
George Bernard Shaw toward Nazism?

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Abstract

This work aims to clarify two aspects still little investigated by official historiography: what was the position of George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright and co-founder of the Fabian Society, in the face of Nazism, and how Hitler's Germany compared to Shaw himself. In this regard, it was useful to analyze some of his most important theatrical works between the beginning of the twentieth century and the thirties, through a theoretical framework that brings out the most important evolutionary philosophies.

Keywords

Socialism - Superman - Evolutionism - Nazism - Anti-Semitism

The executive power of gentleman

This paper aims to reconstruct the position taken by George Bernard Shaw, co-founder of the Fabian Society¹, on Nazi doctrine and to understand, at the same time, the playwright's influence on Adolf Hitler. Fabian socialism, of which Shaw is a worthy representative, thinks of a society organized according to the criteria of efficiency that result in the gradual and steady improvement of economic conditions (Beilharz 1992). The political project should be led by the social reform technicians, experienced bureaucrats and social engineers capable of initiating a socialist project coordinated mainly by professional experts called gentlemen/gentlewomen (Palazzolo 2009). Shaw, in particular, pillories the English bourgeoisie - the harbinger of chaos - and points out the nefarious consequences

¹ In 1882 a number of people gathered in London under the leadership of Prof. Thomas Davidson, a libertarian communist and moralist, to form the Fabian Society in January 1884. Its members had been stimulated by the writings of J.S. Mill and the propaganda of Henry George and H.M. Hyndmann. A few months after its establishment, the Fabian Society began to attract the attention of two young intellectuals: G.B. Shaw and S. Webb. These two members were joined by Sydney Oliver, Graham Wallas, William Clarke and Annie Besant. (See Henderson 2016; Stigler 1959; Shaw, Webb and others 1881).

of capitalism; especially following his contribution in the *Fabian Essays* he criticizes the liberal system and parliamentarianism to the point of considering "order as a necessary political system" to reorder society contemporary to him.

His focus on an anti-liberal politics emerges as early as 1881 in the novel *Cashel Byron's Profession* - appreciated by critics only two decades after its first publication - where he clarifies what the "executive power" of a political leader is and asserts that «the legislator in power must not only possess knowledge and strength, but must also have the courage to use them» (Shaw 1968, 86-88). "Executive power", possessed by only a few individuals, is placed in the service of a higher will; freedom and democracy are chimeras that risk leading the world toward chaos, and most likely to the end of civilization (Shaw 1934, 306). The great merit of this novel was to shake English consciences from Victorian conformity and to renew the stagnant atmosphere of English society. In particular, it shows that in all professions there are men endowed with "divinatory powers," so the social status of individuals is not recognized by the kind of work they do, but by the competence and skill with which they carry on their profession. Through it they will be able to play an important role in society, regarded as a "public service". A gentleman must be erudite and industrious, but above all he is the one who shows that he does not want to adapt to the mediocrity of the world. Shaw echoes the words of the diplomat and poet Edward Robert Lytton: «speak not of whipped genius: genius is the master of man. Genius does what it must and talent what it can» (Shaw 1956, 26).

The Fabian socialists, and Shaw in particular, set themselves the goal of understanding what is the most suitable way to have the most intelligent men in government already at the end of the nineteenth century. Probably when Mussolini and fascism appeared on the international political scene, Shaw, like many of his contemporaries, saw in the Duce the "potential of the Shavian man" which he had already described in 1891 with *The Quintessence of Ibenism*.

The myth of Shavian man as an incipient superman, omnipotent, omniscient, an infallible god, has also been interpreted as a psychological ploy, unconsciously adopted by the writer, to evade the fear of chaos and loss of control. Warren Sylvester Smith states that «the passion for order and his revulsion for disorder is a constant in all of Shaw's thought» (Smith 1982, 31). The latter, in fact, often repeats that political power must be able to keep the rebellious men of society at bay and democracy, or, as he often calls it, mobocracy, has historically failed because it has been the bringer of chaos.

German politics was always a source of attraction for the Irish playwright; in fact, his deep knowledge of German culture and philosophy in general is well known. Regarding this it is interesting to understand the influence of Nietzsche's thought on Shaw, who, in a letter to his translator Siegfried Trebitsch, writes: «the Germans must recognize me as a philosopher, as an English (or Irish) Nietzsche (only ten times more intelligent), and not as a mere writer of farces» (Smith 1982, 31). Although Nietzsche's philosophy was not foreign to the Irish playwright's inspiration, certain differences in their thinking remain stark: Shaw believes that the supermen and superwomen of the future would shape the socialist world, while Nietzsche sees socialism as a secular remnant of Christianity. Furthermore, Shaw thinks of a government based on the social, economic, and spiritual welfare of community while Nietzsche emphasizes the exercise of innate power (Stone 2002).

For Shaw, man is not a fully developed and free individual, so socialism must contribute to a new evolution of what he called "race", from which "superman" can emerge. Shaw in *Man and Superman*, a 1903 work, writes: «The idea of the superman did not begin with [the German philosopher], nor will it end with him. Nietzsche is among the writers whose peculiar sense of the world I recognize as more or less similar to my own» (Shaw 1903, 33). In his writing, the playwright sets out to improve Nietzsche's Superman. His criticism of the German philosopher is that he does not sufficiently specify the distinctive characteristics that a superman must have. In Shaw's view, he must be endowed with superior intellect, cunning and intuition, the ability to challenge obsolete moral codes and self-defined virtues. In addition, the Shawian Man must possess a Vital Energy that drives him gradually to evolve to a higher state of consciousness, according to Henri Bergson's thought (Bergson 2002). It is only by listening to the Life Energy (Hale 2006) that a superman will be able to succeed in lifting the entire human "race" from mediocrity. In the dedicatory letter of *Man and Superman* we read:

a man who, however gifted, may distinguish between good and evil, follows his own instincts without regard to common, statutory or canon law. Therefore, while he wins the ardent sympathy of our rebellious instincts he finds himself in deadly conflict with existing institutions and defends himself vigorously, with the little scruple with which a farmer resorts to the same means to defend his crop from vermin (Shaw 2004, 6).

Technocrats, whom Shaw refers to as gentlemen, are people with above-average innate cognitive abilities who must, however, be better educated than others because "the educated man is a man who knows what others do not know": in this

way they will be able to run society, which they will repay with their "work", considered "public service" (Mills 1991). The Shawian superman is an exceptional man who excels over all others; in fact, he is to be respected and feared by ordinary men; his main tasks include directing the political processes of society and ensuring "order" in a fallen and chaotic civilization.

Carl Schmitt and the protection of the Third Reich

Presumably the desire for "order" through the role assumed by supermen in the "nearly mediocre" civilization leads George Bernard Shaw to regard Nazism as a "necessary" doctrine and Hitler as the likely gentleman who would turn around Germany's fortunes (Cuomo 1993). Geduld - former secretary of Shaw's Society - recalls that Shaw's plays were performed and appreciated, at least until 1935-1936, in the Third Reich (Geduld 1961) and, moreover, Shaw never appeared on the Gestapo blacklist, unlike many British politicians, authors, and intellectuals close to him (Shaw 1986, 330-331). From a superficial reading, all this seems irreconcilable with some positions taken by prominent Nazi figures who considered Shaw's works Marxist, pro-Jewish and Bolshevik. Moreover, some intellectuals, Alfred Rosenberg foremost among them, described Shaw and the likes of Henri Barbusse, Upton Sinclair and Thomas Mann as exponents of an "international conspiracy of bastard artists" in opposition to Germanic ideals (Rosenberg 1930, 445-446). Shaw publicly supported pacifism during the Great War and, within the Fabian Society, played a fundamental role in the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (IAH), founded in 1921, to help the Soviet Union². Moreover, the Irish playwright had long collaborated with the Jewish intelligentsia of the Weimar period, to which he owed part of his success and to which he always felt very close. Authoritative German Anglicists also believe that Shaw failed to understand some of the most important questions about "Aryan" evolution, a subject that needs to be dwelt on later.

While Shaw's socialist comrades - Barbusse, Sinclair, and Mann - were soon banned from German culture in the Third Reich, Shaw's works, except for *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, were never banned, despite the fact that all forms of artistic expression - particularly for the theatre - were subject to severe restrictions. Performance statistics indicate that, under Hitler's regime, Bernard Shaw continued to be the most successful non-German playwright in Germany alive, just as he had been during the Weimar years. The exuberant Irish satirist remained a significant presence on the Nazi cultural scene. In this regard, it

² Shaw, especially in the 1930s, met several times with Stalin; this caused many Nazis and others to argue.

is interesting to understand the reasons why Hitler always supported Shawian thought, despite the opposition of some of his close associates to certain positions taken by the playwright toward the Nazi milieu, which we will discuss later.

It is correct to mention that the reception of his works in the Third Reich experienced ups and downs according to international political developments, but nevertheless no official action was ever taken by Hitler against Shaw. An important fact emerges in this context: at the time when Hitler's regime made murderous positions its own and, as a result, its relations with Western democracies deteriorated, Shaw's works were represented and appreciated more. In seeking an explanation for this, it should not be forgotten that a good part of Shaw's writings, as well as some of his more heterodox views on contemporary social and political issues, were in fact quite compatible with the goals of the National Socialist regime.

Another element that may have favoured the protection of Hitler and the spread of Shawian thought in Germany may be due to some commonalities with Carl Schmitt's thought. Shaw believed that in current parliamentary practice, the rule of a power elite composed of small party committees and representatives of large capitalist groups had supplanted the democratic principle of popular representation and open discussion. Especially in *The Apple*, Shaw clearly questions the democratic foundation of a modern parliament as a solution to the current dilemma of democratic systems. To the delight of reactionary Weimar factions and to the despair of German liberals, "the champion of Fabian socialism" demonstrates a fundamentally undemocratic orientation whenever he attacks Britain's "inept ministers" and advocates contemporary "strongmen" who, in his view, get things done only because they have overcome the obstacles of inefficient parliamentary government. Regarding this Shaw had much in common with Schmitt; his notion of "strong man" conformed to the Schmittian theory of decisionism, which held political action and strong leadership as values in themselves. In terms of the end result, Shaw's recommendation to abolish parliament did not differ significantly from Schmitt's recommendation for a strong, centralized government by "emergency decree" to remedy the failures of Weimar pluralism. Decisionism inevitably leads to reflection on the State of exception: which is «decision in the eminent sense» (Schmitt 1972, 33) since the State of exception cannot be described and contemplated by the legal system. The sovereign state decision is necessary in those historical moments in which the preservation on the State itself is at stake. It is simultaneously external and internal to the legal system: external since the decision cannot be "normalised", generalized and universalised, but always derives from a concrete and real crisis

situation; internal since the sovereign is responsible for the decision on the suspension of the constitutional order. The purpose of the sovereign decision is to re-establish the normality that is denied by the state of crisis, the sovereign is the one who «decides definitively whether this state of normality really reigns» (Schmitt 1972, 39). The decision has a precise legal value, as well as an actual importance in resolving the moment of crisis of the State of exception. The concreteness of the historical moment, its contingency, can only correspond to an equally contingent, personal concrete decision, which cannot derive from the abstractness of the legal norm of which indeed it represents its ineluctable foundation. This is Schmitt's doctrine of decisionism: it denies individuals the possibility of opposing the sovereign authority of the welfare state from outside. It is inevitable that such a theory developed in the 1930s will be read with a certain distrust and discontent by Schmitt's critics. The Nazi totalitarian connivance made Schmitt the target of some criticism from Karl Löwith, who in the article entitled *Political Decisionism*, reproaches Schmitt for having contributed, with his decisionist doctrine, to Hitler's advance, and for having accepted in some way to justify it legally (Löwith 1977, 12).

During the 1930s, Shaw took increasingly strong positions in favour of Adolf Hitler, calling him an "outstanding leader". After opposing the harsh sanctions against Germany stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles, Shaw recognized how "capable" Hitler had been of rehabilitating the German nation in national and international politics as a world power. On Oct. 14, 1933, at a League of Nations conference, Shaw described Hitler as a "decisive leader" and "man of action": «the action of the Chancellor of the Third Reich in exiting the League of Nations and withdrawing from the disarmament conference was a masterpiece» (Shaw 1933a, 642-643).

In a lecture in London in November 1933, Shaw attacked parliament, which, in his eyes, had become "an instrument to prevent the country from being governed", and reiterated his respect for Hitler's insight that "if something had to be done, the parliamentary system had to be gotten rid of", the only way to restore the "necessary order".

Shaw foresaw the alliance of Austria and Germany and saw it as inevitable, he did not support London's protest against the alliance, which he called "a welcome event", and saw it as the logical consequence of the "criminal conditions" of the Treaty of Versailles. At a Fabian Society conference in San Francisco in 1933, George Bernard Shaw described Hitler as "a very capable man"³ and defines the

³ This observation may perplex readers who are aware of Shaw's fervour enthusiasm for Soviet communism. In fact, there is no contradiction, no deliberate paradox in Shaw's attitude. He admired

Führer's rise to power as a triumph of "Will", in fact, according to the playwright, it had taken him less than a decade to turn a few fanatics in a Munich beer hall into Germany's largest political force. His *Mein Kampf* became, literally, a new German bible. Shaw considers the 1930s a very chaotic period and, therefore, thinks that dictatorship, with the consequent elimination of parties, is "the only possible form of government", as we have already mentioned. Shaw argues that Hitler, starting with the "plundering" of Germany - legalized by the Treaty of Versailles - was taking a more than correct position in international politics (Geduld 1961).

Again during the Fabian Conference in 1933 he says,

the annoyed expression that one always sees on Hitler's face is a sign of intense resentment [...], more than justified. Our statesmen seem, on the other hand, too smug, too comfortable about things that should make them seethe with anger. Wouldn't you all be Nazis in England if such an unjust treaty as the Treaty of Versailles had been imposed on you by foreign powers? (Shaw 1933b, 14).

What these words suggest is that Shaw supported Hitler to the hilt, actually this was not quite the case. There were numerous occasions when Shaw declared himself opposed to some of the decisions made by Hitler; this behaviour could not have been carried out by anyone at the time.

Shaw and anti-Semitism

So far, it has been shown not only how much Shaw was appreciated by Hitler, but also how the latter was regarded by the playwright as an "able leader". In addition to the link between Nazism and Shawinism, it is also interesting to understand why, later on, Shaw would harshly criticize Hitler for the holocaust and death camps. Therefore, it is fair to say that Shaw's support of Hitler's policies was not total and that anti-Semitism was the element of disagreement between the Nazis and the playwright. On numerous occasions he condemned Hitler's "Judeophobia" as an "incomprehensible excrescence" of Nazism (Church 1933), several times Shaw spoke out against the Reich's extermination of the Jews, and not only because Shaw had forged important relationships with so many Jewish men and women - among them we also recall his friendship with Albert Einstein. Shaw repeatedly

Hitler and Stalin, just as he had admired Mussolini, because these men had tried to do something and because they had all gotten rid of the "pseudo-democratic" party system.

courageously used the forum of the *Europäische Revue*, to condemn Hitler's anti-Semitism before a German audience, taking risks himself.

Despite the position Shaw took with respect to eugenics, a subject I have dealt with specifically elsewhere (Gabellone 2023), never advocated the extermination of any "race". In England, a Eugenics Society was to be active and influential in the 1940s, proposing the sterilization of the mentally retarded, and also much debated was the doctrine of "differential fertility", as a risk was seen of a worsening of the intellectual level of society, given the low fertility of the elites compared to that of the less affluent classes. Eugenics in Britain is primarily intended to improve humankind by facilitating the reproduction of the best members and hindering that of individuals carrying genetic diseases. Although Shaw showed his support for eugenics, which had become widespread in Britain, in his writings and lectures, the playwright never subscribed to the idea of "controlled breeding" for human beings nor to the extermination undertaken by the Nazis; instead, he insisted that the only way for the human race to improve was to make sure that natural instinct, not limited by social forces, guided reproduction. Faced with the problem of how to achieve a better world, Shaw thought of implementing a socialist society not by trying to change the world, but rather by improving man as a biological organism (an idea quite popular among German socialists, already around 1845) through eugenics. Obviously, this position of Shaw with respect to the biological and controlled process leading to the improvement of "human kind" differs from the Nazi "Aryan race" idea and the Holocaust.

Regarding this, during an interview in San Francisco in 1933, he stated, «the Jewish affair in Germany is a disgrace and has destroyed everything good the Nazis have done» (Shaw 1933c, 19). This indicates that the Nazis had «no real plan of action and were attacking the Jews because they had nothing better to offer the German people» (Shaw 1933c, 19). Even later, in 1934, during his visit to New York, Shaw expressed his displeasure with Hitler's anti-Semitic politics, but the occasions on which the playwright expressed his resentment were several and lasted for many years. In *The Millionairess and Geneva*, Shaw hoped that Hitler would end his persecution of Jews. In fact, when the news of the 1939 Russian-German alliance was made known, it was wonderful news for Shaw because he naively thought that this might be proof that the extermination of Jews would cease. Later, when he realized that unfortunately the concentration camps continued to be active, he sided completely with Soviet Russia and turned away from Nazism for good. In February 1944, realizing that the Jewish extermination would not stop, Shaw was

certain that the end of Hitler and all Nazis had come⁴, in this regard he stated, «Either Hitler is more stupid than I thought or he has gone completely crazy. These Germans had to live in the camps with their prisoners» (Shaw 1945, 6).

From Shaw's analysis is clear that megalomaniac of Hitler it attempts to rationalize the world's evil were now doomed to failure, as he demonstrates on many occasions, "the worst of fools is a saint gone mad". This was Shaw's explanation of Belsen, a leading character in Geneva who was reminiscent of Hitler. However, it would be too superficial to say that Shaw's opinion would have been just a terrible error of judgment; but it would be equally regrettable to try to justify it as a natural outcome of fifty years of pro-Germanic Shawianism. Hitler's Germany was not the Germany that had "discovered" Shaw in the early twentieth century; it was not the Germany of Goethe nor of Trebitsch, who had translated the Shawian gospel into German. Hitler did, however, represent a type of "superman" that Shaw was never able to understand, although he appreciated his position in national and international politics, but he was certainly completely baffled by the implications of anti-Semitism, so much so that he was unable to offer any "solution" for it. Certainly he grasped the 'importance of racism in the Nazi ethos and the danger of genocide only later, when he then turned away for good. Initially, a sense of German revenge for the injustices inflicted immediately after the Great War probably prevailed, especially because of Shaw's role during this period. Unfortunately, the playwright could not immediately see the implications that Nazism could and did have, partly because the Shawian superman theory dovetailed with Hitler very much and not only with him (Shaw 1933d, 15). Eventually he realized that the price to pay because of the Germans' revenge had been too high. The end does not always justify the means, and with dictators the means tend to «supplant the original end and become end in itself».

Despite this, Hitler continued to tolerate Shaw's positions; on December 22, 1937, he issued a double decree: not only would he never take any action against Shaw for his statements, but in addition Joseph Goebbels was to protect him. Hitler probably never abandoned his dream of an alliance between Germany and "Germanic" Britain until July 1940, and from *Mein Kampf* we know that Hitler respected the achievements of the "Anglo-Saxon race" (Rich 1973). Moreover, from a propaganda point of view, Shaw's Irish nationality was extremely important: in fact he was portrayed as an Irishman-and therefore a foreigner-criticizing the British. They used this argument early in the war to justify the extraordinary hospitality

⁴ After his initial support for Mussolini and fascism, Shaw distanced himself from the Duce because he considered him an ally of capitalism. It is fair to say that only Stalin will be considered the strong leader of Europe.

Hitler offered the Irish playwright, which led to a total of 288 performances of his plays in Germany during the winter theatre season of 1939-40. Shaw's plays also appealed to the National Socialists' preference for the "tragedies of an unrecognized genius", the glorification of "people's martyrs" and the Führer's figures.

In March 1941, the Propaganda Ministry, at the urging of some Nazis, investigated the probable connection of translator Joseph Trebitsch with Shaw, specifically whether the Jewish Trebitsch received royalties for his texts. In fact, since 1937 Shaw and Trebitsch had avoided the awkward issue of royalty payments by splitting the amounts, which were, however, sent only to the playwright for German performances, and of all this Hitler was aware. Not only did the Nazi leader allow Shaw's plays to continue, but he also ordered the press to avoid any controversy against the author. Hitler was keen to say that Shaw's plays were now privileged over Shakespeare's plays, for which permission to perform was limited.

Until September 28, 1943, the Ministry of Propaganda still stressed the extreme importance of performing Shaw's plays for the regime's cultural policy. Until the closure of all German theatres in the summer of 1944, four plays by Shaw – *St. Johanna*, *Pygmalion*, *Candida*, and *Kaiser von Amerika* – were performed in ten different venues.

All the elements mentioned so far constitute the essence of the Shawian project, which, by believing in the innate capacities of the superman, results in "justifying" even some of the most terrifying figures of the twentieth century, including Hitler, who was believed one of the few supermen capable of bringing order to Europe and eliminating capitalist disorder. However, Shaw was not certainly only able to stand firm in the face of Jewish extermination but he also openly protested against Hitler and probably, from what we know, was one of the few men in Europe who could have done so.

Disappointed by what democracy turned out to be, Shaw began to consider other political systems through which he could achieve the society he desired so vividly; he seems to be especially attracted to the autocratic system, an interest that finds its *raison d'être* in the playwright's superhuman conception, which stems precisely from his distrust of democracy. The superman, who in this case is identified with the autocratic figure, seems to be the only one capable of solving society's problems and bringing about change. Shaw believes that the emergence and development of autocracies in Europe were a consequence of the failure of democracy: they developed in a period marked by great social unrest and severe economic instability, problems that previous democratic governments had been

unable to solve until then; this situation thus allowed the rise to power of the dictators of the time.

Shaw states that at this moment in history democracy

is not government of the people, made by the people and for the people, but rather as a pawn in the power game of big business, committed to increasing profits and commandeering public services for private greed. Democracies, in other words, are a facade behind which the real power is wielded by plutocracies (Gibbs 2005, 481).

It follows, then, that Shaw's ideal world is, like Wells', ruled by intellectual samurai who guide the confused working poor. Bourgeois intellectuals obsessed with a false notion of the nature of freedom are eventually driven to apply a whole range of things contrary to it. Shaw's utopia is identified through a world organized by the most efficient men, the only ones capable of elevating the nature of the average man.

Hermann Stresau has argued that the playwright showed an inability to fully grasp the political reality of the time. A personality of the previous century, Shaw did not realize that his nineteenth-century ideological concepts were now inadequate. Despite the information he acquired as an avid newspaper reader and the first-hand accounts he received after 1933 from persecuted Jewish acquaintances, he never seemed to open his eyes to the real consequences of totalitarian rule in modern civilization. He probably could not see any alternative to his superomistic philosophy, otherwise it would be impossible to understand how, despite his critique of Jewish extermination, in June 1940, Shaw could persist in his belief in the inherent virtues of German fascism, going so far as to write to his friend colleague Beatrice Webb, a member of the Fabian Society, "we are National Socialists". Nor could one explain Shaw's statement in a letter of October 1942 that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* "is really one of the world's bibles." Significantly, it should not be forgotten that Shaw was also always attracted to "strong leaders" because of the role they were able to play on the world. The playwright often repeated how much he suffered from his lack of influence on European culture and how decisive Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler were in twentieth-century world history, but that is another story.

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