

Democracy and Reason

In one of those unctuous political utterances for which he was notorious, British Prime Minister John Major once declared that "fascism and communism lie behind us. The two great enemies of reason have been defeated." This was astonishing from a nation that spent so much blood fighting these evils - and dead wrong on three counts.

First, fascism and communism may be napping, but are not comatose. Their roots are far too deep for that. Many Eastern European nations, after having been joyously liberated from the horrors of communism in the 90s, turned right around and freely voted it back into power with only a slight change of make-up. As for the much misunderstood fascism, there are signs of it everywhere, both in Europe and in North America, especially in the schools and Universities, which heavily promote ethnic identitarianism.

Second, the implication of his comment was that communism is a demented expression of the left, and fascism, of the right. As a good pluralist, Major wished to blame them equally. Leftist journalists and undergraduates are always eager to echo this balancing reflex by quickly labelling anyone with non-egalitarian views, a "fascist."

But in fact, fascism and communism were both revolutionary, if rival brands of socialism. The former sought to build socialism on national unity (most notably in Italy and Germany), while the latter sought - still seeks - to transcend the level of the nation by building socialism internationally. Desperate to distance themselves from Hitlerism, the internationalists simply persuaded compliant intellectuals to label his fascist socialism "right wing."

But no form of socialism can ever be conservative, except in the perverse and ironic sense that it seeks to suppress human freedoms and the differences that naturally arise in free societies, and thus to permanently rigidify and freeze society in an unchanging utopian mould.

As commonly understood, however, neither of these sibling ideologies was "conservative." For neither sought to preserve the enduring moral and civil values of a free society against the plundering state. Quite the reverse. Although they used the title of "democracy" and claimed to fulfill the will of the people, each worshipped a strong, totalitarian state, and was deeply opposed to capitalism.

They also scorned private property, ridiculed our central belief in individual liberty as the basis of civilization, and were profoundly atheistic, placing great stock instead in the mystical appeal of statism. Mussolini was positively rhapsodic in his claims that fascism reasserts the rights of the state and "its ethical will," which expresses "the real essence of the individual." And each produced dictators with absolute, god-like control over their own people. In brief, both were proudly collectivist, ant-heap ideologies. Always will be.

Most interesting, however, is the charge they were "enemies of reason." For if fascism and communism (or socialism in any of its forms) are anything, they are the highest expression of naked "reason" - if by reason we mean the logical unfolding of a single political theory, unchecked by liberty, and religious or moral norms.

And that is the Western disease. Marx's *Das Kapital* is a tortuously "reasoned" book. Infuriatingly so. That is its great appeal to deracinated Western intellectuals. It literally marches from one persuasive (but false) assumption to the next, and unknown to admirers in its spell leads, like iron rails, not to utopia, but to the concentration camps. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is the same. Tightly, and falsely, reasoned. Mussolini's essays were beauties of reason - if you love statism.

The roots of all this are deep, and burst upon the world for the first time in the intensely reasoned democratic theories of the French Revolution. The revolutionaries hastened to "dechristianize" France (because religion was deemed so irrational) by dragging crucifixes through the streets, smashing churches, and guillotining priests. Whereupon Notre Dame cathedral was renamed the "Temple of Reason." Inside, a gimcrack Greco-Roman structure was built of linen and papier-mache, and a toga-clad opera singer playing the part of Liberty, sang and bowed to the flame of Reason. In the cathedral of Saint-Jean, a "Feast of Reason" was held, where supplicants sang anti-hymns celebrating "Reason as the Supreme Being."

At the start of World War Two, Hitler proudly chortled, "This revolution of ours [National Socialism] is the exact counterpart of the French Revolution. British Philosopher Michael Oakeshott concluded of fascism, communism and national socialism: "the doctrine of representative democracy...is the parent of these ungracious children."

And G. K. Chesterton noted that a crazy person is one "who has lost everything except his reason." That is, has lost moral norms and standards of decency - but not brute logic. Reason without norms leads to disaster.

It's the same for nations. As another wise observer put it, neither fascism nor communism were a relapse into the dark ages, nor a flight from reason, but rather, "its fulfilment." This is the sadness of our past, and its warning to the present.

© William Gairdner