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**Prometheus in Chains: The Roots of Totalitarianism in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound.**

Aim: The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of totalitarianism in Aeschylus' play

*Prometheus Bound.*

Objective: To explore the system of totalitarianism, crime, punishment and power.

Abstract

The twentieth century witnessed the rise of a socio political system known as totalitarianism. Totalitarianism can be defined as a form of a government that is dictatorial and demands complete subservience to the state. Totalitarianism prohibits opposition to the state and the ruler. It is also marked by the high degree of control exercised by the state over public and private life. More often than not, the totalitarian state is subject to the will of a single ruler, in possession of absolute power. State machinery and force was used to eliminate opposition. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy are examples of totalitarian states, governed by the personal charisma of leaders like Mussolini and Hitler. Their regimes were not entirely without opposition. The likes of Willy Brandt, Albert Einstein were vocal in their criticism of the state and the leadership. A similar parallel can be noticed in Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound*. The play begins with the binding of Prometheus for his crimes. His crimes include the theft of fire, and his wilful defiance of Zeus. Prometheus emerges as the benefactor of

mankind, who works for the preservation of the human race in the face of terrible punishment. On the other hand Zeus' actions highlight his tyrannical nature.

Prometheus stole the fire from heaven for a noble cause. He gave it to Man so that civilization may progress. But at the same time, Zeus had been contemplating on destroying the human race. Hence, it is a collision of two conflicting wills, one keen to preserve and the other eager to destroy. Furthermore, Prometheus mentions that Zeus has punished him even when the Titan had helped him previously. As a tyrant, Zeus exercises his arbitrary will and power, and it is imperative that others must bow down to his authority. His rule is largely based on inspiring fear and compelling others to obey him. Prometheus, whose name signifies fore knowledge, defies Zeus and his totalitarian rule. He is in possession of a secret that will lead to Zeus' fall from power. It is this knowledge that gives him the strength to face the ordeal. He is aware about the fact that Zeus gained the throne in a violent manner, opposing the tyrannical ways of his father Cronus. Hence the day is not far off when his hypothetical son will dethrone him.

The actions of Zeus are that of a ruler, insecure about his position. He is keen to weed out all forms of opposition to his rule. But this can only add to the growing dissent among the immortals. As Prometheus predicts, his cruel and authoritarian ways will lead to his fall. But by gaining maturity and knowledge, he can avoid the disastrous consequences. As the benevolent patron of the human race, Prometheus links his fate to the humans. He will be liberated by a man, a descendant of Io, another victim of Zeus will. Prometheus remains defiant even in his suffering. He is certain about the fact that Zeus will have to mend his ways or face the prospect of being dethroned. In this manner he is assured about the end of the totalitarian regime.

Key words: Totalitarianism, punishment, knowledge, benevolence, opposition.

“Cruelty impresses, people want to be afraid of something. They want someone to whom they can submit with a shudder, the masses need that. They need something to dread.”

-Adolf Hitler

## Introduction

The *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus is about resisting tyranny and the frustration and helplessness of reason and righteousness in the face of sheer power. Prometheus is the personification of reason and wisdom, but he also represents the individual of conscience in a tyrannical totalitarian state. He is portrayed as the rebel with a conscience, whose crime - his love for man - brings on him the rage of the gods, but also the immediate sympathy of the human audience. He becomes a representative for those human champions of justice and principle who defy tyranny and pay the ultimate price. In some ways, Prometheus prefigures Christ, as a divine being who suffers horrible tortures for the sake of mankind. He belongs to an older race of divinities known as the Titans. It was his act of stealing fire and giving it to mankind that enabled the progress of civilization. Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods sentenced the Titan to eternal torment for his transgression. The immortal Prometheus was bound to Mount Caucasus, where each day an eagle was sent to feed on his liver, which would then grow back overnight to be eaten again the next day.

*Prometheus Bound* takes place far earlier in the chronology of Greek myth than any other surviving Greek tragedy. The war between the Olympian gods and the Titans, children of Uranus (Sky) and Gaia (Earth), has just ended. Zeus, king of the Olympians, has defeated his father, the Titan Cronus, who had previously overthrown his own father, and is newly established on the throne. The play's central character, the Titan Prometheus, is Zeus' former ally, the subverter of his authority, and the prophet of his potential downfall. Prometheus' theft of fire precedes the action of *Prometheus Bound*; the coming of the eagle that will

devour his liver, announced in the concluding scene, follows the play's action by a long expanse of years. In this play, Prometheus is initially punished not by the torment of the eagle but by the agony and the isolation of his binding, and it is his response to the experience of this imprisonment that will bring on him the further punishment we expect.

“In the *Theogony*, *Hesiod* tells the stories of Prometheus and his conflict with Zeus, with the human race as the pawn in this gigantic clash of divine wills” (Morford 83). Hesiod's Prometheus, here the son of the Titans Iapetus and Clymene, is a divine trickster who allies himself with mortals (minor players in this story) in opposition to Zeus; he can never finally succeed, and the help he gives mortals brings on them further suffering. To emphasize the power of Zeus, Hesiod begins his account with the binding and torment of Prometheus, and then describes the events that precede. Prometheus first attempts to deceive Zeus into taking the bones of a sacrificial ox and leaving the meat for mortals. In his anger, Zeus withholds fire from human beings. When Prometheus then steals fire on their behalf, Zeus punishes mortals by sending them (through Prometheus' thoughtless brother Epimetheus) the “beautiful evil” Pandora, and punishes Prometheus by imprisoning him and sending the eagle to torture him. We also learn that Heracles eventually kills the eagle and releases Prometheus, and that this is done with the permission of Zeus.

As Deborah Roberts writes “among gods as among humans suffering often turns out to follow from acts of injustice and the disruption of familial or social bonds. In this play, two parties, once allies and connected as well by the “terrible strength” of kinship, accuse each other of treachery, wrongdoing, and injustice” (Roberts 12). For Zeus and the other gods, Prometheus has erred in giving humans a prerogative, fire, “to which they have no right.”

No, Zeus kept it a secret because in his heart he was angry,  
Seeing how devious-minded Prometheus once had fooled him;  
Therefore did almighty Zeus plot sorrows and troubles for mankind.

He hid fire, which, however, then Iapetus's great-hearted son, to  
Benefit humankind, pilfered from Zeus, the purveyor of counsel,  
Hid in a hollowed-out stalk to baffle the lover of thunder. (Hesiod 24, 25)

For Prometheus, who both acknowledges his act as error and claims it as deliberate choice, Zeus and the other gods have unjustly returned evil for good, mistreating him although he helped them gain power.

I knew when I transgressed, nor will I deny it  
In helping man I brought my troubles on me;  
But yet I did not think that with such tortures,  
I should be wasted on these airy cliffs,  
This lonely mountain top with no one near. (*Prometheus Bound* 268, 272)

These claims of wrongdoing occur (as in many human tragedies) in a context of political change and crisis. The characters in this play are ever conscious of political power ("freedom belongs to nobody but Zeus") and its evolution ("He is harsh, as all those new to power are harsh"), whether they resist or submit to Zeus' authority. "Prometheus is from the outset of the play strongly associated with humans, and they are a recurring presence in the conversations and narratives that dominate the play" (Roberts 12). To prevent their destruction, he lost the friendship of Zeus, and he is reminded at several points of their helplessness—a helplessness he could only partially remedy and in some sense now shares. And although he is himself imprisoned in a "wilderness where no mortals live," we learn from the chorus that human beings all over the world mourn for him and for his fellow Titans. Prometheus himself gives a vivid description of human suffering in the state of nature, now mitigated by his gift of various arts and technologies, and his account of Io's past and future wandering provides a kind of virtual tour of various peoples.

The actions of the play, mirror certain events that occurred in the twentieth century. It was the rise of totalitarianism in certain parts of Europe. Benito Mussolini once summarized the basis of totalitarianism as, “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.” Typically, the characteristics of a totalitarian state tend to cause people to fear their government. Rather than trying to allay that fear, totalitarian rulers tend to encourage and use it to ensure the people’s cooperation. Totalitarianism is the most radical denial of freedom. It is a form of rule with sovereign power in the hands of one man who exercises power according to his own arbitrary will. “By striving to dominate the totality of man and by claiming to represent the power governing all reality, the system was totalitarian in theory” (Wandycz 224). It involved the suppression of opposition through the use of power. During the twentieth century, totalitarian regimes emerged in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The totalitarian regimes revolved around a single person, wielding absolute power in the state. A similar system occurs in the play *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus is the supreme authority, vested with absolute power. He uses his power to eliminate all forms of opposition. Even the likes of Hephaestus, who resent his tyranny, have got no choice but to submit, for the consequences of defying him are terrible.

Aeschylus’ play, set in the isolated northern region of Scythia, begins with the binding of Prometheus by a reluctant Hephaestus, smith of the gods, under the supervision of Zeus’ agents Power and Force. Immobilized and in pain, Prometheus is reduced (if we can call it that) to his powers of speech, sight, and hearing, and to the foreknowledge for which he is said to be named: Prometheus means something like “the one who thinks ahead,” “the fore-knower.” As the drama proceeds, he speaks with a series of visitors: the daughters of Ocean, the chorus of this play, who listen sympathetically; Ocean himself, who somewhat pompously offers his condolences and proposes to intervene with Zeus; and Io, wandering the world as a result of Zeus’ desire and Hera’s hatred. In the course of these conversations,

Prometheus tells his listeners and the audience about events both past and future. He tells how he and his mother came to side with Zeus and the other gods against the Titans; he explains how he subsequently rescued mortals from destruction at Zeus' hands, gave them fire, and transformed their condition, and how this led to his punishment. He describes what other Titans are suffering, and after Io herself has told how her troubles began, he gives a detailed account of the extent of her wanderings, both past and still to come. His narratives are punctuated by expressions of anguish and criticisms of Zeus and the other gods, and his listeners' questions at times force him to comment on or defend his own actions. He also offers an increasingly explicit and gradually shifting prediction of how his own suffering will come to an end, and reveals his knowledge of the marriage that will lead to Zeus' downfall. In response to his assertions about this marriage, he receives one last visitor, Hermes, messenger of the gods. Hermes threatens Prometheus with added punishment—years underground followed by a return to the upper world to be tortured by the eagle—if he will not reveal what he knows. Prometheus refuses to tell, the chorus refuse to abandon him, and as the play ends, the storm that heralds the beginning of his further suffering begins. “For Aeschylus, the myth is the illustration of a great permanent truth that he finds at the heart of man's activity” (Greene 305).

The nature of the crime

In *The Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Hesiod paints Prometheus as a lowly trickster who breaks the rules laid down by Zeus. In his defiance of Zeus, Prometheus only manages to aggravate the animosity and heightens the conflict.

Seeing how devious-minded Prometheus once had fooled him;  
Therefore did almighty Zeus plot sorrows and troubles for mankind. (Hesiod 23)

Prometheus, a Titan emerges as a champion of mankind, as well as a rebel. His theft of fire is one of the many actions that define him as a rebel against the authority of Zeus. The theory of Hesiod, the oldest of all the Greek poets, was that the Titan Prometheus, the son of Iapetus, had formed man out of clay, and that Athena had breathed a soul into him. "Full of love for the beings he had called into existence, Prometheus determined to elevate their minds and improve their condition in every way; he therefore taught them astronomy, mathematics, the alphabet, how to cure diseases, and the art of divination" (Berens 24). He created this race in such great numbers that the gods began to see the necessity of instituting certain fixed laws with regard to the sacrifices due to them, and the worship to which they considered themselves entitled from mankind in return for the protection which they accorded them. An assembly was therefore convened at Mecone in order to settle these points. It was decided that Prometheus, as the advocate of man, should slay an ox, which should be divided into two equal parts, and that the gods should select one portion which should henceforth, in all future sacrifices, be set apart for them. Prometheus so divided the ox that one part consisted of the bones (which formed of course the least valuable portion of the animal), artfully concealed by the white fat; whilst the other contained all the edible parts, which he covered with the skin, and on the top of all he laid the stomach. "Zeus, easily deceived, chose the bag containing the bones and fat (which are still the divine portion); but punished Prometheus, who was laughing at him behind his back, by withholding fire from mankind. 'Let them eat their flesh raw!' he cried" (Graves 88). Zeus also sought to exterminate the human race by unleashing a great flood. Deucalion and his wife saved themselves by building a ship in which he and his wife took shelter. "Prometheus, however, resolved to brave the anger of the great ruler of Olympus, and to obtain from heaven the vital spark so necessary for the further progress and comfort of the human race" (Berens 25).

The actions of Prometheus stem from a desire to help mankind. “Prometheus becomes the hero of a new kind of story, whose ambition it is to rise above the story to the plane of science. It does this in two ways: by moving from particular characters to general accounts, and by moving from the emotions and feelings to the intellect” (Nussbaum 131). He strives to provide for a better life for the humans. This betterment occurs with the acquisition of knowledge. But the knowledge is forbidden and fraud and deceit must be employed to obtain it. He stole fire from heaven, an act where fire assumes the status of knowledge and power. “He put them, indeed, in the way of achieving all that man has since achieved, and transformed them into all that differentiates man from brutes and insects. But in doing so he had been guilty of an act of great presumption: he had crossed and thwarted the will of Zeus.” (Whitelaw xxii, xxiii). Though it was a just and kindly act, in reality it was an act of great presumption, for it was an interference with the will of Zeus; and it was an act of short sighted folly.

The crime of Prometheus is a form of revolt against the totalitarian authority of Zeus. He makes a genuine effort to improve the condition of humans who come to represent the state. Zeus wishes to exterminate the human race, while Prometheus acts as a benevolent guardian. The appearance of Io also serves to highlight the tyranny and authoritarian regime of Zeus. But she has neither the might nor the knowledge to rebel against the supremacy of Zeus. Prometheus’ actions can also be regarded as a manifestation of his utopian ideals. The earliest history of man was known as the dark ages, when fire was a mystery and he led a life little better than a beast. “It is tempting to see in Aeschylus’ play *Prometheus Bound* an interpretation and elaboration: human beings were without hope, until Prometheus gave it to them along with the benefit of fire. The hope Prometheus bestows on mortals is both blind and a blessing” (Morford 88). Prometheus is the one who sets the cycle of civilization in motion. He helps human beings both by giving them the ability to predict the seasons by star

gazing and the art of divination to know the future. But the first gift he mentions, even before fire—and the one the chorus call “a great service”—is a kind of cancellation of foreknowledge: he has prevented mortals from foreseeing their own deaths. “Prometheus caused them to cease to foreknow the day of their death. For the gift of reason, their supreme ally in their struggle against nature, made them fight on against death in blind hope even when the day of their death had come” (Greene 307, 308).

By filling the hearts of men with hope, he prepares them to face the worst without flinching and despairing. In a totalitarian state, where the human race faced the imminent threat of extermination at the hands of Zeus, Prometheus provided them with hope and knowledge. This almost certainly saved them, but it was against the will of Zeus which proved to be his undoing. As Deborah Roberts writes, “Prometheus is Zeus’ former ally, the subverter of authority and the prophet of his downfall” (Roberts 8). To safeguard his own position as the supreme ruler, Zeus punishes Prometheus.

### The Punishment of Prometheus

“The Titanic artist found within himself the defiant belief that he could create human beings and destroy the Olympian gods at least, and that his higher wisdom enabled him to do so, for which, admittedly, he was forced to do penance by suffering eternally” (Nietzsche 49). The play begins with Might and Violence chaining Prometheus to Mount Caucasus, under the supervision of Hephaestus. This is only the beginning of a long and painful punishment that awaits the Titan. An eagle, the bird of Zeus would gnaw his liver which would regrow in the night, to prepare Prometheus for another day of torture. In his own defiant words he claims that he would have preferred an imprisonment in Tartarus.

Would that he had hurled me  
Underneath the earth and underneath  
The House of Hades, host to the dead-  
Yes, down to limitless Tartarus. (*Prometheus Bound* 152, 155)

Chained to the “airy cliffs” of Mount Caucasus, Prometheus is subject to the gaze of all the other divinities. Some like Hephaestus, Oceanus and the Oceanides are sympathetic but the same cannot be said about the other gods. In truth Prometheus dreads to be the laughing stock of the other immortals.

Now as I hang, the plaything of the winds,  
My enemies can laugh at what I suffer. (*Prometheus Bound* 158, 159)

Zeus intends the punishment of Prometheus to act as a deterrent. His terrible fate would lead other mortals and immortals alike to think twice before transgressing the authority of Zeus. The punishment of Prometheus is aimed at subjugating his mind and knowledge, rather than merely torturing his body. “Prometheus is initially punished, not by the torment of the eagle, but by the agony and the isolation of his binding and it is his response to the experience of this imprisonment that will bring on him further punishment” (Roberts 9). His imprisonment is different from that of the Titans in Tartarus. The ancient Titans are imprisoned in the lowest reaches of the Underworld, where none can see them. Their punishment was the result of their defeat at the hands of Zeus in the Titanomachia, a war between Zeus and the Olympians, against the Titans led by Cronus. Prometheus, a Titan had fought alongside Zeus, but incurred the latter’s ire by defying his authority, for which the punishment is even more terrible.

Hephaestus' sympathy for the plight of Prometheus is understandable, as the smith god too had suffered violently at the hands of his father Zeus. About him, Robert Graves writes, "he dared reproach Zeus himself for hanging her by the wrists from Heaven when she rebelled against him. But silence would have been wiser, because angry Zeus only heaved him down from Olympus a second time" (Graves 54). He suffers at the hands of Zeus, as he questions the power of Zeus, who had chained Juno. His sympathy is one of understanding; an understanding that results from having suffered on similar grounds. But it also must be noted that Hephaestus submits to the will and might of Zeus, which Prometheus does not. Hephaestus lacks the power of knowledge which enables Prometheus to act against the authority of Zeus. He poses a much greater threat to the authoritarian regime of Zeus than the Titans and Hephaestus. His punishment is a manifestation of an endless cycle of punishment which has been forged to subjugate his free will.

"Prometheus is a god, son of the great earth goddess, whose obduracy the new lord of heaven is unable to crush. He mocks the youthful race of gods which abuses him only because he preserved mankind from destruction (Graves 14). The punishment stems from a clash between the ideals of two contrasting individuals. Prometheus professes his "excessive love" for humanity, in stark contrast to Zeus who is willing to exterminate the human race. Their actions too are a manifestation of their character. Prometheus acts in every possible manner to preserve the human race. But he loses out to Zeus, as the latter uses his might and violence against the Titan. "Zeus is a tyrant and Prometheus a slave, but a slave who is master of time" (Naquet 260). Though he is physically restrained, yet he is still in possession of the knowledge that will eventually lead to his freedom.

## Zeus: a paradox

Aeschylus' depiction of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound* is in stark contrast to his portrayal in the Oresteia trilogy. In neither of these plays, does he make an on stage appearance, but it is his conscience which guides the action. It is at his bidding that Might and Violence chain Prometheus and it is at the same god's bidding that Apollo commands Orestes to kill Clytemnestra. Zeus and his brothers revolted against their father Cronus, as the latter was a tyrant. But once in power, Zeus himself acts in a tyrannical manner. The first task he undertakes, is the imprisonment of the fallen Titans in Tartarus. That achieved, he sets about consolidating his position in Heaven. His authoritarian demeanor irked the other Olympian divinities who rose up in revolt. Though their attempt was foiled, it was a reminder of the opposition faced by Zeus. The struggle for the throne of heaven has been an eternal struggle for power. "When Cronus began to swallow his own children, Cronus' wife Rhea had their son Zeus overthrow his father in retribution for his evil deeds" (Naquet 62). Uranus was dethroned by Cronus, who again was dethroned by Zeus. The cause of these rebellious actions was an opposition to the authoritarian regime of the rulers of heaven.

Prometheus makes no attempt to seize power for himself by wresting the authority from Zeus. On the contrary, he makes an effort to establish a democratic state by vesting the people with power and knowledge. Zeus remains an intriguing figure despite making no appearance in the play. He creates Pandora, the first woman to punish man. Despite the warnings of his brother Prometheus, Epimetheus accepts Pandora as his wife. Morford writes:

Previously the races of human beings used to live completely free from evils and hard work and painful diseases, which hand over mortals to the Fates. For mortals soon grow old amidst evil. But the woman removed the great cover of the jar with her hands and scattered the evils within and for mortals devised sorrowful troubles (Morford 87).

This is the beginning of an endless cycle of suffering for humans. Previously, humans who had been free from the effects of death and diseases, suffer from the same. Their suffering is heightened by the fact that there is no hope in sight. “Hope alone remained within there in the unbreakable home under the edge of the jar and did not fly out of doors. For the lid of the jar stopped her before she could, through the will of the cloud-gatherer Zeus who bears the aegis. But the other thousands of sorrows wander among human beings, for the earth and the sea are full of evils” (Morford 87).

Prometheus comes to their aid, by filling their hearts with “blind hopes”.

On the other hand, Zeus is the head of a totalitarian state. The Oxford English Dictionary defines totalitarianism as “a system of government that is centralized and dictatorial and requires complete subservience to the state.” Prometheus refuses to bow down to the authority of Zeus. Endowed with knowledge, he resents the totalitarianism. Oceanus chides him for his defiance and insolence, advising Prometheus to submit to the will of Zeus. But this only serves to annoy him further. Due to their ideological differences, the conflict between Zeus and Prometheus cannot be resolved easily. While Zeus is bent on stamping out all forms of opposition, Prometheus attempts to ensure that humans do get their share of power. In the course of the play, Prometheus expresses his bitterness because, although he fought on the side of Zeus against the other Titans, his only reward is torment. “It is typical of the tyrant to forget and turn against his former allies” (Morford 90).

In Zeus’ actions in the play, there is a marked manifestation of totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes seek to establish complete political, social and cultural control. In the broadest sense, it is characterized by strong central rule that attempts to control and direct all aspects of individual life through coercion and repression. Any dissent is branded evil, and internal political differences are not permitted. Under totalitarian rule, traditional social institutions and organizations are discouraged and suppressed. In *The Origins of*

*Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt writes, “Terror is no longer used as a means to frighten and eliminate opponents, but as an instrument to rule masses of people who are perfectly obedient” (Arendt 6). Zeus, as a totalitarian ruler, uses violence and force to isolate and control Prometheus. His might and oppression are felt by Prometheus and Io, who become victims of his will.

In subsequent depictions, Zeus is no longer an authoritarian ruler, lording it over the three worlds. His character makes a gradual shift towards a more benevolent dimension. Though he remains the supreme ruler, he is no longer an oppressive tyrant. In fact he assumes a passive role in the affairs of gods and men, letting his conscience guide others. In *The Iliad*, we get a glimpse of the change in his character. He no longer imposes his will on the other gods and mortals. He lets fate follow its own course. Despite his love for Troy, he makes no conscious effort to save the city from destruction. While other gods take part in the war, aiding the Trojan or the Achaean cause, Zeus maintains a neutral ground, intervening only to fulfil his promise to Thetis.

His sense of justice also undergoes a change. In *Prometheus Bound* he punishes Prometheus, merely because the latter opposes his will. His idea of justice is inextricably linked to the concept of punishment. He makes no attempt to resolve the conflicts issuing from a clash of ideologies. In *The Oresteia* trilogy, he makes undertakes an attempt to establish a system of justice and order. He no longer tries to subjugate others, opposed to his will. As Thomas R. Martin writes, “for social and political developments in Greece, they showed that a concern for justice had also been a component of the divine order of the universe” (Martin 62). In *Prometheus Bound* no court of law decides the punishment of Prometheus. The justice meted out by Zeus, emerges from a young ruler insecure about his position. “The violent struggle pits a harsh young and angry Zeus against the defiant determination of a glorious and philanthropic Prometheus” (Morford 89, 90). But the fact

cannot be discounted that violence begets violence. With his tyranny, Zeus must also face the possibility of being overthrown, like his predecessors Cronus and Uranus.

Hephaestus also expresses an important theme of the play in his realization that Zeus has seized supreme rule of gods and mortals only recently:

Many a groan and many a lamentation you shall utter, but they  
Shall not serve you. For the mind of Zeus is hard to soften with

Prayer, and every ruler is harsh, whose rule is new. (Prometheus Bound 32-34)

The contrast is presumably intended to foreshadow the later Zeus who will learn benevolence through experience, wisdom and maturity. His character must evolve over the ages, to safeguard his reign. His early reign based on force and punishment aimed at weeding out opposition will fare in the same manner as did the reigns of Cronus and Uranus. "The story presupposes the possibility of Zeus himself being overthrown in turn" (Ogden 213). It is only later that he becomes a father figure to mortals and gods alike. In this aspect, he redeems the past when he had acted in an authoritarian manner.

The power of knowledge

The name Prometheus implies fore thought or fore knowledge. His name, in a true sense relates to his nature. As an oracular deity, he has a knowledge regarding future events. In the play, "Prometheus is both the victim and the master of the secret upon which Zeus' future depends" (Naquet 260). Just as he can foretell Io's future, in the same way he has the knowledge about what future holds in store for Zeus. He also knows the means by which a Cronus-like fate can be averted. It is this potent knowledge that arms Prometheus and enables him to face the tortures. He believes that this knowledge will reconcile him to Zeus.

Yes, there shall come a day for me  
When he shall need me, me that now am tortured  
In bonds and fetters- he shall need me then,  
This President of the Blessed-  
To show the new plot whereby he may be spoiled  
Of his throne and power .

He hopes to be set free in exchange of the piece of knowledge that predicts Zeus' downfall. But at the bottom of his heart he is well and truly aware that he will be released, only when Zeus' anger abates. "But he also tells the chorus that Zeus himself is weaker than the fate that finally determines the outcome of things" (Roberts 13).

In a totalitarian state, where the ruler makes every attempt to crush knowledge, it is the likes of Prometheus in the possession of knowledge who defy the tyrant. Prometheus associates his eventual freedom not with a change of heart on Zeus' part, but with Zeus' fall. With the fall of the totalitarian regime, the philanthropic Prometheus would be liberated. Prometheus has at different points, offered three different visions regarding the future. Firstly, influenced by the knowledge Prometheus has, Zeus will ultimately relent, release Prometheus and befriend him. The second prospect involves Prometheus being released against Zeus' will, while the former may or may not offer Zeus the knowledge that alone can save him from his fall. The last vision offers the vision of the possibility of Zeus' fall. This is probable, since no one but Prometheus can save him, and Prometheus in all likelihood will not do so.

Zeus certainly cannot take it easy, knowing that his enemy possesses the knowledge of his downfall. The totalitarian state faces a threat from an unknown person about whom little is known. He attempts to seize the knowledge by force in order to secure his reign. But Prometheus denies him the knowledge, as it paves the way by which the authority of Zeus

can be challenged. The Zeus, who orders the punishment of Prometheus is not the omniscient Zeus, described by Homer in *The Iliad*. On the contrary, he is woefully lacking in the knowledge which his adversary has. It is only through experience and understanding that he gains knowledge which is a part of his evolving character. In its absence, he would almost certainly have fared in the same manner as Cronus and Uranus.

In the final part of the play, when Hermes orders Prometheus to reveal the secret, the latter merely mocks him. He behaves in the same way as persons opposed to totalitarian regimes do. Being an immortal, he cannot be killed. Despite the threat of endless torture, he chooses to hold back the secret. He only mocks and insults Hermes as a consequence of which more punishment is heaped on him. But by punishing him, Zeus cannot obtain the knowledge. He must contend with the idea that in the future he may be dethroned. The threat is posed by his hypothetical son. Unlike the prophecies of the Delphic Oracle, Prometheus merely expresses a foreknowledge. He puts forth the implications of Zeus' tyranny. It is not necessary that the prediction must come true. It is more of a consequence of Zeus' actions. A mature and benevolent Zeus, can rule in peace, without facing opposition and resentment. "In mature confidence he will rest secure, without the fear of being overthrown, as the supreme and benevolent father of both gods and mortals" (Morford 90).

#### Analysis: Resisting the authority

Aeschylus transforms the mythical figure of the Fire Stealer into the figure of the great inventor and thinker. He is mankind's intellectual hero. His struggle with Zeus represents the perpetual conflict between power and creative intelligence, between brute strength and genius. The greatness of Prometheus is inseparable from his intractability. He is at once the eternal victim and the hero because he does not succumb to Zeus. He is in many ways similar to the figures who resisted the Fascist regime. "The idea was that a civil society

could exist outside of and in defiance of the totalitarian state” (Wandycz 234). During the twentieth century, the totalitarian oppression was resisted by individuals and organizations alike. In Nazi Germany, the opposition was motivated by factors such as the mistreatment of Jews and the harassment of the church. Despite the grave implications, individual Germans, or small groups of people acting as the unorganized resistance defied the Nazi regime in various ways. Most notably, they helped Jews survive the Holocaust by hiding them. The Church too played its part in resisting the totalitarian regime. “The Church having been the mainstay of opposition to totalitarian communism could become the great educator of the alienated nation, teaching it good citizenship, communal solidarity and tolerance” (Wandycz 247).

The actions are a result of natural benevolence, and a desire to help. Despite the threat of punishment, the individuals and organizations wilfully defied the totalitarian regime. Like Prometheus, many were punished, ranging from incarcerations to capital punishment. The likes of Willy Brandt, Alfred Delp, and Albert Einstein questioned the Nazi ideology and attempted to resist the authority. The dissent, despite having its roots in politics, was a celebration of humanity, compassion and knowledge. They aimed for a society based on ethics and tolerance, something which totalitarian regimes lacked. “They elaborate a religion of resistance to all power and turn the dissidents into martyrs” (Lefort 244). Totalitarianism is built on the ruin of the rights of man. Prometheus is the dissenter who tries to restore the rights of man, which the totalitarian ruler Zeus tries to deny. In the process, he becomes a martyr, a victim of the state’s power.

In a totalitarian state, the system is subject to the will of the ruler. “The mercurial will of the leader whose next decision could nullify all previous ones: ideologies of race or history to whose inexorable laws human beings are constantly sacrificed” (Baehr 20). The parallel between the rule of Zeus and the totalitarian regimes of twentieth century is quite clear. Zeus’

intention of exterminating the human race, is the will of a ruler who tries to execute a genocide. In the twentieth century, the Fascist totalitarian states carried out mass genocides, most notably of the Jews. Furthermore, the dissidents were punished, much like Prometheus who protested against the will of the ruler. "According to the leader's principle, everything done, is supposed to emanate from the will of the leader who claims total responsibility for all its actions" (Baehr 247). In *Prometheus Bound* Zeus wills the destruction of Prometheus, which he achieves by the use of crude agents, in stark contrast to the greater knowledge possessed by Prometheus. The act of chaining the Titan to Mount Caucasus, is almost a reflection of the confinement of dissenters in concentration camps. As T. C. W. Blanning writes, "European dictatorships with totalitarian claims to control the whole of society sought to eliminate all dissenting voices in the public sphere" (Blanning 254). Thus, the punishment of Prometheus is much more than an act of punishment. It is an act on the part of a ruler, insecure about his own rule attempting to stifle the voice of opposition.

## Conclusion

*Prometheus Bound*, written in ancient Greece, highlights a problem that Europeans encountered in twentieth century. Aeschylus foregrounds the evils associated with arbitrary power and the skewed sense of justice. The play recounts the actions of a ruler who assumed power in a violent manner. He is assailed by a constant dread that he will be dethroned by someone else. This insecurity and hunger for absolute power leads him to act in an arbitrary and tyrannical manner. He turns against his allies which fuels further resentment among his fellow immortals. He quells this opposition by the use of brute force and power. The play provides a prophetic vision of twentieth century Europe, when totalitarian leaders exercised their power to eliminate dissent and voices of opposition. The entire state was subject to the will of a single person who was in possession of power. Prometheus rightfully predicts that

Zeus will get overthrown by someone else. This holds true to the totalitarian systems which bred much opposition. The same applies true to Zeus, who will be overthrown by his hypothetical son. His fall will mark the end of his tyrannical rule. But a reformed and mature Zeus can avoid the fall from power. In fact, Zeus goes to great lengths to reform himself and even wills the release of his foe Prometheus. This effectually marks the end of his totalitarian rule.

Prometheus is the martyr who suffers for the human race. He is the embodiment of intellect and knowledge in conflict with absolute power. He defiantly faces the punishment meted out, for his benevolent actions. The events of the play stem from a clash of conflicting wills, one is bent on exterminating the human race, and the other can go to any extent to help them. "Prometheus, though possessed of a knowledge of destiny and therefore of victory in the end, is for the present at the mercy of a brutal and ignorant opponent" (Greene 308). But he is certain about the fact that his fate is inextricably linked to humans, for whom he underwent the terrible punishment. Aeschylus mentions that he will be honored by the human race and his plight will be universally lamented:

The wave cries out as it breaks into surf

The depth cries out, lamenting you, the dark

Hades, the hollow underneath the world,

Sullenly groans below, the springs

Of sacred flowing rivers all lament

The pain and pity of your suffering. (*Prometheus Bound* 431, 436)

As he predicts to Io, one of her descendants will liberate him. A member of the human race that he preserved will be his liberator. "Prometheus' deliverance by Heracles, who is part god and part man, once again binds his fate to the creature whom he has helped to survive in the teeth of opposition of the supreme god" (Greene 308).

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