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From Anti-Enlightenment to Fascism and Nazism: Reflections on the Road to Genocide

The purpose of this short presentation is a reflection on the road to the Holocaust and on the universal aspects of Genocide. It is a reflection on the consequences of two centuries of war against the Enlightenment, the rights of man, the idea of equality, it is a reflection on the 20th century European catastrophe and ultimately on the culture of our time.

First of all let me make clear that despite the fact that the Great War is more and more commonly seen as the end of the 19th century and the matrix of the 20th century, the 20th century I am referring to came into being with the intellectual, scientific and technological revolution that preceded August 1914 by 30 years. The turn of the 20th century was one of the most fascinating and most revolutionary periods in modern history: the technological revolution, while transforming the face of the continent, greatly changed the nature of existence. From our perspective today it is important to understand how deeply the scientific revolution overturned the view men had of themselves and of the universe they inhabited. A real intellectual revolution prepared the convulsions which were soon to produce the European disaster of the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, right in the midst of a period of unprecedented scientific and technological progress, the rejection of Enlightenment's humanism, of rationalism, universalism and the idea of the rights of man reached a point of culmination and was followed by a similar rejection of the Christian vision of man.

That was the moment when Fascist and Nazi ideologies were born. Here I have to insist on the fact that on the one hand Fascism cannot be identified with the Nazi biological determinism, but on the other hand the two ideologies, the two movements

and the two regimes have common characteristics and the rise of Nazism cannot be isolated from the rise of other revolutionary movements devoted to the destruction of human rights and other universal values. That is how the fascist impregnation is to be explained: the extreme right, the pre-fascist and already fully fascist right was the direct product of this crisis of civilization on an unprecedented scale. No anti – Jewish policy, no racial laws either in Nazi Germany, in Fascist Italy in 1938 or in Vichy France in 1940 can be explained without the attraction of the different varieties of fascism for both uneducated strata of the population and for some of the greatest figures in the intellectual life of the 20th century.

Here certain basic questions must be asked: has this fascination with fascism something to teach us about our civilization, or can one say, on the contrary, that fascism was no more than a simple parenthesis in the history of our time? Is it reasonable to suggest, as many people still do, that Fascism and Nazism were isolated, incidental phenomena, detached from their general, cultural context, an unfortunate accident which happened after 1918, phenomena strictly limited to the inter-war period, linked to economic catastrophe, unemployment and depression, born in 1918 and dead in 1945? Was Nazism simply a shadow cast by Marxism, a defensive reaction to communism, a vague imitation of Stalinism, as some prominent historians still maintain?

Such an explanation is an easy one, probably too easy. The marginalization of Fascism and Nazism, the apologetic interpretation of events constitute the easy path and those who choose it are spared the need to answer many perplexing questions. Indeed, in order to understand how a murderous machine like the Nazi regime could come into being, we have to ask ourselves how a political culture that sought to rescue Europe from the heritage of the Enlightenment could emerge. Which brings us to some fundamental questions: what is the final objective of all social and political action? What is the nature of the relationship between the individual and the collectivity, and thus, what is the basis of political legitimacy? What is the real basis of collective existence? What constitutes a nation?

To these questions, there are many answers, but, when they are reduced to their essence, these answers belong to two basic categories. There is the answer deriving from the tradition of the Enlightenment and there is the answer rooted in an appeal to all that divides men – history, culture, language, ethnicity – as against that which unites them: their condition as rational individuals with natural rights.

Let us take an example. According to the monumental 18th century *Encyclopédie*, published almost half a century before the French Revolution, the definition of the nation holds in two lines: “une quantité considérable de peuple, qui habite une certaine étendue de pays, renfermée dans de certaines limites, et qui obéit au même gouvernement.”

Not a word on history, culture, language, religion, ethnicity. This political, judicial, vision of the collectivity, did not survive the first years of the French Revolution. It was swept away by the revolt against the Enlightenment, reinforced by the European War. But this conception of the nation represents the heroic attempt of the thinkers of the Enlightenment to overcome the resistances of history and culture and affirm once more the autonomy of the individual. It is often said that nationalism grew out of the French Revolution, but the opposite is true. The Revolution was possible because the nation was already a reality and the transference of sovereignty could take place in a natural way. But the writers of the *Encyclopédie* wanted the nation to be conceived as a collection of individuals: they did not wish history and culture to make man prisoner of any kind of determinism. This was the birth of rationalist modernity.

Let us turn now to the answer provided by the anti – Enlightenment tradition. Since Edmund Burke in England and Johan Gottfried Herder in Germany at the end of the 18th century, to the 1920's and 1930's, society, which means the nation, was considered as a living organism, not a collection of individuals, it had a soul, and this soul was both a natural phenomenon and entirely individual. All cultures were organic and unique totalities, with unique and inimitable languages, values, traditions, institutions, customs. All values, therefore, were individual and historical: as such they were relative values. The Herderian idea that there is a national “essence” whose purity has to be protected and whose special character has to be promoted was fundamental to the whole of the revolutionary right in the first half of the 20th

century. The political conclusion all the anti – Enlightenment thinkers drew from the Herderian conception of history and culture, is first that one cannot enter a family in the way in which one buys a share on the stock-exchange and second, talking about universal values is pure nonsense.

It follows that people who are the product of the same historical and cultural heritage possess a mentality which is unique of its kind. They have a "character" – and this notion of a variety of national characters inevitably destroyed the idea of a universal human nature based on reason. Thus, there are natural collectivities on the one hand, and artificial ones on the other. A community of citizens, a society based on the adherence to the Constitution or simply on some utilitarian principles, must necessarily be artificial and being no more than a legal fiction, is consequently inferior. Since then, various forms of discrimination, exclusion, segregation, became possible and normal. At the end of it, the final solution became possible too.

However, as long as the attack on the Enlightenment had not descended from the cultural heights into the public arena, the political significance of organic nationalism was limited. The change came at the turn of the past century with the translation of these attitudes into the truly popular, revolutionary terms of the nationalism of *Blut und Boden* or of *la Terre et les Morts*, its French equivalent. On the street level that was the job done by social-Darwinists and anti-semites. That is how the explanation of history first in cultural and then in racial terms became a war-machine against the rights of men in general and Jews in particular.

Social – Darwinism constituted in itself a turning point: Let us listen to Georges Vacher de Lapouge, one of the major social Darwinists of the turn of the century. In my view in order to understand Auschwitz, reading Vacher de Lapouge is much more significant and has a much greater explanatory power than consulting statistics of unemployment and cost of living in Germany after 1929.

"Tout homme est apparenté à tous les hommes et à tous les êtres vivants. Il n'y a pas de droits de l'homme, pas plus que de droits du tatou à trios bandes, ou du gibbon syndactitile que du cheval qui s'attelle ou du bœuf qui se mange. L'homme perdant

son privilege d'être à part, à l'image de Dieu, n'a pas plus de droits que tout autre mammifère. L'idée même de droit est une fiction".

In such a general context, anti-semitism has become a European problem. The centrality of antisemitism resided in its role in the struggle against the Enlightenment: antisemitism was an integral part of the intellectual revolution of the turn of the century. It was not as such, a necessary precondition for the growth of fascism. It was almost unknown in Italy at the turn of the century, in Spain or in Portugal, but it played a role of prime importance in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and what is still more significant, in France. Throughout the nineteenth century, the emancipation of the Jews by the French Revolution was the very symbol of the Enlightenment. There was consequently no better way of signifying the death of the values of the Enlightenment than by casting the Jews, whose very capacity to survive in Europe depended on the fate of liberalism, out of the national community. The Jews were the only group of people who could not survive in a volkisch environment. They could survive, as indeed they did, in the ghettos of the Old Regime and they could survive in an open, liberal society. For Jews in Europe, considered more and more as strangers in a continent to which they belonged since the time of the Roman Empire, there was no third way.

All over Europe people were discovering what was considered an absolute truth: the nation was a tribe, citizenship was a fiction, only people of the same blood could participate in the same cultural heritage : nothing could bring it to pass that the heart, mind and spirit of a Jew could become the heart, mind and spirit of a Frenchman or a German. Anyone can acquire a French or German passport, but not anyone is a Frenchman or a German. Antisemitism, as Charles Maurras pointed out, was a methodological necessity in the long campaign against universal values. Jews, whose fate depended on the rights of men and the principles of 1789, became more and more perceived as the true originators of liberalism, democracy and socialism : were they not the only true beneficiaries of ideologies and regimes in which so many people started to discover a mortal danger for the unity of the fatherland? Were they not the greatest enemies of the nation?

I would finally like to say a few words about the relationship between political, national and human rights:

In her well – known work on totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt has returned to the concept of Edmund Burke's "rights of Englishmen," as opposed to the French Revolution's "rights of man", and she gave us a text which is interesting in more than one respect: "The pragmatic soundness of Burke's concept seems to be beyond doubt in the light of our manifold experience. Not only did loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights; the restoration of human rights, as the recent example of the State of Israel proves, has been achieved so far through the restoration or the establishment of national rights ... The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human."

If Arendt means that the experience of the twentieth century teaches us that the protection of an established national community is always a more effective guarantee for the individual than his quality of being human, she is right. But she is wrong if she says that the Jews were exterminated because, after having been stripped of their political rights, they had only the "abstract nakedness of being human" : Jews went to Auschwitz precisely because the Nazis denied their quality of being human. European Jews were emancipated by the French Revolution because of their abstract natural rights and were exterminated on account of the very concrete quality of their being members of a well – defined community, in accordance with the hereditary principles extolled by Burke and all the conservatives as the sole source of dignity and security, being the only form of definition to have an existential validity. In other words: whether the son or grandson or great-grandson of a Jew, the Jew was not a victim of the abstract character of his humanity but of the very concrete quality of his heredity. There was no place for the Jews in a world in which, in the course of the long struggle against the emancipatory work of the Enlightenment, the idea of a human nature common to all men in all times, the idea of natural rights valid throughout the ages - an idea which came down to us from the Jewish, Greek and Roman Antiquity and early Christianity - had disappeared.

The abdication of reason and eruptions of irrationality, the destruction of the idea of the unity of human race are the evils the Enlightenment fought against and these evils were not born in the trenches of the First World War and did not die in Hitler's bunker. Whatever we imagine their future to be, these evils are still part of our world. This is something that should never be forgotten, certainly not on 27 January. It also should not be forgotten that human beings are capable of the best as well as of the worst. No society, no period of history is immune to the temptation of the worst. If there is a lesson we can learn from the history of the last two centuries, it is that men and women are capable of moving forward only as long as they rely on reason and believe in a common human nature and the absolute value of universal principles.

