

Why the Worst Get on Top

Chapter 10 from The Road to Serfdom, by F.A. Hayek

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F. A. Hayek

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[A *n excerpt from Chapter 10, Road to Serfdom (University of Chicago Press, 1944)]*

All power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Lord Acton

We must now examine a belief from which many who regard the advent of totalitarianism as inevitable derive consolation and which seriously weakens the resistance of many others who would oppose it with all their might if they fully apprehended its nature. It is the belief that the most repellent features of the totalitarian regimes are due to the historical accident that they were established by groups of blackguards and thugs.

Surely, it is argued, if in Germany the creation of a totalitarian regime brought the Streichers and Killingers, the Leys and Heines, the Himmlers and Heydrichs to power, this may prove the viciousness of the German character, but not that the rise of such people is the necessary consequence of a totalitarian system. Why should it not be possible that the same sort of system, if it be necessary to achieve important ends, be run by decent people for the good of the community as a whole?

We must not deceive ourselves into believing that all good people must be democrats or will necessarily wish to have a share in the government. Many, no doubt, would rather entrust it to somebody whom they think more competent. Although this might be unwise, there is nothing bad or dishonorable in approving a dictatorship of the good. Totalitarianism, we can already hear it argued, is a powerful system alike for good and evil, and the purpose for which it will be used depends entirely on the dictators. And those who think that it is not the system which we need fear, but the danger that it might be run by bad men, might even be tempted to forestall this danger by seeing that it is established in time by good men.

No doubt an 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. And if I had to live under a fascist system I have no doubt that I would rather live under one run by Englishmen than under one run by anybody else. Yet all this does not mean that, judged on our present standards, a British fascist system would in the end prove so very different or much less intolerable than its prototypes.

There are strong reasons for believing that what to us appear the worst features of the existing totalitarian systems are not accidental byproducts, but 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 dictator would soon have to choose between disregard of ordinary morals and failure. It is for

this reason that the unscrupulous and uninhibited are likely to be more successful in a society tending towards totalitarianism. Who does not see this has not yet grasped the full width of the gulf which separates totalitarianism from a liberal regime, the utter difference between the whole moral atmosphere under collectivism and the essentially individualist Western civilization.

The "moral basis of collectivism" has, of course, been much debated in the past; but what concerns us here is not its moral basis but its moral results. The usual discussions of the ethical aspects of collectivism refer to the question whether collectivism is demanded by existing moral convictions; or what moral convictions would be required if collectivism is to produce the hoped-for results. Our question, however, is what moral views will be produced by a collectivist organisation of society, or what views are likely to rule it. The interaction between morals and institutions may well have the effect that the ethics produced by collectivism will be altogether different from the moral ideals that lead to the demand for collectivism. While we are apt to think that, since the desire for a collectivist system springs from high moral motives, such a system must be the breeding ground for the highest virtues, there is, in fact, no reason why any system should necessarily enhance those attitudes which serve the purpose for which it was designed. The ruling moral views will depend partly on the qualities that will lead individuals to success in a collectivist or totalitarian system, and partly on the requirements of the totalitarian machinery.

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That [socialism](#) can be put into practice only by methods which most socialists disapprove is, of course, a lesson learnt 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 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 agreeing on a particular plan for the organisation of the whole of society; others had already learnt the lesson that in a planned society the question can no longer be on what a majority of the people agree, but what is the largest single group whose members agree sufficiently to make unified direction of all affairs possible; or, if no such group large enough to enforce its views exists, how it can be created and who will succeed in creating it.

There are three main reasons why such a numerous and strong group with fairly homogeneous views is not likely to be formed by the best but rather by the worst elements of any society. By our standards the principles on which such a group would be selected will be almost entirely negative.

In the first instance, it is probably true that in general the higher the education and intelligence of individuals becomes, the more their views and tastes are differentiated and the less likely they are to agree on a particular hierarchy of values. It is a corollary of this that if we wish to find a high degree of uniformity and similarity of outlook, we have to descend to the regions of lower moral and intellectual standards where the more primitive and "common" instincts and tastes 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. It is, as it were, the lowest common denominator which unites the largest number of people. If a numerous group is needed, strong enough to impose their views on the values of life on all the rest, it will never be those with highly differentiated and developed tastes it will be those who form the "mass" in the derogatory sense of the term, the least original and independent, who will be able to put the weight of their numbers behind their particular ideals.

If, however, a potential dictator had to rely entirely on those whose uncomplicated and primitive instincts happen to be very similar, their number would scarcely give sufficient weight to their endeavors. He will

have to increase their numbers by converting more to the same simple creed.

Here comes in the second negative principle of selection: he will be able to obtain the support of all the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own but are prepared 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.

It is in connection with the deliberate effort of the skilful demagogue to weld together a closely coherent and homogeneous body of supporters that the third and perhaps most important negative element of selection enters. It seems to be almost a law of human nature that it is easier for people to agree on a negative programme, on the hatred of an enemy, on the envy of those better off, than on any positive task. The contrast between the "we" and the "they", the common fight against those outside the group, seems to be an essential ingredient in any creed which will solidly knit together a group for common action. It is consequently always employed by those who seek, not merely support of a policy, but the unreserved allegiance of huge masses. From their point of view it has the great advantage of leaving them greater freedom of action than almost any positive programme. The enemy, whether he be internal like the "Jew" or the "Kulak", or external, seems to be an indispensable requisite in the armoury of a totalitarian leader.

That in Germany it was the Jew who became the enemy till his place was taken by the "plutocracies" was no less a result of the anti-capitalist resentment on which the whole movement was based than the selection of the Kulak in Russia. In Germany and Austria the Jew had come to be regarded as the representative of capitalism because a traditional dislike of large classes of the population for commercial pursuits had left these more readily accessible to a group that was practically excluded from the more highly esteemed occupations. It is the old story of the alien race being

admitted only to the less respected trades and then being hated still more for practising them. The fact that German anti-semitism and anti-capitalism spring from the same root is of great importance for the understanding of what has happened there, but this is rarely grasped by foreign observers.

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One of the inherent contradictions of the collectivist philosophy is, that while basing itself on the humanistic morals which individualism has developed, it is practicable only within a relatively small group. That socialism so long as it remains theoretical, is internationalist, while as soon as it is put into practice, whether in Russia or in Germany, it becomes violently nationalist, is one of the reasons why "liberal socialism" as most people in the Western world imagine it is purely theoretical, while the practice of socialism is everywhere totalitarian. [1] Collectivism has no room for the wide humanitarianism of liberalism but only for the narrow particularism of the totalitarian.

If the "community" or the state are prior to the individual, if they have ends of their own independent of and superior to those of the individuals, only those individuals who work for the same ends can be regarded as members of the community. It is a necessary consequence of this view that a person is respected only as a member of the group, that is, only if and in so far as he works for the recognized common ends, and that he derives his whole dignity only from this membership and not merely from being man. Indeed, the very concepts of humanity and therefore of any form of internationalism are entirely products of the individualist view of man, and there can be no place for them in a collectivist system of thought. [2]

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It would, however, be highly unjust to regard the masses of the totalitarian people as devoid of moral fervor because they give unstinted support to a system which to us seems a denial of most moral values. For the great majority of them the opposite is probably true: the intensity of the moral emotions behind a movement like that of National-Socialism or communism can probably be compared only to those of the great religious movements of history. 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 totalitarian regimes which horrify us follow of necessity.

From the collectivist standpoint intolerance and brutal suppression of dissent, the complete disregard of the life and happiness of the individual, are essential and unavoidable consequences of this basic premise, and the collectivist can admit this and at the same time claim that his system is superior to one in which the "selfish" interests of the individual are allowed to obstruct the full realisation of the ends the community pursues. When German philosophers again and again represent the striving for personal happiness as itself immoral and only the fulfilment of an imposed duty as praiseworthy, they are perfectly sincere, however difficult this may be to understand for those who have been brought up in a different tradition.

Where there is one common all-overriding end there is no room for any general morals or rules. To a limited extent we ourselves experience this in wartime. But even war and the greatest peril had led in this country only to a very moderate approach to totalitarianism, very little setting aside of all other values in the service of a single purpose. But where a few specific ends dominate the whole of society, it is inevitable that occasionally cruelty may become a duty, that acts which revolt all our feeling, such as the shooting of hostages or the killing of the old or sick, should be treated as mere matters of expediency, that the compulsory uprooting and transportation of hundreds of thousands should become an instrument of policy approved by almost everybody except the victims, or that suggestions like that of a "conscription of women for breeding purposes" can be seriously contemplated. There is always in the eyes of the collectivist

a greater goal which these acts serve and which to him justifies them because the pursuit of the common end of society can know no limits in any rights or values of any individual.

But while for the mass of the citizens of the totalitarian state it is often unselfish devotion to an ideal, although one that is repellent to us, which makes them approve and even perform such deeds, this cannot be pleaded for those who guide its policy. To be a useful assistant in the running of a totalitarian state it is not enough that a man should be prepared to accept specious justification of vile deeds, he must himself be prepared actively to break every moral rule he has ever known if this seems necessary to achieve the end set for him. Since it is the supreme leader who alone determines the ends, his instruments must have no moral convictions of their own. They must, above all, be unreservedly committed to the person of the leader; but next to this the most important thing is that they should be completely unprincipled and literally capable of everything. They must have no ideals of their own which they want to realise, no ideas about right or wrong which might interfere with the intentions of the leader.

There is thus in the positions of power little to attract those who hold moral beliefs of the kind which in the past have guided the European peoples, little which could compensate for the distastefulness of many of the particular tasks, and little opportunity to gratify any more idealistic desires, to recompense for the undeniable risk, the sacrifice of most of the pleasures of private life and of personal independence which the posts of great responsibility involve. The only tastes which are satisfied are the taste for power as such, the pleasure of being obeyed and of being part of a well-functioning and immensely powerful machine to which everything else must give way.

Yet while there is little that is likely to induce men who are good by our standards to aspire to leading positions in the totalitarian machine, and much to deter them, there will be special opportunities for the ruthless and unscrupulous. There will be jobs to be done about the badness of which

taken by themselves nobody has any doubt, but which have to be done in the service of some higher end, and which have to be executed with the same expertness and efficiency as any others. And as there will be need for actions which are bad in themselves, and which all those still influenced by traditional morals will be reluctant to perform, the readiness to do bad things becomes a path to promotion and power. The positions in a totalitarian society in which it is necessary to practice cruelty and intimidation, deliberate deception and spying, are numerous.

Neither the Gestapo nor the administration of a concentration camp, neither the Ministry of Propaganda nor the SA or SS (or their Italian or Russian counterparts) are suitable places for the exercise of humanitarian feelings. Yet it is through positions like these that the road to the highest positions in the totalitarian state leads. It is only too true when a distinguished American economist concludes from a similar brief enumeration of the duties of the authorities of a collectivist state that they 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 tenderhearted person would get the job of whipping-master in a slave plantation. [10]

Footnotes

[1] Cf. now the instructive discussion in F. Borkenau, *Socialism, National or International?*, 1942.

[2] It is entirely in the spirit of collectivism when Nietzsche makes his Zarathustra say:

"A thousand goals have existed hitherto, for a thousand people existed. But the fetter for the thousand necks is still lacking, the one goal is still lacking. Humanity has no goal yet.

"But tell me, I pray, my brethren: if the goal be lacking to humanity, is not humanity itself lacking?"

[3] Quoted from an article of Dr. Niebuhr's by E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 1941, p. 203.

[4] Findlay MacKenzie (ed.), *Planned Society, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: A Symposium*, 1937, p. xx.

[5] E. Halevy, *L'Ere des Tyrannies*, Paris, 1938, p. 217, and *History of the English People*, Epilogue, vol. I, pp. 105-6.

[6] Cf. K. Marx, *Revolution and Counter-revolution*, and Engels' letter to Marx, May 23, 1851.

[7] Bertrand Russell, *The Scientific Outlook*, 1931, p. 211.

[8] B. E. Lippincott, in his Introduction to O. Lange and F. M. Taylor, *On the Economic Theory of Socialism*, Minneapolis, 1938, p. 33.

[9] We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the fact that the word power, apart from the sense in which it is used with respect to human beings, is also used in an impersonal (or rather anthropomorphic) sense for any determining cause. Of course there will always be something that determines everything that happens, and in this sense the amount of power existing must always be the same. But this is not true of the power consciously wielded by human beings.

[10] Professor F. H. Knight in *The Journal of Political Economy*, December 1938, p. 869.



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Friedrich Hayek (1899 – 1992) was an economist and philosopher, author of seminal works that changed intellectual history, who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his pioneering work in the theory of money and economic fluctuations and penetrating analysis of the interdependence of economic, social and institutional phenomena. He taught in Vienna, London, and Chicago.
