

Review of *The Flight from Truth: The Reign of Deceit in the Age of Information* by Jean-François Revel (New York: Random House, 1991 [1988]) xxxviii , 408 pages, index.

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Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda* appeared in English in 1968 but seems not to have had much influence on people's perceptions of the pervasiveness of distorted outlooks on the world.<sup>1</sup> Since then numerous books have pointed out an abundance of lies in specific areas. For example, *Political Pilgrims* by Paul Hollander [1981, 1990] details the absurd reports put out by intellectuals about socialist countries. Paul Johnson in *Intellectuals* unveils the moral corruption as well as the deceit practiced by major cultural movers.

While Ellul provided a rigorous sociological analysis of attitude management by governments and advertisers, Revel's recent contribution to this literature focuses on the egregious lies of politicians, intellectuals, and especially journalists on matters of public record. Why do lies pervade the media when truth is available? The French title *La connaissance inutile* might be rendered 'Futile Knowledge'. The truth does not seem to count for much where there is an option to have lies instead. As Revel puts it in the English edition Preface:

My principal aim has been to examine the various reasons why human beings so frequently neglect the genuine knowledge that is available to them and prefer to base their conceptions and their actions on false information, even though it is often against their interest to do so. This paradoxical behavior is neither new nor peculiar to our age; but in the twentieth century it has assumed a new intensity, and its absurdity seems all the more mysterious since no civilization has been as oqpnized around knowledge.. .

In fact, Revel does not explain this behavior, though he carefully dissects numerous fascinating specimens of it. As an old-fashioned liberal, Revel's critical perspective can only take him only so far. In this one aspect *Flight* is a shallow, in itself a futile, book.

It is still a very useful compilation of information. So pervasive is the falsehood with which we are bombarded that we lose sight of its outlines. We recognize some of the lies and think ourselves immune from deceptions, whereas each of us has the resources to detect only a few of them. We should therefore value Revel's charting of a great current of deceit, both as a reminder of how little we may trust the media, and as a corrective to particular instances of which we may not have been personally aware. I like to read media exposès, yet occasionally there were even major items that were new to me. For example, after mentioning that *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury handed out North Vietnamese propaganda when reporting Air Force bombing he continues:

*Time* unwittingly did even better, since one of its correspondents in Saigon during the war, an English-speaking Vietnamese named Pham Xuan An, was not an occasional "stringer" but one of the magazine's staff reporters. After South Vietnam had been overrun by the communist armies in 1975 he revealed that he had been a communist agent all along. Shortly thereafter

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<sup>1</sup> Many conservative Christians were turned off by Ellul's neo-orthodox theological writings, which became a neoevangelical fad, and never explored his far more important professional works, the best of which are *Propaganda* and *The Political Illusion*.

Phan Xuan An could be seen seated in the grandstand next to Phan Van Dong, along with the entire Hanoi Politburo, during a military march-past. (p. 245)

Do you recall any apology from *Time* for misleading their readers? Were there any essays in the opinion magazines on the vulnerability of the press to this sort of penetration and deception, and what could be done to minimize its effects?

Two chapters are especially pertinent following the Rodney King riots. "The Political Function of Racism" and "The International Function of Antiracism". Does it occur to the superheated brains of the media opinion mongers that the presence of thousands of heavily armed, highly organized, and thoroughly vicious gang members in Los Angeles might contribute to the reluctance of a jury to turn against the police who are all that stand between them and mayhem? Might not the debased and bigoted character of organizers and participants in 'marches for justice' suggest to them instead the true motive behind the charges of racism? That would be to give up a favorite and effective ploy by the left, as Revel recounts at length.

Revel himself sometimes succumbs to falsehoods. One example is the figure of 20 million Soviet war dead. The USSR originally claimed 7 million, but escalated the number during negotiations over the post-war deposition of Central Europe, as its propaganda value became evident. Besides being a nice round number, the 20 million figure was widely circulated, so they stopped there. It was a favorite of Walter Mondale who argued that the many deaths rendered Russian communists non-aggressive for fear their people would suffer again. According to a study published about ten years ago in *Commentary*, war dead were about 13 million, with another 17 million killed during the war years for political purposes by Stalin's regime. Another error by Revel is in his argument that Americans are entitled to vote out abortion since they voted it in the first place. He seems not to realize that *Roe v. Wade* overthrew state laws by arbitrary court decree.

Other topics Revel considers are the taboo against criticism of left-wing regimes, however murderous; the double taboo in the case of Third World leftists (to report their crimes is always denounced as racist); the viciousness with which the press unites to denounce and defame any critic; "The Need for Ideology"; deception and lust for power by journalists; ideological corruption of academics; and cultural leaders, literary and scientific, prostituting their reputations to propaganda purposes.

Revel is mainly concerned with the European press. There is a need for a similar comprehensive study in the American context, but by a real conservative, not a neo-con who shares Revel's blind spots. While it is a valuable reminder for all of us, Revel's book is good summer reading to prepare the bright and motivated high school graduate against the four years of lies to which he will be subjected in college.

## **Review revisited 2021**

After nearly thirty years, we see the media pursuing the same sorts of falsehoods. But the falsehoods have increased, and at an accelerating pace. Today the majority of the population does not question the identification of the media as fake news. But there are peculiarities. On topics where people are accustomed to being lied to, or which they perceive as political, they dismiss as lies what the news reports. But on other topics they still believe what they hear. But whenever one chances to meet

someone with personal knowledge of an event reported in the media, they always report significant distortion, even if the topic is not political. All news should be treated with skepticism.

But that is the majority of people. There is a significant minority which still follows the fake news with avidity because for them it fulfills a need. In fact the more that the media lies, the greater the need by this part of the population to cling to it. For when the media lies, they recognize this on some level, and they feel a need to be reassured that they have been doing the right thing by believing the media. They need to have the lies repeated and reinforced so that they will feel better about themselves.

There is also the alternative media. There are certain websites that post news stories. But most of the alternative media is in the form of commentators posting videos. These seem to be forming blocks according to what sort of narrative they promote. Most seem not to be competent journalists, but amateurs in search of stories that support their chosen narrative which they wish to repeat and reinforce. This could be, for example, that the people running the world, including politicians and media personalities are reptilian aliens. Or it could be that most Hollywood actors had sex change operations as children, and now play the parts of the opposite sex.

The situation here is that as the participation in lies by the mainline media and the politicians of both parties is so nearly total, people feel that some enormous and fantastic underlying secret must exist to account for this. But this group that rejects the mainstream needs news as well. It needs ongoing reinforcement of some general explanation of the way things are going. There is no such explanation forthcoming from religion, so the media, including the alternative media, are now playing the function of providing integrating myths to explain the way of the world. They are doing a horrible job, but people still cling to it.