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**In his new book, Goldberg has decided to dream up fascists on the left rather than acknowledge the fact that the real American fascists have been lurking in the right's closet for lo these many years.**

**DAVID NEIWERT** | *January 8, 2008* | web only

**Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning** by Jonah Goldberg (*Doubleday, 496 pages*)

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The public understanding of World War II history and its precedents has suffered in recent years from the depredations of revisionist historians -- the David Irvings and David Bowmans of the field who have attempted to recast the meaning of, respectively, the Holocaust and the Japanese American internment. Their reach, however, has been somewhat limited to fringe audiences.

It might be tempting to throw Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* into those same cloacal backwaters, but there is an essential difference that goes well beyond the likely much broader reach of Goldberg's book, which was inexplicably published by a mainstream house (Doubleday). Most revisionists are actually historians with some credentials, and their theses often hinge on nuances and the interpretation of details.

Goldberg, who has no credentials beyond the right-wing nepotism that has enabled his career as a pundit, has drawn a kind of history in absurdly broad and comically wrongheaded strokes. It is not just history done badly, or mere revisionism. It's a caricature of reality, like something from a comic-book alternative universe: Bizarro history.

The title alone is enough to indicate its thoroughgoing incoherence: Of all the things we know about fascism and the traits that comprise it, one of the few things that historians will readily agree upon is its overwhelming *anti-liberalism*. One might as well write about anti-Semitic neoconservatism, or Ptolemaic quantum theory, or strength in ignorance. Goldberg isn't content to simply create an oxymoron; this entire enterprise, in fact, is classic **Newspeak**.

Indeed, Goldberg even makes some use of Orwell, noting that the author of *1984* once dismissed the misuse of "fascism" as meaning "something not desirable." Of course, Orwell was railing against the loss of the word's meaning, while Goldberg, conversely, revels in it -- he refers to Orwell's critique as his "definition of fascism."

And then Goldberg proceeds to define everything that *he himself* considers undesirable as "fascist." This is just about everything even remotely and vaguely thought of as "liberal": vegetarianism, Social Security, multiculturalism, the "war on poverty," "the politics of meaning." The figures he labels as fascist range from Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt to Lyndon B. Johnson and Hillary Clinton. Goldberg's primary achievement is to rob the word of all meaning -- Newspeak incarnate.

The term "fascism" certainly is overused and abused. The public understanding of it is fuzzy at best, and academics struggle to agree on a definition, as Goldberg observes -- and he makes use of that confusion to ramble on for pages about the disagreements without ever providing readers with a clear definition of fascism beyond Orwell's quip.

Along the way, he grotesquely misrepresents the state of academia regarding the study of fascism, which, while widely varying in many regards, has seen a broad consensus develop regarding certain ineluctable traits that are uniquely and definitively fascist: its populism and ultranationalism, its anti-intellectualism, its carefully groomed culture of violence, its insistence that it represents the true national identity, its treatment of dissent as treason, and what Oxford Brookes scholar Roger Griffin calls its "palingenesis" -- that is, its core myth of a phoenix-like rebirth of the national identity in the mold of a nonexistent Golden Age. And, of course, it has historically always been vigorously -- no, viciously -- anti-liberal.

So when Goldberg proclaims early on: "This is the monumental fact of the Nazi rise to power that has been slowly airbrushed from our collective memories: the Nazis campaigned as *socialists*," more thorough observers of history might instead just shake their heads. After all, the facts of Mussolini's utopian/socialist origins and the Nazis' similar appeals to socialism by incorporating the name are

already quite well known to the same historians who consistently describe fascism as a right-wing enterprise.

What these historians record -- but Goldberg variously ignores or minimizes -- is that the "socialism" of "National Socialism" was in fact purely a kind of ethnic economic nationalism, which offered "socialist" support to purely "Aryan" German business entities, and that the larger Nazi cultural appeal was built directly around an open antipathy to all things liberal or leftist. Indeed, whole chapters of *Mein Kampf* are devoted to vicious smears and declarations of war against "the Left," and not merely the Marxism that Goldberg acknowledges was a major focus of Hitler's animus.

This became manifest in the Italian fascist and German Nazi transformations from a faction of street thugs into an actual political power that seized the reins of government, when fascists gradually shed all pretensions or appeals to socialism and became violently anti-socialist and anti-communist. But it was present all along; "the Left" were the people who were beaten and murdered in the 1920s by the *squadristi* and the Brownshirts; and the first Germans sent off to Nazi concentration camps like Dachau were not Jews but socialists, communists, and other left-wing political prisoners, including "liberal" priests and clerics.

The same incoherence underlies what Goldberg imagines is his provocative thesis: the notion that "modern progressivism and classical fascism shared the same intellectual roots," and therefore that "fascism, properly understood, is not a phenomenon of the right at all. Instead, it is, and always has been, a phenomenon of the left." The core of this claim is his insistent description of populism as a form of left-wing politics -- which, in many of its manifestations, it certainly was.

Yet Goldberg incorrectly claims that "populism had never been known as a conservative or right phenomenon before" Mussolini. In fact, populism has historically been a broad-ranging phenomenon that expressed itself in both right- and left-wing politics, as Chip Berlet has described in some detail in his 2000 book, *Right-Wing Populism in America*, which details its history from Bacon's Rebellion to the Ku Klux Klan to the modern-day Posse Comitatus and militia/Patriot movements. What distinguishes these populists from their left-wing counterparts, as Berlet explains, is that "they combine attacks on socially oppressed groups with grassroots mass mobilization and distorted forms of antileftism based on scapegoating." Yet, building on a false characterization of the history of populism, Goldberg goes on to characterize such historical figures as Father Charles Coughlin, the rabid anti-Semitic radio talker of the 1930s, and Sen. Joe McCarthy as *left-wing* figures simply because of their populist foundations.

More to the point, perhaps, is that discussing fascism's "intellectual foundations" is a nonsensical enterprise in the face of the consensus of historical understanding that *anti-intellectualism* is an essential trait of fascism, a fact that Goldberg briefly acknowledges without assessing its impact on his thesis. As **Umberto Eco** put it, the fascist insistence on action for its own sake means that "it must be taken before, or without, reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation." In this worldview, the instincts of the fascist leader are always superior to the logic and reason of puling intellectuals.

Probably the essential fascist statement is one that Goldberg in fact cites unreflectingly -- Mussolini's famous reply to those who wanted policy specifics from him: "The democrats of *Il Mondo* want to know our program? It is to break the bones of the democrats of *Il Mondo*. And the sooner the better." This remark's noteworthy anti-liberalism also seems to elude Goldberg. And the notion that liberal humanism -- with its long history of rationalism and reliance on logic and science -- has anything whatsoever to do with the fascist approach is, once again, an almost comical upending of reality.

*Liberal Fascism* is like a number of other recent attempts at historical revisionism by popular right-wing pundits -- including, notably, Michelle Malkin's attempt to justify the Japanese-American internment in her book *In Defense of Internment*, and Ann Coulter's attempt to rehabilitate McCarthy's reputation in her book *Treason* -- in that it employs the same historical methodology used by Holocaust deniers and other right-wing revanchists: namely, it selects a narrow band of often unrepresentative facts, distorts their meaning, and simultaneously elides and ignores whole mountains of contravening evidence and broader context. These are simply theses in search of support, not anything like serious history.

What goes missing from Goldberg's account of fascism is that, while he describes nearly every kind of liberal enterprise or ideology as representing American fascism, he wipes from the pages of history the fact that there have been fascists operating within the nation's culture for the better part of the past century. Robert O. Paxton, in his book *The Anatomy of Fascism*, identifies the Ku Klux Klan as the first genuine fascist organization, a suggestion that Goldberg airily dismisses with the dumb explanation that the Klan of the 1920s disliked Mussolini and his adherents because they were Italian (somewhat true for a time but irrelevant in terms of their ideological affinities, which were substantial enough that by the 1930s, historians have noted, there were frequent operative associations between Klan leaders and European fascists).

Beyond the Klan, completely missing from the pages of Goldberg's book is any mention of the Silver Shirts, the American Nazi Party, the Posse Comitatus, the Aryan Nations, or the National Alliance -- all of them openly *fascist* organizations, many of them involved in some of the nation's most horrific historical events. (The Oklahoma City bombing, for instance, was the product of a blueprint drawn up by the National Alliance's William Pierce.) Goldberg sees fit to declare people like Wilson, FDR, LBJ, and Hillary Clinton "American fascists," but he makes no mention of William Dudley Pelley, Gerald L.K. Smith, George Lincoln Rockwell, William

Potter Gale, Richard Butler, or David Duke -- all of them bona fide fascists: the real thing.

This is a telling omission, because the continuing existence of these groups makes clear what an absurd and nakedly self-serving thing Goldberg's alternate version of reality is. Why dream up fascists on the left when the reality is that real American fascists have been lurking in the right's closet for lo these many years? Well, maybe because it's a handy way of getting everyone to forget that fact.

*Liberal Fascism* may come complete with copious but meaningless footnotes, but it is in the end just a gussied-up version of a favorite talking point of right-wing radio talkers that the *real* fascists are those nasty liberals, those feminazis and eco-fascists. It may be all dressed up with a pseudo-academic veneer, but the quality of logic contained therein is roughly the same. If only it would vanish into the ether as quickly.



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