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Article · January 2020

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Reflections on Fascism: A Critique of Zeev Sternhell[1]

By Chris Wright

Questions about the "meaning," or the "nature," or the "significance" of fascism have been debated since the early 1920s. Is it a revolutionary or a counterrevolutionary movement? Is it an agent of modernization or an opponent of it? Is it more socialist than capitalist or vice versa? What is the "meaning" of its celebration of cultural revolution? What is the relation between its ideology and its practice, or between fascism as a social movement and fascism as a regime? Some of these questions are easier to answer than others: for example, fascists opposed "modernization" if that term means liberalism, democracy, Marxism, individualism, and feminism, while they favored it if the term means technological and economic advancement, military superiority, efficiency, and the glorification of speed and machines. (It is well-known that one of fascism's ideological sources was Futurism, which shared all these traits.) The traditional Marxist interpretation of fascism has been that, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, in practice it was essentially conservative: it maintained the existing class structure and favored big business while brutally suppressing trade unions and workers' rights. It decisively foreclosed the possibility of revolutionary socialism, thus serving the interests of capitalism. Another interpretation, exemplified by Zeev Sternhell, maintains that fascism was more left than right, more revolutionary than counterrevolutionary: it was basically a revision of Marxism, violently opposed to capitalist society. Far from being a bulwark of the bourgeoisie, it loathed bourgeois decadence and advocated a form of socialism, "national socialism." These are arguably the two most widespread views, or at least the polar opposites around which debate orients itself. In this paper we shall weigh the respective merits of each and decide in favor of the Marxist one, with some qualifications.

In his books *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* and *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Sternhell traces in great detail the origins of fascist ideology from before 1900 to the 1930s.[2] By following the careers of such intellectuals as Georges Sorel, Maurice Barrès, Georges Valois, Hubert Lagardelle, Arturo Labriola, Sergio Panunzio, Edouard

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[1] [This student paper contains a number of problematic statements, arising largely from my excessive desire to be fair to Sternhell. In truth, Sternhell's insistence on the left-wing dimensions of fascism is laughable. One wonders what the point of his scholarly project is, other than to mislead.]

[2] In this paper I'll be concerned only with classical fascism. It seems to me that fascism can take many forms, more or less extreme, depending on the time and place. Classical fascism—particularly Nazism—was merely, in all likelihood, the most extreme, the most nationalistic form possible, because it grew out of a "perfect storm" of epochal social changes.

Berth, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and many others, Sternhell shows that fascist ideology originated—*in its most sophisticated forms*—among ex-Marxists and socialists. It arguably existed even before World War I, formulated by revolutionary syndicalists who had lost faith in the capacity of the proletariat to inaugurate a revolution on its own. These thinkers were disgusted with what they saw as the decadence, the selfishness, the pettiness, the materialism and immorality of bourgeois society; they despised democracy, liberalism, individualism, feminism, pacifism, all "un-heroic" ideologies. Like Marinetti and his Futurists, they longed for a revolution to make civilization *heroic* again. They longed for the triumph of ancient martial virtues over bourgeois egoism and cowardice, moral corruption. Many of them initially seized on Marxism as the means to achieve this aesthetic, moral revolution: they embraced the concept of a heroic struggle on the part of the working class to overthrow the bourgeoisie and therewith (as they saw it) the reign of moral relativism, with everything it entailed. When it became evident, however, that the proletariat was not up to the task, having been duped by its political leaders into settling for piecemeal social reform rather than revolution, intellectuals like Sorel decided that the revolution would have to be *national* rather than "social." It would have to be undertaken by the people as a whole, not just the working class. Sorel and his followers, therefore, turned to nationalism, the glorious idea of the "nation," as the myth that would inspire popular revolutions in France, Italy, Germany, and so on. Out of the ashes of the old corrupt regime would be born a nation of "corporations," a harmonious, hierarchical social order that would not pit worker against capitalist but would merge all interests in the unity of the state. The nation, as embodied in the State, would constitute a sublime collective affirmation of the will to power, a spiritualized entity in a continuous state of martial tension and valor, a semi-realization of Hegel's idealistic philosophy.

In *The Fascist Revolution*, George Mosse gives an analysis that supports Sternhell's. True fascist movements set out to create a new man, a new nation, devoted to principles of beauty, war, hierarchy, self-sacrifice, youth, masculinity, virility, creativity, national unity and mobilization against outsiders or such "parasites" as Jews and financiers. The central principle in all this was nationalism, which often took the form of an obsession with racial purity. What was desired, in short, was a cultural revolution—but not a "social revolution," if that term denotes the overthrow of capitalism. Most fascists were not against capitalism *per se*; in fact, Sternhell shows that many supported it, or rather they supported "a capitalism of producers, hostile to the plutocracy and high finance, the stock exchange, the middlemen, and the money grubbers. [They were] strongly attached to the market economy, to competition, and to the nonintervention of the state in economic activity."[3] No doubt fascists hated materialism, money, speculation, and

[3] Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 91.

bourgeois values;[4] but they accepted the necessity of some form of a capitalist economy, be it "planned" or not.[5] Consistent with their qualified acceptance of capitalism was their ideological replacement of the Marxist opposition between workers and capitalists with the opposition between "producers" and "profiteers" or "financiers," i.e. parasites. Fascists wanted to do away with the parasites and keep the producers, a class that included both workers and "productive" capitalists, such as industrialists.

Already we begin to see that Sternhell is largely right about fascist ideology: it is neither conventionally right nor left. Actually, despite the title of his book cited above, he thinks it is more left than right. And this view, too, is not quite as absurd as it would have seemed to a free-thinking German in the 1930s. Consider Stanley Payne's excellent definition of fascism: it is "a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on extreme elitism, mass mobilization, and the *Führerprinzip*, positively values violence as end as well as means and tends to normatize war and/or the military virtues."[6] This definition has essentially nothing in common with Marxism, but it certainly denotes a (quasi-)revolutionary ideology, an ideology directed at the destruction of the cultural and political status quo.

Sternhell is somewhat convincing, therefore, with respect to the "abstract" ideology that fascists believed in. However, that the movement as a whole was truly "leftist" is far less clear.

Before continuing, we must point out a confusion that can mar historical analyses: the term "fascism" does not denote a movement that was homogeneous across Europe. Fascist ideology is not like Communist or Socialist ideologies in their simple and specific social content, their easily definable program(s) for a revolution and a utopia. Rather, it is more like a "form" that can be filled in with virtually any social content. Communism preaches the overthrow of the capitalist class by the workers, their subsequent dictatorship, the socialization of the means of production for the purpose of expanding and rationally allocating output, and ultimately a society in which everyone works according to his abilities and is compensated according to his needs. This doctrine is extremely specific. Fascism, by contrast, preaches national revolution, the exaltation and rebirth of the *Volk* through a war against foreigners and liberals, militarism, an authoritarian state, a rejection of modern ideologies, and so forth. But *these* goals can be manifested in any number of ways. One fascist might desire the destruction of capitalism in favor of something like socialism, while another might hate

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[4] See, e.g., chapter 7 of Sternhell's *Neither Right nor Left* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

[5] Some fascists favored a kind of laissez-faire capitalism; others wanted something along the lines of state capitalism. See ibid., chapter 6.

[6] Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 14.

socialists and desire that the business class remain in power. One fascist might want to protect certain minorities while another is perfectly happy to send them to concentration camps. One fascist might want to redistribute land to the peasants, while another wants to consolidate the power of landowners and keep peasants in virtual serfdom. The possibilities are endless. This is, indeed, the great strength of fascism: its flexibility, its mutability, depending on which social group or which region is being appealed to. What stays constant is only the *form*, so to speak, the form of mass mobilization and national rebirth, into which one puts whatever content one wants. To be sure, the idea of national rebirth is naturally compatible with ideas of beauty, youth, violence, self-sacrifice, hierarchy—and egalitarianism too!—elitism, a sort of radical democracy, mass spiritual identification with the *Führer* or the *Duce*—a whole array of dazzling and apparently contradictory ideas that are little more than means of fleshing out the abstract *form* of national mobilization for rebirth. What the social content of the regime will be is difficult to tell in advance.

Sternhell insists, against conventional wisdom, that fascist ideology is just as coherent and specific as Communist ideology, and in a sense he is right. Payne's definition quoted above is coherent and specific. But the conventional wisdom is right too: within the framework of this specific definition can be anything from laissez-faire capitalism to state socialism, from rabid anti-Semitism to rabid anti-anti-Semitism. *This* is the solution to all the debates about the "coherence" of fascist ideology, this distinction between the "form" of "palingenetic ultra-nationalism"[7] and the "social content" that can be almost whatever one wants it to be. This is also how it is possible that some fascist parties were so pro-worker they almost qualified as Communist while others showed no consideration whatsoever for workers.

We can see now that Sternhell's claim that fascism is more left than right is misleading. In a sense, perhaps, it is true, for fascism aims at a national revolution; but in a sense it is false, for this national revolution can theoretically veer toward the left or toward the right.

Another argument Sternhell adduces in favor of the leftist nature of fascism is that many of the founders of its ideology were once self-styled Marxists or revolutionary syndicalists. Supposedly, then, fascism is a "revision" of Marxism. But this too is wrong or misleading, for these intellectuals who despised bourgeois decadence and would go on to be fascists were much closer in intellectual orientation to Nietzsche than to Marx. It was Nietzsche who raged against "decadence," not Marx. Sternhell himself admits that Sorel, a progenitor of fascists, even in his Marxist days had incomparably more affinity to Nietzsche than to Marx. "Anti-rationalism and pessimism, the cult of heroic ages and values, and a horror of the Enlightenment were basic to [Sorel's] thinking"[8]—

[7] That's Roger Griffin's definition of fascism. See ibid., 5.

[8] *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, 69.

and totally opposed to Marx's. Anti-materialism, anti-determinism, intuitionism, idealism, moralism, the celebration of will and heroic myths, the glorification of violence for its own sake, the emphasis on psychology over economics—all this is (semi-)Nietzschean, not Marxist. The main reason that future fascists at one time called themselves Marxists is that they believed they "had found in Marxism the most extraordinary weapon of war against bourgeois society ever invented."[9] Marxism for them was a means to an end, not an "objectively true" system (or method), as Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others thought it was. Proto-fascist intellectuals wanted to use its notion of class struggle to overthrow bourgeois culture and politics—but when they finally understood the proletariat's weakness they rejected the class struggle, embracing instead the myth of the nation and thereby showing themselves not to have been committed to a social or economic revolution but merely to a cultural and political one. Their hatred of bourgeois society was *aesthetic* in inspiration, not properly "social" or "economic" or even "moral" (for they rarely condemned its *injustice*, unlike Marxists).[10] To call them revisionist Marxists is therefore a half-truth at best. And to call fascism itself a revision of Marxism is downright false; it is rather a rejection of nearly everything that Marxism stands for.

Sternhell makes a more important mistake, though, in the very method he uses for analyzing fascism. He looks exclusively at the history of ideas, whereas he ought to have combined this approach with social history. It is indeed illuminating to examine the writings and rhetoric of fascist leaders—but only insofar as these factors influence the masses, for it is *movements* we are concerned with, not ideas for their own sake. Sternhell may be right that the "pure" idea of fascism, as expressed in the definitions above, is more compatible with a highly regimented state-socialist economy than with the chaotic, self-interested, materialistic world of "money-grubbing" capitalism. (In fact, he is probably wrong. See below.) But if we want to understand the dynamics of social movements, the real forces that swayed populations and nations during the 1920s and '30s, we have to look at the ways in which ordinary people interpreted fascist ideology.

The first point to make is one that has already been made: most fascist leaders and intellectuals themselves accepted capitalism, in some form (usually corporatist). They liked the Social Darwinism of the market, its dynamism, its productivity and efficiency, its competitive nature—all qualities that harmonized well with the fascist struggle of nation against nation, race against race, the will to power. They merely wanted to do away with the parasites, the financiers. But this loathing itself fit neatly into the fascist

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[9] Ibid., 70.

[10] It can be argued, of course, that Marxists too had a deep loathing of bourgeois cultural decadence. What matters is that they combined this loathing with commitment to a thoroughgoing social revolution—i.e., to a revolution with a *social content* as opposed to a mere nationalistic "form."

program, for it exemplified and justified the war against outsiders, against Jews or people who were not of the *Volk*.

Similarly, the fascists' struggle against Communism naturally inclined them to support capitalism. But why did they oppose Communism in the first place? Because they thought it would undermine the nation. First of all, it was internationalist in orientation—indeed, it was associated with Russia—and secondly, it fomented class conflict, which destroyed national unity. Most fascists (especially the more successful ones) preached a kind of class collaboration or corporatism, which effectively meant the continuation of capitalism.

In their actions, too, fascists proved themselves defenders of capitalism from the red menace. In the years after World War I, Mussolini's *squadristi* frequently attacked and killed socialists and workers on strike. Veterans hated socialists for their internationalism and for having opposed the war, so they joined the movement en masse and terrorized workers all over the country. The same anti-socialist attitudes and actions permeated fascism in Germany, in France, in England, even in Spain, where it was unusually sympathetic to workers.[11] It is not surprising, therefore, that the middle classes in many countries, who feared a socialist revolution in the wake of World War I or during the Great Depression, were attracted to fascism. Robert Paxton goes so far as to say that "Above all, it was by offering an effective remedy against socialist revolution that fascism turned out in practice to find a [political] space."[12] This quality of being a bulwark against Communism was fascism's main attraction to the middle and upper classes.

In much of their rhetoric, of course, fascists were vehemently anti-capitalist. This enabled them to attract millions of workers and peasants, for they promised to end their exploitation by big capitalists and even redistribute land from large landowners to the small peasants. (Needless to say, these promises were not kept when fascists attained power.)[13] Sternhell takes this rhetoric at face-value, or at least he thinks it represents the "true" fascism. We have already argued that "true" fascism is, by and large, not *inherently* committed either way—neither to the left nor to the right—on issues of social importance, such as the relative positions of the classes, the form of the economy, or gender-roles.[14] Its definition makes no reference to these issues. But insofar as fascism does lean toward one side or the other, it surely leans to the right—the *extreme* right—for a couple of reasons. First—with respect to the economy—the idea of a "national

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[11] See Payne, op. cit., chapter 8.

[12] Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 56.

[13] Ibid., chapter 5.

[14] Fascists tended to be very traditional with respect to gender-roles, but this was not theoretically necessary. It was not out of the question for fascist movements to have been progressive in this area—although it was unlikely, for reasons I'll discuss in a moment.

socialism," a fascist socialism, is nearly self-defeating. For fascists opposed the class struggle by definition: they thought, rightly, that a struggle of worker against capitalist would destroy the unity of the nation and thus defeat the very purpose of fascism. It would tear the nation apart. This implies, moreover, that it would necessarily not be motivated by nationalism but by a Marxist desire for social justice. In the 1920s and '30s, however, the only way that socialism or some sort of collectivism could be achieved was through the class struggle, or through a peasant- and worker-supported rebellion against capitalist interests.[15] Hence, a fascist socialism would not have been fascist; it would have been Marxist. The very term "fascist socialism" is an oxymoron. ("Fascist state capitalism" makes more sense.) This, incidentally, is why it was wrong for some of their supporters to accuse Hitler and Mussolini of "selling out" when they crushed trade unions and labor rights after achieving power: they understood that to encourage or even allow such class conflict would violate fascist principles, in particular the principle of *nation above class (and everything else).* They were being perfectly consistent.

The previous point generalizes to all social issues: people who believe in the nation above all cannot believe in social justice or freedom above all. Or, at best, they identify the cause of the nation with the cause of social justice—but this is merely a disingenuous rationalization for their emotional identification with the nation. Through this emotional identification, this profound desire for national unity and glory, they are implicitly devaluing the particularistic struggles of oppressed groups within the nation. They are effectively denying the legitimacy of claims for social equality on the part of, e.g., women, workers, homosexuals, and immigrants. After all, such groups within the nation that fight for social rights are said to be thereby undermining the nation itself, weakening it, fostering unnecessary conflict, and are thought to hate it, to be subversives. Insofar, therefore, as socialism and leftist ideologies in general are defined by their concern for social justice, equality and freedom, they are in principle opposed to fascism and nationalism.[16] In practice people might be confused about this fact, as evidenced by the millions of workers and peasants who claimed allegiance to fascism only to be crushed by the regime, but in principle there is no point of contact between the radical left and the radical right (of which fascism is one variety). In brief, 'left vs. right' generally means 'a concern for social and economic freedom vs. suppression of dissent and of (most people's) freedom (be it social, political or economic).'

Stated more simply, nationalists *qua* nationalists can brook no diversity; they are authoritarian. The nation must be a single homogeneous entity. If oppressed groups

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[15] Some fascist intellectuals seem not to have fully understood this fact. They advocated national collectivism without understanding its fundamentally Communist nature. See Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1964), chapter 4.

[16] It makes sense, then, that fascists would be socially conservative (on gender-roles, for instance, or homosexuality), as in most cases they were.

agitate for rights, they must be crushed. This belief-system is the very opposite of socialism and its fellow radical ideologies.

We are beginning to see that fascism is not what Sternhell seems to think it is: it is not leftist, not social-revolutionary, but largely reactionary, for which reason it can be potentially useful to the ruling class (but only during acute social crises, since the powerful are suspicious of its disruptive potential). This is consistent with the Marxian analysis. Actually, the traditional Marxian position is that fascism is merely an "agent" or a "tool" of capitalism, a means of propping up a decaying capitalist economy, but this view has been somewhat discredited. For it ignores "fascism's autonomous roots and authentic popular appeal."[17] Thus, Daniel Guerin is wrong that fascism "aims to restore endangered capitalist profits."[18] It cannot be so crudely reduced to the economic level. In fact, the very language that Guerin (as a Marxist) tends to use is questionable: what does it mean to say that a movement like fascism "aims" or "aspires" to do something, such as restore profits or protect big business? Social movements are not the sort of things that display intentionality; only people do. We ought to be more careful in how we formulate hypotheses.

Nevertheless, the Marxian approach has value: it provides us with the tools to understand how fascists came to power in two countries, and why it was fascists rather than Communists who did so. Quite simply, the answer comes down to financial and political support, which means support from those in power. We have seen that capitalists and conservatives had reason to appreciate fascism both on the level of its ideology—which replaced the class struggle with the struggle of the nation against outsiders—and on the level of its actions, which were anti-Communist. In the context of an economic and political crisis, during which both Italy and Germany showed "problems of economic dislocation…, a deadlock of constitutional government…, a militant Left growing rapidly and threatening to be the chief beneficiary of the crisis, and conservative leaders who refuse[d] to work with even the reformist elements of the left," [19] fascists could be quite useful to conservatives. Only two parties were substantially increasing their votes and membership during the respective crises of Italy (after World War I) and Germany (during the Great Depression): the Socialists/Communists, and the Fascists/Nazis. The liberal and conservative parties had lost support and become feckless. Naturally, then, the conservatives who ran the government appealed to the fascists to help get society under control and prevent a revolution.

What does this prove? It does not prove that fascism is an "agent of *capitalists*," as some Marxists have maintained, for big businessmen neither created the movement nor

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[17] Paxton, op. cit., 207.

[18] Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 8.

[19] Paxton, op. cit., 105.

trusted it. It does show, though, that to call fascism—as a regime—an "agent of *capitalism*" is not off the mark. Moreover, not only were fascists granted their power by conservatives; once they had come to power, they stabilized capitalism by suppressing trade unions, workers' rights, and all oppositional movements.[20] Sternhell might argue that this was mere political expediency, but we have already seen that it follows directly from fascist ideology, from its nationalism, its authoritarianism and its class-collaborationism (all of which features fit well together, as we saw above).

One way that this analysis has been formulated by Marxists is by using the language of "Bonapartism." This term derives from Marx's analysis (in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*) of Louis Napoleon's government in France during the 1850s. Stanley Payne summarizes the theory as follows:

> [It explains] how in a situation of sociopolitical fragmentation ("equilibrium of social forces") a new force might create independent state power that did not rest solely on the interests of one social class, even though in the economic realm it might guarantee the "class interests of the bourgeoisie." …Fascism [can be seen] as the product of a political and social crisis in which traditional forms of class domination were no longer effective and in which competing forces canceled each other out, allowing a new form of dictatorship to free itself of class domination.[21]

This is a fairly accurate summary of what happened in Italy and Germany during the years of fascism's rise to power. Liberal government, to repeat, had become ineffective, essentially deadlocked between the right and the left and various smaller parties. The bourgeoisie had become incapable of running the country. Fortunately for the ruling class, a wildly popular ultra-nationalist party emerged that promised to restore order. Somewhat reluctantly it was given the reins of power, and it proceeded to rule independently of both labor and business, though with a very pro-business agenda.[22] (And, of course, it was much less independent of business than of labor.) –This account is simplified, but it is roughly accurate.

In short, fascism's great success in Germany and Italy is due ultimately to its dual character of being populist-nationalist and being a useful tool for the capitalist class during conditions of social crisis and political deadlock. Its lack of a specific social program tying it to a single class or group—i.e., its character as an "anti-ideological

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[20] Ibid., 10.

[21] Payne, op. cit., 446. Needless to say, however accurate the "Bonapartist" label may be, fascism also has many features not shared by mere Bonapartism, for example its advocacy of cultural revolution.

[22] Cf. Paxton, op. cit., chapter 5.

ideology," an ideology that aims merely for national mobilization and unity-against-outsiders as an end in itself—allows people to see in it whatever they want, be they peasants, urban workers, the middle classes or big businessmen.[23] This gives it a broader social base than Communism, which appeals specifically to workers. Conversely, the authoritarianism inherent in any kind of ultra-nationalism, especially fascism, makes it a possible ally of conservatives and big capitalists, whose rule over society always has an authoritarian element, an element of force. The two qualities, therefore, are symbiotic: without the first (viz., amorphous populism), the ruling class would have had no reason to co-opt fascism, since the latter would not have had its widespread support among the populace; but without the second (viz., reactionary authoritarianism), fascism would not have been a potential ally of conservatives in the ruling class, which means they would not have offered it political power. Admittedly, the German conservatives, among them Franz von Papen and President Hindenburg, may have made a mistake in empowering Hitler, for he soon brushed them aside and consolidated power in his own hands. But the point is that fascism's dual nature—its populism and its usefulness to the authorities—explains its success, and that when fascism came to fruition it did indeed benefit the capitalist class and the forces of social reaction as a whole.

Perhaps it seems that this analysis contradicts George Mosse's widely accepted thesis that fascism aims for a cultural revolution. The impression is mistaken, though. Mosse is right. What must be emphasized, however, is that the revolution sought by fascists is basically in the service of counterrevolution. Fascists oppose all the progressive, *authentically* "revolutionary" tendencies of modernity, such as social equality, tolerance, inclusive democracy and international integration. In the sphere of culture and politics, these are the quintessentially progressive—revolutionary—trends of the modern world, the properties that distinguish it from the *ancien régime*. In seeking to replace these properties with hierarchy, authoritarianism, a closed national community, racial purity, militarism, in short *hatred of the impure Other*, fascists want to roll back history and recreate culture in the image of a mythical past. The myth of the *past*, of a primordial state of purity that has been lost, is implicit in all variations on the fascist theme, from Hitler's to Phyllis Schlafly's to the radical Muslim's. Indeed, the myth of the nation (or the race, or the religious community) itself is essentially regressive: the nation was born in the mists of early history, and those mists are more or less what the fascist wants to return to. Sorel invoked the heroic age of Greece;

[23] It's worth noting that every type of nationalism as such is basically "anti-ideological," i.e. lacks a "social" content (beyond the proscriptions against immigrants, subversives, racial inferiors, etc.). Fascism is not alone in this respect. What makes it unique is its magnificent use of mass media, its modern propaganda-techniques, its uncompromising and radical nature, and the conditions of its emergence (in advanced European countries).

Mussolini invoked ancient Rome; all nationalists invoke an age prior to modern "corruption." Even if individual fascists did not always see themselves as inspired by reaction or the myth of the past, this is the logic of their movement. They oppose the direction in which they perceive that society is evolving (toward "decadence," etc.); progressives/revolutionaries, by contrast, want to *hasten* social evolution. The logic of their movement hates not only the past but even the myth of the past, preferring the myth of an open-ended, utopian future of universal freedom. –In short, while the fascist utopia can perhaps be called "revolutionary" inasmuch as it is very different from anything that has ever existed, its animating impulse is a counterrevolutionary hatred of the egalitarian and libertarian trends unleashed by the French Revolution.

Nor is this true only of classical fascism. Because it was, so to speak, an anti-ideology, an ideology (and a movement) devoted to national purity rather than any specific social-revolutionary content,[24] it has similarities with a variety of (conservative) movements. Movements or regimes that in many ways differ from classical fascism can be labeled proto-fascist insofar as they are exclusionary, devoted to such concepts as "purity," national or racial unity and supremacy, xenophobia, and an imposed uniformity on the population. Osama bin Laden's Islamism is an ideology of "Islamo-fascism," a kind of quasi-fascism with an Islamic content; the Ku Klux Klan has a fascist ideology, as does, to a lesser degree, Jerry Fallwell's Christian movement (Fallwell at least has *some* respect for democracy and the rule of law); even American Progressivism, from the 1890s to 1920 or thereabouts, had latently fascist elements, namely those that emphasized national purity and uniformity. (Some examples are its anti-divorce, anti-alcohol, anti-prostitution, pro-segregation, and Christian fundamentalist provisions—all provisions that emphasized "purity" or "morality.") Fascists and proto-fascists[25] are international-democratization's discontents: they dislike diversity and freedom/equality; many of them dread the erosion of their old ways of life. They want to recreate culture in a particular authoritarian and exclusionary image, to stem the tide of liberalization. The most fanatical among them, for example the Nazis and Mussolini's Fascists, want to create a "new man," a pure man, who is not so much a new man as an

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[24] To repeat: millions of people who called themselves fascists, for instance peasants and workers, did hope for a social revolution, which means that *their* "ideology" had a "social content." But to the extent that it did, it was not purely fascist. The logic of fascism is hostile to social revolution; it aims only for a "national" revolution. Peasants and workers were deceived: they did not fully understand the movement to which they belonged, as was shown by what happened to them when Hitler and Mussolini came to power.

[25] That is, those who believe in the ideology of fascism, not those who misunderstand the movement and are swept up in it (such as urban workers who think fascism will improve their economic conditions). Nor am I referring here to those people, like hapless petty-bourgeois, who are drawn to fascism simply because it will protect their property from socialist expropriation. I'm talking about the true believers.

old one, an old un-liberalized one,[26] a man who will accept a social hierarchy in which fascists themselves are at the top. These discontents exist even during normal times, but it is only during social crises and times of political deadlock that they can start mass movements and potentially seize power (or be granted it by sympathetic elites).

We have criticized much of Sternhell's analysis, but before concluding this paper it is worth noting that, from a different perspective, fascism *can* have similarities to authentically revolutionary movements, movements for freedom and equality. The similarities are superficial, though. For instance, revolutionary movements can have semi-fascist means of organizing, can share the fascist emphasis on hierarchy, militarism, unity, virility, youth, violence, even race. An example is the Black Power movement in America during the 1960s. The Black Panthers were bona fide revolutionaries fighting for freedom and equality, but they exhibited many of the semi-fascist traits just mentioned. For instance, they all wore the same uniforms and thought of themselves as an egalitarian elite while obeying the cult of Huey Newton (the Leader). They staged mass meetings, roused their audiences into a black-nationalist frenzy through belligerent oratory pitting the white man against the black. And yet, despite these seemingly fascist tricks, the Black Panthers were ideologically at the opposite end of the spectrum from classical fascists, nor did they have the same cross-class appeal or even the same racial prejudices. They were not opposed to internationalism, either: in fact, their Maoism proclaimed the unity of oppressed peoples all over the world.

What are we to make of such phenomena, phenomena that seem to blur the lines between progressive-revolutionary movements and fascism? What do they tell us about our subject? In brief, they merely serve as warnings for us to be careful in how we classify and analyze social phenomena, since movements can have surface-similarities while being essentially different. It is absurd to say that Black Power, for example, has anything more than the most superficial resemblances to Fascism: it is the product of totally different social dynamics, different structural forces, different motivations and desires, different sorts of injustice and economic grievances. However, because it is an oppositional subculture trying to survive within a hostile dominant culture it can, and does, adopt some of the same techniques and rhetorical strategies as fascism did. It could have adopted more, too. It could have gone so far as to model itself, to an extent, on Mussolini's Fascist party—and yet even then it would have remained essentially different from the earlier movement. Its difference is manifested in the fact that its

[26] More precisely, he is a new man inasmuch as he is a technologically savvy, militarily disciplined and selflessly devoted modern mass man; but he is an "old" man inasmuch as he has not been corrupted by modern culture. Culturally he is primitive, heroic, ancient, chivalrous, "moral," "pure," a "barbarian" (as Hitler was fond of saying); organizationally, so to speak, he is modern and efficient.

ideology is committed to specific *social* goals, in particular to economic and political equality for black people, while Mussolini's ideology is committed only to the *form* of national unity, hierarchy, militarization.

Given the fascist emphasis on national unity and an authoritarian state—an emphasis that leads, in practice, to a conservative regime, despite fascism's superficially revolutionary nature—it is not ridiculous to say that a number of ostensibly liberal-democratic regimes have fascist characteristics. It is not a mere misuse of language to say that the United States government under George W. Bush had vaguely fascist qualities. One has only to think of Guantanamo, the Patriot Act, the constant fear-mongering, the widespread surveillance, the common accusation of treason against political opponents, the circumventing of due process and constitutional rights, the propagating of enormous, appealing lies or "myths" (like the great fascist myths) to the point at which an entire alternate reality was constructed for the sake of securing the population's submission, and the intense efforts to program the populace to think in terms of good and evil, of purity and impurity, of nation vs. outsiders. This is all semi-fascist. The analogy should not be carried too far, however, since Bush's administration had no Bonapartist quality—it was explicitly in the service of business, so that it was not "free of class domination"—and it did not grow out of any kind of semi-revolutionary mass movement or a crisis of liberal democracy or social chaos.

Nevertheless, the intuitive reasonableness of comparing Bush's presidency to a semi-fascist regime shows just how mistaken Sternhell is in equating fascism to the revolutionary left. The Marxist analysis—qualified and modified as it has been in this paper—is far more defensible, which is probably why it remains the conventional wisdom even after eighty years of revisionism.