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The Menace of “National Socialism”

Max Nettlau

1933

WHAT is called “national socialism” in present Germany is in fact the ugliest type of anti-socialism. Authority and Monopoly at bay do their worst and are helped in this by the degeneration of authoritarian socialism; under such conditions, the particularly hopeless position of Germany since 1918 and the worldwide crisis setting in three years ago, aided by the callousness which countenanced Italian fascism—this morbid secretion, the by-product of a decaying and dying system originated, and similar secretions will originate everywhere when an old, rotten system is seriously hurt. Another component part is the intellectual inefficiency of very many people, the victims of the authoritarian milieu who are so backward that the criticism and the promises just reactionists appeal to them, whilst straight-forward socialism has been and remains absolutely inaccessible to their understanding. These poor people have thus been roused for the first time in their lives and it would be unfair to deny to all of them the possibility of a more progressive evolution. This mixture of morbid secretions, dregs and those strata which are not necessarily vitiated, but simply intellec-

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tually untouched, of almost pre-historical mentality, gives to these movements the character not only of reactionary devices and brutalities, but also of some inevitable eruption, as strata hitherto stabilized have now become mobile and threaten like a landslide to destroy great parts of our civilization. This civilization, whichever its defects are, embodies untold quantities of progressive effort and must not be overlain by the sterile offal of such an eruption and landslide: this is the great problem connected with all “national socialism” and fascism and it is of course connected with the whole of the general crisis, as the steady operation of these morbid factors obstructs and undermines all sensible social effort toward a solution.

Historically this situation was brought about, I believe, in this way. Socialism can only be realized in a harmonious form, embodying freedom and solidarity in adequate proportion. After ages of authority and professed selfishness mankind wanted at least a period of liberal and humanitarian education and the best men of all countries in the second half of the eighteenth century recognized this and worked for it. But the French Revolution, begun in that spirit, was deflected into State idolatry, a dictatorial regime and Caesarism, and when these failed as a universal Empire, Napoleon’s dream, they became the inmost essence of every European individual State, those that after the long wars had survived or were then reconstructed and those whom the nationalists of several countries still wished to found and never ceased to prepare by their agitation, conspiracies, insurrections and political scheming. On the other hand, the sudden growth of Machinery, the Factory system, and of International Finance, associated capital, prevented the spreading of complete, harmonious conceptions of socialism and made the workers lay every stress either upon direct self-defence, trade unionism, later, syndicalism, or upon attempts to wrestle the political power from the hands of the privileged who controlled Capital and the State, by electioneering methods, from Chartism to Social Democracy or

him. This makes that Hitler familiar to many such people, for he does not pretend to possess education, nor kindness, nor respect for any civilization and frankly calls for cruelty and brutality. This goes right to the heart of many of our contemporaries and they worship him.

If all this, from this pitiable phenomenon to the crisis which lurks everywhere, does not teach the vital elements of humanity to put every stress on the education to a mentality of freedom, then things may become worse still and finally irremediable. This concerns the libertarians of all shades who by laying the main stress of their work on economic criticism and propositions, have also often neglected freedom. It concerns all the syndicalists whom either the everyday labor struggle or plans of later economic reconstruction have absorbed too much. It ought to appeal to those authoritarian socialists who may have preserved some personal respect for freedom and who might begin to understand the responsibility of their parties for the weeding out of freedom from modern public mentality. Many technically minded persons who somehow consider modern mankind as byparts of machinery only, ought to see that soulless men of that type become mentally crippled and that some day under such conditions even the intellect to produce machinery will be failing.

Nationalists and patriots will not all wish to sink down to the low level of the Hitler type and some may discover the brotherhood of man. It is high time to make an end to this spell of madness which has now run for over eighteen years, since 1914, and had been in preparation a good many years before that fateful year. Only a new education to freedom and solidarity can shatter such nightmares as the impudent menace of “national socialism.”

Dec. 6, 1932.

Vienna.

largely subventioned and this enabled both men to gather others round them who saw which way the money was flowing. Both men have the quality of absolute effrontery, shamelessness, cruelty, and so blood and fire mark their trail and brutes are attracted by them and can safely indulge their propensities in this milieu. It is a type of man which we believed to be extinct, but which the war has brought to the top again from the lowest depths. Then the press wrote them up and the dupes gathered round them. In the case of Hitler, these dupes usually believe him to be a revolutionist, a patriot, a social saviour and being ignorant of history, of revolution, of socialism, they know not better and thus it could happen that he got the many millions of votes. To this of course the press of other countries has largely contributed, puffing him up as a very dangerous man and this induced many to cast their vote for him just to do safely the most dangerous thing or—poor fools as they are!—the thing which, as they imagine, would stagger or frighten the outside world! Personally he appears to belong to the spurious category of the dictatorshipmongers, painted laths of the Boulanger type who are finally fooled by more cunning governmentals.

One thing is certain: there are few persons in public life to whom so little human interest is attached, who are so repulsive in every feature. But the more it is the acme of degradation that such a man and such a movement should pass as the apparent expression of the will and wishes of many millions of a nation.

This is a warning to all believers in authority and is an illustration of the origin of authority in general which is not necessarily protection by the strongest or direction by the wisest, but—because uneducated people do not know even who may be the strongest or the wisest—is in many cases submission under the most inferior, because inferior qualities, as those which Hitler exhibits, are most accessible to the greatest number of backward people. Very many undeveloped people like to have a dog with them for the same reason, because they see that the dog is (in their estimate at least) still less developed than they themselves and so they can lord it over

by dictatorial insurrections, from the plans and attempts of Babeuf to those of Blanqui. Here Marx secured a hegemony by keeping two cards up his sleeve, both Social Democracy and a Blanquist grip for dictatorship, and finally Lenin played the latter card with success under the exceptional conditions of 1917 in Russia, whilst the social democrats were good enough to find satisfaction in the holding of offices by their leaders as ministers and other public servants of capitalist regimes. Thus in every way authority was left intact, where not intensified, and socialism as here described, the great mass of European socialists, neglected freedom when it did not combat and scorn it, made authority an indispensable means and an unalterable aim and arrived thus at being the most bitter enemy not only of every complete conception of socialism, but also of the most modest expressions of freedom—of simple liberalism and radicalism.

It is not necessary to dwell here upon the constant carping at the complete conceptions of socialism, those of William Godwin, Robert Owen, William Thompson, of Saint Simon, Fourier, Victor Considerant and not a few others, as utopian, unpractical and all that, until they were discredited in the eyes of the people and lapsed into oblivion, nor systematic persecution of those conceptions which most consciously wielded together the maximum of individual and social aspirations—the libertarian or anarchist conceptions. This persecution by authoritarian socialists, did the utmost to distort before the mind of students and workers the ideas held and proposed by men and women like Josiah Warren, Proudhon, Max Stirner, Bellegarri[g]ue, Déjacque, Coeurderoy, Pisacoune, Landouer, Voltairine de Cleyre and very many others whom the benighted authoritarian socialists ignore utterly. Moreover wherever it could be done safely, that is where the workers were not to some extent penetrated by democratic conceptions, liberalism, federalism, individualism, every sentiment which was not pandering to Statism, were brutally or subtly discouraged, sapped and weeded out by the authoritarian socialist propaganda.

Thus in the German speaking countries Marx, Lassalle and the many able and assiduous agitators who followed their example, literally destroyed liberalism and democracy as political factors, and wherever in Europe socialist parties became numerous in voters and members of elective bodies, it was always done at the expense of liberalism. This looked outwardly as a proletarian success, bourgeois liberals being replaced by labour men who, whatever they did, as a man and at one stroke usually ceased to be workers, but in reality, by destroying every chance of the growth of a liberal spirit by liberal institutions—whilst the socialist minorities themselves were unable to realize any fraction of their own aspirations,—this meant the handing over of supreme power to Conservatism and Reaction.

I am not pleading for the liberals and do neither ignore nor undervalue their insufficiencies and shortcomings; it was also inevitable that many of them as bourgeois, feeling the economic menace of socialism, should themselves evolve backward toward Conservatism. None the less, the close examination of nineteenth century history of Europe will, I believe, show that the career of liberalism was prematurely cut short under the conditions here alluded to and for no other good purpose than to create many millions of socialist voters who are not socialists, and several hundreds of thousands of a socialist leadership and bureaucracy which is not socialist either. A counter-test is offered by the history of Spain where the nineteenth century liberal spirit was not crushed socialistically, but where its finest form as represented by Pi y Margall, the federalist republican who in 1854 proclaimed the sovereignty of the individual and stood nearest to Proudhon, where these ideas penetrated the workers who from 1868 onward accepted the socialism of Bakunin, who in 1872 resisted the Marxist infiltration and who to this day are the largest, most determined and most hopeful mass of libertarians which any country ever held. They were not led astray by liberal blandishments, but they neither destroyed liberalism which can do some useful work by itself and which can

all this proves that the authoritarian world is in deepest commotion and unwilling and unable to react otherwise but by still more authoritarian means and methods. I have said in the beginning, under such conditions the deepest strata are in contortion, and in dark hopeless miserable Germany these elements have brought together the “national socialist” party. It could not have happened otherwise, as nothing better could come from such sources.

Now the antisemites can openly advocate pogromism; the racial cranks can invade universities; the German would-be-fascist fraternizes with the Italian fascist in the town of Bozen (Sudtirol) where the Italian fascists suppress the German nationality which the ‘national socialists’ pretend to love. Now socialists and communists are massacred when met by superior numbers of “national socialists” and every particle of freedom is despised and down-trodden and super-authority, super-militarism, super-submission before the “leaders” are praised to the skies. It is Authority itself, deified, worshipped., run mad, running amuck. What else could happen on a globe where the most cultivated nations are transformed for above four years into military murderers; where one section of socialists, the bolshevists, enforce their dictatorship over 150 millions of subjects and proclaim their superiority over all the socialists these fifteen years; where fascism rules over liberal Italy these ten years! Just as Banks fail everywhere and the financial crisis affects every country, so the orgies of Authority are universal and “national socialism” in Germany is but a particularly ferocious form of this plague.

It is utterly indifferent who that Hitler is or was. He has not said one original word; every remark of his from the beginning existed in the antisemite, nationalist and anti-socialist publications of the last fifty years and more or is now submitted to him by the various fractions of his advisors who on alternate days seem to have his ear, making him, like Mussolini, comediant to-day and tragediante tomorrow. Like Mussolini, after a time, among many rivals, he was selected by smart capitalist agents as the man most worth to be

find some shelter under the wings of their party. But their nerves were in tension and what was said in a hushed voice before, was shrieked now; the place of history was taken by hysterics. Discontent was rife everywhere and the Russian example was reflecting in people's minds in a thousand ways. Education and clear judgment, where not existing before, could not be improvised and so the total result was lamentable.

The output was twofold—governmentalism and excitement. There had hardly been any liberal and libertarian seed; so there could be no harvest. The confusion was increased by the ideological attraction of Moscow and by the very material impulses which were given by Moscow. Very soon with all this turmoil was mingled the hurling of hysterical reaction which had its Moscow in the rest of the Army and looked to salvation from them and received impulsion by them. Nothing came of all this but increased exasperation of the excited, occasional rebellion cruelly repressed, increased warfare between extremist fractions themselves—and increased governmentalism, government meaning now all parties from the conservative to the social democrats, the latter included. The few anarchists had nothing new to say and the hundred thousand who about 1920 were interested in syndicalism, were active in the economic and also in the educational propagandist way, but could not make their voice heard in the sea of hysterics and crew of very real misery.

This material misery lasting from 1915 to 1924 in acute form, became chronic during the years 1924 to 1930 and again in 1931, 1932 and shows no sign of a It produced by and by a general repercussion in all continents and it is felt that it can only be overcome by liberal and generous solidary action of all countries. But just that spirit is most missing to-day and authoritarian selfishness predominates and prevents all sincere mutual cooperation. The super-Statism which rules in Russia and Italy, the nationalist and fiscal difficulties of almost all countries where bourgeoisism still expects to master the situation, the unrest of the native races in all continents,

keep out conservative supremacy. In the domain of education and free thought, resistance to the claims of the Churches, liberalism had begun to do an unestimable amount of good in Europe and conservatism and clericalism were becoming opprobrious bywords: since the intervention of authoritarian socialism set in, all this has been changed and the reactionists and the priests come into their own again as never before.

Germany and former Austria were the classical ground of such developments, but no European country was and is free of them. To explain this we must remember that Germany with which up to 1866 former Austria was nearly always to some degree constitutionally connected, was up to the beginning of the nineteenth century a loose conglomeration of hundreds of Statal units, some of which were cultural centres, but all of which were overburdened with governmental apparatus, fleeced by petty princes or under the thumb of the oligarchy of free towns, all moreover economically separated and fattening fiscally by imposing chicanes on their neighbours. After the Napoleonic period some thirty States were still left, playing their old tricks upon each other with Prussia and Austria as ringleaders; this was the so called Deutsche Bund (German Confederation) lasting until 1866, Exactly as the Italians wished to live in a united country with no plurality of separate States and spared nothing from 1815 to 1870 to reach their purpose by rousing public opinion, conspiracies, insurrections and wars, so did the Germans from 1815 to 1871 and these inevitable developments—for modern nineteenth century life could not circulate when interrupted every few miles by custom barriers, perhaps by a hostile and State policy—reached their purpose not accidentally at the same time, 1870–71, and from the same reason, namely, when the opposing French influence which vetoed the incorporation of Rome into Italy and which helped to keep asunder the German States, North and South mainly, had been eliminated temporarily by the turn which the Franco-German war had taken.

This long effort had been begun by the German liberals and democrats, mainly intellectuals, students and artisans and somewhat later the industrial bourgeoisie and for many years was bitterly opposed and cruelly repressed by all connected with the administration and the courts of the autonomous States, by the landowning aristocracy, by the clergy and by the many who underwent their influence, especially the peasants and the petty bourgeoisie and these were the conservatives. They and the army crushed the liberal revolutions of 1848–49 and when the liberal current rose again in the early sixties, the years corresponding to Garibaldi's greatest effort in Italy, the liberals were once more frustrated as the workers' support was withdrawn from them by Lassalle and Marx and as Bismarck snatched the fruit of their toil from them by solving the existing problems in the dynastic and conservative interest by the wars of 1864, 1866 and 1870. From that time liberalism was gradually ground and crushed in Germany between the social democrats and the conservatives and this created the great phantasm, Social Democracy numbering millions of voters, but in reality powerless, as it was always confronted by overwhelming reaction and void of any fighting spirit. Under such conditions the governing classes did not despair of check-mating socialism altogether and anti-socialist movements of alleged social reform were carefully nursed especially among the small craftsmen, the shop-keepers and the peasants. This was done under the patronage of the State, the catholic and protestant clergy and with the countenance of the large landowners and industrialists. As these small independent producers were really very badly off in face of the rising large industries, oversea agricultural imports etc., it was easy for the government to give them some satisfaction by tariffs and many other means, usually at the cost of lowering the standard of life of the workers and this added to the existing animosity between the peasants and the workers. This animosity is of old based upon mutual envy; the peasant sees the workers paid in ready money at the end of the week and apparently void

of any other care, whilst he depends on weather, prices and other factors; the worker is envious of the peasant who apparently freely disposes of his time, has his food ready grown for him, etc.

All this made it impossible for peasants and socialists ever to meet on common ground; to the peasant collective property of the land is spoliation—to the worker peasant property of the land is monopoly.

For such reasons the currents of discontent in the class of independent producers never took a socialist form, nor could any liberal spirit pervade them and apart from rare genuine original movements they were always under the control of reaction and its direct and indirect tools. Abject patriotism and clericalism were gradually made more attractive by antisemitism which always is the *ultima ratio* of the Church and which after the financial crisis of 1873 was a handy sop wherewith to allay the widespread discontent of the many who had speculated and lost their money. This antisemitism took an anticapitalist form with those who had economic interests to defend, and « racial form with the educated and professional classes, students etc. who thus without an effort of their own acquired feelings of racial superiority. All this could have fizzled out, if serious liberal currents had existed, but what the social democrats had not yet crushed of liberalism was now destroyed by the antisemites whose ranks were swelled by the younger conservative elements and who were always sure of tacit governmental patronage. In Germany besides the Junker, the great industrialists remained a power by themselves which could make terms with any government, but in prewar Austria the antisemites aided by government, the clergy, the aristocracy and the peasants, became the most powerful party and in present German-speaking Austria this party and the social democratic party balance each other completely.

Then the war came and terminating in dismay it brought no real changes for mental evolution and progress were impossible under such stress and those who had lost everything, hoped at least to