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THE STRATEGIC RETREAT OF THE LEFT

THE notions of 'political warfare' and 'ideological strategy' are now firmly established. They provide a useful analogy which can be applied to the analysis of the backward shift which has taken place recently in discussions on political and moral topics, and which has resuscitated, as unsolved problems, controversies in which the issues seemed perfectly plain a generation ago. Translated into strategic terms, this shift appears as a retreat of the Left on a wide front to positions on which the Fascist onslaught, which imposed it, can best be resisted. It has implied the temporary abandonment of the Marxist, and a return to the humanitarian idealist, criticism of society.

The greatest new material force which appeared in Europe in the inter-war years was that of German heavy industry, reorganized and expanded from 1924-28 onwards. This expansion was planned, or rather plotted, on the level of huge financial deals, disposing of enormous credits from international loans. It did not appear in response to an expanding demand for steel. It was, therefore, a monstrous, cancerous growth, and when it reached maturity it found no outlet for its productive capacity. The aims and ambitions of the owners of this powerful new material force were not to be separated from the sheer mechanics of its functioning, that is to say that they were directed solely to the providing of outlets for its products. They were not the soul of this new body, quantitatively separate from it. They were its brain. The soul of the new Frankenstein monster was an *ersatz* soul, a hotch-potch of pre-existent nationalist aspirations, philosophical half-truth, thirst for power, brute passion and intellectual dexterity, devilishly efficient in the field of applied psychology, which goes under the name of Nazism. Nazism does not fit into the structure of European thought. In the whole range of political and philosophical tenets, held from the extreme Left to the extreme Right, there is no place for Nazism, though it borrows terminology and

concepts from many political philosophies. Nazism is the brute soul of a monstrous body, a Caliban, belonging to the natural, not the moral sphere. No system of moral concepts exists which can embrace Nazism in its span.

It is German imperialism in this brutish form, and no mere failure in the realm of ideas, that has forced upon the progressive forces of Europe a strategic retreat. Nothing short of the seizure of German heavy industry by the German working class, and, either its partial dismantling, or its adaptation to the needs of the U.S.S.R., could have influenced the course of events. The citadel was not taken and the retreat began.

No front was formed in Germany against the Fascist onslaught, and all the positive moral forces in Germany, beginning from the Left, were successively wiped out. From that time German intervention in the affairs of Europe has been adequately assessable in terms of material force only, without any positive moral value. On the plane of ideas Hitlerite Germany can produce only falsehood; on the moral plane only evil.

German material force tipped the balance in Spain. In France it passed over the country, in 1940, as a duster passes over a blackboard, obliterating the most delicate mathematical niceties. Steel and lead have been in the most literal sense the standard of all things German, and steel and lead have no place in an ideological scheme. That is why every positive moral force in Europe is ranged against Nazism, and why every quisling sacrifices his soul.

Before this force of nature retreat was inevitable. It remained to be seen in which direction the retreat could be made as a strategic retreat and not as a rout. There was only one direction which did not lead to quisling capitulation. That was back along the main line of development of modern progressive thought, back from Marxism to Utopian Socialism, from Utopian Socialism to Humanitarian Liberalism, and, if the worst came to the worst, back to Nationalism and frank xenophobia. The important thing was to keep one's face to the future, however far back one might be driven.

Across the Channel this has been, not an ideological scheme, but the living experience of the whole working class. In the months that followed the collapse the French workers made the retreat consciously and unflinchingly. But so deep has the iron entered into their souls, so great has the emotional pressure

become, that the fanatical patriotism thus engendered reaches the level of a Greek tragedy. It is from precisely this cup, drunk to the very dregs, that has come some of the purest poetry of our time, *Le Crève-Cœur* and *Les Yeux d'Elsa*, by the Communist poet Louis Aragon, and the heart-rending cry of the steel-worker Timbault as he faced the German firing squad at Chateaubriant on the 22nd of October 1941: 'Vive la France! Vive le parti communiste allemand!' In those simple words are implicit the full span and the highest pitch of the European conscience.

The retreat began with the Popular Front movement. In this country the Labour Party refused to adopt the new strategy and clung hard to the positions it was accustomed to fighting on. Sir Stafford Cripps accepted it and his present position is the logical outcome of accepting it: what was, at the outset, a purely political retreat has become an ideological one; the change took place when the frontier between Socialism and Progressive Liberalism was reached.

In French political life a new front was created, in London, after the collapse, on the line of the Principles of 1789, which meant that all groups to the Left of the Radicals consented to an ideological retreat from the positions of 1871 and 1848. But the situation is now so tense in France that the purely rational ideological line of 1789 no longer suffices in the exalted emotional atmosphere, and straightforward hatred of the *Boche* tends to take its place for all but the most politically conscious. The history of English thought offers no firm line comparable to that of 1789 on which to rally, and no attempt has yet been made to crystallize 'defensive-progressive' thought around a great event in our history. The notion of the 'common man', for instance, arouses no inspiring memories; the 'common man' has no ancestors to compare with *les hommes de quatre-vingt-treize*, who faced undaunted all the kings of Europe.

The Popular Front movement did not succeed in becoming an ideological front in this country because the executive of the Labour Party was persuaded that it constituted a popular front in itself; that, because it grouped the vast majority of working-class votes, it therefore adequately reflected in itself the full span of progressive opinion. Moreover, the Labour Party suffered from a certain rigidity of concepts which more than once led to its being out-maneuvred by the more supple Conservative Party, which,

though guided by the principle that it must remain in power at all costs, gave proof of a ready opportunism and won elections on its opponents' platform.

The Left Book Club made some progress towards the establishment of an ideological front, but the Strachey-Gollancz campaign for a progressive movement based on humanitarian values, which was the L.B.C.'s crowning effort, made little headway in the stagnant year which followed the outbreak of war. At that time the Communists were insisting on returning to the offensive on the Leninist line of 1917, and campaigning far out in front of a retreating army on positions which grew rapidly more isolated. Their offensive was conditioned by what seemed to be a profound hesitation and even retreat on the part of German Fascism, which had attempted to come to terms with the Soviet Union. Their policy offered a superficial resemblance to the pacifist defeatism of some social-democrats (especially in France) and the appeasers on the Right. But the fundamental difference appeared after the Nazi victories in France, when the pacifists became quislings along with the appeasers, while the Communists joined the patriotic front and were soon in the front rank of the resistance. After hanging on in shell-holes, battered by the artillery of both sides, opposed to an imperialist war and to an appeasers' peace, the English party, a skirmishing party, rallied to the main body when the U.S.S.R. itself reeled under the Fascist onslaught.

The abandonment of the Marxist criticism of society and the return to humanitarian idealism has led to a considerable revaluing of old positions. Values which history had outworn have regained their old validity as positive values; words which had ceased to have any meaning have once again the significance of war-cries. The turn of the tide has refilled the channels of old controversies.

The Marxist criticism of humanitarian idealism was not directed against humanitarian idealism as a vision of a future society, but as a means whereby that vision could be realized. Marxist analysis led to the conclusion that the new society could only be established by a revolutionary working class. It did not deny that the commercial class had created high moral values and a civilization of great worth: it stated simply that the spread of those values, of goodwill and enlightenment, would never end in Socialism, nor would Socialism ever result as the sum of partial gains secured by trade union or other pressure.

The object of Marxist criticism is humanitarian idealism, not Fascism. In the face of Fascism it has therefore been necessary to abandon the whole position and return to the humanitarian idealism which was the starting point of Marxist criticism. Humanitarian idealism is the logical antithesis of all that Fascism represents; whenever humanitarian idealism says 'yes', Fascism says 'no'. Humanitarianism is the 'Judeo-bolsheviko-masonic-democracy' of the Nazis. It is, therefore, on the basis of humanitarian idealism that can best be defended—against the mental nihilism and moral cynicism of the Nazis—the structure of intellectual and moral concepts of which Marxism is itself a function.

On the new front Left thinkers find themselves allied with many with whom they had had little contact. The alliance stretches at times as far as the Roman Catholic bishops of Vichy France, who recently protested, in the name of Christian humanitarianism, against the persecution of the Jews. In the newspaper world the tacit alliance extends as far as the *Observer*. In the case of the *Observer* the mountain has come some little way towards Mahomet; however that may be, this paper, which made its policy clear in its editorial of 1st November, now forms the right flank of an unbroken front of which the *Daily Worker* is the left flank.

Meanwhile the Nazis have overrun the Marxist positions and reversed their guns. The doctrines elaborated by them and by their quisling henchmen of the Déat stamp appear at first sight very 'advanced'. Their criticism of British and American imperialism, their reviews of economic history, relating the appearance of a Liberal social structure to the needs of a commercial and industrial owning class for free markets and free labour, are the guns of Marxism, but reversed. They are a parody of Marxism. One of the greatest disservices Fascism has done to thinking men is the systematic distortion of concepts; those of 'revolution' and 'European' are other obvious examples. What distinguishes true Marxist materialism from the fake Nazi brand is that Marxist materialism presupposes the idealism it refutes and cannot exist without it. It is a materialism only as a function, or, better, a counterpart of idealism. 'Refutes' is here used advisedly. The history of thought abounds in theories which exist primarily as negations of previous theories and are therefore dependent on the

theories they refute. Some look towards the past and have no future in them: their value is negative. Others are pregnant with the future and their value is positive. Divorced from such a conception the history of thought would be the history of falsehood, whereas it is the story of the truth.

In the wide sense Marxism participates in that hope of the future, in that 'future-positive' quality, which distinguishes idealism and without which realism becomes cynicism, naturalism becomes hedonism, and education, conditioning. In the narrower sense Marxism has its roots as firmly in German idealism as in the materialism of the sciences. Though taking 'matter' for its highest general statement, it needs, on the level of the first deductions, the concepts of consciousness on the one hand and law on the other. It does not, however, use them as dual 'substances', but as 'processes'. They are considered as being interpenetrable. It is *law* penetrating into *consciousness* that generates *liberty*. To use Hegel's expression—'Liberty is the recognition of necessity'. *Law* is conceived as a relation, as in the sciences. The relation termed 'production relationship', that is to say the relationship between man and man in the production of the necessities of life, is taken as being basic in the study of the development of societies. The term 'exploitation' denotes a special form of 'production relationship'. The presence or absence, or the degree of 'exploitation', will explain the characteristic features of a society.

This philosophical background of Marxism participates of the best of the European philosophic tradition. But for the Nazi this philosophical background does not exist, and the only philosophical background Italian Fascism can call upon is the 'logico-positivism' of Pareto, which is a merely cynical denial of all human values.

If, before the Nazis reversed them, one had stood (as so many thinkers of the Left *did* stand) just behind the guns of Marxism, and then had returned (like a war correspondent) to the rear, one would have found oneself in the company of those who, like Stephen Spender, were looking 'forward from Liberalism'. But the clever young man who broadcasts from Germany his materialist conception of history could make no such retreat, because he cannot say with the Marxist '*unfortunately* this is true', for in that '*unfortunately*' echoes the voice of the idealist, the voice of generations of earnest men.

The backward shift of the principal terrain of discussion has brought on to the field, from beyond its previous limits, positive reaction as distinct from Conservatism, in exactly the same way as clothes rationing has brought from the wardrobe many old suits long discarded; the tailor waits ahead, but out of reach; the wardrobe lies behind. Up to the present time no movement comparable to French reaction has appeared, in the open, in this country. But the backward shift has brought within the scope of controversy an openly reactionary document, the 'Report on Education', which the Conservative Party seems likely to disavow.

Such is the dialectic of the history of thought that the principle of *Service* on which the Report lays such stress resembles an important Socialist principle, and contradicts the *Enlightened Self-Interest* of Liberal philosophies, and I daresay that, in the right company, supporters of the Report might quote the unselfish sacrifice consented to by Soviet youth as an illustration of their own principle. But it is not with anything Russian that the principles of the Report can be compared, but with the philosophy of life preached by the Vichy reactionaries. The Vichy reactionaries reject the moral values created by the last two centuries and return for inspiration to the seventeenth century. They reject, that is to say, the Naturalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, summed up in the affirmation that the completest development and expression of the personality is the highest moral good, and return to the anti-naturalistic ideal of renunciation for its own sake, of discipline for its own sake, of service to the State (not to humanity), to the moral conceptions which flourished under the absolute monarchies, in the rigidly hierarchical States of the seventeenth century.

The English Liberal philosopher, John Morley, writing, in 1886, his chapter on Rousseau's treatise on education, *Emile*, unites the thinking of the two centuries and puts the matter in a nutshell: 'The palsied and crushing conception of this helpful and excellent being (man), as a poor worm, writhing under the vindictive and meaningless anger of an omnipotent tyrant in the large heavens, only to be appeased by sacerdotal intervention, was fading back into those regions of night, whence the depth of human misery and the obscuration of human intelligence had once permitted its escape, to hang evilly over the Western world

for a season. So vital a change in the point of view quickly touched the theory and art of the upbringing of the young. Education began to figure less as the suppression of the natural man, than his strengthening and development' (*Rousseau*, II, 201).

For the eighteenth-century materialist philosopher Diderot, Nature is the source of all virtue, all beauty and all truth. And to take the other extreme of the philosophic scale, absolute idealism, we find the English philosopher Bosanquet discussing, at the beginning of this century, the same fundamental ethical issue, however different his terminology may be from that of Rousseau and Diderot. For Bosanquet, the 'mind' or 'world' of an individual is that complex of experience, which makes up the process of the individual's history; the richer, the fuller, the wider the circle of experience the more the 'mind' ('world') exists and the higher the good that can be attained to. The following is from a passage in his Gifford Lectures on *Individuality and Value* delivered in 1911, which according to the lecturer 'contains the root of the matter'. He is replying to the best argument that can be levelled against him. 'This apparent fact, that a plain, ignorant mind may be good, and one refined and cultured in the highest degree may be bad, is what is commonly alleged against us. And what is true in the objection leads to a most striking verification of our point of view' (p. 46). The difficulty is solved by the application of the principle of *Value* to the principle of *Individuality*. The refined and cultured mind may have a completely negative value; in that case the plain and ignorant mind will have a more positive value than the cultured mind, but its positive value will not be of a high order.

If this test of Value is applied to the issue between service to the State and service to humanity, it will be seen that service to the State may be great, but have a negative value if the State be evil; whereas humanity, being a universal conception, can never have a negative value, and service to it can never, therefore, have a negative value. Bosanquet half accepts and half balks at this conclusion in *The Philosophical Theory of the State*. His hesitation is due to his absolute idealism, which subordinates, in the last analysis, the principle of *Value* to that of *Individuality*. He refuses to admit 'mankind' as a 'state of consciousness', and therefore gives to the State an all but ultimate value.

It is on this level that Marxism clashes with absolute idealism.

Marxism rejects the identification of 'mind' and 'world', and replaces it by objective realism, which for Lenin (in *Materialism and Impirio-criticism*) is a synonym of materialism. Marxism can therefore save the principle of *Value* from dependence on *Individuality*, and can conceive of it as *Consciousness* penetrating into *Law*.

From the other side absolute idealism was radically rejected, in France, by the reactionary traditionalists, among whom one can cite Paul Bourget as being half-way between philosophy and politics. But in Maurice Barrès we find the principle of *Individuality* (divorced from the test of *Value*) developing into an exasperated egotism, and later, when he had substituted the notion of *Nation* for that of the *Individual*, into a sort of 'national egotism', called *Integral Nationalism*. It is interesting to note that because the dividing line between Left and Right stands at present so far to the Right, the Fighting French find the memory of Barrès on their side of the fence, and Pétain finds that of Bourget on his.

In France the issue between humanitarianism and reaction has long been perfectly clear, and the French reactionaries have made no secret of their hankering after the reign of Louis XIV. They are allied with a pre-Cartesian school of philosophers of whom Chevalier, the first Vichy Minister of Education, is one of the principal representatives.

Soviet education, on the other hand, presupposes a naturalism as pronounced as that of Rousseau's *Emile*. Soviet youth makes a religion of life, and seeks avidly and with no sense of guilt for all the joys that life has to offer. And it is to defend its ideal of a new and glorious life that Soviet youth sacrifices life itself. When youth's fundamental attitude to life is positive and welcoming, then discipline, freely consented, even when pushed to Spartan limits, and sacrifice, even when pushed to the point of self-abnegation, have nothing in common with the brutally conditioned mania for suicide of the Hitler *Jugend*, or the morbid renunciation which our modern reactionaries would seek to instil amid a chorus of *mea culpa* and *de profundis*.

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What of the future? When the principal Fascist danger has been averted by the victory of the United Nations, will the new

Reaction develop strongly in an England weakened to the point of exhaustion by her present effort? Will the enlarged progressive movement retain its cohesion on this second front? Or, in an England robust enough to recover rapidly and face the future boldly, will a new offensive of the Left become possible and, therefore, justifiable? If the above analysis is correct, such an offensive could only take one shape, and that is a return to the Marxist criticism of the present phase of optimistic idealism. Some bold men will take this step. But the issues will be very confused, and many sincere thinkers will, in the name of Liberty and Democracy, turn their backs upon the future, and many, in the name of Socialist planning, will help to fasten upon their country the strait-jacket of monopoly capitalism. If, however—as is not likely to happen—a reorganization of the party structure of English politics could be carried out, then the issues could be clarified. If the Liberal Party, uniting with the Conservative Party, became the left wing of a new national party, it could re-assume the task history assigned to it, and combat reaction within the framework of a capitalist party. And if the Communist Party were accepted into the Labour Party, it could fulfil its rôle of critic of socialist idealism. Both issues would then be fought out within the movements to which they belong, and no longer prevent the national political machine from functioning, and two national parties would face each other before the electorate, and fight out what is, as the example of Germany showed, the paramount political issue of our times, the nationalisation of heavy industry.

CECIL BEATON

LIBYAN DIARY

I

ONCE you have shown your passes, and are admitted into the fraternity inside the barriers of the desert—yes there is a barbed wire entrance to the desert—you will find a spirit comparable to that on a great ship many miles out at sea. Everyone isolated here is working together selflessly towards the same goal,