17 *Mismanagement of Democracy*

FRUSTRATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT

For two hundred years, from 1589 to 1789, France was ruled by a dynasty of kings who wielded absolute authority over a unified and rather well-defined homogeneous country. When the last absolute king died on the scaffold, it seemed as if the theories of the French intellectuals were about to be put into practice. The suppression of the spirit of freedom and reason, the misery of the common people upon whose bent shoulders rested the heavy weight of an insatiable court, and the impact of liberal ideas manifesting themselves throughout the world, led to the explosion of 1789 which initiated a new era in Europe.

One of the most remarkable documents of the Enlightenment was Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* (1748), written through a period of nineteen years and still one of the greatest books on political science. It clarified the essence of law and government in relation to man, helping the intellectuals of the period to systematize their theories. There were, besides, the activities of the enlightened philosophers of rationalism, led by Voltaire, Diderot, Helvétius, and Holbach, who pointed to the rottenness and weakness of the social organization. Without the intellectual equipment of these men, without the unconventional and liberal philosophies of Hume and Locke, Rousseau would not have been able to revolutionize the thought of his contemporaries and to prepare the way for the rebels of 1789. Rousseau, of course, was a Swiss, but imbued with the spirit of French culture which made him think in French terms. His influence was not limited to France; before the French Revolution proclaimed the Rights of Man and Citizen, Thomas Jefferson had drafted the Declaration of Independence, clearly under the influence of the ideas of Rousseau, Locke, and other French and English liberals on the state, social relations, and natural rights.

The impact of the Revolution, tremendous throughout the outside world, was cushioned by Napoleon, who did not, however,

eliminate its effect altogether as the three major revolutions during the nineteenth century, in 1830, 1848, and 1871 showed. When Bonaparte was permitted to become a dictator under the name of First Consul, he thought that Europe could be forced by armed might to unite under the sovereignty of an imperial France. Blinded with military glory, he did not realize that force can never induce nations to adopt a political point of view, that only the power of a common ideal or the stress of common suffering can achieve unification on a voluntary basis. His political ideal was French and not European; his social ideal was the bourgeois, the satisfied, individualistic buffer between the upper classes and the masses of the people, and not the citizen whose social conscience would have prevented the ideals of the revolution from becoming lost in a new social stratification.

It is interesting to note that the young American republic, which lacked the age-old European conventions and had discarded many European prejudices, gave the development of the citizen a better opportunity than any other country. One may state without hesitation that the essence of French revolutionary thought has remained alive in the American Constitution. It did not altogether die in France, but lost a great deal of its impetus after Napoleon returned from Egypt and usurped the power of absolute government on November 9, 1799.

From then on, France lived under the "dictatorship of the middle class." [1] A brief restoration of the monarchy or the return of the empire under Napoleon III changed this fact just as little as did the revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871. As the upper and lower classes lost their political influence, the various strata of the bourgeoisie determined the character of France's policy, particularly during the seven decades of the Third Republic which they supported for the maintenance of their position. Theirs was a decided majority, established by free ballot since 1871, and the term "dictatorship" should therefore be looked upon as a symbol rather than as meaning forcible political control.

[1] Albert Guérard, *The France of Tomorrow*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1942, pp. 141ff.

FAILURE OF THE THIRD REPUBLIC

The Constitution of 1875, the result of a brief revolution following the defeat at the hands of the Prussians, was "admirably calculated to hamper effective action." [1] It did not even grant the French a bill of rights since it refrained from incorporating the famous Rights of Man which had been proclaimed by the Revolution of 1789. From its inception, it labored under a cumbersome organization and suffered from the instability of ever-changing cabinets. That, under these circumstances, it held out for seventy years, is not a miracle but a proof of the devotion to a form of government which best represented the interests of the majority of the French people. In addition, a perpetualized bureaucracy which had remained the traditional backbone of the French state through empires, kingdoms, and all political shades of the three republics, contributed to the conservation of middle-class rule. Like the French bourgeoisie, it survived the turmoils of the nineteenth century.

"French democracy has been moribund for years," Albert Guérard writes, adding that France "had not yet become, in the full sense of the term, a democracy." [2] There is hardly any perfect democracy in this imperfect world of ours but the speed with which Marshal Pétain could eliminate the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity seems to indicate that the hold of the Republic on the French people has been overestimated by the millions of lovers of French civilization all over the world.

The nation whose official stationery and whose coins bore the proud words "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," persevered in backwardness of social legislation. It began only in the nineteen twenties to modernize an educational philosophy which had fostered the cultural conceit of a bourgeois intelligentsia which regarded themselves as the sole possessors of the privilege of higher education. (Fees for secondary schools were abolished in 1930.) It steadfastly refused to grant women the right to vote. It was not able or willing to check the subversive activities of those whose pernicious influences and whose hatred of progressivism contributed essentially to France's collapse in 1940.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

It is significant that the French petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry did not feel antagonistic toward the moneyed middle classes and did not seem greatly disturbed by the influence of powerful industrial groups, such as the *Comité des Forges*. Overlooking their own poor chances, they worked for and with the rich and powerful, always hoping for the day when they could retire and live the modest life of a *rentier*, spending the interest of conservatively invested capital, the result of lifelong sacrifice and self-denial. The French *rentier*, a rugged individualist *par excellence*, became the very symbol of egoism and shying away from social responsibilities.

To be sure, many of these shortcomings are not peculiar to the Third French Republic. But as French civilization pretended to tutor and lead the civilized world, more was expected from her. Calling herself the *grande nation*, a title which she undoubtedly deserved in certain periods of her history, France was obliged to justify her reputation but instead permitted her political and social structure to deteriorate under the surface glitter of the extraordinary achievements of her artists and scientists. It seems as though the intellectual accomplishments of French philosophers and social explorers led outsiders to believe that the French state could be identified with these pioneers of rationalism and intelligence. But in reality France, having become a living museum, was in dire need of rejuvenation.

THE LAST REFORM ATTEMPT

Of the many French regimes during the past centuries, the Third Republic may well appear to be one of the most liberal. But "it was born feeble, it remained ailing." [1] Not that reforms were not attempted repeatedly. However, they did not have enduring results. Of all these attempts, the last one in the lifetime of the Third Republic, and the most interesting and far-reaching, was the reform of the government of the Popular Front, headed by Léon Blum, France's unsuccessful "new deal." But very soon the conservative elements of various shades, and even those who called themselves "radicals," began to stem the tide of reform. Blum's concessions to French plutocracy and British toryism in the Spanish civil war could not reconcile the individualistic tra-

[1] Guérard, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

ditionalism of the French middle class to large-scale social and economic reforms.

There had never before been a basic agreement on the part of progressives about the character and extent of reforms to be introduced. However, the terrible experience of German liberals, whose split had enabled Hitler to gain power at their cost, might conceivably have served as a warning to French leftists and moderates. The communists, possibly at the suggestion of Moscow's Third International, declared their willingness to collaborate with a cabinet whose majority was certainly anything but revolutionary. They agreed upon a reform plan based upon a series of political and economic prerequisites.

The political demands were headed by the call for energetic action against the French Fascist movements which had grown too strong for comfort and, like the *Croix de Feu*, the *Solidarité Française*, the *Jeunesses Patriotes*, and the *Action Française*, maintained semimilitary formations. Next on the list was a reform of the press, a very necessary reorganization aiming to repeal some recent laws restricting the freedom of opinion,[1] to control the sources of its finance, to end monopolies, and to prevent the formation of trusts. In addition, reorganization of the state-controlled radio was demanded, based upon absolute "equality of political and social organizations at the microphone." Important measures were adopted to safeguard the freedom of trade unionism and to better working conditions for women. For the people as a whole, generous educational reforms were proposed, doing away with discrimination against poor students and establishing, at last, the *école unique*, the unified school with free and universal secondary education for all pupils regardless of their parents' financial standing.[2]

The Popular Front's foreign policy wished to adhere to the system of collective security and opened to all nations the possibility of becoming cosigners of the Franco-Soviet Pact (which, by the

[1] The freedom of the French press, that is of some of its sections, had been somewhat impaired by Blum's conservative predecessors. On the whole, however, the French press was free and made ample use of its freedom. Its venality, its corruption, and some of its outright subversion played havoc with French public opinion in the years of crisis.

[2] This school reform, Léon Blum's favorite reform, offered some excellent new features. Daladier adopted the reform but it was too late: the outbreak of the war in 1939 prevented its realization.

way, had been signed by a conservative government prior to the Popular Front). The desire for international cooperation and the endeavor to pass from armed to unarmed peace prevented the Popular Front from preparing France against aggression. In view of the fact that the Nazi-Fascist combination of power grew stronger daily and rehearsed its war machinery in Spain, this policy seems to have been extremely unrealistic. Decrees for the nationalization of the armament industry and the Bank of France could not offset this vital mistake; moreover, they had serious domestic repercussions. They caused important elements of high finance in France to look to Hitler rather than to Blum and strengthened a definite pro-Fascist tendency of subversive character.

Objectively, the reforms of the Popular Front were moderate and logical. In fact, its program "still left France, in actual practice, far behind America." [1] The French wage earners accepted them more or less. The mass of employers, large and small, opposed the restriction of their "individual rights" when the working week was reduced to forty hours. French employers had considered it their privilege to exploit their workers in a manner not befitting a democracy. Now they were prevented from doing so.

Furthermore, control of agriculture according to a national plan aroused as much antagonism from the independent peasants and landowners as the regulation of the banking business, the nationalization of the Bank of France, and of the armament industry. A number of measures planned to solve the unemployment problem which here and there show traces of the early New Deal incited heated controversy without actually being seriously supported by the French people. There was relatively least resistance against a plan for the reorganization of taxation and for new social-security laws.[2]

While large sections of the people seemed to accept these meas-

[1] Guérard, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

[2] See Guérard, *op. cit.*, Chap. 9, "Social Pragmatism and the Blum Experiment"; J. C. de Wilde, *The New Deal in France*, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 1937; and Maurice Thorez, *France Today and the People's Front*, International Publishers Co., Inc., New York, 1938. (Thorez was the communist leader collaborating with the Blum government. His account is necessarily one-sided but interesting in many ways. It reflects the hopes of many Frenchmen under the Popular Front in Marxist interpretation.)

ures, the middle classes fought them bitterly and sabotaged them whenever they could. As a result, life became upset, further weakening France's political position in the growing European crisis. The aim of the Popular Front to strengthen France through domestic reorganization was counteracted by influential classes who were led by the "two hundred," the richest families of France.

In retrospect, the Popular Front should be regarded as the last important attempt to reorganize France, but it is also clear that the Blum government lacked the wholehearted support of the powerful French "dictatorship of the middle classes." Being a compromise administration, it could not oppose strongly enough those Frenchmen who preferred property to liberty. The Blum reform was by no means radical; it did nothing more than recognize conditions and tried to meet them with a minimum of disturbance. The bourgeois character of the cabinet, which did not contain a single communist member, would have prevented radicalism in any case.

The resistance against Blum's reforms opened the road for those who wished to capitalize on the discontent of the French nation. The French were split into a multitude of political parties, surpassed only by those of republican Germany. The Popular Front consisted essentially of Radical Socialists, Socialists, and Communists. The Rightists were composed, at the time of the 1936 elections, of Conservatives, the Republican Federation, Social-Action Republicans, Agrarians, the Independent Popular Action, Popular Democrats, Independent Republicans, the Democratic Alliance (a combination of the Republicans of the Left and Independent Radicals), and the Democratic Left. The names of these parties, for the most part, give no clue to their programs; the conservative parties had liberal-sounding names and the progressives were not so radical as their names would lead one to believe. The Communists were vociferous but limited in numbers and influence.

After the Blum government collapsed, its most important reforms were gradually undone by the bourgeois conservatives who again assumed power. Some of them preferred Fascism to a Popular Front, not realizing that such misjudgment would eventually bring about their own destruction. Thus ended the last major attempt to save France from disaster.

THE FRENCH STATE UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1875

In contrast to the American Constitution which not only outlines the form of the government of the United States but also symbolizes the political philosophy of the American people, the French Constitution dealt almost exclusively with the governmental structure of the Third Republic. Like many constitutions, it provided for an executive, a legislative branch, and a judiciary. It adopted Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers of government, but it did not expressly limit the legislative powers of the chambers to amend the constitution as long as legislation was not actually unconstitutional. In other words, the laws produced by parliament were of greater practical importance than the constitutional law. Only those who opposed the republic on principle would have wanted to amend the constitution or even vote it out of existence. There were no provisions which could have legally prevented such an act, as witness the creation of the Vichy regime in 1940.

Here is a brief sketch of pre-1940 France's political organization: the president of the republic, elected by the National Assembly,[1] was a figurehead. His executive powers were purely formal. He signed laws, could theoretically dissolve the chamber, commanded the armed forces, and officially negotiated and ratified treaties with foreign powers. In practice, he would depend entirely upon the advice of his cabinet over whose official meetings he had to preside without being able to cast his vote in any decision.

The executive power of pre-1940 France was in the hands of the cabinet of ministers and the two chambers of parliament. The real —not the titular—head of government was the premier (*Président du Conseil*, president of the council of ministers). Appointed officially by the president, he, in turn, appointed the ministers of his cabinet. As in Britain, he was compelled to base his political power upon a majority backing in parliament. These ministers were mainly political appointees. The frequent and temperamental vacillations typical of the French chamber produced absolute insecurity for the cabinet. The average life of a ministry, as has been mentioned above, was a short one; the history of the Third Repub-

[1] The National Assembly was constituted when the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies convened jointly.

lic shows examples of cabinets which did not outlast a week; the majority did not last longer than half a year. The weaker the coalition of parties behind the cabinet, the more short-lived its activities. Coalitions were essential because the French parties were so numerous that no single party could ever control a majority. Moreover, the French character made the deputies rally around an opposition rather than defend the men in power. Public opinion was by no means the sole cause of ministerial insecurity.

Behind the unstable cabinets, the never-changing administration (civil service) with its *fonctionnaires* (functionaries) formed the permanent element of government. The posts were publicly advertised and filled after competitive examinations had been passed.[1] The *fonctionnaires* received tenure and consequently a maximum of economic security although their incomes were very small. But the real executive power in the Third Republic was in the hands of the two houses of the French parliament: the senate and the chamber of deputies. This structure deviated from the original ideal of unicameralism and was the result of a compromise between royalists and republicans at the time of the creation of the Constitution of 1875.[2] The senate was the more conservative house. Senators were elected for nine years while deputies had to repeat their campaigning every four years. Senators had to be at least forty, deputies could be elected from twenty-five years of age. Often enough, progressive laws voted in the chamber of deputies were killed in the senate. For many years the latter body remained the target of radicals who clamored for its abolition. But the senate never considered voting itself out of existence although, constitutionally, it had the right to do so.

During the Third Republic various electoral systems were in use. The system of single constituencies, changed to that of proportional representation for a time, was reinstated after 1927. This system distorted the parliamentary representation because of the unequal

[1] This automatically eliminated candidates for executive jobs whose education had not been of secondary or university level. Primary-school graduation was required for even the lowest positions. The average civil servant had a higher primary or vocationally specialized education. Thus, while equal opportunities were officially granted to candidates, their backgrounds remained decisive in their chances of appointment.

[2] James T. Shotwell, *Governments of Continental Europe*, R. K. Gooch, "The Government and Politics of France," The Macmillan Company, New York, 1942, p. 140.

size of constituencies. Furthermore, experience had shown that the single-member constituency system tended to perpetuate prevailing political trends even against the wish of the people on the strength of the influence of the Ministry of the Interior. The central government exercised a great deal of power in all the provinces, sometimes imitating the Second Empire's "official candidacies" by indirectly endorsing those candidates who were agreeable to the government in power.[1]

As a consequence, the call for electoral reform went on for decades and climaxed in heated controversies during the last twelve years of the Third Republic when many people complained about the injustices of its electoral system without being able to change it. The fact that no reform could be achieved was the result of the practically unlimited power of a parliament which executed the will of a conservative bourgeoisie.

When the war broke out, Daladier demanded and received sweeping dictatorial powers such as no French government had ever received during the First World War. To be sure, domestically, the situation was far more precarious in 1939 than in 1914. The war was extremely unpopular. The Fascists and the Communists sabotaged it. The Communists in particular declared that they would not endorse another "imperialist" war. Russia, it will be remembered, had concluded a treaty with Germany shortly before the invasion of Poland by the Nazi army. Daladier decided to dissolve the Communist party and to permit only those of its deputies to remain in parliament who openly repudiated the Party Line. The moderate Socialists and progressive bourgeois parties had severed their relations with the Communists when the latter argued vociferously that the 1940 elections should be suspended on account of the critical situation (July, 1939).

When Daladier fell and Reynaud took over, some hopes were felt that conditions might improve, just as optimism soared when Gamelin was relieved of his command and Weygand took over. However, the poorly equipped and quickly demoralized French army was crushed by German dive bombers and tanks against which it was powerless. On June 16, 1940, the Reynaud cabinet discussed the British proposal of an integral union between Great

[1] Shotwell, *op cit.*, pp. 143–145.

Britain and France which would merge both countries into one and grant all their subjects dual citizenship. It was the most radical and progressive suggestion yet to come from any British government. Later historians may well see in this proposal the beginning of a new era of supernational cooperation marking the end of the age of isolated nationalism. But the French did not comprehend its scope; probably not even the British realized the vast implication of this stroke of their political genius.

Unfortunately, the proposal came too late. It is not yet clear whether the French cabinet declined or whether the utmost gravity of the military situation caused the cabinet to deliberate on a possible armistice offer to Germany after hearing the report of General Weygand. By a vote of 13 to 11, the cabinet decided to send the request for the cessation of hostilities on this same day, thereby ending further debate on the British proposal. Reynaud resigned. President Lebrun called Pétain and made him Premier. Pétain had been summoned previously from his post as ambassador to Franco's government in Madrid. He was known to be reactionary, not without Fascist leanings, and imbued with a conviction of the invincibility of the German military machine.

PETAIN: THE END OF THE THIRD REPUBLIC

Pétain's feelings about the Third Republic were an open secret. He had never liked it. He was known to have been in favor of a compromise with imperial Germany during the latter part of the First World War. The "Defender of Verdun" was known to be an admirer of German militarism whose adaptation to France he openly advocated after he had paid a visit to Nazi Germany in 1935. He despised democracy; he resented the men who ruled France, disliked the Anglo-Saxon democracies, and opposed the separation of church and state. Thus it was only logical—though humiliating for France—that his government sent him as ambassador to Fascist Madrid after the Quay d'Orsay had recognized General Franco as the legal ruler of Spain. Sending a known reactionary with Fascist leanings to Madrid was a gesture of reconciliation not to be misunderstood.

Hence his accession to the premiership in a France that faced negotiation with Hitler was not surprising. In fact, it was to be

expected: "The arrival of Marshal Pétain was not an accident," wrote a Frenchman who used to be one of the politically best informed conservative publicists in pre-1940 France. "It had been premeditated, prepared and made possible in the course of a long series of events. Very few initiated men knew about the intrigues behind the scene. It was one of the most scientific and perfect German maneuvers which have led France to her terrible downfall, maneuvers which were the more clever and the more perfect the less it could be verified that the old soldier was an accomplice." [1]

Since 1935, there had grown a tendency to build up the Marshal and predict that great political influence would emanate from him in the near future. In the same year, Pétain traveled through Germany and received the visit of Hermann Goering in his private car. Goering told him that Hitler esteemed but one man in the whole of France, the victor of Verdun. This was an insult to the French Republic but the aged Marshal, quite flattered, stated publicly that he was "very impressed." Again, after 1935, the French Fascist circles openly campaigned for Pétain; Gustave Hervé published a book demanding the premiership for the Marshal with full powers to bring about reforms. (Foch had never been accorded such political favor.) One of the practical results of this campaign was the Marshal's nomination to the Spanish ambassadorship Shortly after the outbreak of the war, the intrigues centering around the Marshal caused M. de Kérillis to write: "Some people try hard to convince the Marshal to resign his post in Madrid and accept the leadership of a cabinet for which several notorious defeatists are slated. According to the plotters, the old Marshal would have to play a role analogous to the one of Marshal Hindenburg who opened the door to Hitler in a moment of discouragement. One must come to the conclusion that such conception could not possibly have developed in French brains." [2]

There is a good deal of likelihood that German fifth-column activities reached deep into French society and had affected influential circles which flirted with Nazism as a salvation from socialism and communism. In any event, the development of French

[1] Henri de Kérillis, *Français, Voici la Vérité*, Editions de la Maison Française, New York, 1942, pp 266ff.
[2] Henri de Kérillis in *L'Epoque*, October 22, 1939.

totalitarianism showed many analogies with the history of the Nazi advent to power. Pétain followed the legal road toward the liquidation of the republican Constitution of 1875 exactly as Hitler had proceeded legally in 1933. Since the introduction of permanent decree laws appeared to be unconstitutional, the National Assembly was convoked and granted the Marshal the right to rule by decree. Parliament voted for the convocation of the Assembly almost unanimously; the communists had been ousted and were absent. The memorable days of July 10 and 11, 1940, witnessed the abdication of the French chambers which consented to the transfer of dictatorial powers to the Chief of State, Pétain, and, at the same time permitted the repeal of the Constitution of 1875. The dazed French parliamentarians, long undermined in their national morale, faced with a military catastrophe without precedent and an extremely harsh armistice imposed upon France by Hitler, obediently committed political suicide.

The long-ailing Third Republic had at long last passed away. Another political intermezzo began, the grimmest in French history.