

Liberal Fascism: the Secret History of the Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning

Review Number:

783

Publish date:

Friday, 31 July, 2009

Author:

Jonah Goldberg

ISBN:

9780141039503

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£10.99

Pages:

496pp.

Publisher:

Penguin

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Keith Flett

Goldberg's book is a publishing phenomena not only featuring at the top of the New York Times bestseller lists as a hardback but also, as Goldberg himself has noted in the blog he runs about the book, going into a third printing in the UK. That is enough to make many historians, used to important articles and books receiving scant if any attention from a wider public, rather envious. It is best then to point out straight away that Mr Goldberg is not a professional historian, and neither, despite the presence of some scholarly apparatus in the sense of endnotes, is his book a work of academic history. Rather Mr Goldberg is a US right of centre political commentator – who has also written for The Times in the UK – a controversialist and, as befits the modern age, a blogger.

So while many academics may well stick to the prudent technique of rather understating findings and avoiding inferences to what cannot strictly be held up by empirical evidence, Mr Goldberg uses the opposite method of rather exaggerating the points he has to make. I say this because Mr Goldberg does have some useful historical points to make in the book but they are probably not the ones that scream at us when we see the title 'Liberal Fascism'.

The book is above all a media event. It has been widely reviewed in the US and in the UK – itself quite unusual these days for any book dealing with an historical topic – and then there is the aforementioned blog of the book, where Goldberg chronicles events related to it. Goldberg has a specific method which nods both to the prudent caution of the academic historian but also utilises the tools of the blogger in making statements designed to provoke a reaction.

For example he is quite careful in a number of passages in the book to point out that he is not being cavalier about calling people fascists, or about extrapolating from an individual view or act to a suggestion of a fascist worldview. He argues on page 393 for example that he has repeatedly made it clear that ‘modern day liberals are not cartoonish Nazi villains’. Since one of the points that he makes quite effectively is that many on the left at certain periods have had a tendency to label anything on the right that they did not like ‘fascist’, as opposed to simply right-wing, bigoted, reactionary, or just conservative, it is a point well made. However he rather spoils that caution by producing a rather thin chapter titled ‘Hitler, man of the left’ where he does in reverse exactly what he accuses the left of.

Perhaps curiously for a man of the right Goldberg’s polemical technique tends towards what is sometimes known as the ‘Stalinist amalgam’. That is to say that if A is somehow associated with B and B, whether known to A or not is associated with C then A and C must be closely linked. This is a knockabout style of argument that has little room for the nuance that is or should be the hallmark of much of the best history.

Goldberg starts the book by reviewing definitions of fascism. He runs through a good number although ignores what I would see as being the most relevant – that of Trotsky, whose work on the united front to fight German fascism has remained required reading for those opposing the modern day far right although of course he was quite unable to achieve it in Germany in the 1930s.

Goldberg’s conclusion is that academics have disagreed about what fascism is, that there is no common standard and hence to use the label ‘fascist’ particularly from the left is to engage not in serious analysis but in abuse.

No doubt there is usage of this kind but Goldberg is missing the point and one suspects that he knows he is. Fascism is a confused set of ideas with little coherence and that is deliberate. The rag bag of beliefs can be used to justify different things at different times although it usually comes down to the same thing in the end.

For this reviewer fascism is summed up by the famous photomontage of the German anti-fascist John Heartfield – again unmentioned by Goldberg, which takes as its text Hitler’s words ‘millions stand behind me’. But the graphic that Heartfield uses to illustrate the words of the Nazi leader shows him as a small figure overshadowed by a huge businessman who is handing him a wad of notes. The millions behind fascism are not the working class masses but the finances of the capitalists looking for a temporary and extreme way of subduing or smashing the working class movement at a time of severe economic crisis. That is indeed exactly what fascism in power in Italy, Germany, Spain and Chile did. Many leftists and trade unionists – and lots of others who did not ‘fit’ were imprisoned and murdered.

It follows as Goldberg notes with some surprise that fascism is not always anti-semitic. This will not come as a revelation to academics interested in the question but Goldberg apparently did not know that Mussolini was not particularly anti-Jewish until Hitler forced him to be. Goldberg spends some time labouring this point.

As much to the point (because Goldberg denies that fascism has any specific meaning) is his failure to focus on the history of US fascism around the Ku Klux Klan or to grapple at all with the holocaust. Of course it is possible to find atrocities where many ended up dead whether one looks historically at the record of some colonial regimes, the Russian Gulag or Year Zero in Cambodia or at more contemporary examples. However the industrial scale of murder in the concentration camps remains, fortunately, unique. The fact that Goldberg does not take this issue as seriously as it merits has received a serious rebuke from the New York

Times reviewer.[\(1\)](#)

Because Goldberg does not find a core to what fascism is this allows him, again in a mirror of what he claims the left does, to argue that some authoritarian regimes are in fact in some way fascist. The example he returns to in the book is Woodrow Wilson's administration in the United States during the First World War which he argues cracked down on civil liberties and centralised control. No doubt he has a point but in fact Wilson's Presidency ended by entirely democratic means in 1921 and that suggests that whatever the exigencies of a wartime economy it was not fascist.

When it comes to his treatment of fascism then Goldberg is sloppy in definition and risks giving offence – probably not a huge concern to a professional controversialist – by rather downplaying or ignoring the realities of genuine fascism. When it comes to the modern era his arguments about right and left in US politics may have more cogency and as a book of contemporary political history rather than any kind of history of fascism Goldberg works better. It is arguably a peculiarly American argument since even if one believes that the policies of New Labour and the Conservatives in the UK are quite similar it is difficult to sustain an argument that they are not rather different kinds of parties at root when it comes to finance, membership and to some extent ideas.

In the US both the Republican and Democratic parties are parties of business interests above all. The former is seen as more right-wing and the latter as more left-wing but this is within quite a narrow spectrum of ideas.

Goldberg argues that John F. Kennedy was not really the hero of the left that he might be held up to be, although whether the left might hold up as a hero the man who got the US into the Vietnam War on a significant basis and almost destroyed the world with the Cuban missile crisis Goldberg doesn't say. Here is not the place to rehearse the many theories about who shot Kennedy and why but Goldberg sees JFK as standing in a line of Democratic leaders through to Hilary Clinton – who he agrees is not a fascist – whose ideas are not as left-wing as some might suppose and sometimes more right-wing than enlightened Republicans. However to suggest, as Goldberg does (p. 205), that Kennedy was in the mould of Mussolini is not really a serious argument. I think many British readers might say 'so what?' at this stage, and that underlines the US focus of Goldberg's arguments. Even so Goldberg's point that perhaps that we should look more at what politicians actually do in practice rather than what they claim they will do or argue they support is a reasonable argument.

He does however range rather more widely than official US politics in the sense that he touches on the question of 'political correctness' and various lifestyle choices sometimes associated with the left that may mirror some of those on the right. Goldberg argues that the new left of the 1960s had authoritarian and right-wing tendencies perhaps primarily because 'free speech' was occasionally denied to those who otherwise made a career out of effectively denying it to others. Equally Goldberg has noticed that some on the left and some fascists are vegetarians although this perhaps does not tell a great deal either. Indeed Goldberg manages to thoroughly confuse himself in this area. He argues for example that not all environmentalists have political positions that place them on the political left. I would certainly agree. But should not a conservative like Goldberg be welcoming the fact that he has some political allies here rather than suggesting that they are either socialists or fascists.

As might be expected from a controversialist Goldberg's book has attracted a range of reviews and these are interesting in themselves. Stuart Jefferies in *The Guardian* [\(2\)](#) slams Goldberg for a lack of seriousness and rigour in his desire to argue that there is a liberal fascism. Nick Cohen in *The Observer* [\(3\)](#) perhaps unsurprisingly was more sympathetic to Goldberg's arguments agreeing that at times the left was similar to fascism. He notes for example the occasions when German Communists joined German Nazis to beat up social democrats – Goldberg doesn't refer to this. However it must be said that this policy was both short lived and regarded as entirely lunatic by much of the left so it is difficult to sustain it as a fixed left-wing position.

However even Cohen does go on to argue, correctly in my view, that Goldberg overstates his case, for

reasons I explain above, and is moved to a rare defence of the left in conclusion. As Goldberg notes on his Liberal Fascism blog (4) he has repaid the compliment by not reading Cohen's recent work.

Writing in the *New Humanist* Stephen Howe (5) enters a plea in defence of liberalism and liberals against Goldberg, and an effective one that the book does not deal with. Howe argues that Goldberg has artificially constructed a view of liberalism that simply means 'a bunch of people I can't stand' but who otherwise do not always have a great deal in common.

Howe also mentions Richard Seymour's recent book *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (6) which focuses on the liberal pro-war 'left' in the UK and US and while he does not approve of Seymour either it might be noted that the existence of people who identify themselves as liberal-left but who supported the war in Iraq and query much in identity politics is a problem for Goldberg's analysis.

Nevertheless Jonah Goldberg's book is an entertaining read, even if it tends towards the intellectually sloppy, and perhaps should not to be taken too seriously. It would for example be to accord the arguments put forward in the book a gravity that they do not deserve to suggest that it is a work of historical revisionism trying to airbrush the dreadful realities of fascism out of history. It is polemic not revisionism. As a sympathetic review in the Daily Telegraph noted it is an 'entertaining political romp'. (7)

Criticising authors for books they did not write is of little value but in this case rather than simply slamming *Liberal Fascism* there is value in arguing that within its pages there is an interesting argument that political labels might not always be the best guide to what actually happens in politics. In an interview about the book Goldberg argued that 'American Conservatism, with its limited ambitions for government, its belief in the imperfectability of mankind, its reverence for tradition and the US constitution and its innate opposition to radicalism are nearly the opposite to fascism'. If we agree that US conservatism is not the same as the neo-liberalism of Bush and Cheney, Goldberg here has a point.

Notes

1. *The New York Times*, 30 Dec 2007. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Guardian*, 14 Feb 2009. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Observer*, 8 February 2009. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Stephen Howe, *Blog Standard* [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London, 2008). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 February 2009. [Back to \(7\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/feb/14/jonah-goldberg-liberal-fascism> [2]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3761>

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