1.

THE NATURE OF FASCISM

A Personal Exploration Into the Heart of Darkness

That things continue on this way is the catastrophe.
—Walter Benjamin, Illuminations

"Fascism," perhaps more than any other term, stands as a watchword of the twentieth-century. Conceptions of it were of cardinal importance in the reconstruction of order in continental Europe during the interwar period—not only in Italy and Germany, but in Spain, Rumania, Hungary and elsewhere—and combating or destroying it altogether was ostensibly a prime Allied objective during the Second World War. Subsequently, the very word "fascism" has become an epithet in the political discourse of the United States, even as the U.S. government has arguably established and maintained, or at least supported, a host of fascist regimes throughout the Third World. At present, serious concerns are being expressed that fascism is evidencing a resurgence in Europe itself.

Given its prominence, it seems logical that there should be a clear understanding of what it is that constitutes fascist ideology and, therefore, what it is that distinguishes it from other modes of political consciousness. Alas, for me, such ideas have remained nebulous, even as I've devoted increasing time and attention to studying their manifestations in "the real world" (especially with regard to nazism). My sense of vagueness in the matter has made me steadily more uneasy as I've tried to come to grips with issues as diverse as racism and genocide, colonialism and politicoeconomic democracy within what are supposedly non-fascist contexts.

It was thus with considerable anticipation that I seized the opportunity of an independent study to delve more systematically into the structure of fascist thinking. My expectation was that I'd be able to read several of the foremost analysts of the question (Mosse, Nacci, Stern and Sternhell), combine what they had to say with things I'd already read or to which I'd been otherwise exposed (Reich and Poulantzas in particular), and come
away with a firm appreciation of what is/is not to be understood as “fascist.”

Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case. On the contrary, my impression at this point is that nobody has ever really been able to offer a coherent and generally defensible definition of what fascism is. Therefore, I continue to find it impossible to separate fascism with any degree of precision from political tendencies which are presumptively nonfascist or even antifascist. The lines of demarcation appear exceedingly blurry in many respects, with the result that fascism seems more a matter of style and emphasis than anything else. Were I to try and provide a schematic or “map” visually delineating fascism, traditional conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and communism, I’m afraid that it would so resemble a Venn diagram as to be useless for analytical purposes.

The balance of this paper will be devoted to explaining why I’ve found this to be true. In view of the constraints of both length and time availability involved, it will be less than exhaustive. For this reason, I will examine several major problems, hoping these will imply the nature of my remaining concerns. In my conclusion, I will sketch out where I think these problems leave us, and where we might go if we are ever to correct them.

Rationality versus Irrationality

Zeev Sternhell in particular pursues the proposition that the emergence and ultimate popularity of fascism during the early twentieth century exemplifies a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism in favor of antimodernist irrationality by European intellectuals. Without denying fascism its due quotient of premodern and irrational impulses, a reality detailed by Wilhelm Reich, among others,7 this argument is in my opinion untenable.

First of all, fascism, whatever the rhetorical appeals attending its organizing techniques, by no means functioned on the basis of irrationality. Quite the opposite, as Italian fascism’s boast about Mussolini’s having made the trains run on time readily reveals, the phenomenon based much of its credibility upon its ability to rationalize national production and logistics in the manner of American industrialist Henry Ford (an icon of liberal democracy’s “free enterprise” system, but himself an avowed fascist). As Noam Chomsky has long and frequently observed, fascism (even nazism), is
a perfectly rational system so long as one accepts its initial assumptions and proceeds from there.\textsuperscript{8}

The questions at hand thus become (at least for me) the nature of fascism's core assumptions and how these might best be discerned from those deriving from the Enlightenment. But where do we turn to find these differing assumptions? To the fascists' oft and loudly proclaimed belief that certain European nations/cultures—i.e., those in which it took root—were superior to all others? This offers an at best dubious potential since such arrogantly triumphalist self-assessments were prevalent throughout the West long before fascism, and within the Enlightenment tradition as much as any other.\textsuperscript{9}

Nor is it more rewarding to examine the strident efforts made in the name of fascism to anchor Europe's imagined cultural superiority in notions of racial supremacy. As Stephen Jay Gould and others have demonstrated rather compellingly, the doctrines of “scientific racism” which held sway among twentieth century European fascists were pioneered over the preceding hundred years in that most liberal of all modern democracies, the United States.\textsuperscript{10} The same goes for the theories of eugenics, the most virulent of all the doctrine's many vile concepts, which became cornerstones of nazi “racial hygiene” policies.\textsuperscript{11}

Sternhell makes much of the “cult of physical strength, violence and brutality” with which fascism was (and remains) imbued, contending that this somehow serves to segregate it from other streams of European intellectualism and political activism.\textsuperscript{12} Yet even he has difficulty with this proposition insofar as he locates the origin of fascism's proclivities on this score in the writings of George Sorel and others among Italy's decidedly leftwing anarchosyndicalist movement. Unable to reconcile the matter without following Poulantzas' lead in consigning anarchosyndicalism itself to the ranks of “petty bourgeois deviations;”\textsuperscript{13} which he was apparently unwilling to do, Sternhell is reduced to describing the confluence of forms as marking merely “a shift from far left to far right of people with radical views on social problems.”\textsuperscript{14}

This is very problematic in that both the ease with which Sternhell implies this shift occurred, and the interpenetration of theory heralding it, do far more to suggest commonality than difference between the supposedly opposing poles of European intellectuality. Sternhell attempts to finesse this by counterpoising both the radical right (fascism) and radical left (marxism)
to what he describes as “the sophisticated rationalist humanism of the Old Europe” each sought to supplant.\textsuperscript{15}

Such a juxtaposition may serve in some ways to clarify how both fascism and marxism have often managed to generate essentially the same extremely violent outcomes—the nazi Holocaust and Stalin’s genocide of the Ukrainians are two obvious examples—but it does nothing to clarify why the Enlightenment’s liberal democracies had already produced many of the same results “out there” in the colonies.\textsuperscript{16} Certainly, there is little in the anatomy of the SS state envisioned by Heinrich Himmler exceeding in ferocity the regime imposed by Belgium upon the Congo.\textsuperscript{17}

Here, one is hard-pressed to avoid Sartre’s conclusion that colonialism equals genocide and that this is true irrespective of whether it is packaged in the particular form visited by the nazis upon eastern Europe, by Italian fascism upon Libya and Ethiopia, by stalinism upon the Ukrainians and others, by maoism on Tibet, or by liberal democracies upon virtually the entire Third World.\textsuperscript{18} On this, Sternhell, along with every other analyst included in our packet, remains conspicuously silent.

I am left with the distinct impression that what Sternhell and his colleagues find so uniquely repugnant and “irrational” about fascism is that, as an aggregate, it took up the very strains of extreme cultural chauvinism, racial hierarchy, violence and domination its purportedly more liberal and enlightened precursors had exported to the rest of the world and applied them within the arena of Europe itself. To the extent that this is true, it seems to me their analyses are so utterly eurocentric as to replicate much of what they are critiquing. In that sense, I find them largely self-nullifying.

**Left, Right and Middle**

A bit more needs to be said concerning the dichotomy most of the analysts seek to draw between fascism and marxism (or “leftism” more generally). Once again, Sternhell is the most vigorous in this regard, mainly, I think, because he is the most concerned with salvaging something of marxism’s standing as an outgrowth of rather than a reaction to the Enlightenment. At his crudest, he simply asserts the standard polemic about how stalinism wasn’t really marxism at all (a contention which is technically more true than not, but which is rather like arguing that Catholicism isn’t “really” Christianity).\textsuperscript{19}
Elsewhere, he is simply confusing, as when he attempts to demonstrate the “violent opposition” between marxism’s “red socialism” and fascism’s “yellow” variety by pointing out the latter’s reliance upon “the personality cult of the leader.” He advances this “distinction” as if he is somehow unaware that terms like marxism, leninism, stalinism, maoism and castroism exemplify precisely the same practice on the part of marxists.

Mosse does little better when he warns that the “danger inherent to subsuming both systems under the concept of totalitarianism is that it may serve to disguise real differences... between fascism and bolshevism.” His illustration? “In Soviet Russia, for example, the kind of public ceremonies and festivals which mark the fascist political style were tried early in the regime but then dropped, and not resumed until after the Second World War, when they came to fulfill the same functions they had earlier for fascism.”

Excuse me? This is the sort of “real difference” separating marxist practice from fascist? The supposed distinction is rendered even more ludicrous when Mosse acknowledges, later in the same essay, that fascism actually “borrowed” its preoccupation with mass ritual events from pre-stalinist marxism.

A larger issue is obviously raised here: If its reliance upon myth and ritual is to be taken as primary evidence of fascism’s intrinsic irrationality—as all the analysts in our packet agree—then the same rule must apply in equal measure to marxism and, by extension, to the Enlightenment tradition as a whole. The truth is, I think, and as was suggested in the preceding section, that the liberal democracies were never really so rational as analysts like Sternhell would have it, nor fascism so irrational. All the systems in question embody substantial portions of both.

Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

I found it striking that, for all the discussion of the relationship opposing marxism to fascism offered by the packet analysts, the name of Antonio Gramsci was never so much as mentioned. This seems especially peculiar in connection with examinations of left/right dynamics in Italy, where Gramsci served as leading theoretician and nominal head of the Communist Party. Moreover, rather than “crossing over to fascism” or going into exile, he set a different sort of example by eventually dying in one of Mussolini’s prisons.
By omitting or ignoring Gramsci—of those I've read for this paper, only Poulantzas avoids this—the analysts also deny themselves access to the most important of his intellectual contributions, the concept of “hegemony,” by which he meant the matrix of explanatory ideas and values developed by any status quo to justify (rationalize) its dominance as a kind of “natural” condition. Had it been otherwise, many of the things mentioned—e.g., Pareto’s notion of “rotating élites”—would have made more sense insofar as they’d have assumed their proper place under a broader or more general theory.

More importantly, avoiding or ignoring hegemonic function (as such), prevents the analysts from apprehending why fascism, in contrast to marxism, was initially rather well received by a range of ruling elites during the 1920s and 30s, and why, “paradoxically,” it held such allure for even the most rebellious intellectuals across the ideological spectrum.

Put most simply, fascism’s early insistence upon reproducing class structure within specific nations, all of them European, meanwhile improving the lot of even the poorest citizens at the expense of other, presumptively lesser nations, resonated quite well with the order and values (i.e., the hegemony) already established on “The Continent” by the liberal democracies of the Enlightenment. Marxism, on the other hand, promised in theory if not in fact to abolish precisely the structure of internal hierarchy the Enlightenment’s élites held most dear (distinguishing fascism’s “national socialism” from stalinism’s “socialism in one country” seems otherwise impossible).

If fascism seemed crass in many respects, this was a price members of the ruling élite were willing to pay in exchange for preservation and revitalization of the key institutions of their own project. They as well as the most insurgent intellectual recognized that “bourgeois society” had begun to stagnate and decay from the moment its endeavors to industrialize and extend its collective imperial dominion to planetary proportions had been consumated. In effect, a restoration of dynamism to Europe required the kind of internal reorganization embodied by either fascism or marxism, and for the “ruling class” there was no doubt as to which was preferable.

For intellectuals, the choice was often equally clear. While the fin-de-siècle left many with a thirst for social, political and cultural dynamism above all else, the option they enjoyed—that of choosing between a movement which would abolish their own élite status and one which promised not
only to maintain but possibly enhance it—was all too frequently a no-brainer. Thus for radicals and “respectable people” alike, the embrace of fascism was never so much a matter of “idealism” as it was of narrow self-interest.

**Barbarism and Corporate Fascism**

Sternhell observes that fascism’s “yellow socialism... preached national solidarity in lieu of the class struggle, and advocated the accession to property rather than expropriation, as well as worker’s participation in company profits and a form of trade unionism in which workers' unions and management unions would exist side by side, which structure would be topped by a strong State, with an assembly of national and regional representatives sponsored by the trades and corporations.”

He goes on to note that fascist theorist “Enrico Corradini began to elaborate on topics that foreshadowed corporatism, complemented by an unambiguous preference for protectionism and other measures designed to appeal to the nation as a whole, such as expansion of Italian industry and commerce abroad, and a colonial solution to the problems of population and emigration.” Mussolini, he remarks, understood “the very word ‘corporation’... in its etymological sense of ‘fashioning into a body,’ a ‘fashioning’ which was the essential function of the State and the one that would insure its unity and continued existence.”

Although these passages were intended to describe outlooks Sternhell believed to be somehow definitive of fascism, they appear to me to be equally useful in characterizing the whole thrust of what John Kenneth Galbraith once called the “New Industrial State” in North America since World War II. Certainly, they for the most part dovetail quite well with the policies and pronouncements of contemporary U.S. leaders from the mainstream left (Bill Clinton, Al Gore) to the mainstream right (Ronald Reagan, George Bush), to the more radical right (Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot).

Similarly, Sternhell attempts to foundation the bulk of what he envisions as the nazis’ “irrational appeal to barbarism” by pointing up their resort to the mythic imagery of the Teutonic Knights and accompanying attempt to establish a new and viable knighthood in the form of the SS. One might be inclined to accept his interpretation of the form and its
significance, but then one would be left to wonder what he makes of the current recruiting ads of the U.S. Marine Corps, and whether he considers this equivalent evidence of the barbaric irrationality inherent to Enlightenment-spawned liberal democracies such as the United States.

A related point, this one brought up most compellingly by Mosse, concerns the strain of irrationality implicit to nazism's romantic "back to nature" content and fascination with the occult and Eastern mysticism. All well and good, but one must ponder how Mosse reads the so-called "New Age" and "deep ecology" movements in the U.S., at least some elements of which have at this point aligned themselves with everyone from rightwing Republicans to Willis Carto, overtly fascist publisher of The Spotlight.

Conclusion

In the end, as Mosse admits, the "frequent contention that fascist culture diverged from the mainstream of European culture cannot be upheld." Instead, as he also observes, it "was [and presumably remains] a scavenger which attempted to annex all that had appealed to people in the 19th- and 20th-century past: romanticism, liberalism and socialism, as well as Darwinism and modern technology."41

There is thus much to commend Poulantzas' conclusion that fascism, rather than representing a fundamental rupture with Enlightenment tradition, simply amounted to a manifestation of that tradition under "crisis conditions." Fascism can no more be separated from the liberal status quo that produced it than the Enlightenment can from backdrop of Medievalism against which it emerged. Unfortunately for Poulantzas, marxism was/is as much a creature of the Enlightenment as liberalism, its practical applications—and in some ways its theories—sharing too much common ground with both liberalism and fascism to pose much of an alternative to either.43

All things considered, it would probably be most constructive if, analytically, we were to stop trying to define fascism, liberalism and marxism as discrete phenomena. Rather, they might be viewed as little more than facets of the same whole, each containing discernible elements of the other (yes, the U.S. is fascistic in more than a rhetorical sense, just as German fascism shared features in common with Soviet marxism). Which facet will prove ascendant at any given moment—either overall or in more specific

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settings—is determined by, and can therefore be adduced from, objective sets of conditions. Examination of the latter might prove a more fruitful focus of analysis than the attempts to create lists of characteristic features that I've encountered thus far.

At a somewhat higher (or deeper) level, viewing things in this fashion implies something else. If one is truly opposed to fascism, then one must be equally opposed to both liberalism and marxism. The eradication of one requires eradication of the others, not simply in their material dimensions but conceptually, in terms of their hegemonic capacities. To approach this task, equipping ourselves intellectually, necessitates adopting an analytical method radically different from those employed in any of the materials I've cited in this paper (excepting, perhaps, Gramsci).

What I have in mind is tracing things back, not to the fin-de-siècle of the turn of the century, but all the way back to the point where we uncover the essential denominator shared in common by fascism, liberalism and marxism alike, and then attacking that (eliminating the cause should eliminate the symptoms). In other words, I'm inclined towards the Foucauldian method, adapted from Nietzsche, of "historical genealogy." Where will it lead us? I'm not exactly sure (although I have my ideas). But wherever it leads must constitute an alternative to the "nightmare of the present" in which we find ourselves.