

THE FREE STATE

By the same Author

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN FRANCE

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

IS INNOCENCE ENOUGH?

THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

THE AMERICAN PROBLEM

D. W. BROGAN

THE FREE STATE

SOME CONSIDERATIONS
ON ITS
PRACTICAL VALUE

“I question much whether we may not, by natural means, account for the success of knaves, the calamities of fools, with all the miseries in which men of sense sometimes involve themselves, by quitting the directions of Prudence, and following the blind guidance of a predominant passion; in short, for all the ordinary phenomena which are imputed to Fortune; whom, perhaps, men accuse with no less absurdity in life, than a bad player complains of ill luck at the game of chess.”

HENRY FIELDING—*Amelia*



HAMISH HAMILTON
LONDON

TO
DR. PIETER GERBRANDY

Prime Minister of the Netherlands

“Quod tanta animi fortitudine, sapientia, fide & constantia factum, ut quos populos huic vestro exemplo conferam, non inveniam. Atque hoc me inter alias causas movit, ut vobis hasce meas politicas meditationes inscriberem. Movit me etiam, quod in his saepissime pro illustrandis praeceptis politicis, exempla quoque a vobis, ab urbibus, constitutionibus, moribus, rebus gestis vestris & confederatarum aliarum provinciarum Belgicarum desumpta petam.”

JOHANNES ALTHUSIUS, *Ad Illustres Frisiae . . . Ordines*

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INTRODUCTION

THE character of this tract is explained, though its faults are not excused, by its origin as a tract directed to those intelligent Germans (who must exist) who may now be pondering the problem of why, twice in a generation, Germany has been involved in catastrophe—and has involved her neighbours. But it is possible that the sermon addressed to Germany may have a wider interest and application.

August 26th, 1944.

THE FREE STATE

CHAPTER ONE

CASE FOR FREEDOM

I

THERE is attributed to an American conservative, Fisher Ames, a famous contrast between democratic and non-democratic government. "Monarchy is like a splendid ship, with all sails set; it moves majestically on, then it hits a rock and sinks for ever. Democracy is like a raft. It never sinks but, damn it, your feet are always in the water."

Fisher Ames lived in the age of the American and French Revolutions; of one he approved a little, of the other he did not approve at all. But for all his dislike for the new forces loose in the world, for all his nostalgia for the past, he was too intelligent not to see the great new fact, that monarchy in the old sense had struck a rock and sunk for ever. He saw too the untidiness of democracy—and its permanence.

In the modern world, the historical background to the dictum of Fisher Ames has been forgotten. Men have forgotten the old world of the rule of custom, of the acceptance of the divine right, not only of kings but of republics. They have forgotten too the enthusiasm with which men welcomed the coming of the new age, the enthusiasm for a new world that greeted the news of the breaking of the cake of custom in France:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven."

So wrote Wordsworth. When the news of the Bastille came to the English Liberal Leader, Charles James Fox, he cried out, "How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world and how much the best." And in fairly remote Königsberg, Professor Kant for once was late; the great news from France was his excuse. Such enthusiasm could not last; the

enthusiasm with which Fichte and Schiller received the news as well as the enthusiasm of Jefferson and Coleridge. Goethe could note, on the night of the battle of Valmy, that a new historical epoch had come into existence, but it was already a matter of war and *Hermann und Dorothea* told another side of the story of French and European liberation, illustrated the cost of the new birth. It is to Metternich (whose profession was to be reactionary) that there is usually attributed the joke: "when I saw what people did in the name of fraternity, I resolved if I had a brother to call him cousin." But warmer people than Metternich felt the same. Jefferson in America, Alfieri in Italy, Wordsworth in England, were all more or less disillusioned. The great voice of Burke was heard pleading with passion for the old, stable, moral order, only half silenced by the sight of the powers that had professed to fight for that sacred cause, taking time off to murder Poland.

From that disillusionment we have never totally recovered. But this did not matter so much as long as the memory of the old order was lively. The cruelty, war, extravagance of language, shallowness of thought, these did not matter so much as long as the hopes aroused by the Revolution, first in America, then in France, were continually fed by living memory of what the old order had been like. Men still knew enough to know that the old order had died; men still knew enough to know that it deserved to die; men still hoped enough to endure the birth pangs of the new world.

The old order was dead. The armies called into existence to resist the endless trouble-making of Napoleon marched, in form, to restore the old kings to their old places. But "there are no restorations." It was a generation, now, since a voice at Philadelphia, like gun shots at Concord, had been heard round the world: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Echoed in words in Paris, in arms from Madrid to Moscow, the principles

of the Revolution set out on that long war that is still being fought.

Ever since that date men have sought to find other sources of political authority than "the consent of the governed," they have sought to achieve or have promised to achieve other aims of government than "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." But they have failed; they have been forced not so much to imitate democracy as to parody it, not so much to let men pursue happiness as to guarantee happiness, beating-up or killing the sceptics who have not been willing to admit that they were happy with the standard product issued from government store. The principle of traditional authority has been in retreat since 1776 and 1789; again and again substitutes for democracy have been announced, again and again new or old principles of political authority have been proclaimed. But as far as they were old and traditional, they have soon shown that all efficacy has been lost and as far as they have been new they have been bogus versions of democracy and not very new bogus versions at that, since the ancient world knew well what it meant by tyranny—and these new governments were tyrannies.

Yet in the past two generations there has been less fervour in the democratic faith, more scepticism about its performance and its premisses. For one thing, the early democrats forgot, in their legitimate enthusiasm for their cause, that the power of any government or social arrangement to promote happiness is limited. As Jefferson wrote precisely, it is the *pursuit* of happiness that a democratic government exists to foster, to guarantee happiness, or even to promise it with a high degree of probability, is not the politics of a wise man. Shelley and the other anarchists could believe that only a few rotten institutions and corrupt men stood in the way of the liberation of the human race from its old bonds to slavery and death:

"I met Murder on the way—
He had a mask like Castlereagh."

But Castlereagh committed suicide and Kotzebue was assas-

sinated without any notable improvement of the condition of the human race. Shelley had his doubts too :

“Oh cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?
Cease, drain not to its dregs the urn
Of bitter prophecy.
The world is weary of the past,
Oh might it die or rest at last.”

And Schiller, if he had lived longer, might have had doubts of the practical policy of the fraternity he sang in the Hymn to Joy. Some men felt that the error was in hoping much from government at all: before the great revolutionary question was asked, the great English Tory, Dr. Johnson, had given an answer :

“How small, of all that human hearts endure,
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.”

But this resignation was not easy or general; for if the power of kings and law, to cure the ills of human hearts was small, there was no doubt of their abundant and increasing ability to cause ills, old and new, to fall on the common man. And, faced with this fact, men became concerned to diminish evils done by law as well as to do good by law. That spirit, called by the English “utilitarian,” saw in government an instrument of good or evil; it depended on how it was used. The Utilitarians neglected or, it would be safer to say, professed to neglect the emotional side of life, the passions for which men commit the unutilitarian mistake of dying, and this neglect in return produced an underestimate (especially in Germany) of the importance of the utilitarian attitude or of the degree to which it was compatible with the heroic, the unselfish, the romantic. In the western nations, especially, there was a kind of conspiracy to hide the warmth and passion of national life from the people. So we have, even at this moment, English soldiers in the sixth year of the war professing to be unable to say for what they are enduring death and wounds and exile and American aviators saying that they daily risk being burned alive to get a better

ice-box. These soldiers are deceiving themselves or they are, very rightly, kidding the investigators. But it is more serious that they are deceiving the Germans, that they are preventing that people from realizing that it is again being beaten, not merely by superior military and economic resources but by a wiser, subtler, more deeply philosophical way of life.

There are many reasons why the early revolutionary hopes were deceived and why history, since 1776, has been one long struggle to get accepted as rules of practice what were then confidently asserted as self-evident truths. There are general philosophical criticisms that can be directed against the democratic theory so dogmatically stated by Jefferson; there is the inevitable disillusionment that comes when any governmental device is looked on as an end in itself and is then discovered to be an inadequate end. But there is also an important historical reason. In a very central and increasingly important part of Europe, the Revolution did not take. Germany was inoculated with the revolutionary germ by France, but the germ had a hard time of it, was never really at home and was exhausted by endless battles with the reactionary anti-bodies of the German body politic.

There are simple historical reasons why this happened. In the first place, the Revolution was suddenly imported into Germany before there was an effective demand for it. It came along with the French Army. There was no native German revolution; few native German revolutionaries. The Rights of Man entered Germany in the baggage wagons of a foreign army. It is not a good way to enter any country, though it may be the only way. Very soon the German was divided in his own mind between intelligent understanding of the fact that the French were sweeping away a great deal of totally useless lumber and resentment of the fact that it was *German* lumber being swept away by the *French*. Henceforward, the intelligent patriotic German was forced to say:

“Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust.”

Down to the triumph of Bismarck it was doubtful which of the souls would win in the German breast; the soul that made

the Germans part of the Western world or the soul which asserted that the Western world was wrong, that the Revolution and all it stood for, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, all that we in the West mean by democratic ideals and democratic practice, was irrelevant, or unimportant, or wrong. The temptation to say the second was great because, otherwise, German political history was not as gratifying to German pride as every nation wants its history to be. If the West was right, Germany was not wrong but certainly belated. Nor was the motive necessarily ignoble. It is easy to think that Hegelianism is bad medicine for a society, especially for German society, without accusing Hegel of being servile or of being no wiser or profounder than the unfortunate Herr Fries whom he knocked about so roughly. It is also profitable to consider whether the rather foolish Herr Fries was not what the German people needed and to suspect that however valuable Hegelian profundity might have been in more pragmatic cultures in England, France and the United States, it was the last thing Germany needed if she was to grow up and get out of tutelage to princes and professors.

But Hegel and Bismarck had it, partly, again it should be admitted, by bad luck. If it had not been for the fantastically incompetent foreign policy of Napoleon III, Bismarck's great gamble might not have come off and the German people might not have been exposed to that most dreadful of temptations for a gambler, early winnings that tempt you to go on.

Historical speculation of this kind has only one value, to make mere moral or intellectual complacency harder and to remind us that nations, like men, can be unlucky. Germany has been unlucky—and that is something for which the whole world has to pay. But bad as it is to be unlucky, it is worse to be wrong about what constitutes your bad luck. For two generations the Germans have been moving to disasters involving them and their neighbours in greater and greater catastrophes; they have been conscious of some malign fate dogging their steps; they have given it a name from time to time: it has been the Jews or the English or the Russians or the Americans or the

French or all of them together. It is not; it has been the Germans; it has been the result, in the German community, of the failure of the German people to pass through a revolutionary epoch that, with more or less violence, threw it back to political first principles and forward to responsibility. The principles need not be very subtle; the first attempts at responsibility need not be very successful; but they must be the people's own political first principles and they must be the people's own mistakes.

The first stroke of bad luck for the Germans was that their sudden rise in economic and political importance, like their confrontation with the Revolution in arms, came before they had an adequate middle class to cope with the problems involved. Eighteenth-century Germany was poor and overwhelmingly rural. The middle class, such as it was, was economically and socially weak, timid, politically impotent. The equivalent of the numerous, rich, proud, aggressive, climbing bourgeois of England, France, Holland, did not exist. In one of the few real cities in Germany, one leavened by a large French bourgeois element, in Berlin, a third of the total population consisted of soldiers, officials and their families, all direct dependants of the King. Berlin was a larger Versailles or Windsor, not a bit like riotous, proud, gigantic, self-confident London; not a bit like huge, rebellious, militant, angry Paris. And most German cities were far smaller and far more prince-ridden than Berlin.

At no time in the nineteenth century were the new bourgeois classes in Germany in a moral or material position to free themselves from the ideas, the preferences, the prestige of the old military and civil bureaucracy. There were not, in nineteenth-century Germany, enough unofficial ideas or instruments of ideas to offset the immense power of the state machine, whether it was reflected in the army, in the bureaucracy, in the universities, state churches, state theatres. The idea of progress by free and wasteful competition, the Western willingness to trust to luck, had only a limited circulation in Germany. Germany was thus saved from many errors, from many types of bourgeois smugness, from many kinds of proletarian barbarism.

But she was also saved from life, from the chance of growing up.

Moreover, Germany was not only passing through the economic crisis, through the industrial revolution that was shaking all Western states; she was passing through a crisis of unification that other states, her neighbours, great and small, England and Holland, Switzerland and France, had long overcome. There was, in the double necessity, a temptation to get it over quickly, to build hastily with the existing materials. There was, in the success with which the building was done, or appeared to be done, a grave temptation to dizzy self-satisfaction. And since Germany was enriched and unified without undergoing the experiences of the Western lands, there was a temptation to ignore the lessons of Western history, to assert with pride that German experience was different and better. And since, again, the Western experience, its insistence on the intrinsic merits of the free political way of life, was an implicit criticism of the new German way, there was a temptation, to which many Germans succumbed, to retort that the German way was the true way, the richest and deepest type of political experience, a point of view which pleased the German state and, in Germany, points of view that pleased the state were the favoured points of view. Since past European history could not justify the German view, past European history was recast in German philosophical terms. A barrier was set up between Germany and the West; the true Germans thought the political experience of the West shallow, the West thought the German view of politics silly. Because of this barrier, Germany was less willing to understand either her own failures or her enemies' successes. She was the more willing to ignore the experience of others, in that her culture encouraged a vigorous handling of what less philosophical peoples call, the data of experience. Germany began to love the limitless and to despise peoples who had a preference for the defined.

“The notion that something that moves and lives, as genius does, can at the same time be absolute has some interesting implications. Such a genius and all its works must be unstable. As it has no

external sources and no external objects, as its own past can exercise no control over it (for that would be the most lifeless of tyrannies), it is a sort of shooting star, with no guarantees for the future. This, for the complete egotist, has no terrors. A tragic end and a multitude of enemies may seem good to the absolute hero and necessary to his perfect heroism. In the same way, to be without a subject-matter or an audience may seem good to the absolute poet, who sings to himself as he goes, exclusively for the benefit of that glorious and fleeting moment. Genius could not be purer than that; although it might be hard to prove that it was a genius."¹

It is not merely a question of bourgeois conformism in the West contrasted with heroic indifference to mere material pleasure or profit on the other side. The Germany of William II, like the Germany of Goering and Ley, was not a model of Spartan asceticism. And in the West, Spain had a greater contempt for mere comfort, mere wealth than had Germany—but with the other Western nations and, more perhaps than they, she preserved a profound sense of individual pride and dignity—a pride that (to the West) has always seemed inadequately developed in German culture, even before it was officially banned in the name of the *Führerprinzip*. To-day, it is harder and harder to see, in many cases, what the official German propagandists inside Germany mean; the language, not merely the Nazi jargon, but the ideas or passions expressed in the jargon, are strange to us. And behind that barrier of jargon and ideas, the German people, again defeated, more than ever distrusted and hated, has to undertake the terrible task of finding out what has again gone wrong, without the political tradition that might help her to state her problems. It is the claim of the Western culture that, in one great department of life, politics, the Germans are not profound pioneers or original barbarians, but backward members of the Western community who have gone more and more astray, through bad luck, through vanity, through neglect of the respect for the rights and spontaneous action of the individual for which German historical experience has so ill prepared the German people. That was their misfortune but is now their fault. They alone can cure the fault.

¹ Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy*.

Faced with the claims of general German culture, the Western world is willing to receive a great many of them. Madame de Staël, Matthew Arnold, Edgar Quinet, Renan, Green, Caird, Bosanquet, Burgess—the list of British, French, Americans who thought that they as individuals and their nations as societies had a great deal to learn from Germany could be lengthened indefinitely. The German spirit of *Geist* was what England needed, thought Matthew Arnold. The first enthusiastic labour of Edgar Quinet was a translation of Herder. To Göttingen went Americans like Motley, as long after went Frenchmen like Maritain to Heidelberg. There is no conspiracy against a German claim to be a great nation with a great culture, but there is, and has been, an increasing unwillingness to admit that German culture is to set, or has set, the pattern for Europe. On the contrary, German culture, like French culture, Spanish culture, English culture, is part of a total European culture, and if the Germans more and more refuse to accept the standards of that culture, there is not the slightest tendency to abandon the standards of the West, there is simply a new and critical examination of the aspects of German culture that lead to such an absurd result. There is no real movement to admire barbarism because it is vigorous or Germanic. The Gobineaus, Carlyles, Houston Stewart Chamberlains are eccentrics and some of the other, less interesting Western converts to German anti-European canons are mere pedants or worse.

And when faced with the formally legitimate developments of certain sides of German culture, the West refuses to follow. If they are legitimate children of Hegel or Wagner so much the worse for Hegel and Wagner. Above all, the extravagance of so much in German intellectual life, its delight in the unlimited, uncontrolled, undefined does not attract the West for long. This disciplined, ordered, planned wildness seems merely comic when it does not seem dangerous. Culturally, the West is willing to be tame if necessary; to be bound that it may be free: “Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.”

And so the contempt felt for bourgeois rationality, the moral superiority felt or expressed by many Germans at the sight of

the pedestrian, utilitarian, prudent Western culture, evokes more amusement than anything else. That the whole civilized world has been wrong we do not believe, that heroism and extravagance are necessarily complementary ideas, this we do not believe. And the more Germans insist on it, the more they foster fear in our minds, fear that, in fact, modern Germanism and our ancient, growing and varied civilization are incompatible. Faced with this undefined German claim, in philosophy and in life, we are ill at ease. An English Hegelian, T. H. Green or Bernard Bosanquet, is embedded in a pragmatic society that saves him from the worst dangers of his trade; the habit of free discussion and of political responsibility saves an American political philosopher, like John Burgess of Columbia, from the worst dangers of his trade. Horace Williams of the University of North Carolina might keep Hegel's *Logic* in his desk drawer and study under Josiah Royce at Harvard, but William James was at Harvard, too, and Horace Williams had to live his life in the highly American world of North Carolina. It was good for him; it would have been good for Hegel.

For us, political philosophy has to be lived and cannot be lived vicariously. For us it is more important to let fools be foolish than, by putting down folly, to define wisdom too soon. The Athenians described the people who took no interest in politics as idiots. And we have no real admiration for the most efficient life of a nation of idiots.¹

Of course many great men have neither taste nor talent for politics. They have better to do and as long as they act this way, because politics are *beneath* them, they are not mere idiots. It is to be feared that too many great Germans thought politics *above* them. And neither type of great man is the complete citizen or the complete great man. English and American and French institutions put only too many temptations, some might hold, in the way of writers, scientists, artists, thinking

¹ While an undergraduate at Oxford, I was once asked by a college servant if I was taking any interest in a current election. I replied, not quite truthfully, that I wasn't. "I believe, sir, that there were people in Ancient Greece called *idiotes*," was the merited rebuke.