

CURRENT MAGAZINES

From Kaiser to Fuehrer:—Mr. George Glasgow, in the *Contemporary*.
The War and the Small Nations:—Mr. C. A. Macartney, in the *Fortnightly*.
Rumania or the Baltics Next?:—Mr. W. Duranty, in the *Atlantic*.

"POWER POLITICS"

ANOTHER ungainly term has been working its way into current use. Who it was that began the talk and the articles about "Power Politics", is a question indeed of no great importance. It may yet be investigated in some dissertation for a Ph.D. degree, with the energy shown in the famous research upon "The Use of the Semicolon in *Sartor Resartus*". But though the authorship of the term is trivial, the sort of attitude to world affairs which needed such a term for its expression is a deplorably significant sign of our times. I shall first state, in more or less compact form, what I have gathered of this doctrine from current magazines in which its discussion figures conspicuously. An effort to put it in words will introduce later comment.

I

The creed I have in mind might be summarized thus:

We are now back in avowed purpose to what we deluded the credulous—and perhaps for a time even deluded ourselves—into thinking that we had given up. The *League of Nations*, with its affectation of introducing a moral element into international relationship, was from the first (as Signor Mussolini so well pointed out) an imposture. For there is no such element in the dealings of States with one another: there never was, never will be, and never can be any motive there at work other than struggle for predominance: all such politics is "power" politics.

Like its predecessors, such as *The Holy Alliance* and *The Concert of Europe*, the *League* pretended to have purposes other and nobler than the desire to perpetuate the control of its leading members, who from its inception found it good strategy to work together. Such was a mere artifice of disguise. When one great Power after another—Japan, Germany, Italy—broke away, this was merely giving sudden and violent expression to a disgust with pretence. Individuals may and do act on more or less "disinterested" motives, but never States. The sooner we recognize this, and govern ourselves accordingly, the better.

In the spirit of such cynicism, every profession of concern for "justice" is greeted. Whether it comes from London or from Rome, from Paris or from Berlin, from Washington or from Tokio, this is always explained away as a more or less useful cloak for purposes everywhere selfish, and the observer who draws a distinction in favor of the sincerity of one Power or one group of Powers rather than another is dismissed as a quaint survival of ways of thinking which up-to-date thinkers have outgrown. Like a biologist still teaching his subject as it was taught in pre-Darwinian days! Another comparison is perhaps still more appropriate. Anatole France wrote of Machiavelli that we should be grateful to him for having removed from law its legendary foundation in justice. After the same manner, the political science one used to know, so closely connected with the study of moral values as to prompt Aristotle's daring paradox "Ethics is a branch of Politics", has been relegated to the scrap-heap: in the new theory of the State, conceptions of moral good or ill are held as irrelevant as in mathematics or in chemistry.

That this is the doctrine prevalent in the "authoritarian" States, a superficial acquaintance with Nazi and Fascist and Bolshevist manifestos will make plain. It is indeed the belief which has served to bring together Powers previously in such conflict as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, while Mussolini's Italy has been somehow—at least for the time—stopped on the verge of a like cooperation. What Mirabeau called "a swallowing of formulas" was achieved last August at Berlin and at Moscow on a great scale, but at Rome the muscles of the throat are still resistant. Agreeing with Stalin in contempt for the old system of scruples, Mussolini has by no means Stalin's purpose for a substitute, and the common doctrine of "Power Politics" which unites them may even yet be illustrated by a struggle between Fascist and Bolshevist power. But it is not in the authoritarian States alone that the demoralizing of international relationship has been advocated. Under the spacious charity which welcomes every sort of honest opinion in a free press, this has found also both British and French representatives.

Without desiring to forbid the expression of that darkest of international heresies, one may opportunely point out just now its incoherence. Did not Erasmus lay down a principle still excellent to guide us—that "It is better to refute an evil book than to burn it"?

II.

From the days of the Greek sophists, there has been irresistible appeal to a certain type of mind in what American slang calls the "debunking" of professions of moral scruple. That everyone is just like everyone else, no one ever really considering any purpose at all except his personal advantage, is a view of mankind put forward in certain quarters with obvious delight. A dark estimate, one might have thought, and to be adopted only on compelling evidence, with pain! That it brings rather a chuckle, if not a thrill, of pleasure to our "debunkers" is apparent, both from the tone of their advocacy and from that contentment with the flimsiest evidence which always betokens eagerness for a particular conclusion. "A little chat about the bad times always leaves me in good spirits", said one of Thomas Hardy's genial commentators. With some, the flow of good spirits is all the more brisk as they recall the universal selfishness: observing again, with the disputants in Plato's *Republic*, that the possession of the Ring of Gyges, rendering its wearer invisible and hence undetectable, would make anybody a consummate rogue; with Hobbes that no parent would care for his children but for cunning forecast of a time when he will need them to care for him; with Sir Robert Walpole that every man has his price, for which he will sacrifice his dearest "scruple".

Such are a few curiosities from cynical literature of the past. The collection might be widely augmented from the work of French Encyclopaedists in setting forth the fundamental self-seeking which underlay the so-called self-denial of the Ages of Faith. What a story they produced, about the sinister co-operation of priest with noble and of both with king, to exploit for a privileged caste under the *ancien régime* the credulity of the French people! But that this chapter in the history of religion and morals should now have other than antiquarian interest; that the psychological absurdities I have illustrated in turn from Plato, from Hobbes, from Sir Robert Walpole, should again be put forward for mankind's disparagement; that we should read once more, in this twentieth century, from the pen of American and Canadian writers, such nonsense about human nature as we had not seen since we read Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* or the sections on Myth in Denis Diderot's *Dictionary*—this is indeed a surprise.

And yet, such a thing has been recorded before: such revival of a long exploded folly, by those with neither historical

knowledge to tell them of its past nor critical insight to detect its incoherence, but with the intense self-consciousness of intellectual pioneers. One thinks of Jonathan Oldbuck's reflection in *The Antiquary*, on the return of enthusiasm for divining: "Ah, rare Ben Jonson! Long peace to thy ashes for a scourge on the quacks of thy day. Who expected to see them revive in our own?"

III.

The theory that the behavior of States has always and everywhere been determined by selfish advantage alone requires for its support the explaining away of each professedly higher motive for many an instance in the past. In this enterprise of disillusionment, the Left Wing historians are more eager of spirit than convincing of method. That Great Britain, for example, was altogether hypocritical in declaring concern for "the public law of Europe" when she went to the help of Belgium in 1914, and would have seen that public law violated without a qualm if this had served her own rather than the German interest, is in some literary quarters a popular story. It is a contention of the same type as the one insisting that scruple about slavery was not the real cause of the American Civil War, or the other declaring that greed of Cuban sugar, not disapproval of Cuban misgovernment, lay at the root of the Spanish-American conflict of 1898. The "debunkers" have had perhaps their stiffest recent job in showing how the United States refrained from annexing Cuba because Washington cunningly calculated that it would be more to American profit to leave the island as it was left, and that the recent decision regarding the Philippines is explicable by a subtle Washington design thus to exploit still further what the natives there have to give. Such modernizing of the ancient sophistry reached some time ago a climax of the absurd which might have diverted the shade of Socrates. Concerned to degrade yet another case of motive *prima facie* high to terms of that lower order which alone this sort of criticism will admit, the analyst accounted for factory legislation in England of a century ago as a project of revenge (in the true spirit of "Class War") by owners of land upon owners of mills. "Retaliation for the repeal of the Corn Laws!" There is a difficulty here about dates. The first Factory Act was passed more than ten years before the Corn Laws were repealed! As Macaulay once said:

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc is not always sound reasoning; but *ante hoc, ergo non propter hoc* is unanswerable.

The truth, as every candid and competent observer knows, is that the leaders of national policy differ from one another in motive, as there is difference everywhere else in the motives of mankind, and that the supposed complete transformation of a generous into a ruthless spirit when the relationship becomes international rather than personal is imaginary. To say so is perfectly consistent with recognizing that chiefs of States have often done for a public purpose such acts as it would have horrified them to do for a purpose of their own, and that they have justified methods in the struggle of State with State which they would acknowledge to be disgraceful in the competition among individuals. But not seldom if they acted in public capacity by an inflexible rule of the individual alone, the issue would be still worse, and it was the effort—wise or unwise—to meet this danger that determined them. One may agree that the very different responsibilities, calling for the exercise of a different moral discretion, which separate a statesman's from a private citizen's task, lend themselves to abuse. So much more must be taken into account, and will be taken into account with increasing foresight, just in proportion as the statesman is intelligently conscientious. If he is more intelligent without the accompaniment of conscience which makes intelligence safe, he may perpetrate much more extensive evil. But it is a poor specimen of what Plato used to call "eristic" when these acknowledged difficulties of the professional as compared with the personal conscience (difficulties which every lawyer, every doctor, even every financier on a large but by no means necessarily an unscrupulous scale knows well) are urged to show that such men engaged on a technical task become blind to the difference they once knew between good and evil. The argument that "the Big Four at Versailles", for example, were either intellectually so much less competent than their vociferous critics or morally so far below these critics in sensitiveness, has ceased to be even amusing. Far more to the point is the reminder from that keen social psychologist, Gustave Le Bon, that the acts of men in public association or, as he liked to describe them, acts of a "crowd" are often morally higher, more idealistic, than those of which the same men are capable separately.

IV.

Such reflections have obvious bearing upon the analysis of the present war situation in current journalism.

A year ago, while the hopes aroused by the so-called Munich Agreement were bright in many breasts, and for a few were apparently still quite undimmed, there was an impulse to deny the "ideological contrast" between Powers or groups of Powers in Europe. It seemed to many a publicist more charitable to emphasize a fundamental likeness of aim, and at least to search for evidence of likeness in method. That genial imposture is still a vivid memory. How we were lectured, from some editorial desks, on the wickedness of supposing Germans or Italians less noble in national character than French or British, and ridiculed for a provincialism which made us fail to identify a single disposition under varying forms of custom and of language! For some odd reason, the proclamation that "we are all alike" did not seem, when illustrative examples were given, to include Soviet Russians in its charitable sweep; nor did it, in the weeks succeeding the Munich affair, stop even those who seemed surest of universal good will from bitter reproach against the "inconsiderate" Czechs. For the time being, it was Germans and Italians who had to be readmitted to the spiritual comity, and the friend of Russia or Czechoslovakia had to be put off with a somewhat illogical postponement. So ran many an article, by writers anxious above all to check the sinister scheme for dividing at least four great Powers of Europe in "ideological" contrast. One thinks with disgust of the lengths they went, to involve all alike in an ignominious equality, levelling down if need be, instead of levelling up. "Power Politics", as the master key, served that strategic purpose. Hence the shameful falsehood about Great Britain's War in South Africa having been just like Italy's in Abyssinia; about French and British treating their native races no better than Germany had treated the Herreros—and so on, all through the gamut of well intended misrepresentation.

That mood is over; let us hope that it is gone for good. Hitler and his circle have this time carried out the really effective disillusionment. To do them justice, it must be admitted that they never left us in much doubt as to their "ideology": it was about whether they would carry their ideas into effect that many were doubtful, and among the worst of disservices done by some publicists in allied countries at such a time was

their reassuring argument that nothing of the kind would happen. For, they pleasantly reflected, was not *Rule Britannia* very like *Deutschland über Alles*? And why doubt that Germany would stop short in action, as Great Britain and France stopped short, of what her "principles" might indicate? She, like them, could be restrained only by consideration of her advantage!

What we have seen is disclosure, on a great scale, of the reality of the contrast. For anyone, however rich in sterile learning, who now pretends—as the cant phrase runs—to "see beyond" this, the British and the French public have at present no leisure, nor can they be expected to have much patience. What is most dangerous of all is the effort already visible to prepare for "the coming peace" yet another spurious conciliation between purposes and Powers in sheer conflict. We have, however, some safeguards in which we can still trust. It is too soon, surely, for the popular success of another delusion about equality through acknowledged partnership in the same "Power Politics". Is it too much to hope that what is already so plain to the public will become clear—within reasonable time—even to "political scientists"?

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