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THE ALLEGED FASCISM OF PLATO

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I

IN Germany the claim is sometimes made that National Socialism incorporates the best of Plato's political theory. In this country, too, Bertrand Russell and Mr. R. H. Crossman have emphasized, but with a different intention, the fascist elements in Plato's thought. It has to be admitted that whereas it would be merely laughable to claim that Jesus or Kant were exponents of the fascist philosophy, there is no such glaring incongruity with regard to Plato. It may be of some interest, therefore, to examine anew the alleged likeness between the basic principles of fascism and the thought of Plato. No one would deny a strong likeness between some details of Plato's teaching and some details of fascism. The question is whether these likenesses are mainly accidental, or are due to some deep-seated similarity of outlook. In order to make this comparison, a fairly full account of fascist philosophy is needed. For since the word "fascism" is now highly charged with emotion, it tends to be used as an epithet of praise or disfavour rather than as a precise designation. Because not all fascist systems are in complete agreement, my account of fascism will be composite.

Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of fascism is its "revolt against reason." Fascists themselves, in so far as they are aware of their intellectual position, would admit their opposition to "rationalism." This is a point of view which it is important to understand. The eighteenth century saw the spread of a movement of thought which is known as "the Enlightenment." According to the thinkers of this movement, there were certain ends which it was rational for men to pursue, and which men would pursue if they were not distracted by prejudice or blinded by ignorance. These ends were basically only one end, variously designated happiness or pleasure. It was held to be the business of the political theorist to show how happiness could be best achieved. Various well-established institutions were condemned because they failed to contribute to the general happiness. The fact that an institution had long existed was no argument in its favour. An hereditary aristocracy, for example, was condemned on the ground that the general happiness was best promoted by putting government in the hands of those best fitted to govern, and of those who would be forced to govern

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as the citizens wished. Impelled by patriotic and religious "enthusiasms," it was said, people tend to act against their best interests. If only they will free themselves from outworn traditions and misleading superstitions, they will be able to apply an unprejudiced intellect to the solution of their political problems. With the removal of prejudice men will come to agree on what is best in political action. For there *is* a best, which intelligent and fair-minded men will agree on. The appeal to prejudice breeds conflict, the appeal to reason leads to profitable agreement. Looking back over the history of the Western world, the philosophers of the Enlightenment claimed to see a gradual reduction of superstition and a weakening of prejudice; the power of kings, priests, and nobles was diminishing, while that of enlightened philosophers was increasing. In history could be descried a progress which, with the advance of science and spread of education, would be accelerated. Oppression, war, ignorance, and even poverty would be increasingly eliminated. History had an intelligible plan.

Beliefs of this kind have had an enormous influence upon our present civilization. Fascism completely repudiates them. Happiness is regarded as an unworthy end; utilitarianism, according to Signor Mussolini, is a *low* moral creed. Calculating attempts to increase happiness or reduce pain are undignified. Humanitarians are materialists who think that the dignity of man is enhanced by his release from effort and pain. The social worker, and even the physician, often presuppose this false morality according to which personal satisfaction is the highest good. This moral protest is supported by an appeal to biology. An increase of comfort will deteriorate the human race. Spengler says:

Nineteenth-century medicine, a true product of Rationalism, is . . . a phenomenon of age. It prolongs each life whether this is desirable or not. It prolongs even death. It replaces the number of children by the number of greybeards. It promotes the world outlook of *panem et circenses* by estimating the value of life by the number of its days, not by their usefulness. It prevents the natural process of selection and thereby accentuates the decay of the race.—*The Hour of Decision*, p. 223.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment had supposed that men really agreed upon their valuations; what looked like radically opposed systems of values were the results of hampering traditions; if only men would free themselves from them they would acknowledge the same ends. This is denied by the fascist. Separate groups develop different cultures and moralities. There is no means of deciding between them by argument. The best culture or civilization is that which survives. Hence the only way to prove that your way of life is better than that of another people is to impose it upon

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them. Furthermore, what is generally taken to be argument on moral questions is not argument at all. When a man claims to prove by argument that a certain way of life is the best, he is really only inventing excuses for his own conduct; his code of morality is not a result of argument but of circumstance. People invent reasons for supporting codes which they would have supported even if they had no reasons at all. Hence there is no difference between prejudices and so-called "enlightened" beliefs. Reason is just another prejudice.

Again, the fascist holds that there is no plan in history; or if there is a plan there is no progress. History is just a struggle of groups, individuals, cultures, and civilizations. Those that survive are the best, but we can only see which is best by seeing which survives. Hence there is no progress, for progress implies an objective standard in accordance with which individuals or groups are judged and to which they approximate more and more. History is a battlefield where disparate groups and civilizations grow and decline, conquer or meet disaster. Chance plays a great part in the issue. In the course of history man has not changed. He is no more free now than he was five thousand years ago. He is no less superstitious, religious, or prejudiced. Most men have always preferred the safety of obedience to the responsibilities of freedom. The modern man calls his god "Progress." Where his forefather spoke about devils the modern man speaks about germs.

So much for the general world-outlook of fascism. We now turn to its political teaching. Here, of course, nationalism is the most important ingredient. Because there are no objective rational ends upon which all unprejudiced men would agree, it follows, the fascist insinuates, that there is nothing left for the individual but to promote the values and power of his own group. This contention gains force because, for a variety of reasons, it has happened that in the twentieth century there has been a great deal of controversy in the sphere of morals. Within a single national community different groups have adopted and advocated very different moral valuations. People have differed very widely as to the morality of war. Moral problems associated with property have elicited opposing answers. There has been much disagreement and change in sexual morality. Democratic States purposely allow these controversies, believing that tolerance and experiment are better than persecution and rigidity. But a great many individuals are puzzled and alarmed by this uncertainty. They like to know exactly where they stand. The experimenters and reformers force them to reflect on matters which they would prefer not to think about. Why must we begin to alter ways which we have become accustomed to? The fascists take advantage of this uncertainty and resentment. They demand that

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controversy on fundamental moral questions shall cease. Dissident minorities shall be coerced and a single code shall apply to the whole nation. People will once again know exactly where they stand. All moral problems will be solved by a single simple formula: "Private and group interests are to be subordinated to the good of the Nation." A scrutiny of moral precepts in the light of any other principle than this becomes treason. Hence in Italy the priesthood is given great power in education. In Germany projects for humanizing the penal code are discontinued. In both countries attempts are made to reinstate the old sexual morality by making women as dependent upon men as can be. These tendencies meet with the approval of all those who are materially and spiritually injured by moral change. Men are no longer men, but Germans, Italians, and "Britons" (not Englishmen, Welshmen, or Scotsmen).

Now the most spectacular way of promoting the "good" of a nation is to increase its power *vis-à-vis* the power of other nations. Hence the eyes of the population are concentrated upon the doings of the nation in the international arena. The principle is actually enunciated that home politics are subordinate to foreign politics, that a diplomatic or military victory is more important than an increase in social welfare. Spengler says :

Internal politics exist only to secure the strength and unity of external politics, and when they pursue different aims of their own, decay sets in and the State gets "out of form."—*The Hour of Decision*, p. 35.

A single rigid morality is established internally in order that a united nation shall be able to increase its power. Intolerance at home is combined with belligerency abroad.

Another important characteristic of political fascism is "the leadership principle." There can be no reconciliation between fascism and democracy. The following are the main complaints made by fascists against democracy: (i) Democratic government must be weak government. For decisions in democracies are generally the result of compromise. Furthermore, owing to the party conflict the work of one government can always be undone by the government which succeeds it. (ii) The growth of parties splits the community. The tendency is for individuals to put party before the community as a whole. (iii) Democratic government enables responsibility to be avoided. Governments refrain from carrying out unpopular but necessary measures. Rather than do so, they resign and thus attempt to throw the unpopularity upon the next government. (iv) Democrats are "soft." They generally fear to make use of that force without which all government is impossible. Hence democratic governments can easily be swept away by those who can and will use force. As a result

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of these criticisms fascists propose to abolish parties (except their own), to eliminate their political opponents, and to submit themselves to the leadership of a single man who is ready to take the responsibility of governing. A single leader appeals to the masses more than a committee does. It is easier to be loyal to an individual than to a set of principles. A leader cannot resign when things go wrong and throw the task of improvement upon other people. When people say "The correct policy is what the leader says is the correct policy," they will act together with the minimum of friction.

Hence we have two fundamental propositions in fascism. First the nationalist proposition: "Whatever is for the good of the nation is right." Then the leadership proposition: "Whatever the Leader says is good for the nation is good for the nation." The Leader's opinion is, therefore, the criterion of right and wrong.

There are two important corollaries of these general principles. Fascists tend to lay great stress upon myths. They say that large bodies of men can only act together with enthusiasm when they believe the same stories. These stories may or may not be true. The important fact is that they are believed in, not that they are true. In order that a nation may be highly organized the masses must be taught the same myths. Herr Hitler was deeply impressed by the Allied war-time propaganda. He thought that the Allied success in the Great War was largely due to their widespread belief that they were fighting for justice and democracy (*Mein Kampf*, vol. i, ch. 6). The Central Powers never evolved such an attractive myth; the Allied propaganda was so skilful that it even affected the Germans to some extent. Since the war the National Socialists have invented some extremely popular and effective myths in order to heighten the national self-respect. These, and the corresponding myths of Italian fascism, need not be recapitulated here. Signor Mussolini acknowledges the influence of Sorel in showing him the importance of political mythology.

The second corollary concerns the nature of the fascist moral code. The fascists repudiate a utilitarian moral code. *A fortiori* they repudiate a moral code of love and forbearance, such as that sketched out in the Sermon on the Mount. Such codes, they say, are unbiological. Furthermore, they are incompatible with nationalism. In their place fascism substitutes a code of *honour*. In this code the highest place is given to what might be called the military virtues. A high value is set upon bravery, endurance, loyalty, unquestioning obedience to superiors, quickness to resent an insult. Pity for the weak is, as Nietzsche had argued, opposed to the lessons of biology, for action prompted by pity tends to preserve and perpetuate the weak. If the strong rejoice in their strength they will by exterminating the weak improve the race. It is also held that a large part of the

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morality of neighbour-love is merely hypocritical. This aspect of the fascist teaching is too well known to need quotations.

II

Now it is immediately apparent that the irrationalism and the relativism which are fundamental to the fascist outlook are wholly lacking from Plato's thought. According to him the Good is discoverable by the intelligence, and is hence the same for all rational beings. There can be little doubt, I think, that if he had been presented with the conception of separate cultures possessing diverse sets of valuations between which no rational preference was possible, Plato would have repudiated it. That he would have done so is clear from his attitude towards those Sophists who adopted a somewhat similar position. So far as I understand him he believed in fixed, intelligible values which are, in the long run, aspects of one. The Good is revealed to intelligence. Hence, although not all men are intelligent enough to apprehend it, different groups and societies will have the same good. There will be an objective standard in terms of which societies may be compared. It is important to notice that such a view, like that advanced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, is opposed to the extremest forms of nationalism. For when it is held that the good is open to intelligent inquiry and that the standards of a restricted group are not the only standards available for its members, the individual is no longer faced with the choice between immorality and isolation on the one hand and selfless absorption in the national ethos on the other. But this is the choice into which the fascist leaders endeavour to thrust the individual to-day. Faced with this choice he will generally elect for conformity and nationalism. Only those are proof against this dilemma who possess a morality which is universal in its claims.

Another instance of Plato's fundamental aversion from modes of thought associated with fascism may be seen in his attitude towards war. As is well known, Signor Mussolini has several times publicly extolled the grandeur of war; Spengler, in a passage which I have quoted, says that external policy is more important than internal policy; to General Ludendorff is due the aphorism that policy exists for the sake of war, not war for the sake of policy. Now this very problem was discussed by Plato in the first book of the *Laws*. In that book the constitutions of Crete and Sparta are criticized because they were manifestly designed with efficiency in war as the supreme end. The following passage shows the conclusion which Plato reached:

But the best is neither war nor faction—they are things we should pray to be spared from—but peace and mutual good will. And thus a victory of a

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city over itself turns out, it would seem, to be not so much a good as a necessary evil. It is as though one fancied that a diseased body which has been subjected to medical purgation were at its best in that condition, and ignored a body which has never stood in need of such treatment. So, if a man takes a similar view of the happiness of the city, or indeed of the individual man—I mean, if external wars are the first and only object of his regard—he will never be a true statesman, nor will any man be a finished legislator, unless he legislates for war as a means to peace rather than for peace as a means to war.—*Laws*, bk. i, 628. A. E. Taylor's translation.

It is clear, of course, from this passage, and others in the *Republic*, that Plato was far from being a pacifist. This, considering the conditions of his era, is not to be wondered at. Furthermore, *reasoned* pacifism, as it exists to-day, is born of the terrible fragility of our highly specialized society, and the alarming efficiency of modern weapons. *Religious* pacifism depends upon a scale of values which has only become accepted at all as a result of the spread of the Gospels. The values to which the religious pacifists appeal are repudiated by fascists, Christians, communists and average men. It is, therefore, no sign of fascism in Plato that he, too, did not acknowledge them. Passages can be quoted, it is true, in which he asserts that the Greeks were innately superior to barbarians and not bound to observe civilized rules of war with them. But we are hardly justified in regarding such passages as examples of racialism or nationalism. They are not the conscious expressions of a *Weltanschauung*. They are just prejudices, like his prejudice against manual workers.

It is worth digressing at this point to call attention to the significance of this difference. There has always been class and group prejudice. What, then, is the difference between fascist nationalism and sheer national prejudice? The sociologist Karl Mannheim has shown how such a question has to be answered. An unchallenged prejudice is very seldom uttered. Conservatives are traditionally called "the stupid party," because they are not responsible for as many books as the other parties are. But the reason why they do not write and argue is not that they are stupid, but that they are satisfied. If they felt threatened they would defend themselves, intellectually and physically. Similarly, I think, the fact that fascist nationalism now attempts to construct a philosophy is a sure sign of the criticism and dislike which nationalism has aroused. Those who, for some reason or other, wish for the perpetuation of nationalism, have felt it necessary to defend themselves.

We have seen that there is lacking in Plato the fundamental irrationalism of the fascists. But in his attitude towards government and democracy he has much in common with them. Plato held that in any well-ordered State an hierarchical organization was inevitable. He held that the average man is not fit for political responsibility and cannot be educated for it. He held that government should be

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carried out by specially trained experts who would consult, not the people's wishes, but the people's good. He held that the activities of business men should be subject to State control. Exaggerated humanitarianism, he thought, would lead to the perpetuation of unhealthy stocks. Democracy he believed to be a form of government which was bound to give place to tyranny. Tyranny itself he criticized as an inefficient and wicked form of authoritarian government. But he did not disapprove of authoritarian government itself. He was prepared to welcome a rigid censorship of art and morals. He advocated the teaching of social and political myths which the rulers themselves did not believe in. He believed in the need for a State religion with the punishment of heretics. In the *Laws* he went so far as to suggest the establishment of a body like the Inquisition for the punishment and eradication of heresy (bk. x, 908-909).

There is no need for me to give a detailed account of Plato's views on government. But for the purposes of this paper it is important to say something about his description of democracy in the *Republic*. For this description is of great sociological importance. The following passage repays careful examination:

"Then, first and foremost, they are free, the city is crammed with liberty and freedom of speech, and there is permission to do there whatever anyone desires?"

"So they say," he said.

"Then clearly where the permissive principle rules, each man will arrange his own life to suit himself?"

"Clearly."

"Then this constitution, I fancy, will be distinguished by the wonderful variety of men in it?"

"Surely."

"It will turn out to be the fairest of constitutions," I said. "Like a garment of many colours of every shade and variety, this constitution will be variegated with every character, and be most fair to look upon; and possibly, just as children and women admire many coloured things, so many people will judge this city to be fairest of all."—*Rep.* VIII, 557. A. D. Lindsay's translation.

The democratic man, Plato goes on, argues that the only way to cope with a desire is to satisfy it; hence all desires, he says, "are alike and deserving of equal honour." We might say that the democratic man recognizes a democracy of desires; every desire is to count for one. He endeavours to embrace within his one life as many kinds of experiences as he can.

It was Plato's opinion that this sort of democracy contained within itself the seeds of tyranny. There is insufficient provision for electing efficient men to offices of importance. Hence the technique of governing deteriorates. Professional politicians arise who get popular support by promising to plunder the rich; the larger proportion of

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the plunder, however, they appropriate to themselves as their due rake-off. The laws themselves are not strictly executed and so fall into disrepute. There is a tendency to be lenient to criminals. The tyrant arises as a popular leader who organizes a bodyguard to protect himself against lawless opponents. With the help of the bodyguard he seizes supreme power. To begin with, he adopts popular, radical measures. In order to remain in power, however, he has to make himself indispensable. Hence he engages in wars. War serves also to keep his opponents from conspiring against him, because they have to work so hard to finance the war that they have no time for political agitation. But differences inevitably arise among his own supporters. In order to maintain his supremacy the tyrant has to suppress the ablest and bravest among them. The word which Plato uses for this process is "purge." Thus the tyrant comes to be surrounded by worthless creatures and is compelled to govern by sheer force which is only available to him for as long as he can pay for it.

There are a number of points of considerable interest in this analysis. In the first place, Plato emphasizes the variety of characters which arise in a democracy. This is a tendency which democrats have welcomed. John Stuart Mill, for instance, not only argued in favour of liberty of opinion, but he also urged the necessity of "experiments of living." It cannot be denied that "experiments of living" may have great social value. Moral codes which succeed fairly well in one set of circumstances may be totally unable to cope with changed conditions. If, however, the modes of social life are so stereotyped that no one dare live his life to a new pattern, the society may not be adaptable enough to survive in the changed conditions. Again, some would argue that spontaneous conduct is intrinsically superior to regulated or traditional conduct. But however important these considerations may be, it must also be remembered that there are limits to the tolerance which any society can permit. These limits are set by the social disturbances which the tolerance evokes. Societies exist because people have to live together and like to live in certain fixed ways. People want to live their own lives, it is true; but most of them can only think of living lives like their fellows. And they also want security. When tolerance threatens to interfere with security democracies are faced with great danger. Tolerance is valuable in so far as it preserves peace and mitigates institutional rigidity. But tolerance may, in some situations, actually promote disorder and endanger institutions. Democracies have often failed to recognize this.

Plato, it will be remembered, says that the democrat admits a democracy of desires. Satisfaction is to be sought, irrespective of what is to be satisfied. It is true that in democratic societies there is a

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tendency to regard extremely divergent moral codes with tolerance. Historically this is a legacy of the Enlightenment. The early defenders of tolerance argued that society gained more than it lost by allowing people to worship how they pleased. This is still the case in our society. In the Western world, at any rate, people's religious beliefs do not affect their conduct very much, and so governments can afford to neglect them. But people's moral and political beliefs have a greater influence upon their conduct. Hence the tolerance which is practicable with regard to religion may not be practicable with regard to morals and politics. Religious tolerance is closely correlated with lack of religious belief. Similarly a complete moral tolerance is incompatible with the adoption of a moral attitude. An era of moral tolerance, therefore, is likely to be an era when a moral code is undergoing, or is about to undergo, great changes. Such an era cannot be permanent. Those who live in it have the task of establishing a generally acceptable and efficacious morality.

Fascists, I have said, tend to deny the view that history shows a single plan emerging in the general improvement of mankind. Plato's suggestion, towards the end of the *Republic*, is that even if a well-ordered community is established, it will tend to deteriorate.

... but since decay is the lot of everything that has come into being, even this constitution will not abide for ever, but will be dissolved.—VIII, 546.

And he goes on to describe the likely course of degradation from kingship to tyranny. Among the Greeks there was, of course, nothing like the modern belief in Progress. That the historical process was cyclical was held by Heracleitus, and later, with much subtle illustrative detail, by Polybius. This theory of an historical cycle was taken over by modern critics of democracy. It is well known that Nietzsche, from whom Spengler borrowed much of his philosophy, believed in an "eternal recurrence;" the events that are happening now have happened before an infinite number of times, and will happen again an infinite number of times. Spengler has argued that although every civilization is separate from every other, they all run through the same inevitable stages of birth, rise and decline. Pareto held that there must be a continual oscillation between conservative and radical groups. It is interesting to inquire why fascists should now find such speculations so attractive. There is no space to enter thoroughly into this inquiry, but there is one obvious point which ought to be emphasized. The denial of progress and the substitution of the theory of recurrence acts as a discouragement to reformers and utopians. They must put before themselves a picture of the society which they are endeavouring to realize, and they are heartened in their efforts if they think that these efforts are being made in the line of a prevailing tendency. If they come to think,

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however, that there is no such prevailing tendency, and that men never achieve anything permanently, but always slip back into their original barbarism, then they are likely to conclude that the effort of reform is not worth the making. The humanitarian is generally tender-minded. He will be paralysed into inaction by the vision of historical recurrence.