DIVORCE WITHIN MODERNITY*

ZEEV STERNHELL is one of the most brilliant historians of the political culture of fascism and right-wing ideology. Widely known for *The Founding Myths of Israel* (1998), his work displays a critical revision of the ideas of his two mentors: Jacob Talmon, the theorist who sought in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract the theoretical foundations of totalitarianism, and René Rémond, the historian who cast light on the right-wing movements and parties in nineteenth-century France. Sterhnell rejected Talmon's judgment on Rousseau while his studies on European fascism amended Rémond's view of French fascism. The latter became the focal theme of Sternhell's *La droite révolutionnaire (1885-1914): les origines françaises du fascisme* (1978), an archeological reconstruction of the movements that shaped twentieth-century Fascist ideology: the populist movements that supported Boulanger in 1888-89; the anti-Semitic currents that surfaced in coincidence with the Dreyfus affair; and the nationalist trajectory that socialism took due to the fusion of economic protectionism (Maurras) and the revision of Marxism (Sorel). A useful starting point to introduce *Les anti-Lumières* may be precisely the subtitle of the 1978 book, which suggests the symbiotic relationship between fascism and the ideologies against which it was mobilized. Fascism, Sternhell maintained in *La droite révolutionnaire*, had its own political culture, which was no less complex than the liberal and socialist ones (a view that is very controversial among historians of fascism). In a series of books published between 1983 and 1994 (but see in particular *Ni Droite, ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France*; *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*; *L'eternel Retour*; both translated into English with the title respectively of *NeitherRight nor Left* and *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*), Sternhell made an interesting methodological move that strengthened his argument: he turned his observation from Fascist movements that became politically successful (in Italy, Germany, Austria or Portugal) to those that failed in seizing power. Precisely because of their failure, these movements were able to remain consistent to their own foundations and preserve a purity through which historians could detect the political culture of fascism in all its facets. In France, Fascist ideology was much clearer than in other European countries because in France constitutional democracy, individual rights and popular sovereignty were successful. In Sternhell's historiography thus, fascism as a political ideology consists in an intransigent reaction against constitutional democracy and the modern nation-state as they emerged from the French revolution. Following the political inclusion of the masses in the French demos, right-wing ideology stopped being a call for anti-modernity (nostalgia for the Ancient Regime)

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and became representative of the quest for social solidarity coming from the newly enfranchised. Rather than an expression of the revolt against the masses in the name of the competent few, as in the nineteenth-century, it became social and popular (or populist). In this way a nationalistic kind of socialism was born in France, a political culture that opposed the French *peuple* to all those who, because of race, nationality and religion were culturally *étrangers*: hence a socialist ideology that was protectionist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Marxist.

Through the years, Sternhell has emphasized his interpretation that the origins of Fascist ideology should be sought in the anti-materialistic and activist revision of Marxism: Sorel's followers converged with corporatists and nationalists in a process of fusion that in some countries, like Italy, was explicit. A merit of Sternhell's interpretation is to show that in France's history and society the Vichy regime was not an accident but the consequence of a widespread hostility against democratic principles and institutions, the revenge of those who had been defeated in 1789. *Les anti-Lumières* focused on the ideology that permeated and nourished that hostility.

In *Les anti-Lumières*, Sternhell argues that this ideology was born before 1789 and evolved through the democratic era that began with the English revolution and John Locke's philosophy of natural rights. However, the French revolution changed the attitude of the conservative ideology and made it stronger: it made it absorb the vital lymph of its enemy, namely liberalism and modernity. The result (what Sternhell calls "*les anti-Lumières*") was an explosive mix, in which Vico, Burke, Herder, Carlyle, Renan and Meinecke fall on the same side not only with the usual suspects, Nietzsche and Spengler, but also with liberals like Isaiah Berlin and François Furet. How to explain this unusual company? And how does Sternhell justify a definition of the anti-Enlightenment that incorporates liberalism? In his mind, what links the ideas of such diverse authors is anti-egalitarianism, the "war against democracy".

The liberalism of the Cold War is the red thread that unifies Sternhell's dense book. The peculiar aspect of this liberalism, which emerged along with the newly coined category of totalitarianism, consisted in the fact that it modeled itself out of a direct and exclusive confrontation with the only form of totalitarianism that was still alive after World War Two, namely communism. Fascism was less relevant to Berlin and Furet than it was, for instance, to Elie Halévy, in the 1930s the most important scholar of the origin of modern tyranny. While to understand the genesis of fascism Halévy went back to the hierarchical ideology elaborated against the French revolution, to explain communist totalitarianism Cold War liberals went back to the promise that lay at the root of the revolutionary thinking itself and that inspired Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Robespierre's virtuous republic, and Lenin's proletarian democracy: equality. Anti-democratic liberals read totalitarianism as an aberration of liberty because it interpreted liberty in conjunction with its equal distribution (not by chance, in Berlin's

Two Concepts of Liberty Condorcet's sincere and honest desire to achieve equal liberty was made responsible for the utopia of positive liberty). Given that assumption, an alternative to the Enlightenment project would need to recover pluralism as the necessary condition for liberty and to break with universalism.

Anti-Enlightenment liberalism challenged its alter-ego (communism) on its own terrain: the interpretation of modernity. It did so by re-defining modernity so as to distinguish within it two trajectories, only one of which was friendly to liberalism: a view of modernity that coupled together tradition and liberty. The other view of modernity appealed instead to the nefarious philosophy of natural rights with the result of giving politics an emancipating and utopian function. *Les anti-Lumières* tracks the history of this divorce within modernity and of the collisions of the philosophical principles and political goals that made for modernity's two trajectories.

The pivotal author of anti-Enlightenment modernity is certainly Berlin, the author in 1958 of the manifesto of Cold War liberalism. Sternhell charges Berlin with having disassociated the liberal project from the Franco-Kantian Enlightenment in order to make it a truly radical alternative against the extreme expression of modernity represented by Soviet communism. But in so doing, Sternhell argues, Berlin disassociated liberalism from democracy and made it a project that could easily flirt with communitarian ideologies (and even post-modern relativism). Berlin took liberalism away from the horizon of Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire and Kant and situated it within that of Vico, Burke, Hegel, Renan, and Meinecke. Much like Furet, Berlin ended up by doing an "immense service" for the enemies of liberalism and universalism: "avant les post-modernistes [...] il apporte la prevue que l'on peut saper les fondements des Lumières à partir d'une position liberale" (p. 26). In sum, the theorists and historians who sought for the origins of totalitarianism in the Enlightenment fatally put themselves in the anti-Enlightenment camp, along with the conservatives and the reactionaries. This made their liberalism dangerously tolerant of authoritarian and anti-democratic regimes if and when those regimes worked as preventive shields against the myth of liberation politics.

Sternhell's reading is captivating and problematic. It is captivating when it shows that, in its desire to break with the factors that incubated totalitarian utopia, anti-Enlightenment liberalism contested not simply an extreme view of democracy, but much more dangerously the very value of democracy and universalism. Once Rousseau is declared to be the enemy, then why not to side with Rousseau's most radical enemies, that is to say Burke, Carlyle, Maistre? After having stylized "good" and "bad" conceptions of liberty, anti-Enlightenment liberals situated their origins respectively in the Glorious Revolution and in the French Revolution. The liberty coming from the English revolution was "good" because it was not deduced from rationalistic and abstract principles (the rights of man and the citizen), not oriented toward the government of the assembly (democracy), and moreover not

driven by a universalistic project. Berlin did in the twentieth-century what Burke had done in the eighteenth-century: he showed that it is possible to disassociate liberalism from universalism and that a good liberalism must be anti-universalistic in order to be able to counter the myth of equality. The British constitutions proved that it is possible to have a liberal constitution and yet preserve a stratified society, to defend civil rights and yet not make rights into a declaration to be carried on by political movements, to recognize the superiority of liberal constitutionalism and yet be pluralist and acknowledge that each country is to develop its own constitutional ethos. After the Bolshevik revolution, the symbolic function of the Glorious Revolution was to be played by the American Revolution.

The anti-Enlightenment project did not walk a linear walk. It went through several stages in relation to the different historical conditions within which it operated. Sternhell has no doubt that the date of birth was 1774, the year of the publication of Herder's *Yet another Philosophy of History* because that little book was the first example of a militant use of pluralism in Western history. The next most important date is 1790, the year Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the first vitriolic attack against the philosophy of natural rights and democratic government. History, tradition and religion were the triumvirate of an anti-Enlightenment modernity, diametrically opposite to reason, rights and universalism.

After the Burkean age, a second stage began with the anti-democratic turn of post-Napoleonic Europe, thanks in particular to Carlyle and Renan, who interpreted democracy as decadence and materialism, an aberration or the bad face of modernity. The attack against the tradition of the Enlightenment provoked a third new burst between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, when another wave of anti-democratic ideology and politics was mobilized by Croce, Meinecke and Sorel to counter the incipient entrance of the masses in the political arena. After World War Two, finally, the anti-Enlightenment project acquired a new character. It became an attack against a certain kind of liberalism, one that pivoted on a view of liberty as individual capabilities and the need of state intervention to promote the social conditions for those capabilities to be expressed. A social liberalism and the social-democratic conception of the state created the new Moloch against which a new liberalism was needed. Against the impersonal machinery of the modern state and its welfarist vocation, this new liberalism needed to be relativist, anti-rationalist and anti-universalistic. It needed above all to drop equality completely from the liberal language. Berlin's masterpiece consisted in making liberalism a hegemonic anti-democratic project that is still under completion in Western societies. Equality was the *bête noire* of Berlin's liberalism as it was for Vico, Burke and Herder before him.

The question is that, Sternhell comments, as the old anti-Enlightenment ended up by finding unexpected allies among the reactionaries so the new anti-Enlightenment found unexpected friends among supporters of natio-

nalism and even fascism. Sternhell's explicit reference is once again to the leading authors of modern liberalism and historiography, Berlin and Furet, the latter of whom is held responsible for merging the two totalitarianisms of the twentieth-century. Furet made Benito Mussolini an imitator of Lenin's ultra-revolutionary socialism without realizing that the founder of fascism absorbed Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism and employed communitarian principles (nationalism and corporatism) to incinerate the "*contenu intellectuel des Lumières*" in order to win his battle against Marxism. Sternhell mentions Furet's faulty interpretation in the epilogue of his book as if he wanted to prove the political consequence that springs from the assault on "*la modernité éclairée*": the legitimization ("*légitimité*") in Western academia of historical revisionism, of the work of Ernst Nolte and his followers (pp. 576-77).

But Sternhell's reading is also problematic. We would like to conclude this review by raising three main problems. The first pertains to Sternhell's polemical use of the history of ideas. If the anti-Enlightenment thinkers are correct, and equality is the cause of modern totalitarian regimes, this means that inequality should be the universal law of social life: the norm is the order of hierarchy (p. 328). This is the organizing logic of Sternhell's category of *les anti-Lumières,* an ideal-type that pivots around the primacy of history over reason, of communities over the individual, of the tradition over innovation, of differences and hierarchy over equality. In relation to this *Weltanschauung*, Sternhell selects the authors, stylizes their representative ideas, and then converts them into samples of a meta-historical category whose "cohérence interne" makes *les anti-Lumières* look very much like a block thinking (p. 32). On some occasions, the rigidity of the paradigm makes the demarcation line separating Enlightenment thinkers and anti-Enlightenment thinkers very problematic. For instance, how to situate those Enlightenment thinkers like Shaftesbury or Diderot, who shared a vivid societal enthusiasm? And how to make sense of the *idéologues* of an hierarchical socialism like Saint-Simon (not mentioned in Sternhell's book) or Auguste Comte, whose anti-liberal ideas permeated Catholic intransigentism yet were not a rejection of modernity either?

A second set of problems comes from Sternhell's rationalistic conception of freedom. In his introduction he seems to suggest that when we attempt to contextualize the expressions of liberty, we risk moral relativism. But trying to enrich the normative conception of freedom and the rights through social and anthropological knowledge does not entail justifying relativism or surrendering to the realistic acceptance of the given fact that many people have lived and live within communitarian social relations. Understanding and justifying are of course separate processes of judgment. Moreover, reading rights in a historical perspective may actually help us to realize that the evolution of liberty is not a cumulative process and that new liberties have been most of the time conquered at the expense of previous ones. It may show that the history of democracy was difficult and tormented rather than

linear and incremental, and is still far from accomplished. If revolutions were needed, if the French Revolution was needed to institutionalize new rights, it was presumably because those rights were perceived as a radical transformation that did not meet with consensus. The fact is that most of the time, liberties do clash and conflict. For this reason it is hard to agree with Sternhell that casting doubts on the idea that rights are founded on Reason or Nature is primed to promote an anti-democratic course. Is there only one way of defending liberty? That the conquest and defense of rights are an historical fact that results from peoples' political action should actually make us aware of how fragile that conquest can be and how important it is that human beings are vigilant and active permanently, even (or especially) when they have achieved a democratic constitution. Perhaps a rationalistic foundation of rights may make rights more fragile because that foundation rests on a metaphysical assumption that can hardly enjoy an invincible status against its enemies, and moreover can hardly be proved by reason alone.

Third and last, moral universalism should allow us to integrate the principle of liberty with those specific liberties that are historically situated and, like an ethical bond, form the social fabric that makes legal codes and institutions strong. This brings us to the role of Burke in the history of modern liberal thought, a role that Sternhell identifies categorically with that of those who supported irrationalism and illiberalism. Yet Burke did not attack rights as such but an ideology of rights enforcement and justification that turned out to be unfriendly to liberty. The French revolution abolished nobility's privileges but it also abolished a myriad of social aggregations that, while providing individuals with ties of quotidian solidarity, could offer them a protective shield against the overwhelming power of an absolute sovereign. It is not by chance that Sternhell does not seem to be at ease with authors like Alexis de Tocqueville or Hannah Arendt, who never reduced liberty to abstract norms and principles nor translated the theory of freedom into a commentary of the Franco-Kantian Enlightenment. In the tradition of Montesquieu (another author who can hardly be situated in Sternhell's paradigm), whose conception of political freedom inspired both Tocqueville and Arendt, we should recognize that modern democratic society needs its own forms of pluralism and intermediary bodies. In conclusion, one can be strongly supportive of liberty all the while acknowledging that liberty is rooted in a historical substratum that is deeper than rationality even while reason is permanently engaged in criticizing, understanding and justifying it.

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