

# Jean François Revel, the Totalitarian Impulse, and Intellectuals

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (September 2019)



**The first chapter of Jean-François Revel's** incisive book *How Democracies Perish* is entitled "The End of an Accident." The accident in question is the future of the democratic process, more specifically, Western democracies. Revel's telling contention is that modern democracy is a historically innovative and experimental social-political organization of mankind. He argues that this experiment is ongoing, thus fluid. Viewed as such, democracy is a dynamic process that must be continually nourished and strengthened with the growth of institutions and attitudes that respect its complex and fragile core.

The idea of democracy as a humane experiment in social-political agglomeration, Revel contends, is a notable improvement over other tyrannical political systems that have appeared throughout history. This is sound advice for postmodernity, a time that is deprived of historical memory. The civilizing pathos of the democratic process is a significant accomplishment, for democracy is susceptible to attack through the corruption of the autonomous internal structure that defines it. This experiment is always in peril due to the great number of enemies that democracies must contend with—especially from within.

Let us compare democracy's susceptibility to internal subversion with what another seminal twentieth century political thinker, Karl Popper, has called the "tribal

instinct” in his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Popper views democracy as a system of values that is diametrically opposed to collectivism. This is the case because democracy strives toward autonomy for the individual and away from man’s deep-seated collective tribal longing. According to Revel and Popper, democracy signals an ontological manner of being for man in the world.

For instance, Popper argues that the lure of some intellectuals toward the totalitarian impulse is a return to a tribal and communistic social set-up. Coerced collectivization is the negation of man as a differentiated, existential being. By collectivizing human existence, we become prey to the fallacy that only under these conditions can man defeat the material and physical forces that dominate the human condition. Revel and Popper suggest the latter forces in question must be understood as metaphysical-existential in nature, and not merely social-political. The totalitarian impulse is incommensurate with the humanizing values that democracy promotes. This is the case because the totalitarian impulse’s main object of attack is human life itself. This is a significant analysis of the plight of democracy as a historical process. For Revel and Popper, the open society humanizes the social-political process.

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Both thinkers point out that anti-humanistic radical ideology is the greatest threat to the virtues of the open society. Ironically, the fundamental demand that the open society makes

of its citizens is to exercise good will.

***Disclaimer:*** *The open society in Revel and Popper's thought should not be confused with the Hungarian communist, George Soros', Open Society Foundations, where the "open society" is used as a pejorative social-political term.*

## **The Role of Intellectuals in the Open Society**

What role should thinkers play in an open society? There are still conscientious thinkers in our technological and ideologically radical age who pose this question. Responsible and honest thinkers ought to respect and protect human dignity, in addition to preserving individual autonomy. This should translate into protecting social-political systems that best safeguard individual self-rule.

While the vast majority of people view life through an apolitical lens, many postmodern thinkers and intellectuals make it their *raison d'être* to politicize all aspects of human existence. Paradoxically, this is particularly the case in democratic, open societies. Revel's poignant and informed criticism of radical ideology is insightful because he was a socialist in his youth.

This question is also important because politicization of human life culminates in mass murder – the moral and logical outcome of tyrannical dystopias. For example, the hope of some

social engineers in the 1920s and 1930s was to fulfill this vision with a society run by technocrats. That is, by scientists and engineers, and technology as its central rallying point. Technocracy it was called. The Soviets opted for the clinical precision of alleged scientific dialectical materialism; men, woman and children were accounted for, not for their intrinsic value as persons, but as temporary units that formed the collectivization of mankind.

The Soviet Union's colossal social-engineering manipulation of mankind was emulated in the West by sociologists and psychologists, among them B.F. Skinner, who believed free will to be an illusion. Today, more than ever before, given the vast data collected in the last hundred years about the destructive effect that radical politicization has on the psyche, we are left with the pressing question: What ought to be the role of thinkers in an open society?

Public intellectuals, scientists and philosophers, I will suggest, should keep an objective and disinterested distance from identity and radical ideology. Instead, prudence in private affairs ought to serve as the strongest guidepost of moderation in the summum bonum of public ends. Discretion has always been the moral imperative and duty of the wise. We can undertake our civic duty in a varied manner of ways. This is what prudence mandates. Prudence does not politicize all aspects of the human condition.

To educate, care for and sacrifice for our children is not only a moral obligation, but in doing so, our moral behavior embraces a form of civic pride that has its origin in honor. A rule of thumb is that intellectuals should mind their own lives with a degree of dignity and sincerity that serves as a

model of the common good. One egregious staple of hypocrisy in postmodernity is the call for a collective, make-work social justice whose proponents are unwilling to practice in private life. This is what Adam Smith means by affectation for the common good.

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, has eloquently argued that disagreement at the social-political level is always indicative of a greater confusion at the metaphysical and moral level. My contention here is two-fold: First, not all solutions to human problems can be construed as political in scope. Secondly, radical ideologies run counter to true humanistic values. In one way or other, we all participate in the democratic process. Even volatile malcontents who deface democracy by defending the indefensible reap great benefits from the democratic process. In the anti-democratic systems of government that radical ideologues promote sophomoric malcontents are not tolerated.

For this reason, we must remain vigilant of the destructive attitude that radical ideology poses for the open society. The totalitarian impulse works incessantly for the establishment of societies, where alleged equality of outcome castrate individual liberty. This is the purpose of totalitarianism. Thus, in the twenty-first century we find ourselves discussing the nature of totalitarianism—cajoled by the language of utopia—much as the elephant in the room.

## **Reason, Good Will and Democracy**

We must also ask, are conditions that inhere in reason as a

logical and self-regulating process equal in kind to those performed by mere intellectual craftiness? The former is the purview of truth; the latter the hallmark of radical ideologues. As an enlightening human modality, reason defends good will, which is a fundamental component of democratic values. On the other hand, we have witnessed how intelligence, when not guided by a self-regulating principle of checks and balances, can be destructive and inhuman, as is evidenced in blind devotion to radical ideology

Radical ideology is a form of social engineering that encompasses the human condition, for radical ideology is all-consuming. Sweeping through aspects of life that have nothing to do with the social-political arena, radical ideology coerces man into the delusion that everything is political in nature, thus necessitating political solutions. This is the legacy of Western radicalism in the twentieth-century, especially the Frankfurt School.

When reason remains grounded in conscience as good will—an ethos that makes reason a solitary wayfarer—it remains disinterested. Understanding and wisdom are the result of reflective thought. This is what Socrates exemplifies by the notion of a private daimon, an inner voice that guided him into always taking the right and virtuous path, often by simply avoiding falsehood.

The gravitas of private reflection is incomparable with social-political action-for-its-own-sake, which is the distinguishing mark of radical ideologues. Postmodernity is an insipid time when the loudest and most disingenuous politically correct clamor gains an audience. For this reason, it is important not to confuse reason with politically



expedient craftiness that censors good will and virtue.

Reason, by its very make-up, is universal and disinterested and leads man to embrace the logical outcome of self-evident truths. It is also self-motivated and contemplative. Reason enables man to embrace virtue, discipline and self-understanding as *amor fati*—that is, willingness to love our own fate. To care about our destiny means to take the necessary steps to secure the conditions that, whether in the social-political or moral-spiritual realm, enable man to cultivate self-rule. Reason dictates that the longest route taken is the hardest won. Reason is a tool that contributes to the transmission of knowledge and values.

Reason results in catharsis, a kind of spiritual purification that strengthens virtue. Is this not the same autonomous solemnity for which democracy provides the impetus? The irrefutable truth is that democracy allows us to become ennobled regardless of our inability to become noticed by society at large. Yet anonymity is the incessant gripe of narcissistic intellectuals. In totalitarian countries intellectuals who are committed to the party-line are handed control of ministries and cultural institutions. In democracies, intellectuals must carry their own weight in talent, vocation and toil.

Democracy enables people to live dignified lives. An honest examination of the role that reason plays in creating and upholding civilization makes everyone responsible in such an enterprise. Reason guides man in the pursuit of truth, just as truth exists as a central cog in the development of man. Reason and democracy are partners in the development of morally and spiritually well-adjusted persons. Democracy does

not have a moral obligation to make us happy, but it does go further than any other system of government in enabling man to attain contentment.

## **Intellectuals and Democracy**

Many conscientious intellectuals have participated in the political realm, often admirably and nobly. The list of these noble of spirit intellectuals, especially prior to WWII, is vast. However, this moral sense began to wane as the twentieth century began to produce what Robert Musil called "the man without qualities—who lives life in a pseudo social-political confusion that prevails over reason and morality."[\[1\]](#)

Many intellectuals have been shielded from human reality by an ideological fog that makes them serve tyranny as useful idiots, as Lenin aptly referred to them. In the twentieth century, such intellectuals played a central role in establishing and protecting tyranny. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we are witnessing the proliferation of this intellectual dishonesty.

Democracies today practice secular governments. The problem is that radical ideological secularism, that is, the transfer of worldly power from an ecclesiastical to a civil order has secularized all aspects of the human condition. In other words, we have squeezed the vitality, profundity and sublimity from human existence and institutions.

The re-education objective that postmodern radical ideology

has implemented on a grand scale has institutionalized the anti-humanistic and nihilistic axiological inversion of values, beginning with the Frankfurt School. Radical ideology's penchant for cultural and moral corruption has politicized aspects of human existence that are merely metaphysical-existential. This has turned Western democracies into a morally bankrupt and vacuous cultural carapace—a mere semblance of profundity.

When intellectuals willingly embrace power-play and radical ideological expediency, reason can no longer recognize objectivity and the pursuit of truth. Intellectuals who become committed to party-politics end by trivializing and politicizing all things human. The structure of social-political debate that radical ideologues propose in postmodernity is devoid of any semblance of a moral and axiological compass.

Because the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of people who embrace the totalitarian impulse is irredeemable, postmodern radical ideologues have opted to usurp capital from capitalists in order to fund their social-engineering cultural war. Radical ideologues refuse to take account of the overwhelming available empirical evidence that refutes their utopian social-engineering. The atrocities motivated by the praxis of radical ideology in postmodernity cannot be brushed aside. The imminent danger of these incessant cries for the establishment of hitherto tried and failed ideological dystopias is that thought and culture become collectivized in the name of alleged progressive liberation.

**Radical Ideological Malcontents and the Destruction of wisdom**

Radical ideological collectivization excels in converting everything serious and sublime into spurious cynicism and boutique-style radical political propaganda. This is a profound indication of the pathological self-loathing of radical ideologues. Soviet theorists understood that party-line political correctness could only be legitimized through doublespeak and false morality.

It is a precariously dangerous state of reality that radical ideologues in Western democracies have institutionalized the techniques of Soviet terror in holding trials for writers, such as Salman Rushdie, Michel Houellebecq, the late Oriana Fallaci, and countless others. This type of trial is a legendary staple of Soviet-bloc countries, we ought not to forget.

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Spontaneity, not radical ideology, is the predominant characteristic of genuinely humanistic free thinkers. These individuals never auto-designate themselves as intellectuals. Humanists—Christian and secular—should be the practitioners of common sense and good will, where what matters most is the coherent appropriation of human existence. Humanism has historically signified a mode of reflection that augments the worth of individual persons. Radical ideology never achieves this end—even though it finds it necessary to disguise itself by wearing the garment of humanity.

In 1960 Jean-Paul Sartre travelled to Cuba to witness firsthand the communist state that Castro's revolution brought about in that island nation. The communist system that Sartre hailed as the model for all nations was indeed a prison of the human spirit.[\[2\]](#) People of good will easily recognize Sartre's self-imposed myopia and the crimes against humanity that such intellectual dishonesty foster. Why couldn't he and other intellectuals.

Radical ideological craftiness can never convert itself into self-reflective intelligence, for self-knowledge is a component of wisdom. This form of contemplation is found in Plato, Aristotle and Stoicism. In ancient Greek thinkers, we encounter speculative and practical reason being guided by self-reflection. This is a key component in the foundation of Western democracy.

We witness reason coupled with moral virtue in the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, a thinker who was the embodiment of Plato's philosopher-king ideal, and Epictetus, a freed slave. Ironic, isn't it?

Boethius proclaimed philosophy to be a lady in his masterpiece *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He was an instrumental figure in establishing music theory in Western culture, for whom "music is associated not only with speculation but with morality as well . . . the soul of the universe was joined together according to musical concord."[\[3\]](#) This reflective temperament is important, considering that Boethius was imprisoned and was going to be executed. This propensity for truth is also found in Saint Thomas Aquinas, who recognized

the need to proclaim divinity and reason as equal partners in the search for truth.

Many conscientious intellectuals have contributed to the open society. Yet many others have been shielded from reality by an incessant need to impose their maniacal egos on human reality. Lamentably, the latter kind acts as judge, jury and executioner of the totalitarian impulse in postmodernity.

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[1] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*. Translated by Sophie Wilkins. (New York: Vintage International), 1996

[2] Nowhere is the totalitarian impulse felt stronger than in the romance of “revolutions” that take place in far off lands, where the natives will undoubtedly eventually show great gratitude to bourgeois intellectuals for their personal sacrifice.

[3] Daniel Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination*. (New York: Random House, 1992), 238.

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