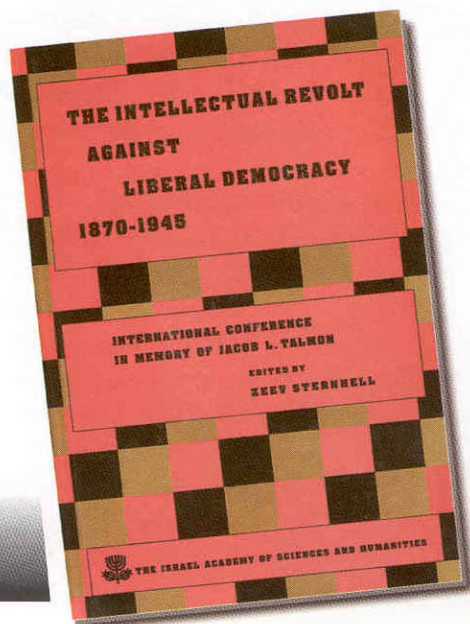


# THE DEATH OF PARADISE

The rationalists of the late eighteenth century ushered in a new era of optimism and faith in universal human progress. This idea, that human beings are able, in a rational manner, to create a better future, has come to be seen as a core tenet of "modernity" and liberal democracy. But, over the next two centuries, always lurking at the darker, largely unnoticed, corners of the unfolding Enlightenment were its malcontents. Not mere reactionaries, these often included "anti-intellectual" intellectuals, cultural pessimists, and negators of the linear Utopian ideal, in practice and in principle. Alienation, irrepressible emotionalizing, cultural and political fragmentation, nationalist and racial antagonism all conspired to attack Enlightenment values, including those of democracy and inalienable human rights.

At the turn of the twentieth century, groups from the French Personalists to the German Revolutionary Conservatives, no less than Nietzsche, held the Enlightenment responsible for Europe's increasing decadence and decomposition. Strong irrationalist tendencies characterized many of these movements, which were both philosophical and populist, both cultural and political. Many agreed with Maurice Barre that the rationalist idea had sterilized life, depriving it of its "spontaneous forms". Liberal democracy had demanded equality for what Nietzsche called "the herd animal, man"; but the malcontents believed that only the elite, the *ubermentschen*, could rise above the vulgar "century of the masses." With the addition of Heidegger's populism, and other contemporary trends, the philosophical basis for German National Socialism had been laid. Nor was it long in coming.

High unemployment, inflation and military defeat certainly contributed to the rise of fascist revolutions in the 1920s and 1930s, but these political revolts were preceded by cultural ones. No matter that many conscientious antagonists of modernity, democracy, universalism and materialism later opposed the Nazis or became their victims, the ideological framework of the Third Reich -- its interpretation no longer in the hands of independent intellectuals -- had already been set. Of course, the vulgar masses decried by the fascist elites were those that demanded their universal rights, and not those that obediently followed their new leaders. But, by undermining the foundations of modern liberal democracy, the anti-Enlightenment, which rarely supported fascism, had undoubtedly paved the way for it.



These are among the fascinating insights offered in *The Intellectual Revolt Against Liberal Democracy, 1870-1945*, a series of papers delivered at an international conference sponsored by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in memory of Prof. Jacob L. Talmon. Meticulously edited by Prof. Zeev Sternhell, who also provides a useful overview, this attractive 400-page volume remains both scholarly and readable. It was published by the Israel Academy in 1996.



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