LENIN AND MUSSOLINI

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I

THE progress of science in the past century has reduced the world to the unity of interdependence. A civil war in America brings starvation to the cotton towns of Lancashire. An injury to the credit-structure of Germany may involve a panic on the Paris Bourse. Not less notable than this web of complex interweaving is the pace at which change proceeds. Feudal Japan can become, as it were overnight, the modern state. Men are still living to whom the railway was an incredible innovation; and their children will doubtless watch aerial traffic blot out the distance between London and New York.

We pay, of course, the price for scientific development. The complexity that ensues involves a necessary fragility in the machine. The working of our social institutions depends, as never before, upon the maintenance of peace. The mechanisms of civilization are so delicate that they respond like the needle of the compass to every gust of wind; and without their continuous functioning we are, to continue the metaphor, like sailors upon an uncharted sea. We cannot maintain the vast system of inter-relationships we have built unless men are prepared to follow consistently the path of reason in their affairs. We need a minimum of social unity that will at least persuade mankind that the path of social change is a matter for deliberation and argument, not for violence and physical conflict.

Yet our interdependence has not procured a unified outlook. Racial hatred, national suspicion, the war of class and class, all these remain to emphasize to us the error of optimism. Confidence, in fact, is the more dangerous because the weapons that science has placed at the service of destruction are now so powerful that their utilization is incompatible with civilized life. We have learned in the last decade that the impulses of savagery that are loosed by war are utterly destructive of the foundations of a decent existence. If men cease to trust the goodwill of institutions, if, that is, they sacrifice the winning of conviction to the attainment of their desires, civilization could quite easily be reduced to the condition where, as in Mr. Wells’ imaginary picture,
some aged survivor may tell of an organized and coherent world as a legend which his grandchildren cannot hope to understand. The plain lesson of scientific knowledge is the making of social change in terms of peace. We must utilize our institutions. To destroy them is to destroy ourselves.

Such, at least, seems the plain lesson of recent experience. It implies, of course, the general realization that great events suggest the importance of continuous social reform. The mass of men has now been entrusted with political power; and the governments of the modern state must discover ways and means of translating the will of an electorate which has hardly known the amenities life can offer into terms of statutes. It is possible that so long as the process of legislation can offer proof to the democracy of a good will that results in solid benefit the transition to a new social order will be accomplished in peace. But the good will must be demonstrated; and the benefits must affect those who feel that they have now too small a stake in the present order to make its preservation a matter of urgency to themselves.

Such an attitude is the more important because the desirability of social peace has recently been attacked from what, at first sight, might seem two opposite directions. In Russia, a revolution made in the name of the workers has enthroned in authority men whose boast it is that they hold power without regard to the will of their subjects. In Italy, there developed alongside the constitutional government an extra-legal organization to which, at the first definite challenge, the former was compelled to yield. In Russia, the Bolsheviks have won and maintained power only at the cost of immense bloodshed, in large part, doubtless, the result of foreign intervention. In Italy, the Fascisti met with relatively little opposition at home, and with no external challenge. It is common to both movements that their power is built upon the force they can command. It is common to them, also, that they have rigorously suppressed all opposition to themselves and dismissed as unimportant the forms of constitutionalism. Each has exalted the end it has in view as superior to all problems implied in the means that have been used. Each has declared its own will so clearly identical with the good of the community as to make invalid, on a priori grounds, the notion of its critical analysis. Each, that is to say, has abandoned the path of reason and declared, in substance, that a great end transcends the doubts to which its methods have given rise. It is worth while
to examine in some detail the principles and possibilities which lie behind this attitude.

II

A revolution in Russia was doubtless implied in the logic of events. No government which is vicious in principle and corrupt in practice can hope, particularly in the atmosphere of military defeat, to retain the allegiance of those who do not share in the benefits of its dishonesty. But the Russian Revolution differs from all its predecessors in that it came in the name of a consistent system of doctrine; and it was largely made by men to whom that system contained the quintessence of social truth. No one can fail to be impressed by the contrast between France in 1789 and the Bolshevik Revolution of November, 1917. At no stage in the drama of Versailles was a body of coherent principles given validity in the event. 1789 was a revolution of occasion; November, 1917, was a revolution of theory. Lenin and his disciples came to do battle in the name of a social philosophy each item of which was built upon historic interpretation. Accident might have defeated their effort, Kerensky might have been a strong man; the Allies might have had a definite policy; the nation might not have been welded into unity by external invasion. But granted that the opportunity was given, Lenin was the first author of an attempt to translate the Marxian creed into the institutions of a state. His was a root-and-branch challenge to western civilization. It was not merely a rejection of social reform; it was not merely an insistence on the over-whelming superiority of communism. It was pre-eminently the argument that communism is so obviously desirable that the cost of its establishment must not be counted; and the methods to that end were drawn from the system inherited by Lenin from Marx.

The theses upon which Lenin has proceeded have at any rate the merit of comparative simplicity. The political institutions of society, he argues, are merely a facade to conceal the real nature of the state's organization. The state is in fact a method of protecting the owners of property; and the true division of men is into those who own and those who do not own possessions other than their power to labor. The life of the state is an eternal struggle between them. They have no interests in common. The class which owns property moulds the civilization of society in the service of its own interests. It controls the government, it makes
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the laws, it builds the institutions of the commonwealth in accordance with its own desires. It divides the society into free men and slaves; and with the advent of capitalism the last stage of that historic antithesis is reached. Just as the social order of the past has secreted within its womb the germ of its successor, as, for example, feudalism produced capitalism, so does the latter contain within itself the germ of its communist successor. Capitalism, as Marx said, produces its own grave-digger. The conflict between owner and proletariat is an inevitable one, and it is bound to result in the victory of the proletariat. The process is predetermined; and there is nothing in Lenin’s writings to suggest that a doubt of ultimate success has ever crossed his mind.

The method he advocates is, of course, the method of Marx. The workers are to assume the reins of power by a revolutionary act; and a dictatorship of iron rigor is to consolidate the new system until the period of transition has been effectively bridged. Lenin has never blinded himself to what this implies. The history of capitalism seems to him the history of a relentless defense of every phase of the rights of property. These were maintained at every point by methods unconnected with morality. If the conflict was extreme, as in the days of June, 1848, or as with the Commune of Paris, the last ounce of misery was wrung from its opponents that capitalism might be secure. A period of comparative quiescence may produce the concession of social reform, but this is merely deception. Once a really vital point is touched by the workers’ demands, they are met by armed resistance. This means that only a conscious and violent intervention can realize communism. The proletariat must seize a propitious moment for the revolution; and until the revolution comes it must do all in its power to disturb the existing régime. For communists have only two functions, to prepare for the revolution and to consolidate it successfully when it has been prepared.

The period of consolidation has always seemed to Lenin a period of iron dictatorship. He has had no illusions about the possibility, in such an hour, of democratic governance. Ideas of freedom and equality are bourgeois myths which cannot be admitted until the ground won has been secured. Revolution provokes counter-revolution; and a victorious proletariat must be on its guard against reaction. Revolution, in fact, demands of the revolutionary class that it secure its purpose by every method at its disposal. For compassion or remorse it has neither time nor
opportunity. It must disarm antagonism by execution, imprisonment, forced labor, control of the press. For as it cannot allow any effort at the violent overthrow of what it has established, so must it stamp out such criticism as might engender further attack. Revolution is war, and war is founded upon terror. The communist must use, in fact, the methods of capitalism to extinguish capitalism. For as capitalism has made of life itself the cheapest of commodities, there need be no repining at its sacrifice, and the result, in the end, is worth the cost, since it destroys the possibility of future sale. It would be, as Marx said of the Paris Commune, a wanton betrayal of trust to observe the traditional forms of liberalism. The end involved is too great to be nice about the means employed.

Nor, Lenin argues, can revolutionary communism halt at its own frontiers. The best defensive is the offensive method; it must attack other states lest they become centres of attack against itself. Of this attitude the Moscow International has been a not ineffective expression. It has allied itself to every centre of proletarian discontent. It has sought everywhere to create revolutionary working-class organizations hostile to the constitutional weapons of the middle-class state. Communists all over the world have been invited to arm the class-conscious proletariat. They have been invited to do all they could to cut down the army of the state as the chief weapon of defense possessed by the bourgeoisie. They have been urged to form their independent, if hidden, military force and acquire arms by every method. They have been asked to discredit influential democrats to whose word the working-class seemed to respond. For everywhere, Lenin has insisted, a violent struggle is inevitable. In England, for example, the workers might capture Parliament at the polls, but political power is in any case a shadow, and were it used for an attack on property it would inevitably provoke an armed resistance. Lenin, indeed, has gone further, and is openly contemptuous of democracy. It is for him a bourgeois institution intended only to deceive the people. The proletariat will always be deceived; and there can be no reliance save upon the class-conscious minority which accepts his views. For in his eyes there is no place in history for the majority-principle. The record of states is of a clash between determined minorities contending for the seat of power. To introduce considerations of consent, to wait on in the belief that the obvious rightness of
communist doctrine will ultimately persuade them to its acceptance, is entirely to ignore reality.

A generation which, like our own, has seen these dogmas applied by armed battalions is unlikely to under-estimate their importance. Nor are they less significant because Lenin has retreated from the full substance of his original position. Compromise may have been made with the peasants; internal difficulties may have called a halt to international propaganda; the pressure of circumstance may have admitted a small measure of private trading. What is here in dispute is not the end the Russian Revolution seeks to serve. The idea of emancipating a people from economic servitude is unquestionably a noble one; and there is a fundamental sense in which the atmosphere of that effort marks a great epoch in the history of mankind. Lenin is quite obviously informed by high sincerity. No work has been too difficult or too dangerous for either himself or his disciples to undertake. They have shrunk from no labor, however hard; and they have pursued throughout impersonal ends.

The question involved is a different one. Capitalism may be all that Lenin believes; and, indeed, the indictment against it is, on any impartial view, a formidable one. The question is whether the overthrow of institutions by violent means is ever likely to serve its intended purpose. It entails, and has entailed in Russia, the suppression of tolerance and kindliness. It has sown cruelty and hatred, anger and suspicion, into the soil of human relations. It has impaired at every point the intellectual heritage of the Russian people. It has been impatient of reason and fanatically hostile to critical enquiry. Its method, in fact, has been that by which every militant religion in past history has propagated its creed. The religion may have been true; but a religion which has sought to enforce its truth by the sword has always been in ultimate conflict with what is most precious in the nature of men.

III

The Italian movement is different in origin, but its ultimate spirit is in no-wise dissimilar. Leninism has been the dictatorship of a party, Fascism is the dictatorship of a man. Its rise is in part due to the endeavor to escape from the disillusion which seized Italy after the Treaty of Versailles, and in part to the ill-considered effort of the left-wing Italian socialists not merely to link themselves to the Third International but also to seize con-
trol of industry in some of the great towns. Violence assumed the character of a habit in post-war Italy. D'Annunzio's defiance of the Allies at Fiume awoke everywhere a vivid enthusiasm; and the ultimate expulsion of his troops by the government was a profound blow to the new pride of irredentist victory. Hardly less dissatisfaction was caused by the supineness of the government before the progress of socialism. Its refusal to expel the workers from the occupied factories was taken, not as a wise effort to avoid unnecessary bloodshed—since their surrender was inevitable—but as a failure to accept the challenge of Bolshevism. The older politicians were thoroughly discredited. Giolitti had been opposed to Italy's entrance into the war; Orlando had surrendered to the prestige of President Wilson; Nitti's conversion to the outlook of a "good European" did not square with the inflamed ambitions of victory. There had, moreover, been for many years a profound unreality about the alignment of Italian parties. They were in the control of machines bankrupt of ideas and—the clericals apart—little different from each other. A revivification of political life was essential if Italy was to realize the new possibilities opened by her part in the victory.

It was as the symbol of that revivification that Mussolini came to do battle with the old order. In part he represented the passionate optimism of youth, eager to control what seemed a great destiny, and in part the desire of the small property-owner for security against the advance of socialism. Fascist ideas found a ready acceptance wherever men were ambitious of power or apprehensive of novelty. As a soldier in the late war, Mussolini could claim a part in the victory. As a former member of the Socialist Party, he had the credit which always attaches to those who abandon unpopular views. The small bands of his supporters grew rapidly until they were the one organized and disciplined party in the state. They were able by direct action to drive out the socialists from their municipal strongholds. They met criticism and dissent not by words but by deeds. They destroyed the printing-presses of their opponents. They broke up public meetings. They beat strikers into submission. Where they encountered resistance, they did not hesitate even at assassination to enforce their will. The district authorities were cowed into submission to their local leaders. They infected the army and navy with their spirit; and the government did not dare to challenge their power. Mussolini, as chairman of the central
council, exacted and received an iron obedience from his followers. They were organized like an army; they wore a uniform. By the summer of 1922 Mussolini had half a million soldiers under his command. The time had come to move from the atmosphere of influence to the realm of government. He marched to Rome. The cabinet resigned its authority into the King's hands; and the latter had no alternative save to make Mussolini Prime Minister.

He was not even within sight of a parliamentary majority; but the Chambers abdicated before his avowed contempt for them. Either, he asserted, they must accept his will, or he would act without regard to their constitutional power. The ethos of Italy was incarnate in himself; and to oppose him was to invite disaster. The result was a remarkable triumph of dominant personality. The deputies did not hesitate to surrender their authority; if they criticized, they were beaten in the street or subjected to humiliating personal attack. Foreign policy and domestic policy alike were simply the will of Mussolini. His followers became the national militia. It is now a legal offense to publish material which serves to bring either the government or its policies into contempt. Freedom of speech has so far ceased to exist that older statesmen like Giolitti and Orlando have hastened to salute the new star. The Chamber of Deputies has passed a bill by which any party which receives one-quarter of the votes at a general election will secure automatically two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber; and since every Italian Government controls the elections Mussolini has granted himself at least four years of power.

He has openly thrown overboard all pretense of majority-rule. He will obtain power not because the mass of the electorate supports his views, but because his followers will not allow opposition to make itself heard. Government, for him, exists to fulfill needs, not to give effect to wills; and its first requirement is an overwhelming strength incompatible with liberty. For liberty, indeed, Mussolini professes no affection. He has called it a nineteenth-century concept which has exhausted its utility. Liberty, for him, is the parent of anarchy if it implies hostility from opponents, and the proof of disloyalty, involving expulsion from the party, if it comes from his declared supporters. He is hostile, also, to notions of equality. Though Fascism was, in its first phases, republican, since its accession to power it has found reasons to believe in monarchical government. It is avowedly favorable to a régime of classes; and it regards the hierarchical
structure of society as the natural reward of ability in an order where the weaker must go to the wall. It is opposed to public enterprise at a period when the increasing control of basis monopolies is more and more regarded as a vital part of social policy. It is imperialistic in foreign affairs. It regards the League of Nations as the ill-begotten child of Anglo-Saxon plutocracy. It is determined to expel England and France from the domination of the Mediterranean. It regards Jugoslavia with suspicion. Wherever Italians dwell in foreign lands, it proposes to create enclaves of Fascismo that they may "be brought to live the Italian life more intimately" and be protected "legally and extra-legally" where they are dependent upon foreign employers. It seeks the domination, in particular, of the Adriatic, which involves the economic penetration of Albania. It demands a sympathetic policy towards Turkey in its new form.

The student of Fascismo who desires to glean from its literature any definite system of ideas will be astonished at its incoherent naïveté. The Italian mind has always been prolific of eloquence; but Cavour and Mazzini, whatever their limitations, had always in view a tangible ideal. Mussolini has offered no such hostages to fortune. His writings and speeches have been sedulously kept within the realm of the impalpable. He emphasizes the importance of patriotism and the duty of upholding the national interest, as at Fiume, at all costs. He denies the validity of class-warfare. Capital must be protected; but labor must be given a due coöperation in its management. He believes, particularly, in the promotion of peasant proprietorship. It is at once a safeguard against Bolshevism and a means of giving individualism the opportunity of active expression. He believes in law, but, so to say, in a lawless sense. When government is weak it must be made strong; and direct action is the path to strength. For the subversive tyranny of Lenin there is substituted the creative tyranny of Mussolini. He has a ruthless will to power; and the extreme situation in which he found himself seemed to demand heroic remedies. The will to power justifies the assumption of power. Its victory means the close of the period of internal trouble and foreign disappointment. Production is to be intensified; all political and economic deficiencies are to be repaired. When life "has resumed its peaceful rhythm" violence may be discarded; but it is an essential method until the national reconstruction is complete.
No one who has seen a political party constructing its electoral program can fail to recognize phrases of this kind. The promise of a new heaven and a new earth are part of the common stock-in-trade of those who traffic in the art of government. Wherein, perhaps, Mussolini differs from his predecessors is in the passionate conviction by which his activity is inspired. He literally regards opposition to his views as a crime. He literally insists that all Italian history since the time of Virgil finds its consummation in the movement he leads. Any party, of course, which regards its dogmas as a religion is bound to derive strength from its fanaticism. It is too early yet to pronounce a judgment upon the meaning of this victory. Declarations of truth are inevitably easier than their realization in the event. Insistence that violence must give place to order is more easily announced than applied. Expectations that one's opponents will start from the acceptance of the condition one has established are often doomed to disappointment. Mussolini has used all the weapons at the disposal of force to hew his way to power. He has trampled down all opposition. He has cowed his critics into silence. He may have yielded a little here, as in his support of England's policy to Germany, or his conciliatory attitude to the Vatican; in general, he holds office without conditions or limitations of any kind. He has made a revolution as vital as any in the history of the last decade by methods which Machiavelli would have understood and admired. If he establishes at length the rule of reason, it will be in terms of the rejection of its essential instruments. For there is no connection between conviction that is won by persuasion, and acceptance that is extorted by force. The victories of the former are enduring; but the conquests of violence produce a reaction conceived in the tragic terms of the model they create.

IV

The historian of the next generation cannot fail to be impressed by the different reception accorded to the changes of which Lenin and Mussolini have been the chief authors. Where Lenin's system has won for itself international ostracism and armed intervention, that of Mussolini has been the subject of widespread enthusiasm. He himself has been decorated by the governments of foreign powers; ambassadors have exhausted the language of eulogy at official banquets; and great men of business have not hesitated to say that only the emulation of his methods
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can reduce the working classes to a proper state of mind. Yet, save in intensity, there has been no difference in the method pursued by the two men; and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the different reception of their effort is the outcome of their antithetic attitudes to property.

Yet the danger implicit in each philosophy is a similar one. We have spent so many years in war that we have grown accustomed to a code of conduct peculiar to times of disorder, and we have even erected laws of behavior which are special to periods of rebellion. In Greece, in Turkey, in Bulgaria, the writ of violence alone receives allegiance; and the news of murder and pillage is accepted without a sense of outrage. We are training to the thought of seizing power numbers of desperate men who are careless of the historic tradition and contemptuous of the morality upon which our civilization has been built. The same temper may be found in America and Ireland; and evidence of its existence in England and France can be found on every hand. Mussolini and Lenin are merely the last term in a series which pervades the circumference of western civilization.

The attitude they represent is the simple one that they serve a great end, and that barriers in the way of their goal must be removed at any cost. Yet it is obvious that if any group of men may, because of ardent belief, ignore the tested constitution of society, there is no prospect of peaceful development. For it is the plain lesson of experience that the only permanent basis of power is action built upon the wills and desires of the mass of men; and those who govern must be humble enough to be so skeptical of their conclusions as to be willing continuously to submit them to the judgment of their fellows.

Since, at least, the Renaissance, what improvement we have made in matters of social organization has been built upon the maintenance of this temper. The willingness to abide by free enquiry is the one certain avenue of progress. We may dislike the result; and we may seek to persuade men by further investigation to reject decisions that have been made. What is above all important is the notion that toleration is the persistent atmosphere of experiment. Once we are willing to be aggressively dogmatic about what are, after all, the most difficult of all questions, we invite the abandonment of reason. For every system of government which fails to rely upon persuasion and argument will always attract to itself men who are capable of neither. They
may begin by asserting that they have seized power for a great end; they are bound to continue by holding power for its own sake. And they are certain to hold power by penalizing dissent from their views.

Such systems have been tried before in history, most notably in the case of religion. They have always failed for the final reason that the bonds which unite the social fabric are too fragile to survive a constant assault. Medieval dogmatism did not produce conviction; it involved the wars of religion. The price we pay for militant certitude in social affairs is always the establishment of a despotism. From despotism to conflict the step is near and logical.

Lenin and Mussolini alike have established a government not of laws but of men. They have degraded public morality by refusing to admit the terms upon which civilized intercourse alone becomes possible. By treating their opponents as criminals, they have made thought itself a disastrous adventure; and that at a time when what is needed, above all, is inventiveness in social affairs. They have penalized sincerity in politics. They have given rein to passions which are incompatible with the security of life. They have insisted on the indispensability of themselves and their dogmas even though we cannot afford to pay the price incurred in the enforcement of that notion. If, as with both men, the problem of social change is to be restricted to a struggle between property and poverty, we shall end either by the establishment of an iron industrial feudalism or an anarchy in which our intellectual heritage will perish.

It may well be that the time has come for a revolution in the temper of human affairs; certainly no modern state can at once widely distribute political power and seek to maintain great disparities of fortune. But the only revolution that can hope for permanence is that which wins by slow persuasion the organized conviction of men. To endanger that process by exalting violence will not merely destroy a law here and a government there. It will, in the end, disrupt the foundations of the social fabric. Great events are not produced by the mechanisms of law or the efforts of single men. They depend, in the last analysis, upon the spirit which surrounds the circumstances of government. If that spirit is habituated to methods of violence, we cannot maintain the traditions of civilization.