

Critique

Professor Forbes' article represents a timely and important contribution. It should, if need be, serve as a means of raising the readers' historical consciousnesses during a period in which dramatic changes in U.S. economic and social policies are under way, in a time when unabashed power politics seem to be imposed on half the globe by the ruling classes of both great imperial powers.

Theories on the nature of fascism have been in existence for over sixty years and vary according to the respective author's ideology and interest. This is due in part to the invariably rather mushy ideology of the different brands of fascism with which the human race has so far been afflicted. European democratic socialists were first in publishing critical works on fascism, and among them Italians such as Giovanni Zibordi and Torquato Nanni made the most noteworthy contributions.¹ They defined in the early 1920s the essentials of fascism as a union of capitalists, the big landholding class and forms of exalted patriotism. Communist theoreticians suffered in their analyses from their rigid doctrine and forced righteousness after having hoped to carry the rest of Europe once the triumph of the *bolsheviki* had been achieved in Russia. Early pro-fascist theoreticians were again Italians, especially Luigi Salvatorelli, with Giovanni Gentile, a former liberal and a man of remarkable intellect, and Alfredo Rocco, whose "Political Doctrine of Fascism," a speech given on August 30, 1925, became something like the official dogma in fascist circles. What his doctrine amounts to is nothing more than a political theory of hyper-nationalism.² The German Social Democrat Herman Heller wrote one of the best analyses in *Europa und der Faschismus*, 1925, four years before the publication of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (*My Battle*) and the installation of Nazi power in his country. He sees fascism as a system of dictatorship without a system of beliefs, without a value system except the drive to power and violence sanctioned by the state. Heller analyzes fascism as totally cynical, propagating a type of irrational voluntarism that is used to justify the immorality of a caste of masters and a mass of servants and slaves. The Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch stresses in his transpolitical interpretation of fascism age-old, atavistic, savior-hungry yearnings in the Europe of his time.³

Forbes tries to show the existence of fascism on the American continent both in the past and at present. He is certainly correct in what he believes are fascist elements in imperial Western history. The brutalizing influence of a frontier or colonialist mentality by the dominant groups is also definitely worth mentioning. The scope of his work—it reaches back to pre-Christian times—is admirable and his allusion to the Messianic strand one of his most interesting finds. But in using “fascism” he is using a term that is historically and ideologically more than “loaded,” and even after his excellent list of “key” and “secondary characteristics” one hesitates to agree in all the instances he is giving us. The term tends to become too vague, too general to be precise and applicable. Characterizing the New England of the 1600s or the Spain of Philip II as periods of fascism may be, despite their repressive, genocidal or imperialistic aspects, too drastic a reduction and may amount to an ahistoric simplification of highly complex matters. The reader runs the risk of being confused by a host of qualifiers such as “nearly fascist,” “proto-fascist,” and “truly fascist.” In many examples the terminology traditionally found like “imperialism” or “colonialism” would probably be at least as useful and easier to define. Forbes, who is not giving us his bibliographical sources, sees evidently fascism as did the American Robert A. Brady and the German Max Horkheimer as an essential, conscious form of capitalism.⁴ One might, for solid reasons, argue the same for Stalinism.

Most of North American history is, alas, not part of God’s gift to humanity and appears to be based less on the benign aspects of Christianity but rather on its least savory traditions, on an extension of European imperialism, on greed. Most Founding Fathers were, sadly enough, slave holders. For Thomas Jefferson, who is a good case in point since he represents the typical child of his age as well as a member of the power elite of his country, economic advantages (i.e., chattel slavery) possessed absolute priority over ideals and morals qualms.⁵

History has, as a rule, been written by the victors. Forbes’ essay touches on that very important aspect of perspective and partiality in historiography. We should bear in mind that no such thing as an objective or neutral writing of history exists. The mere selection of facts, let alone their presentation, already means interpretation. Referring to the

dominant layers of society in the respective continents, James Baldwin said:

History in Europe is now meant as an enormous cloak to cover past crimes and errors and present anger and despair . . . And . . . Americans are even more abject than Europeans. [American history] was poisoned from the beginning, and no one has been able to admit it.⁶

The real rub lies in economic dominance, in self-interest and the denial of power sharing. American historians like Charles Austin Beard realized this as early as 1913.⁷ Most of the rhetoric rests in the history of culture clash in the Americas.

In dealing with Spanish expansionism, Forbes follows the centuries old historiographic tradition of the “leyenda negra.” However, the Catholic Church granted a soul to African slaves—in part as a result of the efforts of Bartolomé de Las Casas—a fact which was hard for the Protestants to concede in the British colonies and the later United States of America.⁸ The “peculiar institution” with its establishment of chattel slavery on the soil of the U.S. remains unique in world history. One should also mention that the Aztecs, like many other powerful Indian tribes, were themselves an imperialistic nation, whose tributary or enslaved tribes enabled, along with many other factors, Hernán Cortéz to conquer what became New Spain.

Forbes refers to a highly relevant issue (and in sufficiently flexible terms to avoid the danger of over-simplification) when he states that fascist elements can merge into a repressive “cultural system” which does not necessarily have to show menacing aspects as long as the group in power does not feel challenged. The existence of “daily fascism” (which implies in more or less overt forms socio-economic and psychological oppression, institutionalized racism, stereotyping, deliberate falsification of history, and a negation of “unsanctioned” cultural values) in virtually every Western society has to be acknowledged and deserves close observation.

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NOTES

¹Giovanni Zibordi, "Critica socialista del fascismo," in R. Mondolfo, ed., *Il fascismo e i partiti politici* (1922). Torguato Nanni, *Bolscevismo e fascismo al luce della critica marxista, Benito Mussolini* (1925).

²Luigi Salvatorelli, *Nazionalfascismo* (1923). Alfredo Rosso, "La dottrina politica des fascismo" (August 30, 1925). Giovanni Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo* (1929).

³Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935, 1962). For a theory of Germanic racism see Alfred Rosenberg, *Das Wesenhafte des Nationalsozialismus* (1932) and the British fascist Oswald Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (1936). From the enormously large literature on Spanish fascism the following have become classics: Generalissimo Franco, *Palabras del Caudillo, 19 de abril 1937—19 abril 1938* (1938); Bravo Martínez, *Historia de la Flange Espanola y de las JONS* (1943); Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Spanish Civil War* (1943, 1962); Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Spanish Fascism* (1961); and Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War* (1965).

⁴Robert A. Brady, *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* (1937), and Max Horkheimer, *Die Juden und Europa* (1939). See also Talcott Parsons, "Some Sociological Aspects of the Fascist Movement," *Social Forces*, 21 (1942) 138-147, and Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (1955) American edition as *Imperialism* (1968), especially parts One and Two.

⁵Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) reprinted in M.D. Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson* (1975). Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters . . .* (1959). Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (1948). Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (1969). David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (1975). One of the best books on ideology, economics, and race issues in the early history of the key state Virginia is Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975).

⁶"James Baldwin: An Interview by Wolfgang Binder," in Press, *Revista/Review Interamericana* (1981-82).

⁷Charles Austin Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (1913).

⁸Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias occidentales* (1552). Lewis Hanke, *Bartolomé de las Casas: An Interpretation of His Life and Writings* (1951). One of the most important Spanish historians of our century, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, published at the ripe age of ninety-three a vicious attack on Las Casas and on what he sees as a tradition of conscious slandering of Spanish honor in the “leyenda negra” with *Bartolomé de Las Casas: Su Doble Personalidad* (1963).

Critique

To quote the cartoon character Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” The key strength in Forbes’ analysis of fascism is his wide-ranging historical sweep and the way he shows that many elements in American character, such as prejudice against immigrants and eagerness for the spread of American ideas overseas, are related to fascistic tendencies throughout American history.

Forbes reinterprets some of the important events and social movements in western history and shows how the tendencies buried in many cultural systems lead to fascist states when the conditions are right. He argues that we cannot dismiss fascism as a momentary aberration of a few fanatic states but must consider how we and our current politico-economic systems are all involved in fascist behaviors. The high points of Forbes’ discussion include his comments on “Jeffersonian democracy,” the Confederate States of America, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In each case, he shows how the high-blown rhetoric of their proponents, who, following the model of Jeffersonian democracy, promised liberty and equality for everyone but masked the repression and terror visited on subordinate groups, such as slaves.

Even though his discussion is exciting, the broad coverage and large number of situations Forbes examines and finds to be fascist or to have “fascist tendencies” lead to two related weaknesses. One is the lack of precision that results from the