

Book Reviews

A. JAMES GREGOR. *THE FACES OF JANUS: MARXISM AND FASCISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. NEW HAVEN, CONN.: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2000. Pp. 240.

Thoughtful persons have long compared the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. Indeed, the application of the word “totalitarian” beyond its original Italian context has been an act of comparison. But since the emergence of Bolshevism and Italian Fascism by the early 1920s, Western scholars—and frequently totalitarian ideologues themselves—have tended to conceptualize the Marxist-Leninist system as a political opposite to Mussolini’s Fascist party and regime, as well as to German National Socialism and the various other “fascist” parties in the thirties. The standard political spectrum taught yearly in thousands of college classrooms only makes sense as a product of this specific conceptualization.

On the other hand, from the 1930s onward (in a few cases one may say from the 1920s onward), classical liberals, libertarians, and paleo-conservatives have, to varying extents, rejected the standard political continuum for the very reason that it seemed to be based on inadequate criteria and even false premises. After all, a spectrum that put Communism and Nazism at diametric extremes distorted reality in significant ways. Yet, rigorous comparisons of Communism and Fascism in mainstream of Western intellectual life have, in most cases, been cut short by reverence for the great “intellectual” orthodoxy that Communism was a great and well-meaning experiment which unfortunately created some “excesses.”

Both for those who have long contemplated the similarities of the supposedly antipodal “extreme right” and “extreme left,” and for those who are just working their way into this fascinating subject, *The Faces of Janus* will be a welcome and highly illuminating work. A. James Gregor is a prolific authority on both Marxism and Fascism, and he offers us here a work of mature, careful, and extensive scholarship on the relationship between Marxism-Leninism and Fascism.

Gregor begins by pointing out some gross disjunctions in Western theories of twentieth-century revolution. Fairly consistently since the 1930s, academic, literary, and intellectual observers have identified Marxist-Leninist and fascist movements as polar opposites. Although some scholars began to apply the term Totalitarian (which came from the Italian Fascist vocabulary) to both “Right” and “Left” forms of ideologically authoritarian regimes, Western academics continued to view Fascism and Soviet Communism in terms of a strict dichotomy.

Fascism was irrational, Communism was rational, even scientific. Fascism was nationalist, Communism was internationalist. Fascism was selfish and aggressive, Communism was a well-meaning (albeit sometimes bumbling) attempt at universal sharing. Fascism was an evil design, Communism was the Great Experiment. And so forth.

Gregor, on the other hand, shows that the failed Marxist-Leninist revolutions do indeed look very much like the failed Fascist revolution of Italy and the various Fascist-like revolutions (including that of the National Socialists). In fact, Gregor finds contradictions to the standard political spectrum not only in Stalin's "socialism in one country" but in Fascist thought as well. Indeed, one of the valuable contributions of this book is Gregor's examination of the little-emphasized early career of Mussolini as a leading Italian Marxist and syndicalist theorist.

By way of a note, since the book is at its core a study of Italian Fascism and Russian Communism, Gregor says little about the National Socialist regime in Germany, though he does point out more than once that Fascism was very much the pioneer, Nazism very much the follower. In fact, he discusses numerous other "fascisms," though his main comparative category is Italian Fascism, with a capital F.

The standard conception of Fascism as the opposite of Marxism-Leninism, Gregor shows, derives directly from the earliest critiques of Mussolini's Fascist movement by Mussolini's former comrades, Italian Marxists, along with Austrian, French, and German Marxists. By the mid-twenties, immediately after the Fascist seizure of power in Italy, Clara Zetkin and other Comintern members worked out the coarse outlines of a Marxist line: Fascism was simply the front for capitalists who were struggling against the working class to bolster "the terroristic dictatorship of big capital."

The Marxist critique became more sophisticated over the next decades, but the vision of Fascism as an essentially inhumane opposite to Marxism remained a staple. In the thirties, R. Palme Dutt summarized many of these elaborations in the form of a standard narrative: Marx showed that the capitalist system must reach a crisis of profitability in which the rate of profit sinks toward zero; the interests of heavy industry and high finance would no longer be able to develop the forces of production; capitalism would have performed its historic role, and the capitalists would have to resort to sheer terror to maintain their power; Fascism represented this sheer terror. According to Dutt, generic fascism was "the most complete expression of the whole tendency of modern capitalism in decay" (p. 34).

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Gregor points out that even in the thirties, some Marxist intellectuals were already rejecting the mainstream Comintern theories as unworkable. Both Otto Bauer and Franz Borkenau conceived of the fascist movements as anything but simple fronts for the capitalists. Borkenau, in particular, viewed fascism as a movement whose role was that of a “mass-mobilizing developmental dictatorship under single-party auspices,” a transitional form of nationalist authoritarianism which accelerated economic development to bring the economy into line with national power—essentially a “Bonapartist” process. Both Bauer and Borkenau were thinking of Stalin and his nationalization of the revolution in Russia.

After the Second World War, Marxist theories about fascism turn on the death of Stalin in 1953, his denunciation by Khrushchev in 1956, and the subsequent enmity between Russia and China. The mutual name-calling which the Sino-Soviet hostility brought about in the sixties gave ample opportunity for Soviet and Chinese Communist theorists to brand each other as fascists. Theoretically, the important point here was that Marxists were explicitly asserting that fascism could arise in a system that was not capitalist at all, and, hence, could not be a front for capitalists. Fascism was no longer a historical category but a descriptive term, and a pejorative one, to be used to describe any state monopoly system which exhibited certain features.

Indeed, much of the theory behind the waves of the Western academic analysis of fascism in the 1960s and 1970s, Gregor shows, came directly from Chinese and Soviet critiques of each other. Gregor finds much that is, almost ironically, accurate in these Marxist slanging matches, since both sides did, in fact, possess the characteristics of which they accused each other. Loyal Maoists, Gregor writes, could truthfully show how to avoid the snares of the evil revisionists:

To be a true Maoist revolutionary, to thwart fascists, all one had to do was to obey the Chairman in an orgy of submission that many academicians, East and West, insisted was a defining trait of right-wing extremism.(p. 83)

Indeed, one finds in both the Chinese and Soviet systems endless “fascist” characteristics: the Führerprinzip, the command economy, futuristic irrationality, and much more.

Gregor puts many of his arguments together in discussing the rise of fascist-like movements in Russia and other lands of the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and since the fall of Communism. With roots in the sixties, a strong intellectual movement emerged in the

1980s which assisted the nationalist revival. Sergei Kurginian, for example, was a devoted Communist and the author of influential writings which aimed at “national salvation” through a more powerful state. Kurginian approved of Stalin’s hierarchic, inflexible, relentless regime, but he thought Stalin had made his “achievements” despite Marxism, not because of it. Gregor labels Kurginian’s ideas as “proto-fascist,” and shows that Kurginian’s influence on Gennadi Ziuganov, one of the most important leaders in the post-Soviet Communist Party, has been substantial and direct. Others, too, have adopted variants of fascist programs in post-Soviet Russia. Almost all started out as particularly committed Marxist-Leninists.

The backbone of Gregor’s analysis is his concept of “reactive developmental nationalism,” a concept which he seems to adapt in part from several of his subjects, especially from Marxist Franz Borkenau and proto-fascist Roberto Michels. Though Gregor does not treat this concept in a systematic way, his counter to the standard “opposites” theory of Marxism and Fascism seems to stem from it. In brief, reactive developmental nationalism represents, according to Gregor, a tendency which emerges when a “nation” sees the need to forge ahead economically in order to assert its national identity and place in the sun, and when the progress toward this place in the sun seems stymied by some foreign catastrophe or national embarrassment. The result is a “reactive” authoritarianism, an attempt to develop the nation from the top down and to adopt something like the “reactionary modernism” which Jeffrey Herf has written about in the case of German National Socialism. Gregor sees both Marxism-Leninism and Fascism as the progeny of this process.

Classical liberal or libertarian thought dovetails perfectly with Gregor’s demonstration of the similarities of the two systems, but many of the readers of this journal will consider his analytical framework of “reactive nationalism” as unnecessarily complicated. The centralization of power has accompanied the Leviathan state since its earliest development some five or six hundred years ago; World War I and its aftermath simply intensified that longstanding tendency. The particular forms of authoritarianism require historical, but not necessarily “theoretical,” explanation.

An extension of this critique of Gregor’s book is that his tendency to hold up “democracy” as the true counterpoint to both Marxism-Leninism and Fascism demonstrates the weakness of reactive developmental nationalism as an explanatory category. The twentieth century has

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shown that democracy has been highly creative and vigorous in developing its own patterns of centralization, Leviathanism, imperialism, collectivism, and intervention into the lives of individuals.

This criticism notwithstanding, *The Faces of Janus* is an outstanding work of careful scholarship which speaks directly to issues long of interest to students of liberty.

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