aware of, and by character more sensitive to, the disfiguring tendencies of people in general—that is, tendencies that exist irrespective of the regimes humans find themselves living under.

Political irresponsibility is deterred by the ability of people to realize that man is by nature a being prone to hatred, resentment, self-righteousness, vanity, pettiness, vindictiveness, and cynicism and that these emotions and reactions are signals of our inevitable imperfection. To the degree that individuals recognize these infirmities as part of the human condition, it will be impossible for them to be sanguine about dogmatic pronouncements and the simple division of society into friend and foe, human and subhuman.

In *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) Karl Mannheim described intellectuals as a group uniquely positioned to be "sentinels of an otherwise pitch black night." Unfortunately, the history of the twentieth century has largely proved otherwise. Those individuals prepared to stand up and be counted in dark times—and even in untroubled ones—have been relatively few. Most intellectuals, and not only in France, have preferred ideological conformity or at least received wisdom. The two books considered here are salutary reminders of this debility, but they are also stirring testaments to the few who were willing to be disconsolate and awkward in a murderous age.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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Aron, Raymond. *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection.* Translated by George Holoch. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990.

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