



Jean-François Revel, 1924-2006 France's defender of freedom

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Jean-François Revel, who died at 82 on April 30, was a rarity in the landscape of leftist intellectuals turned conservative. Revel became the first French neoconservative not over policy matters, but as a defender of intellectual nonconformity and of a radical vision of personal freedom.

I began following his work early on, and his open break with the left at the end of the 1960s was as stunning as that of the Mexican poet and Nobel laureate in literature Octavio Paz. Both men saw a direct progression from dissent within the left to denunciation of a left that believed it could survive without internal controversy and thus without accounting for the crimes committed in the name of socialism and liberation. In American terms, Revel more resembled the art critic Hilton Kra-

mer than the journalist Whittaker Chambers. High modernism in culture, based on experiment and protest, was more important to him than the renewal of the political, religious, or social values of the past. But because liberty was paramount, he became a fierce anti-totalitarian.

In the full flight of '60s rebellion, I first saw Revel's name on a set of pamphlets he edited in Paris with the evergreen title *Libertés* ("Freedoms"). I remember one afternoon in 1968, when I sat in the attic at the headquarters of the Beat Generation, the City Lights Book Shop in San Francisco, where the latest shipment of little books from France had just shown up. The series, bound in brown wrapping paper and including polemics by the French surreal-

ists André Breton and Benjamin Péret, caught my attention. The text by Breton, under the title *Flagrante Delicto*, blasted an alleged forgery of a poem by Rimbaud. Péret's work was a devastating attack on the French surrealists who turned into Stalinists, in a confrontational idiom that remains shocking today, since the writers Péret castigated--like the versifier Paul Iruard--have become icons of world poetry.

Revel possessed impressive credentials as a cultural revolutionary. He was among the most outspoken critics of Charles de Gaulle's semi-monarchical rule, beginning in 1958, and his name was included, alongside those of Breton and other surrealists, among the signers of a document still famous in France, the 1960 "Declaration of the 121 on the Right of Disobedience in the Algerian War." Written by the literary philosopher Maurice Blanchot and the cultural critic Claude Lanzmann, who became famous for his nine-and-a-half-hour documentary film on the Holocaust, *Shoah*, the declaration was also signed by Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, the actress Simone Signoret, and a few other stars of the same magnitude. The "Declaration of the 121" was the last time the radical modernists, whose trajectory had begun in the 1920s, would play a leading role in French political life. But for Revel, it was an early step in a new journey.

I discovered, all those years ago, that two of Revel's books had come out in English--both of them wise and acidulous, both forgotten today. One, given the innocuous title *The*

French when it was printed here in 1966, was a scarring examination of political spinelessness in the face of Gaullism. An earlier and even more obscure work, *As for Italy*, had appeared in English in 1959 and was brutal in its demolition of the cultural and spiritual pretensions of the heirs to the Roman legacy.

But all changed completely in 1970, when Revel published *Without Marx or Jesus*, a tribute to "the new American revolution" that shocked his old comrades of the radical left. *Without Marx or Jesus* made Revel internationally famous, not least in the United States, and I met him on his book tour, when he spoke at a community college in San Francisco. Truth to tell, finding anything attractive about America made him too disturbing to be heard at the University of California at Berkeley or San Francisco State University, those centers of revived Stalinism. He seemed not to know the difference, and was pleased to have had the opportunity to see the West Coast.

His next incendiary device was a book called *The Totalitarian Temptation*, issued in French in 1976 and in English the year afterward. Therein he indicted the generation that produced the New Left. This new work was less provocative but was simply and grimly cautionary. He followed that seven years later with *How Democracies Perish*, in which he described democracy as

the first system in history which, confronted by a power that wants to destroy it, accuses itself. . . .

The distinctive mark of our century is the humility with which democratic civilization agrees to disappear and works to legitimize the victory of its mortal enemy. That communism shall have been more clever and effective in its offensive would only be one additional example of one power being a better strategist than the other. . . . It is less natural and newer that the targeted civilization should not only judge that its defeat is justified, but provide its partisans as well as its adversaries with ample reason to regard all forms of self-defense as immoral, or at best superfluous and useless, if not downright dangerous.

These eloquent phrases were written toward the end of a Cold War to whose successful resolution Revel contributed so much, but which also proved that some enemies of democracy would perish before democracy itself. They are still appropriate in today's struggle against Islamofascism.

I remember with great appreciation my discovery of Revel's work, and my encounter with him, and the necessary moral challenge embodied in *The Totalitarian Temptation*. I fear we shall see few or no more men like him, who were worthy to compare themselves with Orwell but would never do so, out of modesty. Already the idea that there was once a left that put truth before political expediency, and democracy before the incitement of the mob, seems a legend as distant as the early victories of Napoleon, if not an impossibility, like the alchemical production of gold.

The left never again attracted people with the talents of a Revel, and few among the neoconservatives with which he was identified, either in France or on our shores, could match him in passion and eloquence. When fresh, more objective histories of the 20th century are written, free of the burden of political correctness, I believe the line of conduct followed in France by individuals like Revel, who remained wary of political power even as they attained great influence, will be seen as the standard against which all others should be judged.

Aside from the grim realities he forced us to confront, Jean-François Revel remained a man, above all, of humor and protest. He never confused democratic ideals with the crude violence of leftist propaganda. We who follow on his path will be lucky if any of us can, finally, be compared to him. A kind of entropy has taken over the world of the mind; colors have faded into gray, passion and commitment have vanished, and few have the stomach for great battles over principle. Or so we are now told.

Revel was a lifelong enemy of this new spiritual ice age. Another thaw will come, and the majority of men and women will again believe with all their hearts in freedom; but when, we cannot tell. I hope then that the courage and greatness of Jean-François Revel will not have been forgotten.