

Peter Sedgwick

The Problem of Fascism

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The Nature of Fascism, ed. J. Woolf, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 63s

Political Violence and Public Order, Robert Benewick, Allen Lane, the
Penguin Press, 63s

Marxist theory has produced two important propositions about the phenomenon of Fascism: they are not of equal worth. The first thesis, deriving from Trotsky and now widely circulated by academic writers, states that the rise of a fascist movement is the expression of despairing masses of petty-bourgeois, exploited by demagogues and utilised by the big bourgeoisie at a time opportune for the crushing of the labour movement. The second concerns the character of a fascist regime which is actually in power: this, according to pronouncements by the Comintern

leaders, by Trotsky and by such independent Marxist scholars as Franz Neumann (**Behemoth**) and Daniel Guerin (**Fascism and Big Business**) is the untrammelled and perfected dictatorship of capital, acting in the furtherance of business interests without reference to working-class demands, which are now brutally deprived of all expression.

Some alternative, non-Marxist theories about Fascism in power are: (1) that the economies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were centrally-directed, Statified mechanisms in which private ownership was displaced in favour of the decrees of Party and bureaucratic management (this is one version of the bureaucratic collectivism case); (2) that the central feature of fascist structures is their totalitarianism, in the sense of guidance by an all-constraining ideological drive towards world-transformation, which subordinates to its ambition all sectors of the society, including the economy as one among many.

The first thesis, limited to explaining the origins of fascist parties and their initial accession to power, is well supported in the deliberations of the scholars who are reported in the Woolf volume. Much of the mass-movement sociology of the last 20 years has been concerned with trying to produce generalisations about the social processes (usually omitting the political events) which detach class-groups from their habitual loyalties and render them available for mobilisation. Provided that the reader can tolerate pages of discussion which locate fascist movements in a standard cross-cultural cycle of modernisation without recalling the fact that there have been only two or three indigenous fascist regimes, and these in a historically peculiar epoch of world war and slump provided, too, that he equips himself with a mental glossary which replaces the word modern, in all its occurrences, with the word capitalist, and the word non-modern by pre-capitalist, he will find many suggestive reflections here. The most substantial contribution along these lines is that by the sociologist of Peronism, G. Germani, who accounts for the turn

taken by Peron's regime by looking at the state of the middle classes in Argentina. Although the colonel's coup in 1943 was as fascist in inspiration as, say, Quisling's takeover of Norway, there were no frenzied middle classes for them to mobilise. Peron was astute enough to see that the workers were his only possible social base, but a turn towards them involved an attack upon the original fascist sponsorship and the development of new aims favouring the workers. The human basis reacted on the leadership and finally modified substantially the basis of the movement. Trotsky's analysis of fascism is thus strengthened by a negative instance: without the petty-bourgeois run amok, no fascism.

The articles by Stuart Woolf (on economic policies of fascism) and Tim Mason (on the relation between politics and economics in Nazi Germany) form a severe test of all the other theories. It is only now, with the internal documentation on Japan, Italy and Germany available to researchers, that we can get any clear idea of how their systems functioned. Many of the conclusions about fascist structure that were produced in the 30s and 40s were based on impressionism or emotion. For example, Woolf's evidence establishes that the attribution of Statification and planning to fascist economies in those days usually went much too far. The actual methods of State intervention practised in the regimes did not differ very much from those used in the Britain, America or France of today though the fascists could justifiably claim to have pioneered the role of government as the *continuous* supervisor of production, which was unfamiliar to Western societies before the war. What made the fascist economies distinctive was not so much their structures — there is no case, and never was, for classing them as bureaucratic collectivist — or even State capitalist in the Russian sense — as their aims. The economic goals of the fascists were totally dissimilar from almost any private capitalist system before or since, in that they deliberately pulled out of the world trading network and tried to build a closed economy based on a

self-sufficient nation. Through the State monopoly of foreign trade, exports were drastically reduced, and ceased to function as a normal imperative of the system except insofar as they were needed to pay for imports. Internally, prices and costs became irrational since they were no longer subject to the discipline of the international market and business was run on a State-sponsored and corporation-controlled cost-plus system instead of on penny-pinching competition. The closed nation state was of course an inadequate base for a developed or developing economy, and imperialism of a special kind, based on plunder and conquest rather than trade or capital penetration was the inevitable corollary of self-sufficiency: it was also of course thoroughly encouraged by the geopolitical, racist or nationalist elements in fascist ideology.

Woolf's analysis puts Peron's Argentina and Vargas's Brazil firmly outside the family of fascisms, on the grounds of their sharply different policies and possibilities in the economic field. On the other hand, it puts Japan no less definitely inside the fascist framework, for (even though Japan had no fascist party and its leader-cult was around the time-hallowed figure of the Emperor) its economic programme was similar to that of the Nazis. Japan is an important test-case for the petty-bourgeois theory of fascist origins, since the mobilisation of displaced civilians through demagoguery did not take place there and there was not much of a labour movement to be smashed. The trouble is that, once you break away from a rigorous definition of fascism founded on the analysis of a particular political and sociological conjuncture, the way is open to impressionistic labelling of the kind which makes Powellism, Gaullism and Peronism into varieties of fascism. As for Japan, one writer (Barrington Moore) has classified it as a special variant called Asian Fascism; this is probably all right so long as it is recognised that Asian Fascism isn't actually fascism.

Tim Mason's article will repay careful study and re-reading by all who are interested in fundamental socialist theory. His case is that National Socialist Germany exhibits a peculiar primacy of politics in which ideological goals determine the performance of the economic sphere so radically that the whole system cuts loose from any rationality of self-reproduction. The Cicero Fruit Syndicate may well have instigated Arturo Ui's rise to power, but what Arturo did with his power bears no resemblance to the demands of even the most crooked and corrupt vegetable business. In the first place, Reich industry ceased to function as a coherent pressure group after 1936, when Schacht was defeated (and then removed from office) in his battle against Goering's pet proposal for extraction of low-grade domestic iron ore which cut across the Ruhr magnates' capitalisation plans for steel exports. Deprived of a trade union counter-challenge, the employers' common interest disintegrated in a war of all against all in which those firms (like IG Farben and Krupp) which stood to gain from the Nazis' political goals nursed into prominence and coalition with the regime while the other strove to keep up. There is no evidence of any specific business pressure in the determination of Nazi conquest policy though of course the big firms moved in eagerly to clean up the spoils of annexation once the policy was implemented. This abdication from political influence is in stark contrast with the role of the industrialists in the Weimar Republic or even in Schacht's heyday in the 1933-36 period. It is even distinct from the not uncommon phenomenon of a capitalist government (like our own today) pushing through policies which worry the associations of big business: it is, simply, a state of affairs in which big business stops associating. The Nazi-loving segment of the capitalists becomes hugely powerful, of course, but even then as one of a whole range of competing and overlapping pressure- and control-groups in the regime.

Secondly, there is so much in Hitler's behaviour (which, owing to the structure of command, was synonymous with the behaviour of Germany) that defies any but a narrowly ideological analysis. Courses of action were chosen not because they made any kind of economic (or even military) sense but because the belief-system of the leadership demanded these measures. The arms drive spurred on large-scale wage drift, encouraged by local (Gauleiter and employer) acquiescence because the politics of the regime refused to depress the workers' perks. Guns *and* butter were managed quite comfortably until well after the invasion of Russia, and consumer production was kept up remarkably in some spheres even as late as 1944. The ideology of female domesticity prevented the use of women's labour in industry even with the catastrophic labour shortage of the late war years. And, of course, the extermination of the Jews (gassing scarce, Polish metal workers just when they were needed most, commandeering a transport system already unable to meet military demands, and above all serving no propagandist, scapegoating purpose since it was conducted *in secret*) defies reason no less than conscience. The primacy of Nazi politics is exerted not only against economics but against politics (i.e., policy-making) itself. Hitler's orders to destroy Germany before the advance of the Allies in 1945 follow perfectly from the intellectual position of the 'master race', for if this race is itself mastered the only possible conclusion is that it was unworthy of the ideal, and deserves obliteration before the conqueror. But it makes no other kind of sense, political or industrial, capitalist or nationalist.

It is true that Mason is arguing against a very crude (if very common) view of the relation between business and Nazism: the essay is reprinted from an exchange he conducted in the German Socialist press with a number of dogmatists from the GDR. All the same, one wonders how far he is assuming that the primacy of politics is abnormal in cases of national expansionism. It is as though we were asked to believe that

imperialism normally has economic motives, influencing political decisions directly through business pressure groups, but that Nazi Germany is an exception. The lingering influence of the Hobson-Hilferding-Lenin theory of imperialism-as-capitalism may perhaps be detected here. But it has now been satisfactorily established that, e.g. the colonial annexations of the European powers in Africa over 1870-1914 had little or nothing to do with the economic impetus of the export of capital (Lenin's statistics in **Imperialism**, for instance, disguise the fact that capital exports were going, even then, predominantly to industrial rather than backward sectors of the world). Similarly, Noam Chomsky has recently argued that the determination (until recently) of the United States to hang on to Vietnam can be associated with a political imperative (to leave elbow-room for Japan in Asia as a junior partner) rather than any economic importance of the region for Wall Street. What is striking about the Hitler regime is not the primacy of politics per se but the specific fragmentation and retreat of private capital as an organised force in the society.

In reality the motive-force of capitalism in Nazi Germany becomes an indispensable part of one's analysis as soon as one steps back and takes a view of the society over decades rather than individual years. Characteristically, it is Trotsky's epochal sense of history that reinstates an adequate perspective here, in the opening sections of **The Only Road** (written in July 1932, when the bourgeoisie still had to choose between Von Papen and Hitler) which sketch the different alternatives open to the physicians of German capitalism. Irrespective of the outcome of the battle between Nationalists and Nazis, Trotsky foresees a future of frenzied and convulsive economic expansion, along with the speedy restoration of militarism. The pent-up force of a powerful economy walled in by the *diktat* of the Allies can find no other outlet than in a collision course. Trotsky dismisses too readily the Nazi solution to Germany's

sickness: autarchy, as the adaptation of German capitalism to its national boundaries, would (he thinks) weaken the patient still further. Even a year after Hitler's accession, **What is National Socialism?** he is still dismissing planned autarchy as simply a new stage of economic disintegration in which Nazism proves itself to be impotent in economics. Actually, of course, Nazi autarchy, with its expanding borders, its swift annexation of industrial capacity and its planned arms drive, proved to be, at least in the short term, a highly efficient means for the realisation of a dynamic economy. Thus far, Nazi ideology with its prescriptions for foreign conquest and plunder appears as a rationally comprehensible and inwardly rational exercise along one route of capitalist political economy. German society was never more progressive (in the narrow cynical-Marxist sense of developing the forces of production) than at the height of the war in the face of savage Anglo-American bombing and stalemate or defeat on the Eastern front, heavy production kept expanding (with the output of tanks, for instance, multiplying *five-fold* between 1942 and 1944).

It is useful, then, to look at Nazi Germany as a capitalist economy in which the capitalists as such are demoted and subordinated. The principal unit of capital is not the firm or the cartel but the nation: above this level, in the international relations, competition of the most cut-throat variety leads to the system's ruin. The approach developed by Michael Kidron in **Western Capitalism Since the War** has an evident applicability in this field: socialists should cease trying to argue that Hitler was a front-man for business and instead look on him as a pioneer of the permanent arms economy and corporate planning.

The utility of even a revised Marxist analysis breaks down, however, in the face of the gas-chambers. The most dedicated and developed social theory that human civilisation has attained has nothing to contribute towards our understanding of Nazism's politics of race murder. The very

use of expressions like barbarism and medieval by Marxists at this point testifies to the replacement of analysis by horror. It is little wonder that so many on the Left have resorted to psychological explanation as the first available alternative to the Marxist vacuum. Franz Neumann himself, after the rigorous economic framework of his great work *Behemoth*, turned to the speculations of mass-psychology when the concentration camps disclosed their piles of wholly uneconomic human ash. The Frankfurt School of Freudo-Marxists has extracted a variety of psycho-analyses from the mass unconscious: thus, mass society expresses either the submissiveness engendered by an authoritarian pattern of family upbringing (Adorno, Reich) or alternatively the confusion produced when these patterns get relaxed and replaced by permissiveness (Marcuse). Apart from their contradictoriness, these are answers to a false question, namely: Why did the Germans follow Hitler? But on looking at the various phases and sources of mass support for Nazism, it becomes hard to believe that one requires any special psychological factors, other than those which explain, e.g., why the masses supported Churchill or Wilson. Nazi society was not a mass society of atomised, hypnotised individuals: underneath the totalitarian armour, it was a typical advanced industrial society displaying all the sectors of varying and colliding class-consciousness. It doesn't need Freud to tell us why people cheer a politician who stops unemployment, or why they fight savagely when their homes are bombed.

All the same we will not get far in understanding Nazism without psychological explanation. If the necessity that stoked the Auschwitz crematories was not economic and was not political (in the sense of pursuing rational policy objectives in the public arena) what else can it have been but psychological? And it is not a matter of mulling over the case-histories of individual Nazi leaders, fascinating as these are for the student of psychopathology. What has to be determined is the function of

anti-Semitism (and anti-Slavism) in the belief-system of the National Socialist movement as a whole. For, despite the programmatic timidity and opportunism of all the wings of Nazism, from Hitler to the so-called Left Nazis like the Strassers, the Socialism of National Socialism has to be taken very seriously. All the militancy and sacrifice, all the hatred of privilege and corruption, all the determination to make a better and cleaner world, which among revolutionary Socialists is attached to a class perspective upon society, was present among the Nazi pioneers, only linked to a racial vision. Demagogy and conscious deception were practised constantly and consciously, but within the limits of a terrible sincerity. *Pessima corruptiu optimi*: the worst vices come through the corruption of the noblest instincts and the worst cruelties through the deflection of class-militancy upon a non-class target. None but the exalted could triumph in the long and bitter path of struggle that led from the tiny, dingy back-rooms to the rostrum of the Nuremberg Rallies. The struggle imposed a natural selection of the virulent, the racially fixated. And no movement without some kind of ideological parallel to Marxism could have hoped to master a society like Germany in which the contours of class-division were so deeply graven. Mussolini could afford to relax the dynamic, to become bourgeoisified, once the cadres of the young labour movement in a backward capitalism had been physically destroyed: the contrasts between German and Italian fascism derive chiefly from the difference between the relative density of the obstacles that confronted the imposition of national as against class definitions of reality in the two countries. German fascism required, and in the course of its development acquired, ideological hegemony as well as the power of the truncheon. In order successfully to assert its cultural dominance it had to avoid cutting across the grain of a class-divided Germany. One consequence was the Nazi's persistent concern to minimise the burden that fell upon the German working class. Another was the pursuit of social racialism, as an empowering substitute for straight Socialism. This was by no means a

smokescreen or facade: it fulfilled the wants of the leadership as well as providing militant rhetoric for the masses. Social racialism, no less than Marxism, required the unity of theory and practice: history selected Hitler's party, as it selected Lenin's, because it meant what it said. The Third Reich joined, coincidentally, the unsated dynamism of a besieged economy with the intellectual fervour of a world-transforming creed. German capitalism did not need Auschwitz: but it needed the Nazis, who needed Auschwitz.

I have space only for a few general comments on Robert Benewick's treatment of British fascism. The book offers a very detailed description of factionalism and fission in Mosley's movement, and carefully traces the rise and decline of the BUF down to the Second World War. Unfortunately its explanation of these processes is superficially liberal. British fascism was doomed, it appears, because of the peaceful traditions of our public life and because the government passed legislation (the Public Order Act) which forced the Mosleyites to put their black shirts into mothballs. Once these blighters lost their *uniforms*, you see, they lost their guts as well: smart work, Police Commissioner. A little cross-cultural homework would have revealed the fact that the Weimar Republic also introduced laws banning brown shirts, without any effect upon the morale of the SA. What the fascists lost in Britain was the battle of the streets, and that ditched them for good. Cable Street was our front line against fascism, and the police (towards whose dilemmas Benewick is altogether too sympathetic) did their damndest to sabotage it. Phil Piratin's **Our Flag Stays Red**, dealing with the Cable Street days and with the intense local reality of fascism and fascists, remains (almost unobtainably, alas) the best text on the subject.

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