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Ecclesiastes 12:12

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Jean-François Revel's HOW DEMOCRACIES PERISH

by David Chilton

"Democracy may, after all, turn out to have been a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes." With that cheery statement, the famous French ex-socialist thinker Jean-François Revel begins this thoughtful and sobering book. The effect of this book is more than sobering, in fact. It is a horror story come to life. It has all the gripping yet appalling fascination of watching a man being hanged—with the slowly dawning realization that it is a reflection in a mirror.

The Founding Fathers, as all students of history (should) know, abhorred the very idea of democracy, regarding it as "the devil's own government." One of the primary reasons for framing the U.S. Constitution, wrote Edmund Randolph, was that "none of the [State] constitutions have provided sufficient checks against democracy." In the famous tenth essay of the *Federalist Papers* James Madison wrote that pure democracies "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." (For good analyses of some of the central flaws of democracy, see *The Works of Fisher Ames*, 2 vols.; James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*; W. E. H. Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty*, 2 vols.; and Felix Morley, *Freedom and Federalism*, all available from the Liberty Fund, 7440 North Shadeland, Indianapolis, IN 46250; and, of course, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*).

The reason why the American system has survived this long is, of course, that it is not a "pure" democracy: much of it is based on the Christian anti-democratic tradition (see R. J. Rushdoony's *This Independent Republic* and *The Nature of the American System*). But our nation's steady departure from Christianity has caused our democratic anti-Christian tradition to bring forth its suicidal fruit. The culture is collapsing under its own weight; it is sacrificing its children on the altar of self-consistency.

This is, naturally, causing great alarm in all quarters of the Republic, and many are frantically rushing forward with solutions, most of them pure balderdash. Even sincere Christians are worrying themselves sick over how to "get back" to the doctrines of the Founding Fathers, as if that humanistic lawyers' compromise known as the Constitution could be resurrected, or could be of much use if it were (it's what helped us get into this mess in the first place). Nor is the answer to be found in brilliant, exciting French thinkers, of either the nineteenth century (Tocqueville) or the twentieth (Revel). Their writings are of little value for ultimate solutions. On the other hand, they are superb political diagnosticians: they can spot a symptom a mile away. And if Tocqueville were alive today, he would no doubt agree with Revel.

The disease is widespread, malignant, and in the terminal stages. *How Democracies Perish* is a magnificent work of political science; and, on a literary level, it is more than easy reading. Every page sparkles with remarkable insights, phrased (even in translation) in a striking, witty, and memorably aphoristic style. The book is difficult to review for that reason: there is something eminently quotable on literally every page. All I can hope to do in this review is to provide a brief introduction to some of Revel's main concerns, especially as they are outlined in the opening chapters (he provides detailed exposition and illustration of these in the later sections of the book).

The Failure of Democracy

Revel begins by drawing attention to one of the most astonishing developments of all political history: "Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is working to destroy it. The distinguishing mark of our century is not so much communism's determination to erase democracy from our planet, or its frequent success in pursuing that end, as it is the humility with which democracy is not only consenting to its own obliteration but is contriving to legitimize its deadliest enemy's victory.

"It is natural for communism to try with all its might to eliminate democracy. . . . But it is less natural and more novel that the stricken civilization should not only be deeply convinced of the rightness of its own defeat, but that it should regale its friends and foes with reasons why defending itself would be immoral and, in any event, superfluous, even dangerous" (p. 7). The problem is similar to what Jeane J. Kirkpatrick has called the "Blame America First" syndrome, which originates with American, not foreign, intellectuals. It is the Guilt-Manipulator's Ethic on an international scale: *everything* is the fault of the West; we are morally incapable of making judgments about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as long as anyone in the Third World goes to bed hungry; we didn't pass the Equal Rights Amendment, so we deserve to be invaded and destroyed; etc.

It is clearly a goofy notion, based on an unbiblical view of sin and righteousness. In truth, it is a humanistic substitution of guilt feelings about nonexistent "crimes" for the *real* guilt which comes from having violated God's law. "Self-criticism is, of course, one of the vital springs of democratic civilization and one of the reasons for its superiority over all other systems. But constant self-condemnation, often with little or no foundation, is a source of weakness and inferiority in dealing with an imperial power that has dispensed with such scruples. Believing it is always right, even when the facts say it's wrong, is as blinding and weakening to a society as to an individual. But assuming it is always wrong, whatever the truth may be, is discouraging and paralyzing. Not only do the democracies today blame themselves for sins they

have not committed, but they have formed the habit of judging themselves by ideals so inaccessible that the defendants are automatically guilty. It follows that a civilization that feels guilty for everything it is and does and thinks will lack the energy and conviction to defend itself when its existence is threatened" (pp.9f.). Guilt, whether real or imagined, tends to produce passivity and impotence; it leads to an inability to deal with evil.

Tocqueville warned that a democratic state would be a tyranny. The word "totalitarian" did not exist in his day, and he was not sure what to call the monster he saw rising in the future, but he accurately described the coming of what Revel calls "the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient state that twentieth-century man knows so well: the state as protector, entrepreneur, educator; the physician-state, impresario-state, bookseller-state, helpful and predatory, tyrant and guardian, economist, journalist, moralist, shipper, trader, advertiser, banker, father and jailer all at once. The state ransoms and the state subsidizes. It settles without violence into a wheedling, meticulous despotism that no monarchy, no tyranny, no political authority of the past had the means to achieve. Its power borders on the absolute partly because it is scarcely felt, having increased by imperceptible stages at the wishes of its subjects, who turn to it instead of to each other" (p. 13; cf. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Part 4, Chapter 6).

But that is only one side of the coin. The democratic state is not only (seemingly) omnipotent; it is impotent at the same time. "By invading every area of life, the democratic state has stuffed itself with more responsibilities than powers. . . . the state's duties are expanding faster than its means of performing them" (p. 14). By promising everything to everybody, the democratic state inevitably splinters into special interest groups. As Ludwig von Mises observed in his little classic *Economic Policy* (pp. 96ff.), "There are no longer real political parties in the old classical sense, but merely *pressure groups*. . . . You have, in the legislatures, representatives of wheat, of meat, of silver, and of oil, but first of all, of the various unions. Only one thing is *not* represented in the legislature: the nation as a whole. There are only a few people who take the side of the nation as a whole. And all problems, even those of foreign policy, are seen from the point of view of the special pressure group interests. . . . People today do not talk about freedom: they talk about a *higher price for peanuts*."

But Revel does not think that the major threat to the democracies is internal as such. The problem, he says, is that the barbarians are at the gates. We are confronted with a real enemy in the imperial might of the Soviet Union. But the inherent weaknesses of democracy have blinded and disarmed us in the face of an implacable and insatiable foe. If we continue in the course of the last several decades, Revel argues, we not only guarantee that World War III will take place—we guarantee that we will lose. (Indeed, after reading his book you may conclude that the war is already over.)

Western Delusions About the Soviets

The U.S.S.R.'s economic system doesn't work. Everybody but Ronald Sider and *Christianity Today* knows that. The conclusion is often drawn, therefore, that the Soviet Union could never defeat the West because it is not as economically productive. If the Soviets are too weak even to feed their own people sufficiently, they surely cannot conquer the West. Revel agrees with the logic, but not with the conclusion. "It stands to reason that a system that in three quarters of a century has merely perpetuated its people's shortages of food and medical care is doomed to disappear someday. But not in time to change the near future for us." In the short run, a tyranny can easily afford to invest its resources in military adventurism rather than in progressive eco-

nomic development. "The idea that an authoritarian political system must collapse because it cannot provide a decent life for its citizenry can occur only to a democrat. . . . The notion that whoever holds power must clear out because his subjects are discontented or dying of hunger or distress is a bit of whimsy that history has tolerated wondrously few times in real life" (p. 17). "The prime question of our time is which of the two events will take place first: the destruction of democracy by communism or communism's death of its own sickness? It seems to me that the second process is advancing less rapidly than the first" (p. 85).

Another major delusion shared by Western intellectuals is that the U.S.S.R. is not really aggressive or expansionist at all (but might become so if we antagonize it by our own hysteria). The question can be settled by a simple method, Revel says: "The best way to find out if a policy of expansionism exists is to see if there has been expansion" (p. 22). Well, lo and behold. There has been, hasn't there? (There's an old saying about politicians that applies in spades to the Soviets: "Don't listen to what he says. *Watch his hands*.") Is there an international Communist conspiracy, then? "Conspiracy is too mild a term for what the Communists do. They have an overall plan that they follow methodically, patiently, relentlessly. They announced their intentions early in this century, they began to fulfill them under Lenin, and they've been at it ever since."

And how do the democracies, those guardians of Liberty, respond to communism's victories? "In a matter of months after each Soviet advance, the West accepts the fait accompli and acknowledges the U.S.S.R.'s ill-gotten gain, territorial or political, as a rightful acquisition; questioning this by any form of 'interference,' even verbal, is seen as a danger to peace" (pp. 22f). It usually takes about six months. "This is the standard period after each new Soviet thrust, all the time needed to overcome our strongest resentment" (p. 34).

An obvious example of this is Afghanistan, which has by now become rather stale news. The Soviets are still slaughtering people right and left, as vigorously as ever, but we've become used to it. As Stalin remarked, the death of one person is a tragedy; of one million, a statistic. (As far as that goes, we even got over the shooting down of KAL 007 [remember?] fairly quickly, and in no time flat we shrugged off the murder of Major Nicholson last March.) Thus George Kennan, torturing sense and sensibility on the rack of political logic, was able to explain to *U.S. News and World Report* (*Useless News and World Distort*, as some wag has put it) that when the Soviets attacked Afghanistan "their immediate objective was purely defensive" (March 10, 1980). Revel is right: The strongest taboo is the fear of facts. "Fear of knowing always leads to fear of calling things by their names" (p. 28).

Crisis Management in the 80s

The same applies to the Western democracies' reaction to the Soviet squeeze of Poland in December 1981—a reaction which, in practical terms, simply condoned it. In several ways, it would have been a perfect opportunity for the West to flex a little muscle and at least stall the Soviets' multinational advance. The U.S.S.R. badly needed the West's financial support for its empire; Western economic reprisals could have had a significant impact on Soviet activities. "Obviously, the democracies could not dream of making the slightest show of armed force. The problem was what it has always been: how to use the economic and political means we have to moderate Soviet policy. Such tactics have never, to my knowledge, endangered the peace, whatever is said by Westerners toeing the Communist line. In fact, they perfectly fit the definition of peacetime diplomacy. No one can be accused of warmongering because he seeks to suspend or curtail favors that are never repaid. Consequently, the only real question . . . had nothing to do with military

posturing. It was whether the democracies were going to consider the Polish declaration as intolerable and end the era of unilateral Western concessions. There would have been nothing wild or dangerous in such a stance; in dealing with a Communist world tormented by its inner contradictions, it might even have been reasonably effective.

"But the West never tried to play its hand, not even in a limited way. It just surrendered immediately. From the day martial law was declared, the democratic governments trumpeted that nothing had happened. And you can't react to nothing, can you?" (p. 39). This is not to suggest that the West made no response at all. On the contrary, there were two notable, well-publicized responses, both of them theatrical (in more than one sense). A number of intellectuals and artists gathered one evening at the Paris Opera for a genteel show of rather meek and ambiguous support for the Poles; this was followed a month later in the U.S. by a banner-waving, tear-jerking, televised gala called "Let Poland Be Poland," which really must have made the Kremlin sit up and take notice. "Perhaps it will counter with an evening of anticapitalist ballets," Revel quips (p. 42).

Fearful Western intelligentsia will sometimes complain that economic sanctions—for example, refusing to make a loan we know will never be repaid—would be "an act of war," or some such nonsense. More often than not, however, the standard line is that economic sanctions will have no effect whatsoever on the Soviets. Just how this accords with their notion that extending economic aid to the U.S.S.R. (which has been financially dependent on the West since 1918) will accomplish lasting good for all mankind, they do not explain. After all, they can't have it both ways. "Either Western economic cooperation is negligible to the U.S.S.R., which makes the whole theory of détente absurd, or it's important to the U.S.S.R. and suspending it would be an effective sanction" (p. 46).

A related argument during the Polish crisis was that economic sanctions would punish the Polish people, and not their leaders. "Unfortunately, however, recent history proves that standards of living in the Soviet Union and its European satellites reached their lowest point since World War II during the ten years we were flooding their governments with loans. From 1970 to 1980, the democracies lent the Soviet bloc seventy billion dollars, yet food shortages there were never so acute, except in Hungary, as they were in 1980-82.

"It is legitimate to infer that this money was not used for the well-being of the masses. If it was employed to reinforce the states' military and police power, as it appears to have been, then the loans served to increase the oppression of the masses, not to ease their poverty. In Western financial circles, the argument was, in the words of Citibank President Walter Wriston, that 'forcing Poland into default on loans to American banks would push the Eastern European nation into the arms of the Soviet Union.' As though it weren't already there!" (p. 48).

And thus we continue to be wilfully blind; we are afraid to know the truth, and so we choose not to recognize it. A recent article in *The New Republic* (March 25) discussed the anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream*, conceding that its demonstration that a fetus is a human life was "convincing," but that it "proved too much": for if a fetus is truly a defenseless human being, then 4,000 people are being legally murdered in this country every day, which means that we live in a truly "horrific society," surely equivalent to the worst of Nazi Germany. But "this, of course, is preposterous," the writer declares. Why? He gives no factual reasons why such "convincing proof" suddenly became preposterous. Yes, the data have convinced me that abortion is murder; No, it couldn't be murder, not *really*. Why not? Because it just couldn't be. But *why* not? Well . . . because it couldn't be, that's all. (Then why do I have all these guilt feelings? Oh, yeah—it

must be because the government has failed to provide adequate housing for homosexual immigrants, and because we are allowing a true moral abomination like South Africa to survive. I knew there was *something*.)

That's the way it works for abortion, and that's the way it works when dealing with the Evil Empire. We have deliberately abandoned our ability to exercise discernment, to judge righteous judgment. Maybe if we can just keep talking. . . . If we have another conference, perhaps with prettier scenery this time. . . . And we close our eyes again, so that we will not have to know. "The Soviets thrive on conferences, summit meetings, visits, friendship treaties. The sheer fact of meeting with us gives them a chance to drown their acts of aggression in speeches" (p. 51). The end result of all this is that our leaders speak and act (or at least act; speeches don't count as much) exactly the way the Soviets would wish. The debate is carried on in their terms, according to their agenda. "In practice, it's a code that comes down to two precepts. First, we should not deprive the U.S.S.R. of the Western supplies that help it to increase its power. Second, we should not exert any pressure on it, however slight, when it is rendered vulnerable by an internal crisis of the system or when an expansionist venture backfires, like the war in Afghanistan. Add a third precept: our neutrality need not be rewarded; the West must not insist on Soviet reciprocity for its discretion" (p. 54).

Revel summarizes the current international political situation which the West has created for itself: "Since 1945, the democracies have been unable to contain the Soviet Union's territorial gains and have deprived themselves of the right to challenge them by recognizing the sovereignty of the states that were, for the most part, under Red Army occupation. The democracies signed all the treaties, especially in Helsinki, that confirmed the Soviets' conquests. Then they dropped all insistence that Moscow respect the Helsinki clauses signed in exchange for the Western gift. Finally, the democracies let themselves slip to a level of military vulnerability that makes it impossible for them to impose their political will on the Soviet Union—that, on the contrary, forces them to submit to Moscow's." The West, therefore, "has always held excellent cards to play against communism; it is the way it plays them that's disastrous" (pp. 84f.).

How Tyrannies Flourish

One of the greatest failings of Western diplomacy is its failure to understand a basic *motif* of the Communist empire: the territorial imperative. "In the long-range Soviet view, any country is a permanent candidate for promotion to a higher category, from nonaligned to protectorate and up to the rank of inalienable satellite" (p. 58). This is, in the nature of the case, absolutely necessary. Communism, like Nazism, cannot tolerate other societies; they are both "systems whose survival depends at every second on a plan for world domination." The great talent of the Soviets "is their ability to act against the slightest point of resistance at any moment anywhere on earth. Nothing is negligible to them" (pp. 92f.). (It has been *chic* in recent years to speak of Soviet imperialism as nothing more than "paranoia" or "insecurity" along its borders; in reality, as Revel points out, "its neighbors have better reason to feel insecure" [p. 89].)

This territorial imperialism has two main advantages for the Soviets: First, it is difficult to oppose—the governments that seek to combat it become, by definition, "aggressors and violators of international law" (p. 63); second, "it is renewed, fortified and justified by its very success. The wider an empire is, the more it is threatened and, accordingly, the more it must expand to neutralize further threats. . . . Let's be logical: the only way for the Soviet Union to make certain its borders are not threatened, that they are fully secure, is to have no more borders at all or, if you prefer, borders that

coincide with the entire world" (p. 65). "So long as in all the waters of the earth there is a single rock where socialism does not reign, there will be boat people. . . . The only way to fix things so that no one wants to escape from prison is to turn the whole world into a prison" (p. 91).

What seems incomprehensible is that the West knowingly let the Soviets get ahead militarily, although this is somewhat analogous to our experience between the two World Wars, when the democracies tried to "bribe Hitler to be moderate by granting him concessions that, in fact, gave him the time to rearm and then, suddenly, to overrun the continent" (p. 123). Now we are trying to buy off the Soviets. Both systems, of course, are rationalizations of an envious will to power, and thus cannot ever be appeased. The point here, however, is that the democracies were genuinely surprised by the rapid growth of the Nazi Army. But the democracies of today have no excuse. The Soviet Union is not merely a "potential" enemy; it is an imperial power actively pursuing world conquest. It has used *détente* to lull the West to sleep while engaging in a "unilateral arms race." The U.S.S.R. has been aggressively preparing for World War III since the end of World War II. And now it has moved ahead of us in military capability.

The Soviets have won considerable opportunities for military advances through their financing and control of the international peace movement (for an extended study of this, see John Barron, *KGB Today: The Hidden Hand*, Reader's Digest Press, 1983). Accompanying this covert strategy have been its hypocritical but much-publicized offers of "peace," its "non-aggression" pacts by which it proposes that nations come under its jurisdiction without a struggle, its constant seeking for new agreements as soon as previous demands have been met. "All these offers, the oldest and the most recent, have been part of an extremely judicious Soviet tactic: to impress world opinion with the notion that Moscow is seeking *détente* and to blackmail it with the specter of a nuclear apocalypse while the U.S.S.R. continues to build up its strategic arsenal. To judge from the results obtained in the past quarter-century, it's not a bad system" (p. 112). They can afford to wait. "The trouble is that all these treaties, which the West sees as domes of stability, are viewed by the Communists as springboards for destabilization" (p. 107).

Negotiating with the Slave Traders

"The main lines of the Soviet diplomatic offensives were fixed in the early years of the Communist regime. . . . Very early on, Soviet leaders were extremely clear on their goals, namely, to get the capitalist countries to come to the aid of the Soviet economy whenever it is ailing, if possible at their own expense, and in any case on credit terms so favorable as to border on subsidy" (p. 100).

The progress of totalitarianism throughout the world "is rooted in a realistic appraisal of things, and it exploits the West's weaknesses, errors, points of vulnerability—for example, the fact that we are heavily dependent on oil from the Middle East and North Africa, where, by a bizarre coincidence, the two oil-exporting countries, Algeria and Libya, formed early links to the Soviet Union. There is nothing original about exploiting an adversary's weaknesses and seeking out his vulnerable spots. Communism scores its points because it thinks of nothing else, whereas the democracies' concentration is negligent, intermittent, changeable. Communism also advances because there is not an instant when it does not think of the non-Communist world as an enemy to be destroyed, while the democracies imagine they can buy peace by conceding communism a share of the globe. They forget that communism cannot allow itself to stop. It expands or it dies, since it cannot solve any of the internal problems of the societies it creates. . . . Communism is a better machine for world conquest than democracy, and this is what will decide the final outcome of their struggle" (p. 106).

"Throughout the course of relations between the Communist and democratic worlds, the question of 'which will destroy the other' has always been obscured on the democratic side by adventitious side issues. Communism's leaders have never concealed their belief that this is the only question that counts and that they are determined to answer it with a total Communist victory. No temporary compromise, they feel, can alter the final judgment of history. . . .

"Communism considers itself permanently at war with the rest of the world, even if it must occasionally agree to an armistice. This is nothing to be indignant about. We must simply recognize it; unless we do, we obviously cannot begin taking suitable political counter-measures. . . .

"In their minds, the aim of negotiation has never been to reach a lasting agreement but to weaken their adversary and prepare it to make further concessions while fostering his illusion that the new concessions will be the last, the ones that will bring him stability, security, tranquility. The Soviets' 'peace' propaganda, which to them means convincing others not to defend themselves, always overlies a threat of war, of implicit intimidation that exploits our very justifiable fear of an atomic cataclysm. This belligerent demand for peace merely summons the democracies to buy their security with slavery; it is an elaborate way to say 'surrender or be wiped out.' It has been called 'attack through pacifism'" (pp. 350f.).

Revival and International Politics

What sort of counter-measures should we pursue? Revel says: "Our aim should not, of course, be a total blockade of the Soviet empire, which would be utopian and unrealizable, but to bring our dealings with it back within the jurisdiction of the laws of the marketplace, to force the Soviet Union to face economic facts by offering it trade, not aid, and certainly no privileges. It is this return of East-West transactions to normal trading conditions that the European governments have refused" (p. 83).

This proposal is utopian enough. It would require a great deal of political courage and, more importantly, of moral authority; a caliber of character which the West has not seen in its leaders for generations. It would require nothing less than a religious revival—a real one, I mean, not the kind that happens every Saturday night at the impotent, guilt-ridden church down the street—a world-transforming return to the God of the Covenant, of the kind that turns men into Ironsides rather than Casper Milquetoasts. But this is the religion of people who know themselves to be justified, and who can thus face the world with righteous authority and stern resolve. Perhaps this kind of renewal is already beginning to take place; certainly, there are several encouraging signs of such a return.

On the other hand, much of contemporary Christian culture is also reminiscent of the scenes described in Salvian's vivid and horrifying eyewitness account of the Fall of Christian Rome to the barbarians: "The barbarian people were sounding their arms around the walls of Cirta and Carthage and the Christian population of Carthage still went mad in the circuses and revels in the theaters. Some were strangled outside the walls; others were committing fornication within. A portion of the people was captive of the enemy without the walls and a portion was captive of vice within the walls. . . . The noise of battle outside the walls and of the games within, the voices of the dying outside and the voices of the reveling within, were mingled. . . . There scarcely could be distinguished the cries of the people who fell in battle and the yelling of the people who shouted in the circus" (*The Writings of Salvian, the Presbyter*, Catholic University of America, 1947, pp. 173f.).

Which of these is our future? *How Democracies Perish* gives considerable evidence that, whatever the answer turns out to be, it will take place in our lifetime.