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What's Right?: A Review Essay

Arthur Versluis

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the meaning of socialism, and an independent labor party will revive the labor movement, few of the stories of the recent past give an understanding of how to rebuild the movement that Smith so deeply cares about.

Rosemary Feurer

Northern Illinois University

What's Right? A Review Essay

■ *Where Have All the Fascists Gone?*

Tamir Bar-On

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. 232 pp., ISBN 978-0754671541, \$99.95

■ *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*

Paul Edward Gottfried

New York: Palgrave, 2007. 208 pp., ISBN 978-1403974327, \$39.95

■ *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*

Cas Mudde

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 404 pp., ISBN 978-0521616324, \$34.99

We live in an era when the political spectrum has become fairly confusing. Terms like “Left” and “Right” no longer seem to have any clear, widely accepted reference points or definitions, and political actors themselves have not helped matters. One finds on the putative Left variants of libertarianism, while on the putative Right in the United States, one observes the advent of “big-government neoconservatism”—to give two examples. What is going on? Those who claim that Right and Left are distinct or that either of them has a generally agreed-upon meaning often seem themselves to have an ideological agenda, overt or occluded, of defending some particular position. The putatively Right-wing end of the political spectrum seems especially garbled today, but we have several quite interesting books whose authors seek to make sense of it, including one on the European New Right from Canadian scholar Tamir Bar-On and one on American neo-conservatism by Paul Gottfried. Each of them has its particular merits, but here we will look at them in relation to one another to draw larger conclusions

about the “Right” in an international context.

Let us begin with that most contested of categories, fascism. Relatively recent scholarship on the origins of Fascism has demonstrated its heretical origination from the Left in Italy, and even though such conclusions upset commonly held assumptions, fascism and communism are, as A. James Gregor put it, *The Faces of Janus* (2000). For those who are interested, an issue of the journal *Telos* is devoted to making available some of the Italian scholarship in this area.¹ But of course, the subject of generic fascism, especially in Britain and North America, is one of the most contentious areas in all of contemporary scholarship. Interpretations and interpretive models not only diverge, but also seem to generate schools of mutually vituperative critique with significantly more frequency than in other areas of scholarship. Into this fray, armed with a foreword from Roger Griffin, a provocative title, and some suitably muscular assertions and insinuations, marches Tamir Bar-On.

The subjects discussed in *Where Have All the Fascists Gone?* are of considerable interest and have not been widely researched or analyzed, especially in the United States, where the French or European New Right was still mostly unknown even after nearly three decades. Bar-On has read widely in this area, and his accounts of the *nouvelle droite* and of Alain de Benoist make some effort at even-handedness. Bar-On demonstrates a broad knowledge of the various interpretive positions concerning the historical phenomenon of fascism, and his book is a good launching point for those who would like to get some sense of the lay of the land.

However, the very title of the book implies that “the fascists” have gone somewhere—that we should hunt around to see whether we can find them in the *nouvelle droite*, or elsewhere, perhaps even in the American journal *Telos*, which has gone so far as to publish some English translations of articles by the most prominent French New Right author, Alain de Benoist, thus apparently rendering it suspect. In the vein of Roger Griffin, Bar-On’s implication is that the European New Right is inherently dangerous, and that references to the Italian author Julius Evola, for instance, are quite important to ferreting out “where the fascists have gone.” But A. James Gregor convincingly demonstrated in *In Search of Neofascism* what was already known to specialists in the field of esotericism, that Julius Evola plainly is not a solid peg on which to hang one’s theories concerning either Fascism or fascism. The term “neofascism,” like “fascism,” is a kind of floating signifier all too often deployed to tar those ideas of figures one doesn’t like—so that, then, one doesn’t have to grapple with the ideas, because they have been dismissed out of hand. Such dismissals work by insinuation, and that is the case in Bar-On’s conclusions, which have the

paradoxical effect of turning one back to look again at Benoist and the writers of the European New Right to see what they in fact are advocating.

The European New Right is a complex phenomenon that deserves comprehensive, probing, and balanced analysis, and to that end, conservatism might prove more useful as a category than fascism. What *are* the relationships between the emergence of the French New Right, in the wake of a New Left in the 1960s, and the earlier European Right as visible in, say, German conservatism of the 1920s? In what senses is the European New Right conservative? For instance, Benoist has espoused a federalist model, which on its face rejects authoritarianism, including fascist models of authoritarianism. And the French New Right has long asserted positions that claim to be “beyond Left and Right.” Yet many predecessors of the European New Right belong to the broader currents of European conservatism, and charting such connections would produce a different kind of narrative than Bar-On’s. Interesting forays in this direction have already been published, for instance by Göran Dahl, who for good reasons uses the term “radical conservative.”² Sorting through terminology and its implications is no small matter.

Hence I should mention Cas Mudde’s *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, which sensibly rejects the charged invective of fascist or neo-fascist categories in order to catalogue in exhausting detail the seemingly countless populist figures, parties, and movements of the radical Right in Europe. Mudde’s approach is straightforward European social science, with an emphasis on science, that is, on empirical investigation. Mostly, the book reveals an array of nationalist figures with a popular appeal who argue for controlling immigration into their countries. The terms “fascist” or “neofascist” are misleading at best in relation to many of these figures—hence Mudde’s terminological choices. Mudde’s book is quite an important compilation of data and demonstrates the range and nature of the European radical Right today, clearly distinguishing it from the center and from the Left. Here we feel some progress—perhaps those old categories of Left and Right have some meaning after all. But then we come to Paul Gottfried’s *Conservatism in America*.

Paul Gottfried’s *Conservatism in America* is a book that will annoy some people across the political spectrum, including no doubt many “conservatives,” but so what? Gottfried’s book is not only an extensive, if not comprehensive, survey of the history of American conservatism from the post-World War II era to the present, but also a strikingly effective analysis of just how the American Right turned into a neo-conservative cadre with roots in the Trotskyite Left. Gottfried’s analysis of neo-conservatism—its origins, characteristics, and contradictions—is devastatingly acerbic, nowhere more so than in his

extended comparison of early twenty-first-century neo-conservatism to the American Communist Party of many decades before. Both movements, he argues, were ideologically driven, with a few authoritative figures at the top, and many fellow travelers, right down to the *hoi polloi* adherents of vituperative American talk radio, a majority of whom are, Gottfried acidly notes, examples of what Aristotle called “natural slaves.”

The subtitle of Paul Gottfried’s book—*Making Sense of the American Right*—quite accurately expresses what *Conservatism in America* is up to. Even the most casual observer of the American political scene in the early twenty-first century was bound to notice that the term “conservative” no longer bore any clear relationship to what went under that name before the mid-twentieth century. Why not? What happened? How did the term “conservative,” once associated with a profound skepticism of entangling foreign affairs—let alone foreign military occupations, rampant deficit spending, and a metastasizing centralized managerial bureaucratic state—become synonymous with all of these? It is a good question. Gottfried, with remarkable honesty and lucidity, provides an interesting history and many answers. You may or may not like this book—personally, I rather like its acerbic style, too—but upon reading it, you will understand more clearly what has happened to the American Right.

It is widely recognized that neo-conservatism originated among post-Leftists, but it is also important to note that there were precedents for neo-conservatism in what was termed the American “New Right” in the 1970s and 1980s. In an article included in the 1982 volume *The New Right Papers*, Samuel Francis—generally seen as a “paleoconservative”—did make a few points that could be construed as Old Right. But he also argued then that the New Right is a “radical movement,” one that will assert “a more aggressively nationalistic foreign policy” and that “will not be conservative.” Francis argued, in fact, for a “New Right-Caesarist” presidency, taking up a case and terminology already explicitly proposed by Jeffrey Hart in *National Review* in 1974.³ My point in citing this example, not noted in *Conservatism in America*, is to confirm Gottfried’s argument on this score: American neo-conservatism may be unrecognizable in relation to European forms of conservatism, but it does have precedents on the American Right that go back decades and that are self-described as “radical” on more than one occasion. What is more, neo-conservatism has traceable precedents—arguably at least back to the era and figure of Alexander Hamilton—on both the Left and the putative Right.

Still, in the end American neo-conservatism is a new species, and Gottfried’s observations about how it came into being are quite provocative. He suggests that it is no coincidence how closely the neo-conservative movement resembles

the communist movement of earlier generations: in its anti-communist fervor, the *National Review* crowd soon adopted the tendencies of its communist nemeses, ideological certitude combined with occasional purges of former fellow travelers to reassert ideological group identity. We might recall that, already in the 1970s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn was remarking scandalously on parallels between the American and Soviet systems. Gottfried's book shows that American neo-conservatism always has tended toward the direction of statist authoritarianism, and perhaps this accounts for the easy shifts of some prominent figures, for instance David Horowitz, who moved from the communist Left to the neo-conservative Right. In either camp, they have access to millennialist ideological purism and to mechanisms for purging or scapegoating, but in neo-conservatism, they also gain access to control of the levers of national power, as with the George Bush, Jr. administration. Perhaps—heretical thought—the Soviet and the American imperial systems were/are not so far apart in their modes of operation.

This brings us to some larger themes, and to one in particular: whether the terms “Right” and “Left” still have meaning. Certainly these terms would be clearer if they were allied to discernible, consistent principles. It could be useful to think, for example, in terms of a spectrum that goes from individual and local autonomy on one end to collectivist authoritarianism on the other. Such a spectrum at least would have the virtue of making some sense of what otherwise often seems a jumble of often deliberately obfuscating terms. It might be illuminating to consider whether much of the European New Right belongs more to the side of autonomy, whereas American neo-conservatism, for instance, belongs more to the side of collectivist authoritarianism. In many respects, the American imperial military-industrial-financial-espionage conglomeration seems closer to a classically Fascist model than anything emerging on the European Radical Right. Does the autonomy end of such a political spectrum belong today to the Left, or to the Right? This question, I think, has yet to be decisively answered. The answer will go a long way toward making clear what's really on the Right and Left.

Arthur Versluis

Michigan State University

NOTES

1. See Telos, *Special Issue on Italian Fascism*, 133 (Winter 2005).
2. Göran Dahl, *Radical Conservatism and the Future of Politics* (London: Sage, 1999).
3. See Jeffrey Hart, "The Presidency: Shifting Conservative Perspectives?" *National Review* (22 November 1974): 1351–55, cited in Robert Whitaker, ed., *The New Right Papers* (New York, St. Martin's, 1982), 80.