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The Communist Party and the Idea of Dictatorship

Rudolf Rocker

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The disgraceful weakness of the social democracy and the labour unions, their [line missing here] of the “lesser evil” made things easier for the counter-revolutionaries and smoothed the way for fascism. The same goes for Communist Party policy, with its endless contradictions and utter hostility to freedom and its perilous “dictatorship of the proletariat”. All of which simply helped the success of counter-revolution in Germany, by softening up the people mentally. Here let us fully expose the fact that the Bolsheviks’ victory over the Russian revolution has been an overture to fascist counter-revolution in Europe. Because the very idea of dictatorship is, by itself, a counter-revolutionary idea and represents the main obstacle to all creative activity undertaken in a spirit of freedom and justice.

Every authentic revolution, which opens up fresh possibilities to this people or that (and thus to the whole of humanity) in terms of attitudes and culture is characterized less by what it tears down than by what it builds up and its invitation to a new way of living. Only through this new approach can the revolu-

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tion outweigh the mentality of traditions inherited from the past and wrest power from obsolete social practices. In creating something new, the revolution, by that very act, tears down the old and sketches out the paths to a better future. Therefore it has to exercise all the potential that it possesses in order to get as close as possible to the goal it has set itself. But dictatorship – which is always out to bend everything to a certain standard and tolerates only those paths that its representatives deem good – violently breaks down the creative potential of the revolutionary approach and places men and things under the yoke of a political providence that does the thinking and the acting for everybody. Thus, even in their embryonic stages, all brand-new ideas and fresh outlooks on the evolution of society are nipped in the bud. Which is why dictatorship never delivers revolution; instead, dictatorship heralds an incipient counter-revolution.

Cromwell was in no sense the embodiment of the English revolution, but the brutal violence of counter-revolution which degenerated into a brand-new form of despotism and blocked off any trend in the direction of freedom.

The dictatorship of Robespierre and the Jacobins was not emblematic of a sublime transformation releasing France from the curse of feudalism and absolutist monarchy; no, that dictatorship was to be the revolution's shroud and led on to Napoleon's military dictatorship.

In our own day, Bolshevism is merely the death knell heralding the death of the Russian revolution, after having conjured up the mental climate in which fascism can flourish.

Socialism can only cling to its meaning for the future if all of its efforts are committed to put paid once and for all, not just to monopolistic ownership of the land and the means of production, but also to any form of man's exploitation of his fellow man. The banishment of the authority principle from the life of society rather than the capture of power should be the great goal towards which socialism strives; and it must never give

up on it, unless it means to turn its back on its very essence. Anybody who reckons that freedom of the individual can be replaced by equal ownership rights, has failed to grasp the basis of socialism. There is no substitute for freedom; and no replacement. Equality of economic circumstances for all and for every single person is merely a precondition for human freedom, but, on its own, cannot be a substitute for such freedom. Whoever trespasses against freedom trespasses against the very spirit of socialism. Socialism is nothing but solidaristic collaboration on the basis of a shared goal and equal rights for all. Now, solidarity is founded upon the unfettered decision-making of the individual and cannot be imposed without its turning into tyranny and reneging upon its very self.

All authentically socialist effort, whether in big matters or in small, should let itself be guided by the notion of opposing the spread of monopoly into every aspect of life, but it should also set itself the task of boosting and consolidating human freedom in the context of social unity. To that end, socialists should marshal all of the forces at their disposal. Any political activity that leads to a different outcome, is a departure from the true path and does not lead to the construction of socialism. It is in the light of this argument that all of capitalism's claims to superiority over socialism are to be weighed up. As a rule, history knows nothing of any such "transitions". All we can do is grasp the distinction between the most primitive forms and the most highly evolved forms of social phenomena. Every brand-new social order is of course unlawful in terms of the forms in which it finds expression. And yet, in every one of the new institution, conjured into existence by that social order, there have to be inherently all of the potential for further development, just as the embryo contains in a latent condition the rounded being that is to emerge from it. All attempts to incorporate into the new order a few essential component features of the old one (and this is what every dictatorship tries to do), all efforts of that sort always lead to one of two nega-

tive outcomes: they either snuff out, right from the outset, the emergence of new forms of sociability, or they compress the tender shoots of new beginnings, hopeful of a better future, through the petrified forms of the past. Hampered in their natural growth, those shoots gradually wither as all life is drained from them.

When Mussolini says that “in the Europe of today there are only two countries where the State is worth a damn, namely, Russia and Italy”, or when Lenin ventured as far as to state that “freedom is merely a bourgeois prejudice”, their words mirrored two mind-sets, the kinship between which simply cannot be denied. Lenin’s cynical remark proves only that he was unable to elevate his mind to the heights of the authentic notion of socialism and instead turned in despair to the obsolete circle of versions of political Jacobinism. Generally, the distinction between authoritarian socialism and free socialism seems pointless and monstrous; either socialism is going to be free or there not going to be any socialism.

The German Communist Party, the strongest of the European communist parties, survived only on the mistakes made by the social democrats and throughout its existence failed to come up with one single creative idea. It was nothing but a mindless tool of Russian foreign policy and unhesitatingly obeyed every word emanating from Moscow. Abiding by the spirit of such Muscovite policy, it beavered away at implanting belief in inevitability of dictatorship in the minds of those German socialist workers who had lost all faith in the wretched approach of the social democracy. Into the communist ranks were drawn elements of the working class which were not at all bad, particularly young enthusiasts with a fondness for bombast and revolutionary slogans, imagining that these all amounted to something real. Such youngsters showed themselves widely prepared to sacrifice themselves and participate in the active struggle: but the fact is that they lacked the maturity required for a deeper understanding

a degree of common ground between them. The German Communist Party leadership's naïve gambit as they tried to lure the fascists over to them by tossing them concessions to patriotism by way of titbits, has merely culminated in the strengthening of fascism's influence, with the latter finishing up recruiting fresh members drawn from the membership of the Communist Party itself.

of the actual situation. Now it was precisely their youthful enthusiasm – that gem of the workers' movement – that was odiously exploited by the leaders of the German Communist Party and their Muscovite advisors. These youngsters, often with their enthusiasm whipped up, resorted to methods that served only the counter-revolution. Besides, the spirit of fanaticism made them deaf and dumb around anything that had about it a scrap of reasonable appreciation of the facts and events. A mentality like that represents the best soil in which to grow dictatorial aspirations, and [something missing here] their pathetically hypocritical policy and bent out of shape every protest levelled at reactionary measures. They are capable of genuine struggle only in defence of the freedom of those who are themselves would-be dictators and seek the abolition of every freedom. How are we supposed to be able to reproach the reactionaries' efforts to do away with freedom of the press or meetings and the open expression of ideas whilst simultaneously justifying the need for those very same measures in Russia?

One cannot wage a vigorous campaign against the persecution and imprisonment of revolutionary workers in the states of western Europe when soviet Russian prisons are filled with non-Bolshevik socialists and revolutionaries whose only fault is that they hold views that differ from those officially imposed by the incumbent dictators. Just let someone dare express any such objections and the opponents on the right were quick to answer him by pointing to what was happening in the "red proletarian homeland".

Mussolini and Hitler have unquestionably borrowed a lot from Russia; the relentless extermination of any thinking other than government-approved thinking; brutal suppression of any challenging views; the conversion of the trade unions into government agencies; and, most of all, the unrestrained arbitrariness of the State in everything relating to private and social life. Victorious Bolshevism showed the fascists the way. And

let no one try to tell us that the difference between fascist dictatorship and Bolshevik dictatorship resides in their aims rather than in their means. Every aim is fleshed out in the appropriate means. Despotic acts are always the products of a despotic mind-set. Anyone who is a stranger to freedom will see it only as a "bourgeois prejudice". No one will deny that in the eyes of the Bolshevik ideologues a different purpose initially was devised; but they were imprisoned within their modus operandi, which they themselves had chosen and the implementation of which alienated them more and more from the aim that they claimed to be pursuing. What had initially looked to them like just an inescapable method gradually grew into an end in itself. The inescapable outcome of every dictatorship. Anyone honestly looking for the logical consequences flowing from the Russian experience cannot help but come to the same conclusion. Men cannot be schooled in freedom and socialism and delivered from the capriciousness of an unfettered despotism that stifles their creative powers, stymies their will and kills off their every ideal, because the man who is trapped in the iron grip of an all-powerful statist machinery no longer has any connection with ideals.

The Russian revolution has run aground, not because of unfavourable economic conditions, but because of the dictatorship to which the Bolsheviks have resorted. That dictatorship smothered the life force of the revolution, even paralysing its very spirit and driven the people into the arms of a brand-new despotism. In Germany we have witnessed a certain inner connection that exists between Bolshevism and fascism; even during the second last elections a considerable number of communist voters (and this is easily proven) switched to the national-socialist camp; a lot of communists then flooded into the storm trooper units of Hitler's private army and, in some cases, entire units of the German Communist Party threw in their lot with the fascists. This connection between fascism and Bolshevism ought not to be ignored by anyone keen to understand the full

tragic import of what brought about the triumph of the brown terror in Germany.

The Communist Party leaders, eager to prevent the growth of fascism's popularity, even strove to outdo the fascists in the expression of patriotic feelings; and even as the Hitlerites were dopedly bragging about wanting to "successfully deliver Germany", the communist newspapers were talking about the upcoming march of the Red Army which would unfold its tents near the Rhine. Radek was enthusiastic in singing the praises of the nationalist Schlageter on account of his attentat – this being the very same Schlageter to whom a monument has now been erected, on Hitler's orders. The German Communist Party's press latched on to all such patriotic blather and things of that ilk. The most shameful deference was even shown to the German fascists' anti-semitism and Ruth Fischer, the most popular female figure at the time, and occupying a prominent position in the Communist Party leadership and herself of Jewish extraction, cried out at a student rally in Berlin: "String the Jewish capitalists up from the streetlamps!" One can just imagine what sort of chaos such agitation must have created in the minds of the young and in politicians of more mature years.

True, similar concessions were made to nationalism in the hope that Hitler's supporters might be lured into the communist camp. But there is a huge danger that resides specifically in the attempt to employ fascist methods to purposes that are completely alien to them. The upshot of similar attempts was the mangling of their own ideas and a dangerous undermining of all wholesome political currents which were hostile to nationalism; these were the only ones that might have stood up against the pressures from the nationalist backlash. There are some circles that cannot be squared and which it is pointless trying to connect by means of a bridge across the gulf between them as ideas also are governed by certain laws of their own and they cannot be reconciled other than when there is