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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder, Maia Asheri. *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. ix + 338 pp. \$33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-04486-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03289-4.

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Zeev Sternhell, a prolific and provocative student of French fascism, has returned to his subject using a somewhat broader canvas. The question Sternhell asks is: where does fascist ideology come from? And his answer is blunt: Marxism. Or, to be more precise, from “a very specific revision of Marxism” (p. 5). This is not quite the same as declaring fascism to be a “variety of Marxism,” as did A. James Gregor (although for many this distinction may appear to be exceedingly fine). Rather more importantly, Sternhell flatly denies the possibility that fascism could be a response to or a consequence of Marxism. Fascism did not begin as a conservative attempt to parry the threat of revolutionary or even reformist socialism. To the contrary, it grew out of that very revolutionary Socialist movement. Sternhell has made this point before, most notably in *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (1986). But it is made with special force in this volume and he now draws upon the Italian experience to reinforce his analysis.

What is the nature of this “revision of Marxism”? By the turn of the century, classic Marxism had run out of steam, its essential claims belied by the social, economic, and political developments of the late nineteenth century. There were three possible responses to this fact. One, beginning with the original “revisionists” like Eduard Bernstein, was to reject the revolutionary possibilities in Marxism and opt for an evolutionary social democratic approach. This position soon prevailed in most of western Europe. In eastern Europe, by contrast, Marxists like V. I. Lenin and Rosa Luxembourg modified Marx without rejecting the classic revolutionary model. Finally, according to Sternhell, there were a number of French and Italian Marxists who clung to their revolutionary zeal, but abandoned the “materialist” baggage of

classical Marxism. “Materialism” in this context means “the rationalistic, individualistic and utilitarian heritage of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (p. 7), as well as the practice of liberal democracy. The great exponent of this anti-materialist revolt was above all Georges Sorel. Much of the book is a study of Sorel, and his French and Italian disciples, most notably Hubert Lagardelle, Edouard Berth, Alceste de Ambris, Sergio Panunzio, Angelo Olivetti, and Filippo Corridono. Together they articulated a revolutionary ideology that substituted myth for reason, the nation for class, and the producer for the proletarian.

Sternhell also argues, in passing, that fascism represents an amalgam of socialism and nationalism, a historic conjuncture that, in France at least, goes back to 1889. This is a more traditional argument, one Sternhell has made more forcefully elsewhere. But if true, there is some tension between that claim and his belief that fascism owes its origins primarily to a crisis in classical Marxism. The evolution of European nationalism in the years after 1870 is surely as important a question and one that cannot be subsumed under the category of Marxist revisionism. Maurice Barres was a Socialist, but no Marxist; indeed, he drifted from socialism to nationalism just as the French Socialist movement began to embrace classical Marxism. Enrico Corradini certainly appropriated certain Socialist themes in his neo-nationalist doctrine, notably the idea of the “proletarian nation.” But he was intensely and explicitly hostile to Marxism and his nationalism was, *pace* Sternhell, explicitly directed against the claims of the working classes. It is almost as if Sternhell would like to have it both ways. Sternhell the *enfant terrible*, forever cocking his snout at his ideologically blinkered, left-wing *bien pensant* colleagues, wants

to stress the left-wing origins of fascism. However, Sternhell the careful scholar, aware that his more outlandish claims tend to run up against inconvenient facts, is quick, when it suits him, to adopt such safe formulae as: “fascism ... was the product of a number of different but convergent elements” (p. 230).

Although Sternhell writes clearly and forcefully, it must be acknowledged that much of this has been said before, notably by Sternhell himself. The periodic flirtations between some French revolutionary syndicalists and the *Action française* were documented in great detail long ago by Paul Mazgaj, *The Action française and Revolutionary Syndicalism* (1979)—a work unaccountably missing from Sternhell’s bibliography. There is not very much on the Italian proto-fascist revolutionary syndicalism that cannot be found in the writings of A. James Gregor, whose general analysis (if not, in fairness, his politics) Sternhell and his collaborators share. Moreover, Sorel, the subject of a host of studies, is hardly an unknown figure. To be sure, Sternhell’s principal audience is French historians of fascism who Sternhell believes, not entirely without reason, to be ignorant of much of the literature on the subject. Sternhell’s impatience with his French colleagues is, of course, now legendary. However, it should be noted that some of his more acid jibes, a prominent feature of the original French version of this book, have been excised from the English translation.

The book’s title is somewhat misleading, since Sternhell is really talking about the birth of *Franco-Italian* fascism rather than fascism in general. He has little to say about German fascism, arguing that, unlike its Mediterranean counterparts, it was founded on biological racism. Perhaps, but one suspects another reason for ignoring Germany. It would be uncommonly difficult to document the revolutionary syndicalist roots of Nazism, because dissident Marxists, so prevalent in Italian and French fascism, are more or less absent from the intellectual precursors of German fascism.

The central problem with Sternhell’s argument is the huge gulf that separates the ideas of those he singles out as the intellectual and cultural precursors of Italian fascism and the praxis of the Fascist regime. Having lovingly detailed the revolutionary credentials of the Fascist intellectuals, Sternhell is forced to admit that by 1920, at the latest, Mussolini had quietly abandoned almost all of this socially radical revolutionary baggage and begun to seek accommodations with the conservative political elite, the army, the agrarians, the monarchy, the church, and the business community. Moreover, that this should

have been the case was the indispensable pre-condition of the Fascists ever attaining power. And, of course, there was little in the social program of Fascist Italy that bore much resemblance to the ideas of the Italian revolutionary syndicalists.

Sternhell is untroubled by any of this because here, as in his previous writings, he contends that what counts in an analysis of fascism is what its proponents say while in opposition rather than what they do once in power. This is not a self-evident proposition, at least not for those historians who do not take Fascist rhetoric at face value and who suspect that the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. Sternhell counters that all political movements, even radical ones, have to make “compromises” (p. 231) once in power. This is true enough, although in the case of Mussolini “wholesale abandonment” might be a better term than “compromise.” Still, Sternhell persists, Soviet Russia departed dramatically from the program of prewar Marxist-Leninists, but historians still persist in taking the doctrine of Lenin, L. D. Trotskii, and G. V. Plekhanov seriously. Perhaps, but there are “compromises” and “compromises.” The Bolsheviks did not attain power through a cabinet shuffle with the overt complicity of Russian conservative forces; they did not accommodate themselves to the demands of the landowners, industrialists, and the church; they did not retain the Tsar. Had they done so, historians would be looking elsewhere for the intellectual roots of Soviet communism.

France poses no such problems because no Fascist movement ever took power there. This suits Sternhell’s purposes, since he likes his Fascists pure and unsullied by the potentially corrupting contact with actual politics. True, in the 1930s, very large political formations like the *Croix de feu* did emerge. Contemporaries thought them to be Fascist; so too do some modern historians (Robert Soucy, *Fascism in France: The Second Wave* [1994], is the best case in point). Sternhell is having none of this; in accord (for once!) with most historians in France, he has always insisted that movements like the *Croix de feu* simply cannot be Fascist because they represent social conservatism. It is axiomatic for him that *true* fascism can have nothing whatsoever in common with conservatism of any stripe, the apparent counter-examples of Italy and Germany notwithstanding. But this is an assertion rather than a demonstration.

Moreover, by clinging to a narrow and arbitrary definition of fascism, he restricts his discussion of fascism in France to small numbers of politically marginal non-conformist intellectuals. To be sure, by so doing he

makes the task of extracting a coherent body of doctrine much easier. But he ends up analyzing a cast of characters who, for the most part, did not count for very much in French politics and who did not frighten many people either. The same could not be said for Mussolini, Hitler or—comes to that—Colonel Francois de La Rocque.

There is much in Sternhell with which one can agree. He is quite right to stress that the intellectual and cultural roots of European fascism are well established before World War I and equally right to identify a pan-European malaise with the modern world as the crucible from which the new doctrine emerges. Nor could anyone dispute that fascism represents a radical rejection of

the values of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Finally, it is important to record that at least some of the time and in some places this anti-Enlightenment sentiment was articulated by individuals who were, nominally at least, within the Marxist tradition. But the problem is that Sternhell wants to stop the story there. But surely the evolution of a handful of (more or less) Marxist intellectuals is not the whole story on the intellectual origins of fascism or the most important story. Dissident Marxists were hardly unique in their radical rejection of the Enlightenment. They were joined by large numbers of European conservatives, who not only helped define fascism, but also mobilized their big battalions in support of it. And that made all the difference.

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