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THE LITERATURE OF FASCISM

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I AM, I suppose, a typical representative of the British and American public in the extent of my knowledge and ignorance of fascism in Italy. I have paid one or two visits to Italy under the present regime; I have the casual comments of friends who have been living there; I have read the apparently biased views of newspapers of various complexions, without being convinced by Sir Percival Phillips or H. G. Wells; and I have recently read these five books. I am not convinced of anything by these books¹ either. All are excellent; all are persuasive; none is quite comprehensive. The books by Italian authors are rather better written than the books by English authors. Unfortunately for my purpose, none of them quite meet. Signor Salvemini's book, for instance, is crammed with exact documentation, and is a valuable commentary on the evolution of the ideas of the fascist leaders; it appear to be the work of an honest and indignant man, and no one could question the author's sincerity or conviction. But for my purpose of investigation, I feel that Signor Salvemini is too close to his subject; he has suffered too much; and he is obviously an English liberal

¹*The Universal Aspects of Fascism.* By J. S. Barnes. (Williams & Norgate.) 10s. 6d. net.

The Pedigree of Fascism. By Aline Lion. (Sheed & Ward.) 10s. 6d. net.

The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy. By Gaetano Salvemini. Vol. I. (Cape.) 10s. 6d. net.

Italy and Fascismo. By Luigi Sturzo. (Faber & Gwyer.) 15s. net.

The Fascist Experiment. By Luigi Villari. (Faber & Gwyer.) 12s. 6d. net.

in culture. I am not concerned to question any of his statements of fact; and if one had just been reading Sir Percival Phillips, one would be in a frame of mind to agree with him in his conclusions. But his accumulations of facts, however useful they may be to liberals like Mr. Wells, do not in themselves constitute a case. For a citizen of any country, who has definite political views, is always apt to believe that his fellow citizens of other views, when they behave in an unpleasant way, do so because their views differ from his. In one context, we exaggerate the differences of political parties and ignore race; just as in another context we may exaggerate the differences of race. The Russian Revolution, seen from a distance, appears far more Russian than revolutionary; possibly the fascist revolution is more Italian than fascist. Don Sturzo is an Italian dissident of a different political stripe from Signor Salvemini; he also, though he has written a most interesting book, is too close to the object. And Signor Villari is a convinced adherent of the fascist regime. Mr. Barnes and Miss Lion, on the other hand, write as English sympathizers of fascism, who are naturally interested in extracting from the fascist movement the ideas of general value.

Being interested in political ideas, but not in politics, I have found the last two books the most important. But a reading of the other three is a valuable aid to criticizing the theories of Mr. Barnes and Miss Lion. What really matters is whether Fascism is the emergence of a new political idea, or the recrudescence of an old one, that may infect the whole of Europe as Parliametarism infected it in the nineteenth century, or whether it is purely local. It is a commonplace that the increase of the electorate, in Britain, is the destruction of Democracy; that with every vote added, the value of every vote diminishes, and that consequently the actual power will be more and more concentrated in the hands of a small number of politicians, or perhaps in the Civil Service, or perhaps in the City, or perhaps in a number of cities. What I am concerned with

at the moment is not the normal progress of events due to the increase of voters—which seems to be taken for granted by everybody—but the possible influence on the public mind of the *idea*, or rather the vague sentiment of approval excited by the word, of fascism.

There are questions which I should like to ask; but I doubt whether anyone can answer them; and I am quite sure that I should be unable to understand the answers if given. Political theory, from the time of Aristotle, has been a distinguished branch of philosophy. The political imagination still exists: that is to say that people get emotional excitement out of political words, as they do out of other words; the words 'Democracy', 'Communism', 'Fascism', 'Monarchy', 'Republicanism', 'Empire', excite various behaviour from various individuals; and there are very few of us who do not respond with the proper jerk to one or another of these words. The human craving to believe in *something* is pathetic, when not tragic; and always, at the same time, comic. I still believe, however, that religious beliefs (including, of course, Atheism), are on a different plane. Some so-called religious beliefs are really political beliefs in disguise; but many political beliefs are substitutes for religious beliefs. The psychology of religion has been the subject of many books, mostly quite worthless. The psychology of politics is perhaps a more fruitful subject. There is room for books which would examine the nature of political belief: for one thing, the extent to which it is a substitute for religion, and therefore a muddle. So far as bolshevism is a practical way of running Russia—if it is—for the material contentment of Russians, it seems to me worthy of study. So far as it is a kind of supernatural faith it seems to be a humbug. The same is true of fascism. There is a form of faith which is solely appropriate to a religion; it should not be appropriated by politics.

There is another danger. The more a political creed usurps the place of religious creed, the more risk of its

becoming merely a façade. The popular result of ignoring religion seems to be merely that the populace transfer their religious emotions to political theories. Few people are sufficiently civilized to afford atheism. When a political theory becomes a creed, one begins to suspect its impotence.

Mr. Barnes is not only an admirer of fascism, but a Roman Catholic; Miss Lion may or may not be a Catholic, but is certainly a diligent disciple of the Italian philosophers, especially Gentile. They are accordingly anxious to prove, the first the consistency of fascism with Catholicism and mediæval Catholic political philosophy, the second the consistency of fascism with Italian philosophy of the present time. Signor Salvemini and Don Sturzo, on the other hand, are concerned to prove that fascism is opportunism, with no ideas at all, except such as are likely to catch on at the moment. It is certainly shown that the Duce is a politician rather than a political theorist. It does not, of course, matter to the practical value of the 'fascist revolution' to Italy whether it began from ideas, or whether it acquired and changed its ideas as it proceeded; but it is perhaps of use in assessing the value of the 'idea' of fascism elsewhere.

The first question that occurs to me, as a political ignoramus, is to ask in what sense was the 'fascist revolution' a revolution as compared with other accepted revolutions of history. The French Revolution was a revolution if there ever was one. A form of government which had developed gradually from the beginnings of France, was suddenly overturned, and so thoroughly that no restoration has endured. This revolution was prepared by social changes, and by the spread of certain ideas and sentiments; by many causes, so that it is always a matter of conjecture how large a part any one item played. The ideas and sentiments have had a continuous history, so that we may say that the ideas of Republican France, so far as they exist, are descended from the ideas of the Revolution. The Russian Revolution seems to have many parallels with the

French. There was the violent overthrow of an ancient and traditional government, after considerable modification of Russian society in the last generations; the revolution had been fed by misgovernment, hurried and premature reforms, weakness, economic difficulties; it was prepared by a definite new theory of government, and precipitated by accidents. But there are other types of revolution. The English Revolution of 1688 deserves that name, though it has little in common with the French or the Russian: unlike them, it has turned out to be more revolutionary than it appeared at the time. The Great Rebellion could not be called a revolution, not merely because it was reversed in the end, but because there was no weakening in the stamina of the Royalist Party, and therefore no general consent throughout the country.

The 'Fascist Revolution' evidently had some revolutionary characters and not others. Its opponents take pains to point out that there was never any bolshevist 'peril', or actual bolshevism in the disorders following the war. They say in unison that these disorders, furthermore, were already subsiding before the March on Rome. The success of the March, they say, was due to the weakness and vacillation of the Cabinet. But these facts would make the triumph of fascism only the more definitely revolutionary. It is a frequent characteristic of revolutions that they appear all the more inevitable because they might so easily have been stopped. The singularity of the Italian revolution seems to be this, that it began with no 'ideas' at all, or rather as an offshoot of advanced socialism, and proved itself capable of transforming itself as occasion required, and of assimilating ideas as required. If we are to judge the 'idea' of fascism, then, we must speculate where its 'ideas' came from, how they cohere, and whether they are not still in process of formation.

One approaches the books of Miss Lion and Mr. Barnes with these questions in mind. Their methods and aims are not quite the same: Miss Lion is more concerned to

show an affinity between the action of Mussolini and the thought of Croce and Gentile; Mr. Barnes is more anxious to persuade us that the political philosophy of fascism is a modern development of the philosophy of the Catholic Church, and especially of Aquinas. Speaking in the name of fascism, and apparently in sympathy with it, he imagines fascism as saying that Europe

can only be reunited on the basis of the Roman tradition. Reinforce this great common tradition—the only common tradition—by a general conformation to the Roman political and religious traditions, and we may yet have good reason to hope.

I think I understand what the author means by the 'Roman religious tradition', and it is quite natural for him to wish to see the whole of Europe in accord with it. But I am not so sure what he means by the Roman 'political tradition', and if I have any idea what he means, then I do not know what is its connection with the religious tradition, except Mr. Barnes's enthusiasm for both. I presume that what he has in mind is that a fascist form of government in each country of Europe, plus the establishment or at least the general acceptance of Roman Catholicism in all, is the state of affairs which would please him most. It may be that he sees some analogy between fascist organization and that of the Church, for, as Miss Lion says, 'the motto of fascism is order and hierarchy'. He is careful to point out that a fascist need not be a Catholic, or a Catholic a fascist; but he adds that

a non-Catholic fascist will find himself, within the debatable territory which even the strictest theologian admits, in agreement with the fundamental Catholic conception of the State, and will recognize in the last resort the need for an independent moral authority, such as the Church claims to be, in order to provide the coping stone for any truly perfect polity.

I am in accord about the desirability of the 'independent moral authority', but I cannot see why any fascist should necessarily recognize the need for it, unless a fascist also has to be a Christian, which is not demonstrated. And I

am not sure *which* Catholic conception of the state is the fundamental one. I believe it was the view of the Church, in relation to the *Action Française*, that the *coup de force* was to be condemned, and that otherwise it justly allows its members to support any peaceable government; beyond that I should suppose that the Catholic conception of the State was ultimately theocratic. As for the Roman political tradition, that might be the tradition of the Republic and the Empire; and there are some similarities between the fascist revolution and certain events in early Rome, but before the time of Christianity.

In spite of Mr. Barnes's able apology, I remain (as an outsider) unconvinced of the essential harmony between fascism and Roman Catholicism: it remains to be revealed whether the harmony will be any closer than, at best, that of a Napoleonic Concordat. In any case, the position of the Roman Church, facing a Roman Dictator a few yards away, is much more difficult than when it faced a European Dictator in Paris. The question of the temporal power appears difficult, if not insoluble. If the Holy See accommodates itself too well with the temporal power, it must be prepared for the suspicion (however unjust) of becoming merely another National Church; if it cannot accommodate itself at all, it must face many embarrassments and vexations. And if the Duce is indeed imbued with Christian piety, there still remains the danger of Erastian tendencies on the part of a well-established, powerful, and self-confident government. The Roman Church is certainly passing through a difficult and dangerous political channel: it cannot be expected to adopt quite the same attitude in Rome, Paris, New York and Dublin. But I should not like to see it accept in Rome exactly what it has denied in Paris; and I should like to have explained to me why fascism can perhaps be swallowed, when the *Action Française* is spewed out.

These are, however, merely scattered doubts and questions about the conformity of fascism with Roman

Catholicism; and most of them await an answer from future history alone. As I have said at the start, I am not concerned with the feasibility of fascism as a working programme for Italy. What matters is the spread of the fascist idea. Now it is manifest that any disparagement of 'democracy' is nowadays well received by nearly every class of men, and any alternative to 'democracy' is watched with great interest. This is one point on which intellectuals and populace, reactionaries and communists, the million-press and the revolutionary sheet, are more and more inclined to agree; and the danger is that when everyone agrees, we shall all get something that is worse than what we have already. I cannot share enthusiastically in this vigorous repudiation of 'democracy'. When the whole world repudiates one silly idea, there is every chance that it will take up with another idea just as silly or sillier. It is one thing to say, what is sadly certain, that democratic government has been watered down to nothing. It is one thing to say, what is equally sad and certain, that from the moment when the suffrage is conceived as a *right* instead of as a privilege and a duty and a responsibility, we are on the way merely to government by an invisible oligarchy instead of government by a visible one. But it is another thing to ridicule the *idea* of democracy. A real democracy is always a restricted democracy, and can only flourish with some limitation by hereditary rights and responsibilities. The United States of America, for instance, were more or less democratic up to 1829, when Andrew Jackson became President, when the system which is euphemistically known as *la carrière ouverte aux talents*, and more exactly as the Pork Barrel System, became powerful. The modern question as popularly put is: 'democracy is dead; what is to replace it?' whereas it should be: 'the frame of democracy has been destroyed: how can we, out of the materials at hand, build a new structure in which democracy can live?'

Order and authority are good: I believe in them as wholeheartedly as I think one should believe in any single

idea; and much of the demand for them in our time has been soundly based. But behind the increasing popular demand for these things, the parroting of the words, I seem to detect a certain spiritual anæmia, a tendency to collapse, the recurring human desire to escape the burden of life and thought. The deterioration of democracy has placed upon men burdens greater than they could bear, and surreptitiously relieved them of those they could bear: our newspapers pretend that we are competent to make up our minds about foreign policy, though we may not know who is responsible for cleaning the streets of our own borough. There is a general sickness of politics, and a general admission that it is not worth while worrying, as all politicians are alike, and their activity is just as remote from ours as the meditations of Einstein, and our vote doesn't matter anyway. And in this state of mind and spirit human beings are inclined to welcome any regime which relieves us from the burden of pretended democracy. Possibly also, hidden in many breasts, is a craving for a regime which will relieve us of thought and at the same time give us excitement and military salutes.

It is this feeling that I fear, in the popularization of such words as 'fascism' and 'communism'; a feeling which would reduce any paraphernalia of ideas and political philosophy to a mere elaborate façade. I am all the more suspicious of fascism as a panacea because I fail so far to find in it any important element, beyond this comfortable feeling that we shall be benevolently ordered about, which was not already in existence. Most of the concepts which might have attracted me in fascism I seem already to have found, in a more digestible form, in the work of Charles Maurras. I say a more digestible form, because I think they have a closer applicability to England than those of fascism. The important differences are two, and they are both differences in favour of the French school of thought. The *Action Française* insists upon the importance of continuity by the Kingship and hereditary class, upon something

which has some analogy to what the government of England was, formerly, at least supposed to be; it would protect the humble citizen against the ambitious politician. Now the idea of the Kingship does not seem to have played any great part in fascism: it looks rather as if it had been accepted as a convenience. In theory, the *Action Française* does not contemplate a powerful dictator and a nominal king—but the powerful king and the able minister. The other difference is that the aim of fascism appears to be centralization. The theory of the *Action Française* carries decentralization to the farthest possible point, and in this respect represents a reaction against the Napoleonic system, with which fascism has some analogies. It is to be admitted, of course, that Italy has centuries of chaotic decentralization to overcome, and that perhaps the Italian needs for a generation or so a powerful dose of central authority; and that the difference between France and Italy in this respect is diametrical. My point is, however, that the situation of England is nearer to the situation of France than it is to that of Italy.

The political philosophy of Maurras is obscured from English students by the fact that it is embedded in current writings of local interest: he has not generalized them into any statement of direct use abroad. It is also obscured by the fact that M. Maurras and his friends have often displayed a lamentable and even grotesque ignorance of foreign affairs¹—the ignorance which made it possible for M. Daudet to exclaim against British 'tyranny' in Egypt. Nor has the *Action Française* exhibited any desire to examine the foundations of fascism; it has pretended to believe that the Italian regime is good merely because it is different from that of republican France. The philosophy of M. Maurras has its own weaknesses, of course (as well as its

¹ An ignorance which, however, is not by any means limited to this political party, but is, it seems, characteristically French. The French are an insolent people, and inclined often to repudiate their best friends.

intemperances of expression), with which I am not here concerned, such as a disposition, inherited from a previous generation of sociologists, to regard politics as a 'science' independent of morals. But on the other hand I cannot find in fascism any idea of general interest which has not already been expressed by Maurras and his friends. I end by reflecting that the developments of fascism in Italy may produce very interesting results in ten or twenty years. And that it is a matter of regret that England has no contemporary and indigenous school of political thought since Fabianism, and as an alternative to it. The function of political theory is not to form a working Party, but to permeate society and consequently all parties: and this, for good or bad, Fabianism has done. But sound political thought in one country is not to be built upon political facts in another country; I cannot believe that enthusiasm for Russian or Italian 'revolution' has any intellectual value here. A new school of political thought is needed, which might learn from political thought abroad, but not from political practice. Both Russian communism and Italian fascism seem to me to have died as political ideas, in becoming political facts.

ART CHRONICLE

ARTFUL PUBLICITY

THE sensitive Londoner, revolted by the squalor and incoherence of his surroundings, has long had reason to be grateful to the Underground Company for their enlightened efforts to brighten and beautify their share in the civic ensemble. He is so accustomed to having his tastes and feelings flouted by the prophets of big business that when a great undertaking like the London electric railway and omnibus combine shows a kindly and considerate regard for him in the pleasant architecture of its stations, in the good lettering of its announcements, and in the gay and striking devices of its advertisements, he feels an almost pathetic appreciation of the politeness shown him. One member, at all events, of London's travelling public has even gone so far as to wish, upon occasion, that the Underground Company's admirable trains did not run at quite such frequent intervals, as he would have liked more time to inspect the charming decorations that had beguiled his leisure moments on the platform. He had, of course, noted the facts which the company had desired to impress upon him, thanks to the alluring methods by which they imparted their information; and was now preparing to settle down to the pleasures of disinterested æsthetic appreciation . . . but, alas, here was the train.

There is no doubt about it. The modern advertisement is learning how to captivate even the least easily impressed members of its potential clientele. The subtlety of the contemporary poster is a delicate tribute to the fastidiousness of contemporary taste, just as the crudity of the Victorian poster reveals how undeveloped was the side of the Victorian mind that was capable of noticing and reacting to advertisement. Victorian posters delivered