

The Ancestry of Fascism

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(Any transcription errors my fault)

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German Politics today are a realization of theories set forth by Fichte in 1807.

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The philosophy which has been distinctive of Germany begins with Kant, and beings as a reaction against Hume. Kant was determined to believe in causality, God, immortality, the moral law, and so on, but perceived that Hume's philosophy made all this difficult. He therefore invented a distinction between 'pure' reason and 'practical' reason. 'Pure' reason was concerned with what could be proved, which was not much; 'practical' reason was concerned with what was necessary for virtue, which was a great deal. It is of course obvious that 'pure' reason was simply reason, while 'practical' reason was prejudice. Thus Kant brought back into philosophy the appeal to something recognized as outside the sphere of theoretical rationality, which had been banished from the schools ever since the rise of scholasticism.

More important even than Kant, from our point of view, was his immediate successor Fichte, who, passing over from philosophy to politics, inaugurated the movement which has developed into National Socialism. But before speaking of him there is more to be said about the conception of 'reason'.

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The founders of the school of thought out of which Fascism has grown all have certain common characteristics. They seek the good in will rather than in feeling or cognition; they value power more than happiness; they prefer force to argument, war to peace, aristocracy to democracy, propaganda to scientific impartiality. They advocate a Spartan form of austerity, as opposed to the Christian form; that is to say, they view austerity as a means of obtaining mastery over others, not as a self-discipline which helps to produce virtue, and happiness only in the next world. The later ones among them are imbued with popular Darwinism, and regard the struggle for existence as the source of a higher species; but it is to be rather a struggle between races than one between individuals, such as the apostles of free competition advocated. Pleasure and

knowledge, conceived as ends, appear to them unduly passive. For pleasure they substitute glory, and, for knowledge, the pragmatic assertion that what they desire is true. In Fichte, Carlyle, and Mazzini, these doctrines are still enveloped in a mantle of conventional moralistic cant; in Nietzsche they first step forth naked and unashamed.

Fichte has received less than his due share of credit for inaugurating this great movement. He began as an abstract metaphysician, but showed even then a certain arbitrary and self-centred disposition. His whole philosophy develops out of the proposition 'I am I', as to which he says:

"The Ego *posits itself* and it is in consequence of this bare positing by itself; it is both the agent and the result of the action, the active and that which is produced by the activity; *I am* expresses a deed (Thathandlung). The Ego is, because it has posited itself.'

The Ego, according to this theory, exists because it wills to exist. Presently it appears that the non-Ego also exists because the Ego so wills I; but a non-Ego so generated never becomes really external to the Ego which chooses to posit it. Louis XIV said, 'l'etat c'est moi'; Fichte said, 'The universe is myself.' As Heine remarked in comparing Kant and Robespierre, 'in comparison with us Germans, you French are tame and moderate'.

Fichte, it is true, explains, after a while, that when he says 'I' he means 'God'; but the reader is now wholly reassured.

When, as a result of the Battle of Jena, Fichte had to fly from Berlin, he began to think that he had been too vigorously positing the non-Ego in the shape of Napoleon. On his return in 1807, he delivered his famous 'Addresses to the German Nation', in which, for the first time, the complete creed of nationalism was set out. These Addresses begin by explaining that the German is superior to all other moderns, because he alone has a pure language. (The Russians, Turks, and Chinese, not to mention the Eskimos and the Hottentots, also have pure languages, but they were not mentioned in Fichte's history books.) The purity of the German language makes the German alone capable of profundity; he concludes that 'to have character and to be German undoubtedly mean the same'. But if the German character is to be preserved from foreign corrupting influences, and if the German nation is to be capable of acting as a whole, there must be a new kind of education, which will 'mould the Germans into a corporate body'. The new education, he says, 'must consist essentially in this, that it completely destroys the freedom of the will'. He adds that will 'is the very root of man'.

There is to be no external commerce, beyond what is absolutely unavoidable. There is to be universal military service: everybody is to be compelled to fight, not for material well-being, not for freedom, not in defence of the constitution, but under the impulsion of 'the devouring flame of higher patriotism, which embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal, for which the noble-minded man joyfully sacrifices himself, and the ignoble man, who only exists for the sake of the other, must likewise sacrifice himself.'

This doctrine, that the 'noble' man is the purpose of humanity, and that the 'ignoble' man has no claims on his own account, is the essence of the modern attack on democracy. Christianity taught that every human being has an immortal soul, and that, in this respect, all men are equal; the 'rights of man' was only a development of Christian doctrine. Utilitarianism, while it conceded no absolute 'rights' to the individual, gave the same weight to one man's happiness as to another's; thus it led to democracy just as much as did the doctrine of natural rights. But Fichte, like a sort of political Calvin, picked out certain men as the elect and rejected all the rest as of no account.

The difficulty, of course, is to know who are the elect. In a world in which Fichte's doctrine was universally accepted, every man would think that he was 'noble', and would join some party of people sufficiently similar to himself to seem to share some of his nobility. These peoples might be his nation, as in Fichte's case, or his class, as in that of the proletarian communist, or his family, as with Napoleon. There is no objective criterion of 'nobility' except success in war; therefore war is the necessary outcome of this creed.

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