

IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY

MR. JOHN STRACHEY'S book *The Menace of Fascism* (already reviewed by BLACKFRIARS) is interesting perhaps as an objective phenomenon rather than for any very startling contents. The author thinks quite clearly: he sees in Fascism the triumph of the Capitalists over the inept opposition of Labour; he is justly apprehensive of Fascist State-Absolutism; he is logical enough in suspecting that perfervid nationalism (in that it means a hatred of internationalism, and selfish market-hunting) will lead to War. Does the Means Test and the Trades Disputes Act justify the sniffing of Fascism or Nazism? It is early to say, and we have no business with prophecy. Catholics will be (as they have been elsewhere) the first and most obdurate opponents of encroachment upon Democracy—true democracy, that is to say, the only sort of democracy that matters. It is about the nature of democracy that we quarrel a little with Mr. Strachey. His book is prefaced with well-authenticated instances of the recent brutality in Germany, shootings and beatings, the stripping and whipping to death of a woman, and other (one fears) rather representative atrocities. These things Mr. Strachey very justly deplores; and Catholics have not been and will not be outdone in generous denunciation where it is necessary. For all that we have a difference with Mr. Strachey. Very simply it is this. We do not believe that he goes deep enough. Personally I am not moved very urgently to quarrel with Mr. Strachey in his dislike of Fascism. I could, I think, make my copy of the *Menace of Fascism* even more valuable by cramming its fly-leaves with data about Fascist prisons, for instance, and what goes on in them, what sort of people are sometimes put in them, and generally what sort of things happen to you if you fall out very badly with the Fascists.

For all that, we have to be very careful. When an evil thing attacks something else, we must not necessarily suppose that the thing attacked is therefore good. Quite fre-

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quently it is not: and (here is the point of our present argument) quite frequently it is precisely the same sort of evil as the thing that is attacking, or suppressing, or 'persecuting' it! In the present instance we have a competition for the survival of the fittest. We can only hope that none will survive, for both (or all) the competitors are, so far as ultimate values are concerned, supremely unfit. It matters little which at the moment has the upper hand. We must not allow our tendency to react from one extreme to the other and upset our mental and critical balance. If the antagonists are, in the fundamental issues, much of a muchness, we cannot do better than admit it. For the fundamental issues are the things that concern the souls of men, and in these we cannot afford to wink or blink, or shut our eyes, and be caught, a little later on, unawares.

The great difference, so far as the ordering of this life is concerned, between Catholicism and Socialism is that whereas the Socialists believe that it is Society that makes man—the Catholic Church teaches that it is man that makes Society. 'Let us look after Society,' they say in Russia, 'and all will be well with the individuals that compose it.'

I remember a thorough-going Socialist (who happened also to be a sensitive humanitarian) being terribly shocked by a report he had read about a crowd of wandering children (whose diseased bodies were a menace to the State) being rounded up and exterminated by a machine gun. I pointed out that the officials who directed the operation were, after all, if the report were true, only looking after Society. They could be logically indicted only on the principle that the individual comes first—and that, my humanitarian Socialist must deny.

Of course we do not forget the old sophistry about the State being you and me—and the affirmations of the State worshippers that they really have you and me and every poor man and woman in mind when they work for the Beautiful, Perfect State. In reality the philosophers in the U.S.S.R. are a great deal more honest when they shoot at you and me, turn machine-guns on us, starve us, and then

turn a melancholy fanatical eye to the Race, the quite illusive abstraction, ever remote, unknowable, coming into its own only in the far, far off future.

'Heaven,' a disillusioned Bolshevik said to me, explaining his conversion, 'seemed so much nearer!'

Catholics are very careful about abstractions. So often they mean nothing at all; and Bolsheviks when they have eliminated the Person for the sake of the Class should not be astonished to find that the Class (saving the name) does not exist. This is enough, without enlarging upon its pseudo-morality, its substitution of the kingdom of man for the kingdom of God, to discredit the mockery that passes for humanitarianism. St. Thomas tells us why the negation is sinister. The intellectuals who worship an abstraction will be lucky if they do not find themselves in time at the shrine of a dynamic nothing. And so respectable is the cult that no one suspects who or what that nothing is. Only when the mess has been made (if made it must be) will he show his face.

This may seem a far cry from Mr. Strachey's book about the menace of Fascism. Yet not so far when you have read his book: for, so great is Mr. Strachey's dislike of Black-shirts (or brown) that he thinks a Red Flag is to be preferred.

Why should we have either? Mr. Strachey sees in Fascism the violence of Capitalism—its latest and most desperate stand against democracy. He may be right; he probably is, in my opinion. But when we talk about Fascist and Nazi persecution of democracy, let us be clear about what democracy means. We have already spoken of Bolshevik democracy. Before, in conclusion, we speak of real democracy which is the spirit of Catholicism, let us see if we can reasonably admit the possibility of sustaining democracy in the Capitalist system as we know it. There need, of course, be nothing absolutely in Capitalist theory to antagonize Catholicism as there is in Communism. But that is in the main because Capitalistic Theory is derived from this or that particular Capitalist. In fact it is often a more difficult enemy to deal with in that it is not an absolute code like

Marxism. There is always a remote (very remote) possibility that you may come across a form of capitalism that is wholly justified—wholly good like the Capitalism (if one can call it so) of Léon Harmel. If Capitalism and its derivatives were, like Communism, an intrinsically a-moral code, we may be sure that Rome would have as little to do with Fascists and Nazis (indeed with plain British Constitution-*alists*) as she does with Moscow. So much for theory. As for the practice of capitalist industrialism our Holy Father denounces it every bit as vigorously as Communism. Here is a plain description of the prevalent system:

‘Labour, which was decreed by Providence for the good of man’s body and soul even after original sin, has everywhere been changed into an instrument of strange perversion: for dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed where men are corrupted and degraded.’

Here, and again and again throughout the Encyclical, the Pope denounces the prostitution of womanhood and manhood, and the awful perils that surround men and women, boys and girls, in the system actually established by capitalists. He would protect not a vague abstraction, but each and every soul: there can be no principle that needs the sacrifice of one single ailing child. Here indeed (forgetting, for an instant, the meanings that have attached to the words) is real Socialism, here real humanitarianism, here true democracy!

There is one, and one only, sure democracy—the Catholicism of the Popes that recognizes the rights of all without distinction, the rights of every individual soul. Here is an economy for which man, and only man, is the essential social unit, in which the process of production exists for the benefit of him who produces and is no end in itself for which the worker must be sacrificed: a democracy that will tolerate no slavery whether of Capital or State tyranny, neither Fascist nor Bolshevik. This is the democracy of the Popes. We wish Mr. Strachey knew it.

There are many who frankly marvel that our de-Christianized civilization is so slow in reaching the point of complete chaos and ruin—forgetful of the diminishing remnant

of Christian tradition on which we are still living. Christianity, even in its less elevated forms, is not easy to kill. When Russia loses finally all *Christian feeling*, in her utter dejection she will be forced to turn to Christ. The illogicality which redeemed my Communist friend (cited earlier) and made him denounce the execution of children upon pathological grounds, is typical even of many of the more sophisticated Bolsheviks now ruling Russia. There is a charity learnt at our mothers' knees that may take root in the most unpromising heredity, that revolutions may no more than lightly crop. And it was nigh three centuries before the English Church (cut off from the source of apostolic tradition) so suffocated as to look to Anglo-Catholicism for artificial respiration. Atrophy of the truth is a process extending beyond a single generation.

In time we may learn from the Church both to place a greater value upon human nature and to rely upon it less.

The work of the machine which ought to reduce so enormously the travail of life is in effect no more than a tragic and ghastly reminder of this obstinacy of ours which at once (whether in Capitalist or Communist theory) relies so absolutely upon the infallible integrity of human nature, and yet ignores the final value (and prostitutes the lives) of men. It is simple enough to see where the trouble lies. We have law courts to settle, justly or otherwise, our little differences: ordeal by fire was barbarous: the duel, ordeal by sword and pistol, was immoral. But for our international differences in these civilized times we have ordeal by machine—by malevolent science and brute force. We wait to see who is best at blowing up, who is best at poisoning, maiming; who can destroy the most. This is but an indication. What we really want, some say (and one sees their point of view), and can never have, is the abolition, not of armament but of machinery—an amnesty in which we may forget how to kill women and children with test-tubes, and blow up God's creation by pressing a button. It was the late war of shrapnel and gas that revolted us, and the thought of the next that terrifies us. It is machinery and not war that makes pacifists.

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For Catholics the question is deeper yet: for the crux of the problem lies no less deep than with human nature. And none other than She who appraises humanity with absolute accuracy can solve the problem—the Catholic Church. She sees the created through the eyes of the Creator. Man's worth she does not forget, nor his ability overrate. Let none speak lightly of democracy, for there is a democracy which is the dynamic principle of love, the democracy of Christ which laid aside the false principles of a decadent society and took its stand upon a drastic revision of the human outlook: a democracy which shattered privilege and gave to all men responsibilities as well as rights.

When are we going to insist on those rights (for those economically unable to assert themselves?). When—even more important—are Catholics going to accumulate and shoulder the disowned responsibilities that lie all about them? Now is the time, as never before, for superlative generosity. We have no time for caution; we must rely on a prudent Providence. Now is the time for a creative revolution founded on the Charity of Christ. Catholic Action, it is to be inferred, means more than church work; it means the whole of life and all work with a single end in view. For we should live and work in order that there may come about (what M. Berdyaev says has not yet happened) the realization of Christian truth in the social world—so that our faith be no longer confined to 'four walls and Sundays,' nor to place, nor to period, for we must be modern of the moderns. This is the labour of democracy.

Labouring thus for eternity, we shall at least achieve immortality.

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