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ANTI-SEMITISM AND FASCIST PROPAGANDA

The observations contained in this paper are based upon three studies made by the Research Project on Anti-Semitism¹ under the auspices of the Institute of Social Research at Columbia University. These studies analyze an extensive body of anti-democratic and anti-Semitic propaganda, consisting mainly of shorthand transcriptions of radio addresses by some West Coast agitators, pamphlets, and weekly publications. They are primarily of a psychological nature, although they often touch upon economic, political and sociological problems. Consequently, it is the psychological aspect of propaganda analysis rather than the objective content of this propaganda which is here under consideration. Neither a comprehensive treatment of the methods employed, nor an enunciation of a full-fledged psychoanalytic theory of anti-democratic propaganda has been aimed at. Further, facts and interpretations, generally known to those familiar with psychoanalysis have been omitted. The goal has been, rather, to point out some findings, which, however

preliminary and fragmentary, may suggest further psycho-analytic evaluation.

The material studied itself evinces a psychological approach. It is conceived in psychological rather than in objective terms. It aims at winning people over by *playing upon their unconscious mechanisms* rather than by presenting ideas and arguments. Not only is the oratorical technique of the fascist demagogues of a shrewdly illogical, pseudo-emotional nature; more than that, positive political programs, postulates, nay any concrete political ideas play but a minor role compared with the psychological stimuli applied to the audience. It is from these stimuli and from other information rather than from the vague, confused platforms of the speeches that we can identify them as fascist at all.

Let us consider three characteristics of the predominantly psychological approach of current American fascist propaganda.

(1) It is *personalized* propaganda, essentially non-objective. The agitators spend a large part of their time in speaking either about themselves or about their audiences. They present themselves as lone wolves, as healthy, sound American citizens with robust instincts, as unselfish and indefatigable; and they incessantly divulge real or fictitious intimacies about their lives and those of their families. Moreover, they appear to take a warm human interest in the small daily worries of their listeners, whom they depict as poor but honest, common-sense but non-intellectual, native Christians. They identify themselves with their listeners and lay particular emphasis upon being simultaneously both modest little men and leaders of great calibre. They often refer to themselves as mere messengers of him who is to come – a trick already familiar in Hitler's speeches. This technique is probably closely related to the substitution of a collective ego for paternal imagery.² Another favorite scheme of personalization is to dwell upon petty financial needs and to beg for small amounts of money. The agitators disavow any pretense to superiority, implying that the leader to come is one who is as weak as his brethren

but who dares to confess his weakness without inhibition, and is consequently going to be transformed into the strong man.

(2) All these demagogues substitute means for ends. They prate about “this great movement,” about their organization, about a general American revival they hope to bring about, but they very rarely say anything about what such a movement is supposed to lead to, what the organization is good for or what the mysterious revival is intended positively to achieve. Here is a typical example of a redundant description of the revival idea by one of the most successful West Coast agitators:

My friend, there is not but one way to get a revival and all America has got to get that revival, all of the churches. The story of the great Welsh revival is simply this. Men become desperate for the holiness of God in the world, and they began to pray, and they began to ask to send a revival(!) and wherever men and women went the revival was on.

The glorification of action, of something going on, simultaneously obliterates and replaces the purpose of the so-called movement. The end is “that we might demonstrate to the world that there are patriots, God-fearing Christian men and women who are yet willing to give their lives to the cause of God, home and native land.³”

(3) Since the entire weight of this propaganda is to promote the means, propaganda itself becomes the ultimate content. In other words, propaganda functions as a kind of wish-fulfillment. This is one of its most important patterns. People are “let in,” they are supposedly getting the inside dope, taken into confidence, treated as of the elite who deserve to know the lurid mysteries hidden from outsiders. Lust for snooping is both encouraged and satisfied. Scandal stories, mostly fictitious, particularly of sexual excesses and atrocities are constantly told; the indignation at filth and cruelty is but a very thin, purposely

transparent rationalization of the pleasure these stories convey to the listener. Occasionally a slip of the tongue occurs by which scandal mongering can easily be identified as an end in itself. Thus a certain West Coast demagogue once promised to give in his next speech full details about a phony decree of the Soviet Government organizing the prostitution of Russian womanhood. In announcing this story, the speaker said that there was not a real he-man whose backbone would not tingle upon hearing these facts. The ambivalence implied in this “tingling backbone” device is evident.

To a certain extent, all these patterns can be explained rationally. Very few American agitators would dare openly to profess fascist and anti-democratic goals. In contrast to Germany, the democratic ideology in this country has evolved certain taboos, the violation of which might jeopardize people engaging in subversive activities. Thus the fascist demagogue here is much more restricted in what he can say, for reasons of both political censorship and psychological tactics. Moreover, a certain vagueness with regard to political aims is inherent in Fascism itself. This is partly due to its intrinsically untheoretical nature, partly to the fact that its followers will be cheated in the end and that therefore the leaders must avoid any formulation to which they might have to stick later. It should also be noted that with regard to terror and repressive measures, Fascism habitually goes *beyond* what it has announced. Totalitarianism means knowing no limits, not allowing for any breathing spell, conquest with absolute domination, complete extermination of the chosen foe. With regard to this meaning of fascist “dynamism,” any clear-cut program would function as a limitation, a kind of guarantee even to the adversary. It is essential to totalitarian rule that nothing shall be guaranteed, no limit is set to ruthless arbitrariness.

Finally we should bear in mind that totalitarianism regards the masses not as self-determining human beings who rationally

decide their own fate and are therefore to be addressed as rational subjects, but that it treats them as mere objects of administrative measures who are taught, above all, to be self-effacing and to obey orders.

However, just this last point requires a somewhat closer scrutiny if it is to mean more than the hackneyed phrase about mass hypnosis under Fascism. It is highly doubtful whether actual mass hypnosis takes place at all in Fascism, or whether it is not a handy metaphor that permits the observer to dispense with further analysis. Cynical soberness is probably more characteristic of the fascist mentality than psychological intoxication. Moreover, no one who has ever had an opportunity to observe fascist attitudes can overlook the fact that even those stages of collective enthusiasm to which the term "mass hypnosis" refers have an element of conscious manipulation, by the leader and even by the individual subject himself, which can hardly be regarded as a result of mere passive contagion. Speaking psychologically, the ego plays much too large a role in fascist irrationality to admit of an interpretation of the supposed ecstasy as a mere manifestation of the unconscious. There is always something self-styled, self-ordained, spurious about fascist hysteria which demands critical attention if the psychological theory about Fascism is not to yield to the irrational slogans which Fascism itself promotes.

What, now, does the fascist, and in particular, the anti-Semitic propaganda speech wish to achieve? To be sure, its goal is not "rational," for it makes no attempt to convince people, and it always remains on a non-argumentative level. In this connection two facts deserve detailed investigation:

(1) Fascist propaganda attacks bogies rather than real opponents, that is to say, it builds up an *imagery* of the Jew, or of the Communist, and tears it to pieces, without caring much how this imagery is related to reality.

(2) It does not employ discursive logic but is rather, particularly in oratorical exhibitions, what might be called an organized

flight of ideas. The relation between premisses and inferences is replaced by a linking-up of ideas resting on mere similarity, often through association by employing the same characteristic word in two propositions which are logically quite unrelated. This method not only evades the control mechanisms of rational examination, but also makes it psychologically easier for the listener to "follow." He has no exacting thinking to do, but can give himself up passively to a stream of words in which he swims.

In spite of these patterns of retrogression, however, anti-Semitic propaganda is by no means altogether irrational. The term, irrationality, is much too vague to describe sufficiently so complex a psychological phenomenon. We know, above all, that fascist propaganda, with all its twisted logic and fantastic distortions, is consciously planned and organized. If it is to be called irrational, then it is applied rather than spontaneous irrationality, a kind of psychotechnics reminiscent of the calculated effect conspicuous in most presentations of today's mass culture – such as in movies and broadcasts. Even if it is true, however, that the mentality of the fascist agitator resembles somewhat the muddle-headedness of his prospective followers, and that the leaders themselves "are hysterical or even paranoid types," they have learned, from vast experience and from the striking example of Hitler, how to utilize their own neurotic or psychotic dispositions for ends which are wholly adapted to the principle of reality (*realitaetsgerecht*). Conditions prevailing in our society tend to transform neurosis and even mild lunacy into a commodity which the afflicted can easily sell, once he has discovered that many others have an affinity for his own illness. The fascist agitator is usually a masterly salesman of his own psychological defects. This is possible only because of a general structural similarity between followers and leader, and the goal of propaganda is to establish a concord between them rather than to convey to the audience any ideas or emotions which were not their own

from the very beginning. Hence, the problem of the true psychological nature of fascist propaganda may be formulated: Of what does this rapport between leader and followers in the propaganda situation consist?

A first lead is offered by our observation that this type of propaganda functions as a gratification. We may compare it with the social phenomenon of the soap opera. Just as the housewife, who has enjoyed the sufferings and the good deeds of her favorite heroine for a quarter of an hour over the air, feels impelled to buy the soap sold by the sponsor, so the listener to the fascist propaganda act, after getting pleasure from it, accepts the ideology represented by the speaker out of gratitude for the show. "Show" is indeed the right word. The achievement of the self-styled leader is a performance reminiscent of the theater, of sport, and of so-called religious revivals. It is characteristic of the fascist demagogues that they boast of having been athletic heroes in their youth. This is how they behave. They shout and cry, fight the Devil in pantomime, and take off their jackets when attacking "those sinister powers."

The fascist leader types are frequently called hysterical. No matter how their attitude is arrived at, their hysterical behavior fulfills a certain function. Though they actually resemble their listeners in most respects, they differ from them in an important one: they know no inhibitions in expressing themselves. They function vicariously for their inarticulate listeners by doing and saying what the latter would like to, but either cannot or dare not. They violate the taboos which middle-class society has put upon any expressive behavior on the part of the normal, matter-of-fact citizen. One may say that some of the effect of fascist propaganda is achieved by this break-through. The fascist agitators are taken seriously because they risk making fools of themselves.

Educated people in general found it hard to understand the effect of Hitler's speeches because they sounded so insincere,

ungenuine, or, as the German word goes, *verlogen*. But it is a deceptive idea, that the so-called common people have all unflinching flair for the genuine and sincere, and disparage fake. Hitler was liked, not in spite of his cheap antics, but just because of them, because of his false tones and his clowning. They are observed as such, and appreciated. Real folk artists, such as Girardi⁴ with his *Fiakerlied*, were truly in touch with their audiences and they always employed what strikes us as "false tones." We find similar manifestations regularly in drunkards who have lost their inhibitions. The sentimentality of the common people is by no means primitive, unreflecting emotion. On the contrary, it is pretense, a fictitious, shabby imitation of real feeling, often self-conscious and slightly contemptuous of itself. This fictitiousness is the life element of the fascist propagandist performances.

The situation created by this exhibition may be called a ritual one. The fictitiousness of the propagandist oratory, the gap between the speaker's personality and the content and character of his utterances are ascribable to the ceremonial role assumed by and expected of him. This ceremony, however, is merely a symbolic revelation of the identity that he verbalizes, an identity the listeners feel and think, but cannot express. This is what they actually want him to do, neither being convinced nor, essentially, being whipped into a frenzy, but having their own minds expressed to them. The gratification they get out of propaganda consists most likely in the demonstration of this identity, no matter how far it actually goes, for it is a kind of institutionalized redemption of their own inarticulateness through the speaker's verbosity. This act of revelation, and the temporary abandonment of responsible, self-contained seriousness is the decisive pattern of the propagandist ritual. To be sure, we may call this act of identification a phenomenon of collective retrogression. It is not simply a reversion to older, primitive emotions but rather the reversion toward a ritualistic attitude in which the

expression of emotions is sanctioned by an agency of social control. In this context it is interesting to note that one of the most successful and dangerous West Coast agitators again and again encouraged his listeners to indulge in all sorts of emotions, to give way to their feelings, to shout and to shed tears, persistently attacking the behavior pattern of rigid self-control brought about by the established religious denominations and by the whole Puritan tradition.

This loosening of self-control, the merging of one's impulses with a ritual scheme is closely related to the universal psychological weakening of the self-contained individual.

A comprehensive theory of fascist propaganda would be tantamount to a psychoanalytic deciphering of the more or less rigid ritual performed in each and every fascist address. The scope of this paper permits only brief reference to some characteristics of this ritual.

(1) There is, above all, the amazing stereotypy of all the fascist propaganda material known to us. Not only does each individual speaker incessantly repeat the same patterns again and again, but different speakers use the same clichés. Most important, of course, is the dichotomy of black and white, foe and friend. Stereotypy applies not only to the defamation of the Jews or to political ideas, such as the denunciation of Communism or of banking capital, but also to apparently very remote matters and attitudes. We have summarized a list of typical psychological devices employed by practically all fascist agitators, which could be boiled down to no more than thirty formulas.⁵ Many of them have already been mentioned, such as the lone wolf device, the idea of indefatigability, of persecuted innocence, of the great little man, the praise of the movement as such, and so forth. Of course, the uniformity of these devices can in part be accounted for by reference to common source, such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, or even by an organizational linking of all the agitators, as was apparently the case on the West Coast. But the reason must be

sought elsewhere if the agitators in many different parts of the country employ the same specific assertions, e.g. their lives have been threatened and their listeners will know who is responsible if the threat is carried out – an incident that never occurs. These patterns are standardized for psychological reasons. The prospective fascist follower craves this rigid repetition, just as the jitterbug craves the standard pattern of popular songs and gets furious if the rules of the game are not strictly observed. Mechanical application of these patterns is one of the essentials of the ritual.

(2) It is not accidental that many persons with a fake religious attitude are found among the fascist agitators. This, of course, has a sociological aspect which will be discussed later. Psychologically, however, the carry-overs of by-gone religion, neutralized and void of any specific dogmatic content, are put to the service of the fascist ritualistic attitude. Religious language and religious forms are utilized in order to lend the impression of a sanctioned ritual that is performed again and again by some “community.”

(3) The specific religious content as well as the political one is replaced by something which may briefly be designated the cult of the existent. The attitude which Else Brunswik has called “identification with a *status quo*” is closely related to this cult. The devices pointed out in McClung Lee’s book on Father Coughlin,⁶ such as the band wagon idea or the testimony trick, implying the support of famous or successful people, are only elements of a much farther-reaching pattern of behavior. It signifies explicitly that whatever is, and thus has established its strength, is also right, – the sound principle to be followed. One of the West Coast agitators occasionally even directed his listeners generally to follow the advice of their leaders without specifying what kind of leaders he meant. Leadership as such, devoid of any visible idea or aim is glorified. Making a fetish of reality and of established power relationships is what tends, more than

anything else, to induce the individual to give himself up and to join the supposed wave of the future.

(4) One of the intrinsic characteristics of the fascist ritual is *innuendo*, sometimes followed by the actual revelation of the facts hinted at, but more often not. Again a rational reason for this trend can easily be given: either the law or at least prevailing conventions preclude open statements of a pro-Nazi or anti-Semitic character, and the orator who wants to convey such ideas has to resort to more indirect methods. It seems likely, however, that *innuendo* is employed, and enjoyed, as a gratification *per se*. For example, the agitator says "those dark forces, you know whom I mean," and the audience at once understands that his remarks are directed against the Jews. The listeners are thus treated as an in-group who already know everything the orator wishes to tell them and who agree with him before any explanation is given. Concord of feeling and opinion between speaker and listener, which was mentioned before, is established by *innuendo*. It serves as a confirmation of the basic identity between leader and followers. Of course, the psychoanalytic implications of *innuendo* go far beyond these surface observations. Reference is made here to the role attributed by Freud to allusions in the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious. Fascist *innuendo* feeds upon this role.

(5) The performance of the ritual as such functions to a very large extent as the ultimate content of fascist propaganda. Psychoanalysis has shown the relatedness of ritual behavior to compulsion neurosis; and it is obvious that the typical fascist ritual of revelation is a substitute for sexual gratification. Beyond this, however, some speculation may be allowed with regard to the specific symbolic meaning of the fascist ritual. It is not wide off the mark to interpret it as the offering of a sacrifice. If the assumption is correct that the overwhelming majority of accusations and atrocity stories with which the fascist propaganda speeches abound, are projections of the wishes of the orators

and their followers, the whole symbolic act of revelation celebrated in each propaganda speech expresses, however much concealed, the sacramental killing of the chosen foe. At the hub of the fascist, anti-Semitic propaganda ritual is the desire for ritual murder. This can be corroborated by a piece of evidence from the everyday psychopathology of fascist propaganda. The important role played by the religious element in American fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda has been mentioned earlier. One of the Fascist West Coast radio priests said in a broadcast:

Can you not see that unless we exalt the holiness of our God, that unless we proclaim the justice of God in this world of ours, unless we proclaim the fact of a heaven and of a hell, unless we proclaim the fact that without the remission, *without the shedding of blood*, there is no remission of sin? Cannot you see that only Christ and God are dominant and that revolution will ultimately take this nation of ours?

The transformation of Christian doctrine into slogans of political violence could not be cruder than in this passage. The idea of a sacrament, the “shedding of blood” of Christ, is straightforwardly interpreted in terms of “shedding of blood” in general, with an eye to a political upheaval. The actual shedding of blood is advocated as necessary because the world has supposedly been redeemed by the shedding of Christ’s blood. Murder is invested with the halo of a sacrament. Thus the ultimate reminder of the sacrificed Christ in fascist propaganda is “Judenblut muss fliessen” (“Jewish blood must be spilled”). Crucifixion is transformed into a symbol of the pogrom. Psychologically, all fascist propaganda is simply a system of such symbols.

At this point attention must be paid to destructiveness as the psychological basis of the fascist spirit. The programs are abstract and vague, the fulfillments are spurious and illusory because the promise expressed by fascist oratory is nothing but destruction

itself. It is hardly accidental that all fascist agitators dwell upon the imminence of catastrophes of some kind. Whereas they warn of impending danger, they and their listeners get a thrill out of the idea of inevitable doom, without even making a clear-cut distinction between the destruction of their foes and of themselves. This mental behavior, by the way, could be clearly observed during the first years of Hitlerism in Germany, and has a deep archaic basis. One of the West Coast demagogues once said: "I want to say that you men and women, you and I are living in the most fearful time of the history of the world. We are living also in the most gracious and most wonderful time." This is the agitator's dream, a union of the horrible and the wonderful, a delirium of annihilation masked as salvation. The strongest hope for effectively countering this whole type of propaganda lies in pointing out its self-destructive implications. The unconscious psychological desire for self-annihilation faithfully reproduces the structure of a political movement which ultimately transforms its followers into victims.

NOTES

The editor's notes, or editorial additions to Adorno's notes, are enclosed in square brackets.

- 1 Authors: T.W. Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Paul W. Massing. [Later published as follows. T.W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1950. L. Lowenthal and N. Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*. New York: Harper & Row, 1949. P. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany*. New York: Harper & Row, 1949. Adorno does not refer to his own lengthy study of American fascist propaganda, written in around 1943, which elaborates the arguments of the present essay but which was not published in his lifetime: 'The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas's Radio Addresses.' *Gesammelte Schriften* 9.1. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975. The study is discussed in the 'Introduction' above.]
- 2 [Adorno inserted a note here: 'see pp. 8–9, this volume.' That is,

- M. Horkheimer, 'Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach,' in E. Simmel (ed.), *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease*. New York: International Universities Press, 1946.]
- 3 All quotations are taken literally, without any change, from shorthand transcriptions. [The quotes are all from Martin Luther Thomas.]
 - 4 Famous Viennese actor, around the turn of the century.
 - 5 [Adorno analyzes thirty three 'devices' in 'The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas's Radio Addresses.']
 - 6 [A. McClung Lee and E. Briant-Lee (eds), *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin's Speeches*. New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1939.]