

The New Criterion

Books

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State worship

by [John O'Sullivan](#)

On *Liberal Fascism*, by Jonah Goldberg.

Jonah Goldberg

Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning
Doubleday, 487 pages, \$27.95

Liberal Fascism came under attack even before it had gone through the formality of being published or made informally available as uncorrected proofs. Lexington, *The Economist's* usually urbane Washington columnist, devoted the first of two dismissive comments to it nine months before publication. "Progressive" critics in the blogosphere were positively sulphurous in the month before it appeared. A gaggle of critics on Amazon discussed, with counterexamples ("A dark and stormy night ... etc."), whether this was the worst book ever written. It was still ahead when I last checked.

What seems to have induced this frenzied rejection is the book's title suggesting that fascism is a liberal or left-wing phenomenon. That argument is certainly in the book. Indeed, Jonah Goldberg, a friend and *National Review* colleague, writes early on that he was inspired to write it partly by irritation at the endlessly repeated liberal claim that fascism is a sort of extreme or covert conservatism so that if you strike a conservative, a fascist will strike you back.

His starting point, therefore, is to point out that fascism is a collectivist doctrine, worshipful towards the centralized state, socialist in economics (Nazism, remember, is short for National *Socialism*), hostile to both tradition and capitalism—in short, a left-wing ideology opposed in almost every respect to classical liberal conservative individualism. It is this argument that has incensed his advance critics.

In fact, as Goldberg points out in his first pages, something like this is the conventional wisdom among scholars of fascism. Some say it openly; others disguise it in formulations about the convoluted nature of fascist ideology; but only a handful of primitive Marxists still maintain that fascism is capitalism unmasked.

Goldberg goes beyond this conventional wisdom, however, to construct a much more ambitious theory of fascism as a kind of über-ideology. His broad thesis is that the decades from the early 1900s to the 1950s were "the fascist moment." Across the advanced world, intellectuals lost faith in limited government, free market ideas, political democracy, diverse and competing social and cultural institutions, and all the higgledy-piggledy messiness of a free society. Groups as different as "progressives" in America, Fabians in Britain, Bismarckians in Germany, and the Futurists in Italy all sought to replace *laissez-faire* with state control and regulation.

Still more significant, all these groups—"progressives" no less than the others—were inspired by a

semi-religious awe for the centralized state as the expression of a united national community. Such respectable figures as John Dewey, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann saw World War I precisely as the opportunity to turn the disorganized populace into a genuine community dedicated to a great “national purpose.” In the single most provocative passage in the book, Goldberg argues that the Woodrow Wilson administration—with its corporate War Industry Board, its censorship of anti-war publications, and its thousands of “four-minute men” hired to give short patriotic speeches to any public gathering—was the first fascist government in history. Later progressives seized on the Great Depression to justify extending state control of life a second time under the New Deal.

In all of this there are clearly echoes of the totalitarian movements—as the Progressives themselves kept proclaiming well into the 1930s—of Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, and Stalin. But is the similarity strong enough to justify treating either the Progressives or their liberal successors today as “fascists”? Would it not be fairer to describe the period Goldberg delineates as “the statist moment” in which state worship advanced everywhere but in different philosophic forms, each influenced and sometimes restrained by the national traditions of its own society: militarist and conformist in Germany, poetically grandiloquent in Italy, aristocratically liberal in Britain, can-do pragmatist in America, some deservedly called fascism, others worthy of a less opprobrious term?

There is some truth in this criticism. The spirit in which even frankly illiberal measures are implemented can make a deep difference. Wartime Britain under Churchill was a tightly regulated society resting on a collectivist economy. Fascists were detained without trial, newspapers subject to military censorship. Yet the government was regularly criticized in the press. Debate in parliament was unrestrained. And there was a widespread sense of liberty expressed, among other ways, by equally widespread grumbling over rationing. Britain in those days had state control without state worship.

That marked Britain out from Fascist Italy, which glorified both the Italian state and *il Duce* in the most extravagant (and misleading) terms. State worship had appalling consequences that included a lost war. To do Mussolini justice, however, his regime never sought to worship the state with the primitive blood sacrifice of either class or race genocide as did Nazism and Soviet communism.

What then separates these two practitioners of genocidal statism? Surely it is a blend of hypocrisy and aesthetics. Communism had the shrewdness to disguise its genocidal drives behind a façade of concern for social justice. Nazism was not merely frank about its barbaric hatreds; it expressed their essence in theatrical displays of mass sadism that made Nazi uniforms and insignia a staple of the pornography industry. How different, how very very different, from the domestic politics of our own dear John Dewey!

Doubtless it is an understandable desire to separate Progressives and liberals from Hitler’s crimes that stimulates protests against the book. Goldberg underlines throughout, however, that he is attributing neither mass murder nor anti-Semitism to the Progressives or today’s liberals. He even exculpates Italian fascism from these charges. But there are lesser crimes than genocide. Although the infractions of liberty were temporary and restrained by law and tradition under Wilson, as under Churchill, they nonetheless occurred and had victims.

Did they amount to fascism? Do the ideas of today’s liberals? The answer probably lies in the degree of their spiritual ambition. Winning a war is a discrete aim with a time limit on emergency laws. But when H. G. Wells coined the term “liberal fascism” in a 1932 speech that called on his audience to replace the “dilatatory indecisiveness” of democracy with bodies that would “end as the sustaining organizations of a reconstituted mankind,” he was not limiting his aims at all. No time limit or lack of ambition there even if in the service of liberal ideas.

Herein lies the significance of Goldberg’s long list of current liberal attitudes—mocked by some

reviewers—that mimic past fascist ideas. From the young Hillary Clinton’s attempt to collectivize children under the banner of rights through the authoritarianism of political correctness and “sensitivity training” to the post-religious “politics of meaning,” modern statist liberalism exhibits an itch to regulate the lives—and increasingly the minds—of others that seems both boundless and boundlessly self-confident. If Goldberg exaggerates he exaggerates something real.

Whether or not this liberalism amounts to fascism is questionable—but it is a reasonable question and a warning to prudent liberals. That such a liberalism is closer to fascism than either doctrine is to Anglo-American conservatism Goldberg has established beyond reasonable doubt.

John O'Sullivan is an editor at large at *National Review*.

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