The Basis of Despotism


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The author, so we are told, experienced the despotism of absolute total power at first hand in one of Hitler's concentration camps. Yet, there is no analysis of that particular experience. On pages 143 to 149, we find that terror and torture are prominent features of oriental despotism. "It was left to the masters of the Communist apparatus state to reverse the humanizing trend and to reintroduce the systematic infliction of physical pain for the purpose of extracting 'confessions'" (p 147). Was there no torture worth the mention in any of the Nazi judicial procedure and 'confessions' obtained in Fascist Italy and Germany, or for that matter third degree methods employed elsewhere (including the 'benign' rule of the British in India)?

The reason for this rather lopsided emphasis is very simple. The clear and imminent danger against which the book warns is that of Communism. Apparently, Communism is the most dangerous form of Oriental despotism and total power. Marx, even more Engels and Lenin, (so the author tells us) used all their intellectual power to disguise the fact that they were really introducing Oriental despotism into the West. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Chinese, in trying to introduce Western civilization, mistakenly adopted the Soviet system which was really their own Oriental despotism imposed upon Russia by Lenin? Nehru's India seems (to the author) naively ambivalent. This means that the evil present in the communist danger has not sufficiently impressed itself upon the Indian mind.

The author has hardly considered the monsoon worth mentioning as fundamental in Indian 'hydraulic' society; or, for that matter, caste—which all foreigners from the classical period to the present day seem to regard as a peculiar and very important feature of Indian society. Thana Is mentioned twice but only because of a worthless fourth century Nepali legend about its merchant guild. Sopara is, in the author's geography, "one of several settlements located on the coast of Thana, south of modern Bombay". The Manigramam, the Shreni, or the Vira-Vanunja trading caste In India, and the gigantic and really powerful Hong merchants' organisations in China are not allowed to disturb the reader's consciousness.

The Arthasastra Is quoted (without understanding) several times, but nothing whatever has been said of the benign rule of Ashoka, just after the Arthashastra. Why this sudden reversal of despotism in that brief interval of not more than 50 years, without any corresponding change in Indian hydraulics? Why is no mention made of the Chinese travellers' emphatic account that under the Guptas (4-5th centuries) and Harsha (early 7th century) penal legislation was extremely mild, labour was not dragooned and no torture used in the examinations of witnesses? In a study of 'Oriental despotism', why is it essential to omit periods when the rule struck all observers as being singularly kind and unoppressive not only in form, but in fact? How does it happen that the laws of the Roman Twelve Tables and the first Athenian code were far more draconic than under such despots', if not because of the right of private property first showing its teeth and claws?

On page 141, we find the following: "Lenin defined the dictatorship of the proletariat—which he held to be the heart of the Soviet regime as 'a power not limited by any laws'. Like other utterances of Lenin, this formula combines an impressive half-truth with important fallacies." The half-truths and fallacies derive only from Professor Wittfogel. Lenin was first defining dictatorship as such and not merely that of the proletariat. Dictatorship is precisely rule not bounded by law; and this definition goes back to the days of the Roman republic when, in times of emergency, the people and senate agreed to set up a dictator whose orders would be obeyed for a specified period without question as to their legality. Such dictatorship cannot possibly be
A miracle of nature

Crude oil, or petroleum as it is often called, occurs in many parts of the world—chiefly in regions where sedimentary rocks once formed the bottoms of ancient seas.

No one is sure how oil originated. The most widely accepted theory is that it resulted from the decay and alteration of the remains of prehistoric animals and plants. This organic matter was washed from the land into the vast jungles of marine life under the seas. The deposits, mixed with mud and sand, formed layer upon layer on the bottom. As these became buried, Nature's mysterious chemistry got to work. It slowly transformed the organic matter into the compounds of hydrogen and carbon which we now know as oil, and at the same time the fine sediments which covered it were compressed into rock strata. The newly-formed oil oozed into the nearest layers of porous rocks, which held it as if in a sponge, and here it remained.

Throughout the millions of years that oil was being formed, many changes were taking place in the earth's crust. It rose and fell, was crushed and expanded. Lands were drowned, sea-beds became dry land. In some places cracks developed and the land slipped, forming 'faults'.

During these violent changes, some of the imprisoned oil escaped and was lost. In other places it was so near the surface that it seeped through and was discovered and used by man from the earliest times. But the bulk has remained trapped in its porous rocks beneath the surface of the earth.

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written off as Oriental infection of the truly unhydraulc Roman mind.

Similarly, on page 447: "The Second Industrial Revolution, which we are now experiencing, is perpetuating the principle of a multi-centered society through large bureaucratized complexes that mutually—and laterally—check each other: most importantly, Big Government, Big Business, Big Agriculture, and Big Labour. But the destruction of one major nongovernmental complex may bring about the downfall of others. Under Fascism and National Socialism, the liquidation of Big Labour so strengthened Big Government that eventually and laterally—check each other: most importantly, Big Government, Big Business, Big Agriculture, and Big Labour.

What is the tap-root of despotism? Marx noted that the Asian states performed a considerable economic function in development and control of irrigation; but that the solid foundation of Asiatic despotism was furnished by the passive, unresisting stratum of producers. In the virtually self-contained, stagnant villages, whose produce did not become a commodity till it reached the hands of the state. There is no esoteric doctrine here about hydraulics and 'statism'. It might be suggested that the passive, unresisting stratum of Indian peasants in Latin America has something to do with the constant resurgence of tyrannical dictator-presidents like Trujillo. If such a despot has any other prop, it is neither the water supply, nor communist Instigation, but some foreign company capitalized in the land of free enterprise and liberty for the stockholders.

"The history of hydraulic society", says Wittfogel on p 329, "suggests that the class struggle, far from being a chronic disease of all mankind, is the luxury of multicentered and open societies". This is the same sort of nonsense that derides socialism because it is supposed to deprive the workers of their most precious possession, the right to strike, which is far more important than a living wage or control of production: how much surplus is eaten up by the latifundia of the patricians for its own use and that, of the class it mainly serves. Despotism would have no function in a primitive tribal society; but should a tribe reach a certain level of development, a cruel despot like the Zulu Chaka seems a natural phenomenon. Even so, his cruelties as reported by unsympathetic foreigners who wanted to justify intervention and conquest do not match the cold, treacherous malice of the Roman Republic towards any opposition, nor the Spartan massacre of Nikias and about 7,000 Athenian prisoners of war after the battle of Syracuse. Not the insidious vilences of Orientals, but the need to industrialize at all costs in the face of a uniformly hostile environment explains the stresses set up in the first state to be ruled by a Communist party— the USSR. On the other hand, the despotisms that many lamented under fascism were engendered by the unrestrained exercise of the rights of private property.

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