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The Sociology of National Socialism: On the Lecture by German Sociologist Rainer M. Lepsius from 1983

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Opinion

The text to be presented here makes for fascinating reading: the lecture by German sociologist Marion Rainer Lepsius [1] (1928-2014) on the "Sociology of National Socialism". It was delivered in 1983 at the University of Heidelberg, and now, over 40 years later, it has been edited by Tilman Allert and Maurizio Bach. This book is fascinating because, although much has already been written about the Nazi era, National Socialism has never before been analyzed with such consistency from a sociological perspective-specifically, from the perspective of the sociologist Max Weber. The book is divided into ten chapters. It begins with a statement of the author's intent, the "program of the lecture": a strictly sociological analysis of National Socialism as the "most severe and bitter attack on modernity" (19). This is followed by a chapter in which fundamental concepts are clarified. Here it becomes clear that Lepsius conceives of National Socialism as a variant of totalitarianism, the claim to power of which is unlimited-as a "right-wing variant of totalitarianism" (34), as fascism, for which, in the German version, anti-Semitism was the "constitutive essential characteristic" (35).

In the third chapter, Lepsius then analyzes, with admirable conciseness and clarity, how Hitler became the man he ultimately was, and justifies his focus on Hitler's socialization by pointing to the personalization of power. Under National Socialism, this had gone so far that, with regard to certain characteristics of the regime, the question arises as to whether they should be attributed to Hitler as a person or to the structure of the system. This personalization, characteristic of fascist regimes, is the reason why such regimes rarely survived the lifetime of their founders. It complicates or prevents an institutional solution to the problem of succession. Lepsius examines three phases of Hitler's biography: 1. Childhood and youth. During this phase, Hitler's primary goal was self-realization. 2. His time in Vienna. This period was formative for Hitler in that it was during this time that essential elements of his thinking took shape: his anti-Semitism, his anti-modernism, his anti-Marxism, and his anti-liberalism. 3. His time in Munich. During this period, Hitler served in the military, among other roles, as a messenger. It was here that he internalized the model of behaviour that would later shape his leadership style-namely, issuing orders in emergency situations while appealing to the individual morality of the recipient. Furthermore, it is said that during this time Hitler came across that "regulars' table club" (50)-the DAP, which was later renamed the NSDAP-which became the starting point for his mobilization.

In the chapter that follows, the author identifies the crisis situation that was developing in Germany at the time: the "collapse of the economic order" (61) and the "collapse of the political order." Uncertainty regarding individual lifestyles increased significantly, partly because there was a lack of interpretive frameworks that could have explained them. In this situation, according to Lepsius, Hitler presented himself as an entrepreneur-as someone who

had something to offer that others did not have, but on which they depended: mass loyalty. And that, Lepsius continues, was the only thing he had to offer: a loyalty of the masses directed solely at him, that is, bound to his person.

The fifth chapter constitutes the core of the book. Here, Lepsius draws impressively on Max Weber's concept of charismatic leadership to explain Hitler's success. As is well known, Weber distinguished this type of leadership from traditional, legal, and rational leadership. Charismatic leadership arises from the interplay between an "expectation of salvation" (82) that emerges in a crisis situation-the hope for a strong leader with extraordinary qualifications who will resolve the crisis. This expectation of salvation is comparable to a religious one, yet in modern societies it is largely secularized. Corresponding to this is the claim by an individual to possess these extraordinary abilities. This was precisely the case with Hitler: he was convinced that he had a mission and saw himself as an "instrument of Providence" (82). From his perspective, this was the basis for his claim to leadership: Hitler saw himself as acting on behalf of Providence, indeed, of a transcendent power. He felt bound to this power. And from the certainty that he was acting in the service of this power arose the expectation that his followers would follow him blindly and obey without any restrictions.

As already mentioned, the prerequisite for people to follow a leader is a state of emergency-a crisis-that arises when there is no interpretation of a newly emerged situation, and no interpretive framework is available. Such a framework, however, is necessary, since decisions can only be made and actions carried out on this basis. The crisis is thus not merely a cognitive one, but one that has practical consequences and leads to an inability to act. According to Lepsius, however, this must be accompanied by a cultural tradition in which there is a belief in individuals with extraordinary abilities.

What interpretation did Hitler offer? According to Lepsius, Hitler held a Manichaeian worldview, according to which two forces-good and evil-are locked in a constant struggle with one another. And in this worldview, "the Jews were the incarnation of the principle of darkness and evil" (89).

However, such allegiance is maintained only as long as the person who claims to be able to lead the nation out of the crisis-based on his extraordinary abilities-proves himself worthy. Before 1933, Hitler's "prophecy" (90) seemed plausible to many insofar as it predicted Germany's downfall-the actual political and economic

crisis seemed to confirm this. And after 1933-that is, once Hitler was in power-a period began "in which Hitler's charismatic claim proved itself in everyday reality through a rapid succession of sensational successes" (93). Furthermore, Hitler succeeded in determining and controlling for himself the situations in which he believed he could prove himself. This was achieved in such a way that interpretations that cast doubt on this and offered alternative readings of the crises and their solutions were suppressed, persecuted, and rendered impossible. And when crises were not resolved, when failures occurred, the blame was simply placed on others.

In the subsequent chapters, the author examines the charismatic form of government as characterized by the coexistence of a bureaucratic order on the one hand and Hitler's direct authority to override it on the other. The goal was to forge a national community, achieved, among other means, through the suppression and prohibition of interest groups and representation in organized or institutionalized forms. Instead, a collective identity was constructed based on the "concept of ethnic unity" (127).

Further chapters then deal with the delegitimization and re-legitimization of the political order, the fragmentation of interests mediated by intermediaries, as well as conformity, nonconformity, and resistance.

But why did National Socialism ultimately lead to World War II, with millions of deaths, as well as to the murder of six million Jews during the Holocaust? According to Lepsius, this was the consequence of Hitler's Manichaeian worldview-the notion of a struggle between good and evil, in which anti-Semitism played a central role-as well as Hitler's willingness to "put all his eggs in one basket" (97) without regard for the lives of millions of people.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the book is not only written in an extremely clear style and in a very systematic manner, but is also highly convincing in its sociological analysis of National Socialism. Moreover, it is of enormous relevance today, as movements with fascist traits are currently gaining strength in numerous countries around the world-and in some cases have already come to power. Against the backdrop of the possibility of a "collapse of civilization" (202), it demonstrates how important it is to protect and preserve institutions that safeguard individual freedom.

References

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