Freedom Forgotten and Remembered

Follow this and additional works at: http://utdr.toledo.edu/ur-87-68
the same time a re-education of the German and Italian youths is envisaged as one of the tasks involved in the future reconstruction of our civilization. This again impresses us as very reasonable. But as ours is a fight for democracy, we cannot well dismiss from our minds the just-mentioned principle of the democratic faith. No more flagrant interference with a nation's domestic life could be imagined than the contemplated work of re-education. How, then, shall we reconcile this imperative peace aim with the great principle of national self-determination solemnly reaffirmed by the Atlantic Charter?

* * *

Only the meaningless adversity is utterly crushing and demoralizing. It would be a meaningless catastrophe for Germany and Italy to be defeated by superior resources rather than by men who believe in the freedom for which they fight. We must hope that the despondency of politicians will not belie the valor of the fighting men. Only a true victory may prompt the enemy to acquiesce, morally and not merely factually, in the defeat as final and decisive. And if the victory is to be a victory of freedom, it must hold a message of reconciliation also for the enemy. He will need time to recover and to rejoin, by an act of his own will, the community of Western Civilization. In the meantime, it will be incumbent on the victorious powers to make this civilization worth being joined.

Excerpts from
FREEDOM FORGOTTEN AND REMEMBERED
266 PAGES. $2.50

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS
CHAPEL HILL, N. C.
STATEMENT FROM THE PUBLISHER

The book from which the excerpts on the following pages are taken is not easy reading. It will be difficult, if not impossible, reading for those who have been living on intellectual pap. But neither is freedom easy, either to get or to keep or to understand.

In issuing this book the publisher is not merely performing his usual function. He is doing something more. He is protesting against the popular, all-pervasive doctrine of the easily acquired freedom. According to the general view, all we have to do is want freedom, and if we fight for it we'll have it. Already we have forgotten that only a few years ago we wanted peace and thought we could get peace merely by wanting it and by refusing to fight. Now we have resolved we will never make that mistake again—and we probably won't; but we haven't yet realized there are a thousand, maybe a million, other mistakes we can make to everyone right thing that we can do.

What has happened to the art of thinking? We have been taught to say "give us the facts, the facts, the facts alone." And, accordingly, we have vast accumulations of facts. Fifty years or so ago, somehow, nobody really knows how, evolution and progress flowed from the facts, and then one kind of determinism after another—but understanding? Few were concerned about that. And while we today begin to argue whether politics is superior to economics, or whether both are determined by geography or race or something else, we keep our ears glued to our radios in testimony that, whether we admit it or not, we now realize Mars also can do some determining.

Here at last is a book that is directed toward cultivation of understanding.

Freedom Forgotten and Remembered is being published (May 29) in the belief that there is a public interested in and capable of understanding freedom. This book, if given a chance, will help toward that understanding.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

APRIL 15, 1943

SOME EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK

It is not enough to win. If the United Nations should finally crush the Axis powers by the sheer weight of their superior material resources, and if then, giving credit for their success to whom it would chiefly belong, to steel, coal, oil, and the goddess quantity, they would stumble on some sort of international agreement permitting us, for a couple of years, to reconvert tank factories to automobile production—would this be a victory worth its price?

The question of victory must be posed in different terms. The coming peace will not make the world safe for democracy (there is no safety in this world), but it should make democracy live. The question is whether the victory over the Axis powers might become the victory of an idea, in the sense that this idea, which already had begun to fade from the mind, be recaptured through the sacrificial effort of the war. Can faith in a cause be rekindled by a fight for it, into which the faint-hearted believer was pressed? Can the defensive war of democracy become its redemption and the reaffirmation of its creativeness? Then victory would be worth its name and peace something better than a cessation of hostilities.

* * *

Who has ever seen a prophet, genuine or faked, throwing the floor open for a discussion of his message?
Pearl Harbor, when remembered with self-righteous indignation rather than with a searching mind that has felt the sting of remorse, may entice us into a false self-assurance. We may come to feel that we know, whereas we actually deserted the lesson before benefiting from it. Interpreted in the light of the oversimplified Pearl Harbor, the war appears as the clash between empires or groups of empires, aggressors and defenders. Little meaning would be found in such a war. It could appeal only to the spirit of national self-assertion—the very spirit whose savage offspring we fight when we fight Hitlerism.

* * *

No amount of war-time regulations can inadvertently issue in totalitarianism. The act by which a nation renounces its freedom is by its nature catastrophic, abrupt, the product of a crisis. Those who anticipate, with fear and terror, England or America sliding, gradually and imperceptibly, into dictatorship, are frightened by a miscarriage of their own imagination. England and America will turn to dictatorship the moment when the two peoples decide to do so, not sooner and not later; and if they make this decision, the only reason prompting them will be the desire to rid themselves of freedom—of that freedom which is not the stock-broker's freedom to buy and sell the shares he pleases, or the freedom of using up any number of automobile tires, or even the freedom of publicizing every startling idea that passes through our mind. The freedom that goes down under a dictatorship is not lost by inadvertence.

Generally speaking, the external similarity between the indigenous regimentation in totalitarian states on the one hand, and the temporary regimentation imposed on democracies by an emergency on the other, has been greatly exaggerated. What life under a dictatorship means is unimaginable to people accustomed to democratic ways.

* * *

The blueprint for dictatorial policy should not have been a secret. Its principles had been enunciated and its chief stages marked by the founders of political science, Plato and Aristotle. The modern observer finds little to add to their clairvoyant account.

* * *

While we develop into master mechanics and inventors of ever subtler techniques, the grand premises of all our problems and solutions, including those of a mechanical nature, may either recede into the picturesque dusk of half-knowledge or become desecrated in the garish light of sophistry.

* * *

Positivism is the philosophy of the easily acquired freedom.

* * *

Positivism taught: “Science gives us mastery over facts and solves our problems.” And again practical life appeared to bear witness to the soundness of this view. There was still poverty; but economists and sociologists were about to lay out the plan of a new social order and
a more equitable distribution of commodities. There were still diseases; but medical science was gradually hedging in their sway, and even death might be delayed. There was still the anxiety of a guilty conscience, but psychiatrists and psychoanalysts scientifically battled against inhibitions, frustrations, and the like. Facts were companionable, human misery was incidental, scientific technique the panacea. The philosophers of the past almost unanimously disagreed. But what was their disagreement to the truly modern mind?

* * *

The horrors we witness in Nazi Germany are conclusions drawn from one great premise, nothing else. We must aim at this premise when we formulate our objection.

* * *

Not the massacres of women and children, the destruction and pillage of homes, or the torture of prisoners should make us shudder. The real objection of dismay is the error which, if it strike roots in the mind, perverts the heart. In it all those and untold other calamities are involved.

* * *

The popular anti-Nazi propaganda which draws on atrocity stories is a two-edged sword. By arousing vindictive instincts, it may propagate the very feelings which it is designed to combat.
Obscurantism, finding the church an unprofitable place, moved to new living quarters. It seized upon the subversive doctrines of man, dressed them up with shreds and shards collected in the backyards of the natural sciences and foisted them upon gullible students as "scientific" sociology, psychology, pedagogy. Those boldest in the sorry labor of "debunking" were acclaimed as most liberal. Moral anarchy, the world was informed, favors the growth of democracy, compromise is the last word of political wisdom, something can be made of nothing, and freedom is everyone's right to perish in his own intellectual and moral muddle.

* * *

The worshipper of the machine-man and his Brave New World quarrels with Hitler, but his is a quarrel with a more successful rival and partisan. He should rather recognize himself in Hitler—and his own condemnation.

* * *

The impertinence of the disabused intellect posed as humility: "We do not arrogate to ourselves the possession of truth." Thus sophists obscured the fact that, in this case, quest is the only title to ownership and that we are truly humbled only by truth, espied and yet unmastered. They smothered the authentic pathos of research which speaks in the vein of that prayer once offered by a mariner of Brittany: "Help me, my God, my boat is so small and Thy ocean so wide."

* * *

We examine the stuff of which this philosophy is made and we must think: dynamite to blow up civilization.

Like the Marxists, the admirers of fascist economy believed—though most of them with a merely implicit belief—in economy as the god of our era.

* * *

One may look up contemporaneous issues of the London Times or other representative papers appraising the Hitler Movement after its advent to power. The scrutiny will show that the class here referred to as "respectable" is an international institution. Its reactions to major political events were remarkably uniform. The world-wide success of the fabricated legend according to which Hitler restored a cringing and abject nation to self-respect and a sense of honor is another evidence of the power wielded by this group.

* * *

A liar, so an old story goes, walked under the blazing midday sun, through the deserted streets of a small town. Doors were shut, blinds down, and the walls echoed his footfall. Then an idea occurred to him. He banged with his fist at the first door and shouted: "The sea monster is in the bay. Come, see the sea monster," and so from door to door. When he had finished his round, the whole place was awake, and men and women, old and young, a shouting, agitated, hustling multitude, hurried to the near-by shore: "The sea monster, come, see the sea monster!" The liar, erect in the middle of the again deserted street, stared after them, speechless, fascinated. An irresistible power stirred in his mind, and all of a sudden he felt his legs moving under him, saw himself breathlessly scurrying off to catch up with
the crowd and heard his excited voice shouting in the chorus: "The sea monster, come, see the sea monster!"

The radio announcer who, as a result of advertising the virtues of Pilsen Beer day after day, finally takes to beer-drinking, has not yet been heard of. The advertising propagandist seeks victims without ever being victimized by his superlatives. But there is a propaganda to which the propagandist himself succumbs, thereby making it the more effective.

* * *

Hitler promised and gave bread only incidentally. As the true tempter, he enthralled the consciences. Good or evil, he gave a purpose. The democratic governments acted as if there was a purpose, accepted and rooted in the minds of the peoples, and as if there was no need for the authorities to trouble themselves about it.

* * *

In a very well received address, a summary of popular errors, a speaker recently said on the war: "War is destruction. We are devoted to construction. War is a dirty business, but it has got to be done. After we are through with it, we shall forget all about it and return to constructive labor. But it will take us fifty years to reach again the point where we had been when the war started." Hearing this we remembered that America, once before, decided to forget all about a war and declined to take her share in the responsibilities of the peace, thereby hastening the outbreak of another war. Taking the speaker's hint, we would fight the war with our left hand, not letting the right know about it. We might as well offer both hands to the manacles held in readiness by the enemy. But the chief point made by the speaker was the neat distinction between constructive and destructive activities. He spoke in the name of all those who never outgrow intellectual adolescence. It pleases the incurable sophomore to take a good, robust distinction, abstracted from shoemaking and house building, into a field "where angels fear to tread," thrusting upon the mind that which is not of the mind. The illiterate backwoodsman, using his proverbial manner of speech, knows more about human life and the things which "kill or cure." The benighted lay preacher of a widely superstitious sect is less divorced from reality, for he reads and believes that we receive strength "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling."

* * *

Democracy, as its record shows, may be as predatory, aggressive, and hostile to individual freedom as the worst of tyrannies. The successful demagogue may pursue a policy as contrary to the common interest as any despot relying on army and bodyguard for the maintenance of his rule. The enfranchisement of the masses is in itself no guarantee for liberty. The masses may desire not to be free.

* * *

A government may be termed "democratic" insofar as it rules with the free consent of a majority. But what if the consent is fabricated by propaganda? This is a novel problem. Nobody thought it could be done until it actually was done. Once the popular assent can be
produced at will by the government, the old straightforward distinction between democracy and tyranny, freedom and serfdom proves inadequate. This is a cause of great perplexity. If we shirk this problem, it may overtake us when we are least prepared to tackle it and then weaken our resolve. It may seize hold of us as the paralyzing doubt whether this war is not actually another clash of rivaling nationalisms, or of the haves and have-nots rather than what we believe it is: a fight for liberty. It is necessary to face the puzzle and to offer ourselves to the intellectual test of our faith. Even Hitler may become useful if he compels us to think. His destruction of liberty may be turned into a lesson in liberty—an act of recollection. The attempt to extinguish freedom in the human conscience may teach us where alone it can be found and rekindled.

* * *

The disturbing problem lay in the power which the fascist leaders wielded over the mind of their nations. Democracy was wont to have its sails swelled by the strong winds of the time. It believes in popular support and needs it. If dictatorship becomes popular, is then dictatorship democratic?

* * *

In a democracy, the critic is not invited to fight for a perfect state in whose existence he is unable to believe. But he is allowed to fight for the possibility of making, through his criticism, an existing democracy less imperfect.

* * *

Hitler took the freedom, and the freedom was given up. There was much violence and coercion in the taking, but also much enthusiasm and passive submission in the giving up. Outside the dictatorial states and the subjugated countries of Europe, many covet the opportunity for a similar surrender; and there is an infinitely large number of those who would acquiesce in it. In fact there is not one who, with absolute certitude, could say of himself that he is not among the potential conformists. Even those who are eager to lay down their lives for freedom as long as it is a great public cause and the rallying cry of a nation, might succumb to the subtler temptations that, finding us in our privacy, break our wills by confusing our minds.

* * *

It was not absolutely necessary for the Nazi Movement to consider the Jew as the archenemy. But it was absolutely necessary to have an archenemy, and the Jew was best fitted to fill this place.

* * *

When the seizure of power and the great about-face of 1933 occurred, people of the most fastidious intellectual habits held in readiness a philosophical justification of what had happened. . . . They conferred on a primitive belief the semblance of intellectual respectability, covering, as it were, the brown-shirt with the academic robe.

* * *

The fascist movement both in Germany and Italy was largely carried forward by youth, with high-school boys and college students converting their reluctant parents to the new gospel. At the same time the youth of England and America assumed an attitude of sceptical aloofness, very anxious not to be captivated by what they
considered the outworn phraseology of their elders. “We don't want to be fooled.” Wary of propaganda lies, they prided themselves on their intellectual independence and refused to make up their minds. In the meantime they professed distrust of every word publicly spoken, of every view confidently affirmed. But scepticism is good only if used with discrimination, and everybody, in the end, has to make up his mind. The young sceptics, fearful of small lies, inadvertently prepared themselves for being victimized by the great lie. “So far our teachers have not yet succeeded in making clear to us the advantages of democratic rule over dictatorship.” Sentences like this were frequently found in college newspapers as late as 1941; and undergraduates decided by vote that Hitler was the greatest living man.

Everybody may falter. There is none who can be sure of himself. This holds true both of individuals and of nations. The errors of the narrow and timid mind go unnoticed; but the fall of the great shakes a world.

It has been said that the Allies knew how to win the war but not the peace. It is also true that Germany, defeated, did not know how to take the defeat.

If he should defeat the Allies (and as long as his army is in the field, this possibility, however remote, can not be entirely discounted), his police undoubtedly would enforce universal recognition and worship of Adolf Cosmocrator. But the real danger consists in the fact that the dead lion may prove more terrible than the live dog. The war may stimulate an extreme nationalism in the victorious peoples which rose to do battle against it, and the evil seed may come to a belated but all the more baleful harvest.

“You give your all to your country? Why? Just because it happens to be your country? Or because it stands for that which is above all countries?” The answer is obvious. According to a true philosophy of the state, only one who is more than a citizen is a good citizen.

“As far as I am concerned, the Nazis and the Bolsheviks may devour each other,” some one whispers into his neighbor’s ear. His pious wish will not come true, but meanwhile he has done a good turn to Hitler.

Time and again we have been told that we should not interfere in the domestic affairs of any other nation. We religiously observed this rule. In point of fact, it seemed safer to do so. We were in the fortunate position of one who is allowed to follow the line of least resistance with a clear conscience. Every people, we were informed, should be free to choose any form of government. No nation should be forced into freedom. These principles were endorsed with just approval. The pity of it was that they did not go very far in meeting the problem of the actual situation. Now the death struggle between the totalitarian states and the democracies is on. We now hear that Hitlerism and Fascism must be destroyed, but not the German or the Italian people. At