
REVIEW ESSAY

Fascism: Italian, German, and American

— ◆ —
STEVEN HORWITZ

National Review contributing editor and *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* might appear at first glance to be another in a line of loud, mean, and often anti-intellectual books by prominent conservative commentators. Given that the book's subtitle links the Italian Fascists and the modern Democratic Party and that its cover shows a 1970s smiley face adorned with a Hitler moustache, perhaps that first reaction is understandable. However, not judging a book by its cover has never been an apter rule than in the case of *Liberal Fascism*. Although Goldberg does permit himself a few moments of over-the-top liberal bashing, his book is for the most part a work of serious scholarship that attempts to identify important intellectual connections between the American Progressives and European Fascists of the early twentieth century and a number of trends in modern U.S. politics, many but not all of which are associated with contemporary American liberalism.

For the most part, Goldberg succeeds in this endeavor, calling our attention to the ways in which the Progressives, the Fascists, and much of liberalism share a fundamental distrust of markets, unintended social order, and other core ideas of classical liberalism. Goldberg's strengths are his destruction of the argument that fascism is "right-wing" and the way he draws powerful parallels between the line from American Progressivism to the New Deal and the ideas behind European fascism. As

Steven Horwitz is the Charles A. Dana Professor of Economics at St. Lawrence University.

The Independent Review, v. 13, n. 3, Winter 2009, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2009, pp. 441-446.

he tries to extend these parallels to the American liberalism of the 1960s and beyond, the argument weakens and becomes somewhat shriller, but it still contains a number of provocative insights on the way in which many of the assumptions that lay behind earlier European fascism remain in play in contemporary U.S. politics. The afterword, “The Tempting of Conservatism,” points to trends on the right that reflect those ideas as well.

The introductory chapter announces the book’s the bedrock theme in its title, “Everything You Know about Fascism Is Wrong.” Part of what drove Goldberg to write the book, as he has indicated in interviews, is the frustration that many on the right (as well as libertarians) feel when their opponents label them as “fascists” for supporting classical-liberal ideas, especially free markets. That frustration springs from two sources; first, that the Fascists’ actual policies had little in common with classical liberalism (which was, in fact, the set of ideas they opposed), and second, that the actual Fascist policies were much closer to those now espoused by the leftists who frequently throw the epithet around—hence, the descriptive term *liberal fascism*. The rest of the book offers support for both of these points.

The term *liberal fascism* itself accounts in part for the book’s having been made the target of so much venom from the left. As Goldberg notes, he did not invent this turn of phrase. Much earlier, H. G. Wells used it to describe a position he was *advocating* that progressives adopt: keep the Fascist movement’s collectivist policies, but do so with kinder, gentler, more enlightened motives. The phrase *secret history* in Goldberg’s subtitle reflects his claim that the connections among fascism, progressivism, and modern liberalism have been lost, especially by modern liberals, whose lack of historical awareness blinds them to their Fascist sources and the implications of their well-intended policies, as well as to the degree to which classical liberalism was fascism’s target. Goldberg is excruciatingly careful, almost to the point of excessive apologizing, to clarify that he is *not* claiming that modern liberals *are* Fascists or Nazis or that they advocate in any way the political violence associated with those movements. His point is that frequently they have *unwittingly* adopted many of the same underlying intellectual and political assumptions, as well as some similar means to instantiate them, as the Fascists.

The essence of fascism, Goldberg argues, is a set of beliefs and policy visions. The racism and cults of personality that characterized both the Italian and German versions sprang from the particular cultural soil in which those versions took root. The differences in how they developed are more like variations on a theme than markers of fundamentally different social phenomena or politicoeconomic systems. U.S. cultural and political traditions therefore have produced “liberal fascism” as our own particular variant. Charlotte Twight’s phrase “participatory fascism” (1975), which she uses to describe the contemporary U.S. political economy, captures the same idea. Fascism therefore is simply another politicoeconomic system that one might support, rather than a necessary belief in dictatorship or genocide. Calling people “fascist,” then, is no worse than calling them “socialist” or “libertarian”; whatever negative

rhetorical force it provides should come from one's beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of the ideas rather than from its being in effect a claim about the mendacity of the person who espouses those ideas.

The book's first four chapters trace the origins of fascism, with one chapter each devoted to Mussolini and the Italians, Hitler and the Nazis, the Wilson administration, and Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Goldberg's history is solid. The chapters on Mussolini and Hitler explore both the substantive political ideas that motivated their regimes and the ways in which American Progressives praised those ideas. He suggests that in the years just before and after the turn of the twentieth century, the Western world had arrived at a "fascist moment" when various intellectuals thought that "the era of liberal democracy was drawing to a close" and that man had to "rise to the responsibility of remaking the world in his own image" (p. 31). This idea should be familiar to classical liberals as a version of what Friedrich Hayek called "scientism," or the belief that we can apply the methods of the physical and biological sciences to the organization of human social affairs. The "fascist moment" surely pertained to more conscious control of human social affairs, as Goldberg documents, but it was also inspired by experiences of war and religion and their power in engaging humanity's atavistic collectivism. Combine these elements with nationalism, and you have twentieth-century fascism.

The chapters on Mussolini and Hitler also document the ways in which Nazism and Italian fascism were movements of the left in that both relied heavily on anti-capitalist rhetoric and made numerous anticapitalist proposals in their platforms. The Fascists' founding program included a maximum workday, a minimum wage, workers' management, state control over privately owned land, a progressive tax on capital for the purpose of one-time partial expropriation, and state-run schools. The National Socialist German Workers Party platform of 1920 was similarly full of left-oriented proposals: abolition of interest income, nationalization of trusts and department stores, and profit sharing with labor, among others. Neither party kept the socialist elements of its platform a secret. In fact, as Goldberg points out, some observers at the time saw fascism as a kind of "middle-class socialism" that substituted nationalism for class warfare and adopted elements of the socialist program that were most likely to appeal to that group of citizens. By keeping broad elements of the socialist program but wrapping them in nationalist, communitarian, and almost messianic trappings, fascism became a left-wing, "third-way" alternative to either cosmopolitan and internationalist Bolshevism or capitalism.

One of the more important aspects of Goldberg's argument is that he finds in American Progressivism a parallel and perhaps uniquely American development that helps to explain the ways in which the fascist mindset persists in modern American politics. Progressivism's core tenet was that enlightened leaders and technocrats could and should use the state intentionally to improve the people's moral and material well-being. This belief clashed with classical liberalism's reliance on individual choice and spontaneous order under the rule of law. Goldberg documents how prominent

Progressives explicitly rejected the rule of law so they could implement their favored policies as determined by both “science” and morality. The Progressives’ belief in using the state to coerce people into preferred forms of behavior characterizes both fascism and contemporary liberal politics, Goldberg argues, and the environmentalist and public health movements on the left provide evidence for that contention.

Goldberg also devotes a chapter to the Progressives’ connections with eugenics and racism. He points out how eugenics fit nicely into both the Progressives’ and the Fascists’ vision of society as an organic entity that was being sickened by increasing numbers of “unfit” individuals. With the tools of science available to them, the Progressives attempted to repair the “racial health” of American society through state-sponsored eugenic social control, which included the use of abortion. For them, *laissez-faire* in reproduction was no more acceptable than *laissez-faire* in the economy. The hay that Goldberg wishes to make of this point is that the contemporary left correctly connects fascism and racism, but wrongly believes that the combination is historically right wing. In fact, the left’s history is one in which racism and racist thinking played a significant role and led to fascistic attempts to put those beliefs into practice. The application of Darwinism to the social world in all kinds of nefarious ways is much more the history of the left than the history of the right, and classical liberals opposed the Progressives’ eugenics-driven policies.

One of the common objections to the view that fascism was more of the left than of the right is that the Fascists consistently portrayed themselves as “antiliberal.” Goldberg’s response is that the “liberals” at the dawn of the twentieth century were, in fact, *classical* liberals, who have more in common with modern American conservatism than with modern liberalism. The Progressives, too, saw the enemy as “liberals” in the classical sense. However, unlike the Fascists, the Progressives paid their enemies the ultimate compliment by snatching their name, an action that arguably accounts for much of the confusion here.

Goldberg’s chapter on Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal is particularly powerful because it documents the ways in which leading *leftist* intellectuals saw in the New Deal aspects of Italian fascism and *believed that resemblance to be a good thing*. On this point in particular, he is not treading fresh ground: John T. Flynn, in his 1944 book *As We Go Marching*, made many of the same points, and Goldberg appropriately credits him. Roosevelt also shared with the Fascists a predilection for “experimentation.” At the time, intellectuals such as John Maynard Keynes and H. G. Wells viewed Germany and Italy as desirable “experiments” in new forms of political economy. The New Deal was seen as another bold experiment and was praised for taking up elements of those systems. Roosevelt himself acknowledged privately that his programs resembled those in Russia and Germany, but he maintained that we “were doing them in an orderly way” (qtd. on p. 122). Both Hitler and Mussolini praised Roosevelt and the New Deal. Mussolini famously referred to Roosevelt as a “dictator,” which was to Mussolini a desirable attribute. In tracing how much the New Deal era made a mess of how we understand these belief systems, Goldberg also offers a convincing rein-

terpretation of Father Charles Coughlin as an opponent of the New Deal from the left rather than as a kind of “right-wing” fascist, as he is often seen today.

This historical material is the book’s greatest strength. Goldberg’s reading of intellectual history is at its most powerful in untangling many of the complexities that have led us to misunderstand the nature of fascism and its role as a breeding ground for much of contemporary American liberalism. The book is weakest when Goldberg tries to find in specific historical programs—such as the positions of the 1960s radicals or the recent policy positions of the left and the Democratic Party—what he sees as obvious connections to the fascist past. Like the earlier progressivism, John F. Kennedy’s Camelot surely presumed the potency of intellectuals and the ability to remake society, and it was doomed to fail for many of the same reasons. Goldberg tries too hard to find such similarities in the details even though the parallels are at most at the general level of ideas (“visions,” in the sense that Thomas Sowell conceives of them in *A Conflict of Visions* [1987]). The same may be said of his chapters on the 1960s radicals and Hillary Clinton. Saying that “it takes a village” certainly echoes the communitarianism and organicity of the *Volk*, as does using children’s welfare as a wedge issue for expanding the state’s control over parents and families, but here too Goldberg strains too hard to make the finer details fit.

Too often in these chapters, Goldberg seems to be using events and people as a chance to vent his own conservative frustrations with the modern Democratic Party. Whatever the validity of his observations, their connection to the historical analysis is somewhat tenuous. It is one thing to say that modern liberals are ignorant of their history and thus often accuse their enemies of their own historical sins, but it another to suggest a fairly direct line between those past sins and contemporary events and policy positions. Yes, this history has produced a certain liberal “gestalt,” but Goldberg pushes that point farther than the evidence supports.

The afterword, in which Goldberg documents similar “liberal fascist” trends in the modern Republican Party, partially compensates for the earlier overreach. Much of what he says hits its target, and I wish he had expanded this discussion. Given the book’s intended audience, one can perhaps understand his reluctance to do so and maybe even praise him for going as far as he does, but certainly in the post-9/11 era of the George W. Bush administration, a great deal on the right smacks of the same fascist gestalt that Goldberg so easily finds on the left. A book whose purpose was more a contribution to scholarship than to contemporary public intellectual discourse, particularly on the right, would probably have produced a more balanced examination of the vestiges of fascism on both the left and the right. Nevertheless, in his perusal of half of the matter, Goldberg largely gets the story right.

Liberal Fascism is not a perfect book, nor does it represent the kind of deep scholarship that an academic would report, but it is a learned work and develops an important contrarian argument that sheds considerable light on how we think about political systems today. It is not another one of “those” books by conservative commentators. Although it is written in a breezy and readable style, it is heavily docu-

mented in the endnotes with popular and scholarly sources for the interested reader who wishes to go deeper. Experts in the history of ideas or European history will likely find nits to pick, but for nonspecialist academics interested in the history of ideas and political theory and for intellectually engaged general readers, the book is a solid contribution to public intellectual debate. Writing an almost five-hundred-page book on fascism that makes it to number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list is no mean feat, and *Liberal Fascism* is well worth reading.

References

- Flynn, John T. 1944. *As We Go Marching*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran.
- Goldberg, Jonah. 2008. *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sowell, Thomas. 1987. *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*. New York: William Morrow.
- Twight, Charlotte. 1975. *America's Emerging Fascist Economy*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House.