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Nation and the Myth of Origin in Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought¹

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The Issue

The question this essay addresses is quite simply the following one: to what extent are the dynamic cultural and historical ingredients of the so-called "myth of origin"—such as nature, soil, blood, family, tribe, and nation—positive and defining characteristics of what it means to be human and, therefore, to be affirmed and incorporated into any vision of social justice even on the political left? To put the question differently, in more Tillichian language, how important is the "whence" or "wherefrom" of human existence, sometimes referred to as the "isness" of being, in relation to the "whither" or "whereto" (oughtness) of existence? Ever since the triumph and demise of National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s, with its accompanying atrocities, many have equated nationalism with bigotry and injustice. Can one so easily, however, simply identify a concern for elements of origin, like ethnicity and nationality, with reactionary politics in the present situation? This is the primary question of this paper.

The fact is that many of the major political liberation movements around the globe today are struggles precisely for the rightful place of soil, blood, family, tribe and nation. The Black majority fighting against apartheid in South Africa, the yearning for self-determination on the part of the minority Native population in Canada, the determined desire for the preservation of the French language and culture in Quebec, the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, and Ukrainian nationalism in the Soviet Union, to name but a few examples, all point to the significant role which the powers of origin play in the contemporary struggle for historical freedom and justice around

the globe. What the present global political situation demonstrates is that a diversity of national and cultural-religious groups are perceiving the political imperative (the ought or whereto of human existence) to be not the breaking, let alone the dissolution, of the powers of origin, but rather the very opposite; that is, the full realization of those aspects of life connected with origin.

What I want to propose is that the powers of the origin—that is, those dimensions of human existence which root us in nature—are in fact defining characteristics of what it means to exist as human creatures, both as individuals and as groups. It is that which ties us to nature and to fellow human beings and, therefore, to be taken with utmost seriousness in an age of technical reason which uproots us from our origins. Further, I want to argue that the root cause of injustice in the present historical moment is not the affirmation of our various myths of origin per se but rather *domination by one configuration of the powers of the origin over another*. In short, the political ought has to do not with the breaking or overcoming of nationality or ethnicity in themselves, for instance, but with the breaking of the domination by one nationality over another. Justice, therefore, has to do not with the ignoring of the myth of the origin, which is fated to be unsuccessful from the start, but with limiting the powers of origin to their rightful place. The issue, as I see it, consequently, is not whether or not the myths of origin are to be affirmed—in a significant sense contemporary injustice is a turning against and the suppression of the legitimate yearnings of groups for their cultural and ethnic places under the sun—but, rather, the relation of particular cultural constellations (including language, ethnicity and nationality) to each other, on the one hand, and to the universal, international, cosmopolitan human community, on the other. It seems to me, for instance, that Canadian society is an excellent example of a country in which the right balance between 1) a universal federal identity, and 2) the legitimate claims of various nationalities and regional, cultural-ethnic configurations, is still being forged.

I want to use Paul Tillich's analysis of nation and the myth of origin (as contained in his German writings up to 1933) in defense of my position. Tillich has frequently been perceived, especially in light of his own conflict with National Socialism

and subsequent exile to New York City in 1933, as being unambiguously opposed to the national myth of origin in favor of the socialist principle of universal human solidarity, represented by the international proletariat. Such a view is based on a superficial reading of Tillich. There is in all of Tillich's writings during his German period, an underlying romanticism and even mysticism, exemplified, for instance, in his view of theonomy as the presence of the Unconditioned in human culture, his notion of God as the ground of being, his definition of religion as the substance of culture and culture as the form of religion, and his understanding of good art as expressing the infinite. Tillich's radical politics, which took the form of Religious Socialism in which he attempted to bridge the world of Protestant Christianity and a Marxist analysis of society beginning immediately after World War I, is quite well known and will not be discussed at length in this paper.

What is often ignored, however, is the important role which various romantic aspects of the myth of origin played in his socialist thought.² His fundamental critique of the bourgeois principle as well as the doctrinaire socialist principle, which he says ultimately grows out of the bourgeois principle, is that it has lost the religious and sacramental substance and replaced it with pure rational form. This critique of socialism is most clearly seen in his by now famous 1933 book *The Socialist Decision*, which too often is read simply as a resounding condemnation of nationalism and National Socialism. In fact, it was seen by some as giving much too significant a place to soil, blood and nation, even though it was quickly confiscated by the Nazis. It is to a few of Tillich's relevant writings, including his *The Socialist Decision*, that I now turn for help in the analysis of the issue as I see it. My own position is quite close to Tillich's although I think the historical situation, especially in regard to contemporary national liberation movements, has changed sufficiently to make Tillich's conclusions incomplete.

Christianity, Socialism and Nationalism, 1924

In a 1924 article, "Christentum, Sozialismus und Nationalismus," Tillich protests against certain nationalistic views recently defended by the conservative Wingolf student organization of which he himself had earlier been a member.³ He

objects particularly to the Wingolf's uncritical identification of historical Protestant Christianity with German bourgeois morality, especially nationality, and warns that any such unmediated identification with German culture is a falling back into "pre-Christian national religion" and idolatry. What is interesting in this 1924 essay, however, is that, although he unambiguously espouses political socialism, he, nevertheless, leaves positive room for family, *Volk* (the nation) and *Stand* (station in life). In what sense he does this will become clear below. The most important thing to remember about Tillich, however, is that any residues of the myth of origin that remain in his thought are incorporated into his socialist vision for society.

After distinguishing three different concepts, which according to Tillich are often confused in the popular mind—social, socialism, and Marxism—he comes to the strong defense of political socialism and Marxism. *Political socialism* must, he says, be distinguished from the *social* conscience of capitalism and be seen as a commitment to the radical political transformation of the capitalistic social order. *Marxism* is the theoretical basis for such a transformation and consists of three basic elements: 1) it is a philosophy of history and economic doctrine which stands over against classical English economic theory and both continues and restructures the German idealistic philosophy of history; 2) it is a profound new analysis of the relationship between spiritual-religious values and the sociological and economic basis of society; and 3) it provides invaluable insight into the dialectical conflict-character and inner rationality of historical development. Tillich is a committed socialist and Marxist in all of these senses.

The problem, for Tillich, is that bourgeois materialism which descended upon the masses in the nineteenth century also corrupted this great Marxist vision and turned it into a materialistic Marxism which, according to Tillich, spelled the spiritual death of socialism. The bourgeois spirit which has its most explicit manifestation in the capitalistic social order, but which is unfortunately also evident in vulgar Marxism, empties corporate reality of all spiritual substance, reifies the relationship of human beings to each other and to things, splits apart spiritual, social and economic life into subject and object, destroys all immediate communal relationships, and attacks natural and spiritual realities such as family, *Volk* (nationality)

and *Stand* (station), through the formal rationalization of all reality. The masses—Tillich's term for the working class—are the great losers in all of this since they are thereby excluded from all spiritual goods.

Religious Socialism, of which Tillich became the key theoretician in post-World War One Germany, had as its aim precisely making the working class aware of this loss of spiritual substance and calling socialism back to the concerns of early Marx. Here Tillich makes a most provocative point. Religious Socialism, he says, is committed to the struggle against the destructive despiritualizing effects of capitalism on the spirit and life of the nation and the nations. It is this which binds it not only to political socialism but also to what he calls "religiously-grounded national movements," even though in the end Religious Socialism cannot join these national renewal movements because they do not go to the root of the evil. They continue, without wanting to, to support the basic capitalistic attitude.⁴

What becomes clear in this early essay is that Tillich, while he clearly opts for political socialism and Marxism, still retains some ambivalence toward national renewal movements, because it is these movements which correctly perceive the loss in capitalistic society of something valuable; namely, the loss of the irrational and mythical substance of the individual and corporate human existence. Genuine socialism, historically carried by the proletariat, if it is to survive, will need to recover its spiritual ground and ties to the dynamic structures of being and life. What he is rejecting in this essay is not the Wingolf student organization's legitimate concern for the nation as such, but the uncritical identification of Christianity with a particular nation. Tillich felt that both the Religious Socialists and the Wingolf supporters of national renewal ought to have this in common with each other; that they subject their own causes and worldviews to the cross and the judgment of the eternal.

Political Romanticism, 1932–33

What exactly Tillich means in all of this becomes clearer in two articles which he published in 1932 and 1933, in the context of the triumph of National Socialism and the Third Reich: "Protestantismus und Politische Romantik [1932]," and "Das

Wohnen, Der Raum und die Zeit [1933].” The idealistic thinking behind Tillich’s political theory is particularly evident in the first of these articles, “Protestantismus und Politische Romantik.” He begins by distinguishing between two aspects of being human: creatureliness and humanness, two poles which he says are always present. The first is directed to the “wherefrom (*Woher*)” or origin of human existence. Human beings know themselves to be carried by a ground (*tragenden Grund*). The power of the origin expresses itself here as *Boden* (ground), blood and social group. It is what Tillich sometimes refers to as the *priestly-sacramental* dimension of human existence. Its trademark is the concern for *space*.

The second is directed to the “whereto (*Wozu*)” of existence in which human beings perceive themselves as subject to a demand, or an ought, as being directed toward a goal (*Telos*). He sometimes refers to this second aspect or direction of human existence as the *prophetic-eschatological* dimension, in which *time* triumphs over *space*. The important point here is that, although Tillich clearly subordinates the priestly-sacramental dimension to the prophetic-eschatological one, he, nevertheless, considers the former absolutely essential for meaningful human existence. “Both moments,” he maintains, “are active in every moment of human existence. We always stand within the origin, and we always have to tear ourselves away from it.”⁵

According to Tillich, there are two ways in which these powers of the origin are broken: through the prophetic and humanistic impulses. The *prophetic* places the “is” of human existence under the judgment of the ethical “ought,” the “anticipation of coming righteousness.”⁶ It does this still, however, within a mythical framework. While transcendence remains it is now not the holy transcendence of the origin but the transcendence of the future. It is with an Enlightenment-shaped humanism that the mythical is completely overcome on the basis of human autonomy. Human beings now see themselves as on their own. They take into their own hands the structuring of the world, they critically and analytically define and determine their own destiny. Even the ethical ought now loses its otherworldly character and is directed simply to progressive analysis and restructuring of the world. The rational system of bourgeois society replaces the older mythical worldview.

It is in the light of this theoretical and historical analysis that Tillich now proceeds to his political theory, to a discussion of *political romanticism*. "Political romanticism," says Tillich, "is the attempt to return to the myth of origin on the basis of a broken myth of origin."⁷ It is the attempt to recover once again the powers of the origin without giving up Enlightenment autonomy. This is the inner contradiction of political romanticism; namely, that it wants to use the tools of the Enlightenment to recover that which has been broken by the Enlightenment.

There are, however, two forms of political romanticism: the conservative and the revolutionary. *Conservative political romanticism* is against anything new and wants simply to sanctify the old. Tillich saw it at his time to be represented by groups such as the farmers and farm-related craftsmen, the nobility and the military, the priests and certain segments of the civil service. *Revolutionary political romanticism* (into which category Tillich places National Socialism) is represented by those groups which have been completely assimilated into the rational system but still yearn longingly for the powers of the origin, a remythologization of consciousness. For the petit bourgeoisie and large sections of the myth-of-origin groups which have been disenfranchised by the economic crisis, political romanticism takes on a revolutionary character.

What is significant in this latter group is that for them the rational system has triumphed and broken tradition. Technological reason is affirmed, however, only as long as it is useful. As soon as the underside of capitalism becomes manifest and threatens to produce a proletariat, this group rejects the rational system in favor of the myth of origin. According to Tillich's analysis, the strength of political romanticism rests in its recognition of the truth that being human always depends on being carried by a ground. This awareness and the yearning for the myth of origin as this ground becomes especially powerful at a time when the rational system is obviously in a state of crisis and autonomy has become for most an unbearable burden. The weakness and contradiction within political romanticism is that it can triumph only through the destruction of the rational system and lead into chaos and reductionism. This is in fact what Tillich sees as the danger of National Socialism.

Tillich goes on in this essay to discuss how Catholicism and Protestantism, both in its Lutheran and Calvinist forms, stand

with respect to political romanticism. This is not the primary concern of my paper. What I want to show, however, is how, despite his critique of political romanticism and his defense of the prophetic and humanistic protest against the myth of origin, there remains in Tillich an underlying ambivalence toward the myth-of-origin groups. This has to do with his basic affirmation of the metaphysical, ontological, mystical, or sacramental ground of all human existence especially in the face of the crisis of modernity. One might say this is the "religious" dimension in his Religious Socialism.

This ontological and mystical element in Tillich's radical social thought is most remarkably expressed in the second of the above articles, "Das Wohnen, Der Raum und Die Zeit (Habitation, Space and Time)." All three concepts—*Wohnen* (to live in a house, to have a home), space, and time, are given positive value, although in the end time is given priority; that is, according to Tillich, space must give way to time. Space has no abstract meaning but must be understood in its concrete diversity as it relates to inanimate objects, plants, animals and human beings. Space for plants, for instance, means something quite different than it does for inorganic substances. Space for animals, while concentrated at a specific point has much more flexible boundaries as an organic growing entity than a house in which one lives. For the space of animals a new characteristic is added; namely, that of movement, a movement which can conquer and take over foreign space. Here now you have duality which is not present for plants: the movement away from the place of origin and a yearning to go back to primal space, the nest or lair.

For human beings this duality is intensified. Human space, while maintaining all the previous elements, now has a new dimension: the duality between the inner and outer space. Externally, human beings can break all boundaries of space and have the potential for creating limitless or infinite space for themselves; although they always voluntarily limit themselves to a particular space. Inwardly, human beings become conscious of the desire to limit themselves to a finite space, the house and the love of mother and home, on the one hand, and the desire and need to leave home and mother and create infinite space for themselves. However, to have and create space is the way everything that lives comes into existence and as such

space takes on primal and holy quality, above all that space which has the character of preservation (*der Tragenden*), the ground (*Boden*). One's own house, the neighbor's house, village, city, country, and *Volk* (nation or nationality) all partake in the sanctity of space which gives us our existence.⁸ Nevertheless, the space-creating power of human beings is also directed toward transforming the whole earth into a house for all of humanity. This is how space is related to time.

Time can never annul space. In fact, time becomes present for us only within space. In "the present" space and time are united. For Tillich, "Whoever has space has the present; the person who has not yet found space remains without space-for-life (*Lebensraum*), lives toward the future, in order to create for himself the present out of that future."⁹ We have again and again to forsake space for the sake of the future. Abraham was called to leave his life-space (*Lebensraum*) to go into an unknown future and thus, according to Tillich, becomes a symbol for all of humankind. This is an especially important symbol during the present social struggle, says Tillich in 1933, when the gods and powers of limited and enclosed space resist breaking out into all-comprehensive space, the space of humankind. As is evident throughout this essay, Tillich is here not rejecting the importance of space as such, which is essential for meaningful human existence, but protests against that absolutization of finite space which struggles against time and infinite space for all of humankind. What is noteworthy, nevertheless, is how much weight Tillich does put on the importance of *Wohnen* and concrete particular space or *Lebensraum* for human existence.

The Socialist Decision, 1933

How does Tillich apply all of this abstract analysis to a concrete situation—namely, the so-called liberation of the German nation under Hitler and National Socialism? First of all, it must be said unhesitatingly that Tillich earlier than most recognized and roundly condemned the demonic and pagan nationalism within National Socialism. This is evident even before Hitler came to power (January 30, 1933). In a 1932 essay, "Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich: Zehn Thesen,"¹⁰ Tillich in ten theses warns the Protestant churches in Germany against

identifying with and supporting the National Socialist Party in its suppression of socialism (theses nos. 1 and 10); against justifying nationalism and the ideology of blood and race on the basis of a divine order of creation and thus giving up the Protestant prophetic principle in favor of a new heathenism (thesis no. 3); and against giving divinely-ordained authority to the capitalistic-feudal forms of lordship which serve to support National Socialism, thus prolonging the class struggle and betraying the Protestant task of witnessing for justice (thesis no. 4).

Tillich's condemnation of paganism within National Socialism and his challenge to the Protestant churches is crystal clear. Protestantism must preserve its prophetic-Christian character by setting the Christianity of the cross over against the heathenism of the swastika. It must witness to the breaking of the sanctity of nation, race, blood and authoritarianism, and place them under the judgment of the cross. What must be remembered here, however, is that when Tillich uses the term "breaking" he does not mean the dissolution of these aspects of the origin but rather their relativization. Even in this article of ten theses, there is a strange hidden ambivalence which is implicit in theses nos. 8 and 9. In thesis no. 8 he maintains that Protestantism cannot identify itself with any definite political direction and, consequently, must allow its members the freedom to belong to any political party, even those which fight against Protestantism in its ecclesiastical form. It must, nevertheless, place every party, and all human activity under the judgment and hope of the prophetic early Christian proclamation of the kingdom of God. In this way, Tillich continues in thesis no. 9, Protestantism can point those groups who support National Socialism to the true goal and free the movement from the national- and human-destroying demons that now control it.

In his most important political statement, his famous book of 1933, *The Socialist Decision*, Tillich goes much further in his analysis of the two roots of all political thought, ideas which are already present in his earlier writings, some of which we have discussed above. The first root is "The consciousness oriented to the myth of origin... the root of all conservative and romantic thought in politics."¹¹ This root has to do with the cyclical law of birth, development and death from which

none of us can finally escape. The second root is "The breaking of the myth of origin by the unconditional demand... the root of liberal, democratic, and socialist thought in politics."¹²

What is truly remarkable about this book, especially in the light of the political context in which it was written and first appeared—that is, during the time that saw the triumph of National Socialism—is how far Tillich goes in acknowledging the importance of the powers of origin for human existence. "The origin is creative," he says, "... we are continually dependent on the origin; it bears us, ... it creates us anew at every moment, and thereby holds us fast. The origin brings us forth as something new and singular, but it takes us, as such back to the origin again."¹³ Nevertheless, Tillich stresses the ambiguity of the origin. This is what political romanticism does not recognize or accept and this is where National Socialism, which Tillich, as we have seen, identifies with revolutionary political romanticism, goes wrong. It calls us back to an unambiguous origin. But human beings experience, or at least ought to experience, themselves not only as bound to the origin but also as freed from the origin by the moral demand which "calls for something that does not yet exist but should exist"—justice.¹⁴

Justice is the "recognition of the equal dignity of the 'thou' and the 'I' "¹⁵ of the other and of one's self. Herein lies the ambiguity of the origin: that there exists an antinomy between the *actual* origin (presumably what Tillich has in mind here is home, soil, blood, tribe, and nation) and the *true* origin (justice). It is the split between being (the is) and the demand for justice (the ought). This antinomy, however, is not an absolute one because the true origin is the fulfillment of being; that is, "Justice is the true power of being."¹⁶ Further, the relationship between origin and justice, between being and demand is not a simple dialectic, for "The demand is superior to the origin."¹⁷ What distinguishes the spirit of socialism from the spirit of political romanticism is that it takes seriously this demand for something new (justice). Political romanticism in all its forms does not take seriously the demand for justice but draws "the spirit back into the bondage of being."¹⁸

Tillich's book deserves a much more careful discussion than I can give here. His analysis of the principle and inner contradiction of political romanticism; his examination of the bourgeois principle and its attack on all traditional bonds of origin

through a total objectification and rationalization of society, that ultimately robs the proletariat of any connection with the spiritual dimension of its own origin; and his explication, defense, and critique of political socialism in Germany are all relevant here. Nevertheless, I will limit my final remarks to a few observations about Tillich's view of socialism and the nation.

The nation is a fundamental ingredient of the myth of origin—not the nation as nation-state but the nation as a cultural, linguistic, ethnic entity (as in nationality)—and for Tillich is to be affirmed but never absolutized. Where the myth of origin predominates, a particular space like the nation is idolatrously consecrated ontologically. Here the prophetic tradition demands that time be elevated above space. This is what happens in prophetic Judaism which anticipates a “new heaven and a new earth,” the new being which is “intrinsically unontological.”¹⁹ The Jewish spirit raises time above space in this way and represents the protest against bondage to space. “The spirit of Judaism is therefore the necessary and eternal enemy of political romanticism.”²⁰ This means, according to Tillich, that “the actual life of the Jewish nation, like the actual life of every nation, is by nature pagan.”²¹

Although Tillich throughout this book is highly critical of the absurd way in which National Socialism tries to create a unified national tradition on the basis of the old-German heritage and mythology²²—something which cannot be achieved because of the heterogeneity of the Germanic past—and of any attempt to give the nation mythic significance, he does recognize the power of the nation as both an historical reality and as a symbol. While the proletariat is ultimately committed to an international human community, Tillich still maintains that “The concept of a classless society... does not imply a society cut off from the power of origin. Even in the society which socialism wishes to create, the factors of soil, blood, and social group will be present.”²³ Although socialism must protest the ideological perversion of the national idea in the defense of domination and imperialism, “*Socialism must affirm the nation more profoundly than nationalism can.*”²⁴ This is what he says about a socialist view of the nation:

But it is true here, too, that only what once had a genuine use can be misused. The idea of the nation cannot be destroyed by pointing

to its perversion. The idea of the nation has energies deriving from the origin, and therefore has a claim to fulfillment—meaning not uncritical support, but also not destruction. Soil, blood, tradition, the social group—all the powers of origin are combined in the nation. The prophetic tradition thus relates to a people neither in such a way as to confirm it in its immediate self-awareness (as the “false prophets” do), nor to dissolve it for the sake of an immediate transition to a universal humanity (as bourgeois cosmopolitanism does). It seeks rather at once to judge and to support the nation. *The prophetic is always addressed to all humanity, but it always proceeds from amongst a people*, exhibiting thereby the unity of origin and goal that is typical of it.²⁵

What Tillich seems to be suggesting here is that the way to a universal human community is *through* the particular community. In other words, one cannot get to the universal community too quickly, without passing through that which is nearest to one—one’s own family, tribe, and nationality. The problem arises when one becomes fixated with one’s own particular, or national community and no longer sees it as *a means to a* universal, international human community.

Notes

- 1 This paper is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at a conference on the “Future of Religion: Culture, Class, and Nation” at the Inter-University Centre of Postgraduate Studies, Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, April 1987.
- 2 An East German author who has recently examined this romantic element in Tillich’s social and political thought is Detlef Döring, in *Christentum und Faschismus: Die Faschismusdeutung der religiösen Sozialisten* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1982).
- 3 “Christentum, Sozialismus und Nationalismus: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der ‘Marburger Erklärung’ des Wingolf,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XIII (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1972) 161–166.
- 4 *Ibid.* 164.
- 5 “Protestantismus und Politische Romantik,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. II (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962) 209.
- 6 *Ibid.* 210.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 “Das Wohnen, der Raum und die Zeit,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. IX (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1975) 331.
- 9 *Ibid.* 331.
- 10 “Die Kirche und das Dritte Reich: Zehn Thesen,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XIII (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1972) 177–179.

- 11 *The Socialist Decision*, Translated by Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977) 4.
- 12 Ibid. 5.
- 13 Ibid. 3.
- 14 Ibid. 4.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid. 6.
- 17 Ibid. 7.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid. 20.
- 20 Ibid. 22.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid. 34.
- 23 Ibid. 130.
- 24 Ibid. 151.
- 25 Ibid.