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0521676398 - The Search for Neofascism: The Use and Abuse of Social Science

A. James Gregor

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The Search for Neofascism

The Use and Abuse of Social Science

The Search for Neofascism is a study of the informal logic that has governed the half-century of academic writing devoted to what has been generally identified as “neofascism,” together with a careful assessment of those political movements and regimes considered the proper objects of inquiry. The intent of the study is both pedagogical and cautionary. The central thesis of the work is that terms like “fascism,” “generic fascism,” and “neofascism” are often used with considerable indifference, applied uniquely to political movements and regimes considered on the “right” rather than the “left,” intended more often to denigrate rather than inform. The result has been confusion. Within that context some of the most important political movements of our time are considered, including the Alleanza nazionale of Italy and the Bharatiya Janata Party of India, both of which have discharged leadership roles in their respective governments. Identifying either as “neofascism” has clear implications for international relations.

A. James Gregor is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of twenty-four books, including, most recently, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought*, *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century*, and *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China's Long Revolution*. A previous Guggenheim Fellow, he has been awarded a Knighthood in the Order of Merit by the Italian government for his publications on the history of modern Italy.

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This book is dedicated to Aage Pedersen, friend of my youth, a casualty in the invasion of Normandy, who still lives in my heart.

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Preface

Throughout the last decade of the twentieth century and into the first years of the twenty-first, a curious disposition manifested itself – particularly among Anglophone thinkers. They have attempted to address the issues of political violence, racial hatred, hostility to immigrants, the invocation of “Nazi-Maoist” strategies, mayhem at soccer games, and stupidities of sundry sorts – by conceiving them all as expressions of “neofascism.” Instances of “conservative,” “neoconservative,” “right-wing,” and “radical right-wing” political behavior were all equally imagined to be similarly neofascistic. What makes that exceedingly odd is the realization that it is very unlikely that all of it might plausibly be associated with historic Fascism. It would seem that we might expect better of serious scholarship.

Somehow or other, several lifetimes after Mussolini’s Fascism disappeared into history, its specter still troubles the research of some of our most industrious social scientists. They seem to find evidence of Fascism everywhere. Some find Fascism in the neofascism of the French “New Right.” Some find it in the American “Radical Right,” Reagan Republicans, and militia irregulars. Some find it in the neofascism of the “Stalinofascists” of Eastern Europe. Others seem to trace Fascism, as neofascism, to the “pathologically contorted idealism of religious fundamentalism.”

Other than all that, we are told that contemporary Fascism, as neofascism, is to be found in the guise of racism, sexism, sadomasochism, terrorism, and anti-Semitism, as well as among aficionados of heavy metal bands and “proletarian rock.” Wherever we find them, neofascists, we are told, entertain only two “absolute values”: violence and war. But for those two absolutes, neofascists, heirs of Fascism, entertain no discernible ideological convictions. We are told that neofascism is “inherently protean,” empty of content, always decked in “new guises.” It entertains no coherent thought.

It is a prevailing belief among many academicians that no coherent thought is possible among neofascists, because only the political left and traditional liberals really concern themselves with matters ideological. We

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are informed that the political right (the genus, apparently, of which neofascism is a species) finds lucubration tedious. That is the case, we are told, because neofascism, like Fascism before it, is driven, almost exclusively, by hatred, fantasy, and occult impulse, to the exclusion of thought.

In fact, the study of neofascism, as it is presently conducted, leaves us with a ragbag of disappointments, fragments of analyses, and vague allusions to “radicalism” and “racism” as defining properties of a “right-wing extremism” that presumably provides the substance of inquiry – that frequently, and effortlessly, slips into talk of Nazism and the mass murder of innocents. All of this seems singularly unsatisfying.

The contemporary discussion of “neofascism” remains in that parlous state, providing scant satisfaction to those seeking credible information about a subject that would appear to have some immediate significance. To date, “neofascism studies” encompasses so wide a variety of topics that it is difficult, at best, to characterize its range or reference.

The work before you cannot pretend to resolve all the problems that attend so loosely jointed a study. It cannot pretend to advance a formal definition of the presumed subject matter. Neither Mussolini’s Fascism nor its putative modern heirs lend themselves to such characterization.

I am convinced that to attempt formal definitions in the informal disciplines of social science and history more often than not hinders rather than furthers inquiry. Discursive disciplines do not lend themselves to the rigors of more formal inquiry. To pretend otherwise is to deceive. So we are left with informal accounts, lacking rigor, that at best are calculated to persuade – much like the judgments tendered in civil courts that turn on the preponderance of evidence, rather than those verdicts of the criminal courts that require proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Whatever its shortcomings, this work is offered with pedagogical intent. If nothing else, it may illustrate the limitations of current efforts to discuss “neofascism” as an academic subject. In my judgment, the greater part of the contemporary work devoted to neofascism leaves a great deal to be desired. My hope is that the ensuing pages offer something that, in some fashion or other, assuages at least some of those desires.

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Acknowledgments

One of the more pleasant tasks an author traditionally undertakes in the opening pages of his work is to acknowledge his debt to those who have assisted him in his task. It is a responsibility I undertake with considerable pleasure. So many persons have given of their time and their patience that I wish this book better reflected their efforts.

I would like to thank publicly the late Giorgio Almirante, leader of the neofascist *Movimento sociale italiano*, for taking the time, so many years ago, to explain to me patiently what he thought an Italian “postfascism” might be. To Oswald Mosley and A. Raven Thomson, of British Union, I owe some precious insights into what a neofascism could not be. And there were so many others, in the United States and Europe, who must remain nameless, who by speech and behavior revealed to me the tragic and dangerous lunacy of what they imagined “neofascism” might be in an advanced industrial environment. Most had learned the “neofascism” they professed from late-night television – much the same “neofascism” one can still find in some of the contemporary tracts pretending to deal with the subject.

Then there are the academicians who proved so helpful. Among them, I am particularly grateful to Professor Alessandro Campi, Professor Hervé Cavallera, and Dr. Danilo Breschi, who know so much of historic Fascism and of the remnants of Fascism that survived the Second World War. I am indebted to Professor Peter Sperlich for illuminating much of the politics of Marxism-Leninism for me, and to Dr. Chang King-yuh for insights into the history of the Kuomintang and the ideology of Maoism and post-Maoism. To students and professors at Hebrew University with whom I discussed Islamic fundamentalism, and to my black students who indulged me in exchanges concerning black nationalism, I wish to extend my sincere gratitude. Unhappily, despite all the efforts of these good people, the book before you is what it is.

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Acknowledgments

Finally, without the painful pleasure of the absence of my wife, Maria Hsia Chang, and Gabriel, Christopher, and Charles, together with the rest of the brood, this book would never have been written. I owe all kinds of good things to them all.

Berkeley, California
Spring 2005