

Nihilism as a Metapolitical Problem

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Three Faces of Fascism, by Ernst Nolte; translated from the German by Leila Vennewitz, *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966. 561 pp. \$7.95.*

BIOLOGICAL DISTANCES are greater by far than chronological distances. The intervention of a generation's time is a magical sill which transforms in some mysterious way the flow of time which passes over it. When we were close upon the totalitarian wars of a generation ago their meaning was clear and certain enough and fascism itself was a palpable reality which might be known but which like all living things escaped exact definition. Now we are no longer so certain. The easy pragmatic definitions, not entirely lacking in accuracy, which made the waging of successful warfare possible seem now not to possess the validity which once was theirs. Some of them resemble, indeed, from the perspective of the present, the slogans of the propagandist rather than the dispassionate analysis of the historian.

The nature of the change, however, is difficult to define. It is not simply that

old hypotheses have been abandoned nor simply that the number of determinative historical factors has been enlarged. Rather than additive eclecticism reshaping the thesis there has been in the recent past an attempt to discover a typology which will reveal the fundamental nature of the historical phenomenon under discussion.

This emphasis upon comparison and typology has arisen in part because utilitarian urgency with respect to the particular problem of fascism has died away and understanding as a historical objective has come to replace history conceived as a weapon. More importantly, as a dead faith fascism can now be studied as an objective phenomenon and its forms, once obscured by its very vitality and its integral involvement in the contemporary configuration of history, can now be more clearly and dispassionately discerned. Finally, biological distance not only enables but forces a new generation to pose new questions.

It is not accidentally that this generation has been called "non-ideological," and the history it has begun to produce finds it increasingly difficult to understand ide-

ology. When it deals specifically with ideological forms it tends to see these forms in terms of manipulative processes directed toward the achievement of a social or historical objective and not as acts of faith which derive their ultimate validity from the quest for paradise, messianism, or the restoration of innocence. The typological and the comparative approach lend themselves well to this non-ideological history because they concentrate on structure and form, the identifiable and the concrete, the phenomenological rather than on the mysterious substratum of cosmological and religious energies which are so baffling and evasive yet which energize and potentiate every historical event. When the typological and the comparative point beyond the form to the spiritual experience the new history almost inevitably concretizes the spiritual in a sociological or a class form. In short: a sociology which is strongly Marxian in flavor has tended increasingly to replace the idealistic historical structures of the past century. Value, which stood at the center of the anti-positivist revolt, has now been almost wholly displaced by process and form. The result has been both increased historical understanding and the impoverishment of the historical consciousness.

Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism*, *Action Française*, *Italian Fascism*, *National Socialism*, is an outstanding example of both the achievements and the limitations of the comparative and the typological method. Nolte's book possesses a coherent structure, a central and informing thesis and it is truly comparative. For sheer virtuosity it must be reckoned one of the more important historical works of the decade. Its successes are dazzling; its failures are equally impressive.

The study of the history of fascism poses a series of major problems. Most important among these problems is the relationship of fascism to bourgeois society. In Marxian historical studies it has always been insisted that fascism was distinctively bourgeois; the systematization of the ir-

rationalism and the contradiction which Marxism believes to be basic to bourgeois society. Stalinism has given the lie to this thesis. But beyond the naiveté of Marxism there is clearly some connection between fascism and the middle-class matrix out of which it developed.

Nearly as important a problem is that of the relationship of fascism to the European Right and to the older Conservatism. It is all too easy to establish a pedigree for fascism in general and for National Socialism in particular which extends back into Romantic conservatism and its attachment to feudal status society, established religion, and the medieval myth. However tempting the association, closer examination reveals the major disjunctions which exist between the two movements. The very fact that the fascist appeals were couched often in terms of traditional conservatism and that fascism at the outset derived widespread support from orthodoxy and conservatism makes a clarification between radical fascism and conservatism necessary.

A larger and more fundamental question is that of the validity of using fascism as a generic historical term applicable to the European totalitarian movements of the Right. Close examination reveals the widespread differences which existed between these movements in both temper and objectives. But despite these differences the fascist movements and the non-fascist world recognized the existence of common forms in fascist totalitarianism. The identification of common elements in the discrete fascist movements and the establishment of a common objective or objectives thus becomes a major problem for the student of the history of the recent past.

If the Right and Conservatism constitute a major historical question in the study of fascism, the Left, both socialism and Bolshevism, in their relationship to the elaboration of the fascist ideology, pose no less important questions. That fascism was socialist and collectivist in its ori-

entation goes without saying. Indeed, it was difficult for many German conservatives to distinguish between brown and red Bolshevism. Organicism, *Gemeinschaft*, the folk community and overtly socialist and Marxian movements and doctrines exerted a very marked influence upon the development of fascism. It was inevitable, Friedrich Meinecke pointed out, that the two great political impulses of the nineteenth century, nationalism and socialism, impulses which had for so long been viewed as antithetical, should finally merge. Moreover, Bolshevism as both the external and internal enemy of European society was bound to provoke a reaction which was substantially a mirror image of itself. If this is the case, a theory which sees fascism as distinctively bourgeois must stand in need of some sort of adjustment to the facts.

Integral nationalism and fascism are no less important and problematical than the above factors as decisive influences on the development of fascism. In Germany racism and the concept of a folk community played a dominant if not decisive role in the development of National Socialism and both of them were closely related to German nationalism and the quest for a specifically Germanic culture. In Italian fascism racism played little or no role though nationalism was of enormous influence in all the fascist movements. Similarly, anti-Semitism which was dominant in the development of National Socialism was of slight importance in the evolution of Italian fascism. The question becomes whether or not racism and anti-Semitism provided the indispensable impetus for fascism or whether they were simply adventitious forces which helped in specific instances to provide an important dynamism. Explanations of fascism simply as racism writ large do not provide an adequate explanation, but the precise relationship of racism and anti-Semitism to fascism is tantalizingly complex and obscure.

Obviously, fascism developed within a

specific political and historical context and was absolutely dependent as few political movements are, upon charismatic leadership which provided both doctrine and dynamism. It is impossible to conceive of National Socialism and Italian fascism aside from the personalities of Hitler and Mussolini. Were these movements then, nothing more than conjurer's tricks worked upon their respective societies? This question raises a second question concerning the impact of specific historical and political situations upon the development of the fascist movements.

It has been argued most convincingly by Carl J. Friedrich that both fascism and communism belong to a larger phenomenon, totalitarianism. Indeed, according to this view, the differences between the two ideologies are inconsequential when compared with the likenesses. Any study of fascism must, it seems to me, in some way deal with the larger issue of the nature and cause of modern totalitarian systems. There is great evidence to support a general discussion of all totalitarian systems under a single rubric.

Finally, the historian must raise the question of the relationship of the fascist movements to one another. To what extent were the doctrines of Italian fascism and National Socialism doctrines borrowed from Action Française? To what degree did Hitler consciously model German National Socialism upon Italian fascism? Were the lesser fascist movements of Europe independent developments or were they simply derivative from the Italian and the German movements?

Any general discussion of fascism as the dominant political and social phenomenon of the past half century must deal with all of these questions. Nearly all the treatments of fascism up to the present time have focused on one or only a few of these questions and factors. It is the great merit of Nolte's work that he systematically explores all these problems and manages to integrate them into a compelling, if not al-

together convincing, explanation of fascism.

Nolte's book is a large, Germanic, contemplated volume. The prose is heavy and unrelieved by any literary grace. The structure is layered over with detail, but by studying in succession Action Française, Italian Fascism and National Socialism in a truly comparative fashion Nolte is able to arrive at a working definition of fascism. He argues that only a combination of the elements found in all three movements can present us with the structure as a whole; that individually they are not complete. Fascism studied in this way reveals itself to be "Anti-Marxism which seeks to destroy the enemy by the evolution of a radically opposed and yet related ideology and by the use of almost identical and yet typically modified methods, always, however, within the unyielding framework of national self-assertion and autonomy." This later characteristic of "national self-assertion and autonomy," marks fascism as "a life and death struggle of the sovereign, martial, inwardly antagonistic group." By virtue of this fact fascism is characterized by what Nolte chooses to describe as "resistance to transcendence." "Transcendence" is that element in any situation which points beyond itself. More specifically it is defined by Nolte in this way: "Transcendence, looking back on what has been and forward to what is coming reaches out toward the whole." It is thus the attempt to escape the individual, the contingent and the temporal.

Fascism as "resistance to transcendence" registers itself as hostility to change, change which involves the abandonment of the autarkic, the culturally unique, the national struggle against the supranational pressures of historical movement, the war of all against all which supposedly characterizes bourgeois society. Fascism, seen in these terms, is a thoroughgoing naturalism rooted in a conception of an inviolable and unalterable human nature

based upon race, class, and culture, resistant to the changes which philosophical criticism, scientific rationalism, technological innovation, and historical process have introduced. The effort therefore, to transcend man in his particularity in quest of a universal and perfected human nature is precisely what the fascist seeks to forgo.

Now, this is an interesting, even a fascinating thesis. No one but a German could have invented it. It serves as a superb heuristic device, and used to explore the separate fascist movements enables us to see into them as previous studies have not. But as an explanation of fascism as a general "metapolitical" phenomenon it is inadequate and indeed, the concept of "transcendence" as Nolte employs it is confusing and unworkable.

The distinguishing philosophical characteristic of both communism and fascism is not that communism affirms "transcendence" and that fascism is a revolt against "transcendence." The distinguishing philosophical characteristic of both is the fact that they have developed out of the post-Kantian rejection of philosophies of essence. Both seek the radical transformation of humanity. Surely Nietzsche is a poor example to offer, as Nolte does, for what he describes as anti-transcendentalism. Nietzsche knew better than any other European philosopher the consequences of the abandonment of philosophies of essence. To Nietzsche it was apparent that man must live beyond nature, indeed, that man must overcome himself, must create for himself through an arbitrary aesthetic act a new and supposedly beautiful selfhood. When the ideal of the perfection and fulfillment of an essential human nature has been abandoned, as Nietzsche thought it had to be abandoned, it was clear that the road to creative affirmation and fulfillment for mankind could lie only in aristocratic art or aristocratic violence. Nietzsche believed in transcendence. To question this is to exhibit a striking ignorance of contemporary philosophy. More-

over fascism held the same basic set of postulates.

It must be asserted that Marxism was no less insistent upon the consequences of the rejection of the doctrine of fixed essence. Marx did not conceive of man as possessing a nature from which he was "alienated" by the relationships of production in capitalistic society. Nolte speaks of Marx as believing man possessed a "universal nature" and makes a great, and fashionable to-do over alienation. To so construe Marx is a patent absurdity. Sidney Hook in his new introduction to *From Hegel to Marx/Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx*, (The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1962), writes that "It is easy to show that the notion of human alienation—except for the sociological meaning it has in *Capital*—is actually foreign to Marx's conception of man." (p.6) Hook then points out that "alienation" is impossible unless there is an agreed ideal or norm of what human nature should be in its perfected state or that there already exists an ideal or norm. Both these assumptions were rejected by Marx. Man does not possess a fixed nature. Indeed he changes his nature, transforming the environment and the historical process. He quite literally "makes himself" as the Marxist V. Gordon Childe said. "In the end," Hook remarks, "the view that man makes himself or creates his own nature even in part renders untenable most notions of human self-alienation." (p.7)

It seems, therefore, to me, that the two theses of Nolte's book break down under close scrutiny. Marxism is not a "transcendental" system in the sense in which Nolte uses the word, and National Socialism certainly did look toward the radical transformation of man in the same sense that Nietzsche looked forward to that event. In this Soviet theoreticians share their enthusiasms when they speak of the creation of an entity called "the new Soviet man."

Consequently, there seems to me to be a much closer relationship in the basic phi-

losophies of fascism and communism than Nolte admits. To be sure, both are what Nolte describes as "metapolitical" systems. Both reflect the collapse of doctrines of essence as much as they reflect a changed social and political context. In any event "transcendence" or a lack of it will not serve as a unifying hypothesis.

A much more satisfactory metapolitical concept which is capable of explaining the philosophical ground of both Marxism and fascism is that of nihilism. Its practical consequences were made clear when Nicholas Berdyaev wrote in *Dostoyevsky* (Sheed & Ward, New York, 1934):

The inward principle of socialism is disbelief in God and in the immortality and freedom of the human spirit. Therefore does the socialist religion welcome the three temptations that our Lord refused in the wilderness—the temptations of stones turned to bread, of the kingdoms of the world, and the social miracle. It is not a religion for free sons of God but for slaves to necessity, children of the dust whose spiritual primacy has been snatched away from them. If life has no absolute meaning, if there is no eternity, then there is nothing left for men to do but to emulate Versilov's utopia, get together and organize world happiness. (p. 141)

The source of revolutionary nihilism, red or black or brown, is not, as one must at first suppose, immoralism, though the consequences strike at the roots of Christian and bourgeois morality. In all cases the revolutionary is an excessively though pervertedly moral man. Michael Polanyi noted this when he wrote in *Beyond Nihilism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960):

People often speak of Communism or Nazism as a secular religion. But not all fanaticism is religious. The passions of the total revolution and total wars which have devastated our age were not religious but moral. Their morality was inverted and became immanent in brute force because a naturalistic view

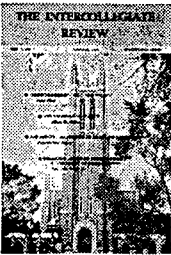
of man forced them into this manifestation. Once they are immanent, moral motives no longer speak in their own voice and are no longer accessible to moral arguments; such is the structure of modern nihilistic fanaticism. (p. 28)

A scant half-dozen works have been written over the last three decades dealing with the ethical, social, and political consequences of nihilism. Among the major sources of the modern temper nihilism goes virtually unrecognized. Yet nihilism persists as a dominant influence in our society, even after fascism has been dissipated and communism lamed. Perhaps the

most important studies of the political consequences of nihilism and its cultural roots are Hermann Rauschning's two books, *The Revolution of Nihilism* (Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1939), and *Masken und Metamorphosen des Nihilismus* (Humboldt Verlag, Frankfurt/M., 1954). Rauschning's work remains one of the most important studies of the genesis and program of National Socialism. It establishes clearly the metapolitical base of modern totalitarianism, and however insightful and clever, however sophisticated and complex Nolte's work is, it cannot bear comparison to Rauschning's in terms of profundity.

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