

Jonah Goldberg's "Liberal Fascism"

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Jonah Goldberg's "Liberal Fascism" was first published in the United States in 2008, and appeared in paperback in the UK this year. It is a partisan attempt by the author to pin the label "fascist" on his political opponents, but not a serious contribution to the study of history or political thought.

What struck me most strongly about this book was how it illustrates what an amazingly strange and alien place America is as a country and the extraordinary oddness of political discourse there.

Both sides in that nation's "culture wars" are weird in the extreme, and the tortured terminology that Goldberg has to employ (using the word "liberal" in two different senses on almost every page) is just a symptom of that oddness.

Goldberg has regularly seen the political right in America being described as "fascists" by their opponents. As the editor of a right-wing publication, a broad supporter of the Bush-Cheney administration and its wars, and a self-described friend of Dick Cheney, he has decided that he has had enough of this, and that it is time to return the compliment.

The basic idea of the book is that what is known in America as "liberal" or "progressive" thinking overlaps and shares common roots with European fascism. Goldberg is particularly interested in the socialist aspects both of Mussolini's background and of Hitler's National Socialism. He examines expressions of approval (during the 1920s and 1930s) by "progressive" thinkers of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. He dissects certain aspects of the movements of the late 1960s (particularly in the universities, with an emphasis on the events at Cornell) and identifies them as fascist. He considers "identity politics" to be fascist by nature, and "reverse racism" when based on culture or race. He betrays a very strong hatred and contempt for the New Deal and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and also spends a lot of time on Hilary Clinton, for whom he seems to reserve a special contempt.

There are certainly elements of truth in his thesis. That some sections of the movements of the 1960s had a strong element of irrationalism and violent destructiveness is quite clear. The ancestry of those impulses goes back far further than fascism: Norman Cohn's "The Pursuit of the Millennium" is good background here: the parallels between his descriptions of the various popular movements he describes there and

more recent history (including fascism, communism and the 1960s counter-culture) are clear.

He is also right to be very sceptical of the takeover by irrationality of some academic disciplines in the humanities (particularly in the US), in particular "deconstructionism" and "postmodernism" in literary theory.

But Goldberg is always highly selective in his choice of historical material. He has quite a lot to say about the Weathermen, and goes into detail about what he considers was a surrender to irrationality by the faculty at Cornell. But the events of May 1970 at Kent State University (for example) do not get a mention.

Interestingly, in his historical survey, he points to the fascist aspects of the French revolution, but not the fascist nature of Napoleon's Empire. This omission possibly says quite a lot about his underlying attitudes.

I do not know enough about American domestic history to have an opinion on his attacks on Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, but it seems clear to me that the parallels that he tries to make (for example) between FDR's New Deal and Mussolini are less well drawn. FDR saw that state intervention in the economy could help to improve the condition of the country as a whole and raise people who had lost everything out of poverty and misery. That Mussolini and Hitler also believed in state intervention in the economy is beside the point.

The problem is that Goldberg doesn't directly set out his own views in this book. To discover them is a matter of reading between the lines, or by looking up other things that he has written on the Internet. By implication, though, it's fairly clear that he believes in the minimal state (defence and rule of law only) and economic freedom unfettered by regulation of any kind. He points out that in the US large corporations actually lobby for state regulation, knowing that this essentially favours themselves while squeezing out smaller competitors. But at the same time he seems to be against anti-trust laws of any kind, and almost explicitly admits that he would like to return to an age where discrimination in employment on the grounds of race was legal and acceptable.

He is very interested in looking at the historical background where it suits him, but when he looks at the issue of race, it is as if he is completely blind to the prior history of slavery, discrimination, segregation and disenfranchisement. Similarly, when he criticises the movements of the 1960s, he offers no background in terms of what they were reacting against.

He defines the three pillars of "liberalism" as the welfare state, abortion and "identity politics". Again: how weird American political thinking must be if this is really what it's all about.

In his introduction, Goldberg tries to portray popular suspicion of the power of the Israel lobby (though he uses the words "Jewish lobby") as an example of paranoid "populist conspiracy theories". That he can say this with a straight face when we know so much about the stranglehold that "the Lobby" holds over the media and political parties in the United States is an early indication both of the one-sidedness of his arguments and of his political motivations. Similarly, he dismisses out of hand

any theory of the JFK assassination other than the "lone gunman" theory.

America is a country where every school child, every day, has to pledge allegiance to the flag. It is a country where the last president made much of his status as "commander in chief", constantly spoke of "a nation at war" and wore combat gear for public events. It is a country which holds people in secret prisons and tortures them. It is a country that has enacted a sweeping set of laws (the PATRIOT act and its successors) giving the executive extraordinary powers over individuals, particularly in the areas of interception of communications and the indefinite imprisonment without trial of foreign nationals. It is a country where the "military-industrial complex" that Eisenhower warned against constitutes a huge proportion of the nation's economic activity, and whose military spending is roughly half of that for the whole world. But none of these interesting aspects of America or its last administration get a mention in the book, written as it is by an apologist for Bush and the Iraq war.

More seriously, while finding so many alleged parallels between historical fascism and American "progressive" and "liberal" thought, he has nothing to say about the sinister influence of followers of the ideology of Leo Strauss on the Republican Party and particularly on the administrations of Reagan and Bush junior. The Straussian view that it is the duty of the ruler to lie to and deceive the masses; that religion is a useful fiction that provides social cohesion; that the elite should use external threats as a way of uniting the populace: these views are the intellectual background of those who set the agenda for the Bush-Cheney administration's actions – an agenda that was planned well in advance of the election of GW Bush in 2000. As he has nothing to say about this ideology, one can't tell whether he considers it "fascist" or not. Similarly, although he sees signs of a "corporate state" in America, he blames this on excessive regulation and interference in the economy by "liberals". He does not have anything to say about the vast distortion of the US economy caused by government defence contracts in a country that spends roughly as much on "defence" as the rest of the world combined.

There is an interesting book to be written in the field of the history of ideas, tracing how irrationality and hatred can so easily become mixed with good intentions and movements of protest and progress. This book is not it. Goldberg's outlook is blinkered and his intentions are simply to provide propaganda for a deeply unpleasant regime, and make its supporters feel good about the hatred they feel for the other side in America's absurd "culture wars".

References

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