

BOOKS

[*Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning*, Jonah Goldberg, Doubleday, 496 pages]

Goldberg's Trivial Pursuit

By Austin W. Bramwell

NOT WITHOUT REASON was Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism* widely expected to be a bad book. As many predicted from the title, Goldberg does not content himself with rebuking those who call anyone who disagrees with them a fascist. Instead, he invents reasons of his own for calling anyone who disagrees with Jonah Goldberg a fascist. *Liberal Fascism* confirms anew George Orwell's remark—cited by Goldberg without irony—that fascism has no meaning today other than “something not desirable.”

Expecting an unkind reception, Goldberg has packed his book with caveats. “I do not believe liberals are evil, villainous or bigoted,” he writes. “I have not written a book about how all liberals are Nazis or fascists. ... Liberals today are not responsible for what their forefathers believed.” Nevertheless, liberals must “account” for their history and “live in a house of distinctly fascist architecture.” Liberal economics are a “fascist bargain” and Hillary Clinton's *It takes a Village* explicates “the liberal fascist agenda.” Liberals have “totalitarian temptations residing in their hearts.” Patient exegetes can determine for themselves which claims Goldberg is actually making and which he means to take back.

In the meantime, one can make out three reasons for calling liberals the true fascists. First, Goldberg points out that liberalism and fascism have many

elements in common. Both fascists and liberals favor a minimum wage, an expansive social safety net, heavy regulation of industry, and redistributive taxation, but stop short of advocating the abolition of private property. Both scorn constitutional limits on government, indulge in economic populism, and see the working classes as their natural constituencies. Both distrust bourgeois values and traditional religion. On these points and others, Goldberg observes, not only do liberalism and fascism agree, but they reject the ideology of the American conservative movement.

That liberalism and fascism happen to overlap is not surprising. One can find just as many similarities between fascism and movement conservatism: both assail communism, exaggerate security threats, rationalize wars of aggression, and uphold nationalism (what sentimentalists call patriotism) and its symbols (flags, founding myths, worship of national heroes). Nothing in logic compels the ideas of liberalism, fascism, or movement conservatism to cohere into a system. On the contrary, creative theorists can mix sundry political ideas as freely as the ingredients of a cocktail. Given the vast range of questions to which competing ideologies purport to provide answers, the real surprise would be if any two ideologies had nothing in common at all.

Goldberg nonetheless sees ideologies as discrete wholes. He makes much of his discovery, for example, that the Nazis supported organic farming and animal rights and even goes so far as to admonish us to “grapple with the fact that we've seen this sort of thing before.” Readers can spare themselves the energy. That Nazism and contemporary liberalism both promote healthy living is as meaningless a finding as that bloody marys and martinis may both be made with gin. Repeatedly, Goldberg fails to recognize a *reductio ad absurdum*. He tells us that Himmler bemoaned the Christian persecution of witches, just like Wiccan feminists do today, that Hitler once described his doctrine as “reality-based,” just like today's progressives

describe theirs, and that Mussolini was quite smart “by the standards of liberal intellectuals today.” In no case does Goldberg uncover anything more ominous than a coincidence.

Often the parallels between liberalism and fascism prove only that they use the rhetorical strategies available to them. John F. Kennedy's successors did not need obscure socialist theorists to tell them about the power of myth to unite their followers. The concept of a “third way” recurs in any ideology that claims to combine the best of various alternatives. Conspiracy theories run amok not just among Nazis and anti-Bush leftists but across the political spectrum, doubtless because they have more cognitive appeal than the counterintuitive models needed to understand how the modern world actually works. Goldberg's own tendency to blame the world's ills on a handful of evil philosophers from Rousseau to Heidegger is itself a kind of conspiracy theory. That does not make Goldberg an unwitting Nazi.

In elaborating liberalism's similarities to fascism, Goldberg shows a near superstitious belief in the power of taxonomy. He devotes a whole chapter to proving that Nazism was left-wing. Hitler was a revolutionary, Hitler was anti-business, Hitler was a socialist: therefore Hitler was a leftist. Very well, but clearly one can also place Hitler on the Right. An ideology does not come under some kind of curse just because it is put in the same category as Hitler's. Nor by lumping Hitler in with one's political opponents can one somehow burden them with his crimes. Other than scandalizing one's enemies, little is accomplished by applying the categories “Right” and “Left” to Hitlerism.

Goldberg's second argument for “liberal fascism,” presented as the official thesis of the book, is that liberalism and fascism share the same intellectual heritage. Like others who look to intellectual history for insight, Goldberg resorts to genealogical metaphor: liberalism is the “daughter” of progressivism, which is the “sister movement of fascism.” Thus liberalism today has

an “embarrassing family resemblance” to fascism. But ideas do not simply beget other ideas; still less do they pass on genetic defects. These metaphors obscure the lack of any actual causal link between succeeding ideas.

Progressivism, for example, did not in any meaningful sense lead to liberalism. On the contrary, in 1922, Walter Lippmann, the leading liberal intellectual of the 1920s, wrote *Public Opinion*, one of the most trenchant critiques of populism and democracy (and, with it, progressivism) ever penned. Lippmann went on to become Mussolini’s most unsparing American critic, precisely because Lippmann saw in fascism the same dangers that he saw in progressivism. If we must describe intellectual history in biological terms, then it would be more accurate to say that liberalism drove progressivism into extinction than that progressivism gave birth to liberalism.

Even if an American species of fascism (i.e., progressivism) did lead to liberalism, as opposed to merely preceding it in time, this still would not mean that liberalism leads to fascism. For one thing, liberals are entitled at least once a century to change their minds. Even if some who we might call liberals once delighted in Woodrow Wilson’s suppression of dissent, fretted over the pollution of America’s genetic stock, or urged Franklin Roosevelt to assume dictatorial powers, today’s liberals may disown these ideas if they like. Associating modern liberals with the dubious judgments of their predecessors is an *ad hominem* argument, and not even a very beguiling one.

Indeed, liberals plainly have changed their minds when it comes to nearly every damning quotation that Goldberg unearths. This goes not just for the white supremacy of Wilson or the eugenics of Margaret Sanger but for liberals’ preferred political theories as well. For example, borrowing heavily from the enthusiasts at the Claremont Institute, Goldberg thinks it significant that progressive intellectuals scorned individual rights and the Declaration of

Independence. Well, liberals these days do not. Goldberg cannot force liberals to stop championing the Declaration right now just so his attacks on liberalism can be vindicated.

At times, Goldberg seems prepared to concede the unimportance of intellectual history. “One objection to all this might be: So what?” he writes. Instead of answering his own question, he moves on to his third, most ambitious reason for calling liberals fascist: namely, that liberalism and fascism share the same inherent tendencies. Whatever the differences between liberalism and fascism, however much liberals are not actually evil, they both seek the same dolorous ends.

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Now, it is unclear how exactly liberalism and fascism share a tendency—which Goldberg portentously dubs the “totalitarian temptation”—that, say, Goldberg’s own movement conservatism does not. Still less is it clear how this tendency actually works. It may suit the purposes of ideologues—who need to manufacture bogeymen to keep their followers entertained—to see ideologies as organisms with inherent tendencies to develop in certain ways. Goldberg, by contrast, has spent some time learning the unpredictable history of 20th-century ideologies. Yet he accuses liberals of harboring a hidden, unacknowledged agenda, even as he flies into a state of high dudgeon when they accuse him of the same thing.

The idea that liberals suffer from a “totalitarian temptation” is in any case without merit. To begin with, far from discerning liberalism’s *telos*, Goldberg does not even describe it correctly. At one point, he writes that liberals cavalierly “dismiss abstract arguments involving universal moral principles.” On the contrary, with the exception of a

few eccentrics such as Richard Rorty, liberals do not hesitate to argue from abstract, universal moral principles such as human rights or equality. Celebrity intellectuals such as Martha Nussbaum even invoke Aristotle to prove that liberalism is everywhere and at all times morally correct. Whatever the errors of liberalism, a failure to appreciate abstract moral obligations is surely not among them.

Goldberg falsely saddles liberalism not just with relativism but with all manner of alleged errors having nothing to do with liberalism. At one point, he exhumes the likes of Derrida and Foucault in order to pummel them once more for introducing postmodernism,

deconstruction, and other continental horrors into the world. What this tiresome routine has to do with liberalism escapes the reader. From the outset, liberals opposed these fads as fiercely as conservatives. Just ask Ronald Dworkin or Brian Leiter. Goldberg, like many movement conservatives, grossly overestimates the influence of postmodernism, doubtless because avowed nihilists make such good straw men (if not good theater, as Derrida and Foucault well knew).

Not only does Goldberg misunderstand liberalism, but he refuses to see it simply as liberalism. Goldberg’s liberals do not just favor a larger role for government, but worship a Hegelian God-State; they do not just welcome the putative moral advances of the 1960s, but are fascinated by apocalyptic violence; they do not just engage in identity politics, but are ushering in “a Nietzschean world where power decides important questions rather than reason”; they do not just hope to curtail tobacco use and fast foods, but are trying to create a *Brave New World*.

Mere disagreement hypertrophies into a cosmic battle that must decide the fate of the universe.

For all his striving for theoretical sophistication, Goldberg manages to come off as something of a philistine. He treats the great philosophers less as thinkers than as figurines to be arranged on a chessboard, each capable of one or two moves. Thus Herder stands for nationalism, Hegel for the divination of the State, William James for the denial of truth, John Dewey for social engineering, Nietzsche for nihilism, and so forth. (Oddly, Goldberg reserves his most curt disdain for those theorists, such as Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt, who faced the truth the most fearlessly.) These names do not lend *Liberal Fascism* gravitas so as much outweigh it with an importance it cannot bear.

To be fair, Goldberg did not come up with his ideas about liberalism on his own. He is a quintessential second-generation conservative, a man who grew up in the movement and chose to make his career within it. Nearly all the authors in the movement's recommended reading list—Richard Weaver, Eric Voegelin, Robert Nisbett, Allan Bloom—appear in *Liberal Fascism*'s footnotes. Not surprisingly, the silliest and most extravagant arguments in his book are also the most conventional, at least to anyone familiar with the ideology of movement conservatism.

Indeed, *Liberal Fascism* reads less like an extended argument than as a catalogue of conservative intellectual clichés, often irrelevant to the supposed point of the book. Here you will read that Rousseau conjured all the evils of the modern world, that the influence of the Frankfurt School is destroying traditional values, that closet Nietzscheans are spreading the disease of moral relativism, and that Deweyan faith in “planners” is corroding our liberties. Intelligent liberals will not cry foul at *Liberal Fascism* so much as groan. They were not fixed in these formulated phrases before and they will not be so fixed now.

Goldberg does at times display a blush of shame. He qualifies his conclu-

sions to the point of taking them all back, insisting that he does not actually mean to say that liberals are dangerous totalitarians. He grants that some of his points are trivial and others may appear outrageous, so that nothing he says should be taken as both true and interesting at the same time. He claims that movement conservatives also suffer from the totalitarian temptation, so that we are “all” fascists now. Why then link liberalism in particular with fascism? Here Goldberg is surprisingly candid: because, he argues, liberals do it to conservatives all the time.

He's right, of course. Many liberals do impute nefarious designs to conservatives. With just a modicum of restraint, Goldberg could have written a very good book. “Look,” he could have said, “Fascism’ has no meaning today, but, in any case, not only does conservatism owe nothing to fascism, but, historically, conservatives in America generally opposed fascism while liberals and leftists often were sympathetic.” Instead, lacking even the excuse of ignorance, he chose to sling the term “fascism” around as casually as the most vulgar leftist. It does not speak well of Goldberg that, by his own admission, he wrote his first book not to enlighten but to exact revenge.

Liberal Fascism completes Goldberg's transformation from chipper humorist into humorless ideologue. Perhaps it was hubris that made him do it. The last important book by a conservative was Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* in 1987, whose ideas had been in circulation for many years before. Goldberg may have convinced himself that by penning yet another disquisition into the “true nature of liberalism,” he could become the first movement conservative in a generation to write something lasting. In the end, he succeeded only in recycling 60 years worth of conservative movement bromides. ■

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[*The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, A.J. Jacobs, Simon & Schuster, 400 pages]

Living Literally

By Peter Suderman

A.J. JACOBS HAS A PROBLEM with seriousness. No matter what his topic, he's compulsively glib. It's like a tic, a joker's Tourette's. Try as he might, he just can't help it.

In his latest book, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, the paragraphs prance nicely along in prose as clean and efficient as a Crate & Barrel showroom, and nearly all finish with a droll remark, a pop-culture allusion, a snarky (though rarely cruel) observation.

For Jacobs, an editor at *Esquire* and a former TV critic for *Entertainment Weekly*, the world—or at least his minor misadventures within it—is nothing if not amusing. Sometimes he tries to hold it in, but even when resisting he can't help but tack on a nudge and a wink. After taking a road trip with his wife, he writes, “I'm proud to say I had absolutely no urge to make a double entendre when we passed Intercourse, Pennsylvania, which I see as a moral victory.” He might have avoided making a crude remark at the time, but in retrospect he couldn't let the moment go by without some attempt to exploit its comic potential.

The book opens with Jacobs describing the attention he received for the long, unkempt beard he grew while writing the book. “Strangers have come up to me and petted my beard, like it's a Labrador Retriever puppy or a pregnant woman's stomach,” he writes. Before the first page is finished, he's referenced ZZ Top, Steven Seagal, and Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings*, which is about as high-brow as the book ever gets.