Prussians & Englishmen

Oswald Spengler

4,018 words

Editor’s Note:

The following is a selection from chapter 3, “Prussians and Englishmen,” of Oswald Spengler’s Prussianism and Socialism, a short book or long essay of about 36,000 words published in 1920.

Spengler argued that true socialism was not represented by the Marxist-inspired Communists and Social Democrats, who had brought down the Second Reich, but by the Prussian spirit of patriotism, duty, and the subordination of private interests to the common good whenever they conflicted.

Spengler also argued the true socialism did not require the expropriation of private property, but merely the regulation of economic activity and the cultivation of an ethos of public-spiritedness and duty. Thus Spengler’s Prussian socialism is very close to what became Italian Fascism and German National Socialism.

In the following selection, Spengler offers an explanation for how the Prussians and the Anglo-Saxons, two racially similar peoples, diverged so radically as to be the paradigms of socialism and capitalism.

11.

I should like to make clear what I mean by the term “Prussianism.” The name, of course, refers to an area of Europe where certain attitudes took on impressive shape and began to evolve. But Prussianism is, first and foremost, a feeling, an instinct, a compulsion. It is the embodiment of spiritual and intellectual traits—and that means also of certain physical qualities—that have long since become the distinguishing characteristics of a race, or rather of the best and most typical representatives of this race. Certainly not every person born in England is “English” in the racial sense; and not everyone born in Prussia in genuinely “Prussian.” This word denotes everything we Germans possess by way of destiny, will, inner drive, and ability, and nothing of our vague ideas, desires, and whims. There are true Prussian types in all of Germany—I am thinking of men like Friedrich List and Hegel, of certain inventors, scholars, engineers, and organizers, but especially of a particular type of German worker. Since the Battles of Rossbach and Leuthen there have been many Germans who in the depth of their souls have harbored a small strain of Prussianism, a potential source of energy which can become active at great moments of history. As yet, however, the only real Prussian achievements have been the creations of Frederick William I and Frederick the Great: the Prussian state and the Prussian people.

Every supreme reality begets later realities. The Prussian element is again making itself felt in the Germans, or rather in the German type, of today; it is gradually reducing the effectiveness of outmoded ideologies. Although the best Germans are not aware of it, Prussianism, with its combination of realism, discipline, energy, and esprit de corps, is a great promise for the future. At the moment, the German people, indeed every individual German, is threatened by what we have dubbed “the German Michel”—the hodgepodge of faded beliefs which we often think of as ingenuous, but which really are useless or even dangerous for Western civilization.

The concept of “the Germans” as used in the idealistic sense by professors and enthusiasts is an artificial construct based on the spurious foundation of a common language. It is unpolitical and impractical; it does not denote a “race” in the sense of instincts having a unified function in the real world. The idea is made up of the ossified remains of the Medieval Gothic mentality, together with the confused gropings of eternally childish souls. The Romantic movement in Germany, with its dreamy politics of 1848, once again brought these traits to the fore. Gothic vestiges, mixed with bits and shreds of English ideas, comprise the basis for such trivial beliefs as cosmopolitanism, international friendship, and universal humanitarianism. In serious cases people have been induced to treason by naively adopting such ideologies, singing and writing and talking about things which the Spanish sword and English money have actually achieved.

Such are the perennial provincialists, the simple-minded heroes of the German Bildungsroman, who may undergo a certain amount of inner development but who display an astounding lack of talent when it comes to dealing with things of the real world. Such are the portly gentlemen of our bowling clubs, our beer halls, and our parliamentary assemblies, who excuse their own lack of ability by griping about the governmental departments they manage so badly. They are the ones with the sleepy tendency toward English liberalism and its hostility to the state, a feeling that pleases them even though they are ignorant of the strong initiative displayed by the private English citizen in political and other matters. Theirs is the narrow-minded, Italian and French preference for smallness in politics, the refusal to pursue political thought beyond the boundaries of their immediate neighbors. They consider order as inimical to culture, and yet they have been unable to capture the spirit of the culture they praise so highly. At the same time they are the outspoken advocates of Spanish-style ecclesiastical authority, which only leads to squabbles among the various denominations.

Such, then, are our “typical Germans”: impractical, servile, stupid but honest, formless without any promise of improvement, old-fashioned, small-minded, thought-stifling, and degrading. They are the inner enemy of every true German as an individual and of all Germans as a nation. Together they represent the “German Michel,” of the five “typical” personifications of modern creative peoples, the only one that is negative in character. They represent a form of Gothic humanity that has resisted the efforts of post-Renaissance and post-Reformation culture to create a race in the new sense of the term.

 12.

The organized colonization of the Slavic frontier involved Germans of all tribes, but the area was ruled by nobles from Lower Saxony. Thus the Prussian people, by origin, is closely related to the English. It was the same Saxons, Frisians, and Angles who, as roving Viking bands, and often under Norman and Danish names, subdued the Celtic Britons. Saxon settlements sprang up along the Thames just as they had in the desert-like region near the Havel and Spree Rivers, a stretch of land comparable in desolate expanse and fateful importance only to Latium, the Roman Campagna. By contemplating the rigid figures of Duke Widukind, the Margrave Gero, and Henry the Lion, we can gain an impression of the type of men who first set this people on its path of Destiny.

But the Viking spirit and the communal spirit of the Teutonic knights gradually gave rise to two antithetical ethical imperatives. One side bore the Germanic idea actively within itself, while the other felt itself subject to it: personal independence on the one hand, and suprapersonal community spirit on the other. Today we refer to these concepts as “individualism” and “socialism.” Virtues of the most exalted kind are summarized by these words: in the one case personal responsibility, self-reliance, determination, and initiative; and in the other, loyalty, discipline, selflessness, and a sense of obligation. To be free and to serve—there is nothing more difficult that this. A people whose spirit and being are capable of it, a nation that can truly serve and be free, deserves to take upon itself a great destiny.

Service—that is the style of Old Prussia, similar to that of Old Spain, which also created a people by engaging in knightly warfare against the heathen. Not “I” but “we”—a feeling of community to which every individual sacrifices his whole being. The individual does not matter; he must offer himself to the totality. All exist for all, and all partake of that glorious inner freedom, the libertas oboedientiae [freedom of obedience — Ed.] which has always distinguished the best exemplars of Prussian breeding. The Prussian army, Prussian civil service, and August Bebel’s workers’ brigades are all products of this breeding principle.

The urge to individuality and independence, however, later drove many of those with Viking blood in their veins—Englishmen, Germans, and Scandinavians—to seek their fortunes on the American prairie. This adventure was, in effect, a late resumption of the expeditions from Greenland at the time of the Eddas, when Vikings touched the Canadian coast: a tremendous migration of Teutons filled with a longing for distance and limitless expanses, teams of adventurers who were to lay the groundwork for yet another people with Saxon characteristics. Yet this new people was to arise apart from the maternal soil of the Faustian culture, and thus lacked the “inner basalt” of which Goethe speaks in his poem “America.” It retained certain races of noble blood and the concomitant virtues of vigor and industriousness, but was without roots and therefore without a future.

Such was the origin of the English and Prussian types. The difference between them is that between a people whose soul has developed out of an awareness of insular security, and one that has been forced to maintain a frontier without natural borders to protect it from its enemies. In England, “splendid isolation” replaced the organized state. A stateless nation was only possible under those conditions; isolation was the necessary ingredient in the development of the spirit of modern England, a spirit that first gained full confidence in the seventeenth century, when the English became the undisputed masters of their island. It is a case of creative topography: the English people shaped and formed itself, while the Prussian people was shaped in the eighteenth century by the Hohenzollern, who brought with them the frontier experience of southern Central Europe, and who had thus become advocates of the organized state.

As real political entities, as state and non-state, Prussia and England embody the maximum and minimum functioning of the suprapersonal socialistic principle. The liberal English “state” is completely intangible; it makes not a single claim on the individual citizen, nor does it make of him a meaningful element in a political system. It serves him exclusively as a means to an end. During the century between Waterloo and the World War, England went without compulsory education, compulsory military service, and compulsory social security—out of sheer antipathy to these negative privileges. The hostility of the English toward centralized organization is neatly expressed in their word “society,” which has displaced in their thinking the ideal notion of the “state.” The concept entered the French Enlightenment as société, Montesquieu arrived at this opinion: “Des sociétés de vingt à trente millions d’hommes—ce sont des monstres dans la nature” [Societies of twenty or thirty million people — they are monsters in nature–Ed.]. This was an anarchical French idea, but in British formulation. Rousseau, as is well known, used this word to conceal his hatred of rules and commands issued by authority; and Karl Marx, whose pattern of thought was likewise predominantly English, merely followed suit. Lessing, as a representative of the German Aufklärung, employed the term Menschengeschlecht in the sense of “human society.” Goethe, Schiller, and Herder preferred the word Gesellschaft, which then became a favorite expression of the German liberals, who used it to blot out of their minds the nobler but more demanding idea of the Staat.

England did away with the principle of the organized state, and put in its place the notion of the free private citizen. The citizen demands permission to fight alone in the ruthless struggle for existence, for this is the only way he can satisfy his Viking instincts. Buckle, Malthus, and Darwin later postulated that the basic essence of “society” was the naked struggle for existence. And they were absolutely right, at least as far as their own country and people were concerned. To be sure, in modern England this principle operates in a highly refined and perfected fashion. But evidence of a more rudimentary adherence to it can be found in the Icelandic sagas, where such behavior is obviously spontaneous and not borrowed from another culture. The forces with which William the Conqueror took England in 1066 could be called a “society” of knightly adventurers, and English trading companies have subdued and expropriated entire countries—most recently, since 1890, the inland regions of South Africa. Gradually the entire English nation assumed the characteristics of a “society.” The Old Norse instinct for piracy and clever trading has, in the end, influenced the Englishman’s attitude toward all of reality, including property, work, foreign peoples, and the weaker individuals and classes among his own people. The same instinct has also yielded political techniques that are extremely effective weapons in the struggle for mastery of the globe.

A concept complementary to that of “society” is the “private citizen.” He represents the sum of certain positive ethical qualities which like all great ethical virtues are not acquired through training or education, but are borne in the blood and perfected after passing through generation after generation. The peculiarly English style of politics is essentially one that involves private citizens or groups of such individuals. This, and only this, is the very meaning of parliamentary government. Cecil Rhodes was a private citizen who conquered foreign countries. The American billionaires are private citizens who rule foreign countries by means of an inferior class of professional politicians. German liberalism, on the other hand, is ethically valueless. It merely says “No!” to the state, and is unable to justify its opposition by offering equally high-minded and vigorous positive suggestions.

Among the political attitudes that prevail in Germany today, only socialism has the potentiality of inner value and integrity. Liberalism is for the simple-minded, for those who like to chat a great deal about things they can never achieve. That is how we Germans are; we cannot possibly be like the English, we can only be caricatures of them—and that we have been often enough. Every man for himself: that is an English idea. Every man for every other man: that is the Prussian way. Liberalism, however, means “the state for itself, and every man for himself.” That is a formula impossible to follow unless one is willing to take the liberal course, which is to say one thing while being dead set against its opposite, but in the end to let the opposite take over anyway.

There are in Germany a number of unpopular and disreputable political philosophies, but none is more fervently despised than the liberal view. Liberalism, in its German form, has always stood for mental sterility, for the ignorance and incomprehension of historical necessities. It has meant the inability to cooperate with others or to make sacrifices for others. Its position has always been one of entirely negative criticism, though not as an expression of an indomitable will to change society—as manifested by Bebel’s Socialists—but simply out of the desire to “be different.” While our liberals have never been at a loss for “standpoints” to adopt, they have lacked the inner vitality and discipline, the confidence and purposeful vigor that are so characteristic of the English form of liberalism. They are, in fact, nothing but obstacles on our historical path.

Since Napoleonic times liberalism has captured the minds of our educated classes. Pseudo-intellectuals (Nietzsche’s “cultural philistines”) and ivory-tower scholars, shut off from the real world by a barrier of abstract knowledge, have been its staunchest defenders. Even the historian Mommsen, who mastered his difficult field of knowledge with true Prussian aplomb, and who recognized and admired the Prussian elements in Roman history, adopted as a member of the Assembly an uncomprehending standpoint of opposition to Bismarck’s policies. An interesting comparison could be drawn between Mommsen and the English translator and editor of his History of Greece, George Grote, a banker and liberal.

With rabbit-like prolificacy, our writers and professors have sired book after book and scheme after scheme in which the English concepts of the free citizen, the free personality, the people as sovereign, and of a universal, free, and progressive humanity are lifted out of the reality of English business offices and emblazoned high in the German clouds. Bismarck, whom Bruno Bauer called in 1880 a “socialist imperialist,” had some interesting things to say about these scholars who mistake the world of their books for the real world. August Bebel once demonstrated his infallible instinct by soundly berating the academics who had entered his party. He felt out the anti-Prussian instinct of the German intellectual, who was secretly undermining his country’s order and discipline. And time has proved him right. Since Bebel’s death, “educated” Socialists have cracked the strength of the party and joined forces with our “educated” middle-class liberals. Together, the two groups are now staging in the Court Theater at Weimar a revival of the ideological drama of the Frankfurt Paulskirche, in which professors hold scholarly conversations about the wording of a paper constitution.[1]

13.

In their “splendid isolation” the English have achieved on the basis of their ethical instinct a unity, both internal and external, such as no other modern Western European people has attained. England has produced a unique form of respectable society, a class of “ladies and gentlemen” joined together by a strong sense of common interest and by uniform patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. Since 1750 this magnificent type of society has been the model for all of modern civilization, and in France first of all. The artistic fashion known as “Empire” served as a background for this style of living. It was essentially a practical and restrained form of rococo, and it imbued this society’s whole environment with elegant and refined taste. In this connection we think today particularly of the masters of the civilized portrait, Gainsborough and Reynolds.

The English were united by a common feeling of success and good fortune, unlike the Prussians, who were moved by a sense of challenge and duty. We may think of the English as Olympians of the business world at the banquet table, or as Vikings returned from distant explorations, but not as knights on the field of battle. Next to noble parentage, wealth is the major condition for acceptance in the group; it is also the criterion for rank within the group’s social structure. Wealth is the Englishman’s prime virtue, his distinguishing mark, his goal and his ideal. Today, only England has what may be called social culture, although it does not possess any other, more philosophical form of culture. The English are a people of profound superficiality; we Germans, in the “land of poets and thinkers,” so often display merely a superficial profundity.

There is not and cannot be a German or Prussian type of society like the English. A society made up of separate egos, lacking the unifying pathos of a common purpose and goal, always strikes us as somewhat ridiculous. In imitation of the English “club” and “banquet,” our German individualists and liberals have invented the Verein and the Festessen; these are his devices for the development of “cultural solidarity.”

The Prussian style of living, in contrast to all this, has produced a profound and vigorous rank-consciousness, a feeling of unity based on an ethos of work, not of leisure. It unites the members of each professional group—military, civil service, and labor—by infusing them with a pride of vocation, and dedicates them to activity that benefits all others, the totality, the state. Such a feeling of solidarity within each group finds symbolic expression in words: at the top level there are Kamaraden, in the middle Kollegen, and at the bottom, but with the same sense of pride, Genossen. The bond of unity at all levels is a supreme ethos of dedication, not of success. The distinguishing feature of membership is rank, not wealth. The captain is superior to the lieutenant, even though the latter may be a prince or a millionaire. The French used the term “bourgeois” during their Revolution to underscore the ideal of equality, but this corresponds neither to the English nor the German sense of distance in social relations. A feeling for distance is common to both Germanic peoples; we differ only in the origins of the feeling. When a German worker uses the word “bourgeois” he means a person who, in his opinion, has merely obtained a certain social rank without performing any real work—it is the English ideal seen from the German perspective. England has its snobs, Germany its title-seekers.

The centuries-old feeling of group solidarity in both countries has brought forth a magnificent conformity of physical and mental attitudes, in the one case a race of successful businessmen, in the other a race of workers. One important symbol of this process, albeit an external one, is the English taste in men’s clothing. England has produced civilian dress in the purest sense: the uniform of the private individual. Their fashion holds unopposed sway in all of Western Europe. England has clothed the world in its uniform, the symbol of free trade, private fortune-making, and “cant.” The counterpart of this English style is the Prussian uniform. It is an emblem of public service, not of private existence. Rather than symbolizing the success gained by diligent activity it stands for that activity itself. “I am the first servant of my state,” said the Prussian king whose father had made the wearing of uniforms a customary practice among the nobility. How many have fully understood the significance of the phrase “the king’s mantle”?

England’s fashion in men’s wear is a matter of social obligation, even stricter than the specifications for uniform-wearing in the Prussian state. Whoever is anybody in England would not think of appearing before his peers in “civilian” dress, i.e., contrary to fashion and custom. But only the Englishman is capable of making a proper appearance in this “gentleman’s” costume. The Bratenrock of the provincial German philistine is a poor copy of the English model. Beneath it the philistine German heart continues to throb for “freedom” and “human dignity.” The Bratenrock is the symbol of the ideals of 1848, and is worn today with pride by the German socialists-gone-liberal.[2]

To the Prussian way of thinking, the will of the individual is subsumed under the will of the totality. The officers’ corps, the members of the civil service branches, August Bebel’s army of workers, and ultimately the German Volk of 1813, 1870, and 1914 have all felt, willed, and acted as a suprapersonal unity. This is not just herd instinct; it is an expression of sublime strength and freedom, something which the outsider can never understand. Prussianism is exclusive. Even in its proletarian form it rejects the workers of other countries together with their egoistic pseudo-socialism. Servility, snobbishness—these are words for attitudes that are understood and despised only when they degenerate. The genuine Prussian despises no one; but he is himself feared.

The English, indeed the whole world, will never understand that the Prussian ethic carries with it a profound inner independence. For people of sufficient mental capacities a system of social obligations guarantees a supreme freedom of the inner life, which is not possible under a system of social privileges. A mentality such as that of General Moltke is unthinkable in England. The Englishman pays for his practical freedom with the loss of the other kind of freedom: he is inwardly a slave, whether as puritan, rationalist, sensualist, or materialist. For two centuries now he has been the inventor of all philosophies that do away with inner independence. Most recently he has produced Darwinism, which makes man’s entire psychic makeup dependent on material forces. Incidentally, the particularly crass form of Darwinism propagated by Büchner and Haeckel has become the Weltanschauung of the German philistine.

The Englishman belongs to his “society” in the spiritual sense as well. His clothing is also an expression of his uniformed conscience. He cherishes his right to act as a private citizen, yet for him there exists no such thing as private thinking. His life is governed by a unified, theologically oriented philosophy of little real content, as fashionable as frockcoat and gloves. The term “herd instinct” is appropriate here, if anywhere.

 Notes

1. A reference to the Weimar Republic, established after the November Revolution of 1918 and the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848–1849, the first freely elected parliament for all of Germany which resulted from the “March Revolution” of 1848 and which met in the Paulskirche.

2. The Frenchman, who regards Faustian drives as embarrassing, gives his creative attention to women’s fashions rather than the uniforms of profession and success. In France, business and civic duty have had to give way to l’amour.)

Source: <http://home.alphalink.com.au/~radnat/spengler/prussianism.html>

Prussians & Englishmen, Part 2

Oswald Spengler

4,216 words

Frederick the Great, King of Prussia

First installment here

In order to overcome man’s inborn lethargy, the Prussian socialist ethic maintains that the chief aim of life is not happiness. “Do your duty,” it says, “by doing your work.”

The English capitalist ethic says, “Get rich, and then you won’t have to work any more.”

There is doubtless something provocative about this latter motto. It is tempting, it appeals to very basic human instincts. The working masses of ambitious nations have understood it well. As late as the nineteenth century it produced the Yankee type with his irresistible practical optimism.

The other motto is forbidding. It is for the few who wish to inject it into the community and thus force it upon the masses.

The first maxim is for a stateless country, for egoists and Viking types with the urge for constant personal combat, such as we find in English sportsmanship. It implies extreme independence of mind, the right to gain happiness at the expense of all others, as long as one’s strength holds out—in other words, scientific Darwinism.

The other, however, is an expression of the socialist idea in all its profundity: the will to power, the struggle for happiness, but for the happiness of the totality, not of the individual. In this sense Frederick William I, and not Marx, was the first conscious socialist. The universal socialist movement had its start with this exemplary personality. Kant, with his categorical imperative, provided the movement with a formula.

In the final phase of Western European culture two great schools of philosophy were founded, the English school of egoism and sensualism around 1700, and the Prussian school of idealism around 1800. They express what these nations are, as ethical, religious, political, and economic entities.

Philosophy in itself is nothing—a collection of words, a series of books. Nor is it either true or false, in itself. It is language of the life of a great mind. For the Englishman, Hobbes is speaking the truth when he sets up the “selfish system” of egoism and the optimistic Whig philosophy of the common good (“the greatest happiness for the greatest number”). And Shaftesbury also speaks the truth, for the Englishman, with his portrait of the gentleman, the Tory, the sovereign personality living life to the fullest. Yet for us Kant is just as truthful with his contempt for “happiness” and usefulness, his categorical imperative of duty. Hegel, in our view, speaks the truth when, with his powerful sense of reality, he places the concrete destiny of individual nations, and not the well-being of “human society,” at the center of his historical deliberations. Mandeville, in his Fable of the Bees, declares that the egoism of the individual is the driving force of the state; Fichte says it is the obligation to work. Which is the highest goal—freedom by means of wealth, or freedom from wealth? Ought we to prefer Kant’s categorical imperative: “Behave as if the precepts governing your behavior were to become law for all,” or Bentham’s “Behave in such a way that you will have success”?

Vikings and knights—both of these types live on the antithesis of the English and Prussian moral systems. The philosophical teachings that have since arisen out of these separate worlds of sensibility, the progeny of the philosophers of both nations, all bear the same distinguishing marks. The Englishman is a utilitarian, in fact the only one in Western Europe. He cannot be otherwise, and whenever he attempts to deny this strongest inner drive of his the result is the phenomenon that has become famous as “cant”—it can be found in its purest form in the letters of Lord Chesterfield. The English are a nation of theologians. Their great revolution took on primarily religious forms, and following the abolition of the state no language except theological language remained with which to express the concerns of communal life. And so it has been: a biblical interpretation of questionable business dealings can ease the conscience and greatly increase ambition and initiative. Out of consideration for the chances of success in the personal struggle for existence, the theological mentality tends to avoid naming by its proper name the true goal of all activity: wealth.

If there is a similar conflict within the Prussian atmosphere, then it is concerned with position and rank. In many cases one is tempted to call it excessive ambition and title-seeking. In principle, however, it is a manifestation of the will to take on higher responsibility because one feels ready to do so.

 15.

Among all the peoples of Western Europe these two are distinguished by a rigid social hierarchy. This is a sign of their drive for dynamic activity. It puts every individual in the precise location in which he is needed most. Such an ordering is the result of a wholly unconscious and involuntary conservation of energies. It is natural and proper to a particular people only; no other people, no man of genius or ever so powerful will can possibly re-create it. It is an expression of the people’s fundamental moral and ethical attitude. Centuries are required for the clarification and realization of this special feeling for social structure. The Viking spirit and the spirit of the medieval knights are apparent here also: the ethos of success and the ethos of duty. The English people is structured along lines of wealth and poverty, the Prussian along lines of command and obedience.

The meaning of class distinctions is thus completely different in these two countries. In an association of independent private citizens the lowest class is the group that has nothing; in a true state the lowest class is the group that has nothing to say. In England democracy means the possibility that everyone can get rich; in Prussia it means that the existing ranks are open to everyone. Within the structure of Prussian society the individual receives his place according to his ability, not according to the demands of tradition.

France (and this means Florence as well) has never had a natural and instinctive class structure of this sort, not even before 1789. Social anarchy was the rule; there existed arbitrary privileged groups of various sizes and composition, and no firm system of relationships among them. Besides the class of court nobility there were the judicial nobles; there were types such as the abbé and the tenants généraux, and fine distinctions such as those between factions of the urban merchant class. This lack of hierarchic social structure existed in France from the very beginning, and is an outcome of the typically French penchant for égalité. In England nobility gradually came to mean primarily the nobility of wealth, in Prussia the nobility of military achievement. The French noble class has never attained such a uniformity of social significance. The English Revolution was directed against the state, i.e., against the “Prussian” sense of order in the Church and in public life. The German Revolution fought against the “English” system of wealth and poverty, which originated in industrial and commercial developments of the nineteenth century and had become the focal point for anti-Prussian and antisocialist tendencies. The French Revolution was not directed against a foreign, and therefore immoral, order; it combated order per se. That is democracy, French style.

Here, finally, we can grasp the profound ethical meaning of the slogans “capitalism” and “socialism.” They represent two systems of social stratification, one that is based on wealth and the uninhibited struggle for success, and one that is founded on authority and legislation. The Englishman would never accept commands from someone poorer than himself, nor would the Prussian ever pay homage to wealth for its own sake. Yet even the class-conscious worker in the erstwhile party of August Bebel obeyed the party leadership with the same sureness of instinct as the English laborer respects a millionaire as a recipient of divine favors. Proletarian class conflict is incapable of affecting such deeply rooted attitudes. The entire English labor movement is based on the distinction between rich and poor within the working class itself. Under such conditions it is impossible to imagine anything like the iron discipline of a Prussian-style party of millions.

“Unequal distribution of wealth” is the typically English proletarian formula, used repeatedly by Shaw. Though it sounds ridiculous to us, it is precisely appropriate to the ideal of living professed by the civilized Viking. With due respect to the magnificent flowering of this ideal in the Yankee type, we might speak of two forms of socialism existing in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Germany: socialism for the billionaires and socialism for civil servants. As an example of the first type we can point to Andrew Carnegie, who first transformed a large amount of public funds into a private fortune, only to turn around and distribute it with sovereign gesture among public enterprises. His pronouncement, “Whoever dies poor dies in dishonor,” implies a high regard for the will to power over the totality. This kind of private socialism, in extreme cases simply the dictatorial administration of public monies, ought not to be confused with the socialism of true public servants and administrators (who themselves can be quite poor). Examples of this latter form of socialism are the otherwise quite different personalities of Bismarck and Bebel.

George Bernard Shaw is today the prime exponent of “capitalistic” socialism, which still sees wealth and poverty as the controlling factors in the economic sphere. “Poverty is the greatest of evils and the worst of crimes” (Major Barbara). He preaches against the “cowardly masses that cling to the feeble prejudice that it is better to be good than rich.” The worker should try to get rich—this was the policy of the English trade unions right from the beginning. That is why there has never been a socialism in the proletarian sense in England, from Owen to Shaw—it was impossible to distinguish from the capitalism of the lower class.

For us, the controlling factor of society is the interplay of command and obedience in a strictly ordered community, be it state, party, officers’ corps, or civil service. The member of any one of these communities is a servant of that community. Travailler pour le roi de Prusse—that means doing one’s duty without giving oneself up to corrupt notions of private profit. The wages paid to Prussian officers and civil servants since the days of Frederick William I have been ridiculously small when compared to the sums required to belong even to the middle class in England. But the Prussians have worked harder, more selflessly, and more honestly. The real compensation for this work is rank. It was the same in August Bebel’s party. This workers’ state-within-a-state did not want to get rich, it wanted to rule. During their enforced strikes these workers starved often enough, but in the interest of gaining power, not for higher wages. They struck in support of a philosophy that was supposedly or actually opposed to that of their employers. They struck for a moral principle, and a defeat in their battle could ultimately mean a moral victory.

English workers were completely unable to understand this. They were not poor, and during their strikes they accepted the hundreds of thousands of pounds offered to them by German workers, who imagined that their comrades across the Channel were fighting for the same cause. Thus the November Revolution in Germany was a case of insubordination in the workers’ party as well as in the armed forces. The sudden transformation of the disciplined labor movement into a wild struggle for higher wages, fought by single groups independent of each other, was a victory for the English idea. Its failure was underscored by the fact that a new, highly disciplined organization reappeared in the Army. The only really talented personality to appear on the scene was a soldier. The German Revolution will continue in this manner, as a series of successes and failures of military authority.

16.

The same contrast prevails in the economic thought of both countries. Political economists have committed the fateful error of thinking solely in materialistic terms. Instead of considering the multiplicity of economic instincts in the world, they always speak in general terms of the economic stratification of “man,” of “the modern age,” and of “the present.” When using such language the scientific discipline of political economics displays all the shortcomings of its English origins. For it had its start among modern Englishmen, with all their self-confidence and lack of psychological tact. It became their only “philosophy”; it corresponded to their sense of mercantile competition, success, and personal gain. With this purely English interpretation of economic affairs they have infected the minds of the Continent since the eighteenth century.

The Teutonic knights that settled and colonized the eastern borderlands of Germany in the Middle Ages had a genuine feeling for the authority of the state in economic matters, and later Prussians have inherited that feeling. The individual is informed of his economic obligations by Destiny, by God, by the state, or by his own talent—these are simply different words for the same fact. Rights and privileges of producing and consuming goods are equally distributed. The aim is not ever greater wealth for the individual or for every individual, but rather the flourishing of the totality. Thus Frederick William I and his successors colonized the marshlands in the East, regarding this as their divine mission. The modern German laborer, with his fine sense of reality, has thought and acted along precisely these lines, although the theories of Karl Marx have obscured for him the close connections between his own aims and those of the Old Prussians.

The pirate instinct of the insular nation has a wholly different understanding of economic affairs. There economic activity is considered a matter of combat and booty—ultimately, the individual’s share in the booty. The Norman state, which developed a refined technique of amassing money reserves, was based entirely on the piracy principle. The feudal system was introduced as a magnificent and elegant means to the same piratical end. The barons exploited the land apportioned to them, and were in turn exploited by the duke. The goal of all was wealth. God bestowed it on the venturesome. The modern science of accounting had its start with these sedentary pirates. The words “check,” “account,” “control,” “receipt,” “record,” and the modern term for the English treasury, “Exchequer,” originated in the accounting chambers of the Norman Duke Robert le Diable (died 1035).[1] When England was conquered in 1066 the Norman barons expropriated the Saxons, their tribal relatives, in the same way. Their descendants have inherited their outlook.

The same style is still apparent today in every English trade company and every American trust. Their aim is not to work steadily to raise the entire nation’s standard of living, it is rather to produce private fortunes by the use of private capital, to overcome private competition, and to exploit the public through the use of advertising, price wars, artificial stimulation of the consumer, and strict control of the ratio of supply and demand. When the Englishman speaks of national wealth he means the number of millionaires in the country. As Friedrich Engels wrote, “Nothing is more foreign to the English mentality than solidarity.” Even in sports and recreation the Englishman sees a test of personal, and especially physical, superiority. He engages in sports for the sake of national and world records; he enjoys prize-fighting, a sport that is closely related to his economic habits and is quite alien to the minds of gymnasts in Germany.

All this proves that the economic existence of England is synonymous with business, i.e., a refined form of piracy. The English instinct regards all commodities as booty, items to be manipulated in order to get rich. The English machine industry was created in the interest of commerce and trade, its chief aim being the production of cheap goods. When English agriculture began to limit wage cuts by fixing its own prices, it was simply abandoned in the interest of commerce. The battles between capital and labor in English industry in 1850 were concerned with the commodity “labor”—one side wanted to get it cheap, the other wanted a high price for it. Everything that Marx has to say with grudging admiration about “capitalistic society” refers principally to English, and not to a universal, economic instinct.

The sublime term “free trade” is part and parcel of Viking economics. The Prussian, i.e., socialist term would be “state control of the exchange of goods.” This assigns to trade a subordinate rather than a dominant role within the complex of economic activity. We can understand why Adam Smith harbored a hatred of the state and the “cunning beasts called statesmen.” Indeed, government officials must have the same effect on tradesmen as policemen on burglars and naval cruisers on the crews of pirate ships.

Likewise characteristic of the Englishman is his overestimation of the importance of capital sums for economic health. The materialist finds it impossible to understand that the English concept of capital is psychologically, and therefore practically (the practical life is, after all, an expression of psychic conditions) different from the French system of private means and the Prussian concept of administrative funds. The English have never been good at psychology. They have always considered their own ideas as logically binding on “mankind.” In fact, all of modern political economics rests on the basic error of equating economic life everywhere in the world with an exclusively English interest in business, and the error is committed even by those who reject the theories of the Manchester school. Marxism, in the very act of negating this theory, has adopted its patterns quite completely. This explains the grotesque fiasco of all predictions concerning the outbreak of the World War; it was said that the collapse of world economy would follow within a few months.

English-style capitalism is the only true counterpart to Marxist socialism. The regulation of economic affairs by the state, a Prussian idea, transformed German capitalism instinctively into a socialist economic pattern. The first step in this process was the protective tariff legislation of 1879. The large syndicates were, in effect, economic states within the state. They represent “capitalism’s first practical and systematic large-scale attempt, although it was not consciously planned, to understand the mysteries of its own techniques and to gain control of social forces which up to then had been regarded as natural and unfathomable, requiring passive, blind submission” (Lensch, Drei Jahre Weltrevolution).

Nevertheless, German liberalism—the Englishman within us—still worships free trade, not just the freedom of the human spirit. In doing so, the “liberal” German cuts his silliest figure. Because he has misunderstood and tended to favor certain Viking instincts, he has “summarily” rejected the authoritarian state, the suprapersonal will, and the suppression of the individual in favor of the totality. By adopting this attitude he has acted, or so he believes, “metaphysically.” That is the belief of “educated” Germans who lack practical experience: the professors, the poets and thinkers, all those who write profusely and never do anything. They cannot, of course, understand or morally accept the other form of liberalism, the pirate principle of free trade with its every-man-for-himself philosophy. They simply have never grasped the connection between the abstract notion of the autonomous self and the practical application of this notion in the offices of the large industrial and commercial firms. Therefore German stock-market liberalism has hitched the German professor to its own wagon. It has sent him to the political meetings to talk and be talked to. It has put him in the editor’s chair, where with philosophical acumen he has turned out article after profound article, conveying to a gullible public (for whom the newspaper has long since replaced the Bible as the source of Truth) political opinions that were commercially desirable to maintain. It has sent him to the legislative assembly to say “Aye” and “Nay,” thereby assuring for commercial interests, which never cared anyway for theories and constitutions, the creation of more and more opportunities for bribery and piracy.

This English-German liberalism now exerts a business-like control over practically all the important German newspapers, the entire educated class, and the liberal party. But the professors are not aware of this. In England the liberal is a liberal through and through; he is ethically free, and for this reason also economically free, and is quite conscious of the connection. The German liberal has two discrete personalities, the ethical and the commercial. The one personality thinks, the other acts and controls; only the latter personality is aware of the mutual relationship—and finds it amusing.[2]

Thus we find two great economic principles opposed to each other in the modern world. The Viking has become a free-tradesman; the Teutonic knight is now an administrative official. There can be no reconciliation. Each of these principles is proclaimed by a German people, Faustian men par excellence. Neither can accept a restriction of its will, and neither can be satisfied until the whole world has succumbed to its particular idea. This being the case, war will be waged until one side gains final victory. Is world economy to be worldwide exploitation, or worldwide organization? Are the Caesars of the coming empire to be billionaires or universal administrators? Shall the population of the earth, so long as this empire of Faustian civilization holds together, be subjected to cartels and trusts, or to men such as those envisioned in the closing pages of Goethe’s Faust, Part II? Truly, the destiny of the world is at stake.

French economic thought has been just as provincial as that of the Renaissance. Provincialism is characteristic of the mercantile system under Louis XIV, of the physiocratic school of Turgot during the Enlightenment, but also of the socialistic planning of Fourier, who aimed at dividing “society” into small economic units to be called “phalansteries” (cf. the late novels of Zola). Only the three genuinely Faustian peoples possess the inner drive to create an economic system for the whole world. The knightly Spaniards made an attempt when they incorporated the New World into their empire. As true soldiers they refrained from theorizing about their economic expansion, but by broadening geographical and political horizons they prepared the way for a new kind of economic thought.

The first country to formulate a theory about its economic activity was England, which created the notion of “political economics” to explain its own practice of universal exploitation. As businessmen the English were clever enough to realize the power of the written word over the most book-conscious nation of all times. And they persuaded their nation that the interests of its pirates were those of the entire world. They succeeded in combining the notion of freedom with that of free trade.

The third and last of these Faustian peoples, like the Spanish a true military nation, lacked the practical shrewdness of the English. Prussia’s accomplishments within its own economic sphere received in theory, with the aid of the other-worldly German philosophy of idealism, the exalted title of socialism. But the true creators of Prussian economic life were not able to recognize their creations in this theoretical guise. Thus there arose a bitter conflict between two unnecessarily hostile factions: one made up of theorists, and another in charge of practice. We have now reached the stage where it is imperative for each of the sides to come to terms with the other and to accept the task that faces both.

Shall the world be ruled by capitalists or by socialists? This question cannot be decided by two countries in competition. It has become an internal question for each and every country. As soon as the weapons used against foreign states are put aside, they will be raised again in civil war. Today, in every country, there is an English and a Prussian economic party. And when the classes and factions are tired of warfare, individual mastertypes will keep it up in the name of principle. Amid the great conflicts of the Classical age between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles, the Peloponnesian War developed out of a war between Athens and Sparta into a contest between oligarchy and demos in all cities. The decisions reached at the battles of Philippi and Actium had to be fought over again in the time of the Gracchi, filling the Roman Forum with blood. In the Chinese world the corresponding war between the Tsin and Tsu Empires, between the philosophies of tao and li, lasted for a century. In Egypt great mysteries of the same kind are concealed beneath the mystery of the Hyksos period, the hegemony of eastern barbarians. Were they summoned, or did they come because the Egyptians had become desperately exhausted by civil strife? Will the Western world assign the same role to the Russians? Our trivial peacemongers can have their talk about reconciliation among nations; they will never reconcile ideas. The Viking spirit and the spirit of the knights will fight it out to the finish, even though the world may emerge weary and broken from the bloodbath of this century.[3]

Notes

[1] The Decline of the West, vol. 2, p. 372.

[2] The Decline of the West, vol. 2, pp. 402 ff.

[3] The Decline of the West, vol. 2, pp. 414 ff.

Source: <http://home.alphalink.com.au/~radnat/spengler/prussianism.html>

Prussians & Englishmen, Part 3

Oswald Spengler

5,639 words

Part One, Part Two

17.

This brings us to the political aspects of the English-Prussian antithesis. Politics is the highest and most powerful dimension of all historical existence. World history is the history of states; the history of states is the history of wars.[1] Ideas, when they press for decisions, assume the form of political units: countries, peoples, or parties. They must be fought over not with words but with weapons.

Economic warfare becomes military warfare between countries or within countries. Religious associations such as Jewry and Islam, Huguenots and Mormons, constitute themselves as countries when it becomes a matter of their continued existence or their success. Everything that proceeds from the innermost soul to become flesh or fleshly creation demands a sacrifice of flesh in return. Ideas that have become blood demand blood.

War is the eternal pattern of higher human existence, and countries exist for war’s sake; they are signs of readiness for war. And even if a tired and blood-drained humanity desired to do away with war, like the citizens of the Classical world during its final centuries, like the Indians and Chinese of today, it would merely exchange its role of war-wager for that of the object about and with which others would wage war. Even if a Faustian universal harmony could be attained, masterful types on the order of late Roman, late Chinese, or late Egyptian Caesars would battle each other for this Empire—for the possession of it, if its final form were capitalistic; or for the highest rank in it, if it should become socialistic.

An inseparable element of any political pattern is, however, the people that has created this pattern, that bears it in its blood, that alone is capable of embodying it. Taken by itself, a political pattern is an empty concept. Anyone can speak its “language.” But no one can truly re-create it or imbue it with genuine reality. In politics as in other ways, there is no choice. Each culture and each single people within a culture arranges its affairs and fulfills its destiny according to patterns that are congenital and essentially immutable. A philosophical debate about “monarchy” or “republic” is really a quarrel about words. The monarchic form of government an sich is just as unreal a concept as the cloud form an sich. An ancient Classical “republic” and a Western European “republic” are two incommensurate things.

The ultimate meaning of great political crises is something other than a change in the form of government. When a crisis elicits the cry of “monarchy” or “republic” it is really nothing more than a cry, the verbal cue in a melodramatic scene, although it is the only thing most people in a given epoch can understand and be inspired by. In reality, following such ecstatic moments a people will always return to its own political pattern, the essential quality of which can almost never be expressed in popular language.

The instincts of a vigorous race are so strong that they can come to grips with any form of government that historical accident may put in their path, and mold it to their own purposes. And when this takes place no one is conscious that the political pattern in question has been realized in name only. The true political shape of any given country is not be found in the wording of its constitution; it is, rather, the unwritten and unconscious laws according to which the constitution is put into effect. Without reference to the particular nations under discussion, the words “republic,” “parliamentarism,” and “democracy” are meaningless.

Accordingly, the “parliamentary form of government” is a specifically English phenomenon, unthinkable except as the product of the Viking character of the English, their insular situation, and the centuries-long process by which they have combined a certain method of conducting business affairs with a whole social ethic. To attempt to imitate it is futile. “Parliamentarism” in Germany is either nonsense or treason. England has succeeded in poisoning all countries to which it has offered the “medicine” of its own form of government. And conversely: should the final development of Western civilization, i.e., the civilization that now rules the world as a whole, make this form of government impossible, England would surely lose its political viability as a nation. English socialism would commit treason if it tried to do away with Parliament. For England is a free society of private individuals, to whom insularity has offered the opportunity of abolishing the “state” and substituting for this purely formal idea a series of wars, lasting through 1916 and waged by soldiers and sailors hired away from foreign countries. This stateless parliamentarism presupposes a firm two-party system, in which the parties must be related to each other in a very special way with respect to organization, practice, interests, moods, customs, and spirit.

What the English call “parties”—the word means different things in different countries—were originally groupings of nobility, which became separated during the revolutions of 1642 and especially 1688 along lines of the Anglican and Puritan faiths. This means, of course, that the basic motive for their separation was a difference in ethical outlook. The nautical Norse ancestors, of whom we read in the Icelandic sagas, bequeathed different traits to each new group. The Tories inherited their pride in noble blood, their aristocratic respect for inherited authority, for landed property, for military feats and bloody conflict. In the Whigs we can discern the Norseman’s delight in piracy and plunder, his pursuit of quick and easy triumphs with abundant portable booty, and his esteem for cunning and cleverness rather than physical strength. Today’s English imperialist and free-tradesman is the end product of a centuries-long process during which these basic Norse traits have been sharpened and refined, thus resulting in an ever more careful breeding within the actual ruling class. The democratization of England in the nineteenth century was only apparent; in reality the nation continued to be led, as in Prussia, by a minority possessing unified, firm capabilities for practical action. The sublime exercise of this will and this practical talent continued right through to the end of the last war.

Business—in the piratical sense—is the sum and substance of this politics, no matter whether Tories or Whigs are the bosses at any given moment. Both types are, of course, “gentlemen” first and foremost, members of the same distinguished society, displaying the same admirable conformity of social attitudes. For this reason it is possible for Englishmen, though at times they may engage in bitter hostilities against each other, to settle momentous disputes by means of private conversation and private correspondence. Thus they are able to get many things done solely on the basis of the end justifying the means. In any other country such disputes would founder on the hubbub of clumsy, legalistic popular assemblies. The English party leader goes about his nation’s business as a private individual. When he meets with political success he declares that “England” was behind his policies. When his policies, though successful, involve dealings that are diplomatically or morally embarrassing, he resigns from his post, whereupon the nation admonishes him with puritanical severity for his lack of manners, and by applauding his resignation rejects the uncomfortable consequences of his actions. Yet all the while the nation thanks God for the grace He has bestowed on England by this politician’s successful work.

Such behavior is feasible only if both parties are of the same mind on essential issues. It is true that the Tories brought about Napoleon’s downfall and took him off to St. Helena after he had spread Whig ideas over the Continent. But Fox was not at all an unconditional opponent of war with Napoleon. And when in 1815 Robert Peel led Cobden’s free-trade system to final victory, thus preferring the economic subjugation of the world to its transformation into a military protectorate, the Tories readily recognized in the Whig system some of their own principles. Tory politics during the reign of Edward VII caused the World War; yet the Whigs, opponents of the war, accepted this possibility tacitly by welcoming “liberal imperialists” into their ranks.

This kind of activity is the true “parliamentarism,” and not the worthless and ineffective externals that are considered as “parliamentarism” in Germany today, such as the doling out of ministers’ portfolios to party leaders or the exposing of the parliamentary process to the widest publicity. In the British system, the final decisions of the party leaders are a secret even to the parliamentary majority. The publicly visible activities of the politicians are fable convenue, and the exemplary tact of both parties sees to it that the illusion of “government by the people” is rigorously upheld in reverse proportion to the actual meaningfulness of the term.

The idea that parties, above all English parties, are segments of the people at large is dilettantish nonsense. In reality there can be no such thing as popular government or government by the people, except in political units comprising a few villages. Only hopelessly liberal Germans still cling to this notion. In all places where English political systems have penetrated, the government actually lies in the hands of a very few men who, with dictatorial arbitrariness, exert their power within the party on the basis of their experience, their superior will, and their tactical skill.

The question therefore arises concerning the relationship between people and party. What meaning can elections have in the modern Western nations? Who does the electing? And whom or what does he elect? The sense of the English system is that the people elect a party, and not just a “representative” of its will and opinions, for these are more or less influenced by the party leadership in any case. The parties are very old and firmly established institutions, whose business it is to conduct the political affairs of the entire English nation. The individual Englishman realizes the practicality of such an institution, and from election to election he supports the party whose declared intentions correspond most closely to his own opinions and interests. He also realizes the unimportance of the individual “representative” appointed quite arbitrarily by the party. Indeed, the phrase “fatuous electorate” fits the average representative better than the voting mass itself. It is significant that English workers have quite often voted for an employer nominated by one of the age-old parties rather than for a workman candidate. In each case, after sober appraisal of the situation, they have regarded it as more advantageous to vote in this way. In America, where the genuine Englishman no longer stands behind the system, the custom now is for the parties to deliver one set of promises to the people, and another to the trust that fills the party coffers; the first set is published, the second is kept.

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We have now broached the decisive question of how the job of politics is paid for in countries that have the parliamentary form of government. The naïve democratic enthusiasts simply do not notice that in this day and age, when all nations, with or without their consent, are led by a politics of commercial interests, the question of finances is crucial, not to the spirit of the constitution but to the much more important spirit of its practical application. Guileless enthusiasts probably think in terms of representatives’ salaries, but that is an irrelevant matter. Whereas the monarchs of the Baroque age disposed of state income as they saw fit, modern political parties merely administrate and allocate these funds. This being the case, it is purely a question of expediency whether big business decides to mollify the electorate, the representatives, or the party leadership itself. The first of these alternatives fits the pattern of English parliamentarism, and in the eighteenth century was practiced in the grand style as vote purchasing. In the course of time this method has become superfluous. Tories and Whigs from upper-class groups having clearly defined social attitudes are now the spokesmen for purely commercial interests, and their sponsors differ only occasionally with respect to the most advantageous form and moral rationale for a particular undertaking. Interest groups once divided have gradually merged under the aegis of the democratized parties.

In anarchic France, where clubs and private associations of rapidly changing number and strength assume the names of parties, the custom has been to pay the representatives, either in cash or by subtler means. The socialist representatives are just as receptive to these techniques as all the others. Often enough, a Frenchman sets out on a political career with the certainty that after a few years he can buy a castle.

In Germany, where the parties approach the people with ideological programs, liberalism has had to do favors for the stock exchange, while heavy industry has gained control of the nationalistic wing. Heavy industry and the stock exchange pay for political agitation and also for a favorable press (partly through advertisement contracts). If the Weimar Constitution remains in effect even for just a few years, representatives’ posts favorable to certain commercial interests will be available for a set price. The very first elections for the Weimar Assembly revealed the beginnings of such practices.

That democracy and universal suffrage are reliable tools of capitalism has been proved in all countries that have adopted these methods on the English model. While the liberal professor hails the Constitution of Weimar as the fulfillment of his dreams, the capitalist liberal welcomes it as the simplest and probably cheapest way to subject politics to the business office and the state to the grafters.

All this characterizes the hegemony of the Viking spirit over Western civilization, which up to now has been largely English civilization. The form in which the essentially nontransferable parliamentarism of England has insisted itself upon the Continent and gradually the whole world is the “constitution.” It has made criticism of the existing government an integral part of government itself. But the stateless character of government that evolved within English society have given all new constitutions based on the English model a definite antistate tendency. The result has been, on the one hand, the creation of pseudo-parties that have vainly attempted the English technique of putting executive power in the hands of the party leadership. On the other hand an “opposition” has appeared on the scene, but it is a destructive rather than a constructive opposition because of the constant friction between the group in power and the party principle, or among the parties themselves as a result of their widely divergent conceptions of party privilege. Mirabeau, the cleverest mind in France at the time it surrendered to the Viking idea, would certainly, had he lived longer, have returned to absolutism in order to save his country from the pseudo-parliamentarism of the sovereign clubs. The word “intrigue” expresses quite fully the attitude assumed by the anarchic French, in place of the careful strategy of the English, to make such methods conform to their way of life. Consequently, the most practicable form of anarchy, instituted now and again in France to achieve amazing but ephemeral successes, has been a kind of despotism-of-the-moment. This is the case with Mazarin and Richelieu, and since 1789 it has been the secret goal of even the smallest political clubs. Its classic expression was the dictatorship of a foreign soldier, Napoleon.

Machiavelli, amid the confusion of Renaissance politics, put his hopes on Cesare Borgia to achieve something quite similar. Of all Western nations, France and Italy have not brought forth a single political idea. The state of Louis XIV, like Napoleon’s empire, was an isolated incident, not a durable system. As an organic form capable of development, the absolute monarchy of the Baroque age was a Hapsburg and not a Bourbon creation. From Philip II to Metternich, the house of Hapsburg set the style for the governmental practices of nearly all courts and cabinets; the court of the roi soleil made its impression solely by costume and ceremony. Proof of this is Napoleon’s very Renaissance-like bearing and appearance. Only in Florence and Paris was a successful military officers able to play such a non-traditional role and to institute such a fantastic and transitory type of state. In fact, there was no typical governmental system in France. Rousseau, the theoretician of political anarchy, derived his concept of the social contract from the firmly established “society” of England, which functioned politically with absolute instinctual confidence. The social contract idea ultimately required dictatorship as an occasional and arbitrary means of rescuing society from the confusion of individual wills. In the event of a revolution Napoleon could have become prime minister in England, field marshal in Prussia, and both at once in Spain—with full dictatorial power. Only in France and Italy is he conceivable in the costume of Charlemagne.

In Prussia, however, there existed a true state in the most exacting sense of the word. In Prussia there were, strictly speaking, no private individuals. Every single person who lived in this system, which functioned with the precision of a good machine, was an integral member of that system. For this reason the task of administration could not be assigned to private individuals, as the parliamentary system prescribes. Administration of public funds was an official function, and the politicians responsible for it were state officials, servants of the commonwealth. In England business and politics were synonymous; in France the swarm of professional politicians called into office by the constitution had become hirelings of the business interests. In Prussia the purely professional politician has always been a disreputable figure.

When, therefore, the democratization of government became unavoidable in the nineteenth century, the English pattern had to be shunned since it was contrary to the Prussian style. Here, democracy could not mean private freedom, for that was tantamount to commercial license and would have led to a form of private politics that would use the state as a tool. The knightly ideal of “all for all” underwent a modern reinterpretation—but not in the sense of forming parties that reached down to the masses every few years, giving them the privilege of either voting for a party-endorsed candidate or not voting at all, while the party itself, if it was in the “opposition,” reached upward to interfere with the work of government. Rather, the “all for all” principle took the form in Prussia of assigning to every individual, depending on his practical, moral, and intellectual abilities, a certain measure of command and obedience. That is to say, each citizen was allotted a very personal rank and degree of responsibility, and like an official post it was revocable.

This was the Rätesystem as planned a century ago by Baron von Stein. It was a genuinely Prussian idea, based on the principles of selectivity, co-responsibility, and professional loyalty. In the meantime, however, it has been forced in thoroughly Marxian fashion into the miasma of class egoism. Today it is an exact mirror-image of the picture drawn by Marx of the piratical English capitalist class, the Vikings who operated outside the limits of state control. It is a free-trade system, English through and through, but turned upside down: the working classes are now the “society.” That is Bentham, not Kant.

Stein and his Kantian advisers wished to organize the occupational groups. In a country where work should be the universal duty and the meaning of life itself, individuals will differ not in wealth but in accomplishment. Thus Stein envisioned local professional guilds, arranged according to the relative importance of each occupation in the society as a whole. He wanted a representative hierarchy, capped by the State Council; mandates at all levels were to be revocable at any time. His plans called for neither organized parties, career politicians, nor periodic elections. To be sure, Stein never expressed these thoughts; he might indeed have rejected them in this form. But they were tacitly present in the reforms he suggested. And they would have permitted a systematic democratization of the Prussian government in harmony with Prussian and not English or French instincts, guaranteeing at the same time that the appropriate personalities would be selected for work in the new system. Just as a machine needs a trained engineer to maintain it, a true state needs a State Council. The non-state, on the other hand, requires a privy council, composed of the various parties but constituted in similar fashion to the State Council. Each party must, of course, be prepared to have its own apparatus serve as the country’s governing body. England in fact possesses two “workers’ councils” or crown councils instead of one—that is the meaning of parliamentarism.[2] What the Prussian system required was a single council with a stable membership.

Instead, under the impression of Napoleonic events the admiration of English institutions became dominant. Hardenberg, Humboldt, and the others were “Englishmen.” They listened to Shaftesbury and Hume, and not to Kant. It was imperative that the reforms take place from within the Prussian system, but they were imposed in fact from the outside. All of the political frustration of the nineteenth century, all the boundless sterility of our parliamentary system, all the lack of manpower, ideas, and accomplishments, all the constant conflict between hostile factions and violent pressures, are the direct result of the imposition of a rigorous and humanly profound political system onto a people gifted for a completely different, if equally rigorous and profound, political order. In those areas where the Old Prussian talent for organization was put to the test in a large enough context—as in the creation of the syndicates and cartels, the trade unions, and in the field of social welfare—it more than proved its mettle.

The indifference that has greeted the elections and the debates on suffrage, despite the efforts of parties and press, shows how alien the parliamentary system is to the Prussian and, since 1870, the German people. When a Prussian or German has made use of his voting franchise it has quite often been merely his way of expressing a vague annoyance. In no other country have these election days à l’anglaise yielded such a false picture of actual political sentiment. The masses have never gotten used to this exotic technique of “cooperation,” and never will. When an Englishman fails to follow the proceedings of Parliament, he does so with the knowledge that that body will look after his best interests. When a German does likewise, he does so with a feeling of complete apathy. For him the only reality is die Regierung. With us, parliamentarism will always be a conglomeration of externals.

In England both parties had long been the sovereign initiators and leaders of policy. But in Prussia there existed a state, and the parties, founded for reasons of parliamentary protocol, became merely critics of the state, whereas in England the functions of the parties were a direct outgrowth of the actual configuration of the people as a commercial entity. In Prussia there was from the beginning a false relationship between the system that was intended and the one that already existed, between plan and effect, between the parties in theory and in practice. The opposition is a necessary and integral part of government in England; it performs a complementary function. Our opposition is truly a negation, of the government itself as well as of the other parties. The removal of the monarchy has not changed things a bit.

It is significant and characteristic of the strength of the national instinct that the two parties which can be called specifically Prussian, the Conservatives and the Socialists, have never lost their antiliberal and antiparliamentarian tendencies. They are both socialistic in a higher sense, and therefore they correspond quite closely to the two capitalistic parties in England. Recognizing neither private nor party interests as the leaders of government, they ascribe to the totality the unconditional authority, the leadership of the individual in the general interest. The fact that one of these parties speaks of the monarchic state while the other speaks of the working people proves to be only a verbal distinction when we consider that in our country everyone works, and that the will of the individual is subject at all times to the will of the totality. Both of these parties were, under the pressure of the English system, states within the state. According to their own convictions they were the state, and thus did not recognize the need for any other party to exist besides themselves. But this is quite enough to preclude parliamentary government. They did not deny their military predilections; they organized exclusive, well-disciplined battalions of voters, in which the Conservatives made better officers, the Socialists better troops. They were structured along lines of command and obedience, and that is the way they conceived of their state, the Hohenzollern state, and the state of the future. Freedom, in the “English” sense, prevailed neither in the one nor in the other state. Despite their truly parliamentary effectiveness they harbored a profound contempt for the English parliamentary attitude which accorded rank in society by measuring wealth. Both parties despised the Prussian system of suffrage with its frustrating hierarchy of rich and poor—the Conservatives perhaps less so, but they regarded it only as a tolerably effective means to an end. Yet they scorned any system of suffrage based on the English pattern, for they knew that it necessarily leads to plutocracy. Whoever is willing to pay for such a system can harvest its fruits.

Besides the Conservatives and the Socialists, Prussia also has had its Spanish-style Ultramontane party, the party whose spiritual tradition extends back to the age of Hapsburg hegemony and the territorial stipulations of the Peace of Westphalia. This party secretly worships Napoleon as the founder of the Rhenish Confederation. Its tactics are reminiscent of the masterly cabinet diplomacy of Madrid and Vienna. With the mature shrewdness of the Counter-Reformation it has succeeded in harnessing democratic tendencies and parliamentary procedures for its own purposes. It despises nothing—in fact, it is able to gain a little something from every eventuality. And one must not forget the socialist training and discipline of the Spanish spirit, which like the Prussian originated in the knightly orders of the Gothic period and which, even earlier than the Prussians, had epitomized a universal principle in the phrase “Throne and Altar.”

Germany’s spiritual Englishness eventually constituted itself as a party dedicated to promulgating parliamentarism with the fervor of a Weltanschauung, as a Prinzip, an Idée, as a Ding an sich. For these people Napoleon was the emissary of libertarian ideals. They have mustered up “ethical convictions” at times when the English would exercise their talent and experience. Their symbol is the political “standpoint.” When three liberals get together they form a new party; that is their idea of individualism. They never join a bowling club without introducing as part of the “agenda” an “amendment of the statutes.” Because a stateless order of public affairs prevails in England, they are enraged at every authoritarian act of government. Even the authoritarian aims of socialism make them shudder.

This bürgerliche outlook is a specifically German phenomenon. One should not have mistaken it for the French bourgeoisie or, even less, for the English middle-class. The grand style of English liberalism fits it poorly. Quod licet Jovi non licet bovi [What is permitted to Jove is not pemitted to cattle]. Beneath the Bratenrock of the German liberal is a heart that still beats to the languid rhythm of the old Reich, and a soul that deplores the realities of modern civilization. These bookish liberals pile up mountains of literature about “transcendency” and “ideality” (something different in every book) that claims to interpret keenly realistic English ideas. Without the English ideas, of course, these people would be defenseless against truly Prussian ideals, which are just as keen and just as unromantic. They are incapable of organization and therefore politically innocuous in themselves, but they have been mobilized into a militant party by the other caste of German liberals, the group that has taken over from the English one of their ideals without comprehending the fundamental importance it has in the English scheme of things: the economic dictatorship of private wealth. Our “English” liberals have made of their party a murderous opposition that slowly undermines and enervates wherever and whenever the Prussian socialist idea stands in the way of all-powerful business. And finally, it was this brand of liberalism that mobilized the “inner England” of our majority-worshiping parties to perpetrate the parliamentary revolution of 1917, thus assuring victory for “outer England,” the Allied powers, by deposing the state itself.

Our liberals demand pure parliamentarism, not because they desire a free state but because they want no state at all, and because they are just as aware as their English counterparts that this foreign cloak can make a socialistically gifted people incapable of action. The “supranational” cosmopolitanism of the German Michel appeals to them. While they may ridicule it as a political goal, they know its value as a political means. They willingly grant the cosmopolitan professors their academic chairs and “cultural” newspaper columns, and encourage parliamentary dilettantes to engage in politics on the editorial pages and in the assembly halls. With this pair in harness they are assiduously driving their political carriage toward perfect Englishness. In the German Revolution socialism suffered its bitterest defeat; its opponents forced it to turn its own weapons on itself.

In spite of all this, the two great universal principles continue to oppose each other: dictatorship of money or of organizational talent, the world as booty or as a true state, wealth or political authority, success or vocation. Both of Germany’s socialistic parties must unite against the one enemy of the idea that they share: our inner England, capitalism and parliamentary liberalism.

Socialist monarchy[3]—that is an idea that has slowly matured in the Faustian world and has long since reared its proper human protagonists. Authoritative socialism is by definition monarchistic. The most responsible position in this gigantic organism, in Frederick the Great’s words the role of “first servant of the state,” must not be abandoned to ambitious privateers. Let us envision a unified nation in which everyone is assigned his place according to his socialistic rank, his talent for voluntary self-discipline based on inner conviction, his organizational abilities, his work potential, consciousness, and energy, his intelligent willingness to serve the common cause. Let us plan for general work conscription, resulting in occupational guilds that will administrate and at the same time be guided by an administrative council, and not by a parliament. A fitting name for this administrative body, in a state were everyone has a job, be it army officer, civil servant, farmer, or miner, might well be “labor council.”

Counter to this idea is the vision of a capitalistic World Republic. For England is a “republic,” although today the word means government by the successful private individual who can pay for his election and therefore also for his influence. The World Republicans dream of the earth as a hunting ground for those who want to get rich and who demand for themselves the right to engage in hand-to-hand combat. Eventually the Tories and Whigs, the two capitalist parties, will band together against the “inner Prussia” of socialism, which in England cannot even claim the undivided support of the workers—work being, of course, a misfortune in the British Isles. This means that the parliamentary system will undergo a structural change, for it cannot function with three parties. In early England it was rich against rich, one philosophy against another within the upper class. Now it will be rich against poor, England against something else.

But that is the same as saying that parliamentarism as a political scheme is worn out; of this there can be no doubt. It was already in decline when German fools brought it over here. Its best era was before Bismarck. It was an old, mature, distinguished, highly refined method, and to master it completely required all the tact of the aristocratic English “gentleman.” It required fundamental agreement on a sufficient number of problems to ensure that “politeness” would not be endangered. The protocol of parliamentary debate resembled that of a duel between noblemen. Like the music of the period between Bach and Beethoven, it was based on the perfect mastery of formal principles. As soon as this formalism was abandoned the music became barbaric. Today no one is able to dash off an old-style fugue as could the classical composers. So it is also with the fugue-like form of parliamentary tactics. Coarser people, coarser questions—and it is all over. The duel becomes a brawl. The institutions, the sense of tact and cautious observance of the amenities, are dying out with the old-style people of good breeding. The new parliamentarism will present the struggle for existence with barely civilized manners and with much poorer success. The relationship between party leaders and party, between party and masses, will be tougher, more transparent, and more brazen. That is the beginning of Caesarism.[4] Hints of its arrival were present in the English elections of 1918. Nor shall we German escape it either. It is our destiny, just as it was the destiny of Rome and China, indeed of all mature cultures. But—billionaires or generals, bankers or civil servants of the highest quality? That is the eternal question.

Notes

[1] The Decline of the West, vol. 2, pp. 361 ff., pp. 416 ff.

[2] The electorate does not have the slightest influence on the composition of either of the councils. It only chooses which of them is to do the governing.

[3] It was Ferdinand Lassalle who, in 1862, in his book Was nun?, called for a union of labor and the Prussian monarchy to do battle against liberalism and the English “nightwatchman” theory of the weak state.

[4] The Decline of the West, vol. 2, 431 ff.