

Why the worst get on top

Chapter #10 from The Road to Serfdom – F. A. Hayek

No doubt an American or English ‘fascist’ system would greatly differ from the Italian or German models; no doubt, if the transition were effected without violence, we might expect to get a better type of leader. Yet this does not mean that our fascist system would in the end prove very different or much less intolerable than its prototypes. There are strong reasons for believing that the worst features of the totalitarian systems are phenomena which totalitarianism is certain sooner or later to produce.

Just as the democratic statesman who sets out to plan economic life will soon be confronted with the alternative of either assuming dictatorial powers or abandoning his plans, so the totalitarian leader would soon have to choose between disregard of ordinary morals and failure. It is for this reason that the unscrupulous are likely to be more successful in a society tending toward totalitarianism. Who does not see this has not yet grasped the full width of the gulf which separates totalitarianism from the essentially individualist Western civilization. The totalitarian leader must collect around him a group which is prepared voluntarily to submit to that discipline they are to impose by force upon the rest of the people.

That socialism can be put into practice only by methods of which most socialists disapprove is, of course, a lesson learned by many social reformers in the past. The old socialist parties were inhibited by their democratic ideals; they did not possess the ruthlessness required for the performance of their chosen task. It is characteristic that both in Germany and in Italy the success of fascism was preceded by the refusal of the socialist parties to take over the responsibilities of government. They were unwilling wholeheartedly to employ the methods to which they had pointed the way.

They still hoped for the miracle of a majority’s agreeing on a particular plan for the organization of the whole of society. Others had already learned the lesson that in a planned society the question can no longer be on what do a majority of the people agree but what the largest single group is whose members agree sufficiently to make unified direction of all affairs possible. There are three main reasons why such a numerous group, with fairly similar views, is not likely to be formed by the best but rather by the worst elements of any society.

First, the higher the education and intelligence of individuals become, the more their tastes and views are differentiated. If we wish to find a high degree of uniformity in outlook, we have to descend to the regions of lower moral and intellectual standards where the more primitive instincts prevail. This does not mean that the majority of people have low moral standards; it merely means that the largest group of people whose values are very similar are the people with low standards.

Second, since this group is not large enough to give sufficient weight to the leader's endeavours, he will have to increase their numbers by converting more to the same simple creed. He must gain the support of the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own but are ready to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently. It will be those whose vague and imperfectly formed ideas are easily swayed and whose passions and emotions are readily aroused who will thus swell the ranks of the totalitarian party.

Third, to weld together a closely coherent body of supporters, the leader must appeal to a common human weakness. It seems to be easier for people to agree on a negative programme – on the hatred of an enemy, on the envy of the better off – than on any positive task. The contrast between the 'we' and the 'they' is consequently always employed by those who seek the allegiance of huge masses. The enemy may be internal, like the 'Jew' in Germany or the 'kulak' in Russia, or he may be external. In any case, this technique has the great advantage of leaving the leader greater freedom of action than would almost any positive programme.

Advancement within a totalitarian group or party depends largely on a willingness to do immoral things. The principle that the end justifies the means, which in individualist ethics is regarded as the denial of all morals, in collectivist ethics becomes necessarily the supreme rule. There is literally nothing which the consistent collectivist must not be prepared to do if it serves 'the good of the whole', because that is to him the only criterion of what ought to be done.

Once you admit that the individual is merely a means to serve the ends of the higher entity called society or the nation, most of those features of totalitarianism which horrify us follow of necessity. From the collectivist standpoint intolerance and brutal suppression of dissent, deception and spying, the complete disregard of the life and happiness of the individual are essential and unavoidable. Acts which revolt all our feelings, such as the shooting of hostages or the killing of the old or sick, are treated as mere matters of expediency; the compulsory uprooting and transportation of hundreds of thousands becomes an instrument of policy approved by almost everybody except the victims.

To be a useful assistant in the running of a totalitarian state, therefore, a man must be prepared to break every moral rule he has ever known if this seems necessary to achieve the end set for him. In the totalitarian machine there will be special opportunities for the ruthless and unscrupulous. Neither the Gestapo nor the administration of a concentration camp, neither the Ministry of Propaganda nor the SA or SS (or their Russian counterparts) are suitable places for the exercise of humanitarian feelings. Yet it is through such positions that the road to the highest positions in the totalitarian state leads.

A distinguished American economist, Professor Frank H. Knight, correctly notes that the authorities of a collectivist state 'would have to do these things whether they wanted to or not: and the probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tender-hearted person would get the job of whipping master in a slave plantation'.

A further point should be made here: collectivism means the end of truth. To make a totalitarian system function efficiently it is not enough that everybody should be forced to work for the ends selected by those in control; it is essential that the people should come to regard these ends as their own. This is brought about by propaganda and by complete control of all sources of information. The most effective way of making people accept the validity of the values they are to serve is to persuade them that they are really the same as those they have always held, but which were not properly understood or recognized before. And the most efficient technique to this end is to use the old words but change their meaning.

Few traits of totalitarian regimes are at the same time so confusing to the superficial observer and yet so characteristic of the whole intellectual climate as this complete perversion of language. The worst sufferer in this respect is the word 'liberty'. It is a word used as freely in totalitarian states as elsewhere. Indeed, it could almost be said that wherever liberty as we know it has been destroyed, this has been done in the name of some new freedom promised to the people. Even among us we have planners who promise us a 'collective freedom', which is as misleading as anything said by totalitarian politicians. 'Collective freedom' is not the freedom of the members of society, but the unlimited freedom of the planner to do with society that which he pleases. This is the confusion of freedom with power carried to the extreme.

It is not difficult to deprive the great majority of independent thought. But the minority who will retain an inclination to criticize must also be silenced. Public criticism or even expressions of doubt must be suppressed because they tend to weaken support of the regime. As Sidney and Beatrice Webb report of the position in every Russian enterprise: 'Whilst the work is in progress, any public expression of doubt that the plan will be successful is an act of disloyalty and even of treachery because of its possible effect on the will and efforts of the rest of the staff.'

Control extends even to subjects which seem to have no political significance. The theory of relativity, for instance, has been opposed as a 'Semitic attack on the foundation of Christian and Nordic physics' and because it is 'in conflict with dialectical materialism and Marxist dogma'. Every activity must derive its justification from conscious social purpose. There must be no spontaneous, unguided activity, because it might produce results which cannot be foreseen and for which the plan does not provide.

The principle extends even to games and amusements. I leave it to the reader to guess where it was that chess players were officially exhorted that 'we must finish once and for all with the neutrality of chess. We must condemn once and for all the formula chess for the sake of chess.'

Perhaps the most alarming fact is that contempt for intellectual liberty is not a thing which arises only once the totalitarian system is established, but can be found everywhere among those who have embraced a collectivist faith. The worst oppression is condoned if it is committed in the name of socialism. Intolerance of opposing ideas is openly extolled. The tragedy of collectivist thought is that while it starts out to make reason supreme, it ends by destroying reason.

There is one aspect of the change in moral values brought about by the advance of collectivism which provides special food for thought. It is that the virtues which are held less and less in esteem in Britain and America are precisely those on which Anglo-Saxons justly prided themselves and in which they were generally recognized to excel. These virtues were independence and self-reliance, individual initiative and local responsibility, the successful reliance on voluntary activity, non-interference with one's neighbour and tolerance of the different, and a healthy suspicion of power and authority.

Almost all the traditions and institutions which have moulded the national character and the whole moral climate of England and America are those which the progress of collectivism and its centralistic tendencies are progressively destroying.