
The 'Zurich School' 1929-1939 — A war on two fronts

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Exile was an obvious option for many German and Italian left-wing writers wishing to maintain their right to freedom of speech in the 1930s. The relative nature of freedom even in exile is however illustrated by the fate of writers who, having supported communism throughout the 1920s, refused to endorse Stalin's regime in the 1930s. Having broken free, some were misjudged or neglected for party political reasons, a state of affairs which tended to continue in post-war exile research. Misunderstanding of the work of the exile community in Zurich particularly has been compounded by the relatively low profile of Switzerland as a land of long-term exile. A temporary refuge for the famous, notably Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, Zurich was the home of Ignazio Silone and Bernard von Brentano for over fifteen years. There they formed life-long friendships with the Swiss writers Rudolf Jakob Humm and Fritz Brupbacher, and the French poet Jean-Paul Samson, who took up residence in Zurich during World War One as a conscientious objector.

Innumerable evenings of discussion and frequent correspondence began as early as 1929/30 when Silone first arrived in Zurich.¹ Brentano came to Zurich early in 1933; his background as a supporter of the workers' movement but also as a cultural journalist and would-be novelist making him a natural addition to the group. In 1936 Samson published an article entitled 'L'École de Zurich (The Zurich School)' describing the factors which united them. He did not put forward any specific literary or political programme, but saw in this very lack of formal organisation and affiliation the group's specific role in the antifascist movement. Their residence in Zurich, traditionally the home of reformation and non-conformism, also seemed significant to Samson:

In a Europe which has successively witnessed the birth of Italian and German fascism, it is perhaps not uninteresting to see a centre of resistance form in such a ticklish spot as the city of Zwingli, Bodmer, Pestalozzi and Gottfried Keller: its members' first concern seems to be to accomplish a return to themselves, so as to be able to enrich, sooner or later, the analogous resistance movement which has been triggered in the two great nations to the West and the South West of Europe, more vast, without a doubt, but perhaps more superficial.²

Samson believes that their characteristic style unifies analytical reflection with the spontaneity of poetry in 'a kind of critical creation (*création critique*)'. Silone, a former communist activist, considered writing in exile 'the continuation of the (political) struggle but in a freer form',³ also combining individual creativity and analysis. The comparative adjective 'freer' gives a pragmatic view of exile; it was not an escape from political dilemma, as Silone wrote to Brentano on his first novel: 'Towards the end you were obviously plagued by this idea: "What will the communists, the socialists, the editors of this and that exile journal think?" These preoccupations have weakened your work'.⁴

Non-literary factors such as party politics are a crucial aspect of research on the 1930s, but they can impede the researcher, especially in the case of writers whose concern was to liberate antifascist opposition from party lines. In *Exil in der Schweiz* (Exile in Switzerland), Werner Mittenzwei makes a clear distinction between exile research and literary inquiry, although the subjects of his book are literary figures: 'the specificity of exile research lies in the study of a fabric woven of processes, causes, phenomena and complications'.⁵ In the final instance, works by exiled artists should be analysed by others; exile researchers must concern themselves primarily with extratextual matters. This conception of exile research means that bias or inaccuracy in the researcher's understanding of historical events can alter the representation of an author completely. Brentano's works fall victim to unsophisticated party political classifications: although associated closely with the Communist Party in the early 1930s, he applied for a visa to return to Nazi Germany in

1940; in Mittenzwei's book all his works from 1934 onwards are condemned in retrospect as fascist.⁶ This judgement is either taken up unquestioningly or glossed over by subsequent critics.⁷

There is no doubt that Brentano underwent a crisis of conscience following the outbreak of World War Two; there is also no doubt that Silone, Brupbacher, Humm and Samson moved away from the extreme left during the 1930s and were traitors in the eyes of the Comintern, external factors which Mittenzwei does not fail to mention. However, in maintaining the fiction that communism was the natural opposite and best resistance to fascism, he misrepresents the weft of these writers' experience by disregarding the warp which completes the pattern of their particular antifascist 'fabric': to their minds, anticommunism was an indispensable complement to antifascism. Less one-sided but similarly generalised conclusions include Asor Rosa's summary of exile: 'Only two groups of political exiles continued to produce culture under Fascism; the Communists and those who took the name "Justice and Liberty"'.⁸ No room is left for nonconformism, and by naming the two groups in question, interest is automatically centred on France and Russia and away from 'minority' exile lands such as Switzerland. Rosa claims he is attempting to save exile culture from oblivion, but he strengthens an impression of its limits by concentrating on parties and factions. Having lauded the originality of Silone's 1927-28 works within the context of communism, Rosa neglects to comment on Silone at all after he is ousted from the Party, although he took to writing as a career in the 1930s.

The Zurich School did not replace their former belief in communism with any other specific doctrine, making them hard to classify; rather than using the standard ideological armoury provided by the political parties, they waged guerilla war on totalitarian oppression with improvised weapons developed during the course of events. The nature of these weapons, often articles in little-known Swiss journals and letters to important figures of the day, means that much of the material necessary to assess their role as a group is not easily accessible;⁹ readily available sources mostly concern Silone and Brentano, but clues to their relationship with the others shows that further research would enrich our view of antifascist exile much as Samson's article claimed the Zurich School would enrich the resistance movement in the 1930s.

Information, the Swiss journal edited by Silone and contributed to by Samson, Humm and Brupbacher 1932-34, prepares readers for this improvisory method:

We must begin by denying the reader what he demands and expects at the beginning: a programme — a nice programme, a “complete and finalised” programme, a system of “complete and finalised” truths, a system built like furniture with many drawers, in which the solutions for all today’s and tomorrow’s problems are ready and waiting. [...] Truths can no longer be depended on. They change with life and are made afresh every day [...] nothing can be valid for all eternity.¹⁰

The journal’s method is made clear, but its content presents more difficulties, ranging eclectically over all aspects of current affairs and allowing contradictory viewpoints to speak for themselves. It began to appear long before Brentano had even considered exile, but it displayed precocious awareness of the Nazi threat in Germany and assumed responsibility for forewarning and forearming Switzerland. In issue 3/1, an article by Adolf Saager is reproduced in full, claiming that Switzerland could learn something from Hitler as regards national pride whilst wholeheartedly disagreeing with Nazism’s methods. The article carries an editorial disclaimer condemning its unthinking use of the term fascism as a rallying cry.¹¹ In the same issue, however, Saager’s book Mussolini ohne Mythos (Mussolini without the myth) is recommended as an enlightened analysis of Italian affairs. Silone often includes extracts from his forthcoming book Der Faschismus rejecting psychological explanations of totalitarianism; other articles take an entirely opposing stance, for example Emil Walter’s article on the psychological roots of fascism in 1/4. All shades of left-wing opinion are represented, even the Soviet conformism later unconditionally rejected by the Zurich School. The editor does not wish his views to go unchallenged; readers are exhorted to write in expressing their views, and to become contributors where possible. The aim is to create critical resistance, to encourage a new consciousness rather than to feed readers propaganda. Information’s obvious weakness lies in the assumption that others approach printed

matter with the necessary critical attitude; it made no sense as an antifascist review if it was not read in an active and informed way. Its strenuous nature was doubtlessly one of the factors which led to its early demise in 1934. The last editorial notes that the Nazis claim National Socialism renders socialism obsolete, and wonders 'how much longer the spell of words will hold?'¹²

Judging by its worldwide popularity, Silone's fiction presented a more readable presentation of the antitotalitarian message. The simplicity of his style was described by the Zurich School as 'antirhetorical' but this is a misrepresentation typical of times when 'rhetoric' commonly referred to fascist bombast. Silone uses another kind of persuasion: Rosa describes antifascist exiles as 'tomorrow's victors',¹³ yet Silone prefers his contemporaries to consider themselves 'yesterday's losers', and to question the social and political theories which informed their youth, whatever their pedigree. *Fontamara* (1933) tells the tale of growing political awareness in an isolated village in Southern Italy, forced to defend itself against Fascist inroads on its liberties and livelihood. The novel's brutally simple ending, the destruction of the village bar three peasants who escape to tell their tale, shows Silone literally putting a question mark against the teachings of Lenin himself. Neither the author nor the peasant narrators proffer an answer to the final question 'What is to be done?'.¹⁴ This was also the title of Lenin's 1902 pamphlet outlining the methods of agitation which would lead to the Russian Revolution. By posing the question again, Silone is casting doubt on the method which brought the Communists to power.

The 'spell of words' could also refer to the terminological confusion characteristic of the 1930s, making the classification of writers by political groupings yet more fraught. Nazis referred to the moderate Weimar Republic as the 'marxist government of shame' and liberal exile writers as 'culture bolsheviks', whereas communists called the same writers 'social fascists'. The situation was further aggravated in 1934 when the U.S.S.R began to adopt the ideas of the Popular Front against fascism, as outlined by Johannes R. Becher at the first Congress of Soviet writers in Moscow: 'To this end we hold out a hand to the humanist writers, the literary representatives of realist rationality, to all those who seek the truth'.¹⁵ Participants were however

expected to acknowledge the U.S.S.R.'s lead. The hand of cooperation was not extended to ex- or anticommunist antifascists, who were further isolated as more liberal bourgeois writers turned to the Soviet Union. The same Becher would not acknowledge Fontamara as a great antifascist novel because its author refused to condemn Trotsky.¹⁶

Silone's second novel, Bread and Wine (1936), was written in an atmosphere of growing acrimony between the members of the Zurich School and their former communist colleagues. The year of its publication saw a definitive turning point; Samson's article proclaiming the School's existence was published, and together they produced letters against Soviet government and cultural policy.¹⁷ Silone's letter to Das Wort, refusing permission to publish correspondence on Bread and Wine, sums up the group's condemnation of Stalin's show trials and the suppression of dissent within the Party:

Every sane human being would agree that a government which uses such methods against its political opponents would be utterly destroyed were a free and honest discussion conducted in the public eye [...]. If I were silent on these matters, I would never again have the courage to write a single line against the fascist dictatorships.¹⁸

Bread and Wine presents an accordingly disillusioned view of the value of party political activism. The protagonist, Pietro Spina, returns to Fascist Italy from exile hoping to lead a build-up of rural resistance, but remains an isolated figure in double 'internal exile'. Estranged from his compatriots by his party education and from his party by its material and ideological failure, any antifascist action he undertakes backfires, thwarted by his underestimation of Fascism's suggestive power over a politically naive population. Some reviewers, such as F.C. Weiskopf, branded Silone a pessimist and back-door saboteur of the antifascist cause:

Don't misunderstand us, we're not advocating rosy-coloured optimism. We agree that a writer must tell the truth, even when it is bitter. But truth in literature is more than just the representation of reality. A socialist writer's realism must not be limited to the representation of what is; it shows the process which

leads from the past to the present and on into the future; in his image of reality there must also be room for the dream of tomorrow's reality, for which he fights.¹⁹

These objections are not unfounded; however, Weiskopf misses the point of Silone's rhetoric, which is one of stock-taking: dreams of the future distort the present. Silone's picture is not all bleak, however, and Weiskopf also fails to appreciate the value of the dialogues Spina establishes. Other critics were similarly blinkered, as in this review by a Swiss communist:

I started the book full of hope and was very disappointed. I hoped for strength and encouragement, and found resignation, which discouraged me even more. [...] Spina has things to say which I wouldn't have missed for the world, things which are no doubt of immense value for humanity ('rein menschlich'). However, when I think of the negative conversations he holds with the peasants, his compatriots, I am very depressed [...] where has Silone's revolutionary determination gone?²⁰

This review shares the attitude that Silone criticises in the figure of Romeo, the hard-bitten cell leader prepared to invent all the news in the underground party newspaper. Silone later said it would have been irresponsible to write even a fiction of political revolution at a time when the workers' movements and socialist intellectuals were so unfitted to lead one.²¹ As the reviewer is concerned solely with political action, he believes the effective conclusion of the novel to be where Spina chalks antifascist slogans on the village walls, only to be discouraged by the villagers' outrage that their respectability has been defaced. However, Spina subsequently befriends Murica, a repentant informer who initiates a new fellowship of antifascists aiming simply always to speak the truth and to help each other. He is killed by the regime, and the grief of his family and home community are a study in solidarity. It is suffering and common-or-garden friendship that bring people together in Bread and Wine, not political ideals; suffering is the great leveller, and gives a foretaste of equality that everyone can understand. Silone appeals to his readers' subjective resources by showing the intensely personal effects of politics,

something to which a novel is uniquely suited. Thus Spina rejects conventional rabble-rousing in favour of an individual approach to politics and ethics: 'Speaking loudly and to crowds is the task of the agitator [...] he tries to inspire hysterical action and becomes hysterical himself [...] but in order to form relationships, to inspire and win trust, it is best to be no more than two, to speak quietly and to include lots of pauses for thought.'²² A rare example of contemporary reader response which does not come from a professional critic shows that this low-key presentation was much more to the taste of those at the front line. A letter from a resistance fighter in Nazi Germany found on Silone's desk after his death reads: 'It is not just a novel. It is life as we lead it, our troubles, our doubts, our courage and our struggle [...]. We thank you that you have confirmed us in our fight'²³

The newly proclaimed Zurich School, however fervently they had supported the revolutionary left wing in the past, did not find Bread and Wine pessimistic. They agreed with Silone's aims, as their reviews of his novel and their public attitude to the revolutionary communist and socialist parties showed. Humm preempted Silone's missive to Das Wort with a letter withdrawing his collaboration. Humm's outrage at Stalin's purges made him draw perhaps too unequivocal a line between himself and the official Left: the Zurich School still considered itself socialist, but in attacking the U.S.S.R., it simultaneously forfeited sympathy from large sections of the left wing. Surely enough, Das Wort took a dim view of Humm's criticism. The editorial board could not be expected to discuss his letter openly, as this would have been fatal in Stalinist Russia: instead, they identified his resistance to the U.S.S.R. with fascism: 'Yesterday Mr Humm "would never have dreamed that it would ever be necessary to draw a line between himself and Soviet Russia". He has drawn this line. We know now who he considers his allies and what kind of "humanism" is his'.²⁴

Bernard von Brentano's first novel Theodor Chindler (1936) came out at the same time as Bread and Wine: Humm saw in both the need to rethink cultural and political mechanisms in a time of crisis, even those of relatively recent date such as socialist revolution.²⁵ Brentano's novel follows a German family, 'yesterday's losers', through World War One, and examines the political and psychological factors that led to German belligerence, defeat, and later, to Nazism. Originally

well received as a condemnation of bourgeois liberalism and patriarchal pre-1917 society, the novel was interpreted as a move to the Right following Brentano's attacks on the Party. Communist critics began to see disillusionment with the workers' movement and democracy itself in it, rather than an account of particular historical events.²⁶

Brentano's second exile novel Prozeß ohne Richter (Trial without a Judge, 1937) puzzled the orthodox Left. The protagonist Professor Klitander is selected by the Ministry of Education to report on the standard of school-leaving examinations. Despite hints that the regime expects a negative result and that the whole process is a trap, Klitander records positive findings, is denounced in the press, arrested and sent to a concentration camp, where he commits suicide.

The novel necessarily poses a threat to any dogmatically-held political belief as its portrayal of an oppressive state is politically and nationally anonymous, relayed to the reader by the simplest, most neutral means possible, for example, by an aside from Klitander's wife's reminiscences: 'In those days people had been happy and cheerful despite the hardships. But now life had become almost unbearable. Her land had a harsh government which ruled with authoritarian methods, without respect for human life'.²⁷ Ludwig Marcuse in Das Wort found Brentano's refusal to commit himself suspect:

We would love to know what is behind this rigorously preserved anonymity, mere cautiousness or intentional ambivalence [...]. Is the world supposed to follow its own preferences when deciding to whom he is referring? There are infamous equivocations which lump black and white together under the general term colour, so that when someone wants to know exactly whether he means black or white – he can say "coloured".²⁸

Marcuse refuses to believe parallels can be drawn between communism and fascism; his adherence to the Popular Front blinds him to the similarity between the Stalinist purges and Klitander's fate. The ambivalence of Prozeß ohne Richter was certainly intentional as far as nationality was concerned; Brentano, a staunch German nationalist, wished to avoid the identification of fascism with any one

country, as he emphasised in his journalistic work of the time,²⁹ but he also wished to create an antitotalitarianism independent of all political parties. There is no reference to organised resistance; Klitander's refusal to comply is a refusal to compromise his personal integrity: 'There were just two of us, my conscience and I'.³⁰ In 1936, Silone published a damning article describing Italian literature under Fascism as tedious and ideologically irresponsible due to over-reliance on the state. He called on the individual to develop a private sense of the worth of humanity rather than hiding behind totalitarian doctrine and tolerating inhumanity in the public sphere.³¹ Similar ideas are developed in Prozeß ohne Richter where the protection offered by the regime is described as 'cowardly, armed banality'.³² Devoid of any consideration of class issues, Brentano's tale examines an individual mode of critical thought. This emphasis made the novel suspiciously bourgeois in the eyes of communist critics; however, as Silone showed in Bread and Wine, set among peasants, personal integrity is an indispensable prerequisite for genuine solidarity. An intellectual in turmoil, Brentano was searching for the roots of his own personal opposition rather than pandering to Party clichés he could no longer believe.

Prozeß ohne Richter suggests no antidote to the monotonous horror of totalitarianism until the closing paragraph, where a direct authorial intervention abruptly widens the novel's perspective from Klitander to readers and author, and by extension, to the whole of humanity. Klitander's gaolers lay him in an unmarked grave, but Brentano adds: 'I have however recorded his story, for Klitander was a human being. And man rots alive when he stops respecting his fellow men'.³³ The novel becomes a memorial or testimony: Brentano creates a literary gravestone, and defends the right of all men to be remembered. Admittedly he is not telling his own story, but even in the courtroom testimony is only a way of accessing the truth rather than a statement of it. In 1930s exile, fiction often had to fill the gap left by the imposed consensus of either fascism or communism. Brentano presents an uncodifiable political situation characterised by self-deception, rather than one in black and white, bad and good, fascist and communist, as some adherents of the Popular Front would have it, notably those in charge of the editorial policies of Das Wort.

Any general conclusion on the works and methods of the Zurich School can only be provisional, for their ways and methods diverged considerably in the 1940s. The kernel of their response to the events of the 1930s can however be summed up in similar terms to the conclusion of Prozeß ohne Richter: testimony to confusion and an unwillingness to suggest other than temporary solutions. Having freed themselves from Communist tutelage they attempted to portray the 1930s as a problem still under examination, rather than as an unfortunate but transitory prelude to the Millennium.

NOTES

All translations from the Italian and the German are by the author.

¹ Cf. Rudolf Jakob Humm, Bei uns im Rabenhaus (The Raven's House); (Zurich, Fretz & Wasmuth, 1963), also Luce d'Eramo, L'Opera di Ignazio Silone (Milan, Mondadori, 1972).

² Jean-Paul Samson, 'L'École de Zurich', Présence, (August 1936), 32-33:

Dans un Europe qui a successivement enregistré la naissance des fascismes italien et allemand, ce n'est peut-être pas, à cet égard, sans intérêt de voir se constituer, en un point aussi névralgique que la ville des Zwingli, des Bodmer, des Pestalozzi, des Gottfried Keller, un foyer de résistance dont les esprits qui le composent paraissent avant tout soucieux d'accomplir d'abord un retour sur eux-mêmes, bien propre à enrichir, tôt ou tard, le mouvement de résistance analogue, déclenché, en plus vaste sans doute, mais peut-être plus en surface, chez les deux grandes nations de l'Ouest et du Sud-Ouest européens.

³ Andreas Mytze, Europäische Ideen (Berlin, 1975), p.5.

⁴ d'Eramo, p.155.

⁵ Werner Mittenzwei (ed.), Exil in der Schweiz (Leipzig, Reclam, 1981), pp.7-8.

⁶ Ibid., pp.110-119.

⁷ Thomas Hansen, 'Bernard von Brentano's "Doppelter salto mortale" im Exil' in Donald G. Daviau (ed.), Das Exilerlebnis (Columbia, Camden House, 1982), pp.256-258, interprets Brentano's works as stepping stones towards Nazism, whereas Ulrike Hessler underplays politics in Bernard von Brentano (Frankfurt/M., Peter Lang, 1984).

⁸ Asor Rosa, 'La cultura dell'esilio' in G. Einaudi (ed.), Storia d'Italia (Turin, Einaudi, 1975), p.1537.

- ⁹ For example, the vast majority of their letters have never been published and are spread out between archives in Switzerland, Germany and Italy.
- ¹⁰ Information (1932), 1/1, 1-2.
- ¹¹ “‘Faschisierung der Schweiz?’” von A. Saager, Information (1932), 1/3, 17-20.
- ¹² Information (1934), 2/6, 1-2.
- ¹³ Rosa, p.1536.
- ¹⁴ I. Silone, Fontamara (Zurich, Oprecht, 1933), p.210.
- ¹⁵ Jens Nielsen (ed.), Antifaschismus in deutscher und skandinavischer Literatur, (Aarhus, Arkona 1983), p.10.
- ¹⁶ Mytze, p.17.
- ¹⁷ Cf. for example ‘Gegen die Methoden der Stalino-Trotskisten’, which denounces the communists’ slandering of André Gide, signed by all five members of the Zurich School, Volksrecht, Zurich 6.9.37.
- ¹⁸ As quoted in Mytze, p.38.
- ¹⁹ F.C. Weiskopf, ‘Brot und Wein’, Die Neue Weltbühne, Prague 6.8.1936.
- ²⁰ J. P. Gloor, ‘Brot und Wein’, Die Zeit (Bern, 1936), 4/5, 186-7.
- ²¹ Mytze, p.3.
- ²² Silone, Brot und Wein (Zurich, Oprecht, 1936; translated by A. Saager), p.120.
- ²³ Mytze, p.29.
- ²⁴ This is tucked away at the very end of Das Wort (1936), 1/4, 114.
- ²⁵ Humm, ‘Brot und Wein’, NZ Basel, 17.5.1936.
- ²⁶ Hansen, pp.256-61.
- ²⁷ Bernard von Brentano, Prozeß ohne Richter (PoR), (Amsterdam, Querido, 1937), p.35.
- ²⁸ Ludwig Marcuse, ‘Prozeß ohne Richter’, Das Wort (1937), 2/7, 86.
- ²⁹ Cf. for example Brentano, ‘Europa und die deutsche Frage’, Neue Schweizer Rundschau (1937/38), 5/7, 440-52, cont. 5/8, 487-501.
- ³⁰ PoR, p.148.
- ³¹ Silone, ‘Über die italienische Literatur’, Die Zeit (Bern, 1936), 4/8, 227-230.
- ³² PoR, p.131.
- ³³ Ibid., p.201.