

Jean-François Revel: liberty's champion

By Henri Astier,
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Jean-François Revel, who died on Sunday 30 April at the age of 82, was not just the grand old man of French political literature; he was a leading exponent of freedom in the tradition of Raymond Aron, Alexis de Tocqueville and Baron Montesquieu.

Revel, initially a philosopher, made his name [1] in 1957 with a critique of the intellectual fashions of the time, *Pourquoi les Philosophes?* (Why Philosophers?). The book contended that philosophy, having spawned a host of disciplines – mathematics, physics, biology, history and the social sciences, as well as the scientific method itself – was itself no longer a creative force. Revel's argument that since the late 18th century, philosophy had ceased to be responsible for intellectual breakthroughs provoked the disgust of both the Sorbonne establishment and the newfangled Nietzschean-Heideggerian school.

In the 1960s Revel continued to contribute to the history of ideas, with a book on Proust and a history of western philosophy. He ventured into politics at the end of the decade with his first international bestseller, *Without Marx or Jesus* (1970). The book, written after an eye-opening encounter with a United States in the midst of a cultural revolution, argued that today's true progressive force was not Marxist collectivism but US-style individualism. "The 20th-century revolution will take place in the United States", Revel wrote. "It can only unfold there, and it has started to do so. It will spread to the rest of the world only if it succeeds in North America."

Revel continued to define himself as a socialist throughout the next decade [2], but his defence of freedom and human rights as absolutes brought him head-to-head with the emerging Marxist left. In *The Totalitarian Temptation* (1976) and *How Democracies Perish* (1983), Revel noted that western capitalism, which carried with it an unprecedented degree of wealth and freedom, was rejected by "progressives" as odious, while communism, which produced only misery and tyranny, was regarded as attractive.

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"France's revolt against change"
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"In praise of French direct democracy"
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The communist danger, as he saw it, was as much moral as military. Democrats, especially on the left, no longer believed in their own values, and even adopted the mental reflexes of totalitarianism (character assassination, doublethink, wilful disregard for facts, and propaganda). Revel deplored what he regarded as an intellectual surrender, and concluded that the west was hopeless at exploiting its own strengths. Democracies, he feared [3], were bent more on rushing to their own enemy's rescue than on self-preservation: in the end the law of political evolution might lead to the "survival of the least fit".

Liberalism vs communism

Revel's anti-communism, coupled with his robust polemical style, led many to regard him as a conservative. The influential London journal the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), in its review of *How Democracies Perish*, linked Revel to the *Nouvelle droite*, as France's intellectual far-right was known at the time. Such judgments were and are based on a deep intellectual misunderstanding that is grounded on the idea – long promoted by the Soviet Union and its admirers – that only a fascist could oppose communism.

Furthermore, Revel's dire warnings in the 1980s led after the cold war to a charge that stuck to the end [4] of his life: that he was wrong about the supposed invincibility of communism and the vulnerability of the west. But the "Revel-was-wrong-about-the-strength-of-communism" virus is proving so prolific that I have to inject more antibodies into the meme pool.

Revel never argued that communism could not be vanquished. He said it was irreversible only insofar as it could not be reformed. Ever since *Without Marx or Jesus* he had always argued that the Soviet Union was an unmitigated disaster. As he wrote in *The Totalitarian Temptation*: "The only way to improve communism is to remove it."

How could Revel, the arch-defender of liberty, have regarded freedom as doomed? To imagine so is to miss the crucial distinction between warning and prophesying; pointing out the mortality of democracy, after all, is not the same as predicting its certain death.

The purpose of *How Democracies Perish* was to urge the west to stand up for its own values [5]. The book sought to show that communist totalitarianism was beyond redemption and should not be placated, and that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics owed its continued survival to its repressive apparatus and the complacent help of democracies.

In *Democracy Against Itself* (1992) Revel lambasts the idea – fashionable at the time – that communism had always been headed for the dustbin of history and that alarm had been misplaced: "It is a little bit as if someone said: 'You can see there was no reason to be worried in 1805 about Napoleon because in 1815 he was in St Helena.' The whole point is that he ended up there as a result of actions by leaders and peoples, not because in 1805 Napoleon was not dangerous or was bound to go out."

It is particularly disconcerting to hear Revel being accused of false prophecy by those who, for fear of losing their progressive credentials, waited until the fall of the Berlin wall to criticise communism in a burst of (as he put it) "retrospective iconoclasm". Revel clinched the point: "An anti-communist is a dog', Sartre said. But there are two kinds of dogs: there are those who bark when the dangerous enemy is standing tall, and those who do it when he is down."

To the very end, Revel remained true to the doctrine that gives his whole work strength and coherence: classical liberalism, i.e. a belief in individual rights and markets underpinned by the rule of law.

It was not him, but his fellow socialists who changed. Until around 1970, the phrase "anti-communist left" did not sound like an oxymoron. No one accused Albert Camus or John F Kennedy of being reactionaries. In the US, the trade-union movement and the Democratic Party were dominated by "cold-war liberals". So was France's mainstream left. "The communists belong neither to the right nor the left, but to the east", said Socialist prime minister Guy Mollet in the 1950s. Anti-communism was most virulent in the libertarian left. In 1968 student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit famously poured scorn on *crapules staliniennes* (Stalinian scum).

Then the mood on the political and intellectual left shifted throughout the western world. I have not studied the resurgence of Marxism in detail, but I suspect it originated in the United States. The anti-war movement – originally a libertarian one – led to questioning of the cold war mentality and ultimately sympathy with the enemy, or at least a feeling that a deal could be reached with it.

I have not tested this hypothesis – it is entirely possible that the switch began in Europe. Be it as it may, on both sides of the Atlantic a feeling arose among leftwing political and intellectual elites that communists were no longer beyond the pale and could be brought into the democratic fold. In France, this led in 1971 to an electoral alliance between a rejuvenated Socialist Party under François Mitterrand and a strongly pro-Moscow French Communist Party (PCF). The deal, in essence, was: you embrace our democratic politics, we embrace your collectivist economics.

Revel saw this alliance as unnatural. He felt communism was no more compatible with democracy than wholesale nationalisations, and urged socialists not to compromise their liberal roots. He became, in short, irrelevant to the left, and as a result was treated as a reactionary renegade.

Revel was always uncomfortable with the conservative label that was attached to him from the late 1970s. Many of the libertarian values he had always championed [6] had indeed migrated to the intellectual right. But he was never close to the Gaullists, whom he knew to be worshippers of the state. Revel's natural political home was the shrinking space in the centre, where France's liberal misfits from both the right and the left tend to converge.

As editor of the newsweekly *L'Express* between 1978 and 1981 he resisted efforts by the new owner, Franco-British magnate James Goldsmith, to extend unwavering support to President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Revel fought hard to keep leftwingers on his staff, and quit when one of them, deputy editor Olivier Todd, was sacked for an anti-Giscardian offence.

The French Orwell

Revel never founded a school – an early dalliance with the Gurdjieff crowd inoculated him against the guru pose. But he did spawn disciples, and these had nothing to do with the fascists of the *Nouvelle droite* (who were just as anti-American and illiberal as the Marxoid left.) The movement he inspired was the anti-totalitarian left that emerged in the late 1970s, and is still a major intellectual force in France. His – now orphaned – spiritual children are the likes of Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkielkraut, Pascal Bruckner, and André Glucksmann [7].

The 20th-century thinker Revel was closest to was George Orwell – who also blamed his contemporaries for ignoring the mortality of democracy and for siding with its Nazi and communist enemies (I have explored the kinship between the two writers in an earlier article [8]).

Revel's most Orwellian work – and perhaps his most profound – was *The Flight from Truth* (1988; one may find the French title more telling: *La Connaissance inutile*). The book dissects

with clinical precision the flexibility of the human mind, its ability to sift information to suit our prejudices:

"The tragedy of our societies is not that we lack the data we need to make informed choices, but that we choose to ignore them. It is true that technology and science are thriving, and we have learned to think rationally on specific projects, like building planes or setting up unit-trust funds. But outside our speciality, we are as prone to superstition and illogical thinking as Neolithic men."

Revel, who has researched the subject thoroughly, traces a catalogue of fallacies peddled from America to Zimbabwe by "opinion makers" who are in fact slaves to humanity's primeval preference for mental comfort over knowledge. The main point of *Flight from Truth*, however, is not that humans are unredeemable liars. On the contrary, just like Orwell, Revel exhorts us to make use of our capacity to take in reality and see what is in front of our noses. "This is important to democratic civilisation, because freedom thrives as much on truth and honesty as tyranny does on lying and cheating."

French commentators often portrayed Revel as a misanthrope, but that was never the way I imagined him. I delighted in his pamphleteering style, often laughing out loud, and pictured him like the jolly narrator of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* – a benevolent, liberal host inviting others to share in his intellectual and gastronomical feats.

I was an admirer, not a friend, of Revel's but I did meet him half-a-dozen times and he was as I had imagined. The first occasion was fourteen years ago. I had sent him the review of *Democracy Against Itself* I had written for the *TLS*, and he had liked it enough to invite me to lunch. As I walked into a restaurant in Montparnasse I felt I was entering hallowed ground. "I have come to see Monsieur Revel", I said shyly, and was taken to the best table where my host was chatting with the *patron*. He gave me a big smile, as if he had been as much looking forward to the meeting as I had.

Revel the man [9] was remarkably similar to the writer: he spoke with the same breezy erudition, common sense and vividness that imbued his books. In October 1992, I put it to him that most reviewers seemed to have missed the point of his latest book. He said:

"I noticed that very early on, after *Pourquoi les philosophes*. People accused me of putting forward arguments I had never held. They were only looking at the few pages in which I mentioned French academics – while my point was much broader than that! The pattern would be repeated with my other books: they were extremely popular, people from all over the world wrote to encourage me, but journalists and reviewers rounded on me for the wrong reasons."

Another example was a 1984 piece on *How Democracies Perish* in the *TLS*, which described Revel as a far-right figure and said he was attacking the pacifist movement of the time. "That was just not true. The big rallies against the deployment of Euromissiles took place in 1983, well after I had handed in the manuscript. It was not a study of pacifism. You see, if you write a book on fly-fishing and people say that your fox-hunting manual is not good, you are entitled to feel surprised."

Although Revel was largely misunderstood by the intelligentsia, his books were indeed huge successes. He was arguably the most powerful and influential of all 20th-century anti-totalitarian writers. Liberty has lost an irreplaceable champion.

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