

Ernst Bloch, “Hitler’s Force” (April 1924)

Abstract

Shortly after the sentencing in Adolf Hitler’s trial in Munich, Marxist philosopher and publisher Ernst Bloch attempted to explain Hitler’s popularity and appeal in the independent weekly *Das Tage-Buch*. He cautioned against underestimating Hitler and National Socialism on account of their low-brow rhetoric. Bloch recognized that National Socialism was particularly attractive to youth, and he regarded this situation as potentially dangerous.

Source

[The following note precedes Bloch’s text in *Das Tage-Buch*: “In this article, the author of *The Spirit of Utopia* and *Thomas Müntzer* assigns the problem of the Hitler movement to a higher social category. It need not be mentioned here that this objective study has been undertaken in an intellectual sphere not frequented by *völkisch* Germans.”]

Hitler’s Force

At first we coldly ignored it. Shrugged our shoulders at the malicious pack that crawled forth. At the red posters with the driveling sentences, but the knuckledusters behind them. That which roughly stepped to our bedside early in the morning to demand our papers, stuck itself up as a party here. Jews are forbidden to enter the hall.

All this was able to sink back again. It was still too alien and had not penetrated deep enough, the old Munich was still alive. The animosity towards the war had matured earliest here; for a long time foreign beauty had been brought into the cityscape and flourished with it, became acclimatized. The grim recollection of 1919, of Eisner’s death and the entry of the White Guard could fade and the brutality withdraw into its shell, as if it had never been. The successful Kapp putsch and the banishment of the socialist ministers admittedly indicated ruffled air again. But even this could still be understood as the reaction of a peasant province, a peasant city against very clumsy Communist dilettantisms. To Hitler this act seemed like a swan song; the further the soviet republic was left behind purely in temporal terms, the more certainly Bavaria seemed to assume its old aspect again.

Instead, as we know, the province became increasingly embittered. The peasants, the urban peasants, still exist here as a rabble: primitive, open to suggestion, dangerous, unpredictable. The same people who had blackened the streets at Eisner’s funeral in countless processions hounded the leaders of yesterday to their death. From one day to the next the flag shops exchanged the soviet star for the swastika; from one day to the next the people’s court, created by Eisner, put Leviné up against the wall. The faithless rabble which all rulers have despised and used vacillated here, and it not merely vacillated, but certainly the hunting of animals and human beings proved to be its most characteristic nature. These were not only impoverished petite bourgeoisie, who grab at now this and now that means of assistance, nor were these an organized proletariat, not even a relatively organizable lumpenproletariat that could be kept up to scratch, but definitely mere riffraff, the vindictive, crucifying creatures of all ages. They were dazzled by the sham, by students in regalia, by the magic of processions, parades, and ringing spectacle; but Bavaria does not paint votive pictures any more. And the beaters are as ambiguous, unambiguous as the rabble, often even more contemptible than the latter. Baptized Hungarian Jews became spies for Hitler, bribed “democrats” from the stock of Balkan journalists filled the ranks. The genuine Thersites and Vansens did not want to be left out, gave the rabble its homogeneous head.

Nevertheless, he who no longer knows what to do knows nothing as yet of the whole. The case lies deeper, disgust and wit are now no longer the correct response alone. For separate from the hideous gawpers and accomplices, new youth glows at the core, a very vigorous generation. Seventeen-year-olds are burning to respond to Hitler. Beery students of old, dreary, reveling in the happiness of the crease in their trousers, are no longer recognizable, their hearts are pounding. The old student fraternity member is arising again, Schill's officers reborn, they find their brother in Schlageter, heroic associations with all the signs of irrational conspiracy are gathering under a secret light. Hitler, their leader, did not deserve the indulgence of his judges and this farcical trial, but even with the wit of Berlin lawyers there is no getting at him, and even Ludendorff, this brutally limited masculine symbol, does not live on the same level with him. Hitler the tribune is undoubtedly a highly suggestive type, unfortunately a great deal more vehement than the genuine revolutionaries who incited Germany in 1918. He gave the exhausted ideology of the fatherland an almost mysterious fire and has made a new aggressive sect, the germ of a strongly religious army, into a troop with a myth. Nor is the lasting power of Hitler's program explained by the fact that liberation from Jews, the stock market, the feudal tenancy of international capital, and the international Marxism hostile to the fatherland, is promised here along with similar, confused music for the ears of the indiscriminating petite bourgeoisie. But if the economy here moves to the periphery and the state ethos to the center, the music of the old unbourgeois discipline thereby rings out again at the same time, the secularized ethics of the chivalric orders.

Thus the extent to which Hitler has young people on his side should not be underrated. We should not underestimate our opponent but realize what is a psychological force for so many and inspires them. From this standpoint various connections with left-wing radicalism become clear, those of a demagogic, formal kind, if not with regard to content. Through this affinity (mostly only a opportunistic copy of socialism, tuned to primitive instincts) changing banners was made all that much easier for the Bavarian rabble. Among the Communists as among the National Socialists an appeal is made to able-bodied youth; in both cases the capitalist, parliamentary state is negated, in both cases a dictatorship of obedience and command, the virtue of decision, is demanded instead of the cowardly acts of the bourgeoisie, this eternally discussing class. It is above all the type of Hitler and of those who follow his example, who are in psychological terms strongly revolutionary. The goals and contents of this gang are also of course, despite all confusion, recognizably only the totally counterrevolutionary expression of the will of sinking strata and of their youth. The twenty thousand dollars of the industry of Nuremberg already indicate the way in which the bourgeoisie does not feel at all threatened here, how it faces the new state mysticism, apparently hostile to capital, without fear. Engels called anti-Semitism the socialism of the stupid mugs, whereby non-Jewish financial capital and above all original capital superbly prosper. The socialism of the cavalier—patriarchal, reactionary anticapitalism—is an even greater misconception or rather an open deception, in order to conceal by means of the mere contrast to financial capital the very much greater contrast to socialism. Folkish instead of international, romantic-reactionary state mysticism instead of the socialist will towards the atrophy of the state, faith in authority instead of the ultimate anarchy latent in all genuine socialism—these are incompatible contrasts of positive volition, stronger than the apparent affinities of form and of the common negation of the present state. Othmar Spann, the Austrian sociologist, a small imitator of the Austrian state theologians of the Vormärz, sought in this way to create a definition for National Socialism; and what emerged was as different from socialism as the Romantic idolization of the state was from this sentence of the young Engels: "The essence of the state and of religion is humanity's fear of itself." The underling, whom the feudal pressure lasting for centuries has produced and left behind, races around and longs as a formal predator to return to stability. He churns up messianic dreams and perverts them with feudal ones, radicalizes the dull center in order to make them into ascetic rebels, and adopts the ideology of "rebellion" by the grace of Metternich, the author of the Karlsbad decrees and guardian of the Holy Alliance.

So to what lengths will this unrest yet lead? It divides into three elements, to be considered separately,

and indeed treated in a very different tone of voice. *Below* runs the petit-bourgeois pack, which deserted from Red to White and is willingly open to malicious and mindless agitation. *Above* them stand the shock troops of Hitler and his officers, good vigorous youth, raw and infected by the hideous background of the camp followers, but on the whole with pure intentions: nauseated by the stock-market age, the depression of the lost war, the lack of ideals in this dull Republic. Hitler himself here ignited or at least fanned a thoroughly unbourgeois movement in bourgeois youth, and shaped a certain ascetic energy that differs by several degrees from the mindlessness of the first German enthusiasm for war, and also from the senior primary-school-teacher pathos of the former fatherland party. *Thirdly*, though, the National Socialist ideology and practice is very treacherous. It seeks to have the bourgeois ousted by the knight, but leaves the bourgeois feeling all the more protected and preserved by the young knights. And even the knight himself—he is admittedly more human than the bourgeois, but at the moment even more unreal than the latter, even more abstractly and even more unclearly preventing the breakthrough into reality. Hitler, Hitlerism, fascism is the ecstasy of bourgeois youth: this contradiction between strength and bourgeoisie, between ecstasy and the most lifeless nationalism makes the movement into a specter. It does not become any more real through the feudal ghosts it carries with it, through the alliance of powerfully present enthusiasm with long-sunken chivalric dreams or Old Germanic folk royalty from the tenth century. All the same, the Hitler Youth sustains the only “revolutionary” movement in Germany at the moment, after the proletariat has been robbed by the majority socialist leaders of its own, of the solely valid, consistent revolution. One part of fascism in Germany is as it were the crooked governor of the revolution, an expression of the fact that the social situation is by no means static. But the genuine tribunes of the people are lacking or prove by themselves the shrewd saying of Babel: “Banality is the counterrevolution.”

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