MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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No. 9
(February 8, 2022)

WRITINGS ON THE EMPIRES IN WORLD HISTORY, VI

Arnold Joseph Toynbee, Review of Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, in «The American Political Science Review», LII, 1, March, 1958, pp. 195-198.

This is a queer book by a fine scholar. Professor Wittfogel, in his preliminary acknowledgments, tells us, as every author should do, what was the genesis of his book. His belief in human values caused him (to his great personal credit) to be interned in Hitler's concentration camps. «My final thoughts», he records, «go to those who, like myself, were passing through that inferno of total terror». Some of his fellow victims asked him, «if ever opportunity offered, to explain to all who would listen the inhumanity of totalitarian rule in any form. Over the years and more than I can express, these men have inspired my search for a deeper understanding of the nature of total power».

Here indeed is a strong incentive to research and writing. But what result would one expect Professor Wittfogel's experience to produce? Surely a full-dress study of the National Socialist regime in Germany, and this for at least three reasons. First, Professor Wittfogel has had direct experience of this regime; and even the most penetrating and imaginative scholar understands better something that he has been through himself than something that he has been able to study from documents only – as Professor Wittfogel has studied the regime of the Liao (Khitan) dynasty in medieval China. Secondly, the Nazi regime is the example of total power that is most easily comprehensible to Western writers and readers, because Hitler and his National Socialist movement are entirely home-grown products of our Western civilization. There is nothing «Oriental» or «hydraulic» about Nazi Germany (I will explain in a moment what Professor Wittfogel means by his rather quaint jargon). A third reason for beginning with the Nazi regime in the contemporary Western World if one is going to make a serious study of total power is that it is the best (*i.e.,* the worst) example of this atrocity so far known to us. Search all the surviving records of human behaviour all over the globe since the beginning of recorded history, and you will find nothing to equal this. The Nazis' cold-blooded murder of millions of people, their tortures, their espionage, their devilish policy of inciting children to denounce their parents – these leave the Assyrians and the Aztecs dead beat.

So one would expect Professor Wittfogel to begin with the Nazis, and to take them as the standard for his comparative study. But not a bit of it. After his illuminating reference in his acknowledgments, he hardly mentions the Nazis again. And, when he does mention total

power in our Western World or in the Graeco-Roman World, it is always in general terms and nearly always in the form of an apologia for it: it was not really so bad after all, or at any rate it has never lasted very long.

The wielders of total power whom Professor Wittfogel is stalking in this book are not our Western Nazis; they are the Russian Communists; and I have a most uncomfortable suspicion that the book – beneath its load of authentic and massive learning – is really a political book and not a scientific one. At any rate, what it all leads up to is a common-form contemporary Western indictment of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. Of course, what is trite may nevertheless be true, and, from the standpoint of the minority in the Western World that believes in, and tries to practise, what we consider to be genuine democracy, Russian Communism is about the next-best target to German National-Socialism for a democratic Western attack on totalitarianism. Then why does not Professor Wittfogel attack the Russian Communist regime direct, on the basis of its, to our minds, glaring intrinsic demerits? The way is open, but he does not take it. Instead, he gets at the Russian Communists by the roundabout route of an attack on what he calls «Oriental or Asiatic hydraulic agromanagerial despotism».

Here I have three bones to pick with him. First, he is doing mankind a serious disservice in trying to resuscitate the propaganda myth – invented by European Greeks in the fifth century B.C. – of the antithesis between a good Europe and a bad Asia. Second, he is flying in the face of the considered opinion of his colleagues the Egyptologists, Assyriologists, and Indologists in trying to apply to the magically vicious soil of Asia – though not to the magically virtuous soil of Europe – the Marxian thesis that the means of production rigidly determine all other elements of social life. Third, he is barking up the wrong tree: for, when one makes even a cursory comparative study of total power, one finds that the worst cases of it have occurred, not in «hydraulic» societies, but in societies in which agriculture gets its water from the rainfall.

In my own association of ideas, the word "hydraulic" suggests drills, brakes, and elevators, but Professor Wittfogel uses it, rather oddly, to mean «irrigational». «Hydraulic» societies, in his parlance, are societies in which agriculture gets its water from the artificial tapping of lake water or river water by irrigation canals.

But, to get back to my three quarrels with Professor Wittfogel and, first, his attempt to revive the propaganda myth of good Europe versus bad Asia. We know all about this smear's origin and history. It was invented by European Greeks in the fifth century B.C. in their very natural animosity against the Persian Empire, which had made an aggressive, though unsuccessful, attempt to conquer them. Alexander the Great was brought up on this myth by Aristotle; but, when he made his own successful conquest of the Persian Empire, he discovered, to his astonishment, that the myth was a lie. As soon as he met the Persians, he recognised in them the qualities of character which had enabled them to give peace and unity to Western Asia for 200 years. His response was to take the Persians into partnership with the Macedonians and the Greeks in the management of the World. But for his premature death, Alexander would have carried this policy through, and that would have been the end of the lying myth. Unhappily, his insight and his policy died with him, and the myth lived on, unscotched, till it was borrowed from the Greeks, in recent times, by the modern Western conquerors of the World.

This myth of a magic contrast between European virtue and Asiatic vice is the ancient Greek and modern Western counterpart of the medieval Byzantine Greek propaganda myth that the Western Christians were misguided barbarians who were bound to come to grief very soon. This myth was borrowed from the Byzantines by the nineteenth-century Russian Slavophils, and from the Russian Slavophils by the Russian Communists. We know how much it irritates us to be told that Russia alone is holy and orthodox (whether in Christian or in Communist terms) and that we Westerners are erring and doomed schismatics or capitalists. It is just as irritating for the peoples who happen to live within the conventional boundaries of "Asia" to be told by us that, as an inescapable result of their geographical location, they are bound to languish under «Oriental» despotism of the «hydraulic agromanagerial» type. Away with both these propaganda myths! Both are lies, and both are heinous offences against the human race, because both of them are engines deliberately designed to stoke up those tribal animosities by which mankind has made itself so miseraable.

I will now take up my third point before my second. I contend as against Professor Wittfogel, that all the worst cases of total power and an atrocious abuse of it have occurred in regions where agriculture depends on rainfall, not in regions where it depends on

irrigation. National Socialist Germany: there was nothing «hydraulic» about her. Czarist Russia and her successor Communist Russia: there is nothing «hydraulic» about her either. Professor Wittfogel cannot deny that in Russia agriculture depends not on irrigation but on rainfall; but he still claims the Muscovite form of Russian despotism for his «hydraulic agromanagerial» type on the ground that the Muscovite despots *may* have learnt their trade, not from themselves or from the Byzantines, but from their Tatar overlords, and that the Tatars of the Golden Horde, at the western end of the great Eurasian steppe, *may* have learnt the tricks of the «hydraulic agromanagerial» trade from brother Tatars who had ridden off in the opposite direction to conquer «hydraulic agromanagerial» China. Professor Wittfogel cites no serious evidence in support of this surely very far-fetched piece of speculation; yet it is one of the key theses of his book.

Professor Wittfogel himself bears witness that, though the cultivators in «hydraulic» Oriental societies have no say in the government of their community, they are not slaves either. But plantation slavery has played a big part in mankind's economic history. Where has it been rife? In Roman Italy in the last two centuries B.C., and in the West Indies and the Americas since their conquest by West Europeans in modern times. The only Asiatic case that I can call to mind is the cultivation of the Tigris-Euphrates delta by African (Zanj) slave-labour in the ninth century of the Christian Era.

Finally, there is Professor Wittfogel's thesis that in China, India, Iraq, and Egypt, though not in Lombardy or the Netherlands, artificial water-control on a large scale has produced a uniform type of «agromanagerial» despotism. If the late Professor Frankfort were still alive, he would have a lance to break with Professor Wittfogel over that. The differences between the "Asiatic" societies whose agriculture is based on irrigation are much greater than their resemblances. I believe there is nothing more in Professor Wittfogel's thesis than the obvious truth that large-scale enterprises cannot be carried out without a unified and effective high command. This is certainly true of large-scale water-works, but it is also true of armies and ships and industrial enterprises.

Here I will leave Professor Wittfogel to be dealt with by the Assyriologists and the Egyptologists. I seldom write a condemnatory review and dislike writing one of this book – not least because I much admire Professor Wittfogel's pioneer work in the economic, social,

and political interpretation of Chinese dynastic histories. But his present book is, in my opinion, something of an aberration and still more of a menace. So I have said frankly what I think about it.