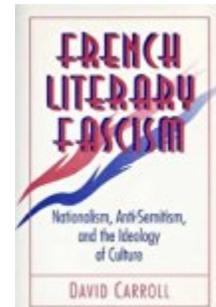


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Carroll. *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. viii + 299 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03723-3.

Reviewed by Harvey G. Simmons (York University)  
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In *French Literary Fascism* David Carroll argues that a number of France's major interwar writers came to fascism through, and not in spite of or apart from, their aesthetics. According to Carroll: "The notion that an 'authentic' artist, writer or critic, in his or her function as artist, writer, connoisseur or critical reader, could not be at the same time a political ideologue, racist or anti-Semite, that art and literature are in themselves opposed to political dogmatism and racial bias and hatred, constitutes nothing less than a mystification of art and literature as well as of the artist and writer" (p. 8).

Carroll devotes separate chapters to major representative figures of French literary fascism: Maurice Barres, Charles Maurras, Robert Brasillach, Drieu la Rochelle, Edouard Drumont, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Lucien Rebatet, and Thierry Maulnier. An afterword is devoted to "Literary Fascism and the Case of Paul de Man." One chapter is devoted to Charles Peguy, who is not generally thought of as a fascist writer, but whose inclusion is strongly argued by Carroll.

The major theme that links each writer is the yearning for a society without conflict, a society characterized by organic unity, or, to use the term most preferred by Carroll, a "total" or "totalized" society. For students of politics who know that fascism spells the end of everything that divides a society—political parties, elections, interest groups, a free press, a written constitution—the interest of Carroll's work lies in his explication of fascism as an aesthetic phenomenon. As Carroll points out, for Robert Brasillach, "it could be argued that the aesthetic experience constituted the most profound level of politics.... The primary aesthetic experience of fascism was the feeling of unity, the feeling of being at one with

one's immediate group, and, by projection, with the entire nation..." (p. 119). For Peguy, "the ultimate purpose of politics was ... claimed to be outside of politics, spiritual and 'creative': the making of an organic 'aesthetic-political work' or the making of an organic people and culture" (p. 61). For Barres, beauty resides in French culture and French national identity, which are determined by nature itself. And so on it goes for each of the authors considered.

Carroll is particularly interested in how each of the authors discussed deals with, or rather deals out, Jews from within the fascist totality. For Barres, who wrote, "there is no French race, but a French people, a French nation" (p. 29), it is French culture that is the aesthetic object and which is threatened by foreign, especially Jewish, cultures. For Barres, "culture replaces nature and serves as the justification for the most violent and radical forms of exclusion" (p. 37). This is exactly the approach taken today by the French National Front. For example, Muslim immigrants are never described as racially inferior; rather the Front emphasizes the incompatibility between the culture, and especially the religion, of North African immigrants and French culture: "Islam, which, unlike the west, doesn't separate the temporal from the spiritual, is not easily compatible with our morals and laws" (*300 Mesures pour la renaissance de la France*, p. 32).

For Drieu la Rochelle, the issue was not to preserve racial purity, a concept Drieu rejected (except when it came to the Jews), but rather to preserve a properly European culture and identity within an "imagined community" of Europe. Carroll's argument that there is no discontinuity between aesthetics and commitment to fascism has serious implications. As Carroll points out,

many critics have tried to rescue the reputations of writers such as Barres, et al., by distinguishing their literary accomplishments, which they value, from their fascism, which they condemn. If Carroll is right, however, the argument has to be stood on its head: the fascism of these authors is permeated with and inextricably linked to their aesthetics. Moreover, Carroll's argument means we cannot dismiss fascists as psychopaths, mad, or power-hungry demagogues; rather we must take them and their ideas as seriously as we take anyone committed to socialism, capitalism, communism, or any of the 'isms' on offer.

On this question, I completely agree with Carroll. Anti-fascists are much too dismissive of fascism, and its current avatar, the extreme right, often interpreting them as epiphenomena of the economy, the class system, the new world order, or whatever. Fascism in all its manifestations is a cruel and inhuman philosophy, but as Carroll's subtle and complex analysis of literary fascists demonstrates, it must be taken seriously.

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