Sailing Against the Storm: Michael Oakeshott's Reflections on Totalitarianism

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Abstract: This essay analyses totalitarianism through the writings of Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), employing his image of navigation upon an open sea as a metaphor of the polyphony of voices against state control. The purposes of this essay are to reconstruct Oakeshott's distinction between the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism as a framework to contextualise twentieth-century totalitarian regimes; to show how totalitarianism represents a manifestation of rationalism in politics, seeking to remodel the human condition according to abstract designs; to trace how this regimes, such as fascism, nazism, and communism, fused the private and public spheres, dissolved pluralism, and subordinated law, morality, and institutions to a pre-determined finality; and to recover, from Oakeshott's own writings, the sceptical and prudential disposition, figured in the image of the stevedore who keeps the vessel in balance against the teleological totalitarian projects. In this sense, the Oakeshottian political disposition offers an antithesis to totalitarianism by conserving traditions that sustain our civilisation in its boundless ocean.

Keywords: Michael Oakeshott; totalitarianism; contingency; tradition; rationalism in politics.

I. THE RATIONALIST SHIPWRECK

Prolificacy is a defining trait of Michael Oakeshott's thought. This British philosopher, in his theoretical undertakings, ranges across fields such as politics, history, aesthetics, religion, and morality. Beyond merely moving within these interconnected domains, it is fair to say that the way he navigates this unlimited ocean is markedly distinctive, insofar as he does not seek to reorganize the world according to individual desires. Oakeshott, like ourselves, is embedded in a journey that began prior to our very arrival in the world and that will come to an end long after the twilight of his life. And it is marked by doubt, uncertainty, and, above all, by the inescapable action of contingency.

The shifting winds of contingency prevail throughout the navigation of an open sea. During this navigation, the vessel is at one moment carried in one direction, at another in a different one. Many occurrences escape the human capacity to anticipate, to govern, or to prevent. What often remains to us is the cultivation of a practical understanding of the situation and the ability to conduct ourselves in the face of contingency in our lives. As we move along a path devoid of linearity, whereas storms and calms succeed one another, we are thrown into uncertainty, as Odysseus and his crew in Homer's *magnum opus*.

In the face of unpredictability and contingency, individuals respond in different ways. There is one group that confronts circumstances with a measure of scepticism, mistrusting alluring and totalizing solutions. Another group, by contrast, advocates drastic alterations in the political institutions and moral life to circumscribe the ocean according to its own preferences. Oakeshott aligns himself with sceptically

informed views, owing especially to his inheritance from British moral philosophy and to his experience of the twentieth century, an era marked by the exacerbation of what he terms the *politics of faith*,[1] which manifested itself cataclysmically in the rise of totalitarian regimes, notably fascism, Nazism, and communism.

The context in which Oakeshott was situated required from him adherence to what he calls *politics of scepticism*,[2] whose purpose is to restore balance to the vessel upon the ocean. The pendulum of politics was moving toward disequilibrium due to the uninterrupted growth of the politics of faith, distinguished above all by *rationalism in politics* (Oakeshott 1991).[3] This form of politics is not confined to totalitarianism; it also encompasses various idealistic ways of conceiving politics in its practical reality, such as modern ideologies that seek to reduce the ocean's vastness to particular segments. In discerning the excesses of rationalism and the totalitarian trajectories assumed by the politics of faith, Oakeshott (2018, p. 139) advances sceptical counterpoints in his posthumous book *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*:

> The *politics of scepticism* understood that its contemporary task was, first, to recognize what was actually happening; second, to understand how government might most economically perform its perennial office of maintaining the order and balance appropriate to the current conditions and activities of society; and, third, to see that political activity was directed to this end and that its creativity was exercised accordingly.

Nevertheless, fascist, Nazi, and communist leaderships acted in a manner diametrically opposed to Oakeshott's formulation. Living through the twentieth century, a period in which the power of contingency was gravely misunderstood and scepticism largely dismissed, he was confronted with the most extreme manifestation of the *politics of faith*: totalitarianism, the pinnacle of *rationalism in politics*. The variety of voices that once resounded, pluralism as a constitutive feature of society, and the moral imagination as a sense of belonging to a civilizational inheritance, elements valued by Oakeshott, were likewise annihilated by the destructive force of totalitarianism, capable of drowning the human being in the depths of the ocean.

Methodologically, this paper follows the contextualist approach of the Cambridge School, associated with Quentin Skinner and John Pocock, which insists that political ideas be situated within the intellectual and historical circumstances that produced them. This choice is not incidental here. Oakeshott and the other authors invoked throughout this essay, such as Hannah Arendt, Leszek Kołakowski, Eric Voegelin Vladmir Tismăneanu, and Isaiah Berlin, theorize totalitarianism from a position of historical proximity, as witnesses and in several cases survivors. To read their reflections apart from this lived context would be to mistake for abstract theory what was, in fact, an urgent confrontation against the rationalism in politics in its most destructive forms (Skinner 1999; Pocock 2013).

Thus, the aim of this text is to analyse totalitarianism through the contributions of Michael Oakeshott. It undertakes discussions of the concept of totalitarianism, as well as examinations of the totalitarian regimes that devastated the twentieth century. It is maintained that the British philosopher offers significant contributions to this theme, chiefly because he adopts a sceptical approach attentive to experience and contingency. Confronted with this problem, Oakeshott might well have posed a rhetorical question: what is the grounding of political regimes that dream of reinventing society and the human condition through rationalized utopias?

II. THE TOTALITARIAN TIDAL WAVE

Totalitarianism is a political idea aimed at the suppression of the values that constitute us as human beings, disseminating repressive practices across all spheres of society. Its leaders act as legislators of humanity, seeking to reshape the social body in accordance with their own designs and relying on abstract ideas to build a "perfect" community (Arendt 1989). Totalitarian regimes destroy all forms of communal life not imposed by a central authority and dissolve human autonomy, constructing a heroic collective guided by a sacrosanct end. Through social engineering, they aspire to resolve the enigma of history, promising happiness, prosperity, and harmony to their people.

The abrupt rupture with the past and the longing to refound society upon different foundations were among the forces that gave rise to totalitarianism. Fascism, Nazism, and communism fostered a continuous movement aimed at the permanent mobilization of the masses. The demand for constant momentum, the pursuit of conquest, and the construction of meaning for the people contributed to the restructuring of a new ethos. Moreover, charisma, whether that of the party (in the communist case) or of the leader (the *Duce*, the *Führer*), supplied these regimes with a prophetic fuel. Vladimir Tismăneanu, a Romanian political scientist who survived the communist tragedy in his country, explains this phenomenon:

> Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, during the reign of these totalitarian movements, conscience itself succumbed. Moreover, "the madness of such systems lies not only in their initial premise, but in the very logic upon which they are constructed." Communism was a radical economic, moral, social, and cultural doctrine centered on the realization of radically transformative ends. Nazi-Fascism emerged as its arch-rival; nonetheless, it shared with communism a collectivist and anti-liberal outlook, the neo-romantic dream of a total community, and the longing for an existence rendered entirely pure (2017, p. 354).

These totalitarian regimes presented themselves as a form of catharsis, claiming the capacity to purify humanity through a revolution not only political, economic, and social, but also moral. Their ideologies carried with them a new perspective on the human condition, envisioning a society that would approximate a paradisiacal vision within the material world or, rather, that would transpose the transcendent into the immanent:

> Fascism and communism, as political movements, emerged as responses to a painful and universally felt "crisis of meaning" across Europe. Born out of the cataclysmic barbarism and unprecedented violence of the First World War, these apocalyptic movements proclaimed the advent of the millennium in this world. To employ Eric Voegelin's expression, they sought to *immanentize the eschaton*, to build Heaven on Earth, and to abolish the Augustinian distinction between the City of Man and the City of God (2017, p. 35).

Nonetheless, the results proved to be radically different from the intentions. The attempt to create a new man and a new civilization through abstract principles, accompanied by revolutionary and violent action, produced a putrefied landscape. Totalitarian movements submerged human identity in a bloody and inhospitable terrain. Totalitarianism, whether in its versions, is intrinsically perverse. There is no moral justification capable of sustaining regimes that seek to undermine the institutions, values, customs, and habits that secure our civilization on plural basis. The Holocaust and the Holodomor were unjustifiable crimes, and history entrusts us with the duty of remembering both.

In the interpretation of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (2005), Nazi-Fascism and Communism represented two incarnations of the "devil in history", an expression that later served as the title of Tismăneanu's book. Totalitarian regimes sought to refound modernity on principles originating in that very period. In condemning the excesses committed by the liberal order grounded in bourgeois ideals

inherited from the Enlightenment, totalitarian ideologies introduced massive doses of rationalism into an environment already marked by secularism, scientism, individualism, and technicism. The effect was akin to setting fire to a tank of gasoline: the ensuing explosions produced wars, persecutions, and death—a veritable sea of blood.

This transformation is central to Kołakowski's (2005) interpretation of twentieth-century totalitarianism. The problem was not merely that political power became increasingly coercive, but that the distinction between political authority and the autonomous forms of social life was progressively eroded. Once the state claimed to embody the truth of history, no independent sphere of association could remain entirely beyond its reach. Plurality and liberty ceased to be understood as an ordinary condition of political life and came to be regarded as an obstacle to the realization of the political project.

Totalitarians departed from the following perception: the entanglements generated by the exaggeration of the liberal *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*. Because they were revolutionary, totalitarian conceptions denounced democracy, parliamentarism, and constitutionalism. As "political religions", to borrow Voegelin's term, they purported to liberate human beings from moral and legal constraints, conferring a new meaning upon the human condition. The aim was to transform entirely morality, ethics, law, language, science, institutions, interpersonal relations, and even the human condition itself. Everything was to be subordinated to the purpose of constructing an ideal society here and now, once this teleological *modus* possessed a sacrosanct character, promising salvation on immanent ground while disregarding the action of contingencies.

If bourgeois ideals were already imbued with rationalism, totalitarians intensified this element and thus fell into the *politics of faith* (Oakeshott 2018). The bourgeois order was declared bankrupt; liberalism was deemed to have failed in both the political and economic spheres; and modernity was said to require reconstruction upon different foundations. With the rise of totalitarian regimes, one of the principal traits cherished by the bourgeois world, individualism, was eclipsed in favor of a collectivist outlook forged amid the ruins of that shattered order.

It was the end of individual autonomy. Totalitarian regimes sought to remodel the human condition through generic and abstract propositions. In terms of political orientation, communists managed to present themselves as heirs of the Enlightenment by offering a new "humanist" solution to social problems, albeit one deeply critical of the bourgeois ethos (Tismăneanu 2019). By contrast, fascism and Nazism denounced the human emancipation made possible by Enlightenment doctrines and, despite its emphasis on so-called traditional values, cannot be regarded as either conservative or reactionary. Lacking an organicist, sceptical, and gradualist praxis, it appealed instead to a non-existent past, to an invented traditions fashioned by a leader who positioned himself as the horizon of a perfect future.

In breaking with Enlightenment constraints, these movements infused themselves with an ideological archetype aimed at the sanctification of historical mythology and the sacralization of fabricated traditions. As Souza and Araújo observe, "communism and nazi-fascism rejected the human condition: the former in the name of historical necessity; the latter, in the name of the heroism of false prophets" (2021, p. 202). Arendt (1989) warns that totalitarian regimes sought to fuse the private and public spheres, eliminating interiority and individual autonomy, and reducing human beings to the condition of superfluous and disposable beings. This phenomenon may be understood as the massification of man.

Existence itself was relativized and preserved only insofar as it conformed to the regime's designs. Those who challenged the inhumane practices of systems were condemned to purges and forced labor, as exemplified by the concentration camps in Poland and the *Gulags* in the Soviet Union. Secret police forces, paramilitary militias, and networks of spies were omnipresent, seeking to preserve the totalitarian system by cruelly punishments (Souza and Araújo 2021).

Totalitarians aspired to the construction of an entirely different order, rejecting most existing institutions and patterns of life. This project of social engineering longed for the reconstruction of civilization through the creation of new human beings, endowed with values distinct from those transmitted over

time. Within the totalitarian mindset, such collectivist systems would resolve the dilemmas of humanity. Nevertheless, Oakeshott (2018, p. 43) advances a critique of this very notion:

> To live at an extreme is an insidious effort; we may perhaps escape from the prison of the extreme we have come to inhabit, but we quickly find ourselves deprived of the power to recognize anything other than some form of extremity. Like those who pursue the warmth of summer thinking only that they are escaping winter, and forget that they are also losing the other seasons, those who embrace the extreme in politics come to understand only a politics of extremes.

In Oakeshott's exegesis, Marxism could be interpreted as a simplifying idea that compels us to abandon all previous modes of social and political activity so that problems may be resolved through the communist ideal. Communism, in turn, represented one of the greatest philosophical and political utopias in history, while promising freedom and salvation, it ultimately produced servitude and desolation. Fascism and Nazism, in a manner analogous to communism, likewise sought to impose a mythical ethos, but ended instead in militarism, persecution, violence, and war.

Fascists, nazis and communists proudly reaffirmed their ideology and suppressed human autonomy through their respective devotion to the leader and to the party. The central objective of the ideological project was the mental control of individuals, converting them into enthusiasts of the totalitarian utopia, one bound to the multiple dimensions of life and governed by the regime's animating ideology. Both extremes shared a belief in the malleability of the human condition and in the capacity to transform it according to a utopian plan guided by ideological precepts. Thus, "nazi-fascism and communism inspired loyalties, a fascination with the image of the perfect society, and a romantic immersion in collective movements that promised the advent of the millennium" (Tismăneanu 2019, p. 261).

Totalitarian ideologies sought not merely the transformation of the external world or of society, but rather the alteration of the human condition itself. Ideology served as the foundation for the extremist actions of leaders who, in attempting to reinvent the human being, condemned humanity to totalitarian damnation (Voegelin 2000; Kołakowski 2005; Tismăneanu 2019).

Time and again, the engineers of human souls have appealed to citizens to sacrifice their liberties in exchange for the promise of security, progress, justice, harmony, order, national emancipation, among other ends. To suppose that in some particular place, whether in the past, present, or future, in divine revelation or in human reason, in the annals of history or in scientific production, or even in the pure soul of an incorruptible man, there exists a final solution is a form of pretension. Isaiah Berlin (2016, p. 23) offers the following synthesis on this topic:

> Some armed prophets seek to save humanity, and others only their own race, on account of its alleged superior attributes; but whatever the motive, the millions destroyed in wars and revolutions—gas chambers, gulags, genocides, all the monstrosities for which the twentieth century will be remembered—are the price that human beings are required to pay for the welfare of future generations. If you truly wish to save humanity, you must harden your heart, whatever the cost.

Berlin's idea reveals the perverse arithmetic that underlies every totalitarian project: the transmutation of atrocity into sacrifice, and of sacrifice into a form of redemption, as Voegelin (2000) argued, this occurred within an immanent dimension grounded solely in human reason. It is precisely this transfiguration of cruelty into necessity that Oakeshott's scepticism refuses to countenance, insofar as no chart of history can license the sacrifice of the plural and irreplaceable voices that make up a society.

There is no final solution capable of building Paradise on Earth. It is wholly indefensible to sacrifice all the values of a society, depriving human capacities in the service of a remote and utopian ideal. According to Berlin, pluralism is an indispensable phenomenon for human beings. Linked to freedom as a tradition

and to the needs of citizens, pluralism allows society to reproduce itself, being constituted over time in an organic manner through polyphonic echoes.

III. NAVIGATING THE OPEN SEA

Michael Oakeshott, upon embarking on a journey that began even before his birth and that continues beyond his death, understands that it is impossible to know the vastness of the ocean; that is, no one can shape infinity according to personal preference. Human beings lack the capacity to comprehend things in their totality, much less to adjust them to individual designs. The author finds himself upon the open sea, confronted with possibilities and challenges in the face of immensity.

Throughout the voyage, Oakeshott hears a wide range of voices freely resonating, and the echoes produced spontaneously come to constitute, gradually, a pluralism anchored in the notion of liberty. This liberty, in turn, is accompanied by historical elements that refer to the traditions of a people who, over time, through both error and achievement, have constructed safe harbors that function as repositories of accumulated knowledge. Within them, one may find moral, political, cultural, rational, and empirical foundations that, jointly and interdependently, crystallize a specific civilizational archetype. As Oakeshott observes, "habits and institutions are neither rational contrivances nor fortuitous collections, but historical compositions" (2018, p. 39). In this part of the ocean, he perceives the operation of contingency and, consequently, its acceptance through the politics of scepticism:

> In the politics of scepticism, government resembles good humour and satire: neither promises to conduct us to heaven nor to disclose the truth; yet the one may preserve us from hell, and the other from folly (2018, p. 74).

Oakeshott does not behold only sceptical arrangements; he also faces innumerable rationalist attempts to reorder the ocean based on idealism. Faced with the inescapable operation of contingency, other individuals respond in the opposite manner. Rather than adjusting sceptically to the shifting winds of circumstance, they prefer to construct their own frameworks out of abstract ideals. By disregarding the role of contingency, the authority of tradition, and the claims of historical experience, they are drawn into the politics of faith, and rationalism becomes the ground of every course of action. It is thus that the ship rests in totalitarian harbours.

At certain moments in the voyage, the song of the siren may draw some of the crew toward the depths of the ocean, just as in the Odyssey. The sirens encountered by Odysseus promised unrestrained pleasure yet delivered desolation and death. Likewise, their song resonates in the sirens of totalitarianism. Those who succumb to the seductive song of the politics of faith do not do so out of mere naivety or malice, but out of a legitimate, if gravely misdirected, longing to escape the anguish of contingency. The song promises calm crossing where only storms exist, certainties where only doubt prevails (Homer 2011).

Forewarned, Odysseus orders himself bound to the mast and the ears of his crew sealed with wax, recognising that the only effective defence against the siren's fascination is attached on institutions, traditions, and the bond that ties us to something greater than the impulse of the moment (Homer 2011). Oakeshott (2018), in an analogous way, places trust in accumulated experience, sedimented across generations, that functions as the rope binding civilisation to the mast, preventing it from casting itself, enthralled, toward a song that promises salvation and delivers only shipwreck.

Thereafter, once travelling upon an ocean delimited by totalitarian presumption, the fate of the vessel becomes deeply troubling. If it sails solely along the route prescribed by the totalitarian regime, it may endure by confining itself to what is permitted; should it cross those boundaries, it will be sunk by the holders of power who guard and preserve the system. Whatever the choice, the tendency is that, at some point during the life of the regime, all are submerged by the totalitarian tsunami. In time, those who follow

the rationally ordained course, and even the leaders who dared to establish the new rules, are themselves swallowed by the Leviathan:

> Faith presents itself as the maximum of government, as the comprehensive ordering of the activities of individuals; and scepticism, therefore, may be said to represent the minimum of government, being concerned to impose as little uniformity as possible upon the direction of those activities. But the character of the sceptical disposition is not merely what is reflected in the mirror of faith: it has a positive office, namely the maintenance of a relevant public order (Oakeshott 2018, p. 164).

In his essay *Rationalism in Politics*, first published in 1947, Oakeshott argues that political rationalism, by placing exclusive trust in reason, seeks to reduce the whole of human experience to a set of generic, abstract, and universal values. This, indeed, is the prevailing temper of totalitarian regimes, notwithstanding the impossibility of grasping the full complexity of human experience through abstractions derived from rational calculation (Oakeshott 1991).

However, rationalists are resistant to gradual reforms and instead endeavour to impose their utopias upon reality. They disparage practical knowledge and maintain that socio-political arrangements may be deliberately chosen in accordance with a prescribed programme, as exemplified by fascism, Nazism, and communism. In doing so, moral imagination, inherited loyalties, and social attachments are dissolved. Totalitarians thereby extinguish any genuine possibility of reflection, imprisoning human beings in the darkness of the ocean's depths:

> The nemesis of the politics of faith, therefore, lies in the manner in which government, when tied to the pursuit of perfection, inevitably collapses: the endeavour to impose a single pattern of activity upon a community is a self-defeating enterprise (Oakeshott 2018, pp. 156-157).

From Oakeshott's writings, it becomes apparent that totalitarianism represents an attempt to impose an ideological and dogmatic vision upon the social body, suppressing the plural arrangements that constitute human life. In this sense, Oakeshott may be understood as regarding totalitarianism as an extreme form of rationalism in politics and as the embodiment of the politics of faith, insofar as it seeks to replace traditions and institutions formed over time with a comprehensive ideological project.

In *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, Oakeshott says that the problem lies not only in the content of fascist, nazi, or communist objectives, but in the very idea that a society can be rationally planned and steered by a political authority toward a predetermined destiny. All of them turn politics into an instrument for producing a particular kind of society and, ultimately, a particular kind of man. Totalitarian regimes are enemies of an unplanned historical society, and the problem is epistemological and political. Firstly, because it presupposes that someone possesses sufficient knowledge to determine the future of a society; secondly, this knowledge comes to justify the concentration of power necessary to carry out this project (Oakeshott 1950).

He criticises the totalitarian pretension to reshape society. The practical sustenance of a utopia result in the abolition of the vast stock of human experience slowly acquired in the course of historical events. This is injurious to human beings, who are submerged together with the values internalised over the course of their lives.

The richness and complexity of the boundless ocean are subdued by totalitarians in the service of generalist ideals presumed capable of solving the enigmas of history. Fascism, Nazism and communism proceed on the belief that unimaginable forms of knowledge lie hidden in the oceanic depths, and that only great minds are able to retrieve them and apply them to society. Such knowledge, hitherto mysterious like a buried treasure, may be wielded only by the messianic leader or party in the name of humanity's salvation (1950, 1991).

Once the chest is opened and the treasure revealed to the rest, new dogmas are externalised. Like a tsunami, these new conceptions of moral, political, and social life sweep away the old foundations, seeking to reconstruct not merely institutions, but the human condition itself. And Oakeshott (1991) cautions us that the rationalist framework imposed by totalitarians is generic in character and very often dystopian.

Oakeshottian thought, in valuing tradition, contingency, practical knowledge, and scepticism, is naturally incompatible with totalitarianism. In a totalitarian regime, the plurality of voices does not resonate, for such a system is hostile to dialogue, pluralism, and freedom. The "great conversation of mankind" is conducted in a technical manner and confined to a bureaucratic body that proposes to recreate the world in its own image and likeness. In this way, the moral sense of society is dissipated, as institutions formed over time are undermined in favour of the construction of a new socio-political order and even of a new kind of human being.

Oakeshott draws attention to the danger of totalitarian regimes on the grounds that they seek to exercise absolute control over every aspect of human life, thereby contributing to the suppression of a fully human existence grounded in traditions historically shaped by contingency. What is imposed is a totalitarian order governed by an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient state. In opposition to totalitarianism, Oakeshott observes that "just as with garlic in cooking, government should be used in such a way that only its absence is noticed" (2018, p. 75).

The philosopher discerns that, with the rise of rationalism in politics, which unfolds into an excessive confidence in the politics of faith, it is wisely to act with prudence. Appealing to this Aristotelian virtue, Oakeshott recalls the doctrine of moderation set forth by Lord Halifax in *The Character of a Trimmer*. Through this work, Oakeshott (2018) retrieves the figure of the stevedore, a simple yet indispensable labourer who distributes the cargo aboard the ship to keep it in balance during navigation. Metaphorically, the stevedore balances faith and scepticism within the vessel, thereby demonstrating that virtue resides in the mean between extremes (Aristotle 1996).

Stevedoring politics draws upon the stock of practical knowledge accumulated through historical experience to ensure that the vessel continues to navigate. What matters is not the length of the voyage or the point of arrival, but the experience acquired in the crossing (Oakeshott 2018). By cultivating prudence, the stevedore understands tradition as something comprehensive, his concern is to keep in balance a vessel sailing upon an abyssal sea:

> Perhaps the most compelling image of this metaphor is that the fate of all ultimately falls into the hands of the humblest of the crew, demonstrating that the virtue of politics resides in experience and moderation (2018, p. 223).

Oakeshott (1991, 2018) contrasts the rationalist mentality with the traditions bequeathed by our forebears, which confer moral meaning upon human life. In doing so, he acknowledges the importance of reason when situated within a framework that also preserves phenomena such as practical knowledge, experience, morality, and contingency. He understands that we inhabit a civilisation where multiple voices resonate and organically constitute a plural environment rich in possibilities.

IV. TOTALITARIANISM IN THE DEPTHS OF THE OCEAN

In the twentieth century, more than in any other period of history, individuals were drawn to the promises of revolutionary messianism, grounded in teleological worldviews imagined by false prophets; for "in the modern world, the context of political scepticism is the presence, not the absence, of power" (Oakeshott 2018, p. 119). It was an era that witnessed the emergence of super-civilisations seeking forms analogous to those of a universal religious congregation, capable of uniting human beings under a single archetype. From fascism, Nazism, and communism, there was a herculean effort to effect a complete transformation of the human condition, giving rise to the neo-romantic dream of transcending what appeared to be the

fragmented legacy of values and institutions that had emerged over the course of human history. Thus, totalitarian regimes were presented at both extremes of politics.

Fascism and Nazism may be understood as the imposition of moral, educational, political, and behavioural values. The individual is fused into the aspirations of the nation, his originality extinguished, while the leader directs the social body towards a national objective justified through fabricated traditions. Communism, by contrast, is described by Tismăneanu (2019) as a "rationalised theodicy", where history replaced God, the proletariat was cast as the universal redeemer, and revolution signified salvation and the end of human suffering. Yet the chimerical dream of Marx and his followers left a toll of one hundred million dead.

Even after the collapse of the Axis powers in the twilight of the Second World War and of Communism with the end of the Cold War, i.e. the Soviet Union's downfall, the spectre of these regimes continues to haunt humanity. In the twenty-first century, fascist reveries and communist delusions threaten nations through the reinterpretation of the principles that constitute these political religions. Totalitarian regimes have left deep scars of suffering, chaos, and tragedy. Lives were extinguished, nations laid waste, and contingency was disregarded in favour of ambitious projects of power. Confronted with the totalitarian catastrophe, Kołakowski (1997) observes:

> Any social utopia that claims to offer a technical plan for making society perfect now strikes me as fraught with the gravest dangers. I am not suggesting that the idea of human fraternity is ignoble, naive, or futile; nor do I believe it should be dismissed as belonging to an age of innocence. But to go so far as to imagine that we can design a comprehensive plan for society by which harmony, justice, and prosperity may be achieved through human engineering seems to me an invitation to despotism. I would therefore retain utopia as a stimulus to the imagination and confine it to that role (see also Tismăneanu 2019, p. 259).

Kołakowski's thought is consonant with Oakeshott's approach regarding the genesis and the apocalypse of totalitarianism. In Oakeshottian interpretation, the critiques of rationalism in politics and of the excesses of the politics of faith, when transposed to analyses of the events that convulsed the previous century, may be understood as anti-fascism and anti-communism. These emerge as logical responses to the cataclysmic experiences that devastated an era in its most varied aspects.

In opposition to totalitarianism, Oakeshott shows us the importance of pluralism, moral imagination, dialogue, scepticism, and above all the dominion of contingency. These attributes may be imperfect, yet they restrain the ascendancy of rationalism in politics and thus avert the desolation of the human condition. From Oakeshott's contributions, we come to understand that civilisational stability depends upon the reproduction of habits, customs, and traditions that confer meaning, rather than a rationalist archetype that seeks to save the world from itself and human beings from themselves.

Totalitarian rulers execrate contingency and place blind trust in the brilliance of their own reason. They rewrite the past, control the present, and prescribe the future in the direction of an ideal society. History, however, has shown the impossibility of such an undertaking. Oakeshott would likely say that we live as though navigating a boundless ocean, marked by storms and calms alike; and that scepticism assists us not in mastering events, but in coping with the diverse situations produced by contingency, including the totalitarian temptations that arise from rationalism in politics.

In place of totalising doctrines, Oakeshott encourages us to live through a prudent disposition historically constituted by the interaction of different experiences and modes, learning what is intimated by contingencies rather than seeking final answers in abstractions. He maintains that "habits and institutions which form our ways of governing are neither rational units nor fortuitous collections, but historical compositions" (Oakeshott 2018, p. 39). This is why the contextualist method pursued throughout this essay matters. Oakeshott and the other authors theorised these concepts in the immediate shadow of catastrophe, lending their thought the weight of testimony. The ocean encompasses an infinity of questions and,

therefore, the so-called enigmas of history admit of no final solutions worthy of pursuit, for they will never be found in any rationalist mind, leader, party or project.

Perhaps, the truest image of this disposition is not the totalitarians delimiting the ocean, but Odysseus upon the "wine-dark sea". Homer's hero does not sail toward some undiscovered utopia, he sails home, toward the island he already knows, toward the hearth, the olive tree rooted in his marriage bed. His wanderings among sirens and enchantresses' proof of how easily a voyager may be seduced by songs that promise a different life, and how each temptation nearly cost the one thing worth the whole labour of return. So too with the inheritance, Oakeshott defends not an innovative doctrine, but a home already given, sustained across generations, to which the prudent voyager, chastened by experience, at last comes back. The safe harbour is tradition itself, and the wisdom of the *Odyssey*, like the wisdom present in historical composition, lies in the disposition to:

> Prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss (Oakeshott 1991, p. 408).

In this civilisational meeting between Homer and Oakeshott, made possible by the voices that echoed across the centuries between them, carried a message forward: it is better to contend with the known imperfectibility of Ithaca than to dwell in the utopian land of Calypso.

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NOTES

1 The *politics of faith* is committed to perfectibility and conceives of government as an activity without inherent limits, directed toward the construction of an ideal society (Oakeshott 2018).

2 The *politics of scepticism* is detached from the pursuit of human perfection and takes the maintenance of order as its principal aim. It represents an attempt to preserve order and the natural course of things in light of the constraints imposed by reality and by the operations of contingency. Politicians and society, in this context, readjust themselves to prevailing conditions so as to improve them in accordance with the surrounding reality (Oakeshott 2018).

3 *Rationalism in politics*, being based entirely on the power of reason, seeks to reduce all human experience to a set of abstract values. In Oakeshott's conception, the rationalist mind stands opposed to inherited traditions, customs, and habits. Oakeshott fiercely criticizes rationalism, emphasizing the impossibility of set human experience into mere abstractions derived only from reason (Oakeshott 1991).