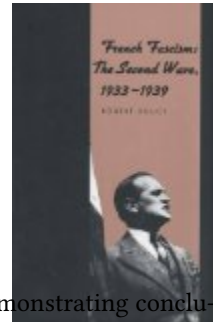


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Soucy. *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995. xii + 352 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-05996-0.

Reviewed by Irwin Wall (University of California, Riverside)  
Published on H-France (March, 1996)



Many years ago, when I first began my studies of French Communism, I turned naturally to the works of the late French historian, Annie Kriegel. She asserted that Communism was un-French, essentially a Russian phenomenon, grafted artificially onto the French social organism due to an accidental conjuncture of circumstances, there strangely to take root and become a powerful political force. From my first exposure to it, I found this thesis bordering on the absurd: was not France the country of Gracchus Babeuf and the conspiracy of equals, of Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, of Louis Blanc and Auguste Blanqui? Did not even Leon Blum at the Congress of Tours in 1920 regard Bolshevism as a form of Blanquism come home to roost? The parallel with the work of Rene Remond immediately struck me; for him, fascism was equally un-French, a foreign import to which the French were fortunately immune. The few genuinely "fascist" groups in France, like the *Francistes* of Marcel Bucard and the *Faisceau* of Georges Valois, were inspired from across the Alps or the Rhine and remained tiny and marginal. The genuine mass movement led by Colonel Francois de La Rocque, the *Croix de Feu*, was not fascist at all, but rather a form of adult boy-scouting.

I have argued that both Kriegel and Remond were wrong, totally wrong. Neither Communism nor fascism were foreign imports. Indeed, after reading Ernst Nolte, who traced fascism back to the Royalist *Action Francaise*, I was convinced that both owed their very existence to French political inventiveness. All this is to explain that I begin with a prejudice in favor of the challenging conclusions of Robert Soucy, which seem to me eminently commonsensible. The controversy over fascism in France has in recent years been dominated by the work of Israeli historian Zev Sternhell. According to some commentators, Sternhell did for French fascism what American histo-

rian Robert Paxton did for Vichy, demonstrating conclusively its deep roots in the national experience. Soucy agrees with Sternhell on this point: there was nothing "un-French" about fascism. But Sternhell takes the argument a step further: fascism, he argues, had its roots on the revolutionary left. It owed as much to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Albert Sorel as to Charles Maurras and Maurice Barres, and its continued problematic was to find a way to revise Marx in a way that successfully synthesized socialism and the national experience. Sternhell follows the Italian Rienze de Felice, who insists upon the revolutionary nature of Italian Fascism, similarly arguing in favor of a French fascism that was "neither right nor left".

Soucy refuses to accept Sternhell's main line of argument; indeed both his excellent studies, *French fascism: the First Wave* (1986) and now *French fascism: the Second Wave* are largely devoted to refuting Sternhell on precisely this point. For Soucy, there is nothing remotely leftist about fascism. On the contrary, fascism was a new variety of authoritarian conservatism and right-wing nationalism that sought to defeat the Marxist threat and the political liberalism that allowed it to exist in the first place. Fascism was dictatorial, hierarchical, para-military, socially conservative, union-busting, imperialist, rhetorically anti-bourgeois but substantively defensive of bourgeois interests and the existing class structure. In two books Soucy systematically applies this model to no less than eight French putatively fascist movements and organizations, from the *Jeunesses Patriotes* and the *Cagoule* through the *Croix de Feu* and Jacques Doriot's *Parti Populaire Francais* (PPF). All these movements, says Soucy, meet the definition without a doubt. All, including the *Croix de Feu*— which Sternhell and the "consensus" historians, as Soucy calls them, ex-

clude from the Fascist lexicon—fully qualify as Fascist. Here, Soucy follows Canadian historian William Irvine, adding copious evidence in an effort to show that La Rocque’s movement was indeed fascist. And lest we be tempted to underestimate the significance of this finding, Soucy reminds us that the *Croix de Feu*, according to some commentators, had 1.2 million members at its high point in 1937. Hitler’s Nazi party had only 800,000 when it seized power in 1933. Fascism failed in France—until the war—because the economic crisis was less severe and the left united against it, among other reasons. French conservative politicians were also extraordinarily adept in taking the wind out of its sails: Raymond Poincaré in 1926-28, Gaston Doumergue in 1934, and Edouard Daladier in 1938 all ended left-wing experiments with government in a manner satisfactory to the French bourgeois elite, which financed the fascist groups and participated in their leadership. In no sense were the French ever “immune” to fascism. Indeed, given the sorry history of Vichy, one wonders at the proclivity of scholars to conclude anything else.

It is tempting to leave the question right there, giving appropriate credit to Soucy for the thoroughness of his research and the systematic way in which he applies his findings to his model. The conclusion seems inescapable. Whether one focuses on the *Croix de Feu* or any other of the eight groups under scrutiny, the same result emerges. If it looks like a duck, walks and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck!

Why, then, do I leave the reading of Soucy with a lingering sense of dissatisfaction and doubt? The trouble, it seems to me, lies in the methodology. Construct a model, apply it in a given number of cases, show the fit, and the conclusion is obvious. There are two possible problems here, following David Hackett Fischer’s *Historians’ Fallacies*. One is semantic; in arguing about whether the *Croix de Feu* was “fascist,” are we not arguing about mere words and what it is appropriate to call things? This is not a very substantive argument. Or, on the other hand, in constructing models and explaining phenomena, do we not fall into the “essentialist” fallacy of ascribing an underlying “essence” or reality to what is, after all, an intellectual construct or model, in this case Fascism. Thus, for Soucy, para-militarism would seem to be an “essential” quality of fascism while anti-Semitism is not. The philosophical fuzziness in this *modus operandi* appears throughout Soucy’s description of the *Croix de Feu* (CF), in which we find that the “fit” to the model is never as precise as one would like. Thus, in reference to street politics, the CF was “more fascist than any other

formation of the Third Republic” (p. 137). Fascism has suddenly become a question of degree. Elsewhere the CF was fascist because “it did not exclude members with Fascist sympathies” (p. 142). This is hardly a meaningful test. Nor was the CF, in its professions of republicanism, “sincerely democratic” (p. 143).

“How many politicians are?” one might well ask. La Rocque, we are told elsewhere, was “more than a conservative; he was a reactionary” (p. 147). This does not seem very helpful either in describing fascists. Nor is it useful to observe that after 1940, lest we want to exculpate La Rocque for eventually joining the Resistance, he acted “more fascistically than democratically” (p. 147), whatever that may mean. Similar imprecision creeps into Soucy’s discussion of the *Solidarite Francaise*, which he occasionally describes as giving certain doctrines a “fascist twist,” or holding a cluster of attitudes that were “undeniably fascist,” or elsewhere, “highly fascist” (pp. 82, 88, 103).

I suspect that our politics creep into our nomenclature. Sternhell and Remond incline to the right; Soucy and I, to the left. The former are parsimonious in their use of the fascist moniker, insisting that strong distinctions be used to separate conservatives and fascists. Soucy and I would probably agree with American historian Arno Mayer that fascism is counter-revolutionary and that it lies along a continuum of rightist movements from simple conservative to reactionary to fascist. Logically, and particularly if Soucy is, like I am, a veteran of the American political battles of the 1960s, we may be inclined to apply more freely the term, or epithet, “Fascist!” Journalist Robert Scheer wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Times*, that Republican presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan was not a fascist, before enumerating his less than admirable qualities. For polemical reasons, I might be tempted to say, had I written Scheer’s column, that if Buchanan is not a fascist, why, like the proverbial duck, does he walk and talk like one?

Not being mainly polemicists, historians should endeavor to control their political passions. It seems to me that arguing about whether the CF was or was not “fascist” may obscure the point. Is it not sufficient to describe fairly and accurately the CF’s politics? Soucy has done this, elucidating in often painful detail its authoritarianism, para-militarism, anti-liberalism, anti-Marxism, anti-feminism, anti-communism, and eventually, its anti-Semitism. He shows its corporatist-inspired concern to achieve class harmony at the expense of the workers in a nationalist framework, and he quotes copiously from its

many expressions of admiration for the achievements of Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, one of the strongest points of Soucy's work lies in his repeated demonstration that virtually every para-military, authoritarian group of the right in France advocated orthodox economic capitalist solutions of the era, cutting expenditures and balancing budgets at the expense of the working class. He demonstrates that militants of the CF moved in and out of the many rightist groups in French politics, with astonishing ease. He demonstrates conclusively that Doriot and the PPF shared the politics of the CF, and that the social or leftist concerns of the one and the other were largely a sham designed to give psychological, not material, satisfaction to workers. Ex-communist Doriot's revolutionary aspirations were a thing of the past after he turned fascist in 1936. When all is said and done, what does Sternhell or Remond achieve by asserting that La Rocque was not a fascist because he was a poor orator or because he refused to attempt a *coup d'etat* at the end of the 1930s? And what does Soucy gain by insisting on the contrary? It matters little what one calls La Rocque in the end. Vichy showed us the depths to which the traditional French right was capable of sinking without calling upon the French "fascists". Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

#### ROBERT SOUCY REPLIES TO IRWIN WALL

There have been several reviews of my *French Fascism: the Second Wave, 1933-39* (until now only in Paris, London and Italian newspapers), but Irwin Wall is the first reviewer who seems to have read the whole book. Some of the previous reviews reminded me of the time many years ago when I asked Frederick Artz, my predecessor at Oberlin College, how to go about writing a book review. His reply was: "If you have the time, read the book first." Wall is a more conscientious reviewer than many, and for that, as well as for his words of praise for my book, I am grateful. He also raises some interesting objections to certain aspects of my book to which I have been asked to reply.

Wall faults me for "applying" a model to eight French fascist movements with a deductive methodology that predetermines the outcome: "Construct a model, apply it in a given number of cases, show the fit, and the conclusion is obvious." If this was indeed the way I approached the subject, I would make the same criticism. However, I would like to think that I have a greater respect for historical evidence than Wall's comment suggests and that my approach was more inductive than deductive. Wall credits me with being more methodologically sophisti-

cated than I am. I simply read all I could about French nationalist movements of the 1920s and 1930s with certain questions in mind—some of the questions, to be sure, having been raised by previous scholars of European fascism. Among these questions were: how "socialist" were these movements? Who financed them? What were their views on political democracy, social democracy, Marxism, capitalism, para-militarism, imperialism, trade unions, working-class strikes, social welfare spending, taxation, education, religion, culture, racism, gender, morality, "decadence," violence, etc.? How did their positions on these issues compare with those of Italian and Germany fascist movements of the era? To what social groups did French fascist propagandists direct their ideological appeals? From what social groups did French fascism derive most of its popular support? Were there differences between fascist rhetoric and fascist reality?

What I found in doing the research with such questions in mind was that certain ideological patterns emerged from the evidence that repeated themselves from movement to movement. >From these patterns came my conclusions (I prefer the word – "conclusions" to "model", since in my mind the former comes *after*, not before, the research is conducted). When the evidence showed divergences from these patterns, I acknowledged them, as in the case of left fascist movements like Marcel Deat's "Neo-Socialism" and Gaston Bergery's Common Front (Wall's comment that "for Soucy, there is nothing remotely leftist about fascism" disregards the section of my book on left fascism). In the end, I hoped to present my findings with more complexity than reductionism, presenting the reader with a picture of French fascist public pronouncements fluctuating in response to changing political circumstances. The latter included acknowledging the grey areas between– and the tug-of-war within–fascist and democratic conservative movements.

Since some of my conclusions differed from those of Sternhell, Remond, and others, I presented considerable evidence on behalf of these conclusions rather than merely engaging in unsubstantiated theorizing. One of my objections to the consensus school, that is, to a group of scholars who insist that French fascism was "a revision of Marxism", which was deeply at odds with the traditional right, is that it ignores massive evidence to the contrary. For too long, studies of French fascism (often written by political scientists, not historians) have indulged in brilliant conceptual acrobatics that ignore inconvenient facts. Wall implies that I too ignore facts that do not "fit" my "model", although he never indicates what those facts may be. If Wall is correct, the solution is simple: chal-

lenge my conclusions with counter-evidence. Since Wall himself seems to find my evidence convincing, I am at a loss as to what it would take to satisfy him. Rather than assuming, as some deconstructionists might, that one interpretation of fascism is as biased as another, thus discrediting all attempts to understand seriously a phenomenon that has harmed so many people, is it not better to adopt a less frivolous standard, one emphasizing the importance of evidence in making a case for one interpretation over another?

As for the “semantic” question, that is, whether applying the word “fascist” or not to the *Croix de feu* (CF) is quibbling over “mere words” and therefore not substantive, I can only reply that the very real victims of fascism throughout Europe between 1919 and 1945 (some of whose victimization Colonel de La Rocque and other French fascists encouraged) experienced fascism in an all too substantive way. If what they suffered was an “intellectual construct,” then it was a construct with very real consequences. Radical deconstructionism reminds me of the medieval monk who, returned from study at the University of Paris to the farm where he was raised, demonstrated to his father with the most rigorous scholastic logic that the breakfast eggs sitting on the table before them did not exist. “Fine,” said the father, and he ate the eggs, leaving his son with none. My encounters with various post-modernist reincarnations of this monk may be why, after teaching several courses in European intellectual history, I always look forward to teaching social history once again: facts, like eggs, are so satisfying.

My taste for empiricism may also be why I object to consensus historians who define fascism as essentially left-wing and then exclude from the category of fascism all French authoritarian movements that have been right-wing (including the *Croix de feu* and the *Jeunesses patriotes*)—thus indulging in what William Irvine has called the “definitional game”. Have I done the same in reverse? Am I an “essentialist” in reverse? Do I ignore facts that do not fit my “model”? I hope not. Indeed, one of the main points of my book is that it is a mistake to try to freeze the realities of fascism into some static construct that disregards fascist opportunism in action. Although fascism is not “suddenly” a matter of degree, it is, in fact, a matter of degree, for the most part a more extreme and brutal version of beleaguered conservatism. Depending on the circumstances, some former fascists supported democratic conservatism when it was expedient and some former democratic conservatives supported fascism when it was expedient. In 1924 Mussolini claimed he wanted to save Italian parliamentary democ-

racy and in 1932 Hitler was still an electoral politician. Did this make their fascism “essentially” democratic? In 1934 La Rocque denounced democracy, in 1936 he defended it, and in 1940 he denounced it once again. Not only is the “fit to the model never as precise as one would like”, but no one familiar with European fascist movements of the interwar period should expect—or “like”—such a fit. Here, as in other places, I find myself more in agreement with Wall than not. Since the introduction to my study attempts not merely to define but also to present several of the fundamental characteristics of European fascism, emphasizing fascism’s fluctuating response to changing circumstances, I will leave it to readers in general to judge how essentialist or historicist I have been.

Wall oversimplifies my argument when he says that I claim that the CF was fascist “because” it did not exclude members with fascist sympathies. This was one of *many* reasons, which alone is hardly conclusive but which in tandem with others is part of a case. One element alone doth not fascism make, but a cluster of elements forming a fascist configuration does.

In my book, I question the sincerity of the CF’s republicanism, to which Wall asks: “How many politicians are [sincere]”? My answer includes Jean Jaures, Pierre Mends-France, George McGovern, Jesse Jackson, Tom Harkin, Richard Gephardt, Patricia Schroeder, Bill Bradley and a long list of others. We should be careful about denigrating “politicians” generically (as fascists in the 1930s did), since less democratic alternatives—be they capitalist or socialist—have an even worse track record.

It is unclear to me why pointing out the “reactionary” aspects of La Rocque’s thought—for example, his desire to turn the clock back sixty years where the rights of labor unions were concerned—is “not helpful in describing fascists.” Not all reactionaries have been fascists, but on a number of issues fascists have been reactionaries—as my book partially demonstrates.

“More fascistically than democratically” means what it says, since I do not find fascism to be democratic. Wall cites this phrase in isolation from the extensive case preceding it, a case supported by a number of precise examples. As for my use of such gradations as “fascist twist”, “highly fascist”, and “undeniably fascist”, I again refer readers of my book to my contextualist approach, i.e., fascists acknowledged more of their fascism under some circumstances than others. For example, following the Popular Front’s ban on French para-military movements in 1936 (which forced the *Croix de feu* to reconstitute it-

self as the “democratic” *Parti social francais*), La Rocque, who was no dummy, muted his para-militarism, thus appearing less fascist.

In the 1960s, for what it is worth, I was a young “Old Leftist” who found some of the tactics of “New Leftists” not only counter-productive but repugnant, as reminiscent of tactics employed by nazis in Germany in the 1930s. I preferred George Orwell to Mario Savio, head of the free speech movement at Berkeley (Nor am I fond today of politically-correct thought police on American university campuses, however much I favor some of the goals of political correctness). In the 1960s, I was opposed to American intervention in Vietnam but did not consider Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon to be “fascists”. The trouble with using the word “fascist” loosely is that not only is it unfair when applied to democratic conservatives, but also that it allows the users to be dismissed as glib when other criticisms they have to make may be quite valid.

Some of Patrick Buchanan’s past praise of Hitler and problematizing of Auschwitz and his present scapegoating of immigrants and decrying of cultural decadence is indeed disturbing, although the fact that he has raised the issue of the increasing polarization of wealth in the United States (and not just Jewish wealth) puts him at odds with most mainstream European fascists of the 1930s. So far, Buchanan has not attacked electoral democracy as such, although his joining the hue-and-cry against “Washington” (parliament) has fascist antecedents. Even if Buchanan’s public statements fall short of full-fledged fascism, I do think that one of the important things to be learned from the history of fascism, including French fascism, is that fascists do not necessarily show all their cards at once and that it is important to resist early signs of fascism in order to prevent its subsequent amplification. Had more of Germany’s conservative Christians resisted nazism when in 1933 Hitler moved first against Marxists and Jews (while sparing most conservatives), they would not have been so vulnerable later. While different fascist practices can be applied to a greater or lesser degree, there is the danger that the lesser may pave the way for greater. Buchanan is not “a” fascist, but there are fascist elements in his ideology and that is sufficient reason to oppose him.

Wall may be right in claiming that what counts in the

end is not whether or not we label La Rocque and certain other French authoritarian conservatives as “fascist,” but whether we understand what they did and, more importantly, *why* they did it. My book is primarily devoted to the latter. Still, if using the word “fascism” alerts us against certain cluster of attitudes which once inspired, and might again inspire, various brutalities, so much the better.

Vichy did include a number of previous French fascists in its government (Pierre Pucheu and Eugene Deloncle, for example), some of whom were instrumental in helping the Germans “solve” the Jewish Question. Petain in France—and also Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, Pilsudski in Poland, and Horthy in Hungary—welcomed individual fascists into their governments while resisting the efforts of native fascist leaders to replace them as heads of state.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that I agree with Sternhell in maintaining that there was a significant fascist tradition in France before the Vichy years (our disagreement is over what constituted some of the major elements of that tradition). To deny, as many French scholars have, the considerable appeal of fascist ideas in France between 1924 and 1944 is to deny a significant part of France’s past, a denial that is dysfunctional when it comes to avoiding the mistakes of the past in the future. But it would also be wrong, indeed, silly, to accuse the French people *in toto* of fascism or to suggest that all political camps during this period were equally culpable (Bernard Henri-Lévy comes close to the latter in his book, *L’Ideologie francaise*). Nor do I think that Francois Mitterand should be condemned *in toto* for his having once belonged to the *Croix de feu*, having once worked for Vichy, and having remained friends after the Second World War with a former Vichy police chief who had persecuted Jews. Many French people, especially on the political left and left-center, resisted fascism during the interwar period and under Vichy, and Mitterand during his long post-war political career did much that was profoundly anti-fascist.

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**Citation:** Irwin Wall. Review of Soucy, Robert, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. March, 1996.

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