

Neither Lord Nor Subject

Translated by Etienne Balazs

Bao Jingyan

300 BC

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We know next to nothing about the man historian Etienne Balazs called “China’s first political anarchist.” Though we know so little about this fascinating Taoist writer, Balazs describes him as “a daring thinker who went well beyond the vague Utopianism of popular Taoism by placing his argument firmly on the political level.” As such, his sole surviving work constitutes one of the earliest and clearest expositions of “Libertarian anarchism,” (Balazs’ phrasing) in world history; a feat of especial importance in an era of Chinese history marked by rising nihilism and libertine age.

In his short treatise, Bao Jingyan begins by countering the prevailing wisdom of ancient China’s dominant “Confucian literati,” and their fundamental assumption that the heavens had condemned some to serve while elevating others to rule. In fact, he states, all such philosophies simply served the interests of those who formulated them, solidifying the Confucian monopoly of office-holding. Rejecting the natural authority of rulers, Bao Jingyan encouraged his audience to investigate the ways of nature and the history of world before the rise of the ruling classes.

Before men sought power—before they strove to conquer nature as well as each other—they enjoyed both peace and prosperity. He presents an idyllic, heavily romanticized vision of ancient life, in which humans joined in “mystic unity” with nature, did not suffer disease or privation, and recognized no social distinctions or disturbances of the peace. Grown fat and decadent, ancient man lost “The Way and Its Virtue,” providing the powerful with ample opportunities for establishing socio-political hierarchies. Gradually, but surely, the social distinction between Lord and Subject grew to include the great mass of common people ruled over by a small elite.

While hierarchy provided the basis for imperial power, it also attempted to subvert and violate The Way and Its Virtue. As such, the very existence of social distinctions provided the impetus for the uprisings and revolution that caused cyclical dynastic collapse. Bao Jingyan concluded by suggesting that no one can truly live outside the unitary system of Nature, and even apparently *unnatural* socio-political hierarchies inevitably served to instruct the people in the necessity of virtuously governing *themselves*. Hope for once again attaining the ancients’ mystical union with the natural order rested in individuals’ personal moral commitments to be “Neither Lord Nor Subject.”

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THE CONFUCIAN LITERATI SAY: “Heaven gave birth to the people and then set rulers over them.” But how can High Heaven have said this in so many words? Is it not rather that interested parties make this their pretext? The fact is that the strong oppressed the weak and the weak submitted to them; the cunning tricked the innocent and the innocent served them. It was because there was submission that the relation of lord and subject arose, and because there was servitude that the people, being powerless, could be kept under control. Thus servitude and mastery result from the struggle between the strong and the weak and the contrast between the cunning and the innocent, and Blue Heaven has nothing whatsoever to do with it.

When the world was in its original undifferentiated state, the Nameless (wu-ming, i.e., the Tao) was what was valued, and all creatures found happiness in self-fulfillment. Now when the

cinnamon-tree has its bark stripped or the varnish-tree is cut, it is not done at the wish of the tree; when the pheasant's feathers are plucked or the kingfisher's torn out, it is not done by desire of the bird. To be bitted and bridled is not in accordance with the nature of the horse; to be put under the yoke and bear burdens does not give pleasure to the ox. Cunning has its origin in the use of force that goes against the true nature of things, and the real reason for harming creatures is to provide useless adornments. Thus catching the birds of the air in order to supply frivolous adornments, making holes in noses where no holes should be, tying beasts by the leg when nature meant them to be free, is not in accord with the destiny of the myriad creatures, all born to live out their lives unharmed. And so the people are compelled to labour so that those in office may be nourished; and while their superiors enjoy fat salaries, they are reduced to the direst poverty.

It is all very well to enjoy the infinite bliss of life after death, but it is preferable not to have died in the first place; and rather than acquire an empty reputation for integrity by resigning office and foregoing one's salary, it is better that there should be no office to resign. Loyalty and righteousness only appear when rebellion breaks out in the empire, filial obedience and parental love are only displayed when there is discord among kindred.

In the earliest times, there was neither lord nor subjects. Wells were dug for drinking-water, the fields were plowed for food, work began at sunrise and ceased at sunset; everyone was free and at ease; neither competing with each other nor scheming against each other, and no one was either glorified or humiliated. The waste lands had no paths or roads and the waterways no boats or bridges, and because there were no means of communication by land or water, people did not appropriate each other's property; no armies could be formed, and so people did not attack one another. Indeed since no one climbed up to seek out nests nor dived down to sift the waters of the deep, the phoenix nested under the eaves of the house and dragons disported in the garden pool. The ravening tiger could be trodden on, the poisonous snake handled. Men could wade through swamps without raising the waterfowl, and enter the woodlands without startling the fox or the hare. Since no one even began to think of gaining power or seeking profit, no dire events or rebellions occurred; and as spears and shields were not in use, moats and ramparts did not have to be built. All creatures lived together in mystic unity, all of them merged in the Way (Tao). Since they were not visited by plague or pestilence, they could live out their lives and die a natural death. Their hearts being pure, they were devoid of cunning. Enjoying plentiful supplies of food, they strolled about with full bellies. Their speech was not flowery, their behavior not ostentatious. How, then, could there have been accumulation of property such as to rob the people of their wealth, or severe punishments to trap and ensnare them? When this age entered on decadence, knowledge and cunning came into use. The Way and its Virtue (Tao te) having fallen into decay, a hierarchy was established. Customary regulations for promotion and degradation and for profit and loss proliferated, ceremonial garments such as the [gentry's] sash and sacrificial cap and the imperial blue and yellow [robes for worshiping Heaven and Earth] were elaborated. Buildings of earth and wood were raised high into the sky, with the beams and rafters painted red and green. The heights were overturned in quest of gems, the depths dived into in search of pearls; but however vast a collection of precious stones people might have assembled, it still would not have sufficed to satisfy their whims, and a whole mountain of gold would not have been enough to meet their expenditure, so sunk were they in depravity and vice, having transgressed against the fundamental principles of the Great Beginning. Daily they became further removed from the ways of their ancestors, and turned their back more and more upon man's original simplicity.

Because they promoted the “worthy” to office, ordinary people strove for reputation, and because they prized material wealth, thieves and robbers appeared. The sight of desirable objects tempted true and honest hearts, and the display of arbitrary power and love of gain opened the road to robbery. So they made weapons with points and with sharp edges, and after that there was no end to usurpations and acts of aggression, and they were only afraid lest crossbows should not be strong enough, shields stout enough, lances sharp enough, and defences solid enough. Yet all this could have been dispensed with if there had been no oppression and violence from the start.

Therefore it has been said: “Who could make scepters without spoiling the unblemished jade? And how could altruism and righteousness (jen and i) be extolled unless the Way and its Virtue had perished?” Although tyrants such as Chieh and Chou were able to burn men to death, massacre their advisers, make mince-meat of the feudal lords, cut the barons into strips, tear out men’s hearts and break their bones, and go to the furthest extremes of tyrannical crime down to the use of torture by roasting and grilling, however cruel they may by nature have been, how could they have done such things if they had had to remain among the ranks of the common people? If they gave way to their cruelty and lust and butchered the whole empire, it was because, as rulers, they could do as they pleased. As soon as the relationship between lord and subject is established, hearts become daily more filled with evil designs, until the manacled criminals sullenly doing forced labour in the mud and the dust are full of mutinous thoughts, the Sovereign trembles with anxious fear in his ancestral temple, and the people simmer with revolt in the midst of their poverty and distress; and to try to stop them revolting by means of rules and regulations, or control them by means of penalties and punishments, is like trying to dam a river in full flood with a handful of earth, or keeping the torrents of water back with one finger.

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