

Miscellany

A First Encounter with Dostoevsky

Ignazio Silone

MY FIRST CONTACT with Dostoevsky's novels was rather belated, I am ashamed to say. It came only when I was twenty-two. And what is more, it was in a sense imposed on me by circumstances. The conditions of my undertaking the reading of Dostoevsky were anything but ordinary—so suitable, in fact, for the understanding of this exceptional writer that it may be worth while to give a brief account of them.

To be precise, I happened just then to be living—it proved to be for two months only—in the "Carcel Modelo" [model prison] of Barcelona. The simple explanation is that Spain was at that time ruled by the military directorate presided over by Primo de Rivera, whose police found my presence in the country—obviously unjustifiable on touristic grounds—a matter of excessive concern. A hostile critic might deduce from this that if I was behind in my reading, I nevertheless displayed a certain precocity in the field of "political delinquency."

When I was taken there, early in the year 1923, the Barcelona prison was packed with Catalans, syndicalists, socialists, communists and anarchists. What magnificent men they were! In no other country in the world have I known men as admirable as those Spanish "subversives."

The "Carcel Modelo" was indeed, in certain respects, a truly model prison. Among the anarchists confined there, several had been condemned to death for acts of terrorism. I hope to have the time, some day, to tell the stories of certain of those men. Especially vivid in my memory remains a very young painter, still under age, with whom I had a chance to become friends, thanks to the kindness of the prison doctor, himself incarcerated for "separatist ideas." The administration, on discovering a doctor among the prisoners, had seized the opportunity, for reasons of economy, to

dismiss the former incumbent, a physician from the outside.

I should like, before coming to my discovery of Dostoevsky, to say a few more words about that young painter who was condemned to die. He himself was in a purely Dostoevskian situation.

After his sentence (in Spain execution is by the garrote—that is, strangulation), an eminent Catholic jurist had ventured to state publicly that no Spanish legal code, including the military, sanctioned the death penalty for minors. Had the judges forgotten this? Public opinion was aroused, and as a consequence the execution was postponed. The military men in power were uncertain how to proceed. Were they to lose face because of a legality? In the end it was rumored that respect for the law had prevailed: they would wait, and execute the guilty man when he was twenty-one. (Notwithstanding that the offense with which he was charged had been committed during his minority.)

The doomed young man had lost nothing of his good humor: he amused himself by drawing caricatures of Spanish generals, invariably flanked by their enormous swords. But it was difficult for the rest of us to share his carefree spirits. And none of us dared complain that time passed slowly.

THE ACCOMMODATING doctor allowed me to spend all my mornings in his infirmary with the young lad, after informing the authorities that both of us were in need of daily medical attention. The doctor was an excellent man. In a sense, he was the model doctor for a model prison. I have never understood why he should have been so considerate of me, a complete stranger.

Besides this relative freedom each morning, he obtained books and magazines that helped us endure the long afternoons and evenings—stretches that were interminable for prisoners returned to the solitude of their cells. And as chance would have it, there were, among the books he had available, various volumes of Dostoevsky, in French translation. Thus I had the immense joy of reading, for the first time, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*. It is beyond my power to say, now, how overwhelming

I found them. No work of literature had ever affected me so much. Soon I lost track of all notion of time and place.

I was no longer in prison. The reading of these books caused the walls of my narrow cell to vanish, and transported me thousands of miles distant, to an atmosphere that filled me with an anguish such as I had never known. Sometimes I was walking with an immense crowd along the banks of a great river, the Neva, while far off in the bright night gleamed the gilded domes of a monastery. Or in a large garden, sitting among jasmine, I tremblingly watched Prince Mishkin as he waited for Nastasia Filippovna. Or in the monastery hall I knelt amidst other pilgrims, listening to the hoarse inspired voice of a holy old man, the *starets* Zosima.

What else could I possibly have talked about with that young man who had been condemned to death, each morning when I rejoined him in the infirmary?

Intervening time has done nothing to change my remembrance: those were marvelous days. They were among the most beautiful days of my life.

(Translated by FRANCIS STEEGMULLER)

We Keep Getting Affluenter All the Time

OUR READERS—and Prof. Galbraith—may be interested in some sobering statistics which appeared in "Taxes and Living Costs vs: a Factory Worker's Pay-check," *Industrial Bulletin*, New York State Department of Labor, February, 1959, pp. 14-17. The article deals with trends in the real spendable earnings—wages, after federal and state income and social security taxes, in constant dollars—of the average factory-production worker in the wealthiest state in the Union during the past decade.

The base period used is 1947-49, two good years and a bad one. Two major factors are considered: the rising tax burden and rising consumer prices. Gross weekly wages rose from \$55.31 in 1947-49 to \$82.49 in 1958 (ten months), a rise of forty-nine per cent. But real spendable earnings — —?

The single worker: Average weekly tax liability rose from \$7.84 to \$16.30. Another \$12.55 has been swallowed up by the

twenty-three per cent rise in consumer prices. This leaves him with \$53.64, in 1947-49 dollars, to spend, compared to \$47.47 in 1947-49. (Disregarding inflation, he now has \$66.19 to spend).

The worker with three dependents: Average weekly tax liability rose from \$1.65 to \$7.65. Take off \$14.19 in price rises, and he has left \$60.65, in 1947-49 dollars to spend, compared to \$53.66 in 1947-49. (Disregarding inflation, he now has \$74.84 to spend).

The article concludes:

Hence, under the combined impact of taxes and prices, the single worker can buy only about thirteen per cent more goods and services at the end of the decade than at its beginning, and the married worker can buy about fifteen per cent more.

Considering that the face amount of the average salary has increased about five per cent a year, it is not at all impressive to discover that the average worker's net purchasing power only has risen slightly more than one per cent a year.

No, we cannot speak of the pauperization of the proletariat. But we can wonder somewhat about affluence. The average worker with two kids, bringing home \$60.65 in today's dollars, still has to pay union dues, disability-benefits insurance, group insurance, sales and other local taxes... then, after minor things like food, rent, and clothing are taken care of, he can really go on a fling with his affluence.

A. A.

For Men Only

Charles Shapiro

THE HIDDEN and unhidden persuaders of Madison Avenue have regularly presented the American Male with his very own products, untainted by a speck of effeminacy. He-men eat Wheaties, smoke cigarettes, bathe with soaps and douse themselves with deodorants, all of which emphasize their ruggedness ("Women say 'deodorant.' Men say 'Trig'"). But only recently has our wonderful world of literature also been organized along sexual lines. The announcement of this change reached me in a letter from one John Hardy, advertising director