

## Creeping Fascism

If fascism came to America, some people say, it would be an unbearable nightmare drastically disrupting the everyday pattern of our lives. And since our lives seem to retain their normal pattern it follows that fascism has not taken over. In actuality, however, the fascist state, like all states, has neither the resources nor the need to make nightmarish intrusions into the trivia of every citizen's life.

As a former colleague of mine, Dennis Judd, once pointed out, the image of Big Brother commanding an obscure citizen to do his morning exercises via two-way television leaves us with a grossly exaggerated caricature of the authoritarian state. Rather than alerting us to more realistic dangers, novels like *1984* cloud our vision with highly imaginative and fanciful horrors of the future, thereby making the present look not all that bad in comparison and leaving us the more convinced that all is well.

In a recent book on social life in Nazi Germany, Richard Grunberger notes that Hitler's take-over in 1933 effected no serious transformations in German daily life. If anything, employment and profits increased with the growth in war preparations; there were no more strikes, no street battles; the birth rate rose dramatically in 1934—an impressive sign of public confidence; and not until 1943, the fourth year of the war, did food shortages become severe. Those who equate fascism with the horrors of Buchenwald are correct in their moral condemnation but mistaken in their sense of sequence. The worst of Buchenwald did not come until the war years. As late as 1939, the SS and SD

were still pursuing a policy of encouraging, and more often forcing, the emigration of Jews to other lands, including Palestine. Mass liquidation as a "final solution" was not seriously considered and was in fact opposed until Hitler's order came—sometime after March 1941, most historians believe. The concentration camp was never the normal condition for the average German. Unless one were Jewish, of active leftist persuasion or openly anti-Nazi, Germany from 1933 until well into the war was not a nightmare world but a fairly comfortable place. All the Germans had to do was obey the laws, pay their taxes, give their sons to the army, avoid any sign of political heterodoxy and look the other way when troublesome people were disposed of.

Since many Americans already obey the laws, pay their taxes, give their sons to the army, are themselves distrustful of political heterodoxy and applaud when troublesome people are disposed of, they probably could live without too much personal torment in a fascist state—some of them certainly seem eager to do so. Orwell's fantasies and futuristic gimmicks to the contrary, what is so terrifying about fascism is its normality, its compatibility with the collective sentiments of so many "normal" people.

We might do well to stop thinking of the state of fascism like the state of pregnancy—either you are or are not. The political system of any one country encompasses a variety of uneven and seemingly incongruous institutional practices. To insist that fascism does not obtain until every abomination of the Nazi state is repli-

cated and every vestige of constitutional government is obliterated is to overlook the disturbing manifestations inherent in many political systems.

It is sometimes argued by those who deny the imminence of American fascism that we are more free today than ever before. One's ability to accept such reassurance partly depends on the class conditions, life chances and social relations that compose one's reality. The economically comfortable middle-class professional whose views fit into that portion of the American political spectrum known as the mainstream (from Republican to Democrat) and whose political actions are limited to the standardized forms of participation—informal discussion, newspaper reading, voting—is more apt to dismiss the contention that America is fascist than, say, the impoverished black farm worker. Almost every black activist who has achieved any local or national prominence is either under indictment, in jail, on appeal, in hiding, in exile or has been murdered by the forces of "law and order." Most of the killings go unreported in the national press. To my knowledge, not one law officer has ever been convicted of murder by the middle-American, all-white juries that pass judgment on these matters.

The Kent State killings demonstrate that racism is not the only consideration in the complicity between authorities and solid citizens. When Attorney General John Mitchell refused to investigate the massacre at Kent State because of his extrasensory knowledge that no investigation would unearth sufficient evidence to convict any Guardsmen, he was manifesting that protective leniency toward uniformed killers which stands in marked contrast to the relentless, punitive justice frequently accorded blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Indians, white poor and radicals of all colors by state, local and federal authorities. While the guardians go unguarded, political activists are arrested on trumped-up charges, often held without bail or subjected to punitive bail; Black Panther offices across the country are raided and destroyed, their funds stolen and their occupants arrested or shot.

In recent years one of the fastest growing markets has been in those

items of violence sold to law enforcement agencies, and the fastest growing kind of public employment has been police employment. The budgets of some cities are beginning to resemble the federal budget in their lopsided dedication to "defense spending." Thus the largest single item in Philadelphia's 1971 municipal appropriations was the \$92 million given to the police department.

The police are becoming politicized, identifying themselves with a right-wing definition of patriotism and a right-wing application of the law, taking their encouragement from the pronouncements of men like Mitchell, Agnew, Reagan, and—in his more forgetful and therefore more honest moments—Richard Nixon. The highest authorities have repeatedly predicted that leftist activism might provoke a strongly repressive "reaction" from the right. "Since," as the *New Yorker* recently noted, "such a reaction could take place only with the cooperation of these same authorities; their predictions have, of course, the character of threats."

It seems that the ability of most middle-class whites to perceive the fascist features of American society is seriously blunted not only by their class experiences but by the aura of familiarity and legitimacy which enshrouds the established political culture. In making comparisons between their society and others, they tend to employ a double standard of perception. Thus the elaborate and well-organized forms of police violence in America are likely to be treated as isolated and aberrant happenings—on the rare occasions they are publicized—rather than as inherent manifestations of our social order. But the same practices in certain other lands are treated as predictable and necessary components of "totalitarian" systems. The Nazi invasion of Poland is facism in action; the American invasion of Vietnam is a "blunder," an "over-extension," or at worst an "immoral application" of power. The indoctrination of children in Nazi Germany into the myths and rituals of the nation-states is seen as a typical manifestation of fascism; but our own grade school indoctrination replete with flag salutes, national anthems, and history books espousing the myths

of American virtue and American superiority is "education for citizenship." Many social arrangements and happenings which would evoke strongly negative sentiments if defined as products of a fascist state become, by their proximity and cultural familiarity, no cause for alarm when practiced at home.

The political center is frequently characterized, by those who occupy it, as a democratic force fighting a war on two fronts against the extremes of right and left. However, a closer reading of history tells us that the center has been more inclined to make common cause with the right against the left rather than oppose both with equal fervor. Far from being a blameless victim when fascism emerges triumphant, the center is something of an active accomplice. In Germany, as early as 1918, the Social Democratic leader Ebert entered an alliance with Field Marshal von Hindenburg "in order to fight Bolshevism." Throughout the Weimar Republic, as Franz Neumann records in his *Bebemoth*, "every law aimed supposedly against both Communists and National Socialists was invariably enforced against the Socialist party and the entire left, but rarely against the right." Those leftists who were critical of the illegal rearmament of Germany found themselves charged and tried for treason, while rightist assassins and putschists "were either not prosecuted at all or were dealt with lightly."

The collusion between center and right is understandable. Despite their differences in emphasis and methods (differences that are not always to be dismissed as insignificant) the center and right share a common commitment to the private corporate system and the ongoing structure of class, institutional authority and national power, along with a common hostility toward fundamental social change. Thus, the styles and pronouncements of liberal college presidents may be more pleasing than those of old-time ultra-conservative ones, but when it comes to defending the campus privileges of military and corporate interests against radical demonstrators, they are no less able to use police clubs, injunctions, dossiers, suspensions and firings.

The policies conducted by the

center seem less threatening because they are enshrouded in a more liberal-sounding rationale. Recall how in 1964 the rightist Goldwater proposed a horrific policy for Vietnam, with massive bombing of the North and defoliation of the South, and how the centrist Johnson implemented these very practices not long after. In a way, the shock we felt toward Goldwater's threats was greater than toward Johnson's practices—the latter being coated with soothing deceits. (This difficulty in appreciating the injustices perpetrated by the centrist is what makes some white radicals and black militants insist that openly proclaimed reactionaries and racists are less insidious and, in a way, less undermining and dangerous than well-intentioned liberals.)

While capable of extensive repressive actions at home and abroad, those on the center continue to consider themselves incapable of the extremism ascribed to the right and left. Indeed, the very linear model they apply to politics (extreme left—center—right—extreme right), like any line or spectrum, can extend itself at both ends to allow for limitless extremes but makes no spatial provision for an extreme center. The extremes, according to Webster's dictionary, is "the utmost part, the utmost limit, an extremity." Therefore, the very notion of an extreme center is a contradiction in terms. The extremes of the center on a lineal political spectrum, to the extent they can be imagined, are nothing more than the beginnings of a moderate left and moderate right. But extreme has another meaning, to quote Webster's again, "an excessive or immoderate degree, condition or measure." Implicit in the second definition is the image of the intransigent, dogmatic and violent extremist, and in common political parlance this second meaning is often blended into the first so that the spatial relationship takes on a moral quality. By virtue of a pun, then, the center becomes incapable of political extremism.

Yet, in truth, it does not follow deductively that those who occupy the extremes of a lineal model (a placement made in accordance with beliefs about changing the established social order) must perforce be extremists in the pejorative sense, nor does it fol-

low that those who occupy the center of any political spectrum are thereby incapable of the kind of brutal, repressive, destructive, intransigent actions usually associated with fascist extremists. It is not the John Birch Society that is bombing Indochina into the Stone Age, nor was it the American Nazi Party that perfected napalm and put thalidomide in the defoliants.

One of the main tactics of fascism is to direct the economic anger of the populace toward irrelevant foes. In a recent article, the historian Herbert S. Levine describes the Germans of the early 1930s: "Trained to patriotism and a rejection of all forms of 'prole-

tarian' Marxism, they gave their votes to a revitalized and rapidly expanding Nazi party. Although they perceived that the government was dominated by economic forces largely responsible for their present distress, they were too closely bound up with the social order to contemplate genuine revolution. They accordingly turned their anger in a Fascist direction, against irrelevant enemies: Jews, Bolsheviks and the Versailles powers." So too today, in the United States, we witness the middle Americans beset by real economic difficulties and social frustrations but too well-indoctrinated in anti-radical, anti-socialist images, and

too committed to a conservative notion of patriotism to make any realistic indictment of our system. Having been taught that the government, the military and the big corporations are the mainstays of Americanism, they turn their anger toward irrelevant enemies: the blacks, the hippies, the students, the "welfare chislers," the poor, the radicals and the real and imagined violators of law and order—those suspected of challenging the middle American's own compulsive and lifelong commitment to patriotism, hard work and private acquisitiveness.

In this indictment of irrelevant enemies, they have the assistance of various liberal writers and intellectuals, those who have used the pages of almost every liberal and conservative publication to pour forth a defamatory and often ranting torrent against the New Left, sparing themselves no snideness or slander. These are the liberals Spiro Agnew has quoted in his speeches (even taking pains to point out that while they do not support him, they share his opinions of the Left). The liberal red-baiters serve Agnew well for they help Americans forget their real grievances as taxpayers, wage earners, urban and rural dwellers and consumers. And rarely if ever do they invite their readers to consider whether it actually was the blacks, radicals and hippies who brought us war, bloated military budgets, high taxes, poverty, urban blight, inflation, unemployment and environmental devastation.

Dedicated primarily to the preservation of their own careers and their own professional and class privileges, many liberals become so preoccupied by their fear of the left as to overlook the serious threat from the right. Interestingly enough, many of the same centrists who are quick to warn of a fascist whiplash whenever radical dissenters become active are most skeptical that fascism is an existing threat in the way I have described it. But some of us have lost our skepticism. What we fear is not the cataclysm but the drift. And we no longer trust in those who can do no better than intimidate the left and imitate the right.

*Michael Parenti is associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont.*

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