

DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND TOTALITARIANISM

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Any study of the historical foundations of National Socialism must begin with the question: How could the totalitarian one-party state, in twentieth-century Europe, take the place formerly held by parliamentary, liberal, constitutional governments? For the totalitarian one-party state is, more than a German, a generally European phenomenon.

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Much indeed could be said about the various causes which brought about the decline of liberal social and political ideals in our time. I have to restrict my observations here to a few sketchy remarks.

1. First of all, we have to remember the *changes in the social and economic structure* which occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The old society, with its economically independent class of notables, land-owners and patricians, was replaced by modern industrial society, with its masses, and the number of economically dependent people grew and multiplied.

The process of levelling in the socio-economic sphere and the abolition of old differentiations and differences was accelerated and radicalised in all the belligerent countries by World War I, but especially in Germany. The first World War fused all of society, transforming it into a monotonous khaki mass, and subjected it to a 'totalitarian' public power which regulated everything and cut deeply into the private lives of the citizens. The State restricted freedom of expression, imposed press censorship, cut off public opinion from any communication with the outside world, rendering it completely dependent on a government-controlled information service. The State familiarised people with an official way of presenting the news, communicating the plain truth only in exceptional cases while distorting it in most cases by omissions or outright falsifications. The individual German citizen was forced to invest a considerable part of his movable assets in War Bonds, which later on evaporated in an inflation which ruined, along with the investments, any existing cash currency. The end result was the concentration of financial power in the hands of 'real estate' owners, the impoverishment of the middle classes, including the intellectuals, with ever broader masses of people depending on governmental or private salaries or rents. Uncounted independent existences were annulled.

In the wake of these general transformations, the party system also changed its original structure, which had been based on a liberal form of government. Under the influence of universal suffrage, the parties lost their original character. They had been groups of notables, clubs of politically informed and interested individuals, of socially and economically independent men; now they became mass organisations, run by electoral machines, with an ever growing party bureaucracy. The political manager took the place of the political idealist; propaganda, rationally developed, replaced personal conviction and persuasion. This entailed a change in the form and content of 'publicity': political reasoning, genuine discussion,

reflection, yielded to an appeal to the mass instincts. The writer who wanted to be read by the masses had to be, above all, exciting and sensational. The more exciting and sensational he could be, the greater his success with the masses. Most effective at all times was the gospel of hatred; least audible, the voice of calm and reason, because it called for thinking and presupposed a certain readiness to learn even a minimum of knowledge and experience.

2. *The political aims* were displaced in a similar way. The nineteenth century (especially in Central Europe) had witnessed the struggle for national unification and freedom defined and guaranteed by constitutions: the struggle, in other words, for the right of the governed to participate, to a certain extent, in the affairs of the state; the struggle for a liberal, secure, juridical order and protection against arbitrary interferences. These were ideal aims, responding, essentially, to intellectual or spiritual exigencies. By the end of the century, those aims had been achieved, by and large, particularly in Italy and Germany (even though they were not always enacted in all details).¹ They were now pushed in the background by the economic worries of our modern industrial society. The struggle for a higher standard of living for the masses became the central political issue on the home front; the idea of freedom was obscured by the idea of 'social justice'; liberalism was attacked and displaced by socialism. Political thought in general became more and more materialistic. The ideas of unity and liberty were not discussed any longer with the same fervour as those of class struggle, of material interests, the battle for daily bread—translated, in terms of foreign policy, into the battle for a 'living space', a large-scale market, sources of raw material, commercial privileges and problems of currency. Faced with such problems, the art of politics lost its ideal impetus and the dignity of parliament diminished in the public eye. The insistent talk about material group interests infused diffidence as to the personal integrity of the people's chosen representatives; the particulars of their economic debates became annoying to the extent that they were hard to understand, and the infinite complications of a partly state-controlled modern economy, together with the host of contrasting material

¹ With regard to Italy, we should remember the demands of the *Irredenta*; with regard to Germany, the revival, rather dramatic around 1918–19, of the 'Greater German' dream, which called for Austro-German unification, as well as the political agitation in favour of Germans who lived around or beyond the German frontiers, an agitation which grew more intense after the loss of certain German territories through the Treaty of Versailles. It should be noted, however, that the 'Greater German' problem played a relatively secondary role in Hitler's propaganda.

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interests which were represented in parliament, excluded on the whole the possibility of reaching agreements which could convince and satisfy the common man. Hence, there was a growing unrest, and unrest bred the demand for a 'strong man'. Large interest groups organised themselves to initiate 'direct' action, outside of parliament. There were strikes; the large syndical and managerial organisations exercised their pressure on public opinion; there were parades, demonstrations, mass meetings. Genuine discussion had no place in such a frame. It was done away with and replaced by 'proclamations'. The political struggle became brutalised: the party with an armed or, at least, semi-militarised following had the best chances of success.

Also in this respect the First World War accelerated and radicalised developments. As with every great war, it left in its wake a host of adventurers unable to find their way back from a military to a civil and orderly existence. Nationalists by conviction, they remained at the disposal of any political adventurer who knew how to win them over for his 'patriotic' aims. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler bitterly criticised the lack of political purposiveness and discipline of that eternal soldiery, roughnecks who joined in the free corps, secret organisations, and armed associations of all sorts, and now supported, now threatened the security of the republican governments. Hitler considered it an unforgivable stupidity on the part of those free corps and armed associations that they occasionally supported the republic in its struggle against communism. Nor did he want to have anything to do with the 'vehmic' assassinations of those putschists—if only because they contented themselves with the liquidation of the 'minor traitors' while lacking the courage to tackle the 'major criminals' responsible for the 'treason of November'. On the other hand he welcomed many of those toughs and daredevils into his 'storm troops', whose 'élite corps' in particular was recruited from those ranks. There was a close connexion between the SA and SS terrorists and the adventurous marauders of World War I. The inflation of 1923—itsself a consequence of the War—likewise created great numbers of destitute who had nothing to lose and were an easy prey for the political activists.

3. *Changes in the intellectual life* had similar effects. Looking at the romanticising young generation of the early twentieth century, with its contempt for bourgeois security and rationality, with its call for a 'dangerous life' and excitement, one might get the impression that the European nations had quickly grown tired of the long peace, to which they owed their material well-being. Both well-being and security were engulfed by World

War I. The war fused all layers of society into a uniform mass which could be impressed only by massive violence and brutal will power. In this totally changed political atmosphere the teaching of Vilfredo Pareto—of the eternal cycles of the activising *élites*, of the falsity and hypocrisy of bourgeois morals, and of the impetus of deep resentment—acquired a new and mysterious actuality. Sorel's doctrines of 'violence' and of the 'myth' that moves the masses likewise gained in importance—no matter how much or how little truth these doctrines might contain. When the French syndicalists (in their first phase) wanted to substitute the ideal of a 'leader party' and a 'militant *élite*' for that of the old-style parliamentary groups, and pursued heroic aims rather than the ideals of the petty-bourgeois private income, they offered to the young Mussolini his first programme of action. And the terrible devastation of World War I cleared the road toward a 'futuristic' policy (in the sense of Gentile, Papini, and Marinetti), which rejected any loyalty to any historic form of authority.

4. *New technical possibilities of political propaganda* facilitated the direct mobilisation of great masses to an extent unthinkable in the bourgeois era: There were loudspeakers, radios, printing facilities for the rapid production of editions running into the millions of copies; there were trucks and buses for the prompt deployment of political storm troops; mass transportation via railway, car or plane knows no limits, and a speaker could chase from one end of the country to the other to address every evening another giant rally. Forty thousand Blackshirts got together for the 'March on Rome' in 1922 and created political panic by the sheer impact of their mass. Hitler, on the occasion of his national party congresses, assembled and addressed each time half a million people.

Thus the possibility arose—and this was the most important point!—of realising the theory of the sovereignty of the people in an entirely new and radical sense: It was now possible to activate the *masses* as *political sovereign*, not merely via the detour of electing representatives to parliament.

The tendency towards organising directly the 'will of the people' seems to have been inherent, from the outset, in the principle of radical democracy—in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon principle of liberalism. The latter's point of departure is not the political rights of the masses but the political notables of the historical feudal estates, which find their continuation in the party combinations in our modern parliaments. Groups of notables 'represent' the people. In England those groups developed into mass parties as late as the nineteenth century, while the rudimentary democracy of the American free states of the seventeenth and eighteenth

century already was inspired by the principle of the direct sovereignty of the people. This sovereignty became manifest and active in the settlers' town meetings, those primary cells of American democracy. Today we still recognise it in the position of the American president as the trustee of the nation, of the electorate in its entirety, not of Congress, to which he is often opposed as the bearer of the will of the people. The principle of liberal parliamentarianism generates discussion and compromise, the just weighting of contrasting claims and interests of various classes, groups, and individual opinions. For the nation is not considered, from this point of view, as a uniform mass, but rather as a multiple articulated whole. The individual counts not only as a 'fellow patriot' (*Volksgenosse*) but is recognised as a personality with his own vital claims and achievements. The principle of radical democratism, on the contrary, in the last analysis implies unambiguous decision rather than the weighting of arguments and compromises. To be sovereign means to make decisions, not to engage in discussion. This corollary of popular sovereignty has been expressed most strikingly by Rousseau in the term 'the common will' (*volonté générale*) which is strictly unitary and does not recognise any relative rights of the minority. To resist the 'common will' means to misapprehend the commonweal (*Contrat social*, I, iv, ch. 2). Rousseau emphatically condemns all forms of separatism of any individual groups, because such groups fail to understand the true interests of the community or threaten to falsify them. To the extent that the separate will is overcome, the chances grow that the true common will, i.e., the true interest of the community, will triumph (*ibid.* I, ii, ch. 3). It is for this reason that the direct sovereignty of the people is superior to any form of parliamentary government. Parliament, as an heirloom of feudal times, is the playground of special interests, which take the place of the common interest (*ibid.*, I, iii, ch. 15).

Rousseau's 'general will' had become a myth, already 'the will of the people' by the time of the Great Revolution. With the help of special organisations, this 'will of the people' placed itself above and beyond parliamentary discussion and revealed itself ever more intolerant. The people, become sovereign (and this is the most important innovation), form a political community of the people (*Volksgemeinschaft*), to which each individual sacrifices his individual rights or claims (according to Rousseau's postulate). Against the *Volksgemeinschaft* there is no appeal to any higher instance; for the *Volksgemeinschaft* is sovereign. In particular, there can be no appeal to traditional rights and special privileges, as there had been under the *ancien régime*. He who opposes the decisions of the 'will

of the people' is considered a dangerous egotist and excludes himself from the community of the people (a fact that may be confirmed by ostracism, viz., by exile, imprisonment or the guillotine).

But how can this absolute and indivisible sovereignty of the people be organised? The simplest and most perfect way (already proposed by Rousseau) is the convocation of all sovereign citizens in the town meeting, as in the polis of antiquity, in the Swiss Canton, or in the American town meeting. But this form of direct democracy is, by its very nature, restricted to small dimensions. States which are spread out over large territories have at their disposal the possibility of a plebiscite, which may be resorted to as a support and supplement to the parliamentary legislative machinery: the plebiscite thus determines the enactment of laws of particular importance, executive decrees, decisions on foreign affairs. But the plebiscite is a cumbersome, clumsy, and costly institution and does not create popular sovereignty in the radical sense. Large countries can achieve such sovereignty only through a third method: by transferring the common will to a trustee of the people, who, so to speak, incarnates the common will in his person and represents it in a way that can be grasped and understood by the common man. This transfer is effected by going directly to the people, without taking the detour of a parliament. It can take two different forms: the legal form of a general plebiscite, or the formation of a following as numerous as possible, well distributed over the whole country and, if possible, armed. This process is accompanied by the organisation of frequent acclamatory popular rallies. It is also possible to combine both the legal and the illegal methods. If the legal form is adopted, the man of the people must be assured from the outset of a vast majority of votes: which may accrue to him in the wake of impressive political or military conquests (which Napoleon I accomplished and Napoleon III tried to achieve), or of bureaucratic pressure, or of a combination of both. If only the second way is open, the establishment of the one-party state through the formation of a personal following, it will necessarily imply terror and adherence to the regime by the compulsion of violence for the creation of a unified popular will. Since the total unity of the 'popular will' always remains a 'myth' considering the variety and contrasting nature of the true interests of the people, a total 'popular community' can never be created except through violent 'adaptation' (*Gleichschaltung*). If this is to be achieved, the minority must gain the upper hand with the help of a purposive group of activists, ready to undertake whatever violent steps are necessary, and, once power is conquered, any contradiction must be

silenced. For this purpose the leader must be generally considered as a paradigm of patriotic virtue, the man who liberates the people from the dark forces of 'reaction'. This was the method of Robespierre, Danton, Lenin. The surest method is to combine legal plebiscite and illegal violence, with the help of an activist following: this was the technique applied by Mussolini and Hitler (*Machtergreifung*). Serious parliamentary discussion and opposition is in any case out of the picture. Where such discussion and opposition exists and persists, there may arise popular 'leaders', as happens in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the British prime minister and the American president fall back on the popular will as long as their power lasts; but their sovereignty is not unlimited either in scope or in time, in contrast to the kind of sovereignty aspired to by the Caesar of the Napoleonic system and the modern dictator of a totalitarian one-party state.

It is only in this wider historical context that the rise of the dictatorships of the twentieth century can be fully understood. This does not mean that they should be considered in any way as a belated aftermath of the great French Revolution, nor—even less so!—that the reading of Rousseau had any influence on these developments. Any such notion would be a gross misunderstanding of our historical observations! Each one of these dictatorships had its own particular roots in the history of the recent past, and its own particular and quite modern aspects.³ But the latent possibility of a sudden reversion from radical democratic liberty to totalitarian tyranny goes farther back than the upsets of yesterday. This possibility exists wherever the vast masses of the modern industrial capital, socially inarticulate, intellectually indifferent as they are, have awakened to self-awareness, and the traditional public authority (of the monarchy or of parliamentary government) has been destroyed or morally undermined. Nothing is as promising in such a situation as the method of raising the already high temperature of distrust to the point where it becomes red-hot; thus a compact front is formed, and the followers close their ranks. The confidence of the masses is gained much easier by a living personality than by anonymous institutions. If a demagogue appears on the scene, who convincingly assumes the role of 'the carrier of the people's uncontaminated will' and embodies for them the principle of strong leadership, the

³ As far as I know, the example of the French Revolution was not consciously present either to the Italians of 1922 or the Germans of 1933. The situation is different with regard to the Marxist doctrine and, accordingly, in the case of Lenin in 1917. The memory of the uprising of the Paris Communes of 1877, however, had an even more direct influence in this case than the great French Revolution.

masses will be his—especially if he can count on an inner circle of strong men. In our time, with its highly developed technical possibilities for controlling the masses, it is not the majority that is decisive but the political activism, the massive impetus of robust minorities. Such minorities consider themselves as *élites*, as champions of the genuine popular will. Being ‘mass men’ in the true sense of the term, they consider the political community of the people as uniform, the ‘popular will’ always as total unity. Any opponent, therefore, takes on an odour of immorality and becomes noxious to the people (*Volksschädling*), one who has to be eliminated forcefully, i.e. given the concentration-camp treatment or ‘liquidated’. The constitution of the Russian Soviet Republic establishes that the most important right of the liberated proletariat is the right ‘to suppress the exploiters without pity’ and ‘to destroy the layer of social parasites’.³

In Germany, the collapse of the ancient historical monarchy came about even more suddenly than in Russia, where the ground had been undermined by the anarchists ever since the 1880’s. Considering the total lack of anarchist conspiracy within the country, it is indeed hard to imagine how the dynasty of the Hohenzollern could have collapsed so suddenly without outside intervention (Wilson!), in spite of the undeniable fact that the regime of William II and the unfortunate finale of World War I had shaken its moral foundations. The shock effect of the catastrophe was the more devastating.

Simplifying to a certain extent, one could say that it was the historical mission of the people’s leader, Hitler, to make up for what the Kaiser had missed in World War I: the fusion of the whole nation into a closed, heroic community of the people, under the leadership of a generally accepted, really popular personality.

³ Cf. Section 3 of the Soviet constitution of October 7, 1918. It seems, incidentally, that in Russia (in contrast to Italy and Germany) the dictatorship of *one* man emerged gradually from the dictatorship of an all-powerful group of activists. Lenin, nevertheless, was by far the most powerful figure, right from the outset, and it is well known that immediately after his death he was embalmed as a saint of the people.