Messianic Politics


This is a curiously disjointed book. Its purpose was “to embrace all the rivers and rivulets into which the Revolutionary Messianic flood broke in the early nineteenth century” to 1848. But in fact it consists of two quite separate “embraces” of two sets of phenomena.

Professor Talmon has divided his work into five parts. The first three are devoted to the presentation of doctrines: “Socialist Messianism” (e.g., Saint-Simon, Fichte to pre-1848 Marx), “Messianic Nationalism” (e.g., Lamennais, Mazzini), and then the opposing positions of the Right (e.g., de Maistre) and of the Liberals (e.g., Tocqueville). The doctrines, particularly the socialist ones, are lucidly presented in the form of a fabric of quotations carefully selected to exhibit over-all structures and directions.

The fourth part of the book is devoted to a comparison of the dream worlds of the messianic ideologies with the economic and political realities of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. The comparison is not wholly satisfactory for a variety of reasons. The data is largely confined to France and is chosen with a view to puncturing the premises of the messianic socialists alone. Further, the economic data available to Professor Talmon, as he himself points out, is not always complete or wholly accurate. But, in any case, part four forms an integral part of the structure of the work.

There follows a fifth part entitled “1848—The Trial and the Débâcle.” It consists of a study of the 1848 revolution in France viewed as a decisive test of the validity of the messianic doctrines. There are two major defects in this attempt, which is evidently a crucial part of the structure of the book. First, there is no serious effort to show that the doctrines were of such a character that the 1848 events must necessarily be viewed as providing a definitive judgment on their validity. Indeed, it seems that no such undertaking could succeed, for the doctrines, as Professor Talmon presents them, are quite capable of assimilating the events in France in 1848 as merely another logical step in the progress toward the New Jerusalem. In short, granting that the doctrines themselves demand to be tested for validity by reference to historical developments, there is no reason to suppose that the events of one year or even of the few years immediately preceding and following 1848 must be regarded as providing anything approaching the sum of the historical verdict.

The second defect is that there is no consistent attempt to identify the degree to which each of the major actors in 1848 acted in strict accordance with the premises of one of the specific ideologies so carefully detailed earlier. And consequently there is no consistent attempt to uncover
what revisions of each ideology were introduced by its sectaries in consequence of the 1840 experience.

The result is a curious disjunction between the first parts, which stand alone as a good introduction to the ideologies presented, and the last part which can neither stand alone as a chronicle of events nor stand in detailed relation to the expositions of ideologies.

Finally, the book’s value might have been substantially increased had Professor Talmon chosen to elaborate and defend the latent judgment in favor of the liberal case in more detail than was possible in a singularly short chapter consisting of but half a page. In this odd chapter he intimates that the liberals were more sane than either the Left or the Right in both principle and practice. Yet he undertakes no defense of anyone’s position. He only notes that both Left and Right detested the liberals, and then he declares: “The liberals could well have replied with the saying of Poincaré that ‘those who thirst before everything for certitude do not really love truth.’ Nor do they love freedom.” And with that he ends the chapter.

Nevertheless, the first and second parts of the book, which comprise half of the whole, will provide the general reader with brilliant introductions to the doctrines and roots of messianic socialism and nationalism. These alone more than justify the work.

Reviewed by E. A. Goerner

The Surrender of Japan


Here is the concluding portion of the author’s five-volume history of American diplomacy during the Second World War. In many ways this short volume is an excellent piece of bookmaking: it is clearly organized, well-written, and it deals with a compact subject—Japan’s surrender in the final months of the war. Moreover, Japan Subdued treats the most controversial aspect of the Second World War, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In discussing the atomic blows that helped end the war the author does not shy away from analysis and speculation of what might have been; a section on “Queries and Reflections in Aftertime” presents as admirable a survey of possibilities as one can find anywhere in print.

There are probably two major points of interest that will attract readers to this