

The following letter we received from Professor of political philosophy Thomas Pangle at University of Toronto after we sent him excerpts from *Kritika & Kontext* and the disputation question for the second issue. We believe that his harsh rebuttal should not be left without replay.

Thus, we decided that in the next, third issue, due in December 1996, this letter will be the focus of our regular Disputation section. Besides my response, which I have already sent to Professor Pangle, we would like to publish your replies and commentaries. Due to lack of space please narrow your response maximum to 2-3 pages.

You can write us to: K&K, P.O.Box 261, 810 00 Bratislava 1, Fax: 00 42 7 / 364 938 or E-mail: kritika@mbox.bts.sk .

Editor-in-Chief

THOMAS L. PANGLE

Dear Mr. Abrahám,

Thank you for your invitation to respond to your question concerning "intellectuals and society" for your journal.

Unfortunately, after perusing the excerpts from the journal that you sent me, I must decline, because I am in deep moral disagreement with the intentions of your journal.

Your journal has as its motto a famous, or infamous statement, by Joseph Schumpeter that endorses relativism and condemns all anti-relativists or believers in the Truth (like myself) as "barbarians". How do you think that I would ever participate in a journal so animated? As "barbarian" exhibit number one? You say you "follow my work well" in that case, how could you have missed my attack on the passage from Schumpeter and Rorty that you have taken as the motto of your magazine (see The Ennobling of Democracy, pp. 57-58)?

In explaining and elaborating your editorial agreement with Schumpeter and Rorty and their aggressive and intolerant, not to say fascistic, form of relativism, you yourself say that "while defending liberal democracy one has to stand up against those who are convinced that they possess the 'truth' and present themselves as having found 'the right path'". In other words, you stand against the American Founding Fathers, and the Declaration of Independence, with its ringing proclamation of the "self-evident TRUTHS" rooted in the "laws of nature and of nature's God." You stand against the entire secular Western tradition of natural right, as well as against all serious religious traditions. Let me assure you that I take my stand exactly against you and what you stand for: I stand with Jefferson, with the truth of nature, and against relativism, which I regard as the single most dangerous and destructive moral current of our time.

Your relativism is unwittingly very close to that elaborated by Benito Mussolini, in his famous statement on relativism as the foundation of fascism [see next pages]. I think you should think again about the motto and the intention of your journal, and in particular ask yourself if you may not be contributing unwittingly to the return of that fascistic relativism which is in some measure responsible for so many of the horrors Eastern Europe has suffered in this century. It was the irresponsibility of liberal relativists, and of relativistic journals like the one you are launching, that I believe helped contribute to the favorable reception of fascism on the part of "advanced intellectuals" in your part of the world.

My suspicions regarding your irresponsibility are aroused by the fact that your discussion of Socrates and what you call "the Socratic ideal", in the presentation of the question you asked me to comment on, is a complete misrepresentation of what Socrates did, said, and stood for. There is no textual basis for most of the positions you attribute to Socrates: he never used any word which could even be translated as "intellectual", never made the gross error of confusing philosophers with intellectuals, and never endorsed the ethic of "autonomy" which you attribute to him. Socrates nowhere ever "questioned the legitimacy of the gods of Athens." The truth is exactly the contrary of what you say: Socrates repeatedly and emphatically endorsed the legitimacy of the gods of Athens, and nowhere more clearly than in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. And Socrates would never agree with your nihilistically and cynically individualistic assertion that a "brilliant mind" which in public "loyally and uncritically serves the established order, however benevolent that order may be", is somehow deficient.

You say you audited a course of mine; I find it hard to believe that you paid much attention to what I said about Socrates or any other of the great political philosophers.

Yours etc.,

Thomas L. Pangle, Professor

BENITO MUSSOLINI
IN THE WAKE OF THE GREAT PHILOSOPHIES: RELATIVISM AND FASCISM

Il Popolo d'Italia, N. 279, 22 November, 1921 (From *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, Florence: La Fenice, 1955, vol. 17, pp. 267-69)

In page 62 of his exhaustive little book on “contemporary relativists”, Adriano Tilgher has too rapidly alluded to the fascistic movement:

“Under our very eyes we have seen in Italy, with the decline of state authority under the proletarian assault, the rise of the fascist movement, proclaiming that the State does not ‘exist’, but at each moment creates itself through those who believe in it or wish it. Fascism is nothing but absolute activism transplanted onto the plane of politics.”

The definition is most exact. With this affirmation, Adriano Tilgher situates fascism in the wake of the greatest contemporary philosophies: those of relativism. If Tilgher had followed more closely, on a daily basis, the work of fascism, he would have noted the phases of the development of the movement and its guiding principles, and I say without immodesty that he would have placed me among the relativists, if not theoretically, than at least practically.

In Germany, relativism is an audacious and demolishing theoretical construction (perhaps it is the philosophic reversal of the defeat of Germany, which may well announce the coming military reversal of its defeat?); in Italy, it is simply a fact. Fascism has become a super-relativist movement because it has never sought to give a definitive “programmatic” guise to its complex and powerful states of mind, but has rather proceeded by intuitions and fragments, of which the documentary evidence is to be found in the present journal. Everything that I have said and done in the recent past is relativism by “intuition.” If, in fact, by relativism is meant the end of scientism, the decline of the “science”, myth which claims to be the discovery of absolute truth, I can boast that I have applied this criterion to the socialist phenomenon. In a speech I delivered in Bologna on the third of April 1921, I said that “nothing in the world is more grotesque than to call socialism scientific”; and later, after having negated every truth in the obscure, incoherent doctrines of socialism, I negated every character of fatality in the advent of socialism itself.

That the socialists believe, for the most varied motives, in the truth and in the fatality of socialism is their problem; but it was necessary to prevent the faith in this truth and fatality from going beyond the circle of the adherents of this church. It was necessary, in short, to create an anti-truth and an anti-fatality with respect to socialism.

Between these two forces, success is judge and has judged. The socialists who believe in socialism as a truth in itself, who believe in an ineluctable fatality of socialism, are few, and even those few are ashamed to confess it. There is nothing that proves that capitalism, with the type of civilization that arises from it, ought necessarily to lead into socialism. This succession of an economic and of a civilizational character, which is supposed to be natural and logical, is on the contrary purely arbitrary: the most elevated criticism had made a *tabula rasa* of of this historicist and democratic mentality, according to which history should be “discounted” always in anticipation and which should know always where men and their society are going to wind up.

It was believed, for example, that war ought to lead into revolution. The reverse is probably the case. The political transformations which we have seen are capable of constituting in reality the beginning of a great restoration. With the evolution toward the “citizen”, the evolution of the nineteenth century proceeds.

It was claimed that there was imminent a period of greater liberty, of greater democracy with proportional voting. It is possible that the coming decades will see the inglorious end of all the so-called democratic conquests. From the government of the many and of all, the extreme ideal of democracy, it is probable that there will be a turn to the government of the few or of one. In economics, the experiment with the government of the many or of all is already a failure. In Russia it has turned into the dictatorship of the factory. Politics cannot continue to lag behind economics. I do not see clearly concerning the fate of universal suffrage and the accompanying proportional trifling. In a little while this will be "old hat". Men will perhaps have a longing for a dictator.

If by relativism ought to be understood the contempt for fixed categories, for the men who believe themselves the carriers of an immortal objective truth, for the static characters who lie down, or instead torment themselves in order to renew themselves incessantly, for those who boast of being always equal to themselves, then nothing is more relativistic than the fascist mentality and activity. If relativism and universal mutability are equivalent, then we fascists, who have always manifested our impartial contempt for nominalisms in whatever way they plant themselves down, like bats in the rafters, those bigots of the other parties; we, who have had the courage to smash to smithereens all the traditional political categories and to call ourselves from time to time aristocrats and then democrats, revolutionaries and then reactionaries, proletarians and then antiproletarians, pacifists and then antipacifists, we are truly the relativists par excellence and our action derives directly from the most actual movements of the European spirit.

Our repugnance to the idea of restricting ourselves to a program, by which is meant that rather than a program we have simply reference and orientational points of view; our agnostic position toward the regime; our having taken from the other parties whatever pleased us and delighted us, and our having thrown out whatever did not fit and proved unpleasant, the derision which we cast on all the socialist and communist mortgages against a mysterious future - all this constitutes abundant documentation of our relativistic mentality. For our movement, it suffices to have a point of reference: the nation. Everything else takes care of itself.

For relativism "in life and in action" is going to be recognized - says Tilgher - as wielding an absolute supremacy over intelligence.

"From the equivalence of all options, the ancient skeptics deduced that it then followed that the only thing to do was to renounce judgment and action. From the equivalence of all ideologies, from their equality as fictions, modern relativism deduces that it then follows that each has the right to create his own for himself and to impose it with all the energy of which he is capable. The formidable contemporary movement which has brought into being relativism and universal skepticism out of historicism is, therefore, nothing other than the effort which the profound forces of life-new and therefore revolutionary products of the dominant historicist ideology, deifiers of the past, and, in its name, negators of the future - are making to shake off the iron yoke and open a way to the light."

The Italian fascist phenomenon ought to appear to Tilgher as the biggest and most interesting manifestation of relativistic philosophy; and if, as Wahinger affirms, relativism is rooted in Nietzsche and his Will to Power, Italian fascism was and is the most formidable creation of an individual and national "will to power".