A Reviewer's Notebook

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

I carried *The Heresy of Democracy,* by Lord Percy of Newcastle (246 pp., Chicago: Regnery, $4.00), around with me for several days, reading it on trains and in a Providence, R. I., hotel restaurant one evening. The experience was interesting and a little disconcerting, for every so often someone would look at the jacket and follow up the first glance with a quick double take. Finally one surreptitious watcher blurted out incredulously:

"You don't really believe that title, do you?"

So that was it—it was a "heresy" to be reading a book called *The Heresy of Democracy.*

Simply because he is tackling a modern article of faith head on, Lord Percy probably will get nowhere with his book. Yet its thesis should be well understood in the United States, for Lord Percy's wisdom was common knowledge to the architects of the American Constitution, particularly to the thinkers who insisted on adding to it the Bill of Rights. In his own difficult idiom, which makes use of many subtle and sometimes exceedingly tenuous distinctions drawn from a study of Christian church history, Lord Percy restates a theory propounded by Peter Drucker fifteen or more years ago. Drucker, it will be remembered, argued that the American Revolution was a conservative affair—a "counter-revolution," in fact, against the dangerous absolutism of the eighteenth century "benevolent" monarchs.

What the American Revolution succeeded in doing was to establish a real dualism in human affairs. Certain particular powers were permitted to government. But the individual had left to him a large area of life and discretion which government was not supposed to invade. Lord Percy would describe the old American government as a "moral" state charged with the duty of refraining to use its power to subvert the words of its charter.

The "democracy" established by the French, or Jacobin, Revolution was, on the other hand, a totalitarian affair. It is the French form of democracy, according to both Peter Drucker and Lord Percy, that is a "heretical" departure from Christian freedom. The weakness lies in Rousseau's concept of the "general will." Since a society, to quote Lord Percy, is "simply a number of human beings living in a certain degree of geographical contiguity," there are inevitably as many "wills" in it as there are citizens. The "general will" is a polite fiction; at best it is nothing other than the consent, whether voluntary or "engineered," of a majority of the voters.

Majority rule is certainly a useful device in many spheres of activity. But a majority can be cruel, it can be wrong, and it can be stupid. In making a mystical fetish of the "general will," the French Jacobins put society at the mercy of a majority that literally went mad. The American Revolution asserted the "natural and indefeasible rights" of the citizen against the State. But Rousseau was not interested in a man's right to be a hermit, or an eccentric, or any other type of unsocial or asocial human being. What Rousseau wished to "engineer" (to use the loathsome modern phrase) was conformity to the proper "sentiments of sociability." These were to be made compulsory through some sort of mystic communion with the State. "Anything," said Rousseau, "that breaks social unity is worthless; all institutions which set a man in conflict with himself are worthless."

If anything points to the Nazi concept of *"gleischaltung,"* this dictum of Rousseau would seem to do it. Lord Percy is assiduous in tracing the history of Rousseau's doctrine as it bubbled and percolated throughout the nineteenth century. Mazzini translated it to mean "one single God: one single master, the law of God; one single interpreter of the law, Humanity." There is nothing to quarrel with about the first part of Mazzini's version of Rousseau: the idea of one single God, and one single law in the natural sense, is necessary if one is to sustain belief in an orderly and predictable universe.

But in making an abstract "Humanity" the single "interpreter" of the law, Mazzini ran a terrible risk. The truth is that human beings are prone to error; they cannot be trusted to read God's mind, or to divine God's law. For all practicable purposes Mazzini's "collective life of Humanity" means the State. Once the State begins to apply the "single law of God" in political terms, it may find itself putting force behind the quite fallible opinions of 51 per cent of a vacillating mankind. The end result may be the guillotine, the concentration camp, or forced labor.

Lord Percy considers Rousseau, Marx, Fichte, Mazzini, Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler to be of the same foul brood. They all erred in making a religion of the State. But religion belongs elsewhere—as Lord Percy says, there must be a dualism in the life of ethics, with Church and State quite distinct from each other. The Church should try to make statesmen into good moral men. But it should convert them as individuals, not seek to participate directly in their exercise of power on a political level. The Christian "moral State" is a result of the disciplining of human beings *before* they assume political power, not the application of power by a theocracy bent on ruling this world as it prepares people for the next.

As Lord Percy puts it, the trouble with democracy is that it runs to what he calls "totalism," which is the word he prefers to "totalitarianism." He himself believes in any type of representative government that allows a practical dualism to operate in human affairs. It doesn't necessarily matter how many people vote, or what the voting qualifications may be, just so long as local institutions flourish freely.

Says Lord Percy: "It is of the essence of representative government that the public opinion which it brings to bear on political problems should not originate in political study. It should originate in groups formed for other purposes and living a life controlled by their own moral standards. If those standards are narrower than the standards proper to statesmanship, if they are no better than a moralization of self-interest—of the self-interest of landowners, merchants or artisans, for instance—the State will suffer; but, even so, a commercial or trade union morality is, within its limits, a real corrective of political morality, and the resulting dualism is still substantially better than an uncorrected absolutism. If, on the other hand, the group standards are wider than those of politics, if they are standards of personal conduct (to put it in modern terms) which are as binding on an Englishman in an African village as on an American in his own home town, politics may come near to the ideal of the Moral State which the world has so long been seeking to realize."

The foregoing passage seems to be the nub of Lord Percy's thought. While Lord Percy's distinctions are clear enough for the most part when they are presented as obiter dicta, they tend to become obfuscated whenever Lord Percy goes delving into some twenty centuries of Christian church history. Lord Percy's knowledge of this history is apparently prodigious. But the author's scholarship is not fairly shared, for *The Heresy of Democracy* frequently assumes that the reader is as conversant with the work of ecumenical councils, or with the persecutions of Decius and Valerian, or with the ideas of the "Augustinian Church," as Lord Percy is himself.

No doubt there will be some readers who will get plenty of nourishment out of Lord Percy's allusiveness and elliptical way of presenting his arguments. Church history, however, is hardly taught at all in the American universities; I myself took a history major at Yale without ever coming to grips with it. The job of "brokering" the full range of Lord Percy's thought, then, is something that will have to be assumed by someone who happens to know more than I do about such worthies, say, as Cyprian of Carthage or such documents as the *Ekthesis* of Heraclius, which is apparently not a misprint of Heraclitus.

The whole thing becomes inordinately confusing when Lord Percy takes time out to remark that "throughout the thirteen centuries of the Christian Moral State, the practice of government has always, for good or ill, marched ahead of its theory." If this is true, we could have stood a lot more in this book about the actual practice of government. Lord Percy does devote a chapter to this subject called "Christendom: the Practise of Government." But this chapter, too, is elliptical and allusive to a degree. It refers to the "medieval succession of Cluniac, Cistercian, Carthusian and Premonstratensian" with the sublime assurance that the reader will know a Cluniac monk from a Benedictine, let alone from a Premonstratensian. It tosses off references to the institutions of the free towns of the Hanseatic and Lombard Leagues. I happened to know something about the Hanseatic League, so I got that one. But if the reference had stood on the Lombard League alone I would have been left wandering alone in Left Field without knowing what the game was all about.

Despite its prickly quality, however, this is a notable book. It should help to bring Americans back to the idea that there are areas of human life that should be kept rigidly apart from politics. Government, being the application of compulsion, must be limited to a minimal sphere if freedom is to be the distinguishing mark of society. This idea comes clear amid the whole confusing welter of Lord Percy's learned references.

Moreover, Lord Percy writes exceedingly well when he is not engaged in being elliptical. His remarks on the modern cultivation of the "social sciences" is a case in point. He warns us against the notion that "human society is either a self-evident entity like the human body, or has been ascertained to be an entity by investigations of its structure as thorough as those of astronomer and physicist."

The truth is that human beings are so infinitely various that they cannot be collectively treated as an "entity" for study. Says Lord Percy: "Every science which is concerned with the study of individual man is a social science, in the sense that man is a gregarious animal; but in any other sense there is only one social science. What the 'social' psychologist or biologist, or the professor of 'social' medicine, really means by his title is that, especially under modern conditions of life, there are certain aspects of his science which are of immediate concern to governments. In other words, the only social science is political science."

Political compulsion, Lord Percy goes on to say, is the "only social fact. All other social activities become social because they are already the activities of individuals, singly or by twos and threes. Law alone is a new creation in society; and the State, in which it is created, is the only society which is something more than the aggregate of the actions and interactions of its individual members."

I have long wondered why modern "sociology" has become such a degenerate study. Lord Percy's distinctions would seem to provide the key to an understanding of its desuetude. It has declined because it has tried to make an entity where none exists. Naturally, when one studies a non-existent phenomenon one is apt to come up with rather worthless conclusions.