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# *The Role of the Individual in History: the Case of World War Two*

The primacy of the relationships and conflicts between social forces in determining the course of history is one of the fundamental assumptions of historical materialism. In societies divided into different social classes, such relationships are perforce class relations. History is thus explained, in the final analysis, as a history of struggles between different social classes and their essential fractions,[1] largely overdetermined by the internal logic of each specific mode of production. Such a view of history is not based on the 'denial' of human individuality nor on an 'underestimation' of individual autonomy, character structure, or 'values'. On the contrary, the view that history is basically shaped by social forces results precisely from a full understanding of the fact that an infinite number of individual pressures will tend to create random movements which largely cancel each other out to the extent that they are purely individual. In order for a *definitive* movement of history to appear—that is, for history to possess a pattern that is intelligible and not merely a meaningless succession of unconnected accidents—*common*

aspects have to be discovered in individuals' behaviour. Only in this case do millions of individual conflicts, choices and possible directions of movement appear to have a determinate logic that allows them to be seen as a real parallelogram of forces, subject to a finite number of possible resolutions or outcomes. This is obviously what happens in real history.

Paradoxically, those who deny the primacy of social forces in shaping human destiny also most diminish the role of the majority of individuals in society. For only under circumstances in which the vast majority have been excluded from history-making, can a few 'great men' be endowed with the power to shape events. When historical materialism posits the primacy of social forces over individual actions in determining the course of history, it does not deny that certain individuals play exceptional roles. If men and women make history, it is always with a certain consciousness, which of course may be a 'false' consciousness to the extent that it misinterprets their real interests or fails to foresee the objective consequences of their actions. It follows in this context that certain individuals in the leadership of social currents can have unusual influence in history, not as supermen but precisely through their relationship to their constituencies.

Such personalities cannot change the 'secular' trend of events. Even the most powerful tyrant in the world cannot escape the implacable demands of capital accumulation resulting from the structure of private property and competition in the capitalist world. Any attempt, for example, to substitute the logic of slave production (as Hitler tried to do) must fall afoul as long as present technology and private ownership continue to prevail. Likewise, neither individual genius nor 'will to power' can overthrow the constraints of the material (socio-economic) correlation of forces. Thus given the respective productive forces of capitalist Europe and the United States in 1941, Nazi Germany, even after subjugating all of Europe, had no chance of winning a war against the vast economic power of North America, except through the successful integration of all the USSR's industrial plant and natural resources (a process that would have taken years).

But given these global social and material constraints, certain personalities can influence history either by possessing a clearer perception than others of the historical needs of their class, or by retarding the recognition of these objective needs. By their influence they can impose decisions which, in the short run, either further or thwart the interests of the social forces that they are supposed to represent. This is largely independent of their will or of their declared intentions. Hitler, for example, did not intend to destroy the German ruling class's power over half of the Reich as it existed on 31 August 1939, but such a loss of power and territory was precisely the outcome of the chain of events unleashed by his invasion of Poland the next day. These events, moreover, included a series of actions which did not represent the only

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[1] This was indeed Engels's formula: if one reduces history to only the struggle between antagonistic classes, such major events as World War One, which was obviously not a war between capital and labour but a war between different fractions of the world bourgeoisie, becomes incomprehensible.

possible choice for the Nazi social bloc, and for which Hitler as an individual bore an immediate responsibility.

**Did Hitler Cause World War Two?**

This distinction between the great secular movements of history and shorter-term variations in historical development, of course, is only an elementary approximation of the relationship between social forces and individuals in shaping the course of events. A further, essential category encompasses the *conjunctural* needs of social groups. To return to the example of the invasion of Poland, it is undoubtedly true that the decision was primarily Hitler's. It expressed, in a striking way, the contradictory facets of his personality: recklessness, monomania, skilful opportunism as well as cyclothymic alternation between paralysed indecision and hyper-voluntarism. But it is also true that as early as 1932 leading circles of the German capitalist class had decided (in consideration of their conjunctural interests) that Germany's only way out of the economic crisis was to establish hegemony over Central and Eastern Europe.

Once such a course was set in motion and massive rearmament was begun, war was made virtually inevitable by two factors. First was the reactive rearmament of Germany's principal capitalist rivals—most immediately, Britain, but also the United States—which sought to block German suzerainty over Europe and its conversion into a world power. Hence the increasing temptation, for the entire Nazi leadership, to unleash war before the enormous productive forces of American capitalism had been mobilized and while Germany still enjoyed certain advantages in up-to-date aircraft and armour. Secondly, the burden of massive rearmament entailed a deepening financial crisis for German capitalism. Currency reserves had almost disappeared and payment of interest on the national debt had become an insupportable burden. It was impossible to continue the rate of militarization without the integration of additional material resources from outside Germany's almost exhausted stocks.[2] Hence the need to plunder adjacent economies and to seek continental scales of industrial organization comparable to those of the USA or the USSR.

Thus while the ultimate decision to unleash the Wehrmacht on 1 September 1939 was undoubtedly Hitler's, the momentum towards war arose out of the short-term calculations of the majority of the German ruling class. These calculations, in turn, were conditioned by the internal contradictions of German imperialism sharpened by the successive crises of 1919–23 and 1929–32. The fact that the ruling class was more or less unified in the project of aggressively modifying the world division of economic power was certainly not accidental. Germany had arrived too late in the arena of the great powers to acquire a colonial empire outside Europe which corresponded to its importance in the world market. Its

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[2] On the interconnection between economic crisis, rearmament and German industry's expansionist goals, see Timothy Mason, 'Innere Krise und Angriffskrieg, 1938–1939' in Forstmeier and Vokmann (eds.), *Wirtschaft und Rüstung am Vorabend des zweiten Weltkrieges*, Dusseldorf 1981, and Alan Milward, 'Der Einfluss ökonomischer und nicht-ökonomischer Faktoren auf die Strategie des Blitzkriegs', ibid.

'manifest destiny', therefore, was interpreted as the quest for a surrogate empire in Europe. The disproportionate political influence of the Junkers (a result of the failure of the nineteenth-century attempts at a democratic bourgeois revolution in Germany) accentuated the arrogant *va-banque* aspects of German foreign policy and magnified support for military expansion.

By the same token, it was hardly accidental that the German ruling class, despite its cultural pride and traditions as upholder of 'law and order', deliberately put its future into the hands of a reckless adventurer. Under 'normal' circumstances, of course, the bourgeoisie chooses its political leadership from its own class. In periods of crisis, however, the bourgeoisie has repeatedly attempted to resolve unfavourable balances of class power by resorting to the parliamentary leadership of reformist labour leaders willing to uphold the basic structures and values of capitalist rule: a collaborationist lineage that runs from Ebert to MacDonald, to Léon Blum, Clement Attlee and Van Acker, Spaak, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt, provisionally ending with François Mitterrand. For a powerful bourgeois class to sponsor a Hitler-type authority implies far more exceptional circumstances: a profound socio-economic crisis that produces generalized social tensions of a pre-revolutionary character. Under conditions of such exceptional crisis, *déclassé* strata of all social classes, but especially the petty-bourgeoisie, vomit forth quite a number of desperate characters proposing to 'solve the nation's problems' regardless of the cost in human or material terms, much less 'traditional values'. Trotsky aptly characterized adventurers of this type as *wildgewordene Kleinbürger*—'petty-bourgeois gone wild'.

Hitler as a political character-type is thus the product of a specific concatenation of circumstances: the ruin of the petty shopkeeping stratum, the mass unemployment of the officer caste, the inflationary destruction of small financial holdings, the anti-semitic competitive fears of doctors and lawyers with few clients, the overproduction of supernumerary academics, etc. The gangster mentality involved was already clearly visible in the formation of the *Freikorps* as early as November 1918. Indeed there were literally *hundreds* of potential Hitlers and Himmlers running around Germany after 1918—many of them with ideological and character traits nearly identical to those of the future Führer. So the way in which the Third Reich actually emerged from the collapse of the Weimar Republic, and paved the road to another world war, was only to a limited extent determined by the particular gifts and weaknesses of Hitler as an individual politician. Incomparably more significant was the broader social crisis of which the Hitler-type was only an epiphenomenon. Even Hitler's monomania about the Jews can now be seen as a widespread dementia amongst reactionary strata of German society. Recently the historian Röhlin has discovered in Emperor Wilhelm II's diaries an ominous sentence dated December 1919—more or less the very moment that Hitler decided to enter politics: 'Let no German . . . rest until these parasites [the Jews] have been wiped out from German soil and exterminated.[3]

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[3] *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations*, Cambridge 1983.

## Marxism and Social Psychology

To understand why such a desperado mentality became characteristic of certain layers of German society between 1918 and 1933, and why it ultimately gained the endorsement of the ruling classes, it is first necessary to grasp the role of collective 'mental structures' which mediate between the material interests of social forces (classes and major fractions of classes) and the ways in which they consciously interpret these interests. Social psychology must be a necessary instance in the Marxist explanation of the historical process and it must elucidate how specific mentalities take hold in a given social group, even when they express a 'false consciousness' that distorts or misconstrues 'objective' interests.

Actually the concepts of *mentalités* or 'structures of feeling', now so useful in social history or cultural studies, have an independent genealogy in classical Marxist thought. Thus Kautsky correctly insisted upon the importance of solidarity and self-sacrifice as traits making up a distinctive 'proletarian mentality'.[4] Without such a 'mental structure', derived from the experience of factory work and large-scale exploitation, strikes and other collective actions of the proletariat would be nearly impossible. (Conversely, strikes by the petty bourgeoisie are extremely rare.) Engels likewise insisted upon the fact that workers living in the great cities and toiling in the new factories of the 1880s and 1890s were the first class in modern German society which escaped the stultifying narrow conformist (*Speisser*) outlook—characteristic of the petty bourgeoisie—which the fragmentation and retardation of Germany in the sixteenth century and the failure of revolution in the nineteenth century imposed upon all social classes. The admirably non-conformist and anti-authoritarian attitudes of the new German working class towards Bismarck's regime—especially as revealed by the mass resistance to the Anti-Socialist Law (*Sozialistengesetz*)—confirmed the emergence of a new *mentalité*.[5]

Not only classes but ethnic groups can display distinctive collective mental structures. The way in which especially oppressed groups— Jews, American Blacks, Gypsies, Palestinians, tribal people everywhere, etc.—cling tenaciously to linguistic, religious, ethnic, even gastronomic traditions testifies both to a praxis of cultural resistance and the perdurance of distinctive *mentalités* which fortify identity and self-respect against great violence and indignity. But this kind of mental structure usually persists only so long as the underlying social milieu is composed of poor petty bourgeoisie, *stetl* or handicraft workers, or marginalized people. When a broad upsurge of capitalism breaks through the older structures of national or ethnic oppression (even if petty discrimination and prejudice survive) this defensive traditionalism may be suddenly reversed in favour of quasi-fanatical assimilation, even over-identification with newly won citizenship or national status. The classic example

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4 Karl Kautsky, 'Klassenkampf und Ethik', *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 19/1, p. 24.
5 Cf. Friedrich Engels, letter to Bebel 29.10.1884 (MEW, vol. 36, p. 227); letter to Kautsky, 8.11.1884 (ibid. pp. 230–31); letter to Bebel 18.11.1884 (ibid, 240–42); and letter to Bebel, 11.12.1884 (ibid, pp. 250–51).

of such a transformation occurred in the nineteenth century amongst the 'assimilationist' Jewish bourgeoisie of Western Europe, but contemporary tendencies can be noted amongst elements of the young Black bourgeoisie in the United States or anglophile sections of the expatriate Indian middle classes.

In the 1930s the Frankfurt School, led by Horkheimer, made a major attempt at developing a social psychology from a synthesis of the ideas of Marx and Freud. The ultimate failure of this ambitious reconstruction stemmed less from the interrogation of Freud than from its mechanical appropriation of Marxism. The role of unconscious drives in human social behaviour, after all, had been emphasized by Engels a half century before, even if he had been in no position to delve into their precise nature. Trotsky, for his part, had been sympathetic to the efforts of depth psychology to theorize their origin and dynamics. The real weakness of the Frankfurt School's project was its inability to grasp the crucial mediating links in the dialectic of infrastructure and super-structure which, in the final analysis, determine historical development. Individual passions and unconscious drives, however determinant of personality, cannot directly shape social transformations involving millions of human beings. They can only create potentials or dispositions for such developments. At the same time, however, they most likely create dispositions for quite different, if not contrary, developments. What line of development or action will actually be undertaken cannot be predicted by analysis of these unconscious drives themselves. Rather, real historical outcomes depend on concrete social-political struggles which interwine not only unconscious but conscious processes, ideas, strategies and material constraints quite as much, or more, than 'spontaneous' ideologies and unconscious dispositions.

For example, in the Frankfurt School's famous analysis of the success of Hitlerism the central theme is the supposed ubiquity of authoritarian structures in German society. But how can this 'social psychological' (we would rather say, 'socio-individual') analysis account for such facts as the ability of the same German working class which failed to strike against Hitler in 1933 to have succeeded little more than a decade before, in 1920, in launching the most successful general strike in history against the von Kapp–von Luttwitz putsch? Surely their education had not been less authoritarian, nor their sexual frustrations less pronounced, in the decades preceding 1920 than in the years before 1933!

Paradoxically again, these attempts to reduce the decisive weight of social forces in determining history really understate the role of ideas and personalities much more than does classical historical materialism. Marxists understand better that, despite the instinctual or infantilized aspects of the human psyche, people *can* grasp the exigencies of their historical situation and act in ways largely congruent with their objective interests. Only when this dimension of rational volition is admitted into the complex parallelogram of historical causation can we understand how individuals with particular talents or dispositions can come into their own.

## Plekhanov and 'Men of Destiny'

The classical Marxist approach to 'the role of the individual in history' was outlined by Georgii Plekhanov in his famous essay bearing that title.[6] Although often associated with a 'reductionist' Marxism, Plekhanov's 1898 text is, in fact, a remarkably subtle and up-to-date analysis. It develops the basic thesis that although the infrastructure of production relations imposes certain material constraints on the class struggle, the way in which these constraints are actually expressed is always refracted through the particular roles of mass organizations and their leaderships. Under these conditions, and especially at historical turning points or moments of crisis, the personal peculiarities of individuals can influence the kind of class organization and leadership which is available. Moreover, Plekhanov makes two additional points: First, as Hegel insinuated, 'the fate of nations often depends upon "accidents of the second degree"'; but these 'accidents' are interwoven with particular correlations of social and material forces which, in turn, limit the autonomous scope of the 'individual factor'. Secondly, social classes in moments of crisis require 'talents of a specific nature', a particular type of leadership. Generally, at such moments, several or more individuals personifying these 'talents' are available as candidates to become the new leaders of their party, class or nation. 'It long has been observed that great talents appear whenever the social conditions favourable to their development exist. This means that every man of talent who actually appears, every man of talent who becomes a social force, is the product of social relations. Since this is the case, it is clear why talented people, as we have said, can change only individual features of events, but not their general trend; they are themselves the product of this trend; were it not for that trend, they never would have crossed the threshold that divides the potential from the real.'[7]

The history of the Second World War provides ample illustrations of the perspicacity of Plekhanov's theses. To take the example of the fall of the Third Republic, the political personalities leading France to capitulation in 1940 had all largely been elected in 1936; that is to say, with the exception of some Communist deputies who had been disfranchised for their opposition to the 'Phoney War', it was a supposedly 'left-wing' Parliament which decided by overwhelming majority to substitute Pétain's *Etat français* for the Republic. How can this be explained? The accession of Pétain was by no means the 'inevitable' consequence of the victory of the German Panzers. Following the defeat of the main body of French forces in May–June 1940, other courses of action were easily conceivable,[8] but only Pétain's usurpation of French democracy corresponded to the majority instincts of the French ruling class, which was determined to use the defeat to 'repair' the setbacks and humiliations of the Popular Front victory and labour insurgency

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[6] This essay appears as an Appendix to G. V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, London 1969.

[7] Ibid, p. 171.

[8] Besides the majority option of Pétain–Laval and the tiny minority support for de Gaulle, there was also the alternative of continuing the war in North Africa, a position supported by the larger minority around Mendès-France, Georges Mandel, and the president of the Senate, Jeanneney.

of 1936. Pétain was the mechanism which allowed it to achieve what its most talented and reactionary ideologue, Charles Maurras, called '*une divine surprise*'. It also allowed an ideological 'sublimation' of defeat in the atavistic cultural restoration of Vichy, with its slogan of 'Work, Family, Fatherland'.

Of course, under 'normal' circumstances such a radical reversal of the social and political balance of forces between labour and capital would have been impossible in France. For the transition from a decadent, parliamentary democracy to an open military-bonapartist dictatorship to occur, three political conditions were absolutely essential. First, the last parliamentary cabinet led by Paul Reynaud had to resign without resistance. Secondly, the president of the Republic had to call upon an open defender of authoritarian rule—in this case, Marshal Pétain—to form a new government. Thirdly, the majority of Parliament, senators and deputies together, had to be willing to bury the constitution of the Third Republic. In the event, all these conditions were fulfilled without hesitation 'when the social need arose' and the general trend became hegemonic inside the ruling class.

Until the end of May 1940 Paul Reynaud had been considered a headstrong and obstinate politician, skilful at manipulating cabinets and deputies. But still he allowed himself to be manoeuvred into an ambiguous cabinet vote, asking not for an armistice but only for Germany's 'conditions for an armistice', which put him into a minority and led him—entirely out of character—to resign. Correlatively, up to this point President Lebrun had been generally viewed as a complete nonentity, without a will of his own, who had only been chosen for his honorific position because his 'personality' corresponded to Clemenceau's famous dictum: 'if you want a president, choose the stupidest.' Nevertheless this nonentity decided the crucial turn of events on 26 June 1940. Had he called Reynaud back instead of summoning Pétain, the Third Republic would have survived at least a little longer. But with a will and obstinacy totally out of 'character', and possibly with the complicity of Reynaud, he imposed Pétain's dictatorship.

Of course, '*c'est Pétain qu'il nous faut*' had been the battle cry of the far right since 1936, but while the old marshal was quite popular—especially amongst bourgeois notables—his parliamentary appeal before May 1940 had been strictly limited to a small fringe. Yet his sudden candidature as prime minister was backed by an overwhelming majority of deputies and senators (including, as we have observed, most of the 1936 parliamentary 'left'), orchestrated by that master of intrigue and blackmail, Pierre Laval. Indeed, Laval had been 'available' for such an operation since at least 1937 and had been frenetically intriguing against the Republic. It is also true that the utter demoralization of most parliamentarians in June 1940, as a result of the stunning and unforeseen defeat of the Allied armies, made it easier for such a manoeuvre to succeed. Nevertheless it is hard to deny that such a swift and radical reversal of the behavioural norms and habits of literally hundreds of politicians—six or seven of whom played decisive roles in the tragi-comedy—could only occur because it accorded with the collective needs and conscious wishes of the majority of the French bourgeoisie. For that class it was imperative

not only to switch sides in the midst of war, but to overthrow the reformist acquisitions of the French labour movement.

A symmetrical but opposite situation arose when the French ruling class was confronted with the imminence of an Allied landing. Now the problem for the majority of French capitalists, deeply discredited in the eyes of the masses by their collaboration with the Nazis, was to save both French capitalism and an independent bourgeois state (and empire) in the face of very unfavourable balances of forces vis-à-vis both the French working class (armed as a result of the rise of the Resistance) and the Anglo-Saxon powers. A radical switch of political personnel and alliances was again the order of the day. This time new 'men of destiny', Charles de Gaulle and his closest collaborators, were 'providentially' available to undertake this seemingly miraculous salvage operation. That it succeeded was a surprise to many contemporaries used to pusillanimous French leaders. (The arrogant and inept Field-Marshal Keitel, when arriving to sign the Wehrmacht's unconditional surrender in 1945, had no other comment to make to the assembled Allied command than the exclamation: 'What, before the French too?')

Certainly de Gaulle was an exceptional personality, with a brilliant mind and iron will superior to most of his class, not only in France but in the rest of Europe. Yet as long as his virtues did not correspond to the self-defined needs of the French bourgeoisie, he remained marginalized, considered half-mad and a dangerous adventurer. Some thought him to be pro-fascist, others later condemned him as a Communist sympathizer. Even as normally astute a politician and judge of character as Franklin D. Roosevelt—the consummate interest-broker in modern American history—constantly made fun of de Gaulle and his 'vainglorious pretensions'. As late as June 1944, the Allies were still ready to impose a military occupation on France, which would probably have led to a Greek-style civil war or worse. De Gaulle, with negligible forces at his disposal, correctly judged the needs of French (and, indeed, international) capitalism and succeeded in establishing by diplomatic *coup de main* a reborn parliamentary regime incorporating the Communist Resistance.

The case of Churchill affords another sort of corroboration for Plekhanov's view of the relationship between decisive personalities and the requirements of class rule. Traditional historiography, whether admiring or critical of Churchill's previous historical roles, has been almost unanimous in lauding his move into 10 Downing Street, at the head of a coalition government including the Labour Party, as a major turning point in the war. Churchill undoubtedly embodied the unshaken resolve of the British ruling class and of the broad majority of the British people not to capitulate to Germany under any circumstance. But by romanticizing his personal attributes, rather than starting from an analysis of the activities of larger social forces, most bourgeois historians fail the test of comparative example. For the central question is not what accidents of biography made Churchill as an individual more decisive than Chamberlain (or, similarly, distinguished de Gaulle from Pétain), but why Churchill was able to rally a majority of his class

and people around himself while de Gaulle remained an isolated figure in France in June 1940.

Of course the fact that the French armed forces had just suffered a humiliating defeat, while the British were able to evacuate most of their defeated army to their island fortress, made a difference. But then again in 1940 most knowledgeable observers—including the American ambassador, Jospeh Kennedy—considered Britain's position as fundamentally hopeless. Meanwhile France, while broken in the Ardennes, still possessed an undefeated fleet (the second largest in Europe), a large army in North Africa—stronger than what the British had at their disposal—a significant air reserve, and an intact colonial empire. It was, thus, by no means clear that the British had the certain means to resist invasion, or, conversely, that the French were utterly defeated or without options for continued national resistance.

In fact the real difference between the British and French situations was less their military predicaments than the predispositions of their ruling classes. The French bourgeoisie had become increasingly defeatist for sound, materialist reasons. It had shown itself economically and militarily incompetent to guarantee the Versailles system in the face of Germany's aggressive expansion and rearmament. Even more to the point, it was primarily obsessed with containing its own working class, which had become a higher political priority than the attempt to defeat German competition. The British bourgeoisie, on the other hand, was neither demoralized nor defeatist. It had already beaten its own labour movement, first economically in 1926, then politically in 1931–35. At the same time its world position (even if rapidly being overtaken by the United States) was still stronger than Germany's, although Hitler's hegemony over Europe clearly endangered the British Empire. Moreover, the British elite were convinced that eventual support from the United States, together with the raw material and manpower resources of the Empire, made continued war against Germany a realistic strategy.

The moment was dramatic and full of dangers, but the future seemed largely guaranteed, provided Britain could weather the immediate crisis. 'If we hold out for three months, we shall be facing victory in three years,' Churchill correctly prophesied in a secret speech to the House of Commons. And Churchill was the almost ideal choice to stiffen British resolve until the Americans entered the war. That is why, after having been considered for years a maverick and has-been figure, a voice crying in the wilderness, he could be suddenly resurrected as the *deus ex machina* of his class. By an abrupt turn of events, and of social needs, the wilderness had been filled with millions of people.

### The Social Sieve of Leadership

In order to understand these various examples of leadership selection in crisis—Pétain, de Gaulle, Churchill—we need to augment Plekhanov's concept of socially determined 'availability' with a more precise analysis of the various mechanisms of choosing and promoting political personnel within different social classes. Although these selection mechanisms are nationally specific, certain common aspects can be noted amongst

the modern bourgeoisie. The starting point, of course, is the functional division of labour inside the capitalist class. Compared with the life of aristocratic 'leisure classes', the business of making profit is a terrifically time-absorbing profession. Hence generally only that part of the bourgeoisie not directly acting as entrepreneurs will be able or willing to opt for political careers. Under exceptional circumstances or conditions of extreme wealth, a personal union between top finance capitalists and the summit of the state apparatus may occur.[9] But this is more an exception than a rule. More typically, entrepreneurs and professional politicians arise side-by-side as separate career streams within the bourgeois stratum.

What entices a middle-class or wealthy individual to pursue a political career rather than the liberal professions or business? Personal ambition, ideological conviction, failure in other fields, family tradition, or exterior events may all play roles in orienting personal choice, but more often than one supposes, social pressures and circumstances bear decisively upon individual dispositions. Often individuals are 'conscripted' by peer groups or nominated by elders to enter political careers or stand for office. Likewise what often appears as force of ideological conviction is even more the weight of social circumstance and peer pressure. Moreover through these networks of social selection (like Ronald Reagan's famous 'kitchen cabinet' of wealthy sponsors) the political ranks are winnowed so that only a select few thousand candidates are groomed and promoted to *national* levels of authority and power. Among this elite, moreover, a third to a half will find some success in office, and from their reduced ranks, some dozens will continue to survive the final tests of political selection as ministers, prime ministers, presidents or dictators. (Even military dictators must pass through the sieve of a class-bound selection process, albeit via coteries of military officers connected to aristocratic or bourgeois milieux.)

At the summit levels of political power, the selection process involves life-and-death tests of will-power, foresight and shrewdness. The ruling classes will rarely let people ascend to positions of central power without having them give prior guarantees that they will responsibly defend the existing structures of property and accumulation. The function of the power hierarchy is precisely its ability to weed out untrustworthy or erratic candidates. For that reason many local luminaries or demagogues (think of Enoch Powell in Britain) will never finally make it to the top of the national power structure. But the selection process is by no means purely negative. Positive qualities have to be selected and tested before the class, or at least its principal representatives, accept a person as a candidate for national leadership. The ability to understand and to articulate collective class needs is vital, as is the corresponding capacity to judge relations of force and to formulate tactics according to some strategic plan. Of course, the qualities required in times of prosperity and times of crisis, in peace and in war, are different. Particular combinations of skills which qualify candidates for leadership in one

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[9] In the United States, the presence of top industrialists and bankers in the cabinet is much more pronounced than in Europe and Japan. Roosevelt's and Truman's wartime administrations were dominated by corporate executives, oil men and 'dollar a year' businessmen.

conjuncture may actually disqualify them to take command in another, transformed situation. Under these circumstances, the very way in which the selection process has occurred makes it nearly unavoidable that in each given country, there are always at least four or five central leaders 'available' to implement quite different solutions. The bourgeoisie will generally choose the one who best fulfils what it considers to be the priority needs of the moment.

The bourgeoisie, of course, can make mistakes in choosing the 'men of destiny'. No automatic law ensures that a social class chooses the leadership it needs (although, more commonly, groups get the leadership they deserve). Moreover, there is always enough discrepancy between short-term and longer-term class interests to make a margin of error in leadership selection inevitable. No collectivity can ever be totally conscious of the sum total of all its interests in a completely objective way, if only because its own political praxis always changes the situation to a certain degree and makes exact calculation of the consequences of action impossible. In addition, in bourgeois society, the tremendous weight of private interests obviates any automatic or complete congruence between private motives and class interests.

But after all these qualifications and clarifications are admitted, it remains the case that the leadership selection process is overwhelmingly social and class-specific. No conspiracy theory is necessary to understand how it works; the role of informal groupings, *salons*, congeries, 'old boy' networks and the like is quite sufficient. It is hardly ever a matter of the 'top monopolists' choosing X, Y, or Z for top positions rather than A, B, or C. Rather the 'top monopolists'—or some broader network of power brokerage within the ruling class—establish sufficient barriers and preliminary tests to ensure that 'weak characters' or 'untrustworthy' defenders of ruling-class interests will not pass the threshold of state power. Thus, in the final analysis, the 'right' man (or, occasionally, woman) will usually be found at the right spot at the right time.

The problem of the individual's role in history has often been formulated in a way that counterposes the individual to the social group. More recently this has been translated into a counterposition between 'biological' and 'social' factors. The schools of 'Sociobiology' and 'Psychohistory' have challenged the capacity of historical materialism to explain historical change in a comprehensive manner.[10] But both of these approaches are unsatisfactory to the extent that they ignore the fact that socially relevant, 'important' individuals who influence history through their individual praxis, only do so by virtue of characteristics which are primarily shaped by society. The biological or instinctual substrata of personalities only create potentials which are open to a variety of different developments depending on larger social contexts. The very plasticity of biological or psychological dispositions means that a definitely shaped individual personality only emerges after many environ-

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[10] E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) is a typical manifesto, while Steven Rose's and Leon Kamin's *Not in Our Genes* (New York 1984) is a spirited critique. A recent synthesis of work in Psychohistory is Lloyd de Mause's, *Les Fondations de la Psycho-Histoire* (Paris 1985).

mental forces have operated to fulfil certain potentials while annulling others. And these environmental forces are to a large extent none other than *social institutions*, which mould the politically relevant individual through successive stages of his biography.

In bourgeois society, these institutions include the patriarchal nuclear family, the education system (including religious instruction and other 'ideological apparatuses'), the various state institutions through which the individual seeks power, and, finally, the particular matrix of partisan organizations which selectively promote promising candidates (parties, corporations, power networks, employers' associations, etc.). It is a truism that no individual can escape the influence of these powerful institutions, and it is the specific contention of historical materialism that they exercise the *decisive* influence in the formation of social leadership, moulding talents and dispositions into certain directions and not into others. They are, in other words, the powerful sources of social conformism, producing personalities which conform to the needs of social classes or their major fractions. They generate personalities who assure the defence and reproduction of a given social order, inasmuch as they 'internalize' the basic values which correspond to the structure and interests of that order.

Moreover, in bourgeois society, all these institutions tend to channel the basic human drive for self-affirmation (*Lustprinzip*) in the direction of individual competition for private wealth and power. But in fundamentally different social structures—tribal communalism, feudalism, or socialism—this primordial drive can shape completely different personalities with radically different valuations of self-esteem. In a society based on democratized and socialized production, for example, the drive for wealth and power would become socially irrational, even 'contrary to human nature'. This is not because the need for self-affirmation would have been suppressed, but rather that it would express itself through an entirely different system of social behaviour: competition for excellence in athletic or artistic prowess, competition for social recognition, competition for serving the community without expectation of material or power rewards, and so on. To recognize this historical specificity of socially-shaped individuality is only to admit an empirically provable and scientifically visible fact; it does not necessarily require a value judgement. But Marxists certainly formulate judgements as well and have traditionally asserted that a society in which the rule *homo homini lupus* prevails will produce more alienated, aggressive and destructive personalities than a society in which the basic relations of production establish voluntary cooperation and conscious solidarity as central social values.

### White Knights of Capitalism

To return, however, to the problem of Nazism and World War Two, it is striking how historians have tended to devalue or overlook the institutional selection process in Hitler's ascent to power. Long before his great electoral breakthrough in 1930, Hitler had to run the gauntlet of his own relatively small party in order to establish his untrammeled authority in this microcosm of the future Third Reich. These initial

years were by far the most difficult period of his political career, and at several points he was on the verge of losing control over his own party to personalities like Röhm. For the German nationalist right was a veritable jungle of would-be Führers, among whom Hitler was initially only *primus inter pares*. The lessons he learned during his relentless fight for leadership determined his *modus operandi* once he attained power, instilling patterns of ruthlessness, opportunism and deceit. To look for the origin of these traits in Hitler's early biography, rather than in the social milieu of the German post-Versailles right, distorts the actual chain of events. Far from being a 'gangster by birth', Hitler was predisposed towards a second-rate career in architecture or art. If he became the master gangster of the twentieth century, it was because he struggled for leadership for a decade in a nearly classical gangster organization, the NSDAP being not unlike the Mafia organizations of Sicily and the United States.

The overthrow of Mussolini in 1943 is another striking example of how larger social forces are able, under surprising circumstances, to seize individuals not as spiders trap flies in their web but as sculptors hammer away at blocks of marble. For Mussolini, a master of intrigue and the cold exercise of power, was easily outmanoeuvred by his stooges: the puppet monarch Victor Emmanuel III and Marshal Badoglio. The king and the marshal had for twenty years been servile accomplices of the *Duce*, totally overshadowed by his intelligence and willpower. It was not some unsuspected reservoir of genius or resolution which allowed them to depose Mussolini but rather the dramatic reversal of the fortunes of the Italian ruling class, put into a panic by the Allied invasion, that stripped the Fascist leader of his social support and power. The collective needs of the Italian bourgeoisie enabled the institution of the monarchy (as well as the suddenly revived 'collective leadership' of the Fascist Party) to reactivate itself virtually overnight, promoting the king from supine puppet to chief conspirator. In the face of the unanimity of the Italian ruling class, the once all-powerful Duce was arrested by a handful of carabinieri, unable to mobilize even a few hundred supporters to defend a dictatorship which had lasted twenty years!

Likewise the Emperor Hirohito had been a passive symbol for the military clique that governed Japan from the mid-thirties. By tradition he was a figurehead who never meddled in the affairs of state or imposed his views. But when it became increasingly apparent that American airpower could destroy the urban-industrial foundations of Japanese capitalism, and that there was no longer any serious possibility for a negotiated peace, the Emperor—advised by Tsugeru Yoshida and his coterie of shrewd bourgeois politicians—skilfully manoeuvred the military diehards into an unconditional surrender. He suddenly was transformed from a mere figurehead into *the* political leader of the ruling class. He imposed peace upon intransigent military leaders literally by raising his voice over the radio, trapping them in an inextricable politico-ideological contradiction. Having legitimated Japanese militarism through the cult of the Emperor's divinity, they were hardly able to act against his 'divine' appeal to his 'most loyal subjects'.

In both the Italian and Japanese cases, the transformation of figureheads

into power-wielders was only temporary. Victor Emmanuel and his entire dynasty were quickly removed from the scene, while Hirohito, under McArthur's forbearance, retreated into his traditional ceremonial role. Their short-lived roles as decisive national figures had been the result of exceptional circumstances that temporarily endowed figurehead institutions with emergency powers in order to rescue the state apparatus from imminent destruction. Furthermore in neither case was extraordinary personal ability or initiative required; rather traditional power networks—around Count Acquarone in Rome, and around Prince Konoye and Marquis Kido in Tokyo—were mobilized to weave intrigues together under the careful surveillance of the ruling class.

In Germany an even more ambitious rescue operation was attempted after the Allied landing in Normandy. By 1944 it had become clear to most German industrial and financial leaders—above all, to the Prussian Junket dynasties—that the war was lost and the Reich would be dismantled unless the advance of the Red Army was halted by a separate peace with the Americans. Even more than in French, Italian or Japanese cases, the sheer survival of large sections of the German ruling class— above all, the Prussian elite—was at stake. When, in fact, the military conspirators struck against Hitler on 20 July 1944, the Soviets were still beyond the Vistula and it is impossible to say what sequence of events might have followed the success of their coup—whether or not they would have succeeded in appealing to anti-Communism to divide the Allied bloc.

But, in the event, their action was a failure. Why? Should one accept conventional explanations that the conspiracy collapsed because of a technical contingency—the faulty placement of Stauffenberg's bomb— or, alternatively, the view that Beck, the real leader of the conspirators, was a 'Hamletian' personality who, vacillating at the crucial moment, was outwitted and outmanoeuvred by the diabolic Goebbels (aided by the personal admiration of Major Remer for the Führer)? Evidently not. General Ludwig Beck had been for many years the Wehrmacht's chief of staff, responsible not only for the successful rearmament of the Reich but also for masterminding many of the early military victories. He was a superb planner who, compared with Victor Emmanuel, Hirohito or Goebbels, not to mention Major Remer, appears like Gulliver amongst the Lilliputians. Yet, this experienced and expert planner failed miserably even to ensure such elementary rules of *coup d'état* as occupying radio stations, seizing control of the Berlin telecommunications system, or cutting the telephone lines between Goebbels's ministry and Hitler's bunker at Rastenburg. Why? Had he suddenly lost his nerve?

It is hard to credit an analysis of the coup's failure that relies on the personal weaknesses of General Beck or his political counterpart, Carl Goerdeler, the Mayor of Leipzig. Incomparably more important is the difference in the objective situation which the German conspirators faced, as compared with the position of the Italian plotters of 1943 or the Emperor's coterie in Japan during the summer of 1945. In Italy and Japan the army had been defeated and the urban centres were helplessly exposed to Allied airpower. There was only one road open before the

ruling class: to end the war immediately and unconditionally. There was thus a virtually unanimous will within the bourgeoisie to follow a clear course of action. In Germany, on the contrary, while the war was obviously being lost, the army had not yet been beaten. It still possessed vast human and material resources to sustain its fighting ability for many months. Moreover, unlike the Japanese or Italian cases (or the earlier French and British examples), the German ruling class was faced with a particularly grave danger: not just the loss of part of its power and wealth but expropriation and destruction of its class position by the Red Army.

Under these specific circumstances, the German capitalist class, in contrast to the Italian or Japanese, was deeply divided as to its course of action. Although it was united against any surrender to the Soviets, and largely convinced that some sort of surrender to the Anglo-Saxon allies was the preferable alternative, it was divided over the estimate of whether the Americans and British would accept a separate settlement. There was a deep difference of opinion on this question within German bourgeois circles. While some urged immediate removal of Hitler and capitulation to the Americans, others doubted whether it was worth running the risk of a collapse of the front without previous guarantees from the Allies. This latter bloc was the majority.

As a result of these strategic differences, both the army and the state apparatus were totally divided. It was this division—resulting from the objective dilemma of German imperialism in the summer of 1944—that explains the fatal vacillation that led to the failure of the coup. If the previously resolute Beck faltered at the decisive moment, it was because he realized that whatever he did would have split 'his' army and ensured civil war or a collapse of the front or both. If the German General Staff had united behind Beck, as the Italians had behind the King and Badoglio, the coup would have been successful within hours. The Nazi Party hierarchy had become deeply discredited and few people would have risen to defend it against the army, which still enjoyed immense prestige among the middle classes. So it was not the 'Hamletian' character of General Beck which doomed the coup, but rather the hesitations of the entire German ruling class, which were, in turn, a reflection of objective contradictions and real confusions. It was not the individual who caused disaster for the class, but rather the class which prevented the individual from acting successfully.

But there is an epilogue to this incident which puts the fate of the 20th July conspirators into ironic perspective. While Beck, Goedeler, Stauffenberg and their associates were preparing their coup, top function-aries of the Nazi Ministry of Economic Affairs (under the protection of one of the leaders of the SS) were quietly preparing a plan for a postwar Germany integrated into an 'open international economy' based on 'free capital movements' and a 'convertible mark'—i.e. a complete break from all the autarchic financial and commercial practices of the Third Reich. The architects of this vision—ultimately realized as the 'miracle of the Federal Republic'—were none other than Ludwig Erhard, the future Chancellor, and Ludwig Emminger, future chairman of the Bundesbank. While they had collaborated with the Nazis for a decade,

when it became necessary for their class survival they changed course by 180 degrees. Their skilful machinations contrasted with the failure of the July plot which ensured the liquidation of the Junket class and the loss of almost half of the German Reich.

Finally, we must note that the Nazi terror unleashed by Himmler after the failure of the coup, together with the effects of Allied carpet bombing, destroyed the remaining potential for sections of the German working class to intervene as an autonomous force to end the war.[11] The massive influx of more than ten million refugees from East Prussia and other lost German territories created a giant reserve army of labour which kept wages low for fifteen years and preserved the high rates of profits originally generated by the Nazi dictatorship's redistribution of income between classes. The course prepared by Erhard and Emminger, sponsored by American imperialism and initially tolerated by Stalin, enabled the German ruling class to emerge twenty years later with more financial and industrial power than ever before, albeit within a smaller state territory. There could be no more convincing illustration of how the 'cunning of history' works through the appropriation of individual talents by class needs within the constraints of a given mode of production.

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[11] Historians, Soviet as Western, generally tend to underestimate the potential for working-class resistance which was still present in Germany in 1944. The Social-Democratic participants in the Beck-Goerdeler conspiracy represented a serious force, and recent research indicates that in Hesse, at least, a plan had been set in motion to organize a general strike of railworkers in the wake of Hitler's assassination. Cf. William Allen, 'Die sozialdemokratische Untergrundbewegung', in *Der Widerstand gegen den National-sozialismus*, Munich 1985; and Timony Mason, 'Arbeiteropposition im nationalsozialis-tischen Deutschland', in Detlev Beukert, ed., *Die Reihen fest geschlossen*, Wuppertal 1981.