

Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) and the beginnings of Czech political psychology

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***Abstract:** Masaryk contributed significantly to early Czech thought on the psychological aspects of political life. His contributions were at the same time fragmentary and diversified. He observed both his political partners and his foes, analyzed function of imitation in behavior, drew attention to significant social-psychological and psychopathological viewpoints in politics, and paid attention to phenomena of dominance and submission. His thoughts are for us not only an interesting topic as a subject of historical study but also a stimulus for a further, systematic development of political psychology.*

***Zusammenfassung:** Masaryk hat erheblich zum frühen tschechischen Denken über psychologische Aspekte des politischen Lebens beigetragen. Jedoch waren seine Beiträge fragmentarisch und verstreut. Er beobachtete seine politischen Partner und seine Gegner, untersuchte die Funktion nachahmenden Verhaltens, lenkte die Aufmerksamkeit auf bedeutende sozialpsychologische und psychopathologische Aspekte in der Politik und beachtete Phänomene der Dominanz und Unterwerfung. Seine Gedanken bilden für uns nicht nur einen interessanten Gegenstand historischer Forschung, sondern auch einen Anreiz zur weiteren systematischen Entwicklung der Politischen Psychologie.*

T.G. Masaryk – professor of philosophy, politician, and statesman – is justifiably viewed as the founder of the modern Czech political science. In the present context, we may ask: Did he have anything to do with a field we designate today as „political psychology“, the study of political behavior and attitudes, in the framework of interaction between individuals and groups?

Earlier studies of Masaryk’s concern with psychological topics stressed his interests in the psychological aspects of education. A recent volume of translations of Masaryk’s psychological writings from Czech into English (Brozek & Hoskovec, 1995) deal not only with such topics as imitation and, more broadly, with child psychology but also with hypnotism, the study of poetry, with psychology’s place in the system of the sciences and the relationship between history and psychology.

A student of outstanding philosophers and psychologists of the time, especially of Franz Brentano, Masaryk quickly comes to tackle problems going beyond

„academic issues“ and dealing with social and political problems of the day. In this regard his career differs markedly from that of Brentano.

Masaryk did not write a treatise on the psychological aspects of politics, not even a systematic review in the form of an article. His thoughts on the subject are scattered throughout his publications. Yet they have a conceptual cohesion.

In 1876, in a study on „Theory and practice“ (p. 7), Masaryk writes:

„I am convinced that the frequently called for combining of political parties would have been realized more readily if we knew each other directly, first-hand. Written communications and negotiations can not achieve what can be brought about by frequent personal meetings. This view is based on psychological laws which should be kept in mind by the statesmen.“

On the very next page (8) we read: „Political science is concerned primarily with action. Plato, the first thinker concerned with political science, was well aware of this. In Plato’s republic, philosophers were to serve as rulers. However, knowing well human nature in general and the characteristics of philosophers in particular, he was well aware that thoughtful man do not like to get involved in the matters of the state. Consequently, he asked that, at least from time to time, the philosophers should stop philosophizing and paid attention to the needs of the state, thus giving up a personal hobby in the interest of the country.“

In 1898, in the first edition of „The social question“, we read that „The newest studies of sociology and psychology [of ther crowds] examine carefully the problems of collective consciousness. However, the issue has concerned science for a long time“ (p. 260). And he adds: „Without [an effective] psychology, it is not possible to interpret historical facts correctly“ (p. 175). „A sociological and historical explanation must be verified psychologically“ (p. 202).

In his psychological review of hypnotism, published in 1880, Masaryk describes the phenomenon as follows:

„The hypnotic state appears to be some kind of absence of the mind. A hypnotized person automatically imitates what he sees and his overexcited imagination can be controlled by the will of the hypnotizer“ (p. 13); a „hypnotized person is an imitative automaton“ (p. 21).

In order to verify the findings reported in the literature, four years earlier, in 1876, Masaryk carried out experiments with human subjects and was able to confirm what he wished to verify.

In the meantime a Danish hypnotizer, giving demonstrations of hypnosis in a theatre came to Vienna. Masaryk, similarly as Sigmund Freud and others,

attended Karl Hansen's shows, „paying attention to everything he could see and hear. After witnessing two such shows, he became convinced that Hansen is dealing with hypnotism. However, Hansen himself believed that he was able to magnetize the subjects thanks to a special power. Hansen's faith in such a power and his conviction that he is endowed by a magic ability gave him a great selfconfidence, which certainly contributed to the success of his experiments“ (p. 18).

If we compare Masaryk's characterization of Hansen and of Adolf Hitler (in 1933), we see an interesting and informative parallel. Similarly, in his story „Mario and a magician“ (or, more precisely, a stage hypnotizer) Thomas Mann referred to Mussolini.

In his review of Hitler's „Mein Kampf“ (Prager Presse, 30/IV 1933, p. 3-4, under the pseudonym „V.S.“, as verified in Masaryk's archives in Prague), the author stated: „Two characteristics are striking. [First], the absolute self-assuredness of a political leader. Hitler believes fully in his mission and therein lies the secret of his successes. As Hitler says, the program of his political party is his religion. [Second], this fanaticism is combined with an utter lack of sentimentality. Hitler is not only free of any sentimentality. He is ruthless and tough. One is tempted to say that this toughness a la Nietzsche has the character of a pleasure derived from [inflicted] pain. Hitler belongs to a dangerous type of human beings.“

In connection with these characteristics Masaryk notes also the significance that Hitler attaches to speeches in politics, in contrast to the writings. In Hitler's view, the spoken propaganda must be popular in character. It must make crystal clear who are the enemies (scoundrels and traitors) and how to get rid of them (how to liquidate them). According to Hitler, all great movements are in fact the work of great orators.

In the view and terminology of contemporary psychology, the hypnotizer suggests ideas and actions to the subject or subjects, induces a depersonalization together with an uncritical acceptance of thoughts and images. One can say that in the political context a political leader of the dictatorial type achieves something similar.

In his „World revolution“ of 1925 we learn about Masaryk's approach to people (p. 392): „As a politician I have always observed and studied people. A political organization must know people, choose them [effectively] and assign them to appropriate tasks. Soon I acquired an almost monographical observation of individuals with whom I had to deal and who were prominent in the public life. I collected all possible data about my friends and enemies. I gathered biographies and other forms of information about politically active people. Prior to getting into contact with [specific] politicians and statesmen I read their writings or

speeches and informed myself about them thoroughly.“ As Masaryk recollects, this tendency manifested itself early. He was about 14 years of age when he encountered Lavater’s treatise of physiognomy and read it with great interest. Here are perhaps the roots of Masaryk’s unceasing study of people. We know that Masaryk studied attentively the photographs of facial expressions and gestures of Hitler too.

In the same review Masaryk encourages psychoanalysts to provide a depth analysis of Hitler’s personality. This was done, skillfully, in 1974 by Erich Fromm in his „Anatomy of human destructiveness“. He notes Hitler’s pleasure from destruction and death, as well as the hypnotizing nature of Hitler’s speeches, in which a stream of sentences was hurled at the crowd, without pause and with growing excitement. All of this helps an uncritical acceptance of ideas by fanatic crowds, possessed by the desire to share in absolute power.

Already in his 1880 essay on hypnotism, valuable from the point of view of the history of psychology and of general psychology, Masaryk pays special attention to one aspect of human interaction, namely to „imitation that plays a larger role in the life of individuals and of whole nations than we generally think, as manifested in attacks of uncontrollable fear and running away of whole armies. On the other hand, the wishes and desires of nations represent to a great extent the imitation of ideals“ (p. 44). In short, in a measure our whole life consists of imitation. At times the imitation may be very rapid. In every historical period it affects a large number of people so that we can speak of mental epidemics, e.g., as manifested in Europe in the excitement during wars.

In 1885 appeared in print Masaryk’s article devoted to imitation. In Masaryk’s view, imitation „belongs to the most interesting psychological puzzles. Here we deal with very difficult problem as well. Nothing less is involved than coming to understand how from the depth of our mind emerge states of mind which are transmitted into visible manifestations „ (p. 53).

The statement „In the political life imitation is a powerful factor, both in the life of the primitive and the cultured people“ (p. 53) is followed by a whole series of examples drawn from history. In the closing statement the author writes: „We are imitating ethical ideas both consciously and unconsciously. Let us not bore our charges by long sermons. Let us live in a way in which we wish them to live. And if we can not live in this way ourselves, then at least let us give them noble examples. Hopefully the mechanism of imitation will take care of the rest“ (p. 58).

Contemporary psychology views the essence of imitation in „observational learning“. The crucial factor is whether the subject’s „model“ is rewarded or punished, is successful or unsuccessful.

In the „Foundations of the concrete logic“ of 1885, in the closing part the author states (p. 80): „By providing understanding of man’s true nature psychology provides foundations for the practical human sciences. It teaches us how to educate future generations and ourselves, what we are permitted to do, and how can we reach the true goal of our lives“.

In 1884 Masaryk critically analyzed the explanation of the tendency to dominate others, as formulated by Henry Thomas Buckle, an English historian: „Historical induction established the significant fact that, in the course of time, from the state of initial, almost animal savagery man changed into a peaceful being. Buckle himself endeavored to prove that, over time, man’s initial combativeness is diminished, and that this is a result of social, not biological factors. Clearly, man’s tendency to dominate is rooted in human nature and thus can be explained only psychologically“ (p. 27). And Masaryk continued:

„Clearly, knowledge of the human nature, is an essential prerequisite for all of history. In interpreting social and historical phenomena, we must first take recourse to psychological laws. To understand man’s development, whether we are concerned with the development of individuals or of mankind, we must begin with the study of psychology“ (p. 28).

Indeed, Masaryk perceived the impressive possibilities of the development of man’s mind. Man is moved by emotions. The intellect and knowledge should regulate them creatively. In politics, reckless, dangerous individuals, bent on destruction, can misuse the emotions. Masaryk was fully aware of this danger. Even today it is not out of the place to remember it.

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